

The Woman in White

Adapted by Craig Sodaro
from the novel by Wilkie Collins

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STORY OF THE PLAY

While on his way to a new art teaching position, young Walter Hartright meets a mysterious woman dressed in white. Terrified, she asks him the way to London and mentions that she once was very happy at the very house Walter is going to.

Reaching his destination, Walter meets his pupils, Marian Halcombe and her half-sister Laura Fairlie, who live at Limmeridge with their uncle, Frederick Fairlie. Walter finds happiness at Limmeridge and soon realizes he's falling in love with Laura. But his happiness is dashed when he finds out she is engaged to Sir Percival Glyde, a match arranged by Laura's father before his death.

When Glyde arrives to set the wedding date, Marian sends Walter away, but not before telling him about a young girl named Anne Catherick who had once lived at Limmeridge. She would now be about the same age as Laura, but apparently disappeared after Marian and Laura's mother died. A mysterious letter simultaneously arrives warning Laura not to marry Glyde, for he hides a secret that will bring disaster upon the marriage.

With Walter nursing his broken heart in Central America, the wedding takes place. But almost immediately after the honeymoon, Laura and Marian find out Glyde only wants the fortune Laura has inherited. Abetted by his flamboyant friends, Count and Madame Fosco, Glyde launches a sinister plot that seems to end with the death of Laura.

However, Marian finds that her half-sister has been committed to an asylum, kept there under the influence of drugs. Bribing a nurse, Marian frees Laura, but they must now hide from Glyde and Fosco, who will surely be looking Laura. Walter returns from Central America to find Marian and a recuperating Laura hiding in an East London flat. Confronting the dangers of Glyde's tightening stranglehold, Walter tracks down Glyde's past and uncovers his secret leading to Glyde's death in a church fire.

Unfortunately, Laura is still not free: a final confrontation with the diabolical Count Fosco is the only way for Walter to end the nightmare.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(Large, flexible)

Main Characters

(4 men, 5 women)

WALTER HARTRIGHT: 20s, an art teacher.
ANNE CATHERICK: 20s, a mysterious woman in white.
FREDERICK FAIRLIE: 50s, a nervous hypochondriac.
MARIAN HALCOMBE: 30s, one of Walter's pupils.
LAURA FAIRLIE: 20s, another pupil, heiress to a fortune.
SIR PERCIVAL GLYDE: 45, a landowner.
COUNT FOSCO: 40s, Glyde's friend.
MADAME FOSCO: 40s, the Count's wife.
MRS. CATHERICK: 40s, Anne's mother.

Ensemble Characters*

(7 men, 8 women, 4 flexible)

PESCA: 40s, a teacher of Italian, friend of Walter's.
MAID: 20s.
SCHOOLMISTRESS: Young woman.
STUDENT: About 12, flexible.
MRS. MICHELSON: 40s, housekeeper.
HESTER: A cook.
DR. GOODRICKE: 50s.
JANE GOULD: 20s, undertaker's assistant.
MRS. CATCHPOOL: A church volunteer.
MRS. JERROD: Another volunteer.
MISS CARLISLE: A nurse.
MR. GILMORE: 50s, a lawyer.
TOM DARCY: 20s, a driver.
MR. GELLER: 70s, a church clerk.
ASSAILANT: Wearing a disguise.
VOICE OF POLICEMAN: Voice only.
VOICE ONE: Voice only.
VOICE TWO: Another.
VOICE THREE: Another.

*Doubling Ensemble parts is encouraged.

SETTING

The play takes place in various locations in England, 1850. Because the action is fluid, there is no need for a specific set. It would be good to use platforms on stage with at least one set up about four feet above the main playing area allowing characters to enter above and behind other performers so as not to be noticed. Several pieces of furniture - best if stylized - remain on the stage during the entire performance. These include a small table, a chair or two, and a wooden bench.

The play is designed to be fast-moving with entrances and exits immediately following one another unless otherwise noted in the script. There is a break between Acts I and II, but otherwise no designation of scenes.

SOUND EFFECTS

Policeman's whistle

Bell tolling

Gunshot

Knock at door

Twigs crackling in a fire

Shouts

Church bell ringing quickly, loudly

Orchestra warming up before a performance

Selection from an opera

LIGHTING EFFECTS

Red lights, symbolizing a fire

See **PROPS LIST** at end of script.

ACT I

(AT RISE: WALTER enters SL.)

WALTER: *(To audience.)* It was the last day of July, 1850. For my own part, the fading summer left me out of health, out of spirits, and if the truth must be told, out of money as well. During the past year I had not managed my professional resources as carefully as usual, and unfortunately, I had as yet failed to find a position as an art teacher for the upcoming months.

(ANNE enters SL, looking back nervously. She is dressed totally in white and looks pale and sickly. She watches WALTER intently, but is unseen by him.)

WALTER: *(Continued.)* Should you be in need of instructions in watercolors, pencil sketching, even oils, I, Walter Hartright, have in the past proven effective, and I have a few recommendations here ... but, no ... I felt at that moment I had exhausted my artistic resources.

ANNE: *(Moves closer to WALTER during his last few words. Intensely, in a whisper.)* Help me!

(As WALTER turns to see who spoke to him, PESCA enters SR carrying a small suitcase, which he sets DSR. ANNE darts behind a platform to hide, as if behind a building.)

PESCA: My good friend, I have searched everywhere for you! And where do I find you? Hiding in Hamstead Heath.

WALTER: Professor! Did you say "Help me" just now?

PESCA: You help me? On the contrary ... your worries are over, my dear boy. I have good news!

WALTER: Don't joke with me, my friend.

PESCA: Yes, your friend! Your dearest friend to whom I owe my life!

WALTER: That was two years ago. You owe me nothing.

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PESCA: You saved me from drowning, my boy! You pulled me from the sea at Brighton when a cramp had overtaken me.

WALTER: Anyone would have done the same.

PESCA: But it was you, my boy, and with that one act we are tied together with a rope that cannot be cut except by death, and I have no intention of inviting him for a visit!

WALTER: Funny, but I thought I might send him a note myself.

PESCA: No, no, no! You listen to me. In the house where I teach my native language ... there is a mama, fair and fat; three young misses, fair and fat; two young misters, fair and fat; and a papa, the fairest and fattest of all who is a mighty merchant. And last week he interrupted our study of Dante's *Inferno* as we were approaching the seventh level of hell with a letter in hand. He said to me, my dear friend Frederick Fairlie has two young nieces and they are in need of amusement. Can you recommend a drawing master to come to my house in the country? It appears his nieces are of an artistic temperament. And so you have been engaged for an indefinite period by Mr. Frederick Fairlie at Limmeridge House, Cumberland. You are expected tomorrow. *(Hands WALTER a letter.)*

WALTER: Professor! I ... I don't know what to say!

PESCA: Thank you, perhaps.

WALTER: But this is too sudden.

PESCA: Oh, you want to mope around London and beg for food all winter? *(Retrieves the suitcase and sets it at WALTER'S feet.)*

WALTER: No, but I don't know if I'm experienced enough for such students. They're not children, are they?

PESCA: They will be children when it comes to watercolors. Go, my friend Walter! Perhaps you will find your destiny. *(Rushes off SL.)*

WALTER: *(To audience.)* I didn't understand how quickly Professor Pesca's final words would begin to take root.

End of Freeview

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