

‘SENSATION NOVELS’

‘Sensation Novels’, *Blackwood’s Magazine*, 91 (May 1862), pp. 564–84.

This review of sensation novels was one of the first, along with H. L. Mansel’s ‘Sensation Novels’ in the *Quarterly Review* (vol. 113, April 1863) and W. Fraser Rae’s ‘Sensation Novelists: Miss Braddon’ in the *North British Review* (vol. 43, September 1865) to identify this sub-genre of popular fiction. MOWO’s choice of texts is significant. She begins with Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White*, serialized in Dickens’s weekly *All the Year Round* from 26 November 1859 to 25 August 1860 and published in three volumes in August 1860. She then turns to Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, which followed it in the same weekly, beginning on 1 December 1860, and completed on 3 August 1861, published in three volumes later that year. She alludes to, but then dismisses Ellen Wood’s *East Lynne*, which was serialized in the *New Monthly Magazine* between January 1860 and June 1861 and which she terms ‘a clever novel’ but one ‘which some inscrutable breath of popular liking has blown into momentary celebrity’ (p. 251). She completes her review with a discussion of what she admits is a little-known novel, *Owen: a Waif*, by Frederick William Robinson, a writer best known for a series of novels about religion. Robinson’s novel was published by Hurst & Blackett, who were also one of MOWO’s publishers, which may be the reason it came to her attention. Robinson was not a passing whim. She would review his *Church and Chapel* in her next article on fiction in August 1863 (see pp. 330–4). The third of the triumvirate of major sensation novels, along with *The Woman in White* and *East Lynne*, Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* was published later in 1862, possibly too late for MOWO’s review.

MOWO immediately identified the originality of Collins’s novel, which was to become the acknowledged prototype sensation novel, and which had created a critical storm after the first instalment appeared in November 1859. And she seized upon the term ‘sensation’, linking it to physical experiences of ‘nerves’, ‘terrors’ and ‘thrills’. She distinguishes Collins’s employment of ‘the common mechanism of life’ which he then uses to ‘thrill[s] us into wonder, terror and

breathless interest' (p. 249) in contrast to writers who rely on the supernatural, fantasy or violent crime to bring about the same effect.

She is less surefooted in her treatment of *Great Expectations*. She identifies the sensational elements in the plot, but regards the novel overall as 'feeble, fatigued and colourless' (p. 258). The figure of Miss Havisham and the interrupted wedding is the focus of her dissatisfaction – 'fancy run mad' (p. 259). The connections between Miss Havisham, Pip and Estella are a failure. But the 'darker side of the story', the story of Magwitch and Pip's redemption, and also the portrait of Joe Gargery, are worthy of their author.

MOWO was lavish in her use of quotation in this article. Those from *The Woman in White* and *Great Expectations* have been truncated in this edition, because of space. Chapter references for the omitted material are provided. Most of the extensive quotations from *Owen: a Waif* have been retained for the benefit of readers who are not familiar with the novel.

Sections of this article have been reprinted in P. Collins (ed.), *Dickens: the Critical Heritage* (1971; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), pp. 451–4, in N. Page (ed.), *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), pp. 111–16, and in S. Regan (ed.), *The Nineteenth-Century Novel: A Critical Reader* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 39–44.

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SENSATION NOVELS.

TEN years ago the world in general had come to a singular crisis in its existence. The age was lost in self-admiration. We had done so many things that nobody could have expected a century before – we were on the way to do so many more, if common report was to be trusted. We were about inaugurating the reign of universal peace in a world too deeply connected by links of universal interest ever to commit the folly of war again – we had invented everything that was most unlikely, and had nothing before us but to go on perfecting our inventions, and, securing all the powers of nature in harness, to do all manner of peaceable work for us like the giants in the children's story. What a wonderful difference in ten years! Instead of linking peaceful hands, and vowing to study war no more, we have turned Industry away from her vaunted work of putting a girdle round the world, and set her to forge thunderbolts in volcanic din and passion. In that momentous interval great wars have begun and ended,¹ and fighting has come into fashion throughout the palpitating earth. We who once did, and made, and declared ourselves masters of all things, have relapsed into the natural size of humanity before the great events which have given a new character to the age. Though we return with characteristic obstinacy and iteration to the grand display of wealth and skill which in 1851 was a Festival of Peace,² we repeat the celebration with very different thoughts. It is a changed world in which we are now standing. If no distant sound of guns echoes across seas and continents upon our ears as we wander under the South Kensington domes,³ the lack of the familiar sound will be rather disappointing than satisfactory. That distant roar has come to form a thrilling accompaniment to the safe life we lead at home. On the other side of the Atlantic,⁴ a race *blasée* and lost in universal *ennui* has bethought itself of the grandest expedient for procuring a new sensation; and albeit we follow at a humble distance, we too begin to feel the need of a supply of new shocks and wonders. Those fell Merrimacs and Monitors,⁵ stealing forth with a certain devilish invulnerability and composure upon the human ships and men to be made fire and carnage of, are excitement too high pitched for comfort; but it is only natural that art and literature should, in an age which has turned to be one of events, attempt a kindred depth of effect and shock of incident. In

the little reflected worlds of the novel and the drama the stimulant has acted strongly, and the result in both has been a significant and remarkable quickening of public interest. Shakespeare, even in the excitement of a new interpretation, has not crowded the waning playhouse, as has the sensation drama with its mock catastrophes; and Sir Walter himself never deprived his readers of their lawful rest to a greater extent with one novel than Mr Wilkie Collins has succeeded in doing with his 'Woman in White.'⁶ We will not attempt to decide whether the distance between the two novelists is less than that which separates the skirts of Shakespeare's regal mantle from the loftiest stretch of Mr Bourcicault.⁷ But it is a fact that the well-known old stories of readers sitting up all night over a novel had begun to grow faint in the public recollection. Domestic histories, however virtuous and charming, do not often attain that result – nor, indeed, would an occurrence so irregular and destructive of all domestic proprieties be at all a fitting homage to the virtuous chronicles which have lately furnished the larger part of our light literature. Now a new fashion has been set to English novel-writers. Whether it can be followed extensively, or whether it would be well if that were possible, are very distinct questions; but it cannot be denied that a most striking and original effort, sufficiently individual to be capable of originating a new school in fiction, has been made, and that the universal verdict has crowned it with success.

Mr Wilkie Collins is not the first man who has produced a sensation novel. By fierce expedients of crime and violence, by *diablerie* of divers kinds, and by the wild devices of a romance which smiled at probabilities, the thing has been done before now. The higher class of American fiction, as represented by Hawthorne,⁸ attempts little else. In that strange hybrid between French excitement and New England homeliness, we recognise the influence of a social system which has paralysed all the wholesome wonders and nobler mysteries of human existence. Hectic rebellion against nature – frantic attempts by any kind of black art or mad psychology to get some grandeur and sacredness restored to life – or if not sacredness and grandeur, at least horror and mystery, there being nothing better in earth or heaven; Mesmerism⁹ possibly for a make-shift, or Socialism, if perhaps it might be more worth while to turn ploughmen and milkmaids than ladies and gentlemen; or, if none of these would do, best to undermine life altogether, and find what creeping honours might be underground: here a Scarlet Letter and impish child of shame,¹⁰ there a snake-girl, horrible junction of reptile and woman. The result is no doubt a class of books abounding in sensation; but the effect is invariably attained by violent and illegitimate means, as fantastic in themselves as they are contradictory to actual life. The Master of English fiction, Sir E. B. Lytton, has accomplished the same end, by magic and supernaturalism, as in the wild and beautiful romance of 'Zanoni.'¹¹ We will not attempt to discuss his last wonderful effort of this class, which is a species by itself, and

to be judged only by special rules, which space debars us from considering. Of all the productions of the supernatural school, there is none more perfect in its power of sensation, or more entirely effective in its working out, than the short story of the 'Haunted House,'¹² most thrilling of ghostly tales; but we cannot enter upon this school of fiction, which is distinct from our present subject. Mr Dickens rarely writes a book without an attempt at a similar effect by means of some utterly fantastic creation, set before his readers with all that detail of circumstance in which he is so successful. Amid all these predecessors in the field, Mr Wilkie Collins takes up an entirely original position. Not so much as a single occult agency is employed in the structure of his tale. Its power arises from no overstraining of nature:— the artist shows no love of mystery for mystery's sake; he wastes neither wickedness nor passion. His plot is astute and deeply-laid, but never weird or ghostly; he shows no desire to tinge the daylight with any morbid shadows. His effects are produced by common human acts, performed by recognisable human agents, whose motives are never inscrutable, and whose line of conduct is always more or less consistent. The moderation and reserve which he exhibits; his avoidance of extremes; his determination, in conducting the mysterious struggle, to trust to the reasonable resources of the combatants, who have consciously set all upon the stake for which they play, but whom he assists with no weapons save those of quick wit, craft, courage, patience, and villainy — tools common to all men — make the lights and shadows of the picture doubly effective. The more we perceive the perfectly legitimate nature of the means used to produce the sensation, the more striking does that sensation become. The machinery of miracle, on the contrary, is troublesome and expensive, and never satisfactory; a miraculous issue ought to come out of it to justify the miraculous means; and miraculous issues are at war with all the economy of nature, not to say that they are difficult of invention and hard to get credit for. A writer who boldly takes in hand the common mechanism of life, and by means of persons who might all be living in society for anything we can tell to the contrary, thrills us into wonder, terror, and breathless interest, with positive personal shocks of surprise and excitement, has accomplished a far greater success than he who effects the same result through supernatural agencies, or by means of the fantastic creations of lawless genius or violent horrors of crime. When we are to see a murder visibly done before our eyes, the performers must be feeble indeed if some shudder of natural feeling does not give force to their exertions; and the same thing is still more emphatically the case when the spiritual and invisible powers, to which we all more or less do secret and unwilling homage, are actors in the drama. The distinguishing feature of Mr Wilkie Collins' success is, that he ignores all these arbitrary sensations, and has boldly undertaken to produce effects as startling by the simplest expedients of life. It is this which gives to his book the qualities of a new beginning in fiction. There is neither murder, nor

seduction, nor despair – neither startling eccentrics nor fantastic monsters in this remarkable story. A much more delicate and subtle power inspires its action. We cannot object to the means by which he startles and thrills his readers; everything is legitimate, natural, and possible; all the exaggerations of excitement are carefully eschewed, and there is almost as little that is objectionable in this highly-wrought sensation-novel, as if it had been a domestic history of the most gentle and unexciting kind.

Except, indeed, in one point. The sympathies of the reader on whom the ‘Woman in White’ lays her spell, are, it is impossible to deny, devoted to the arch-villain of the story. The charm of the book, so far as character counts in its effect, is Fosco.¹³ He is a new type of the perennial enemy of goodness. But there is no resisting the charm of his good-nature, his wit, his foibles, his personal individuality. To put such a man so diabolically in the wrong seems a mistake somehow – though it is evident that an innocent man could never have been invested with such a combination of gifts. No villain of the century, so far as we are aware, comes within a hundred miles of him: he is more real, more genuine, more *Italian* even, in his fatness and size, in his love of pets and pastry, than the whole array of conventional Italian villains, elegant and subtle, whom we are accustomed to meet in literature. Fosco from his first entrance is master of the scene – his noiseless movements, his villanous bland philosophies, his enjoyment of life, his fine waistcoats – every detail about him is necessary to his perfection. Not Riccabocca¹⁴ himself, noble impersonation of national character as he is, is more complete or individual. The manner in which he despises and overawes and controls the violent and weak Sir Percival – the absolute but flattering sway he exercises over his wife, the way in which he pervades the whole surrounding atmosphere with his deep ‘ringing voice,’ his snatches of song, his caresses to his pets – is quite masterly. The reader shares in the unwilling liking to which, at his first appearance, he beguiles Marian Halcombe; but the reader, notwithstanding the fullest proof of Fosco’s villany, does not give him up, and take to hating him, as Marian does. The fact is, that he is by a very long way the most interesting personage in the book, and that it is with a certain sensation of sympathetic triumph that we watch him drive away in safety at last, after the final scene with Hartright, in which his own victorious force and cleverness turn discomfiture and confession into a brilliant climax of self-disclosure. So far from any vindictive desire to punish his ill-doing, we cannot understand how Hartright, or any other man, finds it in his heart to execute justice upon so hearty, genial, and exhilarating a companion. In short, when it turns out that Laura is not dead, and that the woman in white was not assisted to die, Count Fosco becomes rather an ill-used personage than otherwise. He has not done a single superfluous bit of villany – he has conducted himself throughout with a certain cheerful consideration for the feelings of his victims. He is so undaunted and undauntable save for

a single moment – always master of the position, even when he retreats and gives in – that it is impossible to treat him as his crimes deserve. He is intended to be an impersonation of evil, a representative of every diabolical wile: but Fosco is not detestable; on the contrary, he is more interesting, and seizes on our sympathies more warmly than any other character in the book.

This, in the interests of art, it is necessary to protest against. The Foscos of ordinary life are not likely, we admit, to take encouragement from Mr Wilkie Collins; but if this gentleman has many followers in fiction, it is a matter of certainty that the disciples will exaggerate the faults of their leader, and choose his least pleasant peculiarities for special study. Already it is a not uncommon result of fictitious writings, to make the worse appear the better cause. We have just laid down a clever novel, called 'East Lynne,'¹⁵ which some inscrutable breath of popular liking has blown into momentary celebrity. It is occupied with the story of a woman who permitted herself, in passion and folly, to be seduced from her husband. From first to last it is she alone in whom the reader feels any interest. Her virtuous rival we should like to bundle to the door and be rid of, anyhow. The Magdalen herself, who is only moderately interesting while she is good, becomes, as soon as she is a Magdalen, doubly a heroine. It is evident that nohow, except by her wickedness and sufferings, could she have gained so strong a hold upon our sympathies. This is dangerous and foolish work, as well as false, both to Art and Nature. Nothing can be more wrong and fatal than to represent the flames of vice as a purifying fiery ordeal, through which the penitent is to come elevated and sublimed. The error of Mr Wilkie Collins is of a different kind, but it is perhaps even more dangerous. Fosco in suffering would be Fosco in collapse, totally unmanned and uninteresting. It is the perfect ease, comfort, and light-heartedness of the man – what virtuous people would call his 'simple tastes,' his thorough enjoyment of life, and all the pleasant things within reach – his charming vanity and amiableness, as well as his force, strength, and promptitude, that recommend him to our regard. Whatever the reason may be, few good men are permitted in books to enjoy their existence as this fat villain is permitted to enjoy his. He spreads himself out in the sun with a perfect pleasure and satisfaction, which it is exhilarating to behold. His crimes never give him an apparent twinge; his own complacent consciousness of the perfect cleverness with which they are carried out, confounds all compunctions. He is so smilingly aware of the successful evil he has done, and unaware of the guilt of it, that it seems heartless to take so innocent and genial a soul to task for his peccadilloes. Such is the great and radical drawback of the most notable of sensation novels. Fosco is, unquestionably, destined to be repeated to infinitude, as no successful work can apparently exist in this imitative age without creating a shoal of copyists; and with every fresh imitation the picture will take more and more objectionable shades. The violent stimulant of serial publication¹⁶ – of *weekly* publication, with

its necessity for frequent and rapid recurrence of piquant situation and startling incident – is the thing of all others most likely to develop the germ, and bring it to fuller and darker bearing. 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 storytelling must inevitably fall at last. He is not a collaborateur whom we welcome with any pleasure into the republic of letters. His appearance is neither favourable to taste nor morals. It is only in rare cases, even in real life, that bystanders side with those conspirators of justice; and in fiction it is almost a necessity that the criminal who is tracked through coil after coil of evidence should become interesting, as we see him thrust into a corner by his remorseless pursuers. The rise of a Sensation School of art in any department is a thing to be watched with jealous eyes; but nowhere is it so dangerous as in fiction, where the artist cannot resort to a daring physical plunge, as on the stage, or to a blaze of palpable colour, as in the picturegallery, but must take the passions and emotions of life to make his effects withal. We will not deny that the principle may be used with high and pure results, or that we should have little fault to find with it were it always employed with as much skill and self-control as in the ‘Woman in White;’ but that is an unreasonable hope; and it seems but too likely that Mr Wilkie Collins, in his remarkable novel, has given a new impulse to a kind of literature which must, more or less, find its inspiration in crime, and, more or less, make the criminal its hero.

The ordinary belief of the public, backed by recent experience, seems to be that there are few trades more easy than the writing of novels. Any man who entertains this opinion, would do well to take a backward glance over the early works of Mr Wilkie Collins. These productions, all of which have come into existence with elaborate prefaces, and expositions of a ‘purpose,’ will prove to the reader that the ‘Woman in White’ is not a chance success or caprice of genius, but that the author has been long engaged in preparatory studies, and that the work in question is really the elaborate result of years of labour. Academical sketches and studies from the life are not always interesting to the general spectator; nor are painters apt to exhibit them, by way of showing how much pains were necessary before the picture could be composed, and the figures duly set and draped; yet when the great work is complete, there is an unquestionable interest in the fragments of suggestion from which, one by one, the perfect composition grew. We will not inquire whether the ‘Woman in White’ is a sufficiently great work to merit such an exposition; but every reader who thinks so has it in his power to study the portfolio of sketches by which the author measured his strength. We confess that it has, up to a recent time, been a marvel to us what possible interest any human creature could be supposed to take in the motives which induced

a rational man and tolerable writer to weave such a dreary web as the 'Dead Secret,'¹⁷ or to commit to print and publicity such a revolting story as 'Basil.'¹⁸ It appears, however, that the author knew what he was about; his last successful work has thrown a gleam of intelligibility even upon his prefaces, and it is with the respect due to persevering labour and difficulties overcome that we approach the book which shows how much he has profited by his probation. Let us not neglect such an opportunity for a moral. To judge this author by the portfolio of imperfect sketches which he liberally confided to the world before uncovering the picture for which they were made, nobody would have concluded him likely to open a new path for himself, or to produce a remarkable and thrilling effect by the most modest and subtle means. The sketches are often diffuse and washy – sometimes coarsely horrible – scarcely at all betraying that fine faculty of perception which can divine and seize upon the critical instant, neither too early nor too late, in which lies the whole pictorial force and interest of a lengthened scene. Mr Wilkie Collins has profited in the very highest degree by his preparatory labours. He has improved upon all his early works to an extent which proves in only too edifying and complete a way the benefits of perseverance and pains-taking. The very excellence of the result tempts us to an ungracious regret. Would that those memoranda by which future generations may trace 'the steps by which he did ascend,' had but been less confidently intrusted to the public! Such a disclosure of all the beginnings and early essays of a successful career is possible only to literature. Other crafts keep their experiments out of sight. Authors alone have that ingenuous confidence in the world, and belief in its candour and kindness, which emboldens them to submit the first utterances of the muse to its great ear, and confide to it all the particulars of their progress. Fortunately, the confidence is rarely misplaced. When the hour arrives, and the man becomes famous, the indulgent world applauds his success without pausing to remind him of his failures. Let us follow the charitable example. Mr Wilkie Collins has made many a stumble on the laborious ascent; his progress upward has been jolting and unharmonious by time; but now that he has reached a height upon which he can pause and receive the congratulations of his friends, let not ours be the hand to throw his earlier imperfections in his face. If he makes as much progress in time to come as he has done in the past, there is no predicting what future altitude may await the author of the 'Woman in White.'

The novel itself is too well known to call for anything like a critical review at our hands. We need not discuss over again so familiar a tale, or dwell upon the characters which are, all but Fosco, undeniably subordinate to the story, and to the delicate succession of sensations by which that story is set forth. Mr Wilkie Collins insists upon the fact that readers have written to him expressing their interest in 'Laura,' and 'Miss Halcombe,' and 'Anne Catherick;' a fact, indeed, which it is very easy to account for, seeing that there could be no story but by

means of these figures. But in reality the truth is, that one cares very little for these characters on their own account, and that Mr Hartright and Sir Percival Glyde and the rest are persons whom we regard with but the mildest interest so far as themselves are concerned. The distinguishing characteristic of the book (always excepting Fosco) is the power and delicacy of its sensation incidents; the simple manner in which they are brought out; generally the perfect naturalness of the fact, and always the extremely effective manner in which the critical moment and event strike into the tale, giving it a precision and distinctness which no other expedient could supply so well. Nothing can better illustrate the skill and self-control with which these effects are produced than the following scene, which is the first introduction of the 'Woman in White' to the pages which bear her name:—

'The heat had been painfully oppressive all day, and it was now a close and sultry night. My mother and sister had spoken so many last words, and begged me to wait another five minutes so many times, that it was nearly midnight when the servant locked the garden-gate behind me. I walked forward a few paces on the nearest way back to London — then paused and hesitated.

'The moon was full and broad in the dark-blue starless sky; and the broken ground of the heath looked wild enough in the mysterious light to be hundreds of miles away from the great city that lay beneath it.'¹⁹

* * * *

What sort of a woman she was, and how she came to be out alone in the high-road an hour after midnight, I altogether failed to guess. The one thing of which I felt certain was, that the grossest of mankind could not have misconstrued her motive in speaking, even at that suspiciously late hour, and in that suspiciously lonely place.'

Few readers will be able to resist the mysterious thrill of this sudden touch. The sensation is distinct and indisputable. The silent woman lays her hand upon our shoulder as well as upon that of Mr Walter Hartright — yet nothing can be more simple and clear than the narrative, or more free from exaggeration. There is nothing frightful or unnatural about her; one perceives how her shadow must fall on the white summer highway in the white moonlight, in the noiseless night. She is not a wandering ghost, but a wistful, helpless human creature; but the shock is as sudden, as startling, as unexpected and incomprehensible to us as it is to the hero of the tale. It is the first 'point' in the story; it is accomplished by the simplest means, and is in itself a perfectly harmless occurrence; yet the momentary thrill of that touch has an effect as powerful as the most startling event. It is, in fact, in its perfect simplicity, a sensation-scene of the most delicate and skilful kind.

Not much further on occurs the second effect in this singular picture. The whole plot of the story hinges upon the resemblance between the forlorn creature described above, and a beautiful girl, rich, fair, and happy, in whose prospects, at the moment the discovery is made, trouble or mishap seem to have no place. She is outside the drawing-room window of her home, walking upon a moonlit terrace, while Walter Hartright inside listens to sundry extracts from her mother's letters, read to him by her half-sister, Miss Halcombe, by way of throwing some light upon the strange woman in white. The young man, listening beside Miss Halcombe and her candle, has turned his eyes to the window, where he sees 'Miss Fairlie's figure, bright and soft in its snowy muslin dress – her face prettily framed by the white folds of the handkerchief which she had tied under her chin,' passing in the moonlight.

'Miss Halcombe paused, and looked at me across the piano.

'Did the forlorn woman whom you met in the highroad seem young?' she asked – 'young enough to be two or three and twenty?'

'Yes, Miss Halcombe, as young as that.'

'And she was strangely dressed – from head to foot all in white?'

'All in white.'

'While the answer was passing my lips, Miss Fairlie glided into view on the terrace for the third time.²⁰

Nothing can be more delicately powerful than this second shock of surprise and alarm. It is a simple physical effect, if one may use such an expression. It is totally independent of character, and involves no particular issue, so far as can be foreseen at this point of the story. The scene itself is as tranquil as can be conceived – two young people indoors in a lighted room, with a pretty girl outside passing and repassing the uncovered window – yet the sensation is again indisputable. The reader's nerves are affected like the hero's. He feels the thrill of the untoward resemblance, an ominous painful mystery. He, too, is chilled by a confused and unexplainable alarm. Though the author anxiously explains that the elucidation of character has not been in his hands incompatible with the excitement of narrative, these two startling points of this story do not take their power from character, or from passion, or any intellectual or emotional influence. The effect is pure sensation, neither more nor less; and so much reticence, reserve, and delicacy is in the means employed, there is such an entire absence of exaggeration or any meretricious auxiliaries, that the reader feels his own sensibilities flattered by the impression made upon him.

It is unnecessary to enter into further description of a story so well known; nor will we quote the after sensation – scenes of a very closely-wrought plot,

which naturally increases in excitement as it goes on, and perhaps affords no other touches, so emphatic and so entirely dependent upon the skill of the artist, as the above. When the very existence of the principal persons in the story is in question – when the strange country – house where Sir Percival carries his bride is mysteriously evacuated by one person after another, and the bright and resolute Marian becomes suddenly visible as the prisoner of a hidden sick-room – when Laura confronts Hartright by the grave where she is supposed to be buried – when Hartright and Fosco meet in the last struggle, which may end in death to both, – the excitement of the situation has a certain reality which makes the author's task easier. The scenes we have quoted owe their startling force entirely to the elaborate skill and cunning of the workman, and are, in this point of view, more notable than anything that comes after – demonstrations of successful art, which the critical eye cannot look upon without the highest approval. At the same time, the conduct of the drama is far from being unexceptionable. Sir Percival Glyde, who conducted himself before his marriage as astutely as Fosco himself could have done, becomes a very poor, passionate, unsuccessful rascal after that event – a miserable attempt at a villain, capable of deceiving nobody, such as novelists are fond of palming off upon us as impersonations of successful scoundrelism. This was no doubt necessary in order to the full development of Fosco; but had the author been as careful of character as he has been of story, he could not possibly have permitted this unlucky individual to conduct himself so cleverly in the beginning of his career, and so absurdly in the end. Consistency, which in actual life is by no means necessary to existence, is a law and necessity in art. It is indispensable that we should be able to recognise every important figure in the picture, whensoever and howsoever he or she may reappear. There is another still more radical defect in the conception of Laura. How a pure-minded and ingenuous young woman, put under no particular pressure – neither driven to it by domestic persecution, nor by the want of a home, nor even beguiled by the attractions of improved position – should, when nothing but an effort of will seemed necessary to deliver her from the engagement, voluntarily marry one man while conscious of preferring another, is a mystery which the clever mechanist who sets all in motion takes no trouble to solve. We are not even impressed with the idea that Laura's dead father had set any special charge upon her on the subject, or given the prospective marriage anything more solemn than his approval. Yet Mr Wilkie Collins drives his sensitive and delicate heroine, without any reason in the world for the sacrifice, into a marriage which she regards with horror; makes her drive away her lover, and half-kill herself in the effort to give him up, and rather holds her up as the victim of an elevated sense of duty, when, at the cost of all these agonies, she fulfils her engagement, and becomes the unhappy wife of Sir Percival Glyde. Bad morals under any explanation; but when no real reason exists, absolute folly as well, and an ineffaceable blot upon a character meant to be everything that is womanly

and tender and pure. It was necessary to marry the two for the exigencies of the story; but the author of the story has shown himself too much a master of the arts of fiction to be tolerated in such a slovenly piece of work as this. A little more care in the arrangements of the marriage – a little less of voluntary action on the part of Laura – nay, even the hackneyed expedient of a solemn deathbed charge from her father, or obligation on his part to the undesirable bridegroom – would have given the heroine a much greater hold upon the sympathies of the reader, which, we are sorry to say, she loses entirely after the very first scenes. Neither is the secret which makes so much commotion in the beginning of the action, and proves at last so totally unimportant to the matter in hand, managed very skilfully. Some futile efforts were undeniably necessary to enhance the final success; but this thread, which, after we have followed it so long, is snapped so summarily, wants more careful interweaving with the web to make it effective. Mrs Catherick is a disagreeable apparition, and the bow extorted from her clergyman a false effect of the Dickens school. But these are lesser blemishes, which detract only momentarily from the value of a picture in which there is more genuine power of *sensation*, with less of the common arbitrary expedients for exciting it, than in any other contemporary production.

There can scarcely be a greater contrast between two works which aim in their different individualities at something of a similar effect, than there exists between Mr Wilkie Collins's powerful story and the last work of his Master in Art. Mr Dickens's successes in sensation are great. Even in 'Great Expectations',²¹ which is far from being one of his best works, he manages to impress distinct images of horror, surprise, and pain upon the mind of his reader with vivid power and distinctness; but his performances go on an entirely different principle, and use other agencies than those which, in the hands of his disciple,²² heighten the effect by the evident simplicity of the means. Mr Dickens was one of the first popular writers who brought pictures of what is called common life into fashion. It is he who has been mainly instrumental in leading the present generation of authors to disregard to a great extent the pictorial advantages of life on the upper levels of society, and to find a counter-picturesqueness in the experiences of the poor. But while this is the case, it is equally certain that Mr Dickens, for his own part, has never ventured to depend for his special effects upon the common incidents of life. He has shifted the fashionable ground, and sought his heroes among penniless clerks and adventurers, as little beholden to their ancestors as to fortune. He has made washerwomen as interesting as duchesses, and found domestic angels among the vagabonds of a circus, on the very edge between lawlessness and crime; but whenever he has aimed at a scene, he has hurried aside into regions of exaggeration, and shown his own distrust of the common and usual by fantastic eccentricities, and accumulations of every description of high-strained oddity. The characters upon which he depends

are not individual only, with a due recognisable difference to distinguish them from their fellows, but always peculiar, and set forth with a quaintly exaggerated distortion, by which we identify in a moment, not the character described, but the author who has made it, and of whom these oddities are characteristic. If it were possible to quicken these curious originals into life, what an odd crowd of ragamuffins and monsters would that be which should pursue this Frankenstein through the world! In the flush of fresh life and invention, when Sam Wellers and Mark Tapleys²³ led the throng, we all awaited with impatience and received with delight the new oddities with which the great novelist filled his pages; but it is impossible to deny that nowadays that fertile fulness has failed, and that the persistent devotion to the eccentric which has distinguished Mr Dickens through all his literary life, does now no longer produce fruits such as earn him our forgiveness for all the daring steps he takes beyond the modesty of nature. In his last work, symptoms of a dangerous adherence to, and departure from, his old habitudes, will strike most of his faithful readers. The oddity remains, but much of the character has evaporated. The personages in 'Great Expectations' are less out of the way, and the circumstances more so. Strange situations and fantastic predicaments have very much taken the place of those quaint and overstrained but still lifelike phases of humanity in which the author used to delight. He now carves his furniture grotesquely, and makes quaint masks upon his friezes; but he has no longer patience to keep up the strain so long as is necessary for the perfection of a character. After an indication of what he means this and that figure to be, he goes on with his story, too indifferent about it, one could suppose, to enter into the old elaboration. The book reminds us of a painter's rapid memoranda of some picture, in which he uses his pencil to help his memory. After he has dashed in the outline and composition, he scribbles a hasty 'carmine' or 'ultramarine' where those colours come. So the reds and blues of Mr Dickens's picture are only written in. He means us to fill in the glow of the natural hue from the feeble symbol of the word which represents it, or perhaps to go back in our own memory to those forcible and abundant days when he wrought out his own odd conceptions minutely as if he loved them. Perhaps it was not at any time the wholesomest kind of art, but it was certainly much more satisfactory and piquant than now.

So far as 'Great Expectations' is a sensation novel, it occupies itself with incidents all but impossible, and in themselves strange, dangerous, and exciting; but so far as it is one of the series of Mr Dickens's works, it is feeble, fatigued, and colourless. One feels that he must have got tired of it as the work went on, and that the creatures he had called into being, but who are no longer the lively men and women they used to be, must have bored him unspeakably before it was time to cut short their career, and throw a hasty and impatient hint of their future to stop the tiresome public appetite. Joe Gargery the blacksmith alone represents

the ancient mood of the author. He is as good, as true, patient, and affectionate, as ungrammatical and confused in his faculty of speech, as could be desired; and shields the poor little Pip when he is a child on his hands, and forgives him when he is a man too grand for the blacksmith, with all that affecting tenderness and refinement of affection with which Mr Dickens has the faculty of making his poor blacksmiths and fishermen much more interesting than anything he has ever produced in the condition of gentleman. Near Joe's abode, however, dwells a lady who is intended to have much more influence upon the fortunes of the hero than his humble protector. Here is the first sight of Miss Havisham and her surroundings, as they are disclosed to little Pip and to the reader:—

'I entered, and found myself in a pretty large room, well lighted with wax candles. No glimpse of daylight was to be seen in it. It was a dressing-room, as I supposed from the furniture, though much of it was of forms and uses then quite unknown to me. But prominent in it was a draped table, with a gilded looking-glass, and that I made out at first sight to be a fine lady's dressing-table. Whether I should have made out this object so soon if there had been no fine lady sitting at it, I cannot say. In an arm-chair, with an elbow resting on the table, and her head leaning on that hand, sat the strangest lady I have ever seen, or shall ever see.'²⁴

* * * *

This is fancy run mad. As the story progresses, we learn that this poor lady, who is perfectly sane, much as appearances are against her, has lived in this miraculous condition for five-and-twenty years. Not very long ago we heard an eminent Scotch divine pause in the middle of his exposition to assure his hearers that it was not necessary to believe that the garments of the children of Israel were literally preserved from the wear and tear of the forty years in the wilderness, but simply that God provided them with clothing as well as food. We should like to know what the reverend gentleman would say to that wedding-dress of Miss Havisham's, which, in five-and-twenty years, had only grown yellow and faded, but was still, it appears, extant in all its integrity, no tatters being so much as inferred, except on the shoeless foot, the silk stocking on which 'had been trodden ragged.' In this ghastly company lived a pretty young girl called Estella, whom Miss Havisham had reared with the avowed intention of avenging her own wrongs against men in general by breaking as many hearts as possible. The unlucky little Pip is the first victim selected. He is brought there to be operated upon in the special hope that he may learn to love Estella, and by her means have his heart broken — though the unfortunate little individual in question has no connection whatever with the breaking of Miss Havisham's heart, nor any other title to be considered as a representative of male humanity. If startling effects were to be produced by any combination of circumstances or arrangement of

still life, here, surely, was the very scene for a sensation. But somehow the sensation does not come. The wretched old heroine of this masquerade is, after all, notwithstanding her dire intentions of revenge upon the world, a very harmless and rather amiable old woman, totally incapable of any such determined folly. Estella grows up everything she ought not to grow up, but breaks nobody's heart but Pip's, so far as there is any evidence, and instead of carrying out the benevolent intentions of her benefactress, only fulfils a vulgar fate by marrying a man without any heart to be broken, and being miserable herself instead. Here there is the most perfect contrast to the subtle successes of the 'Woman in White.' Mr Dickens's indifference or languor has left the field open to his disciple. With the most fantastic exaggeration of means, here is no result at all achieved, and no sensation produced upon the composed intelligence of the reader. The shut-up house does not deceive that wary and experienced observer: he waits to see what comes of the bridal dress of twenty-five years' standing, and its poor old occupant; and as nothing in the least startling comes of either the one or the other, declines to be excited on the subject. The whole of this scene, and of the other scenes which follow in this house, and the entire connection between Miss Havisham, Pip, and Estella, is a failure. It is a mere piece of masquerading which deceives nobody, and carries to the utmost bounds of uninteresting extravagance that love of the odd and eccentric which has already brought Mr Dickens to occasional misfortune in his long and well-deserved round of success.

Very different, however, is the darker side of the story. The appearance of the escaped convict in the squalid and dismal solitude of the marsh – the melancholy landscape with that one wretched figure embodying the forlorn and desolate sentiment of the scene – is perhaps as vivid and effective a sketch as Mr Dickens ever drew. It is made in fewer words than usual, done at a breath, as if the author felt what he was saying this time, and saw the scene too vividly himself to think a full development of every detail necessary to enable his reader to see it also. Here is the apparition and the scene:–

'A fearful man, all in coarse grey, with a great iron on his leg. A man with no hat, and with broken shoes, and with an old rag tied round his head. A man who had been soaked in water, and smothered in mud, and lamed by stones, and cut by flints, and stung by nettles, and torn by briars; who limped, and shivered, and glared, and growled, and whose teeth chattered in his head as he seized me by the chin ...'²⁵

* * * *

After another very vivid picture of the same marshes under the wild torchlight of a convict-hunt, this horrible figure disappears out of the book, and only comes to life again at the end of the second volume, when, as Pip's unknown benefactor,

the mysterious secret friend who has made the young blacksmith a gentleman, he re-emerges, humanised and horribly affectionate, out of the darkness. The young fellow's utter despair when he finds himself held fast in the clutches of this man's gratitude and bounty – compelled to be grateful in his turn while loathing the very thought of the obligation which he has been unwittingly incurring – is very powerfully drawn, and the predicament perhaps as strange and frightful as could be conceived. The terrible benefactor appears without the slightest warning in the young man's chambers, startling his harmless youthful life into the rudest, yet most intense tragedy; for his convict patron is a 'Lifer,' and the penalty of his return, if found out, is death. The sudden change which thus clouds over a hitherto harmless and aimless existence; the precautions necessary to keep the stranger safe; the gradual concentration of all interests into this one; the way in which, when hunted and in danger, the unfortunate young hero grows first tolerant, then anxious, and at last affectionate, to his strange and uncongenial friend, – is carefully done, and contains all that there is of interest and excitement in the book. It is a struggle against an unseen enemy – always an exciting spectacle; and the fact that it is not the imperilled criminal himself for whom we are principally concerned, but the generous young men who have devoted themselves to save him, refines the contest, and gives it an interest less coarsely tragical. Through the whole, he, the man specially in danger, is acquiescent, passive; while the unlucky object of his bounty contrives and plots for him, accepting the bond between them with hearty youthful generosity as soon as his dreadful patron is in trouble. The narrative is close and rapid, and told without much unnecessary detail; but notwithstanding its undeniable effectiveness as a whole, it must be admitted that neither its successive incidents nor even its crisis strikes sharp upon the course of the story, or stands out with any distinctness from its general level. We watch the second boat stealing out upon the river without any sudden thrill of interest. We see the two convicts go down together into the water churned by the agitating passage of the great steamer which lowers over them like a castle in the water, but we draw our breath as calm as before. The means, in short, are superabundant, and full of all the natural elements of wonder, pity, and terror, but the effect is *not* produced. Perhaps most readers will make sure of what is going to happen to Abel Magwitch before they retire to their peaceful pillows, but once there, the returned convict will not haunt them. He will neither interfere with their sleep, nor startle their leisure with any uncomfortable consciousness of his own lurking, clandestine figure. At first, when he was out on the marsh, there seemed some likelihood that he might – but he has died, so far as his faculty of exciting a sensation goes, for long before he dies in prison. By means almost as exciting as those which, in the case of Bill Sykes, made the reading world hold its breath, and invested with all the dark grandeur of tragedy the vulgar fate of a brutal wretch, too debased for sympathy, Mr Dickens

has this time made nothing but a narrative, powerful, indeed, but not pictorial, and from which we cannot quote any one incident sufficiently vivid and distinct to concentrate the attention of the reader. The following deathbed sketch, however, is full of a subdued pathos and tenderness, without exaggeration or overdoing, dismissing in pity and charity, but without any attempt to make him a wonder either of remorse or reformation, the lawless soul who has been the overshadowing terror of the book:—

‘The kind of submission or resignation that he showed was that of a man who was tired out. I sometimes derived an impression from his manner, or from a whispered word or two which escaped him, that he pondered over the question whether he might have been a better man under better circumstances. But he never justified himself by a hint tending that way, or tried to bend the past out of its eternal shape ...’²⁶

* * * *

This picture is affecting in its simplicity and composure. The man has been a criminal, but he is not remorseful, or even affected by the solemn agitation and thrill of expectancy which we naturally associate with the approach of death. He is only weary and worn out, as most people are when they come to that inevitable hour, unsusceptible of impression. A wonderful mystery among all the mysteries of this life is the quietness with which most people die. Guilty as they may happen to be, going to sleep like innocent creatures, with subdued demonstrations of childlike simple emotion, tearful pleasure, grateful affection – a wonder as great as anything in life, and only coming to be acknowledged as experience of what *is*, takes the place, in all true representations of our various and strange existence, of theories and imaginations of what ought to be. The convict dies with a certain subdued halo of patience and gentleness about him; yet he has been a troublesome ruffian enough as long as he had any opportunities that way, and very shortly before the end of his life has exhibited towards his persecutor sentiments which were anything but Christian. But notwithstanding these drawbacks, Abel Magwitch makes, on the whole, an edifying end; and Mr Dickens seizes the opportunity to note with delicate skill that pathetic gratification in the affection shown them, which is common to the old and weak of all classes. The tender pride with which the dying man dwells on the fact that his ‘dear boy’ always waits at the gate for the hour of entrance is a touch as true to nature as it is affecting in itself.

The secondary persons of this book, however – almost entirely separated as they are from the main action, which is connected only in the very slightest way with the rest of the story – are, so far as they possess any individual character at all, specimens of oddity run mad. The incredible ghost, in the wedding-dress which

has lasted for five-and-twenty years, is scarcely more *outré* than the ridiculous Mrs Pocket, whom the hero finds seated in her garden, oblivious of everything that is going on around her, absorbed in a book which it is natural to suppose must be a novel – for popular superstition still believes in the existence of individuals capable of abandoning all the duties of life for the superior charms of fiction. But it is not a novel, but a Red book, which wraps the lady in an ideal world. Of the same description is the ingenious Mr Wemmick, the lawyer's clerk, who lives in a little castle at Walworth, and calls his old father the Aged, and exclaims, 'Hulloa! here's a church – let's go in!' when he is going to be married. Is this fun? Mr Dickens ought to be an authority in that respect, seeing he has made more honest laughter in his day than any man living, and called forth as many honest tears; but we confess it looks exceedingly dull pleasantry to us, and that we are slow to accept Mr Wemmick's carpentry as a substitute for all the homely wit and wisdom in which Mr Dickens's privileged humorists used to abound. Besides all this heavy sport, there is a sensation episode of a still heavier description, for the introduction of which we are totally unable to discover any motive, except that of filling a few additional pages – unless, perhaps, it might be a desperate expedient on the part of the author to rouse his own languid interest in the conduct of the piece. Otherwise, why Pip should be seduced into the clutches of the senseless brute Orlick, and made to endure all the agonies of death for nothing, is a mystery quite beyond our powers of guessing. And again Mr Dickens misses fire – he rouses himself up, indeed, and bethinks himself of his old arts of word and composition, and does his best to galvanise his figures into momentary life. But it is plain to see all along that he means nothing by it; we are as sure that help will come at the right moment, as if we saw it approaching all the time; and the whole affair is the most arbitrary and causeless stoppage in the story – perhaps acceptable to weekly readers, as a prick of meretricious excitement on the languid road, perhaps a little stimulant to the mind of the writer, who was bored with his own production – but as a part of a narrative totally uncalled for, an interruption and encumbrance, interfering with the legitimate interest of the story, which is never so strong as to bear much trifling with. In every way, Mr Dickens's performance must yield precedence to the companion work of his disciple and assistant. The elder writer, rich in genius and natural power, has, from indolence or caprice, or the confidence of established popularity, produced, with all his unquestionable advantages, and with a subject admirably qualified to afford the most striking and picturesque effects, a very ineffective and colourless work; the younger, with no such gifts, has employed the common action of life so as to call forth the most original and startling impressions upon the mind of the reader. The lesson to be read therefrom is one so profoundly improving that it might form the moral of any Good-child story. Mr Dickens is the careless, clever boy who could do it twice as well, but won't take pains. Mr Wilkie Collins is the steady fellow, who pegs at

his lesson like a hero, and wins the prize over the other's head. Let the big children and the little prebend and profit by the lesson. The most popular of writers would do well to pause before he yawns and flings his careless essay at the public, and to consider that the reputation which makes everything he produces externally successful is itself mortal, and requires a sustenance more substantial than a languid owner can be expected to give.

It is a bold proceeding to place the name of a comparatively recent writer, who has scarcely yet won his spurs, beside that of one of the masters of fiction; and we will not attempt to claim for 'Owen'^{*27} any such place as that held even by the most unsatisfactory of Mr Dickens's works. The book, however, has high qualities of its own, and belongs to a class which possibly never might have come into existence but for the labours of Mr Dickens. How far it is wise, or how far it is expedient, for art to forsake the educated world, and betake itself in search of fresh nature and unsophisticated character to the lowest levels of society, and there to the farthest fringe which divides social guiltlessness (for we cannot say innocence) from crime, is, to our own thinking, a very doubtful question. Nature is no more unsophisticated down below there than it is upon the haughtiest levels. We do not perceive the conventionalities only because they are of a kind unknown to us – or, when we do perceive them, their simple absurdity strikes us so, that in the amusement with which we regard them, we forget to think that the conventionalities which are real and cruel restraints to ourselves, would look quite as absurd to anybody as superior to us in training and education, as we are to the costermongers and vagrants of London. The author of 'No Church'²⁸ has, with apparently a serious inspiration more consistent than that of most of the writers who elucidate the noisy utterances of Whitechapel and the Borough, and convey the story of these heathen places to the distant ear, taken his stand in that confused and obscure world. He takes us there, not to introduce us to quaint wits or darkling villains, but to show us how the course of life flows on – how goodness may exist without religion, but how religion alone can confirm and perfect goodness. His hero, Owen, is a bright, fearless, quick-witted, famishing London lad, desolate and self-sustaining, deserted by a worthless mother, and charmed by the motherly looks and words of a poor costermonger's wife to the paths of honesty and virtue. This poor woman has been, as poor women will, increasing the population of Whitechapel, when the wistful boy, alarmed for the safety of his patroness, appears, in the following effective and simple sketch, watching the humble, anxious house:–

'All was quiet at Tarby's shed, where the gas burned low, and where Tarby walked about on tiptoe enjoying his after-supper pipe, and looking as sober as a judge. Tarby had his hands in his pockets, and his cap tilted on his forehead, and was

* 'Owen; a Waif.' By the Author of 'No Church.'

promenading thoughtfully to and fro, holding a committee of ways and means with himself, and mapping out the proceeds of last week, and calculating for the next, and disturbed in the operation by thoughts of a deeper cast that troubled him, and with which we shall presently trouble the reader ... Tarby, deep in committee, and addressing the chair at the present moment on the probability of a rise in turnips, was unconscious of a watcher who stood in the opposite doorway, and took stock of his proceedings. A youthful watcher, whose clothes were a trifle more worn and dilapidated than when the reader made his acquaintance, and whose face, if he had stopped underneath the gas-lamp yonder, would have been found more thin and pinched and haggard than when attention was first drawn to it on the great London road some three months since. The eyes were very anxiously directed towards the shop at the corner, and the heart under the rags beat with an uncertainty and a sickening sense of fear very new to it. For the watcher had been at that post night after night for above a week, and no sign of Mrs Chickney had presented itself, and he had wished to see and speak to her. But Tarby had been only there of an evening, and he had nothing to say to Tarby just then in which Tarby could take an interest or assist him; it was Tarby's wife he wanted, and she never appeared; and he knew, by the drawn blind before the back-parlour glass-door, that she was ill inside there, and that it was better, however time pressed, not to trouble her ...

* * * *

This little picture is touched with great delicacy and truth in its perfect homeliness, no way etherealised out of the poor, very poor, greengrocer's shop, which is a paradisaical home to the contemplation of the houseless vagrant outside, yet full of a real sentiment and wistful anxiety. This is the beginning of the poor boy's good fortune. The mother, just bereaved of her baby, uses the power of her weakness and grief to melt her husband's heart to the houseless lad, who is taken into their home and hearts, and becomes the stay of the family when Tarby himself, who has three periodical saturnalia every year, knocks down a policeman at last too vigorously, kills the man, and is transported in consequence. The story is not successfully constructed, and has many weak points. Owen, out of the greengrocer's shop, has to be made a gentleman and rich man, which is of course a rather troublesome operation; and the author's ingenuity is considerably tried by the effort of changing his ground with his whole group to a level of gentility, and indeed wealth. He manages the leap, it is true, but it is forced, and not over-successful; and Owen, the costermonger's boy, is a much more natural and agreeable character than the Owen who, in six years, makes money enough to come back from Australia and become master, along with his partners, of a large London foundry. The mere fact of this necessity for raising the hero's social posi-

tion is a serious objection against the choice of a poor boy for this office. Poor boys rarely become comfortable gentlemen, and it is a petty result enough of the research which goes down, enlightened and candid, to show us what noble lives and pure hearts are among the poorest poor, when the same hand which throws that light upon the masses makes haste to detach its special *protégé* from among them, and elevate him to a higher standing, that his virtues may have breathing room. Owen, unlike Pip, works his way up steadily, with some show of probability; but, like Pip, takes to being a gentleman with a facility and readiness not always characteristic of blacksmith or costermonger boys. When he comes to man's estate, his pride and his affections are alike wounded, and he resolves upon leaving England. Just at the same critical moment, his wretched mother turns up suddenly in the lowest depth of drunkenness and wretchedness, and, touched by unexpected kindness, resolves to reform, and consents to go abroad with him. All goes pretty well until the last evening, when the young man, proud, wounded, and embittered, as it is the special privilege of a plebeian hero to be, comes home to find that the wretched creature has been trifling with temptation, warns her sternly that she must give up either her favourite vice or him, and leaves her, believing her penitent. The description that follows strikes us as being singularly powerful:—

‘She was thinking of the morrow, too, in that darkened room. She had not thought of a light until she had somewhat noisily closed the door behind her, and bumped herself on the floor, in a position similar to that which she had adopted in the drawing-room, after the last reproaches of her son. He would be quiet now, and not come down to worry her till the morning – *till the morning!* She shuddered as she thought of it. It was an awful prospect that morning, when he would enter with his death's face, and those dark eyes which would go clean through her, and make her feel ready to sink through the floor. He would talk of her moral weakness and the last chance, and she would be sober then, and every word would stab like a dagger, and yet he would go on stabbing unmercifully. And, after all, for what? To make her live better, show a clean dress and face to the society she hated; render her a servant and a slave; take her to foreign parts, which she did not believe for a moment would agree with her. What did it all amount to? – misery! She was to be sober, and think eternally of those many sins which had multiplied upon her since her first step from right, and thinking of them was horror! She had been all her life trying to forget them in drink, and now he took the drink away because it was more respectable. She didn't care to live respectable just to please him, who, now he was a fine gentleman, wanted a decent mother. He was only thinking of himself; he didn't care much about that past life he was so anxious she should escape from. And it wasn't such a miserable

life, come to think of it. There was no one but herself to please, and it *was* hard to please two. She had found that out soon enough.

* * * *

'She had unlaced her boots as thought suggested her plan of action: she had risen with them in her hands. An awful figure looming amidst the darkness – the angels who had had hope of her might have wept to see her! The old look, the old evil thoughts – the old figure borne back by the irresistible attraction which sweeps back to the sea so many like unto her. For the one who clings to the rock, and holds fast in the storm, how many go down! ... She stepped into the streets, and left the door ajar behind her. It was raining heavily then, and she huddled her shawl round her, and pulled the bonnet over her eyes, and in an instant it was the same world-worn desolate figure we have seen on Markshire Downs, met in Hannah Street, when Tarby's wife died.

'Plodding on in the shadow of the houses went the woman to her dark estate, back of her own free-will to the sin-haunted life, from which one upward spring had been fruitlessly made. In the rain and the wind, with her head bent down, and the refractory grey hair already making its escape after the old fashion, she emerged into the Kennington Road, and plunged into the network of courts and alleys that spring thence – dens of poverty, and sin, and ignorance, and all uncleanness, which there is no sweeping away.'

We cannot call to our recollection any similar sketch so little exaggerated, yet so effective, in recent fiction. It is as sad as it is true, yet refrains from all unnecessary horrors. A little more detail might have made the picture disgusting. As it is, it is almost solemn in its brooding silence, yet restless activity of thought, and in the stealthy resolution and silent guilty joy of the escape. We have had many pictures of reformed lives, but few of the terrible satisfaction with which such a poor sinner escapes out of the restraints of virtue, and has 'her will' again.

Mr Dickens is more or less master in art – not to say of an infinite height of superiority in the gifts of nature – to both the writers whose works we have referred to, and to many others of as wide a diversity of gifts. It was he who brought us first to the crowded London lanes to find wit, and worth, and quaint generosity and virtue, among the despised multitude; and it is he who now bends his powers to the popularising among us of that instrument of literary excitement, the weekly Story-teller. Whether he or anybody else will be able to keep that restless agency going without descending to the expedients of the *feuilletonists*,²⁹ remains yet to be proved. Whether his own fantastic oddities and tamed criminals will do it; or whether, in inferior hands to those which have wielded that equivocal weapon, *diablerie* can do it, without sinking into insanity, we will not venture to prophesy. We can afford to be grateful, for once

in a way, to any form of publication which has introduced into literature the example of skilful workmanship and the delicate and startling thrills of sensation conveyed by the 'Woman in White;' but the Master of the School has not yet condescended to rouse himself for the illustration of his experiment. To combine the higher requirements of art with the lower ones of a popular weekly periodical, and produce something which will be equally perfect in snatches and as a book, is an operation too difficult and delicate for even genius to accomplish, without a bold adaptation of the cunning of the mechanist and closest elaboration of workmanship. How far the result might be worth the labour, we will not attempt to decide.

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37. *Tales* of Madame D'Aulnoy*: The fairy tales (1697) of Marie-Catherine de Jumel de Banneville, countess of Aulnoy (c. 1650–1705) were popular in England from the end of the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth.
38. *Book of Ballads: The Boys' Book of Ballads*, illustrated by John Gilbert, published by Bell & Daldy, 1861. BL Cat.
39. *Lay of the Last Minstrel*: MOWO suggests that Scott's metrical romance, published in 1805, is appropriate reading for children, and also *Ivanhoe* (1819).
40. *Mary Howitt*. Lillieslea: MOWO had met Mary Howitt (1799–1888) in London in the mid 1850s, and 'liked her greatly', according to her *Autobiography* (Jay (1990), p. 40). Her children's story *Lillieslea: or Lost and Found* was published in 1861.
41. *Stoneyshire ... familiar to all readers*: An oblique reference to one of the settings in George Eliot's *Adam Bede*, which was published by Blackwood in 1859, and in whose identity MOWO was keenly interested. See Coghill, pp.167–9.

'Sensation Novels'

1. *great wars have begun and ended*: The Crimean War began in March 1854 and formally ended with the Treaty of Paris in March 1856. The other war in the ten-year period to which MOWO refers was the Indian Mutiny of 1857.
2. *1851 was a Festival of Peace*: The Great Exhibition of 1851, held in Hyde Park between May and October, was, as MOWO suggests, a 'grand display' of British art, science and manufacturing.
3. *South Kensington domes*: The South Kensington Museum, which grew out of the Great Exhibition of 1851, erected temporary galleries to house exhibitions in 1857, 1858–9, and 1862, the first of which was known as the Brompton Boilers. The Brompton Road site was eventually developed into a permanent museum complex. MOWO reviewed the International Exhibition of 1862 in the next number of *BM*: 'The New Exhibition', 91 (June 1862), pp. 663–72.
4. *other side of the Atlantic*: The American Civil War between the Northern and Southern states began in April 1861 when Confederate forces bombarded the Federal Fort Sumpter in Charleston harbour, North Carolina.
5. *Merrimacs and Monitors*: The Confederates' 'ironclad' warship Merrimac was attacked by the smaller but more manoeuvrable Union warship Monitor on 9 March 1862 near Norfolk, Virginia. Neither ship was extensively damaged. The battle was regarded as the beginning of a new era in naval warfare because of the use of iron plating on the sides of the ships.
6. *Woman in White*: Wilkie Collins's novel was serialized in *All the Year Round* 26 November 1859–25 August 1860, and published in three volumes in 1860. It was the first of a cluster of sensation novels which MOWO includes in this review.
7. *Mr. Bourcicault*: Dion Boucicault (1822–90), born Dionysius Lardner Boursiquot, was a popular Irish playwright and actor, whose plays were known for their vivid, sensational scenes, and for integrating contemporary events. His latest play *The Colleen Bawn* opened at the Adelphi theatre in September 1860. His adopted name was originally spelled Bourcicault, but he dropped the 'r' in 1845. See *ODNB*.
8. *Hawthorne*: For MOWO's earlier review of Hawthorne, see pp. 93–6.
9. *Mesmerism*: A technique for inducing a hypnotic state in a patient, named after its first practitioner, an eighteenth-century Viennese physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–

- 1815). Also known as ‘animal magnetism’, it had many adherents in the mid-nineteenth century, although it came under increasing suspicion from the medical profession.
10. *Scarlet Letter ... child of shame*: MOWO had included a discussion Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) in her article ‘Modern Novelists Great and Small’ (May 1855). See p. 93.
 11. *Lytton ... Zanoni*: Bulwer Lytton’s *Zanoni*, considered his most original work of fiction, was published in three volumes in 1842. For MOWO’s first review of the novelist, see pp. 35–54.
 12. *Haunted House*: Thomas Hood’s narrative poem ‘The Haunted House’ was written late in 1843 and published in the first number of *Hood’s Magazine and Comic Miscellany* in January 1844. The macabre story was admired by Edgar Allan Poe, among others.
 13. *Fosco*: MOWO was not alone in regarding Count Fosco, the sinister yet attractive villain of *The Woman in White* as its most arresting character.
 14. *Riccabocca*: Dr Riccabocca, a character in Bulwer Lytton’s *My Novel* (1853), is, like Fosco, an Italian. See MOWO’s review of the novel, p. 39 et seq.
 15. *East Lynne*: Ellen Wood’s *East Lynne* was serialized in the *New Monthly Magazine* from January 1860 to June 1861, and published in three volumes in 1861.
 16. *violent stimulant of serial publication*: MOWO’s argument that serialization was a ‘violent stimulant’ is slightly odd coming from a novelist whose own novels and short fiction were routinely serialized in *BM* and elsewhere. These included *Salem Chapel*, which contained sensational elements and which was currently being serialized in *BM* February 1862 to January 1863. She makes a distinction between weekly and monthly serialization, although she was later to publish fiction in the weekly *Chambers’s Journal* and the *Graphic*, in the American *Harper’s Weekly* and *Littell’s Living Age* and in other weekly newspapers via Tillotson’s Fiction Bureau. For details see Clarke 1986, pp. 19–20.
 17. *the ‘Dead Secret’*: Wilkie Collins’s *The Dead Secret* was serialized in *Household Words* 3 January–13 June 1857, and nearly simultaneously in *Harper’s Weekly*, 24 January–27 June 1857.
 18. *Basil*: Collins’s *Basil* was published in three volumes in 1852. Its depiction of sexual obsession drew much criticism, as in MOWO’s pronouncement that it was a ‘revolting story’. See her earlier comments on the novel, p. 98.
 19. *the great city that lay beneath it*: MOWO quotes a lengthy section from ch. iv of the novel. Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 19–21.
 20. *on the terrace for the third time*: The quotation, from ch. 9, continues on pp. 59–61.
 21. *Great Expectations*: Dickens’s novel was serialized in *All the Year Round* from 1 December 1860 to 3 August 1861.
 22. *his disciple*: Dickens’s support and advice was crucial in the early stages of Collins’s writing. He contributed to *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*, and participated in amateur theatricals organized by the older novelist. Although MOWO persists in referring to Collins as Dickens’s disciple his biographer Catherine Peters argues that by this point, 1862, he had moved from the position of disciple to that of collaborator. See *ODNB*.
 23. *Sam Wellers and Mark Tapleys*: MOWO’s April 1855 article on ‘Charles Dickens’ pp. 55–78) concentrated on his early novels, *Pickwick* in particular, regarding the later ones as a decided falling off of his powers, hence her comment that ‘nowadays that fertile fullness has failed’ (p. 258).
 24. *or ever shall see*: The extensive quotation is from ch. 8.

25. *seized me by the chin*: the quotation is from the first chapter of the novel.
26. *out of its external shape*: MOWO quotes from ch. 56, the death of Magwitch.
27. *Owen: Owen: a Waif*, a so-called ‘novel of low life’ by Frederick William Robinson (1830–1901) was published in 1862.
28. *No Church*: The novel, advertised as ‘by the author of High Church’, was published in three volumes by Hurst & Blackett in 1861. As they were also MOWO’s publishers it may have been drawn to her attention through that connection. See BL Cat.
29. *feuilletonists*: In the nineteenth-century the term, originating in France, was used to describe the authors of fiction serialized in newspapers and periodicals. The term ‘feuilleton’ retained an ambiguous status in Britain, mainly associated with fiction serialized in popular, usually weekly or daily newspapers as distinct from the fiction serialized in monthly magazines, or monthly parts.

‘David Wingate’

1. *This will never do*: This is the second time MOWO has invoked Francis Jeffrey’s well known put down of Wordsworth’s ‘The Excursion’ in the *Edinburgh Review* for 1814. See p. 498, n. 26.
2. *the Newdegate*: see p. 498, n. 23. MOWO’s misspelling of the famous Oxford poetry prize persisted.
3. *Burns*: MOWO’s evocation of Burns as ‘the greatest peasant-poet ever born’ is consistent with her later chapter on Burns in her *The Literary History of England*, 3 vols (London: Macmillan, 1882), vol. 1, ch. 2, pp. 98–167. Burns was an obvious comparator for Wingate, known as the ‘collier poet’.
4. *light which never was on sea or land*: MOWO quoted the line, ‘The light that never was, on sea or land’ from Wordsworth’s ‘Elegiac Stanzas Suggested by seeing a Picture of Peele Castle in a Storm’ (1807) in her article ‘Modern Light Literature: Poetry’ (February 1856). See p. 488, n. 2. Here she (mis)quotes from memory.
5. *Cry of the Children*: Elizabeth Barrett’s poem, first published in *BM* in 1843, was written following the report of the Royal Commission on the employment of children in mines and factories. It had widespread popular appeal.
6. *so missed and mourned*: Barrett Browning died in Florence on 30 June 1861. MOWO had already asked Blackwood if she could review her *Last Poems* when they came out, but obviously received no encouragement (See MS 4172 f. 199).
7. *Song of the Shirt*: Like Barrett Browning’s ‘The Cry of the Children’, Thomas Hood’s poem was one of social protest, in this case the exploitation of seamstresses. It was published anonymously in *Punch* in 1843.

‘John Wilson’

1. *John Wilson*: John Wilson (1785–1854) author, journalist and professor of philosophy, was one of the key figures in *BM* from its establishment in 1817 until his death. Wilson contributed over 500 articles in the four decades of his association with it. See *ODNB* and Headnote.
2. *perfect star*: Tennyson *In Memoriam* (1850), XXIV ll. 15–16. ‘And orb into the perfect star / We saw not, when we moved therein?’
3. *Christopher North*: The pseudonym adopted by John Wilson early in his career at *BM*.