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Draped in Dissent: Sartorial Politics, Class Dynamics, and the Visual Construction of Female Identity in Wilkie Collins' The Woman in White

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Abstract: In Victorian society, identity was not solely an internal construct but was also externally validated through visible markers that made social status discernible within established hierarchies. In mid-nineteenth-century England, clothing emerged as a significant medium for such legibility, influencing class distinction, gender roles and moral standing. This article revisits the sartorial representation in Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* to propose that the novel extends beyond the semiotic use of attire as a symbol of identity, instead highlighting a crisis in the ontological stability of appearance. By contextualising the text within mid-Victorian changes, such as the 1851 Great Exhibition, the growth of ready-made clothing markets, Dress Reform debates, and the advent of photographic identification systems, this essay elucidates how clothing became integral to evolving systems of visual authentication and institutional verification. Through detailed analyses of the novel's initial encounter, Marian Holcombe's observation of Count Fosco and the asylum exchange of Laura Fairlie and Anne Catherick, the study traces a trajectory from semiotic certainty to material disruption. Utilising Bill Brown's distinction between object and thing, it argues that sartorial repression transitions from being a transparent signifier to assuming material agency within legal and testimonial contexts. By incorporating structuralist semiotics, Victorian material history and Thing Theory, this article reconceptualises dress not as mere decorative embellishment but as the material interface through which identity, class authority and narrative legitimacy are both constructed and destabilised.

Keywords: Victorian Age, Sartorial Choices, Class Defiance, Spectacle, *The Woman in White*, Wilkie Collins.

INTRODUCTION

It is... the beholder who lends to the beautiful thing its myriad meanings, makes it marvellous for us, and sets it in some new relation to the age so that it becomes the vital portion of our lives and a symbol of what we pray for, or perhaps of what, having prayed for, we fear that we may receive (Wilde 1890) In the Victorian era, critics turned to a world of visual arts with a whole new enthusiasm. As a burgeoning middle-class audience began to define taste and culture through spectatorship, the writing gained immense popularity as readership grew manifold. Victorian writers addressed this with a wide range of written works including lectures, treatises on aesthetics, volumes of art history, reviews of

gallery and museum exhibitions apart from writing novels. In his classic essay *Modern Painters III* (1856), John Ruskin captures the Victorian fervour for spectatorship when he states, “The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something and tell what it saw in a plain way” (Ruskin 87). The focal point of this research shifts from production to consumption, or rather, to the mediating field of representation of the two, as critics intervene to interpret the visual world for a fresh and eager audience by veering away from the visual arts and concentrating on the words that surround them.

While occasionally unstable and varied, the notion of feminine beauty, its distinguishing characteristics, and its evaluation have persisted throughout history. Desirable appearance is defined differently for men and women, and, arguably, the social construction of femininity is also gender specific. Nonetheless, nineteenth-century fashion did not just exist to impose limitations on women, unlike the corset or the crinoline. It held significance for the social semiotic system it represented, which encouraged participation in society, especially among women. As a result, in nineteenth-century society, fashion for women was both a restricting as well as a liberating factor. The 1860s saw a shift in fashion away from the gauzy, flimsy muslin aspect of dresses toward the bell-shaped body covered in thick fabrics. Initially, a crinoline was made up of several layers of cloth worn below the garment; as time went on, Victorian women began using caged crinolines in place of multiple petticoat layers. Since these cages were uncomfortable, they eventually evolved into the bustle. Collins would have been aware that the crinoline was necessary for most women, regardless of class. The craze for the crinoline extended from the palaces and mansions to towns and country sides.

Exploring the function of clothing as an integral element in the creation of a meaningful visual identity offers a plethora of opportunities to analyse the intrinsic nature of social existence and its portrayals in fictional narratives. Furthermore, the symbolic significance of clothing in literature often reflects the complex interplay between individual identity and societal expectations, providing a rich landscape for examining the dynamics of power, conformity, and resistance. By analysing the ways in which characters’ sartorial choices are portrayed and interpreted, we can gain insights into the nuanced ways in which people navigate and challenge the social norms that define their lives. This enables us to delve into the intricacies of human nature and the role that visual identity plays in the way we perceive ourselves and others. Dress extends beyond mere surface-level appearances and is not merely donned for practical or functional purposes. The visual aspect of clothing conveys a range of subtle meanings that either showcase or influence a wearer’s perceived identity. The primary focus of this paper is to elucidate the processes that occur when individuals contemplate the manner in which they present themselves visually and to decipher the implications of the acts of self-creation perpetrated by others. To gain a more comprehensive grasp of the idea of self-presentation, we can draw a parallel with the process of designing a building. In much the same way that people carefully select and organise the elements of their physical appearance, architects must carefully choose and combine materials, colours, and shapes to create a visually appealing and functional structure. Moreover, both individuals and architects engage in acts of self-creation that reflect their cultural values and societal aspirations, which have implications for how they are perceived by others.

Before turning to the novel, one must address the discourse of the ideal woman that surrounds the characters to explore the nuances between the spoken and the sartorial. The subject of discussion in philosophical reflections has always been on the various ways the patriarchal world view has constituted the female order. Women’s socioeconomic situations are portrayed in literature in a way that reflects the deep-seated prejudice that society has subjected them to, since times immemorial. Though deeply patriarchal in all respects, the Victorian era succeeded in imputing to women some ‘in-born’ attributes and duties. An ideal woman was only permitted to perform domestic chores and low-wage employment since it was assumed that they were incapable of rational thought

and lacked attributes of men. To prevent them from surpassing males or not conforming to patriarchal system, women's sexuality was abused while their femininity was extolled. Regardless of her background and social position, every woman faced the same situation. When French feminist proponent Simone de Beauvoir states, "One is not born but rather becomes a woman" (283), in her 1949 work *The Second Sex*, the notion is evident. The literary masterpieces of the Victorian era effectively convey the idea that women were labelled as 'ideal' with their unquestioning subservience to men and unshakeable docility. With time androcentric perspective gave way to a gynocentric one with the emergence of writers like the Bronte sisters, George Eliot, Margaret Oliphant and others, who asserted the power and identity of their female characters.

The ideas of representation and presentation have changed with the advent of contemporary visual media. The underlying patriarchal mechanisms employed in the text were eventually 'presented' to readers. The essential conundrum is whether sartorial representation can portray things from a gynocentric standpoint, addressing hitherto neglected issues. In an examination of British aestheticism, Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (1859–1860) can appear out of place at first. Published before the consolidation of Paterian doctrine and stylistically removed from fin-de-siècle languor, the novel foregrounds bourgeois masculinity and legal intrigue rather than cultivated detachment. Yet it is deeply invested in the problem of surfaces. When Walter Hartright encounters Anne Catherick on a moonlit road, her white dress commands interpretation before her speech does. The garment renders her hyper-visible while withholding certainty. It promises clarity and generates confusion simultaneously.

This article examines how *The Woman in White* orchestrates a crisis in the epistemology of appearance. In the narrative, clothing transcends its traditional role of signification, instead unsettling the very process of signification. The white garment moves across different bodies, enabling substitution, legitimizing confinement, and challenging testimonial certainty. It does not merely function within a semiotic framework but gains material agency. Drawing on Bill Brown's *Thing Theory*, this study asserts that clothing in Collins' novel becomes narratively pivotal precisely when it stops being a transparent object of interpretation. When the garment fails to stabilize meaning, it emerges as a 'thing'—stubborn, excessive, and resistant to complete assimilation into cultural codes. In an era increasingly shaped by industrial reproduction and the rise of ready-made clothing, visual identity could no longer ensure authenticity. As Charles Blanc noted in 1872, fashion mirrored "the rapid movement that carries away the world." The dependability of appearances became dubious. Collins captures this historical instability not in abstraction but through the novel's form. His work consistently reveals the fragility of visual judgment, demonstrating how garments mediate the relationship between body, institution, and narrative authority. By highlighting dress as both a semiotic tool and a material disruption, this article repositions *The Woman in White* as a reflection on the precariousness of social legibility in modernity. The white dress is not merely a symbol of purity or vulnerability; it is the axis upon which the novel's epistemological concerns pivot.

CRITICAL CONTEXT: Dress, Sensation and the Ontology of Surfaces

Academic discourse surrounding Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* has persistently underscored its pivotal role in the development of sensation fiction. Early analyses, influenced by structural and Foucauldian perspectives, concentrated on the themes of surveillance, documentation, and institutional power. Scholars like D. A. Miller interpreted the narrative's testimonial format as reflective of a society increasingly controlled by bureaucratic processes. Feminist scholars, such as Lyn Pykett and Andrew Mangham, later expanded this analysis by exploring Collins' interaction with legal and medical discourses that regulated women's bodies, viewing characters like Laura Fairlie and Anne Catherick as trapped within patriarchal systems of confinement and epistemic dominance. These scholarly contributions remain vital, as they have illuminated how Collins critiques the

vulnerability of women's security under Victorian marriage laws and how sensation fiction exploits fears related to visibility, secrecy, and domestic instability. Nevertheless, within this scholarly examination, the significance of dress is often relegated to a secondary role, serving as mere illustrative detail rather than a fundamental narrative mechanism. The white dress is frequently recognized for its symbolic importance but is rarely scrutinized as a material force that shapes the narrative's structure.

In parallel with sensation studies, research on Victorian dress and material culture has developed a nuanced vocabulary for analysing clothing as a social text. John Harvey's *Men in Black* remains foundational in illustrating how garments encode moral authority and class identity. More recently, scholars such as Rosy Aindow and Madeleine Seys have contended that Victorian fiction incorporates sartorial description within systems of signification that contribute to character formation and social positioning. Drawing, implicitly or explicitly, upon Saussurean linguistics and Barthesian semiotics, these studies treat clothing as a signifier within a broader cultural language of fashion. Such approaches have elucidated how dress mediates class aspiration, gender performance, and social mobility, clarifying the communicative dimension of fashion and its entanglement with respectability. However, the emphasis on clothing as a sign often presumes the stability of the semiotic system itself, interpreting garments as legible markers within a coherent social code. What remains under-theorized is the possibility that the code falters.

In *The Woman in White*, clothing functions not merely as an identifier but as a destabilizing force. The resemblance between Anne Catherick and Laura Fairlie extends beyond thematic doubling; it is materially manifested through their shared sartorial choices. The white dress traverse different bodies, enabling both substitution and institutional violence. This garment serves as an evidentiary surface within legal contexts that prioritize visual verification. In these scenarios, clothing surpasses its role as a simple signifier and assumes a disruptive capacity. Bill Brown's *Thing Theory* provides critical insights in this regard. Brown's distinction between object and thing draws attention to instances when material forms cease to operate transparently within systems of meaning. We encounter the 'thingness' of objects when they obstruct, resist, or reveal the limitations of interpretation. Applying this perspective to Collins' work demonstrates that the sensational impact of the novel stems not only from its intricate plot but also from the ontological instability of its surfaces. The white garment becomes a narrative driver precisely because it fails to stabilize identity.

While recent scholarship in Victorian studies has increasingly engaged with materiality and object studies, there remains a paucity of comprehensive analyses that situate sensation fiction within a thing-theoretical framework. Discussions surrounding commodities, circulation, and consumer culture have predominantly concentrated on later realist or fin-de-siècle texts. In contrast, Collins is frequently examined through the lenses of genre, law, or gender politics, rather than through the lens of material ontology. This article seeks to address this gap by integrating semiotic interpretations of dress with a thing-theoretical understanding of material disruption. It posits that *The Woman in White* anticipates a contemporary anxiety regarding the instability of surfaces in an era characterized by industrial replication and an expanding visual culture. In the novel, dress functions initially as a form of social language and subsequently as its deconstruction. By tracing this transition from signification to thingness, the study repositions Collins' engagement with fashion as central, rather than peripheral, to his critique of Victorian epistemology.

This article positions the novel at the confluence of sensation studies, fashion theory, and material culture, thereby offering three notable contributions to Victorian scholarship. First, it reconceptualizes sartorial description as an integral structural element rather than a mere embellishment. Second, it broadens the scope of Thing Theory to encompass mid-Victorian fiction, showcasing its relevance beyond the confines of modernist object studies. Third, it places Collins

within the wider discourse on spectatorship, class visibility, and the commodification of appearance. By foregrounding the ontology of dress in its analysis, the article argues that the true sensation is found not only in themes of conspiracy or imprisonment but in the disquieting independence of objects.

THING THEORY AS METHOD: Material Interruption and Narrative Form

The methodological framework of this study is directed by a tripartite objective. Firstly, it aims to recover and contextualize the sartorial code embedded within mid-Victorian fiction, with particular attention to the intricate visual literacy that characterized nineteenth-century social life. Secondly, it illustrates how clothing in *The Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins reshapes our interpretive engagement with domestic and sensation fiction by highlighting the instability of visual evidence. Thirdly, it contends that Collins' portrayal of femininity through dress anticipates later theoretical accounts of gender as a performative construct, predating Judith Butler's articulation of such insights in *Gender Trouble*. In Collins' work, what emerges is not merely decorative femininity but the spectacle of gender as a culturally orchestrated and materially mediated surface.

In pursuit of these objectives, the article synthesizes semiotic, narratological, and materialist methodologies, ultimately anchoring its interpretive framework in the ontological insights of Thing Theory. Structuralist analyses of fashion serve as an essential foundation. Drawing on Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction between signifier and signified, as well as Roland Barthes' elaborations in *The Fashion System*, clothing is conceptualized as a visual sign encoding social meaning. Scholars such as Madeleine Seys and Rosy Aindow have effectively applied this model to Victorian fiction, positing that sartorial description functions as a system of signification through which class identity and feminine propriety are articulated. Seys' assertion that the heroine's attire functions as a signifier rather than mere ornamental excess elucidates how narrative meaning is embedded in fabric, cut, and colour. Similarly, Aindow illustrates that Victorian society frequently utilized clothing as a concise mechanism for evaluating social status.

In the field of narratology, the conceptualization by Fotis Jannidis of characterization as the assignment of attributes within a textual world offers a nuanced perspective. If a character is constructed through the progressive attribution of traits, then attire serves as a pivotal element in this process. Fabrics such as muslin, wool, crinoline, and lace do more than merely adorn the body; they confer discernible qualities, positioning the character within social hierarchies of class, morality, and desirability. Malcolm Barnard's interpretation of fashion as a form of communication highlights this aspect, reinforcing the notion that clothing conveys culturally intelligible signals within shared codes. However, the interpretive validity of semiotics presupposes the stability of these codes, assuming that signifiers consistently align with socially endorsed meanings. *The Woman in White* persistently challenges this presumption. The resemblance between Laura Fairlie and Anne Catherick disrupts visual categorization, with the white dress serving as the medium for substitution. In such instances, clothing ceases to function as a transparent signifier and instead assumes a disruptive role.

The theoretical insights of Bill Brown are crucial in this analysis. Brown's differentiation between 'object' and 'thing' offers a valuable lens for examining the narrative dynamics of dress in Collins' narrative. In the viewpoint of Bill Brown, objects function effectively within established systems of use and meaning, while things emerge when these systems encounter disruption. The 'thingness' of objects becomes apparent when they hinder interpretation, surpass their intended role, or resist assimilation into stable semiotic structures. In Collins' novel, the white garment gains narrative importance precisely when it fails to affirm identity. It transcends mere symbolism of femininity or purity, instead enabling misrecognition, legal invisibility, and institutional confinement. Therefore, the methodology of this article involves a detailed close reading that highlights instances where sartorial description shifts from a communicative sign to a material disruption. Rather than merely

listing garments as symbolic representations, the analysis explores how clothing reshapes narrative authority, testimonial reliability, and institutional influence. Special focus is placed on scenes involving visual recognition, mistaken identity, and documentary validation, where dress serves as an intermediary between the individual and bureaucratic systems.

This study intentionally refrains from merging literary analysis with the expansive domain of fashion studies. Its chief aim is not to reconstruct the history of costumes but to explore the literary ontology of dress. The investigation centers on the function of clothing within narrative frameworks. By integrating semiotic analyses of signification with Thing Theory's focus on material disruption, the article reveals that Collins' fiction stages a crisis in social legibility. Garments simultaneously construct and destabilize identity; they enable adherence to Victorian beauty ideals while also exposing the fragility of those ideals. In this context, sartorial appearance in *The Woman in White* operates on multiple levels. It acts as an indicator of class and respectability, contributes to the portrayal of idealized femininity, and, significantly, becomes an entity that challenges the epistemological foundations of these categories. The novel's sensational impact arises not only from its conspiracies and confinements but also from the unsettling autonomy of its material surfaces. By situating dress at the intersection of semiotics, narratology, and Thing Theory, this methodological approach reinterprets Collins' engagement with fashion as a reflection on modernity itself. When clothing detaches from the identities it was meant to stabilize, the very notion of visual truth is questioned. While existing analyses of material culture often stabilize dress within communicative, symbolic, or ideological frameworks, this study highlights the moment when dress transcends communicative function and assumes material agency within legal, narrative, and institutional contexts.

ANALYTIC DISCOURSE

Sartorial Legibility and the Social Grammar of Victorian Modernity

The social structure of the Victorian era was intricately tied to the concept of legibility. The maintenance of class hierarchies, gender roles, and moral authority relied on visible markers that made individuals understandable within the established systems of family, economy, and polity. Clothing served a purpose beyond mere adornment, acting as a cultural language through which individuals were positioned and interpreted. Historians of nineteenth-century material culture have shown that attire condensed social distinctions into portable symbols that communicated rank, propriety, and virtue with immediate clarity. To be seen was to convey meaning, and to convey meaning was to occupy a specific position within a coherent order. The focus on surface legibility that Collins examines must be contextualized within the mid-Victorian material transformations. The 1851 Great Exhibition in London showcased an unprecedented display of industrial production, highlighting textiles, readymade garments, and mechanized manufacturing as central to national representation. At the same time, the growth of the readymade clothing market in the 1850s and 1860s disrupted traditional associations between fabric and inherited status, making gentility increasingly accessible through purchase. Debates on Dress Reform further underscored concerns about the moral and physiological implications of women's attire, while the rise of photographic portraiture introduced new systems of visual identification reliant on surface representation. Within this broader context of material visibility, clothing did not merely denote social status; it became integral to evolving systems of authentication, display, and verification. Collins' novel engages with this historical moment when surfaces were becoming both more reproducible and more authoritative.

This confidence in legibility resonates with John Ruskin's epistemology of sight in *Modern Painters* III, where he proposes that the highest act of the human soul is to see clearly and articulate faithfully what is seen. The visible world promises epistemological stability. Within such a framework, garments operate as reliable mediators between interior character and exterior perception.

Structuralist accounts of fashion clarify the mechanics of this regime. Drawing upon Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction between signifier and signified and elaborated in Roland Barthes's theorisation of clothing as language, Victorian dress may be understood as a semiotic system in which textile, colour, and cut function as signifiers that index class position, sexual propriety, and moral standing. Madeleine Seys has shown that sartorial description in Victorian fiction forms part of narrative infrastructure rather than decorative surplus. Rosy Aindow similarly demonstrates that women mobilised dress strategically to assert or temper class identity, revealing the garment as a socially negotiated symbol.

Within narratology, as Fotis Jannidis argues, characterisation emerges through the attribution of properties across the textual field. Fabric and silhouette therefore participate directly in the construction of identity. In *The Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins, this semiotic economy initially appears intact. Marian Holcombe's disciplined observation models the interpretive vigilance demanded by sensation fiction. When she observes that Count Fosco is not dressed in his customary care and completeness, suspicion arises from deviation in sartorial pattern. Clothing here functions as evidentiary surface. It affirms coherence when habitual presentation aligns with expectation and signals disruption when it does not. As D. A. Miller has observed, sensation fiction internalises regimes of surveillance and scrutiny. Collins trains the reader to treat surfaces as though they were documents. Dress becomes part of a broader culture of verification in which appearance is taken as testimony. Yet the novel does not merely replicate this semiotic confidence. It gradually reveals its instability.

Performativity, Imposture, and the Limits of Semiotics

While sensation fiction frequently deploys costume for dramatic recognition, disguise, and revelation, Collins uniquely embeds sartorial instability within juridical and testimonial frameworks. In *The Woman in White*, dress does not merely facilitate melodramatic misrecognition; it destabilises the evidentiary structures upon which legal and narrative authority depend. It is this embedding of material volatility within institutional systems that intensifies the novel's epistemological implications. Sir Percival Glyde and Count Fosco exploit the cultural faith invested in sartorial codes. Aristocratic bearing, cosmopolitan elegance, and disciplined grooming stabilise fraudulent identities. Authority is sustained through visible performance. Identity appears constructed through repetition of visual forms rather than secured by innate essence. This dynamic anticipates Judith Butler's later argument that identity is constituted performatively through reiterated acts. Collins depicts class and masculinity as maintained through stylised presentation.

However, the novel moves beyond the logic of performativity. It interrogates not only the curation of identity but also the material conditions enabling its construction. At this juncture the theoretical intervention of Bill Brown becomes central. Brown distinguishes between objects that operate seamlessly within systems of meaning and things that emerge when those systems falter. Objects remain transparent within networks of use. Things become visible when they resist stable incorporation into interpretive frameworks. In *The Woman in White*, dress becomes a thing when it ceases to secure identity and instead reorganises narrative and institutional authority. The white garment around which the novel's title coheres exemplifies this transformation.

The White Dress and the Circulation of Identity

Within Victorian fashion culture white signified youth, unmarried chastity, and restrained femininity. Laura Fairlie's plain white muslin at Limmeridge House communicates modest refinement. The choice of muslin rather than silk negotiates class visibility, aligning her with domestic virtue rather than ostentatious wealth. Textile here functions within the expected semiotic economy. Anne Catherick's adherence to white intensifies the garment beyond moderation. Her whiteness becomes repetitive and absolute. When she is misidentified as a ghost, the response signals ontological

disturbance rather than mere chromatic association. White fuses bridal innocence with spectral foreboding. The narrative repeatedly isolates the phrase the woman in white, linguistically subordinating personhood to fabric. Identity is articulated through attire.

The crisis of legibility emerges when the white garment facilitates substitution. Laura and Anne's resemblance, amplified by identical dress, enables institutional misrecognition. Laura is declared dead and confined under Anne's identity because appearance provides sufficient evidence within the legal structure. The asylum depends upon visual verification. The garment becomes bureaucratic instrument. At this moment semiotic confidence collapses. The white dress no longer functions as transparent signifier of purity or youth. It becomes materially disruptive. It detaches from its presumed signified and circulates between bodies. The legal system that equates appearance with authenticity reveals its vulnerability. The garment intervenes in the distribution of power and produces consequences that exceed symbolic meaning. Brown's conceptualisation of thingness clarifies this shift. The white dress emerges as thing because it resists containment within stable interpretation. It refuses to guarantee correspondence between exterior and interior. It reorganises narrative action. The sensational force of the novel arises not simply from conspiracy but from the ontological volatility of material surfaces.

Female Community, Textile Ethics and Relational Identity

Recent scholarship on Victorian fashion and material culture emphasises that garments participate actively in narrative formation rather than merely reflecting social hierarchy. Clothing accrues histories and affects that exceed its status as ornament. In Collins' novel, sartorial detail structures plot mechanics and mediates female relationships. The circulation of white garments among Laura, Anne, and the memory of Mrs. Fairlie suggests that dress operates within networks of affective continuity. Anne's attachment to white emerges as relational rather than delusional. Mrs. Fairlie's early instruction in white dress becomes embodied inheritance. Anne's recurring question about whether Laura continues to wear white frames clothing as archive of intimacy. Laura's deliberate simplicity similarly negotiates class boundaries. Her plain muslin, initially misread as modest means, reveals itself as ethical restraint intended to preserve female solidarity. Textile becomes medium of communal negotiation. Rosy Aindow's argument that Victorian women used dress strategically to navigate class hierarchies illuminates this dynamic.

Yet Collins simultaneously exposes the precariousness of such strategies. Mrs. Catherick's declaration that virtue in her neighbourhood wore cotton print while she wore silk articulates alienation through fabric. Silk marks elevation but isolates the wearer from communal bonds. Textile inscribes ethical solitude. Christine Bayles Kortsch's work on Victorian dress culture situates clothing within embodied female practice. Sewing and textile literacy constituted forms of communication parallel to print culture. Collins' attention to fabric therefore participates in a broader gendered economy of material knowledge. Femininity in the novel is rehearsed through fabric, silhouette, and repetition. Simone de Beauvoir's insight that one becomes rather than is born a woman resonates within this framework. Femininity is constructed through garments that encode submission, delicacy, and desirability. Yet when those garments detach from stable referents and circulate independently, the constructedness of gender becomes visible. Identity proves materially contingent.

From Semiotic Confidence to Ontological Anxiety

The trajectory of *The Woman in White* moves from semiotic confidence to ontological anxiety. Clothing begins as reliable sign and ends as disruptive thing. The faith in visual certainty that undergirds Victorian social organisation is revealed as dependent upon materials that cannot be fully controlled. At the novel's outset, dress appears to function within a stable hermeneutic contract. Textile corresponds to class, colour corresponds to virtue, grooming corresponds to authority. Surfaces promise coherence. Yet as the narrative unfolds, Collins systematically tests this contract.

The white garment, initially apprehended as transparent signifier of innocence, detaches from its presumed signified and begins to circulate independently of moral content. In that circulation, it exposes the contingency of the entire semiotic order.

This destabilisation carries implications beyond individual misrecognition. Victorian modernity was increasingly organised around evidentiary regimes that privileged visible markers. The expansion of bureaucratic institutions, the codification of marriage and inheritance law, the professionalisation of medical and psychiatric authority, and the growing authority of print documentation all depended upon systems of verification. Identity had to be established, recorded, confirmed. Within such systems, the visible body functioned as primary evidence. Collins reveals the fragility of this evidentiary culture. When Laura's confinement is authorised on the basis of visual resemblance reinforced by dress, the novel demonstrates that institutional authority rests upon surfaces that can be replicated. The white garment becomes a medium through which the state misrecognises the subject. Legality is shown to be materially mediated and therefore materially vulnerable. The crisis extends into narrative form itself. The novel's testimonial structure appears designed to secure truth through accumulation of perspectives. Each narrator offers documentary precision, attempting to stabilise identity through language. Yet just as dress proves unreliable as visible sign, testimony proves partial as narrative guarantee. The instability of fabric parallels the instability of narrative authority. Both reveal that modern mediation cannot secure the transparency it promises.

In this sense, Collins' engagement with dress constitutes not merely a thematic exploration of fashion but a meditation on the ontology of surfaces within industrial modernity. The garment ceases to be a decorative supplement to the body and becomes a material interface between subject and institution. When that interface falters, the subject's ontological security falters with it. The white garment, once emblem of innocence, becomes the mechanism through which legal, narrative, and social authority are exposed as precarious. Its material persistence outlasts the meanings assigned to it. It moves between bodies, between spaces, between juridical categories. It generates effects disproportionate to its apparent triviality. In doing so, it exemplifies the transformation of object into thing, in the sense articulated by Bill Brown. It demands attention not because of what it signifies but because of what it does.

Through meticulous staging of textile detail, Collins transforms fashion into philosophy. The novel reveals that identity, class, and gender are stitched together through materials whose meanings can never be finally secured. What appears at first as surface ornamentation emerges as structural condition. Victorian modernity, the novel suggests, is fabric based. Its coherence depends upon the assumption that surfaces correspond to essence. Once that correspondence collapses, so too does the epistemological confidence that sustains the social order. The movement from semiotic assurance to ontological disturbance therefore marks not simply the narrative arc of a sensation novel but the exposure of a modern paradox. A culture increasingly reliant upon visible verification discovers that visibility is never neutral, never stable, never immune to replication. The garment that promised clarity produces confusion. The surface that guaranteed identity enables its erasure. In revealing this paradox, Collins situates material culture at the centre of nineteenth century epistemology. Dress is no longer ancillary to plot. It is the medium through which modernity recognises its own fragility.

CONCLUSION: Material Modernity and the Fragility of Surfaces

What begins in *The Woman in White* as a question of appearance, of resemblance, attire, and recognition, ultimately culminates in a far more disquieting realisation that Victorian modernity rests upon material surfaces whose stability cannot be assured. Clothing in Collins' narrative does not remain descriptive embellishment nor even symbolic apparatus. It emerges as the medium through which identity, legality, and social coherence are simultaneously constituted and destabilised. At the outset of the novel, dress functions within a semiotic economy that promises legibility. White

signifies youth and chastity. Muslin communicates modest restraint. Silk encodes affluence and distinction. Careful grooming stabilises masculine authority. These surfaces appear to secure a correspondence between exterior presentation and interior truth. The culture Collins represents, echoing the epistemological confidence articulated by John Ruskin, presumes that to see clearly is to know reliably.

Yet the novel's sensational logic gradually dismantles this presumption. When the white dress circulates between Laura Fairlie and Anne Catherick, when identity becomes transferable through fabric, and when institutional structures mistake surface resemblance for ontological equivalence, the semiotic order fractures. The garment ceases to function as a transparent object within a stable system of meaning and instead becomes, in the terms articulated by Bill Brown, a thing. It is no longer a passive signifier but a material presence that resists containment within interpretive certainty. It intervenes in the narrative. It reorganises legal authority. It produces consequences. The implications of this transformation extend beyond individual misrecognition. Collins exposes the fragility of a social order grounded in visual authentication. The asylum, the marriage contract, and the inheritance system all depend upon the assumption that bodies are reliably legible through their surfaces. Once those surfaces prove detachable and replicable, institutional authority is revealed as precarious. The white dress does not merely symbolise instability; it materially enacts it.

Within this framework, the novel anticipates later theoretical insights regarding performative identity. If identity is constituted through repeated acts, as later theorised by Judith Butler, Collins demonstrates that the material conditions enabling such performance are themselves unstable. The surfaces that generate coherence are vulnerable to circulation and manipulation. Identity is not only performed but materially contingent upon fabrics that can be exchanged, appropriated, and misapplied. The broader consequence of this contingency is epistemological. The Victorian faith in visible truth dissolves under pressure. The confidence that appearance guarantees authenticity collapses when garments detach from their presumed signified. Collins thereby stages a crisis within modernity itself. The social world appears stitched together through fabric, yet that stitching proves fragile. When the thread loosens, so too does the structure it holds.

The conceptual movement of this study has traced the novel's trajectory from semiotic assurance to ontological disturbance. Dress in *The Woman in White* begins as sign and culminates as thing. In that progression, Collins reveals the vulnerability of a culture that invests its authority in surfaces. The white garment, once emblem of innocence, becomes the mechanism through which Victorian confidence in visual certainty is undone. Collins does not simply portray a society attentive to appearance. He exposes the instability inherent in a modernity mediated through material surfaces and demonstrates that the coherence of identity, class, and gender depends upon fabrics whose meanings are never secure.

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