

Conflation of Victorian Binaries and Creation of Dangerous Womanhood in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*

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In the heart of the Victorian age, the 1860s, flourished the sensation novel. Its initiation was in the hands of Wilkie Collins, who's famous *The Woman in White* (1860) started the trend that was to be adopted by many of his contemporaries like Charles Reade, Ellen Price Wood, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu. Although many critics have described the Sensation novel as a mere phenomenon of two decades, on a closer look we find that the vestiges of the genre and its sensation elements remained in the novels of main stream Victorian novelists like George Moore, Thomas Hardy, R.L. Stevenson and Daphne Du Maurier – even as late as the 1880s. So influential and palatable its elements were to the popular taste that even a serious artist like Thomas Hardy chose to write his earliest novel *Desperate Remedies* using sensation elements as late as the 1880s. The Sensation novel was a genre particularly noted for its unconventional depiction or handling of women. By 'unconventional' I mean departing from the conventional depiction of women in Victorian Literature – as angels, upholding the morality and sanctity of the Victorian homes, or as passionless madonnas who submerged their own desires and interests in those of their husbands or children. It was however a usual custom in the sensation novels to depict at least one female protagonist as an assertive and transgressive creature of passion, a woman cleverer than Victorian society expected its women to be and adept in disguise and deception. In a few words she was someone dangerous to know, usually the transgressive and self-assertive woman, juxtaposed with the 'angelic' heroine. Such women were doubly dangerous as they generate social instability because they have secrets potent enough to destroy the fabric of rigid Victorian society. Such juxtaposition of two contrasting characters of women was an important feature of the Victorian novel in general, a stylistic device to depict the two polarities of the moral and ideological spectrum that women occupied – the angel or the fallen. Thus we have Becky Sharp pitted against Amelia Sedley or Eustacia Vye and Thomasin. The sensation novel as a genre was perhaps undervalued by critics because it used a fixed formula of ruined heiresses, damning letters, skeleton in cupboards, arson, blackmail, attempts to murder, madness, all the vestiges of the Gothic novels that Austen had parodied in *Northanger Abbey*.

However what is often missed in Sensation novels is the realistic and sympathetic investigation of individual psychology and an exploration of female psyche in the manner of George Eliot and Charlotte Bronte. The prevalence of these 'ingredients' in the popular fiction of 1860s and 1870s suggests that the sensation novel drew its energy from a popular Mid-Victorian reaction to middleclass stodginess and prudery, a reaction that continued well past 1880 and is evident in late Victorian works such as Daphne Du Maurier's *Trilby* (1894). The popularity of the Sensation novels among the working classes could be accounted for from the attacks that these novels staged on both middle class morality and upper class respectability

In this context I would like to discuss one of the most popular sensation novels of this period under focus, Mary Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, chiefly because I intend to point out that in her depiction of her chief woman character – Lucy Graham – Braddon not only blurs the rigid demarcation between heroine and villainess, or merely tease the reader with the problem of differentiating between appearance and reality, but also plays with, mocks and explodes the Victorian water-tight compartments of the depiction of women as either 'angels' or 'fallen women'.

But, before we go into discussing her novel we ought to know a little about Mary Braddon herself, whose life was as adventurous and as unconventional as any of her transgressive heroines. She started acting in provincial theatres from the age of seventeen and thus came into close contact with the not-so-respectable areas of society very early in life. Mary was bold and transgressive when judged along the parameters set by Victorian society to measure the character of women. She became the protégé of John Maxwell, a publisher, and tried her hands at novel writing. From protégé she very soon became his live in partner and surrogate mother to his six children as his wife was confined in a Dublin asylum for insanity. It was Maxwell who serialized her *Lady Audley's Secret* in his magazine *Robin Goodfellow*. In 1899 the London newspaper *The Daily Telegraph* named *Lady Audley's Secret*, which had by then been staged in countless adaptations, as one of the hundred best novels, despite the fact that it had been published almost four decades earlier.

Braddon was one of a handful of young revolutionary novelists who in their artistic responses of the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act 1857 started creating dangerous, scheming heroines embroiled in the complications of what negative reviews termed the 'Bigamy Plot'. They created a new genre while championing the rights of women against a law with an obvious male-bias which determined that, while a wife's adultery alone was sufficient cause for a divorce action, a husband's adultery was insufficient unless accompanied by physical abuse or cruelty. Braddon is consciously contributing her views to the Victorian debate over the nature of femininity as ought to be depicted in literature – either of the conventional angel or the subversive monster – and challenging such polarities by depicting it as it really is – a mixture of both angel and monster. By creating a character like Lady Audley she seems to pose a challenge to the Victorian Patriarchal tendency of simplifying the depiction of women, by neatly labelling them as either the one or the other type. She also mocks the contemporary picture of 'the angel in the house' that was the staple of the Victorian novels of the time. The 'angel' was just a myth constructed by patriarchal society for holding its moral foundations intact. Its definition was unclear and based more on external factors of a woman's appearance, social interaction and little "deeds of goodness" that could earn for her the tag of "angel", but which could very well be a show off by the woman to earn the same. At least the fact that Braddon seems to think so too can be clearly seen in her depiction of Lucy from the inception of the novel. Lucy Graham enters Audley as a governess and instantly fascinates the people around her with her 'angelic' beauty and 'innocent' charms:

...by which a woman can charm with a word or intoxicate with a smile. Everyone loved, admired and praised her. The boy who opened the five-barred gate that stood in her pathway ran home to his mother to tell of her pretty looks, and the sweet voice in which she thanked him for the little

service...the servants; everybody, high and low, united in declaring that Lucy Graham was the sweetest girl that ever lived...(Braddon, 6)

Her fragile beauty and disposition not only build up the female ideal to its height but also shows the enormous power its possessor wields over the minds of people; it allows Lucy to sustain her masquerade for a very long time, earns for her the devotion of the ageing, but rich, Sir Michael Audley and the good opinion of half the world. Braddon's use of ideal female beauty to portray her not-so-ideal and subversive heroine serves many purposes in the novel. However, what has often been overlooked is that Braddon chooses to conflate the ideal with the subversive and deliberately houses them in one woman rather than pitting the angelic heroine against the fallen villainess, that was a common trope of so many sensation novels of the time; in other words she purposely erases the distinction between the "angel" and the "fallen woman" and tries to shake the complacent Victorian reader out of his generalized and shallow assumptions and distinctions regarding women as "angels" or "fallen". The depiction of Lucy Graham with her aureole of a "shower of curls" and her "innocent" and "blue eyes" is used to feed the preconceived notions of the reader by Braddon. She seems to question the very concept of labelling women as "angels" that Victorian patriarchy practised, because Lucy's label of an "angel" helps to mask her true identity of a "fallen woman", a bigamist, a criminal and a ruthless social climber. Braddon makes clever use of voyeurism, as Robert Audley's different perceptions of Lady Audley are conveyed to us, leaving the Victorian reader in two minds about this woman, in particular, and about all women, in general. In the course of some thirty pages Robert presents with too descriptions or opinions about Lucy. In the first he thinks: 'Lucy Audley, with her distorted hair in a pale haze of yellow ...might have served as a model for a medieval saint...' (p.216) And, in the next, Robert is dreaming when he sees:

...the hurrying waves rolled nearer and nearer to the stately mansion, [he] saw a pale, starry face looking out of the silvery foam, and knew that it was my lady, transformed into a mermaid, beckoning his uncle to destruction...(Braddon, 246)

On one hand she appears to be a saint but on the other she is more appropriately the mysterious and dangerous mermaid, thus the threat that Lady Audley poses is not only to the people around her in the novel but to the real world outside too, where patriarchal Victorian society tries to understand its women through hassle-free straitjackets. She disarms and embarrasses society because she has the courage to own her monomania to escape a life of poverty by using the trappings of an angel, which have ironically been given to her by this very society. Lucy Graham is not the fragile, helpless woman that Sir Audley thinks he is rescuing from the bitter gusts of life and taking into his generous shelter but a scheming, calculative and shrewd woman from first-to-last who is also frightfully mercenary. Although all young women of the time were trained to conclude suitable marriages, Lucy shocks the mind of the readers when she confesses that – marriage to her was the means of raising herself from the abject misery of her poverty. She is conscious of the tremendous power that her sexuality and beauty possesses in the marriage-market and she does not hesitate to put it into full use. In doing

this Lucy, or Helen Talboys, proves herself to be the subversive fallen woman, rather than the conventional angel, if only we were to extend the definition of fallen ness to mean falling from virtue and honesty of intentions that should be the guiding spirit of every human being, be it man or woman. Indeed we are set to wonder if her marriage to George Talboys was the fruition of love or based on a tragic misconception that she was entering a socially advantageous alliance, only to realize that Talboys had been disinherited by his father. Utterly disillusioned she forces her husband, with her harangue, to embark on a voyage of fortune hunting in Australia.

Lucy, alias Helen Talboys, does not pine away as the deserted, angelic, forlorn wife, waiting for things to happen to her. Instead she leaves her son with her aged father, invents a new name for herself and by using the universal passport of her angelic looks and innocence manages to secure the position of a governess. Thus far her duplicity, though shocking with respect to Victorian generalizations about the angelic goodness of women, is not corrosive except to her own morality, and the twenty-first century woman-reader thinking so deeply about the rights and emancipation of women, cannot grudge this woman, daring to exploit the only means at her disposal, to carve out her own destiny in a merciless masculine world.

However this admiration cannot hold us for long as we see the Lucy, the 'angel', deceiving Sir Michael by marrying him and committing bigamy. But in a society where the only option open to women was marriage, was it not inevitable that certain, not so morally scrupulous, women would use the glorified labels (and their external manifestations) attached to women by that society and turn the very tables against it? In fact Lady Audley does confess that her calculated second marriage is a foray into a life where there would be no more dependence, no more drudgery for her ever again.

In fact our golden haired, charming, angel can go to any extent to preserve her new-found fortune and Braddon perhaps deliberately breaks all the idealized images one by one as we see Lady Audley conniving with her servants to hold their tongue, to murder her arch enemy Robert Audley, and in fact there is nothing criminal that is beyond the capacity of this iron-willed Lady Macbeth, donning the mask of angelic beauty and feigned innocence. It takes an obsessed "villain-hunter" like Robert Audley to suspect this fair, wax-doll of grave crimes that the people around her cannot even get a whiff of because they write her off as the conventional 'angel'. For them she is either the paragon of beauty, and hence of virtue, or just "silly" and inconsequential. In fact the references to painting in the novel help to intensify this confusion regarding the depiction of women and the flesh-and-blood reality about them. It is only the inspired and probing soul of a painter which can read Lucy mind like a book, painting her in an expression that others think she is incapable of:

"...a strange, sinister light to the deep blue eyes. No one but a Pre-Raphaelite could have given to that pretty pouting mouth the hard an almost wicked look it had in the portrait...Lady...had something of the aspect of a *beautiful fiend*."(My italics)(Braddon, 71)

I have italicized the phrase 'beautiful fiend' because it brings me close to my argument that, Braddon was carefully and consciously trying to conflate the conception of the 'angel' and the 'whore' or 'fallen woman' in a single woman to bring out the pitfalls of the Victorian tendency to generalize, label and simplify women. What tools did

this society have to see through the game of a woman like Lady Audley who carries out her deception at the cost of a society, self-deluded in its understanding of women? None.

Indeed Braddon's introduction of the trope of madness in the novel, to explain away Lady Audley's transformation from the 'angel' to the 'villainess', is indeed a dig at patriarchal society which built up such fixed binaries. It was impossible for such a society to accept the scheming of a perfectly sane woman, who uses the sacred Victorian refuge of the homestead to execute her plans, and Robert Audley, a representative of this patriarchal society having discovered the secret of her aunt that "she is sane" and a criminal has to rely on this label of madness, as several had done before him, to incarcerate this woman.

Braddon thus, is able to stress that madness was an easy excuse, to absolve a woman from her diabolical, criminal activities or cover up her subversive actions, not so much for her sake as for the sake of keeping the myth of ideal femininity intact, and in this case preserving the reputation of the Audley family – which could contain Lucy the 'angel-turned-madwoman' but not Lucy the scheming bigamist, pretender and murderer. Hence, the novel which concludes with the containment of the transgressive woman within the asylum raises serious doubts at this society which is happy to perpetuate the female ideal unblemished by pushing under the carpet such uncomfortable cases like those of Lady Audley, in whom the boundaries of the rigid binaries are blurred. Lady Audley, though denied the acknowledgement of having acted on her own diabolical responsibility by society, still stands out as a threat to Victorian ideals of femininity but at the same time represents women of all times, barring her criminal side, as they are or as they may be forced to become – fallen angels in a Fallen world.

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