

Fremont Great Books Book Club
Discussion Questions for “The Moonstone” by Wilkie Collins
January 24, 2026

1. “The Moonstone” is often called the first detective novel (see T.S. Eliot’s quote below). Which genre does the novel fit into: a detective novel, a locked-room mystery, an epistolary novel, a romance, a comedy, a comedy of manners, a tragedy, a family drama, an upstairs-downstairs story before the titular memoir, a thriller, a gothic novel, etc.? Does it matter?
2. After the preface and short narrative of the theft of the Moonstone, the first major narrative is in an upper house servant’s voice and the second in a relatively poor, ultra-religious, “Rampant Spinster.” What does the use of these characters as mouthpieces say about the class system in the 1860’s?
3. Betteredge mentions being above reason several, but succumbs to “detective fever.” Miss Clack also states that she is above reason due to her dedication to Christianity. What is the meaning of two major characters who contribute to solving the theft of the Moonstone also being opposed to reason?
4. Betteredge warns the reader (just before Miss Clack’s narrative): “I hear you are likely to be turned over to Miss Clack after parting with me. In that case just do me the favour of not believing a word she says, if she speaks of your humble servant.” Miss Clack subsequently refers to Betteredge as an old heathen, and can be assumed is unreliable. With each person casting doubt on others, how is truth defined in the fictional world of “The Moonstone?” By emotional intensity, by protecting those one cares about, by the timing of major events, through first-person accounts, via mesmerism or opiates, or some other way? Who is/are the real detective(s) in “The Moonstone?”
5. Collins introduces the reader to several social outcasts (Mr. Murthwaite, Rosanna Spearman, Limping Lucy, Ezra Jennings, the three Brahmins). What is the purpose of these specific characters and what do their stories reveal?
6. Gabriel Betteridge has many opinions about his now dead wife and women in general. Rachel Verinder is often described as acting like a man, particularly by Miss Clack. With these and other characters, what is Collins saying about the relations between the sexes? Should people follow societal strictures about how their gender should behave? Are women obstructors of justice as Sergeant Cuff claims?
7. The desire to possess or to make oneself master over an object, a person, a race, or a country is explored in several ways in “The Moonstone.” At a time when the sun did not set on the British Empire, how does the novel satirize British attitudes about their belief in superiority, colonization, and religion? Does Collins’ portrayal of the Indian characters reflect the negative prejudices of his times, or is there evidence for nuance in his handling of race (compared to other contemporary writers)?
8. What social or ethical issues are at stake in Collins’ satiric presentation of Miss Clack? What about Betteredge’s supreme reliance on “Robinson Crusoe?” Or Godfrey Ablewhite’s story arc?
9. What does the novel say about love at first sight and true love?
10. In the preface to the 1868 novel, Collins offers the following: “In some of my former novels, the object proposed has been to trace the influence of circumstances upon character. In the present story I have reversed the process. The attempt made, here, is to trace the influence of character on circumstances.” Do you think the author was successful in his aim?

Fremont Great Books Book Club
Discussion Questions for “The Moonstone” by Wilkie Collins
January 24, 2026

OBSERVATIONS BY OTHER AUTHORS

Anthony Trollope:

When I sit down to write a novel, I do not at all know, and I do not very much care, how it is to end. Wilkie Collins seems so to construct his that he not only, before writing, plans everything on, down to the minutest detail, from the beginning to the end; but then plots it all back again, to see that there is no piece of necessary dove-tailing which does not dove-tail with absolute accuracy. The construction is most minute and most wonderful. But I can never lose the taste of the construction... One is constrained by mysteries and hemmed in by difficulties, knowing, however, that the mysteries will be made clear, and the difficulties overcome at the end of the third volume. Such work gives me no pleasure.

Henry James:

Mr Collins's productions deserve a more respectable name. They are massive and elaborate constructions - monuments of mosaic work, for the proper mastery of which it would seem, at first, that an index and note-book were required. They are not so much works of art as works of science.

T. S. Eliot:

The first, the longest, and the best of the modern English detective novels'. Whether or not it is the first, it is certainly one of the best, and writers have been borrowing, adapting, and stealing from it ever since.

Charles Dickens (whose weekly “All the Year Round” published “The Moonstone” as a serial in 1868):

The construction is wearisome beyond endurance and there is a vein of obstinate conceit in it that makes enemies of the readers.

SOURCES AND LINKS

"Detection, Imperialism & Family Secrets"-Wilkie Collins-THE MOONSTONE- Prof. Gauri Viswanathan

[Part I](#)

[Part II](#)

“Wilkie Collins: A Brief Life” by Peter Akroyd

Introduction to The Modern Library’s edition by Catherine Peters (also a biographer of Collins)

[Detective Jonathan Whicher and the Road Hill House Murder](#)

[Study Guide for The Moonstone by Sara’s Shelf](#)

Tea, Tonic, and Toxin Podcasts about “The Moonstone”

[Part I](#)

[Part II](#)

[Discussion Questions](#)