

**The Construction of Womanhood
in Victorian Sensation Fiction,
1860 - 70**

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Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Leeds.
School of English

September, 1990.

ABSTRACT

The status of sensation fiction as “popular literature” led Victorian critics to dismiss the genre as light literature, a tendency which has been perpetuated in literary criticism until very recent years. In this work, I attempt to place the genre in a new light by asserting the seriousness with which it addressed major psychological, social, economic and political issues of the era. Through analysis of the Victorian critical reception of sensation fiction, I reveal the ways in which sensation novelists challenged the aesthetic and ethical codes of conventional realism through their insistence on a new perception of the real. I further discuss the influence which the novels’ introduction of fantasies of rebellion and escape might have had on their major consumers: women. My purpose here is to reveal the link between the cultural conditions of women’s lives and the ways in which they might have responded to the subversive elements in the sensation novel.

My study reveals that the sensation novel closely examined the ideologies responsible for the gendered power structure which characterized the Victorian era. By pushing psychological and sexual constructs of identity to their extremes, the sensation novelists managed to reveal the internal contradictions in these ideologies on which society based its notions of stability. The novels exposed the falsity of the gendered constructs of character by calling into question the age’s models of the self-controlled male and the irresponsible, explosive female. Not only do they suggest that the fixed model of individual identity is an idealistic aspiration rendered impossible by uncontrollable, psychological drives or inexplicable external influences, but also that the model itself becomes a source of psychological stress because of the need it creates to display external composure while suffering from internal stress.

In the case of women, the novels unmask the material underpinnings of ideological constructs of female irresponsibility, passivity, explosiveness, and incapacity, thus undermining the validity of the constructions of womanhood which appealed to notions of female “nature.” In the way they link women’s subversive behaviour directly to the stifling economic and psychological conditions of their lives, the novels reveal that women’s madness is not the result of their instability as the doctors claimed, but of their confined lives. The novels further maintain that ideological notions of female helplessness and irresponsibility were inseparable from the material benefits they guaranteed for men. The institutions of the family, the asylum, and the law became effective means to ensure women’s subjection.

Although the sensation novels challenged Victorian psychological and sexual ideologies, they often resorted to these self-same ideologies in order to establish order in their novels. Rebellious females are incarcerated as mad, while marriage, which is often depicted in the novels as a source of female subjection, is offered as a final reward. Yet, this final establishment of order cannot be taken at face-value since it stands in direct opposition to many of the suggestions in the preceding narrative. While appearing overtly conformist, sensation fiction raised many troubling questions about the ideological and material organization of Victorian society.

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To Ghiath

who shared with me the joys and disappointments of this experience

Introduction

Criticism of sensation fiction, from the Victorian era until fairly recent years, has been characterized by its limited approach to the genre and a systematic insistence on its non-seriousness. Victorian critics of the sensation novel insisted on its status as a commercial commodity, denying novels and novelists alike any overriding moral or social concerns “except the market law of demand and supply.”¹ The status of sensation fiction as a mass-market product seemed sufficient justification for these critics to dismiss it from the realms of serious literature.

Respectable literature, in the eyes of the pillars of the Victorian literary establishment, should be seen to reinforce the dominant moral, social, and political values of the day. Since sensation fiction insisted on disrupting and questioning these values and revealing their ideological basis, the critics immediately attached a host of aesthetically and ethically pejorative terms to the genre. One favourite way of undermining sensation fiction was to classify the novels as novels of “incident,” thus denying the sensation novelists the artistic ability to portray “real” characters or study in detail aspects of “human nature.”²

Sensation novelists, Victorian critics believed, obtained effect through the use of illegitimate aesthetic and ethical means. While lulling their readers into a false sense of security through their use of detailed, familiar, even mundane, settings and characters, they then introduced explosive desires and rebellious instincts. The sensation novelists stretched the boundaries of what the critics identified as real by presenting incident, accident, and inexplicable psychological and sexual drives as an essential part of the realistic world. They furthermore suggested that the notions of individual coherence and self-control on which both realist literature and the industrial society built their theories of stability were invalid, since individuals were often unable to predict or control internal drives and external events.

¹ H. L. Mansel, “Sensation Novels,” *The Quarterly Review*, Vol. 113, April (1863), p. 483.

² *Ibid.*, p.486.

The term “sensational” seems to have become a label which the critics attached quite liberally to incidents or novels which did not accord with their notions of the acceptable. As my study reveals, although the sensation novels shared specific characteristics, they differed widely in the way they presented their material, and more significantly, in the kind of sensation they presented. While Collins's novels often create sensation through mystery and suspense, Mary Braddon's and Mrs Henry Wood's have less overt mystery in their novels. The major secrets they introduce are those of the female protagonist who manipulates and, often defies, patriarchal ideology through her subversive actions. Rhoda Broughton, on the other hand, seems to discard the notion of secrecy or murder in her fiction. Her novels were classified by the Victorian critics as sensational merely for her radical representation of female sexuality.

Far from attempting a specific definition of a genre which, by the very aesthetic mixture it introduced, defied categorisation, I will examine the implications and consequences of the new elements which the sensation novelists introduced into literature. Only recently has sensation fiction started to acquire a new status of literary seriousness mainly through studies, feminist or other, which investigate the links between literature and ideology. The subversive element of female rebellion introduced in the novels, especially those written by women, proved particularly interesting to feminist critics, providing the grounding, for example, for Elaine Showalter's arguments for a female literary tradition in *A Literature of Their Own*.¹ However, Showalter follows a rather limited approach in her study of the genre. Her method necessarily leaves out the male sensation novelists and does not explore the ways in which both male and female sensationalists interrogated the social, medical, and sexual ideologies of the period. Rather than concentrate on female rebellion as the primary characteristic of female sensation fiction, in this work I study the reasons responsible for the ideological constructs of gender examined in sensation fiction, how these constructs operate, and their effects and consequences on the psychological make-up of individuals.

¹ Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*, (London: Virago, 1978).

My work is similar in many ways to that of Jenny Bourne Taylor who, in her study of Wilkie Collins, *In The Secret Theatre of Home: Wilkie Collins, Sensation Narrative, and Nineteenth-Century Psychology*,¹ reveals his deeper involvement with the psychological theories of the era. Yet, I broaden Taylor's scope by considering a group of sensation novelists rather than concentrating on one in particular. Rather than focusing on the relationship between nineteenth-century psychological theory and sensation fiction, I look more widely at medical and sexual theories of the era and the ways in which sensation fiction highlighted the intricate relationship between Victorian psychological, social, and sexual ideologies and the patriarchal institutions which they helped to maintain: the asylum, the family, and the law.

In my work, I will reveal that the sensation novels were serious in addressing the psychological issues which lay at the heart of the period. Sensation fiction could never have achieved the wide popularity it did in the 1860s and 70s had it not directly interested itself in the dominant social, psychological, and political issues which were exercising, and indeed often agonizing, the people of that period. While the 1850s, with the magnificent triumph of the Great Exhibition, marked the height of Victorian industrial success and optimism, by the 1860s, a more pessimistic climate was beginning to emerge. Contradictions between the dominant industrial ideology of self-help and self-control and a felt sense of individual powerlessness were perceived more acutely. In medical and psychological theory the tide started to turn, as the earlier stress on theories of self-control was gradually supplanted by more unyielding, pessimistic theories of hereditary determinism. More generally, the 1860s also witnessed the first awakenings of the women's movement. The sharp gender division, not only of labour, but also of psychological character through which the rising middle-class had established itself, presented the surest guarantee for the supremacy of the propertied male in law, politics, and in education. Romanticizing women, in the shape of either angels or demons, enabled a troubled ideology which was loaded with contradictions, to establish a stable

¹ Jenny Bourne Taylor, *In The Secret Theatre of Home: Wilkie Collins, Sensation Narrative, and Nineteenth-Century Psychology*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1988).

set of relationships which then helped to sustain it. These projections of womanhood, however, were far from stable, and although none of the sensation novelists would identify themselves with the aims of the women's movement, their novels nonetheless fulfilled the same task of challenging and unpicking the patriarchal ideologies of the era.

As my work reveals, the sensation novel recognized in the presence of a gender-constructed identity the very bases of politics in the Victorian period. The novels reveal the ways in which gender-differences were both constructed by and helped to maintain power relations in middle-class society. The novels' insistence on treading the grounds of unfamiliar and extreme behaviour helped them to examine the sexual, medical, and economic ideologies of the era and the ways in which they influenced the opportunities and choices offered to the individual. Hence came the novels' emphasis on women who, as passive angelic beings, or rampant, uncontrolled sexual demons, were at the centre of Victorian ideology, delimiting, by exclusion, the category of masculinity.

The sensation novels do not stop at surveying women's position within ideology, but go further to question the very bases of ideology itself. The novelists frequently assert (and perhaps rather too frequently for credibility) that they are not, and do not intend to be, subversive or rebellious in their work. Their novels do not invent a new set of images or relations; rather they rework those same images already existent in contemporary psychological ideology. Yet, they manage to undermine these ideological constructs by means of their extreme formulations. Their demonic women are extremely villainous and, like Satan, insidiously attractive; they often violate romantic constructs of an Ophelia-like mad woman by committing horrendous crimes. Their angelic women are not rewarded but either die, because self-sacrifice turns into self-extinction, or equally, turn demonic, literally having no feelings. The males presented in the novels prove to be confused individuals who are ruled by the circumstances of their lives or governed by inexplicable internal drives, or petty tyrants using the ideology of self-help as a justification for helping themselves at the expense of the weak or powerless.

Rather than "preaching to the nerves,"¹ as the Victorian critics claimed, the

¹ H. L. Mansel, *op. cit.*, p. 482.

sensation novel seemed to exploit fully the age's nervousness regarding particular issues which disturbed its notions of order. My study asserts the responsible attitude the novels adopted in addressing the medical, social, and legal issues of the period. I will also analyze, through the narrative structure of the novels studied, the ways in which they investigated and exploited the contradictions within Victorian ideology. I will reveal how medical theories about female sexuality, formed and informed by social theories of female "nature," helped to incarcerate women and how the sensation novelists used both female incarceration and the theories responsible for it to account for, or even justify, female rebellion.

The novels studied reveal a deep understanding of the mechanisms by which ideology operates particularly in women, creating deeply internalized attitudes and responses which only severe material and psychological distress can cause them to open to question. The novels reveal further that "natural" constructs of both male and female identity are false. Although they exploit the reader's adherence to contemporary ideological concepts to render acceptable the subversive behaviour of the heroines, they manage to undermine these concepts through their narratives by revealing that women's "disruptive" behaviour is a product of their cultural conditioning rather than their biological "nature."

In the first chapter I will discuss the Victorian critical reception of sensation fiction and its subversion of the realist literary tradition. While in the second chapter I study Victorian psychological ideologies in relation to sensation fiction, in the third, I concentrate on the sexual ideologies of the period. In both chapters I examine the ways in which the novels explored the relationship between gendered theories of the self and the operations of the patriarchal system. The fourth chapter develops these insights more specifically, looking at the ways in which the plot structures of the novels highlight the close correlation between ideological projections of female powerlessness and passivity and their literal economic and legal disempowerment with regard to the transmission of property.

CHAPTER I

**The Contemporary Critical and Public Reception
of The Sensation Novel.**

“If it had not been disturbing, if it had not undermined the most cherished of values, it would not have provoked such visceral outrage.”

Winifred Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar*.¹

The sensation novel of the 1860s offered a challenge to the established moral and aesthetic values of Victorian England. With its preoccupation with the workings of insanity and the explosion of passionate energies, and its calm insistence that chaos and turmoil lurked beneath the quietest of social facades, sensation fiction set itself against the sacrosanct Victorian norms of order, decorum and propriety. Although sensation fiction was generally greeted with outrage by the literary critics, it enjoyed immense popular success. Indeed, critical disapproval seemed to work wonders in stimulating popular demand for the novels. The public, it seemed, was thirsty for a form of fiction which offered a more disruptive vision of social and psychological life. The popularity of the sensation novel uncovered the unpopularity of the system which it frequently criticized. As E. A. Bennett suggested, “If 50,000 people buy a novel ... we may be sure that they have not conspired to do so, and also that their apparently strange unanimity is not due to chance.”² That the novels' popularity seemed to increase with the culmination of the critical indignation against them is obvious; yet, it is difficult to argue which of the two reactions actually created the other. While readers responded to the subversive potentiality of the novels, the critics vainly attempted to stem the tide of this subversion, producing reviews which upheld a literary establishment which was both culturally

¹ Winifred Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860s*, (Princeton and New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), p.65.

² E. A. Bennett, *Fame and Fiction: An Inquiry Into Certain Popularities*, (London: Grant Richards, 1901), p.5.

divisive and patriarchal. It is notable that while social and literary authorities united against the genre of sensation fiction as a whole, their rejection turned into a fury when it came to the female sensationalists. In this chapter I will explore the moral ideology manifested in the reviews of the sensation novel, and the real bases of the reviewers' objections, and suggest some of the reasons why these novels were so popular with the reading public.

The Distorted Mirror: Sensationalism and Realism

Critics of sensation fiction were furious at its daring invasion of the established literary traditions and the social, moral, and class boundaries guarded by those traditions. *The Christian Remembrancer* accused the sensation novel of considering "any close fidelity to nature a slavish subservience injurious to effect, and willingly and designedly draw[ing] a picture of life which shall make reality insipid and the routine of ordinary existence intolerable to the imagination."¹ The formidable Mrs. Oliphant protested that by insisting on changing the boundaries of the real, the sensation novelists were contradicting "all the grand laws of existence."² The sensation novelists severely tampered with traditional meanings of reality and attempted to change perceptions of the real in a way which caused the critical furore against them. To alter social perceptions, albeit through the medium of fiction, was to undermine the illusion of social order which Victorian ideology worked so hard to maintain. If readers were allowed to view their daily lives in a different light, then the "routine of ordinary existence" would be rendered "intolerable." The surprisingly overt nature of these expressed fears highlights the critics' own sense of the precarious balance of social order.

The negative critical response to the sensationalists' projection of the real suggests that, in the preceding tradition of realist fiction those critics had found a form of fictional presentation which confirmed their own ideological assumptions with regard to social and

¹ "Our Female Sensation Novelists," *The Christian Remembrancer*, Vol. 46, (1864), p.210.

² Margaret Oliphant, "Novels," (No. I), *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, Vol. 94, (1863), p.170.

psychological order. In order to understand the challenge to realist practices mounted by sensation fiction, it is necessary to look first at the literary assumptions which underpinned realist fiction. Here, I take George Eliot as a representative figure, who in her early works outlined the cardinal ideas which governed mid-Victorian realist writing.¹ This line of investigation will enable me to outline some of the characteristics of the sensation novel which differentiate it from realist fiction as well as to define the framework of the criticism directed against it.

In her programmatic essay, "The Natural History of German Life," (1856) George Eliot drew the outlines for what would constitute a faithful representation of life in art:

our social novels profess to represent the people as they are, and the unreality of their representation is a grave evil. The greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies. Appeals founded on generalizations and statistics require a sympathy ready-made, a moral sentiment already in activity; but a picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves, which may be called the raw material of moral sentiment.²

The first task for the real artist, Eliot suggests, is a true representation of life, the presentation of a picture of human life which is not built on generalized conceptions or ready - made sympathies, but which, through accurate depiction, is able to arouse true moral sentiment. Necessary to George Eliot's definition of the real is the notion of a common element in human experience. George Eliot considers the representation of the extraordinary or uncommon as a falsification of the true picture of life which art, if it is to be responsible, should represent. Sympathies, she suggested later in *Adam Bede*, should be directed towards the common people and not towards life's rarities.

¹ Modern criticism reveals that George Eliot's attitude towards realism was more flexible and experimental in her later works. In her article on "George Eliot and the End of Realism," Penny Boumelha suggests that as her works progressed, George Eliot was often able to stay within the bounds of realism at the same time as she managed to upset them; see Sue Roe, ed., *Women Reading Women's Writing*, (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1987), p.23.

² George Eliot; see Thomas Pinney, ed., *Essays of George Eliot*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), p.270.

There are few prophets in the world; few sublimely beautiful women; few heroes. I can't afford to give all my love and reverence to such rarities: I want a great deal of those feelings for my everyday fellow-men, especially for the few in the foreground of the great multitude, whose faces I know, whose hands I touch, for whom I have to make way with kindly courtesy. Neither are picturesque lazzaroni or romantic criminals half so frequent as your common labourer.... It is more needful that I should have a fibre of sympathy connecting me with that vulgar citizen who weighs out my sugar... than with the handsome rascal in red scarf and green feathers.¹

The notion of that which is common in experience has been elided with the idea of the common people. The common becomes essential to the moral purpose of her work and conditional to the success of a novel, which, for George Eliot, was signified by the ability of the work to broaden the vision and extend the sympathies of both the characters and the reader.

George Eliot's sense of moral purpose in her work is inseparable from the aesthetic means she employs. Eliot considers art to be false, crucially, not when it introduces false ideas about the manners or interests of people whom the reader does not usually encounter, but when it fails to direct our sympathies into the proper channel where ordinary people are concerned.

All the more sacred is the task of the artist when he undertakes to paint the life of the People. Falsification here is far more pernicious than in the more artificial aspects of life. It is not so very serious that we should have false ideas about evanescent fashions - about the manners and conversation of beaux and duchesses; but it *is* serious that our sympathy with the perennial joys and struggles, the toil, the tragedy, and the humour in the life of our more heavily-laden fellow-men, should be perverted, and turned towards a false object instead of the true one.²

This passage reveals the extent to which the moral code and the aesthetic principles were entwined in her works. Eliot insists that the mediocre and common place is the only proper field to introduce the reader to larger human sympathies and to eliminate the feelings of selfishness. Such fictional projections would help the readers get "a clearer

¹ George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, (1859; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1980), pp.224-225.

² "The Natural History of German Life," p.271.

conception and a more active admiration of those vital elements which bind men together ... and ... help them in gradually dissociating these elements from the more transient forms on which an outworn teaching tends to make them dependent.”¹ This task of promoting certain sentiments and discarding others gives the writer the post of a moral guide. In her notes on “Authorship,” Eliot underlines the writer's responsibility as “teacher or influencer of the public mind.”²

Eliot's emphasis on the representation of the common and on the binding elements in human experience, and her assumption of the position of secular preacher, all spring from her belief that uniform laws govern human experience, and hence that all things are connected within a unified system. Eliot's social, moral and aesthetic philosophy is governed by what she terms “the inexorable law of consequences,” the social law which creates an organized, stable world. She excluded the uncommon in the belief that common laws governed behaviour, and therefore, rarities were insignificant. Yet, there is a slippage here between the idea that uniform laws govern all kinds of behaviour and the admission that certain types of behaviour exist which would seem to contradict these laws. In her review of Robert William Mackay's *The Progress of the Intellect* (1851), Eliot explained how she built up her faith on “the recognition of the presence of undeviating law in the material and moral world - of that invariability of sequence which is acknowledged to be the basis of physical science, but which is still perversely ignored in our social organization, our ethics and our religion.” She stressed that the duty of the individual lay in learning this law and abiding by its principles because “the seal of prohibition and of sanction, are effectually impressed on human deeds and aspirations, not by means of Greek and Hebrew, but by that inexorable law of consequences, whose evidence is confirmed ... as the ages advance.”³ Eliot's belief in an undeviating law within the moral as well as the material world delivered a positive image of social and psychological change through regularity and uniformity. The

¹ Gordon S. Haight, ed., *The George Eliot Letters*, Vol. IV, (London: Oxford University Press; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), p.472.

² George Eliot on "Authorship," see Thomas Pinney, op.cit., p.440.

³ See Thomas Pinney, op.cit., p.31.

underlying model behind this conception was that of the scientific theories of the social organism put forward by such thinkers as Augustus Comte, T. H. Huxley, and Herbert Spencer. In society - as in the biological organism-, these thinkers suggested, "development [was] linked to stability of form."¹ Their theory was essentially one of order, regularity, control, and continuity. The law of cause and effect could produce an orderly society, they argued, because if individuals judged acts by their consequences, the process would result in the edging out of immoral behaviour. In his essay on "The Scientific Movement and Literature," Edward Dowden also found a natural law of morality which could guarantee social justice:

in the knowledge that consequence pursues consequence with a deadly efficiency far beyond our power of restraining, or even reaching them. The assurance that we live under a reign of natural law enforces upon us...the truth that what a man soweth, that shall he also reap.²

George Eliot confirmed her moral theory of the "inexorable law of consequences" in her novels, especially in *Adam Bede* in which she strictly adhered to the organic theory in both moral and formal structures. The novel clearly revealed how Eliot's adoption of organicism as moral philosophy determined both her choice of subject matter and her mode of representation. In 1874, *The Saturday Review* suggested that the "difference between moral and immoral art" - the latter term was frequently used to describe sensation fiction - lies not in the choice of "subject-matter, but in the mode of treatment; it is not that one writer deals with bigamy, and another never suggests a breach of the marriage laws; but that one possesses a healthy, and the other a morbid, mind."³ Yet, it is interesting that in his defence of Braddon's novels, George Augustus Sala described *Adam Bede* as "clearly sensational" because "There is murder, and there is

¹ Sally Shuttleworth, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science: The Make-Believe of a Beginning*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp.3-4

² Edward Dowden, *Studies in Literature, 1789-1877*, (1889). Quoted in Tess Cosslett, *The "Scientific Movement" And Victorian Literature*, (Sussex: The Harvester Press; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), p.17.

³ *The Saturday Review*, "Sensationalism," xxvii, (1874). Quoted in Kenneth Graham, *English Criticism of the Novel 1865-1900*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p.81.

fatality in it.”¹ The basic difference was that although George Eliot dealt with a topic which was regarded as rather unsavoury by the critics, her moral stand kept her treatment of sin, murder and moral retribution within socially acceptable bounds. Despite the narrator's stated awareness of the motivations of Hetty Sorrel's action, and despite occasional statements of sympathy with her follies, the story still follows a conventional line : the sinner was still the working-class girl whose vanity has led her to commit sin and later on, in desperation, has led her to crime. Although her seducer is made to suffer for a short while for his share in the sin, his ordeal is not the result of punishment by society but the outcome of personal feelings of guilt. While Donnithorne is reinstated in society, Hetty is transported and then drowned in an ultimate novelistic compromise which prevents her from disrupting the harmony of Hayslope once more, whilst also ensuring that her punishment was not seen to be irrevocable. Eliot reinforced the doctrines of social unity by allowing only the lawful passions to survive in *Adam Bede*.

If *Adam Bede* were to be rewritten as a sensation novel, not only would Hetty be portrayed as a respectable middle-class girl, but she would also be allowed to keep her adventure a secret and outlive her experience. Her affair with Arthur Donnithorne would be varnished with a romantic haze and readerly sympathy would be entirely with her. The conservative critics were infuriated by the irreverence towards social morality displayed in the sensation novel. Not only did the sensationalists choose suspicious subject matters to deal with, but they also treated rebellion and sin with a daring sympathy. The critic for *The Fortnightly Review*, J. Herbert Stack, was indignant at the practice of investing “the adulterer or adulteress with the interest of romance,”² while H. L. Mansel for his part vehemently attacked the unusual introduction of “noble-minded and interesting sinners.”³ One of the most strident and pertinacious critics of sensation fiction, Mrs. Oliphant, discussed at length the evil which resulted from teaching the reader to sympathize with the sinner to such an extent that he or she forgives the sin and

¹ George Augustus Sala, "The Cant Of Modern Criticism," *Belgravia*, Vol.4, No. 1, Nov. (1867), p.52.

² J. Herbert Stack, "Some Recent English Novels," *The Fortnightly Review*, Vol.15, O.S. 9 N.S. June 1871, p.731.

³ H. L. Mansel, *op. cit.*, p.494.

comes to dislike the virtuous characters because they are colourless.¹

Conservative critics correctly identified sensation fiction traits. In Mrs. Wood's *East Lynne*, the reader's sympathy was constantly with the heroine. Isabel's excessive suffering from the consequences of her sin gave her a spiritual and emotional depth which no other character in the novel was able to achieve, certainly not her virtuous rival. In Wilkie Collins's *No Name*, Magdalen was permitted to be restored to fortune and social status despite her defiance of law and use of her sexuality to attain her ends, and in *The New Magdalen*, a reformed prostitute was allowed to remarry and live happily. Instead of giving vanity and selfishness as reasons for sin, as George Eliot did in *Adam Bede*, a sensation novelist would have dwelt upon the hard conditions of Hetty's life, her wasted beauty, and her romantic dreams to escape to a better life, so that the reader understood and appreciated her motives and consequently sympathized with her frailty.

Although both realist writers and sensation novelists subscribed to a theory of art as reflection, the reason for the serious difference in their moral attitude lay in their disparate definitions as to what constituted the real. Both claimed verisimilitude for their writings. While Eliot identified the real in terms of its commonness and morally-instructive qualities, the sensationalists' claim to verisimilitude was grounded on their use of documents and real life stories, however extraordinary they might be. Their stories were based on real cases reported in newspapers and their characters were frequently based on stories with which the reader would have been familiar from the media. Against the "ordinariness" of Eliot's notion of common life, they highlighted the flamboyant extremes of social behaviour. When Charles Reade was attacked for depicting an English gentleman who had premarital sexual experience in *A Terrible Temptation* and for suggesting, furthermore, that many Victorian men had had similar experiences, his retort to *The Times* was: "Facts Must Be Faced." The duty of the artist, Reade stated in his letter, was to "weave the recorded facts ... of this great age, into the forms of Art," and

¹ Mrs. Oliphant rejects the suggestion that "certain qualities of mind or amiabilities of temper are sufficient to bring a character safely through all kinds of actual and positive wrongdoing without fatal or even serious damage." See Margaret Oliphant, "Novels," (No.1), *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, Vol.94, August (1863), p.170.

the facts as recorded in the newspaper were: "Lunacy, Poison, Divorce, Murder, and Anonyma."¹ For the sensationalists the factual included whatever happened in life, but for the realists it was more narrowly defined as the arena of collective experience. Like Reade, Eliot also refused to modify her own version of "facts" which seems to mean for her the outcome of the writer's objective observation of the common in life:

Perhaps you will say, 'Do improve the facts a little, then; make them more accordant with those correct views which it is our privilege to possess. The world is not just what we like; do touch it up with a tasteful pencil, and make believe it is not quite such a mixed, entangled affair.'²

Against this unexciting version of the factual the sensationalists introduced the extraordinary, the accidental, and the tragic as an essential part of reality. Although the critics grudgingly acknowledged the existence of the extraordinary and tragic in life, they identified these phenomena as of rare occurrence and, therefore, too trivial or unimportant to depict in art. The sensationalists insisted, however, that such incidents were as common as the marriages which were taking place every day and that what was normally classified as collective experience was in fact a whole host of ideological assumptions about individual and social behaviour. In his introduction to *Basil*, Collins observed that:

I have not thought it either politic or necessary, while adhering to realities, to adhere to everyday realities only Those extraordinary accidents and events which happen to few men seemed to me to be as legitimate materials for fiction to work with ... as the ordinary events which may, and do happen to us all. By appealing to genuine sources of interest within the reader's own experience, I could certainly gain his attention to begin with; but it would be only by appealing to other sources (as genuine in their way) *beyond* his own experience that I could hope to fix his interest and excite his suspense, to occupy his deeper feelings, or

¹ Charles Reade, quoted by Richard Stange, *The Theory of the Novel in England 1850-1870*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959), p. 201. Reade states that the character of Miss Somerset, the enchanting mistress presented in the novel was based on a letter to the *Times* on July 3rd (1862) entitled Anonyma; see Emerson Grant Sutcliff, "Fact, Realism and Morality in Reade's Fiction," *Studies in Philology*, Vol.41, (1944), p.598. Wilkie Collins based *The Woman in White* on a famous lawsuit which took place in the French courts fifty years before the novel was written; see C.H. Muller, "Incident and Characterization in *The Woman in White*," *Unisa English Studies*, (1973), p.39.

² George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, pp. 221-2.

to stir his nobler thoughts.¹

Collins's definition of the real embraced the angle which the realists excluded on the basis of its uncommonness and non-representativeness. Collins's statement of his artistic credo is remarkably similar to that of George Eliot : both hope to raise the nobler feelings of their readers. Their practices, however, are diametrically opposed. Collins insists that the so-called "uncommon" is also essential to human experience, and fiction should explore the range of sentiments and experiences not always present in the humdrum routine of every-day life. The sensationalists' belief that the extraordinary, the incidental, and the unpredictable workings of the unconscious determined the destiny of the individuals led them to reject the theory of the law of consequences upon which the realists built their moral attitudes. Neither the workings of the psyche nor of social processes could be constrained, they explained, within the operations of uniform, regular laws. Individual actions and social outcomes are neither predictable nor within individual control. Moral order, therefore, cannot be discerned; the law of consequences is inoperative. Hence, the writer is in no position to judge, direct, or impose the "proper" moral sentiments on his readers and judgement on behaviour becomes relative.

The conventionally orientated critics refused to accept the extraordinary as a version of the real in art. Charlotte Brontë experienced similar criticism for introducing eccentric characters in *Shirley*. Although she defended her characters on the ground that they were real, G. H. Lewes rebutted her defence on the grounds that "Art ... deals with the broad principles of human nature, not with idiosyncrasies."² Similarly, Reade's justification for using sensational material on the grounds that it was factual was rejected by Mrs. Oliphant on the basis that facts which mainly depicted the unfamiliar in experience were not always true to life, or representative of the common, the domain of realism. "Facts," declared Mrs. Oliphant, "are the most false to nature." She insisted that such facts would not have happened "had there been any consistency in life."³ J.

¹ Wilkie Collins, Introduction to *Basil*. Quoted in Sue Lonoff, *Wilkie Collins and His Victorian Readers: A Study in The Rhetoric of Authorship*, (New York: AMS Press, 1982), p.24.

² *Edinburgh Review*, xci, (1850). Quoted in Richard Stang, *op.cit.*, p.175.

³ Margaret Oliphant, "Novels," (No. I), p. 170.

Herbert Stack protested that “a novel can no more be based on exceptional life, than it could on a society of people with wooden legs.”¹ The *vraisemblance* the realist critics insisted on could only be achieved by the selective representation of the familiar in terms strictly according with current literary conventions of realism, an approach which the sensationalists felt to be both despiriting and limiting for imaginative writers. “The realistic school,” commented Mary Braddon, “has been written up so perseveringly of late - always to the disparagement of every thing imaginative - that I was beginning to ... bow my head to the idea that the subject of a respectable novel is bound to be all that is trite & common place.”²

In *Lucretia* (1868), a novel written as a satire on sensation fiction and as a warning against its injurious influence, the Rev. Francis Paget highlighted the suspect process by which sensation fiction was able to upset the boundaries of established literary forms and twist the sympathies of the reader. The sensation novel, he declared, “sedulously pander[ed] to the worst passions of our nature, and seem[ed] directed to one purpose only, the perversion of our whole fictional literature, by a process as insidious as it is demonical, - that, namely, of calling evil good, and good evil.”³ The sensationalists' controversial definition of the real and their belief in the necessary relativity of moral judgement, led them to disrupt the narrative structure of realistic fiction; a structure which was essentially built on principles of uniform, linear development.

The realists believed that change in society, as in nature, depended on the operation of what George Eliot termed, “the law of sequence” which guaranteed gradual transformation within an ordered frame. Edward Dowden was convinced that “the regularity of the operation of physical law actually guarantees the mode of transformation.”⁴ The outcome of this belief in fiction was a narrative form of gradual,

¹ J. Herbert Stack, *op.cit.*, p. 736.

² Robert Lee Wolff, “Devoted Disciple: The Letters of Mary Elizabeth Braddon to Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton 1862-1873,” *Harvard Library Bulletin*, Vol.22, (1974), p.132.

³ Rev. Francis E. Paget, *Lucretia; or The Heroine of The Nineteenth Century, A correspondence, Sensational and Sentimental.*, (London: Joseph Masters, 1868), p.298.

⁴ Quoted in Sally Shuttleworth, *op. cit.*, p.7.

cumulative change, and a correlated projection of a psychology of individual coherence. The orderly world Eliot depicts in *Adam Bede* results in a cyclical narrative where harmony is restored after the characters have changed gradually through the pressure of experience and the potentiality for rebellion has been suppressed. The metaphor for the realists' narrative was that of a chain where incidents were followed by the expected consequence. Against this metaphor of the chain, the sensationalists introduced that of the current represented in the hidden hand which controls the character's destinies and determines their actions. Though the current, like the chain, suggests some controllable order, in the world of sensation fiction order is not achieved through the laws of cause and effect; rather it is the inevitable outcome of uncontrollable circumstances, unexpected incidents, and the unpredictable drives of the unconscious. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, Robert Audley finds himself unable to stop his investigation despite his awareness of the grave consequences it might lead to. Midwinter in *Armada* is also unable to control the operation of the superstition which directs his life. In the sensation novel, incidents do not necessarily produce the expected outcome; rebellion does not always end in punishment, and individuals often find themselves prone to sudden changes or subject to unexpected occurrences which totally alter their future actions.

The sensation novelists' emphasis on the representation of sudden change and incident as determining factors in experience, led the conventional critics to speak disparagingly of the novelists' "incomprehensible" popularity. They classified the sensation novels as novels of "incident" and therefore inferior to the realists' novels of character. "The human actors in the piece," stated H. L. Mansel, "are, for the most part, but so many lay-figures on which to exhibit a drapery of incident."¹ J. Herbert Stack accused the sensationalists of a lack of literary talent because, to him, the skilful writer should make action flow from character, while the unskilful writer would make "a whole volume of woe depend on an accident or a trivial personage, some false delicacy, some touch of jealous feeling or burst of petty wrath. That in real life great effects from little

¹ H. L. Mansel, op. cit., p.486.

causes spring, is no sufficient justification.”¹ The sensationalists' response was to suggest that they were delving into the mines from which the great Greek and Elizabethan tragedians took their material. In those ancient tragedies there was a similar seeming disproportion between cause and effect; an accident or a burst of passion could cause endless suffering. Mary Braddon expressed her confusion at the critics' accusations: “That question about the inadmissibility of accident in art,” she writes to Edward Bulwer Lytton, “is always ... perplexing to me. Why not admit accident in a story when almost all the great tragedies of real life hinge upon accident.”² The answer was that accident meant a disturbance of the orderly, controlled, world of realistic fiction which was governed by the laws of sequence and continuity.

The sensation novel introduced a new option in the practice of novel-writing, which proved that novels “could be successfully, even brilliantly written according to principles which seemed to contradict those of realism.”³ The main challenge sensationalism posed to the realistic narrative came through the “violent yoking of romance and realism, traditionally the two contradictory modes of literary perception.”⁴ This mixture was due to the sensationalists' dependence on the Gothic romance, the *Newgate* novels, the “penny-dreadfuls,” police reports and newspapers for their primary material. Not only did they, through the new mould they presented, revise the Gothic romance, but also the conception of realism itself. They adopted the aristocratic cast of character, used suspense to elicit terror, introduced perversion and abnormality - all elements of the Gothic romance - but the essential difference was that “the supernatural, which was central to most Gothic novels, was replaced by the terrors of every-day life.”⁵ The sensationalists secularized and domesticated the mysteries of the Gothic romance.

¹ J. Herbert Stack, *op. cit.*, p.743.

² Robert Lee Wolff, “Devoted Disciple,” p. 26.

³ Walter M. Kendrick, “The Sensationalism of *The Woman in White*,” *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, Vol. 32, (1977), p.19.

⁴ Winifred Hughes, *op.cit.*, p.16.

⁵ Sally Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel: Chastity, Class and Women's Reading 1835-1880*, (Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1981), p.92.

In his review of Mary Braddon's *Aurora Floyd*, Henry James credited Wilkie Collins with having "introduced into fiction those most mysterious of mysteries, the mysteries which are at our own doors;" instead of the terrors of *Udolpho*, we were treated to "the terrors of the cheerful country-house and the busy London lodgings. And there is no doubt that these were infinitely the more terrible." Anne Radcliffe's novels were romances, but Collins's work put crime and criminals in probable circumstances. While both the Gothic and historical romances were remote from life, the sensationalists clothed horror in the shape of beautiful, middle-class ladies and respectable gentlemen and followed their progress in daily life.¹ Contemporary critics recognized this proximity to life; as Mansel observed, "It is necessary to be near a mine to be blown up by its explosion; and a tale which aims at electrifying the nerves of the reader is never thoroughly effective unless the scene be laid in our own days and among the people we are in the habit of meeting."² Wild ladies, demonic heroes, fantasies of rebellion and escape, were all brought home to the reader who could easily recognize the characters and settings.

The reviewers' proposed version of life was built on ideological, and often idealistic, assumptions of what constituted real human experience. Alfred Austin questioned the sensationalists' artistic abilities because they "represent[ed] life neither as it is nor as it ought to be; and, therefore, while they fail to instruct, they do not even attempt to elevate."³ Austin seemed to ignore the fact that the most acclaimed realistic writers of the age not only rejected idealization as a literary technique, but also acknowledged that a completely truthful representation of life was an aspiration

¹ Henry James, *Notes and Reviews*, ed. Pierre de Chaignon La Rose, (Cambridge, Mass.: Dunster House, 1921), p.110.

² H. L. Mansel, "Sensation Novels," *The Quarterly Review*, Vol. 113, April 1863, pp. 488-489. Alfred Austin refers to the same point suggesting that proximity was "indispensable to the effect"; see Alfred Austin, "Our Novels," (No.II), "The Sensational School," *Temple Bar*, Vol.29, June 29, (1870), p.412. The sensation novelists were sometimes personally involved in the incidents they presented; The scene of the meeting between Hartright and Anne Catherick in *The Woman in White* was reported to be a version of a romantic encounter which Collins himself had with a woman who was incarcerated and who later became his mistress. Reade's *Hard Cash* was also based on the case of *Fletcher v Fletcher*, in which the novelist himself assisted a young man to escape from the asylum. For more details about the two stories see C.H. Muller, op.cit., p.37.

³ Alfred Austin, op.cit., p.424.

impossible to achieve. In *Adam Bede*, G. Eliot stated rather ironically that as an artist “Creeping servilely after nature and fact,” she would not be able “to represent things as they never have been and never will be.” Although she aspired “to give... a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind,” she also warned readers that the result might be imperfect because “The mirror is doubtless defective; the outlines will sometimes be disturbed, the reflection faint or confused.”¹ The critics applied more rigid and less complex notions of the real than the realistic writers themselves did and, failing to find a representation of these notions in sensation fiction, they denounced it as false.

Sensation fiction was a mixed genre. The sensation novelists adopted melodramatic situations and encouraged romantic fantasies, yet used scientific theories to explain behaviour and insisted on every-day, factual realism. The result was a literature which refused categorization. By introducing the fantastic into the actual, the sensation novel was able to open a gap which revealed “nothing more than the uneasy conscience of the positivist nineteenth century.”² These works addressed the tension between the positive laws of regularity, sequence and order and the negative laws of change which relied on chance, accident, incident, the unconscious, and disruptive drives of passion. The sensation novel challenged rigid categorization and hard-line divisions not only through its unconventional characters but also through its form. The reader was often simultaneously presented with two versions of the truth through a form of split in the narrative. The overt narrator's statements which were part of the conventional framework of the novel, were undercut by forms of representation of action and events which suggested very different forms of interpretation. The mechanisms worked to convert the reader's sympathies because they established a deeper understanding of the motivations of action.

¹ G. Eliot, *Adam Bede*, p.221.

² Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, (1973). Quoted in Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, (London and New York: Methuen, 1981), pp.25-26.

Women Writers Within Patriarchal Morality

“A woman, especially, if she have the misfortune of knowing anything, should conceal it as well as she can.”¹

Jane Austen, *Persuasion*

Literary criticism which functioned as a valuable arm of the patriarchal establishment, closely associated the choice of subject matter with the sex of the writer. Although the critics attacked sensation fiction in general, they were more severe when the work involved a female author. The female sensationalists faced the most damaging criticism, indeed, from critics of their own sex, a fact which reveals the vehemence with which some of these female critics internalized patriarchal principles. Text and personality were seen as inseparable in works written by women, especially if those works questioned social morality. Any woman writer who over-stepped the line in her books was judged accordingly and her personality was identified with her treatment of her subject matter.

Interestingly, Charlotte Brontë had faced the same charges as those used against the female sensationalists when *Jane Eyre* was published in 1847. Charlotte Brontë introduced an “unfamiliar” heroine to the Victorian reader: a woman who combined both flesh and spirit, a poor, plain, impulsive, but, more significantly, a passionate and sexualized heroine. The novel's treatment of passion provoked such male responses as that of Thackeray. Calling Charlotte Brontë “The poor little woman of genius,” he goes on to attribute her choice of writing as a profession to her failure in finding a husband. She would, “rather than have fame, rather than any other earthly good or mayhap heavenly one, she wants some Tomkins or another to love her and be in love with,” but being the plain woman she was, she would not have the chance to “fulfill the burning

¹ Quoted by Tillie Olsen, *Silences*, (1965; London: Virago, 1978), p.235.

desire”¹ of her heart. James Lorimer condemned *Wuthering Heights* as “unreadable” and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as “Vulgar.” After attributing the two novels to the author of *Jane Eyre*, he rejected the possibility that such books could have been written by a woman and asserted that if they were, she must have been “a woman pretty nearly unsexed;” because Jane “strikes us as a personage much more likely to have sprung ... from the head of a man.”² Charlotte Brontë was aware that she would never be judged on the same basis as male writers: “You will, I know, keep measuring me by some standard of what you deem becoming to my sex,”³ she protested in 1849.

The sensation novelists were later to incur a similar, yet more vicious, response from the critics. Mary Braddon was the critics' easiest target, and she suffered most at their hands. Braddon lived with her publisher, William Maxwell, had five children with him in addition to his previous five, and married him only when his wife, who was in a mental hospital, died. Braddon's early life was also vulnerable to criticism, because she had had to work as an actress to support her mother after her father had deserted the family. The critics used these facts to attack Braddon who in turn persisted in criticizing social conventions and introducing “illegitimate” passions in her books. In his review of *Aurora Floyd*, Henry James hinted that Braddon had “intimate knowledge of the disorderly half of society” and specifically with that part of it which “ladies are not accustomed to know,”⁴ and are not expected to. After praising *Aurora Floyd* as a sublime work of tragedy, *The Saturday Review* alluded with disappointment to Braddon's knowledge of “men and their ways ... sporting horses, dog-carts, tobacco, the signs of intoxication and betting.”⁵ Like Charlotte Brontë, Braddon was fully aware of the sexual critical bias. She wrote to Edmund Yates:

Do you see what The [Saturday Review] says about *Aurora Floyd* and my philosophy in the matter of beer, brandy, cigars and tobacco? It is all Mr. Tinsley's fault for advertizing me as

1 Quoted by Tillie Olsen, op. cit., p. 233.

2 James Lorimer, "Noteworthy Novels," *North British Review*, Vol. 11, (1849), p. 487.

3 Quoted by Tillie Olsen op. cit., p. 228.

4 Henry James, op.cit., pp.115-116.

5 *The Saturday Review*, 15, No.379, Jan. (1863), p.149.

“Mary Elizabeth”. I used to be called Mr. Braddon, and the provincial critics were wont to regret that my experience of women had been so bitter as to make me an implacable foe for the fair sex.¹

The critics held Braddon’s life responsible for her “immoral” books and rebellious characters. Maliciously referring to Braddon’s earlier career as an actress, Mrs. Oliphant condemned the “low sentiments that are adapted to the atmosphere of Surrey theatre” and the “descriptions of society which show the writer’s ignorance of society.”² She judged *Lady Audley’s Secret* as representative of the writings of an English woman “knowing the attraction of impropriety, and yet loving the shelter of law.”³ The words of the attack corresponded with those used twenty years earlier against Charlotte Brontë when she was accused of “total ignorance of the habits of society” and was deemed to be a woman who must have “for some sufficient reason, long forfeited the society of her own sex.”⁴

The moral attack against the female sensation novelists extended even to their personal virtue. “It is thus that Miss Braddon and Miss Thomas, and a host of other writers, explain their feelings. These ladies might not know, it is quite possible, any better. They might not be aware how young women of good blood and good training feel,”⁵ asserted Mrs. Oliphant. Although Mary Elizabeth Braddon was aware that her novels were controversial (and designedly so), her reaction to Mrs. Oliphant’s statement reveals her sensitivity to attacks which touched upon her personal virtue. Braddon writes to Edward Bulwer Lytton: “Who is the writer who dares to tell me that I do not know how a virtuous or well-bred woman feels. Does he judge me by the evidence of my books. I say boldly___ No.”⁶

Although male writers were not judged on the basis of their knowledge of taboo

¹ Quoted in Robert Lee Wolff, *Sensational Victorian: The Life and Fiction of Mary Elizabeth Braddon*, (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1979), p. 152.

² Margaret Oliphant, “Novels,” (No. II), *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, Vol. 102, Sept. (1867), p.261.

³ *Ibid.*, p.263.

⁴ [Elizabeth Rigby], *The Quarterly Review*, Dec. (1848), p.1xxxiv.

⁵ Margaret Oliphant, “Novels,” (No. 11), p.260.

⁶ Robert Lee Wolff, “Devoted Disciple,” pp.142-143.

subjects, since this was not an issue where men were concerned, they were nonetheless sharply criticized for their daring challenge to the codes of social morality. Writers like Wilkie Collins and Charles Reade were severely attacked for their breach of morality in novels like *No Name*, *A Terrible Temptation*, or *Griffith Gaunt*. Yet, whatever the subject matter the male writers dealt with, and whatever the extent of its transgression of social morality, these novelists were not, like their female counterparts, subject to personal attacks, nor were their lives identified with the lives and experience of their characters. Charles Reade had two mistresses, but he was not linked to the hero of *A Terrible Temptation*; Wilkie Collins had three illegitimate children, but no critic hinted at a possible personal acquaintance with the subject of his novel *No Name*. These novels were not less subversive than those written by women on the same subjects, but men were given the licence to speak while women were not. The relative freedom of expression offered to male authors sprang from the core of the patriarchal structure: the all-knowing, experienced male, and the supposedly ignorant female. A woman should not write of what she was not expected to know. That she could better understand and explain the emotions of her own sex was no excuse for introducing “forbidden passions” in her books. “Were the sketch made from a man's point of view,” suggested Mrs. Oliphant, “its openness would at least be less repulsive.”¹ To the critics, the most appalling aspect of the new openness was that these “repulsive” passions were presented by women, and since these passions were deemed to be alien to respectable women, the women who wrote about them were judged as “bad.”

The critics' obsession with morality explained their rejection of the women writers' openness. Although some critics acknowledged the presence of certain artistic qualities in the sensation novel such as plot construction and story-telling, they all agreed on the novels' immorality. The *Athenaeum* described *East Lynne* as “one of the best novels of the season,”² and H. L. Mansel praised Braddon as “an author of real power.” But the real objection was to the forbidden paths this power wandered in. Mansel went

¹ Margaret Oliphant, “Novels,” (No.11), p.259.

² *The Athenaeum*, No.1772, Oct. (1861), p.491.

further to state that Braddon's talent should enable her to draw better things than “highly-coloured portraits of beautiful fiends and fast young ladies burdened with superfluous husbands;”¹ in other words, she should have used her ability to portray socially acceptable images of women: the angel, (not the fiend) and the pious (not the fast). Mrs. Oliphant described sensation novels as “very fine and very nasty books;”² again, “fine” because of certain artistic qualities they revealed and “nasty” because of their radical presentation of sexuality. Art and morality were treated as synonymous: when art did not teach or endorse the socially-approved ideologies, it was dismissed as “false.” In the case of women writers in particular the emphasis of the critics on the morality of art was doubled, since women were regarded by society as the guardians of morality.

The Sensation Novel : A Threat to Social Stability

So far, I have tried to reveal the ethical background underlying the supposedly aesthetic critical judgements of sensation fiction. The sensationalists were not, finally, attacked for their artistic violation of realism as a literary form but rather for their reexamination and rejection of the social values realism endorsed, particularly in the sphere of gender relations. The sensationalists introduced their own version of society, one very different from that which realism cherished, and the critics objected to the implications of the new picture.

The most upsetting image the sensationalists presented was the sinister image of the “sweet” home. They insisted that crime and secrecy existed in the most respectable families. Under their representation of the family, the figures of the pious, self-sacrificing self-negating wife, and the loving, protective husbands introduced in domestic realism were replaced by those of the adulterous wife or the bigamist husband. The institution of the family was central to the social morality of the Victorian age, and the sensationalists' suggestion of possible corruption within the domestic sphere suggested,

¹ H. L. Mansel, *op. cit.*, p. 491.

² Margaret Oliphant, "Novels," (No. 11), p.269.

in wider terms, that the whole framework of social morality was false. The Archbishop of York's sermon against the sensation novel reflected the degree of disturbance and fear caused by the idea that crime and secrecy were present in family life.

They want to persuade people that in almost every one of the well-ordered houses ... there was a skeleton shut up in some cupboard; that their comfortable and easy-looking neighbour had in his breast a secret story which he was always going about trying to conceal.¹

Instances of crime within the family clearly did exist, although perhaps not on the scale suggested in the sensation novel. E. E. Killett recalled in his autobiography that marital relationships were not as moral as the Victorians were pleased to think and that many suspicious deaths were left uninvestigated.

A doctor once told me that he did not believe there was a single medical practitioner in London, of twenty years' standing, who had not serious reason to believe that wives in his practice had poisoned their husbands and husbands their wives, but in the vast majority of cases the doctors could not utter their suspicion.²

Although clearly unreliable as evidence, this observation is nevertheless indicative of Victorian fears of disturbances within the family and their preoccupation with the need to police social morality. While sensation novelist's reliance on the extraordinary and accidental to produce effect undoubtedly led them to overemphasize the existence of crime, this exaggeration nonetheless supplied the image of Victorian society's worst fears.

Both society and "realistic" literature seemed to have protected middle-class criminals. Very few middle class murderers or murderesses figure in the realistic novel. But the sensation novelists insisted on the existence of murder, adultery and bigamy in the lives of the respectable, self-made, and self-righteous middle class. They were able to suggest that not only were middle-class offenders literally less visible in society, but also that they enjoyed greater immunities. Literary critics were outraged by the frequent

¹ "The Archbishop of York on Works of Fiction," *The Times*, Nov. 2nd, (1864), p.9.

² E. E. Killett, *As I Remember*, (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1936), pp.232-233.

appearance of respectable murderers and murderesses.¹ The sensationalists complex portrayal of the family presented a rather confused and tarnished image of “the vestal temple” and “the sacred place”² called home.

The patriarchal establishment, of which literary criticism was an essential division, employed the press as a means of maintaining the social stability which the sensation novelists were seen as threatening. In the early Nineteenth Century, when literacy started to extend down the social scale, the “superior orders of society” campaigned through the press to insure that the lower classes would be induced to help “preserve the status quo of society in accepting the national life.”³ In the second half of the century, the emphasis seemed to shift from class to gender, and women were insistently advised to keep to their defined roles to guard the welfare of society.

Literature had often aided in the conspiracy of silence as to the representation of the reality of women’s lives and their roles. Tillie Olsen stated that “fanciful constructs” of the female character had obscured the limitation, oppression, and the sense of injustice experienced by actual women. “Worse, they have encouraged expectations and behaviour that only strengthen the real oppression.”⁴ Men seemed to hold women as literary as well as social property. The female image we often encounter in literature, whether by women or men, was, to a large degree, male-constructed; its “truthfulness” and “honesty” as defined by the critics, were derived from its adherence to contemporary ideologies about women. The attempt made by ideology to categorize women according to their acceptance or defiance of socially acceptable norms of behaviour was reinforced in much of the literature of the period. The sensation novel tried to depict women's struggle between the two poles within which their experience was ideologically confined. By introducing more complex modes of behaviour and a wide range of pressing

¹ See Mary S. Hartman, " 'Murder for Respectability' : The Case of Madeline Smith," *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 16, (1973), p.399.

² John Ruskin, *Of Queen's Gardens*. Quoted in Martha Vicinus, *Suffer and Be Still, Women in The Victorian Age*, (London: Methuen, 1980), p.126.

³ Richard Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800 - 1900*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), p.85.

⁴ Quoted by Tillie Olsen, *op.cit.*, p.180.

situations which faced women, the sensation novelists were able to reveal the inadequacy of the definitions of female experience which the social system imposed. Novels like *East Lynne*, *Lady Audley's Secret*, *Cometh Up As A Flower*, or *The Woman in White* suggested that not only did the polarization of women alienate them from the society which required their valuable services, but it also limited men's ability to understand the female mind, since those men were overloaded with society's preconceptions of women. The novels also closely related social definitions of women to their psychological make-up, addressing and examining the ways in which women internalized those definitions and the consequences of this internalization. Documentary evidence on Victorian women seems to reinforce the suggestions made in the sensation novel about the double lives women had to lead in order to conform to the accepted social images. Victorian women's fear of defying these images led many to live in silence, hiding their emotional tumult under a mask of female passivity. Pretence was often the mechanism by which the feelings of guilt, rebellion, and misery were hidden. A young girl dying of consumption wrote, confessing the secret of her double life:

There is completely a world within me, unknown, unexplored, by any but myself. I see well that my feelings, my qualities, my character, are understood by none else. I am not what I am supposed to be ... for I see the depths of sin within me, which are hidden from all other eyes.¹

The statement not only reveals the double life this girl was leading, but also the way she views herself as sinful, mainly due to her internalization of the social view that she should be transparently angelic. Such documents also reveal that women looked at marriage not as the ultimate goal of their lives, as literature and society frequently suggested, but as a vague world, the discovery of which might prove disappointing. Jane Welsh Carlyle, the wife of Thomas Carlyle, suffered loneliness and solitude in her marriage. Her husband believed that "the true destiny of a woman ... is to wed a man she can love... and to lead noiselessly under his protection, with all the wisdom, grace,

¹ Emily Shore, extract from her journal, (1839). Quoted by Erna Hellerstein, Leslie Parker Hume, and Karen M. Offen, *Victorian Women: A Documentary Account of Women's Lives in Nineteenth-Century England, France, and The United States*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1981), p.115.

and heroism that is in her, the life prescribed in consequence.”¹ Jane Carlyle betrays her own feelings about marital experience in a letter to one of her friends who was getting married:

Congratulations on such occasions seems [sic] to me a tempting of Providence. The triumphal-procession air which, in our manners and customs, is given to marriage at the outset _ ... has, ever since I could reflect, struck me as somewhat senseless and somewhat impious. If ever one is to pray - if ever one is to feel grave and anxious- ... surely it is just on the occasion of two human beings binding themselves to one another...just on that occasion which it is customary to celebrate only with rejoicings and congratulations,...and white ribbon! Good God!²

It was to the secret lives of women that the sensation novelists appealed. Although they did not avoid the stereotypes of femininity present in the ideology, the sensation novelists pushed them to the furthest extremes so that they were able to reveal their emptiness. One reason for the severe critical attacks the sensation novelists encountered was their introduction of the figure of a woman whose character seemed to have evolved from the secret struggles which, it was feared, were endemic in the lives of Victorian women. Mrs. Oliphant rightly suggested that it was *Jane Eyre* which had started the new openness in women's literature when the heroine made “what advanced critics called her “protests” against the conventionalities in which society clothes itself.”³ *Jane Eyre* paved the way for a new heroine with a new voice in English literature, by introducing female defiance and insisting on female sexuality as a determinant in the choices she made in her life. The sensation novel embraced the new model but went further to invent a heroine capable of acting out her emotions. In the sensation novel, Jane, “no longer runs away from the would-be bigamist; she is much more likely to dabble in a little bigamy of her own.”⁴ The introduction of the theme of madness in Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* and Wood's *St. Martin's Eve*, reveals the influence of

¹ Thomas Carlyle. Quoted in Janet Horowitz Murray, *Strong - Minded Women and Other Lost Voices from Nineteenth-Century England*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982), pp.111.

² Jane Welsh Carlyle (1859). Quoted in Janet Horowitz Murray, op. cit., pp.111-112.

³ Margaret Oliphant, "Novels," (No.II), p.258.

⁴ Winifred Hughes, op.cit., p.9.

Jane Eyre, and many of Rhoda Broughton's strong-minded heroines are what Jane herself might have been, had Charlotte Brontë lived twenty years later.

Both male and female sensationalists presented radical images of women. In *The Woman in White* there is a potentially controversial portrayal of female characters. By using two heroines, one the antithesis of the other, Collins explores the conventions of duality and underlines through the beauty of Laura's face and the physical attractiveness of Marian's body, the split between the conventional perception of female beauty and the actual workings of sexual instinct in the attitude of the Victorian male - presented through Walter Hartright - to female sexuality.¹ Hartright's spontaneous reaction to Marian's attractive figure is simultaneously checked when it collides with his preconceived notions of femininity which he later finds embodied in the passive beauty of Laura. Braddon introduces another striking concept of female sexuality in *Lady Audley's Secret* by entwining the image of feminine passivity with that of Lady Audley's willingness to use her sexual attractions to better her fortune. While Marian is relieved from her initial role as the chief defendant of her sister's rights by the intervention of Hartright, Lady Audley remains the sole active conspirator and defendant to the very end. As my study of these novels will reveal later, sensation novelists differed in the ways and extent to which they criticized contemporary conceptions of femininity.

The new active female protagonists violated social expectations of women. Braddon's heroines had "masculine attributes" and "strong will,"² exclaimed the critic in *The New Review*: "Woman standing alone: Woman carrying out some strong purpose without an ally or confidant, and thus showing herself independent of mankind and superior to those softer passions to which the sex in general succumbs."³ Sensation fiction presented the audience with active heroines, women not only rebelling against male authority, against husbands and fathers, and against the social ideologies which imprisoned them, but also often acting out their rebellion. The rebel sprang from within

¹ The point that Collins is challenging rather than endorsing traditional stereotypes in the novel will be discussed in detail in the following chapter.

² *The New Review*, "Miss Braddon," Vol. 8, (1863), p.565.

³ *Ibid.*, p.566.

the family; she was not an outcast, and thus her actions were particularly frightening to the critics because they suggested the deterioration of the fundamental social and moral unit in society. Some heroines like Lady Audley and Lady Isabel in Wood's *East Lynne* even violated the cult of motherhood: while the former abandons her child to seek social status, the latter forsakes her children to seek sexual fulfilment and escape a boring marriage.

The heroines of the sensation novel and particularly the female sensation novel, presented the reader with a special kind of "forbidden" knowledge: knowledge about female sexuality, through the specifically sexual overtones with which their speech overflowed. Sexuality was linked with the female's search for freedom and happiness. In Braddon's novels, sexual "irregularity" formed part of the social reality. In nearly every one of her plots, "there is a situation which would have normally arisen out of, or would normally develop into some sexual irregularity,"¹ Michael Sadleir suggests. Broughton's novels were also flooded with references to sexuality, and her *Cometh Up As A Flower* outraged the critics for this reason. The heroine, a married woman, remembers her dead lover in this way:

"My bonny, bonny sweetheart! how goodly you were then! Are you goodlier now, I wonder, in that distant *Somewhere* where you are; or when we meet next, shall we be two bodiless spirits, sexless, passionless essences, passing each other without recognition in the fields of ether? God forbid it should be so!"²

Passion is the essence of being alive. The heroine reveals her inability to survive without her feelings for her lover even after death, thus outraging religious sentiments. The new image was particularly unacceptable to the critics because these explicit violations of woman's "nature" were articulated by women authors. The way "woman's feelings are expressed from a woman's point of view, those speeches about shrinking bodies and sexless essences are disgusting,"³ protested Mrs. Oliphant. The secret dreams of women

¹ Michael Sadleir, *Things Past*, (London: Constable, 1944), p.79.

² Rhoda Broughton, *Cometh Up As A Flower*, (1867; London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1890), p.103.

³ Margaret Oliphant, "Novels," (No.11), p.267.

as presented in these novels were in severe contrast to the social expectations of the female:

What is held up to us as the story of the feminine soul as it really exists underneath its conventional coverings, is a very fleshy and unlovely record.... She [the heroine] waits now for flesh and muscles, for strong arms that seize her, and warm breath that thrills her through, and a host of other physical attractions, which she indicates to the world with a charming frankness.¹

The sensation novelists' radical representation of female sexuality questioned directly the social myths about women as guardians of morality whose purity held the nation together.

In the sensation novel, the irrational was exploited to account for women's passion. Although the writers could not fully dramatize the subconscious motivations their heroines displayed, they asserted that the sexual urge in women was the same as that in men. Mrs. Wood tells the reader of *East Lynne* that the principles of the heroine were sound and that her goodness should not be suspected, because her feeling towards her seducer was not voluntary. In *The Woman in White*, the strong-minded Marian hated Count Fosco, yet could not escape or explain her attraction towards him. The sensation novelists often blamed the heroine's inability to conform to morality on fate and thus lifted the blame of personal responsibility from these heroines. *The Christian Remembrancer* rejected what it termed "fatality" in the sensation novel. Adopting the view that women were sexless, the reviewer stated that the nature of Isabel's temptation was extraordinary: "and as for those fine distinctions between affection and love which some ladies are prone to refine upon, we count them among the most mischievous of sentimental speculations."² The image of a woman neither abused nor mistreated, but sexually frustrated and bored to death was far too radical for the reviewers' morally-imprisoned imaginations.

Their understanding of the social victimization of women led the sensationalists to portray female rebellion sympathetically. Against the rules of social morality, they

¹ Margaret Oliphant, "Novels," (No.11), p.259.

² "Our Female Sensation Novelists," *The Christian Remembrancer*, Vol.46, (1864), p.218. p.214.

protected and pitied the sinners. "Nothing can be more wrong and fatal," protested Mrs. Oliphant, "than to represent the flames of vice as a purifying fiery ordeal, through which the penitent is to come elevated and sublimed."¹ By explaining the conditions which led these women to rebel, the sensationalists were objecting to the sexual double standard. By evoking sympathy for the sinner, they were suggesting that a woman should not pay all her life for a single mistake. Female virtue, they also implied, should be separated from physical chastity. In *East Lynne*, the reader comes to realize that Isabel's purity extends beyond her sexual sin, and in *Aurora Floyd*, he or she concludes that Aurora's loveliness and goodness are the standards by which she should be judged as a human being. The sensation novelists not only exploded the ideological division between angels and demons, but also revealed that the Victorian ideological insistence on woman's purity was a means to keep her dependent on man and maintain the balance of male power which upheld the patriarchal social structure.

The sensation novels were not only socially but also religiously subversive in their suggestion that right and wrong were relative concepts, and in their dismissal of moral responsibility as an active agent in controlling people's lives. Women, in particular, could not be held morally responsible for their actions, the novels suggested, because they did not have the freedom of choice which was the essential component of moral responsibility. When self-determinism is rendered impossible by circumstance, the rules of right and wrong cease to function, and the judgement of good or evil also becomes uncertain. Arguing against the principle promoted by the sensationalists about separating the intention from the deed, Rev. Francis Paget solemnly declared that "in spite of the whole race of sensationalists, ... what we are, our own conduct makes us; and ... the beds on which we lie, are, with few exceptions, these which we have made for ourselves."² The outrage of the religious authorities echoed their objections to Darwin, and later to Freud who suggested that "passionate instincts are as human as they are bestial, and that such subconscious drives, without of necessity being morally

¹ Margaret Oliphant, "Sensation Novels," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, Vol. 91, (1862), p.567.

² Francis E. Paget, *op.cit.*, p.310.

reprehensible, could triumph over reason...even in the best families.”¹ If this was true, how could the Victorians, without an essential belief in the power of reason which could direct action, assume that they were able to earn “a celestial after-life as a reward for an existence in which, at least publically, reason had dominated instinct?”²

The panic of the moral guardians at the threat the sensation novel presented to society was reflected in their warnings against the predicted social collapse of which these novels were thought to be both the cause and the effect. “The existence of ... a silly crop of novels,” claimed H. L. Mansel, and “the fact that they are eagerly read, are by no means favourable symptoms of the conditions of the body of society.”³ *The Christian Remembrancer* went further to detect a social revolution in the popularity of the sensation novel:

The sensation novel of our time, however extravagant and unnatural, yet is a sign of the times - the evidence of a certain turn of thought and action, of an impatience of old restraints, and a craving for some fundamental change in the working of society.⁴

One of the signs of impatience with restraints was the rise of the movement for women's rights, and though none of the sensation novelists showed explicit support for the movement, the critics insisted on aligning them with its outcries for change. The novelty of the sensationalists' depiction of the female character was immediately linked with the “effort of the female sex to take up a stronger position than they have hitherto.”⁵ Most of the literary figures who objected to sensation fiction were also against the movement for women's rights. Mrs. Oliphant was “disgusted” with the whole issue: “Women's rights and women's duties have had enough discussion, perhaps even from the ridiculous point of view.”⁶ The sensationalists' representation of female rebellion

¹ Thomas F. Boyle, “‘Fishy Extremities’: Subversion of Orthodoxy in the Victorian Sensation Novel,” *Literature and History*, Vol.9, 1983, p.95-96.

² *Ibid.*, p.96.

³ H. L. Mansel, *op.cit.*, p.512.

⁴ *The Christian Remembrancer*, *op.cit.*, p.210.

⁵ *The New Review*, *op.cit.*, pp.565-6.

⁶ Margaret Oliphant, “Novels,” (No.11), p.275.

against the patriarchal system not only disturbed the critical establishment which upheld dominant ideological notions of order, but was also seen to pose a threat to social stability itself.

The Appeal of The Sensation Novel

One of the distinguishing characteristics of the sensation novel was its popularity. Some sensation writers were more famous than the "accepted" writers of the age. E. A. Bennett confirmed that "there are thousands of people who have never heard of Meredith, Hardy, Ibsen, ... but you could travel far before you reached the zone where the name of Braddon failed of its recognition."¹ The female sensation novelists were actually more popular than their male counterparts. Some of the most privileged literary figures admired Braddon's novels. Tennyson revealed his fondness for her books: "I am reading every word she ever wrote," and R. D. Blackmore admitted that he much preferred "Miss Braddon's golden-haired homicides to Gwendolen Harleth."² Even the male sensationalists acknowledged the popularity of their female colleagues. In publishing *A Woman Hater*, Charles Reade complained: "the small circulating libraries are dead against me. They will only take in ladies' novels. Mrs. Henry Wood, Ouida, Miss Braddon - there are their gods."³ Mortimer Collins also protested against the public's favourite heroine, "the silly girl ... who cometh up as a flower or throweth her husband down a well."⁴ The real triumph for the female sensationalists lay in the fact that despite being ridiculed and undermined, they were yet widely read, especially by women.

¹ E. A. Bennett, *op.cit.*, pp.24-25. Margaret Oliphant grudgingly declared that even a new representation of Shakespeare's plays could not stand in competition with the sensation novel; see Margaret Oliphant, "Sensation Novels," p.565.

² Quoted by R. C. Terry, *Victorian Popular Fiction 1860 - 1880*, (London: Macmillan, 1983), p.4.

³ Malcolm Elwin, *Victorian Wallflowers*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1934), p.282.

⁴ Quoted in Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.173.

The class thus presented does not disown the picture - ... on the contrary, it hangs it up on in the boudoir and drawingroom ... it seems to be accepted by the audience of the circulating library as something like the truth Is, then, the picture true?¹

Sensation fiction spoke frankly about experiences usually kept hidden by the female audience. The picture might not have been exactly true, as Mrs. Oliphant feared, but it seemed to appeal powerfully to the consumers of female sensation fiction. Victorian documents about crime and criminal women revealed that women, presumed so angelic and passive, were fascinated with crime. Mary S. Hartman states that in the case of Madeline Smith, a girl who poisoned her lover to secure a respectable marriage, these women were reported "as able to talk of nothing else; and they showed up in droves outside the courtroom, The press frequently noted their presence, and just as frequently complained of the unseemly interest of proper women in the sordid details of the case."² But, the letters of support Madeline received from women during her trial revealed the deep sympathy they had for her, a sympathy which could only be attained through shared (albeit vicarious) experience. Whether these women were finding a vicarious outlet for their own frustrations which the murderess had acted out, or whether they were only finding an absorbing subject to pass the time, was not reported.

The sensation novel possibly appealed to female readers in the same way the trial of Madeline Smith did, enabling them to express a wide range of suppressed emotions and to satisfy fantasies of protest and escape. In order to understand the ways in which the female readers responded to the element of fantasy within sensation fiction, it is first necessary to define the frame within which fantasy was introduced in the novels. Addressing a rather conventional audience, and keeping a vigilant eye on the approval of the circulating library, the sensation novelists introduced fantasy through a heavy reliance on both incident and melodrama, ^{constituents} which appealed to the powerless.³ As

¹ Margaret Oliphant, "Novels," (No.11), p.259.

² Mary S. Hartman, "Murder For Respectability," p.399.

³ Martha Vicinus, " "Helpless and Unfriended" : Nineteenth-Century Domestic Melodrama," *New Literary History*, Vol.13,(1981), p.130.

Martha Vicinus suggests, "Melodrama's focus on the passive and powerless within the family made it particularly appealing to the working class and women, two groups facing great dangers without economic power or social recognition."¹ Similarly, novels of incident and coincidence, states Sally Mitchell, are particularly appealing to the aforementioned groups who are aware "(consciously or unconsciously) how little they can influence the social and economic system or, indeed, the events of their own lives."² Both *Lady Audley's Secret* and *East Lynne* are highly melodramatic. In the latter, Isabel stands helpless before the law of entail and her dependant economic condition leads her to the traumatic experience of a loveless marriage. In the former, the story reveals the desperate solutions to which a woman might resort in order to establish social security. Because melodrama speaks about recurrent emotional tensions in women's lives, rebellion and self-sacrifice feature as its main themes. Through feeling sympathy and admiration for the heroine, the reader experiences a process of participation, even unconscious identification, with her.

The sensationalists were aware of the misery engulfing women's lives, and of the desperate remedies many women took to solve their problems. The economic, legal and social position of subordination was similar for all women whatever their class, and fantasies of pure escape, like that of Isabel, were likely to have appealed to those readers in one way or another. Mrs. Wood is aware of the possibility of identification with the heroine but pretends to ignore it by articulating this awareness in the form of a warning to ladies not to follow Isabel's example.

Lady - wife - mother! should you ever be tempted to abandon your home, so will you awaken! Whatever trials may be the lot of your married life, though they magnify themselves to your crushed spirit as beyond the endurance of woman to bear, *resolve* to bear them: fall down upon your knees and pray to be enabled to bear them; pray for patience: pray for strength.³

¹ Martha Vicinus, "Helpless and Unfriended," p.131.

² Sally Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel*, p.164.

³ Mrs. Henry Wood, *East Lynne*, (1861; Dent: London and Melbourne: Everyman's Library, 1984), p. 289.

The opposite face of this strictly moral lesson is the acknowledgement that many a woman's life is like that of Isabel, miserable, confused and productive of rebellion.

The moral guardians of patriarchal authority were convinced of the subversive influence of the sensation fantasies on readers. Fear of the reader's identification with the fantastic world, and of her consequent rebellion, was clear in the writing of the period. In *Lucretia*, Rev. Francis Paget told the story of a young girl who loved sensation novels, identified with their heroines, and acted accordingly. Her favourite was *Aurora Floyd*, and like Aurora, she fell in love with a cowman but woke up, nearly destroyed by her adventures, to realize that when the sensational occurred in life, it was never beautiful or romantic.

The danger of indulging in the romantic world of these novels, the contemporary critics thought, lay in the state of the reader when she returned to the world of reality and compared it with that of the novel. Rebellion could result because of ensuing dissatisfaction with the real world. The reader, presented with an image of love such as that Mellish which had for Aurora, is offered a picture of a woman who, in spite of her shortcomings, had a man who loved her for herself; not for her purity, passivity or sweetness. Critics believed that when the reader opened her eyes to reality, and found that her man was a tyrant before whom she had to stifle her feelings, rather than a loving husband, the sharp contrast between the romantic and the real world would cause her to rebel. *The Christian Remembrancer* stated that identification with the rebellious heroine opened up to young readers a "picture of life free from all the perhaps irksome checks that confine their own existence, and treat all such checks as real hindrances,...to the development of power, feeling and the whole array of fascinating and attractive qualities."¹ The critics' fear of the reader's rebellion implicitly acknowledged that they accepted that her actual world was by no means pleasant or happy. If women could be so easily provoked to rebel it must be because they felt that the "checking" had gone so far as to suffocate them.

Identification with the rebellious heroine does not necessarily give rise to social

¹ *The Christian Remembrancer*, op.cit., p.212.

rebellion, as studies of popular fiction and its relation to society sometimes suggest.¹ Fantasy is not always subversive: it might rather provide a useful outlet for frustrations which cannot be resolved into action, as in the case of the women's absorption in the trial of Madeline Smith. Sally Mitchell suggests that popular fiction fulfils the same role as day dreaming for the reader. It provides "expression, release, or simply indulgence of emotions or needs which are not otherwise satisfied, either because of psychological inhibition or because of the social context." These fantasies are not necessarily sexual; the dreams may give vent to "egotism, desire for domination, for power, for violence"² and other outlets which are socially disapproved. Furthermore, modern studies of romance reveal that although women admit that they read romantic fiction to escape from their duties, "to do something *different* from their daily routine"³ and to find an emotional outlet for the tensions of everyday life, they normally dismiss the suggestion that it encourages them to rebel against their roles as mothers and daughters. They use the word escape not only to describe the act of reading itself, but also the "sense of relief they experience by identifying with a heroine whose life does not resemble their own in certain crucial aspects."⁴

The romance presented by the sensation novel was often checked by the tragic ending of most stories dealing with rebellion, a mechanism that was likely to lead to the diffusion of emotion rather than to its accumulation into action. Tania Modleski finds similarities between sensation fiction and soap operas in the way both forms sustain the reader's/spectator's suspense. Yet, soap operas do not give the spectator even the temporary satisfaction of nurturing rebellious feelings when they identify with the rebellious heroine, suggests Modleski. The reason is that the villainess's attempt to "turn her powerlessness to her own advantage are always thwarted just when victory seems

1 In *The Fallen Angel*, Sally Mitchell concludes that at its best, identification with the heroine suggests an impulse for change and rethinking of woman's position in society; p.168.

2 Sally Mitchell, "Sentiment and Suffering", p.32.

3 Janice A. Radway, *Reading The Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984), p.88.

4 *Ibid.*, p.90.

most assured.”¹ Although sensation fiction differs remarkably from soap operas in the sense that it does at least allow a temporary identification with the rebellious heroine, the two forms both create a feeling of unease as a result of the attempt to identify with those heroines. Modleski suggests that in soaps, the spectator does not comfortably identify with the villainess because she “despises the villainess as the negative image of her ideal self, she not only watches the villainess act out her own hidden wishes, but simultaneously sides with the forces conspiring against fulfilment of those wishes.”²

The female readers of sensation fiction quite possibly responded in the same manner. In fact, this divided nature of the reader's response, characterized by the reader's rejection of the heroine's behaviour on grounds of its unacceptability while she still nonetheless identifies with the heroine and even justifies her behaviour, corresponds to the divided narrative of sensation fiction narrative. While the narrators repeatedly, and often emphatically, condemn the acts of their heroines, they reveal throughout the novels that these acts were often justified. Modleski states that, as a result of the inability to completely identify with the heroine, the spectator in soaps enjoys the repetition for its own sake and takes pleasure “in the building up and tearing down of the plot.” This task, Modleski suggests, helps reconcile woman “to the meaningless, repetitive nature of much of her life and work within the home.”³ In her study of fantasy, Rosemary Jackson also confirms that fantasies are not necessarily countercultural because the more thematic transgression of taboo subjects frequently serves to “re-confirm institutional order by supplying a vicarious fulfilment of desire and neutralizing an urge towards transgression.”⁴

The sensation novels might not motivate female action, but they put into literary form female longing and desires, and the reader's continuous consumption of these books might have acted as a ritual after which the reader, “purified from her sins,” could

1 Tania Modleski, *Loving With A Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women*, (London and New York: Methuen, 1984), first ed., (1982), p.97.

2 *Ibid.*, p.97.

3 *Ibid.*, p.97.

4 Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, (London and New York: Methuen, 1981), p.72.

come out more at ease with her situation. The critics did mention the addictive influence of sensation fiction but never attempted to analyse the causes of this narcotic characteristic. *Fraser's Magazine* asserted that "once begun," these novels "cannot be laid aside; the reader is compelled to go on to the end, whether he likes it or not."¹ The use of he for the reader is particularly interesting here, especially since the concern of the critics was for the identification of the female reader with the rebellious heroine. In her attempt to explain this addictive quality of formula literature, Tania Modleski uses the Freudian concept that "art derives from some persistently disturbing psychic conflict, which, failing of resolution in life, seeks it in the symbolic form of fantasy."² Formula literature acts like certain tranquillizers which have a temporary effect after which they become anxiety producing, suggests Modleski. The patient responds by increasing the dosage to relieve the problem aggravated by the drug itself.³

The sensationalists were writing in one of the most rigid periods in the Nineteenth Century when the patriarchal culture was fiercely trying to sustain its power against currents of social change. The pressure of the age's ideologies on the sensation novel is clear in the genre's conformist endings. The heroines rebelled, transcended, only to fall back, almost always at the moment of self-fulfilment, and their rebellion seldom achieves positive consequences. Because of their strict standards of what was permissible in a novel, the circulating libraries restrained the novelists' artistic freedom. Mudie was often described as "the author of modern English fiction"⁴ because he interfered with the minutest details in the novels he published. Economic need often pushed those writers into conforming to Mudie's prescriptions. Most of the writers were writing for money, and their success depended on satisfying the circulating libraries rather than fulfilling their artistic ambition. They had also to think about their readers and the combinations they preferred. Braddon explains how the mode imposed upon her

1 "Popular Novels of The Year," *Fraser's Magazine*, Vol. 68, (1863), p.257.

2 John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance*, quoted in Modleski, op. cit., p.57.

3 Tania Modleski, op.cit., p.57.

4 George Moore, *Literature at Nurse, or Circulating Morals: A Polemic on Victorian Censorship*, ed. Pierre Coustillas, (1885; Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1976), p.20.

writing restricted her literary ambitions: "I've set my heart upon writing a story with a dash of the supernatural in it, but I shall attempt no high flight ... I've always to remember the interests of the Circulating Library, and the young lady readers who are its chief supporters."¹ The novelists had to reproduce, in some measure, the accepted paradigms of character and incident because the circulating libraries both created and imposed on its borrowers a desire for this mixture.

The sensation novel reflects the period of tension and anxiety in which it appeared. It gained popularity at a time when ideas of reform were being readdressed and reconstructed. Mill had just published his *Subjection of Women* in which he argued for women's right to vote and for a revision of society's notions about female education. Harriet Taylor Mill had further argued in *The Enfranchisement of Women* that women's subordinate positions were maintained by the society for the convenience of men. Women had already started to give voice to their sentiments in journals like the *Women's Review* which became the battleground for women reformers. In such journals, radical women like Barbara Bodichon and Harriet Martineau were able to present their own version of women's position in the family, in education, and in the state.² While the patriarchal authorities were using morality to reject the "new" and "unfamiliar," which threatened to dislodge its power, the sensationalists were holding up to society a frightening discovery, "the skeleton of an England which prided itself on its respectability and "moral progress".³ The worm had reached the bud, they asserted, and the falsity of respectable appearances could no longer be hidden.

Although potentially subversive, sensation fiction was written with both an eye to wide readership and awareness of the hostility of the critics. This contradictory purpose is

¹ Robert Lee Wolff, "Devoted Disciple," p.32.

² Elaine Showalter argues that the openness of the sensation fiction is due to the take-over by women of the literary profession. For further detail, see Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p. 155. Jonathan Loesberg further connects sensation literature with the debate on class reform which prevailed in the end of the 1850s and through the 1860. Loesberg argues that the very structure of the novels, as well as the structure of the critical discussion of them, "are manifestations of the same ideological responses that formed the structure of the Victorian discussions of parliamentary reform in the late 1850s and 1860s." For further details, see Jonathan Loesberg, "The Ideology of Narrative Form in Sensation Fiction," *Representations*, Vol.13, (1986), p.116.

³ Thomas F. Boyle, op.cit., p.93.

reflected in the novels' over arching conventional form which often prevented them from fully developing the taboo subjects they initially introduced while at the same time allowing them subtly to imply their criticism of society and ideology within this conventional frame. For this reason, a modern study of sensation fiction must focus on the discrepancy between the overt and the covert levels of narrative. Only then, might it be possible to discover many of the still hidden secrets of the sensation novel.

CHAPTER II

Medical Ideology and Narrative Form

“In strictness, we are all mad when we give way to passions, to prejudice, to vice, to vanity; but if all the passionate, prejudiced, vicious and vain people in this world are to be locked up as lunatics, who is to keep the key of the asylum?”

The Times, (1853).¹

Sensation fiction owed its popularity, in part, to the ways in which it addressed contemporary issues, in particular those related to the operations of gender. Despite the Victorian critics' dismissal of them as entertainers writing “light” literature, the sensation novelists were, as their novels suggest, seriously interested in examining the implications and consequences of the dominant social and psychological ideologies of the period. The sensation novel linked its characters directly to sets of social and economic conditions which corresponded to those of contemporary society, and closely examined the influence exerted by these conditions in determining their psychology. The economic, social, and psychological ideology of self-control is set against the factual conditions of the characters' lives to reveal its inadequacy. The psychological problems which the novels explore, in both their form and depiction of character, raise serious questions about the age's dominant model of the psyche. Should the loss of self-control occur so quickly and so easily in a society which prides itself on its stability? Do any individuals actually enjoy the much vaunted supremacy of will and freedom of action of contemporary ideology? These questions and their implied answers in the sensation fiction of the period will be explored in order to reveal the extent to which sensation fiction was able to question the medical ideologies of the period.

Critical studies of psychiatric thought have revealed that theories of insanity,

¹ Quoted in Vieda Skultans, *Madness and Morals: Ideas on Insanity in The Nineteenth Century*, (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), p.172.

whether claiming scientific status or not, are usually grounded in the social and moral assumptions of the era. Whether in the theories of moral management which prevailed in the first half of the Nineteenth Century and relied on prescriptive social definitions of behaviour to identify insanity, or in the later allegedly more scientific theories which adopted Darwinism to explain behavioural status in the 1860s, the mental state of the individual was measured against a set of accepted and expected social values of the era. Both theories, though different in their definition of the source of mental malady, aligned mental disorder with “abnormal thoughts, feelings, and action.”¹ Scientific judgements were as value-laden as social ones, a fact which explains the psychiatrists' inability to separate immorality from insanity, either in their definitions or in their treatment of insanity. Socially and mentally, individuals were assessed according to their deviation from, or conformity to, the norms of behaviour assigned by society. In the Nineteenth Century, ideological assumptions about the individual's relation to society, about gender differences, and class distinction, figure in the medical literature about insanity and in the methods of treatment proposed. Psychiatric literature reveals that by taking certain types of behaviour for granted and describing them as “facts of nature”² mental scientists seem to have imposed a severe model of behaviour to accord with what they identified as “natural.”

It is possible to trace, over the last two centuries, a direct correlation between economic theories and conditions and theories of insanity. In Eighteenth-Century pre-industrial England, before the rise of organicist theories of collectivity, insanity was still a matter which primarily concerned the individuals and their immediate families. The deranged were not treated as a separate category and were still allowed, in many cases, to live in the community, although incarceration was still preserved for those unfortunates without a supportive family network. The industrial upheaval in the Nineteenth Century, and the rise of urbanization which accompanied it, produced “a social order whose very

¹ Stephen J. Morse, “Crazy Behaviour, Morals, And Science: An Analysis of Mental Health Law,” *Southern California Law Review*, Vol. 51, No.4, May (1978), p.543.

² Roger Smith, *Trial By Medicine: Insanity and Responsibility in Victorian Trials*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981), p.32.

complexity forced the adoption of some form of institutional response.”¹ The creation of insecure conditions of employment made families “no longer capable of sustaining a non-productive member.”² Institutions were now deemed necessary to get rid of those who potentially threatened the social order. The entire social organization of insanity was now built on “market principles,”³ Andrew Scull suggests.

Ideologies presented through the economic theories in the Nineteenth Century seemed to be inseparable from psychological thought. Since the early Nineteenth Century, psychiatrists identified insanity with the loss of the will. Asserting man's power over himself to control or even prevent insanity, John Barlow (1843), stated that it was not the affection of the brain which caused “delusions, ... *but the want of power or resolution to examine them.*”⁴ In Barlow's medical treatise on insanity, the mental well-being of the individual rested on the cultivation of self-control through the will and adherence to social morality. Barlow stressed the importance of guarding the moral force:

He who has given a proper direction to the intellectual force, and thus obtained an early command over the bodily organ by habituating it to processes of calm reasoning, remains sane amid all the vagaries of sense; while he who has been the slave, rather than the master of his animal nature, listens to its dictates without question even when distorted by disease, ... is mad.⁵

Barlow believed that even the morbid affection of the brain could not render the individual totally irresponsible and that, whatever the disease, it should leave the individual capable of “knowing right and wrong.”⁶

Succumbing to one's animal nature was deemed in the early part of the Victorian age, the most threatening danger to the individual's psychological state since it indicated

¹ Andrew Scull, *Museums of Madness: The Social Organization of Insanity in Nineteenth-Century England*, (London: Alen Lane, 1979), p.14.

² *Ibid.*, p.26.

³ *Ibid.*, p.30.

⁴ John Barlow, *On Man's Power Over Himself To Prevent Or Control Insanity*, (London: William Pickering, 1843), p.12.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.12-13.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.23.

the loss of the will and foretold illness. Sanity and morality meant one and the same thing, and only with their cooperation could the individual be integrated within society. In 1835, James Cowles Prichard introduced the term “moral insanity” which he defined as “a morbid perversion of the feelings, affections, and active powers, without any illusion or erroneous conviction impressed upon the understanding.”¹ The psychological pressure exerted on individuals by these theories of mental health was tremendous. Men had always to guard the outward image of self-control, to suppress emotional outbursts, and follow a course of moderation in physical as well as mental health. George Man Burrows warned that “every passion in excess, may become a moral cause of insanity.”² Women were doubly the target of ideologies of self-control. Deemed to be passive and restrained by nature, they were also regarded as having less will to exert to control themselves, should passions disrupt the tranquil surface of their nature. Indulgence or excess of any emotion or pleasure could lead to expulsion from society on the grounds of mental disorder.

Paradoxically, insanity was identified in the early Nineteenth Century both with the loss of will and with its excessive imposition; too fierce a control could lead to a shattering of the entire mental framework. Both conditions were detected through the individual's inability to conform to the socially accepted norms of behaviour. The method of treating insanity between the 1830s and 1850s depended on the moral management of the patient, a method which actually implied the restructuring of the individual's psychology in a manner which would transform the will into an agent of social convention; for, despite ideological claims, strong exertion of the will was regarded as threatening. By defining insanity as a disease of the will, advocates of moral management proposed a cultural cure for what they believed they had scientifically identified as an illness. Discarding the eighteenth-century methods of external restraint and control, the moral managers actively applied their methods “to *transform* the lunatic,

¹ *A Treatise on Insanity and other disorders affecting the mind*, (London:1835). Quoted in Richard Hunter and Ida Macalpine, *Three Hundred Years of Psychiatry, 1535-1860*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p.83.

² *Commentaries on Insanity*, (London:1828). Quoted in Vieda Skultans, *Madness and Morals: Ideas on Insanity 1580-1890*, (London & Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), p.63.

to remodel him into something approximating the bourgeois ideal of the rational individual.”¹ The treatment included the reinforcement of middle-class morality, and permitting the release of acceptable sentiments.

The new economic theories were in direct correlation with the psychological theories about the importance of the will. In 1859, Samuel Smiles encapsulated contemporary economic and psychological ideology in his exceedingly popular work, *Self-Help*, producing a rhetoric which was clearly a product of the optimism created by industrial progress. While paying lip service to organicist theories of the social whole, Smiles' theory was extremely individualistic. Both the creation and maintenance of the health of society were laid at the door of the individual who was endowed with the supreme power to control, by sheer effort of will, both his own destiny and that of the world in which he lived. Smiles argued that economic and, therefore, social progress could only be achieved through the cultivation of healthy habits of self-control in the individual. As an integrated whole, society would inevitably suffer from illness or corruption in its component parts.

“National progress,” confirmed Smiles, “is the sum of individual industry, energy, and uprightness, as national decay is of individual idleness, selfishness, and vice.”² The individual could be successful, he believed, only when he was prepared to abide by the requisite duties required by the community. He could only take his post as a responsible individual by cultivating the habits of “action, conduct, self-culture, self-control.”³ By sheer force of the will, Smiles asserted, man could develop both himself and his society. He emphasized that the will had to be controlled and preserved as “the very central power of character.” “It is *will*, - force of purpose,” Smiles advocated, “that enables a man to do or be whatever he sets his mind on being or doing.”⁴

Smiles' theory of economic progress was based on the organic principle of the

¹ Andrew Scull, *Madhouses, Mad-Doctors, and Madmen; The Social History of Psychiatry in the Victorian Era*, (London: The Athlone Press, 1981), p.111.

² Samuel Smiles, *Self-Help; With Illustrations of Character And Conduct*, (1859; London: John Murray, 1860), p.2.

³ *Ibid.*, p.6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.154.

conservation of energy. He identified energy with the moral force, whose conservation in the individual, he believed, was the secret to social progress. The conservation of the energy of the whole could be achieved, suggested Smiles, by safeguarding the moral force of the individual. Man could not achieve self-help, he stated, without having "Self-respect"¹ and the individual could not be free "who is the thrall of his moral ignorance, selfishness, and vice."² Moral force, he emphasized, was the crucial founding element for the improvement of the nation through the self-improvement of the individual.

Smiles' economic doctrine of self-help crystallized the ideologies which had underpinned the rise of industrial England. As a product of this newly-achieved industrial prosperity, the rising middle-class exerted control over both the economy and society and, in effect, began to impose its ideologies on the social and medical theories of the age. The cultural model of the successful individual proposed by economic theory was swiftly adopted by the psychiatrists as a standard for judging individual behaviour. The absence in the individual of self-control or self-respect was taken by the psychiatrists to indicate a disuse or misuse of the will, a symptom which the doctors seemed to classify as an indication of an impaired brain. The ideology's insistence on self-control highlighted the implicit fear that loss of control was eminent.

The defining elements of sanity which sufficed in the period of economic progress had to be changed when economic problems and social uncertainties began to trouble the stability of Victorian society. By the end of the 1860s, economic pessimism influenced the adoption of more pessimistic psychological theories. Smiles' individualistic model was exchanged for the new scientific theories of the period. According to the theories of heredity adopted by the Darwinists, men were helpless before insanity which they could no longer control through the will, and consequently they were no longer deemed to be responsible for their mental stability. The Darwinian theory, as interpreted by the social Darwinists, offered a biological explanation for the formation of the social structure. The Darwinians asserted that the existing social

1 Samuel Smiles, *op. cit.*, p.260.

2 *Ibid.*, p.3.

relations were biologically inevitable. Organization replaced the word “will” in the Darwinists' principles for explaining illness. Henry Maudsley, the champion of Darwinian psychiatry, stressed that “No one can resolve successfully by a mere effort of will to think in a certain way, or to feel in a certain way, or even, which is easier, to act always in accordance with certain rules.”¹ The overt statement may suggest a completely new trend in the study and treatment of mental illness, but at its heart, the alienists' argument championed all the principles of the moral theory of insanity.

The crucial difference between theories of moral management and those proposed by the Darwinists was that, in the scientific theory, the individuals were no longer able to change their conditions whatever effort they might make. What the Darwinists did was to shift the emphasis from the will to organization, but the signs by which they identified insanity remained virtually unchanged. Sanity was still identified with adherence to moral behaviour, and the acclaimed scientific theories were as value-laden as the earlier theories of moral management. Healthy moral behaviour was held to be indicative of a healthy organization and moral deviance was deemed to reveal a strong evidence of organic degeneration. Emphasizing that “hereditary organic taint compounded by vicious habits caused madness,”² the Darwinists stressed the importance of the moral force in determining the individual's state of mind. Classifying it as the last faculty acquired in human evolution, Maudsley suggests that the moral force “is the first to suffer when disease invades the mental organization.”³ He goes further to assert that

Good moral feeling is to be looked upon as an essential part of a sound and rightly developed character in the present state of human evolution Whosoever is destitute of it is to that extent a defective being; . . . one way in which insanity is generated . . . is through the deterioration of nature which is shown in the absence of moral sense Any course of life then which persistently ignores the altruistic relations of an individual as a social unit, which is in truth a systematic negation of the moral law of human

¹ *Responsibility in Mental Disease*, (London: 1874). Quoted in Vieda Skultans, *Madness and Morals*, p.212.

² Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture*, (New York: Random House, 1985), p.104.

³ [Unknown source], (1873). Quoted in Vieda Skultans, *Madness and Morals*, p.7.

progress, deteriorates his higher nature, and so initiates a degeneracy which may issue in actual mental derangement in his posterity.¹

The Darwinists argued that the individual's inherited make-up determined his actions. Yet, the only evidence they could produce of hereditary insanity was the extent of the individual's deviance from social morality. As in the theories of moral management, the Darwinists' theories again linked the membership of the individual in the society, or his expulsion from it, with his moral behaviour.

The Darwinists' claim to scientific knowledge of mental illness enabled them to presume a "new social authority as experts on the laws of heredity and the operations of the mind."² Their analysis of the health of individuals, families and nations, extended their influence beyond the asylum. Their insistence on their ability to detect latent insanity strengthened their position as social figures, and they believed that their theories strengthened the moral order. By dismissing nonconformist behaviour as a sign of degeneracy and confining people in the asylum as a result, the Darwinists aimed to rid society of potential sources of disruption. Confirming that "The inducement to self-control must not be weakened and society must be protected,"³ Maudsley suggested that the verdict of insanity is more efficient than a prison sentence because it entailed a lifetime imprisonment and thus put disruptive individuals away forever.

In constructing their scientific evidence of hereditary insanity in an individual, the psychiatric Darwinists were inevitably imposing their personal views and judgements, especially in borderline cases where the only evidence on crossing the boundaries of sanity was drawn from the highly relativistic sphere of social judgement: how far an individual's behaviour conformed to social values. Alienists identified the borderland as that shadowy territory between sanity and madness which sheltered "latent brain disease" and "the seeds of nervous disorders."⁴ Detection of borderline cases occurred through the

¹ Henry Maudsley, *The Pathology of Mind*, (London: 1879). Quoted in Vieda Skultans, *Madness and Morals*, p.197.

² Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady*, p.105.

³ Roger Smith, op.cit., p.31.

⁴ Andrew Wynter, *The Borderlands of Insanity*, (London: 1877). Quoted in Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady*, p.105

individual's moral behaviour which, when at variance with social norms, was seen to indicate serious mental derangement: "On this terrain lurked ... many persons who, without being insane, exhibit peculiarities of thought, feeling, and character which render them unlike ordinary beings."¹ The surrendering of the individual to emotions deemed unacceptable by society could be judged as a sign indicating a deranged mind, states Daniel Hack Tuke; "either because of hereditary taint or diseased cerebral development, ... some individuals could not control their lower nature and emotions,"² and therefore cross the borderland into madness. Weakness of the will is no longer the cause of insanity, but morality is still its indicator.

Formed and informed by the hierarchal principles of middle-class ideology, medical literature about insanity in the Nineteenth Century imposed a great pressure on individuals throughout the social strata; the anxieties provoked were not constricted to one class, gender, or definably insane sub-group. For men, rigid rules of self-control, chastity, and self-determinism were advocated and any excess could result in expulsion from the society. Yet, as these theories were an extension to the gender-based patriarchal principles, it was women who suffered most under their implications. Due to the constricting emotional roles and the severe biological determinism which these theories ascribed to them, women were classified as the group most prone to both physical and mental illness. It might be an exaggeration to suggest that medical men were intentionally conspiring to incarcerate women, but it is certainly true that psychiatric theories actually created a series of illnesses to which women were deemed to be exclusively prone. Writing in 1869, Anne Mozley rightly suggested that the idea of female's vulnerability to nervous illness was a creation of man's imagination - a portrait of how men liked "the feminine ideal"³ to be. She stressed that men encouraged the display of fear, nervousness, and weakness in women so that men's courage could be appealed to and

¹ Andrew Wynter, *The Borderlands of Insanity*, (1877). Quoted in Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady*, p.105.

² Daniel Hack Tuke, *Prichard and Symonds in Especial Relations to Mental Science, with Chapters on Moral Science*, (1894). Quoted in Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady*, p.106.

³ Anne Mozley, "Vapours, Fears and Tremors," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, Vol.105, February (1869), p.229.

they could consequently distinguish themselves as creatures of self-control.

In both the literatures of moral management and the Darwinists' arguments, men are granted more control than women. The rhetoric of moral management, of self-control, and the social position assigned to women as guardians of morality conflicted with contemporary theories of the female body. While woman was exhorted to maintain self-control, she was also told that, biologically, she was unable to do so. The cause of her moral strength, her biological role as a mother, was given by the medical theories as the cause of her liability to illness. The doctors attached to this biological role a host of social functions which ideology had aligned with femaleness, and termed the combination "nature," a word which included all the male's expectations of women. Nervousness was identified as a sign of female nature which was encouraged by the society, Ann Mozley suggested. Different expectations related to gender were clearly revealed in the different reactions to the manifestation of nervous excitement which was looked upon with pity in women and frowned upon as a sign of weakness in men. The assumption that women were more prone to mental disorder than men was associated with the sexual double standard, for men had an investment in women being dependant, child-like, frail, and consequently, more affected by illness.¹

The problem with the Victorian theories of the female mind was that the doctors' definition of illness, like their definition of femaleness, was culturally informed, and consequently, their definition of female illness or health merely reinforced woman's existing position. The doctors, even those who recognized society's influence on the formation of the female's psychology, built their formulation of the female psyche on the ideological assumptions which position woman as an emotional, and explosive being. Though he acknowledged the role of society in suppressing women's passions, Robert Brudnell Carter projected women as emotionally volatile creatures.

If the relative power of emotion against the sexes be compared in the present day, even without including the erotic passion, it is seen to be considerably greater in the woman than in the man, partly from that natural conformation which causes the former to

¹ Anne Mozley, "Vapours, Fears and Tremors," p.230

feel, under circumstances where the latter thinks;¹

The doctors seemed to account for their inability to comprehend the female's reproductive system and its changing cycles by classifying them as sexual irregularities responsible for female illnesses. John Haslam, apothecary of Bethlem, stressed that insanity in women "is often connected with the peculiarities of their sex."² Her womb, the seat of the woman's spiritual elevation as a mother, was also the seat of her "irregularity." The pre-Darwinians attributed female disorders to "those various vapours which came from menstous blood."³ The doctors also believed that woman's actions and thoughts were controlled by her reproductive system. Dr. Millingen stressed that woman is "less under the influence of the brain than the uterine system, the plexi of abdominal nerves, and irritation of the spinal cord;"⁴ After identifying woman as completely under the control of her reproductive system, the doctors were easily able to transform what they first identified as a biological condition into a psychological character. Being dominated by their reproductive system, women, the doctors believed, were actually creatures of desire. Carter actually constructs woman as a creature of uncontrollable sexual passion: "When sexual desire is taken into the account, it will add immensely to the forces bearing upon the female, who is often under its domination, and who, if unmarried and chaste, is compelled to restrain every manifestation of its sway," while the man can exhaust this power "through the proper channel."⁵

The insistence on the woman's peculiar and particular nature supported the social theories of separate spheres: her acknowledged spiritual superiority entailed her intellectual inferiority, and determined woman's place in public life. Medical science supported social ideology by asserting that "the intellectual powers of woman are inferior

¹ Robert Brudnell Carter, *On The Pathology and Treatment of Hysteria*, (London: John Churchill, 1853), p.33.

² Quoted in Vieda Skultans, *English Madness*, p.78.

³ Vieda Skultans, *English Madness: Ideas on Insanity 1850 - 1890*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), p.80.

⁴ J. G. Millingen, *The Passions; or Mind and Matter*, (London: J and D. Darling, 1848),p.157.

⁵ Robert Brudnell Carter, *op.cit.*, p.33.

to those of man.”¹ John Haslam asserted that women's affectability not only increased their “proneness to illness but also decreases the benefits which they are likely to reap from education.”² The doctors concluded that since women cannot benefit from education, and since they are intellectually inferior to men, they have to accept the division of spheres. “In regard to the inferior development of her intellectual powers, therefore, and in the predominance of the instinctive,” Dr. Millingen states, “woman must be considered as ranking below man.” Although the woman excels in her sensibility, he continues, “Her whole character, physical as well as corporeal, is beautifully adapted to supply what is deficient in man.”³ Woman's reproductive role was the justification offered by both social and medical theorists for her exclusion from public life. The message of the social and medical texts was that woman could not compete with man. Describing women as “natural” throws a halo of benevolence around male-domination, analogous, Carol MacCormack suggests, to the “goodness of human domination of natural energy sources.”⁴ Since women's bodies are ruled by natural rather than social laws, they need to be contained within the social boundaries, and hence to be controlled by men through the social rules of propriety. In society at large and in medical practise, women are taken care of by men, the creatures of superior self-control, in order to restore them to mental stability.

Not only did the Darwinian theory support its predecessor in the moral bases it used for identifying insanity, but it also provided a “natural” explanation of the mental characteristics and disorders of both sexes, an explanation which sprang from a “natural” gender-difference. Women suffered keenly under the Darwinists' definitions, since Darwin himself explained sex-roles through the theory of biological sex-difference. The only contribution the Darwinian theory could make to mental science was to prove “scientifically” the Victorian ideologies about both insanity and femininity. Woman's

1 J. G. Millingen, *op.cit.*, p.160.

2 Vieda Skultans, *English Madness*, p.79.

3 J. G. Millingen, *op.cit.*, p.161.

4 Carol P. MacCormack and Marilyn Strathern, eds., *Nature, Culture and Gender*, (Cambridge: London, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p.6.

“nature” in the Darwinists' theory is no longer her emotional instinct, but the set of biological vocations allocated to her. Unlike the moralists, the Darwinists did not directly associate woman's emotional “explosiveness” with her social role, but with “an inherited mental structure, a tyranny of nerve organization which was almost inescapable.”¹ Women, they claimed, were inferior to men by nature of their organization. Maudsley confirmed that women “can not choose but to be women, cannot rebel successfully against the tyranny of organization.”² Underlying the scientific statement is a warning to women not to attempt rebellion because their inferior organization could not bear more than the load allocated to it by both science and the society; otherwise, they were certain to fall ill both physiologically and mentally.

The Darwinists identified woman's character with her reproductive system, just as the earlier moral managers had: “as if the Almighty, in creating the female sex, had taken the uterus and built up a woman around it.”³ In light of the contemporary belief that woman was the slave of her reproductive system, Maudsley issued his famous statement, that “there is sex in mind as distinctly as there is sex in body.”⁴ The Darwinists warned that due to the hold woman's reproductive system had on her mind and body, woman's “feeble” intellect could not benefit from education. Women who strove for learning, they believed, were “daringly violating those natural laws of organization, which have fated the cerebral structure of woman, less qualified for these severe ordeals, than those of her brother man.”⁵ What Maudsley did was to present a “scientific” theory of gender-roles which confirmed the physical determinism of womanhood and the theory of separate spheres. He warned that educated women would be got “at the price of a puny, enfeebled and sickly race.” Intellectual work, he stated, would injure “their functions as

¹ Elaine Showalter, “Victorian Women and Insanity,” *Victorian Studies*, Vol.23, (1979), p.170.

² Vieda Skultans, *English Madness*, p.94.

³ Carol Smith Rosenberg & Charles Rosenberg, “The Female Animal: Medical and Biological Views of Woman and Her Role in Nineteenth-Century America,” *The Journal of American History*, Vol.60, (1973), p.335.

⁴ Henry Maudsley, “Sex in Mind and in Education,” *The Fortnightly Review*, (1874). Quoted in Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady*, p.122.

⁵ Alfred Beaumont Maddock, *On Mental and Nervous Disorders*, (London: 1854). Quoted in Vieda Skultans, *Madness and Morals*, p.228

the conceivers, mothers and nurses of children.”¹ With the help of the new scientific theories, the ideological roles of self-sacrifice, obedience and purity in women could be defended in evolutionary terms as central to the improvement of the race. The Darwinists stressed that by her physical as well as mental organization, the woman was created to be “the helpmate and companion of man.”² Her qualities prepared her to be man's other but never his equal. Her health was again dependent upon her adherence to the social roles which her organization assigned her to.

At the heart of both the theories of the social managers and the Darwinists lies the fear of the female's “irregular” sexuality, and her inability to control it. The woman's biological position in the family as bearer of children entailed a strict sexual fidelity to her husband, a social role which both society and medicine guarded so that wealth could stay within the legal family. The social ideology of female purity was reinforced in the medical thought by the diagnosis of any signs of sexual “deviance” as illness, regardless of the other cultural or psychological pressures on women's lives. Woman's moral insanity was signified by her becoming beyond parental or marital control, turning into an “irreligious, ... false, malicious, ... and quarrelsome”³ being. A woman in psychological health would be religious, submissive, true, benevolent, and silent, traits which all contribute to the social image of the angel of the hearth. The sign to look for in women who might become hysterical, the doctors suggested, was in their “exhibiting more than usual force and decision of character, of strong resolution, fearless of danger, ... having plenty of nerves.”⁴ Women were caught up between the social and medical theories. There was a frantic insistence on the female's instability and lack of balance. Women would become mad because of their weak nervous system, but they could also be judged as mad if they showed more nerve than expected of them.

¹ Vieda Skultans, *English Madness*, p.94.

² T. S. Clouston, *Female Education from a Medical Point of View*, (Edinburgh, 1882). Quoted in Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady*, p.123.

³ “Woman in her Psychological Relations,” *Journal of Psychological Medicine and Mental Pathology*, 4, (1851), p.34.

⁴ F. C. Skene, *Hysteria*, (London: 1867). Quoted in Elaine Showalter, “Victorian Women and Insanity,” p.172.

Like the black and the poor, women were scientifically identified as degenerate creatures. "The description of female biology, character, diseases, and care" Roger Smith suggests, "made medicine a central resource in the political mediation between the individual and society."¹ Almost alone among his male contemporaries, John Stuart Mill recognized in the theories about woman's nature a means of oppression stemming from the threat female rebellion would pose to the patriarchal status quo. Mill recognized the Victorian social and medical attitudes towards women as an integral part of the general social policy set by the ruling middle-class at a period when social roles assigned to individuals were deemed to be part of a natural order. Mill stated that "the unnatural generally means only uncustomary,"² and because the subjection of women was customary, any deviance from it was regarded as unnatural. The same principle was applied to the other ruled classes such as slaves or the working classes. The psychologist created an immensely effective position for himself in social policy by taking the responsibility of differentiating between the natural and the unnatural, the normal and the deviant.

The Sensation Novel and The Medical Ideologies of Insanity

The sensation novelists worked within the framework of contemporary psychological thought, examining, interpreting, often challenging medical and social ideologies in the development of their narrative. The mystery form these novels adopted was vital in the way it helped the reader question the different meanings introduced in the narrative. Mystery seemed to function on two levels in the sensation novel: to draw the reader in to unravel the apparent mystery and at the same time to evoke suspicion which would encourage the reader to question the simple explanations of the mysterious offered in the text. This narrative technique helped the sensation novelists to expose the moral and social implications of mental science and reject contemporary social and medical

¹ Roger Smith, *op.cit.*, p.144.

² "The Subjection of Women." Quoted in Martha Vicinus, ed., *Suffer and Be Still: Women in The Victorian Age*, (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1972), p.127.

beliefs concerning the individual's power of moral choice. The sensation novelists insisted on the importance of chance incidents in determining the future of individuals, introduced forceful passions which the investigation had to acknowledge as determinant of character and personality, and often concluded that moral choice was a difficult ideal which only a few lucky individuals could live up to. Whether detected through heredity or moral behaviour, the judgement of insanity, the novels revealed, was used as a label which functioned to isolate individuals who defied social order.

All the novels studied in this chapter deal with insanity, but from different angles. Charles Reade's *Hard Cash* (1863) concentrates on the abuses of the mental law system and the mismanagement of both the asylums and the inmates but does not actually critique contemporary ideologies of insanity. Mary Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) presents the reader with a study of the social ideologies which govern the medical discourse about women, while Mrs. Henry Wood's *St. Martin's Eve* (1866) reveals the harmful effect of the social and economic conditions on female psychology. In *The Woman in White* (1860), ideas about self-control and self-preservation are placed in direct relation to contemporary notions on economic success.

Reade's *Hard Cash* was based on a number of real stories about the asylums and wrongful confinement and on Reade's personal involvement in releasing some people who were wrongfully confined. The novel was purposely written to criticize the system of lunacy and undermine its institutions, and hence it was crammed with evidence and documents, a factor which often led to the obfuscation of the main themes it proposed to tackle.

Although Reade asserts that the cash and love "will flow together in one stream"¹ in the novel, they often depart and the section about madness, which is supposed to be the outcome of the characters' struggle for cash, becomes a separate episode. Reade seems to manipulate the characters, to turn them mad though they show no predisposing signs, so that he could cite more episodes about mental illness and the current methods of

¹ Charles Reade, *Hard Cash*, (1863; London: Chatto & Windus, 1934), p.201. All other references are to this edition and will be included hereafter in the text.

treatment. Although it could be explained as a result of the cumulation of stress, Captain Dodd's madness comes rather suddenly. He shows a tremendous capability for self-control through the dangerous voyages of the *Agra*, braves death to save people, yet, is suddenly seized by an epileptic fit on his return home because of fear for his money which he has already lost once before. The captain's insanity offers Reade the opportunity to reveal the inhumane methods of treatment employed in the contemporary asylum system and the physicians' role in the conspiracy to rob some rich patients of their money. Due to the over-emphasis on madness, the novel seems to acquire gradually a state of non-seriousness which causes the grave issues it initially proposes to address to stop at the superficial level of case-listing without being developed to reveal their deeper implications.

The story seems to echo indiscriminately parts of the literature written about insanity and the insane in the period. Although Reade sometimes appears to be aware of some of the ideological implications of the theories about mental illness, he often contradicts his initial statements by giving different opinions about a single case. He commits this same mistake when he attempts to discuss the reasons for Julia's illness. The strong-minded Julia is said to become ill of "excessive sensibility" (p. 37) because of her love for Frederick, as the doctor's diagnosis suggests. Reade mockingly reveals that Julia's mind and body are sound, and the doctors are using their ideological conceptions about female vulnerability to serve their personal purpose of gaining money. Julia herself declares: "I have no disease in the world As for you, mamma, you have resigned your own judgement to your inferiors, and that is both our misfortunes. Dear, dear mamma, do take me to a doctress next time." (p. 41) Yet, despite the apparent self-awareness Julia shows, the narrator still undermines women's ability to understand their own state of mind. "The faint attempt at self-analysis," he declares, "was due to the influence of Dr. Whately. For, by nature, young ladies of this age seldom turn the eye inward." (p. 33) Reade often puts women down by frequently asserting that he refrains from explaining their emotion on the bases that women are the most able to understand and describe their own feelings.

Although he seems first to distrust the medical statements about women, Reade

still accounts for Julia's illness by readily adopting the argument about the influence of women's suppressed sexual passion on their mental health, indirectly reinforcing the medical ideologies about women as emotionally explosive beings. While Carter suggested that women were more prone to hysteria due to the necessity they were under of concealing their emotions, he also observed that hysteria was rare in men, because in them "strong emotion is a matter of comparatively rare occurrence, scarcely called forth except to demand immediate and energetic action of some other kind."¹ Reade confirms Carter's statement by suggesting that, because Alfred was a man, he "did not trouble the doctors; he glowed with a steady fire; no heats and chills, and sad misgivings; for one thing, he was not a woman, a being tied to that stake, Suspense, and compelled to wait and wait for others' action." (p. 58)

Like Carter, Reade recognizes the social determinism which causes women to behave in a certain way and make them emotionally unstable, yet, he also seems to believe that this determinism springs from woman's own "nature." Later, Reade points to the collapse of boundaries between the supposed insane and their keepers in the asylum through the representation of explosive female sexuality. Through Mrs. Archbold and Hanna, he seems to suggest that one of the dangers of the loss of self-control is "the release of unbridled sexuality."² The women in the asylum are ravaged by sexual desire and this puts them at a disadvantage with the self-controlled, chaste, Alfred. Adhering to the ideas of self-control of the age, Alfred is actually able to keep sane once incarcerated because he uses his energies to fight against immorality, represented here by the female's sexual temptation. Alfred achieves self-control through guarding his morals. He follows Smiles' teachings by directing his will away from evil, and thus manages to preserve his intellect and his self-control. Smiles asserts that "Directed towards the enjoyment of the senses, the strong will may be a demon, and the intellect merely its debased slave; but directed towards good, the strong will is a king, and the intellect is

¹ Robert Brudnell Carter, *op.cit.*, p.34.

² Winifred Hughes, *op. cit.*, p.93.

then the minister of man's highest well-being."¹ Like the Victorian practices which he intended to criticize, Reade associates sex with insanity, violence, and women. Mrs. Archbold suddenly turns into a monster when Alfred refuses her, but because the narrative is more interested in Alfred's story, than in the people he encounters, no attempt is made to explain Mrs. Archbold's behaviour.

The narrative stresses the importance of self-control as the only way by which the individual can preserve mental stability. Alfred's struggle becomes a confrontation between a man with a strong will and the power of injustice, represented by the asylum system and its proprietors. The medical men presented in the novel assume the figures of criminals. Their main interest is money, and the most famous of them, Dr. Wycherley, who actually stands for Dr. Conolly, the champion of moral management, "first form an opinion, and then collect the materials of one." (p. 334) Insanity, or the "Incubation of Insanity," (p. 265) as the doctor calls it, occurs when the individual deviates from normal habits. Alfred's depression and headache, and what the doctors confirmed as "illusion" about the cash, formed sufficient evidence to certify his "insanity." For the doctors, Alfred was violating respect for his father by accusing him of theft, and this failure to pay regard to social morality was enough to classify him as a potential case of insanity. Many doctors of the era indeed believed that those who were predisposed to moral insanity who believed that the morally insane "would eventually become insane if they were not already, [and therefore] recommended that they be treated as insane and confined."² Frederick can only resist the doctors by following their own teachings and preserving his self-control.

At times his brain throbbed and his blood boiled, and he longed to kill the remorseless ... monsters who robbed him of his liberty But he knew this would not do; that what they wanted was to gnaw his reason away, and then who could disprove that he had always been mad? Now he felt that brooding on his wrong would infuriate him; so he clenched his teeth, and vowed a solemn vow that nothing should drive him mad. (p. 428)

¹ Samuel Smiles, *op.cit.*, p.156.

² Andrew Scull, *Madhouses, Mad-doctors, Mad men*, p.355.

The process Alfred follows to keep his sanity accords, ironically, with the teachings proposed by Dr. Conolly. In addition to calm reasoning, Alfred takes on studies in order to keep exercising his intellectual faculties. Dr. Conolly believed that “those who most exercise the faculties of their minds are least liable to insanity.”¹

In the novel, psychiatry becomes the means of the powerful to control the weak. The psychiatrists hand the weapon to Mr. Hardy which enables him to incarcerate his son. Their generalized statements can easily be employed to serve the interest of the powerful. Dr. Wycherley identifies the incubation of insanity as “a reversal of the mental habits and sentiments, such as a sudden aversion to some person hitherto beloved.” (p. 268) Alfred's father knows well that the doctors would serve him: “Should Alfred blab his suspicions, here were two gentlemen who would at all events help him to throw ridicule on them.” (p. 268) Although the psychiatrists are actually acting in good faith, it is our knowledge of Alfred's sanity that makes us perceive them as participants in the plot. The lunacy laws made it easy for any person to incarcerate another, provided that two doctors certified the latter's insanity.

The most effective statement about the institution of lunacy is made through Reade's insistence on the relationship between money and the lunatic asylum. In the novel the doctors would do almost anything to keep their trade in lunacy flourishing: “Osmond, you know, is jackal to an asylum in London; Dr. Wycherley, ... keeps two or three such establishments by himself or his agents: blinded by self-interest, and that of their clique - ... they would confine a melancholy youth in a gloomy house, among afflicted persons, and give him nothing to do but brood; and so turn the scale against his reason.” (p. 275) Insanity is Alfred's father's means to strip his son of his money, as it is the doctors' means of earning their fortune. Reade's reaction against the lunacy system is symbolically suggested in the act of burning the asylum by an inmate who was wrongfully confined, an act which represents a plea for reform within the asylum system.

The narrative suggests that the persons who appointed themselves as judges of people's minds are the least to be trusted. Dr. Conolly, who was one of the foremost

¹ Conolly's *Inquiry Concerning the Indications of Insanity*. Quoted in John Barlow, *op.cit.*, pp.34-35.

proponents of humane treatment is portrayed as a self-interested money-hunting person. Many of his speeches would be quite commendable if set outside their narrative context. Only due to our conviction that Dr. Wycherley is treating as insane a perfectly sane person, and that he built his judgements on the information given to him by Alfred's father before he had seen the patient, do we come to ridicule and suspect the honesty of Dr. Wycherley's statements. When every act of defiance is interpreted as insanity, and when all people may become mad in seconds, "how is one to know a genius from a madman?" since they both can display signs of excessive cleverness and be obsessed with a particular object on which they brood. The answer to Jane's question is delivered by Dr. Wycherley himself: "By sending for a psychological physician." (p. 274) The statement becomes more ironic when we discover that Dr. Wycherley himself is epileptic, a condition associated in the Nineteenth Century with psychological disorder. The novel further suggests that the asylums can actually drive mad those who already live on the borderline of insanity or even those who are previously perfectly sane. Private letters are intercepted, patients are deprived of sleep and sanity is never examined.

Many a poor soul these little wretches had distracted with the very sleeplessness the madhouse professed to cure, not create. In conjunction with the opiates, the confinement and the gloom of Silverton House, they had driven many a feeble mind across the line that divides the weak and nervous from the unsound. (p. 348)

The problem with *Hard Cash* is that Reade seems to commit the same mistakes made by those he criticizes. He employs insanity or sanity to punish or reward his characters. Alfred's father is punished for his plot against his son by becoming rich and then losing the faculties which could enable him to use his money. Captain Dodd is rewarded by being cured of insanity and Alfred is duly discharged to reap the financial benefits of keeping self-control represented by his acquisition of his father's money. The swiftness and suddenness with which the characters become insane or are cured of insanity in *Hard Cash* indicates the extent to which Reade wanted to highlight contemporary social concern with the issue.

Lady Audley's Secret and *St. Martin's Eve* differ quite remarkably from *Hard*

Cash in their approach to the subject of insanity. Both novels depict a woman as the central figure of the story and reveal her trials and frustrations throwing light on forms of psychological pressures in women's lives which the psychiatrists seemed to ignore. *Lady Audley's Secret* is not simply the story of a woman who transgresses the social order by her demonic behaviour and receives due punishment. Underlying the story of the rebellious heroine is another tale of social suppression, of the male's fear of female power, and of the inadequacy of the Victorian images aligned with womanhood. Through the authorial hints, parallels and contrasts which she employs, Braddon delves into characters and closely examines ideologies to reveal the confusion which Victorian categorization caused to both men and women.

While the overt text overflows with statements which seem to support the status quo, social criticism is offered in a more disguised form through clues carefully woven into the narrative. The first intrusion of the omniscient narrator asserts the duality of almost all scenes we encounter in life.

We hear every day of murders committed in the country. Brutal and treacherous murders; slow, protracted agonies from poisons administered by some kindred hand; sudden and violent deaths by cruel blows, inflicted with a stake cut from some spreading oak, whose every shadow promised - peace. In this very county of Essex there is a meadow in which, on a quiet summer Sunday evening, a young farmer murdered the girl who had loved and trusted him; and yet even now, with the stain of that foul deed upon it, the aspect of the spot is - peace. No crime has ever been committed in the worst rookeries about Seven Dials that has not had its parallel amidst the sweet rustic charm which still, in spite of all, we look on with a tender, half-mournful yearning, and associate with - peace.¹

Coming long before the crime, in the midst of the peaceful scene of fishing, this narrative interruption prepares the reader for the coming events and highlights Braddon's insistence on revealing a possibly sinister reality lying behind appearances. Things are not what they seem to be is the dominant idea in the novel. Braddon's exploration of apparent truths leads her to discover the more negative side of social ideologies and the

¹ Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, (1862; London: Virago, 1985), p.46. All other references are to this edition and will be included hereafter in the text.

significant role man plays in both the creation and perpetuation of ideologies of womanhood.

The sinister interior of the seemingly peaceful scenes is disturbing because it “moved the boundaries of the probable,” and it disturbed “all sense of stability.”¹ The setting of the story is symbolic in itself and confirms the necessity to push back acknowledged social boundaries. The peaceful Audley Court has a hidden well, and a lime-tree walk to which the narrator simultaneously allots two contradictory functions: it is a perfectly suitable place “for secret meetings; a place in which a conspiracy might have been planned or a lover's vow registered with equal safety.” (p. 3) The gothic architecture of the tumble-down house becomes suggestive through the symbolic overtones it is given. Like Lady Audley's character, at first the house seems impenetrable. The door is “squeezed into a corner of a turrent at one angle of the building, as if it was hiding from dangerous visitors, and wished to keep itself a secret.” (p. 2) My lady's rooms are in the middle of the house, away from all eyes; and leading to them is a hidden passage, the main secret in the construction of the building. Significantly, the door of the secret passage is in the nursery. Phoebe discovers that her lady has got a child when she sees the small shoe hidden in Lady Audley's secret drawer. But, the first discovery of a possible hidden secret in Lady Audley's character is made through that same passage which leads to her rooms, where Robert Audley and George Talboys see her strange portrait. Connecting Lady Audley's character with the symbolic structure of the building, one may regard the entrance of the two men, like Fosco's intrusion on Marian's diary in *The Woman in White*, as a violation of the lady's enclosed self, which prepares us for many others to come. Through the penetration of the female body men acquire self control.

Every symbol employed in the novel undergoes many transformations and this helps Braddon to shift and undermine the boundaries of ideology. The stately house is the seat of aristocracy, the root of social respectability, “A noble place” which is the handiwork of “Time ... adding a room one year, and knocking down a room another

¹ Jennifer Uglow, Introduction to M.E. Braddon, op. cit., p.xvi.

year, ... shaking down a bit of Saxon wall here, and allowing a Norman Arch to stand here.” (p. 2) The glorious monument is also trying to protect itself from dangerous intruders like Lady Audley, people who attempt to invade its privacy and threaten its long-established mask of morality. When fathomed, the every-day, familiar scenes acquire a sinister look “a reverse image of chaos, irrationality and violence into which one might suddenly step, like Alice through the looking glass,”¹ into a world just like that of the portrait, “so like, and yet so unlike.” (p. 60) The statement extends beyond its connection with Lady Audley's character to the wider realm of social appearances in the Victorian world, where underneath the calm, restrained world of order there lies, Braddon suggests, a disturbing one of disorder and rebellion.

Braddon presents a special type of heroine in *Lady Audley*, one who embodies all the contradictory types of women in Victorian ideology. Lady Audley can be angel, demon, fairy, witch, or mermaid. With her blue eyes, fair hair and childish innocence, she enchants men as the very type of womanly purity they often imagined. Blessed with that “magic power of fascination by which a woman can charm with a word or intoxicate with a smile,” (p. 5) she reigns joyfully in her kingdom of power. “The innocence and candour of an infant beamed in Lady Audley's fair face, and shone out of her large and liquid blue eyes.” (p. 44) Through Lady Audley's character, Braddon examines the Victorian conception of the angel, suggesting that it creates a mirror through which men are permitted to see only the figure of their own creation. Lady Audley was never benevolent, Braddon makes it clear from the beginning; the angel's actual charm lies in her sexuality rather than in her purity. Every one is so lured by Lady Audley's beauty that no one is able to penetrate her feelings. It is rather a shock to both Sir Michael and the reader when the sweet Lucy Graham declares: “I do not love any one in the world.” (p. 10)

The exaggeration involved in projecting Lady Audley as an angel helps to reveal the less acceptable side of her character. The line the Victorians drew between angels and demons is disturbed violently in the process of Robert Audley's discovery of the female

¹ Jennifer Uglow, op. cit., p.xvi.

characters he encounters such as Clara, Alicia, and Lady Audley's previous teaching companion, Tonks. The excessive zeal with which Lady Audley adheres to the socially acceptable figure of the angel helps Braddon to show the amount of deception involved for women who attempt to conform to conventional ideas about femininity. Lady Audley's hidden power is suggested by her puzzling portrait whose mysterious outlines throw light on her character.

so like, and yet so unlike; it was as if you had burned strange-coloured fires before my lady's face, and by their influence brought out new lines and new expressions never seen in it before. The perfection of feature, the brilliancy of colouring, were there; but it seemed as if the painter had copied mediaeval monstrosities until his brain had grown bewildered, for my lady, in his portrait of her, had the aspect of a beautiful fiend.

Her crimson dress, exaggerated like all the rest of this strange picture, hung about her in folds that looked like flames, her fair head rising out of the lurid mass of colour, as if out of a raging furnace. (p. 60)

Like Lady Audley's portrait, society exaggerates its expectations of the angel. It is the same perfection of the angelic qualities in both the portrait and the novel which produced what seemed their extreme opposite in Lady Audley: fiendishness. Lady Audley is frequently identified with mermaids, especially when angry. She silences Luke Marks by the "greenish light, such as might flash from the changing-hued orbs of an angry mermaid." (p. 272) The identification refers to her power of transformation, to her ability to kill and regenerate, and to the association of mermaids with sirens in leading men to destruction. The narrator draws the reader's attention to Lady Audley's yearning look, thus setting us one step ahead of Robert Audley in his attempt to interpret her character. We often see her looking beyond the world she inhabits, gazing "into the misty twilight," (p. 8) always dreaming of another world with "a yearning gaze which seemed as if it would have pierced the distance and looked away - away into another world." (pp. 8-9) Within the world she has created to live in, she has perfected an image which eludes every one. She comes back singing after having pushed her husband into the well, and is only a shade paler than usual after she sets fire to the inn in her attempt to kill Robert Audley and Luke Marks.

The reader's own investigation often moves ahead of Robert Audley's: contrasts and parallels with the other women in the novel help reveal Lady Audley's multi-faceted character. Alicia, the frank, impetuous girl, with her "coarse" taste for dogs and horses is taken by Braddon as the conservative corrective to the figure of Lady Audley, in the sense that despite her "peculiar" habits, Alicia is a loving, devoted woman. Braddon attempts to deliver an ideological message to the reader not to have preconceived notions built on an abstract categorization of women. The conventional Robert Audley objects to Alicia's manners and tells her that she might gain him as a husband if she learns to "be patient, and take life easily, and try to reform yourself of banging doors, bouncing in and out of rooms, talking of stables, and riding across country." (p. 108) Alicia is placed in direct contrast to Lady Audley; yet while the former is regarded by others as a peculiar girl, Lady Audley is admired for her femininity and her adherence to conventions. The proof the novel gives of Alicia's goodness suggests the superficiality of the social judgement Robert pronounces upon her. Alicia is aware of Robert's limited vision concerning women: "I may not be as amiable as you are, my lady, and I may not have the same sweet smiles and pretty words for every stranger I meet, but I am not capable of contemptible malice." (p. 90) Alicia shares Lady Audley's understanding of the standards by which men pass judgements on women:

You think her sensitive, because she has white hands and big blue eyes with long lashes, and all manner of affected, fantastical ways, which you stupid men call fascinating. Sensitive! Why, I've seen her do cruel things with those slender white fingers and laugh at the pain she inflicted. (p. 89)

Against the negative portrait of Lady Audley, Braddon offers Alicia, who despite her positive attitudes to life, is unable to achieve happiness in society. Alicia's potential rebellion is checked at the end of the novel just as firmly as Lady Audley's more overt defiance is. Her final mission, significantly assigned to her by Robert Audley, is as her father's companion. This self-conscious, spirited woman is destined to marry Sir Henry Towers, whom Braddon portrays as a rich but thoroughly brainless man.

While Alicia stands in contrast and parallel to Lady Audley, Phoebe Marks poses as her double, with one important aspect missing in her character: sexuality. The likeness

between the lady and the maid, we are told, is not striking, but “there were certain dim and shadowy lights in which, meeting Phoebe Marks gliding softly through the dark oak passages of the Court, or under the shrouded avenues in the garden, you might have easily mistaken her for my lady.” (pp. 190-91) Both Phoebe and her lady share a twilight existence; they both have secrets and long for power and status. The progress of both is checked by men, but because Phoebe lacks charm, she fails to match Lady Audley's achievements. Phoebe has her lady's features without her colour, her ambition without her ability, her enforced self-composure without her impulsiveness. The main difference between the two women is that Lady Audley is armed with the exact knowledge of what she needs to survive in her society: appearances.

You *are* like me, and your features are very nice; it is only colour that you want ... why, with a bottle of hair dye, such as we see advertised in the papers, and a pot of rouge, you'd be as good-looking as I any day, Phoebe. (p. 49)

The women portrayed in the novel reveal a hidden self, brought into being by the society's insistence on their polarization. Like the portrait of Lady Audley, the world of the female seems so like and yet unlike. To his surprise, Robert Audley discovers that all the women he encounters are not what they seem to be. As in *The Woman in White*, the official purpose of the investigation is diverted to discover the secrets of the other characters. In his attempt to solve the puzzle of his friend's disappearance, Robert is forced to question his notions about femininity and the feminine ideal. He is made to understand that women could use men's notions about the female for their own purposes. Being unable to change their preconceptions about women, the patriarchal figures seem more prone than any others to be deceived by appearances. Duality, Robert discovers, applies not only to such fallen figures as Lady Audley, but also to more idealized figures such as Clara Talboys. Robert becomes aware after he meets Clara of ~~the~~ “hellish power of dissimulation.” (p. 235) From the passive, passionless image of Clara he sees first, there emerges a woman burning with passions and angry frustrations; “I took her for a stately and heartless automaton: I know her now to be a noble and beautiful woman.” (p. 175)

The female characters in the novel share an important experience in common: the pressure of suppressed emotion and the intensity of passion. Alicia's anger increases under her unrequited love for Robert; Lady Audley's investment in pretence grows more urgent as her struggle to preserve status becomes more fierce and Phoebe's silence is also proportionate to her anger and envy of her lady's success. Clara Talboys cries:

I have grown up in an atmosphere of suppression, ... I have stifled and dwarfed the natural feelings of my heart, until they have become unnatural in their intensity. I have been allowed neither friends nor lovers. (p. 171)

Although the emotion Clara wants to be allowed to show is the socially approved one of sisterhood, the important aspect about her declaration is her awareness of, and revolt against, her father's domination over her life. Placed in a different context, the description of Clara would be one of madness. Her trembling figure, her almost hysterical reactions to the story about her brother and the nervousness caused by the constant need to suppress her emotions are all symptoms which could easily have been cited as signs of insanity, yet are all turned to Clara's advantage due to Robert's perception of her. The least lively of the characters in the novel, Clara is a paragon of self-sacrifice for the family, a cult which Lady Audley violates by her adultery, yet even she reacts to the news of her brother's death by immediately vowing revenge. Like Lady Audley, Clara achieves power through influence, but, unlike her, she does not ostensibly act for herself. Clara is able to stimulate Robert's efforts to pursue the investigation into her brother's disappearance.

The strictness with which the women adhere to social norms in the novel seems to increase with the amount of emotion they are obliged to suppress. Thus, it is no wonder that "the daintiest, softest, prettiest of blond creatures"¹ becomes the fiend of English literature. The social pressure is obvious on all the women in the novel but it is most severe on Lady Audley. Her own version of the story reveals that the suffering she has endured has transformed her into a calculating woman who substituted the values of

¹ Margaret Oliphant, "Novels," (No.II), p.263.

ambition and selfishness for those of self-sacrifice and duty, in her case the only available choice for an ambitious woman who wished to survive in society. Although Lady Audley's behaviour is condemned by her persecutor as destructive to society, she has only used the weapons which society taught her to use: her beauty, her acknowledged status as an object for admiration. Society punishes her because she used its values to serve very different ends to those prescribed.

In her confession, Lady Audley reveals that her murder and bigamy should be judged in the context of the responsibility of society, and specifically of men, in causing women's misery. Lady Audley is armed with profound understanding of the ideologies of her age and the way they operate on women. She has been taught that marriage is the only basis for a woman's future and has followed the teachings to the letter.

I was told that I was pretty- beautiful- lovely- bewitching. I heard all these things at first indifferently; but by- and- by I listened to them greedily, and began to think that in spite of the secret of my life I might be more successful than my companions in the world's great lottery. I had learnt that which in some indefinite manner or other every school-girl learns sooner or later - I had learnt that my ultimate fate in life depended upon my marriage, and I concluded that if I was indeed prettier than my schoolfellows, I ought to marry better than any of them. (p. 297)

Lady Audley uses marriage to achieve a better life. She is not a conscious rebel, rebelling because of personal principles; rather, she has adopted the methods assigned by society in order to be able to survive within it. Like the familiar figures of the middle-class Victorian murderesses so popular in the period, Lady Audley's early experience seems to have conditioned "the strategies of escape"¹ she adopted. Society bears the responsibility for having taught her to assume a character she did not really have. Female criminals, Mary S. Hartman states, similarly adopted special "survival techniques"² which suited the social milieus in which they lived. The triangular relationship between women, criminals and lunatics is obvious in both the novel and the social theories about femininity, and the transformation from one of these states to the others seems relatively easy. In life,

¹ Mary S. Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses*, p.19.

² *Ibid.*, p.31.

women are confined as wives or sisters, and in marriage they lose their legal rights, just like criminals and lunatics.

The combination of adultery and crime was not just a schema for a sensational novel, but also a natural result of the social and legal frustrations women encountered. Lady Audley's image in the looking glass is a suggestive symbol of the multiple selves a woman is forced to adopt in order to survive in society. Her image is not fragmented but multiplied: "the looking-glass, cunningly placed at angles and opposite corners ... multiplied my lady's image, and in that image reflected the most beautiful object in the enchanted chamber." (p. 251) Women transform themselves to outmanoeuvre the ideologies of their age; yet, the images they adopt are those prescribed by the ideologies themselves: angels, demons, mermaids, or Medusas.

The underlying reasons for Lady Audley's apparent defiance are all outlined in her narrative. Young and inexperienced, she feels the weight of the injury inflicted upon her by those whom society calls her protectors: her father and her husband. She is obliged to pursue the only profession available to her as a respectable middle-class woman, the dull job of governess. She confesses to Sir Michael Audley that she would not marry him for love but rather to get rid of poverty and degradation. Poverty is the motive for her escape, her concession to bigamy, and her final decision to fight for the status she has achieved: "I knew how far poverty can affect a life, and I looked forward with a sick terror to a life so affected." (p. 297) Lady Audley reveals how poverty humiliates human beings and crushes their wills. Her mother dies in the asylum because of poverty, and her father meekly accepts his daughter's bigamy for the same reason. Lady Audley's fear of poverty reaches its climax at the end, when as the official narrative describes her action as greed, the reader watches her with pity, as she secures her clothes and jewellery and conceals bits of china among her clothes before leaving Audley Court. We are made to understand that she prefers death to poverty and this increases her determination to fight: "I will not go back - I will not go back. If the struggle between us to be a duel to the death, you shall not find me drop my weapon." (pp. 268-9) The tone which Robert Audley interprets as defiance is also the tone of fear born from a life of humiliation.

Robert Audley's status as the investigator of the crime is significant. He should not

be regarded simply as Braddon's indirect narrative device which helps us discover another side to the female world. His progress throughout the investigation towards social respectability and the acquisition of status is as important as his approach to Lady Audley's character. The narrative reveals that Robert Audley has changed in compliance with the social expectations of him as a gentleman. The quest for the criminal is at heart a quest for Robert's own identity and for a place in society. The word "gentleman" marks both the importance of Robert as a character and also his progress and the covert criticism with which it is laden. Robert Audley is certainly not above suspicion and stands to gain from his discovery.

Braddon's choice of a male figure to conduct the investigation is significant. Throughout his encounters with the other female characters, we discover that Robert is never able to approach, criticize, or even think about them except according to his preconceived notions of womanhood. While Alicia, Lady Audley, and Phoebe seem fairly able to recognize the basic traits in each others characters, Robert has to form a generalized personal opinion of all women in accordance with his discovery of Lady Audley's past. As in *The Woman in White*, male control of the female character seems to be achieved through the revelation of a secret from the past. In *Lady Audley*, Robert is only able to incarcerate Lady Audley on the bases of both the possibility of hereditary insanity and of her bigamy, but not on her unproven murder. That Lady Audley's conviction was not a legal one is significant. Robert's idealistic image of the peaceful, stable world of queens and fairies is swiftly exchanged for a negative one. Unlike the painter of Lady Audley's portrait who perceives another side in her character alongside that of the angelic beauty, Robert Audley just shifts from seeing her as an angel to seeing her as a demon. His previous meditations about the beautiful queen of the hearth making tea are shattered. "To call them the weaker sex is a hideous mockery. They are the stronger sex, the noisier, the more persevering, the more self-assertive." (pp. 177-8) His conclusion about the "bold, brazen, abominable creatures" who were "invented for the annoyance and destruction of their superiors" (p. 178) is but another generalized response which helps to reveal that the blurred image he constructs and reconstructs of the female character is due to his inability to regard women in any other terms than those of

conventional stereotypes.

The closer Robert Audley gets to recognizing the possibility of female defiance, the clearer his identification with patriarchy becomes until he finally takes his post as Lady Audley's persecutor by discovering her "secret." Early in the novel, we perceive that underlying the lawyer's relaxed attitude to life in general, lies a more serious Victorian attitude to the other sex. Although said in fun, the picture he draws of the future lives he would allow his daughters to lead is even more stifling than that imposed by Mr. Talboys on Clara: "If ever I marry, and have daughters ... they shall be educated in Paper Buildings, take their sole exercise in the Temple Gardens, and they shall never go beyond the gates till they are marriageable." (p. 101) From a disinterested observer Robert grows- with the growth of Lady Audley's defiance- into the rigid defender of orthodox values, absolute in his determination to prevent a woman from sustaining power.

Robert's final transformation into the representative gentleman figure of the age is suggested by the changes in his attitudes to life and by his growing inability to tolerate any behaviour which lies outside conventional patterns. The impulsive Alicia becomes for him "more a nuisance than she used to be." (p. 225) In contrast to the influence Lady Audley exerts upon him at the beginning, he becomes immune against the influence of the other sex and more determined to pursue his fight against the defiant aggressor; "Do you think I am to be put off by feminine prevarication- by womanly trickery? No! ... Do you think I will suffer myself to be baffled?" (p. 230). He now has the will to control his actions and the power to persecute the offender. His voice while addressing Lady Audley is the merciless voice of the Victorian moral code, of rigid principles of right and wrong; "a cold sternness that was so strange to him as to transform him into another creature- a pitiless embodiment of justice, a cruel instrument of retribution."(p. 232)

The most suspicious aspect about Robert's trial of Lady Audley is that, legally, no actual murder was committed. Robert's obsession with his friend's disappearance leads him to construct conclusions out of circumstantial evidence, among which is his certainty of his friend's death. The unofficial purpose of the investigation is revealed when Robert confesses his mistake. Although the investigation leads to the discovery of Lady Audley's real identity, it offers no clue as regards the destiny of George Talboys who is

actually alive:

He thought very humbly of the deductions he had made and acted upon. He remembered how implicitly he had trusted in the pitiful light of his own reason; but he was comforted by remembering also that he had tried simply and honestly to do his duty; faithfully alike to the dead and to the living.(p. 364)

Robert's duty becomes to uproot the sources of social disturbance. His friend is not dead after all, and since there is no murder, the only reason to punish Lady Audley is for her defiance of social laws.

The way Lady Audley is convicted is significant because it helps clarify Robert's role in the novel. The official reason offered for incarcerating Lady Audley is hereditary insanity, but both her controlled behaviour and the dialogue between Robert Audley and the psychiatrist unravel graver reasons. Lady Audley is not punished because of her crime, but because of her sexuality, the overwhelming power with which she might "pollute" society, as Robert fears. Lady Audley disarms men of their power to control themselves because her unsurpassable beauty makes them literally mad in love with her. Even Robert, whom Alicia believes to be immune to love, experiences initially the enchanting influence and refers to his falling in love with her. "She's the prettiest little creature you ever saw in your life" he observes to George Talboys. "Such blue eyes, such ringlets, such a ravishing smile, such a fairy-like bonnet- George Talboys, I feel like the hero of a French novel. I am falling in love with my aunt." (p. 48) Lady Audley achieves her aims through her influence on men. As a creation of men's own fantasies, she yet destabilises their world and, consequently, she has to be put away.

Lady Audley's disruptiveness not only threatens social morality but class stability as well. Haunted by her figure, Robert's dreams are inhabited by his fear of her invasion of his class. In the novel, the male fear of female domination is closely linked to fears of class disruption.

In those troublesome dreams he saw Audley Court, rooted up from amidst the green pastures and the shady hedgerows of Essex, standing bare and unprotected upon that desolate northern shore, threatened by the rapid rising of a boisterous sea, whose waves seemed gathering upward to descend and crush the house he loved. As the hurrying waves rolled nearer to the stately

mansion, the sleeper beheld a pale, starry face looking out of the silvery foam, and knew that it was my lady, transformed into a mermaid, beckoning his uncle to destruction. (p. 210)

The class content of Robert's dream is highlighted by Boyle who observes that "the major threat of the woman's deception is against the inviolability of the family's aristocratic tradition. Her weapon is sexuality, a sexuality symbolized by her metamorphosis into a part animal creature."¹ The repeated title of "my lady" functions as a reminder of the status she has gained by her plot. Lady Audley not only becomes a symbol of woman's rebellion, but also of any other subversive power that threatens the domination of both man and class. As Robert Audley suggests, "there is no crime you could commit, however vast and unnatural, which could make me wonder. Henceforth you must seem to me no longer a woman; a guilty woman with a heart which in its worst wickedness has yet some latent power to suffer and feel; I now look upon you as the demoniac incarnation of some evil principle." (p. 292) From the one extreme of identifying Lady Audley as an angel, Robert, finding that the prescribed notions of angelic behaviour no longer apply to her, identifies her as a demon. Robert's fight against Lady Audley takes the form of a quest for self-assertion and a struggle against temptation: fear, loss of self-control and of social position, are all embodied in his responses to her threatening figure.

The novel clearly declares that we are all on the verge of madness. In fact, the most explicit statements on insanity presented in the novel are delivered with reference to Robert Audley himself. Insanity is created by the actual conditions, contradictions, and frustrations of every day life, the narrator suggests;

Madhouses are large and only too numerous; yet surely it is strange that they are not larger, when we think of how many helpless wretches must beat their brains against this hopeless persistency of the orderly outward world, as compared with the storm and tempest, the riot and confusion within; - when we remember how many minds must tremble upon the narrow boundary between reason and unreason, mad to-day and sane to-morrow, mad yesterday and sane to-day. (pp. 175-6)

Madness, or the inability to repress hostile feeling, is a result of the vast contradiction

¹ Thomas F. Boyle, *op. cit.*, p.95.

between the real status of the individuals and the outer image of control which society demands of them.

Braddon prepares the reader for the conspiracy against Lady Audley through the identical plot by which the heroine herself plans to get rid of Robert who threatens her safety. She accuses Robert of madness and nearly succeeds in convincing his uncle to incarcerate him. Through Lady Audley's arguments and the narrator's comments, we are asked to question the social definitions of madness and to perceive their interrelationship with the medical theories. Because Robert does not participate in hunting, but loves animals and reads novels instead, the stately visitors of "Audley Court looked upon the baronet's nephew as an inoffensive species of maniac." (p. 98) Lady Audley is aware of both the social and medical ideologies of her time and that men, as well as women, were judged against social conventions of normality.

Lady Audley is able to use the medical arguments in her scheme to incarcerate Robert. She uses both arguments of moral management and those of the Darwinists to prove her case, a use which highlights the connection between the allegedly different theories. First she appeals to hereditary insanity using words which seem to have been taken from an alienist's article: "Do you know, Alicia, that madness is more often transmitted from father to son than from father to daughter, and from mother to daughter than from mother to son?" (p. 239). She concludes that Robert is insane because he inherited his peculiarities from his father who was an eccentric. Lady Audley also appeals to the contemporary theories of moral management which emphasized the influence of social habits on the will and consequently on self-control. According to George Man Burrows, "Habitual luxury, and the Vices of refinement, are peculiar to the rich; and, consequently, a greater degree of susceptibility and irritability is superinduced."¹ William Moseley also enrols among the predisposing causes of insanity "the absence of appropriate exercise and occupation."² Lady Audley realizes that Robert's

¹ John Man Burrows, *Commentaries on Insanity*, (London:1828). Quoted in Vieda Skultans, *Madness and Morals*, p.37.

² William Willis Moseley, *Eleven Chapters on Nervous and Mental Complaints*, (London: 1838). Quoted in Vieda Skultans, *Madness and Morals.*, p.43.

“odd” social habits can serve her purpose of convicting him as mad: “perhaps he reads too much, or smokes too much. You know that some physicians declare madness to be a mere illness of the brain- an illness to which any one is subject, and which may be produced by given causes, and cured by given means.” (p. 245) Lady Audley asserts that Robert's concentration on the subject of his friend's death has led “the thinking power of the brain” to resolve itself “into a monotone” which caused his mind to become “turbid and corrupt through lack of action.” (p. 246) Lady Audley is able to frighten Robert away in fear that her accusation might convince his uncle. His flight suggests the flexibility of definitions of insanity which could be conferred on any socially abnormal behaviour.

Lady Audley's failure to prove that Robert is insane is extremely important, both as a denouement in the plot-structure after which she starts to decline, and as a proof of the antagonism between her and the self-appointed representative of aristocracy; as she fails to incarcerate him, she has to stand, self-accused, and be punished. Robert avails himself of the weapon Lady Audley offered him by her accusation of insanity as a means to end her dangerous presence. In this last phase of the novel, Braddon interrogates the boundaries of insanity as she had questioned the boundaries of femininity before. She reveals the ideological foundations of medical theories showing how so-called “scientific” accounts of female behaviour were used to reinforce ideological portraits.

Elaine Showalter argues that in the sensation novel of the 1860s and 1870s, “madness, usually hereditary in the female line, is the standard explanation of any act of feminine passion, self-assertion, or violence.”¹ Since the medical theories depended on theories of “woman's nature,” they suggested that woman's innate qualities of mind rendered her subservient to man. Mental breakdown in women was both socially and medically proven when they defied their “nature” by competing with men instead of serving them. In this sense, Lady Audley could have been easily judged as mad. Medical records and psychological texts in the period reveal that women who rebelled against their “natural” roles were frequently convicted of insanity. The “natural” for the

¹ Elaine Showalter, “Victorian Women and Insanity,” p.175.

Victorian psychiatrists was connected with specific, socially-identified codes of behaviour, and “nature” in their terms became a supporter of social propriety.

Lady Audley is officially convicted on the grounds of hereditary insanity although the doctor is unable to trace any hereditary taint in her except her unacceptable behaviour. The dialogue between the doctor and Robert Audley reveals the moral bases of the judgement. Lady Audley is taken at her word and the doctor's very inability to define insanity scientifically helps in her conviction. The acclaimed scientific judgement of hereditary insanity, the narrative reveals, does not depend on scientific findings of disorder in the brain or the nervous system, but on moral judgement of behaviour. Since no physical tests are available to detect insanity, defining borderline cases like that of Lady Audley depends entirely on the extent of her deviance and its nature. Doctors frequently “confused insanity with immorality, especially sexual, and with other forms of non-conformist behaviour.”¹ The possibility of wrongful confinement was ever present in the Victorian age because “There was a tendency to equate the respectable with the reasonable, the unrespectable with the irrational.”² By confessing madness, Lady Audley completes her identification with the negative image of femininity: irresponsible, demonic, and mad.

The real secret of the story does not lie in the discovery that Lady Audley is mad, but in the final conclusion that insanity is a label which society applies to female rebellion. “I AM MAD!” she declares, “because my intellect is a little way upon the wrong side of that boundary-line between sanity and insanity.” (p. 293) Darwinian psychiatrists stressed that the moral faculty was the first to suffer when disease invaded the body, and since Lady Audley has transgressed the moral rules of her society, her insanity is confirmed. Andrew Wynter suggested that the safest prediction of latent insanity could be made through “testing the moral faculties.” The reasoning power may remain clear, and the intellect as bright as ever,” he states, but “these deviations of the moral sentiments

¹ Andrew Scull, *Madhouses, Mad-Doctors, and Madmen*, p.340.

² *Ibid.*, p.351.

are the switch points which indicate the fact that the mind is leaving the main line.”¹ The doctor judges Lady Audley's insanity on the same bases. Her confession of the existence of insanity in her family is enough to convict her. Wynter stressed that “In many cases ... there is no direct mental disease, such as can be legally taken notice of, but these children, more or less, by virtue of their inheritance, have passed into the borderland of insanity.”² The crossing reveals itself in moral failings such as “violent passions, acts of cruelty, and lying.”³

The context in which Lady Audley is first defined and later confined as mad is purely social and not scientific, the narrative seems to suggest. Braddon's real feeling about the trial of Lady Audley and her hint to the reader to go beyond the overt narrative are suggested in the title of the chapter which involves the journey to the asylum: “Buried Alive.” The title emphasizes victimization and recalls the same words used in Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*, where it evokes the cruel injustice of Dr. Manette's eighteen-year imprisonment in the Bastille.⁴ More significantly, a similar title is also used in *Villette*, literally, to describe the state of the nun who was buried alive “for some sin against her vow,” and metaphorically, to describe Lucy's confined life. In *Lady Audley*, the lawyer and the physician, the father “confessors” (p. 316) of the age strive to preserve social stability. The conspiracy is not only signified by the doctor's verdict of insanity on a seemingly sane woman, but also in the symbolic union illustrated in Robert Audley's self-identification with the figure of a physician when he discovers the secret of Lady Audley's identity: “Let me be the physician to strike to the root of your malady, Lady Audley.” (p. 227) The dialogue between Robert and the psychiatrist makes it clear that the former's fundamental interest was not in confirming Lady Audley's insanity, but in smuggling her away to save “the *esclandre* of some legal process” (p. 318) which might have threatened the family honour. The psychiatrist confirms that Lady Audley is not

¹ Andrew Wynter, *The Borderlands of Insanity*, (London: Robert Hardwick, 1874), p.18.

² *Ibid.*, p.44.

³ *Ibid.*, p.45.

⁴ David Skilton, introduction to M.E. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, The World Classics' Edition, (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p.xvi.

mad, a fact of which the reader is fully aware;

She ran away from her home, because her home was not a pleasant one, and she left it in the hope of finding a better. There is no madness in that. She committed the crime of bigamy, because by that crime she obtained fortune and position. There is no madness there.(p. 319).

The lady is not mad; but she has the hereditary taint in her blood. She has the cunning of madness, with the prudence of intelligence. I will tell you what she is, Mr. Audley. She is dangerous! (p. 321)

Although the collusion between the two patriarchal figures to punish her is obvious, the reader is aware that both lawyer and doctor felt the social boundaries crumbling in the face of a woman who defied the demarcations of class and gender. They both find their measures for maintaining social stability inadequate. The danger represented in such persons as Lady Audley is that they often live in a world without boundaries, and force those who deal with them to change their own. The disturbing world of the novel lies in the final message given by the narrative: that law and medicine, supposedly created to serve those who need them, are actually used by the powerful sections of society to oppress those who attempt to defy social rules. Braddon leaves the issue of Lady Audley's insanity open to the reader's own interpretations, making it clear however, that Lady Audley had to be put away because she violated social and class morality.

A contemporary reviewer of the novel recognized that Braddon used insanity not only to absolve the heroine from responsibility, but also to inhibit the reader's identification with the rebellious heroine. The reviewer suggests that the reader experiences a sense of relief on discovering Lady Audley's insanity and that such a calculating, scheming woman could not be a normal type: "The culprit is hateful, odious, fiendish, and, as we hope, a maniac."¹ Yet, the reviewer recognizes that the heroine is not really mad and that insanity was only a mechanism used to seal the controversial issues with which the novel opens. Persons who are liable to contemporary insanity, he

¹ "The Popular Novels of The Year," *Fraser's Magazine*, p.257.

states, are not usually such “calm, gentle, soft, ... people” as Lady Audley. In reality “The cold, calculating, beautiful woman” never loses her presence of mind, he continues, and is always ready to defend herself at others' expense. He emphasizes that a woman with Lady Audley' s intelligence and presence of mind cannot be mad.

It is only when driven to bay- rendered desperate by conflicting circumstances, that she turns and rends the obstacle in her path; and whether it be her direst enemy, or her best friend, she will remove the impediment to her own ease and comfort.¹

Insanity is just another weapon Lady Audley invents in trying to defend herself. The reviewer suggests that there is ‘too much method in her madness’ and recognises that she was taken at her word “to save appearances.”²

The end of the novel reveals how the doctor uses his “newly developing science to sustain society's repressive sexual ideology and to impose it on his patients.”³ In the novel, as in society, he is appealed to as a “social tranquillizer”⁴ to preserve the status quo. The psychiatrist is called for when no other explanation or punishment for Lady Audley's transgression could be found. The verdict of insanity, the “medical language of individual internal disorder,” served to empty “the violent act of external social meaning.”⁵ In the case of Lady Audley, insanity brought to a final close her grievous problems as a woman living in a male-dominated society. As in Mrs. Wood's *St. Martin's Eve*, the issue of insanity in *Lady Audley* is raised to mask the problems of women's position in relation to wealth and power. The act of proving insanity is symbolic in itself because it designates individuals as irresponsible and gives society the power to get rid of them. Lady Audley's sexual attractiveness is frequently referred to and incarcerating her in the asylum is the severest punishment the patriarchal society could inflict upon her, because the charge does not only mean putting her away, but also

¹ “The Popular Novels of The Year,” *Fraser's Magazine*, p.257.

² *Ibid.*, p.259.

³ M. Jeanne Peterson, “Dr. Acton's Enemy: Medicine, Sex and Society in Victorian England,” *Victorian Studies*, Vol.29 No.4, (1986), p.569.

⁴ Vieda Skultans, *English Madness*, p.5.

⁵ Roger Smith, *op. cit.*, p.149.

imposing a permanent restriction on her ability to use her sexual appeal to secure status. Anywhere but in a mad house, her beauty would have enabled Lady Audley to survive.

her life, so far as life is made up of action and variety, will be finished If you were to dig a grave for her in the nearest churchyard and bury her alive in it, you could not more safely shut her from the world and all worldly associations I believe you could do no better service to society than by doing this. (p. 322)

Lady Audley's social and sexual identity are lost in the asylum. She is given a new name and no longer exists to those who knew her by her usurped title.

The novel ends conventionally with the punishment of the daring offender and the restoration of social stability; yet, Braddon manages to probe the depth of Victorian antagonism against those who attempt to defy the set of rules which maintain stability. Women must stay within the boundaries assigned to them, especially those of knowledge. Lady Audley understands the ideologies surrounding womanhood and uses them to obtain position; but like Eve, having obtained knowledge and power, she has to fall.

Although Mrs. Henry Wood does not use insanity as a label for transgression in *St. Martin's Eve*, the reasons for the eruption of the heroine's genuine hereditary insanity seem identical to those which cause Lady Audley's punishment: the heroine's struggle to usurp status and position. Unlike Lady Audley who excels in her ability to adopt the requisite social images of woman, Charlotte proves that the control of the external self enforced by Victorian ideology could prove fatal to a disturbed mind. Medical men advised women to exert their utmost will "in resistance to unwanted ideas"¹ within which category all "violations" such as self-assertion, struggle for status or for rights, are included; but the novel suggests that women's wills are never free to be exerted because they are imprisoned by the social and economic conditions which are stressful enough to be "maddening." The narrative suggests that the contrast between a woman's real feelings and the strait jacket of behaviour imposed upon her by society can actively cause her loss

¹ Daniel Noble, *Elements of Psychological Medicine*, (London: 1853). Quoted in Vieda Skultans *Madness and Morals*, p.171.

of self-control.

Through the introduction of two contrasting heroines, the angelic Adeline and the strong-willed Charlotte St. John, Mrs. Wood explores in *St. Martin's Eve* the extent to which Victorian ideology and Victorian laws pressed on woman's physical and mental health. The novel confirms that both modes of response to social pressure, whether of passive retreat or assertive action, can result in woman's loss of self-control. Mrs. Wood adopts the medical description of the accumulation of emotions in women who become hysteric as a form for the plot. According to Robert Brudnell Carter, hysteria arises as a direct result of attempts to suppress emotions and avoid external manifestation of feelings. Because of their "cumulative character," he states, emotions "after being kept down for a longer or shorter period" often break forth "with increased violence, and through more dangerous channels."¹ Carter emphasizes that such violent emotion "manifests itself by the production of certain effects, either upon the intellect and will, or upon the physical organism."² Charlotte moves by degrees towards madness, and each stage in her life produces in her a new emotion which she has to suppress, until her mind can no longer bear the pressure and her madness breaks forth in dangerous fits. Although the novel adopts contemporary medical theories about repressed emotions as an explanation both for Charlotte's madness and Adeline's bodily health, it makes it clear through the narrative that these emotions have little to do with female sexuality as Carter suggested. Social, economic, and even religious pressure, Mrs. Wood suggests, could be more harmful to women's intellect than sexual passion.

Both heroines are subjected to different psychological pressure on different levels within the family and society. Their trials highlight the social defects responsible for their sad destinies. Hereditary insanity is clearly not the only factor responsible for Charlotte's madness, nor is female frailty the cause of Adeline's death. The novel works on two opposing levels: one adopts the conventional Victorian attitude in the way it condemns the main heroine's action as villainy and finally labels it as madness; the other level reveals

¹ Robert Brudnell Carter, *op.cit.*, p.20.

² *Ibid.*, p.4.

the reality about the experiences of the two heroines while being skilfully masked by the narrator's exclamations, sympathetic statements, or even condemnation of their actions at certain stages of the narrative. The pairing of the two heroines, despite the different forms of illness they suffer from, raises questions about the actual conditions which led to their illness.

As in *Lady Audley*, the ending of the novel reveals, in a backhanded way, the collaboration between society's representatives to drive women mad, or even to terminate their existence if necessary. Charlotte's acts of defiance, her infringements of authority and law are attributed by her judges to a hereditary disorder of the brain. Her struggle against economic and social difficulties is represented in very ambivalent terms. Mrs. Wood adopts standard moral judgements to evaluate Charlotte's behaviour, while simultaneously undermining these judgements by revealing the real motivations and causes of the heroine's actions. Although the overt narrative stresses Charlotte's jealousy, strong will, and more emphatically, her guilty secret, the plot reveals that Charlotte's hereditary insanity might never have appeared but for the harsh circumstances of her life. The novel suggests that social oppression, enforced economic dependence, and the unstable conditions of her life press upon Charlotte's intellect far more than her hereditary disposition.

Marriage forces women to adopt new self-images and imposes upon them new roles, the novel suggests. Before marriage, we are told, Charlotte never pretended to be what she was not. Her character was not formed according to the Victorian standards of the passive angel. She had a special status in her family and a domineering will to safeguard it. She "had received all the love, all the consideration, all the care; the house had only seemed to go on in reference to the well-being and convenience of its eldest daughter."¹ Charlotte has to face the sudden change when she moves from the relaxed atmosphere of her home to find herself confined within her role as a wife and a step-mother. The narrator states that Charlotte experiences deep emotional emptiness because

¹ Mrs. Henry Wood, *St. Martin's Eve*, (1866; London: Macmillan, 1907), p.23. All other references are to this edition and will be cited hereafter in the text.

of her new station. The duties of her marital life deprive her of the powerful position she used to enjoy at her home and force her to retreat to the secondary position of step-mother to the heir.

The novel suggests that the pressures on woman's life render her emotions inconsistent with her will, however good her intentions might be. The narrator confirms that Charlotte's intentions in marrying George St. John are void of any mercenary motives. Charlotte declares: "I should marry George St. John, though I knew that I must beg my bread afterwards from door to door." (p. 18) But, Charlotte realizes that the pressure is too much for her, and her feeling of helplessness is deepened by the birth of her own child. The heroine has to experience a fierce struggle between her "wild, impassioned" (p. 40) love for her own child, and her newly-acquired hatred for the heir. Although only a child, Benja comes to represent the usurper of both Charlotte's rights and those of her son's. He becomes a symbol of the merciless authority, of the law of entail which oppressed Charlotte when she was a girl by depriving her of her father's inheritance because she was a woman and which now oppresses her again by depriving her son of his father's property because he is a second son. "Many a mother, far more gentle and self-forgetting than was Charlotte St. John, might have felt a pang in contemplating the contrast. Benja had a title in prospective; he would be rich amidst the rich. George ... might count his future income by a few hundreds." (p. 39) The narrator makes clear the injustice of the law of entail on both the mother and the child.

As in *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret*, where economic law and marital law cause the victims to adopt criminal means to achieve their rights or improve their position, so in *St. Martin's Eve* the law of entail pushes Charlotte to commit a crime against an innocent child. Although Charlotte vows to "make no distinction between the boys," (p. 81) and be a good mother to the orphan child, the "state of things" (p. 39) - an ambivalent expression Wood uses to describe the circumstances responsible for the heroine's despair- which no one can change forces Charlotte to act against her will. Law again transforms the victim into a criminal. Charlotte's rebellion marks the culmination of the contrast between her desires as an individual and what society offers her as a woman and a second wife. From the moment Charlotte's feelings begin to take shape in

action, the narrator's voice changes from the initial sympathetic tone to a rigid one, but readers continue to pity the heroine because they are fully aware of the motivations of her action. Charlotte's actual guilt lies in her inability to abide by a social law which reduces her existence to a state of charity, depending on the benevolence of the heir. Charlotte regards the law as a set of unethical customs and rebels against it. Her mother, however, stoutly defends the status quo: "Unjust is not the right word. The law of entail may not be an equitable law, but Englishmen live under it, and must obey it." (p. 79)

When she can no longer repress her feelings of rebellion, Charlotte's inner self, threatened by feelings of jealousy, love, and injustice, causes her mind to disintegrate. Although Mrs. Wood uses the medical argument that repressed feelings could lead women to madness, she subtly questions the causes assigned by medical men for such outbursts by stressing that it was mainly Charlotte's economic dependence, created by the law of entail, which had led her to both crime and madness. Long before Charlotte commits her crime, we are made to understand that it was not the result of a deranged mind but an attempt to secure her own and her child's fortune. Charlotte's eyes had "a sort of wild expression of absolute *will*" (p. 13) which was later interpreted as a sign of her insanity. The narrator explains that Charlotte had not only a strong will but also a stern craving for power and status. The story punishes Charlotte by the death of her son which causes her to lose all that she has fought for. "Apart from the child's personal loss, his death took from her state and station; and she was not one to disregard those benefits." (p. 327)

Like Lady Audley, Charlotte comes to understand that to achieve special status, she must act within the means available for her as a woman: -marriage-; so she assumes the character of the gentle, ill-fated lady before Isaac St. John. But Charlotte's attempt to marry the invalid heir threatens the security of Frederick St. John, the heir presumptive who, in his attempt to prove Charlotte's insanity, reveals, like Robert Audley, the mercilessness of the patriarchal figure when an overthrow of his vested interests is attempted. By contemplating marrying his brother, Charlotte threatens to deprive Frederick of future financial security. The overt narrative's laudation of the gentleman's attempt to save his brother from the mad adventuress is undermined by the ambivalence

in the covert narrative regarding his difficult financial situation. There are hints about Frederick's "extravagance," (p. 136) that he "had parted with his money" (p. 106) and also an incident about his being pursued by debtors for unpaid bills. Although a gentleman by birth, Frederick displays ungentlemanly behaviour both in his treatment of the girls who fall in love with him and his hard-heartedness towards his invalid brother.

While Lady Audley uses hereditary insanity as a plea to help her when caught, Charlotte's existent derangement is fiercely awakened by Frederick's pursuit and his attempts to penetrate her already fragmented self. Her final fit is not only the result of the pressure upon her, but also of her realization of her helpless and humiliating state. "The mortification of being turned from Castle Wafer, the visit of Mr. Pym" (p. 446) and the doctor's discovery of her share in the crime, complete Charlotte's frustrations and force out her latent insanity. It is not the "Elevation of dark fumes and Exaltations from the Matrice"¹ which cause women's mental derangements, the novel suggests, but the maddening conditions of their lives. After the series of troubles she confronts, Charlotte's divided self can no longer be healed; it can only explode. The narrative makes it clear that Charlotte's final fit is a form of protest against the Victorian system which stripped her of the will to do good. Charlotte's insanity is not a conscious act of rebellion, but as Shoshana Felman suggests, "the impasse confronting those whom cultural conditioning has deprived of the very means of protest or self-affirmation."² In Charlotte's case, madness represented helplessness and despair. The final allusion to the role of Victorian patriarchy in provoking Charlotte's insanity is suggested through the characters who confine her, and who, as in *Lady Audley*, represent the cornerstones of Victorian authority: Frederick St. John, the social authority, reverend Beauclerc, the religious authority, and Dr. Pym, the medical authority. After her insanity is proved, Charlotte's actions, like those of Lady Audley, lose their symbolic meaning and become the peculiarities of a mad woman. Both *Lady Audley* and *St. Martin's Eve* interrogate the borderlines and the causes of female insanity: although Charlotte and Lady Audley

¹ Richard Blackmore Stale, *A Treatise of the Spleen and vapours: or, Hypochondrical and Hysterical Affections*, (London: 1725). Quoted in Hunter and Macalpine, op.cit., pp.320-21.

² Shoshana Felman, "Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy," *Diacritics*, 5 (1975), p.2.

explode in emotion, they enact their despair on those who for them are representative symbols of oppression. Lady Audley burns the inn with the two men who threaten her peace while she saves Phoebe who knows her secret. Charlotte also burns the symbol of patriarchal authority represented in the heir. Fire in both novels becomes the symbol of female rebellion against patriarchal dominance: the conventional medical images of the smouldering fires, of women exploding with sexuality, are fully exploited to express female anger and are twisted to become women's means of revenge on their oppressors.

The reason for woman's loss of self-control, whether it expresses itself in madness, criminal acts or illness is one and the same in the two novels: their inability to reconcile their feelings as individuals with the social roles assigned to them as a collective race of mothers and daughters. Yet, in her thorough examination of the female reaction to categorization, Mrs. Wood confirms through the story of the angelic Adeline that even adherence to the ideal forms of femininity prescribed by society does not spare woman the loss of self-control. Adeline's miserable life reflects the process of self-enslavement pursued by family and society in relation to women: "Adeline had never been an indulged child She knew her father's haughty, unbending character, his keen sense of honour." (p. 243) Her subjection, unlike Charlotte's, starts early in life, so that her arranged marriage seems to her a natural outcome of the principles of her family. Only when that marriage stands as a barrier before her happiness, does Adeline experience the difficulty of reconciling the suppressed self with the suppressing outer world.

The narrative stresses that Adeline's happiness is sacrificed by her father and the church for her "course of duty," (p. 274) the duty to quell her suffering in order to satisfy every one around except herself. The apparent cooperation between Father Marc and Adeline's father draws our attention to the parallel between her story and that of Charlotte. The statutory law which led to the latter's insanity is replaced here by religion which directly contributes to Adeline's illness. "Never, under any circumstances, could you have allowed yourself to espouse one of the heretical faith" (p. 274) her father confidently asserts; "oh, tush! sacrifice!- happiness! these chimeras of imagination are not recognized by us" he tells Adeline's friend. "Adeline may rebel in spirit- may repine for a week or two, but when once she is married to the Baron, she will settle down

contentedly enough," (p. 277) he confidently confirms. The social system will have its way whatever the sacrifices are, and for one brought up like Adeline, her self-realization, that is her attempted rebellion, must be quenched so that she can fulfil her prescribed course of duty.

Adeline's inner self toils under the pressure of the struggle between two conflicting impulses: either revolting against the established rules, a course which is identified by society as rebellion and leads to loss of self-control, as it did in Charlotte's case, or submitting to these rules, and hence to total self-sacrifice and the deprivation of all personal happiness. As Charlotte's anguish frees the lurking madness in her, Adeline's submission frees her dormant illness and causes the fatal end: "The anguish, the emotion, too great to bear had suddenly snapped asunder one of those little tenures of life." (p. 297) Adeline dies of "consumption": "at least that is what the doctors would tell you," says Rose, "I won't say anything about a broken heart." (p. 366) The general medical and social ideas about female vulnerability operate to obscure the real reasons behind women's suffering. The novel places women's illness and madness in a new light, by stressing that they are not, as medicine claimed, the products of nature but of the cultural conditions and the psychological pressures resulting from those conditions.

Significantly, a few hours before her death, Adeline is allowed to reveal the steps followed by the religious system to entrap individuals. Adeline matures after her experience and comes to understand the causes of her suffering. She realizes that the purpose of the religious forces is not to reconcile human beings to love but to safeguard power and domination, and that religion, like law, is a means to keep society in the kind of order wanted by the controlling authorities.

When you shall be as near to death as I am, you will see the fallacy of these earthly differences, - how worse than useless they must appear in the sight of our universal Father There is but one heaven, and I believe it is of little moment which form of worship we pursue, so that we pray and strive earnestly in it to arrive there. (p. 343)

The novel reveals the ways in which these religious forms function to maintain social power.

Despite her passivity, Adeline fails to survive. Her attempt to subdue her rebellion leaves her self-less, and illness in her case becomes another form of losing self-control. Her death questions the use of the principle of duty and self-sacrifice and concludes that it neither preserves woman's health nor prevents her social imprisonment. The sad ending of the two heroines represents a crusading cry, not for greater sexual freedom as a way to avoid illness arising from repression, but for social, economic and religious reform. The only women in the novel who can survive the system are those who are able to accept it willingly like Rose, Charlotte's sister, and Georgiana, Alfred's future wife, not those who rebel against it, or those who force themselves to abide by its principles.

The question of self-control is vital in all the novels studied in this chapter because it draws into account other important issues about individuals and their reactions to the principles governing society. In *The Woman in White*, ideas about self-control determine the structuring and presentation of the narrative. Walter uses self-control to construct his narratives and those of others, as he uses it also to manage the other characters in the actual plot of the novel. Walter Hartright's own conceptions about self-control form the basis of the gender-relationships in the narrative which he controls. The space which the characters are allowed by Walter to occupy in the narrative is determined by their ability to preserve self-control. Emotional or passionate reactions prove enough to change the fate of the characters and with it the narrative structure in the sense that these outbursts entail the character's absence from the narrative. The loss of self-control is manifested in the narrative through the breakdown of writing and the restoration of control is suggested by restoration of the control over narrative, as in Hartright's case. Characters who cannot control their mental state, like Laura, Anne Catherick, and Sir Percival are not allowed a narrative space of their own; their stories, as well as their fortunes, are controlled by the stronger characters, like Marian, Hartright, and Fosco. Self-control is closely linked to the breakdown and construction of identity in the novel. The final victory is for Hartright who succeeds in gaining self-control by mastering Laura's identity through controlling her and others. His triumph is illustrated by the authority given to him in structuring the final narrative.

Although Hartright attempts to construct the overall narrative in accordance with contemporary ideas about self-control, the attempt is undermined by the narrative strategies he employs. As Robert's narrative in *Lady Audley* loses credibility when set against that of the omniscient narrator, so does Walter's narrative take on new meanings when set against the narratives of the other characters. The conventional lines of gender-difference and its relation to self-control which Walter attempts to draw at the outset of the story are immediately rendered unreliable by the borderline cases of gender, reason and even morality which are offered to the reader through the subsequent narratives. Walter defines the content of the tale as "the story of what a Woman's patience can endure, and what a Man's resolution can achieve."¹ But, the other narratives present a rather different picture from that which Walter wants to implant in the reader's mind from the beginning. Courage and patience, we discover, are relative terms which could be applied to different characters at different stages in the narrative. While Walter was unable to face up to the crisis and could only control his passion for Laura by fleeing from the country, Marian was courageously defending her sister's life and fortune. The two terms, we learn through the narrative, are not as gender-based as Walter would like us to believe. Even Laura, whom both Walter and Marian portray as the passive, dependent angel, shows unexpected resolution in revealing to her future husband her secret love for Hartright. Fosco, whom Walter and Marian portray as a villain, asserts that he succeeded in his plot because of his boundless patience and ability to wait for the right moment to act. Yet, despite the emphasis on his self-control, Fosco does lose resolution when his love for Marian drives him to spare Laura's life. Walter himself passes through various stages when his resolution alters as when he falls in love with Laura, and others where he has to wait and be patient, as when he has to wait for Fosco to commit a mistake or when he has to spend his days in hiding. Other male characters in the novel, such as Sir Percival and Mr. Fairlie, show neither resolution nor endurance. It becomes clear, from our reading of the assembled narratives that Walter's own narrative

¹ Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*, (1859-60; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), p.33. All other references are to this edition and will be included hereafter in the text.

is untrustworthy. There are issues which he wishes to evade or to hide, like the personal economic benefit he reaps from his marriage to Laura and his employment of amoral methods to achieve his ends. Walter's method of telling, we discover, does not generate the truth. At its best, his narrative offers relative truths or different meanings. By his insistence on explaining the incidents in relation to his own story and that of Laura, Walter attempts to reduce the narrative to a single confrontation between him and the criminals. In his study of "Dreams, Transformations, and Detective Fiction," Albert D. Hutter, relates the process psychoanalysis adopts to analyze dreams to the methods followed by detective fiction to solve the mystery of a crime. He suggests that both psychoanalysis and detective fiction use language to retell an event or a series of events which occurred in the past. The "act of retelling" involves a tampering with the time of events in order to arrange them to fit into the narrative sequence. How "we remember an event and how we restate it," states Hutter, "determines for us its historical reality." While it is usual to believe that the past does determine the present, "*it need not do so.*" The way a past event is retold shows that "the present may, in turn influence the past by determining its meaning."¹ This occurs in *The Woman in White*, where Walter's attempt to narrate a past event determines the meanings and significance of that event, as he continuously tampers with, installs or omits other narratives according to the extent to which they serve his purpose. Hutter believes that detective fiction and dreaming share this mechanism of transforming "a fragmented and incomplete set of events into a more ordered and complete understanding." Like dreaming, "the detective story renders our perception of the past through language." Hutter suggests that detective fiction and psychoanalysis share a "structural" as well as a "historical" relationship.² Psychoanalysis, he states, does the same as a detective story; it tries "to shape a personal history into its most complete and most convincing form." In both "Reductionism occurs" with "the insistence on total explanation."³ Walter's subjective view of the

¹ Albert D. Hutter, "Dreams, Transformations, And Literature: The Implications of Detective Fiction," *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 19, (1975-6), p.190.

² *Ibid.*, p.191.

³ *Ibid.*, p.200.

narrative, his reduction of the various narratives into incomplete texts which could only become useful when he puts them in the context of the story, obscures the truth about Laura and even Marian and throws doubt on the credibility of the narrative as a whole.

What we might finally term as the "truth" in the novel is not the one set by Hartright, whose assurance that, as in a court scene, the characters are reliable witnesses, mystifies the fact that some narratives, like that of Mrs. Clements were reconstructed by Walter himself; others, like Marian's, were cut short, or Fosco's were written in self-defence and with awareness of Hartright's position. The relative "truth" we are able to deduce is the set of implied meanings and attitudes which we can get from the tension between Walter's insistence on the total explanation of the story and the fragmented narratives themselves. Hutter suggests that the "tension between mystery and solution is so essential to every detective story that it superimposes itself onto any subject matter or plot and thus becomes a second story."¹ This is clear in *The Woman in White* where the initial investigation set up by Hartright into the identity of the woman in white concludes with his own story, his achievement of social status.

The woman in white connects the main plot of the mystery with the sub-plot of the investigation. She initiates Walter into the search not only for her identity but his own as well. As a borderline case between sanity and idiocy, Anne causes Walter to question his fixed notions about the reliability of the medical judgements about individuals, and to revise his assumptions about the charitable attitudes of the asylums. He concludes that the asylum is not always the home of absolute insanity. It could be, he discovers later, a man's means of solving financial or legal problems. He realizes in his first encounter with Anne that she was not insane:

"the idea of absolute insanity which we all associate with the very name of an Asylum, had ... never occurred to me I had seen nothing, in her language or her actions, to justify it at the time; and even with the new light thrown on her by the words which the stranger had addressed to the policeman, I could see nothing to justify it now." (p. 55)

¹ Albert D. Hutter, op. cit., p.208.

The professional opinion, later discovered in Mrs. Fairlie's letter to her husband, accords with Walter's conclusion. Although Anne's intellect "is not developed as it ought to be," the doctor states, it could still be restored, and she could "grow out of it." (p. 84) Anne's condition was made worse by incarceration. Despite her derangement, Anne was conscious of what happened around her and in this respect, she was dangerous: "She's just mad enough to be shut up, and just sane enough to ruin me when she's at large." (p. 353) Both Walter and the reader discover that, like Laura, Anne was incarcerated because her presence threatened Sir Percival's peace and stirred his feelings of guilt. The final discovery that Anne knew nothing about the secret deepens the sense of injury done to her and reinforces the idea that there is no underlying truth.

While Anne causes Hartright to question his social role and responsibility as a man, she also allows the reader to examine the possibility of finding a definite meaning, a final judgement, or a clear-cut categorization. As a woman in trouble, Anne's first appearance puts Walter in confrontation with the other sex and causes him to question his gender-role, both as an individual and as a man responsible for keeping social stability.

What could I do? Here was a stranger utterly and helplessly at my mercy- and that stranger a forlorn woman. No house was near; no one was passing whom I could consult; and no earthly right existed on my part to give me a power of control over her, even if I had known how to exercise it. (p. 50)

The statement sets up questions which are to be answered later by Hartright and other male characters about their relationship with the other sex. Although Walter brings to the fore these issues of sex-roles and gender-differences during his first meeting with Anne, he confesses his inability to explain the motivations of his behaviour towards her. "I trace these lines, self-distrustfully, with the shadow of after-events darkening the very paper I write on; and still I say, What could I do?" (p. 50). As a woman, Anne causes disturbance to Walter's fixed notions and causes him to suspect his own self-control, which he had believed to be a natural consequence of his own masculinity.

Walter's determination to discover the identity of the woman in white leads him to a new phase in his life, to an allegorical quest for self-discovery, which is symbolized by his entrance to the confusing, borderland of Limmeridge House. "A confused sensation

of having suddenly lost my familiarity with the past, without acquiring any additional clearness of idea in reference to the present or the future, took possession of my mind.” (p. 57) The blank phase which he experiences on his entrance to Limmeridge House proves to be an initiation into maturity, where his involvement in the events leads him to question old notions, modify them, and finally structure his own version which he adopts at the end of the narrative.

In Limmeridge House, Marian- herself a case of gender-borderline- is the one who first leads Walter to check his fixed notions about feminine beauty. Marian is set up by both Walter and herself as Laura's antithesis. Strong-minded and self-confident, she inhabits a twilight existence between masculinity and femininity “half in the soft light, half in mysterious shadow.” (p. 81) Walter experiences shock when his impulsive admiration for her figure is checked by the repulsive discovery of her ugly face; “never was the fair promise of a lovely figure more strangely and startlingly belied by the face and head that crowned it.” (p. 58) From this stage on, Walter, despite his emphatic gender-polarization, has to recognize the possibility of borderline cases. As Walter pauses to think about his shaken conceptions, we pause to examine Marian's character. We realize that the impressions we form about Marian are drawn from Hartright. Marian is described by Walter as a mannish woman, with a “large, firm, masculine mouth and jaw” (p. 58) and a “strong, steady grasp of a man.” (p. 148) As we perceive from her diary, Marian is the victim of the borderline world in which she lives. Her character not only falters between masculinity and femininity, but also between conventionality and rebellion. Marian's own description of her feelings suggests some lesbian tendencies. She talks about Laura's marriage in a peculiar way, regarding Laura's husband as her rival: “She will be *his* Laura instead of mine! *His* Laura!” (p. 207). Her diary also indicates a strong physical intimacy between the two sisters: “She reached both hands up to my cheeks, and drew my face down to hers till our lips met.”(p. 188)

Marian is the victim of her own wish to rebel against the weaknesses allotted to her sex, a wish that causes her to dissociate herself from the activities characteristic of women, such as music, painting, or embroidery. Yet Marian's potential rebellion is contradicted by her conventional standards which, like those of Hartright, prevent her

initially from penetrating others' characters. The prejudice of the upper middle-class characterizes her opinion about Laura's marriage which she regards as "an engagement of honour" as opposed to one "of love." (p. 97) Her judgement of Sir Percival's character is based on her adoption of these notions set by the class-aware age: "He has fought successfully two contested elections, and has come out of the ordeal unscathed. A man who can do that, in England, is a man whose character is established." (p. 107) Marian's involvement in the search for Anne's identity and in the investigation of the plot against her sister, leads her, like Walter, to the discovery of her own self and causes her to call into suspicion, and consequently modify, her fixed notions about class and character.

Marian's journey into self-discovery is initiated by her inability to explain her attitude towards the other sex as represented by Fosco. Like Marian, Fosco also inhabits a gender-borderland: "Fat as he is, ... his movements are astonishingly light and easy. He is as noiseless in a room as any of us women, and ... with all his look of unmistakable mental firmness and power, he is as nervously sensitive as the weakest of us." (p. 242) Her encounter with Fosco leaves Marian utterly unable to explain the cause of her peculiar feelings towards a man she knows well to be a villain. As readers, we only know Fosco through Marian's statements about him. Marian gains importance because she is the only one who proves able to understand the count's character. Despite his faulty habits, his obvious cunning, and the contradictions in his character, the Count forces Marian to admire and like him: "The man has attracted me, has forced me to like him." (p. 240) She confesses that he awakens "illegitimate" feelings in her, and records in her diary "sensations ... which I would rather not feel" (p. 241) when she encounters the Count. Fosco awakens sexual desire in Marian and only when she is able to acknowledge her admiration for the Count and confront her feelings for him can she change and establish her own identity.

As Marian's involvement in the investigation gives her insight into her own and others' characters, so does Walter's role transform him from a social non-entity into a man of important position in the society. While Marian is obliged to change her ideas about class when she discovers the real face behind Sir Percival's mask of respectability, and his dishonourable intentions in marrying Laura, Walter is left with the challenge of

the “hard and cruel question” (p. 95) of class which was raised for the first time by Marian. Walter was initially living in a blank world due to his class position which actually demolished his sexual identity. In the respectable social milieu in which he moved as a drawing master, Walter Hartright, as he states in his narrative, was nothing more than a domestic animal:

I had accepted the position as part of my calling in life; I had trained myself to leave all the sympathies natural to my age in my employer's outer hall, as coolly as I left my umbrella there before I went upstairs. I had long since learnt to understand ... that my situation in life was considered a guarantee against any of my female pupils feeling more than the most ordinary interest in me, and that I was admitted among beautiful and captivating women much as a harmless domestic animal is admitted among them. (p. 89)

Walter's search to establish Laura's identity and to discover that of Anne Catherick leads him into direct confrontation with the stagnant world of the aristocracy. His discovery of the crimes and illegalities committed by the respectable classes in order to establish themselves annihilates his inhibition towards them and helps him realize his own identity. Dismissed initially by Marian as an alien force which threatened class stability through Laura, Walter arranges his narrative so that he is called upon to control and reform that class. Walter is able to gain position through controlling and manipulating both Laura and Marian. As their defendant, he is able to threaten Fosco and to expel Percival, and thus gain his position by stripping the others of theirs.

Walter's relation to Laura and his role in restoring her identity is particularly important for an understanding of the power he gains through his manipulation of the other characters in the novel. It is Walter who actually prepares us for the plot which Fosco weaves later in the novel by being the first to hint at the possibility of exchanging identities when he discovers “The living image ... of the woman in white” in Laura and “the ominous likeness between the fugitive from the asylum” (p. 86) and the high-born lady in Limmeridge House. The plot of exchanging identities poses many question about women, identity, reason, and men's relation to these questions. As in *Lady Audley* and *St. Martin's Eve*, the novel treats insanity as part of wider social and legal issues. Borderline cases, like those of hereditary insanity, are again placed by Collins in the

context of the social position of women and their relation to marriage and property.

The link between insanity and woman's social position is first suggested in Marian's statement about marriage. In both cases of marriage and insanity women end up without identity or property. In marriage, women are uprooted from their families and friends; Men, Marian confirms, are the "enemies of our innocence and our peace- they drag us away from our parents' love and our sisters' friendship- they take us body and soul to themselves." (p. 203) The parallel between marriage and insanity is created by the loss of social and legal identity in which they both result. Later in the novel, the plot to usurp Laura's money hinges upon incarcerating her and posing Anne as Laura. Writing of Laura's marriage, Marian states, seemed like "writing of her death." (p. 207) Laura loses her name by marriage and later by the plot against her identity. For women, identity and existence become synonymous, as Fosco suggests, "I might have taken Lady Glyde's life I . . . took her identity instead." (p. 632)

The significance of the exchange of identities lies in the fact that Laura's transformation changes her from Anne's double to Anne herself: "Fancy my wife, after a bad illness, with the touch of something wrong in her head- and there is Anne Catherick for you," (p. 355) states Sir Percival. The conspiracy starts by simply exchanging the legal identities of Laura and Anne, and ends up by affecting Laura's reason and threatening her existence. Although Walter tries to downplay this transformation, Marian's narrative suggests that Laura would have ended up as unstable and insecure as Anne herself, had she not been rescued from the asylum. Due to Walter's control of the narrative, we are never sure that Laura did not actually suffer from mental illness. Walter's early narrative reveals that even before her incarceration, Laura had a nervous tendency; "the sweet, sensitive lips are subject to a slight nervous contraction, when she smiles." (p. 75) Like Anne, Laura comes out of the asylum on the borderline of madness. In the asylum, Laura loses identity and social rank, but she also loses her memory. She is frightened to remember the past or her oppressors just as Anne was. Whenever the plot against her is recalled to her memory, she becomes as confused and frightened as Anne used to be. In fact the only signs we have of Laura's identity are the external signs of recognition presented by Walter and Marian. The difference between Laura and Anne

is reinforced by Hartright due to his control of the narrative, but as readers we can never be sure that the figure we end up with as Laura is actually Laura herself. This possibility is reinforced by Mrs. Fairlie's earlier statement that once a notion is implanted in Anne's mind, it stays there for ever. If this observation is set against the method of recovery followed by Walter and Marian, of trying to remind Laura only of the happy incidents of the past and establish them as realities in her mind, how can we be sure that it is not actually Anne who internalized these happy events for herself.

The control men practise on Laura's and Anne's reason is revealed in the narrative structure. As I argued earlier, the space allowed for a character in the narrative determines, and is determined by, the self-control this character is able to show. Being on the borderline of reason, both Laura and Anne seem unable to cross the frontier of language or to act for themselves. We only see them through Walter's and Marian's narratives. There is a determination on their part to keep Laura as the ideal image of the beautiful, passive, and non-reasoning angel. Laura's character, as initially given to us, is actually the outcome of the water-colour painting through which Walter sees her. He confesses his inability to "separate her from my own sensations, and from all that has happened in the later time." (p. 74) Yet, Laura is not only the product of the romantic portrait Walter draws but also the final prize for his victory: through her he defeats the upper class and secures a high social position for himself. His idealization of Laura forms part of his feelings towards her as a woman and echoes beliefs which have become central to the formation of his character as a man: "Think of her as you thought of the first woman who quickened the pulses within you that the rest of her sex had no art to stir." (p. 76) But, despite Walter and Marian's tendency to speak for Laura, she sometimes peeps through the narrative as a reflective, self-conscious person. Her marital experience adds to her maturity, and she is fully aware of the disadvantage her money puts her at. "Thank God for your poverty- it has made you your own mistress, and has saved you from the lot that has fallen on me," (p. 280) she tells Marian. She protests against being treated like a child, but Walter and Marian seem intent on ignoring and controlling these outbursts.

Anne also seems unable to speak the sentence which we think would lead to the

discovery of her own and Sir Percival's secret. Anne only pushes the investigation forward. A "walking mystery," (p. 83) she provokes the others to follow her, but proves to be only "an instrument of a Design that is yet unseen." (296) Though she does not know the real secret, Anne is pursued by all the others in order to make her speak.

If either you, or that unlucky lady, had questioned my daughter closely, and had insisted on her explaining what she really meant, you would have found her lose all her self-importance suddenly, and get vacant, and restless, and confused. (pp. 558-9)

Anne dies without knowing who she really is. It is Walter who finishes her sentence for her as well as filling the gap in Laura's memory.

Despite Walter's elaborate attempts to appear as the only honourable man in the narrative, we cannot disregard the parallels which are revealed in the assembled narratives, between Hartright and the villains. Like Percival who physically incarcerates Anne to serve his personal purposes, Walter incarcerates Laura mentally by installing in her memory events from the past which he wants her to remember and modelling her through the process of moral management by getting her to internalize the feelings and manners which accord with his idealized image of her. Despite his attempt to separate himself from the arch villain, Walter stands in parallel to him in many ways. Fosco and Walter are the only persons in the novel who are able to control the reason of others. They both think, in different ways, that women should be treated like children and should be silenced by a severe process of moral management.¹ Walter restores Laura's memory by telling her stories. He forces her to live in an imaginative world of fairy tales and paintings which he pretends to be selling for her. Both Laura and Madam Fosco are not allowed to reason and are subject to moral management by the more self-controlled males. Fosco confirms that a man's own self-control is the weapon which allows him to control women. He advises Percival

never to accept a provocation at a woman's hands. It holds with children, and it holds with women, who are nothing but children grown up. Quiet resolution is the one quality the animals, the

¹ See Jenny Bourne Taylor, *op. cit.*, p.108.

children, and the women all fail in: if they can once shake this superior quality in their master, they get the better of him. (pp. 345-6)

Marian confirms the Count's opinion by showing her ability to combat Percival. She believes that "Any woman who is sure of her own wits is a match ... for a man who is not sure of his own temper." (p. 332) She confesses that she fears the Count precisely because he is a "man who can keep his temper." (p. 271)

Medical ideology about women influences the structure of the narrative. Nervousness is identified as a feminine condition in the novel, and when men are nervous, like Mr. Fairlie and Fosco, their state is identified with that of women. Women's minds, however strong they might seem, give way to male power in the novel. Laura does not die, but "the mere fact of having been locked up in a mental house causes her to show genuine symptoms of mental disease."¹ Marian falls ill as a result of the over-exertion of her limited power as a woman. Like the discovery of Lady Audley's portrait, Fosco's take-over of Marian's diary acts as a violation of both the mind and the self. One of the most disappointing turns the narrative takes is when we discover the identity of the well-wisher who concludes Marian's diary. Marian has to be stopped on the verge of action. After her over-night adventure, she has crossed the boundaries allowed for her as a woman- an action symbolized by the taking off of her under skirt. Like Laura, Marian has finally to wait for Walter to fight for her cause. She ends up as "the self-renouncing friend, Hartright's desexualized "sister"."²

Despite her emphasis on her faultless memory, Marian seems obsessed with the fear of forgetfulness. She often repeats in her diary the necessity she feels to remember and write down every single incident: "I recall the impulse that awakened in me to preserve those words in writing ... while the time was my own, and while my memory vividly retained them." (p. 357) As a woman, Marian is symbolically prevented from seeing into the past or the future; only Walter and Fosco are given this power. Hers is

¹ Merrilyn Williams, *Women in the Victorian Novel, 1800-1900*, (London: Macmillan, 1984), p.36.

² U. S. Knoepfmacher, "The Counter World of Victorian Fiction and *The Woman in White*," in Jerome H. Buckley's *The Worlds of Victorian Fiction*, (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1975), p.366.

the only present tense narrative, the only narrative which is not written for the purpose of the story but in order to keep a register of the events as they happened. Yet just as Walter has chosen the details of other accounts he, consequently, misses out the bits in Marian's which he chooses. Walter's narrative asserts women's inability to concentrate or remember. Mrs. Michelson cannot remember the date of Laura's flight from Waterpark, while Fosco is able to provide Walter with documents which confirm that date. Walter's text projects women as less in control than men, and Marian seems to have internalized his views and acted upon them.

Men's self-control is achieved in the novel through their ability to control their passions, mainly towards women. D. A. Miller suggests that the repeated primal scene, presented in Anne's touch "rehearses the "origin" of male nervousness in female contagion- strictly in the woman's touch."¹ Man's quest for identity often begins with the test of his ability to control his feelings towards women. Like Robert Audley who confesses that his fascination with Lady Audley caused him to trace every incident back to her, Walter describes his obsession with Anne Catherick as "monomania." (p. 105) As Robert can only achieve his identity by incarcerating Lady Audley, Sir Percival can preserve his only by incarcerating both Anne and Laura. To extend his identity, Walter has also to keep Laura under his management, to incarcerate her within the bonds of motherhood, by which he was able to gain both money and status.

Passion becomes a cause of the loss of identity in Percival's case. His past renders him "mad- mad with the terrors of a guilty conscience." (p. 322) Percival's frantic reactions to every one around him who touched on his past results in his death and the revelation of his secret. His loss of self-control leads to the loss of his social identity and transforms him into an outcast. Sir Percival's identity is synonymous with his social rank, as Walter puts it: "The disclosure of that secret, ... would deprive him at one blow of the name, the rank, the estate, the whole social existence that he had usurped." (p. 530) He will be "driven out into the world, a nameless, penniless, friendless outcast!"

¹ D. A. Miller, "*Cage aux Folles*, Sensation and Gender in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*," *Representations*, 14 (1986), p.110.

(p. 530). Percival exchanges places with Anne. He moves from social respectability to being dispossessed, while Anne, initially an outcast, eventually receives social recognition. But, both transformations take place after death. Significantly Percival is burnt in the fires of passion; an imagery associated with the explosive forces of femaleness in the medical literature.

The novel seems to echo the age's ideas about reason and self-control: the characters' success is measured by their ability to act according to the dictates of reason. Whatever the strength of the will is, one outburst of passion is enough to bring down a character, as we see in the case of Fosco. Fosco's first statement about his pride in his self-control proves significant. Like Percival's passionate preoccupation with his secret, Fosco's love for Marian proves to be fatal. His weakness towards Marian causes him to spare her, which allows Walter to set the tide against him: "with what inconceivable rapidity I learnt to adore that woman. At sixty, I worshipped her with the volcanic ardour of eighteen." (p. 619) Passion, Fosco confesses, was the reason for his downfall: "Deplorable and uncharacteristic fault! Behold the cause, in my heart - behold, in the image of Marian Halcombe, the first and last weakness of Fosco's life." (p. 631) Unlike Walter, whose passion for Laura teaches him to preserve self-control, Fosco fails to integrate the two. Walter's initial loss of control is characterized by his exit from the civilized world of the story to that of the jungle. Conolly asserted that "any feeling in excess may become independent of the restraint of the comparing powers, and thus impair or disorder the understanding." Walter gradually learns to control his passion as he matures, learning "the importance of cherishing that governing and protecting action of the mind by careful cultivation and exercise."¹

Despite the narrative's emphasis on the importance of will and self-control to the characters' fortunes, we perceive that the principle of self-help could also be used for amoral purposes. As Fosco declares, moral statements about social control serve as a mask to hide the shortcomings of society. Both Walter and Marian have to acknowledge the existence of an underworld of crime and conspiracies beyond that of respectable

¹ John Conolly, quoted in Barlow, *op.cit.*, p.34.

every-day appearances. The villain, Fosco, is the only one who proves to have assessed correctly the tenuous validity of the mechanisms of social constraint. "The machinery ... set up for the detection of crime is miserably ineffective - and yet only invent a moral epigram, saying that it works well, and you blind everybody to its blunders." (p. 255) Perseverance, self-control, and the determination to achieve success by sheer force of will, were all traits which might equally be employed for criminal ends. Fosco, for example, managed to follow the teachings of this doctrine to the letter. Walter and Marian are obliged to realize that "beneath the moralism" of that world "lurks a vital "counterworld" that is asocial and amoral, unbound by the restraints of the socialized superego."¹ Walter finds out that the institutions founded by society not only serve the longer purse but can also be manipulated to terrorize the victim. He reaches the same conclusion which Fosco offers to Marian: "The hiding of a crime, or the detection of a crime, what is it? A trial of skill between the police on one side, and the individual on the other." (p. 256)

The dark corners of society are discovered during the investigation by characters like Walter and Marian, who initially believed in the untainted goodness of the established social order. The recognition of an underworld of crime and treachery which underlies respectable appearances forces Walter to restore Laura's rights through the use of methods which both he and Marian would have pronounced as unethical under different circumstances. We conclude with Walter that the law does not help even when will and self-control are present. At this stage we realize the impact Walter's control of the narrative has on shaping our perception of the other characters and assessing their behaviour. To restore order, Walter uses the same process which he previously described as a villainous plot: Fosco's process of conspiracy and blackmail, set according to the villain's standards and understanding of society. But Walter endows this process with legitimacy by reference to Laura's state as a victim and the conspiracy of the law against her cause. Marian, likewise, has to act against the law in order to save Laura because the asylum doctor confirms that she is Anne Catherick. Marian and Walter

¹ U. S. Knoepflmacher, op.cit., p.352.

have to hide Laura and live in the underground world, afraid of being detected by both the law and the criminal: "We two, in the estimation of others, are at once the dupes and the agents of a daring imposter. We are supposed to be the accomplices of mad Anne Catherick, who claims the name, the place, and the living personality of dead Lady Glyde." (p. 434) While the victims are excluded from the refuge of the law, Fosco could easily use it against them.

The conclusion of the narrative is offered by Walter. As in *Lady Audley*, the ending of the novel is marked by the restoration of order: moral, social, and legal. The world which we perceive during the investigation, one in which the clear lines of identity, reason, morality, and law are blurred, is exchanged by Walter for one of law and order which marks the end of his adventure. For, while Walter was acting against constitutional law, he was also offending social morality by living with two women who were not related to him. The story is sealed off by the taking of refuge in legality by those same people whom law had deserted. Legal order has to be established as a step towards the consolidation of social order. Walter explains to Marian: "I have no claim on her which society sanctions, which the law allows, to strengthen me in resisting *him*, and in protecting *her*." (p. 579) Laura's identity is established by the assertion of the domestic ideal. She actually marries when her reason is still in doubt; yet, once her legal identity is established through her new social position as Walter's wife, Laura's reason becomes rather unimportant in proving her identity. Walter acts as both her reason and defendant and speaks for her. The happy ending suggests that finally, the social and legal order are integrated.

The ending of the novel is as controversial as the world it represents throughout. Despite Walter's emphasis on his lack of interest in Laura's money, the story ends with a triumphant note about the accession of "Walter Hartright," junior to the property of the Fairlie family, an event which confirms Walter's rise up to the membership of the upper class. In a way, Walter avenges Anne's mother and Anne herself by being able to rise up the social ladder to a position of control within the class which oppressed them both. The established cult of fatherhood is undermined by the discovery of Anne's identity. Laura's sacrifice for her father's memory becomes painfully inconvenient: "I was guided

by my father, because I had always found him the truest of all advisers, the best and fondest of all protectors and friends.” (p. 190) But, the protector's sexual adventure nearly leads to the destruction of his legitimate child.

The shadow of Anne Catherick haunts the novel to the very end. The discovery of her true identity leads us again to distrust the world underlying respectable appearances. The novel offers us a vision of the world where boundaries are shifted constantly, where law might side with the villain, and the teachings of will and self-control serve best those who are able to manipulate the social and legal rules. This open vision allows us to question till the very end the accepted notions about morality, identity, and social stability, including those articulated by Hartright. For, what is the significance of morality or identity in a society that seems to live in disguise?

Although the sensation novelists seem, on the surface, to follow social practise in employing insanity as a device to punish the offenders of order, they nevertheless managed to reveal through the complicated narrative structures of their works, the ideological implications of psychiatric theories of madness. While the over-all structure of the novels often seemed to endorse the accepted beliefs of the age, the fragmented form of the narratives and their covert message beckoned the reader to move away from accepted ideas. The novelists used these ideas of insanity in order to talk about social practices in a wider sense. The issue of insanity becomes inseparable from that of the social, legal, economic, and even sexual identity of the characters. At the same time that the novels seem to confirm contemporary ideologies of self-control, they undermine this position by revealing the impossibility of controlling the self under severe social, economic and psychological pressure. The stable world which the official narrative depicts is swiftly shadowed by one of chaos and irregularities. The novels endorse social statements about self-control, only to reveal later that it is impossible to keep self-control in a society which helps the criminal. In accordance with the contemporary medical ideology, sensation novels portray women exploding in emotion, burning with the fire of passion, but only after they have explained that this fire is due not to women's sexual irregularity or their nature, but to the maddening conditions of their lives, to their being treated as decorative objects or social commodities.

Like the "deviant" individuals whom society excluded, the sensation novel itself was accused by the critics of being a sign of an ill society, "an eruption indicative of the state of health of the body in which they appear."¹ The sensation novel itself was labelled insane because of its introduction of crime and passion in a lurid style. Like the individual, literature was perceived as a unit in society which should keep aloof from unacceptable ideas in order to stay healthy. Mrs. Oliphant claimed that before the strange weed of sensation fiction invaded the novel, the latter was renowned for "a certain sanity, wholesomeness, and cleanness, unknown to other literature of the same class."² The sensation novels' subversion of the ideas of self-help and self-control threatened society's idealized image of sanity and stability, an image which ideology proclaimed to be a necessary consequence of these principles. The novelists not only undermined contemporary psychological definitions of insanity, but also revealed, through their thorough investigation of medical ideology, that the age's obsessive search for signs of derangement was itself a sign of instability in the social order. The desperation with which the patriarchal establishment sought to root out any signs of disruptive behaviour revealed the depths of its own insecurities.

¹ H. L. Mansel, *op. cit.*, p.512.

² Margaret Oliphant, "Novels," (No.II), p.257.

CHAPTER III

The “Innocently Indecent” Heroine: The Challenge to Victorian Sexual Ideology

One of the reasons for the popularity of sensation fiction was its reliance, for its suspense and excitement, on the assumed presence of secrecy in the life of the middle-class. The preoccupation with secrecy in the sensation novel was focused preeminently on the hidden secrets of sexuality and insanity, two of the obsessive concerns of the age. Far from offering a diversionary escapist form of narrative as its critics maintained, the sensation novel actually explored some of the deepest fears of the era.

The Nineteenth Century witnessed fundamental changes in social attitudes towards sexuality. No longer was sexuality a matter for private conscience and the control of the church; it entered into the domain of more explicit social regulation. With the emergence of economic and psychological ideologies of self-control, sex was linked to the mind as well as the body; regulation of the sexual drive through exertion of the will became a matter of individual and social health, rather than one of private conscience. Furthermore, with the development of scientific theories of evolution, sex acquired a new status due to its direct link with physical health and the promotion of the race. These shifts in the concept of sexuality brought about its secularization. The organization of sexuality in the Nineteenth Century became part of the organization of the relationship between the individual and society, part of the individual's responsibility towards the welfare of the social whole rather than to God.

Studies which attempt to examine the nineteenth-century's definition or organization of sexuality should not only consider the various political, religious, scientific, and economic changes which characterized the age, but should further investigate the new set of social relationships created by industrialization and the impact of the new scientific theories on defining and constructing social identity, a domain in which sexuality figured as a major aspect. The model of the Victorians' construction of sexuality which I am going to propose in this chapter will be built on both the social and

medical theories of the age, looking at the writings of the prime exponents of Victorian sexual ideology, as well as those of individuals who embraced or rebelled against them. Through the use of widespread documentary material, I aim to challenge neat totalizing theories about Victorian attitudes to sexuality and to reveal, rather, the complexities of the subject.

Marxist critics have built their thesis about the construction of nineteenth-century sexuality on the close relationship between the forms of production and reproduction. Starting from the premise that changes in the economy in the Nineteenth Century were accompanied by a simultaneous change in the organization of sexuality in the period, they draw the questionable conclusion that the onset of industrial capitalism was distinguished by a severe repression of sexuality. Men's ideologically-induced craving for material success, they argue, led them to constrict their energies to the work place; "the preoccupation with saving extended from the realm of work to the realm of the bedroom. Financial economy was matched by spermatic economy."¹ This theory, as Michel Foucault rightly recognizes in *The History of Sexuality*, is flawed since in depicting sexual repression as a means of controlling and conserving labour, it ignores the crucial class-dimension of nineteenth-century theories of sexual regulation. The prime target of ideologies of regulation was not the working classes, but rather the dominant bourgeois class.

Foucault firmly rejects the hypothesis that sexuality was repressed in the Nineteenth Century in order to utilize and control labour capacity on the grounds that regulation of sexuality in the age excluded the poor and the working classes who constituted the bulk of the productive force in the economy. Sexual ideology in the Nineteenth Century was highly class-specific, thus, any attempt to impose a collective pattern of sexuality fails to accommodate the class division fundamental to the structuring of sexuality in the age. The problematization of sex in children and women which characterizes the organization of sexuality in the era, Foucault argues, started in the

¹ See Mark Poster, *Foucault, Marxism & History: Mode of Production versus Mode of Information*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984), p.122.

privileged classes. He emphasizes that the primary aim in defining and organizing sexuality in the age was not the “repression of the sex of the classes to be exploited, but rather the body, vigor, longevity, ... and descent of the classes that ruled.”¹ He believes that the bourgeoisie established its own body and denied the poor theirs, that it cared for and protected its body in order to retain and develop its value, and that the deployment of sexuality in the Nineteenth Century was a middle-class policy designed to achieve domination through “self-affirmation.” It was initially “a defence, a protection, a strengthening, and an exaltation that were eventually extended to others ... as a means of social control and political subjugation.”²

Foucault rejects the “repressive hypothesis” with regard to the Nineteenth Century's organization of sexuality on the grounds that, more than any other era, the Nineteenth Century talked explicitly about sexual and bodily health, and consequently managed to free sex through discourse. Acknowledging the political and economic effects which created the specifics of the Victorians' organization of sexuality, Foucault concludes that in the Nineteenth Century, sex was “inserted into systems of utility, regulated for the greater good of all, made to function according to an optimum;”³ in other words, sex was channelled and regulated rather than repressed. The Nineteenth Century, he states, separated sex from pleasure, annexed it to mental illness, in order to “ensure population, ... to perpetuate the form of social relations: in short to constitute a sexuality that is economically useful and politically conservative.”⁴

Foucault asserts that a theory of sexual repression would provide a false model of the relationship between sex and power which operated through the explicit discourse on sex in the era. But, Foucault's own definition of power is rather non-specific. His attempt to identify power by the ways it operates in society rather than in terms of an oppressor or oppressed leads Foucault to neglect what Steven Lukes terms as “latent

¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol.1, *An Introduction*, translated by Robert Hurley, First pub. (1976; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1978), p.123.

² Michel Foucault, *op. cit.*, p.123.

³ *Ibid.*, p.24.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.36-37.

conflicts of interests” which are the inevitable outcome of the free exercise of power by a certain group. Lukes suggests that both the oppressor and the oppressed may be unconscious of the exercise of power. This unconscious reaction to power can be revealed, he states, by examining “how people react to opportunities -, or more precisely, perceived opportunities, when these occur, to escape from subordinate positions in hierarchal systems.”¹

Lukes' statement is significant because he draws attention to the fact that Foucault's over-emphasis on the positivity of obtaining power and knowledge through discourse has led him to ignore a group which the exercise of power and the discourse on sexuality oppressed most: Victorian women. Foucault neglects another important discourse which ran alongside that of the explicit discussion on sexuality: medical and social theories of women's natural inferiority. Foucault's sexual politics become homologous with the patriarchal attitudes he claims to undermine because of the insufficient attention he pays to the operation of patriarchal power, an element which it is crucial to consider in any attempt to describe the organization of sexuality in the Victorian era.

Although Foucault reveals the power of the medical discourse in organizing sexuality in the Nineteenth Century, he also recognizes its shortcomings. He stresses the inability of the medical discourse to address sex directly, a failing which led the medical dialogue on sexuality to concern itself with “aberrations, perversions, exceptional oddities, ... and morbid aggravations” rather than the unexceptional. Medicine, he recognizes, was subjected to “the imperatives of a morality whose divisions it reiterated under the guise of the medical norm”² paying greater regard to public opinion rather than to scientific truth. Although Foucault does not explore in detail the operations of patriarchal power, he describes the “hysterization of women” as one of the strategies which constituted a specific form of knowledge and power in the organization of sexuality. Foucault confirms that medicine “analyzed - qualified - and disqualified-” the

¹ Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical Review*, quoted in David Couzens Hoy, ed., *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p.126.

² Michel Foucault, *op. cit.*, p.53.

female body as “being thoroughly saturated with sexuality,” but he does not attempt to discuss the implications or consequences of this discourse on sexuality on the lives and status of middle-class women in the society. The attempt would have certainly led him to the acknowledgement of the decisive role played by repression in the construction of nineteenth-century sexuality. While repression did not, as Foucault rightly maintains, operate primarily across class lines, it clearly functioned hierarchally with respect to gender. By completely disregarding the operations of patriarchal repression which was basically built on gender difference, Foucault fails to locate middle-class women within the power mechanisms which he proposes to reveal through his arguments.

Any study of the formation of sexuality in the Nineteenth Century, and especially one like Foucault's which acknowledges the role of the rising middle-class in constructing a specific form of sexuality which helped it to sustain power, cannot ignore the fact that it was the formation of a gendered sexuality within the ruling middle-class which determined the individuals' relation to and place within the economic, political and social spheres. The Nineteenth Century's formation of sexuality is both particular and peculiar by reason of the specific characteristics with which it endowed the body of the middle-class female who was herself a product of the social and industrial changes of the era. The contradictions which distinguish the medical descriptions of the female psyche also seem specific to an era where man's need to assert his own identity against the set of industrial relations which was actually ruling him, seemed to resolve itself in the description of female sexuality. The Nineteenth Century described woman both as the purifier of the nation and the polluter of the race at the same time. In her body lurked the source of both her elevation as a mother and debasement as an uncontrollable creature. In their attempt to assign a specific form of Victorian sexuality, modern critics often fail to regard the contradictions essential to its character. Like the Victorians themselves, these critics are only able to adopt one view of Victorian women at a time: either manipulating, disruptive figures, or passive, enslaved commodities. Like the social ideology itself, modern critics often seem unable to view Victorian women except as angels or demons.

One characteristic feature of the nineteenth-century's organization of sexuality is the ideological transformation of the female figure from a temptress who led man to his

damnation to the prime agent of his spiritual salvation. This transformation was the outcome of the social, economic, and political unrest which resulted from the industrial upheaval. Nancy Cott argues that it was the Evangelicals who first protested against aristocratic models of artifice and vanity as corruptive to woman. The Evangelicals, she suggests, were able to transform “the truism of the etiquette books” which represented woman as able to influence man through sexual endearment “into the proposition that the collective influence of women was an agency of moral reform.”¹ Their insistence that women were virtuous by nature and void of the affectations assigned to them by society, led the Evangelicals, Cott concludes, to take the further step of presuming that women were passionless.

Passionlessness, as Cott reveals, was an ideology exclusive to the Victorians², a temperament allotted to women along the line of gender division which was needed to stabilize the quick pace of change. The anxiety caused by the French revolution at the end of the Eighteenth Century, and the weakening of the influence of religious morality due to the new scientific theories, led an anxious middle-class to seek self-assertion in the cult of home, and set, through the notion of female passionlessness, “a successful example of domestic piety to the masses,” in which the home “would be the bulwark against both political subversion and sexual impurity which seemed effectively synonymous.”³

The emphasis of social ideology on female passionlessness was entwined with her role as a mother. Woman's biological role placed her in the centre of the sexual politics in the Nineteenth Century, which frequently emphasized that, as the promoter of the race, she had the responsibility of guarding its morality. In her advice to *The Women of England*, Sarah Ellis observed: “You have deep responsibilities; you have urgent

¹ Nancy F. Cott, “Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790-1850,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture And Society*, Vol.4., No. 2, (Winter 1978), p.225.

² *Ibid.*, p.220.

³ Eric Trudgill, *Madonnas and Magdalens: The Origins and Development of Victorian Sexual Attitudes*, (London: Heinemann, 1976), p.40.

claims; a nation's moral worth is in your keeping."¹ Religious sermons urged women to preserve their purity so that the nation could then be saved from corruption and destruction through its stable moral structure.

On you, ladies, depends ... the destiny of our country ... Yours it is to determine, whether the beautiful order of society, a system of many members in one body, and all the members not having the same office, shall continue as it has been, to be the source of blessings to the world; or whether, despising all forms and distinctions, all boundaries and rules, society shall break up and become a chaos of disjointed and unsightly elements. Yours is to decide, ... whether we shall be a nation of refined and high minded Christians, or whether, ... throwing off the restraints of morality and piety, we shall become a fierce race of semi-barbarians, before whom neither order, nor honor, nor chastity can stand.²

The statement not only exemplifies the fear which rapid social changes aroused within patriarchy, but also shows how ideology attempted to reinforce notions of separate spheres and duties as the natural, God-created, ordering of life. The appeal also positions women as entirely responsible for maintaining the prevalent moral order by accepting their subordinate positions and strictly adhering to the principles of social morality. Yet, like most Victorian statements which urge women to remain in their secondary positions, the mere appeal to women not to throw away "the restraints of morality," bears the implication that female morality was an imposed rather than a natural trait.

Not often did the Victorians offer an explicit critique of the politics of their society. However, a rather unusual anonymous article in *The Saturday Review* exposes the Victorians' insistence on female purity as an ideological device which aimed at keeping the social infra-structure intact. Although the article asserts the beneficiality of preserving female chastity as crucial to natural order, it nevertheless observes that female

¹ Sarah S. Ellis, *The Women of England: Their Social Duties, And Domestic Habits*, (1839; London and Paris: Fisher and Son co., 1839), p.13.

² Minister Jonathan Stearns, *Female Influence, and The True Christian Mode of Its Experience: A Discourse Delivered in the First Presbyterian Church in Newburyport*, (1837). Quoted in Erna Olafson Hellerstein, Leslie Parker Hume, and Karren M. Offen, eds., *Victorian Women: A Documentary Account of Women's Lives in Nineteenth-Century England, France, And The United States*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1981), p.164. The same rhetoric of female moral influence is to be found in both England and America during this era.

chastity itself is not a natural characteristic. "Chastity," states the article, "is merely a social law, created to encourage the alliances that most promote the permanent welfare of the race, and to maintain women in a social position which it is thought advisable they should hold."¹

Society and medicine joined forces to locate women within a gender-based culture and to promote subjection as natural and necessary for their welfare and that of the race. Medical discourse blindly adopted current social ideologies about women. The model of sexuality which we might draw from the medical texts in the Nineteenth Century is not exactly similar to the one proposed by either Foucault or Cott. Rather than projecting the female body as completely saturated with sexuality, the same medical discourse offers us contradictory images of women: they are depicted both as being burdened with sexuality and also as having no sexual feelings at all. At the same time medical theories insist that the female is a creature of explosive sexual desire, they confirm her moral responsibility as a purifier of the nation, a role which served as both cause and consequence of her lack of sexual feelings. Study of the medical texts which focus on the biological aspect of female sexuality reveals opposing, dual and inconsistent views within the medical discourse. Medicine drew on the two dominant ideologies of femininity of the age, but failed to integrate them or reconcile their contradictions. In the very same articles or books women figured both as spiritually elevated, morally pure beings, and dangerous bundles of sexual desire whose behaviour was unpredictable, inconsistent, and threateningly disruptive.

The problem posed by the nineteenth-century medical texts on female sexuality is that the contradictory images which they offer of the female seem to be at work simultaneously. While medical discourse projected contradictory images of womanhood, however, ideological notions of the social sanctity of motherhood remained nonetheless unchanged despite or perhaps even due to these contradictions. Medical definitions of both male and female sexuality succeeded in creating a sexual identity suitable to the social role assigned for each sex and class. Under the claim of "ensur[ing] the physical

¹ "Moral Instincts," *The Saturday Review*, 10 August (1867), p.175.

vigour and cleanliness of the social body,”¹ the medical discourse ensured the surveillance and consequent control of the female whose body, in its inexplicable monthly upheaval, its ability to discharge blood and babies at the same time, rendered her both a crucial cite of social productivity and a primary carrier of pollution. William Acton, the doctor famous for his assertion of the “natural” sexlessness of woman, built his theory of sexuality on an assumption of basic physical difference between the sexes. Although he advised restraint for men on the basis of protection from disease and the conservation of energy², he still related the forms of sexuality he projects to the different biological sex roles. The male's sexuality is part of his active, aggressive masculinity, he suggests; its existence “seems necessary to give a man that consciousness of his dignity, of his character as head and ruler, and of his importance, which is absolutely essential to the well being of the family, and through it, of society itself.”³

Frank Mort spots the tension in Acton's writing which is due to his “assertion that the male sexual instinct was capable of intellectual and moral control and his stress on male sexuality as a powerful, inevitable expression of basic physiological process.”⁴ As he defined the male's active sexuality as instinctive, he also defined marriage, motherhood and the love of home as “natural” feminine instincts, thus imputing purity as natural to women who might have felt otherwise. Acton separated this instinctive feminine quality from sexual desire which he perceived as unnatural and allotted to mistresses and prostitutes. Acton asserts that: “many of the best mothers, wives, and managers of households, know little of or are careless about sexual indulgences. Love of home, of children, and of domestic duties are the only passions they feel.”⁵

¹ Michel Foucault, *op.cit.*, p.54.

² Frank Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities: Medico-moral politics in England since 1830*, (London & New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), p.78.

³ William Acton, *The Functions and Disorders of The Reproductive Organs in Childhood, Youth, Adult Age, And Advanced Life Considered in Their Physiological, Social and Moral Relations*, (1865). Quoted in Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality Since 1800*, (London & New York: Longman, 1981), p.39.

⁴ Frank Mort, *op. cit.*, p.78.

⁵ William Acton, *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in Childhood, Youth, Adult Age, and Advanced Life Considered in Their Physiological, Social and Moral Relations*, (Philadelphia: Lindsay and Blakiston, 1865), p. 134.

Acton, however, undercuts his assertions of female sexual passivity in other parts of his text. Although he asserts that women “are not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind” and that, “what men are habitually, women are exceptionally,” he admits that sexual desire does exist and might even end in nymphomania, although this is exceptional. Acton's portrait is typical of the ideological construction of both a class and gender-specific Victorian sexuality. Sexual feelings, he observes, can only be found “among loose, or at least low and vulgar women”¹ who, with their demand of sexual satisfaction, give a false idea to young men who fear that “the marital duties they will have to undertake are beyond their exhausted strength.”² The image he conjures up of the relationships before marriage is that of sexually- motivated women who are constantly trying to lure innocent young men and drain their power. Yet, he undermines all his assertions of middle-class female purity by stating that both men and women, the latter mostly in boarding schools (i.e. middle-class women), do have secret habits which they sometimes cannot control either because of their education or because of a hereditary taint. He confesses that “the same habits which in early life induce abnormal sexual excitement in boys have similar effects in girls.”³ Although Acton asserts that woman “seldom desires any sexual satisfaction for herself” and submits to the act only to gratify her husband, he later classifies those women who have aversion to the sexual act as diseased and attributes their condition to “apathy, selfish indifference to please, or unwillingness to over come the *natural* repugnance the female feels for cohabitation.”⁴ (emphasis mine) At the same time Acton describes the aversion of the female to the sexual act as natural, he describes those females who do not respond to their husbands as ill.

Against Acton's vision of female passionlessness which, as I have argued, is itself undercut in other parts of his text, stands a stronger one of woman's disruptive sexual power. Robert Brudnell Carter classifies “sexual passion” as “the most violent” of

¹ William Acton, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

² *Ibid.*, p. 134.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

feelings in women who, due to their social position are obliged to repress it.¹ This image of the female as obsessed with sexuality, like the one which claims her voidness of sexual desire, is also linked to her biological role. A scientific article which proposes to study woman's psychology in relation to her role as wife and mother adopts an image of woman's sexuality as a force beyond control and identifies it with the supernatural. The article claims that, due to the influence of the ovaria, woman is left in no position to control her feelings which "after numerous struggles to repress them, the propensities excited into such fearful and almost *supernatural* activity, by the ovarian irritation, burst forth beyond all control"² (emphasis mine). The article depicts a life cycle for woman which is entirely dominated by the operations of uncontrollable desire, as a result of which, she will have to be excluded from the public sphere.

The irregularity of female blood was directly associated with nervous predisposition. Psychiatrists linked neurotic disorder to each cycle of woman's life, and hence to the functions of her reproductive system. Dr. Locock confirmed that "there is a great liability to derangements, of one form or another, in the menstrual process."³ Even labour, the crowning glory of woman's biological role as a mother, was identified by Dr. Barnes with mental illness as a "series of convulsions indistinguishable from epilepsy."⁴ J. C. Bucknill and D. H. Tuke go further to suggest under the title of "Insanity of Gestation or Pregnancy" that "Symptoms of mental disorder may arise during pregnancy and recur after labour."⁵ After giving birth, woman was threatened with puerperal mania which doctors also attributed to her explosive sexuality.

Doctors were often led by their belief in the harmful influence of woman's

¹ Robert Brudnell Carter, op. cit., p. 31.

² "Woman in her Psychological Relations," op.cit., pp.33-34.

³ Dr. C. Locock, "Menstruation," see John Forbes, Alexander Tweedie, and John Conolly, *The Cyclopaedia of Practical Medicine ; Comprising Treatises On The Nature And Treatment Of Diseases, Materia Medica And Therapeutics, Medical Jurisprudence, Etc. Etc.* 4 Vols., (London: Sherwood, Gilbert, and Piper, And Baldwin And Cardock; Wittaker, Treacher, And Co.), Vol. 3, (1834), p. 110.

⁴ Dr. Robert Barnes, "Lumleian Lectures: The Convulsive Diseases of Women," *The Lancet*, (1873). Quoted in Sarah Delamont and Lorna Duffin, *The Nineteenth-Century Woman: Her Cultural and Physical World*, (London: Croom Helm, 1978),p.32.

⁵ John Charles Bucknill, and Daniel Hack Tuke, *A Manual of Psychological Medicine. Containing The Lunacy Laws, The Nosology, Aetiology, Statistics, Description, Diagnosis, Pathology, And Treatment of Insanity*, (London: J. & A. Churchill, 1874), p. 348.

reproductive system on both her mental and bodily health to consider her womb the seat of her illnesses. Although Dr. Conolly confirmed that hysteria was not necessarily a disease of the womb, but rather a disease which could be attributed to any cause that might excite the nervous system in both males and females, he, nevertheless, argued that the female's biological system made her prone to hysteria at almost every state of change. Conolly states that

whoever considers the sympathies excited by the changes which the uterine system undergoes at puberty and during pregnancy, and at the cessation of the Catamenia; the altered form and character of the young female; the capricious wishes and taste, or longings of the state of utero-gestation; and the morbid actions of what is called "the change of life;" will without difficulty admit that the hysterical phenomena, bodily and mental, may very probably be called forth by peculiar conditions of the same dominating system in the female economy.¹

Woman was declared ill at every stage of sexual change in her life. Both her life and her illnesses began with puberty and ended with the menopause. Conolly projects an image of a hysterical female which is entirely connected with her reproductive system. He asserts that "In some females hysteria supervenes on puberty, continues to be more or less troublesome until the period of cessation, and then disappears."² What Conolly regarded as "a change of life," some others viewed as an extremely dangerous state which could mark (literally and metaphorically) the end of a woman's life. William Buchan warned that the "period of life at which the menses ceases to flow is likewise very critical to the sex. The stoppage of any customary evacuation, however small, is sufficient to disorder the whole frame, and often to destroy life itself. Hence it comes to pass, that so many women either fall into chronic disorders, or die about this time."³

On this theory of the domination of the reproductive system over woman's life

¹ John Conolly, "Hysteria," *see Cyclopaedia of Practical Medicine*, pp. 568-9. Dr. Barnes concludes by completely identifying woman's biology with her reproductive system, asserting that "the functions of ovulation, gestation, labour, lactation, the menopause in turn dominate over the entire organism of woman." Dr. Robert Barnes, *op. cit.* Quoted in Delamont and Duffin, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

² *Ibid.*, p.569.

³ William Buchan, *Domestic Medicine: Or, A Treatise on The Prevention and Cure of Disease By Regimen and Simple Medicine*. (London: 1779), p.577. This popular work was reprinted throughout the Nineteenth Century.

and its assumed effect on her mental state, the doctors built their evidence to justify woman's exclusion from education, politics, and her relegation to the sphere of home, where her biological function could come into its own.¹ Women, it seems, were suspected of having latent desires. The doctors insisted that the guardians of social morality needed protection and medical help in maintaining “that restraint over the passions”² which they deemed women themselves to be incapable of exerting.

Science managed to transform women's biological function into a narrowly restricted cultural one. It constantly attempted to channel female sexuality into the field of reproduction, and dismiss any other form of sexuality by identifying it as illness. The mechanism which psychiatric medicine employed to reinforce women's reproductive role is clearly visible in the alliance medicine drew between celibacy and mental illness in women. Sexual activity outside marriage was identified with illness, but the women who were unable to use their sexuality for reproduction within the family were also described as ill. The doctors confirmed the liability of spinsters to mental illness. The argument they used to prove their hypotheses was homologous to that used against women who wanted education: that the inability to fulfil the role of reproduction causes illness to women. The educated woman was ill, because as Spencer put it, “the flat-chested girls who survive their high pressure education” are unable to fulfil the aim of the reproductive power, which he deemed to be “the power to bear a well-developed infant, and to supply that infant with the natural food for the natural period.”³

In a similar way, the constitution of the spinster suffers because of her inability to fulfil the aim of the reproductive system. John Conolly confirmed that “in the unmarried state, the system of reproduction, every change in which involves many other changes, acts strongly on the system at large, and in certain circumstances disorders all the functions of the body and the mind.”⁴ The author of “Woman in her Psychological

¹ For a more detailed discussion of the exclusion of women from education and work on grounds of their reproductive role, see chapter II.

² John Conolly, quoted in Andrew Scull's *Madhouses, Mad - doctors, and Madmen*, op.cit., p. 355.

³ Herbert Spencer, *Principles of Biology*, Vol. II, (1864-7). Quoted in Delamont and Duffin, op. cit., p.33.

⁴ John Conolly, “Hysteria,” p. 569.

Relations” emphasized that in the case of “Old Maids,” “the non-fulfilment of their duties as *women* involves its punishment, or its penalty” which is signified by “the gradual development of the mental and corporeal peculiarities of the woman who has passed middle life in celibacy.”¹ “With the shrinking of ovaria and the consequent cessation of the reproductive nusus” he registers a change in the “mind, temper, and feelings”² of the old maid which transforms her into the hideous social image we often encounter in literature. His bias against the old maid is social rather than as a result of scientific evidence, since all women, whether married or not, were deemed to be psychologically ill at the stage of the menopause. The author singles out the spinster, however, and insists that it is her non-fulfilment of her biological role as a woman which causes her to be ill.

At the same time that psychiatric medicine linked women's biological state after child birth with mental illness, it promoted the idea that marriage could save woman from being mentally ill because in marriage she could fulfil the role of her biological organization by becoming a mother. Medical texts claimed that marriage not only provided a legal haven for sexuality, but also a field where women's excessive emotions could be distributed instead of suppressed. Conolly maintained that “all the mischief” resulting from the morbid condition caused by celibacy “is removed by marriage, which, by awakening the natural functions and normal sympathies, allays the whole series of irritations or morbid actions.”³ Some even suggested that married women could not easily become insane, because “The circle of the family relations - husband, father, son, brother- is to the true woman, and to all she blesses with her presence, a perpetual fountain of domestic sweets”⁴ which provided a legitimate channel for woman's excessive emotions. The statement manages to defuse fears of female sexuality by suggesting that that feeling could be safely channelled into the reproductive role and the family. Fear of female sexuality is also implied in the methods of treatment proposed to cure women from certain illnesses which were thought to be connected with the

1 "Woman in Her Psychological Relations," p.34.

2 Ibid., p.35.

3 John Conolly, "Hysteria," p. 569.

4 "Woman in Her Psychological Relations," p.36.

“irregularity” of her sexuality. Dr Brown's clitoridectomy was a surgical enforcement which supported the social attitude of restricting female sexuality to reproduction by the elimination of the element of pleasure in sex.¹

Medicine closely tied the social image assigned to the female as self-neglectful, loving, sacrificial creature, to her biological reproductive role. In 1870, Dr. W. W. Bliss wrote:

accepting, then, these views of the gigantic power and influence of the ovaries over the whole animal economy of woman, ... that on them rest her intellectual standing in society, her physical perfection, and all that lends beauty to those fine and delicate contours which are constant objects of admiration, all that is great, noble and beautiful, all that is voluptuous, tender, and endearing; That her fidelity, her devotedness, her perpetual vigilance ... and all those qualities of mind and disposition which inspire respect and love ... spring from the ovaries.²

With no scientific evidence to support his claim, Dr. Bliss builds around woman's reproductive system a host of social roles which are promoted by society's projection of her as the devoted angel. The reproductive system becomes in the medical texts the spring from which woman derives her “power” to love, and to sacrifice.

Even the medical articles which acknowledge the existence of “desire” as natural in woman, are careful to locate this desire so that it fits into woman's reproductive role. “Woman in Her Psychological Relations” asserts that desire is part of the healthy function of the reproductive system; yet, woman's “desire is to her husband;” in the first stage of her life, and “in common with every female animal, her feelings are concentrated upon her tender offspring; and thus it happens that, during the whole of the period in which the reproductive functions are in activity, love of one kind or the other is the ruling passion.”³ The doctors who accepted the existence of the erotic passion in women, insisted that this passion was created to enable women to fulfil the higher duties society expected of them. Dr. James Foster Scott asserted that “A clean, pure, undefiled sexual

¹ See Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady*, p. 77.

² W. W. Bliss, Quoted in Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *Complaints And Disorders: The Sexual Politics of Sickness*, (London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, 1976), p. 33.

³ “Woman in Her Psychological Relations,” P.19.

feeling” is a “fundamental law in woman's nature, for love is her element; and her sexual feeling is by no means a light thing, but an inflexible yearning, normally, towards an honorable maternity, which impulse is infinitely higher in rank than the sensual passion of the libertine and seducer.”¹ This argument cycles back to that of Dr. Acton's with which I began my discussion, only to reveal that whether they negated or acknowledged the existence of sexual desire in women, medical texts always fell back on the biological role of motherhood as the proper channel through which both woman's sexuality or desexualization should operate.

The tension in the medical texts is most obvious when they attempt to derive woman's “proper” role from her physiology. John Barlow, who was almost alone among the Victorians in suggesting that women had a large development of intellectual organs, asserted that this advantage confirmed the suitability of woman's place as the moral guardian of the race: “nature has written it in characters too clear to be mistaken: the large development of the intellectual organs, and the feeble muscular power, make her for the high-minded purifier of society.”² Barlow concluded that woman should be educated to fit into her role. In a seeming contrast to Barlow, Dr. Millingen asserted the inferiority of women's intellect on the basis of the “inferior size” of her “cerebral hemisphere.”³ But, this leads him directly to conclude that although woman is not an intellectual, she has the faculty of instinct which is stronger in her than in man. Although he builds his view of woman on contradictory physiological evidence to that of Barlow, Dr. Millingen ends up by giving her the same social role of promoting love and sympathy to others:

The *intuitive* powers of woman are certainly greater than those of man. Her perceptions are more acute, her apprehensions quicker, and she has a remarkable *power* (emphasis mine) of interpreting the feelings of others, which gives to her not only a much more ready sympathy with these, but that power of guiding her actions

¹ James Foster Scott, *The Sexual Instinct: Its Use and Dangers as Affecting Heredity and Morals*, (1899). Quoted in Peter Gay, *The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud. Vol. I. Education of The Senses*, (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp.146-7.

² John Barlow, *op. cit.*, p.44.

³ J. G. Millingen, *op. cit.*, p.159.

so as to be in accordance with them, which we call *tact*.”¹

The statement is extremely significant. Dr. Millingen not only reasserts woman's subjection by projecting her as a natural and instinctive being, but more dangerously, he terms women's subordination a form of “power.” To be able to subject herself to other's sway, Dr. Millingen confirms, is an intuitive power of woman. Dr. Millingen's argument leads him to promote the “healthy” division of sexual spheres on which the Nineteenth Century built its sexual, economic and political organization. Although mentally inferior to man, woman, he asserts, is “highly raised above him” due to the “superior purity ... of her feelings.”² He ends up with the argument used by the social theorists, that woman is morally superior to man and, therefore, that she is responsible for upholding the purity of her society.

Only another contradiction results from the medical discourse's attempt to unify conflicting images of womanhood. For, how can woman be morally superior to man if she is his inferior by nature? and how can she safeguard the morality of the nation if she is unable to guard her own explosive, uncontrollable, sexuality? The dichotomy is never resolved either in the medical or in the social texts which promulgate the ideology of woman's influence in her separate sphere. What both society and medicine confirmed was that woman, although inferior by nature, is powerful and healthy as long as she stays at home and fulfils the social demands of purity and subordination.

Both medicine and society laboured to promote this illusive concept of female power to Victorian women. The image of the angel in the house carried ideological weight since it seemed to give woman importance and rank which she was never able to achieve in her previous incarnation as man's tempter. It also carried the authoritative scientific imprint of woman's “natural” state. Women accepted the ideology because, even though illusory, it granted them superiority in their own sphere. According to August Comte,

1 J. G. Millingen, *op. cit.*, p.161.

2 *Ibid.*, p.161.

Sociology will prove that the equality of the sexes, of which so much is said, is incompatible with all social existence, by showing that each sex has special and permanent functions which it must fulfil in the natural economy of the human family, and which concur in a common end by different ways, the welfare which results being in no degree injured by the necessary subordination, since the happiness of every being depends on the wise development of its proper nature.¹

Subordination is not only depicted as a natural order but also a necessary condition for the stability and progress of the nation. Women have to accept the division of spheres, Comte suggests, so that the two sexes, each working in their "natural" spheres, could contribute to the welfare of the nation.

The price women had to pay for being morally superior to men was adherence to a new and almost impossible model of self-control, not only of their feelings but of their behaviour in general. Those who promoted the ideology of female power through influence ensured that this power remained passively constrained within the bounds of home, and that man remained in control both of his own and his female relatives' destiny. Woman's power was identified in passive terms, so that any active assertion on her part could be described as harmful and unnatural. The only available space for woman's exercise of her illusive power is that of the home. Ruskin's final attempt to reconcile the obvious subordination of woman to the concept of illusive power he offers her is summarized in his conclusion that "a true wife, in her husband's house, is his servant; it is in his heart that she is a queen."²

Some women did believe that accepting their subordinate positions was a means of exercising influence and perhaps power. On both sides of the Atlantic women seemed to believe that subordination within a "natural" order gave them prestige. Arguing from this stand, Catharine Beecher wrote in 1837: "While woman holds a subordinate relation in society to the other sex, it is not because it was designed that her duties or her influence should be any the less important, or all- pervading. But it was designed that the

¹ August Comte, "Social Statics; or, Theory of the Spontaneous Order of Human Society" (1839). Quoted in Susan Groag Bell and Karen M. Offen, *Women, the Family, and Freedom: The Debate in Documents, Vol. I, 1750 - 1880*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983), p.220.

² *Of Queen's Gardens*, Quoted in Sara Delamont and Lorna Duffin, op. cit., p.71.

mode of gaining influence and of exercising power should be altogether different and peculiar.”¹ Significantly, she never questions who designed the mode of woman's influence or its sphere, but rather accepts it as natural and fulfilling. Any hypothesis which proposes that Victorian women really held power from this form of ideological representation, has to ignore the host of legal, social, and economic conditions which rendered woman's exercise of power, rather a wish-fulfillment than a reality. Such a study would further have to ignore the essential contradictions in the images of womanhood which were embodied in the ideology and, by reasserting woman's power through influence, would end up reinforcing the ideology itself.

In *Woman and The Demon*, Nina Auerbach interprets the images of Victorian women as angels and demons in relation to the Victorian myths of power. She insists that the contemporary feminist emphasis on Victorian women as victims misinterprets the Victorians' representation of womanhood and hence underestimates the Victorian woman's existent sense of undefined power. Auerbach rejects feminist analyses which, she believes, ignore “the interaction between myths of womanhood, literature, and history, seeing in social mythology only a male mystification dehumanizing women.”² She believes that feminist approaches have reduced the powerful Victorian myth of womanhood into male fantasies about female nature.

Auerbach's argument is anticipated by such conservative Victorian women as Anne Mozley, who, rejecting Mill's *Subjection of Women*, argued that women did have power, but her argument reveals that she is never able to define the source or form of that power. Mozley argues that “in claiming for woman rights she does not now possess, Mr. Mill is as much influenced by resentment for the use she makes of the power now in her hands, as by any real desire to see her sphere enlarged, unless in the change she loses more influence than she gains.”³ Some women went so far as to assert that the status of dependence offered them self-satisfaction although it projected them as infantile. In

¹ *Essay on Slavery And Abolitionism With Reference to the Duty of American Females*, (1837). Quoted in Susan Groag Bell and Karren M. Offen, eds., op. cit., p.181.

² Nina Auerbach, *Woman and The Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth*, (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 12.

³ Anne Mozley, “Mr. Mill on The Subjection of Women”, *Blackwood's*, Vol.106, (1869), p.311.

Singleburst Manor, Emma Worboise writes to her sister: “the best sort of women, ... always feels a secret, unconfessed complacency in yielding themselves to the sway of one of the other sex, in acknowledging his superiority, his strange and potent influence.”¹ Likewise, Auerbach draws a model of a woman with indefinite powers inside the Victorian ideology. She claims that, in her own sphere, “unlike the hungry workers, Woman ruled both the palace and the home while hovering simultaneously in the darkness without. Assuming the power of the ruler as well as the menace of the oppressed, woman was at the centre of her age's myth at the same time as she was excluded from its institutions.”²

Doctors maintained that Victorian women actually used the ideological concepts of passiveness in order to avoid sexual intercourse and the discomforts of pregnancy at a time when contraception was still unacceptable. They also believed that many women feigned hysteria in order to gain influence over family or friends. This so-called exercise of power led doctors to confirm their descriptions of women as manipulative and in need of control. Conolly projects an image of the hysterical female who, conscious and at will, calls forth her fit to obtain instant submission to her wishes from her family.

It is quite certain that the unhappy temper and violent irritability of hysterical females, combined with their constitutional tendency to the hysteric paroxysm, is in some instances sufficient to bring on, almost at the will of the patient, attacks which occasion much concern to their relatives or friends: we have seen undoubted instances in which a temporary loss of muscular power, a singular diminution of the action of the heart, and an inability to speak, but without loss of consciousness, originated in the desire of a self-willed individual to distress the spectators, or to overcome opposition to some wayward desire; as if the wish to feign an attack brought on a real paroxysm.³

The ideological image of the cunning, manipulative female who seems almost to have supernatural powers which she can use in self-interest, is evident in Conolly's description.

¹ [Author unknown], *Singleburst Manor*, (1869), Quoted in Eric Trudgill, op. cit., p.70.

² Nina Auerbach, op. cit., pp.188-9.

³ John Conolly, “Hysteria,” p. 563.

Auerbach's positive interpretation of Victorian mythology about women leads her to neglect historical facts about female subjection, facts not only present in the parliamentary debates, medical practice and theory, and the law, but also in the diaries and tracts written by those same women who experienced the consequences of society's dismissal of them to their ethereal sphere. Her representation supports the ideological image of women as manipulative and unreliable. Victorian ideology did not actually offer women the vast field of transformation which Auerbach claims. Due to her position in the family, woman was nailed down by the realities of her trivial education, her exclusion from the public sphere, and her oppression by the law which asserted her status as commodity. Women had no right of divorce, or custody of children, and were not able to hold their own property after marriage.¹ Women had no actual power which they could have used to improve their prospects except individual attempts to manipulate the ideological conceptions of them. If women did have power as society assumed, they must have used it, as Mill suggests, "under the worst possible conditions because it is indirect, and therefore irresponsible."² Whatever women might have gained out of the mythological powers they were deemed to possess, it was at the cost of their actual exclusion from real participation in social labour and on the grounds of their emotional inadequacy.

Material written by some enlightened Victorian middle-class women reveal that while the ideology claimed to offer women the privileged position of the conscience of her society, the education of women concentrated on creating artificial objects who were able to please men, a fact which re-emphasizes my point that the special place which society offered to women was a way to hide her exclusion from active participation in society at large. Victorian documents register the frustrations, not only of those women who were disillusioned by the passive power of influence and demanded a realistic education, but also of those who rebelled against the frequent attempts of society to imprison them within its images. Unable to resolve the contradictory images society

¹ For a detailed discussion of women's relation to the laws of marriage and property, see chapter Four.

² Speech before The House of Commons (1867). Quoted in Susan Groag Bell and Karen M. Offen, *op. cit.*, p.486.

assigned to them, they lapsed into feelings of guilt and frustration.

In 1836, Frances Power Cobbe wrote in her diary lamenting society's abuse of the potential abilities of middle-class girls through superficial education in the boarding schools: "all this fine human material was deplorably wasted. Nobody dreamed that any one of us could in later life be more or less than an "Ornament of Society." Not that which was good in itself or useful to the community, or even that which would be delightful to ourselves, but that which would make us admired in society was the *raison d'être* of each acquirement."¹ The myth of woman's power relied primarily on her conformity to her assigned and dependant roles in the family.

Anne Richelieu Lamb wrote in 1844 with soured disillusion about society's treatment of women and the repressive implications of assumptions about their passivity and angelic nature which caused women never to be treated as they really were, but always in accordance with society's perception of them.

Treated at one moment as a child, at another as a plaything, if fair as an angel- for a while! Then wearied of as the child, thrown away as the toy, and beauty vanished, stript of her angelic splendour Such is woman now; trained from childhood to believe that for man, and for man alone, she must live, that marriage must be not only her highest, but her only aim on earth²

The portrait is certainly one of complete repression and education into subjection rather than the promotion of the nation. Contrary to the ethereal image Auerbach draws for Victorian women, these documents reveal that, whether identified as angels or demons, those women were never actually educated, identified, or discussed by both society and medical men except as "relative creatures." Ideology could only view them in relation to men. Those women who tried to "become independent and compete with men," warned an anonymous tract written by a woman in 1840, were in danger of losing their claim on man's "protection and tenderness, without being able to shield themselves from his

¹ Frances Power Cobbe, *Life of Frances Power Cobbe As Told by Herself*, (1904). Quoted in Hellerstien, Hume, and Offen, op. cit., p. 74.

² *Can Women Generate Society ?* (1844). Quoted in Eric Trudgill, op.cit., p.67-8.

harshness.”¹

Even the arguments of one of the most conservative of Victorian writers who promoted the idea of women's moral influence on the nation were loaded with contradictions. One cannot help discerning a disappointed tone of self-abandonment in Sarah Ellis's exaltation of women as the purifiers of society. Her statements actually reveal that to achieve the power of influence, women had to relinquish other more important forms of power like those of self-definition and the ability to control their own destinies. To be useful, Ellis states, woman must

lay aside all her natural caprice, her love of self-indulgence, her vanity, her indolence - in short, her very self - and assuming a new nature, which nothing less than watchfulness and prayer can enable her constantly to maintain, to spend her moral capabilities in devising means for prompting the happiness of others, while her own derives a remote and secondary existence from theirs.²

Her appeal recalls Lukes' remarks about the unconscious reaction of the oppressed to the exercise of power by another group. The statement could easily be read as one of dissent, a protest which explains how impossible it is for women to adhere to their prescribed roles. Not only does it state that women are not actually passive, self-sacrificial, and morally pure by nature and that this concept is a social construction associated with their roles as mothers, but it also suggests that it is almost impossible for women to sustain the image of the selfless angel advocated by society. The statement suggests that women could only achieve this image by abandoning their true natures and adopting a new self which is not real. Woman has to abandon all in her that qualifies her to be independent, Ellis suggests, she should leave “all that gratifies the love of power, all that converts woman into the heroine.”³ This reveals that even proponents of women's influence like Ellis recognized that women did not actually hold the power of rule, the power that mattered most.

¹ *Women's Rights and Duties Considered with Relation to Their Influence on Society and On her Own Condition*, (1840). Quoted in Bell and Offen, op. cit., p.233.

² Sarah S. Ellis, *The Women of England*, pp. 43-4.

³ Sarah S. Ellis, *The Wives of England, Their Relative Duties, Domestic Influence, & Social Obligations*, (1843; London & Paris: Fisher, Son, & Co., 1834), p.92

A close reading of Ellis's *The Wives of England* reveals that even conservative Victorian women were disillusioned by the ideological notions of self-sacrifice for husband and home. Sara Ellis dismisses the concept as unrealistic and unpractical. The doctrine could be very beautiful, she argues, "if every act of self-sacrifice be seen and appreciated." Yet, she asserts, self-sacrifice does not entail "the happiness of man."¹ The subversiveness of her statement, however, appears more clearly when we discover that it was the unhappiness of women and their frustrations in the act of sacrifice which Mrs. Ellis was concerned about most. She believes that the happiest women are those who "neither [withhold] what they ought to give up, nor [give] up what they cannot afford to lose." Only such women can be "exempt from a world of wounded feeling, under which the more romantically generous are perpetually suffering."² Her statement reveals that self sacrifice is a romantic and not a natural notion and that all women who try to fulfil it will suffer.

Ellis's observations confirm my initial argument that female power was rather an illusion than a reality in the Victorian age. The assumption that women gained power in their separate sphere is unrealistic. Auerbach's argument, like that used by Victorian ideology, is built on the illusion of power, not only does it ignore the negative aspects of this power but furthermore it unwittingly reinforces the fact that the mythical representation of women was one of the most effective means of their subjection.

Another study of Victorian sexuality which falls into the same trap as Auerbach in taking ideology at its own valuation, is that of Gilbert and Gubar. Like Auerbach, Gilbert and Gubar rely on a positive interpretation of myth in their study of the influence of the gendered social structure on female writing. Their initial attempt to kill the image of the angel³ only leads them to the reassertion of the mirror image of the demonic and/or mad woman. Gilbert and Gubar fail to locate women's writing in the relevant cultural context due to their ahistorical and mythological frame of reference. The book is

¹ Sarah S. Ellis, *The Wives of England*, p.94.

² *Ibid.*, p.94.

³ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Mad Woman in The Attic: The Woman Writer And The Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 17.

concerned solely with the image of women as victims, and thus fails to integrate or take into account the contradictory images of womanhood which were at work in Victorian ideology and society.

Contemporary Victorian material reveals that women experienced difficulties in their attempts to internalize the images which society offered them as models of themselves. Yet, despite the struggle, they often acted according to society's perception of them. Difficulties of interpretation arise not only from the problems of differentiating between the responses of the women themselves and the images proposed, but also from the contradictions within the images themselves.

Jeffrey Weeks suggests that "What is strikingly absent in nineteenth-century thought is any concept of female sexuality which is independent of men's."¹ The female had to be identified as passive so that men could be active; as emotionally unstable so that they could decide for her and assume the post of responsibility for her welfare. Finally, they had to be morally pure so that men could ensure the purity of their lineage and the lawful inheritance of their wealth. The sensation novelists follow the same logic of Victorian ideology in the sense that their accounts of female experience are always dependent on the relations between their heroines and the men who influence their lives. All the women in these novels are studied within patriarchy. The trials of love, marriage or sin are placed within the contemporary social arguments about women's economic dependence, their imprisonment within the temple of home, and how the conditioning of their lives influences their actions, or rather, reactions, to the environment they live in. Attacked by the critics as a source of moral depravity for their presentation of unlawful passions, the sensation novelists were actually drawing on, and subjecting to question, contemporary medical and social projections of women, rather than creating revolutionary females who were acting with lucid awareness of their conditioning.

In highlighting their heroines' sexuality, the sensation novelists were not actually going against contemporary views, especially the medical ones, which themselves confirmed woman's explosive sexuality. Rather, they were developing one aspect of

¹ Jeffrey Weeks, *op. cit.*, p.42.

these views in a more positive light. It was the novelists' positive treatment of female sexuality which most infuriated the critics, rather than the mere representation of it in the novels. The novels' study of the women's reaction to and interactions with contemporary ideological representations results in a complex model of womanhood, one which cannot be compressed into the binary divide of whores and angels. The portrait drawn reveals women's unconscious embedding in Victorian ideology. Far from consciously rebelling against society's notions of womanhood, they often internalized and projected these ideologies in their behaviour. Even their reactions to the possible opportunities of escape offered them suggest that they remain confined in the straitjacket of Victorian expectations.

The novels studied in this chapter depict heroines who are sexually vibrant. In both Mrs. Wood's *East Lynne* and Mary Braddon's *Aurora Floyd*, sexuality acts as a disruptive force challenging the values of the respectable world. Through Lady Isabel's trials and the characters she encounters, Mrs. Wood scans in *East Lynne* the features of a society in which law caused the female to be absorbed into the will of the man. Lady Isabel transgresses one of the strictest social laws, that of female purity. She flies into adultery as a refuge from boredom and imprisonment, and her inability to achieve emotional fulfilment despite her "ideal" home, ideal husband, and her love for her children. A good wife and a loving mother, Isabel commits adultery in a society which elevated wives and mothers on the basis of their desexualization. Isabel revolts against her duty to remain pure and thus becomes a threat to the morality of society which is represented in the novel by her immediate family circle.

In *East Lynne*, Mrs. Wood undermines the moral codes of purity and piety, which she nonetheless vociferously asserts all through. She is never satisfied with simply stating the consequences of sexual sin, but insists on following up the real implications and causes which led to Isabel's fall, and thus indirectly secures the defence of her heroine. While the explicit, severe narrative voice abases the heroine, the iconographic pattern flows with sympathy and exalts her. On a different level from that of the narrator's social sermons to women to stay pure, and away from the short-sighted accounts given by the other characters about the immorality of the mother who abandoned

an ideal husband and a happy home, Mrs. Wood gradually establishes the actual personal, social, and economic factors responsible for the tragedy of the heroine. Through her close examination of Isabel's motives, and feelings, Mrs. Wood penetrates into the conflicts and problems which invaded the heroine's life. The narrative fluctuates in its responses to Isabel: she is projected both as a victim of an ill-considered decision, and, more radically, as a scapegoat of a repressive code of behaviour. The narrative goes so far as to suggest at times that her internalization of the ideology which repressed her was a primary cause of her unhappiness. Despite all its moral waverings, the final attitude of the narrative is that, whatever the cause of her suffering, the heroine was blameless. Mrs. Wood gives a firm judgement on the heroine when, despite condemnation of the immorality of her act, she secures her heroine a place in heaven, perhaps out of the conviction that Isabel's suffering was sufficient to raise her to the state of a martyr.

Behind Isabel's distressing condition lies the implication that society both creates and shoots down its "angels." The story reveals that Isabel's frail wings have fluttered in agony long before her fall. Her father's imprudent career and the unjust law of entail leave her in a state of complete economic dependence. The legal daughter is left with "no roof to put your head under, or a guinea to call your own"¹ while her father's property is handed over to a distant relative. The ideological assumption embedded in the laws of inheritance is obvious; since women are themselves men's property, the law would be inconsistent if they were allowed to inherit property. Long before her sin annihilates her social status, the law of entail has transformed Isabel from "a lady of position, of wealth and rank" to a "pauper." (p. 96) Lady Isabel has to trade her beauty for marriage in order to find herself a shelter. The link between the female body and property is directly established in the novel. The sexual contract is actually woman's investment in her body when she does not possess money; "my child is portionless," states Isabel's father, but "That she will marry well there is little doubt, for she possesses beauty in a rare degree."

¹ Mrs. Henry Wood, *East Lynne*, (1861; Dent: London and Melbourne, Everyman's Library, 1984), p.6. All other references are to this edition and will be cited hereafter in the text.

(p. 91)

Before and after her marriage, Isabel is respectively pushed to her fate by her economic dependence and the stereotypes of femininity she is moulded by. The novel's structure is determined by Isabel's relations with and reactions to other women, who all seem fiercely jealous of her because of her effect upon men. Her first clash with the socially-experienced Mrs. Vane whose awareness of and adherence to propriety carries her through life, causes the inexperienced Isabel to take refuge in a loveless marriage in order to escape humiliation, and this step marks her first mistake. Isabel's movement involves an adaptation to a new kind of life completely different from her previous one, and an enclosure "from the great world" (p. 121) in which she lived before. Mrs. Wood's portrayal of Lady Mount Severn undermines Victorian notions of respectability and propriety and causes Isabel to outshine the falsity of the world of appearances against which she is set, despite her sin. Mrs. Wood seems to suggest that while Isabel's one mistake condemns her to death, there are many other women who are thriving on "the very verge of propriety." (p. 113) Like Lady Audley, Emma Mount Severn is rendered hateful by the narrator's condemnation of her false values. Her strict regard to and understanding of the rules of propriety enables her never to "forget herself, or peril her fair fame." But, Lady Mount Severn is nevertheless "scornfully unforgiving," despite all her falsity, "to those who did forget themselves." (p. 113)

The way women's jealousy sets Lady Mount Severn and Isabel against each other not only contributes to the development of the plot but also helps to reveal a host of female anxieties, reactions and frustrations in a patriarchal society. Isabel's passive nature, caused by her secluded upbringing which sheltered her from the knowledge of the outer world, always leaves her at a disadvantage in the challenges she faces from the other women who influence her life. Her marital experience suggests that this self-same, socially-created nature is widely responsible for the heroine's suffering because it never allows her to express her opinion or take decisions about her own life. Completely "inexperienced, Isabel was unfit to battle with the world." (p. 171) The training of girls into ignorance is condemned by the narrator as it was condemned by some Victorian women who suffered the pressures of the outer world due to their inability to battle with

it. In 1866, Annie Besant protested against the training of girls into complete ignorance: “no more fatal blunder can be made than to train a girl to womanhood in ignorance of all life's duties and burdens, and then to let her face them for the first time away from all the old associations, the old helps. ... The “perfect innocence” may be very beautiful but it is a perilous possession.”¹ Isabel is immediately subjected in her own home to the tyranny of the strong-minded spinster - at that stage portrayed as her antithesis- Miss Carlyle, who is blamed by Isabel's servant for her fall:

She has not been allowed to indulge a will of her own ... since she came to East Lynne: in her own house she has been less free than any one of her servants. You have curbed her, ma'am, and snapped at her, and made her feel that she was but a slave to your caprices and temper ... and she has borne it all in silence, like a patient angel, never, ... complaining. (p. 285)

Despite the frequent caricatured pictures we are offered of “Miss Corny,” there is an undercurrent of sympathy with her which renders her portrait almost as saddening as that of Isabel's after her fall. Cornelia's discontent reveals the net of contradictions society creates in the lives of women even when they sacrifice themselves for the family. Cornelia renounces marriage in order to bring up her brother. The narrator makes it clear that Cornelia was not short of offers and that she chose to forgo marriage because of “her intense love for her brother.” (p. 36) Yet, she is cast off when her role in the initial sacrifice has achieved its purpose. Her avowal “never” to “forgive or tolerate” (p. 131) Isabel is not made out of malice; it rather betrays the insecurity of the spinster in a society where woman's only bliss, whatever the other sacrifices she might make, lies in matrimony:

had you brought up a lad as I have brought up Archibald, and loved nothing else in the world, far or near, you would be jealous, when you found him discarding you with contemptuous indifference, and taking a young wife to his bosom, to be more to him than you had been. (p. 136)

A woman is either a wife or an outcast, the novel suggests. For, despite the emphasis on

¹ Autobiographical Sketches, (1885). Quoted in Janet Horowitz Murray, op.cit., p.114.

the antagonism between Cornelia and Isabel, there is a "fierce interchange of identities between old maid and fallen woman."¹ Their fortunes seem interrelated. While Corny is accused of forcing Isabel into the transforming humiliation of the fallen woman, she herself is cast out of the family as a source of disruption which must necessarily be excluded so that the family could preserve its happiness. The symbiosis of the spinster and the fallen woman is painfully recalled when Isabel comes back almost to replace Miss Carlyle. She occupies Miss Corny's rooms, "her caps.. nearly rivalled those of Miss Carlyle." (p. 407) and her bitterness and envy of the family's happiness are even more severe. Dismissed from woman's heaven, the family, both the spinster and the fallen woman stand on the same line, two negative images of womanhood; one pitied and caricatured, the other socially condemned and damned.

While existing beyond the pale only entails misery, securing respectability within marriage also seems painful because it might entail self-extinction instead of the advocated self-renunciation. Mrs. Hare's selfless image reveals how living under tyranny might metamorphose humanity:

Since her husband ... brought her home to that house, four-and-twenty years ago, she had never dared to express a will in it; scarcely, on her own responsibility, to give an order She had loved him with all her heart, and her life had been one long yielding of her will to his: in fact, she had no will; his, was all in all. (p. 18)

Marriage entails the enslavement of woman's will to that of the man as is covertly suggested in the narrative when, in the second part of the novel, Barbara's strong will, which is repeatedly stressed at the beginning of the reader's encounter with her, has to be discarded. Her "character" is "greatly improved by sorrow," (p. 234) we are told, and she becomes more submissive and humble. Barbara is both Isabel's double and her opposite; an example of a model wife offered in detail to suggest that only love can render woman's loss of will in marriage bearable to her. Like Isabel, Barbara recognizes the difference between affection and love: "I like him as an acquaintance," she spells out her

¹ Nina Auerbach, *op.cit.*, p.151.

feelings towards Captain Thorn, but “Not as a husband.” (p. 318) But, unlike her rival, Barbara decides to suffer rather than marry a man she does not love. Barbara does not attempt to escape her misfortune but chooses to face difficulties and, aided by her strong common sense, to confront awkward situations. Though Archibald scorns his sister's comments about Barbara pursuing him, the reader knows that, although in a different way from Isabel, Barbara is also “fallen” in the way she displayed her passion for Archibald and failed to suppress her feelings. Mrs. Wood's description of the explosion of Barbara's repressed passion could well have been taken out of a medical treatise both in the terminology she uses and the way she describes Barbara's attempt to control that passion: “Her love, her jealousy, the never-dying pain always preying on her heart-strings ... her keen sense of the humiliation which had come home to her, were all rising fiercely, *bubbling up with fiery heat.*” (my emphasis) The endearments which she sees Archibald lavishing on his wife and envy of the couple's happiness “were working her up to that state of nervous excitement when temper, tongue, and imagination fly off at a mad tangent.” (p. 165) Barbara's attempt to suppress her feelings culminates, as Robert Brudnell Carter predicts in his treatise, in hysteria. Mrs. Wood again resorts to medical discourse to explain Barbara's condition: “On it came, passion, temper, wrongs, and nervousness, all *boiling over together.* (my emphasis) She was in strong hysterics.” (p. 166) Mrs. Wood confirms medical notions about woman's explosiveness and nervousness, and her inability to control her passions, even if she were as strong-willed as Barbara.

The fortunes of the two heroines are entirely dependent upon each other; for, only through Isabel's misery and disgrace, could Barbara's happiness be initiated; “The false step ... while it must have secured her own wretchedness, led to the happiness of my Child's,” (p. 439) asserts Barbara's mother. The positions of Isabel and Barbara are completely reversed after Isabel's fall, and the latter comes back to East Lynne to experience the same sensations Barbara once felt. The comparison is brought forward by the narrator: “So, once had stolen, so, once had peeped the unhappy Barbara, to hear this self-same song. *She* had been his wife then; Their positions were reversed.” (p. 441) Isabel comes back to East Lynne not only to watch her rival's happiness with

jealousy, but also to learn from Barbara, the wife and the mother. Barbara frankly indicates that she would never sacrifice her husband, even for the sake of her children: "I should never give up my husband for my baby." (p. 418) Her behaviour, with its privileging of the role of wife over that of the duties of motherhood, highlights some of the contradictions in Victorian ideologies of womanhood. Mrs. Wood seems quite well aware of contemporary social behaviour. Peter Gay suggests that "the nineteenth-century middle-class wife who pours all her affection into her children and denies her husband all sexual warmth" was virtually "a myth."¹ Portrayed as a happy wife and good mother, Barbara violates the sacred creed of motherhood by placing wifedom as her first priority. This again reveals Mrs. Wood's awareness of the possibility of different sets of acceptable relationships other than those advocated by social ideology. Drawing on contemporary documents, Peter Gay argues that many Victorian couples were more attached to each other than to their children and many women preferred to be wives rather than mothers. In 1861, the wife of Henry Varnum Poore wrote expressing her desire to leave her children and join her husband: "The children are well I can leave them *just as well as not*".² More frankly and emphatically, Mabel Dodd (1873) expressed her impatience with the role of the mother: "I have found my perfect and happy sphere in wifedom - I was *made* for a wife - for a mother, truly, *no*. My life is in my husband - a child or children will be merely accidental."³ Barbara makes it clear that her child or children have to give way for her husband, something which Isabel never did even after her fall. The new dilemma set before the reader's judgements on the two heroines reveals that the categories set by both social and medical ideologies could easily be shifted by upsetting the associations accruing to the two images of angel and demon. For, after her explicit confession of her feelings, Barbara could no longer be set as an example of the angel and this is confirmed later by her reaction to her role as a mother. On the other hand, the fallen Isabel, condemned by society for her unforgivable sin, bears misery and

¹ See Peter Gay, *op. cit.*, p.133.

² *The Poor Family Papers* (1861). See, Peter Gay, *op.cit.*, p.132.

³ Peter Gay, *op.cit.*, p.88.

social degradation in order to be able to stay next to her children and thus fulfils the holiest images of motherhood. Isabel lives up to Sara Ellis's most idyllic image of womanhood, by laying aside all that is selfish and bearing pain and suffering in order to stay with her children, an image which the virtuous Barbara cannot achieve.

Although given as the main cause of her fall, Isabel's jealousy of Barbara is manipulated by the narrator so that she could mask the real but unacceptable reason for the heroine's fall: sexual passion. While the overt narrative adopts the view that "but for that most fatal apprehension regarding her husband, the jealous belief, ... she would not have forgotten herself" (p. 289) the covert voice implies that sexual passion was the main reason for Isabel's fall. The foregrounding of jealousy, immediate retribution, and the strict moral pronouncements by the narrator, help keep the real motives for Isabel's behaviour at the deeper level of the narrative. From the beginning of the novel, we learn that Levison has become "dangerous to her peace," (p. 65) that her feelings towards him "had come to love" (p. 115) in Isabel's heart. Despite the narrator's assertions otherwise, Isabel is fully conscious of her passion for Levison. She was even able to realize that it was sexual desire which drew her to the captain: "She was aware that a sensation all too warm, a feeling of attraction towards Francis Levison, was working within her;" (p. 215). She marries Carlyle, yet confesses "I fear I do love, or very nearly love, Francis Levison. I wish *he* would ask me to be his wife." (p. 121) Her love for Carlyle is that for "a brother;" (p. 119) it involves esteem, respect, but not passion.

Wood's attempt to cover up the dangerous ground she is treading in suggesting sexual desire as a motive for the heroine's escape is aided by her use of the medical theories about women's inability to control their passions. The narrator's suggestions that Isabel can never love her husband because love "is a capricious passion," which "never yet came for *trying*," but "comes without the knowledge and against the will" (p. 202) was greeted by outrage from the critics. *The Christian Remembrancer* refused to be fobbed off with jealousy as a justification for Isabel's behaviour and condemned the author's radical attempt to differentiate between love and affection:

None but a thoroughly bad woman could have done what Lady

Isabel did. She had not the ordinary temptation to wrong; and as for those fine distinctions between affection and love ... we find them among the most mischievous of sentimental speculations.¹

Throughout the novel, the insistence on fatality is entwined with the assertion of Isabel's sense of duty and her good intentions. The narrator appeals to the reader, "never doubt ... her wish and endeavour to do right, her abhorrence of wrong; her spirit was earnest and true, her intentions were pure." (p. 222) Mrs. Wood insists that Isabel was helpless before the tumult of passion she felt for Levison. Her feeling was "not a voluntary one," we are told; "she could no more repress it than she could repress her own sense of being." (p. 215) The fatality of the unacceptable passion is revealed in the way it invades Isabel's subconscious through the dreams which she "did not encourage" and which "thrust themselves continually forward." (p. 223) By insisting on Isabel's helplessness to suppress her passions, Mrs. Wood was not inventing false justifications to absolve her heroine, but was actually drawing on the medical texts' insistence on the vapours and fires, the explosive, uncontrollable nature of sexual passion in women. Yet, Mrs. Wood's subversive treatment of the medical images lies in her description of passion as natural not as an illness, and by this she manages to manipulate notions of the inevitability of sexual passion in order to defend her heroine as not consciously responsible for her mistake.

By insisting that Isabel was not responsible for her passion, Mrs. Wood manages to separate the intention from the deed and succeeds in making the reader sympathize with the sinner. Our sympathy is further urged by the horrifying retribution that sets in after the sin is committed; a retribution which allows us to see into the murky operations of social prejudices: "Never had she experienced a moment's calm, or peace, or happiness, since the fatal night of quitting her home. She had taken a blind leap in a moment of wild passion ... and ... had found herself plunged into an abyss of horror, from which there was never more any escape; never more, never more." (p. 288) While Isabel suffers enormously the consequences of a single mistake, Captain Levison rises in society. Fully conscious of the power which the gender-based double standard guarantees him, he

¹ "Our Female Sensation Novelists", *The Christian Remembrancer*, p.218.

declares to Isabel that it is an “awful sacrifice for a man in my position to marry a divorced woman.” (p. 298) He is allowed, by the same social morality that condemns Isabel, to be accepted in society as the “representative ... of an ancient baronetcy.” (p. 298) Levison is welcomed back into the society, and but for the life he had taken, he would never have been punished. That Levison's punishment is strictly legal rather than arising from the general currents of social morality is a clear manifestation of the operation of the double standard in Victorian Society.

Isabel's suffering also reveals that social law is not only gender-based, but class-based as well. The Victorians “often projected onto lower-class ... women the sexual drives they denied the bourgeois wife.”¹ The narrative suggests that the cult of purity is restricted to the higher classes in the society as well as the ability to feel shame or disgrace. Woman's existence was tied up with her social role as a wife and a mother, and her fall, which entailed the loss of that role, also entailed the loss of her social identity. In the novel, moral sense is bound up with social status, exactly as it was in the society. A “wife” is synonymous with a “gentlewoman,” and by violating the moral code, Isabel forfeited her position as a lady. Her name is wiped out from her family, and significantly, with her adoption of a new name after the accident, she assumes the humiliating situation of the governess. Much of the narrative's sympathy with Isabel, and much of her suffering, is the result of her reaction to things as Lady Isabel, while the world knows her and expects her to act as Madam Vine.² Afy, who recognizes herself as Isabel's double because of her sin, is allowed social reintegration through marriage. While Isabel's acute feeling of shame and internalization of society's judgements upon her kills her, Afy, who obviously had several sexual adventures, never regards herself as having sinned. Women's awareness of their violation of sexual morality, the novel seems to suggest, is part of their breeding; it is closely related to their social rank. The text implies that woman's purity is not an inborn instinct since women of the lower classes are not aware of it. It also implies that ideas of purity are themselves unhelpful,

¹ Erna Hellerstein, Leslie Parker Hume and Karen M. Offen, *op.cit.*, p.125.

² Jonathan Loesberg, *op. cit.*, p.121.

artificial constrictions. The narrative asserts that Isabel's suffering was special because "we speak of women in the higher positions in life." (p. 289) Afy falls because she likes her "liberty too well" to confine it in marriage unless something "very eligible" (p. 337) comes up to tempt her. Afy is fully aware that Isabel's fall is more dangerous than hers due both to the heroine's social rank and her position in the family as a mother.

Because she was the Lady Isabel, and I am plain Afy Hallijon, of course I can't be compared to her! ... but, lady angels go wrong sometimes, you see; they are not universally immaculate. She must have been a queer angel, rather, to leave her children. (p. 340)

Purity, and the feeling of shame for not being pure, are part of the cultural conditioning of the middle and upper-class woman, and women who belong to this class are trapped within this framework of thought. Isabel's belief that she is a sinner is the main source of her misery.

The most controversial issue in *East Lynne*, I think, is that the fall seems in a way more ennobling than debasing. Isabel seems able to find self-integrity through social disintegration, and exaltation through exile. Angry at the elevation of the sinner after her fall, Mrs. Oliphant condemns the fact that Isabel becomes "doubly a heroine" because she gains sympathy through the excessive suffering she endures after her sin. "Her virtuous rival we should like to bundle to the door and be rid of, anyhow."¹ When Isabel stops being an angel, she starts to embrace the most sacred roles of womanhood. She lays "aside ... her very self" for her children. The fall enables her to "combine good and evil - to be the worst of mothers, yet the best of mothers in her distinguished state as the children's governess. Her emotional fulfilment depends on her disgrace."² Through her suffering, Isabel is elevated and the "flames of vice" which society so vehemently condemns work, as Mrs. Oliphant recognizes, as "a purifying ... ideal."³

Isabel's excessive suffering renders her morally superior to both Barbara and Mr

¹ Margaret Oliphant, "Sensation Novels," p.576

² Martha Vicinus, "Helpless and Unfriended," p.138

³ Margaret Oliphant, "Sensation Novels," p.576.

Carlyle, mainly because she is the only one who is willing to sacrifice herself for those she loves. Mr Carlyle's idealized image is somewhat marred by some of his actions which the reader cannot fail to notice throughout the novel. The "perfect gentleman" makes use of the earl's financial difficulty to buy East Lynne for a cheap price and consents to cheat the debtors who are entitled to the money. He also harbours and helps Richard Hare in despite of the law. There are hints to the reader of the possibility of personal gains in Archibald's seemingly honourable intentions. The servant refers to the possibility that Carlyle married Isabel for status while he had actually loved Barbara. Wilson suggests that Isabel's rank could have tempted the ambitious lawyer: "when my lady was thrown in his way he couldn't resist her rank and her beauty, and the old love was cast over." (p. 180) While Isabel secures Mr. Carlyle an association with the upper class, Barbara brings him a considerable fortune after their marriage. His intentions are kept ambiguous all through. Like Hartright who constructs Laura into the angel we see in *The Woman in White*, Archibald perceives Isabel as an angel and insists on moulding her according to this image. His blindness to Isabel's needs is revealed in the "sweet" tyranny he displays by refusing to shelter her from his sister's tyranny and his insistence on treating her as a child. The portrait of the Gentleman Mrs. Wood presents is shadowed by curious lights. Through Archibald's cold treatment of Isabel, the narrator is able to criticize the nature of marital relationships and to refer, slightly, to the fickle nature of men:

Mr Carlyle's demonstrative affection, shown so greatly for her in the first twelve months or so of their married life, had subsided into calmness. Is not a similar result arrived at by every husband that the Church ever made one with woman? It was not that his love had faded, but that time and custom had wrought their natural effects. Look at children with their toys; a boy with a new drum, a girl with a new doll. Are not the playthings kissed, and hugged ... and never put down? ... Are not all other things neglected, while the new toy is all in all? But, wait a little time, and the drum is consigned to some dark closet; the doll to its cradle; and neither of them is visited or looked at. Tell the children to go and find their lately cherished playthings ... and they will go unwillingly, for they are tired of them. It is of no use scolding the children for being fickle: it is in their nature to be fickle, for they are human. Are grown children otherwise? Do we not all, men and women, become indifferent to our toys when we hold them securely in possession? (p. 201)

The narrator asserts that fickle human nature cannot maintain the idealized image of romantic, everlasting love and worship. Men treat women as toys, as personal possessions, which they can discard at their leisure.

A final challenge to the domestic idyll surrounding Archibald Carlyle is offered at Isabel's deathbed. Only his sense of duty prevents him from frankly declaring his love for Isabel:

Lower and lower bent he his head, until his breath nearly mingled with hers. But, suddenly, his face grew red with a scarlet flush, and he lifted it again. Did the form of one, then in a felon's cell at Lynneborough, thrust itself before him? or that of his absent and unconscious wife? (p. 632)

The questions asked at this final stage imply that Carlyle's behaviour has been a result of his adherence to social principles. Carlyle has deeply internalized the image which suited both his position and society's expectations of him as a gentleman. He confesses to Barbara about Isabel's return, but the death scene in which he promises to meet her in eternity remains a secret to the undoubtful wife. To live respectably in the social world, Carlyle knows that he has to abandon even Isabel's memory. As he banishes Isabel during her life, he also banishes her name after her death: "Neither need her name be mentioned again between us. A barred name it has hitherto been: let it so continue." (p. 639)

Awareness of social judgements direct the actions, and their consequences, of both men and women in *East Lynne*. Characters have to safeguard their feelings so that they can survive respectably in the society. Yet, the double standard ensures that men will get away with violation of social morality. At the same time that the novel reveals the severe punishment a woman of social position would endure for violating the codes of sexual purity, it reemphasizes the power of sexual passion on women. Setting the assertion of medical ideology of the violence and irrepressibility of sexual desire in women against the narrative's assertion that Isabel's intentions have always been pure and that she never succumbed willingly to temptation, Mrs. Wood manages to absolve her heroine on the grounds of irresponsibility. The novel's heavy reliance on the notion of women's passion leads, however, to the endorsement of the social theories about

women's irresponsibility, theories which gave men free rein to exercise control over women's lives.

All the novels studied in this chapter examine the tragic consequences of society's mythical representation of womanhood. All assert women's need for freedom and demand, whether directly or indirectly, that men should reconsider their idealized notions of womanhood. In *Aurora Floyd*, Mary Braddon picks up with alacrity the theme of the erring woman. Braddon describes *Aurora Floyd* as "more boldly written & less artificial"¹ than *Lady Audley's Secret*. The boldness of *Aurora Floyd* lies not only in its frank appeal for a revised notion of womanhood and treatment of women as individuals, but also in its constant reexamination and transcendence of the mythology which divides women into angels and demons and of the rigid moral codes which offer women a single choice: either to remain pure or to be banished from society. In a more courageous appeal than *East Lynne*, the novel asserts that a guilty woman could be forgiven, if men would stop clinging to traditional conceptions of womanhood, and show wider humane sympathy with the sufferers, which would enable them to understand the motives for the deed before condemning the "criminal."

Aurora's first appearance seems to shatter all the remaining fragments of the sweet heroine of the domestic novel. The *Christian Remembrancer* protests that in her heroines, Braddon shows "repugnance to ... the ordinary feminine ideal."² To the observing social eye, Aurora reveals shocking traits in her love for horses, dogs, and racing, and her hatred for books and learning. She is pronounced a spoiled child by the author of her history; yet our readiness to criticize her is immediately checked when she is described as a good, generous girl for all her unsupervised upbringing:

Aurora shot ~~whither~~ she would, and there was none to lop the wandering branches of that luxuriant nature. She said what she pleased; thought, spoke, acted as she pleased; and she grew into a

¹ Robert Lee Wolf, "Devoted Disciple," p.10

² "Our Female Sensation Novels," p.232

bright impetuous being, affectionate and generous-hearted.¹

Her natural growth has encouraged Aurora to love freedom and power, characteristics never approved of in a Victorian woman, and which consequently have to be destroyed.

The apologetic description of Aurora's upbringing suggests that the narrator does not endorse the way women are educated to become members of society. For a person like Aurora, social education is regarded as equal to imprisonment.

The beautiful shrub was no longer to trail its wild stems along the ground, or shoot upward to the blue skies at its own sweet will; it was to be trimmed and clipped and fastened primly to the stone wall of society with cruel nails and galling strips of cloth. (p. 42).

Other women, having had their initial growth supervised, had their branches trimmed in infancy, while Aurora has to go through the painful process of having these branches trimmed after they have become inseparable from her character.

Braddon's disagreement with the way women were educated is shown in her description of Lucy, Aurora's antithetical image. Lucy possesses all that Aurora lacks in terms of beauty and education. Yet Braddon confirms that she is not the happier for her qualities. Her fair beauty, blue eyes, and golden hair, stand in contrast to Aurora's dark eyes and black hair. Aurora's love for animals is ironically contrasted with Lucy's firm conviction that "sudden death held his throne within a certain radius of a horse's heels" (p. 19). Lucy's education, Braddon states, has left her too selfless, too sweet, and too passive for a living creature:

poor Lucy had been mercilessly well-educated. She spoke half a dozen of languages, knew all about the natural sciences, had read Gibbon, ... and Arnold, from the little page to the printer's name, and looked upon the heiress as a big brilliant dunce. (p. 22)

Although it sounds intellectually tasking, Lucy's education is condemned as a failure in the novel. Lucy does not seem to have benefitted from the books she has read because her education was directed towards making her an ornament of society rather than being

¹ Mary Elisabeth Braddon, *Aurora Floyd*, (1863; London: Virago, 1984), p. 17. All other references are to this edition and will be included hereafter in the text.

fueled by a concern for her individual development.

Girls brought up like Lucy or Lady Isabel, curbed by their sheltered education, are forced into a life of secrecy, concealment, and suffering. Lucy loves and suffers as a girl, becomes even more silent as a woman, and continues to be a dead angel throughout the novel. As a wife, Lucy's behaviour recalls that of Mrs. Hare in *East Lynne*. They both willingly lose their will and the ability to take any decisions after their marriage. Women's silence may bring peace to society, as the reference to the number of coroner's juries that would have to sit if all women had Aurora's temper sardonically suggests, but it can never offer happiness to the silenced section. A long, sympathetic paragraph reveals how many souls like Lucy's are tortured beneath the quiet, every-day smile, and how many women are forced to lead a dual existence to avoid the piercing eye of social criticism:

how hard it is upon such women as these that they feel so much and display so little feeling ... concealment, like the worm in the bud, feeds on their damask cheeks; ... They are always at a disadvantage. Their inner life may be a tragedy, all blood and tears, while their outer existence is some domestic drama of every-day life. (p. 135)

Such women suffer because they are never allowed an outlet for their suppressed feelings, and thus their lives become an endless catalogue of pain and agony.

Aurora herself is an example of how free upbringing may develop wholesome, healthy feelings in a human being. Social education may entail snobbery, false pride, and inability to sympathize with others. In spite of her strong will and self-assertiveness, Aurora is described as ready to act more humanely than the other "ladies." Lucy, who is portrayed as the most gentle and tender-hearted of creatures, criticizes Aurora's treatment of the poor:

She has no sufficient pride: I mean with regard to servants and that sort of people. She would as soon talk to one of those gardeners as to you or me; and you would see no difference in her manner, except that it would be a little more cordial to them than to us. (p. 38)

Interestingly, the same statement is issued about John Mellish, thus establishing the

couple as the charitable, benevolent children of nature, against Talbot and Lucy, the proud slaves of social convention.

An element of heroine worship which Wood seemed cautious to express about Isabel, is here voiced loudly with respect to Aurora who is set on a pedestal. The manipulation of plot, characters and narrative sequence seems to have been set for the single purpose of pleading the heroine's cause, while Aurora herself shines through the pages of the book, and unlike the friendless Isabel, is protected by her creator. Aurora is likened to "some beautiful, noisy, boisterous waterfall; for ever dancing, rushing ... and utterly defying you to do anything but admire it." (p. 63) "We cannot help being a little in love with her," declares *Fraser's Magazine*, "in spite of our better judgement; and in this power of attraction, given to a heroine whose actions are at times almost revolting, lies one of the greatest triumphs of the author."¹ By reason of her vitality, Aurora seems able not only to win the love of Talbot and John, but that of the reader as well. Her goodness, spontaneity, and warm-heartedness urge us to wonder, following the ebbs and flows of her life, whether all that suffering is really necessary to atone for her single mistake. Braddon takes a much more positive and progressive attitude towards sexual sin than Mrs. Wood does and, before her secret is out, Aurora's forgiveness is already granted as we are disarmed by the narrator's insistence on her honest intentions.

Contrary to Mrs. Wood who pleads the passivity of her heroine so that the reader would forgive her one impulsive act, Braddon asserts that Aurora's sexuality, the "touch of native fire blended into her mould," (p. 17) is an essential part of her loveliness and vitality. Yet, despite the frank assertion of Aurora's sexuality, Braddon surrounds the heroine's experience by an air of ambiguity in the novel. The year which includes Aurora's sexual adventure is almost entirely excluded from the narrative.

Aurora is not only sexually attractive but experienced as well. Her overwhelming beauty leaves Talbot stunned, trying to discover

why it was that this woman was such a peerless and fascinating creature; why it was that, argue as he would against the fact, he

¹ "The Popular Novels of the Year," pp. 259-260

was nevertheless allowing himself to be bewitched by the black-eyed siren; freely drinking of that cup of *bang* which she presented to him, and rapidly becoming intoxicated. (p. 40)

Yet, Aurora's sexual experience is often mingled with the narrator's emphasis on the purity of her soul, as Talbot perceives in their first encounter: "A divinity! imperiously beautiful, in white and scarlet, painfully dazzling to look upon, intoxicatingly brilliant to behold." (p. 29) The set of contradictory epithets gradually moves from the spiritual to the sensual, from divinity to intoxication; the white, the conventional reference to purity, is mingled with the scarlet, the signifier of sexual sin. Later in the text, Aurora is covertly associated with the famous literary figure of an adulteress: -Hester Prynne-, when she signs her letter to Conyers with a big "A" in a direct reference to *The Scarlet Letter*. The association is so important that Braddon assigns a separate paragraph to it: "There was no ordinary conclusion to the letter; no other signature than the big capital A." (p. 155) Like Hester, Aurora is actually committing adultery. She hides the secret of her previous marriage from her husband. Later on, Conyers comes back to torture and blackmail Aurora as Hester's wicked husband does.

Long before Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, the question of woman's purity has been set at the heart of the novel. Braddon ventures to challenge openly Victorian concepts of female chastity. What is purity, and who is a pure woman? Should purity "consist in carefully nurtured ignorance of the harsher facts of life, or should it rather be based on knowledge and understanding - even experience?"¹ Rebellion against the social judgements of female purity is initiated through the hypothesis that morality should not always be identified with physical purity, that a woman could be good even if she had a history.

In a society which regarded women as the keepers of the "nation's moral wealth,"² the apparent feminism of *Aurora Floyd* and the social changes it proposes were inevitably severely attacked. *The New Review* wonders whether Braddon's works are part of a "general fermentation of a clever and original writer, who has ventured into

¹ Gail Cunningham, *The New Woman and The Victorian Novel*, (London: Macmillan, 1978), p. 18

² "Miss Braddon," *The New Review*, vol. 8, (Dec. 1863), p.565

untrodden fields for the materials of romance."¹ The review attributes the popularity of Braddon's novels to the "strange and piquant attitude in which they represent women, an attitude which chimes in with the theory of women's rights, as advocated at the present day."² The novel's endorsement of passion and acceptance of it as natural for women is also attacked by Mrs Oliphant, who argues from the social standpoint that woman's purity is extremely important for society, and from the double-standard which asserts that a woman's sin is much more dangerous than a man's. She connects Braddon's novels with those of Rhoda Broughton and links the two writer's new representation of female sexuality to the new movements for women's rights:

What is held up to us as the story of the feminine soul as it really exists underneath its conventional coverings is a very fleshy and unlovely record Women driven wild with love ... women who marry their grooms in fits of sensual passion ... women at the very best of it who give and receive burning kisses and frantic embraces.³

The last example refers directly to Broughton's *Cometh Up as a Flower*. Oliphant realizes that the acceptance of the new images of womanhood is an indication of change in the female character itself. The novel allows the reader to evaluate different images of femaleness not only through Lucy, Aurora's opposite, but also by reviewing these images together with the two contrasting models of the male sex whom Aurora encounters. We are gradually convinced of Aurora's goodness through the novel's examination of the reaction of the two men, and their contradictory notions of womanhood. Through the representation of the struggle between the acutely conventional Talbot and the less conventional John, Aurora is allowed to tower over all the arbitrary social conventions which condemn her.

Talbot's character has a dual function, like that of Robert Audley. He is both a critic and a judge of Aurora and a vehicle through which the narrator can criticize many of the conventional social and moral codes which he represents. The description of Talbot's

¹ "Miss Braddon," *The New Review*, p.565

² *Ibid.*, p. 572

³ Margaret Oliphant, "Novels," (No. II), p. 259

character is mock-heroic in style, rather than a serious exaltation of an admirable person. He represents all the sanctimonious aspects of his class. Through him, the solidly-established code of family honour, the code so enthusiastically defended by the conservative critics, is ironically criticized:

Of all the pride which ever swelled the breasts of mankind, the pride of the Cornish men is perhaps the strongest; and the Bulstrode family was one of the proudest in Cornwall. Talbot was no alien son of this haughty house; from his very babyhood he had been the proudest of mankind. (p. 26)

Although social ideology maintained that the purpose of woman's existence was "to make men that are happy and to bring up more men who will be better specimens than the last generation,"¹ Braddon ridicules Talbot for his strict adherence to this belief. His insistence on finding a noble mother for his race is criticized and hence the mythological conception of the angel is mocked. Talbot is a bachelor "not because he has never loved," the narrator checks our expectations of a possible romantic attachment, but "because he had never met with a woman whose stainless purity of soul fitted her in his eyes to become the mother of a noble race, and to rear sons who should do honour to the name of Bulstrode." (p. 27) Bulstrode's insistence on the purity of his wife amounts almost to obsession.

Significantly, Talbot who seems immune to any physical attraction towards women, and who at the first thrill of emotion caused by a "pair of beautiful eyes ... began to look for infinitesimal stains upon the shining robe of ... virginity," (p. 27) falls in love with Aurora. She is set before him as an experience and a trial. His first reaction to her question about horses is shock. He immediately mentally denies her the prestige of becoming the mother of a Bulstrode race. Aurora stands in sharp contrast to all his preconceived expectations of his future wife whose image accords with that of Lucy,

a gentle and feminine creature, crowned with an aureole of pat auburn hair, some timid soul with downcast eyes, fringed with

¹ Mary Playne in a letter to her sister Katherine Potter (1882). Quoted in Pat Jalland and John Hooper, eds., *Women from Birth to Death: The Female Life Cycle in Britain 1830 - 1914*, (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1986), p. 128

golden-tinted lashes; ... spotless as her own white robes, excelling in all womanly graces and accomplishments. (p. 34)

Against his confident conclusion that Lucy would make the wife he always wanted, Talbot proposes to Aurora, dimly referring to the hidden power which drove him to her. His vague confession of sexual passion registers Aurora's first triumph. Like Mrs. Wood, Braddon treats sexual passion as destiny, the inescapable fate which even the proud Talbot cannot control. But Braddon goes further than Wood in asserting that sexual passion affects both men and women almost in the same degree.

What did I follow? What did I follow, I wonder? My destiny, I suppose, which is leading me through such a witch's dance as I never thought to treat at the sober age of three-and-thirty. (p. 54)

Sexual passion is part of human nature, the narrative suggests, and if the strictly conventional Talbot, at the age of thirty three, could not fight against it, how could the inexperienced Aurora, at the age of eighteen, understand or resist it?

The contrast between Talbot and John Mellish is stressed in terms of appearance and personality as well as in the different ways they react to the woman they both love. Like Aurora's, John's feelings were left to grow naturally and were not checked by the social codes, and, like her, he is warm-hearted, generous, and possesses that extreme capacity for love which Talbot lacks, due to his ideological conditioning. John's reaction to sexual passion reveals itself in overwhelming joy and thankfulness, while Talbot's is distinguished by suspicion and a guilty conscience. John declares happily:

I've only known her half a dozen hours, and I'm over head and ears in love with her already. What is it that has knocked me like this, Bulstrode? I've seen other girls with black eyes and hair, and she knows no more of horses than half the women in Yorkshire; so it isn't that. What is it, then? Hey! (p. 52)

John's main virtue is that he lacks Talbot's blind pride; he harbours no illusions about his advantages or disadvantages, and this allows him the freedom of expressing his emotions as they come. John is aware that he is not the best looking of men, that he does not have "straight hair and a pale face" like Talbot, but, he vows, "I'm sound, wind and limb." (p. 101)

Talbot's and John's reactions to Aurora's secret reveal the profound difference in the two men's approach to women and to life in general. For Talbot, Aurora is "no fit wife for an honourable man." (p. 88) On this principle Talbot deserts his love to preserve his "honour," while John reveals his deep and real love by taking a woman with a spotted robe, a past secret, as his wife:

In spite of a hundred secrets, I could not love you as I do, Aurora, if I did not believe you to be all that is best and purest in woman I give my life and honour into your hands. I would not confide them to the woman whom I could insult by a doubt. (p. 106)

It is immediately made clear that the difference in attitude of the two men is not due to the difference in their ranks or their degree of honour, but rather to different conceptions of love. John is described as a gentleman although his standards are in complete contrast to Talbot's, and through him Braddon demands a new definition of the word. John is able to deal with Aurora and respect her as an individual, a radical attitude for the time, while Talbot views her as a representative of her sex:

He had loved; and more, had trusted her. He had trusted her, when the man who passionately loved her had left her in an agony of doubt and despair. The cause of this lay in the difference between the two men. John Mellish had as high and stern a sense of honour as Talbot Bulstrode; . . . Talbot drove himself half mad with imagining what *might be*; John saw what *was*; and he saw, or fancied he saw, that the woman he loved was worthy of all love; and he gave his peace and honour freely into her keeping. (p. 119)

John accepted Aurora as she is, mistakes and all. The "fancied he saw" is Braddon's customary way of hinting at a possible trial which will, in that case, either support or refute John's belief.

At its best, Talbot's love for Aurora is self-centred. He wanted a wife "who should reflect honour upon himself," and he fell away from Aurora at the first trial of his faith. John's love is of another type; it could be explained in terms of partnership and not of enslavement. He "had submerged his very identity into that of the woman he loved," (p. 280) and shown his readiness to sacrifice for and forgive the object of his faith.

Judgements on people and relationships are both relative and personal, the novel

suggests, in the way it allows the two contrasting heroines to reflect upon and evaluate each other's mode of living. Lucy "beheld the state of things" in her cousin's household "with silent bewilderment." (pp. 121-2) Her strict education blurs her eyes to any other image of a happily married life than one built on a god-and-worshipper relationship, and to any possibility of emotional attachment beyond Talbot Bulstrode. Aurora in her turn, realizes that what suits Lucy and Talbot does not suit her. She knows that her happiness lies in self-assertion while Lucy's lies in self denial, and thus she proposes to marry Lucy to Talbot; having "studied enough in all branches, and covered I don't know how many china jars with impossible birds and flowers, ... and read high-church novels ... the next best thing she can do is to marry Talbot Bulstrode." (p. 131) Ready to melt into his existence, Lucy, as Aurora senses, is the most suitable person to satisfy Talbot's pride. Against the "vulgar" life of Aurora and John, is set a detailed portrayal of Lucy's and Talbot's "sweet" home in which life seems tranquilly happy not because of their adherence to separate spheres, but because one partner has simply ceased to exist:

Lucy willingly abandoned her own delights; But it was very pleasant to her to make the sacrifice. Her inclinations were fatted lambs, which she offered willingly upon the altar of her idol.
(p. 291)

Braddon's objection to the stifled life of imprisonment in marriage is suggested by the fact that she gives the final judgement on the nature of love to the children of nature and not to those of society. Having a completely different experience in, and expectations of, love from that of Lucy, and being quite happy with it, Aurora explains to her cousin that the traditional type of marriage is not the only possibility:

You worship him [Talbot] all day; you sing silent hymns in his praise, and perform high mass in his honour, Ah, Lucy, how many kinds of love there are! and who shall say which is the best or highest? I see plain, blundering John Mellish yonder, with unprejudiced eyes; I know his very faults; I laugh at his very awkwardness ... and yet I love him with all my heart and soul.
(p. 185)

Again, it is John Mellish, and not Talbot, who echoes Braddon's radical appeal for more freedom for women. He acts as the narrator's mouthpiece in criticizing the conventions

of traditional marriages:

If I love to see you ride across the country with a red feather in your hat, it is because I think that the good old sport of English gentlemen was meant to be shared by their wives, rather than by people whom I would not like to name. (p. 168)

John's statement undermines the false pretentiousness of the age and suggests that many men who isolate their wives from taking part in their activities on the grounds that they are protecting them, actually do so because they have mistresses.

Social pretentiousness and the difficulty they experienced in adapting themselves to a conventional society, often led to the self-division of women, and to their enforced existence of secrecy and even deceit. The novel's references to masked characters starts with Mrs Powell with her respectable, genteel manners, her low voice and stinging words, her drooping eyelashes and envious eyes. Mrs Powell is not only an example of what a life of dependence leads a woman to, but also of the harmful effect which could result from the excessive internalization of false values. She serves as another warning for the reader not to judge by appearances. Comparing the heroine with her, we become more appreciative of Aurora, whose tender, unsuspecting heart leads her to offer the governess shelter, only to be repaid by the latter's plotting and hatred. Mrs Powell is directly connected with Iago: "in the great dramas of life, it is the quiet people who do the mischief Iago was not a noisy person," (p. 112) which suggests that Aurora, the noisy, impulsive person is far more honest than many of the silent, sweet women in her society.

Like women who use their beauty to achieve a better station in life, the chief Iago in the novel, James Conyers, uses his beauty to achieve his end: "in his earliest childhood he learned ... to trade upon his beauty, and to get the most he could for that merchandise." (p. 155) Conyers' utter villainy, like that of Levison in *East Lynne*, gives the reader profound cause to sympathize with Aurora, the inexperienced school-girl who falls into his trap. The split between external appearance and internal reality is at its peak in Conyers' character. He looked "like anything but what he was, - a selfish, good-for-nothing, lazy scoundrel." (p. 160) The characterization of Conyers significantly

simplifies the moral difficulty of the book. Conyers' wickedness renders Aurora a victim rather than a willing participant in the sexual relationship and easily establishes her forgiveness.

Conyers' exploitation of Aurora's innocence, his merciless treatment of her, and his inability to notice the beautiful things in life or nature because of his self-centred interest, are sharply contrasted with Aurora's goodness; or say, with Desdemona's innocence, for Conyers determines to avenge himself if Aurora does not respond to his blackmail: "what does the chap in the play get for his trouble when the black moor smother's his wife? I should get nothing-but my revenge upon the tiger-cat." (p. 174)

Even the "Softy" with his rough manners and dark spirit, seems tame in comparison with the brute Conyers, in the sense that the "Softy" at least has a primaeval sense of beauty, a sense which is foreign to Conyers. The "Softy" "had some glimmer of that light which was altogether wanting in Mr James Conyers," (p. 216) the narrator asserts. He himself is a victim of social judgements based on appearances, and his villainy often seems to be a reaction to society's mistreatment, rather than inborn, like that of Conyers. The personalities of both are shaped by society's reaction to appearances. Conyers thrives on society's love for beautiful appearances while the Softy's deformity banishes him. The "Softy" recognizes the falsity of social machinery and how beautiful appearances are taken to indicate good characters. Looked upon as an unfavourable species of animal, he recognizes the reasons for society's acceptance of Conyers.

Perhaps I might have been good for summat if I had been like you, I shouldn't have crept into dark corners to hide myself, and think why I wasn't like other people, and what a bitter, cruel shame it was that I wasn't like 'em. *You've* no call to hid yourself from other folks; nobody tells you to get out of the way for an ugly hound, as you told me this morning, hang you! the world's smooth enough for you. (p. 211)

The death of James Conyers is important for both the structure and the moral of the novel. At the same time that his death provides the essential sensation of the plot, it absolves Aurora from the sin of bigamy and allows her to remarry John. Because of her sexual experience, Aurora, like Lady Isabel, is neither chaste nor innocent, but they are both absolved because of the villainy of the man they believed they loved. Conyers'

death is Braddon's subterfuge to offer Aurora freedom.

The compromise Braddon introduces to satisfy conventional morality lies in Aurora's appeal to Talbot to save her. Treated with irony and criticism throughout the novel, Talbot is offered a chance to prove his physical and moral courage through his reaction to Aurora's dilemma. Acting as the rigid voice of moral conscience, his verdict absolves Braddon from the charge of lack of moral responsibility in setting her heroine free without punishment. Aurora is granted the right to live by the strictest moral character in the novel.

The crime seems to help the characters understand their defects. Talbot recognizes his merciless conduct towards Aurora and describes it as "barbarous -and ungentlemanly," (p. 334) and he later asks John not to suspect Aurora's innocence if he cannot establish sound evidence to refute it. John, in turn, improves the crudities of his naive nature by learning about the darker face of life which he ignored before: the existence of pain, sorrow and villainy.

Throughout the novel, there is an insistent struggle between conventionality and rebellion against both social and fictional laws. Braddon seems to fly in the face of literary conventions by suggesting that the romantic image of love and suffering is an exaggerated one, in the way she concludes the love story between Aurora and Talbot. Against social and fictional expectations, the deserted girl who "ought, in accordance with all dramatic propriety, to have died" (p. 109) outlives her sorrow and starts a new life. The main difference between *Aurora Floyd* and *East Lynne* is that while the sinner perishes in the latter and her husband is allowed to continue living out his life, the former allows both man and woman the chance of living. For both Wood and Braddon, marriage seems to be woman's most grave and important experience, and not her happy ending. This was in itself a very challenging attitude to social morality which proclaimed that marriage was the final, and the happiest stage in a woman's life. Braddon makes clear her concern to thwart the prescribed use of marriage to end a novel:

after all, does the business of real life-drama always end upon the altar-steps? Must the play needs be over when the hero and heroine have signed their names in the register? Does man cease to be, to do, and to suffer when he gets married? And is it

necessary that the novelist, after devoting three volumes to the description of a courtship of six week's duration, should reserve for himself only half a page in which to tell us the events of two thirds of a life-time? (p. 137)

But Braddon falls back upon conventional representation when she wants to indicate a happy ending for Aurora's ordeal. Although the narrative renders marriage a trial rather than a reward for the heroine, it can only offer her forgiveness by making her a mother. This indicates the limited choices available for those writers who wanted to challenge literary conventions. The novel ends with the portrait of Aurora holding her first born, and the suggestion that her vitality must now come to an end.

Although Mrs. Wood and Mary Braddon introduced heroines who were dangerous because of their positions in the family as wives and mothers, they tried hard to eliminate the sexual urge as the primary motivation for their heroines' actions. While their heroines often need a villain to awaken their supposedly dormant sexual desire, the heroines of Rhoda Broughton freely express the intensity of their passion, which becomes a euphemism for sexuality in her novels. All the heroines in her novels are very young, lively, and passionate. Sadlier acknowledges that "the crowded gallery of Braddon's female portraits contains hardly one that is not a living soul."¹ The way these young women address and react to their feelings accords with the image which Sara Ellis condemns so strongly in *The Women Of England*: "the lovely and seemingly amiable creatures of impulse, who rush about, with the impetus of the moment operating as their plea, uncontrollable affection their excuse."²

All the novels of Rhoda Broughton are studies of women in love, and both the women presented and the types of love portrayed infuriated Victorian critics. To the formidable Mrs Oliphant, Broughton's portrait of "the modern young woman"³ who craves "for flesh and muscles, for strong arms that seize her, and warm breath that thrills her through,"⁴ was an exhibition of "forbidden knowledge."⁵ *The Christian*

¹ Michael Sadlier, *op.cit.*, p.95.

² Sara S. Ellis, *The Women of England*, p.177.

³ Margaret Oliphant, "Novel II" (1867), p. 265

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 259

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 265

Remembrancer also condemns Broughton's apparent consciousness of passion and insistent emphasis on it through her active, impulsive heroines:

There is nothing more violently opposed to ... moral sense ... than the utter unrestraint in which the heroines ... are allowed to expatiate and develop their impulsive, strong, passionate characters The heroine is charming because she has never known restraint or cast it aside.¹

Mrs Oliphant's description of Broughton's heroines summarizes the method the writer uses to infuse passion into her heroines. Mrs Oliphant emphasizes that Broughton's "best characters revel in a kind of innocent indecency as does the heroine of *Cometh Up as a Flower*."² Passion is made the natural part of the innocent, inexperienced heroines who awake to the discovery of sexual desire. Although described as innocent, the heroines display constant awareness of their sexuality; an awareness that is mostly revealed in their response to love. The weight of sexual attraction is ever present in the embraces, the thrills, and the shivers of the young hearts whose stories are narrated. In both *Cometh Up as a Flower* and *Red as a Rose is She*, the heroines stress the need to love and not only to be loved, and they show readiness to defy social notions of morality for the sake of their love. Nell waits for the beloved stranger in the churchyard and her response to the first kiss is that she forgets "to be scandalized."³ The heroines express love not in words but in kisses given "voluntarily,"⁴ and they are ready to knock down the barriers to achieve sexual fulfilment which becomes a right on its own. In *Red as a Rose is She*, Essie knows that it is "undignified" and "unwomanly" to ask her lover to take her back, yet she looks at her petition as a human right: "I cannot see my everything going away from me without reaching out a hand to stop it." (p. 210)

A French critic praised Broughton's heroines as "living beings, having not only flesh and blood, but also *esprit* and soul; in a word they are real women, neither animals

¹ "Our Female Sensation Novelists," p. 212

² Margaret Oliphant, "Novels," (No. II), p. 274

³ Rhoda Broughton, *Cometh Up as a Flower*, (1867; London: Richard Bently and Son, 1890), p. 105. All other references are to this edition and will be included in the text.

⁴ Rhoda Broughton, *Red as a Rose is She*, (1870; London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1895), p. 185. All other references are to this edition and will be included in the text.

nor angels, but allied to both.”¹ Because her heroines are “real flesh-and-blood,”² passion for them “forms the largest share of love.” (*Cometh Up*, p. 1) The ethereal images of angels and demons disappear from Broughton's world because the women she depicts are earthly beings and their passion is but a proof of their humanity. Through the encounters of these inexperienced girls with the other sex, Broughton stresses that sexual desire is not a mere impulse succumbed to in a moment of temptation as Braddon and Wood seemed to suggest, but an inborn characteristic, equally present in both sexes, and equally responsible for their happiness. The heroines' fortunes or misfortunes depend entirely on sexual gratification or frustration. In *Cometh Up As A Flower and Not Wisely But Too Well*, Nell and Kate suffer tremendously because they fail to achieve sexual fulfilment while Esther Craven, the heroine of *Red as a Rose is She* is almost virtually snatched away from death through her revitalising reunion with her lover.

Broughton allowed her heroines full expression of their views on Victorian morality. Her sentiments about female passivity led many critics to connect her novels with the new trends of thought presented by the movement for women's rights. Radical American women like Elisabeth Cady Stanton protested against the age's images of passionless women because “a healthy woman has as much passion as a man, that she needs nothing stronger than the law of attraction to draw her to the male.”³ Allowing her heroines to express such subversive feelings, Alfred Austin states, could only spring from a belief in the total equality of the sexes:

Miss Broughton's typical heroine is of a sort neither common nor uncommon, but, we suggest, growing more common every day, in this forcing-house of an age in which we live. It is an age of women's rights and the emancipation of a sex supposed to have been long-enthralled; and freedom in one direction, entailing freedom in another, is pretty certain to encourage it most of all in the direction most desired and most easily taken. We mean of course, the direction of love and sentiments. If women are to do pretty as much as men do, it follows that they are to do pretty much what they please, instead of, as heretofore, doing pretty

¹ [unknown source]. Quoted in Alan F. Walbank, *Queens of the Circulating Library 1850-1900*, (London: Evans Brothers Ltd., 1950), p. 196

² Rhoda Broughton, *Not Wisely But Too Well* ,(1867; London & New York: Macmillan & Co Ltd., 1899), p. 5

³ Quoted in Peter Gay, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

much what other people please.¹

The novels reveal that it is natural for women to be passionate. The lively heroines are often associated with nature which constantly assumes an active role in Broughton's novels. Nature is no longer the passive, romantic participant; it symbolizes life, continuity, and passion. In *Cometh Up* and *Red As a Rose*, nature looks as sensuous as the heroines themselves. Just before Nell meets her lover and experiences the awakening of passion within her, she describes nature in highly sensuous terms. The dens "were telling each other how strong the spring sap was running through their leafy veins, and how grateful was the touch of the dew-freshened flowers about their garland feet." (*Cometh Up*, p. 2) Nature means life and life seems to thrive on passion. In Broughton's novels, there is almost an obsessive pre-occupation with death. Thoughts about death and the after life open almost every chapter in *Cometh Up* and *Not Wisely*. Since passion means life, the inability to achieve sexual fulfilment seems equal to death. The heroines reveal their horror of living without passion even after death, and they dream of sexual fulfilment in heaven. Nell shows her horror at the idea of spiritual life after death.

Oh, my Dick, my bonny, bonny-sweetheart! how goodly you were then! are you goodlier now, I wonder, in that distant *Somewhere* where you are; or when we meet next, shall we be two bodiless spirits, sexless, passionless essences, passing each other without recognition in the field of ether? God forbid it should be so. (*Cometh Up*, p. 103)

There is no fear of moral punishment when love seems to fill both the body and the soul. The carelessness about the pleasures of heaven springs from the belief that heaven does not actually exist. In *Not Wisely But Too Well*, Kate is willing to exchange heaven for love: "I wished to goodness I could make a bargain with God, that I might have you all to myself, for just one month, ... and then ... I should be quite content to be lost ... and ruined for all ages afterwards." (*Not Wisely*, p. 122) Life is where love is and even heaven is "very dreary" (*Not Wisely*, p. 123) without the lover.

¹ [Alfred Austin], "The Novels of Miss Broughton," *Temple Bar*, vol. 41, May (1874), p. 205.

In contrast to the heroines who flow with passion, the virgins, widows, and spinsters set against them seem to be dried up due to their inability to give or receive the element of life: love. In *Cometh Up*, Sir Hugh's mother assumes the figure of a living corpse, always surrounded with ashy yellow. The Brandon widowed mother and spinster sisters live a stagnant life of passionlessness. They display their envy and dislike for the beautiful passionate Esther, in *Red as a Rose is She*. Their craving for love and attention is symbolized in their yearning to invade Essie's loving, lively heart. Their portrait is both humorous and painful, always ready with their "bibles, hymnals ... prepared to Sally forth in proselytising ardour upon the conquest of Esther's soul." (p. 232) The more emotionally deprived, the more religiously rigid they seem to become. Broughton is here again endorsing and making use of the image of spinster found in the medical texts.

Through the presentation of such antitheses to her passionate heroines, Broughton seems to suggest that cold virtue could be equal to death. Men might prefer women who have no past; a "man likes to write his name on a sheet of white paper better than on one upon which many other men have written theirs;" (*Red as a Rose*, p. 322) but Broughton seems to suggest through the negative images of passionless women she introduces, that a woman without history is one without a soul. In *Red as a Rose is She*, Constance, the heroine's opposite, represents a negative example of the socially-esteemed figure of the angel. Her marble, passive beauty hides an envious and calculating nature which has never been refined by passion. Internalizing the prejudices of her class, Constance firmly believes that the expression of passion should be left to "servants and savages." (p. 318) Constance is always associated with lifeless objects; with "white meat" (p. 322) and "stone saints." (p. 367) The "passions that her splendid physique provoke are chilled to death by the passionless stupor of her soul," (p. 300) and this drives, even a conventional man like Gerard, to view the idea of living with such an "unsuggestive, unresponsive, negative woman" (p. 368) with "startled terror." (p. 367) A woman who is willing to give herself to a man who does not love her, as does Constance, must be regarded with disrespect, the novel suggests. Love is ennobling only when it is mutual.

In *Cometh Up as a Flower*, the heroine is also faced by a strong challenge to her notions about love and passion, in the character of her sister Dolly. Though Dolly seems at first to adopt Constance's attitudes towards social propriety, passion and marriage, she is a much more complex character. Dolly has got a soul and a history present in the "gold locket, in which lurked the photograph of the latest victim." (p. 182) Constance is portrayed in order to be despised; Dolly to be liked (perhaps despite our better judgement), because she can at least make men love her.

Unlike Constance's, Dolly's adherence to social rules does not come of blind adoption, but rather of a deep understanding of woman's status within society. The way she manipulates and achieves her aims is important because, in her heart, Dolly is more disillusioned and rebellious than Nell who, as narrator, gives us the impression that her sister is the most conventional of women. To see Dolly's image more clearly, we must see her through her actions and not through the statements Nell issues about her. For, despite her apparent rebelliousness against tradition, gentility, and history, Nell proves to be the weaker of the two sisters. Harsh common-sense distinguishes Dolly's character, and her lack of romantic illusions helps her to sail through life. Underneath her dove-like expression lies a strong will and many subversive attitudes. Dolly does not lie because it is second nature for her to do so, but rather because of her awareness that society lives on lies. She loves money not because she is utterly selfish as her sister suggests, but because her understanding of women's status in society made her reach the conclusion that money and social status could guarantee a penniless woman the exercise of some power: "is there any old lord between the three seas, so old, so numbing, so wicked, that I could not joyfully throw myself into his horrid, placid old arms; if he had but money; money! money! money is power, money is a god!" (p. 237). Nell, on the other hand, completely rejects Dolly's ideas. The heroine believes that "Love is worth all the power in the world." (p. 237)

Nell's story reveals that money could determine one's future, as it did in her case, when she had to marry a man she did not love in order to save the family name. The heroines in *Cometh Up* and *Red as a Rose is She* marry either for status or money; yet, what renders us sympathetic to Nell in particular, is our knowledge that the bargain was

struck almost against her will. Esther, however, loves with an eye to pecuniary interests. She is well aware that she can use her beauty to achieve a better life. Both heroines in *Not Wisely* and *Red As A Rose* show constant awareness of their sexual attraction for men and are ready to use it for personal gain. Kate is aware of her “inexplicable power to draw man to her” and practises this power on a man she does not love only to make sure that it did not get “mouldy - to prove to herself, practically, that it is not lessening, or getting damaged.” (p. 220) While Kate uses her sexual appeal for self-assurance, Esther uses it to better her social position. Despite the narrator's insistence that Essie loves the person and not the money, the story reveals that she is ready to lie about her engagement to Brandon, for fear of losing “the fine house and the broad lands, ... the carriages and horses, the roses and pine-apples, the down pillars and fragrances of life.” (p. 163) There are many references to the fact that Essie was attracted by the money and so was Constance, yet the narrator strives to make their purposes very different by emphasizing love on Essie's side. The sad endings of both *Cometh up* and *Not Wisely* could only suggest that there is no use in looking for fruitful fulfilment in romance. Passion proves to be self-destructive in both cases, and the conventional idea of sexual desire as a consuming fire that was “eating up her body and soul” (p. 414) is recalled through Nell's death of consumption and Kate's spiritual suffering. It seems that Esther succeeds only because she is more down-to-earth than the others.

Women fail to fulfil the cravings of passion where their desires as individuals seem to clash with those of society or its representatives; and a sub-text of pain, shame, and guilt accompanies that of their desire to answer the calls of passion. In addition to the comparisons and contrasts with other women, which aim to reveal the heroines' merits, Broughton introduces a recurring pattern of emotional relationships which help to disclose the heroines' limited choices and their frustrations with permitted social roles. In both *Cometh Up as a Flower* and *Red as a Rose is She*, the heroines are strongly attracted to a male relative before whom their initial rebellion could easily melt into self-sacrifice. In both novels, the relationship could easily have been transformed into a sexual one but for the kinship. Nell reveals the most subversive sentiments towards her dead mother, sentiments which only a rival could adopt. It is surprising that Nell

identifies with the father figure as a symbol of freedom:

I had often heard other motherless girls deploring their destitute condition; envying such of their friends as were in the enjoyment of a mother's care and supervision; but such sentiments, such regrets, met no echo in my heart - but rather inspired me with strongest surprise and amazement. It was to me a matter of unfeigned and heartfelt gratification that my mother had died in my infancy. As often as I came in contact with well-drilled daughters, nestling under the wing of a portly mamma, I hugged myself on my freedom; my father was more to me than ten mothers. If my mother had lived, thought I, I should have been only second in his affection, someone else would have been nearer his heart than I- an idea almost too bitter to be contemplated. (pp. 39-40)

Only a genuine lover can replace the male relative in the hearts of these girls. After the death of her beloved brother, Esther openly declares to her beloved: "it was great grief to me when you threw me away from you; but I could have done without you; if- if- I had not lost my boy." (p. 421) Nell also states "I liked my father a hundred times better than Dick, and always should." (p. 158)

Nell's declaration that her father is "woven into the fabric of" her "life" (p. 305) is significant because in both *Cometh Up* and *Red as a Rose*, the heroines' fortunes are wholly entangled with those of the paternal figure. Yet, the paternal authority is undermined in the narrative when the heroines have to suffer because the male protection, on which they relied heavily, seems to have failed. Left penniless after her brother's death, Esther is forced to accept the charity of the Brandons, and the Le Stranges lose their ancestral home after the death of the father. The death of her father also initiates Nell's misery. The man she idolized as a symbol of her freedom has actually asked her to offer her body and soul to save his fame. Her excessive misery afterwards suggests a condemnation of the principle of self-sacrifice and reveals its futility.

It is significant that Nell's attempt to save the family name and property, and Essie's attempt to rescue herself from the degradation of poverty, are both made through their decision to become other men's property. Essie proposes to marry a man she does not love in exchange for shelter and food, and Nell surrenders her "shrinking body" and "abhorring soul" (p. 307) into the old arms of Sir Hugh. The exchange strikes the most melancholic note in the novels, where the passions which have been praised throughout,

stand helpless before the economic conditions which seem to control the lives of these women. Their self-degradation, and the painful situations which the heroines face up to sadly confirm the fact that woman's only investment in life must be achieved through the surrender of her body to the highest bidder.

Where love does not exist, marriage seems to be a way out of economic problems only to lead into spiritual and even physical degradation, the narratives suggest. Broughton seems to be aware of the silent suffering of a rather large section of women who have to resort to, or are forced into, marriages of convenience. Woman is degraded by her economic dependence before and after marriage. The portrait of a loveless marriage becomes most horrifying when Nell explicitly describes her reaction to her fiancé's familiarities in *Cometh Up*:

His arm is round my waist, and he is brushing my eyes and cheek and brow with his somewhat bristly moustache as often as he feels inclined - for am I not his property? Has not he every right to kiss my face off if he chooses, to clasp me and hold me, and drag me about in whatever manner he wills, for has not he bought me? (p. 325)

Women seem to be aware of and accept the notion that in marriage, woman's body becomes her husband's property. But, Broughton takes the issue further by suggesting that, where love does not exist, love making becomes equivalent to sanctioned prostitution. Only in the most radical statements on women's rights can we find such sentiments, and though explicit political awareness seems still some way from Broughton's perspective, the comparison she draws between woman's position in marriage and that of slavery recalls Mill's discussion on the subject. Nell's discomfort at responding to her husband's familiarities reveals the amount of suffering and debasement a woman undergoes when she offers her body to a man she does not love. Once married, a woman is a fixture for life and she has to bear her cross till her life ends:

Sometimes I will confess to you that I wished he would transfer his amities to some other person, even if it were the cook. I'm sure I should not have been jealous. All Sir Hugh's other servants, if they disliked their situations, or got tired of them, might give warning and leave; but I, however wearied I might get of mine, could never give warning, could never leave. (pp. 357-358)

One can easily trace this statement back to Mill's objection to the debasement of women in a property-based marriage. Like Mill, Broughton draws on the analogy between women and slaves and further suggests that the latter have more rights than the former. Mill states that,

No slave is a slave to the same lengths, and in so full a sense of the word, as a wife is. Hardly any slave ... is a slave at all hours and all minutes; in general he has ... his fixed task, and when it is done, ... he disposes, within certain limits of his own time But it cannot be so with the wife. Above all, a female slave has ... an admitted right, and is considered under a moral obligation, to refuse her master the last familiarity. Not so the wife: however brutal a tyrant she may unfortunately be chained to ... though she may feel it impossible not to loathe him - he can claim from her and enforce the lowest degradation of a human being, that of being made the instrument of an animal function contrary to her inclinations.¹

Broughton might not have discussed ideas about women's rights with a political purpose in mind, but her characterization of women, her demand for equality in the expression of passion, and the necessity of fulfilling desire for the happiness of both the sexes, certainly breathe the spirit of change. Yet, the picture of the world she draws remains unclear. The characters, emotions and sentiments she voices still inhabit a grey land because she gives no final statement or triumph to those passions. Although she does not, like Wood and Braddon, conceal covert criticism, under surface endorsement of contemporary values, she manages to distance herself from the action of the story through the humorous comments with which she approaches the most melodramatic and even tragic scenes.

To blind the censorious eye, Broughton, like Wood and Braddon, allocates sacrificial roles to her heroines who often fluctuate between innocence and experience, rebellion and self-sacrifice. Broughton had to change the ending of *Not Wisely But Too well* so that the novel could be accepted for publication. The change primarily involved the final depiction of Kate. In the first version, the hero gets to the ball, takes our heroine out, and shoots her. The version was not accepted by the publisher, Sally Mitchell

¹ John Stuart Mill, op. cit., p.57.

suggests, because “violent martyrdom in defense of her virginity would make Kate a saint, and she has already been too passionate to go to heaven without spending some time repenting.”¹ In the rejected version, Kate refuses to yield to temptation “for fear of losing her chance in heaven”² and thus puts herself before the man she loves. In the official version, Kate refuses to be the cause of her lover's damnation, and thus takes on the acceptable role of a woman guarding her man's morality. Michael Sadlier suggests that Broughton's endings “are apt to be botched or scrambled; and the reason is that she was unwilling (or did not dare) to carry her love-stories to the lengths of sexual irregularity which they obviously require.”³ In *Not Wisely* Kate is confronted with two choices: either to defy social morality and join her lover, or to live a stagnant life of religious duty. Both choices cause her misery. Ending the novel by the hero's death seems to be the only way to stop Kate from finally succumbing to the call of her passion. As Sally Mitchell suggests, the novel was shocking, not because “the heroine fell but because she wanted to, continuously, in a series of climatic scenes of encounter and renunciation repeated for three volumes.”⁴

The sensation novelists had to show respect for the acclaimed values of society in order that they could appeal to a wide audience. Yet, by their covert challenge of these same values which they seemed to uphold, they managed to transform their implications. The women presented by these novelists seem to vindicate and indeed sanctify Victorian conceptions of the lady at the same time as they suggest radically new interpretations of these concepts. As a result, the reader is asked to interrogate the prevailing social standards of purity. The novels assert that female purity lies in the soul, not in the body, and in trying to modify social conventions, they backhandedly rejected the feminine ideal. It was not the novelists' adoption of the subject of sexuality as a theme that caused the critical furore against them, but their particular way of presenting sexual desire in women and later in absolving those women from sin. Female sexuality takes on a new

1 Sally Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel*, p.83.

2 *Ibid.*, p.83.

3 Sadlier, *op.cit.*, p.115.

4 Sally Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel*, p.83.

dimension especially in Broughton's novels where it becomes an essential part of woman's psychological make-up, a way of identifying her personality, and determining her happiness in life.

Despite their radical treatment of the subject of sexuality, their daring investigation of love, marriage, and the concept of sin, the sensation novelists often had to adhere to the self-same prejudices they were questioning in order to absolve their heroines from blame. Woman's passivity is asserted in the way Lady Isabel accepts her fate, and impulsiveness is adopted as an excuse to justify the actions of Aurora Floyd and some of Broughton's heroines. The sensation novelists reconfirmed the contemporary belief that woman was subject to emotional outbursts, and should be protected because her irresponsible behaviour might harm others. Braddon and Wood often blame women's faults on fate and this strips their heroines of the status of responsible individuals, while at the same time preventing us from judging them by their actions.

The novelists' intensive investigation into the female role reveals that marriage still remained woman's only destiny. Yet, by suggesting that women's most celebrated roles were often painful yokes for her, and that wifehood or motherhood could turn out to be the most miserable and self-debasing of vocations, the sensation novelists were certainly offending Victorian social ideology. As late as 1891, Eliza Lynn Linton condemned any form of argument that tried to reduce the importance of traditional female roles:

The continuance of the race in healthy reproduction, together with the fit nourishment and care of the young after birth, is the ultimate end of woman ... and whatever tells against these functions, and reduces either her power or her perfectness, is an offence against nature and a wrong done to society.¹

Such angry comments against new projections of femininity could perhaps account for the conventional endings of the novels, where the rebellion against contemporary ideologies of femininity, which dominates the body of almost all these novels, changes

¹ "The Wild Women as Politicians," *The Nineteenth Century*, Vol. 30, (1891). Quoted in Susan Groag Bell and Karen M. Offen, op. cit., p. 25.

into a glorification of them by the end. Aurora ends up with her impulsiveness and spontaneity subdued so that she could be reinstated in society. In *East Lynne*, Mrs. Wood discovers that the sinner's only resting place is in heaven and in death she secures Isabel the only possible dignified ending. In Broughton's novels, the heroines' rebellion melts away into sweet submission when they can achieve sexual fulfilment, and they wither and die when they cannot. The sensation novelists were still, as Showalter suggests, "thwarted in a full exploration of their imaginative worlds by Victorian conventions and stereotypes; but they did move well beyond the code of renunciation and submission that informed either fiction."¹ Despite the conventional endings they depict, these novels stand forth as courageous attempts to revise Victorian concepts of womanhood. That Isabel stands supreme despite her sin, that Aurora is allowed to re-establish herself in society, and that Broughton's women are allowed to give vent to their passions, is in itself a great achievement given the confines of Victorian censorship and the strength of the age's ideological machinery.

¹ Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.162.

CHAPTER IV

Sensation Fiction and The Legal System

“It may be law; but it isn't justice.”¹

Caroline Norton

In its quest for social truth, sensation fiction attempted to delve into the complex world of Victorian law, discovering its paradoxes, examining its implications for the individual, and often reaching the verdict Caroline Norton announced in her despair at the injustice of the legal system. By doubting appearances and what society perceived as eternal truths, the sensation novels were able to question the ideological implications of the law and frequently undermine its notions of justice. The process of investigation the novels adopted enabled them to reveal a whole host of conditions: legal, social, medical, and economic, which influenced the construction of identity.

Like medicine, law was another institution which reconciled individuals to social order and squashed sources of disruption; but while medicine claimed to treat the problems of both the individual and the society scientifically, law formed “the official judgement of a society about accepted values and standards of proper behaviour.”² The sensation novel was subversive in the sense that novels like *Lady Audley's Secret*, *St. Martin's Eve*, *East Lynne*, and *No Name*, suggested that both the legal and medical institutions were processes through which discourses on social identity were filtered in order to reproduce that which society sanctioned. As in medicine, constructs of female identity, of which her sexual role was the major component, intervened to structure the laws of marriage, divorce, or inheritance and give power to the propertied male. Legislation helped secure “continuation and definition of specific forms of Patriarchal

¹ Caroline Norton, *Caroline Norton's Defence: English Laws for Women in the Nineteenth Century*, (1854); (Chicago: Academy Chicago, 1982), p.157.

² Dorothy M. Stetson, *A Woman's Issue: The Politics of Family Law Reform in England*, (Wesport and London: Greenwood Press, 1982), p.4.

relations involving the subordination of women.”¹ Like the acclaimed policy of separate spheres, law built its logic on notions of nature and class. The double standard and class division were written into the law. In her study of respectable Victorian murderesses, Mary S. Hartman suggests that those women played upon the jury's preconceptions by adopting the age's ideological concepts regarding women. The stories of the trials reveal that the judges were “mesmerized by the popular stereotypes.”² Middle-class murderesses like Madeline Smith were able to get away with their crimes because the jury was convinced that these women could not have committed such heinous crimes or harboured such dangerous feelings. These women were aware that the trials involved their morality, as it related to their class position, rather than their criminality, and that the jury's suspicion of illicit sexuality could be more damaging than the crime itself.³

Nineteenth-century laws for marriage, divorce, inheritance and legitimacy reveal the extent to which legislation could reflect and enhance patriarchal relations. Ideological assumptions regarding both sexes are embedded in these laws which often seem to operate as agents of social, sexual, and primarily, economic control. The parliamentary debates in 1857 on the issue of offering women control over their property highlight men's manipulative attempts to keep women confined within their present limited sphere so that their total dependence could be guaranteed. Presenting The Married Women's Property Bill, Lord Brougham condemned the ineligible control which marriage allowed the husband over his wife's property. The Husband's freedom in this respect was as boundless as in any other; “He may squander,” his wife's money “upon his pleasures, lavish them on his paramour, employ them to support his spurious offspring, and there exists not the possibility of his being the very least degree either controlled or even called to account for the heartless cruelty of his robbery.”⁴ The dispossession of woman's

¹ Philip Corrigan, ed. *Capitalism, State Formation and Marxist Theory: Historical Investigations*, (London, Melbourne and New York: Quartet Books, 1980), p.79.

² Mary S. Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses: A True History of Thirteen Respectable French and English Women Accused of Unspeakable Crimes*, (London: Robson Books, 1977), p.261.

³ *Ibid.*, p.173.

⁴ *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd Series, Vol. CXLIV, 3rd February - 21st of March, (1857), p.607.

property in the marriage contract could only function in one way: to help assert and preserve the husband's authority by allowing him to maintain power through the expropriation of his wife and a corresponding increase in his own property.

The parliamentary discussions in favour of giving women rights over their property unmask how, by embracing the ideology of the marital subordination of women, the law wipes out their existence as individuals. The law follows the rationale that by marriage the couple become “one body” before God and “one person in the law” and that person is certainly the man, while, as Sir Erskine Perry observed, the woman is reduced “to a mere nonentity. She cannot acquire property; she cannot sue or be sued, and, indeed, has no civil rights which she can assert in a court of justice.”¹ Women were told that their money would be kept safe for their children, but this rule never applied to men. Again, underlying the insistence of the law on protecting women from themselves, is the assumption of their being irresponsible, emotional creatures who are incapable of directing their money. The argument was that women could never manage wealth because it was acquired and maintained through competition which their “physical organization” hindered them from undertaking, and therefore, “in point of independence *arising from wealth* they must, under the present principle of social arrangements, remain inferior.”² Even under equity law which allowed rich women to retain their property, these women were never able to control the property they owned. Their trustees and their lawyers controlled these affairs and these women were treated like infants or minors who needed the constant supervision of their superiors. Novels like *The Woman in White* and Braddon's *John Marchmont's Legacy* clearly suggest that equity law could prove incapable of protecting women because the trustees were not to be trusted. So, both the common law which deprived women of property, and equity which allowed them to retain their money through a marriage settlement could operate against them because it

¹ *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. CXLV, 3rd Series, 30th of April - 18th of June, (1857), p.268.

² William Thompson, *Appeal of One Half of The Human Race, WOMEN Against The Pretensions of The Other Half, MEN To Retain Them in Political, And Thence In Civil And Domestic Slavery: In Reply to a Paragraph of Mr. Mill's Celebrated "Article on Government" (1825)*, (New York: Linox, 1970), p.xi.

was in the male that the law invested all power.

In 1857, demands for giving married women control over their property were at first vehemently rejected. The discussion on the subject unmasked the real motivation for the male's control of the female's property. Men's fear of the loss of control over women is suggested as an important reason for the retention of property. Separate property, they argued, would "effect a complete revolution in the law, which would disturb all the relations of husband and wife."¹ Separate property would cause "discomfort and dissension"² because it implied the existence of two persons, not one, and consequently of two authorities. Women's subordinate relation to property was vital to increase the prospects of men. Often present in the argument was the threat separate property would pose for the husband's capital. Sir John Buller argued that giving married women property was analogous to giving them power and freedom of action because "a married woman possessed of property after marriage had the power of alienating that property and of dealing with it as she pleased." As an irresponsible being, she might invest her money in unlucrative projects and thus "damage the husband's prospects, to which he looked, perhaps for the maintenance of himself during his lifetime, and for the benefit of his children afterwards."³

Yet, the most dangerous revelation the argument unfolded was that, underlying the frantic attempts to keep women in their subordinate position to property was the fear of the loss of control over female sexuality; for, stripping them of the components of power would ensure that women would keep to their assigned sexual and social roles. Availing more women of property, it was claimed, would add "one more temptation to a woman hesitating on the brink of guilt. Any one can see that the fact that the husband possesses all the money, would be an additional security that his wife would not desert him."⁴

1 *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd Series, Vol. CXLVI, 19 June - 17 July, p. 1521.

2 Sir John Buller, *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. CXLVI, 19 June - 17 July, (1857), p.1515.

3 *Ibid.*, p.1515.

4 Ralph Thicknesse, "The New Legal Position of Married Women," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, Vol.133, (1883), p.218.

Underlying these defensive arguments is not only the fear of the female's disruptive sexuality so often discussed in the medical discourse, but also the analogy between woman's chastity and her status as property. The contract of marriage represents the male's sexual and financial investment in the female body. The law of "criminal conversation" which prevailed in the Nineteenth Century compensated the father or the husband in monetary terms in cases of assault on the daughter or the wife. Criminal conversation was defended in the House of Lords on the terms that law could compensate in money for all sorts of injuries which involve loss of property like "estates" or "chattels."¹ The line of the argument suggests that, since the value of a woman lies in her chastity, the loss of this value could be estimated in money, which should be given to the owner, in this case the father or the husband.

The double standard and the obvious assertion of the male's sexual license are ever more dominant in the arguments against giving women equal rights for divorce. Here again, the only party whose benefits or losses are considered is the husband. That the husband had a right to divorce in the case of the wife's adultery and the wife had none in the case of her husband's adultery, was again due, as Caroline Norton rightly states, to "England's merchant spirit Property, not morality, being the thing held sacred."² On the purity of the wife depended the legitimacy of the children, and consequently, the safe transference of the family money. Setting the basis for the bourgeois theory, Adam Smith had referred to "the fidelity of the wife to the husband" as the main duty of marriage because as a result of infidelity, "Spurious children may be introduced into the family, and come to the succession instead of lawful ones."³ The Lord Chancellor justifies the double standard on the same grounds.

A wife might without any loss of caste ... condone an act of adultery on the point of the husband; but a husband could not condone a similar act on the part of the wife. No one could

1 *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, Vol.CXLVI, 19th.June - 17th. July, (1857), p.230.

2 Caroline Norton, *op.cit.*, p.152.

3 Quoted in Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "Property and Patriarchy in Classical Bourgeois Political Theory," *Radical History Review*, Vol.4, (1977), p.54.

venture to suggest that a husband would possibly do so, and for this, among other reasons ... that the adultery of the wife might be the means of palming spurious offspring upon the husband, while the adultery of the husband could have no such effect with regard to the wife.¹

Embedded in this logic is not only the importance of property but also the assumption of the superiority of the man, whose acts are always justified “for he is a MAN, and claims his right of exemption, by natural superiority.”²

The sensation novel focuses on the position of the individual with regard to wealth through its interest in revealing the processes through which both male and female identity are constructed in relation to property. Collins's *The Woman in White* studies the effect of legal and economic aspects on the formation of social identity. The novel begins with a vehement attack on the law and rules out the possibility of obtaining justice from “the pre-engaged servant of the long purse.” Yet paradoxically, the narrative is set up as a trial scene in which “the story of an offence against the law is told in Court by more than one witness.” (p. 33) This narrative technique enables us as readers to question again the witnesses' statements and the degree of their reliability, and establish another version of the truth other than that which the Court's trial scene offers, by delving into the complications of the law and the way characters respond to them.

The stories of Laura and Percival reveal the extent to which property-based society could influence the characters' behaviour and motivate their actions. The inheritance of money and property is the most important part of both plots; both that which the novel narrates- the attempt to steal Laura Fairlie's money and her identity, and that which the investigation discloses- Sir Percival Glyde's manipulation of the law to retain his father's property. Away from the suspected secret of sexual guilt, the narrative unfolds the legal secret of Sir Percival's illegitimacy which proves to be the major cause of his readiness to lose self control and his frantic response to any attempt which might fathom his past. Sir Percival's secret operates on an important level in the narrative because what we discover about his status proves to be comparable to his and Fosco's

¹ The Earl of Donoughmore; *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, Vol.CXLV, 3rd. Series, 30th. April - 18th. June, (1857), p.813.

² Caroline Norton, op.cit., p.152.

plot against Laura. For, while he secures his social existence through the usurpation of legal identity, he and Fosco strip Laura of that identity, and consequently of her social existence. Both Fosco and Hartright draw upon the analogy between legal identity and existence. For Fosco they are equivalent: "I might have taken Lady Glyde's life ... I followed the dictates of my ... own humanity ... and took her identity instead." (p. 632) The similarity between the state Laura is placed in as a result of the plot and that in which Percival would be if his secret were disclosed is clear in Hartright's meditations: "The disclosure of that secret ... would deprive him at one blow of the name, the rank, the estate, the whole social existence that he had usurped" and he will be "driven out into the world, a nameless, penniless, friendless outcast!" (p. 530) a fate which Sir Percival has himself imposed on Laura. Yet, while the parallel still stands, Percival's position as a man enables him to manipulate the circumstances of his life in a way not open to Laura.

The connection between Percival's marriage to Laura and the secret of his past is also made through Anne Catherick's dream. Through her likeness to Laura and her connection with Percival's past, Anne is the most convenient vehicle through which to draw our attention to the future connection between the two plots. Like Hartright's opening statement which promises to state the truth only to reveal later a completely different secret from the one we expect in connection with Anne Catherick, Anne's dream also proves to be misleading. While we think that we are on the brink of discovering the secret of Anne's identity in relation to Sir Percival, the dream proves later to have revealed not only the future plot against Laura, but also Percival's secret. The disappearance of the marriage service in the dream refers forward to Walter's discovery, through the marriage register, that Percival's parents were never actually married.

The ability of characters like Fosco and Percival to manipulate the law reveals that its protection could fail for those who need it most, due to its being fabricated and maintained by those who hold power. The law of marriage reduces women into commodities, focusing as it does on money and status. In marriage both Laura Fairlie, and Mary Marchmont in Braddon's *John Marchmont's Legacy*, gain their importance through what they own. "Miss Fairlie's inheritance is a very serious part of Miss Fairlie's story," (p. 170) the lawyer states, and in fact, her money is the only reason that

makes Laura the heroine of the novel. As a rich woman, Laura's protection hinges upon her lawyer's ability to get her "a proper settlement," yet even with that, the husband will benefit whether from her estate or her ready money. According to the law of entail, Laura will only have a lifetime interest in her property, but "If she died before her husband, he would naturally be left in the enjoyment of the income, for *his* lifetime." In marrying Laura, Percival would secure "the use of three thousand a year (by his wife's permission, while she lived, and in his own right on her death)." (p. 171) Percival's mercenary motives become more obvious when he insists that Laura's twenty thousand pounds of ready money should go to him, after her death. Due to the failure of Laura's valetudinarian uncle to protect his charge, the law of equity which claimed to protect the rich woman and her property operates with the most grievous results by giving her husband in the marriage settlement, "an interest of twenty thousand pounds in his wife's death." (p. 183) As a result, protection can be swiftly transformed into oppression whenever those who control power choose to act in their own interests.

The plot of the novel itself seems to be a victim of the paradoxes which law deals out to individuals, sometimes forcing them to choose between paradoxical alternatives. While men can use the law to establish status, the only alternative which the male-controlled narrative allows for the restoration of Laura's identity is for her to adopt the same process that helped strip her of it: marriage. Laura loses money, legal and social status through her marriage to Percival, but, as Walter projects it in the narrative, she seems able to restore what she lost only by marrying him. The only available way by which she can achieve recognition of her identity is by the acquisition of a new one which Walter offers her as his wife and not through restoration of the stolen one. In cases relating to women, social approval has to be gained through the restoration of social order by the application of the same laws which oppressed these women.

Like the law which it criticizes, the narrative of *The Woman in White* sets out to reveal the achievement of justice but the processes characters have to follow, in their manipulations of the law, both conspirators and victims alike, is disturbing. The narrative not only discloses that justice and law are relative terms but also signals its own unreliability. The final truth could prove to be subjective, since it is Hartright who

constructs the whole narrative. The inflexibility of the law pushes the victims into the position of runaway criminals while the real aggressors enjoy the protection of society. Walter, Marian and Laura have to forfeit their legal and class identities, to live in the underworld of the unknown in order to restore Laura's lost rights: "Our poor place of abode, our humble calling, our assumed relationship, and our assumed name, are all used alike as a means of hiding us" and for all those in the outer respectable world, the victims of Fosco's plot are "at once the dupes and the agents of a daring imposture." (p. 434)

The novel's rationale proves to be that of the criminal in the sense that victory is granted to those who prove to be more apt in the art of blackmail and in manouvering the law: in this case it is Walter Hartright. It is significant that Fosco is not caught by the police or punished by the law but by his own secret organization. Fosco's success springs from his belief that the "tottering foundation" (p. 256) on which society builds up its moral maxims "that crime causes its own detection!" is but again "a mask behind which it hides its shortcomings" (p. 252) and its inability to discover skilled criminals like himself. The novel's own ironical comment on this statement is revealed in the way society reacts to the respectable Fosco's death. To all the world except Walter, Marian and Laura, Fosco is what his wife describes him to be, the agent for "the assertion of the rights of aristocracy and the sacred principles of order." (p. 644) As he uses illegal means to achieve his ends, the victims have to adopt those same means to restore their rights and this leads to the disturbing conclusion that the restoration of justice and order can only be done through the adoption of the criminal's tactics.

In *No Name*, as in *The Woman in White*, the intricacies of law lead to grievous outcomes. "The struggle of a human creature, under those opposing influences of good and evil"¹ which the novel proposes to depict turns out to be Magdalen Vanstone's struggle between succumbing to society's expectations of her passivity as a woman and her rebellion against the injustice done to her by law. More seriously than in *The Woman in White* where, due to their position of authority, Fosco and Percival are able to

¹ Wilkie Collins, *No Name*, (1863; London: Anthony Blond, 1967), Preface. All other references are to this edition and will be cited in the text.

manipulate the property law, here a woman has to fight against this law single-handed. In *No Name*, the property law as related to legitimacy acts as the primary agent of evil; it plays the role of villain by operating to steal the identities of the Vanstone girls and turning them into social outcasts. The novel is an explicit attack on both laws of property and legitimacy; an attack that is rendered vehement when the lawyer's statement condemning these laws is compounded with that of the narrator's explicit condemnation of the false bases of morality on which these laws depend. The Vanstone's lawyer asserts that the legitimacy law as applied in England is "A disgrace to the nation. It visits the sins of the parents on the children; it encourages vice by depriving fathers and mothers of the strongest of all motives for making the atonement of marriage; and it claims to produce these two abominable results in the names of morality and religion." (p. 101) The novel's attack on the hypocrisy of the law does not stop at revealing the limitations of this law, but extends, through Magdalen's defiance, to question the validity of the legal bases of social order. That social status can be obtained through manipulation of the fixed standards of order by a pretended adherence to them, is a conclusion Magdalen reaches in her quest for her lost social and legal identity.

Like *The Woman in White*, *No Name* questions the ways in which social identity is constructed by examining the bases of social order. The beautiful, orderly world of the Vanstone family is suddenly shattered by the revelation of the secret of its illegitimacy, which seems to cling to it like a fatality, since the marriage of the parents fails to change the children's legal status. The narrative introduces the Vanstone family as the idyllic tableau often praised by the Victorians: the quiet, peaceful life, the respectable, firm, but compassionate father, the submissive, angelic mother, and the well-brought up girls. But this conventional image suddenly moves on to acquire a subversive context, when the revelation of the legal secret suggests that a legal marriage could prove to be "a legal mockery" while "in the sight of Heaven" (p. 96) an illegal wife could be, not a fallen woman, but rather the salvation of a man. While the parents' attempt to legalize their marriage inflicts more harm on the children by depriving them of their inheritance, the outer world the novel depicts is a crooked one crowded with imposters like Captain Wragge and opportunists like Frank Clare, who are able to escape its trials unscathed.

The narrative “adds up to a subtle vision of a society threatened from within by “the prosperity of fools” and from without by “the confidence trickster”¹ and it does this by cautiously moving backwards and forwards to examine the appearance- reality dichotomy, not through the medium of a subjective narrator and his collective accounts as in *The Woman in White*, but through the gradual unfolding of the plot. Captain Wragge is introduced by the narrator as one of the “failures” (p. 149) of civilization and, as he describes himself, “a Rogue.” (p. 152) But when we compare Wragge with the other characters Magdalen has to deal with during her quest for social status and identity, we are led to question the standards on which our judgements as to good or bad characters are based. We are told that Magdalen's experience in society “had been experience among people who possessed a common sense of honour, and a common responsibility of social position. She had hitherto seen nothing but the successful human product from the great manufactory of Civilization.” (p. 149) But, has not that same society judged her people as failures and wiped out their legal existence because they disregarded the official rules of morality? This being the case, how can we judge any person as a success or failure if these evaluations cannot be measured against fixed standards? When Wragge, whom the plot reveals to be living by his abilities to cheat or blackmail people, introduces himself to Magdalen as “a martyr to my own sense of order” (p. 155) he causes us to question the bases of social order when characters like Fosco and Wragge, whom we know well to be tyrants at home, succeed in assuming the characters of guardians of social stability.²

From the earliest stages in the narrative, the reader is cautioned not to judge by appearances. The warning is delivered through Miss Garth who describes the reserved Norah as “one of the impenetrable sort ... as dark as night” while she believes that she can see “daylight” (p. 36) through Magdalen. But, it takes only one change to occur in the girl's lives to make their governess realize how ignorant she was about their

¹ John Goode, “Minor Nineteenth-Century Fiction,” *Victorian Studies*, Vol.11. No. 4., June (1968), p.538.

² A portrait of Captain Wragge as an exaggerated version of the age's acclaimed principle of self-help is discussed in detail in Jenny Bourne Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

personalities. Searching “as in a glass darkly” she begins to suspect seeming truthfulness of the “upper surface of their characters” (p. 107) and discovers the mask that was only lifted by the tragedy.

The novel asserts the importance of disguise through both its structure and its plot. The narrative, ^{unusually organizes these into} though divided into chapters, [^] Scenes, during every one of which one character or more is certain to be acting an assumed role, and only “Between the Scenes” are we able to take glimpses of their minds. The need to disguise feelings or motives presents itself to every character in the novel, whether the motivation is good or evil. Miss Garth has to hide her feelings of sadness in order to support the Vanstone girls; Norah has also to check her fits of “unladylike violence” (p. 130) to preserve propriety; Frank Clare lives by “casting himself on society in the character of a well-bred Incubus,” (p. 57) hiding his inabilities under the mask of misfortune. Magdalen's enemy, Mrs Lecount seems in full control because of her ability to hide a very manipulative character under the mask of propriety and Christian feelings.

Captain Wragge serves as the best example in revealing the importance of disguise in the novel. He looks at life in the same way the novel presents it; a succession of scenes. For him “All the world's a stage” (p. 299) where the cessation or continuation of any scene strictly depends on its efficiency in serving the interests of the individual. Captain Wragge is the only character in the novel who has to keep on acting till the very end, and while he suggests to Magdalen that she “Clear the stage, and drop the curtain on the past,” (p. 569) he can only open another curtain on the future by changing into another disguise and moving from “Moral Agriculture to Medical Agriculture.” (p. 569) The novel becomes a play, a series of impersonations, a magnification of the play it opens with, and Magdalen's acting career seems crucial for preparing her for her major role, where her success depends entirely on her ability to deceive others about her identity. Hence, “Jumping into Skins,” (p. 251) penetrating through them, or slipping into names, are important because they not only reveal the fragility of social identity, but they also form the channel through which Magdalen can discover its real components.

Separating her outer self from her inner struggle does not only involve a psychological change for Magdalen, but also a complete dissociation from what had

formed this self, legally, socially, and economically. Magdalen discovers that the most important thing about a self is a name, a legal definition by which it can be located in society. The close link between legitimacy and property is established when Magdalen's search for a name unifies them both. The narrative reveals how in an age when the family was regarded as the cell of legitimate society, society breaks down and becomes chaotic when the family proves illegitimate. A man's marriage, the Vanstone's lawyer asserts is "legally, as well as socially, considered to be the most important event in his life;" (p. 99) because it determines both his position and that of his family; and Mr Vanstone's failure to adhere to law leads to a complete erasure of his family's legal and, consequently, social existence. Legitimacy was important to secure the inheritance of property, and when the legal identity is stolen, it takes both wealth and status with it.

Her first step in defying the law and searching for identity involves Magdalen's stepping into the underground world. The step is characterized by a complete dissociation from the family ties, a liberation from "home control" (p. 134) as her governess puts it, for a name, a legal existence, involves social behaviour and strict adherence to propriety. A name, as Mrs Garth suggests, is perceived as very influential in preventing individuals from offending society. A name actually determines the individual's class-identity and consequently, his or her behaviour in accordance with this social position. Magdalen's awareness of her dismissal from society due to her illegitimacy, suggests Mrs Garth, would remove any "natural reluctance she might otherwise have had to deceiving us, and degrading herself, by the use of an assumed name." (p. 135) At a crucial stage in her adventure, Magdalen re-emphasizes her position as a nonentity, with "no position to lose, and no name to degrade." (p. 135)

As in *The Woman in White*, Magdalen's quest for her right involves a complete abandonment of legitimate relations. Like Walter, Marian, and Laura, she has to enter the underground world and adopt a secretive life in which she is looked on as an aggressor. The "legal," "ordered," world has disowned her. Her new position, brought home to her by Captain Wragge, is identical to that which Marian and Walter find themselves in: the victims have to adopt crooked means to restore a lost right. But Magdalen's fall in class also entails her introduction to, and friendship with, such inhabitants of that darker world

as Captain Wragge. As he clearly explains to her: “My dear girl, on your own showing, it's not a respectable man you want in your present predicament. It's a Rogue- like me.” (p. 152) Magdalen succumbs to this new status: “I have been talking as if I was a young lady of family and position. Absurd! We know better than that, don't we, Captain Wragge?” (p. 152).

While Wragge seems unperturbed by Magdalen's actions, the legitimate society, represented in the novel by Miss Garth and the family lawyer, regards Magdalen's defiant response to injustice done to her as a fall. Although her sin is rather social than sexual, Miss Garth's and the lawyer's reaction to Magdalen's behaviour pinpoints her as a fallen woman. The note distributed with Magdalen's description on it is significant, for it not only suggests a complete social disintegration revealed in the heroine's ability to assume any name, but also confirms society's perception of Magdalen as a fallen woman when it refers to the “Personal marks- two little moles, close together, on the left side of the neck” and suggests the “Mark on the under clothing” (p. 143) as a means of identification. These disturbing details reveal the social authorities' inability to imagine that Magdalen could use any other means except her body in order to achieve her aim. The lawyer regards Magdalen as a contaminating source of evil to her pure sister, as “one of the most reckless, desperate, and perverted, women living; and any circumstances that estrange her from her sister, are circumstances which I welcome, for her sister's sake.” (p. 466) But, it is left to the reader to judge Magdalen's action especially when at the end Norah, highly praised for her strict regard for morality throughout the novel, follows the same path Magdalen used in order to restore the lost fortune: marrying the heir to that fortune, but with the strictest observance to propriety.

Through her estrangement and suffering, Magdalen comes to discover that identity for a woman, can be achieved through a systematic manipulation of the rules of social propriety. *In The Secret Theatre of Home*, Jenny Bourne Taylor rightly suggests that both *The Woman in White* and *No Name* explore “how a “legitimate” identity is in many ways a trick of the light created by the manipulation of self-possession and

propriety, under-pinned by economic interest.”¹ It is not actually her sin that makes society regard Magdalen as fallen, but her manipulation of the law, her use of her attractions for self-interested motives, and her disregard for the social codes of respectability. Before the breakdown of the Vanstone family, Miss Garth suggests that Magdalen can get the best of husbands because of her “social position” and “her rare pecuniary prospects,” (p. 56) but when these two advantages are lost, Magdalen finds out that she can only restore her status by trading her body in and marrying Noel Vanstone; a mechanism followed by both Lucy Graham in *Lady Audley's Secret* and Lydia Gwilt in *Armada*, although in different contexts.

Magdalen's family experience leaves Magdalen aware of the importance of satisfying social propriety through the law, regardless of the individual's intentions. Her full understanding of the system results in complete disrespect for it; for though she marries Noel Vanstone and fools the law by adopting a false name, and though her feelings towards her husband are hatred and disgust, as Wragge explains, the law would socially and legally condone the marriage, unless her husband discovers and protests against her false identity. Only if her husband applies “to the Ecclesiastical Court to have his marriage declared null and void” will her plan fail; otherwise “the marriage would remain valid” (p. 397) even in the case of the death of either of them. Magdalen befriends the law by adhering to its rules to the very letter. Through her marriage which, unlike that of her parents, is actually literally and metaphorically a legal mockery, she almost succeeds in restoring her lost fortune and her status. Despite her self-hatred and feelings of guilt, she is fully aware of her success in legitimizing her existence. Despite the crooked means she uses, she finally fulfils the social roles assigned to her as a woman by becoming a wife:

I am no longer the poor outcast girl, the vagabond public performer, whom you once hunted after I have made the general sense of propriety my accomplice this time I am a respectable married woman, accountable for my actions to nobody under heaven but my husband. I have got a place in the world, and a name in the world, at last. Even the law, which is

¹ See, Jenny Bourne Taylor, *op.cit.*, p.152.

the friend of all your respectable people, has recognized my existence, and has become *my* friend too! ... You forget what wonders my wickedness has done for me. It has made Nobody's Child, Somebody's Wife I have no fear of being obliged to my newly-found friend and protector- the law. (p. 465)

Magdalen's marriage has restored to her what she lost: name and social status, and despite her horror at the act of sacrificing her body to restore her rights, she is aware of the advantages law offers to her as a wife in offering her a new social identity.

The interrelationship between property and social identity is constantly emphasized in *No Name*. A lady is a woman who has both money and social position. While in the first part of the story Magdalen loses her status, in the second part, she retains her position as a wife but loses her property, and the result is the same. Her status as Noel Vanstone's penniless widow renders her position even more hopeless. Now that she has what she thought to be the most important component of legal identity, a name, she discovers that it is money which gives social recognition. Again, she loses all because of the loss of one component of identity: "I am a lonely woman thrown helpless on my own resources, without rank or place in the world." (p. 477) The loss of identity is symbolically suggested by her immediate exchange of both name and situation with that of her servant, her return to the old trick of disguise, and the renewal of the quest for her fortune.

Disguise seems to be woman's only means in the novel to restore her rights. Another woman who has to follow the rules of propriety to serve her self-interest and restore her lost fortune is Mrs Lecount. Mrs Lecount is another illustration of the importance of money in achieving social status. Although the narrator attempts to place her in sharp contrast to Magdalen, who looks at her as "a devil," (p. 216) Magdalen and Mrs Lecount stand in parallel positions to wealth and even follow the same mechanisms to restore their rights. Like Magdalen, Mrs Lecount loses her rightful inheritance from Noel's father because of the inability of the law to deal particularly with cases like hers. She suffers unjustly because Mr Vanstone left no will, and just as Norah and Magdalen were left dependant on the charity of Noel Vanstone, she was left dependant on his "sense of gratitude." (p. 192) Like the Vanstone girls, Mrs Lecount's fortune depends on the inheritance which should have been left for her and which she can only hope to

restore by controlling and managing Noel Vanstone - a position that places her as “an awkward obstacle” (p. 192) before Magdalen. Interestingly, Mrs Lecount's status as a foreigner is analogous to that of an outcast. She has to change her name to be accepted by society, because as she sarcastically explains, the English “will have nothing foreign about them - not even a name, if they can help it.” (p. 217) Although Magdalen is doing exactly the same with reference to Mrs Lecount, the plans of the latter are rendered evil because the narrative stresses that their fulfilment entails stripping Magdalen of her authority over Noel Vanstone. Mrs Lecount not only manages to strip Magdalen of her newly-restored fortune, but to help Noel Vanstone control his wife through his position of authority as a husband:

Tell her you have made a new will, which leaves her penniless at your death - Place yourself in that strong position, and it is no longer you who are at your wife's mercy, but your wife who is at yours. Assert your own power, sir, with the law to help you - and crush this woman into submission . (pp. 438-9)

Mrs Lecount is fully aware that the most effective weapon to be used against a woman is another woman, because their purposes are certain to clash. Mrs Lecount regains control over Noel Vanstone. Her victory over Magdalen is signalled in the narrative by her exchanging places with Captain Wragge. As Wragge plans the plot to restore Magdalen's fortune, she now uncovers it and helps Noel Vanstone keep his money. She even compares her abilities to Wragge's: “Am I as clever in my way as your friend Mr. Bygrave?” and receives the same complimentary approval Noel Vanstone had once given to Captain Wragge: “What a head you have got!” (p. 448). Through her strict adherence to her role, Mrs Lecount vindicates herself and restores her rights by taking Magdalen's example, and only when she does this, is she able to establish her status back in her own country.

Although both Magdalen and Mrs. Lecount compete to gain authority over Mr. Vanstone, they achieve their aims in two contrasting ways. Magdalen's main purpose is to overthrow his “self-control” (p. 325) by allowing his “reptile temperament” to warm up “under the influence of the sex” (p. 284), while Mrs. Lecount's task is to restrain him from succumbing to temptation through following the strictest regulations of moral

management.¹ While the two women attempt to fulfil their ends in their different ways, the plot emphasizes that they both need self-control in order to succeed. At the initial stage of the plot, Magdalen has to avoid “all outbursts of temper” (p. 277) in order to escape detection by Mrs. Lecount. Magdalen's loss of control leads to grievous results: the first time it allows Mrs. Lecount to discover the dress and identify her; the second time it allows the latter to recover possession and control of Noel Vanstone and deprive Magdalen of the inheritance.

The way these two women lose control at various stages in the plot echoes an important question about the ability of women to strive for power or compete for wealth. Both Mrs. Lecount and Magdalen end up collapsing, psychologically, over the loss of control over property, and while the breakdown reveals itself in hysterics in Magdalen's case, it is expressed in brain fever in Mrs. Lecount's. The narrative explains that Magdalen's abuse of her health by pushing her abilities as a woman to their limits is the reason for her collapse. According to the doctor “Her whole nervous system has given way; all the ordinary functions of the brain are in a state of collapse.” (p. 564) But, although Magdalen is not allowed to regain wealth by her own means, she is still enabled to restore her fortune through her sister. The submissive ending which the novel seems to suggest with its final image of a repenting heroine yet remains subversive. What is really the significance of social identity when Magdalen is happily reinstated in society despite her journey of knowledge into the darker corners of the system? The question remains unanswered and Magdalen is enabled to begin the future by completely wiping out the past.

Women's attempts to usurp power through gaining wealth are almost certain to fail in the sensation novel. While Lady Audley's defiance and aspirations lead her to the asylum and Magdalen's struggle is sealed by a nervous breakdown, Lydia Gwilt's quest for unrightful wealth and status ends up in suicide. *Armada* moves in an opposite way to *No Name*. While in the latter the heroine tries to restore a stolen name and identity,

¹ Jenny Bourne Taylor suggests that Mrs. Lecount succeeds in converting moral management into medical control and bringing it about more decisively through the use of her femininity. p. 145.

and her suffering springs from her bitter recollections of her past connections, in *Armada*, both Lydia Gwilt and Allan Armadale (to be called Ozias Midwinter) fervently attempt to dispose of the past and its legacies by forfeiting name and identity. But as in *The Woman in White*, and *No Name*, the loss of identity leads to psychological problems and when the self becomes a repository for the various legacies installed in it, the attempt to forfeit identity results in personal disintegration.

The importance of the past in Collins's *Armada* is enacted in the way it constructs the narrative. The father's confession not only sets "up the basic conflict around the inheritance of a name, property and morbid traits that works in two directions, between self and other, and father and son,"¹ but also sows the seeds for the plot to be performed in the present by determining Midwinter's sense of his identity and strengthening his belief in fatality. The "Great Doubt" whether "we are, or are not, the masters of our own destinies"² remains unsolved since destiny acquires new connotations and resolving the struggle between the rational and the supernatural can only be done through dispossessing the self of its past- a task which the narrative proves to be impossible.

The father's prophecy predicts a repetition of the old story because "in the second generation, there are two Allan Armadales as there were in the first" (p. 35), but as readers we know that the "fatal resemblance of names" worked "its deadly mischief" (p. 35) on the second generation because of Midwinter's obsessive belief in his father's prophecy and Lydia Gwilt's awareness of that belief and her knowledge of the past. Midwinter is trapped in his past. His attempt to ignore it and escape its legacies leads him to the vagabond life where he has no status or name, and he ends in "a disordered state of mind, which looked ... like downward madness." (p. 46) His attempt to rationalize the past leads Midwinter to a constant state of obsession which can only help fulfil the dead father's prophecy. Unlike Allan Armadale who is "dumb about the past," Midwinter cannot choose the life he wants. His vagabond life, his only attempt to escape, leaves

¹ Jenny Bourne Taylor, op.cit., p. 135.

² Wilkie Collins, *Armada*, (1864; New York: Dover Publications, 1977), p.36. All other references are to this edition and will be cited hereafter in the text.

more unerasable traits on his identity, with a strange name, and unusual habits, but more seriously, with a painful belief in a class inferiority which is nonexistent. Although he has his own inheritance, Midwinter's adoption of the vagabond's name and desertion of the real one entails his inability to transcend the social status defined by that name. His sense of inferiority towards his namesake is ever present. "What has a gentleman in your position in common with a man in mine? Can you take *me* into the society at Thrope-Ambrose? Why, my very name would be a reproach to you. Fancy the faces of your new neighbours when their footmen announce Ozias Midwinter and Allan Armadale in the same breath!" (pp. 113-4). Midwinter fails to accept the identity he adopts because of his inability to come to terms with his real name and identity, and this tension is a major source of suspense in the novel. His sensitivity to the fatal prophecy is the medium through which he conveys and preserves Allan's dream, and his insistence on referring back to it and preserving it in writing enables us to watch its vision fulfilled.

Through the intervention of Lydia Gwilt in the narrative, the reader starts to adopt a new view about Midwinter's belief in destiny, while Midwinter himself is still unaware of the new state which the supernatural begins to assume. As the only force remaining from the past, Lydia storms into the present and starts controlling it. Her control is presented in the way she completely takes over, through her shocking, matter-of-fact letter to Mother Oldershaw, from the mystic world conveyed through the dead father's letter and Allan's dream. Lydia exchanges places with fate in the second part of the novel, and in succumbing to her "magnetic influence." (p. 337) Midwinter surrenders to destiny. With Lydia's appearance, the "fatal force of the father's prophecy and projected threat now turn out to be the power of manipulative female sexuality."¹ Like Lady Audley, Lydia's power lies in her ability to fool propriety and push the role of the lady to its extremes. She is fully aware of her power which she uses to lure men and manipulate the law; "Perfectly modest in her manner, possessed to perfection of the graceful restraints and refinements of a lady, she had all the allurements that feast the eye, all the Siren-invitations that seduce the sense - a subtle suggestiveness in her silence, and a

¹ Jenny Bourne Taylor, *op.cit.*, p.154.

sexual sorcery in her smile.” (pp. 337-8) Lydia acts the social image of the lady by literally having “no passions.” (p. 488)

Lydia's plot involves the acquisition of a name and status through the assumption of a false identity. Like Magdalen, her success depends on her being “*proven not to be*” (p. 250) herself, on her ability to dissociate herself from the wicked maid of whom the letters warns. Like Midwinter, she keeps her real identity a secret to the end. She dies as a nonentity and though Midwinter is able to identify her with the shadow in the dream, her manipulation of her identity prevents him from discovering her past, while her knowledge of his past enables her to mastermind her plot. Unlike Midwinter, Lydia keeps her old name, rendering the identification with the maid a matter of “similarity of names.” (p. 191) Through his obsessive fear of the past and insistence on burying its secrets, Midwinter ensures the success of her plot. She manages to usurp the Armadale name through marriage, and it remains for her to dispose of Allan Armadale and claim the property as his widowed wife, and all is done through Midwinter: “The proposal to keep the thing strictly private- which it might have embarrassed me to make- comes from him. Marrying me in his own name - the name he has kept concealed from every living creature but myself and Mr. Brock- it is his interest that not a soul who knows him should be present at the ceremony; his friend Armadale least of all.” (p. 436)

Lydia's plot is significant since it not only relates the present to the past by giving new interpretations to the concept of destiny, but also involves a struggle to escape the past, as serious as that of Midwinter's. Like Midwinter, Lydia wants to rid herself of her old name and all the bitter memories it is associated with. Her ability to succeed will secure her “salvation;” it will offer her “A name that can't be assailed, a station that can't be assailed, to hide myself in from my past life!” (pp. 394-5)- Her bitter experience of the past results in the complex and contradictory character we encounter in her letter to mother Oldershaw. Just as her outrageous style is combined with a refined musical taste, her lady-like manner masks a complete lack of emotional involvement when she declares to mother Oldershaw, “I rather doubt whether I am yours, or anybody's, affectionately,” (p. 139) and proudly identifies herself as “a she- devil.” (p. 189)

Through the medium of her diary, we are allowed to witness the sharp

psychological split which long years of assuming false roles has created in Lydia Gwilt. The diary serves as Lydia's secret self, where her prohibited feelings are explained. Together with laudanum, it helps her to preserve self-control. Yet, it is interesting that while the drug strengthens rather than takes away Lydia's self-control by assisting her not to be her own self, the diary helps her preserve her self-control by allowing her to let vent to her inner self and register its struggles. Lydia fears the loss of memory and emphasizes the necessity of preserving events in writing, just as Midwinter is keen on noting down events related to the past: "in my situation, I dare not trust anything to memory. Before I go to bed, I must write my customary record of the events of the day." (p. 431) The diary also reveals Lydia's gradual loss of self-control as she becomes a slave to her desire for Midwinter and confesses her love for him. "I may own the truth to my own diary! There was a moment when *I* forgot everything in the world but our two selves as completely as he did" (p. 432) and from this point on she starts losing her self-possession. Her attempt to abandon her wicked past and embrace the present by adhering to the familial roles assigned to her is signalled by her abandonment of her wicked self, the closing of her diary.

"I have won the great victory; I have trampled my own wickedness under foot. I am innocent; I am happy," Lydia enthusiastically declares, recognising at the same time that she has to deliver herself to her husband: "When to-morrow gives me to you, I will not have a thought in my heart which is not *your* thought, as well as mine!" (p. 456). But, she realizes that her self has been too much loaded with past legacies to be cleared away. For her, as for Midwinter, the past proves to be an eternal hindrance to living openly or purely in the present.

Is there an unutterable Something left by the horror of my past life, which clings invisibly to me still? ... is there no purifying power in such love as mine? Are there plague-spots of past wickedness on my heart which no after-repentance can wash out?
(p. 482)

Lydia's attempt at self-purification fails because it involves a separation of the self from the past. She can only regain self-possession and control of the plot by embracing her old self with all its wicked legacies- a move suggested by a return to her role playing and

her diary. Lydia's desire for Midwinter and her inability to lose herself in a man's existence can be only resolved at the end by her act of annihilating her own existence by committing suicide.

Women's sexual desire controls them in the sensation novel. As Lydia Gwilt destroys herself as the result of her inability to reconcile her individuality with her sexual passion, in Braddon's *John Marchmont's Legacy*, Olivia Marchmont falls a victim to the conflict between her intellect, pride, the enclosed conditions of her life, and her overwhelming sexual passion. Set against the stifling conditions of her life, Olivia's constant struggle to suppress her sexual desire can only resolve itself in madness.

Perhaps nowhere else in the novels studied in this work are the connections between property, female sexual desire, and madness made more clear than in *John Marchmont's Legacy*. These issues interact to become the fulcrum of the relationship between male ambitions and the female psyche. The essence of the story is the conflict between Edward Arundel, the younger son of an aristocratic family, and Paul Marchmont, the heir presumptive to the Marchmont property to which the infantile Mary Marchmont accedes. While Edward's motives are emphasized by the narrator as honourable and manly, those of his rival are described to be of the basest kind. Success in the novel favours the party which succeeds in securing the possession of the heiress. While Edward marries her, Paul, helped by the tragic accident which befalls the husband, manages to incarcerate her to every one's belief that she had committed suicide.

The villain's plans are helped by the assistance of Olivia Marchmont whose excessive love for her cousin, Edward, pushes her to help Paul get rid of her rival. Olivia Marchmont is the key figure in the narrative, which the narrator projects to us as "The history of Edward Arundel."¹ As the two male rivals fight for the possession of the heiress, it is clear that their purposes can only be successful if they are helped by her step mother, Olivia. Yet, the men's ability to secure Olivia's assistance is, in turn, conditioned by their ability to possess her secret: her obsessive love for Edward. As

¹ Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *John Marchmont's Legacy*. (London: Tinsley, 1863), 3 Vols. Vol. I. p. 1. All other references are to this edition and will be cited hereafter in the text.

Olivia is able to help Paul in his conspiracy against Mary, she is also the only one in the novel, apart from the villain himself, who can unravel the plot and restore the heiress to her husband. Both actions are entirely motivated by her responses to the drives of passion.

Dismissed by the narrator as lacking in womanhood, Olivia is viewed as one of nature's failures throughout the novel. The age's prejudices against bright intellectual women figure in the narrator's description of her. Olivia is described as unwomanly because of her intellect. Her face lacked "variety of expression." (Vol. I. p. 125) Her brow was that "of an intellectual and determined man rather than of a woman." (Vol. I. pp. 125-6) We are warned that although "intellect, resolution, courage, are rare gifts; ... they are not the gifts to look for most anxiously in a woman's face." (Vol. I. p. 126) Olivia's special qualities become, as her father recognizes, "dangerous gifts," a "fatal dowry." (Vol. I. p. 7)

The initial prejudices against Olivia are immediately undermined by the suggestion that it is their narrow lives which cause women like Olivia to suffer. Olivia's bright intellect is never allowed vent due to the restricting conditions of her life. She actually becomes a case study of the harmful influence women's narrow lives may have on them. Olivia suffers both psychologically and economically, from her conditioning;

she was weary of her life. She sickened under the dull burden which she had borne so long, and carried so patiently. The slow round of duty was loathsome to her. The horrible, narrow, unchanging existence, shut in by cruel walls, which bounded her on every side and kept her prisoner to herself, was odious to her. The powerful intellect revolted against the fetters that bound and galled it. The proud heart beat with murderous violence against the bonds that kept it captive. (Vol. I. pp. 135-6)

Olivia's constant round of duties to her father's parishioners, her dislike of her restricted life, combined with her poverty, were a permanent hindrance to her happiness. Furthermore, her awkward class position, being the daughter of a younger son of an aristocratic family and endowed with gifts above the average for a woman, rendered her unable to accept such humiliating positions as that of a governess

The novel makes it clear that it is her narrow life which made Olivia the creature

of uncontrollable passion whom we encounter. Her routine, limited occupations caused her passion to be concentrated and intensified. The novel exploits to their full measure contemporary nineteenth-century notions about the female's destructive, irrepressible, sexual desire, and like the medical discourse, the novel takes into account the repressive conditions of women's lives. Olivia herself recognizes that, had her life been more diverse and colourful, she would have been able to control, and even overcome, her passion: "Oh, my narrow life! ... my narrow life! It is that which has made me the slave of this madness." (Vol. I. p. 151)

The novel shows constant awareness of the concomitant relation between female sexual desire and the entangled net of pecuniary and selfish motivations which govern the man's world. Every attempt made by Olivia to suppress her passion, and every failure in achieving this end, marks an important development in the narrative in relation to property. At each step, Olivia's passion causes her to be victimized by a male figure. Her hopes of being loved even by such a frail man as John Marchmont, are thwarted by her realization that his proposition of marriage was purely motivated by self-interest. John Marchmont perceives that he can use the legal bond of marriage to secure a protector for his child. We are frankly told that he did not love Olivia. Olivia herself is aware that John Marchmont chose her to protect his child: "you wish me to be your wife in order that you may have a guardian for your child? It is very much the same thing as engaging a governess; only the engagement is to be more binding." (Vol. I. p. 168) Olivia honestly lays out her real feelings towards her miserable life to John Marchmont:

in the long, dull memory of the three-and-twenty years that had made my life, I cannot look back upon one joy - no, so help me Heaven, not one! No prisoner in the Bastille, shut in a cell below the level of the Seine, and making companions of rats and spiders in his misery, even led a life more hopelessly narrow, more pitifully circumscribed, than mine has been. (Vol. I. p. 169)

Yet, John Marchmont was determined to snatch "at this one chance of securing her [Mary] a protectress, who would be bound to her by a legal as well as a moral tie" (Vol. I. p. 189) regardless of Olivia's own feelings of debasement. But for Olivia's love for her cousin Edward, the father's plans for protecting his daughter would have

succeeded.

Olivia's first attempt to annihilate the raging desire within her ends up by her plunging herself into a loveless marriage. Pushed by her desire to kill her passion, she flees from one prison to another. She realizes that in marriage, she was merely changing the locations of her old life: "The new prison might be worse than the old one, perhaps; but it would be different. Life at Marchmont Towers might be more monotonous, more desolate, than at Swampington; but it would be a new monotony, another desolation." (Vol. I. p. 171) Olivia reaps no benefits from her marriage. She is left financially insecure because of her husband's inability to take money from the entailed estate. John Marchmont had no money of his own except his life-interest in the property, which ceases on his death. Like Charlotte St. John in *St. Martin's Eve*, with whom she identifies in many ways, Olivia is left dependent on the charity of the heiress. Emotionally, her old passion is revived due to her unhappy life and the return of her cousin who falls in love with Mary Marchmont.

The only real possession left for Olivia is that of her secret love, the discovery of which proves crucial both to the villain in his attempt to usurp the property, and the hero in his quest to restore his wife and her lost fortune. As Lydia Gwilt's penetration of Midwinter's secret obsession with the past helps her in her plans to usurp property, Paul Marchmont's ability to fathom Olivia's secret enables him to employ her as a tool in his plot. Olivia's personal motives lead her to attempt to dispossess Mary of her husband by assisting the villain in his plot to dispossess the heiress of her property through hiding her existence. Olivia's failure to be good, as a result of her inability to control her sexual desire, becomes inseparable from the villain's plot and renders her a villainous figure in the novel, despite our later discovery that she did not possess complete knowledge of the plot. Olivia was "entirely under the dominion of the new master of the Towers," Paul, (Vol. II. p. 320) who, by discovering her secret, was able to make her his slave.

Olivia's sexual passion is exploited with complexity in the plot of the novel. The narrative pushes the medical ideology of female's destructive sexual desire to its extremes. Olivia's desire not only destroys her but also has harmful effects on the other characters including the villain himself. Her passion is described in the medical

terminology of the age as a “horrible monomania,” as “an isolated madness, which stood alone in her soul, and fought for mastery over her aspirations, her wiser thoughts.” (Vol. I. p. 238) The medical ideology is again used to explain the reason for Olivia’s inability to control her obsession on the grounds that she was extremely clever and strong and unwomanly. The “master passion,” the narrator explains, has a special power,

upon these strong-minded women, whose minds are strong because of their narrowness, and who are the bonden slaves of one idea. ... in a breast which holds no pure affection the master-fiend Passion rages like an all-devouring flame, perpetually consuming its victim. (Vol. III. p. 53)

Her concentration on one idea and inability to escape it are attributed to pride and strong-mindedness, which seem to be harmful for women.

The passion which Olivia regards as her destiny due to her inability to alter or resist it, proves to be both hers and the other characters’ destiny. Only the final outbreak of Olivia’s passion can restore her cousin’s wife. Yet, it is interesting that, although provoked by her jealousy, Olivia does the ‘right thing’ only when she becomes mad. As her passion resolves itself into madness and consumes both her intellect and her body, she frustrates the villain by restoring the rightful heir to the property. The “fire in her heart” which was “devouring and consuming her” (Vol. I. p. 330) literally burns the only one who ventured to invade her soul and penetrate her secret: Paul Marchmont. The villain burns both himself and the property.

Paul Marchmont abandons all the women he relied on to achieve his aims including his mother and sister. Legal or moral bounds are not enough to safeguard the dependent, the narrative seems to suggest. Olivia fails to protect her ward because of her jealousy. But, it is the male figure who proves to be most incapable of protecting women. While John Marchmont fails to protect his daughter from her villainous cousin through securing her a guardian, Olivia’s father had already failed in protecting his daughter or securing her a decent life. He failed to protect his legacy as did all the legal protectors in the novel. Olivia’s father who squandered all his money in his youth, left his child penniless and, as most imprudent fathers, waited for a prosperous marriage to improve his daughter’s fortune.

As the fathers prove unable to protect their daughters and the step-mother her charge, so Edward, who is invested with full legal power as a husband, is unable to use the law to restore his wife because of the cleverness of the villain. Edward's hasty marriage turns upon both his young wife and himself with the gravest consequences. On the death of her father, Mary seeks in Edward the lost protection. Yet Edward not only fails to discover the plot against his wife, but also prepares to take himself a new bride only two years after the disappearance of the first. He seeks a replacement for the old romantic, aristocratic love in the righteous, middle-class, practical Belinda. Although the narrative attempts to justify Edward's conduct, it cannot ignore his unfaithfulness. When he is reunited with his wife, Edward forgets to mention to her "that during those two miserable years he had engaged himself to become the husband of another woman." The justification is that "perhaps, even when he is best and truest, a man is always a shade behind a woman in the matter of constancy." (Vol. III. p. 220)

In the novel, men exploit women for their own ends. Though Edward Arundel's motives are stressed as pure, we are aware that, in restoring the property through his son, he has actually secured himself and his new wife a better status. Like that of Laura in *The Woman in White*, the significance of Mary Marchmont in Edward's history rests on her possession of the property which she later passes to his son. All that happens to the heiress is because of the property she holds. All the characters associated with her accuse each other of being interested in, or jealous of, her fortune. No one seems to be able to consider her in isolation of the property she has inherited. The only explanation Edward can find for Olivia's conduct towards Mary, is the former's jealousy "of the thousands which might have ministered to your wicked pride and ambition;" (Vol. II. p. 9). Olivia, in turn, tries to convince both Mary and herself that Edward wanted to marry the heiress "to redeem his fortunes" (Vol. I. p. 336). Both Paul and Edward look at their contest as fighting to restore the usurped property through the restoration of Mary Marchmont. The fact that Mary is only significant because of her money is further confirmed by her death immediately after the plot against her is revealed. She seems to have been allowed to live only long enough to give her husband back the property through the rightful heir whom she had borne.

The portrait of Mary Marchmont and her status in relation to property are significant. The paradoxical transformation her character undertakes between childhood and womanhood is extremely interesting. As a poor, penniless child, Mary is presented to the reader as a woman. Before her accession to the property, Mary is described by both the narrator and Edward Arundel as having suddenly grown up due to the sad conditions of her life. The narrative asserts that what was painful to discover when looking at the child, was “that divine period of perfect innocence, - innocence of all sorrow and trouble, falsehood and wrong, - that bright holiday-time of the soul, had never been hers.” (Vol. I. p. 30) We are told that at eight years old, “She was a woman by reason of all these virtues; but she was no longer a child.” (Vol. I. p. 31.) She is described as a wise and practical housekeeper who perfectly managed her father’s home. Suddenly, all her practicality, wisdom, and early maturity leave Mary on her accession to property. She becomes childish and dependent. Her new social position isolates her from the experience of the outer world and becomes greatly responsible for her tragedy. As an heiress, Mary was “as childlike now, in her early womanhood, as she had been womanly while she was a child.” (Vol. I. p. 294). Her helpless status when her husband fails to protect her leaves her an easy prey for the villain who, unable to get Olivia’s confirmation of the mental derangement of the heiress, a legal trick which could have secured his accession to the property, decides to ignore her existence all together.

Both Mary Marchmont and Olivia become victims to the male’s inability to protect them. While Olivia’s life and love drive her to take refuge in a loveless marriage and to be used by Paul Marchmont, Mary’s inexperience and Edward’s imprudence in his marriage, are solely responsible for her tragedy. We cannot ignore the fact that Edward is the only one who benefits from the outcome of the plot. The two women become the bridge over which he crosses to a better life. While Olivia brings him back the lost fortune by restoring his wife, Mary, by her death, ensures the legitimate passing of the property through their son.

Whether victim or participant, woman, in her role as mother, is the only means through which men are able to pass on property and this puts her at the centre of patriarchal aspirations. Charles Reade's *A Terrible Temptation* reveals how the feud

between two men over property influences the lives and reactions of the women related to them. Unlike Braddon's *John Marchmont's Legacy* where women are easy tools for men's pecuniary ambitions, in *A Terrible Temptation* women actually play a vital role in placing or displacing men as regards the property. Both Lady Bassett and her servant, Mary Wells, prove instrumental in controlling the fortunes of the two enemies, Sir Charles Bassett and his cousin Richard.

The male's obsession with property and money reaches dangerous limits in *A Terrible Temptation*. The need to acquire or preserve property motivates the behaviour of all the characters, but especially the men. From the earliest stages in the novel, we are made aware of Richard Bassett's personal motives in approaching Miss Bruce. Love and money are inseparable for Mr. Bassett. His love for Miss Bruce, we are informed, was entwined with his awareness that "her fifteen thousand pounds would be a fine addition to his present income, which was small, though his distant expectations were great."¹ Marriage into money proves to be the means followed by men in order to improve their prospects. Although he fails to secure Miss Bruce as a wife and she marries his rival, Sir Charles, Richard Bassett's only way to better his position and aid his literal adherence to the rules of self-help, is through marrying a rich woman. Woman and property become inseparable. Woman both becomes property in herself and brings man property through the marriage contract. The equation is spelled out in the advice which Mr. Bassett's lawyer offers him: "Get your colour back, and marry a girl with money, and turn that into land." (Vol. I. p. 160)

The link between women and property is established from the early stages in the novel when the rivals over the Bassett property compete for the possession of the same woman. Richard Bassett fights his battle to win Miss Bruce and deprive his older rival of the chance of having an heir. Should he succeed, he would secure himself and his issue accession to the property if he outlived his cousin. Mr. Bassett makes clear his plans: "Sir Charles's estates are mine by right, and they will return to my line if he does not

¹ Charles Reade, *A Terrible Temptation*, (London: Chapman and Hall, 1871), 3Vols., Vol. I, p.3. All other references are to this edition and will be cited hereafter in the text.

marry and have issue.” (Vol. I. p. 36) As for Sir Charles Bassett, marriage is a necessity to complete his social position as a propertied male. Despite his happy premarital sexual experience, his lawyer explains to Sir Charles's mistress, “Sir Charles is a landed gentleman, he must marry and have heirs.” (Vol. I. p. 48) As Miss Bruce becomes the centre of the conflict between the two enemies, she later becomes the only person who can determine who will be victor, by providing the only means of victory: a child and an heir to the property.

For both rivals, the sole purpose of marriage turns on having an heir to secure the possession of the property. The failure or success in realizing this purpose proves to be detrimental to their behaviour and, more seriously, their psychological make-up. His earnest quest for money transforms Richard Bassett into a mean, aggressive person, who nurtures a dream of having a son who could deprive his childless rival of the property. His “big hate, and ... mania for the possession of land” cause him to follow extremism in all his actions, a matter which leads people to think that “he was mad.” (Vol. I. p. 162)

In Sir Charles's case, the necessity to have an heir to protect his property from his cousin's aspirations causes a serious state of mental illness. Already liable to epileptic fits, Sir Charles is nearly driven mad by his inability to have a child. Aided by the accident in which he could have been killed, Sir Charles's childlessness, the narrator confirms, “became in his eyes a calamity” which “brought him into a morbid state.” (Vol. II. p. 9) Sir Charles's mental state helps his enemy to prove him “dead in law” (Vol. II. p. 63) and accede to the property by incarcerating Sir Charles as mad.

Although the narrator tries to assert that Sir Charles's incarceration is wrongful and a pure plot performed by his rival to usurp the property, we are aware that he suffers from a serious mental problem. After the accident, Sir Charles confesses that his head is rather muddled and he is subject to more fits. Sir Charles is only cured by the news of his having produced an heir. As his reason was affected by his failure to have a child, he is completely cured when the cause is removed. He assures his wife that: “The moment you told me I should be a father, I began to get better, and to laugh at Richard Bassett's malice.” (Vol. II. p. 165)

Sir Charles's obsession with having an heir transforms his innocent, submissive

wife into a schemer. In order to secure her husband's happiness and to restore peace to her life which was wrecked by her childless condition, Lady Bassett feigns a whole story about pregnancy and child birth and installs an illegitimate child, son of her servant Mary Wells, as heir to the property. The plot equally serves her servant's purpose to avenge herself on Richard Bassett since the child is actually Richard Bassett's illegitimate son whom he refuses to acknowledge. Mary Wells's plot changes the lives of both rivals because it not only involves producing an heir to the Bassett Property, but also punishing Richard Bassett by installing his illegitimate child as heir to the property and ending his hopes of inheriting it himself.

Only due to the rift between the two women, which is occasioned by the birth of a legitimate son to Lady Bassett, is the secret of the plot revealed. While Lady Bassett suffers for having, by her own scheming, debarred her own son from inheriting the property and deceived her husband, Mary Wells clings to the benefits of the bargain she had struck with her mistress and which made her son the heir. The moral dilemma of the issue is partially solved in the narrative by a stolid defence of class prejudices: a sharp contrast is drawn between the noble Saxon boy and the servant's child. Reginald, the older son is invested with all the failures attached to his mother's class, starting with vulgarity and ending with theft, while Compton, the real heir, is portrayed as an honourable gentleman.

Lady Bassett fights fiercely to restore the property which she had given to Reginald by claiming him to be her child. Again, she has to resort to scheming and even blackmail. The men stay unaware of the plot till the very end. Only through her confession, and that of her servant, do Sir Charles and his rival come to know the story. Although the men are initially the main motivators of the women's action in the novel, they are helpless before these women's resolute attempts to determine the ownership of the property.

Even having a son, the obsessive dream of both men, proves rather inconvenient. Richard Bassett's legitimate son dies in infancy while his illegitimate one almost deprives him of the property. Sir Charles's obsession with having a son only pushes his wife to cheat him and produce a false heir. The daughter whose birth Richard Bassett lamented,

however, fulfils his dream of restoring the Bassett property. She falls in love with Sir Charles's rightful heir, and aided by Lady Bassett who finds herself obliged to confess the secret of her scheming so that she can restore her son to the property and secure Richard Bassett's approval of him as son-in-law, she marries the heir to the Bassett property. The feud between the two men proves futile, as do their fears, obsessions, and struggles, since it is finally the women who resolve the struggle for property. Richard Bassett is aware that his dreams are actually to be realized through his daughter: "we might just as well have kept it quiet, for my grandson will inherit Huntercombe and Bassett after all ___." (Vol. III. pp. 298-9)

In its focus on the details of property transmission the sensation novel reveals that the acquisition, retention, or loss of property, proves vital in determining the male's psyche in a society which valued individuals in terms of their pecuniary possessions. The different relations of the two sexes to property determines, in turn, their reactions to its loss or possession. Rich women like Laura and Mary Marchmont seem to feel property to be a burden rather than a blessing and they are more than willing to hand it over to their husbands. The novels themselves offer an ideological portrait of rich women as in urgent need of protection both from themselves and of their property. Heiresses like Laura and Mary are depicted as naïve and infantile, while penniless women who attempt to gain property, like Magdalen and Lydia Gwilt, are portrayed, however disparate their motives might be, as resourceful and manipulative.

Both men and women seek to better their social position through marriage, yet while men's attempt is regarded as normal, women's is viewed as villainy. Yet, by revealing that the only means available for women to improve their positions, and sometimes to help their husbands, as in the case of Lady Bassett, is through manipulation and trickery, the novels manage to expose the inadequacy of the laws which were deemed to preserve justice. The disparity which the novels display between the laws which were created to preserve social stability and the notions of justice which the reader draws from observation of the situations which the characters face, leads to the conclusion that, when law has been the servant of the powerful, the helpless should look for justice elsewhere.

Whether with charitable or villainous motives, men in these novels tend to regard

women as commodities, and assert that their protection of these women can only be guaranteed through complete possession, i. e. marriage. This assumption is frequently put into question in the novels, however. The novels assert that the protection of the law fails because legislation had originally been made in the sole interest of serving the powerful. In the case of women, the guarantees of male protection with regard to property collapse because the male figures prove either helpless to challenge the law, as in the case of Hartright and Edward Arundel, or too self-centred to act as in the case of Olivia's father or Laura's uncle, Mr. Fairlie.

Although the structure of the novels reinforces paternalistic ideology, as in the case of Laura and Mary who both give birth to heirs, the novels themselves put into question both the whole system which makes women mere passive pawns in the property game, and the attitudes of the men which derive from and maintain this system. Against such innocent figures as Laura and Mary, the novelists set those of the vibrant, scheming figures of Magdalen, Lydia Gwilt, and Lady Bassett who are all portrayed as admirable. Yet, as a more questionable heroine than the others, Lydia is made to suffer. The representation of Magdalen and Lady Bassett, however, suggests that new standards of evaluation are in play with regard to women. The novels' recognition of economic injustice leads to a questioning of the stereotypes of femininity which produced and maintained the hierarchy of gender enshrined in the Victorian legal and economic system.

Conclusion

In examining issues relating to insanity and sexuality and the legal and economic bases of Victorian social order, the sensation novel produced a radical critique of the era's dominant ideologies. It did so not by eschewing contemporary ideological projections, but rather by enlarging and heightening them, exploiting them to their full measure until their inadequacies and internal contradictions became manifest. The "mad women" who haunt the pages of sensation novels, such as Charlotte St. John, *Lady Audley*, or Olivia Marchmont, are not merely lurid figments of the novelists' gothic imagination, but rather developments of psychological types to be found in the medical literature of the time. On the pages of the novels, however, they take on a rather different character: instead of being illustrations of innate female instability, they point to the ways in which the social and economic restrictions of women's lives force them into forms of behaviour which the patriarchal culture can then conveniently classify as "madness."

It is notable that examples of "madness" in sensation fiction studied here have been directly connected to questions of property and inheritance. In the very plot structure of their fiction the sensation novelists implanted seeds of doubt as to the legitimacy and trustworthiness of contemporary constructions of femininity. Although their ultimate message is not always overtly radical - many of the novels, for example, do seem to endorse the notion that their female characters have become genuinely uncontrollable - the novels by their very structure set in place many searching questions about the ideological and material organization of Victorian middle-class society. Indeed, the sensation novelists were arguably more advanced than the realists in the way they overtly questioned the power-relations which structured bourgeois and upper-class culture.

One of the primary targets of the sensation novelists' criticism was that sacrosanct Victorian institution - the family, and with it all the notions of female purity, spirituality, and social incapacity which helped maintain it. Rather than a symbol of moral order, the family is projected in many of these novels as a primary agent of female oppression.

Although Victorian ideology maintained that all female happiness was centered in and arose from a woman's fulfilment of her sacred duties as wife and mother, the sensation novelists suggested a rather more negative picture. Olivia Marchmont exchanges the stifling conditions of her spinsterhood for the even greater restrictions and demands of wifedom, while marriage for her step-daughter, Mary, produces literal confinement and eventual death, her husband all the while swiftly engaging himself to another woman. Even the novels which end with a seemingly happy marriage leave feelings of unease in the reader's mind. Laura Fairlie's happy marriage to Walter seems to erase her identity almost as effectively as Fosco's plot would have done, fixing her forever in the role of child woman, while Aurora Floyd's accession to motherhood seems to spell the end of her earlier vibrant vitality.

The structure of the novels' plots, with their complex legal and economic details of inheritance highlights the material role played by the family as a mechanism for legitimizing sexuality and securing a stable transmission of property. The novels make only too plain, however, the gender hierarchy which underpins the institutional structure of the family which seemed to guarantee women's sexual and economic subjection, keeping them in their "proper sphere." While marriage granted men sexual licence, allowing them to form sexual relationships outside marriage at the same time as granting them the power to enforce their sexual rights on their human "property," their wives, it insured the women's loss of both economic and sexual freedom. Nell Le Strange's reflections on the physical power her husband acquires over her body through marriage provide one of the era's most chilling reflections on the material nature of female oppression within the marriage bond.

By directly tying their investigations of the operations of the female psyche to the economic and institutional structures of the era, the sensation novelists helped reveal the direct connections between the medical and social constructions of femininity and the material organization of society. Ideological projections of female passivity and lack of self-control, as exhibited by Laura Fairlie, or her seeming opposite, the fiery Charlotte St. John, help guarantee the male's claims to superior self-control, and hence social and economic power. Robert Audley and Frederick St. John systematically pursue their

female relatives who threaten their own inheritance prospects until they have been safely confined for madness, although neither male figure, as both narratives make clear, has been distinguished for his qualities of self-command. Underneath the courtly, paternalist notions which the heroes overtly espouse - that women need protection - one can see other, more disturbing, operations at work. Walter might be “Hewer-Riq” but only within the limited terms of the middle-class male’s patriarchal vision, a vision which the majority of these sensation novels call into question.

The sensation novelists do not offer, however, a crude, or even unambiguous analysis of the operations of Victorian gender ideology. They explore many of the internal contradictions existing within medical and social projections of femininity, and indeed make use of these contradictions for their own purposes. While exploiting medical notions of female irresponsibility and explosive sexuality to justify rebellious actions on the part of the heroines, the sensation novelists also manage simultaneously to undermine these ideologies by revealing through the narrative that female rebellion is a result of cultural conditioning rather than a product of any intrinsic “nature.” Novelists like Rhoda Broughton go even further in challenging sexual ideology by treating sexual drives as natural and necessary for the physical and psychological well-being of both men and women.

The novels manage to subvert the claims of both literary realism and Victorian ideology by undermining dominant notions of both male and female psychology. While examining the tensions and conflicts which contribute to the psychological make-up of the Victorian middle-class woman, they also asserted that the male’s psychology was not as unified nor as straightforward as the realists seemed to suggest. An almost frightening readiness to lose self-control, and hence control over one’s actions, and consequently the direction of one’s life is characteristic of many of the novels studied. Sir Percival, for example, loses his property through his inability to maintain self-control. The novels rework the model of individual identity as a fixed term, a stable unity ruled by uniform laws, which operated within realist fiction and underpinned the institutional structures of the era. Instead they suggest that the tenuous surface control exhibited by characters of both sexes is rather a mask, overlaying uncontrollable psychological drives, disruptive,

inexplicable feelings, and the operations of chance and coincidence. They further indicate that the ideology of self-control itself may prove fatal to an individual's psychological state as a result of the contradiction between the internal tumults which the individual has to repress, the external hardships in his life, and the required external posture of calm control.

Through an examination of the ways in which power operates through different institutions, the sensation novel manages to reveal some of the material realities which underlay Victorian constructions of gender and identity. They manage to unmask the disguises of ideology through their constant emphasis on, and adoption of, disguise as a fact of life. The novels emphasize the necessity of doubting appearances and hint at the need to question the sets of meanings offered initially in the narrative. On a different level, the characters themselves attempt to disguise their motives by outwardly vowing a strict adherence to ideological convention. Men assert that their motives in marrying rich women are to protect them from society, while in incarcerating rebellious female relatives they point to their social responsibility in rooting out disruptive elements which would otherwise threaten social order. The novels offer an intricate analysis of the effects on the female psyche when characters attempt to internalize all the conflicted notions of Victorian femininity. They also, however, reveal the ways in which rebellious women use these ideological constructs for their own advantage, outwardly projecting a rigid adherence to gender conventions. Such women as Lady Audley and Lydia Gwilt, for example, push the concept of female passivity to extremes by showing that, as ladies, they have no feelings.

The mechanism of disguise, used so frequently by the characters, is also used, significantly, by the novelists themselves in the structuring of their works. Although the novels contain severe criticisms of Victorian notions of femininity and women's role in the economic and legal order, they cover their traces, disguising these subversive elements, by reverting quite often to conventional endings which seem to offer marriage and motherhood as a happy resolution to the heroine's trials.

Despite the fact that the sensation novel does not offer solutions for the problems it discusses, it nevertheless manages to expose the net of densely-woven material and

ideological relationships at the heart of Victorian society. Notwithstanding their endings, the novels were ultimately subversive because they held up a dark picture of chaos which challenged the bourgeois idealised vision of stability and order. As Friedrich Engels remarks, a novel can challenge “conventional illusions” and be subversive when it manages to shake “the optimism of the bourgeois world, when it casts doubts on the eternal nature of existing society, even if the author does not propose answers, even though [he or she] might not openly take sides.”¹ The novels might offer conventional endings, and readers might gain only a vicarious sensation of rebellion which appears finally to be squashed, but in the questions that they raise, and the uncomfortably convenient relationship they reveal between women’s legal position and economic disempowerment and Victorian ideologies of womanhood, the novels sow seeds of doubt which, like the female secrets within their fiction, will rankle in the reader’s mind, producing, gradually, a troubling transformation in outlook, a disturbance of any easy notions of social or psychological order.

¹ Quoted in Judith Lowder Newton, *Women, Power, and Subversion: Social Strategies in British Fiction, 1778 - 1860*, (London: Methuen, 1985), p.22.

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