Situational Ethics in Wilkie Collins' "Woman in White" and "Moonstone"

Flora Christina Buckalew

College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/etd

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation


https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-bjv4-6j20

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.
SITUATIONAL ETHICS IN WILKIE COLLINS’
WOMAN IN WHITE AND MOONSTONE

A Thesis

Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by

Flora C. Buckalew

1990
APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
The requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Flora C. Buckalew

Approved, December 1990

Deborah D. Morse

John W. Conlee

Terry L. Meyers
DEDICATION

The author would like to thank her parents, Dr. Robert J. Buckalew and Mrs. Flora K. Buckalew, and her sister, Miss Faye R. Buckalew, for their love and support.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. THEMES AND TECHNIQUES IN THE WOMAN IN WHITE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. ANALYSIS OF THE CHARACTERS OF THE MOONSTONE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. CONCLUSION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The writer wishes to express her appreciation to Professor Deborah D. Morse, under whose guidance this investigation was conducted, for her patient guidance and insightful advice and criticism throughout the investigation. The author would also like to thank Professors John W. Conlee and Terry L. Meyers for serving on her committee, the faculty and staff of the Earl Gregg Swem Library for their assistance in the gathering of materials, and Mrs. Bonnie T. Chandler, secretary of the Graduate English Department, for her valuable assistance and support.
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to investigate the appearance of non-traditional morality in two of Wilkie Collins’ best novels, *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*. This study will be approached from two directions; I will examine various subsidiary themes and literary devices Collins used to suggest that moral decisions should not be blindly bound by social conventions in *The Woman in White*, and perform a character analysis of *The Moonstone* to see how different characters give varying shades of positive and negative examples of moral decisions.
SITUATIONAL ETHICS IN WILKIE COLLINS’

WOMAN IN WHITE AND MOONSTONE
INTRODUCTION

When Wilkie Collins was writing in the mid-nineteenth century, adherence to the dictates of a strictly regulated society was very important. Although many of the details of his novels mesh with the expectations of this society—chaperons for young ladies, absence of overt profanity and sexuality, witty dinner table conversation, and so forth—when one stops to look at the actions which underlie this proper Victorian veneer, one can find many atypical elements.

Despite the generally conventional surface, there is a great deal of questioning of convention in these works. Much of this questioning can be seen in terms of moral decisions made in defiance of the established norms of legal, social, and religious dictates. Many gradations exist in these departures from normal rules and expectations, and the perpetrators cannot be simply classified as either bad or good; the circumstances and effects of each case must be weighed independently before an assessment can be made of any of the characters, and the appropriate assessment is not always obvious. The reader is implicitly called upon to judge in many of the cases. By having most of the characters choose to act at one time or another against the dictates of society, Collins is not asserting that all social rules are wrong or useless. That would be tantamount to advocating anarchy, and these novels
do not attempt anything of the sort. If they did, The Moonstone's Sergeant Cuff, a representative of law and order, would not be as sympathetic a character as he is. Instead, Collins advocates that rules are needed as guidelines, but that no rule is perfect or universally applicable, and that the decision to go against the rules should be judged by the intentions of the actor and by the effects the action or decision has upon others. To examine this concept, I will discuss Collins' two major novels, The Woman in White and The Moonstone.
I

THEMES AND TECHNIQUES IN THE WOMAN IN WHITE

For his era, Wilkie Collins was atypical, both as an author and as a person. As a person, right or wrong, he led the kind of life he thought was best for him, in everything from leisure time diversions to familial establishments, generally ignoring the strict confines of his society. The same spirit of freedom is evident in his novels. Although Collins often works as a social critic, which was something many writers of his day felt to be their duty, the reforms he suggests, and the methods he uses to convey his ideas are often more radical than those of his mainstream contemporaries.

The use of multiple narrators gives Collins' works a flexibility and a multifaceted nature that could not have been attained through the use of one narrator, even if an omniscient narrator were employed. It allows the reader to see the characters and events of the story from more than one perspective, and to assimilate that data to try to construct a whole, much as he or she receives information in everyday life, a bit at a time from various sources, none of which is infallible. Sue Lonoff, in response to Charles Dickens' remark about the "dissective quality" he felt all of The Woman in White's narrators had in common with each
other and with Collins, feels that this "dissective quality affirms his inclination to go beyond the accepted canons of realism."¹ He is going beyond contemporary literary realism to create a psychological realism for the reader which would otherwise be more distant. He uses a similar patchwork of personalities as narrators again in The Moonstone, and it is equally interesting and effective there. Another advantage of this system of multiple narrators, as Walter M. Kendrick notes, is that,

These adjustments (of the reader moving from one narrator to the next) produce what for mid-Victorian critics was the real aim of a novel like this one—a series of 'sensations.'²

This brings us to a discussion of Wilkie Collins as writer of sensationalistic literature. First, what exactly is a sensation novel? It has been defined as one which includes "in varying proportions—crime, mystery, passion, social commentary, and questions of identity, in a contemporary setting."³ Collins has included in his novel all of these traditional elements; however, what makes his works memorable is not these elements individually but his balancing and intermingling of them. Dwelling too much on crime and passion could have made the books little more than a cheap thrill. Dwelling too much on social commentary could have made them ponderous. Balancing them deftly and allowing them to complement and advance one another makes this whole much greater than the sum of its parts.

That is what the sensationalism of Collins is, but how
does it work? What does it do? Jerome Meckier has succinctly defined this process as follows: "An extraordinary incident drives home a highly charged ethical or social observation suited for use in more mundane circumstances." Thus, the ancient twofold purpose of literature is neatly accomplished. The reader is entertained by the excitement of the sensations while he is educated by the positive and negative examples of conduct presented by the characters. For example, consider the first major incident of sensation in The Woman in White. It is near midnight. Walter Hartright is making his long, solitary walk home from his mother's house in Hampstead to his apartment in London "when, in one moment, every drop of blood in my body was brought to a stop by the touch of a hand laid lightly and suddenly on my shoulder from behind me." Walter meets Anne Catherick, the mysterious woman in white, and although he knows nothing about her, and most proper people would say that a woman travelling alone at night in that fashion would probably not be respectable, he allows his behavior toward her to be ruled by his gentle instincts, and he walks with her until he can find her a cab and refrains from divulging any information about her. Walter explains that

The loneliness and helplessness of the woman touched me. The natural impulse to assist her and to spare her, got the better of the natural judgment, the caution, the worldly tact, which an elder, wiser, and colder man might have summoned to help him in this strange emergency.
In essence, Collins, working as a social critic within the genre of sensationalism, has given his reader a thrill while imploring him to be compassionate.

However, although Collins clearly is advancing several unarguable themes, such as, in the above example—it is noble to be kind and helpful to those in need—for a variety of reasons, some people found his works troubling. One was Margaret Oliphant, who did not question the validity of Collins' views, as she interpreted them, but feared that he might not have been as obvious as he should have been, especially in the character of Count Fosco, and that this might lead to two detrimental effects. First, the less perceptive reader, being blinded by Fosco's suave and vivid character, might not understand the depth of his villainy. Second, lesser writers might try to copy him and fail to attain the proper balance when creating their villains, making them even more attractive, "that Collins' imitators, like Bronte's, would reproduce the moral limitations of his characters without achieving the attractive complications." On the other hand, not everyone shared this fear that Collins' works were too subtle and liable to misinterpretation. In fact, Charles Dickens once complained to Collins that he had a "disposition to give an audience credit for nothing, which necessarily involves the forcing of points on their attention." All this is in reference to a character whose actions and subsequent message are,
though flamboyant and interesting, fairly clear cut—stealing someone's money and identity is a nasty thing to do. There are other characters in the novel, however, such as Marian Halcombe, who will be discussed later, whose natures are more complex and problematic.

Closely related to Collins' popularity and importance as a writer of sensation novels is his position as a writer of mystery novels, as he is credited with having written what many consider to be the first detective novel in English, *The Moonstone*, written eight years after *The Woman in White*. Although there is no police detective in this novel like Sergeant Cuff in *The Moonstone*, *The Woman in White* is definitely a novel of mystery, of discovering hidden secrets and piecing together puzzles, and, once again, Collins uses this form for more than entertaining the reader. As Meckier astutely notes:

> In the guise of a mystery novelist, the social critic satirizes his contemporaries for ruining their instincts with an unnatural set of rules that makes goodness vulnerable to villainy whenever it cloaks itself in respectability.\(^9\)

This is an accurate summary of the root of the problems in *The Woman in White*. When Laura decides to marry Percival instead of Walter, she is sacrificing her good instincts for an "unnatural set of rules." Her innocence is made vulnerable to Percival and Fosco's villainy because Fosco is continuously suave, and Percival is able to keep up a show of respectability at least until after he is married. There
are two stories unfolding simultaneously for the reader. Clue by clue, he or she unravels the mystery of the plot, while bit by bit, he discovers the moral meaning of the events.

The ability of better mystery stories to go beyond the intricate but stark puzzle to address profound social issues has been noted by many. Albert D. Hutter feels that mystery novels are "most gripping" when they are addressing "not merely the mystery of the crime, but of human experience more generally." ¹⁰ In *The Woman in White*, Collins presents the reader not only with an intricate and suspenseful story of theft, forgery, fraud, kidnapping, and so forth to be experienced and deduced, but also with implicit questions on the status of women, fairness of inheritance laws, and dangers of hypocrisy.

What does Collins use this form to tell the reader about the status of women in mid-nineteenth-century England? An interesting tension is evident throughout the book between what women might want to be, or are able to be, and what society forces them to force themselves to be. After discussing some of the more general aspects of this subject, I will move on to study the character of Marian Halcombe, one of the two most interesting, vivid and complex characters in the novel.

In the voice of Walter Hartright, Collins writes in the "Preamble" to the novel that "This is the story of what a
Woman's patience can endure, and of what a Man's resolution can achieve.\textsuperscript{11} Walter is daring enough to scorn society when he chooses to champion Laura at a time when everyone else but Marian thinks she is an imposter, but otherwise, he is very traditional, seeing himself as the mover of events, and Laura as a princess waiting to be rescued from her tower. Of the difference between the two of them, this is true enough, but Walter neglects to recognize Marian's part in the events fully. He does not forget her at the end, when he refers to her as "the good angel of our lives,"\textsuperscript{12} but although he recognizes her fundamental worth, he still does not truly appreciate its complex nature, defining her in terms of a simple, limited, and distinctly feminine, though very positive, stereotype. This struggling within Walter between liberal and conservative attitudes toward women can be seen from the time he first meets the sisters at Limmeridge. He believes that Marian's intelligence and lively personality "would have secured her the respect of the most audacious man breathing,"\textsuperscript{13} and yet he does not fall in love with her. His admiration for her pleasant manner and graceful figure is overcome by his distaste for her dark, plain face which is "altogether wanting in those feminine attractions of gentleness and pliability, without which the beauty of the handsomest woman alive is beauty incomplete."\textsuperscript{14} So, he chooses Laura, the fair, quiet, submissive ingenue.
One might parallel the divided wishes of Walter for independent and dependent women with Collins' own apparently conflicting ideas. Sue Lonoff suggests that Collins was unashamedly attracted to women, and the most attractive women in his fiction are those who, like his mother, exhibit strength of character along with warmth and charm. But, as did so many Victorian men, he also found female potency a threat, a source of fear and anxiety. Thus, he sought defenses to keep the threat at bay, and he often resorted to a system of balances and compromises. In life, he defended himself by choosing women weaker than the women he wrote about.\textsuperscript{15}

Collins was, in essence, a rebel, but one who was uncomfortable living in his own rebellion. He could admire strong women, but only at a distance, and this ambivalence is mirrored in Walter, whom Collins often views critically, but with whom he sometimes seems to identify. This gap seems to be closing in The Moonstone in the character of Rachel Verinder. Rachel is generous, willful, independent, and although she behaves in a nontraditional manner, she is given a traditional reward at the end of the novel, in the form of a romantic and fruitful marriage with Franklin Blake.

It has been noted, with reference to Collins' use of dark and fair ladies in his novels, that "the novelistic conventions here are projections of concealed social conventions."\textsuperscript{16} However, it is important to realize that Collins was subverting the stereotype. In the tradition of Sir Walter Scott's Rebecca, the lovely, intelligent and noble Jewess in Ivanhoe, Collins' dark heroines in these
novels are not evil vamps. They are wise, moral, and comparatively liberated. Although their strength and liberation might have been viewed as threatening by some Victorian readers, this was generally far outbalanced by their depth and nobility of character. That many readers were so moved by Marian's beautiful nature that they could look beyond her unconventionality is demonstrated by the number of letters Collins received from male readers asking him who his prototype for Marian was, so that they could find her and ask her for her hand in marriage.17

Kenneth Robinson states that "Marian Halcombe represents [Collins'] most deeply felt tribute to the qualities he admired in woman."18 She is a masterpiece of characterization, but as a creation of Collins' she suffers the same frustrating ambivalence about her own character as an independent woman. Although she can be bold and rely upon her own judgment rather than society's, she still at times feels bound by the dictates of society. For example, when Laura is returning from her long wedding trip, the sisters' first separation, Marian sits at home, awaiting their arrival and thinking,

If I only had the privileges of a man, I would order out Sir Percival's best horse instantly, and tear away at a night-gallop, eastward, to meet the sun--a long, hard, heavy, ceaseless gallop of hours and hours, like the famous highwayman's ride to York. Being, however, nothing but a woman, condemned to patience, propriety and petticoats, for life, I must respect the housekeeper's opinions, and try to compose myself in some feeble and feminine way.19
It is probably because her breaking society's standards by rushing off to meet Laura and Percival at their ship instead of waiting for them to come home would—as she would have thought at the time, not fully realizing how unhappy Laura was—have been done to gratify her whim, and not to benefit anyone else that she decides not to risk it. Meckier feels that "she personifies Collins's contention that Victorian women, often the greatest sticklers for convention, were always the greatest losers by it." However, when her act of rebellion will not be performed for herself alone, when breaking society's standards will help someone she loves, she does not hesitate to act. For example, when she suspects that Fosco and Percival are devising a plot against Laura, she changes her proper hooped silk gown and corsets for a simple woolen gown and cloak, crawls onto the veranda roof and eavesdrops on their conversation, noting in her diary,

\[ I \text{ had but one motive to sanction the act to my conscience, and to give me courage enough for performing it; and that motive I had. Laura's honour, Laura's happiness--Laura's life itself--might depend on my quick ears, and my faithful memory, to-night.}\]

She is willing and happy to make sacrifices and to face dangers to help those she loves, but she feels that sacrifices should be offered out of love, not demanded out of pride or adherence to convention. When Laura, who is in love with Walter, is pained by the thought of marrying Percival, her deceased father's mistaken choice for her,
Marian asks, "Are you to break your heart to set his mind at ease? No man under heaven deserves these sacrifices from us women." \(^{22}\)

Although Marian does not get married in the novel, she is frequently the object of male admiration. Walter, as was noted above, appreciates her strength and help in their cause, but he is never in love with her, partly because he is unable to overlook her plain appearance. The same cannot necessarily be said of the flamboyant Count Fosco, her aunt's Italian husband. He is captivated by her bold nature, and she becomes the one weak point in his plan. He says, "Nothing but my fatal admiration for Marian restrained me from stepping in to the rescue, when she effected her sister's escape." \(^{23}\) He has detected a similarity in their natures nearly from the time they met, which is confirmed when he reads her diary and laments

> afresh the cruel necessity which sets our interests at variance, and opposes us to each other. Under happier circumstances how worthy I should have been of Miss Halcombe—how worthy Miss Halcombe would have been of ME.\(^{24}\)

Marian feels shamed at having unwillingly attracted Fosco. Her distaste for him and his feelings for her causes her to ask Walter to try to avenge Laura’s misfortunes upon Fosco. When discussing this again with Walter, he reasons that "The best of men are not consistent in good—why should the worst men be consistent in evil?" \(^{25}\) He does not always understand his enemy's motivations, he but is willing to
admit that human nature is too complex always to be understood, and he is grateful to accept any help their cause might be able to take from the weakness caused by Fosco's affection. Underneath this dangerous attraction of a wily, middle-aged criminal for his bold and colorful niece lies a thought which repulses Marian more than the man himself, the thought that if he is attracted to her, he might see something that they have in common. U.C. Knoepflmacher suggests that

It is neither Fosco's actions against Laura nor the 'glib cynicism' she professes to find in his philosophy that causes Marian to recoil; what so unsettles her is the discovery that Fosco has invaded the privacy of her diary, read her innermost thoughts, and concluded that a civilized English lady is a fellow anarchist, 'a person of similar sensibility.'

Fosco has discovered what they have in common; they are both rebels. However, they are not alike. They are like the opposite sides of the same coin. Both are rebels, but they are differentiated by their motives. Fosco wants to bring wealth to himself. Marian wants to bring happiness to her sister. One might classify them as the bad rebel and the good rebel.

Collins himself has been described as a rebel. Meckier feels that he "appears cautiously subversive, a rebel within bounds, who demands openness but wants order preserved." Collins is making a blow for truth, against the hypocrisy and artificiality of society, but he is not an anarchist who wants to see a total abandonment of that society. The
sympathetic characters in the novel place a high value upon truth. When describing Laura’s charms Walter says, "but beautiful above all other things is the clear truthfulness of look that dwells in their [her eyes’] inmost depths." However, her fair face and graceful figure would not have been as attractive to him if he had not sensed the honesty of her nature. One of the characters who is most concerned with, and vocal about, truth is Mrs. Michelson, the housekeeper at Blackwater Park. Truth is her reason for complying with Walter’s request to relate the part of the story with which she was most closely concerned, but would not otherwise like to have discussed, in the interests of privacy and propriety. At the beginning of her narrative she states that "as the widow of a clergyman of the Church of England...I have been taught the place to claims of truth above all other considerations." In her value system, any departure from truth is to be avoided, as she says of being asked to conceal the departure of Marian’s doctor from Laura: "It was a merciful deception, I admit—for she was in no state to bear any fresh anxieties. But still it was a deception; and, as such, to a person of my principles, at best a doubtful proceeding."

However, although Mrs. Michelson is sincere in her admiration for the truth, her position as a primary champion of the truth is ironic, as she is easily blinded to the truth by smoke screens of convention and propriety. The
main object of her lack of perception is Fosco. Even though she is generally prejudiced against foreigners, his suave manner and perfect politeness are overwhelming to her, and she admires him completely. Against all evidence to the contrary, she feels that he has been wronged by all that has been said against him and his participation in the conspiracy. In her eyes, anyone who presents such a sweet nature to those around him simply is incapable of doing wrong. She makes the mistake of looking for truth in trivialities.

The difference between Fosco’s real nature and the facade he presents to the world brings us to the opposite of truth, hypocrisy. This was the talent which Percival at first, and Fosco throughout, brought to bear upon their scheme, making those around them believe that they were good men, that was the root of Laura’s troubles. Marian recognizes this, too late to prevent their troubles, but in time to try to assuage them, when she observes that "the aspect of Sir Percival which is the most false, and which, therefore means the worst, is his polite aspect." Not everyone in the novel needs time to discover the true nature of the villains, however. Animals are not bound by the unnatural rules of society, and they are able to sense people’s true natures instinctively. For example, when Percival comes to Limeridge for a visit when he is still courting Laura and is still meticulously putting on his good
manners and charming the human inhabitants of the house, Laura's dog cowers, barks, and snaps in his presence.

The main causes of hypocrisy in the novel are avarice and social convention. Percival and Fosco are primarily motivated out of a desire to obtain Laura's money, but their plan would not work if they did not throw those around them off their guard by hypocritically adhering to the dictates of their society, dictates which have caused characters who are guilty of lesser crimes to commit similar acts of hypocrisy, and have caused innocent people to suffer as well. Blind adherence to convention without thought by harmless, well-intentioned people is more silly than dangerous, as can be seen in Mrs. Vesey, who is described as "having all the cardinal virtues, and counting for nothing," but few people are as innocuous as Laura's former governess. In most people this hollow propriety leads to a moral wasteland parallel to the wasteland Walter describes in the cheap new town where Mrs. Catherick lives. He says that "the deserts of Arabia are innocent of our civilized desolation; the ruins of Palestine are incapable of our modern gloom!" Meckier sums up Collins' views on the dangers of meaningless devotion to convention as follows: "Propriety is a collective madness whose strictures grow stronger after the rationale behind their inception fades." Thus, hypocrisy is like a plague that grows, infects, and engulfs those who are weak enough to
succumb to it.

In a society as troubled as this, is justice attainable? Walter doubts the official justice of the courts and feels that it is limited and ineffectual. In the "Preamble" to the novel, he explains his methods and purposes thus:

the story here presented will be told by more than one person, as the story of an offence against the laws is told in Court by more than one witness—with the same object, in both cases, to present the truth always in its most direct and intelligible aspect. 35

In his collection of documents, Walter is following the methods of a system which he feels should be effective in theory, although they fall short in practice as they are tainted by corrupt people. And why should Walter have faith in the legal system when Mr. Gilmore, the family lawyer whose honest and kind nature is marred by his limited outlook, says that "it is the great beauty of the Law that it can dispute any human statement, made under any circumstances, and reduced to any form" ?36 Justice has been stifled, perverted, and rendered ineffectual by society. Anne does not trust in formal justice, either. She feels that "God's mercy, not man's, will take me to her [Mrs. Fairlie], where the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest."37 Also, as U.C. Knoepflmacher has astutely noted, although justice finally catches up with the novel's primary villain, Count Fosco, "significantly...the forces of law and reason cannot punish the count; he is
murdered by the anarchists that Hartright has unleashed."38

Finally, the motivations of the characters are significant in strengthening the themes of Collins’ works. In both The Woman in White and The Moonstone, sympathetic, heroic characters are other-directed, while villains are self-absorbed. Their actions are not judged in isolation, but in relation to the motivations which cause them to engage in these actions. As Meckier observes,

Collins expects the readers to divide antagonists who rebel against propriety out of greed and self-interest (Sir Percival Glyde) from unselfish protagonists who do so seeking justice or while trying to fulfill their human potential (Walter Hartright, Marian Halcombe). Because Percival is dead when the narratives are collected by Walter, we don’t have a direct insight into his thoughts, but we can assume, from recordings of conversations in which he took part, that he is motivated by a desire for money. Villains who are more introspective and forthright, and therefore more chilling, are Fosco and Mrs. Catherick who, in their confessions, admit to justifying their thefts and frauds by their desire for luxuries. Fosco even employs eloquent rhetoric in his defence, and his assurance in his warped rationalizations is quite frightening.

Our two brave heroes, Marian and Walter, are constantly examining their motives. They are frightened when the baser sides of their natures try to surface and are constantly engaging in self-examination and a sort of purification. Walter sadly acknowledges that "I was not strong enough to
keep my motives above the reach of this instinct of revenge." However, he (and Marian) strive to channel the energy created by this natural, if not noble, feeling to virtuous purposes, as can be seen when Walter states that he was "determined to be guided by the one higher motive of which I was certain, the motive of serving the cause of Laura and the cause of Truth."

Thus, in The Woman in White, Wilkie Collins uses many interesting and entertaining methods to question the effectiveness of the traditional moral conventions of his society. Going beyond many authors of his day in his deep and daring investigations of criminal characters and liberated female characters, he spices his social criticism with the excitement of sensation, providing, in retrospect, a bridge between the more seriously regarded social novels of Dickens and Thackeray and the shallow and wildly sensationalistic novels of his many imitators.
Notes for I


6. Collins 16.

7. Helsinger 139.


12. Collins 564.


15. Lonoff 146-47.


18. Robinson 151.

20. Meckier 114.
24. Collins 299.
25. Collins 491.
27. Meckier 122.
29. Collins 317.
30. Collins 333.
31. Collins 252.
32. Collins 37.
33. Collins 432.
34. Meckier 105.
35. Collins 1.
36. Collins 114.
37. Collins 247.
38. Knoepflmacher 367.
40. Collins 532.
ANALYSIS OF THE CHARACTERS OF THE MOONSTONE

Eight years and several minor works after Collins found fame and success with The Woman in White, he triumphed again with another mystery and sensation novel involving multiple narrators. However, The Moonstone, like its predecessor, is more than a simple detective puzzle. John R. Reed insightfully notes that, "far from being merely a classic detective tale, The Moonstone is a novel of serious social criticism, conveying its meaning through unconventional characters." Much of the action of The Moonstone takes place in a grand country house, involving pleasant and well-mannered members of the gentry, leading up, after many complications, to a conventionally happy ending of comic closure. However, many subversive elements lurk beneath this traditional, pleasant, pastoral surface. In fact, Sue Lonoff asserts that "none of his [Collins'] novels is as profoundly critical of Victorian Values as The Moonstone, and none is more subtle in linking political, social, and religious censure to its central images and symbols."

Although many of the characters choose to act at one time or another against the dictates of society, Collins is not asserting that all social rules are wrong or useless. Instead, he advocates that rules are needed as guidelines, but because laws are made by fallible human beings, none is
perfect or universally applicable, and that the decision to go against the rules should be judged by the intentions of the actor and by the action's effects upon others.

One of the most overtly evil characters in the book is Colonel Herncastle. In fact, Patricia Miller Frick describes him as one who "totally defies all social and moral codes" when he comes into contact with the moonstone. His personality is characterized by greed and revenge. He not only has no respect for the Indians' right to the sacred diamond called the moonstone, which he covets merely for its monetary value, ignoring any mythical or aesthetic concerns, but he also has no respect for their lives and has wantonly murdered to acquire the gem.

After questioning the Colonel on the Indians' death and receiving no answer, Herncastle's cousin, the author of the "Extract from a Family Paper," obviously believes the Colonel to be a murderer. Thenceforth, he refuses to speak to his cousin. This lack of communication is his reason for writing his paper: "My object is to explain the motive which has induced me to refuse the right hand of friendship to my cousin, John Herncastle." In essence, the narrator feels the need to excuse his committing the crime of refusing to speak to a family member, feeling that he is justified because that family member has committed the far more serious crimes of murder and theft. However, as he has no actual proof of this crime, his honor will not allow
him to announce his suspicions publicly, and he intends his writings for family reading only. This family reading does, however, have its effect. The Colonel is ostracized by the entire family.

Betteredge justifies Lady Verinder's refusal to speak to him on the same grounds, and Franklin's father sees Herncastle only when he desperately needs some documents in the Colonel's possession, as the Colonel suspects by greeting him with the statement, "You want something... or you would never have compromised your reputation by calling on me" (Emphasis Collins'). His life is distinguished by greed, his death by revenge. In willing the moonstone to Rachel, he brings the vengeance of the Indians on the house of the sister who shunned him, Lady Verinder. All of Herncastle's decisions to defy social dictates are self-motivated and harmful to others, showing one example of a misuse of the reason by which intelligent men and women can attempt to make rules fit situations more effectively.

Another thief masquerading as a gentleman, and one whose disguise is a bit more effective, is Godfrey Ablewhite. As such, he presents an interesting problem for the "gentleman question." Godfrey, who seems to have all of the outward trappings of a gentleman—good looks, meticulous grooming, dress, and manners, money, piety (some of these appear in a nauseating superabundance)—is inwardly a scoundrel. Therefore, the external signs by which one often
identifies a gentleman are useless in the case of this hypocritical "Christian hero." Although his evildoings are not revealed until the end of the novel, Collins undercuts Godfrey's goody-goody reputation early by having Betteredge exaggerate his description of him and by having him use his committee rhetoric to woo Rachel.  

This sets the stage for the blow Collins strikes against hypocrisy in the novel. One of the great Victorian virtues was earnestness, but several of Collins' characters use its forms without its substance. One is Godfrey Ablewhite. Even his name is hypocritical; there is nothing godly about him, and he is "able" only when he is doing things such as swindling, things which are stained with sin and far from "white." One may even see in his name an echo of Christ's description of the Pharisees as "like unto whitened sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness." Another hypocrite is his follower, Drusilla Clack, who is hypocritical not only with the outer world, but also with herself, as she portrays herself as completely pure and detached, sublimating sexual tension into stifling religious fervor. Sue Lonoff points out that

Collins had no desire to disparage kindly and happy people of any religious persuasion; his attacks were directed against those who perverted morality, those who sacrificed human sympathy and understanding for a creed.
After Ablewhite's true nature is discovered, he is discussed by the other characters. Cuff, with his detached professional and middle-class point of view, can look at this "gentleman" ironically, as when he explains that by embezzling the funds of the young man for whom he was the primary trustee, and by forging the name of the other trustee, Godfrey was able to engage in the "honourable conduct [of] paying the debts incurred for the lady and the villa." In order to save his honor by paying his debts and preserving his pious reputation, he sacrifices his honor by stealing the young man's money and his cousin's jewel, all to finance his dishonorable practice of keeping a mistress. So, we have another character whose decisions to go beyond the bounds established by society are based on selfish desires and are harmful to others. Although he does not actively murder anyone as Herncastle does, the tension resulting from his theft of the diamond and the subsequent investigation results in the deaths of Rosanna Spearman and Lady Verinder, and he adds hypocrisy to his list of vices, pretending to be too good to be true while he is actually a common criminal.

The Indians are somewhat problematic characters, and although they are only minor characters, they reflect the clash between two cultures and present a critique on the lack of understanding between the two groups. The other characters in the novel, with the possible exception of
Murthwaite, view them as totally evil, even subhuman, creatures. But this is too simple an analysis. R.P. Laidlaw feels that some of the fear of the exotic and relatively unknown East mentioned in DeQuincy's *Confessions of an Opium Eater* is echoed in some of the characters in *The Moonstone*. The Indians are undeniably ruthless in their attempt to regain the diamond. After listing the motives the Indians had for killing Godfrey, and viewing the circumstantial evidence—such as bits of Indian thread found in the room where he died—Cuff says that "There is here moral, if not legal evidence that the murder was committed by the Indians." Therefore, although there is apparently not enough evidence to convict the Indians of the crime in a court of law, if they could be caught, there is enough evidence that we can assign the crime to them.

However, although murder is a heinous crime, within the structure of the novel poetic justice is served through Godfrey's death. The Indians have also transgressed the ideals of their society in several points, such as crossing water, but their motives are different. For the Indians, the diamond is "a sacred object...a symbol of unity, and it emphasizes their positive qualities of loyalty, persistence and faith." Therefore, although they have violent tendencies, Reed feels, "once the reader appreciates the Indian priests' sacrifice and its consequences, these outcasts take on greater significance." They value the
gem symbolically and spiritually, rather than merely monetarily as the English do, and the moonstone was theirs originally, stolen from them by the murderous Herncastle. In the case of the Indians, the ideals of two societies, Western and Eastern, are transgressed, and undesirable results, such as the death of Godfrey, who might otherwise have been officially brought to justice, occur; however, they act from selfless, religious and cultural motives and cannot be wholly condemned.

At this time, it would be useful to discuss the role of religion in the novel. While it does not play a major role, it is in the background throughout and is a significant part of the lives of some characters, whether it is sincere or feigned. In general, Collins seems to be in favor of the positive aspects of religion which cause people to treat one another kindly, and against the abuses of the false and overinstitutionalized aspects of religion. The two characters who display the most outward signs of religion, Godfrey, who is trying to fool the world, and Drusilla, who is trying to fool herself, are actually the most corrupt. However, the two "who actually live by their faith—Lady Verinder and Ezra Jennings—say next to nothing about it," and "the most profoundly religious people in the novel are not Christian but Hindu." This genial, nondoctrinal religion which should be lived rather than spoken seems to correlate with Collins' view of religion. He was
independent, liberal, and reserved but firm in his religion. In a letter protesting the mixing of political and religious writings, he said,

I am neither a Protestant, a Catholic—or a Dissenter—I do not desire to discuss this or that particular creed; but I believe Jesus Christ to be the son of God; and believing that, I think it a blasphemy to use his name, as it is used in [two recent articles].

A hint of this anti-establishment way of thinking can be seen in Betteredge, who says, "I have myself (in spite of the bishops and the clergy) an unfeigned respect for the Church...." Although he respects the Church, Betteredge views it mainly as a civilizing influence, a somewhat artificial construct which may suffer in times of stress, when others might say one should be relying upon religion most. For example, Lucy feels unable to forgive Franklin for having unwittingly contributed to driving Rosanna to suicide, and is subsequently very rude to him. Of her Betteredge says, "Here was another of your average good Christians, and here was the usual breakdown, consequent on the same average Christianity being pushed too far!"

Gabriel Betteredge, that charmingly rustic and fatherly figure, has some unique views on religion and life in general. His name is at once both accurate and ironic in indicating his nature. Although he has the fundamental goodness of an angel, it is not the grand, ideal saintliness of the archangel whose name he bears. Rather it is a comic, rough goodness, earthy and real. As his surname indicates,
he is better than many, but he is human and imperfect. He professes to be a Christian, but whenever he is distressed, this good, but essentially worldly, man turns to his copy of Robinson Crusoe, interpreting it as others would the Bible, for direction, explanation and prophecy. However, the opinions he expresses are not confined to religion and Robinson Crusoe. Probably the most important component of his life is his family, meaning not only his daughter, Penelope (who, as another comic character, has the prettiness and cleverness of her married, classical namesake, but lacks her epic nobility and faithfulness) but also the entire family of Lady Verinder, for whom he has worked happily all of his life. He feels that family should stick together and help each other as much as possible. For example, Betteredge notes how depressed Franklin is after Rachel rebuffs him and says that if he seeks solace with Penelope, "it is only doing my daughter justice to declare that she would stick at nothing in the way of comforting Mr. Franklin Blake." Later, he is mortified by Cuff’s insinuations that Rachel stole her own diamond, and says that

it was downright frightful to hear him piling up proof after proof against Miss Rachel, and to know, while one was longing to defend her, that there was no disputing what he said. I am (thank God!) constitutionally superior to reason. This enabled me to hold firm to my lady’s view, which was my view also....

Here we have a character subscribing to some antisocial, and
potentially harmful attitudes, winking at the possibility of his daughter’s becoming forward with his employer’s nephew, and ignoring a logical presentation of a criminal accusation. However, these actions are tempered in several ways. Betteredge is a comic character, and most of his actions do not directly result in serious consequences. Also, the accusation, although logical, is based on incomplete information and is incorrect. Finally, he is motivated by a sincere desire to help and support the good people who have always been good to him.

Betteredge sometimes realizes that he is comic, and uses this aspect of his character to help the family, as when he discusses women with Franklin. Young Mr. Blake is disappointed in love and jokingly compares women to cigars in a conversation with the old family retainer, saying that if you don’t like one, you should cast her off and try another. With a wink, Betteredge agrees that it sounds tempting, but isn’t legal. Although Franklin often comes up with oddly convoluted arguments, which Betteredge attributes to his varied foreign education, he realizes that one principle can’t be applied to all situations, and would not have seriously applied his cigar principle to women.

Since the differences between women and cigars are vast and obvious, this inability to apply one rule to both does not bother Franklin, but inconsistency does disturb him at other times. For example, he doesn’t want Rosanna to
confide in him when she seems to be seeking him out, because Franklin fears that she carries a guilty secret about the diamond. He wants to find the diamond desperately, because finding it will put him back in Rachel’s good graces, but he pities Rosanna and doesn’t want it to be traced to her. He admits that his feelings are inconsistent, but Betteredge, who is relating this part of the story, asks the reader to "remember that you are mortal, perhaps you will thoroughly understand him too." Although he wants to discover the truth, solve the crime and return to his beloved, he does not want to risk hurting an unfortunate woman in the process. This avoidance of the truth is difficult for Franklin. In fact, Betteredge begins his narrative by relating Franklin’s motives for compiling the work. Blake is on a quest for truth because "The memories of innocent people may suffer, hereafter, for want of a record of the facts to which those who come after us can appeal." So, when Franklin tries to avoid learning the truth at one point, and later gathers the truth together which a more discreet person might have tried to mask, he is doing so to try to protect the innocent, causing his rule-bending to be mainly (although not totally, as his efforts win him the girl of his dreams) oriented toward helping others.

One of the characters most obviously involved in uncovering the truth is Sergeant Cuff. As a member of the police, he represents an order in which rules are of high
importance, and his function is to enforce the rules of his society. Consequently, he is less likely to bend rules than many other characters, but he is far from being stiff. In addition to representing the official laws of the society, he also embodies some of the unwritten prejudices of that society, primarily its fear of "passionate, independent women," represented by Rachel and Rosanna, both of whom Cuff suspects of committing the crime, as they do not conform to the quiet, submissive standard society expects of young women. He is, however, professional enough and fair enough to want to give them the benefit of the doubt. For example, when he notices Rosanna hiding in the bushes, he says to Betteredge, "If there's a sweetheart in the case, the hiding doesn't much matter. If there isn't—as things are in this house—the hiding is a highly suspicious circumstance, and it will be my painful duty to act on it accordingly." Not only is he ready to believe in the innocence of this somewhat forward woman, if other motivations can be found for her suspicious actions, he is also ready to allow her personal life to be her own business.

In addition to enforcing the law of the land, Cuff is serious about his own rules. When he wants to search the house and Rachel refuses to have her room searched, Cuff declares that "the search must be given up, because your young lady refuses to submit to it like the rest. We must
examine all the wardrobes in the house or none." In examining all the wardrobes, Cuff would not only be performing his job with the exquisite thoroughness which his professionalism demands, but also, through the equality of the search, be making a very politically wise move, and avoiding alienating any of the household, especially the servants. In Cuff's opinion, a job should be done well, or not at all, which is why he refuses payment for an unfinished job. He is, however, aware of his own fallibility, as he remarks to Franklin, "It's only in books that the officers of the detective force are superior to the weakness of making a mistake." Cuff, generally a rule follower, is open enough to bend the rules occasionally, generally doing so for the benefit of others, as when he assumes that Rosanna is having an affair but not than that she has stolen the moonstone—the former being an act of waywardness which was, to him (and certainly to the author who had two mistresses) more understandable and less reprehensible than the latter.

Mr. Candy does not appear for a great portion of the novel, but his actions profoundly affect the plot as a whole. If he had not administered the opium to Franklin, and then driven home in the rain, fallen ill, and become unable to explain his experiment, none of the latter events would have taken place. Although his actions, both voluntary and involuntary, cause much distress to many of
the other characters, Ezra Jennings tries to justify his employer's actions to Franklin, feeling that his intentions were good:

Every medical man commits that act of treachery, Mr. Blake, in the course of his practice. The ignorant distrust of opium (in England) is by no means confined to the lower and less cultivated classes. Every doctor in large practice finds himself, every now and then, obliged to deceive his patients, as Mr. Candy deceived you. I don't defend the folly of playing a trick on you under the circumstances. I only plead with you for a more accurate and more merciful construction of motives.28

Candy has given Franklin the laudanum to prove the worth of the medicine, not to avenge their dinner table argument.29 He also wants to help Franklin, who has been having trouble sleeping after giving up smoking at Rachel's request. Once again, the rules have been bent; a man was administered medicine without his consent, but it was done through benevolent, other-directed motives.

The other medical man, and perhaps the most admirable character in the story, is Ezra Jennings. Indeed, a contemporary reviewer described Jennings as "the one personage who makes himself felt by the reader."30 Another reason for the extremely sympathetic portrayal of the medical assistant could be found in looking at him as Collins' representative in the story. During much of the writing of The Moonstone, Wilkie Collins was suffering severe pain from rheumatic gout,31 which he tried to relieve by laudanum and writing. Writing not only took his mind off his pain but also helped him fulfill a sense of
Lonoff feels that "Jennings himself, in his reliance on the drug (opium) and his ability to solve the mystery, functions as an author surrogate." An obvious addition to these parallels would be the therapeutic value that both Jennings and Collins find in writing. In this sense, the roles of doctor and detective are conflated, the doctor element detecting illnesses in both people and society, and the "detective fever" curing these ills and the detectives.

Jennings is very cautious and thoughtful in his decision to break the rules. He questions Franklin extensively before deciding to show him the notes he has made of Candy's delirious remarks. Even then, Jennings first points out the many complications of the notes themselves, their circumstances, and their author to avoid Franklin's being at all deceived in the proposed procedure, and ends by asserting with hope that "Your (Franklin's) innocence is to be vindicated; and they (the notes) show how it can be done. We must put our conviction to the proof—and you are the man to prove it!" Once he has studied all the sides of the situation and convinced himself that revealing the notes, in essence breaking a professional confidence, is the only way to prove the innocence of a wronged young man and to reunite him with his beloved, and he has convinced himself that this is what Mr. Candy would have done, had he been well and able to deal with the
situation, he becomes a man of action, and sets to work to put his ideas and revelations to practical use.

A final point to address in the study of the complex Mr. Jennings is his motivations. Jennings longs to make his life useful. In response to Franklin's thanks he says, "If I can do you this little service, Mr. Blake, I shall feel it like a last gleam of sunshine, falling on the evening of a long and clouded day." As events progress and a successful resolution is on the horizon, Jennings once again asserts, this time in a sort of soliloquy, that his usefulness is his reward:

Is it possible...that I, of all men in the world, am chosen to be the means of bringing these two young people together again?...Shall I live to see a happiness of others, which is of my making—a love renewed which is of my bringing back?"

Making others happy is so important to Jennings that he is willing to sacrifice own comfort:

I foresee, in spite of the penalties which it extracts from me, that I shall have to return to the opium for the hundredth time. If I had only myself to think of, I should prefer the sharp pains to the frightful dreams. But the physical suffering exhausts me. If I let myself sink, it may end in my becoming useless to Mr. Blake at the time when he wants me most.

The crisis of his disease, however, is imminent. Jennings is able to complete the experiment, exonerate Blake, and bring the young lovers back together, but he dies soon afterward. As he is dying, he retains his wish to keep others as free from sorrow as possible, and he also displays a touching humility. Candy tells Franklin that Jennings
forbid him to write to tell him that he was dying, quoting him as saying, "I am indebted to Mr. Franklin Blake...for having seen some happy days. Don’t distress him. Mr. Candy--don’t distress him." Often, a literary character’s death can been seen as emblematic of his or her life, and as a sign of that person’s state in the afterlife. In this tradition, it seems appropriate that when Jennings dies, "The sunlight touched his face. A beautiful expression, an angelic expression, came over it. He cried out three times, 'Peace! peace! peace!'" This could be seen as giving Jennings some affinities with Christ, who is known as the Prince of Peace. Both men are portrayed as wise, gentle, noble, outcast saviors, Christ of mankind, Jennings of Rachel and Franklin. Candy mourns the passing of this brave, sweet tempered man, and explains that, in compliance with his request, "no monument of any sort, not even the commonest tombstone" marks his quiet grave.

Robert L. Caserio has suggested that a monument is left behind, not a tombstone raised by Candy, but the marriage and happiness of Franklin and Rachel, made possible by Jennings. Of all the characters in The Moonstone, Jennings is the one able to use and break the rules with the most positive results. Totally other-directed, his actions are carefully deliberated, noble and effective, and bring others, and consequently himself, happiness.

Clearly, then, in The Moonstone Wilkie Collins presents
a complex interplay between the tightly regulated legal, social, and religious norms of the society and the subversive use of what we would today call situational ethics. In the hands of intelligent and well-intentioned people, a little rule bending can be quite a blessing. After all, rules are made by fallible human beings who cannot foresee every possible situation to which their rules will be applied. However, when laws are broken by people whose motives are selfish and who do not care for the well-being of others, crime is inevitably the result. This marks the difference between Ezra Jennings and Godfrey Ablewhite. Some situations are even less clear cut than these, however, particularly that of the Indians, who are trying to live by the codes of Eastern society in the imperialist Western society by which they were wronged.
Notes for II


5. Collins 1.

6. Collins 34.


8. Lonoff 193.


10. Lonoff 88.

11. Collins 430.


13. Collins 428.


15. Reed 284.

16. Lonoff 222-23.

17. Lonoff 217.

18. Collins 32.

19. Collins 175.

20. Collins 152.
27. Collins 415.
28. Collins 363-64.
29. Lonoff 196.
31. Lonoff 171.
32. Lonoff 173.
33. Lonoff 186.
34. Collins 366.
35. Collins 373.
37. Collins 379.
38. Collins 437.
40. Collins 438.
III
CONCLUSION

Despite the many significant differences between Wilkie Collins’ two major novels, one important element is Collins’ skill at employing sensationalism to convey innovative ideas about individual morality.

In *The Woman in White*, Collins achieved a combination of story, style, and character which was astoundingly successful. Masses of readers waited anxiously from week to week for installments to be published, and many other businesses, such as perfume and sheet music concerns, boosted their sales by naming new products after the novel. After experimenting for several years with other styles and devices, Collins returned to many of the techniques of the earlier novel when he wrote *The Moonstone*. Both novels are related by multiple narrators who are organized by the romantic young man of the story in the interests of truth. In both cases these multiple narrators effectively keep the reader’s interest by adding color and variety to the narrative, and they add to the complexity of the narrative by showing different sides of the same incident. Both stories also deal with the difficulty of uncovering and righting crimes which occur within families, and in both cases the families are of the landed gentry. Finally, both
employ sensationalistic elements to excite the reader while subtly questioning the validity of the overly conventionalized moral system of society.

However, there are several differences. In regard to characterization, Collins "made a determined effort to give more weight to characterization" in *The Moonstone*.¹ Ironically, although the characters in *The Moonstone* are more consistently interesting and colorful than in the earlier novel, the two characters who are most generally remembered and recognized in Collins' canon, and his strongest characters, are Marian and Fosco from *The Woman in White*. One difference which Collins said, in the Preface to the first edition of *The Moonstone*, that he was trying to achieve in his latter novel is explained thus:

In some of my former novels, the object proposed has been to trace the influence of circumstances upon character. In the present story I have reversed the process. The attempt made, here, is to trace the influence of character on circumstances.²

This is what makes a study of the motivations of the characters in the second novel interesting. Collins was attempting to place more emphasis on the characters, their personalities and motivations, and the methods by which these elements shape their actions and subsequently shape the plot. Furthermore, as I mentioned earlier, Collins' depiction of the atypical woman changes between the two books. In *The Woman in White*, Marian Halcombe is a person to be admired, but she is not well rewarded, ending the
novel with the prospect of being a single woman living in the home of a married couple. No matter how much she is beloved as the aunt of the house, she does not have her own establishment, husband, job, or anything that is truly hers. On the other hand, The Moonstone's high-spirited Rachel Verinder marries the man of her dreams, who loves her as much as she loves him, and, as they are planning to have a child as the story closes, the rebel finally gets her reward.

Wilkie Collins is often overshadowed in the study of nineteenth-century British novels by writers such as Charles Dickens and George Eliot. However, those who overlook him are ignoring a very intriguing writer. As T.S. Eliot points out, "we cannot afford to forget that the first--and not one of the least difficult--requirements of either prose or verse is that it should be interesting." It is certainly true that throughout his works, Wilkie Collins consistently proposes liberal and enlightened views on the social structure, and he does this in a way which is more entertaining than that of many of his contemporaries.
Notes for III


Works Cited


VITA

Flora Christina Buckalew


In July 1989, she began work and study as a graduate assistant in the English Department of The College of William and Mary in Virginia. Currently, she is working toward a Ph.D. in English at The Pennsylvania State University.