Dear Diary: Wilkie Collins’ Portrayal of Gender Self-Writing

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by

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The debate concerning women’s roles in society has been a longstanding one. Wilkie Collins, in his novels, takes part in this debate, struggling with whether or not women should have agency. By giving women a medium of self-expression, namely writing, Wilkie Collins continually creates strong women only to defeat them and turn them into domesticated women once again. But for at least a time these women can create their own identity, manipulate men, and control the story, giving them a power that cannot be forgotten.
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Tensions ran high in the gender roles debates during the Victorian era. Two social schools or movements, namely the Cult of Domesticity and the New Woman, were clashing over the duties and rights of women. While the Cult of Domesticity demanded that women remain in the home as the traditional wife and mother, the New Woman movement demanded higher education, the right to vote, financial independence, and the ability to choose whether or not they marry. Pamphlets and essays such as Wheeler and Thompson’s “Appeal of One Half of the Human Race,” Ellis’ “The Women of England, Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits,” and information pamphlets on controversial subjects, such as birth control, circulated the educated classes, fueling the debate. Political battles, which ended with the protection of women in factories, the right to vote, and some financial independence, complicated the ways society could configure the roles of women (Victorian Web). This debate, like most social questions, found a battleground in literature, as authors chose how to present their female characters. Wilkie Collins was no exception, dealing repeatedly with gender roles in all of his texts.

One of Wilkie Collins’s major techniques in dealing with gender is through his female characters’ diaries and letters. The Victorian era was a heavily epistolary culture. The ability to express opinions, manner, and events through letters, and often a daily journal helped define social standing, and therefore personal identity. Because of this social convention of self-writing as an establisher and communicator of identity, Collins is able to define the roles of his female characters, and by extension all women, through the inclusion in his novels of their daily texts. The opportunity for a woman to tell part of the story when men are involved, and to effectively handle difficult or even dangerous
situations, shows Collins’ women as almost akin to New Women. In moments, though, the women are beaten back into the ideal characters representing the Cult of Domesticity. This might be partially because he wrote to two different audiences, managing to ensnare more than just the female novel readers. His “position in this changing Victorian literary marketplace was in many ways a double one, both feminine and masculine” (Heller 7), and which would have affected his ability to create a strong woman, because he must understand both sides of the debate. In the selection of his work examined in this paper, Collins wavers in his position, often desiring to create and advocate the qualities for a New Woman but failing to negate the longstanding sexist tradition of his society in such a way as to advance such progressive values. Although these diaries, within Collins’ novels, give women a chance to voice their own story, to have control over how the text is presented and how they and others appear within the text, all of these diaries and other writings are compromised in some way by a masculine presence. Wilkie Collins seems unable to commit to either advocating for female agency or for the betrayal of such a concept.

Disappearing Act:

“The Diary of Anne of Rodway”

1856

In this short story, presented entirely through selections of Ann’s diary, Collins empowers Anne enough to discover who murdered her friend, Mary, when the male police are too unobservant and dismissive to pursue the case. At first, her role in this
mystery is limited to resisting the decrees of the men involved in the case. When the police deliver Mary, injured and dying to Anne, one of them concludes that the young woman probably was not “drunk” (“Rodway” 136), but this seems to be the far reaches of his conclusions. The police are not willing to venture an opinion of what events occurred because they feel that there was “no evidence to show how the blow on her temple had been inflicted” (“Rodway” 137). The doctor, as well, is ready to dismiss the case as accidental, believing that “she must have fallen down in a fit…and stuck her head…and so have given her brain…a fatal shake” (“Rodway” 137). The men, who hold authority from both their gender and their professions, refuse to investigate the case thoroughly, choosing instead to decree the death as accidental. Obvious evidence concerning Mary’s mortal injury lacking, neither profession feels the need as of yet to push their inquiries. Mary is a lower-class woman, which makes it easy for them to follow their inclination. As far as they are concerned, this type of woman often seeks comfort in drink or other drugs and often runs into accidents. Yet Anne will not accept the casual dismissal of her friend’s death. She quickly finds a piece of cravat, “torn off violently from the rest,” indicating that Mary’s death was brought about “by foul means” (“Rodway” 138). The speed of this discovery highlights just how ineffective the men were, while also creating Anne as more capable than the men themselves. Confident that the doctor will help her, Anne confides her discovery in him, hoping for advice. Although he is kind to her, the doctor makes it plain that it will not “lead to anything” (“Rodway” 139). Nonetheless, Anne remains resolved that the torn cravat belongs to Mary’s attacker and turns it over to the authorities for the inquest. Anne remains “more firmly persuaded than ever that there
is some dreadful mystery in connection with that blow on [her] poor lost Mary’s temple” (“Rodway” 143) after the inquest dismisses the case as yet another example of a weak and fainting woman. Anne declares repeatedly in her diary and in contradiction with authority figure after authority figure, what her conclusions are. She displays conviction and rationality, which none of the other characters are capable of in this short story.

Anne, having managed to defend her assertions in her own mind despite what the rest of the male world resolves, begins to take a more active role in proving that Mary was murdered. In a store where she is looking for candles, she notices a “rag” with the “end…torn off” (“Rodway” 149), made out of the same material as her scrap in the spare rag bin. She connives “to get possession of the old cravat without exciting any suspicion” through “a little quickness” on her side (“Rodway” 149). Now that she has the rest of the cravat, Anne needs to discover who owned it before. She finds out that a woman collects the scraps of material and sells them in order to make enough money to get by. By “making believe as if [she] knew of somebody who might employ” (“Rodway” 150) a woman in need of money for charing, Anne convinces the shopkeeper to give her the woman’s name. Her expressions in the diary recognize the risk of losing the cravat if she is not cunning. She also takes pride in her own “quickness” and skills in “making believe” (“Rodway” 149-150). Both her actions and her interpretation of them as presented in the diary show her to be a woman of both intelligence and action. Once she finds Mrs. Horlick, the woman who sold the cravat to the shop, she asked “what her terms were for charing” (“Rodway” 151), keeping up the charade, so that she might find the name of the cravat’s original owner. Eventually finding the man, Anne begins to
shrink from the idea of confronting him. Despite this, “the moment [she] came face to face with him something seemed to stop” (“Rodway” 152) her. Her sense of justice and her somewhat latent courage calls her to action and she is able to respond. Speaking in “bold words,” she convinces him, by letting him think that Mary had “been telling…a pack of lies” (“Rodway” 153-154) about him, to tell her what exactly happened to Mary. Again, her realization that she has the power to speak self-assuredly to a man comes through her own word usage in her diary. Besides that she is effective in her purpose; she is able to manipulate a man, to his later condemnation.

Then again, Anne has a tendency to lack the strength to write her own story when she is too emotionally upset. When she discovers that Mary has been injured, she is not “able to write” on “March 8\textsuperscript{th}. March 9\textsuperscript{th}. March 10\textsuperscript{th}” (“Rodway” 135). The concept of emotion overwhelming a person so entirely that she cannot function in her daily routines is a purely feminine one. The reaction shows her to be weak. She reasons that she cannot write “with [her] eyes full of tears and [her] hand all of a tremble” (“Rodway” 135). The particular physical manifestations of the grief that she experiences are also assigned solely to the weaker sex: no man would succumb to tears and shivering. When Mary dies, Anne “can write no more. [Her] tears drop so fast on the paper” (“Rodway” 142) that she is blinded. Again, she is overwhelmed by the stereotypical characteristic’s of femininity. Her rationality quails under the sheer weight of her emotion, preventing her from thinking independently through her writing. One last time, Anne Rodway experiences an emotion, this time “nervousness and uncertainty,” that “prevent[s her] from noting down” (“Rodway” 148) specifically how she found the cravat. Every time
that Anne neglects the expression of her life she loses the agency she gained through her other actions and descriptions. Marian Halcombe, of *The Woman in White*, also finds that she has “no heart to go into particulars” (*White* 180) in a letter she writes seeking advice from a lawyer friend. Here, rather than having too much emotion, Marian simply cannot face experiencing that much emotion. It is still a defeat of rational expression by base, animalistic emotion. Collins uses this motif of weak feminine emotions debasing the power of individuals to show that women cannot continually remain formidable individuals, capable of leading significant roles in society.

After the confrontation with the cab driver, who witnessed the murder, Anne seems to have reached the limit her of agency and backs away from telling her own story in her diary, focusing instead on her fiancé’s role. Upon Robert’s entrance, she attempts to put together a sentence, and failing “fell on his breast” (“Rodway” 155). At this moment, Anne physically resigns from the story. She not only makes a pathetic attempt at continuing the same self-expression that she has maintained throughout this story, but she also lays herself, her actions, and her story on his chest in a complete surrender. After she is finally able to tell him all that she has done, Robert decides that it is “best that he should carry out the rest of the investigation alone” (“Rodway” 156). All of the work she had done, down to the conviction she maintained before all those men, becomes Robert’s property and duty. She has nothing more to do with the investigation from this point. Meanwhile, Anne can do nothing but relay what Robert learns and begin “working harder than ever at [her] needle” (“Rodway” 157). Returned to the proper position of a poor woman, Anne is no longer a rational and powerful woman. Her effects on the
outside world have been diminished entirely. Her “experience of what happened at [the trail] is limited…to the time occupied in giving [her] evidence” (“Rodway 159). She voluntarily leaves the courtroom the minute her obligation is completed; she prefers to leave the matter to the men of the court and to her fiancé, because she is too “agitated” (“Rodway” 159) to remain and witness the outcome of what she started. In the end, because of her fiancé’s completion of the investigation, and because of her absence in the courtroom when the matter was settled, the conviction of Mary’s murderer cannot be credited to her.

Woman Defeats Woman:

The Dead Secret

1857

With his early novel, The Dead Secret, Collins demonstrates his desire to present a strong woman whose self-revealing writing carries a real effect into the world, despite a patriarchal system that would prefer to silence her. Mrs. Treverton, lying on her deathbed, realizes the need to confess that she has raised her maid’s illegitimate child as her own, but cannot face her husband while telling him this act of will. In order to overcome her inability to speak to her husband, Mrs. Treverton claims that “the Secret must be told…It must be written” (Secret 18). The opportunity for traditional gender-inspired weakness in her character is overcome in this way. Writing is her form of self-expression, and because writing can communicate just as effectively as vocalizing, the act does not allow the reader to label Mrs. Treverton a coward. However, as she begins to
write the explanation of her actions, the writing comes “more slowly, more feebly…then stopp[s]” entirely, with the last word “all blotted together” (Secret 17). Collins takes this opportunity of his character’s ill body to prove that her spirit, her essence, is compelling enough to communicate and own an identity that is not acceptable, because it confuses the patriarchal inheritance scheme. Relinquishing her writing table and materials to Sarah Leeson, the biological mother of the child, Mrs. Treverton commands her to “Write!…Write” (Secret 18) their tale. Through a series of threats and reminders of past obligations, Mrs. Treverton forces the reluctant Sarah to follow the order. The kind of will that demands a solution where the original plan fails, that is able to compel another being, especially when that person is so unwilling, indicates an agency that women characters did not often hold. Lest her tale become the property of Sarah Leeson (it was her story as well after all), Mrs. Treverton reasserts her ownership of her confession by “look[ing] the writing over, and, taking the pen, sign[ing] her name at the end of it” (Secret 19). Again an act of will in the form of writing, this one overcoming her own body’s failing health and consequent weakness, demonstrates her ability to affect individuals around her and control over the way she is seen in others’ eyes. Even after Mrs. Treverton’s defining act in life, secretly adopting her maid’s child, is safely committed to paper, she maintains control over its fate. She will “have [Sarah’s] oath” (Secret 19) that Sarah “will not destroy this paper,” that she “will not take this paper away” from the house, and that she will “give it” (Secret 21-22) to Mr. Treverton. Mrs. Treverton, in this moment, is a formidable character in regards to her spirit and identity;
however, her body is still weak, and she dies before exacting the full oath from Sarah, who is willing to take advantage of this fact by not handing the secret to Mr. Treverton.

Yet, Mrs. Treverton and her dictated confession will not be silenced, even after death. Her writing is powerful enough not only to resurface, despite efforts to keep it hidden, but also to demonstrably change the lives of the people concerned in the letter. Her adopted daughter, Rosamond, finds the letter, after a long search. Upon reading the letter “line by line,” her spirit seems to be crushed, as shown through the physical deflation that leaves her pale and holding “the fatal letter crumpled up in her cold fingers” (Secret 275). The mere act of reading this piece of dictated writing physically affects her. After learning the secret, Rosamond and her husband decide that ethically they must return her inheritance to her father’s real next of kin, “which will therefore render it impossible to keep the Secret to” (Secret 292) themselves. Mrs. Treverton’s purpose has finally succeeded. Her real identity, a woman willing to take risks in order to gain what she wishes, trying to help people, will be known by the public at large, and most especially by her family.

Although this secret effectively recreates and communicates Mrs. Treverton’s identity, the ensuing effect diminishes even the slight independence held by her outcast servant, Sarah and injures her daughter’s identity. Being forced to take dictation of what is effectively her own story from Mrs. Treverton, and being forced to share a part of herself that she would prefer remain secret has, in general, a “paralyzing effect” (Secret 24) on Sarah. She runs from the house and seems cursed in all of her future actions, from entering into a dissatisfying marriage to holding a series of tenuous positions.
Interestingly, Mrs. Treverton’s letter seems not only to have cursed Sarah, but also to have had a substantial detrimental effect on Sarah’s writing. Her decisions to write become more tentative. She no longer feels justified or able to express herself through such a concrete and lasting medium as pen and ink. When her uncle confronts her for not having written him, she recognizes that “it seems neglectful…never to have written…for so many years,” but her real motivation (or lack thereof) was not that she was lazy, but that she felt she “had no right to lay the burden of [her] sorrow on other shoulders” (Secret 149). It is as if Mrs. Treverton’s commandeering the story of Sarah’s child has taken over all of Sarah’s ability to decide when to share her sadness. Her answer is to avoid all epistolary communications, even shallow ones. As she leaves her uncle’s house, promising to “write often” and “always,” she seems “terrified” by “her own words” (Secret 218-219). Even after the sanctuary of her uncle’s house and the support of the plans founded there, Sarah is frightened of the consequences incurred by writing. Self-expression, especially in that particular form, is linked with the compulsory and negative confession she participated in before. In Sarah’s mind, if she were to communicate her life stories to her uncle, to establish her identity through a written record of her choices and emotions, the cost would rip apart her confidante in the same way that the secret would rip apart the Treverton family. In the end, while Collins gives the readers a powerful, though dead, woman, he immediately replaces her with a woman too scared even to attempt to write, let alone give her words authority.

Sarah Leeson chooses to write less often, but that does not seem to matter, because when she does choose to write, her wishes are entirely ignored, or the writing is
so ineffective that her wishes are not communicated. With two separate notes, Sarah attempts to keep the letter with the confession hidden from the Trevertons. First, she writes on the letter itself that she claims no responsibility for the negative effects “if this paper should ever be found (which [she] pray[s] with [her] whole heart it never may be)” ([Secret] 32). Her attempts to disown the dictation aside, her desire that the letter never be found is ignored: Rosamond continues to read the rest of the letter and God disregards her prayer. Sadly, the fact that her efforts are so ineffective is underscored by the apparent effort she takes with them. She does not just write in a note to the household that she hopes the secret will not be found, but endeavors to place her writing over Mrs. Treverton’s in such a way that it would cancel out Mrs. Treverton’s power. Wilkie Collins contrives this moment so that it pits the two women against each other, in order to comment that women as a gender cannot attain true agency. Whenever there is a case of writing being placed over writing, or older writing being destroyed in favor of new writing, it is called a palimpsest. Often a palimpsest will involve “unrelated texts” that become “entangled, intricately interwoven, interrupting and inhabiting each other” (Dillon 245). Such palimpsests appear often in Collins’s texts. Before leaving the estate, Sarah tries once more to affect the chain of events by leaving a note for Mr. Treverton. This note ends with her “begging, as a last favor, that no search might ever be made for her” ([Secret] 35). First of all, the narrator does not see fit to include this letter, foreshadowing that it will be entirely ineffective. Captain Treverton fulfills the premonition, because “the moment [he] had read the letter, he order[s] an immediate search to be made after the missing woman” ([Secret] 37). Her final request of that family,
one that she makes to protect it even, is disregarded out of hand. Her words have no effect. Much later in the story, Sarah’s letters to her Uncle are equally futile, although in a different manner. In an effort to remain in hiding, Sarah leaves her letters “destitute of any personal particulars relative to the writer” (Secret 298). True, these letters do not lead to her discovery, but the exclusion of her life in her own letters precludes the purpose of writing. The letters are ineffective not because of any reaction they evoke in the reader, but because she cannot summon the skill to articulate a part of herself. They serve no purpose. All the same, the “writing betrays her” (Secret 299) in a different matter. Her uncle may not be able to find her, but he knows that she is deathly ill, knowledge that will be the impetus for a more strenuous search for her whereabouts. “The significant changes for the worse in the handwriting” and the fact that “they grow shorter, and shorter, and shorter” (Secret 299) prove that she is becoming weaker with each moment. Interestingly, it is the physical handwriting, not the emotions or events expressed in the letters that inform others of Sarah’s condition, thereby making the letters useless to her purposes. Sarah does not want to inspire worry in her uncle. She most certainly does not want to cause him to increase his efforts in his search. It does not seem to matter what Sarah tries to do or not do with her writing, a part of it will only weaken her, all because of the situation in which the confession places her. She is now a ruined woman, as is her daughter.

Gender Confusion:
The Woman in White

1860

Marian Halcombe, through a series of letters and her own diary, guides her sister and herself through a nightmarish situation. Laura has entered into an engagement without realizing that her fiancé, Sir Percival Glyde, is a controlling and abusive man. This marriage will be the cause of Laura’s imprisonment and Marian’s nearly fatal illness. Marian, through writing her diary, begins to sense the danger inherent in associations with Sir Percival Glyde, long before Laura recognizes anything wrong with him. Before being able to pinpoint any exact cause, Marian starts “always referring to Sir Percival with disparaging terms” (White 188) in her diary. Recognizing this tendency, which she was originally not conscious of, Marian decides to “root out [her] prejudice against him” (White 188). The ensuing exploration of her feelings towards Percival leads to her to notice that when he whispers to her sister something that made her pale to “a deadly whiteness” he remains “barbarously unconscious that he had said anything to pain her” (White 194). This observation leads Marian to “hate him” (White 194). This feeling is the basis for a healthy distrust of Percival that, although it cannot save Laura from the wedding, will make Marian take pains to be secretive and safe around him from this point on. Later when Percival attempts to force Laura to sign a paper without letting her read it first, Marian, already wary of Percival, “decided…to oppose her signing the parchment, whatever the consequences may be” (Secret 255). If it were not for Marian’s support, Laura might not have had the will to continue to resist Sir Percival. Her money would have been taken from her, and Marian would have lost her inheritance. This same
distrust, directed at Count Fosco, makes her realize that she must “keep up friendly appearances with the Count” and “be well on [her] guard, when the messenger from the office comes here with the answer to [her] letter” (White 259). Although she does not know it at first, Marian is coming to realize that the Count is the most threatening person in the house. Knowing better than to make him aware that she distrusts him, Marian is intelligent enough to recognize that she must be friendly with the Count at all costs. She knows that the Count has opened up the letters which she placed in the post bag, but this discovery does not lead her to despair, but to a plan that will allow her to receive her messages unmolested from now on. Finally, Marian recognizes that “future interests may…depend upon the regularity of the entries in [her] journal” (White 289). She has been recording her actions and the schemes of the Count and Sir Percival in detail. There could easily come a time when these records of their wrongdoing and Marian’s solutions, might help lead to a legal conviction of the men. Her writing might have been the way to justice.

While her diary provides a medium through which she can explore her intuition, the letters she writes create plans and inform her, so that she can continue to guide her sister through Percival’s malevolent plans. When Laura, hopeless and confused, wonders how to escape being trapped in an abusive marriage, Marian’s claims that she “mean[s] to write first” (White 308). Confident in her own communication skills and in her ability to influence people, Marian goes about finding a solution to their problem. She educates herself through letters to experts in the law, presents a stronger front against Sir Percival, and attempts to manipulate relatives into helping them escape. In order to find “legal
grounds to shake Sir Percival’s resolution” to force Laura’s signature “and to make him suspect that [the] two women understood the laws and obligations of business,” Marian chooses to “write the only honest man” (White 255) from whom she could ask advice. The response to this letter informs her of Percival’s previous secret plan to take money from Laura and confirms that Laura has legal grounds to resist signing any document that would legally contract her to give her personal fortune and trusts to Sir Percival.

Endeavoring to escape the place where the two women are trapped, Marian “appeal[s] to [Mr. Fairlie] on the terms which [she] mentioned to Laura as the most likely to make him bestir himself” (White 312-323). She takes charge of the situation, finding both a place to flee to and solidifying their acceptance there. Significantly, Marian is not just asking for permission; she has figured out Mr. Fairlie’s weaknesses and is exploiting them.

Marian is a powerful negotiator. At the same time, Marian writes a letter to a lawyer so that he might “know of those bruises on [Laura’s] arm” (White 307). She declares their identity as women who will not stand for this treatment from a man. She seeks out protection from the “ruffian” (White 307) even though that man is Laura’s husband. Her willingness to fight against the institution of marriage in this particular instance, to bring to light the possible horrors of physical and mental abuse, is reminiscent of the New Woman movement, because she is betraying the sanctity of marriage to protect a woman. Marian, already a single woman for life, clearly shows signs of resisting marriage and desiring women to have more freedom to choose not to marry, or even to break a marriage under certain circumstances.
The question remains: Does Marian’s power come from real feminine agency? Collins, having created a reasoning, resourceful woman, seems to justify himself for giving a woman so much strength by adding masculine physicality to complement her masculine rationality. When Walter Hartright first encounters Marian Halcombe in the breakfast-room, he is “struck by the rare beauty of her form and by the unaffected grace of her attitude” (White 31). She appears to be the perfect woman. Her figure is overwhelmingly feminine and the impulse behind each of her movements is fueled by an equally feminine elegance. Only when she turns, he sees that Marian has “dark down on her upper lip” that “was almost a moustache” (White 32). Her mouth is “large, firm, [and] masculine” (White 32), enough to support the moustache. The rest of her features are “prominent, piercing, [and] resolute” (White 32) so that they, too, impart a mannish air. Collins, in creating an amalgamation of sexes in Marian, points clearly to the way in which he assigns gender roles to parts of the body. A woman may be pretty and poised, because her gender role is to present herself as a well-mannered trophy for her husband. Being entirely feminine and yet still intelligent and motivated is not a possibility. Meanwhile, Marian’s masculine face creates her head as male, and thereby all intelligence as a masculine feature. The contradictions in Marian’s form create “a sensation oddly akin to the helpless discomfort familiar to us all in sleep” (White 32). Collins’ commentary on women, through the creation of Marian, indicates how that the New Woman, a woman who would have these elements of both female and male roles, is a person who would turn stomachs. Such a blurring of gender roles skews reality so
much that people who encounter it would not be able to tell the difference between dreaming and waking, which makes her character, and all she accomplishes, unrealistic.

Having debased her power already, Collins further backs away from his previous semi-feminist position by re-feminizing Marian’s mental aptitude and her confidence, forcing her to play a role more consistent with her gender. Throughout her diary, Marian admits to experiencing feminine emotions and in general to acting progressively more feminine and weak. The first blow to her agency occurs after discovering how vicious Sir Percival has been to Laura. Unable to think of a course of action or of a way to comfort Laura, she “reliev[s]” herself by “crying” (White 271). Clearly this is a regression in her strength, because she claims that such a weak gesture “generally does [her] harm” (White 271). As a rational being who strives to take action, rather than waiting for others to take care of her, Marian would not have been comfortable taking solace in the weak and useless act of crying. Now, though, with her chances to change significantly the crisis, she reverts back to the characteristically weak female, whose violent emotions force her, at least momentarily, to give up. When her efforts to protect Laura during the conflict over Laura’s signature succeed and Sir Percival claims that he no longer wants the signature, Marian is so overcome with emotion that her “head was giddy, and [her] knees trembled” (White 277) so much that she was forced to rest on the sofa. She does not have the wits about her to wonder if there were other motives behind Sir Percival’s surrender. She becomes so physically weak with emotion that she cannot tell Laura, the person most affected by the news. The stereotypical fainting woman cannot do much to defend herself or to outmaneuver her enemies. Recognizing this
change in herself, Marian begins to accept in herself the lesser qualities women are supposed to have. Although she has been courageous throughout this predicament, she quails at the thought of descending the stairs in order to eavesdrop on Sir Percival and Count Fosco, because her “courage was only a woman’s courage, after all; and it was very near to failing” (White 326). In transforming into a true woman, Marian cannot possess the courage she once had. In fact she cannot even acknowledge the courage she does still have, after all immediately after this she climbs onto the roof to listen to the conversation below. Part of the feminization process is destroying her confidence in what she has been previously capable of. This misconception of her courage, which appears in her reflective writing, points to her loss of confidence. She has been trained, through experiencing the stress of this crisis, to believe she is less than a man. The final blow to her agency occurs after she develops a fever, which affects her so strongly that when she writes, “the lines all run together” (White 342). These are the last moments of her diary in the novel. She is not permitted to speak again. Collins delivers a nearly fatal illness to her as a punishment for being so strong. So that she does not try to return to her prior strength after she regains her health, Collins “afforded” the Count “the opportunity of enjoying” her diary, and even writing in it (White 343). Her weak fainting illness, which is rather feminine in its existence, allows a man to take away her one outlet of individuality and of power. The diary is no longer her own; it has been written in and she now has no opportunity to rebuild through writing the courage she has lost. More than that it has allowed her to be “totally seen, without ever seeing” (Foucault 202) the Count observing her life. This observation on the Count’s part takes the place of being observed
by society, and thereby becomes the impetus for Marian to “assume responsibility for the constraints of power” (Foucault 202) obligated to women. The fact that the Count has seen every thought and feeling she had had that is not feminine, that he has read the moments when she breaks the social rules of gender, is the final contributing factor in her refeminization. From now on, the knowledge that she might be observed, and even punished, by society will keep her within the bounds of her gender role, while Walter Hartwright saves both Laura and Marian.

Agency in Performance:

No Name

1862

Magdalen, following the discovery that she is illegitimate, takes charge in both creating new identities for herself and in regaining her old identity. In these performances of identity, Magdalen must confront both men and strong women. After hearing that she is not her father’s legitimate child, Magdalen copies the letter explaining what happened and she copied the lawyer’s commentary, including the parts stipulating that she and her sister are “Nobody’s Children” (Name 109). Magdalen, by copying the letter and the lawyer’s comments owns the words as part of herself. Her choice to copy allows her to own the words, whereas with Sarah Leeson in The Dead Secret, Mrs. Treverton forces Sarah to take dictation and bookends the secret with her own handwriting. Magdalen adopts the lawyer’s understanding that she has no identity, and hereafter signs all her letters as “Magdalen” (Name 144, 262, etc.), excluding her family
name. By accepting the loss of her last name, and incorporating into her daily life the fact that she is not her father’s daughter in the eyes of the law, Magdalen has placed herself in a position to be reborn as something else. She is not clinging to what she was, and so there is room for change. Her illegitimacy leaves Magdalen without enough money to live, and so she departs from her sister to find a “living…in the manner which is fittest for” (Name 144) her. Because of her earlier success as an actress, Magdalen feels that performing will be the best way for her to earn her money. She has “no position to lose and no name to degrade” (Name 144), so she feels that she can perform wherever she pleases by adopting identities as her own, not just on stage. Her performances, because she is writing her own script to follow, as well as a few letters, become a way to write her own identity. Because of her choice to act, she, like many “women, as writers or as characters, are identified as at once the source and the focus of ‘a problem’” (Martino 228). Her choice to seek out an identity and to try to steal back her old one from Noel is condemnable because she is a woman and therefore it is not appropriate for her to join a theater company. Magdalen, not satisfied with earning a pittance as an inexperienced actress and finding being an illegitimate child too much to bear, decides to “open the campaign against Noel Vanstone and Mrs. Lecount” (Name 207) in order to retrieve the fortunes of her father that Noel inherited through her own illegitimacy. Thus Noel, the man who has inherited her father’s money and who bears what should be her last name, is the real target of her campaign. She hopes to marry him, preferably with inside help from the maid, Lecount, and thereby regain her original identity. In order to do this, she writes a character based off “of Miss Garth” (Name
207). Writing her performances and the characters she plays leads Magdalen to the chance to take back her name and her fortune.

Wilkie Collins creates a similar performitivity in *The Dead Secret* so that Rosamond can escape her newfound identity as an illegitimate child. Having finally found and read the secret, she cannot figure out how to tell her husband that she is not the person he married. Finally, she acts out a daydream in which she ends up “writing a novel” (*Secret* 282) with characters exactly like themselves. By acting out this new identity as writer, Rosamond accesses a unique combination: the power in reflective writing, as well as the weakness brought about by being unable to tell her husband to his face, without any subterfuge.

In order to produce verisimilitude in both her obviously adopted identities as well as her supposedly true identity, Magdalen needs a male director and sometimes playwright. Without these masculine guides, Magdalen’s courage and creativity would accomplish nothing. Her director and trainer take the form of Capt. Wragge, a very distant relation, whose poverty and manipulation has been a stain on the family for years. He finds Magdalen, after she ran away from her sister, and while explaining how he felt about her choosing to act, feels compelled to spell and sound out words as the speak. Starting with H, U, X – Hux;...T, A – Ta; Huxta; B, L, E – ble; Huxtable” (*Name* 156), Wragge spells out the name of the man she was going to meet. A man whose calling card she had tucked away on her person. He does this again, shortly after the first word, only this time he spells out, sounds out, and defines swindler: “S, W, I, N, D – swind; L, E, R – ler: Swindler. Definition: A moral agriculturist; a man who cultivates the field of
human sympathy” (Name 169). Wragge’s treatment of Magdalen shows a distrust of her literacy; he questions her ability to understand simple words, let alone write and effectively convey into the world a new identity. He convinces her that she needs instruction to make up for her “want of experience…in theatre” (Name 180) and offers his services as a manager and director. She chooses to accept. Effectively, she does not just accept help, but also the sentiment that she is not capable of succeeding on her own. Magdalen repeats Wragge’s suggestion that she is not literate enough; she has not been acting/writing long, to complete her plan. Wragge, not satisfied with taking over the direction of her performances or with suggesting that she is not capable of mastering the English language, steps forward “offering to write the Entertainment” (Name 191). Now, on top of instructing her on how to present her characters, Wragge will write the identities that she adopts each night. Magdalen no longer has any agency herself when it comes to her self-writing performances. Anne Rodway, from “The Diary of Anne Rodway” needs a similar form of direction, or at least she craves it. Although she handles Mary’s murder case well before her fiancé appears on the scene, she opens the story thinking “if only he returned” (“Rodway” 129) and repeatedly follows this with several variations of the theme. Anne, unlike Magdalen, can effectively handle herself for most of the case, but, yet, she wants a male presence there so badly that it starts off her story and repeatedly shows up.

Eventually Wragge is no longer enough of a director, because she needs someone who will be strong enough to take possession of her identity in the form of a husband. Believing that her being the “wretched wife” of her ex-fiancé, who treated her horribly,
would have been better “than the free woman” (Name 258), Magdalen effectively wishes for a man who could have guided her down a different path, with different identities to act out. Later, Kirke, having fallen in love with and taken care of Magdalen, becomes a director in her life in that he is the man with the final word and opportunity for passing judgment on what she has done. She writes “the whole story of her life” (Name 608) in letters to him while he is at sea. Once he has read the letters, Kirke expresses his approval by recognizing “the all-ennobling virtue, of a woman who speaks the truth” (Name 609) and by promising her marriage. Not only has her life story been transformed into nothing more than a chance to show that she is not afraid to tell the truth, but also, Kirke’s sign of approval is nothing more than an insult. He configures Magdalen’s new performance as his wife, rather than accepting the identities she has held throughout the novel or the initiative and strength her actions required of her. However, her true weakness at this moment is that there is no real difference between Magdalen the person and Magdalen the actress playing the good wife, just as there is not “any such difference” between “genuine womanliness and the ‘masquerade’” (Riviere 38). In being forced to take upon herself the role of the good wife, and foregoing all the performances she participated in before, Magdalen has become womanly, but because this concept of gender is socially constructed she has become nothing more than a performance decided upon by a man, in this case by Kirke.

After becoming reliant on Wragge as her director and playwright, Magdalen seems to lose her ability to act, thereby losing her ability to control how others think of her. Running away from Wragge, Magdalen, as the character Miss Garth, goes to meet
Lecount and Noel Vanstone to see what her chances are of convincing them to give her sister and herself enough money to live on. During her interview, she twice let “her own indomitable earnestness…betray her” (Name 236) by overreacting to statements about herself and her sister. By allowing this chink in her role of Miss Garth to appear, Magdalen shows who she truly is. Her acting fails so miserably that as soon as she leaves, Lecount announces to Noel that he is not to “call her Miss Garth” because they “have been favored by the performance of a clever masquerade,” the actress in which was “Miss Vanstone herself” (Name 240). Without someone there to remind her to keep her real personality from shining through, Magdalen is too emotionally tied to the situation to be able to keep up her pretenses. Her writing of the performance is weakened by her own emotions, much like Marian’s feminization in The Woman in White. Nonetheless, her machinations unexpectedly lead her sister and herself towards getting their fortune back, and therefore her writing is still strong, underscoring Collins’s clearly conflicting attitude of the role of women.

The Power of Evil:

Armadale

1866

Lydia Gwilt uses her writing as a confidant and as an exploration of her own thoughts. In her diary and the letters she writes Lydia develops her plans that maneuver all of the people within her reach in order for her to become the wife of a rich man. The first time she speaks, in a letter to Mrs. Oldershaw, Lydia Gwilt signs her letter “yours
affectionately” (Armadale 162). She does not actually feel this way, and admits it, but explains that “we all tell lies at the bottoms of our letters” (Armadale 162) so that the correspondence will be accepted and understood, rather than just read. She is willing to work within social conventions in her writing, but only as a means of manipulation. Later, while Mrs. Oldershaw is trying to convince Lydia to take part in a scam on Mr. Allan Armadale, Lydia addresses a letter to Oldershawe as “Dear Old Love” (Armadale 165) so that Maria will forgive her for her rudeness earlier. Although this manipulation does not provide for true self-expression, her writing is stronger and more effective in paving her way through life. As she applies for her new position as Miss Milroy’s governess, Lydia’s “nice letter” that is “so prettily expressed” (Armadale 206-207) ensures her the position. Had she not been so talented at writing, Miss Milroy might not have allowed her father to hire Lydia. Much later, when she is trying to get back into Allan’s good graces, she writes him a letter that “offers no apologies” for asking to see him, because she feels it would be “an act of justice towards a friendless woman whom he has been innocently the means of injuring and who is earnestly desirous to set herself right in his estimation” (Armadale 363). The letter is so carefully written, and pulls so much on Allan’s highly loyal and emotional tendencies that he cannot refuse. In fact, a lawyer, who is trying to keep Allan away from this woman, feels “profound admiration” (Armadale 363) for her skill in writing the letter and manipulating Allan. As Lydia’s plans become more and more complicated, she begins to confer with her diary, by rereading it, so that it can “show [her] what [she] risks” (Armadale 423). Her diary becomes sort of an advisor, because the writing reminds her what emotions she has been
subjected to and the act of keeping the diary helps her interpret the events as they unfold. The final sign of her strength is her acquisition of the novel. Although it is named after the five Allan Armadales in plot, Lydia becomes such a compelling character that Collins chooses to name the dramatic version Miss Gwilt. The novel, and the resulting play, is Lydia’s.

Despite this strength, Lydia is dismissible as a role model for female readers because she is evil. Collins repeats this theme with the foreign and evil Lecounte in No Name, the crazy Anne Catherick in The Woman in White, and the reformed, but still insane Rosanna Spearman in The Moonstone. However, because this theme of the other discounting any agency in women, no matter how strong they might be, is the strongest in Armadale, the only analysis of the technique will appear here. Her ability to express herself and to control how others interpret and react to her becomes intrinsically connected with her depravity. Lydia, who as a maid helped a marriage by forging letters, is introduced as “wicked” and someone Allan must “avoid” (Armadale 48) at all costs. From the start the readers know she is evil. More than that, the reason she is evil is because she was willing to forge a letter permitting the marriage that started this whole sordid affair of two Allan Armadales. It is her writing that turns her hand towards evil. Later the readers find that she “threw herself from the river steamer” and caused Allan Armadale to inherit the fortunes and “Thorpe-Ambrose” (Armadale 105). Although not hurting others, the attempted suicide is a sin and seems to transfer its bad luck and subsequent evil consequences to good characters throughout the novel. This sin allows for Lydia’s later evil schemes and the strong writing she incorporates into her actions.
Her real evil stems from her villainy directed towards Allan Armadale. She plans on relying on her beauty, which can still make a man “actually blush when [she] looks at him” (Armadale 162), to trap Allan Armadale. She is a “man-destroying woman, frequently and quite naturally presented as handsome . . .although they usually exhibit astounding beauty, it is really abrupt masculinity that characterizes these conventional types” (Reynolds 157). The feminine veneer presented through her beauty, actually only hides a masculine mind, which can only find release through her evil. In this way, she is also weakened, like Marian, by the fact that she must be somewhat masculine in order to be as intelligent as she is. Her original plan, to marry Allan under false pretenses and steal his money, is wicked enough, but after she marries Ozias Midwinter under his real name, she changes her plans to something far more evil. She will “poison” Allan, and “claim” to be Allan’s “widow” (Armadale 663). According to Collins, a woman cannot have any agency, cannot be unmarried, and cannot express herself, unless she is an evil murderous creature. She feeds off of her evil deeds. Although Wilkie Collins does indeed weaken Lydia at the point, his efforts do not compare to the essays of the period, meant “to stabilize the discourse on gender, by reinstating a nostalgically evoked domestic ideal of the womanly woman, and by ridiculing and satirizing any deviations from this norm” (Pyket 67).

To further underscore the relationship with her immorality and her self-writing, Collins momentarily lifts up her moral side, and subsequently her writing and her identity weakens to the point of cessation. Upon deciding to give up her schemes to marry Allan Armadale, and instead love and marry Ozias Midwinter, Lydia chooses to “close and lock
this book [the diary], never to write in it, never to open it again” (Armadale 51). The decision to lock up the writing that holds all of her plans is to her a “great victory” that proves she has “trampled [her] own wickedness under foot” (Armadale 51). As long as she expresses herself through her writing in any way, especially if her expression gives her agency at all, she and her actions will be evil. She, like any woman, must be going against morality if she is able to take care of herself and get what she wants out of this world. When she inevitably returns to her diary “two months” later, she claims that she had to return to “this secret friend of [her] wretchedest and wickedest hours” (Armadale 545). Even she is aware that her immorality is inseparably linked with the act of writing in her diary. After only her second entry, Lydia begins to adopt her plans to win Allan Armadale’s fortune once more. At first, she only wants to “calculate the chances” and then afterwards, she can “easily tear the leaf out, and destroy it, if the prospect looks too encouraging” (Armadale 548). But then, after she finds the chances “tempting,” Lydia refuses to “tear out the leaf” because her “Diary is so nicely bound” (Armadale 549).

Now, only one day after she took up her diary again, Lydia is back to her evil ways. She will not be contented being married to Ozias. Writing to her equals scheming and trying to find a better situation than the one she is in, a situation preferably without a man. As the novel culminates in the final scenes at the sanatorium, Lydia “must close the book [diary] this time for good and all,” because she has written on the “last morsel of space on the last page” (Armadale 61). Although it takes a little while for the act of shutting her diary to catch up with her, she once more becomes good without the influence of her self-writing to tempt her. She stands ready to kill Allan, but finds Ozias instead. In that
moment she has an ethical crisis and realizes that what she would have done is wrong. Realizing what she has done in the past, and what she would have done in that moment, Lydia offers up the “one atonement” she can think of: “the atonement of [her] death” (Armadale 666). Permanently closing her diary, although preparing her for this moment of morality, is not enough to protect her against some other form of corrupting self-writing in the future. Therefore she cannot just cease writing; she must cease to exist if her soul can possibly hope for redemption.

Male Acquisition of Story:

The Moonstone

1868

Although there is no one strong female character, The Moonstone’s narrative is often informed, if not written by women at several different points in the novel. The Moonstone opens with a narrative by the butler, Gabriel Betteredge. He does not have the slightest idea how to start his part of the tale, and so he “consult[s his] daughter, Penelope” (Moonstone 14). She suggests that he “should set down what happened, regularly day by day” (Moonstone 14). When Gabriel admits that he had no recollection of the dates, Penelope offers to help by “looking into her own diary” (Moonstone 14). Despite the fact that she is not actually given this part of the narrative to write herself, her role is desperately important. Without Penelope, the beginning of the mystery would have been confusedly represented, and the circumstances of the case would not have been explained. Penelope’s help is so substantial that Betteredge feels the need to
acknowledge it a second time in his narrative. When he believes that there are several
days that he might omit from his part of the novel, Gabriel confirms this by “consulting
her journal” and continues to rely on “Penelope’s help” (Moonstone 44) as he decides of
which dates to take note. Without Penelope’s record of events, Gabriel would not have
been able to perform his office. She demonstrates a control over past events, which her
father, whose control should be doubled by his gender and parental status, does not have
at all.

Meanwhile, Miss Clack contributes to the novel, as well. She has this opportunity
because she still “keep[s her] little diary” with all “of the day’s events” (Moonstone 171)
entered. Her reflective writing, including her “opinions” and interpretations of the
events she witnesses, appears “exactly as [she finds] them recorded in [her] diary”
(Moonstone 224). Miss Clack colors the reader’s view of the events so that they see the
mystery as she does at the time it occurs. She also takes the opportunity provided from
transcribing her diary to add her current opinions of the situation, including her opinion
of Mr. Franklin Blake. Multiple times she accuses Blake of changing what “may not
prove to be sufficiently flattering” (Moonstone 172) to himself or his wife. These sorts of
charges, especially made so publicly, are evidence of the force of her will power. She is
not afraid to confront men, the way that a woman ought to be.

Unable to let even these rather weak characters stand, Collins filters each of these
women through a male character. Penelope gives her father, Gabriel Betteridge,
complete control of her part of the story. Betteridge, when he finds he is not “quite
clever enough” (Moonstone 10) to write his part of the narrative, requests his daughter to
“tell the story instead” by copying “her own diary” (Moonstone 14). She is unwilling to share her diary with the world, because it is “for her own private eye” (Moonstone 14). This principle of hers allows her to take a strong stance against her father, but he does not allow the readers to interpret it as such. According to him, she will not send in a copy of her diary because it includes the names of “sweethearts” (Moonstone 15). He negates entirely her desire to have some privacy by trivializing it in his narrative, and, worse, transforms it into a choice motivated by her subservience to the male gender. According to him, and, as a result, to the unquestioning reader, Penelope’s decisions are motivated entirely by her interactions with the opposite, and supposedly dominant, sex. Despite the validity of her decision, Collins still manages to orchestrate the events so that the narrative is entrusted to a man instead of a woman. Besides, although Betteredge does mention Penelope’s help on two separate pages, he confirms his statements with her diary for 159 pages. He takes advantage of her help and claims her work as his own for the majority of his narrative. Besides this particular male lens obscuring the readers’ view of what is essentially Penelope’s narrative, Collins provides yet another lens: Franklin Blake.

Also, Franklin Blake, who is the editor of all these narratives, becomes the lens through which the readers see Miss Clack and Rachel Verinder. On several occasions, Miss Clack reminds the readers that she is working for Mr. Blake, and has specific orders. She introduces her narrative as “serv[ing] the caprice of a wealthy member of the family” and as making her “useful to Mr. Franklin Blake” (Moonstone 171). Allowing her readers no illusions that this is entirely her narrative, Miss Clack immediately
announces the restraint placed on her by Franklin. She is subject to his caprices, and must remain faithful enough to his orders that she may remain useful. After informing her readers that she is writing this for a particular person, Miss Clack continues throughout her narrative to name Franklin Blake’s rules. She is not “allowed to improve” (Moonstone 177) her audience by using her narrative as a political or religious podium. The “unrelenting pecuniary pressure of Mr. Blake’s cheques” do not allow her to avoid relating “painful disclosures” (Moonstone 188). She may not include the “copious Extracts” (Moonstone 212) that she seems to feed off. In fact, Miss Clack begins to feel that “prohibits everything” (Moonstone 212). Clearly, with all of these rules, the narrative included in this novel is not the narrative Miss Clack would have chosen to write. Blake, in fulfilling his own purpose, has structured Miss Clack’s submission to the point that it cannot truly be called hers anymore. Early in her narrative, Miss Clack goes so far as to mention that it would be “easy for Mr. Blake to suppress” (Moonstone 172) whatever he may please. The readers must know that what they see is not necessarily her words, that Mr. Blake is collecting all of these narratives and presenting them in the way he sees most fit. Amusingly, Blake, in attempt to restore his name, chooses to write over, and thereby change, her narrative, charging the readers to read the “Note added by Franklin Blake” (Moonstone 172). His obvious separation of his note and Miss Clack’s narrative lends validity to his ethics as an editor; nonetheless, Blake adds a note in the middle of Miss Clack’s narrative when the note would have functioned just as well as part of an introduction, similar to the introduction and explanation in The Woman in White. He wants to influence the readers during this particular narrative. Although he
promises that “nothing will be added, altered, or removed” (Moonstone 172), Blake does use his note to mar the readers’ opinion of Miss Clack. While assuring “Miss Clack” that she “may make her mind easy on this point” (Moonstone 172), Blake uses an extremely condescending tone, which points to the reader how little he thinks of Miss Clack. He also does not address himself to the readers, only to Miss Clack. If he wanted only to reassure Miss Clack, he would have written her a letter. Instead he uses a medium that will also allow him to insult Miss Clack, and sway the alliances of the readers.

Franklin Blake is not the only lens through which the readers see Miss Clack. Before she is introduced, Gabriel Betteredge asks that the readers do him “the favor of not believing a word she says, if she speaks” (Moonstone 166) of him. This statement makes her writing seem untruthful and catty. He presents her as someone who would lie remarkably with the rather common motivation of not liking a person. She does not even have a chance to say a word before the readers feel that she is unreliable.

Miss Clack may be attacked from all sides, but she at least gets to filter her voice through these lenses. Rachel Verinder, the woman to whom the entire story belongs, never once has the chance to speak. For much of the novel, Rachel remains in “her bedroom” with the door “shut and locked” (Moonstone 71), because she is unwilling to admit to anyone that she saw Franklin Blake take the diamond. However, the one chance Rachel has to speak, when she and Franklin “confronted each other” (Moonstone 300) after a long time not speaking to each other, Blake takes over the narrative. This moment is the crux of the novel: Rachel finally says “I saw you take the diamond with my own eyes!” (Moonstone 303). Finally the readers know who took the diamond; finally she
admits that she knew the entire time who it was, and yet she does not get to tell the
readers about it, since this moment, even more than any other in the book shows that her
words are funneled through Franklin’s memory.

Final Split:

Man and Wife

1870

In Man and Wife, with Collins’s concentration focused on protesting the Scottish
marriage law, which causes his plot and character development to be less subtle and
intricate than usual, his inner conflict between the New Woman and the Cult of
Domesticity splits itself into two separate characters. Anne, a poor woman who relies on
the financial help of her friend, Blanche, takes control of her own life and the actions of
her lover Geoffrey Delamayn through means of a particular letter. Geoffrey, after
promising her marriage and placing her in a compromising position, leaves Anne. In
order to solve this problem, Anne “writ[es to him]to insist on” (Man 33) his visiting her
at Blanche’s party by assuring him that she “won’t answer for what may happen” (Man
61) if he does not. By forcing him to see her face to face and listen to her plan for
elopement, Anne wins the first battle against Geoffrey in retrieving her honor and
reestablishing her identity as a socially acceptable woman. In this letter, she demands
that he act on what he “vowed” and marry her, because she was already his “wedded
wife” in the “sight of Heaven” (Man 61). She claims her identity and insists that a man
accept it. Part of her plan is to write letters to her employer and to Blanche, claiming that
she is “privately married, and called away unexpectedly to join [her] husband” (Man 35). Her writing is strong enough to reconfigure her identity in the minds of her best friend and Blanche’s father, who has employed Anne for years. It seems at first that her writing will even be able to predict the future, for the letter “will be the truth in a few hours” (Man 35). These letters are part of the plan that convinces Geoffrey to marry her. The letters she writes will hide his name for a while, allowing him to collect his inheritance, and so he is willing to go through with the plan.

For a short time, Anne and Geoffrey battle over the power of her writing contained within the letter, making it so that Anne fails to maintain agency. Interestingly, as soon as Geoffrey escapes the force of Anne’s writing, he is able to resist the impact of the promise he made. He disappears to his family holdings in town and sends Anne a note explaining that he left to watch at his father’s deathbed and so will not be able to meet at the inn where they are supposed to get married on “one of Anne’s own letters” (Man 42) written to him. It is in fact the letter she sent that forced him to appear at the party that day, and to listen to her demands and plans for marriage. By writing over the letter, just as Count Fosco did to Marian’s diary in The Woman in White, Geoffrey attempts to take over her power in writing and transform the outcome of the meeting that her letter arranged. He is trying to own and manipulate her. After Anne receives the letter, it is stolen by a steward, who hopes that “there’ll be a reward offered for it ane o’ these days” (Man 62) and keeps it. After Geoffrey uses a badly written law to claim that Anne married the man who originally delivered the letter to her at the hotel so that he can marry a rich woman without being interfered with, Anne takes it in mind to find the
letter. When she does find it, she must pay the steward a “five pound note” as well as convince him that it is her “letter” for him to “gi’ it back wi’ a’ the pleasure in life” (Man 106). The steward acts as the first male challenge to her in regaining the letter. Not only must she convince him of her financial independence and superiority, but also she must prove her identity and show him that it is the same identity as the author of the letter. Since her letter is so expressive, he cannot help but admit that she is the author. Geoffrey’s small note on the outside of the letter still configures the letter as his story; however, she is able to take possession of the writing, and the part of her story contained within it, once again. About to tear the letter to pieces, Anne realizes that if she allowed him to marry “her conduct would sanction the false conclusion that she was powerless to interfere, because she was married already to another man” (Man 160). She must prove that she did not marry Mr. Brinkworth, and that she, indeed, is already married to Geoffrey according to Scottish marriage laws. Her realization leads to the answer to all of her problems: Keep the letter and show it to the proper authorities. In taking possession of her writing once more and putting it to a use that will set right her identity, Anne has combated the seal of Geoffrey’s writing on her letter. His note, the announcement that he will not meet her at the inn and therefore not marry her, does not have the power to recreate their position as unmarried people. As Heller points out when discussing other characters, as she “speaks over his voice, which had momentarily overpowered her own” one thinks of a “revolutionary virago” (Heller 105). Clearly, Collins wants this woman to be a strong character throughout the book; according to
Heller, perhaps Anne and other women are supposed to be signs of and a call to revolution.

Anne is not only strong because she is able to shape her identity through her writing, but she is also strong because she is willing to claim that identity, no matter what the cost to herself might be. Having confronted him once more, before producing the letter, Anne discovers just how “hideous, tigerish” his “devouring hatred” (Man 196) towards her has become. Even armed with this knowledge and her male friend’s advice not to go through with claiming Geoffrey as her husband, Anne is determined to “produce this letter” and “declare [herself] Geoffrey Delamayn’s wife” (Man 197). Willing to sacrifice her happiness and safety in order to help her best friend, Blanche, Anne is more potent than any other character in the novel. She is the embodiment of all the independent characteristics in Wilkie’s other characters, without any of the major defects in agency.

However, just like in the other characters, Wilkie Collins seems to be uncomfortable with such a strong character. So he creates a flawed character, who helps offset all the power that Anne possesses. Hester Dethridge, a cook in the same household for which Anne works, is so handicapped that she has no real way to be a strong woman. Having already been broken down by her “inveterate drunkard” (Man 46) of a husband, who “had struck her a blow which had produced very remarkable nervous results. She had lain insensible many days together, and had recovered with the total loss of her speech” (Man 46). Hester already has little possibility for agency, because of her permanent disabilities inflicted on her by an abusive man. Since she is dumb, Hester’s
only form of communication is through writing with a “slate and pencil” (Man 46), which she wears around her neck at all times. Although this slate may improve the strength of her writing because it is her only form of communication, her overall communication abilities are ineffective. Hester is inevitably weakened by how “slowly” (Man 46) she writes, and how shortened her answers must needs be. Besides that, for her to write another message, she must erase the first. This form of palimpsest so completely destroys the first narrative that her identity can never become concrete. Parts are always missing or destroyed. True, her written words carry significant weight, but her ability to relay them in such a way that they construct an identity to those around her is painfully ineffective. In fact, when Geoffrey asks who she is, her reply is only “I am the cook” (Man 93). To explain what function she performs that allows her on the grounds and also to give her name would take up too much room on her slate and too much time. She becomes known only by her subservient gender-dictated position. Eventually, the peculiarity of this handicap marks her, in the eyes of others, as “mad” (Man 94). Now her slate is not just limiting how effectively she can communicate; it is limiting how seriously anyone will consider her words. After all, one does not listen to the ramblings, or in this case, doodling of a crazy woman. These issues in her writing prevent her from establishing any real agency.

Besides these handicaps, Hester takes part in evil actions that destroy any power or respect that her writing brings her, similar to Lydia Gwilt’s evil intentions in Armadale. The first sign that Hester is not the “trust-worthy woman” (Man 46) that the readers are introduced to is Geoffrey’s inexplicable association of his problem about how
to inform Anne that he will announce her as married to another man with “the dumb old woman…as if the answer to the question lay in something connected with her” (Man 94). Geoffrey’s odd premonitions that point to her as evil include a dream about her and “her infernal slate” (Man 139). In Collins’s novels, dreams should be taken seriously, especially if they take the form of bad omens. The frightful image of Hester conjured up in Geoffrey’s dream, and the antagonistic presence of the slate, foreshadow her evil conduct and the role that writing will take in that evil.

The bad feelings that Geoffrey experiences concerning Hester are not the only signs that she is evil. Her actions as the novel progresses, as well as her writing that reveals past actions, show her to be evil enough such that she is discounted as a New Woman figure. As Anne lies dying on the floor, Hester claims that it is better “to let her be” so that “God will take her” and announces that her shivers indicate that she has “been walking over her grave” (Man 99). Her crass statements are simply rude; they indicate a disregard for life so entire that it becomes malicious and immoral. Finally, Hester writes a confession, that Geoffrey finds. In this confession, Hester admits that upon deciding to kill her husband, she “took a damp towel” (Man 223) and laid it “over his face” (Man 225) while he was too drunk to struggle. As a murderess, Hester cannot be a role model for those women who want to become more independent, and so whatever strength she might have has gone to waste. However, her writing does not have much power, except to be used against her. The evil she admits to committing in the confession becomes information useful in bribing her. Geoffrey steals the confession from her, thereby stealing her identity, and realizes that “while the confession was in his pocket the woman
herself was in his power” and she “must get it on [his] terms” (Man 227). Not only has the murder weakened her morally, but also it has placed her in a position of subservience to a man. Geoffrey will use his position of power to force her to help him in his attempt to kill his wife.

Conclusion:

The forms of male self-writing available during the Victorian era were mostly comprised of autobiographies, such as John Stuart Mill’s Autobiography and John Henry Cardinal Newman’s Apologia Pro Vita Sua. These texts were set down specifically as an attempt to identify who these men were and communicate it to their audiences. More than that, these autobiographies were meant to restructure their pasts so that their lives had one constant meaning. For Newman, this meant that he had to explain that there was no “change, intellectual or moral, wrought upon [his] mind” (Newman 132). Clearly this kind of self-writing is not what can be found in the female writings Collins constructs. The women do not need to explain their lives in such a way as to make them flow towards a particular ideology, but rather they need to describe their lives and thereby the little bits of power and personality that come through during the simple events and the horrific ones.

In these events we see many forms of both weakness and strength in the women. Anne Rodway from “The Diary of Anne Rodway” actively sets out to solve a problem, whereas most of the other women either cause problems or are trying to save themselves from crises that they had no choice but to be involved in. Her courage is impressive,
Despite its eventual failure. Her disappearance from her own text, although seemingly done by choice is inevitable, because of the social constraints on women at the time. The impression on the readers is still that she found out the murder on her own. Although the women disappear somewhat from *The Moonstone*, they often find ways that still allow parts of their story to escape. They feed the plot and educate the readers. Yet they cannot be called figures of true agency. Also, Lydia Gwilt, from *Armadale*, loses much of her identity and effectiveness through her wavering between good and evil. She disappears from the text at several points as well, but the consequences of her actions remain. No matter what else happens, Lydia was strong enough to accomplish much in the novel. Meanwhile, *The Dead Secret* and *Man and Wife* present two women who symbolize Collins’s conflicting attitudes towards the gender roles. Each has a strong woman and a weak woman, effectively pitted against each other. Mrs. Treverton’s powerful writing, though in a way encouraging, also endangers female agency, because of the way it subjects Sarah Leeson to her will and nearly kills her. For *Man and Wife*, however, the only conflict between Anne and Hester’s writing is the debate that they offer. Anne’s establishment of identity seems to speak more powerfully to the reader than the weaknesses of the evil and disabled Hester, because people connect to a happy ending more easily than to a sad one. Nonetheless both characters pull against each other in such a way that no real commitment to an ideology on Collins’s part occurs. Both *The Woman in White* and *No Name* end with a main female character adopting the proper role of a woman in the Cult of Domesticity. But yet the machinations that save Marian
and recreate Magdalen’s identity are lasting impressions. One cannot easily forget how powerful and effective they are.

Throughout his novels and stories, Collins creates an intricate debate between the New Woman and the Cult of Domesticity, yet he finds no answers, which is part of why he continues to reshape the debate. Often with his novels it is the memory of female agency left with the readers that does not allow the reader to see the character as weak. Collins would not have worked so hard to create strong women, nor would he have created women so powerful that the readers cannot forget what they were if he only wanted to support the Cult of Domesticity and the view of women as a weak and inferior gender. Furthermore, Wilkie Collins’s attacks against women’s identity in their self-writing involves many techniques, comprised of many different fronts, yet his support of strong women takes the same form of active self-writing again and again. I believe this shows that he feels women are capable of constructing a powerful identity for themselves and so no one kind of attack could really create a dent in the front that the women present.
Bibliography


