



AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Rachael E. Haas for the degree of Master of Arts in Design and Human Environment presented on April 18, 2014.

Title: Constructing Identities: Analyzing Dress, Appearance, and Mental Illness in Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White*.

Abstract approved:

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The purpose of this study was to determine how the popular writer Wilkie Collins used dress and appearance to bring to light concerns about mental illness in his 1859-60 sensation novel *The Woman in White*. The method of narrative analysis was used to complete this study. Data sheets were developed to record references to dress, appearance, and mental illness in the novel. References were examined, coded, and eventually developed into three key themes. These themes were analyzed through theoretical perspectives related to the role of literature in suggesting social change.

Through analysis of two central female characters in the novel, dress and appearance were found to be vehicles not only for creating and promoting identity but also for transforming identity. Through changes in dress and appearance, seemingly distinct categories of identity, such as mental illness, are challenged. Collins suggests that identity is both socially constructed and

fluid, with dress and appearance being two major ways to enable that construction and fluidity.

The notion of identity as socially constructed and fluid coincides with contemporary Victorian fears of and unease with identity transformations, which could occur through new access to mass-produced clothing and through differing definitions of what constituted mental illness. By creating a world similar to the one for which he is writing, Collins is able to suggest ideas about the concept of identity that would have been new and unsettling for readers of his novel.

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Constructing Identities: Analyzing Dress, Appearance, and Mental Illness in  
Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White*

by  
Rachael E. Haas

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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Rachael E. Haas, Author

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Constructing Identities: Analyzing Dress, Appearance, and Mental Illness in  
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

When reading a novel or any work of fiction, one of the major ways we come to form a picture of characters is through their physical descriptions. Key components of these descriptions are dress and appearance, which the author can utilize as forms of characterization. Lennon and Burns (1993) studied the ways in which authors use descriptors such as dress, facial features, carriage, and height as well as situational variables such as time, place, and context to lead audiences into forming a particular impression of a character. They determined that dress and appearance, situated in a particular context, leads audiences to form strong impressions of characters in literary works. Writers such as Bakhtin (1928/1994) and Griswold (1981) argued that literature has the ability to reflect society's concerns and ideals, a concept known as "reflection theory." Reflection theory has been used to examine how cultural products, including literature, both reflect and refract an author's contemporary social order. In the past fifty years, scholars of both dress history and literature have explored the ways in which dress and fiction have intersected across time. While many of these scholars examined the function of dress in character development, few have focused on how the text comments on the sociocultural world of this dressed character.

In this study, I examined the power of literature to comment on contemporary views of critical social issues through the use of dress and appearance, specifically views of mentally ill women in Victorian England. To do so, I analyzed the 1859 English novel *The Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins and examined the ways in which Collins describes and utilizes dress and appearance to convey the mentally ill central female character in the novel. I chose this particular time period to analyze because the Victorian era marks a shift in the treatment of mental illness in the Western world along with a massive shift in the structure of society (Scull, 1993). I chose the novel *The Woman in White* for multiple reasons: 1) the titular female character who drives the plot is mentally ill; 2) the titular female character is described specifically in relation to her dress; and 3) the novel is seen as the first and most prominent example of the sensation genre, which drew on themes such as mental illness to provoke, shock, and excite its audience (Sweet, 2009).

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to determine how Collins used his platform as a popular writer to bring to light concerns about one of the most critical issues of his time (mental illness) and why he chose to use dress and appearance to do so. This is important because knowing how and why can help us understand how we form opinions on critical topics such as mental health based on specific cultural ideals, fears, and context. It will help elucidate why dress and appearance carry so much weight in forming

impressions not only of individuals but also of individuals' personalities and characteristics. To accomplish my purpose I used the method of narrative analysis.

### **Research Question**

How does Wilkie Collins' novel *The Woman in White* use dress and appearance to comment on Victorian views—and fears—of mental illness?

### **Assumptions**

In this study, I am assuming that it is possible to determine what Collins' text (*The Woman in White*) may comment on mental illness. I am also assuming that the best method to answer my research question is narrative analysis.

### **Definition of Terms**

Dress: Dress is defined by Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1995) as “an assemblage of modifications of the body and/or supplements to the body” (p. 7)

Appearance: Appearance is defined by Lillethun (2007) as “the situated body and its attributes, such as age, health, skin color, stature, mood, and more” (p. 121). Together dress and the situated body form a kind of nonverbal communication system.

Double: In literature, a double is a character that presents extreme similarities to another character; also known as a doppelganger.

Mental Illness: For the purposes of this thesis, this term will be defined **in the context of the Victorian era**. Mental illness in this context is any mental *or* emotional disorder that causes its victim to behave in ways outside the socially accepted norm. Examples range from nervous disorders to insanity.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Because of the scope of this research question, this chapter will include overviews of multiple key areas. An overview of major concepts related to dress, appearance, color in dress, pertinent fashion theories, characterization, and Victorian material culture will be presented first. I will discuss a history of the treatment of mental illness in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century England, including its eventual feminization and inclusion in popular literature. Next I will present an overview of the sensation novel, Wilkie Collins, and *The Woman in White*. This chapter will conclude with an outline of reflection theory and previous studies of dress in literature.

#### Dress and Appearance

The concept of “dress” has been defined by Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1995) as “an assemblage of modifications of the body and/or supplements to the body” (p. 7). This includes things like garments, hats, jewelry, and so forth, as well as grooming practices, tattoos, and plastic surgery. Lillethun (2007) states that, in addition, “dress has been defined as a form of nonverbal communication contingent upon social contexts where it is presented” (p. 121). Appearance, on the other hand, is defined by Lillethun (2007) as:

the situated body and its attributes, such as age, health, skin color, stature, mood, and more, [which] combine with dress to form one’s *appearance*. All five senses discern appearance. (p. 121)

Together, then, dress and the situated body form a kind of nonverbal communication system. Stone (1995) also highlights the aspect of nonverbal communication, defining appearance as “the phase of the social transaction which establishes identities of the participants” (p. 21). It is through appearances, Stone believes, that we establish and mobilize our selves.

Entwhistle (2007) has also written extensively on the concept of dress. In her essay, “The Dressed Body,” she highlights the intimate relationship dress has to our bodies, forming as it does “a part of our epidermis—it lies on the boundary between self and other” (p. 93). As we exist in the world primarily as dressed bodies, we are situated objects within the social world.

Entwhistle (2007) writes:

the dressed body is not only a uniquely individual, private and sensual body, it is a social phenomenon too, since our understandings and techniques of dress and our relationships to cloth are socially and historically constituted. (p. 94)

In other words, our dressed bodies are representative not only of ourselves but also of the social and historical contexts in which we exist. The ways in which we exist in our bodies are “crucially shaped by the practices of our culture....The social situation imposes itself upon the body and constrains it to act in particular ways” (Entwhistle, 2007, p. 96).

The boundaries that this imposes on the dressed body hold symbolic significance, according to Entwhistle, who here echoes Douglas’s (1982) understanding of the social contexts of the body. Douglas introduced the idea

of two separate bodies: the physical and the social. The physical body is our biological, individual body. The social body, on the other hand,

constrains the way the physical body is perceived....There is a continual exchange of meanings between the two kinds of bodily experience so that each reinforces the categories of the other.  
(Douglas, 1982, p. 65)

Entwhistle (2007) extends this analysis to reinforce the idea of dress as expressive of the particular cultural and social concerns of which it is a part. By this logic, it is not only the fact that the body is dressed but also the cut and shape of the cloth that help to provide social and historical context. As styles change over time, the cut, shape, and tailoring of the cloth covering the dressed body will change according to the social and historical milieu of which it is a part.

Scholar Elizabeth Wilson (2003) prominently discusses the psychology of dress and its role linking the public and private. Again, the duality of the body—dressed and undressed, public and private, social and biological—is mentioned. Dress can be uncomfortable, Wilson (2003) says, because of the way it connects our biological “private” body to the social “public” being, making it “uneasy territory, since it forces us to recognize that the human body is more than a biological entity. It is an organism in culture” (p. 2). Because of the intimacy clothing has with our bodies, it is able to communicate more subtly than most objects and commodities. Wilson

describes this as the language or psychology of dress, an idea also supported by Craik (2009).

### **Role Theory and Performativity**

One of the major theories applied to the study of dress and appearance comes from the field of sociology: role theory. Created by Erving Goffman in 1959, role theory, according to Lillethun (2007), states that “akin to theatrical roles, people perform social roles in everyday life, based on expectations for their roles” (p. 80). Sometimes called performance theory or performativity, role theory is concerned with how and why we perform our roles in the social setting and what meanings can be inferred from that. Craik (2009) defines performativity as:

Individuals perform[ing] their identities and social roles through their choice and mode of wearing clothes and accessories...or the ways in which the body assumes a sense of self by creating a recognizable identity through the way the body is clothed, gestures, expressions, and movement. (p. 3)

The major aspect of this theory is a focus on the actual acting out of identity, which occurs in social situations and is mediated through clothes, gestures, and expressions.

In his seminal text, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1959) introduces the idea of the front stage and back stage. The front stage is “that part of an individual’s performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance” (p. 22). It includes clothing, sex, age, size, facial expressions,

body gestures, and so forth. These aspects can be divided into appearance (the stimuli which function at the time to tell us of the performer's social statuses) and manner (the stimuli which function at the time to warn us of the interaction role the performer will expect to play in the oncoming situation) (p. 24). The back stage is the opposite of this; it is according to Goffman (1959) "the place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course" (p. 112). This tension between the front and back stages is similar to the tension described by Douglas (1982), Wilson (2003), and Entwistle (2007) between the social and physical, the public and private, and the dressed and undressed.

In addition, Goffman (1959) describes the expectations that arise from management of front and back stages when he says, "An individual who implicitly or explicitly signifies that he has certain social characteristics ought in fact to be what he claims he is" (p. 13). Of course, this is not always the case. Goffman (1959) notes that it is not uncommon for an individual to pretend to be someone other than the person he or she truly is, and that "while persons usually are what they appear to be, such appearances could still have been managed. There is, then, a statistical relation between appearances and reality, not an intrinsic or necessary one" (p. 71). An individual may keep secrets about his or her real identity, secrets that could affect the front stage performance in a minor or drastic way. In Goffman's

theory of performance, we see recognition of the potential disparity between appearance and reality.

### **Semiotics and Dress as a Coded Symbol**

Because I am focusing very much on the coded symbolism of dress in a historical context, it is necessary to briefly address Roland Barthes' theory of fashion, expounded upon in his text *The Fashion System*, first published in 1967. Barthes' infamously dense exploration of the origins and meanings of fashion arises from the field of semiotics, which Lillethun (2007) defines as "the study of *signs* and what is *signified* (their meaning) [which] is used to decode the underlying meaning of cultural products" (p. 80). Typically used in the area of linguistics, semiotics may study as signs actual words or other systems of communication such as dress. Semiotics for Barthes was a way to methodically analyze the process of meaning-making in dress.

The "fashion system" of Barthes is "the 'totality' of social relations and activities that are required for fashion to come into existence" (Carter, 2003, p. 145). Barthes (1983) proposes three categories of clothing that he refers to as "three garments": the real garment, the represented garment, and the used garment (pp. 3-5). Each of these corresponds to the processes of production, distribution, and consumption, respectively (Craik, 2009). For Barthes, the represented garment was most important. This conception of a garment places the focus on visual or written representations of the garment, the latter of which was seen as having the power to, in Carter's (2003) words,

translate the garment “into a system of abstract intellectual meanings” that can be specifically coded as fashionable (p. 151). Barthes (1983) developed a language of clothing which approached each element as a particular sign; signs, in the world of semiotics, have two parts: the signifier and the signified. Craik (2009) describes how a sign is both itself and what it symbolizes—the denotation and the connotation:

Denotation refers to the straightforward meanings that we attach to clothing....The connotation, or contextualized meaning and symbolism...are culturally specific, so that the color white in Western culture symbolizes purity and being a bridge, while white symbolizes aspects of death and mourning in other cultures. We internalize dominant fashion and dress codes in our milieu and make almost automatic readings and interpretations of events based on that knowledge. (pp. 112-113)

Barthes, quoted in Carter (2003), proposes that “clothes are always a combination of a specific signifier and a general signified that is external to it (epoch, country, social class)” (p. 156). He recognizes that an item of clothing is much more than the cloth and thread that make it up; it is full of symbolic meaning, signifying to others (again via social situations) a variety of meanings. Carter (2003), Entwistle (2003), and Lillethun (2007) view this emphasis on the process of meaning-making to be Barthes’ most important contribution to fashion theory.

### **Characterization and Impression Management**

Characterization analysis is a way of analyzing characters in some form of literature; it is a method of analyzing the means by which authors

portray their characters, which could include manner of dress, facial features, weight, height, stature, and carriage (Lennon & Burns, 1993). Lennon and Burns (1993) are notable for developing a system to focus on the ways in which authors use dress and appearance in particular to lead the audience into forming a certain impression of a character. They argue that an author can achieve this by manipulating both object variables (visual characteristics of character and salience of those characteristics) and situational variables (set or context of the play, novel, or television show within which the clothing and appearance of actor is perceived) (p. 161). Lennon and Burns use a four-step process and conduct empirical research in order to suggest that authors are capable of managing the impressions of their audience with regard to character development. The four-step process involves: locating appearance information and isolating symbols of dress, locating related research, forming a composite impression, and comparing the composite impression to some standard (p. 162). The authors applied this process to analyses of both King Henry VIII and Miles Hendon, two very different characters from Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper*. After the four-step process, Lennon and Burns asked students for their impressions, conducted a content analysis, and surmised that it was probable people formed impressions after reading descriptions of dress and appearance.

Lennon and Burns (1993) relied on the concept of impression management when conducting their study on characterization. Impression

management has been defined by Sproles and Burns (1994) as the fact that, given how

impressions formed through person perception processes affect subsequent interpersonal behavior...individuals can manage their appearance and verbal cues in order to convey an image that will elicit a certain impression in perceivers' minds and consequently affects the perceivers' behavioral responses. (p. 238)

The concept is similar to Goffman's (1959) performance theory and highlights the critical fact that individuals have agency in creating impressions of themselves in others.

Lennon and Miller (1984) have also noted the importance of physical appearance in impression formation, stating that "often a person's physical appearance is all that is available to convey information about personal traits in a first impression situation" (p. 96). The authors tested students' responses to visuals of the same woman with different combinations of dress and appearance. These included the presence or absence of specific items or styles, including a blazer, glasses, red hair, and long skirt (p. 102). Students were given a cue (e.g., "intellectual," or "fun") and then asked to judge the visuals for correspondence with the cue. The authors were primarily concerned how the students formed first impressions rather than whether a particular style was judged favorably or not. Lennon and Miller determined that it was the combination of the cue and the particular item/style that

assisted the students in forming impressions rather than the salience of a particular item/style alone.

### **The Color White in Dress**

Because I am concerned with the symbolism of the color white in dress, a short review of its meanings over time is needed. Craik (2009) writes that “color has been a key aspect of how people have clothed themselves as a group and how individuals have created unique identities in the quest to both belong and stand out in parallel fashion systems” (p. 34). Harvey’s (1995) excellent text on the history of color, *Men in Black*, states that “the meaning of a colour is to a great extent the history of the colour. It is a meaning that is made by movement through time” (p. 13). He mentions how gender in particular has been expressed through color—men in black, women in white. Particularly appropriate, Harvey (1995) cites the works of 19<sup>th</sup> century novelists like Dickens, the Brontës, and Collins as writers whose novels “register better than other sources facts of the large spiritual politics of the time that were reflected in the inner and outer person together” (p. 19).

Lurie (1981) mentions color as one of the first and most important signs an individual can convey; it has the greatest and most immediate impact (p. 182). White, according to Lurie, began as the color of clouds and heaven, the dwelling place of ancient Greek gods and the color associated with the joy and resurrection of Christianity (p. 185). Lurie (1981) also describes the secular connotations of white: infancy, young childhood, and

marriage; because the color soils so easily, white has always been connected with “delicacy, and even physical infirmity or weakness, especially when the material is fragile. Invalids in fiction and on stage—as well as in real life—often wear such clothes” (p. 185). Lurie also connects the color white with medical professionals and hospital patients, who are on different ends of the spectrum: while the white of medical professionals is starched, stiff, and sturdy so as to avoid any connotations of weakness, the patients’ white is pale, shapeless, and flimsy; indeed, as Lurie writes, “you are thus simultaneously deprived of your chosen sartorial identity and transformed into a half-naked, helpless, inarticulate creature that cannot even dress itself” (p. 187).

Harvey (1995) focuses on the color white in 19<sup>th</sup> century Western Europe, particularly England. He produces a list of meanings that the color white might convey for female dress in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: virginity, respectability (perhaps ironically so, as in the case of Whistler’s painting *The White Girl* which featured his mistress dressed in virginal white and holding a lily), melancholy, solemnity, mourning (for children and young women), death, ghostliness, radiance, and insanity (pp. 205-206). Harvey also mentions, briefly, the sensuality that white had taken on by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, visible in many of Renoir’s works.

Craik’s (2009) list of associations is more cultural in nature, citing the fact that white is the color of mourning in some societies while black is used

in others. She also mentions the dichotomy of associations conveyed by the color: on the one hand, there is goodness, purity, and cleanliness (e.g., white wedding, white knight, white wash); on the other hand, there is badness, emptiness, or uselessness (e.g., white livered, white slaver, white elephant) (p. 42). This wide variety of associations, in addition to those described by Lurie (1981) and Harvey (1995) point to the importance of cultural and historical context when analyzing meanings of color in dress.

### **Victorian Dress and Material Culture**

The Victorian era, which began and ended with Queen Victoria's reign in Great Britain (1837-1901), was a time of great change in the production and consumption of material culture, particularly dress. By this era, the Industrial Revolution was in full swing, making more jobs available for workers and more commodities available for consumers; workers moved to London in droves, and population increased rapidly. Anonymity gradually became common, and individuals were able to blend into the city crowd in ways they had not before (Entwhistle, 2000, pp. 115-116). Although Victorians already used exteriors as a major way to infer the social standing and interior "inner character" of their contemporaries, this development led to, as Entwhistle (2000) states, "a greater emphasis on appearance as the means by which to 'read' the other" (p. 116). Small details of dress and appearance became instant ways to "read" the status and character of individuals one might cross paths with in the city. This uncertainty clashed

with Victorian ideas of physiognomy, a means of ascertaining an individual's character from facial arrangement, skull shape, and details as minute as shape and texture of the eyelashes (Entwhistle, 2000, p. 122). Now that, as Elizabeth Wilson (2003) puts it, "the individual had to learn pliability, flexibility, and cunning" to survive in the crowded city, employing "the art of dissimulation and disguise," it was much more difficult to tell what lurked behind the public display (p. 137). "Fashion," writes Wilson (2003), "is one adjunct to this self-presentation and manipulation" (p. 138).

Along with population increases and job growth, the Industrial Revolution made more commodities available for more people. König (1973) and Breward (1995) have both written about the new ease of obtaining the items and general look previously restricted to those of a certain income level. The well-entrenched upper classes of Victorian England began to fear that those of lower social standing could afford to "purchase" the look of a more refined, socially elite individual. Craik (2009) has discussed widely the effects of mass industrialization on the fashion system. She writes that because of mass production, "people could buy a cultural identity and thus social credentials....One could purchase a desired identity and exhibit it in a process of conspicuous consumption" (p. 67). Gone were the days when one could determine social standing and character from dress and appearance; the ability to do so was severely hampered by the new "market-place whose

character had been completely reinvented by the development of modern capitalism” (Breward, 1995, pp. 146-147).

Crucially, the mass availability of fashion now disturbed Victorians specifically because the middle and lower classes now had the ability to construct the appearance of the upper classes. Entwistle (2000) states that “people began to be concerned with the control of appearance, and clothing and demeanour were therefore employed as techniques to control how one was perceived” (pp. 123-124). If appearance could be constructed, how was one able to discern the true inner character of an individual? If “socially acceptable” dress could be purchased and worn by those who would otherwise not be deemed as such, how was it possible to know exactly whom one was meeting and mingling with?

Two of the major dress-related innovations of the Industrial Revolution occurred in 1856: the invention of aniline dyes and the creation of the cage crinoline (Breward, 1995, p. 151). Instantly construed as fashionable and modern, aniline dyes allowed for dazzling colors and new patinas previously unthinkable in earlier 19<sup>th</sup> century female dress. The cage crinoline allowed for enormously wide skirts, which required much more fabric. Christopher Breward (1995) writes that these two inventions were “held up by reactionaries and moralists as prime examples of the immorality of modern dress” (p. 151). Mass-production ensured that these inventions were employed and distributed to all levels of society, thereby making fashionable

a new silhouette (in new colors) that some scholars, like Breward (1995) and Lurie (1981) connect with the Victorian woman's increasing space (both literal and figurative) in the home.

If clothes of the early Victorian period suggested, as Lurie (1981) believes, frivolity, inanity, and innocence, clothes of the mid-Victorian period represented a more mature, domestic, divine woman—the stereotypical “angel in the house.” The Industrial Revolution contributed to greater separation in male and female roles, and it was during this era that notions of femininity wholly related to the domestic and private sphere were first introduced (Craik, 1995, p. 47). Women were increasingly taught, through outlets like women's magazines, the appropriate behaviors and rules for domestic settings; Craik (1995) writes, “Victorian notions of femininity were interspliced with codes of etiquette” (p. 50). In other words, there existed an appropriate dress code of which Victorian society was aware. Women were encouraged to express their femininity through clothes, a process that, in combination with exciting new innovations within reach, allowed for the possibility of creating identities through dress and appearance (Craik, 1995, p. 56).

### **History of the Treatment of Mental Illness**

The history of mental illness is a vast topic the scope of which is beyond this paper. I will focus primarily on the ways in which mental illness was both treated and perceived in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century, insanity was a catchall term encompassing anything from mental illness to nervous disorders to indigence (Scull, 1993). Emotions “represented the animal in man and were to be subjected,” particularly during the Age of Reason (Skultans, 1979, p. 52). Madhouses were wretched depositories for those whose families either could not or would not take care of them; according to Showalter (1985), the mentally ill were viewed as “lunatics...as unfeeling brutes, ferocious animals that needed to be kept in check with chains, whips, strait-waistcoats, barred windows, and locked cells” (p. 8). The mentally ill were not regarded as sick or in need of help but rather as a blight upon society, their very existence indicative of the irrationality that ran counter to the reason and order that characterized most of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Toward the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and coinciding with the Romantic Age, views toward the mentally ill began to change. In what has been called “the first psychiatric revolution,” social reformers slowly commenced investigations of the madhouses and prisons that professed to treat the mentally ill (Showalter, 1985, p. 8). A societal shift occurred that began to view emotion and feeling as necessary for life; perhaps the mentally ill were not animals, devoid of human characteristics, but human beings frustrated by passionate forces within. Asylums, both public and private, became the preferred location for treating the mentally ill. But although society began to view the mentally ill with a more humane eye, those afflicted were still seen

as in need of incarceration and incapable of appropriate conduct (Showalter, 1981).

With the ending of the Romantic Age and beginning of the Victorian era in the 1830s, the focus on emotions and passions began to swing in the opposite direction. The Victorian Age has been characterized as an age of reason and scientific inquiry; there was very little that Victorian scientists and scholars felt they could not discover and thereby control (Scull, 1993, pp 104-110). With the shift from agrarian society to industrialized nation, the population of Great Britain participated in a shift not only from the rural to the urban, but also from the belief that nature was the ultimate power to the understanding that man, with his inventions and industrialized might, could control that which had previously been intractable. As Scull (1993) details, “Nature was revealed as anything but fixed and immutable,” and people began to view manufacturing as “a form of human activity in which nature is simply relegated to a source of raw materials” (p. 106). Wilson (2003) echoes this sentiment: “Nature no longer seemed so awesome and mysterious, but became an object for human investigation, and a source of raw materials to be exploited” (p. 60). This belief in the power of mankind to discover, order, and exert control over the natural world extended into every area of life, including the treatment of mental illness. Bourne Taylor (1988) notes that in the Victorian era, “discussions of a wide range of theories on the workings of the mind, including the definition, classification, and treatment of insanity,

were a significant feature” of contemporary journals and intellectual culture (p. 29).

Whereas during the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries the mentally ill were viewed as animals to be shackled and demonized, during the Victorian Age the mentally ill were viewed as a group of individuals to be analyzed, categorized, and systematically cured. The Lunatics Act of 1845 is in large part responsible for this. Requiring that all counties provide adequate asylum accommodation for “pauper lunatics”—those whose maintenance came wholly or in part from public funds— this act revolutionized the ways in which society viewed and dealt with mental illness (Showalter, 1981). Prior to the 1845 Act, the mentally ill poor were typically sent to workhouses where they were beaten or worse. Now, pauper lunatics would be cared for in environments supported by public funds. As Skultans (1979) writes, “faith in man’s powers of emotional self-discipline and control created a different outlook toward the possibility of a complete cure of nervous disabilities” (p. 56).

This new, unarguably more humane view came to be known as moral management, and it predominated as the major view toward the treatment of the mentally ill during the Victorian Age. Just as femininity became domesticated during the Victorian era, so too did insanity. Showalter (1985) writes that this is “the most significant innovation of psychiatric

Victorianism,” and “a decided retreat from Romantic associations of inspiration and madness” (p. 28). Scull (1993) agrees:

Insanity was transformed from a vague, culturally defined phenomenon afflicting an unknown, but probably small, proportion of the population into a condition which could only be authoritatively diagnosed, certified, and dealt with by a group of legally recognized experts; and which was now seen as one of the major forms of deviance in English society. (p. 46)

In this form of treatment, the willpower of the individual was of central importance to an eventual cure, which was the ultimate goal of moral management (Showalter, 1985). Sontag (1990) describes this as a replacement of the 18<sup>th</sup> century notion that disease fits the patients’ character with the new 19<sup>th</sup> century notion that “disease expresses character—it can be challenged by the will” (p. 43).

During the period of moral management, it was widely believed that the average person had the ability to determine who was sane and who was not; even though, as McCandless (1985) writes, people differed over where to draw the line, “few disputed that such a line could be drawn without a great deal of difficulty” (p. 340). Physiognomy, a means of determining an individual’s character based on facial shape and physical characteristics, factored into this as well. However, in the late 1850s and late 1870s, there was a series of so-called “lunacy panics,” in which the general public was incited to fear wrongful confinement in asylums. These panics were based on incidents of actual wrongful confinement, in which a sane individual was

mistakenly incarcerated (McCandless, 1981). The concurrent fear to the sane being deemed insane was the insane being deemed sane. If the line was not as clear as previously thought, how was it possible to tell with certainty the sanity of any individual? This fear went hand-in-hand with the new ability to construct appearance in the industrialized city. The Victorians fully realized the possibility that the outer self could be a disguise for the true inner self.

### **The Feminization of Mental Illness**

Interestingly, England specifically has been viewed as a hotbed of nervous disorders, its people innately susceptible to melancholy. Showalter (1985) writes that in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, society doctor George Cheyne detailed this belief in his book, *The English Malady*, in which he claimed that “madness was the by-product of English sensitivity, ambition, and intelligence...[a sign] of progress and cultural superiority” (p. 7). The late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries held as fashionable the melancholic tendencies of sensitive, artistic men. The Romantic Movement of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries prized emotional sensitivity and freedom of thought above order and logic. Many of that era’s greatest proponents were themselves quite sensitive and fragile, to the point that their illnesses (particularly tuberculosis) were held up as physical manifestations of their passionate inner selves. Sontag (1990) writes about the romanticization of tuberculosis and its attendant symptoms, describing how “wan, hollow-chested young women and pallid, rachitic young men vied with each other as candidates for

this mostly (at that time) incurable, disabling, really awful disease” (p. 29). This was a result, Sontag believes, of the belief that “sickness was a way of making people ‘interesting’—which is how ‘romantic’ was originally defined” (p. 30). This cult of disease extended to all types of illness that affected the mind and brought forth outer representations of perceived inner passions; Showalter (1985) states that these fashionable kinds of illness were associated with “the intellectual and economic pressures on highly civilized men” (p. 7). These types of men were generally poets and artists, not the men of the overworked lower classes who were struggling to survive. Perhaps unsurprisingly, mentally ill women were also not afforded the same fashionable associations in real life. As the Romantic era drew to a close, the concept of the actually insane man or woman (and particularly woman) became much less desirable.

According to Showalter (1985), women were viewed as “more vulnerable to insanity than men, to experience it in specifically feminine ways, and to be differently affected by it in the conduct of their lives” (p. 7).

Showalter (1981) mentions the fact that:

the domestication of insanity, its assimilation by the Victorian institution, coincides with the period in which the predominance of women among the insane becomes a statistically verifiable phenomenon. (p. 315)

The number of pauper lunatics increased after the passage of the 1845 Lunatics Act, and due to the fact that many of the poor mad were female,

more and more women were counted in asylum records. It was less acceptable for a man to leave his family and enter an asylum than for a woman to do so. In private asylums, too, where the upper-middle and upper classes sent their mentally ill relatives, the number of females increased throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Showalter (1985) writes that Victorian psychiatrists explained these increases as proof that “women were more vulnerable to insanity than men because the instability of their reproductive systems interfered with their sexual, emotional, and rational control” (p. 55).

Eventually any instance of female mental illness became known as “hysteria” and was related specifically to women’s reproductive systems; Archimedes (2005) states that mentally women were classified as neurasthenic, hysterical, or morally insane (all the same thing) but primarily these terms served to label these women as “unnatural” (p. 2). In a strange combination of nervous disorders and female biology, mental illness became strongly associated with the female reproductive system, as doctors and psychologists strove to connect scientifically the perception that women were naturally weaker with the cycles of the female body. Schroeder (1995) mentions that doctors often believed the “overexcitement” of the female reproductive system was caused by “passion-stirring” images, statues, music, or novels (p. 302). Shuttleworth (1990) has written about the medicalization of the female body in the Victorian era, where “male health was believed to be based on self-control, [but] women’s health depended on her very *inability* to

control her body” (p. 57). She also describes how mental illness in women was tied to the domestication of the female ideal:

The male returns from his contaminating material labors in the outer world to be spiritually refreshed by his angel within the inner sanctum of the home. This outer/inner polarity existed, however, in direct conjunction with another formulation of the inner/outer divide: women were outwardly fair, but internally they contained threatening sources of pollution. (p. 55)

This quote references, once again, the unsettling notion that the outside and inside might not entirely match up, a fear echoed in Oppenheim’s (1991) analysis of mental illness’s feminization, *Shattered Nerves*.

In addition, those who made up the bulk of mentally ill women in public and private asylums came from the lower and upper classes, not the middle class. Spooner (2004) references the ideal of the middle-class feminine domestic goddess, who was a model of rationality and self-management while providing for her family and still taking time to make a beautiful household (p. 60). Neither the over-worked lower classes nor the self-indulged upper classes achieved this lofty Victorian ideal, making them better candidates, as both Showalter (1981, 1985) and Spooner (2004) have mentioned, for developing mental illness. Bourne Taylor (1988) echoes this sentiment, noting that the domestic middle-class female became the epitome of rationality, which was viewed “against the pathologized imaginary excesses of upper- or working-class sexuality, of hysteria or of mania” (p. 38). By the end of the

Victorian era, hysteria was a household term and the trope of the insane woman was well recognized.

### **19<sup>th</sup> Century Fictional Depictions of Madness**

Mental illness was a major component of many 19<sup>th</sup> century British fictional works. Showalter (1985) has written extensively on the mentally insane female character in 19<sup>th</sup> century British fiction, and she views the treatment of these characters as a corollary to the ways in which the mentally ill female was viewed in real life. Predictably, the Romantic era featured the glamorization and near-sexualization of mentally ill women. Sonnets like George Dyer's "Written in Bedlam: On Seeing a Beautiful Young Female Maniac" (1801) highlight the enticing aspects of female madness, while novels, poems, and melodramas about the fictional "Crazy Jane"—who went mad when abandoned by her lover—were all the rage in the Romantic era (Showalter, 1985, pp. 10-14). Showalter (1985) states that they were "touching image[s] of feminine vulnerability and a flattering reminder of female dependence upon male affection" (p. 13). Toward the end of the Romantic era, though, novelists such as Charlotte and Emily Brontë began to feature female madwomen as central characters who left behind the bondage of female domesticity for the "empowerment" of madness (Showalter, 1981, 1985).

In the Victorian era, madwomen were often central characters in popular novels; stripped of their glamor, though, these characters often

served as examples that nothing was truly as it seemed. From the heroines of sensation novels like Mary Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* and Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* to Charles Dickens' Miss Havisham from *Great Expectations*, these women were viewed as dangerous, wronged, delusional, and sometimes all three. Spooner (2004) also mentions the penchant for secrets (such as hidden insanity) as plot points in 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian Gothic novels; clothing, interestingly, often became the medium through which these secrets could be constructed (p. 47). The contemporary obsession with Ophelia, the prototypical, love-mad female in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, also points to the allure of female madness so evident in the many paintings of Ophelia and restagings of the play.

It is also necessary to reference the disturbing commodification of insanity through fiction that began in the Romantic era and reached its peak in the Victorian age. The aforementioned Crazy Jane, originally the title character of a late-18<sup>th</sup> century poem by Matthew Lewis, started a fashion for a particular type of hat worn in the poem. Such hats were sold as themed "Crazy Jane millinery," which, as Small (1996) writes, enabled "female insanity becoming a fashion accessory" (p. 13-14). A similar, but much larger, craze ensued after the publication of Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White*, which gave rise to a merchandising industry of themed bonnets, cloaks, perfume, and dances, to name a few (Spooner, 2004; Sweet, 2009). The idea that female insanity could be glamorized and commodified represents one of

the critical paradoxes of the Victorians, who were so concerned with morally managing and humanely treating the mentally ill.

### **Sensation Novels**

In 1860s England, a new genre of novel emerged: the sensation novel. This genre was characterized primarily by its ability to shock and excite audiences—to provide them with “sensation,” often melodramatic in nature (Cvetkovich, 1992; Sweet, 2009). The plots of sensation novels typically included, as Sweet (2009) writes, “murder, madness, bigamy or all three” (p. xiii). Pykett (2006) writes that sensation novels were particularly influenced by both sensational newspaper reports of heinous crimes, such as women murdering their lovers by putting arsenic in their tea, and also the contemporary fascination with mental illness and wrongful incarceration of the vulnerable, especially women; “by the mid-1860s,” she says, “madness had come to be seen as almost synonymous with sensation fiction, both as a theme for investigation and as a means of achieving sensational effects” (p. 52). Extremely popular with audiences but harshly vilified by critics, sensation novels occupied a major part of mid-Victorian culture.

The general form of the sensation novel grew out of the popular 18<sup>th</sup> century Gothic novel, where fantastic, often supernatural occurrences took place in far-flung, exotic locales. Popular throughout the Romantic era, Gothic novels allowed readers an escape into a frightening but far-off world. Sensation novels, on the other hand, brought Gothic plot elements (e.g.,

criminality, insanity, misery) into the parlors of proper middle-class British audiences (Sweet, 2009). No longer were crumbling castles and dark forests the settings for explorations of terror; now, as Sweet writes, the plots took place in “contemporary country manors and on brand-new suburban housing developments” (p. xiii). This combination of domestic novel elements, like psychological realism, and Gothic novel elements, like terrifying thrills, was called by Wilkie Collins—widely considered the first sensation author—“the secret theatre of home” (quoted in Sweet, 2009, p. xiii).

Audiences gobbled up the sensation novel as another form of entertainment available to them in their newly industrialized consumer culture. Pleasure had become almost fully commoditized by the 1860s (Sweet, 2009), and sensation novels were treated as another commodity to be consumed and experienced. Cvetkovich (1982) writes that the sensation novel’s “mid-century appearance coincided with the introduction of the department store and other marketing tactics designed to make consumption easier and more attractive” (p. 18). She also mentions the advances in publishing, which allowed newly literate audiences to access sensation novels at a price not previously available (p. 16). Bourne Taylor (1988) notes that this contributed to the “druglike qualities” of the sensation novel, which critics bemoaned could be consumed from “circulating libraries, railway bookstalls, and weekly serialization” (p. 5). Sensation novels, like most fiction in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, were first produced in serialized format, a notion that

makes the drug metaphor all the more potent. Once a week, audiences would receive a quick, thrilling hit of sensation that would have to last until next week's dose arrived.

Not surprisingly, literary critics and moralists were outraged. The sensation genre was viewed as "pop" literature, a form of fiction with no moralizing, instructional tendencies. Critics decried the harmful nervous effects that the sensation genre produced in its readers, seeing in these more than simply an irrational emotional response. D. A. Miller's (1987) analysis of sensation novels focuses on how critics describe the body's reaction to reading such novels with the same terminology used for descriptions of female hysteria; Bourne Taylor (1988) also highlights the implicitly feminine body that featured in many criticisms. Audiences, however, thoroughly enjoyed these sensational pleasures; as Sweet (2009) says:

The pleasure of sensation narrative was queasy and neurotic, but it was one that was pursued by large numbers of Victorian readers who probably regarded the health warnings of such reviewers as part of the fun. (p. xviii)

Cvetkovich (1992) takes a feminist political approach in her analysis of sensation novels. Seeing these novels as vehicles for the politics of affect, Cvetkovich links contemporary critics' responses to the distrust of middle-class literature and the consumer culture explosion. Critics attacked the sensation novel specifically, Cvetkovich (1992) says, because they "represented the entry into middle-class publishing institutions of the

sensationalism that characterized the working-class literature of the preceding decades” (p. 15). This form of literature was thus aesthetically inferior and morally questionable. Critics lambasted the emotional states produced by reading such novels, associating them with animalistic, instinctual responses; “feelings and emotions,” writes Cvetkovich (1982) are “uncivilized and irrational” (p. 22). She believes these ethical, moral arguments often serve to mask a political discourse that sought to disparage cultural forms that appealed to marginalized groups like the working-class and women (p. 22). Cvetkovich also makes the interesting note that sensation novels have historically—and even today—been “consigned to second-rate status through a process that often replicates nineteenth-century discourses suspicious of working-class readers, female audiences, and affectively powerful or nonrealist literature” (p. 15).

### **Wilkie Collins**

The author Wilkie Collins was born in London, England in 1824 to Harriet and William Collins, a successful artist. Peters (1991), in her excellent and definitive biography of Collins, writes that he “came from a background that does not immediately suggest any reason for the determined conventionality that his friends knew, or for the sensational content of his writing” (p. 3). His childhood was relatively unremarkable, filled with trips to Italy and France with his family, including his younger brother Charles, who was to become a noted Pre-Raphaelite painter. From accounts in Ellis (1951)

and Robinson (1952), it appears that Collins first developed an interest in writing after these trips abroad. To his father's dismay, he did not show immense promise in these endeavors, although he was able to publish his first piece of fiction, 'The Last Stage Coachman,' in 1843 in *Illuminated Magazine*.

To please his father, as most biographers (Ellis, 1951; Robinson, 1952; Peters, 1991) note, Collins began to study law in 1846. He published his first book, *Memoirs of the Life of William Collins, Esq., RA*, in 1848; this was a collection of memoirs of the life of Collins' father, who had died the year before. Most critics agree that a turning point in his nascent literary career was his meeting with Charles Dickens in 1851. The pair developed a sort of mentor-protégé relationship that lasted until Dickens' death in 1870. Collins began to publish short fictional pieces in Dickens' literary journal, *Household Words*. Short stories (1856) and his first serialized novel<sup>1</sup> (*The Dead Secret*, 1857) were published throughout the decade. However, it was the publication of *The Woman in White*, which began serialization in *All the Year Round* (formerly *Household Words*) in 1859, that really brought Collins fame. Widely considered the first sensation novel, *The Woman in White* propelled Collins

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on how Collins both aided and was aided by the changing literary marketplace of mid-Victorian London, see Graham Law's "The professional writer and the literary marketplace" in J. Bourne Taylor (Ed.), (2006), *The Cambridge companion to Wilkie Collins*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

to stardom; during that year, Collins also began living openly with his mistress, Caroline Graves.

Other successes followed. Novels such as *No Name* (1862), *Armadale* (1864), *The Moonstone* (1868), *Man and Wife* (1869), and *Poor Miss Finch* (1871) were all critical achievements. Theatrical adaptations were held for some of his most respected works, and Collins continued publishing prolifically, with short stories and plays throughout the 1870s and 1880s. In his personal life, Collins took another mistress, Martha Rudd, in 1868. Although he remained with Caroline for his entire life (despite her marriage to another man), Collins had three children with Martha. He died in London in 1889 at the age of 65.

Critical analysis of Collins' work has shifted over the years. Bourne Taylor (2006) notes that Collins' reputation has moved from the margins of the literary world—where he was seen as “Dickens's rather lightweight protégé and dubious companion” (p. 1)—to the mainstream of serious academic study. Collins' contemporaries and literary descendants, such as Henry James, praised the author for his introducing into fiction “those most mysterious of mysteries, the mysteries that are at our own doors....These were infinitely the more terrible” (quoted in Bourne Taylor, 1988, p. 1). Twentieth century studies of Collins were restricted to either biographies or summaries of his novels' themes. Bourne Taylor (2006) states that it was not until the 1970s that critics began to study Collins' sensation narratives for

their subversive, radical elements; by the 1980s and 1990s, the distinctive features of Collins' work began to be recognized:

His exploration of how social identities and relationships are enacted and maintained, his fascination with the unstable boundary between the normal and the deviant, his reworking of Gothic conventions to explore the power relations at work in the Victorian family...have all made it a particularly fruitful subject for many of the key theoretical and critical concerns of the 1980s and 1990s, and these debates continue. (p. 2)

Peters (1991) notes Collins' preoccupation with identity, which she says occurs so frequently in his work as to suggest that he was troubled as well as absorbed by it. Peters makes the argument that Collins was fascinated with the concept of the double, and with cases of mistaken, substituted, and doubled identity (pp. 2, 202). She goes so far as to suggest that Caroline Graves, his first mistress, presented with her secret life a sort of double identity that captivated him. In fact, it is during his years with Caroline and prior to Martha that Collins wrote his most well-known novels, the ones that dealt primarily with doubles and secret identities (Peters, 1991, p. 202).

Academic criticism since the 1990s has focused not only on Collins' treatment of identity but also on the social, scientific, and psychological contexts in which he was writing, analyzing his work for, as Bourne Taylor (2006) writes, "aspects of his elaborate response to, and treatment of, modern subjectivity and forms of knowledge as much as experiments in genre" (p. 4). Sexuality, race, gender, and disability have featured prominently in contemporary analyses of Collins' work. Bourne Taylor (1988) herself has

written much on Collins' repeated use of madness and his ability to create novels which "articulate their culture's ambivalence towards the nature of knowledge and identity, they disrupt any fixed relation between the sign and its referent" (p. 15).

### *The Woman in White*

First published in serial format beginning November 26, 1859 in Dickens' journal *All The Year Round*, *The Woman in White* is considered by scholars to be the first sensation novel (Bourne Taylor, 1988; Rance, 1991; Sweet, 2009). The plot contains many elements common to sensation novels, primarily insanity and criminality. I will here summarize the plot as briefly as possible, although at over 600 pages this is not an easy task.

The novel is set in England in the year 1848; it takes the form of an epistolary novel, in which different sections are presented in letter or diary form by a series of narrators. In the beginning, it is clear these various sections are meant as recollections of a series of events. The story begins with Walter Hartright, a drawing teacher and the primary narrator and hero of the story. He sets off to Limmeridge House, a country manor, where he will be paid to tutor two stepsisters (who live alone with their uncle, their parents having died) in the art of drawing. On the night before he leaves, he encounters a strange woman dressed in white on the road to London. She appears distressed and fearful, and Walter offers his assistance in procuring her a carriage once they reach London. After doing so, he overhears that a

woman dressed in white recently escaped from an asylum and is suspected to be hiding in London somewhere.

He soon forgets this misadventure as he reaches Limmeridge House the next day; almost instantly, he falls in love with Laura Fairlie, the fair-haired and beautiful sister who is unfortunately engaged to be married to the nefarious Sir Percival. From the beginning, Laura reminds him of someone he cannot put his finger on. It is not until he sees Laura dressed in white that he realizes she is quite physically similar to the woman in white from his last night in London. When Laura is given an unsigned letter warning her against her impending marriage to Sir Percival, Walter and Marian, Laura's unattractive but intelligent, courageous stepsister, discover that the woman in white has been seen loitering around Limmeridge House. Through some clever detective work, the pair determine that the woman in white is Anne Catherick, a mentally unstable girl who was raised in childhood largely by Laura Fairlie's mother. They discover she wrote the letter about Sir Percival and find that Anne has a "secret" about him; she maintains that she will tell Laura and Marian when the time is right.

Eventually the time comes for Laura and Percival's wedding. Walter leaves the country in anguish. The pair are married and honeymoon in Rome; when they come back after a span of nine months away, Laura is much changed, physically and emotionally. It is apparent that Percival abuses her, but we are not informed in what ways or to what extent. He has brought back

with him his friend Count Fosco, an incredibly devious, disarmingly mesmerizing Italian nobleman. Together, Percival and Fosco coerce Laura to sign a document that the reader learns will sign away all of her inheritance (quite a large sum) to Percival upon her death. Marian, who has now taken up the narration of the story via diary entries, attempts to find Anne in order to learn Percival's secret; she is unsuccessful as Anne is hiding out in fear of Percival discovering her location.

One night, under cover of darkness and pouring rain, Marian spies on Percival and Fosco and learns their evil plan: they intend to "switch" Laura and Anne, who has since become very ill, by hastening Anne's death and switching her body out for Laura's, thus creating the illusion that Laura has died and thereby opening up her money for Percival to take. Marian becomes deathly ill after her night in the pouring rain, and while she is languishing in her bed, Laura (who has by this point become a shadow of her former self) is tricked into thinking Marian has left the house. Laura is shuttled away to an undisclosed location where she is severely drugged; Anne, on the other hand, is taken in by an accomplice of Fosco's and given drugs that hasten her death. Anne is brought to Limmeridge House and presented as the dead corpse of Laura Fairlie; Laura is brought to the insane asylum as the returned escapee Anne Catherick.

When Marian recovers and discovers the truth, she is terrified. She writes to Walter, and together they find a way to convince the asylum that

Laura has been falsely incarcerated. Percival and Fosco have by now taken her money and absconded, but Walter vows to fight for Laura's inheritance and help her regain her sanity. Through careful detective work and quite a bit of luck, Walter discovers that Percival's secret is his false identity: he forged his family name and credentials in the church register, a crime that in Collins' day was punishable by death. Percival learns that Walter knows his secret, and in an attempt to destroy the evidence is himself killed in a fire. It is revealed that Anne and Laura are also half-sisters; they share the same father, hence their physical similarities. Through a difficult legal process, Walter and Marian help Laura get her inheritance back. She eventually regains most of her sanity. Fosco is revealed as an Italian spy from a Mafia-type organization and is killed by a friend of Walter's. The novel ends neatly with Walter and Laura married and firmly ensconced at Limmeridge House: a happy ending.

Upon its publication, *The Woman in White* was an instant critical success. Many scholars note that in 1860 and afterwards, a merchandising craze featuring "Woman in White"-themed products—bonnets, cloaks, shawls, nightgowns, perfume, and musical pieces—took London by storm (Andrew, 1959/1979; Clarke, 1988; Ellis, 1951; Hüttner, 1996; Peters, 1991; Robinson, 1952; Spooner, 2004; and Sweet, 2009). Andrew (1959/1979) mentions that white became a popular color for women's dresses because of the novel (p. 152). In 1871, a theatrical version of *The Woman in White*

opened to much fanfare at the Olympic Theatre in London; in 1873 it ran on Broadway in New York City (Gasson, 1998). Much more recently, in 2004, *The Woman in White* was given the Andrew Lloyd Webber musical treatment when it opened in London; much like the merchandising craze that occurred after the novel's publication, this iteration of the story featured branded tapestry kits and pillboxes (Malik, 2006, p. 181). The novel has been adapted into several film versions, and a contemporary sequel to *The Woman in White*, James Wilson's *The Dark Clue*, was published in 2002.

Much of the scholarship on *The Woman in White* has focused on discovering the origins of the plot. Critics now agree that while some of the stories surrounding Collins' artistic inspirations for the plot are somewhat questionable, two major events stand out: his original meeting with Caroline Graves and his fascination with a celebrated French case of false incarceration for insanity (Clarke 1988; Ellis, 1951; Hüttner, 1996; Hyder, 1939; Peters, 1991; Robinson, 1952; Sweet, 2009; Wise, 2012). In a probably embellished tale, Collins is out walking one night with John Millais, the celebrated Pre-Raphaelite painter, when a lovely woman in white, clearly in distress, runs across their path. Collins follows her and discovers she has been kept prisoner against her wishes by a mesmeric and evil man. The woman is Caroline Graves, and, as Clarke (1988) notes, Caroline was Collins' constant companion during the writing of *The Woman in White* (p. 100). The second, and probably more literal, major influence on the plot of Collins' novel

is his reading of Maurice Mejan's *Recueil Des Causes Célèbres*, a collection of French legal cases; according to Wise (2012), this is where Collins first heard of the false insanity case against one Marie de Douhault (pp. 48-50). Marie was the victim of a plot by her brother and nephew to cheat her out of her rightful inheritance when her father died; when Marie traveled to her brother's home in Paris to attempt to put the matter straight, she was intercepted, drugged, and incarcerated at the famous Salpêtrière asylum. Sadly, even though she eventually proved her innocence and was let out, she never regained her inheritance and died in poverty (Sweet, 2009; Wise, 2012).

Sweet (2009) also mentions a Mrs. Coffin, a contemporary of Collins who used to dress up in white like a ghost to scare children playing in the cemetery at dusk, and whom Collins often saw on his evening walks (p. xxiii). Wise (2012) mentions Catherine Cumming, an unstable elderly woman who lived only yards from where Walter meets Anne in *The Woman in White* (p. 52). It is probable that any or all of these factors influenced the plot at some level. One thing that is certain is Collins' familiarity with the contemporary discussions on mental illness. Fass Leavy (1982) notes that Collins was friends with John Forster, who was on several Lunacy Commissions and had been asylum inspector, as well as Brian Procter, the Lunacy Commission secretary, and John Connolly, a famous doctor and *the* contemporary source on mental illness. The image of "a woman in white," particularly as it relates to ghostliness, was also well-established by this time. Parsons (1933) writes

of the prevalence of ghostly white women in myths, while Wise (2012) notes that by 1779, “going mad in white satin” was already a literary cliché (p. 50). In 1820 the poet Percy Shelley rapturously compared the waning moon to a dying lady, “who totters forth, wrapped in a gauzy veil / Out of her chamber, led by the insane / And feeble wanderings of her fading brain... / A white and shapeless mess” (Eco, 2004, p. 288).

Twentieth and twenty-first century analyses of *The Woman in White* have tended to focus on the key areas of identity, doubling, Victorian ideals, and gender, as well as some more general analysis of the work as a sensation novel. Rance (1991) has analyzed critical Gothic elements of the plot that are reworked to great effect as sensation novel material; Pykett (2006) echoes this view and refers to it as the “natural supernatural” (p. 56). Cvetkovich (1992) meanwhile is more concerned with the ways in which the plot’s sensational elements work to form a new politics of gender produced by affect, as is Andres (1995), who views Collins as undermining gender identity. Miller (1987) focuses on the sexualization of hysterical symptoms. Both Bourne Taylor (1988) and Peters (1991) have written about the destruction and re-formation of identity that is at the heart of *The Woman in White*; Peters (1991) believes the major paradox of the novel is its focus on the fear of losing possession of one’s self, which is terrifying on one hand but exhilarating on the other (p. 211). Small (2006) also comments on the central fear of identity loss, viewing it as absence, while Liddle (2009) views it as

theft. Bronfen (1992), Harvey (1995), Hüttner (1996), and Spooner (2004) analyze Collins' use of doubling, or doppelgangers, in the novel, particularly between Laura and Anne and Laura and Marian. Bronfen believes that Walter sees Laura as Anne-in-Laura, the uncanny death-in-life, while Harvey sees the use of the color white as critical to the double development. Hüttner views Laura and Anne as symbolic counterparts. Spooner analyzes the associations with whiteness between Laura and Anne. Scholars who have taken a gender-oriented approach to analyzing *The Woman in White* include Nina Auerbach (1982) and Richard Collins (2003), who both see in Collins' depiction of Marian's moustache a subtle undermining of gender stereotypes. Elam's (1993) analysis of the novel views its female characters as variants of Victorian sexual ideals based on Collins' use of the color white. Teukolsky (2009) also takes this view, comparing Collins' *The Woman in White* to Whistler's controversial *The White Girl* painting. Heller (1992) is also focused on the virginal "white" ideals suggested within the novel, while Meckier (1982) sees Collins' novel as a send-up of Victorian obsessions with propriety. Fahnestock (1981) views the novel's physical descriptions of characters as a direct reference to the Victorian fad of physiognomy.

### **Reflection Theory**

Reflection theory, according to Griswold (1981) "states that cultural products in some way mirror the social order" (p. 740). This idea, developed from writings on culture and literature by Peterson (1979) and Albrecht

(1954) respectively, is applicable to analyzing aspects of literature (a cultural product) for what they reflect about society. A sociologist, Griswold was interested in determining the relationship between American novels and society: was the American novel unique? Could it be said to reflect particular characteristics of America? (p. 741). Griswold compared novels published in the U.S. during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries to novels published in foreign countries during that time period and determined that multiple factors, including treatment of race, middle-class protagonists, and domestic settings set American novels apart from their foreign counterparts. Griswold (1981) was critical in developing the notion that literature could and did reflect “a variety of causal influences from the social world” (p. 741).

White (1980), a literary theorist, was also influential in relating reflection theory to the field of literary studies. He saw literature as “at once a displacement of social problems into an imaginary realm and a prefiguration of possible solutions to that problem which history will provide” (p. 366). White’s contribution to the concept of reflection theory is his ability to fuse together many different views of literature into one concept, that of “literary action.” It is this concept, White believes, that allows literature to suggest change by reflecting society’s concerns and paradoxes.

Folklore is one field that has made use of reflection theory in academic studies. Simonsen (1993) presents an interesting view of reflection theory when he suggests that literature does not necessarily reflect society’s

concerns directly and in their exact form but rather might do so in an indirect, transformative manner (p. 124). Simonsen (1993) writes:

People do not need a mirror image, a cloned image, of reality. What they need is to come to terms with reality; and that is something quite different. Fiction—storytelling—is one way of coming to terms with reality. (p. 124)

He argues that the author, however, must include enough references to direct reality in order for readers to understand that the fictional world is just enough of a representation of their own world; it is this interplay between the strange and the familiar that enables fiction to promote social action. Of especial interest for this thesis is Simonsen's (1993) belief of the importance of material culture:

Even in real life material objects and activities are not just “things,” they are part of a network of affinities and oppositions loaded with values and meaning. In short, material culture is culture in more than one sense, it is also part of the mental frame of reference of its users. (p. 129)

Another scholar who has written widely of the power of literature to reflect society is Bakhtin, who with Medvedev in 1928 published *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship*. Although the term “reflection theory” had yet to come into being, Bakhtin was an early proponent of literature's ability to reflect much more than its narratives:

Literature reflects and refracts the reflections and refractions of other ideological spheres (ethics, epistemology, political doctrines, religions, etc.). That is, in its ‘content’ literature reflects the whole of the sociological horizon of which it is itself a part. (Bakhtin & Medvedev, 1928, quoted in Morris, 1994, p. 128)

Bakhtin was strongly of the opinion that literature is a reflection of more than just literary trends: it is a reflection of the entire ideological environment of which it is a part (p. 133). Scholars who have been influenced by Bakhtin's ideas include Spooner (2004) who notes that texts do not develop in a vacuum but rather diachronically by building on previous texts and reflecting the historical conditions in which they are produced (p. 14), and Feder (1980), who, in writing on the topic of madness in literature, stated that "literary interpretations of madness both reflect and question medical, cultural, political, religious, and psychological assumptions of their time" (p. 4).

### **Dress in Literature**

Academic studies of the role dress plays in literature did not gain ground until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. In their anthology of essays on the topic, Kuhn and Carlson (2007) state that prior to this point, such a serious examination would have seemed frivolous (p. xiii). They reference the fact that fashion has continuously had to justify itself as more than just commodity, and by doing so it has been relegated to the margins of serious study. However, this is no longer the case. As academic studies of fashion became more acceptable toward the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the field of literary studies began to seriously analyze the topic as well.

Kuhn and Carlson (2007) note the potential of the clothed body—particularly the written clothed body—as “a site of aesthetic, social, and

political inscription—rich material for analysis” (p. 1). The areas of fashion and literature already share a linguistic connection, write the authors, whether it be descriptions of the “lines” or “statement’ of an outfit, the way in which their collection “tells a story,” or just simply the concept of “style.” Both fields, Kuhn and Carlson (2007) state, “are arts of expression and craft with an intriguingly mutable quality” (p. 2). McNeil, Karaminas, and Cole (2009) also see fashion as a species of fiction: “With desires, dreams, and idealizations as its counterparts and companions, and as its main driving force—fashion is also *fictive*” (p. xv).

The abundant material for analysis is evident when examining the work of authors over time. “Whether describing an elegant gown in luxurious detail or registering a simple tunic, storytellers attend to clothes,” write Kuhn and Carlson (2007, p.1). This is one of the primary ways in which readers identify and imagine the characters they are reading about. The relationship between the character and the clothes forms a key narrative device in fiction, as McNeil, Karaminas, and Cole (2009) have aptly noted:

Writers want their readers to know their characters, forming a significant contractual expectation between reader and writer. What a character wears and how he or she carries his or her clothes speak to the reader in ways that a character’s spoken words rarely could. Fashion is codified or endowed with meaning and a reader soon catches the writer’s intent. (p. 6)

These subtle meanings make up one important level of the ways in which readers come to understand the world of the author.

Early analyses of the role that dress plays in fiction, such as Collins' (1978) exploration of clothing in Hawthorne's *My Kinsman, Major Molineux*, and Sommers' (1981) examination of dress in *Huckleberry Finn* tended to focus on clothing as a motif that could convey socioeconomic status and character development. Potvin's (1987) analysis of Canadian author Frederick Philip Grove's fiction presents a Jungian view of dress in fiction, arguing for a symbolic reading of Grove's dress descriptions. Perry's (1991) dissertation on textile as material and myth in Virginia Woolf's fiction presented one of the first acknowledgements of the potential for clothing in fiction to convey gender ideologies. *Men in Black*, John Harvey's (1995) analysis of the history of color in dress, focuses much of its examination on characters in literature, particularly during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is unique in that it treats literary texts as potential sources for understanding not only the dress but also the concerns of particular societies throughout history.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has brought a proliferation of dress-in-fiction studies. Spooner's (2004) text evaluates the role of function of dress in Gothic and Victorian fiction, offering in-depth analyses of multiple works of literature. Batchelor's (2005) book on female clothing in 18<sup>th</sup> century literature concentrates on not only novels but also women's magazines and conduct books in developing an understanding of female propriety in that era. *Fashion and Fiction*, Ribeiro's (2005) examination of Stuart England, has been influential in the fields of dress studies and art history for the way in

which Ribeiro uses artistic and literary sources for her analysis (rather than extant dress examples, many of which no longer survive from that period).

Clair Hughes (2005) explores a variety of popular 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century fiction by authors such as Defoe and Wharton to analyze developments in the history of clothing.

Anthologies of essays on dress in fiction have also become popular. Both Kuhn and Carlson (2007) and McNeil, Karaminas, and Cole (2009) have presented collections of essays on the topic. Ranging from examinations of dress in early works of fiction like *Beowulf* (Howard, 2007) to the role of Holly Golightly in fashioning the waif (Finnane, 2009), these two anthologies comprise a huge amount of research on the topic. Wardrop's (2009) examination of clothing in Emily Dickinson's writing and Joslin's (2009) analysis of Edith Wharton's relationship with dress are both part of the "Becoming Modern/Reading Dress" series from New Hampshire Press, a series that specializes in analyses of dress in fiction. Finally, Cameron and Ogle's (2013) essay on the role of dress in portraying gender and identity in the *Deadwood Dick* dime novels relates that series' depictions of female characters with developments in 19<sup>th</sup> century American life.

### **Summary**

Dress can be defined as an assemblage of modifications of the body and/or supplements to the body. Appearance can be defined as the situated body and its attributes, such as age, health, skin color, stature, mood, and

more. Together dress and the situated body form a kind of nonverbal communication system. Goffman's (1959) concept of performance theory states that an individual acts out her identity, which occurs in social situations, and which is mediated through clothes, gestures, and expressions. Barthes (1983) draws on the field of semiotics to propose that clothes are signs full of symbolic meaning that is dependent on the context. Lennon and Burns (1993) suggest that authors can use clothes and physical descriptions to lead readers into forming specific impressions about characters. Scholars such as Lurie (1981), Harvey (1985), and Craik (2009) have analyzed the color white in dress over time and have found meanings as divergent as purity, infancy, weakness, professionalism, mourning, radiance, insanity, and solemnity associated with it.

In the Victorian era the Industrial Revolution led to new processes of making goods available for the masses. Individuals could now in essence purchase an identity similar to those of the upper classes (Craik, 2009). Combined with the rapidly expanding populations of cities, where individuals could easily become anonymous, unknowable beings, these industrial developments caused great unease in average Victorians (Breward, 1995; Entwistle, 2000). Dress-related inventions such as aniline dyes and crinoline hoops led to a growing fascination with the fashion industry, which also was viewed with scorn by more conservative Victorians (Lurie, 1981; Breward, 1995).

Mental illness underwent a great change between the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when mentally ill individuals were viewed as animals, to the Victorian era, where the ideal of moral management was promoted (Skultans, 1979; Showalter, 1985; Scull, 1993). This coincided with a shift from agrarian to industrialized society and a new belief that mankind had the power to exert control over nature (Bourne Taylor, 1988; Scull, 1993). There was also a shift from associating mild mental illness with the sensitive, intellectual male to associating it with nervous, aberrant femininity brought about by the female reproductive system (Showalter, 1981, 1985; Shuttleworth, 1990; Archimedes, 2005). While Victorians attempted to properly diagnose the mentally ill, there were also great fears over false incarceration and the inability to tell the insane from the sane prompted by actual events (McCandless, 1981). Mentally ill female characters were popular in literature throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Showalter, 1985).

The genre known as the sensation novel grew out of Gothic fiction and was popular in Victorian England in the 1860s and '70s (Cvetkovich, 1992; Pykett, 2006; Sweet, 2009). These novels took as major themes insanity, criminality, and murder, but the settings were typically domestic. Audiences devoured these novels but many critics bemoaned their lack of moral instruction and function as a commodity rather than works of art. Several authors have explored potential transgressive functions of the sensation novel (Bourne Taylor, 1988; Cvetkovich, 1992; Spooner, 2004).

Wilkie Collins was born in London in 1824 and rose to fame as writer with the publication of *The Woman in White* in 1859 (Peters 1991). He is considered the first sensation novelist. Collins has moved into serious academic consideration in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and scholars have noted a preoccupation with identity in his work (Peters, 1991; Bourne Taylor, 2006). His seminal novel *The Woman in White* has been analyzed for issues of plot origins (Clarke 1988; Hüttner, 1996; Peters, 1991; Sweet, 2009; and Wise, 2012), sensation (Cvetkovich, 1992; Pykett, 2006; and Rance, 1991), identity (Andres, 1995; Liddle, 2009; Miller, 1987; and Small, 2006), doubling (Bronfen, 1992; Harvey, 1995; Hüttner, 1996; and Spooner, 2004), gender (Auerbach, 1982 and Collins, 2003), and Victorian ideals (Elam, 1993; Fahnestock, 1981; Heller, 1992; Meckier, 1982; and Teukolsky, 2009).

Reflection theory states that cultural products in some way mirror the social order (Albrecht, 1954; Griswold, 1981; Peterson, 1979; White, 1980). Scholars like Simonsen (1993) have applied this theory to fields such as folklore studies. Bakhtin (1928/2003) was also a proponent of literature's ability to reflect not only literary trends but also the entire ideological environment of which it is a part.

The study of dress in literature has gained traction over the past fifty years. Early studies focused on the function of dress in character development, particularly in relation to socioeconomic status (Collins, 1978; Sommers, 1981). Later studies focused on the more metaphorical language of

dress (Harvey, 1995; Perry, 1991; Potvin, 1987), while 21<sup>st</sup> century studies tend to analyze in-depth a particular author's body of work (Joslin, 2009; Wardrop, 2009) or an entire century's worth of literature (Batchelor, 2005; Ribeiro, 2005). Anthologies of essays on dress in fiction are also popular and frequently focus on the relationship between dress, the author, and his/her contemporary social issues (Kuhn & Carlson, 2007; McNeil, Karaminas, & Cole, 2009).

In my study I focus on depictions of mental illness through dress and appearance in one Victorian sensation novel. I attempt to increase understanding of the role that dress and appearance plays in forming our impressions of individuals and their personalities, particularly with relation to critical social issues such as mental illness. I do this by focusing on a novel that places both of these concepts at the forefront during a time in which they were at the forefront of society's collective mind as well.

## CHAPTER III

### RESEARCH PROCEDURE

The purpose of this study was to determine how Collins used his platform as a popular writer to bring to light concerns about one of the most critical issues of his time (mental illness) and why he chose to use dress and appearance to do so. The research question for this study is: How does Wilkie Collins' novel *The Woman in White* use dress and appearance to comment on Victorian views—and fears—of mental illness? To answer this question I analyzed the novel *The Woman in White* using the method of narrative analysis.

#### Research Design

In carrying out this study, I used narrative analysis, a method for investigating written, spoken, or visual materials (Mishler, 1995). Riessman (2008) describes narrative analysis as “a family of methods for interpreting texts that have in common a storied form” (p. 11). She goes on to say:

Attention to sequences of action distinguishes narrative analysis—the investigator focuses on “particular actors in particular social places, at particular social times. As a general field, narrative inquiry “is grounded in the study of the particular”; the analyst is interested in how a speaker or writer assembles and sequences events and uses language and/or visual images to communicate meaning, that is, make particular points to an audience. Narrative analysts interrogate intention and language—*how* and *why* incidents are storied, not simply the content to which language refers. (p. 11)

In the context of this study, I used narrative analysis to perform a “close reading” of *The Woman in White*. I combined this close reading with pertinent historical and cultural information about this time period to form an answer to my research question.

### **Procedure**

I analyzed the text of *The Woman in White* for each description of Anne and Laura that used dress and appearance, as well as mental illness. I used as my guide the definition of dress from Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1995) as well as the definition of appearance suggested by Lillethun (2007). Together, these definitions take into consideration as many physical characteristics as possible. Each instance in which either Anne or Laura (or both together) are mentioned was analyzed not only for descriptions of dress, appearance, and mental illness but also for reactions of other characters and comparisons/contrasts to each other. By doing so, I attempted to consider all aspects of the character’s presence in a particular scene—every effect and impression produced.

### **Data Sheet Development**

In performing narrative analysis, I used two data sheets developed to record all pertinent information for my research question [see Appendices A and B]. One data sheet was used specifically for instances of dress and appearance, and the second data sheet was used specifically for instances of mental illness. Both instruments were designed to record the relevant text,

its location in the novel (page and paragraph number), and my analysis of the text.

### **Pilot Study**

A former graduate student and I conducted a pilot study to assess the reliability of the data collection instruments. She was informed of the purpose of the study and given a copy of each data sheet prior to conducting the pilot study. The student and I read the first ten chapters (pp. 9-77) of *The Woman in White* (1859-60/2009) and noted each instance when dress, appearance, and mental illness were mentioned with regard to Anne and Laura. Only relevant text and location were recorded for this pilot study; analysis of the text was not of interest in determining the reliability of the data collection instrument because the focus was solely on the ability of the instrument to identify appropriate passages. The formula used for establishing interrater reliability is  $\frac{\text{number of agreements}}{\text{number of agreements} + \text{disagreements}} \times 100$ . The number of agreements for the dress and appearance instrument in the pilot study was 27, and the number of disagreements was 2, resulting in an interrater reliability percentage of 93 percent. The number of agreements for the mental illness instrument in the pilot study was 9, and the number of disagreements was 1, resulting in an interrater reliability percentage of 90 percent. Kassarian (1977) states that an interrater reliability percentage of 85 and above is sufficient.

Validity was established through comparisons between initial notes and analyses gathered upon first reading and notes and analyses gathered from the coding process. My background in literature assisted me in noting passages of interest upon my first read of the novel; the data instrument allowed me to note each of these passages as well when I began the coding process. I employed the constant comparison technique of re-reading sections once I had coded them in order to determine if there was anything new or different that did not appear in my first read.

### **Data Analysis**

I recorded all pertinent information using the two data collection instruments described above. Once this was completed, I examined the data to identify key words and phrases (e.g., clothing, insanity, hair, eyes) that represented critical ideas within the text. I repeated this process several times until major groupings and outliers among the ideas were discerned. After this was completed, a coding scheme was developed in order to analyze the major themes present in the data. These were grouped into three main themes. I also utilized my review of literature to assist in analyzing and interpreting my findings.

### **Summary**

In summary, I used the method of narrative analysis for this study. Data were collected from the 1859 novel *The Woman in White* and grouped into either the dress and appearance or mental illness category. Data were

analyzed through coding and background knowledge obtained through the review of literature. Analysis led to the discovery of three major themes that together helped to provide significant answers to my research question.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to determine how Collins used his platform as a popular writer to bring to light concerns about one of the most critical issues of his time (mental illness) and why he chose to use dress and appearance to do so. The data were collected from Collins' 1859 novel *The Woman in White*.

#### Research Question

**How does Wilkie Collins' novel *The Woman in White* use dress and appearance to comment on Victorian views—and fears—of mental illness?**

In order to gather the information needed to answer this question, the entire text of the novel was examined for mentions of dress, appearance, and mental illness for two key characters. Each mention was noted and analyzed.

Analysis of the data provided several themes, each of which will be explored in detail below. Together, these themes create a detailed and complex picture of the ways in *The Woman in White* used dress and appearance to comment on Victorian views and fears of mental illness.

**Theme One: Dress and appearance are strongly connected with identity.**

When Walter Hartright, the earnest narrator of the first section of *The Woman in White*, first sees Anne Catherick (whom he later learns has escaped from a mental asylum), he describes her dress before anything else:

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 heaven—stood the figure of a solitary Woman, dressed from head to foot in white garments; her face bent in grave inquiry on mine, her hand pointing to the dark cloud over London, as I faced her. (Collins, 1859-60/2009, p. 24)

From that moment, Anne is marked as “the woman in white,” and it is this title that is used interchangeably with her given name throughout the novel. Somewhat later, readers learn that Anne Catherick’s predisposition to wearing white comes from the time she spent in her youth with Mrs. Fairlie, the mother of Laura Fairlie (the novel’s female protagonist and Walter’s love interest). The generous and kind Mrs. Fairlie raised both Anne and Laura together for a time, during which she told Anne, “little girls of [your] complexion look neater and better all in white than in anything else” (Collins, 1859-60/2009, p. 60). Because of her birth mother’s cruelty, Anne grew to love Mrs. Fairlie far more than she ever loved her own mother; to honor Mrs. Fairlie and keep her memory always alive, Anne determines to wear white and only white: “I will always wear white as long as I live. It will help me to

remember you, ma'am, [Mrs. Fairlie] and to think that I am pleasing you still, when I go away and see you no more" (Collins, 1859-60/2009, p. 61).

Years later, when Walter comes upon Anne at Mrs. Fairlie's grave, she repeats this desire to connect her dress choices with her long-ago guardian. When Walter questions her about her obsession with white, Anne sighs, "Mrs. Fairlie knew best....Ah! she was so fond of white in her lifetime" (Collins, 1859-60/2009, p. 102). Anne is identified by her choice to wear white consistently; she develops this identity through consciously choosing a color that reminds her of an individual she admires. In this way, Anne uses dress to create an identity; she is referred to as "the woman in white" and identified by others by her choice in clothing.

Another way in which dress and appearance are strongly connected with identity in this novel is the physical similarities between Laura Fairlie and Anne Catherick, which are often described through bodily characteristics and clothing choices. When Walter first meets Laura, he describes her as beautiful and charming, but he feels a sense of "something wanting" and a "sense of incompleteness" (Collins, 1859-60/2009, pp. 52-53). He is enthralled by her beauty but feels a certain something he cannot put his finger on. It is not until he watches Laura walking outside one evening and admires her figure "bright and soft in its snowy muslin dress—her face prettily framed by the white folds of the handkerchief which she had tied under chin" (Collins, 1859-60/2009, p. 60) that he realizes the "something wanting": his "own

recognition of the ominous likeness between the fugitive from the asylum [Anne] and my pupil at Limmeridge House [Laura]" (Collins, 1859-60/2009, p.

62). Walter stands in shock as he takes in the likeness:

There stood Miss Fairlie, a white figure, alone in the moonlight; in her attitude, in the turn of her head, in her complexion, in the shape of her face, the living image, at that distance and under those circumstances, of the woman in white! (Collins, 1859-60/2009, p. 62)

In addition to this initial recognition, there are multiple instances where the two characters' similarities, specifically with regard to dress and appearance, are mentioned. During the scene in which Walter sees Anne at Mrs. Fairlie's grave, he contemplates Laura and Anne's similarities with much distress:

I had seen Anne Catherick's likeness in Miss Fairlie. I now saw Miss Fairlie's likeness in Anne Catherick—saw it all the more clearly because the points of dissimilarity between the two were presented to me as well as the points of resemblance. In the general outline of the countenance and general proportion of the features; in the colour of the hair and in the little nervous uncertainty about the lips; in the height and size of the figure, and the carriage of the head and body, the likeness appeared even more startling than I had ever felt it to be yet...Although I hated myself even for thinking such a thing, still, while I looked at the woman before me, the idea would force itself into my mind that one sad change, in the future, was all that was wanting to make the likeness complete, which I now saw to be so imperfect in detail. If ever sorrow and suffering set their profaning marks on the youth and beauty of Miss Fairlie's face, then, and then only, Anne Catherick and she would be the twin-sisters of chance resemblance, the living reflexions of one another. (Collins, 1859-60/2009, pp. 96-97)

Through their uncanny physical resemblance, Anne and Laura share an identity with each other. It is now impossible for Walter to see one without thinking of the other.

Even Laura, upon meeting Anne for the first time, notes the close physical resemblance. She tells her sister Marian:

While I was looking at her, while she was very close to me, it came over my mind suddenly that we were like each other! Her face was pale and thin and weary—but the sight of it startled me, as if it had been the sight of my own face in the glass after a long illness. (Collins, 1859-60/2009, p. 277)

This startling resemblance is noted by all characters in the novel, including the despicable Sir Percival, Laura's new husband, who intends to do away with his wife and obtain her fortune. Discussing the similarity with his friend Count Fosco, Percival comments, "Fancy my wife, after a bad illness, with a touch of something wrong in her head—and there is Anne Catherick for you" (Collins, 1859-60/2009, p. 333). By continuously comparing Anne and Laura, Collins establishes the characters as doubles, or likenesses of each other. The only difference between the characters—the only thing standing in the way of their identities becoming completely interchangeable—is the "touch of something wrong in her [Anne's] head." Sir Percival does not need to wait long, however, because as Walter feared, that "one sad change, in the future" is soon coming to Laura Fairlie. Changes in appearance and dress will transform her character—and her identity. Before discussing the transformative power of dress and appearance, however, it is necessary to

mention some instances of dress and appearance in connection with the mental illness and identity.

In *The Woman in White*, dress and appearance are strongly connected with the identity category of mental illness as well. Anne's monomania for wearing white is seen as evidence of her mental illness; we learn in a letter from Mrs. Fairlie that the girl's doctor believes Anne's "unusual slowness in acquiring ideas implies an unusual tenacity in keeping them, when they are once received into her mind" (Collins, 1859-60/2009, p. 60). Upon reading this letter, Walter is relieved to have made some advance toward "connecting the probably defective condition of the poor creature's intellect with the peculiarity of her being dressed all in white" (Collins, 1859-60/2009, p. 63). Anne's proclivity for wearing white is attributed to this stubborn tenacity, which is in turn a result of her mental illness. Her identity as a mentally ill individual is connected with her choice of dress.

In addition to dress, physical appearance is a second major way in which Anne's identity as mentally ill is established. She is described in the first half of the novel as essentially a paler, more haggard, slightly "off" version of Laura. It is these physical characteristics that mark her as mentally ill and not Laura. Common words used to describe Anne and her appearance are "agitated," "confused," "blank," "nervous," "uncertain," and

“weak.”<sup>2</sup> Her face, specifically, is “colourless,” “pale,” and “still,” her eyes “large,” “grave,” and “absent,” and her voice “breathless,” “rapid,” and “strange.”<sup>3</sup> Her features mark her as one not only ill, but mentally ill as well; something is not quite right in her mind, and this is expressed through a sense of absence in her features. The absence marks her as mentally ill. In Laura, there is a presence rather than an absence: her eyes are “lovely,” “thoughtful,” and possessed of a “clear truthfulness of look.”<sup>4</sup> More than once Laura’s eyes are referred to as “truthful” and “clear,” and her face is mentioned as mobile and “sensitive.”<sup>5</sup> Overall, Walter’s descriptions of Laura tend to focus on the mobility and gentle sweetness of her features; she possesses the liveliness that Anne lacks, and her physical appearance marks her as healthy, beautiful, and mentally stable.

These characteristics are not immutable, however. As Laura begins to suspect Sir Percival’s duplicity, she grows increasingly ill and exhibits symptoms of nervous anxiety. These symptoms are communicated to the reader through descriptions of her appearance and ultimately dress, which gradually take on the same phrasing as those used for Anne Catherick’s. Laura becomes “sadly weak and nervous,” “delicate,” “frightened,” and

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, pp. 24, 96-99, 104, 280-281, 385, 401, 459-460, 534, and 538 in Collins (1859-60/2009).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, pp. 23-28, 95-97, 106, 276-277, and 280 in Collins (1859-60/2009).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, pp. 51-53, 67, 96-97, 257, and 434-435 in Collins (1859-60/2009).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, pp. 51-53, 67, and 96-97 in Collins (1859-60/2009).

“agitated”; she grows “fearfully pale,” “panic-stricken,” and “trembling,” her face flushed with a “strange feverish energy.”<sup>6</sup> Various narrators remark on the sudden changes in her movement juxtaposed with periods of quiet resignation. The greater Sir Percival’s influence on Laura becomes, the weaker, quieter, and paler she grows. Because Anne Catherick is a character already identified as mentally ill, the use of similar words to describe Laura indicates to the reader that she is now being identified as such.

**Theme Two: Dress and appearance possess a strong power to transform.**

In addition to indicating identity, dress and appearance also have the power to transform identity. This is a major aspect of the novel, and it is through this concept that Collins manages the most sensational plotline of his novel: the switching of identities between Anne Catherick and Laura Fairlie.

The similarities between Anne and Laura’s identities are first introduced early in the novel, when Walter learns through a letter that Anne’s penchant for wearing white comes from her childhood spent with Laura’s mother Mrs. Fairlie. In this letter, Mrs. Fairlie writes to her husband that she “arranged [for] some of our darling Laura’s old white frocks and white hats [to] be altered for Anne Catherick; explaining to her that little

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, pp. 120-126, 130, 141-142, 164, 168, 180-182, 211, 243, 259, 274, 358, 366, 379, 382-383, 385, 389, 428, 438, and 610.

girls of her complexion looked neater and better all in white than in anything else” (Collins, 1859-60/2009, p. 60). By so doing, Mrs. Fairlie transforms Anne into an altered version of Laura, an occurrence that is referenced continually for many years thereafter. Walter is the first to remark on how Anne is essentially a sickly Laura, and both Sir Percival and Count Fosco see Anne as Laura’s sickly double.

This identity transformation comes full circle much later in the novel, where the similarities between Laura and Anne’s identities reach their zenith. Through a complex ruse, Laura is tricked into leaving Limmeridge House. Anne, who has since become increasingly ill, is taken in by Count Fosco’s accomplices and given drugs that hasten her death. In an undisclosed location, Laura, already in the grips of severe nervous anxiety, is severely drugged by the Count. Anne Catherick is presented as the corpse of Laura Fairlie, which allows Sir Percival to obtain Laura’s money. Laura, on the other hand, is taken to the asylum as the returned escapee Anne Catherick. This improbable substitution is achieved through the physical similarities between the two characters—and also through the fact that Laura is dressed in Anne’s old clothing. A nurse in the asylum tells Laura:

Look at your own name on your own clothes, and don’t worry us all any more about being Lady Glyde. She’s dead and buried; and you’re alive and hearty. Do look at your clothes now! There it is, in good marking ink; and there you will find it on all your old things, which we have kept in the house—Anne Catherick, as plain as print! (Collins, 1859-60/2009, p. 427)

We learn later that this dress substitution was a ploy of Count Fosco's to fully transform Laura into Anne. After Anne's death, the Count took her clothes and brought them with him, "hidden under the seat of the carriage...to assist the resurrection of the woman who was dead in the person of the woman who was living" (Collins, 1859-60/2009, p. 610).

This transformation of identities would not have been possible had physical similarities not already existed between Anne and Laura. Because of the power of dress and appearance to denote identity, we as readers are aware by this point that Laura has changed to resemble Anne almost completely, thanks to her declining health and anxiety. In this sense, she is nearly Anne Catherick already; all that is missing is the clothing. Once that is added, even her own sister can hardly tell the difference.

**Theme Three: There is a fine line between distinct categories of identity, such as sanity and insanity.**

Throughout *The Woman in White*, seemingly distinct categories of identity, particularly sanity/insanity, are challenged. Anne and Laura are two characters whose representations throughout the novel call into question the solidity of these categories.

While it is understood that Anne is mentally ill, the extent of her mental illness is dependent on which narrator is telling her story. Upon first meeting her, Walter immediately recognizes something peculiar about Anne, but the fact that she might be insane never occurs to him. When a policeman

later approaches him to inquire whether he may have come across an asylum escapee on the run (i.e., Ann), Walter is surprised:

Some of the strange questions put to me by the woman in white...had suggested the conclusion either that she was naturally flighty and unsettled, or that some recent shock of terror had disturbed the balance of her faculties. But the idea of absolute insanity which we all associate with the very name of an Asylum, had, I can honestly declare, never occurred to me, in connexion with her. I had seen nothing, in her language or her actions, to justify it at the time. (Collins, 1859-60/2009, p. 31)

As the story develops and Walter learns more about Anne, it becomes apparent that she is mentally disturbed but neither deranged nor dangerous. Remarks from Laura and later Marian, Laura's sister and another narrator of the novel, reaffirm this belief.

However, there are more narrators in this novel than Walter and Marian. Later commentary from Sir Percival, Count Fosco, and Mrs. Catherick, Anne's birth mother, paint a different picture of Anne as someone unstable, idiotic, and potentially dangerous. One of these narrators, Mrs. Catherick, firmly believes her daughter is a lunatic and a nuisance. As she cruelly puts it, "She was a worry to me from first to last, with the additional disadvantage of being always weak in the head" (Collins, 1859-60/2009, p. 534). Prior to Anne's confinement in the asylum, Mrs. Catherick assisted Sir Percival in covering up a treacherous lie regarding his lineage; when Anne discovers that there is a secret, she reacts to Sir Percival's cruelty toward her by declaring that she will go public with this secret (despite the fact that she

has no idea what it is). Despite Anne's protests ("She had always had crazy notions of her own about her dignity," Mrs. Catherick says), Sir Percival insists that Anne be placed in an asylum for her "lunacy" (Collins, 1859-60/2009, p. 536). The reader learns that *this* is the real reason Anne has been incarcerated: to keep her locked away where she cannot tell the secret and destroy Sir Percival. For this reason, both Sir Percival and Count Fosco refer to Anne as "dangerous," which makes her seem much more deranged than she actually is. As Percival puts it, "She's just mad enough to be shut up, and just sane enough to ruin me when she's at large" (Collins, 1859-60/2009, p. 330). Anne, then, is not as easily categorized as we might first have thought. She is certainly mentally disturbed, but the extent to which she is troubled depends greatly upon the person telling the story and his or her point of view.

A more literal example of the fluidity between seemingly concrete categories of identity is Laura's shift from sanity to insanity. We have already seen how her appearance changes and signals to other characters (and the reader) the shift into mental illness. She begins the story healthy, beautiful, and perfectly sane and within a year is languishing in an asylum where her identity has been destroyed and rebuilt as something entirely different. The pace with which this total change occurs is remarkably unsettling, especially because it culminates in false incarceration. Count Fosco relates that Laura "was received, with great surprise—but without suspicion; thanks to the order and certificates, to Percival's letter, to the

likeness, to the clothes, and to the patient's own confused mental condition at the time" (Collins, 1859-60/2009, p. 611). Here is sanity passing as insanity because of the machinations of outside forces. Laura's true identity is stolen, and she crosses the line into another identity through no intention of her own. Even the asylum owner unwittingly remarks upon this fluidity between categories of sanity when receiving "Anne" back into the asylum:

On receiving his inmate again, the proprietor of the Asylum acknowledged that he had observed some curious personal changes in her. Such changes, no doubt, were not without precedent in his experience of persons mentally afflicted. Insane people were often, at one time, outwardly as well as inwardly, unlike what they were at another; the change from better to worse, or from worse to better, in the madness, having a necessary tendency to produce alterations of appearance externally. He allowed for these; and he allowed also for the modification in the form of Anne Catherick's delusion, which was reflected, no doubt, in her manner and expression. But he was still perplexed, at times, by certain differences between his patient before she had escaped, and his patient since she had been brought back. Those differences were too minute to be described. He could not say, of course, that she was absolutely altered in height or shape or complexion, or in the colour of her hair and eyes, or in the general form of her face: the change was something that he felt, more than something that he saw. (Collins, 1859-60/2009, pp. 419-420)

This excellent passage highlights popular Victorian beliefs on insanity as well as describes how physical appearance plays a major role in identity classification. Ultimately, as mentioned above, the proprietor bases his decision that Anne must be Anne in part on her clothing and physical appearance. Dress and appearance are uniquely capable of crossing that fine line between distinctive categories of identity.

## Summary

In summary, the research question for this study was:

How does Wilkie Collins' novel *The Woman in White* use dress and appearance to comment on Victorian views—and fears—of mental illness?

I answered this research question by discovering three main themes that centered on the concept of identity. These themes were: (1) Dress and appearance are strongly connected with identity; (2) Dress and appearance possess the power to transform identity; and (3) There is a fine line between seemingly distinct categories of identity, such as sanity and insanity.

Together these themes suggest that dress and appearance are capable of crossing that line between categories of identity. It is dress and appearance that in large part enables the identities of Laura, who begins the novel perfectly sane, and Anne, who is the titular mentally ill character, to be switched.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to determine how Collins used his platform as a popular writer to bring to light concerns about one of the most critical issues of his time (mental illness) and why he chose to use dress and appearance to do so in the novel *The Woman in White*. The method used to conduct this study was narrative analysis, a method for investigating written, spoken, or visual materials (Mishler, 1995). I created two data collection instruments, one for dress and appearance and a second for mental illness, to record each instance where either topic was mentioned in reference to Anne or Laura. The location of the passage within the text was noted, and brief analysis was recorded. When all data had been collected, coding established the presence of several major themes within the data.

The first theme is that dress and appearance are strongly connected with identity. This was shown in several instances, such as Anne Catherick's choice to wear only white in order to self-identify with Mrs. Fairlie, Laura's mother and the woman who raised her briefly; other instances include Laura and Anne's physical similarities, which visually connect the two women's identities, and the appearance-related manifestations of mental illness, which are seen in Anne and later Laura. The second theme is that dress and appearance possess the power to transform. This is shown through two primary examples: Mrs. Fairlie altering Laura's old white dresses to fit Anne,

thus transforming Anne into an altered Laura, and Laura's transformation into Anne through the metaphorical donning of her mental illness and the literal donning of Anne's old clothing. The third theme is that there is a fine line between seemingly distinct categories of identity, such as sanity and insanity. Throughout the novel, this is shown through differing opinions on the extent of Anne's illness, depending on the narrator speaking, and also Laura's shift from sanity to insanity.

### Discussion

I have established that dress and appearance are strongly connected with identity and also possess the power to transform identity. In *The Woman in White*, both Anne and Laura are defined in large part through their dress and appearance, which serve to nonverbally communicate particular identities. Lillethun (2007) notes how dress, as nonverbal communication, is dependent on the social context it is presented in; Stone (1995) also highlights nonverbal communication when he states that appearance is "the phase of the social transaction which establishes identities of the participants" (p. 21). In addition to equating dress and appearance with nonverbal communication, both scholars mention the social context as a major aspect of establishing identity. Douglas (1982) and Entwistle (2007) conceive of the dressed body as biological but also social. In this sense, Douglas (1982) writes, the social body "constrains the way the physical body is perceived...There is a continual exchange of meanings between the two

kinds of bodily experience so that each reinforces the categories of the other” (p. 65). Anne and Laura possess both physical bodies and social bodies, the interplay of which establishes their identities at various points throughout the novel. This interplay is a type of performativity, defined by Craik (2009) as:

Individuals perform[ing] their identities and social roles through their choice and mode of wearing clothes and accessories...or the ways in which the body assumes a sense of self by creating a recognizable identity through the way the body is clothed, gestures, expressions, and movement. (p. 3)

In the context of this study, it is important to note that, as Anne and Laura perform their identities, they are perceived by others who subconsciously (or consciously) place them into particular identity categories. In the novel, the reader hears about Anne and Laura and their identities only through the narration of others; every idea the reader has about who they are, what they look like, what they wear, and what they do is mediated through the retellings of other individuals—and these retellings often lean heavily on descriptions of dress and appearance. We never read anything from Anne or Laura’s perspectives, apart from when a narrator reads a letter written by one of them; even then, we are unsure if the narrator is leaving anything out. No chapter or section is narrated by either of these two females, which is remarkable considering their importance to the plot. Anne and Laura’s identities are given to them by the narrators Collins has chosen. And because we, as readers, meet Anne and Laura only through these

narrators, we are faced with the fact that the formation of identity may not be entirely up to the individual herself. This adds an interesting dimension to the concept of impression formation and management, suggesting that identities are socially constructed and determined in part by individuals perceiving the dress and appearance of others. In other words, it is possible, (especially in the context of literature, which adds the extra layer of reader interpretation) for identities to be managed not only by the individual herself *but also* by others.

In addition to communicating identity, dress and appearance are also able to transform it. Because of their power to communicate identity, dress and appearance can change that which was previously established. It can call into question the perceptions others have previously held about an individual, thereby suggesting new categories of identity with which to associate that individual. In *The Woman in White*, Laura is able to convince others (though not through *her* intent) that she is actually the escapee Anne Catherick thanks in large part to her dress, appearance, and mental state. The same occurs in the inverse when Anne Catherick is brought to Limmeridge House as the supposedly deceased Laura Fairlie. It is through the putting on and taking off of certain clothing items as well as changes in physical characteristics (either superficial or much deeper) that these lines of identity are crossed. Anne becomes Laura and Laura becomes Anne through the interplay of dress and appearance. The concept of putting on and taking

off certain clothing items in order to change identity is in keeping with Goffman's (1959) notion of identity as a front stage/back stage performance and also echoes Entwistle (2007) and Wilson's (2003) writings about the public and private selves. Collins complicates these binaries by suggesting a conception of identity that can change with the input of others in addition to the self. Such a conception implies that identities, even those pertaining to such seemingly distinct categories as sanity and insanity, are fluid as well as socially constructed.

If this is possible, it suggests that perhaps supposedly distinct categories of identity are not as hard-and-fast as first thought. This was a serious topic in Collins' time, where Victorians worried that mass-production and the mass availability of fashion would lead to the inability to distinguish between social classes (Craik, 2009; Entwistle, 2000; Wilson, 2003). With the dawn of new clothing production techniques, fashionable attire became accessible for all, and people, as Craik (2009) writes, "could buy a cultural identity and thus social credentials....One could purchase a desired identity and exhibit it" (p. 67). This unease with categorization extended to many areas of society, including views on mental illness. In discussing the line between sane and insane in the Victorian era, McCandless (1985) states, "Few disputed that such a line could be drawn without a great deal of difficulty" (p. 340). A series of lunacy panics, in which sane individuals were mistakenly incarcerated in asylums, coupled with the pervasive societal fear

that anyone could now purchase any identity, challenged the notion of easy categorization. Biographer Catherine Peters (1991), in discussing the perennial fascination Collins had with identity, writes that the “insistent and powerful” question for characters in his novels is always, “Who am I? How can I cling to this fragile sense of self that is always under threat of extinction or usurpation?” (p. 2). Collins plays on this fear in his novel when he puts Laura in the asylum, her identity completely stripped and transformed against her will.

Taking these ideas into account, we find Collins has established a conception of identity as something socially constructed and fluid. We are products of our society and our culture, as are those who perceive us. Are our identities, then, contingent upon the sociocultural system of which we are a part, rather than some innate essence? Collins seems to argue for this. *The Woman in White* is in line with Simonsen’s (1993) beliefs that good fiction must include enough references to direct reality in order for readers to understand that the fictional world of the novel is just enough of a representation of their own world (without being so parallel as to be boring). Contemporary readers would have understood Collins’ depictions of English society and mental illness—and they would also have been chilled by those implications. Collins cleverly plays on current fears of identity and mental illness and does so largely—and arguably mostly—in part through his descriptions of dress and appearance, an area with which his audience would

be very familiar. By applying reflection theory, or the belief that “cultural products in some way mirror the social order” (Griswold, 1981, p. 740) to the analysis of this novel, it is possible to demonstrate that Collins is suggesting a conception of identity as socially constructed and fluid, rather than something easily defined and categorized. For a Victorian society concerned with the line between rich and poor, moral and immoral, public and private, sane and insane, Collins’ novel would present a representation of a world with which they were familiar but perhaps not entirely comfortable

### **Limitations**

The present study was limited by the time available to collect data. If more time had been available, I could have broadened my approach to take into account dress and appearance for other characters in the novel. This could assist in obtaining a fuller picture of the ways in which Collins uses descriptions of dress and appearance in literature. Along the same lines, I could have compared the depiction of Anne with other mentally ill characters in Collins’ novels. Additionally, during the coding process, the study could have utilized quantitative content analysis for particularly prominent words and phrases. Validity of this study is another potential limitation. Having additional coders from different background areas could have confirmed the validity.

## Conclusion and Implications

Several ideas on the concept of identity are suggested in this study.

One idea is that identity is socially constructed; in other words, the identity of an individual is based in large part on the perceptions of those around her and is not always controllable by that individual. Collins suggests this idea through his portrayal of both Anne and Laura when he uses multiple narrators to construct the reader's perception of the characters' identities. What one narrator believes is not always the same as what another believes, and it is through this disparity that the reader comes to understand the multifaceted face of identity. This intricate interplay may be as simple as a disconnect between the individual's intent and others' lack of full knowledge about that individual (as in the case of Laura and the asylum owner), or it may be more complex and manipulative, as in the case of Mrs. Catherick and Sir Percival's campaign to endorse Anne as truly insane in order to cover up their wrongdoing. This idea of the social construction of identity, particularly of insanity as an identity, is much in line with Michel Foucault's (2005) beliefs that madness is a social construction rather than an absolute truth; Foucault believed that because definitions of madness differed over time, the concept should be viewed as a changeable notion based more on the culture and society of which it is a part rather than an absolute essence.

A second idea about identity suggested in this study is the notion that it is fluid. This idea goes hand-in-hand with the notion that identity is

socially constructed, as it is through a potential misperception that an individual may take on another, albeit unintended, identity. Collins implies this notion through the eventual identity switch that takes place between Anne and Laura, who function as doubles in the novel. Again, dress and appearance are major ways this fluidity is enabled. When Laura has a nervous breakdown and becomes ill, she begins to look more and more like Anne; when Anne's clothing is added, Laura is given to the asylum as an entirely different individual than the one she "actually" is. Anne's physical similarities to Laura enable other manipulative and exploitative individuals to pass her off as Laura when she dies. Interestingly, this identity reversal occurs "off-stage," so to speak; the reader learns of what occurred only after the fact, which enables Collins to put his narrators in the privileged place of knowing the false switch has occurred. The remainder of the novel becomes a quest to restore identity from its social constructions and fluid nature back to its "actual" self. While Laura is eventually restored at Limmeridge House, she has no full memories of the identity switch and her time in the asylum, and she is never fully herself again. A part of her identity died with Anne.

This notion of identity as multifaceted, fluid, and socially constructed is similar to what scholar Elizabeth Grosz (1994) refers to as:

the twisting of the Möbius strip, the torsion or pivot around which the subject is generated. The double sensation creates a kind of *interface* of the inside and the outside, the pivotal point at which inside will become separated from outside and active will be converted into passive. (p. 36)

This understanding of identity as an interface of inside and outside, active and passive, does much to reconcile the dichotomous views of self that were so prevalent in Collins' time and are still in ours. The tendency to categorize and label, while human, does a disservice to comprehending the scope of identity: individuals are both what is seen and unseen at the same time. Perhaps, as Grosz suggests, there is no boundary, no line between intended identity and perceived identity.

This study is important because it looks at the ways in which dress and appearance play a very central role in forming identity. It addresses the topic of mental illness, a critical topic in both Collins' day and ours, and illustrates how such seemingly superficial aspects like clothing and physical characteristics can play a large part in classifying individuals as such. And although the topics presented resonated greatly in Collins' time, I believe they most certainly have a place in our own world. As Rita Felski (2011) writes:

Context does not automatically or inevitably trump text, because the very question of what counts as context, and the cogency of our causal and explanatory schemes, may be anticipated, explored, queried, relativized, expanded, or reimagined in the words we read....The detachment of historical explanation is ruffled, even rattled, once we recognize that past texts have things to say on questions that matter to us, including the status of historical understanding itself. (p. 580)

Felski's quote points to one of the great strengths of literature: its ability to transcend time and place and suggest new ideas and potential solutions for

the world in which we live. In other words, while the context of a novel can help us understand the problems and concerns of a particular time period, it can also be transcended and the essence of the novel applied to our own time period.

The literary theorist H. White (1980), in his discussion on reflection theory, wrote that literature was “at once a displacement of social problems into an imaginary realm and a prefiguration of possible solutions to that problem which history will provide” (p. 366). Literature is unique in that it can hold a mirror to society and reflect back its ideas about particular issues while *also*—and most importantly—suggesting ways in which to view, alter, change, and solve those issues. It is my contention that Collins does just that in *The Woman in White*; not only does he present popular critical issues to the public, but he also suggests that the popular views on these issues (e.g., perceptions of identity, conceptions of mental illness) may need to change. Collins’ ideas on the formation of identity and its connections with dress and appearance were disseminated through his novels and discovered by a public hungry for his work. These ideas have a new meaning for each generation of readers who come into contact with Collins’ novels. In this way, the novel has the ability to suggest change not only in its original context but in every single context in which it is read.

### **Additions to the Body of Knowledge**

While studies of identity in *The Woman in White* have been published, to my knowledge no study has yet addressed the critical ways in which dress and appearance lead to new conceptions of identity; additionally, no study of which I am aware has analyzed the relationship between dress and appearance and mental illness in this novel. This study contributes to the literature on Victorian views of mental illness and on ways in which dress and appearance have been used in literature. It suggests a view of Collins and his work as more than mere sensationalistic shock value and presents an alternative view of the author as a social critic well aware of his audience's worldviews.

### **Future Research**

There are many opportunities for future research based on and off of this study. It would be useful to explore characters in more of Collins' novels, as well as Collins' novels compared to those of other sensation novelists. Dress, appearance, and mental illness could be examined in a variety of Victorian sensation writers' works. Additionally, future research could focus on how dress and appearance are used to convey other important issues of Collins' day, such as poverty, gender issues, social status, and nationalism.

It would also be of particular interest to this study if information could be located on the supposed clothing and accessories produced during the novel's popularity in England. While clothing and accessories are mentioned

alongside sheet music and dances as evidence of commercial tie-ins with *The Woman in White*, I could find extant examples of only the music and dances. Very little information about the clothing and accessories exists of which I am aware, and discovering extant examples, advertisements, or even written descriptions would be immensely useful. Such descriptions could, at the very least, assist in understanding how fashion tied in with the novel. With more evidence, such as advertisements or extant pieces, it would be possible to explore the ways in which characters' identities were "sold" to consumers, especially if the items were white.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A

### Data Sheet 1: *The Woman in White* Dress and Appearance

Record each time Anne and Laura are mentioned with reference to dress and appearance. Analyze description of dress and appearance, reaction of other characters, and potential comparison/contrast to each other if that is noted.

Pg. #	Para. #	
		Relevant text
		Analysis
		Relevant text
		Analysis

## Appendix B

### Data Sheet 2: *The Woman in White* Mental Illness

Record each time Anne and Laura are mentioned with reference to mental illness. Analyze description of dress and appearance, reaction of other characters, and potential comparison/contrast to each other if that is noted.

Pg. #	Para. #	
		Relevant text
		Analysis
		Relevant text
		Analysis