The Other Fiction of Wilkie Collins: the Dover Editions

Kirk H. Beetz
University of California, Davis

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new

Part of the Literature in English, British Isles Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new/vol2/iss1/15

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Studies in English at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in English, New Series by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.
The Other Fiction of Wilkie Collins: the Dover Editions

Kirk H. Beetz

University of California, Davis


Perhaps the most pervasive impression left after reading the Dover editions of Wilkie Collins's fiction is that here is an author who defies labelling. His themes surprise; his ideas cover a vast landscape of thought; he is an author of ideas who speaks eloquently about law, religion, society, and history. Even though he is a writer of profound didactic purpose, his first objective always seems to be to entertain — his stories delight and surprise, his characters amuse and confound. The combination of didacticism and entertainment make his fiction subversive, dangerous, and challenging. An artist of alienation, his attempts to describe and understand it make his best work unsettling and special.

Dover has thus far published four of Collins's novels, two collections of his stories, and two other works that in modern parlance might best be called novellas. Notably absent are Collins's most famous and popular novels, The Moonstone and The Woman in White. These two works are the most frequent objects of scholarly investigation and are readily available in several editions; Dover does scholars and non-scholars the favor of presenting other worthy works which have been undeservedly neglected.

The best of these, most scholars agree, are No Name and Armadale, novels written in the 1860's, between The Woman in White (1859) and The Moonstone (1868). Both are fine, featuring extraordinary plots, careful and lively characterizations, and enough substance to keep critics occupied for the next century. Of these, Armadale is the better. Its great length, unusual even for a Victorian novel, is intimidating, the small type in which Dover printed it is daunting, but it has rewards for its readers. As ever, Collins takes care to give his audience a good story, one filled with supernatural sensations, prophetic dreams, events seemingly fated before any of the central characters are born, mysteries, and fiendishly evil conspiracies. His purposes include more than entertainment, however; the novel is an exploration into evil and its relationship to the creative spirit.

Lydia Gwilt is a character of great vitality and beauty, is gifted with a clever and creative mind, and is Armadale's villainess. Collins does more than move her through the plot — he studies her and digs into her soul. He thus reveals a woman driven to crime; society allows her too few outlets for her creativity, and she turns to villainy because it is more than antisocial; in fact it allows her to step outside of society and act as she pleases. Collins notes: "In the miserable monotony of the lives led by a large section of the middle classes of England, anything
Kirk H. Beetz

is welcome to the women which offers them any sort of harmless refuge from the established tyranny of the principle that all human happiness begins and ends at home” (p. 562). For the Victorian woman, home could be a prison: for dynamic Lydia Gwilt society did not provide a “harmless refuge” for her restless spirit. She is driven to villainy, and the conflict between her nefarious behavior and her desire to love and be loved, and to be at peace, eventually destroys her. From her birth, her destruction is assured by a society which does not let her constructively exercise her imagination.

Although Lydia Gwilt is the focus for much of Collins’s ideas, especially about women, she is not the only creative spirit frustrated by a social order which cannot accept her nature. The second Allan Armadale, who goes by the name of Midwinter for most of the novel, suffers terribly as he acts under his own impression of reality — acting while no one understands his motivations. In him Collins explores other ideas besides criminality and the alienation of the creative woman; he delves into a mind which has difficulty separating accepted reality from possible fantasy. Midwinter believes in prophetic dreams, he believes in intuition, he believes in friendship as an object to be desired for itself, and he believes in fate. He is frightening, therefore, to some of the characters who meet him, and they mock him or try to ignore him. In some ways, his spiritual energy is more subversive than Lydia Gwilt’s: He believes that there are forces acting on people which are greater than the forces society can marshal, and he behaves as if he were more subservient to the former that to custom and social morality.

In Armadale one can find many of the symptoms of the influences that shaped Collins’s ideas and his concept of the novel. He was trained as a painter, and painterly scenes abound. He was a socialist while a young man, and, even though his narrative moves comfortably through the homes of the upper-classes, the novel does not escape a faint tone of disgust when he describes the excesses of the privileged of England. He was deeply influenced by French drama and fiction; consequently, his dialogue often has dramatic flair, and some sections are reminiscent of French naturalism. Throughout Armadale the word fate seems to be used in part because it is a term that can make concepts from French naturalism palatable for his Victorian audience — that is, that one’s past determines one’s future. Armadale also displays many of Collins’s favorite themes, such as the notion that society acts to deny happiness, that women are at best misunderstood
THE OTHER FICTION OF WILKIE COLLINS

— even by other women — and that alienation is almost inevitable for anyone who acts on what he believes is good for himself without first measuring what he wants against what society says is good for him.

In this context No Name is also illuminating. A fine story in its own right, it contrasts with Armadale is important, revealing ways. In No Name, for instance, the woman who resorts to villainy to get her way is the protagonist and is portrayed with much sympathy. Denied legal and moral recourse when she loses her inheritance because her parents never married, Magdalen Vanstone becomes a conniving temptress whose looks can never be trusted, and yet one whose strength of character is manifest. She differs significantly from Lydia Gwilt in that she knows how society has wronged her — she knows that she pursues a very personal kind of justice. Collins’s didacticism is undeniable — he uses Magdalen Vanstone’s plight to assault England’s marriage laws, another favorite theme of his — but Magdalen’s character is of greater interest. She is passionate, determined, ingenuous, daring, and intelligent; she is also fearful, insecure, as well as desperately in need of love. She stands out in the novel as a full woman. Collins numbers among the few men capable of creating women who are complete characters, shaped more by observation of life than by idealizations or Freudian hatreds. The variety of women characters Collins depicts is remarkable: His fiction has simpering coquettes, mindless naggers, weak women — such as Magdalen’s sister — who are nonetheless sympathetic, women too intelligent and ambitious for the stupid men around them, and powerful and brilliant women.

Characterization is obviously important to Collins. Most of his characters are developed slowly and are measured against the events comprising the plots of his stories. Their creation seems artless, their development more accidental than intended. Yet scholars know from Collins’s notes and the observations of his contemporaries that even his longest novels were worked out in detail before they were begun, with entire passages written and with characters described. It is the least Collinsian of his characters, Captain Wragge, the ever affable scoundrel of No Name, who can illustrate Collins’s genuine skill. He is the most Dickensian of Collins’s characters (perhaps furnishing the most graphic evidence of Charles Dickens’s influence on Collins) and by contrast to Collins’s other characters illustrates Collins’s style of characterization.

To modern sensibilities, Collins’s characters seldom seem very
unusual. This view may result in part because Collins's characters have been imitated so often that they now seem like stereotypes; it certainly comes in part from the modern writer's adoption of Collins's realistic approach to the novel. His characters are like real people; they are shaped by events, by their families, and by their latent personalities. Collins seems pre-Freudian in his use of hidden desires (one could anachronistically refer to the unconscious mind). Wragge, by contrast, seems self-created, as if he sprung full-blown from his own forehead. T.S. Eliot was on the right track when he remarked that Dickens's characters were good because each was unique — and thus, perhaps, capturing the uniqueness in each human being — and Collins's were good because they were like many people, like the multitudes one might meet on a city street.

Characterization is important in nearly all of Collins's works, even though his extraordinary plots are often what attract a reader's attention. Nothing is ever wasted in a Collins plot — a doctor's sign will appear early in Armadale, then reappear hundreds of pages later to tell the reader something important; or a vial of a drug will be lost and forgotten in one part of No Name, only to reappear much later as a crucial motivation for characters. Such is the great interest of Collins's plotting that it seems to overwhelm his other achievements in No Name and Armadale. The earliest work thus far reprinted by Dover is, however, an exception. Basil is a study in character, delving into darkness in the human spirit; it is a portrait of the banality of evil, and, more than any other of Collins's fiction, it shows the influence of the French writers he professed to admire.

"I have founded the main event out of which this story springs, on a fact within my own knowledge," Collins asserts in his 1862 dedication of Basil. At least one biographer, Kenneth Robinson, errs in assuming that the "fact" meant Basil was none other than Collins himself; Collins could also have drawn the "fact" of the novel from one of his friends, several of whom had unhappy lives. Whatever the source, the story is commonplace and sad — one of a lover betrayed callously and one of lust and revenge. Naive and sensitive, Basil falls in love with a worldly and insensitive woman who is socially and intellectually beneath him. Her betrayal of him is almost forced by his foolish attentions. Basil seeks vengeance, then her real lover seeks revenge on him. The plot is unusually simple for Collins, although perhaps complex enough for most other authors; the characters stand out in high relief against the plot and against the dark background of
THE OTHER FICTION OF WILKIE COLLINS

Victorian England. In spite of the greater worldliness of the modern reader (one familiar with *The Great Gatsby* and *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*), *Basil* retains its poignancy and its power to hold a reader’s attention. It also remains entertaining. *Basil* is interesting for students of Collins because of its special tone and style. The later novels are more clearly English in style and subject, but this one has an ambivalent style and is much more open about its sexual themes than are subsequent works, which weave themes of sex and infidelity more subtly into other motifs — such as theft and the use of drugs.

Less important, perhaps, to students of Collins, but more fun to read is *The Dead Secret*. In 1857 it did not excite the critical interest that *Basil* had, nor that which *No Name* and *Armadale* would occasion. *The Dead Secret* is part romance and part mystery, a novel easily categorized a mystery story, but one that ultimately defies labels. The story seems Gothic in its theme of an old deed come back to haunt Rosamond, it seems melodramatic in its atmosphere and events, but its plot seems typical of a modern mystery. Some critics place Collins as a mystery writer or a detective-story writer. Such labelling makes him interesting to fans of mysteries, but it also makes him easy for supposedly serious writers to dismiss. In *The Dead Secret*, as in most of his other works, Collins defies simple categorization. He probably was the creator of many of the techniques now standard in mystery fiction, and he may well have set the standards for accuracy and detail that mark the modern mystery novel, but one should understand that he was inventing when he wrote. He uses themes and techniques and then throws them away once they have served his purposes; thus although a novelist might thrive by creating the adventures of a single detective through a series of novels, Collins creates Old Sharon (in “My Lady’s Money”) and uses him only once. Collins’s work is inconsistent, in manner and quality, and is his in defiance of modern genres.

Dover has reprinted at least two stories that on their surfaces seem to fall neatly into sub-genres, one a mystery and the other a ghost story. In “My Lady’s Money” the plot moves as its characters seek the solution to a theft — of the Dover reprints this best fits into the mystery genre. Yet, the thrust of Collins’s narrative does not seem to be directed at the mystery itself, but at the characters and what they represent. Once the villain is unmasked, one discovers a subversive theme running through the story, a theme which invites the reader to accept surface images (even advocates such acceptance), then tears
off those images as if they were masks. Gentlemen are brutes, sophisticated people are fools, intelligent ones are misled, and rogues are dedicated workers. Collins is much more heavy-handed in this story from 1877 than in his work from the 1860's and the story features some bad writing ("He finished the sentence by snapping his fingers with a grin of contempt," p. 148), but this ambitions remain high.

"The Haunted Hotel" is better stuff. Like much of Collins's other later work it lacks the structural tightness of his best writing, but it provides enough surprises to satisfy most readers and it shows some of his skills in description and characterization. "The Haunted Hotel" chronicles premonitions and supernatural revenge, and as such is not extraordinary. Its primary interest is its good entertainment; for scholars it has more historical value than anything else. As with much of Collins's other fiction, this is a seemingly odd mixture of themes and techniques which were more fully explored in the work of later writers, and of motifs which remain undeveloped. Therein may lie a problem in studying Collins: his experimentation means that his fiction rarely fits into a genre, and thus themes often seem out of place. In "The Haunted Hotel" he uses a ghostly (and ghastly) odor to help build suspense; the technique seems in the light of the modern ghost story to be peculiar, even awkward — what might have been unusual and surprising in 1879 now seems a bit silly.

Both "My Lady's Money" and "The Haunted Hotel" also illustrate an unfelicitous feature of Collins's later work. He was afflicted with a progressively debilitating disease, one which caused intense pain and periodically blinded him. It prematurely aged him, making him shockingly bent. Laudanum eased his pain, and he became hopelessly addicted. In his last two decades he suffered chronically sleepless nights, often writing in the early hours of the morning, and suffered from nighttime delusions of figures seeking to hurt him — one frighteningly manifested itself in a post on his staircase which sought to bite him when he climbed the stairs to bed. Collins's concentration on his writing was almost certainly affected, which weakness may account for the awkwardness of his later plots and the production of stories which entertain but fall short of the high ambitions realized in the novels of Collins's middle years.

_Tales of Terror and the Supernatural_ contains short stories which span their author's career, from "A Terribly Strange Bed" (1852) to selections from _Little Novels_ (1887), just two years before the writer's death. Herbert van Thal's selections are good, and can give a reader a
THE OTHER FICTION OF WILKIE COLLINS

fair, though limited, view of Collins's achievement. The early stories, such as "A Terribly Strange Bed" and "The Dead Hand," are better than the later ones, and are examples of the Victorian manner of short stories. They employ understatement and rely heavily on atmospherics, of which Collins was a master:

The darkness forced his mind back upon itself, and set his memory at work, reviving with a painfully-vivid distinctness the momentary impression it had received from his first sight of the corpse. Before long the face seemed to be hovering out in the middle of the darkness, confronting him through the window, with the paleness whiter—with the dreadful dull line of light between the imperfectly-closed eyelids broader than he had seen it—with the parted lips slowly dropping farther and farther away from each other—with the features growing larger and moving closer, till they seemed to fill the window, and to silence the rain, and to shut out the night. ("The Dead Hand," p. 49)

The unfortunate protagonist must spend the night in the same room with the corpse that inspired his morbid imagination. The atmospherics elsewhere are just as gripping and make the early stories rewarding.

The same cannot be said for the titles from Little Novels, three of which appear in Tales of Terror and the Supernatural, and all of which, of course, appear in Dover's recent reprinting of the 1887 edition. The stories might be called novellas rather than little novels, and in that sense they represent Collins's experiments with literary forms, blending the qualities of the short story and those of the novel. The results are haphazard in quality, from the just plain stupid "Mr. Lismore and the Widow" to the sophisticated "Miss Bertha and the Yankee." Throughout the stories characters and plots are colored by heavy-handed didacticism, which is nonetheless strongly indicative that Collins retained his subversive outlook late in his life: "There is surely something mean in an assertion of superiority which depends on nothing better than the accident of birth" ("Mr. Medhurst and the Princess," p. 66) and "the hateful and anti-Christian pride of rank" ("Miss Mina and the Groom," p. 106). Collins's attacks on hypocrisy and cant are as pointed in Little Novels as in No Name, and his strictures on uncharitable behavior and his persistently Christian outlook make one wonder how anyone ever thought of him as other than Christian.
Kirk H. Beetz

The occasional confusion of themes and techniques in *Little Novels* can be attributed to Collins's experimentation, as well as his bad health, which circumstances engender the possibility for speculation about inconsistent quality of his later works. In his efforts to experiment, might he have worked his way through those genres he could best work with and into ones which were unsuited to his talents? There is something admirable in his effort to experiment, and something sad in how often he failed, even if in interesting ways. Much in *Little Novels* is interesting and entertaining, and evaluations of a few of the stories might provide insights into the development of modern forms of this genre, and perhaps even into the difference between a successful and unsuccessful story.

Dover performs a great service to students of Collins, and benefits readers in general, by reprinting in inexpensive editions some of the works of a fine and often underrated author. Undoubtedly, critics will use the new editions for study, and for the most part these reprints will be satisfactory for use in criticism. The Chatto and Windus editions of *Armadale*, *No Name*, *The Dead Secret*, and *Basil*, are usually considered to be the most textually reliable, but they have long been out of print and are hard to find. Few scholars have consulted them for criticism, thus making the Dover versions as good as any other in general use. *Armadale* has special problems because Dover uses the original *Cornhill Magazine* text. Collins distinguished between periodical and book publication, and made minor revisions in *Armadale* after its serial appearance was completed. Both *No Name* and *The Dead Secret* are taken from versions published by Harper and Brothers of New York. Collins took great care that Harper and Brothers received fully edited and revised page proofs from his London book publishers, thus making the Harper editions reliable. The Dover texts of these novels are superior to the Collier versions, which are now commonly in use. *Basil* is taken from the 1862 Sampson Low edition, the standard version even though it varies in minor revisions from the 1852 Richard Bentley first edition. "The Haunted Hotel" and "My Lady's Money" appear in volumes edited by E. F. Bleiler. In his introduction to "The Haunted Hotel" Bleiler mentions having examined the manuscript of the story at the Huntington Library. My own examination of the manuscript indicates that the Dover version is reliable. My examination of the version of "My Lady's Money" in *The Illustrated London News* also indicates that the Dover text is reliable. *Little Novels* is taken from the Chatto and Windus edition, and as
such is as sound as that of any other edition. This book is particularly hard to find and is therefore specially welcome. As for Tales of Terror and the Supernatural, the book would be useful as school text, but the serious scholar will want to consult the Chatto and Windus versions, where possible, or the original book versions in After Dark (1856) and The Queen of Hearts (1859). These earlier versions of the stories are difficult to locate, and if a critic has a choice of the Dover texts, the Collier texts, or not writing an article, the Dover texts are best.

Dover has helped to broaden Wilkie Collins studies with its recent selection of his novels and stories. With these editions may come a better understanding of Collins’s achievements. I, for one, look forward to more.