

Illegitimacy and Laws in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* and *No Name*

Wilkie Collins'in *The Woman in White* ve *No Name* Adlı Eserlerinde
Gayrimeşruluk ve Yasalar

Sercan Öztekin*
Kocaeli University

Abstract

Victorian sensation novels, in addition to their scandalous topics such as fraud, murder, adultery, bigamy, and madness, refer to Victorian laws and their construction by social and cultural standards. As a significant sensation novelist, one of the most important subjects Wilkie Collins calls for attention is illegitimacy, a social, political, and literary topic he recurrently employs in his fiction. In his novels *The Woman in White* (1860) and *No Name* (1862), he dwells on this issue, motivating the characters' crimes and scandalous acts. In both novels, illegitimate characters act illegally to reconstruct their identities by challenging Victorian norms especially about illegitimacy. Concerning his life and his critique of Victorian laws and moral certitudes, this paper explores how Wilkie Collins employs and questions the theme of illegitimacy about crime, sensations, and social and legal problems that influence illegitimate children. After briefly examining illegitimacy and laws about it in Victorian England, it explores how the concept of illegitimacy is shaped and influenced by Victorian conventions and gender ideologies in the two novels.

Keywords: Wilkie Collins, illegitimacy, laws, sensation, gender inequality

Öz

Viktoryen sansasyon romanları, sahtekarlık, cinayet, zina, iki eşlilik ve delilik gibi sansasyonel konulara ek olarak Viktoryen yasalarına ve bunların toplumsal ve kültürel normlarla nasıl inşa edildiğine de değinirler. Sansasyonel roman türünün en önemli yazarlarından olan Wilkie Collins, gayrimeşruluk konusuna da romanlarında sıkça değindiği toplumsal, politik ve edebi bir unsur olarak dikkat çeker. Bu konuyu *The Woman in White* (Beyazlı Kadın) (1860) ve *No Name* (1862) romanlarında karakterlerin suçlarını ve sansasyonel eylemlerini tetikleyen bir mesele olarak inceler. Her iki romanda da gayrimeşru karakterler, Viktorya dönemi normlarına karşı çıkararak eski kimliklerini yeniden edinmek için yasadışı yollara başvururlar. Bu çalışma, Wilkie Collins'in hayatını ve Viktorya dönemi yasaları ile ahlaki kuralları eleştirisini ele alarak, gayrimeşruluk konusunu suç, sansasyon ve gayrimeşru çocukları etkileyen toplumsal ve hukuki sorunlar çerçevesinde nasıl işlediğini ve sorguladığını incelemektedir. Bu makale, Viktorya dönemi İngiltere'sinde gayrimeşruluk konusuna ve bununla ilgili yasalara kısaca değindikten sonra, gayrimeşruluk kavramının Viktoryen gelenekleri ve cinsiyet eşitsizliği ile nasıl şekillendiğini ve bunların söz konusu romanlarda nasıl resmedildiğini tartışmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Wilkie Collins, gayrimeşruluk, yasalar, sansasyon, cinsiyet eşitsizliği

Introduction

Victorian sensation novels flourished in the 1860s in accordance with the public interest in scandals, newspaper reports, and criminal trials. They mirror the social change in the Victorian age with industrialisation, urbanisation, crime, and class by displaying sensational topics such as fraud, murder, adultery, bigamy, and madness. The Industrial

*Lect. PhD, School of Foreign Languages, Kocaeli University

ORCID# 0000-0003-1021-8460; sercan.oztekin@gmail.com; <https://doi.org/10.47777/cankujhss>

CUJHSS (ISSN 1309-6761) Special Issue Jan 2024, 67-76. Received Oct 8, 2023; Accepted Jan 2, 2024

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) 2024 © The Author(s)

Revolution and technological improvements paved the way for the rise of the middle class and higher literacy rates even in the lower class. The gap between higher and lower classes gradually deepened. Accordingly, as the social structure changed in the nineteenth-century, the wide spread of newspapers made scandalous news more accessible to the lower classes. The Victorians devoured newspapers due to their sensational contents including scandals and crime narratives, so the high popularity of newspapers inspired sensation novels. These novels included Victorian class and gender ideologies as their plots, involving “transgressions of gender and class boundaries and proprieties” with unorthodox male and female characters challenging Victorian perceptions of social class (Brantlinger, 2011, p. 430). Moreover, these novels also involved strict Victorian laws and their construction through social and cultural standards.

The inefficiency of British laws regarding the rights of women and illegitimate children led many writers to be critical of these laws in the Victorian age, and Wilkie Collins was one of them. He makes abundant use of laws in his works for social criticism. Lyn Pykett points out that some of Collins's novels are “excellent examples of [...] more self-consciously reforming novels-with-a-purpose” (2005, p. 40). For instance, in *The Woman in White*, there are detailed examinations of marriage laws and women's property rights through the characters of family lawyers. In *The Law and the Lady*, he explores the theme of deficiencies in the penal system with depictions of Victorian courts.

The reason why Wilkie Collins was engaged in legal matters in his novels can be twofold. Firstly, he was a lawyer himself, but he preferred writing fiction, so he was aware of juridical procedures and deficits in Victorian laws, and he also used his sensation novels to raise awareness about legal problems. One of the most important subjects he calls for attention to is illegitimacy, a significant social, political, and literary topic that he recurrently employs in his novels. Secondly, his unconventional and complex private life linked him to illegitimacy. Collins had three illegitimate children with Martha Rudd whom he had never married, while he was together with Caroline Graves although their relationship was also a turbulent one (Pykett, 2005, p. 20). As he was against the institution of marriage, he never married either of these women, but supported both women financially (Pykett, 2005, pp. 20-21). These might be the most significant motives that made him dwell on the harshness of Victorian laws relating to women, marriage, and illegitimacy, for he led a more unorthodox life in a conventional period.

Collins explores illegitimacy as a social concern that triggers some characters' crimes and scandalous actions in his novels *The Woman in White* (1860) and *No Name* (1862). In both novels, characters born out of wedlock before their parents got married act unlawfully to reconstruct their identities by challenging Victorian norms, especially illegitimacy. In *The Woman in White*, the aristocratic villain Sir Percival Glyde turns out to be illegitimate due to a lack of official marriage between his parents. Thus, he commits several crimes, with his ally Count Fosco, to maintain his social reputation and so-called legitimacy. In *No Name* (1862), Magdalen Vanstone schemes to retrieve her rightful inheritance which was taken from her and her sister after the news that their parents were not married at the time of their birth. With regard to his own life and his critique of Victorian laws and moral certitudes, this paper explores how Wilkie Collins employs and questions the theme of illegitimacy about crime, sensations, and social and legal issues that haunt illegitimate children. Collins also shows how men and women born out of wedlock are influenced differently because of patriarchal norms and gender inequality in the period. After briefly examining illegitimacy and laws about this notion in Victorian England, the paper discusses how Victorian conventions and gender ideologies shape the concept of illegitimacy and how it influences the illegitimate characters in these two novels.

Illegitimacy in Victorian England

The severity of social and moral codes in the Victorian period shaped the idea of illegitimacy and the laws about it, as it was considered a prominent matter about Victorian morality and social propriety. In Victorian England, children born out of wedlock were seen as the products of immoral and adulterous relationships, which were regarded as a reaction against rigid moral values. In this period, to supervise sexuality and family, a marriage had to be conducted legally between parents before the birth of their child, which was important for the preservation of marriage traditions and laws. Because of this, the illegitimate were socially stigmatised as their presence “supplied public proof of extra-marital sexual intercourse and that the fundamental precept was a form of intimacy properly existing between those united by marriage” (Wolfram, 1987, p. 122). As observed, Victorian religious and moral certitudes played a significant part in constructing these laws.

Jenny Bourne Taylor indicates that the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate children is an extension of “the definition and establishment of patriarchal power, of the ascendancy of the name and genealogy of the father over that of the mother, of the transmission of property and established power” (1996, p. 123). Men had almost all the rights of property in marriage and the power to accept or denounce a child out of wedlock. Even if the wife had an inheritance, she had to revert her properties to their husband’s control. Furthermore, women were generally prescribed subservient positions in mainstream society; they were usually the ones to blame for these extra-marital affairs rather than men. As Paula Bartley suggests, single mothers “posed a threat to social equilibrium.” At the same time, pregnant unmarried women symbolised “the living embodiment of immorality and an all too visible reminder of female sexual activity” (2000, p. 105). This shame was associated with their children as well, and they had to suffer because of their parents’ mistakes. They were the living indicators of those immoral relationships by unorthodox people.

According to Jenny Teichman’s definition, the illegitimate child is “one whose conception and birth did not take place according to the rules which, in its parents’ community, govern reproduction” (1978, p. 54). As adultery was considered a sin in such a patriarchal order, illegitimate children, like their mothers, were bereft of any legal rights. Until the nineteenth-century, these children had some rights of property and inheritance. The father usually had the responsibility for the illegitimate child, and the church could support the families in taking care of the child if they were unable to do so (Cox, 2004, p. 148). However, this brought a financial burden and offered a temptation for adultery rather than a punishment. Accordingly, some laws influenced the rights and social prosperity of the illegitimate in the nineteenth-century. The Bastardy Clause in the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act and the 1845 Bastardy Act stopped support for unmarried women because an illegitimate child’s father could no longer have the legal compulsion to assist the family financially (Cox, 2004, p. 148). Moreover, Dougald B. Maceachen states that the Parliament did not implement a law for illegitimate children until the 1926 Legitimacy Act, which changed their status and allowed them to be legitimated under some circumstances (1950, p. 125). The government’s inertia to improve their conditions displays the ongoing conservative values of the Victorian age because the ruling class was very reluctant to raise awareness about the harsh punishments forced upon the illegitimate in England. Just like unmarried women with children who had to bear the brunt and experience more difficulties in contrast to men, illegitimate daughters often had to face more severe conditions than sons with unmarried parents. This can be observed in the different treatment of male and female characters in the two novels studied in this paper.

Due to their obsession with order, morality, and control of sexual practices, The Victorians feared the notion of illegitimacy because it suggested human sexuality, which their society firmly wanted to suppress, and in particular, the idea of extra-marital sexual relationships among the working classes terrorized them (Taylor, 1996, p. 130). The eminent Victorians denied and evaded unrestrained passions. As a result, lower-class stereotypes such as the sex worker, the unwed mother, and the illegitimate child were castigated for being the indicators of these forbidden feelings. This is exactly why this concern comes forward as a significant element of Victorian sensation fiction, just like bigamy or adultery, because illegitimate offspring were the outcomes of unlicensed sex and familial scandals in the upper classes. Moreover, Victorian sensation novels used these topics to criticize the legal system and social hypocrisy.

The Woman in White

In his fiction, Wilkie Collins recurrently foregrounds laws about women, marriage, and specifically illegitimacy. In *The Woman in White*, he deals with the issue of illegitimacy while referring to the property rights of women, upper-class criminality, and marriage problems. It is among the most popular novels by Wilkie Collins, which also signifies the start of Victorian sensation fiction with its scandalous and shocking plot in the early 1860s. It narrates how Walter Hartright, a middle-class painting teacher, and Marian Halcombe strive to unravel the mystery and crimes of two aristocrats, Sir Percival Glyde and Count Fosco. Walter visits the Fairlie house to teach painting to Marian Halcombe, and Laura Fairlie whom he falls in love with. However, Laura is promised to Sir Percival by her late father before he dies. In the meantime, Anne Catherick, the woman in white, obsessed with revealing Sir Percival's vicious character, warns Laura not to marry him. After Laura and Sir Percival's marriage, it is understood that Sir Percival is after Laura's fortune that she inherited from her father. With the help of Laura's half-sister Marian Halcombe, Walter traces Sir Percival's past and discovers that his secret is much worse than his mere intention of stealing Laura's fortune.

Walter continues his investigation in the church vestry where Sir Percival and Anne Catherick's mother secretly met in the past. He reveals that Sir Percival forged his parents' marriage record in the church's book in the vestry and created his legitimacy because his parents were not married when he was born. Walter finds a blank space in the original book that references Sir Percival's identity, which was founded on illegal activities. Nonetheless, he creates his social identity and accepts himself with his gentility and artificial legitimacy. It is revealed to be the most sensational incident, which is the source of many crimes Sir Percival and Count Fosco commit throughout the story. Walter's shock signifies Victorian intolerance and severe laws about illegitimacy:

Of all the suspicions which had struck me in relation to that desperate man, not one had been near the truth. The idea that he was not Sir Percival Glyde at all [...] had never once occurred to my mind. At one time, I had thought he might be Anne Catherick's father; at another time I had thought he might be Anne Catherick's husband – the offence of which he was really guilty had been, from first to last, beyond the wildest reach of my imagination. (Collins, 1994, pp. 460-461)

Walter cannot even think about the possibility of such a scandal because of Sir Percival's higher social status. However, just like the way Victorian readers experience both excitement and relief when they read and learn about the upper-class criminals, Walter Hartright feels the same way when he discovers that Sir Percival is an illegitimate son who does not have any rights to his father's inheritance. Thus, Walter uses this fact in his investigation because he knows that the revelation of Sir Percival's secret will create more

impact than a usual scandal in the aristocracy. The extent of Sir Percival's crime has committed can completely eliminate his name and ruin his social position. In this way, because of his illegitimacy, Sir Percival's social status turns out to be lower than that of Walter under Victorian laws.

Sir Percival's motives for his misdemeanours are money and higher social status, and the scandal in the novel is Percival's illegitimacy and crimes motivated by his financial problems. Nevertheless, his act of creating a fake marriage record can be seen as an action against injustice in legitimacy laws. Although he may have rights to his father's property because he is the only son, he cannot legally secure these rights. The law makes him legally blank because he has no rights owing to his illegitimacy and the absence of a will from his father. Percival's deceitfulness unravels that his identity is socially constructed thanks to his societal position and relationships, not because it is his natural characteristic (Pedlar, p. 69). The society around him does not expect a legal confirmation of his identity because he was born and raised as an aristocrat. Collins criticizes the severity of laws by referring to the thin line between legitimacy and illegitimacy. Sir Percival legally obliterates his illegitimacy and makes himself the heir of his father's fortune. This is not to justify hideous criminal acts like forgery, illegal inheritance, and attempt for murder; however, Collins tries to show that Sir Percival might not have committed some of these crimes if he had the rights of a legitimate son. Anne's mother, Mrs. Catherick also states this in the following words:

He knew no more than any one else of what the state of things really was between his father and mother till after his mother's death. Then his father confessed it, and promised to do what he could for his son. He died having done nothing—not having even made a will. The son (who can blame him?) wisely provided for himself. (Collins, 1994, p. 480)

Here, she almost justifies Sir Percival's deeds and blames his father for doing nothing for his son's legitimacy and inheritance legally, not even making a will. Sir Percival, by creating a fake marriage record, attempts to take revenge for his father's indifference to his illegitimacy in England. The father figure here is an important symbol of that period's patriarchal system. By doing so, Sir Percival does not only revolt against this injustice and patriarchal order but also denies the sanctity of religious values and institutions by committing fraud in a sacred place.

In the past, Percival flirted with and seduced Mrs. Catherick to help him reach the church's book to record a fake wedding registry because she was the church clerk's wife. When her husband catches them together in the vestry, he leaves her because of her assumed infidelity, and everybody thinks that she had an affair with Sir Percival. Upon these incidents, Sir Percival also takes advantage of the Victorians' craving for scandals. He makes people in the village believe that he and Mrs. Catherick had an affair, which is true to some extent. Rather than revealing their cooperation in creating the fake marriage record in the church vestry, both accept being remembered as adulterers in society. Sir Percival's illegitimacy would be a far worse scandal, which would ruin his reputation and social status. Even Mrs. Catherick has to bear the brunt because she is believed to be an immoral woman for the rest of her life.

Concerning these laws, Jenny Bourne Taylor states that sensation novels present a wide range of narrative opportunities "for exploring how the concept of illegitimacy throws legitimacy itself into question, in particular, 'legitimate' marriage and the position of the 'lawful wife', who, like the bastard, is constructed as a legal fiction" (1996, p. 128). Both Sir Percival's identity as the legitimate son and his marriage to Laura seem to be social constructs because they are constructed only in the eyes of society in order to give the

impression of a decent gentleman with the help of legal procedures. Thus, social identity is related to legal procedures in its construction and loss. As Jonathan Loesberg states, the loss of identity is a legal matter related to social mobility and status, not a psychological one (1986, p. 117). In *The Woman in White*, while Sir Percival faces the risk of losing his legal identity, he has to re-establish this identity illegally. Thus, Collins presents the class issue and the role of the law in controlling the lives of especially social groups who own property.

While Sir Percival tries to prevent Walter from learning the truth about him, he mistakenly locks himself in the vestry because of its broken door. The vestry catches on fire and burns him inside, destroying the book where the forged marriage record is kept. Sir Percival's burning to death, like in a hellfire in the church vestry, is both a shocking scene and a relief for the Victorian reader because his death means the destruction of the threat to class mobility. If Collins had allowed him to go on his life as usual, a Victorian reader would face the reality that an illegitimate son could turn into a well-educated nobleman by transgressing social and class boundaries. Although these novels deal with unconventional themes, it is observed that they often handle these conventionally to meet the expectations of Victorian readership. Possible consequences of the law make Walter realize that they could "deprive him (Sir Percival), at one blow, of the name, the rank, the estate, the whole social existence he had usurped" (Collins, 1994, p. 521). The distinction between legitimacy and illegitimacy helps Collins manipulate the question of identity in *The Woman in White*; Percival's situation blurs the line between the two as he is a bastard but seems like a gentleman.

Although Sir Percival outwits the British legal system with his cunning scheme, Collins still portrays him as a weak and extremely nervous man, not as strong as Magdalen in *No Name*. Following his desperate aims to keep his secret and reclaim his financial situation, he quickly loses his temper when things do not happen as he wants them to be. For example, he gets furious and disturbed when Laura does not want to sign a paper without asking their family lawyer. Hence, however the circumstances are different and more difficult for Magdalen in *No Name*, Collins again credits female characters for being more resourceful, brave, and clever as he does in most of his novels for women.

No Name

In *No Name* (1862), Collins features the concept of illegitimacy more obviously than in *The Woman in White* because it is the source of the novel's main plot. He also shows that the consequences of this problem are more devastating for women than for men in the Victorian age. Even among the respectable higher classes, illegitimacy was more difficult to cope with for girls than for boys. Lawrence Stone notes that illegitimate sons of noble families usually had a proper education and seemed "to have suffered no social discrimination in terms of professional career or marriage" (1977, p. 534). Stone also points out Lord Mulgrave's remark in the House of Lords in 1800 that "bastardy is of little comparative consequence to the male children;" illegitimate female children, however, "have to struggle with every disadvantage from their rank in life" because a woman of this class could only get married, which was usually a form of business for those families. (qtd. in Stone, 1977, p. 534). Thus, Collins calls attention to the situation of women during this time when they are bereft of any legal rights because of their illegitimacy, regardless of their social class.

After their parents die, the Vanstone sisters, Magdalen and Norah, are both revealed to be illegitimate and disinherited from the family estate. In a similar way to Sir Percival Glyde's case, their parents were not married when they were born and had only recently been able to marry upon the death of their father's first wife in Canada. Eventually, the family estate

is transferred to their uncle, their father's old enemy, and after his death, to their cousin Noel, who is in poor health. The story narrates how the sister's opposite personalities react to being suddenly thrown into a difficult situation due to their illegitimacy. Norah patiently accepts her fate and becomes a governess, while Magdalen Vanstone becomes an actress and schemes to retrieve her rightful inheritance which was taken from her and her sister. Mainly with the help of her acting, she disguises herself under different identities and finally manages to marry her cousin Noel under an assumed name. Nevertheless, this marriage does not last long upon his sudden death. This leads to Magdalen's more disguised identities, and her growing hysteria and eventual nervous collapse cause her to be confined in an asylum. Norah, as a governess, marries another cousin and the new heir, so she gets the family name and estate back. Thus, the story is finally concluded in legitimate ways because Norah, ironically but classically, regains the possession of the inheritance legally because her patience and virtue are rewarded. Nonetheless, Magdalen is harshly punished despite her illegal and fraudulent efforts to regain her rightful inheritance.

Collins draws attention to the sisters' illegitimacy, which is suddenly attached to them and is the source of the story's tension at the beginning. The lawyer, Mr. Pendril, remarks in the novel that "Mr. Vanstone's daughters are Nobody's Children and the law leaves them helpless at their uncle's mercy" (Collins, 1986, p. 98). The story starts in a peaceful middle-class domestic setting with a secure family environment. Collins emphasizes the harshness and cruelty of illegitimacy laws, even for seemingly comfortable middle-class people. In order to criticize these laws about illegitimacy, he goes on using Mr. Pendril to voice his opinions in the novel as such:

I am far from defending the law of England, as it affects illegitimate offspring. On the contrary, I think it a disgrace to the nation. It visits the sins of the parents on the children; it encourages vice by depriving fathers and mothers of the strongest of all motives for making the atonement of marriage; and it claims to produce these two abominable results in the name of morality and religion. [...] The more merciful and Christian law of other countries, which allows the marriage of parents to make the children legitimate, has no mercy on *these* children. (Collins, 1986, p. 98)

Collins reveals how Victorian obsession with morality and familial values haunt people's lives even though it is not always their mistakes but their parents' wrongdoings. He also points out religious hypocrisy because religion should be merciful, but this law is "a cruel law" for the illegitimate (Collins, 1986, p. 98). At the same time, Collins highlights the flaws in the legal system by presenting the Victorian perception of a legal marriage. He contrasts the duplicitous marriage between Magdalen and Noel Vanstone approved on legal terms with their parents' loving relationship regarded as nonbinding. In this way, he also shows how the Victorian age values laws and morality over love and happiness.

Virginia Blain notes that the Vanstone sisters' disinheritance signifies "the disinheritance of Victorian woman" because it also represents their lack of any proper legal rights in social life and marriage (1986, p. xix.). Illegitimacy is "an evocative and subversive metaphor for the position of all women as non-persons in a patriarchal and patrilineal society" (Blain, 1986, p. xix.). It symbolizes how Victorian women are rendered powerless, just like the illegitimate are deprived of their legal rights and identities. Because of this inequality, Magdalen takes matters into her own hands in order to re-establish her legitimate identity and outwit the legal system. Disguising herself as Miss Garth this time, she warns Noel:

nothing would induce her to leave you in possession of the inheritance which her father meant his children to have She is a nameless, homeless, friendless wretch. The law which takes care of you, the law which takes care of all legitimate children, casts

her like carrion to the winds. It is *your law* - not hers. She only knows it as the instrument of a vile oppression, an insufferable wrong. I tell you she would shrink from no means which a desperate woman can employ, to force that closed hand of yours open, or die in the attempt! (1986, p. 212)

Although she ironically speaks on behalf of Magdalen under an assumed name, Collins makes his leading female character boldly criticize and judge Victorian laws of illegitimacy. While cunningly manipulates Noel in this passage because of her demanding situation, she correctly delves into how the laws are governed by patriarchal rules, 'not hers,' which signifies the lack of feminine engagement in these legal cases. Collins makes the reader ponder how these illegitimate children, especially women, are left without anything to depend on.

Nonetheless, Magdalen does not accept being "Nobody's Child" and in doing so, she transgresses class boundaries and social decency expected by a lady in her situation. Collins subverts the issue of illegitimacy for a woman and even displays it to the heroine's advantage. Magdalen mentions how she could not possibly act that freely if she had a reputable name to destroy but luckily, she does not. She says "whether I succeed, or whether I fail, I can do myself no harm, either way. I have no position to lose and no name to degrade" (Collins, 1986, p. 130). She takes advantage of this situation in order to succeed in her plans through a series of different identities, as she does not have a decent one after the revelation of the big family secret. Thus, whereas this law would possibly ruin a person, Collins overturns this legal procedure by making the female character more scheming and pretentious, which is not expected by a woman in Magdalen's case.

Magdalen is portrayed as a transgressive woman because she acts courageously to correct her parents' mistake as well as a law because of which she suffers. Due to the shame and guilt brought by her birth, she becomes a vindictive person. Although she does not have the power to change her situation, she wants to take revenge on the laws that left her in such a vulnerable condition. She turns out to be a manipulative, deceitful, passionate, and overly dramatic woman as her obsession to destroy this law and conventions grows day by day. That is to say, she has most of the negative characteristics associated with women in the Victorian age. Regarding her struggles, Magdalen says, "You know how strong I am? You remember how I used to fight against all my illnesses, when I was a child? Now I am a woman, I fight against my miseries in the same way" (Collins, 1986, p. 436). Here, Collins compares these legal problems to illnesses and miseries and shows a woman's resolution and bravery, which challenge Victorian standards.

Collins incorporates Magdalen's acting as another defiant feature of female characters in sensation fiction because acting was still an unconventional profession for women in the Victorian age, unlike being a governess. It did not conform to Victorian standards of femininity and motherhood that represented traditional moral values. As Martin Meisel explains, in Victorian England, "[i]t is not so much the professional actress who poses a threat, [...] it is the power of impersonation of being other than oneself that appears as a significant literary symbol of moral peril" (1983, p. 30). Thus, by taking her acting one step further and employing it in her disguises and schemes in real life, Magdalen continues to challenge Victorian norms more excessively than being just an actress. Furthermore, Collins attempts to indicate that these cruel laws turn these characters into actors by trying on different identities and creating a new suitable one for themselves regarding societal expectations. However, unlike Ser Percival, Magdalen attempts to create new identities by provoking Victorian traditions and trying to regain her rights illegally. In the end, she only changes herself from "Nobody's Child" to "Somebody's Wife" by marrying Noel, which does not last very long either because of Noel's death (Collins, 1986, p. 436). Magdalen's taking

on different identities is a reaction against strict Victorian laws and social norms controlling women in that period.

Collins deliberately presents two sisters of contrasting natures in order to highlight Magdalen's challenging and resourceful character and what a woman can do. She could choose to submit to her fate and become a governess just like her sister Norah, but she does not. The opening lines of *The Woman in White* about "what a Woman's patience can endure" are also very suitable for Magdalen in *No Name* (Collins, 1994, p. 33). Collins, while questioning Victorian conventions through Magdalen as an unconventional woman, shows how laws and social proprieties alter identities and personalities.

Conclusion

For Wilkie Collins, illegitimacy is a family scandal with potentially destructive repercussions but is a perfect subject for his plots, including crimes and scandals. An illegitimate character is generally linked to a form of Victorian societal hypocrisy because unspeakable taboos and repressed sexual desires led to the definition and stigma of illegitimacy, addressing mostly women and children. Owing to all these cultural pressures, these people undergo traumas and even mental breakdowns, which lead to their downfall eventually. Collins's illegitimate characters are sometimes destroyed, disinherited, and excluded from their houses; their misery signifies a denunciation of religious dogmas as well. Hence, it can be considered a critique of Victorian social and cultural norms that attach subservient positions to women.

Wilkie Collins attacks Victorian laws of illegitimacy and makes the reader ponder on gender inequality by showing different circumstances into which male and female characters are drawn. That is why sensation novels were highly criticized as they were considered dangerous and degrading for female readers because they created awareness about gender norms. Although Sir Percival and Magdalen's situations are similar in terms of their illegitimacy, the consequences are different for them because of their gender identities. Whereas Sir Percival can establish his identity as an aristocrat by committing fraud, Magdalen cannot go that far and can only use her wit for manipulation and using different identities to reach her goal. Besides using illegitimacy as a function of the plot, Collins refers to Victorian social understandings of class and gender with respect to legal and moral certitudes about illegitimacy.

Collins also displays how the legal system may turn people into manipulative individuals who commit illegal activities, although it is supposed to establish social order. Sir Percival's manipulations of Laura in a similar way to Magdalen's entrapment of Noel into marriage reveal that it was a system open to abuse instead of protection. However, at the end of both novels, he points out the downfall of both characters due to their challenging of the laws and social perceptions. Neither Sir Percival nor Magdalen can achieve their goals, and they are punished in different ways. Collins, while presenting how these characters oppose the legal system and social proprieties, stresses how Victorian rules and conventions were too strict and difficult to fight. Moreover, he indicates that Victorian laws regarding legitimacy needed more radical reforms.

Acknowledgement

A part of this article is derived from the author's PhD dissertation entitled "A Cultural Materialist Study of Crime and the Legal System in the Victorian Novel" (Institute of Social Sciences, Istanbul Aydin University, 2019).

References

- Bartley, P. (2000). *Prostitution: Prevention and Reform in England, 1860-1914*. Routledge.
- Blain, V. (1986). Introduction to *No Name*, Oxford University Press, pp. xii-xxi.
- Brantlinger, P. (2011). Class and Race in Sensation Fiction. In P. K. Gilbert (ed.), *A Companion to Sensation Fiction* (pp. 430-441). Blackwell Publishing.
- Cox, J. (2004). Representations of Illegitimacy in Wilkie Collins's Early Novels. *Philological Quarterly* 83(2), pp. 147-169.
- Collins, W. (1994). *The Woman in White*. Penguin Books. (Original work published in 1860)
- Collins, W. (1986). *No Name*. Oxford University Press. (Original work published in 1862)
- Loesberg, J. (1986). The Ideology of Narrative Form in Sensation Fiction. *Representations* 13, pp. 115-138.
- Maceachen, D. B. (1950). Wilkie Collins and British Law. *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 5(2), pp. 121-139.
- Meisel, M. (1983). *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England*. Princeton University Press.
- Pedlar, V. (2001). Drawing a blank: the construction of identity in *The Woman in White*. In D. Walter (ed.), *The Nineteenth-Century Novel: Identities* (pp. 69-74), Routledge.
- Pykett, L. (2005). *Wilkie Collins*. Oxford University Press.
- Stone, L. J. (1977). *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800*. Harper & Row.
- Taylor, J. B. (1996). Representing Illegitimacy in Victorian Culture. In R. Robbins & J. Wolfrey (eds.), *Victorian Identities: Social and Cultural Formations in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (pp. 119-142), Macmillan.
- Teichman, J. (1978). *The Meaning of Illegitimacy*. Engelhardt Books.
- Wolfram, S. (1987). *In-Laws and Outlaws: Kinship and Marriage in England*. Croom Helm.