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Author(s): Leila Silvana May

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**Sensational Sisters:
Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*
Leila Silvana May
North Carolina State University, Raleigh**

At the beginning of *The Woman in White*, Wilkie Collins's principal narrator, Walter Hartright, refers to "the strange family story which it is the purpose of these pages to unfold."¹ Is it a "strange family story," or the story of a strange family? Or, perhaps it is a story of the strangeness of the family? The Victorians' obsession with familial drama belies their ideological enthusiasm for the nuclear family and their assumption that the family as the foundation of society was a unit organized around natural virtue and cemented by individual love, service, and self-sacrifice. For this Victorian enthusiasm masked a fear about the nature of a key component of the familial recipe: namely, female agency as it manifested itself in its purest, most untainted, and "natural" form—sisterly love. Viewed from the perspective of this concern, we see that *The Woman in White*, like so many texts contemporary with it, is in many respects a treatise on sisterhood.² In suggesting that this "strange family story" is structurally yet another story about sororal desire, I am making an empirical claim, not simply alluding to a tautological truth. In other words, a novel of family drama *could* be structured around a parent-child relationship, a matrimonial one, or a lovers' relationship. It *could* have been, but was not. Once again, when a Victorian writer selects among these possibilities (Lévi-Strauss's "mythemes"), he chooses the sororal relation as the exemplar for the creation of his narrative, and in so doing, allows his Victorian readers edification, titillation, and horror at the same time, for sibling love in its immaculate state as conceived in the nineteenth century justifies the familial organization upon which society is based, while its potential anarchic and erotic intensity threatens to undermine the very edifice that contains it.

Wilkie Collins has been (dis)credited with the development of the "sensation novel," a literature which D.A. Miller defines as addressing itself "primarily to the sympathetic nervous system, where it grounds its characteristic adrenaline effects: accelerated heart rate and respiration, increased blood pressure, the pallor resulting from vasoconstriction, etc."³ In sensation fiction, as in literature of the more "approved genres,"⁴ sisters are expected to conform to nineteenth-century conceptions of purity, constancy, and fidelity, both toward other siblings and toward the family at large. However, the ambivalence toward sisterly

passion detected even in other genres is exaggerated in sensation fiction, as its authors experiment with the transgressive possibilities of that passion. In displaying to the Victorian audience sororal desire's capacity for revolt and subversion, these works allow the readers to gaze in horrified delight directly into their own deepest fears concerning the true nature of female agency and desire; but, because the sensation novel magnifies its transgressions, it must also exaggerate the conventionality of its solution. Nevertheless, the incongruity between the excitement provoked by the problem and the reassuring effect provided by the resolution leaves a trace of mnemonic dread in the reader: there exists the permanent potential for sororal monstrosity—she may after all be other than what she is supposed to be.

'A strange family story'

The Woman in White sets forth the story of the fall and rise of a gentrified English house. It concerns a family whose congenital weakness and fragmentation results in part from death (another parentless home), in part from (male) insensitivity and abandonment (the new head of the house alienates himself from the remainder of the family by ensconcing himself in a narcissistic aestheticism of his own creation), and in part from the legacy of illicit (male) desire (the dead father's secret: an affair with a working-class woman producing an illegitimate daughter). The dynamics of the novel—involving the near-destruction of even the fragments of this family, and the ultimate triumphant reconstruction of it⁵—operate across an axis composed of three sets of entwined sibling relationships: that between Laura Fairlie, the family heiress, and her eerie illegitimate half sister, Anne Catherick; that between Laura Fairlie and Marian Halcombe, Laura's other half sister, with whom she has created a fortress of love and happiness in a corner of the family estate; and that between Laura, Marian, and the novel's principal narrator, Walter Hartright, on whom the sisters bestow brotherhood before incestuously absorbing him into the foundation of the reconstituted family.

What is strange about this "strange" family is that it is not a family at all. There is neither a mother nor a father: only two half-sisters and, hidden away in a different wing of the house, the hypochondriacal, egocentric uncle of one of the sisters. Significantly, the first attempt to construct a family—by marrying one of the sisters to a highly-respected nobleman, Sir Percival Glyde—fails, also producing a non-family, one that would have been dissoluble under British law on the grounds of fraud and usurpation. The final successful family—one that has put behind it adultery, illegitimacy, forgery, murder, and what Eve

Sedgwick calls homosociality—is not, as Collins claims in his preamble, the product of “Woman’s patience” and “Man’s resolution,” nor even of Collins’s Victorian didacticism, but of the mad intensity and eventual domestication of sisterly love.

In this story, sororal love forms bonds that protect against the vicissitudes of lust, greed, fraud, insensitivity, madness, class conflict, and the callousness of English domestic and property law, while at the same time being mediated by and transforming those same forces. In its most radical moments, the intensity of this sibling bond threatens to establish an autonomous and subversive domain of sororal justice which is able to function both over and above the vices of the Victorian age and beyond the legitimate structures of authority. On the one hand, the reversal of the identities between the deranged working-class sister and the ideal gentrified sister threatens to obliterate the very class distinctions on which society is based; on the other hand, two sisters and a “brother” set up a secret illegitimate *ménage à trois*, creating a make-believe family in the urban slums (“the house-forest of London” [433]) which, like Robin Hood’s wooded stronghold, becomes a base of military operations against injustice. In the dark warmth of this make-believe domain, there is a dissolution of the very boundaries required for the maintenance and disciplining of the Victorian family as social cornerstone: Walter, while remaining brother to Laura, becomes her father and husband as well, and Laura in turn becomes his sister, daughter and lover at one and the same time. Marian remains sister to Laura, but also plays mother to her and wife to Walter. Eventually, however, in its triumph, this sibling love tames itself, and the make-believe family becomes a real one, where brother becomes husband and father, one sister becomes wife and mother, and the other becomes maiden aunt and nurse—an alchemical transformation that both purges from the Victorian vision of familial bliss the evils that threatened it, and at the same time incorporates those “evils” into the very structure of that bliss.

The action of this novel commences when Walter Hartright, while on a midnight walk in the country, has a surprise encounter with a figure that steps out of the shadows behind him. “[I]n one moment every drop of blood in my body was brought to a stop by the touch of a hand laid lightly and suddenly on my shoulder from behind” (47). He turns to see in the moonlight the beautiful, mysterious (and, as we later learn, seriously addled) “woman in white,” Anne Catherick, who, later disappearing into the night, casts an erotic spell upon him. He soon subconsciously identifies her with yet another woman in white, the young upper-class woman to whom he is teaching drawing. He be-

comes fascinated with his new student, Laura Fairlie, without realizing why. After first meeting Laura, he watches her pace back and forth on the terrace outside:

My eyes fixed upon the white gleam of her muslin gown and head-dress in the moonlight, and a sensation, for which I can find no name—a sensation that quickened my pulse, and raised and fluttering at my heart—began to steal over me. . . . All my attention was concentrated on the white gleam of Miss Fairlie's muslin dress. (85)

In terms which bear echoes of the earlier Romantic relation between brother and sister, Laura evokes in Walter "sympathies that lie too deep for words, too deep almost for thoughts" (76). Yet, at the same time, as he contemplates her she leaves him with "the idea of something wanting. . . . Something wanting, something wanting—and where it was, and what it was, I could not say" (76-7). This "something wanting," this absence that Walter is unable to articulate, comes clearer as he soon detects what he calls an "ominous likeness" (101) between Laura and Anne.

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. (86)

At the same time, he discovers he is falling in love with Laura, who is also clearly attracted to him. But happiness is denied the lovers by virtue of Laura's elevated social status and her engagement to the baronet, Sir Percival Glyde.

In fact, the first woman in white, Anne Catherick, a working-class bastard, and the second woman in white, Laura Fairlie, orphaned daughter of the landed gentry, are, unbeknownst to themselves, half sisters due to their father's secret affair with Anne's mother. Anne receives little love from this mother, but fondly remembers from her childhood the kind treatment she received from Mrs. Fairlie, Laura's mother (since dead), who becomes Anne's figurative mother in her own confused mind. She sees herself as Mrs. Fairlie's daughter, and she displaces her love for Mrs. Fairlie onto Laura, whom she regards as her sister. The irony, of course, is that Laura is indeed her sister, though not at all in the way she imagines in her delirium. Her love for Laura is therefore literally a sororal love, but one that is misrecognized by them both. Anne's is a deranged, displaced filial love characterized by a

passionate desire to protect Laura from her would-be violator, Sir Percy Glyde, and by a vengeful rage against him, for it was he who placed Anne in the asylum from which she had escaped on the moonlit night at the novel's opening (and it will be he who later places Laura in the same asylum in the guise of Anne). Even Laura recognizes the uncanny likeness between Anne and herself, as well as the contrast:

While I was looking at her, while she was very close to me, it came over my mind suddenly that we were like each other! Her face was pale and thin and weary—but the sight of it startled me, as if it had been the sight of my own face in the glass after a long illness. The discovery—I don't know why—gave me such a shock, that I was perfectly incapable of speaking to her for a moment. (300)

The eerie similarity between Laura and Anne is also remarked by the novel's co-conspirators Sir Percy and Count Fosco, after Percy has married Laura. After seeing Anne, Sir Percival describes her to Count Fosco as "a sickly likeness of my wife. . . . Fancy my wife, after a bad illness, with a touch of something wrong in her head—and there is Anne Catherick for you" (355). When Count Fosco hears from Sir Percival of the uncanny resemblance between Laura and Anne, he concocts a scheme to disencumber Laura of her immense fortune and to put it at his and Sir Percival's disposal. The sickly Anne will be allowed to die, and will be buried as Lady Glyde (formerly Miss Laura Fairlie), while Laura herself, enervated from worry, and from her intensive nursing of her sister Marian through a nearly fatal bout of typhus, will be drugged and placed, in the guise of Anne, in the private mental institution from which Anne had escaped. This successful conspiracy obliterates the identities of both women, one lying dead with a tombstone marked with the name of the other, and the other locked away in an asylum, mocked for being the madwoman she is fast becoming as she pleads that she is really a noblewoman. (The final irony here emerges when we discover that in fact she is *not* whom she believes herself to be—namely, Lady Glyde, for there never was such a person, as the man to whom she is married has usurped his title.)

The equation between the two sisters exists, then, not only in Anne's befuddled mind, nor only in Walter's semi-conscious erotically aroused imagination, nor simply in Percy's and Fosco's scheming minds, but also in the minds of Collins's readers, who see the fusion of the sisters accelerate as the narrative progresses. Early on, the marks of Anne's illness distinguish her physically from Laura; but, by the time we are three-quarters of the way through, Laura's suffering has transformed her into Anne's virtual Doppelgänger.

The outward changes wrought by the suffering and the terror of the past had fearfully, almost hopelessly, strengthened the fatal resemblance between Anne Catherick and herself. . . . In those former days, if they had both been seen together side by side, no person could for a moment have mistaken them one for the other—as has happened often in the instances of twins. I could not say this now. The sorrow and suffering . . . *had* set their profaning marks on the youth and beauty of her face. (454-55)

From the beginning to the end of the novel, Anne Catherick remains a specter. She first emerges from the shadows in a ghostly fashion. She is pale as a ghost ("her face ghastly white" [421]), she comes and goes like a ghost,⁶ she is mistaken for a ghost ("but I saw t' ghaist" [110]); and, both living and dead, she haunts the novel.

So the ghostly figure which has haunted these pages, as it haunted my life, goes down into the impenetrable gloom. Like a shadow she first came to me in the loneliness of the night. Like a shadow she passes away in the loneliness of the dead. (576)

Ghosts are contradictory beings, for they are both insubstantial, scarcely existing at all, and terrifying; yet, it is not Anne's spiritual quality, but her madness, that is terrifying. In her derangement there lurks a vehemence and passion which belie her ghostliness, and, always threatening to erupt, lend her a kind of frightening depth.

Her face, at all ordinary times so touching to look at, in its nervous sensitiveness, weakness, and uncertainty, became suddenly darkened by an expression of maniacally intense hatred and fear, which communicated a wild, unnatural force to every feature. Her eyes dilated in the dim evening light, like the eyes of a wild animal. She caught up the cloth that had fallen at her side, as if it had been a living creature that she could kill, and crushed it in both her hands with such convulsive strength, that a few drops of moisture left in it trickled down on the stone beneath her. (128)

Anne's passion is directed against injustice, in the person of Sir Percival Glyde.⁷ She demands justice for her sister (as will the fierce heroine of Collins' *No Name*). In her "maniacal intensity," Anne is the very antithesis of the slowly fading sister in whose name she rails. Even though Anne dies and Laura survives to re-establish their shattered family, it is precisely Anne's mad passion which represents at least an aspect of untamed sororal desire. For the Victorian reader of *The Woman in White*, one of the features of this passion which provoked "sensation" (aside from the more obvious fact that it is a woman displaying this shocking rage) is that it serves to level class distinctions. Laura is a member of the landed gentry; her sister belongs to the working class. Their sisterhood allows for the potential subversion of class difference, as the confounding of their identities leads Anne to be elevated to the level of

a noblewoman, and Laura to be reduced to that of the working class.⁸ This is perhaps the *true* reason why Anne is a “dangerous woman to be at large” (177).

It is significant that sororal desire as expressed figuratively between Laura and Anne is related to the issue of class hierarchy. The dramatic action of the novel is at every turn informed, if not determined, by the exigencies of class difference. Sororal desire, therefore, is mediated by this difference while at the same time it tampers with it. At the top of the social pyramid are the (interestingly suspect) aristocrats, exemplified by the English Baronet, Sir Percival Glyde, and by the Italian nobleman, Isidor, Ottavio, Baldassare Fosco, Count of the Holy Roman Empire, Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the Brazen Crown. Next come the members of the enriched upper-middle class represented by the Fairlies (a class also made somewhat dubious by the father’s sin⁹ and the uncle’s effeteness and despicableness¹⁰). Laura’s other half sister, Marian Halcombe, but for the accident of her poverty and her dependence on the Fairlie fortune, would be a solid member of this class by virtue of her breeding. It is this circumstance of being positioned between classes which allows her such keen observations and commentary on what transpires within the rank and file. The Hartrights and Mrs. Michelson (housekeeper at Blackwater Park, widow of a clergyman of the Church of England) mark another stratum of the middle class, one clearly subservient to those at the level of the Fairlies and Halcombes. Below them are members of the working class, represented by Anne Catherick, as well as numerous servants and other ancillary characters throughout the novel. When Walter at last takes possession of Laura, he does so victoriously as a move in the “struggle against Rank and Power” (435). It might seem, therefore, that this is a work about the triumph of the middle class over the aristocracy; however, when we recall that on the final page of the novel, little Walter Hartright, Jr. is announced as a member of “the landed gentry of England . . . the Heir of Limmeridge” (646), we realize that it can equally well be read as a tale of successful social climbing. There are, after all, three domestic scenes involving Walter, Laura and Marian. The first, which Walter remembers fondly (“How vividly that peaceful home-picture of the drawing-room comes back to me while I write!” [81]), is one in which Walter is unfortunately only a guest and a servant of sorts (“I should have remembered my position”—a position akin to that of “a harmless domestic animal” [89]). The second household scene takes place in the slums of London, where poverty has reduced them all to an equal status. In the third and final scene at the close of the novel, they are all (re)elevated to the stature of the Fairlie family, and the struggle against Rank and Power has elevated its assailants to its very status.

If Anne Catherick's mad but ultimately ineffectual passion represents for the Victorian imagination the frightening possibility of sororal desire—the capacity of overturning class distinctions and thereby undermining social order—the passion of Laura's other half sister represents a very different but equally disturbing potential. The sororal love between Laura and Marian is literal, powerful, and erotic, and, therefore, dangerous. In its fierceness it threatens to propel the sisters (and the reader) into a forbidden terrain which is immune to the principles of social order. It is the key relationship in the novel, and the one that Collins must tame by the end. Collins has created the two sisters according to the typical Victorian formula of contrasting physical and personality types.¹¹ Marian herself provides Walter with the table of differences:

Except that we are both orphans, we are in every respect as unlike each other as possible. My father was a poor man, and Miss Fairlie's father was a rich man. I have got nothing, and she has a fortune. I am dark and ugly, and she is fair and pretty. Everybody thinks me crabbed and odd (with perfect justice); and everybody thinks her sweet-tempered and charming (with more justice still). In short, she is an angel; and I am—Try some of that marmalade, Mr. Hartright, and finish the sentence, in the name of female propriety, for yourself. (60-1)

Walter's first encounter with Marian provides more information with which to complete the table. It has been widely commented on, but deserves to be quoted in full:

The instant my eyes rested on her, I was struck by the rare beauty of her form, and by the unaffected grace of her attitude. Her figure was tall, yet not too tall; comely and well-developed, yet not fat; her head set on her shoulders with an easy, pliant firmness; her waist, perfection in the eyes of a man, for it occupied its natural place, it filled out its natural circle, it was visibly and delightfully undeformed by stays. She had not heard my entrance into the room; and I allowed myself the luxury of admiring her for a few moments, before I moved one of the chairs near me, as the least embarrassing means of attracting her attention. She turned towards me immediately. The easy elegance of every movement of her limbs and body as soon as she began to advance from the far end of the room, set me in a flutter of expectation to see her face clearly. She left the window—and I said to myself, The lady is dark. She moved forward a few steps—and I said to myself, The lady is young. She approached nearer—and I said to myself (with a sense of surprise which words fail me to express), The lady is ugly!

Never was the old conventional maxim, that Nature cannot err, more flatly contradicted—never was the fair promise of a lovely figure more strangely and startlingly belied by the face and head that crowned it. The lady's complexion was almost swarthy, and the dark down on her upper lip was almost a moustache. She had

a large, firm, masculine mouth and jaw; prominent, piercing, resolute brown eyes; and thick, coal-black hair, growing unusually low down on her forehead. Her expression—bright, frank, and intelligent—appeared, while she was silent, to be altogether wanting in those feminine attractions of gentleness and pliability, without which the beauty of the handsomest woman alive is beauty incomplete. To see such a face as this set on shoulders that a sculptor would have longed to model—to be charmed by the modest grace of action through which the symmetrical limbs betrayed their beauty when they moved, and then to be almost repelled by the masculine form and masculine look of the features in which the perfectly shaped figure ended—was to feel a sensation oddly akin to the helpless discomfort familiar to us all in sleep, when we recognize yet cannot reconcile the anomalies and contradictions of a dream. (58-9)

Thus, there exists a contrast not only between the two sisters in terms of polarities—beauty/ugliness, femininity/masculinity—but also within Marian herself. Her masculine head set upon a very womanly body seems to be the source of both polarities, for Marian is “ugly” only insofar as she is masculine. Throughout the novel we are reminded again and again of Marian’s man-like features: she has the “steady grasp of a man” (148); her tears “come almost like men’s tears” (187); her hands are “as awkward as a man’s” (253); she carries a “heavy man’s umbrella” (258); she imagines herself as having male social prerogatives: “If only I had the privileges of a man” (220); and she sometimes imagines herself as a man: “If I had been a man, I would have knocked [Sir Percival] down on the threshold of his own door, and have left his house, never on any earthly consideration to enter it again. But I was only a woman” (268).

By contrast, there is never a trace of the masculine in Laura; indeed, the first time we hear of her, Marian tells us, “My sister is in her own room, nursing that essentially feminine malady, a slight headache” (59). Walter describes Laura to his readers by commenting on a watercolor portrait of her he had painted early in their acquaintance. “Her hair is of so *faint* and *pale* a brown—not flaxen, and yet *almost* as light; not golden, and yet *almost* glossy—that it *nearly* melts, here and there, into the *shadow* of the hat”; “the eyes are of that soft, limpid, turquoise blue, so often sung by the poets, *so seldom seen in real life*.” (75; emphases added). Laura, in short, is scarcely there; it is she, this shadowy, quintessentially feminine creature, and not the Woman in White, who becomes the true ghost haunting this text.¹²

It may seem curious that, though Walter’s male reader¹³ is allowed a long, voyeuristic look at Marian’s provocative body, he is told nothing about Laura’s figure. It is as if Walter would have preferred Laura’s

head on Marian's body. In fact, though Walter never appears overtly to develop an erotic attraction for Marian (the way her archenemy, Count Fosco, will do, and the way Collins himself might have done¹⁴), she certainly wins him over very quickly. After our initial startling introduction to her "ugliness" and her "moustache," they are never mentioned again, and it is she who continually refers to her masculine qualities. Her beauty emerges in spite of them; in fact, this transformation begins to occur immediately after Walter's initial impression of her:

'Mr. Hartright?' said the lady interrogatively, her dark face lighting up with a smile, and softening and growing womanly the moment she began to speak. . . . [These] words of welcome were spoken in a clear, ringing, pleasant voice. The offered hand—rather large, but beautifully formed—was given to me with the easy, unaffected self-reliance of a highly-bred woman. (59)

What conquers Walter is, in fact, the combination of the qualities of the two sisters—"two women, one of whom possessed all the accomplishments of grace, wit, and high-breeding, the other all the charms of beauty, gentleness, and simple truth, that can purify and subdue the heart of man" (88). The final clause, significantly, refers as readily to either preceding description of the sisters.

The emotional relationship between Laura and Marian is rendered in terms typical of that between sisters in Victorian literature. As in *No Name*, *Deerbrook*, and "Goblin Market," it is a relationship of closeness, intensity, self-sacrifice, mutual dependence, and physical demonstrativeness. Prior to Walter's meeting with Laura, Marian talks of her sister, declaring, "I won't live without her, and she can't live without me. . . . You must please both of us, Mr. Hartright, or neither of us" (61). She acknowledges that she would agree with Walter were he to find their relationship "perfectly unaccountable." "But," she proclaims, "so it is" (61). Her description proves accurate. When Mr. Gilmore, the family lawyer, asks Laura if she has any special requests to add to the marriage contract, she blurts out with sudden energy, "Don't let him part me from Marian. . . . Oh, Mr. Gilmore, pray make it law that Marian is to live with me!" (166). Laura pleads with her sister, "Say you will live with me Marian, when I am married—and say no more" (203). Laura makes Marian "twice repeat the promise to live with her when she was married" (203). The willingness to sacrifice one's own interests for the other is taken for granted by both sisters: avers Marian, "I . . . love her better than my own life" (97); "[m]y sister's future is my dearest care in life" (132). Only one motive would make her willing to perform shameful acts, and that motive Marian has: "Laura's honour, Laura's happiness—Laura's life itself" (340). She is willing also to perform dangerous acts, but only "for Laura's sake!" (43). Laura, too,

demonstrates her constancy on the occasion of Marian's serious contagious illness. Even Count Fosco correctly assumes that "there was not the least chance that Laura would consent to leave Blackwater Park while Marian was lying there ill" (377). Laura insists her "place is by Marian's bedside. . . . Whether I am ill, or well, nothing will induce me to lose sight of her" (381-82). And, only by deceiving Laura into believing that Marian has been taken from the house is Fosco able to persuade her to leave.

Laura and Marian express their love physically and fervently. The dullest reader would have difficulty failing to notice its erotic components. Laura kisses Marian's hand (385); Marian crushes Laura into her arms (284); Laura kisses Marian: "She put her lips to mine, and kissed me. 'My own love', she said softly. . . . She reached both hands up to my cheeks, and drew my face down to hers till our lips met" (186, 188); Marian kisses Laura: "I caught her by the hand as she passed me on her way to the table, and kissed her as if that night was to part us for ever" (310). Before Laura's wedding, she climbs into Marian's bed: "'I shall lose you so soon, Marian,' she said; 'I must make the most of you while I can'" (209). In spite of her pending marriage, Laura requires absolute fealty of Marian: "promise me you will never marry, and leave me. . . . You won't be fond of anybody but me, will you?" (235). In fact, Marian seems to have no interest whatsoever in marrying. In an unequivocally feminist outburst, she proclaims: "No man under heaven deserves these sacrifices from us women. Men! They are the enemies of our innocence and our peace—they drag us away from our parents' love and our sisters' friendship—they take us body and soul to themselves, and fasten our helpless lives to theirs as they chain up a dog to his kennel" (203).

We see then that the orphaned sisters live in a self-contained world of love, fidelity, respect, and (at least a hint of) erotic fulfillment. Parents have been removed by death; material needs have been eliminated by accident of birth. A negligent and self-centered guardian is tucked away in a distant wing of the house. We are given a glimpse of a child-like world of sororal bliss, a world which in a certain sense indicts the external world of men which, in a number of different ways, will impose itself upon this sisterly idyll and rupture its unity. First, the arrival at Limmeridge House of the young art instructor, Walter, will stir new feelings in Laura, feelings which necessarily must come between the two sisters. As soon as Marian perceives the signs of this budding romance, she blocks it on the grounds that her sister is already engaged to be married. She tells Walter that she is at least pleased that this engagement removes the necessity of going into the "hard and cruel

question" of social inequalities (95), the question of whether a poor art instructor may have pretensions of marrying a wealthy heiress. Second, the hermetically-sealed sororal world is broken by the Law of the Father. Before his death, Mr. Fairlie had expressed his wishes that his daughter Laura marry Sir Percival Glyde, a man closer to Mr. Fairlie's age than to Laura's. Laura feels obligated to follow her father's desire (make his desire hers) even though this is particularly difficult for her now that she has begun to fall in love with Walter. Third, there is the law in general, and its relation to property, which interrupts the balance, harmony, and happiness of the sisters by transforming Laura into a commodity. As Philip O'Neill points out:

the situation of wedlock is of central importance . . . because the patriarchal nature of the marriage laws are more broadly exposed in terms of the hardship they cause to women. Women are imaged as commodities to be exchanged between men in the interests of property. And while this may not be an altogether new departure, Collins succeeds in showing in unprecedented detail how the law operates to maintain the structure and the subordination of women in the interests of property.¹⁵

All of this conspires to place Marian in a position of rivalry with those forces which would usurp or neutralize her maternal/sororal role. ("Marian has been mother and sister both to me" [166].) At first, in what she mistakenly takes to be a position defending Laura's duty and happiness, she must come between Laura and Walter. When Walter reluctantly accedes to Marian's request, agreeing to leave Limmeridge House and Laura, Marian rewards him with honorary "brotherhood," nearly knighting him.

'I will trust you—if ever the time comes I will trust you as *my* friend and *her* friend, as *my* brother and *her* brother.' She stopped, drew me nearer to her—the fearless, noble creature—touched my forehead, sisterlike, with her lips, and called me by my Christian name. 'God bless, you, Walter!' she said. (148)

Next, finding herself an unwilling rival to Sir Percival, Marian records in her journal: "Before another month is over our heads she will be *his* Laura instead of mine! *His* Laura! I am as little able to realize the idea which those two words convey—my mind feel almost as dulled and stunned by it—as if writing of her marriage were like writing of her death" (207).¹⁶ Laura insists that Marian accompany her and Percival on their honeymoon across the Continent, but Marian brings her "face to face with the hard truth. [She] was obliged to tell her that no man tolerates a rival—not even a woman rival—in his wife's affection" (207). She explains to Laura that the possibility of the two sisters continuing to live in the same house after Laura's marriage "depended entirely on

[her] not arousing Sir Percival's jealousy and distrust by standing between them at the beginning of their marriage" (207-8).

Thus both sisters are expelled from their sororal garden of delights; however (unlike that other Laura and her sister, in "Goblin Market") theirs is a lost paradise which cannot be regained. The "pre-oedipal" *promesse du bonheur* that it offered must be considered suspect in a patriarchally-ordered world whose rewards must everywhere be the product of economic enterprise, and whose feminine values must be developed in terms of their ancillary status to that enterprise—even when, as we have seen, that practice justifies itself in terms of the protection that it offers those feminine values. In *The Woman in White*, what substitute *jouissance* can be offered to replace that which was necessarily obliterated? The solution will be constructed from within the structure of the Victorian family, and will again be confined to its horizontal axis. It was already hinted at early in the book when, as a reward for bowing to her wishes, Marian bestows the status of brotherhood on Walter. It is the construction of a make-believe family of the very type which children would fabricate in the nursery. This pretend family will become the nexus not only of a resolution of the plot's unfinished business (the discovery of the truth about Anne and her mother, the truth about Sir Percival and Count Fosco, and the horrible "accidental" penalty for their crimes that Percival and Fosco must suffer), but the creation of a *real* family that will salve the frayed nerve endings of Collins's Victorian readers.

The location in the poor and populous London neighborhood where Walter, Laura, and Marian play house after Laura's escape from the asylum is described by Walter:

I have taken those two floors in an assumed name. On the upper floor I live, with a room to work in, a room to sleep in. On the lower floor, under the same assumed name, two women live, who are described as my sisters. I get my bread by drawing and engraving on wood for the cheap periodicals. My sisters are supposed to help me by taking in a little needlework. Our poor place of abode, our humble calling, our assumed relationship, and our assumed name, are all used alike as a means of hiding us in the house-forest of London. (433)

Walter can finally say of Laura, "she was mine at last! Mine to support, to protect, to cherish, to restore. Mine to love and honour *as father and brother both*" (435; emphasis added). One might uncharitably observe that Laura's loss of much of her "good looks" due to her ordeal has lessened Walter's erotic desire for her and made him more brotherly than loverly. As he himself admits, "The sad sight of the change in her from her former self, made the one interest of my love an interest of

tenderness and compassion which her father or her brother might have felt" (475). But, in fact, we know that the change in Laura's appearance makes her look identical to her sister Anne Catherick, and it was Walter's erotic attraction to the latter that initiated the metonymical chain of desire in the text.

In this make-believe home, rather than Laura's and Walter's erotic desire rupturing the world of sororal bliss (as it had originally threatened to do), the desire between Laura and Walter has been reabsorbed in a fuzzy, warm, and erotically confused world of sibling love. Here Walter can still play brother to both Laura and to Marian (Marian yet again refers to Walter as "my brother" [581]), but because Marian plays surrogate mother to Laura, Walter can be father to Laura as well as brother. Indeed the newly constructed household seems to feature the relation between Marian and Walter as Laura becomes the child. ("[W]e amused her in the evening with children's games at cards" [456]. "She spoke as a child might have spoken, she showed me her thoughts as a child might have shown them" [458]). Laura is pointedly left out of all decisions: "In a week's time, Marian Halcombe and I had settled how the course of our new lives should be directed. . . . We calculated our weekly expenditure to the last farthing, and we never touched our little fund except in Laura's interest and for Laura's sake" (453). But the infantilized Laura feels she is a burden on the family. "You will end in liking Marian more than you like me—you will, because I am so helpless! Oh, don't, don't, don't treat me like a child!" Walter lifts her head and kisses her, murmuring, "My poor, faded flower! my lost afflicted sister!" (499). When Walter feigns having found a buyer for Laura's "poor, faint, valueless sketches" (500), Laura feels more grown-up and useful. Marian and Walter continue to patronize her. ("When Laura had left us, . . . we could speak to one another without restraint; Marian and I were careful to keep Laura in ignorance" [565, 582].) In fact, Laura's fear that Walter will "end in liking Marian more" is not entirely ungrounded: a serious bond appears to be developing between "brother" Walter and "sister" Marian ("my faith in Marian. My absolute reliance on her" [562]), as Laura slips increasingly toward the margin, becoming the ghostly figure of the novel's title—this, in spite of Walter and Marian's justifying their every act as being "for Laura's sake."¹⁷

The attraction between Walter and Marian, inaugurated in his voyeuristic gaze over her womanly body at the beginning of the novel, but checked by that gaze's discovery of her "ugliness" (read "masculinity"), has existed throughout the book, faintly mirroring the attraction that Marian has for the feminized Count Fosco. In the secrecy of this nursery-family, the attraction is allowed to bloom. Sister Marian be-

comes a rival to sister Laura for brother Walter's love. There must have been a dim consciousness of this and other sensational scandals in the Victorian imagination. How many readers, contemplating the curious brother-sister relation between Walter and Marian, saw that Collins's masculinization of Marian figuratively transformed that relationship into a homoerotic tie between brother and brother? This "family," a kind of "terrorist cell" for social and familial justice, goes beyond the familiar, eroding the distinctions that legitimate role, gender, class, and erotic identifications.

We have seen in this novel a peculiar network of metaphorical family relations all orbiting around the central literal familial bond in the text—that of sisterhood. Walter is "brother" to both Laura and Marian—doubly incestuous to Laura, for he also acts as her "father," making him "father" to Marian as well. Yet Marian often plays the role of Laura's "mother," so she too is incestuously Walter's "wife" as well as "sister" and "daughter"—and perhaps even "brother" as well. As in so many nineteenth-century texts, in *The Women in White* metaphors of familial relations bear much of the burden of plot development. Walter's narrative begins with recounting his biweekly visit to the cottage of his widowed mother and sister. For reasons that remain unclear, he feels obliged to inform the reader of his family situation. "Events which I have yet to relate make it necessary to mention in this place that my father had been dead some years at the period of which I am now writing; and that my sister Sarah and I were the sole survivors of a family of five children" (34). A general slippage among family roles is already foreshadowed in Walter's description of the relationship between his female relatives and his old Italian friend, Professor Pesca, where the daughter and the mother reverse roles.

My sister Sarah, with all the advantages of youth, was, strangely enough, less pliable. . . . I never saw my mother and my sister together in Pesca's society, without finding my mother much the younger woman of the two. On this occasion, for example, while the old lady was laughing heartily over the boyish manner in which we tumbled into the parlour, Sarah was perturbedly picking up the broken pieces of a teacup, which the Professor had knocked off the table in his precipitate advance to meet me at the door. (37-8)

Then, except for telling us that he could not think of visiting the cottage of his mother and sister without thinking of the Woman in White (having just told us that it seemed impossible to speak of "Miss Fairlie and of me without raising the memory of Anne Catherick" [97], thereby establishing a subtle metonymical familial link among the four of them), Walter allows his mother and sister to disappear from the narrative for nearly 550 pages, restoring them only to inform us that "in

their jealous affections" toward Walter, they did not believe the story of the identity switch between Laura and Anne, and this imposed the "painful necessity" on Walter "of concealing [his] marriage from them" (585).

The curious and fraught association between Marian and Count Fosco, though decidedly erotic in some of its features, is also framed in the language of familial bonds. When Fosco transports the seriously ill Marian to a hidden room, he carries "that inestimably precious burden" with "a fatherly care" (626). Later he writes to "magnificent Marian" to warn her and Walter that he is a dangerous man when crossed. He calls his words "paternal caution" (468). But the feminized Count is also fatherly to Laura—if only to deceive her. "I can be paternal—no man more so—when I please, and I was intensely paternal on this occasion" (627-28). Towards both sisters "his smile express[es] a thoughtful, fatherly admiration" (308). He can also be paternal to Marian's other enemy, Sir Percival, whom he treats "benignantly, as a good-humoured father bears with a wayward son" (245); and, sending the bewildered baronet to bed, the Count says, "Percival. Sleep, my son" (355). As metaphorical father to both Marian and Percival, the Count creates yet another odd metaphorical family.

Metaphorical families are created by the rules of rhetoric and psychology that allow for metaphorization; but real families too are the product of rules. Cultural rules, written or unwritten, spoken or unspoken, whether in the form of taboos, laws, moral dicta, mores, or codes of etiquette, not only govern behavior but create it, and in doing so, create social, familial, and individual identities. This is true as well for the meaning of terms like "sister" and "brother," which are not determined merely by biological facts. The nineteenth century saw a rapidly developing process of legal codification of the system of rules that establish cultural and personal meanings. The law was seen sometimes as a protector, sometimes an oppressor.

An important mediating force which determines the direction, flow, and intensity of desire in *The Woman in White*, as it will in *No Name*, is that of the law. Collins's text stands in a fraught relation to the Victorian legal system in two ways. First, the narrative structure both imitates and mocks the law; second, the ideational content both extols and vilifies the law. Not only the novel's form, but also its content, places it in a self-consciously ambivalent relation to the law. In fact, we can say that Collins uses a technique that transgresses the laws of narrative in order to tell a story about the transgression of the law—but one in which, as in Collins's later novel *No Name*, the law itself is in some ways

the transgressor. Certainly Glyde and Fosco have broken the law, as is implied in the second sentence of the book.

If the machinery of the Law could be depended on to fathom every case of suspicion, and to conduct every process of inquiry, with moderate assistance only from the lubricating influences of oil of gold, the events which fill these pages might have claimed their share of the public attention in a Court of Justice. (33)

Why does their case not end up in court? Could we say that the crime was so clever, so subtle, that it slipped through the rather wide-meshed net of the law? But that is not the reason Walter gives. In the third sentence of the text, he asserts: "But the Law is still, in certain inevitable cases, the pre-engaged servant of the long purse; and the story is left to be told, for the first time, in this place" (33). Thus, to the extent that the law is in the service of the monied classes, it is the perpetrator of injustice, or at least it allows injustice to go unpunished. Therefore, both Fosco and Glyde must be brought to justice outside the law; yet, Laura Fairlie, the victim of the criminal acts revealed in the story, is herself a member of the moneyed classes, albeit "only" a female member, and the novel's most prominent representative of the law, Gilmore—who is described by Marian as "the old and tried friend of two generations of Fairlies, and we can trust him, as we could trust no one else" (106)—refuses to draft the wedding contract to which Laura's uncle is prepared to agree, on the grounds that it leaves Laura too vulnerable. The weaknesses in this legal document (which is eventually drafted by another lawyer) inspire Glyde's crime against Laura. So in good faith we cannot blame the law here; rather, in proper Victorian fashion, we might blame a *brother*, Mr. Frederick Fairlie, brother to the deceased Philip Fairlie, for failing to protect his niece and her sister. Yet, in a deeper sense, the truly original source of the infringement of justice lies in the specific English marriage and property laws at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Moreover, the victim here is not Laura Fairlie (though she too was to be victimized by those same laws forty years later), but Percival Glyde. Percival's mother had been married in Ireland to a man who had "ill-used her" (550). Unable to divorce him because of the law, she left him and took back her maiden name. She met Percival's father, Sir Felix Glyde, but was unable to marry again because of the law. Though they lived together as husband and wife, their child was of course illegitimate in the eyes of the law; that is, he had no name.¹⁸

One of the great ironies of the book is the fate of Fosco's diabolical plan to achieve "the complete destruction of Lady Glyde's identity" (631). As Fosco puts it, "I might have taken Lady Glyde's life. . . . [I]

took her identity instead" (632). In this plan he temporarily succeeds; but, his machinations having been revealed, there follows a graveyard scene in which the inscription "Laura, Lady Glyde" is erased from what had been supposed to be her tombstone, thereby, in a sense achieving Fosco's goal of erasing her name (and at the same time establishing an odd metonymical association between Laura, the dead body of the woman in white which lies under erasure, and Fosco's own pale white dead body from which his "mark"—the mark of the Brotherhood—has been erased by his assassin¹⁹). Yet, Fosco's plot has achieved its end before it even conceives of it, for there never was a Lady Glyde (because there never was a Sir Percival Glyde). Laura Fairlie is still herself, sister of Marian Halcombe, temporarily living outside the law in Victorian sin. And it is this law which has come between her and her sister, and determined the motives and the actions of their love. What the law hath taken from them it hath restored. It has also transmuted their love from a dangerous metal to one with social utility: perhaps from quicksilver, or mercury, to lead, for it reconfigures their relationship by modifying and disciplining it.

For, though they are, of course, only playing house, even this make-believe *menage à trois* is in some ways too strong for Collins's Victorian readership while at the same time it titillates them with suggestions of monstrous sex: premarital, incestuous, and homosexual. It is as if Marian recognizes this when she finally blurts out to Walter, "There must be a change in our little household, Walter, we cannot go on much longer as we are now" (578-79). Apparently, a legitimate heterosexual act must take place to erase anxieties about the moral status of this heroic trio, a sexual act which will of course never be mentioned,²⁰ but whose fruit is "little Walter" (644), appearing in the concluding paragraphs of the novel. In these final moments, the only question remaining is whether Marian, who has sacrificed her entire life for her sister, can be expected to continue to do so. Laura and Walter wonder, "Was it not our duty, our best expression of gratitude, to forget ourselves, to think only of *her*?" (640). But Marian will hear none of it. She decides that her future role in life will be as maiden aunt to any future Hartrights. "I will teach them to speak for me in *their* language, and the first lesson they say to their father and mother shall be—We can't spare our aunt!" (641). But Walter's narrative is over. His "pen falters in [his] hand."²¹ The long, happy labour of many months is over. Marian was the good angel of our lives—let Marian end our story" (646). Ghostly sister Laura can now be devoted wife and mother, the conduit of property and position to a male offspring; and Marian, the woman who first introduced herself to us as a devil, has been domesticated, trans-

mutated into an angel in the house, as must every Victorian sister one way or another.

Notes

1. Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (1860; Harmondsworth and New York: Penguin, 1985), 35. Subsequent references will be to this edition and cited in text.

2. A very partial list of nineteenth-century works centrally concerned with sister figures might include novels such as, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Persuasion*, *Frankenstein*, *Deerbrook*, *The Half Sisters*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Dombey and Son*, *Our Mutual Friend*, *Wuthering Heights*, *The Mill on the Floss*, and *No Name*, as well as countless conduct manuals, educational tracts and domestic treatises focusing on the sister. The renewed interest in fairy tales, many of which deal with relations between siblings, as well as the nineteenth-century revival of and fascination with *Antigone*, also attest to the period's fixation on the sister.

3. "La Cage aux Folles": Sensation and Gender in Wilkie Collins' *Woman in White*, (*Representations* 14 [Spring 1986]: 107). Subsequent references will be to this edition and cited parenthetically in the text. According to Miller, Collins' *The Woman in White* is "of all sensation novels considered the best and best known" (108).

4. As D.A. Miller notes, even in spite of recent attempts at critical rehabilitation, twentieth-century criticism generally treats the sensation novel as "pulp-as-trash" and relegates it "to the margins of approved genres" (107).

5. I am indebted to Rebecca Steinitz's insightful unpublished essay, "Inscribing Relations: Family, Writing and Gender in *The Woman in White*," one of whose claims is that the "major project" of the novel is to bring under control a "vastly problematic" extended family of "various truncated groupings" by transforming it into a less threatening normal (i.e., Victorian) nuclear family complete with maiden aunt as nanny. I agree with Steinitz's reading and will incorporate it (and its Millerian inspiration) into my own interpretation of Collins' text.

6. "A living figure was moving over the waste of heath in the distance. It crossed our range of view from the boat-house, and passed darkly along the outer edge of the mist. It stopped far off, in front of us—waited—and passed on; moving slowly, with the white cloud of mist behind it and above it—slowly, slowly, till it glided by the edge of the boat-house, and we saw it no more" (285).

7. "The instant I pronounced that name she started to her feet, and a scream burst from her that rang through the churchyard, and made my heart leap in me with the terror of it. The dark deformity of the expression which had just left her face lowered on it once more, with doubled and trebled intensity. The shriek at the name, the reiterated look of hatred and fear that instantly followed, told all" (129).

8. Wendy Heller makes a related point in her discussion of *The Woman in White*, when she postulates: "[t]he way that Anne and Laura come to be identical twins

suggest a potential union between the causes of women—even upper class ones—and of the working class.” (“Wilkie Collins and the Female Gothic: A Study in the Politics of Genre and Literary Revision,” Diss. Yale University, 1988, 273.)

9. Philip Fairlie is described as “constitutionally lax in his principles, and notoriously thoughtless of moral obligations where women were concerned” (574).

10. In their first and only encounter, Mr. Fairlie both greets Walter and takes leave of him saying each time, “So glad to possess you at Limmeridge, Mr. Hartright” (66, 70). Walter makes clear that he is fully cognizant of what is entailed by his employer’s phrasing when he later wryly comments: “Throughout the whole of that period Mr. Fairlie had been rejoiced to ‘possess’ me” (133). Among his other possessions is a manuscript which, on its own time, is a human being: “‘what can you possibly mean by calling him a man?’ He’s nothing of the sort. He might have been a man half an hour ago, before I wanted my etchings, and he may be a man half an hour hence, when I don’t want them any longer. At present he is simply a portfolio stand” (180).

11. As discussed with care by Helena Michie in “‘There Is No Friend Like a Sister’: Sisterhood as Sexual Difference,” in *Sororophobia* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 15-50.

12. Laura, strolling on the terrace while Marian reads Mrs. Fairlie’s letter to Walter, “glide[s] into view” three times in typically ghostly fashion. Indeed, before long, she becomes “Lady Glyde.”

13. D.A. Miller notes that Walter expressly assumes on a number of occasions that his reader is a man. (“La Cage Aux Folles,” 111)

14. In his introduction to the Harmondsworth edition, Julian Symons claims that “Collins had a liking for strong, mannish women” (14-15).

15. *Wilkie Collins: Women, Property and Propriety* (London: Macmillan, 1988), 7.

16. If the orthodox reasoning of Girard’s theory of rivalry held here, Marian would be placed in a relation of desire toward Percival, and/or he toward her. Yet there is no textual evidence to support such an interpretation. Still, such a curious dynamic does develop between Marian and “the brains” behind her rival’s plotting that one might be tempted to read their relationship as a displacement of what might otherwise have evolved between Marian and her sister’s husband.

17. Early on, we witness the way in which already Marina and Walter make of point of, in including Laura out. They wait until she has “passed out of sight” before reading aloud a letter which was written by her own mother, and decide to “say nothing in her presence” about matters which intimately concern her (83, 86). Even Walter’s descriptions of the “perfect domestic” idylls on both occasions oddly exclude Laura (81, 89), prefiguring her final and most pronounced silencing and banishment.

18. Indeed, as we shall see, his plight is very like that of Magdalen and Nora in *No Name*. "He was not Sir Percival Glyde at all." "He never had a name" (529, 549). And, like Magdalen, he acted in desperation and took matters into his own hands. He forged a marriage record in the church logs, thereby bestowing upon himself the baronetcy of which the law had robbed him. As Anne Catherick's mother says, "It was not his fault that his father and mother were not married, and it was not his father's and mother's fault either. . . . But he succeeded in the end, and made an honest woman of his mother after she was dead in her grave!" (552).

19. The novel's plot demands that the arch villain, Fosco, be brought to justice. The task of doing so seems somehow to fall to Walter as (self-)designated "protector" of his two offended "sisters," Laura and Marian. But the Count's offense merits and indeed requires his death. The opportunity is given to Walter to carry out the death sentence when Fosco challenges him to a sword duel (611); but were Walter to kill the Count who, in spite of his depravity, has been made by Collins to be at least as strangely attractive to the reader as to Marian, Walter would be tainted by Fosco's blood and would cease being the perfect brother/father/husband in the new purified family he will head. Count Fosco, therefore, must die not by Walter's blade, but by the blade of an anonymous assassin, member of the mysterious Italian political association known euphemistically as "the Brotherhood." Its goal is "anarchy and revolution. It takes the life of a bad king or a bad minister" (596). We could say, perhaps, that the Brotherhood is involved in a "struggle against Rank and Power"—precisely the struggle in which "brother" Walter claims to be engaged throughout his story (435). Walter's indirect connection to the Brotherhood comes via his faithful friend, Professor Pesca, who shows "brotherly affection" for Walter (586)—an affection which figuratively places Walter in the ranks of the Brotherhood, and hence makes him the metaphorical assassin of "father" Fosco after all. We might say, then, that this fratricide is a patricide, but, unlike Freud's version of a perhaps equally metaphorical family murder, here the result is the defense of the sisters' honor, and not their violation.

20. "'My darling!' she whispered, 'we may own we love each other now?' Her head nestled with a tender contentedness on my bosom. 'Oh,' she said innocently, 'I am so happy at last!'" (582).

21. Reminding us of the phallic pencil which the Woman in White caused to falter so many pages earlier.