Mary Elizabeth Braddon

Introduction

"You have conquered--a MADWOMAN!"*

Sensation Fiction

*Lady Audley's Secret* is thought of as one of the first sensation fiction novels. The novel was published in 1862, and in 1865 Henry James called Braddon "the founder of the sensation novel". Braddon's novel was widely abused despite its popularity; sensation fiction was not considered good literature because it was not overtly moralistic or realistic. Some of the themes common in sensation fiction are women abandoning their children, domestic abuse, crime, murder, adultery, and bigamy. Ironically, these seemingly unrealistic topics are placed in very real settings, such as a garden, an inn, or a normal household. Sensation fiction was thought of as unsuitable for people, young women in particular, to read because of the cliff-hangers, the suspense, and the tingling sensation that accompanies a combined emotional and mental experience of reading a story that deals with the extraordinary occurring in the mundane.


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Jean Rhys' Biography
**The Life of Mary Elizabeth Braddon**

Mary Elizabeth Braddon was born to Fanny White and Henry Braddon on October 4, 1835. She had a turbulent childhood as the youngest child in a financially distraught family. Mary had two older siblings, Edward and Margaret. Braddon's father was a solicitor who had financial issues; Henry separated from his wife and children when Mary was five, leaving her a child in a single parent family. Mary became very close with her mother, who remained her confidant until her death in 1868. Mary's childhood was untraditional--as a child of a single mother, she and her siblings moved frequently, and Fanny had to rely on the charity of family members to maintain a household. Despite her unusual upbringing, Mary's mother made sure she had a decent education, allowing her to begin to write stories at the young age of 11. Braddon was taught by her mother or by a governess.

The next stage of Mary's life was just as untraditional as her childhood. Mary became an actress in 1952, which was a position looked down upon by Victorian society because of the late hours and the position of the female body as something on display. To protect her family and herself, Mary used the stage name "Mary Seyton" for seven years. Although she was born in London, Mary only acted there for once season; she mainly acted in provincial towns, such as Winchester and Southampton. Fanny travelled with Mary for her protection and to maintain Mary's reputation as a nice middle-class woman.

Mary used her stage name, Mary Seyton, to publish her poetry in newspapers in the late 1850's. Braddon wrote under commission for her patron, John Gilby; however, Gilby stifled Mary's wishes of writing plays and novels by only commissioning epic poems. Mary met John Maxwell, a magazine publisher for working class and middle class audiences, while she was writing for Gilby in London. Braddon's early stories and her first novel *The Trail of the Serpent* (first published serially as *Three Times Dead* in 1860) were published by Maxwell in 1861. Her success through Maxwell allowed Mary to cut ties with Gilby and move past his poetry.

Braddon's life with Maxwell seems to be reflected in her novel *Lady Audley's Secret*. Braddon and Maxwell began an affair in 1861, although he was married and had five children. However, his wife, Mary Anne Crowley Maxwell, was in an Irish mental institution. Braddon and her mother moved in with Maxwell in late 1861, and had four sons and two daughters with him by 1870. Braddon and Maxwell's relationship was generally tolerated in the artistic circles in which they were most present, but there was a plethora of gossip and criticism of their relationship. In 1864, Maxwell put a notice in the newspapers that they were married; unfortunately, Maxwell's brother-in-law responded to the announcement by writing to the newspapers that Maxwell was still legally married. Braddon's novels *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd* suffered the consequences of moral criticism of her life being transplanted onto her novels. Fortunately, these novels were already a hit, having been published in 1862, years before the moral criticism became personal. In 1874, Maxwell's wife died, allowing him to finally marry Braddon after over a decade of living together. With her reputation restored, Braddon enjoyed a social status in the 1880s and 1890s that allowed her to bump shoulders with the likes of Oscar Wilde and Bram Stoker. Mary continued to write and edit. She died of a cerebral hemorrhage in 1915.

Topics for Discussion

Themes

Fallenness
Lady Audley often embodies the characteristics of fallenness, both physically and socially. Lynda Nead's argument about adulteresses in England notes the ways in which adultery and fallenness were intertwined: “[T]he adulteress is defined in terms of her deviation from the feminine ideal, and secondly, deviancy in woman is organized around concepts of weakness, fall, guilt and punishment” (67). Lady Audley's adultery, then, marks her as a fallen woman because she strays from the feminine ideal. Physically Lady Audley is "marked" or bruised by George, which both Robert Audley and Sir Michael make note of (122). And because this physical marker of abuse is kept secret, it lends itself to a fallen woman interpretation, that sensuous, unchaste women attempt to hide their indiscretions. Robert Audley often refers to Lady Audley as an actress, a public, lewd career for women which placed them explicitly within the public sphere and thrust them before a crowd of male gazes. Actresses might also be associated with prostitutes, and thus sexual activity, in that they both use their bodies for entertainment, place themselves indiscreetly before the public eye, and lose their respectability as a result. Furthermore, both Robert and Lady Audley herself refer to her as a "madwoman", perhaps an allusion to Bertha Mason in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, like Bertha who burns down Thornfield, Lady Audley burns down the inn Robert is staying at. In Jane Eyre, Rochester describes himself as a man "bound to a wife at once intemperate and unchaste" (397; emphasis added). Lady Audley, then, in labeled a "madwoman" and likely associated with the unchaste, violent Bertha, takes on the connotations of fallenness. Lady Audley "falls" when she betrays her husband and commits bigamy, thereby losing her feminine virtue. She is powerful, manipulative, conniving, secretive, and sinister in her ambitions. By betraying the ideals of her sex she is tainted. Finally, Lady Audley is often described with flame imagery. Flames burn in her eyes, a sign of passion and violence; as Lady Audley stands inside the inn, her mere physical presence seems to will the candle's flame to waver.

Bibliography:


*Angel in the House*
Frequently Lady Audley is described in ways that mark her as the ideal Victorian female: the domestic angel. Her room is referred to as a “fairy bower” and her features are light, airy, and angelic. She bounces from room to room, speaks pleasantly but without much substance, and attends to her husband’s every wish. Yet the novel appears to complicate the “angel in the house” model, by portraying both Lady Audley and Clara Talboys as women with authority and power (particularly over men, which Robert Audley frequently laments). The novel appears to strip this ideal, portraying Lady Audley as a woman who seems to embody these qualities at the same time that she uses this role in order to hide her inner darkness. Her actions and speech are a facade, in which she acts her part in the hopes of duping those around her. It becomes a manipulative technique.

Masculinity

While the novel provides multiple interpretations of Victorian femininity, it likewise contains various, complex models of masculinity. There are men seduced by women, men tricked by women, naive men, intellectual men. Robert Audley, for example, is a perplexing character—an idle gentleman who undergoes an aggressive transformation. Immersing himself in law and the pursuit of justice, Robert becomes an ideal, heroic figure. Yet the catalyst for his transformation is George Talboys. Robert’s seemingly “ideal” masculinity is complicated with undertones of homoeroticism and male bonding. For example, Robert’s love for Clara Talboys derives from her likeness to her brother. Through his intense feelings for Clara, Robert indirectly, sexually connects with George. And while his profession allows him agency and control, he also feels, at times, helpless—led by divine intervention or destiny: “Surely this must be God’s judgment upon the purposeless, vacillating life I led up to the seventh day of last September. Surely this awful responsibility has been forced upon me in order that I may humble myself to an offended Providence, and confess that a man cannot choose his own life” (374). The novel asks: Are men driven by outside forces (e.g., woman’s moral influence—Clara Talboys, God’s Providence) or do men rule their fate? Can they be chivalric heroes or do women play a greater role in a man’s success?

Modern Art and the Pre-Raphaelites
The scene in which Robert views the picture of Lady Audley is perhaps one of the most intriguing and powerful moments in the novel. Her picture is both pleasant and sinister, much like Dorian Grey's portrait in Oscar Wilde's novel. Here the novel plays on the symbolism and sensual characteristics of Pre-Raphaelite art. The Pre-Raphaelites were founded in 1848 by Hunt, Millais, and Rossetti. * Rossetti, in particular, may be noted for incorporating both sinister and sensual elements in his art. An excellent example of the beautiful combined with the frightful occurs in an illustration (1857) by Rossetti for Tennyson's The Palace of Art. In the image, Saint Cecilia plays the organ while an angel crouches over her from behind. But it is unclear whether the angel is kissing or biting the saint's forehead. Julia Thomas remarks that this encounter is a "troubling one" and that the saint "is shown in the midst of an ecstatic swoon that, to all appearances, is not merely spiritual" (59). Similarly, Lady Audley's portrait is a mixture of feminine grace and menacing power; all at once Robert is confronted with an image that portrays two different entities, two co-existing yet unsettling states of being. Having been painted by a Pre-Raphaelite, her portrait is highly symbolic and, as a result, reveals that there is more to the picture (and, therefore, Lady Audley herself) than merely the paint on the canvas.


*See Additional Materials for more information on the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood

The Uncanny and Doubling
In his essay on the uncanny, Freud notes the connection between the words heimlich and unheimlich. The word "heimlich", Freud notes, can mean what is familiar, friendly, and intimate, but also what is concealed and secretive (124-128). Uncanniness, Freud explains, may be both the familiar and the sinister, both home and the unknown. Uncanniness is related to "all that is terrible-to all that arouses dread and creeping horror" (122). It "belongs to two set of ideas, which without being contradictory are yet very different: on the one hand it means what is familiar and congenial, and on the other, that which is concealed and kept out of sight" (129). One example Freud gives for the uncanny is omnipotence of thoughts. For example, if a person wishes his friend were dead, and he is suddenly found the next day murdered, he experiences the uncanny. It is because "we do not feel quite sure of our new set of beliefs, and the old ones still exist within us ready to seize upon any confirmation. As soon as something actually happens in our lives which seems to support the old, discarded beliefs we get a feeling of the uncanny; and it is as though we were making a judgment something like this: "So, after all, it is true that one can kill a person by merely desiring his death!" (156). Lady Audley embodies Freud's characteristics of the uncanny, for she acts as a known "type" of ideal Victorian femininity while hiding her darker taints of madness. The issue of doubling occurs because Lady Audley essentially has two distinct personalities, two separate modes of being, between which she switches back and forth. Also, the novel remarks on the unusual physical similarities between Lady Audley and Phoebe. Madness and doubling are externally manifested through the comparison of Lady Audley and Phoebe.


Helen (Lady Audley) vs. Helen of Troy

"In Greek Mythology, the most beautiful woman in Greece...was abducted by the hero Theseus who hoped in time to marry her. Later, her fatal beauty was the direct cause of the Trojan War" (http://www.history.com/encyclopedia.do?articleId=211640). Lady Audley, like Helen of Troy, was judged upon her magnificent beauty which in both cases proved to be fatal. Wars and battles have been fought over women since the beginning of time and in the cases of these two femme fatale women, with good reason. They used their looks, to achieve a win on their own personal battles, and used the power their beauty gave them over men, to push boundaries to the limit and cause death and devastation where necessary. Their beauty won them admiration and the were able to hide the intellect behind it.

Law & Circumstantial Evidence
The Law and circumstantial evidence play a large part in this novel. Up until the confession of Lady Audley of what she had done, Robert is only working with circumstantial evidence, which only suggests that Lady Audley is the culprit. It is this large string of evidence which eventually sends her to the madhouse, but it raises the question of, IF this had been brought to court, would this circumstantial evidence be enough to get a guilty verdict? Robert Audley's evidence only suggests that Lucy Audley and Helen Talboys are one and the same; the motive of the disappearance of George is only speculation with no proof that George was actually murdered by Lady Audley. If this had been taken to trial, along with the embarrassment of having a "madwoman" in the Audley family, Lucy Audley f/k/a Helen Talboys, probably would have been let off with a not guilty verdict. This theme of circumstantial evidence also shows a changing perception to law. One event alone to send her away, but a string of events provides means, motive as well as her opportunity. One could also argue that in Robert being the primary judge in deciding her punishment, he did not act in a fair manner. Lucy Audley was sent away for a crime she did not commit. George Talboys was alive and well, and Lucy's biggest crime was attempt to murder. Does the punishment fit the crime?

Manipulation of Madness

In the last volume of the novel much is made of madness and no one manipulates it more than Lady Audley herself. She uses madness as a weapon and a shield. When she is in danger of being exposed by Robert Audley, she waves madness around like a sword, trying to cause harm to Robert by both making him discredible and causing irreparable damage between Mr. Audley and Robert. When Pheobe accuses her of setting fire to the inn, Pheobe is a madwoman. However, when she realizes that she has been exposed, she uses madness as a shield to protect herself. She must be excused from all her behavior because she is is a madwoman. She had no control over her actions, she has a sickness and she must be taken care of.

Keys
The keys symbolize another kind of power Lady Audley has over what occurs within Audley Court, that she knows who has access to her bedroom and when. It also signifies exactly what it is: a key. When she holds the keys to her bedroom and to Audley Court, she holds the "key" to her secrets and can keep them locked away where no one can find them. The keys also signify a transference of power. Alicia originally was the mistress of the house, free to do as she liked and responsible for the keys. However when Lucy comes to power, Alicia is usurped in more ways than one. She no longer has the keys nor does she have the power associated with the keys, but beyond that she loses her fathers affection to Lucy and she loses Robert's attention to Lucy. Everything that was Alicia's transfers to Lucy, starting with the keys.

Form is Content

It looked so like and yet so unlike; it was as if you had burned strange-coloured fires before my lady's face, and by their influence brought out new lines and new expressions never seen in it before. The perfection of feature, the brilliancy of colouring, were there; but I suppose the painter had copied quaint mediaeval monstrousities until his brain had grown bewildered, for my lady, in his portrait of her, had something of the aspect of a beautiful fiend (107, Vol. I Ch. VIII; emphasis added).

This passage, where Robert stares at the unusual portrait, combines a multitude of themes: the uncanny, doubling, passion, and monstrocity. Her image is uncanny, for it is "so like and yet so unlike," so familiar and yet somehow unknown. Here the aesthetic functions as a symbolic image, revealing internal meaning hidden by an external "paint" or mask. The reference to mediaeval monstrousities, which the pre-Raphaelites were known for painting in order to comment on contemporary social problems, turns Lady Audley into a monster, an "other." By being referenced to the middle ages and monstrocity she is also compared to the monstrous races or the Jews and Saracens often depicted as bestial, cannabalistic, and sexual in medieval illustrations. Her "taint" derives, therefore, from her bestiality, violence, and "excessive" sexuality. The oxymoron "beautiful fiend" nicely summarizes Lady Audley's split personality and the novel's preoccupation with doubling. Here beauty and monstrocity are conflated. The "angel in the house" trope is complicated, and the "ideal" form of beauty is tainted with the grotesque. The novel dares to ask how our eyes might deceive us, and how "ideal" beauty may not coincide with female virtue or morality.

Her crimson dress, exaggerated like all the rest in the strange picture, hung about her in folds that looked like flames, her fair head peeping out of the lurid mass of colour, as if out of a raging furnace. Indeed, the crimson dress, the sunshine on her face, the red gold gleaming in the yellow hair, the ripe scarlet of the pouting lips, the glowing colours of each accessory of the minutely-painted background, all combined to render the first effect of the painting by no means an agreeable one (107, Vol. I Ch. VIII; emphasis added).
The next section of this "portrait scene" describes Audley in flame imagery, dressed and illuminated in reds and golds. The folds of her dress look like flames; she is adorned in fire, connoting passion. And it is this excessive passion, this complete adornment in fire, that marks her as fallen and dangerous; for the painting is "by no means an agreeable one." With this flame imagery she is (as aforementioned in Topics for Discussion) compared to Bertha in Jane Eyre. Both women are condemned for their deviation from feminine virtue, their excessive emotions. According to Lynda Nead, "Female adultery is...represented as a consequence of abnormal and excessive sexual feelings; desires which are defined as commonplace in man are treated as a form of madness in woman" (50). The words "raging furnace" to describe her face is a powerful image, connoting violence ("raging"), fire, passion, and instability. A "raging furnace" implies wild, burning fire. Thus Audley is portrayed as uncontained, willful, unpredictable, and untrustworthy. The "lurid mass of colour" partially hiding her face likewise fits this interpretation; it is a "mass," loose and wild.

Bibliography:

...[W]omen are never lazy. They don't know what it is to be quiet...If they can't agitate the universe and play at ball with the hemispheres, they'll make mountains of warfare and vexation out of domestic molehills; and social storms in household teacups. Forbid them to hold forth upon the freedom of nations and the wrongs of mankind, and they'll quarrel with Mrs. Jones about the shape of a mantle or the character of a small maid-servant. To call them the weaker sex is to utter a hideous mockery. They are the stronger sex, the noisier, the more persevering, the most self-assertive sex. They want freedom of opinion, variety or occupation, do they? Let them have it. Let them be lawyers, doctors, preachers, teachers, soldiers, legislators-anything they like-but let them be quiet-if they can (229, Vol. II Ch. VI; Robert Audley's thoughts)

Here the novel reiterates arguments spoken by Victorian feminists of the 1860s; these feminists asserted their right to work in masculine fields. While the novel is conflicted with its representation of femininity, this passage argues for a more radical view of a woman's work. Women are portrayed as strong—"they are the stronger sex"—independent, assertive, and opinionated. While the content of the passage may appear radical, its tone is muted by Robert, who only seems to speak these things because he is irritated by women's incessant chatter. The novel attempts to mediate between maintaining its readership (not wanting to offend middle class readers by radically opposing the norm) and arguing for social reform. To do this, this passage equates social turmoil with domestic turmoil—prevent women from fighting for "the freedom of nations and the wrongs of mankind" and they will quarrel in the home. By equating the two spheres, noting the instability women can cause if not allowed to perform public service, the novel speaks with a feminist, though not offensive, voice. As marriages were thought to be microcosms of the nation and stable marriages were thought to lead to prosperity and happiness, here women are posited as determinants of stability and strength. Happy women make happy homes; and happy (i.e., stable) homes make for a strong nation. Silly, the novel connects domestic happiness to women's employment, arguing for women to enter the professional field if only to keep quiet. By noting the annoyances of women suppressed at home, the novel argues for women to venture into the public sphere and take up professions (if only to spare a man's ear from female complaints). By trivializing such a radical argument—e.g., "social storms in household teacups," an effective rhetorical strategy, combining humor with serious subject matter—more readers are susceptible to it.

Lucy Audley, with her disordered hair in a pale haze of yellow gold about her thoughtful face, the flowing lines of her soft muslin dressing-gown falling in straight folds to her feet, and clasped at the waist by a narrow circlet of agate links, might have served as a model for a mediaeval saint, in one of the tiny chapels hidden away in the nooks and corners of a grey old cathedral, unchanged by Reformation or Cromwell; and what saintly martyr of the Middle Ages could have borne a holier aspect than the man whose grey beard lay upon the dark silken coverlet of the stately bed? (237, Vol. II Ch. VII).
Here the novel shows again how angel-like and fragile Lady Audley is with her yellow hair and soft muslin dress, but this time it changes the tone of her slightly in that her hair is disordered and she is distressed, and also that her dress is falling in straight folds rather than curvy, flowing ones, indicating the sharpness and straight-edged character she has taken on at this particular moment. Because she is compared with a saint also indicates her sorrow at this time, as Sir Michael is sick in bed. The color grey is used to describe the cathedral she would be associated with, a color that’s very drab, dark, dreary, and really without color at all. Sir Michael’s beard is also shown as being grey, because he is sick and is therefore dreary and cheerless.

I do not say that Robert Audley was a coward, but I will admit that shiver of horror, something akin to fear, chilled him to the heart, as he remembered the horrible things that have been done by women, since that day upon which Eve was created to be Adam’s companion and help-meet in the garden of Eden. What if this woman’s hellish power of dissimulation should be stronger than the truth, and crush him? (289, Vol. II Ch. XI).

This passage evokes the anxiety of woman’s origin. Here Robert is clearly frightened by the possibility of female betrayal, dating back to Eve—she who lead Adam astray. Like Lady Audley’s mental illness which is thought to be generational (a common belief by most Victorians), woman’s loyalty is questioned because of her connection to Eve. In comparing Adam and Eve to Robert and Lady Audley, Robert surfaces fundamental questions about a woman’s origins, her sanity, and her health. While the novel perpetually questions whether madness is inherited or the result of excessive feeling, this passage awakens anxieties about clinical madness and biology. If all women are descended from Eve, then is it possible for the entire female sex to have some hidden taints of madness? The very word “dissimulation” connotes secrecy and disguise (relating to the theme of Freud’s uncanny, as well). And Robert, in remembering “the horrible things that have been done by women” since man and woman’s creation, implies that women have the potential, the power, to manipulate, to lie, to betray. Clinical madness is described with religious terminology; Robert attempts to explain madness through religion, seeing it as an unnatural possession that may generationally affect the female sex. Describing it as a “hellish power,” Robert posits Lady Audley’s agency as evil and destructive, and the word “hellish” arises interesting connotations for Lady Audley—e.g., fire, passion, bestiality (what is forbidden, taboo). The word “crush” in reference to Lady Audley also refers to physical violence, brutality, and immense strength-unnatural qualities for a “domestic angel.” These unnatural qualities make Lady Audley all the more fearful; for what appears to be familiar is, in actuality, monstrous and, therefore, terrifying. There is also a fear of deception triumphing over law—that Lady Audley’s “dissimulation should be stronger than the truth.”

Did she remember the day in which that fairy dower of beauty had first taught her to be selfish and cruel, indifferent to the joys and sorrows of others, cold-hearted and capricious, greedy of admiration, exacting and tyrannical, with that pretty woman’s tyranny which is the worst of despotisms? Did she trace every sin of her life back to its true source? and did she discover that poisoned fountain in her own exaggerated estimate of the value of a pretty face? Surely, if her thoughts wandered so far along the backward current of her life, she must have repented in bitterness and despair of that first day in which the master-passions of her life had become her rulers, and the three demons of Vanity, Selfishness, and Ambition had joined hands and said, “This woman is our slave; let us see what she will become under our guidance” (311, Vol. II Ch. XIII).
Once again the novel poses questions about the origins of madness. In this passage, like many others, the novel does not seem interested in finding a solution so much as it is interested in posing questions. Here Lady Audley ponders whether her madness derives from her demonic desires—those censured by Victorian society as deviating and unnatural—and whether she is the aggressor or victim of such demons. Furthermore, she refers to her sin's "true source." Such an ambiguous word can have multiple possibilities of meaning. For example, is her "true source" the first day she gave in to her selfish, ambitious desires? Is this "true source" the day Eve acquired knowledge and led Adam astray? Is the "true source" the day she awakened and felt those taints of madness, generationally passed down, awaken, which in turn made her cruel and selfish? We are left wondering, like Lady Audley, what is madness and what are its origins. The reference to "master-passions" connects excessive feeling to deviancy, as Lynda Nead has argued. By allowing herself to be won over by passion and her pretty face, Lady Audley seems condemned to insanity. This passage also censures superficial beauty over inner character. The novel asks, "Did she discover that poisoned fountain in her own exaggerated estimation of a pretty face?" (311; emphasis added). Female beauty is valued too highly, and this personal love of beauty can lead to selfishness and narcissism. But while Lady Audley is often portrayed as a manipulative aggressor by Robert, she is placed here as a helpless victim, made a slave to her "three demons." Rather than blame her, we are meant to pity her. For what are seemingly familiar characteristics of womanhood—beauty, appearance, charm, and pretty manners—are now horrifying.

Madhouses are large and only too numerous; yet surely it is strange they are not larger, when we think of how many helpless wretches must beat their brains against this hopeless persistency of the orderly outward world, as compared with the storm and tempest, the riot and confusion within:—when we remember how many minds must tremble upon the narrow boundary between reason and unreason, mad to-day and sane to-morrow, mad yesterday and sane to-day (227, Vol. II Ch. VI).

It is this fascination with madness in the 18th century that really brings this topic to the front lines in this novel. It is interesting that almost every character at some point of the novel is also called out to be "mad" which can suggest that perhaps all of us are a little mad. There are all moments of "confusion within" and times where "minds must tremble upon the narrow boundary between reason and unreason". It is this speculation of why madhouses are not larger which brings this question into mind. Can Lady Audley, genuinely be classified as a "madwoman" when in fact all people at one point or another are playing at a balancing act of reason and unreason?

She had flung the horrible burden of an almost unendurable secret off her shoulders, and her selfish sensuous nature resumed its mastery of her. She slept, peacefully nestled in her downy bed, under the soft mountain of silken coverlet, and in the somber shade of the green velvet curtains. She had ordered her maid to sleep on a low couch in the same room, and she had also ordered that a lamp should be kept burning all night (378, Vol. III Ch. V).

This passage shows how important the superficial world is to Lady Audley. She has revealed her deepest and darkest secret and instead of fearing what consequences lie ahead she is able to sleep peacefully. She is able to sleep peacefully because she is in a "downy bed" with a "silken coverlet" surrounded by "velvet curtains". Here settings are remarkably luscious, sensuous and glamorous for a woman who is a perceived murderess and madwoman. This passage shows that this superficiality will always be associated with Lady Audley. This need for the finer things is what motivates her and it is only when she has them she is at peace. The words that Braddon chooses also has an effect on the reader. Braddon continually associates Lady Audley with words and characteristics that are considered positive, yet in continually applying them to a madwoman, the reader begins to see them as negative. So just as the charming blonde ringlets and childlike beauty go from being pleasing to sinister, Lady Audley’s lush surroundings go from being comfortable to excessive.
My lady's yellow curls flashed hither and thither like wandering gleams of sunshine on these busy days of fare-well. Her great blue eyes had a pretty mournful look, in charming unison with the soft pressure of her little hand, and that friendly, though perhaps rather stereotyped speech, in which she told her visitors how she was so sorry to lose them, and how she didn't know what she should do till they came once more to enliven the Court by their charming society (153-154, Vol. I Ch. XVI).

This passage depicts Lady Audley as almost everyone sees her. "Gleams of sunshine," something warm, bright, and wonderful on a spring day, describes her hair while her blue eyes are said to be pretty and mournful. This is a slight contradiction to her normally charismatic and bouncy character, but goes along with her playing forlorn pieces on the piano. These things show more of an inside picture of who Lady Audley really is, rather than the appearance she puts up for everyone. She is also shown saddened by not being able to see these specific visitors but once a year, and pressing the visitors’ hands with hers. The word “charming” is used to describe this pressing, as well as to describe their company, and is significant because in Lady Audley’s case it’s a manipulation tactic. She uses the word as an adjective to their company to make them feel good about themselves, and because it's used to show the unification of her pressuring hand and her words we can see that the visitors agree and are glad for the sense of charm.

The sly old benchers laughed at the pleasing fiction; but they all agreed that Robert Audley was a good fellow; a generous-hearted fellow; rather a curious fellow too, with a fund of sly wit and quiet humour, under his listless, dawdling, indifferent, irresolute manner. A man who would never get on in the world; but who would not hurt a worm (71-72, Vol. I Ch. IV).

Robert Audley is a nice enough man but has no purpose and no drive. He does not live life, he just is an individual watching life pass. It is his curiosity which finally brings him to grow as a character which is cleverly masked under his "listless, dawdling, indifference, irresolute manner", which he uses to deceive his family as to what he is really doing. This quote also serves as "before" picture. We are introduced to this lazy, indifferent, purposless character but by the end he becomes a clever, strong detective and this quote serves to help the reader realize how much he really grows throughout the novel.

She looked very pretty and innocent, seated behind the graceful group of delicate opal china and glittering silver. Surely a pretty woman never looks prettier than when making tea. The most feminine and most domestic of all occupations imparts a magic harmony to her every movement, a witchery to her every glance (242, Vol. II Ch. VII).

The making of tea, is truly only a feminine and extremely domestic act. It is in this "magic harmony" of the blending, steeping and pouring which a woman can control the situation. Women are trained at a very early age to pour and serve tea correctly, to be a good hostess and the act itself can draw the man’s attention to the hands and wrists of the tea-pourer. This control over the situation makes Lady Audley witch like in this domestic ritual. Part of the interesting aspect of sensation fiction was that an individual was not even safe in the home. In this time, many men were being poisoned, and one easy way to conduct that act was to slip something in the tea, because men, did not partake in the ritual of making the tea.

"Why should he not be mad?" resumed my lady. "People are insane for years and years before their insanity is found out. They know they are mad, but they know how to keep their secret; and, perhaps they may sometimes keep it till they die. Sometimes a paroxysm seizes them, and in an evil hour they betray themselves. They commit a crime, perhaps. The horrible temptation of opportunity assails them, the knife is in their hand, and the unconsciousness victim by their side. They may conquer the restless demon and go away, and die innocent of any violent deed; but they may yield to the horrible temptation - the frightful, passionate, hungry craving for violence and horror. They sometimes yield, and are lost" (301 Vol. II Ch. XII).
Lucy Audley clearly knows from experience the symptoms and signs of madness. Lucy speaks of madness as not only an internal battle of keeping the secret, but also an external battle of wills and fight as “they may conquer the restless demon” or “they may yield to the horrible temptation”. In the Victorian era, to give in to passion was to be deemed emotionally mad and the “temptation of opportunity assails them”. Women have to be opportunistic to survive the strictures that society has placed upon them. Those strictures, are enough for madness to be brought about.

Study Questions

1. How does Lady Audley fit the stereotypes of governesses? (e.g., as a seductress, as untrustworthy, as an outsider, etc.)

2. What role does art play in the novel? How does the aesthetic either reveal and/or conceal and what insights does this give us into Lady Audley’s character, the tone of the novel, and the way we should think of beauty (particularly female beauty)?

3. How do the frequent references to French novels influence our understanding of the sensual and the aesthetic in the novel? Are we left to think of French novels as a bad influence? Does Robert Audley’s change or character evolution (if you think that one takes place) reflect a celebration or condemnation of the sensual and externally pleasurable?

4. How might this novel be reiterating arguments from Victorian feminists of the 1860s? (See page 229, the question of a woman’s work and the opportunities of professions in the public sphere, like men). Or, how might this novel be refuting such arguments? Does the novel believe in female empowerment and labor, or does it tend towards a more traditional view of Victorian femininity?

5. In Lady Audley’s Secret, morality and class seem to go hand in hand. The lower classes are the immoral, deceitful characters, whereas the upper class, such as Robert Audley, are morally just and attends to his investigation to simply give his dear friend justice. In this novel, can morality and class be justified by the individual’s character?

6. Is Lady Audley’s madness social or biological? In other words, is her madness the result of her three demons-vanity, selfishness, and ambition-or is she truly born with a mental ailment? Does the novel seem to argue that madness is generational or social? Are all of the characters capable of giving way to madness and how so?

7. Sensation novels generally tend to portray servants as deceitful characters that are not to be trusted, in this novel how does Braddon play with the relationship between a servant girl, Pheobe, and the lady of the house, Lucy? Who has power over whom?

8. The novel is saturated with alarming or uneasy-making images that seem to foreshadowing danger below surfaces or mysterious motives. Where do you see these images at work and how do they contribute to the development of the plot?

9. How does the narrative begin to reveal the difference between Lucy’s appearance and her true character? What IS her true character?

10. Trace the steps of Robert Audley’s transformation. What kind of a masculine type is he when we first meet him? How does the narration trace his changes?

11. How would you describe the relationship between Robert and George? Critics sometimes speak of a “homosocial” as opposed to homosexual relationship. What would that mean in their case?

12. The novel is obsessed with “madness.” What does the term seem to mean in this novel? Note who uses it, when, and why? When is it a diagnosis and when is it a threat?

13. As we said, this novel is written when crime fiction is becoming popular, and people are learning about real detective’s exploits in the news paper. What kind of detective is Robert Audley? How does he conduct his search? When does he realize he may be investigating a crime (and when do WE realize it)?

14. How does mobility, social and physical, play a role in Lady Audley’s Secrets? What does Braddon seem to suggest about social mobility?

15. Fire is frequently mentioned in this story. How does it function as a theme? How is it associated with Lady Audley? What does the association suggest about Lucy Audley?
Lady Audley (a.k.a. Lucy Graham and Helen Talboys)

A bewitching woman who entices and captures the attention of all men with her engaging blue eyes, golden curls and child-like quality. She enchants with her astounding musical ability and it is the skill of keeping up this facade that she is able to so smoothly distinguish herself in a high society household, despite her low class upbringing. It is this "innocence" of personality that enables her to carry off her plan so successfully. The character possesses everything that an "ideal" Victorian woman should have, but manipulates those qualities to best suit her needs thereby putting a new spin on the "angel of the house". As the book progresses she loses her angelic nature. She starts out as an ideal woman but by the end is reduced to a manipulative child abandoning, bigamist, murderer, and madwoman.

Robert Audley

He "was a good fellow; a generous-hearted fellow; rather a curious fellow too, with a fund of sly wit and quiet humour, under his listless, dawdling, indifferent, irresolute manner. A man who would never get on in the world; but who would not hurt a worm." Gentle and oblivious to everything but which he decides to take an interest in, he is the classic, lazy, noble man of the 18th century. It is only with the disappearance of his good friend George, that he starts to be a man, with an iron-will and a determination to give his friend justice in which Robert starts to develop as a character. He grows throughout the novel into a man that can be respected and liked for his perservance and sense of justice.

Sir Michael Audley

Sir Michael Audley is one of the most powerful characters in the novel. He is the character with power and prominence and it is he that sets into motion the events that are to follow. His marriage to Lady Audley is the catalyst of the novel. He becomes so enraptured with the external perfection of Lady Audley that he is willing to sacrifice anything for her. Because of his devotion to Lucy he becomes estranged with both his beloved daughter and nephew. A man wielding the most power in the novel becomes merely a pawn in Lucy's game against Robert. She realizes the power she holds over him and has no scruples in manipulating that power. Whatever kind of man he was before, marriage to Lucy reduces him to a weak-minded fool.

Alicia Audley

The daughter of Michael Audley and the cousin of Robert, Alicia serves as a direct contradiction to Lucy in every way. Both physically and emotionally she contrasts Lucy. While Lucy is a charming childlike, innocent, beautiful, soft creature with blonde curls and blue eyes, everything about Alicia is hard. Her hair is dark, her lips are red. She is loud, smart, outspoken and very exuberent. She is her own woman yet still very childlike. She believes herself to be in love with Robert, yet acts like a petulant child when he does not recieve her attentions in the way she wants. While her distrust of Lucy turns out to be very intelligent, the distrust is based more on jealousy at being usurped as woman of the house rather than any quiet womanly intuition. She is very much a tomboy.

George Talboys:

George is Helen's husband. When first introduced he seems like carefree, happy, devoted husband who is extremely happy to be home. His devotion to Lucy is just as intense as Sir Michaels. When he learns of her death he is absolutely distraught. He turns into a shell of his former self, reduced to a child whom Robert must take care of. The devotion aside, George is quite a terrible husband and father. He abandons Helen and his son to seek a fortune, granted the fortune was for her but it does not change the fact he abandoned his wife. When he returns he abandons his son as well only offering monetary support. He is neither a great friend or brother. When he returns to Australia he doesn't inform Robert, nor does he share this information with anyone. As kind-hearted he may be, he is also very selfish.

Clara Talboys:

Clara is the sister of George and Robert's love interest. She sparks in Robert his previously latent ambition and she becomes his motivation in his continuing search for George. She is described as having the same eyes as George. It is these eyes that Robert finds the most compelling in Clara. Unlike Alicia and Lucy who serve as two extremes of women, Clara is in the middle. She does not have the ridiculous amount of superficial charm that Lucy possess, nor is she as hard as Alicia. She posses a quiet dignity that both Lucy and Alicia lack. She and Robert are bound together in their love for George.

Phoebe:

Phoebe was once a colleague of Lucy's and later becomes her servant. There are many parallels drawn between Lucy and Phoebe, the biggest being their looks. Phoebe is a pale version of Lady Audley and is used as such in the novel. Phoebe has an unusually close relationship with Lucy, and one could argue this is because Phoebe holds keys to Lucy's past. Beyond that Phoebe admires and is envious of how easy it was for Lucy to rise from the position of a governess to the Lady of a household. The two women share an interesting power dynamic with Lucy holding Phoebe emotionally while Phoebe holds Lucy in her knowledge.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resources and Links</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Online Resources</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lady Audley's Secret</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victorian Web - Pre Raphaelite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Raphaelite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victorian Web - Sensation Fiction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Elizabeth Braddon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lady Audley's Secret - Movie Clip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lady Audley's Secret - Play Script</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lady Audley's Secret The Musical - Plot Overview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Articles / Books</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Additional Materials**
The Pre-Raphaelites

The Pre-Raphaelites were founded in 1848 by William Holman Hunt, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and John Everett Millais. Painters of this aesthetic movement were noted for their use of intense color, detail, and their presentation of subversive, contemporary social problems and overt sensuality. According to David Peters Corbett, "Early Pre-Raphaelite painting embraced this idea of fidelity to the physical details of the material world as the vehicle by which a truthful and accurate account of reality could be achieved." (37). These painters addressed themes such as fallen women, adultery (also linked to "fallenness"), and female sensuality. Corbett, and other critics, see Rossetti's work as pre-dating the emerging movement of Aestheticism, or "art for art's sake" most notably foregrounded by Walter Pater. Rossetti's art is visually stunning. According to Corbett, the painting *Lad y Lilith* (1868-73) "seemed to Rossetti's critics to be the apogee of the sensuous evocation of bodily experience for its own sake" (62). Lilith's plush lips, long mass of hair, long neck, exposed shoulders, and overabundant bust combine to create a sensual visual enjoyed especially for its aesthetic quality (*See gallery to view painting*). As Corbett explains, the Pre-Raphaelites, in realizing that art may not be able to solve problems of "identity of self, world, and representation," turned to "art for art's sake" or a "lack of utility and external significance" which might "provide the grounds for its relevance and significance" (66). Paintings in the 1860s and 1870s relied far more on superficiality and aesthetic pleasure as a means of accessing the real (Corbett 66).

Bibliography:


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**Lady Audley's Secret (The Play)**

Lady Audley's Secret has been performed many times as a play. The most famous was a two-act adaptation written by William E. Suter. The play was written in 1863 and performed in Queens theatre that same year. Suter had written many other plays, some of which Braddon herself acted in. Despite her acting background, Braddon did authorize the adaptation and sought to stop the publication of the play but ultimately failed. George Roberts also wrote an adaptation, this one approved by Braddon, and it ran very successfully at St. James Theatre. The example is from yet another adapter, C. H. Hazlewood

*Lady Audley's Secret*

**Alicia.** Robert! Robert! my father is dead. Oh, pity me! pity and protect me! *(Goes to ROBERT)*

**Robert.** Sir Michael dead! Now vengeance, take thy own! Friends, hear me:..I accuse that woman of the murder of my friend, George Talboys.

**Lady Audley.** How and where?

**Luke (revives).** I...I will tell that. She pushed him down that well, *(points to well, all start)* but it will be useless to search there now, for George Talboys is....

*Enter GEORGE TALBOYS, R. 2 E.*

**George.** Here!

*(LUKE falls back dead.)*

**Omnès.** Alive!

**Lady Audley (petrified).** Alive! alive! you alive! you alive!

**George.** Back, woman! and thank that man *(points to LUKE)* that you have not my death upon your soul. You will be scorned, loathed, and despised by all. The blow you struck me rendered me an invalid for months. I have been silent until today, because I gave my word to that poor, dying wretch. *(Points to LUKE.)* But now I am free...free to tell all. Speak to her, speak to her, Robert, and say I forgive her. *(Points to LADY AUDLEY)*

**Robert.** *(to LADY AUDLEY)*. You hear, woman!

**Lady Audley *(vacantly)*. But I do not heed. I have a rich husband. They told me he was dead...but no, they lied...see...see, he stands there! Your arm...your arm, Sir Michael. We will leave this place...we will travel. Never heed what the world says...I have no husband but you...none...none! It is time to depart, the carriage is waiting. Come...come...come!

**George.** What does she mean, Robert?

**Robert.** Mean! Do you not see she is mad?

**Omnès *(retreating from her)*. Mad!

**Lady Audley.** Aye...aye! *(Laughs wildly.)* Mad, mad, that is the word. I feel it here...here! *(Places her hands on her temples.)* Do not touch me do not come near me...let me claim your silence...your pity...and let the grave, the cold grave, close over Lady Audley and her Secret.

*(Falls...dies...Music tableau of sympathy...GEORGETALBOYS kneels over her)*

**CURTAIN**


Beyond normal plays there has also been a Broadway musical adaptation. It ran in the "Eastside Playhouse Theatre" in 1972 and did eight shows. The plot was changed heavily but the story remains essentially the same. The musical numbers include:
Musical Numbers:

1. The English Country Life - Ensemble
2. A Mother's Wish Is A Daughter's Duty - Phoebe
3. The Winter Rose - Lady Audley, Sir Michael
4. That Lady In Eng-a-Land - George, Robert
5. Civilised - Lady Audley, Robert, Alicia
6. Dead Men Tell No Tales - Lady Audley
7. An Old Maid - Alicia
8. Repose - Lady Audley
9. The Audley Family Honour - Lady Audley, Robert
10. La Da Da Da - Lady Audley, Sir Michael, Alicia
13. Forgive Her, Forgive Her - George, Robert, Alicia, Lady Audley, Ensemble

Bibliography:


Additional Works by Mary Elizabeth Braddon

The Octoroon, 1861
The Black Band, 1861
Lady Audley's Secret, 1862
Aurora Floyd, 1863
Eleanor's Victory, 1863
John Marchmont's Legacy, 1863
Henry Dunbar: the Story of an Outcast, 1864
Circe, 1867
Dead-Sea Fruit, 1868
Fenton's Quest, 1871
To the Bitter End, 1872
Publicans and Sinners, 1873
Lost For Love, 1874
Hostages to Fortune, 1875
Dead Men's Shoes, 1876
An Open Verdict, 1878
The Cloven Foot, 1879
Vixen, 1879
Asphodel, 1881
Phantom Fortune, 1883
Ishmael, A Novel, 1884
Cut by the County, 1887
The Fatal Three, 1888
One Life, One Love, 1890
The World, the Flesh and the Devil, 1891
The Venetians, 1892
The Christmas Hirelings, 1894
Sons of Fire, 1895
London Pride, 1896
Rough Justice, 1898
His Darling Sin, 1899
The Infidel, 1900
Dead Love Has Chains, 1907
During Her Majesty's Pleasure, 1908
The Green Curtain, 1911
Luca Giordano - Fresken in der Galerie des Palazzo Medici-Riccardi in Florenz, Szene: Justizia

Pandora - John William Waterhouse from Commons


William Holman Hunt, "The Awakening Conscience" (1853) The woman's startled expression indicates sudden awareness of her "fall"
Helen Talboys (Or Helen of Troy) This is an example of the portrait of Audley's portrait by Mary Elizabeth Braddon.