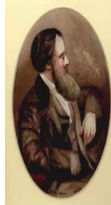


The Popular Gothic Novel
Lecture No. 41
Wilkie Collins' The Moonstone
Introduction to the author; the novel; literary Contexts

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Week 9 Wilkie Collins' The Moonstone

Lecture 9A: Introduction to the author; the novel; literary Contexts

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Hello and welcome to Week 9's lectures on Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone*. In today's lecture, I will introduce the author in detail. I will also discuss the novel and its literary context.

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Wilkie Collins



- "William Wilkie Collins, or Wilkie as he was known to his friends and readers, was born in London's Marylebone where he lived more or less continuously for 65 years. Today he is best known for *The Moonstone* (1868), often regarded as the first true detective novel, and *The Woman in White* (1860), the archetypal sensation novel. During his lifetime, however, he wrote over thirty major books, well over a hundred articles, short stories and essays, and a dozen or more plays."

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Wilkie, as you can see, is a London writer, just as Dickens is. And he is very well known for two best-selling novels, “*The Moonstone*” and “*The Woman in White*”. *The Moonstone* is considered to be the first true detective novel. However, for the purposes of this particular course, I will be looking at the Gothic aspects of this fiction in my later lectures. Collins is also very well known for *The Woman in White*. It is considered to be the first sensation novel. Wilkie Collins is also very prolific, as you can see, he had written over 30 major books. He is also a versatile writer and had written articles, short stories, essays and plays. So, he had dabbled in a lot of genres.

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Wilkie Collins



- “He lived an unconventional, Bohemian lifestyle, loved good food and wine to excess, wore flamboyant clothes, travelled abroad frequently, formed long-term relationships with two women but married neither, and took vast quantities of opium over many years to relieve the symptoms of ill health. Collins's circle of friends included many pre-eminent figures of the day”.

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“Wilkie Collins lived an unconventional Bohemian lifestyle, loved good food and wine to excess, wore flamboyant clothes, travelled abroad frequently, formed long-term relationships with two women, but married neither. And took wise quantities of opium over many years to relieve the symptoms of ill health. Collins’ circle of friends included many pre-eminent figures of the day.”

He had a very very unconventional life. He was outside the pale of traditional society. You can see that he was not married, even though he had two very long term relationships with two women, and he also indulged in the habit of opium taking. He was also chronically very ill. Despite the unconventionality, he was beloved by many important figures of the day.

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Wilkie Collins



- “He knew the major writers, particularly Charles Dickens with whom he regularly collaborated, as well as a host of minor novelists. His friends and acquaintances included some of the foremost artists, playwrights, theatrical personalities, musicians, publishers, physicians and society figures of the time. Collins's unorthodox lifestyle reveals a cynical regard for the Victorian establishment. This view is reflected in his books together with a sense of humour and a profound understanding for many of the then prevailing social injustices”.

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Wilkie was very well connected. That is what comes through in the kind of information that I have provided on the slide. He was associated with a range of artists. He was connected to the theatre, he knew a lot of theatre personalities, he had connections with musicians, publishers, so he was a socialite. And despite his unorthodox lifestyle, one can say that he was very popular with his friends, especially he collaborated a lot with Charles Dickens, and they also acted plays together.

His unorthodox style also indicates that he didn't really have any faith in the Victorian social mores. The fact that he could stay outside of the bounds of society in terms of its cultural rules and regulations shows that he did not really respect them, and he exhibited his cynical attitude. He saturates them in his works with a sense of humour. And he was very very well versed, just as Dickens was with the prevailing social injustices in Victorian society.

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Wilkie Collins



- "Wilkie Collins was the elder son of William Collins the celebrated landscape artist and portrait painter and named after his godfather, Sir David Wilkie. His childhood schooldays began in 1835 at the Maida Hill Academy, followed by a two year interruption when he accompanied his parents and younger brother, Charles, to France and Italy from September 1836 to August 1838. He later recalled that he had learned more in Italy 'which has been of use to me, among the scenery, the pictures, and the people, than I ever learned at school.'"

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Wilkie's father was a very famous landscape artist and a portrait painter. And he was also named after his godfather, Sir David Wilkie. His father also had a lot of connections in artistic circles. Wilkie learned a lot from his art travels during his childhood days and he found that the travels to Italy and France taught him more than his school did. In fact, he learned more from the scenery, the pictures, the people that he saw during his art travels, and he learnt from them more than he would have learnt at a school.

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Wilkie Collins



- “He also claimed that he had fallen in love for the first time in Rome at the age of 12 or 13. Returning to England, his schooling continued at Cole's boarding school at 39 Highbury Place. It was here that he began his career as a storyteller to appease the dormitory bully, later recalling that 'it was this brute who first awakened in me, his poor little victim, a power of which but for him I might never have been aware.'”
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We have a very interesting childhood story which tells us about the emergence of Collins’ creative abilities. When Wilkie was at boarding school, in order to escape from a dormitory bully, a bully who was at the boarding school, he told him stories to entertain and satisfy him. And look at the way Collins pictures himself there in that narrative. He calls himself the poor little victim and the only way out of that victimhood was to tell him stories and safeguard himself.

So, if this school bully was not around, he would never have discovered that he had the ability to tell tales in a fascinating manner.

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Wilkie Collins



- Wilkie left school in 1841 and was apprenticed to the tea merchants Antrobus & Co. in the Strand. It was here, in what he called 'the prison on the Strand' that he began his writing with his first signed publication, 'The Last Stage Coachman' appearing in Douglas Jerrold's *Illuminated Magazine* in August 1843. From May 1846 Collins became a law student at Lincoln's Inn and was called to the bar in 1851.

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It is clear that Collins started out in treat. He was an apprentice to a set of tea merchants and, and he did not like it there. And one can be reminded of Dickens’ experience in the Blacking Factory, and there is a slight similarity there. Collins hated his time with the tea merchants, Antrobus and Co, and he called that ‘the prison on the Strand’. And it was here that he began writing and the first piece of work that came out with his name attached to it was, ‘The Last Stage Coachman’. Collins later became a law student and then he became a lawyer in 1851.

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Wilkie Collins



- “He never practised his profession although several lawyers feature prominently in his subsequent novels. His father died in 1847 and his first published book, *The Memoirs of the Life of William Collins, Esq., R.A.*, appeared the following year and received good reviews. It was followed by an historical novel, *Antonina* (1850) and three contemporary novels, *Basil* (1852), *Hide and Seek* (1854) and *The Dead Secret* (1857).
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Wilkie Collins did not practice his legal profession. In fact, when his father died, he wrote a book called, “The Memoirs of the Life of William Collins”, which was very popular. It had good reviews and he started writing in earnest. He produced 3 contemporary works, Basil, is especially very dark and bleak. And he also wrote a historical novel.

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Wilkie Collins



- A firm friendship developed between the two writers which lasted until Dickens's death in 1870. They frequently travelled together on the Continent to France and Italy and Wilkie became a frequent visitor to Dickens's homes at Tavistock House and Gad's Hill where he was encouraged to fulfil his theatrical ambitions. Collins wrote *The Lighthouse* in 1855 and *The Frozen Deep* in 1856. Both were originally produced by Dickens and his company but were subsequently performed on the professional stage.
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“A firm friendship developed between the two writers, Charles Dickens and him, which lasted until Dickens’ death in 1870. They frequently travelled together on the continent to France and Italy and Wilkie became a frequent visitor to Dickens’ home at Tavistock House and Gad’s Hill, where he was encouraged to fulfil his theatrical ambitions. Collins wrote “The Lighthouse” in 1855 and “The Frozen Deep” in 1856. Both were originally produced by Dickens and his company but were subsequently performed on the professional stage.”

The relationship with Dickens is very significant to Collins in terms of his creative endeavours. These two writers travelled together on the continent to France and Italy, and he was a frequent visitor to Dickens’ home. In fact, Dickens really encouraged him in his playwriting ventures as well. In fact, Dickens produced some of his works and these works were performed on the professional stage. Dickens acted in the play “The Frozen Deep” too.

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Wilkie Collins



- “Collins first contribution to *Household Words* in 1852, 'A Terribly Strange Bed' is still published in modern anthologies of 'terror and the supernatural'. He joined the permanent staff of the magazine in November 1856 at a weekly salary of 5 guineas. Altogether he wrote more than 50 stories and articles many of which were republished in [After Dark](#) (1856), [The Queen of Hearts](#) (1859) and [My Miscellanies](#) (1863). Dickens's correspondence frequently mentions Collins's industry and dependability and they collaborated on several of the Christmas numbers”.

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Wilkie Collins worked for Dickens too. He was on the staff of *Household Words*, that is, he produced narratives which were published in the magazine. A “Terribly Strange Bed” written by Wilkie Collins is especially very popular even to this day. The wonderful story and it has scientific inventions to produce terror and horror. I would recommend you to read it if you get the time. Lots of work produced by Wilkie Collins were extremely prolific.

And Dickens makes a mention of Collins’ industry (industry refers to his hard work and his serious work ethic). And Collins was also dependable in the sense that he would produce the works if he signed up to them. And Collins as I pointed out collaborated with Dickens, especially in The Christmas Numbers.

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Wilkie Collins



- “It was during the 1860s that Collins achieved enduring fame with his four major novels, *The Woman in White* (1860), *No Name* (1862), *Armadale* (1866) and *The Moonstone* (1868). The first of these was published in Dickens new journal, *All the Year Round* from November 1859 to August 1860. It was received with great popular acclaim and ran to seven editions in 1860, alone. All kinds of commodities such as cloaks, bonnets, perfumes were called after it; there were Woman in White Waltzes and Quadrilles; it was parodied in *Punch*; Gladstone found the story so absorbing that he missed a visit to the theatre; and Thackeray was engrossed from morning to sunset.”

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All this is about *The Woman in White*, which was published in 1860. It was written by Collins as I pointed out earlier too. And it came out in Dickens’s new journal all the year-round, from 1859 to 1860. It was immensely popular. It was a runaway success. Gladstone and other political figures, writers, and everybody was caught up in that fascinating work. It in fact fueled the commercial industry as well. Lots of objects were called after some of the things that came up in this sensational novel *Woman in White*. And Wilkie Collins became a household name.

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The Moonstone and Other Major Works



- T. S. Eliot described *The Moonstone* as the first and greatest of English detective novels'. It is certainly a landmark in the history of crime fiction and has a strong claim to having established [detective fiction](#) as a genre. It influenced Collins's successors from Trollope and Conan Doyle onwards and has set the standard by which other detective novels are judged. During its serialisation in *All the Year Round* there were crowds of anxious readers outside the publishers' offices in Wellington Street waiting for the next instalment. Like *The Woman in White*, it has never been out of print.
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All these details tell you the immense popularity of *The Moonstone* as well. It is considered to be the first and best English detective story. It has a mark in the history of crime fiction too. And one can argue that this particular novel established detective fiction as a respectable genre as well. Collins had influenced other major writers of such fiction such as Anthony Trollope to Arthur Conan Doyle onwards, and succeeding detective fiction were judged by the standard set by Collins’ *The Moonstone*.

In fact, we also know from research that during Collins’ time, readers used to wait anxiously outside the publishers’ offices in order to get the next serial of this particular novel *The Moonstone*, which was also published in Dickens’ *All the Year Round* magazine. So, like *The Woman in White*, it had, it has never been out of print. That is the popularity of this particular novel.

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The Moonstone



- “*The Moonstone* is often said to be the godfather of the classic English detective story, its founding text. TS Eliot, claiming that the genre was “invented by Collins and not by Poe”, declared it to be “the first, the longest and the best of modern English detective novels”. [Dorothy L Sayers](#), a queen of crime in the 1930s and 40s, echoing Eliot, pronounced it “probably the finest detective story ever written”. Its influence continues to animate the work of crime writers such as [PD James](#).” ([Robert McCrum](#))
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Once again, we are very powerfully told that it is the foundational text for the English detective story. And in fact, T. S. Eliot goes on to argue that it is not Edgar Allan Poe who invented the detective journal, and that title should be given to Wilkie Collins. And Moonstone is considered to be the best. It is the longest of the detective novels in English and other writers also endorsed this in the tradition of T. S. Eliot.

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The Moonstone



- “Certainly, Collins adheres faithfully to the rules of detective fiction: a mysterious and compelling crime takes place in an English country house; a large cast of potential suspects is assembled, each with plenty of motive, means and opportunity; an incompetent constabulary is replaced by a celebrated sleuth/ investigator who, after a "reconstruction" of key elements in the crime, comes up with a satisfying explanation of the puzzle, based on a brilliant analysis of the clues. Finally, there's a denouement replete with surprise, excitement and a plausible solution. *The Moonstone* has this, and more, all of it brilliantly executed.” ([Robert McCrum](#))
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“Certainly, Collins adheres faithfully to the rules of detective fiction; a mysterious and compelling crime takes place in an English country house, a large cast of potential suspects is assembled, each with plenty of motive, means and opportunity, an incompetent constabulary is replaced by a celebrated sleuth/investigator, who after a “reconstruction” of key elements in the crime, comes up with a satisfying explanation of the puzzle, based on a brilliant analysis of the clues. Finally, there is a denouement replete with surprise, excitement and a plausible solution. *The Moonstone* has this and more, all of it brilliantly executed.”

The Moonstone is a classic detective story. All the attributes of detection are there, such as a country house, and we also know that the country house plays a crucial role in Gothic narratives, but similar settings are there in both these sub-genres. As in detective fiction, there is a list of suspects and each of them possesses a motive and a chance to commit that crime.

The incompetent detectives are replaced by a celebrated investigator, and who does a brilliant reading of the clues, he reconstructs the crime scene, and he comes up with an exciting finale over everything is convincingly explained. So, this is a brilliant illustration of detective fiction. Yet we are going to look at it from the Gothic perspective too in the forthcoming lectures.

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The Moonstone



- “The novel opens with an account, "extracted from a family paper", of how, following his participation in the storming of the Indian palace of "Seringapatam" in 1799, Sir John Herncastle, a British army officer fighting in India, came to be in the possession of a "large yellow diamond". According to his cousin, Franklin Blake, Sir John took the stone from its rightful place, "set in the forehead of the four-headed Indian god who typifies the moon", killing the three Brahmins guarding it" ([Keren Levy](#))

- <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2014/jul/22/book-beach-the-moonstone-wilkie-collins>

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This is the beginning of the story. An extract from a family document is read and it tells us that the ancestor of this family, Sir John Herncastle who was a British army officer in India in 1799 got hold of a large yellow diamond. In fact, he seized it, he took it away from the forehead of a god, a four-headed Indian God, which stands for the moon, which symbolizes the moon.

And more importantly, during that act of stealing of that diamond, he killed 3 Brahmins who were guarding it. So, this is a very interesting family history of how Sir John Herncastle came to be in the possession of an Indian diamond. And we are also told about the colonial past of India.

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The Moonstone



- “Before his death, one of them vowed revenge by the stone: "The Moonstone will have its vengeance yet on you and yours!" Franklin, convinced that his cousin's motives in passing the diamond on are his own form of vengeance for being a family outcast, takes the story forward. Its legacy and legend is set. A holiday context gives it wings." [\(Keren Levy\)](#)

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So, when one of the Brahmins dies, he vows revenge. He says that the Moonstone will have its vengeance on Sir John Herncastle and his family and his descendants.

And Franklin who is related to John Herncastle assumes that his cousin’s motive in passing on this diamond to his family is his own way of taking vengeance on his family because he had been made into an outcast. And we can see how there are several layers of vengeance ongoing in this particular novel.

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The Moonstone



- “the story jumps forward to 1848; the diamond has been missing for two years, lost the morning after it was presented to Rachel. We learn of the appearance of three mysterious Indian jugglers at the birthday party, their presence a continued theme, hanging at the edge of the text and linking the stone back to its origins. It is at this stage that Blake takes up the editorial reins, asking that Gabriel Betteridge, the house steward of the Verinder family, places the whole story on record “in the interests of the truth”. It is a charm of the novel that Collins seems to hand the narration to his characters, passing to them the responsibility of the accounts that follow.” ([Keren Levy](#))

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The diamond goes missing after it is gifted to Rachel Verinder, who is the central female protagonist of this novel. And there are continuous presences of a set of Indian jugglers, and other suggestion that there was a connection between these Indian jugglers and the diamond.

And Franklin Blake narrates a section of the story and later he asks Gabriel Betteridge, who is the house steward to narrate about the incidence that happened to the family in relation to the missing diamond. It is very interesting to see that the house steward is also entrusted with the responsibility of telling the tale in the interest of truth. It is also very important to notice that Collins himself gives up his narratorial responsibility so that the characters in this story can tell the story themselves.

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The Moonstone



- “The Moonstone is funny; sometimes self-consciously so, but it is a foible to indulge. The Robinson Crusoe-loving Betteridge is a joy. Taking firm hold of his portion of the story, making references to his favoured reading matter, his all-knowing gaze falls with distaste on members of his host household. It is, to his mind, of little surprise that the grubby case of the missing jewel should have taken place under such a roof.” ([Keren Levy](#))

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There is a lot of humour in this novel, sometimes the humour is very self consciously set up. But it is a foible on the part of Collins that one can really enjoy, says the critic Keren Levy here. Betteridge, the house steward loves Robinson Crusoe and it is very interesting to see the incidents happen, that have taken place through the eyes of Betteridge. And there is a satiric perception that one can detect in relation to Betteridge. He is a little bit critical of the household and in fact, he calls the grubby case of the missing jewel. One can see that he is not very appreciative of the actions of the household, in which he is an employee.

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The Moonstone



- Furthermore, lest our own minds should wander, Betteridge commands the reader pay due attention: "Clear your mind of the children, or the dinner, or the new bonnet, or what not ... and don't I know how ready your attention is to wander when it's a book that asks for it, instead of a person?" (Comfortable in your corner of the beach, you might just be thinking about bonnets.) The formality of the style is irresistible, because you are so far from it. ([Keren Levy](#))
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Betteridge addresses the readers and that is exciting and interesting. There is an intimacy to that kind of style of narration and commands the reader to get into the story and not to let their minds wander. And he wants everybody to pay attention to the events in the book. So, it is very irresistible, the narration is contagious, the excitement is contagious. It is very exciting because there is no formality.

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The Moonstone



- In the second part of the novel, dramatically entitled "the discovery of the truth", the individual accounts begin in earnest. Collins uses the series of first-person narratives he adopted in his earlier work, *The Woman in White*. The effect is almost but not quite that of witness statements, as a series of characters come forward at Blake's request, their peccadilloes securing our wry smiles. In their asides they impart a sense of access to the inner confidences of the tellers. ([Keren Levy](#))

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“In the second part of the novel, dramatically entitled, “the discovery of the truth”, the individual accounts begin in earnest. Collins uses the series of first-person narratives he adopted in his earlier work, *The Woman in White*. The effect is almost but not quite that of witness statements, as a series of characters come forward at Blake’s request, their peccadilloes securing our wry smiles. In their asides, they impart a sense of access to the inner confidences of the tellers.”

The second part of the novel is entitled “the discovery of the truth”. And one can see that the testimonies come in hard and fast. They are narrated one after the other. And we can see that there is a series of first-person accounts that have been used. The style of first-person narration has been used to great effect in *The Woman in White*, and Collins uses similar methods.

The narratives that we see in *The Moonstone* is not exactly in the tone of witness statements, but we get a lot of access to the inner experiences of the characters who come forward at Blake’s request to give their versions of the truth. So, as readers, we get to know a lot about, not just the events that have happened to the household, the Verinder family, but we also get to know about the minor sense (the peccadilloes means minor sense) of the people who come and offer their accounts of other events.

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The Moonstone



- Miss Clack, the niece of Sir John Verinder, is a satirical character, is the creation of which Collins was most proud. Fabulously self-righteous and apparently struggling against her Christian virtue even to accept payment for her account, she is instructed by Franklin to stay within the limits of her direct experience of the story of the diamond and not to offer up the wisdom of hindsight". ([Keren Levy](#))
- <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jan/27/100-best-novels-moonstone-wilkie-collins>



“Miss Clack, the niece of Sir John Verinder, is a satirical character, is the creation of which Collins was most proud. Fabulously self-righteous and apparently struggling against her Christian virtue even to accept payment for her account, she is instructed by Franklin to stay within the limits of her direct experience of the story of the diamond and not to offer up the wisdom of hindsight.”

Wilkie Collins is very proud of this particular creation Miss Clack, who was related to Sir John Verinder. She is the niece of Sir John and is a satirical portrait. She is very very self-righteous and she does not feel comfortable even to accept payment for the account that she is giving her experience of what had happened in this household. And it is very interesting to see that Franklin advises her to assess things in retrospect. He does not want the wisdom of her hindsight. He wants her to stay within what she had experienced. Thank you for watching. I will continue in the next session.