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Literature Review: *The Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins

INTRODUCTION

The Woman in the White as the first example of sensational literature is of great interest to literary scholars. Collins' novel has been in the focus of many studies that examine the literary work with regard to different themes, some of which even have relation neither to literature nor to art. In this respect, the diversity of themes, literary elements, and ways of transferring the author's message makes the novel under analysis worthy of further investigation. Indisputably, the genre of sensation novel is one of the principal topics many scholars attempt to discuss in their works. The studies of Cameron, Leighton and Surridge, Raghinaru, Schmitt, and Wynne, that are under review, have also tackled this theme. Moreover, some of the scholars, such as Leighton and Surridge stress the novel's mechanical nature as well as commercial interest it has obtained due controversial themes and the challenge of the English beliefs in domesticity. Furthermore, Schmitt and Wynne have narrowed the theme underlining the conviction of the sensation novel, Colins' literary work in particular, for the following reasons – the withdrawal from reality, Gothic manner of the story depiction, the absence of motivation that would force people to think, undermining of gender roles, and the challenge to the established portrayal of English nationality.

Nevertheless, the feelings and emotions the novel evokes together with the author's language, characters' representation, literary devices, and the form make Collins' literary work a distinguished example of sensation fiction. In this regard, the review of scholarly sources includes the following topics: the meaning of sensation fiction as a literary genre, the judgment of sensation novel by Victorian reviewers, Collins' ways to shock the audience and sympathize with the characters, his threat to firmly established gender roles and the English vision of the ideal domesticity and masculinity, as well as the literary analysis of the story at the levels of plot and form. Thus, the studies under review are worth analyzing because the information they contain is useful for the further research of the novel. The paper reveals the mechanical structure of Collins' novel transferred through the author's language, literary devices, plot scenes, and principal characters that challenge the representation of male dominance in Victorian literature offering instead the portrayal of a new woman with cold reason and strong will.

SUMMARY OF SCHOLARLY SOURCES

In the 1860s, many literary works belonged to what is known as the “sensation school” (Schmitt 110; Wynne 38). *The Woman in White* relates to the genre of sensation novel. The term first emerged in the Victorian age once the novel appeared in the magazine *All the Year Round* (Wynne 38). In the 19th century, the reading of Victorian novels greatly differed from the contemporary (Schmitt 107; Wynne 38). In the 1860s, novels were collected and printed altogether in the weekly or monthly family magazines (Wynne 38). This way of entertainment was one of the most popular instructions for the middle-class (Wynne 38). In this respect, sensation novels became open to harsh criticism by the first reviewers for being published in periodical resources (Schmitt 107; Wynne 38). As a result, the novels received the name

of 'newspaper novels' (Wynne 38). Nevertheless, Collins' style of depicting an exciting and simultaneously shocking story supported the high sales of *All The Year Round* (Wynne 38). Wynne claims that the author's specific ability to make the readers feel anxious caused a 'sensation' itself, and, in turn, led to success and great interest in the magazine (39). In addition, the popularity of the novel made it attractive for different entrepreneurs who started to sell various products, for example, cloaks and bonnets (Leighton and Surridge 11; Wynne 38) so that Victorian critics blamed sensation fiction for the creation of commercial atmosphere (Leighton and Surridge 11). Among Victorian reviewers who criticized sensation literature, there were those who accused sensation literary works for being an industrial product (Leighton and Surridge 11). For example, mid-Victorian critics blamed the publishers for manufacturing sensation fiction as a mass product with endless reproduction (Leighton and Surridge 11). As a result, many reviewers considered sensation literature as a product rather than as an art piece (Leighton and Surridge 11). Nevertheless, Collins' novels became known as "the work of art in an age of mechanical reproduction" (Leighton and Surridge 12). Thus, this commercial interest in the novel supported the establishment of a new treatment of literature as well as helped to create the impression of a new literary genre as a type of merchandising (Leighton and Surridge 11; Wynne 54).

At the same time, among Victorian reviewers, there were those who condemned the sensation novel. The ability to 'preach to the nerves' was one of the main reasons for such a reaction (Wynne 38). Collins' novel withdrew from reality in favor of sensational literary tradition to shock the reader and provoke his reaction to the plot scenes (Leighton and Surridge 1). In addition, the reviewers of the Victorian age believed that the sensation novels did not motivate people to ponder on the important issues (Schmitt 110; Wynne 39). Moreover, mid-Victorian critics claimed that sensation literary works, depicting events in a Gothic manner, conveyed a common

accusation of expanding a moral virus (Schmitt 111). As Collins' literary piece was the first example of the genre, it aroused certain prejudice. The novel itself aimed at evoking the readers' emotional response to the plot, specifically mysterious events connected with criminals and lunatic people. As Collins' work depicts a story that provokes the reader's nervous reaction, it is not surprising that the Victorian critics treated the novel so scrupulously (Schmitt 111; Wynne 38).

Moreover, Schmitt views the term "sensation" itself as a reaction of both the reader and the character to the specific elements in the plot (112). In the novel, there are two characteristic moments when the audience and the character are to respond to the most sensational episodes. The first one is the late-night encounter of Hartright and Anne Catherick, whereas the second one is the fact that the young lady resembles Laura Fairlie (Raghinaru 4; Schmitt 112). The language and the literary means the author uses are powerful in making the effect even more thrilling (Leighton and Surridge 8; Schmitt 112). Collins' specific language technique manifests itself in the dialogs throughout the novel (Leighton and Surridge 8; Raghinaru 4). For example, in the episode when Anne Firs meets the painter late at night, "white" is the dominant word in their dialog (Leighton and Surridge 8; Raghinaru 4). The repetition of this word reinforces its meaning (Leighton and Surridge 8). In this respect, the purpose of sensation literature is to challenge the moral norms and undermine the middle-class ideology of the Victorian age (Raghinaru 4; Schmitt 113). To strengthen the impact of the horror plot scenes, Collins attempts to depict the hidden energies and forces of the real world (Schmitt 113). Thus, he builds the plot of the novel around the themes of insane people and criminals (Leighton and Surridge 109; Schmitt 112; Wynne 39).

To make his readers feel anxious for the characters, Collins used a specific

technique for creating the sensation, typical of the genre (Wynne 39). Thus, the writer focused on the fear of poor mental health and the intrusion of crime into the higher classes as the two principal themes the middle-class worried about (Schmitt 111; Wynne 43). Traditionally, the plots of sensation novels dealt with crime and murders (Schmitt 111). In *The Woman in White*, the plot is full of physically and mentally weakened characters including Anne and Laura who together with their companions fight against the criminal gentlemen (Leighton & Surridge 5; Schmitt 126; Wynne 50). At the same time, the literary depiction of the women in white in the novel deserves specific attention (Leighton and Surridge 2). Thus, the tropes of repetition and iteration of formal structures depict the female characters (Leighton and Surridge 2). The constant repetition creates the general verbal picture of insanity in the novel and strengthens the effect of mystery (Leighton and Surridge 9). Collins also allows the woman in white to reveal a little of her personality through the dialog at the beginning of the novel (Leighton and Surridge 4). The woman's appearance only contributes to her mystery and instead of giving information evokes a number of questions (Leighton and Surridge 4). Such depiction allows Collins to portray the women as mysterious creatures, as well as add sensation to the work (Leighton and Surridge 4; Raghinaru 4). At the level of the plot, the writer makes the reader ponder on the possible conflicts before the story unfolds (Leighton and Surridge 5; Schmitt 126). Furthermore, he uses such a method as visualization (Leighton and Surridge 4; Raghinaru 4). Through the representation of one of the male characters, Hartright, Collins applies his visual techniques, namely the attempts of a drawing master to read the woman in white (Leighton and Surridge 4). In this respect, visualization has been of great importance to sensation writers (Leighton and Surridge 4). Moreover, Collins transfers movements from the realist narrative to Gothic in order to convey his vision of 'otherness' (Schmitt 108). The sensation novels of the mid-Victorian age support the tradition of English literature to fall back upon the distant past of foreign countries to afflict England of the 19th century (Schmitt 108).

Thereby, the application of Gothic narrative features in a domestic setting are characteristic of sensation literature (Schmitt 110).

Although sensation novels were very popular among Victorian readers, the reviewers generally viewed such literary works as a threat to firmly established gender roles (Schmitt 108). *The Woman in White* breaks the established norms of social life, with women engaged in domestic work and men occupied with their business (Schmitt 113). In the novel, women obtain the first place – they appear to be in danger and, thus, male characters have to do their best to protect them (Schmitt 113). This change also influences the representation of the subject (Schmitt 113). Moreover, the novel's literary experiments in depicting gender norms, as well as the portrayal of female sexuality, create a character of the new woman in literature (Cameron 1). In his work, Collins offers a feminine literary form neither used nor known before (Cameron 16). The new woman is able to fight with a man as an equal (Cameron 16). At the same time, Cameron observes that the novel is a response to the 1857 Divorce Act (6). This historical event inspired many women to redefine their rights in marriage and social life (Cameron 10). While Victorian law violated women's demands on property, it is not strange that Collins refers to this theme and the general status of women in his novel (Cameron 10). Thus, Cameron claims that in his literary work the writer debates women's independence that mainly depends on feminine qualities (9). In the novel, Laura's sensitive love for her sister and her feminine charm help her to fight against dangers that surround her (Cameron 9). Moreover, Collins' sensational heroine displays qualities and abilities the Victorian female characters did not have before (Cameron 9). In this respect, the author always wants his character to succeed (Cameron 9). Thus, Marian and Laura are two strong female characters who change the established norm of Victorian woman depiction (Cameron 11).

Furthermore, sensation novels have threatened to undermine the general vision of England by other nations and demonstrated that it is no longer what it used to be (Schmitt 108). The violation of women depiction in sensation novels challenges the English vision of the ideal domesticity (Schmitt 113). At the same time, Collins' novel subverts the representation of middle-class English masculinity (Schmitt 118). For example, Marian, as one of the female characters in the novel, is a personification of feminine resistance and toughness (Cameron 16). She is an independent intelligent woman who fights against the male world (Schmitt 118; Raghinaru 2). As a sensation novel, *The Woman in White* demonstrates female rationality while male characters behave irrationally in the story (Raghinaru 2). Collins also conveys the tension between the sexes through the encounters of his characters, for example, the meeting of Anne and the drawing artist at the beginning of the novel (Raghinaru 3). The author uses the tension between the sexes to show who is going to dominate in the story, thus challenging Victorian society (Raghinaru 4). Furthermore, the author portrays an aristocratic gentleman involved in criminal affairs, what, in turn, violates the version of English national identity (Schmitt 118). Additionally, the victimization of women in the novel also undermines the ideal portrait of English masculinity (Schmitt 118). In this respect, many Victorian critics have considered the sensation literature subversive (Schmitt 108; Wynne 38).

Apart from the theme of genre, the novel also touches on the discourses of gender and nation (Schmitt 108). Traditionally, sensation novels addressed female readers as Gothic elements are dangerous for women's audience (Schmitt 111). Moreover, the appearance of victimizing in sensation literary works have identified them as a threat (Schmitt 111). Schmitt views the reason for such a tendency in the mix of realistic and Gothic elements and the contrast of ideology and literature in one novel (111). This strange combination perfectly displays itself in the work's setting and characters (111). At the same time, the critics have considered the confusion between

domestic world and Gothic elements conflict patterns (Schmitt 112). Raghinaru, for example, claims that female behavior in the novel is rationalistic – women no longer ponder near the window or admire moonlight (5). Instead, Collins' female characters challenge the traditional representation of Victorian women (Raghinaru 7). For example, Marian has 'male' rational reason (Raghinaru 10). In addition, Raghinaru defines the body and female sexuality as one of the key elements in the novel (Raghinaru 11). Thereby, gender tension and constant shift in positions of dominance distinguish sensation literature (Raghinaru 9).

Moreover, Leighton and Surridge note that the plot of the novel first turns around Laura's similarity to the woman in white and then around Hartright's and Marian's efforts to seek the truth and, thus, recover the identity of a friend and the loved one (7; Raghinaru 7). In the text, the distinction between Laura and Anne begins when Marian reads Mrs. Fairlie's letter (Leighton and Surridge 8). When the letter discloses that the two women are separate individuals, the painter sees the white posture of Laura in the window that reminds him of the woman in white and shocks him (Leighton and Surridge 8). This scene makes Gothic elements in the realistic setting vivid for the reader (Schmitt 111). Furthermore, Leighton and Surridge consider the scene when the painter goes to Laura's grave as the most sensational episode in the story (9). Standing there, Hartright sees two figures of women approaching him. However, the man does not comprehend that they are Marian and Laura, who is alive (Raghinaru 13). This scene is the climax episode, supported by the author's use of repetition tropes (Leighton and Surridge 9; Raghinaru 9). This passage is full of figures of repetition including anaphora, epistrophe, anadiplosis, and epanalepsis (Leighton and Surridge 9). Such dominance of repetition supports the creation of the sensational effect (Leighton and Surridge 10). Thus, the analysis of the novel at the textual level, as well as detailed examination of the characters, are very important for the general understanding of the author's message.

DISCUSSION AND EVALUATION OF THE SOURCES

All of the five sources mentioned above directly or indirectly discuss the theme of sensation fiction. While Schmitt and Wynne distinguish a particular topic as the leading one in their studies, Cameron, Leighton and Surridge, and Raghinaru do not focus entirely on one aspect. The latter consider the author's language, the literary devices, and the characters themselves as the means of conveying a certain message. Schmitt and Wynne underline the importance of Collins' novel as the first example of sensation fiction, referring to its publication and the manner of Victorian reading. One can argue that the theme of sensation literature is not new and original; however, the authors are very attentive to such details as the audience's response and the attitudes of Victorian readers to new shocking works. At the same time, Leighton and Surridge together with Raghinaru and Wynne discuss the popularity of Collins' work in terms of its commercial effect. Although Victorian critics have blamed Collins' novel for becoming an industrial product, it was the first that produced such an effect. In this respect, Leighton and Surridge consider the new term of mechanical reproduction that can serve as a possible question for further discussion.

Furthermore, Cameron, Leighton and Surridge, and Raghinaru analyze other topics, including the shocking and mysterious character of sensation fiction, the meaning of the term 'sensation', the plot scenes, and principal characters. It is important to note that Schmitt and Wynne discuss "sensation" as a term as well as a feature of Collins' mysterious novel, excluding the levels of plot and form. In this respect, Cameron's, Leighton and Surridge's, Raghinaru's, and Schmitt's studies are of great interest for the analysis. The scholars discuss the author's language, with repetition as a typical feature. However, one should also pay attention that Collins uses repetition not only as a literary device, but exploits it in the plot too, introducing frequent late-night encounters to add more mystery to the novel. Therefore, the

studies of Leighton and Surridge and Raghinaru are of great value because they examine the novel at the textual level.

The challenge of male dominance and the English ideal of domesticity are of crucial importance for further research. Leighton and Surridge, Raghinaru, and Schmitt cover these themes in their studies. The authors state that Collins has represented English gentlemen as criminals, whereas women possess rational reason and ability to struggle against the male world. In this respect, such a depiction violates the portrayal of male and female worlds known to Victorian society. Collins' language and literary devices reinforce the undermining of male dominance in the novel and the violation of English historical beliefs about women in the scope of domestic environment. One can draw a parallel between the novel's mechanical structure and the above mentioned questions. Hence, Leighton and Surridge's, Raghinaru's, and Schmitt's studies make a considerable contribution to the analysis of the novel and, in turn, can serve as the material for further research.

DISPUTES AND DISAGREEMENTS

Although the points of discussion and the evidence provided by the studies under review give a complete picture of different aspects of Collins' novel, there are still certain weaknesses. For instance, Cameron's study does not provide the audience with a full insight in the topics she discusses, specifically female representation and feminine dominance as portrayed in Collins' novel. At the same time, one can disagree with Cameron's view of the woman in white as a prostitute and Laura's description as a character possessing sexual message. Even though Cameron exemplifies her specific understanding of the characters, her study lacks sufficient evidence. Furthermore, Leighton and Surridge consider *The Woman in White* a work of

mechanical reproduction, but they do not develop this idea further. Thus, this question deserves further investigation.

CONCLUSION

After reviewing the literature, one can acknowledge the significance of the selected scholarly sources. The studies examined above allow to analyze the literary material and continue further research of the theme with a focus on particular topic areas. To be precise, the works under review provide the audience with the necessary information concerning Collins' novel as a primary example of sensation fiction, the author's manner of shocking the readers and evoking their empathy for the characters. Nevertheless, the mechanical structure of the novel conveyed through the author's language, literary means, plot scenes, and principal characters deserve further discussion. In addition, it is necessary to research the literary means of portraying a new woman with cold reason and strong will and undermining the male dominance, at the textual level. Therefore, Collins' methods and manner of expressing the mechanical structure of the novel as well as the theme of gender roles and English vision of ideal domesticity constitute a separate area for further analysis.