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White garments, petticoats and straw hats: analysing sartorial clues in Wilkie Collins's The Woman in White

Abiti bianchi, sottogonne e cappelli di paglia: uno studio degli abiti ne La Donna in Bianco

Abstract

The aim of the research is to present and discuss the symbolic dimension clothes acquire in relation to the mains characters of Wilkie Collins's novel, *The Woman in White*. The clothes examined reveal the characters' emotions, intent and personality. Anne and Laura's white clothes will be the first to be examined as means used by the villains to both change and control their identities. The research will then shed a light on the clothes Marian and Fosco, two ambiguously gendered characters, wear to discuss their gender liminality and the impossibility to categorise them within traditional markers of gender. Ultimately, clothes as symbols of patriarchal authority will be considered, with reference to two marginalised female figures, Madame Fosco and Mrs Catherick.

Keywords: Victorian sensation novel, popular fiction, clothes, identity, gender roles

Abstract

Il seguente lavoro prende in esame la dimensione simbolica che gli abiti acquisiscono in relazione ai personaggi principali del romanzo di Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*. I vestiti bianchi di Anne e Laura diventano strumenti per costruire e controllare l'identità femminile. Gli abiti eccentrici che indossano Marian e Fosco, invece, simboleggiano il loro essere personaggi che spesso si muovono tra diversi ruoli di genere. Infine, gli abiti come simbolo dell'autorità patriarcale e di controllo del corpo femminile saranno esaminati in relazione a due personaggi femminili secondari, Madame Fosco e Mrs Catherick.

Parole chiave: sensation novel vittoriano, narrativa popolare, abiti, identità, ruoli di genere

Setting the scene: Fashion for sensation

The sudden appearance of a spectral woman in a moonlit night dressed from head to foot in white garments marks the beginning of what scholars have labelled as sensation fiction. It is the end of 1859 and the woman, namely Anne Catherick, makes her debut in the opening chapter of Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859–60), a novel that was first serialised in *All the Year Round*, the weekly magazine owned and edited by Charles Dickens. The novel acquired immediate and immense popularity. The story aroused a marketing campaign encouraging trends such as The Woman in White perfumes, shawls, dressing gowns, toiletries and merchandise of all kinds (Hughes 1980, p. 5; Knight 2004, p. 39; Teukolski 2020, p. 242).

Following Collins's novel, other Victorian writers copied *The Woman in White's* style and gave life to new sensational heroines, most notably Ellen Wood with her best-seller *East Lynne* (1861) and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862). The result was a decade, the 1860s, characterised by «sensational events and sensational writings» (Pykett 2011, p. 1), when tales of crimes and murders proliferated «to satisfy the cravings of an eager and expanding reading public possessed of [...] downright depraved tastes» (Pykett 2011, p. 3). Several factors contributed to the extraordinary popularity of both sensation novels and sensation journalism. The increase in numbers of readers – circulating libraries and novels printed in the triple-decker format encouraged a wider readership – and the concomitant growth in the circulation of newspapers, weekly and monthly literary magazines, boosted the success of the sensation novels. Furthermore, tales of bigamy, divorce, domestic violence, passionate murders and poisoned lovers proliferated. Newspapers printed and speculated on sensational stories targeted at a large and rapidly growing reading audience. Stories were drawn from criminal courts and were often exaggerated to impress the audience and highlight, in most cases, the domestic side of those criminal accounts. Likewise, the newly established divorce courts (following the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857) were another main source of sensation (Pykett 2011, p. 2; Diamond 2003, p. 120). Victorians were extremely fascinated by sex scandals, tales of bigamy and marital deception that mostly «emanated from the courts, which had a unique obligation to get at the truth». (Diamond 2003, p. 120). This meant that in court «private diaries and letters were read out» (Diamond 2003, p. 120), something which would not be justifiable in any other context. In courts, private affairs «were turned into public spectacle in the theatre of the courtroom» (Pykett 2011, p 2), providing numerous source materials for both novelists and journalists. In addition to the factors already mentioned, scholars agree in recognising the spread of railway travel as another of the pivotal factors in the rise of sensation fiction (Pykett 2011, Diamond 2003). Railway transport played a twofold role in the development of the sensation market. Sensation novels and tales were easily accessible by commuters at railway bookstalls and, equally important, railway transport allowed national newspapers to reach a wider reading public.

Undoubtedly, the sensation novel is the result of the popular culture of a specific historical moment in the Victorian epoch, a moment characterised by what Hughes has defined as Sensation Mania (Hughes 1980, p. 5). In its treatment of adultery, bigamy, disguise, murder and loss of identity the sensation novel exposes the social instability and fears of the 1860s. The first use of the term remains a matter of debate. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term sensation drama came into use before sensation fiction (the sensational theatre was a very popular phenomenon of the mid-Victorian period). In her introductory remarks to *The Woman in White* (1969), Kathleen Tillotson suggests that the term sensation novel appeared for the first time in the *Sixpenny Magazine* in September 1861. She coined the expression «novel with a secret» as a way of organising the body of work that comprised the «lighter reading of the eighteen-sixties» (p. xv). Lyn Pykett argues that Margaret Oliphant used the term in 1862 in her review for Sensational Novelists in *Blackwood's* (Pykett 2011, p. 6). For P. D. Edwards 'sensation novel' is a popular generic term used to identify a broad range of mystery and crime novels written in the 1860s. Despite its great popularity, sensation fiction was often condemned for its lack of respectability as a form that aimed at playing on the nerves and thrilling the senses. D. A. Miller observes how sensation fiction encouraged a bodily/erotic experience due to its characteristics «adrenaline effects» (Miller 1986, p. 107). The shocking nature of the sensation novel was, as Stephen Knight suggests, its violation of the Victorian respectable home (Knight 2004, p. 39). What the new subgenre brought to light was the uncanny discovery that criminal deeds could and were also perpetrated «in the most ordinary and respectable social settings» (Edwards 1988, p. 703). Mid-Victorian sensation fiction renegotiated representations of the home and challenged conventional morality by normalising tales of bigamy, adultery, concealed identity, theft and murder.

Laura and Anne: white dresses, madness and female identity

Scholars agree that Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* is the founding novel of sensation fiction (Edwards 1988; Sutherland 1991; Knight 2004). The story revolves around the uncanny resemblance between two women, namely Anne Catherick and Laura Fairlie, that constitutes the mystery on which the plot is built. As the story progresses, clothing becomes a fundamental element in the construction and the discovery of the secret at the core of the narration. Clothes in literature can both enhance the characterisation and provide material for deeper analysis, also from a social and cultural point of view (Kuhn & Carlson 2007, p. 1). According to Cristina Giorcelli,

> Clothing may still: metonymically represent a character; contribute to the effect of reality; assert or hint at the nature of class and/or gender relations; give characters a meaning and an identity; communicate intentions; reveal connections between the sartorial and the social fabric; be used even in an anti-fashion way to express individuality; and generate interpersonal dynamics between characters so as to become an agent of inter-subjectivity [...] apparel may also be a dream of alterity (Giorcelli 2017, p. 17).

In their introduction to *Styling Texts*, Cynthia Kuhn and Cindy Carlson discuss the role of clothing in the construction of personal, cultural, and social identity and how in literature a «*written* clothed body» may function «as a narrative element with multiple dimensions» (Kuhn & Carlson 2007, p. 1). Analysing the characters' attitudes towards their social milieu through sartorial clues helps understand their behaviours and social role. In other words, if the characters adhere to the social conventions epitomised by their clothing choices, or if they reject them through unconventional but also personal clothing choices. In this regard, Roland Barthes proposes to apply Saussure's language theory and the distinction between *langue* and *parole* to dressing, by separating two realities of clothing: dress and dressing. Dress is an «institutional, fundamentally social, reality» while dressing is identified as an «individual reality, the very act of getting dressed» (Barthes 2006, p. 8). For Barthes, clothes function as language, for «humans communicate via clothes, tell each other if they are getting married, being buried, going hunting or to the beach, if they are department store staff or intellectuals, if they are doing their military service or painting» (Barthes 2006, p. 72).

The aim of this research is to discuss the symbolic dimension clothes acquire in relation to the characters of the novel and how the clothes examined reveal the characters' emotions, intent and personality. Anne and Laura's white clothes will be the first to be examined as means used to change and control identities. The research will then shed a light on the clothes Marian and Fosco, two ambiguously gendered characters, wear to discuss their gender liminality and the impossibility to categorise them within conventional markers of gender. Ultimately, clothes as symbols of patriarchal authority will be considered, with reference to two marginalised female figures, Madame Fosco and Mrs Catherick.

When the sudden encounter with Anne Catherick through Hampstead Heath takes place, Walter, the novel's main narrator, is struck by the colour of the garments the woman is wearing: «There, in the middle of the broad, bright high-road [...] the figure of a solitary Woman, dressed from head to foot in white garments [...] her hand pointing to the dark cloud over London»[1] (WIW, p. 20). A white figure is depicted against a dark and gloomy background. Brightness versus darkness, white versus black: the woman in white is described through visual contrasts. Walter tries to interpret her clothes to understand her social position. A woman alone at night could not be a respectable woman: «What sort of a woman she was […] I altogether failed to guess» (p. 21). The mysterious woman in white evokes the ghostly figures of Gothic fiction. She, however, is a woman made of flesh and blood. The spectral figure disappears in the night, and Walter is pervaded by doubt. Was the woman in white a mere vision? Walter is not the only character who mistakes her for a ghost. Jacob, a school boy of Limmeridge – the town where Walter lives for a certain period working as the drawing master for Laura and Marian – sees a ghost wandering around the village graveyard. He mistakes the figure who happens to be Anne Catherick for a ghost triggering the schoolmaster's anger: «If I hear another word spoken about ghosts in this school, it will be the worse for all of you. There are no such things as ghosts» (WIW, p. 92). The most unsettling thing about Anne is that she is a man-made ghost, locked up and turned into a social outcast. Sir Percival Glyde, one of the villains, contributes to her social annihilation by locking her in an asylum to protect a secret that could destroy his social position. Anne is a spectral character that haunts the story since its beginning. She emerges from the darkness and walks only after twilight. Despite her centrality to the narrative, she is an ephemeral figure, moving between the borders of life and death.

The white clothes she wears are a recurrent motif of the story. They play a twofold role: they signify Anne's nostalgia for the only happy moment of her childhood and the relationship and uncanny resemblance with Laura Fairlie, her half-sister. The rich heiress Laura also wears white, like Anne. Their similar clothing, however, implies diverse intentions. Anne's choice of wearing white clothes is influenced by her memories of the late Mrs Fairlie, Laura and Marian's mother, and the kindness with which the woman cared for Anne. Mrs Fairlie becomes Anne's allegorical mother as she receives no affection and protection from her own mother: «The friend who was better than a mother to me is the only friend I have to visit at Limmeridge» (WIW, p. 107). Searching through her mother's old letters, Marian comes upon one addressed to the late Mr Fairlie in which the woman recollects the visit to Limmeridge of a teenage Anne. It was Mrs Fairlie who passed on Laura's «old white frocks and white hats» (WIW, p. 64) to Anne, since «little girls of her complexion looked neater and better all in white than in anything else» (WIW, p. 64).

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[1] Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*. London: HarperCollins, 2001.
Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as WIW.

Similarly, Laura Fairlie habitually wears white clothes. Walter's first recollection of his pupil happens through a water-colour drawing he made of Laura, following their first meeting. The portrait depicts «a far delicate girl, in a pretty light dress […] with truthful, innocent blue eyes» (WIW, p. 53). Despite the harmony and charm of her figure, Walter notices «something wanting» in her, a sense of an incompleteness which unsettles him. He acknowledges the uncanny resemblance between Laura and Anne a night when he watches Laura's white dress shining in the moonlight. It is «the visual discourse of clothing» (Sloan, p. 802), as Sloan discusses, that eventually leads to the revelation that Laura is Anne's visual double.

> There stood Miss Fairlie, a white figure, alone in the moonlight […] the living image of the woman in white […] That 'something wanting' was my own recognition of the […] likeness between the fugitive from the asylum and my pupil at Limmeridge House (WIW, p. 66).

Both Anne and Laura wear white transgressing accepted social norms. As a working-class woman, Anne's clothes are far above her status, while Laura's muslin dress is too plain, «the sort of dress which the wife or daughter of a poor man might have worn» (WIW, p. 58). Despite being the heiress of a large estate, Laura chooses to wear white to disguise her wealth in relation to the two women she shares Limmeridge House with, her half-sister Marian and Mrs Vasey her governess. In this respect, Sloan argues that Laura's clothing choices «consolidate a supportive female community in the face of threatening male dominance» (Sloan, p. 802), as Laura rejects class distinctions and to socially distance herself from the other female characters. Similarly, Anne's conscious clothing choices associate her with the other female characters living at Limmeridge House long before the mysterious bond with Laura is revealed (Sloan, p. 811). As a matter of fact, Anne's escape from the asylum is dictated by her desire to protect Laura, in memory of the love once received from the female community of Limmeridge House. In this respect, Leila Silvana May argues that the sibling relationship between Laura, Anne and Marian influences the novel dynamics (May, 1995) establishing a strong female bond that allows the novel's happy ending.

In the novel, the colour white is often associated with both childhood and madness. Through Anne and Laura's characters, white clothing becomes the emblem of innocence and purity, qualities often related to childhood. Anne wears white because of her childhood memories of Mrs Fairlie. Jenny Bourne Taylor asserts that, «What is weird about Anne is her obedience and docility, her perpetual childlikeness», which «suggests the pathologization of feminine passivity» (Bourne Taylor 1988, p. 105-106). By wearing the white clothes reminiscent of her childhood, Anne, who is almost two years older than Laura identifies herself as a little girl (Sarnelli 2020, p. 118). The connection between womanhood and childhood is also epitomised in the character of Laura (Jenny Bourne Taylor 1988; Sarnelli 2020). The heiress is repeatedly described and treated like a child. For Walter, she discloses «the innocent perplexity of a child» (WIW, p. 71) and «spoke as a child might have spoken» (WIW, p. 504). Marian defines Laura «the poor child» with «pure hearth and that innocent mind» (WIW, p. 209), who has preserved «the child's subtle faculty of knowing a friend by instinct» (WIW, p. 230). For Count Fosco, women like Laura «are nothing but children grown up» (WIW, p. 371). Mr Gilmore, the faithful family solicitor, sees in Laura «a desperate clinging to the past» (WIW, p. 160), when she was «the liveliest, happiest child that ever laughed the day through» (WIW, p. 161). After her escape from the asylum, Marian and Walter act out as Laura's parents, trying to amuse her «with children's games at cards, with scrap-books full of prints» (WIW, p. 501).

Analogously, white clothes also symbolise masculine construction of female madness (Heaton 2017), a recurrent motif of sensation stories. In this respect, Pykett argues that sensation novels were particularly influenced by the contemporary fascination with mental illness. By the mid-1860s, she claims, «madness had come to be seen as almost synonymous with sensation fiction, both as a theme for investigation and as a means of achieving sensational effects» (Pykett 2006, p. 52). At the beginning of the novel Anne has escaped from the asylum, as Walter overhears from two men searching for the fugitive. The white clothes she wears are the only elements that identify the woman. Her obsession for wearing white is evidence of her mental illness. In a letter Marian finds among her mother's belongings, Mrs Fairlie writes of Anne's poor intellect, that it is «not developed as it ought to be at her age» (WIW, p. 63). Upon reading this letter, Walter is relieved to have made some progress toward «connecting the probably defective condition of the poor creature's intellect with the peculiarity of her being dressed all in white» (WIW, p. 67).

Anne's identity as mentally distressed is also conveyed through the description of her physical appearance. She is often portrayed as agitated and confused (WIW, p. 109), but also meagre, nervous and uncertain (WIW, p. 20). Her face is colourless (WIW, p. 20) and pale (WIW, p. 105), her eyes are large, grave and absent (WIW, p.25) and her voice is still, mechanical and rapid (WIW, p. 21). Those physical features exemplify the only outward difference between Anne and Laura. Their similar white clothes and evident resemblance make them one the double of the other. However, Anne embodies a paler and more fatigued version of Laura. The subtle difference between the two is noted by the characters – and the readers – of the novel. Walter believes that the marks on Anne's worn weary face could, in the future, also emerge on Laura's angelic face, thus making their likeness complete (WIW, p. 106). For Sir Percival Glyde Anne has «a sickly likeness of my wife […] Fancy my wife, after a bad illness, with a touch of something wrong in her head – and there is Anne Catherick for you» (WIW, p. 382). Even Laura recognises the uncanny similarity between Anne and herself, when she meets the woman in white at Blackwater Park boat house.

> While I was looking at her, while she was very close to me, it came over my mind suddenly that we were like each other! Her face was pale and thin and weary – but the sight of it startled me, as if it had been the sight of my own face in the glass after a long illness (WIW, p. 318).

The uncanny resemblance between Laura and Anne and their similar white clothes enable Count Fosco to construct a diabolic plan and play with the identities of the two women. Marian's unexpected illness and the preoccupation for her beloved sister disrupt Laura's angelic features. Her face now weary and fatigued resembles Anne's pale look. Once the marks of suffering violate Laura's innocent face, her transformation into Anne is complete (May 1995). Dressed up in Anne's old white garments, she becomes the mad woman in white. Her new identity is established by the colour of the asylum clothes she must wear – a lavender coloured gown – and by name printed on her new clothes: «Look at your own name on your own clothes, and don’t worry us all any more about being Lady Glyde. She’s dead and buried, and you’re alive and hearty. Do look at your clothes now! » (WIW, p. 493). The white clothes that for Anne had meant regaining freedom and her true sense of self, become prison and oblivion for Laura. She loses control over her own identity and «never quite recovers that part of her experience which she lived through in another woman’s clothes» (Lethbridge 2017, p. 56). Likewise, white clothes symbolise the ephemeral border between life and death. While with Laura the white colour becomes symbol of the bride and therefore of married life, with Anne the white takes on a different and opposite connotation. Anne looks like a ghost, a figure that symbolises death but also the impossibility and unwillingness to part from life.

Marian and Fosco: disrupting gender roles through sartorial clues

The major couple of interest within the story, Marian and Count Fosco, is characterised by unconventional clothing choices that place them away from Victorian recognised social and gender roles. As with the characters of Anne and Laura, the readers are introduced to Marian through Walter’s masculine point of view. The lengthy description the drawing master provides of Marian’s body reveals both his ideal of femininity and Marian’s liminality (Gaylin 2001, p. 315). She is the first resident of the household that Walter meets upon his arrival at Limmeridge House. His initial view of Marian is from behind, while the woman is looking outside the window. Before introducing himself, he takes a few minutes to admire and objectify Marian’s body, an action that D.A. Miller compares to a striptease (Miller 1986, p. 126). He is «struck by the rare beauty of her form» as her waist, «perfection in the eyes of a man, […] was visibly and delightfully undeformed by stays» (WIW, p. 32). The first element of Marian’s transgression is signified by her clothing choices. Marian’s refusal of Victorian female sartorial conventions predicts her unorthodox behaviour. The absence of the corset alludes to her unwillingness to be categorised within Victorian gender and social roles. Walter admires Marian’s natural shape and praises the femininity of her body. However, the drawing master is soon repulsed by the androgynous features of her face. Walter, «in a flutter of expectation to see her face clearly» (WIW, p. 33) is disappointed by Marian’s unconventional and ugly face: «That lady is ugly» (WIW, p. 33). As Richard Collins discusses, «at the center of the novel’s cult status is Marian Halcombe, whose bodily and moral beauty is crowned by the contradiction of a repulsive head, signified by her moustache» (Collins 2003, p. 132). Marian discloses a «large, firm masculine mouth»

(WIW, p. 33), a dark moustache and thick black hair. She personifies Laura's other and their relationship is described through dichotomies: beauty/ugliness, white/black, timid/brave, feminine/masculine. Unlike Laura, Marian is associated with colours. She never wears white but lively colours such as yellow, as Walter describes her in a gown of «delicate primrose-yellow colour, which matches so well with a dark complexion and black hair» (WIW, p. 58).

According to Pykett, both the 1860s sensation fiction and the New Woman writing of the 1890s share a heroine notorious for her «variously transgressive nature» (Pykett 1992, p. 9). This female character «disrupted both prevailing fictional and social stereotyping» setting the scene for new plots «which challenged and problematised definitions of the feminine or of 'woman'» (Pykett 1992, 10). Marian certainly belongs to this new category of heroines. Apart from the evident masculine features of her face, Marian constantly moves between gender roles. She disdains typical feminine activities like painting and music and prefers masculine diversions such as chess and backgammon. She often carries a horrid heavy man's umbrella (WIW, p. 242) and her hands are as awkward as a man's (WIW, p. 263). She behaves like the man of Limmeridge House – the owner Mr Fairlie is an effeminised selfish man – and also like Laura's fatherly figure, mediating between her sister and the other masculine characters of the story.

Aside from masculine physical characteristics, Marian's liminality is also conveyed through her unconventional behaviour. In the novel's opening chapter, resolution is identified as a masculine quality: «This is the story of what a Woman's patience can endure, and what a Man's resolution can achieve» (WIW, p. 3). Marian, as Susan Balée points out, is frequently portrayed as «resolute» (Balée 1992). For Walter Marian has «piercing, resolute brown eyes» (WIW, p. 33); for Mr Gilmore, she is the «resolute, clear-minded Miss Halcombe» (WIW, p. 151); for Count Fosco, Marian discloses the resolution of a man (WIW, p. 372). It is surely her resolution to protect Laura from the villains' plans that leads to one of the most disputed scenes of the novel. Marian eavesdrops a secret conversation between Sir Percival and Count Fosco, standing in the pouring rain on the veranda roof of Blackwater Park. The scene reveals Marian's transgressive role as she denies proper Victorian female clothing. In one of her previous diary entries, Marian describes Victorian women «condemned to patience, propriety and petticoats for life» (WIW, p. 225), referring to the typical hoop skirt with multiple layers of petticoats and other garments that accentuated the silhouette (Seys, 2018) but reduced the woman's movements. Hence, when Marian decides to climb on the veranda roof at

Blackwater Park to spy on Count Fosco and Sir Percival, she records in her diary that a «complete change in my dress was imperatively necessary for many reasons» (WIW, p. 366). Marian changes her attire and removes the abundant layers of petticoats that constrict her body and make any form of movement difficult. The subversive act reveals Marian's double refusal of gender roles: she casts aside conventional women's dress in order to gain mobility

and violates the boundaries between female and masculine space by trespassing the window that separates her sitting-room from the male-oriented library: «In my ordinary evening costume I took up the room of three men at least. In my present dress, when it was held close about me, no man could have passed through the narrowest spaces more easily than I» (WIW, p. 366). In crossing from the private, female space of the home to the masculine sphere, Marian removes those social constructions epitomised by her voluminous clothes and acquires freedom of mobility, a man's prerogative. Covered by a black travelling cloak, Marian disguises herself in the night, allowing the darkness to hide both her body and her unfeminine deeds. The outdoor space symbolises knowledge and transgression. Marian must metaphorically free herself from those social markers that define her as female to access knowledge, that is a masculine privilege.

Marian is not the only character within the novel that transgresses and plays with conventional gender roles and related clothing choices. Similarly, Count Fosco is a liminal figure disclosing feminine traits, both in his attire and in his manners. As Valerie Pedlar points out, there is a connection between Marian Halcombe, «a masculinized woman» and Count Fosco, who embodies the «feminized man» (Pedlar 2001, p. 88). It is Marian who describes the villain in one of her diary entries. He is «immensely fat» (WIW, p. 248) and a most remarkable likeness «of the great Napoleon» (WIW, p. 249). Marian is attracted by the extraordinary power of his grey eyes and by the «gentleness in his voice in speaking to a woman» (WIW, p. 249). Despite his corpulent shape and the cunning role he detains within the story, his manners betray a feminised self.

His clothing choices are disputable. He loves bright feminine colours and often wears straw hats with violet-coloured ribbons and scarlet leather belts (WIW, p. 259). Marian frequently describes the Count's peculiar clothes that contrast with his physical corpulence. He switches from «a blue blouse, with profuse white fancy-work over the bosom» (WIW, p. 250) to a «magnificent waistcoat» made of «pale sea-green silk, and delicately trimmed with fine silver braid» (WIW, p. 327). The attention he devotes to sartorial details and fashion in general are not emblematic of an aggressive masculinity.

On the contrary, they disclose the impossibility to categorise Fosco within traditional markers of gender. Marian suspects that the Count is plotting against her sister when his attire is neglected. Collins provides sartorial cues to support Marian's thoughts regarding the Count: «He was hot and flushed, and was not dressed with his customary care and completeness. Had he, too, been out before dinner, and been late in getting back? » (WIW, p. 357). Marian's suspicion towards Fosco is due to the fact that his clothes are not the usual ones he wears, signifying that other activities have stolen the time he usually devotes to clothing and self-care.

Marian believes there is a strong incongruity between the Count's accepted social role and his demeanours. She describes the inconsistencies in his character through dichotomies/polarities. He is obese and old yet light on his feet and active: «Fat as he is, and old as he is, his movements are astonishingly light and easy. He is as noiseless in a room as any of us women» (WIW, p. 250). He looks like Napoleon yet he jumps when he finds a stain of blood and is «as nervously sensitive as the weakest of us. He starts at chance noises as inveterately as Laura herself» (WIW, p. 250). The Count's in-betweenness is also epitomised by «his extraordinary fondness for pet animals» (WIW, p. 250) and his penchant for sweets. He has a cockatoo, two canary birds and a family of white mice (WIW, p. 250). Marian notices the warmth with which the man treats those little creatures, he «smiles at them, and kisses them, and calls them by all sorts of endearing names» (WIW, p. 251). The Count loves matching his extravagant outfits with the gay little cage «with his darling white mice in it» when he takes his «small white children» (WIW, p. 262) for walks to the lake. According to his cook, Count Fosco speaks to his mice as if they were «Christian children» (WIW, p. 461).

Fosco's taste for fruit tarts and sweets also contributes to his rather feminine character. The Count often lunches entirely upon fruit tarts, which he inundates with jugs of cream: «A taste for sweets», he confesses, «is the innocent taste of women and children. I love to share it with them – it is another bond, dear ladies, between you and me» (WIW, p. 331). He drinks sugar and water while discussing with Sir Percival the plans to get Laura imprisoned in the asylum. During the visit to Limmeridge House, he eats dozens of fruit tarts with cream. He often asks his cook for «a nice tart for dinner» with «much crisp crust […] that melts and crumbles delicious in the mouth» (WIW, p. 463).

Like his fondness for pet animals and his penchant for sweets, music marks Fosco as feminine. He loves music, a typical feminine diversion, as Marian labels it when she introduces herself to Walter. At Blackwater Park Marian and Laura watch him «singing

Figaro's famous song in the *Barber of Seville* […] accompanying himself on the concertina» looking like «a fat St. Cecilia masquerading in male attire» (WIW, p. 259-260). He also loves playing the piano and enjoys listening to Laura playing it. As an effeminate musician, he is Laura's counterpart, the only other character within the novel that plays the piano. Music is again associated with the Count when, almost at the end of the novel, Walter goes to his house at St. John's Wood to see for himself «what sort of man» he has to deal with (WIW, p. 657). Standing outside, Walter hears him singing a «magnificent melody of the Prayer in Rossini's Moses» in a «sonorous bass voice» (WIW, p. 658). The Count is again connected with music when, at the opera hall during one of the last scenes of the novel, he praises Donizetti's delicious music (WIW, p. 661).

The dichotomies that characterise Fosco's personality reveal his gender ambiguity. As Marian's diary gradually uncovers, he is both fascinating and dangerous, not merely because of the perilous threats he poses to her and Laura, but because he explicitly displays the qualities of both sexes and cannot be categorised as either man or woman. Sometimes he acts like a man, others he acts like a woman. The Count escapes those binary categories and his evident liminality attracts both fascination and repulsion. Sir Percival, for example, often ridicules the Count for his effeminate tastes (WIW, p. 253). He labels the music he plays an «infernal noise» (WIW, p. 360) and he scorns Fosco's inclination for sweets, «sugar-and-water for a man of your age» (WIW, p. 370).

Madame Fosco and Mrs Catherick: clothes as symbols of masculine authority

As it was previously discussed, clothes in the novel are mutable as they acquire different symbolic functions depending on the characters. For Anne and Laura, white clothes epitomise childhood, purity and female madness. Marian and Fosco disclose their gender ambiguity through sartorial clues, while for Madame Fosco and Mrs Catherick clothes embody the patriarchal control over the woman's body and life. The two women are socially marginalised for contrasting reasons. Madame Fosco is excluded from the female community that Laura and Marian establish at Blackwater Park since she has no voice of her own. By contrast, Mrs Catherick is excluded from village life as she is believed to be a woman without morals.

Madame Fosco has lost much of her personality since marrying the Count. She once was a feminist, who «advocated the Rights of Women, and freedom of female opinion was one of them» (WIW, p. 266). Now she sits for hours in silence and motionless, with her eyes glued on the Count, «with the look of mute submissive inquiry which we are all familiar with in the eyes of a faithful dog» (WIW, p. 246). Marian introduces the woman to the readers by comparing her current submissive character to her previous civil battles for women's rights. Her «hideously ridiculous love-locks» of her days as a feminist have been replaced by «stiff rows of very short curls, of the sort one sees in old-fashioned wigs» (WIW, p. 246). Her hair is now covered by a matronly cap and she always wears black or grey gowns that cover her entire body, up to the throat, «dresses that she would have laughed at […] in her maiden days» (WIW, p. 246). The drastic change Marian notices in her clothes is emblematic of her change in personality. Once the wayward and vulgar Eleanor Fairlie, she is now under the Count's control as one of his white mice. The Count's domestication of his pet animals metaphorically implies the domestication of the once wild Eleanor Fairlie. Fosco calls her 'my angel' using the common image of the angel in the house to denote his wife. The relationship between the two resembles one between master and servant, rather than a husband-wife relationship. She is cold and impenetrable like a statue, usually engaged «either in monotonous embroidery work or in rolling up endless cigarettes for the Count» (WIW, p. 246). For every cigarette, Fosco homages her with little vanilla chocolates he keeps in his pocket.

Madame Fosco's clothes become signifiers of marital oppression. The dress high around the throat seems to allude to the woman's lack of voice. As a matter of fact, in a novel constructed through multiple narrative voices, she is denied her own. She speaks only with her husband permission and she is not allowed to have a personal opinion of the events. As Count Fosco declares, «we have but one opinion between us, and that opinion is mine» (WIW, p. 277). She patiently waits for his instructions before sharing her views «in the presence of well-informed men» (WIW, p. 265).

The black and grey clothes she wears contrast with the lively colours chosen by the Count. They denote the submissive role she detains in the couple. She metaphorically embodies the Count's shadow, totally lacking in personality. Similarly, her clothes diverge from the colours worn by Laura and Marian, the other women of Blackwater Park, who respectively wear white and yellow shades. There is a strong visual contrast between Laura's white muslin dress and Madame Fosco's dark silk gowns. Collin plays with this light/dark dichotomy to produce a visual contrast between the two Fairlie women: the innocent Laura and the wicked Madame Fosco. The black and white dualism figuratively conveys an opposition between evil and good.

Unlike Madame Fosco, Mrs Catherick gives her contribution to the story through a letter she addresses to Walter, revealing Percival's secret and the role she had in the mischief. Mrs Catherick is the only person who knows Percival's secret – as an illegitimate child he is not the rightful heir of Blackwater park estate– and she is kept silence in return of «a handsome yearly allowance» (WIW, p. 618) that allows her to buy expensive jewels and silk gowns. Mrs Catherick's penchant for lavish clothes and gold watches allows Sir Percival to control the woman's life. As for Madame Fosco, clothes metaphorically symbolise masculine authority. Percival seduces her for the purposes of abetting his crime and later forbids her to leave the town of Welmingham to keep her under his perpetual power. She believes the silk robes she buys will eventually restore her respectability in the eyes of her neighbours. As Spooner has argued, Mrs Catherick gains respectability through the manipulation of sartorial clues. «Her achievement of respectability […] depends entirely upon her outward show of bourgeois furnishings and strict adherence to sartorial convention» (Spooner 2004, p. 70). In her black silk gown, Mrs Catherick is bowed to by the village vicar. Similarly, her ambition for a higher social status is described through sartorial clues. She distances herself from the other village women by wearing silk instead of cotton. «The dress of Virtue, in our parts, was cotton print. I had silk» (WIW, p. 618). While Laura establishes a female community at Limmeridge House by wearing plain clothes that erase the social distance between herself and Marian, Mrs Catherick intentionally places herself outside the female community of Welmingham by wearing lavish silk gowns: «I had a better income, a better house over my head, better carpets on my floor, than half the women» living in the town (WIW, p. 618). Her next ambition, she writes in the letter, is «to make the clergyman's wife bow to me next» (WIW, p. 627). Her desire to emulate the upper classes by purchasing expensive clothes financed by corruption enables Sir Percival to seduce and subdue the woman. The silk gowns she wears are not merely markers of wealth and respectability, they also become the prison in which the woman lives.

Concluding remarks

The research examines the different functions clothes acquire in relation to the characters of the novel. Collins sews clothes that reveal a story behind each individual. They gradually become a text within a text that must be interpreted and analysed as part of each character's social and gender role. Clothes display their mutable nature as they metaphorically change depending on the characters. The white clothes that both Laura and Anne wear denote their status as a virginal bride and as a ghostly figure, respectively. Laura is about to marry Sir Percival Glyde, while Anne's precarious health will eventually cause her premature death. Their plain white clothes also allude to their childlike features and their uncanny similarity that is linked, in turn, to the theme of switched identities. While innocent Laura is symbolised by the white colour, her half-sister Marian is associated with colours. As a liminal figure moving between accepted gender roles, Marian's dressing choices reveal her desire to step outside the stereotypical image of the Victorian woman. Her removal of clothes during the scene on the veranda rooftop could be interpreted as a form of resistance to patriarchal control. It also signifies her refusal of the immobility in which women were forced. Similarly, Count Fosco parodies Victorian gender roles by displaying an obsessive attention to sartorial clues that reveals his feminised self. His lively and eccentric clothes contrast with the dark shades worn by his wife, Madame Fosco. Her change in dress is emblematic of her change in personality. The clothes she used to wear during her maiden days have been replaced by dark silk gowns that cover her entire body up to the throat and limit her mobility. The clothes exemplify the Count's power over the woman's body and personality. Similarly, clothes become symbols of masculine control for Mrs Catherick. She agrees to play a part in Sir Percival's violation of the church registry in return of money that she uses to buy lavish clothes and golden jewels. The silk gowns she wears, markers of her acquired respectability, become the rod with which Percival subdues and controls her.

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