«He calls himself a man»: Gentlemanly Politeness and the Crisis of Masculinity in Wilkie Collins's *Basil*

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Abstract

Acknowledging previous research on the novel and drawing upon the social history of Victorian masculinities by John Tosh, I argue that *Basil* (1852), Wilkie Collins's first venture into the sensation genre, offers an insight into a specific socio-cultural moment in the history of Victorian masculinities, when the changing British social scenario together with the expansion of the middle class onto the commercial and political stage triggered a clear crisis of an aristocratic masculinity defined in terms of «gentlemanly politeness» (Tosh, 2002). This paper's grounding in Masculinities Studies is informed by Herbert Sussman's investigations on Victorian manhood as a highly variegated terrain strictly interwoven with cultural beliefs. Therefore, I employ Sussman's examination of Victorian middle-class masculinities as a fundamental category of analysis to argue that the novel offers a comparison between two opposing «styles of Victorian masculinity» (Adams, 1995) in the characters of Basil, the novel's anti-hero, and Mr Sherwin, his father-in-law. Whereas the latter is consistent with Sussman's definition of the middle-class economic man, Basil personifies an exclusive male aristocratic culture that is threatened by the new market forces. Analysed within a wider historical and socio-cultural context, I argue that Basil's deficiencies are emblematic of the growing crisis of gentlemanly politeness and its struggle to adapt outdated lifestyles to modern realities.

Keywords: Victorian masculinities, Gentlemanly politeness, Economic man, Wilkie Collins, Sensation fiction.

Wilkie Collins's proto-sensation novel, *Basil: A Story of Modern Life* (1852), has attracted considerable critical and academic attention in recent years. This interest can be traced back to foundational studies such as Tamar Heller's exploration of the novel's indebtedness to the female Gothic tradition (Heller, 1992) and Jenny Bourne Taylor's examination of the protagonist Basil through the lens of male madness (Taylor, 1988). Much of the scholarly discourse has since focused on *Basil*'s portrayal of unrestrained female sexuality as a subversive counterpoint to the Victorian ideal of angelic femininity (O'Neill, 1988; Pykett, 2011), as well as its depiction of the titular character as a melancholic man of sensibility (Kucich, 2007; Wagner, 2002). Additionally, several academic inquiries have engaged with the novel's interrogation of male hysteria (Pedlar,

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2006; Talairach, 2008) and its portrayal of Victorian suburban spaces as sites of social and moral anxiety (Bilston, 2013; Wagner, 2006). Building upon these critical studies and drawing on the social history of Victorian masculinities as theorised by John Tosh (2002; 2005; 2007), this paper contends that *Basil* provides a valuable insight into a pivotal socio-cultural moment in the evolution of Victorian masculinities. Specifically, it captures a period when the growing economic and political prominence of the middle class precipitated a crisis of an aristocratic masculinity, traditionally defined by the ideals of «gentlemanly politeness» (Tosh, 2002). This paper situates *Basil* within this broader historical and ideological framework, arguing that the novel articulates the tensions between competing models of manliness that emerged in response to these shifting socio-economic conditions. This paper's grounding in Masculinity Studies is informed by Herbert Sussman's investigations on Victorian manliness as a highly variegated terrain strictly interwoven with cultural beliefs. Sussman's analysis of middle-class masculinities serves as a critical lens through which this paper examines the novel's negotiation of power structures in nineteenth-century England. In particular, *Basil* juxtaposes two distinct «styles of Victorian masculinity» (Adams, 1995): that of the eponymous protagonist, an aristocratic anti-hero whose male identity is destabilised by socio-economic changes, and that of Mr Sherwin, his father-in-law, who embodies the middle-class ethos of economic self-interest and commercial ambition. While the latter aligns with Sussman's archetype of the middle-class economic man, Basil represents a waning aristocratic culture increasingly at odds with the realities of a rapidly modernising society. Within this context, Basil's personal deficiencies can be read as emblematic of the broader crisis of gentlemanly politeness, highlighting the struggle to reconcile inherited modes of male behaviours with the demands of the Victorian marketplace and evolving class dynamics. Being a very slippery concept that resists rigid definition, it becomes essential to clarify the use that this paper makes of the term masculinity in order to avoid confusion. The word "masculinity" along with related terms such as "manliness" and its adjectival form "manly", refers to the set of gender norms, practices, and expectations associated with being male within a given socio-historical context. I also use the plural form "masculinities" to deconstruct the monolithic perception of masculinity, underscoring the multiple possible social, and political, formations of this construction, its mutability over historical periods as well as its responsiveness to cultural and ideological shifts (Sussman, 1995, p. 14). The term "male", on the contrary, is used in its strict biological sense as the opposite of female, while the word "manhood" refers to the attainment of socially recognised manliness in adult males.

Basil, Collins's «first venture» into sensation fiction (Wagner, 2006, p. 200), was published in three volumes by Bentley in 1852, eight years before *The Woman in White* (1860) inaugurated the period generally identified in Victorian literature and culture as the sensational decade. In the novel's letter of dedication dated November 1852, the author attempts a defence of his narrative construction, what Catherine Peters (1991, p. 115) has defined «a [...] somewhat confused manifesto of his intentions». Addressing

his readers, Collins acknowledges that the main event of the plot is based «on a fact within [his] own knowledge» that he reported without hesitating «to violate some of the conventionalities of sentimental fiction» (Collins, 2019, p. v). *Basil* is indeed Collins's first novel to transpose a sensational tale of deceit within a contemporary and also familiar (upper) middle-class setting, thus anticipating several elements that would later be fully developed in Collins's sensational masterpieces of the 1860s. The novel unfolds in the form of a confession written by Basil himself long after the actual occurrence of the main events. Basil is the hero of the story, despite the fact that there is nothing brilliant or remarkable about him. He writes this narrative as an atonement for his faults, recalling the event that led to his estrangement from his father: the encounter with a linen draper's daughter, Margaret Sherwin, on a crowded London omnibus and their secret marriage. It is to the reader, the ultimate judge, that Basil addresses his first-person narrative, revealing the deceitful treachery in which he was unconsciously involved.

The novel's plot offers an in-depth exploration of two divergent forms of masculinities intersecting in a precise socio-cultural and historical context, that of the gradual emergence of a consumerist society. Herbert Sussman's investigation of Victorian manliness (Sussman, 1995; 2012) proves invaluable not only for an understanding of masculinity as a social, cultural and historical construct rather than an essentialist given (and constantly subject to re-construction), but also for his discussion of manliness defined as much in cultural terms as in economic and productive ones. Focusing on Victorian masculinity as «a hard-won achievement» (Sussman, 1995, p. 25) characterised by «a set of contradictions and anxieties» both «fluid and shifting» (Sussman, 1995, pp. 2-3), Sussman discusses how the development of the British nation-state as a commercial and industrial power legitimised the bourgeoisie's social, cultural, economic, and moral supremacy over aristocracy. Undeniably, the nineteenth-century society of industrial capitalism facilitated the gradual emergence of a new type of man redefined as «the middle-class economic man»[1] – that Sussman categorises either as men of commerce or as owners of the new factories – shaped as the antithesis of an aristocratic code of manliness (Sussman, 2012, p. 81) that had begun to lose its influence «from the 1830s onwards» (Tosh, 1994, p. 182). For the historian John Tosh, this transformation was crucial as the new industrial society «was made possible by, and in turn reinforced, a new manhood» attuned to the marketplace (Tosh, 1999, p. 219). With the relocation of wealth from inherited agricultural land to industry, masculinity is no longer established by birth-right but it becomes connected with the acquisition of money. This radical shift – from masculinity as a hereditary quality rooted in intellectual and aesthetic cultivation to one understood as productive capability in a commercial and industrialised world – «was justified by a Protestant theology that spiritualized commercial success as a sign of being chosen by God» (Sussman, 2012, p. 81). Within this context of mechanised growth, the masculine ideal is now equated with economic gain and productivity against the «libertinism and idleness of the gentry» (Sussman, 1995, p. 109) that were increasingly dismissed as markers

of unmanliness or effeminacy (Sussman, 2012, p. 87). This comes as no surprise: the process of industrialisation fostered an environment that rewarded qualities such as initiative and self-help, attributes that became central to the evolving construction of male identities. As a result, the Victorian male ideal was affected by the economic imperatives of the era, reinforcing a model of manliness that prioritised industriousness, ambition and financial success over hereditary privileges and leisure.

Sussman's investigation of Victorian middle-class masculinities in terms of self-ambition and financial success serves as an essential conceptual framework for examining the two opposing male ideals that Basil and Mr Sherwin personify. While the latter conforms to Sussman's theorisation of the middle-class economic man – an individual whose ambition and socio-economic success represent the triumph of the bourgeois ethos rooted in a rigid work ethic – Basil personifies the leisured man whose privileges, and also class status, are inherited rather than earned. In point of fact, Basil embodies «a style of masculinity» (Adams, 1995), mostly at its peak during the eighteenth century, that scholars define as «gentlemanly politeness» (Tosh, 2002), a mode of manliness characterised by elite social standing, refinement and the appreciation of gentlemanly leisure (Steinbach, 2012, p. 134). Tosh highlights how gentlemanly politeness was intrinsically tied to class distinctions, as elite men cultivated social graces to distinguish themselves from their lower-class counterparts. However, the rise of industrial wealth during the nineteenth century challenged traditional aristocratic politeness, leading to a redefinition of masculine virtue that increasingly valued efficiency, moral uprightness and economic productivity. While gentlemanly politeness praised the art of sociability, the new masculine ideal set forth by the cult of productivity prioritised the qualities of rough individualism, what Tosh identifies as manly simplicity. This ideal was particularly dominant in professions such as the military and the industry, where straightforwardness and decisiveness were valued over aristocratic refinement. As the nineteenth century progressed, the tension between these two ideals became more pronounced, particularly with the evolution of a culture that praised imperialism and militarism, favouring a rhetoric of practicality and action over the cultivated gentility of the past. As a result, in the Victorian period, politeness «as a marker of social and political virtue was taken by 'manliness'» (Tosh, 2002, p. 456), a sign that middle-class principles were ascendant. While one could be born a gentleman, manliness «had to be earned, by mastering the circumstances of life and thus securing the respect of one's peers. It lay within the grasp of every man who practised self-help with single-minded discipline» (Tosh, 2002, p. 458).

Robin Gilmour's discussion in *The Idea of the Gentleman in the Victorian Novel* further complements Sussman's and Tosh's perspectives by highlighting how the concept of gentlemanliness was a subject of ongoing debate and redefinition, particularly during the early and mid-Victorian period (Gilmour, 1981, p. 7). This fluidity in defining the gentleman reflects the shifting social landscape, in which wealth was no longer the exclusive prerogative of the aristocracy but increasingly accessible to the rising middle class. While Gilmour acknowledges the longstanding association of

the gentleman with aristocratic ideals of honour, he contends that, in Victorian society, the defining characteristic of gentlemanliness ultimately became leisure. Although, in theory, financial success allowed men from diverse social backgrounds to aspire to gentlemanly status, in practice, this ideal remained largely inaccessible due to the fundamental expectation that a gentleman must remain detached from physical labour or direct business involvement. Gilmour argues that a true gentleman was distinguished not merely by his ability to avoid manual labour but also by his capacity to maintain a distance from overt commercial activity. As he explains, «it was leisure which enabled a man to cultivate the style and pursuits of the gentlemanly life» (Gilmour, 1981, p. 7). Although he might possess financial interests, a gentleman was expected to manage them in a way that did not require explicit attention, ensuring that his social identity was not compromised by the visible demands of business. This emphasis on leisure as a marker of gentlemanly status reinforced a hierarchical distinction between those who could afford to engage in intellectual and cultural pursuits, and those whose livelihoods depended on active professional or industrial engagement. Consequently, the Victorian ideal of the gentleman implicitly devalued the dignity of labour – the very foundation of the emerging industrial society – by suggesting that true refinement and social distinction were contingent upon economic independence and the ability to remain removed from the world of work.

From the perspective proposed by Gilmour, it becomes evident that while Basil embodies certain aspects of gentlemanly politeness, his character reflects an evolution of the concept rather than its traditional form. Unlike his father, who remains firmly anchored in an older social order that links gentlemanly conduct to honour, duty, and military valour, Basil represents a later stage in the transformation of these ideals. Over time, the once-revered associations between gentlemanly status and notions of honour and bravery – previously upheld as markers of social distinction – began to erode. By the Victorian period, gentlemanly politeness had acquired an increasingly negative connotation primarily due to its association with a culture of leisure, idleness and indulgence. Basil's characterization reflects this cultural shift: significantly, his description lacks references to honour, reflecting the changing priorities of the middle class, that increasingly redefined gentlemanly conduct in aesthetic and social terms as opposed to traditional ideals of courage and responsibility. Yet, rather than merely embodying this new model of gentility, Basil exemplifies its most exaggerated form. He embraces a life of leisure that, in the context of a rapidly industrialising society, carried distinctly negative undertones. In an era that celebrated productivity, self-improvement, and economic contribution as hallmarks of success, the gentleman's leisurely existence – once a symbol of prestige – was increasingly viewed as a sign of stagnation, decadence and even obsolescence. Basil's passive detachment from ambition and labour positions him as fundamentally incompatible with the prevailing ethos of Victorian modernity. His privileged status, rather than conferring social authority, positions him as an emblem of a declining aristocratic culture struggling to maintain relevance in an age that valued industry and enterprise. Hence, while Basil embodies aesthetic refinement

and passive privilege, Mr Sherwin, by contrast, epitomises the new, assertive middle-class masculinity that aligns success with personal effort and economic acumen.

Through the comparison between Basil and Mr Sherwin, Collins acknowledges the gradual historical process that led to the ascendancy of a more pragmatic and economically-driven middle class. At the novel's outset, Basil stands as the antithesis of this emerging idea of manliness. Significantly, his personality is often framed in terms that allude to both idleness and effeminacy – traits strongly repudiated by Victorian middle-class men as (negative) markers of an aristocratic and morally suspect conception of masculinity (Sussman, 2012, p. 87). Indeed, Basil himself adopts a self-description that aligns him with the figure of an idle procrastinator. He is «irresolute» and lacks self-possession (Collins, 2019, p. 19), portraying himself as a young man who proudly has «no cares or responsibilities of any kind» (Collins, 2019, p. 3). The generous income he receives from his father, combined with the privileges of a large family wealth built on landed property, has resulted in his lack of ambition. His failure to meet the expectations and responsibilities associated with his rank in society becomes increasingly apparent as Basil acknowledges his refusal to take his father's place in Parliament and his reluctance to start the apprenticeship necessary to become a lawyer. Like the real Wilkie Collins, Basil harbours literary ambitions, expressing a desire to «make a name in literature» (Collins, 2019, p. 3). However, his approach to this goal lacks the intellectual engagement and discipline typically associated with a literary career. He shows little interest in the European literature studied at university, suggesting that his aspirations stem more from personal inclination than from serious dedication. Since he fails to meet his father's standards of manliness, Basil's transition to adulthood is never fully accomplished.

Throughout the novel, Basil's masculinity is often defined in contrast to his wife Margaret's overt sexuality. The role she plays in the novel accentuates both his deficiencies and feminised status. Their first meeting occurs on an omnibus in London, a setting emblematic of the changing urban and social landscapes of Victorian England. In this confined space, the rigid class and spatial divisions that Basil's father, who considers «himself the social superior of any man» (Collins, 2019, p. 4), relies upon to separate his persona from others are dissolved as people «of all classes and temperaments are so oddly collected together» (Collins, 2019, p. 16). Basil is struck by the beauty of an unknown girl who, deprived of any clear social markers, appears as a body among bodies. What at first seems to be an innocuous chance encounter in Basil's recollections, soon acquires erotic connotations. Margaret Sherwin enters the omnibus and Basil instantly acknowledges her sensuality. Her appearance is physical, corporeal. Her beauty affects the observer, inciting an almost irresistible urge to touch what is seen. When Basil's hand briefly brushes against «her arm for a moment» (Collins, 2019, p. 17), this seemingly accidental contact provokes a physical, almost erotic fancy that spreads through «every nerve» of his body (Collins, 2019, p. 17). The woman wears a veil that partially obscures her facial features. Basil, however, succeeds in symbolically denuding the woman of her veil, to admire «the full luxury» of her

beauty (Collins, 2019, p. 18). She is described as darker than typical English women, with black eyes that disclose a «voluptuous languor», lips that are «too full» (Collins, 2019, pp. 18-9) and a body that is «more formed, more developed [...] that most girls at her age» (Collins, 2019, p. 46). She reveals an accentuated erotic attractiveness that the narrator observes in her eyes and mouth. In Basil's account, Margaret is othered in terms of physical appearance, displaying a set of somatic features that function as visual signifiers of her unrestrained sexuality. Her description plays upon the tension between the visible and the concealed – symbolised by the veil – and Basil erroneously reads the surface of her body, beautiful as it is, as a mirror of an even more attractive interiority. Despite being generally acknowledged as an emblem of virginity and purity, in the novel the veil becomes a metonymic marker of Margaret's overt sexuality. The veil simultaneously hides and reveals, fuelling Basil's desire to uncover what lies behind that screen. Reading Margaret as a passive figure in the omnibus scene risks overlooking the complexity of her agency. As subsequent events unfold, her true nature emerges: she embodies the archetype of what Sally Mitchell defines an «adventuress», a woman who «is shown to be evil because of her sexual willingness» and who «later commits adultery» (Mitchell, 1981, p. 76). As Basil's confession gradually takes shape, readers acknowledge Margaret's depiction as a sexually conscious character who strategically employs her sexuality to fasten her upward mobility.

In *Corrupt Relations: Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, Collins and the Victorian Sexual System* (1982) the authors Barickman, McDonald and Stark argue that Collins distinguishes himself among his Victorian contemporaries through the attention he grants to unconventional women, «often distinctly criminal or immoral by the standards of respectable Victorianism» (Barickman, McDonald, Stark, 1982, p. 111). Collins, and more broadly sensation fiction writers, depicts women «as sexual beings» (Pykett, 1992, p. 34), thereby revealing that female eroticism is not unnatural in upper and middle-class women. In most cases within the sensation genre, the representation of female sexuality is intertwined with moral transgression, as the pursuit of carnal pleasure is frequently associated with the dishonourable behaviour of female characters. This holds true in *Basil*, where Margaret Sherwin's characterisation exemplifies how a sexually autonomous woman is portrayed as a subversive and destabilising force. Margaret is one of the earliest female figures in Collins's oeuvre to push the stereotype of the "bad woman" far beyond the boundaries of conventional Victorian moral culture. As such, she poses a threat to both domestic stability and the rigidly defined gender roles of the period. In particular, Margaret's defiance resides in her disruption of the Victorian ideology of female domesticity and the institution of marriage – structures designed to discipline women's bodies, reducing them to mere instruments of reproduction and marital duty. By rejecting a sexuality aimed exclusively at procreation, Margaret threatens the very foundations of Victorian gender norms. Her transgression culminates in her adulterous affair with Robert Mannion, her father's clerk. Upon being caught in the act of infidelity, Margaret's hypersexualised body transforms from an object of desire into a menacing force that must be disciplined and ultimately suppressed. This

process of punitive retribution takes a tangible form when Margaret contracts typhus fever after visiting the clinic where Mannion is hospitalised, following the brutal facial mutilations inflicted upon him by Basil in a violent response to the revelation of their affair. As the disease ravages her body, Margaret's once-alluring physicality is stripped of its erotic potency, reinforcing the link between female promiscuity, moral corruption and bodily decay. No longer a figure of seduction, she instead comes to embody the perceived dangers of unrestrained female sexuality that is associated with disease and contamination. Eventually, her sexuality merges with monstrosity when the woman's body, disfigured by typhus, becomes both grotesque and repulsive (Collins, 2019, pp. 169-71). Margaret's transformation from an irresistible beauty into a grotesque and repellent figure is underscored by Collins's language, that accentuates the physical manifestations of her illness. Her olive complexion, once radiant, is now marred by feverish blotches; her formerly voluptuous eyes are bloodshot; her full lips, once symbols of sensual allure, contort into a ghastly, deformed grin (Collins, 2019, p. 171). Margaret's last appearance in the novel disfigured by typhus is deliberately contrasted with the initial image of her carnal beauty to reinforce the social construction of the female body as a kind of contaminant, «as a contagious disease» (Gilbert, 2005, p. 8), an issue Pamela Gilbert discusses at length. The eroticised female body is stripped of its sexual potency, emerging as both a site and a source of disease and contagion. Ultimately, Margaret's infection serves as an act of narrative exorcism, purging the spectre of the socially dangerous sexual female body thus leading to the restoration of moral and social order.

Analysed within a wider historical and socio-cultural framework, Basil's deficiencies are emblematic of the growing crisis of «gentlemanly politeness» (Tosh, 2002) and its struggle to adapt outdated lifestyles to the demands of modern realities. In a society where the economic mobility and productivity of the middle class are increasingly being recognised as a force for social stability, Basil's prioritisation of an obsolete leisure culture renders him not only ineffectual but fundamentally out-of-place within the shifting social order. His confession reveals a daily routine structured around frivolous pursuits, such as horseback riding with his sister Clara and aimlessly wandering the city, activities that starkly contrast with the industrious ethos that was coming to define Victorian masculinity. His fateful encounter with Margaret Sherwin, significantly, arises as a direct consequence of his idleness – an attribute that, in the Victorian period, bore deeply negative connotations, since it was perceived as antithetical to Britain's industrial progress and imperial growth. In this socio-historical context, where Victorian male identity was strictly interwoven with the valorisation of work «as both moral duty and personal fulfilment» (Tosh, 2005, p. 332), idleness came to be condemned as a «moral and social sin» (Houghton, 1975, p. 189), a failing that undermined both individual virtue and national prosperity. Similarly, Basil's masculine status is prejudiced by his lack of sexual power and, as a consequence of this, by his inability to father a child. The unconsummated conjugal union with Margaret results in his symbolic castration: the probation year – the condition under which

Margaret's father, Mr Sherwin, consents to their marriage – functions as a further emasculating force, effectively suppressing Basil's sexual impulses[2]. Significantly, Basil's failure to preserve his lineage is symbolised by his father's gesture of ripping his son's name and photo from the biographical history of his noble family – a treasured volume that represents the family's generational continuity and ancestral prestige (Collins, 2019, pp. 117-8) – an action that the old man performs upon discovering Basil's inter-class marriage. This act of "literal" erasure serves as a powerful visual metaphor for the broader decline of an aristocratic masculine ideal that is increasingly being displaced by the pragmatic and industrious economic man of the middle class. But Basil's decision to marry out of his own circle is already symptomatic of the deterioration of his family line and, more generally, of the aristocratic male power that his father embodies. Basil and his older brother Ralph are condemned to be the last representatives of a family lineage that «dates back beyond the Conquest» (Collins, 2019, p. 2) as neither of them succeeds in producing an heir. Basil, following his personal and social downfall, retreats into a state of domestic withdrawal, choosing an asexual existence in what amounts to a quasi-marital relationship with his sister Clara. His regression into infantilisation and domestic dependency marks the ultimate negation of his masculine authority. Ralph, on the other hand, represents the opposite extreme: rather than embracing domesticity and duty, he squanders his aristocratic privileges on a hedonistic lifestyle devoted to sexual excess and extravagance, with no intention of securing his family's continuity.

Basil lacks the «individual self-interest» (Sussman, 2012, p. 81) that, on the contrary, characterises Mr Sherwin's masculine identity. Introducing himself «as one of the props of this commercial country» (Collins, 2019, p. 40), his male authority stems from his own economic self-sufficiency. As a point of fact, Mr Sherwin has established himself professionally as the representative of the new rich, people who have made, not inherited, their fortunes and whose respectable status is not connected to noble birth and education, but it is instead increasingly measured through the acquisition of outward markers. It was largely during the Victorian period that manliness was mostly defined through the figure of the industrious provider that starkly contrasted with both the image of the working-class man and that of the leisured and effete noble man. In *Family Fortunes*, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall discuss how industriousness gradually becomes a requirement for masculinity when middle-class men start defining themselves against the aristocratic habit of idleness (Davidoff, Hall, 1987, p. 30). In his discussion of the middle-class economic man, Sussman identifies this figure's preoccupation with his own welfare as his major distinguishing feature. Analysed within Sussman's theorisation, Mr Sherwin personifies the (negative) epitome of the cult of productiveness, «an essentially self-regarding individual looking only to his own personal well-being: a well-being defined solely in monetary terms» (Sussman, 2012, p. 88). As a greedy speculator accustomed to suburbia's extreme commercialisation, Mr Sherwin turns his daughter's body into a marketable commodity for male consumption, an object to barter in return for Basil's prestigious family name as a means to further climb the social ladder. He treats her marriage as a business transaction rather than a

union based on affection. Unlike Basil, who is driven by impulsive romantic idealism, Mr Sherwin operates with cold economic pragmatism, meticulously calculating the material benefits that the marriage might yield. To enhance his daughter's desirability, he repeatedly exhibits Margaret's "economic value" by forcing her to display, in Basil's presence, her accomplishments. He proudly recounts her school achievements and orchestrates performances in which Margaret must demonstrate her refined social graces, such as how she enters and exits a room «with dignity and ease» (Collins, 2019, p. 41) and exhibits «some of her knowledge of languages» (Collins, 2019, pp. 59-60). These acts are not mere displays of pride but strategic marketing tactics designed to highlight Margaret's value as a refined and desirable asset. In true mercantile fashion, Mr Sherwin imposes specific conditions on the union-transaction, dictating the terms under which Basil may claim ownership of his daughter's body. His acceptance of Basil's marriage proposal comes with a crucial stipulation: the consummation of their marriage must be postponed for one year. This probationary period serves as a calculated strategy to prevent losing the social and economic advantages should Basil's father disinherit his son. In doing so, he hopes that the delay will provide Basil with sufficient time to persuade his father to endorse the marriage, thereby safeguarding the social elevation and financial stability that Mr Sherwin seeks.

However, despite the formal purchase of Margaret's body, Basil ultimately finds himself deprived of the right to possess it. His failure to assert his ownership underscores his inability to navigate the rigid structures of a rapidly evolving consumer society. Throughout the one-year probation, Basil never claims his conjugal authority, resulting not only in his public humiliation but also in the symbolic suspension of his masculinity at the hands of Mr Sherwin. By withholding access to Margaret and maintaining constant surveillance over Basil's visits to North Villa, Mr Sherwin effectively strips Basil of both his marital and sexual agency, reinforcing his own dominance over their relationship. Rather than assuming the traditional role of a husband, Basil is reduced to a passive observer, his masculinity suspended by the economic mechanisms that now govern marriage and social advancement. Basil's failure to assert his authority within the Sherwin household is further complicated by Robert Mannion, a clerk working for the Sherwins' mercantile business. Although Mannion occupies a socially inferior position, he nonetheless exerts his authority over his employer Mr Sherwin, something that Basil fails to do. This inversion of hierarchies further accentuates Basil's impotence within the new middle-class order, as he becomes subjugated not only by Mr Sherwin but also by a man of lower social standing. In this way, Basil's experience within the Sherwin household serves as an allegory for the shifting power dynamics of Victorian England, where traditional aristocratic authority is increasingly undermined by the emergent middle-class values of commerce, pragmatism and calculated social manoeuvrings.

As far as the issue of emasculation is concerned, Basil undergoes different stages of "unmanning" that seem to undermine even further the validity of the category of masculinity that he embodies. His emasculation operates on multiple levels – familial, financial, and sexual – gradually eroding his authority and reinforcing his passive,

subordinate role. Basil is doubly "unmanned" by his father, whose financial support renders him economically dependent and, consequently, unable to claim full masculine autonomy. As the novel progresses, this financial dependence is compounded by a more explicit act of paternal repudiation: his disinheritance and eventual erasure from the family lineage. His exclusion from his father's (patriarchal) aristocratic ancestry effectively nullifies his position within the generational transmission of male power, stripping him of both social status and familial legitimacy. Similarly, Basil's emasculation is also enacted through his relationship with Margaret, whose excessive erotic power subjugates him to a position of feminine submissiveness. Unlike the idealized Victorian woman who was expected to embody passivity, purity, and sexual modesty, Margaret is portrayed as a sexually aware figure, thereby inverting traditional gender dynamics. One particular scene, recollected by Basil himself, is specifically relevant to the issue of the protagonist's emasculation:

> Never had I seen her look so beautiful as she now appeared, in the fury of passion which possessed her. Her large black eyes were flashing grandly through her tears – the blood was glowing crimson in her cheeks – her lips were parted as she gasped for breath. One of her hands was clenched, and rested on the mantel-piece; the other was pressed tight over her bosom, with the fingers convulsively clasping her dress (Collins, 2019, p. 78).

The passage occurs immediately after Margaret, in a fit of rage, threatens to kill her mother's cat for having eaten her pet canary. Crucially, the scene is filtered through Basil's visual perspective, reinforcing his role as a passive observer. The explicitly sexualised imagery serves to heighten the underlying erotic tension in the scene. Margaret's violent physical reaction to the killing of her canary is so overwhelming that it manifests as a seizure of her hyper-sexuality: her trembling hands, flushed cheeks, parted lips, shortness of breath, and convulsive bodily movements closely mimic the physiological manifestations of female orgasm. Significantly, the scene juxtaposes the sexually-repressed male protagonist – he remains positioned at the threshold, physically and symbolically distanced from the scene – and the sexually experienced woman. In this passage, the female body is depicted as a symbol of both insatiable desire and threat. Margaret is implicitly portrayed as a sexual menace through the description of her lips parted in breathless passion: her mouth is the orifice that evokes a feminine sexuality seen as insatiable. Beyond its immediate implications, the scene also functions as a broader metaphor for Basil's "caged" sexual role. The imagery of the cat and the canary carries an unmistakable symbolic charge: Basil, like the caged canary, is fragile, confined and ultimately powerless, while Margaret, feline and predatory, teases and then threatens to destroy him. This metaphor encapsulates the overarching dynamic of their relationship, in which Basil – despite his nominal status as the male protagonist – finds himself entrapped and ultimately dominated by a woman whose sexuality he is incapable of controlling.

Basil's constant ineptitude and figurative castration at the hands of Margaret render him a pitiable character, ripe for ridicule and disdain. Eventually, when Basil's

transgression of class boundaries is revealed through his marriage to Margaret, he loses access to the ancient family name and, symbolically, to the masculine authority it exemplifies. Now a «blank space» (Collins, 2019, p. 118) in his family history book, Basil has no place to occupy in the male (upper-class) social body. This position of «namelessness and placelessness» (Taylor, 1988, p. 72) further problematizes his social status and male identity. The fact that Basil is deprived of his own name is itself indication enough of the social invisibility he suffers for his inability to sustain the masculine values his father stands for – a man arrogantly proud of his own noble roots to the point of accusing Basil of having contaminated the old family name «by connection with a cheat» in the person of Mr Sherwin, guilty of being part of the community of tradesmen (Collins, 2019, p. 115). Basil's betrayal of his father's principles validates the character's inadequacy to support the myth of masculine idealisation that his father had so ardently preserved. Likewise, Basil is emasculated by his own vulnerability to mental illness. Having discovered the illicit liaison between Margaret and Robert Mannion, Basil falls ill with a ferocious mental breakdown. This brain fever further feminises him: Basil's mental instability leads to a total physical collapse and induces a state of delirium haunted by horrible visions. A subsequent attack of «nervous malady» (Collins, 2019, p. 197) overcomes him after a gothic-like encounter with Mannion in the wilds of Cornwall, where Basil has retreated to escape the villain's persecution. Here on the Cornish cliffs, in an attempt to kill Basil, Mannion loses his balance and falls to his death down a precipice. The horror arisen from having witnessed Mannion's death swallowed up by the Cornish sea, deeply affects Basil's mental equilibrium, exposing his inability to regulate both his emotions and rational responses. Basil's mental sufferings are externalised through evident physical symptoms: fits of trembling, paleness and, also, an inability to form coherent speech. In the novel, illness is depicted as a process of feminisation and infantilisation: Basil is eventually rescued by some Cornish miners and placed under the care of his sister Clara – who acts as a surrogate mother figure – and brought back to «a life frail and helpless as the life of a new-born babe» (Collins, 2019, p. 102). It is the act of writing his diary – later to become the novel *Basil* itself – that triggers in Basil the process of recovery. Composing his journal during his seclusion in Cornwall becomes the means by which he overcomes his hallucinations and mental delirium, «the only safeguard that keeps me in my senses» (Collins, 2019, p. 191).

Margaret's death and his recovery from his mental breakdowns do not re-masculinise Basil. On the contrary, his social rehabilitation occurs through the suppression of his own sexuality. He abandons London and, stirred by the need to lead a reserved domestic life with his sister Clara, retires to the ancient family home in the countryside which «becomes a safe place, an asylum, but also a kind of pastoral stasis – a place outside history, outside narrative itself» (Taylor, 1988, p. 77). From the outset of the narrative, Basil's quest for an appropriate masculine identity is marked by a tension that manifests itself in the opposition between the rural space – his juvenile family home symbol of his aristocratic ancestries and of (male) privileges – and the urban

and suburban space representing adultness and a style of masculinity shaped by the philosophies of productivity and self-help. By withdrawing from the world of people in a sort of self-imposed exile in the domestic sphere with no professional occupation, Basil deliberately separates himself from the adult male world of social responsibilities that his father had expected of him. In doing so, Basil rejects the prospect of becoming a husband and a father, two fundamental social markers in the construction of Victorian adult male identities (Tosh, 2007). While Margaret and the new suburban space are intertwined with both eroticism and adult male life, the rejection of the city and the return to the family nest with Clara represent a regression to a domestic and infantile condition. Resolved to live «in obscurity, in retirement, in peace» (Collins, 2019, p. 199), Basil refuses his brother's proposal to participate in «the busy world» of public life (Collins, 2019, p. 199), thus sanctioning his seclusion in a state of eternal childhood. His relationship with Clara, a substitute for an absent mother figure, further problematizes Basil's masculinity. His sister, the angelic woman of his premonitory dreams, nourishes Basil's «childish recollections» of their lost mother (Collins, 2019, p. 11), thus embodying both maternal safety and morality. Significantly, Clara – the personification of «an ideal of the past» (Dolin, Dougan, 2003, p. 19) – evokes the childlike longing for reunion with the lost mother, a desire that harkens back to Basil's childhood. The character's regression to a pre-adult existence is evocative of the return to a figurative maternal womb as a site of protection and tranquillity. Basil's isolation in his idyllic country house symbolises his retreat from modern capitalist society – where he feels alienated – into the refuge of domesticity, and reflects the crisis of an aristocratic masculine ideal unable to respond to societal changes.

Through Basil, Collins seems to raise an important doubt about the issue of masculine (in)adequacy, and the traits that define a man. Is a man who identifies himself with writing, literature and creativity like Basil a lesser man than one who measures his worth through his profession and economic gain particularly when such gain comes at the expense of others? To answer this question, I draw on Tara MacDonald's study of early manifestations of the New Man in Victorian fiction. MacDonald describes the New Man as a gentle and compassionate version of masculinity, offering an alternative to the more selfish and aggressive style of the Victorian masculine ideal (MacDonald, 2015). If Basil's return to the maternal womb is interpreted as a choice that enacts the character's symbolic rebirth, then we may assume that, by the end of the novel, Basil's rebirth is indicative not only of the death of an older model of masculinity synonymous with breeding and leisure but also of his re-emergence as an early incarnation and precursor of the New Man. In this light, Basil undergoes a crisis of masculinity that serves as a pivotal point for Collins's broader exploration of masculinities in his later fiction. The author's major sensation novels retain and rework many of the features of Basil's antiheroic stance. His irresoluteness and sensibility combined with his physical and mental vulnerability will become the hallmarks of Collins's most compelling sensational anti-heroes. Rather than reproducing heroic archetypes, Collins reimagines a form of ordinary masculinity marked by imperfection and emotional

depth, traits presented as natural. He promotes an emotional sensitivity – that in the novel emerges as a positive masculine trait – as an integral part of nineteenth-century masculinities that is associated, in his later novels, with growth in social, economic and professional terms. Serving as a model for Collins's future characters, Basil's portrayal lays the foundation for a male (anti)-hero whose masculinity is defined by his mind, his sensitivity and, also, his creative stance rather than his physicality and his performance of hard work.

Notes

1. Herbert Sussman is not the first scholar to use the term "economic man". The concept has a much longer history and has been employed in various contexts before his work. The origins of the term are generally traced back to John Stuart Mill who explicitly formulated the concept in his 1836 essay *On the Definition of Political Economy and on the Method of Investigation Proper to It*. In this work, Mill defines *homo economicus* as a simplified, rational economic agent who acts purely out of self-interest to maximise wealth (for a genealogy of the term, please refer to M. Bee, M. Desmarais-Tremblay, *The Birth of Homo Economicus: The Methodological Debate on the Economic Agent from J.S. Mill to V. Pareto*, in "Journal of the History of Economic Thought", 45, 1, 2022, pp. 1-26). Beyond Mill's formulation, representations of *homo economicus* can be found in literary thought. Notably, Ian Watt in *The Rise of The Novel* (Hogarth Press, London 1987) analyses *Robinson Crusoe* through the lens of bourgeois mercantile individualism, arguing that Defoe's protagonist embodies the traits of a *homo economicus*. Crusoe, as a self-sufficient economic agent, makes rational decisions to optimise his survival and utility, engaging in resource management, production and labour organisation.

2. Basil never consummates his wedding with Margaret, as he discovers her illicit affair with Mannion on the final night of their probation year. This revelation not only prevents him from asserting his marital and sexual authority but also underscores his broader failure to fulfil the traditional expectations of Victorian masculinity. The novel's conclusion further reinforces this sense of displacement. Rather than establishing a conventional marital household, Basil retreats to the countryside with his sister Clara. This withdrawal from both society and heterosexual relationships raises questions about his sexual experience – or lack thereof – leaving the reader to wonder whether he remains a virgin.

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