

Part 1

Wilkie Collins is called the grandfather of the English detective novel. Today, he is best known for *The Moonstone* (1868), often regarded as the first true detective novel, and *The Woman in White* (1860), the archetypal sensation novel. During his lifetime he wrote over thirty major books, well over a hundred articles, short stories and essays, and a dozen plays in which he explored the effects of mysterious, shocking, and criminal happenings on Victorian middle-class families.

Wilkie Collins was the oldest son of William Collins, a landscape artist and a member of the Royal Academy, and his wife Harriet Geddes, a former governess. Collins was named after David Wilkie, the Scottish painter who was his godfather. After spending one year at a small preparatory school called Maida Hill Academy near Tyburn, England, Collins went to Italy with his family, where they stayed from 1837 to 1838. He later recalled that he had learned more in Italy “which was of use to me, among the scenery, the pictures, and the people, than I ever learned at school.” Having returned to England, he continued his schooling at Cole's boarding school at 39 Highbury Place. It was there that he began his career as a storyteller to appease the dormitory bully. His appearance was distinctive since he was born with a prominent bulge on the right side of his forehead. He was only five feet six inches tall but with a disproportionately large head and shoulders. His hands and feet were particularly small and his pictures from the age of 21 show him wearing spectacles.

At age 17, Collins started his first job with a tea merchant named Edward Antrobus, a friend of his father's. Antrobus's shop was located on The Strand in London. The heady atmosphere of The Strand—a major street populated by theaters, law courts, taverns, and newspaper editorial offices—gave Collins ample inspiration to write short articles and literary works in his spare time. His first signed article, *The Last Stage Coachman*, appeared in Douglas Jerrold's *Illuminated Magazine* in 1843.

In 1846, Collins became a law student at Lincoln's Inn, and was called to the bar in 1851. He never practised law although several lawyers feature prominently in his subsequent novels.

Collins's first novel, *Iolani*, was rejected and didn't resurface until 1995, long after his death. His second novel, *Antonina* was only one-third of the way finished when his father died. Then Wilkie Collins started working on a two-volume biography of his father, which was published by subscription in 1848. That biography brought him to the attention of the literary world.

In 1851, Collins met Charles Dickens, and the two writers became close friends. Although Dickens was not known to serve as a mentor for many writers, he was surely a supporter, colleague, and mentor for Collins. According to the scholars of Victorian literature, Dickens and Collins influenced one another and even co-wrote several short stories.

Despite his growing success, Collins's health began to decline during the 1850s and 1860s. He suffered from what he always described as 'rheumatic gout' or 'neuralgia'. This affected his eyes with particular severity and he often needed the services of a secretary.

Part 2

It was during the 1860s that Collins achieved enduring fame with his four major novels, *The Woman in White* (1860), *No Name* (1862), *Armadale* (1866) and *The Moonstone* (1868). The first of these was published in Dickens's new journal, *All the Year Round* from November 1859 to August 1860. It was received with **great acclaim** and ran to seven editions in 1860 alone. All kinds of commodities such as cloaks, bonnets, perfumes were called after it; there were *Woman in White* Waltzes and Quadrilles; it was parodied in the British humour magazine *Punch*; and even the British Prime-Minister Gladstone found the story so absorbing that he missed a visit to the theatre.

In the novel the sudden meeting of the hero, Walter Hartright, with the mysterious woman in white is said to have been inspired by a real life meeting between Collins, who was strolling home one evening in 1858, **accompanied** by his brother Charles and the painter Millais. They met, so the story goes, "a woman dressed in flowing white robes escaping from a villa in Regent's Park where she had been kept prisoner under mesmeric influence." The real life woman in white was Caroline Graves who probably met Wilkie in the spring of 1856. She was a widow, originally came from Gloucestershire, and had a young daughter, Harriet Elizabeth.

The novel *The Moonstone* was described by T. S. Eliot as "the first, the longest, and the best of modern English detective novels..." It is certainly a landmark in the history of crime fiction and has a strong claim of establishing detective fiction as a genre. It influenced Collins's **successors** from Trollope and Conan Doyle onwards and has set the standard by which other detective novels are judged.

However, *The Moonstone* is far more than just a detective story. In its basic form, the whodunit mystery is formulaic: all the players must be seen as possible suspects and this, of course, restricts character development and depth. However, this is not the case with *The Moonstone*. Like the precious gem of the title, this novel has many facets. It is a narrative of richness and variety and was originally subtitled 'A Romance' rather than 'A Mystery'. Just before he came to write the novel, Collins attended a **criminal trial** in London and he was struck by the way in which a chain of evidence and an overall picture of incidents concerning the crime was created from a series of testimonies given by various witnesses as they presented their views from the witness box.

He said, "It came to me then that a series of events in a novel would lend itself well to an exposition like this. Certainly, by the same means employed here, I thought, one could impart to the reader that acceptance, that sense of belief, which I saw produced here by a succession of testimonies, so varied in form and nevertheless so strictly unified by their march toward the same goal. The more I thought about it, the more an effort of this kind

struck me as being bound to succeed. Consequently, when the case was over, I went home determined to make the attempt.”

Many of Collins's later novels do not possess the **force and freshness** of his earlier works. Nevertheless, he remained immensely popular with the reading public. During the 1880s, Wilkie's always delicate health continued to decline. Breathing difficulties due to heart problems became more common. There followed several severe attacks of bronchitis. He suffered a stroke on the 30th of June and died from further complications on the 23rd of September, 1889.