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THE SENSATION YEARS: THE LITERARY CHARACTER
OF ENGLAND IN THE 1860'S

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

By
Harriet Adams Transue, A.B., A.M.

* * * * *

The Ohio State University
1973

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In this study, I have presupposed that the form the literary imagination takes can be largely understood historically, and that popular literature tells us more about those formative conditions than do works of genius, and, therefore, helps to isolate the particular qualities of those more permanent works which last because they participate in the universal imagination.

I have purposely separated the description of sensationalism per se, the intellectuals' reaction to it, the needs of contemporary life that it addressed, and the discussion of the plays and novels, so that one section would not prejudice another. The contemporary debate on sensationalism was necessarily one-sided; the students of society, the intellectuals, and the cultural conservatives argued eloquently against it, but the many who partook in and contributed directly to the fashion remained inarticulate, having an indisputable but unacceptable justification: pleasure and profit. The strength of their side is shown in sales, rather than in the critics' columns.

I have also arranged my material thus, because during the course of my work I was many times led into what, in the
end, I considered very faulty conclusions by the temptation to see too direct a connection between actual historic events and literature. I was encouraged in this by the studies I took as models, studies of political, social, and crime novels. But such cause-effect views of history and literature as are appropriate to those subjects do not obtain in the phenomenon of sensationalism, and I did not wish to inflict that confusion on the material.

In writing about what is typical, as one must do when discussing popular literature and the popular state of mind, one deals with a large amount of material that is necessarily repetitive. I have read through files of newspapers and periodicals, through novels, diaries, and other contemporary records to confirm the recurrence of attitudes and ideas. Nothing is gained by citing each instance, but I should assure the reader that behind what I offer as typical are many other examples, from which I have chosen a single one more or less at random. I have also concentrated most closely on the years 1860-1865, though the sensation novel, at least, continued to be written many years after that. My reason for doing so is that sensation received its real impetus from the conditions of these years, after which two changes took place: historically, a new direction began to emerge, signified by the Second Reform Bill; and in litera-
ulture, the main elements of sensation were appropriated by mainstream literature and ceased to be "sensational." This latter process is the subject of my last chapter--it being, of course, the chief purpose of a study such as this.
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CHAPTER I

"SENSATIONISM"

Sensation and Tradition

In every society of which we have knowledge, story­telling has played a central role in preserving a sense of the past, providing continuity from generation to generation, establishing the meaning of the present in terms of history, and, always with reference to the past, projecting the ideals and directions of that society. It is in this sense that story­telling, whether generalized, anonymous oral poetry, or the individual works we know as literature, has always formed a decisively conservative part in what we call "culture," or the environment from which a people grows. Only in comparatively recent times has that word "culture" come to refer to two often antagonistic environments existing simultaneously: one, a cumulation of the works of individuals and the attitudes and beliefs of peoples, inherited, grown, evolved and bequeathed through ages past, in which the present is only the latest stage; the other, an immediate and self-contained environment whose temporal reference is entirely to itself or to the future. And very recent indeed, connected with the development of industrialism and
democratization as the prevailing conditions of life, is the tendency of a race to turn its back altogether on the past and immerse itself completely in what is new and temporary. That is the impulse behind the growth of popular literature as an answer to the immediate needs of a democratic society, but as a discrete literary strain whose relation to literary tradition has remained problematic.

In the beginning of the 1860's in England, that tendency found sudden and appropriate form in a phenomenon called "sensationalism," a term that was used to cover a state of the public mind which manifested itself in politics, society, intellectual life, and literature. By a coincidence of historical accidents, the phenomenon was named almost immediately, and once identified, was discussed and analyzed as few chapters of popular literary history have been at the moment of their occurrence. The term "sensation" to mean on the one hand "thrilling, shocking, and exciting," and on the other--by demonstrable extension--"enormously popular," was presumably imported from America in mid-1860 by the popular Irish dramatist Dion Boucicault, with his "sensation play," *The Colleen Bawn*. Like most vogue-words, it was inexact and elastic, and its contemporaneous application to plays, novels, scientific books, public trials, and even the national character is as often misleading as not. But the sudden catching-on of this term seems to indicate that it
indeed named a quality of modern life that there was a general need to talk about, and supplied a missing term for an eruption in national life which traditional language did not cover.

In literature, this eruption manifested itself in the "sensation play" and the "sensation novel," whose main resemblances were that they were enormously popular, relied for their interest on thrills, either moral or physical, and made no claim to lasting value. In spite of the differences in their "sensationism," which I shall discuss in more detail in a moment, neither the plays nor the novels developed with specific reference to past literary tradition, nor did they make any effort to come to terms with the significant problems raised by life in contemporary society. Their audiences, men and especially women of all strata of the ever growing middle class, frankly sought in these novels and plays escape, amusement, and excitement, rather than understanding or improvement, though there were borderline works which attempted more than mere diversion. Looking back, however, it is possible to see that this literature had a place in the broad development of Victorian literary tradition, ephemeral side line though it was, and to regard it as the expression of still unformulated, unanalyzed needs which, once released in this inferior literature, were able to enter the mainstream of literary tradition. But it is
important to note that at the time, and in this literature itself, no such purpose was recognized. Instead, it was seen as being akin, in the impulses from which it sprang, to the non-literary and non-dramatic entertainments of the day, "perilous performances," as they were called, in which performers risked their necks to provide amusement for a paying public from many levels of society. It left no lasting effect on mind or spirit beyond the actual moment of absorption; it made no contribution to the development of a national or personal cultural life; it called for no effort at relationship outside itself.

Politically, the restlessness, uncertainty, and irresponsibility which led the public to immerse itself in sensation entertainment, sprang in large part from the prevailing mood and set of fears preceding the Reform Bill of 1867. Sensation was specifically democratic, in the classlessness of its popularity, in its disregard for tradition, and in its concentration on and sympathy with the individual. The irresistible movement toward democracy, on the one hand--irresistible both as the development of a principle and as a practical necessity in a time when economic conditions were dissolving the clarity of old class boundaries--and the upper classes' deep fear of mob rule, on the other, caused a critical conflict between present and past, between necessity and desire, which affected the inner
lives of the thinking and the unthinking alike. I do not claim that this crisis was new; on the contrary, it had been developing since before the French Revolution, since the beginning of the social changes brought on by growing industrialism. But by the late fifties and early sixties the confusion had moved beyond the theoretical concern of the intelligentsia. It had become an inescapable condition with which people had to live.

The break with traditional ways of interpreting personal and public life was heightened and made irreversible by developments in science and religion. Though the evolutionary theories of Darwin, published in 1859, and the movement of much of the scientific world to support them, did not shake the religious faith of the general populace, they proved willy-nilly that not only the church but all theist religion was vulnerable and had to defend itself against disinterested scientific investigation. The theory of evolution called for a new evaluation of the nature of man and his position in the world; the Higher Criticism, questioning the historical authenticity of the Bible, called for a new evaluation of, in effect, God. These scientific and theological works moved religion into the expanding realm of uncertainty and relativism. Once again tradition, and its lower form, habit of thought, did not suffice for making sense out of the present.
My purpose in this study is to try to explain the relationship between the popular literature of sensation and the atmosphere in the crucial years in which it seemed to supply so widely felt a need, and to connect it with the larger progress of the literature which forms the continuity of tradition. My interest in the problem is in part simply historical, since the 1860's seem to me in many ways to epitomize the struggle between what we please to call romanticism and modernism, between a time in which democracy and industrialism had been debatable abstractions, and the time in which they became the chief conditions of everyone's lives. The subject interests me also as an illustration among many of what I consider to be the chief cultural question of the modern world: whether the continuance of living tradition as a part of people's lives, a condition I believe necessary to art, is possible in a world in which people are necessarily cut off from past ways, past modes of thought, past beliefs, and past values, and in which an individual's sense of himself is formed more and more in relation only to the present and the future; or whether art is instead an increasingly elitist, artificial, self-conscious expression of the special and isolated group whose environment enables them to resurrect privately the sense of continuity denied to those who make the world what it is.
Sensation Literature and Its Audience

When I speak of popular literature, I mean literature whose interest is not limited to an exclusive class, and whose bid for the interest of an immediate large audience is notably successful. Though sensational elements have always been an important part of much literature, the terms "sensation play" and "sensation novel" had for a limited time beginning in 1860 very special references. Sensation drama comprised plays with exciting plots usually taking place in remote times and places, whose characters were drawn from the lower and upper, rather than the middle, classes, and which portrayed thrilling physical action and courage in highly realistic settings. The sensation play had at its center a passionate love story, not always happily resolved, and was set in wild, uncivilized surroundings, never in a city, and rarely indoors except for a few scenes in a cottage, a country inn, or a court. Despite the derivation of many of its elements from melodrama, it is clearly distinguished from that earlier form by its abandonment of melodramatic formulae, its naturalistic dialogue, the moral complexity of its characters, its avoidance of urban life, and by its hallmark, the "sensation scene," the culmination of the exciting action and spectacular scenery.

The sensation novel, on the other hand, was a story of upper middle class life, usually revolving around an
irresistibly attractive heroine whose unbridled passion led her to love where she should not. Crimes committed by ladies and gentlemen—usually bigamy or near-bigamy, murder or attempted murder, forgery, and the false committal of the sane to insane asylums—together with real or apparent conjugal infidelity, comprised the action of the stories. The suspense was often excited by a "secret" attaching to the heroine or the man she loved. The novel was characterized by lavish descriptions of furniture, dress, and faces, similar to those of the earlier silver fork novels, and by the conspicuous absence of moral attitudes on the part of the narrator. It was intended to be not only thrilling, but shocking as well; hence its emphasis on crime among middle and upper class characters in the familiar respectable life.

Like any commercial commodity, popular literature has as its specific end profit; sensation literature was no exception. As with other commercial efforts, its success depended on its ability to satisfy the desires and tastes already existing in its audience, as well as on its accuracy in anticipating what novelties would excite interest, yet still be immediately acceptable. It is for these reasons that popular literature, however clever, skillful, and effective, for me at least, is by definition inferior literature.¹ For these reasons also it provides a close indication
of the nature of the play-going and novel-reading public—often, in the 1860's, the same audience for which more lasting works of literature were written. The differences between sensation literature and the popular plays and novels which preceded it signified a changing audience, and new interests and inclinations on the part of that audience. Perhaps the most significant distinction between sensation literature and earlier popular literature was that it appealed to a much broader social spectrum. Partly by absorbing and combining literary elements hitherto channeled into different kinds of novels and plays, partly by a conscious effort to unite excitement with moral acceptability, partly by attending to attitudes and interests particular to the time, rather than to specific classes, sensation authors created for themselves a large and unspecialized audience.

The possibility of such an audience was of course increased by the ever-growing community of interest of the literate populace, and the fading of the proscription of romance for the lower classes. The Newgate novel, the criminal fiction popular in the thirties and forties, had been read by boys and by men of inferior education, as had been popular adventure stories. The tales of terror or Gothic romances of the forties, especially those eschewing the supernatural, contained many elements common to sensation, but their patronage had been limited chiefly to the lower
classes. So too was that of the "penny dreadfuls," another kind of crime and adventure story originating in the thirties, though its popularity continued through the sixties. On the other hand the silver fork novels of a previous generation, while lending much to the sensation novel, had appealed specifically to middle-class women, like the more recent moral novels of the forties and fifties, still published, of course, concomitantly with sensation novels in the sixties. The sensation novel covered the whole range of established interests, combining excitement, sympathy with criminals, and the mystery of crime, with love interest, domestic interest, and interest in the luxurious life. The appeal to fear and the examination of immorality found a form acceptable for the reading of respectable young women, and thus the attractions were realigned.

The sensation novel arrived in a heyday of popular publication. By 1860 a large reading audience was ready and waiting for a literature which would overcome the inadequacies of previous popular fare. To the general conditions favoring the expansion of the popular audience—increasing leisure, greater literacy, more spending money, and cheaper, more efficient printing methods—were added the specific stimuli in 1861 of the repeal of the paper tax and the perfection of a means of producing cheap paper. Periodicals flourished, as the rash of new magazines of the early 1860's, directed at a general audience and appealing mostly through
fiction and popularized essays on morals, the law, medicine, and history, witnessed.

There is room for anything and everything if it be good. Newspapers and periodicals are said to be increasing twenty-fold; but, on the other hand, the number of readers is augmenting five hundred-fold:—

Those now are readers who ne'er read before,
And those who used to read now read the more,
proclaimed a reviewer, announcing the appearance of several new journals and magazines. Of these, many—All the Year Round, Temple Bar, the Cornhill, to name a few—relied heavily for their sales on their sensation fiction. William Tinsley, himself a successful publisher of sensation fiction in three-volume form and later proprietor of Tinsley's Magazine, which ran sensation novels, claimed that Wilkie Collins' Woman in White and The Moonstone alone, two of the most famous sensation novels, materially increased the circulation of Dickens' All the Year Round. He described the reception of the installments among at least one segment of their audience:

During the run of "The Moonstone" as a serial there were scenes in Wellington Street that doubtless did the author's and publisher's hearts good. And especially when the serial was nearing its ending, on publishing days there would be quite a crowd of anxious readers waiting for the new number, and I know of several bets that were made as to where the moonstone would be found at last. Even the porters and boys were interested in the story, and read the new number in sly corners, and often with their packs on their backs. . . .

Publishers, editors, booksellers, libraries, and authors alike, all stood to gain from the great sensation rage.
Of course sensation literature was especially suited to installment publication, since it depended chiefly upon the technique of suspense, which was guaranteed to sell successive issues but at the same time could be worked into a unified story suitable for re-publication in the three-volume editions which made so much money for Mudie's and its rivals. Dickens, rejecting a novel for All the Year Round because "it would seem as though the story were never coming, and hardly ever moving," suggested as models for successful serial publications specifically sensation stories and sensation-type stories—though without using those terms:

There must be a special design to overcome that specially trying mode of publication, and I cannot better express the difficulty and labour of it than by asking you to turn over any two weekly numbers of A Tale of Two Cities, or Great Expectations, or Bulwer's story [A Strange Story], or Wilkie Collins' [Woman in White], or Reade's [Hard Cash], or At the Bar, and notice how patiently and expressly the thing has to be planned for presentation in these fragments, and yet for afterwards fusing together as an uninterupted whole.  

Once fused together, the uninterrupted whole continued to be lucrative for authors as well as for publishers. Mudie's had already been well established for many years, and its reputation for "selectivity" was unimpeachable. So when Mudie carried the latest sensation novel, all the feminine world felt safe in reading it, thus increasing the kind of readership these novels gathered. In the beginning of the sixties, Mudie's was under stiff competition from the
W. H. Smith bookstalls, which sold books at railway stations to a captive audience of many classes. What with Mudie's, W. H. Smith's, and the newly formed though short-lived Railroad Library Company, each vying to provide as many rental copies of the latest sensation novel as its readers could devour, so many copies were sold that publishers were willing to bargain high to get their authors' copyrights. As a result, the authors themselves were making more money than the authors of earlier popular books. Mary Elizabeth Braddon, for example, became a very rich woman in a matter of a few years; and while the craze lasted, the payment of all successful authors was pushed up commensurately. In his gossip column "Echoes of the Week," George Augustus Sala, who wrote moderately successful sensation novels himself, commented in 1862:

Are publishers going mad? This question has been asked by the surly-minded; but "Echoes answers in the negative" . . . if their seeming insanity tends to convert authors and authoresses into Croesuses. How many thousand pounds is Mr. Wilkie Collins to have for the copyright of "No Name" from Messrs. Sampson Low and Son? Four? How many Mr. Trollope for "The Small House at Allington" in the Cornhill? Five? How many "George Eliot" for "Romola" in the same magazine? Seven? Then, again, we hear that a magnificent, a monstrous, sum is to be paid to the authoress [M. E. Braddon] of "Aurora Floyd" for the reprint of that exciting novel from Temple Bar. Well, voque la galere.6

Though George Eliot may have been clear of suspicion that she wrote only for money, the sensation authors were not. Commercialism was largely blamed for the sensation
novel. The Quarterly Review, in a review of twenty sensation novels, pointed its finger particularly at periodicals, dealing by nature with ephemeral material; circulating libraries, providing only the latest fashion, since borrowers, making no investment, could be careless in their choice; and the railway stalls, which offered "their customers something hot and strong, something that may catch the eye of the hurried passenger, and promise temporary excitement to relieve the dullness of a journey." The reviewer described the author at work:

*No divine influence can be imagined as presiding over the birth of his work, beyond the market-law of demand and supply; no more immortality is dreamed of for it than the fashions of the current season. A commercial atmosphere floats around works of this class, redolent of the manufactory and the shop. The public want novels, and novels must be made--so many yards of printed stuff, sensation-pattern, to be ready at the beginning of the season.*

One of the early satirical plays of W. S. Gilbert, *The Sensation Novel* (1869), opens with the sensation author at an impasse:

*I do not know how it is, but I cannot get on with this novel. I've been nearly a week at work, and I have only just finished the first volume. A week! why, I ought to have finished three volumes in a week! Am I not assisted by supernatural agency? Have I not entered into a compact with the Demon of Romance, by which I am able to turn out fifty, three-volumed novels per annum? And, on the strength of that compact, haven't I entered into an agreement with my publishers to supply them, under a heavy forfeiture, with that number of sensation novels every year til further notice? To be sure I have.*
The temptation to mass production was strong, and no doubt the profits to authors account for the amount of sensation-stuff produced by so many people in so short a time, remarkable even in an age of such great productivity as the mid-nineteenth century. And, for the most famous sensation novels, more profits awaited the author when the book was turned into a play.

The sensation dramatists too were encouraged by greater profits than had previously been available to playwrights. Changing moral attitudes toward entertainment not only increased the size of audiences, but altered their nature. However speciously applied, the term "sensation drama" distinguished these plays clearly from entertainments unsuitable for women, and classed them with pantomimes, spectacles, and the list of acceptable operas. Legitimate theatres produced sensation plays, offering the aegis of famous actors to the new drama. By uniting the excitement of the melodrama, the thrills of the hippodrome and other more melange entertainments, the beauty of the pantomime, and the sentimentality of the moral novel, with a convincingly "naturalistic" dialogue, the sensation drama offered an amusement which neither taxed the intellect nor offended the taste of those presumably accustomed to better fare.

The inclusion of women and a high incidence of middle-class men in the sensation audience is attested to by the changes
made in the theatres of Dion Boucicault and Webster, major producers of sensation drama. When they were rebuilt, they were remarkable for their good ventilation, large upholstered seats, and wide aisles—accommodations made for a better class of patrons than they had hitherto attracted.

While the novels gained by proliferation of titles, the plays drew their profits from the long run. Setting up a sensation play, with its elaborate scenes and machinery, was a big investment, and a play had to run a long while if it was to pay enormously. Sensation plays—and, following their example, other plays accounted sensations by dint of their popularity only—did in fact have long runs. The Colleen Bawn, the first and name-giving sensation of England, ran for 360 nights before it went on tour to the provinces and then returned to London for more. In November of 1860, Punch's "Our Roving Correspondent," newly come to London, names the play as his first and most pressing engagement:

> Of course I went to see the Colleen Bawn. I couldn't help myself. Everyone was bothering me about it. "Have you seen the Colleen?" says one. "What d'ye think of the Bawn?" inquired another, (between ourselves I've not the wildest notion of what either of these words mean . . . ).

The result of such popularity was tremendous. "The termination of the present theatrical season," wrote the drama critic of the Illustrated London News in 1861, "presents the drama under some rather novel aspects. The fact of £36,000 having been made by one author by a single drama is a
circumstance so unprecedented that it has naturally given rise to much reflection." That author was Dion Boucicault; the play, naturally, *The Colleen Bawn*. By that time he was manager of his own theatre, but only ten years before he had earned less than £15 a week as stock-author under Charles Kean. It was he who, after his big hit, *The Corsican Brothers*, had insisted on a change in the payment of playwrights. By 1860, they had begun to receive a regular cut on the box take, rather than a flat sum for each play, and Sala is one of many who gave the credit for this type of payment entirely to Boucicault:

I should say that in the end the iron of stock-authorship—the meagre weekly salary and the deprivation of authorial rights—entered into Dion Boucicault's soul; since he was destined to bring about a tremendous revolution in the system of remunerating dramatists; and our leading playwrights nowadays have ample reason to be grateful to the astute author of *The Colleen Bawn*, who insisted that managers should pay their authors a large percentage of the daily receipts of the house.

As the change in paying novelists made it profitable for writers to discover the formulae for a best-seller, so, likewise, this change made it worth a dramatist's while to write a long-running play, since the profits would accrue to him personally as well as to the manager. The effect in terms of literature and drama written especially to please and to sell is obvious, and profit went a long way toward encouraging the kind of writing that is what we today mean by the term popular literature.
But this literature, especially the novels, was in real competition with its superior contemporaries. We have already seen George Eliot and Trollope linked with Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Wilkie Collins as simultaneous, though not equal, recipients of the large profits paid to authors; nor did the connections between sensation writers and the authors of more lasting works end there. They were sometimes friends, often associates or members of the same clubs, and they appeared side by side in the same magazines. To a certain extent they shared the same aims: Trollope and Dickens, for example, were commercial writers as much as Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Mrs. Henry Wood. The audience at which they aimed was in some respects the same audience, and its attitudes, tastes, and predispositions had to be reckoned with by sensationist and serious artist alike.

The Historical Moment

Explaining why that audience suddenly wanted this kind of popular literature in the middle of 1860 is tricky, and subject always to the historian's dangerous advantage of hindsight. That it all began so neatly at the start of a decade is, as I have explained, due to the propitious arrival of the right word at the right time. The conditions which made sensation catch on were manifold, and if in discussing them I refer disproportionately often to the novel, rather
than to the play, that is because the novel spoke more directly to the emotional needs of the moment.

In the early nineteenth century, fiction had been asked to answer certain moral and social purposes. By 1860, though with other stringent Victorian attitudes it was to loosen its hold during this decade, the suspicion of fiction had not entirely disappeared. The decade offered no subject of consuming national concern that could be discussed openly to provide an acceptable cover for the writing of stories, as the national efforts toward social reform, for example, had justified the social novel as an instrument of national instruction. No series of events in the late fifties or early sixties directly explains the rise and success of sensation; indeed, it seems to have caught on largely because its historical context allowed and encouraged the concerns of the individual to surface through the predominantly social current of much earlier Victorian literature. Sensation literature, after all, was not so very sensational, except in comparison with what had immediately preceded it in England. The "sensation" in this literature was caused largely by its treatment of many of the human issues that form the most constant subjects of art: forbidden love, passion defying social law, the conflict of the individual with society, survival in a hostile world. The crudity of the form they took, the shock they simultaneously aimed for and denied,
would not have been necessary except for the strength of the conventions against which they rebelled.

Increasing the tendency of literature to revert to private questions rather than public ones was the fact, evident to all, that in spite of the concerted effort of writers, politicians, and private citizens, social and political problems still abounded. The cynicism which had formerly been directed to things as they were, now attached itself instead to the assumption of perfectibility. The uncertainty of political direction in these years also helped to diminish the appeal of public moral and social matters, and to force the attention inward. The private individual, the reader of literature, withdrew from this debate during his escapist hours, now that the sides had become clear and had little imaginative force.

The instinct to back off from concerns and attitudes hitherto considered common to all was increased by the terribly disturbing challenges to received belief thrown down at that very moment, and to a people bred to certainty in science, politics, and above all religion. Describing what he calls "the bridge-like quality of the sixties,"\(^{15}\) G. M. Young writes:

> We are approaching a chasm which the modern mind cannot easily cross. Somewhere about 1860 a rift opens in the English intelligence. To us it seems the most obvious thing in the world that, in logical jargon, every judgment must be in the form: I being what I am, and the evidence being what it is,
am disposed more or less strongly to think so and so. The force may be so great that I am unable to think otherwise. Today, but it may not be so tomorrow. Psychologists say that one of the characteristics of the child mind is the capacity for holding contradictory ideas simultaneously. Another, I think, and one that lasts longer, is the craving for certainty. The child loves speculation, but when his meditations have issued in a question he wants a definite answer. We do not often think of the early Victorian age as primitive. But in many ways it was. It could hold with undisturbed conviction a religious and an economic faith which were incompatible, and it wanted to be sure.

But certainty became an impossibility in those years when the doubts and heterodoxies of Darwin, Renan, Colenso, Jowett, and others were being published and debated in the full limelight. The overtly religious tone of earlier popular Victorian novels became unsafe since it implied a commitment to a disputed side. Sensation literature was distinguished by its assiduous lack of involvement in moral questions. Operating as it did by eliciting a purely emotional, non-analytic response, it both offered escape from doubt into a world from which those doubts were excluded, and kept its audience by not taking positions. In both cases, focus on the individual to the exclusion of other concerns was its method. But it would take greater authors than these, and a more developed audience than was generally available at that time, to make that change-over graceful and fruitful. Sensation literature, like most popular literature, was abrupt, strained, and inconsistent, and is of interest not for
itself, but for what it shows about the times in which better literature was being written.
Notes

1 Lest there be any mistaking me, I wish to distinguish between "popular literature" and "folk literature," folk literature bearing an essential relation to "high culture" in its adherence to tradition and its origin in and expression of a deep collective life, especially a life founded on a sense of continuity and connection. Popular literature is manufactured for commercial purposes. Its market is created much as the market is for other fashions and has no existence beyond the moment of its endurance.

2 For a fuller explanation of these conditions, see Richard D. Altick's chapters on "The Book Trade, 1851-1900" and "Periodicals and Newspapers, 1851-1900" in The English Common Reader (Chicago, 1957).

3 Illustrated London News, 14 Jan. 1865, 43.

4 Random Recollections of an Old Publisher (London, 1905), I, 114-115.


7 113 (April 1863), 483.


9 Our American Cousin, for example, was called a "sensation-comedy" although "sensation plays" were by definition not comedies; its characters were always included in lists of sensation roles and it was alluded to in reviews of sensation plays. Commenting on its 396th consecutive night, Punch remarked, "How long is it since a play, with no sensational attractions, has been made to run so long?" (44 [25 April 1863], 173).

10 Punch, 39 (3 Nov. 1860), 171.

11 (28 Dec. 1861), 661.

12 The Life and Adventures of George Augustus Sala, Written by Himself (New York, 1896), I, 255-256.

13 Ibid., I, 93-94.
If a novelist played his cards well, he could receive both the profits of his book and those of its dramatization. Mrs. Henry Wood, by not assuring herself the rights to the dramatization of *East Lynne*, lost, by Tinsley's estimation, many thousands of pounds.

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16. Ibid., pp. 149-150.
CHAPTER II

THE SENSATIONAL YEARS

"Sense v. Sensation"

Some would have it an age of Sensation,
If the age one of Sense may not be--
The word's not Old England's creation,
But New England's, over the sea,--
Where all's in the high-pressure way,
In life just as in locomotion,
And where, though you're here for to-day,
Where tomorrow you'll be, you've no notion.

In that land of fast life and fast laws--
Laws not faster made than they're broken--
Sensation's the spirit that draws
To a head, whate'er's written or spoken.
If a steamer blow up on the lakes,
Or a statesman prove false to the nation,
Its impression the circumstance makes
In a paragraph headed "Sensation."

If a senator gouges a friend
In the course of a lively debate;
Or a pleasure-train comes to an end
By trying to leap a lock-gate,
If the great HIRAM DODGE takes the stump,
Or the President makes an oration,
The event able Editors lump
Under one standing head of "Sensation."

The last horrid murder down South,
The last monster mile-panorama;
Last new sermon, or wash for the mouth,
New acrobat, planet, or drama;
All,—all is Sensation—so fast,
Piled up on this go-ahead nation,
That by dint of Sensation at last,
There's nothing excites a "Sensation."

25
And now that across the Atlantic
Worn threadbare "Sensation" we've seen,
And the people that lately were frantic,
    Blush to think that such madmen they've been;
Mr. Punch sees with pain and surprise,
    On the part of this common sense nation,
Every here and there, on the rise,
    This pois'nous exotic "Sensation."

When an acrobat ventures his neck,
    In the feats of the flying trapeze,
Or some nigger minstrel would deck
    His wool-wig with extra green bays;
If a drama can boast of a run,
    By dint of a strong situation,
The posters e'en now have begun
    To puff the thing up as "Sensation."

Mr. Punch 'gainst the word and the things
    It applies to, his protest would enter:
For the vulgar excitement it brings
    May England ne'er prove fitting center.
If you've got something good, never doubt it
    By deeds will avouch its vocation;
And be sure that not talking about it
    Is the true way to make a "Sensation."

Punch, 1861

Happily for the English, they could blame sensation
on someone else. Their eagerness to do so, and their
insistence on its essentially un-English nature, indicated
their discomfort with and mistrust of the qualities con­
nected with "the word and the things / It applies to," as
well as a widespread apprehension about the great social
changes working themselves out inexorably at this time.
Sensation seemed to be the cultural counterpart of political
democracy. And in those years preceding the Reform Bill of
1867, with the agitation for a wider franchise, the issue of
democracy ceased to be a purely, or even predominantly, political one. It struck right at the heart of the nation's conception of "culture," whom it was for, and what it should do. The Americans' appetite for sensation offered the strongest cultural evidence against that people's readiness to govern themselves, and it was comforting to be able to regard the present English vogue as an importation, rather than to have to cope with it as an inherent part of English, or even modern, life.

The Punch poem expresses the common attitude toward sensation. The elements generally recognized as sensational were those antithetical to the ideals which the English had tried to promote through the medium of popular culture. A hundred years later it seems clear enough that sensation was a cultural manifestation, not of the American character per se, so much as of conditions of technology and democracy which prevailed in America before other countries—especially, the growth of a class of influential readers and consumers who were not educated in the cultural tradition and did not participate in the elitist life. But at the time, the simplest and least disturbing way of explaining it was as a cultural import of a combination of conditions that were peculiarly American, though sometimes Irish and sometimes French. Violence and excitement, ephemerality and speed, commercialism, anti-intellectuality, vulgarity,
literalness, lack of imagination, and disrespect for tradition: these general cultural tendencies were considered chiefly American property by a nation whose opinions were formed largely by Martin Chuzzlewit and Mrs. Trollope's Domestic Manners of the Americans and were confirmed by reports of more recent visitors. America was "a land where 'sensation' is . . . avowedly the normal rather than the exceptional feature of society"; the word itself was a "piece of Yankee slang," one of the "disgusting Yankeeisms which are copied by many British journalists who ought to know better." America, where "the material prosperity of the nation has made the people base," offered a vehicle or symbol for a noxious culture in which perverse values prevailed; and it was used simultaneously as a warning against and a scapegoat for the cultural phenomenon of sensation in England. The gross images of appetite and eating that were almost invariably associated with discussions of sensationalism indicate how it was seen as destructive of the publicly accepted aims of culture. Instead of preparing the individual for abstinence and self-denial in the interest of good moral nourishment, it encouraged a gluttonous self-gratification with the "highly seasoned dishes" which led to intellectual flabbiness on the one hand and indiscriminate tastes on the other. For the previous twenty or thirty years, the usefulness of art and entertainment as a
means for the moral and social instruction of the people had been so emphasized as to form the rationale of much literature and criticism and to determine the national attitudes toward art. Small wonder, then, that a cultural fashion which made no claims whatever beyond personal amusement could be seen only as dangerously un-English—a "pois'nous exotic."

The Non-Literary Sensations

The extra-literary English sensations of the sixties, used constantly to define the nature and effects of sensation in literature and out, demonstrate more clearly than plays and novels whence the outcry against sensationalism sprang. Sensationism of every kind was seen as a single phenomenon, and whether or not these sensations bore directly on literature, they were widely publicized as signs of the same state of mind as that which fed itself on sensation novels and attended the sensation drama and, as such, did much to form public attitudes toward sensation in literature. They were, to begin with, more truly "popular," since literacy was no prerequisite for their enjoyment; therefore they could be taken as an over-all index of the people's mentality, the people whose impending enfranchisement was being talked of so vociferously. And because these sensations were neither imaginatively created nor restrained by literary form, they were considered a kind of essence of
sensationism and were used to deplore the supposedly analogous sensation novels and plays. After its introduction in 1860, the word "sensation" acquired wider and wider application and served to describe such various public events as the American Civil War, the visit of the Japanese ambassadors, and Garibaldi's visit. But there were three marvels in the early sixties which were referred to so constantly that they became abiding symbols of sensation and therefore merit special examination if we are to understand what in fact was meant by that word. They were the feats of Blondin, the tightrope walker; the prize fight between the American champion John Heenan and the English champion Tom Sayers; and the very different ones of D. D. Home, the spiritualist. All three of these sensations came from America; all three were enjoyed by people of every class; and all three aroused a marked ambivalence of response on the part of the English to elements so enticing and at the same time so sadly irrational and alien to the enlightenment of the age.

The advent of Charles Blondin into the English limelight was occasioned by the Prince of Wales' trip to America in 1860. The prince was treated to a spectacular display at Niagara Falls, consisting of illuminations, first red, then white, and an acrobatic performance by Blondin, who carried a man on his shoulders across the falls on a
rope 1,100 feet long and 160 feet above the water. A typical editorial comment ran:

We suppose that as regards the ropewalker, whose feats seem to us to have vulgarised a scene that needed no factitious attractions, the best thing that can be said is that, as he had determined to perform the perilous folly, the Prince thought he might just as well see it as not; but we should have been better pleased had his Royal Highness's advisers disowned an exhibition which must be characterised as revolting, inasmuch as its only interest arose from the horrible certainty that, if the performer made one false step, he and his wretched companion were dead men.

The notes that would be sounded and resounded in relation to sensation are struck here: the display was dangerous, and therefore its interest was brutal and morbid; it was "factitious," unnecessary and without positive value; and it had been patronized by someone who should have known better. That Blondin was by birth a Frenchman and that he performed so successfully in America, fitted the English idea of sensation as an American invention with overtones of French immorality. When he arrived in England the following year, Blondin caused a tremendous stir. Everyone who could afford it went to see him at the Crystal Palace, and inferior imitators sprang up all over the country to perform for those who did not get to see Blondin himself.

The same year another French acrobat, Léotard, arrived in England and became part of the acrobatic "sensation." The popularity of the performance is shown by the box office proceeds (Léotard is said to have earned £8,000
a year in England), by the large number of imitators who wanted to get in on the profits, and by the social spread of their audiences. Love of tightrope walking was seen as a reversion of the English people to the bloodthirsty brutality which moved the spectators of the Roman gladiator fights or the equally barbaric Spanish bullfights. "The love of Perilous Performances so rampant still among us," wrote Punch, drawing on the favorite analogy, is merely a new form of the old gladiator gusto with which the bloody Circus scenes were relished in old Rome. We lift our eyes in pious horror at the cruelties wherewith the heathen matrons were wont to feast their eyes, but how many highborn mothers in our Christian land have brought their girls to see (perhaps) a broken neck? Still, a strain of fearful pleasure ran through the comments of even those who disapproved. Here is Dickens, for example:

What with Blondin at the Crystal Palace and Léotard at Leicester Square, we seem to be going back to barbaric excitements. I have not seen, and don't intend to see, the Hero of Niagara (as the posters call him), but I have been beguiled into seeing Léotard, and it is at once the most fearful and most graceful thing I have ever seen done. An aristocratic young lady wrote in her journal after a trip to the Crystal Palace:

Wretched Blondin did his feats on the tight rope (it was not tight at all) at an awful height: we did not know he would. One is certain he will some day be killed; and what a wickedness to tempt Providence to such a degree! A moment's giddiness, an attack of cramp, a breakage of the rope, and nothing could save him.
Having thus disposed of her dutiful horror, she goes on, "It was marvellous: he hung himself head downwards by one leg! walked backwards briskly; stood on his head, made somersaults, etc." 10

Caught between the attitudes of moral delicacy bred into a generation of the upper middle class and the undeniable fact that Blondin had a special social sanction since he performed at the Crystal Palace, the respectable segment of the population was nevertheless convinced that watching "perilous performances" would deaden the sensibilities of the public at large. Lessons were drawn from accidents among the imitators, the worst of which was the fall of a "Female Blondin" to her death at a town fair. She was eight months pregnant, and her manager-husband had refused the expense of replacing a frayed rope. The case was of course notorious. The Queen wrote a letter rebuking the Mayor of Birmingham for allowing acrobatics, and the incident was taken generally as an example of the depravity to which the pleasure-hungry public contributed. 11 This instance involved the common people; another case betrayed the character of the middle and upper classes:

... to see M. BLONDIN risk his life in grim reality, brings no sort of sickening qualm, or compassionating fear to the public. At least, if it feels fright at all, the very terror is attractive; and the more danger there is, the more the public flocks to see it. Take away the chance of neck-breaking, and who would stir a foot to see a man walk on a high rope? It is
the peril that so pleases the tender-hearted public.

It is the chance of witnessing a real act of suicide that makes it flock in crowds, like Spaniards to a bull-fight; while it turns away its eyes in well-affected horror at the simulated death before the footlights of the Octoroon [one of Boucicault's most popular plays].

To see M. Blondin appear on his high rope, the Crystal Palace each day gathered about twenty thousand people; whereas a daily average of not above three thousand have been attracted lately to see him on his low rope, which latter, if judged simply by its acrobatic merits, ought to prove by far the more attractive exhibition. As dancing, rightly practiced, is more elegant than walking, so M. BLONDIN's tight-rope dancing is superior and more worth seeing than his tight-rope walking, albeit in this last there is the charming chance of seeing him fall off and break his neck.12

Punch's analysis of the audience's desires was borne out; this series had to be stopped because it was not profitable enough.

I do not believe there was anything new about this response to scenes of danger among any class. Well do we know the inclinations of the working classes, even in the sixties, who flocked, for example, to the last of the public executions. Cock-fighting and terrier-fighting, while outlawed, were still practiced; one report, for instance, mentions the Prince of Wales' presence at a rat-and-dog fight in the slums of London during the early sixties, "on which occasion, it is alleged, one dog killed five hundred rats in about an hour."13 The comparison that was really in people's minds was, of course, not with ancient Rome or
contemporary Spain, but with the barbarism of an England of not-so-long ago which Victorian culture had tried so hard to erase and whose vestigial influence was still feared as a threat to civilisation. What was new, seen against very recent times, was the admission of the tightrope exhibitions to places of legitimate entertainment where ladies and children could see them. This relaxation, and the confusion it produced for those accustomed to relying on the tenor of general opinion for its judgments, had a profound effect on literature—as we shall see.

The prize fight between Heenan and Sayers in the Spring of 1860 produced a similar effect. Interest in prize fights was traditionally confined to the lower classes and the more raffish and sporting sector of the aristocracy. This particular fight had several distinctions, not the least of which was that both the Times and the Annual Register, neither of which normally reported prize fighting, recognized the newsworthiness and historical interest of "the shocking spectacle of two fine creatures knocking each other to pieces." The general reaction ran much like that of the diarist, Sir William Hardman:

Is prize-fighting rising in public estimation? Are we becoming as a nation more brutalized and degraded? The Times to a great extent reflects public opinion. An occurrence like a prize fight must hold a certain position in the popular mind to induce The Times to report it with all its disgusting details. No doubt our general tendency
for many years was to apathy, peace, and squeamishness. Now our spirit has been aroused, and muscular Christianity, Volunteer movement, Alpine climbing, and the art of self-defense are in the ascendant. The affected Dandy of past years is unknown; if he exists, he is despised.\(^\text{15}\)

Saving the literary implications of this conclusion for later discussion, one should notice that "public opinion" refers to that of the public which read the *Times*, precisely the public that had not habitually owned to its interest in prize fights. The *Annual Register* commented on its change in policy, not having mentioned prize fights for many years (in other words, since the civilizing effect of the Victorian era had taken hold): "It is singular . . . that these pages should now, in these days of humanity and refinement, be called upon to recognize one of the highest exhibitions of this science which has hitherto been known."\(^\text{16}\) "Highest" had a special reference: this fight was especially remarkable for its brutality. The winner was never decided, for the first fight ended in a draw, and Sayer's condition afterwards—he was blinded and debilitated—prevented a re-match. "Between the indignant denunciations of those who condemn the whole proceedings as disgraceful to a civilized and Christian country," wrote one editorialist, the sophisms of those who found excuses for the combat on the ground that it had something of an international character, and was not to be regarded as an ordinary piece of ruffianism, and its eager advocacy by the disreputable class that finds gain in such practices, everybody has been talking a great deal about the battle between the
English champion and the American challenger—both, by the way, sons of Irish parents. Prize fighting terms like "mill" and "round" became part of the current slang. The matter had already been brought up in Parliament because of the public disturbances connected with it; now a Punch cartoon took the excitement into the drawing-room, where two young ladies chatted, one with a copy of the Saturday Review in her hand:

Constance (literary). Have you read this account of "The Mill on the Floss," dear?

Edith (literal). No, indeed, I have not; and I wonder that you can find anything to interest you in the Description of a Disgusting Prize-Fight. The criticism of that novel for its violence, immorality, over-dramatization, and peripheral participation in the sensation craze suggests that this may not have been a perfectly innocent pun.

A final important aspect of this fight was that Heenan was an American. The combat became a kind of nationalistic battle whose fervor was increased by the inconclusive outcome. Punch used the epic form for its satire, "The Fight of Sayerious and Heenanus, a Lay of Ancient London (Supposed to be recounted to his Great-Grandchildren, April 17th, A.D. 1920, by an Ancient Gladiator)," and many may indeed have "found excuses for the combat on the ground that it had something of an international character." A more telling sign of the degree to
which this fight established itself as an indication of the
times and associated itself with anti-Americanism, is
Browning's reference to it in two of the poems which made
up Dramatis Personae (1864), that book rooted so remarkably
in the immediate present. In "A Likeness," a print of
Sayers is one of the "spoils of youth"; in "Mr. Sludge,
'The Medium,'" Heenan, the "Benicia Boy," is one of many
allusions which identify America with Sludge's cringing
arrogance, his vulgarity, and his moral degradation.

The original of Mr. Sludge himself, D. D. Home
(pronounced and sometimes spelt "Hume"), the American
spiritualist, was the third of the sensations I shall dis-
cuss. While not physically violent or "perilous" as were
prize fighting and tightrope walking, spiritualism was
nevertheless sensational in analogous ways. Superstition,
belief in spirits and ghosts, and other primitive religious
tendencies had long been recognized as a sign of the back-
wardness of many English country people and were regarded
with scorn or curiosity as relics of the old days when
irrationality dominated belief. But spiritualism, based
though it was on a belief in ghosts, the possibility of
direct communication with them, and their actual detection
through the physical senses, was widely subscribed to in
the early 1860's by credulous people who ought to have known
better: members of the intellectual, artistic, and
political elite who otherwise partook in the proud rationalism of the period.

We all know about Mrs. Browning's heavy flirtation with spiritualism (in Italy, she anticipated the English fashion); John Bright, a chief proponent of the Reform Bill, was another enthusiast; Charles Reade, sensation novelist, was still another. Articles on spiritualism appeared in middle-class magazines like the Cornhill; advertisements for the American Spiritualist Magazine were carried in such periodicals as the Athenaeum. The popularity of the spiritualist craze among this audience was its most important and most disturbing aspect, as well as its most sensational; it was supported by the people who were supposed to set the moral and cultural tone of England. An essay on "superstition," discussing the financial profits accruing to the two most famous spiritualists (for the educated were also the moneyed, in large part, and like other forms of sensation, spiritualism set its price), expressed a typical view:

Want of education cannot surely be the condition which enables such men as Mr. Home . . . to reap their harvest. Those upon whom they practice have generally had every advantage which wealth and teaching can give; yet all these advantages do not protect them from placing confidence in pretensions immeasurably higher and bolder than those by which a white witch or a gipsy-woman imposes on an ignorant day labourer or mechanic. Nor is this all. Experience proves that other precautions which it might have been supposed would have been at least as effectual as education against such delusions
are in reality of little power. It might have been supposed that the whole atmosphere, social, intellectual, and religious, of the United States was irreconcilably opposed to the spread of superstition. The world does not contain a more shrewd, active, practical population than that of the States, nor one in which the general level of sound education stands so high; yet the believers in spirit-rapping are counted in America by millions, and their belief is practical as well as speculative, for it seems to exercise a considerable degree of influence over the conduct of those who hold it.  

Whether or not this description of the success of spiritualism in America was accurate, it is important to note that spiritualism was universally conceived of in England as an American product. D. D. Home, the first and most successful holder of seances, came from America. The sensational autobiographical accounts of spirit-communication on which the Spiritualist Magazine depended for its interest were American. The Davenport Brothers, a pair of gifted contortionists who attributed their extraordinary maneuvers to aid by spirits' hands, thus combining this sensation with that of Blondin and Léotard, "succeeded in creating a sensation" in England in 1864, where they had come directly from America.

That the spiritualists were motivated as much by greed as by conviction, only the most passionate devotees ever doubted. "Homebug or Humebug;" wrote Mr. Punch, "The Spirit-rapping mania may be a moral disease indeed; but it has also a material aspect. May it not be considered as a species of imposthume?" The Illustrated London News
deplored the encouragement given the "ridiculous quacks who call themselves 'spirit-mediums,'" hoping that "such impostors and their follies may be left to the patronage of semi-hysterical ladies with more money than brains, and who, weary of the ordinary dissipations of a silly life, and not able to find sensation enough in visiting their poorer neighbours, or other works of charity, resort to the 'spirits' as a means of excitement." It was even reported in 1864, that "Mr. Home, has, we hear, been relieved from all future pecuniary care by the liberality of two of the most potent Continental Sovereigns. The times are out of joint." Yet the fact remains that Mr. Home did not make the profits he and others had expected he would from the publication of his autobiography, Incidents in My Life. The reason is, I am sure, simple enough: the eerie glamor of spiritualism was more attractive than spiritualism itself. Just as many read with relish accounts of the Sayers-Heenan fight who did not actually see it, so many must have read the accounts of Home's book without buying it. Actually to attend seances took a certain commitment; commitment was not an attribute of the sensation-hunger. The articles in Temple Bar, the Quarterly Review, the Cornhill, and other periodicals, examining the plausibility of the spiritualists' claims or recounting anecdotes, sold the magazines regardless of the writers' scepticism or
credulity. As with other sensations, faith was not of critical importance. Violence and physical danger in prize fighting and tightrope walking were real and actual; so, however fraudulently achieved, was the touch of "spirit" hands. The question they stimulated was not theological, but the practical one, "How?"

The English themselves produced one undeniably native sensation in the sixties: the Dickens readings of this decade, beginning in 1858 and culminating with his horrific portrayal of Sykes's murder of Nancy from Oliver Twist in 1869. The word "sensation" was used by the press and Dickens himself, as well as by his friends, to describe the readings and their success; and in this single connection, the word carried no perjorative suggestion. "The success of Copperfield is astounding," he wrote in 1862, for example. "It has made an impression that I must not describe. I may only remark that I was half dead when I had done; and that although I had looked forward, all through the summer, when I was carefully getting it up, to its being a London sensation; and that although Macready, hearing it at Cheltenham, told me to be prepared for a great effect, it even went beyond my hopes. I read again next Thursday, and the rush for places is quite furious." Like sensations of other kinds, the readings were commercially lucrative; like others, they attracted an audience
by no means limited to ladies and gentlemen. They were especially designed to include the most dramatic moments of his books and to be sufficient unto themselves, so that familiarity with the novels was not a prerequisite for understanding them. And because Dickens was such a superb actor, the illusion must have been very thorough. As sensations, the readings more than rivaled Blondin, Home, Heenan and Sayers, Boucicault's dramas, or Miss Braddon's novels. They offered the joint attractions of a long-time English hero, a thrilling story, and brilliant impersonation. Everyone knows Dickens' own descriptions of the crowds' wild excitement, the fashionableness of the readings, and the fabulous profits they brought him. His last reading was the murder from Oliver Twist; though he had long wanted to do it, he "got something so horrible out of it that I am afraid to try it in public." In 1868 he gave it a trial run before a group of friends.

Next morning Harness, . . . writing to me about it, and saying it was "a most amazing and terrific thing," added, "but I am bound to tell you that I had an almost irresistible impulse upon me to scream, and that, if anyone had cried out, I am certain I should have followed." He had no idea that, on the night, Priestley, the great ladies' doctor, had taken me aside, and said: "My dear Dickens, you may rely upon it that if only one woman cries out when you murder the girl, there will be a contagion of hysteria all over this place." It is impossible to soften it without spoiling it, and you may suppose that I am rather anxious to discover how it goes on the Fifth of January!!! We are afraid to announce it elsewhere, without knowing, except that I have thought it pretty safe to put it
up once in Dublin. I asked Mrs. Keeley, the famous actress, who was at the experiment: "What do you say? Do it or not?" "Why, of course, do it," she replied. "Having got at such an effect as that, it must be done. But," rolling her large black eyes very slowly, and speaking very distinctly, "the public have been looking out for a sensation these last fifty years or so, and by Heaven they have got it!" 29

Dickens was saved from censure primarily, I suspect, by his clearly established reputation as a writer who had succeeded above all others in making literature a conveyance for morality and sentiment. His books were read by all classes and had gone far toward promoting social reform and personal responsibility. Weighed with his image as a good and moral man, the thrilling horror excited by the scene from Oliver Twist, heightened as it was by its isolation from the novel, posed no cultural danger. The sensation could be accepted and rationalized because it was understood; it was English, it was extracted from a familiar context, and it was offered under Dickens' name.

Culture and Political Democracy

Dickens' readings and his in many ways "sensational" last works (A Tale of Two Cities, 1859; Great Expectations, 1860; Our Mutual Friend, 1864; and the unfinished Mystery of Edwin Drood, 1870) 30 provide a kind of touchstone for the ambivalence toward sensation of the educated British public, those in whose custody the nation's culture traditionally lay. It was not Dickens' kind of sensation they were afraid
of. If the populace at large, the "great unwashed" and their compatriots of the lower middle classes, had confined themselves to Dickens for their education, all would have been well. But even a moralist as sensitive to the public desires as Dickens was, could not resist the great tide away from the public ideal. Sensation was a matter of importance because it seemed to epitomize the popular state of mind, and was therefore considered of far-reaching political and social consequence. What people did with their spare time was not a personal but a public matter; "culture" had begun to mean not just a "separate body of moral and intellectual activities," but "a whole way of life . . . as a mode of interpreting all our common experience, and, in this new interpretation, changing it," to borrow Raymond Williams' definition from the opening pages of _Culture and Society, 1790–1950_.

"Culture," therefore, was closely linked with education as the formative condition of nearly every aspect of the collective life; its specific end was not private enrichment, but the common good.

In these years when the extension of the franchise was imminent, the state of culture took on particular importance. This was the decade of the _Education Minutes_, the reports of the parliamentary commission inquiring into the state of popular education in England; of Matthew Arnold's studies of continental education resulting in _The Popular_
Education of France (1861), and Schools and Universities on the Continent (1868); of his first series of Essays in Criticism, of which "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (1865) is particularly pertinent here; and of his Culture and Anarchy (1867-68). The same years produced John Ruskin's sad and desperate books on the relation between public taste and society—Unto This Last, Sesame and Lilies, Ethics of the Dust, and Crown of Wild Olives—as well as Thomas Carlyle's "Shooting Niagara— and After?" At the very moment when the continuance of the English civilization was to depend on the common man, at the moment when his education and sensibilities had become a matter of the greatest public consequence, he was amusing himself with sensation.

To understand the uneasiness of the intellectuals, it is important to remember that, however sentimental and trumped-up the moral sensibilities paraded in Victorian literature may seem, their effect was real and important. Commenting on a passage from My Secret Life, a 19th century autobiographical work, Steven Marcus writes in The Other Victorians:

Everyone knows what the eighteenth-century London "mob" was like; and it is hardly to be questioned that much of its character persisted, though in modified forms, among the urban lower classes until well into the nineteenth century. That life was degraded and often bestial; drink, violence, early and promiscuous sexuality, and disease were the counterparts of poverty, endless labour, and a life
whose vision of futurity was at best cheerless. In such a context, the typical Victorian values, and indeed Victorianism itself, take on new meaning. It is not usual nowadays to regard such values as chastity, propriety, modesty, even rigid prudery as positive moral values, but it is difficult to doubt that in the situation of the urban lower social classes they operated with positive force. The discipline and self-restraint which the exercise of such virtues required could not but be a giant step toward the humanization of a class of persons who had been traditionally regarded as almost of another species. Indeed, the whole question of "respectability" stands revealed in a new light when we consider it from this point of view. One of the chief components of respectability is self-respect. . . .

Sensation, in literature and in its other forms, ceased to illustrate those values, sometimes indeed claimed to reject them. To those who viewed it with alarm, sensation seemed fast to be replacing everything else as the instrument of moral instruction. The commercial success of sensation novels alone, for example, suggested that "these books must form the staple mental food of a very large class of readers." The vexed question of culture and society was much exacerbated by the confusion of democratic feelings called up by events in Italy and America at the beginning of the sixties. Though England noted with satisfaction—and self-satisfaction—the general trend toward "constitutionalizing" in France, Austria, and Italy and the great landmarks of democratizing like the freeing of the slaves in Russia and in America, this praiseworthy progress away from despotism
and personal degradation seemed to have little to do, in many people's minds, with the principle of the extended franchise. "Free of course he ought to be," wrote Dickens of the American black; "but the stupendous absurdity of making him a voter glares out of every roll of his eye, stretch of his mouth, and bump of his head." Discussing France's possible annexation of Savoy in 1860, one editor took a typical stand in asserting the right of Savoy to do what it wanted:

It is not very possible to ascertain what the will and desire of a people is, and it is necessary, in the first instance, to define of what the people so called consists. Of course the ready expedient is an appeal to universal suffrage; but surely in such a case, and with the experience which we have of that machinery for ascertaining the desires of a nation, its unanswerable efficacy will not be seriously urged in any quarter. If English statesmen are sincere in their adoption of this theory of the will of the people, we may gently hint that the time may come when it may be demanded in the case of Ireland; and we should be glad to know the reception which such a movement would obtain from those who at present seem inclined to admit the principle.  

Garibaldi's deliverance of the Italian people made him a hero in England, despite the revolutionary nature of his methods. "Every eye turns upon Sicily, and every heart beats higher at the news that the insurrection is raging everywhere in the island, and that in all probability Palermo has fallen to Garibaldi," ran an editorial in 1860, using the romantic language characteristically applied to Garibaldi. "... The day of retribution would seem to have
Few were disturbed by the illegality of his means in view of the end accomplished—the overthrow of tyranny—and it was with triumph that the Illustrated London News, for example, was able to announce:

The time has arrived when Garibaldi has ceased to be an adventurer even in the eyes of the most legitimate Sovereign in whom cruelty and tyranny are co-incident with vested rights. When a Monarch treats the leader of an insurgent force on the terms which have been entered into between Garibaldi and the King of Naples, personal dignity becomes equal, and the rebel disappears in the chief of a people. Of course all honest, thinking men who love liberty, and whose blood fevers with sympathy for the oppressed, have long ago placed Garibaldi in his true position in their estimation, as in their hopes.

His visit to England in 1864 was one of the sensations of the decade. "All the fine ladies run after him," wrote one diarist (feminine participation was a special sign of sensation); "Garibaldi is in England, which fact makes everyone stand on their heads; and I suppose all young ladies will shortly appear in red shirts, which, to my disgust have come into fashion," observed another feminine one. Though his reception was considered in poor taste ("We thought that we had made somewhat too near an approach to the Yankee levees and presidential handshaking in the instance of this hero"), the irony of Garibaldi's popularity in the face of his beliefs was observed only by a few, like John Bright, who attended a reception for the Italian idol:

It was a singular spectacle to see the most renowned living soldier of Democracy cared for as by a loving
daughter by a lady who is Countess and Duchess, at the head of the aristocracy of England. Lord Stanley said to me a day or two ago, "I wonder if it ever occurs to the Duke [of Sutherland] that if Garibaldi had his way, there would be no Dukes of Sutherland?"

The wild fervor of democratic enthusiasm aroused by Garibaldi was matched by the fear with which, meanwhile, events in America were regarded. With respect to the United States, "insurrection" had no glorious overtones. The Civil War was generally seen by the English as the inevitable result of a government run by the will of the people. The irrationality of a political system dependent on the judgment of the uneducated and therefore uncivilized could only result in violence. After the capture by the Northern states of the British steamship Trent, carrying emissaries from the South, the universal reaction to the imminence of war between England and America was that struggle over such an incident would be impossible, "... were the American Government carried on on the same principles as those of other nations, and not entirely ruled by the passions of the mob." The political proceedings of Congress in 1860, at the time of Lincoln's election, were reported as "bear-garden scenes," as for example when one day "the members themselves presented more the appearance of a disorganized mob in a low pothouse than that of the greatest deliberative body in the world."
England, on the brink of extended popular representation, looked at America and associated the near-anarchy in its representative government with the cultural rule of sensation. "A Representative Boy:" ran a typical squib in Punch. "The Benicia Boy has ably represented his countrymen in the Prize Ring. Continual accounts from America indisputably prove that he is equally well qualified to represent them in Congress."44 "The American business is the greatest English sensation at present," wrote Dickens of the Trent affair;45 of the Emancipation Proclamation, Hardman commented, "The last sensation by the Americans is their President's message. Poor old Abe Lincoln! He follows events, he does not lead them."46 And, as the war raged on, many were the poems in Punch which included lines like these:

Quoth Yankee Doodle, "Guess I'm used to live upon 'sensation'--
Darned if this war of mine shan't whip All wars fit since creation."47

There is nothing really inconsistent in the conservatism with which the British regarded the Americans, and their liberalism where Garibaldi was concerned. Whereas the Italian represented the vague and romantic idea of a single hero beating down a publicly and traditionally deplored idea, and so could be conceived of in terms of England's own honorable past, the Americans presented an indication of the direction in which the future would lead. Three quarters of a century before, they had taken the step
that was still being deliberated in England, and the results seemed clear. A review of two books on the Civil War and of John Stuart Mill's *Considerations on Representative Government* was characteristic of the thinking of the time; the Civil War was seen as a grand lesson against democracy and an argument against liberal suffrage:

We have seen the drama acted through before our eyes: its boastful opening, its fair-seeming progress, and its tragic close. We have watched that small germ of evil develop bit by bit: the suffrage once relaxed lead to greater relaxations; the restraints which the law imposed upon the multitude one by one torn down; until every organ of the State, legislative, executive, and judicial, has successively become the passive mouth-piece of mob-law . . . . It is a spectacle which we should study deeply, for so striking a warning is rarely granted to a nation.48

An editorial warned against even talking about a reform bill:

It is needless to give a reason why manhood suffrage is simply impossible; the instinct of every rational man will tell him, and if it does not, let him stand for half an hour at any street corner in a low district or join a mob on Lord Mayor's Day. He will then see very clearly why Englishmen will never give political power to a certain class, notwithstanding that they are "born Britons," and are as yet "unconvicted of crime." . . . We have not read the American story for nothing.49

Furthermore, the Italians were relatively unimportant to British national life--foreigners, in a word. But the Americans were relatives. The similarity of language alone produced a deep cultural bond. Commenting on the
"memorable and melancholy" American war, a writer for the Cornhill said:

The history of England is entitled (with a doubtful exception in favour of that of Rome) to be considered as the most important chapter in the annals of the human race; for it describes the growth of institutions and the development of principles by which the largest and far the most flourishing part of mankind regulate their affairs. In another century, our language and literature, and, to a great extent, our laws and institutions, will express the thoughts and control the conduct of the population of more than half the world; and we have, therefore, an interest closely resembling that which connects blood relations in the prosperity of the great nations sprung from the same stock as ourselves.50

The recognition of family resemblance was implicit in the intense dislike and especially the fear with which the Americans and the American war were regarded. It was perfectly clear that "this horrible war would [never] have occurred had the American representative system been rational rather than the reverse, and if educated men and persons of property had really had a voice in the country."51

As popular culture, sensation seemed to have proven a disaster in America, and already its effects were being felt among the English. The office of culture, as well as its more formal counterpart, education, was to prepare a people for responsible government by developing reason and restraint. The ability of the people to analyze, to evaluate, to deliberate justly, was necessary to the continuance of stable government. Both formal education and culture at
large were to accomplish the impossible: to alter the intellectual and moral environment, and therefore the very nature, of a generation of voters who had traditionally been excluded from government. The success of sensation seemed to confirm two horrible fears: one, that literacy would not remedy the inadequacies of the populace, but would only be used for sensational reading matter; the other, that already the political and social character of the times was being determined by emotionalism, irrationality, bad taste, and poor judgment— or, in a word, sensation. The dependence of good causes on storms of publicity, stressing morbid and shocking details, furnished proof for the pessimists. The interest of the investigations into schools had been enhanced chiefly by cases like that of a mentally retarded student who had been beaten to death by an angry schoolmaster; protests against the working conditions of seamstresses were finally aroused by the death of a young woman who suffocated in an airless room as she worked on a ballgown; legal reforms were undertaken only in response to spectacular cases of faulty indictments. The "prevailence of sensationalism in our systems of education, temperance pledges, needlewoman-grievances, law reforms, and stage productions," satirized in the theatre and deplored in editorial columns, seemed to be replacing the legitimate sympathies and sensitivities of a rational and civilized
people. Charitable aid could not be obtained for catastrophes "that have failed to create a 'sensation.'"\textsuperscript{53} Crime was defined and punished by "emotional juries," and "it is intolerable that the criminal law of England should be invented in the jurybox by a dozen wealthy tradesmen wiping their eyes after a sensational address."\textsuperscript{54}

Thus were the cultural questions of the day linked to the spread of political democracy. The coming of reform put demands on culture which it could not possibly meet. And a further problem in trying to evaluate and control the effects of culture was a general uncertainty about who "the people" were whom it was the aim of culture to reach. "Sensation" was more or less a mass phenomenon, but while the prevailing anxiety was that culture would fail in its duty to the lower classes, the prevailing fact was that sensation, habitually an interest of the lower classes, was invading the culture of the middle classes. Both these movements, upward and downward, underlay the political fears reflected in the reaction to sensation. Sensation was the cultural indication that England could follow the political lead of America. Wrote Punch in a serious mood of the desire to watch "perilous performances,"

Strange as it may seem, it has ever been thus, as any one well up in history can vouch. Still, within the last half-century, we in England have been bragging about our March of Intellect, and boasting of the strides that Education has been taking with its
seven-league boots. There arises then the question—After all, does Education in reality refine? 55

That the same kind of language was applied so consistently both to sensation and to democracy is revealing. A discussion of the free drama bill, for instance, which would permit the production of any play without its having to be approved by the Lord Chamberlain, began with, "This is the land of freedom!" (1865), and went on, "Whether the public is so far educated as to avoid silly sensation plays and the drama according to Jack Sheppard is another question; but freedom is the rule. We have a free Parliament, free churches, a free press, and we shall have a very free theatre!" 56 One suddenly remembers the danger traditionally expressed in that word, "free."

It is in this light that we must interpret the great fear that the sensation craze excited. The Quarterly Review wrote of the sensation novel, "A class of literature has grown up around us, usurping in many respects, intentionally or unintentionally, a portion of the preacher's office, playing no inconsiderable part in moulding the minds and forming the habits and tastes of its generation; and doing so principally, we had almost said exclusively, by 'preaching to the nerves.'" 57 Other instruments of education besides the novel were taken over by sensation and seemed to "educate" the public in socially destructive ways. "The sensation drama has produced a system of sensation
lecturing," wrote one reporter of the great financial successes of Professor Pepper of the Polytechnic Institution.

"... Among sensation subjects the liability of ladies' dresses to ignite has lately increased in interest, owing to the frequent accidents arising from the employment of crinoline. Mr. Pepper has taken up the theme and illustrated it in a peculiarly striking and effective manner." To wit, he set fire on stage to a dummy in crinoline and then tried to light the fashionable dress of a real lady whose clothes had been treated with Hoxton incombustible starch. The kinship of this instructive demonstration with "Perilous Performances" is obvious. The Crystal Palace likewise fell down in its educational responsibilities. Ran a Punch poem on the hopes of the intellectuals for the educational attractions of the Crystal Palace:

They thought, poor souls! to draw the town,  
By their condensed zoo- and ethnology,  
Savages set in buff and brown,  
High art, and miniature geology,  
And courts and founts, and trees that crown  
With beauty Sydenham's swelling down—  
They owe the public an apology!

To their appeal the crowd was dumb,  
The share-list soon revealed the blunder;  
Of comfort 'twill not add a crumb  
Against JOHN BULL's bad taste to thunder.  
Best put up FLEXMORE or TOM THUMB,  
Or BLONDIN: if the public come,  
Ask not cui bono?—sack the plunder.

Disinterested education had been subordinated to commercial interests, an inevitable consequence of sensation and democracy.
The newspapers were likewise blamed for catering to the sensation rage. The great bitterness against the papers was heightened by the fact that newspapers were considered a most important instrument of enlightenment for the dangerous masses. 

"Sensation scribbling," "sensation paragraphs," "sensation topics," "sensation headers" (headlines, and a pun on Boucicault's famous sensation scene in The Colleen Bawn, in which he took a "header" into the lake), were attacked with new vigor for stirring up the desire for thrills at the expense of truth and the development of social responsibility in readers. The papers, in other words, were no better than sensation novels with the additional danger that what they reported paraded as fact. "Our journals have lately been little but enlarged editions of the Newgate Calendar," commented Punch a propos of a story in the Times. The Newgate Calendar regularly signified the source-book for sensation novels. Criticizing the lavish description in another Times article of the personal appearance of a prisoner at a trial, Punch's editors wrote, "If we had to write about a murderer we should try to use the plainest, coarsest English we could think of, and not weaken the effect of an appalling crime by speaking of it in the language of a three-volume romance." In fun, Punch also published a parody prospectus for a journal, The Sensation Times and Chronicle of Excitement, in which a "distin-
guished lady novelist has undertaken to do justice to the sentimental features" of crimes and domestic infidelities. It claimed that the paper would "supply the evident want of the Age," as well as "generally Unfitting the Public for the Prosaic Avocations of Life."63

The results anticipated from a sensation-educated public were very specific, and the symptoms of their effect were already in evidence. First was the reliance on immediate satisfaction, "appetite," and self-indulgence rather than sublimation, restraint, and self-control. The immediate political fear aroused by this was the fear of violence, whose control had been one of the great achievements of nineteenth-century England.64 The enthusiasm for public executions was considered an indication of brutish appetite, and it is significant that their abolition in 1868 was effected, not so much by a falling off of interest on the part of spectators, as by the energy of the abolitionists. In 1860 Dickens records having seen, "coming from the execution of the Wentworth murderer, such a tide of ruffians as never could have flowed from any point but the gallows. Without any figure of speech it turned one white and sick to behold them."65 The gathering of a crowd of over 100,000 at the public execution of four murderers at high noon in Liverpool, in 1863, provided powerful ammunition for the Society for the Abolition of Capital Punishment.
A remark from the diary of Henry Greville on the execution of Franz Müller, one of the most famous criminals of the 1860's, uncovers the source of the true fear: "There is a detailed account of this hideous spectacle in the 'Times,' and it makes one feel that if we were to fall upon revolutionary times, there are the elements in that mob for producing the same horrors as were enacted in France." 66

A second, related objection to sensation was its encouragement of "vulgar," maudlin sentiment and morbid emotionalism to replace morality. "Sensation meetings" were necessary to raise money for charities; "sensation topics" got all the attention at the expense of other more worthy subjects. I have already mentioned the renewed complaints about the susceptibility of jurors to sensation addresses, and sympathy with criminals was another much-deplored result of sensation. "Excitement," provided in such plenty by sensation, supplanting moral sensibility. "Hardly any feature of modern society is more conspicuous than the growing appetite for excitement, and the increasing ingenuity with which the means of gratifying it are supplied," said an essayist in the Saturday Review. "... The excitement that is really characteristic of this age is the excitement of quiet, respectable, orderly people. The life of the decently good has more pepper in it than it used to have. The author of Adam Bede has drawn a picture of the
leisurely life that fifty years ago prevailed in remote country parts. Such a life would seem absolutely without any interest now that we have grown accustomed to have our minds acted on by novelty and the desire for a succession of noticeable events. But desire for personal thrills did not provide a sound basis for the political responsibility of even the "decently good."

It perhaps seems contradictory that a third charge against sensation was its lack of sentiment, until we remember that sentimentality was the popular form of humane sensitivity. It had served as a practical substitute for intellectuality and stern principle in the people, however absurd the length to which it had been carried. Sensationalism undermined sentiment, and was therefore considered subversive. "... The morbid taste for seeing human life in peril is one of the most debasing of all depraved tastes," ran a typical commentary. "It blunts the sense of sympathy and deadens sensibility, and gradually paralyzes all the finer feelings which it is the aim of education to evoke. The craving for Sensation is a most unhealthy appetite, and public injury is done by all who pander to it." Since social conscience in the populace was expected to arise from "sensibility" rather than judgment, this was a more serious charge than the anti-intellectuality of sensation.
The Moral Climate

In the idea of public education, and if not the perfectibility, then the improvability, of the people, lies the source of the greatest protest against sensation. It is equally necessary to understand what in the intellectual and cultural conditions of the day, apart from an unwholesome receptivity to American weaknesses, made room for sensation. In the next chapter, I shall discuss the appeal of the main elements of sensation to the imagination of the time. But appeal to the imagination does not in itself sufficiently explain the rise of a widely condemned cultural phenomenon. Looking back on those years of "equipoise," as W. L. Burn calls them, it is possible to see reasons for the weakening power of the old Victorian values of propriety, chastity, abstinence, respectability, work, and sacrifice. When these values ceased to reflect the idealism of the middle class, popular culture was no longer designed to embody them. And simultaneous with this dissolution of the hitherto solidifying elements of earlier Victorianism was the sudden introduction of disturbing developments in science and religion which, although the average man did not directly concern himself with them, disrupted in a most serious way his customary patterns of thought and behavior. What had kept Victorian culture and society so cohesive up to this point was a set of shared assumptions about the
state, about morality, about religion, and about the position of the individual with regard to these—shared, that is, by the class of people with social and political power. The extraordinary social and cultural accomplishments of that time were made possible by this unity, and literature must have gone far toward producing it. In the beginning of the sixties, that unity was destroyed. "What one does not see, at any point in this generation," writes W. L. Burn of the years 1857-1867, "is unruffled calm. If there was equipoise, it was not deliberately planned or contrived. It was the outcome of a temporary balance of forces; but of forces struggling, pushing, shoving to better their positions." 69

The second Great Exhibition, of 1862, provides a kind of touchstone for the changes, since the first Great Exhibition had served as a signal of the success of Victorian civilization, and the second was organized with the intent of repeating the national euphoria that surrounded the first. The possibility of joy in 1862 was inhibited by the recent death of Prince Albert, the initiator and mastermind of both Exhibitions. But the real cause of the disillusion occasioned by the Exhibition of 1862 was the discovery during the past ten years that, as one conservative diarist put it, "Great Exhibitions are humbugs." 70
"In that year," wrote George Augustus Sala of 1851, no modern weapon of war was to be seen in the palace of glass and iron. In 1862 section after section showed cannon, gun, muskets, rifles, pistols, swords, daggers and other munitions of warfare. The promoters of the First Exhibition had thought, good souls! that the thousand years of war were over, and that the thousand years of peace were to be inaugurated; but they had awakened from that dulcet dream in 1862.  

The wars raging all over Europe and the apparent imminence of war with the United States were not the only proofs working against the "Irrational Exhibition," as Shirley Brooks called it.** Even more important was the growing realization of the limited ability of material wealth and material productivity to alter the course of mankind or create "civilization." "A gigantic joint-stock showroom" the Exhibition of '62 was called; "The Palace of Puffs."** The idealism inspired by the first Exhibition had soured to a mistrust of commercialism. A characteristic editorial expressed this stand about "our great error of 1851":

... it is the destiny of delusions that they must be found out, and that those who believed in them must suffer. The lesson, we may hope, has now been duly learned. War will not be put down by any amount of skill in making pruning-hooks. Ambition or selfishness will not be checked by the utterance of oracular sayings that they are wrong. Oppression does not become one jot more easy to a true-hearted and right-principled people because the despot desires them to eat, drink and be merry, and take no thought of the political tomorrow. In a word, man's mental, moral, and spiritual necessities are not to be satisfied by material wealth.
However self-evident such an idea may seem, it had not had a great deal of important currency in recent years, when profit was considered a reward of virtue, and making money a sign of desirable moral qualities. Statements to the contrary began to be frequent with the growing public recognition that "although trade is a very good thing, and although much of our intellectual and moral progress can be distinctly traceable to the influence of commerce, yet we require little reflection to see that trade brings with it many evil influences, and that what is good for trade is often very bad for Humanity." Among those influences must surely be listed sensation, though other aspects of "civilization" were considered to be at stake as well. "If," wrote one editorialist, a sarcastic enemy of this country were asked to define what was meant by the advancement of civilization by England, he would probably reply the opening of new markets for trade at the point of the bayonet. Although, as good patriots, we may reject the sneer, as men of common sense we must accept the fact.

Concurrent with the death of this dream came a drastically altered relation between the public and Queen Victoria, denying the nation a hitherto effective rallying point. To be sure, the Queen at the beginning of the sixties was no longer either young or beautiful, nor, after twenty-four years on the throne, was she the inspiring novelty she had been in 1837. But her almost complete
withdrawal from public life after the death of Prince Albert finally lost her respect and considerably diminished her effectiveness as a leader of the nation. "One of two things must happen to my sister; I know her," the Queen's sister-in-law was reported to have said on learning of Albert's death. "She must either die of this, or go out of her mind." She did not die, but she must in fact have been seriously affected. Nor was the Prince of Wales able to fill the gap her retirement left. Hardman reflected the general opinion in his diary:

Great anxiety is felt about the Prince of Wales and rumours, which I hope and believe are unfounded, have been freely circulated to the effect that his conduct is becoming loose. The Times on three successive days had an article calling on the Prince to take his proper position; now or never is to be seen if he is worthy of the love and confidence of the British nation. This has caused some conversation, for we naturally think the leading journal would not have dwelt so much on this topic without cause.

The desire of the people for a display of royal magnificence as a public symbol of Victorian achievement was evident in the "horrible pleasure massacres" occasioned by the crowds who thronged to the illuminations preceding the marriage of the Prince of Wales to Princess Alexandra; the failure of the Queen to accede to the wish was evident in the quiet country wedding at Windsor, with the Queen herself half-concealed in an alcove.
The break in political generations created by the retreat of the Queen from her public duties was heightened by the death of Palmerston in 1865. As Prime Minister almost continuously from 1855 until his death—earlier he had been Foreign Secretary from 1830 to 1851 with a lapse of only four years, and Home Secretary from 1851 to 1855—he was more than the chief political leader of Britain; he was almost symbolically associated with the reign of Queen Victoria and all that it meant. He was an old man, and his death was anticipated with fear by conservatives, who correctly foresaw an upsurge of liberalism, while the liberal forces awaited it with a sense of coming freedom. The expectation of change in these years during which, in a way, so little happened is neatly illustrated by a letter from Gladstone to John Bright in 1861. In it he predicts that "the men whose minds are full of the traditions of the last century, your chief and your foreign minister, will still cling to the past, and will seek to model the present upon it," but "the past is well nigh really past, and a new policy and a wiser and higher morality are sighed for by the best of people. . . ." The end of one generation and set of values in politics and the ascendancy of another contributed to the fear and excitement which characterized the mood of these years.
The symbolic weight of these shifts was accompanied by a more general and more practical change in attitudes toward government and patriotism as guiding inspiration for the moral life of the nation. The very success of Victorian society was creating a kind of lull at this time. The victory over heavy odds is more interesting than the actual state of accomplishment, and there can be little doubt that these years were the culmination of the Victorian effort to create a moral and humane society. But it was impossible for thinking people not to observe the inadequacies of that success and to wonder whither it had all tended. "Everyone knows that the bulk of the people of this country are, we will not say, careless or indifferent to politics when things are going well with them, but prosperity gives a turn to their ideas and habits apart from the earnest consideration of public affairs," read an editorial of 1860, pressing for the passage of a Reform Bill before the rabble demanded it in unruly ways. These years were prosperous, in spite of the terrible depression of the cotton mill towns; but the sorry record of the Crimean War, the fears of immovable bureaucracy (pointed out by Dickens in *Little Dorrit* in 1857-58), a loss of faith in the personal responsibility of politicians, and the realization of the insufficiency of law and government, as then conceived, to change people's lives, contributed to a decline in the power
of national and social ideals to capture the imagination.

The tendency was expressed in a number of articles like this in the *Temple Bar*, entitled "The Failures of Civilization":

Is there no failure in the civilization that can neither command the first condition of commercial prosperity,—peace,—nor even provide against such a calamity as the loss of the greatest staple of its manufacturing industry? . . . And civilization should give us internal peace, order, protection of life and property, and enjoyment. We have laws enough, a costly judiciary, and a police sufficiently ubiquitous. But is there a morning paper without its murder? Are robberies rare? Is it possible to record the cases of swindling? Can any Englishman be secure for any day that he will not be murdered, garotted, have his pocket picked, or be robbed or outraged in some way by a vast army of outlaws, who are permitted, with the full knowledge of the police, to ply their desperate callings? And so on. "Compromise" and "laissez-aller" were the political watchwords and hardly inspired personal absorption in the affairs of state. Ironically, at the very moment of need, the characteristics accompanying democratization and hastening its arrival were directing individual interests away from public concerns and toward involvement in self.

Events in the Church during the same years furnish one final reason for the decline of former Victorian morality. The threats to established religion during the early sixties offered a way of looking at the world that undermined the very basis of Victorian Christianity. The publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* at the beginning of the decade (November, 1859) denied the Creation and drew much attention, and hence passion, to the vexed relation
between the findings of modern science and the teachings of religion. The discussion was advanced by the publication less than a year later of *Essays and Reviews*, a collection of treatises by seven clergymen who advocated free inquiry on such matters as biblical inconsistencies, distinctions between "essential doctrines" and "external accessories," the role of science in theological interpretation, and even the crippling effect of Christianity on man's intellect. Its appearance, said one columnist, "has caused a great 'sensation,' if the word, vulgarised to the uses of theatres and comic minstrelsy, may be tolerated." In 1862 John William Colenso, Bishop of Natal, published *The Pentateuch and Book of Joshua Critically Examined*, pronouncing the first five books of the Bible, including Genesis and the Law of Moses, to be not historically true. The book was reviewed in terms like these used by the *Athenaeum*:

> These are the days of sensation novels, sensation drama, and sensation books. The sensational element has even crept into theology and with so much of its customary success, that a dull volume of essays has found itself a wider and more excited public than "Peep o' Day" [a sensation play] or "The Woman in White." But Dr. Williams and Dr. Temple [of *Essays and Reviews*] are novices in the art of exciting popular wonder compared against Dr. Colenso.

A further religious controversy was opened by the appearance the following summer of Ernest Renan's *Life of Jesus*, an historically critical biography.
E. E. Kellett maintains that "one of the few characteristics of the time really deserving to be called hypocrisy"—that is, conscious deceit—was the reticence of non-believers and true "materialists" to declare themselves so. This fact, although it complicated evaluating the reaction to the challenges to received belief thrown down in the sixties, reinforces my assertion of the hold that Victorian Protestant values had, not on the minds, but on the imaginations of the people. Any hypocrisy sustained so consistently for so long must have fulfilled an urgent need, even if that need could only be satisfied by a deception.

What distinguished religion in the sixties is that the question broke open and was publicly debated and doubted. The power of religion, whether genuinely theological or merely social, was seriously diminished, and it is hardly remarkable that the values of the Anglican Church became less potent in the literature of the time. Nor did the almost hysterical reaction of some prominent members of the Church to these attacks strengthen the Church's position. The confrontation was violent, and in many ways superficial and undignified, disillusioning many of those who would gladly have reconciled the recent findings with a continuance of Christian faith. The religious fights were seen as sensations, and sensation-symbols were adapted to the divines. *Punch*, for example, criticized the Rev. Edward
Pusey for his prosecution of Jowett, one of the contributors to *Essays and Reviews*, and for his condemnation of the Prince of Wales' choice of a non-Protestant bride, by calling him "A CLERICAL BLONDIN." Punch continued, "It is gratifying to see the agility with which DR. PUSEY, at his years, comes out on the High Church rope, so to speak, and tumbles thereon, flings somersaults, and stands on his head." The Archbishop of York, who gave a controversial speech against sensation literature at Huddersfield, was answered by Mr. Punch, who hints at an important reason for the effectiveness of sensation at this time:

I should like to see "sensation" less rampant in our periodicals; but will you forgive me for suggesting its introduction, in moderation, to our pulpits? . . . What splendid materials of effect your pulpit-orators command, compared with the poor sensation-monger of the penny-serial! Depend upon it, if your preachers were a little more stirring and moving, more in the habit of appealing to the minds, as well as feelings, of their congregations, less somnolent and self-satisfied, less in the habit of complacent assumption, reader to sympathise with real difficulties and honest doubts, keener to note the tendencies of modern thought, to look objections in the face, and examine questions all round, you would find in a more lively pulpit the best counterbalance of a too-sensational press.

The Church's failure to produce such a counterbalance contributed much to the development of a literature in which the Protestant values had little part and whose morality was entirely relativistic. Agnosticism—Huxley's word of 1869—was certainly not claimed by the average man,
but secularism, relativism, and godlessness were common enough. At about this time, Tennyson, according to his wife, talked of "the deadly curse of these days, the loss in so many of the belief in a personal God and in the human soul. He feels," she continued, "that we are on the edge of a mortal strife for the life of all that is great in man and that this will be the cause." And a new subject appeared in popular magazines, as in *Temple Bar* in 1866: "Is a System of Morals Possible?" It posed the question, "Is it possible, without the aid of a Divine revelation, to frame a system of principles and rules of conduct applicable to all men, which shall at once be philosophically satisfactory, and available as a practical guide?" Begging the now uncertain question of Divine revelation, the article concluded in the negative:

An universal standard, and a theory that shall be suitable for all, can only, as it seems to us, be possible at a day when our knowledge of man's nature and of the circumstances in which he finds himself shall have attained a depth, completeness, and precision, of which as yet we see no symptoms.

No wonder readers did not choose to immerse themselves in preachy novels, and turned instead to the ethical ambiguities of sensation literature in which a man or a woman was judged according to "the circumstances in which he finds himself," rather than any absolute set of values.

Thus did the political and moral life of the nation make room at this historical moment for a new literature and
a new source of pleasure that challenged, defied, or simply
ignored the established values of Victorian civilization.
Sensation literature was popular, vigorous, unphilosophical,
and individualistic. Unlike the great literature which
followed or accompanied it—the works of George Eliot,
Thomas Hardy, George Meredith, and Trollope, for example—
sensation literature proposed no alternatives to what it had
rejected. While refusing to endorse self-discipline, social
considerations, or Protestantism as practical or moral
goods, it offered nothing particular as a replacement,
except for simple escape from restraint or isolated con-
siderations which in no way tended toward a coherent world-
view. But though it was illegitimate and highly criticized,
it freed literature from its social responsibilities and
enabled it to take up the cause of the individual instead.
The equivocation and self-contradiction of sensationalism
were the product of cultural, religious, and political
confusion, of eddies and backwaters that could not be con-
trolled by available visions. Sensation was in many ways
an expression, though incoherent, of a new and unshaped
freedom.
Notes

141 (20 July 1861), 31.

2Illustrated London News, 1 Dec. 1860, 508. This particular phrase appeared in a news story reporting the election of Abraham Lincoln as president, an "unequalled sensation" even in America.

3Illustrated London News, 5 Nov. 1864, 459.

4Punch, 43 (16 Aug. 1862), 65. This assertion is incidentally not supported by the Dictionary of Americanisms or the Dictionary of American English.


7Greville, I, 401.

843 (13 Sept. 1862), 116.


11The Illustrated London News, which printed and endorsed the Queen's letter (1 Aug. 1863, 108 and 111), emphasized the wide application of the incident: "... When we say a vulgar crowd we do not mean to speak only of the uneducated. ... No class of the ordinary pleasure-hunter is free from guilt in this matter: some assemblies may be dirtier and coarser than others; but all, washed and unwashed, are attracted by a spectacle which is offensive to refinement and humanity" (25 July 1863, 82).

12Punch, 41 (28 Dec. 1861), 257.


14Annual Register, 1860, Chronicle, p. 51.
Mrs. Browning's encounter with spiritualism was as unusual, I am convinced, as her own intensity of nature. Most seances and spirit-sessions were attended out of curiosity and the desire for thrills, not out of faith; her experience does not partake of "sensation," but that of most people did. It was not by a frivolity that Browning was so impassioned, but by the betrayal of so fine a trust and intelligence as hers.

That editorial positions had little relation to the interest of such articles is illustrated by "Stranger than Fiction," an anonymous account of several seances published in the Cornhill (2 Aug. 1860), 211-224. Its author assured the audience of the integrity of the spiritualists and vowed they had had no opportunity to play tricks; to the article was affixed a disclaimer by Thackeray dissociating both himself and the Cornhill from the writer's attitudes. The presence of both points of view protected the audience from having to consider the validity of the underlying assumptions of spiritualism and allowed them to enjoy speculating on how it was done.
Dickens' contributions to the sensation craze and the special aspects of sensation in these last works will be discussed in Chapters V and VII.


The Quarterly Review, 113 (April 1863), 485.

Letters and Speeches, 38, 239.

Illustrated London News, 10 March 1860, 226.

Ibid., 2 June 1860, 518.

16 June 1860, 569.

Greville, II, 202. His own opinion of Garibaldi was: "The fact is, the man is a goose."

The Diary of Lady Cavendish, II, 207.

Illustrated London News, 23 April 1864, 403.


Greville, I, 414.


38 (12 May 1860), 195.

Letters and Speeches, 38, 54.

A Mid-Victorian Pepys, p. 222.

42 (5 April 1862), 139.

The Quarterly Review, 110 (July 1861), 288.

Illustrated London News, 18 Nov. 1865, 482.

(Aug. 1861), 153.

It is interesting that twenty years before, Caroline Fox reported John Sterling's opinion about popular
education thus: "It is not those who read simply, but those who think, who become enlightened. Real education has such an effect in restraining and civilizing men, that in America no police force is employed where education is general. In a democracy it is all-important; for, as that represents the will of the people, you must surely make that will as reasonable as possible." (Horace Pym, ed., Memories of Old Friends, Being Extracts from the Journals and Letters of Caroline Fox, from 1835 to 1871 [Philadelphia, 1882], p. 123.)

52 Illustrated London News, 21 May 1864, 503.
53 Ibid., 22 March 1862, 284.
54 Ibid., 7 May 1864, 442.
55 43 (13 Sept. 1862), 116.
56 Illustrated London News, 20 May 1865, 487.
113 (April 1863), 482.
58 Illustrated London News, 14 March 1863, 270.
59 40 (22 June 1861), 258.
60 The cheapness of many newspapers made them more available to this class of readers than other reading matter. When the Daily Telegraph came down to a penny in 1856, it was a momentous development. The History of "The Times" in 1939 still described the effect of the penny daily thus: "The Daily Telegraph, which in its maturity was to reach a notably high standard of journalism, began that imitation by London newspapers of sensational New York journalism which, as was feared and prophesied in 1835 and 1855, has since gone far to destroy the English type of popular newspaper and periodical" (II [New York, 1939], pp. 295-296).
61 39 (13 Oct. 1860), 141.
62 42 (31 May 1862), 215.
63 44 (9 May 1863), 193.
64 I am convinced that the strength of this fear is part of what lies behind the terrific Victorian interest in crime. The veneer of "civilization" was sufficiently fragile that the threat of physical violence breaking out was
always present; crime provided an outlet for the fear and
the fascination of the fearful, since crime is condemned
and, however widespread, isolated, unlike for example
revolution.

65. Letters and Speeches, 38, 37-38.
66. II, 224-225.
67. 10 (8 Sept. 1860), 295.
68. Punch, 43 (6 Dec. 1862), 229.
69. The Age of Equipoise: A Study of the Mid-
70. William Archer Shee, My Contemporaries, 1830-1870
(London, 1893), p. 266.
71. The Life and Adventures of George Augustus Sala,
Written by Himself (New York, 1896), I, 376.
72. A Mid-Victorian Pepys, p. 118.
73. Illustrated London News, 10 May 1862, 464.
74. Ibid., 3 May 1862, 431.
75. Cornhill, 9 (May 1864), 566.
76. Illustrated London News, 4 July 1863, 1.
77. Diary of Lady Frederick Cavendish, I, 199.
78. A Mid-Victorian Pepys, pp. 69-70.
79. An entry in Lord Shaftesbury's diary, Dec. 22, 1864,
expresses his fear of Palmerston's death and the probability
of Gladstone and Reform in these terms, for example: "Thus
we have before us democracy, popery, infidelity, with no
spirit of resistance in the country, no strong feelings, no
decided principles, a great love of ease, and a great fear
of anything that may disturb that ease; and a willingness,
nay, a forwardness, to put every apprehension aside, and
say, 'What does it signify?'" (Edwin Hodder, The Life and
Work of the Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury K. G. [London,
1893], p. 596.)

80. Quoted by Asa Briggs, The Making of Modern England
1783-1867, The Age of Improvement (1959; rpt. New York,
The attribution of "sensation" to the penny serial was a common misapplication by critics whose real concern was the reading material of the middle, rather than the lower, classes, in their anxiety to shift the onus to another class.

Hallam Tennyson, Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir by His Son (New York, 1898), II, 419.

16 Jan. 1866, 180 and 187.
CHAPTER III

THE SENSATION IMAGINATION

The breaking up of old restrictions explains why sensation was possible in the 1860's; it does not, however, show why it should have taken the form that it did. To a certain extent the elements of sensation were simply those initiated by the first popular sensation artists and copied as any fashion is copied. But since one of the attributes of the successful popular artist is his accuracy in appraising the cultural needs of the time, we need to seek further for the explanation.

One of the offices of literature is to provide a form for coming to terms with the fears that concern a people, and whenever the currently accepted ideals for literature exclude the discussion of these threats, literature finds a way of subverting those ideals in order to cope with the subjects that trouble the human imagination. The long success of the medieval allegory and legend must have been due to their ability to contain examinations of evil and sin within the Christian frame. To the dramatists of the English Renaissance, politically corrupt Italy provided an indispensable antithesis to the ordered Elizabethan
ideal. Shakespeare was able to contemplate contemporary political fears by displacing them historically. The medieval castle of the 18th century Gothic novel offered a subversive counterpart of the tenets of neo-classicism; the high seas, the African jungle, or Indian forest a formalized suspension of social law for English writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Geographic and historical distance are of course only very obvious ways of eluding the restrictions of one's own time. English literature's interest in the Jew, for example, both in the Renaissance and in the nineteenth century, surely reflects a concern in two highly organized societies with the man who is rich, powerful, and at the same time an outcast.

Because of the extraordinarily rigid censorship exercised over topics for ladies' reading (and ladies formed the largest group of readers of novels and of many periodicals), and because of the unanimity with which decorums were observed, mid-century Victorianism had not far to look for subversive material. By the 1860's the underside of the acceptable world lay in perversions of the social order, in violations by the respectable of social law and even of manners, in scandal, crime, insanity, broken homes—in short, disruptions of every personal and social Victorian ideal. Every ideal, that is, except the suppression of sex, against which the taboos were so deep that breaking them was
uncomfortable and unpleasurable, "disgusting" rather than "delicious."

The political, scientific, and religious developments I outlined in the last chapter stimulated particular fears and problems in the imaginative life of the nation, and the need to acknowledge them in cultural life lies at the heart of sensation literature, the form it took, and its place in literary history. A distinction should be drawn at this point between kinds of "sensation." Though all "sensations," literary and non-literary, were correctly lumped in contemporary discussion as expressive of the same impulses, their significance in the culture of the time and in the long run, was not by any means equivalent. Non-literary, non-dramatic "sensation" entertainments were merely chaotic satisfactions of the desire for excitement, and therefore a sign of the needs of the time. But in themselves they were meaningless. Literature, on the other hand, answered the same needs by incorporating the elements of sensation into a continuous story with an existence of its own. As such, it had a much greater power of suggestion, and therefore a greater influence on its participants. It provided a sense of the reality of its world which non-literature could not supply--a phenomenon which bewildered the critics of sensation, who railed against a people who refused to accept the death of the fictional Octoroon, but
were unmoved by the actual death before their eyes of a
tightrope walker. The novel, especially, provided the
possibility of exploration and speculation. Literature
worked out the human problems and human possibilities
implied in a situation, thus adding many layers to both the
excitement and the satisfaction of "sensation." The result
was sensation as an impulse toward a comprehensive view of
people and society. People were seen in relation to some­
thing; sensation was connected with life itself. A view,
as opposed to an isolated thrill, has to be examined,
accepted, or rejected—experienced, at least—and in these
terms, sensation had far-reaching effects. The novel was
better suited at that moment than the drama to convey such
a view, and was also more available to those who needed
sensation. I will go into the differences between sensation
drama and sensation novels in later chapters; at the moment
it is only necessary to state that the deepest effects of
sensation were felt almost exclusively in the novel.

The widely read periodicals, especially those carry­
ing sensation novels, provide a means for locating and
identifying the especially suggestive imaginative material
of the time. An author observed in a major periodical that
"The great peculiarity of periodical literature is, that it
reflects, with minute exactness, the moral and intellectual
features of the society in which it exists; and there is no
particular in which it does this more precisely than in respect of the different degrees of earnestness and power with which different subjects are discussed."² And, we might add, the frequency. In those matters which they discussed earnestly, powerfully, and frequently, the contents of the famous and successful middle-class magazines for these years— the *Cornhill*, *Temple Bar*, *All the Year Round*, *Blackwood's*, the *Saturday Review*, and the *Quarterly Review*, for example— demonstrate with remarkable consistency popular interest in the subjects drawn on most heavily by sensation drama and sensation fiction. Their subjects, methods of treatment, and attitudes go far to explain the needs fulfilled by sensation fiction, as well as its special accomplishments.

Subverting Sweet Domesticity

History was of course a traditional source of romance-making; Sir Walter Scott, often invoked by sensation enthusiasts as a progenitor of sensation, had fully indicated its possibilities. The many historical incidents retold during these years were notable, first of all for their almost exclusively aristocratic subjects; the very rich, the noble, and especially the royal, were the source of particular interest on account of the wealth and luxury which surrounded them, their power, and the importance and acceptability which remained to them regardless of their
actions. A review of the very popular *Vicissitudes of
Families and Other Essays*, published in 1860, tried to
analyze the interest in such subjects:

As we read of the rise and fall of illustrious
houses, of the elevation and extinction of his­
toric names, of the different sources and varying
fortunes of nobility, we are insensibly led to
speculate on the political, social, and moral uses
of the institution, on the nature and tendency of
blood, and race, on the genuine meaning and phi­
losophy of what is called Birth, and on the
comparative force of the distinction in the lead­
ing communities that have more or less adopted it. ³

As the title of the book indicated and the review pointed
out, what was interesting about these tales was not the
characters' good works but their "vicissitudes." Such books
and articles were devoted exclusively to crimes, actual or
suspected, sexual laxity, falls from favor, and unhappy
marriages. Female figures were of especial interest. ⁴ The
heroine of one of M. E. Braddon's sensation novels, whose
faults arise from her absorption in sensation novels and
her propensity for interpreting reality in their light,
teaches history thus:

She let them off with a very slight dose of the
Heptarchy and the Normans, and even the early
Plantagenet monarchs; but she gave them plenty
of Anne Boleyn and Mary Queen of Scots,—fair
Princess Mary, Queen of France and wife of Thomas
Brandon,—Marie Antoinette, and Charlotte Corday.⁵

A typical article claimed to re-examine the reputation of
Nero, discussing stories told about his crimes, especially
his murder of his mother and of his wife. Another recounted
the story of a Queen of Denmark who had died of poison at the age of twenty-three, having been accused of unchastity but never brought to trial or properly justified. A similar article, entitled "The Queen's Necklace," discussed the question of Marie Antoinette's faithfulness to her husband. And so on.

Such articles, and there were many of them, had several points in common. They confined themselves in the main to relatively unknown figures or to unknown stories about famous figures—like the article "Richelieu's Shabby Suit," which told of Richelieu's involvement with a beautiful and unscrupulous girl, with whom he fell in love, and who for a period of years forged his name to rob him. One is reminded of Browning's anticipation of this fashion for exploiting the possibilities of obscure figures and episodes; it may explain his belated popularity in the sixties. The articles were strangely democratic in their insistence on the inclination of the aristocracy to behavior befitting the lowest classes, made romantic by the splendor of their surroundings. Historical interpretation, however, was carefully avoided; the tales were told not in any organic relation to the past, but as isolated stories of interest in themselves, a decided reaction against the familiar "past and present" technique of the earlier Southey-Carlyle-Pugin era.
And because the incidents could be defended as "true," this approach to history provided the converse to Macaulay's flattering comparisons of modern times with times gone by. It made no attempt at glorifying the triumph of civilization, but implicitly rejoiced in lack of restraints, moral purpose, or social aims, and in brutality, cruelty, violence, and uncontrolled passion expressed in action. From the consequences of such a train of thought, the reader was protected by historical distance. In sensation literature, historical settings were limited almost entirely to the drama, which relied on them heavily enough. Nearly contemporary America and Ireland were the only rivals for the past in sensation drama, and in those cases geographic and national differences, and existing prejudices and stereotypes offered the same protective distance as history.

Otherwise, sensation drama profited but little from the topics of contemporary interest; and even in their treatment of history, sensation plays relied on old forms of tragedy, comedy, and melodrama to express traditional values. The sensation novel, on the other hand, almost by definition excluded historical topics. Yet in many ways it coincided more nearly than the drama with the spirit behind these historical stories. The precursors of the sensation novel had used historical subjects already--Jack Sheppard is a prime example. The sensation novel was sensational
partly because it transferred the actions, deeds, and situations of the uncivilized past to contemporary settings. Less conservative than the drama, it made no pretense that these things could not happen today. Crimes, immorality, violence, marital unhappiness among the powerful classes who set the moral tone of their day—all these, it implied, were to be found immediately at hand in everyday life. A paradigm of this method, more often carried out by implication than by specific transplants of historical incidents, was Wilkie Collins' use of an 18th century French crime as the basis of the plot for The Woman in White, with its modern setting. "The Strange Story of the Marquise de Douhault," the original of Collins' case, also provided the subject of an article in the Cornhill three years later, though without referring to The Woman in White.6

Contemporary analogues to these tales of times gone by were to be found in the newspapers. The Police Reports were long-time favorites, and crime had been an almost obsessive interest since the beginning of the Victorian reign. But a new concern, paralleling closely the appeal of the historical articles, was that in domestic offences and divorces, an interest which was a hallmark of the sensation novel. It can only be seen as a rebellion against the Victorian family ethic and the ideal of "sweet domesticity" which formed so vitally the life and education of women.
The fascination with marital unhappiness in the specific form of divorce and, the other great favorite, bigamy, must have been greatly enhanced by the fact that sexual taboos, in their application to literature, were as strong as ever, and so the topic could only be discussed gingerly. Plenty of suggestion, however, was available to those schooled in reading between the lines in those literary marriages which ended in divorce, separation, or bigamy.

In 1857 jurisdiction over divorce had been transferred from the ecclesiastical to the civil courts and a special act of Parliament was no longer required, with the result not only that divorces, being easier to get, became more frequent among the middle classes, but that the proceedings of the court became publicly available and were reported in extenso in the daily papers. The enormous interest taken in them is a measure of how scandalous and fascinating the idea of unsuccessful marriage must have been, and how little the desire to indulge in such ideas had hitherto been satisfied. The "delicate subjects," the "painful details," the necessity in most cases for a woman's recounting them, were endlessly thrilling, and provided a profitable staple of news in such diverse papers as the Times and the Daily Telegraph. Punch commented frequently on the improper interest taken in such proceedings, and suggested ironically the publication of a Divorce Journal.
It must also be noted that a divorce cost money, and that most of those suing for it were very well off. In answer to the proposal discussed in the House of Commons to close the Divorce Court Sessions, Mr. Roebuck offered an example of the special Victorian device of rationalizing the usefulness of what one knows should be forbidden:

He argued that morality was better served by publicity being given to the causes for which a man's wife desired to be divorced. He thought also that the publicity of that Court had got rid of the sham that this kind of immorality was confined to the upper and lower classes, and that the middle class was free from it, which has proved to be far from the case.9

The comparative rush on the Divorce Court emphasized a new freedom to criticize and re-evaluate the family as the source of ultimate happiness. "Statistics of Domestic Happiness," Punch called its paragraph mentioning that 153 cases had come before the court during one three-week period.10 An article on "Domestic Life" in Temple Bar concentrated on the difficulties in the personal relations between children and parents and husband and wife as the British family was constituted:

All this is social blasphemy to the ears of some. People who believe in the English home as something of divine origin and flawless practice will not readily credit the evidence of their senses, when that evidence goes to prove that there are chips, and cracks, and parted seams, and broken edges here, as in everything else, and that the English home is a fallible institution like the rest of human work.11
But though this fallibility was a chief ingredient of the sensation novel, the novels were nevertheless ambivalent about divorce. Like their readers who found sensation in domestic misery precisely because such topics were still half-forbidden, sensation novels were caught in a kind of confusion. Marriage and family were criticized as possible social evils— one sensation novel, in fact, Ouida's *Held in Bondage*, even claimed to be a didactic novel against "Early Marriage," a polite cover for all marriage. But most of these novels avoided divorce whenever possible (frequently by setting the stories just before 1857); and when they were divorced, the characters often felt that a marriage was really only dissolved by death anyway. In Mrs. Henry Wood's *East Lynne*, for example, the heroine is divorced from her husband; yet the husband does not feel free to remarry until he hears, mistakenly, of his former wife's death. The situation that results when he does remarry is therefore the same in its emotional overtones as if it were forthrightly bigamous. In Mrs. Lynn Linton's *Grasp Your Nettle*, the hero has been married before, and divorced; but the whole story turns on discovering whether the first wife is in fact dead, as he thinks, and therefore whether his second marriage is legitimate. A woman who has been divorced, however legitimate her reasons, remains a social outcast in sensation literature. Even *Held in Bondage*, an
acknowledged plea for tolerance with regard to divorce, rejects the divorcée: the book is written entirely from the point of view of its male characters.

Yet the onerousness of marriage, the ease with which a bad marriage may be contracted, and the necessity for ending such an arrangement were central subjects of many sensation novels. The heroes of both *Grasp Your Nettle* and *Held in Bondage* (there are two such in the latter) were married to bad, designing women who exploited their innocence. In Wilkie Collins' *Armadale* one of the two heroes marries a female fiend who nearly destroys him. The immoral but sympathetic heroine of *Land At Last*, attributed to Edmund Yates but really written by Mrs. Cashel Hoey, finds domesticity so unbearably dull after her life of street-walking, that she leaves her husband for the old, good-for-nothing lover she was (as it turns out) really married to all along. The exemplary parents of Wilkie Collins' *No Name*, though in love with each other, are unable to marry because of the ill-advised early marriage of the father to a drunkard. The examples are too numerous to mention. The infrequency with which children are born to heroines would seem another implicit indication of the sterility of marriage in these novels.

For all that, outright adultery among the respectable characters is not explicitly admitted. As a social
phenomenon we know it was common but it was generally excluded from immortalization in literature. Except in the highly shocking *East Lynne*, and in *No Name*, where it is the older generation who live together unmarried, the idea of adultery occurs chiefly by suggestion in the cases of people whose marriages suddenly become, or threaten to become, null and void, whether through the bigamy of one partner or a fraudulent or illegal wedding. Circumstances such as these suddenly turn relationships hitherto considered legitimate into adulterous ones, forcing a re-examination of both marriage and adultery. In Mrs. Norton's *Lost and Saved*, for instance, the heroine is tricked into believing that a marriage ceremony performed in the wilds of Egypt is valid; when it proves to have been performed by a doctor posing as an Anglican minister, she still considers herself "married" to the man who thus imposed on her, and even considers him the legal father to her child.\(^{12}\) The hero of *Land at Last* discovers that his wife is married to another man, and learns that the marriage he contracted in all good faith has left him, in every other respect a highly moral and respectable man, father to a bastard. There are countless other examples, though the point of view differs depending on whether sympathy has been enlisted for the bigamist or for the unwitting mate; but of course the
piquancy is greatest in those few cases where there were children.

That bigamy should so often be invoked as the means of creating these situations is a sign of the crudity and the limited acceptability of the materials at hand for those who wanted to write subversively of marriage and of sex. The novelist was restricted to work within legal, rather than moral, formulations of marriage and love relationships. Because divorce was technically neither a sin nor a crime, it was an inadequate vehicle for the feelings the situation excited. Bigamy, on the other hand, was both. Like other crimes in the sensation novel, it provided an outward form to replace the psychological state the author wanted to discuss and the readers to read about. It was indispensable to the sensation novel. Many were set in 1855 to eliminate the possibility of divorce; some offered other reasons for their characters' preference of bigamy to divorce: expense or dislike of unseemly publicity in the press. Naming bigamy as the prime subject of the sensation novel, a reviewer in the Quarterly Review wrote snidely,

It is really painful to think how many an interesting mystery and moral lesson will be lost, if Sir Cresswell Cresswell's Court [the divorce court] continues in active work for another generation. Bigamy will become as clumsy and obsolete an expedient for the relief of discontented partners as the axe was in Juvenal's day, compared with the superior facilities of poison.
Interest in bigamy among the respectable was increased by two exciting law cases in 1861, enhanced by their resemblance to sensation novels. At more than one dinner party, "The principal subject of conversation when the ladies had retired was an extraordinary trial now going on at Dublin"¹⁴ (note that it was Irish). This was the Yelverton case. An "Irish lady of great beauty and accomplishments"¹⁵—and incidentally a Catholic—had met and married a rakish soldier while she was doing charity work abroad during the Crimean War. He had never intended anything but seduction and soon abandoned her to marry a rich woman. The public was universally sympathetic to the charming first wife, and a chief interest in the trial was the impassioned speeches of her lawyer about the depths of woman's love.

A second case, arousing less passionate involvement but equally wide interest, was that of Bonaparte vs. Bonaparte. After the death of Prince Jerome in 1860, a claim to his estate had been filed by Elizabeth Paterson, an American whom the prince had married in his youth. His brother the Emperor had insisted on a subsequent state marriage with Catherine Sophia of Württemberg. Though I suspect the reporting of these trials was as much affected by sensation novels as sensation novels could have been by the trials,¹⁶ these two cases cleared the sensationists from
charges of fantasizing. They proved that bigamists could be not only aristocratic, but their victims attractive, lovable, and wronged, and that they really did exist within the confines of modern society—even if they were Irish, American, or French.

Crime and Criminals

What bigamy did for adultery, other crime did for overt and outright social rebellion. Fascination with crime was nothing new in the sixties. It offered middle-class readers an experience in freedom from social and moral restrictions that was simply unavailable to them in their own lives. The sensation novel was not the first to center around crime and criminals. In addition to Dickens' treatments of the underside of society (beginning with Oliver Twist, though not until Great Expectations, 1860-61, did a criminal, Magwitch, actually become the moral center of the book), the Newgate novels had earlier been inspired, like the sensation novel, by even reasonably recent crimes.

But crime in the sensation novel took on a new, almost revolutionary, aspect. Unlike any of the earlier crime novels, the sensation novel was addressed to women, and its treatment of crime was full of what I can only call feminine interest. To begin with, the criminal was frequently a woman—the "lovely fiend of fiction," as Gilbert called her—and a woman who in other ways was an acceptable
and appealing member of the middle or upper class. When the heroine was not actually a criminal herself, she was in some way implicated in a crime, with varying degrees of innocence. Secondly, the world in which the sensation novel was set was not the slums of London, but the drawing room, the beautiful country estate, or the boudoir. In earlier crime novels, including Oliver Twist, criminality had been kept at an unmistakable distance from the middle class, which was present only to have its pockets picked and its snug suburban premises burglarized. In the sensation novel the underside of the social mind, the discord between personal behavior and social law, moved into the respectable classes and among respectable people. The inner sanctum was violated, the home, the private lives of the secure and the good. Bigamy, for example, was a peculiarly domestic kind of crime. And lastly, because of its automatically sympathetic heroines and familiar settings, the sensation novel focused not so much on the crime itself as on criminal psychology. However crude many of these novels were, they explored, or attempted to explore, complexity of motive, confusion of moral judgment, and the possibility of justification or innocence in crime. Of all the qualities of the sensation novel this was the most individualistic and most "modern"; interest was beginning to shift very thoroughly from the way in which an individual could be made to
fit into society, to the failure of blanket social and moral rules to accommodate the individual.

It was assumed both at the time and afterwards that the sensation novel was largely suggested by the unusual number of "sensation crimes" during the sixties. I have come to believe that assumption faulty. The publicity given the sensation crimes indicated the state of mind of which the sensation novel was a literary expression; the imaginative needs of the time influenced journalism as well as literature. These crimes were frequently described and considered in terms of the sensation novel, or "romance."

Commenting on the "ample supply of wild stories" in the current news, one editorialist remarked that, "There is sufficient of mystery about some of these to cause the newspapers, now and then, to be taken up in preference to the romance." The article on the sensation novel in the Quarterly Review expressed the opinion that sensation novels and the news offered the same appeal to readers:

There is something unspeakably disgusting in this ravenous appetite for carrion, this vulture-like instinct which smells out the newest mass of social corruption, and hurries to devour the loathsome dainty before the scent has evaporated. When some memorable crime of bygone days presents features which have enabled it to survive the crowd of contemporary horrors, and, by passing into the knowledge of a new generation, has in some degree attained to the dignity of history, there is much to be said in defense of a writer of fiction who sees in the same features something of a romantic interest which makes them available for the purposes of his art; but it is difficult to extend
the same excuse to the gatherer of fresh stimulants from the last assizes.¹⁹

I do not intend to give a detailed discussion of the notable crimes of the sixties; the stories of most of them have been told elsewhere. But the most widely discussed of them should be noted simply in their relation to the sensation novel, the ways in which they aroused interest because of their similarity to sensation novels, rather than the reverse, and the corroboration they offered that the elements of sensation attributed to modern life were real, not imaginary.

One of the earliest was the famous Road murder, which created two separate sensations, first at its commission in 1860, and again in 1865 when Constance Kent, a chief suspect, confessed to her "cool, well-planned, and most devilish murder of her baby-brother"²⁰--actually, half-brother--and was sentenced to prison for life. The four-year-old child had been found hideously mangled in the outhouse, though he slept in the same room with a nurse who purported to have heard nothing. The details of special interest were of the same variety as those which distinguished sensation novels. The Kents were a respectable middle-class family, whose troubles arose from marital and family difficulties. The murdered child was the son of Mr. Kent's second wife, a former governess in the family; the first Mrs. Kent had gone insane, a tendency possibly
inherited by her daughter Constance, who resented bitterly her stepmother and her stepmother's son. Victorians must also have been impressed by the fact that the Kents had several children after his wife was certifiably insane. The fairy-tale theme of the wicked stepmother, or deep discord between children and their parents, was a prime ingredient in sensation plots, as was the pretty, ambitious governess who tricked her employer into marrying her (Lady Audley, for one; Lydia Gwilt of Collins' *Armadale*, for another). So were madness, as we shall shortly see, marital difficulties, and sexual irregularities. Furthermore, suspicion fell on an almost grown young woman (Constance was sixteen at the time) of solid background. But the insolvency of the crime was the particular fascination, especially because of the apparent absence of the usual motives for crime: gain or revenge. The police failed to make a case or produce a conviction, giving scope to the amateur arm-chair detectives who wrote letters-to-the-editor proposing solutions based on the newspaper reports. A writer for the *Cornhill* finally suggested that, "It is impossible not to infer that what people really wish for is the key to a puzzle and not the punishment of a crime"—exactly the same interest that the *Quarterly* reviewer attributed to the readers of sensation novels:

Each game is played with the same pieces [characters], differing only in the moves. We watch them
The connection between the interest in this crime and the interest in sensation fiction was widely remarked upon. One editorialist, for example, commented on finding a long review of *The Woman in White* in the *Times* followed by a long letter on the Road murder:

Was there ever a more pregnant juxtaposition? One critic had to enlarge on the imaginary crimes of Mr. Collins's characters. To him succeeded another critic whose duty it was to sift, compare, and weigh the features of that horrible mystery . . . which continues to baffle and appall the shrewdest among us.  

The Northumberland Street Affray of 1861 created much excitement because "the case is curious and the details are worthy of a modern French novel" (a "modern French novel" differed from a sensation novel in adding overt sexual interest to its treatment of other forms of anti-sociality). The case involved a middle-class woman who owed money to her lover, a solicitor named Roberts. The solicitor lured her husband, Major Murray, into his office and suddenly attacked him. Major Murray, taken completely by surprise since he had never even met Roberts before, defended himself with a pair of fire tongs and a beer bottle, killing his attacker after a long and brutal fight. "Another most curious and inexplicable case [which] has
occupied public attention" occurred almost at the same time: the attempt of a French nobleman, the Baron de Vidil, to murder his young son on a lonely back road in England. The extreme violence and the premeditation of the attack—the Baron had urged his son to ride along that isolated lane, and had deliberately turned on him with the horse whip when they were out of anyone's sight—, its perpetration by a member of the foreign aristocracy, and its involvement with family affairs put it in the sensation category. The Baron, it turned out, was in financial difficulties, and needed the inheritance settled by his wife on their son, which the Baron could inherit only at his son's death. The Baron moved in circles familiar to English aristocracy, and had even been known by some of them in Paris.

The Vidil case hinged on a will, a long-time inspiration for Victorian romance. Sensation novelists used it as frequently as their forerunners, combining it with another favorite theme, forgery. The trial in 1862 of the most important forger since Fauntleroy and T. G. Wainwright, William Roupell, not only satisfied the sensation hunger of the public, but was actually mentioned in a number of sensation novels as a kind of myth. The case had turned on the disruptions of a private middle-class family. William Roupell was the elder of two sons by the same parents; but his father had not married his mother until
after his birth, so that although his younger brother was legitimate, he was not. The father had left everything to the younger son. William had forged another will leaving everything to his mother and naming himself as co-executor, thus giving himself access to the money, which he squandered thoroughly between the death of his father in 1856 and the time when his younger brother accused him of the crime six years later. The imaginative material offered by this crime lay largely in the question of which son should have been the true heir, and whether the older son did not have understandable provocation in the legal technicalities which robbed him of his rights— as well as, naturally enough, in the matter of the marriage.

One last example of the kind of interest and the kind of reporting the great crimes of the sixties excited is a report of the famous Franz Müller case, "a murder in a railway carriage, of the bad, old, mysterious, and crude sort, with a fascination, far surpassing, as reality always does imitation, the feeble interest of the Lady Audley school of fictionist." The difference between the "feeble interest" of sensation romance, and the "bad, old, crude" sort of crime is revealing. The "feeble interest" was that aroused by the characters' morbid introspection, questioning accepted modes of determining right and wrong, brought on by crimes of the middle and upper classes, involving family
difficulties of love, parentage, and marriage. The old crude kind were crimes whose interest lay in the gory details alone, not in delicate moral issues. The sensation interest raised by this crime was not only the eminent respectability of the victim, but the possibility that the law might be wrong in condemning Franz Müller, who had not confessed, though the evidence pointed irrefutably to him.

Here is a report of his execution:

... Have we not all during the last week been watching the last act of a murder-tragedy with wonderful interest? Again, were we not all intensely relieved, nay, as much "overjoyed," as the newspapers had it, as good Dr. Cappel himself, when he ran down the ladder into the prison crying out, "Thank God he has confessed"? Yes, the chief actor in this dire tragedy, who by wickedness, force of character, obstinacy, stupidity, cupidity, or what you will, had raised himself to the bad eminence he occupied, had moreover attained a certain mastery over the weaker minds by which he was surrounded, and had impressed them with an idea of his innocence. So in this "sensational novel," which we all read in the newspapers, the interest was wrought up to one point, and the culmination—the secret being well kept—only took place at the very last second of time, when, before that fatal trap opened which let the murderer fall from Time to Eternity, he muttered the words, "Ya, Ich habe es gethan,"—"Yes, I did it," and thus took a load from all our breasts. The law of the country was well, vigorously, and yet gently administered, and in the whole trial there is nothing of which England need feel ashamed. Nor, certainly, need anyone feel ashamed at the intense interest which a great crime awakens. "But for the grace of God, there goes Wm. Huntington," said that preacher, pointing to a criminal.28

The last two sentences are revealing of the special, and I believe new, attitudes toward crime that were a
distinguishing characteristic of the sensation novel. No dutiful, upright, hardworking Victorian could really have believed that the difference between him and the criminal was the grace of God. But the possibility that crime could be accidental, unconscious, or even necessary—given the limits of the criminal's own consciousness—was fascinating and credible. It suggested a universe built on more subtle and devious principles than mere cause and effect. Crime—and other evils, but through crimes the hypothesis could be entertained without the chance of self-incrimination—could arise from other sources than avarice or pure malevolence; and guilt could be determined by factors more elusive and complex than mere deed. On those subjects which did not directly touch the solid British citizen, a crude kind of psychological examination was beginning to be possible which one day would diminish absolutist definitions of guilt.

This complexity, or sometimes simulated complexity, is what distinguished the sensation novel from other kinds of criminal fiction, and the interest in crime in the 1860's from that of earlier decades. It was the source, in short, of the material which crime offered the imagination of the day. A significant reason for the quick disappearance of sensation drama was, I think, its inability to treat crime in this new way.

The rash of articles about criminals during these years sprang from the same question. What was the man like
who committed crimes? The growing desire to see him not as a monster but as a man either free of the social restrictions which applied unreasonably to his life, or as a man essentially innocent, and in some way pressed—but a man, in any case—expressed itself in curiosity about the life of convicted criminals, their characters, the possibility of their rehabilitation, and the circumstances of their criminal acts. One has only to think of the difference in Dickens' treatment of Fagin in *Oliver Twist* (1837-38) and of Magwitch in *Great Expectations* (1860-61) to have a measure of the change in the kind of interest taken in criminals in the thirties and forties, and that taken in the sixties.²⁹ For the readers interested in the lives of criminals, the current agitation for reforms of prison conditions and the penal system provided plenty of material. Articles on prisons, prisoners, the penal system, which sprang up everywhere, had a few common points: they universally considered the convict as a human being with rights of his own; they suppressed all hints of moral self-righteousness, or indeed, of any morality at all. "A Convict's Views of Penal Discipline," for example, was actually a reporter's transcription of conversation with a convict; "My Convict Experiences" was the sensational but misleading title of an article by a reporter who visited prisons. "Behind the Bars," "The Punishment of Convicts,"
"The Irish Convict System and Why It Has Succeeded," are samples of the many articles which, claiming social instruction, delved into the mentality and lives of social outcasts. The emphasis in sensation novels on the female criminal exploited the sympathy automatically accruing to the beautiful Victorian heroine, as well as a dim eroticism, to induce emotionally as well as intellectually the same tolerance toward the criminal.

A further refinement on the shock to be had from these subjects was what I can only call the titillating speculations on the emotions caused by being sentenced to death, from the point of view of one who has been so sentenced. The idea must have been stimulated by and must in its turn have stimulated the agitation to abolish public executions, as well as by the amoral medical attitudes of which I shall soon speak. The Illustrated London News ran an article on "The Sensation of Being Murdered," a description put together from the reports of the United States Secretary of State Seward and his son, after both were attacked and nearly killed by John Wilkes Booth. Articles like "Sentence of Death Recorded" compared, without moral distinction and in equal detail, what a person must feel on being told that he has a fatal disease or is to be executed. The sensation of sensation novels frequently depended on similar examinations, without any moral preju-
dice, into the state of mind of one who faces terrible punishment, or death, or total social disgrace.

Insanity and Innocence

It is impossible not to see this suspension of moral attitudes in favor of the impartial inspection of the human mind as leading toward a psychological, rather than social, point of view. The ways in which an individual could be made to adapt himself to a general and collective pattern of thought and behavior had become less urgent and less interesting than the ways in which he could not. The fascination with the possibility of inner and individual subversion of public ethics expressed itself in attempts to circumvent existing modes of thought. No subject offered more material to such exploration of the mind outside social law than insanity, particularly criminal insanity, and the difference between the reception of Tennyson's *Maud* in 1855 and of the sensation novel five years later indicates a real shift in the public attitude toward it.

The great question posed by criminal insanity was the determination of guilt; for sensationists insanity was largely a moral matter. The issue had of course become a public one long before, in 1843, when Daniel McNaughten, acting under a delusion that he was being persecuted by Sir Robert Peel, had shot and killed Peel's secretary, believing him to be Sir Robert. He was acquitted at a trial
for murder, by a verdict of not guilty on the ground of
insanity. The resulting public outcry had been so great
that the judges of England were asked to answer a series of
questions on the subject of insanity, put to them by the
House of Lords. The answers, known as the McNaghten Rules,
constituted a definition of insanity used in courts in both
England and America until very recently. They were based
on the accused's cognizance of the difference between right
and wrong—a moral rather than a scientific definition.
Verdicts of "not guilty, by reason of insanity" had become
relatively common by the early sixties, but the relation of
insanity to crime was still a matter of the broadest specu-
lation to the general public, whose interest in it had
begun to shift from outrage at the insufficient punishment
of wrong-doers, to a consideration of the elusive question
of what insanity was, how it could be recognized, and what
it meant.

The sensation trials of the sixties which involved
questions of sanity were hashed over again and again in
periodicals, especially those in which people were wrongly
accused of insanity. Of these the most famous was the
Windham case of 1861-62, which involved so long a trial, and
excited so much interest, that _Punch_ remarked at its conclu-
sion:

_The Double Verdict_

Windham is sane; but England must be cracked
To bear such process as hath fixed the fact.
Windham was a wealthy young man who had married "the renowned 'Social Evil,' Agnes Willoughby," after a less legitimate connection with her, and had made her his heir. His family had him committed to a lunatic asylum, and at his death contested his will on the grounds that he had been insane. Their claim was eventually disallowed, in a suit whose costs were estimated at £60,000; but the imaginative suggestions of the case, enhanced by the respectability of the family and the large amount of money involved, were far-reaching. A person accused of madness, rightly or wrongly, was ipso facto discredited, and thereby rendered powerless to act on his own behalf. In those pre-psychiatric days the legal definitions of insanity were wholly inadequate; there was no clear delineation of who had the right or the ability to judge sanity. The chances for corruption or misinterpretation were boundless, especially since people were used to judging each other by behavior. In the Windham case, for instance, the charge of insanity had been based on Windham's marrying a prostitute and making her his inheritrix, acts in which madness was not to be distinguished from "merely weakness," as one editorial writer put it:

The conduct imputed to the miserable creature whose infirmities so long disgusted all the newspaper readers in the kingdom was like the conduct of a madman but it did not in itself prove madness. The limits of folly and bad manners are almost immeasurable, and almost all that Mr. Windham did was what
any ill-bred and ill-conducted youth might do and what scores of such youths have done a thousand times.\textsuperscript{34}

The impossibility of judging sanity on the basis of conduct made the individual defenseless against evil-wishers, in a manner most fruitful for the sensation novelists. Condemning a hero to a lunatic asylum, whence he was entirely helpless to escape because of the body of social prejudice and law that worked consistently against him, was a relatively common offense in sensation novels. Readers of Wilkie Collins' \textit{Woman in White} will remember that the technique was a chief instrument of Count Fosco's, being in fact the perfect crime, since the innocent were unable to defend themselves and the evil were in an invulnerable position. In Collins' \textit{Armadale}, too, the evil governess, Lydia Gwilt, attempts to get her husband out of the way so she can claim marriage with another of the same name by luring him into an insane asylum. In that particular case, the "mad doctor" was free to attempt any scientific experiments he chose, so that murder was also part of the plan. Charles Reade's sensation novel \textit{Hard Cash} centered on the evil committal of a sane man to a lunatic asylum, and was devoted almost completely to what claimed to be an expose of the conditions in such asylums, the ease with which a person could be committed to one, and the near impossibility of his escape. Lady Audley, whose crimes were attributable to insanity, was
finally locked away in a mad house, in order to save her
the disgrace of a trial; the measure was considered defen­
sible because her committal was tantamount to the life
imprisonment she deserved, as she would never be able to
get out.

A rash of pseudo-medical articles, like that in the
Cornhill called "First Beginnings,"\textsuperscript{35} sifted through the
symptoms of madness and emphasized the importance of recog­
nizing them right away—symptoms regularly confused, the
reader cannot but notice, with physical disease or simple
eccentricity. Lady Audley, for example, is examined by a
famous "physiologist" after she discloses the central
"secret" of the novel: that she committed her crimes in
the fear that she was or would become mad like her mother.
M. E. Braddon, famous for her lifelike professional conver­
sations, has the practitioner describe the case thus, after
his ten-minute interview with Lady Audley:

\begin{quote}
There is latent insanity! Insanity which might
never appear; or which might appear only once or
twice in a lifetime. It would be a dementia in
its worst phase, perhaps; acute mania; but its
duration would be very brief, and it would arise
only under extreme mental pressure. The lady is
not mad; but she has the hereditary taint in her
blood.\textsuperscript{36}
\end{quote}

This diagnosis is the solution to the central mystery of
that book, and on the strength of it, Lady Audley is com­
mitted to the discreet asylum on the continent for the rest
of her life.
Even more disturbing and thrilling, however, than the possible misuse of insane asylums as prisons for the innocent, was the possible disjunction between conduct and responsibility: the dislocation of guilt. I believe the extent to which this idea was entertained was new in the sixties; previously what had concerned the public about verdicts of "not guilty by reason of insanity" was that a guilty man might go unpunished, but in the early sixties, it was that a criminal deed might in fact be morally innocent. It was becoming possible to discuss crime and criminal motives in other than moralistic terms, or to define morality on a basis other than its social effects, a condition which clears the way for true psychology. The tendency was of course upsetting and threatening to received beliefs about social behavior, and reactionaries were many. A letter to Punch, for example, ironically advocated hanging potential "homicidal monomaniacs" ahead of time, since madness was a "diagnosable disease." But more and more articles in popular magazines began to take approaches parallel to that of getting the convict to talk about the penal system. "Acquitted on the Ground of Insanity (from a 'Mad Doctor's' Point of View)" was a characteristic title. Another typical article defended the much criticized 'mad doctor's' testimony in courts:

The question, What constitutes insanity, is one of the most troublesome in the whole scope of our
jurisprudence, civil and criminal. The doctors seem to fare especially ill in these disputes, whether rightfully or wrongfully; and certainly the contradictions and obscurities to be found in their opinions account for many of the uncomplimentary remarks they are destined to hear for their part in the matter. Still there does seem to be a great deal of prejudice against the doctors whenever they appear in lunacy cases. In civil cases a general impression exists that medical men are bent on placing under restraint every individual on whose sanity they are called to decide; while in criminal cases, the end of their ambition is to obtain the acquittal of every murderer, garotter, or miscreant of any kind on the plea of insanity. In the latter cases, especially, I have long since been inclined to believe that the doctors have suffered a gross injustice, and a recent visit I made to a celebrated private convict lunatic asylum has confirmed the opinion.\(^{38}\)

As the consideration of criminals as human beings led to inside-stories on the prisons, so did this subversion of the moral ethic of responsibility attach interest to those who had actually been declared insane. Lunatic asylums had been a kind of forbidden ground, but the intense curiosity surrounding the deranged mind, the desire to know how a consciousness based on entirely different assumptions from those taken for granted by the world at large, would manifest itself in behavior, led reporters into lunatic asylums and, predictably, criminal lunatic asylums. The discoveries were shocking, and provided a refined form of the same thrill of fear that sensations like Blondin excited. For sometimes the criminal lunatics were not recognizably mad people like Mrs. Rochester, but deported themselves decorously and seemed like other people, though
they were without moral sense. You simply could not tell.

One reporter, a lawyer, visited a criminal lunatic asylum on the night of a ball, where he watched graceful dancing and heard a duet between a doctor and a lady singer, both of whom he found out later were murderers. The doctor contended that "you must perceive there is a far greater affinity between insanity and crime than is generally imagined," and made such perplexing statements as this, on whether mad murderers repent when they "recover their senses":

Never. It is a singular fact, and in my opinion a very beautiful one, in which nature seems to draw a line between crime and misfortune. I never met with a case in which a genuine repentance was visible in a person who had when in a fit of insanity killed another.39

I have dwelt on this question at such length because the public's interest in it is a sign of the state of mind that made the sensation novel possible, and which the sensation novel fed. The re-definition of moral responsibility in personal rather than social terms was the most important single quality of the sensation novel and the true reason it was considered so dangerous. By the use of crime and insanity, the novelists kept the problems they dealt with at arm's length from the readers; but the strongly relativistic moral vision could not be missed, and the application to self was invited by the very bid for the readers' sympathy. For criminality is but an extreme form of mere
wrong-doing, and diagnosable insanity is akin to momentary
madness. As M. E. Braddon editorializes in Lady Audley's
Secret, when the hero is suddenly overtaken with the fear
that Lady Audley's ghost will haunt him:

There is nothing so delicate, so fragile, as that
invisible balance upon which the mind is always
trembling. "Mad today and sane tomorrow." . . .
Who has not been, or is not to be mad, in some
lonely hour of life? Who is quite safe from the
trembling of the balance?

(Ch. 38)

Interest in the criminal, or the falsely accused
criminal, persecuted, ruined, because of the incongruity of
the machinery set up to protect society—and therefore pre­
sumably him—led in other directions as well. Of those
existing social institutions analyzed disinterestedly for
their relation to the individual, the most frequent was the
law, and the mysterious professional codes and technical­
ities which prevented lawyers from doing what had to be
done. The particular emphasis was the possible dissociation
between the truth and the law, a discord which could operate
to the favor or to the disadvantage of a given character or
person, but which in either case showed that the law had
little necessary connection with reality. Discussions of
the validity of circumstantial evidence, for instance, were
plentiful, and their interest lay never in their editorial
positions, which were rather mild, but in the dissection of
famous cases, both recent and long past, to prove that
justice may miscarry and the courts of law even when properly administered may be fallible. The cases of Constance Kent of the Road murder and Jessie McLachlan, convicted for a horrible murder in 1862, 40 provided such magazines as the Cornhill and Temple Bar with material for articles on "Circumstantial Evidence." So did the new edition of State Trials, many of whose cases were reviewed with special attention to the trivial legalities on which convictions were based, the uncertainties, and the probabilities of error. Similar articles explored the importance of confession to conviction, what a confession meant, under what circumstances it might be false, and what should be done in cases when a criminal never confessed. In all the articles "circumstances" was a key word, as it was too in sensation novels. Once again the movement was away from the acceptance of any absolute, and toward the importance of the particular.

A related topic was "Professional Etiquette," as one of many articles on the subject was called. These dealt chiefly with recent cases, and called into question the codes within professions, law and medicine in particular, which prevented professionals from fulfilling their duties to their fellow human beings. It was on such technicalities as the use of evidence, the kind of testimony given by professionals, the ways in which law could be manipulated,
and the ways in which it was wrong, that the sensation novel
frequently turned. The public was beginning to be inter-
ested in what was customary, rather than exceptional: in
those aspects of the legal system that could apply to
anyone, and did; and what that standardized but unpredict-
able application meant in terms of ordinary human beings.
Sensation novels regularly included long talks with lawyers
regarding specific points of law which could be used for or
against the characters; many included actual trial scenes
complete with the lawyers' speeches.41

Similarly, the relation of medicine to crime,
particularly the use of medical information in the detection
of poisoning, was a favorite topic. Magazine articles made
the most of both recent and bygone cases of poisoning, and
considered whether medicine could provide conclusive proof
when offered as part of "circumstantial evidence." The
fallacies of medicine were discussed at length, as well as
the mistakes and ineptitudes of doctors both in their
scientific capacity and in their responsibility to their
fellow human beings. Like lawyers, doctors were suspected
of using professional etiquette as an excuse for non-
involve ment, and to withhold crucial criminal evidence
during trials so as not to offend other members of the
profession. The celebrated poisonings by Catherine or Con-
stance Wilson in 1862, and by Edward Pritchard, brought to
trial in 1865, both convicted largely on the toxicological evidence, added a certain contemporary zest to this subject. In the Pritchard case especially, doubts about medical honesty were raised since Pritchard himself was a physician, and, perhaps even more important, another doctor had been called in to treat his victims, had suspected poisoning, and had not acted on his suspicions because he did not wish to intrude on Pritchard's own practice. The exposés of medical incompetence which had led to the passage of the medical reform bill of the late fifties had certainly prejudiced the public against the profession, and aroused much curiosity about the secrets and abuses of that important science. In sensation novels, doctors appear frequently—as they do in other novels of the time; in those of George Eliot, for example, and Trollope, working as both authors do within the confines of ordinary life—and their misuse of the position was a frequent technicality which moved the plot; their other specific abuse was the issuance of faulty death certificates.

The Notable Omission

In discussing those topics which seem to have generated imaginative speculation and provided a form for rebellious attitudes, it would be misleading not to mention the noticeable omission of a topic which once held so strongly the romantic attention of the Victorian reader.
That was Christianity, and the ideals, however exaggerated, it presented as patterns of behavior.

Implicitly, though never of course by direct emphasis, the sensation novel pointed at the failure of churches and ministers to direct lives on adequate principles, and the cruel self-righteousness of virtuous Christians. In many sensation novels, the invocations of the old Christian ideals are missing; but in a few, they are actually a means of crushing the individual rather than adjusting him to society. In M. E. Braddon's Eleanor's Victory, for example, the heroine is moved to asocial and quasi-criminal action by a thirst for revenge which she specifically adopts over the objections of friends who urge her to Christian sufferance—and ultimately wins both revenge and the rewards of virtue by her course. The heroine of Wilkie Collins' No Name is similarly motivated, with similar gains, though a virtuous sister writes letters admonishing her to Christian modes of thinking throughout the book. Aurora Floyd is prevented from telling her father the truth that would have spared her crime by the humane certainty that it would kill him; in the end she too wins love, money, justification, and even admiration, by flouting not only social but religious and moral conventions. It is practically a universal condition of the sensation novel that forgiveness of personal wrongs, submission to the desires of others and to accepted morals,
patience, self-abnegation, and denial of the importance of
life on earth, are impractical, impossible, unattractive,
and annihilating. On the other hand, what is lost in
belief in a systematic and publicly underwritten religion,
is gained for the individual. Compassion, even with moral
wrong-doers, modification of strict judgment, condemnation
of intolerance and self-righteousness—such are the values
that these books assume.

The subversion of prevailing ethics suggested by
these treatments of these subjects, and the elevation of
the power and integrity of the individual over the require­
ments of society, provide the connection between the
democratizing tendencies of the time and sensation. At its
best, sensation spared literature the necessity of express­
ing already formulated and formalized ideals, and opened its
scope to that essentially modern problem, the struggle of
the individual to maintain his integrity against the crush­
ing forces of his times. To the success of the sensation
novel in embracing this question can be attributed its
strength and vitality—on the unambitious level on which it
operated—as well as its close relation to mainstream cul­
ture. The vapidity of sensation drama, on the other hand,
and its speedy demise, was as surely due to its careful
avoidance of any implications that such principles or tend­
encies could obtain in the present time.
1 The similarity between this term and that of Robert Langbaum in *The Poetry of Experience; The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (New York, 1957) is coincidental, but significant of Browning's long anticipation of the visions popularized in sensation literature.

2 *Cornhill Magazine*, 4 (Sept. 1861), 305.

3 *Quarterly Review*, 107 (April 1860), 324.

4 Lady Cadbury, the authoress in Trollope's *The Way We Live Now* (1874), wrote a book on *The Criminal Queens*.

5 *The Doctor's Wife*, in *Temple Bar*, 10 (Feb. 1864), 331.

6 7 (May 1863), 629-637.

7 How delicately is indicated in accounts like that of Lady Frederick Cavendish whose grandmother, a lady-in-waiting to the Queen, read *Adam Bede* to her granddaughters in 1859, and "duly bowdlered [it] for our young minds" by omitting a chapter (*The Diary of Lady Frederick Cavendish*, ed. John Bailey [New York, 1927], I, 83).

8 38 (11 Feb. 1860), 56.


10 38 (9 June 1860), 237.

11 4 (Feb. 1862), 415.

12 Cf. Lily Dale of Trollope's *The Small House at Allington* (1864), who considers herself "married" to the man to whom she freely gave herself, even though he jilts her. She condemns herself to perpetual "widowhood." So much is made of her freedom in kisses, declarations of love, and their unusualness in her society, that clearly her voluntary surrender of herself is what constitutes "marriage," not the official arrangement. This is in spite of the fact that she has remained perfectly chaste.

13 113 (April 1863), 490.


16. For example, the Illustrated London News, publishing a two-page spread with three illustrations on the story, commented, "... We preface our observations by saying that never did reality more resemble romance than in many of the peculiar situations of the present case" (9 Feb. 1861, 117).

17. For example, the analyst of sensation literature writing for the Quarterly Review commented on Mrs. Houstoun's Such Things Are (1862): "The latter author 'ventures to remind the reader of the fact that all which trenches on either the mysterious or the horrible has for the present generation an apparently irresistible attraction'; and by way of feeding this attraction and depraved taste, has brought again to the light of recollection 'a shadowy vision of two past, but as yet undiscovered crimes,'—in other words—the Road Murder and the Glasgow poisoning" (113 [April 1863], 501). Neither of these crimes was more than two years old at the time of the novel's publication.


19. 113 (April 1863), 502.

20. Diary of Lady Frederick Cavendish, I, 119.

21. 2 (Dec. 1860), 701.

22. 113 (April 1863), 486-487.


25. Ibid., I, 391.

26. A similar moral issue is raised in Trollope's Orley Farm (1862), where the mother's forgery of a will in order to give her son the inheritance she considers his due by natural, and therefore true, justice, is considered sympathetic.


28. Ibid., 19 Nov. 1864, 518.
For a full discussion of the former, see Keith Hollingsworth, The Newgate Novel 1830-1847: Bulwer, Ainsworth, Dickens, & Thackeray (Detroit, 1963).


Cornhill, 9 (March 1864), 304-308.

42 (8 Feb. 1862), 59.

A Mid-Victorian Pepys, p. 88.

Cornhill, 5 (Feb. 1862), 228.

(April 1862), 481-494.


46 (2 Jan. 1864), 2.

Cornhill, 10 (Oct. 1864), 448.

Ibid., 454, 457, and 459 respectively.


As did other, more serious, but sensation-related novels: Orley Farm, for example, and Dickens' Great Expectations and Bleak House. The atmosphere of the legal profession in those novels contributes substantially to their moral climate.

For details on Pritchard--and on Madeleine Smith, who surely provided a model for the sensation heroine--see Altick, Victorian Studies in Scarlet, pp. 169-173 and pp. 175-190. The extraordinary Palmer Case of 1856 (Altick, pp. 152-160) had certainly whetted the appetite for sensational treatment of medicine.

The interest of some early and many later sensation novels in Roman Catholicism may be another aspect of this rebellion. Romanism provided a way of examining formalistic and moral problems which pertained to all Christianity, including Protestantism. Agnosticism was not yet sufficiently widely accepted to be adopted as the moral center of popular novels, and Roman Catholicism was still topical, ten years after "Papal Aggression."
CHAPTER IV

THE SENSATION DRAMA

On the head of Mr. Never-Say Dion Bamboozlicault, as it pleased Punch to call Boucicault, fall the credit and the blame for sensation drama, and indeed for the very term "sensation." He was the author of the two prototypic sensation plays, The Octoroon and The Colleen Bawn; it was he who brought them to England in 1860 after their marvelous successes in America; it was he who imported with them the term "sensation," with all its redolence of American democracy. The plays were designed to succeed with popular audiences, regardless of the artistic compromises that might entail. The plots were exciting and included many scenes of violence and physical danger—murders, shootings, grappling, drownings, falls from cliffs, and the like—, and had beautiful heroines, usually peasants, and heroes who were frequently some version of the noble outlaw. The plays pretended to no philosophic or moral value and carefully eschewed all allusion to contemporary reality, preferring exotic distant settings to anything recognizably English or modern. The elaborate detail of the sets exploited the
possibilities of such settings and were a special mark of the sensation drama.

Though the term sensation was immediately extended to include novels, as well as non-dramatic entertainments, containing elements considered analogous to those of theatrical sensation, in its original sense the word continued to be dramatic in application; the plays were anti-social, democratic, and anti-intellectual in unmistakable ways which made them a useful reference point in discussions of sensation. Boucicault himself became a by-word for sensationalism. He was Irish; his lack of artistic integrity, his desire for profit, his keen ability to detect and anticipate currents of popular taste and then to satisfy them, made him embody all the essential aspects of commercial sensationism, as his condemnation by contemporary defenders of the arts indicates.

Its Place in the Tradition

The sensation play marked much less of a change in the drama than it seemed at the time and had much less influence on the direction of the theatre than was feared. Unlike the sensation novel, sensation drama encountered little real competition. The frequency with which the same Shakespearean plays were acted over and over is an indication of the scarcity of good new plays. Original contemporary drama had nothing that could contend with the quality
or interest of sensation drama. Melodramas were stiff and
dstagey, and for the novel-readers who made up part of the
audience were unthinkably crude and obvious. Pantomimes
and extravaganzas had no dramatic continuity, no possibil-
ities for character development or dialogue. And perhaps
people did not expect much more than entertainment of a
fairly superficial kind when they went to the theatre. As
a reviewer for the Cornhill observed:

There is a mistake respecting sensation pieces:
it is not because intelligence has departed, and
there is no audience for better things, but
simply because the numbers of pleasure-seekers
are so much increased; and at all times the bulk
of the public has cared less for intelligence
than for sensation, less for art than amusement.
If intelligent people now go to witness inferior
pieces, it is because better things are not
produced; and sensation pieces, although appealing
to the lowest faculties, do appeal to them effec-
tively. If there are crowds to see the Colleen
Bawn and the Duke's Motto, it is because these
pieces are really good of their kind; the kind
may be a low kind; but will any one say the
legitimate drama has of late years been repre-
sented in a style to satisfy an intellectual audi-
ence?¹

"The kind" was in itself nothing new. Sensation
drama was almost wholly derivative and took its place as
the last development in a clear tradition of popular drama
rather than as an innovation. It drew elements from many
contemporary popular entertainments to create a grand
amalgamation of pleasure surpassing the appeal of any one
of its components. But its chief long-term contribution to
the history of the theatre was Tom Robertson's reaction
against it in his cup-and-saucer comedies of the mid-sixties, and its introduction—also useful to Robertson—of naturalistic staging and less formal acting conventions. Its novelties, in other words, were technical, while in the more essential points of dramatic conception, it simply pushed existing methods and conventions to the point of absurdity at which they had to be abandoned altogether.

Though contemporary observers spoke of the sensation drama and the sensation novel in the same breath, the novel and the drama were simply unrelated in the kind of sensation they employed and the conventions within which they gave it form. Like most slang terms, of course, the word, once applied, extended its meaning to cover whatever was convenient; the sensation novel, altering so fast in a matter of a few years, served to change the very meaning of the word. By 1865, "sensation" when applied to the novel meant a kind of moral and sexual shock which was absent from, for example, Lady Audley's Secret, and it may well be that critics and commentators were imprisoned by the earlier use of the word. And while sensationalism in the novel continued to expand and spill over into other kinds of novels, sensationalism persisted in its original form in the drama, and so was easier to pinpoint. There may also have been reasons for the association between the two which elude the historian, reasons connected with the dubious respectability
of the theatre and with the firm restrictions on the novel, which made different elements equally sensational, depending on the form in which they appeared.

Why sensation, which had so far-reaching an effect on the novel, should have been a dead-end in drama is a difficult question. I suspect it had something to do with the shifting nature of the dramatic audience, which made changes commercially expedient, but daring experimentation precarious. Novels enjoyed a well-established audience which would be sure to expand as prices continued to drop and leisure and literacy to spread. The theatre, on the other hand, had actively to attract women and their children, and those who had habitually avoided the theatre, by incorporating aspects of entertainments already considered harmless: the pantomime and spectacle, for example. I am tempted to think also that the privacy of novel-reading made that form freer than the drama, which had to be seen in public. Furthermore, what could be suggested, hinted at, or developed by innuendo and indirection in the novel had at least to be explicitly mentioned in the drama. The sexual suggestion on which the sensation of the novel so often rested had therefore to be excluded from the stage for reasons of propriety, while other essential sensation material—divorce, bigamy, and emphasis on psychological development—could not be represented in action at all. The
burden of convention was heavier in drama at that time than it has, I believe, ever been in fiction; whereas the novel was still in the process of defining itself, the drama was limited to clearly delineated traditions which offered the dramatist little flexibility.

I cannot help but think too that the failure of the sensation play was linked with a larger pattern that I am not qualified to discuss in any detail at this point. Throughout the whole of the nineteenth century, drama was an impoverished form compared with poetry and the novel. The sensation novel, as well as other popular novels, had a rich, experimenting, struggling, expanding context from which to grow and into which to fit. For the dramatic artist, this advantage was missing. Why, I am not prepared to say, though I will hazard a few guesses. The censorship which in the novel had led to refined techniques of circumvention, in the drama was exercised in a much cruder and simpler way: the theatre was avoided, and so ceased to be a medium for artistic experimentation and turned into a refuge for the past, where dramas of the Renaissance were the regular fare, on the one hand, and a place of sheer entertainment on the other. I suspect too that the problems of reality most suited to dramatic portrayal were not the concerns nearest the hearts of the Victorian cultural elite. When one considers the wonderful success of the dramatic
monologue and the truly revolutionary aspect of Browning's work, for example, it appears possible that the true source of drama in the nineteenth century was moving away from action and toward psychology. Not until a new philosophy and new conventions, expressed in impressionism, symbolism, and the like, were made available to the dramatist, could these modern experiences find adequate expression on the stage.

The sensation drama, however, was dependent on forms which precluded modernism. The extent to which it was outmoded, anachronistic, and therefore fruitless, appears in its thorough reliance on its predecessors. Almost by definition sensation plays were adaptations of old plots, indicating the degree to which "sensation" was a matter of style and of staging only. The novels of Féval, the Dumas family, and Scott, frequently by way of French stage adaptations, were standard fare. Translations from the French were so consistently claimed as new sensation plays that in 1871 Tom Taylor proposed that an official distinction be drawn between the terms "new," to apply to plays set before an English audience for the first time, and "new and original," to designate plays actually invented as well as written by their "authors."

Contemporary sensation drama also suffered much from the comparisons which had to be made between it and a
vital, living, venerable sensation tradition constantly enacted on the stage by the same companies for the same audiences: the Elizabethan drama. Henry Morley uttered the general complaint when he chastised Fechter for offering modern sensation plays instead of reviving old English drama:

They contain sensation plots by the score; for the Elizabethan public also liked strong meat and mustard. It would not take more trouble to adapt for the "sensation"-loving public Marlowe's "Faustus," or his "Jew of Malta," than to translate and adapt vapid French melodrama.³

Shakespeare, as theatre critics never tired of pointing out, was a sensationist; so were Webster and Tourneur, though they were not played on the mid-Victorian stage. And another source of unflattering comparisons, though it was not often invoked as a precursor to the sensation drama as it was to the sensation novel, were the Romantic poets. In fact, one of the most successful sensation plays was a stage version of Byron's *Manfred*. With works like these the modern playwright aiming at popular acceptance simply could not compete. He turned back to already existing modes, drawing from each the effects he would work into the new formula or combination that was called sensation drama.

The most immediate and most important contributor was the melodrama, the popular genre originating in the early nineteenth century; the term was actually interchanged with "sensation" by critics in the sixties. It provided the
underlying formulae of character and action. The helpless heroine, the conquering hero, the threatening villain, were the essential types which the sensationists translated into more sophisticated—or as many considered it, more decadent--form. Many of the specific effects of sensation drama were direct carry-overs from melodrama, particularly the playing of music at thrilling and sentimental moments, the arrangement of tableaux at the end of acts, and the often superfluous introduction of comic lines, puns, and low-comedy characters, though the artificiality of the latter was considerably reduced. Many of the most important sensation dramatists—Boucicault, Suter, and Fechter, for example—had also written melodrama, and many melodramas were still being written and performed in the early sixties, concurrently with the more profitable sensation plays. The total effect, however, was surprisingly different, and true melodramas seemed stiff and stupid by comparison with sensation plays. The puns and simple plots of, for instance, H. T. Craven's Miriam's Crime and Milky White make it hard to believe that a critic's preference for those plays as "worth a thousand sensation pieces" is based on anything but dogged prejudice against sensation.

From the ghostly "spectral melodramas" fashionable in the early fifties—most of them were versions of early nineteenth-century Gothic horror plays—was drawn the all-
pervading aura of extreme fearsomeness, though except for the controversial *Angel of Midnight*, sensation plays carefully excluded any suggestion of the supernatural. Such pieces as Boucicault's revival of the Gothic play, *The Vampire*, in 1852, though it marked "the extreme point of inanity," according to one play-goer, had provided practice in creating beautiful scenery and ghastly effects. This influence too was generally recognized. A characteristic article in *All the Year Round*, for example, attempting to discredit the "new" sensation drama, observed that the morbid appetite for sensation was nothing new, pointing to the long runs—one for thirty-seven nights running in 1806—of the prototypic spectral "sensation" plays with "strong situations" and "realistic" scenery, the two hallmarks of sensation drama. It cited dramatizations of Monk Lewis' *Castle Spectre* and Holcroft's *Tale of Mystery* as examples.

The elaborately beautiful scenery and rich costumes of sensation drama owed much to the fantastic pantomimes and extravaganzas which enjoyed such popularity during the Christmas and Easter seasons. An immediate forerunner of the sensation play, *Master Passion*, was described in 1859 as a "brilliant, bustling melodrama which has in fact very much the effect of a pantomime," anticipating precisely the union of action and spectacle achieved by the sensation drama. Though not remarked by contemporary critics, many
possibilities must have been suggested to Boucicault and his colleagues by Phelps's spectacular productions of Shakespeare in the fifties, as well as by the contemporary opera. The extravagant sets, popular songs, and highly romantic themes of the favorite operas of the day—La Traviata, Il Trovatore, Lucrezia Borgia, Lucia di Lammermoor, Rigoletto—were imitated by sensation drama, though their impropriety, which kept many away from the opera house, was circumvented in the theatre. Sensation plays frequently included original songs, advertised with the sensation scenes in the playbills. Some of these became popular songs, like "The Wearing of the Green," from Boucicault's Arrah-na-Pogue, which had to be eliminated from performances of that play in Dublin, so great was the patriotic excitement it aroused. Overtures and dances were common, especially those supposed to have a certain authenticity: Irish wedding dances, Mexican and Russian dances, and, in the sensation adaptation of A Tale of Two Cities, the Carmagnole, the music for which was procured from the Bibliothèque Impériale. And though critics did not take this relationship into account when they speculated on the sources of the sensation drama, a contemporary survey of the opera noticed a similarity in the current direction of
theatre and opera which seems to point to an effort to buoy
up each with the strengths of the other:

Partly from inherent, and partly from accidental
causes, the musical element of opera has become
more and more subordinate to the dramatic; and,
as a natural degradation, the dramatic element
has all over Europe succumbed more and more to the
theatrical element. The drama was first stripped
of its poetry and character, in favour of prose
and situation. It rapidly passed to spectacle and
"sensation scenes." The ideal was replaced by the
domestic. Comedy gave way to farce and extrava-
ganza. The audiences became more numerous, and
arts which delight the mob were found both easier
to present, and more attractive when presented.9

Watts Philips' The Dead Heart, 1859, was strikingly,
indeed suspiciously, like A Tale of Two Cities, then appear-
ing in All the Year Round. It centered on the criminality
of a prisoner in the Bastille, released after eighteen years
at the outbreak of the Revolution, and it ended with a
tableau of the hero on the guillotine. Boucicault's Janet
Pride, 1855, a play "here and there too painful to pass
under the name of entertainment,"10 combined a tale of
crime and mystery with realistic scenery. Tom Taylor's and
Charles Reade's Two Loves and a Life, 1854, used "all the
vulgar elements of an Adelphi drama," according to Morley,
but "lifted [them] far above the regions of vulgarity,"11
much as the sensation drama did. That all of these drama-
tists were important sensation writers indicates how, rather
than springing forth suddenly like the sensation novel, the
sensation play was the result of conscious efforts to come
up with a dramatic entertainment which would consolidate as many forms of appeal as possible. In 1860, that play arrived in the form of *The Colleen Bawn*.

"Realism" and Sensation Drama

Despite its entire lack of originality, sensation drama was distinguishable in certain respects from the melodramas to which it was so closely related. Its determining characteristic was what was called "realism," having in this case specific reference to staging and scenic techniques, dialogue, acting conventions, and, with a great many qualifications, to plot and characterization. It must be emphasized that the term was severely restricted and even misapplied; the characters, problems, and settings it usually designated were never to be met in ordinary life. The standards for "realism" were melodramas, not external probability. Even so, however, the attempt at "realism" was the chief contribution of the sensation drama to the stage. It effectively released the drama from the rigid stiffness of the current acting style and the unnatural dialogue and scanty characterization of the melodrama.

Of these innovations, the most superficial was actually the most important to the sensation play: the "sensation scene." This scene, frequently the subject of a full-page engraving in the *Illustrated London News*, combined
the effects of a spectacle with those of "perilous perfor-
formances." "Simply shooting down a victim," wrote Punch,
or killing him or her with a dagger in the ribs, or a bludgeon-blow behind-back, is considered much too wild and unromantic a proceeding; and now to be attractive, the murder must be done in a pic-
turesque locality, where the loveliness of nature increases one's intensity of horror at the crime. Hence we have "Sensation Scenes," as they are termed, and on their attraction mainly rests the fortune of the piece.12

The scenery itself was extraordinarily beautiful and "prac-
ticable," usually depicting some wild natural location—ravines, cataracts, and "torrents" were favorites—its romantic sublimity often enhanced by a dramatic storm or midnight moon. The scene came at a suspense-filled moment in the plot and involved feats of great physical prowess enacted on the stage. Although "our Sensational Managers of the present day are determined to leave nothing to the imagination," as Punch wrote of the detailed literalness of these productions,13 the exotic distant lands or times removed the possibility of a reality-check. The Octoroon was set in America, for example; Tom Taylor's The Serf in Russia, William Suter's Pirates of the Savannah in Mexico, his The Accusing Spirit in the Tyrol, J. Crawford Wilson's The Gitanella in Spain, and of course the special favorites, Colleen Bawn, Arrah-na-Pogue, and Fechter's Peep o'Day in the Irish hinterlands. The recent invention of the scrim, the gradually improving gaslights, the perfection of traps,
and Boucicault's invention of scene-shifting machinery made it possible to produce such scenes without making the audience wait forever. The acting edition of Arrah-na-Pogue, for instance, was prefaced with six and a half pages describing a system of six grooves across the stage, along which different sets could be pulled between scenes. In the last scene the hero scaled the wall of a crumbling castle. The wall was constructed of two "practicable" flats, one above the other, which sank gradually through the stage as Shaun ascended by little steps hidden under curtains of imitation ivy. Against these sets, in richly colorful costumes, the actors performed thrilling fights, tumbling and tightrope walking in the style of Blondin, Leotard, Heenan, and Sayers, creating "a sort of physical-force and picturesque-excitement drama, which we hope will be restrained within proper limits," as a typical commentator put it.14

The most famous, because the first, of the sensation scenes was the Water-Cave Scene of The Colleen Bawn, which all subsequent sensation scenes tried to rival. The setting is:

A Cave; through large opening at back is seen the Lake and Moon; rocks R. and L.—flat rock, R.C.; gauze waters all over stage; rope hanging from C., hitched on wing, R.U.E.

Myles, the Irish peasant hero, in love with an Irish lass secretly married to a member of the aristocracy who wishes
to deny her, uses this rope, "a patent of my own," as he tells the audience, to swing across the water, "—a tightrope bridge." When he is out of sight, a boat with the heroine in it is rowed across the stage by a perverted and deformed retainer of her husband's. He is trying to extort her marriage license from her so his master will be free to marry another. Eily, the heroine, and the hunchback, Danny, step onto the rock and the boat floats away. After unsuccessfully grappling with her for the license, Danny "throws her from the rock backwards into the water, L.C. with a cry; she reappears, clinging to rock"; he pushes her off, she sinks, a shot is heard, and Danny rolls into the water. At this moment Myles appears with a gun on a rock above, sees a woman's dress in the water, swings on his rope down to the central rock, tries to pull her to him, and fails. So he "pulls off waistcoat—jumps off rock. Eily rises R.—then Myles and Eily rise up, C.—he turns, and seizes rock, R.C.—Eily across left arm." End of scene (II. 4).15

The directions given by Henry Leslie and Nicholas Rowe for their much touted sensation scene in Orange Girl, 1864, offer some idea of the lengths to which producers were willing to go:

The Logan Stone and Frozen Tarn. Peal of bells going. The center of the stage is occupied by a flat piece of practicable ice; this is surrounded by rocks except in front, which is clear; on the eminence at back, R., is an old Druidical rocking stone; the wings are formed by tall pines, one with
a practicable branch; in the distance the bells are faintly heard ringing in the New Year. The scene is dark—thick floating clouds are obscuring the moon, which, however, is shewn at convenient intervals.

In the course of this scene Uriah, the villain, lures the young heroine, Jenny, across the ice to learn the secret of her birth. He intends to kill her by leading her into a break in the ice. A man with a gun, her dead father's usurping brother, waits hidden in the rocks. Uriah leads her to the middle of the lake, suddenly hides the lantern, and runs to land. "Uriah holds the lantern, the bells cease, and the distant clock strikes twelve, as JENNY commences slowly to cross; with the last stroke she falls in— the bells, very distant begin to fire for the New Year. Music for all this." At that moment her loving aunt appears, having followed her, and screams, "Murder, Jenny!" The directions call for making what follows "as quick as lightning till climax." She tears the practicable branch from the tree and, using it as a lever, sends the rocking stone after Uriah as he tries to club Jenny on the head with the butt of his gun. As it crashes through the ice she leaps after it. Her head appears above the ice and grabbing the crowbar that Uriah has left on the ice in his haste to escape she breaks her way to shore, dragging Jenny after her. It is done thus:

The piece representing the ice is of irregular form and made like a flat; there are three traps,
one near the L., for Jenny to descend, one at the extreme back for the Logan Stone to crash through, and another through which Mrs. Fryer descends on a slote. The top of the slote represents a piece of projecting rock, on which she stands when dislodging the rocking stone; the effect of MRS. FRYER breaking along the ice could be done either by a laced slit on the Canvas, or better by making it out like a child's puzzle. There is a platform from R.U.E. to C. of stage, towards L., at the end of which the rocking stone is poised. The path which, starting from the top, R., winds to the bottom also R., divides when near the stage. One of these smaller paths leads on to the stage, the other branches at right angles, on to the ice. The ice-piece is set on an incline, and underneath it there is a board, used by URIAH and JENNY, and removed before MRS. FRYER breaks along (I.3)16

In The Idiot of the Mountain, a major excitement is the magnificent thunderstorm which accompanies the sensation scene, advertised as "Smuggler's Nest Overhanging the Abyss." The heroine clings to a fir tree trying to overhear a conversation in the smuggler's nest, a little hut six feet above the stage. A branch breaks, and she crashes out of sight into the ravine below. Minutes later, after we have seen her climb out, torn and bleeding (or so the stage directions say; Punch says there is "not a speck on her gay petticoat"),17 she is engaged in a hand-to-hand struggle with the smuggler at the edge of the ravine. Just as he overcomes her, having kicked down the plank bridge which forms the only egress from the "nest," the idiot, her rescuer, is seen climbing hand-over-hand down the hand-rope which is all that remains of the bridge (II.4).18
In Gitanilla, the final sensation scene shows the gypsy hero, as he grapples with his true love's faithless husband, going over a cataract, sinking below the stage, and reappearing to drown his opponent as a fusilade is let loose on him by soldiers lining the rocks (III.3).¹⁹

Plainly the difference between such scenes and their counterparts in melodrama lay in the setting and type of action only, not in the sentiment. The same was true in those sensation scenes which involved social and moral, rather than physical, violence. A thrilling court trial was satisfactory if presented with fitting realism; or the extraordinary prison scene from Charles Reade's Never Too Late to Mend, based on Bentham's "panopticon" scheme, giving a "perspective of radiating prison corridors seen from the centre of a model prison, with practicable tiers of galleries, and iron staircases, and cells, and gaslights."²⁰

One of the three sensation scenes in The Octoroon was the auction at which the heroine, a beautiful octoroon brought up as a member of an aristocratic family, but in reality a slave, is bid for by the villain who wishes her as a mistress. Her friends band together to buy her and set her free but M'Closky manages just to outbid them. The subject served as an Illustration for the Illustrated London News:

This particular scene recommends itself from its truthfulness. In delineating the dreadful business which it represents the dramatist has attempted no exaggeration. He has treated it as a familiar
horror, one which society has accepted as a portion of the regular business of the market and legalised as an institution. However abominable it may be, it is authorized. Those who observe, and those who are actively engaged in the transaction, alike acquiesce in the fact and the principle, as if there were no outrage being done to nature, no sin against humanity committed. Any external demonstration of excitement would be improper. What conflict there is goes on within. That beautiful Octoroon—what feels she? They who would save her from the threatened degradation—what feel they? And in that determined wretch, who exceeds his means in her purchase—O! what a hell there is in his bosom, of premeditated guilt, and even already of an anticipated remorse! 21

Such scenes were recommended by the "realism" of their psychological violence whose implications would be plain to the audience. Subtlety was unknown to the sensation dramatist, but certain kinds of trials, prisons, deaths by suicide or guillotine were sure to evoke a response without involving the audience too closely. Just in case, however, the Octoroon included a few other scenes of undisguised physical violence, among them the closing moment in which the villain emerges from the ship to which he has just set fire in an attempt to kill the Octoroon. The glare of the fire is behind him when M'Closky is suddenly confronted by a vengeful Indian he has wronged earlier in the play:

WAHNOTE, with his tomahawk, strikes the knife out of his hand; M'CLOSKY starts back; WAHNOTE throws off his blanket, and strikes at M'CLOSKY several times, who avoids him; at last he catches his arm, and struggles for the tomahawk, which falls; a violent struggle and fight take place, ending with the triumph of WAHNOTE, who drags M'CLOSKY along
the ground, takes up the knife and stabs him repeatedly; GEORGE [the hero] enters, bearing ZOE [the Octoroon] in his arms—all the characters rush on—noise increasing—the steam vessel blows up—grand Tableau, and CURTAIN.  

Into those scenes went most of the invention of the dramatist and the resources of the producers, and it was largely for the sake of these scenes that the audience paid to see the plays. There are as many examples as there are sensation plays, for it was the one ingredient necessary to a sensation play. The beauty of the stage, the thrill of action and sentiment surpassed the effect of any other kind of entertainment. They contained next to no dialogue—"But after all," wrote Punch, suggesting that Boucicault appropriate the Crystal Palace for his theatre, so that he would have height and breadth for his scenes, though no one would be able to hear anything, "this is a matter of quite secondary moment: for when one goes to see a strong 'sensation' drama, the scenic situations are the only thing one cares for, and nobody ever dreams of listening to the words." The similarity of these scenes to other wordless performances, like those of the acrobats and tightrope walkers, did not escape notice. Punch mirrored the wit of many when it proposed that a survey be conducted on the number of "killed, wounded, temporarily or permanently injured among those actors who have been engaged for the
last two or three years in playing the Heroes and Heroines of those exciting Sensation Productions, now so much the vogue." In 1863, the familiar Blondin note was sounded by Henry Morley after he saw *The Duke's Motto*, in which Fechter had to haul himself up a rope carrying a baby:

> Why, if the baby instead of being only a doll were but a real live baby with a decent chance of being dropped upon its head or squeezed to death, the piece might run till Christmas 1866.

The "realism" of sensation drama took other forms besides the perfect illusion attempted in these scenes. Perhaps its most important contribution to the stage was the relaxation of the conventions both of dialogue and of acting. The language of sensation attempted an accuracy in the reproduction of natural speech wholly absent from the plays written only a few years before. The formulae of melodrama were fading and when the dramatists did indulge in formulaic speech, it was speech appropriated from contemporary novels, rather than that of plays. Easy, modern, and more expansive than most of melodrama, the conversation sounded a little more like what real people might say. The adaptations of sensation novels to the stage, though as plays they were dismal failures, made good use of passages lifted directly from the books, whose style was well suited to the contemporary stage. A sort of historical accuracy, another aspect of the "realism" that substituted for true plausibility, was affected in most sensation plays.
Dialects and foreign languages were introduced wherever possible. In Boucicault's Irish plays, for example, the characters speak and sing in Gaelic; in The Octoroon an approximation of Negro dialect is spoken by the slaves and a strange pidgin English interlaced with supposedly Indian words, by the Indian. Tyrolean words, gypsy words, French, Spanish, Italian, pepper sensation plays. Tom Taylor even provided footnotes to the Russian words he used in The Serf, including vodka and samovar. From time to time, of course, echoes of the old melodramatic speech forms startle the hearer, like the incongruous rhymed couplet at the end of The Serf:

Here, to my heart! There let the hot tears fall,
Till she too learn, like us, LOVE LEVELS ALL.

(III)26

As important as the attempt at "realistic" language was the abandonment of old acting conventions, both in the script and in the presentation. Gone for the most part were the asides and the long summaries of preceding action on which the audience had had to rely for necessary information about characters and plot. More was left to the characters; information was woven incidentally into the dialogue. Though acting companies were made up as before, often with the playwright acting the chief part and his wife taking the female lead, those parts were no longer necessarily the hero and heroine. Webster, for instance, played
the idiot in *The Idiot of the Mountain*, rather than the hero or the villain—it was the best part. Sensation plays were a steady item in the repertories of Kate Terry, Fechter, and Webster, who were also among the successful Shakespearean actors of their day. The controversial but much admired informality introduced by Fechter to parts like Hamlet was the prevailing style of his sensation roles. Of contemporary plays, sensation drama must indeed have offered the widest scope for acting and the most exciting parts, and it had the additional advantage of being produced at legitimate theatres.

**Failures and Limitations**

The realism of plot, theme, and character claimed by sensation drama was, on the other hand, almost pure chicanery. Once in a while it provided the possibility of tragedy, but that quality had no essential connection with sensation and was readily sacrificed if it did not seem popular. A central example, and one much alluded to at the time, of the trumpery of sensation artistry was Boucicault's revision of *The Octoroon* when his audiences complained about the unhappy ending. As *Punch* described it,

"Anything else we'll stand or sit,
But this," cry boxes, gallery, pit,
"Don't kill the Octoroon."

The author heard; he rubbed his chin;
"They'll call me a poltroon.
But if her death the houses thin,
Perhaps 'tis time I should begin
To save the Octoroon.

"Tragic necessity, good-bye--
And manners change your tune;
The public voice I'll ratify--
My pretty Zoe shall not die--
I'll save the Octoroon." 27

He did—and achieved the desired end: the new conclusion
"was received with unanimous applause from an overflowing
house." 28 A characteristic review of the early version
illustrates the attitudes which the sensation dramatists
took as their standards:

Mrs. Boucicault, as the heroine, excited so much
interest that the audience were scarcely recon-
ciled to her falling a victim in order to point
more effectually the moral of the drama. We
certainly recognize no aesthetic necessity for
such a dénouement, but rather the contrary, and
think that the author would have found his account
in a happier ending. 29

Anything more thoroughly escapist than the sensation
play is hard to imagine; it seduced by its total dissocia-
tion from anything its audience could have known or had to
cope with. Nevertheless it succeeded, by dint of its
technical sophistication, in producing an illusion of
greater complexity than it in fact embodied. Its reliance
on old-fashioned types of peasants and nobility, and almost
feudal relationships between them (loyalties, for instance,
were frequently exemplified by a servant's devotion to his
master; honor by a nobleman's respect for a village girl he
falls in love with) simply avoided all the problems of the
great middle class and the necessity of developing values that pertained to contemporary life. Yet the characters—and this represented a great advance over melodrama, borrowed, perhaps, from the opera—tended to be strong and passionate, rather than clearly aligned with pure moral qualities of good and evil, innocence and guilt, though no philosophic implications were developed or even allowed. It is true that virtue offered no sure protection against unhappiness or even death. Myles na Coppaleen, for example, a peasant and the true lover of Eily O'Connor in The Colleen Bawn, has finally to renounce his claim to her since she is married to a cowardly member of the gentry; the heroine of Gitanilla dies, grief-stricken, in the arms of the old gypsy lover she deserted to marry her faithless English nobleman. The Idiot of the Mountain closes with the death of the idiot who has saved the lives of his beloved, the heroine, and her father. The Jewish heroine of Deborah is stabbed to death in the home of her former lover who has married someone else. Yet in all of these cases the "tragedy" seems better to illustrate the desire for sentimental pathos than to proceed from an artistic conception of the inevitably tragic end of certain kinds of characters and situations.

Although an obvious precedent for this kind of tragedy was to be found in the plots of operas, its incor-
portion into the extravaganza-melodrama seemed like an innovation, and sensation dramatists got a lot of mileage from it. They aimed to make their audiences weep and succeeded in making them believe that they had seized "the topics in which the public take a strong interest," and "regard what is really serious from a serious point of view," as one typical critic put it. The audiences as well as the dramatists must have been willing, even anxious, to exchange "sadness" or "tragedy" for "realism," and to accept an unhappy ending for "what is really serious." In that very respect, therefore, in which sensation drama seems to have anticipated modern dramatists like Ibsen, Sean O'Casey, or O'Neill, the possibility is undermined by the urgent requirements for commercial success and the unqualified sentimentality of these plays. Any modernistic tendencies were a blind response to the emotional needs of a popular audience, rather than the result of a conscious artistic theory.

All artistic requirements were subordinated to thrills. "To push along and keep moving, and if possible to excite," took precedence over "actual character, human probability, natural coherence of conduct." The plots were so complicated and surprise was so necessary to the sensation that some reviewers even refused to provide summaries of action, sometimes because it was too difficult to
describe, sometimes for fear of spoiling the public's pleasure, a most unusual consideration in that day. And some of the "situations" and "incidents" were powerful indeed, even akin to those in the works of older dramatists. The naked violence and crime of the Newgate drama and most melodrama were often made more thrilling by being muted into perverse subtleties bearing at least a superficial relation to character. In The Octoroon, M'Closky's attack on the Indian from behind a tree, for example, is much less exciting than the veiled sexuality and brutality of the slave auction. In Suter's The Pirates of the Savannah, one of the scenes manages to use sensation elements to produce the effect of magical symbolism. Julia, the young heroine, rests in a hammock deep in the exotic Mexican jungle, when "an immense serpent, spotted with red and black, is seen to descend, coiling itself round the tree—the hideous reptile glides into the foliage near the hammock, and an instant after, with its forked sting protruding, is slowly approaching JULIA, preparing to dart upon her—she perceives it when its head is almost close to her." In that serpent centers all the suppressed hatred and repressed sexual violence that moves the suave, careless, attractive villain of the play. Immediately after, the hero anesthetizes Julia with a poisonous flower, producing a deathlike stupor so her enemies will believe her dead. The suggestions of
Juliet and Rapacchini's daughter (published in 1846, and surely familiar to Suter) are irresistible. The ending of that play is also unusually restrained and off-hand for the thick romance of sensation drama. The hero, a famous tiger-hunter, coolly shoots the villain between the eyes, saying, with all the economical symbolism of Hedda Gabler, "'Tis thus, you know, that I kill tigers, always." \(^{32}\)

In such moments the sensation drama seems to hold the germs of something decidedly superior to other contemporary drama. Yet these instances of real sophistication were lost in the conventionality and claptrap that surrounded them. At bottom they were ersatz; that is, they were included rather as part of the machinery which flattered the audience on its worldliness, than as expressions of the essential spirit of the plays. The sensation dramatists used them for decorative touches, while assiduously avoiding their difficult and threatening nature.

In its treatment of love, too, the sensation drama achieved a misleading sense of daring modernity by adding to the old reassuring patterns the spice of apparent violations. Tales of love that was forbidden by class or politically injudicious love, the sensation drama enhanced with the complications of race. The Octoroon relinquishes her lover, nephew of her dead master and father, to the
daughter of a neighboring plantation owner:

He loves me—what of that? you know you can't be jealous of a poor creature like me. If he caught the fever, were stung by a snake, or possessed by any other poisonous or unclean thing, you could pity, tend, love him through it, and for your gentle care he would love you in return. Well, is he not thus afflicted now? I am his love—he loves an Octoroon.

Much is made of the impossibility of cross-racial love in the Gitanilla, in which the heroine, a gypsy, marries an Englishman. In the pair of plays Deborah and Leah (one plagiarized from the other), the heroine is a Jewess who loves, fatally, a Gentile. The Serf is more daring yet in its embroidery of the familiar pattern. A lady of the French aristocracy falls in love with an artist who turns out to be a serf in his homeland, Russia. The humiliation they both suffer when he is called home, and she, on a state diplomatic mission, finds him in his village, subverts the chivalrous assumptions about the nature of man, who may raise a delicate and worthy member of the opposite sex to his station in the world. It seems genuinely revolutionary—until at the end it turns out that two babies were switched in the cradle, and our hero is in fact a nobleman. As usual, convention triumphs over subversion.

The plays depended heavily on the politics of the state to express the unfitness of things as they are as a condition for true character or true love. They seemed to
imply a degree of political liberality or even radicalism which flattered the thoughtless democratic tendencies expressed in the general reaction to Garibaldi, for instance. The Irish plays Arrah-na-Pogue and Peep o'Day had as heroes Irish fugitives from English law, during the very years when Fenianism was such a present fear. The hero of The Serf is actually persuaded to lead a revolution, though he backs off and the subsequent discovery of his birth saves him that necessity. In the many plays set during the French Revolution, such as The Dead Heart and The Forest-Keeper, the center of sympathy is with the revolutionaries.

Yet the political implications of the plays were systematically and harmlessly detonated by their contexts and their endings. Boucicault supported Home Rule; yet all his plays, even his Irish ones, are extraordinarily ambiguous politically. For one thing the political issues are wholly eclipsed by the love story and therefore never have to be resolved; for another, the characters at the end are realigned in terms of their acceptance of the hero and his love rather than by party, thus confusing political divisions. In the Octoroon, for example, slave, slave-owners, Indian, and Southern aristocrat are united in their common hatred for M'Closky, a Northerner but a slave-trader. It is impossible to draw any political conclusions from this situation. The political sell-out in The Serf is even more
blatant. "Love Levels All" is the democratic subtitle of this play, and as I have already mentioned, it seems openly revolutionary. At the last moment its radical potential is transformed by the fairytale, and "leveling" only means granting wealth and position to true love. In all these plays the context was so completely divorced from present reality that no connection between the dramatic situations and current political issues had to be made. The audience could therefore luxuriate in the glow of democratic sympathies without having to consider the consequences.

Dignity and control were also sacrificed whenever necessary to the gratification of primitive wish-dreams and the production of tears. Contrast Dickens' superb restraint at the end of *A Tale of Two Cities* with Tom Taylor's sensation adaptation of the novel for the stage: Darnay, released from the Bastille by Carton's substitution of himself for Darnay, enters the family living room, and we see his wife and child rejoicing in his having been saved (in the novel he is still drugged; we never see him conscious after his escape). Defarge is in the living room at the time. Madame Defarge enters, and she and her husband quarrel about whether Darnay is to be re-arrested, since in the truncation of the story necessary to dramatization, he has only been imprisoned once. Defarge kills his wife, instead of Miss Pross's doing so privately in a fit of
passionate necessity. At that moment the tumbrils are heard outside, and looking up, the little group sees Carton going by on his way to the guillotine (in the novel they never know of his brave sacrifice until afterwards). He looks toward their window, sees them, smiles and waves. The Darnays and Mannettes kneel in prayer while he is still in sight: tableau. The same spirit of indulgence offered play-goers unlikely coincidences, secret origins revealed unexpectedly, lost documents found in the nick of time, unsuspected relationships discovered at the last moment, forgotten crimes uncovered at a crucial point—in short, all the claptrap mocked by Gilbert and Sullivan a decade later—to achieve the results which "realism" and artistic integrity excluded.

The moral values of these plays were also irreconcilable with "realism." Despite a greater ambiguity of character expressive of the dissolution of moral certitude, the old melodramatic underpinnings were visible. Young, pretty girls were made to be loved and were granted as rewards to brave young men. These heroines were always helpless and innocent. Even Arrah-na-Pogue, an Irish peasant girl who got her name, "Arragh-of-the-Kiss," by passing a secret political message to her brother-in-law with a kiss when he was in prison, and who sheltered him in her cabin under circumstances of gravest danger, is
defenseless against false accusations that she has harbored the robber of a bank and has been untrue to her husband. And Arrah is by far the strongest and most independent of the heroines of sensation drama. All the action is initiated by men; men are the heroes, villains, the chief movers of good and of evil, while the pretty maids flit around to be loved, saved, and made happy. However lively, plucky, and constant they may be, women cannot act for themselves and find their only true expression in endurance. Masculine strength, on the other hand, was defined in the terms suggested by my description of sensation scenes: physical daring and prowess, action, and violence. I mention all this because exactly the opposite is true of sensation novels, and the alteration of sexual ideals overturns the basic conception and structure of the novels. The difference between novels and drama in this respect may be due to the traditionally masculine character of both the play-going audience and of playwrights, in contrast to the readers and writers of sensation fiction, among whom women are much more prominent.

Like melodrama, sensation plays used money as an external symbol of happiness. The immediate need for money puts the pressure on girls to marry men they do not love, and vice versa—Arrah-na-Pogue, The Octoroon, The Colleen Bawn, The Hidden Hand, The Idiot of the Mountain, The Angel
of Midnight, *The Orange Girl*, and others—as well as providing motivation for violence and crime. The bill of sale on the cottage door was a regular opener, and the necessary award of money to the favorites and poverty to the villains helped baffle the germs of democracy in these plays. In this respect too they differed from sensation novels, in which money was dispersed among all from the outset and rarely changed hands at the end.

All sensation plays involved love stories of the most old-fashioned and sentimental variety. Love replaced innocence as the prevailing virtue, and in this respect they bore at least a superficial resemblance to the sensation novel though they raised no moral issues. The outlaw was ennobled and even made a hero by being a lover, and values were defined in terms of love. *Punch* conceded to Brougham's *The Duke's Motto*, for instance, that in spite of its being "a tale of the time of that estimable Prince, the REGENT DUKE OF ORLEANS, and several of the characters are about as worthy of the wheel as the roués who made up his delightful Court," "there is some womanly truthfulness and affection to soften the sentiment that pervades the piece, to elevate the gladiator into a champion, and the intriguer into a lover." The failure of Myles na Copealain to win the prize in *The Colleen Bawn* produced an artistic confusion between what the audience expected and what it got, which
made many people dislike the last act; his continued life without the heroine, though he signs her over with a good grace to her husband, is unprepared for by the scheme of the play or by the sensation convention. Otherwise accidents, dying confessions and repentances, kind acts of loyal retainers, and eavesdroppings, were always on the side of the lovers. Violence, deceit, parody of the sacraments, violation of political laws or social institutions—all were forgiven or condemned by whether they advanced or obstructed the course of love. Love, however, had no political, social, or moral consequences; this theme, too, effectively prevented any association between the sensation drama and contemporary problems.

Author and Audience

"Never in the history of our stage were such magnificent rewards within the easy grasp of talent; never were there such multitudes to welcome good acting," wrote a reviewer for the Cornhill, in a discussion of the present state of the drama. The sensation dramatists aimed to capture these rewards, and their effort to do so goes far to explain the plays. The changes in the payment of dramatic authors, who now began to receive a share of the box profits instead of a flat fee for a play, encouraged the indulgence of the public fancy and also reveal how the plays
must have been slapped together if it was thought they would make money, regardless of the means. Piracy both of novels which could be turned into sensation plays and of already-existing plays was common. Everyone took what he could and did whatever he could get away with. William Tinsley records that the injunction he and Mary Elizabeth Braddon obtained to restrain the theatrical publisher Thomas Lacy from publishing dramatic versions of *Lady Audley's Secret* was the first of its kind. "Up to that time, there had been no law to prevent any compiler or writer of plays dramatising any novel that the author had not previously dramatised, and registered at Stationers' Hall in the proper way." On the other hand, the copyright laws were recklessly abused by men like Boucicault, who claimed a copyright for his "rearrangement" of the incidents and dialogue of his sensation play *The Trial of Effie Deans*, based on Scott's *Heart of Midlothian*. "There is," wrote the *Illustrated London News* angrily,

no dramatic faiseur more ingenious and astute than Mr. Dion Boucicault; but a melancholy paucity and barrenness of invention become manifest when we hear of a copyright being claimed in the "rearrangement" of a hackneyed melodrama, which, again, was but an adaptation of one of Sir Walter Scott's immortal fictions.39

The same difficulties obtained in the case of the many plays which were hardly more than translations from the French. Henry Morley, puzzling over why dramatists called such works
their own, remarked that no novelist would fail to make proper acknowledgement for sources drawn on so heavily. His observation points to some of the essential differences between sensationism in the theatre and sensationism in the novel, differences partly dependent on the chaotic conditions of financing in the theatre, which must have lowered the morale and integrity of managers, dramatists, and actors; partly on the immediately preceding professional traditions of each genre; and partly on the attitudes of their respective audiences. No one ever claimed for sensation drama that it attempted anything but the indulgence of public taste. Why should it? "The mania for producing a sensation drama which may last a year and enable the manager to lay aside his pecuniary cares for that long period" had its own justification in that financial fact. Scruples fell before it. Punch even suggested indecorously,

Were SHAKESPEARE living now to write "sensation" dramas, he might, to please the public, make Othello kill Iago three nights in the week instead of venting his blind wrath upon the virtuous Desdemona. Moreover, Hamlet might be altered so as to end happily, Ophelia being rescued and restored to reason, just in time to rush on in the middle of Act V, and so prevent her brother from sticking the Crown Prince, who, having killed the King, might wed her and be happy.

It is difficult to know exactly who made up this courted audience, and difficult also to determine how much their taste was formed by what was available, and to what
extent sensation was exactly what they would have chosen had they had a wide selection available. Of course many commentators held opinions like this:

"... There is a vast and hungry public ready to welcome and reward any good dramatist or fine actor; but in default of these, willing to be amused by spectacle and sensation pieces." \(^{43}\)

The nature of the popular theatrical audience was changing in the early sixties, primarily to include more women and more members of the middle classes. Though prejudice against the theatre was still strong in certain quarters, it was on the whole diminishing. Furthermore, the source of much of the feeling against the theatre had to do with conditions entirely independent of what was shown on stage; many theatres, for example, were notoriously the hang-outs of prostitutes. Nevertheless, ladies attended a large number of plays, among which sensation dramas were conspicuous.

It is interesting to observe that the stage adaptations of sensation novels, which made terrible plays, were such successes. Explaining why play-goers were, in his opinion, a less and less discriminating group, Henry Morley wrote:

"It is quite true that new conditions of society have somewhat altered the relations between stage and people. When there were few readers and few comfortable homes, the story told to the eye and ear attracted thousands whose imaginations needed active exercise. Now the story can be read at
ease among home comforts. Out of the printed page graces of style and delicate suggestion of the fancy rise to the mind undisturbed by the glare of gas and smell of orange-peel, and so it is that the men of genius who would have written plays for the Elizabethan public are the novelists of our own time.  

For these plays, the play-going and novel-reading audience was the same; and it is difficult to imagine what pleasure, beyond that of animated illustrations to the novels, those used to the delicate, or even the rather zesty, suggestions of the sensation novel, found in these dramatizations. Sir Walter Scott lent himself well both to melodrama and to the sensation play, but Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Mrs. Henry Wood, and their fellows did not. The qualities which were most sensational in the novels had to be transformed or eliminated on the stage, and the result were plays that were merely melodramas of the old-fashioned sort. They were called sensation plays, but the term was derived from their status as novels.

To begin with, the attention devoted to psychological examination, which was so important an aspect of the sensation novel, could not be transferred to the stage at all. To compensate, the adaptors relied on old melodramatic types for characters. The fascinating sensation heroine was either reduced to a pretty, helpless young thing, or made out to be a kind of witch. Her opponent became an ordinary villain, her lover a handsome savior.
Since the novels took place indoors in contemporary settings, the dramatizations were deprived of the all-important sensation scenes. They substituted representations of the crimes, often committed by the heroine herself, which in the novels were left behind the scenes. The familiarity of the settings rendered these actions either grotesque or absurd—sometimes both. The result was not only a real distortion of the novels, but a loss of the sensation. To learn through much indirection, after we have been made to admire her and with a view always to psychological analysis, that Aurora Floyd has been married before, and later to learn that the husband she thought dead still lives; to know by many proofs her love for her father, and to understand the misguided but fond motives that kept her from telling him of her disgrace—this, in the novel, produces a very different effect from the drama, in which the audience is told immediately at the outset that Aurora Floyd is a bigamist and knows it.

Since the plays had to include all the sensational acts, the compression necessary to dramatizing long and complicated novels resulted in ludicrous sequences. Characters popped up with no warning, identified themselves, and disappeared. The action, which in the novel usually extended over years, was telescoped with an effect like that which Morley accurately describes in *Lady Audley's*
Secret: "The putting of the superfluous husband into the well follows so closely on the bigamy, the glow of the arson, again so closely on the stain of murder, and the interesting heroine goes mad so immediately, with the glow of the house she has burnt yet on her face, and the man she has burnt in it dying on a stretcher by her side, that the audience has a pudding all plums."46

Regressive techniques, abandoned in "original" sensation dramas, were employed to get it all in. The flashback of the novel was replaced by a conversation between two servants; the main characters were assigned long, stiff monologues explaining what had happened hitherto; awkward asides crudely revealed motivation. Thus the sympathy so elaborately secured for wrong-doers by the narrator, the chief source of sensation in the novel, had to be foregone.

Obviously the audience had read the novels, knew the plots and characters, had had the secrets revealed, and came to see selected fragments of the action in the flesh, regardless of how it was garbled. For us, the distortions perpetrated by the dramatists help to distinguish between what sensation was on the stage and what it was in the novel. But they should also warn against attributing too fine a discrimination to the popular audience of either the plays or the novels. Sensation was sensation, whatever the
kind. What made the difference was not specifically the play-going or novel-reading public, but the literary traditions in which each operated. Sensation in the drama represented a grand exploitation of possibilities long present in the form. The sensation novel, on the other hand, expressed a turning in a new direction.
I have found no allusions to anyone reading a sensation novel aloud. While that is not conclusive evidence, other comments lead me to believe that these novels were not considered good family entertainment.


Morley, p. 53.

(25 July 1863), 517-520.

Morley, p. 240.


Cornhill, 8 (Sept. 1863), 301.

Morley, p. 108.

P. 83.

(7 Dec. 1861), 225.

(20 Feb. 1865), 79.

Illustrated London News, 8 June 1861, 529.


(30 Nov. 1861), 222.


Morley, p. 380.

30 Nov. 1861, 562.
Their objections, however, did not deter them from attending the play—or, we may be sure, Boucicault would have killed off Eily's husband. This is another illustration of the inconsistency of the audience's desires, and another point on which the techniques of the drama and those of the novel converge. It is my contention that the possibility of tragedy, whether realized or not, enhanced the thrill; no one, for example, who went to see that happy-ending Octoroon but knew that once the Octoroon had died. Thus the audience ate its cake and had it, entertaining two mutually conflicting possibilities simultaneously. This technique is a special quality of popular art.
Pains were taken to get that effect, even to the casting of women who looked like sensation heroines. Here is Ellen Terry’s description, for example, of Louisa Herbert, who played the beautiful Lady Audley Miss Braddon had described as resembling a Pre-Raphaelite painting: "She looked like the Blessed Damozel leaning out 'across the bar of Heaven' . . . her appearance was wonderful indeed. She was very tall, with pale-gold hair and the spiritual, ethereal look which the aesthetic movement loved." Louisa Herbert was also very successful in the dramatization of Miss Braddon’s later novel, Eleanor’s Victory. (A Mid-Victorian Pepys: The Letters and Memoirs of Sir William Hardman, ed. S. M. Ellis [London, 1923], p. 152n.)
CHAPTER V

THE SENSATION NOVEL

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

—Incantation to the Demon of Romance, from W. S. Gilbert's The Sensation Novel, 1869

Though the sensation novel was a new development in popular literature, it of course bore a relation to past works. That relation was stressed by contemporary commentators perhaps more than it deserved; Gilbert's Incantation, for instance, written nine years after the first book that was called a "sensation novel," invokes some elements--arsenic, convict, bloody pocket-knife--that were more
properly those of Newgate novels and penny dreadfuls, as well as of sensation drama. The widespread tendency to regard the sensation novel as an offshoot of existing varieties of popular literature indicates that critics and the general public had to cope with what was in fact new by minimizing its novelty and importance. It also goes far to explain their so incongruously lumping together sensation drama and sensation novels under the same rubric. The statements of the time in this respect, intended as they were to disguise the sensation novel's implications to literature, must not be accepted unreservedly.

**Background and Audience**

Contemporaries liked to point to the Newgate novels of twenty to forty years earlier as the immediate predecessors of the sensation novel. Like sensation novels, they had criminals for heroes, and their plots were organized by the commission of crimes. Beyond that general contribution, however, their effect on the sensation novel was negligible. Male sensation writers were perhaps more influenced by them and by boys' adventure stories than were female writers—George Augustus Sala and Charles Reade, for example. But those novels took place among the lower classes; their heroes were "common criminals" celebrated for their daring, cleverness, and physical prowess. The interest of the novels (among the most famous titles are Ainsworth's *Jack*
Sheppard and Bulwer-Lytton's Eugene Aram and Paul Clifford) lay in descriptions of escapes and close calls, prison scenes, pain, torture, violence, and the actual commission of crimes—the same kind of interest, except for its urban setting, as that of the sensation drama. Like the drama, they were set safely in the past. They served, however, as scapegoats for the sensation novel. A characteristic example of this practice is M. E. Braddon's much-noticed introduction of the character of a "sensation author" into one of her sensation novels. He writes, and comments on, formulaic penny dreadfuls, which he calls "sensation novels":

Mr. Sigismund Smith was a sensation author. That bitter term of reproach, "sensation," had not yet been invented for the terror of romancers in the fifty-second year of this present century; but the thing existed nevertheless in divers forms, and people wrote sensation novels as unconsciously as Monsieur Jourdain talked prose. Sigismund Smith was the author of about half a dozen highly-spiced fictions, which enjoyed immense popularity amongst the classes who like their literature as they like their tobacco—very strong.

Miss Braddon's lady readers, at least, didn't take tobacco, and so, while reading The Doctor's Wife, were excused from any association with "sensation" reading. Furthermore, Sigismund's description of his "sensation novels" was specifically not applicable to the sensation novel proper:

Why, you see, the penny public require excitement, . . . and in order to get the excitement up to a strong point, you're obliged to have recourse to
bodies. Say your hero murders his father, and buries him in the coal-cellar in No. 1. What's the consequence? There's an undercurrent of the body in the coal-cellar running through every chapter, like the subject in a fugue or a symphony. You drop it in the treble, you catch it up in the bass; and then it goes sliding up into the treble again, and then drops down with a melodious groan into the bass; and so on to the end of the story.

(Ch. 3)

But there were no bodies in sensation stories, and if someone died, you didn't see it happen unless it was on a sick bed. The body itself never appeared.

A second, related, antecedent was the Gothic romance. Though an earlier form than the Newgate novel, its contributions were perhaps more important. The most striking were the importance of the heroine, the adaptation of "sensibility" to the mode in which she was treated, the importance of passion as a destructive force, and the milieu of wealth and power for the leading characters. All sense of the supernatural or apparently supernatural was of course missing in the sensation novel, which eschewed the indefensibly implausible; so were wild natural, lonely settings, storms and tempests, for sensation novels were always set indoors or in properly tended gardens; so was the acute sense of the past. Nevertheless the true Gothic novels of the late 18th century and their adaptations by such writers as the Brontes provided much material and several important character types appropriated by the sensation novel. A
review of Joseph LeFanu's *Uncle Silas* actually makes this connection, though it was not commonly articulated, possibly because of the ambivalence with which books like *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* were regarded:

> [The book] is one of the best of the melodramatic class of tales, depending for its interest not on a succession of shocks, but on the gradual working out of a double problem in psychology and criminal jurisprudence. There is also considerable variety of character, though the writer is much more studious of singularity than of vraisemblance. The imitation of Emily Brontë is palpable, and not unskilful.⁵

*Uncle Silas* was more closely modeled on the Gothic novel than most sensation novels, but readers, of, for example, *The Woman in White*, will recognize the similarities.

While Scott's tales were boldly plagiarized by sensation dramatists, sensation novelists did not use historical settings. Nevertheless, in many ways the spirit of Scott's novels contributed to their works. LeFanu, for example, defending "sensation" in *Uncle Silas*, pointed out in his preface to that book that Sir Walter Scott had used precisely the same kinds of incidents and motives that he did.⁶ He did not explain that the great difference was that the sensation novelist introduced these themes in ordinary, contemporary settings—the combination was one of the real innovations of the sensation novel. But the reputations of writers like Scott and the Dumas lent respectability to romance, excitement, and mystery, and
sensationists referred to them frequently. The hero of *Lady Audley's Secret*, for example, overcome by the horror of Lady Audley's murder of his friend, suddenly feels that his ghost may appear, and closes the door. "I haven't read Alexander Dumas and Wilkie Collins for nothing," he mutters. "I'm up to their tricks." There can be little doubt that these earlier works—Collins didn't write what were called sensation novels until 1860—provided a certain factitious inspiration and dignity for the sensationists.

Though little remarked at the time, the sensation novel owed perhaps heavier debts to recent "realistic" treatments of contemporary life, which both determined the nature of the sensation novel and provided an apparent rationale for its most revolutionary and most objectionable qualities. The social reform novels of Dickens, Mrs. Gaskell, Disraeli, Kingsley, and others, had thoroughly established a principle on which the sensation novel relied heavily: that "unpleasantness" was admissible in fiction for the sake of truth. Though sensation novels—even those of Charles Reade, though he successfully claimed that they did—had no social purpose, the authors, when charged with moral laxness, fell back on the pretext that their aim was to show life as it was and to expose those aspects of it which the public tried to ignore. No special social gain was expected to come of this exposure, in contrast to that
of the reform novels, but the tradition had been sufficiently well fixed that it served as justification.

From the silver fork novels of the twenties and thirties the sensation novel inherited its upper-middle-class and upper-class settings, and its opulent descriptions of interiors, of clothes, and of furniture. "Historically," writes Walter C. Phillips in Dickens, Reade, and Collins: Sensation Novelists, "sensationalism clearly represents a popular development in fiction in which the novel of mystery is crossed with that of fashionable life." Though his definition of "sensation novel" is not what was meant by that term in the sixties, this hybridization is characteristic of the sensation novel, and among other effects helped to consolidate the audiences of both those types of novel. Nor, though such influence was consistently denied both outright and by implication, can one overlook the at least oblique effect of French and other non-English novels of the kind young ladies weren't supposed to read. In America, too, writers experienced a freedom of scope denied to major British authors in the earlier part of the century. The Scarlet Letter, for example, had been published in 1850, and Hawthorne was among the American authors most read in England.

Finally, the sensation novel replaced for many readers moral and sentimental tales. Though sensation
novels abandoned religious overtones and moralizing, they incorporated such staples of the genre as the examination, though often crude, of the workings and sensibilities of the mind, especially of the female mind, the difficulties of moral choices, and the problem of conflicting passions. The conditions that dimmed the appeal of moral works produced sensation for the same audience. The Quarterly Review justified publishing discussions of "sensation for the million" because it was a fad which extended to all classes and was therefore symptomatic of a general condition of mind. But the worrisome class of readers were the protected young women who received much of their moral training and their outlook on life from novels. Amy Cruse, in The Victorians and Their Reading, writes of the sixties that "A rage for sensationalism had set in, and Mr. Mudie must have been hard put to it to gratify this taste, and at the same time to preserve his library from the taint of doubtful literature." While there was some difference about what sensation novels Mr. Mudie ought to carry, and while he must, especially at first, have trod a fairly narrow line, I suspect that problem was not as bad as it seems. Times were changing, and neither Mr. Mudie nor his readers were insensible of the fact. As a characteristic review of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's work chose to see it:

... It is with her own sex principally that her power prevails. Whether it be that there is a
subtle affinity between the dispositions of all women, which, as their detractors affirm, causes the best as well as the worst of them to rejoice in intrigue and obliquity, to revel in mystery and perplexities, and to consider it beneath the dignity of womanly cleverness to compass the most insignificant object without complex manoeuvres, or whether it be nothing of the kind, let physiologists determine; but there is one fact which we cannot gainsay—and that is the fascination exercised by Miss Braddon.\textsuperscript{12}

In earlier decades of the Victorian period, the novel had exerted itself to express ideals of womanhood that would accord with the social ideals of the time, and to provide models for young ladies to emulate and for young men to love. G. M. Young, recommending that to gauge the change in the social atmosphere between the forties and the seventies one should read a good popular novel from each, makes an important observation:

The use of fictional sources for social history is a practice to be followed, doubtless, with caution. But on one point their evidence is almost infallible. They show us what types were biologically attractive to a particular generation, and by natural law those types will be ascendant in the evolution of the next. They are documents for the Origin of Social Species by Sexual Selection.\textsuperscript{13}

The process also works in reverse: certain aspects of popular literature can be explained by alterations in conceptions of ideal sexual types. Along with the other extraordinary changes which mark the 1860's was a change in what was considered to be the biologically attractive type of woman, and shifts in society and manners were making room
for her. Sensation literature is literature of revolt chiefly in its expression of the wish-dreams of the dissatisfied. The dissatisfied were women. Dissatisfied with what, I believe most of them did not know; hence the confusion of the literature which expressed it. To be interesting, to be actively powerful, without sacrificing that necessity, respectability, is the dream chiefly indulged by sensation literature.

These were years, after all, when restrictions on women, definitions of modesty and propriety, and censorship on subjects of public discussion were slowly relaxing. Not enough to directly affect the lives of most lady novel readers, perhaps, but enough to make themselves felt in some vague recesses of the heart. The Divorce Court and the reports of its proceedings were slowly ridding marriage of its corona of euphoric bliss. Agitation for women's rights had begun in America, where "bloomers" had already been invented, and there was talk of it in England—though articles on "The Occupation of Woman" were not about careers but about needlework and watercolors. A Women's Suffrage Bill was introduced in Parliament in 1867 by "John Stuart Mill and his clique," as one diarist put it, which, though badly defeated, was a sign of rumbling beneath. Mill's On the Subjection of Women appeared in 1869. Occupational opportunities for women were opening slightly at the
beginning of the sixties. In 1860, for instance, Miss Emily
Faithfull opened a printing press which hired only women—
and not just women from the working class. Like most
attempts of this kind it was sneered at:

We wish Miss Emily Faithfull every success, and
may be permitted to indulge in a sincere hope
that she and her lady-conspirators may get plenty
of sonnets, three-volume novels, and circular
invites for balls, picnics, and fancy fairs to
print. In fire, murders, police reports, and
Blue-books they would, we are afraid, break down.15

The new telegraph offices were hiring female clerks.
In 1860 Florence Nightingale started the first nursing
school in the world. The medical schools, again following
the example of the Americans, began to admit women in 1865.
This step too was greeted with hoots. Yet editorials like
the following suggesting that the Royal Academy admit women
to its schools were growing more common:

We should have far fewer pinched and pining
governesses, and rarer despairing outcries for
"employment for women" [in the sense of some­	hing for them to do], if greater and more
generous facilities were afforded for the devel­
opment of the artistic faculties of the better
sex.16

Severe limitations of thought are implied in such passages,
but they did express a gradual progress outward.

The same years saw the publication of medical books
and articles openly discussing such topics as the unhealth­
fulness of tight lacing and other requirements of feminine
high fashion. Florence Nightingale's first book of wide
general interest, Notes on Nursing, was published in 1860, for example. Articles appeared on the value of breast-feeding babies. Investigations of prostitution and of venereal diseases furnish further evidence of an extension of the topics that could be discussed—or even openly acknowledged to exist. There was a corresponding relaxation of at least a few of the social restraints on women, amusing as it seems at this distance. Sir William Hardman, for example, describes a party he planned in 1862 for a circle of friends including Shirley Brooks and Mrs. Charles Dickens, after a lecture by the former:

Evening dress will only be pardoned in "the lecturer," who will be in it ex necessitate. Champagne cup at supper and punch afterwards, with cigars in the dining-room. All ladies who are coming have been warned that they will be expected to stand tobacco smoke, and must dress accordingly. It is a nervous business, but we hope it will go off well.

The sensation novel responded to and was connected with these changes. Literature of the nineteenth century written for respectable women had rigorously avoided treating the worst and most real problems that faced their readers. Social, political, and economic influences now brought the novel to grope toward a new way of looking at the individual in society. Feminine types and the conditions of womanhood became a central concern. The sensation novel did not correct the old imbalance completely, but it opened the way for novels that could.
This may be connected with the startling number of sensation authors who were women. "The world of fiction is the El Dorado of clever and well-educated women of the middle class. It has saved many from the grim Siberia of governessing,"¹⁸ was a characteristic comment of the male-dominated press, which was disturbed to find that:

The lady-novelists are still carrying all before them. The "East Lynne" of "Mistress H. Wood" has been translated into French, and attained at once a tremendous vogue; and Mr. Bentley promises us, on the 10th of November, a fresh novel, entitled "Mrs. Haliburton's Troubles," from the pen of this accomplished authoress. "The [sic] Lady Audley's Secret" is in a third edition; "Aurora Floyd" will probably go through four, and the author, M. E. Braddon—do the initials stand for Marcus Eugenius or for Mary Emily?—has been offered, we hear, fabulous sums for a serial tale in a popular journal. So the gentlemen, Mr. Wilkie Collins excepted, seem temporarily beaten out of the field. Whence this defeat? Is it because men are afraid or unable to describe the phases of life they have seen and acted in, and that women have both the courage and the ability to paint, from mere imagination, the things they have never seen? It would appear as though the gentlemen whispered the secret of the drama of life to the ladies, and the ladies—who are notorious tell-tales, published the secret to the world.¹⁹

To these two names should be added the equally famous ones of Mrs. Eliza Lynn Linton and "Ouida," whose publisher "had not at the time much belief in Ouida's works; but he found out later that there was plenty of money to be made out of the little lady's novels, although he very unwillingly consented to publish her second book."²⁰ Other sensation novelists of the first half of the sixties were the
notorious Caroline Sheridan Norton, long involved with the feminist movement, Mrs. Oliphant, Mrs. Riddell (who wrote under "J. R. Trafford"), Mrs. Cashel Hoey (who collaborated with Edmund Yates, he providing the plot and she writing the story), and Mrs. Craik, as well as those who wrote anonymously. It is interesting that even with such an edge on the sensation market, these women often wrote under assumed masculine or neuter-sounding names because their novels sold better so, perhaps by appealing to more men. Such was the basis of Mrs. Hoey's arrangement with Edmund Yates; a novel that she wrote entirely by herself under his name, for instance, sold twice as many copies as another published under her own name a few weeks later. Mrs. Henry Wood wrote two serials every year for the Argosy, one under her own name and one under the signature of "Johnny Ludlow." Mrs. Wood's serials were often badly noticed, Johnny's usually well; in fact more than one reviewer recommended that she study Johnny Ludlow.

What the Sensation Novel Was

Muddled as these attitudes and unarticulated needs were, it is hardly any wonder that the sensation novel was itself a confused form, eliciting conflicting and even contradictory reactions. At the time the term "sensation novel" was thought so derogatory that its application by a reviewer depended much on whether he had liked the book or
not. Many sensation novels within their own pages denied being such. In spite of all this there was very clearly such a thing as "the sensation novel," and though it was recognizable as such, it was nevertheless not always formu-
laic, and sometimes made very good reading indeed. Contemporary use of the term was based chiefly on Lady Audley's Secret, the first to receive the appellation, and referred to a story about crime and bigamy, with covert sexual overtones, operating by suspense and excitement, and centering on the fortunes of a beautiful but unscrupulous heroine--through "highly-colored portraits of beautiful fiends and fast young ladies burdened with superfluous husbands," as a reviewer of Lady Audley's Secret and Aurora Floyd put it.23

Lady Audley's Secret was in fact a fairly crude, if startling, story. The heroine is exquisitely beautiful, with adorable golden curls, blue eyes, and elegant bearing. She marries for his money George Talboys, who is thereupon disinherited and finally has to leave her to seek a fortune in Australia. For a number of years he is plagued with bad luck, but finally makes a lot of money and heads home. In the meantime his wife, believing him dead, has become a governess, leaving their son with her drunkard father, and in the town where she is working she meets, charms, and marries an older man, Sir Michael Audley. Her husband
returns, searches for her, and reads a notice of her death in the newspaper. It turns out later that Lady Audley, when she learned of his return, paid a dying young woman to impersonate her. Talboys is heartbroken, and to comfort him his old friend, Sir Michael's nephew, invites him to visit at Sir Michael's. There Talboys inevitably meets his wife, who arranges a tryst to explain all. She ends by pushing him into an old disused well. It is important that although the reader suspects she has murdered him, this scene is not described in the book. Robert, the nephew, begins to suspect her, and the rest of the book is the story of his sleuthing and her efforts to elude him.

As more sensation novels were published, including later ones by Miss Braddon, a certain generic type began to emerge that had more literary possibilities than Lady Audley's Secret. Before describing the points common to sensation novels, it is necessary to mention another novel, published in 1855, which provided much of the material and ambience picked up by the sensationists. That book was Caroline Meysey-Wigley Clive's Paul Ferroll. It opens with the gentleman hero, Paul Ferroll, riding off on a summer morning and taking breakfast on the way at the house of one of his farmers. There a messenger gallops up to tell him that his beautiful young wife has been found brutally murdered in her bed. The culprit is never discovered. Ferroll
goes abroad for several years and returns with another lovely young wife, Elinor, and a tiny child (whose age indicates that he must have remarried almost immediately); it is learned that he had loved Elinor passionately for many years before his first marriage, but that "evil friends" had separated them. Who or why, we are never to learn. Ferroll is highly esteemed by both nobles and common folk, and his courage during a cholera epidemic earns him public respect. But he accepts no social invitations from anyone, and except when called on for help keeps entirely to himself, preferring his wife's company to any other. He also forbids, arbitrarily it seems, his daughter's engagement to the son of a neighboring aristocrat. At the end, an old servant whose husband had been a suspect in Mrs. Ferroll's murder returns to England and is accused of murdering Mrs. Ferroll, because of some stolen jewelry found in her possession. She is tried and found guilty. That night Ferroll confesses that he is the murderer. He had buried a confession and his own knife in his first wife's coffin; it is unearthed and confirms his guilt. He is condemned to death, but he and his daughter escape to a Spanish ship sailing for America, his wife having died of shock.

Paul Ferroll is not exactly a sensation novel. The hero offers a much clearer example of the Byronic hero than
was to be found in sensation novels; there is little sense of sexuality; the problems with his first wife which led to the murder are never developed at all; and perhaps most important, the book is remarkably stark, restrained, and controlled. Nevertheless it exchanged psychology for morality, had a respectable and admirable, if not sympathetic, criminal as a hero, "moving in a pleasant English countryside and performing the duties of a good citizen," says Eric Partridge, who adds, "his crime was partly justifiable." The book itself must have influenced the sensationists profoundly. Mrs. Clive also wrote a number of other works on the same story, including a novel in 1862, Why Paul Ferroll Killed His Wife, a development of a part of her initial story that had clearly become acceptable through the sensation rage. But it never gained any notoriety, and Mrs. Clive's works are never listed among the sensation novels of the day.

Said Mr. Punch to Father Nile at the successful conclusion of the Livingstone expedition:

Do you know that you remind me of a sensation novel; when the secret's out, there's nothing in it?

Though the remark was unfair, it is true that the "secret" was of prime importance in especially the earlier sensation novels. Per se, it was overestimated at the time as an element of sensation. Suspense was of course important,
and the "secret" enabled the novelists to manipulate curiosity and produce continuity by a clear and single progress of events. But secrets had been pivotal in other kinds of novels, not only in Gothic novels, for example, but in such books as *Oliver Twist* and *Bleak House*, not to mention *Paul Ferroll*. Commentators of the time regarded the secrets in sensation literature as analogous to these, as gimmicks to create surprise and excitement. Here, for example, is a contemporary analysis of how *Lady Audley's Secret* operated:

There is no wit, no humour, no passion, no eloquence, no truth of description. But there is the skill which carries a story through a steeple-chase of incidents, and never lets the reader's curiosity flag. By artful suggestions we are made to believe that the woman whose illness, death, and burial seem authentically proved, is still living in triumphant wickedness. Who was buried in her name? And how was the substitution effected? Here is one mystery. Then for another, there is the sudden disappearance of a man: what has become of him? Is he dead—murdered? If so, how, and by whom? By simply hinting these things, and by never allowing the reader to be present at the scenes suggested, the author is master of our curiosity, and can take his own time and means for gratifying it. When the explanations of these mysteries are given, it is true that they turn out absurdly incredible; but by that time you have finished the book.26

The title emphasizes the secret of that book; throughout *The Woman in White*, it is referred to with a capital "S." *The Moonstone* was so organized that the central secret was not revealed until the end, creating what has been interpreted as a very strong link between the sensation novel
and the later detective novel, but Wilkie Collins was the only writer at the time who used and perfected that particular kind of "Secret."

A distinction has to be drawn between the three kinds of secrets—all used, often simultaneously, by sensationists—which produced very different literary effects. The old-fashioned kind was a secret of whose existence the reader was not aware, information simply withheld from him until it was finally popped upon him, producing surprise but not suspense. The second was a secret acknowledged by the author and kept before the reader throughout the course of the book, though not revealed until the end. Such a secret was the material of, most strikingly, *The Moonstone*, though it was used less skilfully in most sensation novels, and was a chief means of producing the all-important suspense. But "who dun it" and similar questions are answered remarkably soon for the readers of sensation novels: the reader quickly learns that Aurora Floyd has married a second husband before the first is dead, knows that Lady Audley has apparently killed Talboys, knows that, in *No Name*, the heroine's parents have rushed off to marry in their middle age because the husband's first wife has died at last, and so on. Collins remarks on using this method in *No Name*, when he says in the introduction:

The only Secret contained in this book is revealed midway in the first volume. From that point, all
the main events of the story are purposely foreshadowed, before they take place--my present design being to rouse the readers' interest in following the train of circumstances by which these foreseen events are brought about.27

The third kind of "Secret," therefore, is the one which is revealed to the reader well before the end, and sometimes at the very outset, but is known by only one or a few of the characters; or a complicated secret, part of which is known by several characters. Of the three, this is the most important and the most interesting. The secrets the characters keep from each other threaten to destroy order and personal relationships, are irreconcilable with ordinary social behavior, but often necessary in order to maintain it. The secret becomes an obvious, externalized way of introducing psychological conditions that I believe are essentially modern: the existence of a hidden self, something that has to be kept back, values that the world cannot be expected to share or understand. Paul Ferroll of course had a secret, but the author minimizes our consciousness of it. The sensation novelist made the most of it.

The secret was therefore a chief means of insinuating into the portrayal of contemporary society elements of rebellion against the virtues and mores which made up its moral teachings and in which its security lay. A secret was in itself morally questionable. In Uncle Silas, LeFanu
talks about the power of a secret, in this case the mystery
surrounding a portrait of the madman Uncle Silas:

Why is it that this form of ambition—curiosity
—which entered into the temptation of our first
parent, is so specially hard to resist? Knowledge is power—and power of one sort or another
is the secret lust of human souls; and here is,
beside the sense of exploration, the undefinable
interest of a story, and above all, something
forbidden, to stimulate the contumacious appetite.
(Ch. 3)

The sense of the forbidden was the strongest effect of the
secret in the sensation novel. The reader saw a sympathetic heroine, for example, moving in a world of secrets,
gaining much of her power (and power was a particular
quality of the sensation heroine, and a revolutionary
element in the mid-Victorian image of women) by having
knowledge that she did not impart, being victimized only
when she lacked possession of a single fact. That she
finds secret-keeping on a fairly important scale necessary
is a delicious, rebellious form of sinfulness. When she is
the victim, the secret represents an uncontrollable mystery
threatening to explode at any moment, a signal of her own
loss of power and the inadequacy of social and moral con-
vention to help her. Such is the plight of the heroine of
Mrs. Henry Wood's Oswald Cray, whose respected doctor father
disappears in the night hinting at a great trouble; because
of the "secret" her fiancé breaks off their engagement
without explanation, and she loses both money and friends.
But until the end no one character except the doctor (who
dies without telling) possesses the truth. Sara knows
there is a problem:

... but the particulars had been kept from her. That there existed a secret, and a terrible one, which might burst at any hour over their heads, bringing with it disgrace as well as misery, she had been obliged to learn; but its precise nature she was not told; was not allowed, it may be said, to guess at.28

The fear produced by a secret isolates those who keep it and those to whom it attaches, and thus prepares the conditions for the psychological problems in sensation novels. In Grasp Your Nettle, for instance, the heroine, a beautiful spirited young woman sensitive to the oppressiveness of local respectability, marries a handsome, wealthy, intellectual aristocrat whose one flaw is that he will say nothing about his past—especially about the previous marriage which produced his two little daughters. Aura married him agreeing not to pry into his secret, a sign of her moral strength. But her mother, representative of the same hypocritical small-town gossiping society that George Eliot describes in The Mill on the Floss as "The World's Wife," finds secrecy intolerable in domestic life:

"But I cannot live in such a manner!" cried Mrs. Escott; "one might as well be in Turkey, and not know what one's father or husband was like, as live like this, with nothing but mysteries and secrets in one's own family!"29
I do not think that readers, or even writers, were aware of the implications of this new kind of secret; but the stress they laid on it indicates that it provided a popular form for satisfying more desires than just the desire for suspense.

A second ingredient of the sensation novel was crime or the appearance of crime; but crime of a special sort, suggesting not uncontrolled violence or crude self-seeking. Rather the crime involved sin, and indicated not the evil of its perpetrator so much as the inevitability of violence, rebellion, and above all sexuality within the confines of a repressive society. As I have already explained in Chapter III, the "criminal" was never an ordinary criminal; in fact that term was rarely applied within the novel, and never without a shudder at its inappropriateness—a sign that the rigid definitions of the world outside simply did not fit the realities of the human heart.30

The "criminal" was frequently the heroine, who was generally young and always beautiful and sympathetic. In some of the quasi-sensation novels, like Sala's early Seven Sons of Mammon, the beautiful criminal, in this case a forger, though middle-aged, is still extremely attractive to men—a compromise which other sensation novels dispensed with.31 The heroine of No Name, appropriately named
Magdalen, undertakes to provide for her parents the estate they had lost by their failure to marry, by herself marrying the family heir and poisoning him. She waves aside the sweet ineffectual scruples of her sister and governess, and, assuming a false identity, lives by herself, hiring "rogues" to aid her. She carries out her plan almost to the very end. All this is justified and made sympathetic because her aim is to make her parents happy. The ravishing Aurora Floyd, one of M. E. Braddon's most famous heroines, betrayed into a secret marriage with a horse-trainer at seventeen, marries her true lover on learning—erroneously—from a newspaper that her former husband has been killed. When the horse-trainer turns up on her estate, she finds herself deep in a net of bribery and blackmail since she refuses to tell either her father or her husband what has happened. The novel is entirely kind to her; the unpleasantness of divorce had prevented that way out of her difficulty, the inaccuracy of the newspaper got her into it, and the cruel dictates of "respectability" kept her, for generous reasons, from telling her father.

There are male criminals as well, though they are seen chiefly in their relation to the beautiful women toward whom their enmity is directed. In a few novels bordering on the Gothic (The Woman in White and Uncle Silas, for instance), they are outright villains whose persecution of
the heroine provides the opportunity for her to exercise courage and intelligence. In a few more—Mrs. Norton's *Lost and Saved*, for instance, where the heroine is betrayed into an illegal marriage by a scheming man—the man is a scoundrel; but in most he too is sympathetic, and forced to his crime by extenuating circumstances: the irresistibility of love or the intolerable strictures of society. The hero of Mrs. Lynn Linton's *Lizzie Lorton of Greyrigg*, for instance, accidentally murders a man while striking him in return for his threat to compromise an innocent woman. Acting out of gallantry, the hero had no way of foreseeing that his opponent would fall over the cliff and die. The hero of *Grasp Your Nettle* had married an unscrupulous, coarse, conniving woman; thought her dead; married a young lady of intelligence, virtue, and courage. How was he to blame for the reappearance of his wife and his unintentional bigamy? From this frequent sympathy with the unfortunate criminal lured by circumstance into crime or tempted by it as the best way out of an impossible situation, came the commonplace judgment of critics on the sensation novel:

There is the old unhealthy atmosphere; neither hero nor heroine will appear noble, as most men should count nobility; and the whole savour is of the earth, earthy.  

I have already mentioned the predilection in these novels for domestic crimes: above all, bigamy or desertion of family, with forgery, particularly in family—never
business—matters; false identity, unjust committal to insane asylums, and murder (either unintentional or as part of a family quarrel) as secondary complications of the central plot. Crime was not treated for its own sake, but as a way of epitomizing the potentials for violence, rebellion, and sexuality in modern respectable life. Crime was sufficiently spectacular and extreme to allow the reader a way out of identifying with such dangerous qualities too completely. The overtones of "sin" are so great in all these novels, and the apparatus of crime to formalize it is dropped so revealingly once the form has been established, that one comes to realize that outright crime was not what these novels were concerned with at all. Wrong-doing, moral ambivalence, and guilt, were instead their focus. Commenting on the sensation novel in general, Punch wrote,

Something "sensational" must be a hit off now-a-days, coûte qui coûte; something that sounds striking—startling; suggestive of excitements, --soul-harrowings--unnatural homicides;--or at least hinting at six of the seven deadly sins being to be found [sic] within its covers, but before all things, it must be new.33

This was a typical reaction in the confusion of this distinctly recent literary development. But of all the seven deadlies, the only one that figured in any consistent and central way was Lechery. That was indeed, for the British 19th century novel, something "new."34 This was the reason that bigamy was so popular a theme.
Sensation novels were trying to talk about sexuality, striving to express the connection that Freud would one day articulate between guilt and sex, attempting to evaluate its place in a society which had forbidden its discussion; and trying to do all this within the existing restrictions. The subject was extremely dangerous, for unlike crime, which produced automatic dissociation in its readers, sexuality, however unconsciously, implicated everyone. Criminality, and especially bigamy, was part of an elaborate system of safeguards which released sex for discussion. Look at what the review of sensation novels in the Quarterly Review listed, in order of frequency, as the subject of sensation novels: bigamy, living in sin, divorce, fornication, crime, and theology with the purpose of inculcating hatred of certain doctrines. The last category, which I have explored but little, has been dealt with by Joseph Ellis Baker in The Novel and the Oxford Movement, whose chapter on "The New Sensationalism" points out the prurience aroused for Anglicans by the Catholic Church and the idea of confession and of the confessor. We are back again at the "secret," guilt, and the sense of the forbidden.

Charles Reade, attacked by an American newspaper for the immorality of Griffith Gaunt, a sensation novel revolving around a bigamy case, interestingly analyzed the confusion of bigamy with adultery. His answer of course
aimed at his own defense, and thus provides, for those ready to read between the lines, a statement of the sensationist's methods. The hero of this novel is lured into passionate jealousy of his wife's relationship with her priest, with whom confession has made her intimate (and the novel gains much of its shock from this appeal to the contemporary antagonism to "Puseyism" and ritualism, which stressed auricular confession). He leaves her and falls into a serious fever at an inn where he is unknown. The innkeeper's beautiful daughter nurses him to health and they fall in love. She is wooed by a country lout; to save her from marrying him, the aristocratic hero marries her himself. His intention is never to reveal his identity and thus to preserve absolute secrecy from both wives, but his need for money forces him to collect from his first wife, and ultimately both wives discover what he has done. The American paper listed a series of offenses which made the novel unprintable: first, it was "indecent," second, "immoral," third, the author dealt with "bigamy, adultery, and nameless social crimes," and fourth, he sympathized with them. Reade's reply is called "The Prurient Prude":

Modesty in a man or woman shows itself by a certain slowness to put a foul construction on things, and also by unobtrusively shunning indelicate matters and discussions. The "Prurient Prude," on the contrary, itches to attract attention by a parade of modesty . . . or even by rashly accusing others of immodesty. . . .
Here is his defense against the third charge:

Griffith Gaunt, under a delusion, commits Bigamy; and of course Bigamy may by a slight perversion of terms be called Adultery. But no truthful person, attacking character, would apply both terms to a single act. Is Bigamy more than Polygamy? And is Polygamy called that, and Adultery too, in every district of the United States? [This last is a reference to the Mormons, another subject of fascination to the British press of the day.]36

Reactions to literature are not determined by legal terminology, and so this distinction preserved the respectability of the novels without costing the readers their thrills. And among the titillating scenes so legitimized in Griffith Gaunt was that of the first wife waiting hopefully upstairs in her bedroom the night her husband returns to ask for money; and Griffith stumbling up to her, drunk, and out of habit going to that room. That night a child is conceived, though Griffith considers himself spiritually married to the innkeeper's daughter.

On the speculation about madness common in these novels, I have already commented in Chapter III. Whether genuine or simply apparent, madness offered another means for a novelist to confuse the question of guilt, register the idea that things may not be what they appear, and give form to the threatening presence of revolt against the laws of human behavior. But modern clinical vocabulary was not available to these novelists, and while the old words
"madness" and "lunacy" resonated with echoes of famous lunatics like Mrs. Rochester in Jane Eyre—violent, foaming, beastlike, they were invested with new complexities. The process was in a way the reverse of that involving the word "bigamy," where language protected; here, language attacked, and the reality was softened. Consider Ainsworth's description in 1839 of Jack Sheppard's mother driven mad by her son's crimes and occupying a cell in Bedlam:

Cowering in a corner upon a heap of straw, sat his unfortunate mother, the complete wreck of what she had been. Her eyes glistened in the darkness—for light was only admitted through a small grated window—like flames, and, as she fixed them on him, their glances seemed to penetrate his very soul. A piece of old blanket was fastened across her shoulders, and she had no other clothing except a petticoat. Her arms and feet were uncovered, and of almost skeleton thinness. Her features were meagre, and ghastly white, and had the fixed and horrible stamp of insanity. Her head had been shaved, and around it was swathed a piece of rag, in which a few straws were stuck. Her thin fingers were armed with nails as long as the talons of a bird. A chain, riveted to an iron belt encircling her waist, bound her to the wall. The cell in which she was confined was about six feet long and four wide; the walls were scored all over with fantastic designs, snatches of poetry, short sentences and names—the work of its former occupants, and of its present inmate. 37

Obviously no middle-class character would ever come to this. Yet the word "mad" must have evoked this kind of scene in the Victorian mind even in the sixties. What, then, must have been the effect on the reader of a passage like the following, spoken by a lovely, elegant, refined lady married to a lord, whose dresses, furniture, and jewelry
attested to her membership in the fashionable world—to wit, Lady Audley:

"Bring Sir Michael!" she cried; "bring him here, and I will confess everything. What do I care? God knows I have struggled hard enough against you, and fought the battle patiently enough; but you have conquered, Mr. Robert Audley. It is a great triumph, is it not—a wonderful victory? You have used your cool, calculating, frigid, luminous intellect to a noble purpose. You have conquered—a MAD WOMAN!"

"A mad woman!" cried Mr. Audley.

"Yes, a mad woman. When you say I killed George Talboys, you say the truth. When you say I murdered him treacherously and foully, you lie. I killed him because I AM MAD! because my intellect is a little way upon the wrong side of that narrow boundary-line between sanity and insanity; because, when George Talboys goaded me, as you have goaded me, and reproached me, and threatened me, my mind, never properly balanced, utterly lost its balance, and I was mad!"

(Ch. 34)

Thus she is exonerated, not from the deed, but from guilt. And for the reader, there is the thrill of fear, for a MAD WOMAN has been walking among us.

The corollary, equally or even more frightening, was that a perfectly sane person could be locked up as mad. Walter Hartright, the hero of The Woman in White, having helped the mysterious woman in white to town, is overtaken by her pursuer who cries, "She has escaped from my Asylum!"

I cannot say with truth that the terrible inference which those words suggested flashed upon me like a new revelation. Some of the strange questions put to me by the woman in white, after my ill-considered promise to leave her free to act as she pleased, had suggested the conclusion either that she was naturally flighty and unsettled, or that some recent
shock of terror had disturbed the balance of her faculties. But the idea of absolute insanity which we all associate with the very name of an Asylum, had, I can honestly declare, never occurred to me, in connection with her. I had seen nothing, in her language or her actions, to justify it at the time, and, even with the new light thrown on her by the words which the stranger had addressed to the policeman, I could see nothing to justify it now. 38

And of course she was not insane, though her desperate fear and frantic efforts to escape occasioned by her being locked up made her seem so.

Reade's Hard Cash has this situation as its chief interest. The hero's father, angry at his son's engagement to the daughter of a man he has robbed and fought with, has his son declared mad by two doctors in his employ. The evidence is flimsy and based entirely on a conventional and purposely dense interpretation of some rather courageous ideas and opinions of the hero relating to morality. He is locked away in a series of asylums, unable to get help or even to communicate with the outside world--including the bride who was waiting at the altar when he disappeared. Through him the reader is given an inside tour of several establishments, becoming fully acquainted with the malevolence of the "mad doctors" who, determined to interpret everything as proof of madness, cannot be brought to see the truth. In this case, as in The Woman in White, Armadale, and Edward Dutton Cook's The Trial of the Tredgolds, where the hero's wife was locked away as mad until she finally
became so, what is frightening is the inexorable machinery of the law and the red tape of the asylum working together to the utter defeat of the sane individual, and the cruelty of sterile conditions and medically "scientific" methods. The "mad doctor" is an unrelieved villain, with glittery eye and a head for technicalities only. Compare this with the scene of Mrs. Sheppard again. The pain and cruelty of her treatment were simply the inevitable end of lunacy; she was not the frantic victim of personal viciousness. To call all this a symbol is attributing a design and consciousness of method to the sensation novel which it does not deserve; but there can be no doubt that it provided a vehicle for the open expression of doubts about institutions and society, and for the contemplation in very rough lines of what the integrity of the mind, especially when pitted against a hostile world, is composed of.

To these major lines of interest the sensation novel added more conventional complications and the old-fashioned kind of gimmicky "secret," which made it appear more derivative than it was: hidden identities, revelations about a character's past which suddenly threw light on the present, name changes, and especially the resurrection of people thought to be dead. This last was obviously helpful for bigamy plots. In Held in Bondage, two former spouses thought to be dead reappear in the nick of time to save the
respective heroes and heroines from bigamy. In Paul Marchmont's *Legacy*, by M. E. Braddon, the hero is thought dead and returns in time to rescue his wife from a dastardly plot; the whole second half of *East Lynne* concerns the return under an assumed name of the heroine to the husband she deserted, to be governess to her own children. He has married again, believing her dead. The cases are too numerous to mention. This kind of unlooked-for and improbable coincidence, used with varying degrees of success, is a sign of the anachronistic machinery the sensation novel fell back on in order to work its modern ends. At times these stories border on fairy-tales. Although such moments are not an important aspect of the books, they made the sensation novel vulnerable to scorn for its structure, through which the entire form was discredited.

Partly to offset the incredulity necessarily aroused by such weaknesses, the sensation novelists took pains to root their stories solidly in familiar contemporary settings. The explicit details, much noticed by contemporary critics, must have offered a variety of satisfactions to their readers. Like other sensation, they left little need for imagination. The tendency was in large part a democratic quality, dispensing with orientation by tradition in favor of orientation by experience and observation. In a fascinating chapter of *The Uses of Literacy*, 
Richard Hoggart observes that the uneducated tend to personalize all aspects of life, their chief interest being in people and elemental life: marriage, children, relations with the other sex.  

The primitiveness of this tendency would seem to be operating in the sensation novel, as in other popular novels, and was perhaps a reason that the sensation novel was accessible to the understanding of so many. The descriptions in the sensation novel were finer and more detailed than crude wood-cuts could be; they were like engravings, but could appear for every scene.

The "abuse of specification," as one reviewer called it, pointing out rightly that it was not particularly a "modern misdemeanor, and has been indulged in by writers not quite so ephemeral or so obscure," appealed equally to the middle class. Like a fashion book, the sensation novel offered a catalogue of lovely scenes, pretty furniture, clothes, jewelry, and coiffure. These things were interesting in themselves; when one thinks of the objects collected in a prosperous Victorian parlor, one realizes just how interesting. The details selected for description were of particular interest to female readers. Horses, hunting scenes, fields and woodlands, slums, drunkards—these, though they appear, are never described in the same detail as women, clothes, and interiors. To the question, "What is a Girl?" Punch answers, "A girl is a
female framework supporting an extension of clothes. 41

This paragraph from Hardy's sensation novel, Desperate Remedies (1871), describes more beautifully than analogous examples what was considered the place of dress in the feminine imagination of the time:

His clothes are something exterior to every man; but to a woman her dress is part of her body. Its motions are all present to her intelligence if not to her eyes; no man knows how his coat-tails swing. By the slightest hyperbole it may be said that her dress has sensation. Crease but the very Ultima Thule of fringe or flounce, and it hurts her as much as pinching her. Delicate antennae, or feelers, bristle on every outlying frill. Go to the uppermost: she is there; tread on the lowest: the fair creature is there almost before you. 42

The presence of these extensions of self in all their concrete reality satisfied a major interest, and—since the women were beautiful and the houses luxurious—fulfilled the wish-dream for all-important personal beauty and of course the fruits of wealth.

The similarity between this profusion of minutiae and the "realism" of sensation drama is evident. I have already said that "realism" offered a justification for the sensation novel, and as in the drama that quality frequently meant veracity of detail rather than actual probability. The authors insisted on their factual accuracy. "I tell you that I have known these people," writes Sala of the unbelievable Mrs. Armytage and her associates in The Seven Sons of Mammon. 43 "'Hard Cash,"" wrote Reade in his Preface
of 1863, "... is a matter-of-fact Romance,—that is, a fiction built on truths; and these truths have been gathered by long, severe, systematic labour, from a multitude of volumes, pamphlets, journals, reports, blue-books, manuscript narratives, letters, and living people, whom I have sought out, examined and cross-examined, to get at the truth on each main topic I have striven to handle." If this is so, who can object to the contents of the novel? In the 1861 preface to The Woman in White, Wilkie Collins assures his readers that he has double-checked all the legal points of the story with his solicitor, and that they are correct. Significantly, Dickens' advice respecting a version of No Name, which he thought superior to The Woman in White, was confined almost entirely to questioning points of law: "I believe it would be necessary for a Testator signing his will to inform the witnesses of the fact of its being his will," for example. Of course this requirement produced ludicrous explanations whose blatant inadequacy points out how necessary factual information was considered to be. Mrs. Henry Wood, for example, offers this explanation of a crucial train accident which alters the fortunes of every character in Oswald Cray:

It appeared afterwards that the accident had been caused by the snapping of some part of the machinery of the engine. It was a very unusual occurrence, and could neither have been foreseen nor prevented.

(Ch. 13)
One can be pretty sure that neither Dickens, nor Collins, nor Reade would have been contented with this!

The Sensation Heroine

If the sensation scene was the identification mark of the sensation drama, that office was filled for the novel by the sensation heroine. She was the indispensable item, the newest development, and, I believe, the most important contribution of the sensation novel, as well as, certainly, the source of its greatest appeal. As such, she requires closer attention than she has yet received in these pages. Much of the ambiguity of the sensation novel centered in her: she elicited the emotional sympathy central to the whole novel, yet was frequently reviled by society and chose to disregard it. She was, in short, a dangerous embodiment of conflicting dreams, the old ideal with a new restlessness and desire for freedom.

In a society in which marriage was so vital a necessity to a young woman, these heroines were invested with the two most obviously sexually attractive endowments: money and beauty. Money could be married, but beauty had to be inherited. And sensation heroines were first and foremost sisters to the femme fatale. Their beauty was not that of the demure brown-haired English maid: it was flamboyant and spectacular. Their hair was red, or black, or
gold; their eyes very blue or very dark, or cold gray; they were either very tall or extraordinarily tiny; they frequently had low foreheads. They dressed splendidly; they were sparkling or, in times of strain, frozen. Their beauty made them dangerous; men were prey to them, while to more conventional women they were threats. The very strikingness of their beauty caused suspicion to fall on them. Aurora Floyd had a great crown of black braids and blazing dark eyes; animals and children loved her but the narrow-minded did not. Isabel Vane of East Lynne and Lady Audley were gold-haired; Margaret of Land at Last had "dead gold" hair and violet eyes, and was coveted as an artist's model. Lydia Gwilt's hair, "superbly luxuriant in its growth, was of the one unpardonably remarkable shade of color which the prejudice of the Northern nations never entirely forgives--it was red!" Whether criminals or innocents, they all shared a beauty that was on the one hand irresistible, and on the other "unpardonably remarkable." Here is a description, typical in its drift, of the heroine of Lizzie Lorton of Greyrigg:

There was a certain savageness about her beauty scarcely to be described--a certain supple grace and hidden strength that reminded one of a panther or a leopardess, of itself suggestive of tropical life with all its fire and affluence. She looked the stuff of which a heroine or a criminal might be made, the occasion alone determining the good or evil issue of her intense nature. Martyr or murderess—the choice hung on the chances of fortune only!
Their similarity to the Pre-Raphaelites' "stunners" was more than accidental. Frequently, in fact, the heroine's beauty was remarked by a Pre-Raphaelite or compared to a known painting. Here is the portrait of Lady Audley which Talboys discovers:

... The painter must have been a pre-Raphaelite. No one but a pre-Raphaelite could have painted, hair by hair, those feathery masses of ringlets, with every glimmer of gold, and every shadow of pale brown. No one but a pre-Raphaelite would have so exaggerated every attribute of that delicate face as to give a lurid brightness to the blonde complexion, and a strange sinister light to the deep blue eyes. No one but a pre-Raphaelite could have given to that pretty pouting mouth the hard and almost wicked look it had in the portrait.

(Ch. 8)

The adoption of this physical ideal and of its implications in terms of character as well was a daring aspect of sensation, though one shared or imitated not only by some of the major contemporary novelists, but by the poets of the day: Rossetti and Swinburne, for example, or Tennyson in his treatment of sexuality at Arthur's court.

The spectacular beauty of these heroines was matched by the unconventionality of their ways. They were strong, active, and healthy. They never fainted at even the most difficult crises. Though they often wished for the luxury of that useful feminine weakness, they needed their wits about them; nor would their lively constitutions permit it. Sensation heroines asserted themselves, did as they liked,
ran their own world, lived on equal terms with men—though never offending the sensibilities of at least the staunchest characters. This modification was achieved in part by crossing the siren with the fresh country lass. It is significant that these heroines, even the deepest designers, were without feminine wiles. Flirtation, batted eyelashes, artful conversation were unknown to our heroines, who never trifled with love or love's conventions. Lady Audley never told her husband that she loved him or admitted to any reason other than his money for marrying him. Exercise of the conventional sham of women was a sure cue for suspicion in these novels, and almost always accompanied a false morality and stupid prudery. The heroines might be unconscious of their effect on men; they might be unfeminine (and that very fact tended to increase their sexuality). Several of them, for example—including Aurora Floyd—read the men's sporting magazine, *Bell's Life*. Some rode horseback superbly well; Lizzie Lorton was a sailor. Their manners were natural, though never coarse, and they loved impulsively, unrestrained by convention.

They all possessed unconscious style and good taste. Dabble they did not. If they sang, played, or painted, they did so with genuine skill; otherwise they did not perform. Isabel Vane excelled as a pianist and played Beethoven rather than the popular airs of the day, and so
did Aura of **Grasp Your Nettle**. Aurora Floyd sang with a remarkably deep, rich, though untrained, voice. The two heroines of *Held in Bondage*, each presented as a type of the truly lovable and attractive woman, were artists of a high order. The one, Violet Molineux, belle of the season, was a musician manquee; though her position in society prevented her becoming a professional, music offered her a world of escape from what she considered the essential falseness of the marriage market. The other heroine, Alma, who had the good fortune to be poor, was actually a professional artist who exhibited her paintings anonymously. Her best pictures attracted the attention of the highest art critics, who discussed the painter as "he."

These girls were frequently endowed with masculine mental qualities as well. Their freedom of manner and action proceeded from the self-awareness which was a product of intelligence, education, and a logical turn of mind, combined with energy of spirit. Marian Halcombe, one of the pair of heroines in *The Woman in White*, is first seen from the back by Walter, who is struck with the beauty and grace of her figure and head. When she turns, the discord between that first impression and the masculinity (his word) of her face shocks him:

> Her expression—bright, frank, and intelligent—appeared, while she was silent, to be altogether wanting in those feminine attractions of gentleness
and pliability, without which the beauty of the handsomest woman alive is beauty incomplete.
(I, Ch. 6)

M. E. Braddon's *The Doctor's Wife* concerns the development of Isabel, who possesses both brains and depths of passion her foolish feminine education have perverted into silliness. Her co-heroine and rival in love, Lady Gwendoline, serves her as a model:

Her beauty, a little sharp of outline for a woman, would have well become a young reformer, enthusiastic and untiring in a noble cause. There are these mistakes sometimes—these mesalliances of clay and spirit. A bright ambitious young creature, with the soul of a Pitt, sits at home and works sham roses in Berlin wool; while her body brother is thrust out into the world to fight the mighty battle.

(Ch. 10)

The first reason that the hero of *Held in Bondage* gives for falling in love with Violet Molineux is:

Thank God I have found a girl who has some notion of conversation. I believe, with the Persians, that ten measures of talk were sent down from Heaven, and the ladies took nine; but of conversation, argument, repartee--the real use of that most facile, dexterous, sharp-pointed weapon, the tongue--what woman has a notion? They employ a thousand superlatives in describing a dress, they exhaust a million expletives in damning their bosom friend. But as for conversation, they have not a notion of it; if you begin an argument, they either get into a passion or subside into monosyllables! A woman who has good conversation is as rare as one who does not care for scandal. I met them in Paris salons, and we have found one today.49

Some of these women have had eccentrically unfeminine educations, usually from their fathers or by being allowed to
browse freely in the family library before we meet them; others are put on reading programs by the heroes. But all are educable and true companions and intellectual equals for their men.

Before discussing the lightning that must inevitably strike such women in the sensation novel, one must emphasize the ways in which these women opposed a compelling literary tradition. The aged Lord Brougham, on hearing Harriet Martineau's name mentioned at this time, is said to have exclaimed, "Harriet Martineau! I hate her! I hate a woman who has opinions!" Sensation heroines had opinions, though they did not thereby forfeit their marriageability. Sabretasche, the cosmopolitan admirer of Violet in Held in Bondage, compares his English beauty with women he has met in Paris salons. In many sensation heroines another new strain is also seen: the lady of the demi-monde, the elegant, dashing kept woman, with her false qualities made natural, her brilliant complexion the product of nature, not of paint; her racy talk toned down to the ready, uninhibited expression of a frank and intelligent mind. No one reading descriptions of the sensation heroine could have failed to recognize qualities belonging to Laura Bell, "Skittles," or "Anonyma," for example, or their rare representatives in literature, like Belle in Meredith's The Ordeal of Richard Feverel (1859). How
threatening the idea of the "frail ladies" must have been to proper Victorian women is easy to imagine, especially since the nature of that threat was overtly sexual. Those qualities which wife and mother had sacrificed to propriety and marriageability were the very ones which made the kept woman powerfully attractive. So many explicit symbols of the lady of the demi-monde—her expertise with a horse, for example; the gorgeousness of her hair and coloring; the unequalled elegance of her bearing; the freedom of her mind and masculinity of her speech; and her release from forms of modesty—were given to the sensation heroine, that the sensation heroine must have been an attempt to assuage the envy and fear of its female readers by combining the glamor of the prostitute with the modest virtues of the woman with whom a man could have a legitimate relationship.

Sir F. C. Burnand recalls these ladies:

As a boy about town, I remember several notorious Hetaerae being pointed out to me as they rode in spanking style in the Row, were driven in open landaus, or charioteered themselves about Hyde Park in the season. The most memorable of these was Laura Bell . . . . Clearly do I call to mind Laura Bell's pretty, doll-like face, her big eyes, not ignorant of an artistic touch that added a lustre to their natural brilliancy, and her quick vivacious glances as she sat in an open phaeton, vivaciously talking with a variety of men . . . while her smart little "tiger" stood at the horses' heads. What strange stories I used to hear of her recklessness, her prodigality, her luxury, and her cleverness!
Kate Mellon, a heroine in *Broken to Harness*, was a familiar sight in Rotten Row, and met her death when an enemy jumped out of the hedge and frightened her horse. Or "Skittles":

... the most notorious member of the demi-monde of the 'sixties, at a time when women of her class figured ... prominently in the public eye. This general notoriety was attained principally by a regular appearance in Hyde Park during the fashionable hours, when the frail ladies were wont to make a sensational entrance, either riding or driving. Later their horses would be pulled up near the Achilles Statue, and the rider or occupant of the smart victoria would hold a kind of levee of her admirers and patrons from the ranks of the jeunesse dorée (and gilded senility, too, for that matter), the while the great ladies, virtuous British Matrons and their conventionally innocent daughters, drove by in their great high rumbling barouches, casting but a contemptuous glance or indignant toss of the head at the al-fresco Court of Venus.

"Skittles," in addition to being a fine horsewoman, "had a wide circle of friends, ... who valued her for her bon-homie and lively wit."52 Attention given to a presumably new breed at the time, "Fast Young Ladies," typified in a poem in *Punch*, indicates a revision of feminine ideals away from the sentimental:

Here's a stunning set of us,  
Fast young ladies;  
Here's a flashy set of us,  
Fast young ladies;  
Nowise shy or timorous,  
Up to all that men discuss,  
Never mind how scandalous,  
Fast young ladies.  

On the Turf we show our face, ...  
Know the odds of every race, ...  
Talk, as sharp as any knife,
Betting slang—we read Bell's Life;
That's the ticket for a wife,
Fast young ladies!

We are not to be hooked in . . .
We require a chap with tin, . . .
Love is humbug; cash the chief
Article in my belief:
All poor matches come to grief,
Fast young ladies.

Not to marry is my plan . . .
Any but a wealthy man . . .
Bother that romance and stuff!
She who likes it is a muff;
We are better up to snuff,
Fast young ladies.

Give me but my quiet weed, . . .
Bitter ale and ample feed . . .
Pay my bills, porte-monnaie store,
Wardrobe stock—I ask no more.
Sentiment we vote a bore,
Fast young ladies.53

The literary possibilities of the sentimental view
of women were nearly exhausted; but wish-dream novels could
hardly be made of "fast young ladies" without serious
modification. That compromise was the sensation heroine.
Witness the second hero of Held in Bondage as he begins to
fall in love with the artist:

He had known but two classes of women; those who
shared his errors and pandered to his pleasures,
whose life disgusted, while their beauty lured
him; and those whose illiberality and whose ser­
mons only roused him to more wayward rebellion
against the social laws which they expounded.

Or, the same hero on the same topic:

"Women are either actresses or fools; if they
are amiable, they are stupid, and if they are
clever they are artful."
"Like Thackeray's heroines," suggested Curly [his friend].
"Exactly; shows how well the man knows life." 54

The compromise entailed some problems, nevertheless.
That the problems could not always be resolved is manifested by the frequency with which sensation novels, especially those written by men, provided a pair of complementary heroines. This device enabled the novelist to split the mutually exclusive qualities of the conventional heroine and the sensation heroine two ways, so the reader could eat his cake and have it. The result was usually a strong, dangerous heroine who could be killed or remain single at the end, leaving the job of the happy marriage to the other. Examples of this arrangement are Marian and Laura Fairlie in The Woman in White, the Countess and the girl-soldier in Ouida's Under Two Flags, or Lizzie and Margaret in Lizzie Lorton of Greyrigg. Sometimes both heroines were sensational in different ways, and the death of the men at the end left them free to be friends and remain single, as the heroines do in LeFanu's Wylder's Hand and Miss Braddon's The Doctor's Wife. In the later and more conventional sensation novels, the pair of heroines allowed the novelist to include a sensation heroine but not to make her the center of the novel. This is Mrs. Henry Wood's method in Oswald Cray and The Shadow of Ashlydyat.
Even when there was only a single heroine, the compromise was rarely perfect. As an unconventional woman, the heroine must necessarily be lonely, though not a mere outcast. She generally had few female friends (a fact related to her ability to keep a secret); all but the most discerning women tended to shun her, and she was frequently an orphan deprived of that most important friend, her mother. Hence her imperfect training in the feminine arts. Her loyal supporters were usually men, or females in some relatively humble position—children, servants, or a weak cousin; once in a while she found a true female companion in someone like herself. Like the prostitute, her superb beauty was incompatible with virtue; but her transgressions could not be sexual. It is for this reason, I am convinced, that sensation heroines were so frequently criminals, wittingly or unwittingly, and that bigamy was so suitable an expression of their differences from other women. All were made to suffer and to sin by their courage and their strength; they were set apart from other women. As Mary Elizabeth Braddon said of Aurora Floyd, whose only real fault was trusting an impostor too well and not divorcing him:

But then, if she had been faultless, she could not have been the heroine of this story; for I think some wise man of old remarked, that the perfect women were those who left no histories behind them, but went through life upon such tranquil course of
quiet well-doing as left no footprints on the sands of time; only mute records hidden here and there, deep in the grateful hearts of those who had been blest by them.

(Ch. 2)

Therefore heroism had been left to men, and middle-class women were excluded from the center of the Victorian novel up to mid-century. The sensation heroine had faults, but she was a heroine. The heroine of Eleanor's Victory, for example, who undertakes to avenge her father's death, is, as a characteristic review stated, "a vengeful young lady . . . whose golden hair, gray eyes, elegant figure, and virgin innocence are united with the spirit of a baleful Nemesis." The heroine of No Name, also carrying out a scheme of revenge, tries out her dramatic abilities on her uncle. As usual in literature, the true ability to act is fraught with danger:

The native dramatic capacity that was in her came, hard and bold, to the surface, stripped of every softening allurement which had once adorned it. She would have saddened and disappointed a man with any delicacy of feeling. She absolutely electrified Captain Wragge.

(II, Ch. 3)

Sometimes she was a criminal—as Magdalen was. Lady Rockalda, Gilbert's sensation heroine, sings of herself:

With voice and gait mysterious,
Expression fixed and serious,
And manner most imperious,
I work my charge.
In love unbridled, as in hate,
I wheedle, coax, and fascinate,
Then murder, rob, assassinate,
Mankind at large.
Guilty deeds I must prepare;  
I'm the lovely fiend of fiction,   
With the yellow, yellow hair.

(Gilbert of course exaggerated. The sensation heroine was rarely a cold-blooded initiator of criminal action; more commonly she was the victim of malevolence, misunderstanding, or an intolerable society. Readers were asked to understand that disgrace or even crime was provoked or unavoidable, or the inevitable outcome of great passion. Even Isabel Vane of East Lynne, who ran off with a rake, deserting an excellent husband and three much-loved children, was driven to it by jealousy, resisted by her but fanned into flames by her lover and unconsciously stimulated by her husband's refusal to share his professional anxieties with her. And the heroine of Lost and Saved, whose crime is thinking she's married when she's not, shows her essential virtue by resisting a second and ennobling love:

The first shame of her life was undeserved. She hoped, she thought, in spite of much rashness and imprudence, it was undeserved; but the second shame, of unasked loving, would be hers well earned, hers by choice, hers because she was surely cast in the mould of which light women were made. But she would resist it."

These attitudes, one must understand, were new where women were concerned. They had to be presented in odd ways to avoid the prejudices and preconceptions they subverted. In some ways these heroines were extremists that no one
could identify with, subversive counterparts of the stereo-
typic Victorian heroine. On the other hand, notwithstanding
their deviation from the moral norm, they elicited sympathy,
forgiveness, and compassion from their readers, and legiti-
matized a new conception of womanhood. It is interesting
that at the end of the novels these sensation heroines
either died and acquired the status of tragic heroes, or
were re-absorbed into a society made more tolerant by their
deviations. The authors were not committed to their points;
ey did not run risks. Nevertheless they offered something
new and dazzling: women who were free. An article in the
Cornhill, "Heroines and their Grandmothers," contrasted the
new heroines of recent years—significantly, sensation
heroines and those of George Eliot—with those of the
beginning of the century, skipping over the intervening
generation for reasons it is easy to imagine. The chief
point of comparison was the cheerful happiness of the grand-
mothers and the morbid introspection of their granddaughters.

It would seem as if all the good humours and good
spirits of former generations had certainly
deserted our own heart-broken ladies. Instead of
cheerful endurance, the very worst is made of
every passing discomfort. Their laughter is forced,
even their happiness is only calm content, for they
cannot so readily recover from the first two volumes.
They no longer smile and trip through country-dances
hand-in-hand with their adorers, but waltz with
heavy hearts and dizzy brains, while the hero who
scorns them looks on. Open the second volume, you
will see that, instead of sitting in the drawing-
room or plucking roses in the bower, or looking
pretty and pleasant, they are lying on their beds with agonizing headaches, walking desperately in streets they know not whither, or staring out of windows in blank despair.57

They are, in other words, troubled; the true, active cares of existence fall on their shoulders as if they were men. Though there was kinship between the modern ladies and some of their progenitors, the sensation heroine and her sisters were a modern phenomenon, and even in 1865 raised the question of the new nature of modern times.

Perhaps Emily of Udolpho, more accustomed than the others to the horrors of sensation, and having once faced those long and terrible passages, might be able to hold her own against such a great-granddaughter as Aurora Floyd or Lady Audley. But how would she deal with the soul-workings and heart troubles of Miss Kavanagh's Adele, or our old favorite Ethel May in the Daisy Chain, or Cousin Phillis, or Margaret Hale, or Jane Eyre, or Lucy Snowe, or Dinah or Maggie Tulliver's distractions, or poor noble Romola's perplexities? Emily would probably prefer any amount of tortuous mysteries, winding staircases and passages, or groans and groans, and yards and yards of faded curtains, to the task of mastering these modern intricacies of feeling and doubting and sentiment.

Are the former heroines women as they were, or as they were supposed to be in those days? Are the women of whom women write now, women as they are, or women as they are supposed to be? Does the modern taste demand a certain sensation sentiment, only because it is actually experienced?58

The question raised by the Cornhill article about the relationship between the real and the ideal, and the possibility of new qualities in modern life, strikes at the heart of the peculiarities of the sensation novel. The sensation heroine expressed neither the real nor the ideal;
her short life as a fictional type epitomizes the limitations imposed on literature by Victorian sexual taboos. The ambiguity with which she was drawn expressed on the one hand a revolt against impossible ideals and unconvincing versions of reality, without on the other hand daring completely to defy those ideals or contradict the portrayals. She was symptomatic of the whole sensation rage, and especially of its manifestation in the novel of which she was the center; she was designed to satisfy conflicting demands in a moment of confusion. Like the rest of the sensation novel, she represented an attempt at a compromise between powerful bourgeois values and the rejection of those values, an attempt of literature to adapt itself to the needs of changing times without paying the price of commitment.
Notes


3. Walter C. Phillips, Dickens, Reade, and Collins, Sensation Novelists: A Study in the Conditions and Theories of Novel Writing in Victorian England (New York, 1919), develops this relationship. It is important to remember that he uses the term "sensation" as it was applied after the fact, concentrating on the works of the pre-sixties.

4. The Doctor's Wife, Temple Bar, 10 (Jan. 1864), 161, Chap. 2.


8. P. 34.

9. 113 (April 1863), 505-506.


11. For instance, on Mudie's much disputed exclusion of Father Stirling, a novel by T. M. M'Gregor Allan, the Illustrated London News commented: "... the strong bad books are admitted, and the weak bad books are rejected. The best sensational novel, the works of Renan, Buckle, and Darwin—all these and such many people will declare to be unfit for young readers, as Mr. Mudie did 'Father Stirling'; nay, some persons would burn them by the hands of the common hangman and rejoice in the auto-da-fé." The only sensible solution, it maintained, was for Mudie's to carry whatever there was a demand for (3 Sept. 1864, 238).

12. Illustrated London News, 28 May 1864, 526. Perhaps this is the moment to clear Tennyson of the charge of reading Miss Braddon (Kathleen Tillotson, "The Lighter
Reading of the Eighteen-Sixties," p. x, and P. G. Scott in Tennyson's "Enoch Arden": A Victorian Best Seller, Tennyson Society Monographs, No. 2 [Lincoln, England, 1971]). The mistake arises from a confusion of pronouns in a paragraph of Charles Tennyson's Alfred Tennyson (New York, 1949), p. 377. The person who was "simply steeped in Miss Braddon" and "reading every word she ever wrote," was not Tennyson but his young guest, Arthur Brookfield; Tennyson expressed amazement at hearing of Brookfield's enthusiasm.

16 Ibid., 9 Feb. 1861, 117.
18 Illustrated London News, 8 April 1865, 323.
19 George Augustus Sala, "Echoes of the Week," Illustrated London News, 25 Oct. 1862, 438. The last sentence is an amusing prediction of "Ouida's" methods, though her first novel was not to appear for several years.
20 William Tinsley, Random Recollections of an Old Publisher (London, 1905), I, 82.
21 Ibid., 138.
22 Ibid., 131.
23 Quarterly Review, 113 (April 1863), 491.
25 Preface to Vol. 44 (1863), iii.
26 Cornhill, 7 (Jan. 1863), 136.
For this, Paul Ferroll provided an antecedent; twice he spent the night in jail like a "common criminal," to his wife's utter horror. The situation suggests a confusion of democratic feelings: on the one hand it proved that a gentleman could be treated like anyone else (Ferroll refused the help proffered by his influential friends because of his honorable recognition that he was a criminal), and on the other hand, it was shocking.

But with which Trollope, in *Orley Farm*, did not.


43 (22 Nov. 1862), 214.

Of course there were lechers: the Marquis de Steyne is a famous one, and Becky Sharp's encouragement of him, not to mention her conquest of George Osborne, is strongly suggestive. Indeed, Becky is clearly related to the sensation heroine. But the arrangement of values in *Vanity Fair* and the satiric narrator control the implications which, in the sensation novel, were fully developed.


*Illustrated London News*, 21 July 1860, 64.
She so resembles Maggie Tulliver, even having like Maggie a fair, sweet, conventional cousin Lucy, that M. E. Braddon must have used The Mill on the Floss in drawing Aurora. It is interesting that Maggie was included in discussions of the new sensation heroine.


Quoted in A Mid-Victorian Pepys, pp. 193-194n.

A Mid-Victorian Pepys, pp. 212-216n.


Pp. 204 and 221 respectively.


12 (May 1865), 631.

Ibid., 630.
CHAPTER VI

THE SENSATION NOVEL IN PERSPECTIVE

The characteristics of the sensation novel described in the last chapter were the external signs of more profound qualities, at once the sources of its strength and of its weakness. The relative success and vitality of these characteristics depended chiefly on the degree to which they were actually realized, or suggested and then undercut. The artistic difficulties arising from the inconsistent conception of the sensation heroine carried over to the world which was designed for her, and which had to include a new kind of hero, a new view of society, a new definition of morality, and a new understanding of what shapes the novel could impose on its raw material. Like any true innovations, these proved both beneficial and disruptive to the literature which incorporated them. Often the sensation novel failed to cope satisfactorily with these problems; even more often it ended by backing off from them. The rebellion, the skepticism, and the confusion expressed in the sensation novel were frequently used merely as spice to season a warmed-over dish, and led to plain flummery. When,
however, they were truly present at the moral center of the novel, they were revolutionary and extended the meaning of "sensational"—with reference to the novel alone—to that which was morally shocking.

The "shock" had a profound effect on living novelists, especially George Eliot, George Meredith, Thomas Hardy, and Anthony Trollope, and it goes far to explain the liberation of their works from the inhibitions of earlier novels, as well as their occasional lapses of taste and absence of restraint. In this chapter I shall describe what the new attitudes were that lay behind the sensation novel, and the problems they led to; in the next, I shall explore their effect on the form of the novel and its more serious practitioners.

The Hero

Of the people who surrounded the sensation heroine, the hero or heroes were the most important. Unlike the stereotyped sensation heroines, they were adapted to suit the peculiarities of each novel and therefore cannot be described in terms of a general formula; nor, since they were rarely the center of the novel in which they appear, were they generally subjected to close inspection or analysis by contemporaries. Sometimes the hero was an outright enemy of the sensation heroine, the man who, for example, tricked or deceived her into marriage; sometimes he embodied
in the most formidable shape the prejudices and preconceptions against which she was fighting, as did the husband of Isabel Vane or of Laura in *The Silver Cord*; sometimes, on the other hand, he was her way to the broader and richer world of masculine experience in which she felt at home at last; sometimes he was the voice of courageous reason and mercy which restored the heroine to her proper estimation in her own and others' eyes.

There were only a few quasi-sensation novels which incorporated large portions of what must be regarded as an exclusively masculine world. They were chiefly novels written by men—*The Seven Sons of Mammon*, by Sala, for example, or *Paid in Full* and *The Trial of the Tredgolds* by Henry J. Byron. But in general the time spent in offices, on railroads, at work, or in men's clubs—unless there was gaming—was time lost to sensation, except when the heroine was admitted to these scenes and appeared at the race tracks, in the night streets of Paris, or at dinner in the demi-monde, as she did in *Broken to Harness*, *Eleanor's Victory*, and *Quite Alone* respectively. In the relatively small number of sensation novels which had heroes at their center rather than heroines, these heroes were restricted to the domesticated world of women and to interest in chiefly feminine affairs. The novels of Charles Reade are examples. In *Hard Cash* the center of interest is the hero
and his adventures in insane asylums, though he is introduced and kept interesting by his love affair with the heroine, whose certainty that he is dead, if not unfaithful, provides the special piquancy of his mysterious disappearance and his own frantic despair. Griffith Gaunt is seen exclusively in relation to the two women he marries, and his suffering proceeds solely from his connections with them. Ouida's novels are particularly interesting in this respect, for the masculine flavor of her language, her concentration on men instead of women and her daring forays into their private conversations do not alter the fact that her novels are chiefly about love and sexuality and, instead, simply liberate her from the particular restrictions imposed on female characters. Her exposures of the inadequate provision made by society for the demands of sex could not have been developed if her chief characters had been women; the coarseness and vulgarity of the language employed by her heroes in their discussion of women, so essential to her achievement of "shock" and sensation, would have been impossible among women. Yet her point of view is always feminine, and the total absorption of her heroes in the world of love, even on the battlefield, is an important illustration of the changing sex-roles played by characters in sensation novels.
The constant attribute of the hero of sensation novels (his relative unimportance is indicated by the absence of the term "sensation hero" from the critical vocabulary) was that he illustrated the very type of sexual attractiveness. His chief distinction was that of the heroines of so many earlier Victorian novels; he was made to be loved. Whether dark or fair, stern or gay, distant or familiar, intellectual or sporting, he attracted the attention and the desire of the heroine. In some novels, Lizzie Lorton of Greyrigg, for example, two heroines vied for his love; in others, the heroine was torn between a calm spiritual love for the hero who represented the true ideal of manhood and an irresistible passion for an inferior but sexually more flamboyant man. (Like heroines, heroes often came in pairs.) It is impossible not to recognize in such situations a simple reversal of the long-standing masculine dilemma: that of George Osborne in relation to Amelia Sedley and Becky Sharp, of David Copperfield in his marriage to Dora and rejection of Agnes, of Pip, fascinated by Estella while he recognizes Biddy's true quality, of George Warrington, whose imprudent first marriage disqualifies him as a lover of Laura Bell. The reversal was daring. What the sensation heroine gained by it, however, the hero, as hero, lost. The lover who tempts Isabel Vane of East Lynne to run away with him, for example, though
exquisitely handsome and fascinating, is a mere rake; while her husband, though courageously unconventional in marrying Isabel in spite of her poverty and his relatively greater age, becomes after her desertion a priggish prude, the male counterpart to Amelia in *Vanity Fair*. The horse-trainer Aurora Floyd married in her youth is only a recognizable villain who practiced on her innocence and sexual desire; John Mellish, whom she marries bigamously, is just a foil for Aurora's special character. He is very fair, while she is dark; very big, very athletic, and so generous and adoring that he has no trouble forgiving her bigamy. But to be so he must also be, and is, stupid and uncritical. He exists chiefly to redeem Aurora. The roles are similarly cast in Mrs. Norton's *Lost and Saved*. Barbara is so attracted to a man who courts her that she believes in their improbable mock-marriage, bears him a child, and lives for more than a year in expectation of his acknowledging their marriage. At the end she is rescued by another type of hero; a member of the Italian nobility, educated, refined, restrained, already betrayed in love. Like so many of the men the heroines marry after their misadventures in sensation novels, he is a cardboard representation of all the qualities thought to be essentially manly and desirable and is therefore a suitable reward for the heroine's pains.
In those heroes of whom more is seen, special reversed qualities are required. Since the heroine must have opportunities for deeds and decisions, the hero becomes passive, a secondary character capable of inaction, patience, and ignorance. His worthiness of the heroine's love—when she loves him—is signified sufficiently by a few qualities marking the type of the gentleman-hero: he is handsome, tall, extremely reserved (often because of a "secret" in his keeping), proud, trustworthy in spite of the secret, and he has suffered. His reserve and his pride set him apart from other men and are the source of the heroine's attraction to him, as well as of his to her. The residual resemblances between this hero and the Gothic hero served the reader in the stead of full development; his status as hero was to be immediately recognizable. In this respect Paul Ferroll constituted a recent predecessor as an intermediate stage between the overweeningly proud and sexually fascinating Gothic hero, also a keeper of secrets, and his modification to the requirements of the contemporary setting of the sensation novel. As examples, I offer Godfrey Pierrepont of M. E. Braddon's *Sir Jasper's Tenant* and Jasper Trelawney of Mrs. Linton's *Grasp Your Nettle*. The crux of each story is that the heroine falls in love with and is loved by a handsome, wealthy gentleman seeking solitude in the quiet country life. Each has a mysterious
past to which he shuns allusion; each holds himself aloof from company but finds in the sensation heroine a fit intellectual and spiritual companion. In both books the heroine pledges her troth in spite of the mystery she is enjoined not to ask about; in both the mystery turns out to be an unhappy prior marriage; in both, the first wife has an identical twin currently impersonating her to blackmail the husband.

Godfrey spends his time on long lonely walks collecting biological specimens, and his manhood, which might otherwise be doubted, is proved by his having taken dangerous expeditions to Africa and India. Jasper is rendered suspicious by his total disdain for society; he even refuses to dine with the heroine's parents after his marriage. His manliness lies in his intellectual brilliance and the superb education he undertakes to give Aura. Their unconventional life together, so much commented on in the book, is sanctioned by its superiority to that of ordinary couples. "Those long, warm, luxurious evenings with the new books uncut on the table, the new song to learn, and her unfinished picture to think over; with the children scattered about the spacious room"¹--his children, not hers--are the great rewards he offers for her sacrifice of a life hemmed in by gossip and hypocrisy. Of course such heroes are gathered back into the fold they despised when
their lives are straightened out. Godfrey becomes, reassuringly, the "advanced English Conservative" member of Parliament, and Jasper's pride unbends, just as their wives have children and settle down. Such was the commitment of sensation authors to the implications of their work.

A second type of hero, usually presenting a serious threat to the heroine, was derived from the rake. His sexuality was more blatant than the gentleman's; he was or tried to be a seducer, depending on whether the crux of the novel was the heroine's strength in resisting him or the strength of passion she showed in giving in. In either case the hero had to be a man of irresistible charms and attractions, often open-hearted as well as "weak," and motivated by well-meaning carelessness rather than by callous villainy. If he succeeded in seducing the heroine and failed to marry her, he was only prevented from doing so by a false sense of proportion; he stood to lose a fortune by it or had to marry a woman of higher rank to extricate himself from other difficulties. Sometimes he was the husband, and his weakness showed itself in other respects, especially his mishandling of financial affairs, usually brought on by good-heartedness and a foolish but lovable faith in others. George Godolphin in Mrs. Wood's Shadow of Ashlydyat, who ruins the family bank, destroys the lives of an entire town, and disgraces his sweet wife and trustworthy
brother, is such a hero: he bears in fact a strong resemblance to Mark Robarts of Trollope's *Framley Parsonage* (1861).

This type of hero was almost always an unmistakable failure. The models from which he was drawn had associations too strong for the author to overcome without simply contravening them and producing a confused and inconsistent character. It was difficult to explain the heroine's attraction to him, recognizing, as she must have done, his "weaknesses"; yet the fact that pure physical passion was a component of love and could lead even the virtuous to courses they would regret was an important theme of sensation. The difficulties raised by this type of hero for both sensation and non-sensation authors (not only Trollope in *Crosby of The Small House at Allington*, but Meredith in *Edward Blancove of Rhoda Fleming*, or even Richard Feverel, and George Eliot in *Arthur Donnithorne of Adam Bede*) and yet their obvious need for him, as a man who could arouse dangerous physical passion, indicates an especial poverty in Victorian novels prior to the sixties. These novelists had no types on which to draw, but no other way of expressing the power of physical love. That George Eliot so notably succeeds in *The Mill on the Floss* is partly that she dared to specify the particularly physical nature of
Maggie's attraction to Stephen, and so could work with real characters and explain otherwise inexplicable events.

An example of the difficulties raised by this type of hero is Roland Lansdale of M. E. Braddon's *The Doctor's Wife*. The heroine is a young innocent girl who has married a quiet country doctor she does not love in order to escape the tedium of her home. After her marriage she meets a dashing nobleman who writes poetry, owns an abbey and a splendid library, but is a notorious trifler with women. He is taken with Isabel's beauty and, as a means of seducing her, makes appointments under trees to read naughty poets like Byron. She falls in love with him, and he attempts more and more passionately to persuade her to elope with him. With a strength wholly inconsistent with her character, Isabel resists in spite of her ardent love and admiration for him, and as she does so, even in his anger his physical infatuation ripens to love. Isabel is a product of the working class, very foolish, very young, very inexperienced. Roland's love for her is most unlikely, and his repentance at having tried to seduce her is more unlikely still. Nevertheless, his moral character is elevated by her refusal and in a matter of minutes he is turned into a faithful lover. We are given this explanation for him: he is "real."

He had not led a good life. He was not a good man. But he was a man who had never sinned with impunity.
With him remorse went hand-in-hand with wrongdoing. Heaven knows that I write of him in sober earnest and sincerity. I have seen and known him, or such as him. He is no lay-figure upon which I would hang cheap commonplace moralities; but a creature of real flesh and blood, and mind and soul, whose picture I would paint—if I can. If he does not seem real after all, it is because my pen is feeble, and not because this man has not really lived and suffered, and sinned and repented.²

The reader has to take him for granted.

There are other more mixed types of heroes in these novels, though they too are seen in terms of familiar types and developed in relation to the heroine and her world, frequently assimilating what are essentially feminine characteristics in order to set off her masculinity. The half-West Indian Armadale, for example, in Wilkie Collins' book of that name, in spite of his world travels and his competence at so many trades, possesses a femininely sensitive and emotional organization which betrays his logical faculty at critical moments. Walter Hartwright of The Woman in White is a typically effeminate type of man, an art tutor who in spite the help he gives to Laura Fairlie and Marian Halcombe never moves beyond their world and never eclipses the true hero, Marian. That her admirer is Count Fosco himself, while Walter takes the decidedly inferior Laura, indicates that the strength and energy of this sensation novel are not embodied in him. The hero of Eleanor's Victory, an example of the gentleman-hero, becomes jealous
of his wife's obsession with the villain of the story, mistaking her vengeance for love. One night when she has crept out to steal the will of a dying gentleman, her husband leaves home, taking with him his young ward whom he wishes to protect from his wife. Similarly impotent jealousy, usually assigned to women in Victorian novels, drives Griffith Gaunt from his home. In Land at Last the hero, who has married a beautiful young girl of the streets, learns that she has betrayed him into a false marriage, she being already married. He is deserted and left with an illegitimate child. His sense of shame and despair is oddly parallel to that characteristic of a female character in the same situation, just as Beatrice's in Lost and Saved is the opposite of it.

The ultimate effect of these changes was to liberate the hero from masculine stereotypes as much as the heroine, but in the sensation novel his role was so little worked out, and so relatively unimportant compared to the heroine's, that he remained only one of the many artistically troublesome waves the heroine left in her wake.

The New Love Story

Nevertheless, the combination of such heroes and heroines necessitated a new kind of love story, one which, in spite of the many corruptions to which it was subjected in the sensation novel, was a real and lasting contribution
to English fiction. Love became freed from the literary restrictions of class, marriage, or traditional chastity. And that was a real liberation. Love ceased to be conceived of as a socially cohesive force and became instead a compellingly disruptive one. Yet because the subject was bound up in taboos so strictly and voluntarily enforced, the ways of breaking out were severely curtailed. Thrilling kisses and pressures of the hand were mentioned in most sensation novels, but further than that a novelist usually did not go. The "sensation" excited by illicit or unconventional love had to be derived, not so much from introspection on the part of the characters or the examination of the heart, as from situations external to character, in which love could be relied upon to prove its strength simply through its unconventionality.

In Love and Death in the American Novel, Leslie Fiedler points out the restraint exercised in the American and English novel against cross-class love when the woman stoops socially and elevates her lover to her own position. In the sensation novel this pattern is reversed, and though the reader's attention is not directed to this deviation from tradition, it is a revolutionary aspect of the sensation novel. In this spirit Aurora Floyd elopes with her father's groom and one of the heroines of Broken to Harness, a member of the aristocracy, marries a newspaper writer,
beneath her in wealth and station, though her moral and intellectual superior. Although she leaves him, finding the tedium of their modest life together unbearable, they are reconciled at the end. The characteristic retraction of the sensation novel undermines these and most similar situations. Aurora Floyd marries another man and spends the rest of the novel trying to escape the first; and Frank, reconciled with his wife, gives up the writing that he loves and turns to something more lucrative. It ends thus:

And Barbara and Frank. They live . . . in a charming house, with a lawn sloping to the Thames. Barbara has her brougham again; and all her old acquaintances have called upon her, and expressed their delight at her husband's good fortune with great enthusiasm . . . . But Barbara has not cared to renew old connexions. Thoroughly happy in her husband, doting on her three children [new arrivals], her chief pleasure is in her home, of which she is now the comfort and the pride.3

In contradiction to all the values that have apparently prevailed throughout the novel, we are suddenly made to feel that this is a good thing, that money and station must not ultimately be sacrificed to love.

For the best success, such democratic tendencies combined with other reversals of sex roles to make particular demands on the heroes and heroines that sometimes provided rich possibilities for character development. In Tennyson's Enoch Arden (1864), the husband thought to be dead returns, a broken man, and watches his wife and children living in married happiness with his old rival, himself
apparently forgotten. The morality of the poem was criticized. Three years earlier in *East Lynne*, a similar role had fallen to a woman. Isabel Vane, having run off in a moment of passionate jealousy, returns to her former husband, who has divorced her and, hearing of her death, has remarried. Isabel, transformed beyond recognition into a limping humpback, her jaw deformed with injuries from the accident that was thought to have killed her, and grayed by her moral suffering, takes a job as governess to her own children in the house of her former husband. There she lives under constant threat of discovery, caring for her children as a mother but deprived of a mother's privilege, and torn with physical passion for her husband whom she sees caressing the woman of whom she was mistakenly jealous during her marriage. She hears her own name execrated and kept from her children. Though she reveals herself to her husband on her deathbed, and although he frigidly forgives her, his love is dead, and he is moved by her confession to shock and terror rather than love and pity.

*East Lynne* is in many ways the most radical and daring of the sensation novels, as well as one of the better-written. Mrs. Wood was very bold in her treatment of Isabel. Her pregnancy out of wedlock and her disfigurement must have realized two of the worst dreads of Victorian womanhood, the latter at least rarely being allowed to occur
in any literature before or since. (Esther Summerson is an unusual example, and even though her illegitimacy makes her a different kind of heroine from Ada in the same book, the scene in which she first looks in the mirror after her smallpox is horrifying.) But Isabel becomes ugly, throws away her virtue, and continues to love. Yet she is denied the requirement of chivalry that she be loved in return and is never reconciled with her husband, for whom honor is more important than passion.

Another radical view of love dominates Lizzie Lorton of Greyrigg. Lizzie, the gorgeous tigress whom we have already met, hurls her great ardency and extraordinary beauty at the working-class hero, who is temporarily seduced by it; the other heroine, an aristocrat who also loves him and whose love he returns, begs him to marry her although he is about to be sentenced to life imprisonment for murder. He refuses her: "The man who should bring honour and security, dragging the woman he loves into such mire as I am dragging you!" But she has rejected these ideals along with her ideas about rank and tries to convince him of the strength and capacity of her love and her right to bear his sorrows. The result is enlightenment for both of them:

"It is not the man's place to demand strength from the woman; he ought to give it," repeated Ainslie; "yet perhaps-- . . . perhaps it is the
higher manliness. Margaret, I accept your sacrifice, and you shall be my wife when I am a convict."
"Now I know that you love me," cried Margaret, bursting into tears.¹

One further alteration in the formulae attending the literary treatment of love in the nineteenth century was that women in the sensation novel were allowed to love twice. Presumably this was necessary to their bigamy as well as to their elopement after marriage, and it opened to the novel the important range of psychological complexities provided by, among other things, adultery. In The Silver Cord, the heroine, Laura, called to Paris to help extricate her sister from a vicious entanglement of blackmail and extortion, is afraid to tell her husband where she is going or why, not because of any error on her part, but because if he probes into her business he will learn that as a girl she had been in love with a young man who had died:

I had heard you speak of first loves, and you declared that no woman loved twice. This was before we were married, and I kept a secret which I never dared to tell afterward.²

Breaking out of such prejudices as these enlarged the scope of the hero as much as it did that of the heroine, even though much later heroes, like Angel Clare in Tess of the D'Urbervilles, still entertained them.

Moral Relativism

What made these situations and attitudes shocking and sensational was the readers' careful conditioning,
recognized and indeed utilized by the authors, to condemn and recoil from them. The sensation novel thrived chiefly on the balance it maintained between its readers' known code of ethics and their covert sympathy for what the conventions in which they were bred forced them to denounce. Legitimatizing the suspension of moral judgment was the major achievement of the sensation novel, but it was accomplished by very special means that were not those of the greater novels which followed its pattern. The sensation novel externalized its characters' battles of conscience and omitted to fit them into a true moral framework, often making severe compromises at the end to reconcile ethical radicalism with acceptable convention. On the other hand it produced shock in its readers by invoking in them—instead of within the novel itself—a comparison with their own world and their own moral preconceptions, by making that world, rather than those preconceptions, appear immediate to them, in ways I shall describe in a moment. In the next chapter I shall discuss the difference between the methods of the sensation novel in this respect and those of the more serious and, if you like, dangerous ones, of George Eliot, Meredith, and Hardy. Nevertheless, it is true that the sensation novel went far to free the novel from the moral requirements peculiar to earlier Victorian fiction. The books drew to themselves censure which their
commercial success and essential non-commitment allowed them to afford and gradually prepared their readership not to receive what it had always expected.

In almost every review, the mutual incompatibility of sensation and morality is either stated or presupposed. Mary Elizabeth Braddon, in *Henry Dunbar*, compared her methods to those of Daniel Defoe in treating criminals and villains. A characteristic reviewer's comment ran:

... even granting that she takes a right view of Defoe's method of dealing with superlative villains (so that the retribution varies inversely to the heinousness of the offence), she considers that Defoe's remarks applied to a tale with no more moral purpose than her own, of which she thus speaks: "The story of 'Henry Dunbar' pretends to be nothing more than a story, the revealment of which is calculated to weaken the interest of the general reader, for whose amusement the tale is written." Now, far be it from us to advocate the necessity of "moral purpose"; but far be it from us also to advocate the use of vice and crime as mere playthings for the amusement of excitement-seeking novel-readers.7

Excitement as an end in itself was the premise of the sensation aesthetic, leading in one direction toward art for art's sake and in another toward psychologizing. However disingenuous the sensationists' invocation of pre-Victorian predecessors (Richardson, Shelley and Byron, Shakespeare and Sophocles, among others in addition to Defoe), it was true that they rejected the pretense of moral purpose. In some cases it was replaced with another excuse, eagerly picked up by those who wanted some external
justification for reading: namely, the exposure of an evil. But this apology too was imposed by reviewers and sensation novelists on the material rather than inherent in the novels. A characteristic piece of praise for such a novel is this about W. G. Wills's The Wife's Evidence, a story about a woman with a criminal husband, who cannot testify against him:

Nor would it be fair to call the story sensational, as that term is generally understood; for we take it that a tale is conventionally termed sensational when the author heaps up exciting events simply for the sake of gratifying the morbid or galvanizing the jaded reader. But when an author has a further object, when he desires to impress vividly upon minds the awful consequences which may arise from what he is pleased to consider an existing evil, he is not only justified in exhibiting, he is almost bound to exhibit, in its most lurid colours, the horror which he conceives to be connected with that evil.8

In these years, at least, the absence of moral purpose was considered synonymous with corruption. It is amusing to read in Kate Amberley's journal for 1865 an entry about Mrs. Grote, the historian's wife, who knew George Sand, renowned as an example of French immorality both in her life and in her books and a distinct influence on the sensation novel:

She said she was a bad woman, was the death of Schoppin [Chopin]. Once Mrs. G. asked her why she did not write to elevate the moral nature, instead of only romancing; whereupon G. Sand took a pipe out of her mouth and said, "Voyez vs chère Mm Grote, je suis romancière, pas moraliste."9
Reviews of sensation novels debated the difficult distinction between the immorality of sensation novels and the undeniable similarity of their open treatment of crime, violence, and sin with pre-Victorian works known to be great literature. Here is a typical example from a review of Mrs. Norton's *Lost and Saved*:

In the first place it is perfectly clear that nothing but the most wretched prudery would describe as necessarily immoral a work of great genius—the *Oedipus Rex*, for instance—because it turned around a revolting incident; but it is equally clear that the ordinary run of novels with a moral purpose have no claim at all to be judged on the principles which are proper in discussing the moral value of books of that order. They are almost universally pamphlets conceived from a sentimental instead of a dogmatic view. Such being their position, the true objection to them is not that the doctrine which their author means to insinuate would be immoral if it were advocated in express words, but that by addressing the imagination instead of the reason they tend to set the mind as it were on a wrong scent—to draw it away from the broader and weightier matters of the moral law to dwell upon byways and exceptional cases, which to the great mass of mankind are not only instructive, but positively injurious.10

In such comments, the old elitist tone creeps in, implying that there are a select number who are incorruptible by culture, and that they must exercise a controlling judgment over the reading matter of others. In fact, the sensation novel did operate as the review describes. The central figure was almost always a heroine, specifically because in the Victorian moral system women were judged more critically and were subject to more stringent moral requirements.
than men, and the sensation novel achieved its shock by the unaccustomed naughtiness of forgiving bad behavior. "For though the faults of women are visited as sins, the sins of men are not even visited as faults," wrote Mrs. Norton in Lost and Saved. The process had to be carried out through sentiment rather than by dogma, since exoneration was morally and rationally untenable. Sympathy always fell to the individual to the detriment of the opposing forces of Christian and social morality. In Hard Cash, for example, the heroine is set off by a different kind of girl who scrupulously practices duty and renunciation; the author calls her a "fidgety Christian." In another Victorian novel she would have been cast as a heroine. In an article on "Extenuating Circumstances" in the Cornhill, guilt and responsibility for one's actions are defined thus:

The essence of guilt consists in this: that a man well knowing what is right and what is wrong, and free, physically, morally, and intellectually, to take either course, deliberately chooses the wrong in preference to the right.

Sensation heroines and heroes are either fettered in some way, or think they are, or do not err deliberately. It is thus that the pity rather than the condemnation of their readers is bid for. And behind the plea for tolerance is the feeling that critics found so dangerous: the assumption that guilt and good go by chance, not by desert, and
that the impulse to self-righteousness is an impulse of the narrow-souled.

Here is Margaret, the sumptuously beautiful heroine of *Land at Last*, who bigamously married the idealistic artist who found her starving in the streets and generously forbore to question her about her past. She is dying of morphia-poisoning and repents of ruining Geoffrey's life and giving him a bastard son:

> It was prompted by despair; it ended in desperation. Have those who condemned me—and I know naturally enough I am condemned by all his friends—have those who condemned me ever known the pangs of starvation, the grim tortures of houselessness in the streets? Have they ever known what it is to have the iron of want and penury eating into their souls, and then to be offered a comfortable home and an honest man's love? If they have, I doubt very much whether they would have refused it. I do not say this to excuse myself.\textsuperscript{13}

Such speeches substituted, for delicious moral indignation, the pleasure of compassion and daring broad-mindedness. Lady Audley pleads the poverty of her youth as the source of her criminal actions:

> Happy, prosperous people may feel for others. I laugh at other people's sufferings; they seem so small compared to my own.\textsuperscript{14}

Having seen her mad mother institutionalized because her father, who adored his wife, had no money to keep her at home, she realizes that love and happiness are contingent on money and interprets her first husband's heartbroken
flight to make a fortune as justification for anything:

I looked upon this as a desertion, and I resented it bitterly—I resented it by hating the man who had left me with no protector but a weak, tipsy father, and with a child to support. I had to work hard for my living, and in every hour of labour—and what labour is more wearisome than the dull slavery of a governess?—I recognized a separate wrong done me by George Talboys. His father was rich, his sister was living in luxury and respectability, and I his wife, and the mother of his son, was a slave allied to beggary and Obscurity. People pitied me, and I hated them for their pity.

(Ch. 34)

The audience was further attacked for the narrowness of its emotional experience and was given the chance to expiate its fault by exercising mercy. At the end of No Name, for example, Magdalen suddenly becomes loved by a passing sailor who saves her life and restores her sanity. She tells him her story, and he forgives her crimes; she questions whether she deserves such happiness:

Oh, I know how the poor narrow people who have never felt and never suffered would answer me if I asked them what I ask you. If they knew my story, they would forget all the provocation and only remember the offense; they would fasten on my sin, and pass all my suffering by.15

The reader is invited to join company with those who possess heart sufficient to suffer and therefore to grow. Sensation novels took pains to point out that society was quick to blame and did so, erroneously, on the basis of appearance only. In Lost and Saved the heroine suddenly turns around to find in the room her "husband's" mistress—a woman who,
being respectably married, can carry on illicit affairs with impunity—"and the Real bad woman and the Nominal bad woman stood face to face!"

The real bad woman,—with her reputation preserved, her husband deceived, her friends made accomplices, her very children innocent partakers of guilty rendezvous,—unblamed; unquestioned; asked everywhere to meet her lover; feted, flattered, and caressed; and the nominal bad woman,—the woman without a reputation—unowned and unhonoured, faithful and fond; a true wife; an innocent mother; betrayed, not betraying; and degraded only through the baseness of others.

(Ch. 35)

Within the novels there is often a character firmly rooted in respectability who acts as a true judge of character and whose sympathy for the sinner the reader is intended to share. He defines the appropriate limits to compassion, lest the reader feel himself nearing moral chaos. Thus does the Italian Marquis with whom Beatrice, the "Nominal bad woman" above, falls in love, and who offers her marriage in spite of her history, plead against her refusal to marry him:

What is the opinion to us, that is only founded on forms of thinking? Are you in fact degraded by that unhappy dream of the past? Let the woman who feels that she has been a voluntary sinner—that her antecedents are such that she dare not pretend to be the wife of an honourable man—bear that position un murmuring. She is already married—to shame! That union is spiritual and sacramental; nothing can divorce her or set her at liberty to wed another. But with you, my beloved, it was not so.

(Ch. 54)
Another form of bold forgiveness, also serving to readjust the configuration of the hero and heroine, is that expressed by Margaret of Lizzie Lorton of Greyrigg. Ainslie has confessed his guilt expecting to lose her, but she exercises the liberty of the sensation heroine and decides to wait until his prison term is over or to emigrate to America with him:

"There is nothing irremediable but death!" she added gravely.
"Not crime?"
"Crime? if repented of? No! else, where is the mercy we speak of and profess to believe in?" she answered.
"Then you would not turn from a great sinner?" . . .
"No!" she answered emphatically. "If any one that I loved had done wrong, and had repented, I would cling to him more tenaciously than ever, if by so doing I could help in his reformation."16

New elements are added to love and to character in this relativistic vision of morality; a special kind of courage and a special kind of love are demanded to defy "the world" together, and special kinds of problems are raised in turn by this need. Interest shifts from the predominantly social values held commonly to those pertaining only to the individual.

The Shock of Proximity

Obviously such views of men, women, love, and morality required a severely modified treatment of society. Respectability, propriety, and social institutions (includ-
ing marriage) were enemies to such characters as the novels set up. But unlike the more lasting novels written in the same vein during these years, the sensation novel both relied on devices external to the novel itself to achieve its effect and tended to retract its rebellion at the end. On the other hand, this strong injection of romanticizing freed it to be more forthright in its criticism than novels with more artistic integrity could be.

An important device in this respect was the recognizable modernity of setting. A review of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's works compared Lady Audley to Vittoria Corombona, "transferred to the nineteenth century and to an English drawing-room. But the romantic wickedness of the 'White Devil of Italy' suffers by being transplanted to home scenes and modern associations." This typical comment touches on a crucial aspect of sensation in the novel and one which distinguishes it from that of the drama: its immediately contemporary and familiar settings. From the amorality to be found in classical, Renaissance, neoclassical, and Romantic literature, the reader was protected by historical distance. The sensation novel was shocking because its view of crime, sin, passion, the individual, and a threatening society had to be read against a context in which familiar values and habits of thought and judgment obtained. The amorality of the sensation novel was made
potent by its direct association with the lives of its readers, associations which could not be blinked.

Sensation novels were set in close temporal and geographic proximity to their middle-class readers. The single exception in my experience is Griffith Gaunt, which takes place in the eighteenth century. But so little is made of the temporal distance that it is almost impossible for the reader to bear it in mind. Historical explanation and social detail disturb its immediacy as little as possible, and the subject, the possibly illicit relations between a woman and her confessor, was perhaps impossible to treat sympathetically in a modern context.

Therefore the sensation novel was set in modern England, with an occasional trip to Paris or once in a while even further for a particularly disturbing event. In Arma-dale, for example, the hero's father murders his beloved's husband and betrayer in the West Indies before the story begins. But the modern insane asylum, with its lethal gas chambers in which the heroine dies, is placed in a recognizable part of London and represents quite the latest technological development. Aurora Floyd's youthful marriage took place from a French boarding school; her bigamy, however, is committed in the late fifties on an English estate. Isabel Vane lives with her lover on the Continent, but she
returns to an English town to be governess to her own children.

The characters live in accordance with the dictates of the latest fashion and are sensible of their own modernity. They drive, or watch others drive, the latest, raciest, open "turn-outs" with big green wheels lined with red; they use the slang of the day; their clothes and habits reflect the newest rage. They read new books, including sensation novels, as well as fashionably respectable authors like Tennyson and Longfellow. Charlotte Pain, heroine of Mrs. Wood's *Shadow of Ashlydyat* (1862-3), whose modish costumes are described in great detail—porkpies, mannish riding habits, green silk evening dresses—even appears, fresh from the stable where she has been training horses, with her skirt topped by "some strange-looking thing," a garment "neither a jacket nor a body, its shade a bright yellow and its buttons purple glass." In the midst of the crisis which has drawn her from her horses in this attire, she says suddenly to the woman she is with, "Do you like my Garibaldi shirt?"

"Like what?" questioned Maria, not catching the name.

"This," replied Charlotte, indicating the yellow article by a touch. "They are new things just come up: Garibaldi shirts they are called. Mrs. Verrall sent me three down from London: a yellow, a scarlet, and a blue. They are all the rage, she says. Do you admire it?"
Furthermore, the authors made a point of alluding to contemporary events. M. E. Braddon, for example, wrote an elegy to Thackeray into a number of *The Doctor's Wife*, his death having occurred since the previous one. In *Oswald Cray* (1863), Mrs. Wood puts her characters through the remarkable cold of the winter of 1860 and devotes many pages to the death of Prince Albert the year after, discussing its effects on the Queen, on the nation, and on her characters. Sala included this paragraph in his *Seven Sons of Mammon* to defend his villainous heroine against the supposed objections of a friend:

> But a very few days after our controversy, my friend came well-nigh raving to me about the details of the "Northumberland-Street Tragedy." Tragedy! a wretched Coburg melodrama it was, at best; there are real five-act tragedies going on about us every day,--far more fearful, far more horrifying than that slaughterhouse fray. The ladies are even more difficult to convince than the gentlemen. They won't have Mrs. Armytage [the beautiful criminal heroine]. There was never anybody like her, they say.... Month after month these complaints, these protests reach me. I am bidden to write a story all about purity and honesty and truth and the home-affections, and the rest of it. Well, I will try to do so; but you must not be surprised to find my portion of *Temple Bar* so many blank pages.... Do all the good books that are written about good people save their readers from being covetous and lying and slanderous and sensual? Are the gentle-folk who come up the Divorce Court quite ignorant of the nature of cold-boiled-veal-without-salt novels (in three vols.)? And, finally, how would you like a newspaper in which there were no police-reports, no law or assize intelligence, no leading articles on any other subjects save missionary societies, governess institutions, the art of pickling onions, and
the best means of obliterating freckles? While I live, and while I write, I shall just tell the stories of the people I have met, and of the lives they have led—so far as I have known them,—in my own fashion; and when I begin to paint the Graces from imagination, and the Virtues from hearsay, it will be time for me to retire to the Asylum for Idiots at Earlswood, and gibber.19

For one more touch of immediacy, the letters written in sensation novels were frequently dated, usually within at least a few years of the time of publication.

Discussing the limitations of the political novel as a genre, M. E. Speare talks about the problem of treating in literature "contemporary issues, events, and characters who live in the immediate present, or traditions which we inherit, or the party prejudice which we have encouraged to share in from our own generation. Inseparable from the appeal of such topics is the ever-present possibility of boredom or rejection."20 The sensation novel dealt with moral and social prejudices rather than political ones; that many rejected the attitudes expressed by those novels we have already witnessed. Boredom, however, was no problem. The Quarterly Review explained the excitement thus:

Proximity is, indeed, one great element of sensation. It is necessary to be near a mine to be blown up by its explosion; and a tale which aims at electrifying the nerves of the reader is never thoroughly effective unless the scene be laid in our own days and among people we are in the habit of seeing.

It goes on to assert that the sensation mentality finds its
pleasure in thinking that the people one meets may have a story like Lady Audley's or may be a real-life Count Fosco. This is the same excitement offered by scandal—and, indeed, gossip as a staple of popular journalism was in the ascendant in the sixties: vicarious personal association. Tinsley even bought the right to publish Lady Audley's Secret in three volumes because "there had at some time been some sort of an Audley family secret, and I think the novel and the old story got a bit mixed," and so he felt certain it would sell.

As important as personal association was the feeling that literature was dealing with truth rather than romance (not the case, of course), and that reality was more interesting than one had suspected. A reader objecting to the descriptions of insane asylums in Hard Cash (1863) unknowingly expressed the fear that made sensation so exciting:

When a writer of sensation romances makes a heroine push a superfluous husband into a well, or set a house on fire in order to get rid of disagreeable testimony, we smile over the highly seasoned dish, but do not think it necessary to apply the warning to ourselves, and for the future avoid sitting on the edge of a draw-well, or having any but fire-proof libraries. But when we read, as in the novel, "Very Hard Cash," now publishing in All the Year Round, that any man may, at any moment, be consigned to a fate which to a sane man would be worse than death, and that not by the single act of any of our Lady Audley's, or other interesting criminals, but as part of a regular organized system, in all compliance with the laws of the land,—when we read this, a thrill of terror
goes through the public mind. If what Mr. Charles Reade says be possible, who is safe?

The writer went on to assure the public that what Reade said was not possible; in an answering letter, Reade cited cases and examples to prove that it was.24

In this way proximity was part of the deeply embedded cynicism of these novels. Previous novels had assumed a system of values outside their action; the sensation novel was immersed in its own. It cast off the stifling restraints of middle-class propriety not by moving to the lower classes where those values became irrelevant, but by letting them disintegrate. The rejection found obvious form in respect to institutions, especially the law and medicine. The trials which made criminals of heroes—Trial of the Tredgold, for instance, or Lizzie Lorton of Greyrigg; the laws which confined the hero of Hard Cash and the heroine of Woman in White to insane asylums, were demonstrated to bear no relation whatever to the sound facts of human character and of circumstance or to justice. The assault on institutions provided a means of undercutting more elusive assumptions, including moral ones. Definitions of every sort were disproven. The hero of Held in Bondage who left his wife at the registry is legally "married," for example:

"She calls herself Mrs. De Vigne, I think?"
"She is Mrs. De Vigne," said Sabretasche, with that bitter sneer which occasionally passed over his features. "You forget the sanctity, solemnity,
and beauty of the marriage tie, my dear Montressor. You know it is too 'holy' to be severed, either by reason, justice, or common sense."25

Yet the parents of Magdalen Vanstone, deeply loving, living together faithfully for years, parents of beloved children, cannot be "married," because of the husband's prior wife.

The Marriage Problem

"It is admitted that a novel can hardly be made interesting or successful without love," wrote Trollope in his Autobiography:

In one respect the necessity of dealing with love is advantageous,--advantageous from the very circumstance which has made love necessary to all novelists. It is necessary because the passion is one which interests or has interested all. Every one feels it, has felt it, or expects to feel it,--or else rejects it with an eagerness which still perpetuates the interest.26

Because love, and the related matters of family, home, and marriage were so central to the form and substance of the novel, it was probably inevitable that the sensation novel should have struck consistently, boldly, and irrevocably through these at social forms and ideals which constricted the scope of individual human life and even caused the possibility of tragedy.

A reviewer of what he claimed in 1863 were the three most popular books since Pickwick and the novels of Scott commented on their most striking point of similarity: their treatment of marriage. The books were Lady Audley's
Secret, Aurora Floyd, and No Name. All three shared central heroines who

... though endowed with all the necessary requisites of personal beauty and mental capacities, in two of them at least almost rising to the height of genius, have been placed by the authors in circumstances and caused so to conduct themselves in those trials and difficulties to which heroines must from the necessities of their positions encounter as to repel the sympathies of readers; at least till the period of punishment has been sufficiently extended, and the penitential epoch has arrived. If they are sinned against they are not denied the benefit of being allowed to sin, although, of course, from a retributive point of view. In short, very vigorous efforts have been made in these tales to get rid of those faultless monsters (we use the word in its purely philological sense) in white muslin, whose sorrows and disappointments are in exact proportion to their qualities of meekness, patience, and endurance, who have suffered time out of mind through three volumes to be made happy at last by the very doubtful process of getting married. The three beautiful ladies whose adventures have been thrilling the novel-reading public of late are no puny specimens of the heroine class, but women of the times, who contrive to know life at an early age, and who are endowed with that sort of courage and self-reliance which in men we are accustomed to call pluck, and who as nearly as possible fight through their inevitable troubles single-handed. In the case of Miss Braddon's creations, so far from marriage being the be-all and end-all of their career, it is mainly in one case and altogether in the other as married women that their lives are presented to the reader.

The reviewer notes that Magdalen Vanstone of No Name marries in mid-novel and remarks on

... the implied philosophy of Miss Braddon—namely, that the real tragedy of a woman's life, if it is to be tragic at all, begins only when she becomes a wife; and perhaps one of her chief excellences is the skill and power which she
exhibits in eliciting out of the events of the
every day existence of our own time those ele-
ments of tragic interest which it is with some
reason affirmed are as surely present to human
beings now, although the form of their develop­
ment may be different, as they were in the days
when Aeschylus and Shakespeare respectively
wrote.27

Such comments are replete with significance. The
sacred institution of marriage, rather than solving all the
essential problems of a woman's life (career, life-purpose,
respectability, and love) had tragic potential and was
often irreconcilable with strength, courage, energy,
individuality, and intelligence. Though this view was
common enough in relation to men, the inviolability of mar­
riage and the ideal of domestic happiness were so strongly
upheld in relation to women that intimations to the contrary
were regarded as a kind of tasteless masculine joke. In
the sensation novel the new attitude was no joke, because
it applied particularly to the heroine, dominated the form
of the novel in which she appeared, and permeated its whole
view of "the world."

Many novels pointed out that customs of courtship,
combined with the protection of young ladies from experi­
ences of love—or experiences of almost any kind—provided
an education wholly inadequate for choosing, or being, a
spouse. Physical passion led Aurora Floyd, for instance,
to marry her father's groom; her limited experience allowed
her to be misled. Held in Bondage (its epigraph: "A young
man married is a man that's marred." — SHAKESPEARE) pro-
fessed to be a didactic novel against "Early Marriage,"
though in many respects it preached against marriage alto-
gether. Here one of the heroes speaks in his bitterness:

A young man meets a young woman in society, or at
the sea-side, or on the deck of a Rhine steamer;
she has fresh colouring, bright blue eyes, or
black ones, as the case may be, very nice ankles,
and a charming voice. She is a pretty girl to
everybody; to him she is beautiful--divine! . . .
He falls in love with her, as the phrase goes; he
flirts with her at water-parties, and pays her a
few morning calls; he sees her trifling with a
bit of fancy-work, and hears her pretty voice say
a few things about the weather. A few glances, a
few waltzes, a few tête-à-têtes, and he proposes.
It is a pretty dream for a few months; an easy
yoke, perhaps, for a few years; then gradually the
illusions drop one by one. . . . He finds her mind
narrowed, bigoted, ill-stored, with no single
thought in it akin to his own. What could he learn
of it in those few morning calls, those few ball-
room talks, when the glamour was on him, and he
would have cared nothing though she could not have
spelled his name: Or, he finds her a bad temper
(when does temper ever show in society, and how
could he see without society's controlling eye upon
her?) . . . Or, he finds her a heartless coquette.
. . . Or--and this, I take it, is the worst case
for both--the wife is a good wife, as many (ladies
say most) wives are; he knows it, he feels it, he
honours her for it, but--she is a bitter disappoin-
tment to him! He comes home worn out with the day's
labour, but successful from it; he sits down to a
tête-a-tête dinner; he tells her of the hard-won
election, the hot-worded debate in the House, the
issue of a great law-case that he has brought off
victorious, the compliment to his corps from the
commander-in-chief, of the one thing that is the
essence of his life and the end of his ambition;
she listened [sic] with a vague, amiable, absent
smile, but her heart is not with him, nor her ear.
"Yes, dear--indeed--how very nice! But cook has
ruined that splendid haunch. Do look! it is really
burned to a cinder!" She never gives him more than
that! She cannot help it; her mission is emphatically to "suckle fools and chronicle small beer." The perpetual drop, drop, of her small worries, her puerile pleasures, is like the ceaseless dropping of water on his brain; she is less capable of understanding him in his defeats, his victories, his struggles, than the senseless writing-paper, which, though it cannot respond to them, at least lets him score his thoughts on its blank pages, and will bear them unobliterated!  

The same novel provides a heroine for this man to love, whom he meets after it is too late. For her too the marriage conventions are a cruel torture, for she loves a married man. Her mother pressures her to accept the offer of a repulsive member of foreign royalty:

"Don't you know there is not a girl in the English or French empire, who would not take such an offer as his, and accept it with thanksgiving?"

"Oh, yes! I could not sell myself to better advantage!"

"Sell yourself?" repeated the peeress. . . .

"Yes, sell myself," repeated Violet bitterly.

. . . "Would you not put me up to auction, knock me down to the highest bidder? Marriage is the mart, mothers the auctioneers, and he who bids the highest wins. Women are like racers, brought up only to run for Cups, and win handicaps for their owners."  

The coarseness of her images is consonant with the attitude toward marriage propounded in the whole book. Yates's Broken to Harness pretends to more sedateness; yet a chief incident is the separation between the hero and the heroine. This, says the novelist, is a common state of affairs:

Exposure, publicity in the press, Mrs. Grundy—these are the greatest enemies of the Divorce-Court lawyers; heavy though the list of cases standing over for hearing may be, it would be
fifty times heavier would the proceedings be kept secret. Hundreds of couples not living together, hating each other, "with the hate of hell!" scowling, carping, badgering, wearing, maddening, to desperation driving, from the hour they rise till the hour they retire to rest and fall asleep,— the one cursing his life, the other feebly bemoaning her fate, or, openly defiant, "each going their own way"; a state of being more horrible, loathsome, and pitiable even than the other,—would be disunited, were it not for the public scandal.

The married state, the very happiness so conclusive to the novel, could itself be intolerable. In Land at Last, although a second conventional heroine waits patiently to marry, and thereby restore to happiness, the hero when his "wife" dies of poisoning, our sympathy is elicited for the beautiful streetwalker who has married him bigamously:

I have suffered in this house torments which your slow nature could neither suffer nor comprehend—torments wholly impossible to endure any longer. I have raged and rebelled against the dainty life of dullness and dawdling, the narrow hopes and the tame pleasures which I have suffered for you.

To recognize the blasphemy of such a statement, compare it with E. E. Kellett's story about the two Victorian ladies at a performance of Anthony and Cleopatra: "Contemplating the sad behavior of the serpent of the old Nile, one murmured to the other, 'How different from the home life of our dear Queen!'"  

When marriage is regarded in this light, justifiable reasons or irresistible temptations to quit the union abound; its indissolubility is attacked as well as the
conditions it imposes. Marriage is only a social institution and cannot protect its own from a more compelling love than that for a spouse. Thus we have the hero of Byron's *Paid in Full* dining out with his light-of-love, an actress, while his wife is dying in childbirth:

... he was over head and ears in love with a lady who was not his wife; all very reprehensible and shocking; but such things have happened, do happen, will happen, despite the improved moral tone of society one hears talked about, and the public teachings of that beautiful institution, the Divorce-Court. Horace was no hero of romance; he was a human being, and a very ill-conditioned one into the bargain.  

*The Doctor's Wife* was made sensational by Isabel's post-marital love for Roland. Though she repels his urgent persuasions that she elope with him, her physical attraction to him is dwelt on at length and his lady cousin accuses her to her face of being his "mistress." The word is actually used, and Isabel contemplates its ugliness. Furthermore, the author urges that all that is wrong with this love is its timing: Could Isabel have met Roland before she married the doctor, all would have been well. The crude anticipation of Hardy is evident. Said a typical reviewer, recognizing that this was a common state of affairs, but one which literature should avoid:

Miss Braddon is gifted with the emphasis of genuine passion [a statement to which I take strong exception, but which was widely held] but she squanders her energy on subjects totally unworthy of it. The whole of this month's installment of her story, for
example, is occupied with one of those repulsive tales of conjugal infidelity which we cannot keep out of the daily newspaper, but which we strongly object to have thrust under our eyes in hours of mental recreation. No doubt there are many who really relish this tainted food, but they are not the sort of people for whom Miss Braddon should write.  

Finally, the laws themselves, like other laws in sensation novels, dictated a kind of behavior in marriage that ran contrary not only to human inclination but to conscience. An extreme example would be the wife of Count Fosco. Explaining why she helped him in his crimes, the Count cites the English marriage laws:

I ask, if a woman's marriage obligations, in this country, provide for her private opinions of her husband's principles? No! They charge her unreservedly to love, honour, and obey him. That is exactly what my wife has done.

For all this, most sensation novels could not dispense with the customary ending. That some did so is perhaps more remarkable than that so many did not. Their sensationalism was moderated by their not going too far, not making the incompatibility between inner life and social life too permanent. Aurora Floyd becomes a domesticated housewife on the last page and bears children; Eleanor of Eleanor's Victory, having sacrificed herself from her girlhood to a plot of revenge and whose very marriage was designed to further her plans, settles down to quiet happiness at home after achieving her end. Mercy Vint, Griffith Gaunt's second wife, is provided with a nobleman husband
after Griffith returns to his first wife, an unlikely match, considering that she is an innkeeper's daughter and has already had the illicit union with Griffith. No basis has been laid for this outcome. The most incongruous ending is perhaps that of Held in Bondage, which after railing against the inherent absurdity of marriage, frees both its heroes from their ill-contracted "bondage" only to marry them both at the end. Ouida herself apologized for them in her last chapter with a muddled argument to the effect that marriage is usually a bad thing, but that some people like it.

Nevertheless, there were some novels that did not make this compromise. Sometimes they substituted death for marriage, a type of ending which explains the frequent interchange of the terms "sensational" and "tragic." Sometimes the heroes died instead, leaving a beloved who remained single. After the death of both Roland and her husband, Isabel of The Doctor's Wife lives alone, devoting herself to scholarship and the good works made possible by the fortune Roland left her, while her rival, Roland's cousin, remains a spinster. The pair of heroines of Le-Fanu's Wylder's Hand, one widowed and one having chosen to reject her lover because of the disgrace her brother's crime has brought upon her, we last see together in a gondola in Venice. Neither will ever marry, we are told, but they will spend the rest of their days travelling together. Such
endings lacked drama, but achieved a kind of surprise from their very appropriateness. As M. E. Braddon wrote at the end of *Aurora Floyd*—which was not such a novel:

> Now my two heroines being married, the reader versed in the physiology of novel writing may conclude that my story is done, that the green curtain is ready to fall upon the last act of the play, and that I have nothing more to do than to entreat indulgence for the shortcomings of the performance and the performers. Yet, after all, does the business of the real-life drama always end upon the altar-steps? Must the play needs be over when the hero and heroine have signed their names in the register? Does man cease to be, to do, and to suffer when he gets married? And is it necessary that the novelist, after devoting three volumes to the description of a courtship of six weeks' duration, should reserve for himself only half a page in which to tell us the events of two-thirds of a lifetime?

(Ch. 14)

**The Tragic Potential**

Behind such a passage, however, little realized in the final pages of much sensation literature, lies a subtler attitude than cynicism about marriage or current literary practices. The *Cornhill* article on "Heroines and Their Grandmothers" attributes a quality to sensation heroines which permeates also the novels in which they are found:

> And perhaps, after all, the real secret of our complaint against modern heroines is not so much that they are natural and speak out what is in them, and tell us of deeper and more passionate feeling than ever stirred the even tenour of their grandmothers' narratives, but that they are morbid, constantly occupied with themselves, one-sided and ungrateful to the wonders and blessings of a world
which is not less beautiful now than it was a hundred years ago, where perhaps there is a less amount of sorrows, and a less amount of pain more certainly than at the time when Miss Austen and Miss Ferrier said their say.36

The world of sensation is not a world that is wonderful, beautiful, or blessed. Sensation novels were not merely ungrateful; they were outright rebellious. They celebrated nature over civilization, freedom over restraint, inner conviction over convention. The final statement of such values is that the world is not organized in accordance either with reason or desire; and the object of attack, based on those values, was both Victorian civilization and the benevolent forces which Victorian literature optimistically confirmed with "happy endings."

The attack on accepted values and assumption lies so consistently behind every aspect of sensation I have discussed that I will not elaborate on it except to indicate a few other techniques, borrowed by non-sensation authors, by which it was accomplished. Often a character was introduced, especially a counter-heroine, who embodied all the attributes of the old-style heroine, and she was conscientiously painted as insipid or intolerant. This drew off the objections which might otherwise have been applied to the heroine herself or to other characters with similarly unconventional manners and outlooks.
The sensation novel likewise had representatives of "the world," whose unqualified illiberality automatically endowed any unsociable individual with an aura of virtue and sympathy. *Grasp Your Nettle*, in which both the hero and the heroine are condemned by others solely because of their voluntary isolation, provides an illustration of this simple method. Aura, the heroine, is persecuted by society, and her own dignity is developed by contrast. Jasper, her husband, refusing his mother-in-law's dinner invitation, defines the novel's attitude toward "society":

Why do you take it as a personal affront because I dislike society and am selfish enough to indulge my disinclination? If you disliked peaches, I should not think you slighted me if you refused to eat a basketful that I might have sent you. We must be allowed to exercise some amount of free will in our intercourse with each other; and courtesy under any other terms would be simply slavery.37

At the end of most of these novels, the potency of such criticisms of respectability and conventionality is undermined by reintegration of its outcast characters into the society they despised; in fact, the conclusions are frequently unblushing contradictions. At the end of *Sir Jasper's Tenant*, for example, the lonely hero, well schooled in the vanity of ambition and success, is rewarded thus:

Godfrey Pierrepont has indeed begun a new life. Love, ambition, success—all the brightest flowers that make the crown of existence—blossom for him, for him!38
The solitary hikes are over for Godfrey Pierrepont, the reader supposes, and it turns out that Parliament is really what a man should prefer. An even more flagrant violation of consistency is to be found in Oswald Cray, in which Mrs. Henry Wood's intimations of a fatal outcome suddenly shift in preparation for the happy ending—"Oh, the dull dead pain that lay on her heart!—never for a long long while to be lifted from it" (my italics). Sometimes, however, the restoration of the main characters to money, rank, and respectability is accompanied by lasting reservations about the worth of that society.

But in many sensation novels, hesitantly and inconsistently, another force of irrationality and cruelty is hinted at. This is fatality, chance, accident, happenstance—whatever those forces are that are indifferent to men's happiness and render their dreams of joy foolish. Such an attitude of disillusionment is immoral and presupposes the absence of rewards for virtue or compensation for suffering. The idea was too radical to be given much prominence, but it underlay much of what was distinctive about the sensation novel. It was of course inherent in those novels which ended tragically or inconclusively, as well as in the fact of unconscious crime or inevitable guilt. The world of sensation was an ugly world and one in which human beings were relatively powerless. Here, for
example, is Godfrey Pierrepoint explaining to the woman he loves how his entire life has been spoiled by the innocent mistake of his marriage.

Ah, what a foolish dreamer I was, Marcia! I fancied that my life was in my own hands, and that in my own untiring energy, my own love of learned labours, there lay powers that could mould me into a Bacon, without a Bacon's vices; a second Brougham, with more than a Brougham's greatness.40

On his deathbed, Roland of _The Doctor's Wife_ repents his efforts to seduce Isabel, not because it was wrong, but because happiness is impossible:

A man has no right to desire perfect happiness: I can understand that now. He has no right to defy the laws made by wiser men for his protection, because there is a fatal twist in the fabric of his life, and those very laws happen to thwart him in his solitary insignificance.

... . .

His older friend and mentor, the wise man of the novel, speculates on the fatal timing of this unhappy love affair: how the lovers met after Isabel's unfitting marriage to the country doctor, and how after the death of that doctor Roland himself has been mortally injured by Isabel's father. He thinks of his old hopes,

... of what might have happened if Roland had returned to England to see Isabel in her girlish beauty. And Roland had returned and had seen her--but too late; and now she was free once more,--free to be loved and chosen,--and again it was too late.41

The irony of these narrow misses, the senseless accidents which destroy potential human happiness, while not articu-
lated into a coherent philosophy, is a foretaste of modernity with important implications for the novel.

In general, however, this attitude came in conflict with the sentimentalism which also ruled the sensation world, a conflict which was disposed of not by philosophic reconciliation but by strong emotional ruptures with the habitual prejudices of its readers, copies, as we shall see, with varying degrees of success by more serious artists: the sensation scenes. Basically these were moments when the undercurrent of violence, sin, and pessimism broke out through the controlling forms of social and moral propriety. By definition they were discordant with the scenes surrounding them and from this proceeded both their artistic success and their artistic failure. Unlike their theatrical counterparts, they depended on the reader's sense of an orderly, "realistic," and familiar setting for their shock. They were the outward form which gave compelling reality to the danger and violence which threatened the social world of sensation.

A certain number of these scenes were presented to the reader only indirectly, thus easing the strain on the reader's credulity. Crimes were often instances of this sort. We do not see Lady Audley push her first husband into the well, nor do we see Aurora Floyd's first husband shot, though we see his wounded body and the strange fight
afterwards between him and the village idiot who wishes to procure his money and Aurora's marriage license. But direct experiences were an important part of the sensation repertoire. An entire chapter is devoted to Lady Audley's setting fire to the inn where Robert is staying. We see Lizzie Lorton kiss the bloody hands of her lover, Ainslie, her own blood-covered lips murmuring that this secret of his crime, shared between them, is their marriage bond. In Hard Cash the treatment of the hero in the insane asylums, his abortive attempts at escape, and finally his being hunted down with dogs and guns in his fiancee's very drawing room, furnish a long succession of such scenes. So does the modern insane asylum with its murderous devices in Armadale, ending with the gassing of Lydia Gwilt in a chamber intended for the hero. The discovery of the rotting hand sticking out of the mud, followed by the disinterment of the corpse in Wylder's Hand, is recounted in detail. Many scenes shared with the sensation drama the depiction of daring human bravery. Marian Halcombe furnishes such a one when she crawls out on the roof at peril of her life to overhear the critical conversation between Count Fosco and his accomplice; so does the scene in Armadale when the two Armadales find themselves stranded in the night during a terrible storm on the very ship on which one of their fathers had once murdered the other.
The sensation scene had a broader scope than this, however, and frequently gained its impact from contrast with what a civilized setting and set of laws would seem to make probable. Isabel Vane, in her gray dress and the blue spectacles she never took off, was in herself a sensation scene, a living demonstration of the violability of every social and natural rule. Like the plays, the novels make frequent use of court scenes as formulizations of the conflict between ideal and actual justice. One last example, this time from Lost and Saved, though rare of its kind, exemplifies the way in which the old values and presuppositions were balanced against the new to achieve the particular combination of condemnation and forgiveness so delicious in the sensation scene. Beatrice comes back from her trip abroad troubled for the first time in her life with the weight of having deceived her father by secretly marrying—or so she believes. Beatrice's brother is teasing her:

"Ah, Beatrice," he said, "you would not beat me at a race now; you that were once so nimble! You are grown fat, and pale, and lazy, and quite an old lady."

While he was yet speaking, Beatrice felt a great dizziness; her arm dropped by her side; her eyes swam; but in all the dizziness and swimming she was somehow conscious, as in a dreadful dream, of the expression of her father's face, who had also risen and stood as it were transfixed, gazing at her; he stretched his trembling hand; he was pointing at her!—turning to Mariana [her sister] and pointing. As he did so, a cry escaped him. There is a cry given by those who are suddenly stabbed: neither a shriek nor a groan, but a
combination of shriek and groan stifled and stopped. That was the cry that Beatrice heard --the cry from a man's heart, stabbed by a terrible conviction. She dropped from where she stood, like a shot bird; she fell crouching at his feet; she flung her arms wildly round his knees, and she gasped out--"I am married, father. I am married, but it was not to be owned!"

He thrust her from him; his beautiful Beatrice; his Pet of The Home. He thrust her from him, and stood there, stern and staring, (he whom they had never seen stern!) while Mariana's large serene eyes dilated with pitying wonder, and the startled boy vainly flung himself across his father's breast and called the dear name loudly, as if to call him back to the real, from some fearful unreal world he was contemplating with that fixed dreadful gaze.

"Father, father, what do you think you see?"

The father saw the spectre that can blight the happiest hearth; the dark shadow--SHAME.

I have quoted this odd passage to indicate how the sensation novel as a whole, and the sensation scene in particular, evoked an ambivalence of response that shocked and defied convention without asking its readers completely to rethink their moral scheme. The effect of this scene is heightened by the reader's knowledge that Beatrice has in fact gone through a marriage ceremony and his underlying suspicion that the father may yet be right, though not in the way he supposes. This is of course borne out later, and the idea of "SHAME" is thoroughly compounded.

The startling abruptness of these scenes served the cause of excitement; it also tended to break the illusion of plausibility. But it was a necessary component of the attack on the power of social law to control reality, a way
of externalizing the true essence of sensation. They were born of a new view of what the nature of "reality" was and what aspects of life should be given literary treatment. This view made demands of moral commitment and artistic integrity which most sensationists were unable or unwilling to meet. But there were better artists who were both willing and able, and to them the sensation novel, for all its inferiority, helped to point the way.
Notes


2. Temple Bar, 11 (June 1864), 321.

3. Temple Bar, 13 (Jan. 1865), 291.


8. Ibid., 16 Jan. 1864, 58.


10. Cornhill, 8 (Sept. 1863), 294.


12. (Feb. 1864), 211.

13. Temple Bar, 16 (Feb. 1866), 387.


16. P. 120.

17. Quarterly Review, 113 (April 1863), 491.

18. (Leipzig, 1863), II, 195.

19. Temple Bar, 3 (Sept. 1861), 171-172.
Edmund Yates, author of sensation novels, figured prominently in this journalism. The connection between scandal and sensation was made at the time, too. The same review in the Quarterly Review proposed that sensationists actually used contemporary scandals "of more than usual piquancy" (489), and Punch, in its mock proposal for a Sensation Times, suggested that Miss Braddon and other famous sensation novelists write the gossip columns.

40 Temple Bar, 14 (July 1865), 471.

41 Temple Bar, 13 (Dec. 1864), 132.
CHAPTER VII

SENSATION AND THE MAJOR NOVELISTS
OF THE SIXTIES

The sensation novel evolved quickly, each example pushing the general tendencies a little further, and each profiting from its author's knowledge of what his audience had just read. It may seem paradoxical that for this very reason the sensation novel grew progressively less "sensational" and more moderate and old-fashioned within four or five years of its inception, but such was the case. The contemporary use of the word "eruption" with respect to sensation was accurate, and once it had erupted, sensation quickly reached the limits which politeness and propriety set on its kind of shock. By 1865, the sensationists had retreated; their novels were far more conventional than Lady Audley's Secret and East Lynne, and were merely pale imitations of the least interesting aspects of the early sensation novels, as well as of the popular novels which had preceded them.

Nevertheless, the sensation novel had opened a Pandora's box. It reflected the psychological and cultural
directions of the time too accurately not to suggest new possibilities of form and of substance to more serious novelists. In my concluding pages I shall discuss in general terms what qualitative distinctions can be made between popular literature and lasting literature even when they appear to coincide in tendency, interest, and aim. To anticipate, one of them is certainly the dependency of popular literature on the obvious, the overt, the exterior, without the corresponding moral structures and character development of which they are inevitable signs. Because of their essentially impoverished conception, the staples of surprise, crime, secrets, and amoral behavior soon palled. But as much in their destruction of preconceptions as in their choice of subjects, attitudes, and methods, they offered a rich lode for the superior artists who wrote simultaneously with or followed them. That all of the important novelists of the day were affected by sensation indicates that it supplied a real artistic need; that the same artistic difficulties over which the sensationists stumbled often tripped up these other writers as well, proves how new and as yet uncontrolled the implications of sensation were. Yet it is also significant that the similarities of, and borrowings and even deliberate imitations by, the great novelists--Dickens, Trollope, Eliot, Meredith,
and Hardy— do not obscure the distinction between sensation works and those of a higher quality.

**Plot and Character**

In his *Autobiography* (1883), Anthony Trollope offers a comment which not only indicates the long survival and usefulness of the term "sensation" as a generic definition, but should also help in differentiating between the qualities belonging specifically to the sensation novel and the similar ones adapted to other uses by other authors. He writes:

> Among English novels of the present day, and among English novelists, a great division is made. There are sensational novels and anti-sensational, sensational novelists and anti-sensational, sensational readers and anti-sensational. The novelists who are considered to be anti-sensational are generally called realistic. I am realistic. My friend Wilkie Collins is generally supposed to be sensational. The readers who prefer the one are supposed to take delight in the elucidation of character. Those who hold by the other are charmed by the continuation and gradual development of a plot. All this is, I think, a mistake,—which mistake arises from the inability of the imperfect artist to be at the same time realistic and sensational. A good novel should be both, and both in the highest degree. If a novel fail in either, there is a failure in art.¹

He goes on to list a number of "sensational scenes" in "some of those passages from our great novelists which have charmed the most": scenes from Scott, from *Jane Eyre*, from *Henry Esmond*. He also names one from *Orley Farm*. By this time, of course, the sensation rage was over; the sensation novel was no longer a critical hot potato and "realism," which had
once been linked with sensation to mean that which was ugly, unpleasant, and usually inappropriate to art, was now opposed to it, as meaning likely and ordinary, with a special application to character.

As sensation affected the anti-sensational artists, the distinction between character and plot is most important, since it was what, in fact, sensation led to. Here is Trollope's evaluation of *Orley Farm* (1861-2), the plot and the heroine of which are clearly modelled on the sensation novel:

Most of those among my friends who talk to me now about my novels, and are competent to form an opinion of the subject, say that this is the best I have written. In this opinion I do not coincide. I think that the highest merit which a novel can have consists in perfect delineation of character, rather than in plot, or humour, or pathos.

He conceded, however, that "The plot of *Orley Farm* is probably the best I ever made. . . . I do not know that there is a dull page in the book."^2^ Wilkie Collins, sensationist, wrote on the same subject of character versus plot in the Preface of 1861 to *The Woman in White*, welcoming the great success of that novel as a confirmation of his literary principle:

I have always held the old-fashioned opinion that the primary object of a work of fiction should be to tell a story; and I have never believed that the novelist who properly performed this first condition of his art was in danger, on that account, of neglecting the delineation of character—for this plain reason, that the effect produced by any narrative of events is essentially dependent, not on the
events themselves, but on the human interest which is directly connected with them. It may be possible in novel-writing to present characters successfully without telling a story; but it is not possible to tell a story successfully without presenting characters: their existence as recognisable realities being the sole condition on which the story can be effectively told.\(^3\)

The difference in the values of these two friends points to the emphasis in "sensation" on events rather than on the development of characters. To say that characters must be merely "recognisable" is to allow for the use of types in the place of fully realized characters, a substitution made consistently in sensation novels. In its use of types (the very term "sensation heroine" indicates how typical she was, albeit not an old type) the sensation novel approached melodrama and the "sensationalism" which Phillips attributes to Dickens. Yet the greatest contribution of the sensation novel was the effect it had on characters, an effect brought about by two means. First, in creating new types and bringing others from obscurity into the foreground, it loosened the grasp of the old, and made new conceptions available to those who were able to work out the full human possibilities hinted at in the cardboard sensation heroine and sensation hero. Secondly—and more importantly— it provided the kind of plot in which these potentials could be realized. An entry in Henry
Morley's journal in 1865 defended the literary use of "sensation" along the same lines:

A good story cannot be the worse for taking a very strong hold on the attention. They are the crimes and mysteries of life that stir the depths of human character and bring into play all the passions. If plays and stories turning with strong interest upon incidents of crime are to be put down as "sensational," let us bury our Shakespeares fathoms five, cry Out upon Marlowe, Ford, Massinger, and all the rest of them, and burn half the best novels in our language. . . . The sort of "sensation" novel or play against which protest cannot be too constant and too strong, is that which depends wholly upon the heaping up of crime, mystery, and surprise, and relies on tricks of plot or stage effect, without making any use of the story as means for the subtle development of character. . . .

Of novels turning upon the "crimes and mysteries of life" Charles Dickens had long been master. Though not "sensational" with the special innuendoes that word acquired in the sixties, he was the most sensational of living English writers in those aspects of sensation earlier called "melodramatic." The apparently odd failure of contemporary critics to apply the term "sensational" to Dickens in the sixties perhaps indicates the extent to which his contribution to sensation was already so familiar that it was not especially remarked. In many respects his work anticipated the sensation novel and made it possible, just as his work during the fifties was becoming less and less "melodramatic" in the old-fashioned sense, his plots more and more unified, and his range of characters and "passions" greater.
I have already distinguished between the interests of the Newgate novel and the sensation novel. Hollingsworth discusses both *Oliver Twist* and *Barnaby Rudge* in connection with the Newgate novel, and indeed Dickens' early treatments of crime and violence bear much the same relation to his later works on the same subjects as the Newgate novel does to the sensation novel. Intimations of the material and attitudes that would distinguish the sensation novels of the sixties appear in Dickens' works of the early fifties. *Bleak House* (1852-3) is in many respects a direct precursor of the sensation novel. Crime, danger, and violence are somehow associated with the upper classes, a point which alters the entire conception of "sensational" events from products of social conditions to aspects of a universal psychological life. However successful or unsuccessful it is, Esther's narrative marks a new attempt on Dickens' part to incorporate a feminine consciousness as an integral part of the book's reality, and an emphasis on the examination of character as being as important as action and external observation. Lady Dedlock, though she is neither the center of *Bleak House* nor a character whose soul is opened to us, clearly anticipates the sensation heroine. Her beauty, her cold pride, the extreme control she exercises over a life always threatened by a "secret," her early surrender to passion and continued love, her innocent abandonment of her
child, the disjunction between her marriage and social life and her heart, and finally her flight and tragic death—including the fatal timing of Hawdon's death before Lady Dedlock can find him, and Lady Dedlock's before Esther can save her—presage the most constant and interesting qualities of the sensation heroine. Nor is Hortense, her criminal French maid, unrelated to Lady Audley, for example. What distinguishes this novel from the later sensation novel is that this story is only part of the novel; the vision of the book is infinitely more comprehensive, complex, and ultimately mysterious than that of any sensation novel.

These elements of plot and character occur in succeeding novels of the fifties. The theme of the cruel marriage and the divorce problem is developed in two different connections in *Hard Times* (1854), and in the chaste but passionate love between Stephen Blackpool and Rachael lies the essential problem which the bigamy theme perverted. Rachael herself is another example of the beautiful, strong, suffering heroine who would become the center of the sensation novel. Tom Bounderby's robbery of his father makes crime a symbol of family and psychological disorders and disruptions, rather than of mere social ones; the death of Stephen, caused directly by the false accusation which falls upon him, points to the permanent and senseless tragedy of these underlying conditions. *Little Dorrit* resumed the idea
of crime among the respectable classes and created another version of the sensation heroine in Mrs. Clennam, "... a lady of strong force of character ...: a resolved lady, a stern lady, a lady who has a will that can break the weak to powder: a lady without pity, without love, implacable, revengeful, cold as the stone, but raging as the fire," as Rigaud sums her up to her face; a "Nemesis," Dickens calls her; a "female Lucifer in appetite for power," says Flintwinch. That aspect of the novel which is "a history of a strange marriage, and a strange mother, and a revenge, and a suppression" (II, 30)—the last two both pertaining to a sexual transgression—bears a clear relation to sensation subjects. As in Bleak House this part of the plot is not the center, nor is Mrs. Clennam at the moral heart of the book; but the "secret" is crucial to Little Dorrit as well as to Arthur Clennam, and Mrs. Clennam and her story are symptomatic of the entire novel. In Little Dorrit as in Bleak House, Dickens seems to have been fully aware of the possibilities that would be exploited by the sensationists, and develops them into an entire world, rather than simply using them as events or characters.

In the writing of A Tale of Two Cities (1859), Dickens actually put into effect the sensation aesthetic—
or what led to it—of the relation of plot to character.

He wrote to Forster about that book:

... I set myself the little task of making a picturesque story, rising in every chapter with characters true to nature, but whom the story itself should express, more than they should express themselves, by dialogue. I mean, in other words, that I fancied a story of incident might be written, in place of the bestiality that is written under that pretense, pounding the characters out in its own mortar, and beating their own interests out of them.5

In *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Great Expectations* (1860-61) Dickens most fully realized this conception of form and characterization, though in neither does he make much use of sensational domestic subjects. Estella, on the other hand, is one of the sensation sirens, with her dangerous beauty and more dangerous hardness, her criminal descent, her ascendancy in the world of "gentlemen," and the guiltlessness of her cruel character. *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65) relies on older methods of plotting, though it too contains both character and situations similar to those used in the sensation novel. Though one can only speculate on *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, the development of both plot and character through a central "secret" is apparent enough; the derangement of Jasper, the murder or apparent murder of Edwin Drood, and the scenes in the opium den, as well as possibly the racial innuendoes suggested by the Landlesses, and the containment of all these within a middle-class milieu, point to a close connection with sensation interests.
Because of his long anticipation of so many aspects of sensation and because of his sure sense of the popular mood, I hesitate to infer that these resemblances resulted from influences of the sensation novel on Dickens' work. It does seem possible, however, that Dickens' increasing inclination to reveal the inner natures of his characters, his growing freedom from sentimentality, and his concentration in the novels from 1859 on on simpler but more intense plots, found confirmation in the success and general acceptance of the sensation novel.

Like Dickens', Trollope's art was well developed by the sixties, and unlike Dickens', it was in a clearly anti-sensational vein. Yet *Orley Farm* (1862) is an experiment in overt sensation, carried out through Lady Mason, an unmistakable sensation heroine whose story provides the plot and moral center of the book. The "sensation" of the novel arises from the introduction of serious crime into the upper middle class and aristocratic circles in which Lady Mason moves, and from the incongruity between her beauty and propriety and her guilt. She is a "criminal," though that word is shuddered at in the book. Her grace and dignity give her a power over men that prevents their suspicion of her crime; once it is proven, men continue to stick by her out of the respect due to her sex. Like that of other sensation heroines, her crime was provoked by an
upsurgence of morally commendable feeling: the desire to protect her son from want, the bitterness of which she had been acquainted with in her own childhood. Here is the effect of her confession to Sir Peregrine, the elderly nobleman who has asked her to marry him:

... by degrees the meaning of her words began to break upon him. "I am guilty of all this with which they charge me." Could that be possible? Could it be that she had forged the will; that with base, premeditated contrivance she had stolen that property; stolen it and kept it from that day to this,—through all these long years? And then he thought of her pure life, of her womanly, dignified repose, of her devotion to her son,—such devotion indeed!—of her sweet pale face and soft voice! He thought of all this, and of his own love and friendship for her,—of Edith's love for her! He thought of it all, and he could not believe that she was guilty.

(XVII, 2)

But she was, and the remainder of this scene, in which she collapses at his feet in her effort to convince him, Trollope cites in the Autobiography as an example of a "sensational scene." Her guilt and the fear it occasions provide for Lady Mason, as they had for other sensation heroines, opportunities to display a strength of which older types of heroines were incapable and which they did not need. She endures not only the loss of the world's high opinion, her chief value in life, but a gruelling trial and rejection by the son for whom she has sacrificed all, though her courage wins her the esteem of Sir Peregrine's highly upright daughter-in-law Edith.
Interestingly, critics tended to defend *Orley Farm* on the basis of "realism," as a book whose characters proved that people are not "angels or devils, but human beings":

Novel-readers ... are very inconsequential in their demands. They require that the characters in a fiction should be "true to nature"; and yet unless these characters markedly depart from the known truth of nature, by being either without vices, or without virtues, they pettishly declare that the author has "forfeited their sympathies" by making the hero do this, or the heroine feel that; and upbraid him for endeavoring to confuse their moral judgments "by engaging their sympathies in a man capable of," &c. &c. This impatience of the truth is sometimes excused on the plea that fiction ought to present ideal characters, thus holding up a higher standard of excellence than erring human nature ever can attain, but which it should strive after. And this plea is well founded at a certain epoch of culture. ... If we require the early literature of Types, let us dismiss the incompatible demand for a literature of Character; the persons must be abstract Virtues and Vices. If we demand the portraiture of human nature, we must insist on the resemblance. ...  

Lady Mason represented a startling eruption of guilt in the form of actual crime within the controlled society of which Trollope wrote; but I believe that this work in which character was developed by a sensation plot was a sign of Trollope's changing conception of the demands of the present "epoch of culture" on art, rather than of his exploitation of the sensation rage. His adaptation of sensation increased the range of his characters rather than developed a technique for characterization. Perhaps for
this reason, with the odd exception of Orley Farm, sensation elements were incorporated gracefully and unobtrusively into his works. Later characters show the same failure as Lady Mason to conform to old types: Lily Dale, for example, the heroine of The Small House at Allington (1864), is outspoken, uses slang ("It's so slow, you know, to use nothing but words out of a dictionary"), and in the flowering of her love, expresses freely her passion for the man who jilts her. Afterwards she is tortured with memories of "his accepted caresses, of her uncontrolled and acknowledged joy in his affection. It had all been holy to her then; and now those things which were then sacred had been made almost disgraceful by his fault." Though the world of that novel is a world where social forms retain control, Lily is transformed into an analogue of the married but husbandless sensation heroine.

The Small House at Allington seems to mark a transitional point between the overt sensationalism of Orley Farm and the later novels which develop sensational incidents and characters that would not have been congruous with the early life at Barchester. The murder trial of Phineas Finn in Phineas Redux (1874), Ferdinand Lopez's suicide under the train in The Prime Minister (1876), Marie Melmotte's elopement at which her callous lover did not even show up in The Way We Live Now (1872-73), are all elements of action
deriving from the enlarged repertoire of sensation. Winifred Hurtle, the immensely attractive American "widow"—actually divorced by a Kansas law which holds good nowhere else—is modelled directly on the sensation heroine. She is a siren who has shot a man, and in a moment of passion threatens the hero with a horsewhip. That Trollope had long been interested in such characters is already evident from the introduction, for example, of Signora Neroni in Barchester Towers; but within the context of that novel there is nothing for her to do and no real way of explaining or incorporating her. In the later novels, such characters and qualities are fully integrated and indispensable to the range of human problems that form Trollope's material.

Unlike Trollope and Dickens, George Eliot and George Meredith were only beginning their careers in 1860. Sensation incidents and sensation characters are evident in the early works of both; both are concerned chiefly with introspective characters distinguished by violent passions and the resulting isolation of those characters from a stupid and rigid society. The progress of Eliot and Meredith would seem to have been the opposite of Dickens' and Trollope's: as their work matured they modified and controlled the sensationalism of their earliest books. Since their flowering was simultaneous with the arrival of the sensation novel, their earliest work must have sprung from the same
artistic needs that produced it, rather than merely borrowing its techniques.

The similarities between The Mill on the Floss (1860) and the sensation novel are so startlingly evident that I am convinced that M. E. Braddon, for example, modelled Aurora Floyd on Maggie Tulliver, and Aurora's opposite, her cousin Lucy, on Maggie's cousin Lucy. Maggie's crown of black hair, her musical gifts, her pride, her impulsiveness, her being led, half innocently, into the difficulties with Stephen, her self-punishment afterwards, her superiority to her conventional cousin, and her death by drowning, mark her unmistakable kinship with the sensation heroine. Indeed, contemporary critics classed her with Lady Audley and Aurora Floyd and their sisters, and attributed to George Eliot an aesthetic of character that was essentially what they considered that of sensation to be. For example:

The boldness with which George Eliot chooses her subjects is very remarkable. It is not that, like some writers, she fails in the attempt to represent people as agreeable and interesting, but she knowingly forces disagreeable people on us, and insists that we shall be interested in their story by the skill with which it is told. . . . This habit of representing her characters without any concealment of their faults is, no doubt, connected with that faculty which enables the authoress to give them so remarkable an air of reality. 8

The elopement with Stephen, after so much has been made of his engagement to Lucy, is a subdued parallel to the bigamy
theme, just as Stephen himself is a version of the careless but attractive rakish hero. The difference between these characters and sensation characters is equally obvious; their sensation qualities simply offer them scope which neither the typical sensation heroine nor the old-fashioned Victorian heroine could realize. Maggie's childhood and its importance in the formation of her character indicates how she is conceived as a complete human being, rather than a figure in which particular elements have been extracted for immediate identification with a type. Her struggles with her own idea of morality and conscience are not merely hinted at for the reader to supply, but are the center of the book, the incidents taking the subservient position of catalysts to introspection. In fact, *The Mill on the Floss* offers perhaps a clearer example than any other contemporary novel of the distinction Trollope draws between books that are merely "sensational" and those in which sensation offers a means for the delineation of character.

In no other of George Eliot's books do we find this obvious instance of the sensation heroine. Yet the heroine as the "enemy of God," as George Bernard Shaw would later describe it, remains an essential concern of her work. Earlier, in *Adam Bede* (1859), Hetty Sorrel had been kept on the periphery; her seduction, her murder of her child, and her sensation trial, though posing a horrible danger to the
world of all the characters, served to develop the character of Adam Bede, and therefore of Dinah, rather than of Hetty. The sensation plot of Silas Marner (1861) is laid in the past; by the time Godfrey's unhappy marriage and irresponsible love are revealed and Dunstan's theft of Silas' gold has been discovered, the shock of such behavior among the local aristocracy is muted by the sense of time having passed, and by the almost mystical symbolism of Silas' relation with Eppie and his treasure. In Romola (1863), however, the heroine takes on the proportions of a hero, and is left to make her own way against the fact of her womanhood in a world of men. The historical setting removes both the heroine and her context from the immediate implications of sensation, and by the time this heroine appears again as Dorothea Brooke, her struggle with herself has been internalized and must be seen psychologically rather than as an open conflict with the external world.

In Meredith's novels much the same direction can be discerned. The problems of love, guilt, and types of heroes and heroines that culminate in the refinements of Diana of the Crossways (1885) were worked out through a number of novels in which the sensation influence was clearly observable. Like George Eliot, Meredith had already provided in Richard Feverel (1859) a vision of the world that coincided in important points with the sensation world, though, as in
Eliot's work, the complexity and difficulty of that world set it apart from its popular analogue. Belle, the hetaera, represents the sensation heroine just before she is transferred from the demi-monde and made respectable. Though she belongs to a forbidden realm and is the enemy of Lucy (many sensation heroines were enemies to better but weaker and duller women), she is so enticing that Richard's surrender to her is absolutely convincing. The freedom of her talk, her well-simulated artlessness, her particularly colorful type of beauty, and her bewitching, seductive act when she dresses as a dandy and walks the streets with Richard pretending she is a man—these, and her essential good nature, stamp her as the type of irresistible sexuality which threatens all social and moral law. That the desires of the flesh should overpower a strong conscience and true love is an important point in common between The Ordeal of Richard Feverel and the sensation novel. But in this novel, rather than merely indulging forbidden dreams, these qualities create, as they did for Maggie Tulliver, temptations which lead to moral struggle; their end is character, not excitement.

Rhoda Fleming (1865), however, depends directly on sensation plot and sensation character. Rhoda herself, coldly and cruelly self-righteous, is a version of the "baleful Nemesis"; Dahlia, the gentle sister seduced by a
well-meaning but weak-charactered gentleman, is an abortive attempt at the passionate heroine. In fact, the inadequacies of both plot and character in Rhoda Fleming would seem to reside largely in its close imitation of the sensation novel. The sensationism of plot is so excessive and unmodified that it leaves no room for developed characters, but prevents their delineation in any plausible form. Meredith employs a large number of sensation-inspired devices. Dahlia's elopement with Edward is explained in terms of her physical attraction to him, but the moral issue it raises is simply fudged (a typical sensation-novel way of coping with inconveniently difficult problems of motivation). The reasons for which Dahlia hides from her beloved sister after the elopement are justified on the most conventional grounds, though Dahlia is not a conventional woman. The motivation, and equally the character, of the younger sister Rhoda, who forces her sister to marry a brute in order to atone for her shame, are never convincingly developed; and the escape of that husband from the altar and the subsequent discovery of a former wife which annuls the cruel marriage, are straight from the sensation tale, as is Dahlia's imprisonment by her sister and her nearly successful attempt at suicide when Edward finally, after an inexplicable change of heart, succeeds in finding his way to her father's house. No clear sense of artistic purpose
or moral vision transcends the obvious inadequacies of the sensation apparatus. Nevertheless, the excesses and freedoms of this in many ways unsuccessful book are the very source of the distinction both of Meredith's earlier work, including *Modern Love* (1862)—whose transcendence of the specifically sensational themes of modernity, sexual passion, married unhappiness, jealousy, separation, and suicide, by the shape and psychological possibilities of poetic form is one of the best fruits of sensation—and of his later. Furthermore, even in *Rhoda Fleming* the rhetoric of his fiction prevents any possibility of confusion between his work and sensation fiction. In that respect both he and George Eliot differ from Thomas Hardy: into the very fabric of their work is woven the presence of an idea, a moral passion, an intellectual vision, which prohibits their submersion in sensationalism.

Of these several novelists, Thomas Hardy was the youngest. His first, unpublished, novel, *The Poor Man and the Lady*, was written in 1866 or 1867. Though it does not survive, a fair surmise is that it was written in a sensational vein. Hardy was 26 or 27 at the time, and was frankly setting out to write a commercially successful novel; it was natural enough that the sensation novel should have provided his model. For plot, he studied Wilkie Collins, particularly *The Woman in White*. The letter from
Alexander Macmillan rejecting the manuscript in 1868 is tantalizingly replete with terms of the sort usually applied to sensation:

Of the story itself I hardly know what to say. I should fear it is very improbable, and would be looked on as a sort of Reynolds' Miscellany [a periodical devoted largely to sensation literature] affair, though your really admirable handling often gives a certain dignity and power that greatly redeems it. Much of the detail struck me as strained and unnatural. The scene in the church at midnight has poetical qualities—but could it happen? Then is it within the range of likelihood that any gentleman would pursue his wife at midnight and strike her? Though you give a good deal about the family life afterwards, there is nothing to justify that very exceptional scene. It is too palpably done to bring about the meeting of the lovers.9

Hardy's next book, Desperate Remedies, published in 1871, was unequivocally a sensation novel. Had it been written ten years earlier, I suspect it might have had the success Hardy desired for it, and by that success might also have been the ruin of him. By 1871, however, this type of sensation novel was passé, and the characters and plot of Desperate Remedies were not alone sufficient to insure its success; certainly the prejudice against the sensation novel must have influenced the reviewer whom Hardy claimed to have "snuffed [it] out" so effectively.

In accordance with the advice of George Meredith, Hardy designed Desperate Remedies with a complicated plot. The father of the heroine, Cytherea, dies, leaving her and her brother so poor they must both go to work. This father
had loved once and truly a woman named Cytherea who had rejected him without explanation, a disappointment from which he never recovered. Cytherea meets, falls in love with, and becomes engaged to a young architect, Springrove, who, unknown to her, has long been committed to a loveless marriage of convenience with his cousin. Cytherea gets a position as companion to a wealthy spinster, who, Cytherea finds out by seeing the portrait in her locket (a typical sensation-novel touch), was her father's old love. Miss Aldclyffe tells Cytherea of Springrove's prior engagement, and meanwhile goes to much trouble to hire a man named Manston as the manager to her estate in spite of the superior qualifications of other applicants, including Springrove; on his arrival, Miss Aldclyffe tries to make Cytherea fall in love with him. Still disappointed by her discovery about Springrove, with whom she has quarreled and parted, Cytherea remains aloof, but Manston falls in love with her. A mysterious woman is discovered creeping away from his house one morning who, it turns out, is his wife. A terrible fire burns to the ground the house where she is believed to be staying, and as her body is never found, she is presumed dead. Manston is thus freed to press his suit with Cytherea. She is finally forced to accept him because her brother, who has been lamed, needs a series of operations on his foot if he is ever to walk again, and the only
means of paying for them is Miss Aldclyffe's promise to do so if Cytherea will marry Manston. Since she has never heard from Springrove again, she agrees to sacrifice herself for her brother. The night before the wedding, Springrove's cousin runs off with another man. Springrove himself does not discover it until minutes after Cytherea's wedding, when it is too late to save her. They meet by chance during the reception, and she realizes the nature of her betrayal of herself and him. As Manston and Cytherea leave for their wedding trip, Owen, the brother, and Springrove are told by a railroad worker that he saw the first Mrs. Manston after the fire. Owen and Springrove capture Cytherea by force from the hotel where she is about to spend her wedding night, and keep her until the matter can be settled. Manston puts up a show of looking for his wife, but Springrove finally traces her. Yet though she claims to be that woman, it is discovered that she is only a look-alike; the real wife was murdered, by Manston, before the fire, and the fire was set to cover the deed. So Cytherea is legally married to him after all. A sensation scene ensues when Manston takes out the body from its hiding place in the middle of the night and buries it, watched by a detective, who is in turn watched by his wife's double, who is watched by Miss Aldclyffe herself. Manston goes to prison, where he commits suicide; it is discovered that he
was the illegitimate son of Miss Aldclyffe, who on that account had had to reject the love of Cytherea's father; Cytherea and Springrove marry—and Owen's foot is healed.

I have described this plot to demonstrate for those who have not read it the points it has in common with the sensation novel on the one hand, and with all Hardy's subsequent work on the other. In the Prefatory Note to the 1889 edition of Desperate Remedies, Hardy wrote:

The following story... was published nineteen years ago, at a time when he was feeling his way to a method. The principles observed in its composition are, no doubt, too exclusively those in which mystery, entanglement, surprise, and moral obliquity are depended on for exciting interest; but some of the scenes, and at least one of the characters, have been deemed not unworthy of a little longer preservation. . . .

And in a note to the edition of 1896, the year after the publication of Jude the Obscure, he added:

... it happened that certain characteristics which provoked most discussion in my latest story were present in this my first. . . .

Presumably he refers to the bigamy theme (Arabella's in Jude), the unconsummated marriage, the adultery and consequent shame. Yet the same sensation elements, both of character and of plot, and the dependence on such plots for the development of character, are a constant aspect of all Hardy's work. Bathsheba of Far from the Madding Crowd, Eustacia Vye of The Return of the Native, are versions of the sensation siren; Tess and Sue Bridehead are elaborations
of the heroine in rebellion against society, and raise the same moral issues that the sensation heroine did. Sergeant Troy, Wildeve, and Alec D'Urberville are types of the rakish hero, whose violations of honor and propriety produce the most serious consequences. All Hardy's plots revolve around typically sensational themes: violence, sexual transgressions, domestic ruptures, the inevitable and tragic clash between the individual and society. His use of sensation scenes to epitomize these themes he never abandons; in fact, the ending of Tess surpasses anything in even Desperate Remedies. The rick fire in Far from the Madding Crowd, the drowning of Wildeve and Eustacia Vye in The Return of the Native, the almost incomprehensible scene in Jude when Sue discovers the bodies of her children, convulse the world Hardy has constructed in outbursts of sensational violence. As with sensation novels, these scenes focus on the upheaval of uncontrollable and uncivilized forces that are ordinarily contained.

The reason they transcend the sensation scenes which inspired them is Hardy's remarkable power to paint a picture: visions like that of the reddleman gambling in the forest in the middle of the night imprint themselves indelibly on the imagination as symbolic or epitomical moments of the essential world in which they occur. And an important distinction between Hardy and his sensationist
models, including Collins, is his use of country settings, his extraordinary sense of nature and natural scenes, as well, of course, as his treatment not of fashionable life, but of that of the working classes. Thus the ruptures of the social veneer, though startling and dramatic, are not usually offensive. Scenes like Tess's execution, however, and Father Time's murder of Jude's children, seem to imply that sensation methods stuck with Hardy as an essential part of his craft, and that when his purpose required modes of greater subtlety and complexity, he could not always produce them.

Morality

Both the difficulties and the successes of these authors' adaptations of the obvious elements of sensation—sensation characters, sensation plots, and sensation scenes—can be traced to the necessity of incorporating into their works the revised conceptions of morality and the nature of the world which the times demanded, but which the immediately available literary traditions provided no means for handling. Sensation fiction at least suggested that novels could be constructed to reflect an amoral world, and indicated that new forms and techniques could be devised to show that world. What it offered, however, was inadequate to the more precise and serious needs of non-sensation authors.
However halting their steps, these writers were moving toward the treatment of the uncertainties and ambivalences of guilt and innocence as central issues in their novels. Like the sensationists, and often in sensational ways, they were beginning to conceive of morality as a relative matter to be defined in relation to the individual, rather than in terms of a previously established convention or universal order. The effects on literature were, in the long run, spectacular; the innovations of the modern novel many years later can be traced to this transposition of morality from a function of the exterior to the interior world. Before discussing the formal adjustments made by Dickens, Trollope, Meredith, Eliot, and Hardy to a changing world-view, I shall mention briefly what I consider the central moral issues of their works during these years and their special relation to those of sensation.

For the novels of Dickens in the sixties, moral questions are perhaps less critical than for the others, partly because the romantic nature of his work invited certain compromises which would not have been compatible with the exigencies of realism. *A Tale of Two Cities* exercises the privilege of the historical novel to beg moral questions. The prevailing legal structure is the law of revolution; its fugitives are not criminals. The only binding law is therefore that of mutual obligation, which
can be worked out with reference to nothing but personal responsibility. In *Great Expectations* the matter is more complicated. Both Molly and Magwitch are criminals who are specifically absolved from condemnation though there is no question about their guilt. Jaggers' defense of Molly is startlingly subversive, and clearly shows the law to have no necessary moral content and to be manipulable by a clever lawyer to produce the opposite of its supposed intent. Magwitch's death is the tragedy inevitably produced by the personal heroism that violates social law. Nevertheless, these questions are confined to outcasts and underlings to whom the codes of the middle class do not pertain, so the result is unexpected admiration rather than moral dread. Miss Havisham's guilt with relation to both Estella and Pip, on the other hand, is explained by her madness. In Pip, though he has nothing of the sensational about him, is the beginning of the modern guilty hero, guilty of unspecified but lasting personal failures that cannot be expiated. In this respect, *Great Expectations* is far in advance of those novels of the sixties and later, which assigned to a character a guilty deed and then proclaimed his innocence. But this problem does not recur in *Our Mutual Friend*.

Trollope, in *Orley Farm*, leaped straight into the complexities of true guilt, true innocence and forgivable
crime, in the very manner of the sensationists. The center of that book is the triumph of pity and forgiveness over both moral offense and legal crime. A reviewer in the *Cornhill* tried to reassure the readers who were drawn into this moral subversion by insisting that the novel was "literature of Character," whose aim was to teach sympathy, broad-mindedness, and the postponement of harsh judgment:

> We expected that certain critics would raise the old foolish cry about making guilt interesting; and our expectations have not been deceived. But guilt is not made interesting; it is the sinner we pity, not the sin we absolve. Never for a single instant is the reader's moral judgment in suspense.10

But this very distinction indicates the imminent danger threatening moral judgment: it is less potent as a final emotion than pity. The representative of true Christian morality in that book, Edith Orme, sticks by Lady Mason to the end; for "What are love and friendship worth if they cannot stand against such trials as these?" Her father-in-law, once engaged to Lady Mason, presses her:

> "Do you mean, Edith, that no crime would separate you from a friend?"
> "I have not said that. There are circumstances always. But if she repents—as I am sure she does, I cannot bring myself to desert her. Who else is there that can stand by her now; what other woman?"

These words could have been taken straight from a sensation novel. That they are Trollope's gives them a different impact. Trollope's kind of "realism" was of the quiet,
unremarkable kind; he attempted to show not "true" spectacular aberrations, but the general tenor of a dominant way of life. Yet these lines, and indeed the whole import of that novel are Christian only in a very original, even Catholic, sense; and run decidedly counter to puritanism. Love and friendship replace judgment as moral values; the complexities of fault and blame in Trollope's earlier works grow even more complicated since no one needs to come out untouched. Simultaneously, his tone grows progressively less ironical and more gentle; the characters who people Trollope's world are bound together in a web of error outside their individual control. Phineas Finn, Phineas Redux, The Prime Minister, The Small House at Allington, The Way We Live Now, show a world of darker and darker deeds, in which people's foibles do more permanent harm, but are less and less mocked. The sentiment of Arnold's Dover Beach, that human attachment is the only plausible order in a chaotic and unintelligible world, seems to dominate those later works. That this sentiment is essential to the design of the book and its authorial tone, rather than being artificially tacked on, is the chief difference between this attitude on the part of Trollope and on the part of the sensationists. He was not shocked by his own characters, not secretly delighted by their vagaries; the presence of the narrator keeps that quiet tolerance in
constant control as human weaknesses, rather than glaring wickednesses, are one after another turned up, the evenness of the tension being due to his understanding everyone so well.

For George Eliot the effects of moral relativism were very different. Trollope's substitution of compassion for judgment was applied to society; George Eliot concentrated directly on the individual with his own private, inviolable morality, who was misunderstood and misjudged by those around him, creating an outcast in whom a dramatic kind of heroism was possible. These are the words of a reviewer in the Quarterly Review who tried to ascertain from her works, including her translations, Scenes from Clerical Life, Adam Bede, and The Mill on the Floss, what her religious beliefs must be:

No one who has looked at all into our late fictitious literature can have failed to be struck with the fondness of many of the writers of the day for subjects which at an earlier time would not have been thought of, or would have been carefully avoided. The idea that fiction should contain something to soothe, to elevate, or to purify seems to be extinct. In its stead there is a love for exploring what would better be left in obscurity; for portraying the wildness of passion and the harrowing miseries of mental conflict; for dark pictures of sin and remorse and punishment; for the discussion of questions which it is painful and revolting to think of. . . . It is really frightful to think of the interest which we have ourselves heard such readers express in criminals like Paul Ferroll, and in sensual ruffians like Mr. Rochester; and there is much in the writings of "George Eliot" which, on like grounds, we feel ourselves bound most earnestly to condemn. Let all honour be paid to those who in our
time have laboured to search out and to make known such evils of our social condition as Christian sympathy may in some degree relieve or cure. But we do not believe that any good end is to be effected by fictions which fill the mind with details of imaginary vice and distress and crime, or which teach it—instead of endeavoring after the fulfillment of simple and ordinary duty—to aim at the assurance of superiority by creating for itself fanciful and incomprehensible perplexities.\textsuperscript{11}

The venom of this and similar reviews surely proceeded partly from the fact that George Eliot was a woman. But in no way could the "vices and distress and crime" that formed such a consistent part of her characters be justified on the grounds of social reform, for her characters all struggled against the crushing weight of the very convictions expressed in this review. Her view was not worldly; it was completely private.

The similarities between Maggie Tulliver and the sensation heroine have already been enumerated. Maggie's distinction was her creation of the strictest moral requirements for herself, though they were based not on any perfunctory ideas about "ordinary duty," but on a compelling sense of self and consistency, and a conscience which insisted on piercing the mere forms on which the world in general based its self-righteousness. It is of crucial importance that Maggie did not in fact consummate her union with Stephen as "the world" believed; her moral struggle is refined, and centers in the rigidness of her conscience heightened by her scourging herself for what was not really
her fault, and by her perfect innocence of what "the world" condemns her for. In *The Mill on the Floss* Maggie searches for an understanding of what that morality is that must govern her; the central issue is not how hard morality is to live up to, but how hard it is to comprehend. For Maggie, and for George Eliot in this novel, it is a deeply conservative matter bound up with the past. The section devoted to Maggie's childhood is necessary to establish what that past is. The elements that are a permanent condition of her character, the people to whom she is connected by blood and by long acquaintance—these are the signposts which direct her. For these reasons she refuses to leave St. Oggs after her disgrace; for these she refuses to sacrifice her childhood companion and cousin Lucy, or her childhood sweetheart Philip, for the easy course of marrying Stephen. At the moments of greatest temptation, thoughts of the past steady her. The line of duty Maggie lays out for herself is stern, though she becomes a social alien because of it; and an important sign of her success is that, after everything, Lucy, the conventional woman, should say to her, "You are better than I." Indeed, that recognition is Lucy's supreme moment. Tom is condemned by his rejection of the past and of past ties and past knowledge: he casts off his own father when he is disgraced, and his sister as well. Adherence to the past makes the stern, frightening Aunt Dodson
morally superior: she, for example, does not abandon Maggie after the elopement, despite her rigid righteousness.

After Maggie's interview with Dr. Kenn, in which she pleads to remain in St. Oggs, the narrator discusses the impossibility of her being truly advised by anyone, even this wise, good man:

The great problem of the shifting relation between passion and duty is clear to no man who is capable of apprehending it: the question, whether the moment has come in which a man has fallen below the possibility of a renunciation that will carry any efficacy, and must accept the sway of a passion against which he had struggled as a trespass, is one for which we have no master key that will fit all cases. The casuists have become a byword of reproach; but their perverted spirit of minute discrimination was the shadow of a truth to which eyes and hearts are too often fatally sealed—the truth, that moral judgments must remain false and hollow, unless they are checked and enlightened by a perpetual reference to the special circumstances that mark the individual lot.

All people of broad, strong sense have an instinctive repugnance to the men of maxims; because such people early discern that the mysterious complexity of our life is not to be embraced by maxims, and that to lace ourselves up in formulas of that sort is to repress all the divine promptings and inspirations that spring from growing insight and sympathy. And the man of maxims is the popular representative of the minds that are guided in their moral judgment solely by general rules, thinking that these will lead them to justice by a ready-made patent method, without the trouble of exerting patience, discrimination, impartiality—without any care to assure themselves whether they have the insight that comes from a hardly-earned estimate of temptation, or from a life vivid and intense enough to have created a wide fellow-feeling with all that is human.

(VII, 2)
I have quoted this passage at such length because it shows the way in which for George Eliot the titillating pseudo-moral questions raised in sensation fiction were the basis of a deeply moral way of looking at life, which lies at the center of all her works. In *The Mill on the Floss* she treats it more explicitly than in her other works, but all are informed by the temptation which confronts passion with, not "maxim," but a private, intense sense of duty. The gulf between her work and that of the sensationists, in certain superficial ways so much alike, appears in this commitment of George Eliot to the difficulty of defining duty, to temptation, renunciation, and the vivid and intense life. Dorothea Brooke faces the same questions and is capable of as grand a renunciation as Maggie is, though, like Philip, she is eventually brought to see its falseness. The moderation of *Middlemarch* is a step away from sensation, but what was at the heart of *The Mill on the Floss* is still at the heart of *Middlemarch*.

The difficulty of moral definition took a different form in the works of Meredith, though with him too, it was a central concern. Unlike George Eliot, he recognized passion and even instinct as a more powerful and often more justifiable basis of action than "duty." Renunciation is not an issue so much as the ruinous effects of passion in its battle with the rigid shaping forces of society. In
The Ordeal of Richard Feverel, the youthful, untaught, untried love between Richard and Lucy is not only sentimentally preferable to Sir Austin's matrimonial plans for him; it is a superior biological choice, as Sir Austin comes to realize. But being a man of maxims—literally, though they are his own maxims—he runs counter to the "vivid and intense life" not of private principle, but of nature. In Rhoda Fleming, Rhoda herself becomes the cruel enforcer of maxim: like Sir Austin, she is capable of subjugating intense love to principle, and in doing so becomes a cold and cruel wrecker of lives. This is self-righteousness of a special kind, for it is hard and selfless, and arises from the most intense personal convictions rather than from commonly held social prejudices; society at large is careless and capricious compared to such judges as Rhoda and Sir Austin. Renunciation in both books is left to the women—Lucy who remains faithful in spite of Richard's desertion, and Dahlia who never loses faith in her weak-spirited lover—but in both cases there is the sense that they are fulfilling their stereotypic nature of being beyond the temptation of sexual passion, unlike either Maggie or Dorothea. This sense is not consistent, of course; Meredith's love scenes are particularly physical, and particularly potent because of their sexuality. But under duress, his women are true and his men fall to the flesh—and are
forgiven. In all his works, the essential innocence lies with the individual, the guilt with those who condemn him. It is again the sensation ethic—that law and precept do not and cannot apply to the true individual, and that strength is developed and demonstrated in the individual's battle to hold fast against that more powerful force, whether embodied in a stronger individual or in general social prejudice as in Evan Harrington and Diana of the Crossways. Such is the "ordeal" through which all his characters pass.

That Tess of the D'Urbervilles should have been originally entitled A Pure Woman indicates the way in which morality was dealt with in Hardy's novels. His characters struggle not to do right, as George Eliot's do, but simply to survive. Innocence and guilt for him as for all these authors concern the individual alone; in Hardy's case they are aligned with other powers society has in its employ to crush those it considers undesirable. A world of significance lies in Hardy's comment on Tess in the moments after her seduction by Alec: "An immeasurable social chasm was to divide our heroine's personality thereafter from that previous self of hers. . . ."

Both Tess and Jude are innocent; Jude is simply not strong enough to oppose all alone the organization of the world against the poor and the workers, and Tess is not strong enough to oppose the prejudice against her early
connection with Alec. What both characters have to face is a world that at every step is organized against them. The same is true of Hardy's earlier characters, excluding those in *Desperate Remedies*, who were so subordinate to plot that they are not sufficiently developed to make this kind of judgment possible. As incipient versions of Hardy's later characters, however, they move in the same direction.

Springrove is a poor man intellectually above his class, who risks the frustration of obscurity that Hardy's other heroes do. His father says of him:

> ... I sometimes am afraid that he'll never get on--that he'll die poor and despised under the worst mental conditions, a keen sense of having been passed in the race by men whose brains are nothing to his own, all through his seeing too far into things--being discontented with make-shifts--thinking of perfection.12

The sensational fairy-tale ending thwarts this prediction, but does so for none of Hardy's other misunderstood heroes except Gabriel Oak. Cytherea, too, in a wooden way represents the beginning of a heroine whose life cannot be made to fit into the prevailing scheme. Owen, after she is married and learns too late that Springrove was free, urges her to do her "duty, to society and those about you," by trying to love her husband:

> "Yes--my duty to society," she murmured. "But, ah, Owen, it is difficult to adjust our outer and inner life with perfect honesty to all! Though it may be right to care more for the benefit of the many than for the indulgence of your own single self,
when you consider that the many, and duty to them, only exist to you through your own existence, what can be said? What do our acquaintances care about us? Not much. I think of mine. Mine will now (do they learn all the wicked frailty of my heart in this affair) look at me, smile sickly, and condemn me. . . . But they will never, never realise that it was my single opportunity of existence, as well as of doing my duty, which they are regarding; they will not feel that what to them is but a thought, easily held in those two words of pity, 'Poor girl!' was a whole life to me; as full of hours, minutes, and peculiar minutes, of hopes and dreads, whisperings, tears, as theirs: that it was my world, that is to them their world, and they in that life of mine, however much I cared for them, were only as the thought I seem to them to be."

(XIII, 4)

What is relegated in Desperate Remedies to an obscure speech of Cytherea's, develops into the central theme of all Hardy's work, culminating in Tess and Jude. He describes lives to which moral judgment is inapplicable, worlds at whose center is put a character or a pair of characters who constitute the only reality. The "inner and the outer life" cannot be adjusted, and the result is destruction. That is the morality of Hardy's vision— it is, in short, amoral.

The Blighted World

Implicit in all these moral views and values is a vision of the world and its organization which, though imperfectly realized in the sensation novel, lay at its very basis and distinguished it clearly from works of an earlier period. At the beginning of Tess of the D'Urber-villes, just before the accident which starts the fatal
chain of her troubles, Tess and her brother are looking at the stars which Tess tells him are worlds. She compares them to apples, some sound, some blighted.

"Which do we live on—a splendid one or a blighted one?"
"A blighted one."
"'Tis very unlucky that we didn't pitch on a sound one when there were so many more of 'em!"
"Yes."
"Is it like that really, Tess? . . . How would it have been if we pitched on a sound one?"
"Well, father wouldn't have coughed and creeped about as he does, and wouldn't have been too tipsy to go this journey; and mother wouldn't have been always washing and never getting finished."
"And you would have been a rich lady ready-made, and not have to be made rich by marrying a gentleman?"

All the novelists of whom I am writing saw this as essentially a blighted planet. The demands made on its people, the sufferings they underwent, the pain and sorrow they encountered were not part of an ultimately benevolent design. Such a view, whether atheistic or pagan, is anti-Christian, and the anti-Christianity of these novels of the sixties and after indicates a kind of experience and ways of dealing with it that were new to the novel. It assumes that suffering can be irredeemable, that trouble can mar human nature beyond restoration, that heroes and heroines cannot be protected from tragedy, and that the shaping forces of human lives in the modern world are indifferent or simply chaotic. I hope I have shown sufficiently in the early chapters of this study that I believe these attitudes
to have been part of the nature of the times which could not but affect sensitive and thinking people. Incorporating them into literature, however, raised serious questions of form.

In this respect as in others Dickens was ahead of his contemporaries. His novels of the fifties already show an increasingly pessimistic vision of the surrounding world that would so profoundly determine the nature of literature in the sixties and the decades to follow. Possibly the habit of considering Dickens a writer of melodrama and of social reform novels prevented his contemporaries from perceiving the growing gloom and sense of impending tragedy in these novels, an outlook which is borne out in the letters of his last twenty years. The dark worlds of *Bleak House*, *Hard Times*, and *Little Dorrit* are not specifically political and social worlds, but metaphysical ones. "In *Bleak House*, I have purposely dwelt on the romantic side of familiar things," wrote Dickens in his Preface of 1853. This is not the method of a social critic. The pestilence and pollution of the fog that opens the book and never lifts emanates from an allegorical, not just an actual, Chancery; light of any kind hardly penetrates this book. "Suffer any wrong that can be done you rather than come here!" warn the honorable practitioners of the Court, but the novel shows how wide and often irresistible the net of that evil is, and what price
must be paid for freedom from it. The symbolic caging of Miss Flite's birds, Richard's death, Lady Dedlock's, the permanent loneliness of Jarndyce and of Ada, and the irretrievable loss of Esther's beauty point to a "bleakness" that is much more far-reaching and personal than a social and political structure. The same applies to *Hard Times*, in spite of its social and economic context. The dying words of Stephen Blackpool, "Aw a muddle! Fr' first to last, a muddle!" are surely a pronouncement on a universal state. In this novel, as in *Bleak House*, there is no reassurance that things work out for the best. It is Stephen, not Tom, who dies; Rachael lives on alone, caring for Mrs. Blackpool who has kept her from her happiness. No benevolent fittingness can be seen in this. The same vision pervades the entirety of *Little Dorrit*, though the metaphorical quality of its prisons and shadows is perhaps more obvious. Even the Circumlocution Office and Bleeding-Heart Yard are expressions of a metaphysical organization rather than objects of social satire or criticism. Neither Little Dorrit nor Arthur has ever been happy and the quiet modesty of their final union is the best the book can do for them.

The modern world of sensation didn't make sense, and was always threatened with disconnection and chaos. But Dickens' own works pre-dating sensation were consistent with the fatalism of *Great Expectations*, where ends are left
untied and connections are not made. Miss Havisham's death and Magwitch's, the disappearance of Magwitch's money, Estella's failure to reform, and particularly the double loneliness to which Pip is condemned, having missed both Biddy and Estella, do not confirm that happiness is the ultimate and permanent end toward which things are tending. Yet his hesitancy about the ending seems to indicate that he had something new in mind, was trying to write in a new and maybe tragical mode rather than obscuring his own implications as he did previously. Even the revised ending, however, holds only a tentative promise of satisfaction.

Our Mutual Friend, on the other hand, was designed in a more familiar mode, as Dickens describes:

It is a combination of drollery with romance which requires a great deal of pains and a perfect throwing away of points that might be amplified; but I hope it is very good. I confess, in short, that I think it is. Strange to say, I felt at first quite dazed in getting back to the large canvas and the big brushes.

Yet this novel was not so well received as the more detailed, smaller-canvassed Tale of Two Cities and Great Expectations. "Rokesmith's story is melodramatic in the highest degree," was a typical comment, and many of the installments were criticized for being improbable, fanciful, and dull. The last seems a peculiar charge, and must have sprung rather from a sense of its old-fashionedness than from its actual dullness.
The problem of form and vision in Dickens' novels was compounded by his feeling that literature should be—and I use his word—"wholesome," not because reality was necessarily wholesome, but because the business of literature, being democratic, was to encourage ideals and disseminate an acceptable view of life by not writing about what was dangerous or wrong. His letter to his friend Wilkie Collins in response to the controversy about Griffith Gaunt reveals a kind of scruple that places him, despite all the materials with which he provided sensation, in an earlier generation:

I have read Charles Reade's book, and here follows my state of mind—as a witness—respecting it:

I have read it with the strongest interest and admiration. I regard it as the work of a highly accomplished writer and a good man; a writer with a brilliant fancy and a graceful and tender imagination.

Cross-examined, I should feel myself in danger of being put on unsafe ground, and should try to set my wits against the cross-examiner, to keep well off it. But if I were reminded ... that I was the Editor of a periodical of large circulation in which the Plaintiff himself had written, and if I had read to me in court those passages about Gaunt's going up to his wife's bed drunk, and that last child's being conceived, and was asked whether, as Editor, I would have passed those passages, whether written by the Plaintiff or anyone else, I should be obliged to reply No. Asked why? I should say that what was pure to an artist might be impurely suggestive to inferior minds (of which there must necessarily be many among a large mass of readers), and that I should have called the writer's attention to the likelihood of those passages being perverted in such quarters.15
A similar ethic is demonstrated in his choice of topics suitable for articles in *All the Year Round*. He turned down a proposal for an article about "Vaux," for example, because the "mere details of such a rascal's proceedings . . . are not wholesome for a large audience," but accepted one on the famous eighteenth-century pickpocket George Barrington as a "good subject, as involving the representation of a period, a style of manners, an order of dress, certain habits of street life, assembly-room life, and coffee-room life, etc.; but there is a very broad distinction between this and mere Newgate Calendar." Such a topic was a "piece of social history," and therefore safe, unlike nearly contemporary crimes or subjects with sexual overtones. Whether for practical or philosophic reasons, these attitudes conditioned Dickens' use of the new vision of a blighted world as the basis of a new literary form.

Trollope's response was very different. While he never drastically changed the kind of novel he wrote, nor the benevolent tone of his narrator, the little world he showed—"just as if some giant had hewn a great lump out of the earth and put it under a glass case, with all its inhabitants going about their daily business, and not suspecting that they were being made a show of," Hawthorne described it—grows darker and darker. The compassion of Trollope's voice becomes more indispensable as progressively
more serious wrongs result from the faults and vices of his characters, while his good persons become less and less interesting and decisive. His characters do not necessarily recover from their suffering: Lily Dale is unable ever to love or marry again after her betrayal by Crosbie; Lady Glencora, though she resists her lover in Can You Forgive Her? (1863-4) and reconciles herself to the older husband forced upon her by his friends and hers, is crushed; love and romance will never be hers. The exactions of the world drain and compromise these characters in politics, in society, and in their moral inner lives. Palisser Plantagenet, one of Trollope's favorite characters, fails in his political ambitions and effectiveness precisely because he is a good man and a perfect gentleman (The Prime Minister); he lives in a world in which good men cannot thrive. The same is true of Roger Carbury of The Way We Live Now (1874-75).

The idea that those who touch pitch will be defiled and that pitch is everywhere runs consistently through Trollope's work of the sixties and seventies, from Framley Parsonage (1861) on. The Way We Live Now provides a quintessence of this outlook and its special connection with the immediate present. Dated letters within the novel prove that "now" is a time within the past four years. The nature of "now" reverberates throughout the book in the comments of
all the characters, from all their different points of view, that "We belong to a newer and worse kind of world," as the heroine Hetta says to Roger Carbury, explaining why his ideas of propriety no longer obtained; that "Things aren't as they were, of course, and never will be again," as Roger explains to himself an old friend's financial dishonesty; that "Of course it isn't all nice, but things have got so that they never will be nice again," as Georgiana says, justifying the desperate step she has taken in affiancing herself to a middle-aged Jew in "trade"; that "I think everything is going to come to an end. I do indeed... I feel as though there were no good in hoping that things would ever come right again," as Dolly Longstaffe, the indolent but honest young gentleman, reacts to the dissolution of his club, the forgery of his name, and the imminent collapse of Melmotte, who owes him a fortune. The specific circumstances under which these and similar remarks are made, their utterance not only by such relatively "good" characters as appear in the book but by the people whose own actions exemplify what is wrong with the present age they deplore, and the generality of their terms, point to a coherent view in the novel, shared by all, that modern life is dim, ugly, nasty, impolite, and disappointing in every aspect. Not a character in the book but settles for much less than he had hoped for and expected; not a character but
ends up poorer, with compromised ideals, modified love, if not ruined and solitary. What else can they do? The only possible course is to make the best of a diminished life.

Trollope called *The Way We Live Now* a satire. Nevertheless these characters are not so exaggerated as to make the reader sure that they are drawn satirically; very little real objurgation goes on; and all the characters, even the most vicious, are shown in a changing light which makes them understandable as the victims of a time and a world in which no one can succeed and in which no way is clear. The despair and sadness underlying this book and communicating itself to its readers, is therefore much greater than that of, for example, *Vanity Fair*, where the satire is accompanied by the power to laugh, dismiss, and dissociate. Trollope describes his inspiration for this novel as lying in "what I conceive to be the commercial profligacy of the age":

Whether the world does or does not become more wicked as years go on, is a question which probably has disturbed the minds of thinkers since the world began to think. That men have become less cruel, less violent, less selfish, less brutal, there can be no doubt;--but have they become less honest? If so, can a world, retrograding from day to day in honesty, be considered to be in a state of progress? . . . Nevertheless a certain class of dishonesty, dishonesty magnificent in its proportions, and climbing into high places, has become at the same time so rampant and so splendid that there seems to be reason for fearing that men and women will be taught to feel that dishonesty, if it can become splendid, will cease to be abominable.
The author of the Autobiography uses the same tone as the narrator of the novels, and frequently appears to over-simplify and make merely obvious and practical that which is involved, subtle, and philosophical or moral. I suggest that such is the tone of this passage, and that the "vices" Trollope lists here are not the true subject of his book. As in all his works the political structure is a vehicle for a moral one, and his conservatism extends far beyond political affairs. In The Way We Live Now the selling of sacrosanct family property, the abandoning of entail, the heroine's preference for an irresponsible young man to a fine and honest older one, are all indications of the ascendance of a distasteful, undignified, unsafe, improper "way we live now." It is particularly interesting that this book wastes no time in sentimental retrospection of that lost past with relation to which the "now" is apparently defined: the new is absolute. This novel represents a kind of "realism" which is related both to the spirit which gave rise to sensationalism and to the rationale and kind of action it contributed to the non-sensation authors.

That neither George Eliot, George Meredith, nor Hardy seem to have been troubled about the social or moral functions of literature is a sign of their belonging to a younger generation. They accepted the philosophy that apparently lay behind sensation: that literature should
show "reality." That reality, however, was not merely factual but philosophic and moral. The sensationists claimed the special function of revealing that side of life which had been hidden because it was ugly and unpleasant. The works of Eliot, Meredith, and Hardy rested instead on the premise that "reality" is elusive of definition and hard to understand. Though not explicitly stated by them, the function of their kind of literature was to discover, rather than to confirm, an order or at least a possible order which could explain an otherwise chaotic world. For Eliot and Meredith particularly, the modern world became the material on which a literary form had to be imposed, rather than a condition in itself which art had to show forth.

Both George Eliot and George Meredith saw the blight not in general and saddened terms, but as producing violent tragedy. The extent to which both of them—and Hardy as well—invoke classical gods and heroes in relation to their own heroes and heroines provides an interesting indication of the pre-Christian, even pagan, construction they put on their worlds. A review in 1860 of all George Eliot's works of fiction to date—Scenes from Clerical Life, Adam Bede, and The Mill on the Floss—took the position that she was as coarse and offensive a writer as Charlotte Brontë. One
piece of evidence was that of the five stories she had written every one ended in death:

Surely this is an exaggerated representation of the proportion which sorrow bears to happiness in human life; and the fact that a popular writer has (whether consciously or not) brought every one of the five stories which she has published to a tragical end gives a very uncomfortable idea of the tone of our present literature.19

Of course the death in Adam Bede was Hetty's, a kind of displaced heroine. But The Mill on the Floss was clearly conceived as a tragedy, inevitable in a world too small to hold a woman like Maggie. Though her endings were never again so startlingly dramatic, Eliot's concept of tragedy as the basic pattern of life, and of the tragic potential of every individual, informs all her work. The modified shape this tragedy took was another indication of blighting modernity: the old pagan dignity of form is not afforded lives whose essence is tragic. Thus Romola can die only the spiritual death of self-sacrifice, and Dorothea has to be content with a meager compromise of her ambitions. Here is Mr. Tulliver in The Mill on the Floss:

... Mr. Tulliver, you perceive, though nothing more than a superior miller and maltster, was as proud and obstinate as if he had been a very lofty personage, in whom such dispositions might be a source of that conspicuous far-echoing tragedy, which sweeps the stage in regal robes and makes the dullest chronicler sublime. The pride and obstinacy of millers, and other insignificant people, whom you pass unnoticingly on the road every day, have their tragedy too, but it is of that unwept, hidden sort, that goes on from generation to generation, and leaves no record--such
tragedy, perhaps, as lies in the conflicts of young souls, hungry for joy, under a lot suddenly made hard to them, under the dreariness of a home where the morning brings no promise with it, and where the unexpectant discontent of worn and disappointed parents weighs on the children like a damp, thick air, in which all the functions of life are depressed; or such tragedy as lies in the slow or sudden death that follows on a bruised passion, though it may be a death that finds only a parish funeral.

(III, 1)

By the time of Middlemarch (1871-2) this idea had become the scheme of the entire novel, attaching to everybody's life. That these lives are denied the dignified and spectacular ends which would reinforce their importance only makes them more ironic, more disappointing, and more painful. Nor does the failure of these characters to recognize their own tragedies alter the vision of the novel. The famous lines with which George Eliot introduces Dorothea weeping on her honeymoon epitomize this view of human life:

Some discouragement, some faintness of heart at the new real future which replaces the imaginary, is not unusual, and we do not expect people to be deeply moved by what is not unusual. That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency, has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind; and perhaps our frames could hardly bear much of it. If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well padded with stupidity.

(II, 20)

Even the renunciation in which her characters find an alternative satisfaction to the life they have lost, George Eliot
views as part of the inevitable tragedy, rather than in the sentimentalized Christian terms used by Victorian novelists of the first half of the century (borne out by the ultimate preference for marriage to the life of renunciation).

Meredith, the author of *An Essay on Comedy* (1877), placed more emphasis than George Eliot did on literary form in itself, seeking in all his works a literary and philosophical rather than a moral shape. Both comedy and tragedy are classical forms, and his *Essay on Comedy* indicates clearly enough that Meredith defined comedy, at least, in classical, not Christian, terms; in fact he explains the almost total absence of true comedy in English literature by the predilection of the English for sentimentality, an antagonist to both comedy and tragedy. The tragic design of his first well-known novel, *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, is determined not by the necessity of character but by conscious imitation of familiar tragedies, like *Romeo and Juliet*. *Sandra Belloni* and *Vittoria* are both historical novels; *Rhoda Fleming* experimented with sensation outright. *Evan Harrington* effected an odd compromise, apparently heading for unhappiness, but saved by a self-consciously literary, sentimental—almost Dickensian—ending. Meredith was more interested in finding a literary form that suited his ideas than one which fitted his conception of the shape of human lives. It is interesting that the reasons he gives
for the dearth of English comedies are social conditions
and the mentality of the English people, and that those
qualities which he considers comedy to require are the same
toward which the sensationists were, however blindly, push­ing: a new intellectual heroine and anti-sentimentality.
Of Célimène in *The Misanthrope* and Millamant in *The Way of
the World* he writes:

> But those two ravishing women, so copious and so
choice of speech, who fence with men and pass their
guard, are heartless! Is it not preferable to be
the pretty idiot, the passive beauty, the adorable
bundle of caprices, very feminine, very sympathetic,
of romantic and sentimental fiction? Our women are
taught to think so. . . . The heroines of comedy
are like women of the world, not necessarily from
being heartless but from being clear-sighted; they
seem so to the sentimentally reared, only for the
reason that they use their wits, and are not wander­ing
vessels crying for a captain or a pilot. Comedy
is an exhibition of their battle with men, and that
of men with them; and as the two, however divergent,
both look on one object, namely, life, the gradual
similarities of their impressions must bring them to
some resemblance.  

His early novels experiment with this likeness between men
and women, and dispense with sentiment. His comic theory,
as it pertained to the novel, was a result of the same
rupture of a world-view that made his tragic novels pos­sible, and of which sensation was a crude manifestation.

The phrase "blighted world" is Hardy's own, and
except for *Desperate Remedies*, which can hardly be con­sidered a serious novel, all his works portray it. His
adaptation of classical tragedy to modern needs was not to
compare its inadequacies to the subtle complexities of the modern world as George Eliot did, nor to fit modern life into its shape as Meredith did, but to exploit its particular aspect of fatality; to translate the capricious pagan gods into what in *Jude the Obscure* (with its clearly neo-tragical title) are given the form of "mere men and senseless circumstance." For all their inherent insignificance, these are the forces that mold men's lives, thwart them, and make impotent the great human capacities. Accidents in Hardy's works operate predictably against the characters; they are a sign of universal chaos. This dominant vision is a much deeper version of what many sensation authors used as a kind of trick to sustain suspense:

> How strange are the incidents, the small events that shape the course of human destiny! But for that accidental conversation—and may it not be called accidental?—half the trouble that is about to be related never would have taken place. And the cruel shadow, that was waiting to spread its wings over the days of more than one wayfarer on the path of life, would have found no spot to darken its evil.

Thus Mrs. Henry Wood in one of many similar passages from *Oswald Cray*. She undermines any possibility of philosophic implications in such passages by also averring a belief in a benevolent power. In Hardy there is no such ambivalence. The missed letter in *The Return of the Native*, the two missed letters in *Tess*, the series of psychic misconnections between Jude and Sue, are all minor indications
of the way in which human fate lies outside human control. Already in *Desperate Remedies*, in spite of its obvious contrivance, Hardy seems to be developing the sense that time is a vital agent of fatality: for instance, at the one moment when luck seems to be breaking for Cytherea and Springrove, in the elopement of his cousin, Springrove does not learn of it until moments after Cytherea's marriage to Manston. The entire novel is organized according to the most precise indications of time: the chapters are entitled by hours, dates, or duration ("The Events of Five Hours," for example), indicating Hardy's consciousness of the relation in this blighted world between timing and final outcome. Such a relation is of course immaterial in a world in which all is guaranteed to come out well.

In his last two novels, Hardy's main characters, his tragic heroine and his tragic hero, bluntly announce that life is not worth living. In both books the life which is not worth living is modern life; Tess and Jude and Sue are characters, like Dorothea Brooke, who were born out of their times. They are too soon for the general acceptance of the advanced principles by which they live; but in all such statements is implicit the fact that there were earlier times in which true principles obtained. When Jude suggests to Sue that they go sit in the cathedral, she replies,

"Cathedral? Yes. Though I think I'd rather sit in the railway station. . . . That's the centre
of the town life now. The cathedral has had its day!"

"How modern you are!"

"So would you be if you had lived so much in the Middle Ages as I have done these last few years! The cathedral was a very good place four or five centuries ago; but it is played out now. . . . I am not modern, either. I am more ancient than mediaevalism, if only you knew."

Mediaevalism represents the tradition of romance and sentimentality in this novel; paganism, which Sue fancies, is a faulty approximation of modernity, as Hardy epitomizes in his poem "Hap"; it is Jude, the new classical hero whose mission is self-knowledge, who discovers the truth, that at the center of modern life is nothing but the railroad station.

This takes us thirty-five years beyond Lady Audley's Secret and The Woman in White. It is of course ridiculous still to be talking about the direct impact of the sensation novel. Nevertheless the progress of Hardy, whose first novel was an imitation of the sensation novel, whose literary consciousness was developed in the heyday of sensation, and whose career as a novelist consisted of perfecting the methods and visions he had initially employed, provides an indication of a more general literary direction. Hardy has been called the last of the great Victorians; Jude certainly marks a transition between those qualities which we call Victorian and those which we call modern. The sensation view of life was so convincing that none of our
novelists tried to withstand it; unlike many movements in popular art, it was in touch with essential matters of its time. At the turn of the century new forms would be made available with the development of the theory of the novel and the resulting revolution in ideas of what the novel could do. Freud and his followers would drastically alter conceptions of life, reality, character, and symbol. But between the last years of Dickens and Thackeray and these modern developments lay a period of thirty or forty years during which the novel followed a path straight toward "modernism" which was first exemplified in sensation. It was sometimes chaotic, sometimes confused, often caught between the need to say new things and the necessity of saying them in old ways; but barren it was not.
Notes

1 (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1947), p. 189.

2 Ibid., p. 140.


6 Cornhill, 6 (Nov. 1862), 702-703.

7 For example, here is Lucy of Mill on the Floss, loved by Stephen although he does not recognize the true depth of her care for others:

"Perhaps the emphasis of his admiration did not fall precisely on this rarest quality in her --perhaps he approved his own choice of her chiefly because she did not strike him as a remarkable rarity. A man likes his wife to be pretty: well, Lucy was pretty, but not to a maddening extent. A man likes his wife to be accomplished, gentle, affectionate, and not stupid; and Lucy had all these qualifications" (VI, 1).

Of Aurora's cousin Lucy, M. E. Braddon writes:

"But she was exactly the sort of woman to make a good wife. She had been educated to that end by a careful mother. Purity and goodness had watched over her and hemmed her in from her cradle. She had never seen unseemly sights, or heard unseemly sounds. She was as ignorant as a baby of all the vices and horrors of this big world. She was lady-like, accomplished, well-informed; and if there were a great many others of precisely the same type of graceful womanhood, it was certainly the highest type, and the holiest, and the best" (Temple Bar, 4 [Feb. 1862], 377).

A comparison of the passages also demonstrates the lack of economy, the triteness, and the build-up for moral shock characteristic of the sensation style.


reviewer went on to say, "She delights in unpleasant sub-
jects—in the representation of things which are repulsive,
coarse, and degrading," including Hetty Sorel's seduction
and the birth and murder of her child, and, in The Mill on
the Floss, "the almost indecent details of mere animal
passion in the loves of Stephen and Maggie" (475).

In Comedy, intro. Wylie Sypher (Garden City, New

(Edinburgh, 1864), I, 316.
BIBLIOGRAPHY I

Sensation Drama and Drama Related to Sensation

NOTE: Since the following bibliography is intended to furnish the reader with an impression of the kinds of drama that were related to sensation in the sixties, and also of their chronology, I have divided the list into two sections and included such remarks as seemed appropriate to indicate the approximate date of their first performances and their relation to other sensation plays. I estimate that the list covers most of the famous sensation plays and most of the plays which were reviewed from 1860-1865 in the same terms as those applied to sensation drama. It represents all the pertinent works that I was able to locate.

However, the murky conditions of dramatic authorship, copyright, managerial rights, and publication, foil any attempt at a definitive list. The term "sensation play" was not introduced until 1860, but was applied after that to earlier plays revived during the sixties, retrospectively to plays of the late fifties which seemed to fit the definition, and to "new, sensational" adaptations of old plays. Of these I have included only those directly
related to genuine sensation plays and written by dramatists
who figured in the sensation craze. A further complication
is presented by the variance in titles under which essen­
tially identical plays were performed at different theatres,
and, perhaps more important, by their authorship being
claimed by different dramatists. I have relied on Lacy's
Acting Editions for most of these plays, and reproduce here
their attributions of title and author. However, it should
be recognized that other authors "wrote" the same or similar
plays; one of the characteristics of the sensation stage
was that the list of titles was many times longer than the
actual number of plays. Wherever possible, I have included
other titles under which the same, or nearly the same, play
was presented.

The dates of first English performances are equally
unreliable, for much the same reasons. I give the earliest
performance date I can verify; sometimes using Lacy's
information, sometimes contemporary drama notices, or
references drawn from contemporary sources like diaries.
The list of extravaganzas and burlesques includes those
based on contemporary extra-literary sensations as well as
on the drama. Dramatizations of sensation novels I have
listed under the name of the adaptor who claimed them in
Lacy's editions. The list is limited to plays that I have
actually examined, but I have added to each entry such notes
as seem helpful in interpreting the general picture of sensation drama.

"Sensation Plays" and "Romantic Melodramas"


   First performed Feb. 1860.

   First performed 1863. Based on Boucicault's *The Trial of Effie Deans*, first performed Jan. 1863. Other versions produced in February 1863 were *Effie Deans*, the *Lily of St. Leonard's* and *The Scotch Sisters; or, The Trials of Jeanie and Effie Deans*.

   First performed Nov. 1860.

   First performed Oct. 1864.

   First performed Nov. 1863.

   First performed Nov. 1859, just before the completion of Dickens' serialized *A Tale of Two Cities*.

   First performed Jan. 1863.

   First performed March 1860.

   First performed April 1863. Two different versions had already been on the stage by March 1863. Novel by M. E. Braddon.

   First performed Feb. 1866.


   First performed Dec. 1860.

   First performed Oct. 1860.


Extravaganzas, Burlesques, Farces, Sketches, Etc.

   "Pièce de Circonstance." First performed March 1862.

   "Farcical Extravaganza." First performed July 1862. A burlesque continuation of The Colleen Bawn incorporating also the "sensational" comic figure, Lord Dundreary, from Our American Cousin.

   An "Apropos Sketch." First performed July 1861.


   A "Burlesque Extravaganza." First performed Sept. 1861.
First performed Nov. 1860.

______.  *Lucia di Lammermoor; or, The Laird, the Lady, and the Lover.* London: Lacy's Acting Editions, Vol. 72, n.d.
An "Operatic Burlesque Extravaganza." First performed Sept. 1865.

A burlesque of The Colleen Bawn, one of many during the Christmas season of 1861. In March 1862, The Colleen Bawn was also made into an opera, *The Lily of Killarney.*

Burlesque of The Duke's Motto. First performed July 1863.

A "Farce." First performed Dec. 1862.

A burlesque of sensation literature, inspired by *Sense and Sensation* (see below). First performed Dec. 1864.

A "Modern Morality," burlesque of the sensation craze. First performed May 1864.
BIBLIOGRAPHY II

Sensation Novels

NOTE: The following is a list of the sensation novels I have read and on which I have based my discussion of the sensation novel. It represents nearly all of the famous ones written between 1860 and 1865 and a sizable proportion of those which were either called "sensational" or were reviewed in the same terms sensation novels were, as well as a few later ones written by authors who made a significant contribution to literary history (specifically Wilkie Collins and Thomas Hardy). As in the case of sensation drama, the term "sensation" was variously applied and I have had to rely somewhat, in the more obscure instances, on my own intuition to determine what to read. Several works I have been unable to locate, including Mrs. Houstoun's Such Things Are and Recommended to Mercy.

The editions listed are neither authoritative nor particularly recommended; I have simply used whatever versions I could find. For those works which I did not read in serialization or first edition, I have nevertheless included whenever possible the date of initial publication.

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Braddon, Mary Elizabeth. *Aurora Floyd*. Temple Bar, 1862.

______ *The Doctor's Wife*. Temple Bar, 1864.

______ *Eleanor's Victory*. Once a Week, 1863.

______ *John Marchmont's Legacy*. Temple Bar, 1863.


______ *Sir Jasper's Tenant*. Temple Bar, 1865.


Byron, Henry J. *Paid in Full*. Temple Bar, 1864.


______ *The Moonstone*. First published in *All the Year Round*, 1868.


Hoey, Mrs. Cashel. Land at Last. Temple Bar, 1865, under the name of Edmund Yates.


_________. Hard Cash. New York, 1876. First published in All the Year Round, 1863.

Sala, George Augustus. Quite Alone. All the Year Round, 1864.

The novel was finished by someone else since Sala left it undone to be a correspondent in America during the Civil War.

_________. The Seven Sons of Mammon. Temple Bar, 1861-62.

Wills, W. G. The Wife's Evidence. Temple Bar, 1863-64.


_________. Oswald Cray. 3 vols. Edinburgh, 1864.
