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## **DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**The world is hard on women : Women and marriage in the novels of Wilkie Collins.**

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*Award date:*  
1987

*Awarding institution:*  
Bangor University

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**"The World is Hard on Women";  
Women and Marriage  
in the Novels of  
Wilkie Collins**

Richard Beaton

1987

## Summary

"'The World is Hard on Women'; Women and Marriage in the Novels of Wilkie Collins" examines the ways in which Collins sympathetically explores the situations of women in relation to marriage and to society in general. Each of the first five chapters deals with a particular topic relating to women and marriage, showing how these topical themes recur and develop through Collins's novels. Chapter One, "Marriage, Money and Power", looks at mercenary marriages in which husbands exploit their wives, or in which wives attempt to exploit their husbands. Chapter Two, "The Magdalen Theme", examines Collins's treatment of the question of "fallen" women, and his different attempts to plead for the reintegration of such women back into the fabric of conventional society. Chapter Three, "Marriage Breakdowns", discusses the situation of women who find themselves deserted by their husbands, and facing a hostile and judgemental reaction from their social peers. Chapter Four, "Unmarried Women", shows Collins's sympathetic portrayal of diminution of power and importance of those women who either choose not to, or who are unable to marry. Chapter Five, "Widows" discusses the role played by widows as trustees of male power, and guardians to the younger generation. Chapter Six, "*The Fallen Leaves*", draws on the material discussed in the first five chapters in order to make a detailed examination of Collins's extensive treatment of topics related to women and marriage in *The Fallen Leaves*. The thesis concludes that Collins was very aware of, and radically sympathetic to the problems faced by women in Victorian society, and that this sympathy and knowledge form an important feature of his writing.

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## Introduction

### 1. Melodrama, Gothic Fiction, and the Taboo

In the plots of Gothic fiction and stage melodrama, throughout the nineteenth century, we find constant variation upon a simple theme. Frank Rahill, attempting to define the nature and form of melodrama in his introduction to *The World of Melodrama*, concludes that;

Melodrama is a form of dramatic composition in prose partaking of the nature of tragedy, comedy, pantomime and spectacle, and intended for a popular audience. Primarily concerned with situation and plot, it...employs a more or less fixed complement of stock characters, the most important of which are a suffering heroine or hero, a persecuting villain and a benevolent comic...Characteristically it offers elaborate scenic accessories...<sup>1</sup>

Later Rahill gives the plot of *Trial by Battle; or Heaven Defend the Right* (1818) by William Barrymore as a good example of a minor house-melodrama of the period;

The titled Falconbridge, having evil intentions toward the chaste and beautiful heroine Geralda, makes overtures to a gang of smugglers with a view to having her carried off and her natural protector slain...<sup>2</sup>

This plot-formula, of the persecuting villain and the usually helpless heroine, is also to be found in Gothic fiction, from Anne Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) to Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and beyond, where it is often combined

1. Frank Rahill, *The World of Melodrama* (London, 1967), p.xiv.
2. *Ibid.*, p.137.

with an interest in the supernatural and the taboo (from the "mysteries" of Udolpho to the sexual and religious implications of Dracula's un-death) to give that genre its particular flavour. The elaborate scenic effects of the stage find their equivalents in Gothic fiction in the picturesque settings of the novels, from the Alps to Transylvania, as well as in the evocation of appropriately sinister "atmosphere".

In his fiction, Wilkie Collins achieved a naturalisation of the melodramatic, and a domestication of the Gothic. He brought terror, conspiracy and crime into the safe haven of the Victorian home, and openly treated subjects made taboo by Victorian society. A typical example of this process of rationalisation is Collins's second novel, *Basil*, in which a chance meeting on an omnibus and the hero's involvement with a linen-draper's family living in a London suburb lead through a chain of sensational events involving forbidden passions, sexual misconduct, revenge and vendetta to a climactic confrontation on a Cornish cliff-top. In the eponymous hero and the villainous Mannion Collins presents two stock figures of melodrama. Basil is the innocent and upright hero, who prefers to marry the heroine rather than merely seduce her; Mannion, especially after his face has been scarred by Basil's attack upon him, becomes a nightmare figure of hatred and persecution. However, in this early novel Collins upsets expectations by his presentation of his heroine. Far from being the chaste and innocent victim of Mannion's conspiracy, Margaret is a willing party to her own seduction and completely betrays Basil. At the heart of the novel lies sexual taboo; Basil actually overhears the final physical consummation of Mannion and Margaret's relationship.

Within the domestic Victorian setting Collins reasserts the established patterns of melodrama, with original variations of his own, and touches upon the taboos of Gothic fiction. Collins's treatment of Margaret Sherwin in *Basil* was

immediately regarded as offensive by contemporary critics. D.O. Maddyne complained in *The Athenaeum* that "'Basil' is a tale of criminality, almost revolting from its domestic horrors. The vicious atmosphere in which the drama of the tale is enveloped, weighs on us like a nightmare."<sup>1</sup> The hostility shown towards *Basil* was the beginning of a conflict between Collins and the critics which continued throughout the next four decades. In 1880 Collins recalled in his introduction to *Jezebel's Daughter* "what the nasty posterity of Tartuffe, in this country, said of "Basil," of "Armada," of "The New Magdalen,"..."<sup>2</sup> and restated his right and intention to deal with "certain important social topics which are held to be forbidden to the English novelist..."<sup>3</sup> The introduction to *Jezebel's Daughter* was a defense and apology for Collins's previous novel, *The Fallen Leaves* which had provoked controversy through its portrayal of the rehabilitation and marriage of an adolescent prostitute. Throughout his career Collins tackled subjects which were more normally not regarded as the reserve of a popular novelist: seduction in *Basil*; illegitimacy in *Hide and Seek*, *The Dead Secret*, and *No Name*; adultery in *The Evil Genius*; and prostitution in *The New Magdalen* and *The Fallen Leaves*.

These taboo subjects were all sexual in nature, relating particularly to the role of women in sexual relationships. In this way Collins carried on and extended the Gothic tradition, as David Punter has shown in *The Literature of Terror*, when he writes of;

the very wide-ranging concern among Gothic writers with the nature of taboo: that is to say, we have seen writers who constantly approach

1. D.O. Maddyne, *Athenaeum* (4 December 1852), in *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage* ed. N. Page (London, 1974), p. 48.
2. Wilkie Collins, *Jezebel's Daughter*, vol. 1, p. vi.
3. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. v.

areas of socio-psychological life which offend, which are suppressed, which are generally swept under the carpet in the interests of social and psychological equilibrium. And here, of course, one thinks first and foremost of the question of relations between the sexes, as particularly in Wilkie Collins...'<sup>1</sup>

In the nineteenth century women were rarely if ever involved in politics, the law, or commerce; their role was to be the caring wife to the husband who was the performer and the bread-winner. Collins was keenly aware of the inferior position of women in society, and his novels display this awareness in their constant and sympathetic portrayal of women's issues. Dorothy Sayers considered Collins to be "genuinely feminist"<sup>2</sup> and Sue Lonoff believes that;

On balance, Sayers's assessment is accurate. Despite the inconsistencies, the palpable ambivalence and more than occasional stereotyping, Collins's treatment of women and sexual relationships is more modern than Victorian.<sup>3</sup>

Lonoff devotes a section of her book to "Women: Positive and Negative" in order to assess Collins's achievement. The joint authors of *Corrupt Relations*, comparing Collins with Dickens, state that;

In contrast, Collins is the most directly concerned with issues of women's rights and the most openly irreverent toward Victorian sexual convention.<sup>4</sup>

Recent criticism has thus recognised that Collins achieved more

1. David Punter, *The Literature of Terror* (London, 1980), p.405.
2. Dorothy L. Sayers, "Introduction" to Dent edition of *The Moonstone* (London, 1944), p.viii.
3. Sue Lonoff, *Wilkie Collins and His Victorian Readers*, (New York, 1982), p.157.
4. Barickman, MacDonald and Stark, *Corrupt Relations* (New York, 1982), p.111.



in his portrayal of women than simply creating the memorable Marian Halcombe in *The Woman in White*. In Collins's fiction women are often as important as men, if not even more so: *Jezebel's Daughter*, for example, is concerned with the conflict between two women; the men in the novel are all figures of secondary importance. Collins was not just concerned to create strong and original female characters; he was also interested in the pressing questions relating to the changing role of women in society and in the growing awareness that they often suffered unduly in their dependency.

## 2. Women and Marriage

Central to the relations between the sexes and the position of women in society lies marriage. Marriage for the Victorians was the cornerstone of society; enacted by law, sanctified by the church, and demanded by social mores. Collins upset his contemporaries by questioning the values and purposes of marriage, and by insistently showing in his novels that the married state was not always blissful. He himself, as biographical research by C. K. Hyder, Kenneth Robinson, and Nuel Pharr Davis has shown<sup>1</sup>, chose not to (or was unable to) marry either of the two women who were at various times his mistresses, although he lived for many years with Caroline Graves and fathered three children by Martha Rudd. In novel after novel he questioned the place of marriage in the fabric of society; not merely of itself, but in relation to other topics such as the control of money, and the nurture of children. He also examined the fate of those unable or unwilling to marry; those marriages which break down, and the fate of the partner who survives into widowhood.

1. In: C.K.Hyder, "Wilkie Collins and *The Woman in White*", PMLA 54 (1939), pp.297-303; Kenneth Robinson, *Wilkie Collins* (London, 1951); Nuel Pharr Davis, *The Life of Wilkie Collins* (Urbana, 1956).

For the Victorians the bond of marriage was a barrier set around a couple within which their sexual and other relationships were developed in utter privacy, and which nobody else had the right to breach. Thus, in a domestic setting, the matrimonial bond was symbolically unified with the idea of house and home, and could in melodrama become the direct equivalent of the imprisoning castle walls of Gothic fiction. In *Man and Wife* Collins makes a direct comparison between the legal and physical barriers;

The picture of the lonely house, isolated amid its high walls...rose vivid as reality before Sir Patrick's mind. "No!" he cried out, carried away by the generous impulse of the moment. "It shall *not* be!"...He started up to bar the way to Geoffrey. Geoffrey paused, and looked at Sir Patrick for the first time.

"The law tells her to go with her husband," he said. "The law forbids you to part *Man and Wife*."

Both the wall around the house and the laws of marriage prevent Sir Patrick from reaching Anne Silvester; marriage becomes for Anne literally a prison. Geoffrey repeats the phrase which gives the novel its name -- "Man and Wife" -- and this is in itself an important indication of social attitudes. The normal pairings of words are "man and woman" (sexual identity) and "husband and wife" (marital identity). By combining the two Collins emphasises the independent sexual identity of the man, while at the same time stressing the dependent role of the wife. This imbalance in marriage between the partners is a significant one.

1. Wilkie Collins, *Man and Wife*, vol.3, pp.146-147. All references to Collins's novels are, for brevity and simplicity, restricted to the title, volume and page reference for the respective first edition. Full publication details are given in the Booklist. In the case of *The Woman in White*, the "New Edition" has been used; see Booklist for further details.

### 3. Melodrama and Marriage

At one level the traditional form of melodrama requires an aggressive male villain and a passive female heroine; both are supplied in the situation of a marriage where the husband has control over his wife. However, beyond the simply melodramatic can be perceived an image of social *status quo*; men with power and women dependent upon that power with little or none of their own. Thus for Collins, melodramatic form reflects social concern; as women in society are the objects of male oppression, so they are portrayed in more symbolic form through the stereotyped roles of melodrama. Using melodramatic patterns of plotting and characterisation allowed Collins to depict his social concerns in an immediately recognisable way. When, in *The Woman in White*, Sir Percival Glyde attempts to force his wife to sign away control of her wealth, the scene can be taken at two levels; firstly as one in which the cunning villain attempts to ruin the heroine; and secondly as one in which a woman is subjected to the financial rapacity of her powerful husband.

Throughout his career Collins relied on character types and melodramatic roles to build the fabric of his fiction. At its best the use of these forms could be made inventively new, as in *The Woman in White* with its two heroes, two heroines, and two villains. At its worst it could produce simplistic potboiling material, such as Collins's last novella *The Guilty River* with its weary repetition of stock ideas drawn from earlier novels. These character types and melodramatic roles allow certain easily recognisable plot patterns to recur, and, moreover, the ways in which Collins builds or varies the patterns provide the complexity of his plotting. Patterns of courtship, marriage, marriage breakdown, and widowhood appear and reappear. Women in roles as single young ladies, unwanted spinsters, happy or unhappy wives, mothers, deserted wives, and widows can be identified in novel after novel. The repetition

is significant.

Although Collins treats marriage and related topics as one of his principal recurring themes, he presents only a very small number of conventional happy marriages. The most idyllic portrait of marriage, that of the Vanstones in the first part of *No Name* is an ironic illusion, for the couple are not really married, but living the pretence of a marriage. Elsewhere genuinely loving couples and well-adjusted families play only a minor role. In *Hide and Seek* the kindly Peckovers shelter the infant Madonna, and later in the same novel the Blyths, whose sexual relationship and consequently ability to reproduce have been curtailed by Mrs Blyth's illness take over the role of adoptive parents. In *The Dead Secret* the newly-wedded hero and heroine face a test of their love and belief in each other when they discover that the wife, Rosamond, is not the heiress she believed herself to be. The trial is only momentary and the Franklands triumph to live happily ever after. In *Man and Wife* the Brinkworths are temporarily separated when it transpires that the husband, Arnold, is unwittingly a bigamist, but once the doubt is removed the couple are joyfully reunited. In the later novels conventional happy marriages become even rarer. In this dissertation I do not intend to examine Collins treatment of conventional marriage, marriage where there is no internal conflict between husband and wife; rather I wish to examine those marriages where conflict does occur and give significance to the relationship. I also intend to examine Collins interest in women and women's issues related to the institution of marriage; the control of property in marriage, the right of "fallen" women to marry, the fate of unmarried women and widows, and the debasement of women in the marriage market. I shall use Collins's patterning of plot and characterisation material to show the ways in which genuine concerns run and develop through the course of his fiction to give a broad and sympathetic portrait of the position of women in Victorian society. I shall examine different aspects of

life relating to women and marriage, and I shall end by considering the importance in Collins's *oeuvre* of *The Fallen Leaves*, the novel which brings together so many of the concerns of women and marriage and is central to an understanding of Collins's attitudes. It is in this radical novel that Rufus Dingwell, pondering the social mores that condemn Sally Farnaby concludes;

The world is hard on women -- and the rights of property is a darned bad reason for it!<sup>1</sup>

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Fallen Leaves*, vol.3, p.235.

Chapter One:  
Marriage, Money and Power

In Victorian society, within the framework of a normal marriage, an unscrupulous aggressor was free to mistreat his or her partner with little likelihood of legal interference. In his major novels of the 1860s, from *The Woman in White* to *Man and Wife*, and in several of later novels, Collins portrays a number of such marriages where the principal cause of conflict is financial; marriages are depicted as being one way for a man or a woman to gain access to money, with the encumbrance of a spouse. Collins's four novels written before *The Woman in White* reveal a different interest.

Nuel Pharr Davis has assumed that the early novels in particular are full of autobiographical material and personal concerns, and taken the novels as a source for some speculative reconstruction of Collins's youth'. Although biographers disagree, it does appear that Collins may not have been over fond of his hard-working, zealous and religious father, William Collins, and that some of his father's more disagreeable traits may have been the basis for the tyrannical husbands and fathers of the early novels. In *Antonina* the puritanically religious Numerian casts off his daughter when he believes her to have been seduced by the Senator Vetrano. In *Basil* the hero's father is a proud unbending man who rejects his son for having

1. Nuel Pharr Davis, *The Life of Wilkie Collins* (Urbana, 1956) *passim*.

married beneath himself. In *Hide and Seek* the repressively pious Mr Thorpe attempts, ineffectually, to force his son Zack into a straight-jacket of religious behaviour. The principal conflicts in these novels are between two generations; between parents and children. As a coda to this group of novels, *The Dead Secret* is concerned with the mutual discovery and reconciliation between a mother and daughter; as if, having reconciled the generations, Collins was then able to write his first major novel. Although patriarchal tyranny is principally directed at children in these novels, marital conflicts are also exposed in the process. In Collins's second and third novels, *Basil* and *Hide and Seek* two marriages are portrayed in which the husband and father of the household is a domineering tyrant who wreaks havoc upon the lives of his whole family.

In *Basil*, Mr Sherwin dominates his household with his vaunting ambition to climb the social ladder. He sacrifices his daughter Margaret to his ambition, forcing her through education and into a marriage with the novel's eponymous hero. Under her father's protection, Margaret grows up to be a callous, calculating and grasping young woman, who marries Basil, but betrays him by allowing herself to be seduced by her father's clerk, Robert Mannion. The tyranny of the marriage is symbolised by Mrs Sherwin. She has been systematically terrorised by her husband and her daughter, and her repression has taken on a symbolic pathological form in her strange lingering illness, which leaves her weak and often semi-catatonic;

Her pale, sickly, moist-looking skin; her large, mild, watery, light-blue eyes; the restless vigilant timidity of her expression; the mixture of useless hesitation and nervous involuntary rapidity in every one of her actions -- all furnished the same significant betrayal of a life of incessant fear and restraint; of a disposition full of modest generosities and meek sympathies, which had been crushed down past rousing to self-assertion, past ever seeing the light.'

1. Wilkie Collins, *Basil*, vol.1, pp.235-236.

Physically Mrs Sherwin is dying of disease; spiritually she is being driven to death by her marriage. As the novel progresses Mrs Sherwin becomes more death-like, and less in touch with reality; "lost in a strange sort of lethargy of body and mind; a comfortless, waking trance"<sup>1</sup>, "a solitary figure, ever mournful and ever still."<sup>2</sup> Only shortly before her death is she momentarily able to break through her reserve to confess to Basil, too late, her knowledge of the moral corruption of her daughter Margaret. Destroyed by her own marriage, Mrs Sherwin is unable to prevent a second disastrous marriage from taking place, and finally the process of repression reaches its end with her death. In *Basil* repression leads to physical death; later, in *The Woman in White*, Collins advances the power of his symbolism when spiritual and financial repression lead to a spiritual and financial death for Laura Fairlie, while still leaving her physical body alive.

A similar, but less tragic pattern is repeated in *Hide and Seek*, where Mrs Thorpe has become merely a tool in her husband's repression of their son Zack. Her maternal pride in her son is the one natural emotion that she is left to display;

She had long since, poor woman, forced down the strong strait-waistcoats of prudery and restraint over every other moral weakness but this.<sup>3</sup>

Mrs Thorpe has been totally repressed by her husband's severe Sabbatarian strictness, and is obedient to his command. But Mr Thorpe is a religious hypocrite; his life is far from pure, as he is the seducer of Mary Grice and father to the illegitimate Madonna. Set in opposition to the Thorpes are the loving couple Mr and Mrs Blyth, and the kindly Mrs Peckover. They all

1. Wilkie Collins, *Basil*, vol.2, p.12,
2. *Ibid.*, vol.2, p.15.
3. Wilkie Collins, *Hide and Seek*, vol.1, p.26.



have cared for Madonna, and the Blyths have acted as surrogate parents to Zack. When he is exposed, Mr Thorpe rapidly declines to his death, leaving his son and widow free to start life again. Although initially caught in the same marital trap as Mrs Sherwin, Mrs Thorpe is eventually given emotional release. The end of *Hide and Seek* looks forward to the reconciliation of *The Dead Secret*.

From *The Woman in White* onwards, the pattern of conflict within marriage alters, from the personal to the financial. The egotistical tyrants like Mr Sherwin and Mr Thorpe are replaced by rapacious villains like Sir Percival Glyde and Geoffrey Delamayn, for whom marriage is a passage to wealth and financial security, or by the rebellious women like Magdalen Vanstone and Lydia Gwilt, who attempt to free themselves from financial dependence on men by seeking marriage and widowhood. The state of the law, prior to the passing of the Married Women's Property Act in the 1870's, left the goods and wealth of a married woman entirely in the control of her husband, and thus open to legally sanctioned misappropriation. Some women could retain whole or partial control of their property by having marriage settlements drawn up. This option was only open to those wealthy enough to be able to afford the legal fees, and for the poorer mass of the population, as Collins shows in the story of Hester Dethridge in *Man and Wife*, marriage could leave the woman totally dependent for her financial well-being on the whims of her all-powerful husband.

Although for the majority of people the state of the property laws merely concentrated financial control in the husband and did not itself cause a problem, for those persons whose marriages developed into conflict, or for those whose marriage had been initiated by strong financial motives, it was a matter of singular importance. A man might profit greatly by marrying a wealthy woman, and the woman might lose greatly by the same process. A man who required immediate access to money

could obtain it simply by marrying the right woman, as James Bellbridge intends by marrying the apparently wealthy Mrs Westerfield in *The Evil Genius*. A woman, bereft of her wealth as a result of her marriage, would find it necessary to wait for widowhood to attain both social and financial independence. A woman seeking wealth for herself had not only to marry a wealthy man, but had also to wait for, or perhaps hasten, his death, as do Lydia Gwilt in *Armadale*, and Countess Narona in *The Haunted Hotel*.

This pattern, of marriage as a recognised device for obtaining and controlling wealth, is an important recurring theme in Collins fiction. While it occurs less forcibly and in modified forms in his later novels, notably in *The Haunted Hotel*, *The Fallen Leaves*, and *Blind Love*, the theme is a dominant ingredient in all five of the novels of Collins's major period. The novels fall into two distinct groups. In the first, consisting of *The Woman in White*, *Man and Wife*, and to a lesser degree *The Moonstone* women are shown as being the victims of male financial rapacity. In the second group, consisting of *No Name* and *Armadale*, women are shown rebelling against male financial dominance, and taking on the role of aggressors themselves.

The action of *The Woman in White* centres on the marriage of Laura Fairlie to Sir Percival Glyde, and the plot follows the preparation, execution, and ultimate defeat of a conspiracy to rob the young wife of her wealth, notwithstanding the protection of her marriage settlements. As I have shown in "Elements of Melodrama in the Five Major Novels of Wilkie Collins"<sup>1</sup>, the plot structure of *The Woman in White* presents a reworking, in duplicate, of the simple schematic conflict drawn

1. Richard Beaton, "Elements of Melodrama in the Five Major Novels of Wilkie Collins", M.A. dissertation, University of Wales, 1980.

from stage melodrama; the villain threatens the heroine, the hero defeats the villain and wins the heroine for himself. In *The Woman in White* this pattern is played out twice; Sir Percival locks Anne Catherick up in an asylum, and she escapes with the aid of Walter Hartright, who drives Sir Percival to his death in the church at Old Welmingham. Walter wins the gratitude of Anne, and the love of her double and half-sister Laura Fairlie. Laura herself is the victim of Count Fosco's plans, and she is eventually incarcerated in the same asylum as Anne, from whence she is rescued by the female "hero" Marian Halcombe. Marian also wins Laura for herself, by becoming a permanent third member of the Hartright household at the end of the novel. These two triangular relationships form the basis of a complex interplay between the characters, but at each stage, each character is easily identified by his or her role; Sir Percival and Count Fosco are always villains, Walter and Marian are always heroes, and Laura and Anne are always victimised heroines.

Throughout the novel Laura is less an individual woman than a passive object open to influence by the opposing forces of the heroes and villains. As a character, Laura never comes to life in the novel; her intense passivity is an extreme incarnation of the Victorian ideal of feminine sweetness and submissiveness. Laura is deprived of a will and personality of her own by the demands of her upbringing, and later she is deprived of her name, her identity, her wealth, and her freedom, as a result of male villainy. Laura is thus an archetypal victim.

Laura Fairlie is the passive victim of a plot to gain control of her wealth. This plot concept appears frequently throughout Collins's fiction: in *No Name* Magdalen Vanstone marries her cousin Noel in order to regain control of the inheritance that she has lost because of her illegitimacy; in *Armada* Lydia Gwilt seeks to obtain a great fortune by

becoming first the wife, and then the widow, of the wealthy young Allan Armadale; in *The Moonstone* Godfrey Ablwhite hypocritically woos Rachel Verinder in the hope that he will obtain access to her wealth in order to pay off his secret debts; and in *The Fallen Leaves* John Farnaby successfully plots to seduce and then marry Emma Ronald in order that he may be taken as a partner into her father's business. The mechanics of the plot whereby Laura is defrauded involve the exchange of identities between two people. This device also recurs throughout Collins's fiction: in *The Woman in White* Laura is exchanged with Anne Catherick; in *The New Magdalen* Mercy Merick steals the identity of Grace Roseberry; in *The Haunted Hotel* a dying courier is passed off as Lord Montbarry; in *The Fallen Leaves* John Farnaby adopts Regina Mildmay to replace the true daughter whom he disposed of in infancy; and in *Blind Love* Lord Harry Norland passes off a dead Dane as himself in order to collect on a large life insurance policy. *The Woman in White* is thus the first in a chain of novels which deal with the financial exploitation of one person by another; Laura is the precursor of a number of characters who are plotted against, displaced or even murdered for financial gain. This recurring pattern is important in relation to women and marriage.

Laura's marriage to Sir Percival is purely contractual. She marries him not out of love but out of a misplaced sense of duty to her dead father, who, it is later revealed, was unworthy of that love, being the adulterous father of Laura's half-sister and double, Anne Catherick. However, Laura's sense of duty, as inculcated in her by her education, overrides her personal feelings, and she is willing to go through with the marriage and give up the hope of happiness with the man she truly loves, Walter Hartright. Marian Halcombe explains to Walter that Laura's is a common situation for a woman;

It is an engagement of honour, not of love -- her father sanctioned it on his death-bed, two years since -- she herself neither welcomed it, nor shrank from it -- she was content to make it. Till you came here,

she was in the position of hundreds of other women, who marry men without being greatly attracted to them or greatly repelled by them, and who learn to love them (when they don't learn to hate!) after marriage, instead of before.<sup>1</sup>

Laura's future is determined by agreement between her father and her future husband, and her views are not even sought. Marian implies that marriage for many women is merely something that happens, an event beyond their own personal control. Happiness within marriage is thereafter dependent upon chance.

Vincent Gilmore, the solicitor called in to arrange Laura's marriage settlements, reveals clearly the reason for Sir Percival's desire to marry;

The want of ready money was the practical necessity of Sir Percival's existence; and his lawyer's note on the clause in the settlement was nothing but the frankly selfish expression of it.<sup>2</sup>

For Sir Percival, as for Laura, the marriage is a loveless legal contract. But while Laura drifts into the marriage by failing to exert her will to alter events, Sir Percival actively takes steps to promote the marriage. Laura will lose her freedom, control of her estate, and the man she loves; Sir Percival will gain a pretty and respectable wife, and access to money. The marriage is a bargain, a socially acceptable way for the man to increase his wealth, and Laura is merely a commodity obtained in the process. This concept of marriage as barter was one that Collins was to explore more deeply in *The Fallen Leaves*, as I shall be discussing in the final chapter of this dissertation.

The marriage is cold, and barren; its advantages are all on Sir Percival's side, while for Laura it is a contract of

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*, vol.1, p.112.
2. *Ibid.*, vol 1, p.244.

sexual, social and financial bondage. Marian, writing in her diary, quickly senses that the marriage has not effected the normal change that such an event *should* upon a young woman;

The usual moral transformation which is insensibly wrought in a young, fresh, sensitive woman by her marriage, seems never to have taken place in Laura. She writes of her own thoughts and impressions, amid all the wonders she has seen, exactly as she might have written to some one else, if I had been travelling with her instead of her husband. I see no betrayal anywhere, of sympathy of any kind existing between them...I only see a sad torpor, an unchangeable indifference, when I turn my mind from her in the old character of a sister, and look at her, through the medium of her letters, in the new character of a wife. In other words, it is always Laura Fairlie who has been writing to me for the last six months, and never Lady Glyde.'

The marriage was not one where the two partners hoped or intended to grow and develop together as a loving couple; it was the yoking together of two people for the sake of expediency. Although Laura becomes Lady Glyde in name, the marriage has otherwise no effect upon the development of her personality. The marriage does not change Laura from being a nubile girl into being a wife, it merely imprisons her personality, unchanged, behind her new title.

The marriage settlements provide an obstacle to Sir Percival's easy access to Laura's wealth, and he attempts to make her sign away her rights. When she questions her husband about the documents she is to sign Sir Percival's reactions reveal his proprietorial attitude to his wife, and clearly dramatise the nature of the couple's relationship within the bonds of marriage. Sir Percival sees it as pointless to explain the document to his wife;

I have no time to explain...Besides, if I had time, you wouldn't understand. It is a purely formal document -- full of legal technicalities, and all that sort of thing...What have women to do with

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*, vol 2, pp.10-11.

business? I tell you again, you can't understand it.<sup>1</sup>

He regards his wife as intellectually little short of idiotic, and as unimportant with regard to her own property. At the same time his scorn masks a fear that Laura *might* understand and resist his plans. He regards himself as Laura's master, with no obligations towards her;

[Mr Gilmore] was your servant, and was obliged to explain. I am your husband, and am *not* obliged.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, he not only denies her the right to have answers to her questions, but he denies her the right to ask questions and think independent thoughts in the first place;

"Speak out!" he said. "You were always famous for telling the truth. Never mind Miss Halcombe; never mind Fosco -- say, in plain terms, you distrust me."...

"Control your unfortunate temper, Percival," [Count Fosco] said. "Lady Glyde is right."

"Right!" cried Sir Percival. "A wife right in distrusting her husband!"<sup>3</sup>

To Sir Percival, Laura is only a woman and a wife; an object defined by her sex and her social role and never an independent and free-thinking individual. Laura herself is aware that her husband's attitude is a denial of her existence, and she begs him for recognition of her personality;

"I will sign with pleasure," she said, "if you will only treat me as a responsible being."<sup>4</sup>

But this Sir Percival refuses to do. He has imprisoned his wife socially and spiritually in the marriage; she is his slave

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*, vol.2, p.82.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.2, p.82.
3. *Ibid.*, vol.2, p.83.
4. *Ibid.*, vol.2, p.86.

and prisoner, he both her warder and master. The marriage itself is therefore an image of one aspect of the traditional melodramatic conflict between the villain and the heroine; the legal bonds of marriage have taken the place of castle walls and dungeons.

Collins shows Laura suffering through her unwillingness to completely submit to her husband's will. At the same time he provides an ironic contrast with Laura's suffering in the presentation of Count Fosco's wife, Eleanor. The contrast is enforced by the parallel of the two married couples travelling together and arriving at Blackwater Park together; it is reinforced by the fact that Eleanor Fosco is Laura's aunt, an elder relative who should stand in some degree as an example to the newly wedded wife. While Laura is passive but shows some degree of stubbornness in acceding to her husband's demands, Madame Fosco has been entirely cowed into submission by her husband, and has no existence independent of him;

As Eleanor Fairlie (aged seven-and-thirty), she was always talking pretentious nonsense...As Madame Fosco (aged three-and-forty), she sits for hours together without saying a word, frozen up in the strangest manner in herself...she sits speechless in corners; her dry white hands (so dry that the pores of her skin look chalky) incessantly engaged, either in monotonous embroidery work, or in rolling up endless little cigarettes for the Count's own particular smoking. On the few occasions when her cold blue eyes are off her work, they are generally turned on her husband, with the look of mute submissive inquiry which we are all familiar with in the eyes of a faithful dog.'

While Laura has been imprisoned by her husband and has not adapted in any way to becoming his wife, Eleanor Fosco has been completely changed by her marriage. She has developed from being lively and individual into being completely subservient to her husband's wishes, and she is little more than a slave, or a pet, joining company with the Count's white mice and

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*, vol.2, pp.35-36.



cockatoo.

Sir Percival's failure to form Laura into a second Madame Fosco precipitates the conspiracy at the heart of the novel. With the aid of the Foscos, Sir Percival exchanges Laura for her double Anne Catherick. Laura is locked away in an asylum, apparently suffering from delusions. Anne (apparently Lady Glyde) dies, thus leaving Sir Percival an enriched widower, in complete control of the money that he so desperately required. The action of the conspiracy symbolically takes the Glydes' marriage to its logical conclusion. Through the marriage Laura's true identity has been imprisoned within her role as Lady Glyde, and her personal individuality denied by her husband. As a result of the conspiracy Laura is left physically imprisoned and completely robbed of her personality. Sir Percival has sought a mindless and compliant wife; in Anne Catherick he obtains a wife who, in a her mental instability, is literally mindless, and she conveniently dies of heart disease to leave him her fortune.

Working against the conspiracy of Sir Percival and Count Fosco is Walter Hartright, one of the novel's two heroes. Walter loves Laura (and she him) and his actions are motivated by a desire to see justice done by reconstituting Laura's lost identity. Ironically, by marrying Laura himself after the death of Sir Percival Glyde, Walter ensures that Laura's recovery of name and position will benefit him; the novel ends with the announcement that the couple's new-born child is the heir to the Limmeridge estate in Cumberland. While Sir Percival is treated as a villain in his attempt to exploit his marriage for personal gain, Walter is presented as a benevolent husband and lover. Collins avoids the question of the inequality of women before the law, and allows Laura's fate to lie entirely in the hands of men throughout the novel; firstly she obeys her father, then she marries Sir Percival, falls into the power of Count Fosco, and is finally rescued by Walter. It

is Walter's benevolence rather than any development on Laura's part towards positive action as an individual, which ensures that the novel will have a traditionally happy ending.

The end of the novel is ambiguous. Laura remains a passive figure, the object of both the devotion of her new husband, and of her half-sister who has joined the household to form a strange *ménage-à-trois*<sup>1</sup>. Laura has been given back a recognisable identity; but she is not the Laura Fairlie who first entered the prison of marriage with Sir Percival, but Mrs Hartright, wife and mother. The authors of *Corrupt Relations* conclude;

[The *Woman in White*] undermines its own efforts to cast the males who control Laura into distinct roles as villains and heroes. The damage to Laura has not been caused by one man's villainy, and it cannot be repaired through one man's virtue; it is a disease endemic to the system.<sup>2</sup>

In *The Woman in White* the choice for a woman seems to be not between independence and subservience, but between submission to a good man or a bad man. Laura can exercise her freedom of choice before marriage, but not after it. Collins's sympathetic portrayal of his victimised heroine is undermined by his conclusion; the way to avoid an unhappy and exploitative marriage is to make a happy and non-exploitative one. There is no third choice for Laura.

Thus in *The Woman in White* Collins does not question the value of marriage itself as an institution, but rather he reveals the manner in which the institution can and is perverted to exploitative ends by men. The apparently happy

1. I shall discuss the significance of Marian Halcombe within the novel, and in relation to the Hartright marriage in Chapter Five "Unmarried Women".
2. Barickman, MacDonald and Stark, *Corrupt Relations* (New York, 1982), p.116.

marriage at the novel's conclusion carries a hint of exploitation; in making Laura so entirely passive Collins avoids presenting her as an active participant in a conflict; as a woman she remains throughout an object controlled by men. Laura is the most passive of Collins's heroines; in his later novels his female characters take a greater part in attempting to control their own destinies.

In *The Moonstone* there are no actual marriages, only a series of projected ones which are created, suspended and destroyed in the course of the investigation into the theft of the diamond. At the centre of the novel lies the Moonstone itself, a portable fortune, the possession or suspected possession of which motivates the changes in relationships between the novel's major characters. For Rachel Verinder the possession of the Moonstone is relatively unimportant; she is less concerned by Franklin Blake's "theft" than by his apparent treachery;

Oh! is there another man like this in the world? I spare him, when my heart is breaking; I screen him when my own character is at stake; and he -- of all human beings, he -- turns on me now, and tells me that I ought to have explained myself!...You villain, you mean, mean, mean villain, I would have lost fifty Diamonds, rather than see your face lying to me, as I see it lying now!'

Rachel views the theft from the point of view of a would-be wife. She is ready to accept Franklin's use of her property, as symbolised by his taking of the diamond, but she is deeply hurt by his denial of the facts which seems to her to be a hypocritical betrayal of her submissive trust in him. Charles Rycroft has assessed the theft of the Moonstone in terms of sexual symbolism;

It is not necessary here to demonstrate that the theft of the Moonstone

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone*, vol.3, p.78.

is a symbolic representation of the as yet prohibited intercourse between Franklin and Rachel...<sup>1</sup>

From a psychoanalytic point of view the theft symbolises Franklin's sexual presumption; intercourse before marriage. At the same time, however, the act can be viewed socially as an act of *financial* presumption; Franklin takes premature control of his wife-to-be's property. Rachel does not deplore the act of taking control, nor Franklin's use of her money; she makes it clear that she would have freely offered him any money he required before their marriage;

If you had read on with some interest after that, you would have come to an offer I had to make to you -- the offer, privately (not a word, mind, to be said openly about it between us!), of the loan of as large a sum of money as I could get. -- And I would have got it!<sup>2</sup>

Rachel despises what she believes to be Franklin's deceit, the lies that would form a barrier between them, while at the same time accepting that he should have control of her money for his own ends.

Collins presents a parallel to Rachel's self-degrading acceptance of her lover's criminality in Rosanna Spearman's belief that her knowledge of Franklin Blake's "guilt" will enable her to persuade him to become her lover. Rosanna fantasises an ironic parody of a happy conventional marriage; a union in which the partners share equally their knowledge of dark secrets and mutual dishonesty. Rosanna's hiding of Franklin's incriminating nightgown is a form of unconscious moral blackmail; by saving him she hopes to force herself into Franklin's confidence and eventually his love;

1. Charles Rycroft, "A Detective Story: Psychoanalytic Observations", *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 26 (1957), p.235.
2. Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone*, vol.3, p.80.

But oh! how could I destroy the only thing I had which proved that I had saved you from discovery? If we did come to an explanation together, and if you suspected me of having some bad motive, and denied it all, how could I win upon you to trust me, unless I had the nightgown to produce? Was it wronging you to believe, as I did, and still do, that you might hesitate to let a poor girl like me be the sharer of your secret, and your accomplice in the theft...<sup>1</sup>

Like Rachel, Rosanna sacrifices herself to the man whom she believes to be dishonest; like Rachel she suffers the consequences and deepens rather than alleviates the mystery that haunts the novel. Both women are prepared to accept a submissive role to a financial exploiter; ironically Franklin is unaware, both of the crime and of the two women's beliefs about him; he is not an exploiter and his unconscious "theft" of the diamond was not an act symbolic of his desire to control wealth, but rather of his desire to protect it from other dangers, for Rachel's sake.

While Franklin is innocent but appears to be guilty, the novel's true villain, Godfrey Ablewhite appears to be innocent while in truth being guilty. He hides his pecuniary problems beneath his respectable pseudo-religious façade. He attempts to woo and win Rachel not because he loves her but because control of her wealth through marriage would allow him to pay off the money that he has illegally squandered from a private trust. He sees Rachel, as Sir Percival sees Laura, not as a person, but as an object, as a means to a financial end, and he candidly admits this to Miss Clack after the engagement has been called off;

I have lost a beautiful girl, an excellent social position, and a handsome income...<sup>2</sup>

His real motive for breaking the engagement is later revealed

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone*, vol.3, pp.37-38.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.3, p.183.

by Sergeant Cuff;

Miss Verinder had only a life interest in her mother's property -- and there was no raising the twenty thousand pounds on that.'

Godfrey is the truly rapacious villain; he not only secretly possesses Rachel's diamond, but he seeks to marry her for more money; when he finds out that the marriage would not prove as financially beneficial as he had hoped, he is happy to back out of it.

Although no marriages occur in *The Moonstone* until the final union between Rachel and Franklin, the projected marriages, and the manner of their creation and dissolution all rely on a man's control of a woman's property. Rachel exercises her right to choose the man to whom she will submit herself, physically, socially and financially; through a confusion between appearance and reality she first rejects the innocent man who sought to protect her, and then accepts the man who intends to use her. It is the law, as it governs her inheritance, which saves her from an exploitative marriage, rather than any action of her own. Rachel is not a victim of a man, of men, or of society, but of fatal appearances. Her marriage to Franklin Blake at the end of the novel is presented as a happy partnership; a respectable and trusting union which is a positive reflection of the ironic criminal union projected by Rosanna.

While *The Woman in White* ends ambiguously with the property of the Fairlie family passing by marriage into the control of the Hartright family, *The Moonstone* ends with the great property which has been the centre of the financial complications of the plot being removed from the scene. It reverts from being the valuable gem which had wreaked havoc in

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone*, vol.3, p.288.

in England back into its original and simpler state as the eye of an Indian idol.

Marriage is thus an important element of both *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*. In the last of the five novels of his major period, *Man and Wife*, Collins makes marriage (as the title suggests) the *dominant* theme. Collins examines what constitutes a marriage in England, Scotland and Ireland, and shows how the vagaries of the law can be used by one marriage partner against the other. Like *The Woman in White*, *Man and Wife* explores the power of a man over his wife's social, spiritual and financial identity. It is a novel in which two good women, Anne Silvester and Blanche Lundie, are shown to be the victims of a rapacious man, and like the two other novels of Collins's major period, *No Name* and *Armadale*, it also presents a woman whose revolt against the financial tyranny of men leads to her own corruption and destruction.

The first marriage presented in the novel is that of Mr Vanborough to the elder Anne Silvester. Like Laura Fairlie, Anne Silvester proves to be a physical obstacle to her husband's career progress. Vanborough exploits the laxity of the law which governed his marriage to Anne in Ireland in order to have the union annulled. Vanborough can thereafter marry the wealthy and influential Lady Jane Parnell, and fulfil his ambition by entering Parliament. Anne and her infant daughter (Anne Silvester the younger) are cast out of the family home, and out of society; the former Mrs Vanborough is only a mistress, and her child is illegitimate. In the space of the few pages of the Prologue, Collins thus recapitulates the attitudes that governed the relationship between Sir Percival and Laura Glyde; the brevity reinforces the moral point, and Collins introduces a minor character whose indignant comments underline the immorality of the law and of the action taken by the husband against his wife;

"Is such a state of things possible, in the age we live in?" exclaimed Mr. Kendrew.<sup>1</sup>

"An infamous law!" said Mr. Kendrew.<sup>2</sup>

Mr. Kendrew is not really a character; he is no more than a rhetorical device. Collins uses him to emphasise the inequality of the law as it is used by Vanborough against his wife, to intensify the force of the moral indignation aroused by the husband's mistreatment of his wife.

The main action of the novel concerns the life of the daughter of the dissolved Vanborough marriage, Anne Silvester. Like her mother she is technically a fallen woman, having become the mistress of Geoffrey Delamayn in expectation of marriage. However, like Mr Vanborough, Geoffrey has ambitions; and these would be thwarted by a union with Anne; he is courting a well-connected and wealthy bride, the young widow Mrs Glenarm. He claims that Anne has married Arnold Brinkwater "by declaration" in front of witnesses, and thereby presents Anne with a husband, and obtains his own freedom to marry Mrs Glenarm. However, Arnold has already married Blanche Lundie and has therefore become, unintentionally, a bigamist.

Through one fabricated marriage Geoffrey creates four victims whose positions he exploits for his own mercenary ends. By freeing himself of any claim from Anne, he is able to devote himself to the wooing, marrying and absorption of Mrs Glenarm and her fortune. Blanche is forcibly separated from her new husband and led to believe that he has deceived her; Arnold himself is accused of bigamy. Anne Silvester is accused of having married her best friend's lover, and in order to save the Brinkworths' marriage she finds that she has to sacrifice

1. Wilkie Collins, *Man and Wife*, vol.1, p.23.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.1, p.24.



herself further by forcing Geoffrey to recognise her as *his* wife by declaration. Ironies abound. In order to save the Brinkworths' marriage Anne is forced to acknowledge as husband a man whom she fears and who hates her. In order to be happy together as a married couple the Brinkworths have to accept the self-sacrifice of a dear friend. In order to make a mercenary marriage Geoffrey had used the Scottish marriage laws, but finds that once set in motion these very laws tie him to the woman from whom he was trying to break free.

Thus the law sanctions a union which is an exaggerated version of the Glyde marriage in *The Woman in White*. Like Laura, Anne is an obstacle standing between her husband and money; but she is also detested. Like Laura, Anne sacrifices herself to the marriage out of a sense of duty and honour; but also she does so as a sacrificial gesture of love for her friends. In *The Woman in White* the melodramatic conflict between husband and wife culminates in a symbolic destruction of the wife's identity by the husband. In *Man and Wife* the conflict is more extreme; between bitter hatred and self sacrifice, and culminates in a brutal attempt at murder. For Geoffrey and Anne marriage is not a willing union of love, but a legally sanctioned fettering of two individuals into a state of conflict which can only finally be resolved by death. Geoffrey's sole motive is money; by killing Anne he hopes to free himself to wed Mrs Glenarm. Anne's sole motive is altruistic love for Blanche. The couple thus represent diametrically opposed positions; aggressive and selfish male power and yielding and altruistic female passivity. The Delamayns' marriage is never considered as a romantic union, but simply as a legal function which exacerbates a struggle for power and money.

The third marriage examined in *Man and Wife* is that of Hester Dethridge. Hester marries a man who becomes a drunken, dissolute spendthrift. Through the marriage Joel is able to

control his wife's property and income as he pleases. Hester's narrative tersely depicts the helplessness of a woman trapped in a union with a rapacious husband, and the inability of the forces of law to come to her aid;

"Is your furniture settled on yourself?" [the magistrate] says, when I told him what had happened.

I didn't understand what he meant. He turned to some person who was sitting on the bench with him. "This is a hard case," he says. "Poor people in this condition of life don't even know what a marriage settlement means...The law doesn't allow a married woman to call anything her own -- unless she has previously (with a lawyer's help) made a bargain to that effect with her husband, before marrying him. You have made no bargain. Your husband has a right to sell your furniture if he likes. I am sorry for you; I can't hinder him.'

Simply by marrying Hester, Joel Dethridge usurps control of her property, and without needing to resort to the conspiracies and subterfuges of Sir Percival Glyde, Godfrey Ablewhite or Geoffrey Delamayn, he can use the law to exploit his marriage for personal financial gain.

Hester has two options open to her; submission to injustice, or rebellion. The first entails spiritual and financial annihilation, and the second moral corruption. Like many other female characters in Collins's novels, Hester refuses to accept a passive role, and she takes an active hand in determining her own fate. In order to regain her independent status she must become a widow; therefore she murders her husband in an ingenious way which leaves her free of suspicion and able to start her life afresh. Although, through her actions, Hester is physically triumphant, she is punished morally by her own guilty conscience which afflicts her with dumbness, makes her see hallucinations, and finally drives her to complete insanity when she strangles Geoffrey Delamayn. Within the marriage Hester frees herself from male tyranny by reversing the role of aggressor and victim; by doing

so she both frees and corrupts herself. This ambiguous combination, which seems to be an inherent feature of a woman's rebellion, is an important element in the other two novels of the 1860s, *Armadale* and *No Name*

In *Man and Wife* there are a number of victims of marriage, both female (the two Anne Silvesters, Blanche Lundie, Mrs Glenarm and Hester Dethridge) and male (Arnold Brinkworth, Sir Patrick Lundie, and Joel Dethridge). Collins does not portray the concept of marriage itself in a negative way -- there are happy marriages in the novel too -- but he reveals that as a legal function, marriage is open to widespread abuse, and is often the arena for a bitter conflict of interests between husband and wife. For women the prospect is bleak; once involved in a mercenary marriage their only options are submission or revolt.

In the later novels similar patterns of exploitation reappear. In *The Fallen Leaves*, which I shall be discussing in detail in the final chapter, Collins presents the marriage of John and Emma Farnaby. John Farnaby married Emma so that he could force his way into business partnership with her father. He is oblivious to his wife's real emotional needs; he kidnaps their own love-child to prevent a scandal, and then attempts to placate his grieving wife by presenting her with a niece to adopt. Farnaby is successful; he becomes a powerful business man, while Mrs Farnaby is reduced to living only for the hope of finding her lost daughter. Once that hope is apparently extinguished for ever, Mrs Farnaby commits suicide; her death is a natural conclusion to her husband's spiritual and material exploitation of her. *The Fallen Leaves* thus echoes the stories of Laura Glyde and Hester Dethridge; Emma Farnaby is ruthlessly exploited for her material value by an unscrupulous husband, and her individual identity, as a woman, as a wife, and as a person, are ignored and overridden.

*The Haunted Hotel* reworks the conspiracy plot of *The Woman in White*. The victim of the plot, Lord Montbarry, is secretly exchanged for a second person who conveniently dies of natural causes, leaving his widow, Countess Narona, to inherit the estate. At this level Countess Narona is presented as a one-dimensional melodramatic villainess who, like Sir Percival Glyde, exploits her marriage for financial gain to the point of annihilating her spouse. However, the Countess is herself a victim. Towards the end of the novel she produces the script for a stage melodrama which re-enacts the conspiracy to defraud Lord Montbarry. In it the characters are purposely made to speak in heightened language, and to exaggerate their emotions, but the play nevertheless represents the Countess's confession. Her own character in the play reveals that she is the victim of her brother/lover Baron Rivar, for whom she has steeped herself in crime;;

Where is the true woman..who wants time to consummate the sacrifice of herself, when the man to whom she is devoted demands it? She does not want five minutes -- she does not want five seconds -- she holds out her hand to him, and she says, Sacrifice me on the altar of your glory! Take as stepping-stones on the way to your triumph, my love, my liberty, and my life!'

While it appears that Lord Montbarry has been financially exploited by Countess Narona, she herself has been exploited by Baron Rivar; she is the tool which one man has used to obtain the wealth of another. Thus Collins alters the reader's perception of his central character; he reveals the exploiter to be another victim.

As a woman, Countess Narona sees it to be her duty, her role in life to sacrifice herself to the needs of a man. This sacrifice entails complete moral corruption, and leads

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Haunted Hotel*, vol.2, p.8.

eventually to insanity and death, and Collins thereby shows the dangers inherent in male power and female submission. This concept is made even more strongly in Collins's last, uncompleted novel, *Blind Love*, which is yet another reworking of the conspiracy plot of *The Woman in White*. In *Blind Love* the heroine, Iris Henley, blindly loves the young scoundrel Lord Harry Norland. Norland conceives a plan to exchange himself for a dying man in order to falsify his own death and thereby collect a large life insurance. Iris's marriage to Norland is thus not one in which either partner exploits the other financially, but instead one in which the wife becomes morally corrupted by her husband, as she is drawn into participating in the fraud; the union is a criminal one similar to that fantasised by Rosanna Spearman in *The Moonstone*.

All of these novels centre on the fate of those women who submit. The other two major novels of the 1860s, *Armada* and *No Name*, focus on the idea of a woman's rebellion against exploitation by men, as intimated in the story of Hester Dethridge in *Man and Wife*.

In *Armada* the relationship between marriage, money and power is explicitly made. The title of the novel refers to the family of Armadale, divided between a true and adopted branch, each branch having a father and son named Allan Armadale, in rivalry with each other. The novel follows the attempts of the chief female protagonist, Lydia Gwilt, to break into the family and gain control of its wealth for herself. Lydia is moved by the personal desire to control her own destiny, spiritually, physically, and financially. Lydia has suffered in life as the victim to two villainous men; as wife to the cruel Waldron and mistress to the selfish Manuel, and she has consequently come to hate men, and fear their power over her;

After the horrors I have gone through, I have no vanity left; and a man

who admires me, is a man who makes me shudder.<sup>1</sup>

To Lydia men are objects of detestation and physical revulsion, marriage merely a means to aid her "money-grubbing in the golden Armadale diggings"<sup>2</sup>.

As the proliferation of the Allan Armadales suggests, the men of the Armadale family are less significant as individuals than as bearers of a name. With the name all important, individuals become interchangeable. In the first generation one Allan Armadale marries his rival's promised wife on the strength of his name alone. Lydia Gwilt has the choice of two Allan Armadales in the second generation; one is poor but in love with her; the other is rich but not in love with her, and she realises that for her to break into the family it is only necessary for her to marry *one* Armadale, and then to pose as the *other's* widow;

Marry which of the two I might, my name would of course be the same. I should have been Mrs. Armadale, if I had married the light-haired Allan at the great house. And I can be Mrs. Armadale still, if I marry the dark-haired Allan in London.<sup>3</sup>

For Lydia Gwilt it is the title of "Mrs Armadale", rather than the status of "wife", the pen-and-ink proof of a matrimonial bond rather than the state of marriage, that is important, for it is through the name imposed on her by her husband that she intends to exploit her way to the Armadale fortune.

Lydia does not intend to trap herself into a marital conflict with one man, but with an entire family whose secrets she knows and whose wealth she covets. The marriage she plans

1. Wilkie Collins, *Armadale*, vol.1, p.282.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.1, p.153.
3. *Ibid.*, vol.2, p.136.

is simply a legal and financial contract, entirely devoid of romantic and emotional implications. While Lydia is contemplating entrapping the rich light-haired Allan, Mrs Oldershaw, her accomplice, reveals what prospects the marriage will hold;

Only persuade him to make you Mrs. Armadale, and you may set all after-discoveries at flat defiance. As long as he lives, you can make your own terms with him; and, if he dies, the will entitles you, in spite of anything he can say or do -- with children, or without them -- to an income chargeable on his estate, *of twelve hundred a year for life.*<sup>1</sup>

Lydia is, in effect, to marry the estate. As individuals become subsumed in the all-important family name, so the name itself becomes only a symbol for the wealth and property of the Armadale family. Individuals and property thus become indistinguishable; one may be exchanged for the other. This correlation is made clear in the Prologue, where a genuine Allan Armadale of the elder generation is robbed of his estates by the adopted heir. He takes his revenge by stealing his rival's wife-to-be. The adopted heir, recalling the events in later years, clearly equates possession of the Armadale estates and Miss Jane Blanchard;

You can now guess the truth. Fergus Ingleby was the outlawed son, [Allan Armadale disguised] whose name and whose inheritance I had taken. And Fergus Ingleby was even with me for depriving him of his birthright<sup>2</sup>

The conflict between the two men of the same name for possession of the same estate and the same woman emphasises the woman's role as a chattel. The conflict ends with the destruction of one Armadale by his rival. In the next generation Lydia Gwilt sees that her financial designs depend upon her destruction of the incumbent Armadale, and her ability

1. Wilkie Collins, *Armadale*, vol.1, pp.153-154.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.1, p.27.

to pose as his widow. Between the two generations male and female roles have been reversed. In the first the woman was the passive object of two aggressive male opponents. In the second generation the two men are the passive objects of the aggressive female villain. Lydia, like Hester Dethridge, is not prepared to await freedom passively; she chooses to murder her way to widowhood. Like Magdalen Vanstone in *No Name*, she rebels against the established codes of female conduct, and against the social rules governing courtship and marriage.

Thus the first part of *Armadale* casts Lydia Gwilt in the melodramatic role of hunter and persecutor, with marriage to an Armadale her aim, and money her motive. However, as the novel progresses, Collins, through a subtle and ingenious manoeuvre, alters the reader's opinion of Lydia; he shifts the sympathy nominally reserved for her unwitting victims to Lydia herself, and she becomes, in effect, the novel's heroine. This manoeuvre is achieved by the introduction of sections of Lydia's diary into the novel, alternating with the principal third-person narrative. Gradually the reader comes to see that Lydia's judgements upon people are accurate. The rich young Armadale is indeed "a rattle-pated young fool" and the object of his infatuation, Neelie Milroy, is certainly "rosy and foolish; and, what is more, awkward and squat and freckled, and ill-tempered and ill-dressed."<sup>2</sup> This manoeuvre was responsible for much of the vitriolic reaction against the novel shown by the contemporary critics. They were used to the vilification of villains like Sir Percival Glyde, and Collins's attempt to create sympathy for a degenerate like Lydia Gwilt provoked claims that she was "a woman fouler than the refuse of the streets"<sup>3</sup> and "one from which every rightly constituted mind

1. Wilkie Collins, *Armadale*, vol.1, p.279.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.1, p.280.
3. Unsigned Review, *Spectator* (9 June 1866) in *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*, ed N. Page (London, 1974), p.150.



turns with loathing". Only H.F. Chorley, in a review as severe and negative as those of his contemporaries, perceived some of Collins's purpose;

Mr. Collins belongs to the class of professing satirists who are eager to lay bear the "blotches and blains" which fester beneath the skin and taint the blood of humanity.<sup>2</sup>

Using Lydia Gwilt's viewpoint sympathetically allows Collins to make an inversion by which to criticise his society.

In *The Woman in White* and *Man and Wife* female characters are torn from happy home circumstances, move through a period of dispossession and alienation connected with their marriages, and are finally reintegrated into "normal" society by their unions with benevolent men at the novel's end. In *Armada* the process is reversed; Lydia begins the novel as an outcast, attempting to commit suicide; she moves, through her love of Ozias Midwinter, towards moral regeneration and social integration; and she completes the circle by her successful suicide at the end of the novel. As in the previous novels, a marriage forms the central event of the plot. While Laura's marriage to Sir Percival, or Anne's union with Geoffrey Delamayn lead to their alienation, Lydia's marriage to Ozias, originally motivated by the knowledge that she might use his real name (Allan Armadale) for her own purposes, grows into a love-match which causes Lydia to abandon her plans. In a reversal of her apparent role as aggressor Lydia comes to protect her husband and cannot contemplate harming him;

Is it hard, now that events are taking me, smoothly and safely, nearer and nearer to the End -- is it hard to conquer the temptation to go on?

1. Unsigned Review, *London Quarterly Review* (October 1866), in *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage* ed. N. Page, p.156.
2. H.F.Chorley, *Athenaeum* (2 June 1866), in N. Page, *op. cit.*, p.146.

No! If there is only a chance of harm coming to Midwinter, the dread of that chance is enough to decide me -- enough to strengthen me to conquer the temptation, for his sake. I have never loved him yet, never, never, never as I love him now!'<sup>1</sup>

While Collins shows the villainous Lydia loving her husband truly, he at the same time uses her to expose the hypocrisies and shams of conventional love and courtship. Lydia reveals that the romantic love between Allan Armadale and Neelie Milroy is essentially exploitative, and that even for respectable members of society, subtle games and pretences are used to entrap a wealthy man into proposing;

The artful little minx lost no time in making the necessary impression on him; she began to cry.<sup>2</sup>

Such outrageously straightforward love-making as this, left Miss Milroy, of course, but two alternatives -- to confess that she had been saying No, when she meant Yes, or to take refuge in another explosion. She was hypocrite enough to prefer another explosion.<sup>3</sup>

Lydia's viewpoint, as one who is a social outcast, reveals that the manipulation and entrapment of people into marriage lurk beneath the surface of the most conventional of relationships, enshrined as part of the social ritual.

In her own marriage, Lydia shows that the role of aggressor can be redeemed by love. Collins's other persecutors, in the novels of the 1860s, come to replace affection with greed and hatred, and neither Sir Percival Glyde, Godfrey Ablewhite, Geoffrey Delamayn, Hester Dethridge, nor Magdalen Vanstone, falters in the persecution of the marital victims. Lydia Gwilt begins by entrapping Ozias Midwinter and ends by protecting him; she comes to replace her mercenary desires with love. She moves morally in the opposite

1. Wilkie Collins, *Armadale*, vol.2, p.212.

2. *Ibid.*, vol.2, p.126.

2. *Ibid.*, vol.2, p.127.

direction to the other villains; furthermore her placing of the love of a man over desire for power and money is in itself a significant reversal of the equation of possession of spouse and property, of motives of love and greed, as they had earlier been counterpointed in the Prologue.

The general movement of the last part of *Armadale* echoes, in its negative way, the eventual fate of the heroines of *The Woman in White* and *Man and Wife*. At the end of *Armadale*, Lydia completely relinquishes her attempts to gain a fortune, rejects society, and commits suicide. However, Collins undercuts Lydia's final negative action by revealing her worthy motives. Lydia seeks to dissolve the bond of marriage by death and free the man who has, despite her attempts to protect him, become the physical victim of her villainy;

"Live, my angel, live!" she murmured tenderly, with her lips just touching his. "All your life is before you -- a happy life, and an honoured life, if you are freed from *me!*"<sup>1</sup>

Lydia had hoped to use marriage, murder and widowhood to force her way to independent security; she turns the weapons upon herself and by making Ozias Midwinter a widower she ensures him a happy future. Lydia's final submission to love both redeems and transfigures her;

She silently bent over him and kissed his forehead. When she looked up again, the hard despair had melted from her face. There was something softly radiant in her eyes, which lit her whole countenance as with an inner light, and made her womanly and lovely once more.<sup>2</sup>

Her final address to God is a recognition that her rebellion and exploitation of men and marriage have led her only to

1. Wilkie Collins, *Armadale*, vol.2, p.363.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.2, p.362.

evil and despair, and that finally she must accept the role of victim;

"Oh, God, forgive me!" she said. "Oh, Christ, bear witness that I have suffered."<sup>1</sup>

At the end of *Man and Wife* Hester Dethridge's mania results in Geoffrey's death, freeing Anne Silvester to marry Sir Patrick Lundie, and ensuring the happiness of Blanche and Arnold Brinkworth. At the end of *Armadale* Lydia Gwilt's suicide frees Ozias Midwinter and allows for the conventional marriage of Allan and Neelie. In each novel the rebel is destroyed or sacrificed so that "normal" society may continue to function.

Lydia Gwilt starts the novel as a conventional villain, but progresses from villainy to heroism. Collins shows that for a woman rebelling against the male domination of marriage, property and wealth, the result is frustration, destruction and despair. Lydia's return to rejection, isolation, and death contrasts with the happiness of the light-weight lovers to underline the way in which women are destined to suffer. Despite her villainy, Lydia remains essentially a victim; of society, of her past, of the law and of her own desires. For Lydia the role of victim is ultimately inescapable. As wife to a bad man she is persecuted; as lover to a deceiver she is cheated; as a rebel she is thwarted by fatality; as the wife to a good man she threatens to become the instrument of his destruction. Her final submission to society therefore takes the form, not of marriage, but of suicide; the victim's ultimate self-sacrifice.

In *No Name* Collins again explores the territory of the woman's role in marriage, and its intimate connection with the

1. Wilkie Collins, *Armadale*, vol.2, p.363.

control of property. Much recent critical attention has been paid to the character of Magdalen Vanstone, her swift change of roles, and her rebellion against a life of passive acceptance in a world where property and power are a male domain. Here I wish to examine the significance of the various marriages that are portrayed in the course of the novel, and to focus particularly on the controversial marriage of Magdalen to Richard kirke at the end of the novel

The plot of *No Name* follows the movement of an inheritance within an extended family, and shows the methods by which the central character, Magdalen Vanstone, attempts to bring the inheritance, which she believes to be morally her own, back into her control. When the inheritance passes to her feeble cousin Noel, Magdalen successfully courts and marries him under a false name. Although she hates and despises Noel, Magdalen is ready to submit herself to his physical and legal supremacy. It is a marriage without love, contracted in infatuation by the man, and for name and money by the woman. Noel has bought himself a pretty young wife. Although she has contracted a legal marriage Magdalen has, in a moral sense, prostituted herself.

Magdalen's own mercenary marriage is contrasted with three other relationships; those of her parents, of her maid Louisa, and of Captain and Mrs Wragge. Magdalen's parents were, to outside eyes, the model of a happily married couple. However the couple were not really married, but merely living together, as Mr Vanstone had a wife alive in Canada. When the Vanstones die and their secret becomes known, their lawyer Mr Pendril defends the memory of Mrs Vanstone as a woman who, in the eyes of society, had prostituted herself to a man outside the bonds of wedlock. On the other hand, Magdalen is legally married and no defence of her actions is required. A loving but "illegal" union has to be defended, while a loveless but "legal" marriage is accepted without question.

This contrast is reinforced by the story of Louisa. Like Mrs Vanstone she has had a sexual relationship with a man outside marriage; technically she is a fallen woman. Presented with the contrast of Louisa's sad plight and her own situation Magdalen is forced to admit that *morally* if not legally, she is the sinner;

"For God's sake, don't kneel to *me!*" she cried, passionately. "If there is a degraded woman in this room, I am the woman -- not you!"<sup>1</sup>

It is at this point that Magdalen fully realises the effect of her rebellion against injustice; she has destroyed her own moral goodness. She achieves her single most positive act in helping Louisa to marry the man she loves.

The Wragges present Magdalen with a comic reflection of her marriage to Noel Vanstone. Disparities between husband and wife are grossly exaggerated. Captain Wragge is an intelligent and ingenious man and Mrs Wragge is constitutionally torpid and confused. In the same way Magdalen is a bright and scheming young woman while Noel is feeble-minded and dependent. Captain Wragge is a small neat man and Mrs Wragge disproportionately towers "to a stature of two or three inches over six feet"<sup>2</sup>; a shapeless giantess. Similarly Magdalen is a strikingly attractive woman; Noel is "a frail...little man, clothed in a fair white dressing-gown, many sizes too large for him"<sup>3</sup>; diminutive and childlike. Mrs Wragge is under the impression that she chose Captain Wragge for her husband, but her own admission that she had "a trifle of money"<sup>4</sup> and that "I'm here, the money's gone"<sup>5</sup> suggests that she too was the victim of a mercenary marriage. Although Magdalen is sympathetic to Mrs

1. Wilkie Collins, *No Name*, vol.3, p.200.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.1, p.292.
3. *Ibid.*, vol.2, p.72.
4. *Ibid.*, vol.1, p.297.
5. *Ibid.*, vol.1, p.297.

Wragge's downtrodden position, she repeats the pattern of mercenary marriage, intent on making Noel Vanstone her victim as Captain Wragge had made his wife his. Like the Captain, Magdalen lets her victim believe that he is doing the choosing, by enticing Noel into the proposal which has been her object from the outset.

From being a victim, Magdalen decides to become an aggressor. But she cannot defeat the system which disinherited her, she can only exploit it. Like Lydia Gwilt, she can take on a male role in attempting to use marriage as a means to a financial end. Magdalen takes on the male role of financial aggressor and combines it with a series of acted parts which in themselves are caricatures of feminine roles. She pretends at first to be Miss Garth, the solidly respectable governess, and then her own mild and passive sister Norah. At Aldborough she skillfully and manipulatively courts Noel under the guise of an innocent and demure young girl, Miss Bygrave. The gap between the illusion which Magdalen presents and the reality of her motives clearly illustrates the degree of her moral corruption. Magdalen is really far from being the pleasant Miss Bygraves that she pretends; as a wooer she is a deceiver, and her successful usurpation of a male role acts only to emphasise the corrupt nature of male power. In *The Woman in White* a similar disparity between appearance and reality hides Sir Percival Glyde's true interest in Laura Fairlie beneath a mask of carefully acted courtesy and civility. In *No Name*, by making his aggressor female, Collins further extends his criticism of the pursuit of money through marriage, and, as with Lydia Gwilt in *Armadale*, he shows not just the results of such a pursuit, but also the development of the financial aggression itself.

The end of *No Name* has been seen as a strangely ambiguous one. Magdalen apparently fails to obtain her lost inheritance by her own effort. However, the inheritance passes

to George Bartram, who has just married Magdalen's sister Norah, and so the lost money is finally restored to the disinherited girls by a third person. The catalyst for this final solution is a happy loving marriage, unmotivated by questions of power and money. It would appear that Collins has reasserted the supremacy of the benevolent man and the virtuous woman, an idea reinforced by Magdalen's own moral redemption by Richard Kirke. Contemporary critics and readers were disturbed by the way in which the novel was made to have a conventional happy ending even for the sinning Magdalen. More recent critics have seen the ending as a defect in the novel, whereby the force of Magdalen's rebellion is finally quashed and pallid virtue is seen to be triumphant. Sue Lonoff writes;

The difficulty lies in the way [Collins] intervenes: by sapping her strength, supplying a deliverer who just happens to arrive as she collapses in the street, ridding her of her rebellious impulses, and rewarding her resignation with a fortune that comes to her through her dutiful sister (who has quietly wed the next heir). Once again, a woman with Promethean potential is converted into a happy housewife, and Collins seems unaware that the conversion poses both psychological and structural problems...<sup>1</sup>

Lonoff implies that the end of *No Name* encompasses complete defeat for Magdalen; that she not only fails to achieve her original objective, but that she is also spiritually diminished into simply a "happy housewife" by her marriage to Richard Kirke, and that her final submission to "normal" behaviour is then duly rewarded. However, as Lonoff goes on to note;

Norah's marriage...results indirectly from her sister's "perversity": she and George Bertram meet in the course of tracing Noel and Magdalen.<sup>2</sup>

Lonoff does not pursue this point, but it is instructive to do so.

1. Sue Lonoff, *Wilkie Collins and His Victorian Readers* (New York, 1982), p.151.
2. *Ibid.*, p.151.



The two lovers not only meet as a direct result of Magdalen's behaviour, but their inheritance is also hastened by Magdalen's marriage to Noel Vanstone, as the shock of discovery leads to Noel's premature death. Magdalen fails to take control of her inheritance *directly* through her marriage. But by being the indirect cause of her husband's death, and of her sister's courtship and marriage, Magdalen *indirectly* succeeds in her aim. The authors of *Corrupt Relations* are aware of this second interpretation of the ending, pointing out that it "can be read as a vindication of Magdalen."<sup>1</sup> They go on to show that, as some of the contemporary reviewers had claimed, Magdalen ends the novel happily, having suffered relatively little punishment for her sins. They argue, however, that Magdalen surrenders her individuality to Kirke, as Norah does to George Bartram, and that finally Magdalen is "subsumed in the role of wife and surrogate daughter."<sup>2</sup> They assume that the courtship and repentance of Magdalen are entirely conventional, so that a reformed woman is to be taken back into her subservient position in society. However, a closer reading of the text reveals that this is not necessarily the case. As with the ending of *The Law and the Lady*, which I shall be examining in a later chapter, the critics have assumed that marriage necessarily entailed the submission of wife to husband. The problem for modern critics seems to rest in the transformation of the intelligent and resourceful independent woman into a subservient young wife-to-be. I contend that such a transformation does not occur.

Once she has regained control of her lost inheritance, there is no further reason for Magdalen to remain in her fallen state as a social outcast, and when the opportunity arises for her to marry well herself she takes it. The presentation of

1. Barickman, MacDonald and Stark, *Corrupt Relations*, (New York, 1982), p.129.
2. *Ibid.*, p.130.

the courtship of Kirke and Magdalen makes it clear that it is not merely an instance of love purifying the tainted soul; Magdalen is fully conscious and able to calculate consequences, and her actions are as manipulative as in her courtship of Noel Vanstone. Magdalen sees Kirke as her deliverer, but she cannot passively allow him to love and then perhaps leave; consequently she manipulates him into courting her;

Her questions were endless. Everything that he could tell her of himself and his life, she drew from him delicately and insensibly: he, the least self-conscious of mankind, became an egotist in her dexterous hands. She found out his pride in his ship, and practised on it without remorse...She watched his kindling face with a delicious sense of triumph in adding fuel to the fire; she trapped him into forgetting all considerations of time and place...<sup>1</sup>

Collins insists on the conscious and planned nature of Magdalen's actions; she draws out, finds out, practises upon knowledge, adds fuel to the fire and traps her lover into fulfilling her desires. Magdalen's consciousness of her own acts is reinforced by the statement that Kirke is "the least self-conscious of mankind", by her lack of remorse and her secret triumph at impending success. As Magdalen had earlier become the aggressor in courting Noel, under the guise of the innocent Miss Bygrave, so she actively courts and ensnares Kirke under the guise of mere interest in his life.

Magdalen thinks of Kirke when he is away from her with amazement at the contrast between his strength and gentleness;

This hand that has seized men mad with mutiny, and driven them back to their duty by main force -- is mixing my lemonade and peeling my fruit, more delicately and more neatly than I could do it for myself.<sup>2</sup>

If Magdalen had become a conventional woman by now, one would

1. Wilkie Collins, *No Name*, vol.3, pp.375-376.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.3, p.377.

expect her to desire to have Kirke as her lover, guardian and husband, in order to protect and control her through his benevolent strength. But instead Magdalen's next thoughts are of her own personality;

Oh, if I could be a man, how I should like to be such a man as this!'

Indeed, at no point does Magdalen say that she loves Kirke, nor does Collins confirm this fact through his narrative commentary. Magdalen has found a man who is willing to sacrifice himself -- Collins refers to his "self-sacrificing devotion"<sup>2</sup> -- to her needs and desires. As Magdalen has maintained her male role in directing the courtship, so Kirke is maintained in a role of feminine subservience, being prepared to peel fruit and mix lemonade for his masterful lover. It is Kirke, who pondering the future, fears rejection by Magdalen, believing himself to be too old for her.

It is at this point that Magdalen learns of the outcome of her pursuit of the lost inheritance; that Norah has married the new heir George Bartam. Magdalen instantly realises that the object of her life has been achieved, and she lets go of the purpose which has driven her into self-degrading moral corruption. She is now aware that she is simply a fallen woman, an outcast of society, and that Kirke has the power, as a man, to redeem her. She therefore sets out to be redeemed. She tears up the Trust document, found by Norah, which would give her a fortune, in the knowledge that her share of her lost inheritance will now come to her through Norah and George. She forces herself to tell Kirke the truth about the past, carefully including her final renunciation of her inheritance, and thereby ensures that he will love and forgive her. The

1. Wilkie Collins, *No Name*, vol.3, p.377.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.3, p.377.

pattern of redemption of a fallen woman is one which I shall be discussing in detail in the next chapter, but it is important to point out here that Magdalen, although she is physically saved by Kirke from her illness, takes on the active role in their courtship. There is no intimation that the "Promethean" Magdalen will be "subsumed" by her new role; the novel ends with a positive image of redemption coupled with the implication that the motive force remains with the woman and has not been surrendered to the husband-to-be. Collins thus manages both to redeem his heroine and to vindicate her; it is this apparently contradictory combination, rather than the success of one at the expense of the other, which makes the conclusion to *No Name* so resonant. Magdalen succeeds in obtaining marriage and money, and apparently without losing her power.

Thus *No Name* is the only one of the major novels in which a woman is shown to be able to hold her own in the struggle for control of property and power in marriage, and even here the future is left uncertain. For Laura Fairlie, the Anne Silvesters, Rachel Verinder and Hester Dethridge, marriage to the wrong man leads towards physical and spiritual destruction. For Hester Dethridge and Lydia Gwilt, rebellion against male domination leads only to moral degeneration, madness and death. Only for Magdalen Vanstone is it possible to rebel, achieve a victory, and yet be redeemed; to have power, wealth, and happy marriage, and this is because Magdalen is the first true example in Collins's work of a "fallen" woman redeemed and reintegrated into society. This process of redemption and reintegration is the Magdalen theme, which I shall be discussing in the next chapter.

## Chapter Two The Magdalen Theme

Twentieth-century critics of Wilkie Collins have acknowledged that he was, for a man of his era, unusually outspoken on sexual topics. Robert Ashley states that "Collins was capable of greater candour than most of his contemporaries"<sup>1</sup>, and the authors of *Corrupt Relations* believe that, in comparison with Dickens, Trollope and Thackeray, "Collins is...the most openly irreverent toward Victorian sexual conventions"<sup>2</sup>. The case has been put most strongly by Sue Lonoff, who argues;

Few male Victorian novelists are franker in confronting female sexual desire, more open-minded about sexual transgression, angrier at sexual hypocrisy.<sup>3</sup>

This candour, irreverence, open-mindedness and anger inform much of Collins's treatment of topics relating to women; but it is nowhere more apparent than in his dealings with the topic of "fallen" women.

The Victorian concept of the fallen woman, harking back to Greek myth and Eve's corruption by the Devil in Eden, referred specifically to those women who had had sexual

1. Robert Ashley, *Wilkie Collins* (London, 1952), p.114.
2. Barickman, Macdonald and Stark, *Corrupt Relations* (New York, 1982), p.111.
3. Sue Lonoff, *Wilkie Collins and His Victorian Readers* (New York, 1982), pp.138-139.

relations with a man or men outside the bounds of wedlock. This category thus included mothers of illegitimate children, mistresses, and prostitutes. All were condemned to a life beyond the pale; the social punishment for a woman's sin of sexual transgression was total rejection and contempt. Collins appears to have been particularly insensed at the injustice inherent in social attitudes to women's sexuality, and this, it seems probable, may have been in a large part due to his own relationship with two such "fallen" women, his two mistresses Caroline Graves (the original of the *Woman in White*) and Martha Rudd, the mother of his three (illegitimate) children.

Fallen women, of one sort or another appear and reappear throughout Collins's fiction. William Marshall states,

Fallen women constitute a fairly large group, but their individual cases are so strikingly dissimilar that they are hardly a type.<sup>1</sup>

and he goes on to discuss characters in the novels from *Basil* (1852) to *The New Magdalen* (1873), but omits reference to the later novels touching the same subject. However, a pattern of treatment does emerge strongly in the later novels, where Collins is overtly concerned with Christian morality in relation to concepts of sin and redemption. In *The New Magdalen*, *The Two Destinies*, *The Fallen Leaves* and *The Evil Genius* Collins emphasises the pattern of sin, repentance, forgiveness, and redemption, and attacks the society which will not extend the tenets of Christian mercy towards repentant fallen women. This recurring pattern is the Magdalen theme, relating directly to Jesus's dealing with Mary Magdalene, and alluded to directly by Collins in the title of his novel of 1873, and also in the name of his heroine in the

1. William Marshall, *Wilkie Collins* (New York, 1970), p.130.

earlier novel *No Name*, Magdalen Vanstone.

The Magdalen theme is thus a Christian morality theme, stressing the need to forgive and reintegrate fallen women back into society. There was only one means by which a women could be readmitted to normal social involvement; through marriage. Thus marriage in itself becomes symbolic of the act of forgiveness and redemption, and society's refusal to forgive is most strongly expressed in its refusal to sanction the marriage of one deemed fallen. Collins ended each of the four late novels above with the marriage, or prospective marriage, of the fallen but repentant heroine to a good and Christian hero, and so asserted the ascendancy of true Christian teaching over the hypocritical religiosity widely practised by his contemporaries. The Magdalen theme thus serves two purposes; to extend mercy to the repentant, and to expose social hypocrisy. Marriage is the key issue used to each end.

The Magdalen theme is most clearly expressed in *The New Magdalen*, *The Two Destinies*, *The Fallen Leaves*, and *The Evil Genius*, but it is slowly developed throughout Collins's fiction, from *Antonina* (1850) onwards. Although, as Marshall suggests, there is a considerable disparity in the particular cases of the fallen women in the earlier novels, a chronological survey can show the way in which Collins approached and gradually adapted the ideas which were to find their first full exposition in *The New Magdalen*. This approach can also show how the theme was developed in the later novels.

*Antonina*, Collins's first published novel, touches briefly on the topic of sexual transgression. When the Senator Vetrano is admitted to the chamber of the heroine, intent on seducing her, he is discovered by Antonina's father Numerian. Numerian is a fanatical Christian, and like many of his nineteenth-century counterparts he puritanically objects to those aspects of life which are sensual, and so he symbolically

destroys his daughter's lute, castigating it as "this invention of libertines"<sup>1</sup>. When he discovers Vetrano with his daughter he assumes that Antonina is a willing party to the intrigue, and has moreover succumbed to the senator's sexual advances. He thus condemns her as a fallen woman, and casts her out of the house;

Return to *his* bosom, you shall never more be pressed to *mine*! Go to *his* palace, *my* house is yours no longer! You are *his* harlot, not *my* daughter! I command you -- go!<sup>2</sup>

Numerian is unable to cope with the concept of his daughter's independent sexual identity; his breaking of her lute is an act symbolic of the social repression of female sexuality; his dismissal of her an act symbolic of the uncharitable social rejection of fallen women. Numerian is thus the representative of a type of allegedly Christian society which represses women and severely punishes sexual transgression; that is, Numerian is a Victorian Briton disguised as a fifth century Roman.

Ironically, Antonina is entirely guiltless of the sins which her father hastily fastens on her; he is too quick to judge her, and when he eventually learns the truth, it is not for him to forgive her, but for her to forgive him. The sexual theme is thus intimated in *Antonina*, but it is based on false appearances, which once uncovered resolve the situation, and the subject is developed no further.

*Antonina* received largely enthusiastic reviews, but even this early some contemporary critics were aware of a tendency to candour in Collins's treatment of "difficult" subjects, and H.F. Chorley, who later violently attacked the character of Lydia Gwilt in *Armada*, warned the

1. Wilkie Collins, *Antonina*, vol.1, p.179.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.1, p.277.



budding author against "the vices of the French school... against catering for a prurient taste"<sup>1</sup>. Collins's second novel *Basil* provoked greater critical hostility, as it took the merely suppositious seduction of Antonina, and transformed it into the genuine seduction of Margaret Sherwin, with the consequent results. One reviewer in the *Westminster Review* attacked the novel, stating that

The incident which forms the foundation of the whole, is absolutely disgusting... Mr Collins...makes a woman given up to evil the heroine of his piece, and dwells on the details of animal appetite with a persistency which can serve no moral purpose, and may minister to evil passions even while professing condemnation of them.<sup>2</sup>

In *Basil* the eponymous hero is allowed to marry Margaret Sherwin, the daughter of an upstart middle-class linen-draper, on the condition that the marriage is not consummated for a year so that the girl may complete her education. The night before the marriage is due to take full effect Basil discovers the secret sexual relationship between Margaret, and her father's clerk, Robert Mannion. Collins does not state directly what it is that Basil overhears; the sexual nature of the discovery is implied by Basil's telling of the event;

I listened; and through the thin partition, I heard voices -- her voice, and his voice. *I heard and I knew* -- knew my degradation in all its infamy, knew my wrongs in all their nameless horror.<sup>3</sup>

As the narrative of *Basil* is in the first person, the reader's knowledge of events is curtailed by the scope of narrator's consciousness; as he is unaware, until too late, of Mannion's

1. H.F. Chorley, *Athenaeum* (16 March 1850), in *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage* ed. N. Page (London, 1974), p.41.
2. Unsigned review, *Westminster Review* (October 1853), in N. Page, *op. cit.*, p.52.
3. Wilkie Collins, *Basil*, vol.2, p.146.

intention and Margaret's reciprocation, so the reader only learns of events at second hand. Margaret herself is never more than the attractive and rather selfish girl with whom Basil falls in love; Collins does not attempt to analyse or understand matters from her point of view. Margaret's fate is different from Antonina's; the Roman heroine is reunited with her father, but Basil's wife dies of typhoid contracted at the hospital where she has gone to visit her lover. The moral framework of the novel thus accords with Victorian social values; Margaret sins sexually, and is punished. However, as the *Westminster Review* had noted, Margaret is the novel's heroine. Although the moral structure of the novel condemns her to death, yet the portrayal of Margaret in her social background implies that her seduction is entirely the fault of the men around her; Basil, Mannion, and Mr Sherwin. Margaret is moulded, educated and prepared for men, by men. Basil himself attempts to form her character;

It was at one of these exhibitions that the idea occurred to me of making a new pleasure for myself out of Margaret's society, by teaching her really to appreciate and enjoy the literature which she had evidently hitherto only studied as a task...It would be like acting the story of Abelard and Heloise over again...I had a definite purpose, too, in wishing to assume the direction of Margaret's studies. Whenever the secret of my marriage was revealed, my pride was concerned in being able to show my wife to every one, as the all-sufficient excuse for any imprudence I might have committed for her sake.'

Margaret is more an object than a person, to be taught by Mannion, moulded by Basil, and traded in marriage by Mr Sherwin, without a will of her own. Basil speaks of helping to form her mind in a condescending manner, as if she were a useful possession, rather than an individual person. Basil alludes to the story of Heloise and Abelard, but an older myth haunts the story; undercutting the moralistic impulse of the

1. Wilkie Collins, *Basil*, vol.2, p.8.

narrative is a current of sympathy for Margaret's situation; she is a Galatea whose faults are inherent in her creation by the three Pygmalions. Thus although she is a sinner, Margaret is shown to be a pitiable person, and it is implied that society is partly to blame for her tragedy. This sympathy was something which was to develop, in Collins's later novels and especially in *The Fallen Leaves*, into a full championing of fallen women, and by implication into an attack on the guilty society which bred them.

In Collins's third novel, *Hide and Seek*, the seduction and fall of the woman at the centre of the story are in the past; she is dead, and her illegitimate child has been adopted by a kind household. By placing the crucial sexual transgression in the past Collins avoids any suggestion of prurient interest in the deed, and he is able to concentrate more fully on the long-term effects on characters in the present. The general tone of *Hide and Seek* is humane and compassionate after the passion of *Basil*. Through the medium of Joanna Grice's self-revelatory justification, Collins again shows that the social circumstances of the fallen woman, Mary Grice, are influential in determining her fate. Mary is brought up in a strict puritanical household;

Allowances! I knew my niece better, and my duty as one of an honest family better, than to make allowances for such conduct as hers. I kept the tightest hand over her that I could. I advised her, argued with her, ordered her, portioned out her time for her, watched her, warned her, told her in the plainest terms that she should not deceive *me* -- she or her gentleman!'

Repression creates rebellion, and Mary's seduction is in part a reaction to her aunt's tyranny; and the pattern is repeated in

1. Wilkie Collins, *Hide and Seek*, vol.3, pp.26-27.

the novel's present by the wild behaviour of Zack Thorpe, in revolt against his father's gloomy sabbatarianism. Furthermore Joanna Grice's interference prevents the righting of wrongs; by keeping the two lovers apart she ensures that Mary's pregnancy will be her ruin. Thus the religious practice which is most ready to condemn the sinner is shown to be the promoter of sin itself.

Mat Marksman enters the novel in the second half as a detective and avenging angel, who wishes to discover the identity of the man who seduced and abandoned his sister, Mary Grice, and punish him. The intent of the novel is thus to turn social convention on its head; it is to expose and punish the sexual transgression of the *man*. The memory of Mary herself is treated sympathetically. Through Mat, and his desire to right his sister's wrongs, Collins obliquely expresses a strong sympathy for the dead woman; it is pity and sorrow for a wasted life rather than vengeance that moves Mat. Eventually this sympathy is extended to encompass the seducer himself, the upright and puritanical Mr Thorpe;

Could this man -- so frail and meagre, with the narrow chest, the drooping figure, the effeminate pink tinge on his wan wrinkled cheeks -- be indeed the man who had driven Mary to that last refuge, where the brambles and weeds grew thick, and the foul mud-pools stagnated, in the forgotten corner of the churchyard?'<sup>1</sup>

Mat does not carry through his threat to expose Mr Thorpe publicly, for the sake of his son Zack who has become Mat's friend. Collins completes the parallel between the fallen man and the fallen woman, for like Mary, Mr Thorpe dies in exile from his family. By creating a comparison between Mr Thorpe and Mary Grice, Collins questions the judgement which always falls upon the woman, but rarely on the man, and he again

1. Wilkie Collins, *Hide and Seek*, vol.3, p.289.

implies, as he does with Margaret Sherwin, that the fallen woman is more a victim of her family and background than she is a deliberate sinner.

The secret in *The Dead Secret* is the fact that the strange figure of Sarah Leeson, who hovers mysteriously through the book, is the heroine's mother. Sarah is a fallen woman as a result of her pre-marital sexual relationship with her deceased lover, Hugh Polwheal, but she has masked this fact by aiding her mistress, Mrs Treverton of Porthgenna Tower, in passing off the child, Rosamond, as her own. *The Dead Secret* has a simple and direct narrative structure, as everything in the novel tends towards the discovery of the central mystery. Thus Rosamond's illegitimacy and Sarah's sexual transgression are the focal point of the story. However, the reader is unaware of Sarah's sexual status until late in the novel; she is presented sympathetically as a woman of small intellect attempting to cope with a dangerous moral burden. In seeking to escape the inevitable social condemnation which would have fallen upon her, had the truth been known at the time of the child's birth, Sarah has accepted a state of self-imposed isolation to keep that truth hidden. In order to escape social punishment, Sarah has chosen to punish herself.

When the truth is finally discovered Sarah, like Margaret Sherwin and Mary Grice before her, declines to her death. Collins again follows the pattern of conventional morality; death as the ultimate punishment for sin. However, *The Dead Secret* adds a development of the Magdalen theme not found in the two previous novels. In *Basil* and *Hide and Seek* the fallen women die in misery, poverty and exile; Margaret dies of typhoid in her dwellings, and Mary at the end of her tether with the people of Jubber's Circus. Each woman has been made a social outcast by her sexual transgressions, and each dies in a state of social isolation. In *The Dead Secret*, Sarah dies in comfort and happiness, having been truly reunited with

her daughter, and restored to the role of mother. Rosamond's acceptance of her mother is an act of social reintegration, by which Sarah is drawn back into a secure social milieu, even if only temporarily. The moral pattern of the Magdalen theme is beginning to appear; the strictness of moralistic justice is softened by Rosamond's love, and Sarah achieves a degree of personal redemption before her death.

Thus in his earliest novels Collins begins to create the concept of the Magdalen theme; some elements, for example marriage as redemption, are still absent, but a pattern is clearly emerging. In *Antonina* the pattern is factitious as the heroine is spotlessly pure throughout the novel; in *Basil* Margaret dies in misery and disgrace; in *Hide and Seek* Mary is pitied and revenged after her death; and in *The Dead Secret* Sarah is to some degree restored to her former status. In each of these last three novels Collins follows convention by making the fallen woman die; even Sarah's death largely negates the value of Rosamond's generous act of redemption. In his major novels of the 1860's Collins flaunted the moral conventions by which he had abided in the 1850's, and he portrayed a number of fallen women who live on to battle against social prejudice. Thus he was able to approach the problem without relying on the convenient device of a pious or pitiful death to resolve the issue simplistically.

In *The Woman in White*, Mrs Catherick, mother of the illegitimate Anne Catherick, has forcibly regained her social position, in the town which had originally condemned and rejected her;

I came here a wronged woman. I came here robbed of my character, and determined to claim it back. I've been years and years about it -- and I have claimed it back.'

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*, vol.3, p.128.

It is widely believed that Mrs Catherick was Sir Percival Glyde's mistress, and that her daughter is his child. This belief is not true however, and Mrs Catherick is in some degree right to call herself a wronged woman; the true father of the child is Philip Fairlie. Mrs Catherick reclaims her position on the grounds of a *misdirected* accusation and she is thus, as her artificial piety attests, a hypocrite. She has completed the pattern of the Magdalen theme, by being reintegrated into society, but she is not truly redeemed, any more than she is a true Christian, because she remains unrepentant. Like Mercy Merrick in *The New Magdalen* she has adopted a character to which she has no moral right, and has thus gained only an artificial security, measured by the quality of her Bible, the size of her Church donations, and the bows of the local clergyman. In seeking to escape the taint of the 'sin' of sexual transgression, Mrs Catherick has fallen into the sins of hypocrisy and deceit. The moral implications of this state are explored further in *The New Magdalen*. In *The Woman In White*, within the limits of her own restricted moral vision Mrs Catherick has succeeded in making her life anew; to the external eye her success can be seen as an ironic inversion of novelistic conventions. Whereas the repentant women of the earlier novels are punished with death, the unrepentant and callous Mrs Catherick is rewarded with life and fulfilment. This irony undercuts the value of the society which has allowed the reintegration of such a person; the society itself must be corrupted and hypocritical to countenance the acceptance of an unrepentant adulteress.

In the early novels there is little or no questioning of the social values -- as opposed to the personal motives -- which lead to the expulsion of fallen women, but Mrs Catherick's situation in *The Woman in White* intimates Collins's critical reaction against prevailing attitudes, and it was this critical stance that was to develop openly in the later novels through the outspoken characters, Julian Gray and Amelius

Goldenheart.

*No Name* is the first of Collins's novels fully to utilise the Magdalen theme, and as such it is the direct precursor of the group of four novels which I have termed the Magdalen novels. Collins gives the name Magdalen to his heroine, and it is here that he first clearly enunciates its significance;

Magdalen! It was a strange name to have given her?...Magdalen! Surely the grand old Bible name -- suggestive of a sad and sombre dignity; recalling, in its first association, mournful ideas of penitence and seclusion -- had been here...inappropriately given?'

Collins's emphasis here is not on sin, but on redemption; moreover he suggests through "sad and sombre dignity" a sense of the heroic stoicism which is an essential trait of all the Magdalen heroines. Collins is not satisfied merely to depict the unhappy lot of the fallen woman as a social outcast, but he also implies, by making his Magdalen heroic, that she is in the right and that the judgemental world is in the wrong.

In *No Name* Magdalen Vanstone becomes an adventuress and declines morally in her increasingly desperate attempts to regain her lost inheritance. Under a false name she marries her cousin Noel and awaits his death to inherit his fortune. The marriage is thus one which is motivated by the desire for money and revenge, and Magdalen has no love for her husband. She sells herself to him; morally she prostitutes herself. The moral significance of the marriage is illuminated at a later stage of the novel when Magdalen finds herself in close contact with a more conventional fallen woman, her maidservant Louisa. Collins uses Louisa's commonplace predicament to highlight the nature of Magdalen's;

1. Wilkie Collins, *No Name*, vol.1, p.14.



"Don't ask me!" [Louisa] said. "I'm a miserable, degraded creature; I'm not fit to be in the same room with you!"

Magdalen bent over her, and whispered a question in her ear. Louisa whispered back the one sad word of reply.

"Has he deserted you?" asked Magdalen, after waiting a moment, and thinking first.

"No."

"Do you love him?"

"Dearly."

The remembrance of her own loveless marriage stung Magdalen to the quick.

"For God's sake, don't kneel to me!" she cried passionately. 'If there is a degraded woman in this room, I am the woman -- not you!'"

Louisa has had a sexual relationship with a man outside marriage; they love each other and hope to marry, yet by the lights of convention she is damned as a fallen woman. Magdalen has prostituted herself through marriage, yet within the novel this prostitution is socially acceptable. Collins makes exactly the same point, even more forcefully in *The Fallen Leaves* where a bystander comments on the marriage of a young golddigger to a rich old man;

There is many a poor friendless creature, driven by hunger to the streets, who has a better claim to our sympathy than that shameless girl, selling herself in the house of God.<sup>2</sup>

Collins differentiates between social and Christian morality; the first condemns a Louisa but accepts a Magdalen; the second condemns the sin of both but offers redemption in return for repentance. Magdalen is shown to be no better than her servant and symbolically she takes on Louisa's identity in order to pursue the next stage of her quest. Louisa is helped to marry the man she loves and thus repair the moral damage she has caused: Magdalen is driven by the despairing knowledge of her own fallen state into an even more desperate situation. It is only when she is struck down by fever that her moral descent is

1. Wilkie Collins *No Name*, vol.3, pp.199-200.
2. Wilkie Collins, *The Fallen Leaves*, vol.3, p.202.

halted, and the Christ figure of Richard Kirke enters her life and offers her personal redemption.

*No Name* shows that prostitution is possible within marriage as well as without, and that the bond of marriage is not in itself a guarantee of purity. The end of the novel introduces the final important factor of the Magdalen theme to make the pattern complete. The previous novels have, as I have shown, gradually built up a recurring motif of sin, repentance, redemption, and attempted social reintegration. *No Name* specifies the nature of the redemption; Magdalen is loved by, and will marry her personal saviour Richard Kirke. While the novel criticizes the prostitution inherent in the union between Magdalen and Noel, in contrast it exalts the true love match of Magdalen and Richard and ends with the two lovers kissing. This ending challenged the society of readers and critics *outside* the novel by suggesting that through marriage such a woman as Magdalen could regain her lost state of purity and moral goodness. At the same time, as I have shown earlier, it suggested that the woman might retain her independent spirit and not be cowed into humility or subservience to her husband/saviour.

Contemporary critics seem to have missed the point of Collins's radical Christian message in their attacks on the morality of the novel. Mrs Oliphant in *Blackwood's Magazine* condemned the conclusion; her attitude seems representative of the artificial morality itself;

[Magdalen's] pollution is decorous, and justified by law; and after all her endless deceptions and horrible marriage, it seems quite right to the author that she should be restored to society, and have a good husband and a happy home.<sup>2</sup>

1. Mrs Oliphant, *Blackwood's Magazine* (August 1863), in *Wilkie Collins. The Critical Heritage*, ed. N. Page (London, 1974), p.143.

Mrs Oliphant clearly sees the moral progress of the novel, but not the purpose of its conclusion; that sin can be forgiven if repented, and that true forgiveness leads to the restoration of favour to the repentant sinner. The moral fault at the heart of Victorian society was that it demanded repentance for sin, but could never forgive; moreover it could not accept a repentant sinner, who retained her individual spirit and who did not become the archetype of feminine passivity and submissiveness, as being other than a schemer or hypocrite. In *No Name* Collins redeems his heroine through Richard Kirke, yet at the same time maintains her individuality. Thus marriage takes on a symbolic role in Collins's Magdalen novels. It becomes the act of personal redemption by which the loving man raises up the fallen woman in defiance of social opinion, both inside and outside the novel, but in accordance with the truest tenets of Christianity.

Thus *No Name* matures the Magdalen theme into its final and concrete form; it is a radical expression of Christian redemption which opposes social conventions, and is enacted through marriage. In *No Name* the Magdalen theme is a minor element of the novel's structure, and one which only comes to the fore in the later stages of the story. *The New Magdalen*, as its title suggests, takes the Magdalen theme as its principal subject, and sets out to justify the redemption of its heroine Mercy Merrick through marriage to Julian Gray. The novel's epigraph is "Lead Us Not Into Temptation"<sup>1</sup>, and Mercy is presented from the outset as a woman who has been led into temptation. She has been betrayed into prostitution, is repentant, morally reformed, but finds herself forever debarred from holding any position of trust in society. She explicitly points out the failure of society to move from condemnation and the demand for repentance to the positive act of forgiveness;

1. Wilkie Collins, *The New Magdalen*, vol.1, p.1 (title page).

Society can subscribe to reclaim me -- but Society can't take me back.<sup>1</sup>

Everybody is sorry for me...everybody is kind to me. But the lost place is not to be regained. I can't get back! I can't get back!<sup>2</sup>

In *The New Magdalen* Collins contrives a plot whereby his heroine is able to regain her place in society through a piece of fortuitous deception, and he then follows her to the point where she willingly renounces all that she has gained in order to prove the purity of her nature.

The plot of *The New Magdalen* is problematic in its moral implications. Mercy Merrick is depicted as a good and noble woman, repentant and virtuous; yet she steals Grace Roseberry's identity, and wins her way back into society by lying and cheating. Like Mrs Catherick in *The Woman in White*, Mercy's tenure of her new position, as adopted daughter and companion to Lady Janet Roy, is based on falsehood. While Mercy may have repented her sexual transgressions as a prostitute, she has involved herself in something equally morally reprehensible in order to escape her past. Collins tries to convince the reader that his heroine is morally pure, even when she denies the real Grace Roseberry her name; Mercy is constantly described as great and noble, and Grace as mean-spirited and vicious. The problem arises because Collins is trying to write two different kinds of novel at once, and the characters suffer as a result of the pull towards fulfilling two separate functions.

On the one hand *The New Magdalen* is a cleverly plotted sensation novel in which Mercy personates Grace, gains a home, happiness, an adopted mother, and a prospective husband, and then is forced to face up to the possibility of discovery and

1. Wilkie Collins, *The New Magdalen*, vol.1, p.24.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.1, p.24.

disgrace when the supposedly dead Grace reappears to reclaim her name. Like the transposition of identities, which I have described in the previous chapter, the return of one presumed dead is a favourite device in Collins's plotting, and recurs in a number of his novels<sup>1</sup>. The second novel in *The New Magdalen* is, on the other hand, a full expression of the Magdalen theme through a simple but powerful allegory in which the various characters come to represent different attitudes and beliefs which clash over the moral issue of redemption and forgiveness.

Grace Roseberry is thus the most obvious example of a character whose two functions, sensational and allegorical, do not wholly fit together. In the allegory Grace stands, with Horace Holmcroft, as a representative of the hypocritical and unforgiving society which cannot bring itself to hold out a forgiving hand to the repentant Mercy. As such Grace is presented as a wholly despicable person, self-righteous and vindictive, and she is compared unfavourably with the noble Mercy and the forgiving Lady Janet. However, in terms of the plot, Grace is the victim, first of the German shell attack, and then of Mercy's personation of her; as an unwitting victim she invites pity and sympathy. Grace is thus not just socially affronted by Mercy's behaviour, but she personally suffers the consequences. Collins attempts to show that Grace's social condemnation of Mercy is cruel and wrong, but this effort is partly nullified by the fact of Grace's entirely understandable *personal* hatred of the woman who has wronged her.

Thus, as a sensation novel, *The New Magdalen* is strangely unsatisfactory; the outcome of the plot -- Mercy rewarded with Julian, and Grace, paid off, in retreat in Canada -- seems to be in conflict with the impulses which drive the

1. Characters return from apparent death in *The Woman in White*, *Armadale*, *The New Magdalen*, *John Jago's Ghost*, *Jezebel's Daughter* and *The Evil Genius*.

melodrama; the pattern of hero, heroine and villain is confused. Mercy is a noble villain, Grace is a heartless heroine, and Horace is shown to be a proud and selfish hero. However, when separated from the details of the plot with which it is partly in conflict, the enunciation through allegory of the Magdalen theme is entirely successful. It is as an allegory that the novel remains most interesting.

Unlike most of the novels preceding it, *The New Magdalen* has a very small cast of characters and, in the principal section of the narrative, a strictly limited location. This is largely due to the novel's original conception as a play, in which form it was highly successful and popular through the last quarter of the nineteenth century'. However, the limitations imposed by the novel's theatrical origins also serve to concentrate the allegorical effect. Each character represents a moral concept or a particular facet of human nature. On one level each name could be replaced by an abstract noun: Mercy is Repentance; Grace is Vengeance; Horace is Pride; Lady Janet is Forgiveness; and Julian is Love. On a more complex level the allegory concerns the clash of social and Christian values: Horace and Grace represent Society; Julian and Lady Janet represent Christianity; between the two sides stands the sinner Mercy. The conflict arises from the question: does Mercy have a right to marry?

Mercy represents Repentance. She is a reformed prostitute who meets Grace, while acting as a nurse during the Franco-Prussian War. When Grace is apparently killed by a shell she succumbs to the temptation to slip into the identity of the dead girl in order to regain her lost place in society.

1. G.B.Shaw reviewed a revival of *The New Magdalen*, which was reprinted as "The New Magdalen and the Old" in *Our Theatre in the Nineties* (London, 1932) vol.1 pp.230-237.

but because Grace is not really dead, only comatose, what Mercy achieves is a temporary role-reversal, which provides the mainspring for the novel's sensation plot. Mercy becomes wholly accepted as a virtuous woman and is poised to achieve total social reintegration by marrying Horace Holmcroft, while Grace is a rejected outcast, condemned as an adventuress, imposter, and mad-woman. As lover and prospective wife to Horace, Mercy is compromised by her imposture. Society's refusal to reintegrate her as a repentant sinner has forced her into a situation in which, in order to find happiness with Horace, she must deceive him; to be reintegrated into society she must compromise her own moral integrity; to appear sinless she must sin.

Hence, Mercy not only repents her sexual transgressions which led her to be outcast, but she also moves towards a repentance of her present sin -- the imposture -- and she gives up everything while she is still unassailably recognised as "Miss Roseberry", in order to make an act of restitution to those she has wronged. Mercy then relies on the forbearance of those around her for her future, and the reactions of the other four principals form the core of the allegory.

Mercy agrees to marry Horace Holmcroft, who represents Pride. As an eminently respectable and eligible bachelor he is the archetype of the husband that a socially conscious woman might aspire to. When questioned on the importance of family connections and marriage, he states clearly the importance of rank and history:

"In OUR family," he said, "we trace back -- by my father, to the Saxons: by my mother, to the Normans. Lady Janet's family is an old family -- on her side only."

1. Wilkie Collins, *The New Magdalen*, vol.1, p.259.

Marriage to Mercy is possible because of her (false) family connections, and not because of her (true) character. Mercy puts the important question to Horace: which is more important, the *appearance* of social respectability, or the *reality* of virtue;

"Would you mother have liked you to marry a poor girl, of no family -- with nothing but her own virtues to speak for her?"

Horace was fairly pressed back to the wall.

"If you must know," he replied, "my mother would have refused to sanction such a marriage as that...My mother would have respected the girl, without ceasing to respect herself...My mother would have remembered what was due to the family name...She would have said, No."<sup>1</sup>

Mercy is hypothetically advancing herself as a poor but virtuous girl, and she learns that society, as represented by Mrs Holmcroft, would not accept her. Thus when Mercy reveals the truth Horace falls back upon the conventions of name and rank and rejects her. Wealth and Respectability will not tolerate Virtuous Poverty, and would certainly therefore condemn Repented Sin; social identity comes before moral character. This point is emphasised at the end of the novel, in the exchange of letters between Horace and Grace in the Epilogue. As Horace loved Mercy for her identity, he is able to transfer much of his feeling to Grace, once she has resumed her name;

Believe me, I appreciate your generous readiness to pardon and forget what I so rudely said to you at a time when the arts of an adventuress had blinded me to the truth. In the grace which has forgiven me I recognise the inbred sense of justice of a true lady. Birth and breeding can never fail to assert themselves; I believe in them, thank God, more firmly than ever.<sup>2</sup>

Horace is *gracious* to Grace, but he is *merciless* to Mercy. While he admires Grace's sense of justice, and her forgiveness,

1. Wilkie Collins, *The New Magdalen*, vol.1, p.260-261.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.2, p.259.



he cannot extend the same qualities to Mercy;

"I can't forgive her!" he said.<sup>1</sup>

For Horace marriage to Mercy is an impossibility, because she contravenes social conventions, and as a proud representative of society he is unable to move from condemnation to Christian forgiveness.

Grace represents vengeance; the desire to punish and never to forgive. As such she is innately opposed to any marriage that Mercy could make, since preventing a marriage maintains Mercy in an outcast and unforgiven state. When Grace first meets Mercy at the Front she is unable to take her hand, as she cannot value Mercy's present exercise of virtue more highly than her confessed and repented past sin. When she tracks Mercy to London, she expresses not just her desire to regain her old identity, but to destroy the usurper completely;

I shall have the joy of exposing you myself before the whole house. I shall be the blessed means of casting you back on the streets. Oh! it will be almost worth all I have gone through, to see you with a policeman's hand on your arm, and the mob pointing at you and mocking you on your way to gaol!<sup>2</sup>

Grace sees herself as righteous, and a representative of both social and divine justice. She speaks of "joy" and being the "blessed means", in the belief of her Christian duty. Furthermore she makes it clear that her personal intervention will prevent Mercy's marriage to Horace;

"I'll see that Mr Holmcroft's eyes are opened; he shall know what a woman he might have married, but for Me"---<sup>3</sup>

1. Wilkie Collins, *The New Magdalen*, vol.2, p.220.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.2, p.29.
3. *Ibid.*, vol.2, p.32.

For Grace, Mercy's intention to marry is the ultimate crime against society, to be condemned absolutely;

To die in Green Anchor Fields, or to fall into the clutches of that vile wretch -- is there any comparison between the two? Better a thousand times die at the post of duty than marry Mercy Merrick.<sup>1</sup>

Like Horace, Grace is so bound by the social significance of marriage, and by her conviction of Mercy's permanent sinfulness, that she sees life itself affronted by the possibility of a union between Mercy and Julian Gray, and so death becomes preferable to the act of offering Christian forgiveness.

Horace and Grace together represent contemporary society in its reliance on appearance and reputation over actual virtue, and in its merciless punishment of sin. The structure of the Epilogue confirms this; the correspondence between Horace and Grace condemns Mercy and her marriage to Julian, and Julian's diary recounts the rejection of the newly-married couple and their decision to emigrate as two self-confessed "social failures"<sup>2</sup>.

Lady Janet represents forgiveness and human fallibility. Like Horace and Grace she is deeply entrenched in social convention, but her true love for Mercy overwhelms her conventionality, and she thus "attains the true inner power of moral comprehension"<sup>3</sup> by withdrawing her initial rejection of Mercy in favour of forgiveness, understanding, and acceptance;

Lady Janet...went to the Refuge of her own free will, to ask Mercy Merrick's pardon for the language which she had used on the previous day. 'I passed a night of such misery as no words can describe... thinking over what my vile pride and selfishness and obstinacy had made

1. Wilkie Collins, *The New Magdalen*, vol.2, p.272.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.2, p.298.
3. William Marshall, *Wilkie Collins* (New York, 1970), p.98.

me say and do".<sup>1</sup>

Whereas Horace and Grace vehemently oppose the idea of Mercy as any man's wife, Lady Janet sees that Mercy is fit for social reintegration, and she comes not only to accept the prospective union of Mercy with Julian but she also positively promotes it. Faced with Horace's objections, Lady Janet asserts the ascendancy of Christian forgiveness, and a true appraisal of Mercy's character, over the narrow hypocrisies of social convention;

I take the most favourable view of your conduct towards Mercy Merrick. I humanely consider it the conduct of a fool...But don't trespass too far on my indulgence -- don't insinuate again that a woman who is good enough (if she died this night) to go to Heaven, is *not* good enough to be my nephew's wife.<sup>2</sup>

It is Lady Janet who, convinced of the rightness of Mercy and Julian's marriage, attempts to educate society into her belief by holding a ball in honour of the newly-weds. However, although she has personally learned a lesson in Christian mercy, she is unable to affect society at large; the ball is a failure, and the Grays see this as a final reason for emigrating and escaping social injustice.

Julian represents not only forgiveness, but also love. Like Richard Kirke in *No Name*, Julian stands for Christ, offering personal redemption to Mercy through marriage. Not only is Julian's Christianity in conflict with the institutionalised religion of society, but his radical socialism undermines the fabric of Victorian capitalism;

Starvation wages were the right wages, I was told. And why? Because the labourer was obliged to accept them! I determined, so far as one man could do it, that the labourer should *not* be obliged to accept

1. Wilkie Collins, *The New Magdalen*, vol.2, p.261.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.2, pp.263-264.

them...pitiless political Economy shall spend a few extra shillings on the poor, as certainly as I am that Radical, Communist, and Incendiary -- Julian Gray!'

As Mercy is caught in a moral trap by her own desperate actions, and by the demands of society, so Julian acts as hero to rescue her, and as a Christian to redeem her. The virtue of his radical Christianity, and his status as a minister, expose the villainy of Horace, Grace, and the greater mass of society whom they represent. At the end of *The New Magdalen* society is physically triumphant, as the rejected couple leaves for America, but morally Julian has succeeded in saving a sinner whom society rejects, and the couple are not cast out; of their own free-will they choose to escape the unjust and un-Christian strictures laid upon them.

Thus *The New Magdalen* sets out to deal with the problems of the Magdalen theme through allegory. The novel follows the story of a fallen woman through repentance to forgiveness; the allegorical sub-text relates the individual actions of the sensation plot to a wider pattern of Christian morality and the individual characters come to represent different aspects of morality in action. Marriage is for Mercy both a matter of personal happiness and of Christian salvation. The novel clearly shows that while the true Christian, Julian Gray, will come to forgive and love the repentant sinner, the world at large will always reject her. While society will condone the mistreatment of women within marriage by a rapacious and aggressive husband (as in *The Woman in White*), it ironically refuses to accept the marriage of love between a redeemed sinner and a beneficent man.

The second of the Magdalen novels is *The Two Destinies* (1876). It is among Collins's shortest novels, and

1. Wilkie Collins, *The New Magdalen*, vol.1, pp.142-143.

is the only one to deal at any length with the supernatural and the mystic<sup>1</sup>. Having treated the Magdalen theme through allegory in *The New Magdalen*, Collins attempted to use fantasy for the same purpose in *The Two Destinies*. The novel is rarely mentioned by critics; it is remembered by Robert Ashley as "a thin and rather absurd novel...nevertheless Collins's most striking venture into the region of the occult"<sup>2</sup>. The fantastical nature of the story -- Collins himself termed it a Romance -- has somewhat obscured the serious material of the plot, and has prevented an identification and full appreciation of the novel's treatment of the Magdalen theme.

In the novel's heroine, Mary Van Brandt, Collins presents a variation upon the "fallen" woman character. Mary is not a reformed prostitute, like Mercy in *The New Magdalen* or Simple Sally in *The Fallen Leaves*, but rather a mistress, like Sydney Westerfield in *The Evil Genius*. *The New Magdalen* ends with the rejected Mercy and Julian setting out for America; *The Two Destinies* starts at the point where George and Mary Germaine are suffering the first social consequences of their recent marriage. A dinner party has been arranged, but of each of three couples invited, only the husband attends, with a transparent excuse for his wife's absence. The only couple who arrive together are the unnamed narrator and his wife, to whom the main narrative of the novel, related by George Germaine himself, is given as an explanation of the conduct of his erstwhile friends. The novel thus has a narrative-within-narrative structure, which performs two important functions.

1. *Mr Wray's Cash-Box*, *A Rogue's Life*, *Miss or Mrs?*, *The Haunted Hotel*, *My Lady's Money*, and *The Guilty River* are all shorter than *The Two Destinies*, but are generally regarded as novellas. No other of the twenty-one full length novels has a supernatural theme, although *The Haunted Hotel* and a considerable number of the short stories do.
2. Robert Ashley, *Wilkie Collins* (London, 1952), pp.124-125.

Firstly the double narrative distances the story from the reader and helps to render credible the unlikely supernatural events which are related. Secondly the structure frames George's narrative for a specific purpose; his story is written as a justification of his marriage to the "fallen" Mary Van Brandt. The novel is thus constructed in such a way as to make the telling of a supernatural tale the vehicle for a statement of the Magdalen theme.

Mary, as the unwittingly bigamous "second wife" of Ernest Van Brandt, is initially innocent of sexual transgression, merely the unfortunate victim of circumstances. But, whereas both Mercy Merrick and Simple Sally seek to escape from their life of prostitution, Mary, although she knows the truth about her "husband", decides to stay with him. It is this decision which marks her as a fallen woman, and earns her the social disapprobation as

"a cast-off mistress of Van Brandt," who had persuaded Mr. Germaine into disgracing himself by marrying her, and becoming the step-father of her child.'

Mary maintains her original relationship with Van Brandt not out of misplaced love, nor out of a desire to flout convention. She does so simply for the sake of their child, Effie;

With famine staring her in the face, what else could the friendless woman do but return to the father of her child?...There was the child ...there was *his* hold on her, now that he had got her back!<sup>2</sup>

Mary is prepared to sacrifice her good name and any future happiness for the sake of her child. Mary, Ernest, and Effie form a physical family unit, notwithstanding the absence of a legal marriage, and the child forms a permanent bond which

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Two Destinies*, vol.2, p.297.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.1, p.265.

must unite the parents in concern for her welfare. Unmarried couples, and the child as a bond, are concepts explored at greater length in *No Name* and *The Evil Genius*. In *No Name* Magdalen and Norah Vanstone's parents live happily together and raise a family without the legal tie of marriage, as Mr Vanstone already has a wife living abroad. *The Evil Genius* is much concerned with effect of her parents' separation and divorce on young Kitty Linley, and the novel ends with the child being the catalyst which brings the erring adults together again.

Mary is prepared to accept the label of "fallen" woman and incur the wrath of society for Effie's sake. Although she loves George, she recognises that motherhood binds her morally to Van Brandt, and that to attempt to save her reputation and to seek personal happiness by marrying George would be to condemn them *both* to the social rejection which is meted out to Julian and Mercy in *The New Magdalen*;

You know -- to my shame I confessed it to you the last time we met -- you know that my heart in secret is all yours. What "wrong" are you talking of? Is it the wrong I suffered when Van Brandt married me, with a wife living at the time (and living still)? Do you think I can ever forget the great misfortune of my life -- the misfortune that has made me unworthy of you? It is no fault of mine -- God knows -- but it is not the less true that I am not married, and that the little darling who is playing out there with her doll is my child. And you talk of my being you wife -- knowing that!...Am I to marry you for my food and shelter? Am I to marry you, because there is no lawful tie that binds me to the father of my child? Cruelly as he has behaved, he has still *that* claim upon me. Bad as he is, he has not forsaken me; he has been forced away. My only friend! is it possible that you think me ungrateful enough to consent to be your wife? The woman (in my situation) must be heartless indeed who could destroy your place in the estimation of the world, and the regard of your friends! The wretchedest creature that walks the streets would shrink from treating you in that way.'

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Two Destinies*, vol.2, pp.136-138.

Thus Mary sees that a respectable and socially acceptable marriage is impossible for a "fallen" woman; instead of raising her to her husband's status it would drag him down to hers; she would morally taint any man who married her. Mary explicitly compares herself with a common prostitute in her ability to endanger George's position, and thus Collins connects Mary with Mercy and Sally. For Mary the intention of living out the practical *meaning* of a marriage -- living together and raising a family -- takes precedence over the issue of the legality of even the happiness of the union, even though this may result in the family being permanent social outcasts. Like Mercy Merrick, in *The New Magdalen*, Mary Van Brandt is trapped in a situation, largely created as a result of the punitive morality of society, from which there is no logical or simple escape. Mercy finds that, to win back the respectable place in society to which her reformed and repentant nature would fit her, she must return to deceit and crime in personating Grace Roseberry, and that once there she must either live a lie for the rest of her life, or return in shame and misery to the streets. Mary faces the two options of either sacrificing herself to the happiness of Van Brandt and Effie, or knowingly wrecking the life of George Germaine in order to gain some fleeting personal happiness. In each novel it requires the intervention of an outside force to rescue the victim from the social trap. In *The New Magdalen* it is the force of Christian love and mercy, embodied in Julian Gray, which leads Mercy to renounce everything she has gained, only to find herself rewarded with Julian's love and support. In *The Two Destinies* the intervening force is Fate, manifested in the supernatural predictions and prophecies of Dame Dermody.

Mary persistently refuses to marry George even when, at the climactic point of the novel, she has been finally deserted by Van Brandt and is alone not by choice but by necessity. Just as George, driven to despair by her final refusal, is about to kill them both, the two recognise each other, through



the childhood relic of a green flag, as former infant sweethearts;

"How came you by this?" she asked, in breathless anticipation of my reply...I answered mechanically, "I have had it since I was a boy..." For one moment, she stood enraptured. The next, she clasped me passionately to her bosom, and whispered in my ear, "I am Mary Dermody-- I made it for You!"<sup>1</sup>

As children, Mary and George had created a lifelong and indissoluble bond with each other; they were endowed with two destinies which would *inevitably* bring them together at last;

When I came to myself, I was lying on my bed in the cabin...and Mary was sitting by me with my hand in hers. One long look of love passed silently from her eyes to mine -- from mine to hers. In that look, the kindred spirits were united again; the Two Destinies were fulfilled.<sup>2</sup>

Thus in *The Two Destinies* the fantastical force of fate replaces the moral force of Christianity. As Christianity in *The New Magdalen* and later in *The Fallen Leaves* is specifically represented by Julian Gray and Amelius Goldenheart's Christian Socialism, so in *The Two Destinies* fate is represented by Dame Dermody's mystical belief in Swedenborgian spirituality. The love that brings Mary and George together, first as children, and then later as adults, is reinforced by a series of dreams and visions and rooted in the Dame Dermody's predictions. She, Mary's grandmother, declares near the beginning of the novel;

The spirits of these children are kindred spirits. For time and for eternity they are united one to the other. Put land and sea between them -- they will still be together; they will communicate in visions, they will be revealed to each other in dreams...You may doom them to misery, you may drive them to sin -- the day of their union on earth is still a day predestined in Heaven. It will come! It will come!<sup>3</sup>

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Two Destinies*, vol.2, pp.290-292.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.2, p.292.
3. *Ibid.*, vol.1, p.63.

Mary and George are thus not free agents; their love for each other is interwoven with a destiny which will always bring them together. As George and Mary meet again and again in the novel, unaware of each other's true identity, the reader views events pre-armed with the knowledge that a mutual recognition and union between the two lovers is inevitable.

The marriage of George and Mary is thus not simply the perpetration of another "Outrage on Society"<sup>1</sup>, but the final fulfilment of an inescapable destiny, against which no physical or logical resistance is possible. This force of destiny allows both Collins, and his characters within the novel, to have their cake and to eat it; it provides an irrefutable instance of the rightness of a marriage between a fallen woman and a respectable man, and thereby solves the problem at the heart of the Magdalen theme. Collins presents the reader with a fallen woman who knowingly continues to live as the mistress of a married man, yet he insists, through destiny, that she *must* marry the rich and respectable George Germaine. Mary is able to be Ernest Van Brandt's mistress, yet to act morally for the sake of her child, and she can then become George's wife, sparking off the inevitable process of social condemnation, yet be guiltless and happy in the knowledge that she has only bowed her head to fate.

In the inner narrative confession of George Germaine, Collins has justified a marriage through supernatural means. In the outer narrative of the American guest, this justified marriage is set against the force of social opinion. As society rejects the Germaines, as it had the Grays, it is by implication condemned for its lack of humanity and understanding. The end of *The Two Destinies* closely echoes that of *The New Magdalen*; the newly wedded couple, unable to

1. Wilkie Collins, *The New Magdalen*, vol.2, p.281.

live in the antagonistic climate of England, seek refuge abroad;

In the mean time, our departure from England seems to be the wisest course that we can adopt...We propose to take up our abode, for a time at least, in the neighbourhood of Naples. Here, or farther away yet, we may hope to live without annoyance, among a people whose social law is the law of mercy. Whatever may happen, we have always one last consolation to sustain us -- we have love.'

Thus the mystical fantasy of *The Two Destinies* has developed the plot and led the characters to the same point as has the allegory of *The New Magdalen*; however justified by Christian mercy or by Swedenborgian destiny, the marriage of a fallen woman with a respectable man always provokes a hostile response from society. The woman may find love and personal happiness with her new husband, but both will forfeit their positions in society as a result of the woman's unforgiveable past

As a result of its supernaturalism, *The Two Destinies* only provides a limited resolution to the problems faced by fallen women. Collins had dealt with the topic allegorically in *The New Magdalen* and fantastically in *The Two Destinies*, but in each case the highly individual and unusual nature of the plot -- Mercy's successful personation of Grace Roseberry, and George and Mary's predestined meetings -- has the effect of particularising rather than generalising much of the moral force of Collins's argument. The plea that Mercy, as a reformed prostitute should be fully pardoned, is mitigated by the fact that she is currently steeped in deception; the story of Mary Van Brandt is closer to a fairy tale than it is to the reality of a woman branded as a cast-off mistress. In the second two Magdalen novels, *The Fallen Leaves* and *The Evil Genius*, Collins approaches his subject matter in a different way, and the Magdalen theme is treated through sentimentality

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Two Destinies*, vol.2, pp.298-299.

and realism rather than allegory and fantasy.

*The Fallen Leaves* takes marriage as one of its principal subjects, and treats various aspects of marriage and married life, as I shall show in a later chapter. The novel shows the romantic courtship of Amelius Goldenheart and Regina Mildmay, the financially motivated marriage of John and Emma Farnaby and its eventual breakdown, Regina's fate as an object for barter in the marriage market, the fate of the spinster Miss Mellicent, and Amelius's relationship and marriage with Simple Sally Farnaby, the young street-walker. The relationship between Amelius and Sally dominates the second half of the novel, and was to have provided the material for the proposed sequel, *The Fallen Leaves -- Second Series*.

The relationship of Amelius and Sally echoes that of Julian and Mercy in *The New Magdalen*, but with a number of important differences. One of the purposes of the use of the Magdalen theme in each novel is to castigate contemporary society for its harsh and unchristian morality, and a second aim is to suggest that a truly reformed sinner is a fit mate for anyone. As I have shown above, this is effected in *The New Magdalen* by an underlying moral allegory which reinforces the rightness of the outcome of the story; *The Fallen Leaves* tends towards an unusual combination of realism and sentimentality to achieve the same ends. These different approaches are most noticeable in the treatment of Mercy and Sally's "fallen" state; between the vague ambiguity of treatment in *The New Magdalen*, and the more direct and but emotionally less honest presentation in *The Fallen Leaves*.

In *The New Magdalen* Mercy twice refers to her life as a prostitute, and on both occasions she uses terms and words which merely hint at the truth, leaving the readers to piece together the whole story for themselves;

"You read the newspapers like the rest of the world," she went on; "have you ever read of your unhappy fellow creatures (the starving outcasts of the population) whom Want has betrayed into Sin?"<sup>1</sup>

Helplessly and hopelessly, without sin or choice of mine, I drifted, as thousands of other women have drifted, into the life which set a mark on me for the rest of my days.<sup>2</sup>

Even here Collins uses allegorical devices to make his point; Want and Sin -- like Society throughout the novel -- have become proper nouns in order to give concrete meaning to abstract ideas. However, Collins's treatment of Mercy's past is self-defeating; the reader is asked to sympathise with a character and understand the cause of her misery, but is given the minimum of facts from which to reach a judgement. The reader can best judge Mercy through her actions in the novel, but her account of the past is "clouded with characteristic Victorian vagueness"<sup>3</sup>. This in itself hampers the development of the Magdalen theme; without sufficient knowledge of the past the present plea for forgiveness seems to be misplaced. Thus as a story of *real* people *The New Magdalen* is unconvincing; its polemical effect stems almost entirely from the allegory which underlies and even counteracts the plot.

The treatment of Sally Farnaby in *The Fallen Leaves* is radically different. Amelius comes across Sally in a squalid backstreet in the process of plying her trade, and she speaks to him as a potential client;

Are you good-natured, sir?<sup>4</sup>

Sally is described as a member of "the sisterhood of the streets"<sup>5</sup>, and is shown in the company of two other

1. Wilkie Collins, *The New Magdalen*, vol.1, p.22.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.2, pp.209-209.
3. Robert Ashley, *Wilkie Collins* (London, 1952), p.114.
4. Wilkie Collins, *The Fallen Leaves*, vol.2, p.163.
5. *Ibid.*, vol.2, p.163.

prostitutes. Lest there be any confusion as to the nature of the "sisterhood", Collins introduces Sally's pimp, who poses as her father, and who gives Sally orders which make it very clear what is required of her;

"You've got a gentleman this time," he said to her; "I shall expect gold to-night, or else --!"<sup>1</sup>

Sally's profession, and the surroundings in which she lives are concretely realised within the novel; the reader knows who Sally is, what she does, and what her life must be, from the outset.

To counter this realistic portrayal of vice and squalor, Collins makes Sally a childlike innocent who passes through life morally uncorrupted;

The appearance of the girl was artlessly virginal and innocent; she looked as if she had passed through the contamination of the streets without being touched by it, without fearing it, or feeling it, or understanding it. Robed in pure white, with her gentle blue eyes raised to heaven, a painter might have shown her on his canvas as a saint or an angel; and the critical world would have said, Here is the true ideal -- Raphael himself might have painted this!<sup>2</sup>

Collins thus describes Sally's appearance in terms intended to provoke in the reader feelings of pity and admiration which are not directly connected with the concrete and realistic portrayal of the squalor of her surroundings. This excess of language, which produces a disjuncture between subject matter and emotion, is sentimentality; by evoking ideas of childlike innocence through the use of words and phrases such as "virginal", "robed in pure white", "gentle blue eyes", and "saint or angel", Collins avoids the real moral problem of Sally's prostitution and her redemption, and diverts the issue

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Fallen Leaves*, vol.2, p.169.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.2, pp.164-165.

into society's unjust rejection of a pure and uncontaminated woman. Whereas Mercy Merrick's purity is called into question by her deceptions, Sally's is assured by her child-like state; it is only her past to which society can object.

The realism used to portray life among the London poor emphasises the artificiality of Collins's sentimental treatment of Sally, and it is this vivid clash which has provoked much of the hostility directed at the novel by critics. William Marshall concludes that the novel exhibits "a degree of triteness and sentimentality hardly imaginable in *The New Magdalen*". However, among the critics Robert Ashley has recognised that despite its manifold faults, *The Fallen Leaves* has a clear advantage over the earlier novel;

Although an inferior novel to *The New Magdalen*, *The Fallen Leaves*...in many respects tells the Magdalen story more convincingly.<sup>2</sup>

*The New Magdalen* succeeds in presenting the Magdalen theme through allegory, but its sensational plot detracts from the overall effect as its events run counter to the moral ideas it embodies; however *The Fallen Leaves* eschews allegory and presents its argument most effectively through its plot.

In *The New Magdalen*, the events of the narrative in which Mercy is involved are sensational and exciting in nature. These include: the Franco-Prussian war, the shell attack which injures Grace, the flight to London, the imposture at Lady Janet's, the confession, the return to the Refuge, and the saving of Julian. It is only at the end of the novel that Mercy appears to be about to settle into a more day-to-day existence as Julian's wife. In *The Fallen Leaves* Sally's *background* is sensational, but her actions in the main

1. William Marshall, *Wilkie Collins* (New York, 1970), p.102
2. Robert Ashley, *Wilkie Collins*, (London, 1952), p.114.

narrative are not. The prologue shows how, as a child, Sally was kidnapped by her own father and sold to a baby farmer, thus condemning her to a life of poverty and vice. However, when Sally reappears half way through the novel, she is immediately rescued from her surroundings, and she spends most of the rest of the novel simply growing up. Collins portrays her as an innocent child rapidly maturing into womanhood; it becomes conceivable, therefore, that she and Amelius should fall in love, and eventually wish to marry. By making Sally absolutely pure, Collins effectively disarms any criticism of her; if she is sinless, then there can be no bar to her marrying. Society reacts to condemn Sally because it is unaware of her true nature, for it acts only on appearances. This point is explained to Sally by the clear-sighted Rufus Dingwell;

I do believe you're a good girl -- I couldn't say why if I was asked, but I do believe it for all that...Public opinion won't deal as tenderly with you as I do; public opinion will make the worst of you, and the worst of Amelius. While you're living here with him -- there's no disguising it -- you're innocently in the way of the boy's prospects in life.<sup>1</sup>

Society acts and judges in a manner different from that of private individuals, and is generally oblivious of circumstances. It is a contemplation of these facts which leads Rufus to conclude that the "world is hard on women"<sup>2</sup>. Reputation and good name are more important than genuine moral traits; to marry, a woman need not be good, only respectable.

Amelius finally marries Sally, as Julian marries Mercy, in defiance of public opinion: as a Christian Socialist he offers her security, love, and happiness through marriage. Both *The New Magdalen* and *The Two Destinies* end optimistically

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Fallen Leaves*, vol.3, p.231.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.3, p.235.



with the hero and heroine, united in marriage, setting off to find a new and a happier life abroad, beyond the sphere of influence of English society. *The Fallen Leaves* ends on a more pessimistically uncertain note. Rufus, when he learns of the marriage, comments;

Ah, poor Amelius! He had better have gone back to Miss Mellicent, and put up with the little drawback of her age. What a bright lovable fellow he was! Good-bye to Goldenheart.<sup>1</sup>

The novel thus ends with the first hints of public disapproval in Dingwell's sorrowful dismissal of Amelius and his new bride. The full effect of the clash between the new couple and the outside world was to have been shown in the sequel which Collins never wrote. In 1880 Collins wrote to a correspondent, briefly outlining his plan for *The Fallen Leaves -- Second Series*;

The married life -- in the second part -- will be essentially a happy life, in itself. But the outer influence of the world which surrounds this husband and wife -- the world whose unchristian prejudices they have set at defiance -- will slowly undermine their happiness and will I fear, make the close of the story a sad one.<sup>2</sup>

It would appear that Collins did not intend to allow his new couple to escape censorious society as easily as do the Grays and the Germaines; rather they were to suffer unjustly, and their story was to condemn the unchristian nature of society at large. This letter, although only a hint of Collins's purpose, emphasises the important moral and religious concerns of the Magdalen theme. As *The Fallen Leaves* stands, it is only one half of an unfinished work, but it nevertheless repeats emphatically the pattern of moral concern exhibited in *The New*

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Fallen Leaves*, vol.3, pp.294-295.
2. Kenneth Robinson, *Wilkie Collins* (London, 1951), p.292.

*Magdalen* and *The Two Destinies*. In each of these three novels Collins attempts to use a different method -- allegory, fantasy, and sentimentality -- to achieve a convincing presentation of the Magdalen theme. These techniques make each novel only partly successful. The fourth of the Magdalen novels succeeds completely where its predecessors had faltered.

In *The Evil Genius* the Magdalen theme is skilfully combined with a portrayal of a marriage breakdown -- an element of the novel I shall be discussing in a later chapter -- and the two topics successfully complement each other. Moreover, in *The Evil Genius* Collins tells his story simply, without recourse to controversial literary techniques to reinforce his moral point.

The fallen woman of *The Evil Genius*, Sydney Westerfield, is, like Mary Van Brandt, a mistress rather than a prostitute, and it is because of her presence that the marriage of Herbert and Catherine Linley crumbles. Sydney becomes Herbert's lover, and she lives with him at various hotel addresses until their relationship too breaks down. Like Mary, Sydney is fully aware of what she is doing, and chooses to continue to live with Herbert until she decides, of her own free will, to leave him. At the end of the story she has joined the employ of the novel's religious figure, Captain Bennydeck, and it is strongly hinted that the two will end by marrying each other. Unlike the earlier Magdalen novels, *The Evil Genius* was a success with both the critics and the public. The novel received favourable reviews, and was the most financially successful of all Collins's later works. Robert Ashley comments;

This is all the more surprising in view of the novel's somewhat bold treatment of forbidden subjects. In describing the growth of illicit love between Herbert and Sydney, in picturing the life of an adulterer and his mistress, in making a kept woman the heroine of his novel, and in allowing eventually her to marry the most pious male character in the book, Collins rushed in where most Victorian novelists feared to

tread. The favourable reception accorded the novel can only mean that contemporary criticism had matured sufficiently to appreciate a delicate treatment of a touchy subject.'

While it would be difficult to dispute Ashley's conclusion, another explanation for the positive response to *The Evil Genius* is possible. *The Evil Genius* is the novel which most successfully embodies the Magdalen theme, and it does so in such a way as to convince both reader and critic, where the earlier novels had faltered or failed.

The moral scheme of the Magdalen theme can be divided into four parts: temptation, sin, repentance, and redemption. This scheme can be expressed in terms of plot in the following way: background, life as fallen woman, attempt to recover lost position, and marriage. Each of Magdalen novels follows this pattern, but in each the emphasis is different. *No Name* depicts Magdalen's idyllic childhood, and her "fall" motivated by her sense of injustice. The bulk of the novel follows her moral decline, and her repentance and redemption through marriage occur swiftly in the final pages of the novel. The novel does not provide Magdalen with a background tending to lead her towards a career of deception, and the period of her penitence is remarkably brief, after which she seems set to acquire a model husband. *The New Magdalen* starts with Mercy's penitence, and refers back only vaguely to the period of sin and temptation. Moreover her penitence itself is undermined by Mercy's continued personation of Grace Roseberry. *The Two Destinies* starts with the redemption through marriage, and looks back from that standpoint, and the nature of the story emphasises the fantastical inevitability of destiny, rather than the sin-repentance-redemption pattern followed by free individuals. *The Fallen Leaves* makes its heroine sinless, and

1. Robert Ashley, *Wilkie Collins* (London, 1952), p.119.

the treatment of Sally Farnaby succeeds in justifying the marriage only in sentimental terms; Sally does not go through a period of repentance, and although we know of her state as a prostitute when Amelius finds her, we do not know how she came to maintain her unspotted innocence. Each of these novels minimalises one or more elements and lays great emphasis on the heroine's final marriage. *The Evil Genius* provides all the details; and furthermore the novel does not overstress the contentious issue of redemption through marriage but instead concentrates on the earlier phases of the Magdalen theme.

Collins convincingly depicts Sydney's background in the prologue ("Before the Story") entitled "Miss Westerfield's Education". The prologue to *The Fallen Leaves* shows how the infant Sally was kidnapped by her father, but it does not show the effect upon her, nor into what new life she passes. In *The Evil Genius* Sydney is first shown as a child, with a personality, capable of feeling and of being deeply influenced by circumstances. When her father dies in disgrace, Sydney is left in the care of her brutal mother, who ignores her in favour of her younger brother. Collins depicts an intelligent child who lives in physical and emotional deprivation, and who creates her own world of the imagination in which she becomes the loving mother to her dolls, and lavishes the affection on them which is denied to her;

"The eldest is a girl, and her name is Syd. The other is a boy, untidy in his clothes, as you see. Their kind Mamma forgives them when they are naughty, and buys ponies for them to ride on, and always has something nice for them to eat when they are hungry...Their Papa is dead. I'm obliged to be Papa and Mamma to them, both in one. Do you feel the cold, my dears?" She shivered as she questioned her imaginary children. "Now we are at home again," she said, and led the dolls to the empty fireplace. "Roaring fires always in my house," cried the resolute little creature, rubbing her cold hands cheerfully before the bleak blank grate.'

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Evil Genius*, vol.1, pp.40-42.

As the title of the prologue suggests, its purpose is to show the effect of childhood experience on the mind and character of Sydney Westerfield. Collins gives psychological credibility to Sydney's longing for love as an adult by showing her state of emotional deprivation as a child. When Sydney is removed from the oppressive cruelty of Miss Wigger's school, it is entirely convincing that her gratitude to Herbert Linley should rapidly develop into infatuated love. Herbert becomes not only her lover, but also the kind parent and friend that she has never had before.

Thus Sydney's propensity to seek and be overwhelmed by love and affection is skilfully established in the portrait of her sad childhood, and so her "fall" is foreshadowed, explained, and excused. In the main narrative of the novel Collins firmly attributes the growth of the illicit relationship between Sydney and her employer to Herbert. While Sydney is emotionally thwarted and can easily turn gratitude into infatuation, Herbert is a model product of his class and family background. He is well-bred, well-educated, happily married and a doting father. He is led on by Sydney's physical allure and his own lust; it is he who initiates the relationship;

He looked at the poor little tortured face, turned up towards him in the lovely moonlight. Again and again he had honourably restrained himself -- he was human; he was a man -- in one mad moment it was done, hotly, passionately done -- he kissed her.'

It is Herbert who surrenders to his passions; Sydney attempts to suppress hers. However, a series of unfortunate events, and the interference of Herbert's mother-in-law Mrs Presty, bring the two together in a situation in which their mutual declaration of love becomes inevitable. Throughout this part

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Evil Genius*, vol.1, p.208.

of the novel Collins stresses that Sydney is a weak person trying to control her emotions, whereas Herbert is a strong person who knowingly and willingly gives way to a new and dangerous passion. Sydney tries to warn Herbert of her weakness;

I am a wretch unworthy of all the kindness that has been shown to me. I don't deserve your interest; I don't even deserve your pity. Send me away -- be hard on me -- be brutal to me. Have some mercy on a miserable creature whose life is one long hopeless effort to forget you!'

However, Sydney's protestations only make her more attractive, and she cannot resist Herbert when he embraces her. The couple are discovered by Mrs Linley, who rejects her adulterous husband and allows him to leave with Sydney. Throughout the illicit affair, from the first acknowledgement to the final elopement, Collins has stressed Sydney's immaturity and naivety. She is not a naturally vicious woman; she is undeveloped, weak, and easily influenced; it is Herbert who, having the experience, the knowledge and the power to crush the relationship in its early stages, chooses to pursue the wrong course and leads Sydney to become his mistress. Sydney is a weak woman corrupted by a man with a stronger personality than her own.

Although Sydney becomes Herbert's mistress she does so out of necessity, and not because it is her chosen mode of life. She hopes that, when Herbert is divorced, they will be able to marry and start a normal respectable life together. Sydney's moral sense urges her towards normalising her relationship, while Herbert is more and more aware that he has lost Catherine rather than gained Sydney. While he is content to live with Sydney, he has no intention of marrying her;

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Evil Genius*, vol.2, p.67.

"I only ask you to tell me if you are a free man again."

Quiet as it was, her tone left him no alternative but to treat her brutally or to reply. Still looking out at the street, he said "Yes."

"Free to marry, if you like?" she persisted.

He said "Yes" once more -- and kept his face steadily turned away from her. She waited awhile. He neither moved nor spoke.

Surviving the slow death little by little of all her other illusions, one last hope had lingered in her heart. It was killed by that cruel look, fixed on the view of the street.'

Collins emphasises that Sydney is deluded in her trust and belief in Herbert, and that her moral impulses are towards goodness; she wishes to marry and normalise their relationship. It is Herbert who, while continuing to live with Sydney, mourns the loss of his wife and child and thereby thwarts Sydney's intentions.

Following Sydney's final disillusionment with Herbert, Collins analyses Sydney's state of mind in a chapter simply entitled "Miss Westerfield". It is in this chapter that Sydney clearly moves from a state of sin to a state of repentance as she realises her position, sees what she has lost, and the severe limitations on her future as she is now no more than a fallen woman;

While [Mrs Linley] held her place in the world as high as ever, what was the prospect before Sydney Westerfield? The miserable sinner would end as she had deserved to end. Absolutely dependent on a man who was at that moment perhaps lamenting the wife whom he had deserted and lost, how long would it be before she found herself an outcast, without a friend to help her -- with a reputation hopelessly lost -- face to face with the temptation to drown herself...<sup>2</sup>

Sydney has faced up to the despair that drives Mercy Merrick to the extreme of personating Grace Roseberry, and leads Mary Van Brandt resolutely to refuse happiness with George Germaine.

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Evil Genius*, vol.2, pp.208-209.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.2, p.214.

In *The New Magdalen* and *The Two Destinies* the two heroines report their despair at second hand. In *The Evil Genius* the repentance and sorrow are expressed and felt, not merely reported; Collins's analysis of Sydney's thoughts make her emotions more immediate, more convincing, and more moving.

Sydney's move towards repentance is motivated by her realisation that her life with Herbert is impossible. She chooses to renounce Herbert of her own free will, and not as the result of the interference of a third person. In *No Name* Magdalen Vanstone is fortuitously struck down by fever, and it is the physical intervention of Richard Kirke that saves her; thereafter her moral redemption is inextricably woven with her growing love for him. In *The New Magdalen* Mercy explains how she was first moved by the preaching of Julian Gray at the Refuge; this effect is repeated at Mablethorpe House, for it is Julian who leads Mercy into renouncing her imposture and eventually into becoming his wife. In *The Two Destinies* Mary moves simply from being Ernest Van Brandt's mistress to being George Germaine's wife, and in *The Fallen Leaves* Sally is rescued by Amelius and stays in his protection until they marry. In each of these novels the heroine's repentance is closely accompanied by a romantic attachment; while happiness in marriage with a benevolent man is shown to be the right for a repentant sinner, it is possible to interpret events so that the "repentance" is seen to be motivated by the promise of reward. This interpretation of the Magdalen theme as Collins presented it was unacceptable to Victorian moralists; it suggested manipulative hypocrisy disguised as genuine penitence. In *The Evil Genius* Sydney has no reward in view in seeking to leave Herbert and repent her past life; her repentance is clearly genuine.

Sydney chooses to express her repentance directly to the person whom she has wronged: Catherine Linley ;



"Oh, I claim no merit for my repentance, bitterly as I feel it! I might not have had the courage to leave him -- if he had loved me as he once loved you...I am the miserable victim of a man's passing fancy. You have been, you still are, the one object of a husband's love...Will you let him ask your pardon?" she said. "He expects no more."<sup>1</sup>

In each of the novels discussed above the heroine's redemption is achieved through her marriage, but morally such personal redemption can be interpreted as having a selfish motivation. Marriage redeems Sydney, but it is not her marriage to Captain Bennydeck, but the remarriage of Catherine and Herbert that achieves this redemption. At the end of the novel Herbert and Catherine are reunited, and Sydney is left in the care of her new protector. Both Catherine and Sydney have suffered as a result of Herbert's actions; both are chastised by society for their behaviour, and both are treated as sinners. Herbert himself escapes relatively unscathed; he starts with a wife, then has a mistress, and after a brief period of unhappiness he regains his wife. As a man Herbert is barely touched by the opinion of the world, for it is upon the two women that the severest sanctions fall. It is Catherine and Sydney who are held responsible for the breakdown of the marriage and Herbert's elopement, even though the force behind all the actions is Herbert himself. I shall be discussing Catherine's situation as a deserted wife in a later chapter. When Herbert and Catherine are reunited Sydney is left tainted by her association. Sydney's actions are selfless and not susceptible of any hypocritical or selfish interpretation. It is *following* the interview with Catherine Linley that Sydney meets Captain Bennydeck for the first time; the man who will stand in relation to her as Julian Gray to Mercy Merrick, or Amelius Goldenheart to Sally Farnaby does not enter Sydney's life until after she has repented and made an act of selfless restitution.

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Evil Genius*, vol.3, pp.103-106.

The novel has thus followed the pattern of temptation, sin and repentance in a clear and logical way. The final phase, Sydney's own eventual happy marriage to Captain Bennydeck, is suggested rather than forced upon the reader in the last lines of the novel;

When we were out in the street again, [Kitty] said to her uncle:  
"Do you think my nice Captain will marry Syd?...What do you think, Samuel?"

I followed Randal's lead, and answered, "How should I know?"

The child looked from one to the other of us. "Shall I tell you what I think?" she said, "I think you are both of you humbugs"

THE END'

Kitty is a perspicacious child, and her opinion of Bennydeck and Sydney together in "as pretty a domestic scene as a man could wish to look at"<sup>2</sup>, seems well-founded.

Sydney Westerfield's story in *The Evil Genius* presents the Magdalen theme in its final and most convincing form. Her background and error are shown and not merely reported, and they are motivated and justified by events rather than excused by rhetoric or sentimentality. Her repentance is personally motivated, and she redeems herself through acting to repair a broken marriage. Her reward -- Bennydeck -- comes to her after she has carried out her penance, and her future happiness and marriage is only hinted at rather than insisted upon. *The Evil Genius* is the most successful of the Magdalen novels because reality of situation, development of plot, credible characterisation, and moral design are harmoniously interwoven.

The Magdalen theme, as it is expressed in unrefined form in the early novels, and in a highly developed form in the four Magdalen novels, shows women suffering for sexual

1. Wilkie Collins *The Evil Genius*, vol.3, pp.264-265.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.3, p.264.

transgression; repeatedly they are cast out, repressed, and denied happiness. Collins argues that these women, if they are repentant, should be allowed to return to society and to marry the man who loves them without public interference. However, as he shows, the world cannot bring itself to act in a truly Christian manner, and it continues to be hard on women.

### Chapter Three Marriage Breakdowns

As I have shown in Chapter One, in novels like *The Woman in White* and *Armadale*, Collins explores the relationship between marriage as a bond, and the ability of the dominant partner to exploit the weaker in a form of socially recognised bondage. Such marriages are all ultimately doomed either to failure or self-destruction; Sir Percival Glyde destroys his wife's identity in order to complete the pillage of her wealth; Lydia Gwilt's plans to marry Allan Armadale necessarily entail his untimely death, to follow as a matter of course. This pattern of selfish marriages being destroyed is to be found constantly through Collins's novels, and while the novels of the 1860s principally deal with marital breakdowns in relation to money, the later novels introduce new topics, including religion and adultery. Thus variations upon the theme of marital breakdown form an important developing concern throughout Collins's fiction, and a vital element in his portrayal of women and marriage.

Although Collins often ends novels with the conventional happy marriage of the hero and heroine (after the trauma of her marriage to Sir Percival, Laura is united in marriage with her true love Walter Hartright at the end of *The Woman in White*) he also frequently sets up a marriage early in the story which is destroyed in the course of the plot. In *Basil* the eponymous hero marries Margaret Sherwin only to

become witness to her seduction by Robert Mannion, and the novel only ends when seducer, adulteress and unhappy marriage are all destroyed. In the novella *A Plot in Private Life* (collected in *The Queen of Hearts*) the sham financial marriage of Mr and Mrs Smith is destroyed when the husband deserts his wife for the woman he loves. Magdalen Vanstone's marriage to her cousin Noel in *No Name* ends untimely when Noel is badgered to death by the financial rapacity of his wife and his housekeeper. *Man and Wife* shows the Vanboroughs' marriage wrecked by ambition, and the Brinkworths' almost ruined by deceit; it also shows how the unhappy couplings of the Dethridges and the Delamayns lead at last to murder. *The Law and the Lady* opens with a marriage which breaks down within a few chapters, only to be restored at the novel's conclusion by the wife's efforts to clear her husband's name. *The Haunted Hotel* reworks the principal idea of *The Woman in White*; Lord Montbarry is married for his money, and then ruthlessly and mercilessly exploited and murdered. Mrs Farnaby's discovery of her husband's underhand means of marrying her, in *The Fallen Leaves*, leads her resolutely to break up the marriage so that she becomes free of moral taint. In *The Black Robe* Lewis Romaine marries in order to overcome his guilty fears, and when he finds a deeper solace in Roman Catholicism he deserts his wife to follow his calling. The Galillees' marriage, in *Heart and Science*, ends when Mr Galillee finally realises that his wife is nothing but a rapacious tyrant. *The Evil Genius* follows the course of a marriage, ended because of the husband's adultery, through a divorce to an unexpected final reconciliation. Collins's last, incomplete novel, *Blind Love*, follows the course of a marriage doomed by the husband's criminal propensities and the wife's deluded infatuation.

The destruction of marriages which are built on purely financial considerations is innate in their creation, and has been discussed earlier. In this chapter I intend to focus upon the breakdown of marriages for other reasons, and to explore in

particular Collins's portrayal of woman, both as transgressor and victim in these situations.

*The Law and the Lady* is Collins's second full-length detective novel, and like *The Moonstone* before it, admirably adheres to the rules of "fair play" and to the general plot construction of mystery-detection-solution, three elements which have since become the firmly established trademarks of the genre. However, Collins was writing long before the genre of "detective fiction" was recognised as such, and to see this novel merely as an intellectual game is to misrepresent Collins's aims and achievement. Valeria Macallan sets out to discover who murdered her husband's first wife, not simply to satisfy her own curiosity, nor yet to bring the guilty to justice. She does so in order to save her marriage. This simple motive is reiterated throughout the novel;

"No," I said. "Now I know it, our married life has begun--begun with a new object for your wife's devotion, with a new reason for your wife's love!...Here she is, with one object in life--to show the world, and to show the Scotch Jury, that her husband is an innocent man!"<sup>1</sup>

Could I face the glorious perils of childbirth, with that possibility present to my mind? No!...not until I had once again renewed the struggle, and brought the truth that vindicated the husband and the father to the light of day.<sup>2</sup>

"Valeria!" he says..."If I understand nothing else, my love, I understand this:-- The proof of my innocence has been found; and I owe it entirely to the courage and the devotion of my wife."<sup>3</sup>

Valeria and Eustace's marriage is the dominant subject of the novel's present, and Eustace's first marriage to Sara is the dominant subject of the novel's mysterious past. Valeria is required to unravel the mysteries, and uncover the miseries, of the first marriage, in order to resolve the problems of her

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Law and the Lady*, vol.1, pp.209-210.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.3, p.133.
3. *Ibid.*, vol.3, p.338.

own; the unhappy marriage of the past impinges on the present, and it is only by finally revealing that Sara was driven to commit suicide that Valeria frees Eustace from the taint of suspected murder. Thus marriages, one failed and one failing, are central to the novel's plot, to character and motivation, and to the resolution of the mystery which, as detective, Valeria sets out to solve.

The importance of marriage in *The Law and the Lady* has been pointed out by several recent critics. The authors of *Corrupt Relations* say of the novel that

its central thematic concern is finally very Trollopian -- the power struggle within marriage and woman's role in that struggle.<sup>1</sup>

and Sue Lonoff in *Wilkie Collins and His Victorian Readers* suggests that

Collins's major theme is disobedience -- or rather, the paradoxical nature of a woman's disobedience.<sup>2</sup>

As Lonoff points out, the opening words of the novel are taken from the Marriage Service, and they explicitly exhort a wife to be obedient to her husband and lord;

For after this manner in the old time the holy women also, who trusted in God, adorned themselves, being in subjection unto their own husbands; even as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him Lord; whose daughters ye are as long as ye do well, and are not afraid with any amazement.<sup>3</sup>

Lonoff goes on to discuss the ambiguity inherent in Valeria's

1. Barickman, MacDonald and Stark, *Corrupt Relations* (New York, 1982), p.146.
2. Sue Lonoff, *Wilkie Collins and His Victorian Readers* (New York, 1982) p.149.
3. Wilkie Collins, *The Law and the Lady*, vol.1, p.1.

deliberate disobedience of these instructions, which ironically ends by saving the Macallans' marriage, rather than destroying it. However, seen in the light of a comparison between past and present, between Eustace's first marriage to Sara, and his second marriage to Valeria, it is clear that a wife's *disobedience* is not necessarily the central issue, nor is there a significant power struggle in the Macallans' marriage in the sense used in *Corrupt Relations*. From the very start of the novel Valeria is shown to be the dominant and active partner, and Eustace to be the passive; Valeria's actions are not born of a disobedience to her husband, but of a constructive moral vision which clearly sees the necessity for action as the only alternative to unhappiness.

Valeria is presented as a strong-willed character from the very start, and as the narrator of the novel she is firmly located as its sympathetic moral centre. Eustace is portrayed as a weak, vacillating and in part deceitful man, who has married Valeria under a false name. Much of Valeria's commentary on her husband is intended to show that she loves him despite his obvious faults, and Collins felt sufficiently aware of the apparent problems involved in creating a "weak" male lead character to attempt a disclaimer in his introductory *Note Addressed to the Reader*;

Be pleased, then, to remember...that we are by no means always in the habit of bestowing our love on the objects which are the most deserving of it, in the opinions of our friends.'

Valeria describes Eustace as a somewhat shy and retiring man, slightly disabled -- "he just halts a little in his walk" -- and with many characteristics more commonly attributed to women than to men;

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Law and the Lady*, vol.1, p.v.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.1, p.10.



He looks at me with the tenderest and gentlest eyes...that I ever saw in the countenance of a man. His smile is rare and sweet; his manner, perfectly quiet and retiring, has yet a latent persuasiveness...which is (to women) irresistably winning.'

That this style of description is more normally applied to a woman can be seen when the above passage is compared with Walter Hartright's description of Laura Fairlie in *The Woman in White*;

Lovely eyes in colour...-- large and tender and quietly thoughtful ...the sweet sensitive lips...'

In both descriptions the qualities of tenderness, gentleness, thoughtfulness, sweetness and sensitivity are stressed. Eustace is thus seen in feminine terms; as the "heroine" figure in the melodramatic scheme of the novel, for whom the "hero" (Valeria) must act.

A comparison of the plots of *The Law and the Lady* and *The Woman in White* reveals further the degree to which, in Eustace and Valeria, Collins is presenting a study, not of disobedience or struggle, but of role-reversal. In each novel a passive person (Eustace: Laura) is deprived of the power to act fully for him- or herself (by the Scotch Verdict: by the Fosco-Glyde conspiracy), and in each case an active person who loves the victim (Valeria: Walter) overcomes serious obstacles, and destroys those who know and hide the truth (Miserrimus Dexter: Count Fosco and Sir Percival Glyde) in order to reinstate them and recover the *status quo*.

This pattern of sexual role-reversal affects not only Eustace and Valeria's marriage, but is echoed and parodied throughout the novel. Major Fitz-David, entirely in thrall to

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Law and the Lady*, vol.1, p.10.
2. Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*, vol.1, pp.75-76.

the female sex, is overpowered and domesticated by his strident and loud-mouthed protégé, Miss Houghty, in a marriage which is a mockery of the Macallans';

The ordeal of marriage had so changed my gay and gallant admirer of former times, that I hardly knew him again...Standing behind the chair on which his imperious young wife sat enthroned, he looked at her submissively between every two words that he addressed to me, as if he waited for her permission to open his lips and speak. Whenever she interrupted him...he submitted with a senile docility and admiration, at once absurd and shocking to see.'

Two other of the minor characters balance each other in a similar way; Valeria's two unofficial guardians, her mother-in-law, Mrs Macallan, and her father's clerk, Benjamin. Mrs Macallan is variously described as "a terrible old woman"<sup>1</sup>, "sharply-satirical"<sup>2</sup>, and is persistently on the offensive in trying to control Valeria's actions. Benjamin is described as "simple old Benjamin"<sup>3</sup>, easily frightened even by Eustace, "mild and moderate"<sup>4</sup>, and "feeble"<sup>5</sup>, who guards Valeria in a gentle and caring way. However, most of important of all is the extreme example of reversal presented by the crippled Miserrimus Dexter and his servant Ariel.

Dexter is presented throughout the novel in feminine terms, and in connection with traditional feminine activities. On her second visit to him Valeria sees him dressed in a jacket of "pink quilted silk...[and] his wrists were actually adorned with massive bracelets of gold."<sup>7</sup> He states;

I despise the brutish contempt for beauty and the mean dread of expense which degrade a gentleman's costume to black cloth, and

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Law and the Lady*, vol.3, p.332.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.2, p.154.
3. *Ibid.*, vol.2, p.166.
4. *Ibid.*, vol.1, p.193.
5. *Ibid.*, vol.1, p.239.
6. *Ibid.*, vol.1, p.240.
7. *Ibid.*, vol.2, pp.229-230

limit a gentleman's ornaments to a finger ring, in the age I live in.'

When Dexter begins to work on a piece of embroidery he explains his affinity to women;

"Women," he said, "wisely compose their minds, and help themselves to think quietly, by doing needlework. Why are men such fools as to deny themselves the same admirable resource...As a man, I follow the women's wise example.'<sup>2</sup>

Dexter's servant displays the opposite tendency; she is a woman with strongly masculine qualities. She has a "rough, deep voice, which I should certainly never have supposed to be the voice of a woman."<sup>3</sup> Ariel wears a man's hat and is a

creature half alive; an imperfectly-developed animal in shapeless form, clad in a man's pilot jacket, and treading in a man's heavy laced boots: with nothing but an old red flannel petticoat, and a broken comb in her frowsy flaxen hair, to tell us that she was a woman.<sup>4</sup>

Dexter and Ariel enact an inverted and ambiguous imitation of marriage; the wilful and feminine Dexter is master, and the brutish masculine Ariel is totally subservient. After Dexter's death Ariel pursues her devotion to the extreme and is found dead on her master's grave. The ambiguity of the sexual roles and the extremes to which the master and servant relationship is taken clearly call into question the validity of other male and female, or husband and wife, relationships, and provides a thematic analogy for Valeria's marriage to Eustace.

As the ironic opening words of the novel and their application to each of the Macallan marriages show, the

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Law and the Lady*, vol.2, p.230.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.2, p.238.
3. *Ibid.*, vol.2, p.169.
4. *Ibid.*, vol.2, p.185.

breakdown in Eustace and Valeria's relationship is not, in the novel's own terms, an act of disobedience. Although in Victorian England it was generally held that it was the duty of a woman to be entirely obedient and subservient to her husband, in *The Law and the Lady* Collins turns the whole concept on its head. From a narrow viewpoint, the action shows Valeria disobeying the implicit desires of her husband, but managing by good luck eventually to recover his love by clearing his name. Such a view would also naturally assume that Valeria finally submits her independent spirit to her husband's authority, in the same way that Magdalen Vanstone is presumed to submit to Richard Kirke at the end of *No Name*. However, a careful reading of the novel, which relates past to present, and places Eustace and Valeria's marriage within the framework of role-reversal created by the other characters, reveals that Valeria is the "hero" (active) and Eustace the downtrodden "heroine" (passive) of the sensation plot.

Valeria's strength and Eustace's weakness are constantly highlighted in the novel. When their courtship is nearly brought to an end by the opposition of relatives and friends, it is Eustace who gives way and declares "Forgive me -- and let me go!"<sup>1</sup> Valeria's passionate response shows her immediate and overwhelming strength of purpose;

"Go where you may," I said, "I go with you! Friends -- reputation -- I care nothing who I lose, or what I lose. Oh, Eustace, I am only a woman -- don't madden me! I can't live without you. I must and will be your wife!"<sup>2</sup>

It is Valeria who provides Eustace with the strength to go on with the marriage, and her self-deprecation -- "I am only a woman" -- is coupled with a veiled threat -- "don't madden me!"

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Law and the Lady*, vol.1, p.29.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.1, p.29.

These are Valeria's recollections on her marriage night, and they are immediately followed by her statement of possession;

Again, I lifted my head from his bosom to taste the dear delight of seeing him by my side -- my life, my love, my husband, my own!'

In the repetition of "my" there is little or nothing of the dutiful obedience to husband and lord dictated by the words of the marriage service. Valeria is in control, and in possession of Eustace, having from the start assumed the dominant role. This point is immediately reinforced in the novel by allowing Eustace to behave in an apparently weak way;

His face was still averted from me. I turned it towards me, with my own hands, by main force.

I looked at him -- and saw my husband, on our wedding-day, with his eyes full of tears.<sup>2</sup>

When Valeria discovers that Eustace has married her under the false name of "Woodville", she unhesitatingly sets out on the road of discovery which forms the principal ingredient of the mystery plot of the novel. She is advised merely to accept the situation as it stands, but her resolve to uncover the truth is unshaken;

"Leave things as they are, my dear. In the interest of your own peace of mind, be satisfied with your husband's affection. You know that you are his wife, and you know that he loves you. Surely that is enough."

I had but one answer to this. Life, on such conditions as my good friend had just stated, would be simply unendurable to me. Nothing could alter my resolution -- for this plain reason, that nothing could reconcile me to living with my husband on the terms on which we were living now.<sup>3</sup>

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Law and the Lady*, vol.1, p.30.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.1, p.31.
3. *Ibid.*, vol.1, p.84.

While Valeria exhibits a strongly active determination to seek out the truth, right wrongs, and make her marriage acceptable to herself, it is Eustace who passively follows Benjamin's advice and seeks to keep matters as they stand, to be satisfied with his wife's affection, and to know that she loves him.

The true nature of Valeria and Eustace's marital relationship is revealed in the confrontation in which Valeria admits that she knows her true name, and intends to discover more. Eustace propounds a traditional view of a husband's superiority and authority, and of a wife's natural obedience;

"If you could control your curiosity," he answered, sternly "we might live happily enough. I thought I had married a woman who was superior to the vulgar failings of her sex. A good wife should know better than to pry into affairs of her husband's with which she has no concern."<sup>1</sup>

As both wife and narrator, Valeria directs the reader's response, in rejecting Eustace's argument as false. She shows that his claim is untenable, and that a marriage is no marriage if there is no trust or ability to share;

It is hard, Eustace, to accuse me of curiosity, because I cannot accept the unendurable position in which you have placed me. Your cruel silence is a blot on my happiness, and a threat to my future. Your cruel silence is estranging us from each other, at the beginning of our married life. And you blame me for feeling this? You tell me I am prying into affairs which are yours only? They are *not* yours only: I have my interest in them too.<sup>2</sup>

Eustace's authority as a husband, based purely on social convention, is effectively shown to be invalid; Valeria further identifies it as a form of foolish paternalism; "He was

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Law and the Lady*, vol.1, p.99.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.1, pp.99-100.

treating me like a child."<sup>1</sup> Unable to exercise his husband's authority, Eustace cannot forbid his wife from pursuing her investigations; he can only warn;

On my faith as a Christian, on my honour as a man, if you stir a step further in this matter there is an end of your happiness for the rest of your life! Think seriously of what I have said to you; you will have time to reflect.<sup>2</sup>

Valeria's decision to continue her pursuit of the truth is not an act of disobedience, for in exposing Eustace's false authority, she has removed his right to command. Valeria has developed into the active "hero", and for her, as for Walter Hartright in *The Woman in White*, mysteries are there to be solved, and warnings act only as a spur to further action;

I don't pretend to be able to analyse my own motives; I don't pretend even to guess how other women might have acted in my place. It is true of me, that my husband's terrible warning -- all the more terrible in its mystery and its vagueness -- produced no deterrent effect on my mind: it only stimulated my resolution to discover what he was hiding from me.<sup>3</sup>

*The Law and the Lady* is a variation upon the stock melodramatic plot which Collins uses and re-uses in many of his other novels, and its novelty is achieved by the full role-reversal. While in *The Woman in White* Marian Halcombe assumes the "hero"-role, conjointly with Walter Hartright, there is no equivalent male "heroine". In *Armadale* Lydia Gwilt in an aggressive villainess, and to some extent Allan Armadale is her weak victim, although he never falls entirely within her power, and maintains his own semi-comic hero-role in his courtship of Neelie Milroy. *The Law and the Lady* completes the process by having a complementary reversal, and so carries a stage further

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Law and The Lady*, vol.1, p.100.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.1, pp.100-101.
3. *Ibid.*, vol.1, p.101.

the general analysis of a woman's status in marriage, with which the earlier novels are concerned.

The discovery that Eustace has a verdict of Not Proven against him, tainting his life, provides a second comparison, that with the group of novels which deal with the Magdalen theme. *The Law and the Lady* falls chronologically in the middle of the Magdalen novels; it was published in 1875, after *The New Magdalen* (1873), and before *The Two Destinies* (1876), *The Fallen Leaves* (1879), and *The Evil Genius* (1886). Eustace's tainted character, as a suspected murderer, is analogous with the tainted characters, as fallen women, of Mercy Merrick, Mary Van Brandt, Sally Farnaby, and Sydney Westerfield. Like Mercy, Eustace has recovered a recognised position in society (marriage) by assuming a false name, and, once he has been exposed, he can only be saved by the action of a loving and benevolent partner. At the start of *The New Magdalen*, Mercy is found escaping from the shame of her past by nursing the wounded in the Franco-Prussian war. Eustace Macallan follows the same course by leaving Valeria to act as a nurse in Spain. Like the fallen women, Eustace has committed a sin (he unjustly neglected his first wife), and society has enlarged the sin into an unforgivable crime. Eustace is thus a "fallen" man, a fact which further emphasises his passive and traditionally feminine role in the plot structure of the novel. As Mercy is saved by Julian Gray, or Sally by Amelius Goldenheart, so Eustace is saved by Valeria. As Julian, George, and Amelius each ignore the advice of friends, and fly in the face of social convention in order to rescue the person whom they love, so Valeria acts heroically in opposition to external pressures. Her action is not, in Sue Lonoff's terms, the disobedience of a wife within the confines of marriage, but the rebellion of a hero against false constraints.

Thus the general structure of *The Law and the Lady* presents a strong figure fighting for the rights of a weak, and



reverses traditional roles by making the strong figure female, the weak male. Other characters in the novel, and a comparison with other of Collins's works, reinforce this argument; in the Macallan marriage it is Valeria, as a beneficent woman, who ultimately exercises just control over Eustace. Through mounting difficulties she finally produces the evidence which completely clears her husband's name, and restores complete trust between the two within their marriage. Moreover the evidence itself completes the novel's implicit argument, that a strict adherence to the convention demanding female submission to male power is ill-founded and dangerous.

As Sue Lonoff has pointed out, names in Collins's novels can be highly significant'. It is hardly coincidental, therefore, that a novel which opens with a Biblical allusion to Sarah and Abraham, should be deeply concerned with the mysterious death of a woman named Sara Macallan. The opening words of the novel have as much significance for the first Macallan marriage as for the second. As the record of Eustace's trial reveals, Sara desperately sought to be a model of wifely subservience in a relationship built not upon love, but upon servile infatuation on one side, and pity on the other;

In conclusion, I can only repeat that no evil which could have happened (if she had remained a single woman) would have been comparable, in my opinion, to the evil of such a marriage as this. Never, I sincerely believe, were two more ill-assorted persons united in the bonds of matrimony, than the prisoner at the bar and his deceasedwife.<sup>2</sup>

As the mystery of Sara's death is unravelled. it becomes clear that her death (suicide, and not murder) was not an act of rebellion, revenge, or escape, but a despairing act of

1. Sue Lonoff, *Wilkie Collins and His Victorian Readers* (New York, 1982), pp.129-133.
2. Wilkie Collins, *The Law and the Lady*, vol.2, p.67.

obedience to Eustace's unspoken and half-conscious desire that his wife should die. Sara reads the words from Eustace's diary which are used to condemn him at the trial;

I dreamt last night, that this unhappy wife of mine was dead. The dream was so vivid that I actually got out of my bed, and opened the door of her room, and listened... What a life mine is! what a life my wife's is! If the house was to take fire, I wonder whether I should make an effort to save myself, or to save her?<sup>1</sup>

It is this revelation, that she is unloved and better dead, that leads Sara voluntarily to sacrifice her life to her husband's desires;

I have read your Diary.

At last I know what you really think of me... I have already sacrificed everything but my life to my love for you. Now I know that my love is not returned, the last sacrifice left is easy. My death will set you free to marry Mrs. Beauly.<sup>2</sup>

Thus Valeria's investigation into her husband's first marriage reveals that the chain of events leading from the death of Sara and the indictment of Eustace, through to the breakdown of her own marriage, is the direct result of Sara's "obedience" to the demands of her husband and master. Sara destroys herself and leaves a legacy of mystery and pain which nearly destroys the lives of others, because she had followed the requirements of the marriage service to their logical conclusion.

As I discussed earlier, the marriage of Magdalen Vanstone at the end of *No Name* can be seen as a submission of a strong-willed woman to her husband and lord, or as a vindication of the victorious heroine. The conclusion of *The Law and the Lady*, however, presents much less of an

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Law and the Lady*, vol.2, p.84.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.3, p.295.

ambiguity. Valeria has been the dominant figure throughout and, Magdalen, her individuality cannot be interpreted as being compromised by her reunion with Eustace. Valeria offers to share her full knowledge of Sara's suicide with her husband, but he is willing to bow to her desire that it should be kept a secret;

"If I give up the public vindication of my innocence... do you say, as Mr. Playmore says, that I shall be acting mercifully and tenderly towards the memory of my wife?"

"Oh, Eustace, there cannot be the shadow of a doubt of it!"

"Shall I be making some little atonement for any pain that I may have thoughtlessly caused her to suffer in her lifetime?"

"Yes! yes!"

"And, Valeria -- shall I please you?"

"My darling, you will enchant me!"

Eustace submits to Valeria's superior judgement, and the last words of the book re-echo Collins's apology in the prefatory *Note*, requesting the reader not to bear too hardly on Eustace, to forgive his errors, for Valeria's sake.

In *The Law and the Lady* Collins presents a situation in which a marriage breaks down because the husband relies too heavily on the conventional belief in his power over his wife. As the novel progresses, Collins shows the wife taking over the dominant role, and rescuing the marriage by positive action. At the end the two are reunited, but their roles seem to have been permanently reversed, and Eustace is now the one who is reliant on the beneficent power of his wife. Whereas several of Collins's earlier novels create a strongly sympathetic portrait of the powerlessness of women against male aggression, particularly within marriage, *The Law and the Lady* presents a positive alternative; woman as hero.

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Law and the Lady*, vol.3, pp.339-340..

Apart from *The Law and the Lady* two of Collins's novels deal specifically and centrally with the topic of marriage breakdown, and with the women involved in such situations. *The Black Robe* shows the course of the courtship and marriage of Lewis Romaine and Stella Eyrecourt, follows the marriage as it declines to its breaking point, and finally resolves its heroine's problems through death and remarriage. *The Evil Genius* is specifically a novel about divorce, and the effect that the divorce has upon the wife, Catherine Linley, her child Kitty, and their future life; it resolves its heroine's dilemma through an unexpected reconciliation. While *The Law and the Lady* is concerned with the nature of a failing marriage, and the way in which it may be saved, the two later books focus instead on the sufferings endured by the woman within the marriage, and upon the plight of a deserted wife, facing society alone.

In *The Black Robe* love, marriage, and family life are presented as one possible option open to the principal character, Lewis Romaine. At the start of the novel he is, apparently, the hero; moving through trial and tribulation towards a conventional happy marriage with the heroine Stella Eyrecourt. However, halfway through the novel Collins shifts his authorial sympathy away from Romaine, and a new "romantic" hero, Bernard Winterfield, enters the story; hereafter the novel progresses towards a final happy union between Winterfield and Stella. Romaine becomes gradually less and less sympathetic as he is drawn into the Catholic Church. Although he does not become fully villainous (the role of villain is fully sustained by the Jesuit priest, Father Benwell) he does become sufficiently corrupted to abandon his wife and unborn child in order to pursue the hope of a career as a Catholic preacher. *The Black Robe* is thus, like *Armadale* or *No Name*, a novel in which characters gradually change role as their true function in the plot becomes clear. In *Armadale*

Lydia Gwilt moves from melodramatic villainy towards dramatic heroism as her character becomes revealed to the reader through her diary. In *No Name* Magdalen Vanstone descends the path which leads her from innocent child heroine to the worldly-wise imposter of the later part of the novel. Similarly Romaine moves from standard romantic heroism towards that particular type of callous and selfish amorality which is common to many of Collins's semi-villainous negative characters'.

As in the two earlier books mentioned above, this shift or change of character role performs a highly significant function within the structure of the novel. As Lydia Gwilt moves into the role of sympathetic heroine in *Armada*, so Allan and his love for the conventional Neelie Milroy are diminished; senseless romantic love is satirised as part of the novel's assault on conventional morality. In *No Name*, as Magdalen Vanstone declines morally, so the irony of her rebellion against an unjust society becomes more poignant; she can only move towards social justice through personal corruption. Lewis Romaine's move in *The Black Robe* undermines the reader's assumptions concerning Collins's intentions in the first part of the novel. By presenting a courtship and marriage, and then by transforming the husband into an unworthy lover and homewrecker, Collins brings into question the value of the original relationship and the elements that were brought together to form it; through Romaine's corruption Collins scrutinises the marriage, and differentiates between the relative positions of its two partners.

*The Black Robe* has a narrative structure in the form of a prologue (Before the Story), five Books, and an epilogue

1. Nugent Dubourg in *Poor Miss Finch*, Horace Holmcraft in *The New Magdalen*, Miles Mirabel in "*I Say No*" and Lord Harry Norland in *Blind Love* are other notable examples of ambivalent amoralists in Collins's fiction.

(After the Story). "Before the Story" sets the scene and thoroughly establishes Romaine as a man in need of a wife. Book the First follows the machinations of both friends and enemies to bring Romaine and Stella together, or to keep them apart. Book the Second follows the courtship through to the marriage. Book the Third traces the marriage to the point of the first serious rift between husband and wife. Book the Fourth leads to the actual breakdown and the separation of Stella and Romaine. "After the Story" shows the consequences of the separation, and resolves the novel's plot.

"Before the Story" rapidly establishes Romaine as the nominal hero, and emphasises his eligibility for romance and marriage;

He was thirty years old; he was not married; he was [the enviable possessor of the fine old country seat, called Vange Abbey; he had no poor relations; and he was one of the handsomest men in England.]<sup>1</sup>

The action centres on the event which will morally influence the course of Romaine's life; as a result of a dispute over a game of cards he, unwillingly, fights a duel and kills an innocent young man. His guilty conscience is strengthened when he hears the voice of the dead man's young brother crying accusingly at him

Assassin! Assassin! where are you?<sup>2</sup>

The voice comes to haunt him, as a supernatural or subconscious reminder of his guilty deed, and torments his conscience. Thus Romaine is not only eminently eligible for marriage, but he is also in need, morally, of a nurse. The situation requires a

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Black Robe*, vol.1, p.4. In the original "the" is misprinted as " he".
2. *Ibid.*, vol.1, p.45.

woman willing to take on both these roles, and later in the prologue she is briefly introduced;

After we had left the harbour, my attention was attracted by a young English lady -- travelling, apparently, with her mother. As we passed her on the deck she looked at Romaine, with compassionate interest so vividly expressed in her beautiful face, that I imagined they might be acquainted.<sup>1</sup>

Immediately afterwards the concept of marriage is introduced;

It was no uncommon circumstance in his past experience of the sex... to be the object, not of admiration only, but of true and ardent love. He had never reciprocated the passion -- had never even appeared to take it seriously. Marriage might, as the phrase is, be the salvation of him. Would he ever marry?<sup>2</sup>

It is notable that marriage is first mentioned not as a happy consequence of mutual love, but as a cure for Romaine's guilty depression.

In conventional novelistic terms the prologue sets Romaine up as a sympathetic hero; borne down by guilt and ripe for matrimonial redemption. However, this prologue is ironic, for Romaine is not the novel's true romantic hero, and the reasons which would appear to make him need marriage are the very same which later cause the marriage to founder. "Before the Story" -- ostensibly written by a worldly-wise, middle-aged army man -- is entirely male-centred in its viewpoint. What Romaine (a person) requires is a wife (a role). Stella appears not as an individual person, but as a suitably beautiful and compassionate-looking female who might be able and willing to conform to the required role.

Book the First follows the attempts of Lord and Lady

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Black Robe*, vol.1, p.50.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.1, pp.51-52.

Loring to bring the "person" and the "role" together, and of Father Benwell to keep the two apart for his own nefarious ends. The centre of attention shifts to Stella Eyrecourt, and her fascination with the mysterious Romaine. While Romaine is shown to be in need of rescue, Stella is shown to be in need of diversion; her problems appear to be social rather than moral, merely an unwillingness to enjoy the pleasures of society;

*My "earthly Paradise" is here, where I am allowed to dream away my time over my drawings and my books, and to resign myself to poor health and low spirits, without being dragged into society, and (worse still) threatened with that "medical advice" in which...my poor dear mother believes so implicitly.'*

Stella is thus presented as also ready for salvation through marriage, although her problem appears to be a merely conventional and inconsequential "female" one. However, like the prologue, this first depiction of Stella is ironic; she is not merely a bland conventional young woman suffering from lassitude and ready to be married off at the first opportunity; she too has a guilty secret which both recommends a marriage but also ultimately militates against it. Stella keeps secret the fact that she went through a marriage ceremony with Bernard Winterfield, only to discover on the church steps that he was a bigamist. It is the guilty memory of this event which causes Stella to withdraw from an active life in society.

Lord and Lady Loring do their best to bring the two together, not because of the love between them but because the similarity of their situations makes them suitable for each other. Romaine requires moral nursing, and Stella requires an occupation. Romaine requires a wife to smooth away his cares, and Stella is required to sacrifice herself to these needs of her would-be husband. Romaine himself is initially aware of

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Black Robe*, vol.1, p.107.



the sacrificial nature of Stella's proposed role, and he warns her of the possible consequences;

Can I ask a woman to share such a dreary life as mine? It would be selfish, it would be cruel; I should deservedly pay the penalty of allowing my wife to sacrifice herself. The time would come when she would repent having married me.<sup>1</sup>

Romayne's statement foreshadows the development of the plot. In marrying Stella he accepts her short-sighted sacrifice, condemns himself to madness and death, and clearly indicates, by his own admission, that the marriage will end in separation and misery.

In marrying Stella, Romayne is guilty of meanly accepting her self-sacrifice; she is only guilty of well-intentioned enthusiasm. Stella's position in relation to Romayne is reinforced by her counterpart Arthur Penrose. The Loring's attempt to marry Romayne off is balanced and opposed by Father Benwell's intention to convert Romayne to Catholicism in order to regain control of Vange Abbey for the Catholic Church. Benwell's tool is the enthusiastic young Jesuit Penrose, who declares himself willing to dedicate himself to the cause of the conversion. The Loring's offer Stella to Romayne as a form of social and romantic diversion; Benwell offers Penrose to him as a spiritual and intellectual companion. Penrose is full of good intentions, but is guided by an obviously corrupt adviser; likewise Stella is full of genuine attraction to Romayne, but is misled towards marriage by her friends. Collins makes the opposition of purpose and the parallel degree of fervour clear by explicitly comparing the two;

Stella answered instantly.

"I determine to be his wife!"

With the same pure enthusiasm, Penrose had declared that he too

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Black Robe*, vol.1, pp.238-239.

devoted himself to the deliverance of Romyne. The loving woman was not more resolved to give her whole life to him, than the fanatical man was resolved to convert him. On the same common battle-ground the two were now to meet in unconscious antagonism. Would the priest or the woman win the day?'

Thus Stella, like Penrose, is fired by "pure enthusiasm" and prepared to devote her energies altruistically for the benefit of Romyne; her feelings for Romyne are as much compassion as they are love.

Stella triumphs over Catholicism and Romyne overcomes his scruples and marries her, at which point the genial Loring, having achieved their aim, retire from the action. Father Benwell, having failed to convert Romyne *before* his marriage then determines to use his knowledge of the past to separate the couple *after* their marriage. *The Black Robe* has been dismissed as a rather clumsy piece of anti-Catholic (or more precisely anti-Jesuit) propaganda, and Collins's reported statement that "we must all do what we can to keep these 'black robed' gentlemen within due limits"<sup>2</sup> has abetted this notion. Undoubtedly in his attempt to wreck the Romaynes' marriage Benwell is a thorough-going villain, and undoubtedly Collins was suspicious of Jesuitical intrigues, but *The Black Robe* is no more a simple propaganda exercise to show that the Jesuits are evil than *The Woman in White* is an attack on fat Italians. Arthur Penrose is the reverse of Father Benwell; he is a good Jesuit devoted to altruistic ideals, and his influence within the novel is equal to that of Benwell's. Father Benwell is not a typical Catholic; he is an example, as is Count Fosco, of the moral corruption of overweening egotism.

Benwell has only to bring Stella's secret to light in

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Black Robe*, vol.1, p.244.
2. Reported by Robert Ashley, *Wilkie Collins* (London, 1952), p.116.

order to create a rift between husband and wife, and this he achieves by engineering a meeting between Romayne and Stella's bigamous "husband" Bernard Winterfield. Once the seeds of doubt are sown in Romayne's mind the outcome is inevitable; no longer able to trust the woman whom he has married, he rejects her moral solace, and consequently turns to the alternative which has always been on offer to him within the Catholic Church. Although Stella can continue to offer the sacrificial tenderness and care that attracted Romayne to her, the taint of her "secret" negates this devotion in Romayne's eyes, and the marriage founded on self-sacrifice rather than mutual love collapses.

Thus, with the interference of Father Benwell, the forces which brought Stella and Romayne together -- the need for and the offer of a woman's self-sacrifice -- prove ultimately to be those which drive them apart. Romayne finds the sacrifice impure, unsatisfactory and insufficient for his needs, and Stella is trapped in a self-negating mode of life from which she has no easy escape. Romayne seeks intellectual stimulation and career prospects beyond his marriage, while Stella's life is geared to easing the domestic milieu which Romayne has come to despise. Romayne accepts Stella's self-sacrifice, uses her, and then turns away from her to other interests.

Stella has fulfilled her conventional role as wife; as domestic angel, supporter and comforter to her husband, but the role is made to seem hollow by Romayne's egotism. That Romayne is an egotist is made increasingly clear as he gradually moves out of the role of sympathetic hero;

My ambition to make a name in the world has never taken so strong a hold on me...as at this time, when I find I can't give my mind to my work...Politics are open to me. Through politics, I might make my mark in diplomacy. There is something in directing the destinies of nations

wonderfully attractive to me in my present state of feeling.<sup>1</sup>

It is upon this egotism that Father Benwell plays once Romaine's conversion has been completed; he offers Romaine the prospect of a career as a power in the Catholic Church;

The Church, Romaine, wishes to make use of you...A man of your strict sense of honour -- of your intellect -- of your high aspirations -- of your personal charms and influence -- is not a man whom we can allow to run to waste...I say it with authority; an enviable future is before you.<sup>2</sup>

The revelation that the Church does not recognise Winterfield's first marriage, thus implying that Stella is really Mrs Winterfield and Romaine a single man, is sufficient to make the new convert ready to escape from an unhappy situation; he deserts Stella and goes to Rome to join the priesthood. This act of desertion is the climactic finale of the five Books comprising the Story, the event towards which the plot has been steadily moving.

By the end of Book the Fifth Collins has undermined the conventions which apparently guided the story in its early stages. The eligible bachelor has been shown to be a dedicated egotist, and the loving woman has dwindled to become the neglected and deserted wife. The consolation which he sought and she offered has been shown to be hollow, and insufficient as a basis for a marital relationship. The husband has taken what he needed and rejected what is left; the wife has given up everything and is left with nothing. The five books of the Story thus chart a marriage and its breakdown, and show the results of misguided intentions, short-sightedness, and selfishness. At the end Romaine is free, Stella trapped. Romaine has achieved his ambition; freedom from guilt, freedom

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Black Robe*, vol.2, pp.225-226.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.3, pp.75-76.

from domestic ties, a new career and a bright future. Stella is left still bound within the bond of marriage, attempting to piece her life together in the aftermath of the separation. That Stella is unjustly trapped, so that Romaine can gain his freedom, is made clear by Collins's continued use of character pairing.

By the end of the Story, the five principal characters, Romaine, Stella, Benwell, Penrose, and Winterfield, have all suffered a significant alteration in their relationships with one another. At the start of the novel Stella and Romaine are paired as a romantic couple, Benwell and Penrose are paired as Jesuits, and Winterfield stands alone as an apparently villainous bigamist. As the novel progresses parallels are drawn between the two enthusiasts, Stella and Penrose; Romaine reveals his affinity, as an egotist, with Benwell, and Winterfield is cleared of being a wilful bigamist. By the end of the Story the new relationships have fully formed. Romaine and Benwell, freed from any domestic ties by the requirements of celibacy, are both in Rome to pursue their power-seeking careers, and Stella and Winterfield are moving towards an understanding and reconciliation as a romantic couple. Particularly important is the parallel between Stella and Penrose. Collins uses Penrose's religious enthusiasm as a paradigm for Stella's altruistic compassion, and he counterpoints the influence of these two opposing forces upon the mind of Romaine. The comparison between the two characters is carried forward through the rest of the novel in such a way that Penrose's situation reflects upon the nature of Stella's. At first they are both genuine enthusiasts, both unduly influenced by bad advisers, both willing to offer themselves to Romaine. When Stella succeeds in marrying Romaine, Penrose turns his altruistic attentions elsewhere; he joins a mission to the North American Indians. At the point in the novel at which Stella feels most strongly the force of the impossible situation in which she has been trapped, news arrives from

America, which physically mirrors her predicament:

The Indians have made a night attack on the new mission-house. The building is burnt to the ground, and the missionaries have been massacred -- with the exception of two priests, carried away captive.'

Penrose's situation symbolically echoes Stella's; each have given themselves up entirely to a cause -- the mission and the marriage -- and have had that cause destroyed by the beneficiaries -- the Indians and Romaine. As a result of this, each is trapped in a predicament; Penrose is the prisoner of the Indians, while Stella is caught in the ruined marriage. To complete the parallel, Bernard Winterfield, who acts as Stella's protector in adversity, is also the person who successfully mounts the rescue of Penrose. This pairing of Penrose with Stella, which has developed through the novel, forces a comparison between the savagery of the Indians and the cruelty of Romaine, and emphasises the way in which each victim suffers the consequences of altruism. Penrose, as a missionary, has followed the conventional role expected of a priest; it leads him to imprisonment and possible death. Stella, as a wife, has followed the conventional role expected of a woman; it leads her to abandonment and disgrace.

The last part of *The Black Robe*, "After the Story", is not, as its title would suggest, merely a brief epilogue rounding off the plot, but rather a view of the consequences and final outcome of Romaine's actions. The epilogue concentrates on Winterfield and Stella, and the effect upon them of Romaine's flight to Rome. The transformation of Winterfield's role to that of the hero is completed in the epilogue. Collins makes him the narrator and thus the sympathetic centre of consciousness. Winterfield also becomes physically heroic in his brave rescue of Arthur Penrose, and

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Black Robe*, vol.3, p.210.

chivalrous in his attempts to protect Stella and preserve her reputation. Stella faces the outcome of her marriage to Romaine and gains an insight into the errors which led to it;

"I have been thinking of the Lorings...They advised me to be silent about what happened at Brussels. And they too are concerned in my husband's desertion of me. He met Father Benwell at their house... I am still a young woman," she said. "Oh, God, what is my future to be?"<sup>1</sup>

The plight of a separated (or divorced) woman was one that Collins was to explore in greater detail in *The Evil Genius*, as I shall show later. In *The Black Robe* Stella's difficulties are sketched briefly in the epilogue. Although she has financial worries as a result of the separation, Stella's principal problems are social. Within the novel, Stella's ebullient mother, Mrs Eyrecourt, acts as the mouthpiece of public opinion, and after the separation it is through her that views and requirements of society are voiced. In the patriarchal Victorian society women bore almost full responsibility for the failure of marriage; and although it is Romaine who has deserted Stella, it is she who is generally regarded as the guilty party. While Romaine is free to go to Rome to pursue his religious career, Stella is left in the anomalous position of being married but at the same time alone. The effect of Romaine's desertion is to force Stella into isolation; any move she makes to strike up friendship with another man would be regarded as possibly adulterous. When Stella turns to Winterfield for help, Mrs Eyrecourt interferes and clearly puts society's case for maintaining Stella in isolation;

Now, Winterfield, it is surely plain to your mind that you must not see Stella again -- except when I am present to tie the tongue of scandal. My daughter's conduct must not allow her husband...the slightest excuse for keeping away from her.<sup>2</sup>

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Black Robe*, vol.3, p.140.
1. *Ibid.*, vol.3, p.150.

For society the most acceptable resolution to a breakdown in marriage is reconciliation. In *The Law and the Lady* there is no doubt of the attachment between Valeria and Eustace Macallan, and a reconciliation becomes possible once the barrier of the Scotch Verdict has been removed. In *The Black Robe* there is an emotional as well as physical estrangement; Romaine has ceased to care for his wife. Despite this conclusive end to the marital relationship, social duty dictates a reconciliation motivated purely by shame and guilt;

My contemptible son-in-law shall return to his wife...Romaine is a weak fool; and Father Benwell's greedy hands are (of course) in both his pockets. But he has, unless I am entirely mistaken, some small sense of shame, and some little human feeling still left.<sup>1</sup>

Thus society, embodied by Mrs Eyrecourt, commands the deserted wife to act in a number of strictly defined ways; she must remain isolated from other men; she must expect, and moreover strive to make her husband return to her, *whether or not the two still love or could be happy with each other*. Stella finds that as a result of the marriage breakdown her actions are severely restricted by social sanction and the bonds of marriage lay most heavily upon her after the marriage itself has broken up. While Romaine escapes social restraints, Stella becomes subject to the increasingly repressive demands of her peers.

Under pressure to conform to these restrictive social dictates, Stella and her mother are faced with two options; to submit completely to the demand for a reconciliation, or to leave the country;

At one time, Mrs Eyrecourt... is eager to place her deserted daughter under the protection of the law; to insist on a restitution of conjugal rights or on a judicial separation. At another time she...

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Black Robe*, vol.3, pp.145-146.



declares that it is impossible for her, in Stella's deplorable situation, to face Society; and recommends immediate retirement to some place on the Continent in which they can live cheaply.<sup>1</sup>

Like Mercy and Julian Gray in *The New Magdalen* and Mary and George Germaine in *The Two Destinies*, Stella is forced by the power of social opinion to leave the country and seek refuge abroad. Romaine's callous act of desertion, which has left him free to do as he pleases, has made his wife both socially and physically an outcast. As long as Romaine stays away from her, Stella's life is circumscribed by the accident of the desertion. She must sacrifice any hope of future happiness for herself -- propriety demands that she keep her distance from Winterfield -- and make a further self-sacrifice for the sake of her child, in attempting to secure for him the property and wealth that are his birthright.

Romaine's death alters the perspective at the end of the novel; while he himself sees his end as a release from a world of sorrow and an acceptance of his repentance for having killed young Marillac, it is also, as foreshadowed earlier, the retribution for his mistreatment of Stella. Finally his eyes are opened to the vanity of his desires and the value of what he has denied;

Winterfield, Death is a great teacher. I know how I have erred -- what I have lost. Wife and child. How poor and barren all the rest of it looks now!...All vanity!...The true happiness was waiting for me here. And I only know it now. Too late. Too late.<sup>2</sup>

It is too late for a reconciliation and a resumption of conjugal rights, but there is a final understanding between husband and wife. When Romaine dies, he transforms Stella's social position immediately from that of unrespectable deserted

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Black Robe*, vol.3, p.157.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.3, pp.247-249.

wife, to that of respectable widow. As such she inherits the power of free choice in her actions, and is able to choose to marry Bernard Winterfield at the novel's conclusion.

Thus *The Black Robe* traces the course of an ill-judged marriage and its consequent breakdown. For Stella, as a woman, the marriage proves to be a disaster; she sacrifices her independence to a man who believes that she will be able to act as his personal comforter; she is misunderstood, mistrusted and deserted; she is forcibly separated from the man she truly loves, isolated and made a social outcast; she is burdened with a child whose future she has to consider as well as her own. No simple reconciliation can negate such suffering; only Romaine's death, by giving her the freedom of widowhood, can resolve her problems.

Although *The Black Robe* is, as its title suggests, largely a novel concerned with the Jesuitical intrigues of Father Benwell, and the effects of religious fanaticism, the marriage of Stella and Lewis Romaine is important in itself within the novel, and not just as an example of Father Benwell's powers. As Romaine moves from heroism towards amorality, so Stella's plight as a wife is highlighted in the process, and the final portion of the novel sympathetically portrays the plight of a deserted wife. However, in *The Black Robe* the emphasis of the Jesuit plot pushes the marriage problem somewhat into the background and obscures its importance. In the same way, Stella is never a fully-formed active character; she is cipher-like, and her choices and difficulties as a woman and a wife are expounded principally only in relation to the men in the novel -- Romaine as lover and husband, Bernard as lover and would-be husband -- and reflected paradigmatically in the events befalling Arthur Penrose. Thus the problems and hardships endured by women as a result of marriage breakdown form only a small, but nonetheless significant feature of the *The Black Robe*. Collins returned to

the question more forcefully in *The Evil Genius*, where the life of the deserted wife was to be treated as one of the principal subjects of the novel.

As I have shown in an earlier chapter, *The New Magdalen*, *The Two Destinies*, *The Fallen Leaves* and *The Evil Genius* each retell the Magdalen story in a slightly different way. Similarly the three novels of marriage breakdown each approach the topic of separation from a different angle. The plot of each novel follows the same basic pattern; in each there is a marriage; a husband's desertion, the wife's suffering, and some form of reconciliation or resolution. In *The Law and the Lady* the emphasis of the novel, the aim towards which Valeria's detective work tends, is a reconciliation with Eustace. The social and moral consequences of Valeria's position as a deserted wife are barely touched upon. In *The Black Robe* the desertion comes towards the end of the novel; the emphasis is on the creation and disintegration of the marriage rather than the aftermath, as Stella's problems are condensed into only a few pages of narrative. In *The Evil Genius* the breakdown theme is taken one stage further. As in *The Law and the Lady*, the desertion in *The Evil Genius* occurs early in the story; the bulk of the narrative is then concerned, like the brief epilogue of *The Black Robe*, with the tribulations of a deserted wife, examining in detail her status, the attitude of contemporary society, and creating a sympathetic portrait of a woman suffering unjustly as a result of her marriage.

*The Evil Genius*, like many of Collins's later novels, has both supporters and detractors among the critics; Robert Ashley assesses it as "an absorbing story and an intelligent thesis novel"<sup>1</sup>, while Sue Lonoff dismisses it as

1. Robert Ashley, *Wilkie Collins* (London, 1952), p.119.

"among the weakest books [Collins] wrote"'. Two critics raise points which require discussion and have a direct bearing on the themes, subject and achievement of the novel. William Marshall states that *The Evil Genius* is "merely an account of the involvement of a woman in the lives of others"<sup>2</sup>, and Collins's biographer, Kenneth Robinson, disapprovingly states that the novel is "concerned with forbidden passions and divorce, a field he would have been better advised to leave to those who were already exploiting it successfully."'.

William Marshall assumes that the evil genius of the novel's title is Mrs Presty, whose attempts to solve her daughter's marital problems only serve to worsen them. However, within the novel Mrs Presty herself calls Sydney Westerfield, Herbert Linley's mistress the "Evil Genius of the family...The name exactly fits her"<sup>4</sup>. The title of the novel is thus ambiguous and ironic, and the concept of the evil genius, as a baleful influence on the Linley household, works on two levels. On the one hand the evil genius is Sydney, for it is she who, coming between Herbert and Catherine Linley, causes the marriage to break up. However, Collins treats Sydney sympathetically; within the moral framework of the novel she is not the villainess, but the Magdalen figure who repents and is eventually redeemed. In the light of this development, Sydney's destructive role is undercut, and Mrs Presty's continued meddling forces the title of evil genius back upon herself. As a role the evil genius is divided between the two women in such a way that Sydney is pardoned for her sins. Thus the novel is more than simply an account of Mrs Presty's meddling; the evil genius is a concept used within the novel to

1. Sue Lonoff, *Wilkie Collins and His Victorian Readers* (New York, 1982), p.137.
2. William Marshall, *Wilkie Collins*, (New York, 1970), p.106.
3. Kenneth Robinson, *Wilkie Collins*, (London, 1952), p.309.
4. Wilkie Collins, *The Evil Genius*, vol.2, p.25.

further the Magdalen theme. This aspect of the novel I have already discussed above.

Kenneth Robinson's objection to *The Evil Genius* is that the novel deals with a subject alien to Collins, and one which he was unwise to have tackled. As I have already made clear, aspects of marriage, including marriage breakdowns, are recurring topics in Collins's fiction. *The Evil Genius*, as a novel about divorce, is not an isolated thesis novel on a random subject; it develops a concern which has been thematically and materially important in at least three earlier novels: *The Law and the Lady*, *The Fallen Leaves*, and *The Black Robe*; moreover, the novel is also the culmination of the Magdalen sequence, as I have shown. Thus *The Evil Genius* does not mark an aberration in Collins's choice of subject matter, but rather a development from at least two groups of earlier novels, uniting the Magdalen and breakdown themes. Furthermore the style of the novel, in its unsensational development of the plot, and in its tendency to concentrate on character rather than action, is a progression from *Heart and Science*. Of this earlier experiment Robert Ashley writes;

This endeavour to emphasise character and humour won Collins greater popular and critical acclaim than he had received for many years and made [it] his best novel of the 'eighties.'

Collins applied the same principles in writing *The Evil Genius*, so that this later book "represents another attempt on Collins's part to cater to the current taste for more realistic fiction...and won from the reviewers only slightly less praise than they had bestowed on *Heart and Science*"<sup>2</sup>. Thus

1. Robert Ashley, *Wilkie Collins* (London, 1952), p.116
2. *Ibid.*, p.119.

in *The Evil Genius* characters, their relationships with each other, and their development are as important as the action of the plot. As in *The Black Robe*, Collins is less concerned with sensational effect and the melodramatic concept of villainy, than with the idea of amorality. Characters act wrongly and harm each other not as a result of their evil natures, as for instance do Sir Percival Glyde in *The Woman in White* or Robert Mannion in *Basil*, but rather they act selfishly as a result of moral confusion. All three central characters in *The Evil Genius* act foolishly and dangerously; Sydney and Herbert in allowing themselves to be drawn into a disastrous love affair; Catherine in consenting to a divorce and then attempting to pose as a widow. In some senses the Magdalen theme applies to all three, not just to Sydney; each character "sins" and "repents", and finally finds personal salvation. Herbert and Catherine remarry, and Sydney seems set to find happiness with Captain Bennydeck.

Although Sydney is the principal catalyst, whose actions lead directly to the breakdown of the Linleys' marriage, the story of her fall and redemption is subsidiary to *the main action of the novel*. Sydney becomes, as the novel progresses, one of the heroines rather than the villainess, but she remains second in importance to the novel's principal sympathetic character, the wronged wife, Catherine Linley.

By placing Catherine at the centre of the novel, Collins emphasises the plight of women who, like her, are betrayed by their husbands and left as deserted wives. Catherine's situation, unlike that of Stella Romaine in *The Black Robe*, is due to her husband's sexual frailty, and she is initially entirely blameless in the matter. Collins implies that there is a normal sexual and emotional relationship between husband and wife, but that Herbert is attracted to Sydney for purely sensual reasons. Herbert's brother Randall, discussing Herbert's desertion of Catherine for Sydney, writes;

He has been misled by one of those passing fancies, disastrous and even criminal in their results, to which men are liable when they are led by no better influence than the influence of their senses.<sup>1</sup>

Collins does not suggest that Herbert is unsatisfied with his married life, nor that Catherine in any way fails to please her husband; he presents Herbert as an ordinary man who gives way to strong sexual temptation.

Despite the fact that the Linleys are shown to have a normal marriage, and it is Herbert's sexual proclivities which initiate the separation between husband and wife, the novel clearly demonstrates the way in which society blames, wrongs, and maltreats the deserted wife as a consequence of her husband's actions. At first Catherine acts with restraint; she forgives her husband, and sends temptation, in the form of Sydney Westerfield, away. She calls Sydney back only when it becomes a matter of life and death for her daughter Kitty, yet her actions are generally misconstrued, firstly by the law, and secondly by society. The divorce judgement specifically comments on Catherine's behaviour in a moralising way which pays little respect to attendant circumstances;

Grievously as Mrs. Linley has been injured, the evidence shows that she was herself by no means free from blame. She has been guilty, to say the least of it, of acts of indiscretion. When the criminal attachment which had grown up between Mr. Herbert Linley and Miss Westerfield had been confessed to her, she appears to have most unreasonably overrated whatever merit there might have been in their resistance to the final temptation...She herself appears to have placed the temptation under which he fell in her husband's way, and so (in some degree at least) to have provoked the catastrophe which has brought her before this court...I know that the maternal motive which animated Mrs. Linley is considered, by many persons, to excuse and even to justify that most regrettable act; and I have myself allowed (I fear weakly allowed) more than due weight to this consideration in pronouncing for the Divorce.<sup>2</sup>

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Evil Genius*, vol.2, p.82.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.2, pp.180-182.

This statement, published nationally in the newspapers, is supposed to work its way into the national social consciousness, and it thereby develops into a social as well as a legal judgment. Later in the novel two society matrons discuss the Linley divorce in disapproving terms, and their version of the truth shows how Catherine has been moved from innocence via compromise to guilt for what occurred between Herbert and Sydney;

His lordship declared he had a great mind not to grant the Divorce at all. He spoke of this dreadful woman who has deceived us, in the severest terms; he said she had behaved in a most improper manner. She had encouraged the abominable governess; and if her husband had yielded to temptation, it was her fault.'

Society has hardened and indeed corrupted the judgment of the law. Catherine is moved from being indiscreet to behaving in an improper manner, from acting on maternal instinct to encouraging Sydney's proximity to Herbert. The judge had felt that Catherine was in some way to blame, even though the bulk of the guilt rested on Herbert. Society does not blame Herbert for yielding to temptation; it castigates only the two women, firstly the temptress, and secondly the wife who did not prevent her husband from yielding. While Sydney is dismissed as simply abominable, Catherine is doubly censured; she is expected to be both subservient and loyal to her husband, but at the same time to be his guardian, preventing him from straying into adultery. Regardless of the real rights and wrongs of the case, the voice of society sums up its attitude as "it was her fault".

From the beginning of the Third Book of *The Evil Genius* Collins centres the story on the tribulations of Catherine Linley, following Herbert's elopement with Sydney. From the moment that Herbert leaves, Catherine is put in the wrong.

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Evil Genius*, vol.2, pp.235-236.



Although she is the injured party, she is unable to continue life at Mount Morven;

After what had happened, it was, of course, impossible that Mrs. Linley could remain in her husband's house. She and her little girl, and her mother, were supposed to be living in retirement. They kept the place of their retreat a secret from everybody but Mrs. Linley's legal adviser, who was instructed to forward letters.'

Like Stella Romaine in *The Black Robe*, it is the wronged victim of the desertion, Catherine, who is forced to take flight, while the guilty party, Herbert, has achieved what he sought. Herbert's desertion thus has brought him Sydney as a lover, but in the process has made Catherine an outcast from her own home.

Unlike Stella, Catherine has a child at the time of the separation. The laws governing the control of children were, at that time, inflexible; unless a court (for instance, following a divorce) decided otherwise, the child remained the legal dependent and responsibility of the father, and he alone could decide matters relating to its welfare. Within a normal family such legal issues might provide no problems, but after a separation, the state of affairs might be very different. After Herbert's departure, Catherine is left with Kitty in her care, although legally the child should be in the custody of her father. Having wronged Catherine by rejecting her, by making her a social outcast and the subject of gossip, Herbert is able to persecute her further, with the full backing of the law, by demanding that his daughter be handed into his care;

There is no wish, on my part, to pain you by any needless allusion to my claims as a father. My one desire is to enter into an arrangement which shall be as just towards you, as it is towards me. I propose that Kitty shall live with her father one half of the year, and shall return to her mother's care for the other half. If there is any valid objection to this, I confess I fail to see it... If your maternal anxiety suggests any misgiving, let me add that a woman's loving care

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Evil Genius*, vol.2, pp.75-76.

will watch over our little girl while she is under my roof. You will remember how fond Miss Westerfield was of Kitty, and you will believe me when I tell you that she is as truly devoted to the child as ever.'

Although he is entirely in the wrong, Herbert can use his knowledge of his legal rights regarding Kitty to put himself on an equal footing with his deserted wife. The reasonable tone of his request only emphasises the power that he has over Catherine and Kitty's lives; behind the request is a veiled threat, should Catherine not agree to comply. Catherine's reaction to Herbert's "moderate" request exposes the false reasoning of the law, and the powerlessness of a woman in the face of a man's demands. She sees that Herbert is acting *entirely from a selfish motive, decked out as generosity;*

And he threatens to separate us for six months in every year! And he he takes credit to himself for an act of exalted justice on his part...The cruellest of all separations is proposed to me -- and I am expected to submit to it, because my husband's mistress is fond of my child!<sup>2</sup>

Catherine sees that the law, operated by men, works on a basis of logic and not of compassion, and that the natural injustice that Kitty's separation from her mother would impose is entirely disregarded;

Is there no such feeling as shame in the hearts of men?<sup>3</sup>

As a temporary measure to avoid giving Kitty into her husband's custody Catherine is forced to leave Britain secretly for the continent. Thus, as a result of Herbert's demands, Catherine is forced not only to hide from social condemnation but also

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Evil Genius*, vol.2, pp.89-91.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.2, pp.90-92.
3. *Ibid.*, vol.2, p.90.

the persecution of the law, which twists natural justice to accommodate the rights of the father over those of the mother, regardless of circumstance.

Herbert, in attempting to console Catherine for the temporary lose of Kitty, reminds her that Sydney is very attached to his daughter. Herbert has set out to reconstitute his family, by replacing Catherine with Sydney. Although physically Herbert has deserted his wife, metaphorically he has cast her off from him. Once he is away from Mount Morven Herbert seeks to reinstate his daughter within his family circle, and bring in Sydney as both a replacement wife for himself, and as a replacement mother for Kitty. With the force of the law behind him, Herbert is able to repel the unwanted Catherine, and attract the desired Kitty and Sydney to him, and Catherine is left in a powerless isolation.

Catherine has thus two options only open to her; to run continually before the law, or to turn the law into acting as her protector, by seeking a divorce. Driven into a corner from which divorce is the only safe escape, Catherine agrees to initiate the action, but in doing so she makes a long heated speech which condenses within it the principle moral dilemmas and concerns of the novel;

Mrs. Presty added her tribute of consolation.

"After all," she asked, "what is there to terrify you in the prospect of a Divorce? You won't hear what people say about it -- for we see no society now. And, as for the newspapers, keep them out of the house."

Mrs. Linley answered with a momentary revival of energy.

"It is not the fear of exposure that has tortured me," she said. "When I was left in the solitude of the night, my heart turned to Kitty; I felt that any sacrifice of myself might be endured for her sake. It's the remembrance of my marriage, Mr Sarrazin, that is the terrible trial to me. Those whom God has joined together, let no man put asunder. Is there nothing to terrify me in setting that solemn command at defiance? I do it -- oh, I do it -- in consenting to the Divorce. I renounce the vows which I bound myself to respect in the presence of God; I profane the remembrance of eight happy years, hallowed by true love. Ah, you needn't remind me of what my husband

has done. I don't forget how cruelly he has wronged me; I don't forget that his own act has cast me from him. But whose act destroys our marriage? Mine! mine! Forgive me, Mamma; forgive me, my kind friend -- the horror that I have of myself forces its way to my lips. No more of it! My child is my one treasure left. What must I do next? What must I sign? What must I sacrifice? Tell me -- and it shall be done. I submit! I submit!"<sup>1</sup>

Catherine uses a number of key words and phrases relating to her social role as a woman and as a wife; she is prepared to "*endure any sacrifice*"; she sees that Herbert has "*cast me from him*"; she begs for advice and ends with two cries of submission. These points in the speech emphasise a woman's subservience to men, firstly to the man who has wronged her, and secondly to the man who advises her. However, while on the one hand the speech highlights Catherine's submissiveness, on the other it also emphasises the way in which her agreement to the divorce is an act of rebellion against the very state of marriage. As well as *consenting* and *submitting* (passive states) to the fact of the divorce, Catherine must also *renounce*, *set at defiance*, *profane* and *destroy* the moral, legal and religious bond of marriage itself. The crux of her moral dilemma is this: she has submitted to ill-treatment from Herbert; in order to protect her child, and seek restitution for herself, she has to make a positive, rebellious act which destroys the very union which she treasured and sets her in defiance of God. Catherine is forced, because of Herbert's adultery, to overthrow their marriage; in Christian terms Herbert's sin has forced Catherine to sin herself.

This religious aspect is an important feature of *The Evil Genius*, and is projected in the novel through the person of Captain Bennydeck. Bennydeck courts Catherine, unaware of her marital status, and when he learns the truth he rejects her and castigates her for

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Evil Genius*, vol.2, pp.135-137.

The day when you remembered the law of man, and forgot the law of God; the day when you broke the marriage tie, the sacred marriage tie, by a Divorce.<sup>1</sup>

Bennydeck is of an evangelical tendency; the word of God, as revealed in the Bible is beyond dispute, and he cannot marry Catherine because of Jesus's preaching in the Sermon on the Mount;

Whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery.<sup>2</sup>

For Catherine, the pragmatic considerations of personal safety have to take precedence over religious ones. The law of God, as perceived by Victorian society, supports the man and blames the woman. Catherine attacks Bennydeck's position as one in which righteousness is more important than understanding and mercy;

"You are too cruel!" she declared. "You can feel for me, you can understand me, you can pardon me in everything else that I have done. But you judge without mercy of the one blameless act of my life, since my husband left me -- the act that protected a mother in the exercise of her rights."<sup>3</sup>

Collins has thus set up a conflict between the right of women to some degree of active self-determination, and the will of God as interpreted by the Church. The conflict is resolved, in the novel, through the intervention of the narrational voice, which undercuts Bennydeck's position and reveals his error;

Another innocent woman, in her place, might have pointed to that first part of the verse, which pre-supposes the infidelity of the divorced wife, and might have asked if those words applied to her.<sup>4</sup>

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Evil Genius*, vol.3, pp.191-192.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.3, p.195.
3. *Ibid.*, vol.3, p.193.
4. *Ibid.*, vol.3, p.195.

Collins not only points out Bennydeck's selective use of scriptural quotation, but insists that Catherine is an "innocent woman". Catherine is thus vindicated, and Bennydeck shown to be in the wrong. Whereas the earlier religious figures, Amelius Goldenheart and Julian Gray, profess a Christian Socialism which pragmatically adapts the word of God to the reality of the moment, Bennydeck is a representative of the more unbending and unthinking Christianity prevalent in society. The exposure of Bennydeck's fallibility highlights the way in which the Church conspires with the law and society in general, to oppress women. Catherine is cast out and threatened with the loss of her child, rejected socially as responsible for her husband's adultery; through Bennydeck she is also anathematised as a "fallen" woman by a representative of the established Church. In the face of this treatment Collins maintains that Catherine is "innocent". Bennydeck himself is thus another example of a foolish amoralist who stumbles into a wrong action through moral confusion; at the end of the novel he lends his respectability to Sydney Westerfield, and it is hinted that the two will marry; as Bennydeck offers personal salvation to a genuine and repentant "fallen" woman, he appears to himself have been saved from error and learnt the meaning of Christian forgiveness and mercy.

Like Mercy Merrick in *The New Magdalen*, Catherine finds that she is not accepted in society under her true name, and so, under the influence of Mrs Presty, she adopts a false name and false identity in order to start a new life. Like Mercy she discovers that the deception lends only temporary relief; when confronted with the need to deceive the man who is courting her, she chooses to reveal the truth and suffer the consequences. At the same time her true identity is discovered by her new circle of friends, and they too reject her. Although they are aware of her personality, her social identity

as a divorcee is more important; she is permanently tainted. The two society matrons, who have warped the divorce judgment into a damnation of Catherine's character, regard her as morally dangerous; they determine to keep their children away from her and not to allow them to attend Kitty's dinner party for fear of infection;

Lady Myrie pronounced sentence without hesitation. "Of course your girls musn't go. Daughters! Think of their reputations when they grow up!...Though my children are boys (which perhaps makes a difference) I feel it my duty as a mother not to let them get into bad company."¹

Society rejects Catherine for fear of damnation by association. Lady Myrie's comments emphasise the frailty of a woman's social standing; she believes a girl's future could be jeopardised merely because of contact with Catherine Linley. For men it is a different matter; it is not reputation but moral character that is at risk, and this distinction is an important one; men must be pure, and women must not only be pure, but also be seen and be believed to be pure. Whatever the truth of Catherine's moral character, the rumour of her corruption, as interpreted through the divorce judgment, is sufficient to damn her. Thus Lady Myrie and Mrs Romsey repeat the form of social rejection encountered by the newly-wed Grays and Germaines in *The New Magdalen* and *The Two Destinies*; they ostracise Catherine Linley and thus confirm her status as a social outcast.

Catherine has been cast off, rejected, threatened, isolated, forced to live in hiding, forced to go against her own religious beliefs, forced to take an assumed name, and she loses her new lover when he discovers the truth about her. The whole social, legal, and religious structure of Victorian

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Evil Genius*, vol.2, pp.236-237.

society has conspired to make her suffer for her husband's faults and her determination to protect herself. Catherine has neither the protected status of wife, nor the prospects of an unmarried woman, nor (except by deception) the freedom of choice of a widow. The only resolution possible for Catherine is to achieve one of these socially accepted states; she cannot be "unmarried", nor can she expect to be widowed by Herbert's death; the only option left to her is the protected state of wife. Bennydeck refuses Catherine in terms which imply that a second marriage would not be possible for her. Thus the last logical course of action is for Catherine to be reunited with Herbert.

As the novel follows the progress of Catherine's sufferings, it also charts Herbert's disillusionment with Sydney, his repentance, and the anguish that he feels when he realises that he has given up everything he treasured for a transitory romance. While Catherine suffers continual external pressure from society, Herbert is unaffected by public opinion; his repentance is entirely motivated by the personal conviction of his own errors. Thus, as Catherine is buffeted by society and Herbert moves to a just appreciation of himself, of Sydney, and of his former wife, a reconciliation becomes no longer improbable, but rather the inevitable resolution of the plot.

The last part of the novel is, as Robert Ashley opines, "open to the charge of being thesis-ridden"'. The various characters discuss divorce, marriage and remarriage in such terms as to defend the conclusion to the story. Herbert's brother Randal Linley speaks out on divorce;

Where there is absolute cruelty, or where there is deliberate desertion, on the husband's part, I see the use and the reason for

1. Robert Ashley, *Wilkie Collins* (London. 1952), p.119.



Divorce. If the unhappy wife can find an honourable man who will protect her, or an honourable man who will offer her a home, Society and Law, which are responsible for the institution of marriage, are bound to allow a woman outraged under the shelter of their institution to marry again. But, where the husband's fault is sexual frailty, I say the English law which refuses Divorce on that ground alone is right, and the Scotch law which grants it is wrong. Religion, which rightly condemns the sin, pardons it on the condition of true penitence. Why is a wife not to pardon it for the same reason? Why are the lives of a father, a mother, and a child to be wrecked, when those lives may be saved by the exercise of the first of Christian virtues -- forgiveness of injuries? In such a case as this I regret that Divorce exists; and I rejoice when husband and wife and child are one flesh again, re-united by the law of Nature, which is the law of God.<sup>1</sup>

Randal thus combines, like Julian Gray or Amelius Goldenheart, the pragmatic with the truly Christian; divorce has no right or wrong *per se*, each individual case has its own merits. A marriage breakdown is not simply final; by the exercise of penitence and forgiveness those in the fallen state may be redeemed. Thus the remarriage of Herbert and Catherine is not only a resolution to their marriage problems, but it is also an adaptation of the Magdalen theme, most clearly expressed in the novel through the story of Sydney Westerfield. In this instance both partners to the marriage are in a fallen state; Herbert morally because of his adultery, and Catherine socially because of her divorce; when Catherine agrees to remarry Herbert she redeems him through forgiveness, and in the process she redeems herself as well. At the end of the novel Mr Sarrazin the lawyer exhorts his wife to be the first representative of society to overcome her prejudice against the novelty of the situation, and to start the process of social reintegration by visiting the newly married couple.

The three novels dealing with marriage breakdown, separation and divorce move progressively towards a full

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Evil Genius*, vol.3, pp.254-255,

exposure of the harshness of the world upon deserted wives. *The Law and the Lady* poses important questions about the relationship of man and woman within marriage itself, and in the novel the Macallans' problems are resolved partly by a realignment of dominant and passive roles. Although Eustace leaves Valeria, the marriage does not completely founder, and Valeria struggles to reform her relationship with Eustace in order to save it, rather than to combat the prejudices of society. *The Black Robe* focusses on the process of courtship, marriage, and breakdown, showing the ways in which at each turn a woman is required to sacrifice her personal needs to society and the male ego, and in the final portion of the novel Collins briefly presents the traumas of the deserted wife. *The Evil Genius* takes the concept one stage further, by following in detail the problems of Catherine Linley (the conflict over child custody, the publicity, the social stigma, and the effect on her future life), and through the use of the Magdalen theme Collins upbraids a society whose legal, social, and religious representatives condemn an innocent woman. Thus taken together Collins's series of thematically linked novels, *The Law and the Lady*, *The Black Robe*, and *The Evil Genius*, convincingly show that in a situation of marriage breakdown, it is the women who suffer.

## Chapter Four Unmarried Women

Many of the female characters in Collins's novels are seen in direct relation to marriage, either as wives or prospective wives. In keeping with romance conventions, Collins regularly ended his novels by either marrying off his hero and heroine, as for example in *No Name*, *The Moonstone*, *Poor Miss Finch*, *The Fallen Leaves*, and *Blind Love*, or by reuniting a pair of lovers divided earlier in the story, as in *The Law and the Lady* and *The Evil Genius*. In these novels and elsewhere, much importance is attached to the role of wife, or prospective wife. Valeria Macallan in *The Law and the Lady* sets out, as a wife, to save her marriage, while Mercy Merrick in *The New Magdalen* is deemed to be a contaminating influence, and unfit to be the wife of the Rev. Julian Gray. Laura Fairlie in *The Woman in White* is first the wealthy prospective wife to be wooed and won, then the oppressed and victimised wife of the villain, and finally the restored and happy wife of the hero, while Catherine Linley in *The Evil Genius* is firstly shown to be the cruelly wronged wife in a marriage wrecked by adultery, and then to be a woman so tainted by divorce as to be unmarriageable.

There is a large class of female characters in Collins's novels who are not portrayed in immediate relation to an ongoing or prospective marriage. They fall into two separate groups: firstly those who have never, for a variety of reasons, married, and secondly those women, mainly in middle age, who have been through marriage and are now in a state of

widowed independence. These two groups, standing apart from the rituals of courtship and marriage, present to us the status of women, and the value of marriage, from a perspective different to that of their more conventional counterparts.

Those characters who have not, do not wish to, or merely cannot be married, are found throughout Collins's fiction, from the bereaved Antonina to the eccentric Miss Jillgall in *The Legacy of Cain*, and include a wide variety both of character types, and of roles in relation to marriage. These include the comic spinsters hankering after affection, the lonely women of middle age, the independent-spirited women, the physically or mentally disabled, and also those who have been involved in sexual and emotional relationships outside the legal and moral sanction of marriage. Perhaps the most immediately recognisable type is the passionate spinster, of whom the most well-known example is Miss Clack in *The Moonstone*, and the most sympathetically portrayed is Miss Minerva in *Heart and Science*.

Miss Clack has a vital function as narrator in *The Moonstone*; her unconscious hypocrisy creates a good deal of humour, so that her narrative acts as a strong contrast to that of the preceding chapters, which are given by the dry and long-winded Betteredge. Miss Clack also misleads the reader, through her unreliable testimony, so that Godfrey Ablewhite's complicity in the theft of the Moonstone is obscured. *The Legacy of Cain*, Collins's last completed novel, looks back for its form and structure to both *The Moonstone* and *The Woman in White*; it is the only other of Collins's novels to be composed entirely of first-person narratives which shed conflicting light on the progress of the plot. Miss Jillgall is introduced into *The Legacy of Cain* partly as comic relief, in order to lighten the rather sombre treatment of inherited destiny and character that forms the main theme of the novel, and thus her character has the same sort of dramatic function as Miss

Clack's in *The Moonstone*. Like Miss Clack, Miss Jillgall also has a narrative of her own, which is structurally important. As, in *The Moonstone*, Godfrey Ablewhite's scurrilous motives for wooing Rachel Verinder are filtered through Miss Clack's warping consciousness, so in *The Legacy of Cain* the climactic attempt by Helena Gracedieu both to poison Philip Dunboyne, and to frame her sister Eunice for the crime are seen from Miss Jillgall's point of view. Thus both characters comment on climactic moments in complex and dangerous courtship-relationships from the standpoint of a middle-aged spinster.

Drusilla Clack is an entirely unsympathetic character; a stereotyped "old maid", burning with hopeless passion for Godfrey Ablewhite. She describes her ardent admiration for Godfrey using quasi-religious language, and the comedy arises from the disparity between what Miss Clack believes to be religious fervour and sisterly affection, and what the reader can clearly see is a more earthly passion;

He beamed on us with his beautiful smile; he held out a hand to my aunt, and a hand to me. I was too deeply affected by his noble conduct to speak. I closed my eyes; I put his hand, in a kind of spiritual self-forgetfulness, to my lips. He murmured a soft remonstrance. Oh, the ecstasy, the pure, unearthly ecstasy of that moment! I sat -- I hardly know on what -- quite lost in my own exalted feelings. When I opened my eyes again, it was like descending from heaven to earth.<sup>1</sup>

Miss Clack is an example of a well-known character type, familiar as a comic butt in many branches of literature, legend and folklore; the unlovely, unlovable, often ageing spinster, burning with an unseemly passion for an unresponsive man.<sup>2</sup> In a conventional novel this character type can be seen as a perverse caricature of the heroine; motivated by desperation

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone*, vol.2, pp.104-105.
2. Well-known literary examples include Dickens's Fanny Squeers in *Nicholas Nickleby*, and Gilbert's Katisha in *The Mikado*.

rather than by genuine affection, declining into middle-age rather than growing into the fullness of youth, unattractive and unnoticed rather than loved and admired. Miss Clack is a figure of comedy, of a rather unkind comedy, for whom love and marriage, however desirable, are almost impossibilities. Beneath this comedy is the reality; that for a woman deficient in youth and beauty, society would deem marriage inappropriate, while men, the active partners in courtship, would hardly spare them a glance. As a result of this social rejection the unmarried spinster becomes either a hanger-on, as Miss Clack does to the Verinder household, or becomes entirely isolated from the social community. At the beginning of her narrative Miss Clack reveals that, at the time of writing, this latter situation has become her eventual fate;

I have been cut off from all news of the prosperous branch of the family for some time past. When we are isolated and poor, we are not infrequently forgotten. I am now living, for economy's sake, in a little town in Brittany, inhabited by a select circle of serious English friends, and possessed of the advantages of a Protestant clergyman and a cheap market.<sup>1</sup>

Miss Clack is so grotesque that it is not possible to feel any sympathy for the reality of her situation, nor does Collins attempt to make her anything other than comically perverse. However, the two later spinsters, Miss Jillgall and Miss Minerva, are each treated both more realistically and more seriously.

Miss Jillgall in *The Legacy of Cain* is presented to the reader ambiguously, from the two contrasting viewpoints of the spiteful and cynical Helena, and of the kind and generous Eunice. To Helena she is nothing more than the comic spinster, ingratiating and servile, given to prying and meddling, and hinting at an excessive admiration for Mr Gracedieu, the

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone*, vol.2, p.67.

Minister, in quasi-religious language which recalls the effusions of Miss Clack;

"Dear Helena, I dare not found any claim on what I owe to your father's kindness."

"Why not?" I inquired.

"Because your father is not a man---"

I was rude enough to interrupt her: "What is he then?"

"An angel," Miss Jillgall answered solemnly. "A destitute earthly creature like me must not look up as high as your father. I might be dazzled."<sup>1</sup>

Eunice also sees Miss Jillgall as comic and grotesque, but as her comments show, she is also aware of Miss Jillgall's unfortunate circumstances. Eunice recognises with sympathy Miss Jillgall's physical shortcomings;

"When my views are directed by my affections," she assured me, "I never see wrong. My bosom is my strong point."

She has no bosom, poor soul -- but I understood what she meant.<sup>2</sup>

It is through Eunice's narratives that Miss Jillgall's enforced role in life is fully displayed. To Helena she is only a meddler; to Eunice she frequently asserts her desire "to be useful". As an ageing, unmarried woman without independent means, and never likely to possess them through marriage, Miss Jillgall is dependent upon the goodwill of relatives to provide for her. As she has failed to take up what would have been considered her natural vocation in life, and the only proper career for a woman -- marriage and motherhood -- she is left to decline unsupported into old age, ekeing out her existence as a poor relative, and enjoying life and love vicariously through the courtship tribulations of Helena and Eunice. As such she is a natural commentator on life, rather than a participant in it. At the end of the novel we learn that Miss Jillgall has

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Legacy of Cain*, vol.1, p.181.

2. *Ibid.*, vol.1, p.243.

joined the household of the newly-wed hero and heroine where she has sufficiently improved her lot to be considered "queen of domestic affairs"', a form of glorified housekeeper.

The alternating diary narratives of Helena and Eunice present Miss Jillgall in such contrast as to make her character ambiguous; part comic stereotype, part genuine and pathetic personality. In *Heart and Science* the straightforward third-person narrative removes any such structurally imposed ambiguity, and the position of the unmarried Miss Minerva is made much more clearcut. As Robert Ashley has pointed out, *Heart and Science*, along with *The Evil Genius*, shows a move by Collins away from his normal territory of crime and intense plotting towards "the realistic novel of character and humour"<sup>2</sup>, such that character, and more especially character development, take precedence over plot. In *Heart and Science* the conspiracy by Mrs Galillee to prevent her son Ovid from marrying her niece Carmina is restrained and unmelodramatic, and the novel dwells largely on the changing relationships of the various persons of the Galillee household, including the ugly and apparently bitter governess, Miss Minerva. Miss Minerva is at first presented as a comic stereotype, but is then allowed to develop into a sympathetic individual character. The first description of her in the novel sets up the stereotype -- the physically unappealing spinster -- while immediately suggesting that a simplistic judgement made on appearance alone may be misleading;

Miss Minerva's eager sallow face, so lean, and so hard, and so long, looked, by contrast, as if it wanted some sort of discreet covering thrown over some part of it. Her coarse black hair projected like a penthouse over her bushy black eyebrows and her keen black eyes. Oh, dear me (as they said in the servants' hall), she would never be married -- so yellow and so learned, so ugly and so poor! And yet, if

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Legacy of Cain*, vol.3, p.279.
2. Robert Ashley, *Wilkie Collins* (London, 1952), p.116.



mystery is interesting, this was an interesting woman.<sup>1</sup>

Miss Minerva's secret, like Miss Clack's, is a hopeless passion for a younger man who is courting the heroine;

Even [Miss Minerva's] capacity for self control failed, at the moment when she took Carmina's place. Those keen black eyes, so hard and cold when they looked at anyone else -- flamed with an all-devouring sense of possession when they first rested on Ovid. "He's mine. For one golden moment he's mine!"<sup>2</sup>

As a governess, Miss Minerva, like Miss Clack or Miss Jillgall, is in a dependent position, relying for her continued employment, and moreover for any future employment, on the goodwill of her employer, Mrs Galillee, Ovid's mother. In such a situation any betrayal of emotion could lead to immediate dismissal, and its financial consequences. Lacking youth, wealth, or conventional beauty, Miss Minerva is entirely outside the established society of marriageable women. She is thus forced to suppress and control her emotions, while at the same time left to make desperate efforts to make herself attractive, and consequently eligible;

In her small sordid way she...was persecuted by debts -- miserable debts to sellers of expensive washes, which might render her ugly complexion more passable in Ovid's eyes; to makers of costly gloves, which might show Ovid the shape of her hands, and hide their colour...<sup>3</sup>

In a world financially and politically dominated by men, women without individual power or wealth can only achieve a position in life by attracting a suitable man, and rely for such attraction almost entirely on physical appearance. Thus their livelihood may depend upon good looks, and a woman without conventional beauty may be scorned and overlooked. As Carmina

1. Wilkie Collins, *Heart and Science*, vol.1, p.47.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.1, p.142.
3. *Ibid.*, vol.1, pp.221-222.

comes to befriend Miss Minerva she, as another woman, criticises the male standards which cannot pass beyond the merely physical;

Are all men alike, I wonder? Even my kind dear father used to call ugly women the inexcusable mistakes of Nature. Poor Miss Minerva says herself she is ugly, and expects everybody to misjudge her accordingly. I don't misjudge her, for one.<sup>1</sup>

Carmina, as the innocent and entirely sympathetic heroine, leads the reader to reappraise Miss Minerva's character, questioning the stereotyping which has been inflicted upon her, not by the author, but by the other characters within the novel. As a consequence of this movement Miss Minerva becomes gradually revealed as a sympathetic character. When she confesses her love for Ovid to Carmina the tone of the narrative is completely different from the irony with which Miss Clack reveals the true nature of her feelings for Godfrey, or the mockery with which Helena Gracedieu depicts Miss Jillgall; the tone is of pathos and sympathy rather than of comedy;

One thing I may say for myself. I know the utter hopelessness of that love which I have acknowledged. I know that he returns your love, and will never return mine. So let it be.

I am not young; I have no right to comfort myself with hopes that I know to be vain. If one of us is to suffer, let it be that one who is used to suffering.<sup>2</sup>

Collins's sympathetic treatment of Miss Minerva is a complete contrast to his mockery of Miss Clack, and goes further in its acknowledgement of genuine emotions than the ambiguous portrayal of Miss Jillgall, which occupies the middle ground between comedy and pathos. All three women show the unhappy

1. Wilkie Collins, *Heart and Science*, vol.1, p.249.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.2, p.101.

fate of the unwanted ageing spinster; unable to obtain independence or a recognised social position through marriage, they have declined into grotesque figures of fun, or pathetic and embittered shadows, tolerated rather than accepted in their own right, and existing only on the fringes of society; denied love and marriage because of age and physical appearance.

Miss Garth and Marian Halcombe are two strong-minded characters, each of whom diminishes in significance as the novels in which they appear progress. Miss Garth starts *No Name* as a governess and family friend. After the tragedy at Combe-Raven she retires with the Vanstone girls to London. Magdalen's escape then leaves Norah and Miss Garth in the background. Norah and Magdalen's proposed marriages at the end of the novel leave Miss Garth alone and out of the centre of activity and interest, which now falls upon the two pairs of lovers. This diminution of importance follows the same pattern for Marian Halcombe in *The Woman in White*. As I have argued elsewhere, Marian takes on the role of female-hero, as a doer and achiever, rather than the passive role of heroine.<sup>1</sup> However, as recent critics have pointed out, despite Marian's vigour and positive activity in the earlier part of the novel, her role declines as the novel progresses towards its climax, with the action propelled by the second hero, Walter Hartright. Sue Lonoff notes that "Laura sustains the novel's love-interest and...Marian may properly subside into a happy maiden aunt."<sup>2</sup> The authors of *Corrupt Relations* conclude;

At the end of the novel Marian remains almost a third partner to the marriage of Hartright and Laura...She has no secure, separate identity.<sup>3</sup>

1. In my M.A. dissertation, "Elements of Melodrama in the Five Major Novels of Wilkie Collins", University of Wales 1980, pp.8-9.
2. Sue Lonoff, *Wilkie Collins and His Victorian Readers* (New York, 1982), p.145.
3. Barickman, MacDonald and Stark, *Corrupt Relations* (New York, 1982), p.119.

However intimate she remains with the Hartridges after their marriage, Marian is never at the centre of the relationship, but remains a peripheral addition, a benign guardian, "the good angel of our lives".<sup>1</sup> At the time of novel's action, Marian is still young, but she is already marked, by Hartright at least, as lacking beauty ("The lady is ugly!"<sup>2</sup>) and the relationship which grows between the two is a friendship based on a common interest in the welfare of Laura Fairlie. As Laura becomes more emotionally important in Hartright's life, Marian's significance is lessened. At no stage is it suggested, either by authorial comment or by any of the novel's other characters, that there is more than friendship between Marian and Hartright; she differs from Miss Clack and Miss Minerva in not harbouring a secret love for the romantic hero. Marian rejects love and marriage, rather than hankering after it; indeed she is ardently admired by Count Fosco, but his attentions disturb her. This rejection may in part be due to what appears to be the latent lesbianism which leads Marian to place Laura, her half-sister, rather than any man, at the centre of her emotional prospects for life. She writes of Laura's marriage to Sir Percival Glyde in terms of possession similar to those reiterated by men in relation to women throughout Collins's fiction;

Before another month is over our heads, she will be *his* Laura instead of mine! *His* Laura! I am as little able to realize the idea which those two words convey...as if writing of her marriage were like writing of her death.<sup>3</sup>

In giving her a traditionally male role, the active "hero", Collins has allied Marian with other male characters in his fiction; a concomitant to her striving for her sister's welfare is her proprietorial regard for Laura's person, and to a degree

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*, vol.3, p.368.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.1, p.47.
3. *Ibid.*, vol.1, p.300.

she, like the malign Sir Percival, or the benign Hartright, looks on Laura as a possession rather than as an individual human being. As a character whose gender is in conflict with her chosen role in life, marriage in the normal sense is not appropriate for Marian, and hence the implication that at the end of the novel she gains emotional satisfaction as the third party to the Hartrights' marriage. For herself Marian rejects men and marriage in a passage which has often been quoted as evidence of the strength of Collins's feminist sympathies;

Men! They are the enemies of our innocence and our peace -- they drag us away from our parents' love and our sisters' friendship -- they take us body and soul to themselves, and fasten our helpless lives to theirs as they chain up a dog to his kennel.'

What Marian is protesting against is not marriage for Laura as such -- she offers no protest to her later marriage with Hartright -- but the possession and control of Laura's life and identity by Sir Percival, which will cause a breach between the two half-sisters. Her reaction to the union of Laura and Hartright is entirely different, for she sees that she is only to share Laura with her new husband, not to lose her altogether;

"After all that we three have suffered together," she said, "there can be no parting between us, till the last parting of all. My heart and my happiness, Walter, are with Laura and you."<sup>2</sup>

In inviting herself into the Hartright household, Marian significantly places "Laura" before "you", emphasising the fact that her life as an adjunct to her half-sister's marriage will not be wholly emotionally unfulfilling. However, despite Marian's successful maintenance of her emotional attachment to

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*, vol.1, p.295.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.3, p.358.

Laura, her withdrawal from the field of courtship and marriage forces her, like Miss Minerva or Miss Jillgall into a dependent situation. That so strong an individual as Marian should be so reduced by her choice to remain single, further emphasises the importance which marital status conferred upon women, and the diminution of significance which the lack of it entailed.

Although the reasons which lead Marian to remain single place her in contrast with Miss Clack, Miss Jillgall, and Miss Minerva, her fated role as an outsider is essentially the same. In *The Two Destinies*, Collins presents a woman whose example of unsought spinsterhood and extreme social isolation takes on symbolic form. *The Two Destinies*, as a story of Swedenborgian mysticism and supernatural communication, is deliberately non-realistic, and therefore more than normally open to symbolic interpretation. In the same way that the women I have discussed above are pushed to the fringes of social recognition, Miss Dunross suffers under a tangible physical isolation in a remote house in the Shetlands. Not only does Miss Dunross live separated from social contact with people other than her father and their servants, but she also moves in continual darkness; windows are curtained if she enters a room. The isolation and the perpetual darkness take on symbolic properties in relation to Miss Dunross's social position;

"If you wish to see much of me, Mr. Germaine," she began, "you must accustom yourself to the world of shadows in which it is my lot to live."<sup>1</sup>

Although not old, Miss Dunross's illness has radically reduced her life expectancy, and she is approaching death without hope of finding a loving partner, or being able to marry. Like Miss Jillgall, she finds some emotional consolation in making herself domestically useful;

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Two Destinies*, vol.2, p.2

I can read and write in these shadows -- I can see you and be of use to you in many little ways, if you will let me. There is really nothing to be distressed about. My life will not be a long one -- I know and feel that. But I hope to be spared long enough to be my father's companion through the closing years of his life. Beyond that, I have no prospect.<sup>1</sup>

Like Miss Jillgall and Miss Minerva, Miss Dunross keenly feels the separation from society and the social rituals of courtship and marriage, and she compensates for this loss by creating her own society, and by taking a vicarious interest in George Germaine's love story. To replace the human society with which she has lost contact, Miss Dunross has created her own private society of cats, of which she is the centre; the cats dance round her to the playing of the harp in a strange mockery of human admiration;

The music quickened, and the cats quickened their pace with it. Faster and faster the notes rang out, and faster and faster in the ruddy firelight, the cats like living shadows whirled round the still black figure in the chair, with the ancient harp on its knee. Anything so weird, wild, and ghostlike I never imagined before, even in a dream!<sup>2</sup>

The very strangeness of Miss Dunross's consolation highlights the extent of her separation from the normal, and manifests her role as an outsider. The whole scene, in its atmospheric use of darkness, firelight, and strange movement, recalls Valeria Macallanm's first encounter with Miserrimus Dexter, the most eccentric and most extreme of social outcasts, in Collins's preceding novel *The Law and the Lady*;

Redly illuminating the central portion of the room...the firelight left the extremities shadowed in almost total darkness...A high chair on wheels moved by, through the field of red light, carrying a shadowy figure with floating hair, and arms furiously raised and lowered, working the machinery that propelled the chair at its utmost rate of speed.<sup>3</sup>

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Two Destinies*, vol.2, pp.3-4.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.2, p.12.
3. Wilkie Collins, *The Law and the Lady*, vol.2, p.175.

Both characters live in a closely confined physical space, both play the harp, both are deeply attracted by their unexpected visitors from outside, and both show a vicarious interest in the love problems of others. In Dexter's case this interest is the result of guilt, in Miss Dunross's it is the result of a reawakening of dormant emotions. As Valeria rejects Dexter's unwanted attentions, so George rejects Miss Dunross's love. He echoes the male viewpoint that equates the attraction of physical beauty with love, and justifies his rejection of Miss Dunross by restating the idea that Miss Dunross, in losing her beauty, has lost the power to be loved;

How could I (in the ordinary sense of the word) be in love with a woman whose face I had never seen? whose beauty had faded, never to bloom again? whose wasted life hung by a thread which the accident of a moment might snap? The senses have their share in all love between the sexes which is worthy of the name. They had no share in the feeling with which I regarded Miss Dunross.<sup>1</sup>

The intrusion of George Germaine into her world of isolation leads Miss Dunross into a hopeless love for him which cannot be reciprocated. While Miss Clack's love for Godfrey Ablewhite is purely comic, and Miss Minerva's attachment to Ovid Vere is sad and pathetic, Miss Dunross's love for George becomes a personal tragedy. Miss Clack and Miss Minerva survive their emotions, but Miss Dunross dies with George's locket at her bosom. Miss Dunross is an extreme example of the unmarriageable woman; her social isolation symbolised by her physical isolation in Shetland; her physical beauty not simply faded, but ravaged by disease; her yearning for contact displayed through her society of cats; and the hopelessness of her unrequited love magnified by her death. Miss Dunross makes a statement about herself and her perceived position in life which sums up in metaphysical terms the status of the unwanted woman living half-seen on the very fringes of life; she is only "an impersonal creature -- a

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Two Destinies*, vol.2, pp.34-35.



shadow among shadows."<sup>1</sup>

Miss Dunross's story crosses the borderline between the comic-pathetic and the tragic. Miss Clack, Miss Jillgall, and Miss Minerva have all, through physical causes or the mere passing of time, missed their opportunities for marriage, and, through their lack of marital status and social contact, have faded into insignificance. The intensity of Miss Dunross's situation connects her with a second group of unmarried women in Collins's novels. These women have been involved in courtship or pseudo-marital relationships, but their involvement has led to personal tragedy rather than to happy marriage. For each woman the resulting isolation is not simply the result of social oversight; it is partly due to the consciously chosen state of spiritual spinsterdom or widowhood.

The eponymous heroine of *Antonina* is a young Roman girl who finds her true love in Hermanric, one of the host of revenging Goths who are beseiging Rome. Hermanric is murdered as a result of the actions of the embittered widow Goisvintha, leaving Antonina, unmoved by the love of the Senator Vetrano, to grieve alone;

Vetrano's heart beat quick; the action revived an emotion that he dared not cherish; but he looked at the wan, downcast face before him, at the grave that rose mournful by his side, and quelled it again... Antonina's tears fell fast on the grass beneath, as she resumed her place.<sup>2</sup>

Collins's first published novel is entirely conventional in its treatment of doomed love; the novel does not follow the course of Antonina's sorrow, nor does it endeavour to describe the effects of her chosen state of spiritual widowhood. Instead, Antonina's solitary grieving is presented simply as an

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Two Destinies*, vol.2, p.8.
2. Wilkie Collins, *Antonina*, vol.3, p.331.

effective tableau with which the novel comes to an end.

I have discussed earlier the way in which Mercy Merrick, Mary Van Brandt, and Sally Farnaby are compensated for their rejection by an unforgiving society, and are emotionally and spiritually fulfilled by their marriages to Julian Gray, George Germaine, and Amelius Goldenheart respectively. Like Mercy, Mary and Sally, Miss Jethro in "*I Say No*", is an outcast, fallen woman, who is offered a last chance of happiness with a man who forgives, and wishes to marry her. Miss Jethro's past is another straightforward repetition of the Magdalen story;

It was the common story of sin bitterly repented, and of vain effort to recover the lost place in social esteem. Too well known a story, surely, to be told again.<sup>1</sup>

Unlike Mercy, Mary, or Sally, Miss Jethro irrevocably rejects the offer of social and spiritual salvation, and turns down the offer of marriage made to her by James Brown. She answers his final imploring letter with a simple note -- "I Say No" -- and Brown in despair commits suicide, an act which being misinterpreted as murder sets in motion the mystery plot of the novel. Miss Jethro accepts society's condemnation of her moral fall, and regards herself as unfit for love and marriage;

Have I any right to love? Could I disgrace an honourable man by allowing him to marry me?<sup>2</sup>

In keeping secret Brown's suicide, Miss Jethro inflicts a further degree of punishment and isolation upon herself. Because of her manner she is shunned and disliked, but she is also ready to ward off overtures of friendship with self-revelatory warnings;

1. Wilkie Collins, "*I Say No*", vol.3, p.296.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.3, pp.305-306.

You can never be *my* friend...If you do despise me, it is after all no more than I have deserved...I am not a fit person for you to associate with.<sup>1</sup>

In accepting and even reinforcing her own rejection by society, Miss Jethro commits an act of spiritual suicide; she denies herself any meaningful future life. She comes to regard herself as untouchable and emotionally dead;

Say for me to [James Brown's] daughter, that the grateful remembrance of her is my one refuge from the thoughts that tortured me, when we spoke together on her last night at school. She has made this dead heart of mine feel a reviving breath of life, when I think of her.<sup>2</sup>

*The New Magdalen*, *The Fallen Leaves* and *The Two Destinies* all end optimistically with the hope that despite the condemnation of English Society, the newly-wedded couples will find happiness in each other's company elsewhere in the world. "*I Say No*" presents the example of a woman who accepts rather than rebels against moral condemnation; she suffers not only the physical and social isolation of the unmarried state, but also the spiritual death of self-hatred and grief. While Miss Jillgall, Miss Minerva, and Miss Halcombe are forced to retreat into the background, but maintain a tenuous presence even at the end of each novel in which they appear, Miss Jethro is completely removed from "*I Say No*"; symbolically the last reference to her is of disappearance;

"Never, in our earthly pilgrimage, shall we meet again...Farewell, Mr. Morris; farewell for ever."

"I confess that the tears came into my eyes. When I could see clearly again, I was alone in the room."<sup>3</sup>

For the fallen woman unable, or unwilling to find redemption through love and marriage, the consequence is social and spiritual annihilation.

1. Wilkie Collins, "*I Say No*", vol.1, pp.41-42.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.3, p.309.
3. *Ibid.*, vol.3, p.309.

In Collins's fourth novel, *The Dead Secret*, Sarah Leeson unwillingly hides and keeps two secrets which set her apart from the rest of society and force her into a state of almost total isolation. She knows that she has an illegitimate daughter, Rosamond, the offspring of her relationship with a recently deceased miner named Polwheal; she knows further that the same child has been taken from her by her mistress, and imposed upon her master, Captain Treverton, as his own child, and heir to the family estate of Porthgenna. Her own sense of guilt at her hidden "sin", coupled with the desperate attempts of the dying Mrs Treverton to reveal the truth, lead Sarah to take drastic action; she hides the written evidence and proceeds to disappear. Unable to disobey her mistress's final wish, and yet unable publicly to acknowledge her shame, Sarah is left with only one option; self-imposed exile from Porthgenna. In cutting herself off from home, relatives and friends, Sarah enters a state of both physical and social isolation. Her relationship with Polwheal, ended by his untimely death, thus ultimately results in Sarah's isolated spinsterhood.

When Sarah reappears in the novel it is under the new name of Mrs Jazeph. Technically Sarah is now a widow, but this change is merely an authorial convenience, for by altering Sarah's surname and title, Collins attempts to keep her true identity secret for a few chapters. Talking to her Uncle Joseph of her marriage, Sarah reveals that it was never a genuine love union;

I had no love to give to my husband -- no love to give to any man...I married him because I was too weak to persist in saying No!...He is gone; he is dead -- I have got my release; I have given my pardon!'

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Dead Secret*, vol.1, pp.258-260.

Sarah's marriage affects only her name; she continues to live in a state of isolation akin to the unmarried state of the women discussed above, rather than having gained a measure of independence as have the widows whom I shall discuss in a later chapter.

Miss Clack, Miss Jillgall and Miss Minerva, in their reduced state, have no role in the social hierarchy; even the ebullient Marian Halcombe can best be socially defined as a maiden-aunt. Sarah has a role, that of mother to Rosamond, but her self-imposed silence denies her the right to the happy fulfilment of that role. When she is fortuitously reunited with her daughter, the conflict between her secret guilt and her long-thwarted maternal instincts is displayed in her apparently eccentric behaviour. To the characters in the novel, unaware of the truth, Sarah's actions are comic, mysterious, disturbing, and create a further barrier of separation between them; to the reader Sarah's actions are moving and pathetic as she longs to touch and caress her long-lost child, but is unable to give her emotions full play;

But, from some inexplicable reason, Mrs. Jazeph's touch, light and tender as it was, had such a strangely disconcerting effect on her, that she could not succeed, for the moment, in collecting her thoughts so as to reply, except in the briefest manner. The careful hands of the nurse lingered with a stealthy gentleness among the locks of her hair; the pale, wasted face of the new nurse approached, every now and then, more closely to her own than appeared at all needful.'

As the mother of an illegitimate child Sarah is a fallen woman akin to Mary Van Brandt; to acknowledge the truth would result in social condemnation and ostracism. Ironically, by choosing to keep her secret for many years Sarah has made herself an outcast, and because, unlike Mary, she has left her daughter behind, she has inflicted a "punishment" upon herself

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Dead Secret*, vol. 1, pp. 197-198.

which is unrelieved even by the presence and love of her child. Later Sarah's silence is promoted by a third motive; the continued happiness of her daughter and her daughter's new husband, Leonard Frankland. As Miss Minerva teaches herself to sacrifice her own feelings for Ovid Vere so that he may be happy with Carmina, and as Miss Dunross suppresses her growing love for George Germaine so that he may fulfil his destiny to be reunited with Mary Van Brandt, so Sarah forgoes her last chance of fulfilment, as loving mother to her only child, in order that the truth of Rosamond's parentage will not destroy her marriage. A familiar pattern is repeated; a tainted, unwanted or unloved woman must give up all hope of happiness in order to ensure the future of a younger and more conventional generation.

When Rosamond and Leonard learn the truth, Sarah is already dying. Sarah's death is morally convenient; the "sinner" is punished, and the young couple are freed of a lurking social stigma. Like Miss Jethro Sarah is not allowed to have a peripheral but continuing social existence; she has to be removed from contact with other people altogether. By making Sarah die Collins appeased the severe moralistic prejudices of some of his readers, but her death also allowed him to indulge in a sentimental death-bed reunion between mother and daughter in which, for a brief moment at least, Sarah is accepted, loved, fulfilled, and happy;

"Mother!" cried Rosamond, raising her on the pillow. "I have come back. Don't you know me?"

"Mother?" she repeated in mournful, questioning tones. "Mother?" At the second repetition of the word a bright flush of delight and surprise broke out on her face, and she clasped both arms suddenly round her daughter's neck. "Oh, my own Rosamond!" she said.'

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Dead Secret*, vol.2, p.299.

Sarah is thus like the other unmarried women of Collins's novels; her chance for happiness is slight and brief, she has no socially recognised existence, and like Miss Jethro, once the truth of her life becomes known, she ceases to exist.

Two other women in Collins's novels, although technically unmarried, have relationships with men which are akin to marriage but which, falling short of the normal and the socially acceptable, condemn the participants. In *No Name* Mr and Mrs Vanstone appear to be a perfectly normal, happily married couple; indeed the opening chapter of the novel lays great stress on the domestic bliss of the household at Combe-Raven. But the Vanstones are not legally married, for Mr Vanstone has an estranged wife living abroad, and Mrs Vanstone has assumed that name and status in order that she may live in apparently respectable circumstances with the man whom she loves. As with Sarah Leeson in *The Dead Secret*, social morality is appeased; once the truth is known, and the union finally legalised after Mr Vanstone has become a widower, Mrs Vanstone dies, in childbirth. Although Mrs Vanstone escapes the social condemnation and ostracism which would have resulted had she lived on, she is overtaken by a greater "punishment" in death. *No Name* then concentrates on the effect of the Vanstones' unmarried but happy life on their two illegitimate daughters, Norah and Magdalen. Through the mouth of the family lawyer, Mr Pendril, Collins questions the righteousness of the posthumous social rejection of Mrs Vanstone;

Let strict morality claim its right, and condemn her early fault. I have read my New Testament to little purpose indeed, if Christian mercy may not soften the hard sentence against her -- if Christian charity may not find a plea for her memory in the love and fidelity, the suffering and the sacrifice of her whole life.'

This passage in laying the blame, and demanding mercy for the

1. Wilkie Collins, *No Name*, vol.1, p.183.

sinning woman emphasises the fact that social disapproval for sexual nonconformity falls rarely, if ever, on men. Mr Vanstone, who has left his true wife and is an equal partner in the non-marital relationship, is neither blamed, nor even mentioned by Mr Pendril; all attention is focussed on Mrs Vanstone. However, notwithstanding the apology for a woman's sacrifice, the action of the novel hardly suggests that, until her death at least, Mrs Vanstone's choice has led to any suffering. Although Mrs Vanstone is technically unmarried, the moral force of the novel, through the depiction of life in the Vanstone household, suggests that in all senses but the merely legal, the Vanstones are "married". Society's refusal to accept the validity of a loving union outside the law leads to Norah and Magdalen losing both their social identity and their financial birthright; society assumes the role of deity in condemning the woman and visiting her sins upon her children.

In *The Law and the Lady* Ariel, a masculine woman, lives with, and acts as servant to her cousin, the feminine Miserrimus Dexter. As I have discussed earlier, the two enact a strange parody of marriage in which gender and roles are reversed and confused, so as to highlight the role-reversal in the marriage of the hero and heroine, Valeria and Eustace Macallan. Ariel is in all respects a social outcast; living with the hermit-like Dexter she is isolated from contact with humanity at large; her unusual appearance and masculine attributes and manner further set her apart from members of her own sex. She is entirely devoted to Dexter, who merely treats her as alternately a slave and an amusing plaything. As owner of the house, and also Ariel's guardian or employer, Dexter has total control over the domain in which she can continue to exist. When Dexter dies Ariel is left with no place to live, and no person to relate to; without Dexter she has no meaningful existence, she cannot be accepted into normal society, and her isolation is taken to its logical conclusion in her death. Thus Ariel has an identity and role only in



relation to a man with whom she lives in a non-marital union. When that union is dissolved by death she loses everything, she becomes totally outcast, unrecognised by society, and like Miss Jethro or Sarah Leeson she follows her social and spiritual annihilation by a physical one, death.

Thus, for those women who have to some degree been involved in marital relationships without the legal and moral sanction of a "true" marriage, some form of social "punishment" follows. Sarah Leeson is driven into eccentricity and denied an outlet for her maternal instincts; Mrs Vanstone is struck down and has the status of social outcast which she escaped in life passed on after death to her children; and Ariel is made to depend for her very existence upon the whims of the demented Dexter. Through these characters, as through the other unmarried women in his novels, Collins shows that those not involved in the institution of marriage are or become outcast, with little or no status or identity in life; at best ignored, at worst condemned.

As I have shown, with the exception of the comic and grotesque Miss Clack, the unloved or unmarried women of Collins's novels are portrayed with sympathy. Marian Halcombe and Sarah Leeson are entirely sympathetic central characters in *The Woman in White* and *The Dead Secret*, while Miss Minerva, Miss Jillgall, Miss Jethro, Mrs Vanstone and Ariel are each treated with sympathy and understanding, rather than condemnation and rejection, by the moral keystone figures in the novels in which they each appear. Collins does not dismiss these women or, except in the case of Miss Clack, mock them. A positive solution to the problem of the outcast woman is offered in *The New Magdalen*, *The Two Destinies*, and *The Fallen Leaves* -- religion and true love triumphing over reactionary social condemnation. But in each of these novels the heroine is still young and beautiful; each has committed an error that has been repented, and the force of the moral argument in each

novel is towards the reintegration of the penitent fallen woman into a recognised social position. In *Poor Miss Finch* a different solution is offered. Lucilla Finch is neither ageing, sinful, nor lacking in beauty, but she is both physically and metaphorically crippled by blindness;

There was no deformity; there was nothing to recoil from, in my blind Lucilla. The poor, dim, sightless eyes had a faded, changeless, inexpressive look -- and that was all...A more charming creature -- with that one sad drawback -- I never saw.<sup>1</sup>

Like Miss Dunross in her self-imposed darkness, Lucilla lives in a state of physical as well as social isolation. Her home is in a small out-of-the-way village in the heart of the Sussex Downs, she has separate rooms on her own in her father's house, and she is sightless. But her blindness is and can be cured, she leaves Dimchurch and encounters life elsewhere, and comes to the point of marriage with a handsome and desirable man, Nugent Nubourg. But Lucilla's experience of life outside Dimchurch, of society, and of love are not as she expected. She is cheated by Nugent, who is not the man she believes him to be, and her problems are resolved when, failing to heed her oculist's advice, she overstrains her eyes and goes blind again. Returned to a state of isolation Lucilla can marry Oscar Dubourg, Nugent's twin, who like Lucilla is an outcast. Oscar is both the innocent defendant of a notorious murder trial, and also an epileptic who has been treated with silver nitrate which has disfigured his skin. Thus the blind woman and the blue man can find happiness together. The plot of *Poor Miss Finch*, which may seem absurd in abbreviated form is convincing in execution, and offers a serious solution to the plight of the outcast and isolated woman; marriage to an outcast man.

Amelius Goldenheart, the hero of *The Fallen Leaves* goes

1. Wilkie Collins, *Poor Miss Finch*, vol.1, p.29.

further, and promotes as a tenet of Christian Socialism the need to involve, care for, and reintegrate such social misfits. The Christian Socialist Community at Tadmor, Illinois, accepts into its midst a Miss Mellicent;

Miss Mellicent was not beautiful, and not young. When she came to us, she was thirty-eight years old, and time and trial had set their marks on her face plainly enough for anybody to see.<sup>1</sup>

Miss Mellicent, like Miss Clack, Miss Jillgall and Miss Minerva, is past her youth, without beauty, isolated and sad; like them she develops a hopeless love for a young man who rejects her (Amelius). At first the Community recognises Miss Mellicent's plight and instead of rejection, offers Christian consolation, and a sanctuary from the world. However, Miss Mellicent's love for Amelius contravenes the rules of the Community, and both she and Amelius are sent into temporary exile. Even here the position of an older woman who is unmarried, and still expecting to find fulfilment in life, is seen to be unacceptable. In the novels I have discussed earlier in this chapter Collins recognises and describes the plight of the unmarried women; in *The Fallen Leaves* he expresses most strongly his sympathy for them. Indeed the novel, in its treatment of love, marriage, spinsterhood, marriage breakdown, motherhood, and prostitution is the most radically sympathetic to the downtrodden status of women in Victorian Society of all those that Collins wrote. It is Rufus Dingwell, the radical American, who states that the world is hard on women; it is he also who points out the inequality inherent in the male rejection of unmarried women;

"A woman close on forty who falls in love with a young fellow of twenty-one---"

"Is a laughable circumstance," Rufus interposed. "Whereas a man of forty who fancies a young woman of twenty-one is all in the order

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Fallen Leaves*, vol.1, p.85.

of Nature. The men have settled it so. But why the women are to give up so much sooner than the men is a question, sir, on which I have long wished to hear the sentiments of the women themselves."<sup>1</sup>

This problem is one which Collins examines in novel after novel, but for which he can offer no convincing solution, only sympathy.

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Fallen Leaves*, vol.1, p.98.

Chapter Five  
Widows

As I have shown, the lives of the unmarried women in Collins's novels reveal recurring patterns of social isolation, rejection, diminution, and destruction. Collins acknowledges and emphasises the fact that the world is hard on unmarried women; as a result of their lack of married status these women are rendered powerless; as a result of their lack of power they are perpetually denied the ability to improve their lot in life. Since men wield the social and economic power of the world, marriage, as an alliance of women with men, provides the women with access to power. Widowhood is different from spinsterhood; widows have been married and so, through their husbands, they have gained a social status. The death of her partner leaves the widow as heir to the power that was her husband's; widowhood offers a woman the possibility of having social standing and financial security combined with independence and freedom.

Whereas the unmarried women are weakened by their failure or inability to marry and ally themselves with men, the widows may be strengthened, enriched, and freed by their marriages. Collins portrays the unmarried women sympathetically; as they are largely powerless he shows the ways in which they compromise their desires in order to survive or, like Miss Jethro, annihilate themselves. Collins's treatment of widows is different; they have at least a degree of social recognition and power, and they are judged by the ways in which they use, fail to use, or misuse their power.

Collins's major novels of the 1860's are deeply concerned with those power struggles within marriage which are principally financial in origin. The marital progress of Magdalen Vanstone in *No Name* clearly defines the way in which a struggle for financial power may be inherent in marriage. At the start of the novel Magdalen loses both her parents and finds herself, as an illegitimate child, bereft of both name and money. As an unmarried woman she is of no social consequence, reduced to living on the love and goodwill of her former governess, Miss Garth. Her decision to marry her cousin Noel Vanstone is the fruit of her knowledge that such a union will both legitimise her name and status, and give her access to the wealth which Noel has inherited and which she regards as her birthright. After Noel's sudden death Magdalen expects to maintain her recognised status as Mrs Vanstone, and as her husband's widow and natural heir, to regain complete control over her lost fortune, as well as resuming her independent state, free from any encumbrances in the way of children. However, events do not go according to plan, and Magdalen is forced into further acts of criminal subterfuge in order to try to achieve her aim.

Collins does not emphasise the importance of Magdalen's status as a *widow*, but two important elements emerge from the story in relation to this widowhood; the restrictions on the personal use of power, and the importance of the widow's maternal role. Magdalen expects to be able to use her power for herself; eventually she learns that she can only use it for others. She can help her maidservant Louisa and unconsciously aid her sister Norah so that she meets and eventually marries George Bartram. Towards Louisa Magdalen acts as a guardian, advising her and helping her towards a marriage of her own; she thus provides maternal guidance to a younger and less experienced person. These two elements recur throughout Collins's treatment of widowhood.

The power of widowhood is not derived from the character of the women themselves, but is inherited from their husbands. Society recognises primarily male power, either wielded by a man, or by proxy by his widow. Thus a widow's status depends on her deceased husband and not upon herself. The use of power is also restricted; widows are not accepted as female equivalents to men, but as trustees. They are knowledgeable and influential members of an older generation who can influence the actions of the young *in loco parentis*. As the principal characters in Collins's novels are usually the young romantic leads, the widow stands behind them to exert her influence on the development of the romantic and other strands of the story. If she has children, she directs them as a mother; if she has no children of her own, her influence is as a surrogate mother figure.

The widows in Collins's fiction have all gained some form of power from marriage. Like men they have the choice to wield their power for good or for ill, heroically or villainously. Usually their heroism or villainy is secondary to the male-dominated action of the plot. In *Armadale*, Lydia Gwilt is guided in her nefarious plans to entrap Allan Armadale by Mrs Oldershaw, whom she calls Mother Oldershaw. In *The Two Destinies* Mrs Germaine attempts to give her son George guidance in what she sees as a dangerous entanglement with a married woman, Mary Van Brandt. At one point she acts as a go-between for the two young people in order to protect their reputations. In *The Law and the Lady*, Mrs Macallan, feeling responsible for her son Eustace's desertion of his wife, sets herself up as a guide and guardian to help her daughter-in-law Valeria. It is Mrs Macallan who helps Valeria to meet Miserrimus Dexter, and who also helps to affect a reconciliation between the estranged couple. In *The Black Robe*, Mrs Eyrecourt is initially presented as a giddy widow living the high life. However, when

Stella's reputation and happiness are threatened as a result of Lewis Romaine's flight to Rome, Mrs Eyrecourt steps into the situation and sacrifices her own pleasures to protect her daughter and grandchild. In *Heart and Science* the old duenna Teresa returns to London from Italy, once her husband's death has left her an independent widow, in order to devote herself to caring for her surrogate child Carmina, who is embroiled in the schemes of her wicked aunt, Mrs Gallilee. In *The Evil Genius*, Mrs Presty acts as adviser to her daughter Catherine when she becomes embroiled in the scandal arising from her husband's adultery and the couple's subsequent divorce. Her advice is pragmatic and often unsound, so that Catherine's plight is worsened rather than alleviated.

In one novel, however, the *central* conflict of good and evil, is entirely female-centred. *Jezebel's Daughter* is one of Collins's later novels, written after the much-criticized *The Fallen Leaves*. In response to the hostility with which the critics greeted the earlier novel, Collins set out in *Jezebel's Daughter* to move away from Christian Socialism, satire and social propaganda back towards a simple and straightforward sensation novel; creating a strong, exciting, melodramatic plot climaxing in the revitalising of an apparent corpse in the Frankfurt Dead House. *Jezebel's Daughter* is Collins's most obvious potboiler, and as such it has received sparse critical attention. Robert Ashley, in his *Wilkie Collins*, refers to it once merely as "Collins's most readable novel between *The Law and the Lady* and *Heart and Science*."<sup>1</sup> Arthur Compton-Rickett, acknowledging the step backwards, notes that "[Collins] returns once again to his old *métier*"<sup>2</sup>, while Sue Lonoff in her extensive treatment of Collins dismisses the novel as simply "among the weakest books

1. Robert Ashley, *Wilkie Collins* (London, 1952), p.124.
2. Arthur Compton-Rickett "Wilkie Collins", *The Bookman* 42 (June 1912), p.109.



he ever wrote."<sup>1</sup> The novel is undeniably contrived, but it is not entirely devoid of interest, and it is surprising that the conflict between two strong women, Mrs Wagner and Madame Fontaine, has not provoked more interest. The novel provides a clear picture of both sides of widowhood, and is central to any discussion of Collins's treatment of the subject.

The novel opens with a comparison between the Wagners and the Fontaines;

In the matter of Jezebel's Daughter, my recollections begin with the deaths of two foreign gentlemen, in two different countries, on the same day of the same year.

They were both men of some importance in their way, and both strangers to each other.

Mr. Ephraim Wagner, merchant (formerly of Frankfort-on-the-Main), died in London on the third day of September, 1828.

Doctor Fontaine -- famous in his time for discoveries in experimental chemistry -- died at Würzburg on the third day of September, 1828.

Both the merchant and the doctor left widows. The merchant's widow (an Englishwoman) was childless. The doctor's widow (of a South German family) had a daughter to console each other.<sup>2</sup>

This passage swiftly establishes a number of relevant facts. It starts with the men, expresses their importance, and, by the structure of the sentences, it implies their similarity. The passage moves on to the widows as persons of secondary importance, as the heirs to their husbands, and emphasises their dissimilarities. This is one of the central plot concepts of *Jezebel's Daughter*; the way in which the different personalities of the widows affect the inheritance of power from their dead husbands.

Mrs Wagner inherits everything that was her husband's: social status, wealth, and power. As the words of Mr Wagner's

1. Sue Lonoff, *Wilkie Collins and His Victorian Readers* (New York, 1982), p.137.
2. Wilkie Collins, *Jezebel's Daughter*, vol.1, pp.3-4.

will make clear, it is his intention that his wife should carry on his life and business from the point where he leaves it;

The fourth clause left the whole of the testator's property, in lands and in money, absolutely to his widow...he appointed her sole executrix of his will.

The sixth and last clause began in these words:-

"During my long illness, my dear wife has acted as my secretary and representative...I really act in the best interests of the firm of which I am the head, when I hereby appoint my widow as my sole successor in the business, with all the powers and privileges appertaining thereto.<sup>1</sup>

Mr Wagner's will thus strengthens his wife's position as a widow, by adding business power to the natural inheritance. Mrs Wagner is thus able to assimilate all the power that was her husband's, in property, status, and in career, into her new role as widow. Mr Wagner has gone further than a normal husband in improving the lot of his widow; he is an early supporter of feminism, who seeks to hand over some of the province of male influence to women, and his will is a final expression of the belief which motivates his treatment of women in general;

Thinking the subject over in his own independent way, he had arrived at the conclusion that there were many employments reserved exclusively for men, which might with perfect propriety be also thrown open to capable and deserving women...The scandal produced in the city by this daring innovation is remembered to the present day by old men like me. My master's audacious experiment prospered nevertheless, in spite of scandal.<sup>2</sup>

Mrs Wagner not only inherits her husband's material possessions, but also his ideals; she plans to take his progressive plans to the business in Frankfurt; she also takes up his ideas on the treatment of the mentally ill. Going against the wishes of her advisers, she rescues and

1. Wilkie Collins, *Jezebel's Daughter*, vol.1, pp.6-7.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.1, pp.14-15.

rehabilitates Jack Straw from his incarceration in Bedlam, and, as the novel progresses, events prove Mrs Wagner to have made a wise and humane decision. Mrs Wagner uses her acquired power to nurture life, to help women and the mentally ill towards happiness and fulfilment. Her care for Jack is duly rewarded; it is he who unconsciously provides her with the antidote to the fatal poison which she has been given. As she saves him from Bedlam, he in turn saves her life, and these events justify Mrs Wagner's original decision to take Jack into her household. Mrs Wagner is shown to be right in taking over her husband's ideals; she takes on the mantle of male power and uses it wisely.

Madame Fontaine is Mrs Wagner's opposite; rather than acting altruistically she uses her inheritance of power to further her own personal ends. She is motivated by an intense devotion to the happiness of her daughter Minna, but she is totally corrupt in her actions on the child's behalf, being prepared to poison and murder in order to ensure that Minna is happily married. Her husband, Doctor Fontaine was a chemist who had experimented with recreating the Borgia poisons;

I have been anxious, in the first place, to enlarge the list of curative medicines having poison for one of their ingredients. I have attempted, in the second place, to discover antidotes to the deadly action of those poisons, which (in cases of crime or accident) might be the means of saving life.<sup>1</sup>

Thus by attempting to turn the Borgia poisons to good use, Dr Fontaine, like Mr Wagner, seeks to enhance life. Aware of the dangers of these chemicals in the wrong hands, Doctor Fontaine leaves explicit instructions in his will as to their disposal. Unlike Mrs Wagner, Madame Fontaine refuses to accept the posthumous guidance of her husband; she rebels against his will and secretly takes his chest of poisons as her inheritance. As

1. Wilkie Collins, *Jezebel's Daughter*, vol.1, p.87.

Mrs Wagner continues her husband's beneficial work, so in contrast Madame Fontaine perverts her husband's beneficial work to evil ends. Mrs Wagner sees the power imbued in her by widowhood as a trust to be used for others; Madame Fontaine sees the power as a possession, a weapon, and a servant to her will;

"Power!" she thought, with a superb smile of triumph "The power that I have dreamed of all my life is mine at last! Alone among mortal creatures, I have Life and Death for my servants...I stand here, a dweller in a populous city -- and every creature in it, from highest to lowest, is a creature in my power!"<sup>1</sup>

The opposition between Mrs Wagner and Madame Fontaine can be expressed as simply that between life-enhancing and death-seeking women. As older figures influencing a younger generation their roles are akin to the archetypes of folklore; Mrs Wagner is a "fairy godmother" and Madame Fontaine a "wicked step-mother". The opposing influence of these two "mothers" is clearly displayed in their contrasting relationships with Jack Straw.

Jack is in Bedlam as a result of his tampering with one of Dr Fontaine's experiments; he is rescued as a result of Mr Wagner's ideals. Under the motherly care of Mrs Wagner, Jack grows from a state of great mental disturbance to one of childish simplicity. He is simply retarded, maintaining a child's spirit and personality in an adult body. Collins emphasises Jack's childlike nature; he is "as fond of sweet things as a child"<sup>2</sup>, and awaits exciting events "like a child waiting to see a promised toy"<sup>3</sup>. Mrs Wagner responds to him affectionately, and like a mother she comforts him when he is upset;

1. Wilkie Collins, *Jezebel's Daughter*, vol.2, pp.204-205.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.2, p.237.
3. *Ibid.*, vol.2, p.248.

Mrs Wagner was not the woman to resist this expression of the poor little man's feeling. In a moment she was at the window comforting him and drying his eyes, as if he had been a child.<sup>1</sup>

Madame Fontaine, upon the other hand, speaks of Jack as an entertaining oddity -- "My dear madam, Jack amuses me." -- but at the same time she regards him as both foolish and dangerous, as a person to be mistrusted and watched rather than coddled and loved;

That feeble little creature might do some serious mischief...<sup>2</sup>

Mrs Wagner shows trust in Jack; she allows him to guard her keys and money, and he repays her trust with gratitude. Madame Fontaine distrusts Jack; she taunts him with the knowledge of her poisons, but refuses to give him access to what she claims is a wonderful tonic.

These events and attitudes reflect, at a simple level, the good and evil sides of the two widows. However, they also have important implications for the development of the plot, which makes the opposing maternal relationships between the widows and Jack a central feature. When Mrs Wagner is poisoned by Madame Fontaine, Jack uses the keys with which he has been entrusted to break into Madame Fontaine's cupboard and obtain the antidote; at the same time he takes the poison which he has been led to believe is a tonic, and he later gives this to Madame Fontaine, thereby killing her. The influence of the mother figures is paid back in kind by the surrogate son; Jack gives life to the life-enhancing Mrs Wagner, and death to the death-dealing Madame Fontaine.

1. Wilkie Collins, *Jezebel's Daughter*, vol.2, p.279.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.2, p.244.
3. *Ibid.*, vol.2, p.252.

Thus the use of power in widowhood is explored in *Jezebel's Daughter* in the opposing treatment of Jack by Mrs Wagner and Madame Fontaine. At the same time the novel's presentation of their different states emphasises the ways in which marriage and widowhood have both extended and curtailed their lives. Mrs Wagner has become a female embodiment of her husband, and she succeeds because she strictly follows the path laid out for her by him. Madame Fontaine has rebelled against the will and authority of her late husband, and as I have already shown in "Marriage, Money and Power" such rebellion entails moral corruption. Although widowhood gives the two women independence, their legacies also limit their freedom, and when Madame Fontaine steps outside the path of duty prescribed for her it leads inevitably to her destruction. *Jezebel's Daughter* thus shows the influence of marriage and the authority of the husband reaching beyond the grave.

The good widows in Collins's fiction are those, like Mrs Wagner, who attempt to use the power and influence of their widowhood altruistically. They range across a spectrum of strength and importance from the weak Mrs Vesey in *The Woman in White* to the domineering Madame Pratolungo in *Poor Miss Finch*. At the lesser end of the spectrum the widows are minor figures who exercise their power and responsibility with regard to the younger generation either passively or ineffectively. In *The Woman in White* Mrs Vesey is Laura Fairlie's old governess, and her extreme passivity is symbolised by her sedentary lifestyle; she sits whenever and wherever possible. She is like a second mother to Laura, and Marian writes of her coming "to visit her pupil -- I might almost say her adopted child"<sup>1</sup>. Similarly Mrs Clements acts as maternal guardian to Laura's half-sister and double Anne Catherick, saying that the "poor thing was as good as my own child to me"<sup>2</sup>. For both women

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*, vol.2, p.8.

2. *Ibid.* vol.3, p.92.

widowhood has given them the independence to devote themselves to the care of a young woman, but for each simple kindness proves to be no match for the insidious aggression of Sir Percival Glyde and Count Fosco.

Apart from Mrs Wagner, the two most important and influential benevolent widows in Collins's fiction are Madame Pratolungo in *Poor Miss Finch* and Lady Janet Roy in *The New Magdalen*. Both of these women are central characters in the novels in which they appear, and each, like Mrs Wagner, plays a significant role as a surrogate or adoptive mother which relates to her inheritance from her late husband.

Madame Pratolungo is the widow of a South American revolutionary patriot. In the opening chapter of *Poor Miss Finch* she briefly describes her marriage and the effect which it has had upon her character, status and lifestyle, and her principal inheritance from the late Doctor Pratolungo;

To these qualifications I added another, the most precious of all, when I married the Doctor; namely -- a strong infusion of ultra-liberal principles. *Vive la République!*'

His death leaves her an independent woman "with nothing but the inheritance of my husband's noble sentiments to console me". At the start of the novel Madame Pratolungo is a widow seeking an independent income and with nothing but her widowed status, her musical talents, and her inherited beliefs to sustain her; in seeking employment she is searching for a sphere in which to put these powers to good use. This she achieves by becoming companion to the blind Lucilla Finch, the novel's heroine.

The introduction of the exotic Madame Pratolungo into

1. Wilkie Collins, *Poor Miss Finch*, vol.1, p.2.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.1, p.4.

the sleepy atmosphere of Dimchurch, and Collins's use of her as the novel's principal narrator serves two purposes. The events of the story, relating to blindness, epilepsy, a man turning blue, and identical twin brothers, are strange and extravagant, even by Collins's standards; Madame Pratolungo's unusual character, introduced at the outset, helps to prepare the reader for future developments, and also helps to distance the story from the reader thereby rendering its events more credible.

Once she is established in Lucilla's home, Madame Pratolungo rapidly develops a maternal relationship with Lucilla, and attempts to guide her through the difficulties of her romantic entanglements with Oscar and Nugent Dubourg. Collins clearly shows that Lucilla is bereft of normal parental guidance and friendship. Lucilla lives in a separate wing of her father's house, as a rent-paying tenant. Her father is remarried and he and his new wife have a large family of young children. Although the members of her family use her as a source of income, they give her nothing in return. Madame Pratolungo fills the missing place in Lucilla's life. Within a day of arriving she is telling her new charge "Tonight you must be only my child. Come and let me put you to bed"<sup>1</sup>, and she then comments to herself;

When I had left her for the night, I could hardly have felt more tenderly interested in her if she had been really a child of my own.<sup>2</sup>

Thus within five chapters Collins has firmly established the revolutionary widow as the second mother to the blind girl living in a quiet Sussex village. The freedom of action that her widowhood has conferred upon her is being used altruistically to provide maternal companionship to a

1. Wilkie Collins, *Poor Miss Finch*, vol.1, p.57.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.1, p.57.



motherless girl; her adopted revolutionary fervour is being adapted to domestic use.

At intervals throughout the novel, Madame Pratolungo is called away to deal with her father in Paris, and her relationship with him is itself an ironic image of motherhood. Madame Pratolungo's father is a foolish old man who is constantly getting into entanglements with undesirable young women. Madame Pratolungo exchanges roles with her parent, and Collins emphasises this reversal through his description of the old man's false youthfulness;

The venerable victim had gone the length of renewing his youth, in respect of his teeth, his hair, his complexion, and his figure (this last involving the purchase of a pair of stays).<sup>1</sup>

Madame Pratolungo becomes the apparently older and wiser figure who advises and directs, and who has a wide knowledge of the ways of the world; he becomes the young and foolish adolescent, innocent of the wiles of the young women who pursue him, and intent on following his own emotions. Madame Pratolungo has to mother her own father as if he were her own wayward son

Thus, like Mrs Wagner, Madame Pratolungo's main function within the novel is determined in relation to her roles as a surrogate mother. Like Mrs Wagner she does not act out of self-interest, but attempts to use her independent status wisely for the good of others. In England Madame Pratolungo protects Lucilla and guides her towards a happy marriage with Oscar Dubourg; in France she protects her father by preventing him from foolishly marrying any one of a series of young goldiggers. As an independent widow herself, Madame Pratolungo is fit and competent to advise her charges on the question of marriage. For Madame Pratolungo the two maternal

1. Wilkie Collins, *Poor Miss Finch*, vol.1, p.222.

roles produce unwanted conflict, but Collins uses this conflict positively to advance the action. The plot of the novel is enabled to progress by his use of absence; Collins ensures that Madame Pratolungo is not always available in England to protect Lucilla, and her father gets into further misadventures because she is not always in France to help him there, and each conflicting demand upon Madame Pratolungo strengthens the call of the other demand. At a critical moment in the novel her father becomes involved in an elopement; Madame Pratolungo goes to France to rescue him and thereby leaves a clear stage for Lucilla's unfortunate elopement with Nugent Dubourg. The two conflicting catastrophes ironically complement each other. However, Madame Pratolungo is not defeated by the conflicting demands; her strength of character allows her to fulfil both her roles successfully.

Unlike Mrs Vesey or Mrs Clements, Madame Pratolungo has real power, which she exercises in order to fulfil her maternal roles. She has, unlike Mrs Wagner, no physical, financial, or commercial power; her strength is vested entirely in her own personality, as informed by liberal republicanism. She does not bow to the conventions of meekness and servitude in women, and she tells Nugent Dubourg;

I have a hearty contempt for threats of all sorts, and a steady resolution in me to say what I think.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, like Marian Halcombe in *The Woman in White*, Madame Pratolungo is prepared to take the offensive in order to achieve her desired ends: in Paris she takes steps to expose the past of the latest young adventuress to engage her father's affection; in Dimchurch she is prepared to face and outwit Nugent Dubourg to save Lucilla from being duped.

1. Wilkie Collins, *Poor Miss Finch*, vol.2, p.287.

Collins makes Madame Pratolungo aware that Nugent has fallen in love with Lucilla and is prepared to trade upon his similarity with his twin brother in order to win her away from Oscar to himself. Madame Pratolungo is not prepared merely to protect Lucilla passively; she approaches Nugent directly and outwits him by using her intelligence and determination to undermine Nugent's smug belief in his own superiority;

"What do you mean to do?" he asked, keeping his eyes attentively fixed on mine.

"I mean to force you to leave Dimchurch."

He laughed insolently. I went on quietly as before. "You have personated your brother to Lucilla this morning," I said. "You have done that, Mr. Nugent Dubourg, for the last time."

"Have I? Who will prevent me from doing it again?"

"I will."

This time, he took it seriously.

"You?" he said. "How are *you* to control me, if you please."

"I can control you through Lucilla. When I get back to the rectory, I can, and will, tell Lucilla the truth."

Nugent relies on his own prerogative as a man to control and order both his own and other people's lives; he is prepared to cheat his brother and to delude Lucilla for his own pleasure, and he expects to be able to carry out his wishes without outside interference. He thus treats Madame Pratolungo's first warnings with insolence, and it is not until he is aware of her determination to see justice done at any cost that he realises that he is defeated and gives way. Madame Pratolungo plays the role of protective parent, willing to cause her charge pain in order to save her from a worse fate, and courageous in the face of a male aggressor. Her determination is effective; Nugent withdraws from Dimchurch and Lucilla is saved in her innocence for the time being.

Nugent eventually finds another way to Lucilla, and as a result of the conflicting call of duty to her youthful

1. Wilkie Collins, *Poor Miss Finch*, vol.2, p.288.

father, Madame Pratolungo is detained in France. Nugent elopes with Lucilla and plans to marry her. When Madame Pratolungo returns, she is no longer required to be a protectress, but rather a rescuer; she takes on an entirely active role in pursuit of Lucilla's happiness. It is Madame Pratolungo who leads the rescue party that locates Lucilla; it is she who eventually breaks the truth of Nugent's deception to her adopted child; it is she who physically reunites Lucilla with Oscar and ensures that the story will have a happy ending.

Madame Pratolungo thus uses her power beneficially to promote the happy marriage of Lucilla and Oscar, and to defeat the obstacles which threaten to prevent it from taking place. Madame Pratolungo is made to achieve a great deal through the power of her widowhood; without her presence the outcome of events in Dimchurch might well have been tragically different. However, although she is central to the plot of the novel, affecting its development and outcome, within the social structure of the novel she is of secondary importance; she holds and uses her power as a trust which must finally be relinquished to the younger generation. The novel ends with Madame Pratolungo installed in the Dubourg household as "aunty" to the new children. Madame Pratolungo's final destiny clearly echoes that of Marian Halcombe's at the end of *The Woman in White*, and a comparison between the two women and their lives is instructive.

As I have shown earlier, Marian, as an unmarried woman, is a person of no social significance, and as *The Woman in White* moves towards its climax, she gradually drops into the background. Although she is highly active early in the novel, her importance diminishes after the return of Walter Hartright, and she ends the novel as a third party to the Hartright marriage. In *Poor Miss Finch* there is no sense of a diminution of power and importance; Madame Pratolungo maintains the respect and influence due to a widow throughout the story; her

role does not diminish, and she is a vital figure in the resolution of the novel's plot. However, like Marian, Madame Pratolungo's social role is always one of second rank; the exercise of her considerable power is strictly limited to guidance for the younger generation, and is not used for her own improvement. Finally, as a mentor who has helped the Dubourgs towards happiness, Madame Pratolungo is dependent for her future on their gratitude. The novel ends with lines which express the contradictory nature of Madame Pratolungo's controlled freedom;

Well, I have many blessings to comfort me, on closing my relations with you. I have kind souls who love me; and -- observe this! -- I stand on my political principles as firmly as ever. The world is getting converted to my way of thinking: the Pratolungo programme, my friends, is coming to the front with giant steps. Long live the Republic! Farewell.'

Madame Pratolungo acknowledges her dependence upon the "kind souls who love me", yet at the same time expresses her vigorous independence through an assertion of her beliefs; ironically these beliefs are themselves simply inherited from her dead husband. Madame Pratolungo's position is thus a paradoxical one; as a widow she is dependent but also free; yet her freedom is defined and derives ultimately from a man.

Lady Janet Roy, in *The New Magdalen*, although eccentric in her viewpoints, is materially a more conventional and socially well-established widow than Madame Pratolungo;

Where is the modern hermit who is not familiarly acquainted, by hearsay at least, with the fantastic novelty and humour of her opinions; with her generous encouragement of rising merit of any sort, in all ranks, high or low; with her charities, which know no distinction between abroad and at home; with her large indulgence, which no ingratitude can discourage, and no servility pervert? Everybody has heard of the popular old lady -- the childless widow of a long-forgotten lord.

1. Wilkie Collins, *Poor Miss Finch*, vol.3, p.320.

Everybody knows Lady Janet Roy.<sup>1</sup>

This introduction establishes a number of important points pertinent to Lady Janet's widowed status; her popularity and celebrity speak for the fact that her widowhood has established her as an independent and respectable woman within the fabric of society. Her personal status is so firmly based that she is no longer regarded simply as her husband's widow, and he is now "long-forgotten". From him she inherited wealth, social status and power, all of which she has used benignly and altruistically for the good of others. However it is stressed that one thing has not been left to her: a family, for she is childless.

Thus, like Madame Pratolungo, Lady Janet Roy has inherited power and used it for others, without regard to herself. The arrival of Mercy Merrick (personating Grace Roseberry) to act as her companion, alters Lady Janet's long-standing situation, for she finally finds in Mercy the daughter that she never had;

The old lady -- affectionately familiar with her -- speaks to her as she might speak to an adopted child.<sup>2</sup>

Late in life, Lady Janet develops a maternal relationship with a young woman. One element of *The New Magdalen's* plot thus shows the way in which Lady Janet rapidly develops into a mother and how she is morally corrupted by the process.

Like Madame Pratolungo, Lady Janet's moral worth is measured by her use of power to benefit the lives of a younger generation. She treats Mercy like an adopted daughter, and she

1. Wilkie Collins, *The New Magdalen*, vol.1, pp.87-88.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.1, p.89.

regards Horace Holmcroft as almost her own son; as a surrogate mother to both young people she does her best to smooth the path for an early marriage between them. However, Mercy's own remorse at the deceit in which she is embroiled prevents her from simply obeying Lady Janet and, under the influence of Julian Gray, she determines to tell the truth and break the adoptive parental bond that has developed between the two women. As Lady Janet becomes aware of the impending dissolution of her happiness Collins makes her move into a pattern of amoral behaviour; she starts to use her power and influence to prevent Mercy from making any revelation, and thereby to maintain by any means their artificial relationship;

There was something unutterably touching in the keen hungering tenderness of the look which [her eyes] fixed on the portrait, intensified by an underlying expression of fond and patient reproach...The lips were only eloquent of her unflinching resolution to ignore the hateful present and to save the sacred past. "My idol may be shattered, but none of you shall know it. I stop the march of discovery; I extinguish the light of truth. I am deaf to your words, I am blind to your proofs. At seventy years old, my idol is my life. It shall be my idol still.'

Collins describes Lady Janet's maternal instinct as a bodily need, like hunger; as something which is stronger than will power and above rational explanation. Overwhelmed by this emotion Lady Janet is prepared to use her influence for personal ends, to satisfy her own desires. In the early part of the novel Collins stresses the ways in which Lady Janet uses her power altruistically; faced with the prospect of losing Mercy, she becomes selfish, and her selfishness perverts her use of power until she is prepared to fight against truth and honesty in order to preserve her own false ideals. Her selfishness leads her to bribe Grace Roseberry to leave the country, to force Horace to break his engagement with Mercy,

1. Wilkie Collins, *The New Magdalen*, vol.2, pp.116-117.

and to try to tempt Mercy herself into retaining her assumed name for the convenience and comfort of the household. Thus as the novel proceeds Lady Janet moves from the altruism of Mrs Wagner and Madame Pratolungo towards the manipulative egotism of Madame Fontaine; she is driven towards moral corruption by the power of her new maternal desires.

Lady Janet's corrupt motives are defeated by Mercy's determination to tell the truth at any cost. Mercy's confession redeems her in the eyes of Julian Gray; but it redeems Lady Janet as well. Although Lady Janet initially rejects Mercy -- "I never forgive ingratitude, ... Go back to the Refuge" -- she swiftly comes to a full appreciation of her errors. She returns to her earlier mode of behaviour, as a maternal advisor, and having despatched Horace Holmcroft as a suitor for Mercy's hand, she becomes the ardent advocate of her nephew, Julian Gray. Her advocacy eventually brings the two young people together, and after they have married Lady Janet is prepared to attempt to use her social status and wealth to urge society to recognise Mercy's moral worth;

These poor stupid people simply don't know what to do. They are waiting to be told by a person of distinction whether they are, or are not, to recognise your marriage. In plain English, they are waiting to be lead by Me. Consider it done. I will lead them.<sup>2</sup>

Lady Janet attempts to alter fundamental social attitudes, and fails, with the consequence that Julian and Mercy emigrate to America. Lady Janet exercises her power, but she still loses her adopted daughter finally and completely to the man whom she loves.

Through the course of *The New Magdalen* Lady Janet moves

1. Wilkie Collins, *The New Magdalen*, vol.2, p.242.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.2, pp.290-291.



from altruism to selfishness and back again. Collins shows a widow using her power effectively on members of the younger generation, but ineffectively upon herself and upon society; Lady Janet can promote Mercy's prospective marriages, but she cannot act to keep Mercy for herself, either through deceit or through changing social attitudes. Although she has a recognised social status and role, along with both material wealth and personal power, her sphere of influence is severely restricted. Lady Janet holds a place midway between the powerful corruption of rebellion, and the weakness of spinsterhood. Her own marriage and widowhood fit her to be an advisor and a trustee, able to prepare Mercy for her new life with Julian, but prevent her from attaining her own personal happiness. Lady Janet's situation is thus closely allied to that of Madame Pratolungo; while she is not diminished, as are the spinsters, she is a relic of the past, she is a figure of nurture from whom the young heroes and heroines must grow away to their own independence. Her attempt to halt the process involves her in lies, deception and bribery, and it is only by gracefully submitting and forgoing her own needs that she escapes from moral corruption and retrieves her former position.

As Mrs Wagner and Madame Fontaine provide opposing examples of good and corrupt widowhood in *Jezebel's Daughter*, so Lady Janet's movement between two modes of behaviour, the altruistic and the selfish, illuminate the contrasting effects of the use and misuse of personal power on one person. The good widows in Collins's fiction are only a small group. They provide nurture and guidance but they are not always able to defeat male villainy or the organised forces of society; their power becomes corrupt when used other than altruistically. Those widows, like Madame Fontaine, who actively seek power form a larger and more significant group, whose maternal role has been corrupted.

Collins's first published novel, *Antonina*, contains one of his most powerful corrupt widows: the bereaved Gothic matron, Goisvintha. Having lost her husband and children as a consequence of the massacre of Aquileia, she determines to revenge herself upon an innocent Roman, and chance leads her to decide upon the heroine, Antonina. Hence Goisvintha's love for her children is perverted by their death into a desire for vengeance; she moves from nurture to destruction. However Antonina is protected by the noble Goth Hermanric, who becomes her lover. Goisvintha therefore sets out not only to destroy Antonina, but also to destroy the love between the two young people. She slashes the tendons in Hermanric's wrists so that he will be unable to wield his sword and will thereby forfeit his status as a warrior. This act is both a symbolic act of emasculation whereby Hermanric's love for Antonina is punished, and also the means by which Hermanric is prevented from protecting Antonina from Goisvintha's vengeance;

Long since I swore to you that she should die, and I will hold to my purpose! I have punished *you*, I will slay *her*! Can you shield her from the blow to-night, as you shielded her in your tent? You are weaker before me than a child.'

Whereas the good widows, like Madame Pratolungo, attempt to guide the younger generation towards happy marriage, Goisvintha uses her power to destroy the prospect of happiness, she prevents a marriage between Hermanric and Antonina, and she ensures that the young heroine will suffer bereavement. As a bereaved mother she ironically notes that Hermanric has become "weaker...than a child", and her jubilation at this reduction of man to child, ready for destruction, is a measure of the perversion of her maternal instincts. Later Goisvintha attempts to murder Antonina, but her destructive urge is ironically turned back upon herself, and she ends up as the

1. Wilkie Collins, *Antonina*, vol.2, p.296.

is an sacrificial victim to the god Serapis. Antonina survives to grieve in solitude for the loss of Hermanric.

Goisvintha's behaviour towards Antonina and Hermanric involves an inversion of motherhood; she attempts to destroy rather than to nurture; she uses the power of her widowhood to corrupt personal ends and is consequently destroyed. Goisvintha's fate is the opposite of Lady Janet's. By promoting love and marriage Lady Janet is eventually redeemed; by destroying love and marriage, Goisvintha is herself ultimately destroyed. *Antonina* is a crude melodrama, and deals in an unabashed and simplistic way with concepts which Collins developed with greater sophistication in later novels. Goisvintha is a crude and one-dimensional character, but she is also Collins's prototype for the malevolent widow.

In *No Name* Magdalen Vanstone's plans to marry her cousin Noel are opposed by his housekeeper and surrogate mother, the widowed Mrs Lecount. Both women have intentions towards Noel's fortune: Magdalen wishes to recover her lost inheritance, and Mrs Lecount wishes to receive suitable remuneration for years of service to the family;

If Mr. Michael Vanstone had made his will, there is no doubt she would have received a handsome legacy. She is now left dependent on Mr. Noel Vanstone's sense of gratitude; and she is not at all likely, I should imagine, to let that sense fall asleep for want of a little timely jogging.<sup>1</sup>

Mrs Lecount and Magdalen thus clash over Noel; it is in Magdalen's financial interest to marry him; it is in Mrs Lecount's financial interest to prevent the marriage. Mrs Lecount, like Goisvintha, is a widowed member of an older generation attempting to halt the marriage of two young people.

1. Wilkie Collins, *No Name*, vol.2, p.25.

Mrs Lecount's motives are entirely personal, and ironically the marriage she wishes to prevent is not a love match, but a cold calculated manoeuvre by Magdalen solely for her own ends. The two women both act immorally as they oppose each other, but as Magdalen is still nominally the novel's heroine, Mrs Lecount automatically assumes the role of villain.

Mrs Lecount is the widow of an eminent Swiss professor. Her inheritance from her husband is materialy very small;

Eminent in many things, the Professor was great at reptiles. He left me his Subjects and his Tank. I had no other legacy. There is the Tank. All the Subjects died but this quiet little fellow -- this nice little toad.<sup>1</sup>

The toad is a symbol of Mrs Lecount herself: like her it is quiet, placid, impenetrable and malevolent, and Magdalen is led to compare the two;

"I wonder whose blood runs coldest," she said, "yours, you little monster, or Mrs. Lecount's? I wonder which is the slimiest, her heart or your back?"<sup>2</sup>

As the toad is a relic of the Professor's scientific interests, so Mrs Lecount is the relict of the marriage. As the toad was exposed to science, so was Mrs Lecount;

It is long, long ago, Mr. Bygrave, since I have heard myself addressed in the language of science. My dear husband made me his companion -- my dear husband improved my mind as you have been trying to improve it.<sup>3</sup>

Mrs Lecount's real legacy from her marriage is a mind improved by science. In this way Mrs Lecount is closely related to Madame Fontaine, as another widow apparently corrupted by

1. Wilkie Collins, *No Name*, vol.2, p.71.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.2, p.67.
3. *Ibid.*, vol.2, p.198.

science. As an intelligent and educated woman she is able to comprehend and combat the ingenious ploys of Captain Wragge, and to prove Magdalen's real identity beneath her pose as "Miss Bygrave". She uses her knowledge to counteract the developing conspiracy and to try to warn Noel Vanstone of the trap into which he has been lured. It is only because Captain Wragge succeeds in forcing Mrs Lecount to leave the country for a short period that the marriage of Noel and Magdalen is able to take place. Mrs Lecount is thus like Madame Pratolungo, a strong force which it is difficult to counter in action, and one which can only be evaded rather than confronted. When Mrs Lecount returns from Switzerland she, like Madame Pratolungo, sets out rapidly to restore matters to their original state. She opens Noel's eyes to the truth and induces him to write a will which in the first place disinherits Magdalen, and in the second fully recompenses Mrs Lecount herself for her years of service to the family. Thus she finally thwarts Magdalen's ambitions and gains her own end. When Noel dies shortly afterwards, Mrs Lecount is able to retreat to Switzerland with her pension, and Magdalen is left penniless.

Although the marriage of Noel and Magdalen is not a loving one, but the result of infatuation and deceit, it is nevertheless the act by which Mrs Lecount's master and surrogate son breaks away from her parental control and asserts his independence. Mrs Lecount founds her expectation of reward upon Noel's continued state of dependence; by revealing Magdalen's true identity to Noel she makes him once more dependent upon her wisdom and strength of character. Once more dependent upon her, Noel behaves "with the docility of a well-trained child". Mrs Lecount starts the process of reducing Noel to a state of childlike inadequacy, and finally he begs her to take back her old responsibilities;

1. Wilkie Collins, *No Name*, vol.3, p.109.

He dropped to his knees, and caught at her dress with the gasp of a drowning man. "Save me!" he gasped, in a hoarse, breathless whisper. "Oh, Lecount, save me!"

"I promise to save you," said Mrs Lecount; "I am here with the means and the resolution to save you."

Mrs Lecount uses her widowhood and her maternal role to direct events to her own advantage. She is not moved by any altruistic desire to protect Noel or to defeat Magdalen, but simply by the selfish inclination to receive her pension. Thus her maternal role is corrupt; she does not seek to guide the younger generation for their own good, and she manipulates the influence of her maternal role to force Noel to behave according to her wishes. Mrs Lecount succeeds, and she ironically ends as a public benefactor to her community in Switzerland. She endows a scholarship for poor students at the University of Geneva and sets up a fund to allow for orphan girls to be trained for domestic service, thus satisfying both sides of her character, the intellectual and the domestic. She becomes finally a patron, or more properly a matron, to the youth of Switzerland. Collins underlines the irony of the final good purpose to which Mrs Lecount's corrupt talents are turned when he reports;

The Swiss journalist adverted to these philanthropic bequests in terms of extravagant eulogy...and William Tell, in the character of a benefactor to Switzerland, was compared disadvantageously with Mrs. Lecount."<sup>2</sup>

In *Man and Wife* Lady Lundie is the widowed stepmother of the heroine Blanche. She has inherited from her late husband a sense of her own importance, and the belief in her right, as female head of the family, to interfere in and regulate the affairs of the junior members. Thus when it comes to her attention that her new son-in-law, Arnold Brinkwater,

1. Wilkie Collins, *No Name*, vol.3, p.111,
2. *Ibid.*, vol.3, p.252.

may be a bigamist, she hastens to interfere between the newly-weds and to break up their marriage. This she does not out of concern for Blanche, nor out of a sense of justice, but rather as a malicious way of regaining her influence over her surrogate child. Blanche immediately recognises this;

"You and I never liked each other," she said. "I wrote you a pert letter from this place...I have shown you plainly -- rudely, I dare say -- that I was glad to be married and get way from you. This is not your revenge, is it?"'

Lady Lundie is unwillingly a step-mother; she dislikes her step-daughter and takes pleasure in thwarting her. She misuses her powers to flatter the sense of her own importance. She is also keen to hurt Blanche's best friend Anne Silvester. Although her interference does not wreck the Brinkworth's marriage, it does ensure that Anne will be forced into accepting her Scotch marriage with the villain Geoffrey Delamayn. Through her interference *Lady Lundie attempts to* break up a happy marriage, and succeeds in promoting an unhappy one which leads to attempted murder. Her maternal role is thus entirely negative and destructive, and the younger characters in the story suffer rather than benefit from her exercise of power. The novel ends ironically; Anne Silvester, now herself a young widow, marries Sir Patrick Lundie and assumes the role of female head of the family over her old enemy. Lady Lundie attempts to use her powers to satisfy her own petty vices; she ends by being deposed from her position of power altogether.

Lady Lundie's malevolence is petty, but the novel's other corrupt widow, Hester Dethridge, is a more formidable figure. She is not a natural widow; she has murdered her husband because of his cruel treatment of her. Her inheritance from her marriage is thus an impoverished independence, a

1. Wilkie Collins, *Man and Wife*, vol.3, p.32.

knowledge of marital conflict, a guilty insanity, and the secret of an undetectable murder. Hester is Geoffrey and Anne's landlady, and thus stands in maternal relationship to the unhappily united couple. She uses her experience to guide and warn Anne of future danger;

I know something of bad husbands. Yours is as bad a one as ever stood in shoes. He'll try you.'

Hester dumbly watches as she sees the violence of her own marriage being re-enacted before her, and when Geoffrey has discovered the secret of her past, she is forced to aid in the plan to murder Anne. At the climax of the conspiracy Geoffrey is prevented from smothering Anne by Hester's insane attack upon him, in which he himself is strangled. Hester's dangerous insanity eventually saves Anne's life; although she is a deranged murderess her maternal impulses lead her to protect a member of the younger generation from marital violence. Hester is thus a morally ambivalent character; she achieves good through evil means; she fulfils her protective maternal role through murder, and ends the novel in an asylum.

Lady Lundie and Hester Dethridge are an ironically contrasted pair. The one uses maternal duty corruptly for revenge; the other fulfils her maternal role only through a murder which will ensure her own punishment. Both widows move beyond the normal bounds of their power; both suffer as a consequence, and both materially affect the lives of the younger generation.

*Heart and Science*, as its title suggests, is a novel concerned with the conflict between emotion (as represented by love and affairs of the heart) and reason (as represented by science, particularly vivisection), and one of the central

1. Wilkie Collins, *Man and Wife*, vol.3, p.173.



figures of the conflict is Mrs Gallilee. She is the widowed mother of the novel's hero, Ovid Vere, and aunt to the novel's heroine, Carmina Graywell, and as such she naturally has a material influence on the progress of the love affair between the cousins.

However, Mrs Gallilee is also a wife and mother. The novel shows that the Gallilees' marriage is not a conventional one; while Mr Gallilee and his children remain together as a close family unit, Mrs Gallilee pursues an independent life. Roles have been reversed; Mrs Gallilee is the active partner of the marriage and Mr Gallilee is the passive partner;

The widowed Mrs. Vere (as exhibited in public) was still a fine woman. Mr. Gallilee admired "that style"; and Mr. Gallilee had fifty thousand pounds...Result, three thousand pounds a year, encumbered with Mr. Gallilee. On reflection, Mrs. Vere accepted the encumbrance -- and reaped her reward.'

Collins reveals that Mrs Gallilee, like Magdalen Vanstone or Lydia Gwilt, has usurped the male role of choosing a mate, and made a mercenary marriage in which the husband is little more than a source of money. Mr Gallilee is himself ironically introduced into the novel, with his two daughters, as persons "of small importance"<sup>1</sup>.

Mrs Gallilee acts as though she were an independent widow; she has the social standing achieved by two marriages, but she acts entirely for herself with no thought for her second family. She neglects her two young children, and concentrates her efforts in attempting to influence her son and niece, for her own benefit. When her niece arrives in England, Mrs Gallilee is rapidly prepared to take on the widow's role of surrogate mother;

1. Wilkie Collins, *Heart and Science*, vol.1, p.81.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.1, p.52.

Mrs. Gallilee was as complete a mistress of the practice of domestic virtue as of the theory of acoustics and fainting fits...Before Carmina had recovered her senses she was provided with a second mother, who played the part to perfection.'

Collins's ironic narrational voice reveals that Mrs Gallilee is an actress; she has no real feeling for Carmina, any more than she has for the rest of her family; but she is aware that Carmina's future will mean money in her own pockets. Mrs Gallilee learns that should Carmina die childless or unmarried, her fortune will revert to her aunt, Mrs Gallilee herself. Therefore it is in her personal interest to prevent the growth of intimacy between Carmina and Ovid.

Mrs Gallilee's maternal and surrogate maternal relationship with the younger generation is thus warped by self-interest. She pursues investigations in an attempt to prove that Carmina is illegitimate, and at the climax of the novel she faces Carmina with her accusation;

Mrs Gallilee tore open the fastening of her dress at the throat, to get breath. "You impudent bastard!" she burst out, in a frenzy of rage.<sup>2</sup>

Mrs Gallilee's overweening presumption has taken her too far, and her outburst reveals the malevolent schemer beneath the facade of maternal concern. She has presumed upon her widowed status to act independently and selfishly, and she has sought to destroy her niece's happiness for her own financial ends. Her exposure has two ironically complementary effects; it directly causes Carmina's near fatal illness, thus almost bringing Mrs Gallilee's plot to fruition; but it also leads to Mr Gallilee exerting his authority and separating himself and his children from his wife, so that she does indeed attain her

1. Wilkie Collins, *Heart and Science*, vol.1, pp.64-65.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.3, p.47.

independence by default.

Mrs Gallilee is shown to be not a nurturer of life but a destroyer; her persecution of Carmina is paralleled by her interest in science. Objects and people have no intrinsic worth in her eyes, they may only be dissected and used. When Carmina comments on the flowers in the house, and asks if her aunt arranged them, Mrs Gallilee replies

The florist's man...does all that. I sometimes dissect flowers, but I never trouble myself to arrange them. What would be the use of the man if I did?'<sup>1</sup>

Her attitude to people is the same; Mr Mool the lawyer comments that

I have felt her eyes go through me like a knife<sup>2</sup>

Mrs Gallilee's corruption of her maternal role is thus related to the novel's principal didactic concern, the exposure of the horrors of vivisection through the person of the vivisectionist Dr Benjulia. Dr Benjulia eventually destroys himself and his work when he finds that others have achieved his aims by kinder means; Mrs Gallilee's moral turpitude cuts away the world from around her and leads her to insanity and isolation; Ovid cures and marries Carmina. Thus Heart is made to triumph over Science.

The novel ends ironically with a victory for Mrs Gallilee. Restored to mental health, and rid of her family ties, she is able to assume her independent widowed status in full, and devote herself to scientific pursuits, declaring (in the last words of the novel); "At last, I am a happy woman!"<sup>3</sup>

1. Wilkie Collins, *Heart and Science*, vol.1, p.207.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.1, p.90.
3. *Ibid.*, vol.3, p.302.

The novel thus ends not with the loving hero and heroine, but with the villainous mother. In *Heart and Science* Collins creates a complex figure who combines the traits of many earlier characters. She has the selfish interest in money of Lydia Gwilt, the scheming ability of Magdalen Vanstone and the scientific coldness of Mrs Lecount. Mrs Gallilee forgets her moral responsibilities; she ignores her own children and mistreats her niece. She attempts to use her independence for personal ends, and discovers, like the other widows in Collins's fiction, that her power is a trust which cannot be used beneficially for herself. Like Mrs Lecount's heroic reception in Switzerland, Mrs Gallilee's triumphant "At Home to Science" underlines the way in which she cannot function as an independent woman in ordinary English society.

In Collins's final Christmas story, *The Guilty River*, the figure of the interfering and corrupt widow makes its last appearance. This short novel, written in haste, is largely an uninspired cobbling together of old ideas, with little attempt at the invention of original material. Collins's lifelong fascination with disablement is apparent in the creation of the malicious deaf villain, recalling Madonna the deaf heroine of *Hide and Seek* and, like her, being principally known by a nickname, the Cur. Mrs Roylake, the widowed step-mother of the narrator-hero, is a simple repetition of the corrupt widow stereotype. She is a hypocritical snob, keen to make her step-son marry well, and to prevent his courtship of the local miller's daughter Cristel Toller. Late in the novel it is revealed that she was prepared to contribute to a scheme to have the offensive Cristel kidnapped. As with Lady Lundie in *Man and Wife*, her plan backfires, the hero marries Cristel, and Mrs Roylake is deposed as female head of the family;

Mrs Roylake has retired from the domestic superintendence of Trimley Deen.

THE END'

*The Guilty River* thus repeats in simplistic terms the pattern relating to widows and surrogate motherhood, that Collins had presented with greater sophistication in his earlier works. The widow gains power through her widowhood, but the misuse of the power is eventually visited upon herself.

The widows in Collins's fiction are called upon to act as surrogate mothers to younger people. They may choose to carry out their duty, refuse their duty, or attempt to use their powers selfishly. In each case Collins shows that the power inherited by the women is strictly limited in its application; the only personal achievement possible is the satisfaction of promoting a happy marriage. Madame Pratolungo, Mrs Wagner and Lady Janet Roy all contribute to the marriages of the young characters in the novels in which they appear; each gains nothing material for themselves from their exercise of power. Goisvintha, Lady Lundie and Mrs Roylake are all damaged by their corrupt use of power. Mrs Lecount's successful recovery of her pension, and Mrs Gallilee's scientific successes are presented ironically, while Hester Dethridge turns evil to good purpose but loses her sanity in the process. The maternal role imposed upon these widows is a restrictive one; not one of them has the opportunity to use her independence successfully for her own happiness. The *independent* status of widowhood is illusory; like married or single women, the widows in Collins's fiction have severely restricted lives.

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Guilty River*, p.188.

## Chapter Six

### The Fallen Leaves

*The Fallen Leaves* has received the most uniformly hostile treatment of any of Collins's novels. The contemporary critic in *The Times* found "the general tone of the novel...unpleasing"<sup>1</sup>, and this idea of unpleasantness has been the predominant critical reaction to the novel for the last century. Swinburne called the novel "too loathsome for comment or endurance"<sup>2</sup>, S.M.Ellis thought it "one of the least successful of [Collins's] works"<sup>3</sup>, while Kenneth Robinson summed up "this unpleasantly sentimental novel" as "the low-water mark of Wilkie's achievement"<sup>4</sup>.

More recent critics have been equally negative in their views. Robert Ashley, although denying that *The Fallen Leaves* is wretched, was forced to admit that it is "all in all...a pretty silly book"<sup>5</sup>. William Marshall found that it attained "a degree of triteness and sentimentality hardly imaginable in *The New Magdalen*"<sup>6</sup>, and more recently still Sue Lonoff has briefly disposed of it as "one of the weakest books he ever wrote"<sup>7</sup>. Unlike many of Collins's later novels, which have

1. Anonymous Review, *The Times*, 29 September 1879, p.4.
2. A.Swinburne, "Wilkie Collins", in *Wilkie Collins, The Critical Heritage* (London, 1974), ed. N. Page, p.261.
3. S.M.Ellis, *Wilkie Collins, Le Fanu and Others* (London, 1931), p.48.
4. Kenneth Robinson, *Wilkie Collins* (London, 1951) pp.292-293.
5. Robert Ashley *Wilkie Collins* (London, 1952), p.115.
6. William Marshall, *Wilkie Collins* (New York, 1970), p.102.
7. Sue Lonoff, *Wilkie Collins and His Victorian Readers* (New York, 1982), p.137.

enthusiasts and detractors in roughly equal numbers, *The Fallen Leaves* has the distinction of being universally disliked.

It is not my purpose in this chapter to attempt to reverse these opinions or to prove them entirely wrong; no amount of analytical criticism can turn a bad novel into a good one. However it is my contention that a bad book may be both an interesting and important one. If Collins failed to achieve his purpose in writing *The Fallen Leaves*, the novel nevertheless remains a testament to his intentions. If the material used in the novel is not fully assimilated into a feasible work of fiction, the material is nevertheless worthy of investigation. To dismiss *The Fallen Leaves* as a failure is defensible; to ignore the novel's aims and contents is not.

*The Fallen Leaves* is of paramount importance to a study of Collins's treatment of women and marriage, for women and marriage in their various aspects, are the dominant themes of the novel. *The Fallen Leaves* brings together a number of motifs which run through Collins's fiction and binds them together to provide a broader canvas; the novel deals with marriage and money, the Magdalen theme, parents and children, marriage breakdown, and unmarried women. It is significant that the novel was dedicated to Caroline Graves, one of the two most important women in Collins's life, his first mistress, and almost certainly the original of the Woman in White, and the woman with whom he lived on intimate if unmarried terms for many years. Many of Collins's recurring preoccupations, such as society's treatment of unmarried women, appear to have arisen from first-hand experience, while other isolated examples, like his attack on vivisection in *Heart and Science*, appear to have been the result of an external stimulus. The themes of *The Fallen Leaves*, treating as they do all aspects of a woman's status in relation to marriage, bringing together motifs from a number of other novels, suggest that that the book was for Collins a major personal statement, one

of his most "serious" novels, coming between the fantastical *The Two Destinies* and the potboiler *Jezebel's Daughter*. Its failure obviously disheartened him greatly. In his preface to *Jezebel's Daughter* he explained at some length why his new novel was not the proposed sequel to *The Fallen Leaves*;

When the book is finally reprinted in its cheapest form -- then, and then only, it will appeal to the great audience of the English people. I am waiting for that time, to complete my design by writing the second part of "The Fallen Leaves,"...[It is well known that] there are certain important social topics which are held to be forbidden to the English novelist (no matter how seriously and how delicately he may treat them), by a narrow-minded minority of readers, and by the critics who flatter their prejudices...I remember what the nasty posterity of *Tartuffe*, in this country, said of "Basil," of "Armada," of "The New Magdalen," and I know that the wholesome audience of the nation at large has done liberal justice to those books. For this reason, I wait to write the second part of "The Fallen Leaves," until the first part of the story has found its way to the people.<sup>1</sup>

This preface raises three important points; firstly that the novel was intended to deal with "certain important social issues"; secondly that the novel was designed as the first half of a two-part story and therefore we have only one half of an incomplete work; and thirdly that Collins believed that his public would respond to urge him to complete his design. It never did, and Robert Ashley says of Collins's abandonment of his original intention;

No reader of the "First Series" will regret his decision<sup>2</sup>

It is hardly surprising that a half-finished work should be so poorly regarded, and there are certainly loose ends and unresolved elements in the novel which, while allowing for the continuation in a sequel, are in themselves a blemish on the novel as it stands. The future of the hero and heroine, and

1. Wilkie Collins, *Jezebel's Daughter*, vol.1, pp.v-vii.
2. Robert Ashley, *Wilkie Collins* (London, 1952), p.115.



Amelius's relationships with Rufus Dingwell and Miss Mellicent are all unresolved, and the possible influence of Christian Socialism upon the lives of the characters is left undeveloped.

It is pointless to speculate on Collins's possible achievement in an unwritten work, and in "The Magdalen Theme" I have already given an indication of Collins's stated intentions for the sequel. In this chapter I intend to limit myself to analysing what Collins achieved in the novel as it stands, and to show the ways in which certain motifs interact to produce in *The Fallen Leaves* a synthesis of Collins's views on women and marriage.

The central character of *The Fallen Leaves* is a man, Claude Amelius Goldenheart, who is presented to the reader as an innocent abroad. Although of English stock, Amelius has been brought up at the Christian Socialist Community at Tadmor, Illinois. He has therefore been inculcated with Christian Socialist beliefs; he is young and inexperienced; he is socially an American; and he is out of step with English society and its prejudices from the moment when he arrives in London. In terms of function within the novel, Amelius fulfils several roles. Firstly he is the novel's romantic hero. He courts Regina Mildmay, and at the end of the novel he marries Sally Farnaby. Secondly he is Collins's mouthpiece in the novel for disseminating the tenets of Christian Socialism, both through his ordinary behaviour and conversation, and also more particularly through the public lecture which he gives on the subject. Thirdly he is the tool by which Victorian society is exposed as hypocritical and corrupt.

Amelius's first role is fairly conventional. As a young man of independent means, he is eminently eligible for marriage. He is thrown into company with his host's niece, Regina, and a conventional courtship is thus set in motion. However, as I shall show later, the pattern of

conventional courtship is undermined by Amelius's third role as the exposé of insincerity. Amelius's second role is also quite straightforward; Collins puts into his mouth certain views concerning Christian Socialism and its criticism of the world so that they may be passed on, in the guise of fiction, to the reader. The device of having Amelius deliver a lecture (to an audience of listeners within the novel and to an audience of readers without) is obvious, clumsy and dull, and moreover unfortunate, for as Robert Ashley points out;

Although the tenets of Christian Socialism contain considerable sense, Collins's mouthpiece, a kind of Victorian Oroonoko, is such an egregious fool as to make suspect every word he utters.<sup>1</sup>

Ultimately Amelius, as a proponent of Christian Socialism, is too obviously a puppet of authorial concerns. However the third role that Amelius plays is the most subtle and important one. As a direct critic of Victorian society Amelius *tells* his audience what is amiss; as an indirect critic, as an innocent abroad, Amelius *shows* them what is wrong. Amelius's unorthodox beliefs and behaviour question and expose many of the the values and institutions of Victorian England; and his innocence is used to probe the corruption of the city businessmen, the artificiality of the marriage market, and the plight of the poor in the streets of London.

Amelius is involved with four particular women, and with a number of marital relationships, in the course of the novel. The four women are Miss Mellicent, Mrs Emma Farnaby, Regina Mildmay, and Sally Farnaby. Miss Mellicent is a figure in Amelius's past; she is indeed part of the reason for his arrival in England from America. She is an unmarried woman of middle years, who has formed an attachment to Amelius which

1. Robert Ashley, *Wilkie Collins* (London, 1952), p.115.

proves to be embarrassing for the young man. Miss Mellicent, although only a very minor figure in the background of the novel, is nevertheless another example of a solitary spinster who, like Miss Minerva in *Heart and Science*, suffers from her unrequited attachment to a younger man. Like the other spinsters, Miss Mellicent finds herself powerless and forced to rely on the beneficence of her married relatives to sustain her, until at the end of the novel she is allowed to re-enter the asylum of the Tadmor Community. Miss Mellicent is never physically present in the novel; she hovers as a memory of the past, and this insubstantiality is itself symbolic of her diminished influence upon life.

The next contact is Emma Farnaby who begs Amelius to help her to look for her long-lost daughter, who was kidnapped in infancy; a task to which Amelius agrees. By necessity, his knowledge of the lost child brings him into Mrs Farnaby's confidence, and into close contact with the unhappy Farnaby marriage. The loss of the child has inflicted a symbolic state of physical and emotional sterility on Mr and Mrs Farnaby, and the reader already knows from the Prologue that the secret of the child's disappearance is kept by Mr Farnaby, and that the marriage is a sham.

The Prologue sketches Emma Farnaby's background, and presents several of the novel's major themes in miniature. Emma is the child of one tyrannical marriage, and becomes the wife and victim of a second. Her father is

A man habitually fortified behind his own inbred obstinacy and selfishness...[with] for the most part an irresistible power within the limits of his domestic circle.<sup>1</sup>

He has already turned one daughter out of the family for having

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Fallen Leaves*, vol.1, p.5.

made an imprudent marriage "in a pecuniary sense", and comes to discover that his other child has flown in the face of his parental authority, has been seduced by John Farnaby, and has borne a child by him. Of this event Collins comments;

the retribution which sooner or later descends on all despotisms, great and small, overtook the iron rule of Old Ronald, and defeated the domestic tyrant on the battle-field of his own fireside.<sup>2</sup>

Collins implies that Ronald was wrong to rule his family as a patriarchal despot, and that Emma's seduction is a direct result of it; Emma's first problems spring from her father's tyranny. Unable to assert herself because of her father, she naturally falls prey to the machinations of John Farnaby, who wishes to marry her.

Emma is the victim of one man, and then of another, and indeed Collins uses this word to express her fate;

Emma is his victim, body and soul.<sup>3</sup>

Farnaby, like Sir Percival Glyde in *The Woman in White*, or Lydia Gwilt in *Armadale*, wishes to marry for financial reasons; he wants Emma not because he loves her, but because through her he has designs on her father's business. Mrs Ronald explains the young man's intentions to her husband;

He has acted throughout in cold blood; it is his interest to marry her, and from first to last he has plotted to force the marriage on us...Don't you see it for yourself?...if I take Emma away, to some place abroad, on pretence of her health -- there is an end of his hope of becoming your son-in-law; there is an end of his being taken into the business. Yes!...he looks forward to being taken into partnership, and succeeding you when you die!<sup>4</sup>

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Fallen Leaves*, vol.1, p.6.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.1, p.6.
3. *Ibid.*, vol.1, p.41.
4. *Ibid.*, vol.1, pp.40-42.

This repetition of the marriage, money and power theme, so openly stated, reinforces the concept that marriage can be used by men merely as a means to an end, and that women can be used up as victims in the process.

Farnaby succeeds in his aim because his knowledge of the illegitimate child is a secret which he can use to blackmail the parents. Not only is Emma the victim of her father's tyranny and of Farnaby's ambition; as the mother of an illegitimate child she is automatically the victim of social repression and rejection. Mr Ronald immediately recognises this fact, calling it "disgrace, everlasting disgrace", and Farnaby himself, having manoeuvred the family into his power realises that the child, while useful as a tool against the Ronalds, is also a threat to him;

When we are married, we musn't have a love-child in the way of our prospects in life.<sup>2</sup>

Farnaby therefore removes the child himself and hands her over to the care of an old woman, with the promise of money to follow;

"Emma's reputation is safe enough now!...Emma's husband-that-is-to be" -- he had reasoned it out -- "will naturally be the first person Emma wants to see, when the loss of the baby has upset the house. If Old Ronald has a grain of affection left in him, he must let her marry me after *that!*"<sup>3</sup>

Farnaby thus manipulates familial relations in order to fulfil his own selfish desires. He has no thought for his wife-to-be, or his infant daughter, other than whether they can be useful or are a threat to him. Farnaby corrupts relationships into

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Fallen Leaves*, vol.1, p.40.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.1, p.49.
3. *Ibid.*, vol.1, p.49.

business transactions, buying and selling the female members of his family like simple chattels. This characteristic is developed in the main portion of the novel, where Farnaby offers his niece Regina for sale in the marriage market.

Farnaby succeeds in marrying himself into business, and it is with this financially-motivated marriage that Amelius becomes involved. The missing child has never been found, and symbolically the childless union now exists only as a legal formality. The child represented the illicit and infatuated love of Emma for John, and her loss has removed all affection from the marriage. The Farnabys' marriage is one of convenience -- for him a step to financial success, for her an act to save her social reputation -- but without the child it is a meaningless relationship. Farnaby has got out of it exactly what he wished; success, prosperity, respectability. Mrs Farnaby has been imprisoned by her need to keep the secret, and suffers years of suppressed maternal emotion. When Amelius describes her it is in terms of implicit tragedy;

But now there is an expression of suffering in [her eyes] -- long, unsoled suffering, as I believe -- so despairing and so dreadful, that she really made my heart ache when I looked at her. I will swear to it, that woman lives in some secret hell of her own making, and longs for the release of death...<sup>1</sup>

Mrs Farnaby has not only suffered at the hands of her father and her husband, but also has inflicted upon herself a deep-rooted guilt complex, believing that the loss of her daughter was some form of retribution for her illicit love;

...I committed a sin, many long years ago. I have suffered the punishment; I am suffering it still.<sup>2</sup>

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Fallen Leaves*, vol.1, p.139.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.1, pp.192-193.

Mrs Farnaby thus sees herself as a pathetic but justly suffering sinner, rather than as a misused victim of male aggression. Bowing to fate she accepts her lot.

Farnaby has assuaged any sense of guilt, and furthermore attempted to complete the false marriage by introducing a false child into it. In order to replace their own lost child the couple have adopted their niece Regina Mildmay as a substitute, for Mrs Farnaby to expend her thwarted maternal emotions on. However, Mrs Farnaby can only see Regina as an expression of her husband's uneasy conscience, and an example of his lack of understanding of her needs;

[Reginal is devoted to me, of course -- she is the living consolation I told you of just now. That was Mr. Farnaby's notion in adopting her. Mr. Farnaby thought to himself, "Here's a ready-made daughter for my wife -- that's all this tiresome woman wants to comfort her: now we shall do." Do you know what I call that? I call it reasoning like an idiot.]

The Farnaby household is thus entirely artificial; the marriage was based on expediency and is now merely a formality; Farnaby has as mechanically taken on Regina as he had cast off his own child -- Regina is a present to his wife rather than a daughter for himself; Mrs Farnaby has accepted her as a companion but never as a substitute daughter. The family is a sham, the marriage a facade, John Farnaby an exploiter, Mrs Farnaby a victim, and Regina an interloper, the whole unit bound together by the guilty secrets of the past.

When Mrs Farnaby discovers that her husband was responsible for Sally's disappearance, the bonds which hold the family together disintegrate, and the marriage collapses. When Mrs Farnaby realises that she is not the recipient of divine retribution but a victim of male tyranny, her passive

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Fallen Leaves*, vol.1, p.200.

acceptance is turned into revolt and she deserts her husband to look for Sally alone. The Farnabys' marriage repeats the villain and victim pattern of Collins's major novels of the 1860s. Mrs Farnaby's subjection to the cruelty of John Farnaby recalls Laura Fairlie's treatment by Sir Percival Glyde in *The Woman in White*, and Anne Silvester's subjection to Geoffrey Delamayn in *Man and Wife*. However *The Fallen Leaves* adds parenthood to the pattern. While Mrs Farnaby can endure, and finally escape from the bonds of her mercenary and loveless marriage, she cannot escape the life-long effects of her thwarted emotions. Her unfulfilled desire for her lost child tortures her throughout her marriage, leads to her separation from her husband, and finally to her suicide.

Mrs Farnaby moves from being the victim of one mercenary exploiter to being the dupe of another. The villainous Jervy, playing on her her credulity, gets money out of her on the pretence of reuniting her with her lost child. When he absconds with the money Mrs Farnaby is overcome with despair and takes an overdose of strychnine. It is as she lies on her death-bed that she is finally reunited, through the intervention of Amelius, with Sally. Collins appears to have chosen strychnine poisoning, with its violent and recognisable symptoms, with a specific purpose in view. He describes Mrs Farnaby's death-pangs in detail;

The fell action of the strychnine wrung every muscle in her with the torture of a convulsion. Her hands were fast clenched; her head was bent back: her body, rigid as a bar of iron, was arched upwards from the bed, resting on the two extremities of the head and the heels: the staring eyes, the dusky face, the twisted lips, the clenched teeth, were frightful to see.<sup>1</sup>

It is following this final convulsion that Sally is brought to

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Fallen Leaves*, vol.3, p.105.



her mother and recognised as the lost daughter; immediately afterwards Mrs Farnaby dies. The whole passage, and particularly the use of strychnine as the instrument of death, take on a symbolic meaning in relation to Mrs Farnaby's thwarted maternal desires. At the moment when Sally is miraculously reborn to her, Mrs Farnaby is undergoing a gruesome parody of childbirth. Amelius is present to deliver the child to the mother;

With his knife he ripped up the stocking, and, lifting her on the bed, put her bare foot on her mother's lap. "Your child! your child!" he cried; "I've found your own darling! For God's sake, rouse yourself! Look!"<sup>1</sup>

Amelius is showing Mrs Farnaby the webbed toes which form a positive proof of Sally's identity, but his actions are also an ironic mockery of the delivery of a child by a doctor. Amelius cuts the stocking as a doctor would cut the umbilical cord, and he places Sally's foot, as if it were an infant Sally herself, into her mother's lap. Thus in death Mrs Farnaby's desires for motherhood are fulfilled; she dies in symbolic childbirth.

The third woman with whom Amelius comes into contact is the Farnaby's niece and adopted daughter, Regina Mildmay. Socially, if not biologically, Regina is a product of the Farnaby marriage. Regina is artificial, a "ready-made" daughter to replace the lost Sally. Her personality matches her role; she is an artificial rather than a natural person; product of an artificial marriage and society. Collins lays great stress on the false nature of the Farnabys' social milieu, in order to give Regina a convincing background. Mr Farnaby is the patriarch of his social group, and in business he presents an immaculate surface. Both he himself and his

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Fallen Leaves*, vol.3, p.108.

premises present a perfectly groomed surface:

It was a grand stone building, with great plate-glass windows -- all renewed and improved...since old Mr. Ronald's time.<sup>1</sup>

[Mr Farnaby's] iron-gray hair and whiskers (especially the whiskers) were in wonderfully fine order -- as carefully oiled and combed as if he had just come out of a barber's shop.<sup>2</sup>

At home Mr Farnaby's dinner party combines impressiveness with a strict attention to social formulae;

Well -- and now about the Farnaby dinner...there was such a quantity of it, and Mr. Farnaby was so tyrannically resolute in forcing his luxuries down the throats of his guests...Our printed list of the dishes, as they succeeded each other, also informed us of the varieties of wine which it was imperatively necessary to drink with each dish...I asked for the wine that I could drink, out of its turn. You should have seen Mr. Farnaby's face, when I violated the rules of his dinner-table!<sup>3</sup>

Farnaby's social background is thus one of glittering surface; plate-glass windows, oiled whiskers, and formal dinners with strict rules of conduct. There is no space for individuality or depth of personality. The Farnaby creed of social behaviour -- circumstance, appearance and etiquette before all -- is extended to the assessment of outsiders. Mr Farnaby has only been mildly polite to Amelius until he discovers that the young man is the junior member of a old family. From that time on Mr Farnaby treats him with greater cordiality;

The greatness of England, sir, strikes its roots in the old families of England. They may be rich, or they may be poor -- that don't matter. An old family is an old family...<sup>4</sup>

Mr Farnaby lives by surface; he is therefore not interested in

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Fallen Leaves*, vol.1, p.130.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.1, p.131.
3. *Ibid.*, vol.1, pp.149-150.
4. *Ibid.*, vol.1, p.160.

character and personality. He shows little interest in the concrete realities of a person; instead he expresses his "sincerely servile admiration for the accident of birth!". Thus Amelius, in viewing the Farnaby circle, extending both inwards to the family and the marriage, and outward to the rest of society, is aware of the high level of artificiality and falseness which controls and governs behaviour and opinions;

We have an inveterately false and vicious system of society in England. If you want to trace one of the causes, look back to the little organised insincerities of English life.<sup>2</sup>

It is within this social and familial milieu that Regina has been brought up and her character formed.

As Regina is the artificial daughter of the Farnaby household and of the society around her, so she is a completely conventional person; not, that is, a simplistic stereotype created without invention by Collins, but a convention-bound person, developed by her upbringing to operate within a limited and strict code of behaviour, and unable or unwilling to break free. As society's false creation she is a model of the type of woman to be admired and desired by conventional men; the angel of the house and ideal wife;

She is one of those young women, sir, who delight in sacrificing themselves to others...What she does, she does out of her own sweetness of disposition. She brightens this household, I can tell you!<sup>3</sup>

Regina is presented to society as the perfect nubile girl; even-tempered, submissive, domesticated. Even before she appears in the novel references are made to her

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Fallen Leaves*, vol.1, p.162.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.1, p.169.
3. *Ibid.*, vol.1, p.157.

marriageability;

The man who gets her will be a man to be envied, I can tell you!'

She thinks she can never be grateful enough to [Mr Farnaby] -- the good creature! -- though she has repaid him a hundredfold. He'll find that out, one of these days, when a husband takes her away.<sup>2</sup>

From a male perspective Regina's future as a wife-to-be is clearly indicated from the outset. Her character is greatly admired; she is someone to be possessed and taken away by a man; she is not so much a person as a well-presented article in a market, for sale through marriage to the right buyer.

Mrs Farnaby, imprisoned in the false society by her marriage, can appraise Regina's personality in a more clear and detached way;

Regina's a good sort of creature -- I don't dispute it. But she's like all those tall darkish women; there's no backbone in her, no dash; a kind, feeble, goody-goody, sugarish disposition; and a deal of quiet obstinacy at the bottom of it, I can tell you.<sup>3</sup>

Regina's attractiveness is presented as a composite of a number of weaknesses and negative qualities; lack of opinion, lack of assertion, lack of variation. Her conventionality makes her ideal as a partner in a male-dominated marriage, where individuality is not necessary or desirable.

As an independent and eligible bachelor, and a nubile and well-brought up spinster, Amelius and Regina seem, superficially, to be ideally suited to one another. As they are mutually attracted the conventional patterns of courtship can be played out; attraction, companionship, love, proposals,

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Fallen Leaves*, vol.1, p.155.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.1, p.158.
3. *Ibid.*, vol.1, p.201.

parental consent, marriage, and life together happy ever after. However, as I have mentioned earlier, Amelius's role as an innocent exposé of hypocrisy and cant undermines his role as romantic hero. While on the surface Amelius and Regina are well-suited, underneath it their personalities and beliefs are so far opposed as to make a conflict of interests inevitable. Amelius's unusual adherence to Christian Socialism at first attracts Regina through its novelty. However, Regina sees Amelius's beliefs as an amusing quirk, and believes that her lover will rapidly develop into the model of a conventional husband;

"Do you object to his being a Christian Socialist, miss?"

The young lady's look, when she answered the question, was not lost on Rufus..."Amelius will soon get over all that nonsense," she said, "when he has been a little longer in London."

Amelius must fit the standard mould in order to become the right husband for Regina. She may be interested in eccentricity (from a social standpoint), but it is something to be cured, not fostered or tolerated. Her cold reception of Amelius's friend Rufus emphasises her inability and unwillingness to try to understand people whose behaviour is not within her own code of practice. Mrs Farnaby tells Rufus;

My niece (with many good qualities) is a narrow-minded young woman...You are not like the men she is accustomed to see. She doesn't understand you -- you are not a commonplace gentleman.<sup>2</sup>

At first Amelius is prepared to follow the courtship patterns, but when it comes to the point of obtaining parental consent, he finds himself at odds with Mr Farnaby. Regina is for sale in the marriage market, and Amelius finds that he does not have sufficient funds to pay for her. Mr Farnaby is horrified to

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Fallen Leaves*, vol.2, p.8.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.2, p.12.

discover that Amelius has only five hundred pounds a year -- "he positively turned green" -- and like a good salesman he tries to bargain and haggle with Amelius for a price agreeable to them both;

I tell you this, Mr Goldenheart. I'm willing to make a sacrifice to you, as a born gentleman, which I would certainly not consent to in the case of any self-made man. Enlarge your income, sir, to no more than four times five hundred pounds; and I guarantee a yearly allowance to Regina of half as much again, besides the fortune which she will inherit at my death.<sup>2</sup>

Amelius refuses to bargain, no deal is struck, and Regina is withdrawn from sale. As a consequence Amelius turns to Regina's natural emotional state, and appeals to her as a true lover to ignore the social demands that link marriage with the acquisition and control of money. He immediately finds himself in conflict with her; convention-bound as she is, Regina cannot countenance a marriage which does not comply with her code of behaviour.

Amelius proposes an elopement, but for Regina such emotional impulsiveness is alien to her nature, as the appearances and formalities of a social wedding are vitally important;

"Without my uncle to give me away!" Regina exclaimed. "Without my aunt! With no bridesmaids, and no friends, and no wedding breakfast! Oh, Amelius, what can you be thinking of?"<sup>3</sup>

The gulf between Amelius and Regina is unbridgeable. He is impulsive, emotional, critical, and receptive to new ideas; she is restrained, calculating, satisfied with and rigid in her beliefs. While Amelius believes that human nature is the most

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Fallen Leaves*, vol.2, pp.19-20.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.2, p.20.
3. *Ibid.*, vol.2, p.42.

important factor in determining love and life, Regina stays firmly attached to her social conventions which dictate precisely the ways in which she may act and react. Regina is a figure of pathos; she is the victim of an entire system of education, one which prevents her from thinking or acting spontaneously, and she is consequently unable to free herself from her predetermined role as a wife to be bartered for by a prospective husband.

At first, Regina appears to be the romantic heroine of the novel, but, like Lewis Romaine in *The Black Robe*, she loses authorial sympathy. Gradually the role of heroine is taken over by Sally Farnaby. In his portrayal of Regina, Collins presents the type of the ideal wife, and shows her to be an artificial being, created by a false marriage at the heart of a sham society. Trained to return submissiveness and devotion in return for wealth, comfort and social position, she is unable to respond to the radical demands of Amelius Goldenheart. Collins's treatment of Regina is ambivalent; on the one hand she is held up against Sally as the alternative wife for Amelius, and she appears colourless, insipid and conventional by the contrast; on the other hand she is presented as being pitiable, a human being completely engulfed in her role and unable to think or act independently. Her fate, inevitably, is to be given in marriage to a man deemed worthy by Mr Farnaby. There is Mr Melton a "certain middle-aged man of business...one of Regina's faithful admirers" who sticks with Farnaby even after the latter's bankruptcy and flight to the continent. Regina is the lure that keeps Melton faithful;

To [Rufus's] mind, Mr. Melton's conduct was plainly attributable to a reward in prospect; and the name of that reward was -- Miss Regina.<sup>2</sup>

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Fallen Leaves*, vol.2, p.259.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.3, p.292.

At the end of the novel Regina is still a passive object of male control, to be handed as a reward from one man to another.

Collins's portrayal of Regina, her relationship with the subversive Amelius, and her confinement within the conventions of courtship and marriage, highlight the male-centred state of contemporary society and the ways in which women become objects, and marriage itself a process of barter. While Regina is only a passive participant in the marriage market, there are other women who will actively sell themselves, body and soul, to a husband. Such a woman, making such a marriage, is witnessed late in the novel by Amelius and Sally;

The bride was a tall buxom girl, splendidly dressed: she performed her part in the ceremony with the most unruffled composure. The bridegroom exhibited an instructive spectacle of aged Nature, sustained by Art. His hair, his complexion, his teeth, his breast, his shoulders, and his legs, showed what the wig-maker, the valet, the dentist, the tailor, and the hosier can do for a rich old man, who wishes to present a juvenile appearance while he is buying a young wife. No less than three clergymen were present, conducting the sale. The demeanour of the rich congregation was worthy of the glorious bygone days of the Golden Calf.<sup>1</sup>

Collins emphasises the artificiality of the participants in the marriage; she is acting a part, while he has created a false appearance for the occasion; she is selling herself, he is buying, and the church is acting as salesman. Furthermore the large and appreciative audience bears witness to the social acceptability of the marriage. The standard social reaction is one of envious approval;

He has twenty thousand a year -- and that lucky girl will be mistress of the most splendid house in London.<sup>2</sup>

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Fallen Leaves*, vol.3, p.201.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.3, p.202.



One voice of disapproval is raised against the marriage, and the old lady's bitter comments contain the central germ of Collins's didactic message in the novel;

"I call it disgraceful," the old lady remarked..."There is many a poor friendless creature, driven by hunger to the streets, who has a better claim to our sympathy than that shameless girl, selling herself in the house of God!"<sup>1</sup>

What Collins has done, through the old lady's speech, is to equate marriage for money with prostitution; in each case a woman sells her body to a man. Thus, Collins implies, society is doubly cruel and hypocritical, firstly by refusing to extend its sympathy and forgiveness to the Magdalen figures of the world, and secondly by operating its own form of prostitution in the marriage market. Although it is obliquely stated, this is perhaps Collins's most radical assault on the institution of marriage; while, as I have shown, he has portrayed it as a bond, a snare, an exercise of male power, and a mark of social recognition, he here suggests that it can sometimes be no more than flesh for money. It is within the light of this critical judgement that Amelius is compelled to choose between the social prostitution of marriage to Regina, or a love match with the reformed prostitute, Sally Farnaby.

Amelius's meeting with Sally is a pivotal event, occurring as it does almost exactly half-way through the novel. Up to this point the conventional courtship of Regina and Amelius has followed its traditional pattern, and has reached an impasse over the matter of parental consent and settlements. Two elements in the novel lead towards Amelius's discovery and rescue of Sally; Mrs Farnaby's search for her lost child, and Amelius's profession and practice of Christian Socialism.

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Fallen Leaves*, vol.3, p.202.

Mrs Farnaby has constantly resented and resisted Amelius's attention to Regina, because she wishes him to remain a free agent who may one day chance to discover her daughter. It seems inevitable therefore that Amelius should find Sally, and most readers probably guess her true identity at once. The discovery is purely coincidental, but Collins does not attempt to make the secret of Sally's true parentage into an unsatisfyingly transparent mystery. There is no revelation of the truth, and in the chapter before Amelius presents the daughter to her dying mother, Collins refers to the discovery to come in such a way as to imply that the reader should already have guessed its nature;

In those words she innocently deferred the discovery which, if it had been made at the moment, might have altered the whole after-course of events.<sup>1</sup>

Amelius's discovery of Sally is thus the resolution of one strand of the plot; Mrs Farnaby's search is over and she dies contented. The discovery is also the event which finally condemns John Farnaby to his deserved punishment; made ill and forced out of London by his wife's desertion of him, he ends as a bankrupt abroad, with only Regina and Melton to support him.

Amelius's decision to rescue and nurture Sally derives directly from his Christian Socialist beliefs; he extends the same mercy to Sally that Julian Gray does to Mercy Merrick in *The New Magdalen*. His act of charity is a moral inheritance from the community at Tadmor, where similar sufferers are welcomed and helped;

The people who have drawn blanks in the lottery of life -- the people who have toiled hard after happiness, and have gathered nothing but disappointment and sorrow; the friendless and the lonely, the wounded and the lost -- these are the people whom our good Elder Brother calls The Fallen Leaves. I like the saying myself; it's a tender way of

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Fallen Leaves*, vol.3, p.74.

speaking of our poor fellow-creatures who are down in the world.<sup>1</sup>

Sally is one of the Fallen Leaves; her life has been a torment; she was kidnapped, brought up by strangers, and is now struggling to make sufficient money to survive. Amelius therefore does no more than his Christian duty in taking Sally away from her squalid life, and attempting to rehabilitate her.

In the second half of *The Fallen Leaves*, Sally Farnaby is constantly contrasted with Regina Mildmay. In the first half of the novel Regina's character is defined in relation to her social and family background. She is a false child, used as a tool by her step-father, and ready to be sold in marriage to the highest bidder. When Sally is introduced half way through the novel, her background and family are also described, and they ironically echo the situation of Regina in the Farnaby household. John Farnaby acts as Regina's father but he is not actually so; Sally has been "adopted" by a man who poses as her father and uses her to his own ends to gain money;

"Father always beats me, sir," said Simple Sally, "if I don't bring money home..."

One of the women touched Amelius on the shoulder, and whispered to him. "He's no more her father, sir, than I am. She's a helpless creature -- and he takes advantage of her."<sup>2</sup>

John Farnaby controls Regina's prospects for marriage; he presents her availability to suitors and then determines who shall have her as wife. Sally's "father" uses the girl to get money from men; he is her pimp. Thus a parallel is drawn between the "half-drunken ruffian" and Farnaby; each is pimping for his adopted daughter. This parallel is further

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Fallen Leaves*, vol.1, p.87.
2. *Ibid.*, vol.2, p.168.
3. *Ibid.*, vol.2, p.169.

reinforced by the old lady's comparison of the society wedding and prostitution, later in the novel.

Amelius, as the romantic hero of the novel, offers first Regina, and then Sally, an escape from servitude. Amelius offers to release Regina from the slavery of the marriage market by offering to marry her simply for love. Regina cannot face the prospect and refuses. Amelius offers a simple escape to Sally; he takes her away from the control of her pimp and the society of streetwalkers and criminals, and gives her the chance to grow up in a healthy environment. Sally agrees. While Regina has been corrupted by her conventional and artificial lifestyle, Sally has remained untainted, and has maintained her childlike innocence.

Once she is removed from the influence of the criminal underworld, Sally is brought into contact with respectable society. Collins uses the Magdalen theme, as I have discussed earlier, and pleads for society to accept Sally. *The Fallen Leaves* portrays a society that is corrupt, and its rejection of Sally compounds its corruption with hypocrisy. Like Mercy Merrick in *The New Magdalen*, Sally is a fallen woman and permanent social outcast, beyond the reach of mercy and forgiveness;

The landlady of the lodgings decided what was to be done. "You will be so good, sir, as to leave my apartments immediately," she said to Amelius. "I make no claim to the weeks rent, in consideration of the short notice. This is a respectable house, and it shall be kept respectable at any sacrifice...If that creature in the bedroom is not out of my house in an hour's time, I shall send for the police."

The landlady's hasty rejection of Sally is representative of general social attitudes; Sally is not a human being, she is a

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Fallen Leaves*, vol.2, pp.185-186.

creature, to be shunned and avoided at all costs.

While Sally is in the world of the streets, her life and situation are an ironic echo and parallel of Regina's respectable life in the Farnaby household. Once she has been rescued by Amelius, Sally then becomes not an echo, but a contrast to Regina. Regina is exceptionally respectable and conventional, but she is the Farnaby's false daughter. Sally is a reformed prostitute, brought up outside the bounds of respectability, but she is the Farnaby's natural daughter. Thus the two women are constantly placed in contrast with each other, and as Amelius becomes disillusioned with the falsity of the adopted child, so he gradually grows to love the true child. Thus Collins gradually shifts the role of romantic heroine from Regina to Sally, by revealing that Regina is the usurper and Sally the true heir to Amelius's love.

The comparison between the two women further reinforces Sally's suitability for social acceptance and reintegration; she is more morally worthy as an outcast than Regina is as a member of society; and moreover society has been shown to be essentially artificial and corrupt. Thus Amelius's decision to marry Sally, revealed in the final pages of the novel, is an act of personal redemption in defiance of convention; it is a rebuttal of the system, of the marriage market, of false values of respectability, of hypocritical morality and of the lack of the genuine Christian spirit of sympathy and forgiveness.

Each of the women with whom Amelius comes into contact is shown to be the victim of male power and the social pre-eminence of marriage. In America Miss Mellicent is scorned, rejected and diminished by her unhappy spinsterhood. In London Emma Farnaby is oppressed by her father, seduced and cheated by John Farnaby, then deluded by Jervy. Regina's life is controlled and circumscribed by John Farnaby, and she is eventually to be portioned off as a reward to Mr Melton. Sally

is rejected by her father, beaten and misused by her pimp. In London each of the women suffers at the hands of John Farnaby; he is the moral villain at the centre of the falsity and corruption in society, and marriage and family bonds are the tools which he uses to oppress and control the women in his life, in order to make his way in the world. He marries Emma to make his way into business. He fathers Sally and disposes of her to prevent a damaging scandal. He adopts Regina as a replacement for the lost child, and controls her behaviour to the point of deciding who she shall and shall not marry. In John Farnaby's hands marriage and family bonds are weapons, and women are the victims of his rapacity.

*The Fallen Leaves* thus brings together many of the themes and motifs related to women and marriage which I have been exploring in this dissertation; marriage, money and power in Farnaby's marriage to Emma Ronald; rebellion and marriage breakdown in Emma's repudiation of her husband; parenthood in the Farnaby's contrasting feelings towards their genuine and surrogate children; the Magdalen theme in the treatment of Regina and Sally; and briefly unmarried women in Miss Mellicent. The novel is dominated by the tyranny of men, the uses and misuses of marriage and the family, and the continuing oppression of women. *The Fallen Leaves* may be Collins's least successful novel, flawed by sentimentality, crude melodrama, clumsy plotting and intrusive propaganda, but it is his most intense and sustained assault on hypocritical society, his most searching exposure of marriage, and his most radically slanted story, in its sympathy to the women who continue to be the victims of the entire system.

## Conclusion

Collins defines the female characters in his novels in two ways. Firstly they are participants in a melodramatic plot and are assigned roles of heroism or villainy. Secondly they are people living in a society, and are assigned roles in relation to that society, as wives, mothers, fallen women, spinsters and widows. It is the superimposition of one defining role upon the other which produces the patterns of tension and contradiction by which Collins's views on women and women's issues may be clearly seen and judged. Perhaps the most notable example of such a superimposition occurs in Collins's portrayal of Marian Halcombe in *The Woman in White*. On the one hand she is the thoroughly admirable female "hero" who is an active protagonist in the plot, countering the plans of Count Fosco and rescuing her sister Laura from the asylum where she has been imprisoned. On the other hand Marian is a single woman who, through her lack of married status, comes to have little significance in society, and declines in importance as the novel progresses. Marian's melodramatic and social roles are divergent, and it is through this divergence that Collins exposes and criticises the unjustified neglect meted out to strong, independent, but single women by Victorian society.

Collins uses the same devices to reveal the ways in which women generally suffer through marriage at the hands of society. In novels such as *The Woman in White* and *Man and Wife*, Collins shows that women may become equated with property

and wealth and thereby become the victims of rapacious men. Laura Fairlie is married by Sir Percival Glyde to increase his wealth while Anne Silvester is the obstacle between Geoffrey Delamayn and his marriage to the wealthy Mrs Glenarm. Both women suffer as they are treated as objects to be utilised or destroyed by men for personal gain. In *Armadale* and *No Name* Collins shows the effects of women's rebellion against the male domination of wealth and power. Lydia Gwilt and Magdalen Vanstone attempt to use marriage for themselves; they ape male attitudes and behaviour and are morally corrupted by the process. Lydia is destroyed, and Magdalen can only be redeemed and vindicated through the intervention of a benevolent man.

The intervention of such a man is also necessary for the happiness of those women who have apparently forever forfeited the right to happy marriage within society, as a result of their extra-marital sexual experiences. Collins shows the noble Mercy Merrick in *The New Magdalen*, the moral Mary Van Brandt in *The Two Destinies* and the inexperienced Sydney Westerfield in *The Evil Genius*, facing rejection and condemnation from society, but being personally redeemed by the intervention of the benevolent men, Julian Gray, George Germaine and Captain Bennydeck, respectively. Collins also shows that the force of social opinion is such that these men themselves may become outcasts as a result of their acts of Christian redemption.

In his novels dealing with marriage breakdowns, Collins reveals that the deserted wives always suffer social condemnation, whether or not they are responsible for the failure of their marriages. In *The Black Robe* Stella Romaine is exiled from England after her husband Lewis has deserted her, and she can only find happiness again after Lewis's death, when she marries the benevolent Bernard Winterfield. In *The Evil Genius* Catherine Linley finds that the divorce which was intended to protect her and her child has made her a social



outcast, whose only chance of happiness lies in reconciliation and remarriage to her former husband. Valeria Macallan achieves happiness in *The Law and the Lady* only by reversing social roles with her estranged husband, and making him dependent upon her knowledge and judgement.

Collins portrays those women who by chance or choice remain unmarried losing their power to influence the lives of others or themselves. Miss Jillgall in *The Legacy of Cain* ends up as a housekeeper. In *The Moonstone* Miss Clack is exiled to oblivion on the Continent. Miss Jethro, an unredeemed Magdalen figure in *I Say No*, withdraws herself completely from social contact. Through their lack of defining a marital status such women become nobodies.

Those women who gain independent status through widowhood are shown by Collins to have only an illusory freedom and use of power. They may use their power only to influence the younger generation towards marriage. Those who do this, like Madame Pratolungo in *Poor Miss Finch*, or Lady Janet Roy in *The New Magdalen*, are either awarded some peripheral family role or simple left isolated by the marriage of their young charges. Those who attempt to use their power for themselves, or to thwart young love, are damaged or destroyed in the process. In *Antonina* the murderous Goisvintha dies as the sacrifice to the god Serapis. Madame Fontaine is killed by one of her own poisons at the end of *Jezebel's Daughter*. Mrs Gallilee's vaunting ambition and malicious scheming in *Heart and Science* lead her to insanity. The widows are shown to be trustees who must relinquish their power and influence to a new generation of marriages and families.

The different patterns described above are repeated as a unified assault on society and its values in *The Fallen Leaves*. John Farnaby marries Emma Ronald in order to force his way into business. The couple's daughter, Sally, is a reformed

streetwalker who is rejected by society and has only one chance of happiness; marriage to the benevolent Amelius Goldenheart. When Mrs Farnaby takes the initiative and leaves her husband and their sham marriage, her rebellion leads to her death. Miss Mellicent is an insignificant unmarried female in the background of the story, while Regina Mildmay passively allows herself to be bartered in marriage to the highest bidder.<sup>1</sup> Society is represented in the novel by John Farnaby, who uses his wife, casts out his daughter, and sells his niece. He has a large business, a comfortable house, wealth, friends, and high social standing. In the course of the novel he is exposed and he flees to the Continent as a bankrupt, and the society he represents is revealed to be as shallow, artificial, hypocritical and morally bankrupt as himself.

Through most of his novels Collins offers solutions to the problems facing women in relation to marriage only within the structure of existing society. He shows that some women can find happiness through marriage to a benevolent man, or through reconciliation with an estranged spouse, or through acceptance of their own diminished significance. Another solution is the one taken by the Grays at the end of *The New Magdalen* and the Germainesa at the end of *The Two Destinies*; escape from England to a more liberal society. Only in *The Fallen Leaves* does Collins offer a genuinely radical alternative; social reform under the tenets of Christian Socialism.

Collins probably based his fictitious Primitive Christian Socialists on the Brotherhood of the New Life, a sect

1. Mrs Sowler, a minor character who is probably a widow, repeats the pattern of widowhood. She takes responsibility for the infant Sally and later attempts to use her knowledge not to reunite the divided family, but to make money for herself. She goes mad and is finally apprehended by the police.

which he may have come across while he was in the United States of America.<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Robinson notes that Collins

describes his Utopian community...with the sympathetic approval that one would expect a genuine Radical to feel towards these fumbling experiments in the direction of Socialism.<sup>2</sup>

Kirk Beetz has shown that Collins had a connection in his youth with Edward Pigott's radical journal, *The Leader*, and that he was "a warm supporter of *The Leader's* 'Red Republicanism', [and] an advocate of political and social reform"<sup>3</sup>, while at the same time being "enough of a Christian to risk losing friendship and employment for his faith."<sup>4</sup> In *The Fallen Leaves* Collins promotes a combination of Christianity and Socialism as a radical answer to society's problems. Predictably, society, in the form of Collins's readership, rejected his solutions, and indeed the novel itself. *The Fallen Leaves* is Collins's most significant failure.

Collins's Christianity and his radicalism go hand in hand to explain his interest in the plight of women in contemporary Victorian society. Robert Ashley writes that

In his recognition of the unjust restrictions imposed on women by Victorian society, his sympathy for the fallen woman, and his audacity in creating women with minds of their own as well as strong physical charm, Collins was ahead of his time.<sup>5</sup>

Ashley highlights the two important features of Collins's treatment of women and women's issues in his novels;

1. S.M. Ellis, *Wilkie Collins, Le Fanu and Others* (London, 1931), p.48.
2. Kenneth Robinson, *Wilkie Collins* (London, 1951), p.292.
3. Kirk Beetz, "Wilkie Collins and *The Leader*", *Victorian Periodicals Review* 15 (1982), p.25.
4. *Ibid.*, p.25.
5. Robert Ashley, *Wilkie Collins* (London, 1952), p.136.

recognition and sympathy. Collins recognised the problems that women faced, and showed these clearly and unequivocally to his readers in novel after novel. His heroines suffer injustice and are portrayed sympathetically; his female villains are evil in a manner that echoes male behaviour, and they may, like Lydia Gwilt, be sympathetic and villainous at the same time. Collins approached issues relating to women and marriage as a radical and as a Christian. As I have shown, his novels provide ample proof of his interest, knowledge, understanding and sympathy, and attest to Dorothy L. Sayers claim that Collins was "genuinely feminist"<sup>1</sup>.

1. Dorothy L. Sayers, "Introduction" to the Dent edition of *The Moonstone* (London, 1944), p.viii.

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