

# Wilkie Collins

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**William Wilkie Collins** (8 January 1824 – 23 September 1889) was an English novelist, playwright, and writer of short stories. He was hugely popular in his time, and wrote 27

novels, more than 50 short stories, at least 15 plays, and over 100 pieces of non-fiction work. His best-known works are *The Woman*



Wilkie Collins

*in White, The Moonstone, Armadale and No Name.*

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## Life

Collins was born in London, the son of a well-known landscape artist, William Collins. Named after his father, he swiftly became known by his second name (which honoured his godfather, David Wilkie). At 17 he left school and was apprenticed to a firm of tea merchants, but after five unhappy years, during which he wrote his first novel, *Iolani*, he entered Lincoln's Inn to study law. (*Iolani* remained unpublished for over 150 years until 1999.) After his father's death in 1847,

Collins produced his first published book, *Memoirs of the Life of William Collins, Esq., R.A.* (1848), and also considered a career in painting, exhibiting a picture at the Royal Academy summer exhibition in 1849, but it was with the publication of his first published novel *Antonina* in 1850 that his career as a writer began in earnest.

An instrumental event in Collins' career occurred in 1851 when he was introduced to Charles Dickens by a mutual friend, Augustus Egg. They became lifelong friends and collaborators; several of Collins' novels were serialised in Dickens' weekly publication *All the Year Round*, and Dickens later edited and published them himself.

Collins suffered from a form of arthritis known as 'rheumatic gout' and became severely addicted to the opium that he took (in the form of laudanum) to relieve the pain. As a result he experienced paranoid delusions, the most notable being his conviction that he was constantly

accompanied by a doppelganger he dubbed 'Ghost Wilkie'. His novel *The Moonstone* prominently features the effects of opium and opium addiction. While he was writing it, Collins' consumption of laudanum was such that he later claimed to have no memory of writing large parts of the novel.

Collins never married, but lived, on and off from 1858, with a widow, Mrs. Caroline Graves, and her daughter. He also fathered three children by another woman, Martha Rudd, whom he met after Mrs. Graves left him in 1868. Mrs. Graves returned to Collins after two years, and he continued both relationships until his death in 1889.

He is buried in Kensal Green Cemetery, West London. His grave notes him as the author of *The Woman in White*. Grave Number 31754, Square 141, Row 1.

## **Works**

His works were classified at the time as 'sensation novels', a genre seen nowadays as the precursor to detective fiction and suspense fiction. He also wrote penetratingly on the plight of women and on the social and domestic issues of his time. Like many writers of his time, he published most of his novels as serials in magazines such as Dickens's *All the Year Round*, and was known as a master of the form, creating just the right degree of suspense to keep his audience reading from week to week. (Sales of *All The Year Round* actually increased when *The Woman in White* succeeded *A Tale of Two Cities*.)

He enjoyed ten years of great success following publication of *The Woman in White* in 1859. His next novel, *No Name* combined social commentary - the absurdity of the law as it applied to children of unmarried parents - with a densely-plotted revenge thriller. *Armada*, (the first and only of Collins' major novels of the 1860s to be serialised in a

magazine other than Dickens' "All The Year Round") provoked strong criticism, generally centred around its transgressive villainess Lydia Gwilt; and provoked in part by Collins' typically confrontational prefatory material. The novel was simultaneously a financial coup for its author and a comparative commercial failure: the sum paid by the Cornhill magazine for the serialisation rights was exceptional, eclipsing the prices paid for the vast majority of similar novels by a substantial margin, yet the novel itself failed to recoup its publishers' investment. *The Moonstone*, published in 1868, and the last novel of what is generally regarded as the most successful decade of its authors' career was, despite a somewhat cool reception from both Dickens and the critics, a significant return to form and reestablished the market value of an author whose success in the competitive Victorian literary marketplace had been gradually waning in the wake of his first "masterpiece." Viewed by many to represent the advent of the Detective Story

within the tradition of the English Novel, it remains one of Collins' most critically acclaimed productions.

However, various factors (most often cited are the loss of Dickens' literary mentoring after that author's death in 1870; Collins' increased dependence upon laudanum; and a somewhat ill-advised penchant for utilising his fiction to rail against social issues) appear to have led to a decline in the two decades following the success of his sensation novels of the 1860s and prior to his death in 1889; and Collins' novels and novellas of the '70s and '80s, whilst by no means entirely devoid of merit or literary interest, are generally regarded as inferior to his previous productions and receive comparatively little critical attention today.

*The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone* share an unusual narrative structure, somewhat resembling an epistolary novel, in which different portions of the book have different narrators, each with a distinctive

narrative voice. *The Moonstone*, being the most popular of Collin's novels, is known as a precursor for detective fiction such as Sherlock Holmes.

After *The Moonstone*, Collins's novels contained fewer thriller elements and more social commentary. The subject matter continued to be "sensational", but his popularity declined. Swinburne commented: "What brought good Wilkie's genius nigh perdition? Some demon whispered - 'Wilkie! have a mission.'"

## Bibliography

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- *Antonina* (1850)
- *Rambles Beyond Railways* (1851)
- *Basil* (1852)
- *Mr Wray's Cash Box* (1852)
- *Hide and Seek* (1854)
- *The Ostler* (1855)
- *After the Dark* (1856)



- *The Dead Secret* (1857)
- *The Frozen Deep* (1857), a play co-written with Charles Dickens
- *A House to Let* (1858), a short story co-written with Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell and Adelaide Anne Procter
- *The Queen of Hearts* (1859)
- *The Woman in White* (1860)
- *No Name* (1862)
- *My Miscellanies* (1863)
- *Armada* (1866)
- *No Thoroughfare* (1867), a story and play co-written with Charles Dickens
- *The Moonstone* (1868)
- *Man and Wife* (1870)
- *Poor Miss Finch* (1872)
- *Miss or Mrs?* (1873)
- *The New Magdalen* (1873)
- *The Law and the Lady* (1875)
- *The Two Destinies* (1876)
- *The Haunted Hotel* (1878)
- *The Fallen Leaves* (1879)
- *A Rogue's Life* (1879)
- *My Lady's Money* (1879)
- *Jezebel's Daughter* (1880)

- *The Black Robe* (1881)
- *Heart and Science* (1883)
- *I Say No* (1884)
- *The Ghost's Touch and Other Stories* (1885)
- *The Evil Genius* (1886)
- *The Guilty River* (1886)
- *Little Novels* (1887)
- *The Legacy of Cain* (1889)
- *Blind Love* (1889 - unfinished.  
Completed by Walter Besant)
- *Iolani, or Tahiti as it was. A Romance* (1999)

## References

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## External links

- The Wilkie Collins Website
- Wilkie Collins Information Pages
- Works by Wilkie Collins at Project

- Gutenberg
- Find-A-Grave profile for Wilkie Collins

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