

# Sensate Detection in Wilkie Collins's *The Law and the Lady*

Judith Johnston

Despite Graham Law's assertion that *The Woman in White* (1861) "launched the fashion for 'sensation fiction'" (97), that novel's narrative mode has always more strongly suggested the detective genre rather than Sensation per se. Even one of its earliest critics, Margaret Oliphant, in her *Blackwood's* review "Sensation Novels", could pronounce with assurance:

What Mr. Wilkie Collins has done with delicate care and laborious reticence, his followers will attempt without any such discretion. We have already had specimens, as many as are desirable, of what the detective policeman can do for the enlivenment of literature: and it is into the hands of the literary Detective that this school of story-telling must inevitably fall at last (568).

And this is the core issue to be addressed in this article: not the sudden giving way of Sensation to Detection, but the degree to which the two genres, Sensation and Detection, intersect, using Wilkie Collins's *The Law and the Lady* as a template. The same intersection was occurring in other novels of the 1860s and 1870s and the arguments offered here might well be applied to other titles in this timeframe.

Joseph Kestner argues that Ronald Thomas's *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science* "demonstrates that the rise of forensic science prevented sensation fiction from permeating detective fiction and led to the former's demise" (20). However, Collins's fiction reveals that the shift in genre is not quite as simple as that. Instead, even if forensic science is absent, the novels still reveal a dominant detective process through feeling and emotion, none more so than *The Law and the Lady*. While the main thrust of the detective genre—the re-establishment of order—is paramount in *The Law and the Lady*, its investigative tools are, as Bourne Taylor suggests in the introduction to the Oxford Classics edition, states of mind, impulses, random associations, and early ideas of psychoanalysis (xv). However, all of these 'tools' emanate directly from the heroine Valeria's passionate feelings for her newly-married husband and her unswerving faith in his truth and innocence. This faith is irrationally based on emotion and adhered to despite apparently irrefutable evidence to the contrary. While Collins may be creating a sensation through the preposterous character Miserrimus Dexter, "a strange and startling creature—literally the half of a man" (173), I will argue that what actually brands this novel 'sensational' is Valeria's almost continuous state of excited feeling, a state that conflates sensation with detection as a specific mode in nineteenth-century writing.

More importantly, however, I want to demonstrate through a close reading of *The Law and the Lady* how this novel brings the two genres into such close alignment that emotion and imagination, sensate subjective categories, rather than objective analysis and facts, become the unlikely investigative tools by which any particular case is solved. This is despite the fact that as early as 1825 Jeremy Bentham in *A Treatise on Judicial Evidence*, as Kate Summerscale puts it: "argued that testimony needed to be backed up by material proof. Only *things* would do: the button, the boa, the nightgown, the knife" (216). Yet in thinking about the broad range of Collins's novels, it is more often than not feelings and emotions, categories often gendered

feminine but in Collins's work also applicable to male protagonists such as Walter Hartright that in the end solve mysteries, predominating over any hard facts and forensic evidence which might emerge at the novel's end merely in confirmation of conclusions already established. Although Lawrence Rothfield argues that Sherlock Holmes examines emotion as he does physical clues, and that emotion is not "ignored or denied existence by Holmes", at the same time it is only regarded as an instrument rather than a personal quality (136). It is the personal element that signifies sensate detection.

The term 'sensate detection' I have coined as a useful means of drawing together those conditions I have described above. In particular there is the connection to sensation itself in the semantics of the word 'sensate', meaning "of the nature of or involving sensation" (*Oxford Dictionary*) to which I would harness the terms emotion and imagination. This assists in confirming the interdependence of the sensation and detection genres. More importantly as far as my argument is concerned, is the further meaning of 'sensate' as "perceived by the senses" (*Oxford Dictionary*). Perception is, to my mind, a key concept in considering detection. Detection embraces the practices of discovering, uncovering, noticing, investigating. All of these practices require perception. Dickens demonstrates perception as an essential quality in developing the character of Mr. Bucket, the police detective in *Bleak House*, in stating that for "the most part Mr. Bucket notices things in general" (p. 364, chapter 22) and much later remarks on the "cunning of Mr. Bucket's eye" (p.895, chapter 62). Bucket's ultimate failure rests in his inability to link feeling and emotion to his perceptions. His strict maintenance of objectivity, his remaining outside the events merely as an impersonal observer, reduces his perception. Moreover, although we might associate feelings and emotions with sensation, their harnessing to the practice of detection implies that both genres inform the narrative style in Collins's work. Françoise Dupeyron-Lafay regards *The Law and the Lady* as a hybrid, containing "sensational elements, detection and gothic themes and patterns" (142). While there is a possible case to be made for urban gothic as a mode in this novel, it is the interdependence of sensation and detection that predominates.

Wilkie Collins's *The Law and the Lady* was first published in serial form in the *Graphic* from 1874-75. The *Graphic* was an illustrated weekly magazine aimed at a middle-class family readership and *The Law and the Lady* was illustrated with woodcuts prepared by various artists and engravers, with noted artist Luke Fildes producing the frontispiece. As Graham Law argues, Collins was "keen to exploit new publishing trends" and almost all of his work appeared first in periodical form in a variety of journals (99-101). The choice to serialize, and the accompanying pressures that such a mode inevitably places on the author, coupled to the lure of dramatic illustration, enhances the tone of urgency and sensation in this novel from Collins's later career. Notably, the illustrations extracted from the *Graphic* serialization for the one-volume edition of 1876 all feature the heroine, Valeria. They reinforce reader focus on her as the novel's key protagonist and on the various confrontations she undergoes in her detective quest to uncover the mysteries surrounding her new husband, Eustace Macallan. He has married her under a false name, Woodville, and as it turns out has been previously married. He had been tried several years earlier for his first wife's murder by arsenic poisoning with a verdict of 'Not Proven'. The death had occurred in his country house in Scotland, with what was to become a typical scenario in detective fiction, all the likely suspects gathered under one roof.

The focus on Valeria is all the more appropriate because the novel is written in the first person so that the post-trial actions are from the heroine's perspective alone. Russian structuralist, Tzvetan Todorov, has argued that there are always two stories in detective fiction, the "story of the crime" and the "story of the investigation" (44), a popular dichotomy which recurs in countless other critiques of detective fiction where Todorov is sometimes acknowledged and sometimes not.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the dichotomy is an important element in the structure of *The Law and the Lady*. In this novel Collins differs from his practice in earlier ones, usually labelled 'Sensation' novels, like *The Woman in White*, where "the story of the investigation" is taken up by a variety of the characters involved in the narrative, which ensures that detection is supported by a range of witnesses and evidence. Instead, in *The Law and the Lady* the detection centres on the one main female character. However, embedded in *The Law and the Lady* there is a report of the court case at which witnesses have given evidence and this, to use Todorov's terms, is "the story of the crime". The court case report serves two purposes: it informs Valeria herself of the events from the past and at the same time it informs the reader.

Casey A. Cothran conjectures that the presentation in the court case report of the other major character in this novel, Miserrimus Dexter, is so sensationalist it can "distract the reader from the detective work of the heroine" (206) but I want to argue that ultimately it is that detective work which is the novel's *modus operandi*. This leads on to the other part of my argument, the degree to which Valeria Macallan can be said to offer the reader something new in both the sensation and the detection genres: the amateur female detective, a sensational concept in itself. Collins's novel at first appears to confound the tantalising prospect of the development in fiction of a professional female detective, or even a highly enthusiastic amateur, because his heroine does not undertake what most readers would understand as standard detective practice: the accumulation of forensic evidence. The *Lady* of Collins's title never investigates via any such practice. Rather, she investigates through feeling and emotion, seesawing violently from one view of the case to the next, based for the most part on what amounts to hearsay, as offered by various characters involved in the earlier events. What is more, jealousy is also an emotion which impacts on Valeria's thinking and directs her investigative practice. As Elizabeth Anderman argues, the "detective who is most open to the sensations the clue evokes will be best able to understand its significance in the plot" (137).

Republished by Oxford Classics in 1992, *The Law and the Lady* is praised by its editor Jenny Bourne Taylor for producing "probably the first detective heroine in a full-length novel" (xv). However, there had been predecessors of the type more in keeping with the popular modern idea of a female detective. In 1864 Andrew Forrester Jun. published *The Female Detective*, a set of seven cases of varying length. The heroine, Mrs. G—, works for the Metropolitan Police. *Revelations of a Lady Detective* by W. S. Hayward was apparently also published around 1864. Stephen Knight argues that the success of the former produced the latter (the British Library edition of *Revelations* is dated January 1865) (35).<sup>2</sup> *Revelations* is a set of ten episodes, or cases, and the heroine, Mrs. Paschal, also works for the Metropolitan Police. Both these women are older, appear to be relatively free of encumbrances such as husbands and children, and happy to undertake this paid work. As professionals, most notably, their emotions are never engaged. Forrester's Mrs. G—, in the

introduction which establishes the stories as Mrs. G—'s reminiscences, addresses the issue of gender in particular, stating that "the reader will comprehend that the woman detective has far greater opportunities than a man of intimate watching, and of keeping her eyes upon matters near which a man could not conveniently play the eavesdropper" (quoted in Knight, 35).<sup>3</sup> Hayward's Mrs. Paschal tells the reader that to be a successful detective you have to have a "vigorous and subtle brain", as well as "nerve and strength, cunning and confidence, resources unlimited" (quoted in Kestner, 8).

Kestner also notes, as a predecessor to *The Law and the Lady*, Wilkie Collins's own short piece published in *Household Words* titled "The Diary of Anne Rodway" (1856). Like Valeria, Anne Rodway refuses to accept a legal decision, an inquest verdict of 'Accidental Death' on her friend (Collins, "Diary of Anne Rodway," 8), and declares that a "kind of fever got possession of me—a vehement yearning to go on from this first discovery and find out more, no matter what the risk might be" (Collins, "Diary of Anne Rodway," 11). Valeria may have "nerve and strength" but possesses none of the other requisites for the successful female detective as outlined by Mrs. Paschal. She reveals more the kind of feverish desire attributed to Anne Rodway. It is subjective intuition that spurs Valeria on. Kestner argues that these various early manifestations of the female detective may be fantasies of female empowerment and that they are inherently transgressive (17). Transgressive perhaps, but Collins's novel cannot be described as a fantasy of female empowerment for two reasons. The first is that Valeria becomes involved in detection by chance, not choice. The second is that Collins offers ideologically-based excuses all the way through for Valeria's patently unfeminine decisions and actions that offend against gendered propriety. Most startling of all is the revelation towards the end of the novel that Valeria has been pregnant throughout the investigation.

Her decisions are explained using ideological truisms based on a proliferation of irritating gender stereotypes which recur throughout the novel. For example, "Only give a woman love, and there is nothing she will not venture, suffer, and do" (16). Another more important example is, "I must have been more or less than woman, if my self-respect had not been wounded, if my curiosity had not been wrought to the highest pitch" (30). Curiosity, traditionally demeaned as a feminine weakness, is nevertheless a specific element of detection in the Holmes stories emerging just a decade or so later than *The Law and the Lady* (Rothfield 144). In sensate detection, however, curiosity is not an impersonal emotion, but rather the very opposite, even while it is demeaned as feminine. Curiosity thus becomes an important factor in this novel, for its necessary impetus to detection but also because it is so much a part of Valeria's character. In demonstrating this Collins manages to reinforce yet another gendered stereotype when Valeria's husband declares: "if you could control your curiosity ... we might live happily enough. I thought I had married a woman who was superior to the vulgar failings of her sex. A good wife should know better than to pry" (54). But the reader has already been offered evidence of Valeria's prying. Early one morning, she goes through her husband's dressing-case and discovers a false bottom: "forming a secret compartment for letters and papers. In my strange condition—capricious, idle, inquisitive—it was an amusement to me to take out the papers" (24). She puts everything back "exactly as I had found them" suggesting a consciousness of violating this new husband's privacy.

In sensate detection, then, ‘intimate watching’ is an important and peculiarly feminine investigative tool, linked with curiosity. Intimacy is the crucial factor here, because it is embedded in the domestic. Stephen Knight has argued that Victorian society feared “threats of passion and crime’ thriving ‘within the walls of respectability” (39), that is, within the domestic. This fear is based on the subversion of intimacy, connected as it is to emotion and feeling and because it is both subjective and personal. Valeria is not, after all, an objective investigator. With ‘intimate watching’ comes the ability to read: not just documents, but bodies, actions, gestures, faces. My first example of the effectiveness of ‘intimate watching’ occurs when Valeria accidentally meets Eustace’s mother while walking on the Ramsgate sands. While Valeria recognizes her from the photograph in the secret compartment of the dressing-case, his mother does not know the name of Woodville, the false name under which Eustace has married Valeria, and has no idea she is conversing with her son’s second wife. On Eustace joining them and making introductions his mother says “‘I pity your wife’” and walks away. Seeking explanations from him regarding both the failure to recognize the name and his mother’s contempt, Eustace attempts to laugh it all off by labelling his mother ‘eccentric’:

He burst into a fit of laughter—loud, coarse, hard laughter, so utterly unlike any sound I had ever yet heard issue from his lips, so strangely and shockingly foreign to his character as I understood it, that I stood still on the sands, and openly remonstrated with him. (31)

Valeria adds it “was all forced; it was all unnatural. He, the most delicate, the most refined of men—a gentleman in the highest sense of the word—was coarse and loud and vulgar! ... A child ... who had heard what I heard, would have discovered that he was trifling—grossly, recklessly trifling—with the truth” (32). Valeria labels the explanation Eustace contrives as “shameless prevarication” (34). Her obvious failure to accept it (“I burst out crying”; 35), based on her intimate reading of the false demeanour he has assumed and her emotional reaction to it, results in his passionate admission that he *has* been lying, while still refusing to offer any explanation. Discovering she has been married under a false name naturally leads the reader (and Valeria) to suspect that this is a case of bigamy: a very popular Sensation genre standby. She locates her mother-in-law who assures her she is lawfully married but advises her to abstain from trying to find out more. This has little effect. As Valeria states: “I left the house, positively resolved ... to discover the secret which the mother and son were hiding from me” (43). Intimate watching has produced the impulse for investigation.

A quite different example of effective ‘intimate watching’ occurs when Valeria, as part of her resolution to solve the mystery, determines to visit her husband’s friend Major Fitz-David. The Major is a lecherous, highly ambivalent character as far as today’s reader is concerned but probably seemed much less so in Collins’s time. He only agrees to see Valeria because his butler has described her as young, pretty, and of good figure (59). While the Major appears to exercise the “determining male gaze” to use Laura Mulvey’s term (19), Valeria in fact equally returns a similar determining gaze: “I studied him attentively; I tried to read his character in his face” (60). Asking the Major for the explanation refused by both her husband and his mother, he continually attempts to evade the issue. As Valeria remarks, Collins once more employing gendered truisms, a “man in my place would have lost all patience, and

would have given up the struggle in disgust. Being a woman, and having my end in view, my resolution was invincible” (65). In this case, it is Valeria’s gaze which is both ‘controlling and curious’, neatly regendering Mulvey’s argument. In the end, by working on his weakness for women—““Your adorable sex has made its pretty playthings of my life, my time, and my money”” (71)—Valeria persuades the Major to agree that while he won’t help her, he won’t prevent her discovering what she needs to know. He admits that she might find a clue to the mystery in the very room in which they sit and offers to leave her alone there to examine everything in it. This she does: every drawer, every box, under every cushion, every cabinet, every paper, she even shakes every book. In the sixth drawer of a cabinet she discovers “the fragments of a broken vase” (78), at which point the Major re-enters the room: “The instant he noticed the open drawer, I saw a change in his face . . . as if he had caught me with my hand on the clue” (79). He leaves again but Valeria notices a partially-closed communicating door: ‘Had somebody been watching me through the chink? I . . . pushed it back . . . . There was the Major, . . . I saw it in his face—he had been watching me at the bookcase!’” (83). His covert surveillance of her activities has, however, proved ineffective. His anxiety directs Valeria to focus her activity on the bookcase but to no avail until his latest “pretty plaything” makes her way into the room, and explains the broken vase as a jealous outburst on her part when she threw a book at it. The book is produced and is, of course, *A Complete Report of the Trial of Eustace Macallan for the Alleged Poisoning of his Wife*.

Valeria’s reaction to this discovery is to swoon from the shock she suffers on discovering that her new husband, Eustace Macallan, has not only been married before but has been tried for the murder by arsenic of his first wife, Sara Macallan. She states that the “black blank of a swoon swallowed me up” (94) and on coming to, her first remembrance is “Pain—agonising pain, as if every nerve in my body was being twisted and torn out of me. My whole being writhed and quivered under the dumb and dreadful protest of Nature against the effort to recall me to life” (94). This overwrought description is fairly typical of the kind of excessive emotion described in the novel, but Valeria’s swoon is also deliberately employed as a useful indicator of her upper-class status as well. This helps to counter her rather unladylike outbursts, of which there are a number. In the early days of their courtship, when Eustace has declared they must part, she states:

I held him desperately, recklessly. His eyes put me beside myself; his words filled me with a frenzy of despair. ‘Go where you may,’ I said, ‘I go with you! Friends—reputation—I care nothing who I lose, or what I lose. Oh, Eustace, I am only a woman—don’t madden me. I can’t live without you. I must, and will be your wife!’ Those wild words were all I could say before the misery and madness in me forced their way outward in a burst of sobs and tears (21).

This declaration, her rather outré confession of love for her new husband—“I love him! I love him! I love him” (12)—and the first three days of the honeymoon rapturously described as ‘days of delicious solitude, of exquisite happiness, never to be forgotten, never to be lived over again, to the end of our lives’ (23), are all expressions of intense sexual feeling surprisingly explicit for pre-*fin de siècle*, middle-class sensibilities. Thus her swoon marks her clearly as a lady of upper rank. To reinforce the point, contrast is provided by the young, presumably working-class woman, the “pretty plaything” and ostensible protégé of her husband’s lascivious

friend, the Major. This young woman, who has inadvertently led Valeria to the discovery of the trial report, reveals her lesser status by asserting: “I am not one of the fainting sort myself; but I feel it, I can tell you. Yes! I feel it, though I don’t faint about it. I come of respectable parents—I do” (97). Stephen Knight has suggested that Collins does “shake certainties about rank, gender, class, body” but nevertheless remains, for the most part, “politically conservative” (40 and 47).<sup>4</sup> Another issue for Collins, and the reason why he has to establish Valeria as both exceptional, but still a lady, is the practice of detection itself. As Michelle Slung notes, the “very essence of criminal investigation is antithetical to what was considered proper feminine breeding, involving as it does eavesdropping, snooping and spying, dissimulation, immodest and aggressive pursuit and physical danger” (xi). The representation of the ideologies of gender and class is something Collins struggles with throughout the novel, wishing both to surprise his readers, to “provoke sensation” as Anderman puts it (147), but also to avoid scandalising and losing them.

Eustace, unable to deal with the fact that Valeria now knows his terrible secret departs (with the newly-formed Red Cross) to assist at the war in Spain, declaring their marriage to be over. In their only interview over the matter, she exhorts her husband to take action for himself: “*I say, Not Proven won’t do for me. Prove your right, Eustace, to a verdict of Not Guilty. Why have you let three years pass without doing it? ... I had roused myself; my pulses were throbbing, my voice rang through the room. Had I roused him?*” (106). His only response is to say “*We can only submit*” (107) upon which he leaves the house and later sends a farewell letter. This is the decisive action which sets Valeria on the trail, her words and tone strikingly similar to her declaration of love quoted above:

A new ardour burnt in me. ‘No!’ I said to myself. ‘Neither relations nor friends shall prevail on me to falter and fail in my husband’s cause. The assertion of his innocence is the work of my life—I will begin it tonight (123).

Valeria understands that Eustace was tried in Scotland, and under Scottish law at the time a verdict of ‘Not Proven’ could be brought in. This has left Eustace Macallan in a no-man’s land, neither innocent nor guilty, causing him to make poor decisions such as marrying Valeria under a false name (Woodville) and failing to tell her his situation, including the fact that he had been married before. Despite his prevarications and an underlying weakness of character which strikes every reader, (even his mother condemns him as “an essentially weak man” (196)) Valeria persists in both loving him and believing in him. Kathleen O’Fallon is one critic who finds Eustace “not worthy” of such a heroine as Valeria and points out that Collins clearly felt obliged to explain this aberration in his “Note addressed to the Reader” at the front of the novel (236), where he suggests women habitually bestow love on undeserving objects (3). Indeed the only apparent reason for Valeria’s belief in her husband’s innocence is her passionate love for him which, as I have already indicated, Collins presents in highly sensual terms from the very start of the relationship, a case of love at first sight:

I was spell-bound under his eyes and under his voice. I had fancied, honestly fancied, myself to have been in love, often and often before this time. Never, in any other man’s company, had I felt as I now felt in the presence of *this*

man. ... I leaned against the Vicarage gate. I could not breathe; I could not think; my heart fluttered as if it would fly out of my bosom ... (15).

As Karin Jacobson has rightly argued, this is a novel in which “fact and emotion, ... cannot be separated” (298), and, I would add, just as sensation and detection cannot.

Miserrimus Dexter offers, however, the most important example of how ‘intimate watching’ operates as a specifically female and sensate detective tool. As has already been intimated, this character has been the focus of any number of critical studies. Anderman argues that Dexter’s “imagination controls the narrative and shapes the detection” (136) and Dupeyron-Lafay, that the “detective text would literally be crippled or mutilated without the deformed Miserrimus Dexter” (145). Cothran, on the other hand, reads Dexter as disruptive, even though he “is the author of many events of the narrative” (205) and “his actions may be said to most closely resemble those of a detective novelist” (206). Dennis Denisoff, like Dupeyron-Lafay, reads him as a “sensationally gothic individual” (48). Perhaps Collins was attempting to rework the success of the bizarre but fascinating Count Fosco in *The Woman in White*, but the creation of Dexter as a study of deformity is so excessive that Collins feels obliged to address this issue in his “Note addressed to the Reader” as well, to the effect that “Characters which may not have appeared, ... , within the limits of our own individual experience, may nevertheless be perfectly natural Characters” (3). There is, however, nothing “perfectly natural” about Dexter—his sideshow monstrosity is taken to almost impossible lengths—and Collins’s disclaimer implicitly recognizes this. As H. L. Mansel wrote in his 1863 article, “Sensation Novels” for the *Quarterly Review*, the “sensation novel ... is usually a tale of our own times. ... a tale which aims at electrifying the nerves of the reader is never thoroughly effective unless the scene be laid in our own days and among the people we are in the habit of meeting” (488-9). It is in this respect that Collins’s creation is a failure. To use Cothran’s term, however, Dexter is a disruptive body (195). He is first introduced to the reader as a witness in the account of Eustace’s trial, a public performance causing a “commotion among the audience, accompanied by suppressed exclamations of curiosity and surprise” and producing ‘a burst of laughter from the public seats’ when he appears in court (172):

a strange and startling creature—literally the half of a man—revealed himself to the general view. A coverlid, which had been thrown over his chair, had fallen off during his progress through the throng. The loss of it exposed to the public curiosity the head, the arms, and the trunk of a living human being: absolutely deprived of the lower limbs. To make this deformity all the more striking and all the more terrible, the victim of it was—as to his face and his body—an unusually handsome, and an unusually well-made man. His long silky hair ... fell over shoulders that were the perfection of strength and grace His face was bright with vivacity and intelligence. His large, clear blue eyes, and his long, delicate white hands, were like the eyes and hands of a beautiful woman. He would have looked effeminate, but for the manly proportions of his throat and chest (173).

Reading the trial account, Valeria fails to realize that Dexter’s apparently clear and balanced evidence has been edited and made ‘presentable’ for publication, as Eustace’s mother later points out to her (199). His account arouses, first, jealousy in Valeria over a certain Mrs. Beaulieu staying in the house at the time of the first wife’s



death. This reaction is followed, secondly and swiftly, by a belief that Dexter hints that Mrs. Beaulieu is the murderer, and a determination to visit Dexter to seek confirmation. The Major is horrified at the idea, protesting that “the man’s mind is as deformed as his body” (191) and avoids providing an introduction. However, Eustace’s mother admires Valeria’s “courage” and “fidelity”—qualities that might be applied to the professional female detective—as well as her “unshaken faith in my unhappy son” (196). For these reasons she agrees to accompany Valeria to Dexter’s house. The pair are shown in but confronted with a notice announcing he must not be disturbed. Mrs. Macallan, undaunted, leads Valeria up two flights of stairs to a recess where Valeria is commanded first to ‘Listen’. “I listened, and heard, on the other side of the door, a shouting voice, accompanied by an extraordinary rumbling and whistling sound travelling backwards and forwards” (205). Puzzled she is then invited to ‘come and see’. Valeria now takes on the same role as the Major as a covert observer and intimate watcher, except that intimacy has been violated because what the reader is offered is a form of spectacle, a freak show.

Robert Bogdan argues that “‘Freak’ is a way of thinking about and presenting people—a frame of mind” (quoted Cothran, 204). Kate Flint, on the other hand, argues that Dexter is ‘no freak-show exhibit, but rather claims the talents of a serious performer’ (156). Nevertheless to my mind Collins presents Dexter as a form of spectacle, and as a key actor in the novel’s Sensational aspects. These factors confuse perception and cause Valeria to misread Dexter’s performances and what Flint has termed his “imaginative projection[s]” (156). This is what Valeria sees, a far cry from the orderly description of Dexter provided by the court reporters:

I saw (or fancied I saw, in the obscurity,) a long room, with a low ceiling. The dying gleam of an ill-kept fire formed the only light by which I could judge of objects and distances. . . . the firelight left the extremities shadowed in almost total darkness. I had barely time to notice this, before I heard the rumbling and whistling sounds approaching me. A high chair on wheels moved by, through the field of red light, carrying a shadowy figure with floating hair, and arms furiously raised and lowered, working the machinery that propelled the chair at its utmost rate of speed. . . . The fantastic and frightful apparition, man and machinery blended in one—the new Centaur, half man, half chair—flew by me again in the dying light (206).

A sudden flame of light allows Dexter to see the intruders, who are to all intents and purposes spying on him and invading his privacy. When Mrs. Macallan says she has brought Eustace’s second wife he leaps from the chair with a cry of horror landing on the floor “as lightly as a monkey, on his hands. The grotesque horror of the scene culminated in his hopping away, on his hands, at a prodigious speed” (207).

Dexter quickly regains self-control, so effectively that Valeria shifts from being “frightened” and “disgusted” to deciding she can see “nothing mad in him, nothing in any way repelling” while allowing that this might be due to “want of perception” (213). She believes that the solution to the mystery lies with him and so, because she desperately needs him to be sane, she defends him. As she tells her mother-in-law, “I believe he really can be of use to me” and “I must run risks. . . . prudence won’t help a woman in my position” (222). Dexter of course encourages her jealousy and suspicions of Mrs. Beaulieu to hide his own misdeeds surrounding the death of

Eustace's first wife. Valeria's solution to the mystery at this point is based solely on emotion. Discovering her error she sums up the issue neatly:

I had been trebly in the wrong—wrong in hastily and cruelly suspecting an innocent woman; wrong in communicating my suspicions (without an attempt to verify them previously) to another person; wrong in accepting the flighty inferences and conclusions of Miserrimus Dexter as if they had been solid truths (269).

This statement reveals the extent to which Valeria's investigative tools now appear to have been unreliable and ineffective and she seeks legal advice (the 'Law' of the title) from the solicitor, Mr. Playmore, whose role in the Trial proceedings she had noted with approval. Playmore accepts her suggestion that Dexter is in some way involved and for the first time introduces into the novel specific forensic terms: the need for "plain evidence" and the consciousness of the difficulty "at this distance of time" (279). Furthermore, should she interview Dexter one more time he recommends, "I should have a witness with me" (289). At last Valeria begins to think like the more standard detective of modern fiction, asking herself a series of questions and trying not to allow her feelings of compassion for Dexter cloud her judgment.

The final interview with Dexter is also the scene of his disintegration. As he collapses into madness in telling a tale, so fragments of the truth are revealed in the disjointed ramblings. There was no murder; Eustace's first wife had committed suicide and loving her, Dexter had torn the suicide note into tiny pieces which are eventually located in the dustheap behind the house and painstakingly reconstructed by Valeria's faithful old friend Benjamin and Mr. Playmore, proving finally that Eustace is innocent of any crime. As Hutter remarks, discussing Collins's *The Moonstone*, "the restatement and restructuring in the present of a past event" is characteristic of all detective fiction (175). Moreover, Hutter argues that detective fiction "sustains a tension between subjective mystery and objective solution" and that rationality need not dominate (192). *The Lady and the Law* demonstrates to a nicety the way in which the two genres, Sensation and Detection, are neatly conflated. In considering other and earlier so-called Sensation novels, novels which are predominantly critiqued as 'Sensation', the conflation of the two genres is actually evidenced in most of them. Collins's own earlier work; Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*; Ellen Wood's *East Lynne*; even Dickens's *Bleak House* all offer examples where sensate detection is the primary investigative tool.

Valeria has, after all, successfully solved the mystery, through intense emotion. At first it might be thought she is the antithesis of subsequent female detective figures who begin to appear late in the century, and the antithesis of the Law as Depeyron-Lafay suggests, a Lady who is "another law, an anti-law" (145). However, in conclusion it might be useful to compare Valeria to the American fictional girl detective Nancy Drew. Nancy Drew first saw the light of day on 28 April 1930. Rehak describes her apotheosis in this way:

Miss Nancy Drew, well-to-do plucky girl of the twenties, arrived on April 28, 1930 dressed to the nines in smart tweed suits, cloche hats, and fancy dresses— ... Even the Great Depression would prove to be no match for her

... she was also in possession of not only an admirable intellect, but a shiny blue roadster. (116).

Nancy is a cool, calm, collected sophisticate: she solves her cases with plain evidence, often putting herself at risk to locate it. She rarely operates on intuition but she does use intimate watching as the ultimate investigative tool. She is never emotional, as even the recent 2002 movie, *Nancy Drew*, reveals. When the film begins Nancy and her friends are starting college. A young man, Hank Luckford, recognizes them: “Well I’ll be a monkey’s uncle. Nancy Drew. Right? ... Wow. The she-Sherlocks of River Heights High. The girls who get to the rock-bottom truth; who dare ask the questions no-one else will.” It could be argued that Nancy Drew is Valeria Macallan’s opposite. Rehak claims Nancy has a “relentless desire to succeed” (xiii) and that her writers “envisioned her as a girl who could do what she wanted in a world that was largely the province of men” (xvii). Notably, both these factors are true for Valeria who is equally relentless, and also willing to dare to ask the questions no-one else will. If she continually apologises for refusing the advice of men, Collins is merely trying to manage the gendered anxieties of the period by protecting his heroine from opprobrium. In spite of Poe’s theories as espoused by his mouthpiece Dupin, and more fully developed by Conan Doyle with the advent of that ultra-cool, master of rationality, Sherlock Holmes, sensate detection remains as significant and as necessary as rational detection. Valeria represents sensate detection alone. Once she has uncovered the proper direction the investigation should take through feeling and emotion, she withdraws from the search but not before she has “infected” both Benjamin and the lawyer Mr. Playmore with her enthusiasm (371). As the lawyer Mr. Playmore remarks to Benjamin on locating the necessary forensic evidence with which to solve the mystery:

‘We are indebted to her for these results, ... But for her resolution, and her influence over Miserrimus Dexter, we should never have discovered what the dust-heap was hiding from us—we should never have seen so much as a glimmering of the truth’ (381).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See for example A. D. Hutter, “Dreams, Transformations and Literature”, 192; Peter Thoms, *Detection and its Designs* (1998), 1; Peter Hühn, “The Detective as Reader”, 451; and Charles J. Rzepka, *Detective Fiction* (2005), 18-19.

<sup>2</sup> Kestner dates *Revelations* as either 1861 or 1864, 6.

<sup>3</sup> Also quoted Kestner, 11 and Summerscale, 188. I am indebted to the research contained in Kestner’s *Sherlock’s Sisters* which assisted materially in the development of my own argument.

<sup>4</sup> Collins’s engagement with gender ideology in particular is a much debated issue. D. A. Miller in “*Cage aux folle*” argues that the restoration of the status quo in *The Woman in White*, because recontextualised as “sensational”, “risks appearing monstrous” (198-9). Pamela Perkins and Mary Donaghy in “A Man’s resolution” more determinedly find Collins is not fundamentally conservative at all, offering instead “a subtle critique of Victorian society” (392).

---

**Works Cited**

- Anderman, Elizabeth. "Interpreting the work of Art and Reading Clues: Aesthetics and Detection in Wilkie Collins's *The Law and the Lady*". *Formal Investigations. Aesthetic Style in Late-Victorian and Edwardian Detective Fiction*. Stuttgart: ibidem, 2007.
- Collins, Richard. "Marian's Moustache. Bearded Ladies, Hermaphrodites, and Intersexual Collage in *The Woman in White*". *Reality's Dark Light. The Sensational Wilkie Collins*. Ed. Maria K. Bachman and Don Richard Cox. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2003.
- Collins, Wilkie. "The Diary of Anne Rodway", *Household Words* (19 and 26 July 1856) available at <http://www.google.com.au/search?q=diary+of+anne+rodway&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8&aq=t&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&client=firefox-a>  
Accessed 6 August 2009.
- Collins, Wilkie. *The Law and the Lady*. 1876. Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1992.
- Cothran, Casey A. "Mysterious Bodies: Deception and Detection in Wilkie Collins's *The Law and the Lady* and *The Moonstone*". *VIJ: Victorians Institute Journal* 24 (2006): 193-214.
- Denisoff, Dennis. "Framed and Hung. Collins and the Economic Beauty of the Manly Artist". *Reality's Dark Light. The Sensational Wilkie Collins*. Ed. Maria K. Bachman and Don Richard Cox. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2003.
- Dickens, Charles. *Bleak House*. 1851-3. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982.
- Dupeyron-Lafay, Françoise. "The paradox of gothic detection in *The Law and the Lady* (1875) by Wilkie Collins". *Anglophonia/ Caliban* 15 (2004): 141-152.
- Flint, Kate. "Disability and Difference". *The Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins*. Ed. Jenny Bourne Taylor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Hühn, Peter. "The Detective as Reader: Narrativity and Reading Concepts in Detective Fiction". *Modern Fiction Studies* 33.1 (1987): 451-66.
- Hutter, A. D. "Dreams, Transformations and Literature: The Implications of Detective Fiction". *New Casebooks. Wilkie Collins*. Ed. Lyn Pykett. London: Macmillan, 1998.
- Jacobson, Karin. "Plain Faces, Weird Cases. Domesticating the Law in Collins's *The Law and the Lady* and the Trial of Madeleine Smith". *Reality's Dark Light. The Sensational Wilkie Collins*. Ed. Maria K. Bachman and Don Richard Cox. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2003.
- Kestner, Joseph A. *Sherlock's Sisters. The British Female Detective, 1864-1913*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003.
- Knight, Stephen. *Crime Fiction, 1800-2000*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- Law, Graham. "The professional writer and the literary marketplace", *The Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins*. Ed. Jenny Bourne Taylor. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006.
- Mansel, H. L. "Sensation Novels". *Quarterly Review* 113 (1863): 481-514.
- Miller, D. A. "*Cage aux folles*: Sensation and Gender in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*". *Speaking of Gender*. Ed. Elaine Showalter. New York: Routledge, 1989.

- 
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), *Visual and Other Pleasures*. London: Macmillan, 1989.
- Nancy Drew*. Lawrence Bender Productions. Director James Frawley. Screen Writer Ami Canaan Mann. Starring Maggie Lawson. 2002.
- O'Fallon, Kathleen. "Breaking the Laws about Ladies: Wilkie Collins's Questioning of Gender Roles". *Wilkie Collins to the Forefront. Some Reassessments*. Ed. Nelson Smith and R. C. Terry. New York: AMS Press, 1995.
- Oliphant, Margaret. "Sensation Novels". *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 91 (1862): 564-84.
- Perkins, Pamela and Mary Donaghy. "'A Man's Resolution': Narrative Strategies in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*." *Studies in the Novel* 22 (1990): 392-402.
- Rehak, Melanie. *Girl Sleuth. Nancy Drew and the Women who Created Her*. Orlando, Fla.: Harcourt, 2005.
- Rzepka, Charles J. *Detective Fiction*. Cambridge: Polity, 2005.
- Rothfield, Lawrence. *Vital Signs. Medical Realism in Nineteenth-Century Fiction*. Princetown: Princetown University Press, 1992.
- Slung, Michelle. "Introduction". *Experiences of Loveday Brooke* by Catherine Louisa Pirkis. 1894. New York: Dover, 1986.
- Summerscale, Kate. *The Suspicions of Mr. Whicher or the Murder at Road Hill House*. London: Bloomsbury, 2008.
- Taylor, Jenny Bourne. "Introduction". *The Law and the Lady*. Wilkie Collins. Oxford: Oxford Classics, 1992.
- Thoms, Peter. *Detection and its Designs. Narrative & Power in 19th-Century Detective Fiction*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1998.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Poetics of Prose*. Trans. Richard Howard. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977.