

Identity and Anxiety: An Analysis of the Characters' Anxieties

Revolving Identity in *The Woman in White*

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Abstract

As a literary genre of fiction which enjoyed its great popularity in Britain in the 1860s and 1870s when the country had just gone through a series of social changes and a variety of anxieties prevailing the whole society, the sensation novel presents to readers a wide range of anxieties and gives responds to some of them. *The Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins (1859), which is generally regarded by critics as a typical representative of the sensation novel, displays diversified anxieties through the depiction of various impressive characters, and especially through their processes of establishing, losing, regaining, strengthening, hiding and faking their identities. This essay will analyze the representative work, exploring and examining the characters' anxieties revolving their identities in relation to the social backgrounds of that era.

Keywords: Identity; Anxiety; *The Woman in White*; Sensation novel

As one of the most important narrators, the development of Walter Hartright's identity embodies the process of the replacement of middle-class capitalists replacing the aristocrats as the ruling power of society. In Part One of the story, young Walter is tormented by his love to Laura and his sense of inferiority when faced with Laura, Laura's family and her fiancé. As a professional guardian for wealthy aristocratic females, Walter used to control his feelings and emotions and avoid falling in love with his students:

I should have remembered my position, and have put myself secretly on my guard. I did so....I had accepted the position as part of my calling in life; I had trained myself to leave all the sympathies natural to my age in my employer's outer hall....my situation in life was considered a guarantee against any of my female pupils feeling more than the most ordinary interest in me. (Collins, 1865; 28)

Here young Walter's self-control or self-restraint seems to be part of his professional morality as a guardian. However, his love to Laura, the particularly attractive student, finally defeats his self-control, which is then realized by Laura's half-sister Marian. Marian feels responsible to remind him of the reality:

You are guilty of weakness and want of attention to your own best interests, but of nothing worse....I blame the misfortune of your years and your position....the hard and cruel question as I think it - of social inequalities....matters of rank and station. (Collins, 1865; 30)

In this private conversation, Marian points out two problems that makes it impossible for Laura and him to become a couple even without Laura's fiancé, the first of which is his "weakness" while the second is the disparity between the two social classes. Here the weakness pointed out by Marian can be seen both as a characteristic of the young man who is still not mature enough to establish his own identity and as a metaphoric feature of the middle-class capitalists who were still not powerful enough to assert their own value and their identity as a crucial social class. As a result, young Walter departs with Laura despite of his suspicions of her fiancé and his worries about her life in future.

Walter comes back in the last section of Part Two of the novel:

Early in the summer of 1850 I and my surviving companions left the wilds and forests of Central America for home....Death by disease, death by the Indians, death by drowning--all three had approached me; all three had passed me by. (Collins, 1865; 169)

The novel was written at a time when Britain had been accelerating its colonial expansion overseas (Chen Wei, 2001). Here "the wilds and forests of Central America" and "death by the Indians" apparently indicate that Walter has been involved in such undertakings, and just through joining in such a cause and experiencing all the difficulties it inherently involves has he overcome his "weakness" in the past and become a confident, courageous and responsible man:

From that self-imposed exile I came back, as I had hoped, prayed, believed I should come back--a changed man. In the waters of a new life I had tempered my nature afresh. In the stern school of extremity and danger my will had learnt to be strong, my heart to be resolute, my mind to rely on itself. (Collins, 1865; 169)

It is not unreasonable to say that the narrative of the changes of Walter can be seen as metaphorically indicating that the middle-class capitalists as a social class had strengthened themselves through their enterprise overseas and had come back for the domination of social power. In the following parts of the story, Walter plays the roles of an intelligent detective, a meticulous carer, a clever and brave protector as well as a responsible husband. With his resolution and intelligence, he finally defeats Sir Percival Glyde and Count Fosco, who are metaphorically the representatives of aristocrats at that time, and successfully restores Laura's identity. Therefore, the character of Walter Hartright embodies the middle-class capitalists as a whole, and his process of establishing and developing his own identity marks the process of the rise of middle-class capitalists as a social class. Though some critics regard Walter as an exceptional model of middle-class identity (Kucich, John, 1994), it is not unreasonable to see the character as typical representative of the middle-class capitalists when the historical background is taken into consideration. Walter's anxieties in the first part of the story symbolize their class anxieties derived from sense of inferiority and powerlessness when facing dominating aristocrats; his experience in Central America alludes to their colonial expansion in America, from which they strengthen themselves; his coming back and final success embody the final success of the middle-class capitalists as a new-rising social class over the aristocrats as another class who used to be dominators of society. Sense of inferiority about his identity as an individual and the identity of the class to which he belongs is the major source of Walter's anxiety, and the development and establishment of both of his individual identity and his class identity finally wipe out such anxiety.

The depiction of the character of Laura, one of the major female characters in the novel, presents anxieties about gender identity as a woman in that era. Laura is generally regarded as an ideal female figure at that time (Xu Qi, Huang Xiaohong, 2004), pretty, weak, obedient, sensitive, considerate, tender, quiet and lovely. However, Sir Percival Glyde and Count Fosco take advantage of such satisfactory features and push her into desperate situations. In Part One of the story, Laura's anxiety mainly comes from the contradiction between her own will and what she is expected to do as an aristocratic lady, a daughter and a fiancée. Sir Percival Glyde is the fiancée decided by Laura's father, and though Laura never meets him, she obeys her father and accepts such arrangement. When she realizes that she has fallen in love with Walter just as Walter loves her, she feels guilty and tormented:

When the doubt that I had hushed asleep first laid its weary weight on her heart, the true face owned all, and said, in its own frank, simple language--I am sorry for him; I am sorry for myself. (Collins, 1865; 28-29)

Here the torture Laura endures after she realizes her love to Walter seems to indicate her attitude that in spite of the love between Walter and her, she will never disobey her father's will, and that she already knows that their love is doomed to failure. However, she is not able to do anything to change the situation, and all she can painfully expect is that Walter leaves her life, which indicates her passiveness:

Not in love, at that last moment, but in the agony and the self- abandonment of despair.

"For God's sake, leave me!" she said faintly.

The confession of her heart's secret burst from her in those pleading words. (Collins, 1865; 53)

What exposes her passiveness more completely is her decision to confess to her fiancé that she loves another man and her decision that it is then to be decided by her fiancé whether to marry her or not. When Sir Percival Glyde asks Marian to tell Laura that he will give up the engagement as long as Laura asks him to do so, he actually takes advantage of Laura's love to her father and her value of credit and promise. His seemingly considerate suggestion is actually a way to urge her to accept their marriage. However, Laura assumes and expects that Sir Percival Glyde will naturally cancel his engagement with her when he knows that Laura does not love and will never love him, and she prepares to remain single all her life after that. To her surprise, her fiancé still decides to marry her, which makes her totally passive and depressed. Laura's anxiety here is mainly a result of the contradiction between her own will and what she is expected to do by her father as well as by social conventions, between her identity as an individual and her identity as an ideal upper-class female figure of that time.

After their marriage, Sir Percival Glyde begins to expose his nature, his neglect of the will of his wife and his bad temper. When Laura refuses to sign the document which he tells her to sign but which she has not read, he loses all of his self-control and polite disguise, and what Laura honestly told him before marriage becomes what he can use to insult her. Here Laura's anxiety about her marriage is again caused by the conflict between her identity as an individual and her identity as a wife in her husband's expectancy.

However, unlike Walter Hartright's finally establishing and developing his own identity, Laura's case seems much more complicated. Laura is announced to be dead and sent to the Asylum where Anne Catherick used to stay. Such a disaster destroys Laura's mind, and her memory becomes obscure and full of confusions. When Hartright finally unites with Laura and Marian, Laura has already lost much of her memory about the past. Hartright and Marian try to encourage her to recall the happy memories before her unfortunate marriage:

Tenderly and gradually, the memory of the old walks and drives dawned upon her, and the poor weary pining eyes looked at Marian and at me with a new interest, with a faltering thoughtfulness in them, which from that moment we cherished and kept alive...with some faint reflection of the innocent pleasure in my encouragement, the growing enjoyment in her own progress, which belonged to the lost life and the lost happiness of past days. (Collins, 1865; 181)

Here the way in which Hartright and Marian try to revive Laura's memory inevitably makes careful readers to suspect if they really have restored Laura's memory or they actually have re-created her memory. As Rachel Ablow comments in her *Good Vibrations: The Sensationalization of Masculinity in "The Woman in White"*:

It is impossible to say whether Walter and Marian revive memories that have been concealed to their possessor or whether they provide her with the information she needs to play her part...whether they are helping Laura recover or are helping her...become what they need her to be. (Ablow, Rachel, 2003-2004; 158-180)

Therefore, it is hard to say whether Laura's identity is restored by Walter and her half-sister or re-established by them. Laura's anxiety in this period can thus be understood as not only because of the challenge of proving herself to be sane Laura instead of insane Anne Catherick, but also because of the ambiguity of her identity as the past Laura who has revived and restored her memory or the new Laura who experiences the happy experience again as arranged by Hartright and Marian.

Apart from Hartright and Laura, the major antagonists in this novel also present anxieties in relation to identity. Sir Percival Glyde is illegitimate to inherit the property or title of his parents. In order to get a legitimate identity, he forges the entry of his parents' marriage in the marriage register at Old Welmingham Church, which is a secret known only by Anne Catherick's mother. Sir Percival Glyde lives all his life in the fear of someone discovering his secret, and the faked identity explains all his anxieties about Anne Catherick's

escaping from the Asylum and Walter's investigating into his secret. Count Fosco, as another crucial antagonist, used to belong to a secret political society in Italy. After betraying the society, he lives in England and tries very hard to conceal his identity in many ways such as eating a lot of sweet food in order to transform his stature. Meanwhile, he remains extremely careful and sensitive to danger. However, Walter finally discovers his identity by chance and he is murdered by agents of the society he has betrayed.

In conclusion, *The Woman in White* presents through its characters a variety of anxieties revolving identity, which is closely related to the historical background of the novel. Walter Hartright is a typical representative of the middle-class capitalists and his establishing and developing his own identity embodies the rise of the social class as a whole. Laura is an ideal female figure in that era and the contradiction between her individual identity and the expected female identity marks the gender anxiety of women similar to her in background and situation. The two antagonists' anxieties are all related to their intention to fake a new identity or hide their real identities. Investigating the novel from the perspective of anxiety and identity will contribute to readers' detailed comprehension of the story and the characters in relation to the social and historical background of the novel.

References

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Biography

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