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Ghostlier Determinations: The Economy of Sensation and The Woman in White

ANN CVETKOVICH

Do you believe in dreams? I hope, for your own sake, that you do. See what Scripture says about dreams and their fulfillment, and take the warning I send you before it is too late.

—the woman in white in *The Woman in White*

And they said unto him, We have dreamed a dream, and there is no interpreter of it. And Joseph said unto them, Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell me them, I pray you.

—Genesis 40:8

When the work of interpretation has been completed, we perceive that a dream is the fulfilment of a wish.

—Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*

The “Preamble” to Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* claims for the narrative the status of a legal document whose writing is necessitated by the inadequacy of the legal system in uncovering and prosecuting all crimes. Because the “Law is still ... the pre-engaged servant of the long purse,” operating in the service of those with power and wealth, it remains the task of a poor man and amateur detective, Walter Hartright, to investigate and defend the interests of Laura Fairlie, the victim of legal loopholes that disenfranchise her of both her inheritance and her identity. As the primary narrator of the story of crime and its investigation, Hartright aspires to “present the truth always in its most direct and most intelligible aspect.” To carry out this project, he enlists the supporting testimony of eyewitness accounts other than his own and arranges these texts in logical order so as to “trace the course of one complete series of events.”¹

This description of the novel as an objective and rational document seems oddly inaccurate, given that *The Woman in White* was one of the most famous sensation novels, noted for its capacity to create suspense and excitement. Following *The Woman in White*’s publication in 1860, the sensation genre became the publishing phenomenon of the decade. Novelists such as Collins, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Mrs. Henry Wood, and Charles Reade wrote stories about bigamy, mistaken identity, and murder that sold in enormous numbers to a pub-

¹ Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p. 33. All further citations will be included in the text and refer to this edition.

lic clearly eager for literature that would “[preach] to the nerves.”² In the Preface to the 1860 edition of *The Woman in White*, Collins refers to the “two main elements in the attraction of all stories—the interest of curiosity, and the excitement of surprise.”³ It does not seem to be his intention that the reader listening to a story told “as the Judge might once have heard it” should respond with impartial objectivity (33). Instead, his mystery narrative invites the reader not just to participate in a process of rational inquiry but to enjoy the thrill of being shocked by the unexpected.

The absence in the Preamble of any reference to the narrative’s sensationalism perhaps signals a disavowal of the way the sensation novel promotes an extension of the operation of the law by locating the private confines of the family as the domain of crime.⁴ Sensational responses are central to the quasi-legal procedure of uncovering the secrets that crop up everywhere in the novel. Characters are alerted to the presence of a mystery by their own bodily sensations of fear, excitement, and suspense. Similarly, the reader who is startled by the “excitement of surprise” is prompted to satisfy the “interest of curiosity” that might also motivate legal inquiry. The extension of the law beyond its usual boundaries installs a hermeneutics of suspicion in which every fact that excites a sensation merits investigation.

We might suspect that Walter Hartright, the writer of the Preamble, is hiding more than just his narrative’s sensational qualities. He is, after all, more central to the novel both as narrator and as character than his claims to pluralism and disinterestedness admit. The story he introduces is not only about Laura Fairlie’s persecution (“what a Woman’s patience can endure”) but also about the way his discovery of it (“what a Man’s resolution can achieve”) serves as a vehicle for his accession to patriarchal power and property, making it possible for him to marry her despite their class difference. His pursuit of justice allows him to further his own interests, and by unmasking the crimes of aristocratic men like Sir Percival Glyde and Laura’s sexually immoral father, he finally assumes their social position. In lamenting the fact that the legal system is not extensive enough to protect Laura Fairlie from exploitation by her husband, he fails to acknowledge that its lapses afford him the opportunity to step in where the patriarchal fathers and lawyers leave off.

I want to argue that many of *The Woman in White*’s most sensational moments—Walter’s encounter with Anne Catherick on the road to London, his realization that Laura Fairlie is identical in appearance to Anne, Laura’s return from the dead—enable the more materially determined narrative of Walter’s accession to power to be represented as though it were the product of chance occurrences, uncanny repetitions, and fated events. The mechanism for his rise up

² [H.L. Mansel] “Sensation Novels,” *The Quarterly Review* 113 (April 1863), p. 482. For the most comprehensive description of the genre and the critical controversy it provoked, see Winifred Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

³ Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*, ed. Harvey Peter Sucksmith (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. xxx.

⁴ See D.A. Miller, “From roman policier to roman-police: Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone*,” *NOVEL* 13 (Winter 1980), pp. 153–70, for a discussion of how detection or surveillance operates through the form of multiple narration rather than through the overt intervention or representation of the police or even, finally, a detective. He argues that the novel aims to align ordinary experience with detection.

the social hierarchy is another kind of sensational moment—falling in love with Laura Fairlie—but this event is obscured by its links with those other sensational events (sensational both because extraordinary and because they produce bodily responses) described in the rhetoric of fate and chance. The disruptive energy of Walter's secret love for Laura is diffused by his ability to uncover other secrets, such as Sir Percival's false identity, Anne Catherick's mysterious origins, Laura's resemblance to Anne, Count Fosco's Italian past, or Sir Percival's plot against Laura, that are more criminal or repressed than his own. As his romance with Laura becomes entangled with the mystery of Anne Catherick, Walter constructs a sensational narrative about fate and chance that provides an alternative to the possibility that events are determined by social convention, and thus suggests that the unlikely event of his marriage to Laura Fairlie can become a reality.

Long before he has any evidence to do so, for example, he is obsessed with the idea of Sir Percival's secret and overcome with a foreboding sense that misfortune will come to Laura Fairlie:

Judging by the ordinary rules of evidence, I had not the shadow of a reason, thus far, for connecting Sir Percival Glyde with the suspicious words of inquiry that had been spoken to me by the woman in white. And yet, I did connect him with them. Was it because he had now become associated in my mind with Miss Fairlie, Miss Fairlie being, in her turn, associated with Anne Catherick, since the night when I had discovered the ominous likeness between them? Had the events of the morning so unnerved me already that I was at the mercy of any delusion which common chances and common coincidences might suggest to my imagination? ... The foreboding of some undiscoverable danger lying hid from us all in the darkness of the future was strong on me. The doubt whether I was not linked already to a chain of events which even my approaching departure from Cumberland would be powerless to snap asunder—the doubt whether we any of us saw the end as the end would really be—gathered more and more darkly over my mind. (101)

The passage maps the mental process by which Walter comes to “associate” Sir Percival with Laura Fairlie, and Laura in turn with Anne Catherick, a process which, rather than following “the ordinary rules of evidence,” seems to be inspired by the associative powers of the unconscious. The affective charge of his relation to the two women plays itself out through the transfer of that affect to the person of Sir Percival, who becomes his rival for possession of Laura. Walter's belief that events are controlled by some invisible force, even as it renders him helpless, gives him the hope of rescue from the social position to which he is confined. Furthermore, his susceptibility to bodily sensation provokes the melodramatic conviction that “the end” to be foreseen cannot be predicted. He describes himself as being “at the mercy of any delusion” because of the “unnerving” nature of his encounter with the woman in white and his uncanny recognition of her resemblance to Laura Fairlie. Bodily sensation, because it is involuntary, becomes a symptom of the self's subjection to the shock of

chance or surprise events, and underwrites the process by which a sensational or melodramatic narrative can be constructed. Walter's incapacity to control his own body, even as it renders him anxious, permits him to rise to power without appearing to aspire to it. The dramatic revelation of Sir Percival's illegitimacy and Count Fosco's membership in the Brotherhood makes it possible for the bourgeois hero magically to ascend to the status of the aristocracy. However, before his confrontations with these two men, which are almost like chivalric duels, take place, Walter has a series of shocking encounters with "the woman in white" and her double, Laura, the affective power of which needs to be explained.

In arguing that the sensational narrative, which intertwines romance, male secrets, and the rhetoric of chance and fate, mystifies the story of Walter's class mobility, I do not want simply to replace one story with the other. This would be to lapse into the logic of false consciousness, to explain away without explaining the force of sensation. Rather, it is necessary to consider what dividends might accrue by routing Walter's desire and rise to power through the sensational. As D.A. Miller has suggested, *The Woman in White* provides a locus for examining "the value, meaning, and use that modern culture ... finds in the nervous state."⁵ I want to look carefully at the early scenes in the novel that are centrally concerned with the creation of both sensation and Walter Hartright's desire in order to examine how, in addition to providing a cover for his class aspirations, they carry an affective power that seems to exceed this explanation. It does not seem accidental that this excess seems to center on the bodies of two women, whose extraordinary effect on Walter is increased rather than dispelled by his discovery that they resemble one another. The thrill exerted by Anne's and Laura's resemblance is not demystified by the revelation that they have the same father. We don't really care what the reason is, we want an excuse to be shocked, preferring to read an interesting story rather than a legal document.⁶ The rather predictable story of the young art instructor falling in love with his beautiful student is complicated by its occurrence in the midst of the mystery about Anne Catherick. Walter stresses the immediacy of his love for Laura, relying on her natural beauty as an alibi for the way that his desire transcends the economic exigencies that govern her marriage to Sir Percival Glyde and that promote her persecution. We could say that his story

⁵ D.A. Miller, "Cage aux folles: Sensation and Gender in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*," *Representations* 14 (Spring 1986), p. 109. Although I agree with much of what Miller says, especially his argument that the sensation novel has to be read in terms of its production of bodily sensation, my reading departs from his in so far as he sees the somatic experience of sensation as a threat to be defended against, whereas I am arguing that it serves as a welcome screen and conduit for Walter Hartright's accession to power. Rather than having to secure himself against the feminizing, and hence debilitating, effects of sensation, Walter is able to acquire power because of his sensitivity to affect. I would also argue that the somatic nature of sensation has to be read in relation to its projection onto a text, and thus would not separate thematic sensation and bodily sensation as readily as Miller does.

⁶ Perhaps the most conclusive instance of this phenomenon is one critic's discovery that, despite Collins's elaborate plotting, the scheme to substitute Laura for Anne was in fact technically impossible according to the dates established in the narrative. Collins corrected this error in subsequent editions, but the critic admits that the irrelevance of the supposedly all important facts to the reader's enjoyment of the novel is testimony to the author's power: "A plot that is worked out of impossibilities, like that of robbing the almanack of a fortnight, may be treated as a jest; but we vote three cheers for the author who is able to practise such a jest with impunity. He will not have a reader the less, and all who read will be deceived and delighted" ("Appendix A," *The Woman in White*, ed. Sucksmith, p. 586). That Collins could make such an error suggests that the affect produced by his mystery is more important than the solution to it.

of "love at first sight" is a mystification, that he reads the signs of her position as if they emanated naturally from her body rather than being a function of her social position. What's odd about his claim to love Laura at first sight is that the novel itself seems to demystify it by having Laura's appearance preceded by Anne's. Why, after all, does Walter not fall in love with Anne Catherick, given that she looks the same as Laura? The fact that he doesn't suggests that his love for Laura must be determined by her social class, but because the text itself reveals this so readily, we must consider how sensational plotting complicates any simple material or social interpretation of romance.

A reading of the sequence of events that leads to the awakening of his desire suggests that his attraction to Laura is inhabited from the start by his experience of Anne Catherick, and furthermore that the shock of his encounter with Anne Catherick is connected to his expectations of Laura. There is no primal event in which love arises naturally or instantaneously as an uncontrollable physical sensation, but rather a structure of determinations that patterns events. The forces of social determination revealed by Anne's resemblance to Laura can be mapped in relation to how the women's startling similarity plays out another kind of determination, one that follows the logic of Freud's notion of *Nachträglichkeit* or deferred action. For rather than demystifying Walter's love for Laura, the woman in white's relation to her double seems only to add further sensational intrigue to the romance, which itself sensationalizes and masks Walter's class transition.

Although future events will ultimately confirm the significance of his experience, Walter Hartright's first perceptions of Laura Fairlie and Anne Catherick acquire much of their sensational force from his own investments. Walking home on the last evening before he departs for his new position at Limmeridge House, Walter indulges in a fantasy prompted by Pesca's fairy-tale story about his prospects for marrying one of the ladies of the house, the first of a series of prophecies that will ultimately be fulfilled. He loses the customary constraint required by his position as art instructor, a profession in which the sign of his class difference is his desexualization. A male version of the female governess whose class position and relation to the family are ambiguous, Walter appears to harbor some resentment about being "admitted among beautiful and captivating women much as a harmless domestic animal is admitted among them" (89). His professional training demands that he separate himself from his body and his feelings as though they were detachable possessions: "I had trained myself to leave all the sympathies natural to my age in my employer's outer hall, as coolly as I left my umbrella there" (89). Rather than being an integral part of one's identity, the bodily sensations of desire conform to the exigencies of social position, since Walter's "situation in life [is] considered a guarantee against any of [his] female pupils feeling more than the most ordinary interest in [him]" (89). These passages remind us that one of the mechanisms for class division is the management of sexual desire, which far from being a natural entity independent of social convention, is so tied to class politics that Walter's pupils are assumed not to be susceptible to any but the "most ordinary interest." Rather

than being forbidden or repressed by social restrictions, desire or sensation does not even appear when the social configuration is inappropriate. Thus it cannot be said that sexuality is a natural force, and that the awakening of Walter's sensations in response to Laura, and her feelings for him, represent an escape from social restrictions. The link asserted here between sexuality and social classifications reminds us that what is forbidden is not sexuality in and of itself but the class transgression that love between an instructor and his pupil might represent. Since Walter so closely associates sexuality with class here, we have to see his love for Laura as crucially tied to class mobility, rather than independent of it.

Yet Walter's encounter with the woman in white would seem to suggest that sexuality is repressed by class hierarchies rather than being a mechanism for their preservation. As he proceeds on his walk home, the return of this repressed sexuality is catalyzed by his heightened sensitivity to the landscape, as if to suggest that, freed from the confines of the social world, he can recover a more natural sensibility:

The prospect of going to bed in my airless chambers, and the prospect of gradual suffocation, seemed, in my present restless frame of mind and body, to be one and the same thing. I determined to stroll home in the purer air by the most roundabout way I could take; to follow the white winding paths across the lonely heath; ... So long as I was proceeding through this first and prettiest part of my night walk my mind remained passively open to the impressions produced by the view; and I thought but little on any subject—indeed, so far as my own sensations were concerned, I can hardly say that I thought at all.

But when I had left the heath and had turned into the by-road, where there was less to see, the ideas naturally engendered by the approaching change in my habits and occupations gradually drew more and more of my attention exclusively to themselves. By the time I had arrived at the end of the road I had become completely absorbed in my own fanciful visions of Limmeridge House, of Mr Fairlie, and of the two ladies whose practice in the art of water-colour painting I was so soon to superintend. (46-47)

Walter allows himself to be carried along by the landscape, forsaking his usual rationality and direction for the "most roundabout way" (just as the mystery story takes a detour through sensation to arrive at rational explanations). He gives himself over to the outside world, letting his mind "remain passively open to impressions" that remain unmediated "sensations" rather than formulated thoughts. Even when his consciousness turns inward to speculations on the future, and his dispersed attention narrows to a single focus so that he is "completely absorbed" by visions that "[draw] more and more of [his] attention exclusively to themselves," Walter's mind is still the passive receiving medium of ideas that are "naturally engendered" rather than produced of his own volition. The taboo on "fanciful visions" is loosened by his ability to disavow any responsibility for them.

Given the already charged relation between Walter's state of mind and the landscape, it is hard not to read Anne Catherick's startling appearance as though it were a response to his questions about the future:

I had now arrived at that particular point of my walk where four roads met I had mechanically turned in this latter direction [back to London], and was strolling along the lonely high-road—idly wondering, I remember, what the Cumberland young ladies would look like—when, in 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 me. (47)

Walter's emphasis on his passivity as he "idly" speculates about the future and "mechanically" proceeds towards his destination suggests that he is subject to a determination outside his control, that the event which occurs has not been willed or desired in any way. The woman in white's touch abruptly returns him to his body, interrupting the flow of mental and bodily activity by bringing "every drop of blood ... to a stop." Walter becomes the sentient flesh-and-blood creature that he cannot be in the workplace. The shock of this physical event resonates forwards and backwards across the text, underwriting the mystery of Anne Catherick's behavior and demanding an explanation in part because it takes the form of a physically traumatic experience. Yet, one possible meaning for the event might be derived from the speculation that precedes it. The woman in white might be seen as the harbinger of the ladies at Limmeridge House, but in a way that allows Walter to disavow any responsibility for his desire to form a romantic liaison with one of them. Rather than being removed from the social world, the encounter with Anne Catherick appears magically to suggest that Walter's fantasy might become a reality.

Walter's construction of the woman in white as a figure of mystery can be seen as an attempt to recover from his physical shock by explaining it as the product of an identity or a story that remains hidden from him. The single instant of his terror must be installed within a larger narrative that will locate and rationalize that fear as residing outside of himself. "Far too seriously startled by the suddenness with which this extraordinary apparition [stands] before [him]," Walter finds himself "quite unable to account for" the woman's presence (47-48). He describes his attempt to determine her identity or motives from her physical appearance, the illegibility of which allows him to construct her body as the sign of and potential solution to her mysteriousness: "All I could discern distinctly by the moonlight ..."; "The voice, little as I had yet heard of it ..."; "her dress ... so far as I could guess" (48). Anne Catherick's body provides a series of clues, which, if correctly read, might provide the explanation for her cataclysmic effect.

In describing his response to Anne Catherick, Walter seems particularly concerned to ward off any suggestion of a sexual subtext to the encounter. His guilt about the sympathy he feels when "the loneliness and helplessness of the woman touched [him]" suggests that he fears that his response will be construed as sexual attraction. Disturbed by his own sense of helplessness, when his

"natural impulse to assist her and to spare her" overcomes "the judgment, the caution, the worldly tact, which an older, wiser, and colder man might have summoned to help him in this strange emergency," Walter must reassure himself that he has not fallen into the clutches of a woman of ill repute (49). "The one thing of which I felt certain was, that the grossest of mankind could not have misconstrued her motive in speaking, even at that suspiciously late hour and in that suspiciously lonely place" (48). The narrative is marked by retroactive justification, indicating that Walter is still haunted by uncertainty about his behavior and its significance. His feelings of sympathy seem uncomfortably ambiguous, perhaps in part because they take the form of an uncontrollable bodily response that resembles sexual desire.

What could I do? Here was a stranger utterly and helplessly at my mercy—and that stranger a forlorn woman. No house was near; no one was passing whom I could consult; and no earthly right existed on my part to give me a power of control over her, even if I had known how to exercise it. I trace these lines, self-distrustfully, with the shadows of after-events darkening the very paper I write on; and still I say, what could I do? (50)

Walter casts his aid to Anne Catherick as the equivalent of a sexual fall, emphasizing his own helplessness and lack of control as much as hers. Writing about his acquiescence to her request to be left alone, he describes his utterance of the word "yes" as though it were as cataclysmic in its consequences as a woman's sexual consent: "One word! ... Oh me! and I tremble, now, when I write it" (50). The writing of the past causes him to reexperience his earlier sensations, while the future contaminates his account so much that "the shadows of after-events [darken] the very paper" he writes on. Past and present grow confused, and the affect the episode conjures seems to be produced as much by subsequent events as by the encounter itself. Is Anne Catherick's significance present to Walter when he meets her, or is it only constructed retrospectively, in light of "after-events"? He "traces the lines" of his writing as if the script, rather than the event itself, might be the source of meaning. The physical nature of the encounter becomes both alibi and dilemma, as Walter can only describe himself as the victim of a bodily sensation that overtakes all rational considerations: "Remember that I was young; remember that the hand which touched me was a woman's" (50). This moment attains the status of an event which shapes the course of his future life, marking his break from the "quiet, decent, conventionally domestic atmosphere of [his] mother's cottage" (50).

Walter's lurid rendering of the encounter with the woman in white leaves ambiguous the question of whether its significance lies within the event itself or in its relation to future events. We are caught between body and text; is the moment charged because of the force of his physical experience of having "every drop of blood ... brought to a stop" or because Anne Catherick will turn out to resemble Laura Fairlie and will become embroiled in Sir Percival's plot and secret past? It is not clear whether the physical shock of the event must be diffused or parried by the sense that future events are determined by it, or

whether Walter is locating the affect attached to subsequent events in the single telling instance of his encounter with Anne Catherick. Walter tells the story as though his response to Anne Catherick itself determines what follows.

What had I done? Assisted the victim of the most horrible of all false imprisonments to escape; or cast loose on the wide world of London an unfortunate creature, whose actions it was my duty, and every man's duty, mercifully to control? I turned sick at heart when the question occurred to me, and when I felt self-reproachfully that it was asked too late. (55)

Walter's rather hysterical pronouncements about the consequences of his action suggest that it is being loaded with a significance that cannot be found within the event itself. Thus, the establishment of this moment as the primal event might be seen as a screen narrative for the more questionable act of falling in love with Laura Fairlie, which simply becomes one more of the events somehow set in motion by his inability to respond adequately to this encounter. His sense of having acted "too late" in questioning his behavior might also apply to his belated guilt about falling in love with Laura. In this instance, and in the affectively charged scenes that follow, Walter seeks to locate the significance of events not just in their relation to a larger temporal sequence but in their dramatic sensational force. Physical sensations that threaten to overwhelm the perceiver must be transformed into mysteries to be explained. But if this is a primal event, it is one produced as an origin through the mechanism Freud describes as deferred action⁷; sensation is not in itself meaningful except when it has been endowed with meaning after the fact of its occurrence. Thus, one of the meanings of Walter's response to Anne Catherick has to do not with the woman herself, but with how she is tied to his subsequent response to Laura.

Among the more immediate after-effects of Walter's encounter with the woman in white is the way it heightens the striking force of his visual first impressions of Marian and Laura Fairlie. The memory of Anne Catherick is mingled with his anticipation of the other women. "What shall I see in my dreams tonight? ... the woman in white? or the unknown inhabitants of this Cumberland mansion?" (57). Marian Halcombe, the sight of whose ugly and masculine face provides the shocking conclusion to Walter's scrutiny of her figure, confirms the idea that the female body and the male perception of it are legible indicators of sexual attraction. Fresh from his ambivalence about Anne Catherick and his response to her, Walter finds in Marian a woman whose body provokes immediate physical repulsion, and in Laura the exact opposite.

⁷ My understanding of Freud's notion of deferred action is derived from his case study of the Wolfman. Of the retroactive projection of meaning onto a primal event, which may itself only be a construction of the imagination, he says, for example: "Scenes from early infancy, such as are brought up by an exhaustive analysis of neuroses ... are not reproductions of real occurrences, to which it is possible to ascribe an influence over the course of the patient's later life and over the formation of his symptoms. [The interpretation] considers them rather as products of the imagination, which find their instigation in mature life, which are intended to serve as some kind of symbolic representation of real wishes and interests, and which owe their origin to a regressive tendency, to an aversion from the problems of the present." Sigmund Freud, "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis (1918)," *Three Case Histories*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Collier, 1963), pp. 236-37.

Suspense builds for Walter's first encounter with Laura, which is delayed by his meetings with other members of the household, and his enlistment of Marian's help to investigate the woman in white's references to Limmeridge House and the Fairlies. Primed by previous events, Walter begins to "wonder ... whether [his] introduction to Miss Fairlie would disappoint the expectations that [he] had been forming of her" (74). Although he accounts for his attraction as a case of love at first sight, it is difficult not to see it as a function of a series of expectations and prior events. When the moment finally arrives, he interrupts his narrative to alert us to his difficulties in describing the immediate effects of his experience because the event must be mediated by his language about it and by the history in which it is installed.

How can I describe her? How can I separate her from my own sensations, and from all that has happened in the later time? How can I see her again as she looked when my eyes first rested on her—as she should look, now, to the eyes that are about to see her in these pages? (74)

The burden of Walter's narrative is to explain his love for Laura as the unavoidable effect of her appearance. His alibi for social transgression is his helpless susceptibility to the physical sensation produced by her body. "I let the charm of her presence lure me from the recollection of myself and my position" (78). Describing Laura as the "first woman who quickened [his] pulses," he attempts to chronicle the "sensations that crowded on [him], when [his] eyes first looked upon her" (76). In order to recreate this experience for the reader, he must convert his text into an image in order that the eyes that read it become "eyes that are about to see her."

However, there is very little that is immediate about Walter's account of the event. He uses a drawing he has made in order to recall her freshly to mind, as though her body is an image or as though what he is really recalling is his perception of her rather than the woman herself. Furthermore, he ascribes the power of Laura's appearance to her body's status as the material instantiation of linguistic figures and mental ideas. She is the lyric love poem come to life; her eyes, for example, are "of that soft, limpid, turquoise blue, so often sung by the poets, so seldom seen in real life" and convey "the light of a purer and a better world" (75). Invoking a Platonic metaphysics, Walter describes Laura as the embodiment of ideal form:

Does my poor portrait of her, my fond, patient labour of long and happy days, show me these things? Ah, how few of them are in the dim mechanical drawing, and how many in the mind with which I regard it! A fair, delicate girl, ... that is all the drawing can say; all, perhaps, that even the deeper reach of thought and pen can say in their language, either. The woman who first gives life, light, and form to our shadowy conceptions of beauty, fills a void in our spiritual nature that has remained unknown to us till she appeared. Sympathies that lie too deep for words, too deep almost for thoughts, are touched, at such times, by other charms than those which the senses feel and

which the resources of expression can realise. The mystery which underlies the beauty of women is never raised above the reach of all expression until it has claimed kindred with the deeper mystery in our own souls. Then, and then only, has it passed beyond the narrow region on which light falls, in this world, from the pencil and the pen. (75-76)

Rather than being a body, Laura is a physical representation of Walter's spiritual life, the entity that "fills a void" and "gives form" to "shadowy conceptions." Although this idealist rhetoric seems oddly out of context in a sensation novel, it aptly describes many of its sensational moments, which derive their force from the "mystery" of a prediction or an expectation becoming a reality. Thus, we could read Laura's embodiment of his "shadowy conceptions" as the fulfillment of a dream already firmly in place. Like his response to Anne Catherick, the immediacy of Walter's sensations is not in itself significant, for those sensations are always mediated and in part produced by a textual understanding of the event. Furthermore, by describing his pen and his language as incapable of rendering "the mystery which underlies the beauty of women," Walter poses as the insoluble mystery of the novel Laura's physical attractiveness. I will have more to say about this mystery as a form of mystification that turns the woman's body into a fetish object in both the Freudian and the Marxist senses.

Walter's declaration that his response to Laura is immediate and instantaneous also seems suspicious because his first impressions of her are inhabited by his memory of Anne Catherick, even though he is at this point unaware of how substantial the link between the two women is. Some mystery in addition to the "mystery" of the soul is created by her appearance:

Mingling with the vivid impression produced by the charm of her fair face and head ... was another impression, which, in a shadowy way, suggested to me the idea of something wanting. At one time it seemed like something wanting in her: at another, like something wanting in myself, which hindered me from understanding her as I ought.... Something wanting, something wanting—and where it was, and what it was, I could not say. (76-77)

Although he does not yet recognize the "something wanting" as her resemblance to Anne, Walter's perception of Laura as the complete embodiment of his desire seems to depend on her disturbing lack. His first encounter with her, freighted with significance as the moment at which his love originates, will turn out to have the "shadow" of a prior event and of another woman cast over it. It is possible to read the locution "something wanting" as a description of Walter's own desire, and his "sense of an incompleteness" as an attempt to find the lack in "the harmony and charm of her face" that suggests she requires his love to be truly whole. Laura's body would thus again become a symbol for his mental state. However, the solution to the mystery of "something wanting," that Walter has forgotten that Laura resembles Anne, complicates this relation between body and psyche, since it suggests that Laura's body exerts its sen-

sational attraction only because it serves as the sign of something other than itself. She becomes attractive when her body ceases to be merely a body and becomes a sign or text.

Walter's identification of the "something missing" occurs when Marian reads her mother's letter, in which she explains her acquaintance with Anne Catherick. Walter's narrative alternates suspensefully between the text of the letter and the image of Laura; as in the earlier encounters with both Anne Catherick and Laura Fairlie, a woman's body arrives to fill the void created by narrative expectation. Walter is like a voyeur aroused simultaneously by an image and a text, and carried to a greater pitch of excitement by his ability to project Marian's text onto Laura's body. As Marian asks him about the woman in white, Laura flits at a distance across his field of vision: "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 a fluttering at my heart—began to steal over me" (85). Walter reexperiences the same sensation, a quickening of the pulses, he felt when falling in love with Laura. Her figure provides a locus to which he can assign the name of his unrepresentable sensation, the locus that allows him to "fix" his eyes while his mind wanders in a combination of aimlessness and excitement, much like the pleasure of sexuality. He is both voyeur and fetishist here, taking pleasure in the view of Laura at a distance, and seeking to locate in her clothing the source of his pleasure.⁸ As when he encountered Anne Catherick, his state of suspended tension begins to narrow to a single focus: "All my attention was concentrated on the white gleam of Miss Fairlie's muslin dress" (85). Even as Marian announces the "extraordinary caprices of accidental resemblance," Walter comes to the same realization through the repetition of an earlier sensation. It is not clear whether his memory is triggered by Laura's resemblance to Anne or by the recurrence of his own feeling.

A thrill of the same feeling which ran through me when the touch was laid upon my shoulder on the lonely high-road chilled me again.

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

⁸ Freud describes fetishism as the cathexis on an object that substitutes for the penis the mother lacks. The fetish object both represents the threat of castration and provides reassurance against it: "He [the fetishist] retains this belief [that the mother has a penis] but he also gives it up; during the conflict between the deadweight of the unwelcome perception and the force of the opposite wish, a compromise is constructed such as is only possible in the realm of unconscious modes of thought—by the primary processes.... It [the fetish] remains a token of triumph over the threat of castration and a safeguard against it; it also saves the fetishist from being a homosexual by endowing women with the attribute which makes them acceptable as sexual objects." Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism (1927)," *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Collier-Macmillan, 1963), p. 216.

Walter reassures himself against the threat posed by the woman in white (and the threat of feminization posed by his susceptibility to sensation) by finding pleasure in Laura's image. However, I don't want to read this moment simply as the sign of Walter's mastery of the shock he receives from Anne Catherick, as though that were the primal moment whose threat requires some form of reassurance. The earlier moment is no more primary than this one.

recognition of the ominous likeness between the fugitive from the asylum and my pupil at Limmeridge House. (86)

The "something wanting" is not a thing but a relation. As Neil Hertz suggests, what is uncanny is not the content of what is repeated but the fact of repetition.⁹ Although this moment would seem to be startling because it repeats Walter's encounter with Anne Catherick, as he experiences "a thrill of the same feeling," it would have to be more precisely described as a moment of deferred action. He constructs his encounter with Anne Catherick as meaningful because she resembles Laura, a significance only made possible by his acquaintance with Laura after the fact of his encounter with Anne. That original event acquires significance because of its relation to subsequent events, even though Walter has attempted to describe it as shocking in and of itself. Two primal moments with these women merge in this one, as Walter relives his encounter with Anne and recovers the solution to his sense of "something wanting" in Laura.

If the fact of repetition is more important than the content of repetition, we have reason to be wary of how Walter gives that content a dark significance, reading the relation between the women as an "ominous likeness" rather than merely an "accidental resemblance." His response to the shock of repetition is to turn it into a meaningful harbinger of the future: "To associate that forlorn, friendless, lost woman, even by an accidental likeness only, with Miss Fairlie, seems like casting a shadow on the future of the bright creature who stands looking at us now" (86). This reaction bears out Freud's suggestion that the uncanny sensations produced by "involuntary repetition ... [force] upon us the idea of something fateful and inescapable when otherwise we should have spoken only of 'chance'."¹⁰ The hidden forces that Walter senses at work will ultimately appear manifest when the image Laura presents becomes a reality. This confirmation of "the idea of something fateful and inescapable" finally seems to supercede the shock produced by the events themselves. Having discovered the connection between Laura and the woman in white, Walter is reassured against the confusion he has experienced: his "doubt" "flashes into conviction in an instant." He regains control by being able to attribute his feelings to the supernatural coincidence of uncanny resemblance, and any possibility of his "thrill" having a sexual content is dispelled. He has produced a mystery or secret that displaces or replaces the secret of his own love for Laura. The easing of anxiety produced by his "conviction" suggests that the production of mystery, rather than simply producing further affect, also manages it.

For at the same time as Walter discovers the mystery of the relation between Anne and Laura, he also confesses his love for Laura: "The poor weak words, which have failed to describe Miss Fairlie, have succeeded in betraying the sensations she awakened in me" (88). He depicts himself as the victim of

⁹ Neil Hertz, "Freud and the Sandman," *The End of the Line* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), pp. 97-121.

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny' (1919)," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74), 17: 237.

sensations which affect him in spite of himself ("my hardly-earned self-control was as completely lost to me as if I had never possessed it" [89-90]), implying that love is beyond considerations of social class. He confesses that which must remain a secret, although he doesn't manage to escape Marian's scrutiny, and her announcement that she has "discovered [his] secret" leads to his departure from his position.

We might read Walter's subsequent detective work as a form of paranoid projection; he discovers the secrets that the other men who threaten his position possess in order to ward off discovery of his own secret. He disposes of Sir Percival and Count Fosco not simply by uncovering their plot to substitute Laura Fairlie for Anne Catherick but by threatening to expose their personal ghosts in the closet, secrets so threatening to their reputations that Walter can use his knowledge to blackmail these rivals into silence. He becomes a trader in secrets, using his discovery of Sir Percival's illegitimate birth and Count Fosco's membership in the Brotherhood in exchange for making public Laura Fairlie's hidden identity and his love for her. For both men, a single fact about their past dominates their entire identity and fate, and these secrets are represented by a single all-telling mark or text. Of Fosco's membership in the Italian secret society, Pesca tells Walter, "We are identified with the Brotherhood by a secret mark, which we all bear, which lasts while our lives last" (596).

Similarly, the secret of Sir Percival's illegitimacy is revealed by the absence of any notation of his birth in the second copy of the church registry. According to Walter, "That space told the whole story!" (529). With melodramatic excess, he ascribes to this fact explanatory power over all of Sir Percival's actions:

Who could wonder now at the brute-restlessness of the wretch's life—at his desperate alternations between abject duplicity and reckless violence—at the madness of guilty distrust which had made him imprison Anne Catherick in the Asylum, and had given him over to the vile conspiracy against his wife, on the bare suspicion that the one and the other knew his terrible secret? (530)

The novel derives its sensational force from casting events as the result of a single hidden cause. Furthermore, to know or to reveal a secret is to wield an enormous power, since Walter's discovery of the registry gives him access to property that is the equivalent of all that Sir Percival owns: "This was the Secret, and it was mine! A word from me, and house, lands, baronetcy, were gone from him for ever" (530). Because secrets render discourse powerful enough to strip a man of his possessions and his identity, Walter can rise in social position by acquiring knowledge. The sensational force of uncovering secrets obscures their function as a means to social mobility.

Walter's success depends not only on unmasking secrets but also on producing them. Faced with the painful impossibility of his love for Laura, he invents a mystery that allows him to believe that his feelings are more than just the result of a broken heart: "Poignant as it was, the sense of suffering caused by the miserable end of my brief, presumptuous love seemed to be blunted and dead-

ened by the still stronger sense of something obscurely impending, something invisibly threatening, that Time was holding over our heads" (101). The production of anxiety acts as a way of diffusing and managing another anxiety. Given Walter's own secret and the desire for social mobility that it represents, it is not surprising that he should be so eager to believe Anne Catherick's claim that Sir Percival has a "Secret," a word that he writes with a capital letter in order to increase its ominous power. His one hope for the success of his romance is that some dramatic turn of events will alter the outcome that social convention would normally dictate. He cannot rely on his own desires or actions, but must instead count on chance events or the working of a larger fate to rescue him. Thus, long before he has any reasonable evidence for Sir Percival's or Count Fosco's criminal behavior, Walter is susceptible to the possibility that secrets exist and that some hidden fact will alter his fortunes. The "delusions" he feels compelled to construct from "common chances" and "common coincidences," such as Anne and Laura's resemblance, are perhaps not quite so irrational as he might like to think (101). Forced to leave Limmeridge House because of his own secret and because of Laura's commitment to Sir Percival, he can only hope that the future will hold dreadful consequences. The overshadowing of his "sense of suffering" by the "still stronger sense of something obscurely impending" suggests that "Time" will rescue him from his misery (101). It is to Walter's psychic, and, ultimately, economic and social benefit to believe in forces of determination that will bring about apocalyptic events and to believe that he cannot predict their outcome. Belief in chance allows him to hope that it will accrue to his good fortune. As Derrida says, "To believe in chance can just as well indicate that one believes in the existence of chance as that one does *not*, above all, believe in chance, since one looks for and finds a hidden meaning at all costs."¹¹

The language of fate and chance events, which leads Walter to pursue Sir Percival and Count Fosco, is first generated by the bodily resemblance of Anne Catherick and Laura Fairlie, and we might wonder how this mysterious coincidence is connected to those other secrets that determine the relations between men. We can note first of all that their resemblance is the product of yet another male secret, their father's sexual indiscretion, which produces the illegitimate Anne. Their blood relation further strengthens the social reading of their difference; they share a common parentage, but because Anne is illegitimate she is destined for the life that makes her body bear the marks of suffering. Furthermore, Walter's assumption of the family property is rendered morally secure by the fact that the father's crime ensures the instability of his transmission of property. Had there been no Anne Catherick, Laura's fortune might have been safe from the plots of Count Fosco and Sir Percival, and because she embodies the secret of her father's sexual promiscuity, Walter can finally reconsolidate the family line by replacing him:

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, "My Chances/Mes Chances: A Rendezvous with Some Epicurean Stereophonies," *Taking Chances: Derrida, Psychoanalysis, and Literature*, ed. Joseph H. Smith and William Kerrigan (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), p. 4.

But for the fatal resemblance between the two daughters of one father, the conspiracy of which Anne had been the innocent instrument and Laura the innocent victim could never have been planned. With what unerring and terrible directness the long chain of circumstances led down from the thoughtless wrong committed by the father to the heartless injury inflicted on the child! (575)

Walter seeks to locate a direct link between the father's "thoughtless wrong" and subsequent events, again invoking the metaphor of the "chain" that connects past and present. Causality is given an emotional valence, as he speaks of the "unerring and terrible directness" of this teleology. But where exactly did the crime occur, given that the effects of the "fatal resemblance" exceed its origin? The father's indiscretion provides no guarantee that a conspiracy will take place. The lineage of heredity somehow becomes responsible for determining all further events, but the causality here is not as necessary as the language suggests. The resemblance between Anne and Laura becomes a literalization of the law that the "sins of the father are visited upon the children," but that literal reality must be acted upon before "heartless injury" makes "accidental resemblance" a "fatal resemblance." The crime of the father gets written on the bodies of the two women, which bear the traces of his secret in an immediately visible form. Their "resemblance" is striking in part because it renders concrete, literally embodies, the hidden causality that connects them.

Yet the compelling affect produced by both Anne's and Laura's appearance also seems related to Walter's sexual attraction. Once again, though, sexuality has to be read as a conduit for material and social forces. Walter's glorification of Laura's physical appearance can be seen as a version of commodity fetishism, which is described by Marx as a process of sensationalizing objects, or creating a mystery that substitutes for a recognition of the true source of their power: "The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things."¹² Walter makes the mistake of reading social relations as inhering in an object when he attributes Laura's attractiveness to her physical beauty. This is made evident by the fact that the only difference between her and Anne Catherick is their social class, and this can be the only explanation for why Walter loves Laura rather than Anne. If Laura's body is not naturally possessed of the characteristics that make her desirable, then the fascination she exerts must be explained by appeal to a theory of how objects become cathected, which is one way of describing Marx's notion of commodity fetishism. He explains commodity fetishism in specifically visual terms, a suggestive analogy in so far as Walter's relation to Anne and Laura is so insistently visual:

¹² Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, intro. Ernest Mandel, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage, 1977), pp. 164-65.

Through this substitution, the products of labour become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time suprasensible or social. In the same way, the impression made by a thing on the optic nerve is perceived not as a subjective excitation of that nerve but as the objective form of a thing outside the eye. In the act of seeing, of course, light is really transmitted from one thing, the external object, to another thing, the eye. It is a physical relation between physical things. As against this, the commodity-form, and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material ... relations arising out of this. It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things.¹³

Just as the commodity fetishist takes the evidence of sight as confirmation of the commodity's objective and intrinsic value, so Walter Hartright uses the immediacy of sight in order to locate the source of his desire in Laura's body rather than in social relations. And indeed Laura is a kind of commodity, the acquisition of which guarantees to its possessor social property. However, because her status as a site of property or position is mediated by the sexual attractiveness of her body, her power can be simultaneously mystified and naturalized. The sexualizing or sensationalizing of her body is the mechanism for romance, which is then the means to social mobility, and the steps in this process are collapsed when her body itself is seen as the source of her appeal. Furthermore, the "definite social relation" that might explain the difference and similarity between Laura and Anne assumes in this sensational text "the fantastic form of a relation between things." The substitution of Laura for Anne seems to work two ways, both establishing and denying the importance of the body as a marker of identity and social position. On the one hand, if Laura can be sequestered away as Anne Catherick, and actually come to look like her, it would suggest that identity is contingent, that the body is not a guarantee of individuality, but can be molded or propped upon to create another identity. On the other hand, Walter and Marian's discovery of Laura in the asylum works to suggest that she really is Laura and not Anne. Their instant recognition of her, even when she is disguised, implies that they see, beyond the trappings of society and the machinations of Fosco, the essential Laura. Of course, this real Laura is finally no more than body, since she is reduced to a state of childlike dependency once her memory and identity are stripped away by trauma. However, this is the only Laura who is necessary and desirable for Walter's purposes because he can then act as her parent and bring her back to life, while still being sure of her utter dependency on him and her conformity to his ideal of femininity.

The mystery that is created by Laura's and Anne's bodies can be connected to Marx's description of commodity fetishism as the production of a secret: "Value, therefore, does not have its description branded on its forehead; it

¹³ Marx, *Capital*, p. 165.

rather transforms every product of labour into a social hieroglyphic. Later on, men try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of their own social product."¹⁴ We might understand from this passage how to read the sensation novel's interest in secrets, its fascination with uncovering the mystery of the object. The reference to value branded on the forehead conjures up the fantasy enabled by Fosco's brand, the possibility that a secret could be as easy to discover as a mark on the body. Similarly, Laura and Anne represent the possibility of a body that is meaningful in and of itself, while also showing how this objectification creates female desirability as a cover for social desirability. The difference between the two women is broached but then mystified as the product of fate or chance. Thus the sensation novel provides a narrative for social determination but obscures it by rendering it in the form of fatal determination. Furthermore, the fetishization of the woman's body takes on a sexual quality, and both is and is not the real object that represents social relations.

It is difficult to say whether Anne and Laura are fascinating because they are bodies or because they are signs. Walter melodramatically concludes from the likeness between the two: "If ever sorrow and suffering set their profaning marks on the youth and beauty of Miss Fairlie's face, then, and then only, Anne Catherick and she would be the twin-sisters of chance resemblance, the living reflections of one another" (120). When this prediction is fulfilled, this sentence is repeated almost verbatim, suggesting that textual repetition is as important as bodily repetition. "The sorrow and suffering ... *had* set their profaning marks on the youth and beauty of her face; and the fatal resemblance which I had once seen and shuddered at seeing, in idea only, was now a real and living resemblance" (454-55). What is being effaced here by the emphasis on repetition are the social circumstances that make this repetition possible. The difference between Laura and Anne could be read as the difference between a rich woman, safely ensconced in domestic comfort, and a poor woman confined to an asylum. Their resemblance is a reminder that identity is a product not of intrinsic qualities but of social determinations which mark the body sufficiently that identical women can have different appearances. This fact is revealed even more clearly by the fact that Laura can come to look like Anne. However, the text is structured so as to make this event seem to be the mysterious product of "chance" or "fate." Our attention is focussed on the blurring of the distinction between text and reality, as the "idea" of resemblance becomes "real and living." Once again, Laura is not a body but an image. Similarly, when she becomes Anne revived, and as her body enacts the drama narrated in the letter, she appears as a "white figure" and a "living image" rather than a real body. We are reminded by this language of the fact that Laura, even as a body, is a figure for something else. This in fact is the implication of Marx's description of the commodity; if correctly perceived it stands as a sign of social relations, and is perhaps the only way they are made tangible or visible. However, those social relations are always liable to be misrecognized if their power is located in the object's natural properties rather than in what it represents.

¹⁴ Marx, *Capital*, p. 167.

The Woman in White thus encodes within itself the process which it encourages the reader to enact. It provides the vehicle for a relation between a physical sensation and a text, attaching bodily responses to lurid tales. It thus fulfills the desire to make what the body fears meaningful, translating ordinary events into the effect of extraordinary tales. At one point in the narrative, we catch a glimpse of a different origin for sensation, prompted by the changes brought about by urban development. During one of his journeys to inquire about Sir Percival, Walter describes in gothic tones the scene that he comes upon, a very different landscape from that in which he encountered Anne Catherick:

Is there any wilderness of sand in the deserts of Arabia, is there any prospect of desolation among the ruins of Palestine, which can rival the repelling effect on the eye, and the depressing influence on the mind, of an English country town in the first stage of its existence, and in the transition state of its prosperity? I asked myself that question as I passed through the clean desolation, the neat ugliness, the prim torpor of the streets of Welmingham. And the tradesmen who stared after me from their lonely shops—the trees that drooped helpless in their arid exile of unfinished crescents and squares—the dead house-carcasses that waited in vain for the vivifying human element to animate them with the breath of life—every creature that I saw, every object that I passed, seemed to answer with one accord: The deserts of Arabia are innocent of our civilised desolation—the ruins of Palestine are incapable of our modern gloom! (503)

Walter transfers onto the landscape the hidden narrative of his own accession to power, observing with horror the waste and desolation that may be its byproducts.¹⁵ He reacts by being “repelled” and “depressed”; here are the emotions and sensations of the individual subject, who, faced with a rapidly modernizing capitalist society, reaches for a novel to escape. Progress in England, which should mean a move away from the primitive state of the “deserts of Arabia” and the “ruins of Palestine,” seems only to bring a new form of anxiety rather than a new form of happiness. The commodity is suddenly unfetishized, no longer animated with the life of the labor that makes it; instead there are “dead house-carcasses” standing in “arid exile.” Yet the objects that lack “the vivifying human element” still seem able to speak the words that the human subject cannot articulate. Walter anthropomorphizes the products of capitalist accumulation even as he pronounces them dead, and they declare “with one accord” that one of the products of urban advancement is a new affect, “modern gloom.”

The Woman in White demonstrates how affect can be made melodramatic in order to enable male accession to power, while repressing or mystifying (both in the sense of obscuring and in the sense of making mysterious or sensational) the mechanisms by which this is made possible. Walter’s sensational attraction to Laura Fairlie depends on both the mystification of the way, as a marriageable woman, she represents his means to social success, and the mystification of her

¹⁵ I am indebted to Sabrina Barton for this observation.

body as significant in itself rather than as the marker of social relations. Her resemblance to Anne Catherick both reveals the nature of those social relations, and reconceals them by enabling a story about determination in the form of fate. This form of determination allows Walter to believe that his accession to power is not the result of his own transgressive ambition or desire, but is somehow in the cards. Furthermore, in so far as the resemblance is a function of chance, a realization made possible by his accidental encounter, he can also believe that social determination does not prevent his rise in power, that accidents can happen and can be significant enough to change the course of events. This continues to be one of the social functions of sensation; it encourages the belief that all events are extraordinary and thus that change occurs miraculously rather than through more mundane or painstaking processes. Both fate and chance, while seemingly opposed, are invoked to obscure the nature of social determination, and are used to describe the relation between Anne and Laura. Walter's psychic fascination with the two women is the product of the fantasy that it might be possible to make social relations visible in single cataclysmic events.

If the passage about "modern gloom" quoted above were read as the key to *The Woman in White's* affective power, it would suggest that the sensation novel merely transfers affect from one site to another. Walter's sensationalizing of Laura and of secrets would represent a displacement of the affect generated by his own social mobility and the transitions created by capitalism, a displacement that transforms that affect from anxiety to magical fascination. But *The Woman in White* is also about the *production* of affect, not just about its transfer from one cathected site to another, demonstrating how Walter's fascination with the two women enables his accession to power. The mystery of the woman in white reveals why sensation might continue to exert its thrill, even when demystified by Marxist analysis, for Marx's own notion of the commodity implies that, if correctly seen, objects have the capacity to render social relations visible or concrete. If the woman in white and her double are affectively powerful because they are signs, and not just bodies, this is no less true for the reader of culture than it is for the fortune-hunter.