

THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY

A WILKIE COLLINS PhD DISSERTATION

Summarized by Kirsten Hüttner

Zlata Antonova's PhD dissertation 'The Third Period of Creative Work of Wilkie Collins,' Cherepovets State University, Russia.

Zlata Antonova, a Russian graduate of Cherepovets State University, Russia (Psychology and English) has finished her PhD dissertation on Wilkie Collins (1824-1889). This study by Antonova is the second and more recent Russian dissertation on Collins, following the earlier one by E. A. Keshakova in 1978. The present dissertation is the result of intense research over a period of three years during which Antonova has published various Russian language studies and articles on several aspects on Collins's oeuvre.

Antonova's study is devoted mainly to the works written during Wilkie Collins' 'third writing period' (1870 - 1889), with particular focus on the novels *Man and Wife* (1870) and *The Law and the Lady* (1875). Antonova describes the evolutionary process that Wilkie Collins had undergone throughout his entire writing career. She analyses how he develops various writing principles, styles, characters and topics in the course of three individual periods. Stating that not enough critical attention had been paid to Collins' later novels, Antonova tries to fill this gap in current criticism of Collins's works. In her examination she links Collins's later novels to those written earlier and presents the development of the Victorian author's altered focus towards the end of his career.

Antonova offers a logical, threefold structure for Collins's 'evolutionary path' throughout his life as a writer. The first part of the study is devoted to Collins's early writing, his '**first period**' (1848-1859). She shows that even at the beginning of his career (*Basil*, 1852; and *Hide and Seek*, 1854) Collins is developing his central ideas (e.g. religion, family relationships and social problems) and elements (e.g. detective issues). The experience gained from these early novels prepares Collins for the success of his '**second period**' (1860-1870).

Collins's most famous novels, *The Woman in White* (1860) and *The Moonstone* (1868), represent further growth in his stylistic techniques and mark the period where Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens come closest. In these works Antonova shows that Collins was most ready to meet the expectations of his readers and makes allowances for this. Antonova examines his two most famous novels in depth, particularly looking for links with Collins's previous books and the origins of his future works. Outstanding aspects of *The Woman in White* are its

multi-narrative perspective and sophisticated plot structure with complex parallel action. Antonova indicates, however, that social topics such as illegitimacy and discrimination against women by the law still remain in the background.

The Moonstone demonstrates Collins's mastery of the multiple narrative technique which also allows him to create a gallery of characters rather less romantic than those of *The Woman in White*. Of course the central issue of *The Moonstone* is the development and perfection of the detective element. In addition, Collins displays an interesting range of humoristic elements - humour, irony and sarcasm. With the two novels of his second period; Collins not only became one of the most popular authors of the time but also helped create the sensation novel. Antonova emphasizes in this context that the genre of the sensation novel is not meant as a term of disapproval but simply to describe a certain type of novel of that period. She therefore refers to other contemporary authors of sensation novels such as Charles Reade and Mary Braddon. The historical development and main characteristics of the sensation novel are also presented in her dissertation.

The **'third period'** of Collins writing is the longest and, according to Antonova, may be the most difficult to summarize. Over almost 20 years, Collins uses a variety of topics in those stories which Antonova classifies as 'purpose' or 'tendentious' novels.' Collins here uses his particular writing techniques to maintain suspense. He captivates his readers and thus entertains them despite the serious presentation of various Victorian social problems in his books. Because of their highly entertaining nature, his novels were often labelled belletristic. Antonova however, defends Collins's late novels against both this accusation and that they had declined into lightweight, valueless reading.

Antonova then illustrates how most novels of Collins's third period deal intensely with certain problems inherent in the Victorian society. As a recurring leitmotiv, Collins consistently deals with the special issue of discrimination against women because of Victorian laws and conventions. This is a topic that Collins had also vehemently criticised in his non-fictional works as a journalist. *Man and Wife* (1870) focuses on the complicated and unfair contemporary marriage laws in England and Scotland and the discrimination because of women's lack of rights to property. In this novel the issue becomes central whereas it was still a minor feature in the novels of his second writing period such as *The Woman in White* or *No Name* (1862). Antonova points out that the women's issue is picked up in almost all novels of that period if not as the main topic then at least on a secondary level.

Action and key characters of all Collins's novels are located in the upper middle class of Victorian society and the focus is on their contemporary social issues. However, as distinct from the comparable author, Charles Reade, Wilkie Collins is not concerned with the crucial problems of the Victorian working class - trades unions, strikes, working conditions and farming crises). Collins restricts himself to a particular class and to defending Victorian women. He frequently creates as a character the indigent woman, deprived of her property rights, who submits to the control of a weak and useless companion. This was repeatedly criticised by his contemporaries. Nevertheless, Collins displays in his novels of purpose a basic philanthropic attitude which assures him the favour of his readers.

In the final part of her dissertation, Antonova analyses more deeply what she considers Collins's most important novels of the third period. In her opinion *Man and Wife* is the best example to demonstrate Collins 'second manner' and can be considered a true purpose novel. This story and *The Law and the Lady* are the most typical for this final period of Collins's career: they both tackle the issues of

marriage law and double standards of Victorian morality. Antonova also refers briefly to the other novels of the third period, such as *The New Magdalen* (1873) and *'Say No'* (1884) and gives analogies to what she considers are his major novels of that period.

One innovative element in *Man and Wife* is the clear position and thinking of the heroine as narrator. Here she displays her personal opinion much more evidently than in Collins's earlier novels. All problems are presented through the main characters' point of view, thus presenting their psychology. This sophisticated way of bringing light to their thinking and psychological situation reminds Antonova of the elegant style of Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*.

In *The Law and the Lady* Collins once again follows his typical concept of combining entertainment and education: he creates the heroine that the reader would expect. The plot of this novel is quite unlike that of his previous book, just as *The Woman in White* is very different from *The Moonstone*. Collins himself considered *The Law and the Lady* an 'autobiography of a young lady' and again gives insight into female psychology. All the major issues of the novel (e.g. juridical and religious matters) are shown from the female point of view - thus Collins once more becomes a kind of 'herald of the female soul,' as Antonova puts it. She also draws attention to Collins's typical descriptions of landscape and nature as a reflection of the inner mood of the narrator.

In *The Law and the Lady*, as well as in other Collins's novels, the heroine has a pastoral upbringing, which of course heavily influences her attitude and reactions. This explains why the strong-minded heroine finally submits to her weak husband without questioning her subordinate position. Although the juridical issue is also of importance in this novel, greater weight is given to the impact of Victorian conventions and restraints on the heroine.

In the conclusion of Antonova's study, she assesses the importance of Collins's 'third period' novels in comparison with his previous periods. She sees a clear maturing process in Collins writing career. He had a good foundation with his earlier success: he was famous, experienced, had developed style and narrative technique, and was financially independent. So in his third writing period he moved from sensational fiction to novels of purpose with social intentions. He stayed with his focus on the problems of the English bourgeoisie, such as hypocrisy, snobbism, excessive athleticism, and general injustice in Victorian society. However, his main interest is the problem of Victorian women.

Antonova affirms that Collins creates heroines of a modern type which are similar to those of the European (continental) authors George Sand and Ibsen. Collins's type of new woman is powerful, strong-minded and persistent, but compared with the continental type, considers herself subordinate to her male companion. Antonova explains this phenomenon by the strict 'corset' and moral upbringing of Victorian society.

In his later novels Collins develops his secrets with mastery and fulfils his readers' expectations to keep them entertained. By changing from the genre of sensation literature to purpose novels, it is difficult to categorize Collins later novels: as Antonova puts it, 'Detective Collins is not following the direct path of canon genre.' But that, as the author of this study concludes, does not affect the sensational and entertaining effects that his novels achieve with his readers.

This detailed, carefully researched study by Zlata Antonova is a valuable piece of international criticism of Wilkie Collins and his novels. Her analysis and focus on Collins's final period is logically structured and innovative of its type. Her

perspective from the background of Russian scholarship certainly adds new insights to existing Western criticism. Most Western scholars will probably be unable to read the study in its original Russian. Antonova therefore hopes in due course to translate some parts of her text to make it available for non-Russian speakers.

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PUBLICATIONS:

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