

“The Woman in White” by Wilkie Collins

Discussion Questions

1. Laura is presented as an ideal of Victorian womanhood, obedient, respectful of social conventions, and willing to sacrifice her own wishes for others. How does her double, Anne Catherick, illuminate the dark side of that ideal?
2. Drawing on Hartright’s descriptions of Marian Halcombe and her sister Laura, as well as Anne Catherick and her mother, do you think that Wilkie Collins shared his protagonist’s (Hartright) naïve view of women?
3. Why is Marian so mesmerized by Fosco, who she says "has interested me, has attracted me, has forced me to like him"? Why is Fosco able to see Marian, despite her physical unattractiveness, as a "magnificent creature"?
4. "You will make aristocratic connections that will be of the greatest use to you in life," Collins's father told him when he started school. But Collins lived a life on the periphery of respectable English society that his father would not have condoned. In the novel, how is pedigree intertwined with deception and immorality? Where do the lines blur between servants and the served? How are the underprivileged used as a screen for viewing the upper-crust characters?
5. When Hartright returns from Honduras to restore Laura's true identity, he brings tactics he had first used "against suspected treachery in the wilds of Central America" to "the heart of civilised London." Why is he forced to work outside the laws and conventions of society to achieve his aim? Why did he have to leave England and return in order to make this change?
6. One critic has suggested that Marian and Fosco might be considered the true protagonists of *The Woman in White*. (In many ways they are much closer to Collins's own bohemian sensibilities than Hartright and Laura.) In what sense might this be true? How would you interpret the story's conclusion— especially Marian and Fosco's fate—in this light?
7. The use of multiple narrators was one of Collins's favorite storytelling techniques. What qualities does each narrator bring to the story? How does each change our view of the characters? Could the story have been told from a single viewpoint, and if so, whose?
8. Throughout the novel, how does Collins use premonitions, coincidences and dreams to foreshadow key events?
9. Wilkie Collins has been hailed as the creator of the “sensation novel,” while others claim that “*The Woman in White*” is the first true mystery novel. What do you think?
10. In her Introduction to the Modern Library edition, Anne Perry asks, “What is there in *The Woman in White* that transcends the change in culture from 1860 to the present, and beyond?” How would you answer this question?