The Woman in White

by Wilkie Collins

SUMMARY

The Woman in White is one of the best stories of mystery and suspense ever published. It was a sensational success when it was published in London in 1860, and one hundred and forty years later the reader turns its pages with the same urgent need to discover what happens next.

Late one night, on a lonely road, a young man, Walter Hartright, meets a woman dressed all in white. They talk together and Walter discovers a strange coincidence: he is about to start work with a family in the north of England, and the woman knows a member of the family.

This is the dramatic start to a strange and compelling story. Walter starts his new job, teaching art to two half sisters, Laura Fairlie and Marian, whose parents are both dead. Walter falls in love with the beautiful Laura, who - by another coincidence - closely resembles the ‘Woman in White’. But although Laura loves Walter she is already engaged to a baronet, Sir Percival Glyde. Sir Percival, however, is only interested in Laura’s money. He also has a terrible secret that the ‘Woman in White’ knows. He and his sinister friend, Count Fosco, plot to steal Laura’s money by substituting the ‘Woman in White’ for Laura.

The suspense mounts as Walter and Laura’s half sister, the brilliant Marian, try to prevent Sir Percival from harming her. Will they succeed? And will they discover the secrets of Sir Percival and the ‘Woman in White’?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wilkie (William) Collins can be described as the author of the first full-length detective stories in English. Born in London in 1824, he was the son of a landscape painter. He was educated at private schools, but received his real education on a two-year tour of Italy with his family. He trained as an artist, but became a full-time writer in his early twenties. During the 1860s, with the publication of novels of mystery, suspense and crime, he became a household name. Of these novels, The Woman in White (1860) and The Moonstone (1868) were the most successful, and are still widely read today.

Collins was very highly thought of by contemporary critics and his books were widely read in both America and Europe. The famous British author Charles Dickens was his friend and mentor, and like Dickens, Collins was a tireless social campaigner. After 1870, Collins’ novels concentrated more on social issues such as prostitution and vivisection than on good storytelling.

Collins suffered from gout, and was addicted to opium for the last 27 years of his life (at the time, opium was considered to be a safe painkiller). Collins’ private life was unconventional: he had two mistresses and married neither of them, although he had three children by one, Martha Rudd. He died in 1889.

BACKGROUND AND THEMES

The plot of The Woman in White, although very exciting, seems unlikely: a woman is robbed of her money by her identity being confused with another woman who looks very like her. However, it is now known that Collins found the basic plot of The Woman in White in a book of French crimes which he bought from a bookstall in Paris. This book, Recueil des Causes Celebres, by Maurice Mejan, gave an account of a sensational lawsuit which was strikingly similar to the events in Collins’ novel; there is even a similarity between the personalities in the lawsuit and the main characters in the novel.

Similarly, the dramatic meeting of the hero, Walter Hartright, with the ‘Woman in White’ at night on a lonely road, also had a basis in real life. The famous English painter, John Millais, tells the story of how he and Collins were walking in North London one evening, when they heard a scream in a garden nearby. A young and beautiful woman in a long white dress came running towards them, begging for help. Collins followed her and did not return that night. The woman’s name was Caroline Graves and Collins subsequently lived with her for many years.

Written in 1860, The Woman in White is one of the most successful examples of ‘the novel of sensation’. This genre of fiction first started in the 1860s and was characterized by stories of mystery and crime - sinister secrets that were slowly uncovered, in an atmosphere of great suspense. Even though the events were often unlikely and sensational, they took place in everyday settings of the time, and this created a feeling of greater realism. Wilkie Collins was a master of this genre.

The ‘novel of sensation’ gave rise to the modern detective novel. Indeed, in The Woman in White, Walter Hartright and Marian act as amateur detectives. The Moonstone (1868), Collins’ other huge success, is even more of a detective story.

Novels of this kind generally have a hero, a heroine and a villain. In The Woman in White, there are two heroines and two villains. Laura, the woman Walter loves, is the type of woman popular with Englishmen in the 19th century. She is very beautiful, very feminine, and very inactive; she does almost nothing. Laura’s sister, Marian, on the other hand, is...
PART TWO
Chapters 1-4
In small groups, students write one sentence about each of the following characters. Each group then reads their sentences out to the class and the class votes for the sentence that best describes each character.
- Laura
- Marian
- Sir Percival Glyde
- Count Fosco
- Walter Hartright

Chapters 5-9
In small groups, students discuss the following question:
What do you think is the most dramatic moment in each of these chapters? Put the dramatic moments in order from most dramatic to least dramatic.

PART THREE
Chapters 1-7
In small groups, students tell the story of these chapters from the point of view of the following characters. Each student takes it in turns to say one sentence:
- (a) Marian
- (b) Laura
- (c) Walter

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE BOOK
Collins’ advice to other writers was: ‘Make ‘em laugh, make ‘em cry, make ‘em wait,’ (‘em=them, ie, the readers)
In small groups, students discuss how Collins does this in The Woman in White. Students can look through the book to find examples. Then have a whole-class discussion about it.

Glossary

It will be useful for your students to know the following new words. They are practised in the Before You Read sections of exercises at the back of the book.

PART ONE
Chapters 1-4
- ancestor (n) a member of your family who lived a long time ago
- gamekeeper (n) someone whose job is to look after animals and birds that are wild and are hunted on private land
- relationship (n) the way in which two people behave towards each other

Chapters 5-9
- survive (v) to continue to live in spite of many difficulties and dangers
- veranda (n) an open area with a floor and a roof that is built at the side of a house on the ground floor

PART THREE
Chapters 1-7
- accomplice (n) a person who helps someone such as a criminal to do something wrong
- crackle (v) to make a lot of short sharp sounds, like wood burning in a fire
- forgery (n) the copying of an official document illegally
- fulfil (v) to do something you promised in the past to do
- lantern (n) a lamp that you can carry
- restore (v) to give back to someone something that was taken from them
- vestry (n) a small store-room in a church
The Woman in White

CHAPTERS 5-9

Chapters 5 & 6

1. Answer the following questions.
   (a) After Walter’s meeting with Anne Catherick, Walter and Marian make certain plans. What are these plans?
   (b) Why is Marian unable to talk to Anne Catherick?
   (c) Whose fault is it that Laura and Sir Percival’s marriage takes place?
   (d) Why does Mr Gilmore feel so worried about Laura’s marriage settlement?
   (e) What in these chapters illustrates Mr Fairlie’s selfishness?

2. In small groups if possible, discuss the following question.
   Laura’s marriage is an ‘arranged marriage’ - in other words, a marriage where the parents choose the marriage partner for their son or daughter. What are the advantages and disadvantages of arranged marriages?

PART TWO

CHAPTERS 1-4

Chapters 1 & 2

1. Answer these questions.
   (a) What does Marian consider strange about Mrs Catherick’s behaviour?
   (b) What does Marian decide to do as a result?

2. Imagine you are Laura. Write a letter to Walter in which you describe your present life and tell him your true feelings towards him and Sir Percival.

CHAPTERS 3 & 4

1. Answer the following questions.
   (a) Why does Walter feel disturbed when he meets Laura for the first time?
   (b) Why does Susan Catherick run away from Limmeridge House and why?
   (c) Why does Walter think that Anne Catherick may be the Woman in White?
   (d) Why does Walter feel disturbed when he meets Laura for the first time?

2. What is your opinion of the Woman in White so far? Do you think she is mad? Give reasons for your opinion.

PART TWO

CHAPTERS 1-4

Chapters 1 & 2

1. Answer these questions.
   (a) Do you believe Sir Percy’s story about Anne Catherick? Why/why not?
   (b) Why does Laura feel she cannot break off her engagement to Sir Percival?
   (c) Whose fault is it that Laura and Sir Percival’s marriage takes place?
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Student’s activities

Chapters 3 & 4
1. Complete these sentences. Then find the sentences in the book and check your answers.
   (a) ‘There’s a .................. on the floor here,’ said the Count.
   (b) ‘I just need you to sign a .................. .’
   (c) ‘I need you to act as ................... to Laura’s signature.’
   (d) Laura then began to tell me about her .................. and her ..................with Sir Percival Glyde.
   (e) I was .................. for wasting two young lives - Laura’s and Walter’s.
   (f) ‘Please let me put this on your .................. ,' Anne Catherick said.
   (g) ‘I know a .................. about your cruel husband.’


3. Answer these questions.
   (a) What do you think Sir Percival’s ‘terrible secret’ could be?
   (b) What do you think is going to happen in the next two chapters?

CHAPTERS 5-9

Chapters 5 & 6
1. Complete the following sentences.
   (a) If Marian hadn’t gone down to the lake, she wouldn’t ..................
   (b) If Count Fosco hadn’t seen Anne, Anne ..................
   (c) If Marian hadn’t been out on the balcony, she ..................
   (d) If it hadn’t been wet and cold, Marian ..................

2. Answer the following question.
   In your opinion, what is the main motive of the following characters? In other words, what is it that makes them do the things they do?
   Marian, Laura, Sir Percival, Count Fosco

3. Answer these questions.
   (a) When Sir Percival and Count Fosco talk together in chapter 6, what does Count Fosco seem to be suggesting to Sir Percival?
   (b) What is Sir Percival’s ‘other difficulty’?
   (c) Why ‘must’ Sir Percival find Anne Catherick and what do you think he might do when he finds her?
   (d) If Count Fosco has a plan to help Sir Percival, what do you think that plan could be?

Chapters 7, 8 & 9
1. These events are in the wrong order. Put them in the correct order.
   (a) Laura arrives at Count Fosco’s house.
   (b) Mrs Michelson realizes that Sir Percival deceived her and Laura: Marian is still at Blackwater Park.
   (c) Walter meets Laura again.
   (d) Laura leaves Blackwater Park.
   (e) Sir Percival decides to close up Blackwater Park.
   (f) Laura dies.

2. Answer these questions.
   (a) In what way does Sir Percival decease Laura and the housekeeper?
   (b) Why do you think he does this?
   (c) What do you think his plan could be?

3. Both Sir Percival and Count Fosco are wicked men. Which man do you think is worse? Give reasons for your opinion.

PART THREE

CHAPTERS 1-7

Chapters 1 & 2
1. In small groups, discuss whether or not you agree with the following statement. Give reasons for your opinion.
   Marianne is the real heroine of The Woman in White.

2. Write an explanation of what Sir Percival and Count Fosco did to Laura, Marian and Anne Catherick.

3. Answer these questions.
   (a) How does Marianne find Laura and help her escape?
   (b) Why are Marian and Laura living quietly in a poor part of London?

Chapters 3 & 4
1. Answer these questions.
   (a) Why does Walter go and see Mrs Catherick?
   (b) What kind of a woman is Mrs Catherick?
   (c) What does Mrs Catherick tell Walter to do?
   (d) What is Sir Percival’s ‘secret’ and why is it so ‘terrible’?
   (e) Why does Mrs Catherick say, ‘You can’t prove a thing’?

2. In pairs, act out the conversation between Walter and Mrs Catherick when Walter returns from the church.

3. What do you think could happen in the last three chapters? How do you think the story will end?

Chapters 5, 6 & 7
1. All these sentences are false. Correct them.
   (a) Sir Percival couldn’t get out of the church because someone had locked it.
   (b) Sir Percival’s servant tried to rescue him.
   (c) Laura’s guardian was Anne Catherick’s father.
   (d) Count Fosco died in London.
   (e) Mr Fairlie died of a fever.
   (f) Marian inherited Limmeridge House.

2. Answer this question.
   The story ends happily. Explain in what way it ends happily.

1. If people were animals, what animals would the following characters be? Give reasons for your choice.
   Walter, Laura, Marian, Sir Percival, Mr Gilmore, Mrs Catherick.

2. In your opinion, in what way is The Woman in White a detective novel? Who is/are the detective(s)?

3. Now you have read the whole book, would you describe The Woman in White as realistic?