

KAREN BETH STROVAS

“Oh, my God! am I going to be ill?”: Narratives of Sleep and the Sickbed in Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White*

On July 22, 1905, *The British Medical Journal* (BMJ) published an anonymous article titled “Bedside Books,” which claimed that “most men, except such as go in terror of their wives, read in bed” (200). The article makes the observation that even men who swear by reading in bed feel the need to justify their behavior, as if to make an excuse for bringing a book to bed. Luckily, the *Journal* assures its readers that reading in bed is acceptable and even advisable. Dr. Osler, the Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford, “advises every one to read for half an hour before going to sleep” (200). The article makes a national medical issue out of what type of books turn-of-the-century British men should read before falling asleep, or in order to fall asleep. The author, “Having reached the period of old fogeydom,” cannot help but suggest his “favourites,” Scott, Dickens, and Thackeray (201). He offers a variety of suggestions but insists, “As a rule, Wilkie Collins and other masters of plot-weaving should be avoided, as likely to murder sleep” (201). This memorable phrase—borrowed from William Shakespeare (*Mac.* 2.2.48)—characterizes sleep not only as something that can die, but also what is more fearsome, be killed; it also singles out Wilkie Collins as the author most likely to murder one’s sleep, if one is unwise enough to take his tales to bed.

The intricate narrative of *The Woman in White* (1860) is an early but prime example of a plot-weaving sensation novel by Wilkie Collins. *The Woman in White* follows the story of art instructor-turned-amateur detective Walter Hartright as he assists his intelligent and capable friend Marian Halcombe in solving the mystery of the identity of Anne Catherick, the “Woman in White.” Catherick, whose mental and physical illnesses are as mysterious as she is, is a woman whom Hartright meets only briefly and helps one late night in London as she escapes from an asylum. Catherick’s death about mid-way through the novel is purposely registered incorrectly by antagonists Sir Percival Glyde and Count Fosco as the death of Laura Fairlie, the recent Lady Glyde and half-sister of Marian, so that Glyde and Fosco can steal Laura’s inheritance. Hartright, whose devotion to Laura and respect for Marian know no bounds, works with Marian to solve the clues that involve mistaken identities, falsified documents, and evil ploys of foreign aristocrats. As the narrative and mystery develop, Collins adds to the complexity of the story by switching between various first-person narrators, including both Hartright and Marian. While plot-weaving is the

only complaint that the author of "Bedside Books" makes in his allegation that Collins murders sleep, the fact that Collins's fiction so often features sleep as a fragile and dangerous state would have been much more damning as evidence of this murder. In fact, Collins's major works are often consumed by the intermingling of issues of sleep, illness, and anxiety.

In *The Woman in White*, Collins allows his male characters to sleep surprisingly well in comparison to his female characters, who have bad luck in almost all aspects of sleep. Famously, Count Fosco can "command . . . sleep at will" by falling asleep and waking on the instant of his choosing, "feel[ing] infinitely refreshed" (610). In contrast to the men, Marian, Laura, and Anne each sleep poorly and are taken advantage of in their sleep during periods of ill health. Marian in particular always seems to be waking when she wants to sleep and falling asleep while she is trying to stay alert. It is arguable that Collins uses Marian's battles of untimely sleep and sleeplessness as a means to manipulate the ways in which readers interpret Marian's mental and physiological health. This is because, on the one hand, Collins draws a clear causal relationship between anxiety and sleeplessness within Marian's narratives. On the other hand, he links her illness with deep, vulnerable sleep.

Despite this relationship, however, it is important to note that Collins never "diagnoses" his characters in this novel with sleeping disorders, nor is that my purpose, as the phrase "sleep disorder" implies a medical disorder. In contrast to a medical disorder, I firmly believe Collins instead wanted a *narrative* disorder, so to speak—a strategy for starting and stopping narrative so that his switches between one diary entry and another, or one narrator and another, would seem instinctive to the characters' natural (as opposed to dysfunctional) physiological functions rather than artificially manipulated by plot, though they of course were. I read the sleep and sleeplessness of Collins's women, in conjunction with their health and illness, as related to the writing of first-person narratives.

More specifically, I examine the act of writing and creating text in order to understand more fully the significance of Collins's pairs—sleeplessness and anxiety being the first pair, and sleep and illness being the second—for these are essential to the novel's form and its movement between male and female narrators. This paper seeks to determine the extent to which Marian's writing of journal entries, and the reasons she stops writing, are woven with her agency and lack of agency, for Collins maneuvers through questions of gender simultaneous to his exploration of the tropes of sleep, sleeplessness, sickness, and nervous anxiety.

First, we see that Collins uses sleeplessness caused by anxiety as a plot device to stimulate Marian into writing long, developed journal entries at night; but, later, at the point when Collins needs to switch to a new narrator, he finally allows her to achieve deep, unbroken sleep, through the guise of a serious illness. Readers understand that only a serious debility would prevent Marian, so brave and capable, from documenting her

experiences and the treachery waged against her sister at Blackwater Park. Thus, Collins manipulates her physical health in order to prevent her from creating new narratives. With Marian unable to write, Collins can move away from her limited point of view and integrate new voices with new perspectives and different motivations—specifically, those of evil and wrongdoing for which sensation fiction is widely known. Collins must put his women “to bed” before they can be preyed upon effectively, and the narrative method he chooses for causing sleep is illness. Marian’s profound and elaborated descent into collective sleep and illness is my primary focus as it is this descent through which Collins crafts one of the novel’s most sensationalized plot events.

Still, it is significant that Collins uses both sleep and sleeplessness because it demonstrates a creative understanding of the full spectrum of consciousness and its utility in relation to narrative form. Collins’s major characters go through the full spectrum of daily consciousness between sleep and wakefulness, but Collins relies on the spectrum’s extreme poles at the most poignant moments in the story in order to produce excitement through both plot and form. Collins’s use of both full wakefulness and unconsciousness influences the shape of his narrative and demonstrates a specific, inseparable connection between his plot and form, underlining his seeming fascination with sleep states as vehicles for narrative development. This point of fascination is an important point of analysis, for we see this strategy of thematic and formal development mature and expand throughout Collins’s *oeuvre*, especially in his later novels *Armadale* (1866) and *The Moonstone* (1868).

Anxiety and Sleeplessness as Combined Motivations for Narrative

Collins repeatedly draws on sleeplessness as an outward sign of anxiety. Attacks of nerves and anxiety create what Athena Vrettos in *Somatic Fictions* (1995) calls a “troublesome middle category” in the Victorians’ “comfortable duality of body and mind” (50–1). And, in *Nerves and Narratives* (1997), Peter Melville Logan notes that one of the “central characteristics of the nervous body” is “its tendency to talk, especially to talk about itself” (2). Collins adheres to this notion of anxiety and uses it as a vehicle to create a first-person singular text by way of sleeplessness. Ailments of the nerves lead characters to speak about them repeatedly and directly, and these discussions develop and press forward the plot of the novel. We read Marian’s distressed diary entry, which expresses her mixed emotions: “This last day has been all confusion and wretchedness. How can I write about it?—and yet, I must write” (195). She recognizes that writing her thoughts and creating narratological sense out of the wretched confusion “is better than brooding over my own gloomy thoughts” (195). She writes of writing itself as an imperative: she “must write” the seemingly un-writeable. She must untangle “confusion and wretchedness” through the act of writing, and she attempts this task at night.

Just as Collins uses nervous anxiety to bring about Marian's nighttime wakefulness and motivate her to explore her feelings through writing, so too does Collins use sleepless anxiety and the narratives it produces to explore and illustrate the affection between half-sisters Marian Halcombe and Laura Fairlie. Marian translates her nerves and her concern for her sister into writing, and she does so at the expense of sleep. At one point, Marian's journal reads, "13th. — A sleepless night, through uneasiness about Laura" (179). At a later date, she writes "long after midnight, [I have] just come back from a stolen look at Laura in her pretty little white bed" (196). Marian cannot fall asleep without first checking on the condition of her sister, hoping she is sound asleep. Laura, though, is "not sleeping. The glimmer of the night-light showed me that her eyes were only partially closed—the traces of tears glistened between her eyelids" (196). Collins depicts anxiety and sadness here as a roadblock to sleep. Laura's tears glisten "between her eyelids" where sleep should reside. After seeing Laura unable to sleep, Marian then returns to her room to write in her journal of her anxieties about Laura's unhappiness regarding her upcoming nuptials.

Marian usurps her half-sister's emotions and claims ownership of them as she writes them into being, which means that Laura's anxiety and sleeplessness have transcended their original importance within the plot. Laura's inability to sleep causes or, at the very least, prolongs Marian's inability to sleep, but Marian's nighttime wakefulness arguably bears more significance than Laura's because it produces its own story (and Laura's) in writing; in other words, Marian's sleepless anxiety brings about the narrative of itself as well as the narrative of her love for Laura. We see evidence of this causal relationship when Marian writes in another journal entry, "Poor dear Laura hardly leaves me for a moment, all day; and, last night, when neither of us could sleep, she came and crept into my bed to talk to me there. 'I shall lose you so soon, Marian,' she said; 'I must make the most of you while I can'" (189). Making "the most of" Marian, apparently, means keeping her awake—keeping her talking, and, most importantly, keeping her writing, *a lot*. Marian's sleepless anxiety is sometimes unprovoked and sometimes self-inflicted. Because Marian understands her body's tendency toward wakefulness when she is anxious, she does not fight it. Instead, it is arguable that, once she knows she will not sleep easily, she then engages in self-inflicted wakefulness by engaging in long periods of writing. Marian's lengthy narrations are particularly relevant for this reading of the novel because they are the direct result of Collins's peculiar methodology to keep his heroine awake as long as possible, and to equate her nervous wakefulness with the production of text.

Neuroses, as attacks of "nerves" or nervousness were often called, lacked a clear link to disease in the Victorian period, but they did bring on "physical symptoms" which thus "separated such disorders from madness" (Vrettos 51). Because Victorians "routinely collapsed," confused, or otherwise connected bodily illnesses with emotional ones (Vrettos 52), it is

not surprising that nervousness was re-categorized as mental illness and often misdiagnosed as such throughout the era. *Nerves and Narratives* by Peter Melville Logan analyzes the “nervous body” as a cultural sign for hysteria in both genders and claims that a character’s outward expression of anxiety is shorthand for an author’s critique of society (2). At several points in *The Woman in White*, the women’s nervousness reaches a level of panic and energy, which critics such as Logan might refer to as hysteria, but which requires neither a hysterical reading nor an implicit social critique. Instead, I argue that such anxieties are plot-driven. Or, more specifically, the anxieties are plot-driving and plot-creating.

Writing Oneself Into or Out of Sleep

Sleeplessness during the night hours functions as a plot device that gives upper-class ladies, particularly Marian, the privacy, time, and opportunity to clear their heads without any interruption. To be sure, nighttime is Marian’s metaphorical “room of one’s own,” where she can write freely and at length. Marian routinely delays her bedtime hour; it is not uncommon for her to use writing as an excuse to stay awake. For example, she writes in typical fashion one night, “I have a few lines more to add to this day’s entry before I go to bed to-night” (228). But her “few lines” amount to about seventeen pages of text in the novel, and it is unclear whether she ever finds her way to bed. Marian does not mind losing sleep, especially since she feels that her documentation of her sister’s hardship is a necessary labor of love. Collins uses wakeful nights as a setting as well as a plot device, which enables Marian’s creation of text and her ability to express herself and her anxieties through language.

Marian uses writing instead of reading to try to fall asleep because her sleep has already been “murdered,” to return to the ominous word choice from “Bedside Books.” One night, prior to Sir Percival and Lady Glyde’s return to Blackwater from their honeymoon trip through Italy and France, Marian cannot sleep for thinking about Laura’s new life since marriage. She questions herself, “The servants are evidently going to bed. Shall I follow their example?” (199). Her response reads much like a passage from Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), one in which Jane paces around the attic out of boredom and dissatisfaction with the quiet domestic life of women. Marian answers herself:

No, I am not half sleepy enough. Sleepy, did I say? I feel as if I should never close my eyes again. [I’m kept] in a perpetual fever of excitement. If I only had the privileges of a man, I would order out Sir Percival’s best horse instantly, and tear away on a night-gallop . . . a long, hard, heavy, ceaseless gallop of hours and hours . . . Being, however, nothing but a woman, condemned to patience, propriety, and petticoats for life, I must . . . try to compose myself in some feeble and feminine way. (199–200)

In *Jane Eyre*, Jane's inner passion eventually broke free from suppression through her romance with Mr. Rochester and her financial independence from him; tellingly, she did not feel compelled to write her "autobiography" until a decade had passed since their marriage. Unlike Jane, Marian has neither the romantic notions nor the luxury of time to waste. She writes her accounts and feelings right away, and not for an audience, but for herself. Indeed, she states that she will "compose" herself at night, and she does so quite literally through writing, through the *composition* of her narrative. She fantasizes about riding a horse for "hours and hours" through the night, with "ceaseless" energy, but eventually settles down to write, knowing that a ride is not possible, being, as she says, "nothing but a woman."

The fact that Marian as a woman cannot, without total disregard for propriety, release her energy in an athletic, physical way, disappoints and aggravates her. In addition to harking back to the inner passions of *Jane Eyre*, this passage also reflects the fervor of Florence Nightingale's Cassandra, who cries out, "Why have women passion, intellect, moral activity—these three—and a place in society where no one of the three can be exercised?" (205). Nightingale places the blame for the sleep problems of a young lady directly on her domestic containment and her consequential pent up energy:

What these [women] suffer—even physically—from the want of such work no one can tell. The accumulation of nervous energy, which has had nothing to do during the day, makes them feel every night, when they go to bed, as if they were going mad; and they are obliged to lie long in bed in the morning to let it evaporate and keep it down. (Nightingale 221; emphasis mine)

"Look at the poor lives we lead," Nightingale's speaker commands, further stirring up her readers, voicing viewpoints that could be Jane's, Bertha Mason's, or Marian's. She says, "It is a wonder that we are so good as we are, not that we are so bad" (Nightingale 209). The inability or unwillingness to sleep that Cassandra, Marian, and many other Victorian heroines share, provides for them a "space" of wakefulness—"a room of one's own," perhaps, safe and removed from gendered obligations, where they have the time and privacy to produce narratives of their lives. Notable Victorian women authors and characters regularly voiced the same frustrations Collins allows Marian to vent in writing. Marian laments her mental agitation because it limits her interest in any socially acceptable, ladylike activities: "Reading is out of the question—I can't fix my attention on books. Let me try if I can write myself into sleepiness and fatigue" (200). Marian believes that sleep is something that she can write herself "into," as if it were a chosen destination. Here, Collins suggests that the act of writing stirs sleep into being, it hints at its arrival, sets up the characters and plot, and creates sleep out of words. If writing causes a narrator to fall asleep

during her narrative, writing becomes sleep, and vice versa, as the reader experiences the narrator's writing and sleep simultaneously. In this and many other scenes, however, Marian's attempts to write herself to sleep are unsuccessful.

The Woman in White calls into question this very notion of writing as sleep, proving it false and unreliable, because writing is too powerful a tool. For Marian, it is also too physical a tool. Marian embodies her writing. She becomes her writing, and it becomes her, too: she is, as she writes it, "deeply absorbed in my letters," and this process of absorption affects the health of her mind and body. Although she claims that writing is a way of "compos[ing her]self," in reality, it stirs her up and discomposes her. She says, "[My] very fingers burn as I write it!" (179). It is a true incorporation, to reach back to the word's Latin roots, of body into writing and writing into body, and Marian repeatedly confuses the two. Collins's decision to blur the line between Marian's physiological state and the text she produces provides further evidence that he saw, while writing *The Woman in White*, a strategic yet natural connection between a woman's health (and its relationship to her consciousness) and the shape of her narrative.

Throughout Marian's narratives, she routinely tries to "write [her]self into sleepiness and fatigue," but she fails because her life—more specifically, her narrative of Laura's life—is too stimulating. Writing the story in its entirety means more to her than allowing the lull of language and the steady rhythm of the pen to put her to sleep. Indeed, language does not lull her; instead, it enlivens her and rushes out with a kind of violence. She exerts much energy and puts bodily weight into it. Marian self-admittedly "write[s] with a heavy hand and a quill pen, scraping and scratching noisily over the paper" (313). Because of Marian's vivacity and strength, Collins knew that he would have to remove her from the narrative in some way before his male characters could successfully prey on Laura. He attempts to make Marian write herself to sleep on numerous occasions. However, Marian as a character is even too strong for what seem to be Collins's intentions, because she continues to be able to write until the end of her narrative train of thought, instead of only writing until she loses consciousness. Knowing the corner he had written himself into, it seems as though Collins knew illness was the most reliable plot device to use to isolate Marian from her sister and force sleep upon her since she would not sleep of her own accord. In fact, by creating an illness that is brought on by Marian's actions, Collins puts the illness into Marian's own hands. Literally, she writes herself into illness, and—consequently—into sleep.

Collins needs Marian to create her own illness in order to make the reader feel the intrinsic need for a replacement narrator rather than recognize the manipulated (and horrifying) switch between Marian to her archenemy, Count Fosco. Collins's manipulations are essential to his narratological strategy in that, after Collins uses wakeful nights as both a setting

and a plot device that enables Marian to produce an expansive narrative and express her anxieties creatively, he then halts her ability to produce or express anything by putting her into a dangerously sound sleep during a serious illness. Readers have no choice but to welcome a new narrator to the story, which seems to be precisely Collins's objective, however horrifying the switch to Fosco is. Collins artfully attempts to erase his own artifice, in my opinion, in order to encourage a more enjoyable reading of the novel and to avoid disruption of the scintillating mystery. Readers acknowledge Marian's narrated loss of consciousness as a legitimate transition to a new narrator, for her exact moment of unconsciousness is the exact moment her writing stops. Significantly, Collins connects Marian's depth of sleep or wakefulness so closely to her (really, to his) production of text that we cannot fully separate the shape of her narrative (and others reliant on or influenced by her narrative) from her state of consciousness.

Writing Illness and Sleep: Marian Hartright, Victorian Pathosomnographer

Marian's illness comes to her not immediately after several hours of being "drenched to the skin, cramped in every limb, cold to the bones" (341), but after trying *to write* about it. She spends the night at Blackwater Park huddled in a rainy corner of an upstairs balcony eavesdropping on a conversation below between Sir Percival Glyde and Count Fosco. She listens to them discuss the possibility of killing Laura to collect her inheritance to pay their sizeable debts. In what might be one of the most captivating scenes in sensation fiction, not far in line behind the Woman in White's unexpected appearance to Walter Hartright on the road to London, Marian creeps across outside balconies, practically scaling a wall, to get back to her room at Blackwater Park without being caught. Marian understands the immediate danger she and her sister are in:

I remember the persuasion settling itself in my mind that *the words* those two men had said to each other would furnish us, not only with our justification for leaving the house, but with our *weapons of defence* against them as well. I recall the impulse that awakened in me *to preserve those words in writing*, exactly as they were spoken, while the time was my own, and while my memory vividly retained them. All this I remember plainly: *there is no confusion in my head yet.* (341; emphasis mine)

When she reaches her bedroom, she knows she must write down everything she saw and heard as evidence. As Marian often writes through the night, we are not surprised that her journal records the "bright stillness of the morning" on this morning (341). Still, this entry is different from the records of her other late nights. "I have not been near my bed—I have not once closed my weary, wakeful eyes," Marian admits (341). Instead of sleeping, Marian writes her story all night regarding the conversation

between Count Fosco and Sir Percival, and then she writes the *story of herself* writing the story, in order to catch her journal up to the present.

Though she is able to chronicle with clarity what she heard between Count Fosco and Sir Percival, the tone of Marian's writing grows increasingly disoriented and confused once she begins to narrate her illness and fever. Collins uses plot to affect style—Marian, at least to the reader's knowledge, does not fall ill until she writes that she is falling ill. As Athena Vrettos argues, "to be ill is to produce narrative" (2), but Collins reverses this methodology: to produce narrative about an illness is to create that very illness. Marian blames the rain for her worsening condition ("Oh, the rain, the rain—the cruel rain that chilled me last night!" [342]), but she equates her developing illness with her unwillingness to sleep and her continued persistence to write. Marian even asks herself why she has not gone to bed, though her journal implies that it is more dangerous to fall asleep into the unknown than to be awake in pain and in fever:

Why do I sit here still? Why do I weary my hot eyes and my burning head by writing more? Why not lie down and rest myself, and try to quench the fever that consumes me, in sleep?

I dare not attempt it. A fear beyond all other fears has got possession of me. I am afraid of this heat that parches my skin. I am afraid of the creeping and throbbing that I feel in my head. If I lie down now, how do I know that I may have the sense and the strength to rise again? (342)

The fear that "possess[es]" Marian to stay awake also prods her to keep writing—as if she believes she truly is writing for her life and the life of her sister. She fears the fever and chills in her limbs and the pain in her head, but mostly she fears the pen in her hand. She exhibits alarm at her confusion and does not recognize herself without control over her body and words. She laments, "My head—I am sadly afraid of my head," but what she really means is that she is sadly afraid of her inability to express herself in writing anymore. "I can write," she explains, "but the lines all run together" (342). The character Marian can no longer tell us her story; instead, her writing and its inconsistencies, holes, and inadequacies tell us her story, which is that she has written herself ill.

She writes herself into illness, creating what little of her own pathography (her account of her illness) for which she can stay conscious. Marian's fever, on the brink of incapacitating her completely, is not only a bodily fever but also a fever of words. She writes "faster and faster, hotter and hotter, driving on more and more wakefully" (342). As she is embodied in her writing, Marian stays awake just long enough to become wholly ill and out of control. Once she realizes that she has lost control of language, she cries, "Oh, my God! am I going to be ill? Ill, at such a time as this!" (342). The fact that she asks in the interrogative, "am I going to be ill?," instead of writing in the declarative, "Oh, my God! I am ill!", shows that she no longer has any grip on reality. The reader can tell that Marian is already

ill. Her body is weakened, feverish, and possibly hysterical, and the act of writing until this point had been Marian's only defense in keeping her mind from joining her body in sickness.

Marian also writes "ill" in that she writes badly, by which I mean that, once her mind gives way to illness, she no longer writes coherently, grammatically, or even legibly. As she tells us, she "*can* write, but the lines all run together" (342; emphasis mine). She sees words but does not quite understand them. She writes the words but cannot make them stay still on the page through her delirium. She tries to count the sound of the clock chimes in order to determine the hour, remembering that she needs to warn Laura of danger in the morning, but "the strokes I can't count, keep striking in my head—" (342). Collins, by way of his narrator Walter Hartright, who is the managing editor of the collection of evidence against Fosco and Sir Percival, attempts to explain the confusion on Marian's page by writing in his own account of the case: "NOTE: [At this place the entry in the Diary ceases to be legible. The two or three lines which follow contain fragments of words only, mingled with blots and scratches of the pen. The last marks on the paper bear some resemblance to the first two letters (L and A) of the name of Lady Glyde . . ." (342-3). Collins combines the effects of three medical concerns to lead up to Marian's state of unconsciousness: severe exhaustion from a routine of abbreviated sleep complicated by no sleep the previous night, fever brought on by exposure to the elements, and nervous anxiety over the safety of her sister.

Through the literary implementation of these three medical concerns, Collins maintains control over how his characters start and stop their narratives. First, Collins is able to create a physiological and mental state of being for his character that is ideal for the creation of narrative, and a sizeable amount of narrative at that. Marian's anxiety keeps her awake throughout nearly the entirety of the novel except for during her illness, even in narratives other than her own, as in that of Walter Hartright, who often comes home later in the novel to find Laura in bed with Marian awake, keeping vigil. Her nerves spur on discussions about her nerves, and, in turn, these discussions are documented to use as evidence or as a record of the case. Second, Collins is able to create a sick, fevered body that can no longer physically or mentally support its emotional need to write. Mrs. Michelson, the housekeeper, finds Marian "walking about her room with a pen in her hand, quite light-headed, in a state of burning fever," at which point Laura and Mrs. Michelson put Marian straight to bed (365). In order to move forward in his sensationalized plot, which necessitates Marian's removal and Laura's manipulation in order that Fosco can succeed in the falsification of her death, Collins needs Marian's narrative to end and another, more sinister narrative to begin.

The end of Marian's narrative, when she finally succumbs fully to illness, and the segue to the next section, narrated by her worthy nemesis, is likely to bring chills to even the most seasoned readers of Collins's sensa-

tion fiction. As Hartright notes, Marian leaves off in "blots and scratches," but even though it is the end of her narrative, surprisingly, it is not the end of the text in her journal. Count Fosco, once notified of the "Admirable" Marian's illness (343), finds her journal and not only reads what she has written, but also writes in it! Hartright tells us, "On the next page of the Diary" after Marian's blots mark her unconsciousness, "another entry appears. It is in a man's handwriting, large, bold, and firmly regular . . . It contains these lines—" (343):

POSTSCRIPT BY A SINCERE FRIEND

The illness of our excellent Miss Halcombe has afforded me the opportunity of enjoying an unexpected intellectual pleasure.

I refer to the perusal (which I have just completed) of this interesting Diary.

There are many hundred pages here. I can lay my hand on my heart, and declare that every page has charmed, refreshed, delighted me.

To a man of my sentiments it is unspeakably gratifying to be able to say this.

Admirable woman!

I allude to Miss Halcombe.

Stupendous effort!

I refer to the Diary.

Yes! these pages are amazing. (343)

Collins, via Fosco, celebrates the clever way in which he has brought about Marian's exit, but in doing so, he also celebrates the very sleeplessness that instigated the narrative text. Without Marian's many bouts with anxiety that caused her sleepless nights, she would not have written the diary. Additionally, Fosco would have had nothing to glorify and esteem as "stupendous" and "amazing," no property of hers to so flamboyantly vandalize, and no private narrative of hers to usurp. In Marian's journal, Fosco writes his perspective of the story—that he has read Marian's conversation between himself and Sir Percival, and that she has documented it correctly, and that he does, in fact, desire to do away with Laura. Through her narrative, he sees "[v]ast perspectives of success unroll themselves before [his] eyes," because he has just read the manuscript in which she literally wrote herself out of his way. Marian, weakened by illness, finally succeeds in writing herself to sleep and, consequently, her sleep is the link in the chain reaction that allows Count Fosco and Sir Percival Glyde to fake the death of Laura, Lady Glyde, institutionalize her for insanity, steal her inheritance, and trick Marian into thinking she has lost her sister forever.

Count Fosco asserts his new authority in the very place that she has contemplated and constructed hers—the journal. Fosco's handwriting in Marian's journal marks an extreme, unforgivable violation, one far worse than taking it and reading it without her permission. It is a rape of privacy that only an avid diarist can understand. A woman's diary is private not

only because it presumably holds secrets, but also because it is hers alone, as is Marian's "room of one's own" for writing that she made out of night-time wakefulness. Her writing space is not meant to be a shared space. Her sleep is likewise a part of her life that cannot be shared, either. Thus, the secrets of her sleep and *her* writing in her diary are intended solely to be her property. Winifred Hughes, in *The Maniac in the Cellar*, observes that one of the quintessential characteristics of sensation fiction is a "direct, full-scale invasion of the middle-class domestic paradise," and that "The key to this invasion is the sensation novel's assault on the heroine" (43). For Collins's *The Woman in White*, the invasion and penetration of Fosco's pen in Marian's diary results in a direct assault on Marian—direct specifically because she has embodied herself in the writing, and now her writing must suffer to reside alongside her enemy's.

Sleeping and Waking *The Woman in White*: Plot Development and Puzzles

My extended analysis above of chapters nine and ten of "The Second Epoch" of *The Woman in White* brings to light many of the ways in which Collins wrote himself in and out of mystery and crime stories, particularly in relation to the ways his characters fall in and out of sleep and illness to support the plot. Collins used physiological as well as psychological conditions to instigate the creation and cessation of a narrative. Anxiety and nervous narration make up a sizeable portion of Marian's journal entries, even though Marian largely appears as a character with a sound mind, sound judgment, and none of the belittling feminine hindrances of delicacy that afflict most Victorian heroines, at least in Walter Hartright's account of her. Once Marian falls ill, various narrators express anxiety and create their own pieces of nervous narration, in part regarding Marian's condition, but mostly regarding domestic affairs at Blackwater, such as the hiring and firing of servants and nurses, the anger and impatience of Sir Percival and his emotions' effect on the help, and the relationships between residents, visitors, and their numerous employees. Though the characters update the readers regularly on Marian's condition, she is no longer the focal point, and, like Count Fosco, who isolates her from her sister, Collins limits and replaces Marian's voice in the text. I argue that, through this transition from narratable, anxious wakefulness to unnarratable, ill sleep, Collins represents female agency (and the lack thereof) as innately tied both to the woman's production of her own narrative and to her control over her consciousness.

In *The Woman in White*, Collins uses sickbed sleep and what turns out to be its converse, anxious wakefulness, as the means through which Fosco sees his plan through to fruition. Besides Marian, Collins created several other female characters that fit into sleeping-waking, and ill-healthy binary oppositions. Laura Fairlie and her pale, mysterious look-alike, Anne

Catherick, the "Woman in White," neither of whom are allowed narratives of their own, share more than their startling physical similarities and inability to speak for themselves. They share the distinct character trait of sleeping in the text almost as often as they are awake.

Laura plays a minor speaking role in the last third of the novel, namely because she cannot engage in the same investigative work as her husband Hartright (whom Laura marries after the death of Sir Percival) and Marian. Hartright and Marian put nothing else above protecting Laura's nerves. In fact, he confesses, "Marian and I were careful to keep Laura in ignorance" (576). In order for the plot to come together smoothly, it seems Collins wanted to account for and legitimize Hartright and Marian's need to be able to speak to each other alone at night and voice their plans and evidence freely. Collins periodically "wakes" Laura to reinforce the frequency of delicate moments between her and her sister, or her and her husband, but by and large Laura slumbers through the end of the novel while her loved ones vindicate her faked death, and her faked eternal sleep, which, in reality, is slept by Anne Catherick.

It would be difficult for me to overstate the relationship between sickness, the sickbed, and narratives of sleep in mid- to late-nineteenth-century British fiction in general and sensationalized fiction more specifically. Especially in *The Woman in White*, Collins's entwinement of sleep and illness, and, similarly, of wakeful sleeplessness and anxiety, does not fashion medical connections between these bodily states and bodily ailments, it *presupposes* them. This allows him, instead, to fashion narratological connections between the two that transcend plot and character and grow to affect the form of the entire novel. To be sure, issues of sleep and sleeplessness determine when and where a character's narrative starts and stops, as well as the ways in which it connects to the narrative body as a whole. By weaving a character's state of consciousness into his or her state of health, Collins creates embodied narratives that depend, on fundamental levels, on what the body experiences, feels, and expresses.

Collins's melting pot novel of bodily and mental instability plays right into what Nicholas Dames has recently observed as the Victorian preoccupation with and philosophically-altered notion of nervousness. He defines nervousness as "the life of the nerves rather than, or even *as*, the life of the mind—[which] suggests a new way to understand the stresses and complexities of the Victorian narration of consciousness" ("1825–1880" 236). To complicate Dames's understanding of the "narration of consciousness," this essay has investigated several dimensions of Victorian narration into *unconsciousness*—of literary illness-in-sleep, which could even be interpreted as sensation fiction's take on Gothic Romanticism's "Death-in-Life." Illness-in-sleep is an unpredictable and tenuous state of unconsciousness, but one that authors use as a device all too readily.

In his first sensation novel, Collins risks impressing upon his readers the concept that though sleep might be rejuvenating, it might also be a form of illness—a weakened, vulnerable state during which one is responsible for what happens both inside and outside of the body, even when the body has no agency over those happenings. Collins negotiates these challenges of form and meaning, if with the gimmicky puzzles and labyrinths, then also with an undeniable understanding of what is at stake in unconsciousness and the trappings of the enfeebled and pathologic body unconsciousness brings with it. In this way, Collins introduces a new body into Victorian literature and fiction to come—a body perpetually at the crossroads between nervous wakefulness and a symbolic and interruptible death, which comes out in the thematic trope of illness-in-sleep.

The women in *The Woman in White* live in a world in which sleep is never easy to achieve, or at least a world in which the achievement of sleep signifies more than simple rest. Collins's women—Marian Halcombe, Laura Fairlie, and Anne Catherick—must be either neurotic or ill, with one choice mandating prolonged sleep while the other mandates prolonged wakefulness, and with both choices authorizing a lack of control and a fevered, misread body. So, perhaps the author of "Bedside Books" was right, that, "As a rule, Wilkie Collins and other masters of plot-weaving should be avoided, as likely to murder sleep" (201). Collins's murder of sleep was not merely a murder of the reader's sleep, but a slow, calculated, and intentional murder of the restful, rejuvenating, and, above all, healthy sleep of female characters in sensation literature.

Wayland Baptist University

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