

Wilkie Collins



Wilkie Collins:  
Interdisciplinary Essays

Edited by

Andrew Mangham

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**P U B L I S H I N G**

Wilkie Collins: Interdisciplinary Essays, Edited by Andrew Mangham

This book first published 2007. The present edition first published 2009.

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-0510-6, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-0510-0

*In loving memory of Alex and Jade*



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## PREFACE TO THE PAPERBACK EDITION

I am delighted that this book, originally the result of a conference held in Sheffield in 2005, is now appearing in paperback form and therefore likely to reach a wider and more varied audience. I am even more delighted that this edition features a foreword from Jenny Bourne Taylor, whose name has been at the forefront of Collins research since it began. I would like to thank Professor Taylor for her kind support and encouragement in this and the other projects I've plagued her with over the last few years. I would, as always, like to thank the contributors to this collection whose insights have led to some strong reviews and whose enthusiasm and patience helped to make this project a pleasure to work on. I would like to thank the Department of English Literature at the University of Sheffield for hosting the conference and my wonderful colleagues at the University of Reading for their inspiring ideas and assistance. Various people have given suggestions at different stages of the project. Angela Wright, at the University of Sheffield, showed me how a nervous breakdown could be avoided by conceding that contractual deadlines are frequently a fictive concept. Janice M. Allan gave excellent advice throughout my work on this book; she read through the whole manuscript and spotted a number of typos. I am grateful to Greta Depledge for standing in last minute with her contribution and for chasing a couple of references. Graham Law kindly helped me locate and access a number of Collins sources and patiently listened to my ravings over coffee on a number of occasions. Amanda Millar and other members of staff at Cambridge Scholars Publishing have spent a great deal of time and effort on the proofs for this volume and have produced a handsome book. My work on this project has also benefited a great deal from the guidance of Sally Shuttleworth. Although busy with her own work, she kindly set aside time to offer advice at all stages of this venture and read my own contribution. Any faults, typos, and inconsistencies, however, are likely to be the result of this book's rather fallible editor.

Andrew Mangham  
Reading, 2009.

## FOREWORD

JENNY BOURNE TAYLOR

Wilkie Collins was regarded as a rather eccentric research topic when I first started working on his fiction in the late 1970s. Although *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone* were regarded as a central part of mid-century popular culture, they were still primarily seen as examples of genre fiction, an important part of publishing history, but not worthy of sustained study, while the vast field of Collins fiction remained ignored and largely unavailable in modern editions. At the same time, the interdisciplinary study of Victorian literature tended to be dominated by the cultural and political context of the 'social problem novel' in which writers were read as reacting to external social, economic and cultural conditions. During the last thirty years of course the critical landscape has changed profoundly, and the massive expansion in Collins's studies has played a crucial part of this transformation. Sue Lonoff's seminal study *Wilkie Collins and His Victorian Readers: A Study in the Rhetoric of Authorship* (1980) built on existing book history to begin this process, as Collins became the focus of interdisciplinary work in on literature and psychology, on the study of gender identities and relationships, and of racial hierarchies. Indeed, Collins's work chimed with the interest in the instability and performativity of identity and the provisional nature of evidence and experience, and demonstrated how these were mid Victorian as much as late twentieth-century concerns.

The present collection of essays develops this interdisciplinary work and takes it in new and intriguing directions. Like other recent publications such as Maria Bachman and Don Cox's *Reality's Dark Light: The Sensation Wilkie Collins*, *The Cambridge Companion to Collins* that I recently edited, and Andrew Maunder and Graham Law's account of Collins as a working writer, it demonstrates the diverse ways in which Collins studies in the twenty-first century has moved away from an exclusive focus on 1860s and on the sensation novel as the genre which defines his work. As these varied and fascinating essays show, Collins's *oeuvre*, from the his first published novel *Antonina* to his final work in the 1880s can be productively approached from a range of intellectual and theoretical contexts. From mediumship to debates on vivisection; ranging between medicine, and law, narrative indeterminacy, theatrical adaptation and book illustration, these essays not only broaden and

deepen our appreciation of Collins work, but also make an important contribution to our understanding of Victorian culture.

## INTRODUCTION

Wilkie Collins was, as this collection aims to show, an author who was not afraid to experiment with different styles, genres, and ideas. Throughout his prolific and profitable career he wrote novels, plays, journalism, social commentary, histories, guidebooks, and much more besides. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that some scholars have identified him as an author who is difficult to categorise. In a recent collection of essays, for instance, Maria Bachman and Don Richard Cox have commented that, because Collins's work defies attempts to bracket or label it, the time has now arrived for students of Victorian literature to begin appreciating the author as more than just a sensation novelist (Bachman and Cox 2003, xxiv). Literary criticism since the 1980s, however, has frequently concluded that there is more to Collins than sensational tales of feverish suspense. What our book aims to do is suggest that Collins's varied writings are best understood by approaches that take account of their interdisciplinarity and intertextuality.

More specifically, Collins's work frequently refers to ideas that one would ordinarily expect to be exclusive to other fields of expertise. Legal, artistic, scientific, and theatrical technicalities, for instance, appear in books with which Collins intended to electrify readers with a range of sensational effects. As Jenny Bourne Taylor's seminal book on Collins makes clear, the author is thus ideally suited as the focus of interdisciplinary study. Such research has had a surge of interest in recent years. Although this collection enters into that energetic and active field of research, it does not ignore—as is often the case with such studies—the complex reasons for why ideas from widely varying disciplines appear in the work of this Victorian popular writer. This is not a book satisfied with recording where specialised ideas appear in Collins's work; rather, it is concerned with how and why they traveled across disciplinary boundaries and what this tells us about Victorian media and literature more generally.

This collection opens, therefore, with two essays that discuss Collins's experimentations with genre and his place within the periodical press. In exploring these areas we aim to offer some account of why Collins's work was experimental and interdisciplinary. Focusing specifically on Collins's 1879 novel *The Fallen Leaves*, Anne-Marie Beller begins this volume with an appraisal of the “generic indeterminacy” of Collins's work. She aims to explain the “failure” of *The Fallen Leaves* (as understood by Victorian and modern

critics) as a result of the author's "experimental approach to genre". The text, Beller claims, offers a "challenging example of [...] how nineteenth-century popular fiction [...] provided a shared space in which classes came together".

As recent research has shown, the Victorian family magazine, a vehicle for most of Collins's fiction, was a complex forum in which a broad range of ideas, fictional and non-fictional, came together.<sup>1</sup> Deborah Wynne has noted that editors of periodicals would attempt to "draw out the themes and ideas of the serial novels" in ways that would relate to the "factual" material they were printed alongside. This, Wynne suggests, aimed to "enhance reading pleasure and generate debate" (Wynne 2001, 3). Holly Furneaux's essay, the second in this collection, analyses Collins's journalism within the context of Dickens's *Household Words*. She demonstrates how crucial the journalistic context is to understanding the serialised novel and reassesses contemporary critical thoughts on how Collins and Dickens influenced each other's work. Far from the notion that the latter censored the writing of the former, Furneaux suggests that Collins's non-fictional celebrations of bachelorhood were selected and emphasised by Dickens to support his characterisations of bachelors. This "suggests a mutual sexual radicalism" between the two authors and hints at the intricate intellectual relationships that existed between contributors to Victorian magazines.

The serialisation of nineteenth-century fiction also allowed novelists like Collins to respond to important contemporary events. Real crimes, in particular, were a frequent source of inspiration for popular novelists. If "a crime of extraordinary horror figures among our *causes célèbres*", wrote the Reverend Mansel in 1863, "the sensationist is immediately at hand to weave the incident into a thrilling tale, with names and circumstances slightly disguised" (Mansel 1863, 449). In 1860 the *Lancet* associated the growth of popular newspaper reports with the "literature of a certain class". Although it does not mention sensation fiction (or Wilkie Collins) directly, it is clear that such works were the article's intended critical target. Newspapers and popular fiction, it complained, were responsible for acquainting the general public with the knowledge of how to murder:

We almost shudder at the widespread knowledge which must exist among those least to be trusted with it of how best to destroy life with the least chance of being discovered. In these days of cheapening everything for the "million", the means of murdering have become popularised. The well-reported history of one case of poisoning forms but the rehearsal for the second; nay, the very processes employed for unraveling the mysteries of one tragedy are registered for the purposes of another. (Anon. 1860, 217)

What is interesting here is how "mass" journalism and popular fiction are viewed as united in their ability to corrupt readers with a single unhealthy

narrative. In the eyes of this writer, journalism and fiction are not distinct disciplines but rather two styles of writing that cooperated in a way that rendered them virtually indistinguishable. Indeed, the boundaries between the fictional and non-fictional, in the intellectual climate of the mid-nineteenth century were not altogether distinct.

Thus, many of the essays featured in this book were written with the view that, in order to fully understand a Wilkie Collins text, one needs to engage with the complex network of ideas that each one operated within. In Tatiana Kontou's essay, for instance, it is shown how mid-Victorian reports of spiritualist practice, and the real cases of alleged mediums, form a crucial backdrop to one of Collins's best-known characterisations and themes. She argues that Magdalen Vanstone in *No Name* (1862) has much in common with female mediums of the mid-nineteenth century. "The sensation heroine (as an actress)", she writes, "and the medium (as a sensation heroine) [...] demonstrate the extent to which these different cultural registers influenced and broadened each other".

As Kontou suggests, séances, whether they were believed in or not, involved a thorough engagement with the visual. Each spiritualist "subject" was an image to be viewed and judged. This may, therefore, have spoken to Collins's long-standing interests in both the performative and visual arts. Art was important to Collins for a number of reasons. His novels frequently appeared alongside illustrations of their key episodes. As biographies and collections of Collins's letters make clear, the author also had strong links with a number of artists. Most notably, his father was a Royal Academician who knew many of his own contemporaries. These included Sir David Wilkie (after whom his son was named) and William Blake, a man whose art often blurred the boundaries between the written and the visual. Collins's aunt, Margaret Carpenter, was also a famous painter of picturesque still life and his brother Charles Allston was an artist who worked on the fringes of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Wilkie Collins knew key members of the brotherhood intimately. It seems, therefore, that he swam against the tide by becoming a novelist instead of a painter. Indeed, he felt from an early age that he was destined to follow in his father's footsteps.

Clare Douglass's essay, "Text and Image Together", considers why art, in the form of periodical illustrations, became a crucial part of the reading experience with regards to Collins's work. She argues that acknowledging the illustrations Collins's novels often appeared with is an important factor in reading and criticising Victorian popular novels. Douglass writes: "The power and significance, creatively and historically, of this experience calls for the recovery of not only Collins's other illustrated work but that of the many other Victorian writers whose illustrated fiction has long been forgotten".

As Aoife Leahy demonstrates in the sixth essay, Collins's artistic heritage is something he never entirely abandoned. Despite the fact that he was often criticised for concentrating more on plot than on character, his stories are packed with meticulous descriptions of people and landscapes. Leahy concentrates on images of evil. She demonstrates how Collins's depictions of handsome, masculine villains entered into contemporaneous discussions of Raphaellesque beauty. More specifically, she contests that, like Noel Paton's *The Adversary* (1879), Collins's beautiful villains concur with Pre-Raphaelite thinking by linking idealised appearances with evil. Thus, concludes Leahy, "*The Adversary* helps us to see the fiend that is lurking at the heart of many a Collins villain, despite the diabolical charm of such characters as Godfrey Ablewhite, through a Ruskinian suspicion of ideal beauty".

Considering less-canonical texts like *The Guilty River* (1886) and *Hide and Seek* (1854), Leahy shows how this is a volume that aims to appreciate the wealth of Collins material that is still relatively unknown to modern research. Although Wilkie Collins criticism is now what Lyn Pykett calls "as voluminous and as contradictory as the novels on which it comments" (Pykett 2005, 226), literary critics still appear preoccupied with the small sample of work Collins produced in the 1860s: namely *The Woman in White*, *No Name*, *Armadale* (1866), and *The Moonstone* (1868). Although this book suggests that much is still to be gained by offering new approaches to these better-known texts, it also aims to reveal that a great deal remains to be learned by considering the writings produced before and after Collins's most successful decade.

Hence, I aim to demonstrate the importance of Collins's second, and unjustly neglected, novel *Antonina, or the Fall of Rome* (1850). This novel, it is argued, offers a unique commentary on the turbulent politics of the 1840s through a historical retelling of the decline of the Roman Empire. In particular, my essay suggests that the similarities between images of political crisis and psychological breakdown supply Collins with a means of expressing his own ambivalence towards the European revolutions and Chartist movements of the early Victorian period. This is the first of five contributions to consider Collins's use of medical imagery. In her essay on physiognomy and the depiction of heroines, Jessica Cox focuses on how the author's female characters reproduce the physiognomic ideas introduced by John Caspar Lavater at the end of the eighteenth century. Cox's essay takes a broad sweep of the Collins canon and argues that nineteenth-century physiognomical ideas are crucial to the understanding of Wilkie Collins's women. In accordance with the sensation genre, Cox maintains, Collins employs such "ideas as a means of both creating and confusing the reader's impressions of character". Although discredited by modern science, Cox demonstrates how "physiognomical ideas remain an important key for reading character in nineteenth-century fiction".

In 1982 Barbara Foss Leavy offered an account of the social and intellectual connections between Wilkie Collins and key nineteenth-century psychiatrists.<sup>2</sup> In “Questioning Moral Inheritance in *The Legacy of Cain*”, Amanda Mordavsky Caleb takes advantage of such links to offer a detailed analysis of the ways in which the author explores and reworks the predominantly-scientific images of degeneration and biological determinism. Concentrating on the author’s penultimate novel, *The Legacy of Cain* (1889), Caleb argues that Collins aimed to reveal the “complexities of the ‘nature-versus-nurture’ debate” and “the potential dangers involved in accepting inheritance theories”. *The Legacy of Cain* is, according to Caleb, a novel that provides a “case study”, through the characters of Eunice and Helena Gracedeuil, which explores the Victorian notions of heredity and degeneration. Caleb’s is an essay that views the aging Wilkie Collins’s work as an anticipation of the *fin-de-siècle* and the cultural anxieties that that era brought. William Hughes similarly demonstrates how Collins’s best-known novel, *The Woman in White*, explored a range of ideas that were central to Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897). Hughes argues that both *The Woman in White* and *Dracula* share a concern with the nineteenth-century belief in “an identifiable medical discourse—a systematic, physiologically orientated psychology” championed by the influential psychologist William Carpenter. This notion of “unconscious cerebration”, Hughes suggests, is something that drives representations of asylums and alienists in each author’s most canonical text. While in *The Woman in White* the asylum comes to represent “the wrongful incarceration of the innocent and the apparently sane”, *Dracula* presents the same as an arena where patient “abuse is knowingly and deliberately undertaken by the presiding physician”.

Of the scores of books and essays written about Collins and sensation fiction, many concentrate on the author’s representation of femininity. He was, as many have argued, particularly sensitive to the legal plights of women. In the eleventh essay in this collection, Greta Depledge suggests that such concerns with the rights of women extend to an interest in their *medical* treatment as well. Expanding the theme of medical malpractice, as raised by William Hughes, Depledge suggests that *Heart and Science* (1883) “provides a challenging literary representation of the complexities that surround medicine for women in the nineteenth century”. Depledge observes that the text’s representation of Dr Benjulia has as much to say on the medical (mis)treatment of women as it does the vivisection debates. Collins’s text, she maintains, operates as part of the period’s concerns over what lengths men will go to in the name of science.

As hinted above, the legal statuses of women is a recurrent focus in Collins’s fiction. Collins initially trained as a barrister, though he never practiced as one. This no doubt cemented a long-standing interest in legal issues. In her essay, “The Scottish Verdict and Irregular Marriages”, Anne

Longmuir considers how the intricate and often frustrating workings of nineteenth-century Scottish law provide Collins with the tools to present British identity as beset with “uncertainty” and “irrationality”. Longmuir reveals how Scots law, in the nineteenth-century, was itself a paradigm of “epistemological uncertainty”. With its loose definitions of marriage and “Not Proven” verdict, law in Scotland became emblematic of all that was “primitive”, misleading, and uncertain. In *The Law and the Lady* (1875) and *Man and Wife* (1870), Longmuir reveals, these ideas are a powerful method of generating sensational plots and commenting on the essentially unstable nature of British selfhood. Such connections, she continues, offer innovative alternatives to “the pre-Freudian Victorian ideal of the whole and essential self”.

Taking advantage of recent research into Collins’s letters, Graham Law’s essay on Collins and international copyright provides an exploration of the author’s interests in the perceived faults in the Anglo-American legal system. Through two journalistic pieces of Collins’s, “A National Wrong” (1870) and “Consideration on the Copyright Question” (1880), Law provides a useful account of the legal, economic, and political technicalities surrounding the publication of Collins’s novels. These two pieces of journalism, in particular, “provide [...] a context for a reading [...] Collins’s [ideas ...] on the issue of international copyright”. Although Collins offered no “theoretical basis” for his interest in the copyright issue, Law maintains that the author took his lead from Dickens in feeling a great sense of injustice in regards to the lack of legal provisions for protecting the “intellectual property” of the novelist.

From copyright law we move on to a consideration of family law in Lynn Parker’s “The Dangerous Brother: Family Transgression in *The Haunted Hotel*”. With reference to Collins’s 1879 novella, Parker suggests that “Collins employs this spectral narrative to explore flaws in the nature of sibling bonds, ‘bonds’, moreover, that were considered central to the affectionate Victorian family”. Although Parker discusses the impact of “The Deceased Wife’s Sister’s Bill” (1835) on nineteenth-century familial relationships, her focus is mainly on the ideological laws of sisterly self-sacrifice as propounded by domestic manuals like Sarah Stickney Ellis’s *The Woman of England* (1843). In *The Haunted Hotel*, Parker claims, Collins portrays a “darker possibility” lurking beneath the veneer of familial ideology and ultimately reveals “the inability of those bonds to function successfully in the Victorian social realm”.

As Collins’s biographers have discussed, the author was not only an avid follower of stage performances but an active participant in them. He initially met his close friend and advisor, Charles Dickens, through their participation in Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s 1851 play *Not So Bad as We Seem*. He also wrote above fifteen plays including a melodramatic collaboration with Dickens, *No Thoroughfare* (1867), and *Black and White*, a love story first

performed at the Adelphi theatre in 1869. Many of Collins's novels are indebted to the author's fascination with the stage. *No Name*, for instance, tells the story of an actress through chapters defined as "scenes"; *The New Magdalen* (1873) was originally conceived as a drama and went on to be successfully reproduced for the stage.

As Richard Pearson and Janice Norwood show in this book, however, Collins's most sustained engagements with the theatre came through his adaptations of *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*. Since then, as Stefani Brusberg-Kiermeier highlights in the last essay, these stories have gone on to be filmed for cinema and television with differing results. Pearson analyses dramatic adaptations of Collins's *The Moonstone* in "'Twin Sisters and Theatrical Thieves'". He aims to redress a prevailing critical assumption that "Collins either dashed off his [theatre] adaptations to secure dramatic copyright against pirated stage versions, or that he produced mistakes, full of 'drastic changes', that scarcely reward investigation". In comparing Collins's 1877 adaptation of *The Moonstone* with the original novel, Pearson shows that, rather than being a pale imitation, the play ought to stand alone as an impressive contribution to nineteenth-century drama.

Janice Norwood discusses the various adaptations of the *The Woman in White* from Collins's own rewriting in 1871 to Andrew Lloyd-Webber's recent transformation of the text into a stage musical. She questions whether Collins's adaptation can be considered a "sensation drama"—a type of theatre that emerged alongside the sensation novels of the 1860s. Comparing the 1871 adaptation with other sensation plays and the original novel, Norwood not only highlights the challenges Collins faced in transferring his best-known work to the stage, but also underscores how its production was more sophisticated than the average sensation drama. "It should", claims Norwood, "be recognised as a valid drama in its own right" and an anticipation of the "new psychological dramas of the late-nineteenth century".

In the final study for this book, Stefani Brusberg-Kiermeier speculates on the relevance Collins has for modern television and film audiences. Brusberg-Kiermeier analyses the specific pressures faced by film and television makers in adapting Collins's writings for the screen. The current trend for producing Collins-inspired films, she suggests, testifies to the "topical or even timeless appeal of Collins's plots" and has important modern signification. "The subversiveness of Collins's characters", it is poignantly concluded, "might indeed enhance a political consciousness for social inequality" in our own time.

This book focuses on the life and works of Wilkie Collins in order to bring together a range of voices, each with its own idea of what constitutes interdisciplinarity, to show the importance of situating popular Victorian fiction within a wide and varied cultural framework. This collection intends to widen

our current understanding of Collins's work by reasserting its function as part of a complex and contradictory culture. Yet we also hope to introduce new ways of thinking about literature more generally. How, for instance, can an interdisciplinary framework bring little-known texts like *Antonina* and *The Fallen Leaves* to the forefront? How might such an approach benefit research into more canonical works like *The Woman in White* and *No Name*? Collins's body of work encompasses both neglected and widely known texts. In offering essays on both, we aim to go some way to answering the above questions and, with the aid of Janice M. Allan's concluding remarks, speculate about the theoretical future of Collins research.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Cantor and Shuttleworth 2004, Cantor, et al. 2004, and Wynne 2001.

<sup>2</sup> See Leavy 1982.

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**PART I:**  
**COLLINS IN CONTEXT**

“TOO ABSURDLY REPULSIVE”:  
GENERIC INDETERMINACY AND THE FAILURE  
OF *THE FALLEN LEAVES*

ANNE-MARIE BELLER

*The Fallen Leaves* (1879) is viewed by the majority of Collins scholars as aesthetically inferior to his other works, and is considered expressively to summarise the deterioration of the later novels. A. C. Swinburne summed up its contemporary lack of success, in both critical and commercial terms, when he described it as “ludicrously loathsome” (Page 1974, 27) and “too absurdly repulsive for comment or endurance” (Winnifrith 1996, 140), and in the *Critical Heritage* (1974) Norman Page appears to endorse this opinion, claiming that “by general consent then and now” *The Fallen Leaves* is “a dismal failure” (Page 1974, 2).

The aim of this essay is to examine the reasons for the almost universal disparagement and neglect of Collins’s 1879 novel, and to consider the implications of Swinburne’s choice of the epithets “ludicrous” and “absurd”. I want to suggest that these terms are prompted by the structural and formal elements of *The Fallen Leaves*, rather than simply its thematic content, and to focus particularly on Collins’s flouting of accepted notions of generic classifications. Jenny Bourne Taylor has argued of Collins’s later work that it

continually shifts between genres though on the whole the novels are clearly recognizable within definite categories, as purpose novels, high melodrama, domestic realism. They adapt a shared stock of conventions from the earlier sensation fiction, yet it is impossible to draw precise generic boundaries around them. (Taylor 1988, 211)

While agreeing broadly with this statement, I would argue that *The Fallen Leaves* constitutes an exception, in that it is not clearly recognisable within one definite category, and that its extreme generic indeterminacy is a key factor in the difficulty that readers and critics alike have experienced in approaching this novel. Before considering the specific problems raised by *The Fallen Leaves*, I want to offer a brief context for my discussion by highlighting some of the contradictions inherent in Victorian (and later) negotiations of genre.

In some senses, the Victorians' relationship to genre was characterised by contradiction and paradox. On the one hand, the entire concept of genre was at a critical juncture: traditional Aristotelian and neo-classicist ideas about genre had been challenged and undermined by the Romantics, so that, in the nineteenth century the stability and hierarchical nature of the established literary categories became questionable for the first time. In addition, the novel's appearance as a distinct literary type in the eighteenth century posed other problems. Not only did the novel resist traditional categories by refusing to conform to their criterion, but the nature of its form undermined the very concept of "literariness" upon which theories of genre were based.

On the other hand, however, Victorian culture was characterised by a zeal for taxonomy, by a drive toward classification in all areas of the social and natural world. If species, races, classes, and the disciplines of science, anthropology, and the law were subject to this movement toward codification, then so too was the area of literature. Thus, the Victorians were arguably faced with a conflict between their innate desire for classification and the specific problems attaching to questions of genre.

The often arbitrary distinction between "sensational" and "realistic", which held sway in the nineteenth century, has remained largely unquestioned until relatively recent times. Similarly, Victorian sub-categories of fiction have influenced modern scholars in their perception of various "minor" writers and the genres in which they worked. In 1870, *Temple Bar* ran a series of articles on contemporary fiction in which the critic and future Poet Laureate, Alfred Austin, discussed the major trends in novel writing. He separated contemporary fiction into three categories or schools: "fast", "sensational", and "simple". Austin's definition of the last category, which he saw as deriving from Samuel Richardson, accords with that of the "sentimental novel" and is represented by writers such as Charlotte Yonge and Florence Marryat. Collins, Braddon, and Wood head the "sensation" school and, for Austin at least, the "fast" school is typified by the novels of female writers like Ouida (Austin 1870).<sup>1</sup>

Given that these three categories purport to contain the sum of contemporary fiction, the question arises as to where Austin accommodates the novels of such writers as Thackeray, Trollope, or Gaskell. The implicit suggestion is that writers working within the framework of social realism or the "novel of character" somehow transcend genre. By omitting "realism" as a category Austin invests it with a "natural" status, a given, against which other forms must define themselves in negative opposition. This naturalisation of genre, and the notion that genuine artists are above generic conventions, remains current as demonstrated by the modern label "genre fiction", typically applied to popular or "lower" forms, often mass-produced and formulaic, and which implies that superior authors work outside genre. A recent critic, neatly illustrating these

assumptions, has made the comment that: “[Dickens] is of far too great a stature to be bounded by genres” (Punter 1996, 188).

Austin’s articles also highlight the subjective and fluid nature of genre, in that many of the authors detailed above are perceived to belong in different categories by various critics. Rhoda Broughton, for example, is often associated with sensation fiction and was also identified by Margaret Oliphant, on the basis of her candid depictions of female passion, as decidedly “fast”. Sally Mitchell’s article “Sentiment and Suffering” (1977), however, locates Broughton as a writer of the sentimental novel.<sup>2</sup> In the same way, Ouida is alternately seen as “fast”, “sensational”, and “sentimental”, just as all three categories can be, and are, applied to Florence Marryat. All this would suggest not only a confusion on the part of mid-Victorian reviewers as to the agreed criteria for genre allocation, but also a continued sense among modern critics of the inadequacy of traditional concepts of genre.

To return to Collins, it is reasonable to say that he showed a marked disregard for the authoritarian aspects of genre throughout his career, repeatedly playing with and deliberately subverting the conventions of different genres (such as stage melodrama, gothic, penny fiction, and contemporary newspaper journalism) in novels from *Antonina, or The Fall of Rome* (1850) onwards. It might also be argued that Collins’s critical reception has suffered because of this disrespectful attitude towards generic rules, and through early critics’ inability to comprehend Collins’s unorthodox approach to genre. Philip O’Neill has employed the useful term “critical straitjacketing”, arguing that the determination to view *The Moonstone* (1868) as the prototypical detective novel “misses much of the substance of the novel as a whole” (O’Neill 1988, 3).

Without doubt this tendency toward generic indeterminacy increased in the latter stages of Collins’s career, which arguably relates to the negative critical opinion of the later work. Robert Ashley, for example, noted in his 1952 biography that “[d]uring [the 1870s and 80s] Collins seems to have been unable to make up his mind just what kind of novelist he wanted to be, sensationalist, or social critic, romanticist or realist, with the result that his fiction follows no consistent line of development” (Ashley 1952, 113). Ashley sees this “indecisiveness” as occurring mainly from book to book, yet in many of the later novels the movement between different genres that he identifies is present in the same work. In *The Fallen Leaves* Collins’s hybridisation of genre is at its most extreme, and results in an apparent disunity, which I believe accounts, to a considerable degree for the extensive judgments of aesthetic failure.

Recent critics have drawn attention to the fact that, from the beginning of his career, Collins was interested in a wide range of different literary types. Lillian Nayder, for example, discusses his “early experimentation with various genres” and points out that “Collins produced melodramas, short stories, travel

narratives, and journalism”, as well as a novella and a memoir (Nayder 1997, 13, 15). Though he decided to focus on novel writing, this initial experimentation with a variety of literary forms continued to inform Collins’s fiction, and he repeatedly subverted the conventions of a host of genres within his novels, producing new directions and innovations, with the result that his oeuvre as a whole defies easy classification in traditional generic terms. Nayder has also suggested that a tension existed between Collins’s desire to be seen as a serious author and his conflicting desire to explore subjects and themes that were associated with “lower” forms, such as the penny dreadfuls, female melodrama, and the gothic. This conflict, she argues, was evident early in Collins’s career and affected his working relationship with Dickens:

Hoping to succeed as a middle-class professional yet troubled by his perception of working-class injuries, gender inequities, and imperial wrongdoing, Collins not only complies with but works against Dickens from nearly the start of their collaborations. (Nayder 2002, 8)

Tamar Heller is another scholar who has examined Collins’s ambiguous position in the Victorian literary marketplace. Heller’s study of the influence of Radcliffean gothic in Collins’s work illustrates the way in which his interest in the themes of female subordination, victimisation, and rebellion led to his appropriation of genres perceived as feminine, and consequently his marginalisation in a literary arena that was witnessing the professionalisation, and therefore masculinisation, of novel writing. As Heller also notes, this marginalisation continued into the twentieth century, “a period of aggressive canonisation” (Heller 1992, 5), largely because “Collins’[s] association with ‘subliterary’ genres caused him to be considered a minor writer not worthy of serious critical study” (ibid., 5). Both Nayder and Heller question the ideological basis of aesthetic judgments, pointing out the “shifting beliefs in what constitutes literary value” (ibid., 6), and suggesting the “need to reexamine our ideas of literary value and to broaden our conceptions of a novel’s worth” (Nayder 1997, 139). Nevertheless, the principal focus of both studies remains on the celebrated novels of the 1860s, with neither critic engaging with Collins’s later neglected fiction in any real depth, and Heller unconsciously replicates earlier judgments when she refers to “the aesthetic awkwardness of a novel like *The Fallen Leaves*” (Heller 1992, 166).

In one of the rare modern discussions of the work, Jenny Bourne Taylor has pointed out that *The Fallen Leaves* is “Collins’s most politically explicit novel” (Taylor 1988, 232), and it may be argued that this overt political content is connected to the spectacular lack of success in popular and critical terms, though not in any straightforward way. It is not merely the obtrusive polemical style of portions of the novel which is responsible for its failure but, more

subtly, the fact that Collins’s political views had direct implications on his ideas about literature and the content of his fiction. The enthusiastic democracy that floods the pages of *The Fallen Leaves*, signalled most clearly by the hero’s Christian Socialist beliefs, was also evident in Collins’s deliberate embracing of the widening reading public, a stance that was not widely shared by the literary elite in the mid to late Victorian period. Indeed, as Peter McDonald has recently shown, many influential figures of the late nineteenth-century literary scene viewed the enlarged reading public—produced by both the electoral reforms and the post 1870 Education acts—as a pernicious threat to literary standards (McDonald 1997, 6-7). Writing of the attitudes of a growing literary and critical elite, McDonald claims that “far from being intrinsic [...] the value of literary forms was [...] dependent on the limited size and specific gender of their readership” (ibid., 6). Collins, as a writer whose greatest successes were inextricably connected with the popular and female-associated genre of sensation fiction, represented the antithesis of such views. His belief in the desirability of a democratised and ever-widening readership, first articulated in the 1858 essay “The Unknown Public” (Collins 1858), continued to inform his ideology, leading increasingly to a stance, by the end of his career, which was decidedly at odds with that of the literary elite. Inevitably, this endorsement of the popular impacted on the writer’s critical reception. Collins’s optimistic statement that *The Fallen Leaves* would achieve its due recognition from “the great audience of the English people” (Collins 1887, iii) is echoed in a letter dated the 22 June 1880. He writes:

The Second Series [of *The Fallen Leaves*] will be written [...] when our English system of publication sanctions the issue of the first cheap Edition which really appeals to the people. I know “the General reader”, by experience, as my best friend and ally when I have certain cliques and classes in this country arrayed against me. (Baker and Clarke 1999, 429)

Yet Collins’s reliance on the popular vote as a reliable indication of his novel’s worth was a view that was becoming distinctly outmoded, with many commentators believing the obverse to be in fact true. As one reviewer phrased it: “books and poems are not to be esteemed, like loaves of bread or pots of ale, by the number of their purchasers; [...] popularity [...] is the most fallible of tests; [...] literature exists of itself and for itself” (Anon. 1892, 265).

Collins believed that the failure of *The Fallen Leaves* to secure widespread popularity upon first issue was largely explained by the prudish, middle-class distaste for his choice of subject matter. In the preface to his following novel, *Jezebel’s Daughter* (1880), Collins complained with reference to *The Fallen Leaves* that

there are certain important social topics which are held to be forbidden to the English novelist (no matter how seriously and how delicately he may treat them), by a narrow minded minority of readers, and by the critics who flatter their prejudices. (Collins 1887, iii)

He goes on to acknowledge the similar complaints levelled against *Basil* (1852), *Armadale* (1866) and *The New Magdalen* (1873). Yet, what Collins fails to consider is that, despite objections about the perceived immorality of these works, all of them achieved some measure of critical approval and significant popularity in terms of sales. Dickens greatly admired *Basil*, while, as S. M. Ellis claims, *The New Magdalen* “was a favourite tale of Matthew Arnold’s, though he as a rule was not addicted to the reading of sensational fiction” (Ellis 1951, 47). Thus, while Collins is undoubtedly correct in citing distaste for the content of *The Fallen Leaves* as one element in its celebrated lack of success, it cannot wholly account for the continued neglect and critical disdain.

Comparisons with *The New Magdalen* are illuminating because, thematically, *The Fallen Leaves* closely resembles Collins’s earlier novel about a reformed prostitute, with both works positing the fallen woman as victim and attacking social hypocrisy through the framework of Christian Socialism. Yet despite the common concern with identity, perceptions of innocence and purity, and the paradox underlying social respectability, and Collins’s notion of true morality, the two novels are in fact very different. A significant departure in *The Fallen Leaves* is the shift in focus from female identity to male. In common with most of Collins’s earlier novels, and indeed sensation fiction more generally, the central character of *The New Magdalen* is its heroine, Mercy Merrick. Jenny Bourne Taylor justifiably states that “the moral centre of the story is the Christian Socialist priest, Julian Gray” (Taylor 1988, 218), but it is Mercy’s story, her quest for identity and acceptance with which Collins is primarily concerned. By contrast, in *The Fallen Leaves* it is the hero, Amelius Goldenheart, whose emotional and moral journey provides the trajectory of the novel. Several separate narratives converge and are resolved through the figure of Goldenheart who operates, as his name indicates, on an almost mythical level throughout.

Temporarily exiled from the Eden, which the novel casts in general terms as America, and specifically as the Christian Socialist Community at Tadmoor, Amelius emerges as a Christ-like figure, drawing to himself a collection of troubled people, the “fallen leaves” of the title. The Christ motif is emphasised throughout the novel, notably in Amelius’s evangelical preaching at the “fatal lecture” and in his redemption of the Mary Magdalen figure, Simple Sally. Collins sets up an opposition between the prostitute Sally and the cold Madonna, Regina. Yet, perhaps the most interesting woman with whom Amelius becomes involved is Mrs Farnaby, in whom the roles of suffering

Madonna and fallen Magdalen are combined. The different stories that each of these women represent are tenuously held together by Amelius until the end, when all three women are found to be related to one another. The mythical quality embodied by the idealistic figure of Amelius is extended to Collins's treatment of Simple Sally. Here again is evidence of the difference between *The New Magdalen* and *The Fallen Leaves*, for although the ideological perspective in both novels casts the prostitute firmly in the role of victim, Sally lacks the independence, resourcefulness, and intelligence of her predecessor Mercy. On first meeting Sally, Amelius is struck by the girl's fragility and innocence:

His heart ached as he looked at her, she was so poor and so young. The lost creature had [...] barely passed the boundary between childhood and girlhood. [...] Her eyes of the purest and loveliest blue rested on Amelius with a vacantly patient look, like the eyes of a suffering child. (Collins 1879, 185)

What are most apparent in the scenes describing Sally and the sordid environs she inhabits are the apparently unconscious contradictions of Collins's approach. The writing is characterised by both a brutal realism and an implausible sentimentality, which sit oddly together and are, in some ways, reminiscent of early Dickens novels such as *Oliver Twist* (1837-9). Collins vividly describes a London that would have been shocking and alien to the majority of his readers, and he does so with a persuasive knowledge and compassion that is compelling. The effect is intensified by being filtered through the youthful idealism of Amelius, to whom such unfamiliar scenes are tantamount to a vision of hell:

On the floor of a kitchen, men, women, and children lay all huddled together in closely packed rows. Ghastly faces rose terrified out of the seething obscurity when the light of the lantern fell on them. The stench drove Amelius back, sickened and shuddering. (Collins 1879, 190)

The realism evinced here and in comparable scenes is, however, undermined by a persistent sentimentality in the characterisation of Sally and the other prostitutes, of whom Collins writes: “All that is most unselfish, all that is most divinely compassionate and self-sacrificing in a woman's nature, was as beautiful and as undefiled as ever in these women” (ibid., 187). The insistent idealisation of the street women, whom Collins presents as wholly untouched by the corruption and misery surrounding them, creates a romantic note which, paradoxically, weakens his argument against the injustice suffered by this underclass. Sally's relatively untroubled transformation from half-starved, abused street urchin to ideal Victorian lady is similarly unconvincing, jarring with the implicit premise of the novel regarding the inexorable and inescapable plight of the London poor.