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Loving Self-Reflection: Paradigms of Narcissism in *The Woman in White*  

By Carolyn Laubender

much like the foundational myth of Ovid, Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White* also opens onto a landscape of Narcissism. For Collins, though, the terrain has changed: his penning deal not with literal pond-gazing, but with the more metaphorical manifestations of self-love and adoration that comprise the core of his characters interactions with one another (and, for that matter, themselves). But their particular vanities are various, ranging from comical hypochondria to a sensational and heroic love that serves to self-aggrandize rather than self-sacrifice.

The narcissisms embodied by Collins’ characters Fredrick Fairlie, Walter Hartwright, and Laura Fairlie are not Ovidian as much as they are Freudian and Lacanian, with each figure fitting into a different psychoanalytic archetype of (self)love.

Sigmund Freud’s writings on narcissism, when read alongside *The Woman in White*, suggest a shocking complicated picture of Frederick Fairlie’s character. Though the ec- centric and rather odd uncle of Laura Fairlie is a flawless depiction of an exaggerated narcissism and ego-centrity, a more radical interpretation of his character suggests that Fairlie is a far more complex expression of repressed psychological desires that lead him to, quite literally, fall in love with himself. His narcissism has progressed beyond the necessary Primary Narcissism that Freud sees in all individuals and has distorted into a totalizing Secondary Narcissism that manifests as hypochondria and is explained by an implicit coding of Fairlie’s character as homosexual. In Freud’s 1914 essay, “On Narcissism: An Introduction,” he suggests that narcissistic tendencies may not, as previously assumed, be a disorder, but are more likely a normative state of being. Freud theorized that individuals function with the capacity for two different types of libido: ego-libido and object-libido. Ego-libido (narcissism) “is the libidinal compliment to the egoism of the instinct of self-preservation” and constitutes an essential piece of “healthy” individuals. It is, as Freud terms it, a Primary Narcissism. Object-libido, then, is that section of desire that has been directed at objects external to the self and is typically associated with the love of or desire for another person.

Freed imagines libido as a fixed quantity within the mind, thereby implying that ego-libido and object-libido are engaged in a constant exchange with one another. In cases when the individual’s development of the libidinal stage is somehow “disrupted,” however, the individual may never fully develop an object-libido. This results in Secondary Narcissism, or a psychological disorder where the libido withdraws its attention from the outside world and focuses entirely on an obsession with the self, as seen in cases of hypochondria and megalomania.

Thus the type of hypochondria exhibited by Fredrick Fairlie’s character develops when the self becomes so obsessed with itself that it essentially begins to see the entire external world as a threat to either health or sanity. Fairlie’s preoccupation with “the wretched state of [his] nerves” which he mentions, without fail, in every conversation he has, is the primary focus of his hypochondriac obsession; he is, by his own estimation, “nothing but a bundle of nerves dressed up to look like a man.” Consumed by thoughts...
of his body, his “nerves,” his mental stabil-
y, his physical health, Fairlie often uses his “poor health” or “weak nerves” as excuses for not having to be held socially responsible or to redirect his conversation back to himself when it has strayed to other topics. He manipulates his “illness” as a way to control the characters around him, insisting that the voices of chil-
dren, the banging of doors, and the dirt on visitors’ shoes are all things that will disturb his health, thereby excusing him from having to necessarily without having to view himself as narcissistic. The extremity of Fairlie’s self-
love is even noticed by Walter Hartwright who, upon his first encounter with Mr. Fairlie, observes that his “self-affection and [his] wretched nerves” mean “one and the same thing.” Fairlie’s self-absorption far surpasses any “normal” type of Primary Narcissism envisioned by Freud. He is an “ideal self,” an “ideal ego”—Fairlie’s own aggrandized illusion of his body, his mental stabil-
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Finally, Lacan’s notion of desire in the Symbolic Order includes a phenomenon he terms “The Gaze.” For Lacan, The Gaze is not merely the subject’s act of looking at an object of desire, but also includes the subject’s (almost paranoid) realization that he is being gazed back at by the object. This realization is essentially one fraught with anxiety and insecurity because we are forced to realize that the “other” we are gazing at has at the very least the ability to gage back, almost threatening us with our own “Ideal-I” by forcing us to subconsciously recall the fact that we believe we lack much of what our “reality” reflects us to be. Thus, our relationships with objects in the Symbolic Order are similar to our relationship with ourselves in the Imaginary Order; both are characterized by a simultaneous obsession with the image of our ideal selves and a sense of anxiety (generated by the fact that the image forces us to realize that, in the Real, we are not what we want to pretend to be).

By deconstructing his narcissistic idealized self-image and troubling that image by constantly reminding himself of his own lack in comparison to the image, Walter attempts to verbalize this uncanny15 paradox by again speaking of the ambiguous “I” in his heart. His own image is both in love with and unsettled by the fundamental anxiety accounts for the fundamental anxiety accounts for the insecurity that his idealized reflection of himself stirs in him, he literally goes to another location by succeeding in the latter venture. Bewildered by succeeding in the former, he becomes everything that he previously idealized himself into his Ideal-I; he really and truly becomes the woman in white, at once and forever.”18

The text of To Woman in White almost immediately alludes to the underlying problems structuring Laura and Walter’s desire for love for the Ideal-I (as represented to us, in the Symbolic Order, through others) and thus firmly fates to fall in love with his own image. Walter’s ‘almost obsessive drive to look at and watch Laura whenever possible. The insecurity that his idealized reflection of himself awaken prompts Walter to try to master that anxiety, to overcome it by perpetually staring at it. His repeated glances at and observations of Laura are thereby read not as looks of love, but as an almost colonial desire to gain control over and possess the unstable root of his fear. Despite his best (subconscious) efforts, though, Walter is never able to overcome the anxiety described in Laura’s version of the Castration Complex because, according to Lacan, the insecurity has nothing to do with the object itself, which is always strongest, in the most contradictory manner, when she looked at me . . . Some- thing is going on, something unregistered—where it was, and what it was, I could not say.”19 The fact that this “wanting” occurs most secretly when Laura is gazing at Walter, fixing her reflective eyes on him, speaks to Lacan’s assumption that “The Gaze” is especially coded with both the narcissism of his own image and Laura’s subsequent confinement to the “ruined cities of Central America.”20 Essentially, though, the internal conflict becomes too unbearable and Walter parts with Laura, leaving Lacan’s theory becomes more complicated. Lacan’s assumption that “The Gaze” is essentially coded with both the narcissism of his own image and Laura’s subsequent confinement to the “ruined cities of Central America.”20 Essentially, though, the internal conflict becomes too unbearable and Walter parts with Laura, leaving him forever frustrated and her to another location by succeeding in the former. By his own sleuth-like actions of Laura’s existence. At this point in the narrative, Walter’s flawless representation of Laura’s existence. At this point in the narrative, Walter’s flawless representation of Laura’s existence. At this point in the narrative, Walter’s flawless representation of Laura’s existence. At this point in the narrative, Walter’s flawless representation of Laura’s existence. At this point in the narrative, Walter’s flawless representation of Laura’s existence. At this point in the narrative, Walter’s flawless representation of Laura’s existence. At this point in the narrative, Walter’s flawless representation of Laura’s existence. At this point in the narrative, Walter’s flawless representation of Laura’s existence. At this point in the narrative, Walter’s flawless representation of Laura’s existence. At this point in the narrative, Walter’s flawless representation of Laura’s existence. At this point in the narrative, Walter’s flawless representation of Laura’s existence. At this point in the narrative, Walter’s flawless representation of Laura’s existence. At this point in the narrative, Walter’s flawless representation of Laura’s existence. At this point in the narrative, Walter’s flawless representation of Laura’s existence. At this point in the narrative, Walter’s flawless representation of Laura’s existence. At this point in the narrative, Walter’s flawless representation of Laura’s existence. At this point in the narrative, Walter’s flawless representation of Laura’s existence. At this point in the narrative, Walter’s flawless representation of Laura’s existence. At this point in the narrative, Walter’s flaws
with the future of Laura Fairlie had set her
profound marks on the youth and beauty of her face. The fatal resemblance [between Laura and Anne] which she had once seen and shuttered at seeing, in idea only, was now a real and living creation of the very paradigms of narcissism Freud states through the work they produce. Often, artists and writer, reading their urge to explain this literary and artistic tendency of representing a false yet attractive reality by applying his own theories to the artists and writer, reading their urge to materialize as representative of the artist's own fumbling attempts to transcend his or her own anxiety: “The artist desires to win honour, power, wealth, fame, and the love of women; but he lacks the means for achieving these satisfactions” in the “real” world and so turns to art and writing to create a delusional resolution that would otherwise be unobtainable.22 From this Freudian meta-perspective, the artist is necessarily narcissistic because every production, every creative expression, represents nothing more than “an invert[ed]”31 own desire to “[mak][e] his dreams come true” and take pleasure from that creative extension of himself.10 Artists’ fictionalized worlds are not the result of former self-burns of his, but are indicative of authors’ own quasi-neurotic states and their vain attempts to stabilize those states by self-idealization. Often, they—like the characters they produce—are subject to being read as a living embodiment of the very paradigms they had assumed to be mentally ubiquitous and are repositioned from the pedestal of “creator” to the couch of the psychoanalyst.

Walter’s final joy in marriage comes from the fact that he can now, fully and completely, own Laura, his love, his looking-glass, his mirror whose image he can now constantly and securely worship. His happiness is not the idealistic Victorian ending, lovers of fiction often point to novels as if they are testaments of dreams come true, as if transposing into the trap (and a seductive trap it is, indeed) of mistaking for reality what is simply fiction. The artist desires to win honour, power, wealth, fame, and the love of women; but he lacks the means for achieving these satisfactions” in the “real” world and so turns to art and writing to create a delusional resolution that would otherwise be unobtainable.22 From this Freudian meta-perspective, the artist is necessarily narcissistic because every production, every creative expression, represents nothing more than “an invert[ed]” own desire to “[mak][e] his dreams come true” and take pleasure from that creative extension of himself.10 Artists’ fictionalized worlds are not the result of former self-burns of his, but are indicative of authors’ own quasi-neurotic states and their vain attempts to stabilize those states by self-idealization. Often, they—like the characters they produce—are subject to being read as a living embodiment of the very paradigms they had assumed to be mentally ubiquitous and are repositioned from the pedestal of “creator” to the couch of the psychoanalyst.