Walter Hartright and “[t]he mystery which underlies the beauty of women”:

The Nature of Beauty and Attraction in Collins’s The Woman in White

“I could add no more,” Walter says. “My voice faltered, my eyes moistened, in spite of me” (Collins 157). While Victorians have been primarily characterized by their rigid standards of propriety and by their unflinching adherence to patriarchal social and gender standards, Walter, as the opening narrator of Wilkie Collins’s The Woman in White, sets the stage for a surprising subversion of this historical presumption. This subversion, however, goes far deeper than his crying in front of Marian and points to a far more significant conclusion about the nature of beauty, attraction, and power in the novel’s complex web of relationships. Indeed, while Walter’s conceptualizations of beauty are primarily determined by the stereotypical gender-based standards—both physical and attitudinal—of the Victorian era, he respects and is therefore attracted, however unromantically, to female characters who subvert such standards.

As the chief object of Walter’s affections, Laura represents the ideals of feminine Victorian beauty. Upon their first meeting, Walter describes her in such grandiose terms as are “so often sung [of] by the poets, so seldom seen in real life. Lovely eyes in colour, lovely eyes in form . . . but beautiful above all things in the clear truthfulness of look that dwells in their inmost depths” (Collins 89). He actually spends a surprisingly short time describing her physically but justifies this with the assertion that this depiction of her as a “fair, delicate girl, in a pretty light dress . . . is all the . . . deeper reach of thought and pen can say” (Collins 90). Yet despite
Walter’s claim that Laura’s beauty transcends and defies language, he tellingly characterizes her as youthful and childish: “I understood why the sweet sensitive lips smiled so rarely and so restrainedly now; and why the clear blue eyes looked at me . . . with the innocent perplexity of a child” (Collins 104). The somewhat vague details of her physique are thus given shape by their traditionally and stereotypically feminine character, their tenderness and needfulness. For children are defined, in part, by their ignorance of the world and their dependence on others for protection and nourishment; “feminine” women have, historically, been expected to require these same things from their men. Drawn by this trait, which appears almost exclusively in Laura, Walter himself admits that “it is difficult to estimate the relative merits and defects of [Laura’s] other features,” her “natural human blemishes” having been wiped, insignificant, away (Collins 90). Like a child, she strives to please, to give “me back, by the practice of her art, the pleasure which I had offered to her by the practice of mine” (Collins 102). His own testimony would thus suggest that, for Walter, Laura’s physical beauty is inseparable from her personality, itself characterized by her submission to and embodiment of feminine delicacy and goodness.

As Laura’s foil, Anne Catherick’s beauty and attractiveness to Walter are determined by virtue of her relationship to Laura. In fact, while Walter offers little in the way of an explanation of his physical attraction—or lack thereof—to Anne upon her introduction, he later says that “I now saw Miss Fairlie’s likeness in Anne Catherick—saw it all the more clearly because [of] the points of dissimilarity . . . If ever sorrow and suffering set their profaning marks on the youth of Miss Fairlie’s face, then, and then only, Anne Catherick and she would be . . . twin-sisters” (Collins 132). Precisely because of her sufferings and despite repeated references to her as childish, Anne has lost the childish innocence which Laura still possesses, and she is distinctly less feminine as a result. Characterizations of Anne as childish refer more to her being
psychologically damaged than they do to her “womanly” mentality: “We had made some advance, at least, towards connecting the probably defective condition of the poor creature’s intellect with the peculiarity of her being dressed all in white, and with the continuance, in her mature years, of her childish gratitude towards Mrs. Fairlie” (Collins 101). If Laura and Anne are so much alike, then it is safe to assume that Walter initially felt the same physical attraction towards Anne’s beauty as he does towards Laura’s. However, the story is told retroactively, and Walter, knowing of the unfeminine transformation Anne’s pain has had on her “youthful face, meagre and sharp to look at, about the cheeks and chin,” edits out the immediately romantic impressions of her beauty which he then expresses in his story of meeting Laura (Collins 63). While Laura, a Victorian idealization, is only made more beautiful by her innocence, Anne is made all the less beautiful by a lack thereof.

Similarly, Marian’s physical blemishes are heightened and highlighted by her attitudinal rejections of femininity and her assumption, on more than one occasion, of a traditionally male role in her relationship with Walter. From the beginning, she resists Walter’s initial stereotyping of her feminine beauty: “[I] saw a lady standing at [the window], with her back turned towards me. The instant my eyes rested on her, I was struck by the rare beauty of her form, and by the unaffected grace of her attitude . . . She approached nearer—and I said to myself (with a sense of surprise . . .), The lady is ugly!” (Collins 74). This initial surprise, resultant from Marian’s markedly unfeminine physique, is subject to change under certain circumstances, such as when she comforts Walter at the moment of his departure: “She caught me by both hands . . . the force and energy of her face glowed and grew beautiful with the pure inner light of her generosity and spirit” (Collins 157). The image here of Marian “growing beautiful” when expressing two of the most traditional feminine emotions, emotions normally associated with Laura, reinforces the
relationship between physical beauty and personality, a relationship in which personality is the privileged term. By this line of reasoning, Marian’s ugliness should correlate with her rejection of gender typing, and, indeed, it is so: when Walter is initially left dumbstruck by Laura’s conventional beauty, Marian “took the business of talking, as easily and readily as usual, into her own hands” (Collins 91). Even in this most trivial of interactions, Marian steps in for Walter’s momentary weakness and, in so doing, replaces him at the top of the power structure. More significantly—and overtly—Marian must be strong for Walter when he is forced to leave Limmeridge. Not only does he cry in front of her, which emasculates him, but she catches “me by both hands—she pressed them with the strong, steady grasp of a man” (Collins 157). With this linkage between Marian and subversive androgyny thus established, it becomes impossible for Walter, a heterosexual male, to find Marian beautiful. Yet, paradoxically, he is attracted to her; what makes her ugly is also what makes her platonically attractive.

While it could be argued that Walter’s friendship with—and implicit respect for and nonsexual attraction towards—Marian suggests a feminist support of her rejection of gender roles, this is less likely than is the supposition that he respects her instead, not as a feminist woman, but as a sort of masculine equal. When Marian joins Walter in his investigation into the woman in white, he accepts her as a partner, even amending his plan for interrogating Anne’s caretakers at Todd’s Corner when Marian rejects his proposal: “‘Not to be thought of for a moment,’ interposed Miss Halcombe, in her most decided manner” (Collins 142). At the same time, when she takes one of her rare feminist stances against Mr. Dempster during her interrogation of Jacob Postlethwaite, Walter treats it with a removed indifference which rejects the notion that it is her rebellion against social convention which inspires his attraction towards her. She says, “Upon my word, Mr. Dempster, you pay my feelings a great compliment in
thinking them weak enough to be shocked by such an urchin as that” (Collins 123). Walter, meanwhile, “throughout the whole of this strange scene . . . stood apart, listening attentively” (Collins 125). Ironically, feminism was not a feminine trait, and so Walter treats it, in his “masculine equal,” with a passive indifference which is even more telling than scorn. He is far more receptive to Marian’s typically derisive attitudes towards her own sex: “Women can’t draw—their minds are too flighty, and their eyes are too inattentive . . . I can match you at chess, backgammon, écarté, and (with the inevitable female drawbacks) even at billiards” (Collins 77). In a time of significant feminist tumult, Marian aligns herself with markedly regressive gender attitudes, itself another example of traditionally masculine conservatism. More than agreeing with Walter on the opinion of adherence to feminine standards, then, Marian agrees with him from the perspective of a man.

The meaning of Walter’s respect for Marian might be further explained when placed in opposition to the character he least respects and feels the weakest attraction to: Frederick Fairlie. Upon his earliest introduction, the dilettantish recluse violently abuses his servants in front of Walter in an ostentatious display of his power and prestige: “Don’t drop it! You have no idea of the tortures I should suffer, Mr. Hartright, if Louis dropped that portfolio . . . Louis, go away. What an ass you are . . . A thousand pardons, Mr. Hartright; servants are such asses, are they not?” (Collins 84). In sharp contrast to Laura’s gentle, “truthful” touch and Marian’s assured friendship and authority, Mr. Fairlie is false and manufactured, a front put up to assert his dominance over Limmeridge. While Walter does characterize Mr. Fairlie’s feet as “effeminately small, and . . . clad in . . . little womanish bronze-leather slippers,” his feminine physicality is, again, far less important to Walter than his rejection of his male role as Laura’s guardian and protector. Indeed, Marian takes over this role for him: “You must leave us for her sake, as well
as for your own. Your presence here . . . harmless as it has been, God knows, in all other respects, has unsteadied her and made her wretched” (Collins 110-1). All at once, Marian comforts Walter by absolving him of his guilt in loving Laura and orders him away from Limmeridge in order to protect her sister’s marriage engagement and mental health. Mr. Fairlie, meanwhile, prefers to forget his duties to his niece, symbolically disparaging all children, when it is Laura who is most childishly innocent: “Such brats—oh, dear me, such brats! Shall I confess it, Mr. Hartright?—I sadly want a reform in the construction of children. Nature’s only idea seems to be to make them machines for the production of incessant noise” (Collins 85). Again, the power dynamics and roles between man and woman are shifted, this time with Marian taking on the definitively paternal role which Mr. Fairlie has effeminately thrown out.

For Walter, beauty and attraction are two distinct concepts; the former is reserved almost exclusively for Laura, while the latter is reserved for Marian. As he says, he finds himself “alone in the society of two women, one of whom possessed all the accomplishments of grace, wit, and high-breeding, the other all the charms of beauty, gentleness, and simple truth” (Collins 102). In both cases, Walter’s feelings towards the two women are driven more by their adherences to or rejections of Victorian gender roles than by their outward physical appearances, although it would be an oversight not to consider these. What is most interesting, however, is that while Victorian beauty demands an embodiment of these rules, platonic attraction and respect seem to grow from a spurning of these same rules, at least in the case of female characters whose rejection of gender typing is precisely what elevates them to an equalized “masculine” status. In such a light, the direction of Walter’s love might seem paradoxical; surely, Marian is stronger and Wittier than her sister, and yet there is nothing in the text to suggest Walter’s romantic
interest in her. Indeed, as Marian herself so bluntly puts it, “I am dark and ugly, and she is fair and pretty” (Collins 76).
Works Cited
