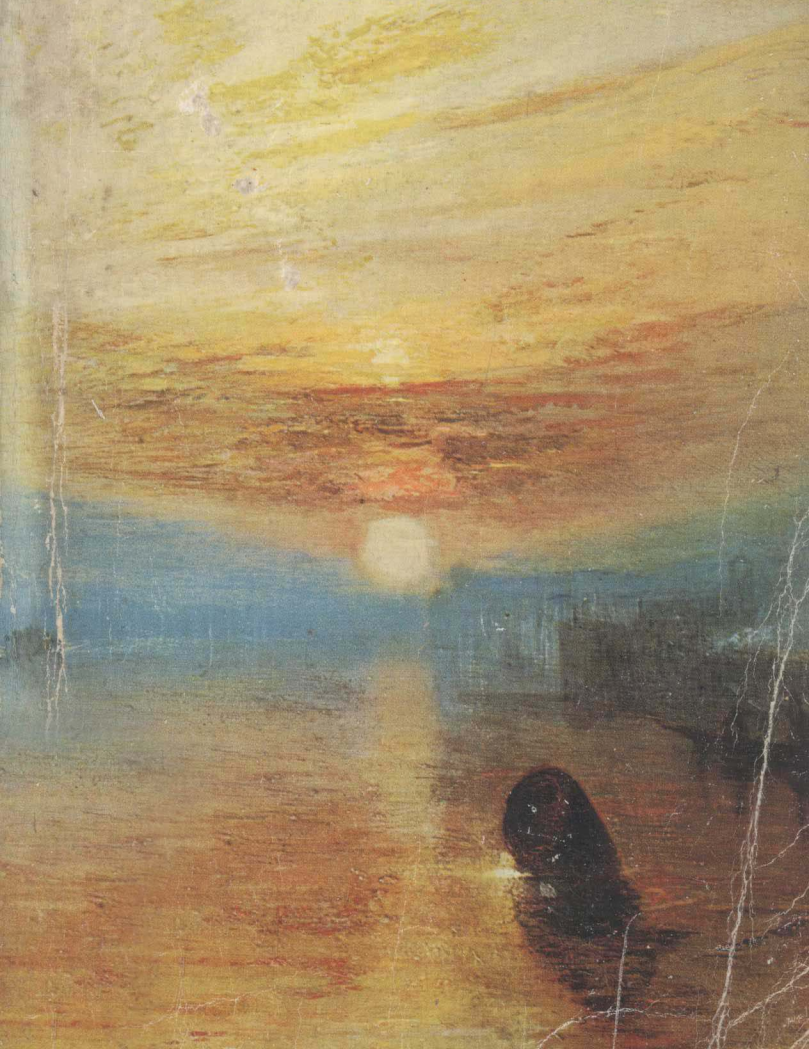


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WILKIE COLLINS

THE MOONSTONE



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THE MOONSTONE

WILKIE COLLINS

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WILKIE COLLINS
THE MOONSTONE

EDITED BY
J. I. M. STEWART

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INTRODUCTION

IN 1834 Coleridge declared the three most perfectly plotted works in universal literature to be the *Oedipus Tyrannus* of Sophocles, Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*, and Fielding's *Tom Jones*. Had he been writing forty years later, he might conceivably have added *The Moonstone* to this oddly assorted trio. Certainly no English novel shows a structure and proportions, or contrives a narrative tempo, better adapted to its end: that of lending variety and amplitude to a story the mainspring of which has to be a sustained interest in the elucidation of a single mysterious event. T. S. Eliot described the book as 'the first, the longest, and the best of modern English detective novels', and in this judgement 'longest' is not the least significant word. For once a story has unmasked itself as preponderantly concerned with solving a mystery, or hunting down a quarry, extraordinary skill is required if the reader is to be pleasurably beguiled by any lingering on the way. There are several reasons why Collins was successful – almost uniquely successful, as it has proved – in this attempt.

His first published work was a life of his father, who had been a landscape painter, and as he judged it part of his duty in the course of the book to provide a detailed account of a large number of pictures he acquired an early expertness in simple description. This, when united to a strong dramatic impulse, gave him marked power as an atmospheric writer. In no modern detective novel, unless it be perhaps Dorothy Sayers's *The Nine Tailors*, will one find anything comparable with the evocation of the Shivering Sand:

The last of the evening light was fading away; and over all the desolate place there hung a still and awful calm. The heave of the main ocean on the great sand-bank out in the bay, was a heave that made no sound. The inner sea lay lost and dim, without a breath of wind to stir it. Patches of nasty ooze floated, yellow-white, on the dead surface of the water. Scum and slime shone faintly in certain places, where the last of the light still caught them on the

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two great spits of rock jutting out, north and south, into the sea. It was now the time of the turn of the tide: and even as I stood there waiting, the broad brown face of the quicksand began to dimple and quiver – the only moving thing in all the horrid place.

It is a set piece, yet saved from being obtrusively so by the deft use of two phrases – ‘nasty ooze’ and ‘horrid place’ – which touch in the voice of the respectable old servant who is here the narrator. And always, before we can become tired of mere picturesque effect, the scene is animated. One or another actor has stepped into it:

As I got near the shore, the clouds gathered black, and the rain came down, drifting in great white sheets of water before the wind. I heard the thunder of the sea on the sand-bank at the mouth of the bay. A little further on, I passed the boy crouching for shelter under the lee of the sand-hills. Then I saw the raging sea, and the rollers tumbling in on the sand-bank, and the driven rain sweeping over the waters like a flying garment, and the yellow wilderness of the beach with one solitary black figure standing on it – the figure of Sergeant Cuff.

And Sergeant Cuff, the detective in *The Moonstone*, brings us to Collins’s next virtue. It is the ability to delineate character vigorously – whether with marked fidelity to contemporary social types, as in a novel of manners, or in terms of more or less grotesque invention, such as Dickens excelled in. Cuff is himself an admirable mingling of fact and fancy. To the readers of the time, he was designed to suggest an actual policeman, Inspector Whicher, who had been one of the first products of the efforts of Charles Rowan, Richard Mayne and others to establish a body of professional detectives on the continental model within the London Police Force. He had already appeared, barely disguised as ‘Sergeant Witchem’, in *Household Words*, which ran a series of articles on his earlier cases. Collins now drew directly upon a later case of Whicher’s, known as the Road Murder, and perhaps the most sensational of them all. A four-year-old boy, Francis Kent, had been stabbed to death, and suspicion fell on his sister Constance. Whicher found a list of this woman’s linen in her bedroom; it included three nightdresses, and she was able to produce only two; from this Whicher concluded – rightly, as

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it eventually turned out – that the missing garment must bear evidence of the crime. In *The Moonstone* Sergeant Cuff is similarly concerned with what may be called the clue of the missing nightgown, although it is not blood that is eventually found on it.

This may serve as an instance of Collins's constant recourse, throughout his career, to authentic criminal records; Maurice Méjan's *Recueil des causes célèbres* and Jacques Peuchet's *Mémoires tirées des archives de la police de Paris* were for him much the same sort of treasure trove that the Old Yellow Book was for Browning. Like many subsequent writers of detective stories, he made it a point of honour to get factual details right. If he felt the need of a new sort of lunatic he would persuade a friend to stroll through an asylum, and if he proposed murder by means of a lethal machine he would have the machine actually manufactured. He gave an equal care to the operation of the law. The manner of Sergeant Cuff's employment may strike us as odd. Lady Verinder hires him from the police at her own expense, and then dismisses him when his investigations threaten to take an awkward turn. But Scotland Yard, it seems, did then actually work in that way.

Yet Cuff is already the detective of fiction quite as much as he is the detective of fact. We are assured that he has the advantage of resembling 'anything else you like, except what he really was'. Equally we are assured that this is not quite true. For :

His eyes, of a steely light grey, had a very disconcerting trick, when they encountered your eyes, of looking as if they expected something more from you than you were aware of yourself.

And Cuff is the first English detective to exploit enigmatic remarks and actions. We realize that he sees farther than we do, and that he is challenging us to a battle of wits – a battle in which fair play is to be observed. This is of the essence of the detective story.

But *The Moonstone* displays other aspects of Collins's marked command of character. Rachel Verinder and Rosanna Spearman both exemplify his ability to portray women with a fidelity much in advance of some more famous Victorian novelists. Perhaps because he himself lived, as we shall see, outside the ring-fence of

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Victorian convention, he was more willing to endow his females with intellect, passion and strength of will than were many of his contemporaries, and he was even at times to represent estimable women as involved in irregular sexual relationships. Dickens was once to describe him as expounding, in familiar talk, 'a code of morals taken from French novels', and himself as checking this reprehensible propensity in his young colleague. In point of fact it seems likely that Dickens was occasionally drawn by Collins into practical explorations of that code amid what he called 'the festive diableries of Paris'. But he judged it wrong to move anywhere near it in fiction, as Collins sometimes dared to do.

Of the male figures in *The Moonstone* two may be instanced as illustrating Collins's skill in building character whether within or without the contemporary conventions of fiction. Gabriel Betteredge, although very much the faithful old retainer of tradition, is presented sympathetically and confidently alike in his ruminative vein and in his relations with his employers. Collins is much better at depicting servants than are most Victorian novelists, and again it is with careful attention to detail. He was annoyed when an American illustrator drew Betteredge, a head-servant, in livery; he ought to be made to look 'like an old clergyman'. Ezra Jennings, on the other hand, owes nothing to convention. In a double sense he is drawn from life. Collins had met just such a doctor's assistant when on a walking tour with Dickens in 1857; the man appears in an excellent short story, 'The Double-bedded Room', written immediately thereafter, and in *Armada* as well as *The Moonstone* he was to live again. And by the time *The Moonstone* was written the sufferings of Ezra Jennings had become a bitter part of Collins's own experience. This is why, although Jennings's role is built firmly into the structure of the novel with the 'physiological experiment' marking the story's climax, he may strike us as not quite belonging in *The Moonstone*; he is a portentous figure and somehow deeper than the book that contains him – rather as is Annable, the game-keeper in D. H. Lawrence's *The White Peacock*.

Quite another sort of character is represented by Miss Clack – whom Collins is careful to mention in his preface to the edition of 1871 as 'most successful in amusing the public'. In fact this

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viciously satirical portrayal of an evangelical busybody must have occasioned some scandal, as well as the merely critical reflection that her activities extend beyond the necessities of the fable. But Collins had once been persecuted by two Miss Clacks simultaneously when in a position that rendered him vulnerable to their reproaches. Miss Clack is the only character to approximate to the grotesque in *The Moonstone*.

Rejoicing in much free and vigorous creation of this order, we may reflect that Collins was fortunate in having to deploy his characters only in what is, essentially, a 'primitive' contribution to the detective *genre*. For the developed detective story, moving as it does within a number of sharply limiting conventions, is not easy to reconcile even with some of the quite modest purposes of 'straight' fiction. For example, as the intricacy and ingenuity of plots increases, it becomes more and more a condition of success in the kind that we should go short of any sure sense of character as we read. If the game is to be exciting, that is to say, anybody in the story must be capable of acting under any motive to any end. Thus the writer who treats himself to, say, an uncontestably 'nice' character is either heading towards a violation of sentiment and plausibility or creating so much dead wood. In technically less advanced stories, on the other hand, numerous characters can be built up as more or less predictable moral agents, whether good or bad; and this, while it constricts the writer's field of manoeuvre and the pleasurable play of our suspicions, makes more room for certain of the values and interests of fiction proper. Yet the reader who supposes that *The Moonstone* is altogether rudimentary in point of the 'least-suspected person' convention and the like is in for a surprise. For Collins has seen to the heart of the problem of the fully realized mystery story, and he has solved it by a means which, right at the start, constitutes one of the great *tours de force* of the detective novel.

But the chief virtue of the book lies neither in atmosphere, nor in character, nor even in the ingenuity of its fundamental device. All these contribute, indeed, to its excellence – but they would not make the effect they do save for the particular narrative method in terms of which they are exhibited. More strictly, as Collins's admirer Swinburne liked to insist, it is a matter of the

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felicitousness with which Collins handles that method. There is nothing original in the machinery of a frequently shifted point of view; Richardson, for instance, had employed it on a large scale in combination with his epistolary convention in *Clarissa*. Only in *The Moonstone* and its equally great predecessor *The Woman in White* does Collins have recourse to it upon a fully developed scale. He does so as the result of a characteristically acute perception, a record of which has been preserved by one of his French translators, Louis Dépret, and quoted by Professor Nuel Pharr Davis in his authoritative biography.

Round about 1856 Collins attended a criminal trial, and was impressed both by the manner in which a chain of evidence could be forged from the testimonies of successive witnesses, and by the mounting effect of this upon the spectators as the case proceeded :

It came to me then that a series of events in a novel would lend themselves well to an exposition like this. Certainly by the same means employed here, I thought, one could impart to the reader that acceptance, that sense of belief, which I saw produced here by the succession of testimonies so varied in form and nevertheless so strictly unified by their march toward the same goal. The more I thought about it, the more an effort of this kind struck me as bound to succeed. Consequently, when the case was over, I went home determined to make the attempt.

We are familiar today with both plays and short novels which transact their entire business within a law court. Collins saw how the method could be adapted to the much larger theatre of his two principal novels.

He was forty-four when he finished *The Moonstone*, and a long career as a writer still lay ahead of him. Yet *The Moonstone* stands alone in its kind; from none of his other books does the modern reader gain a sense of attending upon the birth of the detective story. Even *The Woman in White*, although it deals with the unmasking of a crime, is essentially a thriller, and all his later books hold much more mystery than detection. If he realized the full extent of his originality, and of the genre it might have opened up, he made no consistent attempt at its exploitation. This must disappoint us, and is explicable only upon some brief consideration of his career as a whole.

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William Wilkie Collins was born in London in 1824. His grandfather, an unsuccessful picture dealer and picture restorer, had made numerous equally unsuccessful forays into the field of literature, notably in *Memoirs of a Picture*, which curiously combines a sensational novel with a biography of the painter George Morland. He was improvident and died in penury, but not before he had launched a son, William, upon a career as a painter. William was hard-working, careful with money, pious, blameless in his domestic life, and happily endowed with a real flair for cultivating aristocratic patrons – ‘a most unthankful spirit’ towards whom he distinguished as one of the chief vices of the age. Imbued with these principles, he became an R.A. and made a very good living out of landscape painting – as he was entitled to do, since he believed decidedly that this is what landscape painting is for. He sent his eldest son – named after the eminent Sir David Wilkie, R.A. – to an expensive private school at which, he declared, ‘You will make aristocratic connexions that will be of the greatest use to you in life.’ What young Wilkie actually got from these potential patrons was an occasional sweetmeat when he successfully diverted them with a piece of story-telling, and the smart application of some instrument of correction when they judged his offering tedious. ‘I learnt to be amusing on a short notice,’ he said afterwards, ‘and have derived benefit from those early lessons.’

Even before this, he had derived precocious benefit from a more agreeable experience. William Collins, although by now an established painter, had never visited Italy, and in 1828 he yielded to Sir David Wilkie’s urgings to make good this professionally disadvantageous defect in his education. Being a devoted, if somewhat oppressive, husband and father, he decided that his wife and two sons should accompany him, and as a consequence the future novelist spent the greater part of his fourteenth and fifteenth years on the continent. A meeting with ‘a descendant of Michelangelo who showed them the original manuscript of the *Sonnets*’ may not have held any large significance for a boy of his age, but it is nevertheless likely that these wanderings in search of the Sublime, the Beautiful and the Picturesque represent a first substantial nourishing of his romantic imagination. He

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returned to England for a little more orthodox schooling and then, in his later teens, successfully fought his way out of a proposed commercial career and announced his inflexible adherence to the profession of letters. To this the elder Collins reconciled himself upon being persuaded that Wilkie might 'with his tact and taste, produce most satisfying and popular works'.

This is what Collins was to do. He matured as a fairly predictable amalgam of familial conformity and rebellion. He could work as hard as his father, and with an equally assured sense of what his labours were about. 'This is indeed a great age for great authors,' he wrote in 1849, and added, 'Dickens told a friend of mine that he had made *four thousand guineas* by his last year's Christmas Book.' The day was to come when, as Professor Davis records, 'his cash receipts . . . came to well over £10,000, no doubt the highest year's income for any writer during the century'. Like his father, he nevertheless grudged every penny that escaped him. Unlike his father, he achieved his success without piety (he was an atheist), without the support of domestic rectitude (he was to support two irregular establishments simultaneously), and without patrons (other than a single powerful one within the literary world itself).

Today we are inclined to believe that the highest excellence in a writer is incompatible with the achieving of wide popularity, or at least most unlikely to be accompanied by it; and there is unfortunately much evidence to support this view. The Victorian age held a robust faith. Dickens, upon association with whom all Collins's success was founded, took it for granted that the best work would win the widest acclaim, and contrived to combine an astute and vigorous commercial sense with a confident belief in the moral and artistic qualities of what he produced. His disciple early adopted the same attitude. Intent though he was upon gratifying the readers of *Household Words* and calculating the likely moral tolerances of Mr Mudie of the lending libraries, Collins nevertheless could speak, precisely as Henry James might have spoken, of 'the patient, uncompromising, reverent devotion of every moral and intellectual faculty' which the writer owes to his craft. Many of the prefaces with which he accompanied his novels render a somewhat misleading impression of his predomi-

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nant concern. No *Name* is declared to evince 'a resolute adherence, throughout, to the truth as it is in Nature' and to pursue 'the theme of some of the greatest writers, living and dead . . . the struggle of a human creature, under those opposing influences of Good and Evil, which we have all felt, which we have all known.' *Armada*, which is in fact a masterpiece of intricate melodrama and nothing else, is spoken of as Thomas Hardy might have spoken of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* or *Jude the Obscure*: 'Estimated by the Clap-trap morality of the present day, this may be a very daring book. Judged by the Christian morality which is of all time, it is only a book that is daring enough to speak the truth.' For *The Moonstone* itself, which is simply the best of all mystery stories, Collins writes a preface declaring that he is attempting 'to trace the influence of character on circumstances' – and that it is thus unlike some of his earlier novels, which 'trace the influence of circumstances upon character'.

It is not easy to determine the degree of seriousness with which Dickens and his circle actually regarded the melodramatic and sentimental concoctions to which they devoted much of their intimidating energies. They were certainly in no sense cynical purveyors to an unsophisticated and vulgar public. This becomes clear when we consider those amateur theatrical activities which were a fashionable diversion of the time.

Dickens had a passion for getting up such entertainments, often in some charitable interest and before an audience which included many of the most distinguished people of the day. He would himself sustain the leading role, various members of his family would be involved, and the privilege of completing the cast would be accorded to a few *protégés* or intimate friends. Collins's progress can be traced in terms of this occupation. He began in 1851 as stage valet to Dickens in a comedy by Bulwer-Lytton – a part which had been declined, evidently as demeaning, by W. H. Wills, Dickens's assistant editor of *Household Words*. In the following year Collins was promoted above-stairs, sustaining the role of 'Mr Shadowly Softhead, a Young Gentleman from the City, Friend and Double to Lord Wilmot' – Lord Wilmot being Dickens. By 1856 the two novelists were co-starring (before the Duke of Devonshire and the Lord Chief Justice) in *The Frozen*

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Deep, a play written by Collins himself. In this piece two explorers, meeting in the vicinity of the North Pole, discover themselves to be respectively the accepted and the rejected suitor of the heroine. The rejected suitor, Dickens, has murder in his heart, but magnanimity prevails and he saves his rival's, Collins's, life by staggering with him through the dark arctic night and depositing him with a dying effort at the feet of the heroine, who has turned up with some other ladies in a cave on the shores of Newfoundland for the purpose.

We know that Dickens, at least, lived his part in this piece of nonsense with blazing intensity. It had enormous success, and was eventually repeated in the presence of the Queen and Prince Consort. Moreover its central situation gave Dickens his idea for *A Tale of Two Cities*, and in this we may find a pointer of considerable importance for an understanding of much of Collins's work. It derives from the theatre, and to the theatre it may be said to be perpetually striving to return, since Collins ceaselessly engaged in dramatizings of his novels – constructing some of them in the first instance, indeed, with a plain eye to readiness of adaptation. This important affinity tends to be obscured by the length and prolixity of many of the books, but these were characteristics largely forced upon Collins by the insistence of Mudie and others on the three-volume novel form. It is commonly asserted – and certainly with a measure of truth – that Collins's essential achievement was to take the old-fashioned 'sensation' novel, strip it of its outmoded Gothic trimmings, and re-embody its essence in a Victorian domestic integument. But equally influential, and probably a good deal sharper in their impact, were those melodramas of Dumas, Soulié and others which Collins frequented during his visits to Paris, and which his friend Charles Reade was constantly imitating at home.

His own plays are, at least in one sense, sufficiently theatrical, rejoicing in bizarre settings and strong situations. *Black and White* is described by one biographer as 'concerned with slavery and the colour question in Trinidad'; it turns out to be about a French nobleman who, having a touch of the tar-brush, has the misfortune to find himself briskly auctioned off in a slave market in Jamaica. *The Red Vial* has as its principal characters a lunatic