

Jim Neilson
The 19th Century Novel Podcast
Episode 20

A 19th Century Miscellany: Method and Mania

To celebrate the 20th episode of the 19th century novel podcast, I'm looking back at the episodes that have brought us here and identifying recurring themes—in other words, I'm trying to draw some conclusions from this piecemeal, digressive, and disordered miscellany. I'll start by saying a few words about the method of this podcast, about how and why I do what I do.

As I noted in the very first episode, the Preface, one goal of this podcast is to bring attention to lesser-known 19th century novels. I won't be devoting episodes, for instance, to *David Copperfield* or *Madame Bovary*. But I might discuss *Barnaby Rudge* or *A Sentimental Education*. In some small way I hope to give attention to what are mostly forgotten books and authors. I'm not making a case for these works being undeservedly neglected masterpieces. But I do think they're worth reading and studying. These authors tried to accurately depict their time and place, to make money by appealing to a large reading public, and at the same time to comment on contemporary social practices and beliefs. I view these novels, if you'll excuse the cliché, as portals into the past, as ways we can more deeply understand how men and women lived nearly two centuries ago. I could say that in doing so I'm exposing the roots of our own social problems and thereby helping us understand our own time and place. There's some truth to that. But my main interest is historical. Admittedly, there's more than a little escapism in this project. Facing a rising authoritarianism and a sadly declining natural world, I've chosen to stick my head in the sand—or more accurately to hide my head in the pages of a three-decker novel—to satisfy my curiosity and indulge my creativity by examining a subject of little interest and of no relevance to the dismaying world around me. With the humanities besieged and English departments struggling to retain their currency (in both senses of the word), not to mention their students, there's little space even in universities for what I discuss here.

I'll begin by talking about my methodology. I see what I do as akin to creating an annotated novel, filling in as much of the cultural and historical and biographical backgrounds of these books as I can (and sometimes, I fear, over-stuffing these episodes). The creation of these has been more difficult than I'd imagined, which is why I've turned out only 19 episodes in about two and a half years. This is partly due to my resemblance to the profoundly slothful Oblomov, the titular hero of a 19th century novel by Ivan Goncharov. But it's equally due to the work each episode entails: I closely read each novel several times; I read author biographies, histories, literary criticism, newspaper and magazine archives, and whatever else I can find to help me elaborate on what these novels are up to. Those episodes devoted to genres like the Gothic rather than to an individual work are particularly time consuming since I read multiple novels and examine a broader cultural background and history. I've been working intermittently for over a year, for instance, on an episode devoted to the Newgate novel, a crime-centered Victorian subgenre popular in the 1840s, tracing its antecedents to criminal biographies that appeared in the 16th century through

crime novels of the 18th century, not to mention many academic works on criminology and the law in Britain. I've also started episodes, one on Sheridan Le Fanu's 1864 sensation novel *Uncle Silas*, the other on Charles Maturin's 1820 Gothic novel *Melmoth the Wanderer*. But my immediate interest is Balzac, whose novels will be the focus of several forthcoming episodes.

Besides having to read a great deal, I'm slowed down by my lack of familiarity with this material. I was an English professor; I occasionally taught sophomore surveys of British and American literature; and I have read most of the canonical novels—British, American, French, and Russian—of the nineteenth century. But my area of specialization was the contemporary American novel. So I've had to do much to achieve a sufficient understanding of Victorian Britain and 19th century France. To that end, in my retirement, I've sat in on upper-level courses at North Carolina State University, one on the sensation novel, one on French history from the Revolution to the present, and one on Nineteenth Century European intellectual history. While my relative ignorance of this period has been a drawback, it's also been beneficial: I'm not jaded about this material but am instead enthusiastic about and eager to share this newly gained knowledge. My lack of expertise has also, I hope, made this podcast less obscurely academic and has helped me appeal to you, the listener, who may have similarly partial knowledge but a desire to learn more.

An unusual aspect of this podcast is my frequent citation of scholars and their academic (or otherwise informed) backgrounds. Sometimes this habit creates rather clunky and cluttered sentences that intrude on content. But so many scholars have devoted so many hours and so much thought to their scholarship—and are almost entirely unknown outside their narrowly circumscribed disciplines—that I feel compelled to help acknowledge them and their work under the naïve assumption that a few listeners might actually read some of their books and articles, that these scholars' insights will not be confined to unread volumes and unopened PDFs. It's not just little-known novelists I'm writing about, then, but little-known literary critics and historians and sociologists and biographers. Writing a podcast for a large (if one can count 2500 downloads as large) and nameless listenership is an odd undertaking, made even more odd if you consider that I'm citing unknown scholars to explain the forgotten books of obscure authors for an anonymous audience listening on cellphones and computers, and maybe some students in lit classes who I hope will avoid the urge to plagiarize me. As I labor over the composition of these episodes, I perhaps foolishly imagine I'm writing (and eventually speaking) to a like-minded audience who together with me, and with these novelists and scholars, can become a community of knowledge.

To analyze these novels, to explain how they work, I draw from my training in a form of literary criticism that looked closely at texts to discover patterns and repetitions and to connect these formal elements to a work's themes. This now old New Criticism too often looked at texts as autonomous works without considering important historical and political context. If you've listened to this podcast at all, you'll know that, on the contrary, my formal analysis of literary texts is inseparable from their context. To put it simply, I ask what authors say about their time and place, whether they're critiquing or reinforcing (or are in an undecided middle ground about) their culture's dominant beliefs. And I attempt to show how what are essentially political views are conveyed

through literary devices and the representation of a rich, complex, realistic world inhabited by believable women and men.

I'll begin by showing some examples of my critical method, which may help you understand what I'm doing and may help you improve your own critical expertise, your ability to more deeply appreciate the 19th century novel. When I discussed the Gothic novel, I pointed out that a psychoanalytic approach, especially its concept of repression, more than simply explaining character motivation, can help uncover significant cultural anxieties and prejudices and interests, as demonstrated in the following excerpt from Episode 10.

Why did the Gothic so commonly critique Catholicism, especially during a time when the percentage of Catholics in England was in steady decline, from four percent of the population at the beginning of the 18th century to only one percent at the beginning of the nineteenth? (“Catholic”). For one thing, the Enlightenment perceived Catholicism as grossly superstitious and irrational. For another, it was associated with England’s perpetually troubled colony of Ireland, as well as with its two main foes, France and Spain. And it continued to pose a threat within Britain. Fifty years before publication of *The Monk*, while British troops were battling the Spanish on the continent (in the War of Austrian Succession), the Jacobite risings, led by the Scottish Catholic Bonnie Prince Charlie (or more formally, “Charles Edward Louis John Casimir Sylvester Severino Maria Stuart”), unsuccessfully sought to replace the Protestant Hanoverian king George II with the Scottish and more rightful heir to the throne James Francis Edward Stuart, “the Old Pretender,” son of James II. Thus, the anti-Catholic spirit of the Gothic novel derived both from a general Enlightenment opposition to religious superstition and an ongoing fear that such superstitious beliefs could once again hold sway over the British Isles. Because of these fears, the power of the Anglican Church, and a general intolerance of the foreign and different, Catholics were barred from serving in Parliament or in most public offices, a ban that wouldn’t be lifted until passage of the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829. Catholics were also barred from admission into Oxford and Cambridge universities until the passage of the Universities Tests Act of 1871.

Featuring superstitious Catholic tormentors, mysteriously haunted castles, and ever-present threats of violent depravity, the Gothic novel served as a return of the repressed, depicting a darkness whose power the Enlightenment sought to deny and displace. No surprise, then, that scholars have often approached the Gothic from a psychoanalytic perspective. These texts easily lend themselves to such interpretations. Their basic structure—dark secrets from the past dangerously uncovered by ingenuous protagonists—resembles the psychoanalytical model of exposing repressed traumas to explain and cure current maladies. This sympathy between the Gothic and the psychoanalytic can be seen in the fact that both Sigmund Freud and his colleague Ernest Jones wrote about *Hamlet*, the most Gothic of Shakespeare’s plays, and that Freud’s friend and fellow psychoanalyst Marie Bonaparte, who was also the great grandniece of Napoleon, wrote a biography of the Gothic short story writer, Edgar Allan Poe.

Contemporary critics have expanded the use of psychoanalysis, applying it not just to individual but to social repression, to a “political unconscious.” The well-known literary critic and theorist Terry Eagleton explains this critical approach:

Gothic represents the shadowy underside of the Enlightenment, exposing the family as a cockpit of murderous loathings and society as a tainted legacy of guilt and crime through which the unquiet spectres of the past still stalk. . . . It is also one of the first great imaginative adventures into . . . sexual politics—a kind of social unconscious in which the sedate text of our everyday lives is suddenly flipped over to reveal the appalling disfigurements which silently inform it (104-5).

Maggie Kilgour, Professor of English at McGill University, makes a similar point: “With its theory of an underlying reality, psychoanalysis helped give the gothic a new ‘profundity’ by seeing it as a revelation of the private life of either the individual or his culture that had been buried by habit, the conscious will, and forces of individual and social repression” (220). For many contemporary critics, including me, most novels, regardless of their mode or genre, to some degree repress or obscure a culture’s unresolved social dilemmas. It’s up to the critic to explain both what is being repressed and how—through a novel’s aesthetic features—this repression is being enacted. Because it’s more emotionally excessive and transgressive than the realist novel, the Gothic novel offers a more dramatic—and more obvious—rendering of these dilemmas, while the realist novel more successfully represses these. In some ways, then, the Gothic novel, though set in the past and filled with the unbelievable, can be read as *more* realistic than the realist novel because it conveys its concerns much more dramatically and passionately. That is, its repression of the personal and the social is less successful and requires less arduous critical analysis (Episode 10, 23:46).

The adoption of psychoanalytic method, seeing how authors and whole genres represent obliquely in the form of a dream information that might otherwise be unsettling or unacceptable, gives critics the tool to think about the seemingly unimportant and peripheral in literary texts. For literary critics, it’s not necessarily a preponderance of evidence but can be infrequent references, even marginal (especially marginal) ones that can help explain what’s at work in a novel, particularly when one is considering a novel’s politics and its references to potentially ideologically disturbing facts, as in Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s references to India in the sensation novel *Lady Audley’s Secret*, which I discussed in the following excerpt from Episode 14.

Still grieving one year later, George compares his suffering to

some of our fellows . . . wounded in India . . . [who] came home, bringing bullets inside them. They did not talk of them, and they were stout and hearty, and looked as well, perhaps, as you or I; but every change in the weather, however slight, every variation of the atmosphere, however trifling, brought back the old agony of their wounds as sharp as ever they had felt it on the battlefield. I’ve had my wound . . . I carry the bullet still, and I shall carry it into my coffin. (47)

George’s use of this martial metaphor fits his character since, when he met Helen, he was an officer in the British Army, although he didn’t serve in India. There’s little overt concern with British imperialism, its rule over India, in *Lady Audley’s Secret*. But this seeming absence of evidence isn’t determinative. Common practice within contemporary literary scholarship is to identify historically significant and socially troubling references to matters like imperialism and slavery, however textually peripheral, under 1) the belief that the fortunes, the manor homes, the aristocratic privileges of the British upper class, and the rise in living standards of the middle class, depended upon exploitation of the subaltern, and 2) the belief that such concerns, even when appearing in occasional and obscure references, can contribute significantly to our understanding of a text by explaining its historical and social context.

Another way to look at it is that in their seeming omissions such novels replicate Britain’s marginalizing and obscuring of its dependence upon exploitation and racism and oppression. However much the dominant ideology sought to repress these issues (and however much writers of realistic novels attempted to adhere to this ideology), as in any form of repression, the repressed subject returns, disguised, distorted, hidden. Literary critics seek to uncover this repression. Lilian Nayder, English Professor at Bates College, does just this when she writes, seemingly against the spirit and content of *Lady Audley’s Secret*, that “Braddon fills her novel with references to India and the Indian Mutiny” (37). Nayder cites many such references: Robert shares a railroad carriage with “an elderly Indian officer” (138); Lady

Audley “wrap[s] herself in an Indian shawl . . . that had cost . . . a hundred guineas” (318) and proudly displays “a marvelous Indian tea-caddy of sandal-wood and silver” (191) and has in her boudoir “fantastic [chests] of Indian filagree work” (251); Alicia Audley, mocking what an Army officer had told her father, jokes, “we should have another war before long . . . we shall have no army at all, by and by, nothing but a pack of boys . . . fighting in Oudh in calico helmets to this very day” (280) (Episode 14, 38:20).

The repetition of references to India, in this case, reveals deep-seated fears and doubts brought on by the violent rebellion of Indian troops and their massacre of English colonials, doubts that raised troubling questions about the alleged civilizing mission of Britain in India and elsewhere in the empire—and even raised questions about the guiding ethos of Victorianism and British nationalism.

But such repetition needn't be political. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, Braddon uses repeated images associated with fire to foreshadow Lady Audley's setting a building ablaze to kill the man who threatens to ruin her life by revealing her secrets. But more importantly, Braddon uses these images to help us understand Lady Audley's character, her rage and passion, and eventually her loss of will and her demise, which I discussed in this excerpt from Episode 16:

With Lady Audley uttering the word “death” while staring into the fire, hearing Phoebe's fears of Luke's accidentally setting fire to the highly flammable Castle Inn, and picturing a man burnt in his bed as the Inn is engulfed in flames, readers should have little doubt about what is to come. And if they've been attentive, they should have known this was coming since Braddon repeatedly links Lady Audley with fire:

[T]he luminous rose-coloured firelight envelop[ed] her in a soft haze, only broken by the golden glitter of her yellow hair. (251)

The firelight shining on that pale face lit up the large, soft blue eyes and showed them drowned in tears. (241)

A glittering light shone through the tears in her eyes, and the lines about her pretty rosy mouth, those hard and cruel lines which Robert Audley had observed in the pre-Raphaelite portrait, were plainly visible in the firelight. (242)

My lady, brooding by the fire in her lonely chamber, with her large, clear blue eyes fixed upon the yawning gulfs of lurid crimson in the burning coals, may have thought of many things very far away. (252)

Her crimson dress, exaggerated like all the rest in this strange picture, hung about her in folds that looked like flames, her fair head peeping out of the lurid mass of color as if out of a raging furnace. (65)

Even Audley Court is described as if it's about to combust:

The . . . August sun glimmered redly upon the broad face of the old clock over that ivy-covered archway. . . . A fierce and crimson sunset. The mullioned windows and twinkling lattices are all ablaze with the red glory; the fading light flickers upon the leaves of the limes in the long avenue . . . even into those dim recesses of brier and brushwood, amidst which the old well is

hidden, the crimson brightness penetrates in fitful flashes till the dank weeds and the rusty iron wheel and broken woodwork seem as if they were flecked with blood. (26)

The closer we get to ignition, the more frequent these fiery images—to the point of comic obviousness:

The red blood flashed up into my lady's face with as sudden and transient a blaze as the flickering of a fire. (264)

Lady Audley's face was no longer pale. An unnatural crimson spot burned in the centre of each rounded cheek. (266)

The unnatural colour still burnt like a flame in her cheeks, the unnatural light still glittered in her eyes. (267)

My lady looked upon these familiar objects with scornful hatred flaming in her blue eyes. (269)

Her hair had been blown away from her face, and being of a light, feathery quality, had spread itself into a tangled mass that surrounded her forehead like a yellow flame. There was another flame in her eyes. (273)

More than foreshadowing, this imagery hints at Lady Audley's character, her wrathful nature and willingness to destroy, a nature that has even overtaken Audley Court—both the literal structure and grounds and what this place stands for, patriarchal and class rule and the rule of law. These are all at risk of being ruined through her contrivance and cruelty—just as they're put at risk by the growing resistance of British women.

Arriving at Castle Inn after midnight under the pretense of paying down debts owed by Luke and Phoebe to the county bailiff who is staying at the Inn, Lady Audley makes an excuse to wander off with a candle, locks from the outside the room in which Robert is sleeping, and places the candle atop a dressing table in an adjacent room, "the flaming tallow candle very close to the [decorative] lace [fabric] about the [looking] glass" (276). As she returns to Audley Court accompanied by Phoebe, "the night sky was no longer all dark. The thick blackness was broken by one patch of lurid light" (277). Castle Inn is ablaze. Falling to her knees, Phoebe accuses Lady Audley of having gone there expressly to set the fire and to do away with her tormentors, Robert and Luke. She beseeches Lady Audley to tell her she's wrong. But Lady Audley replies, "I will tell you nothing except that you are a mad woman" and are "behav[ing] like a maniac" (278). "Get up, fool, idiot, coward," she exclaims, "Is your husband such a precious bargain that you should be groveling there, lamenting and groaning for him?" (278). Here Lady Audley reveals her true feelings, the belief that a woman who has empathy—or for that matter who feels anything for her husband—is an idiot. To have feelings for a man is to show weakness. To lament the loss of a loved one, for Lady Audley, is to grovel. And when considering Phoebe's husband, Lady Audley naturally thinks in terms of material advantage: he is no "precious bargain." The night ends with Lady Audley walking toward Audley Court, while Phoebe remains "kneeling upon the hard road, where she had cast herself in that agony of supplication" (279).

Things are back to normal the next day, the burning of Castle Inn replaced by a blazing hearth, the crazed scene at the Inn replaced by a scene of domestic bliss, Sir Michael and wife, with daughter Alicia, sharing a breakfast in the library "at a comfortable round table, wheeled close to the blazing fire" (279). . . . (Episode 16, 13:05).

Braddon continues to use fire imagery later in the novel to convey the slow ruin of Lady Audley.

Lady Audley's final destination is "a great mansion of grey stone, with several long ranges of windows, many of which were dimly lighted and looked out like the pale eyes of weary watchers upon the darkness of the night" (329); "one of the windows [is] shrouded by a scanty curtain of faded red; and upon this curtain there went and came a dark shadow, . . . the shadow of a restless creature who paced perpetually backwards and forwards" (329).

In seeing this woman pacing behind a faded red curtain, Lucy is seeing herself, her own dismal fate, for her spirit is broken. Entering her chamber at Audley Court, after she had finished recounting her secret life, Robert had discovered her

lying upon the floor, upon the very spot in which she had crouched at her husband's feet telling her guilty story. Whether she was in a swoon, or whether she lay there in the utter helplessness of her misery, Robert scarcely cared to know. . . . My lady had not fainted; she . . . rose from the ground upon which she had groveled. Her golden hair fell in loose, disheveled masses about her ivory throat and shoulders, her face and lips were colorless, her eyes terrible in their unnatural light. (311)

What had once been the sign of her beauty and her power, those features that caused Sir Michael to swoon, "those soft and melting blue eyes; the graceful beauty of that slender throat and drooping head, with its wealth of showering flaxen curls" are all diminished, disheveled, discolored.

The loss of her vitality is shown as well in Braddon's use of fire imagery. Whereas Lady Audley had been associated with fire, with its suggestions of rage and violence, now she has been reduced to embers: after she leaves the room, leaning upon her maid's shoulder, Robert "sat down by the broad hearth upon which the red embers were fading, and wondered at the change in that old house which, until the day of his friend's disappearance, had been so pleasant a home for all who sheltered beneath its hospitable roof. He sat brooding over the desolate hearth" (312). And after Sir Michael departs by carriage from Audley Court, "Robert Audley sat alone in the dark library, where only one red spark glowed among the pale gray ashes" (313). From dangerous fire, Lady Audley has been reduced to fading embers and a single red spark. We should keep this imagery in mind when she sees a vision of herself in the woman behind the faded red curtain, a color suggesting the last remains of a fire, and thus the dwindling of her willful, energetic nature, of life itself. "You have used your power basely and cruelly," she tells Robert, "and have brought me to a living grave" (333) (Episode 16, 38:37).

As mentioned earlier, for this podcast I researched 19th Century French and Victorian cultures, novel genres, and the development of the novel itself, discovering that the novel, its genres and subgenres, were consistently derided for being too popular and too emotional, too female, lacking the ennobling features of the classics, and thus potentially harmful, especially to women and adolescents, and a threat to public order. Here's part of my earlier discussion of these matters from Episode 8:

The novel, too, was frequently criticized. For instance, that embodiment of 18th century verities Samuel Johnson complained that "These books are written chiefly to the young, the ignorant, and the idle, to whom they serve as lectures of conduct, and introductions into life. They are the entertainment of minds unfurnished with ideas, and therefore easily susceptible of impressions; not fixed by principles, and therefore easily following the current of fancy; not informed by experience, and consequently open to every false suggestion and partial account." Likewise, the Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge declared, "where the reading of novels prevails as a habit, it occasions in time the entire destruction of the powers of the mind: it is such an utter loss to the reader, that it is not so much to be called pass-time as kill time. It conveys no trustworthy information as to facts; it produces no improvement of the intellect,

but fills the mind with mawkish and morbid sensibility, which is directly hostile to the cultivation, invigoration, and enlargement of the nobler powers of the understanding” (3). It’s viewpoints like these that Jane Austen addresses when, in her Gothic parody *Northanger Abbey*, she defends the novel: “there seems almost a general wish of decrying the capacity and undervaluing the labour of the novelist, and of slighting the performances which have only genius, wit, and taste to recommend them” (22) (Episode 10, 7:47).

In the 18th and the early 19th century, the novel was considered a lesser form of literature, inferior, writes Clive Probyn, Emeritus Professor at Australia’s Monash University, “to its literary cousins, history, poetry, travel literature, popular journalism, and the sermon” (160). This low esteem was caused, first, by the novel’s novelty: it had no real tradition behind it and no direct connection to what was considered the pinnacle of imaginative writing: Greek and Latin literature; second, by the novel’s authorship: many were written by and for women; thus, the form itself must be deficient (women were, of course, excluded from the more refined realms of poetry and history and sermons by their inability to attain a classical / university education); third, by the novel’s popularity: it must be an inferior art form since it appealed to the unrefined classes, Probyn asserting that by the 1760s, “for the first time in the history of the genre of prose fiction it is possible to speak with confidence of a middle class readership as an instrumental force in determining literary production” (149). Having no classical antecedents, written by women, and read by women and the uneducated middle classes, the novel was said to be aesthetically and morally flawed. Over and over again, we encounter this reaction: a new literary form appeals to the masses and is instantly criticized by elites as morally dangerous (Episode 8, 4:16).

As it developed and was recognized as a more serious art form, critics shifted their attack from the novel itself to types—or genres—of the novel, particularly those often written by and read by women. We see this attack in responses to the Gothic, which I detailed in this passage from Episode 10:

The Gothic novel, like the novel of sentiment, was criticized by adherents of realistic fiction. Jane Austen, for one, satirized the form in her mock-Gothic novel *Northanger Abbey*, as in this passage which contrasts the fantastic of the Gothic with the prosaic of everyday life: “in the central part of England. . . murder was not tolerated, servants were not slaves, and neither poison nor sleeping potions to be procured, like rhubarb from every druggist” (137) or this passage in which the novel’s protagonist, Caroline Moreland, is attracted to a man she had met only once because she hasn’t again run into him in the small, elite social circle of the town of Bath, an absence she romanticizes: “this sort of mysteriousness,” Austen writes, “which is always so becoming in a hero, threw a fresh grace in Catherine’s imagination around this person and manners, and increased her anxiety to know more of him” (21). Another proponent of a realist aesthetic, Walter Scott, pointed to the absurdities of Gothic fiction in the introduction to his novel *Waverly*, imagining what a reader would have expected if he’d given his novel a Gothic title: “a castle . . . the keys . . . consigned to the care of some aged butler or housekeeper, whose trembling steps . . . were doomed to guide the hero, or heroine, to the ruinous precincts? . . . stories of blood and horror which [a heroine] had heard in the servants’ hall. . . a profligate abbot, an oppressive duke . . . black cows, caverns, daggers, electrical machines, trap-doors, and dark-lanterns” (3-4).

The Gothic was mocked by much of the respectable, male literary establishment, ostensibly for its lack of originality, its lack of realism, its lack of moral seriousness and the threat all of this posed to vulnerable readers. As often in such moral panics, these objections were couched in the need to protect the children. One anonymous reviewer, writing in 1798, for instance, worried that the Gothic novel “spread terror throughout all the nurseries and boarding schools of the metropolis.” These novels, he wrote, serve “no useful purpose. . . They can only tend to infuse the most wild and ridiculous ideas into the minds of young people; fill them with groundless fears; make them imagine every *dark chamber* to be haunted, and even to be startled by their own shadows” (Review of *Santa Maria* 786). Likewise, another anonymous writer

asked, “what instruction is to be reaped from the distorted ideas of lunatics[?] . . . Are we come to such a pass, that the only commandment necessary to be repeated is, ‘Thou shalt do no murder?’ Are the duties of life so changed, that all the instructions necessary for a young person is to learn to walk at night upon the battlements of an old castle, to creep hands and feet along a narrow passage, and meet the devil at the end of it?” (“Terrorist” 224).

On this view, it was the role of culture to instruct and the role of cultural guardians to paternalistically repudiate inappropriate instruction. And it was the lower classes, women in particular, who needed to be guarded from what Davison refers to as “the dangerous potential of mass literacy.” “The popularity of the gothic novel,” according to Fred Botting, Professor of English Literature at Kingston University, London, “highlights the way that the control of literary production was shifting away from the guardians of taste and toward the reading public itself, much to the chagrin of those interested in maintaining an exclusive set of literary values” (43). Thus, the 18th century satirist who offered the mocking Gothic recipe I quoted earlier deplored these novels’ absence of moral purpose, specifically their impact on women, asking, “Is the corporeal frame of the female sex so masculine and hardy, that it must be softened down by the touch of dead bodies, clay-cold hands, and damp sweats? Can a young lady be taught nothing more necessary in life, than to sleep in a dungeon with venomous reptiles, walk through a ward with assassins, and carry bloody daggers in their pockets, instead of pin-cushions and needlebooks?” (224-25).

That a critic of Gothic romances believes a lady should be taught the necessities of life via pin-cushions and needlebooks suggests that the Gothic romance, many written by and read by women and often featuring an unchaperoned and vulnerable heroine in a dangerous foreign setting being tormented by a threatening male, was perceived as a challenge to the patriarchal system. It’s easy to see why novels featuring an independent woman discovering herself through overcoming a dominant male would be thought threatening. The popularity of the Gothic in the 1790s, specifically what has become known as the “female Gothic,” suggests these novels were responding both to prevailing 18th century masculinity, the same male behaviors that the sentimental novel sought to correct, as well as to changing gender relations, that is, the onset of bourgeois domesticity, which would become such a mainstay in Victorian households.

Of the former, the reaction against 18th century masculinity, we should consider the standard female Gothic plot, which Fred Botting synthesizes as a story “of [an] orphaned heroine with all the virtues of middle-class domestic values discovering [her] aristocratic birthright after a series of terrors, persecutions and imprisonments” (65). This heroine’s struggles against tyrannical males, against imprisonment in a castle, against threats of violence, against what appear to be supernatural forces was a painful education in and an overcoming of, to use a contemporary term, toxic masculinity (the license and libertinism and dominance of 18th century males), a necessary step before she could claim her right as heiress and spouse.

The latter point, that these novels were a reaction to incipient bourgeois domesticity, is noted by Indiana University Emeritus English Professor Patrick Brantlinger, who sees a continuity between disparate novelistic genres: “Both the sentimental novel and the Gothic romance,” he writes, “deal with the effects of potentially ‘degrading’ desires and of liberating individuals from emotional and moral restraints” (26). These restraints would become more fixed as domesticity became more established as a female ideal. Thus, female Gothic novels, as exemplified by *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, which were written by women and centered on a female protagonist, were responding to the growing hegemony of conservative bourgeois values. Brean Hammond, Emeritus Professor at the University of Nottingham, and Shaun Regan, Lecturer at Queen’s University, Belfast, elaborate on these changes:

Suburbanization, the increasing availability of luxury goods, and increasing standards of living [for upper- and middle-class women] resulted in a more decorative purpose for many women, who were required to become their husbands’ status symbols, and settled into an existence of

hostessing and reading. Accompanying this change in social role was an ideological shift, whereby women began to be considered as inhabiting a separate social sphere of emotional expertise. It was in the early eighteenth century that women were first constructed as custodians of moral and emotional virtue, as homemakers with a monopoly on sensitivity. (11)

It was against this backdrop that the female Gothic novel developed and to which it responded. As George Haggerty explains, “The Gothic novel records the terror implicit in the increasingly dictatorial reign of [middle class] values” (221), the heroine being imprisoned in a castle and ruled by a tyrannical male reflecting the domestic imprisonment of bourgeois marriage. (Episode 10, 41:50).

After the Gothic, the little-remembered Silver Fork novel of the 1820s and 1830s was targeted for criticism by the literary establishment, as I explain in this excerpt from Episode 9.

Like Regency romances, silver fork novels were wildly popular, and they depended upon (and were criticized for) their formulaic plots. Whereas Jane Austen’s novels are cleverly and precisely plotted, the plots of silver fork novels are often picaresque—that is, episodic, charting characters’ movements through their social circles with little concern for narrative development—and little concern for teaching a moral lesson. The term “silver fork” itself, adopted from a review by the essayist William Hazlitt, was a way to disparage these novels, making them synonymous with what was perceived as their central flaw: a preoccupation with the superficial details of the lives of aristocrats. “Provided a few select persons eat fish with silver forks,” Hazlitt wrote, these writers “consider it a circumstance of no consequence if a whole country starves” (345).

The silver fork novel was criticized for many other reasons, as Casey documents, focusing on reviews in the weekly journal *The Atheneum*. Besides their hackneyed plots and fascination with the details of the good life, these novels were deplored for their style and grammar, their “vulgar words imported from the club-house or the kennel,” and [their] “flagrant outrages upon the laws of universal grammar” (qtd. in Casey, “Silver-Forks” 254). According to the *Atheneum*, literature should be moralistic (but not preachy) since, writes one critic, “events, as they occur in real life, have always a moral if we have but the wisdom to detect it” (Review of *The Three* 461). Extremely popular, Casey describing them as “perhaps the first bestsellers” (“Aristocracy” 13), silver fork novels raised fears that an ever-enlarging reading public which crossed class boundaries would be exposed to and influenced by frivolous and amoral or dubiously moral fiction, leading one critic to decry “the blighting influence of [their] artificial manners, cynical egotism, and corrupted morals” (Review of *The Three* 461).

The problem such critics were addressing was the rise of consumer culture—that is, the publication of novels meant to respond to the marketplace, to broad public taste, rather than to the refined tastes of the cultural elite. Thus, one critic rued that authors had “fallen upon evil days and . . . like tradesmen . . . must subordinate [their] own tastes to those of their customers. . . . [They must submit] to the necessity of pandering to the prevalent corruption of the intellect” (803). Another criticism was simply that there were too many of these titles, too many novels being published overall. In fact, the number of novels published annually in Britain in the years 1820 to 1836 was, from a modern perspective, quite small, ranging from a low of 69 to a high of 112 titles (Garside 25). The number of copies per edition was also small, a first edition of a new novel having a press run of between 500 and 2000 (Garside 29). Complaints about the excessive number of silver fork novels being published are indicative of the literary establishment’s frustration about losing their gatekeeper function. But they also show a culture in transition, an elite literary world being overwhelmed by a burgeoning mass market.

Another objection was that the silver fork novel seems not to have been spontaneously created by the genius of individual authors but to have been contrived by a publisher. Emeritus English professor John Sutherland explains: “The mastermind behind silver forkery was the publisher Henry Colburn. In 1825-26, at a time when the book trade was prostrated by a recession Colburn embarked on a saturation campaign of publishing short-life best sellers, exploiting post-Regency fascination with the high life” (584). Roughly three-quarters of the 500 silver fork novels published were connected in one way or another to Colburn (Sutherland 584). Relying on gimmicks and deception, Colburn prefigures the kind of wily and manipulative marketers who dominate our commercial environment (and who have been part of the publishing industry since its beginnings in the 17th century) (Episode 9, 45:27).

In the following excerpt from Episode 13, I argue that the mid-Victorian vogue for the sensation novel, many written by and for women, evoked similar responses from concerned guardians of culture.

The sensation novel was criticized for appealing to the lower classes and the lower instincts of the upper classes, rather than to their elevated sensibilities, its cross-class appeal threatening the authority of cultural critics and the superiority of high art. Thus, Alfred Austin, who would succeed Alfred Tennyson as poet laureate, complained that “unhappily, the sensation novel is that one touch of anything but nature that makes the kitchen and the drawing-room kin” (qtd. in Price 45). The journalist William Fraser Rae made an almost identical point, accusing the novelist Mary Elizabeth Braddon of “having temporarily succeeded in making the literature of the Kitchen the favourite reading of the Drawing room” (qtd. in Wolf 196-7).

To their critics, by appealing to a broad public, sensation novelists did not aspire to the creation of high art, they did not elevate and educate their readers, nor did they strive for the sublime and the beautiful but sought merely to sell books. In collapsing the distinction between high art and low art, between the elite and the popular, these novels also threatened to blur the distinction between classes, especially the boundary the middle class sought to maintain against the lower classes. As Henry Mansel, Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy and Dean of St. Paul’s, complained in 1863, “No divine influence can be imagined as presiding over the birth of [this] work, beyond the market-law of demand and supply, no more immortality is dreamed of to it than for the fashions of the current season. A commercial atmosphere floats around the words of this class, redolent of the manufactory and the shop” (483). Mansel’s claims support Lyn Pykett’s observation that “One of the chief objections to sensation fiction was that it was (at least in the opinion of middle-class reviewers) a commodity, produced (and deformed) by market forces, and directed at the appetites of consumers” (*Improper* 30). And it was women whose appetites were being satisfied by the purchase of commodities.

This fear of the commodification of literature was part of an overall uncertainty about the rise of consumer culture. Any significant cultural change such as this, which in the 1860s was visible in the rise of stores and shops in London’s West End (Walkowitz 5), is likely, of course, to produce anxiety. More specifically, consumerism was perceived as a threat to the existing class hierarchy. The rising middle class could purchase the same expensive and showy goods as the upper class, imitating their taste and blurring class distinctions. Additionally, shopping for these goods often meant an intermingling of the classes and of the sexes. Accordingly, Johns Hopkins University Professor Emerita Judith Walkowitz observes, “If shopping fulfilled women’s social obligations as status symbols of their families’ wealth, it simultaneously exposed them to new dangers. For many Victorian observers, immersion in the sensuous world of consumption rendered women suspect, subject to the seduction of men and sales promotion and to their own uncontrollable impulses” (5). Characters such as Lucy Graham in Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* are examples of women who have been seduced by consumer desire. And by shopping, by crossing into the sphere of the marketplace, she, and bourgeois women overall, violated the proscribed role for a middle/upper-class wife, to serve as Angel in the House. Writes Erika Rappaport, History professor at

UC-Santa Barbara, “the shopping public was an integral part of urban and economic change in the late-nineteenth century, yet its feminine and amorphous nature challenged bourgeois ideology, which had long characterized public spaces and the more abstract public sphere as masculine” (19). To put it another way, a woman couldn’t be angel in the house if she wasn’t in the house. Criticism of the sensation novel’s interest in commercial rather than aesthetic success, then, is in essence a fear of the impact of a changing and developing consumer economy, particularly its impact on the perpetuation of Victorian gender norms.

Its aesthetic failure, critics wrote, was due to, among other things, its playing upon readers’ emotions. In other words, the problem with the sensation novel was sensation. Or as Mansel argues, sensation novels were “moulding the minds and forming the habits and tastes of its generation; and doing so principally . . . by ‘preaching to the nerves’. . . . Excitement, and excitement alone, seems to be the great end at which they aim” (482). Because it appealed to emotions, because many of its authors were women, because many of its protagonists were female, because it frequently focused on marital concerns, and because it did not aim to be high art, which was seen as a male domain, the sensation novel was perceived as feminine. As Pykett notes, “Many, perhaps most, of the reviewers’ objections to the genre, and their anxieties about it, derive from their perception of it as a form written by women, about women and, on the whole, for women” (*Improper* 32). In such female-centric novels, female protagonists could not remain passive and angelic as prescribed by prevailing gender codes. Instead, they had to act, to engage with and sometimes to outsmart male characters. One critic, writing in 1862, explained the logic here: “it will scarcely do to represent them as passive and quite angelic, or as insipid—which heroines usually are. They have to be high-strung women, full of passion, purpose and movement” (E.S. Dallas qtd. in Pykett, *Improper* 32). The problem was that heroines of sensation novels had too much passion and too much movement. Nervously and excitedly, critics decried sensation novels for appealing to readers’ nervous excitement, thereby both revealing their own nervousness about the changing role of women and ascribing traits seen as essential characteristics of women to the sensation novel. These “feminine” characteristics didn’t meet the standards set by male critics and thus what was presented as purely an aesthetic objection was, to a significant degree, a gender-based repudiation of the sensation novel. (Episode 13, 41:01).

In many ways, fear of the novel and of the unpredictable immorality and criminality it might ignite in a diverse and uncontrollable and cross-class and significantly female reading public was a fear that tradition, that authority might be over-turned by the chaotic forces of modernity: it’s a fear of widespread and unsupervised literacy, a fear of the empowerment of women and workers, of an expanded franchise, of rising secularism and the decline of Christian morality, of the unpredictable and unstoppable advance of industrialization and urbanization, of capitalism and consumerism.

I’d thought this fear tamed since Victorian times. But the recent mania in the United States for removing books from school libraries suggests otherwise. That these novels have included Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*, and Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and that these attacks were justified as protecting children from explicit sex and alternative sexualities, suggests that the fears of earlier generations of cultural guardians, that novels might corrupt children, might lead to, as expressed in the title of the 1950s comic books *Jeremiad*, a “seduction of the innocent,” persist, their targets modified but their rhetoric equally breathless and fearful. As obtuse as these objections frequently are (alleging Morrison’s denunciation of the damage done to children is itself damaging to children) and as much as I oppose this censorship, there’s something encouraging that in a world filled with explicit sex and violence and depravity a click away on the internet, many people remain afraid of the novel sitting

harmlessly on a school library shelf because of its singular power to engage imaginations and change behaviors and challenge social convention, a power that was advanced through the skill and labor of realist novelists of the 19th century.