The Pre-Raphaelite Art of the Victorian Novel

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Chapter Three

Wilkie Collins’s Reconfigurations of Pre-Raphaelite Gendered Shadows

Collins’s intimate and lasting friendship with John Everett Millais and William Holman Hunt, founders of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, is recorded in numerous letters to them as well as to friends and relatives. Shortly after the formation of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, we find his support of their art in a letter to his publisher, Richard Bentley, where he suggests that Millais, Hunt, and his brother Charley (also a Pre-Raphaelite artist) draw the illustrations for his Christmas story, The Mask of Shakespeare. This letter reveals his conviction in the greatness of Pre-Raphaelite art at a time when denunciatory reviews raged in the press:

I should propose that the three illustrations should be done by three young gentlemen who have lately been making an immense stir in the world of Art, and earned the distinction of being attacked by the Times (any notice there is a distinction)—and defended in a special pamphlet by Ruskin—the redoubtable Pre-Raphael-Brotherhood!!

One of these “Brothers” happens to be my brother as well—the other two Millais and Hunt are intimate friends. For my sake as well as their own they would work their best—and do something striking, no matter on how small a scale. (Letters 1:73; October 23, 1851)

Certainly Collins could see that in spite of adverse criticism the Pre-Raphaelites would succeed once Ruskin became their fervent advocate. But even earlier that year, in a long, laudatory review of the 1851 Royal Academy Summer Exhibition, he had praised the fundamental Pre-Raphaelite principles: their “earnestness of purpose, their originality of thought, their close and reverent study of nature.”

71
Collins’s admiration of Pre-Raphaelite painting and his conviction in its superiority to contemporary Victorian art remained constant through the years as attested in a letter he wrote to Hunt late in the century in response to the exhibit of his paintings in 1886. Curiously enough, his effusive comments are not dedicated to recent paintings but to a very early one, A Converted British Family Sheltering a Christian Missionary from the Persecution of the Druids (1849–1850), the subject of critical denigration when it was first exhibited. His remarks are worth quoting at length, for they also reveal some of Collins’s techniques in his own narrative art:

My first impression, on entering the room, was of such a feast of magnificent colour as I had not seen since I was last at Venice. My next pleasure was to study the pictures in detail. You know so well how incapable I am of flattering anybody—least of all, a dear old friend—that I shall say freely what is in my mind. As a painter of human expression, the most difficult of all achievements in your Art, there is no man among your living English Colleagues (and not more than two or three among the dead) who is fit to be mentioned in the same breath with you. To my mind, you are a great teacher as well as a great painter.

With obstacles and discouragements which I lament, you are nevertheless doing good in teaching the people to see for themselves the difference between true art and false. Such a reform as this in the popular Taste works, as we both know, insensibly on the popular mind, and clears its way slowly through the thousand modern obstructions of conventionality and claptrap. But the reform does go on. I saw some people silently wondering before the picture of the Christian priest, saved from the Druids. They consulted in whispers, and went on to the next picture. But the Priest had got them. They came back—and had another long look—and consulted again. Slowly and surely that fine work was pleading the good cause with people ignorant of the subtle beauty of it; but insensibly discovering its appeal to their sense of nature and truth. I am absolutely certain that the next Royal Academy Exhibition will not succeed as well as usual in imposing on those innocent strangers. (Letters 2:521–22; July 24, 1886)

In this letter, written at the latter part of the century, when the Pre-Raphaelites had finally gained the public’s and the critics’ recognition and approbation, Collins emphasizes the principles that served as the foundation of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood: naturalism, unconventional subjects, emphasis on expression rather than beauty, the primary principles that represented their resistance to the canonized aesthetics of the Royal Academy. Hunt of course was the only founding member of the
Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood to uphold these values to the end of his career, and Collins, as his close friend, was keenly aware of the essence of his art. In the process of appraising Hunt’s art, however, Collins might also have been indirectly referring to those Pre-Raphaelite concepts that he himself pursued in his own narrative art, particularly in his later novels. Here I wish to discuss Collins’s reconfigurations of Pre-Raphaelite modes of perception in his popular *Woman in White*, the novel Collins considered as his masterpiece, memorably encapsulated in his unique request to have its title inscribed on his tombstone: “Author of *The Woman in White* and other works of fiction” (Symons 7).

Like the realist novelists, putatively representing life accurately, Collins, though the founder of the sensation novel that capitalized on the mysterious, the macabre, and the sensational aspects of life, insisted on declaring his dedication to realism. In the “Preamble” of *The Woman in White*, for instance, he underscores the importance of his innovative approach to the novel in representing realism, accuracy, and “truth”: “[T]he story here presented will be told by more than one pen, as the story of an offence against the laws is told in Court by more than one witness—with the same object, in both cases, *to present the truth always in its most direct and most intelligible aspect*” (5, my emphasis). Some critics have already commented upon Collins’s emulation of Pre-Raphaelite realism, particularly his attention to minute details in his drawing of landscapes. Patricia Frick, for instance, observes that his interest in the Pre-Raphaelites’ “strict adherence to the truth as it is in Nature, provided Collins with a sense of landscape, which enabled him in his later writings to establish his scenes with vivid effect.” Here I wish to explore Collins’s new modes of perception developed in *The Woman in White*, originally represented in Pre-Raphaelite art, not merely in connection to landscapes but also in regard to identity formation and the extension of conventional gender boundaries.

No doubt Collins, like the other novelists discussed in this book, was keenly aware of the reviewers’ demand for “visual” narratives. A contemporary reviewer’s comments on *The Woman in White* are representative of the prevalent tendency to interpret novels in pictorial rather than narrative terms; in this case the reviewer points out what was to become for years a representative perspective on Collins’s work: his convoluted plot construction at the expense of realistic and psychologically complex characters. “He does not attempt to paint character or passion,” the reviewer contends; his characters “are not staring at the spectators, or, if they are, they are staring listlessly and vacantly . . . their eyes bent in one direction . . . half-painted, sketchy figures.” Undoubtedly Collins considered such critical expectations when he interwove in *The Woman in White*, as well as in his other narratives, contemporary artistic techniques and subjects.
Pre-Raphaelite Subjects in The Woman in White

The Woman in White, one of the most popular novels in Victorian England (published in four editions within the first month of its publication), was preceded by several Pre-Raphaelite women in white, depicting Victorian oppositions and contradictions: the virgin and the fallen woman. Charley Collins’s Convent Thoughts (1852), for instance, the painting Ruskin described as “Mr. Collins’ lady in white” (Works 12:320–21), and the vulnerable, divine figure in Rossetti’s Ecce Ancilla Domini! represent idealist conceptions of the Victorian woman as a virginal, pure, unattainable figure. Yet, women in white such as in Ford Madox Brown’s Take Your Son, Sir! (1856–1857) or William Holman Hunt’s Awakening Conscience (1854), as we have seen, disclose cultural anxieties about the other, in this case the fallen woman, the outcast.

Besides these figures with whom Collins’s woman in white shares affinities, several other Pre-Raphaelite subjects are also redrawn in his novel. Even a cursory look, for instance, at Rossetti’s “haunting and somewhat bizarre drawing” How They Met Themselves (1850–1860), which depicts a couple in medieval costume meeting their doubles in a dark wood (Faxon 140–41), seems but an illustration of Collins’s rendering of the doppelgänger theme in The Woman in White. Laura’s reaction to Anne Catherick, when the two first meet in the boat house, is reminiscent of the facial expression of the fainting woman in How They Met Themselves when she meets her double. Like the meeting of the two figures, which takes place in the shadows of a forest at night, Laura’s and Anne’s encounter is also drawn in the darkness. Recounting that meeting to Marian, Laura describes her shock at the discovery of her resemblance to Anne: “While I was looking at her, while she was very close to me, it came over my mind suddenly that we were like each other! Her face was pale and thin and weary—but the sight of it startled me, as if it had been the sight of my own face in the glass after a long illness. The discovery—I don’t know why—gave me such a shock, that I was perfectly incapable of speaking to her, for the moment.” And, as in the legend of doppelgänger, Anne dies after her encounter with her double, while Laura is presumed dead. By transposing the illegitimate Anne Catherick with her respectable half-sister Laura Fairlie-Glyde, the outcast with the privileged, Collins undermines contemporary concepts of femininity, demonstrating that women, as long as they are kept uninformed, run the same risks whether they be outcasts or honored members of the upper classes.

On the other hand, John Everett Millais’s drawing Retribution (1854), which, as Susan Casteras points out, depicts the ironic reversal of roles of the fallen woman, portrayed as a regal figure, and the respectable wife as a...
pitiful suppliant in a society ruled by a sexual double standard (Images 30–31), can also be seen as an illustration of the ironic reversals in *The Woman in White*. Certainly the pivotal situation in the novel seems to duplicate this tableau. Whereas Laura Fairlie, the upper-middle-class woman, is imprisoned in her own house by her husband, Sir Percival Glyde (who later on commits her to an asylum, where she is deprived of her own identity and property), Mrs. Catherick, “the fallen woman,” mother of Laura’s half-sister, enjoys respectability. Furthermore, because of Mr. Fairlie’s infidelity, Anne Catherick and Laura Fairlie never know that they are sisters. Besides, Walter Hartright’s passionate commitment to “unknown Retribution” (278), his pursuit of Sir Percival, which his love for Laura engenders, is a theme that unifies the various narratives of the novel.

**Pre-Raphaelite Light and Shade**

In addition to themes for the novel, Pre-Raphaelite paintings also provided Collins with ideas for his primary narrative technique in this novel, namely his treatment of light and shade. Early reviews of Pre-Raphaelite exhibitions reveal the Pre-Raphaelites’ departure from traditional modes of perspective and treatments of light and shade. In 1849, for instance, a reviewer of the *Athenaeum*, responding to John Everett Millais’s *Isabella* (1849) and William Holman Hunt’s *Rienzi* (1849), proclaims that “the faults of the two pictures under consideration are the results of the partial views which have led their authors to the practice of a time when knowledge of light and shade and of the means of imparting due relief by the systematic conduct of aerial perspective had not obtained” and concludes “that hard monotony of contour” in *Isabella* is due to the “absence of shadow.” Two years later, an outraged reviewer in the *Times* of May 7, 1851, responding to an exhibition of Millais’s *Mariana*, Collins’s *Convent Thoughts*, and William Holman Hunt’s *Valentine Rescuing Sylvia from Proteus*, censures the painters’ eccentric techniques, particularly their disregard for the established rules of light and shade:

Their faith seems to consist in an *absolute contempt for perspective and the known laws of light and shade*, an aversion to beauty in every shape, and a singular devotion to the minute accidents of their subjects, or rather seeking out, every excess of sharpness and deformity. . . . That morbid infatuation which sacrifices truth, beauty, and genuine feeling to mere eccentricity deserves no quarter at the hands of the public, and though the patronage of art is sometimes lavished on oddity as profusely as on higher qualities, these monkish follies have no more real claim to figure
This reviewer connects the Pre-Raphaelites’ defiance of the established laws of light and shade with their unconventional representations of gender—“an aversion to beauty in every shape.” Thus, as was often the case, this reviewer interweaves aesthetics with gender ideology. Though the reviewer notes that the Pre-Raphaelites’ unorthodox treatment of perspective reveals hitherto concealed excesses of “sharpness and deformity,” he fails to recognize the possibilities for new modes of perception that such an eccentric perspective may entail.

The extent of the reviewers’ preoccupation with the violation of traditional renderings of light and shade, which continued through the 1850s, is also evidenced in the *Morning Chronicle* on April 29, 1854, in which a reviewer of Hunt’s *Light of the World, The Awakening Conscience*, and Collins’s *Thought of Bethlehem* focused on the shadow in the background of *The Awakening Conscience*, a relatively minor detail in such a heavily cluttered painting: “The complicated compound shadow in the mirror is also a mere piece of intricacy without any good or valuable effort” (cited by Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism* 1:406). Here the reviewer disregards the realistic effect of the woman’s shadow reflected in the mirror, for the established laws of aesthetics of the time did not aim at naturalistic effects. Two years later the *Athenaeum*, reviewing Millais’s *Autumn Leaves*, pointed out that Millais’s style was no longer as finished as in his earlier paintings (even though such finish was the target of critical censure): “Though true to texture, his drawing is now frequently coarse and careless—his colour treacly and harsh, and his shadows are heavy and disturbed” (my emphasis).

The lack of the conventional perspective in Pre-Raphaelite paintings, which had hitherto balanced and harmonized interplays of light and shadow, agitated contemporary reviewers for several reasons. To begin with, the interplay of light and shade in highly acclaimed paintings endorsed by the Royal Academy governed perspective by placing secondary figures and objects in the background, partially concealed by shadows and therefore less finished than the figures or objects in the foreground. Such configurations were artificially arranged, disregarding naturalistic effects. This artificial arrangement simultaneously established a hierarchical order within the painting that confirmed the spectators’ own preconceived notions of hierarchical social structures, thus assisting them in their interpretations. Such guidelines, however, did not exist in Pre-Raphaelite paintings, which, instead of following the established laws
of light and shade, depicted reality with scientific accuracy and treated subsidiary areas of the painting with the same meticulous care as that lavished on the primary figures. Thus the Pre-Raphaelite egalitarian and naturalistic, rather than hierarchical and artificial, representation of life made new demands on the spectators, compelling them to see hitherto overlooked details, further disturbing them by subverting their hierarchical modes of perception. Alone and unassisted, the viewer’s glance moved from object to object, large and small, in the foreground and in the background without any recognized guidelines. Lacking a hierarchical order between primary and secondary figures, Pre-Raphaelite paintings compelled spectators to make decisions about meaning and interpretation alone, without any directive from the artist.

Aware of the Pre-Raphaelites’ egalitarian treatment of their subjects, Collins in *The Woman in White* associated the Pre-Raphaelite technique of the innovative treatments of shade and light with new ways of seeing. To him, the Pre-Raphaelites were engaged with the project of initiating novel modes of perception; in effect, they were teaching their viewers to engage themselves with new ways of knowing and thus understanding the world and those around them. As we have already seen in his letter to Hunt regarding his early painting, *A Coverted British Family Sheltering a Christian Missionary from the Persecution of the Druids*, Collins extolled Hunt’s talent as both a great teacher and a great painter and attributed to him the ability to teach “people to see for themselves the difference between true art and false.” In the same letter, what Collins calls Hunt’s “reform in popular taste” was essentially true of the collective Pre-Raphaelite project that complicated the simplistic and stark contrasts of conventional thought and subverted or conflated the prevailing binary gender oppositions of Victorian culture. In portraying women uncharacteristically and unexpectedly, Collins followed the general spirit of the Pre-Raphaelites. As with other Pre-Raphaelite women in white, Collins’s woman represents attributes of both the virgin and the fallen. Similarly, the plotline of the novel seems to be built around role reversals so crucial in Pre-Raphaelite paintings. Assigning women stereotypical roles, the illegitimate and the privileged, the fallen and the respectable, the narrative progresses by withdrawing the roles it established and then reversing them, as is the case with Anne Catherick and Laura Fairlie. In this sense, the narrative underscores the arbitrary character of the standards around which social conventions shape people’s understanding of each other.

Recent critics such as Balee, Bernstein, Elam, Langbauer, and Williams have focused on Wilkie Collins’s subversion of Victorian stereotypes in *The Woman in White* but have overlooked the Pre-Raphaelites’ effect on Wilkie Collins’s representation of gender constructs. Unlike the Pre-
Raphaelites who used light and shade to create new perspectives and to oblige their viewers to see things differently, Collins situates his characters in scenes that distort ordinary contents of perception and engender new ways of perceiving the external world. Unlike the Pre-Raphaelites, who used brushstrokes of light and shadow to give light to objects in the background and to enable viewers to see what ordinarily is partially concealed or lost in the background, Collins uses brushstrokes of light and shade to obscure objects in the foreground as well, thus concealing what normally appears in full view and distorting what usually stands in center stage and commands all the attention. Most often Collins positions his characters in scenes partially lit and partially darkened, surrounded by objects that viewers can hardly detect. His landscapes often evoke states of consciousness between waking and dreaming and forms of knowledge between the real and the imaginative.13 Collins’s reputation as the founder of the sensation novel may largely be attributed to the ways he adapted the Pre-Raphaelite techniques of representing scenes and characters to his narrative purposes. The Pre-Raphaelite influence on The Woman in White did not go unnoticed by contemporary critics. The Critic, for instance, noted “that there is an inclination of over-minuteness we cannot deny, but pre-Raffaelitism is in the ascendant.”14

Pre-Raphaelite Modes of Perception

Even before the woman in white appears to Walter Hartright at the opening of the novel, we are aware of a landscape suffused with light and shade. As a teacher of drawing, Walter is naturally sensitive and receptive to his surroundings, describing them in Pre-Raphaelite interplays of light and shadow: “[T]he long hot summer was drawing to a close; and we, the weary pilgrims of the London pavement, were beginning to think of the cloud-shadows on the corn-fields, and the autumn breezes on the sea-shore” (6). Oppressed by the humidity, he decides to “stroll home in the purer air . . . to follow the white winding paths across the lonely heath” in the “mysterious light” of the moon. Hartright in a moonlit landscape—a half-lit, mysterious, and eerie setting, the scene before the appearance of the woman in white—is representative of Collins’s ability to interweave the sensational with the realistic to the extent that one cannot be extricated from the other. As Hartright enjoys “the divine stillness of the scene,” admiring “the soft alternations of light and shade . . . over the broken ground,” he is startled by the sudden appearance of the solitary figure of Anne Catherick, the woman in white: “[T]here, as if it had that moment sprung out of the earth or dropped from the heaven—stood the figure of a solitary Woman,
dressed from head to foot in white garments, her face bent in grave inquiry on mine, her hand pointing to the dark cloud over London, as I faced her” (19–20). Adapting the Pre-Raphaelite technique of light and shade to his own literary landscapes, Collins creates a scene where the sight of a person registers not as a human being but as a ghostly figure, a shadow—“an extraordinary apparition”—that partakes of the substantial and the ethereal, the conscious and the unconscious, the real and the possible (20). Anyone familiar with William Holman Hunt's popular painting *Light of the World*, “the most famous of all Victorian religious images,”15 would have no difficulty seeing that Collins's woman in white, a ghostly figure silhouetted in the moonlight, her hand raised, pointing toward London, evokes Hunt's most famous painting.

In this painting Christ, his hand raised, knocking on a sinner's door, is captured in the moonlight, the moon in the background serving as his halo. It is entirely possible that Wilkie Collins had this painting in mind when he drew its literary transformation in *The Woman in White*. After all, he had observed Hunt working on this painting when he spent time with his brother Charley, John Everett Millais, and William Holman Hunt at Rectory Farm in Ewell in 1851 (Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism* 1:302). Collins must have been struck by the extraordinary circumstances of Hunt's work on the painting. True to the Pre-Raphaelite principle of representing nature accurately, Hunt worked from 9 PM to 5 AM, when the moon was full, in the light of a lantern suspended from a tree (Judith Bronkhurst in Parris, *The Pre-Raphaelites*, 119). Collins must have also known that “the character of the head was a composite taken from several male sitters . . . while Lizzie Siddal and Christina Rossetti sat for its colouring” (ibid.). In the hands of a Pre-Raphaelite artist, then, the creation of the image of the ultimate patriarchal figure became possible through the fusion of opposite genders.16 It is not surprising that Collins would transform this representation of Christ into the image of a destitute woman—the other. Moreover, Collins's readers, who saw the woman in white as the narrative redrawing of *The Light of the World*, would also have been aware of Collins's subtle allusion to *The Awakening Conscience*, a painting that Hunt conceived as the “material interpretation of the idea in 'The Light of the World.' ” “My desire,” Hunt states, “was to show how the still small voice speaks to a human soul in the turmoil of life” (Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism* 1:347). Like *The Light of the World*, *The Awakening Conscience* represents a figure in white fraught with cultural contradictions and ambivalent messages, as we have already seen. Thus Collins, like his Pre-Raphaelite friends, further complicates the concept of the other by interweaving it with projections of cultural anxieties and contradictions.
In an attempt to master his bewilderment, Hartright responds to Anne’s call for help by resorting to Victorian standards of respectability and conventional gender roles: “All I could discern distinctly by the moonlight, was a colourless, youthful face, meagre and sharp to look at, about the cheeks and chin; large, grave, wistfully-attentive eyes; nervous, uncertain lips; and light hair of a pale, brownish-yellow hue. There was nothing wild, nothing immodest in her manner: it was quiet and self-controlled . . . not exactly the manner of a lady, and, at the same time, not the manner of a woman in the humblest rank of life” (20–21). Indeed the details relating to Anne Catherick’s appearance, “colorless, youthful face . . . large, grave, wistfully-attentive eyes,” could very well be those describing Christ’s face in The Light of the World. It is interesting to note that Ruskin’s interpretation of the painting, in his May 5, 1854, letter to the Times, contains details Collins relates to Anne’s appearance and role in the novel: “The legend beneath it is the beautiful verse,—’behold, I stand at the door and knock. . . .’ On the left-hand side of the picture is seen this door of the human soul. . . . Christ approaches it in the night-time. . . . It is fast barred. . . . He wears the white robe, representing the power of the Spirit upon him. . . . Now, when Christ enters any human heart, he bears with him a twofold light: first the light of conscience . . . and afterwards the light of peace, the hope of salvation” (Works 12:328). From her first appearance till the end of the novel, Anne becomes a Christ figure, an integral part of Hartright’s identity formation (his conscience, “the still small voice”) and later a potent force in Sir Percival’s and Count Fosco’s lives.

Yet Collins takes the situation of the initial shock produced by the perception of a person eluding conventional categories to a greater extent than Hunt. For unlike Hunt, who is obliged to focus on the object of perception, Collins can as a novelist explore the full range of the effects that the object of perception can produce on the observer. Moreover, these effects, as we have seen in Collins’s own response to Hunt’s painting of the missionaries sheltering a priest from the druids, are not confined merely to the pleasure of seeing something new and atypical, but also, more importantly, to the capacity of seeing things in new and atypical ways, without “the obstructions of conventionality.” The shock of Hartright’s intriguing encounter with the woman in white initiates an identity crisis that is not resolved until the end of the novel. “Was I Walter Hartright?” he asks himself; “had I really left, little more than an hour since, the quiet, decent, conventionally-domestic atmosphere of my mother’s cottage?” (23). His bewilderment may be partly explained by Anne Catherick’s transgression of conventional gender and class boundaries. When, for instance, he consents to help her, he is astonished by her defiance of conventional feminine behavior: “‘You are very kind.’ . . . The
first touch of womanly tenderness that I had heard from her, trembled in
her voice as she said the words; but no tears glistened in those large, wist-
fully-attentive eyes of hers, which were fixed on me" (22). In this case
Anne does not meet Walter's preconceived notions of femininity; she is
neither frail nor conventionally timid. Furthermore, Anne undermines
the traditional dynamics of the gaze that dictate the male/female, specta-
tor/spectacle, subject/object, hierarchical gaze relations.

Equally disturbing to Hartright is his inability to act out his own con-
ventional role. Whereas the meeting creates a conventional situation, a
woman in distress, a man coming to her rescue, Collins, like his Pre-
Raphaelite friends, opts for the unconventional, depriving Hartright of
the opportunity to affirm his masculinity by acting out the traditional role
of the rescuer. Thus Collins intimates that Hartright's identity crisis is
bound to the suspension of gender constructs during his extraordinary
meeting with the woman in white. As the novel progresses, several inci-
dents involving destabilizations of gender constructs constitute the most
important phases of Hartright's journey toward identity formation.

Collins's representation of Walter's encounter with the woman in
white revolves primarily around the effect that it produces on Walter.
The scene, whose depiction follows the Pre-Raphaelite techniques of
light and shade, sets the conditions that undermine the certainty associ-
ated with ordinary sense perception. Thus Walter, and the reader vicari-
ously, is beset by unsettling questions: Is he seeing or imagining things? Is
it the figure of a woman or a ghost that stands before him? Yet the limits
Collins imposes on ordinary perception turn out to be the very conditions
for seeing things differently. Precisely because Walter is caught between
the dark and the light, the real and the imagined, the narrator intimates,
he has an opportunity to see something new, to perceive reality without
"the obstructions of conventionality." But because he does not yet trust
what he sees, he lets convention and habit form the content of his per-
ception; that is, he translates what he sees in terms of ready-made attrib-
utes and conventionally established roles. Thus from his perspective,
Anne Catherick must be a lady or a servant, a woman in trouble or one
in some kind of mischief. Restricted within conventional modes of per-
ception, he does not realize that Anne may partake of both roles or of nei-
ther.

The full effect of the encounter culminates in Walter's bewilderment
over his own role in this situation. Once again he resorts to traditional
roles: He is either to rescue her and escort her to London or to report her
to the authorities. Uncomfortable with the two conflicting notions that
self-understanding evokes, Walter attempts to settle the conflict and step
out of the gray area that has opened up before him, acting out one of his
possible roles: He decides to see himself as a rescuer and proceeds to offer her his help. Partly accepting and partly rejecting it, Anne disappears, leaving Walter further overwhelmed. After Walter assists the woman in white to find a cab and get away, he is uneasy about his decision and confesses that he “was perplexed and distressed by an uneasy sense of having done wrong, which yet left me confusedly ignorant of how I could have done right” (27). Hartright’s perplexity and bewilderment turn into torment when he realizes, after he sees her pursuers, that she has escaped from an asylum: “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?” (28–29). Through these questions the narrator engages the readers’ involvement in this extraordinary situation that may not be comprehended or resolved through conventional standards of conduct.

The initial encounter between Walter and Anne, then, turns out to be a mis-meeting, a failure on his part to come to terms with the ambiguity of perception or, more precisely, to turn an ambiguous perception into a resource for a new self-understanding. Realizing his failure, Walter experiences an identity crisis over a woman who will continue to haunt him until he learns to open his eyes and his thinking to the ambiguities in life. Through this sensational encounter and its impact on Walter, Collins may have attempted to dramatize the disorienting and somewhat bewildering effect the Pre-Raphaelites’ unorthodox treatment of perspective or egalitarian distribution of light and shade often produced on their viewers. In addition, like the Pre-Raphaelites, Collins connects the effect of a sensational scene drawn in interplays of light and shadow to the very identity of the observer. For it is this event that sets off the process of identity formation that Walter will undergo throughout the rest of the novel. In order to understand who he is, Walter must learn to trust what he perceives (however unorthodox) and to shape his identity according to what he comes to know firsthand.

His first encounter with Marian at Limmeridge is yet another test of his conventional modes of perception, once again masterfully interwoven with his traditional gender notions. Like his initial mysterious and bewildering meeting with the woman in white, his first encounter with Marian is yet another failure and another mis-meeting. Here too Walter’s perception is guided by stereotypical lenses that afford him ways of dealing with a person who does not fit preestablished molds and ready-made frames of knowledge. As Marian is standing by a window gazing outside with her back turned on Hartright, he is unable to see her, yet he indulges in the stereotypical male/female, spectator/spectacle, masculine/feminine, supe-
rior/inferior, subject/object gender binaries. From a distance, before he even meets her, her figure half concealed in shadows, Hartright's gaze objectifies, fragments, and appropriates Marian's body: “The instant my eyes rested on her, I was struck by the rare beauty of her form, and by the unaffected grace of her attitude. Her figure was tall, yet not too tall; comely and well-developed, yet not fat; her head set on her shoulders with an easy, pliant firmness; her waist, perfection in the eyes of a man for it occupied its natural place, it filled out its natural circle, it was visibly and delightfully undeformed by stays” (31). Gradually Walter's gaze turns Marian into an object of male desire. In the process Walter defines femininity within the conventional boundaries of masculinity: “The easy elegance of every movement of her limbs and body as soon as she began to advance from the far end of the room, set me in a flutter of expectation to see her face clearly.” However, his anticipation is thwarted as she moves closer, for Marian's face transgresses conventional standards of femininity, and thus Collins defuses the hierarchical dynamics of the gaze that cast Hartright as the subject and Marian as the object of desire: “She left the window—and I said to myself, The lady is dark. She moved forward a few steps—and I said to myself, The lady is young. She approached nearer—and I said to myself (with a sense of surprise which words fail me to express), The lady is ugly!” (31). Hartright's response echoes that of contemporary reviewers' who, as we have seen, often berated the Pre-Raphaelites' predilection for ugliness and disfigurement. 

In this case his conventional expectation of conventional femininity is unsettled by the disjunction of femininity with masculinity. As such Collins's somewhat androgynous portrait is consciously Pre-Raphaelite: “The lady's complexion was almost swarthy, and the dark down on her upper lip was almost a moustache. She had a large, firm, masculine mouth and jaw; prominent, piercing, resolute brown eyes; and thick, coal-black hair, growing unusually low down on her forehead” (32). Indeed, Marian becomes a composite Pre-Raphaelite figure resembling Rossetti’s “dark Venuses” with an “Amazonian body (often with enlarged hands)” and Hunt’s “exotic, 'swarthy' models,” which were the targets of the reviewers' racial slurs in the 1850s (Casteras, “Pre-Raphaelite Challenges,” 29, 31). As Susan Balee has already pointed out, through the representation of the androgynous and strong-minded old maid, Marian Halcombe, Collins contributed to an existing sociopolitical demand for “a new ideal of womanhood” in place of the outdated Angel in the House.17

When Walter first meets Marian, however, he may perceive her only within the constrictive parameters of conventional gender boundaries. From a distance Marian is the stereotypical object of desire, a desirable form of femininity; from up close she is the typical “ugly” woman since her
characteristics are stereotypically masculine. Oscillating from one type to the other, Walter cannot see between them or through them; thus he is unable at the time to recognize that Marian is neither conventionally feminine nor traditionally masculine, but her face and figure partake of both characteristics. Yet even on this occasion Hartright is struck by Marian's expression. As we have already seen, the early Pre-Raphaelites opted for the representation of unique modes of expression rather than conventional beauty. Her expression, Hartright remarks, “bright, frank, and intelligent—appeared, while she was silent, to be altogether wanting in those feminine attractions of gentleness and pliability, without which the beauty of the handsomest woman alive is beauty incomplete” (32). In Hartright's conventional perspective, Marian's feminine figure and “masculine form” are disconcerting incongruities akin to “the anomalies and contradictions of a dream” (ibid.). Relying on the Pre-Raphaelites' by then well-known transgressions of conventional femininity and masculinity, Collins produces a new type of ideal woman, a convergence of femininity and masculinity.

Marian gazing outside a window is reminiscent of John Everett Millais's popular Mariana, also standing in front of a window, anxiously waiting for her lover, who never returns. The choice of the name itself, Marian, seems a deliberate allusion to that painting. But unlike Mariana, who pines away for her lover and remains imprisoned, Marian's fierce independence from any romantic attachment enables her to become both Laura's and Hartright's rescuer. Initially unable to see beyond gender boundaries, Hartright eventually recognizes Marian's beauty beyond the boundaries of conventional constructs. When he decides to leave Limmeridge after he realizes the futility of his love for Laura, who is already engaged to Percival, he goes to bid Marian farewell and is struck by her warm sympathy: “She caught me by both hands—she pressed them with the strong, steady grasp of a man—her dark eyes glittered—her brown complexion flushed deep—the force and energy of her face glowed and grew beautiful with the pure inner light of her generosity and her pity” (125, my emphasis). Even though he still notices the masculine grasp of her hands, he now focuses on the beauty of her expression, thus, even if momentarily, perceiving her beauty, which his own restrictive gender boundaries initially concealed. At the end of the novel, though he sees himself instrumental in reinstating Laura's identity, he nevertheless realizes that his accomplishment would not have been possible without Marian's (conventionally masculine) rescue of Laura from the asylum and her protection from Sir Percival's and Count Fosco's schemes: “I was indebted to Marian's courage and Marian's love,” (557) he admits when, after a few days' absence in search of clues for Percival's secret, he returns home,
where Hartright, Marian, and Laura are hiding. As Susan Balee has already demonstrated, "the first line in The Woman in White . . . presages what the novel is really about: the subversion of sexual stereotypes. Because this is the story of what a man with a woman's patience can endure, and what a woman with the resolution of a man can achieve" (211).

Initially attempting to extricate himself from the anxiety the woman in white entails, Hartright unwittingly becomes once again engaged in her predicament as her image becomes imperceptibly fused with that of Laura's when Walter first meets Laura in the summerhouse at Limmeridge. It is important to note that on this occasion, when Walter narrates his first meeting with Laura, he does not dwell on her physical appearance as he recalls her, but instead he describes his own watercolor which he has drawn in an attempt to capture his first impression of her. When we first meet Laura, then, it is not herself, but rather Walter's Pygmalion-like recreation of her. In its detail and the seemingly arbitrary placement of the shadow of her hat, with the emphasis Walter places upon it, this drawing very closely resembles a Pre-Raphaelite watercolor, as, for instance, Rossetti's Meeting of Dante and Beatrice in Paradise (1852), which depicts Beatrice in a lush landscape with the minute details of the blades of grass in the foreground and the leaves of the trees in the background. Beatrice faces Dante as she raises her headdress, the shadow of her right hand reflected in its lining. In a Pre-Raphaelite sensitivity to light and shadow, Walter draws our attention to the seemingly insignificant shadows in Laura's portrait, thus unconsciously fusing her image with that of Anne's.

I look at it, and there dawns upon me brightly, from the dark greenish-brown background of the summer-house, a light, youthful figure, clothed in a simple muslin dress, the pattern of it formed by broad alternate stripes of delicate blue and white. A scarf of the same material sits crisply and closely round her shoulders, and a little straw hat of the natural colour, plainly and sparingly trimmed with ribbon to match the gown, covers her head, and throws its soft pearly shadow over the upper part of her face. Her hair is of so faint and pale a brown—not flaxen, and yet almost as light; not golden, and yet almost as glossy—that it nearly melts, here and there, into the shadow of the hat. (48–49)

Laura's features melting in the shadow of her hat, thus unconventionally casting a shadow on the focal point of his watercolor, evoke the seemingly arbitrary choice of Pre-Raphaelite interplays of light and shade.

Like the Pre-Raphaelites, who were often berated for the unabashed inclusion of blemishes in their representations of masculinity or femininity, Walter represents, somewhat apologetically, Laura's flaws: "It is hard to see
that the lower part of the face is too delicately refined away towards the chin to be in full and fair proportion with the upper part; that the nose, in escaping the aquiline bend (always hard and cruel in a woman, no matter how abstractedly perfect it may be), has erred a little in the other extreme, and has missed the ideal straightness of line" (49). Yet even though consciously Pre-Raphaelite, Walter’s watercolor portrait of Laura at this point involves Reynoldsian touches of idealism, thus revealing Walter’s tendency to allow his preconceptions to supersede his actual perceptions. Thus, though he paints her portrait with the details requisite of Pre-Raphaelite art, he encases Laura in the conventionally Victorian paradigm of the angel of ideal feminine beauty, “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” (50).

In this respect Walter’s reading of his own portrait of Laura closely resembles that of mainstream reviewers hostile to Pre-Raphaelites, who, opposing Pre-Raphaelite unorthodox subjects, firmly upheld conventional standards of beauty, insisting that “the most beautiful soul must have the most beautiful body” (Wornum 271). Considering Laura’s conventional role in the novel as the Angel in the House, we can see why Hartright’s Reynolds-like portrait here is appropriate: “and the eyes are of that soft, limpid, turquoise blue, so often sung by the poets. . . . Lovely eyes in colour, lovely eyes in form—large and tender and quietly thoughtful—but beautiful above all things in the clear truthfulness of look that dwells in their inmost depths, and shines through all their changes of expression with the light of a purer and better world” (49). Such idealization lacking in Hartright’s response to Anne Catherick’s sister, who strikingly resembles her, underscores Collins’s awareness that gender is a relational construct determined by socioeconomic conditions. Seeing her in the luxurious surroundings of the aristocratic Limmeridge House, Hartright defines Laura as the ideal woman. By contrast, Anne Catherick, Laura’s double, alone in the street in the dark, lacks conventional beauty. Yet their figures become interchangeable by the machinations of her husband, Sir Percival, and his ally, Count Fosco. By transposing the illegitimate Anne Catherick with her respectable half-sister Laura Fairlie-Glyde, the outcast with the privileged, Collins further undermines conventional femininity, demonstrating that women, as long as they are deprived of social and legal rights, run the same risks whether they be outcasts or honored members of the upper classes.

As the novel progresses, Collins demonstrates that Laura Fairlie is representative of an outdated ideal of femininity—a fair lie—vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. This is why Collins chooses Reynolds’s principle of ideal beauty when drawing Laura’s portrait. Such a construct of femininity, Collins implies, is a vanishing, outdated, pernicious ideal, a rem-
nant of the past. Furthermore, Laura herself is certainly victimized by the past since her fate has been sealed through her promise to her dying father to marry Sir Percival Glyde, representative of corrupt and degenerate aristocracy. It is precisely truthfulness, honesty, innocence, and trust, the qualities Victorian society upholds as paramount to ideal womanhood, that Percival thoroughly exploits, incarcerating Laura in an asylum as Anne Catherick and depriving her of her identity in order to inherit her property.19

Walter's initial encounter with Laura, drawn in Pre-Raphaelite interplays of light and shadow, represents another mis-meeting fraught with contradictions and governed by preconceived stereotypes that determine and control perception. It is interesting to note that on this occasion, as Walter sets aside his Pre-Raphaelite perception in preference for the Reynolds-like idealization, he also unconsciously interweaves the ideal with the profane in the description of his irresistible attraction to Laura: “Lulled by the Syren-song that my own heart sung to me, with eyes shut to all sight, and ears closed to all sound of danger, I drifted nearer and nearer to the fatal rocks” (65). The juxtaposition of the angel with the siren is especially curious if we consider that at the time prostitutes were often compared to sirens. In a study of prostitutes in Liverpool, for instance, William Bevan warns young tradesmen of the danger of prostitution: “He lounges in lassitude about the neighborhood. He is allured by a syren voice that charms but to destroy... He yields and is undone.”20 Once again Collins discloses the sociopolitical contradictions inherent in contemporary views of women; simultaneously the contrasting images reveal Collins’s insight into human psychology—the other within the self.

A few hours after his first meeting of Laura, on the evening of the same day, while he and Marian try to fathom the mystery of the connection of the woman in white to Laura’s mother, Walter is stunned to see Laura dressed in white, walking on the terrace, bathed in moonlight—a Pre-Raphaelite figure enveloped in light and shadow: “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... of the woman in white! The doubt which had troubled my mind for hours and hours past flashed into conviction in an instant. That ‘something wanting’ was my own recognition of the ominous likeness between the fugitive from the asylum and my pupil at Limmeridge House” (60–61).

Stunned by Laura’s extraordinary appearance in the moonlight, Walter refuses to trust what he perceives, consciously disregards Laura’s striking resemblance to the woman in white, and tenaciously holds on to his ear-
lier, stereotypical way of perceiving her as an ideal angel. Immediately he regrets his recognition of a resemblance between Anne and Laura, for, he thinks, “to associate that forlorn, friendless, lost woman, even by accidental likeness only, with Miss Fairlie, seems like casting a shadow on the future of the bright creature” (61). Yet Walter’s endeavor to extricate himself from the social responsibility to the “forlorn figure” is futile the moment Laura’s and Anne’s images are interchanged.

Together these initial encounters, Walter’s first meetings with Anne, Marian, and Laura, cast in Pre-Raphaelite interplays of light and shadow, or, in the case of Marian, representative of a much–resisted, Pre-Raphaelite representation of femininity more closely aligned with androgyny, deeply unsettle and disturb Walter’s conventional notions of femininity and masculinity. Walter, much like the viewers of early Pre-Raphaelite paintings, at first resists new ways of perceiving the world but gradually realizes that in the process he also misses opportunities of understanding the self and the other or the other within the self. Walter’s initial encounters with these women could then be considered as mis-meetings that frame the entire novel, underscoring both the enormous difficulty involved in perceiving the world the way it presents itself and the extraordinary courage required of people to rely on their own unmediated perception when the latter defies ready-made categories.

Indeed, secondary characters in the novel demonstrate how far people are willing to abide by conventional ways of experiencing the world. Gilmore, for instance, whose profession requires him to bracket preconceptions in the face of evidence, is far more comfortable with the safety that comes with conventional interpretation than with the risks involved in pursuing justice that might unsettle convention and habit. Justifying his conduct as “practical” by juxtaposing it with Walter’s “romantic” view, Mr. Gilmore, Laura’s lawyer, resists any doubts he himself experiences about Sir Percival’s defense against Anne Catherick. When he is made uneasy by Marian’s suspicions, Mr. Gilmore muses complacently, “in my youth, I should have chafed and fretted under the irritation of my own unreasonable state of mind. In my age, I knew better, and went out philosophically to walk it off” (137). Like Laura’s uncle, who refuses to participate in drawing a marriage settlement that would protect her from Sir Percival’s abuse and who later on prefers her dead lest a legal action to establish her identity disturb his “fragile nerves,” Mr. Gilmore prefers his peace of mind to the pursuit of justice, the solipsist cocoon of individual complacency to social responsibility. In this respect he prefigures his successor, Mr. Kyle, who, though he believes that Laura has been the victim of a gross deception (imprisoned in an asylum as Anne Catherick and, after Anne Catherick’s death, declared dead and deprived of all her legal rights), tells
Walter that he does not have “the shadow of a case” (450).

Undermining the contemporary social and gender hierarchy, Collins seems to enjoy playing with a series of contrasts and ironic situations, thus destabilizing traditional class and gender constructs. A destitute, vulnerable, seemingly outcast figure, Anne Catherick could be easily perceived as the guilty party. Wealthy, respectable, “a really irresistible man—courteous, considerate, delightfully free from pride—a gentleman, every inch of him” (147), Sir Percival Glyde, on the other hand, is beyond suspicion. Tradition becomes valorized and convention upheld even when all evidence points elsewhere. Hence Collins carries to the point of ridicule the successful claims to tradition by Percival and Fairlie.

Through his representations of Sir Percival and Fairlie, Collins also criticizes the contemporary corrupt and decadent manifestations of traditional constructs of masculinity. Indeed, Sir Percival’s name evokes the Arthurian eponymous knight, distinguished for his innocence and chivalry, glorified by Tennyson. The cynical aspect of the allusion is underscored in a scene in the novel that takes place in Rome, when Laura and Sir Percival visit the tomb of Cecilia Metella, a memorial of her husband’s love. “Would you build such a tomb for me, Percival?” Laura asks. “If I do build you a tomb,” Percival sarcastically responds, “it will be done with your own money” (262). This scene with husband and wife leaning over a woman’s tomb evokes “one of Rossetti’s finest medieval watercolours,” How Sir Galahad, Sir Bors and Sir Percival Were Fed with the Sanc Grael; but Sir Percival’s Sister Died by the Way, whose design was based on the mural The Attainment of the Sanc Graal, painted for the library of the Oxford Union in 1857 (Wood, The Pre-Raphaelites 29). Here the three knights, bowing reverentially, receive the Grail from an angel at an altar; in this pose they seem to simultaneously pray for Percival’s dead sister, who lies beneath them on the ground before her burial. In a letter to Charles Eliot Norton, Rossetti discussed his intention to have this mural as a companion to Sir Launcelot’s Vision of the Sanc Graal. Unlike his father, Sir Launcelot, whose sin prevents him from attaining the Holy Grail, Rossetti explains, Galahad, his son, is allowed to reach it: “As a companion to this [Sir Launcelot’s Vision of the Sanc Graal] I shall paint a design, which I have made for the purpose, of the attainment of the Sanc Graal by Launcelot’s son Galahad, together with Bors and Percival (Letters 1: 337). As Poulson explains, the mural with Sir Galahad is a composite of two stories from Morte d’Arthur, that of Galahad and Percival’s sister, who, “Christ-like, she gives her life to heal a lady who can be saved only by the blood of a virgin who is also a king’s daughter” (85–86).

The narrative reconfiguration of Rossetti’s watercolor adumbrates Laura’s subsequent victimization and plotting for her death; at the same time it underscores the narrator’s cynicism over idealized constructs of
masculinity sanctioned by the aristocratic tradition. Collins further draws the ironic connection between King Arthur's knight and Sir Percival in his novel when the villagers, gathered around the burning church in which Percival perishes while attempting forgery, question his identity: “'Who was he? A lord, they say.' 'No, not a lord. Sir Something; Sir means Knight' ” (531). Thus Collins evokes a chivalric construct of masculinity only to cynically deconstruct it, in the process underscoring its obsoleteness in a highly materialist age.

Like Percival, Mr. Fairlie also represents the decadent, effete, and self-centered members of the aristocracy abiding by tradition and convention. Unlike Hartright, who jeopardizes his own life in his determination to restore Laura's identity, Mr. Fairlie, “nothing but a bundle of nerves dressed up to look like a man,” completely detaches himself from her predicament as long as his own tranquility is preserved (356). It is not accidental that he is identified with the artists sanctioned by the Royal Academy, Raphael and Rembrandt. In fact, the first time Hartright meets him in the Limmeridge house, he instantly becomes aware of “a picture of the Virgin and Child, protected by glass, and bearing Raphael's name on the gilt tablet at the bottom of the frame” (39). By underscoring Fairlie's effeminate nature, perceived at the time as a deviation from masculinity, Collins once again associates tradition with decadence.

Unlike Percival, Fairlie, or Mr. Gilmore, Walter engages the doubts that come with the disjuncture between new perceptions and conventional forms of knowledge. The formation of his identity depends on his ability to undertake an honest self-examination in view of this disjuncture, a reorganization of his life in view of forms of knowledge that defy customary ways of thinking. Signs that he is beginning to extricate himself from the boundaries of preconceived notions appear in his second meeting with Anne at the cemetery. This scene evokes Pre-Raphaelite representations of rescue, yet it is destabilized by Anne's relative freedom from gender constraints that her unique situation has entailed.

When Hartright meets her in the cemetery, where she is cleaning the cross on Mrs. Fairlie's tomb, he is keenly aware of her resemblance to Laura, seeing her for the first time as Laura's double: “I had seen Anne Catherick's likeness in Miss Fairlie. I now saw Miss Fairlie's likeness in Anne Catherick. . . . Although I hated myself even for thinking such a thing, still, while I looked at the woman before me, the idea would force itself into my mind that one sad change, in the future, was all that was wanting to make the likeness complete. . . . 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 reflexions of one another” (96–97).
this scene the narrator emphasizes Anne Catherick’s posture, her kneeling by the cross, several times. When Hartright tries to speak to her, we are told, “she turned from me, and knelt down before the inscription once more” (97). At this point, in an attempt to garner information against Sir Percival, Hartright presents himself as Anne’s rescuer: “‘You remember me?’ I said. ‘We met very late, and I helped you to find the way to London’” (95). When she refuses to cooperate, Hartright informs her that he knows she is the author of the anonymous letter she sent Laura, incriminating Sir Percival.

Anne’s shocked reaction could very well describe details in Rossetti’s painting *Found*: “She had been down on her knees for some little time past. . . . The first sentence of the words I had just addressed to her made her pause in her occupation, and turn slowly without rising from her knees, so as to face me. The second sentence literally petrified her. . . . [H]er lips fell apart—all the little colour that there was naturally in her face left it in an instant” (103). Anne here strikingly resembles the kneeling figure with the petrified, ashen face in *Found* who has turned her head toward the wall as her former fiancé tries to reclaim her. Even the response of the fallen woman in the painting, “Leave me—I do not know you—go away” echoes Anne Catherick’s reaction to Hartright’s intrusion (Faxon 64). Turning to the cross over Mrs. Fairlie’s tomb, she murmurs, “ ‘Oh, if I could die, and be hidden and at rest with you!’ ” (103). However, unlike the fiancé in *Found*, who, leaning over the kneeling woman, attempts to rescue his former sweetheart, Hartright, instead of a rescuer, unwittingly becomes a pursuer, for Anne springs to her feet and disappears from his sight. Thus Collins once again undermines a stereotypical representation of masculinity by defusing the power that traditional gender relations ascribe to men. At the same time, however, he connects Hartright’s identity with the woman in white. As in her first sensational appearance in the light and shadows of the moonlight, here Anne Catherick disappears in the lengthening shadows of twilight: “I looked after Anne Catherick as she disappeared, till all trace of her had faded in the twilight—looked as anxiously and sorrowfully as if that was the last I was to see in this weary world of the woman in white” (107).

Catherick’s mystery haunts Hartright during his adventure in Central America, where he escapes after confessing to Marian his love for Laura and discovers that she is already engaged to Percival. The arduous journey, the distance and time, he believes, may efface his feelings for Laura. At that time, Marian’s prophetic dream depicts Walter’s struggle with Eros and Thanatos, prefiguring his eventual rebirth; simultaneously, the dream conveys a fusion of the real and the imaginative or possible. In this exotic dream Walter appears in a landscape drawn in Pre-Raphaelite
touches of light and shade cast by immense tropical trees that “shut out the sky, and threw a dismal shadow over the forlorn band of men on the steps. *White exhalations* twisted and curled up stealthily from the ground” (278). Later on, in the same dream Walter appears “kneeling by a tomb of white marble, and the shadow of a veiled woman rose out of the grave beneath, and waited by his side” (279, my emphasis). Thus, once again, the Pre-Raphaelite “soft alternations of light and shade,” against which Walter’s meeting of the woman in white first occurred, highlight this important episode that prefigures Sir Percival’s deception, the burial of Anne Catherick as Lady Glyde.

When Walter resumes the narrative after his return from Central America, he seems to celebrate his higher state of consciousness signaled by his symbolic death in Marian’s dream. Through his social involvement, his determination to vindicate Laura and thus become fully involved in exposing the deplorable inefficiency of the legal system, Walter emerges as a reborn figure, a self-reliant, self-assured individual, seemingly disengaged from tradition, believing that “in the stern school of extremity and danger my will had learnt to be strong, my heart resolute, my mind to rely on itself” (415).

After this recognition, the following scene in the cemetery, where he believes Laura is buried, is yet another transformation of his initial encounter with the woman in white; in fact, his reaction to Laura’s touch is almost identical to that of the mysterious shadow: “[T]he springs of my life fell low, and the shuddering of an unutterable dread crept over me from head to foot” (419). In this case, however, Walter does not resist the call, does not attempt to extricate himself from social responsibility, but undertakes the seemingly impossible task of vindicating Laura, which he realizes may be possible only through his subversion of tradition and convention: “through all risks and all sacrifices—through the hopeless struggle against Rank and Power, through the long fight with armed deceit and fortified Success, through the loss of any friends, through the hazard of my life” (422). When, following her imprisonment and escape from the asylum, Laura strikingly resembles Anne, Hartright no longer resists his perception but sorrowfully accepts the similarity:

The outward changes wrought by the suffering and the terror of the past had fearfully, almost hopelessly, strengthened the fatal resemblance between Anne Catherick and herself. In my narrative of events at the time of my residence in Limmeridge House, I have recorded, from my own observation of the two, how the likeness, striking as it was when viewed generally, failed in many important points of similarity when
tested in detail. . . . The sorrow and suffering which I had once blamed myself for associating even by a passing thought with the future of Laura Fairlie, 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 which asserted itself before my own eyes. (442–43)

Thus Hartright at this point reconciles the hitherto tormenting disparity between his conventional ways of knowing and his new perceptions and recognizes the necessity of thinking beyond conventional class and gender boundaries. Finally he stands determined to risk all of the safety that convention provides in order to vindicate Laura’s identity.

His journey toward identity formation concludes with the most important event in Hartright’s struggle for Laura’s vindication, an event that coincides with his ability to rely on his own perception. In the nightmarish scene of the church vestry fire, where Sir Percival (the secret of his illegitimacy having been discovered) tries to surreptitiously add the names of his parents to the church marriage register but accidentally starts a fire with his lantern, Hartright responds instinctively to an unforeseen situation by renouncing his passionate commitment to retribution—a traditional construct remnant of the chivalric age. Like the sudden appearance of the woman in white, the sudden fire represents another call, another temptation to gratify the ego by letting Sir Percival burn to death. Nevertheless, unlike the first occasion, when Walter relies on convention by seeking to ascertain Anne Catherick’s respectability before he offers help, this time Walter immediately responds to his perception of danger and tries to rescue Sir Percival: “I rushed to the door. The one absorbing purpose that had filled all my thoughts, that had controlled all my actions, for weeks and weeks past, vanished in an instant from my mind. All remembrance of the heartless injury the man’s crimes had inflicted; of the love, the innocence, the happiness he had pitilessly laid waste; of the oath I had sworn in my own heart to summon him to the terrible reckoning that he deserved—passed from my memory like a dream. I remembered nothing but the horror of his situation. I felt nothing but the natural impulse to save him from a frightful death” (527).

The description of the scene of Hartright’s attempted rescue evokes yet another Pre-Raphaelite painting, Millais’s Rescue (1855), which depicts a fireman rescuing two children from a fire and delivering them to their anguished mother, a scene illuminated by the intermittent light and shadow cast by the fire in the background. The red glare of the fire permeates the entire painting, illuminating the faces of the subjects. Millais worked feverishly on this painting to meet the deadline for the exhibition, and with the
help of Wilkie Collins's brother, Charley, who painted the water hose, he was able to complete it in time (Malcolm Warner in Parris, _The Pre-Raphaelites_, 132).

Unlike Millais's painting, which celebrates heroic masculinity and iconographically delineates gender power relations by casting the fireman, carrying the two children, as the rescuer, towering above the distraught mother, who longingly reaches out for her children, Collins's narrative redrawing of a similar scene defuses masculine power by emphasizing Hartright’s helplessness and powerlessness at rescuing Percival, who dies in the fire. In an interplay of light and shadow and the mysterious atmosphere it evokes, Collins reconfigures a conventional scene representing traditional gender relations into an unconventional situation, a man attempting a heroic feat but ultimately defeated by forces beyond his control. At the same time, however, Hartright at this point trusts his own perception, refusing to submit to conventional notions of retribution. It is not accidental that a sense of renewal permeates the last part of the novel.

Rebirth follows death as the novel closes in the springtime and Walter traces the full circle of his journey: “From their long slumber, on her side and on mine, those imperishable memories of our past life in Cumberland now awoke, which were one and all alike, the memories of our love” (570). Yet Hartright’s marriage to Laura, who exhibits no mental or psychological growth by the end of the novel and still remains representative of conventional femininity in spite of the ordeals she has suffered, is somewhat of an anticlimax, casting doubts on any conjectures about Hartright’s new level of consciousness. Disappointment with the ending of the story, particularly with its return to a conventional order after the subversion of tradition and the suspension of conventional gender relations, has been expressed by several critics, most notably by Nina Auerbach, who appropriately calls Laura “the nebulous, incompetent heroine” (135). Carl Jung’s explanation of a man’s love choice may explain Hartright’s marriage to Laura: “[M]an, in his love-choice, is strongly tempted to win the woman who best corresponds to his own unconscious femininity—a woman, in short, who can unhesitatingly receive the projection of his soul. Although such a choice is often regarded and felt as altogether ideal, it may turn out that the man has manifestly married his own worst weakness.” Few readers would dispute that Laura represents Hartright’s worst weakness—lack of individualism. This is perhaps one of the reasons that Collins chooses the strong-minded and independent Marian, holding Laura’s and Hartright’s child, as the focal point of the closing scene narrated by Hartright: “So she spoke. In writing those last words, I have written all. The pen falters in my hand; the long, happy labour of many months is over! Marian was the good angel of our lives—
let Marian end our Story” (643). Yet the traditional Victorian closure of
the novel, the marriage of Hartright to Laura, discloses Collins’s keen sen-
sitivity to the forces of the marketplace, simultaneously revealing his
exquisite ability to gratify his middle-class readers while severely criticiz-
ing them. Once again, however, at the end of the novel, Collins displays
his Pre-Raphaelite ability to interweave the conventional with the
unconventional. Though the ending does not culminate in a complete
rejection of gender stereotypes toward which the novel moves, neverthe-
less it is representative of a new symbolic order, as Diane Elam has already
observed, for the marriage of Hartright, the impoverished, self-reliant,
and defiant drawing master, to an heiress “effects a change from an old to
a new social order, legitimizes a new genealogical order in preference to
the impotent tradition Sir Percival represents” (54).

Wilkie Collins often attempted to gain recognition as a literary artist,
the founder of the sensation novel that moved beyond the limits of the
realistic without violating realism. As Jenny Bourne Taylor states, Collins
has been recognized as a novelist who “breaks down stable boundaries
between wildness and domesticity, self and other, masculinity and femi-
ninity, ‘black’ and ‘white.’ Moreover, his stories involve not only complex
explorations of forms of perception, of consciousness and cognition, but
also of the shaping of social identity” (1). The new ways of seeing initiat-
ed by the Pre-Raphaelites, Collins demonstrates, are essential to an
understanding of the self and the other, crucial to identity formation. In
the liberating dream space of the sensation novel, Collins successfully
undermines Victorian society, which displaces women by either apotheo-
sizing them as angels or condemning them as outcasts—in either case
confining them within conventional gender boundaries. Through his
emphasis on Walter’s mysterious entanglement in someone else’s fate—an
outcast, the illegitimate daughter of a fallen woman—Collins, like his
Pre-Raphaelite friends, fuses the shadow of the other with the self, explor-
ing psychological anxieties generated by the incongruities inherent in
conventional gender constructs. Drawing like his Pre-Raphaelite friends’
landscapes and portraits in hitherto Pre-Raphaelite unconventional alter-
nations of light and shade, Collins underscored the significance of new
perceptions beyond the constrictive boundaries of tradition.

Through the Pre-Raphaelite paintings Collins evokes and redraws in
The Woman in White, he compelled his “audiences to reconsider what was
decorous or ‘correct’ in art as well as private life” (Casteras, “Pre-
Raphaelite Challenges” 32). In a letter addressed to a friend on November
26, 1887, he explained that the central idea of The Woman in White was
the destruction and the recovery of a woman’s identity (Letters 2: 545). The
question of a woman’s identity seemed to have gradually evolved to the sub-

Gendered Shadows
ject of gender identity, Collins's central preoccupation in *The Woman in White*, particularly gender defined beyond the stereotypical Victorian boundaries. As Susan Balee argues, *The Woman in White* subverts “Victorian sexual stereotypes (the angel in the house, the manly man) in order to promote new icons. *The Woman in White* actively works to dismantle old myths of sexuality in order to construct new ones that would be of greater use to an economically-altered society” (201–202). Some of these new icons were represented in Pre-Raphaelite paintings of the period, but Collins further revised these representations by redrawing them in his novel and thus demonstrating that even the seemingly unorthodox Pre-Raphaelite representations of gender were at times framed within restrictive gendered boundaries. Wilkie Collins's narrative reconfigurations of these paintings give us insights into not only his novel but also literary history and nineteenth-century gender conflicts. If we are to fully appreciate Collins's disguised criticism of his culture's conventional gender constructs, then we must take into consideration the Pre-Raphaelite dimension of his narratives. Indeed, *The Woman in White* seems to orient us toward a new perspective on Collins's challenge to gender constructs inextricably bound with modes of perception, some of which his Pre-Raphaelite friends initiated.