

London cabs, Wilkie Collins and *The Woman in White*

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Abstract

For all its industrial and technological heat, Victorian Britain remained a largely horse-drawn society. Focusing on the use of horse-drawn vehicles in Wilkie Collins' 1860 novel *The Woman in White*, this essay explores representations of city space, intra-urban mobility, connectivity and public transport in popular nineteenth-century fiction. Cabs, I argue, represent intriguing and paradoxical spaces, poised between public and private, continually on the move in the static city. I ask how literary figurations of horse cabs focus and negotiate anxieties associated with travel within Victorian cities. I also suggest that cabs – vehicles for the fast and disreputable – articulate new ways of occupying space.

Keywords

Cabs, mobility, fiction, Victorian London

The history of the horse cab in London is under-researched given its historical and cultural significance and, indeed, its transformative effect on Victorian society.¹ Extending existing work on networks and transportation in literature, this subject can be addressed more fully from a perspective that is attuned to the social, political and judicial imperatives that inform the regulation of private hire vehicles. Writers fictionalised fears about the threats, perceived and actual, of emergent transport technologies.

The novels of Charles Dickens to the detective fiction of Arthur Conan Doyle deploy cab transport with sufficient detail to permit assessment of the accuracy with which writers describe public transport in fiction. Furthermore, it is

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illuminating to consider the significance of these descriptions in the context of a variety of contiguous Victorian cultural discourse. I propose that undertones of peril, violence and eroticism emerge distinctly and intriguingly in relation to hackney coach and cab travel in the literature of this period. Whether we have in mind Dickens's Mr Squeers, who declaims 'I never thrashed a boy in a hackney-coach before – there's inconveniency in it, but the novelty gives it a sort of relish too!' (*Nicholas Nickleby*), or Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, who deduces that 'If he came from outside on so wet a night, and yet left no trace of damp upon the linoleum... then it is exceedingly probable he came in a cab... yes, I think we may safely deduce a cab' (*The Hound of the Baskervilles*), the horse-drawn aspects of the period's literature invite more sustained, focused investigation. This essay, as part of that inquiry, seeks to give a clearer sense of the complex ways in which cultural narratives both constructed and defined cab travel during the Victorian period.

'Encapsulation', an article on horse-drawn journeys in late-Victorian literature by John Stokes, considers the relatively sparse critical writing on the history of cab travel.² Stokes gestures towards the wide range of insights that are generated by examining the experience of cab travel specifically through literary examples, using, for context, Henry Mayhew's rich social research from the early 1900s and Henry Charles Moore's contemporary lively and engaging account on the origin and history of the omnibus and cab. In addition to writers such as Mayhew and Moore, who had first-hand experience of and access to the people and vehicles described, there are more recent histories of the horse cab.³ Moore's work provides a reliable sense of contemporary debates and attitudes surrounding the use of hire vehicles.⁴ He captures the energy, and dangers, of travel as well as the factual detail: the cab is evidently a social space associated with disputes, crime, humorous anecdotes, and personal accounts.

In his recent book, *Charles Dickens's Networks: Public Transport and the Novel*, Jonathan Grossman examines the ways in which transportation and issues of time, space and community intersect through readings of *The Pickwick Papers*, *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Little Dorrit*.⁵ Grossman's analysis of the novels, in which he finds ample evidence of the impact of high-speed passenger transport and its organisation in the work of Dickens, is engaging and often illuminating. I consider cab travel specifically, however, with sustained attention to the multiple ways in which parliamentary papers and issues raised by doctors in medical journals of the period illuminate social pressures to which we are no longer attuned.⁶ Crime and disease found a new space in the cab, requiring swathes of regulation, only gradually implemented, generating public debates centred on the collision between anxieties of the age and new efficient forms of urban travel. The cab offers an intriguing window into issues of regulation, violence, crime and surveillance, focusing profound social and moral questions in a mobile space that was paradoxically public and private; a moving room in the static city. In the work of Wilkie Collins these vehicles represent troubling interventions, raising social issues he was clearly eager to explore.

Wilkie Collins was born in London in 1824. His work includes short stories, plays and journalism, but Collins is now best known for his novels, particularly *The Woman in White* (1860), *Armadale* (1866) and *The Moonstone* (1868). Charles Dickens invited Collins to produce an exciting serial novel to be published in his new periodical *All the Year Round*, and with *The Woman in White*, Collins established not only his reputation but also, at the same time, a new sub genre of fiction: the sensation novel. As Lyn Pykett notes

whereas the in the first half of the century criminality was regarded as antithetical to respectability, some of the new crimes which seized the public attention in the 1860s – such as fraud, embezzlement, poisoning and blackmail – actually depended on the appearance of respectability.⁷

The sensation novel described new technology and offered up stories that engaged with scientific and legal debates to bring to the reading public gripping instalments of criminality and detection.

Wilkie Collins's first piece of published fiction was a short story for the *Illuminated Magazine*, 'The Last Stage Coachman' (1843), written at the age of nineteen.⁸ It is a topical, rather intense first foray into the literary market place and details a vision in which the stage coachman – whose livelihood had been destroyed by the advent of trains (a process presided over by sneering railway directors) – emerges 'with a gleam of unutterable joy' from the heavens, driving a fully equipped phantom coach: 'a railway director strapped fast to each wheel, a stoker between the teeth of each of the four horses, [...] mementos of railway accidents' occupying the roof. It was not uncommon for writers during this period of transition to look back, either in a reactionary, romantic or merely sentimental fashion, to the halcyon days of the long-distance stagecoach. For example, in *The English Mail-Coach*, Thomas De Quincey contrasts horse-drawn travel with 'the new system of travelling', arguing that 'iron tubes and boilers have disconnected man's heart from the ministers of his locomotion.'⁹

While both Collins and Dickens describe railway development and associated issues, it is clear that they were also fascinated by the fictional possibilities presented by horse-drawn travel. Collins's novels, like those of Dickens, engage with life in the city; at times, his work presupposes topographical knowledge of the urban landscapes he describes, together with an expectation that his readers will recognize the key sites, and even specific streets. Detailed knowledge of urban space proves an important asset to the protagonist in Collins's novel *The Woman in White*. Walter Hartright – the young drawing teacher and likable narrator, engaged by Frederick Fairlie to instruct his niece, Laura, with whom (rather predictably) he falls in love – is involved in one of the novel's most compelling inner-city moments, namely, Walter's evasion of Sir Percival Glyde's hired spies in central London:

I looked at him as I passed, and instantly recognised one of the men who had watched me before I left England. [...] Having done this, I again walked northward, till I reached the New-road. There, I turned aside to the west (having the men behind

me all the time), and waited at a point where I knew myself to be at some distance from a cabstand, until a fast two-wheel cab, empty, should happen to pass me. One passed in a few minutes. I jumped in, and told the man to drive rapidly towards Hyde Park. There was no second fast cab for the spies behind me. I saw them dart across the other side of the road, to follow me by running, until a cab or cabstand, came in their way.¹⁰

Even before the cab clatters into the text, Collins attaches importance to the ability to orient oneself – to walk northward and know where this will lead (the ‘New-road’), then to turn west, and so on. Collins tells us that if spies are to be evaded, Walter must exhibit an acute awareness of his surrounding environment, and a degree of caution, even if this does not allow him to return ‘till many hours later’. In other words, Collins’s initial wish is to portray a vigilant, shrewd protagonist who does not escape pursuit due to the fortuitous presence of a cab; he is located ‘where [he] knew himself to be at some distance from a cabstand’. Walter’s flight resonates with the first scene, the search for the woman in white. In both instances, unsuccessful pursuit is linked directly to Sir Percival, a manipulative figure who uses legal systems and institutions (the asylum) to control others.

Using *The Woman in White* to provide a detailed test case, it is possible to examine the various ways the horse cab focuses social, sexual and political tensions of the Victorian era. The women’s body and freedom of movement through urban space are bound up with cabs, privacy, risk and transparency. Indeed, relatively prosperous women who used cabs unaccompanied were frowned upon by the older generation who associated the new, light and faster hansom cab with the young and disreputable.¹¹ There is also ample evidence to suggest that crime and the dangers of using transport, particularly at night, were cause for genuine concern.¹²

Cabs in context: The train compartment and the cab

Travel in the coach was characterised not only by the traveller’s intensive relationship to the world outside, the traversed landscape, but also by their lively communication with each other.¹³

In the city, people live their lives through their object relationships: that is, through an urban relationship to the world.¹⁴

Despite being excerpted from a work concerned with railway transportation in the nineteenth century, the above quotation from Schivelbusch’s important contribution to the history of transport reveals an essential aspect of horse coach travel that was lost with the mechanisation of transportation systems. The introduction of the railway in the first half of the century, as Schivelbusch suggests, marked the decline of ‘lively communication’ between passengers that was characteristic of travel by stage coach or omnibus (Latin, ‘for all’) – ‘mechanised by seating arrangements and by new perceptual coercions (including new kinds of shock), routinised by schedules, by undeviating pathways, the railroad traveller underwent experiences analogous to military regimentation’.¹⁵

With the introduction of the railway, there were predictions that mechanised transportation would spell a fundamental shift, a transformation that would not only make long distance travel more efficient but also would result in a condensed geography of possibility, as cities are brought into closer proximity. This effect was described by Schivelbusch as the 'annihilation of space and time'. If we take London as an example, we see the potential for extending outwards from the metropolis, a diffusion of the population from the centre, as habitation is multiplied and extended. The railroad was much debated, a subject of comment and speculation, precisely because traditional technology was making way for something entirely new. Basic understanding of space and the negotiation of distance radically shifted due to mechanisation, recasting social perceptions of space-time: 'distances practically diminish in the exact ratio of the speed of personal locomotion.'¹⁶

By reading the horse cab as a public/private space, we can extend Schivelbusch's consideration of the politics of the train compartment. Indeed, Schivelbusch notes – before addressing the subject of isolation, compartmental seating arrangements, and class divisions in the train – the difference between the conditions in the train carriage and the horse coach (the latter a space 'characterised by lively communication'). He then goes so far as to make the literary connection when he maintains: 'coach travellers were talkative folk, providing material for numerous novels published in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.'¹⁷ Referring only to long distance travel, however, Schivelbusch neglects short distance journeys through urban space.

Cabs usually operated with one horse that was changed during the day, each horse working for a period of six or seven hours. If, as was usually the case, the horse was changed once, the driver would work for the entire period; that is, seven hours followed by a change of horse and another seven hour stint. However, this practice varied, and the working hours per day for a cabman could be as many as eighteen, and in some cases less than twelve.¹⁸

The cab, a more private, faster way to negotiate the city, was an unviable means of travel for less affluent sectors of the community. And given that the taximeter, a device to measure distance and calculate cost of journeys, was not a feature of cabs; until the end of the century, there were often disputes over the fare.¹⁹ As well as the generally negative perception of cabbies as drunk and careless drivers – curiously no driving test was deemed necessary until 1896 – the trade exposed the driver to hazards and pressures which few other professions encountered as frequently: for example, drunks, women in labour, psychopaths, counterfeiters, and fare-jumpers.²⁰

Henry Mayhew marks the legal distinction between the 'Metropolitan Stage-Carriage' (omnibus) and the 'Metropolitan Hackney' (cab): the cab plies for hire at an appointed 'stand', and 'carries no one but the party hiring it'. Moreover, Mayhew explains that a primary difference between the two is that it 'is an offence for the omnibus to stand still and ply for hire, whereas the driver of the cab is liable to be punished if he ply for hire while his vehicle is moving.'²¹ The Omnibus threw

people together, mostly middleclass families with children on shopping trips and days out, and city employees who could now commute daily from the suburbs.²²

Mayhew was not content simply to understand the regulations governing the use of cabs and omnibuses. He also went on to make enquires about the drivers of these vehicles. He lists among the cabdrivers: greengrocers, costermongers, jewelers, clerks, broken-down gentlemen, carpenters, joiners, coach-builders, footmen, shopkeepers, pickpockets, swell-mobsmen, musicians, some good scholars, several ex-policemen.²³ Widely circulated rumours of a baronet cabman could not be substantiated. Far more common were the number ('a tenth' or possibly 'a twelfth' of the whole number of cab drivers) of what are known as 'fancymen', that is, drivers who live with 'women of the town' (as Mayhew refers to prostitutes) and are supported, wholly or partially, by the income derived through the money made from prostitution. Mayhew provides a balanced account and goes on to describe what he calls the 'better sort of cabman':

Some of the best of these men are, or rather have been mechanics, and have left sedentary employment, which affected their health, for the open air of the cab business. Others of the best description have been connected with country inns, but the majority of them are London men. They are most of them married, and bringing up families decently on earnings of from 15s. to 25s. a week. Some few of their wives work with their needles for the tailors.²⁴

Such historical and contextual detail allows us to read the uncanny opening encounter in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*, between Walter Hartright and the mysterious woman on the Hampstead – to – London road, with new sensitivity to the social, commercial and psychological issues at play. This analysis will consider, for the first time, the important figure of the cabbie, connecting transport to the vital theme of privacy and 'shutting up' v. publicity and disclosure in the novel. From the shock of transition to railway transport, attention should be brought to the ways the sensation novel effectively deployed the speed and erotics of the horse cab – the moving room in the static city.

'My hand was on the cab door . . .': Cab anxiety in literature

The memorable early passage in *The Woman in White* dramatising the meeting between Walter Hartright and Anne Catherick takes place late at night and is fraught with anxieties for both. It is a scene of mystery and confusion, but one that is also charged with overtones of desire. Anne Catherick is conscious of the danger she faces: 'Only say you will let me leave you when and how I please – only say you won't interfere with me. Will you promise?'²⁵ The sexual connotations of the word 'interfere' are clear, but there are also many undertones of denotation that lie just beneath the surface in this encounter. The reason Hartright is so profoundly disoriented by the encounter has to do with the repression of troubling desires:

Although Hartright is disturbed by meeting a possible lunatic or prostitute, his fear could also stem from his own sexualised response to the woman in white [...] Anne

Catherick becomes a blank canvass onto which he projects the dangers of his own nature. Henceforth she becomes – for him – the object of a horrified, introspective realisation.²⁶

The confrontation has the suggestiveness of an illicit assignation. Indeed, the Victorian interest in prostitution, the ‘social evil’, was at its height in the 1850s and 1860s culminating in the Contagious Diseases Acts.²⁷ The opening scenes of *The Woman in White* provide a credible frame for the encounter, while confirming dangerous and disturbing aspects of the urban condition. Deborah Epstein Nord, in *Walking the Victorian Streets*, has remarked on middle-class perceptions of poverty, disease and prostitution in urban environments:

The novelist or investigator of these decades registered the anxiety of the middle classes about the incursion of urban blight and disease into the preserves of their rank and fostered the notion that maintaining distance between the classes in the city was neither wholly possible nor even desirable.²⁸

An acceptance that contact between the classes was, to some degree at least, inescapable in a highly populated city like London fostered anxieties about crime and health. Indeed, one significant consequence of such fears was the introduction of measures such as the Contagious Diseases Acts in the 1860s, which gave the police wide-ranging powers to arrest women they suspected of working as prostitutes.²⁹ As Rebecca Solnit has observed, this legislation involved an invasive and highly unpleasant procedure: following arrest, a medical examination was conducted; if the woman refused to undergo this painful and humiliating procedure, she would spend time incarcerated; if she was found to be infected, she was confined to a lock hospital: ‘guilty till proven innocent, she could not escape unscathed.’³⁰

We can pull into sharper focus the relevance of perceptions of female prostitution as a means of illuminating the nocturnal encounter between Walter and Anne Catherick in *The Woman in White*. Each party is nervous for different reasons: Hartright fears being suspected by the cabman, or indeed by anyone else who might observe the scene, of soliciting a prostitute. Equally, Catherick finds herself in a position liable to be misconstrued, and in danger from whomever she might ask for help, as well as from the authorities. It is also worth considering the scene from the cabbie’s perspective, a crucial aspect of this early scene, though, hitherto unexamined:

I can’t take you, sir, if you’re not going towards Tottenham-court-road’, said the driver, civilly, when I opened the cab door. ‘My horse is dead beat, and I can’t get him no further than the stable’. [...] I had assured myself that the man was sober as well as civil, before I let her enter the vehicle. And now, when she was seated inside, I entreated her to let me see her set down safely at her destination.³¹

The cabbie’s comment that his horse is ‘dead-beat’ is more than merely an attempt to avoid an undesirable fare. The driver has, after all, been stopped by a nervous looking woman dressed entirely in white and a gentleman eager to help her, for

reasons that may appear ambiguous to any casual observer. There is more here to his comment regarding the horses than meets the eye. Legislation passed in 1835 to regulate the profession stipulated that vehicles had to be roadworthy and clean, without 'broken window, door, or step', or the owner would 'forfeit any sum not exceeding Twenty Shillings' for each such offence.³²

The 1835 Act also brought horses of vehicles under scrutiny for the safety of passengers and other road users: use of 'incompetent or vicious horses' and any injury, or stoppage, caused by a defect in the carriage carried a fine of up to five pounds. This sum represented a heavy fine, and if W. J. Gordon's account in *The Horse World of London* (1891) is accurate, the worst vehicles were often used at night when the state of the cab would have been more difficult to ascertain.³³ Hartright seemed satisfied that the cab driver was an honest man. Moreover, the reason for alluding to the condition of the horses and the distance he is prepared to travel may be the instinctive response of a driver eager to avoid a complaint to the authorities that he was refusing to drive. The 1847 Act is unambiguous about the penalty of up to forty shillings for refusing a passenger without reasonable cause.³⁴ In other words, the cabman can only refuse to pick up what, from his perspective, is a dubious fare by citing legislation. This suggests that the driver, in presenting his excuses, is aware of the offences punishable under the recent legislation – or, more exactly, that Collins was aware of specific aspects of transport law.

The Town Police Clauses Act further stipulated the punishment for 'Drivers misbehaving'. Anne's desire to get away speedily would have given the cab driver in *The Woman in White* cause for concern. To be told by a fare to 'drive faster' would put the cabbie in an awkward position. Legislation made 'wanton and furious driving' an offence with a substantial fine of five pounds, or a prison sentence of anything up to two months. It would appear, then, that underlying this apparently innocuous conversation is an acute awareness – from all parties – of what is at stake in the transaction being negotiated. The ways in which the cab trade had been tightened, and a painful consciousness on the part of the driver of the penalties that might endanger his livelihood if any complaint were to be brought before a magistrate, loom particularly large.³⁵

The transaction that takes place between Walter Hartright and the driver is informative in other ways. Although only implicit in the novel, the issue of the cab fare is important to understanding the anxieties that animate Collins's opening scene. Walter presumably offers the cabbie a specified sum to take Anne as far as she wishes to go – Anne, after all, would not have any money having just escaped an asylum and would be unable to pay the fare for her journey. It is not her intention to reach any specified destination, but simply to escape. Furthermore, it has already been disclosed by Collins that the driver is only able to take her as far as the condition of his horses will allow. It should be noted that in reaching agreement with Walter the cab driver must have been aware that legally he was in no position to demand, at the conclusion of Anne's journey, any more than the sum agreed even if this transpired to be less than the legal fare.³⁶ The punishment for demanding more than the fare agreed was 'a penalty not exceeding Forty Shillings'.

It was not just an offence, therefore, for the driver to charge more than 'is authorised by any Bye Law made under this or the special Act', but also an offence to ask at the conclusion of the journey for more than the figure agreed on before setting out. The London Hackney Carriage Act of 1831 recognised the problem of passengers refusing to pay the fare, or the disappearance of the passenger without paying ('bilking', in cabbie's parlance). Section 41 of the Act states that refusal or omission to pay the driver the legal fare was a criminal offence; the offender, if found guilty, would face anything up to a month's imprisonment with hard labour. Trevor May, in his history of the horse cab, recognises the trouble faced by cabmen:

In practice the police and courts treated the respectable classes differently from the rest, and few cabmen could afford the time to pursue their grievances through the courts. It was difficult, if not impossible to trace offenders, and while drivers, after 1853, were required to give passengers a ticket containing the number of the cab, passengers were not required to hand over their visiting cards – nor even to give their name and address.³⁷

We can, then, read much into the driver's civil but rather limiting revelation (addressed to Walter Hartright) – 'I can't take you if you're not going towards Tottenham-court-road [...] my horse is dead beat, and I can't get him no further than the stable.'³⁸ It was, further, stipulated in clause 51 of the 1835 Bill for The Better Regulation of Cabs that horses could not be changed in the street, except in cases of accident, indeed, the driver 'for every such offence, shall forfeit and pay any sum not exceeding Forty Shillings'.³⁹ It is in the interest of the driver, then, to ensure that the horses are changed at the appropriate time and place in order to prevent any charges for which he might be held accountable if the vehicle is unable to make it as far as the stable. The desire to avoid a fine of forty shillings would be sufficient to ensure that the driver would not be tempted to continue to ply for hire with horses that are in no condition to pull the cab. There are, then, many clear indicators in the scene that the driver is worried about prosecution.

The brief episode between the three characters – Hartright, Catherick and the cabman – in *The Woman in White* reveals that Anne is anxious to escape her captors and, at the same time, she is painfully conscious of the dangers of meeting a man in the street at night who may 'interfere' with her. The danger is not just imagined: Walter Hartright wants to help the woman while not wishing to appear in a way that would make his actions liable to be misconstrued, and this is added to a confusion that, as Andrew Mangham has suggested, hints at his 'sexualised response' to the encounter.⁴⁰ The cabman is also, in the eyes of Walter, a threatening presence. In his commentary, May contends that 'women were among those cabmen least liked to carry. [...] They were less familiar with the driver/passenger relationship and with the delicate but crucial matter of tipping.'⁴¹ This unfamiliarity was perhaps inevitable given the relative infrequency with which women had opportunity to utilise the vehicles. During the daytime, at least, hire vehicles, particularly the faster

hansom, would have been primarily occupied by 'City men' for business purposes.

Anne Catherick, 'tired and frightened', expresses her wish 'to shut herself' within the confines of a carriage 'and be driven away'. A passing cab, having just been vacated by a gentleman, is immediately hailed by Walter. The innocence implied by her white apparel is undercut by the sexual overtones of her 'breathless eagerness' as she 'pressed by me into the cab'. The vague idea he has of stopping the vehicle almost prevents her flight, by causing delay. Moreover, there is still more at stake than readers today may suppose:

My hand was on the cab door. She caught it in hers, kissed it, and pushed it away. The cab drove off at the same moment – I started into the road, with some vague idea of stopping it again, I hardly knew why – hesitated from dread of frightening and distressing her – called, at last, but not loudly enough to attract the driver's attention. The sound of the wheels grew fainter in the distance – the cab melted into the black shadows on the road – the woman in white was gone.⁴²

The hand on the cab door is a literal reminder of Walter's control, and also of his role in abetting the escape of the mysterious woman. The sexual ambiguity is then picked up again in the second sentence as the woman catches the hand of Walter, kisses it and pushes it away. The tension is profound, and we can apply Kucich's astute general observation made about this passage in a more specific context: 'In *The Woman in White*, Collins makes honesty not just a central moral value but a necessary erotic condition. Despite the intermittent romance of the sensational, honesty and its vehicle – rational understanding – constantly shape the protagonists' desires.'⁴³

The wheels are quite literally set in motion, and future events cannot be averted. Walter, himself left in the dark as to the significance of this encounter, remains behind, calling out ineffectually into the night. The conspicuously dressed woman in white is whisked away into the 'black shadows of the road'. This passage operates in a figurative sense also, essentially prefiguring her fate: the wheels that sound fainter in the distance are indicative of the inevitability of her decline as she heads irretrievably towards death (a theme with which she is associated time and again). The woman in white is an innocent victim absorbed into and ultimately overwhelmed by the darkness of societal institutions, as well as by people around her who know how to employ such institutions to their advantage.⁴⁴ Margaret Oliphant, in her 1862 essay on 'Sensation Novels' for *Blackwood's Magazine*, captured the essence of what is at stake in this scene when she declaims: 'It's natural that art and literature should, in an age which has turned to be one of events, attempt a kindred depth of effect and shock of incident.'⁴⁵ Clearly the novel contains many references to madness and asylums, but there are also numerous resonant allusions to the proliferation of cabs that are revealing for what they tell us about Victorian history and culture.⁴⁶

The anonymity of the cab driver is precisely what 'made him such a potentially dangerous man, for his relationship with his passenger is a fleeting one'.⁴⁷ Without

wishing to demonise the cabbie, as there are many instances highlighting the risk to which the driver too is subject, it is clear that news agencies and the popular press, on occasions when criminal activity did occur, would seize on such cases to reinforce and perpetuate existing attitudes about cab drivers and, significantly, women.

An article that appeared in *The Morning Chronicle* on 31 July 1858 explores at length an incident and trial involving a cabman and a young lady, Mary Barton, who was working as a servant at a hotel. Barton remembers returning home one evening after visiting a friend:

As it was raining I took a cab, and about half way home the cabman asked me to have some ale with him, and I remember nothing more till the next morning, when I found myself in a common lodging-house. I then missed my purse, containing £1 17s. 4d., a pair of studs, my boots and a parasol. I asked the landlady how I came there, and she said I was brought in a cab the night before. [...] It was a Hansom cab, but I should not know the cabman again.⁴⁸

The article appeared under the heading: 'The Mysteries of a Hansom – Caution to Young Females'. Such sensational articles, which gained a wide currency through reporting in papers like *The Morning Chronicle*, add a further dimension to the passage from *The Woman in White* involving Hartright and the mysterious woman in the road. Moreover, the heading under which this article appears shows the pervasive nature of messages designed to control women and their behaviour on the streets.

The cab in *The Woman in White* also operates as a site of deception. There are multiple risks attached to being 'shut up' and 'driven away', and not, in Collins's novel at least, from the driver. Indeed, cabs are used by the novel's villains for distinctly sinister purposes. For example, Count Fosco, the refined but enigmatic and menacing friend of Sir Percival Glyde, writes his confession, proclaiming: 'I sent my wife, in a cab, to clear Mrs. Clements out of the way.'⁴⁹ The scene is earlier described in Hartright's narrative:

She and the elderly lady (clearly Madame Fosco) then left in the cab. The lady stopped the cab, after it had driven some distance, at a shop, before they got to the hotel; and begged Mrs. Clements to wait for her for a few minutes [...]. She never appeared again.⁵⁰

The Count, following in another cab, is allowed the opportunity to deceive Anne Catherick by luring her away while Mrs. Clements is engaged elsewhere:

The 'good gentleman' [Fosco] sent in a note by a street boy, and paused for results, a door or two further on. At the moment when Anne appeared, this excellent man had the cab-door open ready for her – absorbed her into the vehicle – and drove off.⁵¹

Whereas Mrs Clements was simply left waiting in a cab, something altogether more ominous is implied by Fosco's assumption of an alternate identity. Once Anne has been 'absorbed' into the cab, there will be no escape; she is immediately driven off on a journey completely other to that she intended to take. This

abduction demonstrates the cab's multiplicity of purposes and trajectories. The most extraordinary detail in the above passage, though, is that the journey Anne believes she is making is not the journey planned and arranged by Fosco. Each traveller has a different conception of how the trip will terminate; in other words, while both leave from the same point, the divergence of their beliefs as they proceed towards their destination produce entirely different experiences of the journey. What is more, this journey mirrors the first described in the novel, where Walter helps Anne Catherick on the road.⁵² Here, too, Anne relies on another character to assist her; but this is the final cab journey she will make. Once again, the woman in white, the innocent victim of deception and dishonesty, is 'absorbed' into the dark.

This absorption leads inevitably to the second part of the deception practised in London following the real Lady Glyde's arrival (Laura Fairlie, having been driven into a loveless marriage to Sir Percival Glyde, is sent to London, incarcerated in an asylum under an assumed name and proclaimed to be dead):

I [Fosco] started in the fly, leaving the false Lady Glyde dead in the house, to receive the true Lady Glyde, on her arrival by the railway. [...] Hidden under the seat of the carriage, I carried with me all the clothes Anne Catherick had worn on coming into my house. [...] Lady Glyde was at the station. There was great crowding and confusion, and more delay than I liked (in case any of her friends had happened to be on the spot), in reclaiming her luggage. Her first questions, as we drove off, implored me to tell her news of her sister. I invented news of the most pacifying kind; assuring her that she was about to see her sister at my house. My house, on this occasion only, was in the neighbourhood of Leicester Square, and was in the occupation of Monsieur Rubelle, who received us in the hall.⁵³

The function of the journey from rail station to destination is, as the above example illustrates, essential for moving the novel's plot forward. Fosco is anxious among the crowds and 'confusion', disturbed by the possibility of discovery. Only once he has his victim inside the cab does he consider himself safe from detection.

The centrality of the hired vehicle and specific details surrounding horse-drawn travel emerge as distinct themes on which Walter Hartright's case (his attempt to resurrect the supposedly dead Lady Glyde in the eyes of the world) ultimately depend. The Count's confession reveals that proof of events would be established through consultation with the man from whom he hired the carriage that collected Lady Glyde from the station:

On the very day (the 25th), when the doctor's certificate declared that she had died in St John's Wood, she was alive, by Sir Percival's own showing, at Blackwater – and, on the day after, she was to take a journey! When the proof of that journey was obtained from the flyman, the evidence would be complete.⁵⁴

The 'fly' referred to by Count Fosco was – at the time Collins was writing his novel – applied to any vehicle drawn by a single horse. More salient, perhaps, are the precise details revealed when Walter goes to visit the person from whom the vehicle

was ordered. The book in which the record of the details for the journey were documented reveal: 'July 26th, 1850: Brougham to Count Fosco 5, Forest-road. Two o'clock. (John Owen)'. This supplies the evidence required by Walter, and, further, the testimony of the cabbie provides necessary closure, echoing the journey taken by Anne Catherick at the beginning of the novel. Indeed, the symmetry created by the representation of cab travel at the beginning and end of the novel is far from coincidental and serves neatly to draw together loose strands of narrative: from the mystery and darkness of the opening scene, we have finally emerged from a long and treacherous journey into a more logical, less disquieting, realm where details of journeys can be sought and found, and where travellers do not disappear into darkness but are brought out into the light.

Conclusion

Victorian authors were responding to legislation and social anxieties associated with public hire vehicles, their regulation and intra-urban travel more generally. Some of these anxieties are practical in nature, connected to violence and collisions in the street, while others are more political or ideological, concerned with public/private tensions in this moving hired space. By bringing the theme of travel into productive opposition with wider issues of Victorian urban studies, I have identified the horse vehicle as a crucial nexus of social interaction, an ideal space in which to examine issues of gender, power and the body.

Analysis of literary representations of horse-drawn vehicles in the Victorian period exposes hitherto neglected psychological and social aspects of the urban travel experience. Examining a range of texts alongside depictions of public transport in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860) enables consideration of the body and the previously unexamined figure of the cab driver in the context of what we might call 'cab space'. With appropriate sources, it is possible to tease out specific points of social, sexual and political tension. The cab clearly focuses themes of trust, deception and privacy in Collins's novel.

The sensation genre sits in a context of uneasy, speedy modernity. This essay has extended work on modernity and the railway in sensation fiction to bring focus to city travel. The public shock of the railway, surveyed by Schivelbusch, is only one part of the modernity described in sensation fiction. Shifting this debate to the unstable and ill-defined spatial boundaries of the cab, this essay has explored the politics of the intricate and complex cab space in *The Woman in White*, to demonstrate how interactions just outside and within this enclosed environment can be brought to bear on understanding of Victorian issues of transport and mobility for men and women. The sensation genre made effective use of the paradoxically public and private space of the cab – the moving room in the static city. Indeed, it is fitting that the novel credited with the emergence of this new genre should both begin and close with this resonant symbol of public transportation.

New hire vehicles on the streets of London represented a change in the way people negotiated the city; to cope with the dramatic increase in the number of

vehicles plying for hire, new rules of the road were introduced to regulate these vehicles. With so much critical work focused on the railroad, literary and cultural critics have largely ignored the fact that Britain remained a horse-drawn society until the end of the Victorian era. The role of cabs on the streets has been neglected, as well as the energy they brought to the city and opportunity for new connections and activities. As the passages and themes I have examined reveal, authors were busily processing these innovations and changes. For writers, the horse cab was a moving space for social interaction, rich in dramatic possibility.

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Notes

1. More sustained research into this subject has begun to emerge in the context of literary criticism. See, for example, Ruth Livesey's work on the stage- and mail-coach network during the first half of the nineteenth century: 'Communicating with Jane Eyre: Stagecoach, Mail, and the Tory Nation', *Victorian Studies*, 53:4 (2011), 615–38.
2. John Stokes, "'Encapsulation': Horse-Drawn Journeys in Late-Victorian Literature", *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 15:2 (2010), 239–53.
3. There are few histories of horse transport in the nineteenth century, and only a couple specifically relating to cab travel. A good place to begin is Trevor May's concise history, *Victorian and Edwardian Horse Cabs* (Buckinghamshire, Shire Publications, 1999); and the only authoritative and detailed history of the subject, Trevor May's *Gondolas and Growlers: The History of the London Horse Cab* (Gloucestershire, Allan Sutton, 1995). See also T. May, 'The Administration and Organisation of the London Cab Trade From the Late Eighteenth Century to the First World War' (Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1991).
4. Henry Moore, *Omnibuses and Cabs: Their Origin and History* (London, Chapman Hall, 1902).
5. Johnathan Grossman, *Charles Dickens's Networks: Public Transport and the Novel* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012).
6. Ian Middlebrook, *Hackney Coaches, Cabs and Victorian City Space* (Ph.D. thesis, Aberystwyth University, 2014). For more general work on the subject of travel in literature, there have been a few excellent recent studies: Charlotte Mathieson, *Mobility in the*

- Victorian Novel: Placing the Nation* (Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2015); Adrienne E. Gavin and Andrew Humphries, *Transport in British Fiction: Technologies of Movement, 1840–1940* (Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2015).
7. Lyn Pykett, *Authors in Context: Wilkie Collins* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 45.
 8. Wilkie Collins, 'The Last Stage Coachman', *Illuminated Magazine* (August, 1843).
 9. Thomas De Quincey, 'The English Mail-Coach', in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater and Other Writings*, ed. Grevel Lindop (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998), p.183.
 10. Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*, ed. Matthew Sweet (London, Penguin, 2003), pp. 446–7. Subsequent references are to this edition.
 11. Henry Moore, *Omnibuses and Cabs: Their Origin and History*, p. 266.
 12. See W. J. Gordon, 'The Horse World of London: The Cab Horse', *Leisure Hour* (November, 1891), pp. 112–17.
 13. Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century* (Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1986), p. 74.
 14. Steve Pile, *The Body and the City: Psychoanalysis, Space and Subjectivity* (London, Routledge, 1996), p. 236.
 15. Schivelbusch, p. xiv.
 16. Dionysius Lardner, *Railway Economy* (London: Taylor, Walton and Maberly, 1850), p. 35.
 17. Schivelbusch, p. 74.
 18. See Charles Booth, ed., 'Industry: On Cab Drivers and Owners', in *Life and Labour of the People in London* (London, Macmillan, 1903).
 19. For a detailed account of the way information about fares was distributed and standardised, see Paul Dobraszczyk, 'Useful Reading? Designing Information for London's Victorian Cab Passengers', *Journal of Design History*, 21:2 (2008), 121–41.
 20. Fred Davis, 'The Cab Driver and His Fare: Facets of a Fleeting Relationship', *The American Journal of Sociology*, 65:2 (1959), p. 159.
 21. Henry Mayhew, *London Characters and Crooks*, ed. H. Christopher (London, The Folio Society, 1996), p. 407.
 22. See Jennifer Terni, 'The Omnibus and the Shaping of the Urban Quotidian: Paris, 1828–60', *Cultural and Social History*, 11:2 (2014), 217–42. For paintings, see William Maw Egley's *Omnibus Life in London* (1859) from the Tate Britain collection; and George Joy, *The Bayswater Omnibus* (1895); Also, a fascinating painting designed as social commentary, Alfred Morgan's *An Omnibus Ride to Piccadilly Circus, Mr Gladstone Travelling with Ordinary Passengers* (1885).
 23. Jerry White describes the fraught relationship between the police and cabmen as follows:

Cabbies were a byword for truculent independence of spirit throughout the nineteenth century, especially in its first half. So a palisade of regulation was thrown up to keep them in their place. From 1834 both cabs and cabbies had to be licensed by the government Coach Office. Then, from 1853, the Metropolitan Police took over and pegged and poked away at the cabmen much as they did with the costers. By the 1890s it had all become a war of attrition – or, rather, irritation. In 1894, with 14,672 licensed drivers, the police secured no fewer than 3,985 convictions for offences under the hackney carriage regulations.

- Jerry White, *London in the Nineteenth Century: "A Human Awful Wonder of God"*, (London, Jonathan Cape, 2007), p. 213.
24. Henry Mayhew, *London Characters and Crooks*, p. 410.
 25. Collins, *The Woman in White*, p. 29.
 26. Andrew Mangham, *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction* (Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2007), pp. 175–7.
 27. Paul McHugh, *Prostitution and Victorian Social Reform* (London, Croom Helm, 1980), p. 17.
 28. Deborah Epstein Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation and the City* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 9.
 29. For a useful discussion of the Contagious Diseases Acts, along with beliefs about the transmission of disease, see 'Implementing the System' and 'Resisting the Acts', in Mary Spongberg's thorough study *Feminising Venereal Disease: The Body of the Prostitute in Nineteenth-Century Medical Discourse* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997). See also Paul McHugh, *Prostitution and Victorian Social Reform*.
 30. Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (London, Verso, 2001), p. 233.
 31. Collins, *The Woman in White*, p. 30.
 32. A bill for the better regulation of cabriolets and other hackney carriages, and of omnibuses and other stage carriages for short distances, used in and near the metropolis, and of the drivers and attendants thereof (1835), pp. 1–32.
 33. W. J. Gordon, 'The Horse World of London: The Cab Horse', *Leisure Hour* (1891), pp. 112–7.
 34. *Town Police Clauses Act: An Act for consolidating in One Act certain Provisions usually contained in Acts for Regulating the Police of Towns* (1847), pp. 865–78.
 35. It is also useful to note that slow-moving cabs plying for hire caused 'unnecessary obstruction' to other traffic and road users in the busiest areas of London. The erection of cabstands in London alleviated the problem of vehicles continually moving at slow speed around the city while plying for hire. Indeed, it became an offence for the driver of a hackney carriage, when un-hired, to drive at a slower pace than four miles an hour as stipulated in clause 47 of the 1835 bill for cab regulation.
 36. In 1853, a cabman was charged with demanding more than his legal fare; the complainant declared that although the distance travelled was only three miles the defendant had charged as if it were five. The cabby was sentenced to a month's imprisonment. Before his period of incarceration had expired, an anonymous gentleman paid to have the distance measured exactly. This was found to be no less than seven miles. In order to resolve such disputes, on 15 March 1899, six cabs fitted with a distance measuring apparatus, christened the 'taximeter', began trial runs around London. The device was a small clock that was fixed to the outside of the right-hand window of the cab recording, at the end of every journey, the distance travelled and the legal fare the passenger had to pay, depending on whether he or she had hired the cab by time or distance. This novel device also registered extras paid for luggage and waiting, the number of journeys made, the number of miles travelled and the total earning of the day. When the cab was empty, a little red flag projected from the side. Immediately, a fare enters the cab driver turned down a lever, lowering the flag and causing the words "not engaged" to disappear and be replaced by the tariff. When the end of the journey is reached, the cabman pulls up the lever; and the distance travelled and the fare to be paid appears on the dial. Fares were charged by distance, by time, quantity of luggage,

additional persons (e.g. a child carried by two persons), and waiting (for over fifteen minutes).

37. May, *Gondolas and Growlers*, p. 102.
38. Collins, *The Woman in White*, p. 30.
39. Clause 51 of the 1835 *Bill for the Better Regulation of Cabs*.
40. Mangham, *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction*, p. 175.
41. May, *Gondolas and Growlers*, p. 103.
42. Collins, *The Woman in White*, p. 30.
43. John Kucich, 'Competitive Elites in Wilkie Collins: Cultural Intellectuals and Their Professional Others', in his *The Power of Lies: Transgression in Victorian Fiction* (New York, Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 87.
44. For more on this, read Ronald R. Thomas, 'The Letter of the Law in The Woman in White', in *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 57–74.
45. Margaret Oliphant (unsigned), 'Sensation Novels', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (1862), p. 565.
46. Further information on insanity and medicine can be found in Helen Small, 'The Woman in White, Great Expectations, and the Limits of Medicine', in *Love's Madness: Medicine, the Novel, and Female Insanity, 1800–1865* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998).
47. May, *Gondolas and Growlers*, *The History of the London Horse Cab*, p. 96.
48. *The Morning Chronicle*, 31 July 1858.
49. Collins, *The Woman in White*, p. 607.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 463.
51. *Ibid.*, pp. 607–8.
52. Gina M. Dorré briefly alludes to this passage in *Victorian Fiction and the Cult of the Horse* (Hampshire, Ashgate, 2006), p. 98.
53. Collins, *The Woman in White*, pp. 609–10.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 594.