

ABSTRACT

CLINE, CARRIE. *Thrice Renewed: Inversions of Triangulated Desire in Charlotte Brontë's Villette and Wilkie Collins's The Woman in White*. (Under the direction of Leila May.)

Although Victorian society developed and adhered to rigid ideologies regarding sexuality and gender roles, Victorian novels, like Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* and Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* illustrate how women may attain power within a patriarchal culture. This thesis uses and significantly revises the theories of triangulated desire developed by René Girard, author of *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* and Eve Sedgwick, author of *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* to demonstrate how this empowerment may occur, for the triangulated relationships within *Villette* and *The Woman in White* disrupt conventional structures of relationships and desire seen in Victorian society. Furthermore, this study analyzes how the feminine gaze enables women to bond within triangulated relationships. Chapter I discusses how *Villette*'s Lucy covertly connects with Polly and Ginevra while superficially vying for masculine attentions. Similarly, Chapter II addresses how Laura Fairlie of *The Woman in White* outwardly contends for male attention while attaching herself to Anne Catherick and Marian Halcombe. The Conclusion following these chapters assesses the imperative cultural work performed by novels as they challenge Victorian conventions by depicting triangulated relations that subordinate the masculine and privilege the feminine.

**“Thrice Renewed”: Inversions of Triangulated Desire in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* and
Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White***

by

Carrie Beth Cline

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty of

North Carolina State University

in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

ENGLISH

Raleigh

2005

APPROVED BY:

Chair of Advisory Committee

Dedication

To my parents who taught me to read and encourage me to pursue what I love.

To my sister, Amy, who supports me in all things.

To Matt whom I happily add to the “Dedication” page.

Biography

Born in Mansfield, Ohio and raised in Lakeland, Florida, Carrie Cline spent her formative years enjoying stories like *Little Old Man Who Could Not Read*, *Piggy Bank Gonzales*, *The Alligator Song*, and *The Fox with Cold Feet*. She became deeply devoted to literature at the age of seven when she read Beverly Cleary's classic *Henry and Ribsy*. This commitment to reading and the printed word grew as she did. Authors like Jane Austen, Edgar Allan Poe, and Ernest Hemingway enriched her high school years. While working towards her Bachelor of Arts in English at Florida Southern College, Carrie greatly benefited from reading John Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. In the years after college graduation and during her time at N. C. State University, the authors Charlotte Brontë, Virginia Woolf, and Tim O'Brien, the poet Carolyn Forché, and the literary theorists René Girard and Julia Kristeva greatly impacted her. Carrie hopes to spend her life reading many more good books.

Table of Contents

Introduction: On Victorian England, Gender, and the “Commonsense” Triangle	1
Chapter I: Assessing Tripartite Relations in Brontë’s <i>Villette</i>	9
Chapter II: Unframed Women in the Triangles of Collins’s <i>The Woman in White</i>	23
Conclusion	45
Works Consulted	50

Introduction: On Victorian England, Gender, and the “Commonsense” Triangle

Among the concerns of Victorian England, those pertaining to gender roles in society are perhaps the most intriguing. While insisting upon and displaying a façade of sexual modesty, decorum, and absolute respectability, Victorians suppressed a fear that within “society lurks a vital ‘counterworld’ that is asocial and amoral, unbound by the restraints of the socialized superego” (Knoepflmacher 59). Ironically, “Victorians managed to win for themselves the reputation of the most sexually, and indeed physically repressive society in history precisely by bringing the body ever more fully into discourse” (Gallagher vii). The body that was brought into discourse was, of course, usually the feminine body, which provided a habitual site for anxiety and bewilderment; “tensions within men [arose] from unstable, irreconcilable definitions of ‘woman’ as mother, wife, sexual partner, and (for all practical purposes) servant” (Hall 10). The dread of society’s uncontrollable “counterworld” also manifests itself in men’s distress about appropriately controlling women.

Each culture seems to privilege a certain kind of order and thereby necessarily attends to the classification and regulation of its own corpus. The Woman question became such a question of order, “a set of issues, impulses, preoccupations—a pervasive social climate of questioning and change that eventually reached into . . . nearly every relationship between men and women in nineteenth-century England” (Barickman 1). Although Victorian patriarchy, by definition, “claimed practically all social authority for economically privileged men,” it was also “fractured and inherently unstable” (Hall 12). The “mid-Victorian novel” exposed the volatility of male power and also “provided an expansive arena for grappling vigorously with social issues” (Hall 9). These novels therefore display “semantics of power

and powerlessness [and offer] infinite surprises and rich opportunities for . . . reflections on culture” (Hall 1).

Victorian society carefully constructed and assertively clung to ideologies concerning sexuality and gender roles, as Michel Foucault explains in *The History of Sexuality*. Within this “regime,” “repression operated as a sentence to disappear, but also as an injunction to silence, an affirmation of nonexistence” (Foucault 1, 4). “Illegitimate sexualities” smoldered within an economy that insisted upon “protect[ing]” only what was “ordered in terms of generation” (4). Despite the impulse to uncover and expurgate aberrant sexuality, these “irregularities” existed within Victorian culture and preoccupied Victorian thought. For René Girard, author of *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, the novel serves as a site where desires¹ are traceable because the novel “is a photograph of reality external to the novelist [where] observation bears on a substratum of psychological truth” (23). Girard asserts that novelists, in representing “reality,” portray “the birth of desire” where “the third person is always present” (21). Eve Sedgwick expounds upon Girard’s notion of triangulated desire in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. Within triptych relationships, Sedgwick notes, masculine bonds form through a feminine entity who acts as a “mediator of desire” (Girard 2). The gendered nature of these connections typically privileges attachments between men by subordinating women. The Victorian novels, *Villette* by Charlotte Brontë and *The Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins, necessitate modifications of the theories of Girard and Sedgwick, for in these works, masculine bonds are quite clearly displaced in favor of feminine alliances.

¹ I follow Eve Sedgwick’s definition of desire as a “potentially erotic” force “analogous to the psychoanalytic use of ‘libido’-- . . . for the affective social force, the glue . . . that shapes an important relationship” (1, 2).

Sedgwick writes that the “triangle [becomes a] useful figure by which the ‘commonsense’ of our intellectual tradition schematizes erotic relations” (21). Before seeing the methods Brontë and Collins use to contort typical formations of desire, an understanding of Girard’s theory regarding the triangular relationships is essential. For Girard, desire is not a spontaneous action but an imitation; more importantly, though, desire does not merely take place between a subject and an object. The very nature of desire is three-fold, for a desiring subject necessarily generates a rival. So, there will almost always be two rivals who stand in opposition to one another, two subjects desirous of the same object. Girard writes that in these instances “we abandon the object of rivalry as a starting point and choose instead the rival . . .” (13). The “nature” of this exchange “is hard to perceive because the most fervent imitation [may be] the most vigorously denied” (Girard 15). Nevertheless, “[w]hat is most interesting” in the triangular configuration is the “insistence that, in any erotic rivalry, the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved” (Sedgwick 21). The attachments that develop between rivals may be “even stronger, more heavily determinant of actions and choices, than the initial ties of the rival to the object” (Sedgwick 21). In fact, “Girard finds many examples in which the choice of the beloved is determined in the first place, not by qualities of the beloved, but by the beloved’s already being the choice of the person who has been chosen as rival” (Sedgwick 21). The third angle of Girard’s formation essentially reconfigures the entire relationship by displacing the original drive between subject and object.

That the rivals of Brontë’s *Villette* and Collins’s *The Woman in White* are women signals a pronounced deviation from Girard’s patriarchally constructed triangle. In fact, Girard assumes that rivals will be men and that they will be striving to gain a woman’s

affection. In those cases where the desire between rivals is not directed towards a woman, Girard posits that it will be for an inanimate entity like an idea or value. This gender privileging is worked into *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, as Girard, referring to the conventional rival, writes of “his defeat,” “his role,” and the “rival himself” (7, 7, 13). Eve Sedgwick reexamines the gender relations of Girard’s text. In *Between Men*, she comments that “patriarchy structurally *requires* homophobia,” and “within the male-centered novelistic tradition of European high culture, the triangles Girard traces are most” interested in the nonsexual “bond between males” (Sedgwick 41, 21). Furthermore, “the symmetry of his formulation depends upon suppressing the subjective, historically determined account of which feelings are or are not part of the body of ‘sexuality’” (Sedgwick 22). This same regimentation is seen in “English culture, chiefly embodied in mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century novel” where a “condensed, self-reflective, and widely influential change in economic, ideological, and gender arrangements” takes place (Sedgwick 1). Not only is there no place for sexuality which deviates from the norm but there is also a deep need to disavow and extinguish any appearances of such “abnormalities.” Sedgwick argues that “in any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male homosocial (including homosexual) desire and the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power” (Sedgwick 25). Homosocial relations, then, consist of an “emerging pattern of male friendship, mentorship, entitlement, rivalry, and hetero- and homosexuality . . . [where] no element of that pattern can be understood outside of its relation to women and the gender system as a whole” (Sedgwick 1).

Patriarchal systems of power depend upon the gendered nature of triangulated relationships where women function as objects which mediate between men. For Sedgwick,

Girard's theory is useful because if the more noteworthy desire is between rivals, then entire cultural constructs are founded upon masculine ties. These bonds are "potentially erotic" and therefore fraught with homosexual ambiguities which necessarily must be masked (Sedgwick 1). Sedgwick quotes gender critic Gayle Rubin's explanation of the absolute necessity to restrain this homosexual element: "The suppression of the homo-sexual component of human sexuality... [is] a product of the same system whose rules and relations oppress women" (3). If a system of patriarchy, governed by erotically charged male homosocial relations that diminish women, can be dismantled or problematized, then entire ideologies and social structures can potentially be reworked.

Triangular relationships within *Villette* and *The Woman in White* disrupt traditional patterns of relationships and desire seen in Victorian society. Furthermore, these texts revise the theories of triangulation espoused by Girard and Sedgwick, for in these novels, the most noteworthy bonds formed by "erotic rivalry" are between women, not men, and the gendered juxtaposition of these triangles is particularly important (Sedgwick 21). Dominated by patriarchal forces, Victorian culture outwardly shunned homosexual relationships and sexually charged homosocial ties, yet Brontë and Collins depict female interactions which relocate masculine power and privilege to the feminine. This shifting happens in subversive ways; these tri-partite bonds most notably develop through scopic interactions. Although vying for masculine attentions on a superficial level, *Villette's* Lucy surreptitiously connects with Polly and Ginevra. In a similar way, Laura Fairlie of *The Woman in White* outwardly contends for male attention while attaching herself to Anne Catherick and Marian Halcombe. The "desire" underlying these interchanges goes unrecognized as Brontë and Collins mask the favored relations between women beneath a socially acceptable and heterosexual guise.

Moreover, the women of these works, by supplanting the male gaze, “fight . . . [the] culture’s oppressive influences” (Auerbach 34). In so doing, *Villette* and *Woman* disrupt patriarchal models of social and sexual interactions, thereby providing empowerment for women.

If, as Lisa Sternlieb suggests, “feminist criticism . . . is still more comfortable writing about women as objects of the ‘male gaze’ than as subjects who look themselves,” an assessment of the personal and political power women access by mastering the gaze is indispensable (6). In *Downcast Eyes*, Martin Jay, explains “certain cultures or ages have been ‘ocularcentric’ or ‘dominated’ by vision” (3). The English Victorian society is one of these periods, for “throughout [its] literature, the gaze provides a common terrain upon which an intense power struggle is enacted” (Hall 109). In fact, Donald Hall, in *Fixing Patriarchy*, writes that the “concern over the dynamics of ‘looking,’ ‘staring,’ and eye contact” is “[pervasive] in Victorian texts” (109). Hall even cites the “British manual *The Habits of Good Society: A Handbook for Ladies and Gentlemen* (1859) [which] cautions young women” by asserting the following:

[The] audacious stare is odious; the sly, oblique, impenetrable look is unsatisfactory. Softly and kindly should the eyes be raised to those of the speaker, and only withdrawn when the speech whatever it may be is concluded. (Hall 110)

An “[insistence] that the proper woman’s eyes should be deferential and modestly inviting” evidences that “*penetrability* is the obvious ideal” (Hall 110). Victorian society authorized the masculine eye’s dominance while requiring the subjectivity of feminine sight (Jay 368).

Since “vision may be understood as a conflictual field,” forcing the feminine eyes downward while socially sanctioning masculine looking exhibits a conscious “manipulation of the gaze [which] is in fact central to male strategies for controlling women” (Jay 368, Hall 111). The “pervasive and insidious power of the patriarchal gaze” strives to frame women,

to place them as objects and therefore be in command of them (Hall 111). If a woman should raise her eyes, stare at a man, or attempt to read him with her gaze, she would be socially aberrant, a non-conformist. To engage in “ocular combat” with a man is an attempt to achieve power in a world that gives women very little, for “the battle over the gaze indicate[s] a desire to limit access to knowledge and power” or an attempt to attain some for oneself (Hall 114, 109). Fixing a man within the feminine gaze, then, removes his subjectivity which, in essence, interrogates the “primacy” of masculinity.

Because the “defensively poised male social body” of Victorian England, legislates what women look at and how they may do so, feminine control over the gaze delivers a strong message of rebellion against the status quo (Hall 13). This insurgency becomes even more powerful when women look with desire at one another, for, “[r]anging from the casual glance to the fixed glare, the eye can obey the conscious will of the viewer in a way denied the other more passive senses” (Jay 10). The optic connections among women that demonstrate the “appetite of the eye” are insubordinate and “unnatural” to the patriarchal customs of Victorian society (Jay 366). Discussing the importance of feminine looking, Donald Hall uses an insightful comment by Dale Bauer: “When women step out of their traditional function as sign; when they refuse the imposition of the gaze; when they exchange their sign-status for that of manipulator of signs, they . . . become threatening to the disciplinary culture which appears naturalized” (109).

The feminine triptychs created by Brontë and Collins illustrate Nina Auerbach’s statement in *Woman and the Demon*: “Victorian women were an essential part of a complex and capacious milieu, not a . . . beleaguered class or nation” (34). Rather than being passive objects in a social economy that depends upon feminine Otherness, the women of these

triptychs find empowerment in interesting and important ways. Brontë and Collins imbue their heroines with agency, and, by innovatively revising the patriarchally constructed triptych, these authors question long-held assumptions concerning gender relations. Also, the female characters of *Villette* and *The Woman in White* “reflect, or . . . refract the changing conceptions of women’s roles that characterized Victorian England” (Barickman 3). Most significantly, the fiction of Brontë and Collins demonstrates and represents the “slow process of negotiation, both within society and between writers, that helps account for a very gradual deterioration in male hegemony during the nineteenth century” (Hall 6). The pattern of gender relations in Brontë’s *Villette* and Collins’s *The Woman in White* is emblematic of a much larger system of feminine-based associations in Victorian fiction. These readings, then, are not of subordinated females but unconventional women with complex identities who struggle, despite the obstacles, for liberation.

This thesis represents a unique investigation into the gender roles of triangulated desire. The work done by Girard and Sedgwick, while groundbreaking and insightful, completely overlooks the empowerment women find by bonding through triangulated relations. If men may ensure their dominant positions in society by strengthening male-homosocial relationships, why may women not use the same techniques to disturb patriarchy? In essence, this study uses Victorian texts to ask why the ideas of Sedgwick, which are drawn from Girard, may not be reversed. Additionally, the thesis explores how women use the gaze within triangulated relations to attain social agency and exhibit homosocial desire. The gender criticism of this inquiry, furthermore, accepts Sternleib’s challenge to explore how women gain power as subjects who look upon male objects, in lieu of “comfortably” evaluating the disempowerment of women.

Chapter I: Assessing Tripartite Relations in Brontë's *Villette*

"Did I pity him, as erst? No, I hardened my heart, rivalled and out-rivalled him . . . where *he* was outcast *I* could please."—Lucy Snowe

Sally Shuttleworth, writing in *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*, discusses the connections between "novelist and physician . . . in mid-Victorian culture" (14). While the novelist "took on the role of social sage, empowered to diagnose the moral and social ills of the society," the physician acted as "supreme arbiter of mental and physiological health" (Shuttleworth 14). Both types of "inquiry [are] far from disinterested," and indeed Brontë does not attempt to depict the "surveillance and interpretive penetration" of both fields as "innocent activities" (Shuttleworth 17). As a well-read, intelligent woman, Brontë was keenly aware of the disparities within the "structure of power relations" in Victorian society, and her fiction directly addresses issues like individual identity, gender roles in society, and sanity (Shuttleworth 45). Rather than a typical representative of masculine science who tries to reveal female nature, Brontë is the female novelist investigating masculine doctrine concerning the feminine. She "both works within and against . . . highly charged notions of gender differentiation" (Shuttleworth 98).

Although firmly embedded within Victorian culture, which shuns homosexual or erotically charged homosocial relationships, Brontë uses an inverted version of triangular desire in *Villette* to depict female interactions that displace masculine power, and privilege the feminine. Brontë shifts the traditional male-oriented triptych in a subversive way, namely via reversing scopic connections. Within two sets of characters, one of Lucy, Graham, and Polly and another of Lucy, Graham, and Ginevra, the women vie for masculine attention on a superficial level while using the gaze to bond covertly with each other. The desire underlying these interchanges goes unrecognized by men as Brontë masks the favored

relations between women with a socially acceptable and heterosexual guise; in so doing, Brontë's *Villette* disrupts established patriarchal patterns of relationships and desire in Victorian society, thereby modeling empowerment for women.

The existence of triangular relationships is evident in the first pages of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*. Lucy situates herself as a potential rival for her godmother's son, Graham Bretton, by virtually opening her narrative with a description of him. She portrays his features in detail: his "eyes were blue . . . [and] very piercing- and the colour of his long hair . . . [was] golden. He inherited the lines of his mother's features, [and] also her good teeth" (Brontë 61). Thus begins the "voyeuristic delight" and "erotic . . . quest" of *Villette* where characters connect with one another, among other ways, by sight (Boone 20, 22). Already an object in Lucy's vision, Polly too fixes upon Graham: "she nestled to [him], and seemed to feel by his feelings: to exist in his existence" (Brontë 83). Within the first volume, these girls have more in common than an interest in Graham. For example, Polly "reflects a contradiction inherent in Lucy herself. Lucy, too, is both vulnerable and strenuously self-reliant" (Eagleton 64). Even the "capriciousness in [Polly] which attracts Graham Bretton suggests aspects of Lucy's own concealed emotional life" (Eagleton 63). The similarities in the girls' identities only helps to intensify their growing rivalry.

Because of their youth, neither girl is a viable romantic option for Graham, yet the erotically charged nature of the relations between these characters begins to develop. Lucy removes much of herself from this part of her tale, but acting as a voyeur or a "spectatorial outsider," she keeps close observance of the interchanges between Polly and Graham and notes even their slightest interactions (Eagleton 63). "Once I saw Graham—wholly unconscious of her proximity—push her with his restless foot," Lucy recalls (Brontë 90).

This type of careful watching is anything but indifferent. In several instances, Lucy actually discourages Polly's affections for Graham by making pointed comments to the girl. For example, after Graham shuns Polly one day, Lucy intensifies Polly's frustration and hurt by saying, "Graham is busy with his school-friends" (Brontë 84). This comment convinces Polly that "he likes them better," and the offense injures her (Brontë 84). Another time, Lucy prods, "Paulina, you should not grieve that Graham does not care for you so much as you care for him. It must be so" (Brontë 91). In trying to deter Polly's passion for Graham, Lucy's words indicate a rivalry between two competitors who are interested in the same object.

To affirm a modified version of Girard's ideas concerning triptych relationships, a bond must exist between the two rivals, and in this case, the connection is an erotic one. On numerous occasions, Lucy and Polly attach by focusing on one another instead of Graham; at some times, "Lucy [even] projects herself into Polly" (Eagleton 64). For example, Lucy notes, "I did take notice: I watched Polly . . . I heard her weep . . . I saw her eyes seek me. After some minutes' silent scrutiny, she . . . passed me mute" (Brontë 65). Lucy and Polly are tied together, even in these silent moments. Lucy's attachment to another woman is unsurprising, for as Terry Eagleton explains, she "is a lonely, frustrated, exploited woman in a predatory male society" (xvi). Not concerned about Graham's appearance or his exchanges with Polly, Lucy focuses solely upon Polly's emotions, an affirmation that she perceives the girl's pain. Consequently, when Polly is troubled and vulnerable, her gaze not only searches for Lucy but closely examines her. The "control of the gaze" is an act of power; here, Lucy and Polly demonstrate their autonomy by fixating upon each other (Boone 22). Linked

through the gaze, the original aim of their desires falls away, and the girls form the final tie in a threefold liaison.

After Lucy takes up residence in Madame Beck's pensionnat, another of *Villette's* significant triangular relationships emerges. In this case, Brontë conjoins Lucy, Ginevra Fanshawe, and Dr. John.² Although Lucy met Ginevra during her voyage to France, the two only become rivals for Dr. John's attentions later in the novel. Initially, Ginevra cloaks her ties to Dr. John by calling him "Isidore." Unlike Polly and Lucy, Ginevra is quite confident of Dr. John's affections for her; during a conversation with Lucy, Ginevra says, "I occasionally allow Isidore the pleasure and honour of expressing his homage, by the offer of a trifle'" (Brontë 154). As facetious as her character, Ginevra's desire for this object waxes and wanes but unites her with Dr. John nevertheless. While Ginevra accepts trifles from "Isidore," Lucy is, again, busy intensely observing Dr. John. Recalling one such examination, Lucy says, "I have met him coming out of [Madame Beck's] presence with a mischievous half-smile about his lips, and in his eyes a look of masculine vanity He had never been within the compass of my penetration" (Brontë 167). To know and establish a connection with Dr. John, Lucy tries to expose his secrets; she performs the typically masculine act of "penetration" in order to assert her place as a rival for his affections. To help in this endeavor, she practices informal phrenological readings upon him. As with Polly and John, Lucy positions herself as a rival with Ginevra through the gaze; instead of announcing herself as an opponent, Lucy consciously suppresses her desire.

In a similarly inconspicuous manner, the third angle of this triangular relationship develops between Lucy and Ginevra. The bond created by their rivalry for Dr. John's

² Graham Bretton, Dr. John, and "Isidore" are the same character. Lucy does not reveal this to the reader until later in the novel.

attention ultimately supercedes their desires for the original object. Ginevra expresses the comfort and acceptance she feels with Lucy, stating, “I am far more at ease with you . . . dear crosspatch—who take me at my lowest, and know me . . .” (Brontë 155). An affectionate remark of this sort is never made toward Dr. John; in fact, Ginevra is frequently bothered by or “ashamed of him” (Brontë 217). Furthermore, the attachment between these two women is physical; Ginevra exhibits her reliance upon Lucy by frequently “lean[ing] upon [Lucy with] her whole weight” (Brontë 393). “[B]y way of keeping out the intruder,” Ginevra would also “pu[sh] her hand . . . under [Lucy’s] arm” (Brontë 394). In both triptychs that Brontë uses, the female characters subordinate the initial object of their desire, Graham or Dr. John; he becomes a mediator or conductor, a mere instrument providing intercession for the more significant affiliations between women.

Charlotte Brontë, writing in the unquestionably patriarchal and strictly regimented English Victorian era, inverts the erotic system of triangulated desire to deconstruct traditional, masculine modes of power. The triptychs she creates place, as previously noted, figure the male as conductor of desire between two females. In so doing, Brontë fixes the male in a secondary role beneath feminine control. The homosocial and erotically charged connections between Lucy and Polly then Lucy and Ginevra are extremely significant because they work to unsettle Victorian society which based itself upon a gendered ideology that portrayed and sought to create women who were chaste, innocent, and virtuous beings. Any threat, however small, to this ideal presented a serious danger to established modes of thought and belief. By portraying feminine relationships where desire between two women may not only be erotically charged but also sexually deviant (i.e. lesbian), Charlotte Brontë privileges the feminine while quietly displacing established forms of desire and challenging

the “ideological homophobia” implicit within the power structure of Victorian culture (Sedgwick 25).

Borislav Knezevic, in “The Impossible Things: Quest for Knowledge in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*,” writes that Brontë’s novel “is about desire as [the] desire to know and be known” (67). This desire, to know another and be known by another, is evident in the female relationships developed through the inverted triptychs of *Villette*. As “Lucy is immediately thrown into a threefold configuration of desire” with Graham and Polly, the reader sees the feminine connection very early in the novel (Knezevic 70). After Polly enters the Bretton house, Lucy is troubled by her presence. Insisting that she has a composed and rarely ruffled nature, Lucy makes comments like, “I, Lucy Snowe, was calm” (Brontë 79). Despite these remarks, she is visibly moved in observing Polly, stating, “an object less conducive to comfort . . . it was scarcely possible to have before one’s eyes” (Brontë 69). Polly possesses a certain uncanniness that unsettles Lucy. This feeling of displacement only grows when Lucy “[finds Polly] seated in a corner alone” and feels the room is “haunted” (Brontë 69). Polly becomes a romantic specter that haunts Lucy, invading her consciousness and subconscious: “when of moonlight nights, on waking, I beheld her figure, white and conspicuous . . . kneeling . . . I scarcely knew what thoughts I had; but they ran the risk of being hardly more rational and healthy than that child’s mind must have been,” Lucy details (Brontë 69). Placed between reality and dream, Lucy’s carefully monitored mental state breaks apart. Upon finding Polly in a position of supplication, an angelic figure in a dim room, her thoughts loose themselves from conventional strictures and operate independent of “rational” or conventional modes.

The situational and mental connections between Lucy and Polly foreshadow the establishment of a physical bond; here, Brontë uses a threefold configuration to emphasize a partiality towards feminine relations. The night before Polly leaves the Bretton house, she sits “cold, . . . vigilant [and] perched” on the bed, unable to sleep (Brontë 90). Lucy recognizes her “painfully restless . . . state” and takes her “to bid Graham goodnight again” (Brontë 91). The bond between rivals supercedes initial attachments to the object when Lucy, cradling the girl, becomes the bearer of Polly: “She . . . stretched out her little arms . . . [and Lucy folded] a shawl around her” (Brontë 91). Moreover, Lucy has been the one who recognizes Polly’s needs and desires. While Polly does not “[show her] godmother one glimpse of her inner life,” she “lavishes her eccentricities regardlessly before” Lucy (Brontë 90). The two are notably attuned to one another. Lucy carries Polly in her arms to see Graham, and at the moment he “tak[es] her,” the three create a physical triangle (Brontë 91). When this figure breaks, the girls are still united. Graham makes this action possible by flippantly kissing Polly and then passing her back to Lucy who notes, “She was . . . restored to me” (Brontë 91). Her simple comment implies that Polly’s rightful place has been, all along, with her.

Not surprisingly, then, the desire that joins these two is not only socially but erotically charged. Upon going to her room one night, Lucy comments that she “went with an unquiet anticipation” (Brontë 90). The tension Lucy felt outside only intensifies within the room. As the two lie in their separate beds talking, Polly is unable to answer a critical question regarding Graham. When Lucy asks, ““Do you no longer wish to be his little companion?”” only “[d]ead silence” follows (Brontë 92). Just after this moment, Lucy “saw the little thing shiver” and directs Polly: ““Come to me,” I said, wishing, yet scarcely hoping, that she would

comply” (Brontë 92). The sexual nature of this scene fully blossoms after Polly enters the bed. Lucy recalls, “I took her in . . . I warmed her in my arms. She trembled nervously; I soothed her” (Brontë 92). The very tone of Lucy’s exposition changes at this point; her sentences are declarative and un-descriptive. She masks a culturally offensive desire by severing the reader’s sight. After Polly is “tranquilized and cherished,” an entirely vague way to explain a situation, Lucy lies awake thinking about the girl’s future (Brontë 92). The last image of Bretton focuses upon the two females in bed together, presumably entwined. Graham is notably absent. Brontë chooses to end the narrative of their formative years with a scene of Lucy and Polly; this conscious choice only highlights a privileging of the feminine desire over the masculine, heterosexual components of triangulated desire. The subversion of traditional desire takes place unbeknownst to the patriarch of Bretton, Graham, so in a socially acceptable space, Brontë quietly affirms the growth of an alliance between Lucy and Polly.

Brontë attends to feminine desire with another threefold configuration—Lucy, Dr. John, and Ginevra. Ginevra unsettles Lucy in much the same way that Polly infected Lucy’s mind. “While wandering in solitude” during the pensionnat’s vacation, Lucy day-dreams of many things, but Ginevra occupies an ever-growing place in her thoughts (Brontë 230). Lucy muses, “Ginevra had a kind of spirit with her, empowered to give constant strength and comfort, to gladden daylight and embalm darkness” (Brontë 230). Taking on almost mystical attributes, the image of Ginevra comes to “haunt” Lucy as the figure of Polly did. Lucy notes that Miss Fanshawe is protected by “the best of the good genii that guard humanity,” and she “gradually [becomes] . . . a sort of heroine” to Lucy (Brontë 230-31). Lucy’s thoughts, troubled by a preoccupation with Ginevra, help to highlight the desire

which grows between the two; Lucy states, “perceiving this growing illusion, I said, ‘I really believe my nerves are getting overstretched: my mind has suffered . . . ’” (Brontë 231). The draw Lucy feels towards Ginevra, the rival, occupies the place Dr. John, the object, would conventionally fill. Besides Lucy’s mental fixation upon Ginevra, the girls’ physical proximity to one another and bantering language evidences the bond, growing in strength, between them.

Lucy and Ginevra act as ostensible rivals; Lucy counsels Dr. John not to fall for Ginevra while Ginevra toys with “Isidore.” Meanwhile, the two females need one another in small but significant ways. For example, the women exchange food in the mornings, an affectionate gesture on both parts. Lucy remarks, “I gave half [of the pistols] to Ginevra; and she in return . . . [gave] me a portion of her coffee” (Brontë 312). Besides providing an opportunity for the girls to commune together, this food-swapping is an obvious act of favoritism; “though many others . . . covet the superfluity,” Lucy admits that she “never var[ies] in . . . preference” (Brontë 312). Additionally, the two participate in a sort of linguistic bantering or sparring. This informal and jocular way of conversing is unique to Lucy and Ginevra’s relationship. For instance, Ginevra expresses her pleasure upon Lucy’s return to the pensionnat, evidence that Lucy has been in her thoughts too, saying, “I am glad you are come back You don’t know how often I have wanted you in this dismal place” (Brontë 312). When Lucy responds sarcastically, “Oh! . . . Then . . . you have something for me to do,” Ginevra rejoins, “Crabbed and crusty as ever!” (Brontë 312). The familiarity and cadence of their dialogue evidence the ease with which Lucy and Ginevra handle one another.

As Lucy, Graham, and Polly are depicted in a literal threefold configuration which displays triangulated desire, Brontë uses the play of the fete to create a similar construction between Lucy, Dr. John, and Ginevra. In this instance, Lucy stands on stage cast in the role of a man and half dressed as one. Mark Hennelly, in “The ‘Surveillance of Desirée’: Freud, Foucault, and *Villette*,” writes, “Lucy’s semi-cross-dressing and uncanny self-identifications with John . . . imply gender coding and uncoding, and recoding at the same time” (429). Lucy, then, breaks traditional gender roles by stepping onto the stage in costume, but the way she enacts her role is even more significant. As Lucy begins “to notice [her] fellow actors,” she realizes that Ginevra is “acting *at* someone,” Dr. John (Brontë 210). Terry Eagleton explains that “[s]ince Lucy loves the man who loves Ginevra, there is a sense in which she loves Ginevra too; and since Ginevra treats Lucy in the play as a substitute John, Lucy is out to attract her” (70). “[F]eeling the right power come,” Lucy plays the fop and immerses herself “[in the] wooing of Ginevra,” thereby creating a triangle that is scopically linked (Brontë 210). The play functions as “a primal scene . . . in which Lucy discovers desire,” and in so doing, she pits herself against Dr. John for Ginevra: “I rivaled and out-rivalled him . . . where *he* was outcast *I* could please,” Lucy explains (Brontë 210). Although Ginevra looks toward Graham, the only socially acceptable option for her in this visual triangle, she has a “pointed partiality [in] her manner towards” Lucy (Brontë 20). Lucy observes, “between us we half-changed the nature of the role” (Brontë 210). Writing in *Caught in the Act*, Joseph Litvak pointedly notes, Lucy “in effect rewrites the script so as to release from its formulaic lineaments a veritable orgy of overdetermined triangularity” (93). Moreover, she “turn[s] the beholder into a spectacle in his own right” (Litvak 93).

While Brontë connects these three characters triangularly, she places only Lucy and Ginevra on stage together in a “drama that disturbs both hierarchies of gender and hierarchies of power” (Litvak 93). In so doing, Brontë allows these women to reshape a traditional “role” that has been mandated to them. Between acts, M. Paul notices that something unusual is happening: “C’est peut être plus beau que votre modèle . . . mais ce n’est pas juste,”³ he comments (Brontë 210). As director of the play, M. Paul authorizes what is displayed to the audience, and he recognizes how Lucy and Ginevra have literally and metaphorically transformed the script given to them. By noting the incorrectness of their revision, M. Paul attempts to realign them socially with their “correct” positions in Victorian society. M. Paul’s guidance has come too late, for Lucy’s “longing was to eclipse the ‘Ours:’ i.e., Dr. John” (Brontë 210). Having already taken shape, her desire and preference for the feminine are solidified. Brontë’s use of the play in *Villette* supplies another demonstration of her renovation to the conventional form of triangulated desire. Displaced from a position of domination, Dr. John provides an acceptable guise for feminine assertion of desire.

By making themselves objects who look and are not merely looked upon, Lucy, Polly, and Ginevra superficially uphold societal norms while covertly asserting their own power. These women use the gaze to undermine Victorian ideology, which only authorizes heterosexual relationships. By controlling the gaze, Brontë’s women cast off “objectification by the privileged male gaze, that ubiquitous instrument of surveillance in a patriarchal society” (Boone 31). Lucy, Polly, and Ginevra, within their own triangular relationships, “[disavow]” what Boone, in “Depolicing *Villette*,” calls “the penetrative imagery of male conquest” (37). Furthermore, since the gaze is the “privileged medium of trying to know and

³ “It may be finer than your model, but it is not correct” (Brontë 606).

be known by the other,” this is primarily the means by which these three women of *Villette* establish and foster desire for themselves and one another (Knezevic 67).

In “The Cypher: Disclosure and Reticence in *Villette*,” Karen Lawrence explains that “Lucy at first defends herself against being truly ‘impressed’ by Polly,” but “Polly is interesting *with* and *for* Lucy” (460). Even at Bretton, Lucy’s gaze is connected with Polly’s as she attempts to read her: “my eyes being fixed on hers—I witnessed in its irid and pupil a startling transformation . . . an intense expectancy” (Brontë 70). “Lucy’s voyeuristic fixation [is] on Polly” (Knezevic 76). Later, Lucy looks into Polly’s eyes to examine her again: “her dilated eye was both troubled and glowing . . . it was obvious she must not be left” (Brontë 90-1). Lucy and Polly are linked by close observation of one another, but this watching is not merely a dispassionate act. When Lucy and Polly are reunited in *Villette*, Lucy comments, “I had moved to the fire, and she stood opposite, and gazed into me; and as she gazed, her face became gradually more expressive of thought and feeling” (Brontë 358). As Lucy basks in firelight, Polly’s eyes evoke what is at work internally. “I remember you well—your countenance, the colour of your hair, the outline of your face . . .,” Polly remarks (Brontë 358). Her memory is clearly bound with sight. Retaining the image of Lucy through the years, Polly acutely remembers the details of Lucy’s face in a manner reminiscent of a lover recalling her or his beloved, but here, “the gaze has not been directed according to masculine orders” (Robbins 219).

Lucy and Ginevra employ their scopic connections as a weapon against the dominating patriarchal modes of being. Ruth Robbins, in “How Do I Look? *Villette* and Looking Differently,” writes that “pleasure in looking—pleasure in the other, and pleasure in and for the self— take place differently for men and women because of the structural and

political imbalances in the concept of gender” (218). By directing desire with their eyes, Lucy and Ginevra deconstruct these gender inequalities. Lucy is repeatedly conscious of Ginevra’s appearance, and she takes care to mention it. For example, one morning Lucy notes, “I had seen [Ginevra] last in elegant evening attire. I don’t know that she looked less charming now in her school-dress I even think this dusky wrapper gave her charms a triumph; enhancing by contrast . . . the freshness of her bloom . . .” (Brontë 312). Lucy’s awareness of the beauty in Ginevra’s aspect is reminiscent of the way in which Polly recalls Lucy’s characteristics. The indifference Ginevra employs at times throughout the novel is play; she is, in fact, just as aware of Lucy’s presence and appearance as Lucy is of Ginevra’s. “I saw you at the concert the other night, dressed, actually, like anybody else,” Ginevra recalls (Brontë 314). Although in a crowded public place, Ginevra has not only recognized and scrutinized Lucy but also made it a point to address her presence. Lucy, Polly, and Ginevra cast off the plight of objects who submissively permit scrutiny; instead, they look where and when they please. Choosing to position women within their gaze, Lucy, Polly, and Ginevra bind themselves to one another, functioning apart from the dictates of a masculine sphere.

In her article “Public Spaces, Private Eyes: Gender and the Social Work of Aesthetics in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*,” Anita Levy writes that Brontë’s *Villette* “consistently juxatpos[es] Polly to Lucy to Ginevra” (404). In her own way, each woman represents a “hybrid category on the personal, sexual, and psychological plane,” if only by placing herself as a subject within an inverted triangle of desire (Levy 411). Girard’s theory of triangular desire works in *Villette* as Brontë creates structures that allow for feminine subversion of the traditional framework of desire in the Victorian period. Through concealed operations, Lucy,

Polly, and Ginevra, subordinate Dr. John Graham Bretton, a patriarchal figure, by placing him as mediator of the real relational charge. Margaret Shaw rightly explains in “Narrative Surveillance and Social Control in *Villette*” that what Lucy, Polly, and Ginevra “wan[t] invisible to the common gaze is desire” (817). To allow their desire free play within sight of Victorian society would be self destructive. Furthermore, a public exhibition of erotically charged homosocial or homosexual relationships would be catastrophic to an ideology which not only shunned but sought to exterminate aberrant sexuality. Responding to the composition of Victorian culture, largely founded upon a restrictive image of women as pure, chaste, and subordinate, Brontë empowers her characters by allowing for a more realistic acceptance of human desire—whether it is homosocial, heterosexual, homosexual, or some combination thereof. Brontë’s innovative restructuring of traditional patterns of relationships foreshadows a more modern sentiment as well as impending issues that would confront Victorian society on a larger scale as the end of the century approached.

Chapter II: Unframed Women in the Triangles of Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*

“I was obliged to tell her that no man tolerates a rival—not even a woman rival—in his wife’s affections”
- from the narrative of Marian Halcombe

While Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* subtly complicates mid-Victorian conceptions of women, the sensation novel, as a genre, more forthrightly questions and problematizes traditional beliefs about gender, societal roles, and cultural stability. In *Nobody’s Angels: Middle Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture*, Elizabeth Langland writes, “the emergence of sensational novels has been tied to a changing role of women and a ‘discontent with old ways.’ The dissatisfaction has been linked, especially, with the repression of female sexuality and passion” (233). Because of this malcontent, the “sensational novel . . . often invested part of its energies in chipping away at long-cherished notions of women’s proper status and position” (Ledwon 3-4). In fact, “[s]ensation novels that emerged in the 1860s portrayed a different kind of middle-class woman,” one who was not necessarily the Angel in the House but a more complex, and therefore more realistic, representation of Woman (Langland 233).

As a prominent writer of Victorian sensation fiction, Wilkie Collins is not surprisingly “concerned with the issues of women’s rights,” but his “[open irreverence] toward Victorian sexual conventions” as well as “the prominence he gives in his fiction to unconventional women” is most remarkable and innovative (Barrickman 111). In “Communicated by a Romantic Old Gentleman,” an article printed in Dickens’s *Household Words*, Collins, writing under the guise of an elderly patriarch, asserts that conventional portraits of women in literature are restrictive and outdated:

Let me say something, first, about our favourite two sisters—the tall, dark one, who is serious and unfortunate: the short light one who is coquettish and happy. [. . .] I venture to respectfully suggest that the time has arrived when it is no longer necessary

to insist on them in novel after novel. I'm afraid there is something revolutionary in the heart of man [W]omen are represented in a stereotypical fashion in literature and . . . these literary conventions have no basis in reality. (O'Neill 180-1)

Sexuality, for Collins, "is a complex of desires, attitudes, roles, and norms that is virtually coextensive with all social life," yet he "does not focus directly on the question of reform. [H]is methods are more circuitous" (Barrickman 31, 112). Phillip O'Neill, writing in *Wilkie Collins: Women, Property, and Propriety*, argues that "Collins sees the situation of women as both symptomatic of and supportive to bourgeois patriarchy" (5). By "deliberately subverting the popular literary representations of women," their desires, and the relationships within which they are involved, Collins consciously breaks with Victorian notions of propriety, a term which is "synonymous with social convention, with the status quo and with a regard for appearance" (O'Neill 103). In this manner, Collins's works generally, and *The Woman in White* particularly, undermine Victorian "ideology . . . [and] cultural hegemony which both controls the individual and allows the individual to act" (O'Neill 103).

From the first line of *The Woman in White*—"This is the story of what a Woman's patience can endure, and what a Man's resolution can achieve" (Collins 6)—Collins invokes an "oppositional gender structure" where the feminine is passive while the masculine is active; however, he immediately begins to dismantle this paradigm (Langland 236). His techniques for dislocating masculine power and instead empowering the feminine are quite similar to those used by Charlotte Brontë in *Villette*. In fact, "the triad" is important to *The Woman in White* because "it allows for complex, shifting, and dangerous slippages of identity" (Ledwon 10). The two triptychs of this novel which display inversions of traditional triangulated desire are first Laura Fairlie, Walter Hartright, and Anne Catherick, and second Laura, Walter, and Marian Halcombe. While some critics note the "remarkably

high number of triads” in this work, the desire at play within these specific configurations has gone relatively unnoticed (Ledwon 10). Like Brontë, Collins neglects the male-oriented triptych and allows women to bond, using a masculine figure as the mediator for their desire; this reversal enables the “heroines to escape the power of [patriarchy]” (Milbank 64). By these means, *The Woman in White* offers “a unique instance of a mid-Victorian novel in which the author openly acknowledges an anarchic and asocial counter-world as powerfully attractive to the ordered, civilized world of conventional beliefs” (Knoepfmacher 60).

Unlike the dominant feminine voice of *Villette*, the masculine narration of Walter Hartright delivers much of *The Woman in White*. As an art teacher, Hartright constantly uses his eyes to fix and read women; he is what Allison Milbank, writing in “Hidden and Sought: Wilkie Collins's Gothic Fiction,” calls “a framer . . . an encloser of women” (77).

Remarkably though, the women of this novel refuse to situate themselves permanently within Walter’s conceptions. Instead, they make him the object of their desire before, in turn, configuring him as the mediator of desire between themselves. Anne Catherick is the first to meet and counter Walter’s expectations as he travels upon the road to London one evening. In recollecting the event, he states, “there, as if it had that moment sprung out of the earth or dropped from the heaven—stood the figure of a solitary woman, dressed from head to foot in white garments; her face bent in grave inquiry upon mine” (Collins 24). Anne, like an inexplicable phenomenon or a supernatural spirit, appears before Walter; he cannot make logical sense of the circumstances, and, unable to react, he becomes the passive object of her gaze.

Trying to reassert control of the situation, Walter attempts to read Anne: “I looked attentively at her It was then nearly one o’clock. All I could discern distinctly by the

moon light, was a colourless, youthful face, . . . large, grave, wistfully-attentive eyes; nervous, uncertain lips” etc. (Collins 24). Walter’s inadequate assessment, “What sort of a woman she was, and how she came to be alone in the high-road, an hour after midnight, I altogether failed to guess,” evidences his need to classify her within his predetermined notions concerning “types” of women (Collins 24). Outside of the domestic space, Anne is a problem, a compelling riddle for Walter, and he himself notes his inability to see her correctly: he addresses this fallibility with such comments as, “All I could discern,” “so far as I could guess,” and “This was all I could observe” (Collins 24). Early in the novel, Walter demonstrates that his vision is prone to error and that women easily beguile him.

Unlike Walter, Anne controls herself within the situation. While he bumbles from moment to moment, she is direct; “Did you hear me?” (Collins 21) she questions when Walter is lost in thought, and again when she senses his suspicion of her, she queries, “Why do you suspect me of wrong doing?” (Collins 25). For her successful escape from the asylum, Walter is a necessary tool. Anne needs his knowledge and information to achieve her purposes; furthermore, she establishes a physical connection which aids her in this endeavor. Anne willingly acknowledges, “I was obliged to steal after you and touch you” (Collins 25). This casual touch evinces a desire that blooms exponentially in a matter of moments. Walter notes his newly found emotional attachment: “The loneliness and helplessness of the woman touched me. [I had] the natural impulse to assist her” (Collins 26). When Anne “came close to [him], and laid her hand with a sudden gentle stealthiness on [his] bosom,” Walter comments, “Remember that I was young; remember that the hand that touched me was a woman’s” (Collins 26). Recalling the episode after a substantial time

lapse, Walter exclaims, “Oh me! I tremble now when I write it” (Collins 26). That Anne Catherick “casts an erotic spell upon him” is undoubtable (May 125).

Anne is not merely active in a situation where Walter is passive, but she also leaves him suffering from what a Victorian culture would consider more “feminine maladies.” The captivating late-night experience with Anne causes Walter to doubt his own identity and sanity as well as the situation’s propriety: “Was I Walter Hartright? . . . I was too bewildered—too conscious of a vague sense of something like self reproach” (Collins 27). Walter is awestruck, shaken, and clearly not in control of his senses. Anne, on the other hand, demonstrates much more composure: she directs her approach to and departure from this man. By attaining his compliance with her wishes and provoking his desire for her, she also controls his will.

Consumed by his connection with this first woman in white Walter relates, “[she] got between me and my pencil, between me and my book” (Collins 32); despite a preoccupation with Anne, however, Walter begins to establish a similar bond with another woman in white. When Walter meets Laura Fairlie upon his arrival at Limmeridge House, he is as visibly moved as the moment he first saw Anne: “How can I describe her? How can I separate her from my own sensations . . . ? How can I see her again as she looked when my eyes first rested on her . . . ?” (Collins 51). While Anne and Laura know nothing, as of yet, about one another, they become rivals for the attention of Walter’s mind. The situations under which these women meet Walter Hartright may be dissimilar, but many of the characters’ behaviors are uncannily alike. For example, the settings of these two scenes denote opposition—Anne is outside on a road leading to a city at night, while Laura is in a summer house safely within the domestic sphere during the middle of the day—yet, in both cases, Walter’s capricious

emotions are almost immediately involved. Furthermore, in both scenes, his instinctive reaction is to frame the women through the gaze and according to his already fixed notions of femininity. Though he failed in this endeavor with Anne, he attempts to do the same with Laura. He even paints a picture of the first moment he saw Laura: “The water-colour drawing that I made of Laura Fairlie . . . in the place and attitude in which I first saw her, lies upon my desk while I write Her hair is of so faint and pale a brown—not flaxen, and yet almost as light; not golden” (Collins 51). In writing about Walter’s description of Laura, Alison Milbank aptly observes, “the actual description is not just vague, but ambiguous through its very specificity [She is] an image rather than a domestic ideal” (71). Imagist paintings give the essence of a thing but not the thing itself; Laura, in much the same way, evades Walter’s tendency to fix and contain.

As with Anne, Walter recognizes the imperfection of his vision concerning Laura when he says, “How can I describe her?,” “How can I see her again as she looked?,” and “Does my portrait of her . . . show me these things [the individuality of characteristics in her expression and face]? Ah, how few of them are in the dim mechanized drawing” (Collins 51-52). Though Walter claims that Laura “unconsciously gave [him] the key to her whole character” in just a few words, he contradicts himself by admitting moments before that “there was something wanting in *her* . . . which hindered me from understanding her as I ought. The impression was always strongest, in the most contradictory manner, when she looked at me” (Collins 54, 53). Displaced from a position as a seeing subject, Walter feels uncomfortable as the object of the female gaze. Laura, like Anne, unseats Walter’s presumably secure masculine poise and reason. In yet another exclamation upon his own weakness with women, Walter cries, “Yes! let me acknowledge that, on this first day, I let

the charm of her presence lure me from the recollection of myself and my position” (Collins 55). Faced with desire for the feminine, Walter seems prepared to neglect the demands of propriety.

Early in the text, Collins creates a triptych in which Walter is strategically positioned between Anne and Laura. Both rivals demonstrate their desires by establishing physical connections with the object, yet their primary goal is not to obtain Walter’s romantic affections. Instead, both feminine subjects desire this masculine object as a means of subverting patriarchy. To maintain any agency within a society that strictly manages the woman’s sphere—placing Anne in an asylum and forcing Laura to marry against her will—these women require the aid of a patriarch. Relatively silent and constrained by Victorian gender ideology, Anne and Laura utilize what currency is marketable in this cultural system—a man’s voice and action. Anne needs Walter’s complicity and testimony so that she may successfully escape the asylum, and later, Laura requires Walter’s aid in regaining her legal identity. In this way, Anne and Laura are rivals who willingly use a man as a tool in successfully achieving different ends; this connection brings the two women together in a firm allegiance against patriarchy.

Upon examining this triptych, the preference of the feminine bond between Anne and Laura and placement of Walter as a mediator of desire becomes clear. In fact, Anne and Laura are continually paired together, even from the moment Anne enters the text. While walking along the road to London, Walter ponders “what the Cumberland young ladies [Laura and Marian] would look like” (Collins 23). At that specific moment, “every drop of blood in [his] body is brought to a stop by the touch of [Anne’s] hand” (Collins 23). When Walter fantasizes about the looks of Laura and Marian, when he quantifies and objectifies

their appearances, Anne materializes, and with one touch, she places him in a subordinate role as the one acted upon instead of the one acting. The looks of Laura and Anne, along with their sororal relation, couples them most strongly together in this instance. Walter seeks to chain feminine identity with exterior appearance, but Collins repeatedly uses the connection between Anne and Laura to subvert these expectations. Anne, whose “dress—bonnet, shawl, and gown [were] all of white” (21) eerily embodies the image of Laura when she comes down to dinner “unpretendingly and almost poorly dressed in plain white muslim” (56). While Marian reads the letter bearing Anne’s childhood words “I will always wear white as long as I live” (61), Laura “glid[es] into view on the terrace,” and now she is the woman in white or the woman in the night who accosts Walter’s senses. As with Anne, Walter experiences a “sensation, for which [he] can find no name . . . quickened [his] pulse, and raised a fluttering at [his] heart” (61). The “equation Anne = Laura is a false metaphor and one . . . which Walter Hartright is guilty of initiating when he links the two women in his mind” (Milbank 70).

Walter’s confusion about feminine identity and general anxiousness around women leads him to construct a narrative that is at times unreliable. Not given narrative voices in the text, Anne and Laura frequently bond and find power by unseating Walter from his position of narrative authority. For instance, after first laying eyes on Laura, Walter tells the reader, “Think of her as you thought of the first woman who quickened your pulses within you that the rest of her sex had no art to stir” (Collins 52). Walter’s implication that Laura was the first and only woman to speed his heart’s beat is wholly incorrect; he seems quite disposed to forget that, not two days earlier, Anne did the same to him.

Both Anne and Laura defy the reductive representations into which Walter tries to force them: each “refuses to be placed as property, as essence, as a single identity prescribed by reason’s principle” (Elam 59). Instead, they unsettle Victorian notions of gender by revealing the “feminine” nature within him. Around these two women, Walter repeatedly “forgets himself” and the laws of propriety; he frequently exhibits erratic emotional states, easily moving from moments of calm to ones of intense passion. Moreover, Walter is unable to control his own mind and is prone to questioning his senses, perceptions, and his own sanity. Ironically, two women who should be passive, submissive, and contained, are able to unsettle masculine restraint. In this manner, Walter becomes subordinate, a mediator for the more significant connections between these women.

When Walter mentions Cumberland to Anne, she immediately remembers her benefactress, Mrs. Fairlie and her “little girl [who] may be married and gone away” (Collins 29). This memory, which Walter’s comment precipitates, and her knowledge of Sir Percival send Anne on a mission to aide Laura. Anne, in fact, “displaces her love for Mrs. Fairlie onto Laura [This] deranged and displaced filial love [is] characterized by a passionate desire to protect Laura” (May 125). “You know how I love your child, for your sake!” Anne utters to Mrs. Fairlie while “kissing the [tomb]stone . . . [and] beating on it passionately” (Collins 104). When Anne meets Walter in the Cumberland graveyard, she solicits him for information about Laura: “Is Miss Fairlie well and happy? Does she wear white now, as she used when she was a girl?” (Collins 102). Walter’s unsatisfactory replies provoke her, and his attempts to control the conversation push her away. Anne intuitively senses his disingenuousness and says so: “‘You want something,’ she answered, sharply ‘Speak to me; tell me what you want’” (Collins 105). Later, she demandingly inquires, “Why don’t

you help me?" (Collins 105). Walter seems quite unequal to the task as he continues to mention Sir Percival Glyde, whom Anne asked him not to speak of.

Anne began and continues her mission to save Laura from a doomed marriage without Walter's help. In a letter to Laura, Anne admits, "'Last night, I dreamed about you, Miss Fairlie'" (Collins 79). In this dream, Anne imagines herself on one side of the altar in a church as Laura and a man walk down the aisle. The dream is one of foreboding rather than happiness; Anne clearly understands that this specific marriage will end in ruin, but her portrayal of the man in this dream has much larger implications concerning the institution of marriage itself. Lenora Ledwon points out that "[in] nineteenth-century England, women's bodies were the habitual sites of legal regulation. [. . .] But the most persistent and basic deprivation women faced occurred through coverture, the loss of legal identity associated with marriage" (Ledwon 1). Anne envisions a man whose heart is "as black as night" and bears "the hand writing of the fallen angel" (Collins 80). This dream depicts a legal ceremony in which man brings covering darkness to woman. Ledwon also notes that "Anne's warning letter to Laura, based on a dream-vision, is a moment when the woman's gaze is a weapon protecting her sister . . . from the dangers of coverture" (13). At the end of the letter, Anne writes, "I don't give you this warning on my account, but on yours. I have an interest in your well-being that will live as long as I draw breath" (Collins 80).

Anne exhibits a deep concern for Laura's safety and happiness by going to great lengths to communicate with her, placing herself in physical danger, and also risking her own capture and return to the asylum from which she escaped. While Anne wants immediately to stop Laura's impending marriage to Sir Percival, he is not the only man who worries her. Walter's typically masculine behavior in the graveyard, his desire to "pursu[e] the inquiry to

that final point,” to have his way, finally scares her and leads her to associate him with other men who threaten her. “‘I’m afraid you’ll always frighten me now,’” she admits to him (Collins 107). The masculine becomes a sign of menace, a perpetual danger that is always liable to re-possess or expunge feminine identity. Because of the hazards latent within masculinity, feminine connections, such as the bond between Anne and Laura, take precedence in triangulated relations.

As Richard Barrickman, et. al. explain in *Corrupt Relations*, the “two ‘women in white’ are ultimately used to expose the absurd cruelty of a more conventional notion of women in white: pure, virginal, passive. . .” (113). Though they resemble each other quite closely, Anne and Laura fracture Victorian ideology concerning feminine identity by subordinating a man who sought to frame them through the gaze; their “doubled W’s, the doubled whites, the doubled women [themselves] disrupt the singular narrative closure of the text” (Elam 55). Anne and Laura need one another and depend upon their sororal bond before they rely upon Walter. “Even though Anne dies and Laura survives to reestablish the shattered family, it is precisely Anne’s mad passion that represents an aspect of untamed sororal desire” (May 129).

Sororal desire is also obvious in *The Woman in White*’s second inverted triptych; though Marian and Laura initially serve as rivals for Walter, their relationship, like the one between Anne and Laura, displaces Walter as subject and figures him as a mediating object. Even though Walter tries to frame Marian within his expectations of the feminine, she, like Anne and Laura, disturbs his traditional conceptions of gender roles. As he did with Anne and Laura, Walter scopically attempts to read and enclose Marian when he is first introduced to her: “The instant my eyes rested on her, I was struck by the rare beauty of her form . . .,”

he remembers (Collins 34). Already portraying her as an object, he begins to divide her into parts: “Her figure was tall, yet not too tall; ... her head set on her shoulders with an easy, pliant firmness; her waist, perfection in the eyes of man... was visibly and naturally undeformed by stays” (Collins 34). Walter’s description exhibits a sexist attitude which he self-righteously possesses. He even permits himself to indulge in this voyeuristic pleasure: “She had not heard my entrance into the room; and I allowed myself the luxury of admiring her for a few moments” (Collins 34). Confident in his position as a masculine subject whose gaze Victorian society sanctions, he feels “a flutter of expectation to see her face clearly” (Collins 34).

Collins structures this scene in such a way that Walter’s assumptions concerning women are immediately and sharply confounded: Walter remarks as Marian approaches, “The lady is ugly! Never was the conventional maxim, that Nature did not err, more flatly contradicted” (Collins 34). Marian, too, cannot be confined within masculine expectations. Jenny Bourne Taylor writes, “Hartright’s response to Marian’s disturbing androgyny . . . tacitly questions the implied sexual oppositions that enable his vision, even his sanity, to function . . .” (115). Yet, as Walter continues his inspection of Marian, she disturbs him even more; aside from her “almost moustache” and “prominent, piercing, resolute brown eyes,” she is altogether wanting in those terminal attractions of gentleness and pliability” (Collins 35). Walter, misled by the “symmetrical limbs” and her “shoulders that a sculptor would have longed to model,” begins to “feel a sensation oddly akin to the helpless discomfort familiar to us all in sleep when we recognize yet cannot reconcile the anomalies and contradictions of a dream” (Collins 35). The conscious assumptions Walter makes concerning feminine beauty meet with a reality which he can only relate to at an unconscious

level. By confronting Walter with Marian's "masculine form and masculine look" (Collins 35), Collins "shows that it is impossible to 'read' Marian and all females for that matter, for he can compose [none of them] into the harmonious picture that an artist of conservative style like Hartright wishes to produce" (Milbank 74).

The immediate sexual attraction Walter feels for Marian does not disappear from the novel, however: "The attraction between Walter and Marian, inaugurated in his voyeuristic gaze at her womanly body, at the beginning of the novel but checked by that gaze's discovery of her 'ugliness' (read 'masculinity'), exists throughout the book . . ." (May 138-39). Though Walter asserts his love for Laura, he "begins his detective work [concerning the woman in white] by enlisting a female partner," Marian Halcombe, not Laura Fairlie (Elam 52). When Walter confides in Marian about Anne Catherick, she recommends, "You had better not speak of it yet to Mr. Fairlie, or to my sister" (Collins 39). This initial example of secret-sharing between Marian and Walter establishes a model that will be repeated throughout the novel. In fact, Marian and Walter constantly privilege one another with information, leaving Laura an ignorant outsider concerning their plans to find Anne, restore Laura's identity, or defeat Sir Percival and Count Fosco. Furthermore, Marian acts as a romantic advisor for Walter, guiding his behavior with Laura. Despite her connections with Walter, Marian, like Anne and Laura, places him in "feminized" positions. Walter tries unsuccessfully to fix and interpret Marian, to reveal the secrets of her nature, yet Marian is quite capable of doing so effectively with him: "I have discovered your secret—without help, or hint, from anyone else," she tells Walter. Later, she reprimands him, saying, "I pity you for opening your heart to a hopeless affection. [. . .] You are guilty of weakness and want of attention to your own best interests . . ." (Collins 71).

In many cases, Marian provides physical support and guidance for Walter; by doing so, she relegates him to a more “feminine” role in their relationship. When Marian reveals to Walter that Laura is already engaged, she must physically touch him in order to bolster him beneath the burden—“reaching across the table, [Marian] laid her hand firmly on [Walter’s] arm” (Collins 72). As she tightens this grip, he “raised [his] head and looked at her. Her large black eyes were rooted on [him] . . .” (Collins 72). Not only is Marian capable of revealing the secrets of Walter’s nature, but she successfully fixes him as the object of *her* gaze before reinscribing him within a restrictive gender role: sensing his weakness, she tells him to “Crush it! [. . .] Tear it out; trample it under foot like a man!” (Collins 73). By challenging his gender status, Marian asserts her own strength and confidence while drawing attention to Walter’s limitations.

The connection between Marian and Walter is not a temporary one. Even after Walter leaves Limmeridge House, she recalls in her journal, “Walter Hartright is uppermost in my memory” (Collins 198). Also, when sick with typhus, Marian dreams of Walter: “I saw Walter Hartright. [. . .] we were both together again at Limmeridge House” (Collins 273). Sensing his danger as well as her own, she implores him, “Remember your promise to her and to me. Come back to us . . .” (Collins 273). When Walter does return to help Laura regain her legal identity, Marian becomes his confidante once again, and the bond between them, the help and support she supplies, is every bit as important as his connection with Laura.

Any rivalry between Marian and Laura concerning Walter merely lays the foundations for desire between the two sisters. Walter absolutely serves as the mediator for a stronger relationship between women. Because of his presence, they are able to retain the

“[c]hild-like world of sororal bliss, a world that in a certain sense indicts the external world of men [which would] impose itself upon this sisterly idyll and rupture its unity” (May 134). As a patriarch of Victorian society, Walter is necessary to ensure the social legitimacy and duration of this sororal relationship. Even as Walter arrives at Limmeridge House, Marian forthrightly explains to him, “I won’t live without her, and she can’t live without me You must please both of us, Mr. Hartright, or neither of us” (Collins 37). Walter receives an inferior position within this triangular configuration, and he readily confesses as much: “I was admitted among beautiful and captivating women, much as a harmless domestic animal is admitted among them” (Collins 66). By figuring Walter as an object in this triptych, Marian and Laura become subjects with agency. The extreme importance of their sororal bond necessitates that the women use whatever means necessary to maintain this attachment. Indeed, they counteract Victorian notions about gender by rearranging traditional triangular relations. Favoring feminine connections shifts power from the male, with whom it would conventionally lie; in this manner, women may find power and agency in a society where they would generally have little.

Marian and Anne not only privilege their relationship, but they also defend it if ever a masculine presence becomes threatening. When Walter questions Anne’s safety in marrying Sir Percival, Marian responds, “My sister’s future is my dearest care in life; and I have influence enough over her to give me some power, where her marriage is concerned, in the disposal of it” (Collins 109). Marian, with complete confidence, makes it quite clear that she has a permanent place in Laura’s life. The symbiosis between the sisters makes the threat of separation horrifying to them. Laura pleads with Mr. Gilmore, the family lawyer, when she encounters the possibility of estrangement from Marian: “Don’t let me part from

Marian,' she cried with a sudden outbreak of energy. 'Oh, Mr. Gilmore, pray make it a law that Marian is to live with me!'" (Collins 143). Rather than become one with her husband, Laura wishes to maintain her identity by keeping Marian always about her. Some of the novel's most vehement comments are made when sororal relationships are threatened. For instance, after Mr. Fairlie resolves that Laura will indeed be married to Percival (necessarily implying a separation of the sisters), Marian exclaims, "Men! They are the enemies of our innocence and our peace—they drag us away from our parents' love and our sisters' friendship—they take us body and soul to themselves . . . as they chain a dog to his kennel" (Collins 181). Marian and Laura work wholeheartedly to escape this fate. Writing in her journal upon Laura's departure with Sir Percival, Marian notes, "My own love! [. . .] Oh, what a trust is placed in that man's hands tomorrow. If he ever forgets it; if he ever injures a hair of her head!" (Collins 194). Marian's silent threat of violence, should any injury befall Laura, is unsurprising. Laura is precious to Marian; however, the bonds that tie the two women together are not merely familial or homosocial but erotically charged as well: "it is a relationship of closeness, intensity, self-sacrifice, mutual dependence, and often eroticized physical demonstrativeness" (May 133).

The erotic nature of the desire between the two sisters disturbs Victorian ideology concerning feminine relationships; Laura and Marian's kinship fragments laws of social decorum and propriety which dictate the "natural, God-given" framework of male-female roles. Moreover, "Laura and Marian express their love physically and fervently. The dullest reader would have difficulty failing to notice its erotic components" (May 134).

Relinquishing herself to her father's dying wish that she marry Sir Percival, Laura finds solace and safety in Marian: Marian writes in her journal, "She put her arms around my neck,

and rested her head quietly on my bosom,” and more notably, “She put her lips to mine, and kissed me. ‘My own love,’ she said softly, ‘you are much too fond of me’” (Collins 164). Though Laura may appear, in many instances, as a passive pawn manipulated by those around her, she exhibits much more will than that. In both of the instances detailed above, she is the active instigator of a physical connection with her sister. The triangulation of their desire is best evidenced when Laura sits in bed with “the little book of Hartright’s drawings half hidden under her pillow,” the same place “she used to hide her favourite toys” (Collins 165). When Marian points to the book, Laura “reached both hands up to [her sister’s] cheeks, and drew [Marian’s] face down to hers till [their] lips met” (Collins 165). In this triptych, Walter’s book of drawings, a symbol of the man himself, mediates for the sisters, allowing them to exhibit their erotic desire for each other. Ironically, Walter’s attempts to frame and enclose women end with his identity reduced to and bound within a collection of his own drawings.

Aside from the physical connections between women in Collins’s *The Woman in White*, Anne, Laura, and Marian use the gaze, first to bond with Walter and then with one another. By disabling his gaze as the dominant, socially sanctioned means of seeing in the novel, these women escape patriarchal constraints. Privileging the feminine gaze while diminishing masculine vision, infuses the feminine with agency not necessarily granted to the “fairer sex.” *The Woman in White* “plays with the relationship between ways of seeing, modes of identity and forms of power” (Taylor 99). Walter’s belief in himself “as a man who judges with ‘the eyes of a man’” (Miller 126) is repeatedly upset by the feminine gaze. Although he is “intent on imposing a set of disabling gender constructs on the women of the

tale,” they, “in turn, both explicitly and implicitly demonstrate the hollowness of tradition-based Victorian conceptions of women’s roles” (Hall 157).

When Walter meets Anne upon the road that “sultry” night, he twice remarks upon her “wistfully-attentive eyes” which are “fixed on” him and “loo[k] hard in [his] face” (Collins 24, 26). Walter’s own language acknowledges his attempts to appropriate the feminine through the masculine gaze: “I stole a look at her face,” and “I tried again to lift the veil that hung between this woman and me” (Collins 28). Walter’s earlier physiognomic reading supplied insufficient evidence; he is unable to divine this feminine mystery: “At the opening of the novel Hartright’s inability to interpret Anne,” to see her properly, “is the product . . . of the shock to his faculties, and his own inability to control it” (Taylor 112). Anne’s presence, her look, unsettles Walter, and her “uncanny figure reflects the inevitable return of the repressed” (Elam 58). Because Walter cannot figure or forget Anne, memories of her run rampant in his mind: “Anne Catherick again! Even the memory of the farewell evening with my mother and sister could not return to me now, unconnected with that other memory . . .” (Collins 75).

Anne’s looks and her look itself emasculate Walter so that “instead of exhibiting ‘manly’ resolution . . . [he] is characterized by indecision” (Gaylin 312). Laura, in turn, does the same to him. Walter repeatedly references her “truthful, innocent blue eyes” (Collins 52, 53), yet he is unable to see her correctly too—she, like Anne, eludes him. Her gaze seduces and flatters him, the “expression in the lovely eyes that looked into [his] with such an earnest desire to learn all that [he] could teach . . . attracted more of [his] attention than the finest view . . .” (Collins 55). Before long, Walter’s only desire is to “live in the very light of her eyes” (Collins 65). With Laura, Walter admits, “all the discretion, all the experience which .

. . . secured me against other temptations, failed me with her” (Collins 65). Obviously, Laura exerts some mastery over Walter as Anne does. While Anne and Laura never physically look at one another in the text, the closeness between their physical appearances allows their bond to become the most significant within the first triangulation of desire. Rather than seeing one another, they are seen *in* one another. The strength of their connection lies beyond the bond either woman individually has with Walter, and because Walter maintains regimented notions concerning femininity, the combined effects of Anne and Laura cause him to question his own gender and sanity.

When Marian and Walter finally *see* the resemblances between the two women, Walter remarks, “I see it—more unwillingly than I can say. To associate that lost . . . woman . . . with Miss Fairlie, seems like casting a shadow on the future of the bright creature Let me lose the impression again, as soon as possible. Call her in, . . . pray call her in!” (Collins 62). The binary oppositions Walter attached to each woman break down quickly when he begins to see their similarities. This type of deconstruction is so dangerous for Walter that even Marian challenges, “Mr. Hartright, you surprise me, . . . I thought that men, in the nineteenth century, were above superstition” (Collins 62). Marian’s insinuation is that he is clearly acting un-manly. The disturbing likeness in appearance between Anne and Laura causes Walter, throughout the novel, to question not only his ability to see but also “whether [his] own faculties were not in danger of losing their balance” (Collins 81).

As in the first triptych, the gaze connects Marian, Laura, and Walter’s triangular relationship. Marian scopically connects with Walter, and her gaze, like Anne’s and Laura’s, subordinates his. By possessing a dominant feminine gaze, Marian exemplifies a prioritizing of the feminine rather than the masculine. As seeing subjects instead of objects, Marian,

Anne, and Laura empower themselves. For example, instead of Walter inspecting Marian, the opposite happens at Limmeridge House; Walter looking for signs of Laura at lunch one day comments, “Miss Halcombe, whose quick eye nothing escaped, noticed the looks I cast . . .” (Collins 49). Marian also demonstrates the ability, unlike Walter, to successfully read people’s faces and reactions; when she questions Walter, his looks give her a reply well before his voice does: “Never mind your answering Mr. Hartright. [. . .] I *see* in your face . . .” (Collins 50). Marian’s gaze is powerful and dominating; when Walter attempts an impossible romantic quest for Laura, Marian’s “penetrating eyes [contract] a new habit of always watching [him]” (Collins 68). By using the power of the feminine gaze to destabilize masculine looking, Marian, Laura and Anne perform acts of solidarity that display homosocial desire. In this case, Marian’s looking displays homosocial desire, for she uses the gaze as a means of protecting her relationship with Laura.

The scopic connection between Marian and Laura is quite powerful. Before Laura’s wedding to Sir Percival, the two are so upset about their impending separation that they “avoided looking each other in the face” (Collins 194). When Marian goes to Laura’s room to watch her sleeping, she details, “her eyes were only half-way closed My little keepsake—only a brooch—lay on the table at her bedside I waited, looking at her as I have seen her thousands of times . . .” (Collins 194). The tenderness of this watching evidences the intimacy of the bond between these sisters. The truth of Laura’s comment, “Whenever you and I are together Marian, . . . we shall both be happier . . . ,” is evident in the ways the women look at one another, as well as the measures they take to maintain their bond (Collins 212).

Another way women manipulate the gaze in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* is by veiling themselves. This process stops the masculine eyes from attempting to objectify or over-power feminine. Instead, the veil provides agency for women; acting as a shield of sorts, the veil allows women to remain enigmas, mysteries, to the eyes of men. Furthermore, the veil allows women to see without necessarily being seen. With a veil, women have the power to decide whether to remain anonymous or to reveal their identities to others. When Walter, believing Laura to be dead, visits her gravesite, he sees two women: "Their veils were down, and [they] hid their faces from me," he recalls (Collins 410). Only by these women's conscious choice to unveil themselves do they bind the lives of this triptych bound together. Rather than Walter's choosing them, they uncover their eyes and select him.

Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* provides inspiring examples of females who use the resources available to them in order to attain agency in a society where they have very little power; "every female in the novel is similarly transgressive and, at times, anti-patriarchal" (Hall 162). Anne's escape from the asylum, her reluctance to be unjustly constrained, exhibits a resourcefulness which is at odds with her "role" as a social outcast. Moreover, Anne actively works to save her sister from a dangerous existence within the domestic sphere. Though she dies in her attempt to defeat a threatening patriarchal oppression, in the form of Sir Percival and Count Fosco, Anne remains a "specter" within the text, for "both living and dead, she haunts the novel" (May 128). Like Anne, Laura and Marian avoid "[containment] by the ordering obsession of mid-Victorian gender ideology" (Elam 55). While "the typology of common law" deems "the husband and wife [as] one, and the husband is the one," *The Woman in White* serves as a text that complicates this ethic (Ledwon 1). Laura Fairlie's identity, far from being erased by her husband, is legally

restored. Furthermore, the second triptych stands together at the novel's close, and Marian, not Laura, holds the newborn child. In this way, Marian affirms her place in the triangle, and the feminine bonds of this relationship remain intact. Collins uses *The Woman in White* to raise important questions about "Victorian male subjectivity [which] was inextricably bound up with his perception of, demarcation of, an Other," a woman (Hall 162). The triangular relations within the novel assert the importance of women by giving priority to the feminine while unsettling the masculine. Moreover, *The Woman in White* depicts Collins's progressive thinking concerning the inherent instability of gender categorization.

Conclusion

“Here pause: pause at once. There is enough said.” – Lucy Snowe

And what of the conclusions to these novels? What of the importance of the triangle after all? The inverted triptychs of *Villette* and *The Woman in White* represent moments, some longer than others, when women use what resources are available to them in a patriarchal society to deviate from the status quo. Rather than accepting a prescribed gender role, the women of these novels bend and many times break the social constraints placed upon them in order to express “deviant” desire. Brontë and Collins imbed radical triangles within these novels, thereby posing important questions concerning the gender and power relations of Victorian England, but are the works, in the end, revolutionary? Many critics read both novels as inspired but failed attempts at female empowerment; however, the validity of these readings may be countered by assessing triangular relations at the novels’ conclusions.

Brontë and Collins resolve the triangular structures of *Villette* and *The Woman in White* quite differently. Although both novels end with engagements and marriages of women to socially respectable men, the triangular relations of *Villette* dissolve, while the triptychs of *The Woman in White* are, to some degree, maintained. *Villette*’s inverted triptychs break apart after Ginevra runs away with M. De Hamal, Polly becomes engaged to Dr. Graham, and Lucy’s romantic attachments to M. Paul deepen. In *Villette*, there is little to expect from the marriages of Polly and Ginevra but that the unions will veil these women by the laws of coverture; Lucy, on the other hand, presents a different case. She has finally found a secure place in a turbulent world; moreover, her experiences have given her a better sense of her own identity. Rather than setting up house, she takes M. Paul’s help, and not only establishes but runs a small school. Brontë further complicates the novel by leaving it,

ultimately, unresolved. Lucy is never forced behind the veil, because she remains unmarried. Unconstrained by patriarchy at the novel's close, Lucy represents hope for women's agency and autonomy. Brontë quite clearly demonstrates that, if M. Paul does not return, Lucy is self-sufficient and need not relinquish her independence or become immersed within the domestic sphere.

The ending of Collins's *The Woman in White*, unlike *Villette*'s, maintains vestiges of the triangulated relationships established early in the novel. For example, although Anne dies, her "ghostly figure" continues to permeate the text (Collins 555). By giving her life in an effort to help Laura, Anne becomes an inextricable part of Miss Fairlie. After Anne's death and Laura's release from the asylum, their identities intermingle in an extremely unsettling way, for when Laura emerges from her wrongful imprisonment, she looks even more like Anne than before. Walter notes, "the fatal resemblance which I had once seen and shuddered at seeing . . . was now a real and living resemblance which asserted itself before my own eyes" (Collins 434). Surely Walter cannot help but recall the mysterious Anne when he looks into his beloved Laura's face. While the first triptych remains figuratively connected, the second triptych is more literally and physically linked. Despite her more passive nature since her illness and narrative "rape" by Count Fosco, Marian remains a strong female character who, finally, does not allow any man to sever her sororal bond with Laura. As the three stand together in the novel's final scene, the symbol of hope, restoration, and happiness to the domestic household—the child—is held by Marian and not by Laura or Walter. Walter's comment, "Marian was the good angel of our lives—let Marian end our Story," seems entirely appropriate in emphasizing the perpetual connection of their triangulated relationship (Collins 627). Marian herself emphasizes the endurance of this

triptych: “After all that we three have suffered together . . . there can be no parting between us, till the last parting of all” (Collins 621). The sharing of the object between these feminine rivals and the lasting intensity of these bonds is made evident through Walter’s words and Marian’s as well.

In discussing the dynamics of male homosocial desire, Eve Sedgwick writes, “the response to sharing sexual territory with other men may be unexpectedly . . . exhilarated. It is a way of participating in a supraindividual male power over women, and of being [more] close to . . . males” (97). But why can this not be true of female desire as well? Rather than triangular relationships where desire between men heightens *over* women, triptychs which allow women to bond *over* men exist as well. The triangulated desire exhibited in *Villette* and *The Woman in White* demonstrates women’s excitement—not men’s, as Sedgwick posits—in “sharing sexual territory,” using feminine power over men, and of intensifying relationships between women (Sedgwick 97). Lucy’s vaudeville act and Marian’s protectiveness concerning Laura, for instance, reveal the inverse of Sedgwick’s statement. In both cases, feminine assertion of dominance over a man serves to intensify relationships between women. What is more, the heterosexual relationships and romantic interests of women in these novels “have as their *raison d’être* an ultimate bonding between” women (Sedgwick 50). If bonding between men “is not detrimental to ‘masculinity’ but definitive of it,” as Sedgwick submits, then bonding among women may constitute femininity as well; the bonds between the women of these novels become “the organizing [facts]” of much of their “social [lives]” (Sedgwick 102).

Because “culture and society determine the position women occupy,” literature serves as a site that displays and revises gender categorization (O’Neill 185). Charlotte Brontë’s

Villette and Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* show the constraints of Victorian culture upon women, but these novels also challenge the status quo by allowing women to subvert patriarchy in their daily lives. Brontë and Collins directly refute "Robert Southey's advice that . . . 'literature cannot be the business of a woman's life,'" for if nothing else, these novels are completely *about* women's lives (Litvak 88). The popular success of Brontë and Collins, whose interest in women's existences spans their literary careers, also proves the egregious fallacy of Southey's words. Southey's sentimentality toward women is latent within John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869). Writing on the role Victorian society gave to women, Mill aptly submits:

All women are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men; not self-will, and government by self control, but submission, and yielding to the control of others. All the moralities tell them that it is the duty of women, and all the current sentimentalities that it is their nature, to live for others; to make complete abnegation of themselves, and to have no life but in their affections. (Quoted by O'Neill 184)

The most important work accomplished by the inverted triptychs of *Villette* and *The Woman in White* is that they re-envision the traditional role given to members of the "lesser sex."

The women of these texts—particularly Lucy, Ginevra, Anne, Laura, and Marian—demonstrate individual will, self-government, and an unwillingness to comply with anyone's wishes but their own. They live for themselves rather than for others, do not deny themselves or their own desires, and exist with yet beyond their affections. In so doing, they are not merely providing the fantasy space of escapist literature but playing a didactic role in Victorian culture, a role not unlike that of Mill's feminist advocacy.

By inverting triangulated desire, Brontë and Collins undermine Victorian culture's patriarchal tendencies. The triangle's structure allows feminine bonding to take place quite subversively. Under a heterosexual guise, desire between women thrives. Moreover, the

women of these novels empower themselves by mastering the gaze. Though penetrating masculine eyes attempt to fix, read, and control the feminine, the women of *Villette* and *The Woman in White* undermine the male gaze. As looking subjects, these women turn the power of their gaze upon men; instead of being inscribed by the male eye, they, in turn, inscribe men. Then, these women determine their own gender roles by looking at one another. The feminine eye becomes the transmitter of desire, so in a world dominated by masculine authority, the triangle and the gaze are means of siphoning some social power for themselves. Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* and Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* are revolutionary in that they challenge conventional sexuality; by modeling amended triangulated desire and an irreverent gaze, Brontë and Collins unveil their conception, a more affirmative and more realistic vision of and for women.

Works Consulted

- Altick, Richard. *Victorian People and Ideas*. New York: Norton, 1973.
- Auerbach, Nina. *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1982.
- Barickman, Richard, Susan MacDonald, and Myra Stark. *Corrupt Relations: Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, Collins, and the Victorian Sexual System*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.
- Boone, Joseph. "Depolicing *Villette*: Surveillance, Invisibility, and the Female Erotics of 'Heretic Narrative.'" *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 26 (1992): 20-42.
- Brantlinger, Patrick. "What is 'Sensational' about the 'Sensation Novel'?" *Wilkie Collins: New Casebooks*. Lyn Pykett, Ed. New York: St. Martin's, 1998. 30-57.
- Brontë, Charlotte. *Villette*. 1853. New York: Penguin, 1985.
- Collins, Wilkie. *The Woman in White*. 1860. New York: Penguin, 2003.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës*. Hampshire: MacMillan, 1988.
- Elam, Diane. "White Narratology: Gender and Reference in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*." *Virginal Sexuality and Textuality in Victorian Literature*. ed. Lloyd Davis. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993. 49-63.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage, 1978.
- Gallagher, Catherine and Thomas Laqueur, eds. *The Making of the Modern Body: Sexuality and Society in the Nineteenth Century*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.
- Gaylin, Ann. "The Madwoman Outside the Attic: Eavesdropping Narrative Agency in *The*

- Woman in White.*" *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*. 43.3 (Fall 2001): 303-34.
- Girard, René. *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*. Trans. Yvonne Freccero. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1965.
- Hall, Donald. *Fixing Patriarchy*. New York: New York UP, 1996.
- Hamilton, Susan, ed. '*Criminals, Idiots, Women, and Minors.*' New York: Broadview Press, 1995.
- Hennelly, Mark M. "Reading Detection in *The Woman in White*." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 22 (1980). 449-67.
- . "The 'Surveillance of Desirée': Freud, Foucault, and *Villette*." *Victorian Literature and Culture* 26.2 (1998): 421-40.
- Hyder, Clyde. "Wilkie Collins and *The Woman in White*." *Victorian Literature*. Ed. Austin Wright. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1961. 128-135.
- Jay, Martin. *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
- Knezevic, Borislav. "The Impossible Things: Quest for Knowledge in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*." *Literature and Psychology* 42 (1996): 65-100.
- Knoepflmacher, U.C. "The Counterworld of Victorian Fiction and *The Woman in White*." *Wilkie Collins: New Casebooks*. Lyn Pykett, Ed. New York: St. Martin's, 1998. 58-69.
- Langland, Elizabeth. *Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture*. Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1995.
- Laqueur, Thomas. "Orgasm, Generation, and the Politics of Reproductive Biology."

- The Making of the Modern Body: Sexuality and Society in the Nineteenth Century.*
Catherine Gallagher and Thomas Laqueur, eds. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987. 1-41.
- Lawrence, Karen. "The Cypher: Disclosure and Reticence in *Villette*." *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 42.4 (1988): 448-66.
- Leavy, Barbara Fass. "Wilkie Collins' Cinderella: The History of Psychology and *The Woman in White*." *Dickens Studies Annual: Essays on Victorian Fiction* 10 (1982): 91-141.
- Ledwon, Lenora. "Veiled Women, the Law of Coverture, and Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*." *Victorian Literature and Culture* 22 (1994): 1-22.
- Levy, Anita. "Public Spaces, Private Eyes: Gender and the Social Work of Aesthetics in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*." *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*. 22.3 (2000): 391-416.
- Litvak, Joseph. *Caught in the Act: Theatricality in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992.
- May, Leila. *Disorderly Sisters: Sibling Relations and Sororal Resistance in Nineteenth-Century Literature*. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2001.
- Milbank, Alison. "Hidden and Sought: Wilkie Collins's Gothic Fiction." *Daughters of the House: Modes of the Gothic in Victorian Fiction*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992.
- Miller, D. A. "Cages aux Folles: Sensation and Gender in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*." *Representations* 14 (Spring 1986): 107-136.
- O'Neill, Philip. *Wilkie Collins: Women, Property and Propriety*. London: Macmillan, 1988.

Pykett, Lyn, ed. Introduction. *Wilkie Collins: New Casebooks*. New York: St. Martin's, 1998. 1-29.

Robbins, Ruth. "How Do I Look? *Villette* and Looking Different(ly)." *Brontë Studies: The Journal of the Brontë Society*. 23.2 (2003): 215-24.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia UP, 1985.

Shaw, Margaret. "Narrative Surveillance and Social Control in *Villette*." *Studies in English Literature*. 34.4 (1994): 813-833.

Shuttleworth, Sally. *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1996.

Sternlieb, Lisa. "Marian Halcomb: Appropriating an Identity." *The Female Narrator in The British Novel: Hidden Agendas*. New York: Palgrave, 2002. 1-16, 52-74.

Sweet, Matthew. Introduction. *The Woman in White*. By Wilkie Collins. 1860. New York: Penguin, 2003. xiii-xxxiii.

Taylor, Jenny Bourne. *In the Secret Theatre of Home: Wilkie Collins, Sensation Narrative, and Nineteenth-Century Psychology*. London and NY: Routledge, 1988. 98-130.