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Wilkie Collins, Narrativity, and Epitaph

Jolene Zigarovich

This essay closely examines the complicity between writing and mortality, especially the epitaphic function of writing, in Collins's fiction. These novels constantly warn us that texts, including epitaphs, may be subjectively interpreted, have multiple interpretations and referents, and in addition, are often susceptible to rhetorical slippage. False and premature pronouncements of death—as well as the writing and rewriting of death—are rhetorical situations in which Collins exposes his own participation in the expansion of narrative boundaries and the exploration of the subversive nature of language. Collins's attention to typographical detail furthers the argument that the gravesite is a locus for the workings of language and truth in his fiction. The insistence that epitaphs be graphically reproduced in his work reminds us visually of the paradox and ensuing problem of writing the dead.

Every great writer senses the presence of death in the act of creation he performs through written language. During the act of writing, every artist becomes, momentarily, a carver of grave-stones.¹

Taking the epitaph as a paradigm for writing is one of the great power plays in humanism's history.²

In "Essay Upon Epitaphs—I" (1810) William Wordsworth defines the epitaph as a form of writing "intended to be permanent and for universal perusal." Yet the tombstone, like any other text, can be miswritten or lie. The

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inscriptions of tombstones, as Peter Brooks recognizes, are “authoritative texts that nonetheless require decipherment” (297). Tombstones appear often in the nineteenth-century novel, for instance in Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* (1843) where Scrooge uncannily reads “upon the stone of the neglected grave his own name, EBENEZER SCROOGE” and, most memorably, in *Great Expectations* (1860–61), which overlapped publication with *The Woman in White* in *All the Year Round*.³ As Brooks has notably interpreted, the opening scene of the novel dramatizes quite remarkably the role of the epitaph, not only as narrative, but as a visual marker. Here young Pip confronts his parents’ graves:

As I never saw my father or my mother, and never saw any likeness of either of them (for their days were long before the days of photographs), my first fancies regarding what they were like, were unreasonably derived from their tombstones. The shape of the letters on my father’s, gave me an odd idea that he was a square, stout, dark man, with curly black hair. From the character and turn of the inscription, “Also Georgiana Wife of the Above,” I drew a childish conclusion that my mother was freckled and sickly. (3)

This alignment of the body and corpse with narrative and visual representation demonstrates in an interesting manner one of the more creative functions of epitaph. In this scene Dickens has the orphaned Pip face the tombstone (the meeting place of corpse and text) in order to develop some sort of image of how the dead appeared when alive. It is as if the graphic symbols—the manner in which the engraved letters are painted and shaped—have become directly mimetic. Though Pip does not tell us the full content of the inscription, we do know that simply “the shape of the letters” made an impression on him—they inspired him to conjure an imaginative mental picture of his absent parents. The epitaph has thereby become a decipherable and interpretive narrative; the visual and textual switch places or are somehow conjoined.

As in *Great Expectations*, Collins’s novels constantly warn us that texts, including epitaphs, may be subjectively interpreted, have multiple interpretations and referents, and in addition, are often susceptible to rhetorical slippage. For this discussion, we will investigate not only the rhetorical significance of the language of death, but the possible reasons behind Collins’s own fascination with buried texts. From the tomb-tending in *Antonina* (1850) and *Hide and Seek* (1854), to the themes of forgery and the erasure of identity and writing in *Basil* (1852), to the ghost-like figures and cemetery scenes in *The Dead Secret* (1857), Collins’s early fiction demonstrates his preoccupation with the susceptibility of identity and writing to misreading. Buried texts and unmarked graves are favorite images and plot elements, evident in later novels such as *The Moonstone* (1868). While others have remarked on the deconstructive implications of blank and white spaces or of

the Gothic and feminist symbols in *The Woman in White*,⁴ this study will demonstrate how in Collins's fiction, writing (and righting) the dead proves epitaphic: it is problematic, uncanny, and, at intervals, vacant. If we interpret the tombstone as a visual metaphor for dichotomy (life-death, presence-absence, engraved-blank, speaking-silent, and so on) then we can more closely look at Collins's dramatization of epitaphs, absent forms of writing ("vacancies"), and the act of authoring to reveal and demonstrate Collins's intuitive understanding of the various manipulations of writing and representation. Unearthing the meanings behind the tombstone—Collins's touchstone for narrative and death—casts new light on the implications of *logos* and *thanatos*.

I

Critics and biographers of Collins have repeatedly pointed to the sources of the "sensation" plots employed throughout his fiction, yet none have looked at the way in which the provocative "presumed dead—returned to life" plot works on a narrative level. His labyrinthine plots, emphasis on body-doubling, and narrative duplicity all contribute to not only his "modern" sensibility (what Walter M. Kendrick terms "a tentative breach of the mid-Victorian realist contract"), but create an unstable environment in which writing cannot be trusted. And as we shall discover, we must focus our attention on the places where writing, death, and absence merge. What narrative complications are created when a supposed posthumous character is pronounced dead? In what way is Collins figuratively demonstrating through the "epitaph" that in the fictional world, death is not always final and writing is not always truthful? For Collins, the tombstone and its inscription are integral places in his fiction where paradox is found at its apex: body and corpse, writing and erasing, truth and fraudulency, and exhumation and burial merge at the gravesite.

The theme of the presumed dead returning to life can be seen in Collins's early works such as *Sister Rose* (1855) and "The Dead Hand" (1857), the play *The Red Vial* (1858) where a supposed corpse awakens in the Frankfurt morgue, most notably in *The Woman in White* (1860), and then later in *Armadale* (1866), *John Jago's Ghost* (1873–4), *The New Magdalen* (1873), and *Jezebel's Daughter* (1880). The dramatic device of digging a false grave and erecting a tombstone while the person supposedly dead is still alive becomes Collins's sensation marker, to be adopted by Mary Elizabeth Braddon for *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862). Due to the popularity of Collins's and Braddon's novels, readers learned to expect a supposed dead character to return. Kathleen Tillotson aptly remarks, "Eventually readers must have learnt never to believe anyone dead unless they had a complete corpse (not charred bones),

certified as of the right identity and safely buried” (xxv).⁵ In fact, “dead, yet not dead” became one of the most adopted stereotypes of the sensation novel. What these types of plots create is posthumous narrative. False and premature pronouncements of death—as well as the writing and rewriting of death—are rhetorical situations in which Collins exposes his own participation in the expansion of narrative boundaries and the exploration of the subversive nature of language.

In order to recognize Collins’s insistence that the gravesite—especially the epitaph—should be the center of narrative plot, we must look at his intentions. John Sutherland has noted that Collins was meticulous about the typography of his work. In his note on the manuscript of *Armada*, Sutherland remarks that “throughout his manuscript, Collins paid minute attention to details of interruptive typography: the italics, white and black lines . . . and dynamic typography which break up the narrative flow” (vii–viii). Collins is particular in instructions to the compositor regarding such things as small caps, new paragraphs, “white lines,” dashes, and spacing. This attention to typographical detail is evident in most of his manuscripts, but blatantly so for the graphic replication of epitaphs.

Though not a sensation novel, *Antonina; or, The Fall of Rome* (1850) represents the commencement of Collins’s interest in epitaph, grave-tending, and the paradox of writing death. *Antonina*, wooed by the chieftain Hermanric, later devotes herself to tend his grave out of respect for the warrior who had “died in her defense and for her love.” In fact, the novel ends at the graveyard (a place of “righting” the dead for Collins) where *Antonina* and her father pay their respects.

The trees, the flower-beds, and the patches of grass, all remained in their former positions; nothing had been added or taken away since the melancholy days that were past but a change was visible in Hermanric’s grave. The turf above it had been renewed, and a border of evergreen shrubs was planted over the track which Goisvintha’s footsteps had traced. A white marble cross was raised at the end of the mound; the short, Latin inscription on it signified, “PRAY FOR THE DEAD.” (436)

As a crossroads, the grave is also the setting where the repentant *Vetranio* bids goodbye to *Antonina* before he retires to the country. Indeed, *Vetranio* is no stranger to the epitaph. Earlier in the novel, when the invasion of Rome by the Goths is imminent, he addresses the Romans. At “The Banquet of Famine,” *Vetranio* accepts defeat and uncannily speaks “a funeral oration over his friends and himself” as he unveils his own epitaph “scratched on the marble in faint, irregular characters” (see fig. 1). It is a pagan symbol to others in the suicide pact of his resoluteness to honorably accept death. Yet *Vetranio* escapes death, leaving the self-authored epitaph as a marker for

Stop, Spectator!
 If thou hast reverently cultivated the pleasures of the taste,
 pause amidst these illustrious ruins of what was once
 a palace;
 and peruse with respect, on this stone,
 the epitaph of
 VETRANIO, a senator.
 He was the first man who invented a successful
 Nightingale Sauce;
 his bold and creative genius added much, and would have
 added more, to
 THE ART OF COOKERY;
 but, alas for the interests of science!
 he lived in the days when the Gothic barbarians besieged
 THE IMPERIAL CITY;
 famine left him no matter for gustatory experiment;
 and pestilence deprived him of cooks to enlighten!
 Opposed at all points by the force of adverse circumstances,
 finding his life of no further use to the culinary
 interests of Rome,
 he called his chosen friends together to assist him,
 conscientiously drank up every drop of wine remaining
 in his cellars,
 lit the funeral pile of himself and his guests
 in the banqueting-hall of his own palace,
 and died, as he had lived,
 the patriotic **CATO**
 of his country's gastronomy!

Figure 1. Graphic of Vetranio's epitaph. *Antonina*. Harper and Brothers illustrated edition, 1873. Courtesy of Honnold/Mudd Library for The Claremont Colleges, Claremont, California.

one who still lives. This “burial plot”—the fact that death is announced prematurely—is a strangely ironic, reoccurring theme in Collins's fiction (and also foreshadows his own epitaphic self-authoring).

The Dead Secret (1857) anticipates *The Woman in White* in its theme of buried secrets and ghosts, as well as its insistence on the gravesite as a locus for plot, character, and paradox. Early in the novel Sarah Leeson visits the grave of her former love, Hugh Polwheal, before she leaves her position as maid following the death of her mistress. She then picks a few leaves of grass from the grave and embalms them in a little book of *Wesley's Hymns*, a gift from the deceased. She is next seen much later in the novel, following a sixteen-year absence. Again, she visits “the grave which had stood apart in the bygone days” and now had “companion-graves on the right hand and on the left.”

She could not have singled it out but from the weather-stains on the head-stone, which told of storm and rain passing over it, that had not passed over

the rest. The mound was still kept in shape ; but the grass grew long, and waved a dreary welcome to her, as the wind swept through it. She knelt down by the stone, and tried to read the inscription. The black paint which had once made the carved words distinct was all flayed off from them now. To any other eyes but hers, the very name of the dead man would have been hard to trace. She sighed heavily as she followed the letters of the inscription mechanically, one by one, with her finger:

SACRED TO THE MEMORY
OF
HUGH POLWHEAL,
AGED 26 YEARS.
HE MET WITH HIS DEATH
THROUGH THE FALL OF A ROCK
IN
PORTHENNA MINE,
DECEMBER 17TH, 1823.

Her hand lingered over the letters after it had followed them to the last line ; and she bent forward and pressed her lips on the stone.

'Better so!' she said to herself, as she rose from her knees, and looked down at the inscription for the last time, 'Better it should fade out so! Fewer strangers' eyes will see it; fewer strangers' feet will follow where mine have been—he will lie all the quieter in the place of his rest!'⁶ (34)

This scene foreshadows the textual drama that ensues at Mrs. Fairlie's gravesite in *The Woman in White*. Here the epitaph has virtually lost its power of inscription; it now stands in as a tabula rasa for any or every dead person. Though buried and stained, what remains of the inscription is simply a "trace" of the anonymous body it stands for. This early scene exemplifies that, for Collins, the act of writing can be seen as epitaphic. Here, Sarah Leeson emotionally and physically bonds with the site of the corpse (the grave), the pronouncement of death (the engraved tombstone), and the slow erosion of signification (the fading epitaph). It is a cryptic scene where contraries mingle and complicate interpretation.

The importance of the graphic becomes more apparent when its reproduction history is illuminated. The serial publication of the novel twice includes the graphic of Hugh Polwheal's tombstone. In fact, it is the only significant graphic in the issue. We can only assume that Collins's manuscript depicted these typographical instructions for the manuscript of the novel has not been located. (This is a mysterious example of Collins's own "buried writing" or "dead secret").⁷ The serial publication of the novel in *Household Words* must then be used as the earliest evidence of Collins's typographical directions for the epitaph in the novel. Despite the space and font limitations of a serial publication, Hugh Polwheal's tombstone is reproduced twice. It is distinctive from the rest of the publication due to spacing and capitalization and is a

powerful visual marker (fig. 2). Without the graphic of the tombstone, the significance of the scene and the symbol of death would be diminished.

In the Bradbury & Evans two-volume first edition (1857) and the Harper and Brothers illustrated edition (1873), Hugh Polwheal's epitaph is again reproduced. Details such as spacing, small caps, and more ornate fonts such as Gothic script are designated for a more realistic effect (fig. 3). It is here that Collins demonstrates the literal problem of "writing" the dead. The typographical significance is more powerful than in *Household Words*; it is a realistic depiction of a tombstone as well as a visual reminder of epitaphic paradox.

The Woman in White's blending of sensation and detective genres aptly suits Collins's further exploration of metaphors that reflect the symptoms (and difficulties) of writing death. While the novel compiles multiple narratives and enlists the experiences of multiple narrators, its mysteries are hinged upon both the absence and presence of various forms of writing. Yet at the same time the text repeatedly works to expose the forgeries, duplicities, and inherent arbitrariness of narrative. In order for buried truths to be uncovered, textual gaps, blanks, and lies must be exposed and then written (or erased and rewritten) with truth. Bodies are in essence "blanks" waiting to be inscribed, literal epitaphs are incapable of sustaining meaning, and writing speaks for yet defies the body. Here Collins has clearly developed the use of the epitaphic function to include not only the literal but the figural; the living are confused with the dead. In the novel's opening, we find a figure who represents the paradox of "the dead alive:"

There, in the middle of the broad, bright high-road—there, as if it had that moment sprung out of the earth or dropped from the heaven—stood the figure of a solitary Woman, dressed from head to foot in white garments; her face bent in grave inquiry on mine, her hand pointing to the dark cloud over London, as I faced her. I was far too seriously startled by the suddenness with which this extraordinary apparition stood before me, in the dead of night and in that lonely place to ask what she wanted.⁸

(15)

This passage, noted by Charles Dickens to be one of the two most dramatic descriptions in all of literature and directly inspiring his re-narrating of it in the figure of Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations* (1860–61),⁹ is the first of the novel's two most climactic, "sensational" scenes. Here the figure is described as an "extraordinary apparition" that appears alone in the "dead of night," is garbed in white, and seems transfixed in her pointing stance. Though writing from retrospect, Walter chooses to suspend belief and allow his readers to imagine that the figure he has encountered is truly a ghost. Most disturbing is that Walter describes the figure as a recently exhumed object: "As if it had that moment sprung out of the earth." The apparition

Charles Dickens.]

THE GIFT OF TONGUES.

[January 10, 1857.] 41

she had restrained since leaving her room, began to flow again. Urgent as her reasons now were for effecting her departure without a moment's loss of time, she advanced, with the strangest inconsistency, a few steps towards the nursery-door. Before she had gone far, a slight noise in the lower part of the house caught her ear, and instantly checked her further progress. While she stood doubtful, the grief at her heart—a greater grief than any she had yet betrayed—rose irresistibly to her lips, and burst from them in one deep gasping sob. The sound of it seemed to terrify her into a sense of the danger of her position, if she delayed a moment longer. She ran out again to the stairs, reached the kitchen-floor in safety, and made her escape by the garden-door which the servant had opened for her at the dawn of the morning.

On getting clear of the premises at Porthgenna Tower, instead of taking the nearest path over the moor that led to the high road, she diverged to the church; but stopped before she came to it, at the public well of the neighbourhood, which had been sunk near the cottages of the Porthgenna fishermen. Cautiously looking round her, she dropped into the well the little rusty key which she had brought out of the Myrtle Room; then hurried on, and entered the churchyard. She directed her course straight to one of the graves, situated a little apart from the rest. On the headstone were inscribed these words:—

SACRED TO THE MEMORY OF
HUGH POLWHEAL,
AGED 26 YEARS.
HE MET WITH HIS DEATH
THROUGH THE FALL OF A ROCK
IN
PORTHGENNA MINE,
DECEMBER 17TH, 1823.

Gathering a few leaves of grass from the grave, Sarah opened the little book of Wesley's Hymns which she had brought with her from the bed-room at Porthgenna Tower, and placed the leaves delicately and carefully between the pages. As she did this, the wind blew open the title-page of the Hymns, and displayed this inscription on it, written in large clumsy characters:—"Sarah Leeson, her book. The gift of Hugh Pol-

followed the moorland path on her way to the high road.

Four hours afterwards, Captain Treverton desired one of the servants at Porthgenna Tower to inform Sarah Leeson that he wished to hear all she had to tell him of the dying moments of her mistress. The messenger returned with looks and words of amazement, and with the letter that Sarah had addressed to her master in his hand.

The moment Captain Treverton had read the letter, he ordered an immediate search to be made after the missing woman. She was so easy to describe and to recognise by the premature greyiness of her hair, by the odd, scared look in her eyes, and by her habit of constantly talking to herself, that she was traced with certainty as far as Truro. In that large town, the track of her was lost, and never recovered again. Rewards were offered; the magistrates of the district were interested in the case; all that wealth and power could do to discover her, was done—and done in vain. No clue was found to suggest a suspicion of her whereabouts, or to help in the slightest degree towards explaining the nature of the secret at which she had hinted in her letter. She was not seen again, not heard of again, at Porthgenna Tower, after the morning of the Twenty-Third of August, eighteen hundred and twenty-nine.

THE GIFT OF TONGUES.

AN interesting feature in the late war was the multiplicity of languages with which it brought the western armies into contact. They occupied the soil of a people whose half barbarous speech was made up of contributions from Greek, Roman, Scythian, Median, Celt, Gothic Venetian, and Mongol Tartar. They heard the tongues of Wallachian, Bulgarian, Slovak, and Circassian. There was spoken among them English, French, Italian, German, Berber, Turkish, Egyptian, Modern Greek, besides some little Abasian, Persian, Croatian, and so forth. They were opposed to Russian, Polish, Usbec Nogars, and all Cossack forms of speech. In the midst of such a Babel who was so much at a loss for the gift of tongues

Figure 2. Graphic of epitaph. *The Dead Secret* serialized in *Household Words*, January–June, 1857. Special Collections, Honnold/Mudd Library for The Claremont Colleges, Claremont, California.

SACRED TO THE MEMORY
OF
Hugh Polwheal,
AGED 26 YEARS.
HE MET WITH HIS DEATH
THROUGH THE FALL OF A ROCK
IN
PORTGENNA MINE,
DECEMBER 17TH, 1823.

Figure 3. *The Dead Secret*. Harper and Brothers illustrated edition, 1873. Courtesy of Honnold/Mudd Library for The Claremont Colleges, Claremont, California.

wears shroud-like garments and, with no subtle pun, has “grave” eyes and is bent in “grave enquiry.”

This scene is later repeated by another astonishing entrance of a woman in white:

There stood Miss Fairlie, a white figure, alone in the moonlight; in her attitude, in the turn of her head, in her complexion, in the shape of her face, the living image, at that distance and under those circumstances, of the woman in white! The doubt which had troubled my mind for hours and hours past, flashed into conviction in an instant. That ‘something wanting’ was my own recognition of the ominous likeness between the fugitive from the asylum and my pupil at Limmeridge House. (51)

Laura Fairlie, as “living image,” is the complement to Anne Catherick (“T’ghaist of Mistress Fairlie”) who is associated with “fatality.” Though quite alive, Anne is figured as an apparition that haunts the likeness of Laura and the mind of Walter. The “something wanting” that both women embody emerges as the symbol of a blank space awaiting inscription, of the ghostly attributes that haunt the workings of language and meaning.

While Anne writes anonymously and Laura refuses to “mark” her identity, Mrs. Fairlie’s absence-presence is encrypted on the white surface of her tombstone. Carolyn Dever remarks that Mrs. Fairlie’s gravesite “is the locus of difference,” the center of the dead mother plot (115). Tamar Heller observes, “The novel’s most central symbolic site is the grave of Laura and Marian’s mother, which functions as an image for women’s lack of identity”¹⁰ (114). I would agree that the site is the symbol of female lack and difference (or “otherness”), and would further argue that it is the symbol of the dichotomous workings of representation. Loss of origin, misreading, and the problematic of identity are bound up here, specifically in relation to the mingling

of engraved and buried lies. In the novel, not only the gravesite but also the gravestone's inscription itself is overtly fetishized: the epitaph is repeatedly visited and gazed at, kissed, cleaned, traced, erased, amended and re-engraved. Walter describes it as such:

The natural whiteness of the cross was a little clouded, here and there, by weather-stains; and rather more than one half of the square block beneath it, on the side which bore the inscription, was in the same condition. The other half, however, attracted my attention at once by its singular freedom from stain or impurity of any kind. I looked closer, and saw that it had been cleaned and the part that had not, was traceable wherever the inscription left a blank space of marble—sharply traceable as a line that had been produced by artificial means. Who had begun the cleansing of the marble, and who had left it unfinished? (78)

This “blank space” and the cleaning of the marble, of course, foreshadow Walter's later removal of Laura's name from the tombstone in the same churchyard at the end of the novel, but the scene also has a more symbolic significance. Reminiscent of the tombstone in *The Dead Secret*, Mrs. Fairlie's tombstone embodies a trace—here between legible and non-legible. The “traceable line” visually cuts the tombstone in half—it leaves “a blank space of marble.” The line divides the readable and unreadable, life and death, body and text, presence and absence. Anticipating that the person who cleaned half of the stone will return to complete the cleaning, Walter decides to hide in the cemetery in order to survey the gravesite. He soon describes the appearance of a woman: “I saw the woman in a cloak approach close to the grave, and stand looking at it for a little while” (82). The woman proceeds to dip a white cotton cloth into the brook, kiss the tombstone, and then clean the inscription.¹¹ Walter learns that the grave tender is indeed the woman in white, Anne Catherick: “There, speaking affrightedly for itself—there was the same face confronting me over Mrs. Fairlie's grave, which had first looked into mine on the high-road by night” (83). Evidently Anne's power as the tomb-cleaner is not only in erasure but in revelation.¹² While the identity of Mrs. Fairlie is once again clearly legible (and legitimate), her epitaph stands in contrast to Anne, the embodiment of anonymity and illegitimacy.

If the epitaph is the uncanny voice of both life and death, it isn't surprising to find Anne drawn to the object that so exemplifies her existence. As she cleans the gravestone, Anne's near-necrophilic exclamations are overheard by Walter, “‘Oh, if I could die, and be hidden and at rest with *you*!’ Her lips murmured the words close on the grave-stone; murmured them in tones of passionate endearment, to the dead remains beneath” (90). And similar to Sarah from *The Dead Secret*, she merges her body with the stone: “I heard her lips kissing the stone: I saw her hands beating on it passionately.” And

in an ironic foreshadowing, she states: “*I shall not rest under the marble cross that I washed with my own hands, and made so white and pure for her sake*” (255). (Indeed, she will be anonymously buried under the cross). Once again Anne enacts the merging of her dead body with the tombstone: “She crouched down over the flat stone of the grave, till her face was hidden on it,” and she “never moved her face from the stone” (90). She tells Walter of Mrs. Fairlie: “Ah! she was fond of white in her lifetime; and here is white stone about her grave—and I am making it whiter for her sake” (89). Unlike Sarah Leeson who chooses to leave Hugh Polwheal’s epitaph unreadable, by “making it whiter” Anne erases in order to reveal its decipherability as she creates a textual space for her own pronouncement of death.

The connection between Anne, Laura, and Mrs. Fairlie’s grave is subsequently intensified (and perverted) by Sir Percival and Count Fosco’s sensational death-plot, during which Anne subsequently dies, and most importantly, before the true Lady Glyde was to arrive in London. Count Fosco writes in his narrative: “When I got back, Anne Catherick was dead. Dead on the 25th; and Lady Glyde was not to arrive in London till the 26th!” (567).¹³ The body-swapping plot, described by John Sutherland as “bizarre” and “cumbersome”¹⁴ (“Wilkie Collins” 255), is further complicated by the fact that Laura’s body must stand in for Anne at the asylum. The novel indeed forces the issue of metaphoric replacement. Laura later admits to Marian and Walter that she herself was unsure of her own identity after seeing the written “proof” of her existence as “Anne.” Walter writes:

This was the Asylum. Here she first heard herself called by Anne Catherick’s name; and here, as a last remarkable circumstance in the story of the conspiracy, her own eyes informed her that she had Anne Catherick’s clothes on. The nurse, on the first night in the Asylum, had shown her the marks on each article of underclothing as it was taken off, and had said, not at all irritably or unkindly, “Look at your own name on your own clothes, and don’t worry us all any more about being Lady Glyde. She’s dead and buried and you’re alive and hearty. Do look at your clothes now! There it is, in good marking-ink; and there you will find it on all your old things, which we have kept in the house—Anne Catherick, as plain as print!” (393–94)

Again, body and text merge. The label, as metaphoric epitaph, embodies the identity of the dead. Laura has now become the walking epitaph for Anne Catherick, the textual voice for the presence-of-absence. It is only when Marian visits “Anne” at the asylum that the true identity of Laura is confirmed.

Miss Halcombe advanced on her side, and the women advanced on theirs. When they were within a dozen paces of each other, one of the women stopped for an instant, looked eagerly at the strange lady, shook off the nurse’s grasp

on her, and, the next moment, rushed into Miss Halcombe's arms. In that moment Miss Halcombe recognized her sister—recognized the dead-alive.

(387)

It is a troubling scene: Marian (along with the reader) must instantly and simultaneously bury Anne and raise Laura from the dead. Once again the novel's burial-exhumation theme resurfaces; the cathartic sensation of recognizing "the dead-alive" is replayed.

In *Hide and Seek* (1854) Collins sets the revelation of buried identity in a graveyard. Searching for his sister, Matthew Grice is told that a girl named Mary was buried behind the church where "the poor were buried."

A few of the mounds had stained moldering tombstones at their heads. He looked at these first; and finding only strange names on them, turned next to the mounds marked out by cross-boards of wood. At one of the graves the cross-board had been torn, or had rotted away, from its upright supports, and lay on the ground weather-stained and soiled, but still faintly showing that it had once had a few letters cut in it. He examined this board to begin with, and was trying to make out what the letters were, when the sound of some one approaching disturbed him. He looked up, and saw a woman walking slowly toward the place where he was standing.

(349)

Here Mary Grice's identity is unknown; she is buried in a pauper's grave, the initials "M.G." marked on a rotten wooden board at the foot of an unkempt grave "in a dark corner among the trees." As with Collins's previous graveyard scenes, the visitor struggles with deciphering the epitaph; it is a sign of the corpse's anonymity and the slippery workings of writing death. Mary is virtually nameless; her identity is erased as the epitaph "M.G." literally decomposes. It is mere coincidence that Mrs. Peckover, the sole mourner of Mary, approaches the grave where Matthew is standing, his sister's braided hair bracelet in hand (fig. 4). It is a powerful scene, in which Mary's identity and family are soon after revealed, and the grave in Bangbury churchyard is later properly and "rightly" marked.

If for Collins the gravesite is the morbid apex of drama and narrativity, as found in *Hide and Seek*, this is where *The Woman in White*'s most sensational moment must occur. First, a visitor must enact the uncanny element of epitaph: he must attempt to read the slippery inscription. Upon his return to England, Walter hears of Laura's death and proceeds to visit her grave to mourn. "There was the marble cross, fair and white, at the head of the tomb—the tomb that now rose over mother and daughter alike" (376). Though fully aware of her death, Walter is incapable of reading Laura's name on the headstone.

I stopped before the pedestal from which the cross rose. On one side of it, on the side nearest to me, the newly-cut inscription met my eyes—the hard, clear



Figure 4. *Hide and Seek*. Harper and Brothers illustrated edition, 1873. Courtesy of Honnold/Mudd Library for The Claremont Colleges, Claremont, California.

cruel black letters which told the story of her life and death. I tried to read them. I did read, as far as the name. 'Sacred to the Memory of Laura—— . . . '

A second time I tried to read the inscription. I saw, at the end, the date of her death; and above it——

Above it, there were lines on the marble, there was a name among them, which disturbed my thoughts of her. I went round to the other side of the grave, where there was nothing to read—— (376)

Eerily reminiscent of Matthew Grice in *Hide and Seek* and then later Sarah Leeson in Collins's *The Dead Secret* who visits the grave of her lost love and attempts to read the inscription, Walter finds the epitaph difficult, if not incapable, to read. As the name "Glyde" slides off the stone, it is as if Walter somehow realizes the inscription is a lie—that his faltering reflects the hesitation to believe in Laura's death, reflects the indecipherability of death itself. The blank side of the tombstone provides relief, for literally, instead of figuratively, he cannot read it.

Next, for the sensational element of narrative to be enacted, the symbol of destabilization must be the site for figural exhumation.

The veiled woman with her cried out faintly. I stopped. The springs of my life fell low; and the shuddering of an unutterable dread crept over me from head to foot . . . the veiled woman had possession of me, body and soul. She stopped on one side of the grave. We stood face to face, with the tombstone between us. She was close to the inscription on the side of the pedestal. Her gown touched the black letters.

The voice came nearer, and rose and rose more passionately still. 'Hide your face! don't look at her! Oh, for God's sake, spare him!——'

The woman lifted her veil.

Sacred

TO THE MEMORY OF

LAURA,

LADY GLYDE,——

Laura, Lady Glyde, was standing by the inscription, and was looking at me over the grave.¹⁵ (378)

Despite the appearance of her name on the gravestone (written testament of her death), Laura, recently "escaped" from the asylum, is very much alive.¹⁶ Later to be used by Dickens in *Great Expectations*, where the haunting figure of Magwitch (a surrogate parent of sorts) appears near the tombstone of Pip's parents for shocking and symbolic effect (fig. 5), the scene is uncanny for at once Laura appears to be both Anne Catherick and her own ghost; she simultaneously appears and disappears, unveils and veils. This marks the height of sensation for the novel and is illustrated in the 1873 edition (fig. 6). As in Pailthorpe's illustration "The Terrible Stranger in the Churchyard,"

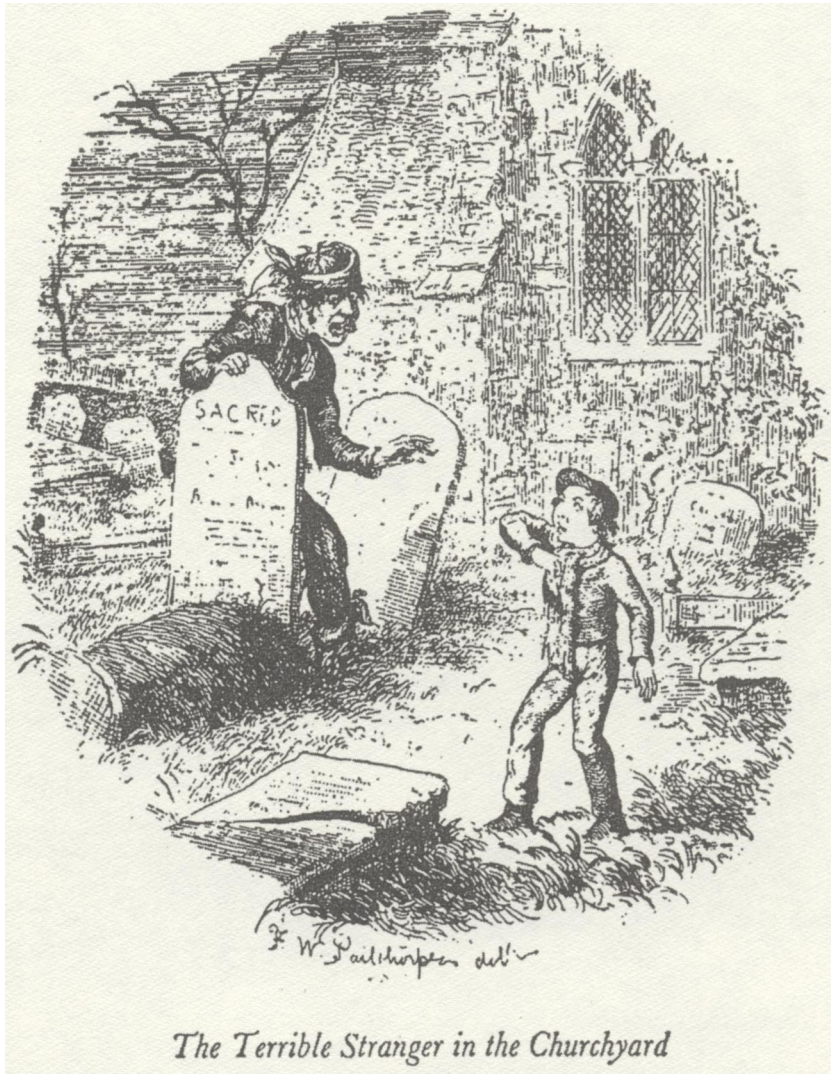


Figure 5. F. W. Pailthorpe. "The Terrible Stranger in the Churchyard." 1885. *Great Expectations. The New Oxford Illustrated Editions.*



Figure 6. Harper and Brothers illustrated edition. 1873. *The Woman in White*. Courtesy of Honnold/Mudd Library for The Claremont Colleges, Claremont, California.

the body and epitaph appear to merge; the dichotomies of alive-dead and voice-silence are conflated. Here Walter is re-living the experience of young Jacob Postlethwaite in reverse: he sees the ghost of Laura who must in reality be Anne, the true corpse that the tombstone fails to mark. The appearance of Laura's own body denies the text; she is the haunting presence of the physically impossible. As "the dead-alive," Laura is in fact the living embodiment of the unreadable epitaph—she has inherited Anne's previous role as her own walking tombstone.

For added drama and realism, Collins graphically reproduces the epitaph in part, and visually marks with a drawn line Walters inability to read her death in its entirety: Lady Glyde,—. The line drawn after Glyde, not drawn in the manuscript, also represents the blankness of death and is not reproduced

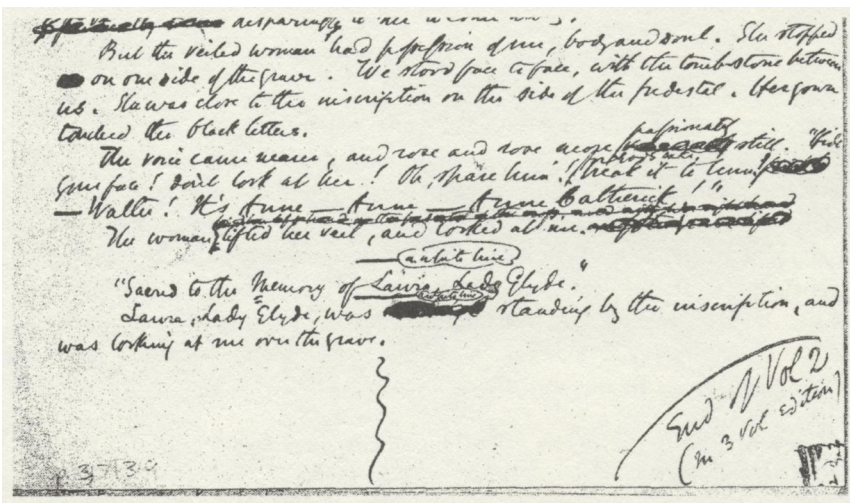


Figure 7. Manuscript. *The Woman in White*. Courtesy of The Pierpont Morgan Library (MA79).

in the second half of the novel (fig. 7). The manuscript shows that Collins did instruct that white lines be placed above and below the partial epitaph, which are reproduced, but he also included a line extracted from subsequent publications:—Walter! Its Anne—Anne—Anne Catherick! (also fig. 7). Clearly Collins wanted Laura to announce that it is Anne who is dead and buried in her wrongly marked grave. This line most likely was deleted by Collins from the serial publication so that the morbidly ironic position of Laura at her own gravesite would be sensationalized, but it also contributes to Collins's perpetuation of the shifting nature of signification and inscription where names, identities, and mortalities are interchangeable.

III

In Wilkie Collins's early novel *Basil* (1852), the attempt to destroy identity is violently dramatized. Here Basil, the narrator, is textually illegitimized for dishonoring his father's wishes. Taking out the family Bible, Basil's father opens it to the page displaying the family tree. "At the top, a miniature portrait of me, when a child, was let into the leaf. Under it, was the record of my birth and names . . . below, a large blank space was left for the entry of future particulars" Basil relates (201–2). His father then proceeds to destroy the page:

"In this record your place is destroyed—and destroyed for ever. Would to God I could tear the past from my memory, as I tear the leaf from this book!" . . . My father rent out from the book before him the whole of the leaf which contained my name; tore it into fragments, and cast them on the floor. (203)

Being forced to abandon his father's name, Basil describes that this act of destruction incurred a blank "wherever my father's name should appear." This scene of ripping out the proof of identity and leaving a blank space where the record of legitimacy previously was located is mirrored in *The Woman in White*. Peter Brooks designates the parish register as "the most important text of all" (170), and Collins was so pleased with the register plot that he later recycles it for *Armadale*. Ironically "copies" of writing determine the illegitimacy of Sir Percival. In fact, it is a blank space that signifies his origins. Walter relates this discovery as such:

I turned to the month of September, eighteen hundred and three. I found the marriage of the man whose Christian name was the same as my own. I found the double register of the marriages of the two brothers. And between these entries at the bottom of the page? Nothing! Not a vestige of the entry which recorded the marriage of Sir Felix Glyde and Cecilia Jane Elster, in the register of the church! (470)

The absence of Sir Felix Glyde's marriage—the blank—signifies.¹⁷ In a metaphoric doubling of the troublesome link between Philip Fairlie's legitimate and illegitimate daughters, Laura and Anne, Glyde forges himself into legitimacy. The name "Glyde"—literally denoting that words (whether true or false) are slippery and intangible—is important. Sir Percival's attempt to fictionally legitimize himself (in opposition to Anne's power to erase and reveal) has been exposed—his aristocracy "glides" off of him. The forged, textual evidence of a marriage ceremony, squeezed into the blank space of the register, is a textual rape, much like Fosco's forced entry into Marian's diary.¹⁸ Ultimately, Sir Percival, just as Walter and even Collins himself, can

be seen as a type of fictional author, filling up gaps with writing. Here the scene in *Basil* is reversed: Sir Percival fills the blank space with legitimacy while Basil's father creates a blank space by attempting to render his son "illegitimate," figuratively "dead" to the family. Walter further describes this textual gap:

The marriage was not there. The entries on the copy occupied exactly the same places on the page as the entries in the original. The last entry on one page recorded the marriage of the man with my Christian name. Below it, there was a blank space—a space evidently left because it was too narrow to contain the entry of the marriages of the two brothers, which in the copy, as in the original, occupied the top of the next page. (470–71)

The multiple narration of the novel is reflected not only by Mrs. Fairlie's tombstone, but in the marriage register itself, for its three versions lead Walter to unveil Sir Percival's secret. With this blank space, Collins demonstrates the power of absence to signify.

That space told the whole story! There it must have remained, in the church register, from eighteen hundred and three (when the marriages had been solemnized and the copy had been made) to eighteen hundred and twenty-seven, when Sir Percival appeared at Old Welmingham. Here, at Knowlesbury, was the chance of committing the forgery, shown to me in the copy—and there, at Old Welmingham, was the forgery committed, in the register of the church! (471)

The buried secret is paradoxically exposed by a "space that told the whole story," an exposed grave symbolizing the demise of his forged identity.

Engraved and buried signs are crucial to the identification of Sir Percival in death (his engraved watch in this case) as well as the accomplice in Laura's legal death, Count Fosco. Unlike Laura and Anne, Count Fosco is more than pleased to apply his signature to the blank page. He signs his narrative which admits his crimes and duplicities, and upon his forced entry into Marian's diary, he signs it with aplomb: "FOSCO." Important for this discussion are the ways in which Collins conflates notions of the body and text. With Professor Pesca's assistance, Walter discovers that Count Fosco is an exiled member of an Italian Brotherhood that marks all its members with a distinct tattoo. Pesca informs Walter: "We are identified with the Brotherhood by a secret mark, which we all bear, which lasts while our lives last" (536). It is a mark directly linked to mortality—somehow the sign changes at death. He then shows Walter the identification mark:

He raised his bare arm, and showed me, high on the upper part of it and on the inner side, a brand deeply burnt in the flesh and stained of a bright blood-red color. I abstain from describing the device which the brand represented. It

will be sufficient to say that it was circular in form, and so small that it would have been completely covered by a shilling coin. (537)

Reminiscent of Anne, who carried on her body the symbol of living death, the presence of absence, Fosco also harbors a brand that is the marker of his mortality: the emblem of epitaphic gesture.

Fished out of the Seine and then exhibited (as anonymous) at the infamous Paris dead-house, the Morgue (notably visited by Collins and Dickens on several occasions),¹⁹ Fosco's dead body contains the sign of his assassination. Walter describes the particular markings of death:

The wound that had killed him had been struck with a knife or dagger exactly over his heart. No other traces of violence appeared about the body, except on the left arm; and there, exactly in the place where I had seen the brand on Pesca's arm, were two deep cuts in the shape of the letter T, which entirely obliterated the mark of the Brotherhood. (581)

Assassinated, Fosco's identity and mortality are usurped by the Brotherhood, just as he usurped Anne and Laura's. Walter describes further: "The two cuts, in the form of a T, on the left arm of the dead man, signified the Italian word, 'Traditore,' and showed that justice had been done by the Brotherhood on a Traitor" (581). Philip O'Neill remarks, "By erasing the scar, the society put things to right. All signs now reflect reality" (124). But Fosco's body, just as Marian's diary, is textually raped. The spectacle of his corpse demonstrates that even in death the body is able to signify. This reinscription foreshadows the reinscription of Laura's tombstone (and is an odd reversal of Pip's personification of his parents' tombstone). We learn that he is a double agent; his duplicitous identity becomes symbolized by double writing. It is also appropriate that the man whom has discovered a "means of petrifying the body after death, so as to preserve it, as hard as marble, to the end of time" (199) is not preserved; his corpse is defiled, designated traitor, and "performs" in death. Resembling Sir Percival's corpse that was suspended in anonymity, Fosco's corpse is displayed, naked and nameless, to the Parisian public. Incidentally, Walter writes, "The body was identified, the day after I had seen it, by means of an anonymous letter addressed to his wife" (582). Similar to Anne's earlier letters of warning, the anonymous body, signed by the mark of the Brotherhood and then re-signed, is ironically identified by the absence of a signature.

IV

Through an accumulation of evidence and speculation, Walter discovers that the "fatal resemblance" between Anne and Laura is genuine: they both share

the same father.²⁰ This complicates Anne's burial even further, for as the illegitimate daughter of Philip Fairlie, she is indeed buried in the proper grave, next to her father's wife, marked "Daughter of the late Philip Fairlie Esq." The epitaph, in part, thus "writes" Anne correctly. Yet Anne still "claims the name, place, and the living personality of dead Lady Glyde," her half-sister, complicating a unique reversal of mortalities (380). Laura as well is a phantom-figure, alive in the eyes of Marian and Walter, but dead to everyone else: "In the eye of reason and of law, in the estimation of relatives and friends, according to every received formality of civilized society, 'Laura, Lady Glyde,' lay buried with her mother in the Limmeridge churchyard" (380). While Anne underwent a loss of identity as an inmate of the asylum, Laura too undergoes a similar obliteration. The novel must now rewrite itself and give a credible explanation for Laura as "living" so that Anne can be properly interred (and referred).

For Collins, the tombstone repeatedly lies, for it embodies the voice of the impossible. It is as if the novel itself—through the metaphor of the tombstone—desires to expose the problems of narrating death. Walter explains his desire to re-engrave the tombstone with truth: "Lady Glyde . . . has been cast out as a stranger from the house in which she was born—a Lie which records her death has been written on her mother's tomb." Inevitably, the stone must be cleansed. "That house shall open again to receive her," he continues, "in the presence of every soul who followed the false funeral to the grave; that lie shall be publicly erased from the tombstone" (410). Walter desires to "right" the dead by re-performing the funeral rites (a textual exorcism of sorts), and by correctly "writing" the dead.²¹ And that is in fact Walter's task: as textual excavator, he must legally resurrect Laura from the grave of Sir Percival and Count Fosco's inheritance plot. This task involves him in countering physical objects that have been turned into forged "narratives" such as "The Narrative of the Doctor" and "The Narrative of the Tombstone," "the most evil false text in the novel" (Kendrick 29). The documents are a doubling of the epitaph's lie; they embody the triumph of false narrative. For realistic effect, Collins chooses to graphically reproduce these documents, as illustrated in subsequent volume editions.

THE NARRATIVE OF THE DOCTOR

To The Registrar of the Sub-District in which the under-mentioned Death took place.—I hereby certify that I attended *Lady Glyde*, aged *Twenty-one* last Birthday ; that I last saw her, on *the 25th July*, 1850 ; that she died *on the same day at No. 5, Forest-road, St. John's Wood* ; and that the cause of her death was

CAUSE OF	DURATION OF
DEATH	DISEASE
Aneurism	Not known

Signed,
Alfred Goodricke

Prof. Title. *M.R.C.S. Eng. L.S.A.*
Address. *12, Croydon Gardens, St. John's Wood.*

Collins's reproduction of "The Narrative of the Tombstone" is striking:

Sacred
TO THE MEMORY OF
LAURA
LADY GLYDE,
WIFE OF SIR PERCIVAL GLYDE, BART.,
OF BLACKWATER PARK, HAMPSHIRE;
AND
DAUGHTER OF THE LATE PHILIP FAIRLIE ESQ.,
OF LIMMERIDGE HOUSE, IN THIS PARISH.
BORN, MARCH 27TH, 1829.
MARRIED, DECEMBER 22ND, 1849
DIED, JULY 25TH, 1850.

Collins's attention to detail is again evident in the manuscript and serial publication. The manuscript emphatically demonstrates the desire for veracity. For "The Narrative of the Doctor" Collins draws the small box representing the certificate and designates which words are to be italicized and capitalized (fig. 8).

Considering the narrow columns and limited space, it is quite amazing that these directions were approved for *All the Year Round* as well (fig. 9). "The Narrative of the Tomb Stone" also incurs some typographical changes from the manuscript, but the power of the tombstone is apparent. In the manuscript, Collins designates that "a black line" be drawn above and below the epitaph and that capitals be used for the first letter of certain words (fig. 10). "Sacred" and "Laura" are to be all capitals. In *All the Year Round* a box is drawn around the epitaph, an addition that helps the narrative resemble a true marker (fig. 11). "Sacred" is in script and only the "S" is capitalized, while "Laura" is printed largest and in all capitals. The remainder of the narrative is in small yet all capital letters, a change from the manuscript instructions.

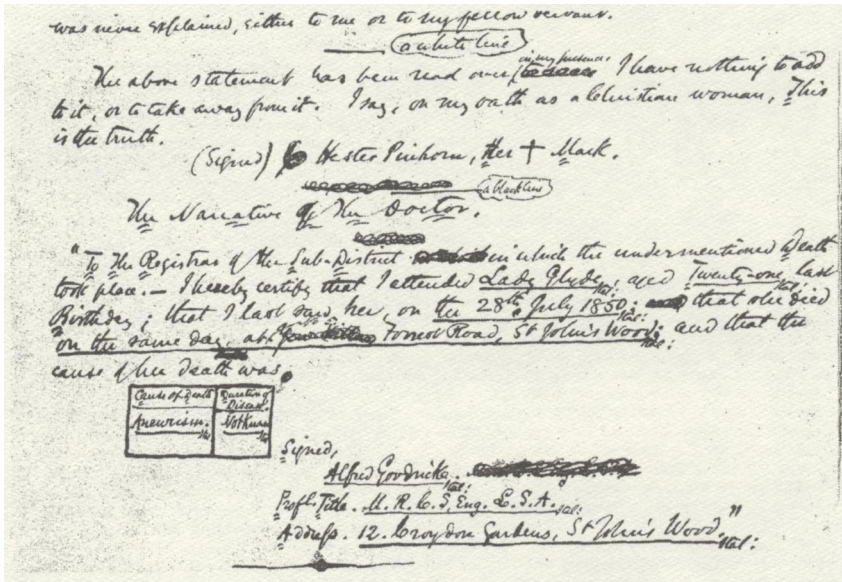


Figure 8. “The Narrative of the Doctor.” Manuscript. *The Woman in White*. Courtesy of The Pierpont Morgan Library (MA79).

While attention to type and spacing is emphasized, Collins mistakenly writes the incorrect marriage date as “December 23rd” and it is printed thus in *All the Year Round*.²² Interestingly, H. P. Sucksmith chose to use the serialized version of the novel in *All the Year Round* as the basis for his Oxford edition, which thereby reproduces the death certificate and tombstone as shown in Collins’s manuscript. Subsequent scholarly editions of the novel have unfairly ignored Collins’s intentions, diminishing the emotional and visual impact of the narratives.

In the end, the novel must return to Mrs. Fairlie and Laura’s gravesite, the textual locus of the novel that embodies shifting and erroneous narratives. This will be the last lesson in epitaphic function. After gathering the proof of Anne’s death and illegitimacy, and of Laura’s survival and true identity, Walter is equipped with enough textual evidence to erase the false tombstone. For evidence, Walter takes a copy, a tracing, of the epitaph: “My last labor, as the evening approached, was to obtain ‘The Narrative of the Tombstone,’ by taking a copy of the false inscription on the grave, before it was erased” (575). In a way, this “tracing” of the false narrative perpetuates a falsehood—it leaves a trace of the lying text. The next day the redramatization of the funeral occurs. It is a pseudo-legal reenactment that “rights” Anne’s burial rites. Walter explains: “I invited all the persons present . . . to follow

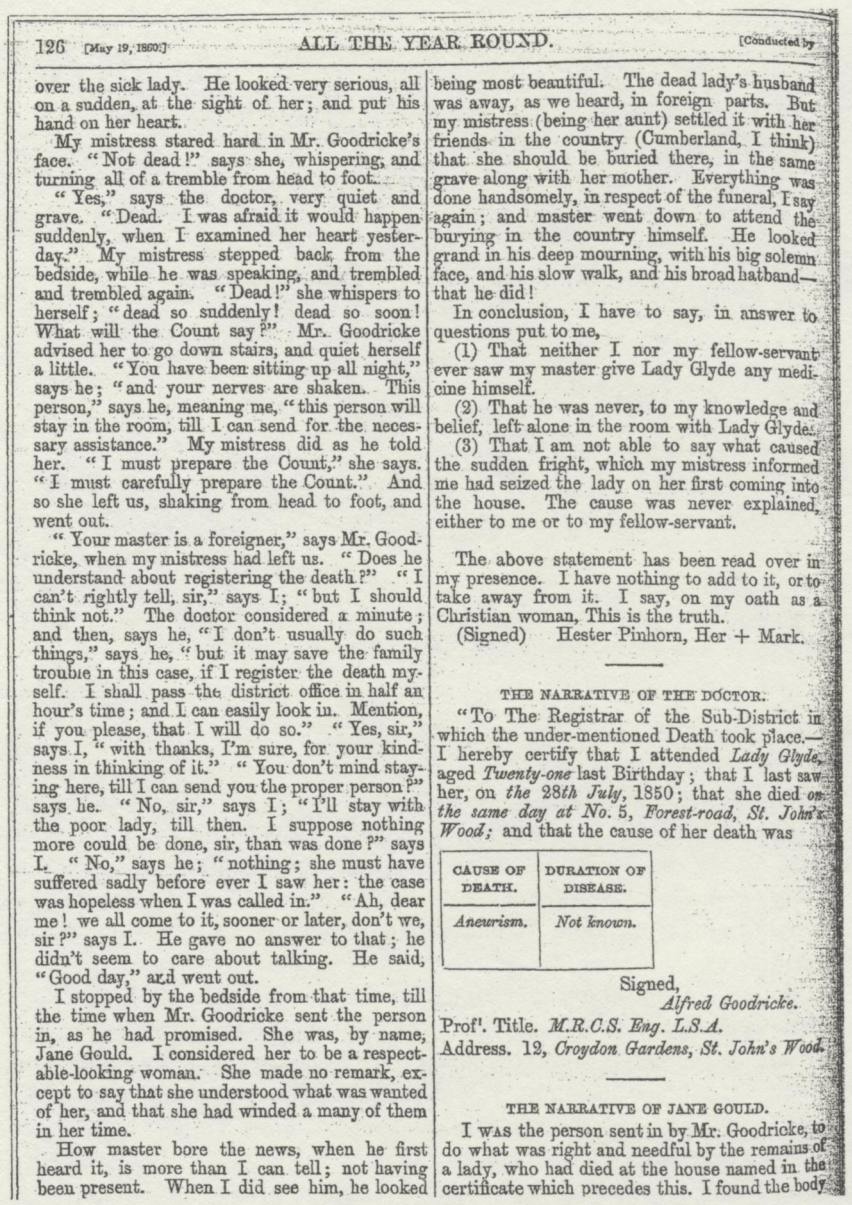


Figure 9. "The Narrative of the Doctor." *The Woman in White* serialized in *All the Year Round*, May 1860. Special Collections, Honnold/Mudd Library for The Claremont Colleges, Claremont, California.

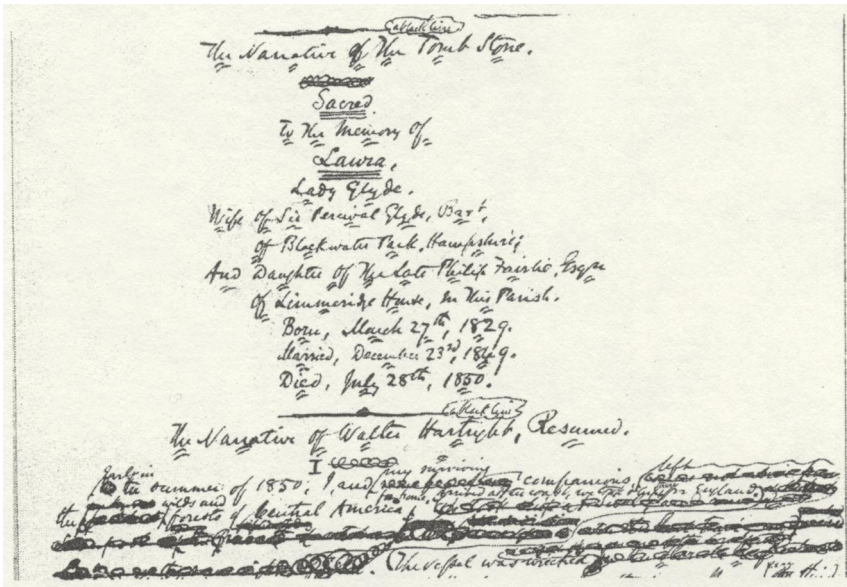


Figure 10. “The Narrative of The Tomb Stone.” Manuscript. *The Woman in White*. Courtesy of The Pierpont Morgan Library (MA79).

me to the churchyard, and see the false inscription struck off the tombstone with their own eyes” (577). The epitaph, “The Narrative of the Tombstone,” is its own piece of evidence. As the novel’s “editor,” Walter here exerts ultimate control over narrative. Reenacting Anne’s tomb-cleaning, he demonstrates the power to erase and alter the fiction. The letters of the tombstone are then chiseled off; the false signature is erased: “Not a voice was heard; not a soul moved, till those three words, ‘Laura, Lady Glyde,’ had vanished from sight. Then, there was a great heave of relief among the crowd, as if they felt that the last fetters of the conspiracy had been struck off Laura herself” (577). Clearly the graphic tombstone that Collins provides makes the visualization of the erasure scene more violent and extraordinary. Similar to Pip who merges the epitaph with notions of the physical body, here Laura is a living representation of the engraved letters of death. As with other bodies in the novel (notably Fosco’s corpse), Laura’s body merges with text and must be “struck” in order to properly signify. Next, the false narrative is exposed and then an imposing revisionary narrative is laid over the inscription of origins. “It was late in the day before the whole inscription was erased. One line only was afterwards engraved in its place: ‘Anne Catherick, July 25th, 1850’ ” (577). The reinscription of the narrative of the tombstone symbolizes the proper joining of Anne with Mrs. Fairlie in death, while the

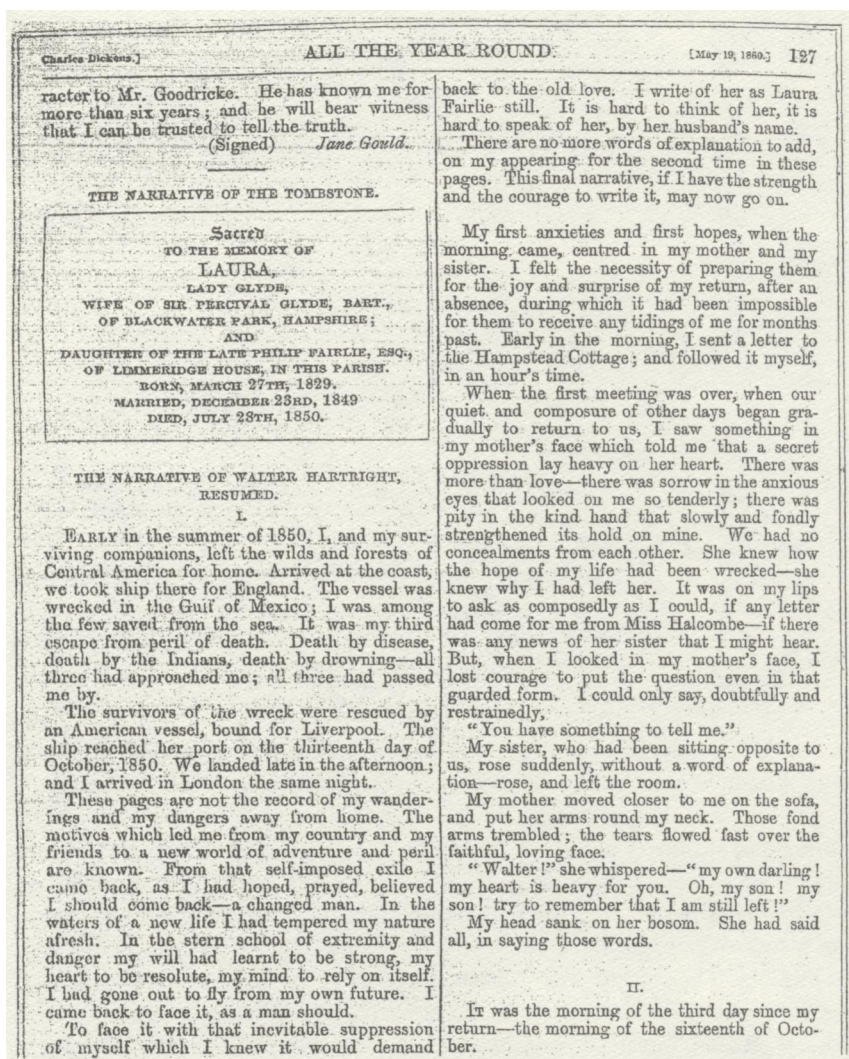


Figure 11. Graphic of epitaph. *The Woman in White*, serialized in *Household Words*, 1859–1860. Special Collections, Honnold/Mudd Library for The Claremont Colleges, Claremont, California.

subversive epitaph next to Mrs. Fairlie's inscription is a blank space waiting for Laura's true signification.

Though its ambiguity remains, the narrative now attempts to construct a credible version of the death story. The second half of the novel has worked to achieve this point—finally Laura is textually exhumed and Anne is properly and correctly buried. In the end the burial-plot is unraveled: bodies and corpses reflect their proper mortalities, and texts properly signify their referents. Yet the epitaph's textual vulnerability persists.²³ Elam explains: "The possibility of slippage remains, as does the narrative palimpsest on the tombstone: Anne's name inscribed over Laura's erased name" (61).²⁴ Indeed the trace of the erasure (reflecting the trace left earlier by Anne's cleaning), is now a trace of Laura's unwritten death. While Anne's name is chiseled over Laura's lying epitaph, the trace remains as a ghostly reminder of Laura's fate. As this scene exemplifies, language is unstable, under erasure, and consumable. Similar to the marriage register, the tombstone inscription incurs multiple versions: Mrs. Fairlie's, Laura's, Walter's copy, Laura's erased, and then Anne's. The tombstone, with its multiple narratives, is thus an emblem for the novel as a whole—an emblem for all textuality as a mourning of truth and presence.

V

This examination of narrativity and epitaph would be incomplete without the discussion of Wilkie Collins's own will and gravesite. When Collins died on September 23, 1889, he left clear and meticulous instructions about his funeral and burial. Kenneth Robinson notes: "His Will was drawn up with the precision and attention to detail that one would have expected. It is dated March 22nd, 1882" (324). Resembling Collins's attention to typographical detail in his fiction, particular consideration was paid to the tombstone and its inscription.

I direct that all my just debts and funeral expenses shall be paid with all convenient speed after my decease. I desire to be buried in the Cemetery at Kensal Green and that over my grave there be placed a plain stone and no other monument and that there shall be placed on such stone cross the inscription which my executors will find written and placed in the same envelope occupied by this will and I desire that nothing shall be inscribed upon the said cross except the inscription which I have herein before directed.²⁵

His will includes specific details regarding not only his gravesite, but the funeral expenses, mourning wear, and attendants.

And it is my will that exclusive of the expense of purchasing the customary grave and of setting up the plain stone cross and putting the inscription thereon my funeral expenses shall not exceed twenty five pounds and I direct that no scarves hat bands or feathers shall be worn or used at my funeral.

For an author of such notoriety and national acclaim (though at the time he was avidly read but “little esteemed or talked of” according to early biographers) he requested an unassuming headstone: “Over my grave a plain stone cross.” The will resounds with Collins’s own willfulness; there is an ironic pun on the phrase “it is my *will* that . . . my funeral expenses shall not exceed twenty five pounds,” while the phrase “the plain cross” and his request that it should never be altered is stated three times. Propriety aside, perhaps this anxious statement reflects the acknowledgment in his fiction that tombstones are places of textual disruption and misreading; that somehow writing can be erased and reinscribed but that the layers of signification persist. His request for a large, white cross uncannily resembles the description of Hermanric’s grave in *Antonina* on which is raised “a white marble cross” with a short Latin inscription, and Mrs. Fairlie’s own “white marble cross.”

Collins displayed his interest in epitaphs by not only graphically reproducing them in his novels, but by authoring his own. Collins’s epitaph is engraved on a marble block below the cross, distinctly matching the placement of Mrs. Fairlie’s inscription: “At the square block of marble below it [the cross]” (78). The tombstone is engraved with his name and dates and the inscription he had wanted (fig. 12).

In Memory of

WILKIE COLLINS

AUTHOR OF “THE WOMAN IN WHITE”
AND OTHER WORKS OF FICTION.

Born 8th January 1824
Died 23rd September 1889

The “inscription which my executors shall find included in this envelope” exemplifies his alignment in death with the immortal work for which he was most known. Indeed the epitaph is quite uncanny, for it emblemizes the fiction that so fetishizes the narrative function of the epitaph itself. Collins’s epitaph is thereby a doubling of death and narrative. In *The King of Inventors: A Life of Wilkie Collins*, Catherine Peters observes: “The inscription he chose for his memorial, ‘Author of *The Woman in White* and other works of fiction’—forbidding anything to be added to it—acknowledged where he felt the final significance of his life to lie. He wanted no religious or sentimental

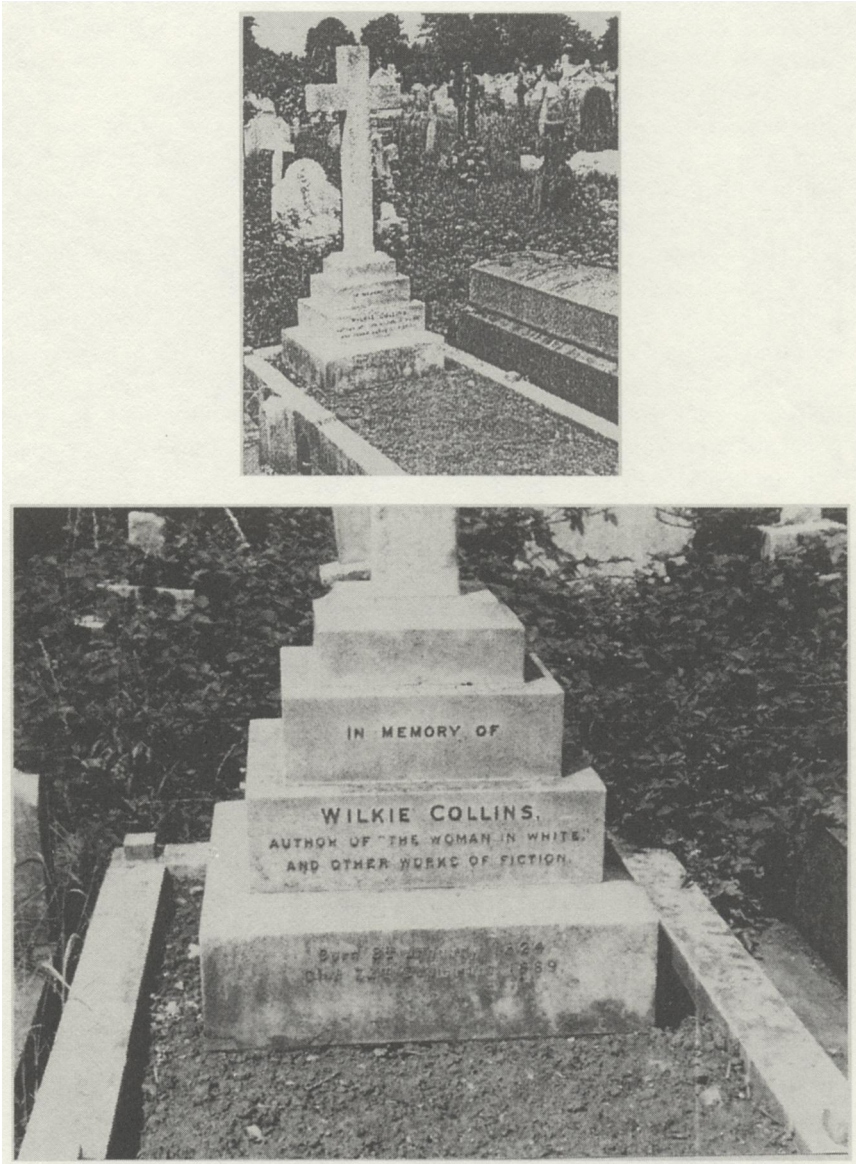


Figure 12. Wilkie Collins's gravesite, Kensal Green (Grave number/Square/Row 31754/141/1). Before the recent restoration, "In Memory Of" was engraved in a script font. With kind permission of Andrew Gasson, Chairman, Wilkie Collins Society.

effusions, no mention of heaven or family'' (432). This choice in some way resembles Hugh Polwheal's tombstone in *The Dead Secret*, where Sarah Leeson's initials and dates will be inscribed upon her death according to Rosamund's belief that a "short and simple inscription is the fittest and the best" (361). Wordsworth designates the role of the epitaph for the heroic as one in which the contribution to the betterment of society should be noted: "Of course ought the attention to be directed chiefly to those actions or that act" (105). Appropriately the novel that is obsessed with writing death should be presented as the "action" for which Collins is to be memorialized. For Collins, his fictional burial-plot, *The Woman in White*, is to be considered his own true haunting legacy.

Significant to Collins's "buried" life is Caroline Elizabeth Graves. There has been much speculation regarding Caroline as the inspiration for *The Woman in White*, and many now dismiss that she was the "shadowy" woman in white he encountered on the streets of London in 1859.²⁶ The main source for the premise of the novel has since been identified by Hyder and is widely accepted (299).²⁷ Important for this discussion is that she can be seen to embody the fictional woman in white in important and disturbing ways. As Collins's mistress and muse for close to thirty years, Caroline Elizabeth Graves plays a considerable role in Collins's own burial-plot which is just as mysterious as one of his fictions. It is upon his death that his lifelong relationship with her (and the more recent with Martha Rudd) is revealed. In his will, which would become "public" knowledge, he leaves her his "gold studs" and the contents of her bedroom and his study. The income from his estate he put in trust, half going to Caroline and her daughter. For over five years Caroline Graves took care of his resting place at Kensal Green, London (eerily, the tender of Collins's grave is Mrs. "Graves").²⁸ It is somehow appropriate that the woman who possibly inspired the infamous scene at the opening of *The Woman in White* tends the grave of its creator, cleans the stone that marks her textual re-invention. Caroline's actions double those of Anne Catherick, not only in the infamous opening of the novel, but in Anne's fetishizing of Mrs. Fairlie's grave—both women are walking epitaphs, embodying "the woman in white" and *The Woman in White*.

Ironically, and in an uncanny reflection of the novel, upon Caroline Graves's death in 1895 (a reversal of the "birth date" of *The Woman in White* in 1859), no stone was erected, no inscription was engraved. She requested to be buried with Wilkie Collins, and as stated in his will, his epitaph was left without reinscription. "When the grave was opened again in 1895, for Caroline's coffin, no word was added to mark it as her resting place" (Peters 432). Collins's sealed instructions most likely contained Collins's wish to have Caroline (anonymously) buried with him. Hyder remarks, "No other name is marked on that stone, but with Collins lies buried Caroline

Elizabeth Graves, who died in June, 1895, at 24 Newman Street, aged sixty-one, apparently the widow of a George Robert Graves'' (297).²⁹ Caroline Graves's grave is unmarked; it is a blank tombstone, infinitely awaiting inscription. Aptly, this woman in white is signified in death only by the novel she may have inspired. Even more disturbing is the fact that her surname (obviously missing from the inscription) signifies Collins's burial-plot(s)—the two bodies that lay below the white cross in Kensal Green. It is fitting that Collins's grave doubles Mrs. Fairlie's for both "plots" contain two corpses, suspend death, await the proper burial of an interred body, and include inscriptions that are only half-correct—both epitaphs fail to inscribe death. But while Collins's fiction concludes with the eventual "righting" and "writing" of death, Caroline Graves is infinitely represented by a blank space. Collins's intentional last words and testament are false and incomplete, for his own "Narrative of the Tombstone" demonstrates the uncanny workings of epitaph as it leaves us perpetually searching for its dead secret.

NOTES

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1. Karen Mills Campbell, "Poetry as Epitaph" *Journal of Popular Culture* 14, 4 (1981) 659.
2. Cynthia Chase, "Reading Epitaphs." *Deconstruction is/in America: A New Sense of the Political*. Ed. Anselm Haverkamp (New York: New York UP, 1995) 52.
3. *The Woman in White* was published serially in *All the Year Round* from Nov. 23, 1859–Aug. 22, 1860 while *Great Expectations* appeared Dec. 1, 1860–Aug. 3, 1861.
4. See studies such as those of Gilbert and Gubar, Diane Elam, and Tamar Heller. This paper is indebted to the work of Carolyn Dever whose work examines the feminist, Freudian, and deconstructive implications of the Victorian dead mother.
5. Tillotson further remarks that "By 1870, 'dead, yet not dead' had become such a stereotype that it is difficult to imagine Dickens adopting it" (xxv).
6. Wilkie Collins, *The Dead Secret* (Harper and Brothers 1873) 34. In his Introduction to the Oxford edition, Ira B. Nadel notes, "For added, realism, Collins reproduces the inscription of the headstone, as he will do later in *The Woman in White*" *The Dead Secret* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999. xiv). The Oxford edition does not reproduce the accurate spacing or font as printed in the serial version in *Household Words*.
7. Many thanks to Ira Nadel and Andrew Gasson for their help with confirming that the location of the manuscript for *The Dead Secret* is not known.

8. In the Introduction to Collins's *Mad Monkton and Other Stories* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994) Norman Page notes: "The chance meeting with a mysterious woman, always a potent stimulus to Collins's imagination, recurs most famously in *The Woman in White* (1860), though Collins had used it earlier, and crucially, in *Basil*" (xvii). The theme was also used in Collins's short story "The Ostler" (1855).
9. One of Dickens's sons recalled his father saying that the description was "one of the most dramatic descriptions he could recall." The other was the account of the march of the women to Versailles in Carlyle's *French Revolution*. See *The Recollections of Sir Henry Dickens* (London, 1934) 54. *The Woman in White* was published serially following Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859). Both novels revolve around doubled figures that are substituted for each other. In the Introduction to Collins's *Mad Monkton and Other Stories* Norman Page remarks: "'The Lady of Glenwith Grange' (1856) is a particularly good illustration of Collins's general tendency to anticipate in his short stories elements that would reappear more prominently in his—and sometimes not only his—longer fictions" (xix). Its double identity plot antedates the double identity plots of both *A Tale of Two Cities* and *The Woman in White*. See Laurie Langbauer's "Women in White, Men in Feminism" *Yale Journal of Criticism* 2,2 (1989) for a comparison of several literary "women in white."
10. Tamar Heller, in her feminist reading of the novel, also identifies Anne Catherick as the embodiment of "social invisibility that renders women blank pages to be inscribed by men."
11. This "cleansing" indeed has Christian connotations (baptism, spiritual cleansing, etc.) and also connects to Walter's own association with cleansing, water, and drowning. At the opening of the novel it is learned that he previously saved Professor Pesca (ironically meaning "fishing" in Italian) from drowning.
12. For a discussion of Anne's power in erasure see MacDonagh and Smith.
13. This date discrepancy is the minute evidence Walter must prove in order to legalize Anne's death and Laura's life. Ironically Collins himself had the travel and death dates wrong in the serial version of the novel. Reviewing the third edition in *The Times*, 30 October 1860, E.S. Dallas made the well-known objection about the impossibility of the novel's time scheme. See Sutherland, "Two Emergencies in the Writing of *The Woman in White*," for a detailed analysis of the death-date dilemma.
14. John Sutherland, "Wilkie Collins and the Origins of the Sensation Novel" *Dickens Studies Annual* 20, (1991): 255. Sutherland asks, "Why not just poison Laura? She is chronically delicate." The corpse-substitution plot was subsequently used by Collins in *The Haunted Hotel* (1879) and in his last completed work, *Blind Love* (1889) where Lord Harry substitutes a consumptive victim for himself in order to collect his own life insurance. Mary Elizabeth Braddon went on to further popularize the burial-plot in *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862). J.D. Coates remarks, "*Lady Audley's Secret* even uses what is, perhaps the most striking of Wilkie Collins's dramatic devices in *The Woman in White*, that of the false grave dug and the headstone put up during the life-time of the person supposedly buried

- there.” See “Techniques of Terror in *The Woman in White*.” *Durham University Journal* 73, 2 (1981): 181.
15. This is the partial inscription, visually demonstrating Walter’s inability to read it in its entirety. The entire inscription is replicated later as its own chapter and “narrative” in the second part of the novel. Significant is the fact that Collins chooses to graphically reproduce the inscription in both the manuscript and serialized edition of the novel. Many thanks to Christine Nelson, Curator of Historical Documents at The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York for use of the manuscript (MA 79).
 16. Collins earlier explored the “presumed dead but alive” theme in the play *The Red Vial* (1858) where Mrs. Wagner is presumed dead, but somehow kept alive. In *John Jago’s Ghost* or “The Dead Alive” (1873–4) John Jago is presumed murdered yet returns to the surprise of the townspeople. And of course Mary Elizabeth Braddon utilizes the theme in *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) in the figure of George Talboys who is assumed to be murdered by Lady Audley but manages to survive his attack.
 17. Illegitimacy is a favorite theme in Collins’s fiction, from *The Dead Secret* (1857) to *No Name* (1862). This may be due to the fact that he had three illegitimate children of his own with long-time mistress Martha Rudd. In Collins’s short story “The Lady of Glenwith” (1856) the alleged Baron Franval is actually an impostor and a criminal impersonating the real aristocrat, making him the prototype of Sir Percival and Count Fosco.
 18. Collins will later use the forged marriage register in *Armada* (1866) where the villainous Lydia Gwilt forges her marriage to Allan Armadale.
 19. In his biography, Kenneth Robinson notes a particular visit by Collins in 1844: “In his idle wanderings through the Paris streets, some morbid impulse had again drawn him into the chilly corridors of the Morgue. ‘A body of a young girl had just been fished out of the river. As her bosom was black and blue I suppose she had been beaten into a state of insensibility and then flung into the Seine.’ Fifteen years later he chose this grim setting for our final glimpse of Count Fosco in *The Woman in White*” (40). Robinson also notes that Collins used another famous morgue for the setting of his play *The Red Vial* (1858). The sensational climax of the play is “the awakening of a supposed corpse in the Frankfurt dead-house. The sight of a naked arm thrust from the door of the mortuary-cell and clutching at the handle of an alarm-bell was more than even an Olympic audience could swallow” (120). See Hutter for a discussion of the morbid tourism of Dickens and Collins and the role of the Paris Morgue as *theatrum mundi*.
 20. Collins’s novels *Hide and Seek* (1854) and *The Dead Secret* (1857) are earlier plots that also include an illegitimate daughter.
 21. In a certain manner Walter and Sir Percival are types of ironic “resurrection-ists”—both steal or replace bodies (and identities) from graves.
 22. See Sutherland’s comments in the Oxford edition.
 23. Jacques Derrida recognizes that the movement inside the crypt, the tearing away of a false front (monumental exterior) and the tearing down of a false dichotomy (outside/inside) would be endlessly repeated.

24. Though she rightly correlates loss of identity and lack of agency with the feminine, Elam doesn't acknowledge that powerful male characters also lose their identities and are relegated to the blank page.
25. The text of the will is courtesy of Paul Lewis and the Wilkie Collins Society website <<http://www.wilkiecollins.org/>>. The original lies in the London Public Record office and a copy can be found at The Pierpont Morgan Library.
26. Many disagree that it was Caroline Graves who inspired the novel, and therefore disregard the story in J.G. Millais's biography of his father that relays the encounter with a mysterious woman (supposedly Graves). In brief, Millais describes that his father, Wilkie, and Charles Collins were walking in London on a moonlit night sometime in the 1850s when they heard a "piercing scream coming from the garden of a villa close at hand. It was evidently the cry of a woman in distress; and while pausing to consider what they should do, the iron gate leading to the garden was dashed open, and from it came the figure of a young and very beautiful woman dressed in flowing white robes that shone in the moonlight. She seemed to float rather than run in their direction . . ." (qtd in Robinson, 130). Most likely Collins met Graves sometime in 1859 (Collins composed *The Woman in White* from August 15, 1859 to July 26, 1860). See Robinson's *Wilkie Collins: A Biography* for further details regarding the relationship between Caroline Graves and Collins.
27. See Clyde Hyder's seminal article for his discussion of Mme. de Douhault's court case in Maurice Mejan's *Recueil des Causes Célèbre* and the similarities to the plot of Collins's novel.
28. Afterward, Martha Rudd, the mother of Collins's three illegitimate children, tended the grave. Hyder notes: "After Mrs. Graves's death Collins's grave was for a time under the care of Martha Rudd" (297). Interestingly, Robinson also recognizes "The Narrative of Wilkie Collins's Tombstone." He aptly remarks: "For some years after Caroline's death, the grave was tended by Martha Rudd until she too vanishes from the story" (326).
29. Hyder, 297.

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