Taking Back the Pen: Sensation, Sanity, and Subversion in Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret*

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Taking Back the Pen: Sensation, Sanity, and Subversion in Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret*

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Abstract

Despite the Victorian society’s dismissal of sensation novels as low-brow literature and scholars’ lack of attention to the genre in terms of its contributions to the hidden feminist movement in the Victorian era, novels like Braddon’s *Lady Audley's Secret* take the misogynistic language and tropes of the era, reshape them with their own ideals, and thus subvert the patriarchal models within literature and the society. This research expands from the groundwork on women’s literature in the Victorian era laid by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, as well as Elaine Showalter, to the less-explored genre of Victorian sensation fiction. Showalter, Gilbert, And Gubar identified binaries that appeared prevalent throughout women’s writing of the era. Specifically, this work will look at the Angel/Monster binary that Gilbert and Gubar identified, as well as the Sane/Insane binary that Showalter suggests. I will first explore the binaries and their appearances in the more traditional literature. I then use Braddon’s novel as a case study to explore how she adapted the binaries differently than her peers. Braddon’s novel displays the hidden rebellion that Gilbert and Gubar identify as a commonality among 19th century women authors, but *Lady Audley's Secret* proves to be more revolutionary than its contemporaries in its treatment of the binaries as it not only argues against them, but also provides new and innovative models for women.
I would like to thank Professor Daniel Pollack-Pelzner for all of his guidance, advice, time, and patience with me during this process. His wonderful support has made all the difference.
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Chapter One: Setting Up the Cultural, Historical, and Critical Framework

The Legacy of Women’s Writing

During the 19th century British women writers were faced with an enormous amount of adversity. Critics who believed women belonged solely in the domestic sphere had many different kinds of arguments to support their opinions. The common thread in their arguments was the fixation on the fact that women were in some way (or several) “unfit” to attempt the same things men did. The response in the literary community to the surge of women writers in the late 1800s was of outrage, and men used all the tactics they could to try and keep women out of what they saw as their territory. However, women writers persevered in spite of the adversity, though not without being affected by the views of the opposition. It is impossible to fully understand the works of Victorian era women in isolation; a carefully cultivated understanding of the social, cultural, and intellectual issues they faced by deciding to become writers is necessary in order to fully appreciate their works. I will be taking a new historicist approach in this paper to examine some of the Victorian women writers. Specifically, I will explore cultural phenomena and history, such as historically popular ideas of psychology, biology, and gender; how and why these phenomena affected women; and how the effects on women in general then translated to the effects on women writers of the time. And I will be using Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s novel Lady Audley’s Secret as a case study to apply the theories found.

Within this exploration of this topic, I will be using three main texts: The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (first published in 1979), Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology by
Sally Shuttleworth (published in 1996), and *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* by Elaine Showalter (published in 1977). Gilbert and Gubar’s work created the field in which scholars have looked deeper into the 19th century women writers and the commonalities found in their works in the 1970s. As the first scholars to really notice that the women of the 19th century had pioneered their own kind of feminist discourse, which had been overlooked due to its subtle and often disguised nature, Gilbert and Gubar revolutionized the way that these women are studied today. Gilbert and Gubar noticed that there seemed to be a “distinctively female literary tradition,” which was comprised of common themes and imagery in multiple works of different female authors who were geographically, historically, and psychologically far away from one another (Gilbert and Gubar xi). In picking up the themes of imprisonment, “mad” figures and their counterparts, appropriations of male-created stereotypes (like the “Angel” and “Monster” paradigm), and fixated portrayals of disease and madness, Gilbert and Gubar wondered at the underpinnings of such anxieties for women writers of the time. They began doing close readings of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, a now archetypal work for this kind of study, and looking to see the different ways in which the text could be interpreted (xii). In an attempt to understand Brontë and her contemporaries more fully, Gilbert and Gubar looked into the culture of the women of the 19th century to see if they could discover the source of the seemingly common anxiety that all women seemed to share. The two argued that the kinds of patterns found in 19th century women writers’ works were the expressions of women’s frustrations and rebellion against the oppressive patriarchal system of the society at the time. While it is generally universally acknowledged that Gilbert and Gubar’s work was groundbreaking and highly influential, it has since been discussed that there are gaps within their arguments about the women of the time.
Having been over thirty years, it is expected that the critical conversation surrounding women writers of the 19th century has evolved since the publication of Gilbert and Gubar’s work. Many literary scholars have since used Gilbert and Gubar’s work as a starting point for their own study and expanded the scope of the field. One of the main criticisms of Gilbert and Gubar’s book is that they fail to address the women of other ethnicities and focus solely on the white, middle to upper-middle class women of the 19th century. In the same vein, Gilbert and Gubar focused mainly on certain kinds of women authors: those who, like Charlotte Brontë, are part of the literary canon. My discussion of 19th century women authors will focus on a subset of authors, those who wrote in the Victorian sensation genre.

Tamara Wagner, a feminist critic, discusses some of the limitations of Gilbert and Gubar’s work, specifically in terms of sensation fiction of the Victorian era. Sensation novels were reviled in their time because they, as H.L. Mansel (a literary critic in the Victorian era) wrote in his review of sensation novels, “[usurped] in many respects, intentionally or unintentionally, a portion of the preacher’s office, [played] no inconsiderable part in moulding the minds and [formed] the habits and tastes of its generation; and [did] so principally...by ‘preaching to the nerves’” instead of the judgment (Mansel 482). Plot-driven and filled with scandal, Victorian sensation novels were considered to be lowbrow literature, were still considered that way for some time, and thus often overlooked. In her analysis, Wagner notes that while Gilbert and Gubar briefly reference the sensational novelists in their study of the 19th century women writers, they generally ignored the genre in favor of the more traditional literature. However, since Gilbert and Gubar’s time in the 70s and 80s, the sensation genre has been the basis for much of the critical analysis of the attitudes of women writers at the time and particularly in the case of women writing “literary
representations of normalcy as a cultural construction” (Wagner 185). Wagner also noted that the Victorian sensational novel, being based in domestic realism, often portrayed either the domestic sphere failing as the promised refuge from the evils of the world or as the domestic sphere breeding danger and subversive characters (Wagner 186). Out of the Victorian sensation novels a few in particular have emerged as their own kind of canonical standards: Wilkie Collin’s *The Woman in White* (1860), Charles Reade’s *Hard Cash* (1863), and most notably Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862), which will be explored in depth later in this paper. In Wagner’s essay, she pays some close attention to Braddon’s novel and in general notes where it departs from the kinds of tropes Gilbert and Gubar discuss in their work. Gilbert and Gubar discuss the images of the “Angel” and “Monster” in women’s fiction, and use Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* to identify the two embodiments of the images; Jane, noted for being the Angel, and Bertha representing the Monster. In contrast, Braddon’s Lady Audley is both Angel and Monster, so the dangerous subversive woman is a part of the societal ideal and hidden behind her angelic visage. Whereas Gilbert and Gubar emphasize a split image, Braddon has made them one (Wagner 188). I will continue to explore Wagner’s idea that the relationship between the “angel of the house” and “the madwoman in the attic” has a long history, but in female sensation fiction it is more disconcerting because it is internalized into one character and then hidden (Wagner 188). I base my analysis of Victorian women writers on Gilbert and Gubar’s work, but I also take a slightly different approach in a couple of significant ways.

First, I seek to use a “sensation” novel, Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret*, which is a lesser-known novel and not as widely read or studied as *Jane Eyre*, as a kind of case study to see if the kinds of theories found in Gilbert in Gubar’s work can be applied to women authors outside of the traditional literary canon. Second, I will be arguing against some of the
binaries found in the critical study of women authors. Specifically I will be focusing on the Angel and Monster binary, arguing that whereas Gilbert and Gubar see the Angel and Monster as doubles of one another but still distinctly separate, Braddon actually fuses the two and in that way subverts the idea all together. I will also examine the sanity and insanity binary which appears to be quite prevalent in Victorian literature. To examine this binary I will build on the work of Shuttleworth and extend her work from Charlotte Brontë to Mary Elizabeth Braddon, who challenges the distinction between sane and insane. Elaine Showalter, a feminist literary critic, argues that Lady Audley is sane rather than insane as the novel labels her, but I contest that Showalter fails to take into account the context of the medical and psychological discourse of the Victorian era which proves to be a vital component in understanding Braddon’s novel and its intentions. Set in the context of Victorian psychology, Lady Audley’s Secret eliminates the sanity and insanity binary as the Victorians would have seen it and argues against its inherent subjectivity and use as a tool for control within the society. Using the frameworks I will explore below, I argue that despite the Victorian society’s dismissal of sensation novels as low-brow literature and scholars’ lack of attention to the genre in terms of its contributions to the hidden feminist movement in the Victorian era, novels like Braddon’s Lady Audley’s Secret take the misogynistic language and tropes of the era, reshape them with their own ideals, and thus subvert the patriarchal models within literature and the society.

The Obstacles for Victorian Women Writers

The first context to consider when studying 19th century women writers is the climate in which they wrote. Criticism of women’s literary works tended to focus more on a woman’s sex rather than her abilities as an author. Showalter, most well known for her work
on Victorian women authors, said that “To their contemporaries, nineteenth-century women writers were women first, artists second. A woman novelist, unless she disguised herself with a male pseudonym, had to expect critics to focus on her femininity and rank her with the other women writers of her day, no matter how diverse their subjects or styles” (73). Authors, such as George Eliot and Charlotte Brontë, were particularly vehement about the subject and occasionally resorted to using certain tactics in order to avoid the inevitable association. For example, Brontë tried to delay the publication of *Villette* (published in 1853) in order to avoid coinciding with Gaskell’s *Ruth* (1853), which would have led to a comparison between the two novels that would attempt to make the women rivals in the industry (Showalter 73). Despite the critics’ cruelty toward women, more and more women were publishing their works in the 19th century, as seen in the steep rise of women authors in the 1850s and the 1860s (74). The critics and general public could not ignore the fact that women were able to write novels, despite the chauvinistic ideas of gender roles they so desperately clung to. Their response highlights the Victorian attitude towards women writers, and shows the grim reality Victorian women would have faced when first reaching for their pens.

As women writers became more prominent, male authors responded quickly and with great fervor. One of their complaints was the belief that women were aggressively conspiring against them in an effort to take over the job market and deprive men of their readership; the men “[saw] them as ‘dominating because of superior numbers rather than superior abilities’” (Showalter 75). Unable and unwilling to admit that women might have talent in the realm in which the men had previously enjoyed total reign, men turned to popular notions of ideals and biology of the time in order to bolster their arguments. A majority of the criticism during this time utilized “a double standard for men’s and women’s
writing and seemed shocked or chagrinned by individual women’s failures to conform to these stereotypes” (Showalter 76). This is demonstrated in W. Fraser Rae’s review of Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret*, “Sensation Novelists—Miss Braddon,” published in 1865: “The artistic faults of this novel are as grave as the ethical ones. Combined, they render it one of the most noxious books of modern times” (qtd. in Wolff 195). Not only does Rae insult Braddon’s creativity, but he also asserts that her sense of morals and ethical code are at fault, clearly not something that a woman should display. However, not only did male critics harshly judge women authors, but women also ruthlessly critiqued one another. Margaret Oliphant was one such critic. Her negative and often caustic reviews were infamous at the time. Oliphant was especially critical of “sensation novelists,” such as Braddon. In her article simply entitled “Novels” published in 1867, she criticized both Braddon’s novel and Braddon’s own moral character:

[Lady Audley] brought in the reign of bigamy as an interesting and fashionable crime, which no doubt shows a certain deference to the British relish for law and order. It goes against the seventh commandment, no doubt, but it does it in a legitimate sort of way, and is an invention which could only have been possible to an Englishwoman knowing the attraction of impropriety, and yet loving the shelter of the law (qtd. in Wolff 202-203).

Oliphant snidely hinted at Braddon’s affair with a married man, whose wife had been placed in a madhouse. Here again, not only does the critic condemn the author’s creativity, but also her moral character. This was a prevalent technique of the time as there were many stereotypes surrounding women in the Victorian era. The stereotype most often used was the Angel/Monster paradigm, which will be explored later in this paper. Not only did the critiques employ personality stereotypes, but they also used biological stereotypes. Victorian
criticism relied on the “proof” of medical findings “to justify the assumption that novels by women would be recognizably inferior to those by men. When the Victorians thought of the woman writer, they immediately thought of the female body and its presumed afflictions and liabilities” (Showalter 76). The argument that women were physically weaker than men played a surprisingly large role in the reasoning behind the animosity concerning and cursory dismissal of women writers of the time.

Scientists and doctors in the Victorian Era emphasized the importance of discovering more about the body and mind, how they functioned, and the explanations behind certain processes. Sally Shuttleworth, in her book *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*, explores the phenomenon. During this time there was a rise in studies done of the female body and the resulting findings were often used against women. Even literary critics turned to medical science to reinforce their prejudices against women. Showalter writes that the physicians and anthropologists of the time all argued that the physical evidence supported of the inferiority of women: “They maintained that, like the ‘lower races,’ women had smaller and less efficient brains, less complex nerve development, and more susceptibility to certain diseases, than did men” (Showalter 77). This “susceptibility” or inherent weakness of the female body translated into the Victorian belief that women were physically unable to control their minds, unlike men. A woman was especially vulnerable and delicate at the beginning of her menses. Shuttleworth cites a prominent expert at the time who suggested that

“taking improper food, violent affections of the mind, or catching cold…is often sufficient to ruin the health, or render the female ever after incapable or procreation.” Women ignored their menses at their peril; not only might their physical health break down, but they could be excluded forever from
the social category of womanhood, whether through the loss of their sanity, or from the onset of barrenness, and the cessation of their reproductive powers (79).

Because society defined women solely by their biological fitness during the 19th century, a woman with an irregular menstrual cycle or worse, a barren woman, was completely ostracized from society. The fact that medical science argued women were so delicate allowed any man to severely restrict a woman “for her own good.”

Not only was the menstrual cycle affected and disrupted by natural forces (such as cold or nutrition), but the Victorians also argued that the mind affected the menstrual cycle. Research during that time found that any “unfeminine” feelings or thoughts produced in the mind, such as anger, fear, or grief, would block the menstrual cycle and could prove permanent (Shuttleworth 90). Such was the fear that this process might occur, that it shaped societal expectations of women, which led to the birth of the ideal of woman as the “Angel” figure. Women had to regulate themselves, taking care to remain calm and docile so as not to disrupt their natural processes: “Woman’s ‘mission’ [was] to try and suppress all mental life so that the self-regulating processes of her animal economy [could] proceed in peace. Female thought and passion…created blockages and interference throwing the whole organism into a state of disease” (91). This argument was often used to dissuade women from taking up male-oriented pursuits, such as higher education. In fact, it was believed that the mental strain of intellectual pursuit would drain energy from a woman’s reproductive organs and cause her body to completely shut down (77). Men then had a scientifically endorsed reason to disapprove of intellectual ambition or inclination of any kind in women (77). The scientific community’s endorsement of women not pursuing intellectual activities permeated
the society. Articles were published in medical journals, newspapers, and popular magazines, all of which women had access to; this in turn affected their own psyches.

Being so inundated with the belief and “evidence” that they were the biologically weaker sex, women often had the same view of themselves as the men did. However, while some women were content to accept their supposed limitations, others railed against them:

Although women writers often believed that they did labor under innate handicaps of mind and body, they nonetheless felt pressured to prove both their reliability and their physical endurance….As they met deadlines, edited magazines, and coped with the strenuous burdens of part-publication andserialization, women writers expressed more openly their irritation with those sisters who exploited the old stereotypes of weakness and sickness (Showalter 78).

Women writers like Charlotte Brontë were very aware of these medical findings, and in fact in the Brontë’s household Thomas John Graham’s *Domestic Medicine* was highly regarded due to her father’s preoccupation with the health of his family, evidenced by the multiple annotations made by him within his copy of the book (Shuttleworth 11). Charlotte herself became increasingly preoccupied with her health, which she supposed weaker because of her sex, after the death of her sisters (31). However, even though clearly some women writers did believe in the myth of the weakness of their sex, it did not stop them from pursuing their literary careers. This is again evidenced by the sharp upturn in female writers in the late 1800s (Showalter 74). Other woman writers during the 19th century were frustrated with the popular belief that women were the weaker sex, and spoke out against it. George Eliot, in her essay entitled “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists,” expresses her irritation with the idea that women are inferior and the consequences of such a belief: “The foolish vanity of wishing to appear in print, instead of being counterbalanced by any consciousness of the intellectual or
moral derogation implied in futile authorship seems to be encouraged by the extremely false impression that to write at all is a proof of superiority in a woman” (Eliot 113-114). Here Eliot indicts the belief of woman inferiority as the cause for women writers who favor pointless subject matters full of gilded descriptions. She believed that if a woman who wrote was not seen as the exception, thus proof of intelligence, but rather the norm, then the literature community would have seen a greater caliber in women authors. However, the reality remained that men not only used women's biology in terms of their reproductive ability against them, but also women's inability (due to their weaker physiology) to control their own minds.

Psychiatry underwent some interesting shifts in the 19th century, which definitely influenced the way society treated women, especially women who went against the social norms. As techniques and theories were refined, ideas about “insanity” shifted as well. The field of psychology moved from the idea of noticeably visible insanity to the idea that it largely internal and could only be detected by a trained specialist (Shuttleworth 15). Psychiatry, then, became a science in which its practitioners were dedicated to finding and deciphering external signs to reveal someone’s inner being (3). Not only did psychiatrists believe that madness was no longer as easily visible as it once was (though there were still some cases of very observable madness), but they also believed that it was no longer unpreventable. Experts in the field began to postulate that “Madness [was] less as an inescapable physiological destiny, than as a partial state, to which anyone under stress is liable, and which endures only so long as passion overturns reason. An individual can thus move in and out of a state of insanity” (35). This shift did mean that the individual now held responsibility for his own sanity, but it also meant that he held the guilt for a lack of sanity. This idea of personal responsibility also tied with societal expectations of the time, which
also influenced the evolving science. Those in the Victorian society highly regarded the quality of self-restraint, for both men and women. As a result, a lack of self-restraint served as a symptom of insanity: “Social conformity thus became an index of sanity; the only measure available to the individual fearful of his or her own normality would be a willing obedience to designated social roles” (35). This idea that insanity rested on whether or not an individual followed prescribed social rules led to new definitions of insanity.

In 1835, James Prichard coined the term “moral insanity” (Shuttleworth 49). Moral insanity was defined as: “a morbid perversion of the natural feelings, affections, inclinations, temper, habits, moral dispositions, and natural impulses, without any remarkable disorder or defect of the intellect of knowing and reasoning faculties, and particularly without any insane illusion or hallucination” (49). The radical new definition meant that an individual could be perfectly sane in every other sense, have no history of insanity, and function well in society with the only failure and sign of insanity being the “failure to conform to the increasingly rigid social and moral prescriptions of Victorian culture” (49). To further complicate this new idea, moral insanity could not be diagnosed by reading external signs like the other forms insanity; moral insanity had to be diagnosed based on an “observer’s interpretation and assessment of the relationship between outward behaviour and inner motivation. Outward conformity was no longer sufficient. Insanity could be adduced if the underlying emotional attitude was judged to be unsatisfactory” (49). This rendered this new disorder highly subjective and as such there were many cases of wrongful diagnosis in which the individuals were put away in asylums, which then led to a kind of paranoia of being mistaken for insane (Matus 347). Braddon actually wrote Lady Audley’s Secret during what was called the “lunatic panic” in England, a period in which the paranoia ran rampant (347). The common fear of wrongful incarceration is preyed upon in the novel, as Braddon’s main character is indeed
wrongfully imprisoned in an asylum and essentially sentenced to death. Her readers would have been aware of the very real possibility behind this scenario and it would have added to the thrill of the novel. In particular, Braddon’s female readers would have shared this fear as women were most often affected by this new “development” in psychiatry and were thus the individuals with the most reason to worry about wrongful imprisonment.

More so than men, women of the Victorian era were strictly bound to societal rules and expectations. Due to this new theory of moral insanity, any slight deviation from the rules and a woman would be labeled insane, regardless of her previous actions and the circumstances surrounding her current situation. The chances that a woman had of being labeled insane were fairly high, especially considering the lack of a specific set of symptoms for diagnosis. An observer, such as a woman’s husband, could just misinterpret an action and have her committed, or worse, he could have her committed for more self-serving reasons. The effects on the women of the 19th century are easy to see as Shuttleworth explains that:

…but one can trace the uncompromising outlines of Victorian models of manhood and femininity. Women in particular were sufferers under this regime… “A female, modest and circumspect, [who] becomes violent and abrupt …betrays without reserve unbecoming feelings and trains of thought.” All the imprisoning Victorian assumptions [of] femininity are encapsulated in this notion of the “unbecoming” which shades directly into insanity (Shuttleworth 49-50).

This new trend meant that women, especially those interested in pursuing literary careers, had to be extremely careful about their actions. Not only did women worry about others perceiving them as insane, but they were also worried about actually becoming insane.
Women writers especially became very concerned with the ideas and principles of self-control. This was especially true since women were perceived weaker and less able to control their minds and bodies. One can certainly see the influence of contemporary psychology in Brontë’s novels (10). Shuttleworth found that “Medical texts of the era foregrounded the same three concerns which dominate Brontë’s novel: the mechanics of self-control, the female body and sexuality, and the insurgence of insanity” (148). Through Jane, Brontë displays her anxiety about her lack of self-control, but also indignation at the idea that women should be kept tranquil and inactive. Jane, depicted as a fiery woman, often suffers from fits of agitation: “Who blames me? Many, no doubt; and I shall be called discontented. I could not help it: the restlessness was in my nature; it agitated me to pain sometimes” (Brontë 92). Jane realizes that her “restlessness” will cause society to criticize her, and this knowledge along with the fact that she cannot control it causes her pain. As a result of this, she muses on the unjust and restricting rules that women have upon them:

> It is vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquility: they must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find it. Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot. Nobody knows how many rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth. Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn
them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex (Brontë 93).

This passage directly states Brontë’s views on the limiting roles women of her time were placed in. She argues that women feel just as men do, and that they do not tolerate confinement any better than men would. She bases her argument on her idea that the sexes are equal and that human beings are by nature dynamic and curious creatures; therefore, men and women cannot abide captivity. Victorian conventions for women in the roles of passive, home-bound beings are thus unjust and extremely damaging to women. Brontë was not the only author to fear the insanity that might result from the restlessness and despise the strict societal conventions that women were expected to follow.

Women writers did not always let the fear of insanity rule them; rather they learned to work with the system in order to subvert its constricting regulations. Women in the 19th century learned to use the rhetoric and techniques available to them and:

one must look beyond the surface texture of the novels to the conflicting ideologies of self-control and female sexuality which permeated Victorian economic and psychological discourse, and inevitably affected not only Brontë’s representations of her heroines, but also her attitudes to her own authorial role. Brontë, as a female writer, occupying a highly marginalized social position, and brought to bear, had a vested interest in both exploring and defying the forces of literary and social surveillance (Shuttleworth 18).

Brontë, as well as other female writers like Mary Elizabeth Braddon, learn how to subvert societal expectations in literature. One of the ways in which they do this is taking the stereotypical and constraining roles that society, as well as the male-dominated literary world, and placing them in and challenging them in their own written works.
Angels and Monsters: The Confining Roles of Women

Not only were women writers influenced by popular notions of their inferiority in terms of biology and psychology, they were also dealing with the limited roles that literature put women in during that time period. Victorian ideals of women were not only very limiting, but also extremely pervasive within the society. Women would have been well aware of the patriarchal rule that permeated all layers of life. Gilbert and Gubar explore this phenomenon in their work. Gilbert and Gubar were among the first literary critics to look closer at the texts of authors like Brontë. By noting that women writers came from a patriarchal history of literature, they postulated that when women began to want to write, they were faced with some difficult issues: “For all literary artists, of course, self-definition necessarily precedes self-assertion: the creative ‘I AM’ cannot be uttered if the ‘I’ knows not what it is. But for the female artist the essential process of self-definition is complicated by all those patriarchal definitions that intervene between herself and herself” (Gilbert and Gubar 17). Up until that point, women had been defined by men in the physical, medical, and literary contexts. Those in the medical profession proclaimed women to be the weaker sex, inferior in every way to men. And in the literary tradition, women are held up to impossible standards. These impossible standards are embodied in the characterizations of women as Angels or Monsters.

Within the patriarchal literature of the era there was a distinct binary in terms of women’s roles within the society. The “definitions” that women writers would have been labeled with within that binary were those of the Victorian woman as either an “Angel” or a “Monster.” The supposed necessity of the angel figure was lent some accreditation by the supposed biological realities of the woman. As women’s reproductive processes were extremely delicate, they had to take care to remain peaceful or they risked their health
(Shuttleworth 90). In literature this Angel figure became quite prominent, especially in works written by men. The image of the “Angel” in terms of the Victorian era context stems from Coventry Patmore’s poem, “The Angel in the House,” which was first published in 1854. This was an immensely popular work and as such would have been well-known to almost any Victorian. Patmore described the ideal woman within the poem, which gave birth the expectation of woman as “Angels”:

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Pure dignity, composure, ease

Of sense and spirit sweetly mix’d.
Her modesty, her chiepest grace,

In mind and manners how discreet;

How candid in discourse; how sweet
    The concord of her lips and heart;
How simple and how circumspect;
    How subtle and how fancy-free;
Though sacred to her love, how deck’d
    With unexclusive courtesy;

How amiable and innocent
    Her pleasure in her power to charm;
How humbly careful to attract,
    Though crown’d with all the soul desires, (Patmore Canto IV).
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Patmore’s poem paints the ideal woman as a paragon of virtue and humility with “modesty, her chiefest grace.” While written as a celebration of his wife, Emily, “The Angel in the House” displays the Victorian ideal woman and her role in society. Women were expected to be “In mind and manners….discreet” and “amiable and innocent.” Modest, humility, discretion were all traits that the typical woman in the 19th century era would have had to live up to. This image of the woman as the “Angel,” as an ideal, existed not only throughout society, but literature as well. Any woman who failed to meet such high standards would have been heavily criticized. Women were thus saturated with this ideal of the Angel, an impossible and severely restricting standard. Women, then, were not supposed to take up the pen and write their own story, not if they were trying to live up to the Angel ideal. Next to this shining example of womanhood, men compared all other women who did not follow the prescribed and approved courses of action to “Monsters.”

The image of women as Monsters arguably stems from Homer’s *Odyssey*, when Odysseus comes upon the shores of the Sirens. The pretty, beguiling creatures that Odysseus and his men find hide terrible secrets and hideous visages beneath their bewitching charm. The sirens have snake-like features, another common theme in literature in terms of Monsters, calling to mind the fall of Eve in the Garden of Eden after Satan disguises himself as a snake. These “Monsters” are the complete opposite of their “Angel” counterparts: possessing voices and creativity all their own, unwilling to conform to societal standards, sexually charged, and almost fiendish in a way, much like Braddon’s Lady Audley who “had something of the aspect of a beautiful fiend” (Braddon 47). The way male authors treated women like this in their texts, like Thackeray’s treatment of Becky Sharp in his novel *Vanity Fair*, made it impossible for women to ignore men’s feelings toward intellectual or creative women: “to the extent that they incarnate male dread of women and, specifically, male scorn
of female creativity, such characters have drastically affected the self-images of women writers, negatively reinforcing those messages of submissiveness conveyed by their angelic sisters” (Gilbert and Gubar 29-30). Male authors’ treatments of women in their texts attacked women, showing women how incapable they were in the literary world. In male-authored works men depicted how, “In the mouths of women, vocabulary loses meaning, sentences dissolve, literary messages are distorted or destroyed. (30). If both contemporary and classical literature was not enough to impress upon women their incapability in pursing intellectual goals or the unladylike and thus socially unacceptable desire to do so, then mythology certainly would have made it clear.

The story of Lilith appears in Hebrew mythology and tells the story of Adam’s first wife (Gilbert and Gubar 35). Lilith was made from dust, just as Adam was and thus believed she was made to be his equal. This belief caused her to rebel against him rather than falling into a submissive role and she ran away to live among demons when Adam refused to accept her as an equal. Her punishment was to lose one hundred of her demon children a day unless she returned. Preferring to accept her punishment rather than live in a patriarchal marriage, she rebelled again and started injuring the male children in revenge. She was doomed to live outside of the human community forever, and so Lilith became an example for women trying to define themselves (35). Women were troubled by this kind of a story and the problem Lilith represents has been associated with the problems of female authorship and female authority. Even if they had not studied her legend, literary women…bemoaning the double bind in which the mutually dependent images of angel and monster had left them, must have gotten the message Lilith incarnates: a life of feminine submission, of “contemplative
purity,” is a life of silence, a life that has no pen and no story, while a life of female rebellion, of “significant action,” is a life that must be silenced, a life whose monstrous pen tells a terrible story (Gilbert and Gubar 36).

Gilbert and Gubar’s explanation of the idea of “contemplative purity” recalls Patmore’s description of the ideal woman. Because these images and ideas of Victorian society surrounded women in their daily lives, there would have been no escaping them. It would be a mistake to assume that these issues would not have haunted women every time they reached for a pen to tell their story. The pervasiveness of the belief that women were the weaker and inferior sex would have to have some kind of an effect on women who wrote in the 19th century. It would not be hard to understand why some of them may have preferred to abandon the pen altogether. Yet, as has been discussed, there were a great deal of women writing in 19th century England. Considering all of the negative societal and cultural influences women would have had, especially about beliefs of the inferiority of women, what is it that allowed certain women to push past not only society’s rule but their own anxieties concerning their abilities? The answer can be found when one looks closely at the texts that women writers produced during the Victorian era.

In the 1800s, becoming a writer was still a fairly new concept for most women. Clearly, women’s pursuit of higher education was not encouraged due to ancient prejudiced beliefs about the inferiority of women (both mentally and physically), so entering the world of literature was not a natural course of action for British women of the Victorian era. As a widely-regarded source of expert information, the medical field, too, influenced how women thought they should act and how they were treated. The heavy emphasis on the importance of women as a means of reproduction tied their femininity to their ability to have children. This femininity is what allowed women to have a place in society and without it, a woman
would be forever ostracized and kept on the outskirts of social groups. As a result, actions were taken to ensure women kept their reproductive cycle healthy, which at the time meant that women were expected to stay calm and passionless, lest a sudden fervor disrupt their menses and render them unable to have children. This medical reasoning was fairly effective at keeping women out of male-dominated spheres such as schooling, literary pursuits, and the educated workforce. However, the medical reasoning went further than just physiological risks as well.

Insanity was a new worry for the Victorians and as such they were preoccupied with the ability to spot it and prevent it. Because women were regarded as delicate and completely at the mercy of their bodies, their minds were supposed to be especially vulnerable to madness. The Victorians believed that any kind of effort to elevate the mind through academic pursuits would result in a drain on their reproductive organs and thus a disruption of the menstrual cycle. So Victorians believed that women should only concentrate on “dulling the mind, allowing the processes of their body to proceed unimpeded by mental obstruction” (Shuttleworth 88). The expectation that women should be dull limited many women in the 19th century simply because they had not the means to dispute it. Though, it was not only biological reasoning that kept women in the submissive places of society. The cultural myths regarding the disaster that would surely befall a woman who tried to define herself on her own terms, rather than keeping quiet and letting the men define her, were very prevalent. In considering all of these factors, it is a wonder that any woman had the courage to ignore all of the conventions and to do what she felt she must do: write her story.

The 19th century British women who were brave enough to become writers, Charlotte Brontë, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Elizabeth Gaskell, and George Eliot to name a few, pioneered the field in the sense that they had to find a way
to tell their story without falling into the unforgiving tropes male writers before them had created and without seeming to step over the line of social propriety. Of course, trying to create that balancing and warring with themselves at the same time most likely created some internal anxiety. Gilbert and Gubar also discuss this matter of a woman author’s anxiety. The central question at issue when dealing with British women writers of the 19th century seems to be “What does it mean to be a woman writer in a culture whose fundamental definitions of literary authority are...both overtly and covertly patriarchal? If the vexed and vexing polarities of angel and monster...are major images literary tradition offers women, how does such imagery influence the ways in which women attempt the pen?” (Gilbert and Gubar 45-46). Having discussed the historical context surrounding these women, the ways in which that context affected their writing can now be examined. For a woman to have made the decision to take up the pen despite her male peers’ disapproval, she would have needed to have strongly felt that her story needed to be told. No timid woman would have been able to survive the caustic environment of the literary world at the time, and it would have required a great amount of creativity. A woman like this would have had what Chaucer’s Wife of Bath called, “Experience, though noon auctoritee” (Chaucer, l. 1), the authority of experience (Gilbert and Gubar 16). She would have knowledge of what no man could ever know to write: a woman’s experience. The division between the genders in the Victorian era were clearly marked, and rightly so. Men, in their ignorance, had no idea what being a woman was like. Therefore, the woman does have a story to tell that has not been told before, even by those men who actually had female characters (because they would have stuck to the Angel vs. Monster paradigm).

However, simply deciding to write was only half the battle she would have faced.
Given the context of the society, it would seem that women writers would have only had two options when writing: “they could accept the ‘parsley wreath’ of self-denial, writing in ‘lesser’ genres…or limiting their readership to ‘mere’ women like themselves and producing…‘Silly Novels by Lady Novelists.’ … [or] they could become males manqués. Mimics who disguised their identities and, denying themselves, produced most frequently a literature of bad faith and inauthenticity” (Gilbert and Gubar 72). Neither of these options were particularly appealing for most women writers, and though some of them did choose the “lesser” routes, a great number of women rose above and created their own options. In order to avoid being exiled from society, women writers became creative in the ways that they told their stories. Mimicking the Victorian psychology idea that the exterior being presented to society and the interior being kept private and personal are two different beings, women began to conceal the true meanings of their texts in their works. In a sense, “these writers allayed their distinctively female anxieties of authorship by following Emily Dickinson’s famous (and characteristically female) advice to ‘Tell all the Truth but tell is slant— ’” (73). They created a way in which they were able to submerge the deeper meaning of the text in such a way that the more socially appropriate side of the story reigned and the less acceptable was able to pass unnoticed (72). This allowed women to obscure, but not eliminate, the “dangerous” visions under more acceptable veeners (73). One of the ways in which this duplicity was made possible was by the author herself having to “examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of ‘angel’ and ‘monster’ which male authors have generated for her” (17). In order to “defeat” the Angel and Monster images, she would first have to fully understand them so that she may better subvert them. A popular tactic of female writers was to contrast an Angel and a Monster figure within their novels. Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre provides a good example of this.
Jane, as a quiet, slim, and moral-minded governess clearly represents the Angel figure, while Bertha, wild, sexually charged, and mad is cast as the Monster within the novel. Jane, most often described as plain, also displays a humble nature and a care for others: “I dressed myself with care: obliged to be plain—for I had no article of attire that was not made with extreme simplicity—I was still by nature solicitous to be neat. It was not my habit to be disregardful of appearance, or careless of the impression I made: on the contrary, I ever wished to look as well as I could, and to please as much as my want of beauty would permit” (Brontë 83-84). In direct contrast, Bertha is described in animalistic terms, which strips her of her humanity: “the clothed hyena rose up, and stood tall on its hind feet” (250). To further portray her as mad, Brontë describes her features which not only seem inhuman, but also make her appearance reflect the madness within: “The maniac bellowed: she parted her shaggy locks from her visage, and gazed wildly at her visitors. I recognised well that purple face—those bloated features” (250). However, Brontë “both assimilated and challenged Victorian constructs, and breaking the bounds of contemporary discourse in the complex structures of her fiction” (Shuttleworth 5). Jane had not always been the paragon of virtue that she appears to be at Rochester’s house. As a child Jane is fiery and prone to fits of passion: “The fact is, I was a trifle beside myself; or rather out of myself, as the French would say: I was conscious that a moment’s mutiny had already rendered my liable to strange penalties, and, like any other rebel slave, I felt resolved, in my desperation, to go all lengths” (Brontë 9). Bertha, too, was not always the “madwoman” in the attic. Before marrying Rochester, “‘Miss Mason was the boast of Spanish Town for her beauty…a fine woman, in the style of Blanche Ingram; tall, dark, and majestic….She flattered [Rochester], and lavishly displayed for [his] pleasure her charms and accomplishments. All the men in her circle seemed to admire her” (Brontë 260). It was only after she married Rochester that her
“madness” came to light. As Shuttleworth writes, “Bertha functions as “an imaginative projection of what may happen if the energy of the oppressed is harnessed and controlled in the service of aggressive individualism and upward mobility” (Shuttleworth 5). Brontë does give Bertha, as the Monster, the ending the Victorian audience would expect and punishes her for her madness. And yet, when examined closely, it seems that Brontë lives in both Jane and Bertha. Jane is the Angel that society wants her to be and Bertha is “the author’s double, an image of her own anxiety and rage” toward the structures of society (Gilbert and Gubar 78). Brontë can use Bertha to show her frustrations with the confinement of Victorian society, by having her as the example of the dangers of oppression and constraint. This tendency to hide meanings within novels and to use a double within the novels was very popular in the 19th century and conveyed a greater meaning.

In picking up the pen the woman author admits that she has a story to tell, and most often it is her own. In novels like Jane Eyre, where the author appears in two different characters, there is “some sense [of] a story of the woman writer’s quest for her own story; it is the story, in other words, of the woman’s quest for self-definition” (Gilbert and Gubar 76). The action of putting herself in both the Angel and the Monster also expresses how the woman has redefined the “Monster.” In her own story, like that of Brontë’s or Braddon’s, the Monster is really only a woman who wants to have the power to define herself (78). She wants for herself the ability to cast-off all of the expectations and previous ideas that hang over her from modern medicine and psychiatry. These desires and how she chooses to go about redefining herself on her own terms while still writing a novel that will be considered socially acceptable heavily influence how and what she writes.

With this framework I will now use Lady Audley’s Secret by Mary Elizabeth Braddon to explore some of the central questions from Gilbert and Gubar’s study of 19th century
women authors, such as how Braddon was able to push past society’s rule and possibly her own anxiety in order to write a story of her own. More specifically, I will examine how the patriarchal binaries prevalent in Victorian society were presented in sensation fiction and look to see if the Angel/Monster binary presented in Gilbert and Gubar’s work appears outside the traditional literary canon or if the binary itself, along with traditional women’s roles, is subverted. I will also examine the sane/insane binary that Showalter seems to suggest and how Braddon presents or challenges it within her novel. In general, I hope to show how Victorian sensation fiction, while regarded as low-brow literature in its time and not well studied now, showcases the subversive qualities of 19th century women’s writing. Braddon’s novel displays the hidden rebellion that Gilbert and Gubar identify as a commonality among 19th century women authors, but *Lady Audley’s Secret* proves to be more revolutionary than its contemporaries in its treatment of the binaries as it not only argues against them, but it also provides new and innovative models for women.
Chapter 2: *Lady Audley’s Secret*, a case study

Taking the framework from the work of Gilbert and Gubar, I will now use *Lady Audley’s Secret* as a case study to see how the theories within *The Madwoman in the Attic* can be applied to 19th century novels outside the traditional literary canon. As *Lady Audley’s Secret* is part of the Victorian sensation novels genre, the novel is not often studied in these contexts. In fact, in its time the novel was disregarded as a cheap thrill and in contemporary academic work it has been overlooked in favor of analyzing more traditional literature, such as *Jane Eyre*. I seek to see how Braddon incorporated or challenged patriarchal language and stereotypes within her novel and how that functions within the text. Specifically I argue that Braddon, while incorporating the conventional binaries such as Gilbert and Gubar’s Angel and Monster and the sane/insane binary, was more radical than her female contemporaries in her treatments of the patriarchal tropes. In her novel *Lady Audley’s Secret*, Braddon uses the stereotypes of women to shape her critique of Victorian society and to challenge expectations.

The Life of Miss Braddon

First published in March of 1862 as a serial in the *Sixpenny Magazine*, Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* became one of the most popular mystery stories of its time (Donaldson v). The book was beloved not only by the general populous, but also by illustrious writers of the era. Among Braddon’s fans were men such as Alfred Lord Tennyson, Robert Louis Stevenson, and William Makepeace Thackeray (v). Thackeray, a contemporary of Braddon’s and author of *Vanity Fair*, wrote: “If I could plot like Miss Braddon, I should be the greatest novelist that ever lived” (qtd. in Donaldson vii). With such high praise it is expected that Braddon would have enjoyed much success in her time;
however, a brief look into Braddon’s history reveals that her career was far from easy. Even her novel *Lady Audley’s Secret*, which while enjoying some famous admirers, was also the subject of some of the harshest criticisms of the time.

Braddon was born to Henry Braddon and Mary White in 1837 (Donaldson ix). As a result of her father’s sexual indiscretions, she was left without a father and then had to care for her mother for most of her life. At a fairly young age she turned to writing as a way to make money to support her mother and herself. By the time Braddon was eighteen she had been regularly contributing to a Brighton newspaper, and by age nineteen, despite several naysayers, she joined a traveling acting group for two years under the name Mary Seaton (ix). During this time she continued to write plays and articles, and when she finally stopped touring she settled in Beverly, Yorkshire where she then took a commission for a sensation serial, entitled *Three Times Dead*, and project for a book of poems on Garibaldi (ix). In some ways, this was how Braddon launched her career. It was not until she met and fell in love with John Maxwell, however, that she began *Lady Audley’s Secret*, the book responsible for her fame during her lifetime.

As previously stated, the novel was original published as a serial in the *Sixpenny Magazine*; however, originally Braddon published parts of the serial with Maxwell’s fledgling magazine, *Robin Goodfellow*, in 1861 because Maxwell needed part of a serial in order to publish his first issue (Donaldson vi). Unable to find any other authors, Braddon wrote him the first installment of *Lady Audley’s Secret* overnight so that he could publish without delay (vi). Unfortunately, Maxwell’s magazine failed after only twelve issues, but Braddon’s story was so popular that she was encouraged by readers to finish it with another magazine. The novel was an instant success and should have provided Braddon and her mother with enough financial security to live comfortably for some time, and most likely would have if
not for the fact that in order to help her lover Maxwell, Braddon had mortgaged *Lady Audley’s Secret* and a few of her future novels to Maxwell’s creditors (x). Over the next few years Braddon wrote furiously to try and escape the debt. She even wrote pseudonymously for halfpenny magazines in order to keep some income for her family (x). Her practical need for money drove her to write cheap horror stories known as “dreadful halfpennies.” In a letter to one of her friends, Braddon explains her writing during this time: “It is the most piratical stuff, and it would make your hair stand on end if you were to see it. The amount of crime, tragedy, murder, slow poisoning and general infamy required by the halfpenny reader is something terrible. I am just going to do a little parricide for this week’s supply” (qtd. in Donaldson xi). Braddon knew what kind of literature would be popular and would sell, so regardless of her distaste of the subject matter she wrote the “dreadful halfpennies.” Despite her prolific career, it was some time before she was able to get out from under the debt.

The conditions under which Braddon wrote, steeped in debt and often pregnant and in charge of Maxwell’s children from his first wife as well as her own, were difficult but her work ethic enabled her to become a very prolific writer. By the end of her life, Braddon had published over eighty novels under her own name, half a dozen more under pseudonyms, edited her husband’s second attempt at a magazine (*Belgravia*) as well as others’ magazines for several years, numerous articles and poems, and even a novel in French: *Le Figaro* (Donaldson xiii). Not only did she write her own novels, but she also acted as her own publisher by buying paper, ordering printers and binders, and sending the bound books to a company for distribution (xiii). Her steadfast determination and refusal to bend to her harshest critics ensured that she was equal among her contemporaries, but it was *Lady Audley’s Secret* that she was both best known for and also most criticized for.
Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* is categorized as part of the genre known as sensation fiction. As a genre that became increasingly popular in the 1860s, sensation fiction was nevertheless heavily criticized by “proper” Victorian society, especially by literary critics. Among the critics’ chief complaints was that it was full of plot-driven thrills, ignoring the more serious character-driven fiction, its tendency to rely on techniques that produced a physical effect on the reader (where the term “sensation” came from), and its scandalous heroines (Bowser 75). Most critics were content to dismiss all sensation novels, and thus Braddon was harshly judged for her contributions to the genre. The literary critic Margaret Oliphant in particular criticized sensation novels: “The girls of our acquaintance in general are very nice girls; they do not…pant for indiscriminate kisses, or go mad for unattainable men…It is thus that Miss Braddon and Miss Thomas, and a host of other writers, explain their feelings. These ladies might not know…any better. They might not be aware how young women of good blood and good training feel” (Oliphant 150). However, though *Lady Audley’s Secret* does share many characteristics common to the sensation novels genre, it cannot simply be labeled as such. This analysis of the novel examines how Braddon uses the conventions that were present both in Victorian society and literature of the era against themselves to subvert traditional societal codes and challenge the patriarchal control pervading her society.

Like many Victorian female writers, Braddon was aware of society’s expectations of her and crafted her novels in such a way that, on the surface, they seemed to conform to societal conventions. When read closely, *Lady Audley’s Secret* reveals its subtle subversions of Victorian values and proves itself to be a critique of the society Braddon lived in. Several aspects of Braddon’s novel point to its multifaceted underpinnings. Braddon does have a version of Gilbert and Gubar’s Angel and Monster within her novel; however, the two
images appear within one character rather than a split image. Braddon also contrasts the ideas of sanity and insanity in her character Lady Audley, but unlike Showalter’s view of the binary in modern contexts, Braddon uses the distinction to critique the Victorian societal use of the labels of insanity as a method of control. Of all of Braddon’s critiques lay below the main narrative of the text, hidden within under the surface. While the main story follows the adventure of Robert Audley in his quest to discover the fate of his friend, George Talboys, this narrative only lies on the surface of the novel. Below this surface are the complexities that make the novel into more than just a detective story and reveal its true subversive qualities. Braddon uses her characters and details of the story itself in order to subtly critique and subvert different aspects of Victorian society, such as traditional gender roles and popular ideologies of sanity. Hidden in her masterful prose and thrilling plot is a diatribe, which when examined closely shows the novel to be a progressive feminist text. The first aspect of Braddon’s novel that reveals its complexity is its characters.

**Inverted Gender-roles in *Lady Audley’s Secret***

At first glance, *Lady Audley’s Secret* seems to reinforce the patriarchal nature of Victorian society. The villainous and treacherous woman seems to get her “just-desserts” and Robert Audley, the “hero” of the story, triumphs over her evil and rids Audley Court of the unnatural feminine power, which ultimately leads to a reinstatement of the patriarchy rather than a woman in charge. However, a closer look at the characters and their personalities reveals that Braddon undermines the stereotypical gender roles of society and upsets the balance. Herbert Klein and Nicole Fisk, scholars of Victorian era literature, each examine different aspects of Braddon’s subversion of traditional gender roles. I will build on Klein’s work to show how the men of the novel not only fail to uphold the traditional
Victorian expectation of masculinity, but they also seem to embody the traditional roles and behavior expected of women. Fisk argues that Lady Audley’s pioneering behavior as an atypical woman and subsequent punishment in the novel are necessary for the other female characters to break free from their confining feminine positions. However, while Lady Audley does make it possible for the other women to subtly rebel, she serves another purpose than simply acting as a sacrifice. I argue that Braddon also uses Lady Audley to critique traditional Victorian society. In this section I will first examine how each of the main characters fails to uphold the gendered roles expected of them and then I will study how Braddon then uses them as a societal critique. Braddon’s female characters display a distinct “unfeminine” strength and defiance and the male characters fail to meet the standards of masculinity of the time.

George Talboys, the unfortunate victim of the tale, while seemingly a very masculine character given his opening description, often falls short of expectations. George first comes into the novel sailing from Australia to England and he is “a young man of about five-and-twenty, with [a] dark face bronzed by exposure to the sun; he had handsome brown eyes, with a lazy smile in them that sparkled through the black lashes, and a bushy beard and mustache…He was tall and powerfully built….was the life and soul of the vessel…everybody liked him” (Braddon 9). The traditional handsome characteristics, the “dark face bronzed by…the sun,” “brown eyes…and a bushy beard and mustache,” along with his physique, “tall and powerfully built,” give him the traditional “manly” appearance. Braddon gradually reveals that he has been in Australia for three years and had traveled there to make his fortune so that he could support his wife, Helen, and their young son. However, his manly appearance is only a façade, which is betrayed by his actions. Rather than taking an active role in his own life and controlling his fate, George rarely initiates anything and seems
only to react to events rather than acting to begin with (Klein 165). This is especially apparent when George reveals his history.

George Talboys came from a very wealthy family, but was cut off by his father for marrying Helen, a woman from a lower class than his own. Content with his savings for over a year, the Talboys are faced with poverty after the money runs out. Rather than face this hardship, George abandons his wife and child and sails for Sidney to try and make his fortune (Braddon 13). George recounts his tale to a governess that he meets on his ship back to England: “[Helen] fairly broke down, and burst into a storm of sobs and lamentations, telling me that I ought not to have married her if I could give her nothing but poverty and misery…I flew into a rage with her, myself, her father, the world…and ran out of the house….with a strong inclination to throw myself into the sea, so as to leave my poor girl free to make a better match” (13). After having tried only once to find a job, George gives up quickly and gives himself over to despair. Afterwards, rather than confronting his wife a second time, he runs away. This tendency to run from his problems follows him throughout his life; after he finds out that his wife Helen, now Lucy Audley, has married another man he simply runs away again instead of fighting for her (Klein 165). His passivity presents itself in all of his relationships, not only with his wife, but with Robert as well. He remains submissive and simply follows his friend’s suggestions (165). This submissive nature is not what was expected of men in the Victorian era, and in fact was a quality more expected of women during that time. George’s bending to his wife’s will serves to highlight Braddon’s suggestion that men are weak when it comes to women. This suggestion is furthered by the character of Sir Michael, Lady Audley’s second husband.

George is clearly not the only man to fall victim to Lady Audley’s charm and beautiful appearance. When Sir Michael Audley first meets his second wife, she is known
simply as Lucy Graham, a poor governess (Braddon 5). However, it is her childlike
personality and angelic appearance that draws Sir Michael to her, and he proposes to her
without truly knowing her past. Once the two are married, Lady Audley soon becomes the
master of the house, keeping the keys (a sign of power within the household), and
controlling everything and everyone at Audley Court, especially Sir Michael (3). While Lady
Audley’s innocent ways make her appear as though she depends upon her husband, it
becomes clear that it is the other way around; Sir Michael does nothing without her approval
and does all he can to please her. This inverted power dynamic hints at Braddon’s message
about men. Klein writes that, “Although this is clearly a case of the elderly besotted husband
who submits willingly to this role reversal, it is even more an instance of the endangering of
the social and moral order…men are in much greater danger from their sentimental feelings
than women” (Klein 162). Sir Michael’s weakness when it comes to Lady Audley has blinded
him to the ambiguity of her past, causing him never to question her and to fall prey to her
ambitious schemes. In fact, so blinded is Sir Michael by his wife’s charms, that when he finds
out about her scheming and somewhat violent nature, he becomes heartbroken and never
quite recovers (Braddon 286). He remains passive and allows his daughter, Alicia, another
woman to take over his life for him (286). His passivity is a quality that was valued more in
women than men, and further distinguishes him from the Victorian ideal of men. His
nephew, Robert Audley, is no better despite being the “hero” of the tale.

Robert Audley is perhaps the most apathetic of the men in the novel for a majority
of the narrative. His lack of ambition and passivity is easily seen:

Robert Audley was supposed to be a barrister. As a barrister was his name
inscribed in the law-list…had chambers in Figtree Court, Temple… had
eaten the allotted number of dinners, which from the sublime ordeal through
which the forensic aspirant wades on to fame and fortune. If these things can make a man a barrister, Robert Audley decidedly was one. But he had never either had a brief, or tired to get a brief, or even wished to have a brief in all those five years...He was a handsome, lazy, care-for-nothing fellow (Braddon 21).

Along with an apathetic view toward his career, Robert wastes his days smoking his pipe and reading trashy French novels, and never aspires to do any more (22). He also often appears unemotional, and untouched by any concern: “his dark eyebrows elevated to the center of his forehead (his only manner of expressing surprise, by the way)” (23), but this does not spring from the desire to remain stoic (a typically masculine trait), rather it stems from an indifference to the world around him. Nothing, it seems, can interest him, not even his cousin Alicia, daughter of Sir Michael, who is hopelessly in love with him. The only affection Robert ever shows Alicia is that of a brotherly affection, and he has never been in love with any woman (Klein 163). Robert seems utterly content to waste away his life, certainly not a course of action the Victorians would have condoned for a man, until his dearest friend, George, goes missing.

Robert and George had been friends in their school years, and the two are reunited when George runs into Robert on his return home from Australia. The two quickly become inseparable, as if no time had passed at all: “Robert seems to have found a purpose in life through caring for his friend like a faithful wife, and this obviously means very much to him” (Klein 164). Robert’s already feminine qualities, that of a domestic idleness and fondness for French novels, seem to suit the relationship and he gladly takes up his role as caretaker for the only person who has ever inspired so much emotion from him and Robert thus takes up a woman’s role. When George goes missing, Robert is finally propelled into
action. It is only after George, the arguably more masculine of the two, goes missing that 
Robert takes on a more decisive role. He turns into the detective character and begins to 
relentlessly pursue clues to the mystery of his friend’s disappearance. His interactions with 
Lady Audley after he begins to suspect her involvement show him to be an assertive and 
powerful man. However, this newfound power and surety does not last long, and Robert 
soon regresses into a more passive role once more.

The most telling evidence that shows Robert to be more of an emasculated character 
is his interactions with Clara Talboys, George’s sister. Robert loses faith twice in his journey 
to find his friend and it is Clara, not his own motivation, who encourages him onward. In 
the end, Robert happily submits to Clara’s will. The language which Braddon employs in 
regards to their interactions is very telling. The reader is given a glimpse of Robert’s mind as 
he muses on his predicament and Clara’s involvement: “‘But I am in it, and I can’t get out of 
it; so I better submit myself to the brown-eyed girl, and do what she tells me patiently and 
faithfully. What a wonderful solution to life’s enigma there is in petticoat government!’” 
(Braddon 136). Here the “petticoat government” refers to the society of women. Robert is 
clearly completely willing to be submissive to a woman, something that most Victorian men 
would have abhorred. Until now, he has had to be the driving force of his quest and now he 
can happily become passive again and let Clara direct him. Of all the characters, Robert’s 
thoughts are given the most space within the text, highlighting their importance. While his 
thought processes generally tend to focus on George, he often muses about the power of 
women. Braddon reveals her thoughts on the differences between the sexes through Robert: 
“‘To call them the weaker sex is to utter a hideous mockery. They are the stronger sex, the 
noisier, the more persevering, the most self-assertive sex’” (136). None of the men in the 
text have proven to be assertive or strong, both traditionally masculine qualities, and in fact
the men all end up in the passive roles that women of the Victorian era were expected to occupy. In contrast, the women of the novel are given free reign over their communities and fill the vacant male roles.

Within the novel there are several female characters, but there are three that seem to make the best case for strong female models: Alicia, Clara, and Lady Audley. Fisk, in her study of Victorian gender-roles, explores how Braddon uses Lady Audley as a “sacrifice” in order to grant agency to the other women in the novel. While Lady Audley does lead the way, the evidence in the text suggests that she has more agency than just acting as a sacrifice for the rest of the women. Lady Audley acts not only as a forerunner, but also a platform which Braddon uses to critique society. Not only does Braddon use Lady Audley to critique society and its ideas concerning gender roles, but she also uses the other female characters within the novel.

Alicia, the daughter of Sir Michael, has a history of power within the novel. After Sir Michael’s first wife died, when Alicia was fairly young, he allowed his daughter to rule over him and Audley Court. For the majority of her childhood Alicia was allowed to carry the symbol of authority of the house: “for Miss Alicia had reigned supreme in her father’s house since her earliest childhood, and had carried the keys” (Braddon 3). Even when Sir Michael’s marriage to Lady Audley usurps Alicia’s reign, she remains assertive in the household, especially with regards to her cousin Robert. Alicia is “head and ears in love with [Robert]” (41), which Robert is well aware of, but he does not return her affection. Klein finds that in their relationship, Alicia “acts a man’s part in courtship, but fails to evoke the desired response. Her masculine traits are emphasized by her directness, her sporting activities and her bouncing gait” (Klein 167). Even in her relationship with her only suitor Sir Harry Towers, the man she marries by the end of the novel, Alicia is the stronger partner in the
pair. Her directness is a quality which was found more often in the men of her time, yet she regularly employs it with mastery. The end of the novel shows that while she did consent to finally accepting Sir Harry’s proposal, after having rejecting him the first time, she did so on her own terms. In marrying him, she becomes “Lady Towers” and thus gains a position that frees her from her father's house and grants her an excellent position in society. As Braddon has shown, Alicia holds the power in their relationship, so she will most likely retain that power for the rest of her life. There is a stark contrast between Alicia and the male characters around her. She rules over her husband and next to him and her idle cousin Robert the strength of her character is emphasized. Robert also serves as a foil for Clara Talboys.

Robert first meets Clara in his quest to discover the fate of his friend, George. Harcourt Talboys, Clara's father, strongly influences Robert’s first impression of her. At first, it seems that Clara rests fully under the control of her strict and stoic father: “‘Sit down Clara,’ he repeated, ‘and keep your cotton in your workbox,’ The lady blushed at this reproof, and stooped to look for the cotton” (Braddon 123). As time goes on, however, it becomes clear that Clara has a strong will of her own. She chases Robert down after he leaves the Talboys’ house, intent on ceasing his search for answers. What first strikes Robert about Clara is her likeness to George: “Robert looked at her with a tender compassion in his face; she was so like the friend whom he had loved, and lost, that it was impossible for him to think of her as a stranger; impossible to remember that they had met that morning for the first time” (133). This similarity, along with her passionate nature, convinces Robert to once again take up the search. Robert allows her to direct his life and she becomes the authority in their relationship:
“What am I in her hands?” he thought. “What am I in the hands of this woman, who has my lost friend’s face and the manner of Pallas Athene. She reads my pitiful, vacillating soul, and plucks the thoughts out of my heart with the magic of her solemn brown eyes. How unequal the fight must be between us, and how can I ever hope to conquer against the strength of her beauty and her wisdom?” (170-171).

Though Robert is the one to seek out the truth, it is clear that it is only at Clara’s insistence and given the fact that she would do it if Robert failed to do so: “If I were a man, I would go to Australia, and find him, and bring him back” (282). Her insistence that “if [she] were a man” shows the power of her character. This is not a meek, domesticated “Angel” of the house, but instead a woman willing to do whatever is necessary to get her brother back. In marrying Robert at the end of the novel, she still retains this power of hers. Her marriage frees her from her father’s tyrannical rule and allows her to act freely. By marrying Robert, she is able to act like a man might and go out into the world to find George (Fisk 26). Clara’s and Alicia’s actions are made all the more possible by Lady Audley’s earlier transgressions. Having set the precedent for female power, Lady Audley’s actions, though punished at the end of the novel, clear the way for Clara and Alicia to escape the patriarchal system in which they were imprisoned.

Fisk argues that Lady Audley’s imprisonment in the Maison de Santé is the necessary sacrifice needed in order for Clara and Alicia to gain agency: “Lady Audley serves as a sacrifice: even though she is prevented from exercising her female independence by being locked away in an asylum, she has opened the way for the remaining female characters to achieve domestic power and to fashion a new life” (24). While it is true that Lady Audley’s transgressive actions are what allow Clara and Alicia to easily subvert the patriarchy, she
functions as much more than a simple sacrifice and plot tool for the other women’s gain. The fact that, despite being the title character, Lady Audley is not given much space within the text and Braddon often only speculates on Lady Audley’s thoughts rather than exposing them, seems to imply that Lady Audley is a very shallow and one-dimensional character only used by Braddon to create tension. In examining the text and the language used in conjunction with Lady Audley, however, it becomes clear that there is much more to her than is readily apparent.

**Braddon’s “Femme Fatale”**

Lady Audley’s defining features are her physical features. Her angelic and childlike appearance is often described within the narrative: “soft and melting blue eyes; the graceful beauty of that slender throat and drooping head, with its wealth of showering flaxen curls; the low music of that gentle voice; the perfect harmony which pervaded every charm, and made all doubly charming in this woman” (Braddon 5). Lady Audley frequently employs her incredibly ideally feminine appearance as her best tool for advancement. She learns early on the kind of effect that her looks have on the people around her and how they could be used to her advantage: “I was told that I was pretty—beautiful—lovely—bewitching…by-and-by I listened to them greedily, and began to think that in spite of the secret of my life I might be more successful in the world’s great lottery than my companions… I concluded that if I was indeed prettier than my schoolfellows, I ought to marry better than any one of them” (231). It is her beauty that allows her to attain the power that she has in her marriage with Sir Michael.

From the very moment Sir Michael lays eyes on her, he is lost: “That one quiet evening sealed Sir Michael’s fate….at the sober age of fifty-five, Sir Michael Audley had
fallen ill of the terrible fever called love” (5). Through the use of her looks and childish charm, Lady Audley is able to completely control her husband: “Now, so complete was the dominion which Lady Audley had, in her own childish, unthinking way, obtained over her devoted husband, that it was very rarely that the baronet’s eyes were long removed from his wife’s pretty face” (37), and in simply looking at her, Sir Michael discerns her wishes and grants them completely. Not only do Lady Audley’s physical attributes help her to attain what she wants, but they also serve as a tool for Braddon to eliminate the Angel and Monster binary that Gilbert and Gubar argued was so readily present within the Victorian era. Braddon refutes that a woman has to be either the Angel or the Monster with her character Lady Audley, who looks the part of an Angel, but may act the part of the Monster. It is important to note that one of Lady Audley’s most prized physical attributes is her blonde hair. Before Braddon’s novel, most “villainesses” were not blonde, as blonde hair was always associated with the “Angel” image. Essentially, Braddon pioneered the blond villainess figure. Oliphant wrote of the effect that this aspect of the novel had on Victorian fiction: “[Braddon] is the inventor of the fair-haired demon of modern fiction. Wicked women used to be brunettes long ago, now they are the daintiest, softest, prettiest of blonde creatures; and this change has been wrought by Lady Audley, and her influence on contemporary novels” (Oliphant 155). Ellen Tremper traces the figure of the blonde “femme fatale” through fiction and film, and the start of her study on the topic began with Lady Audley. Tremper discusses how the physical depiction of Lady Audley subverts societal conventions: Lady Audley is the epitome of blond beauty, but being blond...does not mean being submissive; it certainly doesn’t prevent Lady Audley from conceiving an outrageous plan to achieve economic security. Braddon, following Brontë, continued the image-demolition of the pliant and placid
fair girl revered in folk-and fairy tale and cherished in this period of high nationalism. The blonde could be just as rapacious, aggressive, and sinister as the dark antiheroine (Tremper 84).

In creating her villainess as a blonde, Braddon subverts the convention that women with blonde hair, blue eyes, and a general “angelic” look to them were passive and submissive beings. She also subverts the feminine ideal by using the conventional appearance of beauty to hide her protagonist’s more dangerous side. In her exploration of Lady Audley, Showalter states that “The brilliance of Lady Audley’s Secret is that Braddon makes her would-be murderess the fragile blond angel of domestic realism…the ‘pretty little girl’ whose indoctrination in the female role has taught her secrecy and deceitfulness, almost as secondary sex characteristics. She is particularly dangerous because she looks so innocent” (Showalter 165). Lady Audley’s innocent looks lure the people around her, particularly the men in her life, into a false sense of security. Sir Michael never thinks to question her because she is so beautiful and innocent, and at first Robert is also quite taken with her deceiving beauty. It is not just her looks that give Lady Audley her power within the novel, however, she also uses her own skills and determination to attain her goals.

Lady Audley was born as Helen Maldon, the poor daughter of a drunkard father and a “mad” mother. From an early age, Lady Audley learns what it means to be poor: “I felt the bitterness of poverty, and ran the risk of growing up an ignorant creature among coarse rustic children, because my father was poor” (Braddon 230). The state of poverty is intolerable for her and she resolves to escape it however she can. She first plans to use her looks and charm to marry George Talboys, a rich dragoon. While she succeed in seducing and marrying George, her station in society caused George’s father to cut him off financially for marrying a girl beneath him in status. Thrust into poverty once again, Lady Audley
despairs until she hatches a plan to run away, change her name, and try her luck elsewhere. Finally she meets and marries Sir Michael. This marriage has given her not only wealth, but also a secure position in the upper class. Her rise in class status despite her history is one of the reasons why Lady Audley’s character is so powerful. Lady Audley was able to circumvent societal rules and marry above her status because of her looks. Jill L. Matus discusses this aspect of the novel in her article “Disclosure as ‘Cover-Up’: The Discourse of Madness in *Lady Audley’s Secret*.”

Despite being punished at the end of the novel, Lady Audley still manages to thwart the laws of a class-ruled Victorian society using her looks, intelligence, and ambition. Even though her actions are often cruel, “what seems primarily to be the matter with Lady Audley is that she threatened to violate class boundaries and exclusions, and to get away with appropriating social power beyond her entitlement” (Matus 335). Braddon plays on the fear that the “wrong” kind of woman will rise in the ranks. While Lady Audley certainly looks the part, with her angelic blue eyes and golden hair, she is clearly the “wrong” sort of woman and driven by inherently immoral desires (335). On the surface, Lady Audley appears to be an innocent, childlike and harmless woman, but there are hints within the text that suggest a complexity far beyond what an initial impression could suggest.

The clearest instance within the novel in which Lady Audley’s hidden depth is revealed is when Robert and George view a portrait of Lady Audley in her apartments. The description of this painting suggests that there is more to Lady Audley than is seen on a normal basis and that the painter has managed to capture her darker nature:

> No one but a pre-Raphaelite would have so exaggerated every attribute of that delicate face as to give a lurid brightness to the blonde complexion, and a strange, sinister light to the deep blue eyes…given to that pretty pouting
mouth the hard and almost wicked look it had in the portrait. It was so like, and yet so unlike. It was as if you had burned the strange-colored fires before my lady’s face, and by their influence brought out new lines and new expressions never seen in it before…had something of the aspect of a beautiful fiend. Her crimson dress…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. Indeed the crimson dress, the sunshine on the face, the red gold gleaming in the yellow hair, the ripe scarlet of the pouting lips, the glowing colors of each accessory of the minutely painted background, all combined to render the first effect of the painting by no means an agreeable one (Braddon 47).

The language used in this passage, such as “lurid,” “strange, sinister,” “wicked,” “strange-colored fires,” “fiend,” “crimson,” “flames,” and “raging furnace” all call to mind traditional images of the devil, hell, and sin. The use of the words to do with flames and “fiend” seem to suggest that she has a wicked and evil side to her. The crimson of the lady’s dress and the “ripe scarlet of [her] pouting lips” reference her power as a siren. In fact, she is compared to a siren more than once within the novel. Robert dreams of her as such: “As the hurrying waves rolled nearer and nearer to the stately mansion, the sleeper saw a pale, starry face looking out of the silvery foam, and knew that it was my lady transformed into a mermaid, beckoning his uncle to destruction” (162). This “mermaid, beckoning his uncle to destruction” is an allusion to the sirens in Homer’s Odyssey (56-60). Lady Audley is able to use her looks to disguise the less-feminine side that lurks beneath, much like the sirens did. Not only does Lady Audley appear to combine the Angel and Monster image,
thereby eliminating the Angel and Monster binary, but she also serves to question the sanity and insanity binary as well.

**The “Madness” of Lady Audley**

Showalter’s famous declaration about Lady Audley that, “As every woman reader must have sensed, Lady Audley’s real secret is that she is *sane* and, moreover, representative” (Showalter 167), while revolutionary in the sense that for the first time it was clear that a rebellious woman in the Victorian era was not, despite popular belief, a rare example but rather a unapologetically candid depiction of reality, fails to take into account that it rests on a binary that the novel does not support. In essence, Showalter’s assertion presupposes the binary of sane and insane, a binary which the Victorians were clearly aware of. However, Braddon’s novel *Lady Audley’s Secret* has already been shown to be critical of binaries and often destabilizes them. As discussed, Braddon takes the gender binaries, male (masculine) and female (feminine), and subverts them with her characters. Braddon uses Robert’s feminine qualities to show him to be the opposite of what a virile, young male hero of the Victorian novel should be and then contrasts him with the much more assertive and thus less archetypal female, Clara. Braddon also challenges the Angel and Monster binary by combining the two in Lady Audley. Lady Audley’s angelic appearance, with her “soft and melting blue eyes; the graceful beauty of that slender throat and drooping head, with its wealth of showering flaxen curls” (Braddon 5), is representative of the Victorian “angel in the house,” but her actions and behaviors suggest a kind of fiendishness. By combining qualities of the two stereotypes, Braddon rejects the binary and presents instead a new option. She also does this with the concepts of sanity and insanity.
In order to understand just how Braddon complicates the ability of the reader to declare Lady Audley as insane or sane, the context and cultural significance of the language used in the novel must be examined. To begin, labeling someone as “mad” has several different connotations, which are dependent on the historical context. In the Victorian era context “mad” would have been defined as: “1. a. Suffering from mental disease; beside oneself, out of one’s mind; sane, lunatic. In application, implying violent excitement or extravagant delusions: Maniacal, frenzied. Note: The word has always had some tinge of contempt or disgust, and would now be quite inappropriate in medical use, or in referring sympathetically to an insane person as the subject of an affliction” (“Mad”). In a contemporary context, “mad” often refers to being angry, but for the Victorians “mad” was associated with a mental disorder. This definition makes it clear that “mad” cannot be used the same way today as it was in the Victorian era, as it is now politically incorrect. There is also the fact that the way Victorians understood insanity, or “madness,” is very different from how it is defined today. Critics like Elaine Showalter who declare that Lady Audley is “sane” are judging Lady Audley in terms of modern psychology. Showalter seems to make the claim that Braddon labeled Lady Audley as insane in order to spare herself criticism: “Lady Audley’s unfeminine assertiveness…must ultimately be described as madness, not only to spare Braddon the unpleasant necessity of having to execute an attractive heroine with whom she in many ways identifies, but also to spare the woman reader the guilt of identifying with a cold-blooded killer” (Showalter 167). However, Showalter fails to realize that Braddon would have understood what real mental illness was versus what her society claimed it to be. The text clearly does not give any evidence that Lady Audley is mentally ill, in fact Braddon makes a careful distinction between Lady Audley and the mentally insane: “All mental distress is, with some show of reason, associated in our minds with loose,
disordered garments and dishabille hair, and an appearance in every way the reverse of my lady’s” (Braddon 223). Here, at least on the surface level, Braddon acknowledges that Lady Audley is not mentally distressed and therefore cannot be labeled as mentally insane, especially in terms of modern psychology. However, Braddon was writing at a time when insanity was not so carefully defined, and in making Lady Audley’s hereditary insanity the “secret which is the key to [her] life” (Braddon 165), Braddon critique’s her society’s views of madness, especially the madness of women, and madness’ use as a tool for control.

Understanding the 19th century view of madness and insanity, then, becomes key in understanding the purpose of Lady Audley’s supposed “madness.”

Ihsen Hachaichi, a scholar of scientific determinism in literature, discusses how Braddon used the Victorian ideology of madness in order to critique society. Given that the Victorians had very specific ideas of madness and how it related to biological and social behavior, Braddon used societal norms and expectations against themselves in her novel. Hachaichi writes that “Braddon puts on a new face on the well-established representation of female madness by showing that the perilous entanglement of pseudoscience and science with nineteenth-century ideology has regulated women’s relation to their body and stigmatized defiant women as mad” (Hachaichi 88). As has been discussed in the first part of this paper, madness and mental illness were the same concept for the Victorians. Madness, though now understood to be a cause for acting outside of socially accepted behavior which stems from intention was equated with mental illness, which is biological and involuntary. The Victorians believed that “Social conformity [was] an index of sanity; the only measure available to the individual fearful of his or her own normality would be a willing obedience to designated social roles” (Shuttleworth 35). It is this definition that Braddon uses to label Lady Audley as “mad.” Dr. Mosgrave realizes this fact when speaking with Robert, who very
clearly wants to have Lady Audley committed. In fact, “Dr. Mosgrave’s comment suggests that Robert Audley has ascribed the label of madness to Lucy because she has deviated from the average norms of institutionalized female behavior. He reveals that Robert’s judgment of Lucy endorses confusion between madness and mental illness” (Hachaichi 92). This is entirely intentional; Braddon uses the Victorian misconception of madness to then critique the society in which she lived and to expose its flaws.

The first step in understanding how Braddon uses culturally specific understandings of madness is to differentiate between the Victorian ideal of madness and mental illness. She does this not only through the surface portrayal of Lady Audley, whose appearance is the opposite of the typical person suffering from mental distress, but also through Dr. Mosgrave. Dr. Mosgrave, upon hearing Robert Audley’s retelling of Lady Audley’s deeds, replies that “there is no evidence of madness in anything she has done. She ran away from her home, because her home was not a pleasant one, and she left in the hope of finding a better. There is no madness in that” (Braddon 248). Not only does he believe the steps that Lady Audley took to be completely rational given her situation, but he also dismisses the influence of hereditary insanity, stating that it does not always get passed on. Only after Robert Audley confesses that he believes Lady Audley killed George Talboys (which proves untrue, another important facet of the novel) does Dr. Mosgrave admit there “is latent insanity!” (249). However, even after he claims that there is this “latent insanity,” he still clarifies that “The lady is not mad; but she has the hereditary taint in her blood” (249). At this point it becomes clear that Lady Audley only has the potential to be “mad” and only because she might have killed her first husband and because her mother “tainted” her blood with insanity. Braddon uses a situationalist perspective and outlines the fact that Lady Audley
is not, in fact, mentally ill, but rather her “madness” is a product of her environment. Braddon uses this important distinction to then expose the faults in Victorian society.

Through Lady Audley, Braddon not only subverts the Angel and Monster images, but also Victorian societal expectations of women. Jean Baker Miller, a feminist writer, argues that “The belief that women could or should accept and adjust to the stereotyped role has been a cause, not the cure, of their problems” (qtd. in Rigney 5), suggesting that it is not the women themselves, but their society that lies at the root of their so-called “madness” as the label was used as a tool for control. Braddon shows how societal expectations of not only women, but of people in general were responsible for Lady Audley’s actions. In giving Lady Audley her own back story, not only does Braddon make it impossible to completely dismiss Lady Audley as a villain, she also elicits sympathy and understanding for her actions.

One of the ways in which Braddon works to garner sympathy for Lady Audley is in the latter part of the novel in which she reveals the difficult childhood that the beginning of the novel only hinted at. Not only does this technique serve to present Lady Audley as troubled, but it also furthers the idea that Lady Audley’s so-called madness was a direct result of her environment. Lady Audley, in defending herself and her actions to Robert and Sir Michael explains that from a very young age she was aware of the importance of money: “I felt the bitterness of poverty, and ran the risk of growing up an ignorant creature among coarse rustic children, because my father was poor” (Braddon 230). This experience with shortage in her childhood instilled a fear of poverty in Lady Audley, which she desperately tried the rest of her life to avoid. As a young girl, Lady Audley also learned how important marriage was in her society: “I had learnt that which in some indefinite manner or other every school-girl learns sooner or later—I learned that my ultimate fate in life depended upon my marriage, and I concluded that if I was indeed prettier than my schoolfellows, I
ought to marry better than any one of them” (231). The knowledge that an advantageous marriage could better her situation influenced her behavior and that led her to George Talboys. As a young dragoon, George was part of a very wealthy family and in marrying him Lady Audley believed her troubles and struggle would be over. However, once George’s father cut him off from the family fortune, Lady Audley’s worries resurfaced once again. When George abandoned her, she knew that she had to figure something else out or she risked returning to a life of poverty. Her marriage to Sir Michael was everything she hoped for in her first marriage, and in marrying him she was actually trying to adhere to the conventions of her society by securing herself an advantageous marriage. She used her conventional beauty to marry a wealthy man and become the perfect housewife, and all of this was motivated by her fear of poverty. Her actions, those of hiding her past and of attacking George because he threatened her newfound security, were motivated by her intense fear: “What could I do? I must go back to the old life, the old hard, cruel, wretched life—the life of poverty, and humiliation, and vexation, and discontent. I should have to go back and wear myself out in that long struggle and die—as my mother died, perhaps!” (208).

The result of Lady Audley’s actions, being labeled “mad,” is Braddon’s critique of Victorian society. Because Lady Audley is punished for actually trying to conform to the conventions of her time, Braddon is indicting society’s paradoxical moral standards.

It is clear from Lady Audley’s story that she was only attempting to avoid poverty as well as do what was expected of her. However, because of her failure to marry well the first time, her efforts were disrupted and George’s abandonment left her with few options. Pamela K. Gilbert discusses the ironic nature of Lady Audley’s situation:

For Robert, women are evil when they have masculine ambitions and take on masculine roles; paradoxically, it is precisely because he does not have these
characteristics that he finds them hateful. Yet the women who really do evil in *Lady Audley’s Secret*—Lady Audley and Phoebe—do not do so out of a desire for leadership, but out of a desire to avoid the pain inflicted by and active masculine element…and to seek passive comfort in the socially and financially secure role of wife. Thus, contrary to Robert’s perception, Lady Audley’s story shows that women are most evil when they conform to social expectations—a lesson which Robert must deny if he is to take his place as an active member of the ruling class (P. Gilbert 224).

Not only does Braddon show the Victorian tendency to label those who appear to deviate from social norms as mad as a form of control, but she also shows how complicated and dangerous actually conforming to the norms can be. Braddon thus shows the danger of conforming to the strict moral codes of society. Her novel shows the impossible position that women of the Victorian era were put in: expected to be “angels of the house,” but at the same time endangered by the very role that they were expected to fill. Lady Audley becomes the perfect vessel to carry this observation because she is a female character to whom Braddon gave “her own story…[and] who has tried to play by the rules and implicitly critiques those rules merely both by articulating them so badly (and thus calling attention to their arbitrary and artificial nature) and by citing their failure to work” (P. Gilbert 230). The reason that Lady Audley’s portrayal is so successful is because while the Victorians would have felt that she received the punishment she deserved, she cannot be judged so easily now. The reader’s sympathies are stirred when she tells her life story, including the “secret of her life.” The vivid descriptions of the horrors of poverty make the actions she took to avoid such terrible conditions more understandable. In addition to complicating the ability to judge
Lady Audley as a “mad” villainess, Braddon further inhibits the ability to judge *anyone* as “sane” or “insane,” and fully breaks down those binaries.

To begin tearing down the sanity/insanity binary, Braddon shows that Lady Audley is not only sane, but that *Robert* actually has more potential for insanity. Pamela Gilbert writes that between Robert and Lady Audley there are many similarities in their natures, but their circumstances are different (P. Gilbert 227). Because Robert is a wealthy, privileged *male*, so any eccentricities can be ignored, but as Lady Audley is a female, any deviations from the social norm are seen as unforgiveable acts and signs of madness (227). In fact, Pamela Gilbert asserts that Braddon is “reminding us that not only is madness ubiquitous, but that the very man who judges Lady Audley is himself mad, placing him and the reader and the Lady in the same category, “trembling on the balance” (P. Gilbert 229). This “trembling on the balance” exists because, as Braddon writes:

> We are apt to be angry with this cruel hardness in our life—this unflinching regularity in the smaller wheels and meaner mechanism of the human machine, which knows no stoppage or cessation, though the mainspring be forever hollow, and the hands pointing to purposeless figures on a shattered dial. Who has not felt, in the first madness of sorrow, an unreasoning rage against the mute propriety of chairs and tables, the stiff squareness of Turkey carpets, the unbending obstinacy of the outward apparatus of existence? We want to root up gigantic trees in a primeval forest, and to tear their huge branches asunder in our convulsive grasp…Madhouses are large and only too numerous; yet surely it is strange they are not larger, when we think of how many helpless wretches must beat their brains against this hopeless persistency of the orderly outward worlds, as compared with the storm and
tempest, the riot and confusion within—when we remember how reason and unreason, mad to-day and sane to-morrow, mad yesterday and sane to-day (Braddon 135).

This passage illuminates Braddon’s ideas about mental states. She appears to argue that not only is madness not so easily defined, but as human beings we cannot help but vacillate between sanity and insanity. The suggestion that one is never fully sane or insane, but always treading the line in between the two, suggests the need for a different way of classifying mental states rather than the black and white binary that existed in the Victorian era. As well as arguing for new definitions of mental states, Braddon is also slyly remarking upon society’s rigidity and the impact it has on its people: “Madhouses are large and only too numerous; yet surely it is strange they are not larger, when we think of how many helpless wretches must beat their brains against this hopeless persistency of the orderly outward worlds, as compared with the storm and tempest, the riot and confusion within” (135).

Braddon remarks that madhouses were so large and numerous because of how loose the Victorian definition of madness was, and how easy it was to declare someone “mad” simply because they refused to conform. At the same time she states that given the inflexible “orderly outward worlds” it was a wonder that more people in her society were not declared insane. Not only does her exploration on the meaning and consequences of madness in the Victorian era serve to indict the society that she lived in, but the ending of the novel also further challenges her society.

The Not-So-Happy “Happily Ever After”

Along with the other elements of the novel, the ending plays a critical role in shaping Braddon’s veiled critique of society. Because Lady Audley’s Secret was published as a sensation
novel, readers would have expected it to follow certain rules of the genre. Showalter, in her discussion of Lady Audley, lists the conventions of the sensation novel:

Typically, the first volume of a woman’s sensation novel is a gripping and sardonic analysis of a woman in conflict with male authority. By the second volume guilt has set in. In the third volume we see the heroine punished, repentant, and drained of all energy…It was so widely accepted that marriage would conclude the representation of the fictional heroine, that “my third volume” became a coy euphemism for this period of women’s lives (181).

On the surface, Braddon’s novel appears to follow these conventions. Lady Audley begins the novel in power, ends the novel incarcerated in a “maison de santé,” and there are in fact two marriages: Clara and Robert, and Alicia and Sir Harry Towers. Another aspect that seems to place the novel in the sensation genre is the fact that Braddon wrote a novel that capitalized on the “lunacy panic,” which had swept through England shortly before the release of the novel (Matus 347). This period of panic had to do with the terrifying possibility and cases of wrongful incarceration in an asylum. There were several cases that were brought to the public’s attention by the press, which resulted in a widespread panic that was often reflected in literature. Rescue narratives focused on a subject being mislabeled as insane (whether by accident or design), placed in an asylum, and then her subsequent rescue. As such, these types of novels ended in the victim being freed from the “madhouse” and having her named cleared. *Lady Audley’s Secret* plays with both of these conventions, of the sensation novel and of the wrongful incarceration narrative, but deviates from both and thus succeeds in acting as a critique of society, specifically the Victorian society’s unforgiving moral code.
Early on in the novel Braddon implies that appearances, even those of the novel itself, cannot be trusted. As discussed, Lady Audley’s appearance is particularly deceiving, which is what makes her such an effective actress. The ending of the novel functions in the same way as its appearance cannot be trusted either. Within the first few chapters Braddon warns the reader about the deception of surfaces:

We hear every day of murders committed in the country. Brutal and treacherous murders; slow, protracted agonies from poisons administered by some kindred hand; sudden and violent deaths by cruel blows, inflicted with a stake cut from some spreading ask, whose every shadow promised—peace… No crime has ever been committed in the worst rookeries about Seven Dials that has not been also done in the face of that sweet rustic calm which still, in spite of all, we look on with a tender, half-mournful yearning, and associate with—peace (36).

Braddon appears to be warning the reader that behind the most peaceful and benign settings can lay horrific secrets and possible danger. So early on in the novel, this warning can be brushed off fairly easily. The seasoned reader of sensation novels would have taken it as a nod to one of the tropes within the genre: violence in the domestic space. The passage, while serving that purpose as well, serves as a warning for the entire novel. Braddon cautions her readers against allowing the narrative to be unquestioned. This warning that speaks of “protracted agonies…crime[s]…committed…in the face of that sweet rustic clam…associate[d] with—peace” highlights not only the dangerousness of Lady Audley, but also the false peace in the ending of the novel; the seemingly peaceful life that Robert lives in at the ending resides in an uneasy reality.
One aspect of the ending that contributes to the unease is the fate of Lady Audley. While Victorians, especially those who subscribed to the strict moral codes of society, would have seen her imprisonment as justice, the narrative clearly complicates that view. Lady Audley, despite what Robert thinks, is not mentally insane as anyone of the contemporary medical profession would have defined her. Dr. Mosgrave’s diagnosis (both initial and revised) shows that she cannot be placed in the same category as someone who suffered from mental delusions. As such, her story then becomes one of wrongful incarceration, with Lady Audley as the victim and Robert as her cruel jailor. While her actions, especially those concerning George, are not condoned by Braddon they are examined and explained in a way that provokes sympathy; she cannot be seen as a stereotypical villain and she cannot be seen as mentally insane. Her fate is then problematic when the novel is read as a wrongful incarceration tale. Traditionally, a novel with that theme would end with a rescue. *Lady Audley’s Secret* not only fails to end in a rescue, but it also ends in the tragic death of Lady Audley in the asylum. Braddon emphasizes the injustice of her fate because not only is she wrongfully incarcerated (as “mad” when she is clearly not), but Robert “[has] brought [her] to [her] grave…[has] used [his] power basely and cruelly, and [has] brought [her] to a living grave” (Braddon 256). Lady Audley’s accusation against Robert, as well as details within the text, serves to highlight her tragic end.

The title of the chapter in which Braddon reveals Lady Audley’s grim fate is “Buried Alive.” This title calls to mind a horrific image of being, literally, buried in the ground while still alive. The title alone sets up the tone for the chapter, and the language Braddon uses only emphasizes the sinister image. After Robert has Dr. Mosgrave diagnose Lady Audley with “latent insanity,” he takes her to a *maison de santé* in Belgium (Braddon 249). Only once they arrive does Robert tell her where he has taken her and that he is condemning her to a
life of solitude and restraint during which she can repent for her sins (Braddon 256). Given that Robert influenced Dr. Mosgrave into giving the diagnosis, by suggesting Lady Audley murdered her husband which caused the doctor to change his mind after stating that she was clearly sane, it is evident that Robert has brought her to this *maison de santé* (or “madhouse” as Lady Audley points out it would be called in England) to punish her for her assumed wrongdoings. What seems like a villainess getting what she deserves becomes an unfair sentence when it is revealed that George is not dead, but had only been injured and then purposefully disappeared. The tale becomes a wrongful incarceration story, but does not follow those conventions. Instead, Robert Audley leaves Lady Audley to her fate simply because he does not approve of her and her methods. Braddon creates an even more heightened feeling of unease to complicate the reader’s emotion in her description of the *maison de santé*.

As Braddon describes the house in which Lady Audley will spend the rest of her life, it becomes clear that the title of the chapter is not just for show. In end of the novel Braddon reveals that Lady Audley dies after only one year of imprisonment, which makes the chapter much more literal. Even the description of what will be Lady Audley’s new rooms adds to the idea that Robert has brought her to the *maison de santé*:

Acting upon this hint, Monsieur Val opened the outer door of a stately suite of apartments, which included a lobby, paved with alternate diamonds of black and white marble, but of a dismal and cellar-like darkness; a saloon furnished with gloomy velvet draperies, and with a certain funereal splendor which is not peculiarly conducive to the elevation of the spirits and a bed-chamber….looked dreary enough in the wan light of a single wax-candle. This solitary flame, pale and ghost-like in itself, was multiplied by paler
phantoms of its ghostliness, which glimmered everywhere about the rooms;
in the shadowy depths of the polished floors (Braddon 254-255).

The diction in this passage is very carefully chosen and all adds to the gothic feeling of the rooms. These rooms, while well-furnished, are full of “a dismal and cellar-like darkness,” with “gloomy velvet draperies” and “funeral splendor” (254). The word “funeral” itself, without all of the other details, suggests that the rooms are Lady Audley’s coffin and the mention of ghosts lingering about in the room furthers the heavy feeling of death. Not only is Robert condemning her to a life of solitude and penance, as he claims, but he also condemns her to death in these rooms. And indeed, Braddon writes that Robert receives an announcement of Lady Audley’s death from “a long illness, which Monsieur Val describes as a *maladie de langueur*” (Braddon 286). This ending of Lady Audley’s story complicates the novel as Lady Audley had been one of the protagonists alongside Robert Audley, but she dies alone in a madhouse and outside of the narrative. Not only that, but as a wrongful incarceration novel Braddon purposefully does not follow the conventions in order to show that in Victorian society, there were many women who had been wrongfully declared “mad” or “insane” who were not rescued but died in their imprisonment just as Lady Audley does. The feeling Braddon creates in the novel affects the reader in a way that makes it hard to simply condemn Lady Audley because she did not follow Victorian society’s strict morals. Braddon shows Lady Audley not to be a villain or a madwoman, but simply a woman who was trying to do the best she could with the tools she had. This story then critiques the society in which men can lock up women if women are not content with following the impossible standards set for them. Along with this critique, Braddon also shows that despite the fact that there are marriages at the end of the novel (a very traditional Victorian convention), they are not as ideal as they seem.
Braddon has already shown throughout the novel the male characters to be the weaker, more passive sex. The novel ends with two marriages and a seemingly peaceful scene, both of which the Victorian reader would have expected in a novel of the time. By having the marriages in the novel, Braddon gave the appearance of submitting to the principles of Victorian society; however, the surfaces within the novel have already proven deceiving and the meaning beneath the ending of the novel challenges societal conventions. In the two marriages, Robert is content to allow himself to be ruled by Clara, and Sir Harry Towers is happy to marry and submit to Alicia even though she clearly does not love him. Robert is especially submissive in his role as Clara’s husband: “How pleasant it was to be lectured by the woman he loved! How pleasant it was to humiliate himself and depreciate himself before her!” (Braddon 280). Despite the concession to societal expectations, Braddon still undermines the gender roles of the time. Also, again the warning from the beginning of the novel hangs ominously over the peaceful scene of the ending. Braddon states that even in the most peaceful and innocent of settings there can be violence and subversion, which means that the ending of her novel in which Robert and Clara live out their days in a “fairy cottage” cannot be trusted (Braddon 285). Not only can the seemingly ideal and picturesque setting of the end not be trusted, but Braddon’s last words in the novel as she addresses the reader also should not be taken for granted.

The end of *Lady Audley’s Secret* seems to suggest a reinstatement of order and morality; the villainess has been punished and sent away, Robert has bloomed into a man and married, Alicia also marries, George is alive, and the young couples live out their days peacefully and able to forget the “horror” they endured under Lady Audley’s reign. Braddon also seems to reinforce this notion of restored order when she writes:
I hope no one will take objection to my story because the end of it leaves the good people all happy and at peace. If my experience of life has not been very long, it has at least been manifold; and I can safely subscribe to that which a mighty king and a great philosopher declares, when he said, that neither the experience of his youth nor of his age had ever shown him “the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging their bread” (Braddon 286).

Braddon accomplishes several things with this last paragraph. First, she appeals to the typical Victorian reader, in that she hopes that they will forgive her for setting down these awful proceedings and not “take objection to [her] story because the end of it leaves the good people all happy and at peace” (286). Braddon reminds the reader that Lady Audley, implied as one of the “bad” people, has been punished and that Robert, George, Clara, Alicia, Sir Michael, and Sir Harry, the “good” people, are all able to live happily for the rest of their lives. In doing this, she points out that on the surface she follows the conventions of a Victorian novel, especially the conventions of a novel written by a woman, and she subscribes to the morality of her society. Also, Braddon plays to her audience’s religiosity by quoting the bible. It is important to note that not only does she quote a male figure in the bible, King David, but she also refers to him as “mighty king and great philosopher” in order to appear as though she is taking the role of an admiring and devout woman. The quote itself, “I have been young, and now am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging their bread” (King James Version, Psalm 37:25), plays to the Victorian expectation that those who are “morally upright” will be rewarded. All of these elements work together to lull the unsuspecting reader into thinking that she has done nothing to challenge society; however, given her tone, style, and form of the rest of the novel, it becomes clear that Braddon is still critiquing her society.
Critics have differing opinions on Braddon’s intentions with this last paragraph. Chiaki Ohashi, who studied the feminist discourse in the novel, explores the ways in which Braddon fails to completely undermine the conventions she was challenging. About the ending he writes, “it should be pointed out that the authorial commentary at the end hints that Braddon’s sympathy lies with the new order as she ends the novel with the self-conscious assimilation of her own narrative voice” (Ohashi 47). However, Ohashi fails to take into account that this paragraph aligns completely with her intentions throughout the novel. Critics like Fisk know that “Braddon presents extraordinarily modern ideas about female equality in Lady Audley’s Secret, but she masks those ideas well in a seemingly conservative nineteenth-century novel” (26). Braddon’s intention for the last paragraph was to “mask” the subversive nature of her novel by reminding her Victorian audience that, on the surface level at least, she followed societal conventions. While the willfully or unwittingly unobservant reader with strict, Victorian morals would be pleased with this ending, those who care to look closer see that Braddon was not condoning this story and its resolutions, but rather using it to critique the society she lived in.

**Conclusion**

*Lady Audley’s Secret*, while largely popular in its time, garnered a lot of extremely negative reviews from literary critics of the time. Part of the reason the novel was so heavily criticized is because of its apparent identification as a sensation novel. Sensation novels, as Reverend Henry Longueville Mansel wrote, “belong ‘to the morbid phenomena of literature—indications of a widespread corruption…called into existence to supply the cravings of a diseased appetite.’ The novels themselves ‘foster the disease, and…stimulate the want which they supply’” (qtd. in Wolff 190). Sensation novels were seen as catering to
Braddon’s novel was particularly criticized not only as a result of its place in the sensation genre, but also because of its scandalous and villainess heroine. Critics were particularly caustic when reviewing Braddon’s novel and often condemned her for her subject and her “lack of talent.” An anonymous reviewer wrote that Braddon “does not write ‘novels of character’; so her successes cannot be due either to intellectual power or to ‘close observation of human nature’” (qtd. Wolff 193). Another reviewer, W. Fraser Rae in his article “Sensation Novelists—Miss Braddon,” does the same thing: “The artistic faults of this novel are as grave as the ethical ones. Combined, they render it one of the most noxious books of modern times” (qtd. in Wolff 195). Out all of Braddon’s critics, however, Margaret Oliphant was by far the most vocal and scathing: “Lady Audley has ‘brought in the reign of bigamy as an interesting and fashionable crime, which no doubt shows a certain deference to the British relish for law and order. It goes against the seventh commandment, no doubt, but it does it in a legitimate sort of way, and is an invention which could only have been possible to an Englishwoman knowing the attraction of impropriety, and yet loving the shelter of the law’” (qtd. in Wolff 202-203). While Oliphant seems to have understood that the novel is subversive in some way, she focuses on Braddon and her affair with a married man over her novel, *Lady Audley’s Secret*. Critics during the Victorian era seemed to understand that there was something subversive about Lady Audley, but also seemed to be missing its real rebellion in the form of its societal critique rather than the scandal at the center of the plot.

As Braddon not only challenges literary critics during the time of the Victorian era, she also challenges the assumptions of modern Victorian critics. Gilbert and Gubar’s work identified the male-created Angel/Monster binary prevalent in women’s works in the Victorian era, but they identified the Angel and the Monster as two separate entities while
Braddon combines the two into one. By combining the Angel and Monster Braddon challenges the misogynistic stereotypes of women as either “the angel of the house” or a fiendish Monster while also eliminating the binary all together, arguing that women are not only unable to be defined by males, but they are also not able to be defined in such black and white terms. Showalter identified a sane/insane binary within the novel, by asserting that Lady Audley is sane rather than insane as she is declared. However, Braddon’s usage of “madness” and insanity as defined by Victorian society does not support such a binary because insanity is defined differently in the 19th century than it is now. Braddon instead uses Lady Audley and her label of insanity to critique the society’s arbitrary ideas of madness and the use of the label as a means of controlling women. Just as Braddon had subverted the conventions of her own society, she subverts the conventions of modern literary criticism.

As much of the study done in the field of 19th century women writers has been focused on canonical works, future scholars should look to examine the sensation novel genre for further insight into the minds of Victorian women writers. The genre’s controversial qualities compared to its more traditional contemporaries, like Jane Eyre, allowed women some freedom in their writing not found in other literature of the time. Those within the Victorian society would have expected sensation novels to push the boundaries of acceptability, so it would be useful to study them in more depth to see how women writers took advantage (or did not as the case might be) of the lack of restrictions and how they used that to critique society. It is clear that women who represented a higher education level and wrote more sophisticated literature were preoccupied with rebellious impulses and frustration with their confining role in society, but to what extent can this be generalized to all women writers of the period? Did other sensation novelists follow Braddon’s example and appropriate the patriarchal tropes laid out for them in literature and
twist them to undermine the stereotypes and criticize the overly strict societal codes or did they simply accept the roles prescribed for them? Future study into the sensation genre might led to a more developed view of women writers of the time across class levels, which would result in a deeper understanding of how they were able to overcome the deeply-rooted prejudice against women and take up pens to write their own stories.
Works Cited


