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The 19th Century Novel Podcast
Episode 13

The Sensation Novel

A disfigured wife, hiding behind a veil, pretending to be a governess to her own children; a wife feigning her death to escape one husband in order to live with her other husband; a woman forging and destroying letters so that her sister will marry a wealthy man rather than the man she loves—these are some of the characters who inhabit the pages of the sensation novel. A minor genre that thrived in the 1860s, the sensation novel remains a literary curiosity, a striking but ephemeral Victorian phenomenon. To those lucky enough to be introduced to it—usually college students in literature classes—the sensation novel can be both a pleasure (they’re engagingly written) and a revelation (who knew Victorian writers could be so unVictorian?).

While acknowledging proto-sensation novels such as Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, scholars usually trace its origin to one book, Wilkie Collins’s 1859 novel *The Woman in White*. Andrew Maunder, Head of the Department of Culture, Media and Communication at the University of Hertfordshire, further narrows its origin, placing its beginning at a precise moment in this novel: “when a ghostly woman, dressed from head to foot in white garments, laid a cold, thin hand on the shoulder of a young man as he walked home late one evening” (1). Here’s the passage Maunder refers to:

I had now arrived at that particular point of my walk where four roads met—the road to Hampstead, along which I had returned, the road to Finchley, the road to West End, and the road back to London. I had mechanically turned in this latter direction, and was strolling along the lonely high-road—idly wondering, I remember, what the Cumberland young ladies would look like—when, in one moment, every drop of blood in my body was brought to a stop by the touch of a hand laid lightly and suddenly on my shoulder from behind me.

I turned on the instant, with my fingers tightening round the handle of my stick.

There, in the middle of the broad bright high-road—there, as if it had that moment sprung out of the earth or dropped from the heaven—stood the figure of a solitary Woman, dressed from head to foot in white garments, her face bent in grave inquiry on mine, her hand pointing to the dark cloud over London, as I faced her.

I was far too seriously startled by the suddenness with which this extraordinary apparition stood before me, in the dead of night and in that lonely place, to ask what she wanted. The strange woman spoke first.

"Is that the road to London?" she said.

What makes this passage sensational? It’s the sudden appearance of this woman and the mystery associated with her. It’s the transgressive element, a strange woman in

the middle of the night touching the narrator's shoulder. It's the narrator's reaction, his every blood being brought to a stop. It's the sense of the uncanny, a woman, or rather an "apparition," seeming to have "sprung out of the earth or dropped from the heavens." It's her ghostly appearance, head to foot in white. It's the time and place, "the dead of night . . . that lonely place." These elements—a strange, unnamed woman violating propriety, shocking and discomfiting a man with a sudden touch—point to the features of and convey the atmosphere of the sensation novel.

But, obviously, there's more to the sensation novel. Critics, in fact, have spent much effort defining this novel, identifying how it differs from other novels of the period. What, in other words, makes a sensation novel sensational? First and most obvious, the sensation novel includes sensational elements. Lyn Pykett, Emerita English Professor at Aberystwyth University, Wales, lists several of these: bigamy, murder, blackmail, fraud, forgery (especially of wills), impersonation, kidnapping, and wrongful imprisonment" (xxii), to which Sally Mitchell, Professor Emerita, English & Women's Studies at Temple University, adds, "illegitimacy . . . disguise, changed names, railway accidents, poison, fire . . . false reports of death, the doubling of characters" (xii). In his 1871 opera "The Sensation Novel," W.S. Gilbert (of Gilbert and Sullivan fame) mocks such plot devices by offering a sensational recipe:

Take of best quill pens a score,
Take of ink a pint or more,
Take of foolscap half a ream,
Take, oh take, a convict's dream,
Lynch pin, fallen from a carriage,
Forged certificate of marriage,
Money wrongly won at whist,
Finger of a bigamist,
Cobweb from mysterious vaults,
Arsenic sold as Epsom Salts,
Pocket-knife with blood-stained blade,
Telegram, some weeks delayed,
Parliamentary committee,
Joint stock panic in the city,
Trial at Old Bailey bar,
Take a Newgate Calendar,
Take a common jury's finding,
Take a most attractive binding,
Hold the saucepan by the handle,
Boil it on a penny candle.

While its shocking content, which Gilbert so adroitly mocks, was a new development, the sensation novel was also a hybrid of earlier novel genres, "a unique mixture," writes Patrick Brantlinger, Emeritus Professor of English at Indiana University, "of contemporary realism with elements of the Gothic romance, the Newgate novel of criminal 'low life,' and the 'silver fork' novel of scandalous and sometimes criminal 'high life'" (1). We can see domestic realism in the day-to-day interactions of true-to-life characters, often from the bourgeoisie, as they struggle with their economic and social

and, especially, romantic concerns. We can see the Newgate novel in depictions of criminality and an interest in criminal psychology. We can also see Victorian stage melodrama, defined by the poet and independent scholar Winifred Hughes as a drama that features “external conflict between good and evil, embodied in heroine and villain, and final resolution of that conflict according to the most rudimentary principles of poetic justice” (10). These novels were both influenced by melodrama and often became popular stage melodramas. Finally, we can see the hybrid nature of the sensation novel, this mixing of genres, by turning to one of the best known (and most scandalous) of these books, Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* and noting her frequent shifts in the register of her prose and the mode of her presentation.

She sometimes adopts a realist tone worthy of George Eliot:

He walked to the window and looked out upon the broad, white high road. There was a wagon laden with trusses of hay crawling slowly past, the lazy horses and the lazy wagoner drooping their heads with a weary stoop under the afternoon's sunshine. There was a flock of sheep straggling about the road, with a dog running himself into a fever in the endeavor to keep them decently together. There were some bricklayers just released from work—a tinker mending some kettles by the roadside; there was a dog-cart dashing down the road . . . there were a dozen common village sights and sounds that mixed themselves up into a cheerful bustle and confusion. (74).

She sometimes writes a passage that could be dropped directly into a Dickens novel:

Mr. Maldon had established his slovenly household gods in one of those dreary thoroughfares which speculative builders love to raise upon some miserable fragment of waste ground hanging to the skirts of a prosperous town. Brigsome's Terrace was, perhaps, one of the most dismal blocks of building that was ever composed of brick and mortar . . . Ill luck and insolvency clung to the wretched habitations. . . . Solvent tenants were disturbed at unhallowed hours by the noise of ghostly furniture vans creeping stealthily away in the moonless night. Insolvent tenants openly defied the collector of the water-rate from their ten-roomed strongholds, and existed for weeks without any visible means of procuring that necessary fluid. (139)

In her description of a wealthy interior, Braddon adopts the method of the silver fork novel, detailing the many expensive fineries which decorate an upper-class lady’s boudoir:

My lady [was] . . . made bewilderingly beautiful by the gorgeous surroundings which adorn the shrine of her loveliness. Drinking-cups of gold and ivory, chiseled by Benvenuto Cellini; cabinets of buhl and porcelain, bearing the cipher of Austrian Marie-Antoinette, amid devices of rosebuds and true-lovers' knots, birds and butterflies, cupidons and shepherdesses, goddesses, courtiers, cottagers, and milkmaids; statuettes of Parian marble and biscuit china; gilded baskets of hothouse flowers; fantastical caskets of Indian filigree-work; fragile tea-cups of turquoise china, adorned by medallion miniatures of Louis the

Great and Louis the Well-beloved, Louise de la Valliere, Athenais de Montespan, and Marie Jeanne Gomar de Vaubernier

: cabinet pictures and gilded mirrors, shimmering satin and diaphanous lace; all that gold can buy or art devise had been gathered together for the beautification of this quiet chamber in which my lady sat. (231)

And to convey a sense of dread and foreboding, Braddon imitates the Gothic:

The dim village lights flickered faintly through the growing dusk when Robert reached Audley. . . . The over-arching trees stretched their leafless branches above his head, bare and weird in the dusky light. A low moaning wind swept across the flat meadow, tossed those rugged branches hither and thither against the dark gray sky. They looked like the ghostly arms of shrunken and withered giants, beckoning Robert to his uncle's house. They looked like threatening phantoms in the chill winter twilight, gesticulating to him to hasten upon his journey. (182)

The Gothic strongly influenced the sensation novel, more than just by creating a spooky setting. In the sensation novel, traditional Gothic elements were made contemporary. "The novelty," asserts Henry James, "lay in the heroine being, not a picturesque Italian of the fourteenth century, but an Englishwoman of the current year, familiar with the use of the railway and the telegraph. The intense probability is constantly reiterated" (112-13). In the sensation novel, the supernatural is discarded; Gothic terrors become real terrors. According to Brantlinger, "the sensation novel involves both the secularization and the domestication of the . . . mysteries of the Gothic romance" (4). "In the sensation novel," Brantlinger continues, "the Gothic is brought up to date and so mixed with the conventions of realism as to make its events seem possible if not exactly probable" (9).

Key elements of the Gothic—a woman who is threatened by a dangerous, perhaps evil man associated with some darky mystery and who is locked in an ancient castle in medieval Italy or Spain—appear, in the sensation novel, transformed: the woman is as likely to be the threat as the threatened. Since it's taking place in contemporary England, the haunted castle is replaced by an upper-class home where the terror and mystery of the Gothic enter the world of the domestic, menacing the sanctity of the home and all it stands for. In 1856, during a House of Lords debate about married women's rights, one peer made this fear of home invasion concrete, suggesting that a wife should be entitled to a divorce if her husband's "adultery [were] committed in the conjugal residence" (qtd. in Shanley, "One" 368), the crime being more violation of the home than of the husband's marital vows. But the disturbing implications of this proposal were quickly pointed out by other peers, as paraphrased by Margaret Woodhouse, History Professor at Jacksonville State University: "A casual seduction of the chambermaid would make a man liable to lose his wife and home. . . . And what about a case, such as the one of which the speaker presumed they all well knew, of the man who had three mansions on the same square in London with a wife in one and mistresses in the other two. He had not been in his wife's house for years. Where was the conjugal residence?" (271).

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One of the most frequently cited influences on the sensation novel was the passage in 1857 of the Married Women's Rights and Divorce Act, which simplified the divorce process, allowing men the right to divorce on the grounds of adultery and women on the grounds of adultery but only if their husband was also guilty of incest, bigamy, or cruelty (Shanley, "One" 356). (Parliament considered and dismissed "rape, sodomy, desertion, transportation, [and] penal servitude" as further grounds for divorce [Shanley, "One" 368]). At the same time, Parliament modestly expanded married women's property rights since they had had none, the law until then perceiving a husband and wife, explains Professor Emerita of Political Science at Vassar College Mary Shanley, "as one body' before God [and] . . . the law, and that person was represented by the husband" ("One," 360).

These changes certainly figured in the sensation novel's preoccupation with adultery and bigamy and other complications ensuing from marriage. Ironically, the real-world impact of the Marriage and Divorce Act was negligible. As Gail Savage, History Professor Emerita at St. Mary's College, Maryland, explains, "the law did not materially affect either the behavior of families or the status of women during the Victorian and Edwardian periods. . . . Expense barred most of the working class from the court, and the social stigma attached to divorce must have discouraged many of those who could have borne the cost" (108). An example of the social stigma associated with divorce can be found in the practice of Dr. Isaac Baker Brown, a member of the Obstetrical Society of London who believed that masturbation caused madness and could therefore be cured, in women, by surgical removal of the clitoris. According to Princeton University Professor Emerita Elaine Showalter, "He operated five times on women whose madness consisted of their wish to take advantage of the new Divorce Act" (75-76). While Brown's actions were extreme, they were legal, revealing in their extremity how stigmatizing divorce could be. "Although important as a precedent, as a first step in the gradual change of the position of women before the law," Savage acknowledges, "not many women actually derived much benefit from the law" (108).

Yet the Marriage and Divorce Act—and the well-publicized Parliamentary debate surrounding it—made women's rights more prominent. For men, Parliamentary debate about the Act revealed their anxiety about the changes—however hypothetical—to the nature of marriage and the role of wives. For instance, as cited by Mary Shanley, one Lord worried that the Act "would lead to perpetual discord. . . . It was a proposal shocking to all the habits of the people of the country," another that it would "effect a complete revolution in the law, which would disturb all the relations of husband and wife," still another that the Act could cause "the breakdown of . . . the distinguishing characteristic of Englishmen—the love of home, the purity of husband and wife, and the union of one family" (qtd. in Shanley, "One" 374). For women, on the other hand, the Act suggested the possibility, if not the probability of substantial changes in their rights and a move toward domestic equality. As Shanley puts it, there was

a belief, or a yearning to believe, that equality of rights before the law would lead to greater reciprocity, understanding, and intimacy—intellectual,

emotional, and sexual—between husband and wife. These ideas, which emerged in a handful of brilliant pamphlets during the 1850s, became staples of feminist ideology in the upsurge of organized political feminism that followed the submission of the women's suffrage petition to Parliament in 1867. (*Feminism*, 48)

It can be argued, then, that the sensation novel took advantage of this gap between limited accomplishment and fulfillment, between the disappointing actual and the longed-for ideal, depicting the frustrations and confusions of women and men in a culture unable to embrace full equality in marriage.

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Coinciding with the Married Women's Rights and Divorce Act, questioning British tradition and domestic stability, and influencing the sensation novel was the Indian Mutiny of 1857, which shocked and enraged the British and lingered for decades in public memory, even generating a literary subgenre, the Mutiny novel. Why was what for the British was a minor incident so shocking? After all, it's not like Victorian Britain, as it pursued and maintained its empire, was pacifist. W.L. Burn, Professor of Modern History at Durham University, provides us with a compelling list of British militarism between just 1815 and 1846:

Within that period British troops had been in action against Gurkhas, Pindaries, Mahrattas, Sikhs, Afghans, Burmese, Chinese, Kaffirs, Ashantis and Boers. Ships of the Royal Navy had bombarded Algiers, routed the Turks at Navarino, operated against Mehemet Ali [in Egypt and Syria], underwritten Latin American independence, blockaded Buenos Aires and [Athens], captured slavers and waged war on pirates from the Caribbean to the China Sea. [Parts of India and Pakistan] and a great part of Burma had fallen to British arms. . . . It was natural that a country which lived by its foreign trade and its foreign investments should protect and extend them, in the last resort by force. (56)

Furthermore, however brutal, the Mutiny did little damage to British rule in India and led to fewer British deaths than the Crimean War two years earlier. "Gauged purely in the light of its empirical scale and its practical consequences," writes English Professor Emeritus at Northwestern University Christopher Herbert, "the Mutiny might not seem an outstandingly momentous historical event. . . . nor do modern historians tend to treat it as more than a lurid footnote to the tale of nineteenth-century imperialism" (1-2).

And yet the Mutiny had a dramatic, if not traumatic and long-lasting impact upon the British. Herbert notes that "Contemporary accounts of the Mutiny portray it . . . as an event of almost incomprehensible magnitude and historical importance" (2). In part, this impact was caused by the sudden and seemingly irrational nature of the Mutiny, in which Sepoys (i.e., Indian soldiers) serving the British turned against them. This

reaction was also caused by the shocking and brutal details, the atrocities committed against British soldiers and civilians, as reported in the popular press. Lydia Murdoch, History professor at Vassar College, focuses on one particular trauma connected to the Indian Mutiny: the murder of children. Anyone who's read a few Victorian novels quickly perceives the culture's worship of children and, with a high childhood mortality rate, its need to ritually grieve and find solace in Christian worship. Children killed in the Indian Mutiny were denied these rituals. Murdoch explains that "Survivors could not always mourn children's deaths in a manner that reinforced British values and Christian traditions. The inability to grieve and commemorate the good deaths of children," she continues, "compromised the domestic ideals justifying British imperialism. When proper burial and mourning rituals for children could not be carried out, the British sense of national community began to fray, and doubts about the costs of empire emerged" (367). Ultimately, the Mutiny was perceived as, according to Herbert, "a terrible break' in British experience, a traumatic explosion from a known world into a frightening new historical era" (2-3).

The sensation genre, with its frequent violence and law-breaking and assaults upon the domestic world, was shaped by the Mutiny. The intrusion into public consciousness of mass violence generated by British colonial rule conflicted with the benign picture of this rule, threatening the national confidence and superiority prevailing in mid-century Britain (as exemplified by the Great Exhibition of 1851). n. For many Britons, imperial rule in India established political stability, helped staunch primitive and destructive cultural practices, raised Indians' standard of living, initiated the country's entry into the modern world with the establishment of a rail system and an efficient civil service, and sought to bring a superior morality and the true faith through conversion to Christianity. The Mutiny undercut all of these beliefs. According to Herbert,

it was a moment when educated Britons suddenly were afforded a deeply disillusioning view into the national soul and found that they could never return afterward to their prelapsarian state of unawareness. The shock of finding that they were despised by their supposedly grateful imperial subjects in India was in part the shock of finding that their national idealism and national self-esteem were self-deluding and morally corrupting. The moment of this discovery coincides with the beginning of the rapid unravelling of the mid-Victorian fabric of values that forms the main story of British cultural history over the next several decades. (16-17)

The prevailing darkness—the lies and disguises and madness and violence—intrinsic to the sensation novel was a response to and a reflection of this "deeply disillusioning view." (Even the proximate cause of the Mutiny—Muslim and Hindu troops believing that their rifle cartridges were greased with pig and cow fat—was sensational.) Arousing British indignation, the Sepoys' atrocities, inflicted upon a people they served and a governing system they supposedly admired, revealed a dark underside to human nature, a view adopted by sensation novelists and disparaged by critics, one reviewer, writing in 1865, declaring sensation novels "one of the abominations of the

age” because “into uncontaminated minds they will instill false views of human conduct. . . . The fault of these novels is that they contain pictures of life, wherein there are scenes . . . grossly untrue to nature” (Rae 203). The same author approvingly cites the words of the Archbishop of York: These novelists “want to persuade people that in almost every one of the well-ordered houses of their neighbours there was a skeleton shut up in some cupboard; that their comfortable and easy-looking neighbour had in his breast a secret which he was always going about trying to conceal” (qtd. in Rae 203).

These fears about the depiction of a falsely dark human nature are an obvious over-reaction. That sensation novels featured characters who appeared normal and respectable but who were deeply flawed and malignant isn't evidence of a sweeping condemnation of mid-Victorian society. In fact, these novels most often end with villains punished and heroes and heroines triumphant, the moral order restored. For many of these novels' critics, it seems, acknowledgment that *some* evil likely existed and thrived behind the façade of respectability was too threatening to acknowledge, suggesting how fragile this facade was. In other words, to point out that immorality and cruelty could be found within the respectable classes, especially behind the beautiful and innocent smiles and within the melodious voices of angelic women, threatened beliefs upon which Victorian culture depended.

At this time, theories that might have explained how civilization, which had reached its pinnacle in Victorian Britain, both concealed and amplified the innate violence within humans (which would later be explained by theories like Darwinian natural selection and Freudian psychology) did not exist. Without explanatory frameworks such as these, the idea that individuals, whatever their social position, might harbor destructive and self-destructive drives was dismissed as a gross distortion of human nature. With no “philosophies which decried the theory of conscious, individual choice, rational and responsible,” W.L. Burn argues, it was assumed “that the problems of national and individual life could be solved as easily as problems in simple arithmetic” (49). The brutality of the Sepoy rebels and the brutal response of British soldiers and their Indian allies, in addition to the vitriol of the British public, complicated this equation by questioning belief in the power of “conscious, individual choice” and by presenting evidence of a hidden, seemingly innate cruelty, of the many skeletons and secrets shut up in the nation's well-ordered houses which sensation novelists brought to light.

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Another factor in the creation of the sensation novel was the social climate of 1860s Britain. Beginning in the early years of the 19th century, the philosopher John Stuart Mill sensed that things were different, that this era marked a break from the past. Writing in 1831, Mill asserted that even the concept of “the spirit of the age” was new, that earlier historical periods had no concept of living in a fundamentally new time. What marked this new era, according to Mill, was “that it is an age of transition. Mankind have outgrown old institutions and old doctrines, and have not yet acquired

new ones” (53). If Mill’s observations were not the common perception in the 1830s, by the 1860s this view that life was being transformed—and that this transformation would be a permanent and accelerating condition—if not enunciated by most people was nonetheless felt by them and had entered into public consciousness. Although the new order advanced by modern technologies was welcomed as the start of an age of progress, its technology was also seen as the driving force behind a dangerously radical cultural transformation. Or as the social historian Peter Gay puts it, “Dismayed moralists found that nineteenth-century technology, the source of so many unquestioned blessings to civilization, also facilitated the dissemination of moral poison” (359). Sensation novels, to their critics, were equally guilty of spreading this poison, Henry Mansel, for instance, warning unsuspecting readers that “poison . . . is sometimes concealed [in] . . . the circulating library” (486).

What was perceived as morally poisonous was essentially the aesthetic response by novelists to mid-century social transformation. In *Lady Audley’s Secret*, Braddon has one of her characters ruminate about this change, saying, “It is an age of eccentricity, an abnormal era of the world’s history” (168). The 1860s was such an era, a period in which rail travel expanded mobility and reduced local tradition, a period in which information was transmitted quickly and cheaply via telegraph and the penny press, a period in which consumerism was supplanting a culture of thrift and modesty, a period in which the thrills and threats, the evils and excitements of London were overwhelming the rituals and the community of rural life. Arguably, it was this factor—the phenomenal changes occurring in everyday life—that readers and writers of the sensation novel were responding to, especially the discord between the traditional domestic world and the disconcerting advent of modernity. In this context, the actual impact of the Marriage and Divorce Act was less important than the radical reconsideration of the domestic suggested by this act. In other words, the Act was caught up in the larger spirit of change impacting individual lives; it raised the idea of the possibility of, a fundamental change in gender relations.

I should make special note of the importance of newspapers in preparing the ground for sensation novels. The popular press became much more widely available after the abolition of the newspaper tax in 1855 (Altick 6), and, writes the prominent literary scholar and Victorianist Richard Altick, “a formidably expanding daily press had acquired the capacity to spread news of the latest homicides to the remotest part of the British Isles within hours” (7). These newspapers were filled with stories of murder and scandal. Thomas Boyle, author of several mystery novels and English professor at Brooklyn College, suggests these newspapers revealed an underside to Victorian culture that predated the appearance of the sensation novel. “The crime columns,” he writes, “provided sufficient evidence . . . that there . . . [was] a brutal strain in the English people of all classes which was at odds with the notion of a superior Anglo-Saxon breed” (34). Sensation novelists often drew from these true-crime stories—and were just as often criticized for doing so—to depict this “brutal strain in the English people.”

The popularity of these novels suggests that readers wanted something more than the predictable and boring content of respectable novels and of approved British culture

more generally. Sensation novels offered just the excitement and mystery that more socially acceptable cultural products lacked, “providing,” writes Hughes, “a racy alternative vision, which struck at the roots of Victorian anxieties and otherwise unacknowledged concerns” (5). As Hughes notes, the popularity of violent and often sexually suggestive crime stories in newspapers and sensation novels is evidence that many Britons perceived, perhaps unconsciously, a disturbing element within staid mid-century British culture. The sensational elements in these novels were often contrived and exaggerated and thus a fair target for criticism. At the same time, though, they represented real fears which the dominant culture repressed to maintain a quiescent normalcy. Or as Burn suggests “religious and moralistic professions were used to cover conduct which was immoral, criminal, and base” (43). And it was just this, the immoral, the criminal, and the base, that was at the core of the sensation novel.

* * *

This immorality and criminality and baseness also inspired attacks from the literary establishment. 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

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what was presented as purely an aesthetic objection was, to a significant degree, a gender-based repudiation of the sensation novel.

One of the criticisms offered by contemporary critics is that however much sensation novels may threaten conventional belief, they almost invariably close with a conventional ending, often with a marriage, that reinforces these beliefs. Thus, while the unsettled nature of the 1860s contributed to the hybridity of the sensation novel, to its interweaving of earlier literary genres, stitching together pieces of the past while simultaneously deconstructing tradition, these novels ultimately end by roughly sewing these frayed pieces into a conventional—and often unconvincing—conclusion.

Shaped by other novel genres, by the hopes and frustrations associated with the passage of the Married Women's Rights and Divorce Act, by the sudden and inexplicable violence of the Indian Mutiny, by the absence of an explanatory framework to understand such violence, by doubts about the purpose of empire, by technology's overturning of social traditions, and by the expansion of the penny press, and criticized for its lack of moral purpose and aesthetic uplift, for its exaggeration and capitulation to consumer demands, and for its appeal to readers' emotions, the sensation novel, after a decade of popularity, disappeared, its stiches fraying into genres like the detective stories of Arthur Conan Doyle, the horror Gothic of Bram Stoker and Robert Louis Stevenson, the adventure tales of H. Rider Haggard, and the naturalist fiction of Thomas Hardy. The sensation novel's hybrid nature was too unstable to endure. And the kind of fever-pitch these novels tried to achieve was unsustainable; it could only dissolve into cliché and absurdity. Sensation by its nature is ephemeral, as was the sensation novel.



THE SENSATION NOVEL.

Clara. "YES, DEAR. I'VE GOT THE LAST ONE DOWN, AND IT'S PERFECTLY DELICIOUS. A MAN MARRIES HIS GRANDMOTHER—FOURTEEN PERSONS ARE POISONED BY A YOUNG AND BEAUTIFUL GIRL—FORGERIES BY THE DOZEN—ROBBERIES, HANGINGS; IN FACT, FULL OF DELIGHTFUL HORRORS!"

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