

Unit 1

Night Encounter

The Woman in White by Wilkie Collins

How well can you introduce a mystery story?

Access strategies

Wilkie Collins is often credited with writing the first mystery story, *The Woman in White* (1859). It's easy to forget that, once upon a time, writing about a mystery was a new concept! The hero of the story, Walter Hartright, is a kind of detective and your pupils will be sampling the style of writing which influenced so many later authors to weave sensational plots around a sleuth. The story was incredibly popular in its own time, and there were even products like perfumes and clothing using the 'Woman in White' branding. Although the novel itself is long, encourage as many of your pupils as possible to try it because it is readable and eventful.

Try using a **key image strategy** to open up access to this famous mystery for all. Which images in this short extract from Chapter 4 stimulate the children's curiosity the most? Why?

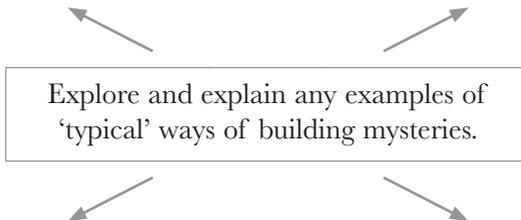
[...] in one moment, every drop of blood in my body was brought to a stop by the touch of a hand laid lightly and suddenly on my shoulder from behind me.



I turned on the instant, with my fingers tightening round the handle of my stick.

There, in the middle of the broad, bright high-road – there, as if it had that moment sprung out of the earth or dropped from the heaven – stood the figure of a solitary Woman, dressed from head to foot in white garments, her face bent in grave inquiry on mine, her hand pointing to the dark cloud over London, as I faced her.

Now, use an **explore and explain** learning pathway. The idea is that your pupils are building an understanding of *how* the mystery is set up. They must search for evidence in one group and then move groups to feed back to others. This keeps the pressure on to participate, listen and learn, rather than defer to the most proactive students.



After switching groups and deepening their learning, ask them to share selected ideas as a whole class and then add your own knowledge. Linking now with the ‘beyond the limit’ section on page 16 might be useful to incorporate prior learning and **link reading**.

Excellent responses will include:

- 🍷 The first person narrator’s fear is shared with us as he experiences it.
- 🍷 Phrases like ‘every drop of blood’ add detail to the emotional atmosphere and link mental with physical distress. The hands on the stick accentuate this.
- 🍷 The light touch on the shoulder adds to a sense of the unknown. It may not hurt but it prickles the senses.
- 🍷 A one line paragraph makes us read it like a still photograph.
- 🍷 The much longer paragraph, with the dashes marking off an echo of the narrator’s astonishment, finally gives us the view we have waited for.
- 🍷 A ‘solitary Woman’ is perhaps a surprise! Why is there a capital letter for ‘Woman’?
- 🍷 The white garments mark out a mystery and they stand out visually. What can white signify?
- 🍷 Why is the hand pointing at the dark cloud?

The questions mount ...

Writing a **taster draft** now would exploit the deeper thinking and stimulate original writing. Ask your pupils to use some of the ideas they have learnt from Wilkie Collins in a brief passage. It could

introduce a mysterious character in an appropriate setting. No sustained plot is needed at this point, just a taster of the feel of mystery. Drafts should be shared, explored and read out, with more advice given in a **mini-plenary**.

Bob says ...

Do add your own reading experiences at this point. Often we can get so absorbed in spotting techniques that we forget it's the overall power of character creation that endures. Discuss how your pupils feel about the figure in white, whether they have had spooky encounters or felt that sinister sense of the unknown. Which books or poems have the same kind of impact? Does TV or film do it in the same way? The best English lessons find space to explore and explain how we interact with language and how the experience is different for each one of us.

Let's all get inspired by this taster draft by Ethan from Roch Community Primary School:

The crunch of footsteps over rusty leaves fills me with shock, as I jump back into the darkness of the villainous woods, with the trees looking down at me. A young man with an unusual moustache walks past and lights his pipe. Slowly I bend over and walk towards the man; the moonlight showing the way. I tap his shoulder. Trembling with fear I run back before he has a chance to turn around.

Shock fills him. I am gone. The darkness hides me as he, still overpowered with questions, stands shaking like leaves in an autumn wind. Slowly walking back over I tap him again but this time say, 'Is this the way to London?'

Ethan Jones (Year 4)

Reading journeys

Now more of the text should be revealed and read out. Expect your pupils to be fascinated as they compare in their minds their taster drafts with this extended piece:



I had now arrived at that particular point of my walk where four roads met – the road to Hampstead, along which I had returned, the road to Finchley, the road to West End, and the road back to London. I had mechanically turned in this latter direction, and was strolling along the lonely high-road – idly wondering, I remember, what the Cumberland young ladies would look like – when, in one moment, every drop of blood in my body was brought to a stop by the touch of a hand laid lightly and suddenly on my shoulder from behind me.

I turned on the instant, with my fingers tightening round the handle of my stick.

There, in the middle of the broad, bright high-road – there, as if it had that moment sprung out of the earth or dropped from

the heaven – stood the figure of a solitary Woman, dressed from head to foot in white garments, her face bent in grave inquiry on mine, her hand pointing to the dark cloud over London, as I faced her.

I was far too seriously startled by the suddenness with which this extraordinary apparition stood before me, in the dead of night and in that lonely place, to ask what she wanted. The strange woman spoke first.

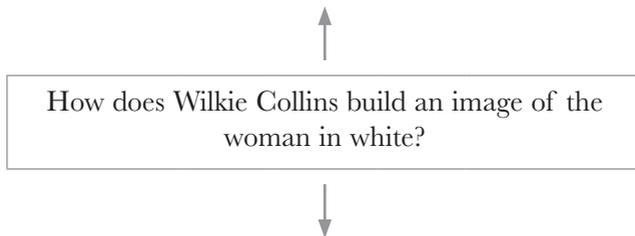
“Is that the road to London?” she said.

I looked attentively at her, as she put that singular question to me. It was then nearly one o’clock. All I could discern distinctly by the moonlight was a colourless, youthful face, meagre and sharp to look at about the cheeks and chin; large, grave, wistfully attentive eyes; nervous, uncertain lips; and light hair of a pale, brownish-yellow hue. There was nothing wild, nothing immodest in her manner: it was quiet and self-controlled, a little melancholy and a little touched by suspicion; not exactly the manner of a lady, and, at the same time, not the manner of a woman in the humblest rank of life. The voice, little as I had yet heard of it, had something curiously still and mechanical in its tones, and the utterance was remarkably rapid. She held a small bag in her hand: and her dress – bonnet, shawl, and gown all of white – was, so far as I could guess, certainly not composed of very delicate or very expensive materials. Her figure was slight, and rather above the average height – her gait and actions free from the slightest approach to extravagance. This was all that I could observe of her in the dim light and under the perplexingly strange circumstances of our meeting.

What sort of a woman she was, and how she came to be out alone in the high-road, an hour after midnight, I altogether failed to guess. The one thing of which I felt certain was, that the grossest of mankind could not have misconstrued her motive in speaking, even at that suspiciously late hour and in that suspiciously lonely place.

“Did you hear me?” she said, still quietly and rapidly, and without the least fretfulness or impatience. “I asked if that was the way to London.”

The **reading journey** can continue with a range of questions which could be distributed as appropriate. See how many pupils can access the **hardest question first**. Offer support as necessary:



Support questions could include:

- 👁️ Can you list how the woman looks to the narrator?
- 👁️ Use the illustration (on page 8) as a kind of close-up on the face. What does it make you think?

- 🍷 Can you describe what she wears?
- 🍷 Can you define any words you might not understand, like ‘gait’ or ‘wistfully’?
- 🍷 Describe in your own words a profile of the woman in white.
- 🍷 How do we know whether the narrator feels threatened by the woman by the end of the passage?
- 🍷 Will a chart support your thinking?

Physical features	Clothes	Overall impressions
Nervous uncertain lips	Small bag	Under pressure

Beyond the limit

Build in ‘beyond the limit’ reading and investigations at as early a stage as possible. The mystery genre is a popular area and it’s vital to engage pupils’ enthusiasm from any prior reading. Try some of these stories and detectives from the pioneering days of the mystery story:

- 🍷 *The Moonstone* by Wilkie Collins (Sergeant Cuff)
- 🍷 *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (see Unit 6) and other Sherlock Holmes stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle
- 🍷 *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens (featuring Inspector Bucket)

♥ *Murders in the Rue Morgue* by Edgar Allan Poe (featuring Le Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin)

Other mysteries with a distinctive atmosphere include:

♥ *Noughts and Crosses* by Malorie Blackman

♥ The ‘Artemis Fowl’ series by Eoin Colfer

♥ The ‘Hardy Boys’ series by Franklin W. Dixon

♥ *Coraline* by Neil Gaiman

♥ *The Owl Service* by Alan Garner

♥ *Emil and the Detectives* by Erich Kästner

♥ *Why the Whales Came* by Michael Morpurgo

♥ *The Wind Singer* by William Nicholson

♥ The ‘Swallows and Amazons’ series by Arthur Ransome

♥ *The Silver Sword* by Ian Serrailier

Some of your pupils can **dig deeper** by launching investigations and explorations on related themes such as:

♥ How writers create mysterious characters (e.g. the Birdman in *Why the Whales Came*).

♥ How writers find original and convincing settings (e.g. a floral pattern on ancient dinner plates sets off the retelling of a Welsh myth in *The Owl Service*).

♥ How characters can be developed to solve mysteries in books which become a series.

☛ How *The Woman In White* might develop as a story – then see how much of it can be read!

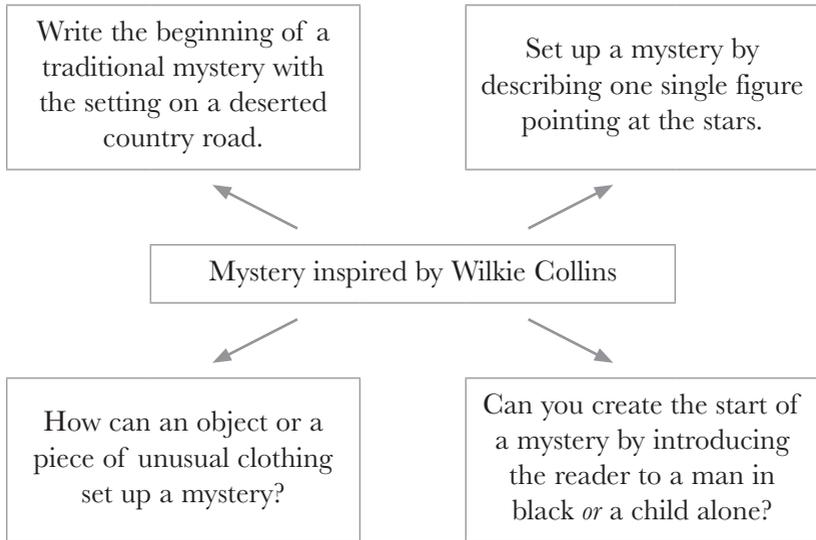
Film clips from *The Woman in White* can be found on the internet – don't miss the one from the 1948 version directed by Peter Godfrey (<http://www.tcm.com/mediaroom/video/275994/Woman-in-White-The-Movie-Clip-I-m-Afraid-I-m-Lost.html>). Some of the old adaptations are better in terms of capturing an atmosphere closest to Collins's prose.

Wings to fly

The standard of the children's final written work will be partly conditioned by the richness of the 'beyond the limit' reading and partly by their engagement with the text, but all the pupils should enjoy writing a mystery!

Bob says ...

Choice is important. Some pupils may write a superb, fully sustained and lengthy mystery, but it's wise to advise them to maintain a simple focus or the possibilities are so huge that the writing can become unmanageable or intimidating. For this reason, you might want to limit the title to anything implying that a mystery is about to unfold, at least for some pupils.



The advantage of maintaining a narrow focus is that the quality of the writing will be enhanced by imitating Collins, making us, the reader, shiver with apprehension! As your pupils have now done a taster draft, they are well placed to begin. Their plans could revolve around the anticipated response of the reader. A lot can be learnt from crafting phrases in a plan and then testing reactions with friends. Sometimes, I've found pupils enjoying the writing process but being quite unaware of the reaction of their words on others. Will the fictional mystery in their heads be well received by their friends when it's read? This unit should give them deeper practice in learning how words on a page start to connect with someone else's expectations.

Try peer marking on the relative effectiveness of each other's drafts using the following questions. Ask your pupils to predict each other's

denouement before it's been written. Predictions from other pupils' drafts or taster phrases will be enthusiastically received before final corrections and insertions.

- ☞ How will your friend's mystery develop?
- ☞ Did your friend's writing convey a shiver of fear or a moment of questioning?
- ☞ Was the character original?
- ☞ Did the character and setting complement one another?

It might be worth remembering this advice from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*: 'As a rule, the more bizarre a thing is the less mysterious it proves to be ... a commonplace face is the most difficult to identify.' So, mystery does not have to come from the extraordinary. It's the questions readers are posed which start to trigger the tension!

A very rich whole-class **mini-plenary** will give you the chance to add any missing knowledge or to signpost routes to mastery. Get ready to appreciate and celebrate some original moments – the famous woman in white's appearance on the road to London should have started another quality text to quality writing journey!

Congratulations to Esme at Roch Community Primary School for succeeding in giving me a shiver of anticipation with this piece inspired by Wilkie Collins:

A gentle touch brought him back from his reverie. Whipping his head around he was startled to find a young woman.

A woman in white.

Her face shone, surrounded by a glowing aura. His mouth moved but no sound came out. Then she was gone, disappearing into the shadow of the dark caused by the bruised cloud that hovered above; waiting to let fly its thousand fleets of arrows.

That woman had seemed to recognise him ...

‘Sir?’ A voice cut through the silence of the lonely place.

Esme Pykett (Year 6)

This writing came after the teacher compared the opening of Neil Gaiman’s *The Graveyard Book* with this extract from *The Woman in White*. The pupils also watched the 1948 film clip of the initial meeting between Walter Hartright and the woman in white.