Mad, Bad, and Well Read: An Examination of Women Readers and Education in the Novels of Mary Elizabeth Braddon

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This dissertation titled
Mad, Bad, and Well Read: An Examination of Women's Reading and Education in the
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ABSTRACT

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Mad, Bad, and Well Read: An Examination of Women Readers and Education in the Novels of Mary Elizabeth Braddon

Director of Dissertation: Joseph McLaughlin

In exploring the early writings and marketing techniques of Mary Elizabeth Braddon, an infamously successful Sensationalist of the 1860s, Sowards argues that this highly criticized author used writing strategies common to her genre to guide her female readers into better reading practices. Focusing on several existing theories about women’s reading behaviors, Sowards revises the way in which scholars have overlooked the Sensational genre as nothing more than frivolous, low art. She contends that Braddon uses particular representations of fictional female readers to develop the critical thinking skills of her real female readers. For these reasons, Sowards concludes that through this particular writing approach, Braddon was able to bring attention to female reading practices, offer a more expansive view of Victorian femininity, and blur the lines between Sensationalism and Realism.
I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my grandfather, Clifford H. Monk.

Without his tireless financial and emotional support none of this would have been possible.
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 1: Introduction</th>
<th>Braddon Scholarship</th>
<th>The Book Market</th>
<th>Braddon's Sensational Realism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: An Imaginative Affair: Blissful Reading and (Re)education in <em>The Doctor's Wife</em></td>
<td>Education and Misreading</td>
<td>Readings of Bliss and Sexual Autonomy</td>
<td>A Marriage of Two Extremes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Friendly Readings: Feminine Bonds and Communities in Four of Braddon's Novels</td>
<td>The Narrative Strategy of Friends</td>
<td>Feminist Leanings</td>
<td>An Uncommon Bond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: Novels as Accoutrements</td>
<td>Books as Commodities</td>
<td>Female and Male Readership</td>
<td>Reading as Feminine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: Feminine Reading as Detection in <em>Eleanor's Victory</em></td>
<td>Braddon Trains Her Readers</td>
<td>Balancing the Hyphen</td>
<td>What an Unwomanly Thing To Do!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reading as a Mask</td>
<td></td>
<td>Female Detective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Page</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman vs. Woman</td>
<td>259</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blurring the Poles</td>
<td>267</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eleanor's Realism and the Solving of the Mystery</td>
<td>270</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6: Lasting Legacy</td>
<td>275</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>285</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Page</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>“Sensation Novels.”</td>
<td>43</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>“I am half sick of shadows”</td>
<td>61</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>“Woman Reading”</td>
<td>84</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>“Pa’s Lodger and Pa’s Daughter”</td>
<td>85</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Talboys gazing at Lady Audley’s picture</td>
<td>174</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The bruise on Lady Audley’s wrist</td>
<td>176</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Bocca Baciata</td>
<td>190</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Lady Audley’s unwelcome visitor</td>
<td>197</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Illustration for part 13</td>
<td>225</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>“Preparing Tea”</td>
<td>229</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>“An Afternoon in the Nursery”</td>
<td>231</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>“Mariana”</td>
<td>233</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Illustration for part 17</td>
<td>240</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

On the evening of a beautiful, Spring day, a young woman takes her time walking back from an undisclosed location, as she holds some daisies in one hand and an open book in the other. The pathway through which she slowly saunters winds around the grounds of her newly acquired manor house and past a large moss and lichen covered well. Crumbling and in various states of disintegration, the well suffers from obvious disuse, but in its present state it makes a definitive nod toward the old age of the house itself and the antiquity of the name attached to it. The new baroness who walks along this path, on this particular day, emits a type of iconic appeal in her looks and demeanor. She is small of stature with reddish blonde ringlets and large, startling blue eyes. With expressions that can only be defined as “angelic and demure,” she seems the paragon of femininity. Her actions on this day are seemingly innocuous and do not, immediately, cause concern. As any number of women would do, she looks as though she is merely making her way home after a day of relaxation and reading. Seemingly, without a care in the world, she takes her time getting to her destination, carefully positioning her book in her open hands, as she nonchalantly looks about her and continues to sing sweetly.

It is only the most perceptive readers of this scene in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), however, who eventually make the crucial connections to fully understand what the author describes here. Indeed, critical readers eventually understand the implications behind a man's disappearance, his calling on the woman described above only hours before he vanishes, and severe bruises that eventually appear on this same woman's wrists that very evening. As readers continue perusing this story,
they are inevitably led to the awful and quite startling realization that this very woman, who so completely epitomizes ideological and idealized feminine traits, has just very capably attempted the murder of her first husband. Truly horrifying to first-time readers is the realization that, according to the time sequence of the plot, the young woman has knocked her first husband down a well and left him for dead; right before one witnesses her languishing the day away reading and singing, on her way through the grounds.

This most pivotal scene in *Lady Audley's Secret*, illuminates a heroine that is, by far, one of the most recognizable figures of all the fictional characters populating the Sensational novels of the 1860's. In this novel, Braddon relays the tale of a young woman who, although she begins as a governess with an illusive past, eventually enjoys great mobility of class and status when she marries “up” and becomes Lady of Audley Manor. Although she is able to woo and entrance anyone she comes in contact with, if only by her very innocence, beauty, and childlike behavior, doubts do arise about her persona when her nephew's friend, later revealed as her first husband, goes missing. In what then becomes a representative “cat and mouse game,” Braddon's novel highlights the mind power of the pseudo detective Robert Audley, Lucy's nephew, as he tries to first find his friend, George Talboys, and then later incriminate Lucy Audley in the man's disappearance. It is in Braddon's portrayal of Lucy Audley, however, as she attempts to shield her real motives from her husband, nephew, and readers, alike, that the author raises some of the most provocative questions about Victorian women and their personal lives.
In the scene I recount here, one sees a complicated image of a woman who appears both innocent and demurely feminine, while also representing the capacity to commit murder. Throughout her novel, Braddon holds up Lucy as a type of conundrum, a paradoxical figure, who engages in a wide range of unethical acts, but does so always from behind the mask of the idealized feminine. It is the illusive “secret” of the text indicated in the title that Braddon later reveals as Lucy’s propensity toward madness, therefore, accounting for her contradictory persona as the symptoms of nothing more than a madwoman. Still, Braddon's story reveals much more than just the consequences of insanity and it is the implication that Victorian woman’s nature is not unequivocally honest, unassuming, and passive, but rather fully capable of duplicity, vengeance, and aggressiveness that struck hard at the Victorian public's idealized notions about femininity. As W. Fraser Rae argues in his 1865 article for the *North British Review*, “Whenever [Lady Audley] is mediating the commission of something inexpressibly horrible, she is described as being unusually charming.” “All this,” Fraser writes is “exciting; but it is also very unnatural” (*Aurora Floyd*, Appendix, 584). So, when Sensation’s critics witness Lucy Audley as a bigamist, a liar, an attempted murderer, on at least two occasions, and all from the mindset and appearance of what seems like the pinnacle of spotless womanhood, their emotions blaze and reel. These reactions, however, are not just responses to the nature of the plot, but also function as rebuttals to Lucy's obvious *performances* of qualities Victorians considered essential to femininity. This is not natural, Fraser adamantly opines, and yet, albeit frighteningly, Braddon suggests that, indeed, it is.
Braddon’s depiction of a transgressive woman is complicated, at best, and not so easy to sum up in simplistic terms, especially when one considers the specific characterizations that Braddon uses to narrate Lady Audley’s transgressions. If we look back at the opening scene with which I began, we see that in a crucial turning point in the plot in which Braddon lays out Lady Audley’s true, sinister, capabilities, the young woman reappears, from where readers will later learn she has attempted to murder her first husband, with an open book in her hand. An “open book” often emphasizes the idea of full disclosures and honesty, but Braddon uses this concept in an opposite, but meaningful, way. As readers continue to witness Lady Audley’s plotting, manipulations, and overall deceptions, this earlier scene in which she carries an open book does not seem to directly relate to her, as she is full of secrets. Indeed, the “open book” metaphor becomes more about the act of reading, itself, than it does about Lady Audley’s character. Inviting her readers to take a closer look at her heroine, Braddon utilizes the notion of an open book to direct her readers’ approaches to her own story. In other words, this open book motif will lead readers, if critically aware, to the answers of the mystery.

This is not the only occasion in which Braddon showcases Lucy as a reader; however, and she is very purposeful and specific in this rendering, for Lucy importantly only uses “reading” as a type of distraction from her otherwise unsavory actions. This particular reading moment exposes Lucy as only one who pretends to read, and as I will argue more at length in Chapter 4, this type of “reading” aids in her very calculated performance of the ideal woman. Making a type of prop out of her books, Lucy attempts to craft an image of herself as innocent, but also as the benign and non-threatening
woman that connotes Victorian “normalcy”, thus hiding her guilt and delaying her
detection as the single person involved in George Talboys' disappearance. The very fact
that Lucy could use her book as a way of detraeting from her more sinister potential
substantiates a certain tolerance and even societal expectation concerning women's
reading habits. Victorian society’s “tolerance,” however, depended upon the nature or
content of what one was actually reading. Certain texts garnered more tolerance than
others, like Sir Walter Scott's novels or Samuel Richardson's. While we cannot be certain
which one of her books Lucy chooses to use as her prop in the scene recounted here, one
can be sure that she does, later in the novel, specifically mention her affinity for a
Sensational story, even going as far as to try and compare it to her own life.

Braddon Scholarship

It is this moment of readership, and many others like it, that are so subtle and yet
so significant to Braddon’s objective and what she wanted to make of the Sensational
fiction she wrote. While in the last several years the field has been inundated with
scholarship on Braddon's works and almost exclusively on Lady Audley's Secret, there
still remains much work to be done on what I contend is Braddon’s strategic creation and
molding of both her fictional readers and the real female readers who faithfully and
consumed her books. From Braddon’s death in 1915 to the late 1980s, most scholars
overlooked Braddon’s role in Victorian literature as a whole. In fact, as late as 1984,
scholars like Ellen Miller Casey suggest that Braddon never solidifies her theories on
women or the policies that bound them. Braddon “succumb[s] to the pressure of other
people’s prudery and [produces novels],” Casey writes, “that are “less interesting as a
finished work of art than for what [they] reveal about [their] age” (qtd. in Introduction, *Mary Elizabeth Braddon in Context*). Focusing mainly on Braddon’s endings in which the erring heroines are either effectively muted or undergo a reformation, Casey adopts a rather conventional way of addressing Braddon’s novels throughout the 80s. Despite the way in which Braddon’s novels may hint at transgressive inquiries, Casey finds Braddon unable to sustain these ideas to the end. Most early scholarship, then, focuses on Braddon’s implications of character with female heroines like Lady Audley and Aurora Floyd. It is not until the mid 1990s that scholars reassess Braddon’s importance and contributions to Sensation fiction and, more broadly, to Victorian literature as a whole.

In more recent years, however, most Braddon scholars like Lyn Pykett, Pamela Gilbert and Marlene Tromp see Braddon as a specific and poignant voice for the mid-Victorian era and on all aspects of women’s issues, but namely marital roles, property laws, consumerism, and mental health issues. With most reevaluating Braddon’s career as one that made great strides in legitimizing the Sensational genre, Pykett, especially, argues for a reassessment of Braddon’s style and the sheer diligence she instituted in demonstrating the possibilities of Sensation fiction as a much more reputable genre (Pykett, *Mary Elizabeth Braddon*, 130). In fact, Pamela Gilbert and Winnifred Hughes have kick-started a trend of not only endowing Braddon’s oeuvre with more attention and credibility, but also re-positioning some of her most popular novels, like *The Doctor’s Wife*, in a category they refer to as “mid-Victorian realism.” To put Braddon’s works alongside other works like those of George Eliot signifies a distinctive move in thinking differently about these generic boundaries and Braddon’s contributions. It is only a recent
trend, then, to view Braddon’s enormous textual output as a testament to her success as both a Sensationalist and as a savvy businesswoman who understood and could gauge a lucrative market. Writing for the “shilling shocker” market as well as for the more mainstream Sensational ones, Braddon produced hundreds of stories and novels from 1861-1914. This prolificacy has never garnered Braddon the right kind of attention, and in fact, actually worked against her, deterring from any consideration of her as a serious writer. Now, however, the trend is to delve deeper into that amazing amount of texts and “read” this as an ability to sustain popularity by obviously knowing what her audiences wanted. The fact that most of these readers were female has produced the most recent attention and scholars like Haynie, Gilbert, and Tromp connect Braddon’s transgressive heroines to the actual women readers buying these novels. Indeed, as the three scholars concur, the fact that middle-class housewives numbered amongst Braddon’s most loyal fans, says something about the changing face of the consumer, but says a lot more about what these women found so pleasing in adulterous, rebellious heroines like Lucy Audley, Aurora Floyd, and Isabel Gilbert (Haynie, Gilbert, and Tromp, Introduction to *MEB in Context*). Lyn Pykett most recently argues that Braddon’s fictional feminine models represent a changing gendered perspective now apparent at the beginning of the 1860s and extending throughout the period rather than only beginning, with the New Women literature of the 1880s and the fin de siècle as previously argued. Socially, culturally, and politically, Victorian women’s ideas about themselves were changing and Braddon’s Sensational novels have given a whole new perspective on what this feminine audience
really thought about the progressive attitudes that abounded within almost all of Braddon’s works.

An even more recent trend in Braddon scholarship and one that is particularly relevant to my concerns here is the refocusing of attention on the female reader as a figure within Braddon’s text and the effects of reading Sensation Fiction on young girls. Pamela Gilbert investigates the metaphorical discourses surrounding the act of reading and finds that they are mostly those of ingestion when discussing female readership. Citing many of Braddon’s contemporaries and their fears associating book reading with a demoralization, sexual penetration, or even diseased, infestation of bodies, Gilbert uncovers many similar references to reading in Braddon’s novel, *The Doctor’s Wife*. With several comparisons and associations between food and eating alongside literal moments of reading throughout Braddon’s novel, Gilbert argues that Braddon must have been aware of these metaphors and viewed her character Isabel’s reading habits as unhealthy and morally suspect. Of course, there is just as much evidence in descriptions about Isabel’s reading behavior that suggest Braddon does not consider all of Isabel’s readings frivolous or even harmful, but rather only her approach and lack of a well-rounded education. Ann Cvetkovich also takes a comparable view of female readership and the Sensational genre, but focuses her attention on the female reader and emotional affect, thus arguing that the reading of certain texts provides at least the illusion of social and political change. Female readers’ identifications with these Sensational heroines, then, could redirect and shape their energies and later their responses to forms of power and control. In moving more specifically to a discussion of relationships between reader
and female heroine, Lyn Pykett’s work comes close to that of several drama and screen scholars who have focused on the spectator’s, or in this case, reader’s, point of view. Pykett suggests that Sensational authors often spoke directly to women when reading a Sensation novel, “invoking a shared feminine experience” (32). In this particular way, a female reader, then, is offered a complex position usually defined as masculine” (32-33). More than this, since the female reader is simultaneously “subject,” with her identification with the protagonist, but also “object” because of the way melodrama always reinforces normative gender roles, she is in an almost impossible space (32-33).

Certainly, the projects I mention here give a good sense of the new scope of Braddon scholarship. Today, many scholars, view her works as the beginning to worthy conversations about what women were reading throughout the period. My own objective, then, is not to repeat the very astute and convincing arguments concerning Braddon’s attention to her female readers and the more specific arguments that discuss the characterization of Isabel Gilbert in The Doctor’s Wife, Braddon’s most explicit and, therefore, most discussed fictional reader. Instead, I want to look more closely at the overlooked, but nonetheless important examples of readership found in almost every one of Braddon’s earlier novels from 1862-1867. At the height of Sensation’s popularity, as well as in the midst of the controversy about women’s reading habits, Braddon includes very detailed and explicit portrayals of feminine readership. In each case, I will argue, Braddon employs a significant strategy in how the female reader comes to reading, what she selects to read, how she postures herself during the reading process, and the complicated, but not always negative, effects of those readings. Most scholars focus on
Isabel Gilbert and argue that this character reflects Braddon’s anxieties about her own Sensational production and the girls who read her novels. These theories draw from the facts of the novel that seem to connect Isabel’s reading habits to her failed marriage, the death of her husband and lover, and her loneliness by novel’s end. What most do not consider, however, is the extent to which her particular reading behaviors help to make her a repentant woman, and in fact, it is her “education” at the hands of her lover, Roland Landsell, that literally guides her in making better choices and helps her to more efficiently comprehend, understand and apply what she reads. Indeed, Braddon spends an exorbitant amount of time elucidating Isabel’s lack of a proper education. So much so, that once Roland offers her instruction, despite his often eroticized and illicit appeal for her, Isabel actually learns how to be more astute, critical, and even more moral through the literature and poetry Roland suggests and their conversations about each one.

It is not just in The Doctor’s Wife that Braddon employs these tactics concerning fictional female readers, and as I will discuss in each subsequent chapter, the way she uses the act of reading as a specific way of educating and preparing her heroines for the “real-life” situations they will encounter is just as important. These women either learn how to better themselves and their situations, build strong and lasting feministic bonds, or investigate and even astutely detect those who would do them harm.

This project, then, intends to fill some of the gaps in the scholarship, while also seeking to make sense of the entire reading process as Braddon employs it in most of these earlier works. Most importantly, I argue that one cannot ignore the significant similarities between Braddon’s fictional readers and those real women who were avidly
borrowing or purchasing these texts throughout Sensation’s earlier period. What I argue here is that while Braddon obviously creates specific examples of fictional readers throughout each of her early novels, by doing so, she also simultaneously molds and initiates a particular type of real female reader as well. That is, in novels like *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *Eleanor’s Victory*, Braddon employs an apparent detective style, one that ultimately prompts real readers to read in a critical and observant manner if they want to solve the predominant mystery of the text. In this way of reaching out to her female audiences, Braddon coaxes her readers into a very distinctive reading style, one in which the reader must become more astutely aware and especially of characters like, Lucy Audley, who performs common feminine activities like reading so as to appear innocent. I argue, then, that there is a distinctive “training” taking place here, as Braddon manipulates her readers to either effectively strip away the façade of Lucy Audley and fully understand what this character’s theatrics symbolize or join Eleanor in tracking elusive criminals’ clues, as she seeks out her revenge for her father’s death. In more of a conceptual sense, novels like *Charlotte’s Inheritance*, *Birds of Prey*, and *John Marchmont’s Legacy*, place the lead heroines in dire circumstances only to have another lead female character learn to fully comprehend the severity of the situation so that they might save the vulnerable woman. This, of course, strengthens the feminine bonds between fictional characters, but, most importantly I argue, it also projects the concept of an anomalous feminine community to real readers as well. Those who “read” these novels also “read” examples of womanhood that resist the social and normative standards which dictate women must be passive and vulnerable or in constant competition with one
another, and instead, see women who defy the ideological definitions of ultimate
dependence, frivolity, pettiness, and selfishness. Braddon consciously used her particular
medium, then, to create new tolerance for women as literate, intellectual, and involved
citizens.

Critiques of Sensation

Because the act of reading is at once an accepted and suspicious pastime, I argue
that Braddon’s repetitive and specific use of reading moments provides an alternative
narrative for ways of thinking about female readers. Braddon’s characterizations of
female readers, then, challenge the narrow-minded representations or warnings Victorian
society attached to female readership. Indeed, there seems to be little controversy over
the fact that it was young women who were mostly numbered among Sensation's avid
following, and as Elaine Showalter later specifies, the genre was really the main pastime
for middle class girls who could afford ample amounts of leisure time. Many regarded
this idea of “leisure” time and the freedom such moments allowed as the real problem.
Without any real guidance or limitations over what and how to read, young girls’
Sensational readings openly exposed young girls to a range of what most considered
unethical and unfeminine role models.

Throughout the 19th century, what constituted “normal” femininity or a woman’s
essential nature was always in debate. Cultural decorum anticipated and, at times even
mandated, that women, especially those of the middle to upper middle class, focus their
training and education toward lives as future homemakers, wives, and mothers.
Acclaimed poet, Coventry Patmore, perhaps says it best and most explicitly in his highly
popular “Angel in the House” series, when he outlines the makings of not only a happy marriage, but also what constitutes ideal, and later, iconic femininity. Excessively passive and demure with only the family's interests at heart, the ideal woman had no individual desires or needs beyond those of catering to her husband's whims and the well-being of her children. Partly in honor of his own wife, Emily, whom he personally considered the epitome of the feminine ideal, Patmore, with his poem, solidified and substantiated what the Victorian public had always expected of women.

The ideal model of the Victorian woman who epitomized passivity, honor, duty, and maternity is, of course, at strict odds with a Sensational heroine who often showcases an active, independent, duplicitous, and desirous subjectivity. In fact, a lot of Victorians found the women who existed within the pages of a Sensational text so disconcerting that they dubbed these fictional characters “anti-heroines,” thus not just remarking on their frightening displays of autonomy, but also even more crucially, I think, on the ways in which these characters, when configured as the heroine of the text, question an established literary form and tradition as well. Literature, then, that sold copies by the thousands and depended upon not only thrills and chills, but also its alternative view of women for its success, certainly set the literary world and Sensationalists’ peers into an uproar.

As one of Sensation's most vehement critics, Margaret Oliphant frequently condemned female readers and their choices of Sensation novels. To see women in “fits of passion,” Oliphant raged, posed a particular danger for readers, who were assuredly mostly female. Her fears though are not just for the way in which this might lead to
corruption, but that authors of Sensation discussed this “eagerness for physical sensation” in terms of “women who wait only for “flesh and muscles, for strong arms that seize her, and warm breath that thrills her through” (Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine, September 1867, Appendix to Aurora Floyd 599). What Oliphant actually saw as an irreversible possibility was the idea that as more and more girls came to Sensation for their reading materials, the girls themselves, as well as the Victorian public, would inevitably begin to define girlhood and even womanhood in terms of individuated passions, desires, and a distinctive sexual subjectivity, like the character traits resonant in any one of the Sensation novels of the 1860s. As Sensation novels, and Braddon's particularly became more and more popular so too might the novels’ themes, and once perpetuated, despite how inadvertently, Oliphant worried about how this would undermine a woman’s purpose and the sanctity of Victorian domesticity.

Oliphant’s condemnations of Sensation have a lot to do with her distaste for Braddon, herself. In fact, most female Sensationalists found it very difficult to convince critics that they led separate lives from their “anti-heroic” creations. In specific regard to Braddon, Oliphant often made the case that in order to write about such harrowing tales or illicit occurrences, like affairs, one must have a close connection with such livelihoods. For Braddon, however, this was only partly accurate. Mary Elizabeth was born on October 4th 1835 and was one of three children born to her Irish mother, Fanny White and her Cornish father, Henry Braddon. Plagued by overextended finances and debts, Braddon learned early, by watching her father, how one could survive by writing to make ends meet. Henry Braddon wrote for several periodicals, such as The Sportsman’s
Magazine, in attempts to better support the family. As a result, the relationship between her parents was often fraught with disagreements and in 1839, Braddon’s parents separated. After the separation, Braddon remained mainly with her mother and it was this closeness between mother and daughter that also perpetuated her love for reading and the great novelists of her time. Reportedly an avid reader, Braddon’s mother introduced her daughter to the works of Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray and Bulwer-Lytton. After her older brother left for India, leaving only Braddon and her mother together, Braddon pursued a career on the stage with the pseudonym, Mary Seyton.

Victorian actresses had quite an infamous reputation, suffering associations with prostitutes and fallen women because of fears about the nature of performance, fiction, and self-fashioning.

Perhaps it was Braddon’s past as an actress that fueled some of Oliphant’s distaste for her heroines and novels; most likely, however, it was Braddon’s long standing and unconventional affair with John Maxwell, a married publisher. With the success of her first novel, The Octoroon or The Lily of Louisiana (1859), Braddon decided she would write full time and that is when she first met Maxwell. In 1860, Maxwell’s new magazine Robin Goodfellow kicked off with Braddon’s Lady Audley’s Secret as its premiere serial. Although the serial did not garner much response at first, Maxwell believed in her talent and eventually, Braddon did write her first best-seller by reworking her second novel and changing the title from Three Times Dead to The Trail of the Serpent. In 1861, publisher and star writer began an affair and eventually started living together. Braddon quickly became a surrogate mother to Maxwell’s children by his first wife, Mary Ann Crowley,
who was confined to a Dublin asylum. Together, Maxwell and Braddon would go on to have five children together that, to most Victorians would be considered illegitimate. Indeed, the couple could not officially marry until Crowley died in 1876. This lifestyle was certainly not traditional and for many of Braddon’s critics, any knowledge of her situation added even more venom to the accusations leveled at the subject matter of her novels.

Similar to Oliphant's condemnations, and quite frequently in publications like the Quarterly Review, critics called out young girls who prominently numbered amongst the readers of the genre, saying that those who read “wallow from day to day, amid filth of the most defiling kind,”(Appendix, Aurora Floyd) thus blatantly jeopardizing their moral cores. As so many contemporary and present day scholars point out, if women dedicated even a third of their waking hours to the reading of such texts, then they did so at what was seen as the crucial neglect of important tasks or roles. Whether women used Sensation fiction as an escape from domestic duties or as a form of procrastination from other expectations, most viewed the effects as the same. As Andrew Radford points out, magazines such as Fraser and the Quarterly Review repeatedly focused on the ills of Sensation and its effects on young girls’ “moral standards,” which most already viewed as having the potential to be “fluctuating, volatile, and unreliable” (Radford 67). While these latter qualities seem to obviously contradict the more refined and genteel attributes defined as essential to a woman’s nature, it seems imbedded within the logic here that young girls needed direct guidance and strict limitations to realize their full potential. Indeed, most of these critics’ beliefs hinged on the idea that young girls were not
inherently capable of the discernment necessary for distinguishing between reality and fiction, and, like Radford in his *Reader's Guide* and Lynda Hart in *Fatal Women* (1997) both imply, after having read so many stories rife with scenes of transgressive women, the spectrum which existed between “normal” femininity and the “fallen woman” glaringly shortened.

If in any way, the Victorians saw the line between the ideal woman and the fallen one as indiscriminate, it jeopardized the culture’s ideological understanding of Victorian womanhood. The prospect of a Victorian woman developing strong attachments to female characters, who so many believed touted and promoted amoral and, therefore unwomanly, behaviors, prompted questions and concern about the feminine ideal, an undeniable mainstay and foundation for British life. Even more unsettling is the idea that if women became so wrapped up in a Sensational novel, and could successfully, even if only for a few hours, escape from their otherwise mundane duties, then avid female readers offered up an alternative view of women, one that revealed needs and desires that exceeded the boundaries of their feminine sphere for which Victorian ideologies gave them credit. If only on the most simplistic level, then, a married woman who became enraptured and consumed in the latest serial or novel, wherever she might be reading, took quality time away from her family. To match the concerns that critics leveled at this type of reading which could only cause marital strife, they found it just as disconcerting, possibly even more so, for young girls to read this fiction as well. Finding the younger, unmarried girls the most vulnerable and impressionable to these stories, critics feared that, over time, desensitize them to the blatant examples of immorality depicted in its
pages. Dissolution of the deeply ingrained value system would eventually alter the realities of the feminine sex. The very idea that now these books were readily available and women no longer had to rely on their father or husband's home library, is a testament to the ways in which women were, for the first time, monopolizing a market as avid consumers. The concept of a marketplace and the quickly developing department store intersected with these changes in reading habits and women's access to more authority, especially since they could shop in a bookstore and buy what, visually, peaked their interests.

In her book, *Shopping for Pleasure*, Erika Rappaport discusses the development of London’s West End as a commercial haven for the female consumer. She theorizes that the development of the West End “produced new notions of desire, rewrote gender ideals,” and produced a “bourgeois femininity that was born within the public realm” (Rappaport 5). This bourgeois femininity was built upon the idea of a very public type of pleasure and seeking pleasure in the act of shopping. Indeed, Victorian culture often viewed women's consumerism as suspicious and frighteningly risky because of its very public displays of the relationship between desire and gratification. As Rappaport affirms, making a purchase played only a partial role in the real pleasure inherent in the act of shopping and, indeed, the tantalizing effect really had much more to do with the way shopping elicited “discuss[ion], looking at, touching, buying and rejecting commodities,” therefore making decisions and altogether relishing the susceptibility to the visceral sights and sounds of the downtown shops (Rappaport 5). Naturally, then, the sheer physicality of shopping was often viewed in sexual terms, Rapport writes, and
women who avidly purchased commodities for their own singular enjoyment and public
gratification did so at the risk of an unsavory and demeaning alignment with “public
women” or prostitutes. Nevertheless, as Rappaport amends, even if there were critics of
women’s consumption, they “never questioned the assumption that [shopping] was a
’natural’ feminine pastime” (Rappaport 5). That is, although women had generally
always made the decisions about buying food and clothing for households, it was the
peddlers and merchants who came to them, thus genteel ladies did not have to leave and
actively search out their wares or bargains. A woman’s entrance into a public market,
literally the shops in town, offered her a space outside of the safe, private boundaries of
her ordained sphere. This is not to say, however, that women of the mid-century had not
gradually become more active participants in London’s cultural pursuits and, in fact, as
Rappaport argues, women of this period toured the different regions of London, “strolled
in the city’s parks” and “visited its museums” (Rappaport 7). With that said, there were
always limitations and “for much of the period a woman’s freedom to ‘walk alone’ in the
city was constrained by physical inconveniences and dangers as well as by social
conventions that deemed it entirely improper for a woman to roam alone out-of-doors”
(Rappaport 7). For these reasons, the (un)chaperoned woman was always relatable to the
streetwalker or, worse, fallen woman. The bourgeois female shopper, then, challenged
these ideologies, while giving herself more freedom to be away from home. Critics of
the steady increase in female consumerism voiced one fear above all others. That is, if
women enjoy the spoils of the store, making of themselves quite a spectacle, as they
publicly try on makeup, clothes, jewelry, and even search through books according to
their own whims, then there was an inevitable, and perhaps irreversible, self-fashioning process taking place. In this way, the time-honored essential qualities of womanhood, morality, chastity, and passiveness, were at stake, especially if the female shopper took these newly acquired commodities and self-perceptions back into the home. A sullying of the home, even if only metaphorical, was a pervasive fear that dominated the way in which Victorians viewed themselves.

As Rappaport continues, however, the nature of the female shopper bore just as much of a legal ramification as it did a philosophical or ideological one. According to Rappaport, by the mid to late century, county courts were filled with cases involving women consumers and their debts (Rappaport 48). Regardless of whether women managed their own inherited funds or depended upon their husband’s pin money for commodities, it was clear that the female shopper was forcing Victorian society to rethink women’s “legal agency” (Rappaport 48). Prior to the 1860s, although a woman might mismanage her money, rampantly buying on credit and therefore accruing more debts than she or her husband could reasonably pay back, the money and the goods owned were undeniably the husband’s property. Although slow to start, many cases began to result in judges exonerating the husband and, unprecedentedly, making the wife financially responsible for any debts she, herself, incurred. These types of verdicts eventually caused an upheaval in the way Victorians thought about women and property laws. Rappaport perhaps says it best when she argues that, for the first time, these rising numbers of female consumers set into motion debates about “the meaning of family, property, and consumption” (emphasis Rappaport’s, 48), thus reshaping the public and
private sectors to such an extent that “family and the economy [could] hardly be regarded as separate spheres” (Rappaport 48).

The Book Market

It is not hard to see, then, how the act of reading, although certainly a “private” act as well, threatened the ideal image of womanhood, if for no other reason, than that the female reader could exercise individuated desires and thoughts apart from her duties as daughter, wife, or mother. The pervasiveness of such concerns and the climate surrounding Sensation fiction is one of the key elements that Braddon exposes with each novel I discuss here. Because she understood the demographics of her target audience and also fully comprehended the Victorian public’s restrictions, limitations, and denials of intellectualism for that audience, Braddon represents the act of reading as a noteworthy pastime for women.

Richard Altick and Kate Flint in their respective books entitled The Common Reader (1957) and The Woman Reader (1995), illuminate the very crux of what constituted these concerns about female reading. Since young girls mostly came to reading as a family hobby, thus having access to only the books in their father’s library, parents could control availability and selection. Flint, however, suggests that through her extensive research into period letters, diaries, and memoirs, young girls usually made a distinction between reading on weekdays and what they could read on weekends. Although readings on the weekends might have been less supervised, there is still a sense that girls often have to “sneak” readings, regardless of the day of the week, with which they knew their mothers and fathers would strongly disapprove. Supervision of reading
practices, almost exclusively relegated towards girls, maintained a stronghold on women's leisurely reading. Obviously, reading aloud further controlled the girl's reading habits because the entire family was privy to not only the content covered, but also to the young lady's vocalized reactions to the literature. Conversely, and perhaps more frighteningly, are the unknown responses to novels when read privately, and these, of course, caused much more criticism about feminine readership in general. In other words, Victorian society felt it a part of feminine nature to read certain types of literature, those that generally boasted of melodramatic plot lines and over-sentimentality, but once the reading challenged cultural decorum or deeply ingrained definitions of femininity, the public was more apt to view it as abnormal and subject such material to tougher criticisms.

I point here toward the changes in the book trade in the early 1850s as having had much to do with this new way of reading in that it altered not only what was available to women for reading, but also how one could go about reading it, something Braddon makes note of throughout her most notable novels. In fact, many of Braddon’s heroines are said to have received their novels through Mudie’s or similar networks, which historically made it easier for young women to access more types of books and, for Braddon in particular, begin their educational process that was necessary to solve the crime, undergo reformations, come to a friend’s aid, or realize the potential of their own femininity.

In 1852, Charles Edward Mudie established a circulating library in New Oxford Street. He offered low rates for subscriptions and essentially began loaning or “renting”
books from any one of his branches located throughout London. By setting up one of the
largest and most successful book exporting services of its kind, Mudie catered his
business to country people living out of reach of his city branches. Employing eight
“vans” that delivered books in various parts of London and its far reaching outskirts,
Mudie could reach hundreds of clients, mostly women, who might not have had the
chance to buy the newest copies of a serial or a newly bound three-decker novel. Mudie's
enterprise forever altered reading habits because now, as never before, readers could receive deliveries throughout the year and stay up to date with the latest trends or authors
(The English Common Reader). Public libraries, too, provided a space, like nothing before, which automatically cultivated a very privatized act of reading because one would have to stay quiet amongst other readers. Although at their onset, Victorians associated public libraries with the lower classes and a place for vagrants to get out of the harsher weather elements, eventually, libraries provided clean and well-ventilated spaces for the public to read privately, especially women and girls. Women could now physically remove themselves from the controlled, thus safe, space of the home and enter a more public arena in which they could freely choose what to read. Essentially complex in its nature, then, I argue that the public library's space for reading simultaneously placed women in the public realm, while also, perhaps contradictorily, requiring a very private act, like reading to oneself. Because Victorians considered reading a safer act when it was a public one, even if that meant only reading aloud to one's family, the concept of “silent” reading, as a very private, individualized, act, enhanced anxieties. Avid female participants in the library's spaces for reading found that they, for perhaps the first time,
could respond, react, and feel what they might to the novels they chose; thus somewhat undercutting reading as a public activity and really emphasizing its possibilities for more secrecy.

Definitions of the Form

The choice of reading a Sensational text would inevitably provide women with an outlet for getting in touch with their own, secretive, passions. Truly causing a physical “sensation,” these novels were reputed to have the power to forever alter both mind and body. Although Sensation fiction seemed to explode onto the scene with Wilkie Collins’s publication of The Woman in White in 1861, which quickly earned him the title of the Father of Sensation, it was not entirely a new format. Indeed, from the beginning of the century, the Victorian public used the word “sensation” to describe various items and concepts from an inventive household product that was creating a “sensation” to a particularly harrowing crime reported in the London News that the public considered representative of “sensational” style journalism. Many scholars have also pointed to the use of the word to describe various forms of the arts throughout the period. Certain paintings or artistic styles as well as theater productions and melodramas were dubbed as “sensational,” or causing a sensation to those that witnessed them. As Alberto Gabriele accounts in his book on the readership of Braddon's self-edited magazine Belgravia, the word appears several times within the serial between the years of 1867 and 1870 first describing a “sensational” new style of fur coat and a new Indian tea, next as an emotion related to the unraveling of a mystery about factory production, and, finally, as the type of tortures one expects for a captured prisoner in a serialized fictional story. Despite its
frequent usage by the mid to late 1860s, most scholars and the *OED*, however, attribute
one of the first usages of the word to Henry Longueville Mansel, who, in a barrage of
insults, impugns the Sensational genre in an 1863 edition of the *Quarterly Review*.
Mansel describes this sect of literature as one that merely “preached to the nerves,” thus
marking it as Sensational because it, literally, and according to him, quite basely,
capitalized on exciting one’s nerves and nothing more (“Sensational Novels”, *Quarterly
Review* April 1863, Appendix to *Aurora Floyd* 573). In this same defining article, Mansel
makes a tangible connection between what audiences *read* and the actual *physical*
effects on their bodies. Mansel’s claims that Sensation novels “stimulat[ed] nerves, “caused a
breathless rapidity, and were, altogether, an example of the worst tastes and habits,” even
“diseased appetites,” shows what he saw as a vile and dire genre for sure, but in a way
that was inextricably corporal (Mansel, *Quarterly Review*). In *Theories of Reading:
Books, Bodies, and Bibliomania*, Karen Littau emphasizes these same connections
between books and the body, suggesting that reading is a communing of two bodies “one
made of paper and ink and one made of flesh and blood” (2). Littau also reasons that
since the 1700s most physicians aligned reading with bodily exercise, thus further
making a connection between bodies and books. For these physicians, reading
“exercise[d] vocal chords” and “lips as they mouth[ed] and murmur[ed] the sounds of
words” (2). While commonplace during Sensation’s heyday, Littau brings attention to
how medical theorists and scientists of the 18th century also spent time focusing on the
positive or negative effects that reading could have on the body. Strictly speaking, it is
affective responses that seemingly cause the most concern and as Littau affirms, it was
the “sublimity of rapture or the tenderness of sentiment” that scholars often readily
“condemned as dangerously irrational” (2). Indeed, the theory that reading could induce
a type of madness manifests throughout the 18th and predominately in the 19th century as
a tangible set of specific symptoms known as “bibliomania” (5). A lot of reading critics
referred to bibliomania by its more general name, “the novel reading disease,” but
regardless of moniker, the so-called disease could cause a plethora of symptoms ranging
from “constipation, a flabby stomach, eye and brain disorders, nerve complaints, and
mental disease” (5). Most importantly here, critics of reading behaviors linked the
negative effects of avid readership almost exclusively to the body. In fact, it seems as
though imbedded within all of the criticisms of reading behaviors there is a particular fear
and anxiety about the possible degeneration of bodily health.

In these published critiques, and especially the ones concerning Sensation fiction,
the repetitive use of words like “tastes” and “appetites,” to describe an avid reader’s
proclivities certainly mark this genre as not only having to do with the body or the
nervous system, but also being a type of food for the mind, which directly underscores
anxieties about ingestion. Mansel might have been the first credited with the terminology
for this genre, but he was not the only critic to use food and consumption as a metaphor
for Sensation’s effects. In fact, as Pamela Gilbert notes, novels opened up an entire
“metaphoric field” in which the discourse aligned the act of reading certain novels with
eating, drug intake, and even sexual intercourse (Gilbert 65). In line with this, and
according to Andrew Radford, those who tried to make sense of the predilection for these
novels over other genres found the desire akin to an appetite for “fiery sauces” or
“strongly seasoned meats and drink” (Radford, 70). These “appetites” quickly converged into “addictions” and it was not long before the language attacking such predilections looked more like an uncontrollable need for a “fix,” much like an “opium eater” (Radford, 68), than just a craving for food. In attempts to make sense of these varying comparisons, Gilbert stresses that the significance of how the public viewed reading as an act stays the same regardless of metaphor. “In all of these metaphors,” Gilbert reasons, “the text is a substance that enters the reader and has an effect on him or her,” thus, the “text is not an inert thing to be merely manipulated,” but rather, “active- even opportunistic” (Gilbert 66). As Gilbert and many other scholars have noted, the act of reading, this metaphorical, but nonetheless “real” ingestion of the words on the page, with no tangible way to sift or censor, puts the morality of the mind at risk, thus inextricably putting the body that does the mind’s bidding at risk as well. Eventually, this “social corruption,” as Mansel often termed it, spread like a disease amongst society's most vulnerable (i.e young girls, and the lower classes) with its infiltrating power, and as it did, the metaphors again changed to ones of plague and mass contagion.

Although Mansel consistently had nothing good to say about Sensational texts or their authors, he, like so many other critics of Victorian popular culture, often contradicted himself to the point that readers could easily confuse what Mansel considered Sensational. According to Andrew Radford in *A Reader’s Guide to Victorian Sensation Fiction*, Mansel “accuses the Sensation genre of being numbingly dull (lacking in all variety) at the same time as he decries it as hyper-stimulating” (11). For Mansel, then, it seems as though he only knew Sensation when he saw it; that is, at one point
suggesting that the novels could be “classified according to which sensation they produced” (11) and later admitting that there were some generic examples that only “gently stimulate[d] a particular feeling,” while others “carr[ied] the whole nervous system by stream” (11).

With so many facets attached to a single word, it is no wonder that its epistemological progression toward a meaning dealing with low, cheap literature is confusing. It is both an emotion derived from a certain catalyst and the catalyst itself. Even when related to fiction, the word “sensational” had been used to describe several different types of literature throughout the late Romantic period. These novels also propagated scenes of sensational crimes, much like what came later. Andrew Radford pinpoints these novels as Bulwer-Lytton's *Lucretia* (1846), Sophia Crawford's *A Double Marriage* (1851), Noelle Radcliffe's *The Secret History of a Household* (1855), Caroline Clive's *Paul Ferroll* (1855), Emma Robinson's *Mauleverer's Divorce* (1857), and Dinah Craik's *A Life for a Life* (1859). While as Radford points out these novels call into question present-day scholars' tendencies to reduce Sensation's popularity to just a decade, it is also important to note what the Sensation of the 1860s offered that was so different from preceding versions, which in turn caused the mass influx of attacks and criticism. In his influential essay, “What is Sensational About the Sensation Novel?,” Patrick Brantlinger gives perhaps the best answer to the question as to why the 1860s form of Sensation was so successful and provoking. Part of its simultaneous appeal and loathing comes from its associations with earlier, but similar novels representing some of the same forms. Notably, Brantlinger positions Sensational fiction in an indiscriminate
place somewhere between the Gothic genre and Melodrama. Like the Gothic Fiction of
the 17th and 18th century, Sensation Fiction, often regurgitated plots that were generically
familiar in their depictions of young innocents, usually females, who must, after having
been held captive, overcome the violent oppression of an authority figure. What made the
1860s sensationalized text different, however, was that, this time, authors replaced the far
removed locales of the Gothic text, as in the case of Anne Radcliffe’s Italian monasteries,
for instance, and frighteningly relocated them to any Englishman's back door, thus adding
to the appeal for some readers, but also to the discomfort for others. Although many
other present day Victorian scholars now avidly make this connection, Brantlinger and
Winnifred Hughes perhaps were the first to point to late Romanticism and Melodrama as
the most influential precursor for the drama that unfolded within the pages of a Sensation
Novel. Like Brantlinger argues, Victorian stage dramas often enacted similar plot lines
and themes as the Sensational novel, especially in their dramatization of usually one
criminal act that must be rectified by the last curtain. These similarities led most
Victorians to associate Sensation fiction with popular or “low” theater. To strengthen this
claim, Brantlinger points to how audiences and critics, alike, were aware of these
parallels as evident in Richard Holt Hutton's editorial for The Spectator: “The
melodrama of the cheap theaters is an acted Sensational Novel” (5). While Hutton's
comment definitely points toward a genesis or parentage for Sensation, it also very
clearly categorizes the genre as “cheap,” therefore indisputably marking it as low art.
With that said, however, and as Hughes slightly amends, ”With the rise of the Sensation
novel, melodrama . . . lost its innocence” (qtd in Brantlinger 5). Hughes importantly
reasons that this connection not only affected Sensation, but also forever altered the public's conceptions of melodrama as well and, perhaps, not necessarily for the better. Still, despite the slight shift in public perception about Melodrama, according to Hughes, most still favored this genre over Sensation Fiction. That is to say, in melodrama’s plot resolutions, it seemed to at least “celebrate virtue and domesticity, but the sensation novel questions them, at least by implication” (qtd. in Brantlinger 5). To further align the two genres and complicate public reception, many Sensation authors were playwrights, themselves, and the most successful and popular novels, like Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* and Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* were easily adapted for the stage.

Because of her attempts to convince the public of Sensation's finer attributes, Braddon might not have reveled in the associations with Melodrama, however, she did put a great amount of stock in Sensation's other precursor-- the Newgate Novel. These novels enjoyed popularity and frequent publishings between the 1830s and 1840s, focusing mainly on issues of criminals and their crimes, as well as their lives in and around the Newgate gallows. Braddon's long time supporter, mentor, and pen-pal, Edward Bulwer Lytton, was a famed Newgate novelist whose works numbered in the hundreds. Despite the genre's avid following, however, according to Altick, Newgate authors still could only boast of a 10 to 15 year stint of sustained popularity. Altick attributes this seemingly shortened period to the genre's many critics who found it disturbing that these novels seemed to “romanticize criminals, a practice that was inimical to public safety” (*Victorian Studies in Scarlet* 73). In her many letters to Bulwer-Lytton, Braddon effusively praises his talents as well as his Newgate novels, thus
actually admitting to mirroring her own style and works around his, an œuvre that she sees as the best combination of truthful accounts and incident.

Unfortunately for Braddon and her fellow Sensationalists, legitimizing their genre proved difficult and complicated, at best. One of those reasons was that there had always existed, albeit in the underbelly or underground literary world, publications that capitalized on the bodily sensations created through harrowing and suspenseful tales. These particular texts’ demarcation as the “penny dreadfuls” or the “shilling shocker,” however, prescribed them a lower social status, therefore, limiting their wide-range appeal. Because of their association with the “shilling,” a cheap currency, for sure, the public relegated these serials to the hobbies of the poorer classes, marking them as an inappropriate pastime for any genteel, middle class reader. Usually sold cheaply at railway stalls, these penny mags with often their tell-tale yellow backed bindings, were, indeed, an immediate and public signifier for low art and a lower class status. So, when the Sensational fiction of the 1860s first appears in serial publications also featured at railway stations, despite the fact that they often appeared in magazines which most considered more reputable, like Dickens' *Household Words*, for instance, the associations between the two was, undeniably, complete. Indeed, no one could really dispute the similarities between Sensation with its depictions of shocking crimes and usually one nail-biting, predominate mystery and these other penny dreadfuls. For Braddon, especially, the connection was somewhat more detrimental to what she intended with her more reputable form of Sensation. This was mostly due to the fact that while writing for more credible mags like *Temple Bar*, she also composed for these same penny
mags that detracted from her credibility. Regardless of whether it was a penny dreadful or more of an example of Sensation proper, this genre's success depended upon the “cliffhanger” format, its serialization not only made writers like Braddon lament about feeling “forc[ed] into overstrained action in the desire to sustain interest” (Devoted Disciple 13) but also changed how the public read too. In fact, as Altick affirms, in his extensive study on the development of English reading habits, the serial format in which all Sensation Fiction was published, not only made stories more interesting but it also provoked and guaranteed a steady stream of future sales for the magazine. Attributing the onset of the serial to the publication of Charles Dickens' Pickwick Papers, Altick reasons that “it took a degree of self-discipline few men possessed to listen to one's friend about what would happen in . . . [the] next number and yet delay one's own reading of the book until, long months in the future, it was complete, bound, and available in the circulating library” (The English Common Reader 280). Moreover, if one bought the serial installments first, instead of waiting for the bound edition, it could actually cost them considerably less; thus, this is how the serial format reached not only a solidly successful middle class “who could afford to spend a shilling a month,” but also a working class too, who saved a third of the price, if buying in this cheaper bound format. In fact, once the serial had run its course, one could even buy the complete novel, in volumes, for only a shilling more. The secret to Sensation's early success and novelty appeal, then, was also its “Achilles heel,” for, as Braddon's Sensationalist writer Sigismund Smith in the Doctor's Wife says it best, he must always “wr[ite] for his public, a public that bought its literature in the same manner as its pudding- in penny slices” (12). Often covered in ink
and heedlessly rushing between one text and another, Smith, as a carefully crafted character, helps Braddon to showcase a literal manifestation of every stigma attached to this genre. Demonstrating with Smith's character, that Sensation is, indeed, a “dirty” business Braddon really undercuts her own profession, thus exposing the publishing climate of the sensational world with an emphasis on how the Sensational process, itself, does not easily lend one to the belabored and thoughtful writing that she must have believed important for the creation of high art. Smith, then, is certainly an ironic, but nonetheless reflexive, portrayal of Braddon's own conflicted feelings regarding disjunctions between her true authorial aspirations and this degraded, but very profitable writing style. As she candidly admits to Bulwer-Lytton, Braddon felt as though she had written as “conscientiously” as she could, but more “with a view to the interests of [her] publishers than with any great regard to [her] own reputation” (*Devoted Disciple* 10). Although Braddon consistently put much effort into demonstrating Sensation's worth and value, she still found most of her critics very quick to demean her work as “low” or to question her innate talents as a writer. It is no surprise, then, that in her letters to her cherished mentor, Braddon describes herself as a “patcher up of sham antiquities as compared to a Grecian sculptor . . . a dauber of pantomime scenes, all Dutch metal, glue and spangles, as compared with a great painter” (*Devoted Disciple* 11). Here Braddon's lack of confidence certainly shines through, as she envisions herself as only a mere imitation of a real writer. When considering the time constraints on producing serial fiction, however, one can truly believe that Braddon encompasses the nature of the fast moving machine and industry that Sensationalism was, when she affirms, “I [have] never
written a line that wasn't against time” (Devoted Disciple 10). It was surely stable and profitable work, but satisfying the machine of sensationalism, and reaching a large public base, constituted by both readers and publishers alike, came at the price of impossible pressures, whose results cramped an artistic process and did not easily procure literary credibility. To say a “large” public is perhaps an understatement; for, by 1863, publishing houses could boast 10,000 novels in circulation and Wilkie Collins, probably one of the most successful Sensationalists, could boast of an audience of readers numbering in the millions (Nestor 24-25).

One of the main reasons though that Braddon's Sensationalism suffered so much criticism was that Sensational serials could boast of avid readership on both sides of that tangible line dividing the middle and lower classes. Despite Elaine Showalter's comment that the reading of Sensation novels was primarily a middle class female hobby, the lower working class, still mostly females demonstrated immense interest and countable readership as well. Not so surprising, then, is the revelation that through the Sensational novel the lower classes were also privy to their social superiors' awful failures and horrific crimes, as most of these novels dealt with the middle to upper middle class lifestyle (Brantlinger). The working class woman, then, who read Lady Audley's Secret, could acquire, if only imaginatively, some type of social mobility, like in the case of the novel's lead character, who hides her lower class origins and marital status so that she might enjoy the luxuries of wealth. As subject matter, class distortions or changes in status, if only performative, were certainly threatening to the stability of middle class respectability. As similarly referenced here in this 1868 cartoon from Punch, it is a very
meaningful statement, when one critic condemns Braddon for bringing the “literature of the kitchen to the drawing room.”


**SENSATION NOVELS.**

*Mary.* "Please, Sir, I’ve been looking everywhere for the third volume of that book you were reading."

*Lodger.* "Oh, I took it back to the library this morning, I——."

*Mary.* "Oh! then will you tell me, Sir, if as how the ‘Markis’ found out as she’d missed ‘er two fat ‘usbandis!!”
The theme and, therefore the concern, is obvious from this illustration featured at the height of Sensation. Here, the master and servant have obviously been sharing a novel and this pervasive trend began to alter and blur the lines between respectable, high art and the type of novels normally associated with the lower classes. Additionally, and perhaps the most frightening, is that since her master has already returned the novel, she must rely, then, on further conversations with him about the contents of that volume. The nature of the story given here seems indicative of a Sensational one with its clues about poisonings and bigamy, and because of this content, it seems to breach lines of social decorum mitigating class lines. Particularly relevant to my argument is the fact that this is a male-female relationship. Part of the problem with associations like these was also the idea that women read and enjoyed, even seemingly became obsessed, with the details of these types of stories.

**Braddon's Sensational Realism**

Many times throughout her early career, however, Braddon spoke publicly about the possibility of aligning Sensation with reason, as a way of bridging generic gaps between Sensation and its competing genres and perspectives. Indeed, in what represents perhaps the most blatant example of her justifications of form, Braddon writes to Bulwer-Lytton about how she could never imagine a successful work of literature that was “without incident, and in referring to her own uncle’s death, who was tragically and
mysteriously murdered, Braddon strives to make her point that life is often full of incidental occurrences that mimic those found in Sensation Fiction.

In fact, and what I argue is one of the leading reasons that an examination of Braddon's style is still noteworthy are the specific ways in which she tried to combine a Sensational perspective with that of a very realistic and possible outcome. Perhaps the most notable reason that Sensation suffered such a critical backlash was the way in which these novels, even if only superficially, looked crucially different from the competing genre of Realism. In fact, if one listened only to the condemnations of Sensation published regularly in popular journals throughout the 1860s, as a genre, it would seem in direct contrast and opposition to the novels of authors like George Eliot and Anthony Trollope who gained more respect as Realist writers. This line of reasoning, however, might prove slightly incorrect, especially when one considers the nature and status of Realism in the 1860s. Although it reigns as perhaps the more canonical and “literary” of the two genres, Realism, itself, was still a relatively new concept as well. As a genre “proper” and as the form presently familiar and identifiable today, it does not really coalesce until the end of the 18th century, and as David Skilton conveys, did not become a more popularized part of the English language concerning the literary arts until the late 1850s (The Early and Mid-Victorian Novel, 86). By the 18th century, however, the term “Realism” had begun to mean a “particularity of description,” regardless of what it named; thus, the 18th century novel, then, demonstrated some “appearance of probability.” Even in adventure tales like Robinson Crusoe (1719), Defoe strove to “provide a logical cause and effect relationship, thus solidifying detail in order to achieve
the reader's willing suspension of disbelief.” Realist writers prided themselves on the
accuracy of their plots and the believability of their stories, and by the 19th century,
scholars define Realism as a canonized approach and a notion of “truth to life.” Realistic
fiction “ennoble[ed] the subject” if for no other reason because it dealt with real life
topics and representations of the “real world” and “scientific truths” (Skilton 86).

On the contrary, however, many modern day scholars, in more recent publications,
have amended this view of Realism as a set and established genre by which so many
critics judged Sensation. While even Brantlinger contends that as Realist writers were
“investing the novel with a new philosophical gravitas, the [S]ensationalists were
breaking down” their conventions (27), thus marking a “crisis” in the history of literary
realism, he accepts that Realism, in of itself, was actually a tangible “thing” to break
down. Although certainly an attractive concept, I, however, see these genres as
functioning in a more fluid manner, which I argue is also what Braddon, too, saw, as she
develops her own style and version of Sensationalism that could successfully incorporate
both coincidence and “truthful” representations. Most Braddon scholars, today, however
generally view some of her novels like Aurora Floyd and The Doctor’s Wife, as “mid-
Victorian realism” (Gilbert, 65). This current distinction, then, allows for the type of
fluidity in classification that I argue Braddon must have understood even before others
noticed the blurred lines between the two genres. For these reasons, and throughout this
dissertation, I will use the definition of Realism that Winnifred Hughes and Richard
Nemesvari convey instead. Exposing how past literary researchers overlooked the nature
of genres in of themselves and failed to question how genres are formed, in the first
place, Richard Nemesvari argues that while 19th century critics scathingly berated Sensation, they were simultaneously able to (re)define and “reify ‘the realistic’ in ways which had been unachievable before” (17). Borrowing only slightly from Hughes who reasons that “formal realism never existed in a vacuum,” Nemesvari maintains that Victorian reviewers “created an improper genre [Sensationalism] against which to define an acceptable Realist standard” (18). That is, both genres are inextricably linked, thus formed and reformed according to what the needs were of those intent on setting up Sensation as bad art and Realism as fulfilling the standards that, as W. Rae Fraser contends, was a novel perfectly imitating life (Nemesvari 22). Indeed, most arbitrators of Realism as a more superior genre believed that the Realist writer had the ability to “raise the details of the commonplace into art” through their “truthful presentation” (Skilton 87), but, importantly, as both Hughes and Nemesvari affirm, one could only really understand what constituted Realism if one at the same time understood what made Sensation different.

Despite how contemporary scholars still see the genres in opposition to one another and Realism as having set parameters, the two have always somewhat melded, thus blurring in definitive categorizations. Both Brantlinger and Hughes not only pinpoint examples of how the two opposing genres might have been more similar than not, but they both convincingly locate some of the influence for the first 1860s Sensational novel, and thus a melding of the two approaches, in Charles Dickens' works, and as early as the 1840s. Citing examples such as *Great Expectations* and *Oliver Twist*, Brantlinger and Hughes find Dickens' novels representative of Realism in the author's approach and
detailing of events, but undeniably *sensational* in the fact that Dickens normally integrated a mystery and at least one suspenseful/sensational event leading up to the resolution of that mystery in nearly all of his novels. It is very telling, then, to note that Dickens was at once said to have “something here good” and also to “hurry aside into regions of exaggeration” (Brantlinger 8). Even Anthony Trollope, whose contemporaries generally saw him as staunchly Realistic, shared his views on the blurring of lines between a Sensational and Realist perspective when he writes in his *Autobiography* that a “good novel should be both realistic and sensational, and both in the highest degree” (Trollope). Although there were always definite connections between Sensation and Realism, then, even if they existed in no better form than an illusive acknowledgement in the back of critics and writers' minds, most wanted to keep this quickly forming binary firmly established. Even Brantlinger in his accounting for the similarities does attribute some key differences to the Sensational form: “its occurrence and timeliness between Gothicism and other romantic fictions, its subordination of a narrative voice for the description of plot and mystery, and its psychological properties” (Brantlinger). He goes on to say that in “the [S]ensation novel, the Gothic is brought up to date and so mixed with the conventions of realism as to make its events seem possible if not exactly probable” (Brantlinger 9). One of the most prevailing criticisms of Sensation Fiction and, therefore, how it differed from the more respected genre of Realism was its utilization of imagination and embellishments as well as how it became largely commodified, thus in some critics eyes, detracting from its literary value. In a review of Anthony Trollope's *The Small House at Allington* (1864) in the *Spectator*, the assumed author, Richard Holt
Hutton, describes Trollope's expertise as a Realist writer when he says, “Mr. Trollope has written nothing more true or entertaining than this admirable representation of our modern social world.” Deeming it as having qualities that aren't exactly like a story, but rather like a “complicated social strategy,” the writer concludes that Trollope through his form consistently highlights his understanding of the important differences between fancy and the “circumstances of actual life” (Spectator 9 April 1864). Similar to Hutton's review of Trollope, he had also previously given George Eliot a glowing appraisal arguing that she is “remarkable” for the “striking combination” of a “very deep speculative power with a very great and realistic imagination” (National Review July 1860). “She draws her external world as much as possible,” Hutton explains, “from observation instead of imagining it” (National Review, emphasis Hutton's). Here, the explanations of middle class existence, (becoming synonymous with “real life”) are privileged instead of the details that seemed to provoke, by their very existence, a descriptive imagination, like the murders, poisonings and overall intrigue found within a Sensational text.

In trying to make sense of this phenomenon, in her book The Improper Feminine, Lyn Pykett, too, speaks to this Sensation-Realism paradigm and its baser categorization, when she explores the very gendered discourses circulating Sensation’s production. Pykett attributes at least some of Sensation's generic degradation to the crucial ways in which the Sensational novel’s critics generally aligned it with the literal feminine form and all of its social, political, and economical machinations. Pykett theorizes that the terms associated with the genre were always emphatically “mechanistic, commercial,
passive, and appetitive consumptive,” thus making it undoubtedly feminine, regardless of the author's sex (31). For a female Sensationalist and for Braddon in particular, the issue was especially compounded. As I mentioned before, the metaphors circulating around the act of reading were specific and mainly consumptive in nature. Because of these models that Victorians particularly linked to food and drugs, the ingestion of a novel could invariably alter a person’s bodily makeup. For instance, since novel reading was likened to “dram drinking” a pastime Victorians almost exclusively associated with the lower classes, avid reading of texts like Sensation could simultaneously enfeeble or soften the reader, while also degenerating or polluting their class associations. This “pathology” of reading puts the reader at risk of class demotion or disorientation, but also, most importantly, feminizes that reader too. As Pamela Gilbert and Catherine Gallagher assert, gendered metaphors constituting the relationship between reader, text, and author informed the ways in which the public responded to Sensation as well, and to specifically the female Sensationalist. According to Sensation scholars, critics always discussed and conceptualized the text, itself, as feminine. The male reader, then, must be careful so as not to let the effeminate text “drain his virility,” thus devaluing and altering his masculine power (Gilbert 71). As confirmed above in the more tolerant and ameliorative responses to male Sensationalists, the metaphors circulating a male authored text were those of a “male inseminating the text with his ideas” (Gilbert 71). Female authors, however, did not fare as well and, in fact, since most Sensationalist authors and readers were female, the comparisons more or less included the author “prostituting herself” and the female reader running the risk of the text seducing and corrupting her.
The texts, themselves, bore the resemblances to these metaphors as well and while critics tolerated and even praised male-authored Sensation, using masculinized forms of discourse that perceived their texts as the “unique expression of individual genius” (Pykett 31), female authored texts were often diminished and ignored if because of their associations with romantic, sentimental drivel. Here, the lines are clearly drawn and it seems as though because Sensationalism was so entwined with the feminine sex, and a marginalized sex at that, it could not possibly gain the kind of validation that Realistic novels could and did.

While this might be true in looking at the middle period as a whole, and from the perspective of what was more literary in nature, present day scholars now cannot discount the effects Sensation had on Realist writers' marketing and rates of publication. Despite its stigma of less than valuable literature, Sensational novels were undeniably popular, selling more copies and going into more editions than any of their Realist counterparts. Sensationalists were, at the least, calling into question what constituted a favorable and believable story, thus challenging predominating theories about novels and art as having value only when strictly commonplace and mimetic. Even Realist writers themselves felt the backlashes and the quickly encroaching constraints, as they tried to keep up with the Sensationalists immense productivity and success. In a letter to, John Blackwood, George Eliot evidences just this type of anxiety when she admits that she:

sicken[s] again with despondency under the sense that the most carefully written books lie, both outside and inside people's minds, deep undermost in a heap of trash. (Eliot, George Eliot Letters)
Casting Sensational fiction as the trash under which her more “carefully” written books lie, Eliot muses about the reasons why her books do not sell more copies or gain enough attention. To further her lament, Eliot specifically takes on Braddon's *Trail of the Serpent* (1860), and how it exemplifies that popular and very successful literature sold at the railways. Saying that she “suppose[s] the reason why her 6/- editions are never on the railway stalls is that they are not so attractive to the majority” as Braddon's works; “still,” Eliot continues, “a minority might sometimes buy them if they were there” (*George Eliot Letters*). Bitingly sarcastic, Eliot calls attention to not only her feelings about Sensational novels and how a “majority” readership does not necessarily mean a well-informed and intelligent reader, but also crucial, and perhaps detrimental marketing problem. If sellers would only put her editions on their stalls, instead of choosing only that which has a fad status, what she calls a “minority” reader might actually buy them. In other words, the sheer lack of availability of her texts, and how Sensational novels consistently overshadow them, thus appealing to a majority, or less than refined audience, forever places her novels out of the public eye, and therefore restricts their options to buy her works.

Even from within the confines of its own generic brotherhood, however, there existed amongst other writers and Sensationalists a tendency to separate the male and female authorial objectives. Showalter attributes these gender determined cliques to the phenomenal success of women as not only novelists but as developers and editors of their own serial magazines beginning in 1860. “Their business skills and unflagging energy,” Showalter affirms, “made them formidable competitors, and their popularity, as well as
their aggressiveness, antagonized many of their male contemporaries” (155). Henry James, an American writer whose later works, like *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), were, if anything Sensational, often wrote fairly complimentary editorials about Sensation fiction; and yet, as a male writer, he seems particularly put out and threatened by the success and sheer determination of the female Sensationalist. In reference to Braddon's works, James was very particular in his separatist logic. While “brilliant, lively, ingenious and destitute of a ray of sentiment,” they were not like the male writer's product which was representative of “cleverness and social omniscience,” James writes (Appendix to *Aurora Floyd*). Likewise, in his article for *The Nation* in 1865, James has nothing but praise for the popular male Sensationalist, Wilkie Collins, deeming his work as “deserv[ing] of a more respectable name,” than Sensation and finding his novels a “masterpiece of massive and elaborate constructions,” pieces that to him seem more comparable to great “works of science” (*The Nation* 1865, *Aurora Floyd* Appendix, 596). In his response to the publication of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Aurora Floyd*, however, James admits that it is "clever" and "audacious," thus full of “literary tricks that the “author has managed to bring off,” but that by integrating what he deems a “thoroughgoing-realism” Braddon really gives “romance” to “vice” (596). Like most backhanded compliments, James credits Braddon with a distinctive style and ability to pull it off, even going as far as to call her form of Realism “thoroughgoing.” Despite his earlier compliment that she is without exaggerated sentiment, by summing up her achievements as a “romanticization of vice,” James somewhat retracts his praise, thus associating her novels with the lesser genres of Romance or Sentimental fiction.
While Braddon's plots may follow a certain generic formula, her approach and these specific reading moments, I suggest, importantly, invite her female readers to become aware of themselves as critical beings and very capable of making intelligent decisions about everything from guessing the end of the mystery to understanding a new way of thinking about their femininity as a more powerful role within Victorian culture. Nothing, I will argue, could be more of a testament to Realism than this approach and initiation of feminine intellect. It is a crucial aspect of my argument, then, that in using Sensational novels as a forum for this type of project, Braddon attempts to reverse the way in which her own genre suffered from literary critics' degradation with its relegation to the outside margins of reputable literature. In fact, it is her refusal to idealize or make caricatures out of her female characters that reveals her very realistic portrayals of women, and what I suggest constitutes her intentions of demonstrating Sensation's foundations in Realism. In the novels *The Doctor's Wife*, *Birds of Prey*, *Charlotte's Inheritance*, *John Marchmont's Legacy*, *Aurora Floyd*, *Lady Audley's Secret*, and *Eleanore's Victory*, Braddon repeatedly assigns difficult roles to the female characters that it is only *through* the act of reading that they each find enlightenment and strength. Education and avid readership, then, is key and it is at the crux of each example of women's reading habits that Braddon strengthens her convictions that learning how to read carefully and in a discerning fashion can only benefit the Victorian woman for the better.

Starting with the most obvious and blatant forms of feminine readership that Braddon demonstrates, in my second chapter, I will focus mainly on *The Doctor's Wife*. I
argue that Braddon locates the misuse and misinterpretation of novels, like her own, on a lack of guidance or education for women. Borrowing from reader theories on how Victorian women were instructed to read and not to read, as well as Roland Barthes theories on the eroticism and sensuality of reading practices in general, I maintain that Braddon views novels, especially Sensational texts, as educational tools and I will demonstrate how this concept of education and guidance resonates within other novels as well, namely *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd*. Indeed, throughout these novels, Braddon not only shows holes within the present understanding of women's reading practices and the educational system, but demonstrates how reading, discussing, and writing about books can only help in the making of a more well-rounded, astute, and moral individual.

The third chapter will look closely at how Braddon deems that reading practices help to create and maintain feminine communities and feministic attitudes. Indeed, in her novels *Birds of Prey*, *Charlotte's Inheritance*, and *John Marchmont's Legacy*, Braddon reveals how the cognition of Sensational plots and a discerning readership can help to bolster feminine friendships and formulate support groups for those who must face complicated obstacles because of their very femininity or ideological roles. I argue, then, that Braddon's approach to highlighting these moments of reading as well as her acknowledgements of those girls who suffer from strictures on reading habits strengthens her advocacy for girls to become avid and informed readers.

Moving from more explicit to more abstract examples of reading behaviors, my fourth chapter will look closely at the narrative strategy at work in the creation of Lucy
Audley as a reader in Braddon’s most well-known novel *Lady Audley’s Secret*. I focus here on Lucy Audley’s performative nature and how reading becomes a calculated and inextricable part of her guise as a demure and innocent woman. Lucy Audley’s awareness of her performances challenges prevailing restrictive and diminutive conceptions about women's capacities of expression and intellect. Since the novel's detective format forces female readers to read the text in a critical fashion, it is my argument that Braddon leaves the reader with much more at the end than just the reveal of Lucy Audley's crimes, and rather gives them a startling, but perhaps more accurate version, of Victorian femininity.

Finally, in the fifth chapter, I discuss the development and progression of the female detective in *Eleanor's Victory*. In this example, Braddon details the life of an avid reader who, through her reading of Sensationalized texts, refashions herself into a critical and astute reader of character. This development and shift in perspective enables Eleanor to solve the mystery of her father's death and to track down those involved in his murder. In this particular novel, Braddon demonstrates how a woman is not only capable of detective work but also able to master this technique and still retain her femininity.

Braddon, then, importantly resists the trope of making her female detective a masculinized figure.

In each of these early novels, then, Braddon offers a new look at women readers and their capacities. Each of her stories I represent here, were meant to attract attention and regard, but not just anyone’s attention. Indeed, Braddon did not just target a general audience rather she wanted to reach a particularly *female* audience. In knowing that most of her readers were women, Braddon seems to have felt an obligation to write in such a
way and tell a certain type of story that would not be entirely dismissed as ineffective or as crucially detrimental. One can easily justify this by just looking at her consistent usage of reading moments and then tracing their very tangible and viable effects. It was not her project to compose novels that only told one kind of story or to just stop short of real meaning. In fact, the most important element that I argue here is that Braddon understood her role as an author perhaps better than most of her peers.

It is this attention and analysis of the acts and processes of readership that I find a worthy and valuable element of Braddon scholarship. In creating fictional readers that prompted real readers to read and decipher text in a certain fashion, Braddon offered an outlet for feminine intellect and critical reasoning. What this dissertation, then, seeks to prove above all else is that Braddon, as a Sensationalist, and as someone fully aware of the infamy of that genre, consistently used representations of the act of reading as a way to counter the triviality and immorality of Sensationalism. In doing so, she utilized her narratives as guides for more effective and beneficial reading processes.
CHAPTER 2: AN IMAGINATIVE AFFAIR: BLISSFUL READING AND
(RE)EDUCATION IN THE DOCTOR'S WIFE

“I would not want this book to end up in the hands of young girls”

(Devoted Disciple, Letter No 11)

When Mary Elizabeth Braddon says this to her confidant and long-time pen pal, Edward Bulwer-Lytton about her 1864 novel The Doctor's Wife, she is perhaps really reflecting on something much more subversive hidden within the book's pages than just merely its plot. It is no secret that, with her eighth novel, Braddon wanted desperately to break away from the sensational niche that she had helped to propagate; and yet, surprisingly she chooses to write her own version of Gustave Flaubert's 1857 novel, Madame Bovary, a work that was, if one can say anything about it, definitely sensational, and causing quite a stir, even in France. Rife with controversy and labeled as immoral, Flaubert's work had landed him in the midst of a lawsuit for immorality. Although later acquitted, Flaubert's reputation in France and abroad bore the everlasting consequences of this type of generic labeling. The author often found himself trying to defend his portrayal of the vivacious, but selfish and adulterous Emma Bovary who, when unable to resign herself to a simple life as a provincial doctor's wife, has two lurid affairs that ultimately bring her and her husband to financial ruin. Calling Flaubert's style an “example of that unvarnished realism that was the very reverse of poetry” (Devoted Disciple, Letter No. 7), Braddon's choice to write a novel based on this one might seem odd at first; however, as discussed in my introduction, one only has to consider the ways in which Braddon consistently strove to incorporate methods of Realism as well as
Sensationalism to understand that choice. Despite the obvious and staunch approach to Realism evident in his portrayals of characters who often deal with the harsh realities of impoverishment or reap justifiable consequences for their actions, Flaubert still encroached on the borderline separating what the public saw as Sensational and what they saw as Realism. At least in part, this fluidity between genres is due to what most critics saw as Flaubert's use of immoral characters; thus, fueling the public protestations and legal charges of indecency. Often categorizing starkly realist novels as part of that “extraordinary Pre-Raphaelite style,” Braddon intends to rewrite this novel in a very particular way, insisting to Bulwer-Lytton that:

you [Lytton] will like my new novel The Doctor's Wife better than anything I have yet done, because I am going in a little for the subjective, and for the first time am going to try to infuse a dash of poetry into my her. (Devoted Disciple, Letter 7, Jan. 17th 1864)

In commenting on Flaubert's “Pre Raphaelite” style, Braddon makes a specific connection between this brotherhood of painters and other artists who relay realistic subject matter, but through that approach convey an even more important but, nonetheless, Sensational or unconventional message. The Pre Raphaelites were a group of artists whose unconventional methods and overall aesthetic theories set them at odds with the fads and reigning masters of their time. While forms of art flooded France and England, touting an abstractive approach to art, Pre Raphaelite members D. G. Rossetti, John Vincent Millais and William Holman Hunt, to name a few, recreated images of biblical and classical iconography with almost a photographic quality. In their attentions
to the minutiae of detail, thus representing figures and landscapes that looked absolutely real, the brotherhood brought to life a tangible image of iconic and historical figures, like Mary, Jesus, and Joseph, but also giving a face and body to the people of classical Greek and Roman myths, as well as Arthurian legends. Indeed, it is their understanding of art as completely reflective of nature and the way that they strive to emulate the “real” that many critics found troubling when combined with the sexualized images they usually produced of those literary or biblical figures. In the following picture (figure 2), John Waterhouse images the imprisoned Lady of Shalott from Lord Alfred Tennyson's poem. While many of the Pre Raphaelites utilized this poem for different artistic focuses, most stayed consistent in bringing the Lady's sexuality to the forefront.
Here, the Lady of Shalott is working on her loom as she represents frames of a story through thread. Waterhouse has imagined a captured moment, in which the Lady takes a break from her work and story. With her back arched and her hands behind her head,
Waterhouse accentuates the female form and the dormant sexuality of a woman presumably locked in a room. The disarray of the room around her and her obvious exhaustion and staring eyes that look past her work elevate her overwrought emotions. With her stare and bodily position, Waterhouse most likely implies an interruption of work for a dream or fantasy of her lover who she, according to the poem, awaits to save her. The visual representation of Tennyson's work certainly adds another dimension to the poem's overall meaning, which of course, for many, begged the question as to the Pre Raphaelite's moral basis.

In using the Pre Raphaelites as a basis for her definition of Realist writers though, Braddon establishes a very important theory about the extent to which Realist writers already sensationalize their subject matter. In this way, Braddon would have felt that she was doing nothing that different from so many of her fellow writers. In her letters to Lytton throughout the winter of 1864, however, Braddon consistently returns to her ever mounting concerns about the reception of *The Doctor's Wife*. Because she tries to revise what the public thought of her writing capabilities, Braddon admits that she is “especially anxious about this novel; as it seems to me a turning point in my life, on the issue of whether I must sink or swim” (*Devoted Disciple*, Letter No.11). Even Bulwer-Lytton was not complimentary or supportive of her endeavors when he read an early version of the novel. Although Braddon regularly read French novels, she often tried to make a distinction if only in theory from her own style of writing and what she deemed a “truly immoral” style. Perhaps this is why she tries to revitalize Emma's character and not take
away her flaws, but rather offer her version of this character at least some opportunity for retribution.

Indeed, in her revision of Flaubert's explosive text, Braddon does mute Emma Bovary's transgressions with her heroine, Isabel Sleaford Gilbert. Like Emma, Isabel is a doctor's wife, who must grow accustomed to the simple and meager lifestyle into which she has married. Both women are also avid readers who strive to create lives for themselves that mirror the tales of the heroines within their books. Both women read so often that the scenarios from within the novels take a priority over their own realistic lives, which they find boring and quite unbearable. In hoping to transfer what they read from the pages of romances and sentimental novels onto their own lives, both of these women utilize their books as if they are guidelines or formulas for happiness and fulfillment. Both women privilege the fictional over their reality to such an extent that they find it impossible to face their day to day lives.

Aside from Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, Braddon may also have sought inspiration in the explosive and highly publicized 1857 divorce case of Isabella Robinson. Mrs. Robinson was married to an influential entrepreneur, Henry Robinson. Although extremely wealthy and successful, thus affording Isabella a socially elite lifestyle, Henry was reportedly emotionally distant and absent from his home for months at a time. For this reason, Isabella befriended a younger doctor by the name of Edward Lane who was a revolutionary in homeopathic medicine and cures. While staying at Moore House, Edward’s “rest” facility, Isabella reports in her diary of committing adultery with Lane on several different occasions. The singular aspect of her case,
however, is that Henry found out about the affair when he accidentally came upon his wife’s diary; thus, Isabella incriminates herself with her meticulously and recorded account in her journal about her encounters with Lane. Henry uses the diary as his only proof against his wife and is able to petition the courts for a divorce in part because of recently reformed divorce laws. The important intersection here between this real life case and Braddon’s fictional plot is the way in which Isabella’s own memory, private thoughts, and essentially her imagination stand trial as well. In fact, her defense attorney’s entire case hinges on the idea that what Isabella has written down in her diary are more or less fantasies and not truths. Mrs. Robinson’s defense team urged the jury to see a woman, who similar to Madame Bovary and, I will argue, much like Braddon’s Isabel Gilbert too, merely let the fictional life take precedence over the real one. The Robinson case mainly made headlines due to its sensational aspects and the idea that the jury held up a woman’s own diary as the entirety of the evidence. So sensitive and explicit were the diary entries that the judges hearing the case decided to prohibit female citizens from attending the trial, as it did not seem proper for them to hear. This part of the trial would have definitely struck a chord with Braddon and its revelation that many Victorians felt that Sensational stories were inappropriate reading material for women because they jeopardized the vision of that iconic moral femininity. This decision to bar women’s entrance to the courtroom was to protect them from a sensational and hyper-sexual diary. Even if fictional, many still felt that these novels like Fanny Burney’s *Evelina* or even Wilkie Collins’s successful Sensational text, *The Woman in White*, were now bordering on scandalous. Because of how they presented a type of neo-reality,
writers of the epistolary style garnered more suspicion and intolerance, if only for the ways in which they represented “real” letters and diary entries as the basis for their plots.

Regardless of what inspired Braddon, she seems to take this story on because of what is crucially at the heart of it. While questions of Sensation’s authenticity, appropriateness, and whether or not a woman should read these novels circulated, Braddon, seems to want to meet these issues head on. Karen Littau deems *Madame Bovary* as both a “readerly and writerly text” Since Emma Bovary is a passionate, involved reader who reads herself into the fictions that she consumes, real readers, according to Littau, enact the same practice. “We read passively then,” Littau argues, “allowing sensations to act upon us” (74). According to Littau, only certain situations, those in which the narrator distances Emma from us, call the reader to become more “active” and interpret scenes apart from Flaubert’s heroine. While Braddon certainly demonstrates a passionate, passive reader, at least at first with Isabel, it is only Braddon’s heroine that undergoes major changes in her abilities to critically read. In the latter half of Braddon’s book, then, Isabel’s gradually more interpretative reading practices provoke a similar response in real readers. It is for these reasons that I point to how Braddon does not just retell *Madame Bovary*. In fact, while there are some similarities, I will argue that it is her particular points of departure from *Madame Bovary* that help to tell the real story she wanted to impart to her readers. Ever mindful of the critical public, Braddon creates a background for her heroine that is not nearly as accomplished as the one with which Flaubert endows Emma Bovary. In having her heroine come from a poorer and more financially suspect situation, Braddon can offer more of a justification for Isabel’s lack of
preparation for married life. The absence of guidance for Isabel on what a wife should be and do is an obvious link, then, to her later intolerant attitude towards the monotony of her life. In other words, one can safely attribute her demeanor to her upbringing rather than a selfish apathy essential to her nature.

While Emma Bovary receives an education at a proper convent school, Braddon describes Isabel's education as a “smaffering of everything” (27). She knew just enough foreign languages and history to read what she considered the “sugarplums.” That is, growing to adore only the more sensationalized tidbits, Isabel only concentrates on the more infamous personae of world history. Braddon deems this hodge podge of instruction as the education “popular with the poorer middle class,” in which the girl is left mostly to her own devices to make up for the holes in her tutoring with a membership to the closest circulating library (27). Certainly, Isabel's education is not a priority or realistic option for her downtrodden, criminal father and emotionally distant stepmother. In fact, the majority of Isabel's education and understanding of her world comes from the novels that she obsessively consumes. In direct contrast with Flaubert's characterization of Emma, Braddon's heroine reads books “she might have better left unread” because she has had no guidance in this at all. While Emma's propensity toward novels seems more like an almost benign personal preference or hobby alongside other educational books, Isabel's reading becomes more suspect and shows more clearly the dangers of self-education because these sentimental novels, or “intellectual opium” (29), make up the entirety of her education. With this background for her heroine, Braddon creates not only a sense of flawed reading habits, but also highlights the ways in which because she lacks
instruction, Isabel actually misreads or misinterprets those stories that she consumes so ravenously. In this very important way, then, Braddon diverts the blame from the text itself, and redirects it toward how the story is read.

A crucial hallmark of Braddon's entire project, then, is to suggest that there is a way of reading that can possibly circumvent the problems that she shows are evident in Isabel's character. In this chapter, I will argue that it is most certainly Braddon's statement of objective when Sigismund Smith, the sensationalist, articulates that “no wise man or woman was ever the worse for reading novels.” “Novels,” he argues, “are only dangerous for those poor foolish girls who read nothing else, and think that their lives are to be paraphrases of their favorite books” (30). Braddon makes it quite clear that she wants to redirect the venom against her genre toward the right culprit-- a lack of education and guidance, and not just to the stories themselves. Importantly, and as with her other novels that showcase avid female readers, whether they are villain or protagonist, Braddon represents specific instruction for a healthier way of reading and approaching her novels. It is in her characterizations of Isabel's uneducated approach to reading, the young girl’s specific utilization of novels, and her distinctive blend of realism and sensation shown in her departures from Flaubert's text, that when looked at together, I will argue, make Braddon's ultimate point-- It is the holes in female education that enable women to misread or overlook these books' potential for sound instruction. As I believe she clearly meant with the statement that serves as my epigraph for this chapter, Braddon certainly does not want this book to end up in the hands of the
misguided young woman, but rather only in the hands of those girls who, through education, can interpret the message embedded within its pages.

Education and Misreading

Isabel Sleaford definitely has an overactive imagination and not even Braddon can completely condone its application all the time. Like her literary model, Emma Bovary, Isabel consumes novels at such a rate and at the total detriment of everything else that her stepmother sardonically and perhaps accurately says that “she would let her family burn in a fire, just so as to not have to put her novel down” (26). Defined as one who repeatedly “live[s] on her imagination,” Isabel loses herself and her sense of reality within the pages of what she is reading. In describing one particular reading session, Braddon’s narrator explains that, although the light was fading, Isabel “went on with her book,” reading “more eagerly, almost breathlessly” always in fear that her stepmother would call her inside to do some menial task and then

[T]here would be no chance of reading another line of that sweet sentimental story, that heavenly prose, which fell into a cadence like poetry, that tender, melancholy music which haunted the reader long after the book was shut and laid aside, and made the dullcourse of common life so dismally unendurable. (27)

From these defining moments, it is clear that Isabel's life with her parents hardly feeds or fosters the imagination she does have, for her days are filled with laborious tasks and mundane activities. It is no wonder then that Braddon describes her reading practices as “eager and breathless.” With these words, Braddon connotes a specific type of reading, one that demonstrates how completely Isabel can lose herself within her book, thus
immersing herself so entirely in the fictional world and shutting out all remnants of the
realistic environment she finds so ugly and hard. In significant ways, Braddon's
rendering of Isabel's reading may be more palatable or at least more excusable than that
of Emma's in *Madame Bovary*. This is mostly due to the difference in class status. While
class references are present in Flaubert's text, they are definitely not as pronounced and
oppressive as in Braddon's revision. Significantly, Braddon takes much time to explain
the details of Isabel's family home calling it “untidy,” a confusion of odds and ends,
“shabby” and “dilapidated” (21). Braddon removes her descriptions of Isabel’s home
from the way in which Charles Bovary, Emma Roualt's future husband, describes her
childhood home, calling it a “prosperous farm” with its high barn and “walls as smooth as
your hand” bordered by “symmetrically planted trees” and a pond from which one could
hear “the merry sound of a flock of geese” (Flaubert 13). Even the makeshift room that
Emma fashions for her father's recuperation (for he has broken his leg and must stay there
until it heals) boasts of a luxury far removed from anything Isabel has. Charles describes
a “large canopied bed covered with calico” and a design of “people in Turkish costume”
(Flaubert 14), thus seemingly pointing toward a more refined and comfortable style. The
setting that Braddon purposefully creates for her heroine, however, is not one that would
ever seem to lend itself to any kind of luxury or refinement. Braddon describes Isabel's
real life as definitely a hardship, especially in her descriptions of her relationship with her
stepmother, one that she characterizes as a “rule of force” with “spasmodic outbreaks of
violence” (105). It is not surprising, then, that when the family finds themselves in
financial ruin, it is Isabel, the constant outsider, who must stay behind, finding a
governess position with Mr. Charles Raymond, whose two female nieces are in need of a simple education.

Much like her own education, Isabel’s administration of lessons for the two young girls is meaningfully simplistic. It is actually these descriptions of Isabel's own lack of education, her teaching methods, and Mr. Raymond's theories on the female mind and the sex's capacities that aid Braddon in locating the real problem with girls' tendencies towards overactive imaginations. Although Raymond has great hopes for Isabel's suitability as a governess, he does characterize her as one who is a “good little girl,” but one with “too much Wonder and exaggerated Ideality” (67). As if he finds that these idiosyncracies of persona are the direct results of Isabel's reading material, he goes on to say that she “opens her big eyes when she talks of her favorite books, and looks up all scared and startled if you speak to her while she's reading” (67). Significantly, Braddon pairs Raymond's assessment of Isabel's personality and, perhaps, too much reading with a characterization of Raymond's personal hobbies that, if anything, also demonstrate an excess:

There were books everywhere in Mr. Raymond's house; and the Master of the house read at all manner of abnormal hours, and kept a candle burning by his bedside in the dead of night. (67)

These details of Mr. Raymond’s own reading behavior reveal the crucial differences in how society thought about men and women’s reading habits. Of course, Mr Raymond did not read the types of romances that Isabel did, but he certainly gave way to a style of reading that was comparable and just as consuming. Described as an “author, a
philosopher, a phrenologist, and a metaphysician, who wrote grave books for the instruction of mankind” (67-68), Charles Raymond was, if anything, also involved in pursuits that ran contrary to the mainstream of Victorian decorum. It is in the way that he envisions himself as an educator in what would have been seen as suspicious sciences of this period that really reveals the differences in how the Victorian public conceived of women and men as readers. Just as I discussed in the introduction, most felt that young girls’ readings should be limited, especially if they were the types of readings that ran counter to the education conventionally found suitable for women. At the same time, however, and to further emphasize the paradox, a young middle class girl's obsessive attitude toward the circulating library might be met with a certain degree of apathy because of her very sex and the way Victorian society perceived her intellectual capabilities. Like Mr. Raymond, himself, who when asked about his fanciful and imaginative new governess replies, “[I]f they were clever children, I should be afraid of her exaggerated ideality, but they're too stupid to be damaged by any influence of that kind” (72). By defining his female charges as too stupid, and thus incapable of learning anything from Isabel's misguided teachings, Mr. Raymond not only underscores a flippant attitude toward a social problem but also emphasizes what Braddon saw as a need for a balanced education for women and not just the “hodge-podge” and “smattering” style that was indicative of the lower middle classes. By referring to Isabel as “little girl,” Raymond also infantilizes his new governess, which definitely puts her in a categorical position of a lower intellectual level than might have really been accurate. Raymond continues his rant on how Isabel's social status predetermines her abilities, and
also, therefore, her flaws, when he contemplates that Isabel's leanings toward “bright faculties might not be the best gifts for a woman. It would have been better,” according to Raymond, “for Isabel to have possessed the organ of pudding-making and stocking darning” (82). With this comment, Raymond applies social status to learning capacity and, unfortunately, as Braddon herself intrusively comments, this leaves Isabel's education, “which would have been invaluable to her, as much wanting at Conventford as it had been in Camberwell” (72). In reverting attention to what he obviously deems more “proper” activities for a young girl, Raymond nods toward a debate that connected a woman's reading habits with questions of how much education was warranted for young Victorian girls.

As a suspect form to begin with, the novel had always, since its conception, been ideologically conceived as feminine. Masculine narratives, almost completely synonymous with non-fiction, were more prone to having social and political impact. Once the novel became more mainstream, categories developed which left women a niche for writing that was overtly domestic and sentimental, and a form certainly looked down upon when considering any kind of educational curriculum. Questions of whether or not a novel was appropriate for a woman to read underwrote more major concerns about formatting an education specific to what most felt women’s roles were and to what extent they should receive education in the first place.

Braddon's resonant argument here, one that calls for a closer look at the flaws in women's education, is not that removed from social commentary on this subject that had been present for years. Despite the fact that in her essay “Silly Novels by Lady
Novelists,” George Eliot might actually be referencing writers like Braddon, if not Braddon herself, the concept of females acquiring education through novels is a thread in both works. Eliot first tries to find a justification for the types of silly novels women are writing that are full of “improbable incident” and “vacillating syntax” and presently inundate the book market. She could find excuses, she says, if the women who wrote such silly works were of a class or group that came to it from sheer necessity. An appeasing and, therefore, forgiving image for Eliot, then, is the “destitute” woman who becomes a writer only because it provides her with quick money for her family or to help pay off an errant husband’s crippling debts (Eliot). Eliot quickly amends this daydream, however, in order to reveal the much more disconcerting truth that these female authors know nothing of hardship much less have a great insight into the lower classes, even though they write from that perspective ad nauseam:

It is clear that they write in elegant boudoirs, with violet-colored ink and a ruby pen; that they must be entirely indifferent to publishers’ accounts, and inexperienced in every form of poverty except poverty of brain. (Eliot)

Implicitly here, Eliot implies that it is education that has certainly gone awry and that, for the most part, female authors of this brand do not have the abilities or groomed intellects to produce works of worth and value, despite their obvious higher class status. Indeed, in using the example of a novel she calls “Laura Gay,” Eliot more explicitly hones in on female education as the root of the problem. In deeming the lead heroine one who “seems less at home in Greek and Hebrew” but who “makes up for the deficiency by a quite playful familiarity with the Latin classics—with the ‘dear old Virgil,’ ‘the graceful Horace,’
‘the humane Cicero,’ and the pleasant ‘Livy,’” Eliot describes a heroine whose “smattering” of education seems to mirror that of Braddon’s Isabel. The heroine in the story Eliot discusses does not understand the nuances of her knowledge or when to apply it to normal, social conversations. In fact, as Eliot contends, Laura’s *use* of her readings seems to be the crux of the problem because the young girl clearly does not know when it is appropriate or relevant to demonstrate her knowledge and readings of certain topics. Of course, this criticism is leveled at the author of Laura, but the point may well be the same. This type of knowledge, although fanciful and prone to helping one “show off,” does not necessarily have any real practical value. Indeed, as Eliot emphasizes, “It is as little the custom of well-bred men as of well-bred women to quote Latin in mixed parties; they can contain their familiarity with "the humane Cicero" without allowing it to boil over in ordinary conversation, and even references to "the pleasant Livy" are not absolutely irrepressible” (Eliot). One of the key problems for Eliot is the idea that in misrepresenting reality to such an extent, these authors almost seem to recommend these heroines’ misreadings, irrelevant quotations, and inabilitys to effectively communicate as a type of feminine paragon of heroines. It is in that faulty and possibly even dangerous lack of guidance that Eliot finds the most evidence for the necessity of change.

This, too, seems to be a key issue with Braddon, though few have given her credit for similar undertakings, and might actually too quickly slough her off into the same category with writers of novels like “Laura Gay.” The difference though is that Braddon does not hold up Isabel as having virtues, refined intellect, or a grasp on reality. In fact, it is quite the opposite and she clearly reveals Isabel’s mistakes and miseducation at every
Deeming Isabel’s reading as more of an escape from anything real or that life entails, Braddon demonstrates that Isabel views her novels like viable entities in of themselves in the ways they affect her daily life, haunting her and reminding her of where she would rather exist. For these reasons, Braddon seems more understanding than Eliot of why stories like these would attract young girls. The power of novels here is evident in that Braddon likens them to cadences or melancholy music. In this way, she offers a tangible essence to works of fiction, giving them resounding effects that remain even after the words are read, just as one can still hear a musical chord after it has been struck.

The power of books and thereby the imaginings that they foster is not without its need for censure and boundaries, according to Braddon. These ideas are obvious in the descriptions of how completely Isabel lets her readings consume her every thought to such an extent that even her conversations can only exist within the realms of the books she reads. These descriptions closely mirror Eliot’s arguments about the lead heroine in “Laura Gay.” In one such key instance, the first time that George and Isabel meet, Braddon demonstrates how Isabel's reading habits inhibit her from really completely engaging in the situation. In this introductory scene, Isabel cannot be bothered with really focusing on their conversation; indeed, she rose to meet him, but “kept her thumb between the pages, evidently meaning to go on with the volume at the first convenient opportunity” (24). This is an important detail in Braddon's characterization of this young woman. She cannot extricate herself from this fictional world entirely, thus she demonstrates how she operates between the two—literally keeping a thumb in the realm of the novel, while she converses with a real person. With her thumb marking her place,
Isabel demonstrates her reliance on this world of someone else's creation and its priority over any real life interaction. Braddon does not condone this total immersion and demonstrates this through how silly Isabel often makes herself look when she can only discuss tales of Napoleon, and the controversial poets: Byron and Shelley. Braddon describes her as so overly romantic that “tears come to her eyes when she talked of the sorrowful evening after Waterloo, or the wasted journey to Missolonghi, just as if she had known and loved these great men” (32). In these characterizations, Braddon illustrates the lack of moderation and disregard of a practical application of the books her heroine reads. Ultimately, this can lead to trouble and a complete disassociation or break from reality, or, at least, the inability to connect and interact with the real people in one's life.

Nowhere in the novel is Braddon more clear on this subject than when she depicts Isabel's project to find real examples of heroes and heroines. Isabel consistently searches for real manifestations of the men and women she reads about in her novels, but without any real regard for the nuances of character or what the author really intends in his or her descriptions. She naively underestimates what life would be like with these characters and even wishes that her father could be like a Dombey, Augustine Caxton, or a Rawdon Crawley, so that she could really, truthfully say that a man had cruelly mistreated her. As a marker of her glaringly inefficient education, Braddon interweaves Isabel's avid readership of these novels with her misrepresentation of the characters. That is, it is not enough to convey Isabel's poor education with her consumption of such books, but it is her misunderstanding and manipulation of characters to fit her own erroneous ideals that really underscores a misstep in her education. With Edith Dombey, a character from
Charles Dickens' *Dombey and Son* (1846) that Isabel returns to time and time again, the young girl misses the nuances of character, thus meaningfully casting a doubt on her comprehension skills. Indeed, Isabel overlooks Edith's tendency toward cruelty and selfishness which ultimately lead her to a loveless marriage. Isabel, instead, romanticizes Edith's beauty and class status often letting “down her long black hair before the little looking glass and act[ing] to herself in a whisper”(74); therefore, she privileges her own desires of what she wants Edith Dombey to be over what Dickens truthfully intended. Completely overlooking Dickens' intentions of showing the entrapments of pride that can lead to devastating the family, something to which Isabel might have better paid attention, considering her own illicit behavior, she overlooks what is really written and “cherry picks” the representation that best fits her own imagination. This tendency definitely raises questions about Isabel's education, just as Braddon most likely wanted it to. Isabel’s lack of instruction when approaching these novels perpetuates her misreadings and, therefore, her flawed perspective. She is unlike Emma Bovary, who ignores her sound instruction and, instead, consistently represents an arrogant flippancy that aids in her downfall.

While Emma Bovary represents a more tempered absorption with her novels, Isabel takes it one step further and attempts to act out scenes from the stories. This is crucially a more complicated problem than what we see in the case of Emma Bovary, who only uses her books for justifications as to why she is so dissatisfied with her life. Isabel, however, struggles to define or even imagine a self that exists outside of the boundaries of fiction. It is only during her moments of acting out scenes that Isabel
seems to have peace with herself, as if she, by enacting what she sees as Edith's part, gets closer to how she envisions herself. In self-fashioning a persona like the ones she imagines to be in her novels, Isabel inevitably loses sight of her own reality and the inextricable repercussions of bad behavior. Seemingly, this might be one of Braddon's most blatant warnings, not against novels, but against misdirected reading and, thereby, education. So much is Isabel's reality altered by and defined by the stories she creates from novels, that she only knows the extent of women's lives by what is written. It is not surprising, then, that in recognizing a trope of sentimental fiction where the heroines are only given two options, either they get married or die, Isabel “had an especial desire,” Braddon meaningfully writes, “to die early, by consumption, with a hectic flush and an unnatural lustre in her eyes” (28).

Even Sigimund Smith pinpoints Isabel's misdirected imaginative leanings when he informs George that Isabel wouldn't “look at a decent young fellow in a Government office, with three hundred a year and the chance of advancement . . . She's waiting for a melancholy creature, with a murder on his mind” (30). For Isabel, then, those figures that people her novels represent possibilities to search out. In disregarding the real implications of an abusive father or a murderous husband, Isabel sets herself up for inevitable disappointment, not because similar men might not or could not exist in real life, but rather that she may have forever altered any tangible and realistic prospects for that real life.
Readings of Bliss and Sexual Autonomy

As the literary protégé of Emma Bovary, one would expect that Isabel would engage in some type of affair, especially if Braddon intends to call her novel a British version of the French text. While Emma Bovary engages in two lurid affairs that definitely become sexual relationships, Braddon’s Isabel does not literally commit adultery, and yet, one can clearly see an affair of sorts budding between Isabel and Raymond. Although their relationship never extends to a sexual one, I argue that what does occur between the two portrays even more intimacy than either of Emma’s affairs. What sets Braddon’s version of an affair apart is the extent to which most of Isabel's and Raymond’s connection stems from the books they share. Braddon, then, demonstrates an affair nonetheless, but, importantly, one that looks almost beneficial, not reaching the heights of scandal or destruction that Emma Bovary's indiscretions do. I argue that although Braddon's goal is to mute the transgressive nature of the type of heroine that Flaubert creates, her text still displays scenes between Roland and Isabel that are charged with erotic energy. However, her methodology of conveying this affair through the means of books and a sharing of reading practices is unique, if not outright self-promotional and prescriptive, making her novel markedly self-conscious. That is, in limiting Isabel and Roland's affair to their engagement through reading, Braddon can achieve two goals: She can rewrite the now famous Bovary affair in such a way that it not only tones down its transgressive nature, but also makes books its central focus. She, therefore, highlights the power of literature and the crucial differences between a misguided and risky form of reading and one that is more appropriate and beneficial. She
does not attempt to completely eradicate the intimate association with books, however; rather Isabel’s reading with and alongside her “lover” Roland enables her to eventually showcase a more balanced intellect. This strategy of distracting readers’ attention away from the books themselves and replacing it, instead, with her promotion of a certain model of reader is very important to Braddon’s overall project.

Although most scholars of Braddon's work mention the avidness of Isabel's reading and what she reads, most do overlook the important relationship between her reading selections and how she reads. It is these postures, I would argue, that help to define this affair as more than just implicitly passionate. Scholars like Catherine Golden who write on the ways in which Victorian women have been imaged as readers throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, continue the trend of only looking at Isabel's reading postures in terms of how often Braddon mentions she reads, thus not looking more closely at the most important scenes in which Braddon clearly defines Isabel's affair. If one is to accept the Victorian mantra that how one reads is just as detrimental as what one reads, then, as readers of an author who counters the propaganda against the consumption of novels, we must look carefully at how Isabel is reading when she first meets Roland. Indeed, Braddon does not refrain from describing Isabel in a particular state and posture of readership:

One day . . . which made kind of a chasm in her life, dividing all the past from the present and the future- She sat on her old seat under the great oak-tree, beside the creaking mill-wheel and the plashing water; she sat in her favorite spot, with Shelley on her lap and a green parasol over her head. (158)
Here, readers get a view of a pastoral scene in which Isabel can escape the drudgery of her mundane life with George. Braddon envisions Isabel sitting under a tree, in what would have to be a reclined position with “Shelley on her lap.” This image could definitely incite some specific male-oriented anxieties. For one thing, Isabel is alone and reading silently to herself, thus no one can know what she is actually reading or what she is making of it, not to mention the fact that she is reading Shelley. Physically removed from the domestic space, Isabel prioritizes reading over these duties and, without knowing what interests her so much, her silence could look even more dangerous.

According to James Conlon, author of *Men Reading Women Reading*, the way in which women positioned their bodies while reading initiated stress or anxiety for the male viewer or patriarchy as a whole. Although he deals exclusively with paintings, Conlon does apply the pervasive Victorian logic about feminine readership to his analyses. Reclining or lounging while reading, Conlon explains, indicated a type of sexual openness, since these were the postures normally associated with such acts. By lying down, women allowed themselves to be more open to any immoral suggestions within the books, because they were physically in a state of relaxation or rest and not in a state of active resistance. Perched on her lap and open, this book gives Isabel an opportunity to lose herself completely in the world it creates and depicts for her, thus making her more susceptible to possible transgressions of a deviant nature. Literally placing the book on one's lap seemed, for the Victorians, to indicate an association, if only because of proximity, between the book and the female anatomy. This posture, then, inevitably gave way to thoughts and desires of a sexual nature, putting female chastity at risk. This
thought process reveals most clearly how the Victorians felt that the connections between mind and body were inextricable. That is a corrupted mind inevitably led to a compromised body and vice versa. The thought process of the connection between mental and bodily demoralization is clearly evidenced through the explosion of advice pamphlets onto the book scene throughout the 19th century that often told stories about fallen young women whose whole decline began with just some relaxed reading time. A woman's whole being, then, could be in danger of immorality if one allowed herself to be open for such influences within the context of the books she read.

In posturing Isabel in this way, Braddon would have known that she was clearly entering into a heated debate about feminine reading practices. Even the pastoral scene that Braddon chooses, although not considered in most present day analyses of this novel, I will argue has a distinctive bearing on Braddon's purpose here. Conlon argues that a pastoral scene for reading is crucial in understanding the ways in which female readership is imaged, understood, and limited in a patriarchal framework. “In patriarchal culture, then, the woman reading- any woman genuinely engaged in a text-can only be threatening to men.” “The book takes her out of the conventional world of male dominance and places her in a textual world where pleasure and wisdom are, literally, in her own hands” (Conlon 40). Conlon prefigures that just because what a woman reads might always be “male-authored,” or, at the least, a part of the patriarchal system that dictates and manipulates how women authors write, does not mean that a woman's reading experience does not still “require some type of performance on her part” (Conlon 53-54). Because reflections are always a part of the reading process, that is “a way to
order and situate in one's own ideologies the info read, the act of reading always demands a certain amount of autonomy (53-54). This autonomy, the formulation of ideas and thoughts that occur apart from what is just written on the page and the larger ideologies of one's culture, produces the most anxieties for the woman's male counterpart. To counteract this threat to their power or complete hegemony, Conlon argues that men have consistently painted women readers in such a way that they can still control the scene, thus lessening some of the anxieties implicit in the moment of a woman's intellectual musings. According to Conlon, artists often used the quiet peacefulness of a pastoral scene to mute any potential for progressiveness or proactive responses on the part of the woman featured reading. In this way, the tactic was supposed to at least balance the anxieties about what the woman was actually reading and thinking with an image that was calm and given more to laziness than active thought or intellectualism. In other words, as Conlon theorizes, artists painted scenes like these in order to “domesticate the wild act that reading can be” (Conlon 43).

In figure 3, Claude Monet represents just this type of common pastoral scene in his depiction of a woman reading outside amongst trees and flowers. Despite the fact that the book rests on her lap, Monet’s pastoral scene does much to undermine erotic energy the girl might derive from her book. Monet importantly places her alone in the midst of trees and flowers, but it is in the translation of peace that really turns attention from her act of reading. Renderings such as these successfully mute the threatening nature of a woman reading.
Importantly, however, this is not what Braddon does when she describes Isabel’s reading practices. Despite the fact that Braddon never commissioned anyone to do illustrations for *The Doctor’s Wife*, the details of her scene here are both vivid and visceral, but also significantly subversive. Instead of the tactics Conlon describes and Monet embodies in Figure 3, Braddon interestingly pairs the banality of the setting in which she places Isabel with the roaring of a river and its mill, thus instigating a comparison of work and progress fused with a setting more tranquil and innocuous. By highlighting the loudness of the splashing water and the obvious work of the mill, Braddon, significantly, refrains from completely taming the scene and actually opens up the possibilities of Isabel's reading habits.
In other crucial, similar ways, male artists often paint women in a voyeuristic situation, in which the woman becomes an object of the male gaze, thereby losing her subjectivity for the male's fantasy inscribed onto her. In this way, then, artists feature women’s reading as more lackadaisical, while they image men’s reading habits as more professional. Indeed, Conlon reports that often this is a way to revision the possibilities of an autonomic moment as nothing more than a distraction or a woman longing for something other than what is on the page, most probably a man (Conlon). Women are often shown as more lackadaisical when pictured with a book, while men are imaged as more professional. In an illustration from Charles Dickens’ *Our Mutual Friend* (1864) (figure 4), the illustrator, Marcus Stone, epitomizes this tradition of featuring a woman reading while a male suitor gazes at her from a distance.
Figure 4. “Pa’s Lodger and Pa’s Daughter.”

To look at this illustration from Conlon’s perspective, one immediately notices the forefront which depicts a woman reading. Indeed, while she relaxes by the fire to read only one book, thus more likely a recreational endeavor, her suitor has several stacked in his hands, thereby symbolizing work as opposed to relaxation. The different postures and reading materials featured here support Conlon’s view that artists tended to associate work and importance with men’s reading and triviality or purely enjoyment with women’s. This rendering of gendered reading behaviors also underscores the ways in which male authored texts often negate women’s reading experiences. In this case, the man’s presence with his own stack of books at least underwrites the woman’s with the implication that he has more reading to do, and thus, perhaps, more important reading.

Another crucial element of this illustration resonates in the voyeuristic quality of the woman’s male suitor. With her back turned, and obviously taking some leisure time to focus her attention on her book, her suitor catches her, at first, unaware and therefore can enjoy “looking” at her, with what he thinks is without her knowledge. The picture, though, seems to suggest that the young woman actually knows he looks at her, as she makes a glance backward in his direction. With that said, however, the man in the illustration still has the pleasure of looking at her, thus making the focus of the picture more about his interest and desire instead of her reading behavior.

What Braddon might have really wanted to show with her particular scene might go even further in the direction of sexual innuendo, but it also, I argue, demonstrates that
the consequences of Isabel's reading and impending affair do not really have the dire long-lasting effects that one might assume. It is also no accident, that Braddon describes this scene immediately before Roland literally enters into Isabel's life for the first time. While he definitely breaks Isabel's concentration, it is Roland's instruction and their eventual joint reading practices that reins in Isabel's imaginings and gives to them a balance tempered with clarity and practicality. Indeed, it would even be difficult to say that Roland serves as a typical male usurper, one who enters the scene, only to thereby control the woman's reading or to distract her from her own musings. If one can say anything of Roland Lansdell, it is that he is definitely not hyper-masculine, thus not existing within the realm of that aggressive patriarchal paradigm:

Yes, capricious Nature had showered her gifts upon Roland Lansdell. She had made him handsome, and had attuned his voice to a low melodious music, and had made him sufficiently clever; and beyond all this, had bestowed upon him that subtle attribute of grace, which she and she alone can bestow. He was always graceful. He could not throw himself into a chair, or rest his elbow upon a table, or lean against the angle of a doorway, or stretch himself full length upon the grass to fall asleep with his head upon his folded arms, without making himself into a kind of picture. (128)

Nowhere else in the novel does Braddon take such time to describe the minutiae of her characters' demeanor or physique. In intermingling the more masculine attributes with those that are assuredly effeminate like the voice of melodious music, gracefulness, and the constant look of a picture, Braddon demonstrates that while definitely occupying a
strong male presence in the novel, Roland was also very feminine too. This complete blending is important if one is to fully understand the significance of Isabel as a reader and Roland's involvement in that activity. Most convincing of Roland's status as a type of go-between in terms of masculinity and femininity is that Roland's only career and life goal was to be a recognized poet. He too, like Isabel, enjoyed the sweet melodious chords of poetry and poetic prose. It is these pursuits that cause those around Roland to describe him as a disappointment, most likely because he does not satisfy his society's especial expectations for someone that is male and who has ample money and education. The fact that Roland defies and shirks his responsibilities in becoming more involved in the male-ordered world around him, characterizes him as even more effeminate. Indeed Braddon writes of him that

[A]t thirty Roland was nothing. He had dropped out of public life altogether, and was only a drawing-room favorite; a lounger in gay Continental cities; a drowsy idler in fair Grecian islands; a scribbler of hazy little verses about pretty women, and veils, and fans, and daggers,and jealous husbands, and moonlit balconies, and withered orange-flowers, and poisoned chalices . . . a beautiful useless, purposeless creature; a mark for manoeuvering mothers; a hero for sentimental young ladies. (141)

In his laziness, idleness, and focus on the things of sensationalized stories, Roland is not only effeminate, but very similar to Isabel. It is for these reasons that I would argue that, in describing Roland as a type of ineffectual dandy, Braddon alleviates or at least limits any associations with this character and that of a masculine regime. So, in other words,
when Roland happens upon Isabel reading on that first day, it is a meeting of like-minded people, a male, indeed, but one that does not utilize his social status or power at all. In fact, it is only Roland's better education and massive income that separates the two.

This is not to say that Braddon does not sexualize the scene, but not in the way in which Conlon describes that male artists do to maintain power. What she does do, however, is make reading books look not as dangerous, while still presenting readers with an affair of sorts. In his noteworthy book *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes surmises that all reading acts are erotic. For Barthes, this is because when a writer writes he or she puts himself into the text, showing how he or she feels, and when the reader reads these views, the ideas and words of author and reader intermingle or harmonize in such a way that can only be conceived as erotic (Barthes). Operating from a school of thought that sees the reader as a sense maker and not just a passive recipient of information, Barthes’ theory on the relationship between writer and reader is especially relevant to my argument here, especially since Roland and Isabel’s affair begins between the pages of Roland’s published book of poems, *The Alien's Dreams*. Roland notices that on the day that they meet, Isabel has brought along *The Alien*, however, readers have known for several pages of the novel that the young woman immensely enjoys Roland's first attempts at poetry. Braddon describes Isabel's first experience of perusing Roland's text in such a way that definitely bespeaks of an intimate joining of word and mind, lending itself to a Barthesian reading.

The Alien's Dreams seemed like her own fancies, somehow; for they belonged to that bright other world which she was never to see. How familiar the Alien was
with that delicious region; and how lightly He spoke of the hothouse flowers and diamonds, the ermine carpets and Arab steeds! (120)

Importantly, Isabel describes what she is reading as similar to her own fancies, thus the ways in which he particularly describes all of the elements of his plot, things she will never be able to physically see, make her view these details in the way that Roland describes them. In this way, Isabel's own prior imaginings begin to coincide with those that Roland has put down on paper; therefore, her reflections on the issues are more in line with his and the co-mingling of the two minds has already begun before they actually meet. For these reasons, Braddon privileges the interaction through the book of poetry over the real, literal meeting. “She read the poems over and over again,” Braddon writes, “getting up now and then to look at her profile in the glass over the mantlepiece, and to wonder whether she was like any of those gorgeous but hollow-hearted creatures upon whom the Alien showered such torrents of melodious abuse” (120). Roland's poems affect Isabel to such an extent that she literally enacts a performance in order to see if she can physically match this writer's imaginings. For Isabel, it does not matter if the Alien hands down “abuse” to these women, but only that she conceives it as “melodious.” Although she might slightly miss the import of what Roland, as poet, was trying to accomplish with these words, what Isabel does demonstrate is an engagement with Roland's text that goes beyond just the superficial reading of stanzas. There is an involvement with the book to such an extent that it can only be described as life-changing, and, therefore, intimate and erotic.
Isabel and Roland's affair is one way in which Braddon revisions Flaubert's text to fit her own focus of making books and the way we read them of the utmost importance. Instead of a sexual affair with two men, like Emma Bovary, Braddon's heroine only shares books and thoughts with one poet; and yet, at times, this form of an affair looks much more intimate and powerful than even that of Emma's destructive liaisons, which are much more sexually explicit. In her chapter on *The Doctor's Wife* and *Madame Bovary*, Catherine Golden, in arguing that it is only Isabel's naivete that Braddon wants to condemn, quickly brushes aside any real weight that this affair might have in the narrative, implying that it was nothing more than platonic. It is crucial to my argument, however, that Braddon does want this relationship between Isabel and Roland to have more significance than just providing her with a way to show Isabel's misinterpretation of her actions toward Roland. Braddon, indeed, wants her readers to see that a meeting of minds can be more intimate than an actual sexual affair.

Braddon makes this idea of intimacy very clear in her own letters to her literary idol Edward Bulwer Lytton. It is surprising that in all of the scholarly attention that Braddon's depiction of Isabel as a reader and her liaisons with Roland has received, no one makes the surprisingly obvious connection between Braddon's own treatment of Bulwer's letters, poems, and literary guidance with her descriptions of Isabel's handling of Roland's work and ideas. I argue that these similarities demonstrate how significant this affair really is to Isabel's sense of self as a married woman and our understanding, as readers, of the consequences Braddon imposes upon her. Just as Isabel begins to let Roland guide her in her literary endeavors, Braddon too often writes of how Bulwer
becomes the driving force in how she will read and re-read literature. For instance, in one such letter, Braddon determinedly informs Lytton that she will “re-read Scott . . . with Lytton's own words near her” in order to guide and gauge her interpretations (Devoted Disciple, Letter 4.). Often deprecatingly harsh on herself and her work, Braddon, in most letters to Lytton, seems overly apologetic of what she sees as her own failings of style, thus giving, like Isabel does to Roland, much credence to his opinions. Braddon never wants to disappoint Lytton and it is her desires to have Lytton view her as a competent, accomplished writer that perhaps most closely mirrors Isabel's intentions of making herself, at first, like one of Roland's heroines and then like someone who resembles more closely the more well-rounded, literate woman Roland is helping her to be. In one such letter, Braddon encloses a picture of herself for Lytton's perusal, and yet, she seems overly nervous about his appraisal of it, thus suggesting that there is at least an implicit desire to have Lytton think of her physicality in a pleasing way. This, too, is reminiscent of the way in which, while reading The Alien's Dreams, or any one of Roland's suggested titles, Isabel often goes to her mirror to try and pinpoint the similarities she can find between herself and these women that Roland has penned or admired. Like Isabel seems to compartmentalize her marriage with George keeping it far removed from her dealings with Roland, Braddon enacts a similar tactic. In what could be called the most telling example of Braddon's affection for Lytton, while she openly offers information to her other friends and peers about her long-standing affair with John Maxwell, Braddon purposefully refrains from sharing such information with Lytton, even
hiding pregnancies from him and refusing to sign her name as Mary Maxwell, once she is officially married (*Devoted Disciple*).

Still, one of the most important similarities is the rather obvious way in which Braddon and Bulwer-Lytton develop an intimate bond solely dependent on the epistolary style. Just as Roland and Isabel's mutual affection seems to develop from their combined reading efforts and notations made in the margins of books, so too, does Braddon depict a comparable relationship through a significant mound of letters. Additionally, while Isabel and Roland must eventually depend on their book reading in order to connect over the geographical distance between them, Braddon relies solely on her letters to Lytton for their connection, since she has not seen him since 1854- their first and only meeting. Braddon is able to keep up this relationship only through the “conversation” that takes place through letters and their own respective publications. Built on a type of symbiotic connection, Lytton can offer Braddon literary advice, while she can guarantee him mention in one of the several different magazines she edits throughout the years of their correspondence. More to the point, both couples can only rely on the written word and books to bolster their mutual regard and intimacy for one another.

Even Roland and Isabel begin to understand that their arranged meetings to read and share books would not possibly be viewed as something in line with social decorum, especially between a married woman and an eligible, rich bachelor. It is for these reasons that Roland hides the books he has brought to Isabel and signals that she should not tell Sigismund what they are doing when the young writer accidentally happens upon the two lovers one afternoon. In this very important scene, Roland has signaled much more than
just his need for Isabel's silence and acquiescence, but rather he also, all at once, defines their relationship in terms of something illicit and implicitly characterizes it as an affair. That is, without necessarily verbalizing it, he has shown his true feelings for Isabel. Their affair, then, does take on more intimacy as Braddon informs readers that Isabel can read in the margins what Roland thinks of a certain text that he lends her, and as she runs her fingers over his handwriting, she can reflect on his thoughts as she reads, thus preparing for another consummation of ideas, once they meet again.

Braddon takes these well-known associations between books and postures and uses them to enhance the connection between Isabel and Roland, without making this affair seem too lurid in nature. When Roland leaves the county, he gives Isabel full rein in his library for the duration of his absence. While in his grand house, Isabel finds herself sitting in a “low easy chair in the library -his easy chair-, with a pile of books on the reading table by her side”(235). Of course this moment showcases the ways in which Isabel can enact a type of class and gender cross-dressing, in that she can sit in his chair with his books surrounding her, as if she too, has a social right to be there amongst this finery. This scene also demonstrates how Isabel can offer herself a physical closeness with Roland despite his absence, thus emphasizing their intimacy. In mimicking his movements around his own house and sitting in his chair, Isabel brings herself closer to his memory and physical self. Not only does Isabel attempt to be closer to Roland through his furnishings, but she also takes his books into the boudoir to read. As Nicole Reynolds explains in her essay “Where Women Read,” the boudoir was a room replete with social and gender demarcations. According to Reynolds, the space at once
“distinguished between family and guests,” thus, including and excluding and importantly marking certain areas of the home as appropriate for public use and exposure, while keeping others remotely private. The privatization of such a space marks it as almost entirely feminine, if nothing else but because of pervasive gender hierarchies that deemed men a crucial part of public life, while society relegated women to the more private end of life and spaces within the home. The boudoir, Reynolds reasons, could have been somewhat of a contradiction, not only in that it offered to women not only a space for private actions, thus in keeping with the ordained female codes of chastity and morality, but it also could become a space that enabled types of “solitary renderings” (Reynolds). Much like Conlon's theories on the postures women chose for reading, Reynolds explores the ways in which the tendency to read in one's boudoir away from anyone else “denies a book's social and institutional functions” (Reynolds). In other words, women could become more autonomous and independent, in their reading choices and what they made of those readings, than if they were subject to a more public reading space. Similar to Pearson's discussions on the evolution of women's silent reading habits and the anxieties such actions incurred, many other scholars have located the boudoir as a space marked for private actions. Like many women of the period who would use this space to read according to her own will, Isabel chooses it to read some of Roland's books, therefore, definitely marking the space for her private thoughts that manifest as illicitly sexual. Once Isabel enters the boudoir, she immediately removes her bonnet and shawl, thus exposing more of her body. Braddon also includes specific descriptions of her posture of reading, as she sat there with a volume open upon her lap, thus becoming more
open to possibilities, and, as Braddon informs, Isabel begins to dream of Roland, fantasizing and desiring him, and even shockingly going so far as to vocally express her love for him (237).

More than this, however, is the way in which Braddon continues, throughout these scenes, to emphasize that this sharing and reading of books is certainly powerful and intimate, not to mention educational. While reading a “great deal of the lighter literature upon Mr. Lansdell's bookshelves,” Isabel would also read about the countries which Roland was visiting at that time and it would seem like, through his books, she somehow “followed him” (235). For it is the education that Isabel receives, the “expansion of her mind, “and the gradual “consciousness of her ignorance” (235), that makes this affair so different from even its literary predecessor. While certainly intimate and often even erotically charged, Braddon is careful to make the point that it is only through this affair, one that exists mainly through books and reading practices, that Isabel acquires her much needed education.

For Roland, then, his lending of books to Isabel takes on a much deeper meaning, as he begins to try to educate her and to fill in the holes in her former studies. True, she is a novelty to him, a woman who consumes herself with “school-girl fancies,” who should really be the “most practical person in Graybridge” (167). At the same time, Isabel fascinates and obsesses Roland and he wants, at once, to listen to her wide-eyed re-tellings of Shelley and Byron, as well as to mold her into a more educated version of herself. One cannot say that Roland does not take pleasure in his position as her instructor, and yet, there is more to this than just a simple, clichéd sexualization of his
pupil. According to Conlon's theory, Roland would have to sexualize his imaginings of Isabel to thwart the danger she imposes by reading, thus making her his object of desire. Although he does spend a great deal of his time thinking about how she often “looks,” and calling her a “pretty picture,” sitting under the oak, with the blue water in the foreground” (167), thus imaging her like one of the anxiety ridden painters Conlon speaks of, Roland also derives pleasure from imagining how he could hand over control of his library to Isabel and how she would “open her eyes” when she saw it (167). To be the one that opens her eyes to a new way of looking at the world is definitely provocative and alluring for Roland, but, with that said, the desired outcome is still the same-- he wants to re-educate her in the same fashion that he received. Thus, in allowing her free reign in his library, Roland demonstrates that he does not necessarily have any anxieties about what she will make of his reading selections. This is not to say that he will not guide her, but Braddon gives us no indication that Roland's project will include some type of aggressive control. In fact, he still condones most of the readings she has previously chosen. So, for instance, it is not that she loves the era of the French Revolution, finding everything about it interesting that is the problem; instead, it is just that she might not have a well-rounded view of the event. In this way, it is her way of reading and her methodology for comprehension that he undertakes to change.

Braddon's depicted relationship between the poet and her heroine, then, lends itself to another one of Barthes' theories of reading – that of the crucial differences between Readings of Pleasure and Readings of Bliss. According to Barthes, a text that connotes Pleasure (plaisir) is one that “contents, fills, grants euphoria, does not break
from culture, and is linked to a comfortable practice of reading. A text that demonstrates Bliss (jouïssance) is one that imposes a state of loss, it discomforts, unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, and psychological assumptions and disrupts the consistency of former tastes and values. Indeed, the readings that Roland offers Isabel are definitely eye-opening for the young woman, who, up until this point, has had very little guidance when it came to her reading selections or practices. Roland offers Isabel *The Life of Robespierre* and Carlyle's *French Revolution*, punctuating the latter with this disclaimer:

> I don't suppose you'll like Carlyle at first; but he's wonderful When you get accustomed to his style-- like a monster brass-band . . . that stuns you at first with its crashing thunder, until, little by little, you discover the wonderful harmony, and appreciate the beauty of the instrumentation. (185)

In no better way could Roland have better described Barthes' Readings of Bliss. Despite Roland's advice to Isabel that she perhaps will not like Carlyle at first, the young poet goes on to describe the effects of reading Carlyle on the senses. Just as Barthes claims that a blissful reading will make you uncomfortable, perhaps startling you, Roland, too, describes this process as a “monster brass band and a crash of thunder.” Significantly, it is not just the jarring or discord of the reading, but rather what you can glean from it and the end result of harmony that makes this an enjoyable, nonetheless erotic or blissful, experience. In assigning these particular readings, Roland also clearly demonstrates that his goal in instructing Isabel is not to completely alter her love for reading or the subjects she is interested in, but rather to offer a more complete view, albeit mind-altering, of the ideas at hand.
Not only does Roland want to introduce Isabel to different readings and thereby give her a better understanding of some of her favorite stories, he also wants to instruct her in a specific method of how to read. For this reason, he tells her when speaking of adding Lamartine's *Girondists* to the list that this will “make a great pile of books, but you need not read them laboriously.” He advises, “you can pick out the pages you like here and there, and we can talk about them afterwards” (185). Roland's instructive reading practices for Isabel are interesting, and suggest that it is the discussion, the intimate communion of minds that he privileges over her reading alone the lengthy histories in their entirety. Certainly, this “cherry-picking” style of reading could have its downfalls, and it is Roland's offer that they discuss everything afterwards that most likely conveys his intentions to offer the guidance she might need in making sense of the information. Barthes, too, mentions this type of reading practice, calling it ‘tmesis.’” He theorizes that this is the process by which a reader “sets what is useful to a knowledge of the secret (of the book) against what is useless to such knowledge” (Barthes). In other words, the reader, in attempting to divulge the secrets of the text to himself, chooses what to read and what not to read, thus making this a type of erotic game between author and reader because the author never knows what the reader will or will not read. The author, then, according to Barthes, can only playfully guess at what the reader will consume, thus this process can only take place at the moment of consumption and highlights only certain portions of the text as pleasurable. Although not the author of all of the texts in which Isabel receives her education, Roland, too, can derive some type of pleasure as Isabel, in her readings of bliss, selects, unbeknownst to him, what they will discuss that
day. Shockingly similar, Braddon, too, describes a “tmetic” process of reading when she reads Lytton's essays and poems. Already somewhat familiar with their meaning, Braddon tells Lytton that she often just “opens them to the middle” and begins wherever this will lead her. Braddon is sure to relay the amount of pleasure this style of reading affords her. The concentration on just portions of text enables her to refocus her ideas and thoughts about Lytton's work, without having to “labor” through the parts not applicable to that day's musings. For Braddon and Isabel, this will make the reading session more individualized and because they share it with one another, more intimate pleasure with that person as well.

In fact, once Isabel and Roland begin this type of reading practice, thus meeting several times a week, to engage in literary conversations, Isabel forgoes the reading and re-reading of her stash of three-volume novels and prefers these new histories over the tired romances. When thinking about Roland, she claims it is “better than reading” (184), a sentiment that Braddon also uses to describe her feelings about her written discussions with Lytton, which make her forget everything else and “bring[s] her closer to art.” Despite Isabel's exclamation that dreams of Roland and their conversations are better than reading, which importantly privileges the engagement the reading induces, Braddon never indicates that Isabel quits reading the books that Roland suggests. Indeed, her consumption of these stories not only picks up, but also begins to take priority over even the most mundane, everyday activities. Isabel even finds ways of integrating the reading practice into her eating rituals, thus eating dinner with her husband while also keeping one eye on the book by her plate. With these scenes, Braddon demonstrates how
it is not the sheer intake of books that Roland, or even she herself, found disturbing, but rather what Isabel had been making of them according to her own, misguided approach.

Braddon makes her objective and definition of the affair strikingly clear when Roland attempts to make their relationship more official and intends for Isabel to run away with him. It is here that Braddon glaringly departs from Flaubert's work, thus privileging her own purpose of pushing the act of reading to the forefront of her concerns. Ironically, it is the education that Isabel has received from Roland's careful attention and selections of books that makes it impossible for her to accept his proposal of scandalously running away with him to Italy. Indeed it is because of those 3 volume novels and the way that those romances are described as well as the eye-opening guidance she has received through Roland that makes Isabel unable to conceive of a love that could survive if she were to run away. Despite her understanding of how she has been overly romantic at times and quite childishly silly, Isabel still reveres the idea of love for love's sake and the simple pleasure of idolizing Roland that cannot exist if marred or sullied by the snares or entrapments of social logistics. That is, while Braddon has Roland want to literally move forward with Isabel and start a life with her as his mistress, a logical next step in what he obviously sees as their relationship, Braddon's heroine could never engage in an agreement like this one because it glaringly contradicts the romances from her novels and the concept she has had of her love for Roland. For Isabel, then, Braddon makes clear that she never had any ideas or schemes for her relationship with Roland to progress beyond the present:
She was resigned to the idea of never leaving Graybridge-on-the-Wayverne. she was content to live there all her life, so long as she could know that he was near her, thinking of her and loving her, and that any moment his dark face might shine out of the dulness of her life. (254)

What Roland proposes, then, upsets a very specific formula that Isabel has gleaned from her novels and applied to her life. She can never truly be the heroine of a tale, what she so desperately desires, if she allows Roland to bring “shame and disgrace” upon her (272). Isabel truly has enjoyed a love that if left to come to full fruition would ruin it. Braddon has her heroine speak this plainly when she tells Roland:

I never thought that you would ask me to be more to you than I am now: I never thought that it was wicked to come here and Meet you. I have read of people, who by some fatality could never marry, loving each other, and being true to others for years and years . . . I fancied that you loved me like that. (273)

For Isabel, Roland was an embodiment of her imagination, a manifestation of the type of love she had read about, but nothing more. In the hopes of one day having a love so pure and long-lasting, thus uncomplicated by the drudgery of domestic work and financial problems, she worked to create this out of her interactions with Roland. While certainly looking quite naive in thinking that Roland would appraise their affair in the same fashion, Isabel does assert a type of sexual autonomy here that would shock the reader who has assumed that Braddon's novel would end like Flaubert's, in which the heroine goes through with her self-destructive behaviors and ruins her husband's life, while eventually ending her own. In resisting Roland's project of making her a mistress, Isabel
redefines the parameters of their affair, thus illuminating that the enlightenment she received through his books was really the height and purpose of it all. By having Isabel take control of her reputation and adamantly deny Roland's plan that would ultimately alter her reputation for the worse, Braddon can make Isabel's re-education through the right style of reading paramount. In a sense, then, Braddon alters what might traditionally be thought of in terms of an affair and makes the outcome more productive and at least not as tragic for the woman involved. She, at once, shows the power of books, the connections they can foster, and how reading them in the right way can be productive, not destructive.

A Marriage of Two Extremes

With her eighth novel, Braddon has demonstrated a young girl's overactive imagination, her dependency on reading over everything else, and an affair that ultimately re-educates her, giving her the ability to utilize some practicality in her life. To what purpose though does Braddon really take up this cause? We cannot so hastily count this novel amongst those that revile reading habits like the ones that Isabel demonstrates because Braddon promotes Isabel's avid readership, for it is only through it that she has an affair with Roland and, thereby, gains more balance. Despite her intentions of rewriting Flaubert's work, Braddon departs from her model in meaningful ways, thus underscoring that perhaps the idea of what and how to read is much more important than any exaggerated consequence of this type of consumption. It should be clear, then, that Braddon would not have intended for her book to be characterized quickly as just another
prescription for female readership and ways to avoid the addictions that were thought to bring such destruction upon the Victorian woman and the cult of domesticity.

It is in her depiction of characters that I believe Braddon makes her most solid and valid points. While Isabel's overactive imagination renders her incapable of appreciating or enjoying her life of simple practicality, George's lack of imagination and constant hyper-realism is not necessarily privileged either. While Isabel gives herself over to wild fancies, daydreams, and escapism through the books she reads, George epitomizes the use of cautious reason. He only enjoys reading histories or the authors that could boast a more realistic style like Cooper and Lever, thus characterizing Byron and Shelley, which we know to be two of Isabel's favorites, as "immoral and blasphemous" (102). Just as he reacts to reading, George also finds other examples of culture boring and impractical, like not seeing the point in spending time at the Royal Academy and "growing very tired of staring at pictures" for an entire day. Braddon is sure to point out here that George misses the point, thinking that "the finest works of modern art were only 'pretty pictures' more or less interesting according to the story they told; and . . . disquisitions upon modelling, and depth, feeling, and tone, and colour, and distance were so much unintelligible jargon" (35). George's resistance to reading anything other than dry newspapers, his thriftiness at the cost of culture, and his total lack of interest in anything literary are not behaviors that endear him to his wife. George's hopes and dreams for his future never reach beyond the bounds of his present reality and his simple life as an underpaid doctor. To make sense of these crucial differences, Braddon spends much of her time detailing Isabel's visions for redecorating the house,
only to have them severely limited and cut short by an overly financially cautious, and unimaginative George. “Why Izzie,” . . . you'd ruin me before the year was out, “ George admonishes when Isabel has mentioned buying a special ottoman, “chintz curtains lined with rose-color, white watered paper, and Venetian shutters” (114). Braddon also pairs Isabel's reading pleasures and daydreams of travels with that of George's common habits and especially his inclinations toward consuming large quantities of onions, a food Isabel finds low and indicative of a questionable social status. Even during their honeymoon the differences in extremes mount: George cannot refrain from obsessively calculating their budget because he is intent on not “going beyond a ten-pound note” (106), while Isabel dreams of having free reign in the hotel's reading library. Braddon, then, is quick to demonstrate, from the very beginning, a lack of connection between these two characters, a particular misfitting that aids her in examining them as extremes.

In their book *From Sensation to Society*, Natalie and Ronald Schroeder suggest that Braddon describes George and Isabel's marriage in this way because she wants to demonstrate how prescriptive and “natural” these types of unions were thought to be. Like most of the present-day scholarship on this novel, the Schroeders believe that this marriage of opposites helps Braddon to refocus critical attention on the problems inherent in the institution of marriage itself. According to them, Isabel, while certainly naïve in her dealings with Roland, understands her duties with regards to marriage and “accepts marriage as the appropriate narrative of a woman's life” (Schroeder 163). When George's offer of marriage does not coincide with Isabel's dreams or visions, her acceptance, the Schroeders argue, reveals her “assimilation into the dominant discourse of the culture”
They go as far as to analyze Isabel's mindset post marriage and find that her dissatisfaction and extreme boredom is always paired with her knowledge of how their union “demands the subordination of her will to George's and that marriage has made him her master” (166). For the Schroeders, then, Braddon's ultimate goal with Isabel and George is to show each one’s understanding of the marital pact they have entered, all the while operating within a union that is naturally at odds with one another. That is, the Schroeders see Braddon making a very clear and timely commentary on the dire need for marital reform, which for them resonates very clearly in Braddon's descriptions of the Gilberts' marriage and the ways in which the masculine sphere's over-obsession with materialist pursuits, thus practicality, will forever be at odds with the domestic sphere's “nonmaterialist values” (165). Indeed, Braddon deems Isabel foolish and devastatingly young suggesting over and over how at odds this couple truly is. The end result, then, will always be a mismatch of people and loveless marriages with no possible way out.

While the Schroeders' understanding of Braddon's plot is definitely convincing, it is their proximal argument that, as readers, our sympathies and identifications with the characters become confused and compacted when we read such literature that speaks most directly to my argument of Braddon's purpose. That is, despite Isabel's affair and overactive imagination, Braddon also gives George's lack of imagination the same type of scrutiny, and it is configured, more times than not, as just as much of a problem as Isabel's overactive one. I argue that while marital strife is definitely an obvious concern, it is the way in which Braddon configures these differences of the imagination within and outside of novel-reading that really steals the focus of this text. More to the point,
everything that George feels about Isabel, particularly his imaginings and visions of the
perfect marriage, hinges on his obsessive use of practical reason:

He loved this young woman, and believed in her, and was ready to bring her to his
simple home whenever she pleased to come thither; and had already pictured her
sitting opposite to him in the little parlour, making weak tea for him in a Britannia
metal teapot, sewing commonplace buttons upon his commonplace shirts,
debating Mrs. Jeffson as to whether there should be roast beef or boiled mutton
for the two o' clock dinner, sitting up alone in that most uninteresting little parlour
. . . waiting to preside over little suppers of cold meat and pickles, bread and
cheese and celery. Yes; George pictured Miss Sleaford the heroine of such a
domestic story as this, and had no power to divine that there was any incongruity
in the fancy; no fineness of ear to discover the dissonant interval between the
heroine and the story. (78)

Indeed, George seems to be describing anyone other than Isabel. Interestingly, instead of
romantic liaisons and heroic gestures, George's imaginings, although proof of an
imagination all the same, have more to do with a very specific style of practical
domesticity, one that demonstrates piety, attention to menial tasks, and total self-
servience. George's use of words like “simple,” “little,” “weak,” “commonplace,”
“uninteresting,” and “cold” are at odds with the word “imagination,” and yet, this is how
George utilizes his imagination to visualize his union with Isabel. One only has to note
the explanations of a wife's duties to fully comprehend that George has not really seen
Isabel for who she is and this faulty sense of reason makes him incapable of seeing Isabel
for the wife she can be. Braddon does not give this approach to life any less criticism than she offers to Isabel's obvious extreme fancies. What Braddon has us see here is that both characters, either with the use of practical, traditional expectations or fanciful dreams, project themselves outside of the realms of realistic marriage, and thereby any type of real capacity for happiness.

Because Braddon manipulates our sympathies in such a fashion and she clearly demonstrates that it is not one or the other, the imaginative reader or practical person, that should make up a whole or well-rounded person, she most likely is calling for a combination of both. It is this insistence of a melding of sorts that comprises what I argue is at least one crucial portion of Braddon's thesis with this novel. In fact, it seems as though her characterizations of George and Isabel bring to light a much more deeply embedded agenda. This husband and wife make up a marriage of opposites and each occupies an extreme point on the binary distinguishing between reason and irrationality. Much like the cultural ideologies that French theorist and feminist Helene Cixous extricates and then analyzes, it is this paradigm of the sexes, these clearly defined boundaries between male and female that have separated conceptions of the genders for centuries where “Woman” always resonates on the side of being unreasonable and fanciful, while men firmly control the side more associated with intellect and reason. Braddon most clearly reveals her 19th century conception of this dichotomy when in a letter to Lytton she explains that what she really tried to show in this novel was the crucial “difference between a man's love and a woman's sentimental fancy” (Letter, 4). Here Braddon remarks upon the inherent differences between the two genders when
approaching a love match. More than this, however, is the way in which she implies that this separatism is difficult to remedy.

While Braddon's novel is definitely in keeping with this gendered division, thereby suggesting much about Isabel and George's inevitable marital problems, it is her use of the concepts of imagination and novel-reading that reveals most clearly her objective. Here we see another type of binary surface, one whose two sides coexisted and produced much strife for Braddon herself. The mutually exclusive genres of Realism and Sensationalism certainly parallel the distinctions that Braddon has drawn separating her main characters and their respective genders. While realism is practical, reasonable, and thought to delve into topics that were realistically possible, sensationalized stories, of course, made use of the imagination, depicting extreme stories of intrigue and plot lines that seemed more unrealistic, exaggerated, and coincidental as opposed to realistic scenarios.

Even though Braddon wrote mostly imaginative stories and was for most of her writing career acknowledged as the “Queen of Sensation,” I argue that she did, however, especially in the case of The Doctor's Wife, believe that a balance of extremes made for the perfect novel. It is no secret that with this novel Braddon intended to show a departure from former stories, and yet, what readers actually see is a distinctive melding of both a stark realism in the case of the marriage plot as well as a defense of the imagination through Isabel's novel-reading. At both ends of these plot lines, Braddon demonstrates the failings of each, thus consistently calling for more of a melding of the two sides. Nowhere is Braddon more clear on this subject and her intention of balancing
her own binary than in her letters to Lytton when she verbalizes her hope that it [this novel] would be “one that is both poetry and real” (Devoted Disciple, Letter No 23).

She goes on to say, in several subsequent letters immediately following this one, that her project is to “write a novel of character,” but she significantly admits that she could never “write something that has no accident in it” (Devoted Disciple, Letter No 26). Calling for what she deems a little “Promethian fire,” Braddon insists that this melding of styles is, indeed, exemplary of “real life” (26). Through her own words, then, Braddon reveals a lot about her definitions of the perfect novel form, one that incorporates both ends of the generic spectrum—both realism and sensationalism. Braddon was verbose on this subject and often discussed with Lytton those authors who did not just attempt to show a “deification of the commonplace,” a fault she found with most realists, but someone who could also “impart an awful sublimity” (Letter No, 7) a style that she found more rewarding and engaging.

So, even in her attempts to write a novel more realistic, Braddon could not depart completely from a sensational style, thus importantly I argue, she demonstrates the significance of combining forms. She enacts this type of narrative synthesis in her additions of Isabel's father's mysterious return and Roland's subsequent murder to the, otherwise, predominately “realist” text. Despite her narrative intrusions throughout the novel, and in one particular instance where she claims “this is not a sensational novel,” Braddon still relies on her form of sensation or engaging accidents to propel her plot. Her adamant proclamation here is most likely in line with her objective to demonstrate that sensation does not mean untrue or impossible occurrences.
In surely what resonates as a narrative twist and sensational tactic, Braddon kills off Roland Lansdell at the hands of Isabel's own father. Certainly a departure from Flaubert's tale in which Emma Bovary's lovers are left alive and only Emma and her husband perish, Braddon kills off Roland, but does so in a fashion that bespeaks of old resentments, mistaken identities, and horrific violence. For Roland's death is, if anything, assuredly tragic. Making good on his threat to destroy the man that identified him as the leader of a band of criminals, Isabel's father beats Roland in the head, leaving him insensible and past all remedy. The resurfacing of Isabel's father, thought to be living in America, is part of the sensation too, and it serves Braddon in her project of mixing a little suspense in a tale that, otherwise, would have been, more or less, just an in-depth look into the trials and tribulations of marriage and novel-reading.

Another, perhaps more obvious way that Braddon reveals her true purpose with this novel is the way in which she allows Isabel to live and kills off George and Roland. Although Braddon herself was conflicted about her decision to kill George, a narrative move that she later seemed to regret in a letter to Lytton, this decision actually most clearly supports her objective. Neither George nor Roland really move beyond functioning on their ends of the binary which splits reason from imagination. George, certainly remains reasonable and almost stagnantly objective, even when he begins to hear gossip concerning Isabel's meetings with a strange man, which turns out to be her father. True and steadfast to the last, George lives a simple, practical life that never suffers from heightened passions or changes because of enlightenment. He believes in Isabel completely and dies not, as in the case with Charles Bovary from a broken heart.
and harsh realizations, but from a contagious disease caught from his undying and never swaying devotion to his poor patrons. As a static character that has only demonstrated reason and realism, George has not been able to demonstrate a way of functioning between the two extremes, thus he cannot be allowed to go on living on just one side. Similarly, Roland, although an interesting mix of both masculine and feminine characteristics, cannot break free from his overactive imagination and the way he has envisioned and fancied the extent and reaches of Isabel's love. This is most evident in his pleas for Isabel to run away with him, a moment in which he might be trying to employ some realistic planning to support a dream. However, Roland stops short of this melding of styles and what is most telling about this plan is the way in which he presents it to her through the context of fiction by first comparing her to an “Italian picture” (268) and then going on to say:

> you remember the monk in Hugo's *Notre Dame*. It seems a grand story in that book, Izzie, . . . Some day, some careless day- we look out of the window and see the creature dancing in the sunshine, and from that moment every other purpose of our life is done with and forgotten; we can do nothing but go out and follow her wherever she beckons us. If she is a wicked siren, she may lure us into the dark recesses of her cave and pick our bones at her leisure. If she is Undine, and plunges deep down into the blue water, we can only take a header and go to the bottom after her. But if she is a dear little innocent creature, worthy of our best love and worship, why should we not be happy with her ever afterwards, like the good people in the story-books? (268)
Roland cannot talk to Isabel, except in terms of novels, and very imaginative ones at that. In this way, although he suggests that these “grand tales are really quite commonplace” (268), he is unable to move beyond his reliance on fantasy and on stories that have little room for real-life application. He is so obsessed with this vision of the two of them living together that he forgets the more practical reasons why Isabel could never do this.

Perhaps most telling is how Braddon lets her heroine remain alive, unlike Flaubert's heroine who dies in a traumatic, public scene after having ingested large doses of poison. Braddon's version of a heroine, however, becomes quite a penitent, but more than this, she finds a way to incorporate and live what she has read, without necessarily foregoing either her newfound reasonable intellect or her imagination. During the course of her husband’s illness Braddon tells readers that “the likes of “Edith Dombey and Ernest Maltravers, were alike forgotten during those long days and nights in which the surgeon's rambling delirious talk only broke the silence”(356). Isabel, then, puts away these fancies and yet finds a better model from her readings to enact, thus importantly not doing away with these heroic examples altogether: “If she could not be Mrs. Dombey, sublime in scornful indignation and ruby silk velvet, she would have been contented to be simple Dorothea, washing her tired feet in the brook, with her hair about her shoulders” (357). Here, Isabel merely trades one idea of herself for another, one that perhaps fits her circumstances better and, at the same time, serves as a more suitable idol.

Despite its lack of critical attention and praise, with this novel Braddon did take great strides in challenging societal attitudes toward female education, reading habits, and the realist and sensational genres. In using a book like Madame Bovary for her
inspiration and framework, Braddon opened herself up to attacks on the sensational aspects, but if any critic really paid attention to her commentaries on reading and female education, then s/he would be able to see that Braddon’s point was to show the possibilities of a novel such as this one. For Braddon, there could always be a social and cultural value to what she wrote. Taking up the controversial subjects of female reading practices and female education, Braddon gave readers a natural conclusion— that if provided with the proper guidance and instruction any woman or young girl reading this novel could begin to understand its proper applications—its crucial and timely balance of sensation and realism.
CHAPTER 3: FRIENDLY READINGS: FEMININE BONDS AND COMMUNITIES
IN FOUR OF BRADDON'S NOVELS

Similar to the ways in which Braddon demonstrates the importance of women’s reading habits and education in *The Doctor’s Wife*, she shows how reading can foster relationships between readers in the connected novels *Birds of Prey* and *Charlotte's Inheritance* and *John Marchmont's Legacy*. Most importantly, however, the relationships that readings incur in these novels are almost entirely relegated to those between women. That is, instead of building on a romantic, and often erotic, form of shared readings, Braddon shows another purpose to women’s avid reading through the very strong and close knit feminine communities that coalesce around books.

In her novels, Braddon almost always deals with a feminine friendship as a way of bolstering and maintaining feminine bonds that are crucial to her plots. It is not, however, the strength and sustenance of such friendships that should receive one’s entire focus, but rather how Braddon brings women to friendship and, at times, against all odds. Indeed, in one particular example from *Charlotte's Inheritance* (1868), the character Diana Paget’s formulation of a friendship with Charlotte Halliday is, at least at first, fraught with resentment, jealousy, and competition. For Diana's life before meeting Charlotte, Braddon renders an extremely rough and complicated picture, complete with an apathetic and truant father, who is often emotionally and physically abusive. Diana's early childhood, then, is spent mostly amongst her father's fellow criminal associates and their latest illegal schemes in foreign casinos. As an avid gambler and alcoholic, Diana's father is not always successful in his plans; thus, the “family” (which consists of Diana,
her father, and her father's assistant Valentine Hawkhurst), must often move quickly from one location to another. Consequently, Diana has no home per se, and must constantly live from one moment to the next without stability and peace of mind regarding the possibility of her father's apprehension and incarceration.

The only confidant and friend that Diana has is her father's assistant, Valentine. Eventually, as Diana grows older, Braddon's descriptions of the young woman's feelings for this friend become definitively more sentimental and eventually seem more comparable to love than merely sisterly affection. Despite the fact that he is slightly older than Diana, it is Valentine, however, who can only partially recognize his feelings for the young girl, therefore refraining to admit to having any tangible feelings beyond those of a brother and protector. Diana carries this form of rejection with her to a boarding school, whose head governess is a distant relative, and to whom she must flee, once her father's financial troubles force him into hiding. It is here that Diana first meets Charlotte Halliday and the two quickly form an unlikely union, as Braddon characterizes Charlotte as an optimist who has had a much more advantageous life than Diana. Despite these circumstances, Braddon usually demonstrates the eventual triumph of a common feminine spirit that helps the friends maintain or even rededicate themselves to the bonds formed, however precarious or unusual they might seem at first. So, while Diana must come to terms with the fact that Valentine eventually intends to marry Charlotte, the two women are incredibly close and, although Braddon from time to time gives vent to Diana's feelings of jealousy, she does not write that this turn of events comes between the two friends.
In a genre like Sensationalism that relies on a mastery of the sleight of hand technique and characterizations of women who easily transform from innocents to villains in just the turning of a page, it is only natural that, as a crucial signifying motif, authors often categorize women as polar opposites, thus enhancing the potential for the two characters to be at odds with one another. If not outright enemies or foils, one of the female characters resonates as a darker, more suspect version of womanhood, while only one of the pair functions as the intended heroine. For instance, Wilkie Collins, perhaps Braddon's most famous and accomplished contemporary, makes the stark polarization of female types look like a qualifying trope of the Sensational genre. He almost always pairs a dark, broodingly complex woman with one who is vulnerable, uncomplicated, and angelic. In one of his most acclaimed novels, *The Woman in White*, Collins showcases two main female characters, who, although stepsisters could not be any more different. While Laura Fairlie is meek, vulnerable, and angelic, her sister, Marian Halcombe, is dark and masculine, even sporting a visible mustache. Laura, on the other hand, represents the iconic “angel in the house” motif, as she consistently needs saving, protection, and a strong male presence on which she is completely dependent. Marian, on the other hand, remains obstinately independent, intelligent, and enigmatic; thus, at least her early characterizations refute any type of specific, normalized categorization. Although Marian reigns as the central voice of the narrative, as she single-handedly and quite astutely acts as a detective for unraveling the major mystery of the novel, Collins eventually abbreviates any real power Marian might have. First, she falls ill and then her diary entries, the majority of the text up to this point, abruptly end. Marian only
resurfaces at the end of the novel and importantly not in “first-person,” but rather as a bystander to the celebration of the birth of Laura's son. So that the iconic woman's qualities shine that much brighter, Collins creates a circumspect woman as the foil needed to extol the more culturally sanctioned of the two. Avid readers of the Sensationalist style, then, might assume that Braddon, as a matter of course, would resort to making one of her female characters less visible, less astute, or even a villain, and yet, in most of her novels, including *Charlotte's Inheritance* and *John Marchmont's Legacy*, Braddon resists the generic polarization of women and, instead, makes both of them arguably equals in sentiments, heroine potential, and even readerly affection.

Within the context of her novels, and in these crucial ways, Braddon develops a significant and uncharacteristic feminine community. Her characters strengthen these feminine bonds over time, often doing so in the face of great adversity. Indeed, once Diana learns of Philip Sheldon’s plot to murder Charlotte, all former allegiances to love and prospective suitors give way to an intense desire to protect each other against their shared antagonists, and especially against those antagonists who capitalize on the vulnerable and dependent positions in which women are consistently configured and placed. The way in which she enables her female characters to choose their female friends' needs over other, perhaps even selfish, whims, is through an implicit, but systematic portrayal of each woman as an avid reader. The nature of these readings as well as the attention Braddon places on the amount of time the female characters turn to books is surely significant, especially when one also considers the placement of reading moments alongside major decisions about how to forge, maintain, or protect a female
friendship. The instances in which reading occurs alongside the evidence of powerful female bonds is striking, and the suggestion here is that it is the information derived from the readings, and usually uninhibited reading behavior, that helps these women bolster a communal feminine spirit. Diana Paget’s past, then, and her readership of certain types of novels, those both of a sensational and sentimental nature, enable her to look at Charlotte's situation in a more critical, but also sympathetic way. Similarly, in *John Marchmont's Legacy*, Braddon starkly contrasts Mary Marchmont’s freedom of reading habits prior to her father’s death with her restricted readings once her stepmother, Olivia, is in charge. Because Mary’s life with Olivia initiates a suspenseful sequence of terrors and eventual imprisonment, it is another woman, Belinda’s, liberal penchant for certain types of readings that enables her to quickly understand the true gravity of Mary's situation. Belinda, as a loyal friend to Mary only because of the stories she has heard that seem remarkably similar to her novels, distrusts Mary’s oppressors, and accepts a feminine empathy that she internalizes, instead of giving way to resentment and jealousy, once Mary resurfaces and claims her marital right to Belinda's fiancée.

The feminine circles that Braddon portrays in her novels are made up of women who are, most importantly, literate, and who ultimately value the strength of their feminine bonds, even at the cost of other individuated or traditional relationships. In this chapter, then, I examine how Braddon formulates her female characters and to what purposes their reading habits aid each in creating a strong feminine perspective and community. Each girl's affinity and choice of certain novels seem to offer them an education, but, of course, not a conventional one, rather a crucial helping of feminine
empathy and understanding. For this reason, it is vital to my discussion to determine how reading enhances these girls’ lives and how those whose guardians restrict reading ultimately suffer for that disadvantage. In expounding upon Sharon Marcus’ research which reexamines the importance of Victorian female friendships and their abilities to function as the “narrative matrix” from which all conventional marriage plots hinge, I, too, argue that Braddon’s feminine bonds propel the narrative, but also make it possible for the women in these novels to succeed and triumph over adversity. Finally, I suggest that it is Braddon's careful and calculated portrayal of feminine readers that, in these contexts, showcase young women who resist normative and generic categorizations of passive, dependent victims. Instead, Braddon demonstrates the potential and capacity for quite a powerful feminine movement.

The Narrative Strategy of Friends

Feminine relationships are commonplace within the Victorian Novel, so much so, that it is relatively impossible to read a novel from the period without encountering at least one set of female friends. Indeed, this does, at least in part, reflect the real public's attitudes regarding what constituted young females' lives. While the roles of wife and mother were of ultimate importance, as Sarah Stickney Ellis, author of *The Women of England* (1839) suggests, Victorian society saw women inextricably as daughters, wives, mothers, and friends. According to Ellis, when combined, these roles work together to make up the ideological Victorian girl. In fact, Ellis defines feminine friendships or what she calls “private friends” as the relationships in which '[a young girl] learns what constitutes the happiness and the misery of woman” (qtd. in Marcus 25). Ellis
characterizes like-minded, feminine companions as helpmates or advisors for one another in their progression from young girls to womanhood. Who better, then, to entrust with your deepest thoughts or private despairs than someone who is going through it all at the same time? Braddon, too, seems to utilize this version of Victorian girlhood, as she, especially in the case of Diana and Charlotte, and even Belinda and Mary, creates a sense of a shared understanding of femininity because they all share the trials involved in coming of age.

Indeed, based on Sharon Marcus' expansive research consisting of diaries, memoirs, and letters belonging to Victorian girls, relationships with girlfriends “reinforced femininity, but at the same time licensed a form of agency women were discouraged from exercising with men” (Marcus 2). That is, women could “compete for one another, enjoy multiple attachments, and share religious fervor” (Marcus 2). All three of these examples gave women an outlet for an active, rather uninhibited life, beyond the boundaries of their homes and at least while they were still unmarried. On the face of it, then, women who enjoyed close feminine friendships demonstrated more masculine freedoms as opposed to the hyper-feminine passivity women were often seen to accept as part of their adult lives with husbands. While Marcus accounts for the gradual shift in the way Victorians thought about marriage from the social and economic dependence of women to a more equal, “friendlier” union by the 1880s, she does importantly distinguish that female friendships were based on “affection and pleasure” and, unlike one’s relationship with her husband, not on “instrumental utility” (26). Female friendships gave women a certain type of freedom to act boldly and utilize agency before they must
accept a matrimonial bond. However, although women might have consciously understood the nuanced differences, as Marcus argues, the concept of friendship was not necessarily completely separate from married life, as she finds clearly evidenced in the sheer mass of letters and diaries, in which young married women obsessively and meticulously recount major life experiences, consistently inform each other of their daily lives, and apparently cherish each other to a great extent. In this way, although marriage would mean a theoretical loss of these types of freedoms, it is not evident, then, that women saw their relationships with their husbands as a literal and definitive end to their female bonds.

In fact, the specific ways society encouraged girls to select and even think of their female friends really mirrored a male-female courtship. In *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* (1982), Deborah Gorham recounts the mantras apparent in conduct literature that simultaneously encouraged female friendships, while also warning against half-heartedly selecting them:

> Girls were advised to choose their friends with care, and to distinguish between the slight, unimportant, giddy friendship and the deep, intimate one. Girls were warned that if they had too many friends, they were probably being frivolous and shallow . . . and they were warned to beware of a tendency . . . to 'take a sudden and violent liking which expends itself in a little while.’ (Gorham 113)

It is obvious, then, that not only did the public accept feminine relationships as a natural part of any girl's development, but conduct literature often instructed girls on how to go about formulating friendships. According to Gorham, Victorian society was particularly
cautious about friendships created while away at school, which were often either entered into hastily or could, even more annoyingly, lead to “wasteful, time-consuming and even morally reprehensible letter writing” once the girls returned to their respective homes (113). The persistent concerns about school friendships most likely circulated because of the lack of control one's parents could tangibly have over any bonds formed while a girl was not living at home. Braddon also configures a relationship based on this premise, when she shows how Charlotte's meeting of Diana at boarding school potentially throws a wrench in her step-father's plans for her death, especially once she invites Diana to live with her. While Charlotte's mother and stepfather question Charlotte's intentions of inviting Diana, a complete unknown, into their home, the reality of this unusual relationship is that it actually benefits Charlotte more than any other bond does, seeing as though Diana functions as a key interloper in thwarting those diabolical schemes that threaten Charlotte’s safety.

As with most cultural philosophies circumscribing feminine development, the focus was often on the restrictions and limitations. In Gorham’s example, this particular manual warned girls to “beware” of “violent” emotions that could lead to strong attachments. Advice such as this reveals the deeply-rooted Victorian attitude toward feminine desire and agency. Conceived as dangerous and risky, feminine passion had no understandable, thus comprehensive, boundaries and therefore could not be left to its own devices. Words like “beware,” “sudden” and “violence,” subsume and point to quite a specific form of constructive advice for girls as they dealt with their varying emotions. What is even more interesting about this excerpt lies in its resemblance to advice about
finding a potential mate. The advisors here could have just as easily directed this same pamphlet to young girls in pursuit of acceptable and appropriate suitors. Conduct literature advised intimate, serious relationships over any other type of fleeting association or bonds formed merely out of geographical convenience. This too could be said of a young girl who questions her suitor's intentions or dedication to their courtship. Similarly, the caution against having too many friends or becoming violently obsessive could also translate to male-female relationships as well. As Marcus posits, it is not, then, necessarily an illogical leap to see the symbiotic qualities apparent between friendships and romantic associations because the Victorians, at least linguistically, had already made these connections themselves.

Although Marcus delves more into uncovering subtle hints about the actual nature of feminine relationships within the Victorian novel and how authors construct these friendships with implicit (and sometimes not so implicit) references to homoerotic desires and lesbianism, she does not, however, want to reiterate this type of research and, therefore, tell only one story about women's friendships. Regardless of whether these friendships were only rooted in conventional heterosexuality or seemed more subversive because of their homoerotic characteristics, Marcus illumines some important and vital information about the value Victorian women had for their female friendships. She, therefore, vehemently opposes the recent scholarly tendency to see feminine relations as only “genuine” or important if they rigidly “oppose heterosexual institutions” (76). What she wants to redirect attention to, then, are the many cases within the Victorian Novel in which one sees the “courtship between men and women proceed in tandem with
declarations of female amity” (76). For Marcus, it is important how often these moments of blatant feminine friendships occur so as to help or aid the heterosexual union in coming to fruition. Calling female friends “marriage brokers,” Marcus insists that a woman's friendship did not necessarily exist in opposition to or on the outskirts of the marital paradigm, but in reality, often prodded and reinforced the courtship between her friend and that woman's future husband. Essentially, this places feminine friendships in conjunction with normative heterosexual structures and not necessarily as its key antagonist. One can then clearly reference any number of Romantic or Victorian novels such as Jane Austen’s or Anthony Trollope’s to verify these claims about the significance of the friendship plot alongside, and not contrary to, the marriage plot.

In order to defend this point of view, Marcus outlines what she sees as the conventional or most common structure of the marriage plot within a Victorian narrative structure. First, she asserts that there is always a crucial period in the beginning of most of these novels in which authors distinguish between male-female relationships and female friendships, with the former showing signs of at least a preliminary period of “false first impressions,” “obstacles,” and “misunderstandings” (82) and the latter showing an immediate bond that “effortlessly intensifies” and one that the characters can “express clearly and openly” (82). Because of these contrasts, Marcus argues that feminine bonds are the “motor rather than the subject of the plot” (82). That is, feminine relationships expend a lot of energy towards the marriage plot, thus helping it along, but do not necessarily make up the crucial, key components of any plot structure. What Marcus then deems as the “middle” of the plot takes place when one friend
other one to become ready for her marriage, either in functioning as a type of mediator, the person who clears up the misunderstandings, or actually the one who give[s] a husband to a friend, or a friend to a husband” (82). In this latter structure, the marriage plot is veritably impossible without the strength of female friendships. The existence of the female friends enhance each woman's marriageability, eventually culminating in the “parallel states” of “harmony” that man and woman can have because of the harmony already established between the wife and her female friend (82).

While Marcus’ model certainly seems logical and applicable to a range of Victorian novels, I want to redirect the focus, if only slightly, to the way in which these girls receive their guides and instructions on how to serve as “good” or “useful” friends from the books they read. In fact, I argue that in the case of Braddon’s novels, the instruction often goes beyond just the development of friendships in conjunction with the marriage plot and rather focuses on how friendships initiate an understanding of what it means to be female in a Victorian social context. Many of Braddon’s female characters have no parents, have been left to fend for themselves, and, at times, have no official education. The potential, then, for books to function as the outlet for escape, but also as the accessible route to understanding one’s world is paramount. In most of Braddon’s novels, the women utilize the books they read to garner information about their lives and, in so doing, develop attachments with other women facing similar demands or obstacles.

While she focuses on the ways in which marital plots succeed because of feminine friendships, Marcus also argues that there are plenty of examples in which the marital bond undermines or displaces the feminine one. When this happens, according to
Marcus, it is due to the nature and intensity of the female bond prior to the marriage, thus often seeming more homoerotic and desirous than even the feelings between man and woman. Authors, then, would need to subvert these attachments and render them more socially acceptable by effectively squelching their intensity and nullifying any remnants of sexual attraction or desire between the female friends. It is not hard to pinpoint instances of these types of “cover-ups,” which really surface quite often in Victorian novels, and especially in those of Sensationalized contexts.

If we return to the previous example of Wilkie Collins' *Woman in White*, readers are sure to note the subtleties of attraction between Marian and Laura. As half-sisters, the two women share an intimacy that far exceeds the normal boundaries of such associations. While only an implicit attraction for the most part and merely referenced in how the women refer to each other as “love” or in the consistent demonstrations of physical affection as when Laura, in one important scene, “reaches both hands up to [Marian's] cheeks, and drew [Marian's] face down to hers till [their] lips met” (166-167), these moments seem to only barely stretch the sanctioned bonds of sisterhood. When it comes to discussing Laura's impending marriage, and Marian's inevitable displacement, the implications of attraction and homoeroticism become much more tangible and harder to ignore. As Marian comes to terms with the actuality of Laura's marriage to her less than favorable betrothed, Sir Percival Glyde, she must deal with her disconcerting feelings about Percival's intentions toward her sister and his past. In an attempt to educate Laura on the expectations concerning her marriage, Marian dispels Laura's assumptions that she could live with the two after Laura's marriage. It would “depend
entirely on my [Marian] not arousing Percival's jealousy and distrust,” Marian explains to
Laura (188). In this scene, Collins clearly establishes Marian as a rival for Percival, thus
emphasizing what Marcus' research reinforces about what happens when homoerotic
feelings surface between females. Indeed, the female “friend” and male suitor are often at
odds with one another. Collins further solidifies this view, when he details how Marian
“drop by drop” pours the “profaning bitterness of this world's wisdom into that pure
heart” (188). Despite the fact that Collins never reveals the specifics of that conversation,
it is still quite important that it is Marian who decides to educate Laura to the ways of the
world, and not her future husband. In speaking afterwards of this task, Marian at least
alludes to the nature of what she has told Laura in affirming that the “simple illusions of
her girlhood are gone and; my hand has stripped them off . . . Better mine than his
[Percival's]- that is all my consolation” (188). Because Marian has heretofore been so
completely male-identified, her rush to inform Laura of wifely duties and what her
relationship with a husband will entail, gives her an opportunity to best Percival and to
reveal herself as his ultimate competitor. Here, Laura clearly plays the role of the
essentially feminine receptor, as Marian, “drops” “wisdom” into her innocent or virginal
mind and “strips” away the remnants of Laura's idyllic girlhood. With his clear
metaphors of intercourse and wedding night consummation, Collins marks Marian as the
male “penetrator” of her sister's virginal consciousness, thus making Laura forever
altered as she begins to comprehend her adult sexuality. In the scenario that Collins
creates, then, the female friend stands in direct opposition with the male suitor and, in
taking it one step further, clearly desires to occupy the masculine position, once Marian
takes it upon herself to function as the revealer of Laura's impending womanhood. True to the tactics which Marcus outlines, Collins must quickly mute and then silence these attractions in order to reinstate a strong patriarchal structure to his novel as a whole. Once the hero of his tale, Walter Hartight, can eliminate Laura's oppressors, he takes over Marian's former role, but not because he is that hyper-masculine, as Walter has functioned as effeminate throughout, but rather as the one person that Marian condones to take her place. Despite the notion that Marian may only sanction a union between Walter and Laura because he is effeminate, this does not detract from the point that he is still physically a male and thus has opened to him the societal benefits and power inherent in that position. Here, we see a clear sense of how Collins must abbreviate a formerly strong female bond and conventionally displace it for a heterosexual one.

Braddon explores homosocial/homoerotic relationships too, but importantly not between females. Indeed, as perhaps a calculated way of keeping her feminine communities unadulterated by sexual attractions and eventual displacements, she, instead, leaves the implicit, unsanctioned desires for the men’s friendships. For example, in Lady Audley's Secret (1862), which I will discuss at greater length in Chapter 4, Braddon details the intense and loyal friendship between Robert Audley and George Talboys. After a surprise reunion, and several days spent catching up in what comprises a sort of pastoral dream setting, George disappears after he learns of his wife’s untimely death. Robert's search for George and his dedication to learning what might have happened to his friend receives an intensity and focus that no other relationship in the novel does. Like Collins and perhaps as a way of abiding by cultural standards that restricted such taboos,
Braddon eventually undermines Robert’s homoerotic desires by effectively displacing his affections for George onto George’s sister Clara Talboys. With this strategic move, Robert can easily reenter the normal boundaries of patriarchy, without feeling as though he has lost anything in the process. George, importantly, remains unmarried at the novel’s end, and in thus immortalizing this character as forever single and a bachelor, Braddon enables Robert to continue his relationship with George, but rather only now under the socially sanctioned veil of brothers-in-law.

Feminist Leanings

The key female characters, Lucy Audley and Phoebe Marks, of Braddon’s *Lady Audley's Secret*, however, do not have a relationship that betrays any underlying eroticism. Despite the obvious differences between their current class ranks, Phoebe is Lucy’s personal maid and her only female confidant. This closeness between servant and employer is not a trend particular to Braddon, and is one that resonates quite often throughout the period. As Richard Altick remarks in *Victorian Studies in Scarlet* (1970), servants who maintained positions in the upper rankings of household servitude like the butler or lady's maid held a much more esteemed social position than that of groom or kitchen maid (221). These rankings, Altick affirms, were also dependent upon the social status of the employers, thus making those who worked for a “peer” or a “duchess” of a higher status truly “the aristocracy of servant society” (221). In her descriptions of the young maid, Phoebe, Braddon points out that in becoming Lucy Audley's personal maid Phoebe found her “wages trebled and her work light in the well-ordered household at the Court,” making her the “envy amongst her particular friends” (29). In this way, servants
who worked closely with their ladies or masters did often develop intimate relationships that one could describe as a friendship, especially if the servant worked for the family for years, thus witnessing the evolution of many generations of masters. Inevitably, the most treasured and “close” of servants gained unparalleled access to not only the inner workings of the household, but would often know of business and financial issues as well as enjoy a position that made them privy to all of a lady's affections and secrets.

Lucy Audley’s substantial “jump” in class status once she marries the baron, Michael Audley, alters the relationship with her former peer Phoebe, who does not know, at first, how to react to her friend’s newfound wealth: “What was she in Mr. Dawson’s house only three months ago,” Phoebe questions, “[t]aking wages and working for them as hard, or harder than I did” (31). At least at first, then, Braddon depicts this friendship as quite a faulty one or at least one built upon natural resentments. As Phoebe catalogues Lucy’s newly acquired “pictures, gilding, great looking-glasses, and painted ceilings” (31), it becomes apparent that Phoebe finds most of this hard to digest, especially since she and her fiancée want to open a public house.

There is definitely apparent resentment here. Phoebe obsesses over the spoils of Lucy’s social mobility and seems shocked at the effortlessness with which Lucy gained this impressive social status. Despite the fact that she does use the unidentified lock of baby hair as a token of blackmail so that Lucy will fund her public house, Phoebe does often come to Lucy’s defense. For instance, when Luke mentions stealing one of Lucy’s jewels, Phoebe is quick to protect her lady and their relationship, thus aptly and quickly redirecting her fiancée’s attention.
One can surely see that a true and honest relationship this does not exactly make, but Braddon continues to enhance and strengthen the girls' bonds in such a way that eventually a strong sense of shared feminine experience resonates. One important way that she does this is through the shared reading of certain novels. Although I will discuss at length Lucy's reading habits and its specific bearing on her characterization in Chapter 4, it is pertinent to my discussion to spend some time on it here, as the conversations and intimacies that arise between the girls because of their joint readings is crucial. Braddon remarks fairly early on in the novel that Phoebe had enough education and could understand French, at least enough to “understand her mistress when Lucy chose to allow herself to run riot in a species of intellectual tarantella” or to be able “to dip into the yellow-paper-covered novels . . . and to discourse with her mistress upon the questionable subjects of those romances” (108). Here we see Phoebe looking like what must have only a short time before been seen as an anomaly in terms of education for a lady's maid, but, in fact, as literacy levels rose, the educated servant was not necessarily unique. Lucy, then, can feel quite comfortable asking Phoebe about the context of a certain French novel they both read because she knows that Phoebe's reading habits go far beyond just simple comprehension and that the young maid can actually make inferences and connections about what she reads. In one such instance, Braddon spends a good portion of textual space explaining the theme of a French novel in which Lucy asks Phoebe about her specific recollection of this novel's outcome. Even the most unobservant reader can see the similarities that the plot description of a well- loved countess who hides a crime that she has committed for over 60 years, only to have its
eventual revelation bring about her immediate execution, potentially bears on with Lucy's own secret. The fictional woman had risen to great heights of social importance and was able to maintain that position and the devotion of society because she maintained her secret. For Lucy, this educative book provides a type of guide or at least some possibilities about the ways in which she should proceed in maintaining her own secret. For Phoebe, who is at that time contemplating a marriage to her cousin, Luke, and carrying some of her own secrets, ones that directly affect Lucy, mention of the novel has stirred some disturbing feelings. The solemnity and nature of such a conversation scares and unsettles Phoebe, to such an extent, that she remarks on how one does not even “need to read such books to give one the horrors” in Audley Court (110). Both women let the shared book alter their feelings about where they live as well as their own situations, thus making each woman seem slightly paranoid or at least aware of the real precariousness of their current social status.

It isn't, however, until Lucy begins talking to Phoebe about the young maid's impending marriage to Luke that one can see the extent to which Braddon creates a unique feminine mentality and approach to a woman's issues. When Lucy prods Phoebe by questioning her loyalty and the legitimacy of her bond with Luke, Phoebe does not answer right away and “for some time looking vacantly into the red abyss in the hollow fire” (111). It is only after several minutes of hesitation that Phoebe says:

I don't think that I can love him. We have been together from children, and I promised, when I was little better than fifteen, that I'd be his wife. I daren't break that promise now. . . I daren't refuse to marry him. I've often watched and watched
him, as he has sat slicing away at a hedge-stake with his great clasp-knife, till I have thought that it is just such men as he who have decoyed their sweethearts into lonely places, and murdered them for being false to their word. (111)

To this, Lucy adamantly replies:

You silly girl, you shall do nothing of the kind! You think he'll murder you, do you? Do you think, then, if murder is in him, you would be safer as his wife? If you thwarted him, or made him jealous; if he wanted to marry another woman, or to get hold of some poor, pitiful bit of money of yours, couldn't he murder you? (111)

Lucy's reply to Phoebe's resignation is not only matter of fact, but quite wise and logical, as she forewarns her maid to think seriously about the implications and possible self-endangerment if she were to go through with marrying a violent man like Luke. Lucy appears to have some knowledge about the ways of murderers; thus, she insinuates that if someone could ever be guilty of murder, then this is a crucial part of their personality and a trait that does not change regardless of circumstances. One can only imagine that this “experience” comes from not only her own background, thus her own secrets, but also from novels, just like the one she previously discussed with Phoebe in regards to secrets, feminine social status, and consequences. From the snippets that Braddon affords her readers of Lucy's background and particularly her relationship with her own father, one can see that Lady Audley seems to have a penchant for dealing with men who demonstrate greedy and only self-interested natures. Contemporary readers of this novel, however, might not have, at this textual moment, realized that the woman who gives her
maid such sage advice is the same woman who is married to George Talboys. This realization and connection, then, comes much later, but nonetheless the significance of what George, in the second chapter, remembers about his wife Helen's (alias for Lucy) father is still vital. Calling him “shabby” and a “humbug,” who had an “eye for nothing but the main chance,” George talks openly about the “pitiful, contemptible, palpable traps” Lucy's father set for “big dragoons to walk into” (23). Despite Lucy's father's ploys, George claims that he saw through it all and that he well knew how ready the old man was to “sell [his] poor little girl to the highest bidder” (23). Indeed, once George marries Lucy (Helen) and exhausts his own money, it is Lucy's father who steals the rest of their money from them. It is at this point that George abandons his wife to seek his riches in Australia. When Lucy warns Phoebe against a life of impoverishment and being at the mercy of a dishonest, temperamental man, she does so from experience of similar circumstances and not just from a past with her father, but also from the abandonment that George incurs. Indeed, once readers have finished the novel, they will surely realize that, at this point, Lucy has already had an unfortunate encounter and “reunion” with her husband, George, in which she has received some bruises and attempted his murder. Lucy's words of caution to Phoebe, then, are definitely elicited from experience and are intended, at least at this point, to warn Phoebe against making similar mistakes.

Phoebe's “repayment” and loyalty to Lucy Audley continues, even after the young maid goes through with her wedding to her cousin, thus underscoring the peculiarities but also undeniable strength of the two women's friendship and feminine bond. Demonstrating a very strong bond between the two, Phoebe employs a messenger boy to
take a note to her former mistress, once Robert Audley takes rooms at the Marks' Castle Inn. Well aware of Robert's abrasive and oppressive investigation of Lucy, Phoebe promises that “if there's any bad meaning in his [Robert's] coming here . . . my lady will know of it in time” (135). Not only does she send Lucy a warning message, but she is also able to give nothing away when Robert questions her about her past with Lucy. Similarly, Phoebe shows astute intuition as she motivates her husband to check on the brewery door, instead of remaining to talk with Robert, as she can clearly see that his conversation and drunken mannerisms could possibly give something away about her mistress's secret. Situations like these resonate quite often and one often sees Phoebe warning Lucy of Robert's whereabouts when he stays at the Castle Inn quite often. On one such notable occasion, Luke aggressively sends Phoebe to go see her mistress and demand more money from her, for the couple will lose their Inn the following day because of Luke's gambling habits. Interestingly, Phoebe comes into her mistress's room, as Lucy appears to be reading a book. What follows this moment is a clear demonstration of Phoebe's dedication to her mistress and an apparent understanding between the women concerning drunken husbands and what must be done. Phoebe begs forgiveness from her former mistress and swears that it is not she who wants to “impose” upon her (299). This sentiment and her loyalty to Lucy, even above those for her husband, are further intensified as Phoebe instructs Lucy to “impress upon Luke that it is the last money you will ever give him while he stops in that house” (300). Phoebe even goes as far as to admit to Lucy that Luke is not quite cut out for his present position, and that, indeed, the man has almost cost them their lives.
Although Braddon's narrator clearly intimates that Lucy does not focus her thoughts on Phoebe's circumstances, despite the direness and danger of the maid's situation, her next moves definitely bespeak a plan that eliminates both her and Phoebe's male oppressors. In this way, despite the illegal and violent nature of Lucy's decision to burn down the Castle Inn, Braddon showcases how Lucy is able to rationalize this action, on the grounds of a feminine relationship. After Phoebe realizes what Lucy has done, Lucy admonishes the girl saying:

Get up, fool, idiot, coward! Is your husband such a precious Bargain that you should be grovelling there, lamenting and groaning for him? What is Robert Audley to you, that you behave like a maniac, because you think he is in danger?

(321)

Clearly, Lucy feels as though the burning down of the Castle Inn will eliminate both oppressors. If Luke dies, then Lady Audley can avoid his blackmail, not have to pay any more of his debts, and Phoebe will be free of him. Likewise, if Robert Audley, too, dies, then there will no longer remain anyone who has uncovered her secret identity or her involvement in George's disappearance, thus enabling both women to maintain their newfound social status. In her harsh words to Phoebe, Lucy also strives to remind her, if only implicitly, about the true nature of her relationship with her husband, a notion that she only has because of Phoebe's consistently voiced complaints and fears. It is not hard to see, then, that Lucy's actions are at least in part of a selfish nature, however, there is also clearly a sense of eliminating all problems for both her and her maid at the same time, which, for Lucy, could only be, ultimately, mutually beneficial, and quite possibly
denotes more of a shared sense of purely feminine interests, than scholars usually attribute to this character. Finally, another clear testament to the strong bond between the women comes near the very end of the novel, once Luke, although near death from burns, reveals what he knows of Lucy's involvement in George's disappearance. It is Phoebe, however, that in the midst of coming to terms with her former mistress's actions and violent behavior, still must confirm with Robert that her lady had not “gone where she [would be] cruelly treated” or “ill-used,” for Phoebe's loyalty and feminine concern for a peer is still quite strong. She even goes so far to affirm her lady's better character saying that she is glad Lucy will not suffer harm because her “lady was a kind mistress” (404).

An Uncommon Bond

Braddon consistently returns to unlikely friendships between women such as those in Lady Audley's Secret. In Birds of Prey and its sequel, Charlotte's Inheritance, Braddon also demonstrates the friendship between Charlotte Halliday and Diana Paget as one that is often awkward and uneven. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, Diana's life, prior to meeting Charlotte and in between her sojourns at the same boarding school, was replete with hardships. As a gambling, scheming alcoholic, Diana's father neglected his daughter and only concerned himself with his winnings and debts. Perpetually melancholic, Diana adamantly guards against revealing information about her family and, against all her pride and dignity, must continually take handouts and charity from those around her because of her family's enigmatic and impoverished circumstances. Indeed, even Charlotte with her constant optimism and benevolent persona cannot overlook Diana's filial associations and “knew that her dearest friend was not a person whom it
was advantageous to know” (*Birds of Prey*). “She had seen Diana depart ignominiously, and return mysteriously after an absence of some years, very shabby, very poor, very sombre and melancholy,” Charlotte informs, “and with no inclination to talk of those years of absence” (*Birds of Prey*). Despite these undeniable facts and obvious differences in status, Charlotte only tried harder to strike a lasting connection between herself and Diana, thus often giving the sullen girl unnecessary and trifling gifts as a way of revealing to Diana how much she “cherished her with an affection which was far beyond the average measure of sisterly love” (*Birds of Prey*).

If Charlotte comes on strong and seems overly devoted to her friendship with Diana, Diana, in turn, meets these suppositions with guarded disdain and caution. In fact, Braddon always describes Diana's demeanor as gloomy, hesitant, and bitterly resigned to her plight in life. Simply put, Braddon seems to make a strong case for why these two girls should never really be friends; and yet, there are moments when she characterizes Diana as at least capable of thinking of someone outside of her own misery:

> Her character was not to be altered all at once by this new atmosphere of love and tenderness; but she loved her generous friend and companion after her own fitful fashion, and defended her with passionate indignation if any other girl dared to hint the faintest disparagement of her graces or her virtue. (*Birds of Prey*)

So, Diana's simultaneous love for Charlotte and her envy of the girl's better circumstances make for some tense encounters. Braddon attempts to explain Diana's fickleness by saying that the young girl could “accept Charlotte's affection one day” and even let herself give into the pleasure of friendship, but she could also just as quickly
“revolt against it on the next day as a species of patronage which stung her proud heart” (Birds of Prey). At the crux of the problem, then, is Diana's parentage and her situation which has always made her the object of charity and pity.

These feelings of resentment propel her self-ostracization, but it is also Diana's choice of reading habits that make her seem more peculiar than the other girls, as well:

“The elder girls thought Miss Paget unsociable because she preferred a lonely corner in the gardens and some battered old book of namby-pamby stories to the delights of their society” (Birds of Prey). As an avid reader and lover of solitude, these moments of seclusion and reading help to justify, or at least rationalize, Diana's failures to socialize with the other girls. In other words, time and again, Braddon shows how Diana uses her novels as a type of shield from society or to afford herself an excuse for “a morbid indulgence in her own sad thoughts” and not in facilitating new friendships (Birds of Prey). Books have become Diana's solace, something that cushions the harshness of her situation, thus enabling her to look as though she does not care if her classmates avoid her or resist having conversations with her because she, too, is otherwise engaged.

Braddon, however, is quick to mention that Diana's “readings” were often cleverly designed to hide her daydreaming, as she imagined a future with Valentine where he would earn an honest living “by means of literature, or music, or pen and ink caricatures” (Birds of Prey). In these moments, Diana dares to envision herself going to theaters and concerts and spending long days doing nothing but “reading to Valentine” (Birds of Prey).

Although Diana creates a utopian bohemia, unlike the one she knows, it is Braddon's rendering of how the elder girls mark Diana’s readings as “namby-pamby” that
firmly locates her reading material in the realm of the sentimental and hyper-feminine. Indeed, it is this type of fanciful, romantic literature that women were thought to consume more than men, but in this case, one sees Diana’s fellow female students using it as another reason for looking down upon their classmate. Despite the fact that they are more than likely just as interested in these types of stories, it is Diana’s choice to read over every other activity that makes them question her behavior. Braddon makes it clear that she does not share this view of Diana’s reading behavior or her novels, when her narrator describes certain rituals that took place during holiday breaks. All of the girls, even Diana, would gather together for the retelling of terrifying ghost stories or to engage in some type of gossip about well-known “scandals and intrigue” (*Birds of Prey*). Here Braddon reinforces the particular style of reading and stories in which all of the girls engaged. Most importantly, however, Braddon demonstrates how readings and shared stories like these, despite their overly romantic context, help to create feminine communities, thus bringing everyone together. These details perhaps seem less important until Braddon shows the beneficial consequences of such readership. That is, as Charlotte and Diana’s readings create more of a connection between the two, the more they are able to recognize potential threats in their own lives and eventually see the very apparent necessity to protect each other.

Once Diana moves in with Charlotte and her family, she undergoes a dramatic societal change. For perhaps the first time, she does not have to worry about her finances or room and board, since she earns what little money she needs as a companion and occasional seamstress for Charlotte's mother. It is while here that Diana's father returns
to England and that Diana meets Valentine once again. Valentine, understanding the conventional hobbies of young girls, uses several common pretenses such as “small offerings in the way of a popular French novel adapted for feminine perusal, or an occasional box for some theatre” as reasons for his continual visits to Charlotte and Diana, after the initial rounds of introductions and hospitalities had expired (Birds of Prey). These feminine pastimes that Valentine capitalizes on have, unfortunately for Diana, less to do with her and more and more to do with Charlotte. In fact, Diana becomes so aware of Valentine's growing affection for Charlotte that she cannot fight her anger or her jealousy from surfacing:

She saw him now almost daily, and she was miserable. She saw him; but another woman had come between her and the man she loved: and now, if his voice took a softer tone, or if his eyes assumed a tender earnestness of expression, it might be Charlotte's influence which wrought the transformation. (Birds of Prey)

While the two girls continue to accept and read the French novels and bits of poetry that Valentine offers them, as well as participate in the walks and theater visits, it is only Diana who understands the true gravity of what is happening between her friend and Valentine and the reasons behind his presents. So much does Diana feel Valentine's slight that she can no longer control her emotions

as she sat looking down at the bright creature who had done her this worst, last wrong which one woman can do to another. This passionate heart, which ached with such cruel pain, was prone to evil, and to-day the scorpion Jealousy was digging his sharp tooth into its very core. It was not possible for Diana Paget to
feel kindly disposed towards the girl whose unconscious hand had shattered the airy castle of her dreams. Was it not a hard thing that the bright creature, whom every one [sic] was ready to adore, must needs steal away this one heart?

*(Birds of Prey)*

Here Braddon makes it clear that these two women are, indeed, at odds with each other and that, despite the former makings of a long-lasting and mutually beneficial friendship, it is this latest turn of events that causes the two young women to hit a proverbial “snag.” It is, however, in these moments that Braddon demonstrates a much more realistic take on the nature of friendships, thus accounting for the “ups and downs” as well as the common breaches of loyalty and jealousies that do occur. Although Diana bemoans Charlotte's hold on Valentine, she is still able to see that it is due to her friend's “unconscious” actions against her that causes this turmoil. Diana's propensity toward anger, then, does not entirely find its mark in Charlotte and, instead, Diana consistently tries to convince herself of Charlotte's innocence.

Despite the obvious fractures of a romantic alliance, Valentine's preference for Charlotte impacts his and Diana's friendship as well. Seemingly, to offset this, though, Braddon consistently demonstrates the crucial similarities between Valentine and Diana, thus, at least for a time, insinuating that their friendship will eventually outlast any former romantic feelings. For instance, Diana often compares her life's situations with literary stories like the parable of David and Nathan which she finds similar to her own situation in that “David is so rich—he is lord of incalculable flocks and herds; but he will not be content till he has stolen the one little ewe lamb, the poor man's pet and darling” *(Birds of*
Valentine, too, thinks of life in terms of stories and books and, much like Diana, he uses his books for “meditations” and, in taking a rather effeminate view on his attraction for Charlotte, Valentine is just as capable of losing himself in the world of sentimental poetry and French novels as the young girls. These readings impact his perceptions to such an extent that he often can only think of Charlotte in these literary terms; thus, he often speaks of her as “better and fairer than the fairest heroine of a novel," and claims that "[s]he is like Heloise,” and specifically remarks on how “the quaint old French fits her to a nicety” (*Birds of Prey*). Most likely referencing Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s epistolary novel, *Julie or the new Heloise*, Braddon alludes here to quite a scandalous story. Detailing the lives of two lovers, Rousseau intertwines themes of illicit love, passion, and rejection of the Christian church, which ultimately landed his novel on the Catholic Church’s “Index Librorum Prohibitorum.” Most likely, it is the way in which throughout his novel, Rousseau elevates the ideas of an individual’s autonomy and individuality that made the Catholic Church resent its widespread appeal. Indeed, readers of Rousseau’s novel were so emotionally affected that they sent him hundreds of letters in support of his writing, furthering the Church’s animosity toward the now celebrated author and somewhat likening Rousseau’s popularity to that of a Sensationalist in Braddon’s day. Braddon’s use of this reference is important in that it demonstrates Valentine’s reading behavior as somewhat illicit, and his comparison of Charlotte to Heloise specifically reveals his romantic and passionate intentions toward the young girl. More importantly, the reference is one that values a crucial individuality, even in the
wake of crisis or strife. This will become even more important in Charlotte’s life later, when a shared reading like this with Valentine and Diana will help to save her life.

Despite these characters idealization of life and love, it is important to recognize that it is only because of these readings and literary applications that they can become more discerning about life's occurrences and can, therefore, better “read” what is happening around them, thus making them more capable of using their minds to perceive life, instead of giving way to just romantic notions. Moreover, and crucially important to my argument here is that by enabling each character to think differently about the novels they read, or, at the least, to understand the differences between reality and the hyperbole and idealization present in literature, the two women, especially, can strengthen the bonds of their friendship. Indeed, it is only when Diana finally overcomes her feelings for Valentine, once and for all, telling Charlotte that “these things do not last forever, Charlotte, whatever the poets and novelists may tell us,” that the young girls rededicate their friendship, providing the way for Valentine and Diana to work together in saving Charlotte's life. In this meaningful way, Diana can overcome the trappings of only thinking of love and relationships in terms of a novel or a poem, and rather is able to critically extricate real life from fiction. Diana, therefore, because her “love for [Charlotte] has overcome [her] love for [Valentine]” can refocus her energies on protecting her friend's interests, thus illuminating a feminine bond (Birds of Prey).

The nature of this feminine bond and the way that Braddon explains it is central to my overall argument. That is, Diana is able to understand Charlotte's situation with her stepfather and her eventual strange illness because of at least two main sectors of Diana's
past life. The first, perhaps, is her real life experiences with her own father. Although duped many times by his pathological dishonesty, Diana can eventually clearly say that any other creature in this wide world he might deceive, but not her. She had lived with him; she had tasted the bitterness of dependence upon him—ten times more bitter than dependence on strangers. She had forgiven him long ago, being of too generous a nature to brood upon past injuries. . . But she could not forget what manner of man he was, and thank him for pretty speeches which she knew to be meaningless. (Charlotte's Inheritance)

Here, Diana boasts of the crucial insight that she has to her father's character, so that he no longer has the power to dupe her or to take advantage of some residual filial attachment. With these words, Diana appears clear-headed, independent of her father's whims, and wiser. Given this new type of relationship with her father, Diana is better equipped for pinpointing the unthinkable and that also means the quite diabolical plans of Charlotte's stepfather. The second place, then, in which Diana gleans some of her newfound strength and independence comes from the critical eye that her readings have naturally afforded her. Although more implicit than most of Braddon's commentaries on reading, Diana's full comprehension of the reasoning behind her friend's sudden illness and Charlotte's stepfather's plans are due in part to her ability to reason through what is laid before her. Appropriately titled “Firm as a Book,” in this chapter of Charlotte's Inheritance, Diana comes to terms with Philip Sheldon's poisoning of his stepdaughter and pledges her aid to Valentine, in part because of the nature of her reading. Indeed, as readers know, up to this point, both Diana and Charlotte had a special affinity for French
novels or those works of literature of a highly sentimental or sensational element. In fact, it is Diana who, as Charlotte sinks deeper and deeper into a strange despondency and illness, reads to her from Sir Walter Scott's *The Bride of Lammermoor* (1819). The book has an effect on the young woman, and it is Charlotte who even remarks that “the words seem to float indistinctly in my brain, and all sorts of strange images mix themselves up with the images of the people in the book” (*Charlotte's Inheritance*). Although Braddon does not remark specifically upon the novel's effects on Diana, it is while reading to Charlotte, that Diana hears of Philip Sheldon's plan to poison his stepdaughter and the extent to which Valentine will go to prevent it. Immediately perceiving the intensity and direness of the situation, Diana demonstrates that she has not only acquired a finely tuned sense of perception from novels, but has also aptly “learned the language of [Valentine's] face” (*Charlotte's Inheritance*) and thus knows how to “read” people as well. In fact, after only exchanging a few private words with Valentine in regards to Charlotte's illness and Philip's implication in that illness, Diana seems convinced of Philip's plan to sacrifice Charlotte for monetary gain. In fact, she quickly tells Valentine, after he tells her of his dire suspicions, that he “may trust [her] vigilance and that she “did not think it was in [her] nature to love any one as [she] love[s] Charlotte Halliday.” Diana and Valentine, then, conspire to keep Philip from moving Charlotte, secret another more reputable doctor into the house to offer a second opinion, and enlist the help of the longtime Sheldon maid, Mrs. Woolper, to administer the new medicine. It is also Diana herself that orchestrates how the conspirators will prevent Philip Sheldon from entering the young girl's sick chamber, therefore demonstrating her abilities for foresight and logic.
While certainly portraying examples of resolution and courage, the three conspirators take their plans even one step further, proving that novel reading helps to shape their imaginations and creativity when dealing with an accomplished and powerful foe. Braddon's mention of Scott's novel *The Bride of Lammermoor* is no accident and although poisonings and the attempted murders of one's child is absent from his novel, it does, in fact, depict an overpowering and obstinate parent. This time the central antagonist is in the form of a mother who is willing to sacrifice her own daughter's happiness to scheme and outright ordain that her daughter marry a much wealthier man, thus making the union more profitable for the entire family than if the young girl were to marry her own choice of a husband. As mentioned before, Diana has been sharing in the reading of this novel with Charlotte right before Valentine reveals his suspicions and proposes a plan. One does not have to search too deeply to see some important similarities between what the girls have been making of their readings and Braddon's plot. Indeed, Philip Sheldon's plan to gradually poison Charlotte comes only after he has tried in several different ways to deter or at least delay Charlotte's intended marriage to Valentine. Diana's knowledge of Scott’s novel, as well as what she knows about Philip's feelings on Charlotte's marriage enables her to quickly connect the pieces of the story, thus saying affirmatively to Valentine that she believed everything to “be most true” and that there has “been so much in that man's conduct that has mystified [her] and this explains all” (*Charlotte's Inheritance*, emphasis Braddon's).

Not only does Braddon draw on what Diana and Charlotte have been reading, but as the plot continues towards its climax, she also incorporates common Gothic tropes to
intensify the connections between the two girls preferred readings and, at least in Diana's case, her abilities to be more critically perceptive, which enables the young girl to protect her feminine bond. In what one can only describe as a truly suspenseful moment, Philip Sheldon returns home only to find no one at home and that, according to Mrs. Woolper, Charlotte has gone to a “better place” (*Charlotte's Inheritance*). Interpreting the maid's cryptic information as confirmation of his stepdaughter's death, Philip ventures to the young girl's room to satisfy his suspicions and to make peace with his own actions. Once entering the bedchamber, however, Philip finds the room empty and, to his surprise and mounting paranoia, many familiar objects were missing and particularly those that “had been familiar to him during the dead girl's illness, and which were associated with her presence” (*Charlotte's Inheritance*). Importantly, and as one might expect, one of the key items that Philip notices missing, and a part of what he says had become so closely associated with the girl's life, was a stand of books. Once Philip realizes that everyone has faked Charlotte's death and in moving the sick girl to a separate location had to take her most important possessions, like her novels, he truly comprehends the conspirators’ trickery. To list Charlotte's novels as one of her necessities and an inextricable part of her selfhood is vital to my argument in that it demonstrates Braddon's insistence on making reading, and specifically the reading of novels, a necessary portion of every girl’s development. To further solidify this point, Braddon goes one step further by making it obvious that this climactic conclusion to Philip's diabolical plans has come to fruition perhaps because of the girls' specific reading history of Sentimental is a standard plot line, when it comes to Sensational fiction as well as its key predecessors. Shakespearean
plays are chocked full of poisonings and faked deaths as in *Measure for Measure*, when Isabella is tricked into believing that her brother, Claudio, has been executed so that her antagonizers may take advantage of her. In Ben Johnson's *Volpone*, it is Volpone, himself, who schemes to fake his own death in order to reveal the unsavory nature of his intended heirs. Various Gothic novels like those mentioned in the introduction, and those that specifically impacted the development of the Sensation novel, also use fake deaths and family secrets as their main impetus. Moreover, most also utilize the theme of at least one parent or guardian wrecking havoc with the younger generation's life for reasons that one can usually reduce to financial instability. In Anne Radcliffe's famous sentimental and melodramatic Gothic tales, there are several lead female characters who suffer imprisonment or who are secreted away to convents so that their oppressors may have sway over their inheritances or legacies, thus concocting a type of social “death” in which the girl's rights are usually void. The intentions here in either faking a death or removing a girl from her present life seem to resonate under the same impetus-- to reassert at least one family member's superiority and financial stability. Sensation fiction, of course, picks up on these tropes as well, thus only slightly muting the melodrama and familial crimes of infanticide and incest. As avid readers, then, Diana and Charlotte, like Braddon herself, would have been quite aware of these seemingly “commonplace” events within the context of the fiction they read. In the *Woman in White*, Collins, for example, writes of a faked death and switched identities when Laura Fairlie's enemies imprison her in an insane asylum under Ann Catherick's name. This occurs only after the *real* Ann Catherick has died, unconsciously assuming the name of Laura Fairlie. Perhaps the most similar
example of a faked death in which the protagonist uses this method to outwit her oppressors comes from Ellen Wood, Braddon's contemporary and co-sensationalist, who in 1861 wrote *East Lynne*, in which Isabel Carlyle leaves her neglectful husband and infant children to run away with an aristocratic suitor. Once the suitor abandons her, Isabel, realizing her mistake, attempts to return to her former husband and children, only to be involved in a train accident, that somewhat alters her appearance. Then, with the help of actor's makeup and a fake death announcement, Isabel reenters the home of her first husband as an unknown governess for her own children. Even Charles Dickens who enjoyed a loyal and avid following of readers for most of his career and who, as I mentioned in my introduction, dappled in Sensational plots long before there was an official category, often tells the tale of faked deaths. In a comparable plot to Wood's novel in which the protagonist fakes his or her own death to gain clemency or to outwit enemies, *Our Mutual Friend* (1864) details the events surrounding mistaken identities and inheritances when John Harmon, the rightful heir to his father's legacy, takes on the identity of a drowned man, John Rokesmith, thus faking his own death, in order to “feel” out his intended fiancee, Bella Wilfer. Once he knows that she will marry him for love, despite the fact that he is poor, Rokesmith reveals his true identity as the heir incumbent to the Harmon fortune.

I provide these examples here not to suggest that Braddon merely copies trends of her craft, but rather to demonstrate the nature of well-known and widely read novels' plots so that what the girls read connects and possibly informs, if only implicitly, the combined efforts in imagining a way to trick Philip Sheldon and save Charlotte's life and
rightful inheritance. Diana, alone, becomes a key figure in this ruse, as she intercepts and delivers medications, watches over all other key figures so as to make sure that they play their roles appropriately, and, foregoing any remnants of jealousy, serves as a witness for the secret marriage between Valentine and Charlotte. With Diana's character, Braddon explores a very particular type of friendship, one that bolsters and flourishes due to a strong sense of feminine attachment and common feminine trials. Crucially aware of the workings of criminal sects, like those of her father, Diana, instead, chooses a life on the straight and narrow, thus acting on the differences between right and wrong and utilizing her keen sense of critical thinking, perception, and her self-proclaimed “reading” skills to aid her friend in her gravest time of need. Against all odds, then, Diana overcomes her initial feelings of resentment and, perhaps because of her readings, can foresee and believe the worst about the person who deems to hurt Charlotte, thus laying the foundation for her priceless help in safeguarding her friend.

I Read, Therefore, I Do

Perhaps one of the most unlikely pairings of feminine relationships takes place in Braddon's earlier novel, *John Marchmont's Legacy*, published in 1863. I have waited to discuss it at the end of this chapter because it is the most extreme case of women who, against all odds, have immense respect and affection for one another, even though they never physically meet. The girls' attachment, however, stems from a forceful and resilient undercurrent of feministic attitudes that consistently prevail throughout the novel. In this example, Braddon, explores the reasonings behind such intensity of feeling, and perhaps even the existence of such feminine devotion and loyalty, all between women who are
literally strangers to one another, if for no other reason than to draw firm lines between the girls' readings and their behaviors. Braddon, once again, shows that it is the readership of certain texts, those often criticized or marginalized, that enables at least one woman to remarkably forgo selfishness and, instead, choose the protection of a communal feminine spirit.

Dealing with a somewhat similar concept as she later does in *Charlotte's Inheritance*, in *John Marchmont's Legacy*, Braddon details the poverty stricken life of John Marchmont. Down on his luck and financially bereft, Marchmont must resort to holding placards for cheap theater productions in order to make enough money to support himself and his young daughter, Mary. A chance meeting with an old student, Edward Arundel, and the fondness that grows from that initial meeting, places Marchmont, unbeknownst to the man himself, on the road to a better life. It is John's young daughter's demeanor and angelic attributes, however, that places the family in the great esteem of the young Arundel. It is also through the two men's conversations that Braddon makes readers aware of a Marchmont inheritance, so inextricably entwined in the laws and legalities of primogeniture, that it seems hopeless that this Marchmont branch will ever reap the rewards or live at the coveted family estate, The Towers. As dire and impossible as the circumstances first appear, John Marchmont does, because of a few coincidental deaths, however, eventually take ownership of his family's fortune and estate. This breach in a long run of bad luck catapults his daughter, Mary, into the position of an heiress and in direct line for a substantial fortune.
Although Mary's improved circumstances are obvious to everyone, it is not this newfound fortune that repeatedly beckons Edward Arundel to the Towers. Indeed, it is Edward's growing love and attraction for his former teacher's daughter and his sworn promise to protect her after her father's impending death that brings him back time and again. Braddon spends, of course, a great deal of time inaugurating her readers to the wonders of Mary's temperament and devotion to her father, thus solidifying her as the novel's intended heroine. In fact, Mary is said to have only one extravagance— that she “read[s] novels,—dirty, bloated, ungainly volumes,—which she borrow[s] from a snuffy old woman in a little back street, who charged her the smallest hire ever known in the circulating—library business, and who admired her as a wonder of precocious erudition” (John Marchmont's Legacy). With this specific definition of Mary's characteristics, the librarian particularly marks Mary for an intellectual capacity far beyond her years. Going to a great extent to detail the content and nature of what Mary read, but careful to remind readers that “[Mary] neglected no duty,” the author colorfully remarks on how delicious it was to sit down to "Madeleine the Deserted," or "Cosmo the Pirate," and to lose herself far away in illimitable regions, peopled by wandering princesses in white satin, and gentlemanly bandits, who had been stolen from their royal fathers' halls by vengeful hordes of gipsies [sic]. (John Marchmont's Legacy)

With these examples, Braddon shows how at least Mary's early education with an overly-indulgent father was inundated with fanciful tales that could have most likely led to an over-imaginative constitution, but by suggesting that Mary saw much more beyond her
years, Braddon makes it clear that, for at least a time, the young girl’s freedoms for reading enhanced her propensities toward intellectualism. Underscoring this sentiment and, at the same time, enforcing another type of readership, Braddon's narrator even interjects, deeming these tales examples of “dim poetic sentiment” and “scarcely the best or safest dower for a young lady who has life's journey all before her” (*John Marchmont's Legacy*). Just as I discussed in Chapter 2, however, it is important for one not to mistake Braddon's intentions here with these statements. As with Isabel Gilbert, it is left to Mary Marchmont's own discretion to read and make of these tales what she might through her father's nightly absences that bespeaks of the most problems. Time and again, Braddon intimates her theories on education for young girls and that women have capacities like men, if only cultivated. Interestingly, and similar to her other descriptions of the novels her heroines often read, Braddon pays careful attention to the description of the physical quality and appearance of these books. Creating a visceral image, Braddon takes special note of these “dirty, bloated, ungainly volumes” in which Mary loses herself. As if the physicality of such books represents their effects on a young mind, Braddon implicitly draws connections between what one could say of a young woman's appearance and these volumes so that she may better emphasize the meaning of Mary's type of readership. In this case, then, Mary reads with no limitation, therefore putting her quickly forming intelligence and mental capacity at risk.

Similar to her portrayals of readership in *The Doctor's Wife*, whatever Braddon believes about reading and education without structure and guidance, she does not perpetuate a fondness for an excessively militant or authoritative style of instruction
either. These feelings are most apparent in the ways in which she chooses to discuss Mary's stepmother Olivia's plan of action for the young girl's reading material. Once John Marchmont marries Olivia Arundel, cousin and unrequited lover of Edward Arundel, and then dies not long afterward, Olivia takes charge of the young Mary's education.

It is through Olivia's resentment and bitterness toward her stepdaughter, which surface in both attitude and instruction, that one clearly sees a villain begin to emerge. As most of Braddon's female villains, and heroines for that matter, are complex, Olivia, too, serves as an example of the conflicted persona whose intentions and justifications for wrongdoing are not so easily chalked up to simple and prosaic desires. Braddon, in her descriptions of Olivia, represents a woman lacking those assets one could imagine all women possess--that of sensitivity, benevolence, and kindness. In essence, Braddon suggests that it is “womanhood” in itself that was the “something wanted in Olivia Arundel's face” (John Marchmont's Legacy). Despite her “rare gifts” of “intellect, resolution and courage,” it was not her way or “natural” for her to be “gentle and tender, to be beneficent, compassionate” or even “kind” (John Marchmont's Legacy). Although Olivia has faithfully administered to many of the poor's needs, these acts of what looks like kindness were merely her notions of unshakable duty and nothing more.

Establishing tough standards to live up to, Olivia consistently found fault with herself and because she had no hope of Edward's returned love, was militantly resigned and disciplined to live a life of “self-abasement” and hard work.
When it comes to Mary's education, then, Olivia's dutiful and unrelenting nature informs the aggressive curriculum that she imposes on the girl. This approach becomes all the more evident once Braddon claims that Olivia did not merely oversee Mary's studies or hire tutors, but rather “took possession” of the girl's subjects, thus serving as the controller of all areas and especially of the girl's future (John Marchmont's Legacy). What has a particularly important bearing on my argument about friendships and their connections to reading behaviors, however, is the detail that Olivia, in her intentions to completely control her stepdaughter, “came between Mary and her one amusement,—the reading of novels” (John Marchmont's Legacy). What Braddon calls Olivia's “ruthlessness” in this matter further intensifies as Mary's stepmother appears to search out all novels remaining in the house, including Scott's Waverly novels, sending them all back to the Swampington circulating library, which she defines as “shabby” (John Marchmont's Legacy). Despite Braddon's caveat that Olivia found Sir Walter Scott's “morality irreproachable,” the author further explains that, according to Olivia, it would still “not do for a young lady to be weeping over Lucy Ashton or Amy Robsart when she should be consulting her terrestrial globe” on the “latitude and longitude of the Fiji Islands” (John Marchmont's Legacy).

Olivia’s educational plan for Mary is only partially indicative of commonly held 19th century theories on female education. In fact, according to Jacquelyn Pearson, one’s family and formal educators (if privileged) often limited a young girl’s education to the Bible or other religious tracts. In her examinations of diaries and journals, however, Pearson amends that most in charge of a girl’s lessons believed that even the reading of
the Bible could not keep women from the exposure to “improper expressions.” In offering the first-hand account of one such educator, D’Arblay, Pearson summarizes that “a boy can be allowed the risks and dangers, (of the Bible) but a girl should be restricted to edited summaries” (Pearson 45). Like religious texts, most saw historical texts as necessary components to boys' educations, but excluded women from lessons on history or politics. As Pearson contends, educators offered this curriculum as part of their preparation for “compliance to a male-dominated culture and its discursive practices” (Pearson 50). In showing the specific differences in cultural expectations for what boys should learn and what girls should know, Pearson brings to light this obvious tradition of making a girl's education more extraneous and, at times, altogether unnecessary. “Boys,” Pearson tells us, “read history for a preparation for an active, public, life,” while “girls read to become a more suitable companion for a future husband” (50). Olivia, with her intensive lessons on geography and history, seems to prescribe something much more industrious for her young female charge than what most educators of the time found appropriate and useful for women.

With that said, however, Olivia seems to be more in line with pervasive feelings about young girls and novel reading. As generally thought to be more suspect, novels have always provoked even more concern, thus magnifying already existing fears about poetry and drama. In marking women's mental capacities as weak and readily open to manipulation and vulnerabilities, novels were thought to infiltrate women's sensibilities to such an extent that not only could they entice or enhance sexual feeling, but also forever alter a woman's makeup to one of “self-indulgence” and irreversibly limit
“rational self-hood” (Pearson 83). It is important though to distinguish between two competing notions and definitions of novels. As Pearson confirms, a novel dubbed a “Romance,” was more suspicious because it depicted events that never happened or were ever likely to happen, while fiction marked as merely a “Novel” generated less anxieties because these were tales that portrayed believable people and scenarios (Pearson 198). These distinctions do not represent a majority of opinion at any one given time, and, in fact, allegiances to one or the other remain fluid throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. While many scholars and critics could firmly support a Novel as the most realistic, thus better for a young girl to read because it was not fanciful, others rebutted that the Novel's realism was just the problem and one should never restrict a Romance, full of fancy, on the very grounds that it was “harmless because of its blatant fictionality” (emphasis mine, Pearson 199). At any rate, regardless of the ongoing Novel versus Romance debate, the successful and prolific editors of *The Ladies Magazine* included article after article about respectable reading materials and those that young girls and women should always avoid. As for the end of the 18th century, the novels that most considered appropriate or at least benign enough to not raise anxieties were: Burney's *Evelina*, Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling*, Scott's *Millenium Hall*, Brooke's *Julia Mandeville*, Lennox's *The Female Quixote*, Inchbald's *A Simple Story*, and the novels of Richardson.

Taking the limitation of novels to an extreme, Olivia restricts all novel reading with no exceptions. By having Olivia resist compromises of any kind, Braddon can demonstrate an extreme version of educational control, one that she herself could never condone. Instead of the light literature some educators believed to be permissible for
young girls in moderation, Olivia took the alternative view, believing that only the knowledge and recitation of hard facts was a worthy endeavor. So is the plan that Olivia establishes that Braddon deems it a type of “steeple-chase of instruction” in which Olivia always presents Mary with advanced lessons, and if the girl quickly masters them, then the stepmother administers even harder lessons. Braddon's real testament to how this mode of education and restrictive reading practices fails comes when she offers the reader a look at what Mary's education actually afforded her in a pragmatic sense:

She was alarmingly learned upon the subject of tertiary and old red sandstone, and could have told you almost as much as Mr. Charles Kingsley himself about the history of a gravel–pit,—though I doubt if she could have conveyed her information in quite such a pleasant manner; she could have pointed out every star in the broad heavens above Lincolnshire, and could have told the history of its discovery; she knew the hardest names that science had given to the familiar field–flowers she met in her daily walks;—yet I cannot say that her conversation was any the more brilliant because of this, or that her spirits grew lighter under the influence of this general mental illumination.  

(John Marchmont's Legacy)

In outlining Mary's unique accomplishments paired with the more poetic or commonplace understanding of these concepts, Braddon clearly portrays how, although undeniably impressive, Mary's education has not aided her character or real world capacities in any crucial way. Mary, then, can recite by heart the scientific epistemologies of stars and flowers, but she could not, Braddon laments, really converse
with anyone on these subjects or use her emotions to find meaning and connect with someone else.

This type of flawed instruction is really at the crux of what Braddon wants to say about the use of fiction in young girls' education. Even when Mary is eventually allowed novels again, they are only those that Olivia, in her strictest of ways, will approve. As Braddon relates, these novels are normally those which detail the conflicted and traumatic tales of “young ladies who

fell in love with curates, and didn't marry them: novels in which everybody suffered all manner of misery, and rather liked it: novels in which, if the heroine did marry the man she loved—and this happy conclusion was the exception, and not the rule—the smallpox swept away her beauty, or a fatal accident deprived him of his legs, or eyes, or arms before the wedding–day.

(John Marchmont's Legacy)

What Braddon so knowingly and humorously depicts here is the literature of well-known and widely-prescribed authors whose tales dabbled in the overly dramatic and sentimental. Authors like Samuel Richardson and Sir Walter Scott often wrote novels that detailed the lives of passive and vulnerable women whose goal was to flee from their oppressors, which they rarely can orchestrate on their own, or to snag the best husband, which as Braddon notes, often ends traumatically. While obviously displaying young women with spotless virtues and excessively passive outlooks, novels like Richardson's Pamela really describe girls whose lives end horrifically because they lack the foresight they need to outwit their oppressors. Indeed, the idea of even using one's wit in the first
place would seem foreign to most of these characters. Braddon's mention of these types of novels here, though, serves a special purpose for her. Olivia's education, especially her restriction of most novels for her stepdaughter, has made the young girl incapable of dealing with practical, real world problems, those that affect the girl on a daily basis. That is, when Mary's stepmother and cousin, Paul Marchmont, take advantage of Mary's recent marriage to Edward and his almost immediate disappearance, Mary cannot see through their lies about Edward's assumed death, nor can she foresee or imagine what to do to protect herself, her inheritance, and even her unborn child.

While Braddon makes connections between what Mary has read and what she cannot apply to her life's predicaments, no other character's abilities and background could be more different than that of Edward's eventual second wife, Belinda Lawford, whose reading behaviors are much more uninhibited. In fact, it is actually Belinda's reading behaviors that enable her to not only become more critical of the villains like Paul Marchmont, but also educate her on common feminine predicaments, thus strengthening her fidelity to other women, specifically Mary, about what it means to be a female. From the moment Braddon introduces this character, we know that she is more astute, although the author always adds that she was genuinely benevolent to others. Specifically discussing her reading behaviors and education, Braddon admits that “Belinda Lawford was clever;” but she adds, that she did not “think she could have got through Paradise Lost or Gibbon's Decline and Fall or a volume by Adam Smith or McCulloch . . . but she could read Shakespeare for the hour together” (*John Marchmont's Legacy*). Here Braddon outlines the parameters of a more varied and, therefore, better
diversified version of feminine education and reading habits; thus we see a girl who has not been schooled, as Mary was, in the cold, hard facts of obscure subject matter, but rather one who could just as easily read Shakespeare, Macaulay's History of England, or the “letters in the Times, with no false quantities in the Latin quotations, and knew what she was reading about” (John Marchmont's Legacy). Belinda's love for novels is also evident, especially in one important scene in which Belinda's friend and Edward's sister, Letitia, are discussing their shared reading of a novel that they both are anxious to finish. In fact, they are so interested in this book that both girls are finishing it at tea time, an act that surely demonstrates the freedom both girls have to read what and when they want. Letitia describes it as engaging and she nor Belinda can wait to find out who the hero will marry. While Letitia desires a happier, and definitely a more unlikely ending, Belinda maintains that the hero will not marry the heroine and that she will die, instead. This does not imply that Belinda likes this type of overly sentimental, and always tragic, literature, but rather that she has read enough of it to astutely understand these novels' plot structures. It is because of Belinda's knowledge of such contexts that the young girl can imagine Edward Arundel and his lost wife, Mary, as characters in one of these books, therefore, strengthening her affection for the couple and not just the man, himself. Belinda imagines “Edward's face as it must have been before care and sorrow had blotted out the brightest attribute of his beauty” (John Marchmont's Legacy). So completely do these thoughts take up her time that the “young man's sorrow seemed to shut almost every idea out of her mind” (John Marchmont's Legacy).
In order to better qualify Belinda's seemingly obsessive thoughts about the Arundels, Braddon reminds readers that Belinda led a quiet, country existence and one in which a “decently-written romance from the Swampington book-club was [perhaps the only] thing to be looked forward to with impatience” (JML, parenthetical text mine). Calling Belinda's reading choices “decent” is certainly a way for Braddon to define the girl's reading habits as harmless, but also to distinguish her behaviors from those of Mary, whose stepmother specifically banned the Swampington romances. Braddon, then, makes the connection that it is not strange for Belinda to see in Edward and Mary's story something akin to the novels she reads and to eventually develop a “stronger interest in the hero of the tale” (JML).

It is not just the infatuation of Edward and his past that Braddon enables her character, Belinda to accept, but rather the legitimacy of his claims against Paul Marchmont as the true culprit in Mary's disappearance. After hearing the story from Edward's sister, Letitia, and meeting Edward for herself, Belinda instinctively cannot trust the owner of The Towers. For this reason, when Paul invites the Lawford family to The Towers, it is Belinda who sways her father against complying: “you won't go and sit at Paul Marchmont's table and drink his wine, and shake hands with him?; I know he had something to do with Mary Arundel's death” (JML), the girl says quite affirmatively. Indeed, it is Belinda's fine-tuned instincts, those Braddon leads us to believe she has gained from romances that have enabled her to critically evaluate the Marchmonts. In fact, when Paul's mother and sister, Lavinia, visit the Lawford family, it is Belinda who notices their kindness and their apparent love for Paul, and yet, instead of letting this alter
her feelings of the situation, Belinda reasons that, if these women maintain love and support for Paul, it is because they are merely “ignorant of his wickedness” (JML). The most blatant scene and example of Belinda's ability to reason and sift through details comes when Paul Marchmont actually accosts the young girl at a party, in the hopes of allaying his growing and unsettling fears about the young girl, and her friends and family who supported Edward's claims. Although their conversation is short, Belinda can see through Paul's objective and actually interrupts him as he attempts to win her over by affirming that: "[I]t remains to be prove[n] who is right and who wrong, Mr. Marchmont," she said. "Mr. Arundel is the brother of my friend. I cannot easily believe him to have done wrong" (JML). With the utmost confidence and astuteness, Belinda maintains that, if only because of her belief in Edward as the hero of the tale, she cannot mindlessly give in to Paul Marchmont's version of events. It is Belinda's ability to “read” the situation and facts, and then make up her own mind that is the best testament to the functionality of her books. To intensify the way in which Braddon wants readers to understand the power of books, the author also shows the effects of someone like Olivia who has heretofore demonstrated strong will and forthrightness, but who later cannot speak for herself, nor can even muster the strength to go against Paul's machinations. Importantly, Braddon tells one that “Olivia “rarely opened a book now, rarely wrote a letter, or occupied herself in any manner” (JML). This lack of cognitive activity, and especially in regard to the reading, seems to give a reason for what one learns about Olivia almost immediately afterwards:

[Olivia] seemed entirely under the dominion of the new master
of the Towers. It was as if the stormy passions which had arisen out of a slighted love had worn out this woman's mind, and had left her helpless to stand against the force of Paul Marchmont's keen and vigorous intellect. A remarkable change had come over Olivia's character. A dull apathy had succeeded that fiery energy of soul which had enfeebled and well-nigh worn out her body. There were no outbursts of passion now. She bore the miserable monotony of her life uncomplainingly. (JML)

Seemingly, Olivia cannot stand up to Paul or even activate her own cognition. She goes about the Towers sullenly and “apathetic,” but with no chance for an outburst that was the hallmark of her character. The detail of her lack of reading or writing activity is pertinent in that it reveals Olivia's refusal to think for herself, to reason out Paul's plan, and to determine whether or not she will acquiesce. To stop exercising her mind, and thereby thinking for herself, even if it is only in engaging the hobby of reading, Olivia forgoes her ability to proactively take charge and rein Paul in before he destroys Mary's life.

Similarly, without her reading background, Belinda would have not felt the way she did about Edward, and, perhaps most importantly, about Mary either. Before Mary resurfaces, Belinda spends her time not just mulling over her growing attractions and love for Edward, but also often wishes, regardless of her own feelings, that Mary's life would have turned out differently too. Saying often “poor Mary” and lamenting the “love the two must have had for one another,” Belinda surely shows her tendency to romanticize in a way similar to a novel, but she also demonstrates anomalous empathy for Mary's situation, before and even after she learns that Mary is still alive. Belinda even tells her
father that she wished she could have been Mary's friend and protected her, going as far as to “resolutely” confirm that even if Mary were alive now, she would still choose to be the girl's friend, despite the obvious fact that this would ultimately mean the end to her budding romance with Edward (JML). In fact, once Edward does propose, Belinda accepts the man along with his past, thus powerfully and maturely acknowledging the strength and source of her emotions, saying that the notion that he “should cherish a remorseful sorrow for that lost wife, made him only the truer, nobler, and dearer” husband to her (JML). It is as if the “story” of Mary and Edward that Belinda recognizes strengthens her abilities to look inward as well. In this way, the young girl reveals a remarkable sense of self-understanding about her role as the second Mrs. Arundel.

Braddon's most important example of Belinda's benevolent response to a fellow female's distress comes when Edward learns, in the midst of his wedding to Belinda, that Mary is actually still alive. Braddon, of course, portrays Belinda as distraught, but it is her words later to Edward's mother that really encapsulate the young girl's ability for empathy, even in the face of an inevitable and abrupt change to her own future plans. Speaking kindly to Mrs. Arundel, Mary petitions Edward's mother to “tell [Edward] that he must not think I am so selfish as to be sorry for what has happened,” and then adds, “[T]ell him that I am very glad to think his young wife has been saved” (JML). With these words, Belinda solidifies her love for not only Edward and his happiness, but also for the idea that providence had returned his first wife to him. Here, Belinda chooses solidarity of sorts with another female, whom she has never met, over feelings of resentment and selfishness. Indeed, it is only through her reading habits that Belinda can
even recognize not only the nature of Edward and Mary's situation, but also the implications that would undeniably incriminate Paul Marchmont. By juxtaposing the two girls' reading behaviors, and showing them as opposites in this fashion, Braddon illuminates what Mary could possibly have comprehended about her situation, if she had received training and read so as to become more cognizant of her surroundings.

In all of the novels discussed here, Braddon makes women’s reading behaviors representative of feminine communities and not just individual, disconnected acts. For each female reader she depicts, Braddon emphasizes that it is the young woman’s reading behavior that has educated her on feminine issues and helped to formulate a common feminine understanding. More than this, and in each of the novels I discuss in this chapter, Braddon calls for a specific version of reading instruction. Clearly, Diana and Belinda are model readers in that both women read from various genres, but can still take away a strong sense of femininity, common spirit, and an analytical ability that helps them to save their fellow female friends. It is not, then, the limitless, misguided instruction, or the overly restrictive, militant style, but rather a balanced method that brings forth a rational, well-adjusted young woman.
CHAPTER 4: NOVELS AS ACCOUTREMENTS

If one were to do a search of all of the books of criticism on Mary Elizabeth Braddon, it would be impossible not to read extensive accounts and analyses of perhaps what scholars and readers, alike, find as her most famous and representative work—*Lady Audley's Secret*. It is with this book that Braddon put herself on the map in the Sensational world and the one that certainly overshadows the other eighty novels and short stories. While Wilkie Collins had firmly positioned himself as the “King” of this genre with his hugely successful novel *The Woman in White* (1859), Braddon, with the serialization of *Lady Audley’s Secret* in 1862, was definitely now accruing just as much attention. Critics, however, did not always condone Braddon’s portrayal of her lead female character, Lucy Audley. Artfully scheming to mask the more sinister persona beneath, Braddon's heroine undermines and outright challenges the ideological image of the British woman, showing the capacity to act outside of sanctioned limits that most Victorians thought inherent for women. This anomalous characterization of a lead female role definitely caused much of a stir amongst Braddon's contemporaries who, although dealing with a relatively new genre, still expected to recognize a formulaic ending. That is, although somewhat allowing for a heinous or, at the least, disturbing account of the crimes women committed, these villains should have to suffer justifiable consequences as part of the conventional plot resolution. It is Braddon's complicated portrayal of Lady Audley and the novel's possibilities for a subversive rendering of feminine villainy that left most of her authorial peers and readers reeling. This book in which the “villain becomes the hero” only added to the distaste for a new style that seemed to be emerging.
These critiques also had a lot to do with attitudes toward serials and their departure from a conventional form of closure. Indeed, Sensational serials utilized cliff-hanger endings in order to draw readers to the next installment, but even in the final installment many of these resolutions seemed inconsequential to the rest of the story.

As this reviewer from *The Times* argues, *Lady Audley's Secret* upset the emerging conventions of Sensation in that Braddon “reconcile[s] Lady Audley's bad qualities with those of the angelic”-- that time-honored and protected status of Victorian ideology (*The Times* 18 Nov. 1862). A similar review published in *The Spectator* that same year, defines *Lady Audley's Secret*, as “a monstrosity,” most likely because Lucy Audley seems so at odds with Victorian culture's conception of the domestic and angelic (*The Spectator*, 1862, in appendix to *Lady Audley's Secret* 483). In regards to the culturally acceptable, albeit idealized notion of the feminine sex, this writer goes on to say that “[Lady Audley's] vice of selfishness is seen as something that few women possess.” Perhaps in the hopes of detraacting attention away from the realities of women who commit crimes, some of which had only lately occurred in the months leading up to the serialization of the novel, this particular reviewer tries to distance Braddon's seemingly odd characterization of Lady Audley from what he insists is a “real” Victorian woman. To further this point, he ends his scathing assessment of Braddon's novel with a jab at the class of reader he assumes reads such literature and at the author, herself, by saying: “We do not object particularly to these classes' gratification – provided that those who cater to them are content with their true place in literature, which is not above the basement” (*The Spectator*, 1862). As mentioned in the Introduction, this reviewer marks an all too popular
connection between the Sensation genre, or at least Braddon’s brand of it, with that low
class fiction the “penny dreadful.” Because he saw the sensational genre as inherently
intertwined with a lower class affinity and perspective, this reviewer can also relegate
Braddon to the same position in society. Other reviewers and critics of Braddon's novel,
however, could not be so flippant or find the genre's tactics so excusable. For instance, in
her verbose essays featured in *Blackwood Magazine*, Margaret Oliphant was not just
profuse in her attacks against the genre in general, but also in her personal attacks against
Braddon herself. In setting Braddon apart and calling into question her intentions,
Oliphant rages that only someone who wrote stories like these might have led a similar
life. In directly attacking Braddon's sense of morality, Oliphant aligns the production of
such novels with a conscious, deviant desire to re-indoctrinate women to a new form of
expression, one that would compromise chastity.

Despite the ways in which several scholars have pointed to *Lady Audley's Secret*
as the key initiator of concerns about the Sensational genre and the likelihood that it
promoted a certain type of what Jennifer Hedgecock, in *The Femme Fatale*, deems a
dangerous form of “vicarious readership,” no one discusses Braddon's very explicit
descriptions of Lucy Audley as a reader. In fact, although Hedgecock discusses the
inherent problems of impressionable, middle class girls, reading this type of literature and
gaining unrealistic expectations about how to afford oneself the social mobility Lucy
Audley demonstrates (Hedgecock 112), she does not mention the ways in which Braddon
purposefully deals with her fictional creation of a heroine who reads. Katherine
Montwieler comes closest to pinpointing what I will argue is one of Braddon's most
important achievements with her heroine, Lucy Audley, and yet, she still falls short of the way in which Braddon demonstrates her conscious “participation in discussions about consumerism” (Montwieler). Despite her recognition of how the advertising of Lucy Audley's wealth and cataloging of goods is akin to sales pitches for novels, Montwieler does not delve into how Braddon uses Lucy Audley's explicit collection of books and reading habits to further a very specific commentary on the value of Sensation fiction and its readership. I will argue, then, that Braddon creates a specific reader in this novel which ultimately helps to reveal her overall purpose. In demonstrating how Braddon likens books to other market commodities, I argue that she makes these important connections not only to reveal the changing status of a lucrative market, but also to enlighten readers on the reading habits of women and, especially, how her own Sensational genre can further cultural development and not hinder it. Finally, I will look at her particular descriptions and narrative strategy in regards to her reading heroine/villain to make sense of how Braddon not only provides a guide of how to read, but also what one should take away from the plot.

Books as Commodities

If there are doubts about the significance of books and reading in this novel, one only has to look to the original illustrations of *Lady Audley's Secret* to fully comprehend the connections Braddon wants to make between Lucy's conspicuous consumerism and the book-reading habit. In the 4th illustration which depicts the momentous scene in which George Talboys first looks upon the portrait of Lady Audley, immediately recognizing her as his “dead” wife, a book figures into the frame quite prominently. This
scene, as described in the book, captures one of the most extensively catalogued examples of wealth in the novel describing the atmosphere of Lucy Audley's boudoir as:

  oppressive from the rich odours of perfumes in bottles whose gold stoppers had not been replaced. A bunch of hot-house flowers withering upon a tiny writing table. Two or three handsome dresses lay in a heap upon the ground, and the open doors of a wardrobe revealed the treasures within. Jewellery[sic], ivory-backed hair-brushes, and exquisite china were scattered here and there. (70)

One can obviously see the manifestations of Lucy's newfound wealth; and yet, the room also bespeaks a sense of disorder. Nothing is put away and all of her commodities are lying helter-skelter, as if she has left in a hurry. More than the speed with which she left, this room designates a site of production, one where the “Angel” adorns herself with accoutrements. There is, of course, a level of anxiety at this locus for self-fashioning because it demonstrates just that – that the role of the fashionable woman and certainly, given Lucy’s persona, an Angelic woman, is dependent upon consumerism and performance. What is of particular interest to my argument at this point, however, is that nowhere in the descriptions of her room does Braddon make any mention of books, and yet, in the illustration, a large, ornately bound book makes up the entire representation of her wealth.
Figure 5. Talboys Gazing at Lady Audley’s Picture.

Even though the quality of the print is extremely shadowed, one can tell that the room is expensively furnished, but it is the book itself which makes up the entirety of items that are left behind. Even more significantly than its appearance, is the fact that it is not merely a pamphlet or penny paperback, but what looks to be a very expensive and substantial piece of literature. What Braddon's illustrator, F.H. Townsend, demonstrates here is actually a common type of book ownership for the period, in which the book was more than just a means of readership according to one's taste and availability of cheap copies or circulating library copies, but rather a commodity and status symbol for book collectors. After books had run their course as periodical serials, they were often rebound in one large book of three or more volumes. While some three volume editions were certainly affordable, many were expensive and publishers geared these versions to
the consumer who could afford to collect many different editions of one single novel as a hobby. This fad of filling one's bookshelves with as many copies and often exquisitely bound novels as one could is indicative of a shift, if only slight, in the ways that an upper middle class began to think about novels as artifacts of wealth. As a rampantly selling commodity, the types of books you had on your shelves could now showcase your class and social status, and not just your reading habits. Because it was unlikely that one could or even would intend to read every copy of a novel they owned, these secondary versions were really showpieces, thus bolstering the book business. Within the context of this novel, however, Braddon uses this fact to convey how completely this practice commercialized literary art.

Thinking about books as commodities that signify status and not just signifiers of intellect or literacy informs how and why Braddon prominently figures them in both the illustrations and within the novel’s text. In the very next illustration in this series (figure 6), the image of books, again, take the forefront. This scene marks an interesting moment in which Lucy’s nephew, Robert Audley, first suspects her of telling a lie. More than this, however, the scene imaged here surely captures a pivotal moment in the plot, but also emphasizes a crucial point in my own argument concerning Braddon's utilization of books and the act of reading.
As seen in figure 6, when Robert comes to Audley Court to deliver some Russian sables that he has procured for Lucy, he begins to lament George’s absence and his confusion as to what has happened to his friend. In the illustration added here, Sir Michael Audley examines the bruise upon his young wife's wrist as Robert Audley watches from a side table. Readers of this scene would understand at least some of the implications resonant here because the narrator is able to cast more doubts, if only tiny, onto Lucy's character, as she attempts to cover the bruise on her wrist with an expensive and flashy bangle. When questioned, Lucy brushes the incident off as nothing more than the consequence of tight ribbon, but Robert infers that she must be telling “childish white lies”(90) because the bruise is obviously a more recent wound than she wants to admit. First, this bruise alters one's understanding of Lucy as an innocent character and then, most importantly,
points to her capacities for duplicity. What I want to point out, however, is the way in which Braddon utilizes Lucy's conspicuous consumerism to help her hide the marks of her own violent actions and then aligns this persona with books and novel reading. That is, in looking closely at the illustration once more, it is not difficult to see the books lying around the room. There are at least two propped against the legs of the piano and two lying on the floor as well as one positioned on the table on which Robert Audley lays a definitive and meaningful fist. So, as Lucy accepts the gift of her Russian sables, uses her bangle bracelet to hide the remnants of somewhat suspicious actions, and catches Robert's attention with serpent shaped ruby rings, she is also sitting in a room in which books are lying all around her, solidifying them as part of her avid consumption and key components to her decadence and wealth. Braddon gives life to an interesting paranoia—the idea that established gentry, aristocratic holdings, and a seemingly dutiful wife might not denote genuineness and may actually only amount to a superficial contrivance. As discussed in the Introduction, one of Sensation fiction’s biggest lures as well as one of its key hindrances to critical success was the way in which the genre invited the lower classes in for a “backstage” view of the rich and wealthy. Indeed, one only needed literacy to get a new angle on the aristocracy, and since Sensation replaced the Gothic monasteries with the English country house, these contexts caused much distress. Including richly bound volumes as a prominent commodity in this scene just adds more attention to what Braddon saw as one function of the book, namely the market.

Indeed, Braddon continues the association between books and Lucy's sinister purposes when she demonstrates how Lucy begins using the ruse of reading as a way to
help provide a scapegoat for her suspicious actions. This narrative technique definitely sheds new light on what Braddon wants her readers to understand about the act of reading and especially Lucy’s particular brand of it.

Female and Male Readership

The first instance in which we see Lucy as a reader comes from second-hand information and only through the observations of Robert Audley and George Talboys. Although the reader might not be sure that he is talking about Lucy Audley, because we are, as of yet, unclear on her connections to George, Robert does find many remnants of reading materials amongst the “artifacts” of George’s dead wife. Among these, he finds transcribed excerpts from Byron and Moore. Interestingly, Byron is the same poet that a governess tried to discuss with George on his return trip from Australia, but he “had fairly laughed in her face, as if poetry were a joke,” thus instigating the narrator’s qualification that George was “by no means too learned a gentleman” (LAS, 19). Even George’s tombstone that he erects for what he thinks is his dead wife can be described as cryptic at best, mentioning only his relation to her and never mentioning their son. Despite George’s obviously more privileged background, his intellectual power seems simplistic at best and he has no interest in upper crust culture. Instead, he spends his time playing cards and drinking port. These early comparisons between George and Lucy develop more significance over time, especially once George’s disappearance marks Lucy as a suspect and the proprietor of mistaken identity. By associating Lucy with reading, the narrator assigns her a certain type of intellect, at once making George seem more
uneducated, and suggesting that Lucy has capabilities beyond what one might have expected from a woman.

Still, the narrator’s comparisons between Lucy’s reading and Robert Audley’s reading hobbies bear an even more important significance on the narrative strategy, since Robert will eventually become Lucy’s nemesis. From the beginning of the novel, the narrator emphasizes one fact about Robert Audley above others—he is prone to lackadaisical behavior and enjoys nothing more than a lazy afternoon and a stack of yellow-backed French novels. Indeed, the narrator informs readers that Robert Audley was “supposed” to be a barrister, but instead, was a “care for nothing fellow” who after “exhaust[ing] himself with the exertion of smoking German pipes and reading French novels would stroll into Temple Gardens and lying in some shady spot . . . would tell grave benchers that he had knocked himself up with overwork” (35). Readers know, however, that Robert really does not do much “work” at all. The fact that the narrator associates Robert Audley with these pastimes is important on several accounts. First, it establishes his class privilege and the leisure time that social status offers. Second, Robert demonstrates his choice of reading over any other hobby, but it really emphasizes his extreme laziness and can be read as no activity. Perhaps, most notably, it aligns him with a certain type of literature, one that carries the stigma of sensational drivel and makes him seem quite effeminate in his choice of it. One can even say that as much as Lucy Audley

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1 As mentioned in the introduction, yellow-backed novels carried a specific stigma in Victorian culture. Thought to be silly, sensational, and often risqué, they were generally associated with a female reading public and not considered to have any literary value. Known visually for their common bindings, they dominated the popular reading market and became a fundamental component of the cheap railway literature phenomenon.
goes to extremes to appear like the idealized angel, so too does Robert Audley go to great
lengths to avoid any kind of work or exertion of any kind. When going to his uncle’s for
the hunting season, for instance, the narrator is sure to note that in not intending to do any
hunting, Robert packs “half a dozen French novels, a case of cigars, and 3lbs of tobacco”
for his comforts during his stay (LAS, 117). Certainly what we have here are superlative
characterizations, extremes that, in the case of Robert and Lucy, quickly become opposed
to one another.

These differences, then, make it all the more interesting that Robert eventually
begins to exert himself in his detective work to incriminate his aunt. In fact, it seems as
though it is the very nature of the books he chooses to read that guide him in his tactics of
detection as well as prompt him to consider his aunt as a suspect in the first place.
Braddon recasts these otherwise frivolous readings into preparation or real work. As a
way of ensuring that readers make this connection, the narrator has already set the
groundwork for Robert thinking of himself as a character in one of these sensational
stories the first time that he meets Lucy Audley. After going to extremes in his
compliments of her beauty, Robert tells George (who has not walked over to see the
Lady) that he “feel[s] like the hero of a French novel,” and that he is certainly “falling in
love with his new aunt” (59). Casting himself in the role of hero in this context does not
seem far removed from later envisioning himself as one of the many detective-like
characters that graced the pages of such novels. The narrative strategy, then, at least in
regards to Robert, seems clear here. As a reader of this genre, he becomes a better
detective, able to fine-tune his tactics, uncover the villain, and save his best friend.
Lucy’s reading, however, does not reveal the same strategy. In keeping with the way in which the narrator juxtaposes these characters, Lucy’s reading does not bring much success for the ill-fated heroine, rather, at least at first, it functions to cast more doubt onto her character.

Readers also know that Robert is undeniably effeminate, especially in his own reading practices. Ironically, the most significant example concerning the role of his beloved novels occurs when he stops reading them altogether. After becoming despondent about George’s disappearance and obsessing over the mystery itself, Robert loses all taste for what used to bring him such joy: “He was in no humor even for his meerschaum consoler; the yellow-papered fictions on the shelves above his head seemed stale and profitless” (158). On the surface, the phrase “stale and profitless” might seem to suggest that Robert no longer sees the value, even if only recreational, in these reading pursuits and that perhaps he will not focus his time on such meaningless works of literature. It seems just as plausible, I argue, that Robert's speech that he has “no inclination for his French novels,” though there was a “packet of uncut romances, comic and sentimental, waiting his pleasure upon one of the tables” (209) suggests that Robert no longer desires these fantasies, because he thinks he is, in fact, already living them. His detective work leveled at Lucy Audley’s suspicious behavior enables him to have the type of existence that he most certainly had read about and fancied in his novels. Braddon, however, has heretofore described Robert’s affinities for such novels in a tongue in cheek manner; therefore, she most likely did not intend for the reader to condone or identify
with his sluggish demeanor or his form of passive readership, at least at that early point in
the novel.

The fact that his reading practices eventually give him more of an “edge” over Lucy Audley underscores an important tension in the novel. In the beginning, Braddon uses Robert’s reading behavior as a way to emphasize his effeminacy and lack of usefulness. Later, once Braddon starts to place more suspicion onto Lucy Audley’s character, Robert’s readings help him to carry out more masculine action in his pursuit of Lucy. Braddon redefines this character in order to highlight what motivations and abilities his readings have provided. This is not to say, however, that Robert is immediately successful, but rather only that his books change function and significance, guiding him to become more proactive.

Robert’s choice of certain novels also exposes the crucial differences between what Victorian society tolerated for men, but not often for women. Indeed, when Lucy discusses a sensational French novel that she and her maid, Phoebe, have shared, Braddon’s implication that she finds some startling comparisons between her own life and that of the novel’s heroine is clear. After describing the plot and hinting at the duchess’ crimes, Lucy asks Phoebe if she remembers how no one found out about these crimes until the duchess had grown very old, and only then did the woman’s judges finally execute her as a much delayed punishment. Lucy’s reading of French novels aligns her with Robert’s pursuits as well; but, more than this, the fact works to cast more doubts upon her and especially her outward appearance of innocence. Although of the same genre and caliber as Robert’s, Lucy’s readings do not help her in the same fashion
that Robert’s do. In fact, her identification with novels like these make one suspect her more and complicate what we know about her self-portrayal as an Angel.

Reading as Feminine

Although we are constantly reminded that Lucy reads, either through text or illustration, the narrator would, strangely, first have one believe that this paragon of womanhood does not read at all. In one of the earliest scenes of the novel, the narrator informs readers that all of “[Lucy’s] amusements were childish…‘[s]he hated reading or study of any kind, and loved society . . . rather than be alone” (55). Importantly, the narrator combines these characterizations with the hyper-feminine persona that she creates for the heroine in the beginning of the novel such as the beautiful “ringlets, ravishing smile, fairy-like bonnet-all a tremble with heartsease and dewy spangles, shining out of a cloud of gauze” (59). These descriptions are certainly hyperbolic, as they align her with something fantastical, but Braddon's choice in categorizing Lucy as angelic is most meaningful in regards to her commentary on female readership. Because the narrator so insistently casts Lucy as the angel, it seems as though hating reading just emphasizes this depiction. The idea of seeing the angel as a non-reader, however, actually serve as a crucial part of the cultural ideology that constructs and prescribes this domestic ideal for the Victorian woman. For Victorians, then, reading was both a signifier of feminine traits and a hobby that produced anxieties and, therefore, only marginal tolerance. While there were plenty of Victorians who criticized female readership for what they considered its threats to one’s moral compass, there were just as many who deemed it trivial and benign, if only because it was a feminine hobby. At this point in the
novel, if Braddon’s narrative strategy is to have one see Lucy Audley as the epitome of womanhood, then her reading should not be of French novels, as one sees later, but rather more useful texts that could instruct her on being a better housewife or mother. So, in casting Lucy as a non-reader of a certain type of text, at least at first, the narrator reinforces the impression of Lucy as demure, passive, and, although childish, an ultimate rule follower.

These classifications do not last, however, and in an undeniable shift of narrative emphasis, Braddon begins to characterize a heroine who appears to fit the angelic mold, but who is quite possibly functioning as the angel's more sinister counterpart— the demon. Just as the Victorians perpetuated an ideal version of femininity, an emblem of purity and decorum, they envisioned an opposite, one that provided an example of the worst possible attributes for women. Literature is inundated with these temptresses and manipulators who strive for their personal gain, thus defying all of the cherished qualifications for Victorian womanhood. Critically, scholars have examined, classified, and reclassified these varying types of women. It is no surprise, then, that characters such as Thackeray’s Becky Sharp, Collins’s Lydia Gwilt, and even Braddon’s Lady Audley have all at one time or other epitomized the definition of the demonic woman who opposes the cultural paragon of femininity. The female demon, then, functions in many different ways, often as a maddened fiend, siren, or criminal. Interestingly, however, this binary of the representation of the feminine does not always remain so easily detectable or function as a clear case of opposites. As Nina Auerbach argues in *The Woman and the Demon* (1984) there are more times than not in which a paradigmatic
shift occurs, a displacement in which the boundaries of such classifications seem much more fluid. The angel, then, might easily give herself over to the ways of the demon or in the very mysticism that surrounds the angelic position, demonic attributes can surface simultaneously. In stripping away the stringent Victorian attitude that elevated these symbols to iconic cultural ideologies for women, Auerbach calls for looking at the history (both biblical and medieval) of the angelic figure, which she reveals were surprisingly often depicted as male. According to Auerbach, they were strong, uninhibited, “martial armoured figures” that often represented bisexuality. In Victorian literature, however, the angel always manifests as feminine and although the novels “teem with male demons, there are no male angels” (74). Auerbach reasons that, even female demons, which quite often resonate in Victorian literature and especially Sensation fiction, are essentially a revision of biblical history which, like the angel, had always established these figures as male. This cultural trend of depicting angels as feminine instead of the traditional masculine figures, reveals much about the paradoxes inherent in the role Victorians prescribed for women, and helps to explain why the slippage of gender boundaries is so commonplace in nineteenth century literature. In replacing male angels who were often harbingers of bad news, revenge, or ill fates like those of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* with Patmore’s vision of the female angel who is loving, but passively benevolent, authors systematically manipulated a tradition as well as called into being a new role for women. For Auerbach, as demonology and angelology “is stripped of scriptural authority, “it gains new imaginative life” (75). In positioning the angel and her demon sister as “illicit invaders of traditional Anglican symbolism,” Auerbach contends that they are given more
facetted personae than their male counterparts. But this Victorian version of the angel, and thereby demon as well, are from their cultural conception a contradiction, complicated figures with no real historical source. As the angel gains an iconic status in Victorian ideology, she epitomizes traits that are impossible to perfectly encapsulate. The demon classification, then, is all too handy for categorizing those women who fall short of angel status. The chance that Victorian women cannot resemble the angel model at all times is not only possible, but more than likely.

Inextricable from one another, the female angel with her time-honored position, but paradoxical power (thus protected and restricted), often reveals the tendencies of the only too closely related demon. More to the point with Braddon's characterizations, Braddon’s narrator clearly shows us the potential to see both angel and demon resonant in Lucy Audley’s actions from the beginning. In one such early scene, Braddon’s narrator captures the essential closeness and fluidity between the angel and the demon when she describes Lucy Audley serving tea. First, she remarks on how “pretty and innocent” Lucy looks while serving, observing that women “never look prettier” than when engaging in this task. As the description continues, however, Braddon's epitome of a domestic goddess and household bliss take on qualities that seem more like those of that more questionable female entity than the honorable angel:

The most feminine and most domestic of all occupations imparts a magic harmony to her every movement, a witchery to her every glance. The floating mists from the boiling liquid in which she infuses the soothing herbs, whose
secrets are known to her alone, envelop her in a cloud of scented vapour, through which she seems a social fairy, weaving potent spells with Gunpowder and Bohea.

(222)

It is obvious, here, how Braddon distinguishes the angelic role, but also allows for the slippage between the two poles. The domestic duties given up so entirely into the angel's control render her more mysterious and ethereal. This effectively separates her from the masculine world and sensibilities, but also, most strikingly, makes her as elusive and suspiciously intangible as the demon. Interestingly, it is in the midst of a very domesticated act, one that the Victorians’ version of the angel would surely perform every day, that Braddon implies these similarities between the angelic and the “magic,” “witchery,” and “fairy”-like ambiance of the demon. In this example, Braddon shows the inherent problems with such a stringent system of classification for women by alluding to the capacity for something more mystical and even “dark” in the midst of an idealized domestic moment.

It is at a very particular moment in the plot, however, in which Braddon demonstrates a shift in her own representations of Lucy Audley and instead of inundating readers with descriptions of the angelic, readers get details that hint at a much more calculating and sinister side to the once charming heroine's personality. It is in that pivotal scene in which George Talboys first looks at Lady Audley's portrait, fully recognizing her as his own wife, now thought to be dead, that Braddon strategically reveals Lucy as more of a demon and capable of treachery. Braddon compares the portrait itself to something similar to a Pre-Raphaelite painting, thus evoking images of female
centered art that often implied a secret or “demonic” edge to otherwise angelic iconography. What critics found disconcerting about the Pre-Raphaelites’ art was the visually rendered blurring of the angel and the demon. Because the Pre-Raphaelites were widely known for their abilities to relay a more realistic image, the narrator’s comments on the “strange, sinister light to [Lucy’s] deep blue eyes” (72) is the first clue that the painter has been able to see beneath the angel’s mask. Deeming the former “pouting” mouth as “wicked,” the narrator cleverly offers the suggestion that Lucy now resembles a “beautiful fiend.” Making what was once the exemplar of gentility into something strange and even frightening, enables Braddon to clearly shift her narrative strategy. The narrator then prompts the reader to see even more of a transformation, as she takes us through the nuances of the portrait:

Her crimson dress, exaggerated . . . 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 . . . all combined to render the first effect of the painting by no means an agreeable one. (72)

Because we are effectively prompted, readers can clearly see the hellish imagery present in this scene. Proposing that the crimson dress looks like flames functions as enough of a hint, but the narrator takes it one step further and, in the next line, strengthens that comparison by implying that her head seems ensconced by a “raging” furnace. We are inundated with shades of red and images of fire, so much so that readers would definitely understand that we are now to view hellish imagery as another indicator
that Lucy has the capacity to be the demon. In evoking a Pre-Raphaelite style image, Braddon aligns Lucy with the likes of many less than moral female subjects pictured in the paintings of popular Pre-Raphaelites such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Although Rossetti never painted Braddon’s Lucy Audley, his oeuvre of work reflects a focus on secretive and seductive female figures. For example, in the painting featured below (figure 7), completed in 1855 and signifying a new concentration on women’s desire, Rossetti captures his vision of Alatiel, a Saracen princess and a character in Boccaccio’s Decameron. After taking many lovers, Ataliel is still able to present herself as a virgin to her impending husband, the King of Algarve. Entitling the portrait Bocca Baciata, which when translated means “mouth that has been kissed,” Rossetti attempts not only to capture the essence of her literary character transcribed from a proverb found in the Decameron, but also to tangibly visualize the sensuality and artfulness of Ataliel’s desires.
One can immediately see the prominent use of reddish hair, which has a longstanding association with passion and, therefore, active desire. The fact that it ensconces and frames Ataliel’s face emphasizes the woman’s passionate persona. In the Victorian period, artists commonly use red hair to denote the woman of ill repute, thus often literally making her hair resemble fire or flames. Braddon’s mention of this detail in Lady Audley’s portrait would have immediately struck an association between Rossetti’s
work and Lucy’s portrait for contemporary readers. Red hair is the signifier of a harlot, which for Victorians is practically synonymous with a desiring woman. Ataliel’s red hair captures and holds immediate attention and evokes another one of Rossetti’s well known tropes—that of the devouring woman. Often pictured with masses of serpentine hair, Rossetti’s female subjects look menacing and threaten the stability of masculine power, as if in possession of a phallus they can devour manhood. In the picture of Ataliel, Rossetti has not used a serpentine symbol, but her hair still ensconces and has the power to engulf or smother. Ataliel’s gaze too looks slightly away from the painter, as if she thinks of someone else other than who is right in front of her. In fact, Rossetti’s use of the averted feminine gaze becomes a trope as well, thus resonating in many of his paintings of the female body. By averting her eyes from the implied painter as well as from any viewer, Rossetti can accrue more interest, seduction, and even desire from those looking on the form because the woman does not satisfy at least the male viewer’s need of knowing she looks at him looking at her. This specific gaze, then, places the viewer in the voyeur position, which evokes its own form of pleasure, and also firmly establishes the woman as an object of the male’s powerful and controlling gaze because it enhances her attractiveness, thus inciting the male gaze (Mulvey). While one cannot deny the obvious sexualized nature of the Pre-Raphealite style and the painters’ particular use of female objectification, there is still much one could say about Ataliel’s expression. Similar to Lucy’s expression that belies a sense of cruelty and selfishness, Rossetti’s Ataliel looks as though she is daydreaming and if one knows the story behind the painting—that she has had many lovers—or pays close attention to the title, one might naturally assume that
someone else other than her husband elicits her concentrated expression. The fact that Rossetti captures Ataliel richly adorned with her jewels and after her successful marriage, but seemingly distracted, at least prompts the question of the nature of her thoughts and reaffirms the secret nature of her real status as a former harlot and not a virgin.

Braddon, too, selects an at least partially secretive place for the revelation of the portrait of Lucy Audley. When George Talboys first sees the visage of his long lost wife, it is in Lucy’s boudoir. Ladies used boudoirs for a variety of purposes, but usually they designated them for sitting rooms and dressing rooms, as discussed in Chapter 2. The key here is that these rooms were private areas, usually only the lady, herself, and perhaps close female friends or relatives frequented these rooms. When Robert and George view the portrait, they have done so by breaking into Lucy Audley’s boudoir so that they may look at her image while she is gone. Importantly, then, Robert and George invade Lucy Audley’s personal, secret space, and in doing so, see a secret revealed in her portrait. Braddon’s fictional painting and its similarities to Rossetti’s works emphasizes the secretive nature of women and hints at the truth that might lie beneath an ideal façade. This in turn, however, causes much anxiety for the viewer of Rossetti’s Ataliel or for the reader of Braddon’s text, not just because the secrets exist, but because they exist in the iconic feminine form—the virgin and the Angel. Both the fictional portrait and Rossetti’s heighten anxieties because they deny the viewer any tangible disclosures, only hinting that a possibility of desire or transgression exists. Ataliel’s gaze as well as the fleshy appearance of her skin shown on the prominent neck perhaps best fulfills Rossetti’s objective to concentrate on more realistic portrayals of the feminine body. In bringing
this into focus and giving historical and well-known literary figures a sexuality and an obvious desirous nature, Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelites, alike, trespass stringent moral codes.

Similarly, with her portrayal of Lucy Audley’s portrait, Braddon also wants to at least show the potential for a woman’s agency and autonomy. In contrast to Rossetti’s sexually transgressive Ataliel, however, Lucy Audley’s desires have nothing to do with sexual passion, but rather are acquisitive in nature because clearly only wealth and status motivate her. Although the narrator often positions Lucy in conjunction with other fallen women, it is certainly never Lucy’s romantic desires which contribute to her particular transgressions. In fact, for Lucy, men are often just a means to an end and not necessarily the goal. Despite its obvious departure from Rossetti’s work, Braddon’s fictional portrait still meaningfully alludes to the Pre-Raphaelites, to reveal the shocking truth of Lucy’s persona and call into question the essence of womanhood in general.

Interestingly, once the narrator begins to show readers that the angelic is merely a façade, a narrative tension occurs in which Lucy, simultaneously, begins to self–present hyper femininity and the epitome of Victorian angelhood. More to the point of my argument, once it is clear that Lucy has demonic propensities, Braddon begins to depict Lucy as the occasional reader. Since the ideal vision of womanhood would prescribe a woman who put all individual pleasures aside for those of her family, it is not surprising that when wanting the reader to see Lucy as having a capacity toward something much more sinister, the narrator depicts a reader. Once this narrative shift takes place, Braddon uses Lucy’s act of reading as a unique way to cast more suspicion onto her
character. Indeed, in this novel, Braddon’s reading model functions exclusively as a technology of interiority and individuality. Reading, then, emphasizes concerns about Lucy’s character because when Lucy reads or pretends to read, no one has any idea what she is thinking.

The assigning of readership to a character such as Lucy, however, is not really that easily summed up, and, in fact, is a rather complicated matter. Despite the many criticisms leveled at women readers, the idea that women read certain genres like Sentimental/Domestic fiction as well as Sensational texts was seen as an essential proclivity, one that spanned across many different class levels. In fact, most Victorians, like their Romantic predecessors, believed that women had an inborn propensity for the imagination. Although the use of the imagination seemed to threaten idealized decorum, the notion was that these experiences were almost exclusively feminine hobbies and because so common, it was almost expected. Like Jacqueline Pearson reasons, the act of reading had always been a complicated issue throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, but one that, more times than not, Victorians saw as “passive, thus feminized,” and at odds with the more masculine and “active art of writing” (16). At the same time that society cautioned women against reading and warned that books were dangerous portals between their private realm of the domestic and the man's public sphere, they were also encouraged to read, at least a little, in order to “compensate for their less rational natures” (15). So, although an activity that caused much anxiety, reading was also a peculiarly feminine endeavor. I argue, then, that it is extremely important to note that once Braddon's narrator starts to hint at Lucy's potential for a much darker persona, Lucy
begins to *self-represent* or perform traits of a stereotypical femininity: she reads.

Braddon would have had full knowledge of these associations and if she wanted Lucy to reveal that her angelic nature was as an act, then part of that performance entailing only moderate intelligence would naturally include reading.

**Reading as a Mask**

Although Lucy speaks of reading the sensational novel to Phoebe, this is really the only instance in the novel in which the narrator makes it clear that Lucy does, in fact, *read* the novels she seems to collect. For the most part, Lucy’s “act” of reading, is just that-- an act, a contrived performance so that she may maintain the appearance of innocence as the evidence stacks against her. Reading, then, enables Lucy to play the role of the typical female lost in a book, instead of appearing as a conniving schemer. For instance, in the scene I first describe in the introduction, George Talboys, after obviously detecting his wife in the portrait Robert shows him of his new aunt, goes to confront her. As readers, we are not given his intentions or told that he has realized his wife’s bigamy, but in the last scene before he disappears, he asks for Lucy Audley at the main door of Audley Court. The narrator indicates that after telling George Lady Audley had gone out for a walk, the servant saw the young man go in that direction to find her. Immediately after this scene, the narrator tells us that Lady Audley returns after an hour’s time, meandering through the lime-walk with an open book in her hand. The implication of this scene is most likely clear, even in the first reading of the text. Braddon must place Lucy in the vicinity of the crime, while still maintaining doubt as to her involvement so as to control the suspense of the novel. As I mentioned in the introduction, the fact that
Lucy returns to the house carrying an open book is immensely significant to my argument about her use of reading as part of her angelic guise. She seems idle here, as if she has spent a day wallowing away the time reading a novel, singing, and lazily gathering flowers (which we learn on the next page). To be seen as someone engaging in what would look to anyone like a genuine female pastime can assumedly keep up her persona. This scene also brings attention to the performance itself. Here the book becomes not only a valued commodity that she has on hand, but also a type of *prop* that Lucy uses as a crucial part of the angelic act. It does not matter how threatening or innocuous the book she is holding actually is, but rather that she must understand that this is, ironically, a marker of the persona that she wants to imitate. At this point, then, Braddon uses books as a feminine accessory that seem to point to a lack of intelligence and an inability to act. In actuality, however, this rendering is much more subversive in that it does everything to mask Lucy’s sharpened skills of scheming. Lucy begins to use books in the same fashion in which she used the bracelet and other items of conspicuous consumerism—namely, to hide her secrets. When Robert Audley openly accuses Lucy of her crimes, she returns to her boudoir and attempts to calm herself, after a particularly harrowing day of angry encounters. Once alone in her room, Lucy begins to rehash the day, Robert’s motives, and her next move, when she hears a knock at the door:

She rose suddenly, startled by any sound in the stillness of her room. She rose and threw herself into a low chair near the fire. She flung her beautiful head back upon the soft cushions, and took a book from the table near her. (294)
As before, Lucy’s instincts are to consistently set the stage for her productions of self. She can never find herself caught off guard; and, by grabbing a book, she can provide herself with a convincing activity and keep up the demeanor of the hyper-feminine. The illustration below (figure 8), captures this moment when Lady Audley uses her reading to at least appear at ease.

![Figure 8. Lady Audley’s unwelcome visitor.](image)

In this scene, Lucy’s expression might tell it all. She acts as though Phoebe has disturbed her and her expression, therefore, does not seem inviting. In attempting to set the scene, Lucy places herself in a reclining chair and holds her book up to at least give the appearance that the book engrosses her. Importantly, since this moment captures Phoebe already present in the room, it is significant that Lady Audley never shifts her book in
order to refocus attention on Phoebe and keeps it held at chest level. In trying to appear innocent, then, Lucy uses her book and her posture to ensure that this is what she has been doing. This “reading” behavior, that most readers will recognize as a performance by this point, constitutes what Lucy understands as feminine and innocent.

It is the way in which Lucy continuously comes to reading that really conveys her dependence upon it and how merely associating oneself with the habit of reading, at least for women, can help to emphasize qualities of innocence. After locking Robert Audley in his hotel room and then burning the entire establishment to the ground, Lady Audley spends a restless night wondering if she has succeeded in eliminating her oppressor. Interestingly, the next morning, when her demeanor and physiognomy surely indicate a night of unrest, Lucy, again, utilizes the reading habit as an explanation:

It was very late the next morning when Lady Audley emerged from Her dressing room . . . with a very pale face, and with half-circles of purple shadow under her eyes. She accounted for this pale face and these hollow eyes by declaring that she had sat up reading until a very late hour on the previous night. (323)

Significantly, Lucy knows that the excuse of reading will suffice for any concerns one might have about her unusual appearance. In this scene, Lucy appeals to a very intriguing sense of cultural thought about women and reading. Although it causes anxieties for several different reasons, the type of habit Braddon discusses here seems much more exaggerated and extreme. The concept that women might commonly defer rest for the finishing of a novel, denotes an avid readership, yes, but also a type of reading habit that seems obsessive and consuming. While this excuse of reading until late into
the night might certainly raise an eyebrow or garner some disapproval, Lucy importantly
seems to recognize that this behavior, regardless of how much of an addiction it might
seem, still offers her a certain amount of protection from suspicions that she has
committed a worse crime.

Braddon Trains Her Readers

Significantly, and perhaps as the greatest testament to her purpose, Braddon does
not just want to criticize novel reading by associating her reading heroine with such
villainous activities. In fact, she does quite the opposite and it is her narrative strategy in
regards to the reasons that Lucy Audley comes to reading and the necessity of hiding her
criminal activity that really underscores how Lucy's reading practices should be read
within the narrative framework. For example, in one scene in which Lucy has taken up a
book to deflect suspicion away from herself, the narrator intrudes and at once provides an
explanation for the heroine's performance habits:

Insignificant as this action was it . . . spoke very plainly of ever-recurring fears-of
fatal necessities for concealment of a mind that in its silent agonies was ever alive
to the importance of outward effect. It told more plainly than anything else how
complete an actress my lady had been made by the awful necessity of her life.

(295)

Although narrative intrusions are by this time in the novel ordinary, the narrator's
explanation that follows this scene is interesting in that it marks Lucy's reading
performance as a “necessity.” Indeed, this is a rare moment in which the narrator backs
slightly away from criminalizing Lucy and offers the circumstances of Lucy's
predicament as a kind of justification for her constant need for “outward effect.” Not only does this commentary make sense of Lucy’s choices, making most of them seem necessary in order to protect her newfound comfortable life, but it also suggests that the performance itself is an inextricable part of feminine life in general. This moment, then, opens up the frightening possibility that feminine qualities thought to be innate are really nothing more than strategic contrivance, something Braddon has exemplified in her renderings of how easily Lucy moves between the polarities of the Angelic and the Demonic. In *The Femme Fatale*, Jennifer Hedgecock's argument concerning Lady Audley is in line with these narrative theories. Hedgecock sees Lady Audley as a complicated femme fatale figure, proving that as a marginalized group, women who act out are usually doing so because the system in which they live has rendered them powerless. They have “little alternative, Hedgecock reasons, “but to manipulate social codes” (Hedgecock). Although Hedgecock does not make these particular connections, as readers can see, Braddon *does* demonstrate how Lucy Audley has had little control over her life and, thereby, her social status. Deserted by her husband and left with a criminal and financially ruined father, Lucy quickly takes advantage of a better situation through a much more advantageous marriage proposal. According to Hedgecock, once she is Lady Audley, she “challenges the full measure of Victorian ideology that represses female desire and female agency by breaking the law and pretending to be the archetypal domestic goddess” (Hedgecock). What often gets overlooked, though, is the idea that until George Talboys visits Audley Court, Lucy Audley is operating under the assumption that her first husband, who she has not seen or heard from in years, is most likely dead.
Believing in this fact if for no other reason than because of George’s lack of communication with her for so many years, Lucy’s acceptance of Sir Michael’s proposal does not mean she consciously committed bigamy. Seeing Sir Michael as a route to a better life, one unimpeded by debts and poverty makes her an opportunist, true, but not necessarily a criminal.

It is really Lady Audley’s agility in performing the angelic, while functioning as something more demonic, that garnered so much contemporary anxiety as well as so much critical attention. To add to Hedgecock's view, most of the recent scholarship on this novel does find that it is Lucy's propensity toward the performance of the angelic, traits thought to be effeminately essential, and the lengths she will take in order to maintain her position, that is the most noteworthy. Similarly, Ann Cvetkovich also speaks to this disruptive legacy of Lucy Audley when she suggests that, her “criminal behaviors and transgressions defied sacred ideologies” (46). For most scholars, like Cvetkovich, it is how Braddon illuminated the possibility of the “Angel's deceptiveness and what was lurking beneath the domestic facade” that was so poignant (46). While this is certainly a legitimate claim, one must not forget that what was lurking beneath Lucy’s façade was, unlike other literary demons, not sexual in nature, but rather an economic desire for goods and status. It is these desires, specifically, which motivate her actions and spur her to continually protect her angelic guise.

It is the answer to this question of what lurks beneath, and how Braddon intended for her readers to “read” into these classifications, I argue, that is really Lady Audley's most disruptive and resounding legacy. Through the specific detective format that she
employs, Braddon reveals that the “Secret” of the text might just be the failings of constrictive, and illogical, definitions of femininity. As readers are swept up into the detective game along with Robert Audley, one's job becomes to cipher clues along with him, and, at times, assuredly getting to the point and making connections before he can. Of all strategies that Braddon could have used, it is extremely significant that she chooses a detective formula to tell this particular story. These stories incite an active readership, like no other genre, and in so doing, create an interactive relationship between the astute reader and the fictional detective who must search for clues. Like D.A. Miller reasons about detective stories in general, these types of stories have at the crux of their goals a “sequence” which “turn trifles into ‘telling’ details” (The Novel and the Police, 35). Readers of detective fiction must then also acclimate to the context that forces them to make more out of coincidences, thus seeing more into the everyday details. Indeed, although Miller will affirm that detective novels by their end usually negate most of these early suspicions or hidden “meanings” as having had no bearing on the crime at hand, therefore literally “falling out” of focus, he does see this as a type of process in which every detective novel reveals its stabilizing power—even if that order is only in the “restricting and localizing the province of meaning” (34). In Miller’s view, then, the detective novel becomes a cohesive and comprehensive entity for as much as what the reader realizes is important to the case as what one eventually finds as insignificant. Although he does not delve into the reader’s importance here, it is consistent with my argument that the determining, reasoning, and appraisal of these clues makes for a certain type of reader and demands a particular style of readership. A novel of this nature could
even be said to “teach” or “guide” readers in the ways of reading more carefully, being more cautious and careful, as each tries to determine the meaning behind the central mystery of the novel.

Interestingly, in the course of this novel the fictional “reader” that gets the most guidance and education is actually Robert Audley. Robert is the one who learns from his French novels and Sensational style plots that Lucy’s angelic behavior is a facade. Robert’s identification with the feminine and his choice of reading materials potentially sparks a connection between himself as pseudo-detective and Braddon’s masses of female readers. Although Robert is not necessarily the hero of Braddon’s tale, as the detective in this context, he does function as the only route to a certain reading practice that Braddon wanted to instill in her predominantly female audience.

If Braddon’s unconventional portrayal of Lady Audley and anomalous mystery speaks directly to a group of young female readers, then the implications of such suspenseful and detective type writing carry much more cultural significance. Miller’s work on the readers of detective fiction centers mostly on Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White*. His conclusions though about the relationship authors create between text and reader are important to my discussion and say much about the readership of the Sensation genre in general. First, Miller pinpoints that it is a proclivity for nervousness that enables the characters in *The Woman in White* to reason out the enigmatic events surrounding them; thus “those without the capacity to become nervous also lack the capacity to interpret events” (150). Because it is only the nervous, anxious characters who begin to piece together the mystery, these are the characters with which the reader will inevitably
and solely identify, not only because they are the main characters but because it is through their nervousness that they critically “read” events and also help the reader to piece the story together simultaneously. In other words, they are the makers of meaning within the context of the novel. In this crucial way, Miller even goes as far as to connect the emotional unrest of “nerves” as a “metonymy for the act of reading” in and of itself within the context of Collins’ novel (151).

It is not enough, however, to stop there and suggest that the characters or readers of Collins’s novel, or any Sensational novel for that matter, are similarly affected. According to Miller, most of the characters with explicit nervous conditions are, indeed, female like Marian Halcomb and Laura Fairlie, the latter of which has so many nervous issues that it is called a purely “feminine malady” (qtd. in Miller 151). Despite the fact that nervousness and faintness are feminine qualities, many of the male characters also continually display a peculiar affliction of the nerves. While Count Fosco is the mastermind and most manipulative of the characters, and usually described as efficient and eerily calm, Miller argues that it is his smoking and incessant pacing that belies a nervous quality. Walter Hartright who Collins, very early on, establishes as effeminate, also seems nervous quite often; thus, he actually resembles a man with a woman’s senses in him. For Miller, these emotions and nervous tendencies pass to Walter when the Woman in White (later known as Anne Catherick) first touches him: “lightly and suddenly [she] lays her hand on Walter Hartright’s shoulder,” bringing every drop of blood in his body . . . to a stop” (qtd. in Miller 153). Much more than just her hand touches Walter, however, and in playing on the word “touch” or to be “touched,” which
often refers to a possession of some type, Miller highlights the way in which Collins says that Catherick’s “loneliness and helplessness” touched Walter as well. To solidify his point about Hartright’s changed nature and the possible effects of his physical encounter with Catherick, Miller points to the way in which, from this point on, Walter consistently defines himself as “immature” and having an “uneasiness,” as if he always feels as though he has “betrayed his sex” (qtd. in Miller 152). Miller sees Hartright’s effeminate nature as a literal possession of Catherick’s femininity, and as Miller argues, this point of view, while certainly provocative, is in keeping with the incarceration theme so prevalent throughout each section of the text where women are either symbolically imprisoned or physically incarcerated in asylums. For Miller, after this primary scene, the woman in white is now ensconced in the Man, thus Walter is forever changed and definitively effeminate.

Given this reading, Miller draws the convincing conclusion that this nervousness that precludes the ability to interpret is, in fact, of the feminine and not masculine at all. Despite the fact that Collins genders the reader as “male” throughout his novel, often even explicitly referring to the audience as “he,” Miller suggests that, this is merely one more detail that readers must dissect and one that cannot be taken at face value. If Collins meant for the reader to identify with the nervous, but astute characters, then it only follows that the reader, too, takes on these anxious and feminine qualities: As the first of the novel’s sensation effects on us, the scene thus fictionalizes the beginning of our physiological experience
of the sensation novel as such. Our first sensation coincides with...the novel’s originary account of sensation. Fantasmatically, then, we “catch” sensation from the neuropathic body of the Woman who, no longer confined or controlled in an asylum, is free to make our bodies resonate with-like-hers. (153)

Here Miller describes the elusive and almost fantastical process of reader-character identification. As a detective novel, though, that identification process is more important and more complete. If readers want to solve the case along with the detective character, then they must fully suspend their individualities to connect with the character solving the crime. In the case of Collins’s novel, every reader, despite the author’s insistence of gendering it male, is feminine, if only because he or she must suspend disbelief and buy into or “catch” the Sensational feeling, thus ultimately identifying with the effeminate malady of nervousness and those detecting characters who seem to have the jitters so they can solve the case.

In the case of Braddon’s novel, however, it is not necessarily a nervousness that incites the characters’ perceptive powers and the reader’s identifications, but rather the sheer pace of movement and activity that first Lady Audley presents and later Robert Audley does as well. Once readers acclimate to the nature of this Sensation novel and the need to search for clues as to George Talboys’ whereabouts, they are ultimately caught up in the hurried manner of Lucy Audley. Readers view her flitting and bouncing and as a constant wave of shimmery movement. Ethereal and elusive, yes, but she is ultimately infectious. Later, readers are aware of her prowess in beating Robert Audley to the punch with impressive foresight, but also succeeding because she seems indefatigable—taking
out fake death announcements, running off to London for a day, arranging for telegrams, running to Mount Stanning and back to Audley Court in the course of one night, and traveling to her father’s seaside home for a day to destroy clues. All of these actions focus on physical movement, in particular movement that is independent of others. That is, Lady Audley does not rely on anyone else and gets around based on her own acclivities for foresight and speed. Robert Audley, however, is slow to join in the race, and until he begins to suspect Lady Audley he remains his sluggish, lazy self. It is not until he picks up his pace of clue-solving and traveling that the readers can connect with his character, as they have already done from the beginning with Lady Audley, and it is for this reason that I dispute that the reader only connects with Robert Audley. In fact, it seems as though Braddon’s strategy here is to encourage the reader to identify with Lucy as she is the one who, from the beginning, is mobile, thus initiating more of the reader’s involvement.

Braddon also spends much more time and textual space extensively describing Lucy Audley’s whereabouts and her thought processes. Indeed, unlike Collins’ novel in which readers are never prompted to identify with anyone other than the pseudo-detectives, Braddon invites readers in for a “backstage” view of the villain and the woman’s mind in a way that she never offers with Robert Audley.

As Miller argues more generally, “novel reading takes for granted the existence of a space in which the reading subject remains safe from the surveillance, suspicion, reading, and rape of others” (162). For this reason, Miller amends this definition for the Sensational genre and suggests that while this space might guarantee the reader a spot of safety, it does not stop them from contributing to the definition of such situations or
characters because in “reading about them we contribute largely to constituting them as such” and enjoy the “violation of their privacy” while maintaining our own (162). The Sensation novel specifically, however, develops an effect on the reader about what he or she is watching; thus, to a certain extent, the reader of the Sensation genre is always “perturbed” by the events unfolding (162). “We remain unseen,” Miller argues, “but not untouched” (163). Reading Sensation fiction renders the “liberal subject the subject of a body;” therefore we are “rocked” and suffer shocks to our system, just as the characters do and this forever compromises our sense of privacy or our safe distance from the action of the text (163). For Miller, this identification, this perturbation or nervousness that *The Woman in White* produces on its readers is undeniably feminine. In the case of *Lady Audley’s Secret*, however, it is the movement, proactive manner, and strategy with which readers must identify if they want to keep up with the pace of the novel and solve the mystery behind its title, and not Robert Audley’s effeminacy and sluggish behavior which constitutes the first half of the novel. Indeed, even Robert Audley must manipulate his persona and acclimate himself to “acting” like Lady Audley; thus, he must pick up his pace to match her step for step in order to uncover George’s whereabouts. He, then, must literally go *against* his personality or innate characteristics of sluggish inactivity and effeminacy, and conform to what Lady Audley represents, the capability for aggressive movements and sharp senses—traditional masculine sensibilities resonating from a feminine form. Readers of this novel must also do the same and importantly do so while coming to terms with the fact that they identify with Braddon’s particular brand of a villainous heroine. In fact, unlike Miller’s assessment of reader identification in *The
*Woman in White*, Braddon’s novel confuses heroine with villain to such an extent that readers might not immediately understand with whom they should identify — the emerging detective or the more established character of Lucy Audley (even if she is quickly shaping up to be the villain). The Sensational discomfort this novel produces might actually lie in the very fact that readers find themselves rushing along and rooting for Lucy Audley and not necessarily the self-appointed savior for George Talboys. Although Robert can hone in on his masculine persona, it often looks like an act, or at least a persona that is naturally foreign to him. If readers, then, identify with Robert, they identify with the feminine, or literally an effeminate enacting a woman’s form of masculine sensibilities.

Braddon’s contrasting depiction of reading behaviors for Lucy and Robert complicate her model of good reading at this point. Prior to the contextual moment when Lucy begins to move around from place to place as a way of setting traps and covering up evidence that ultimately help her protect her current status, her reading behavior has been a convenient prop used to affirm her innocence. As a prop, Lucy can reach for a book and literally or figuratively “hide” behind its pages to project an image of the passive, idealized angel. Significantly, Braddon eventually uses Lucy’s reading behavior as a way to cast more suspicion onto her character, if only because it is a behavior of interiority, and one in which we never know what she is actually reading or thinking. Despite its status as a progressive technology, reading, in and of itself, usually belies a crucial immobility. Once Lucy begins to understand Robert as a threat, however, she moves around a lot and it is this movement that Robert Audley must match, therefore leaving
behind his former passive reading behaviors. Since the real readers of Braddon’s text are encouraged to identify with both Lucy as a likable villain and Robert as the detective figure, they too must keep up with the pace of the novel, Robert’s detective work, and Lucy’s foresight. In this way, then, Braddon’s reading model becomes at least subversively aligned with active motion.

Since Lady Audley’s proactive nature, speed, and strategic reasoning conventionally signify the masculine, it might seem as though Braddon genders the reader as male. As readers adopt this anomalous form of masculine reasoning and foresight, they still understand, on some level, that this stems from a literal woman, no matter how much she fakes the hyper-feminine persona. According to Miller’s analysis of Collins’ novel, a feminine sensibility passes to the main male character, Hartright, through a type of physical possession. That transference, however, never takes place in Braddon’s novel; thus, for this to work in the reverse, Lucy Audley, clearly the main character, would have to receive some type of male “inspiration” and that just does not happen. In fact, it seems as though what readers identify with here is actually a woman who must have the built in capacity for masculine reasoning. Because the narrator, at least in the latter half of the novel, forces readers to see a demon, instead of the angel and someone obviously performing the Feminine, this structuring of characterization and shifts in narrative strategy beg several questions about what it means to identify with a character like Lucy and to what extent that identification bespeaks of the masculine, the demon, or both.
Balancing the Hyphen

Perhaps the most threatening element to the stability of this author-reader relationship is, I will argue, that not only does Braddon call into question the Angelic definition, which she clearly invites readers to see as performative, but how she also wants them to doubt the Demonic classification as well. If what Lucy reveals as her capacities toward the Demonic are, at least in part, masculine traits such as cleverness, reason, and foresight, when Braddon calls the authenticity of even these into question, the way in which one can read Lucy as Woman with male sensibilities changes. One only has to look again at one of the first scenes in which Braddon's narrator introduces Lucy Audley to the reader for the first time to see a glimpse of something that is neither the angelic ideal nor her demonic counterpart. In the midst of describing Lucy Audley’s “blessed magic power of fascination by which a woman can charm with a word or intoxicate with a smile,” Lucy, herself, is explaining to Sir Michael Audley her real feelings on his proposal (11). “I cannot be blind to the advantages of such an alliance,” Lucy says, “don’t ask too much of me,” she implores him. “I have,” she admits, “been selfish from my babyhood” (16). The tension here is clear: the narrator’s strategy determinedly emphasizes only the good, almost ethereal qualities, while Lucy’s own voice reminds readers of her flaws. Here, too, the narrator reminds readers of what the narrator would have us see about her-- that of the angelic ideal, while Lucy proposes something not necessarily angelic at all, but not necessarily purely masculine and certainly not demonic either. In fact, what Lucy admits to is the rather benign emotion of selfishness and not criminal propensities or aggressive violent outbursts due to madness.
With this narrative strategy, Braddon demonstrates the possibility for a system of classification for women that neither proposes the angel or the demon. This “other” that is left behind is truly frightening for the very reason that it is nameless; it is not the time-honored angel, or the fallen angel turned demon, but something that defies all recognition and explanation. By inviting her readers to identify with Lucy, Braddon proposes that what the reader identifies with is something beyond conventional definitions and not a feminine type, but rather a unique individualism.

It would oversimplify Braddon's intentions here if one were to suggest that her revision of essential feminine qualities was cut short because of the ending of her novel in which the heroine/villain dies. For many scholars, however, Braddon's attempts at vocalizing frustrations are never fully felt. Like Elaine Showalter who says that many writers, mostly sensationalists, “never undertake a radical inquiry into the role of women,” thus meaning that they never really or completely state the real crux of the problem and their “anger is never confronted or understood” (180). More times than not, Showalter explains, “they couldn't work out the implications of their plots” (180). Showalter attributes this to fear or market pressures citing that most of these novels convey the conventional endings of marriage or death, despite their earlier chapters which seem to point toward a resolution that could be more revolutionary or subversive.

And yet, this is exactly what I argue that Braddon does achieve with this novel, if only simply because the vision of what Lady Audley reveals never completely leaves the forefront of the novel's concerns. Like Robert Audley so meaningfully suggests in regards to Lucy when he says, “I would rather, if possible, think her mad […] I should be
glad to find that excuse for her” (369). Here Robert Audley affirms that the alternative to madness is too dangerous and too unthinkable to comprehend. Braddon prods her readers to carefully examine this diagnosis of Lucy's madness, making it clear that it falls short of really grasping what has instigated her performance of the angelic and her disposition toward the demonic. Even the doctor employed to examine Lucy can only say this about her condition:

    I have talked to the lady and we understand each other very well. There is latent insanity! Insanity which might never appear; or which might appear only twice in a lifetime . . . The lady is not mad; but she has the hereditary taint in her blood. She has the cunning of madness, with the prudence of intelligence . . . She is dangerous! (372)

The idea that they understand each other bolsters our view of her as sane rather than as a raving lunatic. Although the doctor sees potential for madness, he does not think she is mad at all, and in fact, does not know whether she will ever show symptoms of it in her lifetime. It is his last remarks on her condition, however, when he remarks on her “cunning” and her “prudence” that perhaps best indicates Braddon's purpose in writing the end of her heroine's life. Positioning her somewhere in between two binaries, suggesting that she has the capacity to show cunning like the mad as well as caution and prudence like the sane would further prompt readers to question the classification of Lucy. Does she exist somewhere in between the cunning of the Demon and the prudence of the Angel, or like French Feminist, Helene Cixous, has argued, does she defy all definitions of an ordered system entirely? You can’t talk about a female identity as
“uniform” entity or as something “homogeneous,” Cixous argues, it is not “classifiable into codes” (“The Laugh of the Medusa,” 1971). These lasting questions become Lucy Audley's real purpose as a character.

If young girls reading this novel have identified with Lucy and can understand or foretell what the heroine must do to try and stay ahead of Robert’s detections, this type of readership has demanded a certain type of cautious and logical perusal all along. One only has to revisit the before-mentioned illustration (figure 6) in which Robert Audley places his hand upon a book in Lucy’s parlor to get a better understanding of how vital a way of reading is to this novel and its purpose.

With his fist definitively positioned on the book, Robert critically begins to “read” the situation before him and invites readers to do the same. Throughout her detective plot, then, Braddon invites female readers to take on a practice of reading that demands close readings and even re-readings, a style that could enhance their intellectual reasoning and problem solving skills, thus implying that Sensation could really be quite instructive. Most importantly, it is not that she wants readers to mimic Robert Audley as much as she wants readers to understand the implications embedded within Lucy’s character and that in reading her story they receive an apt lesson in how to read—to take note of details and fully process information. The discomfort of first identifying with someone like Lucy Audley and then later the revelations about the inability to determine definitions for the traits she possesses would ultimately reveal the flaws in conventional ways of thinking about femininity. In this way, Lucy Audley emphasizes the most dangerous purpose of all – a defiance of any ordered system of categorization for women.
Although Lady Audley dies while incarcerated in the mental asylum, Braddon does not move away from her heroine so quickly and actually gives to her a way to maintain a forceful, albeit threatening, voice. In the last chapter, Braddon's narrator speaks of Audley Court and informs readers that the house is often shown to visitors who can still look upon the Pre-Raphaelite portrait of Lucy Audley and ask questions about the “fair-haired woman who died abroad” (436). In this way, Braddon gives further import to this portrait's revelations, particularly in the ways that it depicted the shifts from Angel to Demon as well as how it demonstrated Lucy's performances of what was thought to be essential and true of femininity.

In creating this type of character who demonstrates a wide range of violations of propriety from reading sensational texts and using them as props for her performances to literal criminal acts, and who does so with full knowledge and a suspicious levity and strategy, Braddon challenges those respectable boundaries of femininity that her culture deems appropriate and natural for women. Definitely aware of the backlash a novel of this sort and all of Sensation was causing, Braddon embeds within her pages commentary on the ways in which novel-reading should be thought of and practiced. For these reasons, Braddon's novel becomes quite self-conscious of itself, existing simultaneously as an example and a guide of just the type of novel that Lady Audley would read or pretend to read in order to aid in her performance of culturally sanctioned womanhood. More than this, and in perhaps quite a revolutionary way, Braddon invites female readers to “read” this dual example of a novel in just a way that they can ascertain how and to what purpose Lady Audley commits these crimes against men and ideology, thus leaving
lasting revelations and questions about the significations of the feminine. The real secret, then, of the text is not just that Lady Audley performs, but that she offers up a realistic version of femininity that is not conventionally feminine, angelic, masculine, or demonic.
CHAPTER 5: FEMININE READING AS DETECTION IN ELEANOR’S VICTORY

Like many of the other heroines discussed in this dissertation, Eleanor Vane, too, is a reader. In her 1863 novel, *Eleanor's Victory*, Braddon stays true to one of her most consistent themes of representing active female readership. Perhaps with Eleanor, though, Braddon delves into the most ostentatious form of reading materials; indeed, Eleanor’s choice of reading material is so blatantly sensational and fantastical that the novel only literally mentions this choice of book once. After returning from her school in London, fifteen year old Eleanor Vane rejoins her father, a pathological spendthrift and utterly ruined man, in Paris. In only one day's time, Eleanor loses sight of him again, when he abruptly disappears, after leaving with some suspicious looking men to settle some debts through a game of “escarte.” Left to her own devices, the young Eleanor decides to wait up for her father who has been known to disappear, sometimes for days on end. It is during these hours of waiting, that one first catches a glimpse of Eleanor as a reader. Wanting a distraction from her otherwise anxious thoughts about her father's whereabouts, Eleanor searches for a book amongst his things to help her “while away the hours” (v. 1, 110). What she finally selects is a “dirty” and “tattered” copy of a Paul Feval novel, whose “leaves were crumpled and smeared with stains and splotches of grease” (v. 1, 110-111).

Here is perhaps Braddon's most obvious testament to George Vane's decline in social status. He can only provide a tiny and dirty apartment above a butcher shop to accommodate his daughter during her stay, and his possessions, like his life, are in ruins. The physical appearance, however, of the Feval novel might really symbolize much more
than just George Vane's fall from the social pedestal. In fact, if one examines Paul Feval's literary career, one would, indeed, find enough that would support the narrator's comparison of George's reading habits to those of "any schoolgirl" (v. 2, 112). Still, the physical appearance of the French novel in all of its tatters and greasiness is an interesting detail to give, especially since the story, itself, is one that is truly sensational in nature and one that a very young and impressionable young girl will read for the duration of the night. The Feval novel seems to exude and symbolize its own stigmas; thus, while the appearance seems unsavory, so too is the inner story.

Surely purposeful, it is not a random choice that Braddon chooses Paul Feval as the author of the novels that George Vane readily enjoys and the one in which his daughter will choose to read on the fateful night that her father never returns. French novelist Feval definitely wrote what one could only describe as Sensational tales and is widely known for his swashbuckler and vampire stories. He achieved most of his success for a series of crime novels entitled *Les Habits Noir* and a detective novel entitled *Jean Diable*. Although unclear from the references, Eleanor most likely chooses Feval’s *Les Belles-de-nuit* (The Beauties of the Night) or as it is often called, *Les Anges de la famille* (The Angels of the Family) to read on that fateful night. This story ran for several weeks in the French newspaper *L’Assemblee Nationale* from September 1849 to April 1850 and is one of the only Feval novels during this period to feature two drownings and kidnappings that Eleanor references. On the first night that Eleanor reads Feval's novel, the effect of the story on the young girl's imagination is explicit and profound:
Paul Feval was interesting no doubt. There was an awful mystery in those greasy tattered pages: a ghastly mystery about two drowned young women treacherously made away with . . . there were villains and rascals paramount throughout this delightful romance; and there was mystery and murder enough for half a dozen novels. (v. 1, 112)

In more than one place, then, Braddon mentions the "greasy" quality of the Feval novel. The connotations associated with something greasy are certainly unsavory and further solidify the novel's alignment with the poorer classes. Despite its obvious overuse and its filthy appearance, however, it is within the pages of this novel that Eleanor first learns about the possibilities of crimes against her father and how to figure them out.

In her descriptions of Eleanor’s reading choice, Braddon turns attention to the young girl’s reading process, as she shows how Eleanor completely immerses herself in the novel before her. Despite her feelings of worry for her father and her anxiety concerning where he has gone, Eleanor cannot help but get lost within Feval's story, so much so that the nature of what she is reading begins to make her imagination run wild and she cannot help but transfer the frights of the novel onto her present situation with her father:

The dreary river bank and the ghostly pollard-willows, the drowned young woman and the ubiquitous villains all mingled themselves with her anxious thoughts about her father; and the trouble in the book seemed to become a part of the trouble in her own mind, adding its dismal weight to her anxieties. (v. 1, 112)
Eleanor's transference of Feval’s plot onto what she thinks might have likely happened to her father aids Braddon in highlighting the effects of this particular novel on her young heroine. This scene, however, also gives the reader a first glance at Eleanor’s reading practices and marks the way in which she deeply focuses and invests in the plot while also letting the book, in some ways, alter or change her perceptions. Despite the nature of Feval’s novel, the way in which Eleanor utilizes this reading to help her “reassess” her father’s absence is important because it makes Feval’s novel seem more plausible. Unlike other authors who have penned well known and similar female readers in the past, like Jane Austen’s Catherine Moreland in *Northanger Abbey* (1818), for instance, Braddon does not intend for Eleanor to get caught up in the most unlikely of scenarios. More recent scholarship on *Northanger Abbey*, however, classifies Austen’s novel as much more subversive in its intent, thus extenuating conventional takes on the novel as a satire of the Gothic genre. Karen Littau, for instance, sees the novel as a *bildungsroman* in which Austen unconventionally distances her readers from Catherine Moreland so that they might not become as riskily involved in her book as the fictional ones that Catherine reads. For Littau, *Northanger Abbey* “sets out to teach the female reader a lesson in reading” in its “self-conscious” portrayal of both reading genres and reading responses (71). This take on Austen’s novel certainly makes it much more similar to Braddon’s because, while Braddon allows for Eleanor’s engrossing reading behaviors, she also highlights the self-reflexivity of the novel itself. In other words, readers read Eleanor reading and gaining critical, interpretive skills that they too gain in the process. Readers see this process begin quite early and from the very beginning when Eleanor first reads...
the Feval novel while she waits on her father to return. Indeed, because of her father's past, the demeanor of the men with whom he left, and the part of town in which they live, Eleanor does not seem to think that any of her imaginings about this situation, regardless if they're elicited through the novel or not, are really that far-fetched. Braddon, then, again, tries to make a solid connection between a Sensational tale and Realism. Indeed, since Eleanor has seen the men who took her father away, the narrator tells us, left a lasting impression on her. Reconstructing his unique image in her mind over and over again, Eleanor begins to think that the “splotchy engravings” of the villain scattered throughout Feval's novel, might also represent the visage of the “sulky stranger who had followed her father and the Frenchman away towards the Barriere Saint Antoine” (v. 1, 213). It is only because of this sensational novel, then, that Eleanor goes through the routine of committing to memory the man's appearance.

Not only does the story seem to connect to what Eleanor remembers about the events of the evening, but Braddon also demonstrates another way in which the young girl uses her reading practices for her own purposes. As Eleanor's attempt to use the novel as a distraction fails, if only because of its very similarities to her situation, Braddon's heroine begins to use the novel as a sort of time marker. In other words, she can make a bargain with herself and fate as she continues along with her reading. “Before I turn over to the next page, papa will be home,” or, Eleanor reasons, “before I finish this chapter, I will hear his step upon the stairs” (v. 1, 114). In this way, Braddon defines Eleanor's reading practices quite clearly in opposition to escapist leisure reading. The young girl does not read the book as one would who could fully give themselves over to the leisure
time a reading session usually incites. Positing another causal connection between the world of the novel and the “real world,” Braddon shows how Eleanor’s reading guides her developing ideas and theories about her father. The speed or tempo of Eleanor’s reading must be hurried and anxiously driven, as she embarks on a type of reading practice that allows the contextual markers of time, like conclusions of pages or chapters, dictate her own state of mind. In other words, Eleanor quickly alters the meaning of her reading practice and assigns it a new use value as it helps her to mark how long her father's absence actually lasts. In almost a fantastical way, then, Eleanor demonstrates how she believes that her reading affects much more than just a time schedule and, indeed, has almost a magical power to bring her father back.

Despite what is really going on behind Eleanor's reading that night, Braddon informs readers that the passers-by on the street below see only a young, beautiful girl with her face lit by the warm glow of a candle, as she turns the pages of her novel. In fact, Braddon comments that this makes quite the “pretty picture” for those people below, as they only see a “picture of a girl, serene in her youth and innocence, bending over her book, her pale muslin dress and her auburn hair faintly visible in the subdued light” (v. 1, 111). Of course, at this point in the plot, readers already know that Eleanor’s appearance and what is really going on behind those curtains are two very different stories. Interestingly, however, in her reading posture, Eleanor has unknowingly satisfied some type of ideological rendering of femininity. One might indeed become more suspicious, if one were to know the title of her reading and what she concludes about her readings, but strictures on female reading behaviors, as discussed at length before, were not as
stringent in Paris, as they would have been in England; and yet, the way that a common stranger perceives Eleanor on what will prove to be the most traumatic night of her life, is still significant. Braddon has dressed her in pale muslin and the glow of the candle does, indeed, offer her an ethereal countenance. Her reading practice, then, at this particular moment, only enhances her innocence and picturesque quality for those on the street. As discussed in previous chapters, Braddon demonstrates again how the reading practice itself signifies a complicated image of womanhood. It is, at once a purely feminine habit, thus even emphasizing femininity and demureness, and a transgressive activity eliciting anxieties because of the attitudes it might produce that are often considered unfeminine.

In this respect, and similar to the reading model she offers in *Lady Audley's Secret*, Braddon allows for a paradox regarding the meaning behind her heroine’s reading behaviors and the image the behavior might create. On the one hand, Eleanor is externally immobile (therefore passive and an exemplary model); and yet, the inner turmoil the readings produce make what she is thinking in this moment, at least possibly, more proactive and subversive.

In line with this representation, Braddon takes pains to consistently describe Eleanor as the epitome of innocence and femininity. So clearly does Braddon insist of on Eleanor's femininity that, later, even in the midst of crucial moments in which she employs her logical, detective skills, she does so while still retaining a very feminine demeanor and perspective. For example, when Eleanor has not yet learned the circumstances leading up to her father's death, and as her friends, the Signora and Richard Thornton, prepare to tell her all, the narrator takes special note of Eleanor's
lovely appearance: “She sat near an open window, looking very beautiful and virginal in a loose white muslin dressing gown, and with her long auburn curls, falling upon her shoulders” (v. 1, 161). In almost an exact replica of the former scene, Braddon once again chooses the very ethereal way to describe Eleanor's visage from the vantage point of a window. Indeed, in consistently framing Eleanor by a window, Braddon can evoke a very painterly feeling of her heroine’s image. Again to passersby, Eleanor would seem angelic and the epitome of innocent womanhood; and yet, we know that she has already begun to suspect her father's demise and has formulated a clear and resonant mental picture of the leading suspect. The very fact that she is able to comprise such a set of theories is due entirely to her reading habits, and especially the Feval novel. There is also something particularly poignant in her intuitiveness and "feelings" which drive her to the next clue or help her to put the pieces of the puzzle in clearer view. As she combines a hardened sense of logic and deductive reasoning with a "sense" of the actual events of the crime, Eleanor never foregoes her more feminine attributes in order to solve the mystery and avenge her father's death.

In the following illustration from part 13 of Eleanor’s Victory featured in Once A Week in May of 1863, Braddon’s illustrator, George Du Maurier, aptly captures one of these window scenes:
Up to this point in the narrative, Braddon has given readers many examples of Eleanor in this exact posture by a window, and each time the simplicity of the scene contradicts the underlying turmoil in Eleanor’s inner thoughts. As seen in this scene, Eleanor, in a flowing gown, and seated in a sitting room, evokes a certain domestic charm. From our vantage point of inside the room, everything looks fairly benign and evokes a sense of bourgeois normalcy. Even Eleanor’s expression does not immediately suggest any emotion other than one of relaxation. Yet, having read the novel up to this point, one knows that Braddon has repeatedly created a tension for moments like these. Similarly to when it occurs before, Eleanor’s gaze out of windows or readings by windows, bespeak
much more about her mental state, developing sense of revenge, and her abilities as a detective than her fulfillment of idealized domesticity.

In fact, as Mary Elizabeth Leighton and Lisa Surridge recount, most illustrations in Victorian serialized novels’ gave a significant “narratological analysis” of the text and revealed “specific verbal/visual interplay” (67). For Leighton and Surridge, Eleanor’s Victory is a special case in which the illustrations obviously enhance or reemphasize some of the more implicit thematic content like “mistaken identity, female volatility, emotional turbulence, suspense, detection, surveillance, visuality, and the fraught relation between the domestic and public realms” (68). Braddon’s choices for pictorial representations of her scenes, then, seem very purposeful alongside the verbal text that, at times, both explicitly and implicitly deals with these themes. Scholars know very little about Braddon’s relationship with Du Maurier. What we do know, however, as biographer Jennifer Carnell has affirmed, is that Braddon advised Du Maurier to “replicate her letterpress faithfully” and later told him she was “delighted” with his work (qtd. in Leighton and Surridge 69), eventually commissioning him to do the illustrations for a new volume of Lady Audley’s Secret. According to Leighton and Surridge, Sensation serials had already come to rely on illustrations as a key factor in their generic form. Du Maurier was not an unusual choice, then, for Braddon, since his career was just picking up with illustrations for Once A Week, Punch, and Cornhill (69). This also shows Braddon’s prominence in the moment because she chose Du Maurier. Du Maurier, too, seemed to understand and conceptualize how illustrations functioned within a Sensational framework. Usually including two illustrations per installment, these pictures did not
always just reveal plot lines, and in fact, authors often suppressed these revelations to sustain the suspense of the novel as a whole. What Du Maurier achieves with his illustrations for *Eleanor’s Victory*, then, is what most illustrators for the genre tried to do: “create a sense of instability, transgression, and turbulence” (70). After having read the novel up to the insertion of this particular illustration, readers would recognize the apparent contradictions between how Eleanor “looks” in this otherwise domestic moment and what they already know about her relentless drive and focus on uncovering the secrets of her father’s death. Eleanor’s expression that at first glance may seem merely indicative of a daydream now seems more pensive and calculating in nature.

Leighton and Surridge argue that the tensions Du Maurier captures with his illustrations for *Eleanor’s Victory* have a lot to do with Braddon’s intentions to show the “fragile and permeable boundary between middle-class respectability and crime” (qtd. in Surridge and Leighton). According to them, Braddon creates this tension by consistently “insinuating” the male villain and Eleanor (repeatedly referred to as Launcelot’s “nemesis in crinoline”) in key “domestic spaces” (13). This tactic offers an alternative meaning to what can usually be taken at face value and suggests that sensational occurrences are an integral part of realistic representation. Importantly, then, in calling into question the stability and immunities of middle class domesticity, Braddon can emphasize this “cross-fertilization” of Sensation and Realism that had become a type of hallmark of the Sensational genre (13). In figure 9, what Leighton and Surridge refer to as the “text’s most domestic illustration,” Braddon utilizes an artistic convention, making Eleanor’s subversive potential all the more emphatic.
Although Surridge and Leighton do not include any specific comparisons between Du Maurier’s illustration of Eleanor and other artists’ similar representations of women in the period, the following are good examples of the particular visual tropes Braddon and Du Maurier employ for her scenes of Eleanor by a window. In figure 10, entitled “Preparing Tea,” artist Jane Maria Bowkett (1837-1891), depicts a very domestic act, as the mother prepares the table for afternoon tea. Although at first glance it might seem a benign portrait, most scholars consider Bowkett’s paintings rife with implications about how Victorian women often subvert their traditional roles. For example, in this image, while the mother engages in a daily chore that constitutes her domestic life, it is the convenient placement of windows in several of her paintings that really solidify their metaphorical meaning. In “Preparing Tea,” the window figures prominently in this scene, providing the mother with an opportunity to gaze outside and away from the interiority of her home. Indeed, the mother seems lost in a moment of thought as her hand, poised above the bread she prepares to cut, seems frozen and still. The window here signifies an outlet for thoughts that, essentially, distract and, at least for the moment, take her mind away from her duties and what her children are doing. In line with this theme, Bowkett also creates quite a contrast in color between the lightness and openness of the window with the much darker colors of the interior. The curtains’ fabric contributes to this overall feeling of airiness as they seem to be made of lace, while those from within the room seem darker and much heavier in texture. These differences help Bowkett to imply an oppressive more stifling feeling from the room, thus making the window and what is beyond it more of an outlet and escape.
While Bowkett features the woman engaging in a task that epitomizes the Victorian ideology of filial and domestic duty, the window offers the woman, at least a *look*, beyond the confines of her private, family space. Here, the window provides an interesting border or intersection between the private and public realms. As a way to “look” beyond one’s normative gender roles, the window acts as a synecdoche for a book because it too offers a comparable escape. Indeed, when a book literally features in the painting of a woman by a window the connection becomes even more evident. In figure 11, a sketch entitled “An Afternoon in the Nursery,” Bowkett features a woman in the
nursery with her children, and yet, she focuses her attention on the book in her lap. The artist positions another much larger doorway, offering access to a balcony, directly to the mother’s right. Much like the illustration for Braddon’s novel and the scenes in which Braddon describes Eleanor reading by a window, this painting portrays an outward image of domestic tranquility as the mother and her children engage in a leisurely activity. Again, however, the act of reading is already so culturally inscribed with anxieties and contradictions that although the viewers may at first “read” the scenes as conventional and even iconic displays of femininity, in reality, one cannot ignore that the mother’s attention is wholly and undividedly on her book, not her children. The open space beside her, again, invites her to a world outside of the home, much like her book already does as well. Ironically, the nursery, a mainstay of domestic bliss and idealized motherhood, is transformed by the book into a type of borderland strategically positioned here between the private and public realm. To solidify the book’s portal metaphor, Bowkett has shaded the window, thus the book and its invitation to a world beyond the nursery and the woman’s duties takes its place.
To enhance Eleanor's femininity, while at the same time suggesting that there is more going on than would ever resonate with naive passersby, Braddon, too, juxtaposes the act of reading with a window. The way in which the people on the street below perceive the ethereal image of Eleanor is in line with a traditional view of woman as the angelic ideal because the viewer imposes a sense of domestic idealism and perfection onto the woman they only see as a perfectly framed painting. In Eleanor’s specific case, her books provide a useful look into a world she feels is remarkably similar to her own, and her position next to a window underscores the possibilities of that usefulness outside of the home. In figure 9, readers understand that at this textual moment, Eleanor’s gaze out of the window of her sitting room has nothing to do with her fulfillment of idealized femininity and everything to do with her strategic proximity to Launcelot’s house and her abilities to discreetly spy on him.
The tensions Braddon creates here between a seemingly dutiful, albeit romanticized, appearance and an underlying sense of subversive intellect and desire are obvious and ones that also link these textual moments and illustrations to those of the Pre-Raphaelites. Certainly, Braddon's later descriptions of Eleanor as she comes to fully understand her father's death as a direct result of other men’s actions is reminiscent of Pre-Raphaelite style paintings in which these artists capture women in crucial moments of reading, work, or thoughtfulness, but also, simultaneously, imply a sense of underlying discontent, anxiety, exhaustion, or desire. These latter emotions are, of course, those that are in strict contrast with what Victorian society anticipated and expected of women, and what they might have begun to fear lurked within the confines of the domestic sphere. In figure 12, John Everett Millais depicts Mariana, the protagonist in Alfred Lord Tennyson’s poem of the same name, who suffers from a severe depression and melancholy due to the fact that her lover cannot return to her. In response to his absence, Mariana wiles away the hours of her life in her rooms, refusing to leave, so as to wait for her lover that never reemerges, even by poem’s end. Her home and rooms, then, become a type of living tomb in which she isolates herself from the real world with only a window from which to look out. Millais’ painting depicts lines 9-12 of Tennyson’s poem, and envisions Mariana in a moment of unrest, as she stretches her body and looks out of the window.
Despite the extremity of what is really her own self-inflicted isolation, Mariana’s domestic space functions as a form of entombment that separates her from social interactions and the public world. Those who are familiar with Tennyson’s poem know that Mariana spends most of her time working on her loom and daydreaming about her
lover’s return. The idea of domestic work and duty combined here with her sustainment of loyalty and dependency on her lover, points to a pervasive ideology concerning women and domesticity. Even the content of the stained glass that partially obscures her view out of the window depicts a scene of ultimate dutifulness with its presentation of the angel Gabriel approaching Mary to instruct her on her duties as the future mother of Jesus and her impending immaculate conception. Sacrifice, loyalty, and selflessness are key virtues that inform the biblical iconography Millais includes here, but these qualities also, importantly, relate to Mariana’s decision to devote her entire life to an absent lover.

Although of course a special case, Mariana’s appeal to imagined passersby and to viewers of the art, itself, seem very similar to the way in which others might see Eleanor and the women featured in Bowkett’s paintings. In all four cases, however, although each one epitomizes a certain sense of the domestic ideal, there is also at least the potential for transgression against social and gendered norms. That is to say, Millais definitely sexualizes Mariana’s bodily form. As if exhausted from past work or just pure loneliness, Mariana’s body arches forward, thrusting her breasts and backside outward and drawing attention to her figure. The arching of her back and provocative stance of her body implies a deeply rooted longing, which one can only conceive as physical and, thereby, sexual as well. In fact, as the focal point of the painting, it is clear that her longing and desire has finally superseded her patience. While the view from below the window would make one presume they are looking at a purely domestic moment, the vantage point from inside the room, and that of the painting’s audience, depicts unrest and a need for release. In fact, the existence of the window itself implies an escape, if only mental, from her
work and isolation. In this vein, Mariana is the embodiment of both a fulfillment of the ideal as well as a manifestation of active desire, something Victorian women were advised never to display. In each example I describe here, the convenient location of the window combined with the woman’s proximity to it and often her own expressionism underline a crucial sense of autonomy and transgressive tendencies.

Similarly, in Braddon's portrayal of Eleanor, her gaze out of the window, despite its hyper-feminine appeal, conveys more than just an ideal image. Just as Mariana is both literally chaste and demure but also provocative, Eleanor is both a virginal angel clad in white at the same time that Braddon informs readers that changes are taking place in her mind for she is now “[n]o longer a child or schoolgirl,” but instead, “a woman desperate and almost terrible in the intensity of her despair” (v. 1, 166). Moreover, once the Signora and Richard give her the fragment of a note that her father left to her before he died, in which he blames someone, whose name is partially obscured, for his death and goads his daughter to seek him out, Eleanor's shift from just the innocence of a pretty picture to something more capable of revenge is complete. In vowing to one way or another “be revenged for [her] father's death,” Eleanor

stood with her slender figure drawn to its fullest height, her auburn hair streaming over her shoulders with the low light of the setting sun shining upon the waving tresses until they glittered like molten gold. She looked in her desperate resolution and virginal beauty, like some young martyr of the middle ages waiting to be led to the rack.  (v. 1, 173)
What readers see here is an interesting combination of both the feminine ideal and an Eleanor who raises herself to a fuller height and makes a vow that seems at odds with her earlier passivity and vulnerability. Although her auburn hair is still lit up and shining, it is not by the muted glow of a candle, but rather the fiery light of the setting sun and it “glitters” like lava. With the tattered remains of her father's letter, the partial information about the guilty man, and knowledge of his death, the Feval novel has truly come to life. Eleanor “rises” to the occasion, determined to seek out her life's greatest mystery as she would have in any novel she read. To describe a shift of purpose and demeanor is common to Braddon's novels and her descriptions of women. As I previously discussed in regards to Lucy Audley in Chapter 4, with the above description of Eleanor’s altered sense of reasoning, Braddon again focuses attention on what lies beneath the surface of the women she creates. It is not, I will argue, a transformation, but rather an ability to tap into a repressed sense of strength and courage that perhaps always existed just beneath that surface. In fact, in looking more closely at the above description, Eleanor is both virginally clad and, therefore, effeminately rendered so as to look even more angelic, at the same time that she exudes a disposition of confidence and aggressive determination. This concept of the Angel in its cultural Victorian rendering that has the capacity to resonate as the Angel’s “other” or opposite of Angel is not necessarily the Demon as I argued in the case of Lady Audley in Chapter 4. In fact, Eleanor, in never quite foregoing the qualities of femininity she presented from the beginning of Braddon’s text, resembles more of a warrior or avenging angel. Indeed, Eleanor states quite uncharacteristically and boldly that she does not know whether her feelings are “womanly or Christian-like,”
but only that this new self is from that day on her new purpose in life, one that she says, “is stronger than [herself]” (v. 1, 173). Importantly here, Eleanor, herself, does not know how to distinguish her new feelings; all that she knows, as Braddon implies, is that this is how she feels. While conventional definitions evade her, she grapples with whether she can term her sheer determination as womanly and also whether she can configure it as morally sound. The fact that she does not attempt to give these feelings a name and only knows that she has no control, as the inclinations are “stronger” than her, points toward the possibilities that Braddon toys with so often of women already possessing what they must have in order to be stronger and more proactive. True, Eleanor may not understand that these abilities always lie just beneath the surface, but she does explain it in such a way that it seems organic to her femininity and not a complete transformation.

Most significant to my argument, then, is the way in which Braddon attributes Eleanor's shift in persona to her prior reading habits. Calling Eleanor childish and “ignorant” in the ways of the world, Braddon's narrator attributes her profession of revenge on the books the girl has most likely read and much like the one that she read at the beginning of this story. Similar to most three volume novels of a Sensational format, Braddon admits that Eleanor could have formed her thoughts about life from these very sources in which “the villain was always confounded in the last chapter, however triumphant he might be through two volumes and three quarters of successful iniquity” (v. 1, 189). Suggesting that Eleanor's strength of vengeance and her pledge against who she considers to be her father's murderers comes from her reading history is a broad claim to make. With this parallelism, Braddon defines Eleanor as one who formerly did not
know the ways of the world, but who now has, at the least, a stunning and anomalous amount of courage toward a purpose garnered from books and the exact same “type” of books that Braddon, herself, spends her entire career creating and defending. Eleanor is clearly able to take everything she knows from those books concerning criminal possibilities and, most crucially, the act of detection as a process to seek out her father’s murderer.

In this chapter, I argue that Eleanor systematically demonstrates her progress from the impulsive and even vulnerable woman, unwise in the ways of the world and detection, to a woman who can successfully and beneficially mute her impulses and “read” people and situations astutely and critically. Despite her friends’ restrictive definitions and, at times, disbelief of her thought processes and powers of detection, Eleanor retains a feminine perspective throughout, thus never foregoing a womanly approach. This, in and of itself, marks Braddon’s form of the female detective as quite separate from her contemporaries’ visions, a distinctiveness that I will argue further highlights her achievement in writing the first “true” female detective. With this plot line, Braddon effectively demonstrates how the knowledge of certain novels, and a particular way of examining these novels, can afford one a helpful and individuated critical eye-- one that becomes indispensable for Eleanor's objective.

What an Unwomanly Thing To Do!

Once Eleanor understands the implications behind her father's mysterious disappearance with two unknown men, which she believes led to his untimely death, she makes a solemn vow to avenge her father in any way that she can. The methodology that
she uses here, however, often makes her the target of her friends' extreme incredulity, so much so that they attempt to mute her obvious transgressions against normalized femininity. Eleanor learns a lot about the law and criminality from her friend Richard (Dick) Thornton, who seems to never be at a loss for sound instruction and advice when it comes to Eleanor's predicament. This character, then, serves as the only one who can educate and prepare Eleanor for the task at hand.

In fact, it is Dick who first “schools” Eleanor on analyzing art and visual cues. Since Launcelot is a painter by trade, Dick informs Eleanor of various artistic trends and helps her to see the metaphors behind the images in a specific set of Launcelot’s paintings. Since these particular paintings depict gambling scenes, both hope that the clues they extricate from the paintings can help them to better understand what happened to Eleanor’s father on that fateful night. In the following illustration (figure 13), Dick instructs Eleanor about various artistic conventions and actually guides her through the analytical process of “reading” and conceptualizing one important image that seems relevant to her case.
Leighton and Surridge also discuss this pictorial moment and how it emphasizes the role that the visual plays in Braddon’s novel. They argue that Du Maurier’s illustration does not show the sketch itself, but rather only the act of interpretation. For this reason, Leighton and Surridge argue that this is one of the many testaments to the importance of “seeing” throughout the novel. Most of these illustrations privilege not what a character sees, but rather the action itself. What is significantly more important here is the way in which this scene marks another moment in which Eleanor receives guidance in order that
she may better comprehend a situation or fine tune her critical thinking skills. Despite the fact that it is Dick who is instructing Eleanor, in this captured moment, it is Eleanor who towers over Dick, not the other way around. Importantly, then, and perhaps to emphasize Eleanor’s position as the more aggressive and dedicated detective, Dick sits below Eleanor who stands tall and resolutely to his side and is not featured in a more conventional, passive position. With this method, of artistic representation, Braddon also prompts her real readers to follow along and to make sense of not only verbal/textual clues but also those that the narrator describes as visual.

Dick's fitness for this role comes as no surprise, since he is a set designer for two Transpontine theaters and has been avidly working to adapt a sensational vampire story entitled, *Raoul*, for the stage. In fact, it is Dick who first learns of Eleanor's father's death when he makes a trip to the morgue in order that his new set design will closely reflect a morgue's exact layout. The narrator never refrains from enlightening the reader that Eleanor's dearest friend's work is certainly seedy and far removed from the refinement of more popular, established theater companies. Dick, then, is no stranger to London's world of crime and the authors and playwrights who adapt these real life dramas for public audiences on a regular basis. Despite all of Dick's dealings with the city's underworld, low-class theaters, and sensationalized subject matter, even *he* is surprised and often “put off” by Eleanor's sheer determination and unmerciful masterminding. For instance, when Dick tells Eleanor that she really has no case against her father's antagonists for only cheating him at cards, Eleanor, “with a dangerous light kindling in her eyes,” says quite self-assuredly, that she would then just try to lure the men into committing some other
crime. In this way, Eleanor boasts that she would “twist” the law to her own purpose (v. 1, 233). Later, she also adds that “there is no slow torture that [she] could inflict upon him that would seem cruel enough to satisfy [her] hatred of him” (v. 1, 234). The narrator explains that Dick is truly “aghast” at Eleanor's thought processes which lead her to such flippancy about the strength of her revenge. Calling her a “Red Indian,” and telling her that she has seriously “frightened” him with her manner of speaking, Dick marks Eleanor's spoken vengeance as a type of savagery and something certainly far removed from the cultural expectations of such a feminine and youthful person (v. 1, 232). Rendering Eleanor as the barbaric, foreign “other” here, Dick attempts to negate Eleanor’s plans as not only feasible, but also deem them as unfeminine. In a counterintuitive move, however, Braddon implicitly asks her readers to follow the illogical reasoning behind Dick’s statement. If in fact, Eleanor’s comments appal Dick to such an extent that he cannot fathom a woman saying them, he, himself, ascribes masculinity onto her because this is what would naturally make sense to him. The problem here is that if Dick can only think of a transgression of femininity as unwomanly or more specifically, masculine, then he aligns her with a gender representation that society has, for centuries, seen as logical. Dick, seemingly at a loss to understand exactly what Eleanor presents, however, must refine his thoughts. Thus, he must see her as more masculine, yes, but not logical. Hence, she is, for him, a savage. This fear resonant in seeing the transgressive woman as anything other than masculinized is a common trope throughout literature, and one that gets played out ad nauseam in detective style novels in
which the lead female detective must shed her feminine attributes to become more like her masculine counterparts.

Dick also defines Eleanor’s ideas about finding the man who caused her father's death as a circumstantial reality that can only exist in novels. As if trying to censor her revenge that seems to stem only from “folly” and impulse, Dick cautions her that real “life is not a three-volume novel or a five-act play”(v. 1, 233). “The sudden meetings and strange coincidences common in novels,” Dick warns, “are not very general in our everyday existence” (v. 1, 233) and he informs Eleanor that it would be very unlikely that she ever come into contact with either of the men she saw leave with her father on that fateful night of his death. Despite the adamant worldly wisdom that Braddon gives to Dick, the author's methodology and subversive tactics are still extremely clear. In having Dick comment on the parameters of a novel's real life application, Braddon uses a commonly held belief about Sensational fiction to demonstrate that it is a misconception. Once Eleanor eventually meets up with her father's oppressors, under apparently coincidental circumstances, that are nevertheless probable, Braddon convincingly demonstrates that the plot lines in her Sensation fiction are not only possible, but real and that while instances might seem coincidental or "heavy-handed," and her heroines shockingly unfeminine, they are just another form of femininity, not necessarily masculine or Demonic. In fact, her constructions of heroines really, and quite consistently, denote a challenge to the common representation of beliefs about women's natural propensities toward domesticity, marriage, and more humble vocations. This is not to say that Braddon’s transgressive or anomalous versions of femininity only existed
within the context of her own mind, but rather that she challenges the perhaps more repressed, even unreflective ways in which authors wrote about women. For Braddon, the most transgressive part of her own portrayals is the significant way in which she blurs the sanctified divisions between femininity and the ultimately transgressive or fallen woman, especially through reading behaviors.

In fact, once Eleanor pieces together more about her father's death and desires to follow up on clues and insights that she might have, Dick, as the central masculine voice of the novel, voices his concerns about how Eleanor's detective qualities such as critique and analysis might irreversibly alter her character. Dick echoes a well-known editorial from an 1859 issue of Fraser's magazine, whose writer laments about the shifts and changes in Victorian women from the “fresh untutored minds and generous hearts” to, what he coins “an enemy body” that ascribes to the “banners of Matter of Fact, Stern Reality, and Common Sense” (Fraser) or, in more modern terms, -- masculinity. Dick also anxiously questions his young friend on what she intends to do, once she has the information she needs to make an accusation. Perhaps most important to Dick's concerns, is whether or not Eleanor really understands the import of what he sees as the undeniable consequences of such motives:

Supposing you can prove this; by such evidences as will be very difficult to get at; by such an investigation as will waste your life, blight your girlhood, warp your nature, unsex your mind, and transform you from a candid and confiding woman into an amateur detective. (v. 2, 87)
Dick, then, becomes Braddon's voice box for the cultural discourse mitigating a woman who defies the dependencies of her sex and utilizes her own intellect. Reflecting the language of the Fraser article and others like it, Dick equates investigation and the use of her mind in a detective fashion, as a threat to girlhood, nature, and even her sex. Similarly, the anonymous critic in the Fraser piece linguistically frames this feminine shift of purpose around first the abstractions of young women’s minds and hearts and then later to their conscious giving over of themselves to an “enemy body.” Eerily present here in both pieces is the tendency to discuss a woman’s transgression from conventional femininity as a bodily issue, therefore, discursively undermining what could be signified as a remarkable feat for a carnal, almost lustful, action. Indeed, these alignments are truly the best proof of the ways in which a critical, investigative mind was conceived of in a female form. Clearly, Dick does not align Eleanor’s mental prowess with masculinity; indeed, it is altogether something else. It is an informed, not innocent girl, whose very nature seems unsexed and unaligned with either femininity or masculinity. Somehow she is also neither candid nor confiding, traits that, for Dick at least, seem at odds with the detective figure. All of these essential qualities, those that make up femininity according to Dick, will waste away and even blight Eleanor's abilities to remain forthright, as if, by definition, feminine nature cannot possibly include the abilities of critical insight. What Dick describes here though is certainly vague in that it does not necessarily name what exactly he thinks Eleanor will become, if she continues on this path. Dick merely calls this unthinkable thing a detective, and an amateur one at that, but not necessarily masculine.
As a newly emerged and somewhat controversial figure, the real fears here, then, might lie in the nature of the detective, itself. A detective must withhold information, while also seeking out others' secrets, thus consistently employing scrutiny and analysis to everyday situations. That is, even the seemingly innocuous daily occurrences must now be approached and "read" with new suspicious eyes. It is this "new" way of looking at the world, to which Dick fears Eleanor will succumb.

In saying that these tactics could "unsex" her, Dick exposes how his anxieties reach an even higher level, in that he feels Eleanor's new world view would not necessarily make her more masculine, but could possibly strip her of any gender identity at all; thus, the question mark of what one could assign to her, in terms of a gender category, resonates as all the more frightening. In other words, to fear Eleanor's "unsexing" is to fear that by her own inclinations she could self-fashion and fine-tune an identity that defies definition. Interestingly, these are the same comments and fears that critics attached to Sensation itself. Braddon’s female characters, then, become embodiments of the genre. Dick's thought process here is further intensified in his very choice of the term "unsex," therefore alluding to the famous Lady Macbeth, when she asks a higher power to enable her to shed the entanglements of conventional feminine passivity in order that she may aid and incite her husband to usurp power. Significantly, then, it is the easily cited repercussions of a woman exiting the confines of her gendered norms and, as Dick puts it, the "humiliating falsehoods, the pitiful deceptions, [and] the studied baseness" that Eleanor would inevitably resort that not only calls her own gender associations into question but also causes concern over what to make of the detective, in
and of itself (v. 2, 87). Certainly, this figure is at odds with representations of the feminine, but it is not necessarily in line with a normative version of masculinity either as detectives were often seen as beings of heightened intellect.

In a fictional context, throughout the height of Sensationalism, detectives are inarguably male. Resonating as wise, astute, and controlling of the case's details, these often hyper-masculine detectives exude a sense of powerful patriarchy, as they sift out and successfully detect the answers to the puzzle before readers often even know where to look. This power that the male detective maintains, throughout these types of narratives, might really stem from the ways in which the authorial voice and therefore master controller of plot, must transfer his or her knowledge of the case and its eventual end to the detective character, if he wants this figure to unravel the case. That is, if the plot is to make sense and the case is to be solved by novel's end, then the author must create the detective in his own image. As Peter Thomas suggests in Detection and its Designs, the detective's “cleverness in piecing together the criminal story mirrors his [the author's] own ingenuity in devising plots” (94). In this way, one might often see the detective figure as one who the author bears an obvious and blatant affection, thus making him exude “reassurance” and act as a type of “guide we would like to trust” in the midst of a confusing or baffling mystery (Thomas 94). Indeed, exhibiting a type of sixth sense, one that enables the detective to sense out the forgotten, the covered up, or the facts to which no one pays attention, the author elevates the detective above the common man in terms of perception and intellect. Wilkie Collins’ version of this comes in the form not of a detective, explicitly, but rather Sergeant Cuff, who is assigned to the
case of the missing diamond in *The Moonstone* (1871). This investigator's reputation precedes him as Collins formulates a history for his character that denotes innovation and an unusually high success rate of solving mysteries, and as one character notes: “there isn't [his] equal in England!” (Collins101). True to the form that Collins creates and other writers later copy, Sergeant Cuff's appearance seems to parallel the hard-nosed and analytical detective that he is, thus displaying a face as “sharp as a hatchet” and “eyes of a steely light grey” (*Moonstone*, 102). As he begins his investigation, Collins really sets a foundation and criteria for the detective figure that, thanks to Arthur Conan Doyle, later inundates the genre and book market beginning in 1888. Like Doyle's Sherlock Holmes who has perhaps become the most iconic and ideological detective of the 19th and 20th century, Collins' Cuff, existing seventeen years before Holmes, sets the bar high as he critically surveys his setting, pays close attention to nuanced details, and, right away, pinpoints crucial evidence, an elusive and seemingly insignificant paint smear, that the former inspector did not notice, and a clue that becomes a major key to unlocking the entire mystery.

When it comes to the detective figure in literature, and especially during Sensation's heyday, writers didn't always create *actual* detectives. Like Braddon’s Eleanor, the pseudo-detective is an interesting figure all of its own that begins to surface alongside detectives in the middle of the period. According to Peter Thomas' research on *The Moonstone*, and specifically Collins' character of Franklin Blake, the common citizen who takes up an investigation does so mostly to save his or her own reputation, not necessarily to aid in a case that has no bearing on their own lives. For Thomas, this is an
undeniable example of the character's attempts at self-definition or performance: “it reveals a compulsion to limit inquiry and restrict vision; ostensibly an act of self-definition, thus the detective's shaping of narrative becomes a strategy of self-performance” (Thomas 95). In regards to Collins' Franklin Blake, Thomas argues that this pseudo-detective takes up the “magnifying glass” (quotations mine) out of a necessity to “create favorable representations” of himself and clear his good name (Thomas 95).

Indeed, as I discuss in my chapter concerning Braddon's infamous and breakout novel, *Lady Audley's Secret*, the character of Robert Audley certainly fits this formula in the way in which the impetus that draws him to investigation is really more about safeguarding his family and his uncle's good reputation. Of course, once the pseudo-detective takes up the case, obsessions, like those demonstrated in Robert's character, can definitely occur. Similar to Eleanor, then, the pseudo-detective's relationship to his or her case is, at once, more inextricably personal, thus creating more of an intimacy and emphasizing more of what is at risk, if he or she should fail. This fact, alone, disables the detective figures' abilities to offer themselves distance and separation from what they are seeking out. In predating Franklin Blake, then, Braddon shows just these idiosyncrasies of behavior resonating in her portrayal of Eleanor's character, as the young girl fine tunes her skills but also searches for her father's destroyer at any cost.

Female Detective

Braddon must tread cautiously, then, as she demonstrates Eleanor's development from a bereaved and helpless girl to one who fashions herself as a type of detective.
Eleanor's progression from innocence to mastermind truly makes her look like a cultural anomaly, but one who challenges representations of fictional heroines during the height of Sensationalism. Certainly, there are women throughout the Sensation genre who invert gender norms and exemplify stronger, more independent women than the “damsel in distress” formula often offers them. This is also not a hidden fact from most scholars, who, like Keith Reirstad, discuss the 1860s and Sensationalism as a definitive “resurgence of the centrality of female characters” (qtd. in Hall153). For Reirstad and others, this resurgence of female centered narratives hails from the Gothic period and yet most find that Sensation exceeds its predecessors because, as Reirstad argues, most of these previous trends cannot resist representing women only as types of “satellites who revolve around heroes” (153).

Speaking for several of his fellow scholars and building upon their claims about Sensationalists, Donald Hall, like many others, find Wilkie Collins as the only Sensationalist who outrightly challenges and overthrows the cultural paradigm concerning feminine roles. Particularly, Hall is interested in the language Collins uses to formulate the interactions of his heroines, and finds most of these women “memorably powerful,” as they “exceed the language which surrounds and works to define them” (Hall 155). One of Hall's main examples, and specifically pertinent to my own study, is Collins' case of Marian Halcombe in the Woman in White (1860), who aids Walter Hartright, the clear cut hero of the novel, in freeing his love, and her own half- sister, Laura Fairlie, from several oppressors, intent on gaining control of her property. Collins' novel is particularly vital to my arguments about Braddon's formulation of character
because most scholars credit Collins with the birth of the Sensational genre from the publication of *The Woman in White*. Indeed, even Braddon often calls herself the “daughter of Sensation” to what she believed to be Collins' fatherhood. The character of Marian Halcombe is also significant in that she is another example of a writer dealing with unconventional traits of the feminine. Marian also acts as a type of detective who must seek out clues to make sense of the mysteries surrounding her sister's marriage and eventual disappearance.

In this first accredited novel of the Sensational style, Collins does utilize a new approach, one that actually combines several different narratives, therefore fracturing a linear, sequential narrative voice. All of the narrators, however, in some way or other impact the plot and the resolution of the novel's central mystery. According to Hall, Marian Halcombe's particular strength comes through in her singular narrative style, which offers an interesting determined and calm foil to Walter Hartright's, the undisputed hero and pseudo-detective's, “confusion,” “helplessness,” and “incapacity” to make sense of events (156). Hall, then, reads Hartright's inconsistencies and incompetencies as Collins' subversive way of highlighting a woman's strength of purpose and intelligence, arguing that Marian maintains a certain style of language that systematically nuances everyone else's contributions. The sense of purpose, determination, and even fearlessness that Braddon gives to Eleanor certainly looks reminiscent of Marian's approach to her situation as well. For Hall, Collins' biggest triumph with his character Marian, however, is the way in which he blurs the lines between what constitutes the feminine “proper” and what one can see as traditionally masculine behavior. Marian, then, seems to have both
of these properties, thus defying one single gender appropriation, which is all the more underscored each time a male counterpart falls short of hyper-masculinity or seems effeminate. Borrowing then from present-day theories on what happens when one gender transgresses his or her sphere, Hall employs a theory that focuses on the inextricable ways in which one affects the other. Reminiscent of Nina Auerbach's work that looked at the paradoxical qualities of the Angel in the House iconography, Hall suggests that while patriarchy and the feminine affect each other through their individual transgressions, the masculine, patriarchal side of the binary can just as easily re-balance itself through its very associations with the feminine. In other words, the feminine, as conceived of and configured in an often repressive Victorian context, ultimately sustains patriarchy through its very powerlessness. Still, once a patriarchal figure transcends his boundaries, thus refuting or challenging the hyper-masculine qualification, it ultimately affects the feminine side of the paradigm as well, enabling a woman to compensate for this lack of strength. It is then, like Hall and Auerbach similarly conclude, only through a type of compromise between sides that they reconstitute a balance and form a new economy in which the feminine and masculine attributes continue to blur and become more fluid.

With this said, however, Hall seems to overlook the ways in which Collins subverts the balance of feminine and masculine, and by novel's end, has, through his own discourse, firmly reestablished patriarchy, not necessarily challenged it. Hall cites Marian's physical features as a way of strengthening his view that Collins wished to show a heroine who maintained both the capacity to look and act both feminine and masculine.
I argue, however, that Collins aligns Marian's physicality so completely with masculinity, even going so far as to bestow her with a mustache, that one cannot possibly align her with the feminine. Despite the fact that Collins can have Walter Hartright appreciate the beauty of her form, at least in its possibilities, Collins' hero goes on to admit that the “lady is ugly” with a “large, firm masculine mouth” and in her expression that is “bright, frank, and intelligent,” appears “wanting” in the “gentleness and pliability” that Hartright considers a requirement for feminine beauty (32). These characteristics that denote even the hint of femininity are further squelched once Walter discusses the “discomforts” much like a dream full of contradictions, that Marian's form evokes (32). The only aspect of Marian Halcombe's persona that Collins feminizes, then, is her anatomy that makes her biologically a woman. This is very far removed from Braddon's formulation of Eleanor, who is consistently perceived as ultra-feminine in form and beauty. This tactic allows Braddon to look more courageous than Collins in that she does not try to subvert that a womanly woman can have powers of intellect.

In this vein, I see Collins demonstrating a very specific type of alignment with the masculine, one in which he works to simultaneously squelch any strong remnants of Marian's traditional feminine behavior, like when Marian confides in Walter about her shocking dislike for painting and music, but upholds her love for backgammon, escarte, and billards (35). In this way, Collins makes any deviant potential Marian might have of looking like a woman who has both feminine traits and detective traits, impossible. In other words, Collins can effectively abbreviate her femininity to such an extent, thereby efficiently aligning her with a masculine representation, that one might forget she is
actually a woman by the end of the novel. Indeed, one of the strongest discursive practices that Collins enacts in order to rein in Marian's power is to consistently frame her language and actions as anomalies, as if he must always rationalize this character so as not to give the wrong idea that this really exists in Victorian women. Even Marian, herself, often becomes a voice box for the cultural limitations on women, as she, too, often puts down her own sex, saying that “women can't draw” because of what she deems a “flighty” and “inattentive” demeanor (37). Although Marian includes herself as part of this reasoning and as a way of accounting for her own shortcomings, this does not in any way seem to embarrass her and one does not believe that she will attempt to fine tune these feminine practices.

What most find as the hallmark of Marian's logic and reasonable qualities, though is her writing style, as it is juxtaposed with the other narratives throughout the novel. D.A. Miller, at least in some ways, agrees with Hall's thesis regarding Collins' construction of Marian. Both find that because Walter's narratives often end in “blinding tears of helplessness,” a “void” comprised of an “absence of reliability and narratorial capability,” “Marian “substantially fills” this space (Hall 156). Hall deems Marian's words quite uncharacteristic of a conventional feminine style in that they are “plain and undramatic,” thus they formulate what he sees as the only “lucid female narrations in the novel” (157). What Hall does not account for here is the fact that the other female characters who write these competing narratives are of the working class, thus they have not had the education or training in discourse that Marian's background and station
affords her. Importantly, then, this difference is one of class rank and not necessarily one of hyper-femininity and an astute, logical, albeit anomalous, female.

Like Miller, who eventually strays from Hall's thesis to find the novel's ending a way of “castrating, heterosexualizing, and sequestering” the feminine voice, I too feel as though Collins ultimately controls Marian's transgressiveness so as to finally and efficiently silence her power as an intellectually sound woman. One significant scene that bears much weight on Marian's development as a detective and on her abilities to transcribe all of the events, thus becoming a type of author of all of their lives, is when Marian falls ill and Count Fosco, perhaps the worst of Laura's two oppressors, intrudes and interlopes in that narrative, actually writing in Marian's diary, himself. Hall does not mention this scene, but it is crucially important in how one begins to see Marian's involvement in the case and perhaps Collins' systematic squelching of her voice and power. Despite Fosco's admiration for Marian as he writes in her diary that the “pages are amazing” and takes special notice of her “discretion, rare courage, and wonderful power of memory,” he will not credit her, he writes, with altering his plan, but rather only in “confirming the plan of conduct he previously arranged” (344). Fosco's confident narcissism glaringly reveals itself in the midst of his audacious task of writing his own narrative alongside Marian's private one. Readers, however, know that these normally “privatized” entries in a diary hold much more clout in this story because they are, as formerly discussed, the narrative in its entirety up to this point; thus, Marian's voice and her detections blend with those of Collins and his own plan in revealing his mystery bit by bit. Fosco's appraisal of Marian's efforts, and his own extreme actions of writing onto
her narrative in that way, thus manipulating it, redirecting it, and molding it to his own purpose, are, at the least villainous, but certainly demonstrate an infringement on Marian's sense of self and readers' point of view. The traits and characteristics that she has systematically offered and the ways in which she has built her own persona, offering up the only information about herself and the case that readers understand, makes this moment one akin to the worst of male dominance and violence against feminine power.

As I mentioned before, Hall does not explicitly discuss this scene, but in referencing Marian's early “power” throughout the narrative, he configures her position as “author” of the story's events as a “filler of space,” someone who fills the void of articulate discourse left when Walter Hartright, perhaps the most obvious choice, falls short. That is, in speaking of spaces or voids, Fosco does not necessarily fill hers, but rather writes in another space, parallel to Marian's own. In this way, Fosco offers an alternative narrative to what readers have already read from Marian's point of view; thus, it is intended to run counter and at least challenge Marian's position as the “voice” of the novel. As I have said, Marian never writes again; therefore, the space left at the end of her last diary entry reads all the more horrific because the reader never gets another perception from Marian, thus ultimately the space is akin to final and effective silence. In orchestrating this switch of narrative voice, Collins can have another person, even in the form of the villain, do the muting and reordering of an errant female.

Indeed, for the next two-hundred pages, readers never have the opportunity of viewing Marian's narrative; instead, Collins privileges male narratives as first Frederick Fairlie's (Laura's brother), Walter Hartright's, and even Fosco's accounts are given.
Although the others discuss Marian and her recuperation from illness, readers do not get a sense of her own individuated perceptions. In this way, Collins effectively can overshadow any uncomfortable transgressions that Marian might have displayed up to this point. In order to safely and efficiently replace Marian back into the ordered sense of things, Collins must try to “play down” Marian's lack of femininity and any other “unnameable” associations, thus reinstating patriarchy in such a way that it dampers uncertainty about this female character who, as a woman, calls into question essential traits and capabilities.

Despite Marian's strength of intellect and unconventional ways throughout the novel, no one could miss the implications in Collins' language at the end of the novel, which he attributes to Walter Hartright in a sort of “retelling” of Marian's words. While Hall feels that the end of the novel speaks for itself as he reads it as Collins' “prophesy” for a “happy, unanxious future shared by empowered women and nonpatriarchal men” (157), I argue that it is the greatest testament to the resilience and reconstitution of patriarchy in the entire novel. In this final scene, Marian holds up Walter's son above her head asking him if he “knows who this is?” She then feigns an introduction between Walter and his newly born son, now calling the child the “Heir of Limmeridge” (Collins 643). In this moment, all is resolved, conventions are restored, and, importantly, it is Marian, the once transgressive woman and detective who affirms that the patriarchal structure will continue through the very lineage of the Hartrights' son. Indeed, a feminine perspective is completely absent from these final moments. In a way, though, this ending should not really surprise readers all that much. Collins truncates Marian's femininity to a
great extent, but clearly misses any chances of introducing a new concept in the way that he can only see one way to define these transgressions and that is in masculine terms. The resounding images of patriarchy by novel’s end, then, effectively squelch any anomalous or revolutionary potential Marian may have had.

In a comparable authorial move, and fifteen years after the first serial of *The Woman in White* and twelve years after Braddon’s depiction of Eleanor, Collins attempts a more literal portrayal of a female detective figure in *The Law and the Lady* (1875). Here, Collins details the life of an abandoned wife, Valeria Woodward, who during her honeymoon realizes that her husband has accepted an alias. Determined to seek out the underlying meaning for the switch, Valeria uncovers a horrifying truth when she discovers that her husband was tried for the poisoning of his first wife, and the Scottish case now bears the incriminating verdict of “Not Proven.” Valeria, in a detective fashion, sets out to enlist the help of her husband’s friends in the hopes of clearing his name, while her husband runs away and leaves her to defend him on her own. This representation of a determined woman seems born more out of necessity than out of any essence of nature. Indeed, Valeria only steps into the detective position and excels at it because those around her fail to offer any form of tangible support. Her husband abandons her, his closest male friends seem unconcerned or secretive at best, the women involved, like her mother-in-law and Dexter’s nurse, offer no information, and Misserimus Dexter, the single key to the whole mystery, is literally half a man, suffering from severe birth defects and disfigurements which have left him with no legs, thus restricting his mobility to actually *hopping* on his hands. As anyone can see, Valeria’s process of fine-tuning her detective
skills come with a certain necessity. That is, if she does not seek the answers, no one else will. This representation of those around her definitely mutes one's reading of Valeria as an astute and hard-nosed detective.

What Braddon does so differently in *Eleanor's Victory*, then, is show the self-initiated process of the heroine's transformation into a more perceptive and critical “reader” of situations. Eleanor does not have to take on the revenge for her father's death, and yet she does, with eventually a controlled and rational sense of purpose. Unlike Collins, who often designates transgression as nothing more than an acclivity toward the masculine, thus safely re-orchestrating gender norms by novel’s end, Braddon, however, boldly never attempts to mask her female characters' femininity in the first place, thus frighteningly challenging the definition process.

**Woman vs. Woman**

Braddon orchestrates this unusual characterization in using the familiar tactic of comparing one woman of extraordinary, albeit transgressive, qualities with one more wholly feminine. For these comparisons, Braddon uses the lovely, but truly naive Laura Mason, as Eleanor's clearest foil. While Eleanor is obviously introspective and, eventually critical, Laura is girlish, needlessly dramatic, and romanticizes every situation. The circumstances that bring Eleanor into Laura's company are complicated and strange, to say the least. Once Eleanor can no longer financially support herself living with Dick and the Signoria, she accepts a position, which her estranged older sister arranges for her, as a paid lady's companion. The family with whom she will now live are close relatives to a man who was Eleanor's father's college friend. Although Eleanor, since her babyhood,
has heard her father speak of a mutual promise between the two men to leave each other
the entirety of their wealth, Eleanor's sister forbids her from telling her father's friend,
now old and dying, her true identity. Because Eleanor's older sister is ashamed of their
late father and his infamous debts, she warns Eleanor that she should not put herself in a
position to look as though she too, like all of the older man's relatives, schemes to inherit
the man's money. For this reason, Eleanor's sister insists that the young girl adopt an
alias, while living with Laura's guardian, Mrs. Darrell. Although this might put Eleanor
at a disadvantage, and cause her to start a relationship with Laura on false terms, it really
enables her to sharpen her detective skills. In other words, Eleanor can keep her identity
secret while also affording herself ways of clandestinely accessing information about the
Darrell family and, eventually, Mrs. Darrell's son, Launcelot, who she discovers may
have been involved in her father's death.

It is the significant relationship that Braddon develops between Eleanor and Laura
that categorizes them, therefore polarizing what each young woman demonstrates about
Victorian femininity. From the beginning of their friendship, Braddon makes it clear that
Eleanor, whose life's purpose lies with finding those responsible for her father's death,
feels trapped and limited living out a purely domestic existence and one that amounts to
nothing more than sewing and piano-playing. Laura, on the other hand, does not seem to
show any signs of discontent and, what's more, cannot fathom a life or purpose outside of
this convention. To intensify their differences, once Launcelot returns home, after having
supposedly lived in India, Eleanor is immediately aware of something secretive about the
young man, to such an extent that she instantly knows she could never trust him. Despite
his appearance and charming manner, a demeanor that demonstrated "classical perfection," Eleanor, through what Braddon deems her "rapid perception," detects obvious flaws in not only his expression, but also in his character, therefore, thinking to herself that "if [she] was in need of help against [her] father's murderer, she would not ask this man to aid [her]" (v. 1, 292). In direct contrast to Eleanor's quickly developing astuteness and knack for "reading" people, Laura endlessly gushes about Launcelot's handsomeness, believing that he was like a "painter's model for all the lovers in prose or poetry" (v. 1, 292). Laura hangs on every word and listens intently to anything the young man says to her, but while the innocent girl is engrossed by Launcelot's supposed travels, it is Eleanor who realizes that the young man is too evasive and that perhaps he cannot discuss details about Indian life because he may never have gone there. This deception will prove particularly intriguing and useful to Eleanor, since Launcelot stands to inherit his great-uncle, Maurice De Crispigny's, wealth, which would have put him in direct competition with Eleanor's father, thus providing him with at least the motive to ruin her father's prospects. So, while Laura, in a silly fashion, imagines and romanticizes Launcelot as a "tiger-hunter," "pig sticker," and one who avidly attended "beautiful Government House balls," Eleanor, on the other hand, determines to search out Launcelot's whereabouts for the last several years and figure out if he was, indeed, living in India like he claims, or if he could have been in Paris during the time of her father's disappearance (v. 1, 292).

Eleanor's skills as a detective, albeit amateur ones, continue to intensify, thus furthering the gap between her and any other woman, especially Laura Mason. Despite
Mrs. Darrell's best efforts to provoke a match between Launcelot and Laura, the young man directs most of his romantic attentions toward Eleanor. While Eleanor might at first feel somewhat honored at having inadvertently won the young man's appraisal, she seems ultimately reticent and withdrawn about her own feelings. This discretion on the part of Eleanor differs greatly from Laura's approach to seeking Launcelot's affection, as she gushes over him, excessively waits on him, and then defends his lack of interest by blaming it on his similarities to Lord Byron's Corsair. In fact, once Launcelot proposes to Eleanor, she does not hesitate to reject him, seemingly still unable to reconcile a gradually emerging memory that connects Launcelot to the night of her father's death. Despite her firm rejection of Launcelot's intentions, Eleanor must still leave the Darrell's residence at urgent request of Mrs. Darrell, who hopes to eliminate all competition impeding on the marriage of Laura and her son. This removal from the close proximity of her number one suspect does not deter Eleanor, thus Braddon only strengthens her heroine's resolve to search out answers, as she prepares to take lodging at a house in town so that she may not lose any time in continuing her observations of Launcelot.

Eleanor's focus on Launcelot as the missing link in the mystery of her father's death, proves extremely accurate, once she recognizes some of Launcelot's nuanced mannerisms as the same type of demeanor that the man with the large black mustache represented right before her father left with him on the street in Paris. Despite the fact that this recognition occurs only as Eleanor, secretly tucked in a carriage, passes a store front where Launcelot is scuffling his feet and kicking rocks, the girl's abilities to retrieve such recollections is definitely in line with the capacity of the detective figure,
who is always cognizant of the smallest detail. It is at this point of complete realization, and after carefully scrutinizing his character, that Eleanor picks up on quite an obtuse connection, therefore underscoring how her powers of analysis have surely improved.

As Eleanor becomes a more astute observer, readily able to recall important information, she does not forget that she is, indeed, a woman; and yet, this does not always function as an impediment for her, but instead as something she can utilize. While following her next lead to the shipyard in order to determine whether or not Launcelot ever sailed for India in the first place, Eleanor, although she enlists Dick's help, takes complete control of the situation: “Bustl[ing] Dick down the stairs and out of the house before he well knew where he was” (v. 2, 78). When Dick falls short of retrieving any information on his own, Eleanor devises a plan to return the next day, but this time she will accompany him. Her reasons for wanting to do so are the clearest testament to what she sees as her specific abilities, and not limitations, as a woman. If she wants to get all of the information that she needs, she knows that she must take advantage of how others will perceive her-- as a beautiful woman. This knowledge of her own purpose, how she must keep it a secret, and how she can entice the shipyard captains to do her bidding, highlights her understanding of the powers inherent in the very accoutrements that might seem oppressive and limiting to other women. Unlike Laura Mason, who would only use her feminine accessories to snag a husband, Eleanor will use them in a more deliberate and even manipulative fashion. For this feat, the narrator tells us that Eleanor dons a pale and delicate blue bonnet, an accessory that she compares to the “chief instrument in the siege,” “a feminine battering ram,” and an “Armstrong gun” (v.
With these comparisons, Eleanor reveals her true prowess and perhaps her clearest transformation from a youthful innocent to a woman of purpose, fully aware and capable of utilizing the tactics that any detective must use in order to garner useful information. It is vitally important to note that in these otherwise menial accoutrements, Eleanor sees not just their capacities for detection but she fancies herself as a type of soldier in the cause to find her father’s murderer. Her ability to see accessories like a bonnet and a dress as more than just feminine tactics and as a way to manipulate those with valuable information demonstrates Eleanor’s resistance to give into a masculine perspective. Instead, it is in her own femininity that she finds the capacity to liken herself to one who uses these tools.

Braddon offsets Eleanor's deprecating comments about her detective abilities, with her gradual progression into quite the astute and competent observer. In fact, even Eleanor's reading habits change, once she begins her transformation. Separated now because of Mrs. Darrell, Eleanor and Laura must resort to writing letters to keep in touch. While Eleanor may want to know about Laura's life and feelings, her real motive for writing Laura a letter is so that she can keep a closer watch on Launcelot's whereabouts as well as determine what he will say, when asked about his departure for India. Once Laura's letter arrives, it is described as an excessively long missive, nearly twelve pages of rambles and effusive rants on her grief at Eleanor's departure and her anxieties about Launcelot's true feelings. Eleanor's reception of such a letter forever solidifies the two girls as opposing binaries in their world view, but it also, and most importantly, characterizes Eleanor as a different, more deliberate, type of reader:
A few days ago she would have been touched by Laura's innocent expressions of regard; now her eyes hurried along the lines taking little note of all those simple words of affection and regret; and looking greedily forward to that one only passage in the letter which was likely to have any interest for her. (v. 2, 72)

In the midst of what constitutes one of the most cherished and undeniably feminine hobbies, that of letter writing, Eleanor cannot fully give in to the charm once endued on such an activity. Indeed, perhaps in one of the most blatant ways, Braddon demonstrates Eleanor's process of detection, she shows how Eleanor cannot involve herself with these trivial feminine exploits. In fact, the narrator describes her as “greedily” searching for the morsels within the letter that she needs to make her case, thus ignoring any other details that do not fit her purposes. This practice of reading is surely not in line with the simplistic leisure often associated with feminine reading habits. It is quite the opposite, as Braddon's heroine must read quickly and “hurriedly,” only skimming through so that she can efficiently skip to what is vital to her own analysis of Launcelot. Here, reading has a distinctive end; it is not idly reading for reading's sake, but rather to extricate and then critically weigh the important details against her own developing ideas.

This is not the first time that Braddon employs this tactic of clearly determining how a woman's reading can fine-tune and sharpen her world-view. Indeed, in Braddon's novel *Aurora Floyd* (1862), Braddon shows how her misunderstood and sexually progressive heroine Aurora looks at the world through a lens of not sentimentality, but rather one of astute, rationale and “bottom-line” type of reasoning. Definitely not of a conservative feminine mold, Aurora pushes the boundaries of what constitutes morality
for a Victorian woman. It is through her obsessive reading habits, however, of equestrian, hunting, and horse race magazines, that Braddon details Aurora's abilities to stick to the facts of situations, reap the rewards of reasonable decisions, and eventually, outsmart her most oppressive antagonist. Similarly, in *Henry Dunbar* (1864), Braddon, once again, details how reading can help one to use more discretion. In this novel, Braddon depicts Maggie Dunbar whose father has, unbeknownst to her, abandoned his real station in life to assume the identity of his worst enemy, Henry Dunbar, a man who brought about his financial downfall and irreversibly ruined his reputation. Maggie, as an avid reader, unknowingly embarks on a type of preparation for what is to come, when her father must reveal all of his crimes to her. As a critical reader, Maggie can take charge of her father's dire situation and even avoid the legal officials in eventually safely restoring her father's reputation.

In all of the above tales, then, Braddon carefully develops female characters who defy the odds and exceed the confines of the discourses that usually define transgressive women. It is only in *Eleanor's Victory*, however, that Braddon makes the most blatant effort to demonstrate a woman's reading habits as a methodical tutorial on how she must view the situations that arise. In making her lead heroine a pseudo-detective, something Braddon does not do until this novel, she simultaneously emphasizes the detective mind, places it in a woman's body, and stretches the bounds of women's abilities of analysis to truly call into question cultural definitions of femininity.
Blurring the Poles

Although Braddon certainly tempers Eleanor's progress from an innocent girl to an experienced and critical detective or reader of situations, she does not hesitate to show how her heroine's assigned purpose in life puts her at strict odds with conventional domesticity. Instead of idealizing Eleanor's romantic attachments or, as most readers would assume, making her fall in love with Dick, her childhood friend, and then safely marrying her off to him, once they have solved the mystery, Braddon refuses to place this novel amongst others of its class or run-of – the mill sentimental fiction. In so doing, Braddon not only redefines a viable form of femininity, but she acknowledges that her novel is more steeped in realism, thus breaking from the associations one would expect for a Sensational tale. In defying these generic formulas altogether, Braddon has her heroine marry, not for love, but rather for the proximity of his house to Launcelot's. Eleanor's marriage to Gilbert Monckton, the Darrells’ neighbor, lawyer, and Laura's legal guardian, enables her to keep an eye on Launcelot at all times, thus aiding her detective work, and affording her an opportunity that she lost, once she left the Darrells. While Braddon is quick to suggest that Eleanor has great respect for Gilbert and could have possibly loved him before she became involved in avenging her father's death, Eleanor's thoughts on the marital contract are unconventional, at best:

She held out her hand to him. No trace of womanly confusion or natural coquetry, betrayed itself in her manner. [She] offered up her Future as a small and unconsidered matter, when set against the one idea of her life—the promise to her dead father. (v. 2, 117)
Poignantly, Braddon uses certain terminology like “natural” and “womanly” to firmly disentangle Eleanor from the trappings of culturally sanctioned femininity, as she informs readers that Eleanor shows no sign of these emotions. Here, Eleanor perhaps exceeds the most time-honored and important boundary of all—that of the institution of marriage. In a time when society still considers women property of their husbands and once married there is, even in the best of circumstances, a forfeit of individuality, a defiance of the normative reasons in which women come to this is crucial in understanding Eleanor’s decision as not regressive but progressive. With this narrative move, not only does Braddon defy a deeply rooted sense of gender ideology, but she also transgresses her literary form, thus suggesting that there is another type of story about women that needs to be told. The best testament, however, to Eleanor’s individuated approach to the marital bond and her intentions to stay on her course of discovery are how she never succumbs to the normalized domestic duties, and instead, still privileges her detective work over that of any natural or womanly desire to attend to her wifely duties. Still, despite Braddon's allusions to how Eleanor has taken up an “unnatural office” and an “abnormal duty” (v. 2, 152); thus, consistently putting her marriage aside for her focus on incriminating Launcelot, Braddon shows that, in spite of it all, Eleanor can achieve success. This, Braddon informs readers, happens once Eleanor efficiently squelches another feminine behavior--that of impulse. Yet, Braddon does seem to have at least the inclination to make Eleanor's transgressions seem less excessive, especially in regards to her detective work. In so doing, Braddon can make Eleanor more palatable and identifiable to a wider range of feminine readers, a reality that is never that far from her
thoughts. Because the nature of Eleanor's persona might actually alienate her and separate her from normalized femininity, Braddon must show a gradual progression toward the fine-tuning of her detective skills, as well as have her come to terms with what she has overlooked, like her affections for Gilbert, during that process.

Often described as a “warhorse” scenting the nature of the “battlefield,” Braddon must balance Eleanor's more non-gendered or questionable gendered responses and actions with the heroine's propensity to keep herself under control. Indeed, although throughout her detective work Eleanor ranges from vehement rage to patient and meticulous obsessions over details, she does not, however, lose her cool or show her hand too quickly in front of Launcelot or his partner in crime, Monsieur Bordon. To perhaps the detriment of her marriage, Eleanor even refrains from confiding in Gilbert about her suspicions, thus patiently, but astutely, never giving anything up to the chance of discovery. For example, while having dinner with the Darrells’, Eleanor will silently, but dedicatedly stare at Launcelot trying to gather some more information about him, all the while hoping that he will give away too much information about having never gone to India and, instead, having lived in Paris and been complicit in her father's death. The best example of her patience and control over impulses, however, takes place when Eleanor witnesses Launcelot and Monsieur Bordon breaking into the house of Maurice De Crispigny, after the old man's death. Using all of her powers of stealth and control, the young woman hides herself in clear view of De Crispigny's window and fights her “first impulse to rush into the room and denounce Launcelot” to those who might answer her call. “A second impulse, as rapid as the first,” the narrator informs, “restrained” her
because she wanted to see this incident through to its conclusion and see, to the full extent, before she accuses Launcelot of anything related to her father, what he is truly capable of doing (v. 3, 48). This of course shows Eleanor's strength of purpose and character that she does not give into unreasonable dramas, but rather can mute them and see a task to its end, thus affording herself many more answers in the process.

Eleanor's Realism and the Solving of the Mystery

Eleanor does become victorious in the end, as the title of the novel dictates, but not before Braddon has the young woman face a last and most complicated conundrum and twist of fate. When Eleanor gets the chance to publicly accuse Launcelot of switching the real De Crispigny will with a forged one, thus also revealing her true identity, she realizes that the real will which she thought she had stolen back from the house for proof's sake and placed in her pocket, is now missing. This causes much confusion, while validating those who had lost faith in Eleanor, namely her husband Gilbert. Believing her to be enamored with Launcelot and then misconstruing the purpose for her deceit, Gilbert, often saying that he must resign himself to being “the victim husband in a French novel,” (v. 2, 284) abandons Eleanor and takes his charge, Laura, abroad.

Without the substantial proof of the will, Eleanor falls prey to not only the possible dissolution of her marriage, but also to the attacks of Launcelot, himself, who repeatedly mocks her accusations, calling them the stuff of “penny-liners” and the “Minerva Press” (v. 3, 83). Notably, Braddon’s inclusion of these particular connotations is critical to her overall purpose. In a tongue-in-cheek and even self-conscious approach,
by having both Gilbert and Launcelot reference the morally suspect or lower class genres of fiction and their infamous press, Braddon calls attention to the actual disconnection between what she has written here in *Eleanor's Victory* and those other types of publications, a contrast that becomes all the more evident once Eleanor's “crazy” accusations are actually found to be sound and reasonable. In this way, Braddon can use Launcelot’s misplaced criticisms against her demeaned genre to actually validate it.

Eleanor eventually gets the opportunity to travel back to Paris, which puts her within close proximity to Monsieur Bourdon, Launcelot's most recently distant friend who fell out of favor with the young heir, once he took possession of the De Crispigny fortune. Ready for his own act of revenge, Bourdon meets with Eleanor and sets up a time for the two to meet again at his hotel where he promises to hand over the real will to Eleanor. Despite her lack of trust for Bourdon, Eleanor agrees to these terms because she knows it will serve as the only way for her to acquire the information she needs to finally make Launcelot pay. In what can only seem like a true leap of faith, Eleanor, accompanied by the husband of her new employer, goes to the hotel, only to find Bourdon suffering from a severe case of Delirium Tremens. This unlooked for respite from bargaining enables Eleanor to steal back the real will, which she begins to read almost immediately, before even leaving the room and Bourdon to his hallucinations. While Dick and Gilbert return during this scene, in order to help Eleanor, this female detective has already accomplished what she needed to without their help. Her prior meeting with Bourdon had set the terms of their agreement and Eleanor was able to defiantly hold her ground, even in the face of a former antagonist.
Moreover, it is in this final scene that Braddon makes an interesting, but significant allusion to one of Sensation's predecessors: the Gothic genre. As recounted in the introduction, Gothic fiction often framed a moment of appropriate or sanctioned reading with a return of a helpmate or a major resolution to a novel's dominant conflict. In this scene, Braddon seems to draw from those antecedents and for no simplistic purpose. For, just as Eleanor begins reading, what one can only consider, as the most important document of her life, her husband and friend return, effectually bringing an end to her conflict with Gilbert, thus allowing them to re-devote themselves to their marriage. Of course, this may seem like the formulaic hero's return to save the day; and yet, Braddon overshadows the hero’s conventional moment because Eleanor has already retrieved the needed document. Indeed, it is Gilbert who apologizes and seeks redemption, not Eleanor for any previous, undutiful behavior. What's more, Braddon, in making this scene quite reminiscent of a Gothic trope, establishes a particular formula here that she must follow by showing that if only because Eleanor's conflicts are ultimately resolved in the end, her reading habits, style, and approach, regardless of its effect on making of her a competent detective, are well worth it and beneficial.

Even in one of the final chapters entitled “The Day of Reckoning,” Braddon resists a less than satisfying Gothic formula of silencing or muting the heroine's voice in the final incriminations; a role which the heroine's male counterpart usually usurps, and, instead, makes Eleanor's voice central and crucial. This tactic explicitly sets her novel apart from her fellow Sensationalists and especially Collins. Although Gilbert tries to “restrain” Eleanor from accosting Launcelot, once the band reaches the De Crispigny
estate, Eleanor, determined to the last, “wave[s] him back with her hand and went on to
where the young man [Launcelot] stood with her head lifted and her nostrils quivering” (v. 3, 295). In a resolved and articulate voice, Eleanor informs Launcelot that she has the proof of his forgery and calls him out saying, “cheat, trickster, forger, there is no escape for you now” (v. 3, 296). In these final scenes, Eleanor seems, at least at first, quite resolute in her purpose as her victory over the man who hastened her father to death becomes tangible. She is unbending as first Launcelot then his mother, Mrs. Darrell, plead for her forgiveness and clemency. It is here, however, that Braddon defies detective and sensational conventions and, instead, of having Eleanor legalize her accusations against Launcelot, thus sending him to jail, Braddon has her heroine come to terms with the essence of mercy. It is Mrs. Darrell's own supplications that turns Eleanor's heart from what has been her one purpose. For Eleanor, Mrs. Darrell functions as the unintentional target; the one, who by proxy, will suffer a great loss and grieve because of her son's deeds. Calling her's only a “half victory” Eleanor

had never thought that some innocent creature would suffer more cruelly by her vengeance upon Launcelot Darrell than the man himself would suffer. And now here was this woman, whose only sin had been an idolatrous love of her son, and to whom his disgrace would be worse than the anguish of death. (v. 3, 304)

Braddon's choices of enduing Eleanor with the capacity of forgiveness, even in the midst of her final triumph, certainly shows a strength of character, but it also applies perhaps a more ethical nature to the detective figure, as one capable of empathy when faced with a criminal. It is because of this character trait that Eleanor most likely decides to send
Launcelot away to the continent in order to afford him time and focus for fine-tuning and perfecting his artistic talent. Of course, one must assign a certain caveat to Eleanor's strength of forgiveness in regards to the fact that Launcelot's crime of cheating and swindling hardly bespeaks of extreme malice; and yet, given the sheer strength of Eleanor's focus on exposing Launcelot as a fraud, her ability to offer him the opportunity for recompense is still a noteworthy, progressive attitude. More in line with my argument, Braddon takes the detective figure and, perhaps for the first time in her genre, effectively feminizes the position; not just demonstrating sympathy or empathy, but also implying that Eleanor believes in the capacity for a nurturing that can lead to reformation. Again, we see Braddon utilizing Eleanor's femininity not to restrict our reading of her as detective, but rather to open up an alternative narrative strategy in which the feminine ideal reigns supreme at the end without having had to relinquish the essence of one's feminine nature.
CHAPTER 6: LASTING LEGACY

On the grounds of Richmond Parish Church, there is a bronze tablet dedicated to the memory of Mary Elizabeth Braddon and her expansive literary output. This plaque memorializes Braddon as “a writer of rare and refined scholarship who gave profitable and pleasurable literature to countless readers in her library of threescore and ten works of fiction” (Wolfe, figure 64). In the course of 56 years, Braddon’s career in Sensational Fiction witnessed a definitive progression from the days of Victorian censure and anxiety to those of the Twentieth Century and its more openness toward women’s freedoms and education. As evidenced in the inscription, the early 1900s brought Braddon a certain amount of literary praise and attention. In fact, one can immediately see the differences between how critics railed against her writing style and plot lines in the 1860s and how by 1915, the year of her death, she had earned the recognition of her peers. Notably, the 20th century critics found Braddon’s literature indicative of her impressive “scholarship,” while her readers gained “pleasure,” but also, most importantly, “profit.” Although it took nearly 50 years for literary critics to characterize her novels as those capable of both popular appeal and education, this is exactly what Braddon had set out to do from the beginning of her career.

Braddon found her niche for Sensation fiction early on, and as I have argued, worked hard to strike a balance between giving in to what her public expected from a Sensationalized tale and creating a meaning that went beyond just a thrilling plot. To mediate what could only have felt like an impossible position, Braddon made concentrated efforts to use her works to reach out to her female readers who, by the late
1860s, numbered in the thousands. Her purpose here was two-fold; not only could she sustain her popularity and secure income through a very profitable writing style, but she could also use her novels to reach out to her female readers in a way that no one would necessarily expect. Since most of her novels were mysteries or detective style stories, Braddon could guide her female readers to become more critical and astute in the midst of trying to solve the questions of the text. Braddon, then, wrote her novels in such a way that they could be seen as something more than just the stuff of popular, meaningless fluff.

In these early novels that I have discussed here, published at the height of Sensation’s popularity and simultaneous censure, Braddon delivers an important message about the possibilities of her genre. Acutely aware of the disparaging criticisms leveled at Sensation Fiction in general and at her own morals as the author of such tales, Braddon’s attempts to write in a way that could educate her readers was an effort to open up alternative ways of viewing Sensation. Importantly, Braddon’s goal seems very different from that of her Sensational peers, as it is her unique plot lines that guide her readers in enhancing their cognitive abilities and affords them a more comprehensive education. As I have argued, these are not conventional lessons, but ones that Braddon must have felt necessary for the sex that was too often limited or completely disregarded when it came to education. Her methodology was more about “life lessons” and coming to terms with feminine capabilities than it was traditional in approach.

Braddon’s stories did not always end well or as expected; thus, she never included a clear-cut parable at the end. Instead, Braddon’s tales demanded a certain amount of
cognitive “action” on the part of her readers. For Braddon, then, “how” a woman read
was just as important as “what” she read. It is Braddon’s specific plot lines and the fact
that her heroines were almost always readers themselves that heighten her real readers’
level of involvement with their reading. In each of the novels I have discussed here,
Braddon guides her readers through the texts, forcing the real reader to identify with the
fictional one so that she may recognize the lesson at hand.

When Isabel Gilbert begins a revolutionary educational program through her
shared novels with her lover Roland Lansdell, real readers witness the differences
between Isabel’s misreadings when left to her own devices and how, with Roland’s
direction and guidance, she seems to grasp more of the actual meaning behind the text.
Eventually, readers see how her reading sessions with Roland help her to more
appropriately and intellectually respond to the situations in her life. Isabel’s new, guided,
reading practices help to shape her developing intellect, but also help her to balance the
use of imagination and practical reason. Braddon takes her readers along throughout
Isabel’s transformation, thus enabling them to understand and even mimic Isabel’s
improved reading behavior.

In an even more concrete way, Braddon’s novels *Lady Audley’s Secret* and
*Eleanor’s Victory* invite readers to become detectives; thus, each reader of these novels
must actively and critically read in order to solve the pervasive mysteries of the text. In
fact, Braddon uses *Lady Audley’s Secret* to go one step further, as its readers must
analyze the story’s details in order to uncover not only the mystery of the text, but to
understand Braddon’s most complex of female characters: Lady Audley. Throughout this
novel, it is Lady Audley’s less than truthful persona that incites Braddon’s readers to break down her façade and solve the main secret propelling the story. More than this, as Lady Audley systematically breaks down recognizable definitions of the heroine and the feminine, Braddon can educate her readers on a more compelling and progressive form of femininity. Lady Audley lies, cheats, and attempts murder; yet, she is always the character with which Braddon prompts her readers to identify.

In this way, Braddon creates a unique text and one that offers the reader a certain amount of reflexivity. This is not to say, however, that Braddon condones Lady Audley’s transgressions, but rather that she fully develops this character and demonstrates a complicated form of womanhood and one that cannot be so easily ignored or summed up in simplistic terms. Indeed, Braddon’s readers are asked to go along with Lady Audley as she purposefully and speedily moves around London to help hide her past. In order to understand the “secret” of the text, though, readers must come to terms with the truth of Lady Audley’s character and understand the reasons for her deceptions as they take place. Braddon seemed to know that her readers would not identify with Robert Audley, even though he is the fictional pseudo-detective. Instead, readers are invited into Lady Audley’s private realm in a way that they never are with Robert, thus reinforcing the connection they will ultimately have with her, but also making each reader a part of Lady Audley’s plans and moves. As Lady Audley herself reads and uses her books to bond with her maid, and come to terms with her own life choices, the real readers of the text gain an incomparable insight into another version of femininity, one that challenges the status quo of Victorian gender formations. It is this all too real portrait of womanhood,
one that does not fit into a tidy category that helps readers to better comprehend Lady Audley’s lasting legacy. While the book, itself, is a mystery in the detective style, Braddon systematically trains her readers to read it in a certain way if they want to reveal its hidden meanings. What readers find at the end, however, is a lesson in shocking truths; Lady Audley’s disposition cannot be explained. And, while it is not madness, angelicism, or the demon that is left once readers strip away her accoutrements, it is, indeed, something even more challenging: a question about what type of femininity Lady Audley actually represents. Her persona clearly disrupts the carefully orchestrated balance of gendered order and begs the question of what to make of such a woman who so clearly does not fit in any ordered system. Braddon’s readers, if they have paid attention throughout the text, become involved in the plot against Lady Audley as well as the heroine’s own movements and responses to her oppressors, and would ultimately come face to face with an alternative femininity, and one that contests anything they had ever encountered. What Braddon leaves with her readers here is a twofold benefit. Simultaneously, she teaches readers of Lady Audley’s Secret to become more careful, and exacting of reading material and also how to recognize a theme that could be applicable to their own lives. This theme opens up different possibilities and capacities for women who are individuals. Lady Audley forces female readers to sympathize with her anti-heroine, while presenting the information in such a way that readers can appreciate Lady Audley’s proactive aggressiveness and crucial power of intellect. In facing the idea that Lady Audley is not a traditional, feminine type, readers are at least introduced to possibilities for their sex beyond what they’ve been previously taught.
The lesson here is one that obviously propelled conversation and more questions. Most likely, this is just the type of effect Braddon would want her stories to have. Not only did she teach her readers how to read more critically, but she could also prompt questions about their roles as Victorian women. Similarly, in *Birds of Prey*, *Charlotte’s Inheritance*, and *John Marchmont’s Legacy*, Braddon probes at the Victorian social structures mitigating women’s roles. This time, however, she does so to look more closely at women’s relationships with each other. Despite the traditions of a marriage market, which often pitted women against each other, Braddon uses these novels to represent unique and nontraditional friendships that challenge conventional ways of thinking about women as inherent competitors. In all three novels, Braddon illustrates how women who are unlikely matches make lasting connections with each other. Since most of these women came from varying economical backgrounds, social strictures would have most likely kept them from being close friends; and yet, Braddon shows otherwise. Instead of giving in to Victorian tropes that place women at odds with one another, Braddon makes her readers witness the formulations of these friendships that eventually serve to save each of the fictional women from dire circumstances. Importantly, each woman builds her friendship from the books they read together or share. In fact, books figure prominently in these women’s friendships, as each woman uses the context of literature to make sense of their own worlds and to help them make decisions about how to react to their antagonists. It is these strong feminine bonds that Braddon’s readers would witness as they read through these novels. The key arguments that Braddon makes here, then, are not just about how significant books are in the lives of
these girls, but rather also about what these friendships symbolize in a larger context. Braddon has each girl build a feminine community in which they learn about how to protect each other, but she also incites them to better understand and re-conceive their roles as women too.

These types of friendships, better critical reading practices, and a move from seeing oneself as passive or limited are the most important outcomes of what Braddon imparts to her female readers. At the crux of these lessons, however, is the idea that Braddon upholds femininity as a focal point. Despite Braddon’s training of her real readers to be more reasonable and critical and her portrayal of fictional women who mold themselves into overly rational and perceptive detectives, Braddon never has any of these women forego their feminine natures. Indeed, as she embarks on a project that guides women in adopting traits that most consider masculine, each female character is able to maintain her femininity, and in fact, at times, use her femininity to work through a problem. This obviously shows the boundless nature of women, or at least the capabilities that are possible.

In this specific way, Braddon stands apart from other Sensational authors. Unlike her Sensationalist peers who give women freedoms and power only to eventually abbreviate or negate it as masculine by story’s end, Braddon’s female heroines sustain their newfound control while remaining hyper-feminine. Braddon also differs from her peers in that she utilizes the act of reading and comprehension as the route by which all of her heroines reach their intellectual potential. It is only through reading in a careful,
perceptive way that both Braddon’s fictional and real female readers acquire the knowledge needed to solve the mystery and, thereby, fine tune their cognitive skills.

By molding Sensation Fiction to address these issues, Braddon can lessen the sting of critics’ disparagement and reach out to avid readers in a more substantial way. Because she spoke about it often, scholars know that Braddon strove desperately throughout her career to gain the literary acknowledgement of her critics. In the early novels that I discuss here, Braddon works to achieve that life-long goal by making Sensation mean more than mere entertainment. By addressing specific feminine issues, devising plots that guided readers on how to become analytical thinkers, and offering up unrestricted examples of womanhood, Braddon achieved this goal. Regardless of whether or not her critics ever recognized her efforts or ever came to see Sensation Fiction as anything more than popular, therefore low, literature, Braddon was still connecting with her readers on a more important level. As her popularity with female readers grew, Braddon must have known that while she was definitely elevating anxieties, she was also, in a much more subversive way, creating stories that not only told progressive, unconventional tales about women, but ones that also represented tales of strength and empowerment.

Braddon wanted to be taken more seriously and to be recognized as having written noteworthy and valuable novels, and she used Sensation to do worthwhile work. Hidden between the pages recounting scandalous affairs and unthinkable crimes was a training guide for any young girl who wanted to learn how to be more perceptive and analytical. In the act of being astute, readers also gained a special insight into alternative
forms of femininity. So, when Braddon’s critics so fervently spoke out against Sensation, warning against, what they saw, as lasting effects on the genre’s young female readers, this was exactly what Braddon was doing. The effects on her female readers, however, was not something dire and immoral, as so many of her critics assumed, but rather lasting in that her novels provided training for women to take more active, cognizant roles in their immediate surroundings and lives as a whole. Braddon trained her readers not to accept the adulterous and illicit behavior, but rather to be able to figure out these secrets and understand them. That is, Braddon offered her readers a glimpse of women as more complicated than just passive, demure, rule followers, and a chance to see them as “real” people who at once make mistakes and break social codes, and can forgive, be forgiven, and change or progress. Braddon’s female characters were never static, consistently challenging what Victorian ideologies ordained women should be. This is perhaps what critics could never understand in the 1860s, when gendered strictures, idealized morals and the angelic iconography still mitigated and informed their conceptions of the feminine. The critics of modernity and the early 1900s, however, were much more tolerant and open-minded to the woman who wrote about villainous women with strength of character and undeniable moxie.

Now, nearly one hundred years since she ceased writing, Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s particular brand of Sensation fiction is still worthy of exploration. In recent years, serials targeted toward young female readers depicting a range of scandalous tales involving vampires, werewolves, witches, and various other forms of supernatural beings prove that Sensationalism, in its various forms, is still a prolific and profitable genre. The
advent and continued success of crime dramas and detective style TV shows also makes a convincing testament to Sensation’s staying power. However, it is Braddon’s brand of Sensationalism should sustain the most critical interest because it consistently challenges the normative standards about the feminine and Victorian culture. Like Braddon said many times throughout her career, she could never conceive of a story that did not at least have some element of Sensation in it. For Braddon, a story without Sensation would never maintain appeal.

As her memorial inscription reads, she was able to balance bringing pleasure and profit to her readers for nearly 60 years. Truly ahead of her time in manipulating her genre to fit her purpose, Braddon worked hard to overcome her genre’s categorization of popular and low art and to highlight its potential for something much more valuable and educational. It is her focus throughout her works on women’s reading habits and definitions of femininity that worked toward shaping a female reading public for the better.
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