

## Author Spotlight

# WILKIE COLLINS



Wilkie Collins was born January 9, 1824 in the Borough of St. Marylebone, England to Anglo-Scottish parents. He attended school in the 1830s and lived in Italy with his parents (1836-1838). His first known publication is a short story in 1843. His father died in 1847 and in 1848, his first book was published— *The Memoirs of the Life of William Collins, R.A.*—a biography of his father and notable landscape painter. In 1850, Collins published his first novel, *Antonina*. Although he shunned marriage, Collins had two significant women in his life, Caroline Graves and Martha Rudd—common law wife and the mother of his three children. He died in London, September 23, 1889 following a paralytic stroke.

In 1851 Collins met Charles Dickens and formed a close friendship. Wilkie Collins began his literary career writing articles and short stories for Dickens' periodicals. *The Woman in White* was serialized in *All the Year Round*, the weekly periodical edited by his friend, occasional collaborator and competitor, Charles Dickens, from November 1859 to August 1860. In August 1860, it was published in three volumes and became his most popular work. Collins published his best known works in the 1860s, achieved financial stability and an international reputation. During this time he began suffering from gout, took opium for pain and developed an addiction. During the 1870s and 1880s, the quality of his writing declined along with his health.

The plot of *The Woman in White* is based, as were many of Collins's crime stories, on an actual case history he discovered in Maurice Méjan's *Recueil des causes célèbres* (1808). This dramatic tale is told through multiple narrators. Frederick Fairlie, a wealthy hypochondriac, hires virtuous Walter Hartright to tutor his beautiful niece and heiress, Laura, and her homely, courageous half sister, Marian Halcombe. Although Hartright and Laura fall in love, she honors her late father's wish that she marry Sir Percival Glyde, a villain who plans to steal her inheritance. Glyde is assisted by sinister Count Fosco, a cultured, corpulent Italian who became the archetype of subsequent villains in crime novels. Their scheme is threatened by Anne Catherick, a mysterious fugitive from a mental asylum who dresses in white, resembles Laura, and knows the secret of Glyde's illegitimate birth. Through the perseverance of Hartright and Marian, Glyde and Fosco are defeated and killed, allowing Hartright to marry Laura.

Prepared by Maureen Socha  
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Source: Biography Reference Center, Masterplots, Introduction to *The Woman in White* published by Everyman's Library and [www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com)



## Discussion Questions for *The Woman in White*

1. Laura is presented as an ideal of Victorian womanhood—obedient, respectful of social conventions, and willing to sacrifice her own wishes for others. How does her double, Anne Catherick, illuminate the dark side of that ideal?
2. “You will make aristocratic connections that will be of the greatest use to you in life,” Collins’s father told him when he started school. But Collins lived a life on the periphery of respectable English society that his father would not have condoned. In the novel, how is pedigree intertwined with deception and immorality? Where do the lines blur between servants and the served? How are the underprivileged used as a screen for viewing the upper-crust characters?
3. Why is Marian so mesmerized by Fosco, who she says “has interested me, has attracted me, has forced me to like him”? Why is Fosco able to see Marian, despite her physical unattractiveness, as a “magnificent creature”?
4. When Hartright returns from Honduras to restore Laura’s true identity, he brings tactics he had first used “against suspected treachery in the wilds of Central America” to “the heart of civilised London.” Why is he forced to work outside the laws and conventions of society to achieve his aim? Why did he have to leave England and return in order to make this change?
5. One critic has suggested that Marian and Fosco might be considered the true protagonists of *The Woman in White*. (In many ways they are much closer to Collins’s own bohemian sensibilities than Hartright and Laura.) In what sense might this be true? How would you interpret the story’s conclusion— especially Marian and Fosco’s fate—in this light?
6. The use of multiple narrators was one of Collins’s favorite storytelling techniques. What qualities does each narrator bring to the story? How does each change our view of the characters? Could the story have been told from a single viewpoint, and if so, whose?

Source: [www.penguinrandomhouse.com](http://www.penguinrandomhouse.com)

