

# The Aestheticized Male Gaze in *The Woman in White*

RACHEL O'BRIEN

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Walter Hartright's last name makes it immediately obvious, or so it seems, that he is the hero of Wilkie Collins's sensational 1860 novel *The Woman in White*. He also relentlessly pursues and then defeats its villains—the fraudulent and bullying Sir Percival Glyde and his flamboyant partner in crime, Count Fosco—and he is the instigating force behind the novel itself, an assemblage of testimonies that seek to establish moral justice where legal remedies have failed. Surely, then, he is one of the good guys! But as Rachel O'Brien argues convincingly in this essay, things are not so simple. Her close attention to Walter's aesthetic perspective shows that in his own way he is part of the same oppressive patriarchal system as Sir Percival and Fosco. He doesn't just idealize the woman he loves: he also seeks perfect control over her, actively soliciting his readers' cooperation as he does so. Rachel's close scrutiny of Walter's narrative reveals that his heart may not be so right after all.

— Dr. Rohan Maitzen

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**W**ilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* works to illuminate the various dangers the patriarchal system poses to women, highlighting the domineering dispositions of central male characters like Sir Percival, Count Fosco, and Mr. Fairlie; men who wield their power to harm the women in the novel or render them painfully vulnerable. Collins establishes the artist Walter Hartright as the hero of the narrative, distinguishing him from his villainous male counterparts by emphasizing the kindness he extends to the women in the novel, using his privileged position of power to protect

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them from patriarchal violence. Walter's interest in and dedication to art profoundly colours the way he understands and describes the female characters, particularly Laura Fairlie. Under Hartright's male artist's gaze, Laura is viewed not only as an object, but specifically as an *art* object that embodies his particular aesthetic ideal. Hartright's artistic fascination with Laura's beauty motivates him to depict her as his own personal creative project, describing her with dehumanizing language that implies his desire to design and shape her to satisfy his artistic ends. In transforming Laura from a complex individual to his personal art project, Walter demonstrates a possessiveness toward her that is profoundly oppressive and disenfranchising, locating him within the same harmful patriarchal system as the narrative's more sinister male characters like Percival and Fosco.

Hartright introduces Laura to the reader with a lengthy and extensively detailed physical description of her character as she appears in his water-colour drawing. He writes: "How can I describe her? [...] I look at [my drawing], and there dawns upon me brightly [...] a light, youthful figure, clothed in a simple muslin dress" (Collins 48). Hartright thus chooses to construct Laura for the reader from his artistic rendition of her character rather than a study of her subjective identity, presenting the reader with a vivid image of nothing more than one of his drawings. In displaying Laura as the subject of his art rather than a complex individual, Hartright has transforms her into an object with a distinctly aesthetic purpose to

which he claims creative license. Hartright perceives himself as an artistic master, casting Laura not only as his muse but his actual creative work, a possessive attitude that reveals his desire to obtain complete ownership over her. Hartright's desire for power over Laura illuminates how he acts within the harmful power dynamic of the patriarchal system to which Percival also belongs.

Hartright locates Laura as the object of his male artist's gaze, and appeals to an implicitly male gaze when he addresses the reader in his attempt to accurately convey Laura's beauty: "Think of her as you thought of the first woman who quickened the pulses within you that the rest of her sex had no art to stir [...] take her as the visionary nursling of your own fancy; and she will grow upon you, all the more clearly, as the living woman who dwells in mine" (50). Here, Walter situates Laura as the embodiment of not only his personal aesthetic ideal, but of an apparently universal male conception of perfect female beauty, a dehumanizing project that casts Laura as an object that exists for the viewing pleasure of men.

In elevating Laura to an impossible model of aesthetic perfection, Hartright has created a role for her that she is fundamentally unable to fulfill. Laura's beauty is bound to err from Hartright's model of perfection, as she is not in fact his artistic creation, but a human individual. Hartright identifies the way Laura's looks do not fully conform to his ideal model as a fault within her:

Mingling with the vivid impression produced  
by the charm of her fair face [...] was another

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impression, which, in its shadowy way, suggested to me the idea of something wanting [...] The impression as always strongest, in the most contradictory manner, when she looked at me; or, in other words, when I was most conscious of the harmony and charm of her face, and yet, at the same time, most troubled by the sense of an incompleteness. (51)

Here, Walter communicates his discomfort and confusion at his inability to fully possess Laura as his own artistic creation. Laura's undeniable existence as a particular individual cannot be reconciled with Walter's attempt to transform her into a perfect art object of his own making. Something is "wanting" because an abstract aesthetic ideal cannot be embodied. Hartright is frustrated by Laura's failure to conform to his aesthetic vision as it disables him from fully possessing her as his own artistic creation.

Hartright's heroism stems from the apparent empathy he extends to the female characters in the novel, offering them protection from male villains like Percival and Fosco who abuse their patriarchal power to harm and disenfranchise women. Hartright is however still profoundly implicated within the dangerous power dynamics of the patriarchal system in the way he exercises an agency-denying, possessive understanding of Laura as an aesthetic object that belongs among his own artistic projects. Therefore, Hartright's apparently benevolent desire to protect Laura does not stem from a place of pure kindness, but from his desire to possess and control her as his personal art project. While Hartright does not put

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Laura's life into literal danger like Percival and Fosco, his active participation in a dehumanizing and oppressive system of understanding women is life threatening in the sense that it denies Laura the possibility of active, subjective and complex personhood, fixing her instead as a lifeless aesthetic object.

### WORKS CITED

Collins, Wilkie. *The Woman in White*, Oxford University Press, 2008.