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MANY VOICES

One of the most interesting features of *The Woman in White* is the author's use of multiple first-person **narrators**. This narrative style was unusual for the time, and had a great influence on British literature in the following decades, inspiring many detective stories.

Narrative voice

Narrative voice is the point of view that a story is told from. The choice of narrative voice can have an important effect on the story and the reader's experience. Here are some of the most common types.

First person

A character in the story tells the story, using *I* or *we*.

Third person

The story is told by someone who is not a character, using *s/he* or *they*.

Third person omniscient

The story is told, using *s/he* or *they*, by someone who is not a character in the story, and who has more information than the characters.



Multiple first-person narrators

In the novel, the story is told by a number of different characters, who take turns to describe the events they have witnessed[•], using their own words. Let's take a look! The main narratives – those that begin and end the novel – are told by Walter Hartright, a young art teacher and one of the main characters of the book. Walter is an 'everyman'[•] character, and the reader can easily identify with him[•]. The parts of the story where Walter is not present are told by other characters, mainly through letters, diary entries and other documents which Walter has collected. The Victorian age saw a huge increase in printed material (books, newspapers and magazines), and people had access to a wider variety of information than ever before. By including a number of documents in the story, Collins reflects this new age of information in which he and his readers are living.

Who is telling the truth?

In his introduction to the book, Collins describes the narrative form he has chosen for the novel:

“The story here presented will be told by more than one pen, as the story of an offence[•] against the laws is told in Court by more than one witness.”

Collins had studied law, and was used to hearing witnesses giving evidence in court. The story copies the process of giving evidence in court. In the story, the 'evidence' is each character's narrative, and the reader compares each narrative and decides who is guilty and who is innocent, much like a judge during a trial. The story was inspired by a real case of abduction[•] and imprisonment[•] which had taken place in France.

- **abduction:** act of taking someone by force
- **everyman:** (in literature) ordinary; normal
- **identify with him:** see themselves in him
- **imprisonment:** act of keeping someone prisoner
- **inspiring:** giving the idea (for something new)
- **offence:** (here) crime
- **omniscient:** that knows everything
- **witnessed:** seen



Secret after secret

The story moves forward little by little, secret after secret. Each narrative adds information to the previous one, so that each part helps fill the gaps left by the ones before. However, the narrators are unreliable and only give their own point of view. In this way, the reader is never sure which narrator (apart from Walter) can be trusted.

Each narrative voice has its own style, which reflects the character of the narrator. Walter, the everyman character who is the main narrator, writes in a traditional style and is aware that he is telling a story. He then collects the other accounts, diary entries, letters, interviews and legal documents from the other characters and presents them to us without changing them. These narrators are unaware that their narratives are part of a more complex story.

Novels which include letters and other documents.

Epistolary novels were popular at the time, as the inclusion of letters and documents was thought to add realism to the plot. However, *The Woman in White* stands out, as each narrative keeps the unique style of its narrator. The narrators vary from foreign noblemen to female servants and family lawyers.

Other novels of the time which use letters and documents include Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Collins's later novel, *The Moonstone*, is another example of the genre.

- **accounts:** written descriptions
- **complex:** difficult and complicated
- **enriches:** makes richer
- **is aware:** knows
- **presents:** (here) tells; shows
- **stands out:** (here) is much better (than others)
- **unreliable:** that cannot be trusted

Multiperspectivity

The use of multiple narratives is a form of *multiperspectivity*. Multiperspectivity, as the name suggests, offers multiple perspectives, or opinions, around a plot. This creates a wider and more informed storyline, and allows the readers to see what the various characters are thinking and feeling. In *The Woman in White*, this method also creates suspense and enriches the readers' experience, as each character adds to the mystery. Multiperspectivity has become an essential part of how we learn and study history.



In groups, discuss why multiperspectivity is necessary when studying history.

Here are some examples of multiperspectivity in literature, art and film. Choose one and find out more about it.

- *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner
- Cubism (Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque)
- *Elephant* by Gus Van Sant



The Woman in White

Marian Halcombe

Walter Hartwright

Laura Fairlie



Mrs Catherick



Anne Catherick



Sir Frederick Fairlie



Sir Percival Glyde



Count Fosco



Madame Fosco

BEFORE READING

- 1 Look at these pictures of the main characters in the story. Write a few sentences to describe each of them physically.



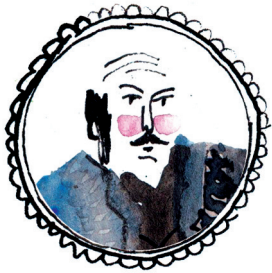
Anne Catherick



Walter Hartright



Count Fosco




Sir Percival



Marian Halcombe



Laura Fairlie

- 2  In pairs, compare your descriptions.
- 3 These jobs are mentioned in the story. Match them to their definitions.

a housekeeper

b lawyer

c clerk

d nurse

e drawing master

f cook

1 person who gives legal advice

2 person who keeps records and does administration


3 person who teaches art

4 person who looks after sick people

5 person who makes food for other people

6 person who looks after a house




- 4  Read the following descriptions of the 'woman in white', then discuss the questions with a partner.

The woman seemed very strange and delicate. [...]
The loneliness and helplessness of the woman touched me.

'Have you seen a woman in white pass this way?
She has escaped from my mental asylum.'

'Anne especially liked a white dress, as my mother told her how lovely she looked in it. Anne promised to always wear white as it would remind her of my mother.'

'It was early evening, miss, and I saw a woman in white
in the graveyard standing over Mrs Fairlie's grave.
It was Mrs Fairlie's ghost!'

- What do we find out about the 'woman in white'?
 - What are the differences in these descriptions?
 - Why do people have different impressions of the same woman?
 - Who is the 'woman in white'? Is she any of the characters on page 14? Give reasons for your answer.
 - What is a mental asylum? (Use the text on page 7 to help you).
- 5 **The Woman in White** is a mystery story that combines Gothic horror and romance. **Underline the parts of the descriptions in Exercise 4 that fit the Gothic horror genre. Then using a different colour, underline the romantic parts.**
-  Compare with a partner. Discuss your answers.
- 6 **The story takes place in London, in Cumberland and in Hampshire. Find these different places on a map of the UK. There are two important houses in the story – Limmeridge House is in Cumberland and Blackwater Park is in Hampshire. The rest of the action takes place in or around London.**



This is a story of patience and determination•.
It is told by a number of people.

PART ONE

1 A Strange Meeting



Told by Walter Hartright, a drawing master, aged twenty-eight years

It was the last day of July. After a long hot summer, I was in London with no job or money. That evening, I decided to go to visit my mother and sister in Hampstead. As soon as I rang the bell, my Italian friend, Professor Pesca, opened the door with a big smile. Pesca had left Italy for political reasons, and now taught Italian to rich families in England. Many years ago, I had saved his life in the sea at Brighton, and we had become close friends.

We went into the sitting room, where my mother and sister were waiting impatiently.

‘I have good news,’ said Pesca with enthusiasm•. ‘Mr Frederick Fairlie, a friend of my employer’s, is looking for a drawing master• for two young ladies. They live in Limmeridge House in Cumberland, in the north of England. You would have to give the two ladies painting lessons for a period of four months. Can you think of a better way to pass the next few months than in the company of two young ladies?’

It certainly was an interesting offer. However, I felt that I wanted to refuse, but I couldn’t explain why. I thought of all the excuses possible not to go. In the end, I accepted the offer with a heavy heart.

- **determination:** strong wish to do something
- **enthusiasm:** feeling of great interest
- **master:** teacher

The evening before I left for Limmeridge House, I went back to my mother and sister to say goodbye. It was nearly midnight when I started to walk home. The moon was full in the dark blue sky. I was enjoying the peace and quiet of the night, when suddenly, I felt a hand on my shoulder. My heart stopped for a second as I turned round. There before me was a tall thin woman, dressed from head to foot in white. She was wearing a hat and carrying a small bag.

‘Is this the road to London?’ she asked me, in a quiet voice.

It was very dark, but in the moonlight, I could see a pale face with long blonde hair and large sad eyes. The woman seemed very strange and delicate.

‘Yes,’ I replied, ‘this is the way.’

‘May I trust you?’ she asked. ‘Can you help me find a carriage so I can go to my friend’s house?’

‘You may trust me,’ I replied, and we set off together towards the city. The loneliness and helplessness of the woman touched me.

We walked for a while, then her voice broke the silence again.

‘Do you know many noblemen in London?’ she asked.

‘Why do you ask?’ I replied.

‘There is one nobleman from Hampshire that I hope you don’t know.’

‘Will you tell me his name?’

‘I can’t. Please don’t ask!’

The lady was very agitated, so I tried to calm her. ‘I am only a drawing master,’ I said. ‘And tomorrow, I’m going to work in Cumberland.’

‘Cumberland!’ she repeated. ‘I was once happy in Cumberland. I went to school in Limmeridge. I would like to see Limmeridge House again.’

I could not believe my ears. This was the place where I was going the next morning.

‘Limmeridge House?’ I asked in surprise.

‘Yes!’ She seemed excited. ‘Do you know it?’

• **agitated:** anxious and upset

• **carriage:**



• **noblemen:** men of high social class (lord, etc.)

• **touched:** (here) made me feel something

• **trust you:** believe you are honest

I didn't want to tell her of this strange coincidence•, so I replied, 'Yes, some people mentioned• it a few days ago.'

'Not my people,' she replied. 'Both Mrs Fairlie and her husband are dead, and their little girl may be married and gone away.'

By then, we could see the lights of London. A carriage stopped ahead of us and let a man out. We ran over to it, and the woman got in. She took my hand and kissed it. Then the carriage drove off, and the woman in white was gone.

Coincidence

Think of a coincidence that has happened to you.

Suddenly, I saw another carriage, with two men inside, arriving quickly. It stopped beside a policeman, and one of the men cried out: 'Have you seen a woman in white pass this way?'

'I haven't seen her, sir,' replied the policeman.

'If you meet her, stop her and send her to this address,' the first man said, giving the policeman a card.

'What has she done?' replied the policeman.

'Done? She has escaped from my mental asylum•. Don't forget, a woman in white!' And the carriage drove quickly away.

Now I was very worried. The woman was mentally ill. I got home, but I couldn't sleep. I spent the rest of the night thinking about the woman in white. Was she safe? And where was she now?

In the morning, I was glad to leave my house and go to the railway station.

- **coincidence:** situation when two similar things happen without a reason
- **mentioned:** spoke about quickly
- **mental asylum:** place for people with mental problems

AFTER READING VOCABULARY

1 Use five of the words in the box to complete the sentences.

ahead bald debt relief
reveal sense tragic touched

- a He went to bed a happy man, thinking of the next few months of him.
- b Laura was shocked by his reaction, and I could the panic in her voice.
- c Walter was by the loneliness and helplessness of the woman.
- d Sir Percival was almost and his face was marked with time.
- e Mr Hartright left Mr Fairlie's room, breathing deeply in

2  In pairs, write three sentences with the words left out in Exercise 1.

3 Correct the adverbs and adjectives in the following sentences.

Example: 'Be carefully or you will be a prisoner, too!' → 'Be CAREFUL or you will be a prisoner, too!'

- a She was tall, with dark hair and a gracefully body, but when she turned to greet me, her skin was swarthy and her face was very masculine.
- b My heart began to beat violent as I ran back to the house.
- c The moon was fully in the dark blue sky.
- d We went into the sitting room, where my mother and sister were waiting impatient.
- e I tried to convince him that this settlement was the worst possibly thing for his niece and should not be accepted.

P B1 Preliminary English Test Reading Part 5

1 Complete each sentence by choosing the correct answer (A, B, C or D).

- 1 'Laura and I last saw each other six months ?'
A yet B past C ago D since
- 2 She was tired to go out.
A too B very C much D too much
- 3 Unfortunately, Laura remembered very
A less B any C little D few
- 4 Sir Percival never visited Limmeridge House, he had met Laura's father.
A Despite B Although C However D Because
- 5 She said that she died, she wanted to leave everything to Marian.
A whether B as C unless D if
- 6 When Sir Percival arrived, he looked older I had expected.
A when B than C that D then
- 7 If she doesn't sign her name on the document, he be able to pay his debts.
A would B won't C wouldn't D will
- 8 It was when I had calmed down that I heard a sound.
A only B as C alone D that
- 9 Laura was kneeling my side.
A over B across C through D by
- 10 He nursed her day and night she recovered.
A unless B until C if D meanwhile