Wilkie Collins’ Challenge to Traditional Female Roles in *The Woman in White*
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Introduction

“This is the story of what a Woman’s patience can endure, and what a Man’s resolution can achieve”. So begins Wilkie Collins’ thrilling novel *The Woman in White*, published in 1859. One hundred and fifty years after its publication this novel is still as intriguing and fascinating as the day it was written, and as a result, it is still read worldwide. This popularity together with its many up-to-date themes makes it a novel suitable for language studies. Collins was one of the most popular authors of the Victorian Era, a time when novelists had a great influence on society, and when prominent authors, such as his good friend and mentor, Charles Dickens, and the Brontë sisters, were writing their bestselling novels.

Alongside names like Ellen Wood and Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Collins was also one of the authors who inspired the creation of a new literary genre: the sensational novel, where *The Woman in White* is seen by many as the first example. The sensational novel became a popular literary genre during the 1860s to1870s, which Elaine Showalter describes as “a genre in which everything that was not forbidden was compulsory” (158). What distinguished the sensational novels from other literary genres at this time was the fact that the authors placed their sensational stories within the domestic sphere, which was something that had not been done before, and which in turn captured the interest of housewives, since these were novels to which they could relate.

During the 19th century, the view of women and their duties and goals was very different from what it is today. Women did not have the right to vote, nor were they allowed any form of higher education until 1848. It was not until the Matrimonial Act of 1857 that divorce became a possibility for women, but it was still not an easy task for a woman to sue for divorce; it was much easier for men. This lack of social status resulted in very different prospects for a woman’s future. She was supposed to marry, start a family and become a loving and supportive wife, and thus live up to a concept known as the-Angel-in-the-House. Any other career or goal for a woman was highly unlikely and not favoured by society.

However, during the 1860s the social status and role of women began to change, much as a result of different Acts being passed to improve the social status of women. Furthermore, Susan Balée claims that “these changes were linked to the influence of popular literature” and that the authors of this time began writing novels which
“revolutionized public knowledge”, and not only fiction (201). Wilkie Collins was definitely one of the writers who contributed to the change in women’s status through his novels and heroines. This essay argues that in his novel *The Woman in White*, Collins challenges the stereotype of Victorian womanhood in the presentation of Laura Fairlie and Marian Halcombe, and it aims to prove this by examining and comparing the two heroines of the novel to each other as well as to the traditional Victorian view of women and literary heroines.

*The Woman in White* is a thrilling story about the lives of young Laura Fairlie and her half-sister Marian, where they face conspiracy, madness, and terrible deeds aimed to end their lives. It takes place in different parts of England in the mid-nineteenth century where we follow Laura from her life at Limmeridge as a young bride-to-be, to Blackwater Park and her life as the persecuted wife of the cruel Sir Percival Glyde, to her institutionalization in an asylum, and finally to London, where she marries her former drawing teacher, Walter Hartright. Through all this she has the constant companionship of Marian, who helps her through her toughest and most challenging times. This novel follows a different narrative structure than what is commonly used because it is presented by different narrators who all have different connections and views on the story and its developments.

This essay is divided into four chapters, where the first two will examine the characters Laura and Marian. Laura will be compared to the expected qualities of the traditional literary heroine while Marian will both be compared and contrasted to these expected qualities. This will demonstrate how Collins created a new literary heroine in Marian and how he goes against the traditional Victorian view of women by so doing. The third chapter will look closely at the sisters’ relationship, in order to show its importance and how their strong love for each other influences their decisions as well as their behaviour. It will also be shown how Collins not only goes against the Victorian view of women, but the Victorian view on family and sisterhood. The last chapter has taken the form of a didactic approach to this novel. It will explain why a teacher can use *The Woman in White* in the language classroom, as well as giving examples of how it can be used.

*The Woman in White* is a novel which has been examined and debated by many critics over the years, and many theses and studies have been written with this novel as their foundation. For this essay a feminist perspective has been chosen, the two most
important studies being Susan Balée’s *Wilkie Collins and Surplus Women: The Case of Marian Halcombe* and Leila Silvana May’s *Sensational Sisters: Wilkie Collins's The Woman in White*, since they have addressed aspects closely connected to this essay’s argument, and have thus provided me with a solid foundation for my own study. The sisters’ relationship has been further developed to show how a traditional and a modern literary heroine complement each other and how their relationship contains elements of eroticism. For the didactic chapter four sources have been used to explore how best to work with classic literature in the language classroom: *Skolverket*, Tricia Hedge’s *Teaching and Learning in the Language Classroom*, David Willis & Jane Willis’ *Doing Task-based Teaching*, and Murat Hişmanoğlu’s *Teaching English Through Literature*. 
Chapter 1: Laura, the Traditional Heroine

In this chapter the character of Laura Fairlie, the traditional heroine of the novel, will be analyzed. First, it will briefly describe one of the first scenes in the novel where Walter Hartright meets Anne Catherick, the “Woman in White”, and how this meeting affects the portrayal of Laura Fairlie throughout the main parts of the novel. Secondly, a description of the first portrayal of Laura in the novel will be given, which will be followed by a closer examination of her characteristic qualities. These qualities will be compared to the expected qualities of a traditional literary heroine from this era. Lastly, the development of Laura’s character throughout the novel will be examined in order to demonstrate whether or not her development follows that of the traditional heroine.

At an early stage in the novel Walter Hartright, the opening narrator of the novel, meets Anne Catherick for the first time. This meeting occurs on a cold autumn night after midnight; Walter is walking along a deserted road on his way into London, when suddenly he feels the light touch of a hand upon his shoulder. When turning round, he sees a woman completely dressed in white, who appears to be utterly lonely and helpless, all alone on the road, and with a rather strange and scared appearance. After giving her a helping hand by showing her the way to London, he overhears a conversation revealing to him that she has escaped from an asylum. Even though this disturbing information has been brought to his attention, Walter cannot help wondering if she was not wrongly locked up in the asylum, and if he will ever meet her again. It has by now been made clear that Anne Catherick, though her name is unknown at this stage in the novel, has made a great impression on Walter. The memory of this meeting, as well as the subconscious feelings he develops for her will affect him as the story progresses. However, it will not only affect Walter, but also our view of Laura Fairlie when the narration is carried forward in the words and thoughts of Walter, which covers an extensive part of the story.

It is with this in mind that we can continue to the first portrayal of young Laura Fairlie, given by and seen through the eyes of Walter Hartright. She is described as a blonde, blue-eyed, and beautiful young woman, who is completely dressed in white. The great attraction Walter feels towards Laura is based on the striking resemblance between Laura and the fragile and helpless Anne Catherick, the woman whom Walter is already drawn to. Several of the expressions used to describe the physical appearance of Laura should be looked upon through the Victorian ideal of female purity, an aspect
addressed by Sandra Gilbert & Susan Gubar. First of all we have Laura’s completely white dress, where white is the colour of angels and of purity, but also the description of her blonde hair as light and golden is a reference to angels and the “whiteness of heaven”, a place where those who lived a pure life were rewarded. The reference to heaven can also be found in the description of her eyes, which shine with “the light of a purer and a better world” (52). To further make the reader understand how beautiful Laura is, Collins, through Walter, continues his description of her by comparing her beauty and her gentle character to that of a mother: “the woman who first gives life [and] light” (52). By the above description of Laura it is made clear that, to Walter, she represents the ideal of the pure and angel-like woman of the Victorian Era.

During this first description of Laura, she is a young bride-to-be, living in her childhood home at Limmeridge under the guardian eyes of her uncle, Frederick Fairlie. She is never lonely, since she has the company of her half-sister and best friend, Marian Halcombe. Her expectations and dreams for her future life as a married woman are to become a loving and supportive wife, who controls the domestic situation: the so-called Angel-in-the-House. Lynn Linton describes the Angel-in-the-House as a woman whose biggest joy is to tend to her husband and give birth to his children. She is a woman “who, when she married, would be her husband’s friend and companion, but never his rival … a tender mother, [and] an industrious housekeeper” (qtd in Cunningham, 8). Gilbert & Gubar also give a definition of the Angel-in-the-House as “a woman in white”, “passive, submissive, unawakened, she has a pure white complexion which betrays no self-assertive consciousness, no desire for self-gratification” (615 f).

Having presented Laura as a beautiful, marriageable young woman, Collins then adds other qualities, typical of the traditional literary heroine. One of these is female fragility. As described by Judith Rowbotham, the traditional heroine is often portrayed as sensitive and weak, she is a woman who will be bedridden by a headache and who suffers from “various malaises”. This fragility has been known as the “early Victorian invalidishness” (36). However, it is worth addressing the fact that these “various malaises” also include an aspect of female sexuality, namely a woman’s menstruation. During the time in which this novel takes place, there were no treatments for the pain or agony a woman can experience during her period as those available today, and the only option was to stay in bed and rest. The “early Victorian invalidishness” is found in Laura, as can be seen in Marian’s first mention of her, addressing Walter when he first
arrives at Limmeridge to be Laura’s tutor in the skill of drawing. She states that Laura cannot come down to welcome him because she is “nursing that essentially feminine malady, a slight headache” and even though she feels better the next day she is not yet “sufficiently recovered” to be able to join them for breakfast (38, 50).

Furthermore, the traditional heroine should, as a result of her sensitivity, not be able to handle sad and/or disturbing news, but should rather be spared from it. This is an aspect which fits in perfectly to Laura’s character. Later in the story, when Laura lives with Walter and Marian in London and the devious deeds of Sir Percival and Count Fosco have been revealed to Walter and Marian, they both decide not to share this information with Laura. They feel the need to protect her from unpleasant news, and are afraid that her already very fragile psyche will not be able to handle such news. Even the death of Sir Percival is not mentioned for the same reason.

Laura’s main characteristic is her weakness of character, which can be seen in relation to female fragility and sensitivity mentioned above. This is a quality which Laura demonstrates throughout the novel. While living at Limmeridge she has agreed to be married to Sir Percival Glyde, but this marriage arrangement is not drawn up as a result of love between the two. It is rather a business arrangement between Sir Percival and Laura’s deceased father. It is, as Marian puts it, “an engagement of honour, not of love – her father sanctioned it on his death-bed … she herself neither welcomed it, nor shrank from it” (73). She has agreed to marry a man to please her father, and decides to honour the arrangement even though she has fallen in love with Walter. Although she gives Sir Percival an opportunity to break their engagement by confessing her feelings for another man, she does not have the strength to end their engagement on her own, and when Sir Percival refuses to do so, she marries him. Jenni Calder states that for the women of the Victorian Era marriage was “not only the proper ambition of well-bred young ladies, it [was] their only safe refuge” (17). She continues by stating that women of this time had no economic rights and were dependent on the generosity of their husbands (17).

At Blackwater Park, her home after her marriage, Laura is the victim of the persecution of her husband. She is neglected and her thoughts and ideas and, frankly, her entire being are seen as worthless. There is only one example to be found where Laura stands up for herself at Blackwater Park, and it concerns the question whether or not she should sign a document without having read it thoroughly. However, even if
Laura is the one who stands up to her husband, she would not have done so if Marian had not told her to. Laura is most often very compliant and never stands up for herself, but instead she lets Marian do it for her. Nevertheless, there are some scenes later on in the novel where she does in fact demonstrate some sort of inner strength. What needs to be noted is that these few episodes have one thing in common: the safety of Marian is at risk. When Marian is ill and unable to defend herself, or Laura for that matter, Laura rises to the occasion and fights for her right to be with Marian and to see her, exclaiming, “I must, and will see her’ with extraordinary firmness” (370). Thus the acts of strength demonstrated by Laura are not a permanent quality, but rather a temporary action caused by her anxiety concerning Marian’s illness.

For the most part, however, Laura is a woman who is passive, not active, and her dependency on others gives her an immature, childlike quality. This can be seen in the way Marian and Walter treat her when they are living together in London in the final stages of the story. Marian and Walter, who both love her dearly, treat her as a child and try to protect her from everything that might damage her spirit. To make her feel as if she is contributing to their little household, Walter pretends to sell her drawings and gives her money out of his own pocket as payment for them, thus keeping her in the dark about the fact that she is not contributing anything financially. Walter also states that when she spoke to him “she spoke as a child might have spoken; she showed me her thoughts as a child might have shown them” (437 ff). Even Laura herself realizes that she is as helpless as a child and that she is being treated as one, as shown by her exclamation towards Walter: “I am so useless! I am such a burden for both of you … Why is there nothing I can do? You will end in liking Marian better than you like me – you will, because I am so helpless! Oh don’t, don’t, don’t treat me like a child!” (478). According to Gilbert & Gubar, Laura’s childlike quality is emphasized by her choice of white clothing. They argue that the white dresses symbolize the “pathos of the Victorian-child woman who clings to infancy”, indicating that Laura is not yet ready to shoulder the burdens of becoming a grown-up woman (619).

As mentioned previously, being a woman during the Victorian Era often meant having a dream and goal of becoming a wife and mother. The marriage between Laura and Sir Percival Glyde is never consummated, and thus the creation of a family does not occur in this arranged marriage. Not to have a child is an intentional move by Sir Percival since he does not want a child to inherit Laura’s wealth after she has died. He
makes his intention known to Count Fosco when answering his question if Laura is likely to have children by stating that “she is not in the least likely to” (326). By creating this failed and miserable marriage Collins goes against the traditional novel of the Victorian Era. However, the marriage to Walter and the birth of their son produces an enormous change in Laura, who leaves her childlike behaviour and instead shoulders the role as a loving wife and mother. Or as described by May: the “ghostly sister Laura can now be devoted wife and mother” (99). By ending the novel with a loving marriage and the creation of a family, Collins supplies the traditional ending for his traditional heroine and ends his novel in typical Victorian fashion: happily.

However, this ending where Laura fulfils the traditional role of happy wife and mother is not convincing considering her character and what she has gone through. Instead I would argue that far from developing into a stronger character, she declines and becomes more like Anne Catherick as the novel progresses. Laura shows the strongest strength of character in the early stages of the novel when she is safe and sound at Limmeridge, and still unmarried. As soon as she is married and moves to Blackwater Park, her strength fails. Marian is first “removed” from her side, to return later on specific conditions for their company. Laura can therefore not rely as much on her as she had done before. She is, furthermore, dejected and broken down by her husband as well as by some of the servants of the house. When she finally gets away from her husband, she is institutionalized at the asylum under the name of Anne Catherick. During this time there is no doubt that Laura is becoming Anne since they share a greater resemblance now than they did at the beginning of the novel. Their mental status is similar, and since Laura has lost some of her angel-like beauty, due to her declining mental health, this also results in a greater resemblance to Anne. As a result of the persecution of her former husband, Laura is a broken and mentally instable woman when she escapes from the asylum, and her declining strength of character is clearly seen during these stages and in her life in London where her inability to help herself or Marian and Walter is shown.

One of the most interesting aspects of examining the character of Laura Fairlie is the fact that she is the only protagonist in the novel who is not allowed to account for her own thoughts and experiences in her own words. This is an interesting phenomenon, considering that the story revolves around her life and experiences, and yet we never get to understand her own thoughts about them. She is, instead, always
described by another narrator, resulting in, for example, one of the few unanswered questions in the novel: what happens to her at the asylum? However, the lack of her own voice is not only shown in the narration of the story but also in her passivity in its action. The lack of a proper voice is thus one of the most significant qualities of Laura’s character, just as the ability to speak out, both as a narrative voice and an active participant in the plot is the dominant characteristic of Marian, Laura’s half-sister and devoted friend. It is to this very different type of woman that we will now turn.
Chapter 2: Marian, the New Heroine

In this chapter the focus will be on Marian Halcombe, Laura’s devoted half-sister and best friend, and it will address the same aspects as in the previous one. The presentation of Marian’s qualities will be compared to those of Laura to establish how the two heroines of the novel differ from each other, and how Marian takes on the role of the new heroine.

The two heroines in Collins’ novel are two very different women, not only regarding their characteristic qualities, but also from a structural point of view. Marian is, together with Walter, the main narrator of the novel, and gets to retell the story during an extensive part of it, and is thus given a voice of her own. This can be compared to Laura who, as mentioned in the previous chapter, never gets to take on this role and thus does not have a voice of her own. By having Marian narrate the story, Collins shows respect to his new literary heroine. He puts faith in her narration and story, even though she is a woman, and he goes against the dehumanized view of women.

Besides being one of the narrators, Marian is also given an active part in the progress of the story and demonstrates great inner strength. Laura, on the other hand, is mostly a passive character that lacks inner strength, but whom the action revolves around. The activity and strength of Marian can be seen throughout several different stages of the novel, first at Limmeridge where Marian shows her intellectual creativity in her pursuit to help Walter solve the mystery of the woman in white and later on when she is connected to the fate of Laura and Sir Percival’s big secret. Her pursuit for an answer often leads her into dangerous and even life-threatening situations, such as at Blackwater Park when she spends a great part of a cold night sitting on a rooftop in the rain (319 ff). At this point she not only faces the risk of becoming ill, but she also risks being caught, by both Sir Percival and Count and Madame Fosco. Even though she faces these risks, she never hesitates to complete her self-given task.

This activity and strength is, lastly, demonstrated in London where, even though her physical and inner strengths have been weakened after her illness at Blackwater Park, she plays a part in restoring Laura’s honour by proving that she is indeed alive and that it is Anne who is buried under the gravestone with Laura’s name on it. As shown by the above examples, the inner strength Marian demonstrates in the novel is closely connected to the safety and well-being of Laura, just as Laura demonstrates the
most inner strength when Marian’s life is at risk. Ann Gaylin argues that by allowing Marian to take such an active part in both the story and its narration, Collins goes against one of the Victorian assumptions about the passivity of a woman, and provides his new literary heroine with qualities which had earlier only been seen in male characters (306).

As well as presenting a contrast between passivity and activity, the two heroines can be seen as representing polarities of beauty/femininity and ugliness/masculinity, according to May. When we first meet Marian she is, just like Laura, seen and described through the words of Walter Hartright. The first aspect of her appearance that he notices is her figure’s rare beauty. She “was tall, yet not too tall; comely and well-developed, yet not fat; her head set on her shoulders with an easy, pliant firmness; her waist, perfection in the eyes of a man, for it occupied its natural place, it filled out its natural circle, it was visibly and delightfully undeformed by stays” (34). As Marian turns to welcome him, he sees her face for the first time, and he is immediately struck by her masculine features: “the dark down on her upper lip was almost a mustache” and “she had a large, firm, masculine mouth and jaw”. He is struck by the paradox of how it was possible for “such a face” to be “set on shoulders that a sculptor would have longed to model”, and he realizes that “the lady is ugly!” (34 f). Not once in the descriptions given regarding Laura can a trace of masculinity be found, but throughout the novel, we are constantly reminded of Marian’s masculine features: she has “the steady grasp of a man” (124), her hands are as “awkward as a man’s” (230), and “she has the foresight and the resolution of a man” (324).

This first description of Marian differs greatly from the first description of Laura in another aspect. The main focus is on Marian’s provocative figure, while Laura’s figure is never once referred to in such terms; instead there the focus is on her face’s angel-like qualities. Another important aspect is that after this first description by Walter, he never refers to Marian’s features as masculine again; this is instead done by Marian herself, and by Count Fosco. It appears as if Walter starts to feel a strong attraction to Marian despite her mannish features, and that, as suggested by May, he possibly would prefer Laura’s delicate face on Marian’s provocative body (90).

The polarity of femininity and masculinity not only occurs between Laura and Marian, but it also exists within the physical aspect of Marian alone: she has the feminine body of a woman but the masculine face of a man. This interesting idea of
polarity is addressed by D.A. Miller, who takes it one dimension further than done in this essay, when he argues that Marian is outside the sexual system, and that she is neither a man nor a woman. He states that this is because she is “unable to compete” and therefore “she cannot be ‘male’” and because she is “unable to attract [sexually] … neither can she be ‘female’” (127).

The above-mentioned masculine/feminine distinction between the two sisters is even recognized by Marian herself, as she assigns female qualities to Laura, as with the “essential feminine malady” (38), and masculine qualities to herself, when writing that her tears “come almost like men’s tears” (164). She acknowledges the difference in their appearance by stating that “I am dark and ugly, and she is fair and pretty. Everybody thinks me crabbed and odd (with perfect justice); and everybody thinks her sweet-tempered and charming (with more justice still). In short, she is an angel; and I am----“(37). Furthermore, throughout the novel, she expresses her thoughts concerning women being the weaker sex, and how she often wishes that she could have been born a man. She writes, for example: “My courage was only a woman’s courage” (319), and “If I had been a man, I would have knocked him down . . . But I was only a woman” (245).

The above quotations support the idea that Marian views her own sex as being the weaker one, an aspect of Marian’s character which makes way for Collins to go against the traditional view of the literary heroine. By allowing a woman to have these critical feelings and by allowing her to demonstrate qualities very different from those of the traditional heroine, he makes way for the introduction of a new type of heroine. If the view of women being the weaker sex had been given to one of the male protagonists, it would have had a different effect, suggesting that women could be seen as worth less than men. However, by giving this view to a woman, and by giving her a crucial role in the solving of the mystery regarding Laura’s supposed death, Collins instead introduces a stronger and more independent literary heroine, to be admired and seen as a role model among women.

Throughout the novel Collins not only allows Marian to have these critical thoughts, but he also allows her to speak her mind and to have a greater influence over the male sex than was normal during the Victorian Era. As a result, she not only speaks her mind, but she also challenges the thoughts and ideas of the male characters. An interesting relationship to address here is the one which forms between Marian and
Count Fosco. When she first meets him, she sees him, as opposed to Laura, as a friendly man, unlike Sir Percival. She admires this man who seems to be in contact with his more feminine side, and who possesses a great intellect, and she becomes attracted to him in a way that she never has been attracted to a man. She comments: “He looks like a man who could tame anything. If he had married a tigress, instead of a woman, he would have tamed the tigress. If he had married me, I should have made his cigarettes, as his wife does—I should have held my tongue when he looked at me, as she holds hers” (217). By admitting this she demonstrates an unknown aspect of her personality, which goes against her more characteristic qualities: she shows that she would be able to submit herself to a man.

As the story progresses, Marian realizes that it is Fosco who is their real enemy, and far more wicked and dangerous than Sir Percival, and she starts to hate him when she realizes that he has read her private diary, and has seen her naked during her time of illness. Nevertheless, her admiration of his genius still remains, as well as his ability to influence her with his charm. Count Fosco, unlike Sir Percival, sees and understands Marian’s genius, and he thus treats her as one of equal intellect; he treats her like a man because, in his eyes, she thinks like a man. After having read her diary, during her illness, and truly having understood her thoughts and plans, his attraction to and admiration for her are made clear, as he comments: “How worthy I should have been of Miss Halcombe – how worthy Miss Halcombe would have been of ME” (337). The relationship between the two becomes one based on an intellectual attraction rather than a sexual one, and even though Marian’s feelings for Fosco change, the attraction remains till the end. As mentioned above, Laura is not affected by the Count’s charm and she sees him immediately as the dangerous enemy he is. This is one of the rare moments in the story where Laura is the wiser of the two sisters. She does not let herself be fooled by the Count’s smooth talk or his attempts to win her over by giving her her favourite flowers, nor by him defending her in front of Sir Percival.

Having examined the qualities of both Laura and Marian, it is clear that the two characters represent two different kinds of literary heroine. From the beginning of the novel Marian is given the role of the new heroine, an unmarried and independent woman who expresses no desire to marry. She is the stronger of the two and the one who takes care of Laura throughout the novel. However, on the very last pages a change occurs. At this time, Laura and Walter are happily married and they have a son, but in
the last scene of the book it is not Laura who holds her son, it is Marian. By doing this, Collins demonstrates a new and motherly side of Marian and this side, together with the last words written by Walter: “Marian was the good angel of our lives”, turns Marian into an angel – not the “Angel-in-the-House” – but rather a new kind of angel. This is a woman who can take care of herself and does not need to marry to find happiness, but who at the same time shows her more feminine and gentle side through the protectiveness of a mother.

Collins’ new and modern heroine is not only an independent woman, but she is also a woman who is seen as an equal among men. He goes against the view of the literary traditional heroine as the “Angel-in-the-House”, a concept which emerged naturally after the industrial revolution when men worked away from home and the role of a woman was to take care of the domestic situation. According to Balée, the need for this new heroine was sparked by the fact that during the 1850s the number of single women was greater than the number of single men, which, as a result, meant that many women would remain unmarried and never get the chance to become the “Angel-in-the-House” (202). The women of this Era thus needed a heroine who could provide for herself, but who still had a female and caring side which they could identify with. Showalter claims that the authors of the sensational novels “made a powerful appeal to the female audience” by creating novels of mysteries and crimes, all taking place within the domestic sphere where the women were in charge (159). Thus a new kind of heroine was not only needed as a result of the many women that would never become the “Angel-in-the-House”, but also for those who had fulfilled this ideal, and now were unhappy with their roles as supportive women in their families. The sensational novels attracted these women, because, according to Showalter, the mysteries and secrets that were described in these novels “were the secrets of women’s dislike of their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers” (158).

In conclusion it has been shown in this chapter and the previous one how the two heroines of Collins’ novel differ from one another and how Laura represents the traditional literary heroine of the Victorian Era, while Marian possesses the qualities given to the new literary heroine, often featured in the new genre of the sensational novels. They are each other’s opposites both regarding their physical appearance as well as their mental strength. The scenes in the novel where the two heroines go against their assigned roles are closely connected to illness or the risk of unhappiness
concerning the other sister. The power of sisterhood is thus strong enough in this novel not only to affect their actions but also to make them go against their dominant characteristic features. It is this relationship between the sisters that will be looked at more closely in the next chapter.
Chapter 3: The Relationship between the Sisters

We have seen how Wilkie Collins challenges the stereotype heroine in his characterization of Marian Halcombe and how he also presents a rather unusual and intensive relationship between Marian and her sister Laura. This chapter will examine the power of sisterhood between them and how it goes beyond the affectionate bonds expected in the Victorian family.

May describes the ideal Victorian view of family life as built on mutual love and respect between parents and children where self-sacrifice for the well-being of the family was completely normal. However, she also notes that several novels published during and before this era, for example Pride and Prejudice, Sense and Sensibility, and The Half Sisters dealt with the love between two sisters in its “purest, most untainted and ‘natural’ form” (82). May continues by pointing out that in the genre of the Sensational Novels, to which Collins belongs, sisters were supposed to “conform to nineteenth-century conceptions of purity, constancy and fidelity . . . toward other siblings” (82). The love between two sisters was often portrayed as a relationship with a stronger affectionate bond than the one between a father or mother and a daughter, with the potential of becoming anarchic and even erotic. This suited the authors of the Sensational Novels perfectly, since they preferred to experiment with, as well as exaggerate, the passion and sensation which could develop from this kind of relationship.

The relationship between Collins’ two heroines is one based on their strong feelings of affection for each other. To the readers of the Victorian Era this relationship was seen as extremely provocative since the sisters’ means of demonstrating their mutual affection consisted of actions more suitable for two lovers, such as kissing and sleeping in the same bed. It is through these physical demonstrations of affection that Collins challenges the Victorian view on sisterhood, as well as the stereotypical Victorian woman, and since he was an author of the Sensational genre, he was never afraid of addressing aspects like these, which were seen as provocative and even forbidden by society. The intense and close relationship between Laura and Marian is not only visible during an extensive part of the story, but it also evolves as a result of their living conditions and Laura’s marital status.

The sisters’ close relationship is seen for the first time at Limmeridge with the entrance of Walter Hartright into their lives. At the first meeting between Marian and
Walter, Marian tells him that he “must please both of us . . . or please neither of us” (37). When it is revealed to Walter, and to the reader, that Laura is to be married to Sir Percival, Marian decides to send Walter away from Limmeridge, and from Laura, since she has understood that he not only has feelings for Laura, but she has feelings for him as well. She knows that Laura will never be able to break her engagement, out of honour for her father, and thus Marian decides to remove the temptation of Walter’s love away from her sister. This is to ease Laura’s feelings of disloyalty towards her father, and towards her future husband. It is obvious that for Marian, her sister’s happiness and well-being is more important to her than her own happiness. This is shown since Marian knows that through Laura’s marriage to Sir Percival she will be removed from her side and her biggest fear will be realized, and yet she is willing to make this sacrifice for Laura’s sake, because, as she says, she “love[s] her better than [her] own life” (73).

To be separated from Laura is Marian’s deepest fear. They have lived together as sisters and best friends since they were children, and now with Laura’s wedding approaching they will be separated for the first time, and neither of them knows for how long. Her despair regarding this future wedding and the loss of Laura to Sir Percival is clearly understood by her exclamation that “she will be his Laura instead of mine!” (185). Laura is not oblivious to this fact and she cannot bear the thought of having to live her married life without Marian at her side. In an act of rare activity from her side, she begs her lawyer, Mr. Gilmore, not to “let him part [her] from Marian”, and she even demands that he should “make it law that Marian is to live with [her]!” (143). This is one of few occasions in the novel where Laura is the one who becomes the more active sister when she does everything in her power to make sure that she is not going to be separated from her sister; Marian, on the other hand, takes on the more passive role and accepts her ill fortune. This behaviour thus demonstrates how the power of their sisterhood makes them go against their more dominant characteristic qualities.

It is also at Limmeridge that we get the first example of the more physical demonstrations of their affection. At this point in the story the marriage is soon due and Marian has taken the role as narrator for the first time. As a result we get a direct description of the signs of affection which take place in the more private sphere between Laura and Marian, and not only the observations made by Walter and Mr. Gilmore, which earlier had been the case during their narratives. An argument occurs
between Laura and Marian concerning whether or not Laura should confess her feelings for Walter to Sir Percival. While Laura states that she cannot start her life as a married woman with a lie, Marian argues that Sir Percival “has not the shadow of a right to know it!” (164). As a way to end this argument Laura puts her lips to Marian’s and kisses her (164).

After the marriage between Laura and Sir Percival, and thanks to Laura’s persistence in her desire not to be separated from her sister, Marian comes to live with the newlyweds at Blackwater Park. During this time their affection for each other is described in a different way: their spontaneous outbursts of affection in front of other people are reduced, but are instead shown within their more private sphere. At Blackwater Park Marian continues the narration and the more privately demonstrated signs of affection are thus accounted for. A second reason for this change in the expressions of affection is their living situation: at Limmeridge they lived happy and safe lives, and on rather equal conditions. However, at Blackwater Park the situation is completely different for both of them; Laura is being persecuted by her husband and her spirit is broken, and Marian is only there because Sir Percival allows her to be, and she always faces the risk of being sent away. They both live in a very hostile environment where they need to be careful of what they say and to whom, and where the consequences of their actions are to be feared.

This hostile and insecure living situation results in their affection for each other appearing to be stronger and it is not only shown by the use of words, but also through physical actions. When Marian and Laura first meet again after Laura’s honeymoon, they walk “hand in hand” and Marian demonstrates that her love for her sister has increased during the time they have spent apart when she writes that she is now “more precious to me than ever” (210-11). Their relationship deepens as their living situation becomes more hostile and the danger of Count Fosco is understood. It is during this time the physical aspects of their relationship become the most apparent: they share a bed during the nights to find comfort and a refuge from the life they live, and they kiss each other, as Marian describes it, “as if that night was to part [them] forever” (287). It thus appears to be their strong sisterly bond that helps them get through the days.

During the time at Blackwater Park Marian continues to show her growing love for and protectiveness of Laura. After having overheard a conversation between Sir Percival and Count Fosco, Marian understands that Laura’s life might be at risk, and
this knowledge results in brave actions from her side where her own safety is put at risk. Even so, she never hesitates in doing so because, as she says, everything she does is for “Laura’s honour, Laura’s happiness – Laura’s life itself” (318). It is also here that Laura demonstrates some of her strongest moments and where her need to protect Marian becomes apparent. Laura does everything in her power to make sure that Marian is safe and tended to during her illness. This strong need to protect each other is yet another aspect where Collins challenges the Victorian view on sisterhood and womanhood, since such extreme protectiveness is a quality which is not as commonly found in a sister-relationship as it is in a relationship between two lovers, and, it is also a quality which is more often shown by men.

When Laura, Marian, and Walter live together in London, yet another change in the sister-relationship occurs, and their affection for each other becomes less outspoken and less physical. This is partly due to the fact that Walter has taken on the role as narrator again, but also because of the change in their living situation. At Blackwater Park, Marian and Laura had only each other; there was no one else who cared for them or showed them any kind of sympathy. This changes completely with Walter’s return to the story. He is first and foremost a changed man after his time abroad, and he is now a much more resolute and strong character than he was before. He is also the man Laura is in love with, so her love is now being divided between Marian and Walter, and the affection she has shown Marian earlier is now also given to Walter. Another reason for this change is Laura’s mental health: after her time at the asylum she has become a broken and mentally weakened woman, who in any circumstances is not able to take care of herself. As a result of this change in Laura’s mental health, Marian’s affection towards Laura is not demonstrated through words of love or intimacy, but rather through her more protective side.

After the marriage between Laura and Walter, the relationship between Laura and Marian is yet again altered. Through the marriage a family is created and the actions of love earlier seen between Laura and Marian are now more appropriately transferred to husband and wife. According to Balée, the creation of this new family results in Marian becoming “the surplus woman of the household” (209). However, she continues by stating that through the final act of the novel, where Marian, not Laura, is the one holding Laura and Walter’s baby, Collins allows Marian to become an important part of the family, and she leaves the surplus role behind.
Throughout the novel, the power of sisterhood is a constant factor which influences the sisters’ actions. As mentioned above, the fear of being separated from each other and the fear for the other sister’s life are two factors in the novel where the sisters’ strong love for each other influence their actions, and thus also the course of the novel. The power of sisterhood might first appear as a secondary aspect of this novel, but when examined more closely it becomes clear that without this aspect of sisterly love the story’s progression would have taken a completely different direction, since several of the twists of the plot appear as a result of actions caused by this bond. For example, Sir Percival’s secret would never have been revealed, nor would Laura have been rescued from the asylum if it wasn’t for Marian’s strong love for her. The sisterhood aspect is thus a very deliberate choice from Collins, as well as crucial for the development of the novel.

As mentioned earlier in this essay, the power of sisterhood is not only strong enough to influence the actions of the sisters, but it is also strong enough to make them go against their more dominant characteristic qualities. When faced with Laura’s misery, Marian reacts in a very uncharacteristic way with tears and embraces, and does not know how she is going to cope. Laura, on the other hand, when faced with the possibility of never seeing Marian again, reacts with strength and persistence, which completely goes against her normal behaviour. It is an interesting aspect that the sisters not only appear to be each other’s opposites in appearance and in personality, but when they are faced with a situation that results in them reacting with uncharacteristic behaviour, these reactions mirror the other sister’s more dominant qualities.

In conclusion, this chapter has shown how the relationship of the two sisters is portrayed in the novel, and how it alters depending on their life situations and Laura’s marital status. It has also been shown how their love for each other influences their actions as well as their tendency to react in a very uncharacteristic manner when the other sister is in danger. Furthermore, it has been shown how important their relationship is for the progress of the story and thus that it is an important aspect to consider in an analysis of *The Woman in White.*
Chapter 4: Using *The Woman in White* in the Classroom

For this final chapter a didactic aspect will be considered, and it will be shown why a teacher can and should use Collins’ *The Woman in White* and the findings presented in this essay in the language classroom, as well as how this can be used. Questions such as why we need to study literature and how the classics of literature have influenced our society will be addressed. Furthermore, it will be discussed how students can benefit from studying the classics in the language classroom.

The Swedish National Agency for Education (*Skolverket*) states in the goals for English 6 that, regarding content of communication, we, as language teachers, need to introduce our students to “living conditions, attitudes, values, traditions, social issues as well as historical, political and cultural conditions in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used” (7). By the use of classic literature, most of these aspects will be covered: they provide us with descriptions and portrayals of cultural values and events, social issues, and historical contexts from times and eras which are now in the past.

Murat Hişmanoğlu addresses other reasons for using literature in the language classroom. He argues that by the use of literary texts in the language classroom we will provide our students with authentic input material, and that this is of great importance since it will introduce the students to “many different linguistic forms, communicative functions and meanings” (54). In addition they will “learn about the syntax and discourse functions of sentences, the variety of possible structures . . . which develop and enrich their own writing skills” (55). Regarding whether or not contemporary literature is to be preferred, it is clearly stated by *Skolverket* that both “contemporary and older literature, poetry, drama and songs” are to be used in the language classroom as a tool to help the students fulfil the goals of English 6 (7).

It has thus been shown that literature both can and should be used in the language classroom, so the next point to consider is why we should choose Collins’ novel for our language teaching. First of all, when choosing a novel for students to read, it is important to try to find one they will be interested in reading, and which contains aspects they can relate to. Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White* is a gothic mystery novel which is bound to awaken the interest of its readers through its many twists of
events and dark secrets. It also contains several aspects which are suitable for discussions and class-work, such as the structure of the novel, arranged marriages, and women’s social status. So it provides the teacher with different topics from which a task sequence can be built. Secondly, since *The Woman in White* is a classic novel written in 1859 it will also provide the students with a rare opportunity to experience the cultural heritage of Great Britain, as well as exposing them to a different kind of language than they are accustomed to today.

After having demonstrated that *The Woman in White* is indeed suitable for language studies and that by the use of it we will provide our students with valuable insights into culture and language, the next aspect to consider is how a teacher can work with this novel in the classroom. My proposal is to focus on the two heroines of the novel. They are two very distinctive women who, through the eyes of Victorian society, were looked upon very differently, due to their characteristic differences and actions. Since the feministic discussion is one of great interest today, a suggestion is to compare the heroines of *The Woman in White*, and how they are portrayed to heroines in contemporary novels, such as Hermione Granger in the *Harry Potter* series and Bella Swan in *The Twilight Saga*. Hermione and Bella have been chosen since they represent two very different types of literary heroines, who have their counterparts in Marian and Laura. The idea is for the students to reflect on how they think the heroines in Collins’ novel were reacted to when it was first published and how they would be seen today, as well as how the discussions in society went regarding the behaviour of Hermione and Bella when *Harry Potter* and *The Twilight Saga* were first published. As a suggestion, this theme and comparison could be worked through by using Dave Willis and Jane Willis’ task-based teaching method, consisting of a three-step sequence with pre-, target-, and post-tasks.

*The Woman in White* is a very extensive novel of 627 pages, so it would not be possible to ask students in an English 6 class to read the entire novel. Therefore the next aspect to consider is which parts of the novel the students ought to be asked to read. Considering the aspect chosen to work with, I would use the main part of the first epoch of the story, where Walter Hartright is the narrator, starting with Walter’s journey to Limmeridge and ending with his departure. This would mean pages 22 – 126. Since it is such an extensive novel with so many important scenes for the story’s progress, it would be impossible to provide the students with enough extracts for them to
understand the plot and story completely. However, since the focus is on the two literary heroines of the novel, rather than its plot or timeframe, it would be sufficient for the students to read the 100 pages from the first epoch, this since these sections contain several episodes where both Marian and Laura demonstrate their most dominant characteristic qualities. Any further reading of the novel will not be required since it will take too much time and effort for the students, and since it is not necessary for the planned task sequence. The rest of the content will be given through a film adaptation of the novel.

As mentioned above, I would propose to follow Willis and Willis’ task-based sequence with pre-, target-, and post-reading stages while working with this novel. Tricia Hedge claims that by doing this we “ensure that reading is ‘taught’ in the sense of helping readers develop increasing ability to tackle texts” (209). When designing a reading activity it is important that we as teachers make sure that the students read for a purpose, just as we read for a purpose in our everyday life, and that the activities planned thus ought to “reflect language use in the real world” (Willis & Willis, 23).

The pre-task for this sequence would preferably be a discussion task where the topic of the sequence is introduced and where the students get a chance to familiarize themselves with the theme. Here a general introduction to literature and its heroines would be given, and the students asked to contribute with their own thoughts and ideas about how a modern literary heroine is expected to be. At this stage Hermione Granger and Bella Swan will be brought up and the students would then discuss how these two different characters represent their view of a literary heroine. As a continuation and a link to the Victorian Era, the students will be given questions such as: Which of the two modern heroines do you think would cause commotion in the 1860s? Why? Is it the same today? Why/why not? This stage will also provide the students with background information and thoughts which they need to keep in mind when reading the extract from the novel, and it will also foster the students’ critical thinking.

The next step, the target-task, is for the students to read the extract from the novel, and while reading it, keeping a couple of questions in mind which are provided by the teacher, such as: How do the two heroines of the novel differ from each other? How do you react to their behaviour and actions? Which of the two heroines do you see as the real heroine of the novel? Can you see any resemblance between the two heroines of the novel and Hermione and Bella? Their answers to these questions should be
briefly noted down during the reading of the extract to be answered individually and more thoroughly after they have finished reading. This is done to make sure that the students keep a steady flow in their reading and don’t interrupt the process by answering questions. The questions are provided to stimulate what Hişmanoğlu describes as the readers’ personal involvement. By having the students reflect over questions which concern their own thoughts and interpretations of the extract, rather than questions where answers can be found in the text, the students will not only improve their critical thinking but will be kept motivated and enthusiastic to continue reading. Hişmanoğlu states that this will “have beneficial effects upon the whole language learning process” (55).

To make sure that all the students have started reading before they get to do the rest as homework, they will begin to read the extract in the classroom. The above-mentioned questions assigned to them will also be homework and answers should be brought back to the classroom for the post-task. They are assigned as homework because the students need time to reflect over what they have read as well as time to combine their spontaneous reaction to Laura and Marian and their thoughts and questions after having finished the extract of the novel.

The third step will consist of discussions in groups of 3 or 4, depending on the class size, where their reactions to the novel are to be reflected upon and where they will have the opportunity to listen and take in reactions and thoughts both similar and different from their own. After these reflections have been shared, they will be given almost the same questions as they got in the pre-task, but with the focus on Marian and Laura, rather than Hermione and Bella. Which of Laura and Marian do you think caused commotion in the 1860s? Why? Is it the same today? Why/why not? How would we react if the novel was published today? By giving them these questions to discuss the students will practice their “comprehensible output” (Hedge, 13). This means that they will use all their language resources to communicate with each other, rather than only being provided with language input from the novel and the teacher. This will be followed by a writing assignment where the students will be asked to write a short and creative essay where they reflect over the possible fate of one of the two heroines.

All of the activities in this task-sequence focus on meaning rather than form and they consist of different methods of language training. The students need to understand
the input and produce their own language, both in written and in oral form, and both spontaneous and planned. Willis and Willis address the importance of variety when designing a task-sequence, since variety will keep the student interested by motivating them to work with different kinds of tasks.

Since the students are not given the entire novel to read or extracts from later stages of the novel, a good idea would be to show them the film adaptation from 1997 by Tim Frywell. This will give them the historical setting of the story and the plot, and hopefully this will give them a greater understanding of culture and society during the Victorian Era. Some background material about the Victorian Era and the view on women and family should be included to help the students gain a greater understanding as to why this novel was seen as very provocative when it first was published, as well as the contrast between a literary heroine of that era and a contemporary one. This information should not be given at the beginning of the task-sequence because it is preferable that the students use their already-existing knowledge about our history and that they have to analyze and think critically with this knowledge as their foundation.

To summarize, there are many reasons why a teacher should use classic literature in the language classroom, and it has been shown in this chapter why Collins’ *The Woman in White* should and can be used. It is, first of all, a very intriguing novel which captures readers’ interest through its mystery and gothic aspects. It is secondly a novel which contains several topics which are still up-to-date, such as the view on women, and which are suitable for use in the language classroom. Thirdly, it provides the readers with invaluable insight into the culture of Victorian England, as well as developing their knowledge about the English language. Most importantly, however, it is a novel which will trigger the students’ desire to read more.
Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine and compare the new literary heroine, Marian Halcombe, with the traditional literary heroine, Laura Fairlie, as well as to the traditional Victorian view of women. It also aimed to see how the strong relationship between Laura and Marian influenced their actions and behaviour. This was done to prove the argument of this study, which was that Collins challenges the stereotype of Victorian womanhood through the characters Laura Fairlie and Marian Halcombe in his novel *The Woman in White*.

The first two chapters demonstrated how different the two heroines of Collins’ novel were, not only regarding characteristic qualities but also in their physical appearance. Marian is the ugly new heroine, who goes against the traditional womanly ideal, while Laura is the young and beautiful traditional heroine, who fits perfectly into the Victorian model of a woman. Marian is the one who possesses great determination and inner strength, while her sister is the weaker and childlike one, who cannot take care of herself. However, what was soon evident after having examined the novel more closely was that even though Laura is the weaker sister, she does, in fact, demonstrate acts of great inner strength, just as Marian demonstrates her more feminine and weaker sides, at certain stages in the novel.

Even though these findings turned the essay in another direction than was originally planned, they provided it with a stronger foundation to rest upon, since the aspect of sisterhood was given a very prominent and important role and became the subject for the third chapter. The third chapter demonstrated that the sisters’ strong bond and affection for each other was a crucial aspect of the story’s progress as well as a strong influence regarding their behaviour. When faced with danger to her sister’s life, the other reacted completely against her own dominant qualities and instead mirrored her sister’s characteristic qualities. The strong influence of the bond between the sisters became more apparent during the writing process, and it also proved to be of a greater importance than first imagined since it showed that Collins not only challenged the view on the traditional heroine but also the view on sisterhood.

Lastly, the fourth chapter dealt with the didactic potential of using classic literature, and specifically Collins’ *The Woman in White*, in the language classroom. There are several advantages of using *The Woman in White* in the classroom, and the most important of these are the different themes which are still relevant today and
therefore suitable for discussions and activities. One of this essay’s main contributions concerns the didactic aspect and how to address the novel through a feminist point of view, and it is the proposed suggestion to use contemporary literary heroines, such as Hermione Granger and Bella Swan, to compare and create a contrast to the two heroines in Collins’ novel. With the critics as a foundation, a task-based sequence with pre-, target-, and post-tasks was suggested as a way to work with the novel. The task-based sequence would mostly focus on discussions in both the full-class and small groups, and these discussions would be both planned and prepared for as well as spontaneous. This would allow the students to practice and develop their language input by listening to their classmates, and their language output, as well as participating in the discussions with their own thoughts and ideas.

Through the introduction of the new and strong literary heroine, Marian Halcombe, *The Woman in White* became a novel which influenced popular opinion on the status of the Victorian women, and it also demonstrated the possibility for a woman to go against her expected destiny and not become an Angel-in-the-House, but instead a strong and independent woman. As a result, *The Woman in White* became a novel of great feministic value which contributed to the improved status of Victorian women.

*The Woman in White* is not only the first of the sensational novels; it may also be seen as a prequel to Collins’ first step towards developing the detective novel. In *The Woman in White* Walter Hartright takes on the role of the detective for personal reasons, to solve the mystery of Sir Percival’s secret, whereas in the later detective novel, the protagonist would do this through a professional approach instead, as in Collins’ novel *The Moonstone*, the first recognized novel of the detective genre. This novel is thus also the starting point of not only one, but two new literary genres which contributed to the Victorian Era’s glorious literary development. *The Woman in White* is a novel which revolutionized its time and thinking, and whose contributions are still visible today.
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