

# The masculine and feminine identity in Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White*



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Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* portrays the distinctly partitioned sexual spheres in the Victorian era, as is reflected through the weak and victimized female characters and the powerful and domineering male characters. The Victorian femininity is characterized through passivity, endurance and unassertive meekness, while masculinity is characterized by energy, action and resoluteness. The passive Laura Fairlie reflects the prevailing expectation that women should be submissive and obedient. The fair and delicate Laura who exudes feminine weakness exemplifies the passivity of the Victorian femininity in the uttermost, while the plain and energetic Marian Halcombe poses a serious defiance to the prevailing Victorian womanhood by scorning feminine passivity and embracing masculine energy and resoluteness, though with ultimate failure. On the other hand, the active and energetic men like Percival, Fosco and Walter embody the masculine energy and resoluteness. In contrast to the comparatively weak and often victimized women, the men take an active hand to shape the course of their lives, despite their moral discrepancies. Percival and Fosco use their evil energy and resolution to shape destiny to their advantages. Walter Hartridge uses his noble energy and chivalrous resolution to rescue the distressed damsel and save the day, which even the shrewd and energetic Marian fails to emulate. It is ultimately through masculine action and resoluteness that the development of the story is shaped. Marian's ultimate failure in challenging the prevailing Victorian femininity shows that the established gender spheres could not be easily defied, and that the division of sexual realms remains firm in the Victorian period. The prototype of Victorian womanhood is represented by the character of Laura Fairlie. Laura is the extreme representation of the passive and unassertive Victorian

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womanhood. She encapsulates the Victorian social expectation that women should be obedient, unassertive and patient. Laura reflects feminine obedience by submitting to her father's wishes of marrying Percival. Even though she is painfully aware that marrying Percival would transform her into "the most wretched of her sex" (Collins 171), she still resolves to enter into the arranged marriage out of deference to her father's dying wishes. As Marian observes, Laura was simply "content to make it" (73). Laura embodies the Victorian virtue of female endurance. When being confronted with the prospect of a loveless marriage, she announces stoically that "I must submit, Marian, as well as I can" (172). She stifles her emotional spontaneity by burying her love for Walter, and is resigned to her sufferings at Percival's hands without complaints. As Marian observes, "there is no under-tone of complaint, to warn me that she absolutely unhappy in her married life" (201). Laura's passive nature reflects the Victorian expectation that women should be unassertive and demure, instead of being active and resolute like men. She is constantly being pushed and manipulated by others while possessing little individual will power to advance her own interests and desires. She is compelled to give up the man she love and submit to the tyranny of the man she loathes. She is weak in intellect and hasty in trust, making her an easy prey to Fosco's sharp cunningness that ultimately renders her losing her status of legal existence. Laura's intellect further degenerates to the point of being reduced to the diminutive status of a child, who helplessly clings to the strong protection of Walter and Marian for guardianship. Laura's pathetic childlike state reflects Fosco's patriarchal assertion that women "are nothing but children grown up" (323). Marian grieves that Laura is "socially, morally, legally dead" (413), which can be <https://assignbuster.com/the-masculine-and-feminine-identity-in-wilkie-collins-the-woman-in-white/>

seen as a lament for the passive state of Victorian womanhood. Like Laura, women of the Victorian era have been too much reduced to passivity and submissiveness, that they are indeed “ socially, morally, legally dead” (413) in the figurative sense. Against the backdrop of feminine passivity and submissiveness, Marian Halcombe poses a powerful defiance to the prevailing Victorian womanhood. Marian’s defiance to the feminine prototype is first reflected in her physical features. Unlike the womanly Laura, who is known for her soft and delicate features, Marian’s features have a “ masculine look” (35). Her masculine features are symbolic because they serve to reflect the masculine trait in her characters. This transgression of gender boundary in an age where separate sexual spheres are upheld is bound to raise some eyebrows, and Walter is initially “ repelled” (35) by the idea that both elements of femininity and masculinity can be found in her. Marian’s characters are equally unfeminine in the Victorian sense. She is full of masculine energy and takes an active hand to shape the course of the story. It is Marian who takes an inquisitive interest by investigating into her mother’s old letters and discovers the identity of Anne Catherick; it is she who intervenes into a hopeless romance by separating Walter from Laura, it is she who protects Laura and shields her from harm; it is she who writes to lawyers for male advices; it is she who eavesdrops on conversation and makes inquiries. Marian possesses the masculine will and the resolution. She is eager to defy the limitations on female freedom and aspires to play an active role in life. She refuses to remain passive and wants to assert her worth as an active being when she cries out “ don’t refuse me because I’m only a woman. I must go! I will go” (583)! Marian is painfully conscious of the limitations on a woman’s freedom of action and resents herself for being a

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woman and being condemned to “patience, propriety and petticoats for life” (198). She envies the masculine power and its freedom of action. At one time, Marian imagines “if I had been a man, I would have knocked [Percival] down on the threshold of his own door” (245). At another time, Marian fancies that “if I only had the privileges of a man, I would...ride to York” (198). Marian has clearly crossed the gender boundary by preferring masculine freedom and resolution over feminine passivity and obedience. Marian can be seen as a member of the “new women” who defy female submissiveness and passivity by aspiring to become the active, independent, thinking woman. Marian is almost an early feminist who takes passionate interests in defending women’s rights against the patriarchal tyranny. Upon learning Laura’s abuses at the hands of Percival, She has the courage to stand up to him and tell him that “there are laws in England to protect women from cruelty and outrage...to those laws I will appeal” (293). Marian is not content to be resigned in female endurance. Upon seeing Laura’s bruises, she brushes aside all pretenses of endurance and announces that “our endurance must end, and our resistance must begin” (299). Her energetic character is given full credit by her admirer Fosco, who calls her a “sublime creature” (336) who stands “firm as a rock” (324) to hinder Percival and Fosco’s evil schemes. Marian defies the Victorian ideal that women should be obedient wives and nurturing mothers. Unlike Laura, who marries at an early age, Marian is unwilling to enter into matrimony out of a reluctance to be subjected under the domineering husband and is contented with the liberties of spinsterhood. The sight of Laura’s sufferings at men’s hands strengthens Marian’s hatred towards the patriarchal social order and the tyranny it entails. Marian hates the state of matrimony and lashes out at

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passionate tirade against it, “ Men! They are the enemies of her innocence and our peace...they take us body and soul to themselves...I’m mad when I think of it” (181)! Instead of rejoicing in the prospect of Laura’s marriage, Marian conceives a “ reckless, vindictive, hopeless hatred of the man who was to marry her” (82). Throughout the book, Marian poses a serious challenge to the conventional Victorian womanhood by rejecting the imprisoning passivity and chooses to embrace the liberating experience of masculine action and firmness. In contrast to feminine passivity that defines the predominant Victorian womanhood, the Victorian manhood is characterized by resolution and action. Marian paints a vivid portrait of female passivity and male resolution when she tells Walter to crush his love for Laura, “ don’t shrink under it like a woman, tear it out; trample it under foot like a man” (73)! The three important male characters including Walter, Percival and Fosco are all characterized by a firm resolution and energetic action in spite of the discrepancy of their morality. As a socially rejected bastard, Percival is resolute to shape his own destiny by rebelling against what fate has allotted him, and to achieve his ambitious ends through evil resolution. He is not resigned to illegitimacy and poverty and is determined to achieve wealth and respectability. He is the consummate social climber who has no scruples from resorting to fraud, trickery and other immoral practices to obtain his heart’s desire. To achieve power and status, he forges his parents’ marriage, usurps the title and property, and shuts off Anne Catherick in the asylum to hinder the disclosure of the fraud. Percival and his evil adviser Fosco go as far as faking a false death of Laura in order to devour her property, and buried her alive by shutting her in an asylum under the name of Anne Catherick. The scheming Percival and Fosco who actively

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shape life to their own advantages could not have been more opposed to the truthful and passive Laura who meekly endures the sufferings inflicted on her. Unlike the passive womanhood condemned to endurance and patience, exemplified by Laura, Percival and Fosco are the epitome of masculine action and resolution by taking an active hand to shape the course of their destiny. Their resoluteness is such that they are willing to trample on both law and morality in order to shape destiny to their likings. Percival and Fosco's evil resolution of usurping wealth and status is contrasted by Walter's noble resolution of restoring Laura to her identity and social position. Laura's passive life is predominantly shaped through men's action and resoluteness. It takes Percival and Fosco's evil acts to destroy Laura's life and Walter's chivalrous resolution to rescue the distressed damsel. It is Walter who actively seeks to restore Laura's identity by making inquiries, conducting investigations and forcing confessions out of people. Laura's identity could not have been restored without Walter's active quest. Marian may possess the resolution to make inquiry and resort to eavesdropping, but she is too ready to lapse into feminine weakness by falling ill at the crucial moment, and leaving Laura at the mercy of Fosco's devices. Her pathetically emotional behavior after the eavesdropping shows that even the masculine Marian is not free from the physical fragility and mental irritability of women. She easily loses her self-possession by lapsing into feminine weakness and is reduced to " a useless, helpless, panic-stricken creature" (334). As a Victorian woman, Marian is still hampered by the many limitations on a woman's action which discourage her from taking an active role in restoring Laura's identity. She often excuses her weakness by lamenting " but I'm only a woman" (245), and therefore incapable of the grand masculine actions. In <https://assignbuster.com/the-masculine-and-feminine-identity-in-wilkie-collins-the-woman-in-white/>

the third epoch of the book, Marian has lost her domineering presence and has lapsed into feminine subservience by subjecting her and Laura under the masculine protection of Walter. She chooses to be cloistered at home with Laura. The Marian who used to burst with energy and passion now hides under Walter's protective shield and leaving him to "support, to protect, to cherish [and] to restore" (414) the ill-fated Laura. Despite Marian's courage and resolution, she ultimately fails to successfully defy the passivity of the Victorian womanhood and is compelled to resort to masculine action and resolution to restore order. Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* portrays the sharp differences in the Victorian gender expectations. The strictly separate gender spheres demand the meek, passive woman and the manly, resolute man. Marian Halcombe's defiance of the conventional feminine model shows that feminine passivity and unassertiveness can be imprisoning and oppressive, which are incompatible with the energetic characters of the independent, free-thinking "new women", exemplified in Marian. Despite of Marian's courage and resolution, she ultimately fails to rebel against the Victorian femininity by lapsing into feminine weakness and clinging onto the masculine protection. Marian's failed rebellion against the conventional Victorian womanhood shows that the established gender expectation is not easily challengeable, as there are too many deeply entrenched impediments in society to hamper a woman's freedom of action. The unconventional "new woman" like Marian may enjoy a brief flirtation with masculine energy and resoluteness, but is ultimately forced back to the conventional standards of propriety and decorum, and be condemned to "patience, propriety and petticoats for life" (198). Bibliography Collins, Wilkie. *The Woman in White*.

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