

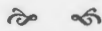
Body of Truth: Intuition and Truth in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*

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Abstract:

The analysis of Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* provided here indicates Collins's privileging of nervous system-based body wisdom and intuition over that of logic and reason. Through research and analysis of the text, I claim that Collins uses the nervous aesthetic of sensationalism to reveal the truth-value of intuition. Body wisdom is employed both within and outside of the novel, whereby the characters in the novel, as well as the reader, experience a physiological nervous system response that ultimately guides them to truth and justice. Furthermore, the failure of the law and the success of intuition throughout the novel suggest a critique of the nineteenth-century epistemology of truth in regard to the legal system method of acquiring the truth. Moreover, I conclude that Collins is attempting to communicate with the reader's sensations and solve the mystery of the novel with intuition to show that the body is the ultimate bringer of truth.



In *The Woman in White*, Wilkie Collins employs the genre of the sensation novel as a means of getting the reader to think outside of the mind and respond with the wisdom of the body. Although the story is told with the formulaic equations of a syntactic language symbiosis, Collins suggests that this "symbiosis" is also a way of getting to a deeper level of communication and "truth." The characters of the novel respond to situations with the logic and reason of language and evidence, but the prevailing response throughout the novel is the physiological response of the body. This is a nervous system response that often functions as a character's "intuition." By employing the nervous system response, Collins has created a sort of "nervous aesthetic" that guides the intuitive characters, as well as the reader, through the mystery of the novel and provides them with the means of discovering and identifying the "truth." Collins's sensationalism exposes an important truth-revealing physiological response that seems to undermine the prevailing truth-revealing methods of logic and reason that dominated nineteenth-century epistemology. In doing this, Collins is also forming the basis for a critique of the legal system, and the law's ability to bring truth and justice to the criminal and victim. Through the "nervous aesthetic" of sensationalism, Collins is suggesting that "truth" is in the body and can be revealed through a physiological nervous system response. Collins's "nervous aesthetic" can best be described as a truth-revealing "intuition."

Collins's truth theory, as employed through the means of the nervous aesthetic of intuition, is suggested at the beginning of the novel when Walter takes the long way home on the night before leaving to take his drawing master position at Limmeridge House. Walter's "restless frame of mind and body" led him to take "the most round-about way" on his way home (Collins 23). Walter attributes his nervous system reaction of "restless[ness]" to his "prospect of going to bed in [his] airless chamber" or his "prospect of gradual suffocation" being "one and the same thing"

(23). Walter's response to the physiological feeling of "suffocation" and "restless[ness]" causes him to take "the most round-about way." Walter's nervous reaction is a communication with intuition, which eventually leads him to a meeting with Anne Catherick.

When Walter begins to follow his intuition and abandon his logic and reason, he is led to a precursor of the truth and outcome of his story. He is led to a discovery that will ultimately acquaint him with one of the victims of the conspiracy and will inevitably help him to understand the "truth." When Walter sets out on his intuitive wandering, he says, "so far as my own sensations were concerned, I can hardly say that I thought at all" (23). Walter is following the communication of his intuition and not the logic and reasoning of his conscious mind. It is Walter's intuition that leads him to meet Anne Catherick on the lonely road:

I had mechanically turned in this latter direction, and was strolling along the lonely high-road—idly wondering, I remember, what the Cumberland young ladies would look like—when, in a moment, every drop of blood in my body was brought to a stop by the touch of a hand laid lightly and suddenly on my shoulder from behind me (23).

Walter "mechanically," automatically and instinctively responds to the physiological nervous stimuli of his intuition and finds his way to Anne Catherick through the means of a "mechanical" and intuitive navigation system. A logical system of navigation would have led Walter to take the "[least] round-about way" home, which would have caused him to miss his meeting with Anne Catherick and ignore his nervous system reaction of intuition. Collins suggests that there is a deeper and more truthful level of communication being revealed through Walter's "mechanical" compass of intuition than that of a logical response to his "restless frame of mind and body."

In the essay "Good Vibrations: The Sensationalization of Masculinity in *The Woman in White*," Rachel Ablow argues that Walter's sensational response to his first meeting with Anne Catherick is useless. Ablow explains, "This 'apparition' [Anne Catherick] may explain the momentary stoppage of his blood, but since there is no obvious reason for this woman to be here, it is itself inexplicable. As a result, he has no idea how to respond to her" (162). Furthermore, Ablow mentions Walter's observations of Anne Catherick's physical features, but says, "rather than helping make sense of the situation, these observations enable him only to conclude what she is not" (162). Ablow's argument notes Walter's lack of the use of logic and reason in determining why he has met Anne Catherick, what her motives are and how to "make sense of the situation," but she fails to recognize that it was his intuition that led him to Anne Catherick in the first place. Furthermore, if Collins is suggesting that a "mechanical" compass of intuition is guiding Walter, then it would be assumed that there is, in fact, an "obvious reason" for Walter to meet "this

apparition." Ablow's argument fails to recognize the importance of sensation as it relates to intuitive communication in the novel.

Moreover, when being read as "intuition," Walter's "sensation" or "nervous system reaction" to the situation is the means by which he makes the final decision to let the unjustly imprisoned Anne Catherick escape in a cab. Although Walter does not know that she has escaped from an insane asylum at this point, he trusts his intuition which has led him to this situation in the first place, and despite Anne Catherick's strange behavior, saves the distressed woman from being placed back in the asylum. Walter's lack of logic and reason, at this point, is what saves Anne Catherick, and inevitably enables her to meet with him on later accounts and with Laura Fairlie at Blackwater Park. When Anne Catherick asks Walter if he will help her get a cab, she tells him that he must leave her and let her go by herself. Walter responds to the reader by saying, "Remember that I was young; remember that the hand which touched me was a woman's" (Collins 26). Anne Catherick asks Walter to promise that he will let her go alone and he agrees to do so (26). After Anne leaves, Walter discovers that she has escaped from an insane asylum and that he has just aided her in being able to roam free. Ablow mentions "Only then does he [Walter] discover that he has assisted an inmate of an insane asylum to escape" (162). Walter then questions himself about his decision to let Anne go. Ablow argues that "Walter's susceptibility to his sensations has prevented him from asking these questions until it is too late" (162). Ablow blames Walter's "susceptibility to his sensations" for leading him "into error," but it is, in fact, his "susceptibility to his sensations" and his "restless frame of mind and body" that leads him intuitively down the road to meet Anne in the first place. It is also his "susceptibility to his sensations" that allow him to make the decision (or lack of decision) of letting an innocent woman escape the pursuit of a man whose main aim is to do harm to her. Walter's physiological communication intuited during his meeting with Anne seems to be Collins's way of pointing out that a young man's intuition, forestalling logic and reason, has aided an innocent woman in escaping harm. Walter does not use logic and reason when deciding to say "yes" to Anne Catherick. Logic and reason, as it appears in this situation, would have led to the capture and imprisonment of an innocent woman. When Walter begins to use logic over intuition, he decides that it should be his "duty" to "control" the actions of Anne Catherick. Walter's strictly logical interpretation of the event only makes him similar to the cold, collective and manipulative behaviors of Sir Percival and Count Fosco. Through intuition, Walter seems to know the truth and his physiological response to the situation is the best justice that he can do for Anne at the moment. Walter's intuition has told him the "truth" and he lets her go. Collins seems to suggest that intuition holds a higher level of virtue than does logic.

Collins's use of the "nervous aesthetic" further implies that "truth" is in the body and can be discovered through intuition. Throughout the novel, Collins proves that intuition is truth by creating a nervous response in the reader, which provides insight into the "truths" of the novel. In the essay "Cage Aux Folles: Sensation and Gender in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*," D. A. Miller mentions how the sensation novel creates its affect on the reader:

... [The sensation novel] is obsessed with the project of finding meaning—of staging the suspense of its appearance—in everything except the sensations that the project excites in us. Yet in principle the sensation novel must always at least imply a reading of these sensations, for the simple reason that it can mobilize the sympathetic nervous system only by giving it something to sympathize with. (108)

The sensational response that the reader gets when reading Marian Halcombe's description of Blackwater Park allows the reader to respond with an intuition that tells the reader that not all is well in Blackwater Park. Marian describes Blackwater in a most foreboding way: "The house is situated on a dead flat, and seems to be shut in—almost suffocated, to my north-country notions, by trees" (Collins 197). Logic and reason would tell the reader that there is nothing to fear, but Collins's specific diction ("dead flat" and "suffocated") creates the effect of a natural sensation that one would have when visiting a place like Blackwater Park. The nervous response to Marian's description of Blackwater Park serves to warn the reader of danger. Although not a logical response, the reader's intuition (physiological response) communicates the truth that lies behind the scenes of Blackwater Park. Blackwater Park is the scene of Fosco and Percival's conspiracy and their manipulation of Marian and Laura. The reader's intuitive response to the sensational description of Blackwater Park serves to shine "truth" on the events that inevitably take place at Blackwater. Miller mentions that "... those without the capacity to become nervous also lack the capacity to interpret events, or even to see that events require interpreting" (109). The "capacity to interpret events," whether it is the reader of the novel or characters within the novel, is fulfilled through the intuition of the nervous body. Collins's use of the sensation novel suggests that the "nervous aesthetic" of the novel serves as a means of revealing the truth.

The physiological response that is created between Walter and Laura at the Limeridge House in the beginning of the novel foreshadows the truth of their love and marriage in the end of the novel. Collins suggests that Walter's sensations of love for Laura are a communicated intuition of truth and love. The fact that their love lasts throughout the novel, and through the separation of a year, suggests that Walter and Laura's initial intuition of their love was a reciprocated communication of the truth. Ablow argues that Walter's "susceptibility to his sensations" is "responsible for his inappropriate attachment to his wealthy pupil, Laura Fairlie" (Ablow 162). Walter's "sensations" are, in fact, "responsible" for his "attachment" to Laura, but Laura's "sensations" are equally "responsible" for her "attachment" to Walter. Furthermore, Walter's "sensations" and "inappropriate attachment" are his intuition of truth and true love.

Walter's "susceptibility to his sensations" is, in fact, what brings him to the graveyard in the end of the novel to discover that his lover (Laura) is still alive. When Walter hears of Laura's false death he expresses his "sensations" to his mother: "'Let me go away alone, for a little while,' I said. 'I shall bear it better when I have looked once more at the place where I first saw her—when I have knelt and prayed by the grave where they have laid her to rest'" (Collins 408). The physiological "sensations" caused by

Laura's supposed death led Walter intuitively to Limmeridge House and to the graveyard where he believes he will find Laura's tomb. Instead, he finds Laura alive and is drawn to her with an intense sensation; "... the veiled woman [Laura] had possession over me, body and soul" (410). This course of events seems to suggest that Walter's intuitional compass has led him, once again, to the truth. Walter's "sensations" bring him to the discovery of the truth; Laura Fairlie is alive.

Although Walter uses logic throughout the novel as a means of attaining evidence to support the truth behind the conspiracy, he does not pursue the legal method of procuring the truth, and the end result of his systematic development of a legal case is undermined by the identification of Laura by her friends and family in the end of the novel. When Walter discovers that Laura is alive and that she and Anne Catherick were the victims of a malicious and successful conspiracy that has cost Laura her identity, he attempts to gather evidence that will help him build a legal case to restore Laura's identity, but after attaining the necessary evidence he, a man of no title, station or legal position, merely invites Laura's friends and family to Limmeridge House to show her to them and tell them that she is no other than Laura Fairlie. The audience's first response to seeing Laura is a physiological response that fills them with a sensation that reveals the truth to them: "A perceptible shock of surprise, an audible murmur of interest, ran through them, at the sight of her face" (617). The audience is "shock[ed]" with "interest" at the "sight of her face," which implies that their physiological response is beginning to fill them with the truth. The fact that Walter does not use the legal system to identify Laura suggests that the problem of identity loss can mostly be solved through the inner knowledge of body language and intuition. Although Laura is physically altered when he sees her again after her alleged death, a physiological response wells up in his chest and provides him with the truth of her identity. Even though Walter has provided evidence of Laura's identity to the people gathered at Limmeridge House, it is their response at seeing her that motivates their initial "shock" and "interest." Laura may serve as physical evidence, but she is also the vessel of physiological communication between bodies. The people are described as being filled with an "interest" when Laura

is present, but not before she is actually present in front of the people at Limmeridge House.

The nervous aesthetic used by Collins to inspire a reaction in the reader allows the reader to have a deeper physiological connection with the events in the text. The intuition created by the nervous system response guides the reader through a sensational landscape that provides the reader with an alternative means of acquiring the truth. Logic and reason can be used to uncover the truth and solve the mystery of the novel, but sensationalism, provided through intuition, allows the reader to respond with the body and intuit their way through the mystery and into the light of the truth. The nervous aesthetic also guides the characters throughout the novel and creates a physiological bond between the reader and the characters. This serves to prove as evidence of the truthfulness of intuition. Collins's "truth theory" of intuition provides that truth is known through the physiological response of the nervous system and implies that the "body" tells the "truth." Furthermore, the failure of the law and the success of intuition throughout the novel suggest a critique of the nineteenth-century epistemology of truth. Collins is suggesting that the legal system is not the only way of acquiring the truth and is, in many ways, flawed by its investment in logic and reason. Collins is also suggesting a new way of thinking about the truth that seems to move toward the esoteric and metaphysical, yet is grounded in the biology of physicality. Collins is attempting to communicate with the reader's sensations and solve the mystery with intuition to show that the "body" is the vessel of truth.

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