



**Closure as Revelation: Reflecting upon Lady Audley's  
Guilt in Mary E. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret***

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“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to walk from here?”  
(Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, 1865)

In this passage, Alice is wandering around the dazzling Wonderland and seeking for orientation and guidance. As Alice, I have found myself wondering which path was best to take when writing this paper. For this reason, I would like to thank my tutor, Andrew Monnickendam, for pointing me in the right direction as well as for his invaluable help and support. His constructive comments allowed me not only to improve my dissertation, but also to learn and to enjoy this journey a great deal more.

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## **Abstract**

With the increased popularity of the novel throughout the Victorian period, a considerable number of works concerned about women's role and their possibilities in a patriarchal society proliferated. In her sensation novel *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), Mary Elizabeth Braddon portrays the life of a duplicitous woman who is severely judged for her actions and eventually confined to an asylum. Although she is first thought of as the perfect Angel in the House, worshipped and admired everywhere she goes, her debatable acts will corroborate that the world is ruled by a male hegemonic power that will deem her mad and condemn her for not fulfilling her "duties" as a woman.

Taking this into consideration, the aim of this paper is to argue that the seemingly restorative and unexpected ending is in fact used to question the idea of Lady Audley's guilt. Consequently, the notion of gender becomes especially relevant at the end because it plays a significant role when determining Lady Audley's future, placing her in a vulnerable position and inexorably dragging her towards her tragic destiny. Through a close reading of the text, this study unveils how concepts such as madness and male hegemony were used by Victorian society to keep women under control. By comparing Lady Audley's actions to those of the male characters, I will propose that she is sometimes no more drastic or cruel than her rivals. Nevertheless, the timely remarks of the narrator influence our opinion when it comes to judge the different characters, urging us to focus on her "inherent wickedness".

**Keywords:** *Lady Audley's Secret*, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, 19<sup>th</sup> C female writers, gender roles, madness, male hegemony, closure

## 0. Introduction

Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* was an immediate success when it first appeared in three-volume form in 1862. From that moment onwards, Braddon has been identified as one of the main representatives of the sensation school and this novel in particular has become the definition of sensationalism par excellence. Although she was dismissed for many years, the way in which she questions gender roles and criticises social conventions by depicting strong, independent and ambiguous female heroines has been once again extensively studied over the last few decades. If Braddon's novels were considered dangerous and intolerable by more conservative critics of her time, it is because she "teases the reader with a vision of the distortions and contradictions bred by contemporary domestic ideology, which constrains female energy and exertion, relegating it to decorous ornamentality" (Matus, 1993: 346). Thus, since she opposed the very same principles that society advertised, namely, the cult of domesticity, she was regarded as a subversive writer.

Moreover, Braddon's work has also been central to feminist studies because in her novels, she challenges the ideals of Victorian womanhood at the same time that she portrays a new type of femininity. Lady Audley is first and foremost a unique woman due to her resoluteness to succeed in life regardless of her humble origins and the many obstacles she encounters, as well as to the cleverness she displays to achieve such a task. Elaine Showalter (1976) claims that the character of Lady Audley is of an enormous complexity because for the first time: "Braddon means to show that the dangerous woman is not the rebel or the intellectual, but the pretty little girl whose indoctrination in the feminine role has taught her deceitfulness almost as a secondary sex characteristic" (3). What is more, Showalter suggests that it is the imposition of certain behaviours and attitudes on the female condition which triggers Lady Audley's meanness. On the other

hand, critic Lyn Pykett (2015) cleverly points out that in creating the multiple aliases of Lady Audley, Braddon shows how gender roles are performative rather than inherent and, therefore, they can be used as an instrument to manipulate other people: “Braddon satirically demonstrates how effectively an unscrupulous woman can adopt the disguise or perform the masquerade of the domestic angel to achieve her own ends” (136). Likewise, Katherine Montwieler (2000) draws our attention towards Braddon’s shrewdness to condemn gender roles as anyone can learn to behave in a certain way to pretend what they are not: “Braddon follows the strategy of domestic manuals to relay the message of advertisements: if you look like this, act like this, buy these things, you will become genteel” (48). Thus, it is Lady Audley’s awareness of how gender roles function that it is especially subversive since it would teach other women how to be deceitful.

Additionally, other critical works have also commented on the ambiguous morality that is conveyed at the end of the novel. Lady Audley is eventually deemed mad and sent to a foreign asylum as a punishment for her terrible acts. However, because she is a complex character with many sides, Elizabeth Langland (2000) remarks that the traditional system of “punishment and reward” depending on the “goodness” of the characters does not work so well in this novel: “Although Braddon ostensibly produces the conventional conclusion of evil punished at the end of her story, the representation of Lady Audley complicates a traditional reading of that conclusion” (4). Therefore, it is not so easy to judge Lady Audley’s actions because both her personal background and social context add to the tension and complicate her case.

Nevertheless, few studies have focused on the relevance of the closure in *Lady Audley’s Secret* as a means to reveal how Braddon raises questions of gender roles to criticise social conventions as well as the Victorian ideal of femininity. It is clear that the

ending is particularly unsettling because despite its traditional moralistic tone, it does not seem to be in accordance with the events depicted throughout the novel. Lady Audley might not be the personification of innocence, but she surely is not crueller than others. For this reason, in this paper I argue that the seemingly restorative and unexpected ending is deliberately used to question the idea of Lady Audley's guilt. Hence, I analyse the notion of narrative closure in literature to show in what ways the ending in this novel is uncommon and prompts the reader to reconsider the nature of characters and their actions. Moreover, through the character of Lady Audley, I aim to explore in greater depth to what extent gender, as understood in the novel, determines the life of a woman and ultimately shapes her destiny. Furthermore, I focus on the concepts of madness and male hegemony to reveal not only how Victorian society approached these notions, but also how they made use of them to keep women quiet and under control. Finally, I compare Lady Audley's actions to those of the male characters to show that they are no less malicious than they consider her to be.

### **1. Framing the sensation novel in its social context**

“No *man* would have dared to write and publish such books as some of these are: no man *could* have written such delineations of female passion (...) No! They are women, who, by their writings, have been doing the work of the enemy of souls, glossing over vice, making profligacy attractive” (305). In 1868, Reverend Francis Paget used these harsh words to define and discredit the sensation novel, which rose in the 1860s only to last for one or two decades. What this statement shows is that, beyond its close association to women, this literary genre caused great controversy amongst Victorian society, mainly due to its content and implications. Consequently, despite its widespread popularity, many critics and notable writers such as Henry Mansel (1863), Margaret Oliphant (1867) or Reverend Francis Paget (1868) himself considered sensation novels to be dangerous

because they challenged the moral values and domestic conventions of the period by introducing scandalous elements, such as crime, bigamy or adultery, into middle and upper-class environments. For conservatives or educated readers, these novels represented a threat to the respectable bourgeoisie since they suggested that anyone can be deceitful and that appearances are often misleading.

Rather than a completely new genre, the sensation novel can be understood as a mixture of domestic realism, the Gothic and the Newgate novel, a combination of traits which, according to Elaine Showalter (1976), makes sensation fiction even more exceptional and powerful. What is more, these stories produced such strong emotions in the public because many of them were inspired by the distressing events that appeared in the newspapers of the time, for example, the Constance Kent case in 1865, in which Constance confessed the murder of a child when she was sixteen years old, five years after it had happened. It was especially these types of cases that caused great excitement and commotion amongst society because they contained unsolved mysteries and intrigues, which were later portrayed and adapted to literature. Therefore, this meant that fictional characters and their shocking experiences were not so aloof from the real world, making anyone suspicious of hiding something.

As a result, at the core of these narratives lies a secret (or secrets) that is revealed by means of hints and remarks, although the mystery is never fully solved until the end of the novel. In order to achieve this, both the narrator and the characters contribute to accentuate the factor of secrecy to grab the attention of the reader, who is greatly encouraged to participate in the unravelling of the plot. What is also interesting to notice is that the type of secrets that appear in these literary works are especially “sensational” in that “[they] were not only simply solutions to mysteries and crimes; they were the secrets of women’s dislike of their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers” (Showalter,



1978: 158). This is the case because most sensation writers were women who started using literature as a way of fighting for their rights while denouncing the injustices that patriarchal Victorian society inflicted upon them.

Although sensation novels were not considered “serious literature”, mainly because they were stereotypical and addressed subjects “sensationally” to shock and amuse the audience (Brantlinger 1982), the narrative of these books tends to be very complex and it also includes many cultural and literary references. Due to their considerable length, these novels consist of several minor storylines which intermingle with one another and contribute to the development of the major plot. Moreover, as critic Kate Flint remarks, sensation novelists also play with intertextuality to render the act of reading and writing more interesting and to add an extra meaning to the text:

Mary Braddon and Rhoda Broughton’s novels are particularly notable in their references to literary reading, however, since they encourage their consumers not just to take cultural references as a part of a social backcloth, but to enter into an active process of interpretation which invites recognition of their own active, rather than passive, role as readers. (1993: 283)

Therefore, by encouraging the reader to participate in this cultural dialogue along with the author and the text, sensation writers proved that they were as cultivated and as competent as any other writer and for that reason, they should also be respected and recognised for their literature.

### **1.1. Successful women writers**

Although women had long been associated with the novel both as readers and writers<sup>1</sup>, the continued development of this genre throughout the nineteenth-century resulted in an increase of women in the literary market as it gave them the chance to carve out respectable careers to support themselves financially. Ellen Wood, Mary Elizabeth

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<sup>1</sup> Fanny Burney (1752-1840) and Maria Edgeworth (1768-1849) are two examples of prolific women writers of the second half of the eighteenth-century.

Braddon and Rhoda Broughton became well-known contemporary writers and their respective works *East Lynne* (1861), *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), and *Cometh Up as a Flower* (1867) were widely circulated and read. Consequently, more women stopped being passive readers to become engaged writers who wanted to express their thoughts and make themselves heard among society. They embraced the novelistic genre because it allowed them to explore alternative ways of understanding domesticity as well as to question the ideas of middle and upper-class femininity and the assumed gender roles.

By the 1860s, the marketplace for professional women writers had already grown exponentially and many writers such as the above mentioned relied on journals and magazines to publish their stories instead of making them circulate exclusively in the three-volume format known as "triple-decker". The former, which involved the serialisation of the novel on instalments, was really successful because it made literature available to those readers who would have found single editions too expensive and unaffordable. Taking this into consideration, the birth of the sensation novel at a prolific and favourable time for literature and for women novelists resulted in its extremely popularity and widespread commercialisation. Furthermore, because of their great demand and mass-production, we can refer to these works as best-sellers of the era.

Unlike former women's literary creation, which was to a certain extent more conservative in tone, the new generation of women writers openly expressed their sympathy and support towards the feminist movement. Hoping that the expansion of women's literature would make them influential enough to achieve real changes within society, these self-assertive novelists used their literature to show their concern for gender equality by discussing subjects such as domesticity or marriage in a more transgressive way. However, rather than their engagement in the literary creation, what was new about this generation of women writers was their role in the production. For instance, the

creation of publishing houses that were run almost entirely by women, such as the Victoria Printing Press, which was founded in 1860 by Emily Faithfull, made it easier for them to distribute their works. Consequently, it was their determination and literacy skills that allowed them to become strong competitors in the literary market of the time.

Additionally, because dramatic tension in sensation novels was mainly build upon the exploration of domestic violence and the challenge of the assumed gender roles, the close association of this genre with women novelists was reinforced. Moreover, it was also presumed that the readership was mostly a female one seeking for entertainment. This allowed to create a special connection between writer and reader. The novelists, who also suffered the consequences of male supremacy, knew what type of intrigues and topics their audience would like to find in these books. Therefore, to a certain extent, the empowered female characters that appear in these stories are based on the innermost desires of real-life and oppressed women that enjoyed imagining all the things that someone like them dared to do in a fictional world (Showalter 1982).

In that sense, the sensation novel was highly subversive because it showed women the way towards independence and emancipation. As Flint suggests, if these novels represented such a threat in Victorian society, it was because: "In many ways, this fiction's most disruptive potential lay not on the emphasis which it placed on woman's capacity to express powerful, emotional reactions, but in the degree to which it made its woman readers consider their positions within their own homes and within society" (1993: 276). For this reason, since the development of the genre coincided with the beginning of a new wave of social changes, the Matrimonial Causes Act (1857), for instance, had just made divorce somewhat easier to obtain, public figures such as Henry Mansel feared that this popular and influential literature would become an extra incentive for women to defy social conventions. As a result, they tried to discredit the revolutionary

ideas that these works conveyed by alienating the them from the real world: “The sensation novel, be it mere trash or something worse, is usually a tale of our own times” (Mansel, 1863: 487).

## **1.2. Mary Elizabeth Braddon and *Lady Audley’s Secret***

Of the many novelists that are usually identified with sensationalism, Mary Elizabeth Braddon and her greatest success *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) is probably one of the first names which comes to our mind. In fact, her popularity was so extensive that a lot of people were familiar with her name even if they had not read her novels. She was not only one of the most prolific writers of the time but also very controversial. Critics and public figures such as Margaret Oliphant (1867) or Revered Francis Paget (1868) severely judged the sensation genre and therefore Braddon’s works because they deemed them inappropriate for opposing Victorian values. For instance, Oliphant wrote an article accusing sensation novel writers of having contributed to the decay of the novelistic genre as well as having had such a negative influence on their audience. Some of her words are as follows:

It may be possible to laugh at the notion that books so entirely worthless, so far as literary merit is concerned, should affect any reader injuriously, though even of this we are a little doubtful; but the fact that this new and disgusting picture of what professes to be the female heart, comes from the hands of women, and is tacitly accepted by them as real, is not in any way to be laughed at. (1867: 260)

As it can be seen, sensation novels such as those by Braddon lacked all the qualities that good literature was supposed to have, but, as she herself highlights, they were nonetheless a matter of concern because, instead of shocking women, they encouraged them to identify themselves with the rebellious heroines portrayed in the stories.

Apart from the negative image that some people had about her, her former career as an actress and her private and “scandalous” lifestyle were only some of the difficulties that she encountered as she attempted to become a serious professional writer.

Nevertheless, the wide public acclaim that she earned as a sensation novelist allowed her to consolidate a position in the literary market and to continue fighting for changes in the industry. It is true that nowadays she is lesser-known amongst modern readers than she used to be, but the fairly renewed academic interest in her shows that her legacy and her figure as a strong female writer are still worth considering.

In general terms, her novels are set in wealthy Victorian households which enable her to explore and criticise gender roles, the institution of marriage and the family model in Victorian Britain. Moreover, one of her major contributions was her resolution to break with literary tradition by creating an ambiguous Angel in the House, in other words, the ideal model of passive femininity. Formerly, it was brunette characters who were morally doubtful and deceitful. Notwithstanding, in the case of *Lady Audley's Secret*, Braddon introduced for the first time a blond and fair-skinned character who was dubious and wicked: "She is the inventor of the fair-haired demon of modern fiction" (Oliphant: 263). Ultimately, because of the presence of mysterious elements and secrets and her treatment of the omniscient-narrator, who seems to play with the reader by constantly withholding relevant information, Braddon can also be considered as a precursor of the subsequent detective novels such as those by Agatha Christie.

Due to its immediate success and popularity, Braddon is most well-known for having written *Lady Audley's Secret*. Even after the decline of the sensation novel and her adaptation to the new trends of the late nineteenth-century, she was still remembered as the author of this praised but also undervalued novel. When it first appeared, it had such a good reception from the middle and upper classes that a year later, it was already circulating in serial form for the lower classes. Furthermore, it was adapted for theatre on several occasions and more recently, the BBC released another adaptation of the novel on Radio (2009).

This fictional work depicts the life of a woman who has the appearance of a devoted and respectable wife but who is capable of performing despicable acts to secure a suitable marriage and a favourable social position. When in need of hiding her deepest secrets, she is strong, resourceful and determinate, qualities that are not compatible with her female condition. For this reason, her nephew Robert Audley decides that he will not rest until he unravels all the mysteries that she withholds because he feels he has the moral duty to prevent a woman like Lady Audley from dragging the name of his family into the mud:

If I *could* let the matter rest; if—if I could leave England for ever, and purposely fly from the possibility of ever coming across another clue to the secret, I would do it—I would gladly, thankfully do it— but I *cannot*! A hand which is stronger than my own beckons me on. (148)

As the novel approaches its ending, all loose threads seem to be accounted for; her secrets are revealed, she is judged for her cruel actions and eventually confined to an asylum. On the other hand, we are told that “good” characters enjoy happy and peaceful lives. Far from being another common type of restorative ending, this unforeseen closure does not seem to be in accordance with the rest of the book. As a matter of fact, it raises more questions instead of providing answers to them and lastly, it prompts the reader to review certain passages of the story before drawing any final conclusions. Lady Audley might not be the best example of a woman who is defined by her honesty and righteousness, but she surely is not any less guilty than the male figures who drag her towards her fatal destiny. Therefore, when thoroughly analysed, the closure in *Lady Audley's Secret* becomes highly significant because it enables to consider the character of Lady Audley from a complete different perspective to that that is portrayed throughout the novel.

## **2. Closure in *Lady Audley's Secret***

In this section I am going to focus on the disruptive ending of *Lady Audley's Secret* as a means to show how it is cleverly used to raise questions on gender roles. As previously mentioned, on the surface, the closure of this novel seems to provide a clear explanation to all the mysteries as well as to ensure that each character obtains what he or she “deserves”. Nevertheless, underneath this restorative façade lies the key to understanding and appreciating the subversive nature of sensation novels, which, to a certain extent, challenged the pillars of the Victorian patriarchal society by giving voice to powerful and strong-minded women who wanted to make a place for themselves in society.

For this purpose, I will briefly expose the complexity of narrative endings so as to show in what ways the closure in *Lady Audley's Secret* is deliberately unconventional to question Lady Audley's guilt. Moreover, concepts such as madness and male hegemony will be further analysed so as to reveal how they were used to keep women, represented by Lady Audley, under control.

### **2.1. Narrative closure and its function**

The notion of closure in narrative is of great significance because it is commonly associated with a sense of completion of a story. The belief that books end when the storyline is successfully resolved is almost inherent to us because as children, we are generally told that narratives have mainly three parts: “introduction, development and conclusion”. What is more, we even internalise well-known closing sentences such as “and they lived happily ever after”. Therefore, when readers start immersing in a book, they often take for granted that at one point, the different plots that the text deals with will be satisfactorily accounted for. According to J. Hillis Miller (1978): “the ending of a narrative or dramatic action is still today spoken of as its resolution or denouement: that is, of course, its untying” (5). In other words, narratives reach their end when it seems

there is nothing more to be explained and, as a result, closures give readers peace of mind since they tend to resolve all the problems.

Nevertheless, this concept is far more complex than it might look because as Alexander Welsh points out: “any action is defined by its ending” (1978: 1). Endings are decisive because they derive from the culmination of a determinate succession of events and choices. Thus, it is only when the result is visible that we can appreciate the adequacy of a particular action. For instance, moments before Lady Audley enters the asylum, she complains about having decided to stay and confront Robert Audley: “I had better have given up at once since *this* was to be the end” (333). Since she has failed, she blames herself for having taken the wrong decision. However, if she had succeeded, she probably would have considered the act of staying very differently. Thus, if narrative endings have the power to prompt the reader to go back and reflect upon certain aspects, it means that they are not so closed and that they can also be used to question some of the ideas that the untying suggested.

Taking this into account, the closure of *Lady Audley's Secret* is especially intriguing because in spite of its moralistic and conventional appearance, it leaves the reader with an uneasy feeling. From the moment that Lady Audley makes her confession and reveals the many secrets that she has been hiding, the narrative moves dramatically towards a chain of events that almost seems impossible to believe: she is judged very harshly, confined to a foreign asylum where she dies, and she is ultimately forgotten. In addition, her first husband, George Talboys, turns out not to be dead and Robert Audley and Clara start a new life together in companionship with him. Just as the narrator reminds us, it is too good an ending for all the dreadful incidents that have taken place: “I hope no one will take objection to my story because the end of it leaves the good people all happy and at peace” (380). Actually, the more one focuses on the concluding chapters, the more it



gives the impression that rather than a satisfying account of events, the closure reads as a strategic device intended to question the explanations the text has just provided. For example, Lady Audley's madness or Robert Audley's triumph.

Furthermore, another aspect that really draws attention is that for a novel which is named after its main character, very little is told about her in the last chapter: "It is more than a year since a black-edged letter, written upon foreign paper, came to Robert Audley, to announce the death of a certain Madame Taylor, who had expired peacefully at Villebrumeuse, dying after a long illness, which Monsieur Val describes as a *maladie de langueur*" (379). This short passage is the only one that makes reference to Lady Audley once she has been locked up in the asylum. It is particularly interesting to notice that the name of Robert Audley appears just before hers, thus suggesting that the male authority that has been responsible for her tragedy is also in control of the narrative. *He* has the information and consequently, it is only through him that the reader will find out about Lady Audley's destiny. Moreover, this passage shows how her identity has been completely erased because she is referred to as "Madame Taylor". She only takes this name when entering the asylum and it clearly reminds us to the English word "tailor", someone who sews or the verb to "sew" or to "adapt": she is forced to abandon her former identity and has to adopt a new one to adjust to this situation.

By focusing on calm and cheerful images, this last chapter pretends to give the impression of a reassuring ending but the language that is used indicates the opposite. In no more than two pages, the word "peace" appears three times: the title of the chapter is "At peace", she dies "peacefully" and the narrator says that the story will leave people "at peace". The reiteration of this word seems to encourage the reader to think that there is nothing else to worry about because the characters who have suffered throughout the book are now free from troubles and merry. Nonetheless, rather than simply stating the

present *status quo*, the insistence of the narrator to use this word suggests that there is a main concern to direct the reader into a specific line of thought, that is, that the story ends happily. Therefore, the word “peace” is to a certain extent a warning about certain ambiguous aspects that the narrator definitely wants the reader to forget, such as Lady Audley’s tragic destiny or George Talboy’s mysterious and unexpected return.

For these reasons, the closure in *Lady Audley’s Secret* is unsettling because it is somewhat contradictory. Despite Lady Audley’s struggle, Robert Audley has succeeded in marginalising her and she has no choice but to accept it. The circumstances by which she is sent away remain ambiguous though. When she decides to defy Robert Audley, she is perfectly aware of the risks that she is taking. She knows that she will probably fail and this is why she refers to her future as her “fate” or “destiny”, just as if it were something that she could predict beforehand: “Fate would not suffer me to be good. My destiny compelled me to a wretch” (302). What is interesting to notice is that if she can foretell her future, it is because there must be something in her condition that allows her to come to this conclusion. Had she been a man, she possibly would not have had to face such persecution nor would the story have ended so horribly for her. Therefore, since it is a male character who sends her away on the grounds of being mad, Lady Audley can be said to suffer the consequences of patriarchal society. She is somewhat unique because she decides not to fulfil the role that is expected of her but, at the same time, the severe punishment which frustrates her plans makes her ordinary because this is the fate that other self-determined women like her would have suffered.

## **2.2. Madness**

One of the most controversial and striking matters in the novel is that of Lady Audley’s madness. It is particularly unsettling because there are no obvious signs of her suffering from a monomania and the explanations that the text provides remain quite ambiguous.

In the first chapter, she is described as a perfect woman: she is beautiful, young, devoted, kind and very accomplished. Everybody admires her because she is “the sweetest girl that ever lived” (11). Despite Robert Audley’s suspicions, it is not until the end that she is deemed mad and ultimately sent to an asylum, an unexpected turn of events which only casts more doubt on the whole situation. The circumstances surrounding Lady Audley might not be very clear but her story is definitely not an unusual one. That other novels such as Charlotte Brönte’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) or Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White* (1859) deal with madness illustrates Victorian society’s deep concern about this issue. It was also a recurrent theme on the newspapers of the time which brought to light real-life cases such as that of Rosina Wheeler during the late 1850s, who had been diagnosed with insanity and locked up in an asylum for three weeks. Consequently, literature became for many female writers such as Braddon herself a space to criticise and denounce how society approached this matter.

In order to understand the complexity of Lady Audley’s case, it is essential to place the notion of madness in its context. As opposed to the modern connotation of the word “mad”, which often is a synonym of “angry”, Victorians associated madness with a mental disorder and for this reason, those who were considered to suffer from mental illnesses were frequently sent to asylums to receive treatment. Moreover, madness was described in terms of binaries. This means that a person was either *sane* or *insane*, but the fine line between the two was a source of controversy. On several occasions, insanity was applied to those attitudes which society rejected, for example, a woman’s refusal to submit to her husband’s will or her emotional distress after childbirth. Additionally, because it was generally associated with women, madness was often referred to as “the female malady”. Nevertheless, Braddon must have been well aware of the difference between what real mental disorder was and what her society presupposed it was and as a

result, she played with this dichotomy through the character of Lady Audley. As critic Elaine Showalter (1976) radically suggested: “As every woman reader must have sensed, Lady Audley’s real secret is that she is *sane*, and moreover, representative” (4). Taking this into account, we must assume that Lady Audley is declared insane not because she really is, but because she is becoming a threat by not following social conventions nor fulfilling society’s expectations.

During the nineteenth-century, women’s position was still subdued to that of the men and they were either regarded as an “Angel in the House” or a “fallen woman”. Susan Gorsky summarises it as follows: “Women who maintain socially acceptable relationships with men are ‘good’; those who defy the norms are ‘bad’” (1992: 3). Therefore, what Braddon does with the character of Lady Audley is very innovative because she is complicating the assumed roles of women. Lady Audley gathers traits of both the Angel in the House and the fallen woman but she also is more than that. She is the perfect wife because her beauty (blond, blue eyes and fair skin) and her qualities (devotedness, kindness) corresponded to the ideal of femininity. However, she is despised because of her rebelliousness and her acts, for instance, committing bigamy, abandoning her child or trying to kill her first husband. In becoming the wife of Sir Robert Audley, Lady Audley establishes a new way of defining femininity, that of a strong and independent woman who is ready to defy social conventions so as to make her own place in this unequal society.

In the novel, there is no unequivocal evidence of Lady Audley’s insanity and yet her fate depends upon Dr. Mosgrave’s diagnosis. Initially, the doctor himself dismisses the possibility that she is mad because he strongly believes that all her actions are logical and reasonable:

There is no evidence of madness in anything that she has done. She ran away from her home, because her home was not a pleasant one, and she left it in the hope of finding a better. There is no madness in that. She committed the crime of bigamy, because by that crime she obtained fortune and position. There is no madness there. When she found herself in a desperate position, she did not grow desperate. She employed intelligent means, and she carried out a conspiracy which required coolness and deliberation in its execution. There is no madness in that. (321)

As the conversation proceeds, Dr. Mosgrave becomes more insistent on her rationality and claims that there is nothing he can do to prove that the lady is mad. This exchange is especially revealing because it shows that Robert Audley is conscious of the law and is clever enough to take advantage of it. According to the Madhouse Act (1828), a person had to be interviewed by two doctors in order to be confined to an asylum. Even if Braddon did not know the details of this Act she was well aware that a visit from a doctor was practically the only thing that was needed to lock someone up in an asylum. Thus, with the intention of getting rid of Lady Audley quietly and quickly, Robert Audley tries to persuade Dr. Mosgrave to admit that she is mad and dangerous.

As a result, Lady Audley is left in a vulnerable position because she has to fight not only against the Law, but also against the medical theories that related madness to the female condition. With the expansion of scientific and medical advances throughout the nineteenth-century, the development of new studies focusing on the female body revealed that women were prone to suffer from mental illnesses as hysteria due to natural processes, namely, menstruation or childbirth. Furthermore, women's biology began to be defined as inherently passive, sensitive and having a maternal instinct, qualities which restricted women to the domestic realm. In this context, scientific determinism became widespread and it was generally presumed that mental diseases such as insanity were hereditary. Going back to Lady Audley's case, we have seen that Dr. Mosgrave has categorically refused to assert that she is mad on the grounds of her reasonable decisions. Nevertheless, it is only when Robert Audley informs him of her mother's madness (which

is also described in ambiguous terms) and his suspicions concerning the death of George Talboys that Dr. Mosgraves' diagnosis dramatically changes:

There is latent insanity! Insanity which might never appear; or which might appear only once or twice in a lifetime (...) The lady is not mad; but she has the hereditary taint in her blood. She has the cunning of madness, with the prudence of intelligence. I will tell you what she is, Mr. Audley. She is dangerous!"(323)

Therefore, another reason why Lady Audley is eventually locked up in an asylum is not because there is solid evidence of her madness, but because of the assumption that madness is hereditary.

Through the character of Lady Audley and the incongruity surrounding her situation, Braddon successfully manages to question and criticise Victorian's approach to insanity. As Jill L. Matus remarks: "If insanity can be understood as the consequence of defective moral agency, behaviour judged deviant then becomes a symptom of moral insanity" (1993: 338). This means that rather than a real mental disease, madness was in some cases, such as that of Rosina Wheeler, a social construct used as a weapon to oppress women for not fulfilling the duties assigned to their gender. Thus, in order to avoid the label of "mad", women had to come to terms with their confinement to the domestic sphere because this is what their biology was supposedly suited for. Moreover, since both the Law and the medical sciences were unquestionable pillars of Victorian society, women had little chance to fight back against this unjust system. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, Braddon accounts for this deplorable situation by denouncing the ruling male hegemonic power, a concept which will be further explored in the following section.

### **2.3. Male hegemony**

When it comes to analysing the extensive character list in *Lady Audley's Secret*, it becomes clear that there is a certain balance between female and male characters. Just as Lady Audley, Alicia Audley and Clara Talboys portray different types of femininity, Robert Audley, George Talboys and Sir Michael Audley depict distinct ways of

understanding masculinity during the second half of the nineteenth-century. Nevertheless, it is also possible to argue that it is a male-dominated novel because male voices are in permanent control of the narrative. For this reason, since Braddon's work gathers traits of domestic realism, the events that take place at Audley Court can be regarded to a certain extent as a representation of society of the time.

Even though the Victorian era was characterised by rapid changes, prosperity and refinement, its society remained a patriarchal one and women's position did not improve almost until the end of the period. At home, the man was head of the family and outside, he was responsible for dealing with political and economic matters. For a long time, men enjoyed freedom and benefited from privileges that were denied to women such as the right to vote or to own property. In that sense, women's privileges were even more remarkably limited within aristocracy. For instance, in the UK only male property holders could vote until 1867 and from that point in time onwards, working class men also had a voice. 61 years would have to pass until women could vote on equal terms with men in 1928.

Moreover, it was during this time that the distinct roles of men and women became firmly established. Because of their "inherent" characteristics, men were said to belong to the public sphere whereas women were restricted to the domestic realm. As a result, women found themselves in a vulnerable situation not only because men had control over them, but also because a woman's life depended entirely on a male figure. As Gorsky points out: "women were essentially men's property: before marriage, a woman's life was determined by her father; after marriage, by her husband (...). A woman's social status and economic well-being depended on the man in her life, and, to a very large degree, her happiness depended on his goodwill" (1992: 2). Gorsky's statement summarises in some measure Lady Audley's story because she is an ambitious woman who is well aware of

her social inferiority but who is ready to perform debatable acts to prosper in life. Despite her efforts to succeed, the fact that she is eventually subdued by a ruthless and also morally ambiguous patriarchal system, represented by male characters such as George Talboys, Sir Michael Audley and Robert Audley, allows us to assert that *Lady Audley's Secret* is certainly a male-dominated novel.

To start with, although George Talboys is presented as a victim of the deliberate and careful manipulation of Lady Audley, he actually is the cause of her future misfortunes. Soon after George returns to England, he finds out in a newspaper that his wife, Helen Talboys (Lady Audley) is “dead” and from that moment onwards, the narrative focuses on the deep depression that follows this discovery. Even though she is not really dead, the emphasis on his suffering is used to accentuate Lady Audley’s wickedness, as she has “destroyed his life”. However, the confession that she is forced to make at the end of the novel reveals another side of the story that is simply ignored by both Robert and Sir Michael Audley. She explains that she married George because she loved him but when they started to have economic problems, he abandoned her with their child. Moreover, she remarks that she was left with nothing more than a letter explaining that he had run away to seek fortune. Far from being an act of sacrifice as the narrative suggests, George’s depart is very immature and selfish because as mentioned, women at the time depended economically on their husbands, which means that Lady Audley was left with no resources whatsoever to survive. Any passive woman would probably have accepted her fate silently, but Lady Audley did not do so. Having waited for three years for his return, she confesses to herself: “I have a right to think that he is dead, or that he wishes me to believe him dead, and his shadow shall not stand between me and prosperity” (301). Thus, if she marries Sir Michael Audley it is because she is determined to rebuild her life after George has abandoned her and not because she is disloyal to her first husband.



Nevertheless, since these events are portrayed from George's perspective, Lady Audley's success is simply seen as an atrocity.

Furthermore, despite both Lady Audley and Sir Michael Audley remarry to obtain a personal benefit, her second marriage is considered a crime, and his, a right. On the one hand, Lady Audley confesses that she married the baronet in the hope of achieving prosperity because her first husband had abandoned her. As touching as her story might be, her motives are simply dismissed because society can only see that she is guilty of committing bigamy. On the other hand, the fifty-six-year-old widow Sir Michael Audley marries the governess Lucy Graham because she enables him to revive memories of his blissful youth. As the narrator remarks, she is the door through which he experiences what real love and fierce passion are for the first time and he also emphasises that the union with his former wife was nothing more than a marriage of convenience. Nevertheless, since their love story is described from Sir Michael's perspective, the idea that Lady Audley is an opportunist is reinforced as the narrative progresses. It is only by paying special attention to the words of other characters, in this case Lady Audley's maid Phoebe, that we can unveil the hidden side of the baronet, who wants Lucy to be his wife as she is the perfect partner to attend public events: "You should have seen her while we were abroad, with a crowd of gentlemen hanging about her, Sir Michael not jealous of them, only proud to see her so much admired" (29). Therefore, Sir Michael does not marry Lucy because he truly loves her but because he wants to take advantage of her physical traits. For this reason, Elizabeth Langland's statement: "Both Lady Audley and Audley court are available for public viewing" (2000: 9) is highly relevant because it suggests that Sir Michael treats women as objects that can be possessed and exhibited and that he can do so because he represents authority.

Finally, underneath Robert Audley's heroic façade lies an egocentric and misogynist man who is only interested in seeking justice for his own benefit. Initially, he is described as a "care-for-nothing" and unambitious barrister who rejects social conventions by neither working nor marrying. As a result, that he turns into a "skilful detective" who saves the reputation of the Audleys as well as an exemplary citizen is particularly striking because this radical change seems to be triggered by his obsession to defeat the increasing threat that Lady Audley, or rather, the entire female community, represents, which conventionally should be submissive and quiet: "I hate women (...) They're bold, brazen, abominable creatures, invented for the annoyance and destruction of their superiors. Look at this business of poor George's! It's all woman's work from one end to the other" (178). Nevertheless, if his misogynist side or his abusive power over Lady Audley are disregarded, it is because the narrative focuses on his "goodness" and his sense of moral duty towards his family. As Ann-Marie Dunbar alerts, by subduing Lady Audley, Robert becomes the hero of the story, thus representing the decisive victory of patriarchy:

The novel's conclusion witnesses the detective not out of work but ensconced in a new, profitable line of work, as a practising barrister. This peculiar mismatch between the bulk of the novel and its ending makes more sense when one realizes that Lady Audley's confession is crucial to Robert's professional ascendancy (...) The novel subsequently becomes the story of Robert's professional development. (2014: 108-109)

#### **2.4. Lady Audley's guilt**

The subtext of the novel and especially its closure are two elements worth considering because they enable to see another side of Lady Audley than that which is depicted on the surface. What they reveal is that she is too complex a character to be solely judged by applying the dichotomy of good and evil. Thus, one of the first conclusions that can be drawn from the analysis of the ending and concepts such as madness and male hegemony is that her guilt is in fact a consequence of the expectations and constraints that society has imposed on her gender.

Lady Audley is determined to perform outrageous acts because it is the only way she has of trying to escape from the limitations of her female condition. That she goes as far as to abandon her child, burn the inn where Robert Audley is staying and to attempt to kill her first husband is a sign of her utter despair against the impossibility of securing a comfortable and successful life for herself. Moreover, since the story is told from a male perspective, she is the only one who is punished and identified as a criminal for committing ignoble deeds: “What she had to tell she told in a cold, hard tone, very much the tone in which some criminal, dogged and sullen to the last, might have confessed to a jail chaplain” (299).

Additionally, the resoluteness and cleverness she displays to climb the social ladder is the reason why she is labelled “madwoman”. From the moment she realises that her husband George has put in danger her financial security and comfort, she resolves not to give up and to fight for achieving prosperity. Nevertheless, her attempt to put an end to women’s passive role and dependence on their husbands is sufficient proof for male characters of her deviance of common behaviour, which must be subdued if social order is to preserve.

Therefore, taking into consideration the subtle nuances and ambiguities that surround Lady Audley’s case, it can be argued that she is by all means a victim of an oppressive patriarchal society. In this context, her choice of defying the ideals of femininity as well as paving the way for other women to break with the attitudes assigned to gender roles is doomed to failure from the very beginning, an outcome which proves that, in real life, self-determined women had little chance of succeeding in life if they were to rebel against the “duties” that they were expected to perform. Consequently, just as the title of chapter VI in volume III, “Buried Alive”, suggests, Lady Audley’s imprisonment in the asylum can also be understood metaphorically as women’s confinement both to the domestic

sphere and to their female condition. However, even if she does not triumph, her story would have prompted readers of the time to reflect on the values endorsed throughout the Victorian period.

### **3. Conclusion**

The exponential growth of the novelistic genre throughout the nineteenth-century gave way to the development of the subversive sensation novel in the 1860s. Despite its widespread popularity, sensationalism arouse great controversy among conservatives and critics of the time precisely because it questioned the very same pillars of the Victorian era, namely, moral values and the notion of domesticity. By introducing scandalous elements such as bigamy, crimes, secrets and unconventional heroines to respectable households, women writers attempted both to defy the assumed gender roles and to fight for equal rights through their literature. In this context, Mary Elizabeth Braddon's immediate success *Lady Audley's Secret* became the role model of the sensation school since it openly opposed social conventions.

As this paper has argued, this novel is especially revolutionary because it cleverly makes use of the apparently restorative and unexpected ending to question Lady Audley's guilt and, to a larger extent, to criticise gender roles. Even though it is traditional and moralistic in tone, the closure is unsettling and contradictory as it is not in harmony with the storyline. While characters who perform their social "duty" such as Robert Audley are rewarded with merry lives, the reasons for Lady Audley to be punished and sent away remain unclear. Thus, it is through the disruptive denouement that the reader is prompt to reconsider Lady Audley's situation and tragic fate.

Furthermore, Lady Audley's efforts to prosper in life are unequivocally frustrated by the ruling male hegemonic power that takes advantage of the ambiguity surrounding the notion of madness. On the one hand, as Dr. Mosgrave states, there is no clear evidence of

Lady Audley's monomania and yet, she is sent to the asylum on the grounds of her "latent insanity". What this proves is that rather than being a dangerous madwoman, she is a threat to society for not fulfilling the passive role that is expected of her and, therefore, she has to be subdued to restore social order. On the other hand, through the comparison of Lady Audley with her male companions, this paper has shown how all of them are capable of performing dubious and even cruel acts. However, it is because of the established patriarchal system that male characters are presented as good-hearted heroes whereas she is depicted as a wicked, deceitful and manipulative woman who must be severely punished.

Finally, Lady Audley is a victim of the society of her time because she is deprived of the right to decide who she wants to be as well as harshly judged for seeking gender equality. The main reasons why she eventually fails to succeed in her pursuit of a better life are her female condition and the threat she represents to social order due to her determination and ingenuity. Nevertheless, the story of this duplicitous but appealing woman will surely continue to amuse, shock and entertain readers for a long time.

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