Ocular Poetics of Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*

Wilkie Collins'in *Beyazlı Kadın* Başlıklı Romanının Oküler Poetikası

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Abstract
The aim of this article is to explore the critical role of vision and act of seeing in the poetics of Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* in the context of the ocular dynamics of the nineteenth-century in general and the generic markers of the sensation novel in particular. The conceptual equivalence Collins builds between the agencies of seeing and knowing will be explored by paying particular attention to the ways in which power is exercised on the axis of the modality of the visual. Taking visibility and invisibility as the controlling agencies in *The Woman in White*, the discussion will focus on exploring the scopic aspects of the novel in its historical and theoretical context, and reading the semiosphere of the novel as a dynamic space of interaction between and vision and ocular power.
Keywords: Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*, vision, sight, spectacle, focalization

Öz
Bu makalenin amacı, Wilkie Collins'in *Beyazlı Kadın* başlıklı romanında görmenin ve gözün oynadığı kritik rolü irdelemek ve bu tartışmayı on dokuzuncu yüzyılın göze/görmeye dair oküler dinamikleri ve sansasyon romanının jenerik özellikleri bağlamına yerleştirmektir. Collins'in görmek ve bilmek edimleri arasında kurduğu kavramsal eşdeğerlik, iktidar ilişkilerinin görme/göz üzerinden nasıl işlediği dikkate alınarak tartışılacaktır. Dolayısıyla, *Beyazlı Kadın*'ın skopik unsurları tarihsel ve teorik bağlama yerleştirilerek mercek altına alınacak, romanın görünürlük ve görünmezlik halleriyle örülü semiosferi görme ve oküler iktidar arasındaki dinamik ilişkiyle şekillenen bir etkileşim ve çatışma alanı olarak okunacaktır.
Anahtar Kelimeler: Wilkie Collins, *Beyazlı Kadın*, görme, görüntü, seyir, fokalizasyon

> The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible.
> (Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*)

This article aims to read Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* as an ocularcentric text, in the sense that vision, visuality and acts of seeing and looking have overarching significance in the hermeneutics of the novel as a highly acclaimed example of sensation fiction. One of the distinguishable hallmarks of sensation novels, especially those that address lost-and-found themes or misplaced identities, is that the sense of sight, conditions of visibility and invisibility, and agency of the eye that defines humans as social animals play a crucial role in energizing the working principles of the genre. By definition, sensory experience and embodied vision are the key elements in the unfolding of events in sensation fiction which rely heavily on visual sensory details to describe characters and setting as objects of visual perception. Characterized by their focus on thrilling and often scandalous events, sensation novels often deploy suspense-driven ocularcentric tropes and motifs, including imposture, deception, impersonation, misdirection, identity shams, hallucinations, delusions, paranoia, mysterious doubles and twins, spying and detection, which are all linked to literal and metaphorical aspects of seeing and visual imagination in one way or another.

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The Woman in White never fails to underline the role of empirical vision and visual imagination in forming, regulating, and even manipulating how the characters accommodate themselves in the world picture of a plotted universe, with an acute awareness that they are part of the visible world. Clashing and sometimes conflicting narrative views of multiple narrators continually remind readers the fundamental ocular principle that "perspective makes the single eye the centre of the visible world" (Berger, 1977, p. 16). The novel's perpetual emphasis on the visual and ocular aspects of social and cultural existence reflects, as a matter of fact, a wider Victorian practice of placing the eye and vision at the centre of popular imagination as well as literary production. The nineteenth century was a time of significant developments in optical technology, which had a profound impact on how the Victorians viewed and contemplated material reality. The heightened awareness of vision in Victorian storytelling, as exemplified in *The Woman in White*, suggests a symbiotic relationship between technological progress and cultural consciousness of the time.

Collins and other writers of sensation fiction were the nineteenth century descendants of the first *viewers* of modernity's perspective-bound "world picture" as Heidegger puts it. There is a vast archive of scholarship on the scopic character of modernity, which explores how the Western scholastic medieval convention of seeing and visual representation evolved radically from the Renaissance onwards. The post-Copernican need to redefine the world from the human perspective marked a return to a homocentric world view that placed the human eye on the pedestal of artistic representation and philosophical discussions. This paradigmatic shift derived from an urge to depict a world from the eye and perspective of man rather than visualizing a world as seen from the omnipotent eye of God, the ultimate beholder. Heidegger explains this *modern* condition in his renowned 1938 lecture "The Age of the World Picture," or "The Age of the World View" (Die Zeit des Weltbildes), noting that "the distinguishing mark of modern times" is that "the world […] becomes a view" for the modern subject or individual (1976, p. 351). The agency of the look thus gained a prominent significance in the course of modernity in terms of how individuals responded to and interacted with the world in which they contemplated themselves as lookers and observers. In Heidegger's words, "'[t]o be in the picture' connotes having the know-how, being equipped and oriented toward the matter in question. Where the world becomes a view, the existent as a whole is posited as that with respect to which a man orients himself […]. World view, properly understood, therefore, means, not a view of the world, but the world understood as view" (1976, p. 350). In the light of this "view-character" or picture-character of the world, "[n]ow, for the first time, there is such a thing as a viewpoint of man" (1976, p. 352). With the emergence of this new paradigm in representation in arts, there flourished different ways of seeing that prioritize subjective perspective of a historicized individual who is bound with the "here and now" condition of the partial, limited and therefore flawed perception of the material world. "That the world becomes a view is one and the same process with that by which, within the existent, becomes a *subjectum*," and "[t]he basic process of modern times is the conquest of the world as picture" (Heidegger, 1976, pp. 352-353, emphasis original). Heidegger's insights underscore the intertwined connection between our perception of the world and the emergence of the self as a subjective being within that material reality. The world becomes a picture or a view only on the condition that it is framed by the individual eye.

The historical journey of this *subjectum* in the course of modernity is also the cultural and artistic history of seeing. Since a synoptic survey of this interlocked progress falls outside the scope of this article, the discussion will be limited to a brief sketch of the defining impact of vision in the Victorian timeframe that accommodated the products of sensation fiction

which relied significantly on the sense of sight to create their generic effect. Kate Flint, in *The Victorian and the Visual Imagination*, notes that "the Victorians were fascinated with the act of seeing, with the question of the reliability – or otherwise – of the human eye, and with the problems of interpreting what they saw" (2000, p. 1). Findings of previous research show us that the readers of sensation novels of the nineteenth-century were the inhabitants of a cultural and social ecosystem that was shaped by inventions of optical devices, instruments and techniques, such as thaumatrope, phenakistiscope, zootrope, diorama, kaleidoscope, binocular telescope and microscope, stereoscope, kinetescope, and magic lanterns, some of which were basically illusion-generating devices or optical toys (Crary, 1992; Meisel, 1983; Foster, 1988). Together with the advent of photography, these novelties cumulatively and gradually created a new visual mass culture as well as a new kind of observer/seer/viewer. Public spectacles and exhibitions that displayed optical illusions and magic shows were popular entertainments in the nineteenth century, and this cultural backdrop was woven into the plots of sensation novels, especially those with thematic emphasis on the manipulation and control of what is to be seen and what is to be kept out of sight. In the sphere of artistic and literary production, collaboration of novelists and illustrators was a common practice in serialized and published books. Co-existence of text and image in the pictorialization of stories was a significant marker of Victorian literary production and consumption. Grandville's illustrations, for example, are powerful indicators that illustration functioned as a kind of authorship and illustrators as co-authors of narratives. Darcy Irvin, in her article on *The Woman in White* as a narrative space of image-texts, notes that especially the decade of 1860s in the history of sensational literature "coincides with an absolute explosion of visual media in printed texts", and points at the abundance of "readable images" in the novel, which she calls "image-texts" (p. 225). In short, reflecting not only a fascination with the visual but also a "faith in seeing" (Christ and Jordan, 1995, p. xx), such inventions and scientific discoveries in the field of optics were powerful game-changers in cultural experience and creative production.

The pivotal significance of visual imagery in *The Woman in White* is manifested in the title on a paratextual level, directing the reader's attention to the connotative cultural repertoire of the colour white and its attachment to femininity. It is apt to mention Alberto Manguel's *Reading Pictures* where he warns us that no colour, and no sign for that matter, is innocent, for every colour is known to us through words and a discourse. Regarding the colour white, Manguel says that on the contrary to any colour stain, the blank space of the colour white invites us to fill its void and even provokes us to do so. Its blank form enabled by a frame presents itself to us in the past tense, as if it can turn into something else any moment with the slightest touch of an ink stain, losing its signifying emptiness and desolation (2000, p. 51). In a similar manner of experience, Walter Hartright's first encounter with Anne Catherick in the late hours of the night, when "the moon was full and broad in the dark blue starless sky" (2000, p. 19), takes place when his "mind remained passively open to the *impressions* produced by the *view*" as he was walking towards London, the Victorian city of spectacles (2000, p. 20, emphasis mine). Anne's white dress will later assume a metonymic reference to the mystery leading to Laura's misfortune, and Walter will undertake the role of a detective to solve the mystery, reveal the truth, and restore order and justice. As a matter of fact, his entire endeavour will be to fill the emptiness symbolically reflected in the whiteness of Anne's dress. Anne's image that bears a stark contrast between a hostile

darkness (background) and a vulnerable whiteness (figure) is going to function almost as a retinal afterimage[1] in the rest of the narrative.

Walter, as a master of drawing[2] who has come to Limmeridge to "master the visual experience" (Garrison, 2009, p. 168), must be aware and conscious of how the mechanism of looking and seeing operates between the subject and object of gaze, especially in a gender-specific context. Also observed by L. Garrison, "a gendered relationship emerges where the dominant, masculine viewer scrutinizes a passive, female object" (2009, p. 169). The distinguished place of sight among senses is famously noted by John Berger who observes in *Ways of Seeing* that "[i]t is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. […] We never look at one thing; we are always looking at the relationship between things and ourselves" (1977, pp. 7-9). Collins seems to be drawing attention to this particular relationship inherent in the nature of looking by confronting one look/view with other looks/views in a series of testimonial narratives. In this space of confrontation, a singular character (mostly female), who is portrayed from the outside as the object of a watcher, looker or voyeur, becomes the owner of the gaze and introduces a different version of the line of events in her own narrative. This co-presence of multiple narrations and viewpoints almost becomes a technical equivalence of what Berger means by "looking at the relationship between things [viewed object] and ourselves [viewing subject]" (p. 9).

At this juncture, it would be fitting to bring up a parenthetical note regarding Collins's personal involvement with the ways and methods of seeing. In the biographical context, Collins the author was no stranger to the Walter's profession as a drawing master. Collins's father was a renowned painter who was also a Fellow of the Royal Academy. Collins was born into a world of visual description and image, and had an almost trained eye for visual representation. From his birth (1824) until 1851 (publication date of *The Woman in White*), he lived in a cultural environment populated by the influential names of the art circles of his time (Dolin, 2006, p.10). According to Dolin's biographical report, Collins's mother was a cousin of the Scottish painter Alexander Geddes, and his aunt, Margaret Carpenter, was a well-known portrait painter. Coleridge and Ruskin were among the distinguished figures who paid frequent visits to Collins's family home (Dolin, 2006, p. 10). We also learn that Collins's intellectual and artistic tendency was closer to "the reformist young painters who

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[1] Afterimage is "a subjective visual phenomena" which is defined as "the presence of sensation in the absence of o stimulus" (Crary, 1992, p. 98). Crary also informs us that retinal afterimage is discussed in Goethe's *Theory of Colours* as an important optical phenomenon (p. 98). An afterimage, in other words, is the surviving stain/trace of an image on our retina, a kind of residual image that we continue seeing for a while after we stop looking at the object of our gaze or after that object is removed from our sight. This ocular or optical term entertains many thoughts concerning *The Woman in White*, and may be deployed as a conceptual portal into several metaphoric reading of the novel. For example, it may be argued that Laura becomes the afterimage of Anne when Anne dies and is buried in disguise as Laura. She, in a way, replaces Anne as her afterimage.

[2] Walter's mastery of professional vision, and his claim to aesthetic commentary and judgment is occasionally underlined in various contexts throughout the novel: Miss Fairlie's sketches are "exhibited … to [his] professional eyes" (p. 56); he utters educated comments, such as: "our capacity of appreciating the beauties of the earth we live on is one of the civilized accomplishments which we all learn as an art" (p. 57); his ekphrastic description of Laura as he is staring at her frozen image in his "water-colour drawing" (p. 52), and the way he contemplates on the difference between drawing and mental picture (p. 53); his aesthetic judgment about Marian when he first set eyes on her: "the lady is ugly" (p. 34), or about the "neat ugliness" of the town of Welmington (p. 561).

rejected the rigid orthodoxies of the Academy" (Dolin, 2006, pp. 8-9). In an unsigned review that appeared in the *Critic* a few years after the publication of *The Woman in White*, the "inclination of over-minuteness" in the novel is explained by the ascending influence of pre-Raffaelitism (2005a, p. 85). In another unsigned review, which is worth quoting in length, the characters in the novel are described like figures in a painting:

> None of his characters are to be seen looking about them. They are not occupied in by-play. They are not staring at the spectators, or, if they are, they are staring listlessly and vacantly, like witnesses who are waiting to be called before the court, and have nothing to do until their turn arrives. There they stand, most of them, like ourselves, in rapt attention, on the stretch to take their share in the action of the central group—their eyes bent in one direction—their movement converging upon one centre—half-painted, sketchy figures, grouped with sole relation to the unknown mystery in the middle. The link of interest that binds them is that they are all interested in the great secret. By the time the secret is disclosed, the bond of unity will have been broken—the action of the drama in which they figure will have been finished—and they will go their own ways in twos and threes, and never meet again. (2005b, p. 87)

Theatrical vocabulary the reviewer uses to describe the symbolic universe of the novel brings to mind Count Fosco's treatment of the readers as spectators who embody the "public gaze" (Collins, p. 700). He then utters a comment as spectacular as his looks and attire: "What are we (I ask) but puppets in a show-box? Oh, omnipotent Destiny, pull our strings gently! Dance us mercifully off our miserable little stage!" (p. 700). As the metonymic presence of surveillance in the novel, Fosco is fully aware of the performative nature of being as embodied souls on a stage which is at all times exposed to the hermeneutical gaze of others. Yet, until his death, he manages to remain in the shadows and manipulate events by means of surveillance and spying from behind the curtain. Ironically, when he dies, his body is displayed to the curious eyes of spectators behind a glass screen in the morgue, turning the villain's body into a symbolic embodiment of Death on display.

In this hermeneutic association between death and display, or death and spectacle, there is a subtle implication that male subject as the owner of the gaze can be dispossessed of his privilege of looking only on the condition that he is dead; his body as the temple of his gaze can become an object of spectacle only on the condition that it is reified by death. Women, on the other hand, do not wait death to be reified under the male gaze. The display culture of flourishing industrial modernity in the nineteenth-century only made it more evident than ever how "man act, and women appear" in visual representations in European art, as noted by John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* (1977, p. 46).

Although Walter is nothing like Count Fosco – who is a spy, a voyeur, and Percival's informer – he cannot escape the reifying agency of the male gaze that is accustomed to see and portray women as passive objects that "appear" in the visible space of Heidegger's world picture. His aesthetic judgment as a drawing master, for example, extends to the description of Marian's "appearance" that fall outside the normative measures of female elegance and beauty with her "masculine form and masculine look" (p. 34), as well as her unorthodox preference and taste of accessories, such as her "horrid, heavy, man's umbrella" (p. 239), which may be seen as the manifestations of what Count Fosco admires in Marian as a woman who "has the foresight and resolution of a man" (p. 372). Or, the grammatic discourse he uses while referring to Laura's prospective marriage to Percival, describing her almost like a possession that is transferred from one owner to another: "she will be *his* Laura instead of mine! *His* Laura!" (p. 210, emphasis original).

Walter's framing eye is best seen in two comparable scenes where the objects of his observing gaze are portrayed as posing figures in framed moments of artistic representation. The scene where Walter crosses paths with Anne in the dead of night is given as follows: "There in the middle of the road […] stood the figure of a solitary Woman, dressed from head to foot in white garments; her face bent in grave inquiry in mine, her hand pointing to the dark cloud over London, as I faced her" (p. 20-21). This captivating moment of encounter is often compared to the scene where Laura Fairlie is described again by Walter as a posing figure in the terrace at night at Limmeridge. "Miss Fairlie's figure, bright and soft in its snowy muslin dress – her face prettily framed by the white folds of the handkerchief which she had tied under her chin – passed by us in the moonlight" (p. 63). Both portrayals are dense with visual imagery, presenting Laura and Anne as objects of Walter's gaze from the vantage point of an observer. And both focalizations portray Anne and Laura against a dark background – a darkness which is dense yet mysteriously weightless, begging for and inviting an inspecting eye that would make visible its invisible content. What follows in the rest of the novel is a series of testimonies that attempt to crystalize the darkness behind them. The dark background against which they stand obviously represents the mystery that surround them as well as many of the thematic markers of sensation novel such as the uncanniness of the mysterious. But it also stands for the space beyond vision, which can only be penetrated by and through the voyeuristic gaze of the teller's imagination. In the process of the crystallization of the darkness that surround Anne and Laura, we as readers are offered the privilege of seeing beyond the frame, and into the privacy of a domestic drama. This is mostly how the sensation novel's narrative works to captivate readers' curious attention especially in penny dreadfuls that were very popular in the nineteenth-century.

It is also telling that the illuminating and enlightening eye is also a major symbol and device within the generic convention of detective fiction. Walter in *The Woman in White* not only articulates his concerns about suspected forgeries and unlawful acts in Laura's family drama, but he undertakes a detective work in order to illuminate the darkness enveloping this clandestine background. There is, in this regard, an obvious link between seeing and detecting, and a contemplation of detective work first and foremost as an art of seeing. In his thought-provoking article "Foucault's Art of Seeing," John Rajchman highlights the conceptual connection between visibility and evidence, and draws our attention to the etymological fact that the word evidence comes from *videre*, to see, in both English and French (1988, p. 93). Also, Simon Goldhill points at the semantic and morphological cognation between the Greek word "to know" (eidenat) and the word "to see" (idein), and conveys that "the '*analytique de regard*' is always already an anatomy of the subject's claim to know" (1996, p. 20). In a novel which is composed of testimonial narratives that also function as proofs or evidences of a crime, each testimony sheds light to a different dark(ened) corner of the greater textual space of its own semiosphere and thus makes the previously unseen/unknown things visible to the eye. Yet, significantly, Walter is aware that personal accounts, statements and testimonies will not stand as "hard proof" in the eye of law which demands solid evidence such as signed documents, eyewitnesses, recorded accounts, so on and so forth. He therefore takes great pains to obtain necessary evidence to set the record right. In the post-Enlightenment world of observable, measurable and classifiable phenomena, which was ripe enough to give birth to Sherlock Holmes in 1887 (only a couple of decades following the publication of *The Woman in White*), Walter's effort to obtain objective and material evidence gains further significance. In the world of phenomena, knowledge had to be testified by observable and visually testifiable signs and objects including all forms of inscription on diverse surfaces.

Walter's act of collecting evidence as a detective figure parallels, or rather supplements his role as the overarching editor who compiles the testimonies of other characters (including inanimate ones such as the tombstone) and constructs the architecture of the novel's textual space as a symbolic courtroom in which each narrator stands in the witness box and delivers his/her account of events from their subjective *view*point. In this assemblage of testimonies, one view/perspective/vision overlaps others, suggesting the inevitable coexistence and collaboration of multiple perspectives in modern man's search of truth. The narrative voice in the "preamble" speaks from an outer ontological layer which embraces the multi-focal narrative universe:

> the story here presented will be told by more than one pen, as the story of an offense against the laws is told in Court by more than one witness – with the same object, in both cases, to present the truth always in its most direct and most intelligible aspect; and to trace the course of one complete series of events, by making the persons who have been most closely connected with them, at each successive stage, relate their own experiences, word for word. (p. 4)

Significantly, Walter's assemblage of testimonies and authored "records" by "other pens" (p. 182) exclude Laura's and Anne's testimonies as narrated from their own viewpoints. Thus, the promise of the overarching narrator in the "preamble" is not faithfully fulfilled. These missing pieces are anchored at the heart of the novel as performative silences that speak volumes. If the textual space of the novel can be considered a mnemonic archive that harbours verbal evidence and verbal records, Walter as the compiler and editor of these records assume the function of the guardian of the archive who is entitled to the right of choosing what is to be included in and excluded from this space of power. Lack of Anne's and Laura's first-person narratives – except from Anne's short letter to Laura – creates a lacuna similar to the symbolic whiteness of their dresses, which lingers over the plot like a haunting absence or invisibility. Ironically enough, Anne's fugitive sick body literally becomes a haunting presence when spotted by a schoolboy in Limmeridge and taken for a ghost (p. 93).

While Laura and Anne are denied of a textual space of their own, Marian's textual space is violated by Count Fosco who secretly reads her diary and inscribes his own words on her pages. Laurie Garrison reads Fosco's inscriptive "assault" on Marian's private textual space as "a form of editing" and questions the potential violations and manipulative additions and/or omissions in Walter's practice as the editor:

> The Count's violent editorial insertion into Marian's diary takes place within a complicated sort of layers of editing. Marian's diary has been written by Collins writing as Marian, added to if not edited by Fosco, edited and united with the rest of the narrative of *The Woman in White* by Walter Hartright, and published in the periodical *All the Year Round*, edited by Charles Dickens. (2009, p. 176)

And yet another layer can be added to Garrison's list of editorial practices. Towards the end of his concluding narrative, Walter relates Pesca's narrative through his own translation from the Italian, referring his act of translation as "repeating": "It is only right to mention, here, that I repeat Pesca's statement to me, with the careful suppressions and alterations. […] My first and last concealments from the reader are those which caution renders necessary in this portion of the narrative" (p. 670). All these layers of editing correspond to a fascinating structure which is actually composed of layers of visions piled on top of one another. Fosco's transgressive bold hand leaves a visible trace on Marian's pages, contrasting his invisible eye that secretly watches, studies, inspects, and spies over Laura and Anne. In Marian's words, "[t]he marked peculiarity which singles him out from the rank

and file of humanity, lies entirely … in the extraordinary expression and extraordinary power of his eyes" (p. 247). Fosco's spying vision, in this respect, becomes a means of discipline and surveillance. Anne and Laura not only exist as the living images of one another in their ominous physical resemblance, but rendered to objects of narrativization, being exposed and re-exposed to focalization in the testimonies mostly of male focalizors.

At this point, Berger's observations quoted above can easily be transferred to the realm and terminology of narratology, regarding the gender dynamics of focalization in narratives. The focalizing agency of various narrators in *The Woman in White* invites a closer critical attention to this particular narratological aspect of storytelling in relation to the ocular poetics of the novel. Introduced by Gerard Genette, the term and concept of "focalization" largely replaced the conventional terms "perspective" and "point of view," or what Henry James calls "the centre of consciousness" in some of his prefaces to his works. Genette's model is grounded on his famous distinction between "who speaks" (narrator) and "who sees" (focalizor, as Mieke Bal terms it in her narratological model; 2009), and it distinguishes between narrative agency (telling) and visual mediation (showing). As a term inherited from optics, focalization addresses the certain position of the one who sees and who does so as the embodied agency of a "point of view," yet the term actually involves the act of getting things into focus when looking. From narratological perspective, then, Laura's missing testimony suggests that her opinions and responses are embedded in other characters' narratives and conveyed only through dialogues and focalized observations. The closest we get to her mind and heart is the narrative of her half-sister Marian Halcombe, but Marian's narrative differs from other narratives because it is composed of her diary entries and filtered through the editorial process of the overarching narrator. Unlike other witness accounts, her voice is not heard directly. As explained by the editor-narrator in the footnote to Marian's narrative, the passages from her diary have been "omitted here and elsewhere" (p. 183). Although it is claimed that the passages omitted "are only those which bear no reference to Miss Fairlie or to any of the persons with whom she is associated" (p. 183), the editorial authorship practiced by the narrator here remains to be suspicious or doubtful. Moreover, as revealed on the succeeding pages of the diary, it "is mediated through a document which has been appropriated and annotated by Fosco." In Lyn Pykett's words "we have the uncanny impression that we have been reading Marian's journal over [Fosco's] shoulder" (Pykett, 2006, p. 57). While Marian's narrative is dissected, butchered, and even manipulated by male hands and eyes, the case is not very much different for Anne and Laura. Their stories are conveyed to us through partial and limited fragments of a multiplicity of perceptions. This discontinuous style of successive partial narratives not only contributes to the generic effect of the novel as part of the sensation school of fiction, but also reflects the spirit and mechanism of urban modernity which forms the backbone of sensation plots. The "thrills of sensation fiction bound up with secrecy, suspicion, spying and detection," are closely associated with the literal or metaphorical gaze of modernity's *subjectum* and the peculiar characteristic of the visual imagination of the nineteenth-century (Pykett, 2006, p. 53).

Such forms of rendition, or submission to the filtering perspective of another consciousness emerges as yet another form of confinement for Anne and Laura in the novel. In *The Woman in White* confinement seems to be the structuring metaphor and motif in the novel, and narrative gaze and focalization seem to function as yet another tool or device of captivity in terms of gender-bound context of the overall discussion. Focalization, or the narrative act of seeing, is, like gaze, a powerful agency of control and dominance. In Collins's storyworld, it is not hard to notice how the painter's brush and the writer's pen are allies in how they operate in the hands of Walter, no matter how well-meant he may be. Denying Laura of her

share of testimonial space is hardly different from condemning her to narratological invisibility. Anne's and later Laura's confinement in an asylum removes them from the sight or view of others. In Lacanian terms, their power and potential of looking back at the seer or looker is cancelled, and the domineering male agencies of power thus secure their privilege of seeing without being seen. Manfred Jahn articulates a supporting premise, saying that "perception, thought, recollection, and knowledge are often considered to be criterial features of focalization, and all these mental processes are closely related to seeing, albeit only metonymically or metaphorically" (1996, p. 243).

Another pivotal aspect of the ocular grammar of *The Woman in White* is its capacity to re/address one of the age-old crossroads of poetics and philosophy: the relevance of image to the real. Percival's and Count Fosco's collaborative fraud, which enables the legal recognition of Laura's fake death and burial, is essentially based on the deceptive, misleading and illusionary potential of images, and relies on the empirical truth that it is through surfaces or appearances that we primarily communicate with the material reality that surrounds us. In the context of the nineteenth-century visual culture characterised by aforementioned optical innovations and inventions that altered the Victorian ways of seeing, the almost ominous resemblance between Anne and Laura carries us back to one of the oldest yet still current discussions on how the image relates to the real, or vice versa. And one recalls the opening line of Susan Sontag's famous essay on photography, "The Image-World" (1977): "Reality has been interpreted through the reports given by images; and philosophers since Plato have tried to loosen our dependence on images by evoking the standard of an image-free way of apprehending the real" (1999, p. 80). These lines are followed by an encapsulating observation on Collins's time, which is worth quoting in length:

> But when, in the mid-nineteenth century, the standard finally seemed attainable, the retreat of old religious and political illusions before the advance of humanistic and scientific thinking did not – as anticipated – create mass defections to the real. On the contrary, the new age of unbelief strengthened the allegiance to images. The credence that could no longer be given to realities understood *in the form of* images was not being given to realities understood *to be* image, illusions. (1999, p. 80, emphasis original)

In *The Woman in White*, Anne, as the mirror image of Laura, replaces the "real" in Percival's evil scheme of things, while her ontological mark is reduced merely to "resemblance." And a gradually thickening concern of Victorian modernity that "image-world is replacing the real one" (Sontag, 1999, p. 81) is articulated in Collins's novel in the haunting mystery that envelops Anne's afterimage that remains on the narratological retina of the plot. The overall narrative space of testimonies becomes a testing ground for the contesting legacies of "image" and the "real." Moreover, reflections on diverse aspects of this age-old relational pair are not limited to the mystery plot that revolves around the manipulation of images and sight but extends to the novel's most amusing passages that introduce the reader to the eccentric character and occupations of Mr. Fairly, the owner of Limmeridge and the possessor of invaluable pieces of art and cultural heritage. Mr. Fairly's obsessive occupation involves having "the treasures and curiosities in his possession" photographed, or producing their "sun-pictures" in order to ensure their permanence attached to his name (p. 225). On the one hand, the idea of photographically replicating the images of paintings, such as *Madonna and Child* by Raphael, seems to offer an ironical commentary on the multiplying layers of representation that separate the original from the copy. On the other, by relying on the capacity of photographic representation (image) to truthfully attest to the authentic/historical/material work of art (the real, albeit in the form of an image), Mr.

Fairly's enthusiastic occupation casts an ironical shadow on the novel's overarching conflict based on misplaced identities and subrogated images.

Consequently, in the light of the above discussion, it would not be erroneous to infer that the narrative universe of *The Woman in White* is a microcosm of visible traces and signs to be read and decoded by all sorts of viewers and watchers. Drawing parallels between looking and narrating, the eye and the pen, image and text; Collins not only countervails the agencies of seeing and knowing as epistemic pairs but also affirms Hal Foster's observation that "[a]lthough vision suggests sight as a physical operation, and visuality sight as a social fact, the two are not opposed as nature to culture: vision is social and historical too, and visuality involves the body and the psyche" (1988, p. ix). Reading *The Woman in White* from the lens of ocular poetics reveals yet again how vision and power are intertwined in complex ways, and how we produce and reproduce reality in a palimpsestic fashion in our acts of seeing and visualizing our world picture. In the narrative cosmos encapsulated within the novel, acts of observing and narrating become entwined in such a manner that the novel unravels as a narrative wherein vision and power engage in a complex symbiosis. As a dynamic space where the interaction of vision and power takes centre stage, *The Woman in White* emerges as a narrative canvas where ocular agencies become not just narrative devices but integral components that drive the suspenseful and captivating machinery of sensation fiction.

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