

ESCAPING THE CONFINES OF THE “LIVING GRAVE”:  
SYMPATHY AND FEMININE PERFORMANCE IN  
SENSATION FICTION

by

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While formulaic plot, journalistic intrigue, marital violence, and bigamy are important elements used by Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) and Gillian Flynn’s *Gone Girl* (2012), two sensation novels, to elicit shock, the novels ultimately rely on constructions of identity and appeals to readerly sympathy in order to elicit their emotional, visceral, and sensational effects upon the audience. Both novels are “sensational” by the way in which they enable the reader to sympathize, align, or identify with female impostors. Though Lucy’s and Amy’s violent and manipulative actions hardly prove sympathetic, the women themselves generate sympathetic alignment with their female audiences by revealing the failings of conventional gender roles and the expectation that women conceal their true selves under the guise of untenable “angelic” façades. Both Lucy’s and Amy’s performative femininities undermine male ideals of womanhood, revealing these ideals for their superficiality and lack of realism.

These performances serve Lucy’s and Amy’s own efforts to assert agency and power by whatever means necessary. They conceal their desire for agency under these

façades in order to adhere to the feminine ideals espoused by their respective husbands, families, and societies. They are expected to uphold unrealistic, performative versions of womanhood, and when their performances expose the unsustainability of such expectations, they are ultimately punished for being performers in the first place. Though Robert and Nick respectively vilify Lucy and Amy as unnatural, mad, and unfeminine, their judgments rather have the opposite effect. Instead, they underscore the unfairness of pre-established ideals regarding a woman's proper role and the societal (or male) anxieties produced by feminine assertions of agency. The reader, and especially the female reader, identifies with Lucy and Amy in recognizing the inequities that force them to "perform" the personas that fit within such a restrictive model of femininity.

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## Introduction: Sympathetic Sensation Fiction?

On October 18<sup>th</sup>, 1862, a literary critic for *The Atlas* newspaper in London, England, reviewed *Lady Audley's Secret*, the serialized work of Mary Elizabeth Braddon which had very recently been published as an entire novel. The reviewer writes,

This is a book written to gratify the taste of the day. It is a sensation novel from beginning to end. Crime is its Alpha and Omega. The heroine is a criminal; the hero is, apparently, the victim [...] From the very first chapter the reader *knows*, though he is not told, that he will have several dishes of crime served out to him, very skilfully garnished [...] and, of course, in the end, virtue is triumphant, and poetical justice is rendered to everybody. (*The Atlas* 4)

This review speaks to the contemporary Victorian sentiment towards sensation fiction, considered the “epidemic literature” of the decade for its “temporary success of complicated crime and passion” (*Morning Post* 6). Later in the review, the critic unequivocally laments the fact that “[t]his kind of literature is getting very common, and, we fear, it indicates anything but a healthy feeling” (*The Atlas* 4). He asks, “Why is crime, with all its hideous surroundings, to be the staple commodity of modern novelists?” (*The Atlas* 4). These questions are wholly expected and unoriginal, as they directly mimic those of many of his contemporaries, bemoaning the popularity of the “sensation” genre amongst Victorian readers. Furthermore, his condemnation of sensation fiction focuses upon the thrilling and shocking elements of crime which preclude realist character development, an understanding of the sensation genre that today’s sensation scholars maintain. However, this review in particular stands out in its focus upon the sensational villain’s effect on both the author and the reader. He claims that the “evil” of the sensation novel arises when:

the author becomes, insensibly, the apologist of the criminal. [...] It is difficult, when your villain has committed a crime, to say that it was his fault. He may be partially excused. Circumstances over which he had no control, combined to make him what he is. Education, which should have taught him, at least, the difference between right and wrong [...] This feeling is growing upon us; and a literature pandering to such a feeling is, certainly, not to be admired. (*The Atlas* 4)

Rather than deriding elements of plot, as many of Braddon's reviewers did, this critical perception of sensation fiction as "evil" almost entirely derives from the critic's belief that the author, and by extension the reader, can understand or give reasonable credibility to the actions of the sensation novel's villain. He speaks not to plot, but to *sympathy*, and in particular, the sympathetic alignment between the novel's antagonist and the reader. The sensation genre, and especially *Lady Audley's Secret*, is "evil" because it provokes "such a feeling" for Lucy Audley, as Braddon enables us to recognize the conditions which produce the "sensational" comportment of her novel's criminal.

*Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) and *Gone Girl* (2012) are two distinctly popular novels occupying different eras and geographical locales. Mary Elizabeth Braddon's novel, *Lady Audley's Secret*, published at the height of the sensation phenomenon in Victorian England, portrays the mystery of Lucy Audley, Sir Michael Audley's beautiful, young wife who eventually reveals herself to be a bigamist and an attempted murderer. Abandoned by her first husband, George Talboys, she flees her domestic home and assumes a new identity, enjoying the wealth and comfort of an aristocratic life until faced with the prying curiosity of her husband's nephew. Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*, a novel broadly categorized within the modern mystery, crime, or thriller genres, depicts the confounding disappearance of Amy Dunne, whose cheating husband Nick is suspected as her apparent murderer. However, the reader ultimately discovers Amy's

clever and vindictive plot to frame her adulterous husband for murder, as she fabricates her own death and flees her suffocating domestic situation. This sensational disappearance from small-town Missouri sets alight a media uproar, as Nick must answer for his wrongdoing on the national stage. Both *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Gone Girl* were hugely successful in their contemporary eras; not only were they commercially successful, selling numerous copies during publication, but they were also culturally significant. The two novels each ignited a veritable literary frenzy, seizing the imaginations of their respectively vast reading audiences.

While *Gone Girl* may have met a critical response far more receptive to its subversive nature and thrilling plot than that of *Lady Audley's Secret*, this modern thriller borrows many of the literary conventions popularized in Braddon's infamous novel and in the Victorian sensation fiction genre as a whole. The novel employs similar narrative tactics to evoke an emotional or visceral response from its audience, producing a violent feminine perpetrator of crime and undermining the foundations of marriage and family by setting this crime in the domestic abode. In addition, the novel's focus on media attention (in particular, the way that the media aims to paint the perfect domestic woman) recalls the Victorian sensation genre's origins in sensational journalism, as well as the way in which Victorian critics based much of their criticism of sensation fiction on societal perceptions of the idealistic wife. Just as Lucy Audley subverts her role as the domestic "Angel in the House" by lying, manipulating, and plotting against the men who seek to quell her agency, Amy Dunne shirks the idealized "Amazing Amy" or "cool girl" personas that have been expected of her, as she lies, manipulates, and plots against Nick in order to seek revenge from her marital restraints.

However, the sensation novel of the Victorian Era was not only “sensational” for the conventionally shocking crimes that permeated its pages, but also for the way it elicited sympathetic alignment with female characters resorting to violence, manipulation, and bigamy as a means of asserting their own power or escaping limiting gender roles. This notion of a “sensational” sympathy is evidenced in the aforementioned review by Braddon’s contemporary critic from *The Atlas* newspaper. How does sympathy function in these two “sensation” novels, and how do they produce sympathy for their female villainesses? What does this sympathy mean for the reader, and why can we sympathetically align with these characters? While formulaic plot, journalistic intrigue, marital violence, and bigamy are important elements characteristic of the sensation genre and used by the two novels to generate shock, the novels rely heavily on constructions of identity and appeals to readerly sympathy in order to elicit their most sensational effect upon the audience. Ultimately, both novels are “sensational” by the ways in which they enable the reader to sympathize, align, or identify with female impostors. Though Lucy’s and Amy’s violent and manipulative actions are hardly sympathetic, they reveal the failings of conventional gender roles and the social expectation that women conceal their true agency or desires under the guise of untenable “angelic” façades. The reader, and especially the female reader, identifies with Lucy and Amy in recognizing the inequities that force them to “perform” the personas that fit within such an ideal. Both Lucy’s and Amy’s deconstruction of performative femininities essentially undermines male ideals of womanhood, revealing these ideals as superficial and illusory.

When we step into the shoes of Lucy Audley, her actions do not seem like those of a “madwoman;” in fact, they seem to result from the lucid and quick thinking that enabled her to ascend the ranks of society and establish a comfortable life for herself, despite her status as an impoverished married woman. Although we often follow the narrative perspective of her nephew, Robert, through the unraveling of Lucy’s “secret,” audience sympathy ultimately lies with the violent and subversive Lady Audley. Lucy’s origin story and the circumstances of her childhood poverty facilitate our understanding of the motivations behind her bigamy, as well as the necessity of adopting a new identity to protect her newfound security. And while her contemporary female audience may not agree with the violence that she enacts, they can nonetheless recognize the social, cultural, and political expectations of feminine performance that precipitate Lady Audley’s assertions of agency.

*Lady Audley’s Secret* generates sympathy for its titular antagonist, Lucy Audley, because it exposes and questions the extent to which she is trapped by her social status and her contemporary culture’s idealized view of womanhood. She must play an artificial, performative version of Victorian femininity ultimately shown to be untenable by her underlying violence, materialism, and anger (deemed unfeminine and wicked if exhibited by Victorian women). While Victorian literary reviewers reviled Lucy’s violent, and subversive, comportment, they most notably feared the novel’s ability to affect the reading audience, especially the female audience. In fact, they expressed acute anxieties regarding the female audience’s sympathetic alignment with Lucy, assuming that this alignment would lead women to emulate Lucy’s particular transgression of the social and cultural norms dictating feminine behavior (or, perhaps, performance). This

critical response to *Lady Audley's Secret* demonstrates the extent to which Victorians themselves recognized the role of sympathy in the production and experience of the “sensational.”

The same production of readerly sympathy occurs with *Gone Girl's* Amy Dunne, though perhaps in a slightly different manner. Unlike the genuine sympathy established by Braddon for Lucy Audley's plight, much of the readerly sympathy produced for Amy Dunne comes by way of her false diaries, which seek to make the case against her husband, Nick, as her ostensible killer. Here, *Gone Girl's* “sensation” comes from the sudden revelation at the novel's center that Amy's diaries present a fictional version of Amy, manufactured to look like a sympathetic victim. And, nevertheless, the novel still invites some sympathetic alignment with the violent, vengeful, and sociopathic Amy in the end, as she can only ever play performative roles that adhere to others' expectations of her as a daughter, a wife, and a woman. Elements of Amy's character, rather than just the sensational revelation of her actions, are carefully laid out in order to produce and exploit sympathy for Amy. As both *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Gone Girl* thus suggest, the most “sensational” aspect of sensation fiction stems from the ways in which female readers connect to the “violent” and “criminal” women of sensation novels, as the genre reveals disparities between their vilification and an understanding of the social restraints which provoke such violent responses. Sensation novels elicit this sympathy by targeting the societal institutions that constrain women to the home and to the conventional roles that seek to silence them.

## Chapter 1: Cultural Contexts – Sensation Fiction and Victorian

### Sympathy

In 1857, three years before the ostensible emergence of “sensation” fiction, the Matrimonial Causes Act offered citizens of Victorian England their first legal path to divorce. This new law heavily favored male plaintiffs; while men only needed evidence of their wife’s infidelity, women were required to prove both adultery and other additional “marital offense[s]” in order to legally separate from their spouses (Savage 103). However, women who could provide grounds for divorce gained full rights to their own property and to custody of their children. Regardless of the law’s tendency for male favoritism, it nonetheless indicated a profound cultural shift in legal rights for Victorian women (Savage 104-106). Following the Matrimonial Causes Act and rising cultural interest in the case for divorce, widespread ideals of marriage and domesticity became subject to scrutiny, revealing potent undercurrents of frustration, fear, and anger regarding a woman’s role in the home and in society. With the 1860 publication of Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White*, the sensation genre appeared as the latest genre *du jour*, part of the decade’s fascination with all things “sensational,” whether in melodramatic theater performances or gruesome crimes reported by print journalism (Pykett, *Nineteenth-Century* 1-2). In particular, Victorians found themselves engrossed with the domestic drama of divorce and criminal courts. These court cases provided ample evidence of abuse, violence, and bigamy committed by married couples, which “violate[d] the sanctuary of the home” and conservative ideals of peaceful domesticity (Pykett, *Nineteenth-Century* 2-3). The circumstances of real domestic court cases overwhelmingly influenced the fictional plots of sensation novels, demonstrating the

significance of the current political, legal, and social climate to the development of sensation fiction. Sensation novels thus drew terrifying parallels between fact and fiction for their wide-eyed Victorian audiences.

“Sensation” fiction, as termed by its scathing contemporary critics, seemingly occupied a relatively short period of popularity, reaching its peak between 1860 and 1870. This genre contributed to widespread critical perception of the novel form as a vulgar creation of mass-production; these novels appealed to the general public, providing reading material to an increasingly literate population existing in all social classes. Sensation fiction first appeared in serial form, as technological advancements in printing made it possible for increased proliferation of cheaply printed materials (Palmer 86). The “sensation” novel was most notably recognized as a profitable literary model able to attract a variety of readers, especially those of lower classes (Gilbert 2). But what did “sensation” really mean for Victorian readers? As Elisabetta Marino has noted in an article entitled “Challenging the Commodification of Victorian Femininity: The Sensation Novel,” Victorians “undoubtedly linked [the word “sensation”] with bodily pleasure and excitement rather than emotional or intellectual enjoyment,” and this appeal to the ostensibly superficial or sensual ultimately degraded the genre in the opinion of its literary critics (170). As Janice Allan notes in “The Contemporary Response to Sensation Fiction,” Victorians labelled a variety of diverse literary works with the term “sensation” in reference to their “perceived effect on the audience,” rather than any “common formal property” that conclusively defines the genre (87). This focus on the “emotive intensity” of sensation fiction enabled Victorian reviewers to write off the sensation genre, which presented a considerable threat to “the bedrock of values that

ground the English middle-class subject” (Allan 86). The sensation genre was thus distinguished from “legitimate art” (i.e. the domestic and realist novel) in order to minimize the genre’s apparent popularity and influence. Critics positioned the domestic novel, and its perceived “appeals to the sympathetic faculties,” directly in contrast with the sensation novel, which aimed only to “shock and excite” (Allan 87).

What really makes sensation fiction “sensational”? According to Patrick Brantlinger, who poses the same question in his essay titled “What is ‘Sensational’ About the ‘Sensation Novel’?,” the sensation novel comprises “violent and thrilling action, astonishing circumstances, stereotypic heroes, heroines, and villains” and contemporary Victorian interest in “bigamy, adultery, and the problem of divorce law” found in crime newspapers (5). Here, he suggests the obvious. The “sensational” or shocking aspects of sensation fiction must be the explicit violence, bigamy, murder, or deceit that take place within Victorian society or the domestic abode, particularly when undertaken by female characters who subvert the conventional order in fits of “insanity, bigamy, [and] homicide” (Brantlinger 11). Brantlinger maintains the traditional critical view that the genre’s ostensibly formulaic plots, concerned with murder and bigamy in “proper, bourgeois, domestic settings,” generated its sensational aspect and produced the affective shock expected to entice a larger reading audience and generate sales (1).

However, other scholars have often identified how the above-noted “sensational” elements of sensation fiction derive from preceding novelistic genres and literary works. Allan asserts that the characteristics frequently attributed to the supposedly ephemeral sensation genre, including “its incident-laden plots, emphasis on crime, secrecy, class transgression and aggressive, passionate heroines,” cannot be

considered singular hallmarks of sensation fiction; in fact, she posits that “these features were neither new nor unique to the works deemed sensational” (91). Despite widespread critical judgment of the sensation genre’s inferiority to higher forms of literature and its reliance on superficial, affective means to generate readerly interest, *Lady Audley’s Secret* and other sensation novels of the 1860s rather demonstrate the genre’s dependence on pre-established literary conventions, as well as a continuing dependence on the reader’s alignment with the world and characters of the novel. Critical evaluation of the sensation genre’s inferiority originates with contemporary Victorian critics, who fashioned the title of “sensation novel” in order to brand “literature perceived to be aesthetically inferior, and by implication morally questionable” (Cvetkovich 17). In an effort to delegitimize its popularity and ubiquity, Victorian critics accused the “sensation” genre, which often explored “current and provocative issues” in daily life, of “corrupting the populace” (Ifill 5-6). Furthermore, the sensation genre’s ostensible inferiority was often attributed to its affective, emotional influence on the reading audience; critics not only espoused “assumptions that body and emotion are distinct from and inferior to mind and reason,” but also utilized their self-constructed “sensation” label to “[enable] the disparagement of cultural forms that appealed to marginalized groups, such as the working-class or women” (Cvetkovich 22). More importantly, critical reduction of the sensation novel’s appeal to the emotional, or the “sensational,” elides the fact that preceding genres, such as the “Gothic novel, the sentimental novel, the novel of sensibility, the Newgate novel, [and] the domestic novel,” all demonstrate a similar “ability to produce affect” and a reliance on “affective power” to draw in their reading audiences (Cvetkovich 15).

The genre's abundant emphasis on plot and mystery, in the eyes of the critic, suggests the simultaneous reduction of character development and readerly sympathy, elements which typically characterized the realist novels of Jane Austen, George Eliot, Gustave Flaubert, and Honoré de Balzac, among many others. Though scholars generally define the sensation genre as a "mix" of the Gothic and the realist novel forms that preceded it, the sensation novel's "realism" is purportedly relegated to the genre's setting in the domestic sphere rather than the depiction of character interiority or processes of reason (Brown 101). As a result, the genre has often been labelled as having "one-dimensional characters" that lose the agency and complexity of realist characters (Haugtvedt 157). Brantlinger's essay stresses the dichotomy between sensational plot and realistic character numerous times; he argues that the sensation novel "is the subordination of character to plot" (12), that the "sensational derives much more from plot than from character" (13), and that "circumstances rule characters" and strip them of their agency (13). Brantlinger even goes so far as to assert that the "sensational" aspects of the genre ensure that it is "not to be taken too serious[ly]" (27).

These assertions regarding the "one-dimensional" quality of sensation fiction's characters were widely used to denounce the genre, because it posed a dangerous threat to established Victorian social conventions and ideals, particularly the idealistic view of women and femininity. Since female characters were habitually the perpetrators of sensational crime, violence, and murder in sensation novels, contemporary critics often cited arguments of realism and character development to destabilize and challenge such subversive representations of women. Victorian critics lauded realist novels for their "serious and sympathetic treatment of average people," particularly characters who

adhered to the cultural and social norms of their era (Brown 96). In “Feminine Sensationalism, Eroticism, and Self-Assertion: M. E. Braddon and Ouida,” Natalie Schroeder quotes E. S. Dallas, a Victorian journalist, who argues that novels require “personages in whom we can be interested,” or rather, characters who are believable and sympathetic (quoted in Schroeder 89). Furthermore, Dallas invokes stereotypical Victorian notions of the docile, domestic angel of the house to denounce the sensation genre’s reliance on violent female characters to move the plot forward, arguing that “if the novelist depends for his sensation upon the action of a woman, the chances are that he will attain his end by unnatural means” (quoted in Schroeder 89). The sensation genre particularly hinges upon questions of women’s roles in the home and in society, crucial aspects of the domestic genre which preceded it; while the domestic novel “articulated [...] notions about women’s normative relation to marriage, family, and the domestic sphere,” the sensation novel revolved around the same questions of feminine domesticity and agency by borrowing and subverting the idealism of the domestic novel (Fraiman 170).

Contemporary critics’ severe derision of sensation fiction largely stemmed from these societal fears about the effect of sensation novels on their audiences, especially female audiences, as well as the transgression of the cultural norms upheld in realist fiction. Daniel Brown’s essay, “Realism and Sensation Fiction,” posits that critical appeal to sympathy and readerly identification, in order to deride sensational and subversive characters, demonstrates the ways in which “any forms of subjectivity not in line with those endorsed by realist representation were considered abhorrent” (100). In fact, Victorian author Henry James produces a similar critical gaze in regard to Lucy

Audley of *Lady Audley's Secret*; he posits that Lady Audley is totally devoid of character (and therefore, realism and sympathy), indicative of a “non-entity, without a heart, a soul, a reason” (quoted in Reynolds and Humble 107). Lady Audley’s violence, deceit, and bigamy render her positively unnatural and unfeminine, and to her contemporary reviewers, she represents the total diminishment of sympathetic, realist character to sensational plot devices.

However, biographical works which detail Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s literary ambitions demonstrate that she was especially sensitive to this reputation of not only her own work, but of the sensation genre altogether. In fact, Braddon biographers have indicated how she strove to “free at least some of her novels from the constraining conventions of sensation fiction” (Schroeder and Schroeder 18). As a child, Braddon read not only popular fiction, but also literature highly venerated by her Victorian contemporaries, including Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, Maria Edgeworth, and Walter Scott (Pykett, “Mary Elizabeth Braddon” 124). In her nascent literary career, she regretted having to rely on “[h]alf penny & penny journals” to earn her living, feeling that the restrictive expectations of formulaic “crime, treachery, murder, slow poisoning & general infamy” in penny journal sensation stories were “something terrible” (quoted in N. Houston 15). Following Braddon’s enormous financial success with serial publications, the author attempted more “serious social fiction,” even writing an English adaptation of Gustave Flaubert’s realist novel *Madame Bovary* (N. Houston 15). Lyn Pykett asserts that *John Marchmont's Legacy*, another sensational Braddon novel published after *Lady Audley's Secret*, utilizes the “usual sensation machinery” while

working to produce “plots [which] arise naturally from character” (Pykett, “Mary Elizabeth Braddon” 126).

Braddon’s particular evaluation of sensation fiction’s perceived flaws, and her efforts to improve upon sensation with character, supplement my own recognition of the domestic and “sympathetic” nature of Braddon’s sensation writing in *Lady Audley’s Secret*. Since Braddon hoped to write great works of fiction, yet felt pressured by monetary ambitions and time constraints arising from the expeditious publication of serial magazines, it becomes easier to see the ways in which Braddon made small efforts to subvert or alter the genre’s typical elements in her own “sensational” serials. And according to Natalie Schroeder’s and Ronald A. Schroeder’s book *From Sensation to Society: Representations of Marriage in the Fiction of Mary Elizabeth Braddon, 1862-1866*, Braddon’s subversion of sensation conventions ultimately served her own “interrogation of marriage as a cultural institution and as personal or individual experience” (20). The “social ostracism and unpleasant publicity” for Braddon, following her interrogation of the effect of marriage on “individual” character in her sensation novels, precisely demonstrates why her fiction cannot be written off as totally devoid of character and sympathetic affect (Schroeder and Schroeder 21).

More recent scholarly work has begun to probe the limits of sympathetic character development in the sensation genre, and in particular, the ways that sensation relies on sympathy and realism in order to elicit the genre’s more potent shocks. In fact, much of the scholarly work that I’ve read touches upon the sympathetic aspect of *Lady Audley* and other subversive sensation fiction characters in Braddon’s oeuvre. In “The Ideology of Narrative Form in Sensation Fiction,” Jonathan Loesberg asserts that,

despite Lucy Audley's "role of villainous conspirator," she "becomes a figure of sympathy" when she loses everything at the novel's end (120). Elisabetta Marino argues that Lucy's violent behavior is "partially justified" (174), highlighting the character's "gloomy fate" in being "disposed of like a useless object" (177). Anthea Trodd, author of *Domestic Crime in the Victorian Novel*, states that Braddon "invites sympathy for her heroine as a daredevil careerist capable of anything" (116). In *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction: Crime, Medicine and Victorian Popular Culture*, Andrew Mangham suggests Lucy's role as the novel's primary sympathetic character, asserting that "the reader's sympathies are never with Luke Marks" or other male characters attempting to dominate Lucy (90). Though definitions of sensation fiction frequently posit that the sensation genre only deals with plot, relegating more nuanced depictions of character to the realist genre, questions of character and character sympathy appear (unintentionally) significant to many scholars' appraisals of the sensation genre's "sensational" aspect.

In an essay titled "The Sympathy of Suspense: Gaskell and Braddon's Slow and Fast Sensation Fiction in Family Magazines," Erica Haugtvedt works against scholarly assumptions that sensation novels only employ "suspense" to stimulate readerly interest (150). She states that while "cliff-hangers" and narrative withholding of information are important to the sensation genre, many literary scholars have not acknowledged the non-sensational "slowness" of narrative necessary to the construction of a sensation novel (Haugtvedt 151). In particular, her essay substantiates my own argument about Braddon's sympathetic narrative gaze in relation to her "sensational" anti-heroine. Haugtvedt defines sympathy as "a bonding process whereby characters or readers imagine themselves in another's situation" (151). According to Haugtvedt, the reader's

sympathetic “feelings” toward or “investments” in characters enable them to feel the “anxiety of suspense” more fully; our investment in a character makes us eager to know what will happen to them in the end (151). Haugtvedt claims that the sympathy of sensation novels, “built on the legacies of the narrative’s past and present,” creates our interest in characters and enables an “anxiety of suspense to flourish at key junctures of narration” (151). Thus, she argues that the anxiety and suspense of sensation novels require the kind of character development and narrative work that Victorian and modern scholars have denied to be components of the sensation genre.

I would like to pose the following question: what did the term “sympathy” signify for Victorian reading audiences? Victorian uses of “sympathy,” as indicated in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, demonstrate the term’s multifaceted quality in the nineteenth century, employed by a variety of psychological, medical, economic, and literary works. Unlike the term’s typical use today, Victorians utilized “sympathy” to demonstrate anything from sympathy between bodily organs (*OED* “sympathy, n. 1.b”) to sympathy between commercial products fluctuating in prices (*OED* “sympathy, n. 1.c”). In general, sympathy broadly indicated an “affinity between certain things, by virtue of which they are similarly or correspondingly affected by the same influence” (*OED* “sympathy, n. 1.a”). The Victorian understanding of “marital sympathy” is particularly useful for discussions of the female role in Victorian society and for understanding the extent to which “sympathy” itself profoundly affected the lives of Victorian women (Ablow 11). Husbands and wives shared an idealized “sympathetic bond,” fusing them into one body both religiously and sexually, but they were also legally bonded under marital coverture (Ablow 11). This law of coverture required that

a “wife’s legal identity was effectively absorbed into her husband’s,” including her property and any inheritance (Ablow 10). Thus, Victorian marital sympathy not only facilitated the alignment of husband and wife as a legal unit, but also generated the socially expected loss of feminine identity in marriage, which Ablow terms “a form of female erasure” (14).

Furthermore, “sympathy” in the nineteenth century began more frequently to denote that which we associate with the term today: an understanding and awareness of another human being’s condition. In particular, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines this type of “sympathy” as the “conformity of feelings, inclinations, or temperament” between people (“sympathy, n. 3.a”), the “state of being affected by the condition of another with a feeling similar or corresponding to that of the other” (“sympathy, 3.b”), and the “feeling of compassion or commiseration” caused by recognizing the suffering of others (“sympathy, n. 3.c”). Haugtvedt takes up this latter form of “sympathy” in “The Sympathy of Suspense,” as she argues that sensation novels still facilitate our ability to “imagine” and sympathize with the situation of the literary characters inhabiting the pages of Victorian novels (151).

Other scholarship on sympathy and sympathetic realism in the Victorian era add nuance to Haugtvedt’s definition of sympathy in relation to fellow-feelings or compassion. In *The Marriage of Minds: Reading Sympathy in the Victorian Marriage Plot*, Rachel Ablow also defines “sympathy” as “the experience of entering imaginatively into another’s thoughts or feelings” (8), but in her focus on Victorian marriage plots, she rather suggests that novelistic sympathy indicated a more detached “mode of relating to others and of defining a self” (2). Furthermore, Rae Greiner’s

*Sympathetic Realism in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* differentiates between Victorian “sympathy” and modern “empathy.” According to Greiner, Victorians maintained a “border between self and other,” where “one could generate experiences of sympathetic connection without requiring that others’ feelings and minds be known or identically shared” (159). In fact, she posits that Victorian realism argued for a “sympathetic understanding” that did not require total acceptance or emulation of another person; paraphrasing Adam Smith, Greiner argues that “one need not feel what others feel in order to sympathize with them” (159). Empathy, on the other hand, is the modern effect of “feeling *with* rather than *for* others,” in contrast to the Victorians’ more distant employment of sympathy (Greiner 159). This distant sympathetic gaze, which keeps the reader or “self” detached while still enabling the imaginative understanding of another person’s plight, directly undermines contemporary critical fears that Victorian women would “be adversely influenced by the amoral characters” of sensation fiction (Ifill 5).

The above-mentioned definitions of Victorian sympathy seem especially appropriate for appraisals of Lady Audley as a sympathetic villainess. Though Lucy’s means are utterly violent and deceitful, hardly producing an inspirational model for behavior, it becomes increasingly difficult to cast her off or to judge her as a wicked madwoman when Braddon details the poverty, societal restrictions, and expectations of ideal femininity that eventually provoke her manipulative assertions of agency. Helena Ifill recognizes this in her book *Creating Character: Theories of Nature and Nurture in Victorian Sensation Fiction*, in which she argues that the sensation novels of Mary Elizabeth Braddon and her literary peer, Wilkie Collins, “frequently provide clues to the

reasons behind their characters' personalities, and lay the foundation for characters' actions by revealing details of family history, upbringing and inherent constitution" (9). These details of "character formation" allow Braddon to demonstrate to the reader why Lucy would resort to violence, crime, and manipulation in order to protect herself (Ifill 8). For Ifill, this formation of character facilitates readerly understanding that "respectable people" like Lucy can "*become deviants,*" rather than being inherently violent or deviant (9). As Anthea Trodd writes in *Domestic Crime in the Victorian Novel*, Braddon employs Lucy Audley's subversive violence to "expose the incompatible demands made upon the domestic angel" while also "[inviting] sympathy for her heroine" (116). While Lucy's violence may alienate readerly "fellow-feeling" or emulation, Braddon manipulates her narrative characterization of Lucy in a way that allows the reader to nonetheless identify with or understand Lucy's reasoning and actions (*OED* "sympathy, n. 3.b"). As Haugtvedt posits that "only through the reader's sympathetic investment in the characters can the story have an impact," it certainly seems that the "sensational" quality of *Lady Audley's Secret* stems from the way that the reader, and especially the *female* reader, can sympathize with such a violent and transgressive female character (156).

Female readers in the Victorian era "[granted] sympathy to the villainesses" of sensation fiction because they identified with and understood "the stifling domestic environment they were confined to" (Marino 170). This feminine sympathy and identification, rather than simply "sensational" plot elements, generated the genre's sensational aspect; sensation novels were popular because they "indirectly voiced women's ambitions for individuality and power," straining against the "tedium and

injustice of the feminine role in marriage and the family” (Schroeder 87). Rather than substantiating critical fears that sensation fiction “posed [a danger] to female readers,” who critics believed would reenact fictional feminine violence, the genre’s appeal to feminine sympathetic identification augmented social interrogation of the limiting institutions that sought to restrain women’s agency (Schroeder 89). Sensational villainesses like Lady Audley offer a “deconstruction of the ideal Victorian heroine” (Reynolds and Humble 105) and expose the nature of women’s performative efforts to impersonate “an impossible ideal” (Talairach-Vielmas 132).

In particular, Lucy Audley of *Lady Audley’s Secret* and Amy Dunne of *Gone Girl* utilize performances of femininity that demonstrate the inequities of gender roles within the social sphere. Judith Butler defines gender as “an incessant activity performed,” often “without one’s willing,” which operates within a “scene of constraint,” and these novels make it increasingly clear that such constraints of gender primarily instigate Lucy’s and Amy’s respective transgressions (*Undoing Gender* 1). Lucy Audley exposes the necessity for Victorian women to play an angelic, domestic, and childish version of femininity which simultaneously dispossesses them of agency, conforming to the ideals espoused by their socially powerful and active male counterparts. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler defines this type of gender performance as “strategy of survival within compulsory systems,” the transgression of which results in “clearly punitive consequences” (*Gender Trouble* 178). Lucy’s performance in multiple identities, as well as Amy’s numerous identities in the modern thriller *Gone Girl*, speak to larger questions of socially anticipated female gender performances, which both Lucy and Amy deem obligatory in

order to succeed economically, politically, and socially. In addition, the novels generate a pointed critique of the manner in which these performances ultimately result in Lucy's and Amy's subsequent vilification by those who nevertheless expect a certain performance of femininity. In the case of Lucy Audley, her performance as the idyllic and naïve Victorian angel garners tremendous sympathy and admiration, yet the realization that this ideal can only be attained through performative and artificial methods eventually provokes Robert's efforts to remove her from Audley Court. The emptiness of identity resulting from Lucy's and Amy's feminine performances enables female audiences of both novels to recognize, understand, and commiserate with these anti-heroines' manipulations and subversions of social and domestic systems of control. Though the sensation novel may focus more frequently on constructions of plot and delivery of visceral shock (in comparison to realist novels), *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Gone Girl* still enable readers to examine "the human condition" by analyzing the ways in which female characters exhibit reason and respond to difficult situations, especially those instigated by marriage and limiting expectations of the Victorian social sphere (Ifill 8).

## Chapter 2: Sensational Sympathy in *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862)

Mary Elizabeth Braddon's 1862 novel *Lady Audley's Secret* epitomizes the trademarks largely deemed to distinguish the Victorian "sensation" genre: set in Braddon's contemporary London and focused upon the dynamics of a peaceful aristocratic society, *Lady Audley's Secret* unveils shocking revelations of bigamy, identity fraud, attempted murder, and madness, all crimes perpetrated by Audley Court's seemingly angelic, child-like, and charming Lucy Audley. In Volume I, Chapter VII, Braddon's narrator perfectly encapsulates the unnerving extent to which the "sensation" genre destabilized the Victorians' idealizing of the domestic sphere, marriage, and society. After commenting on the "peaceful prospect" of the village near Audley Court, the narrator's tone turns chilling, as Braddon writes,

We hear every day of murders committed in the country. Brutal and treacherous murders; slow, protracted agonies from poisons administered by some kindred hand; sudden and violent deaths by cruel blows, inflicted with a stake cut from some spreading oak, whose very shadow promised – peace. In the county of which I write, I have been shown a meadow which, on a quiet summer Sunday evening, a young farmer murdered the girl who had loved and trusted him; and yet even now, with the stain of that foul deed upon it, the aspect of the spot is – peace. No crime has ever been committed in the worst rookeries about Seven Dials that has not been also done in the face of that sweet rustic calm which still, in spite of all, we look on with a tender, half-mournful yearning, and associate with – peace. (Braddon 57)

The narrator's emphasis on "brutal and treacherous murders," "poisons," and "crime" aligns with Patrick Brantlinger's and other Victorian sensation fiction scholars' assessments of the essential "sensation" characteristics. Braddon's juxtaposition of atrocious murders against the novel's setting in the peaceful countryside undoubtedly adheres to the "sensation" trope which requires the occurrence of crime in quotidian Victorian society, the "sweet rustic calm" typical of domestic and realist novels which

preceded the sensation genre. However, Braddon's effective contrast between violence and peace also suggests, to a subtler degree, the validity of my fundamental argument regarding what truly renders her sensation novel "sensational." Here, violence and peace are inextricably linked, existing as two essential elements for the novel's capacity to affect the reading audience; the "sensation" of this passage not only hinges upon gruesome murder, but also upon the "slowness," as defined by Haugtvedt, which derives from earlier domestic and realist works of fiction (Haugtvedt 151). Braddon deliberately highlights the word "peace," repeated three times and accentuated with the use of dashes, to intentionally focus the reader's attention upon its uncomfortable and discordant fusion with horrific crime. Most importantly, Braddon constructs audience sympathy for the young girl brutally murdered by her love, foreshadowing Braddon's own critiques of marital oppressions that are later exposed by developments of Lucy Audley's and Phoebe Marks's character histories. At this minute level, Braddon's writing works to generate the indissolubility of shock and peace, and by extension, "sensation" and sympathetic realism.

The indivisible nature of the "sensational" with the realist produced by *Lady Audley's Secret* becomes especially clear in Braddon's narrative characterization of Lucy Audley. With "soft and melting blue eyes" and "showering flaxen curls," Lucy leaves all who encounter her with the distinct impression of her "grace, her beauty, and her kindness" (Braddon 11-12). She is the veritable "angel in the house," the ideal image of Victorian femininity and domesticity espoused by earlier nineteenth-century domestic novels. Nevertheless, the titular "angel" of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's popular sensation novel commits bigamy, identity fraud, attempted murder, and arson, lying to

and manipulating those around her in order to retain her newfound position of wealth and comfort. She reveals, beneath the artificiality of her performative docility and her adherence to the cultural ideal of modest womanhood, a violent, and potentially mad, assertion of feminine agency against those who seek to expose the nature of her performance and to deprive her of the luxury she has acquired in a bigamous marriage. Despite Lucy's violent and deceitful means, which provide the novel's characteristically sensational aspect and no doubt shocked the contemporary Victorian reader, Braddon carefully constructs Lucy in a manner which enables her predominantly female audience to understand or align with Lucy's plight. Though Lucy is manipulative and violent, the circumstances of her childhood poverty and her first husband's desertion reasonably motivate her comportment. Braddon not only delivers the sensational thrills of Lucy's subversion of feminine domesticity, but also provides the reader with details of Lucy's past misfortunes, aspects of character formation that allow the reader to comprehend and connect with Lucy's actions.

As detailed in the previous section, Haugtvedt's work entitled "The Sympathy of Suspense" asserts that the anxiety and suspense of sensation novels requires the exact sympathy that I believe Braddon elicits in her construction of Lady Audley's story. We cannot feel anxiety, worry, or shock in regard to Lucy's actions without the inherent sympathy produced in the development of her character by the novel's narrator. Sympathy, and the way in which this sympathy undermines the idealized Victorian domestic abode, renders *Lady Audley's Secret* truly "sensational." Braddon elicits readerly sympathy for Lucy Audley (née Helen Maldon) to not only augment and intensify the "sensational" shock of her novel, but also to call into question the limits of

feminine performance expected by Victorian social ideals; she ultimately creates sympathy by targeting the societal flaws that constrain women to marriage and the home and to the conventional roles that seek to silence them.

CLiC v2.0.1		UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM		Arts & Humanities Research Council
Showing 1 to 6 of 6 entries, Rel. Freq, 40.00 pm, from 1 book				
b61de3				
Left	Node	Right	Book	
1 alone; a house in which no one room had any	sympathy	with another, every chamber running off at a tangent into	<a href="#">LadyAud</a>	
2 been a churl who could not have laughed for pure	sympathy.	He was a capital hand at speculation and vingt-et-un, and	<a href="#">LadyAud</a>	
3 maid bore to Lucy Audley was, perhaps, a point of	sympathy	between the two women. It was not to be called	<a href="#">LadyAud</a>	
4 he seemed to have lost all taste for companionship, all	sympathy	with the pleasures and occupations of his class, since the	<a href="#">LadyAud</a>	
5 ed?" the Frenchwoman said, interrogatively, with a look of intense	sympathy.	as she placed an arm-chair for my lady. "Madam" shrugged	<a href="#">LadyAud</a>	
6 I carried the old bullet in my breast; and what	sympathy	could I have with men who knew nothing of my	<a href="#">LadyAud</a>	
<a href="#">Previous</a>	1			

Figure 1: CLiC search for “sympathy” in *Lady Audley’s Secret*

CLiC, a digital concordance tool, allows users to search for words in digital editions of Victorian novels. In order to see if Mary Elizabeth Braddon utilized the term “sympathy” in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, I generated a search for “sympathy” in CLiC’s online edition of the novel. The figure above demonstrates my search results, where each instance of “sympathy” is organized by its chronological appearance (Image generated via CLiC: clic.bham.ac.uk/).

Readerly sympathy toward Lucy’s predicament, formed by depictions of character history and provoked by the societal restriction of women, challenges the Victorian critic’s view of Lucy as the wicked villain threatening the peace and stability of the domestic home (and Victorian society itself). Furthermore, Braddon utilizes the specific term “sympathy” six times within *Lady Audley’s Secret*, which suggests her own authorial attention to the effect of sympathy within the novel and on her reading audience.

Lucy epitomizes expectations of Victorian femininity, beauty, grace, and above all, innocence, in her marriage to Sir Michael Audley. She exudes these characteristics

in a shrewd and careful performance, exploiting her beauty and charm in order to attain material comfort and to evade her past poverty and deprivation. In fact, Lady Audley's character superficially fits within modern literary scholars' belief that the sensation genre reduces development of character. Lucy Audley is merely the hollow shell of a girl, an "endlessly proliferating set of performances" where the "removal of one mask reveals another and then another" (Taylor and Crofts xxxii). This largely results from Lucy's dexterity in conforming her body and her comportment to the needs and desires of her society; she has cleverly perceived that her success, particularly as a lower-class woman in the Victorian era, depends upon her society's perception of her rather than her own self-perceived identity. In fact, Lucy relies upon her self-constructed performance as a beautiful Victorian "angel" in order to garner sympathy from her peers, and she elicits sympathy from those around her by playing this role to perfection.

Narrative descriptions of Lucy, as well as other characters' appraisals of Lucy, predominantly emphasize her physical characteristics as indicators of her value and her ostensible perfection. Lucy later recalls her formative years of youth, when she was first "told that I was pretty – beautiful – lovely – bewitching," recognizing that this feminine beauty could enable her to "be more successful in the world's great lottery than my companions" (Braddon 345). Indeed, Helen Talboys, who will later undertake the role of Lucy Graham, depends on this performance, and the sympathy which places her in step with her economic superiors, in order to rise out of poverty and misery. She ascertains that her "ultimate fate in life depended upon my marriage" (345), and she tailors her performance of femininity so as to secure an "advantageous" match (11). This performance proves highly successful when she becomes Lucy Graham and

subsequently Lucy Audley, as every person who encounters her lauds the appearance of her “amiable and gentle nature always to be light-hearted, happy, and contented” (11). Furthermore, this performance emphasizes the inability of her peers, and ultimately the ignorance of Victorian society, to recognize the extent to which Victorian women were required to perform a version of femininity that wholly precluded feminine agency, activity, or opinion. Lucy embodies a “childishness” which renders her nonthreatening to those in power, especially the male figures in her life, and her idealized, feminine beauty augments their initial perception of Lucy as naïve and harmless (55). The narrator underscores Lucy’s “innocence and candour” shining “out of her large and liquid blue eyes” and highlights her “rosy lips, the delicate nose, and the profusion of fair ringlets,” all of which aid in her performative “charm” (55). However, the superficiality of her physical attributes, and the sympathy which they garner from her (primarily male) peers, conceals something sinister beneath its murky depths; in fact, Braddon exploits this ostensible superficiality of Lucy’s character to make a much more poignant and potent critique of the feminine loss of identity undergone in marital coverture. The precepts and gender conventions of her contemporary society force Lucy to undertake a series of interminable and artificial performances in order to retain a semblance of her agency as a woman. And furthermore, Lucy’s beauty and apparent innocence successfully disguise the nature of her performative femininity for much of the novel; the narrator, speaking on behalf of Sir Michael and other peers in his social circle, observes that there “was nothing whatever in her manner of the shallow artifice employed by a woman who wishes to captivate a rich man” (13). Her performance ensures her survival and her comfort, and yet, Lucy will ultimately be vilified for her

performative role as the feminine “angel” whom Sir Michael desires to possess. Thus, Henry James’s critique that Lucy is “devoid of character” rather reflects the failings of the conventions which compel her to act in such a way (Reynolds and Humble 107).

Though Lucy may represent the condition of women who become hollow shells devoid of character in Victorian society and marriage, Braddon nonetheless endows Lucy with elements of character history and hints of personal depth that enable readerly understanding of or sympathy for her titular anti-heroine. The novel’s very first chapter, aptly named “Lucy,” sets the stage for Lady Audley and most readily prepares the reader to generate their sympathetic alignment with the mysterious former governess. First, Braddon provides the reader with the picturesque description of Audley Court, where Lucy Audley plays an important role as the angelic, sweet, and benevolent mistress of the house. Braddon paints Audley Court as the serene and idyllic setting of marital bliss and upper-class comfort, calling the estate a “glorious old place – a place that visitors fell into raptures with; feeling a yearning wish to have done with life, and to stay there for ever [...] a spot in which Peace seemed to have taken up her abode, setting her soothing hand on every tree and flower” (Braddon 8). After briefly introducing Sir Michael Audley and his only daughter, Alicia, the novel turns to Lucy, and it subsequently takes the reader back in time to when she was Miss Lucy Graham, attracting the attentions of Sir Michael. At first, much like the idyllic portrayal of the domestic abode over which she will preside, Lucy epitomizes the stereotypical “Angel in the House” and the feminine charms expected of her by society. She exudes “joy and brightness,” with a face that “[shines] like a sunbeam” (11). Furthermore, Braddon presents the social appraisal of Lucy Graham that establishes her eminence in the novel

and her likability amongst her peers: she reveals that “[e]very one loved, admired, and praised” Lucy as “the sweetest girl that ever lived” (12). This directly recalls Coventry Patmore’s “The Angel in the House” poem, published between 1854 and 1862. In this poem, Patmore demonstrates societal ideals of feminine beauty and goodness that were expected of Victorian wives and women, praising:

Her *modesty*, her chiefest grace,  
The cestus clasping Venus’ side,  
How potent to deject the face  
Of him who would affront its pride!  
Wrong dares not in her presence speak,  
Nor spotted thought its taint disclose  
Under the protest of a cheek  
*Outbragging Nature’s boast the rose.*  
In *mind and manners* how *discreet*;  
How *artless* in her very art;  
How *candid* in discourse; how *sweet*  
The *concord of her lips and heart.* (Patmore 40, emphasis my own)

Here, Patmore indicates the attributes and comportment which characterize the Victorian ideal, the “angel” of the domestic abode who must be modest, discreet, innocent, artless, candid, and sweet. In accentuating the “concord of her lips and heart,” Patmore plays upon nineteenth-century understandings of sympathy between parts of the body, one definition of sympathy from the *Oxford English Dictionary* which I have noted in the previous section of this thesis. This sympathetic alignment between the wife’s lips and heart emphasizes expectations that exterior beauty reflects moral interior character, an assumption made regarding Lucy’s lovely physical appearance and apparent naïveté by the society of Audley Court in the novel’s opening chapter. Braddon’s writing ultimately exposes this assumption as false, rejecting other characters’ inclinations to pity Lucy or sympathize with her solely based on her beauty. Interestingly, Patmore’s poetic representation of the idealized wife acknowledges the

performative nature of women in Victorian life and anticipates Lucy's own performance as an angelic wife; when Patmore declares that the Victorian wife is "artless in her very art," he seemingly recognizes the necessity of feminine "art" that then works to conceal itself and appear "artless." This tension becomes profoundly significant in Braddon's construction of sympathy for her novel's titular character, and furthermore, this tension produces striking anxieties about the nature of our own formation of sympathy and what kinds of characters merit readerly sympathy.

Lucy fulfills the expectations of Patmore's Victorian "angel" in this first scene, but before Chapter I ends, Braddon begins to point out the untenable nature of this ideal as Sir Michael offers Lucy his hand in marriage. Upon first seeing Lucy's immense beauty and charm, Sir Michael immediately claims Lucy as his "fate," and the narrator reveals Sir Michael's belief that "she was his destiny" and that "*this* was love" (Braddon 12). Without any formal attachment or indication of reciprocated feeling, Sir Michael essentially claims Lucy as his own, hoping that she will eagerly love him because "her life had been most likely one of toil and dependence" (13). Thus, Braddon establishes within the first few pages the presumptuous and idealized view of femininity espoused by the male gaze, as well as foreshadowing elements of Lucy's past which will become essential for understanding her later motivations and constructing her sympathetic aspect. Though Lucy invites the "envy and hatred of her sex," and particularly the hate of Alicia Audley, in marrying Sir Michael, Braddon makes it clear that marriage (and ultimately, bigamy) is hardly Lucy's goal. Lucy seems "perfectly well satisfied with her situation" at the start of the novel, working as a governess for Mr. Dawson, and it is only through the urging of the Dawson family that Lucy concedes

to pay more attention to Sir Michael (11). Mrs. Dawson first reveals Sir Michael's intentions to Lucy, much to Lucy's chagrin; at this news, the young governess "flush[es] scarlet to the roots of her fair hair" and grows "pale" (14). When Mrs. Dawson implies that Lucy should not encourage Sir Michael if she is not interested in marriage, Lucy becomes quite angry, proclaiming, "pray don't talk to me, Mrs. Dawson. I had no idea of this. It is the last thing that would have occurred to me" (14). With "bitterness," this revelation provokes Lucy to vaguely reflect upon her past, and after stating that "some people are born to be unlucky," Lucy clearly asserts that "it would be a great deal too much good fortune for me to become Lady Audley" (14). These reflections serve two purposes. First, Braddon hopes to generate sensational intrigue, creating the initial mystery surrounding Lucy's identity by withholding narrative information. Second, Braddon begins to establish the subversive and reasonable motivations that will sympathetically align Lucy Graham with her primarily female readership. Though Lucy's bigamy is not yet known at this point in the novel, the exposure of her first marriage undoubtedly provides more clarity to Lucy's bitter reaction against the prospect of marrying Sir Michael.

However, the Dawsons, embodying their society's rigid expectations of women, compel Lucy to once again constrain herself within marriage. As Braddon's narrator notes, "[it] was a tacitly understood thing in the surgeon's family that whenever Sir Michael proposed, the governess would quietly accept him; and, indeed, the simple Dawsons would have thought it something more than *madness* in a penniless girl to reject such an offer" (15, emphasis my own). Braddon implies the Dawsons' simple ignorance of Lucy's plight, and by extension the plight of all Victorian women expected

to be joined to a man in marriage, indicating Braddon's narrative attentions to the forces which shape and motivate character in her novel. This "slowness" essentially mimics the marital themes prevalent in domestic and realist fiction; the courting ritual itself can hardly be considered "sensational," yet Lucy's seeming revulsion at this process enables the infusion of "sensation" into the ordinary workings of Victorian marriage rituals. Lucy's anger and embarrassment serve Braddon's critique of the marital system, as Lucy seemingly has no choice or agency in deciding her own fate. Furthermore, the label "madness," associated with Lucy's reluctance to marry Sir Michael, foreshadows Robert Audley's subsequent efforts to label Lucy's performative and idealized femininity as "madness;" the novel ostensibly forces Lucy to assume this label, regardless of her actions, which contributes to Braddon's construction of Lucy's sympathetic aspect. Lucy's futile position between two forms of supposed "madness" develops one of Braddon's most effective criticisms of the dual expectation and denunciation of Victorian feminine performance.

What should be the simple and sweet acceptance of a marriage proposal, as would be expected of the Victorian "angel," Lucy immediately perplexes Sir Michael (and the reader) in rejecting his love and refusing to promise love to him in return. Instead, she accepts his marriage proposal for the "bargain" of companionship and material comfort, rather than the unconditional feminine love espoused by Coventry Patmore and expected of Victorian wives (Braddon 17). However, Lucy's materialistic motivations do not hinder the development of readerly sympathy, because Braddon immediately details elements of Lucy's misfortunes in order to justify Lucy's break from the status quo. Lucy, agitated by Sir Michael's offer, proclaims, "You ask too

much of *me*! Remember what my life has been; only remember that. From my very babyhood I have never seen anything but poverty [...] Poverty, poverty, trials, vexations, humiliations, deprivations! [...] I *cannot* be disinterested; I cannot be blind to the advantages of such an alliance” (16). Rather than simply portray the proposal as a means for developing the novel’s plot, Braddon writes a particularly poignant description of Lucy as she considers her predicament. The narrator paints an almost mournful scene, informing the reader that Sir Michael, if he had been able to see Lucy’s face, “would have seen a yearning gaze which seemed as if it would have pierced the far obscurity and looked away – away into another world” (15). Here, Braddon develops an unhurried and deliberate depiction of Lucy’s own desire for freedom and her “yearning” for something beyond her grasp. This scene, while not developing her character in the minutely detailed manner of earlier domestic novels, nonetheless demonstrates Braddon’s reliance on slower, sympathetic forms of writing to attract the curiosity, and ultimately the sympathetic understanding, of her reading audience. Furthermore, Lucy comforts herself with the idea that she will suffer “no more dependence, no more drudgery, [and] no more humiliations” (17). These revelations by Lucy are not inherently “sensational,” but rather provide the reader with important background knowledge of Lucy that will become significant as the novel (and our understanding of Lucy) progresses. By portraying Lucy’s somber acceptance of Sir Michael’s proposal, and alluding to the nature of Lucy’s previous hardships, Braddon implores her audience to consider elements of character that form the basis of readerly attachment to Lucy. These scenes are slow, and they serve to establish how we see and comprehend Lucy’s actions. She is the first character with whom the reader can

perceive any reasonable depth or motivation. In particular, Lucy piques the reader's interest because she already begins to demonstrate the methods in which she, and more importantly, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, subverts or defies expectations of her role as the quintessential Victorian wife. Whereas Patmore asserts that the Victorian woman "loves with love that cannot tire," Lucy refuses to pretend that her marriage to Sir Michael stems from the idealized archetype of tireless, devoted love, the type of unquestioning feminine love which Sir Michael hopes to attain (Patmore 75). Thus, Braddon produces something "sensational" in the quiet proposal of Sir Michael and the sympathies produced toward the unfortunate Lucy.

The relationship depicted in *Lady Audley's Secret* between Lucy and her lady's maid, Phoebe, generates a mutual feminine sympathy that particularly reflects Braddon's target female audience, who would no doubt recognize and understand the societal limitations that force Lucy and Phoebe, both lower-class and impoverished women, into marriage. Early on in the novel, Lucy remarks upon their similarity, asking her lady's maid, "Do you know, Phoebe, I have heard some people say you and I are alike?" (Braddon 60). Though Phoebe protests, calling herself a "poor plain creature" in comparison to Lucy's stunning beauty, Lucy reasserts their similarity, unequivocally stating, "you *are* like me, and your features are very nice; it is only colour that you want" (60). Underlying the materialistic and superficial aspects of their discussion of beauty and "colour," Lucy simultaneously places herself in step with Phoebe, bridging their social, class, and economic differences in a manner which personally aligns the two women. Rebecca Kling concurs in her article on cosmetics in *Lady Audley's Secret*, arguing that Braddon "sensationalizes" cosmetics by implying that they "enable [the]

social mobility” of Victorian women (Kling 561). However, within the “sensational” implication of cosmetics also lies the more powerful implication that these two women, who belong to separate spheres, can nonetheless sympathize with one another. Throughout the novel, Lucy forms a kind of sympathetic attachment with Phoebe, one which allows the two young women to recognize, and even commiserate with, their collective miseries in marriage and society. As the narrator remarks in Volume II, Chapter XIII, the “sympathies between [Lucy] and this girl” not only demonstrate how the two women are “eager for advancement” through the ranks of social hierarchy, but also emphasize the ways in which they are both “weary of dull dependence” (Braddon 296). Lucy makes Phoebe her confidante, and though this trust in Phoebe later hinders Lucy’s strategic performance, it allows Braddon to produce small moments where her reader finds sympathetic fellow-feeling between two women very much at the mercy of similar constraints on their own agency and mobility.

Lucy sympathetically aligns herself with Phoebe, because Phoebe occupies the same disadvantaged position that Helen Talboys, Lucy’s former identity, once held. Poor and without options, Phoebe must resign herself to marrying her cousin, Luke, to whom she “promised, when I was little better than fifteen, that I’d be his wife” (Braddon 111). This feeling of marital entrapment resonates with Lucy, because Lucy was formerly trapped within the confines of her marriage to George Talboys, forced to fend for herself in the wake of his domestic desertion. Phoebe’s marital anxieties stem from an even darker source; she fears the violence of her future spouse, to whom she must give everything under the laws of coverture and marital sympathy. When Lucy urges Phoebe to leave her cousin, Phoebe asserts her inability to do so, declaring:

I don't think I can love him [...] I daren't refuse to marry him. I've often watched and watched him, as he sat slicing away at a hedge-stake with his great clasp-knife, till I have thought that it is just such men as he who have decoyed their sweethearts into lonely places, and murdered them for being false to their word. When he was a boy, he was always violent and revengeful [...] I tell you my lady, I must marry him. (111)

Phoebe's distressing depiction of Luke's violent tendencies first works to augment the sensationalism of Braddon's writing, as Phoebe horrifyingly contemplates the murder of innocent women by their "sweethearts" and the possibility of her own death. Phoebe's fear that Luke resembles other men who have murdered their sweethearts directly harkens back to the narrative description of a farmer murdering his sweetheart in the peaceful countryside, an analysis of which began this chapter. The continuity of this image, produced by Phoebe's character, demonstrates the significance of feminine oppression in marriage as a theme underlying the entire novel. The purpose of Phoebe's speech seems twofold; Braddon not only plays with the sensational imagination of her reader, but she also employs tactics which enable her to develop sympathetic alignment between the female reader and Phoebe. The particularly "sensational" aspect of this passage rests in the way that it forces the reader to consider the institution of marriage as a form of captivity or constraint in which many Victorian women suffered. The sympathetic bond between Lucy and Phoebe, by way of their shared experience in marriage and under the authoritative control of men, extends to Braddon's female audience, who no doubt understood the fears expressed in Phoebe's speech.

Lucy's and Phoebe's constraint in marriage refers back to the legal questions of coverture, particularly in regard to a wife's identity being "absorbed into her husband's" (Ablow 10). Thus, the sympathetic alignment between these two female characters, which also facilitates readerly identification and sympathetic understanding, posed a

profoundly dangerous threat to the institution of Victorian marriage and to gendered forms of control. In fact, Holly Furneaux posits that Braddon makes significantly subversive critiques of coverture in her depictions of “live burial” throughout *Lady Audley’s Secret* (425). She asserts that Braddon is especially attuned to the ways in which “women in Victorian society were always metaphorically facing live burial” when they become married and widowed (425). Furneaux, too, indicates how Braddon’s characterization of and alignment between Lucy and Phoebe enable the author to “elaborate the expectation of a wife’s social death” (430); in doing so, Furneaux argues that Braddon’s novel “rejects the institutionalized expectation that a married woman should suffer the complete obliteration of her individual identity” (431). Therefore, Braddon generates another form of sympathetic identification with Lucy, as well as with Phoebe, that relies upon a critical understanding of how Victorian marriage ultimately disintegrated female identity and agency in marriage, sending a wife to her “premature grave” (Furneaux 429).

Braddon makes this type of burial apparent in Lucy’s change of identity, forcing her to fabricate the death of Helen Talboys in order to escape her first marriage and eventually marry Sir Michael Audley. As Furneaux notes, Braddon similarly paints Phoebe with a “language” of burial and corpses during her marriage to Luke (430); when Phoebe approaches the church for her wedding day, she resembles a “very dim and shadowy lady” whose paleness might compel a stranger to “[mistake] the bride for the ghost of some other bride, dead and buried in the vaults below the church” (Braddon 114). Such language not only produces a sensationally Gothic image of Phoebe and Lucy as “ghosts” moving between identities, but also produces a poignant illustration of

feminine resignation towards the death of her personhood. Lucy's and Phoebe's characters must undergo significant changes in order to meet expectations of their roles as Victorian women. Though Lucy shrewdly manipulates this system to attain greater wealth and social standing, she nonetheless must conform to a system which inherently disadvantages her, forcing her to perform identities which will later be used to vilify her. Such depictions of feminine marriage and movement through life stages can hardly be called "sensational" in and of themselves; the descriptions of Phoebe's and Lucy's collective fears about marriage rather become sensational through their sympathetic aspect. The metaphor linking marriage to feminine death, and Phoebe's and Lucy's examinations of what marriage means for them socially, economically, and personally, do not exhibit the fast intrigue of typical sensation plots. Instead, Braddon constructs these marital moments to slow down her sensation novel's plot and to pose meaningful critiques of the society in which her characters must live (and conform). The sympathetic identification and alignment created in these slower moments augment the sensational reveal, capture, and confinement of Lucy, carried out by unsympathetic and powerful male figures in the novel.

If Phoebe Marks represents the sympathetic female alignment between Lucy Audley and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's female audience, Robert Audley serves as Lucy's apathetic male antagonist, who despite learning the nature of Lucy's past injustices and suffering, vilifies and confines her. Our first introduction to Robert Audley scarcely paints a sympathetic or likable picture of the young barrister; at the start of Volume I, Chapter IV, the narrator characterizes Robert as a "handsome, lazy, care-for-nothing fellow," with a "listless, dawdling, indifferent, irresolute manner"

(Braddon 35). Perhaps most striking, the narrator notes that Robert's male peers perceive him as a "man who would never get on in the world; but who would not hurt a worm" (36). Yet, this qualification hardly serves as an apt characterization by the novel's close, for reasons which I hope to elaborate throughout the rest of this chapter. In fact, Braddon's narrator and Robert's lengthy inner monologues work to demonstrate how Robert cannot and should not be considered a fair judge of Lucy Audley. He digresses for nearly two pages on the "petticoat government" of active and ambitious women, and he outright declares, "I hate women," labelling them "bold, brazen, abominable creatures, invented for the annoyance and destruction of their superiors" (207-208). This misogynistic procession of thoughts illustrates the nature of male anxiety underlying Robert's character, and it elucidates the extreme lengths which Robert takes to silence Lucy for her ambitions and manipulations as his perceived inferior counterpart. Robert as detective, hero, and bringer of justice proves rather problematic in light of his own acknowledged male biases and misogyny regarding the proper role and comportment of women in society.

Robert's admission that women are "the stronger sex, the noisier, the more persevering, the most self-assertive sex," though perhaps revealing Braddon's own efforts to legitimize female power, also directly reveals Robert's obvious disdain for women that do not conform to the childish, naïve, docile, and angelic ideal of Victorian femininity (Braddon 208). Robert's initial attraction to Lucy Audley indicates his deep attachment to this Victorian ideal; when he asserts to George that he is "falling in love" with Lucy, he praises the young woman's "blue eyes," "ringlets," "ravishing smile," and "fairy-like bonnet" (59). The admiration of these physical qualities, and the "fairy-

like,” angelic, or magical aspect with which Robert describes them, prove especially dangerous when he later understands the extent of Lucy’s performative role as Lady Audley. The “vague feeling of uneasiness” in relation to Lucy only grows as Robert begins to suspect her complicity in George’s disappearance, and Robert must wrestle with his simultaneous feelings of sympathy for Lucy and his revulsion at her ostensible subversion of feminine innocence and passivity (89). These simultaneous feelings also indicate a concurrent tension between his expectations of Lucy’s ideal comportment and the reality of Lucy’s surreptitious agency, hidden by her own performance. The “touch of pity in his eyes” for Lucy quickly dissipates throughout the novel as Robert increasingly recognizes how Lucy’s performance as domestic angel has deceived him (141). This revelation not only provokes his aforementioned misogynistic reflections, but also incites his threats against Lucy’s status and position within the Audley home. He insinuates the tenuous nature of her feminine power when they sit by the bedside of Sir Michael, who has fallen ill. Robert intimates this threat to her by saying, “I have no doubt you have been anxious [...] There is no one to whom my uncle’s life can be of more value than to you. Your happiness, your prosperity, your *safety* depend alike upon his existence” (217). Her subsequent defiance, and Robert’s eventual recognition of her artful agency, forever darken the ideal of femininity to which he so desperately clings. In reflecting on the image of Lucy at Sir Michael’s side, Robert bemoans that the “pleasant picture it might have been” is now tarnished with “the black cloud” of knowledge that Lucy has transgressed expectations of her feminine naïveté and innocence. He deems this transgression of his own expectations of feminine passivity “an arch mockery” and “a diabolical delusion” (230).

Braddon's construction of a sympathetic Lucy contradicts Robert Audley's revulsion toward her, as well as his seeming indifference toward her own plight and disadvantage as a woman. In fact, Robert's reaction to what he learns of Lucy's past causes him to grapple simultaneously with his own yearning to sympathize with Lucy and his desire to bring down the woman who has endangered his friend, George. As Robert searches for the evidence which will definitively link George's wife, Helen Talboys, to Lucy Audley, he travels to her original home in Wildernsea, where she was once confined in a desolate marriage to George. The setting of her former life helps Braddon to augment the productions of sympathetic alignment toward Lucy. When Robert "pitilessly" questions her father Captain Maldon (Braddon 171), insinuating his knowledge of Maldon's and Lucy's participation in George's apparent death, he sends Maldon into a mournful torrent of "inarticulate gasps" (173). This dismal scene, in which Maldon "[sobs] aloud in his wretchedness," forces Robert to briefly detach from his own apathetic and relentless pursuit of Lucy; by witnessing the older man's sadness, Robert reflects that "[p]erhaps in all dismal scenes of domestic misery which had been acted in those spare and dreary houses – in all the petty miseries, the burning shames, the cruel sorrows, the bitter disgraces which own poverty for their common father – there had never been such a scene as this" (173). This scene, instead of emphasizing Robert's brilliance as a detective or his moral high ground in relation to Lucy's supposed villainy, rather calls the reader to undertake, once again, a sympathetic understanding of Captain Maldon, his daughter, and the dilapidated setting of poverty which has profoundly influenced the feminine manipulations being vilified. Braddon forces Robert to see difficult scenes of poverty and deprivation, of which his aristocratic

social standing has made him ignorant, and the view of the “shabby room, the dirt, the confusion, [and] the figure of the old man, with his grey head upon the soiled tablecloth” generates Robert’s momentary doubt about the nature of his purported efforts for justice (173). These slower scenes of realist setting and character emotion enable Robert to critically ponder his own comportment as detective, thinking “how *pitiless* I am, and how relentlessly I am carried on” (174).

Furthermore, the inhabitants of Wildernsea provide explicit detail of the wrongs felt by Helen and help Braddon further establish genuine sympathy for Lucy, reliant on protection and economic stability from a man who has abandoned her. Robert only seeks the precise dates of Helen’s departure and Lucy’s appearance at Mrs. Vincent’s, information which he does eventually uncover; Braddon not only provides these dates, necessary to Robert’s “fatal chain of circumstantial evidence” to expose Lucy, but also requires Robert to learn of the circumstances that occasioned Helen’s flight and eventual bigamy (Braddon 219). Mrs. Barkamb gives him the physical letters that serve as cold evidence of Lucy’s crimes, but also force Robert to perceive Lucy in a sympathetic light. She recounts that Helen “left abruptly, poor little woman!” and states that Helen “tried to support herself after her husband’s desertion” to no avail (246). Helen’s letter gives Robert the incriminating proof of Helen’s connection to Lucy Audley, but it also plays a significant role in Braddon’s attempt to render Lucy a sympathetic female character, despite her violent or deceitful wrongdoings. Helen reveals in this letter: “I am weary of my life here, and wish, if I can, to find a new one. I go out into the world, dis severed from every link which binds me to the hateful past, to seek another home and another fortune” (248). In light of this painful revelation,

Braddon makes it much more difficult for the reader (and Robert) to revile Helen (or Lucy) for her actions, urging us to perceive the circumstances that provoked Helen's "crimes."

Braddon underscores her hopes for readerly sympathy toward Lucy in the way that Robert himself cannot help but feel a pang of pity and sympathy for Lucy's past misfortunes. The scene which follows unambiguously pits Robert's sympathies for Lucy against his own socially accepted and expected desire to undermine Lucy's agency. He commiserates with Lucy, terming her a "poor little creature" and "poor unhappy little golden-haired sinner," proceeding to note that "the battle between [them] seems terribly unfair" (Braddon 250). These reflections ostensibly mirror those of Braddon and the audience, who are brought to recognize the inequities in the treatment of men and women in Victorian society. While George may abandon his wife and child without repercussion, Lucy's choice to do the same results in the necessity that she commit a crime and undermine societal notions of Victorian femininity. Though Robert acknowledges that George's desertion "must have seemed so cruel to her who waited and watched at home," he and his male peers ultimately vilify Lucy for doing exactly what her first husband was able to do unquestioned (239). Elizabeth Langland notes this too, stating that Lucy "is more sinned against than sinning in taking Sir Michael Audley for her husband after George Talboys abandoned her with no prospect of returning [...]. But Talboys is absolved of guilt whereas Lady Audley must play out the play" (12). Braddon eventually restores Robert's unsympathetic indifference toward Lucy when he begins to think about George, and due to his homosocial alliance with George, he discards sympathy for Lucy by declaring that he "will tear away the beautiful veil under

which she hides her wickedness” (Braddon 251). In fact, Laurence Talairach-Vielmas writes that Robert’s “quest seems to be directed towards investigating femininity” rather than truly locating his missing friend (123). Robert, despite his desire to recognize Lucy’s suffering, cannot ultimately sympathize with her, because she completely undermines his expectation of the idealized, angelic, and passive Victorian wife. Though George abandoned his wife with nothing to defend herself, Robert cannot look past Lucy’s bigamous crime. Thus, Braddon places Robert at odds with the sympathetic gaze toward Lucy which has been carefully constructed for the reading audience; Braddon’s decision to reveal the tragedy of Lucy’s plight immediately before Robert’s declarations of vengeance causes the reader to perceive Robert’s own callous dismissal of Lucy and his unfair treatment of her needs and feelings. Robert’s refusal to accept a sympathetic gaze toward Lucy separates him from the audience, while continuing to augment audience sympathy for Lucy. This division and dissonance between male apathy and audience sympathy eventually generates the tension that provokes readerly discontent at the novel’s close.

Braddon amplifies this dynamic between the sympathetic anti-heroine and the unsympathetic male “hero” in the way that Robert ultimately rebukes, imprisons, and exiles Lucy for her behavior. In Chapters III and V of the novel’s third volume, Braddon depicts Robert’s final accusations against Lucy and Lucy’s defiant stance against his judgment of her. First, Braddon presents Robert’s traditional Victorian perspective on ideal domestic femininity in his condemnation of Lucy’s villainy. He rebukes Lucy as a “wicked woman” and equates her assertions of feminine manipulation and control to the “treacherous dagger-thrust of an infamous assassin”

(Braddon 266). Robert's judgment of Lucy asks the reader to view her as a threat to societal order and feminine docility; he boldly asserts that he "can no longer know pity or compunction" for her misfortunes, because her violent and manipulative conduct has essentially rendered her unfeminine and unnatural in his eyes (339). His sympathy for her as a woman requires that she comport herself in a manner which fits within his view of traditional gender roles, and because Lucy has transgressed expectations of her role as wife and mother, she is "no longer a woman" and becomes an "incarnation of [...] evil" to Robert (340). The narrator directly characterizes Robert's "cold sternness," indicating that he has become "a pitiless embodiment of justice, [and] a cruel instrument of retribution" (268). Braddon immediately contradicts Robert's unsympathetic gaze by allowing Lucy to directly voice her history, reason, and emotional motivation to her unsuspecting husband, Sir Michael. She unequivocally tells Sir Michael and the reader that her miserable experience of "poverty" has colored her entire life and her behavior, and she further acknowledges that her "ultimate fate" as a woman in Victorian society "depended upon [her] marriage" (344-345). In addition, she asserts the lack of viable options open to her as a woman; if she were to concede to Robert and leave Audley Court, she knows that she "must go back to the old life, the hard, cruel, wretched life – the life of poverty, and humiliation, and vexation, and discontent" (312). These details provide the reader with concrete and legitimate reasons for why she committed bigamy and violently sought to protect her newfound wealth and comfort.

Furthermore, Braddon overtly appeals to the reader's sympathy (and Sir Michael's sympathy) by making a comparison between Lucy's history as a lower-class woman and that of Sir Michael and Robert, who "have been rich all [their] lives, and

can very well afford to despise me” (Braddon 345). Through Lady Audley’s contradiction of Robert’s and Michael’s unfeeling and unsympathetic view of her, Braddon implores the reader to acknowledge the injustice of punishing Lucy and the inherently unfair nature of the social structures to which Lucy must defer. Lucy Audley explicitly denounces the “slavery” of her former marital and domestic abode, which she calls her “wretched home,” and details the “desperation” to “lose myself in that great chaos of humanity” (348). Furthermore, Lucy asserts that, had they allowed her to continue in peace, she “might have been a good woman for the rest of [her] life” (349). She contradicts and rejects Robert’s extreme characterizations of her own comportment by pondering:

Have I ever been really *wicked*, I wonder? [...] I am not like the women I have read of, who have lain night after night in the horrible dark and stillness, planning out treacherous deeds, and arranging every circumstance of an appointed crime. I wonder whether they suffered – these women – whether they ever suffered. (294)

Lucy’s denial of her wickedness, a label forced upon her by Robert, not only denies his negative perception of her performance, but also seems to produce a poignant critique of the rampant vilification of women as depicted in the sensation genre as a whole. This passage perhaps reveals Braddon’s own hopes of infusing her sensation novels with aspects of character development typically denied by an overabundant attention to plot. Lucy’s deliberate and pensive reflection on her own supposed villainy, as well as her pointed attention to the “suffering” of sensational characters, undermines the audience’s ability to vilify Lucy as Robert eagerly does. Though he perceives Lucy’s “fatal necessities for concealment,” and understands her performativity being “made by the awful necessity of her life,” he nonetheless rejects and rebukes her (295). The male

rejection of Lucy seems particularly cruel when Braddon equips the reader with the details of Lucy's own suffering, particularly her self-proclaimed "slavery" resulting from marital inequities. Robert's ultimate decision to exile Lucy for her misdeeds and transgressions against the status quo frustrates and disappoints readerly sympathy for Lucy, which has developed throughout the course of the novel.

Robert tries to blame Lucy's comportment on her purported "madness," hoping to have a medical justification for his intention to confine and exile Lucy; he admits that "I would rather, if possible, think her mad. I should be glad to find that excuse for her" (Braddon 369). Dr. Mosgrave, whom Robert calls upon to make this diagnosis, directly denies her purported madness, arguing that Lucy simply "employed intelligent means" in the "hope of finding a better [home]" (370). Here, Mosgrave indicates Lucy's inherent capability to reason, and he recognizes the credible motivations for her desertion of Wildernsea and bigamous marriage to Sir Michael. However, Dr. Mosgrave, nonetheless aligned with Robert's unsympathetic male gaze, still asserts that Lucy is "dangerous," and he enables Robert's final imprisonment of Lucy in a Belgian *maison de santé* (372). Gail Turley Houston highlights the disconcerting nature of Robert's power to so easily and ruthlessly condemn Lucy; Houston argues that "if there is madness in the novel, it is masculine," particularly because Robert "is the one who makes the rules" and "[pursues] the monomaniacal intentions of the law" (G. Houston 26). The sensational male accusations of feminine madness, as Houston states, seem "bland," and as I argue, rather contribute to narrative constructions of Lucy's sympathetic aspect in relation to Robert's monomania (G. Houston 26). Just as the 1862 critic from *The Atlas* aptly identifies the function of sympathy in Braddon's novel, he

also identifies the hollow nature of Lucy's diagnosis and rejects the label "madness". He asks, "would she have committed the crimes attributed to her if her husband, George Talboys, had not deserted her [?] [...] They were married, and after a time this beautiful woman, this amiable creature, finds herself deserted" (*The Atlas* 4). This scene, in which Robert hopes to manipulate a medical diagnosis for the purposes of quietly imprisoning Lucy, perfectly illustrates the myriad ways in which Braddon underscores and develops the reader's sympathetic alignment with Lucy as a direct contradiction to the expected placement of sympathy with the novel's stereotypical male hero, Robert, who becomes Lucy's "gaoler" (Braddon 375). Though Robert continues to "pity her for her womanhood and her helplessness" as he transports her to the asylum, he nevertheless stifles this pity in order to vindicate his justice for George Talboys (376). The *maison de sant * "crystallizes transgressive womanhood and changes female exhibition into male physiological observation" (Talairach-Vielmas 131). Lucy admonishes this assertion of male control, declaring to Robert that "you have used your power basely and cruelly, and have brought me to a *living grave*" (Braddon 384, emphasis my own). For the second time, Lucy must bury her identity and her agency, at the mercy of potent male control. She powerfully reproaches Robert's unsympathetic act of male domination, asserting, "I do not thank you for your mercy, Mr. Robert Audley, for I know exactly what it is worth" (387). These depictions of Lucy's ever-defiant rebuke of Robert as callous and "merciless" enable Braddon to solidify her female readers' sympathetic alignment with Lucy, rather than Robert, in a poignant illustration of Lucy's entrapment within a highly unsympathetic and unjust system.

Though Braddon concludes her novel with Lucy's incarceration and death, as well as a societal return to peace and order, the audience's experience with Lucy, whose story enables us to understand the hardships of her position as an impoverished and entrapped lower-class woman, renders the novel's morally conventional ending unsatisfying. Lucy perishes from a "*maladie de langueur*" (Braddon 436) when exiled to a remote and "forgotten Belgian city" (433), allowing Robert to fulfill the conventional ideal of Victorian marriage and domesticity in his marriage to George's sister Clara Talboys and his "dream of a fairy cottage," unpolluted by the grasp of Lucy's feminine manipulations (435). The male reassertion of power and control over female agency ultimately solidifies both Braddon's narrative construction of a sympathetic Lucy and her attempts to reveal Robert as the embodiment of the unsympathetic male gaze. Braddon's narrator mournfully notes that "[h]owever verbose I may be in my description of her feelings, I can never describe a tithe of her thoughts or sufferings. She suffered agonies that would fill closely printed volumes, bulky with a thousand pages" (310); this narrative sympathy for Lucy's sufferings most readily reveals Braddon's own sympathetic alignment with Lucy, as well as her wish to further elaborate Lucy's interior character and feelings. Braddon's deliberate efforts to juxtapose the sympathetic details of Lucy's plight with the harsh indifference of her contemporary male peers enables her to slyly comment upon the problematic and unjust vilification of women who have no other options. Robert's denunciation and punishment of Lucy ultimately force her return to the "living grave," exiling her for her efforts to exploit and subvert the Victorian ideal of femininity (384).

In fact, Furneaux posits Lucy must undergo a “twisted re-enactment of the [Victorian] marriage ceremony” when Robert expunges her name, forcing her to undertake the name Madame Taylor when he exiles her to the *maison de santé* (437). This change in her identity, one which she does not and cannot control, equates to her “absolute isolation,” in which she experiences a “parallel social death and live burial” of her personhood and whatever agency she had managed to maintain throughout the novel (Furneaux 438). And though this conclusion seemingly places blame upon Lucy for transgressing the norm, allowing peace to return to the aristocratic countryside of England, Braddon’s sympathetic construction of Lucy complicates the idyllic reinstatement of the status quo. The introduction to *Beyond Sensation: Mary Elizabeth Braddon in Context* similarly indicates the potential of Braddon’s subtly subversive writing: although Braddon “may seem to capitulate to normative Victorian standards of morality” at her novel’s end, she instead invites a “subversive variety of revision that allows figures like the infamous Lady Audley to confound and, thus, call into question notions of gendered identity and the domestic order” (Tromp et al. xvii). Lucy Audley, who perishes in the Belgian *maison de santé*, nonetheless haunts the peace achieved at the novel’s end; the men who have removed her from society can no longer ignore or forget the extent to which Lucy has disrupted and undermined their idealized notions of Victorian femininity and domesticity. As Braddon’s narrator astutely writes, the “dream was broken” (346). Lucy’s performative resistance, despite her defeat, enables the destabilization of the status quo and renders her fate sympathetic to Braddon’s female audience. This is precisely because Lucy comes to represent a “critique of institutionalized female disempowerment,” a disempowerment which produces

audience “dissatisfaction” (Furneaux 441-442). The ability for the female readership to both identify and even sympathize with the violent, manipulative, and assertive Lucy demonstrates the “political potential of sensation”: readerly sympathy or “affect,” created through the “sensational representation of [gendered] power dynamics,” gives the occasion for this female readership to be “mobilized” (Tromp et al. xxi). The danger of Braddon’s “sensation” novel thus rests in its powerful effect upon the visceral sensations *and* the sympathetic attachments of the reading audience.

### Chapter 3: Sensational Sympathy in Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* (2012)

At the very center of Gillian Flynn's 2012 thriller *Gone Girl*, Amy Dunne, presumed to have been murdered by her own husband, reveals herself to the reading audience, declaring, "I'm so much happier now that I'm dead" (Flynn 219). Until this point, the novel's entwined narrative points of view, shared between Amy Dunne's diary entries and her husband Nick Dunne's present-day narration, work hard to establish the reader's sympathetic alignment with Amy, who expresses fear and isolation in response to Nick's adultery and supposed abuse. Nick's own efforts to persuade both the police and the reader of his innocence prove unsuccessful in the admission of numerous lies, all of which damage his reliability as a narrator. Before Part Two of the novel, it seems relatively easy to assume Nick's culpability and to sympathize with Amy, whose marital anxieties and feelings of confinement give reasonable credibility to her victimhood. However, Amy eventually exposes the nature of her performance, her multiple identities, and the extent of her own anger. Much like Lucy of *Lady Audley's Secret*, Amy is not only confined to expectations of her role as a wife and a woman, but also feels required to perform numerous versions of an artificial "Amy" in order to fulfill the ideals espoused by her parents, her husband, and the media. She remarks, in her revelation that she has narratively forged a sympathetic identity, that "Nick loved a girl who doesn't exist," speaking to her performance as the ever devoted and understanding wife (Flynn 222). Furthermore, both Amy and Lucy manipulate and scheme in order to maintain agency against their male counterparts, and these manipulations subvert the status quo. They are violent, ambitious, and shrewd; Amy, just like Lucy, is *sensational* in her ability to transgress normative feminine roles

and to expose the pitfalls of marital life. However, Amy, unlike Lucy Audley, ultimately proves unsympathetic, despite narrative attempts to make her sympathetic. Emma Brockes of *The Guardian* notes this, too, and even asserts that the appeal of Flynn's novel comes from "how willing she is to make every single person [...] unsympathetic" (Brockes). Yet, the question and construction of sympathy underlies both Flynn's and Braddon's novels, and more significantly, sympathetic construction of character enables these novels to more powerfully generate thrilling sensation and shock.

Following its publication, Flynn's *Gone Girl* established itself as a literary and cultural phenomenon. The novel revolves around the crumbling marriage of Nick and Amy and the dark secrets of their marital life, domestic home, and individual identities, which are exposed when Amy goes missing. It centers upon the mystery and investigation of Amy's disappearance, the suspicion that Nick has murdered her, and eventually, the revelation that Amy has cleverly framed her husband in revenge for his adultery and lies. The novel quickly became a *New York Times* bestseller, and over one million copies were purchased within four months after its initial publication (Memmott). The novel, generally categorized within the crime, thriller, or mystery genres, stunned its reading audience and literary critics. Critical reviews praised the novel as "twisted and wild," noting its introduction of a villainous "maniac you could fall in love with" (Giles). *Entertainment Weekly* writes that "Flynn pulls the rug out from under you – and, by the way, you didn't even realize you were standing on one" (Giles). Another review asserts that *Gone Girl* "thrills and delights while holding up a mirror to how we live" (Harwood). The *New York Times* states that the novel "almost

requires a game board to show how Nick and Amy move” (Maslin), and the *Chicago Tribune* emphasizes the novel’s conventional function as a thriller, with “tantalizing secrets and red herrings” (Gutman). *Time* argues that the novel “may be postmodern” but embodies the “form of a thoroughbred thriller about the nature of identity and the terrible secrets that can survive and thrive in even the most intimate relationships” (Grossman).

These critical appraisals of *Gone Girl* and the devices which aid its categorization in the mystery and thriller genres bear striking resemblance to traditional scholarly and critical views of the “sensational” aspects of Victorian sensation fiction. Just as *Gone Girl* has attained its status as a popular novel and a cultural phenomenon, the Victorian sensation genre was first and foremost deemed “sensational” because of its terrifying effect upon the contemporary Victorian readership. Though Victorian literary critics deemed the sensation novel inferior, the genre experienced immense “popularity, often across a range of readerships” and a “commercial, as well as cultural, success” (Gilbert 2). Furthermore, the sensation genre of nineteenth-century England dealt with the same “plots of secrecy, mystery, suspense, crime, and horror” that propel the action of Flynn’s novel (Pykett, *Nineteenth-Century* 5). However, the parallels between Victorian sensation fiction and the 2012 thriller *Gone Girl* extend beyond simply the critical and readerly response. I argue that Gillian Flynn borrows from and updates many of the sensation genre’s plot devices, narrative techniques, character tropes, and settings to create her own modern manifestation of a sensational domestic thriller. The way in which she constructs her plot, weaves her narrative devices, and focuses upon the domestic horrors of everyday life and marriage enables me to make a

connection between her modern domestic thriller and the popular Victorian sensation novel. The two novels work in much the same way to shock their respective readers and obliquely call into question the problems inherent in the societal institutions of marriage and family. Though Flynn has never explicitly named the Victorian sensation genre as an influence, she slyly entwines allusions to the Victorian era into her primary characters' narrations. The influence of the Victorian in *Gone Girl* becomes apparent in the novel's very first chapter: while describing the "angles" of Amy's head, Nick Dunne states that she has "what the Victorians would call *a finely shaped head*" (Flynn 3). When Nick and Amy leave New York City, Amy's beloved hometown, for North Carthage, Missouri, Amy remarks on the "receding skyline," asking, "isn't that what they write in Victorian novels where the doomed heroine is forced to leave her ancestral home?" (Flynn 102).

As the novel unwinds, we become privy to the dark and menacing aspects of Amy's and Nick's marital life, the secrets which they each hold, and the tenuous foundations of their relationship. The scene of the crime, Amy's ostensible murder, takes place in the living room of their ordinary, generically suburban home, and Nick notes the strangeness of this domestic crime as the police arrive to investigate, looking like "they were dropping by a neighborhood picnic" (Flynn 32). Nick bristles at the police's interference in his personal life and his control over this domestic realm; when a female officer prevents him from opening a clue left by Amy, he becomes furious that "this woman presumed to tell me what to do in my own home" (59). Just as the media and the police detectives intrude upon the Dunnes' domestic abode and the inner workings of their private lives, the novel allows the reader to look up-close at Amy and

Nick, shedding the superficial façades which they have constructed around them. The 2012 novel thus mimics traditional features of the Victorian sensation novel, where domestic violence and ensuing journalistic and police response “violate the sanctuary of the home” by turning “private affairs” into “public spectacle” (Pykett, *Nineteenth-Century* 2-3). Flynn’s choice to set *Gone Girl* in the contemporary, ordinary American household puts the novel’s mystery, duplicity, and emotional violence in close proximity to the experience of the everyday reader, and thus, generates more “sensational” responses of shock and intrigue.

In addition to these allusions to the Victorian and to characteristic elements of sensation fiction, *Gone Girl* particularly demonstrates the significance of sympathetic character construction and performative identity for sensation novels, though in a manner far different from Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret*. *Gone Girl* centers upon the disguises that both Nick and Amy assume in their marriage to one another. The novel alternates between Nick and Amy as narrators, allowing each respective character to influence and persuade the reading audience’s sympathies. This narrative technique, reliant upon two rivaling constructions of sympathy, enables Flynn to better confuse and eventually surprise her readers; her novel constructs a game of sympathy which ensures the reader’s failure in forming genuine sympathetic alignment. Unlike *Lady Audley’s Secret*, *Gone Girl* alienates the reader’s sympathy from the novel’s main characters. Flynn does not construct genuine sympathy for either Amy or Nick, a sympathy more apparent in Braddon’s sensation novel. Instead, Flynn exploits and manipulates the sympathetic tendencies of her audience in order to deliver her novel’s most “sensational” horrors, especially her novel’s central plot twist. The

revelation that Amy has manipulated our perception of her victimhood, fabricated by her diary entries, works to *extinguish* sympathy. Nevertheless, Flynn's focus upon character development and the influence of character upon audience sympathy demonstrates the inextricable link between "fast" sensation and "slow" sympathy, which I argue necessary to the sensation genre as a whole. Most importantly, Flynn's novel demonstrates that the oft-considered ephemeral sensation genre (or perhaps the sensational formula) remains influential for today's popular fiction novels. *Gone Girl* and *Lady Audley's Secret* provoke similar responses from their respective audiences because they both rely upon the production of sympathetic alignment, forcing us to probe underlying anxieties surrounding the corruption of marriage, the dark secrets of the domestic realm, and the limitations of feminine agency and identity.

According to *Chicago Tribune* reviewer Amy Gutman, *Gone Girl* lacks a certain realism; she writes:

For all its strengths, this isn't a book for those inclined to true-to-life fiction [...] Flynn has no qualms about shaping reality to suit the needs of her high-wire plot. At times, there's a slightly cartoonish aspect to her cast of characters, and more than once, their over-the-top scheming strains credulity [...] But what "Gone Girl" lacks in realism, it more than makes up for in inventiveness and narrative bravura. (Gutman)

This critical view of *Gone Girl* specifically parallels a common critique of the Victorian sensation novel. As Lyn Pykett (and many other sensation critics and scholars) asserts, "character is quite often subordinated to incident and plot" in the sensation novel (Pykett, *Nineteenth-Century* 5). While plot and incident are vitally important for the sensational appeal of *Gone Girl* and *Lady Audley's Secret*, the novels nonetheless undermine this characterization in their mutual employment of character sympathy and "slow" developments to augment plot tension. There are instances where *Gone Girl* or

*Lady Audley's Secret* elicit sympathy from the reader through emotional, affective means, especially in regard to the repressed and violent female “villainesses” that drive their “sensational” plots. Amy hopes to provoke sympathy by characterizing herself as the abandoned wife, because Nick, “who brought me here, who uprooted me to be closer to his ailing parents, seems to have lost all interest in [...] me” (Flynn 139). Her parents’ treatment of her contributes to Amy’s sympathetic aspect, too, as their passive-aggressive judgment of her failings enables the reader to understand Amy’s bitterness and insecurities; she notes that “whenever I screw something up, [Amazing Amy] does it right” (26). By contrast, Nick’s character wholly rests upon his ineffective endeavors to make himself seem sympathetic in the eyes of the reader. When the novel requires the shocking disclosure that Nick has cheated on Amy, Nick reluctantly admits to covering up his own infidelities to preserve readerly sympathy; he anticipates that the reader must now “stop liking me,” if they even “liked me to begin with” (142). As Nick tries to convince Detective Boney of his innocence, he states that “I appealed to Boney [...] with the sympathetic air that seemed at least partly authentic. (*It’s not*, I reminded myself)” (178). His pointed focus on the reader’s ability to align sympathetically with his point of view emphasizes the extraordinary extent to which *Gone Girl* relies on constructions of sympathy for narrative shock, as in the above-stated revelation of Nick’s secret girlfriend. While clearly depending upon traditional methods of sensational surprise, *Gone Girl* is just as much an examination of the effect of sympathy upon the reading audience’s connection to character.

The reader sympathizes with Amy in Part One due to the fabricated nature of Amy’s identity as a “cool girl” and a perfect wife, as well as the unsympathetic

exposure of Nick, who reveals that he is “a big fan of the lie of omission” (and therefore undermines his own credibility) (Flynn 133). Flynn mirrors the reader’s initial alignment with a sympathetic Amy in the media coverage of and reaction to Amy’s disappearance, as the public demands Nick to “tell us what he did to his wife” (193). Amy plays with sympathy by exacerbating our perception of Nick’s unsympathetic character; she writes in her fabricated diary, “I catch him looking at me with those watchful eyes, the eyes of an insect, pure calculation, and I think: *This man might actually kill me*” (205). The self-constructed sympathy for Amy dissipates when she ultimately unmask her sympathetic identity as a construction meant to swindle the reader and, most importantly, the police, the neighbors, and the media. Amy explicitly states, after discovering her husband’s infidelities, that she intended to “think of a different story, a better story, that would destroy Nick for doing this to me. A story that would restore my perfection,” and ultimately, one that “would make me the hero, flawless and adored” (234). Flynn directly speaks to the significance of sympathy for *Gone Girl* when Amy addresses her now cognizant audience, writing:

I hope you liked Diary Amy. She was meant to be likable. Meant for someone like you to like her. She’s *easy* to like [...] I thought the entries turned out nicely, and it wasn’t simple. I had to maintain an affable if somewhat naïve persona, a woman who loved her husband and could see some of his flaws [...] but was sincerely devoted to him – all the while leading the reader (in this case, the cops, I am so eager for them to find it) toward the conclusion that Nick was indeed planning to kill me. (237)

While plot twists, violence, and sociopathic deceit manufactured by Amy become important tools to produce the novel’s sensational aspect, and no doubt align *Gone Girl* with its Victorian sensation novel predecessors, the prominent narrative and structural device which generates the “sensational” comes from Amy’s exploitation of readerly sympathy. The appeal to the audience’s sympathies in an effort to provoke sensation

undoubtedly aligns *Gone Girl* and *Lady Audley's Secret*, but the truth of Amy's unsympathetic nature differentiates the two. Unlike Lucy Audley, Amy does not ultimately garner sympathy from her audience at the novel's end, particularly because she makes us privy to the nature of her manipulations of sympathetic alignment. Here, sympathy does not inherently reside with Amy's character, and the novel removes our inclination to sympathize with her. Instead, sympathy works as a tool for shocking the reader, whose sympathies for Amy will be ripped away after learning of her deception. Nevertheless, *Gone Girl* demonstrates how and why sympathy seems inextricably linked with the "sensational" aspect of the sensation novel.

Furthermore, the novel's appeal to and subversion of readerly sympathy functions, much like *Lady Audley's Secret*, to reveal potent anxieties about gender roles and domestic ideals that prevail in our modern day, and these anxieties particularly mimic those that spurred Victorian sensation fiction. As Pykett notes, sensation novels "reproduced and negotiated broader cultural anxieties about the nature and status of respectable femininity and the domestic ideal," probing the nature of gender roles in utilizing subversive characters like the "fast woman" and the "feminized male who lacks a clear social role" (Pykett, *Nineteenth-Century* 13). These transgressive or subversive examinations of the role of men and women in marriage play a central role in Flynn's novel, which places emphasis on the sensational collapse of Nick and Amy's marriage. Amy becomes the villainous woman who deserts her domestic role as a wife and cleverly outwits her husband, while Nick slowly transforms into the unemployed, careless misogynist who cannot fulfill his expected role as a financial and sexual provider. For example, Nick, who relies on Amy's inheritance to build his bar, asserts

with acrimony that he “would not be a man who borrowed from his wife – I could feel my dad twisting his lips at the very idea” (Flynn 7). When Nick and Amy’s idealistic façades wear off in the face of the 2008 economic downturn, they shirk their expected marital roles, propelling the novel’s criminal plot and Amy’s bitter revenge against her husband’s deceit. Reviewers of *Gone Girl* explicitly identify the novel’s ability to probe questions of marriage and gender roles as a narrative function that augments its status as a thriller: *Entertainment Weekly* writes that, despite *Gone Girl*’s shocking twists and turns, the novel truly stuns when it forces the reader to ponder “how tenuous power relations are between men and women, and how often couples are at the mercy of forces beyond their control” (Gutman). Amy’s attempt, through performative identity changes, to fulfill the role of the ideal woman, girlfriend, and wife, as well as her eventual inability to maintain this role, participates in Nick’s disillusionment and his realization of the performative nature of her femininity. As Amy writes in one of her many artificial diary entries, she sometimes felt “like Nick ha[d] decided on a version of me that doesn’t exist” (Flynn 121). She stresses this failure to perform an “unsustainable” role, one which Nick anticipates when they move to Missouri, as the catalyst for their mutual destruction (141). His father’s declaration that Amy “doesn’t belong here” only accentuates her isolation and alienation when unable to perform in the way expected of her (123).

At an early point within the novel, before the extent of Amy’s performance has been revealed to the reader, Nick reflects that there is “a difference between really loving someone and loving the *idea* of her” (Flynn 21, emphasis my own). He begins to recognize the extent to which his own idealization of his wife has precipitated his

disappointment, a disappointment felt when she no longer plays the role of the “cool girl.” However, Nick is also guilty of performative concealment, playing a role he believes will help him succeed in winning Amy. After Amy disappears, Nick identifies his own methods of performance for his suspicious neighbors; he notes that “like some awful piece of performance art, I felt myself enacting Concerned Husband” (23). He explicitly calls out his own performative function and the necessity of his performance as a husband while married to Amy, when he “had pretended to be one kind of man and revealed myself to be quite another” (214). Similarly, Amy feels the pressure to perform in her numerous identities, including the idealized version of her Amazing Amy “literary alter-ego” (26), an alter-ego concocted by her parents that Amy understands to represent what “makes [her] unsatisfiable, unsatisfying” (29). Amy carries the burden of this expected performativity, noting that her husband’s and parents’ desire for a performative Amy, rather than her true self, forces her to suppress her “independence,” “pride,” and “esteem” (238). Amy expresses a profound resentment of this expectation, declaring that she has “never been more to them than a symbol anyway, the walking ideal” (259). She ultimately disappears, while framing Nick for her apparent murder, in order to escape from the restraints of her life in performance. *Gone Girl*, just like *Lady Audley’s Secret*, makes clear the centrality of gender roles for the sensation genre, the subversion of which challenges the “social and moral status quo” (Pykett, *Nineteenth-Century* 13).

Perhaps Flynn’s most pointed reference to the gendered inequities of Victorian marriage comes with Amy’s anniversary gift to Nick: Punch and Judy dolls, “icons of marital conflict” used in Victorian puppet shows (Crone 1057). As noted by scholars,

the Punch and Judy dolls performed in “comical representation[s] of domestic violence,” where Punch becomes a “murderous wife-beater” with “exaggerated and outrageous violence” (Crone 1057-1058).



Figure 2: “Punch and Judy” from Felix Leigh’s *London Town* (1883)

This page from *London Town*, illustrated by Thomas Crane and Ellen Houghton, depicts young children gathered around a Punch and Judy puppet show in the streets of London. Note how Leigh’s poem emphasizes Punch regularly “beating his wife [...] / As is Mr. Punch’s peculiar fashion.” (Image in the Public Domain, via Wikimedia Commons: [commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:55\\_London\\_Town,\\_page\\_51.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:55_London_Town,_page_51.png))

Rosalind Crone states in “Mr and Mrs Punch in Nineteenth-Century England” that Punch’s violence toward Judy represents an act of “shrew-taming,” meant to put his wife in her proper place of submission (1061); with this violent “re-establishment of

mastery in his household, Punch becomes a hero, while little sympathy is left” for Judy (1063). Once again, Amy suggests manipulations of sympathy in her utilization of the Punch and Judy puppets for Nick’s anniversary gift, which Nick asserts to be “the narrative of my frame-up” and the hint to Amy’s exploitation of implied marital abuse for media sympathy (Flynn 232). Aside from this exploitative pull for sympathetic alignment, Amy’s utilization of the Punch and Judy dolls also exposes an underlying fear of her own silencing and submission to the expectations of her husband. Amy’s decision to play the “cool girl” persona entails her choice to give up agency and individual identity in her marriage to Nick, and this choice precipitates her eventual bitterness when Nick has an affair. Her efforts to be the ideal, submissive wife prove fruitless, and she has assumed a persona which nonetheless leaves her empty-handed.

The novel frequently delves into what it means to be a wife and the place of feminine identity in marriage. One of Amy’s first contrived diary entries notes: “I have become a strange thing [...] I have become a bore, I have been asked to forfeit my Independent Young Feminist card” (Flynn 38). Though this explanation of Amy’s loss of agency comes from a fabricated persona, it arguably represents Amy’s genuine fear that she has lost herself within a performative role. This “cool girl” identity becomes untenable and eventually disintegrates as their marriage develops; when this happens, Nick stresses the discrepancy between the “woman I fell in love with” and the “new, brittle, bitter Amy” who shed her first façade like a snake (49). These insecurities of feminine identity, domesticity, and performativity fester within Amy, and after revealing her diary persona and “cool girl” identity as false, she unabashedly censures her male counterparts for their willingness to disregard the inherent performativity of

such identities. She declares that “Cool Girl became the standard girl. Men believed she existed – she wasn’t just a dreamgirl one in a million. Every girl was supposed to be this girl, and if you weren’t, then there was something wrong with *you*” (223). She scorns Nick for “truly believing he had married this creature, this figment of the imagination” (224). Though Amy reveals that she was happier when “pretending to be someone else,” which exposes the extent to which she feels obligated to perform for a successful marriage, she also declares her dissatisfaction with the emptiness of such a performance (224). She writes that “it had to stop, because it wasn’t real, it wasn’t me,” particularly because the exertion of such a performance caused it to start “collapsing on itself” (224).

Amy’s attempt to escape her fabricated personas and to frame her husband prove unsuccessful, just as Nick’s attempt to play the sympathetic, mournful husband fail to garner true sympathy. Thus, Gillian Flynn concludes her novel with the disturbing re-confinement of both Amy and Nick to their previous performative roles as an idyllic couple, the perfect wife and husband of American suburbia. Amy returns, concocting yet another sympathetic performance as a wife kidnapped and raped by a former boyfriend. Nick, cornered by her manipulations and the unsympathetic nature of his infidelities, must reassume his role as well. Flynn traps her primary characters within their performances to poignantly, and horrifyingly, critique the ways in which societal expectations of perfection and the “ideal” create the tensions that disintegrate Amy’s and Nick’s marriage. Nick confirms this in his declaration to Amy, stating that “[w]e weren’t ourselves when we fell in love, and when we became ourselves [...] we were poison” (Flynn 393). They hate one another, and they want to kill one another, but they

are nonetheless confined within the roles that they previously utilized to produce the appearance of a perfect marriage. In particular, Amy's unsuccessful efforts to subvert and evade her performance as "Amazing Amy" and "Cool Girl" imprison her within the marital restraints that have generated her bitter hatred and unhappiness. Amy's fate mimics that of Lucy in *Lady Audley's Secret*, whose transgressions of the status quo lead to her inevitable imprisonment away from society. *Gone Girl* differs in its equal punishment of Amy and Nick, female and male performers, but still functions as a pointed criticism of the social structures that provoke and perpetuate the necessity for gendered performance.

## Conclusion

At the peaceful conclusion of *Lady Audley's Secret*, the narrator insists upon the novel's happy ending, emphasizing the "fairy cottage" and perfect familial scene with Robert, Clara, and their young children (Braddon 435). However, Mary Elizabeth Braddon must remind her reader that Audley Court, which "my lady's ringing laughter once made musical," is now "shut up, and a grim old housekeeper reigns paramount" (436). The haunting aspect of Audley Court, wasting away in its emptiness and without the influence of its feminine leader, undermines the professed idyllic scene of Robert's domestic happiness. It further contributes to the haunting nature of Braddon's novel upon the reader, as we, too, cannot ignore the silence of Lady Audley in exile. The narrator penetrates Robert's blissful conclusion, revealing that visitors to vacant Audley Court still ask about the "pretty, fair-haired woman, who died abroad" (436).

The narrator appeals to the reader in the novel's final page, stating, "I hope no one will take objection to my story because the end of it leaves the good people all happy and at peace" (Braddon 436-437). Yet, in light of the ever-present Audley Court, the description of which interrupts this supposedly peaceful conclusion, the narrator's reinstatement of idealized domesticity and order seems rather hollow and unconvincing. In fact, the narrator's anticipation that *Lady Audley's Secret* will provoke readerly "objection" further emphasizes Braddon's aims to construct Lucy's sympathetic aspect. In presupposing objections to the blissful end of Robert's "merciless" quest for Victorian (and primarily male) justice, Braddon not only hopes to appease those critics who would find fault with Lucy's comportment, but also draws attention to her conclusion as one manipulated for the sake of critical and social expectations of her

work. Her efforts to interrupt and distract from the presumably peaceful ending, by way of narrative reminders of Lucy's death in ostracism and Audley Court's melancholy vacancy, ultimately contradict stated hopes that the happy ending can or should be satisfying.

By raising questions of subjective objections or dissatisfaction with the novel, Braddon essentially brings attention to her novel's capacity to affect readerly sympathy and emotion. This not only refers to its sensational aspect, speaking to the horrors of crime, deceit, and feminine provocation of established ideals, but also speaks to an underlying sympathetic aspect, one which Braddon uses to subvert her method of appeasing traditional critics. Robert, George, and Sir Michael may attempt to forget Lucy, Audley Court, and the events which have transpired, but the vacated mansion and the exiled Lady Audley are not easily removed from the reader's psyche. The sympathetic alignment constructed between Lucy and the female reader, too, cannot be easily severed; the image of Lucy wasting away from a *maladie de langueur* (Braddon 436) in a "forgotten Belgian city" functions as an emotional and sympathetic reminder that Robert's form of justice and peace depend upon the unjust and unsympathetic removal of a female threat to his supremacy (433).

Similarly, Gillian Flynn's conclusion of *Gone Girl* haunts the reading audience. Much like Lucy Audley of *Lady Audley's Secret*, *Gone Girl* re-confines Amy to her unhappy marriage with unfaithful Nick and to the performative roles she hoped to evade at the novel's beginning. Her attempts to punish Nick for his marital disappointment, produced when she can no longer uphold her idealistic role as an easy-going wife, fail miserably, and the couple traps themselves within a marriage founded upon lies and

manipulations of sympathy. Amy acknowledges this, asserting that “Nick still pretends with me. We pretend together that we are happy and carefree and in love” (Flynn 409). Amy becomes pregnant in this re-confinement, ensuring that Nick will not pursue legal recourse and imprisonment as revenge for her efforts to frame him for her murder. Nick declares that he “was a prisoner after all” (411), and he implores the reader to view him as “the hero,” proclaiming that “I am the one to root for in the never-ending war story of our marriage” (413). Most importantly, he writes that he “can’t imagine my story without Amy. She is my forever antagonist. We are one long frightening climax” (413).

This plea for sympathy rings hollow, just as Amy’s manipulations of sympathy demonstrate her unsympathetic aspect. Flynn leaves her reader with two unsympathetic antagonists that have shockingly undermined readerly expectations of sympathetic alignment with literary characters. However, these exploitative appeals to readerly sympathy function in Flynn’s novelistic attempt to critique and subvert societal notions of the idealistic wife, marriage, and domestic life. Nick’s revelation to the audience that he “can’t close my eyes when I’m next to her,” comparing Amy to a “spider,” mimics the way in which Robert and George view Lucy Audley at the end of *Lady Audley’s Secret* (Flynn 405). Nick, like Robert and George, has lost his capacity to believe in or expect the idealistic version of femininity, versions of womanhood wholly transgressed by Amy and Lucy.

Both novels point to the longevity, and danger, inherent in these ideals, and they raise questions regarding the performativity expected of women not only in marriage, but throughout their lives. The novels’ mutual reliance upon sympathy and constructions of sympathetic alignment to female villains, in order to produce the

sensational crime within their pages, demonstrates that the anxieties of femininity, performativity, and sympathy continue to be relevant today, just as they were in 1862 at the height of the Victorian sensation genre. Such anxieties are made sensational by these novels in order to more effectively point out the manner in which women continue to be disadvantaged by societal anticipation of a certain “angelic” performativity, one which renders them unequal to their male counterparts and disempowers them from total agency. The reader’s sympathetic capacity to understand Lucy Audley and Amy Dunne best enables Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Gillian Flynn to underscore the inequities that motivate their violent and transgressive comportment, and it is with sympathy that these novels ultimately find power to affect the reader.

My research calls attention to the significant function of sympathy in sensation fiction, an element of sensation which has not been afforded adequate attention by the majority of sensation scholars. In particular, the connection between sympathy and feminine performativity in sensation novels helps to explain the purported threat or danger of sensation fiction for Victorian and modern ideals regarding the agency of women. Though the purpose of sympathy in *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *Gone Girl* is clearly noted here, it remains to be seen how sympathy functions in other sensation novels; my work demonstrates the need for further research on and analysis of the effects of sympathy and sympathetic alignment with character in the production of the “sensational.”

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