

Spring 2022

**Realism as weaponry: challenging Victorian ideals of femininity in  
Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's secret* and Wilkie Collins'  
*Armadale***

Taylor Aalgaard

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REALISM AS WEAPONRY: CHALLENGING VICTORIAN IDEALS OF FEMININITY IN  
MARY ELIZABETH BRADDON'S *LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET* AND WILKIE COLLINS'

*ARMADALE*

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A Thesis

Presented To

Eastern Washington University

Cheney, Washington

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Arts in English Literature and Writing

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By

Taylor Aalgaard

Spring 2022

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## Introduction

“I believe that we may look into the smiling face of a murderer,  
and admire its tranquil beauty”

– Robert Audley to Lady Audley, *Lady Audley's Secret*

“You have the two greatest blessings that can fall to a woman's lot;  
the two capital H's, as I call them – Husband and Home.”

– Doctor Downward to Lady Audley, *Armada*

## Sensation Fiction

In the mid-nineteenth century, serial publications from three authors, Wilkie Collins, Mrs. Henry Wood, and Mary Elizabeth Braddon, signaled the emergence of a new subgenre of Victorian literature. Victorian critics labeled the three authors' writing as “sensation fiction.” The novels that were categorized as sensational were, albeit questionably, characterized by their representation of criminal acts, scandalous plots, and villainous characters, both male and female. The novels were often referred to as “novels with a secret,” a phrase coined by Kathleen Tillotson, because they included conventions of secrecy and mystery that intensified the reading. The writers of sensation fiction were initially met with harsh criticism from Victorian critics because in their writing they examined social anxieties, challenged Victorian critics' perception of what books qualified as Victorian literature, and questioned Victorian ideals, specifically, what was determined to be “natural” in Victorian society.

It is largely agreed upon that the subgenre of sensation fiction began in the 1860s with Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (1860), Mrs. Henry Wood's *East Lynne* (1861), and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862). Due to the three novels' proximity in publication, recent twentieth century scholars who have attempted to define the conventions and characteristics of sensation fiction have had difficulty agreeing upon an objective

characterization of the subgenre. In *The Manic in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860s*, Winifred Hughes argues that the subgenre “had no perceptible infancy... it sprang full-blown, nearly simultaneously from the minds” of the three authors (6). In “Figuring Out the Fascination: Recent Trends in Criticism on Victorian Sensation and Crime Fiction,” Mark Knight agrees with Hughes by stating, “it is not always clear where the boundaries of sensation begin and end” (325). Both Hughes and Knight highlight how sensation fiction was, and continues to be, a difficult subgenre to define.

There are two common definitions associated with the word “sensation.” In “The Ideology of Narrative Form in Sensation Fiction,” Jonathan Loesberg distinguishes the difference between the two definitions. First, the word “sensation” can refer to something, usually an event, that is shocking and astonishing, which is how the general public defines it currently. On the other hand, the word “sensation” can also refer to an effect on physical senses, which is how the Victorians defined it at the time sensation fiction was being published (Loesberg 125). The effect on physical senses was a result of the scandalous plots found in sensation novels. The sensation novelists’ representation of passion, greed, and lust in the plots of their novels inspired a physical reaction from the Victorian reading public. With the intent to shock, sensation novelists wanted to create breathless and captivated readers who hurriedly turned the pages of their novels and remained at the edge of their seats in anticipation of the release of the next serial installment. Sensation novelists’ focus on the physical senses led to Victorian reviewers focusing their critique on the stimulative nature of sensation fiction rather than the literary strength of such novels.

Scholars such as Patrick Brantlinger, Andrew Maunder, and Susan Bernstein indicate that the shocking content of the novels and their subsequent reception from Victorian critics was the

foundation for labeling Collins' and Braddons' work "sensation fiction." In his much-quoted article "What is 'Sensational' about the 'Sensation Novel,'" Patrick Brantlinger claims that sensation fiction is defined by its content which included "crime, often murder as an outcome of adultery and sometimes bigamy, in apparently proper, bourgeois, domestic settings" (1). The events and crimes found in sensation novels were taking place, mostly, in middle-class homes located in the rural and peaceful countryside, a setting that Victorian readers were familiar with. The setting of sensation novels was a drastic change from earlier Gothic novels. Novels in the Gothic genre were typically set in distant Catholic countries such as Italy or France while sensation novels were being set in Protestant England. The close setting of sensation novels made the devious events much more scandalous. In "Mapping the Victorian Sensation Novel: Some Recent and Future Trends," Andrew Maunder adds to Brantlinger's definition by stating that sensation fiction included "shocking plots" centered around "lurid, exaggerated or sensational events in which murder, adultery, bigamy, illegitimacy, kidnapping, madness, and fraud proliferated" (5). By placing such criminal and shocking events in domestic spaces, specifically middle-class homes in England, the authors of sensation novels made the sensationalism personal and more realistic for the Victorian reading public.

### **Victorian Response to Sensation Fiction**

In the mid-Victorian era, the authors of sensation fiction received harsh backlash from Victorian critics such as Henry Mansel and Margaret Oliphant because of their novels' scandalous content and the potential influence of that content on a susceptible Victorian audience. When discussing the response to sensation fiction, Mansel and Oliphant are routinely cited by contemporary scholars. Whereas Mansel focused on a more general readership, Oliphant

mainly focused on the effect sensation fiction had on female readers. Mansel's most notable review was published in 1863 in the *Quarterly Review*. In his review, Mansel focused on how the "commercial venture" of sensation novelists was an "[infiltration to] the respectable literary marketplace" (quoted in Wynne 390). Mansel argued that since sensation novelists published their work in newspapers and "penny dreadfuls," they should not be considered "real" literature by Victorian standards (quoted in Wynne 391). Since sensation fiction was largely commissioned writing for profit, Mansel argued that the novels were no more valuable than mass-produced fashion items, writing, "so many yards of printed stuff, sensation pattern, to be ready by the beginning of the season" (quoted in Wynne 390). In his argument, Mansel was drawing a distinction between high and low literature. While Mansel praised realist novelists, such as Eliot and Thackeray, for upholding the "traditional values" related to morality, gender roles, and marriage, he attacked sensation novelists for "preaching to the nerves" and corrupting those same "traditional values" (quoted in Wynne 390). Victorian reviewers, like Mansel, sought to solidify the distinction between serious and popular reading because they feared the consequence of a large readership buying, both materially and morally, into sensation fiction.

Contrary to Mansel, Oliphant typically centered on female sensation novelists and a female Victorian readership. Oliphant, known for being vocal about her views, addressed the dangers of sensation fiction for a female readership in her 1867 review "Novels," published in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. Oliphant argued that female sensation novelists, such as Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Mrs. Henry Wood, and Ouida, presented their female audience with "a very fleshy and unlovely record" of femininity (quoted in Wynne 275). By representing their protagonists as passionate, aggressive, and material-driven, female sensation novelists received harsh criticism from Victorian reviewers like Oliphant who argued that sensation novels were



not appropriate for female readers. Oliphant, a Victorian author herself, routinely called out female writers of sensation fiction and held the writers responsible for constructing scandalous plots that revealed other alternatives for femininity.

### **Contemporary Response to Sensation Fiction**

Due to the hostile nature of sensation fiction reviews, scholars such as Bernstein, Loesberg, Wynne, Allan, Helfield, and Brantlinger believe that the label attributed to sensation novels stemmed from critics that sought to condemn the novels as opposed to a definable subgenre that authors such as Collins, Wood, and Braddon were writing for. Bernstein and Loesberg argue that the label of “sensation fiction” is representative of a reaction to specific novels rather than an actual genre with specific characteristics. Exemplifying this sentiment in “Dirty Reading, Sensation Fiction, Women, and Primitivism,” Bernstein argues that “the phrase ‘sensation fiction’ describes much less of a cohesive literary style or genre than a critical construction coined by the watchdogs of dominant culture” (222). As Bernstein argues, “the phrase ‘sensation fiction’” functioned as a label to “define, locate, and contain” any “oppositional tendencies of contemporary culture.” The unique feature of sensation fiction was that it was written in opposition to, what was considered at the time, “real” literature. Loesberg agrees with Bernstein by stating that the genre was more emblematic of its “literary reception” rather than any “intrinsic values” (115). In “Critical Responses to Sensation,” Wynne notes that Victorian reviewers “rarely focused on the literary qualities” of works written largely by Collins, Wood, and Braddon (390). In “The Contemporary Response to Sensation Fiction,” Janice Allan outlines the unprecedented literary, and moral, debate occurring during the 1860s which she claims was defined by its “vehemence and intensity” (85). Even though she grants that the most

aggressive attacks were found in “elite quarterlies,” such as the *Edinburgh Quarterly*, *Quarterly Review*, *Westminster Review*, and *North British Review*, Allan argues that the reviews were “characterized by an exaggerated rhetoric, occasionally verging on the hysterical” (85). Vincent E. H. Murray, writing a review in *The Contemporary Review* in 1878, characterized the genre as “a pestilence so foul as to poison the very life-blood of our nation” (quoted in Allan 85). In “Poisonous Plots: Women Sensation Novelists and Murderesses of the Victorian Period,” Randa Helfield argues that relating the writing of sensation novelists to “poison” was a common tactic of Victorian reviewers (162). Brantlinger indicates that sensation fiction was viewed as “disreputable by contemporary reviewers” due to the authors’ “exploitative approach to controversial issues like bigamy and adultery” among other serious topics (6).

The distinction between serious and popular reading led contemporary scholars such as Brantlinger and Allan to investigate the relationship between sensation fiction and other genres such as Gothic novels, Newgate novels, and realist novels. Gothic novels were particularly known for their reliance on mystery, supernatural events, and suspense or fear. While some sensation novels, such as Collins’ *The Woman in White* and *Armadale*, have eerily similar elements like their gothic ancestors, due to their inclusion of the supernatural and religious undertones, most sensation novels diverged from the gothic by including elements of realism (Brantlinger 9). The subgenre was also associated with the Newgate novel because sensation novelists would regularly base their plots on real-life events found in the Newgate Calendar (1). Brantlinger references Richard D. Altick’s claim that “every good new Victorian murder helped legitimize and prolong the fashion of sensational plots” (quoted in Brantlinger 9). Brantlinger, working with Victorian critics’ responses, highlights how the tendency of sensation novelists to use stories from the headlines of prominent Victorian newspapers gave Victorian critics, such as

Mansel, further reason to diminish the literary significance of “newspaper novels” that, as they claimed, had no sense of originality. Aspects of realist novels can be found in sensation fiction. Realism was a popular genre in the Victorian mid-nineteenth century and came out of a reaction against Romanticism. Realism was characterized by its replication of real life in literature. Realist novelists dedicated most of their novels to constructing well-developed and complex characters as well as realistic settings, which resulted in a rather uneventful plot structure. Like realist novelists, sensation novelists constructed realistic settings and characters. Unlike realist novelists, though, sensation novelists incorporated elaborate and shocking plots in their novels.

Contemporary scholars, such as Bernstein, Maunder, and Schroeder, have examined the fears exemplified in Oliphant’s criticism and how sensation fiction challenged a “class-bound model of femininity” through the author’s representation of violent and aggressive female heroines (Bernstein 214). Literature, specifically the novel, was dangerous when it came to maintaining social control over women. During the 1860s, there were more opportunities for women to publish and consume literature than ever before. In “The Victorian Novel and its Readers,” Kate Flint states that the novel was suspect at this time because it was “likely to influence adversely, to stimulate inappropriate ambitions and desires, [and] to corrupt” (17). The popular novel was widely accessible by a range of different social groups, and therefore, it was constantly scrutinized for what it might reveal or inspire in individuals. In response to sensation novels, there was the fear that this type of frivolous reading would, as Flint states, “lead a woman to become dissatisfied with her mundane domestic duties” (27). The fear of what popular reading would inspire in women is reminiscent of what Bernstein called a “social catastrophe” that was posed by the publication of sensation fiction (213). In a review of recent and future trends regarding the Victorian sensation novel, Andrew Maunder claims that the subgenre put “on

[trial] and [recast] mid-nineteenth-century conceptions of womanhood” (12). By including villainous women who commit bigamy, murder, arson, and deception, sensation novelists challenged what Victorians had constructed to be “natural” for how a woman should conduct herself. Oliphant advised young girls and readers in general to avoid reading sensation novels out of, as Schroeder argues, a “fear of corruption” (89). The representation of villainous women in sensation fiction challenged Victorian constructions of femininity and, thus, resulted in Victorian critics condemning the subgenre.

### **Mid-Victorian Society and Middle-Class Women**

To contextualize how sensation novelists’ writing posed a threat to Victorian ideals of femininity, an overview of mid-Victorian society and Victorian gender roles is necessary. During the two decades in which sensation novels were being published, the Victorian middle class was experiencing great social change. The industrial revolution, though it began during the eighteenth century, greatly influenced the mid-nineteenth century social order in England and raised more than a few questions about gender roles, the family, and social classes. Prior to the industrial revolution, there was not as strong a distinction between male and female roles. Since most families lived in agricultural communities, both males and females took part in maintaining the home and providing for the family. However, the industrial revolution resulted in a shift from agricultural communities to populated cities. In the city, jobs became increasingly specialized and extracted Victorian men from the comforts of their homes. The industrial revolution’s success led directly to the formation of an entirely new class of people – the middle classes. Middle-class men increasingly left the house to seek employment to support themselves and their families while women remained in the home to take care of the children and other domestic

duties. Though clear distinctions between male and female roles existed previously, Victorian England was ordered by an extreme version of the separate sphere ideology.

The separate sphere ideology became a central component to upholding the Victorian middle-class and their ideals, specifically the Victorian ideal of femininity, which represented middle-class women as having “natural” qualities that distinguished them from other classes. In “Acts of Madness: Lady Audley and the Meanings of Victorian Femininity,” Lynn M. Voskuil highlights how separate spheres and Victorian ideals of femininity became indicators of a distinct middle class in mid-Victorian society. As Voskuil notes,

Such constructions [of separate-sphere ideology as authentic] functioned to protect middle-class privilege by giving it an ostensibly inherent value not connected to economic status, by representing it as natural, obvious, indisputable. By ‘acting naturally,’ then, the middle-class wife became the embodied proof that middle-class superiority was more than skin deep, that it was in fact bred in the bone. (623)

The increase in industrialization brought with it an increase in material goods that were more widely available to all classes of mid-Victorian society. In “Challenging the Commodification of Victorian Femininity: The Sensation Novel,” Elisabetta Marino highlights the growing issue of distinguishing one’s class in mid-nineteenth century England. Marino acknowledges that “telling the classes apart by simply judging from the appearance of garments and accessories was becoming rather difficult and quite problematic” (165). In “Nobody’s Angels: Domestic Ideology and Middle-Class Women in the Victorian Novel,” Elizabeth Langland concurs with Marino and notes that “with the rapid increase of wealth generated by the industrial revolution, status was fluid and increasingly dependent on the manipulation of social signs” (293). To manipulate those social signs, the middle-class relied on the “naturalness” of middle-class

women to distinguish themselves from the lower classes. Victorian femininity then was not, in the eyes of the middle class, something to be taught or learned, but rather, it was represented as an innate quality and something that naturally came to middle-class women. The natural quality of middle-class femininity was an indicator of superiority that, in theory, other classes could not impersonate.

The most prominent features of mid-Victorian life included middle-class families, limited opportunities for middle-class women, and a repression of anything immoral or unconventional according to society's middle-class standards. There was a very narrow view of middle-class womanhood. In "Psychology, Sexuality, and Social Control in Victorian England," Elizabeth Fee outlines the dominant traits and behaviors that were prescribed and regulated by the bourgeoisie class: "Self-control, self-discipline, and [a] rejection of present pleasure" as well as "hard work, cleanliness, punctuality, responsibility, *and* sexual restraint" were valued among the middle classes (633). Anything that opposed these traits and behaviors was viewed as going against the social order and evidence of moral decay. The distinction was not just between virtuous and vicious, but, as Fee notes, with more intense ramifications, "morally sane" and "morally insane" as a form of disease or degeneration (633). Therefore, when middle-class females transgressed social norms, from minor and seemingly inconsequential norms to criminal acts, they were often diagnosed as "insane" in the Victorian era. Fee argues, "[Female] crime, especially violent crime, directly challenged the familiar characteristics of 'woman's nature' and it was therefore easier to interpret female violence as evidence of insanity than as 'normal' criminality" (638). Rather than investigating the motives of female criminals, Victorian society cast them off as "insane" because they did not uphold the behaviors and traits that were valued by the middle classes.

Due to the limited view of Victorian womanhood, two ideals of femininity emerged in mid-Victorian society: the ideal wife, characterized as passive and dutiful, and the ideal mother, characterized as nurturing and selfless. The next two sections provide an overview of the ideal wife and ideal mother in mid-Victorian society as they were routinely challenged by sensation novelists.

### **The Ideal Victorian Middle-Class Wife**

In mid-Victorian society, the ideal middle-class woman and the ideal middle-class wife were nearly identical in their qualities. The main difference was that the ideal middle-class wife had achieved the quintessential mark of middle-class success: marriage. In “Wedlock as Deadlock and Beyond: Closure and the Victorian Marriage Ideal,” Joseph Allan Boone explores the implications of marriage in mid-Victorian society and what it meant for middle-class women. Since the ideal Victorian woman was represented as innocent in nature, marriage and love in Victorian society were not associated with sex or sexual desire. Boone argues that “by conceiving of marriage as the natural goal of love’s progress and the homes as the center of life’s most permanent values, the Victorian ethos sought to transform the otherwise potentially disruptive energy of passion into a stabilizing convention of bourgeois society” (65). The ideal middle-class woman in Victorian society was either a wife or a woman who sought to be a wife. Boone continues by arguing that by “making [a] woman’s only legitimate fulfillment one with marital fulfillment, then, Victorian society assured the continued maintenance of its hierarchical order” (71). Upholding the institution of marriage as the only ideal goal for women to achieve was a twofold solution in Victorian society to maintain middle-class power and impose unrealistic expectations for how an ideal woman should look and behave.

In “‘The Angel in the House’: 19<sup>th</sup>-century Myths of Perfect Womanhood,” Christopher Stace outlines the qualities of an ideal middle-class wife in mid-Victorian society. Stace notes that the “perfect wife” was “that of the decorously passive woman, pure of heart, self-sacrificing, religious – the Vestal virgin” and “the dainty doll” (37). Representing the perfect wife as selfless, pious, and passive was a common occurrence in mid-Victorian society. In “Social Position of Victorian Women: *Villette* and *Emma*,” Aycan Gökçek echoes Stace’s definition of the perfect wife, writing,

A Victorian woman was expected to be submissive, dutiful, selfless, disinterested, kind, and spiritually pure especially to their fathers and husbands... They were seen as the divine guide, purifier, inspirer of man, and their mission was to help man to resist the evils and temptations of the world. (144)

The ideal middle-class woman was viewed as an extension of the domestic hearth as her purpose was to nurture and revitalize her husband, both spiritually and morally, from the influences of the outside world. The perfect wife was represented as someone who thought only of others and never considered her own needs.

The conception of the perfect wife as an “angel in the house” was first introduced into literature by Coventry Patmore in his 1854 poem of the same name. According to Patmore, “Man must be pleased, but him to please / Is woman’s pleasure” and the woman was “pure dignity, composure, ease” (quoted in Marino 168). Patmore’s poem, published six years prior to the rise of sensation fiction, painted a picture of the idealized woman whose purpose was to dutifully serve and please her husband without complaint. Patmore’s poem makes it clear that the middle-class Victorian woman’s place was within the home, thus, exemplifying the separate sphere ideology. John Ruskin’s 1864 lecture, “Lilies. Of Queen’s Garden,” echoed Patmore’s argument



regarding the place and position of women in Victorian society. According to Ruskin, a man had “energy for adventure, for war, and for conquest,” while a woman was “enduringly incorruptively good; instinctively, infallibly wise – wise not for self-development, but for self-renunciation: wise, not that she may set herself above her husband, but she may never fail from his side” (quoted in Marino 168). Both Patmore and Ruskin defined the middle-class woman’s role in relation to her duties and relationship with her husband. Mid-Victorian women were to be subservient in the middle-class home.

Marino examines the influence of Patmore’s poem and Ruskin’s lecture in the fabrication of the Victorian feminine ideal. Marino highlights the “inextricable connection” between “female beauty” and “ethics and morals” (168). In the mid-Victorian society, Marino argues, “a dignified, attractive lady was unfailingly endowed with a rosy complexion, perfectly coiffed fair hair, and childlike blue eyes” and her appearance was an indication of her moral character. In essence, with an ideal middle-class woman, her exterior was indicative of her social status and only those from that social status could exemplify those qualities “naturally.”

### **The Ideal Middle-Class Victorian Mother**

While becoming a wife was represented as an indicator of middle-class success, achieving the status of a mother was the ultimate goal of mid-Victorian middle-class women. The ideal mother, like the ideal wife, was selfless in her pursuits. The ideal Victorian mother was kind, gentle, protective, and pious. In “Murderous Mothers: The Problem of Parenting in the Victorian Novel,” Joan Manheimer links the ideal mid-Victorian mother to the “Good Mother” ideal found in Victorian novels. According to Manheimer,

The ideal of the Good Mother served a coherent system: with the world divided between public and private spheres, pressure was on the latter to compensate for the increasing ravages of the former. The Angel in the House was caught in a dialectical dance with the demons at the door. The Good Mother was a guardian of the hearth, a refuge from the harshness of the new industrialization. (531)

Manheimer's depiction of the Good Mother highlights a few of the key aspects of ideal Victorian motherhood. Since women were limited to the private sphere, the home, they were paradoxically protected from the outside world and responsible for protecting their children and the sanctity of the home from the outside world. Mid-Victorian mothers were expected to protect and guard the home not from physical dangers of the public sphere, but from the psychological and societal dangers that were seen as threats to the home and family. The mother was seen as the protector of traditional morals and ideals from an increasingly modern world that was changing fast. In Manheimer's description, it is also clear that mid-Victorian mothers were meant to be comforting and loving to their children like they are with their husband. The mother's pursuits were to be selfless in nature. The ideal mid-Victorian mother put the needs of everyone else above herself.

### **Realism's Role in Sensation Novelists' Challenge of Mid-Victorian Femininity**

The heated debate between Victorian reviewers and sensation novelists about what should be classified as "real" literature has been a continued point of contention among contemporary literary scholars. In "Sensationalism Made Real: The Role of Realism in the Production of Sensational Affect," Allan investigates the way in which realism and sensationalism have been historically discussed in oppositional terms. Allan acknowledges that the dichotomous relationship between realist and sensation fiction is likely attributed to the fact

that “realism was [used as] the critical yardstick against which sensationalism was routinely judged and found lacking by nineteenth-century critics” (97). However, Allan highlights how various Victorian reviews, such as the *Spectator*, *Temple Bar*, and the *British Quarterly Review* among others, in the 1860s commented on sensation novelists’ juxtaposition of realism and sensationalism (98). The Victorian reviewers who identified the juxtaposition of genre features were early exceptions to the mainstream view of realism and sensation as oppositional genres. As an explanation of why the two genres are largely discussed in oppositional terms, Allan suggests that the “generic classifications” of each genre fed into “contemporary constructions of literary value” (98). To reestablish the “supplemental relationship between realism and sensationalism,” (98) Allan argues that sensational affect depends on a sensational event occurring in a domestic and “homely environment” (100). To ground her argument, Allan analyzes how Collins created sensational affect in *The Woman in White* (1860). Allan argues that the relationship between realism and sensationalism was an important feature in sensation fiction because it “reveals the artificiality and constructedness” of Victorian ideals, “not simply of the form being imitated but also its value and ideological assumptions” (107-08). Though it is generally agreed upon by contemporary scholars that sensation novelists challenged Victorian ideals, Allan identifies how sensation novelists’ juxtaposition of realist and sensation elements accomplished this challenge. Allan constructs her argument by reversing the dichotomy identified by Richard Nemesvari, an influential scholar on the topic. Nemesvari’s dichotomy argues that “the formulation of ‘the sensational’ is an essential and constitutive strategy which reifies ‘the realistic’ in ways that had been unachievable before” (quoted in Allan 98). Allan reverses Nemesvari’s dichotomy by arguing for the “‘essential, constitutive’ role of realism in the ‘formulation of the sensational’” (98). By strategically implementing elements of realism in

sensational events, sensation novelists, as Allan notes, make everything seem “legitimate, natural and possible,” (101) and thus, invite “readers to pause and take note of the normally ‘invisible’ disjunction between the ‘true’ and the ‘real’” (106). The thought of sensational crimes occurring in middle-class homes was a disruption to Victorian concepts of the tranquil, safe home.

Commenting on the impact of sensation fiction, Allan writes,

Littered with allusions to disease, contamination, and degeneration – the discursive fields that came to dominate the debate – the contemporary reviews appear to recognize that the sensation novel posed a threat not simply to literary standards, but to the bedrock of values that ground the English middle-class subject. (108)

In her argument, Allan focuses on how the production of sensational affect challenged the values inherent in the middle-class home. The middle-class Victorian home was viewed as the epitome of Victorian ideals and, thus, was a safe, protected space untouched by the outside world.

However, sensation novelists challenged the ideal middle-class home by making it the setting of sensational crimes that made readers question the “naturalness” of the Victorian middle-class home.

While Allan focuses her argument on the sensational affect constructed by the juxtaposition of sensational events and domestic environments, her argument could be extended to consider the sensational affect constructed by the juxtaposition of sensational crimes and Victorian ideals of femininity. Allan focuses on how the domestic setting of sensation novels makes the sensational seem realistic. I argue how the expressed motivations behind female criminals in sensation novels makes the sensational seem realistic. In sensation novels, it is not the crime itself that makes the novel sensational; rather, it is the realistic and explainable motivations behind the female criminals’ actions that make the novel sensational. In this thesis, I

argue how Mary Elisabeth Braddon in *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) and Wilkie Collins in *Armadale* (1864) challenge mid-Victorian femininity by developing the realistic motivations and complicated characters of Lady Audley and Lydia Gwilt, which exposes the constructed-ness of the ideal, middle-class wife and the problematic relationship between female criminals and madness.

The first chapter of this thesis focuses on Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*. In Braddon's novel, she constructs a beautiful, childlike protagonist named Lady Audley. Lady Audley, on the surface, appears to fit the ideal of a dutiful, passive wife as well as a caring, selfless mother. Her former employers and her new husband believe her to be nothing but the perfect young lady. Through the course of the novel, Braddon challenges mid-Victorian femininity by having the ideal young wife, Lady Audley, commit sensational crimes such as entering a bigamous marriage, attempting to murder her first husband, and committing arson on a public house in the hopes of murdering and silencing her young nephew, who threatens to expose her true identity. Braddon shows how the criminal acts Lady Audley commits are motivated by a necessity to survive after being deserted by her first husband and being unable to support herself and her young son. By showing Lady Audley's motivations, Braddon encourages a mid-Victorian audience to sympathize with the young woman and understand her need to play and maintain the role of the ideal wife.

The second chapter of this thesis focuses on Collins' *Armadale*. In Collins' novel, he constructs a scheming and villainous female protagonist named Lydia Gwilt. Miss Gwilt has a seductive beauty and is regarded as a respectable lady in the novel, but readers are aware that she previously murdered her first husband by poison, went to prison for theft, and extorted money from her previous mistress, among other crimes. There is no denying that Miss Gwilt has led a

criminal life. However, Collins strategically implements realism by countering Miss Gwilt's criminal acts with real-life, believable motivations. Collins allows readers to empathize with Miss Gwilt and her complicated past by letting her speak in the form of diary entries in the novel. Collins grants Miss Gwilt narrative agency to highlight how her actions, while not entirely excusable, are rational. Collins challenges mid-Victorian femininity by complicating both the ideal, dutiful, and passive wife as well as the female criminal through the character of Lydia Gwilt.

**Chapter 1: Lady Audley and the “beautiful fiend”: Challenging Mid-Victorian Femininity  
in M.E. Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret***

“I have always considered your uncle’s wife one of the most amiable of women. I *cannot* bring myself to think her otherwise. It would be an uprooting of one of the strongest convictions of my life, were I compelled to think her otherwise.”

– Mr. Dawson to Robert Audley, *Lady Audley’s Secret*

“Your youth and beauty, your grace and refinement, only make the horrible secret of your life more horrible.”

– Robert Audley to Lady Audley, *Lady Audley’s Secret*

Sensation novelists were arguably some of the most daring writers in mid-Victorian society. By making middle-class homes the scene of scandalous crimes and realistic domestic angels the perpetrators of those crimes, sensation novelists shocked their readers and disrupted Victorian ideals pertaining to the home and femininity. Though Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s first publication, *Three Times Dead* (1860), later retitled *The Trail of the Serpent*, included aspects of sensation fiction such as violence, detection, and insane asylums, it was with the publication of her renowned second novel, *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862), that she gained notoriety from Victorian critics as one of the first sensation novelist alongside Wilkie Collins and Mrs. Henry Wood. Braddon’s protagonist, Lady Audley, garnered attention from Victorian critics who condemned Lady Audley’s deception and manipulation. Lady Audley continues to capture the attention of contemporary twentieth-first century scholars who seek to move beyond condemnation and analyze the motivations and implications of such a transgressive Victorian protagonist.

The strategic juxtaposition of realism and sensationism by sensation novelists such as Braddon is identified by Janice Allan as a key component of creating sensational affect (109).

Allan argues that sensation novelists' juxtaposition of realism and sensationalism posed a challenge to mid-Victorian ideals by exposing the "artificiality and constructedness" of those ideals (107). Though Allan briefly mentions Braddon's novel, specifically Lady Audley's uncanny portrait, when examining the denaturalization of the realistic in sensation novels, she focuses her study on Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (1860). By extending Allan's insights on realism's role in sensation fiction to Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, I argue that Braddon's representation of Lady Audley exposes and, thus, challenges the social construction of mid-Victorian femininity that characterized the ideal Victorian woman as a dutiful wife, a selfless mother, and, above all, a passive, weak, and innocent woman incapable of committing a crime. Even though Lady Audley attempts to murder both her first husband and her nephew, abandons her child, and commits arson, Braddon develops Lady Audley as a both a woman trying to survive and a character deserving of the Victorian readers' sympathy. Braddon challenges the mid-Victorian ideals of the middle-class wife by juxtaposing Lady Audley's sensational criminal acts with her realistic and survival-driven motivations for the crimes.

Prior to exploring the implications of Braddon's sensational heroine, a brief summary of the novel is necessary to contextualize the character and action of Lady Audley. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, the unnamed narrator tells the story of a charming young governess, Lucy Graham. It is through her governess position that she meets and later marries the older Sir Michael Audley.<sup>1</sup> Not much is known of her past, but she is thought highly of by those who know her. Her beauty, musical talents, and childlike nature are enough to earn the trust of her new husband and, quickly after, of his nephew Robert Audley. That is, until his good friend and

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<sup>1</sup> In *Lady Audley's Secret*, Braddon routinely uses "Sir Michael" to reference Sir Michael Audley. In this thesis I will follow Braddon's handling of the name and use "Sir Michael."



recent widower George Talboys goes missing with his last known whereabouts at Audley Court. Robert suspects that Lady Audley knows more than she is letting on. Through amateur detection, Robert begins to unravel Lady Audley's trail of deceit. Robert learns that before Lady Audley was Lucy Graham, she was Helen Talboys, his missing friend's supposedly dead wife. Abandoned by her husband and presuming him dead, Helen leaves her young son and her old life and resurfaces in another town under the false identity of Lucy Graham. When she learns that George will be returning from Australia, the newly surfaced Lucy begins to cover her tracks from her previous life. First, she arranges to have her death announced in the *Times* newspaper in Westminster because she knows that George will be awaiting a letter from her there. Next, the fictitious Lucy uses a dying girl, Matilda Plowson, to further solidify her fake death announcement so that George will be satisfied that she is in fact dead. Her plans go awry, though, when Robert shows up at Audley Court with her first husband. Lady Audley is successful at avoiding George for the first few days of his visit, but when he shows up at Audley Court unexpectedly and confronts her in the yard, she has no choice but to face him and own up to her lies. She hopes that since they are alone in the yard, she can convince George to leave quietly, but he threatens to expose her to Sir Michael. Unable to stand the thought of her new husband finding out about her deception, Lady Audley pushes George down a well and is convinced that she has murdered him. With Robert hot on her trail, she attempts a second murder by setting fire to the inn he is residing at. Her determination to maintain her new identity fails, though, and upon seeing Robert alive and well with his accusation of attempted murder, she confesses that she is mad. She reveals the secret that she has kept for so long: her mother was mad and, because Victorians believed madness to be an inherited trait, Lady Audley believes that she has inherited her mother's madness. After her confession, she is sent to a mental institution

in Belgium. Two years later, she dies in that same place to which she was banished. Even though Lady Audley attempted two murders, she is not a murderer by the end of the novel because both attempts failed: Robert escaped the fire, and George escaped the well and was restored back to health.

Braddon constructs Lady Audley to appear as the mid-Victorian ideal wife. On the surface, Lady Audley appears to be beautiful, innocent, and passive which would, by mid-Victorian standards, show the audience that she was an ideal, middle-class wife. Braddon first describes Lady Audley as “the sweetest girl that ever lived” (11). The narrator highlights how Lady Audley appeared to the other characters in the novel by saying she was “blessed with that magic power of fascination by which a woman can charm with a word or intoxicate with a smile” (11). Lady Audley’s beauty and charm quickly earn her a good reputation in the town. The narrator notes,

Lucy was better loved and more admired than the baronet’s daughter. That very childishness had a charm which few could resist. The innocence and candour of an infant beamed in Lady Audley’s fair face, and shone out of her large and liquid eyes. The rosy lips, the delicate nose, the profusion of fair ringlets, all contributed to preserve to her beauty the character of extreme youth and freshness. (50)

Lady Audley’s childlike nature is indicative of her innocence. To the other characters around her, Lady Audley seems to be the ideal wife because her natural beauty signified to them that she had a high moral character. In mid-Victorian society, they still followed the earlier notion physiognomy that believed a woman’s beauty was symbolic of her character, in that there was no discrepancy between how a woman looked and how she was regarded on the inside. Before Sir Michael proposed to Lady Audley, he believed her to be “lovely and innocent” (Braddon 12). Sir

Michael assumed that Lady Audley “might never have formed any attachment” to any other men and that he would “obtain her fresh and earliest love” (Braddon 12). Through Sir Michael’s perspective, Braddon constructs Lady Audley to appear as a virginal, innocent young woman. Sir Michael believes that Lady Audley is a virgin and, therefore, the ideal young woman for him to propose to and later marry. Though Sir Michael is a rich man, Braddon highlights how “there was nothing whatever in [Lady Audley’s] manner that betrayed the shallow artifices employed by a woman who wishes to captivate a rich man” (Braddon 13). By highlighting Lady Audley’s lack of cruel intentions in marrying Sir Michael, Braddon makes it clear to her audience that Lady Audley was not a cunning and plotting woman intent on marrying a rich man for his money. While Braddon does not deny Lady Audley’s enjoyment of Sir Michael’s wealth, she constructs Lady Audley as a perfectly innocent ideal, middle-class wife.

Braddon further constructs Lady Audley as the ideal, middle-class wife by exemplifying her moral influence over her first husband, George Talboys. In “Social Position of Victorian Women: *Villette* and *Emma*,” Aycan Gökçek highlights how the ideal middle-class wife was “seen as the divine guide, purifier, inspirer of man, and [her] mission was to help man to resist the evils and temptations of the world” (144). The ideal wife was seen as the moral compass of the family who was meant to nurture and revitalize her husband. Braddon amplifies Lady Audley’s moral character and influence through George’s description of his young wife. When George is on the ship returning home to his wife, he reminisces about her purifying qualities. George describes Lady Audley as his “gentle, innocent, loving, little wife” who he hoped was waiting for him after he had left her three years prior in order to make money for their family (Braddon, 21). Prior to leaving his wife, George wrote her a note assuring her that he “never loved her better than now, when [he] seemed to desert her” (Braddon 24). Though George knew

he was leaving his wife and young son to fend for themselves, with little help from his wife's drunken father, George did not view his departure as deserting her because he intended to come back and make her happy if he earned the fortune which he set out to make. Finally returning to his wife, George describes her as his salvation, saying,

“I clung to the memory of my darling, and the trust that I had in her love and trust, as the one keystone that kept the fabric of my past life together – the one star that lit the thick black darkness of the future. I was hail fellow well met with bad men; I was in the centre of riot, drunkenness, and debauchery; but the purifying influence of my love kept me safe from all.” (Braddon, 24)

Even though Helen believes George has deserted her and their young son, George believes he was kept safe by the pure, loving nature of his wife at home. No matter what he faced in the harsh, cruel world, he was at peace because his wife was his protector; his wife was his angel. While middle-class wives were viewed as the moral compass of the family, Braddon magnifies this ideal by representing Lady Audley as keeping her husband safe while he is quite literally across the world from her. Braddon's representation of Lady Audley's purifying nature extends beyond what was considered “normal” or typical for the ideal of the middle-class wife. By extending the refining quality of the middle-class wife in Lady Audley, Braddon shows her audience that Lady Audley appeared, undoubtedly, to be the ideal, virtuous middle-class wife.

Braddon's construction of Lady Audley as an ideal, middle-class wife is important for Braddon's creation of sensational affect. While Allan indicates that sensational affect is created when the sensational crime occurs in a setting in which it has no place being – the middle-class home, my argument shifts the focus from the novel's setting to the novel's female protagonist. With this shift from the novel's setting to its protagonist, the sensational affect is created when

the sensational crime is committed by a female protagonist who is considered by the audience to be the least likely character to commit a crime – the ideal, middle-class wife. With Braddon’s introduction of Lady Audley as a beautiful and innocent wife, Victorian readers do not expect Lady Audley to be capable of committing crimes because it goes against her “nature” as a middle-class woman. Braddon highlights the improbability of ideal Victorian wives committing crimes through the assertions of Lady Audley’s former employer, Mr. Dawson. When questioned by Robert about Lady Audley’s history in life, Mr. Dawson exclaims, “I have always considered your uncle’s wife one of the most amiable of women. I *cannot* bring myself to think her otherwise. It would be an uprooting of one of the strongest convictions of my life, were I compelled to think her otherwise.” (Braddon 188-89). Mr. Dawson, a respectable man in the novel, cannot bring himself to think of Lady Audley as anyone other than an amiable woman worthy of respect. According to Mr. Dawson, it would go against his beliefs in life to think of Lady Audley as anything other than the sweet young girl who he once employed in his house. Victorian readers would likely have the same conviction as Mr. Dawson and think it impossible for Lady Audley to be anything other than a sweet, innocent young woman. However, by making Lady Audley not only a well-constructed ideal wife, but also the perpetrator of criminal acts, Braddon intensifies the sensational affect and invites her audience to question the “naturalness” of the Victorian ideal of femininity which characterizes middle-class wives as innocent, passive, and incapable of committing crimes.

Through her representation of Lady Audley, Braddon challenges Victorian ideals of femininity, specifically the innocent, dutiful wife, by juxtaposing Lady Audley’s sensational crime of bigamy with her realistic, survival-driven motivations for marrying a second husband. Throughout the novel, readers learn that Lady Audley commits bigamy by marrying Sir Michael

when she was still married to George Talboys. If Braddon had only included the sensational crime of bigamy, her Victorian audience probably would have characterized Lady Audley as a selfish and greedy woman underserving of any sympathy. However, through Lady Audley's confession to Sir Michael, Victorian readers learn the motivations behind Lady Audley's bigamous marriage and become more sympathetic towards her.

In her confession to Sir Michael, Lady Audley recounts how she grew up knowing what it was like to be poor. While her father was in the navy, she was entrusted to a "disagreeable lady" who was "irregularly paid" and, consequently, "vented her rage upon [Lady Audley] when [her] father was behindhand" in paying the woman for watching Lady Audley (Braddon 296). After attending school, Lady Audley learned that her "ultimate fate in life depended upon [her] marriage" (Braddon 298). Lady Audley thought that she had secured for herself a happy life when she married George Talboys, but when George's father learned that his son had married a poor girl, he cut off George financially. Lady Audley told George he had committed a "cruel injustice" in making his wife live in poverty while his family lived in luxury (Braddon 300). George left Lady Audley and their young son to seek fortune in Australia to provide for his family, but there was no guarantee that he would ever return. Lady Audley initially tried providing for her young son by teaching music lessons, but her father would take the money she earned and take it to the bar. After three years without a single letter from her first husband, she accepted the fact that he was either dead or wished her to think he was dead, and she came to the resolution that "his shadow [would] not stand between [her] and prosperity" (Braddon 301). Knowing that marriage would determine her fate in life, Lady Audley feigned a new name and left her old life behind.

In Lady Audley's explanation of her bigamous marriage to Sir Michael, Braddon establishes that Lady Audley's necessity for financial support is directly linked to marriage. Braddon establishes the connection by juxtaposing Sir Michael's desire for a marriage based on love and Lady Audley's inability to marry solely for love based on her financial need. Sir Michael, being drawn to the romantic side of marriage after his dull and uneventful first marriage, tells Lady Audley that there is no "greater sin" than "that of the woman who marries a man she does not love" (Braddon 14). While Sir Michael wishes to be the reciprocate of the young governess' love, he would rather be heartbroken than have a loveless marriage. Lady Audley responds, saying, "*You* cannot tell; you, who are amongst those for whom life is so smooth and easy; you can never guess what is endured by such as we. Do not ask too much of me, then. I *cannot* be disinterested; I cannot be blind to the advantages of such an alliance" (15). In their conversation, Braddon highlights how Sir Michael, a wealthy man, cannot fathom a loveless marriage because he does not have to worry about money. On the other hand, Braddon highlights how Lady Audley, a poor girl working as a governess, cannot overlook the "advantages" of marrying Sir Michael because by marrying him, she would not only be raising her own status, but she would also be able to send money to her young son and provide for him.

Victorian readers would recognize and understand the connection Braddon is highlighting between marriage and financial security. In "Feminist Ambivalence in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*," Seda Cosar Celik states that prior to 1857, divorces were virtually impossible unless it was granted by a "private Act of Parliament" that was only obtainable by the rich (217). While the criteria for divorce changed slightly with the passing of the Matrimonial Causes Act (1857), which allowed husbands to get a divorce if his wife had committed adultery, the possibility of a woman obtaining a legal divorce was still seemingly impossible (218).

Women had to jump through multiple hoops to even have a divorce be considered. Therefore, as Lyn Pykett points out, marriage and divorce concerns were “frequently articulated in the form of the bigamy plot” by sensation novelists (quoted in Marino 218). Lady Audley’s response to Sir Michael’s marriage proposal highlights the role that women had to play to achieve financial security since that security could not be obtained on their own. Lady Audley is aware that her marriage to Sir Michael could potentially be bigamous in nature, but at this point in the novel she is under the impression that her first husband is dead. Marrying Sir Michael is a way for Lady Audley to achieve financial security since she cannot be supported by her poor, drunk father or by her first husband who deserted her.

By establishing a motivation for financial security linked to survival, Braddon juxtaposes the criminal act of bigamy with Lady Audley’s realistic and need-driven motivations for entering a bigamous marriage. Victorian readers can understand that Lady Audley marries Sir Michael because she has reason to believe her first husband is dead and her fate depends on marriage. Female Victorian readers, in particular, would likely sympathize with Lady Audley because they know the importance of marriage in a woman’s life in mid-Victorian society.

Braddon further challenges the ideal, innocent, and dutiful middle-class wife by juxtaposing Lady Audley’s sensational crimes, namely the attempted murders of George and Robert, with Lady Audley’s realistic motivations to keep her crimes hidden and maintain her façade as the ideal wife. If Braddon had only revealed Lady Audley’s sensational crimes of attempted murder, a Victorian audience would have likely dismissed Lady Audley as a mad woman irresponsible for her actions. However, Braddon employs Lady Audley’s criminality with plausible, realistic motivations and challenges both the ideal, middle-class wife as well as the problematic conflation of female crime and madness.



Once married to Sir Michael, Lady Audley is elated with happiness due to her new position in life. Lady Audley was thankful to Sir Michael for providing her the lifestyle that she felt robbed of in her first marriage to George. Lady Audley was determined to be “as good a wife as it was in [her] nature to be” for Sir Michael (Braddon 301). However, when her first husband arrives at Audley Court, under the impression that his young wife is dead and unaware of his close proximity to her there, Lady Audley desperately tries to avoid meeting him because it would lead to the discovery of her crime of bigamy. However, George is persistent when he suspects that his wife and the new Lady Audley are one in the same and he confronts her in the lime-walk alone. Lady Audley admits that she was “determined to bribe him, to cajole him, to defy him; to do anything sooner than abandon the wealth and the position I had won, and go back to my old life” (Braddon 334). Lady Audley was desperate to keep her position at Audley Court, but George claimed he would never forgive her for the one “deliberate and passionless wrong” she had committed by convincing him that she was dead (Braddon 334). George threatened to take her to Sir Michael and make Lady Audley confess her story. It was at that point, in an impulse of passion, Lady Audley pushed George into the well intent on silencing and ultimately killing him.

Braddon constructs the second attempted murder of Robert in a similar way. After Robert gives her one final warning to leave before he exposes her to Sir Michael, Lady Audley again refuses, thinking that she can maintain her appearance as the ideal wife despite his accusations. However, Robert sends Lady Audley a letter in which he names a specific person from Lady Audley’s past, Mrs. Barkamb, whom he intends to bring to Audley Court so that she can identify Lady Audley as Helen Talboys. Lady Audley exclaims that if Robert were before her, she would “kill him” (Braddon 261). She then accompanies her former maid, Phoebe Marks, back to the

Castle Inn where Robert is staying and leaves a lit candle under a low-hanging curtain with the intent to burn down the Castle Inn and silence Robert forever.

In her construction of Lady Audley, Braddon highlights that Lady Audley is not a hardened criminal who plots her crimes, but rather a young woman driven to commit crimes out of necessity to protect herself and her character. The crimes that Lady Audley commits in the novel, bigamy and two attempted murders, differ in severity and deviousness, though. Lady Audley's first crime of bigamy is thought out and considered by Lady Audley prior to going through with the crime. On the other hand, her second and third crimes of attempted murder are not as thought out as her first crime. In both attempted murders, Lady Audley commits the crimes in the heat of the moment, and they are characterized as spontaneous and driven by opportunity. Braddon distinguishes Lady Audley's motivations for her crimes by writing, in Lady Audley's inner thoughts,

“My worst wickednesses have been the result of wild impulses, and not of deeply-laid plots. I am not like the women I have read of, who have lain night after night in the horrible darkness and stillness, planning out treacherous deeds, and arranging everything circumstances of an appointed crime.” (253)

Through Lady Audley's thoughts, Braddon reveals to Victorian readers that Lady Audley is not a calculating criminal with internal criminal desires but rather a woman driven to commit crimes to protect herself from the external dangers of poverty and then from George and Robert. Robert reinforces Lady Audley's motivations by saying to himself, “She would be capable of any new crime to shield her from the consequences of the old one” (Braddon 233). Lady Audley is pushed to commit arson and two attempted murders when confronted with men who threaten to expose her original identity. Victorian readers would have understood the danger that Lady Audley

faced if her deceit was discovered by those around her. Braddon emphasizes the danger by stating, through Robert, that Lady Audley's "happiness," "prosperity," and her "*safety* depend alike upon [Sir Michael's] existence" (185, emphasis in original). A Victorian audience would have sympathized with both the situation that Lady Audley was in, and her impulsive crimes committed in attempts to conceal her identity and protect herself. Lady Audley feared for her life if she her secrets and crimes were exposed to Sir Michael. While a Victorian audience would not necessarily condone the attempted murders and arson, they would likely empathize with Lady Audley, leading them to question the "naturalness" of Victorian femininity and the structure that upheld its necessity for the middle-class: marriage.

Whereas Braddon first juxtaposes Lady Audley's sensational crimes with her realistic and survival-driven motivations to challenge the role of the ideal wife, she then juxtaposes the sensation of an apparent ideal, middle-class woman who abandons her maternal responsibilities with the realistic depiction of Lady Audley as a mother who is selfish, amoral, and neglectful. In mid-Victorian society, the middle-class relied on the "naturalness" of middle-class women to distinguish the middle class from the other classes. According to mid-Victorian belief in physiognomy, if a woman appeared to be a beautiful, passive woman, her character was assumed to have the same qualities. There was no distinction between a woman's appearance and her moral character. Due to the lack of distinction between appearance and character, Lady Audley's outward appearance as an ideal, middle-class wife would have been viewed by Victorians as an indication of her ability to be an ideal, nurturing, and selfless mother. However, Lady Audley fails in her role as being an ideal, selfless mother by not only refusing to act as a mother-figure to Sir Michael's daughter, Alicia Audley, but also abandoning her young son and leaving him with her alcoholic father. Braddon juxtaposes the sensational element of an ideal mother who neglects

both her stepdaughter and young son with the realistic representation of Lady Audley, whose appearance contradicts her overly childish and selfish character.

Braddon first constructs Lady Audley as an overly childish woman who is incapable of being a mother figure for her stepdaughter. Lady Audley takes on the role of a child in her mannerisms and appearance. Her childlike qualities hinder her relationship with her newly acquired stepdaughter, Alicia. As the narrator states, “Lady Audley had, in becoming the wife of Sir Michael, made one of those apparently advantageous matches which are apt to draw upon a woman the envy and hatred of her sex” (Braddon 10). Alicia felt bitterness towards Lady Audley because, for seventeen years, Alicia had been the woman of the house and commanded the place like it was her own. With the marriage between her father and Lady Audley, Alicia had to surrender her power in the house to Lady Audley. It is likely that Alicia felt resentment towards Lady Audley for taking away the attention of her father. However, instead of trying everything in her power to remedy the situation, Lady Audley settled for a truce with Alicia. On the one occasion she brought it up to Alicia, Lady Audley said, “If we cannot be friends, let us at least be neutral. You won’t try to injure me?” (Braddon 93). With the shrug of her shoulders, Lady Audley was nonchalant about the relationship between her and her new stepdaughter even going as far as to allude to Alicia having the potential to injure her. Lady Audley also takes no measures to nurture or protect Alicia as she prefers to be the childlike beauty herself in need of protection from Sir Michael. Braddon exaggerates the mid-Victorian ideal of femininity of a woman being “naturally” innocent by making Lady Audley overly childish. Braddon’s exaggeration of the quality of innocence challenges mid-Victorian femininity by encouraging readers to question the “naturalness” of ideal wives and mothers as innocent beings.

Braddon then constructs Lady Audley as a realistically selfish and neglectful mother who abandons her young son because she resented him for supposedly being the cause of her madness and because she desired to live a life outside of poverty. By leaving her son behind, Lady Audley avoids her maternal responsibilities and fails to nurture or protect her child. When confessing her life story to Sir Michael, Lady Audley admits that she “did not love [her] child; for he had been left a burden upon my hands” (Braddon 300). Lady Audley states that “the hereditary taint [of madness] that was in my blood had never until this time showed itself by one sign or token; but at this time I became subject to fits of violence and despair” (300-01). In her confession, Lady Audley acknowledges that there was no innate maternal instinct that beckoned her to love her child. Instead, she felt resentment towards the child for setting the hereditary madness that was in her blood into motion. She blamed her child for causing her to act in violent, desperate ways. In “Lady Audley and Lydia Gwilt: Two Portraits of Sensational Female Criminals,” Marion Charret-Del Bove argues that

the main medical argument for female criminality was that women were passively submitted to biological, sometimes pathological, process (such as menstruation and defective menstrual flow, pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, puerperal mania and menopause), which considerably weakened their power to resist violent compulsions.

(40)

This prevailing medical argument in mid-Victorian society is prevalent in Lady Audley’s explanation of how her madness was set into motion. Lady Audley was aware that if her mother had been diagnosed with madness, she was likely to receive the same diagnosis after a biological process such as giving birth to her first child. Lady Audley’s acknowledgement of resentment for her child is far from what Marino identified as the ideal “selfless, affectionate mother” of the

mid-Victorian household (168). Lady Audley did not want to suffer while taking care of a baby; she wanted to “lose [herself] in the great chaos of humanity” (Braddon 301). She also likely felt resentment for her child because of the child’s father: George Talboys. George came from a financially well-off family, but he was unable to provide for her and instead left her an “heir to his father’s [George’s] poverty” (Braddon 22). While it is George who comments on his son as heir to his poverty, it is likely that Lady Audley shared the same perspective that neither she nor her son would escape their fathers’ poverty. She foresaw her son being subjected to the same poverty-stricken fate that she had been subjected to, but she made the decision to leave her son with her alcoholic father, who she knew could not provide financially for the boy.

By constructing Lady Audley as a realistic young woman who failed to be an ideal mother, Braddon challenges the mid-Victorian assumption that middle-class women were “naturally” selfless and nurturing. Lady Audley provides selfish reasons for why she abandoned her son and, unlike her motivations for entering a bigamous marriage and attempting to murder two men, her crime of child abandonment is not meant to elicit sympathy from a Victorian audience. Braddon represents Lady Audley as a bad mother to make her audience question the “naturalness” of women being inherently maternal and caring. Braddon represents Lady Audley as a bad mother because Lady Audley abandons her maternal responsibilities and puts her needs above the needs of her son.

To conclude, in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, Braddon challenges mid-Victorian femininity through her representation of Lady Audley as an apparent ideal, middle-class wife and mother. For the ideal wife, Braddon juxtaposes Lady Audley’s sensational crimes of bigamy, attempted murder, and arson with her realistic, and survival-driven motivations. For the ideal mother, Braddon juxtaposes the sensation of an apparent ideal, middle-class woman who disregards her

maternal responsibilities with the realistic depiction of Lady Audley as a mother who is selfish and neglectful. Through her representation of Lady Audley, Braddon exaggerates Lady Audley's pious and innocent qualities to encourage her audience to question the "naturalness" of mid-Victorian femininity. Though Lady Audley commits sensational crimes, Braddon's focus centers on the realistic depiction of a woman who desires to be financially secure, admired, and carefree from the responsibilities of motherhood.

**Chapter 2: Lydia Gwilt and “The figure of a woman”: Complicating the Female Criminal  
in Wilkie Collins’ *Armadale***

“If it was ten years since, instead of to-day; and if I had married Midwinter for love, I might be going to bed now with nothing heavier on my mind than a visit on tiptoe to the nursery, and a last look at night to see if my children were sleeping quietly in their cribs. I wonder whether I should have loved my children if I had ever had any? Perhaps, yes – perhaps, no. It doesn’t matter.”  
– Lydia Gwilt, *Armadale*

Sensation novelists were known for scouring the pages of the *Times* for fresh, exciting, and scandalous crimes to inspire the plots of their novels and intrigue an ever-growing reading public in mid-Victorian society. Wilkie Collins, widely recognized by contemporary twenty-first century scholars as the first sensation novelist, knew the importance of producing works that would sell. Collins is best known for two of his novels in particular: *The Woman in White* (1860) and *The Moonstone* (1868). *The Woman in White* is generally regarded by Victorian critics as the novel that jumpstarted the subgenre of sensation fiction. *The Moonstone*, while not always classified as a sensation novel, was praised by T.S. Eliot as the “first, the longest, and the best of modern English detective novels” (quoted in Farmer 11). Collins was a prolific writer in mid-Victorian society and, a year after his success with *The Woman in White*, he was solicited by George Smith at *Cornhill Magazine* to produce a new serialized sensation novel (Niles 65). The new sensation novel, *Armadale* (1864), was bold and scandalous as it included dual identities, dream prophecies, and, most importantly, a certain devilishly beautiful, calculating, and murderous protagonist; Lydia Gwilt.



Expanding further on Janice Allan's argument about sensation novelists' strategic deployment of realism and sensation, in this chapter, I apply Allan's insights to Wilkie Collins' *Armada* (1864). Rather than focusing on sensational events in relation to domestic environments, like Allan does in her article, I instead focus on sensational events, in this case criminal acts, in relation to the realistic and believable motivations of a character who looks the part of an ideal mid-Victorian wife. I argue that Collins challenges mid-Victorian femininity by juxtaposing Lydia Gwilt's sensational crimes with her survival-driven motivations for committing the crimes. While Victorian readers are aware of Lydia Gwilt's criminal background, Collins moves beyond characterizing her as female criminal, highlighting the grey areas of Victorian femininity, and encourages his audience to question what they have been taught to view as not only the "naturally" innocent, passive, and noncriminal middle-class woman, but also the "innately" mad, female criminal. Through an analysis of Miss Gwilt's intricate background and personal diary entries, it becomes evident how Collins granted narrative agency to his female protagonist and complicated the figure of a female criminal.

Before investigating Collins' complex and criminal heroine, the intricate plot of the novel must first be considered as it directly impacts Lydia Gwilt's motivations and values in the novel. Collins' novel begins, not with the introduction of the vehement Miss Gwilt, but instead, with the complicated family history of three generations of Armadale men, a plot line central to Miss Gwilt's scheming and ultimate demise. At the onset of the novel, readers are presented a deathbed confessional from a father to his son in the form of a letter. The confession letter recounts how the father, Allan Armadale, initially changed his name from Matthew Wrentmore on the prospect of inheriting his uncle's property. Armadale's choice, which he was aware of, consequently disinherited his distant cousin, also named Allan Armadale. The disinherited

cousin, feeling the need to avenge his new namesake and inheritor of his father's property, befriends the unknowing Armadale under the fake name of Fergus Ingleby. The fictitious Ingleby poisons Armadale and, with the help of a crafty young maid, Lydia Gwilt, Ingleby and Miss Blanchard deceive Mr. Blanchard with a forged letter from Armadale's mother and marry before he can intercept the deceitful matrimony. Avenging his stolen marriage, the new Armadale murders the former Armadale by locking the cabin door on a sinking ship and thus drowning his cousin for his lies and deception. Armadale kept his murderous secret hidden until, years later, his health declines and he learns that the widow of the man he killed also had a son, like him, and they both were given the cursed name of Allan Armadale. With his deathbed confession, in the form of a letter to be read by his son when he was of age, Armadale, Senior, warned his son,

“Never, to your dying day, let any living soul approach you who is associated, directly or indirectly, with the crime which your father has committed. Avoid the widow of the man I killed—if the widow still lives. Avoid the maid whose wicked hand smoothed the way to the marriage—if the maid is still in her service. And more than all, avoid the man who bears the same name as your own... Never let the two Allan Armadales meet in this world: never, never, never!” (Collins 26)

Fast forward almost two decades and the two Allan Armadales do meet when they are in their early twenties, though both are unaware of their connection at first. The son of the murdered Armadale was kept in the dark of the horrible events by his mother and secluded from the world for most of his upbringing. The son of the other Armadale led the life of a vagabond in his earlier years and, to escape discovery from his stepfather, changed his name to Ozias Midwinter. It is only after the two Armadales have met that Midwinter learns of his father's deathbed confession

and his warning to never meet with the other Allan Armadale, the widow, or the maid who aided in the deception.

Midwinter, fearful that he will bring harm to Allan if they remain near each other, deliberates whether he should remain by Allan's side because of Allan's genuine generosity towards him, something which he has never felt from anyone else, or abandon Allan to protect him from danger. After confessing the secret of his father's murderous deeds to Allan's guardian, Decimus Brock, Midwinter decides to continue his friendship with Allan. Midwinter is forced to reconsider his decision to remain with Allan though when Allan recounts a dream which Midwinter believes to be a prophecy of his father's dying words, that he or the maid who paved the way to the wedding through her wicked forgery will bring harm to Allan should they ever meet. The dream convinces Midwinter that he must protect Allan against the maid and make sure they never cross paths. Midwinter protects Allan, without Allan's knowledge, and has his guard up against any females fitting the maid's description.

Lydia Gwilt, having led a criminal life from a young age, sets her eyes on Allan and his newly inherited estate at Thorpe Ambrose. Unable to obtain any money from the rest of the Blanchard family for financial security, Miss Gwilt seeks out her former mistress, Allan's mother, for compensation for her part in the deceptive marriage all those years ago. Allan's mother, afraid of her former maid telling Allan about their family history, pays off Miss Gwilt and dies shortly after. Miss Gwilt's financial gain is short-lived because her second husband, who entered a bigamous marriage with her since he already had a first wife, takes the money, and abandons her. Desperate to survive and unable to provide for herself, Miss Gwilt is determined to seek compensation from her mistress' son, Allan, by marrying him and inheriting his money and estate. After learning that Allan's tenant, Major Milroy, has a daughter, Miss

Gwilt seeks a position as the Milroy's governess to get close to Allan. Miss Gwilt is faced with multiple challenges in her attempts to marry Allan including a suspicious Midwinter, a young, love-stricken Miss Milroy, and Miss Milroy's jealous mother, Mrs. Milroy. Miss Gwilt's plan ultimately fails, though, when Mrs. Milroy enlists a naïve Allan to investigate her new governess' references and family history. Allan barely uncovers the surface of Miss Gwilt's criminal past, and even though he refuses to proceed further, Miss Gwilt realizes she will have to seek her fortune through an alternative route.

Miss Gwilt's alternative route becomes apparent when Midwinter, sympathizing with the unjust inquiry into Miss Gwilt's character and falling for her charm, confesses his original name to her. Even though Miss Gwilt reciprocates Midwinter's feelings, she devises a new, alternate plan to secure Allan's money and estate. By marrying Midwinter under his birth name, Miss Gwilt plans to kill Allan, either by her own hand or someone else's, making it look like an unfortunate accident, and resurface in Thorpe Ambrose as Allan's grieving widow to inherit Allan's estate and money. Miss Gwilt's marriage and love for Midwinter make her second guess her new plan, but she decides that, upon going through with her plan, she will have to deny her marriage to Midwinter to his face and uphold her position as Allan's widow. Despite her conviction for her new plan, Miss Gwilt fails three separate times in attempting to kill Allan. On her third attempt, she almost kills Midwinter when he senses something suspicious and switches rooms with Allan. With the guilt of almost killing her husband, Miss Gwilt repents for her crimes and kills herself in the room filled with poisonous gas that was originally meant to kill Allan.

Even though *Armadale* begins and ends with two Armadale men, it is Lydia Gwilt who takes over the narrative of the novel by captivating the audience's attention through her complicated and vulnerable diary entries. It is through her character that Collins challenges mid-

Victorian ideals of femininity, specifically the dutiful, passive wife. Collins constructs Lydia Gwilt as a complex female criminal intent on surviving. Readers know that Miss Gwilt has a rather extensive criminal history before her entrance into the Milroy home. Miss Gwilt's first criminal act was committed at the young age of twelve. Having learned from her previous guardians how to manipulate her handwriting and forge other's handwriting, she assisted her mistress, Miss Blanchard, in deceiving Mr. Blanchard and ultimately made Miss Blanchard's marriage to the disinherited Armadale possible. Once she was a bit older, Miss Gwilt played an essential role in a card-playing scheme with an older lady, whom she likely viewed as a mother figure. Miss Gwilt's role in the sketchy business was to distract the gentlemen with her beauty and charm so that they would be unaware they were being swindled. Miss Gwilt was also accused and "tried for her life" for poisoning and killing her first husband, Mr. Waldron (Collins 289). The judge had sentenced her to death, but the public rallied against his decision because they could not fathom a sweet, young woman receiving a death sentence regardless of whether she was guilty or innocent. Having escaped the death sentence, she was later charged with theft for stealing jewelry from her late husband's house and sentenced to serve two years in prison. In constructing Miss Gwilt, Collins made no attempt to deceive the audience into believing that Miss Gwilt was an innocent, noncriminal woman. Instead, Collins made it clear that Miss Gwilt was involved in crime since she was barely even a teenager. Collins constructed a protagonist that was undoubtedly criminal to challenge and subvert both the passive, dutiful middle-class wife and the problematic conflation of female criminals and madness.

Like Braddon before him, Collins also challenges the mid-Victorian belief that female criminals were, in some way, morally insane. In "Psychology, Sexuality, and Social Control in Victorian England," Elizabeth Fee claims that, especially with female crime, "moral deviance"

was viewed as “insanity” (638). Imprisoned women, as Fee notes, were regarded as “mad” or “disturbed” rather than “intentionally wicked or vicious” (638). In mid-Victorian society, female criminals were not considered to be calculating or manipulative in the execution of their crimes. As Fee contends, if women “explained their own actions as provoked by domestic troubles, desertion by the husband, illegitimacy of the child, monetary difficulties, or, more simply, want and poverty,” their “explanations were then listed as concurrent causes precipitating an attack of insanity” (639). Collins constructs a subversive female protagonist not only because Lydia Gwilt commits criminal acts, but also because her motivations behind committing the criminal acts are explained and rationalized. Collins refuses to diagnose Lydia Gwilt as mad and instead explores why she commits crimes. By exploring Lydia Gwilt’s motivations for her crimes, Collins invites Victorian readers to sympathize with the protagonist and question Victorian ideals of femininity that construct women who commit crimes as mad, disturbed criminals.

Even though readers are aware that Miss Gwilt is a criminal, Collins constructs her to appear as an ideal, respectable lady. Collins represents Miss Gwilt as an ideal middle-class woman because sensational affect is created when the sensational crime is committed by someone who is considered to innocent and incapable of committing crimes: a well-respected, ideal middle-class woman. Even though readers are aware of Miss Gwilt’s criminal past, her appearance as a respectable woman makes the sensational crimes realistic, believable, and more sensational. If Lydia Gwilt can look the part of an ideal woman and fool the other middle-class characters despite her criminal acts, readers are forced to consider how the Victorian ideal of femininity is constructed and not, in fact, “natural.”

By having both Mr. Brock and Mr. Blanchard, two well-respected men in society, describe Miss Gwilt as a respectable middle-class woman, readers can see just how believable

Miss Gwilt's appearance and conduct is. Miss Gwilt is first described by Mr. Brock. Though Mr. Brock does not see Miss Gwilt's face, he describes her as a "neatly dressed woman, wearing a gown and bonnet of black silk and a red Paisley shawl" (Collins 38). She is further characterized by Mr. Brock as a "remarkably elegant and graceful woman" (Collins 38). Even under the disguise of the veil, Miss Gwilt upholds herself as a lady worthy of respect and admiration from Mr. Brock and the other townspeople. Later in the chapter, she is similarly described by Arthur Blanchard when she boards the same vessel as him. Still dressed in her black silk and red Paisley shawl, Miss Gwilt struck Mr. Blanchard with "the rare grace and elegance of her figure" (Collins 43). Like Mr. Brock, Mr. Blanchard did not look at Miss Gwilt's face. In the company of Mr. Brock and Mr. Blanchard, Miss Gwilt conducted herself with the grace of a lady in her appearance and conduct. Grace and elegance were two qualities attributed to ideal, middle-class women during the mid-Victorian era. Miss Gwilt's ability to look the part even though she is a criminal is indicative to readers of the constructed-ness of mid-Victorian ideals of femininity.

When Miss Gwilt arrives at Thorpe Ambrose to start her position as the Milroy's governess, both Allan and Midwinter describe her beauty as mesmerizing, and she appears to them, as she did with Mr. Brock and Mr. Blanchard, as an ideal middle-class woman. Allan, encountering Miss Gwilt on the shore, expects to meet an elderly woman and he is taken aback when he sees Miss Gwilt. The narrator notes how "the sudden revelation of her beauty, as she smiled and looked at him inquiringly, suspended the movement in his limbs and the words on his lips. A vague doubt beset him whether it was the governess, after all" (Collins 148). Miss Gwilt's beauty made Allan freeze where he was standing. Her beauty is reason enough for Allan to quickly dismiss his flirtatious conversations with Miss Milroy and refocus his attention on Miss Gwilt. The following day, Midwinter seeks out the new governess and, like Allan, is

stunned by Miss Gwilt's appearance. While looking at Miss Gwilt for the first time, Midwinter describes her appearance, saying,

[Her] hair, superbly luxuriant in its growth, was of the one unpardonably remarkable shade of color which the prejudice of the Northern nations never entirely forgives – it was red! ... Her eyes, large, bright, and well opened, were of that purely blue color, without a tinge in it of gray or green, so often presented to our admiration in pictures and books, so rarely met with in the living face... Her complexion was the lovely complexion which accompanies such hair as hers – so delicately bright in its rosier tints, so warmly and softly white in its gentler gradations of color on the forehead and the neck. (Collins 154)

In Midwinter's description of Miss Gwilt, he notes the brightness, delicateness, softness, and gentleness of her appearance. The delicate, soft, and gentle features were typically indications of a youthful beauty. The ideal mid-Victorian woman was young and innocent, likely in her late teens and early twenties. Though Miss Gwilt is thirty-five, she can conceal her age under Maria Oldershaw's cosmetics and deceive those around her into thinking she is younger than she really is. Since middle-class Victorians prescribed that one's appearance was an indication of their character, Miss Gwilt's appearance is indicative of her gentle and delicate "nature" as a woman. Though Miss Gwilt can look the part of the ideal Victorian woman, a contradiction to the ideal is evident in her red hair and seductive nature. Unlike the ideal blonde curls that bounce on Lady Audley's head, Miss Gwilt's hair is red in color, and, in the Victorian era, red hair was not considered desirable in women because it was indicative of evil and fierce qualities which was far from the "natural" gentle quality of middle-class women. In "Lydia Gwilt: Wilkie Collins's Satanic, Sirenian Psychotic," Johnathan Craig Tutor argues that Miss Gwilt's red hair "links her to



traditional Satanic figures such as Judas and Cain” (41). The fact that Collins constructed Miss Gwilt both to have red hair and to take on the role of an ideal woman is suggestive that he is challenging the conditions of appearance in an ideal middle-class woman as well as the deeper issues of conduct.

By juxtaposing the character and appearance of Miss Gwilt with that of Miss Milroy, Collins further challenges conceptions of mid-Victorian femininity by having an older, seductive, and red-haired woman win the affections of Allan Armadale rather than the young, innocent, and brown-haired Miss Milroy. Prior to Miss Gwilt’s arrival at the Milroy cottage, Miss Milroy, her new pupil, and Allan had already fallen in love with each other. To win Allan’s affection, Miss Gwilt must intercept and extinguish the affections between Allan and Miss Milroy. Miss Milroy is first described by Allan through a set of contradictions. When Allan sees Miss Milroy for the first time in the garden of Thorpe Ambrose, the narrator notes that “she was pretty; she was not pretty; she charmed, she disappointed, she charmed again” (Collins 95). Miss Milroy is the tender age of seventeen and has a youthful appearance to her. Despite her youthful appearance, Miss Milroy is not a strikingly beautiful girl according to the narrator who describes her, noting how “her nose was too short, her mouth was too large, her face was too round and too rosy” (Collins 96). In contrast to the narrator’s description of her, Miss Gwilt’s description of Miss Milroy is likely tainted by her dislike of her young pupil; however, it too provides insights into Miss Milroy’s appearance and character as a young lady. In a letter to Mrs. Oldershaw, Miss Gwilt describes Miss Milroy writing, “She, too, is rosy and foolish; and, what is more, awkward and squat and freckled, and ill-tempered and ill-dressed. No fear of her, though she hates me like poison, which is a great comfort, for I get rid of her out of lesson time and walking time” (Collins 158). By highlighting Miss Milroy’s rosy freckles, squat stature, and questionable attire,

Collins uses Miss Gwilt's letter to make it evident that Miss Milroy is not what Victorians would consider an ideal woman. Her character is neither passive nor gentle as she is quick to anger and awkward in her encounters with Miss Gwilt and Allan. Miss Milroy's defining qualities for adhering to the ideal of a middle-class woman is her youth and subsequently her innocence. As the narrator points out, when Allan was talking to Miss Milroy, he was not "addressing a woman worn out with admiration, but a girl just beginning a woman's life" (Collins 95). Miss Milroy had not attended school nor had a long-term governess and, as a result, she had not yet learned how to conduct herself as a lady. Nevertheless, she is successful in her pursuits with Allan because he, too, is young, naïve, and largely uneducated in matters of society. Miss Milroy is a pretty girl in his proximity who returns his flirtation, and, for Allan, that is enough. In contrast to Miss Milroy, readers can see that Miss Gwilt, though she is older, red-headed, and seductive, appears to be the ideal, middle-class woman. However, looking past her appearance, readers can see the reality of Miss Gwilt's character as evidently not an ideal, middle-class woman.

Through his representation of Miss Gwilt, Collins challenges Victorian ideals of femininity, specifically the passive, dutiful wife by juxtaposing Miss Gwilt's sensational crimes with realistic explanations of her motivations through his inclusion of both her backstory and her diary entries. Miss Gwilt's criminal acts of murdering her first husband, Mr. Waldron, by poison, though it occurs a few years prior to the plot of the novel, and her plan to kill Allan will serve as the first two sensational crimes. According to James Bashwood, enlisted by his father to investigate into Miss Gwilt's past, Miss Gwilt, then Mrs. Waldron, was "committed for trial, on the charge of murdering her husband by poison" and was later "sentenced to death in such a scene as had never been previously witnessed in an English court of justice" (Collins 294-95). The sensational act was murder and if Collins had only provided the allegation and conviction of

murder to his audience, readers might have disregarded Miss Gwilt as a cold-hearted criminal who was likely insane. However, Collins strategically implements aspects of realism by exposing Miss Gwilt's motivations behind the murder both through the backstory presented by James Bashwood and Miss Gwilt's own diary entries in which she recounts her first marriage. James Bashwood, in his explanation of the events leading up to the crime, highlights how, after the initial bliss of the honeymoon phase, Mr. Waldron "became savagely jealous of every male creature who entered the house" (Collins 293). Mr. Waldron "shut his wife and himself up from every living creature" to prevent Miss Gwilt from having any contact with other men even though it was unlikely that Miss Gwilt showed any signs of entertaining other men. Feeling desperate and isolated, Miss Gwilt began corresponding with a man named Captain Manuel without her husband's knowledge. Upon learning of his wife's correspondence with Captain Manuel, Mr. Waldron "[struck] her across the face with his riding-whip" (Collins 294). In Bashwood's account, readers can see how Miss Gwilt was emotionally and physically abused by her husband. Mr. Waldron exercised his power over her and locked her away from everyone. Feeling desperate and alone, Miss Gwilt likely saw no other avenue for escaping her abusive husband other than getting rid of him by poisoning him. Collins included the possible motivations behind Miss Gwilt's murder of her husband so readers could sympathize with Miss Gwilt. While the possible motivations do not excuse her actions, nor do they entirely justify the murder, an audience of predominantly female readers could empathize with a young woman who was emotionally and physically abused by her husband.

Miss Gwilt's inner turmoil over killing Allan is evident in her contradictory diary entries. In some entries, she expresses her hatred for Allan and willingness to end Allan's life. In other entries, she questions whether she can commit a second murder at all. In her diary, Miss Gwilt

writes, “Some women—in my place, and with my recollections to look back on—would feel it differently. Some women would say, ‘It’s easier the second time than the first.’ Why can’t I? why can’t I?” (Collins 246). In this diary entry, Miss Gwilt compares herself to other women who have resorted to murder to solve their issues. Miss Gwilt supposes that they might find a second murder easier than the first, but she questions why she cannot think in the same way. Miss Gwilt’s contemplations illustrate that she is not a cold-hearted killer. She was motivated to kill her first husband by necessity of survival, but she seriously contemplates whether she can commit Allan’s murder because she is not driven by that same necessity of survival. Collins shows his readers, through Miss Gwilt’s diary, that she should not be characterized by the audience as a woman capable of murdering anyone who stands in her way. Miss Gwilt reasons with herself and does not equate the murder of her first husband to the potential murder of Allan. In her mind, the murder of her first husband was a justified act of survival. Readers can see Miss Gwilt’s complex thoughts about taking someone else’s life. At multiple points in Miss Gwilt’s diary, she questions herself and her own motivations for wanting to murder Allan for his fortune. When contemplating her three-step plan to acquire Allan’s fortune, which involves killing him, Miss Gwilt asks herself, “What is it that daunts me? The dread of obstacles? The fear of discovery? Where are the obstacles? Where is the fear of discovery?” (Collins 249). Miss Gwilt also asks herself, “But, oh, after what I have done already in the past time, how can I? how can I?” (Collins 249). The choice of murdering Allan is not an easy choice for Miss Gwilt to make. Through Miss Gwilt’s diary entries, Collins complicates the character of a female criminal.

Collins further complicates the character of a female criminal and Miss Gwilt’s attempt at being an ideal middle-class wife through his inclusion of Miss Gwilt’s diary entries that reveal her unexpected and complicated feelings towards Midwinter. Even though Miss Gwilt’s goal is

to obtain Allan's wealth, the possibility of being happy and content being married to Midwinter derails her ambitions and ultimately leads to her suicide at the end of the novel. From the onset of her interactions with Midwinter, Miss Gwilt is intrigued and mystified by the young man. Unlike Allan, who she describes as a "man whom [she] could use so ill, if [she] had the opportunity," Midwinter has "brains in his head and a will of his own" that she must discover the truth behind (Collins 158-59). Once she marries Midwinter, she reminisces about the life she could have had. In her diary, she writes,

"If it was ten years since, instead of to-day; and if I had married Midwinter for love, I might be going to bed now with nothing heavier on my mind than a visit on tiptoe to the nursery, and a last look at night to see if my children were sleeping quietly in their cribs. I wonder whether I should have loved my children if I had ever had any? Perhaps, yes—perhaps, no. It doesn't matter." (Collins 238)

Miss Gwilt fantasizes about what her life would be like if she had married Midwinter when she was younger and for love. She fantasizes about being a mother and having only to care for her children's wellbeing. Since she is older, she fears she must cast aside her fantasies about marrying Midwinter for love. In her diary, Miss Gwilt reveals her true thoughts and ambitions because she does not have to play a role for herself. While fantasizing about an alternative life, Miss Gwilt considers whether she can be the ideal middle-class wife. Though Miss Gwilt has led a criminal life, she still longs to be a good wife and have the life that she never thought was possible for herself. Without Miss Gwilt's diary entries, the audience would lose the complexity of Miss Gwilt's character as it is unlikely that she would divulge this information to anyone in her life outside of herself. In her diary, Miss Gwilt contemplates the feelings she has towards Midwinter, writing,

“Is it Love? I thought I had loved, never to love again. Does a woman not love when the man’s hardness to her drives her to drown herself? ... Did all my misery at that time come from something which was not Love? Have I lived to be five-and-thirty, and am I only feeling now what Love really is? – now, when it is too late? Ridiculous! Besides, what is the use of asking? ... The more we [women] think of it, the more we deceive ourselves.” (Collins 274)

While expressing herself in her diary, Miss Gwilt contemplates what love is and how she knows if she is in love at all. She thought that she had loved her second husband, Captain Manuel, because when he deserted her, she attempted to take her own life, but what she feels towards Midwinter, now her third husband, makes her question what feeling was really at the bottom of her relations with her second husband. Miss Gwilt is struggling with coming to terms with her feelings towards Midwinter and her motivations to deceive Allan for his money. Her feelings towards Midwinter are scary because she thought she was incapable of loving another man. On the other hand, her motivations to deceive Allan for his money are comfortable and safe because she has become used to leading a criminal life and using other people for monetary gain. Since she had to commit crimes from a young age to survive, Miss Gwilt feels as if her criminal lifestyle is a habit she cannot break. For Miss Gwilt, her feelings for Midwinter seem to come secondary to her motivations for deceiving Allan because her motivations to deceive make her feel more like herself, not because she is inherently criminal, but because she has become accustomed to resorting to crime to survive. At the end of her second diary chapter, it seems that Miss Gwilt has decided to trust in love and give up her criminal intentions for Midwinter. She writes, “The eve of my wedding day – I close and lock this book, never to write in it, never to open it again. I have won the great victory; I have trampled my own wickedness under foot. I am

innocent; I am happy again. My love! My angel!” (Collins 287). In the battle against herself and her wickedness, Miss Gwilt feels as if she has won, and the prize is her happiness in her marriage to Midwinter. Though she has lived life as a criminal and deceived those around her for most of her life, she feels that her marriage to Midwinter can restore her and make her a good woman. Miss Gwilt feels as though she can take on the role of the dutiful wife and not have a thought other than her husbands’ thoughts. Instead of finding her happiness in the scheming plans she once made, she will now find her happiness in her marriage to Midwinter in a sort of domestic bliss. However, her attempt to play the dutiful and passive wife is short-lived. Miss Gwilt thought that she could play the part of the ideal middle-class wife as she had played the part of the ideal woman for most of her life, but when Midwinter abandons her in pursuit of his writing, she feels the same neglect and passiveness that suffocated her during her first marriage. Though Midwinter does not lock Miss Gwilt up in a house, he becomes synonymous with Mr. Waldron, Miss Gwilt’s first husband, because he neglects her needs and expects her to remain passive while he actively pursues his own interests. For a woman that is accustomed to plotting and scheming, she is pushed over the edge in her pursuit of the mid-Victorian ideal of femininity. The mid-Victorian ideal of femininity is too limited for Miss Gwilt because her life of crime has led her to feel like she is truly herself when she is plotting against other people. By settling down with Midwinter in their marriage, Miss Gwilt must surrender her criminal side, which she has come to associate with her need to survive. Collins’ inclusion of Miss Gwilt’s longing for a successful marriage and family are integral in the audience’s understanding of and sympathy for Miss Gwilt’s character.

In Collins’ *Armadale*, he constructs a female protagonist who is one of the most complex female protagonists found in sensation novels. Miss Gwilt looks the part of the ideal, middle-

class wife, but she must plot and scheme against others to feel like she is herself because she has become used to committing crimes to survive for most of her life. Collins uses Miss Gwilt to make one of the most daring challenges to mid-Victorian femininity by combining Miss Gwilt's sensational crimes with realistic, and often sympathetic, explanations of her motivations to commit those crimes. Unlike other sensation novelists, including Braddon, Collins grants his protagonist narrative agency through Miss Gwilt's diary entries and thus challenges the representation of the ideal, dutiful, and passive wife by developing Miss Gwilt's complicated motivations for her crimes through those diary entries and complicating the simplistic correlation of female criminals and madness.



## Conclusion

In the mid-nineteenth century, sensation fiction was condemned by Victorian reviewers for the threat it posed to society. Sensation novelists disrupted not only the domestic, middle-class home but also the ultimate figure of domesticity: the angel in the house. By constructing female protagonists who not only look the part of ideal, middle-class wives but also commit crimes such as bigamy, murder, and arson, sensation novelists like Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Wilkie Collins make an explicit challenge to constructions of mid-Victorian femininity. Braddon and Collins juxtapose elements of realism and sensation to create sensational affect that implored their readers to question both the “naturalness” of the ideal innocent, passive, and dutiful middle-class wife and mother and the conflation of female criminals and madness.

Even though Braddon and Collins create drastically different protagonists, a comparison of the two sensation novels highlights how their protagonists both acquire higher positions through feminine avenues such as governess positions and marriage. When Lady Audley assumes a new identity and begins a new life, she knows that in order to marry a wealthier man, she must take on a governess position in a wealthier neighborhood. Lady Audley is aware that without a good reference to establish her character, she will not obtain a governess position. To secure a good reference, she applies as a teacher in a smaller town where she is more likely to charm her way in. Only then can she apply for the governess position at Mr. Dawson’s house because the headmistress at the school can act as a reliable reference for her character. Likewise, Miss Gwilt applies for a governess position at Major Milroy’s house because the position will guarantee her close access to Allan and the opportunity to come in between the already existing flirtation between Allan and Miss Milroy. Both Lady Audley and Miss Gwilt propose reasonable compensation for their work knowing that their low pay, in addition to their beauty and skills,

will almost guarantee them the positions. Whereas Lady Audley is pursued and persuaded into marriage by Sir Michael, Miss Gwilt pursues Allan and while she doesn't persuade him to marry her, she does try to persuade Allan to rekindle his affection for her after he learns a part of her criminal past. Lady Audley enters a possibly bigamous marriage because she views the marriage as an escape to the poverty she once lived in. Like Lady Audley, Miss Gwilt views marriage in terms of what she can gain financially. Miss Gwilt plans to marry Allan because he is wealthy and can provide for her every need and want financially. Both Lady Audley and Miss Gwilt understand the constraints placed on them as women in mid-Victorian society. Both protagonists acknowledge that they will have better success using female avenues to gain financial security, namely governess positions and marriage, than male avenues, such as working outside of the home and taking on a man's role in society to support themselves. Though governesses worked outside of the house, Victorian society did not equate the governess position to other jobs outside of the house because the governess position was considered proper employment as it was completed in another middle-class home.

While Braddon's and Collins' novels both include female protagonists who appear to be ideal middle-class wives, the two authors' representations of their female protagonists' physical attributes vary drastically. Braddon constructs Lady Audley to be a blonde, childlike, and innocent young woman. On the other hand, Collins constructs Lydia Gwilt to be a red-haired, seductive, and guilty older woman. While Lady Audley is twenty years old, Miss Gwilt is thirty-five years old. While Lady Audley is a mother to a young son, whom she abandons, Miss Gwilt is childless and, though she fantasizes about being younger and having children, she never becomes a mother. It is clear from the comparisons of Lady Audley and Lydia Gwilt that Collins is more daring than Braddon in the construction of his female protagonist. While both Braddon

and Collins aim to show how a seemingly ideal wife could be capable of committing crimes to survive and protect herself, Collins goes further by showing how a seemingly criminal female is more complex, complicated, and deserving of sympathy than mid-Victorian society made them out to be.

While both Lady Audley's and Miss Gwilt's criminal acts are initially based on the external influence of poverty, Lady Audley continues committing crimes due to other external influences such as George and Robert's threats to expose her, but Miss Gwilt continues committing crimes due to other internal, psychological influences such as her habitual need to commit crimes even after she is safely married to Midwinter because she has become used to living that way. Lady Audley's criminal acts occur after she is safely remarried to Sir Michael, but her crimes serve to protect her bigamous marriage from being exposed. Prior to her second marriage to Sir Michael, there is no indication that Lady Audley committed any crimes. It is also unlikely that Lady Audley would have committed any crimes after her second marriage had her first husband not crossed paths with her at Audley Court. Unlike Lady Audley, Miss Gwilt has led a life of crime since she young. Miss Gwilt grew up in an orphanage and was passed around and abandoned by multiple people, forcing her to resort to crime to survive. Before Miss Gwilt arrives at Audley Court, she has already been tried and convicted for murdering her first husband with poison, has served two years in prison for theft, and has extorted money from her previous mistress.

While Braddon keeps Lady Audley's secrets hidden from Victorian readers until the end of the novel, Collins makes it clear to his audience from the start of the novel that Miss Gwilt is a criminal. The authors' choice to withhold or share pertinent information about their protagonists influences how the Victorian audience perceives the two protagonists. While Victorian readers

perceive Lady Audley as a likable character and slowly come to terms with her crimes, they would perceive Miss Gwilt as a less likable character and slowly come to terms with her humanity in her psychologically perceived need to continue committing crimes. Braddon constructs Lady Audley as an angel in the house while Collins constructs Miss Gwilt as a hardened criminal who must appear as an ideal, middle-class woman in order to succeed. Braddon's novel was published two years prior to Collins', so it is possible that Braddon felt compelled to start with the ideal wife, as her audience would recognize this ideal, and systematically break down and challenge the ideal with Lady Audley's criminal acts. Conversely, Collins' approach, admittedly more daring, involves starting where Braddon ended with a female criminal who known to readers and tempted by the possibility of becoming the ideal wife and, through complicating her character, inviting the audience to consider her motivations and sympathize with her.

In terms of narrative agency in the novels, Braddon filters Lady Audley's thoughts and emotions through the narrator and the other characters in the novel and, thus, limits Lady Audley's narrative agency. While a couple of Lady Audley's letters are included in the novel, they are interpreted by either the narrator or Robert Audley, thus minimizing Lady Audley's agency to represent herself in the text. Arguably, the only time during which Lady Audley gets to tell her side of the story is when she confesses her secrets to Sir Michael and, even then, her confession is conveyed by the narrator and, consequently, readers are unable to see Lady Audley's thoughts, motivations, or complexity. Conversely, Collins grants Miss Gwilt more narrative agency by including Miss Gwilt's letters and diary entries. Collins' novel moves beyond third-person omniscient narrator to first-person narrative in the letters and diary entries written by Miss Gwilt. While the letters provide a glimpse into Miss Gwilt's character and

motivation, they are somewhat limited because they are filtered by how she chooses to present herself to the recipient of her letters, Mrs. Oldershaw. However, the diary entries provide an unfiltered account of Miss Gwilt's complicated feelings about Midwinter and her complex motivations for wanting to kill Allan. Through the diary entries, Victorian readers can see the inner turmoil that Miss Gwilt goes through when considering both her decision to marry Midwinter and her decision to murder Allan. By allowing Victorian readers to hear Miss Gwilt's own voice in her diary, Collins encourages his audience to see Miss Gwilt as a complex character who is neither strictly a female criminal nor the ideal, middle-class wife. While Braddon mitigates Lady Audley's voice through the narrator and minimizes the audience's understanding of her character's motivations, Collins allows Miss Gwilt to speak freely in letters and diary entries without intrusion from the narrator and increases the audience's understanding of her complex feelings and motivations for the crimes she commits.

Despite many contemporary scholars, including Brantlinger, Maunder, and Bernstein, arguing that the shocking plots of sensation novels were the cause of Victorian reviewer's criticism, it becomes evident through close analysis that sensation novelists' strategic implementation of realism and sensationalism was the true cause of Victorian reviewers' outrage in mid-Victorian society. The inclusion of sensationalism, namely criminal acts of bigamy, murder, and deception, alone would not cause the condemnation of sensation fiction by Victorian reviewers. Instead, it was the sensation novelists' juxtaposition of realistic motivations and sensational crimes committed by protagonists who they portrayed as ideal, middle-class women that led to the Victorian reviewers' attack of sensation fiction. By juxtaposing realism and sensationalism in relation to Victorian ideals of femininity, sensation novelists like Braddon and Collins urged their audience to reconsider and question the "naturalness" of the Victorian ideals

of femininity which represented women as innocent, passive wives and nurturing, selfless mothers.

By analyzing Braddon's and Collins' novels side-by-side, scholars can consider the importance of transgressive female characters in sensation fiction. While both Braddon and Collins include a transgressive female protagonist, Collins' *Armadale* is not as widely discussed as *Lady Audley's Secret* in contemporary scholarship. However, since Braddon constructs a protagonist who lacks both an independent voice and agency, Collins constructs a more daring protagonist who poses a greater threat to mid-Victorian ideals of femininity. A close analysis of Collins' lesser-known sensation novel reveals a transgressive protagonist that might have been overlooked in scholarship for Braddon's more widely studied sensation novel. Collins' representation of Lydia Gwilt should not be overlooked because Collins represents a complex female character whose unfiltered voice is revealed to the audience by Collins and he implores the audience to understand Lydia Gwilt's motivations for her crimes on her terms, however messy and complicated those motivations might be.

A close reading of Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* and Collins' *Armadale* is important to the larger field of Victorian literature because it provides scholars with insight into how sensation novelists broke free from previous literary conventions and forged a new literary path. Although sensation fiction is a smaller area of focus, the study of sensation fiction is valuable because it adds to the larger context of how literature in the mid-Victorian era was responding to and challenging the dominant Victorian values of femininity that represented women, whether they be wives or mothers, as innocent, passive, selfless, and noncriminal.

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