EXPERIMENTS IN SUSPENSE: TECHNIQUE IN THE EARLY FICTION OF WILKIE COLLINS

by

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(Under the Direction of Richard Menke)

ABSTRACT

This study addresses the critical tendency to view Wilkie Collins's early novels, *Basil*, *Hide and Seek*, and *The Dead Secret*, as failed attempts at writing *The Woman in White*. I propose that these novels deserve more attention, as they demonstrate Collins's technical concerns in creating a novel of suspense, specifically those related to narrative construction and narratorial presence. I first explore how the early novels serve as experimentations with technique and conclude by discussing how Collins's narrative strategies in *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone* stem from his findings in the earlier novels.

INDEX WORDS: Wilkie Collins, *Basil*, *Hide and Seek*, *The Dead Secret*, *The Woman in White*, *The Moonstone*, suspense, technique, narrative, narration

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Best known for his sensational plots and suspenseful narrative technique, Wilkie Collins made his mark upon nineteenth-century fiction by exploring how the Gothic could reside within an ordinary, realistic Victorian setting, what Collins himself hailed as "the secret theatre of home" (*Basil* 76). No longer were gothic themes and images, as they filtered down through the century from the genre's more conventional characteristics, reserved for far-away locales and unbelievable happenings. Collins brought the mysterious secrets and dark truths of the Gothic right into the parlor of Victorian comfort, upsetting conventional literary boundaries, but not with any ill-effect upon the popularity of his fiction. In fact, as Peter Brooks notes, Collins was the "century's best-selling and highest-paid novelist in English" (168-69). Indeed, Collins' most famous sensation novels, *The Woman in White* (1860) and *The Moonstone* (1868), were not only sensational for pairing the Gothic with the domestic but also sensational in the fact that his readership found it enthralling to delve into contemporary plots and to get to know characters that they could potentially pass on the city streets or, perhaps, had known all of their lives; there was something terrifying yet exciting in reading about malicious acts and ruinous secrets making their way through the fortified, impenetrably-proper Victorian setting. Rather than being a "safe, pious place" from which to escape the filthy goings-on of the outside world, the home became "the source of plots in which the most innocent family member might be kidnapped, or even murdered" (Johnson viii).

The 1859 serial publication of *The Woman in White* in Dickens' *All the Year Round* is the "generally accepted historical starting point for sensation fiction" (Sutherland 75). Moreover, the idea of uncovering hidden secrets, masked by the Victorian power of social appearance, spurred the development of Collins's work as detective fiction; Collins placed emphasis not only on the "what" but the "how" and the "why" in his novels. In order to keep his plots interesting, and his readers reading, Collins had to pay particular attention to the way his novels were constructed; he had to exalt the process as much as the subjects of his novels to ensure the preservation of suspense until the novel's close. The "originality of device" in Collins's work even "kept readers like Thackeray—someone who yawned over most popular fiction—turning pages from 'morning till sunset'" (Sutherland 75). Though clues carefully lain within the text helped lead readers to connect the dots between various narratives provided by different characters, the truth only became transparent when the reader had finished the novel and could retrospectively re-examine the case with all the facts at hand. The focus on the whodunit aspects of the novel essentially allowed the reader to become the detective.

It is no coincidence that Collins' most popular novels, *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*, are those in which he most carefully constructs his narratives through a technique that upholds suspense until the very last page; the plots of these novels warrant a rigid, systematic narrative construction because of the nature of their intratextual purpose, that of providing all the facts and available information so as to determine the nature of the truth, and the need to keep his readers looking for the solution to the mystery or crime. For Collins, the nature of knowledge is subjective, and it is only by collecting as much relevant information as possible that one can filter through the mass of potential meaning to discover a more objective truth. In *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*, Collins's use of multiple, first-person

perspectives emphasizes this idea, suggesting to the reader as the novels progress that one must be in possession of all the facts to better determine the truth.

Given that the plots are complicated by presenting a variety of perspectives, Collins had to figure out a way to clearly present the case to the reader, helping him or her along while still maintaining suspense. As each character has his or her own point of view, providing different pieces of the puzzle from his or her own experience, the plethora of factors, opinions, and available information required some sort of manageable, reader-friendly binding adhesive. Collins solves this problem by carefully constructing a series of narratives, divvied up by character yet usually connected in a chronological order, that work together (often in a literal sense by referencing other characters' narratives) to carry the plot as events unfold and toward revelations of the truth. These narratives function, as Collins suggests through the character of Walter Hartright in the Preamble to *The Woman in White*, much like a court of law in which multiple witnesses are called upon in efforts to ascertain the truth "in its most direct and most intelligible aspect"; by having each character give his or her own testimony, and by looking at them collectively, we can "trace the course of one complete series of events" (4). Collins's "fragmented, multi-vocal narratives" were, as Lynn Pykett declares, "the boldest experimentations with narrative form to be found in the sensation mode" (*Sensation Novel* 14). This formative technique, along with the novels' content, has generated a significant amount of criticism, if only in the last thirty years.

Over the past few decades, Collins's work has undergone a period of re-discovery, one in which critics have begun to discuss his work in a more serious fashion rather than as crowd-pleasing entertainment. However, in comparison to the critical attention given to his more popular works, Collins's earlier novels seem to have barely made a splash in the critical pool,

especially in terms of technique. As Steve John Farmer has pointed out in his article "A Search for Form: Wilkie Collins's Early Fiction," the novels preceding his landmark productions of the 1860s, *Antonina* (1850), *Basil* (1852), *Hide and Seek* (1854), and *The Dead Secret* (1857), have mostly been viewed as Collins's "apprentice fiction," as mere "stepping stones to success" (7). Most scholars who approach these works do so on the basis of plot, characterization, and description, using them as a means of suggesting "a straightforward and teleological development from apprenticeship to achievement," portraying them as "link[s] in a chain" leading to *The Woman in White* (8, 10). Farmer further observes that critics often "rank" the novels in efforts to demonstrate "that *Antonina* least resembles *The Woman in White*, that *Basil* shows slight improvement, that *Hide and Seek* shows advance, and that *The Dead Secret* represents the last plateau before greatness" (9). In suggesting that we resist this critical tendency to view Collins's early fiction as failed attempts at producing *The Woman in White*, "as consciously working toward a yet-unwritten novel," Farmer opens up a rich critical vein, one that approaches the novels as individual experiments in which we see "a young novelist's several distinct attempts at finding a successful formula for writing" (11, 7).

While Farmer concentrates his exploration of the early fiction on Collins's search for "form," Farmer's term for the types of fiction with which Collins experiments, we might apply a similar mindset to Collins' technique, or the various narrative devices he uses to shape his novels. Perhaps if we look at his technique in the early novels not as something he fails to do until *The Woman in White* but rather as Collins's experimenting with various methods that correspond with his search for a more suspenseful form, we can see how Collins discovers and polishes his trademark narrative strategy. Through the process of determining what works and what doesn't, or, rather, discerning how to make good use of and combine those elements that *do*

work, a writer may finally arrive at that breakthrough point of discovery in his or her literary career; by looking at how certain techniques arise and are implemented in Collins's works up to that culminating point, and by examining them alongside *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*, we can detect the authorial concerns Collins exhibits within his early fiction and perhaps trace how he develops and perfects the "secret" of his success in mastering the element of suspense.

The works most essential to a study of Collins's early experimentation with technique are *Basil*, *Hide and Seek*, and *The Dead Secret*. If we look at these novels as a group, they are structured quite differently. *Basil* provides a retrospective first-person account of the narrator's doomed nuptial adventures; *Hide and Seek* gives us the story of detecting a family secret, though told by an intrusive, omniscient narrator; and *The Dead Secret* dishes up a tale of mystery in which the omniscient narrator is scarcely visible. Despite the differences in the general schemes of the novels, they share an interest in how to go about implementing and maintaining suspense. Throughout these works, Collins seems to focus his experimentation with techniques of suspense in the areas of narrative construction and narratorial presence. Though narrative construction and narratorial presence are almost inseparable in Collins's work, as the major novels meticulously demonstrate, looking at these two techniques individually may help to shed some light on Collins's concern for how narratorial presence affects a narrative's construction. Narrative construction is characterized here simply as the way the narrative is arranged, the way in which the story is presented. Narratorial presence may be defined as the narrator's relationship to the text, incorporating such issues as a narrator's privileges or limits.

Directing our attention to the technical devices Collins explores and experiments with in *Basil*, *Hide and Seek*, and *The Dead Secret*, we can see how he manipulates those techniques to

best serve the element of suspense in the later novels. Characteristics such as the elimination of an omniscient or sole narrator, the carefully-planned stringing together of various narratives to give multiple points of view as well as building upon available evidence, and providing a guiding intratextual purpose for the story's existence appear to be decisions Collins made as a result of his experimentation with other technical approaches. By the time Collins discovers the form with which he is most comfortable, the sensation novel intermixed with elements of detective fiction, he has also discerned a technique to accompany his form. The fictional purpose for the novels' existence, trying to gain as many perspectives and as much relevant information as possible to reach the truth, not only demands the type of narrative strategy Collins employs but also allows Collins to put into practice the techniques he comes to associate with his own "formula for writing."

CHAPTER 2

NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION

Throughout his early fiction, Collins demonstrates a concern for how his novels are arranged, particularly in how the text itself—its construction—can be used to create suspense. What emerges in *Basil*, *Hide and Seek*, and *The Dead Secret* is a sort of tension between telling and withholding information. "The acceptable concealing of information," a phrase Jeanne Bedell applies to his later novels, develops as a major point of interest for Collins, especially in his early works; in a novel of suspense, the "manner of concealment" becomes more important than the secret: "Even the crime itself is not more hideous and more incredible than the mystery in which its evil motives, and the manner of its evil ripening, were still impenetrably veiled" (25, 27; *Basil* 178).

Collins's second published novel, *Basil* (1852), marks a significant shift in the type of fiction he writes. Leaving behind the form of his first published novel *Antonina* (1850), a historical romance set around the fall of the Roman Empire, Collins gravitated toward a more suspenseful narrative with a modern setting. The primary focus of *Basil*, titled after the novel's narrator and protagonist, is the story of a young man's experience with love and deception. After falling in love on a London omnibus and secretly marrying Margaret, the daughter of a tradesman, under probationary terms, all the while keeping his marriage (in name only) a secret from his privileged family, the young gentleman spends a year waiting to claim his wife as his own. On the very eve before the appointed day of consummation, Basil discovers an affair between his wife and Mannion, an employee and friend of Margaret's father. Basil later learns

that he has been the victim of an ill-conceived plot of revenge happening right under his nose, and the rest of the novel traces his flight from and eventual battle-to-the-death with Mannion, who loses the battle.

Little do we know as we begin *Basil* that we are thrown amidst a complex narrative structure, one that maintains suspense throughout the novel and does not allow the outcome to become fully transparent until the very end. Crucial to this construction is Collins's decision to implement a double story-line and time frame. While our narrator leads us toward the events that have placed him in his current situation, disownment and isolation, the story does not end there. Basil is still part of a situation that has yet to be resolved and suffers under this anxiety even while he tells the story of his past. Just as we think we are approaching the novel's resolution of Basil's present state, through Mannion's demise, we are again left to wonder what happens to our protagonist as he falls into a fever of nervous shock and abruptly leaves off writing. Our fears are finally put to rest by the inclusion of supplementary material in the form of letters. Within these letters we discover Basil's fate; he is restored to his father's good graces and embraced again by his family. Moreover, the final letter Basil writes to Mr. Bernard provides an explanation for the novel's structure as well as its fictional publication.

Basil's three sections, respectively titled "Basil," "Journal," and "Letters in Conclusion," are made distinct by a shift in materials and function both separately and as a whole. The first section of the novel is the narrator's manuscript in which he writes retrospectively about the events that set the novel in motion. In the second section we are presented with the narrator's journal where he records the immediate happenings around him. The supplementary materials in the final section help to tie up loose ends and explain how the novel itself, in its complete form, comes into existence. While these sections function as a collective whole, bridging the various

layers of time that complicate the narrative, they also function separately. One of the technical concerns Collins asserts within these individual sections is the idea of motive, especially as it relates to why, as well as how, a particular part of the novel is written. Another major concern for Collins is linear progression; the structure of the individual sections attempts to maintain a forward progression of the plot, and related to this is the concern for how to furnish background information necessary for the reader. Finally, Collins also points to the notion that the novel is a heavily constructed text, both literally and, more importantly, within the novel's fictional realm. Collins's interest in these technical matters takes root in *Basil*, and they will become fundamental in *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*.

As Basil begins to write the "history" of his past, he does so in the manner of answering questions that he proposes himself, as if he anticipates his reader's questions. Christopher Kent remarks that "when an omniscient author decides to tell us a story we do not expect to be told why he is doing so. When we encounter a first-person narrator who has created his document, we expect some explanation of why he has done so" (67). This method not only outlines the purpose of the manuscript, as a sort of preface for Basil's motive for writing, but also hints at the manuscript's structure:

> What am I now about to write?
>
> The history of little more than the events of one year, out of the twenty-four years of my life.
>
> Why do I undertake such an employment as this?
>
> Perhaps, because I think that my narrative may do good; because I hope that, one day, it may be put to some warning use. I am now about to relate the story of an error, innocent in its beginning, guilty in its progress, fatal in its results; and I would fain hope

> that my plain and true record will show that this error was not committed altogether without excuse. (1)

It is clear from the very beginning that Basil's motive in writing is to "do good," he claims, and by presenting, and therefore telling, his story as a "plain and true record," he hopes to vindicate himself, if only against the events with which he has had no part, namely Mannion's ruining of Basil's marriage. Basil undertakes his "self-imposed occupation" with a specific audience in mind; as he demonstrates a concern for how his memory will be viewed among the "next generation of [his] house," he indicates that the manuscript to be "found after [his] death" is written for those closest to him, presumably Clara, Ralph, and Basil's father as well as any future relatives that might come into possession of the manuscript, instead of a more general audience (1).

Layered on top of Basil's need to write a testimony of what exactly happened is the immediate "threat of impending hostility" (2). Though Basil secretes himself in a remote location of Cornwall, he works against a time constraint. He must finish his narrative before his enemy, "determined and deadly, patient alike to wait for days or years for his opportunity," enacts his revenge: "In entering on my new employment, I cannot say of my time, that it may be mine for another hour; of my life, that it may last till evening" (2). These introductory remarks about Basil's motives point toward Collins's concern for instilling a sense of reality or truth within the fictional framework of the story. The seriousness of the situation calls for absolute truth, as this is, potentially, Basil's last chance to give a complete and truthful statement. One of the ways to ensure this is to have Basil tell his story from beginning to end exactly as it happened to him so as to provide the whole story, or all the facts, at least those his limited, first-person perspective can provide.

One of the problems in telling the story this way, retrospectively, is that the narrator knows the outcome. In order to further instill his reader with sympathy for his plight, Basil must take the reader through his past, keeping him or her naïve of certain events as he himself was at the time. The outcome must be kept a secret so that the reader can see that "this error was not committed altogether without excuse" (1). Though we know what the consequence of his error is, Basil fears for his life, we are kept in the dark about the cause of his present condition. The creation of this dual suspense forwards the progression of the novel, teasing us. Though we may reach the point at which we know what happened in the past, the issue has not yet been resolved and there is still a dangerous threat.

However, this raises the issue of how Basil's hindsight affects what we see. Though Basil must recreate his story as if experiencing it again for the first time, he is in a position that allows him to manipulate how the reader sees specific events. When Basil reaches a particular place in his narrative that will come to bear significance later on, something he could not see at the time, he makes a conscious effort to point this out to the reader while leaving out any explanation as to how the event or scene fits into the revenge plot that hides beneath the surface. Basil's hinting not only accentuates the reader's sympathy for his earlier self, as he or she feels all the more sorry for a character that cannot see the tell-tale signs of something happening right under his nose, but it also stimulates the reader's interest, prodding him or her to read more carefully to try to determine the outcome which Basil uses as a means of holding us in suspense. A particularly telling example of this occurs when Basil introduces the events that occur during the probationary period of his marriage, such as instances when Margaret demonstrates odd behavior. While he mentions that "some [events] affected [him] with a temporary disappointment," he subtly directs his reader to be on the lookout for meaning, or clues, by

adding that he did not, at the time, view these events "with even a momentary suspicion," and that he "can now look back on them, as so many timely warnings which [he] treated with fatal neglect" (101). While Basil's hindsight may present a problematic situation in that it prevents him from being able to render the story accurately, exactly as he experienced it the first time, complete with his ignorance of certain events or potential meaning, hindsight also serves as a useful tool for suspense, as it heightens our awareness of something we cannot see, despite our efforts at detection.

Though Basil informs us that the series of events of which he writes spans the period of just over a year, he includes a good deal of background information necessary for the reader to be on equal standing with him before he begins his actual story. Instead of jumping right into his work, and providing background information as it is needed throughout, Basil explains any pertinent information up front, such as he does when he describes his family: "In the mean time, it is first necessary that I should say more about the members of my family. Two of them, at least, will be found important to the progress of events in these pages" (5). Basil expresses a similar concern when he refers to his father's disapproval of his older brother's disappointingly capricious manner: "He was still unaltered. My father's temper suffered under this second disappointment. He became more fretful and silent; more apt to take offense than had been his wont. I particularly mention the change thus produced in his disposition, because that change was destined, at no very distant period, to act fatally upon me" (16-17). Not only do these characters and situations point to a beginning before the beginning of the immediate narrative, but they also serve as a foundation for some of the things he will address later on in his manuscript. In order to move forward linearly in an efficient manner, going ahead and getting these issues out of the way will help the reader understand Basil's situation and prevents the

interruption of his narrative. Once Basil has "completed all the preliminary notices" for his story and finally "proceed[s] at once to the more immediate subject of [his] narrative," the central focus of Basil's manuscript is set in motion and maintains a forward progression throughout (24).

The most interesting of Collins's technical concerns within *Basil*, perhaps, is the notion that this is a constructed text. Not only is Collins, the author, fitting together the elements of plot and structure, but Basil too, as our fictional writer, is concerned with elements of textuality, particularly in the first section of the novel. After we reach the point in the manuscript where we discover how Basil has been deceived, we retrospectively look back over the events of the past to see things in their true light. Basil comments on this strategy directly, suggesting that "to seek once more the lost events of the End," we must go back "through the events of the Beginning" (172). The structure of the novel, "innocent in its beginning, guilty in its progress, fatal in its results," only becomes fully transparent once we ourselves have a bit if hindsight (1). After we have come full circle, back to the beginning of Basil's manuscript, we can see why, with both outcome and explanation in hand, Basil makes certain technical decisions, such as when he quite self-consciously uses the past tense to refer to his relationship with his father: "I always considered my father—I speak of him in the past tense, because we are now separated for ever; because he is henceforth as dead to me as if the grave had closed over him" (5). Just as Basil "detected…how the…plot had been framed to keep [him]…deceived," the reader becomes conscious that he or she is reading an exceedingly constructed text (185).

The second section of *Basil*, titled simply "Journal," demonstrates many of the same technical concerns as those conveyed in the manuscript section. Again, Basil expresses a need to explain his motive for keeping a journal, and this motive points toward the notion of

construction. Though his "retrospect is finished" and he has "traced the history of [his] errors and misfortunes…from the past to the present time," he acknowledges that he has not "related all which it is necessary to tell" (311). Rather, "there remains for [him] a future which must be recorded, as the necessary sequel to the narrative of the past" (311). Though we have learned what brought Basil to his current situation, we still do not know the outcome. Though he has managed his retrospective account before being discovered by Mannion, there is still the time constraint with which he is pressed at the beginning. For this reason, he decides to "note down events daily as they occur" as a "continuation" to his story, even if it is related "fragment by fragment" (312). By openly discussing in his first entry the journal's purpose and how it will function, he points to the journal's relationship to the manuscript, that they function both separately and as a whole, and reaffirms the fact that what we are reading is a constructed text.

However, before he begins narrating immediate events as they occur, linear progression being inherent in the journal form, Basil tells us what his life has been like since his arrival in Cornwall. We know that Basil has been writing in a foreign locale, as he constantly reminds us of his seclusion throughout the manuscript, but we know nothing of what his life has been like, outside of those vague remarks, since he left London: "But, first, as a fit beginning to the Journal I now pose to keep, let me briefly reveal something, in this place, of the life that I am leading in my retirement on the Cornish coast" (312). In the manuscript, Basil exhibits a concern for how to start his journal once he's completed his pseudo-preface; we are again provided background information so that we may proceed linearly towards the future. Once we reach the "now," we are still held in suspense by a moment-by-moment account of the villian's actions. If the manuscript section establishes a suspenseful situation for the reader, that of having to wait for

Basil's fulfillment of his promise to reveal all, the journal section creates an even more suspenseful state as we do not know which entry will be his last.

As the journal progresses towards its close, and as Basil's physical and psychological suffering increases, Basil's writing becomes less self-conscious and more in-the-moment. Here, the writing mimics his mental state. Following the last few surges of Basil's thoughts, we are provided with a "Note by the Editor," stating that "there are some lines of writing beyond this point; but they are illegible" (329). For the very first time we are aware of another presence in the novel that helps in constructing the narrative. We are brought to question what that role has been since the "Editor" remains hidden until the very end of the novel. Like Basil, we return to the text, looking over what has passed to elicit an interpretation about the present. The return adds suspense while pointing to the novel's constructed-ness, as it anticipates Basil's explanation that this is a formulated text in the final pages of the novel.

The concluding section of *Basil* comes in the form of supplementary letters that aid in tying up loose ends, filling in the gap of where we left Basil. Through the included correspondence of William and Mary Penhale, our anxiety about Basil (did he die from fever or nervous shock?) is put to rest. We learn that he makes a full recovery and returns to his father's good graces. While there is no direct explanation as to why these letters are included or how they function in relationship to the rest of the novel, Collins by no means leaves his readers speculating, especially when the text has been more than forthcoming in explicating its technical strategies. As always in *Basil*, we must wait until the end to see how and why this last section, "Letters in Conclusion," concludes the novel.

The final letter in which Basil writes Mr. Bernard, whom we learn is our editor, tells us how he came to be such, why the novel is put in the order it is, and how it came into our hands

(as a fictionally published novel). Feeling indebted to Mr. Bernard's assistance in his medical recovery, Basil hands over his narrative as an explanation for how he ended up in the condition in which he was found: "I felt that it was only your due that you should know by what trials I had been reduced to the situation in which you found me, when you accompanied my brother and sister to Cornwall—I felt this; and placed in your hands, for your own private perusal, the narrative which I had written of my error and of its terrible consequences" (337-38). Only after his father's death is Basil willing to have his autobiography published, provided that he retain his anonymity as the author. Though Basil permits Mr. Bernard to make any necessary changes to his style, he prohibits him from changing any of the "characters and events which are taken from realities" (340).

One of the most important issues the final letter raises, in terms of the novel's construction, is how to conclude the story; there are events which still need to be told if the story is allowed to come to a complete close. Even in this final moment, the writer expresses practical concerns about the narrative's construction, though those concerns are tied to the novel's insistence on truth:

> One difficulty, however, still remains:--How are the pages which I am about to send you to be concluded? In the novel-reading sense of the word, my story has no real conclusion….Is it fit that I should set myself, for the sake of effect, to *make*, a conclusion, and terminate by fiction what has begun, and thus far, has proceeded in truth? In the interests of Art, as well as in the interests of Reality, surely not! (339)

Rather than write a fictional ending to a story that has "proceeded in truth," Basil suggests that the inclusion of the Penhales' letters, as well as his own letter, stand as a sufficient conclusion: "Whatever remains to be related after the last entry in my journal, will be found expressed in the

simplest, and therefore, the best form, by the letters from William and Mary Penhale, which I send you with this" (339). Having provided "all the materials [he] can supply for the conclusion of [his] autobiography," Basil can conclude his letter, and thus the novel comes to a close (342).

Among Collins's early novels, *Basil* most resembles *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*, especially in terms of construction. The narrative techniques in *Basil* strongly resonate throughout the major novels and serve as a fruitful experimentation for Collins's formula for writing. As with the major novels, we see various sections coming together and proceeding linearly to create a whole; the "accumulation" and subsequent "synthesis into meaningful narrative" of assorted materials brings the novel into being (Marshall 131). Furthermore, the inclusion of supplementary information, such as Mannion's narrative-like letter to Basil and the newspaper article recounting Mannion's attack, assists in creating a sense of authenticity; the latter is particularly effective, as Collins "plays upon the privileged status of the newspaper as a touchstone of reality" within his fictional work (Kent 68). The novel, like its counterparts, is framed in a way that we have layers of time; there is the remote past of the manuscript and the present of the journal, though all of this. In the concluding letters, however, we discover that all the events take place in the past. Perhaps the most crucial element of construction that links this novel with the later ones is the emphasis on truth serving as justification or explanation. However, despite the close connections between *Basil* and the major novels, the fact that Collins experiments with other types of narrative constructions in *Hide and Seek* and *The Dead Secret* points to the idea that he was still searching for or deciding on the method that best suited his needs, that there might be other techniques that work better to create and maintain suspense. Though Collins would eventually return to the general type of narrative

construction he used in *Basil*, *Hide and Seek* and *The Dead Secret* helped to solidify some of his technical concerns.

In *Hide and Seek* (1854), Collins continues to experiment with the element of suspense, and his novel takes on a peculiarly Dickensian plot. The story is centered around the mysterious parentage of Madonna, a mute orphan who is "adopted" by the artist Valentine Blyth and his wife. The family enjoys a continuance of their situation despite Valentine's fear that Madonna's mysterious past will eventually cause a rupture in the happy family's current arrangement. The occasion for this occurs with the introduction of Matthew Grice into the plot, the rough-edged sailor who befriends Zack, a close friend of the Blyth family. By bringing Matthew into the family's circle, by way of attending an art exhibit of Valentine's works, Zack causes the fusion of two mysteries. Mat himself has returned after a long absence from England to trace what happened to his pregnant, unmarried sister who disappeared a long time ago, as well as her child. Once Mat is convinced that Madonna is the long-lost daughter of his sister Mary, all thanks to a hair bracelet, Mat spends the rest of the novel searching for, or detecting, the man who set these unfortunate events in motion. As we reach the end, in a resolution much like that of Dickens, all hidden connections are made apparent: Zack's father is also Madonna's father.

Unlike *Basil*, *Hide and Seek* is told from the third-person perspective of an omniscient narrator. As is often the case with omniscient perspective, the novel's narrator assumes unconscious acceptance of the story on the part of the reader. For this reason, there is no need to impart a fictional purpose for the story being told, and in general the novel lacks, or does not call for, the explicit delineation of the narrative's construction that is so essential to *Basil*. Nevertheless, Collins constructs this novel in a way that speaks to other technical issues he raises in *Basil*. While his experimentation is somewhat different in the later novel, he continues to

apply alternate techniques. Collins exhibits again a concern for proceeding linearly as well as how to communicate necessary background information. However, this is complicated by the greater number of significant characters in the novel as well as the shifting of focus on those characters, which forces the narrator to backtrack so that he may recapitulate other characters' actions. Whereas in *Basil* we follow the limited perspective of Basil, the omniscient narrator's privileges allow him more flexibility in following around the novel's main characters, Blyth, Madonna, Zack, and Mat.

The novel's structure is divided into two sections, "The Hiding" and "The Seeking," and is framed by an "Opening Chapter" and a "Closing Chapter." Instead of jumping right into the story, we are given an "Opening Chapter" that discusses the Thorpe family some fourteen years before the immediate action of the novel. The next chapter opens in the novel's "present," and initially it seems that the only connection between that chapter and the one that precedes it is location. We are not told how this opening chapter is significant; we wait to see how it fits into the plot, as we trust our omniscient narrator will reveal this to us later. The first section, "The Hiding," involves setting the scene for the second part in which most of the novel's immediate action takes place. This section consists mostly of background information; out of the section's eleven chapters, only four are primarily set in the present.

Whereas in *Basil* Collins gives us most, if not all, of the necessary background information at the beginning, before the immediate action of the novel proceeds, he goes about conveying that information here in a different way. This, again, is perhaps due to the greater number of characters and multiple storylines. As the narrator introduces new characters, we get their background. After a lengthy description of how Bargrove Square has changed in the last fourteen years since the novel's opening scene, we are introduced to Valentine Blyth and

provided his history up to the present time: "Thus much for the history of the painter's past life. We may now make his acquaintance in the appropriate atmosphere of his own Studio" (41). Likewise, when Madonna first appears, the narrator returns to the past to explain who Madonna is and how she figures as a character in the novel, the process of which interrupts the immediate action for a long period of time: "Some years ago, an extraordinary adventure happened to Valentine in the circus of an itinerant Equestrian Company. In that adventure, and in the strange results attending it, the clue lies hidden, which leads to the Mystery of the painter's fireside, and reveals the story of this book" (53). With the reintroduction of Zack, though a brief "specimen has already been presented of Mr Thorpe's method of religiously educating his son," the narrator must fill in the gap between Zack as we last saw him and Zack as he is now: "Such was the point at which the Tribulation of Zack had arrived, at the period when Mr Valentine Blyth resolved to set up a domestic Drawing Academy…with the double purpose of amusing his family circle in the evening, and reforming his wild young friend by teaching him to draw" (134, 140). Collins's struggle to balance multiple characters' significance may seem to break up the flow of the narrative, but this method also assists in creating suspense. In commenting on the nature of plot, Walter de la Mare suggests that a plot "resembles a puzzle or a mathematical problem" in that "as soon as the solution is made clear, it ceases to interest us" (77). In order to hide the secret, to place it in a way that it can be sought, there is the need for lots of background information. Though the constant oscillation between past and present seems rather chaotic, this strategy facilitates Collins's attempt to delay the discovery of his secret.

The narrator also constantly disrupts the linear progression of the novel in the second section, "The Seeking." As Collins implements several interconnected storylines, which often develop apart from one another, he must find a way to balance the progress of each. This

requires that the narrator's surveillance switch around among the different characters. After having concentrated on one character for a period of time, the narrator must backtrack to a certain point to recap what has occurred with another character. For example, after having spent a significant portion of the narrative describing Mat's activity of searching for answers to his mystery in Dibbledean and other towns, away from the other important characters, the narrator relates what Zack has been doing in the interim period: "While Matthew Grice was traveling backwards and forwards between town and town in the midland counties, the life led by his young friend and comrade in the metropolis, was by no means devoid of incident and change" (387). This technique of switching back and forth among characters, like Collins's application of background information to break up the narrative's smooth progression, works to help keep the secret from becoming apparent too soon. In commenting on the sensation novel in general, Lynn Pykett notes that the "narrative satisfactions" of this type of novel "depend…on the gradual uncovering of the central secret(s). To this end the most effective sensation writers developed techniques of narrative concealment and delay or deferral" (*Sensation Novel* 5). Collins's technique of "deferral" is built into his development, or pacing, of multiple storylines; as there are multiple characters, each with their own history, and their own part to play in the novel, the plot becomes more susceptible to suspense. There seems to be a tension between keeping us in-the-know and keeping us in suspense. Just as we begin to make some progress with one particular storyline, the narrative follows another.

Something new to Collins's construction is the use of chapter titles. In *Basil*, Collins limits himself to providing titles for the headings of the separate materials, emphasizing the textual nature of the sections. The use of title chapters in *Hide and Seek* helps to organize the information differently as it points towards the chapters' contents, often in a way that hints at the

progression of the plot. Titles such as "The Search Begun," "Fate Works, with Zack for an Instrument," and "The Discovery of Arthur Carr prepare us for what we will encounter. The inclusion of these helpful labels within his novel suggests that as much as he wants to hold us in suspense, Collins also has a desire to help the reader along. One chapter in particular, "Joanna Grice's Narrative," deserves attention, as it anticipates the organizational strategy he employs in his later novels. Aside from a few parenthetical interjections from Mat, we are presented within this chapter with Joanna Grice's epistolary explanation of what happened to Mary Grice, as far as her experience can tell. Her testimony composes almost the entire chapter, and as such the chapter's title pointing to her narrative is warranted. Like *Basil*, the inclusion of supplementary materials, such as Joanna's narrative, Mary's letters concerning Arthur Carr, and Mr. Thorpe's letter to Mat in which he explains his relationship with Mary, not only help in furthering the plot by uncovering bits and pieces of the mystery but also lend a sense of reality to the fictional story.

Though the novel lacks the explicit delineation of narrative technique that we find in *Basil*, Collins by no means refrains from hinting at the novel's construction. In explaining to Zack how to go about drawing, Blyth offers some advice comparable to the way in which Collins creates his novel: "First sketch in the general form with a light and flowing stroke…Then put dots on the paper; a dot where his head comes; another dot where his elbow and knees come, and so forth. Then strike it all in boldly—it's impossible to give you better advice than that—strike it in, Zack; strike it in boldly!" (149). Like Blyth's technique, Collins first gives us a general sketch of the characters, followed by how they fit into the plot; throughout the rest of the novel, Collins establishes connections between the various characters, just as Blyth "strike[s] in boldly" the lines that connect the dots. In possibly the only moment in which the narrator comments on the

simultaneous actions of his characters, Collins points to the fact that the novel is a construction of multiple storylines:

> At the very moment when [detective fever] was rising ominously in [Mat's] mind, Valentine was expounding anew the whole scope and object of 'Columbus' to a fresh circle of admiring spectators—while his wife was interpreting to Madonna above stairs Zack's wildest jokes about his friend's love-stricken condition; and all three were laughing gaily at a caricature, which he was maliciously drawing for them, of 'poor old Mat' in the character of a scalped Cupid. Even the little minor globe of each man's social sphere has its antipodes-points; and when it is all bright sunshine in one part of the miniature, it is all pitch darkness, at the very same moment, in another. (262)

This passage indirectly hints that while the reader may be enlightened in one area of the novel, he or she remains in the dark about others happening at precisely the same time.

Perhaps the most interesting of Collins's subtle comments concerning the novel's construction, that it is a constructed text, occurs when Zack arrives at Blyth's studio: "While the young gentleman is being admitted at the garden-gate, there is a leisure moment to explain how [Zack] became acquainted with Mr Blyth" (124). Collins inserts this background information into the text in a moment when the immediate action of the novel provides a place for him to do so; the amount of time it takes the servant to admit Zack into the studio is linked to the amount of physical space Collins needs to explain the relationship between Zack and Blyth. Though these textual comments are placed more implicitly within the novel, we see Collins playing with the idea that a novel functions not only as a space in which a story is told but also as a means by which to comment on how the plot is constructed, something he will drive home in *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*.

In the novel following *Hide and Seek*, *The Dead Secret*, Collins again tells the story from the third-person perspective of an omniscient narrator. Published in novel form in 1857, *The Dead Secret* tells the story of a buried family secret. Its title hints at the story's suspenseful quality much in the same way as does *Hide and Seek*. As the novel opens, we observe a dying woman, Lady Treverton, dictating a confessionary letter to her maid, Sarah Leeson, who exhibits apprehension in taking part in this act. Though she promises her mistress to hand over the unexplained statement to her master upon her death, Sarah convinces herself, with the aid of certain loopholes in her agreement, not to give the letter to Captain Treverton; instead, she hides the mysterious piece of paper in a long-unused room, the key to which she discards upon fleeing Porthgenna Tower. Sarah leaves behind a letter that tells the Captian that there is a secret but not what it is, and eventually the secret becomes a thing of the past. The search for the secret's information begins anew when Rosamond and Leonard, newly-wed and later new parents, encounter Mrs. Jazeph. This strange woman, who serves temporarily as nursemaid to Rosamond, is none other than Sarah Leeson; her curious plea that Rosamond not go to Porthgenna Tower, and especially that she not enter the Myrtle Room, sets in motion Rosamond's will to do just that. The novel balances Sarah's efforts to go back and destroy the secret with Rosamond and Leonard's efforts to discover it. Once the secret is discovered, the fact that Rosamond is not the natural child of the Trevertons but rather Sarah's illegitimate daughter, the novel progresses towards the reunion of Rosamond with her mother, who has disappeared into the obscurity of London. Overlaying this plot is the storyline of the recluse uncle, Andrew Treverton, whose presence in the novel serves initially to complicate the couple's endeavors and later to ease them.

Like *Hide and Seek*, the novel works with multiple storylines, namely those of Rosamond and Leonard, Sarah and Uncle Joseph, and Andrew Treverton. However, the novel is constructed

in a way that eliminates the interruption of the narrative that we see in *Hide and Seek*. Collins maintains a linear progression that is much more fluid but still balances the development of the separate storylines that eventually converge in the end. The opening scene is set in the remote past, some fifteen years before the immediate action, and once we reach the novel's "present," we stay there. Instead of disrupting the narrative's forward movement for the sake of imparting background information, Collins fills in the gap between the past and the present by incorporating the missing connections into the novel's plot; he seamlessly imparts this information through the guise of the vicar, Mr. Chennery, telling his curious guest, Mr. Phippen, the history of Porthgenna Tower as well as how the Treverton and Frankland families came to be joined through the marriage of Rosamond and Leonard. The novel lacks, as well, the constant backtracking we find in *Hide and Seek*. Though the novel traces various storylines that develop, for the most part, separately from one another, Collins chooses to frame the plot in a way that does away with simultaneous action; rather than picking up a storyline at the moment in which we left it, Collins moves forward.

One of the reasons Collins constructs his plot in this way is, perhaps, due to the novel's serial publication. *The Dead Secret* was Collins's first novel to be published in installments. With this added element, Collins had to structure his plot in a way that individual chapters could stand on their own:

> Whether it appeared in separate paperback numbers, in magazines, or in newspapers, the serial mode of the publication of fiction clearly exerted an influence on the form of the nineteenth-century novel. Each instalment had to keep to a set length, and had to end in a way that would make the reader look forward eagerly to reading (and buying) the next

> one. In addition, each instalment had to work as a free-standing unit as well as functioning in a longer narrative. (Pykett, *Wilkie Collins*, Authors 78)

Suspense in the form of the cliffhanger became paramount. However, Collins also had to consider the fact that a potential reader might pick up an installment of the novel that was well into the story; for this reason, Collins had to adapt his writing in a way that avoided complicating the narrative's progression.

Collins again uses his plot as a means of suggesting something about the novel's construction. In relating the history of Porthgenna Tower, Dr. Chennery begins first with an account of the Trevertons and the Franklands: "Don't look puzzled, Phippen; I am not going so wide of the mark as you think. These are some of the necessary particulars that must be stated first. And now they are comfortable disposed of, I can get round at last to the main part of my story—the sale of Porthgenna Tower" (56-57). Here, Collins comments, through the Dr. Chennery, about the importance of background information and how one must start at the beginning to fully understand the end. In a scene that looks forward to the narrative strategies of *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*, Collins points to the idea that one must have all the facts in hand before arriving at some sort of truth:

> 'Young woman!' (here Mr Munder turned, turned suddenly on Betsey)—'we have now traced these extraordinary facts and circumstances as far as you. Have the goodness to step forward, and tell us, in the presence of these two parties, how you came to utter, or give, what Mrs Pentreath calls a scream, but what I call a screech. A plain statement will do, my good girl—quite a plain statement, if you please.'…. 'There are the facts, the circumstances, and the events, laid, or rather placed, before you. What have you got to say to them? I call upon you both solemnly, and, I will add, seriously!' (201-03)

Although Collins presents this notion in a comic manner, he emphasizes many of the concepts we see in *Basil*, such as "tracing" events linearly, presenting "facts" and "plain statements," as well as the idea that these elements come together to create a complete picture.

The experimentation with construction in Collins's early novels suggests that, rather than aimlessly trying to write what would become *The Woman in White*, he was intentionally exploring how various technical methods aid in creating suspense. By the time he sits down to write the defining novel of his career, Collins has developed a landmark technique that emerged from his earlier efforts. We see, for example, traces of *Basil*'s construction in *The Woman in White* with the emphasis on stringing together various texts and materials to create a sequence of events. The use of multiple storylines in *Hide and Seek* is modified as multiple perspectives, each contributing to the plot's collection of testimonies. *The Dead Secret*'s fluid, efficient narrative progression becomes an influence upon *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*, as each narrator is prohibited from discussing irrelevant information. What *Basil*, *Hide and Seek*, and *The Dead Secret* demonstrate most is Collins's view of the novel as a heavily constructed text, that a novel's construction can be used to help create and maintain suspense. For Collins, "secretiveness" is not merely the "origin" and the "subject" of his plots—it is, more importantly, the "structuring principle" (Pykett, *Sensation Novel* 14).

CHAPTER 3

NARRATORIAL PRESENCE

While Collins plays around with narrative construction, he also experiments with different types of narrators, exploring the limits and privileges of narration as well as how the element of suspense affects them. The narrators in *Basil*, *Hide and Seek*, and *The Dead Secret* take on the traditional role of a guide, leading us through the novels. Collins uses several techniques to ensure that his readers follow along. However, just as much as we see Collins's narrators guiding their readers, we also see them taking measures to keep readers in the dark. To ensure suspense, they often pose questions which they have the means to answer but don't. In both *Hide and Seek* and *The Dead Secret*, we see Collins's narrators moving toward the use of reported dialogue and free indirect discourse, morphing an external narration into his characters thoughts; in these moments, the narrators seem to recede into the background, abdicating from the privilege of omniscience, leaving us to make our own conclusions about the novels. These techniques demonstrate the tension between telling and withholding and lay the groundwork for some of the methods toward which Collins gravitates in both *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*.

In *Basil*, Collins presents his reader with a first-person narrator. Given the nature of this type of narration, he's limited in his perspective; he can only relate his personal experience, which is inherently subjective. Basil points toward this limitation when he introduces his siblings as part of the reader's need-to-know tutorial: "I make no attempt to judge their characters: I only describe them—whether rightly or wrongly, I know not—as they appeared to *me*" (5). Basil

acknowledges his own limits as a narrator again when he admits that "It is useless for [him] to guess" about the future because he cannot know its outcome:

> I live under a threat of impending hostility, which may descend and overwhelm me, I know not how soon, or in what manner. An enemy, determined and deadly, patient alike to wait for days or years for his opportunity, is ever lurking after me in the dark. In entering on my new employment, I cannot say of my time, that it may be mine for another hour; of my life, that it may last till evening. (17, 2)

As "God alone judges and knows" everything, Basil can only tell us what he knows from personal experience (5). Basil attempts to "master his story," and his writing "function[s] as both a therapeutic exercise [and as] a reflective practice which allows him to make sense of his past and of his story's present" (Thoms 16, 17). Though he attempts to lend an air of objectivity to his story by taking the reader through the events just as he experienced them before, his perspective is ultimately a subjective one, and his constant hinting at something being not quite right further prevents this from being the case.

Basil's perspective takes on a subjective quality in a number of ways, one of which deals with his language and descriptions. Upon *Basil*'s publication, a contemporary review commented on Collins's style, stating that "there is a gushing force in his words, a natural outpouring of his sensibility, a harmony, tone, and *verve* in his language" (Maddyn 48). Rather than simply serving as indicative of his own style, Collins's writing becomes an extension of Basil's character, mimicking his emotions. Having suffered considerably through his experience with Margaret and Mannion, and placed in a hypersensitive state in which he fears for his life, Basil's narrative is filled with grandiose and emphatic rhetoric, especially when he discusses a topic that excites his sensibility:

> Among the workings of the hidden life within us which we may experience but cannot explain, are there any more remarkable than those mysterious moral influences constantly exercised, either for attraction or repulsion, by one human being over another? In the simplest, as in the most important affairs of life, how startling, how irresistible is their power! How often we feel and know, either pleasurably or painfully, that another is looking on us, before we have ascertained the fact with out own eyes! How often we prophesy truly to ourselves the approach of a friend or enemy, just before either have really appeared! How strangely and abruptly we become convinced, at a first introduction, that we shall secretly love this person and loathe that, before experience has guided us with a single fact in relation to their characters! (29)

Passages such as these strewn throughout the novel constantly remind us that we are dealing with a narrator who is intensely connected to the story, both emotionally and in the sense that he's writing his autobiography; Basil's feelings, considering his situation, will naturally make themselves apparent within the text, especially as writing serves as a cathartic process for him.

If Basil lends a subjective quality to his narrative by letting his emotions run rampant throughout his writing, he also allows his emotions to prevent him from imparting certain information. Though he suggests he will tell all, he chooses not to tell us some things because it is too painful for him or might upset others, unlike the omniscient narrator who tells all and has no qualms about exposing a character's secrets. For this reason, Basil "never mention[s his] brother and sister but by their Christian names" and provides a "blank…wherever [his] father's name should appear" in order to protect them from being associated with his history (3). Basil seems to be most hesitant to divulge information when he comes across a point in his narrative in

which he professes his love for Margaret; Basil is so repulsed by the outcome of his experience that he simply cannot bring himself to physically write on the page what resounds in his mind:

> Did she remember me? The mere chance that she did, gave me confidence: I—
>
> —No! I cannot write down the words that I said to her. Recollecting the end to which our fatal interview led, I recoil at the very thought of exposing to others, or of preserving in any permanent form, the words in which I first confessed my love. It may be pride—miserable, useless pride—which animates me with this feeling: but I cannot overcome it. Remembering what I do, I am ashamed to write, ashamed to recal, what I said at my first interview with Margaret Sherwin. I can give no good reason for the sensations which now influence me; I cannot analyse them; and I would not if I could. (54)

Not only does his subjugation to emotion affect the way Basil tells his narrative, but, in the fictional realm of the story, it also potentially threatens the novel's existence altogether: "I could not suffer events of which we never afterwards spoke ourselves, to be given to others in the form of a printed narrative which might perhaps fall under his [father's] own eye" (338).

However, despite Basil's subjective, limited perspective, the way *Basil* is constructed allows him some of the privileges of omniscience, if only over the reader. As Basil tells his story retrospectively, he possesses and is in control of knowledge that the reader must come to grasp through the narrative's progression. This narratorial advantage also provides Basil with the opportunity of serving as a helpful guide for the reader throughout the novel. Despite being emotionally stimulated by the re-telling of his story, Basil has enough distance to be able to comment on the general scheme of his narrative to assist the reader: "An epoch in my narrative has now arrived. Up to the time of my marriage, I have appeared as an active agent in the

different events I have described. After that period, and—with or two exceptional cases—throughout the whole year of my probation, my position changed with the change in my life, and became a passive one" (101). Moreover, this narratorial distance grants Basil the ability to anticipate questions his readers might have or point to what other people in his situation might have thought or done. When Basil depicts the instance in which he contemplates marrying Margaret, in spite of the difference in their stations, he subtly navigates himself through the reader's potential question of why he must marry instead of making her a kept woman: "the base thought never occurred to me, which might have occurred to some other men, in my position: Why marry the girl, because I loved her? Why, with my money, my station, my opportunities, obstinately connect love and marriage as one idea; and make a dilemma and a danger where neither need exist?" (44). When Basil relates the portion of his narrative in which he negotiates the probationary terms of the marriage with Margaret's father, Basil acknowledges now what did not occur to him then:

> Some men more experienced in the world, less mastered by love than I was, would, in my position, have recognised in this proposal an unfair trial of self-restraint—perhaps, something like an unfair humiliation as well. Others would have detected the selfish motives which suggested it: the mean distrust of my honour, integrity, and firmness of purpose which it implied; and the equally mean anxiety on Mr Sherwin's part to clench his profitable bargain at once, for fear it might be repented of. I discerned nothing of this. (83)

Basil, in his role as guide, seems concerned that his readers follow along, especially when pointing to key moments in the story that will later be re-viewed once the reader knows what happens. He has the ability to point to significant events in his narrative that might otherwise

seem unimportant; however, while Basil makes his reader conscious that a particular event has meaning, he always fall short of explaining what that meaning is. The novel is flooded with phrases that revolve around the idea that Basil could not see "then" what he can see "now": "a mere accident changed every purpose in my life, and altered me irretrievably from what I was then, to what I am now"; "I was yet destined to discover…but not then—not for a long, long time"; "Still, this trifle had produced one abiding result. I knew it not then, but I know it now" (27, 29, 47). Basil furthers this foreshadowing effect by constantly interrupting his narrative to remind us of his current location and condition: "In this solitude where I now write—in the change of life and of all life's hopes and enjoyments which has come over me—when I look back to those evenings at North Villa, I shudder as I look" (105). These techniques heighten our awareness for potential meaning, yet despite the keenness with which we read, we still cannot solve the novel's mystery. Basil's narratorial presence reinforces suspense by reiterating, time and time again, that he is in possession of a secret that we do not know.

In *Hide and Seek*, Collins forgoes the use of the first-person narrator he employed for *Basil*, telling the story, instead, from the viewpoint of an omniscient narrator. While this narrator exerts many of the traditional privileges we associate with omniscience, he is not the type of omniscient narrator that lets the events unfold by themselves by taking a backseat to the story itself. Rather, this narrator is very intrusive, offering opinions and high-flown philosophy whenever possible, and subjectively leads his readers through the plot. Despite this narrator's friendly disposition, he constantly taunts the reader with the fact that he presumably knows all but declines to tell us certain things, often hiding as much information as he reveals for the sake of suspense, especially as the plot thickens and we near the uncovering of the secret.

Like all omniscient narrators, the narrator of *Hide and Seek* possesses the ability to transcend time and space. As he demonstrates in the opening scene of the novel, the narrator can place himself so as to observe simultaneously action happening in two different locations: "While the theory of Mr. Thorpe's system of juvenile instruction was being discussed in the free air of the parlour, the practical working of that theory, so far as regarded the case of Master Zack, was being exemplified in anything but a satisfactory manner, in the prison-region of the dressingroom" (18). Far from being limited to a particular space, the narrator can jump back and forth between physically distanced events, such as he does when following different characters around various locations of England: "While Matthew Grice was traveling backwards and forwards between town and town in the midland counties, the life led by his young friend and comrade in the metropolis, was by no means devoid of incident and change" (387). The narrator is in a position to see all, and he takes advantage of this quite regularly by often switching around between his chief characters.

Also characteristic of omniscience is the sense that the narrator knows or sees what other characters cannot, and this particular narrator makes it a point to indicate his command of this sphere. One of the most obvious ways in which the narrator supersedes his characters in this manner is his ability to see what other characters are not in a physical position to see. While rummaging through the bureau in which he hides Madonna's hair bracelet, Blyth's chance turn in the wrong direction keeps him from seeing that Mat has observed the bracelet: "If, instead of turning to the right hand to speak to Mr Gimble, Valentine had turned to the left, he would have seen that, just as he opened the bureau and began to search in it, Mr Marksman [was looking] sideways into the bureau with those observant eyes of his which nothing could escape" (246). The narrator's privilege also extends to interpreting that which his characters do not have the

rational capacity to see. Such is the case when the narrator shows us Zack's ineptitude at reading female signals, suggesting that while Zack lacks the perception to pick up on Madonna's behavior, the narrator knows exactly what her bashfulness means: "If young Thorpe had not been the most thoughtless of human beings—as much a boy still, in many respects, as when he was locked up in his father's dressing-room for bad behaviour at church—he might have guessed long ago why he was the only one of Madonna's old friends whom she did not permit to kiss her on the cheek!" (126). Similarly, the narrator has the advantage of foresight (or hindsight) which his characters lack. While his characters may make predictions or assumptions, only the narrator knows the truth or the folly inherent in their words. For example, after Blyth suggests that his drawing academy will "end in working the reformation of Zack," the narrator immediately contradicts Blyth's assertion, stating, "When Mr Blyth pronounced those last words, if he could only have looked a little way into the future…the smile which was now on his face would have left it in a moment" (133).

While the narrator of *Hide and Seek* exercises his narratorial privileges of omniscience, he also, like *Basil*, takes on the role as the reader's guide, helping the reader to keep up with the various characters, shifts, and important information within the novel, especially as we move deeper into the complex plot. One of the ways in which the narrator attempts to keep his reader moving along with him is by signaling a shift in the progression of the narrative. The narrator often provides a simple summary statement concerning the information that has just been presented and follows it with a phrase that suggests forward movement. After providing a long descriptive passage in which the narrator gives us Blyth's history up to the present time, he suggests that we meet the character to whom we have just been introduced: "Thus much for the history of the painter's past life. We may now make his acquaintance in the appropriate

atmosphere of his own Studio" (41). The narrator treats the discussion of Zack's shamed departure from his father's house much in the same way, suggesting that what follows, Zack's second meeting with Mat, will constitute a furtherance of plot: "Thus much, in brief, for the narrative of his holiday. The proceedings, on his part, which followed that festival, claim attention next; and are of sufficient importance, in the results to which they led, to be mentioned in detail" (218).

The narrator also uses signal phrases to pull the narrative out of digression and to re-situate the reader in the immediate action of the plot. After a long separation of the novel's "present" by a lengthy discussion of Madonna's past, some five chapters, the narrator is careful to remind us exactly how we left our protagonists: "It is now some time since we left Mr Blyth and Madonna in the studio. The first was engaged, it may be remembered, in the process of brushing up Bacchanalian Nymphs in the foreground of a Classical landscape. The second was modestly occupied in making a copy of the head of the Venus de' Medici" (123-24). The narrator likewise makes sure to remind us of characters we may have forgotten and to make connections to previous events. In discussing how Zack came to be associated with Blyth, the narrator explains the friendship between Blyth's father and Mr. Goodworth, taking care to tell the reader that this is "the identical Mr Goodworth who figures at the beginning of this narrative as one of the actors in the Sunday Drama at Baregrove Square" (124). When the narrator states that "a curious change came over [Mat's] face" when he looks sorrowfully at Madonna, he carefully connects this emotion with those Mat felt upon learning of his father's death, declaring that it is "a change like that which had altered him so remarkably in the hosier's shop at Dibbledean" (331). By guiding us throughout the novel, the narrator reinforces the reader's

perception that the story is being told from an omniscient perspective; as he knows everything, he is in a position to serve as our guide.

While an omniscient narrator has the advantage of an objective perspective, what makes the narrator in *Hide and Seek* distinctive is his intrusiveness; he often includes subjective elements in his narration. One way that he does this is by adding opinionated commentary, rather than unobtrusively narrating the story as it unfolds. As the narrator describes the quality of Blyth's paintings, the narrator interjects with his own estimation of his work: "For years and years his pictures pleaded hard for admission at the Academy doors, and were invariable (and not unfairly, it must be confessed) refused even the worst places on the walls of the Exhibition rooms" (34). The narrator inserts his judgment, again in relation to Blyth's work, about the squire's proclamation that the portrait of his horse "was one of the best…that had ever been taken": "to which piece of criticism the writer of the present narrative is bound in common candour to add, that it was also the very worst picture that Mr Blyth had ever painted" (66). At times, such as when Zack "mutter[s] something savage in reply" to the household page pointing out his curfew, it is the narrator's personal view that certain things are not "advisable to report" (177). These moments when the narrator provides his opinion are often presented comically and therefore do not take on the appearance of trying to sway our own thoughts in a particular direction; we take them in stride, noting the narrator's good-humored disposition.

Another way the narrator adds subjectivity to his narration is through his sentimentalized rhetoric or high-flown philosophy. The best example in which the narrator's individual view intrudes upon, and influences, the reader's perception occurs when he describes Madonna as Blyth first sees her in the circus:

> Ah, woful sight! So lovely, yet so piteous to look on! Shall she never hear kindly human voices, the song of birds, the pleasant murmur of the trees again? Are all the sweet sounds that sing of happiness to childhood, silent for ever to *her*?...Oh! Angel of judgment! hast thou snatched her hearing and her speech from this little child, to abandon her in helpless affliction to such profanation as she now undergoes? Oh, Spirit of mercy!...Guide her, pure as she is now, from this tainted place to pleasant pastures, where the sunshine of human kindness shall be clouded no more…! (61)

The narrator pulls upon our heart-strings, evoking the deepest sympathy one can muster for this young girl. In preparation for introducing the Snuggery, the bar in which Zack first encounters Mat while defending him in a brawl, the narrator delivers a philosophical, though comical, speech about the metaphorical characteristics of vice:

> The Roman poet who, writing of vice, ascribed its influence entirely to the allurement of the fair disguises that it wore, and asserted that it only needed to be seen with the mask off to excite the hatred of all mankind, uttered a very plausible moral sentiment…But in these modern times it may be decidedly asserted as a fact, that vice, in accomplishing the vast majority of its seductions, uses no disguise at all…For, let classical moralists say what they may, vice gathers followers as easily, in modern times, with the mask off, as ever it gathered them in ancient times with the mask on. (179-80)

The narrator often prefaces his description of places or characters with some sort of philosophical comment, forcing us to form an opinion before we even encounter that which we judge.

While the narrator is often forthcoming with his opinions and philosophical commentary, he is often just as vague. This elusiveness is to ensure suspense, of course. The narrator is often

at his vaguest when he anticipates the reader's questions or concerns about a particular aspect of the novel, usually as a chapter comes to its close. After introducing Madonna into the immediate action of the novel, and presenting her in a way that steps around explaining her physical malady and her relationship to Blyth, the narrator closes the chapter by directly stating, but not immediately answering, questions at the forefront of his readers' minds: "What can this absolute and remarkable silence mean between two people who look as affectionately on each other as these two look, every time their eyes meet! Is this one of the Mysteries of the painter's fireside? Who is Madonna? What is her real name besides Mary? Is it Mary Blyth?" (52). The narrator leaves us again in suspense as he comments on the significance of Zack's seemingly trivial statement:

> 'That's a rather odd fellow'—thought Zack as he pursued his own road— 'and we have got acquainted with each other in rather an odd way. I shall certainly go and see [Mat] though, on Thursday; something may come of it, one of these days.'
>
> Zack was a careless guesser; but, in this case, he guessed right. Something *did* come of it. (193)

Perhaps the most suspenseful cliffhanger in the novel appears when the narrator communicates Mat's anxieties about the execution of his plan to sneak into Blyth's studio to steal Madonna's hair bracelet. As he leaves Blyth's studio, the back door to which he has sneakily unlocked, Mat goes over several potential foils to his efforts: "Would the servant, who had most likely bolted and locked it early in the evening, go near it again, before she went to bed? Would Mr Blyth walk to the bottom of the room to see that door was safe, after he had raked the fire out? Important questions these, which only the events of the night could answer" (335). The narrator

amplifies our suspense, leaving us to wonder what the outcome will be, forcing us to continue reading to set our mind at ease.

Another way in which the narrator exercises his ability to keep the reader guessing is by offering ambiguous statements or providing multiple explanations without telling us which one is accurate. The narrator's willfulness in withholding information, which, being omniscient, he must certainly know, makes us uncertain of where we stand in narrative terms. Rather than firmly asserting the unspoken connection that takes place between Madonna and Blyth upon their first encounter, the narrator vaguely suggests that it "might have been so," as if he does not actually know with certainty: "Was there something in the eager sympathy of his eyes as they met hers, which spoke to the little lonely heart in the sole language that could ever reach it? Did the child, with the quick instinct of the deaf and dumb, read his compassionate disposition, his pity and longing to help her, in his expression at that moment? It might have been so" (62). The narrator again refrains from applying his knowledge to affirm which of the two positions concerning Madonna's safekeeping, Mrs. Peckover's view that no one is "seeking" Madonna or Blyth's view that "discretion" has hindered someone from finding her, is true:

> Perhaps Mrs Peckover's view of the case was the right one; or, perhaps, the extraordinary discretion observed by the persons who were in the secret of Madonna's history, prevented any disclosure of the girl's origin from reaching her father or friends…But, at any rate, this much at least is certain: —Nobody appeared to assert a claim to Valentine's adopted child" (123).

These indefinite statements work to challenge the trust we put in the narrator, a narrator who hovers between the traditional, authoritative figure of omniscience and a seemingly limited, subjective perspective. As Patrick Brantlinger notes, "at the same time that the narrator of a

sensation novel seems to acquire authority by withholding the solution to a mystery, he or she also loses authority or at least innocence, becoming a figure no longer to be trusted":

> The narrator is diminished by no longer communicating with the reliability of the tellers of more forthright tales. From a presiding mentor, sage, or worldly wise ironist guising us through the story as in *Middlemarch* or *Barchester Towers*, the narrative persona must now become either secretive or something less than omniscient, perhaps slipping back into the interstices of the story as unobtrusively as possible. (42-43)

A particularly interesting aspect of the novel is the narrator's tendency to let his characters' thoughts overtake the narration. Instead of having firm, directly narrated speech, indicated by phrases such as "he thought" or "she said," there are moments when the narrator slips into or hides behind the thoughts of his characters. These moments seem odd, as our narrator ordinarily makes a point of flaunting his control over the story, yet he relinquishes his authority in a way that moves closer to first-person narration. Collins's experimentation with what would become known as free indirect discourse looks forward to his use of multiple narrators, or perspectives, in both *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*; he "escapes from the logical awkwardness" of secretive omniscience, or "narrative hide-and-seek," in his later novels by implementing a "pattern of multiple first-person narrations" (Brantlinger 42). Dorrit Cohn defines free indirect discourse as "the technique for rendering a character's thought in his own idiom while maintaining the third-person reference and the basic tense of narration" (qtd. in McKeon 485). Michael McKeon's description of the mechanics of free indirect discourse is particularly enlightening, as he comments on the same type of method Collins uses to give his characters more dimension:

> As a method of internalization, free indirect discourse does not, strictly speaking, reach a 'deeper' level of consciousness in characters than that already accessible through first-person narration (whether epistolary or autobiographical) and third-person 'omniscience.' Rather, the effect of greater interiority is achieved by the oscillation or differential *between* the perspectives of narrator and character, by the process of moving back and forth between 'outside' and 'inside,' a movement that seems palpably to carve out a space of subjective interiority precisely through its narration objectification. (485)

Collins sees something valuable in having his characters narrate their own thoughts or logical processes; the subjectivity of individual perspective, and the confusion created by using multiple narrators, creates great potential for suspense.

The narrator's use of expressions distinctive to particular characters points to the idea that the characters function somewhat separately from him; the characters are not solely brought into being by the narrator's words but, perhaps, exist outside the boundaries of narrative. When depicting the feelings that Mat's new occupation of detection gives him, the narrator incorporates into his own words a phrase specific to Mat: "Not once, since he had set forth to return to his own country, and to the civilization from which, for more than twenty years, he had been an outcast, had he felt (to use his favourite expression) that he was 'his own man again', until now" (262). Likewise, the narrator borrows one of Zack's expressions to describe the scene in which Blyth overly partakes of the Squaw's Mixture prepared by Mat: "If any fourth gentleman had been present to assist in 'spending the evening,' as Zack chose to phrase it…he would most assuredly have been taken by surprise, on beholding the singular change which the lapse of one hour had been sufficient to produce in the manners and conversation of Mr Valentine Blyth"

(311). There seems to be present a certain level of reciprocity between the narrator and his characters.

At times, the narrator forgoes the use of punctuation that reaffirms the fact that our story is filtered through the narrator. Rather, the narrator provides us with reported information. The chapter titled "The Search Begun," in which Mat returns to Dibbledean after a twenty-year absence to find out what happened to his sister, is almost completely composed of reported thoughts and dialogue:

> What could he serve the gentleman with? The gentleman had not come to buy.
>
> He only desired to know whether Joanna Grice, who used to keep the dressmaker's shop, was still living?
>
> Still living, certainly! the young man replied, with brisk civility…in all probability, her intellects were a little shaken, years ago, by a scandal in the family, which quite crushed them down, being very respectable, religious people—
>
> At this point the young man was interrupted, in a very uncivil manner, by the stranger. (208)

Though the narrator maintains signal phrases, such as "the young man replied," the distance between narrator and character seems considerably lessened. Other times, the narrator leaves off from using any technical devices by which to assert his presence, indirectly representing a character's interior thoughts. In moments when the novel resembles features of free indirect discourse, the characters seem to narrate their own stories. The scene in which Zack carelessly thrusts aside Madonna's drawing generates one of these moments, moving seamlessly from the narrator's description of Madonna's actions into her inner thoughts:

> So she stood, looking towards the fireplace and the figure kneeling at it, bearing her new disappointment just as she had borne many a former mortification that had tried her sorely while she was yet a little child. How carefully she had laboured at that neglected drawing in the secrecy of her own room! How happy she had been in anticipating the moment when it would be given to young Thorpe; in imagining what he would say on receiving it, and how he would communicate his thanks to her; in wondering what he would do with it when he got it: where he would hang it, and whether he would often look at his present after he had got used to seeing it on the wall! (156)

The rapid succession of Madonna's girlish, love-stricken thoughts, "what he would do with it…where he would hang it…whether he would often look at [it]," seems to be narrated by Madonna herself.

Besides mingling his words with his characters' thoughts, the narrator regularly reveals the mechanisms of their logic, particularly in the case of Mat, our amateur detective. Having completed his inquiries at Dibbledean, and obtained Mary's box of letters, Mat considers what his next course of action should be:

> He left the shed; regained the road; and stopped, looking up and down, and all round him, indecisively. Where should he go next? To the grave, where he had been told that Mary lay buried? No: not until he had first read all the letters and carefully examined all the objects in the box. Back to London, and to his promised meeting next morning with Zack? Yes: nothing better was left to be done—back to London. (217)

A similar instance occurs after Mat has confirmed that Madonna is Mary's child and moves to the next point of his investigation, determining Madonna's father:

> Still, though the painter was assuredly not the father, might he not know who the father was, or had been? How could he otherwise have got possession of Mary Grice's bracelet and Mary Grice's child?
>
> These two questions suggested a third in Mat's mind. Should he discover himself at once to Mr Blyth; and compel him, by fair means or foul, to solve all doubts, and disclose what he knew?
>
> No: not at once. That would be playing, at the outset, a desperate and dangerous move in the game, which had best be reserved to the last. (353)

By relinquishing some of his authority to his characters, the narrator seems to temporarily remove himself from our view, leaving us to make our own conclusions about the mystery.

Collins's experimentation with an omniscient narrator suggests that in a novel where secrecy is paramount, omniscience is a bit problematic. As the narrator presents himself as a friendly, all-knowing being, like the narrators of George Eliot's novels, we expect him to tell us everything, not to suddenly become secretive or disappear from our sight. The traditional privileges of this type of narrator must be manipulated, or withheld, so that the reader is kept waiting for the solution to the mystery. While Collins creates suspense by playing upon the expectations of his readers, violating the contract between narrator and reader, the trouble this technique causes, specifically within the reader, outweighs, perhaps, what it delivers. We are less trusting of an omniscient narrator who refuses to tell all, or who somehow becomes less than omniscient throughout the course of the novel, than we are of a limited, first-person narrator, such as we have in *Basil*. This becomes a major concern for Collins in *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*; because these novels rest on the fictional foundation of trying to reach some sort of truth, an untrustworthy, omniscient narrator would conflict with the novel's objective as well

as the reader's suspension of disbelief. Rather, the use of first-person perspectives, which the reader understands are inherently subjective, has a sort of built-in elusiveness that a novel of suspense requires. In *Hide and Seek*, we see Collins experimenting, through elements of free indirect discourse, with the usefulness of having characters narrate their own stories. By the time he writes *The Woman in White*, this will become one of the novel's formative technical strategies.

For *The Dead Secret*, Collins again uses a third-person, omniscient narrator. However, in comparison to *Hide and Seek*, this narrator seems minimally visible and much less intrusive. The narrator functions less as a guide and more as a story-teller, letting the events unfold without giving us step-by-step commentary and refraining from interjecting his personal views. For this reason, moments of free indirect discourse in the novel seem much more natural than those in Collins's previous novel.

Just as in *Hide and Seek*, the narrator has the ability to transcend time and space. The novel opens with the events of the remote past, the hiding of the secret, and then moves forward some fifteen years to the period in which the majority of the novel is set. Likewise, the narrator jumps about to follow the three different storylines, that of Rosamond and Leonard, Sarah and Uncle Joseph, and Andrew Treverton, as they develop, for the most part, separately from one another. Even when important action in two different spheres takes place at the same time, the narrator has the privilege of seeing all. For example, the narrator switches back and forth between depicting Sarah and Uncle Joseph waiting outside the Tower and the goings-on of the servants within the Tower: "While Sarah was waiting in doubt outside the walls, it happened, by a curious coincidence, that another person…was also waiting in doubt inside the walls. This person was no other than the housekeeper of Porthgenna Tower; and the cause of her perplexity

was nothing less than the letter which had been delivered by the postman that very morning" (173).

The narrator also confirms certain things that the characters themselves cannot (or don't even know). For example, the narrator points to his ability to see what others cannot when he describes Mrs. Jazeph's peculiar expression when observing Rosamond: "Mrs Jazeph sat down with her back to the lighted candle when she heard herself asked for. Just before that, she had been looking at Mrs Frankland with an eager, undisguised curiosity, which, if anyone had noticed it, must have appeared surprisingly out of character with her usual modesty and refinement of manner" (122). The narrator displays this narratorial privilege again when he comments on the postman that Sarah and Uncle Joseph pass on their way to Porthgenna Tower: "His bag had been much heavier, and his walk much longer, that morning than usual. Among the extra letters that had taken him out of his ordinary course, was one addressed to the housekeeper at Porthgenna Tower, which he had delivered early in the morning, when he first started his rounds" (165-66). Though this narrator has the advantage of omniscience, he does not flaunt his abilities the way that the narrator in *Hide and Seek* does; the tension between telling and withholding information becomes less of an issue.

While the novel takes advantage of the conventional privileges of the narrator, we see Collins playing with the narration. The interesting scene that opens Book II, in which we meet the newly-wed Rosamond and Leonard, is narrated through the perspective of a hypothetical stranger. Though the narrator will later explain what is really going on in this scene, Collins positions his hypothetical stranger in a way that offers an alternative perspective:

> At half-past seven o'clock, on a certain fine summer morning, in the year eighteen hundred and forty-four, if any observant stranger had happened to be standing in some

> unnoticed corner of the churchyard, and to be looking about him with sharp eyes, he would probably have been the witness of proceedings which might have led him to believe that there was a conspiracy going on in Long Beckley, of which the church was the rallying-point….Following them—as our inquisitive stranger could not fail to do—he would have detected three more conspirators advancing along the footpath. (38-39)

We find out in the following scene that the "conspiracy" we are observing is a private wedding, and that our "conspirators" are none other than Rosamond, Leonard, and Captain Treverton. Here, Collins seems to emphasize that knowledge is subjective and that truth depends upon the availability of certain information.

Another way in which Collins experiments with his narrator is through reported or indirect representation, much as he does in *Hide and Seek*. Though the narrator is taking advantage of his unique privilege, that of seeing inside his character's thoughts, the way in which he renders that information distances him from the reader. The lack of punctuation and the lack of signal phrases obscures the narrator from the reader's mind; we become less conscious that we are receiving this information through the narrator, especially as he abstains from commenting on what he narrates.

The narrator often reports, rather than narrates, dialogue. If we did not have the subtle signal phrases that faintly indicate the narrator's attendance, we would forget his presence altogether. As Uncle Joseph speaks to Sarah about going to Porthgenna to retrieve the hidden letter, we see the narrator transitioning into reporting speech: "There was no need, he said, to speak another word on that subject. If she had abandoned her intention of going to Porthgenna, she had only to say so. If she had not…he was deaf in both ears to everything in the shape of remonstrance…. Having expressed himself in these uncompromising terms, Uncle Joseph

abruptly dismissed the subject" (162). Another example of reported dialogue occurs when Leonard and Rosamond try to settle on a course of action when they do not hear from Uncle Joseph concerning Sarah's whereabouts:

> Leonard's first idea was to write immediately to Uncle Joseph, at the address which he had given on the occasion of his visit to Porthgenna Tower. When this project was communicated to Rosamond, she opposed it, on the ground that the necessary delay before the answer to the letter could arrive would involve a serious waste of time, when it might, for aught they knew to the contrary, be of the last importance to them not to risk the loss of a single day. (304)

Other times, the narrative forgoes all evidence of the story being filtered through the narrator, further distancing us from an already distant narrator. As in *Hide and Seek*, the characters seem to give us their interior thoughts from their own perspective. In relating the close friendship between the Porthgenna doctor and Captain Treverton, the narrator seems to slip away as Rosamond's opinion of the doctor takes over: "when the sad news of the Captain's death had reached Cornwall, the doctor had written a letter of sympathy and condolence to Rosamond, speaking in such terms of his former friend and patron as she could never forget. He must be a nice, fatherly old man, now, the man of all others who was fittest, on every account, to attend her" (96).

Collins still seems interested in depicting the rational mechanics of his character's minds. He presents this in exactly the same way as he does in *Hide and Seek*; his characters often try to reason out the answers to issues that puzzle them. Noticing that Sarah (known then to Rosamond as Mrs. Jazeph) behaves oddly, Rosamond struggles to elicit some meaning from her manner: "Rosamond saw that, while she was affecting to arrange the bedstead, she was doing nothing

whatever to prepare it for being slept in. What did that mean? What did her whole conduct mean for the last half-hour? As Mrs Frankland asked herself those questions, the thrill of a terrible suspicion turned her cold" (125-26). Mrs. Pentreath likewise tries to extract meaning from Uncle Joseph's perplexing conduct, especially as she has no instruction from Rosamond's letter concerning him: "Mrs Pentreath was struck speechless. Who was this familiar old gentleman with the foreign accent and the fantastic bow? and what did he mean by talking to her as if she was his intimate friend? Mrs Frankland's letter said not so much, from beginning to end, as one word about him" (178).

As Collins continues his experimentation with many of the same techniques he employed in *Hide and Seek*, and *Basil* for that matter, we can presume that he is not haphazardly working his way through his novels. Rather, Collins is expressly addressing some of the concerns he has in maintaining a novel of suspense: what type of narrator works best? How do the privileges or limits of a specific type of narrator contribute to the novel's endeavors? How does believability or untrustworthiness affect the way the novel is perceived? Collins's early novels may indeed serve as a sort of "apprentice" stage in his career, as critics often remark; however, instead of defining his "apprenticeship" as a period of inferior work completely lacking the skills of a master-writer, we may consider his early efforts with novel-writing as distinct experiments in finding a formula that works best for his purposes, one that will make *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone* the defining novels of his career.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUDING REMARKS

When *The Woman in White* made its debut in the literary circuit, some critics not only seemed a averse to the novel's sensational content but also denounced its technique as making "wearisome demands on [their] credulity" (qtd. in Page 106). Despite the novel's popularity among Collins's general readership, critics strongly connected with the realist tradition that identified *The Woman in White* as a production of low art, hardly deserving of any real attention. In a review of the novel by *Dublin University Magazine*, the anonymous commentator speaks in a manner that praises convention, preferring safe, standard novel-writing to the experimental efforts of Collins:

> What movement the story has could have been imparted by much simpler means; and we would rather have seen the characters developed in the usual way, than by a process about as credible and straightforward as that employed by the spirits who are supposed to move our drawing-room tables, and play sweet music on accordions once attunable by mortal fingers alone. (qtd. in Page 107)

What this critic's remarks point to is the susceptibility of anything new, or novel, to harsh criticism because it is not in keeping with tradition; those who push established boundaries to their limits, or even beyond, often reserve for themselves a significant place in literary history. Collins, considered by many the father of the detective mode, and the forerunner of sensation fiction, certainly made his mark in such a fashion.

What is interesting within Collins criticism is the tendency to consider his early work as insignificant, or unsuccessful, attempts at what he would finally achieve with *The Woman in*

White and, later, *The Moonstone*. Some scholars seem to entertain the notion that *The Woman in White* appeared, so to speak, out of thin air, while others maintain that Collins "finally got it right." Regardless, even critics who approach the early novels do so as a means of comparing them to the major works, allowing the prestige of those works to overshadow and to influence their view of *Basil*, *Hide and Seek*, and *The Dead Secret*. Dorothy Sayers, one of Collins's major champions, argues that "although [*Basil*] marks a steady progression towards achievement in the direction of plot and character construction, it remains as a rather melancholy monument—a citadel for ever unachieved" (92). Likewise, Audrey Peterson remarks that Collins's "early attempts at suspense in *Hide and Seek* and *The Dead Secret* matured as it were overnight into a flawlessly constructed novel" (49). What has not been addressed is the idea that Collins, rather than failing at writing *The Woman in White*, was experimenting earlier in his career with different techniques in efforts to determine his own formula for writing. Throughout his early works, especially when we look at them collectively, Collins plays around with various techniques that speak to specific concerns he has in relation to suspense.

By the time he writes *The Woman in White*, Wilkie Collins settles into both his trademark form and the techniques by which he renders suspense. What emerges from Collins's experimentation with many structural and narratorial techniques is an "architecturally…flawless" construction that caters to suspense (Elwin 225). In both *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*, Collins presents his plot through a series of first-person narratives arranged chronologically. These narratives are instigated and compiled by a "master" narrator, or editor, who sees a need for the story's being told. The story must, according to the master narrator, be told from beginning to end, and individual narrators must tell only what their personal experience allowed them to know at the time and no more. When the character closest to a

particular set of events ceases to be such, another person steps in and provides what information he or she possesses. Peter Thoms suggests that through this strategy "the subject of narrative literally becomes the unfolding of narrative" (3). In this manner, the novel moves forward, amassing a collection of subjective testimonies that, when viewed together retrospectively upon the novel's close, establishes a more objective truth.

The structure of *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone* is most reminiscent of *Basil*, as the novels are composed of various materials that come together to create a whole. Collins's use of a master narrator, or editor, provides a frame for the novels. The editors view the story as a complete sequence of events and arrange the sections in a way that achieves "temporal and causal continuity" (Kendrick 76). Like Basil, both Walter Hartright and Franklin Blake provide the fictional means of bringing the novels into existence; each sees the need for a written, factual record of events that puts to rest any rumors and serves as a vindication against some crime. By situating the novel in this way, Collins makes the novel seem much more personal; we are more quickly drawn into a story that is told by a narrator who seems real and has genuine concerns than we are by an omniscient narrator who seems distant and has no real connection to the story: "[A first person narrator] is much more persuasive than a report from an omniscient storyteller, for first-person narration narrows the distance between reader and teller, thus permitting the reader to believe he is receiving personal testimony which has not been filtered through an all-knowing but less involved narrator" (Greiner 6). This is not to say that the master narrators do not possess something like an omniscient perspective, as having lived through their individual experiences, Hartright and Blake maintain the privilege of omniscience that retrospection provides. However, part of the process of vindication is allowing the reader to make his or her own judgment based on the facts provided.

Instead of telling the complete stories themselves, Hartright and Blake bring forth multiple witnesses to substantiate their claims. They hope to establish a record of truth, one that excludes "hearsay evidence" and deals with facts alone (*Woman* 3). For this reason, they institute certain guiding principles for their witnesses, what D. A. Miller refers to as the "policing power" of the novel (46). One such rule requires that the narrators relate only what personal experience permits them to know. The elimination of extraneous and repetitive statements provides the novel with a certain expediency, an "economy of expression" (Elwin 227). As Bradford Booth suggests, "the single stalk of [Collins's] plot has many branches": "each is allowed to grow until it has contributed to the symmetry of the whole; then it is precisely trimmed off. There is no wild growth, beautiful but excrescent. What remains is cultivated in its intricacy with the greatest care" (140). In *Hide and Seek* Collins makes use of an omniscient narrator who loads the text with social and philosophical commentary that, besides painting a clearer picture of a character or scene, does not particularly serve as need-to-know information; by eliminating superfluous subjects, Collins ensures that everything recorded in the major novels has potential meaning.

Passing the torch, so to speak, from one witness to another, the novel works with a mostly chronological progression; at times, especially in *The Woman in White*, a certain period of the events must be narrated by more than one witness, but with each subsequent testimony a new revelation becomes apparent: "the story moves forward bit by bit, until at last the mosaic of evidence is complete and every hold is filled up. The advantage of this new method is, that the story moves forward without interruption, and that the reader's curiosity is continually teased by a sense of mystery" (qtd. in Page 98). The emphasis on linear progression is not a new concern for Collins; he demonstrates this inclination in all of his early works. The later novels proceed in a manner similar to *Basil* or *The Dead Secret*, both of which steer clear of the backtracking we

see in *Hide and Seek*. John Sutherland suggests that these "high-impact" narratives have a "pseudo-documentary surface and a real-time chronology which teasingly negate the work's inner identity as fiction" (74). While the chaotic juggling of multiple storylines serves to create suspense in *Hide and Seek*, this approach will not do for a novel that seeks to give the impression of an official document.

The use of supplementary materials, such as letters, journals, and newspaper accounts, something Collins includes in all of his early novels, helps to strengthen the appearance of the novel as a true record, creating an "impression of verisimilitude or actuality" (Pykett, *Sensation Novel* 37). Letters impart a sense of sincerity, as one does not usually write a letter with the notion that it will be read by anyone other than the recipient. Journals provide a glimpse into a character's private, candid thoughts, as well as a sense of proximity to, and therefore accuracy of, immediate events; such is the case in Marian Halcombe's journal, which she consistently refers to for corroboration concerning something in the past. These types of materials are often inserted in lieu of narrated testimony or to assist in supporting a statement or fact.

The initial delineation of the novel's structure and process in *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone* gives the impression that what we are reading is a truthful, straightforward text. However, as we make our way through the novels, we find that determining the truth, or solving the mystery, is much more complex than we originally perceived. As with *Hide and Seek*, *The Dead Secret*, and, most importantly, *Basil*, we are held by suspense and must wait until the end of the novel when we have all the facts at hand, and may retrospectively review them, to establish the truth. This becomes fundamental in the major novels, especially as the multiple narrators "speak to, challenge, and reinterpret one another's narration," constantly "re-complicat[ing]" the plot (Salotto 27; de la Mare 76). Because we are at times given contradictory

points of view, there is no one clear track to follow; rather, everything has potential significance until we can distinguish between what is true and what is false:

> It has become a critical commonplace that literary interpretation is analogous to criminal detection. The semiotics of behavior in the controlled world of the detective novel offers the simplest model of that analogy. All events and objects are charged with significance until a structure of meaning is established by which the crime/problem is solved. (Reed 91)

Not knowing where we stand, and surrounded by an excess of potential meaning, we anxiously await the moment in which we can begin to unravel the plot's mystery.

Collins's use of multiple first-person narrators serves the novel in a way that omniscience cannot. The limited perspective and the subjective nature of first-person narration creates a tension in the novel that omniscience could, theoretically, all too easily solve. In *Hide and Seek* we see the difficulty of telling a suspenseful story from an omniscient perspective; in order to keep the reader from figuring out the mystery too soon, the frequently-intrusive narrator must withhold information, appearing untrustworthy and flustering his readers. However, with first-person narrators we expect some limitation; though the narrators' statements may be unreliable, the unreliability stems from the incapacity to render an objective, omniscient-like perspective rather than a willfulness to divert our attention or lead us down the wrong path. While the narrators may present us with what Greiner refers to as "legitimate false scents," we do not feel that they are purposely trying to trick us, as they are "restricted to relate only what [they] know personally," however misleading it may be (4).

First-person narration also allows the characters to illustrate their own personalities and opinions, as well as the rationalizing mechanics of their thoughts; this type of narration gives us

"privileged access to a character's interiority" (Pykett, *Sensation Novel* 38). Like Basil's autobiography and Collins's use of free indirect discourse in *Hide and Seek* and *The Dead Secret*, each character's narrative takes on the qualities distinct to him or her. Though he seeks to write a factual narrative, Hartright at times allows his sentimentalized feelings for Laura to influence his narrative at times. Miss Clack makes her busy-body, victimized personality known within the very first lines of her "testimony." Sergeant Cuff's statement seems to be most like a report, as his statements are business-like and to-the-point. Rather than developing characters through the subjectively-filtered view of an omniscient narrator, such as in *Hide and Seek*, we observe these characters more directly.

One of the technical benefits in using first-person narration, and especially multiple narrators, is that Collins can subtly control the information he gives his readers; this strategy works to "solve the perennial problem of the mystery writer" in not revealing the solution too promptly and losing the reader's interest (Peterson 42). The constant introduction of new narrators has a distracting effect much in the same way that *Hide and Seek* has; this is remarkably the case in *The Moonstone*, as the reader perhaps does not notice that the only significant character from whom we do not receive a testimony is the guilty party: "The use of so many levels of narration keeps the reader busy trying to sort out not only multiple characters, but also various narrative styles so that he does not have time to think about Godfrey. The reader is too occupied adjusting to new personalities and different narrative voices" (Greiner 5). Finally, as Sue Lonoff points out, first-person narration "permits the characters to confront the audience directly" (128). The narrators' direct application to the reader removes most, if not all, of the distance between character and reader. We sit further on the edge of our seats as we listen to what Walter or Betteredge tells us; not only do we serve as "impartial and objective judges," but

we also "become engaged in the narrative…as subjective participants in a mystery" (Knoepflmacher 62).

One of Collins's concerns that extends to all of his novels deals with the subject of knowledge. Whether challenging assumptions about omniscience or trying to define the nature of truth, Collins's writing seems to engage what Eleanor Salotto describes as philosophical questions: "what is knowledge? Is knowledge to be apprehended solely through logical means of detection? Or is knowledge a much more slippery category? That is to say, what is knowledge predicated on, and more important, what is its connections to power and interpretation or detection?" (25). What cannot be overlooked is the fact that the nineteenth century was a period in which science and technology, as well as wider social and psychological movements, upset established epistemological ideas and conceptions of reality. As Lynn Pykett notes, "all novelists of the 1850s, 1860s (and beyond)…engaged in the process of defining, reworking and redefining realism" (*Sensation Novel* 68). For Collins, knowledge is ultimately subjective. Though a person may look back upon events retrospectively, from a seemingly objective position, he or she cannot escape the fact that his or her individual perspective is inherently subjective, only one view among many. It is only by collecting as many relevant perspectives as possible, and all available information, that we can begin to arrive at a more objective truth.

Collins's experimentation with narrative techniques not only resulted in a novel way to present a story that keeps the reader turning pages from cover to cover; rather, Collins's strategies and philosophical approaches anticipate some of the modernist techniques of the twentieth century employed by authors like Conrad and Faulkner (Greiner 3). As recent critical attention of Collins has shown, he stands as an important literary figure of the nineteenth

century. Like Collins's novels, it will serve us well to revisit the beginning of his career so that, perhaps, we may learn something new about his later fiction.

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