

What's in a Name?

Mystery of the Protagonist's Inconstant Identity in Wilkie Collins's *Armada**

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What does “mystery” mean in literature? Answering this question is difficult because the word mystery has two meanings. First, mystery can refer to a genre: mystery novels. However, mystery can also mean an element of a novel. For example, in the *Sherlock Holmes* series, mystery is an important plot element. The protagonist, Sherlock Holmes, faces a challenging mystery, which is usually a crime like murder, and reveals the truth—the identity of the murderer. This process, the appearance and revelation of the mystery, is not only characteristic of detective novels like the *Sherlock Holmes* series. In fact, mystery was originally an important element of Gothic novels in the late 18th century.

Gothic writers created the supernatural mystery genre by using medieval and foreign settings. For example, Ann Radcliff's eminent Gothic novel, *The Castle of Udolpho* (1794), is set in 16th-century France and Italy. In this novel, the heroine is incarcerated in the castle and experiences various supernatural mysteries. After the Gothic genre's decline in popularity in the early 19th century, the sensation novels of the 1860s reinstalled the element of mystery as an important topic. David Punter and Glennis Byron points out that ‘the domestication of the Gothic’ in the 19th century was ‘partly the result of its appropriation by the sensation novel’ (26). In sensation novels, unlike their Gothic predecessors, the medieval and foreign settings changed to contemporary British environments. Consequently, the nature of the mystery changed from supernatural to domestic. Henry James attributed the change to the author Wilkie Collins, stating, ‘to Mr. Collins belongs the credit of having introduced into fiction those most mysterious of mysteries, the mysteries which are at our own doors’ (594). In short, Collins brought the supernatural mystery of Gothic novels into the domestic life of the Victorian middle class.

Through the Industrial Revolution, mobility among the classes was on the rise, and during the Victorian period, it was possible that children who were born to working-class parents could become gentlemen through education. Therefore, the readers in those days were concerned with issues of social identity, which may have evoked fear in them. The novelists were also

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interested in the problem. Among them, the sensation novelists particularly used it as the main topic of their works.¹

Collins was also interested in this identity problem, and to bring the crisis into his works, he used the names of his characters. *Armadale* (1864–66) is a definite example of this technique. While it is not unusual for a father and son or mother and daughter to share their name,² *Armadale* is distinctive because there are five Allan Armadales from two different families. The story focuses on two young Allan Armadales. Here, the first identity problem occurs: these two Armadales exchange their identities because of a secret scheme plotted by a woman who wants Armadale's fortune. In addition, the relationship of their fathers, who also share the name Allan Armadale, is more complex: victim and murderer. This relationship afflicts their sons' fate. Thus, Allan Armadale, the son of the murderer Armadale, takes the assumed name Ozias Midwinter to avoid his fate.³ This situation makes Midwinter's identity unstable.

Collins gave Midwinter two names and depicts his identity as being unstable between these while describing the process of escaping from his doom. This inconstancy reflects the fear of Victorian readers and functions as the mystery in *Armadale*.

Naming people is an important act because one's name seems to shape one's identity. Thus, people who have the right to name someone do so in order to fix the person's identity. In fiction, the author has the right to name characters. Michael Ragussis suggests that 'the view that equates name and person . . . has perhaps its broadest usefulness in the fatalistic plot in which the name shapes the destiny of the character' (9). Midwinter's true name, Armadale, is cursed because of his father's crime of murder, which was committed because his father shared the name, Allan Armadale, with the victim. Furthermore, the son of the victim and the son of the murderer also share the name. Therefore, Midwinter's true name strongly seals his fate.

¹ Jonathan Loesberg discussed the sensation novelists' 'constant concern about the identity problem'; he stated that 'sensation novels evoke their most typical moments of sensation response from images of a loss of class identity. And this common image links up with a fear of a general loss of social identity as a result of the merging of the classes' (117).

² For example, in *Mary Barton* by Elizabeth Gaskell, the mother and the daughter have the same name, Mary Barton; there are many other examples of children inheriting their parents' names in literature.

³ Midwinter's father had inherited the property and the name Allan Armadale from a kinsman; the kinsman had his own child whose name was Allan Armadale, but he disowned him. The disowned Armadale plots his revenge on the man who inherited his father's property and name, but he is murdered by the man; the two young Armadales are the children of the victim and the murderer. In this paper, Allan Armadale, who is the son of the murderer and uses an assumed name, will be called Midwinter, the other Allan Armadale is referred to as Armadale.

The father's crime can be regarded as a kind of inheritance of the 'sins of the father', which is an important element in Gothic novels. Fred Botting explains how this is typically manifested:

The Gothic theme that the sins of the father are visited on the offspring is manifested in the representations of the illegitimacy and brutality of paternal authority, the repetition of events, and the doubling of figures and names in successive generations. (129)

What Midwinter's father feared was exactly that: 'the repetition of events, and the doubling of figures and names in successive generation'.

Midwinter's father's crime is not only his own sin but is passed along to his son, predicting his child's death. Therefore, Midwinter's father writes a letter advising his son to escape his fate:

My son! The only hope I have left for you hangs on a great doubt—the doubt whether we are or are not the masters of your own destinies. It may be that mortal free will can conquer mortal fate . . . Never, to your dying day, let any living soul approach you who is associated, directly or indirectly, with the crime which your father has committed . . . And more than all, avoid the man who bears the same name as your own . . . Hide yourself from him under an assumed name . . . Never let the two Allan Armadales meet in this world: never: never: never! (55–56)

In the letter, he advises his son to conceal the true name and escape from the fate. This will, however, restricts Midwinter's freedom of choice as he follows it. In this respect, the father's words eventually function as another fate for Midwinter: he has to live with a disguised identity.

Nevertheless, Midwinter follows his father's advice and takes an assumed name; however, he finds it difficult to fully live as Midwinter, as he explains to Mr Brock, a clergyman:

"Twice a year," Midwinter pursued, "I must sign my own name to get my own income. At all other times, and under all other circumstances, I may hide my identity under any name I please . . . it costs me no sacrifice of feeling to keep my assumed name." (118)

He thought that concealing his true identity would be easy; however, this also hints that he cannot completely escape using and bearing his true name because he has to use his real name at least twice a year to collect his money. Here, the problem of his property also becomes fatal to him.

These two kinds of fate are the consequence of inheritance. The inheritance of property resulted in one fate and that of his father's crime resulted in another. In the process of inheritance, the name becomes the symbol of fate because it represents inheritance from one's ancestors. In this way, his identity is divided under two names, and his character becomes inconstant.

At the first meeting with Midwinter, Mr Brooks finds him hesitant to reveal anything about himself:

The conversation which ensued between the two was a very guarded one. Mr Brock felt his way gently, and found himself, try where he might, always kept politely, more or less, in the dark.

From first to last, the man's real character shrank back with a savage shyness from the rector's touch. (74)

This description shows the characteristics Midwinter assumes in that he is a guarded person and does not express his mind. This is his basic character; however, when he faces his fate or his love, he exposes his emotions and shows his strong will. After reading his father's letter, Midwinter's inconstant nature comes to the fore. To Mr Brock, he confesses his love for Armadale and his intention to stay with him under his assumed name.⁴ This decision, of course, is against his father's will, but he cannot control his love:

“. . . I do love him! It *will* come out of me; I can't keep it back. I love the very ground he treads on! I would give my life—yes, the life that is precious to me now, because his kindness has made it a happy one—I tell you I would give my life—”

The next words died away on his lips; the hysterical passion rose, and conquered him. He stretched out one of his hands with a wild gesture of entreaty to Mr Brock; his head sank on the window-sill and he burst into tears. (122)

While he conceals and restrains his thoughts, he cannot help expressing such emotions. This inconstancy arises because of his name-fate, and it afflicts him throughout the novel.

This inconstancy makes his attitude towards his fate volatile. When he decides to stay with Armadale, he has a strong will. However, while he does stay with Armadale, his anxiety about his fate increases. His anxiety appears most conspicuous when he and Armadale are trapped in the ship where Midwinter's father killed Armadale's father. In the cabin, Armadale falls asleep

⁴ This love can be regarded as narcissism in that it is the love for a man who has the same name.

and dreams three impressive scenes.⁵ Although these are not his dreams, Midwinter regards them as prophetic and feels extraordinary fear:

“It has come!” He [Midwinter] whispered to himself, “Not to me—but to him [Armada].”

It had come, in the bright freshness of the morning; it had come, in the mystery and terror of a Dream . . . One question, and one only, rose in the mind of the man who was looking at him. What had the fatality which had imprisoned him in the wreck decreed that he should see?

Had the treachery of Sleep opened the gates of the grave to that one of the two Armadales whom the other had kept in ignorance of the truth?

Was the murder of the father revealing itself to the son—there, on the very spot where the crime had been committed—in the vision of a dream? (163–64)

For Midwinter, the dream seems to predict how their fate would be embodied, and he realizes the impossibility of escaping fate. When Midwinter tries to leave Armadale, he finds he cannot. When the first scene of the dream is fulfilled, the narrator explains:

His conviction of the terrible necessity of leaving Allan for Allan’s good had not been shaken for an instant since he had seen the first Vision of the Dream realized on the shores of the Mere. But now, for the first time, his own heart rose against him in unanswerable rebuke. (323)

He decides to leave when they reach the shore, but after returning to his room, his decision wavers. Whenever some part of the dream is realized, he tries to leave it but suffers from this conflict even more.

Ironically, the more he suffers from emotional conflict, the more he becomes blind to the truth. He cannot identify his most fatalistic woman, Mrs Gwilt, who is the last witness of the incident between the parents of Armadale and Midwinter. Outwardly, Mr Brock gives misinformation to Midwinter about this woman of fate. In reality, Midwinter’s superstition

⁵ At the beginning of the dream, Armadale saw his father. Then, three unidentified scenes followed. In the first scene, he was somewhere with a broad pool surrounded by open ground. He saw the shadow of a woman near the margin of the pool. The second scene featured Armadale sitting near a statue in an unfamiliar room. There was a shadow of a man at the window. Then, the man stretched towards the statue before dropping his arm. The last scene is that he found the shadows of a woman and a man, and he could not see anything but their shadows. The woman gave the man a glass filled with liquid, and the man passed it to Armadale. After drinking it, Armadale fainted.

makes him commit such a mistake. He loves Mrs Gwilt, his archenemy, and finally falls into her trap:

“I love you!” I [Gwilt] whispered in a kiss. “*Now* will you tell me?”

“Sit down,” he said. “You have given me back my courage—you shall know who I am.”

“In the silence and the darkness all round us, I obeyed him, and sat down.

“In the silence and the darkness all round us, he took me in his arms again, and told me who he was.” (509)

He cannot avoid confessing his love and his biggest secret to Mrs Gwilt. In this conversation between Midwinter and Mrs Gwilt, Collins describes Midwinter’s inconsistent character. Before she says, ‘I love you’, he hesitates to confess his secret; however, her confession of ‘love’ changes his mind. This shows Midwinter’s defeat.

Being deceived by Mrs Gwilt, Midwinter decides to live as Midwinter and restore his friendship with Armadale. At the end of the novel, Armadale marries, but Midwinter does not. The fate Midwinter inherits ends here because Midwinter will not have an inheritor of his name, neither Armadale nor Midwinter. Here, Midwinter’s fate come to the end. However, Midwinter’s inconstant identity continues because his true name is still valid.

The word ‘mystery’ is ambiguous today, but it was originally an element of Gothic novels. Wilkie Collins followed this tradition by changing the nature of the mystery and making it domestic. Using the complex naming technique in *Armadale*, Collins succeeded in describing the inconsistent personality of Midwinter. This inconsistency in the sense of Midwinter’s identity presents the novel’s mystery. In the Victorian period, it was believed that a prominent family name was not necessary for class mobility. In *Armadale*, however, Collins depicted the difficulty of discarding one’s birth name and living a new life by one’s own power because property inheritance is strongly connected to the name. Midwinter continues to bear his real name because he must receive his money. He cannot rise in class on his own without the property that he inherits in the end. Here, fiction contradicts the ideal of Victorian society, and it confused contemporary readers. Collins created the domestic mystery, which evoked the same fear from readers that the late-18th-century Gothic novel did with supernatural mystery. Thus, Wilkie Collins’s sensation novels belong to the tradition of Gothic novels, and he is a clear descendent of the gothic novelists of the late 18th century.

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