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Sensational Investigations

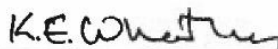
Social decay and reform in the Victorian sensation novel

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from  
The College of William and Mary

by

Colleen Marie-Cecilia Wilson

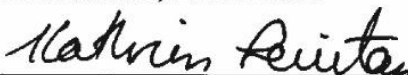
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## Introduction

The sensation novel often features investigation as a narrative subject while also performing it as a narrative activity. The novels *Bleak House* (1852) by Charles Dickens, *The Woman in White* (1859) by Wilkie Collins, and *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) by Mary Elizabeth Braddon each incorporate investigation on two levels: one level is the events of the mystery plot, and the other is the mechanism of the narrative itself which uncovers and analyzes evidence of social abuses and decay. When characters in each of these plots are confronted by the bodies of victims, they seek to discover who was responsible for the death by gathering and interpreting clues. Meanwhile, narrative details reveal that the worlds of these novels themselves seem to be dead, corrupt and therefore subject to investigation. Joseph Hillis Miller writes of *Bleak House*, for example, "In the opening paragraphs the novel presents the *corpse of a dead society*, smothered in fog, immobilized in mud, paralyzed by the injustices of an outmoded social structure frozen in its stratifications, and enmeshed in the nets of inextricably tangled legal procedures" (169, my emphasis). The fog everywhere, fog up the river, fog down the river, like some mortal miasma, seems to have asphyxiated the whole of England. Similar descriptions of a decaying body politic appear in Collins' and Braddon's novels. In reaction to the troubling images they present, these three novels exhibit what Miller calls "a retrospective reconstruction" examining "how the world came to be in [a] befogged, mud-soaked, fragmented, and decomposed state." In this way, each novel can be viewed as a form of "mystery story," examining the nature and cause of society's mortal wounds and subsequent decay (Miller 168). The narrative activity of investigation in these novels becomes a means of social critique, engaging explicitly or implicitly with the topical concerns of mid-nineteenth century England.

Detective work itself is a form of narrative construction, a compilation of meaningful details which lead to an understanding of the true circumstances surrounding the crime. Peter Thoms argues in *Detection and Its Designs*, “If the detective hopes to exert a lasting impression upon his audience and to install his own version of events as the accepted truth, he must possess the narrative knack of organizing the evidence in a persuasive way” (9). Story-telling accounts for mysterious events, but the story must offer a comprehensive, clear assessment of the available information to convince a judge or reader of the veracity of the detective or author’s conclusion. By the same token, the social investigations conducted by these novels must be persuasive if they are to convince their readers of a need for reform. To understand and assess these sensation novels’ investigations of decaying social structures, we must first examine the sensation novel as genre, its reception, and its fitness as a vehicle for civil critique. Then, discussions of the body politic metaphor and of social problems relevant to the novels—including political, sanitary, and legal reform; the rights of married women; and the treatment of the mentally ill—will provide a foundation for literary analysis. This method will establish the contexts of fiction and of fact before giving close attention to the texts themselves. These novels, it will be shown, use investigation as a vehicle for social critique, but they do so with varying degrees of persuasiveness and clarity of intention.

### **The Sensation Novel**

Sensation fiction was a hybrid of the two seemingly incongruous genres of realism and the gothic, and it could stir readers emotively and intellectually with the resources of both genres to provoke social assessment. A brief survey of realism and the gothic will reveal the elements which sensation writers adopted into their own works. The term realism was first applied to the paintings of French artist Gustave Courbet in the 1850s. His paintings were radical in their

selection and treatment of subject matter: working-class people are shown in their authentic living conditions without the brightening lens of artistic idealism. As Caroline Levine observes, the English novel, though it predates the terminology of realism, shared the democratization of subject and accurate representation of conditions seen in Courbet's artwork (89). Early novels such as Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722) and Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) followed the lives of working-class heroines rather than the nobility or historical figures. Yet, literary realism, as it is identified by critics today, is not merely a label for texts concerned with common characters. Twentieth-century discussions of Victorian realism traced its development to conceptual shifts in human understanding, arising from political and cultural upheavals. In his 1937 book *The Historical Novel*, Georg Lukács argued that realism developed as a reaction to the French Revolution and the rise of Napoleon, events which gave individuals a new sense of their own actions as set within the larger span of human history (cited in Levine 85-88). Two decades later, Ian Watt proposed in *The Rise of the Novel* that realism essentially grew out of the Enlightenment's empirical philosophies which heightened interest in the individual's experience of the world (cited in Levine 85-88). After outlining existing critical theories of realism, Levine herself defines it as a highly varied and experimental form identifiable by its "probing, searching, sometimes anxious struggle to register the fact of restless change." She considers the "desire to mark difference" the key realist trait (88).

As Levine observes, realism is fundamentally concerned with changes and disparities, within culture and within the individual, and the implications of those differences give force to the genre's social criticism. Literary renderings of complex human relationships, psychological believability, and gritty detailism contribute to realism's commentaries. For instance, the individual's sense of action within a historical context which Lukács described can be seen in the

interconnectedness of the realistic novel's personal and class relations, as famously exhibited in Dickens' diverse swaths of characters. Dickens "distills" his society into "a networked structure of social relationships," Levine explains (92). The task of conveying psychological nuances and complex social interactions led novelists to experiment with narration. Per Ian Watt's theory of the realistic novel as a product of an age fascinated with the individual's experience, first-person narration cultivates a sense of mental and emotional verisimilitude for the reader which can, in turn, prick his or her sympathies. On the other hand, an omniscient narrator can display the vast expanse of human relationships which compose society. As will be discussed in the analysis of the three novels in question, both of these forms of realistic narration were also crucial to the sensation genre. Narration became a pedagogical tool prompting readers to consider their neighbors as persons who share their capacities for relationship, feeling, and thought.

In *The Principles of Success in Literature*, the late-Victorian critic George Henry Lewes uses detailism as a synonym for realism on the basis of the "predominance of unessential details" with which novelists recreate the material realities of life, and particularly working-class life. However, he argues that detailism drowns the higher ideals of art: "There are other truths besides coats and waistcoats, pots and pans, drawing-rooms and suburban villas" (100-101). If detailism dims the guiding light of idealism, it may do so for an artistic and moral purpose. In one regard, it can expose the loss of ideals in a world ravaged by materialism and degrading poverty. Remarking on the realism of Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot, Levine explains, "Rather than distracting us with ideal beauty, writers should prompt audiences to recognize the dignity of commonplace lives. [...] The point was not only to shock audiences with ugly, lowly new content, then, but to galvanize them into a new understanding of their own place in a complex social environment" (90-91). In another aspect, the detailism of the realistic novel was a

movement towards to the detail-driven plot form of the mystery story, an experiment in the “science of deduction,” as Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes would call it. In *The Novel and the Police*, D.A. Miller describes narration as a form of detective work which uses small clues to construct and explain pivotal points; he writes, “If the mainstream novel proves ultimately to be another instance of such detection, this is because both in its story and in its method of rendering it, it dramatizes a power continually able to appropriate the most trivial detail” (28). Like a masterful detective, the realistic novelist recognizes that the mud on a man shoes or a woman’s rumpled collar may have far more importance than meets the eye. The realistic fascination with networked social structures, narrative innovation, and detailism adopted by sensation writers allowed them to “galvanize” readers with an awareness of the conditions in which they and their neighbors lived.

Like realism, the term gothic was applied to visual art before it appeared in literary criticism. It was first used by early Renaissance art historians as a deprecatory term for the features of medieval architecture which they falsely attributed to the barbaric tribes of Goths who controlled much of Europe throughout the early middle ages. Thus, the designation of fictions as gothic in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries implied that such texts had a certain archaic and barbarous character. Accordingly, Jerrold E. Hogle and Fred Botting both consider the re-visitation of a cruel past upon the civilized present as a distinguishing feature of the genre. Hogle explains that gothic tales are usually set in an antiquated or seemingly antiquated space, and “within this space, or a combination of such spaces, are hidden some secrets from the past (sometimes the recent past) that haunt the characters, psychologically, physically, or otherwise at the main time of the story” (2). As a genre, the gothic can use apparitions from the past to veil and dramatize the anxieties of the present. Botting observes that the gothic “condenses” anxieties

and perceived threats to enlightened civilization into a set of thematic elements including natural and supernatural forces, social transgressions, mental disintegration, and spiritual corruption (2). All of these elements exhibit a preoccupation with boundaries. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick considers surfaces and divisions such as veils as metaphors for identity, leading her to conclude that in the gothic, identity “is social and relational rather than original or private” (256). Her definition of gothic identity is wholly opposed to the individualistic characterization of realism presented by Lukács. The vulnerability of the self in the face of permeable and breakable boundaries reveals how the outlandish visions of the gothic still manage to strike and chill the hearts of readers: if the human person is always vulnerable to a breach of the boundaries dividing the present, the past, the sensory world, the supernatural, the other, and the self, then the reader’s attempt to differentiate between the real and the unreal becomes problematic. The fear of a breach to the borders of the person contributes to a variety of gothic devices including mistaken or usurped identities, character doubling, paranoia, and physical or psychological contagion, all of which appear in sensation fiction. However, unlike the gothic, sensation fiction eschews the supernatural and provides natural explanations for all happenings.

As the nineteenth century progressed, the gothic became less distinct as a discrete genre because it was subsumed into a wider range of genres and texts. Gothic devices were sprinkled throughout the writings of the period, leading scholar Grace Kehler to identify even investigations of urban sanitary conditions as “gothic documentaries” (442). The gothic and its anxieties permeated and characterized the Victorian world view. For instance, Botting observes that the antiquated spaces of the forest and castle characteristic of earlier gothic works were transformed into the labyrinthine slums of the industrialized city and the stately ruins of country estates (11). A domesticization of the gothic taking place in the mid-Victorian period resituated



the genre within the home. The model of the home as a refuge from external threats of disorder and strife, Tamara Wagner argues her article “Gothic and the Victorian Home,” was torn away to reveal within outwardly ideal families the roots of crime and discord (111-112). Within the realism of the modern working- and middle-class world, the antiquated spaces of the gothic were revealed by the hauntings of family discord, injustice, and social and personal disintegration. The meeting of the gothic’s startling literary devices and unrestful past with the keen social awareness and mimetic representations of realism produced sensation.

Scholars generally identify the publication of *The Woman in White* in 1859 as the dawn of the sensation novel, but Anne-Marie Beller notes that Dickens was the first to provide “a blueprint for sensationalising everyday life and domestic relations,” especially in *Bleak House*, in which he had “purposely dwelt on the romantic side of familiar things,” as he stated in his preface to that novel (Beller 9). Considering that the gothic was often viewed as a subgenre of romanticism, Dickens’ statement conflates the outlandish “romantic” or gothic with the “familiar” or realistic. Robert Mighall calls attention to the fact that Collins’ and Braddon’s so-called sensation novels were at the time of their publication considered to be novels of the “Dickensian” school (Mighall quoted in Wagner 112). Dickens had already combined realistic techniques – detailism, networked social relationships, and omniscient narration – with those of the gothic – transgressions and violence, haunting secrets of the past, and uncertain identities – in his productions prior to 1850, such as *Oliver Twist* (1837) and *A Christmas Carol* (1843). Contemporary commentators recognized that Collins was the father of sensation but was not without his own forebears. In a *Blackwood’s Magazine* review of *The Woman in White*, Margaret Oliphant wrote that “it cannot be denied that a most striking and original effort, sufficiently individual to be capable of originating a new school in fiction, has been made, and that the

universal verdict has crowned it with success,” yet she clarified that “Mr. Wilkie Collins is not the first man who has produced a sensation novel.” She identifies Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Edward Bulwer Lytton’s *Zanoni* (1842), and the general span of Dickens’ oeuvre as earlier works of sensation (Oliphant 248).

The emergence of the sensation novel as a literary phenomenon in 1860s brought a greater concentration on middle-class crime, interest in criminal investigations, and ever-increasing anxiety about the stability of class and personal identity. Mariaconcetta Constanti argues that by dramatizing instances of middle-class crime rather than attributing all criminality to the so-called “criminal-classes” of laborers and factory workers, sensation novelists played upon fears of decaying social boundaries by exposing the presence of stereotypically lower-class behavior in a genteel setting (101). Crime manifested itself as the new horror rising from antiquated spaces. The festering rage and brutality beneath the respectable surface of the middle-class criminal replaced gothic monstrosities. However, the actual plausibility of crime in all social spheres and its psychological and material impact anchored the subject firmly in realism: it was the unavoidable stuff of newspapers as much as it was the stuff of wild fictions. In conducting a study of sensation novels and related journalism, Thomas Boyle concluded that by using real cases which were widely-reported in newspapers as a basis for stories, sensation novelists created new “techniques for unroofing the city” and exposing society’s most awful deformities (133).

## **Reception**

The exposure of such deformities certainly accomplished one thing on which all Victorian commentators agreed: it caused a sensation, thus giving the genre its name. Within the decade from 1852 to 1862, *Bleak House*, *The Woman in White*, and *Lady Audley’s Secret* were

all published in serial form. Between March 1852 and September 1853, Dickens' novel was published in monthly installments bound in booklets—rather than in a periodical—by Bradbury and Evans; between November 1859 and August 1860 Collins' novel was serialized in the journal *All the Year Round*, edited by Dickens; and after the magazine in which Braddon's novel began its serialization failed, it was soon reintroduced as a twelve part monthly serial in January 1862 in *The Sixpenny Magazine* due to popular demand. Each novel was eventually published in bound volumes and later released in cheaper railway editions, which were often sold as entertainments for rail passengers. Writing for serialization presented challenges, but these successful novelists found opportunity rather than limitation in the form. Instead of mutilating existing narrative structures to fit it, they used the divisions of installments to frame suspenseful plots which lead their readers through a maze of uncanny scenarios, setting clues along the way, and leaving the public ravenous for the next number after cliffhanger endings. There are no accurate records of the sales of serials, so it is difficult to estimate the number of readers who enjoyed Dickens', Collins', or Braddon's novels in their earliest publication, but contemporary accounts of the public mania their novels aroused give some indication of how popular they were.

George Henry Lewes noted of Dickens' first serialized novel, *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-37), "even the common people, both in town and country, are equally intense in their admiration," and it was not unusual to see butcher's boys, kitchen maids, and workers of all trades poring over the latest installment during moments of leisure (quoted in Flint "Victorian Novel" 18). In a letter to Mrs. Richard Watson dated August 27, 1853, shortly before the publication of the last installment of *Bleak House*, Dickens claimed, "I never had so many readers" (in Ford and Monod 889). Many reviews and responses to the novel were written by

middle- and upper-class readers, and, given the working-class readership described by Lewes sixteen years earlier, it can be assumed that *Bleak House's* audience was also a substantial part of the literate population. However, Dickens' novels took much longer than those of other authors to pass from bound volume publication to more affordable versions. *Bleak House* was not published in a cheap edition until five years after it was released in bound volumes, which likely cost about thirty-one shillings and six pence, or £138 (\$180) in modern currency, as Kate Flint notes in her article "The Victorian Novel and Its Readers" (16). The allowance of such a gap between editions could be a result of Dickens' continual battle for stricter copyright enforcement, but it also indicates a preference for upper- and middle-class readership.

Collins' novel moved more quickly into mass-market versions to meet an outrageous demand. According to John Sutherland, all 1,000 copies of *The Woman in White* in its expensive three-volume edition sold out in one day. Additionally, when it was released in a cheaper edition, it was given an initial run of 10,000 copies with the expectation of selling at least 50,000 of that quality before running an even cheaper edition (Sutherland Appendices 654). "While the novel was still selling in its thousands," Kenneth Robinson writes in his biography of Collins, "manufacturers were producing *Woman in White* perfume, *Woman in White* cloaks and bonnets, and the music-shops displayed *Woman in White* waltzes and quadrilles" (149). The book caused a merchandising boom. Like Dickens, Collins appealed to a wide range of readers, and Robinson reports that *The Woman in White* even won the admiration of Prince Albert who sent a copy to Baron Stockton (149). The periodicals in which Dickens and Collins published were produced for a middle-class readership yet reached readers of higher or lower standing because of their immense popularity. Braddon, on the other hand, published much of her writing in magazines aimed at a working-class audience. Shortly after it had been released in three-volume and

cheaper editions, there was apparently enough of a demand for versions of *Lady Audley's Secret* among working-class readers to initiate a second serialization of it in the *London Journal*.

Braddon's novel's return to serialization shows that her readership, unlike Dickens' and Collins' perhaps, had its strongest base in the working class.

Victorian readers avidly bought up popular novels, yet many readers were extremely conscientious about the moral value of what they read. The success of novels like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) demonstrated the public desire for fiction with a clear motive of moral edification and social reform. On the other hand, the sensation novel frequently raised moral objections, but some commentators realized that its exploration of scandalous topics could be a means of edification in itself. As an 1863 review from the *Christian Remembrancer* proposed, "The 'sensation novel' of our time, however extravagant and unnatural, yet is a sign of our times—the evidence of a certain turn of thought and action, of an impatience with old restraints, and a craving for some fundamental change in the working of society" (quoted in Houston 485). Allowance could be made for reading immoral sensation fiction if, with a more critical approach, one could diagnose its "extravagant and unnatural" elements as symptoms of moral degradation.

In the case of *Bleak House*, reviewers recognized and approved Dickens' effort to promote reform, but they felt that his main critique of Chancery Court was either mismanaged or unnecessary. *The Athenaeum* published one review of the novel in March of 1852, just after the release of the first installment, and one in September 1853, just after the serial came to its close. The first review identifies the novelist's concentration on the institutional evils of Chancery. "The principal *dramatis personæ* are to be," the reviewer predicts, "'parties in the suit;' and out of such materials what passionate tragedy and sarcastic force may a pen like Mr. Dickens' evoke! Such a work is well timed too,—and may fairly be counted on as a useful contribution to

the cause of Chancery Reform” (270). The reviewer admires Dickens’ critiques as valuable contributions to reform movements and hopes that his latest work will engage in the debates about Chancery. In September 1852, *The Standard* printed a review of the first seven parts of *Bleak House* written by the former Lord Chief Justice Lord Denman. Though he appreciated Dickens’ concern for reform, he did not feel that his new interest in Chancery was “well timed” as did *The Athenaeum*’s reviewer. Denman considers that in the past twenty years of the novelist’s career,

The abuses of Chancery were at their height, and were visible to every eye in ruinous houses, neglected farms, disordered intellects, and broken hearts. Active exertions were making to remove the monstrous evils of that Court [...] But now that the reformers appear to have gained their end [...] Mr. Dickens takes an active part in promoting Chancery reform. (3-4)

If Dickens was troubled by the abuses of Chancery, Denman suggests, he should have addressed them when they were going unchecked. Though improvements had been made, it seems that not all reviewers agreed with Denman that the reformers had “gained their end.” For example, *The Athenaeum*’s review of the full novel in September 1853 argues that the promised attack on the Court was not carried out. The “anticipated scenes which might rival the Pickwick trial, or combinations such as should keep that mighty mystery of Iniquity and Equity perpetually before the reader” do not appear, for “at an early period the fortunes of Richard and Ada pass into the place of second interests, while the first concern and sympathy are given to Lady Dedlock’s secret” (1088). While Denman and *The Athenaeum*’s reviewers did voice admiration for the novel’s sympathetic treatment of the poor, both felt that the topic of Chancery was not appropriately handled: the critique either went too far or not far enough.

Collins' reviewers, contrastingly, did not find unfulfilled promises in *The Woman in White*: the novel promised excitement, and it delivered just that. *The Times* released a largely favorable review in October 1860 after the novel had become available in three different editions. The reviewer commented on Collins' request in his preface that reviewers avoid revealing plot points to preserve a sense of mystery: "We are commanded to be silent lest we should let the cat out of the bag. The cat out of the bag! There are in this novel about a hundred cats contained in a hundred bags [...] We are very willing to stroke some of these numerous cats, but it is not possible to do it without letting them out" (quoted in Robinson 148). Readers saw in *The Woman in White* a new literary creature, a thing never before seen in England, and reviewers admired Collins' skillful construction of his sensational plot, but they were wary of the consequences of the sensation novel's treatment of crime. If criminals are to be central characters, then their characterization must in some way touch the reader's sympathy or fascination. One writer for the *Saturday Review* commented in August 1860, shortly after the conclusion of the novel's serialization, "Most of Mr. Wilkie Collins's characters have no character at all. There is one exception, or rather what looks like an exception, in *The Woman in White*: Count Fosco" (quoted in Page sec. 26). Similarly, Oliphant spoke of the Count, wondering how Walter Hartwright "finds it in his heart to execute justice upon so hearty, genial, and exhilarating a companion" (250). Reviewers tended to dismiss the apparently heroic characters in favor of Fosco, but they saw that such an attraction to a man of evil genius was problematic. According to these readers, Collins' sensation novel did not have an obvious motivation of reform and edification like *Bleak House*, and it seemed to lack substance. The *Saturday Review* stated, "Our curiosity once satisfied, the charm is gone. All that is left us is to

admire the art with which the curiosity was excited,” and, further, Collins’ works are “not so much for the library as for the circulating library” (quoted in Page sec. 26).

The phenomenon of the sensation novel did not always carry obvious moral or reform messages. Reviewers frequently accused their authors of using clever stories to excite “curiosity” and leave the reader with no seed of wisdom, only a hunger for more thrills. *The Athenaeum*’s review of *Lady Audley’s Secret* in October 1862 prophesied, “It is, in fact, just the sort of book to be read by everybody,—not too sentimental for a man’s requirements, nor too useful for a woman’s; having no end of plots and conspiracies for those who like plots, and plenty of light, easy, agreeable conversation for those who do not.” The reviewer finds, “The book is well written and worth reading,” but does not imply that the novel has any message of reform or educational value (526-525). It was light fiction, suited to all tastes because it required no taste in particular and made few demands of its reader. The triviality of sensation novels aggravated Henry Mansel who insisted, “No divine influence can be imagined as presiding over the birth of [the sensation novelists’] work, beyond the market-law of demand and supply.” He acknowledged Braddon’s talent, but determined, “The skill of the builder deserves to be employed in better materials.” *Lady Audley’s Secret* may have been well written, but he did not second *The Athenaeum*’s opinion that it was worth reading if it offered only “mere trash or something worse” (quoted in Houston 490-494). In Braddon’s novel, these reviewers found little besides a tantalizing narrative. The sensation novel, however, did not need to actively promote an agenda of reform in order to encourage an assessment or investigation of social ills. As the reviewer from the *Christian Remembrancer* suggested, the popularity of the books themselves presented “evidence of a certain turn of thought and action, of an impatience with old restraints, and a craving for some fundamental change.” With their use of realistic and gothic techniques to



stir readers and their popular appeal, sensation novels were uniquely positioned as vehicles for social commentary.

### **Investigation**

As proposed by Peter Thoms, the investigator's work is a narrative project, the task of "organizing the evidence in a persuasive way" to propose an explanation of events as the truth (9). When these sensation novels serve as investigations or investigators in their own right, they present evidence of social injustices in a believable manner, but they do not necessarily offer solutions. The same distinction which exists between the role of the investigator and the role of the judge exists here as well: the investigator observes, collects evidence, and organizes it to suggest a particular conclusion while the judge casts a verdict based upon the evidence and issues the order for corrective action. These novels do not issue corrective plans for reform. Instead, they participate in a form of policing in their realistic worlds to uncover transgressions. D.A. Miller draws an analogy between the activity of the police and the control of the novelist which places characters under a "social surveillance" similar to that which was used to promote reform: vigilant attention to the gritty details of a realistic world lets the novel detect and decry injustices in fiction which reflect those present in fact in an effort to reestablish order (18). The narrative conducts the investigation and reports its findings to readers. The readers, therefore, play the role of judge, and have the opportunity to review the evidence, make a decision, and enact reforms.

The work of investigation by detectives, journalists, or other individuals diagnoses the ills of society, making it the first stage of any reform movement. In the early nineteenth century, the attempt to diagnose those ills was facilitated by the development of an official detective force and the proliferation of investigative journalism which alerted public opinion and generated

legislative change. The Metropolitan Police Act of 1829 established the first police force in London, with its headquarters at Scotland Yard, but it was not until 1842 that a detective branch was created and tasked with the capture of criminals and collection of evidence for trials. Previously, the discovery of crimes and pursuit of suspects were largely left to the public, although parish constables, patrolmen, local magistrates, and private thief-catchers occasionally undertook the tasks of detection. In *Crime Control and Everyday Life in the Victorian City*, David Churchill argues that much of the work of detection was done by the public: records of police activity in Liverpool from 1841 and 1842 indicate that in 83 per cent of cases it was civilians, not police or detectives, who discovered crimes (148). Impressions of detectives themselves were varied. For instance, Haia Shpayer-Makov sees the employment of professional detectives in the nineteenth century as part of the expanding involvement of the government in the lives of individuals (*Ascent* 3). The public had reason to be suspicious of men whose profession was the surveillance of the public, and many felt that detectives, who often worked undercover, were not to be trusted. Furthermore, because detectives needed to be well acquainted with the criminal underworld, there was an expectation that they would dabble in illegal activities themselves. In the 1850s and '60s dozens of newspaper articles announced stories such as "A 'Detective' Detected" to expose detectives who were using their positions to cover up underhanded dealings. For instance, the news story cited above which was printed in *Jackson's Oxford Journal* in 1855 and another titled "A Detective Nearly 'Detected'" printed in *Reynolds's Newspaper* in 1860 both describe detective officers who were convicted as pickpockets (issue 5307; issue 538).

The role of the detective seemed to be one of moral ambiguity because of its position at the boundaries of legal order and its inherent need to, as Thoms writes, "exert control over

others” in proposing an authoritative explanation of crimes (2). However, the detective’s position had more to offer the public than just control and security. As Shpayer-Makov remarks, “Detectives had the know-how to provide an insider’s view of the margins of society” (“Journalists” 969). Precisely because they operated on the fringes of the social order, detectives had access to the information journalists sought: sensational stories of crime, the latest news on the street, and factual information about the livelihood of the urban poor. Detectives began leading journalists through the slums of cities so they might observe and record what they saw in the dark alleys and gutters. Dickens ventured into the notorious slum of St Giles with his friend Inspector Field, who was immortalized in the character of Mr. Bucket<sup>1</sup>. Dickens published the account of his excursion in *Household Words* in June of 1851—before he began drafting *Bleak House* in November of that year—in a piece entitled “On Duty with Inspector Field.” Dickens celebrated Field’s blend of intellect, social acuity, and benevolence. During their night-time journey, Dickens followed Field into a cellar room near St Giles’ Church known as “Rats’ Castle” where a company of noted thieves regularly convened. Field greeted the company and was congenial with them, yet made a careful study of the premises for anything out of the ordinary: “Inspector Field’s eye is the roving eye that searches every corner of the cellar as he talks. Inspector Field’s hand is the well-known hand that has collared half the people here, and motioned their brothers, sisters, fathers, mothers, male and female friends, inexorably, to New South Wales.” Although he is stern in bringing criminals to justice, Field also shows deep concern for the community he serves. He is a friend to the orphans, widows, and impoverished who recognize and call to him in the street (Dickens “On Duty” 266-267). Dickens attributes the

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<sup>1</sup> Although Mr. Bucket is considered the first professional detective to appear in literature, Collins’ other great novel *The Moonstone* (1868) is frequently identified as the first true detective novel. In addition to its professional sleuth Sergeant Cuff, it introduces elements which would become typical of later English detective fiction, like the isolated country house setting, array of false suspects, and twist-ending.

detective's excellent reputation to a blend of shrewdness and compassion. He cares about citizens in the most wretched circumstances yet uses his familiarity with their community to gain access to areas where he can closely observe criminal activities.

The fact that middle-class journalists relied on detectives like Mr. Field to safely escort them through squalid working-class neighborhoods reflected a fear of the dangerous quarters of poverty which were viewed as evidence of social decay: the body politic had become corrupt and was disintegrating into incompatible fragments. Catherine Gallagher analyzes representations of the social body in the works of Thomas Malthus and Henry Mayhew, two of the figures who shaped Victorian political economy. From their perspective, she explains, "Society was imagined to be a chronically, incurably ill organism that could only be kept alive by the constant flushing, draining, and excising of various deleterious elements" (Gallagher 90). It seemed to many commentators that the burgeoning population, in cities in particular, had become a teeming mass of disease and filth. For instance, Mayhew likened the crowds of "urban wanderers" to parasites: "they partake more or less of the purely vagabond, doing nothing whatsoever for their living, but moving from place to place preying upon the earnings of the more industrious portions of the community" (*London Labour and the London Poor*, vol. 1, 1861, pp. 2-3 quoted in Gallagher 90).

The metaphor of the body politic had been used in discourse since medieval times and made many appearances in literature—Shakespeare, for instance, used it in his plays, as with the remark in *Hamlet* that "There is something rotten in the state of Denmark" (I. iv. 90). The nineteenth-century imagination projected its own gothic anxieties of breached boundaries onto the metaphor. In exploring the decomposition of the body politic envisioned in *Dracula* (1897), Leila May finds that "The Victorian body, social and individual, felt itself under perpetual

assault from all quarters within and without, and responded to the perceived threat by adopting manifold defensive and retaliatory measures through various reform laws, regulations, and forms of moral policing” (16). The exposure of “assaults” was the work of investigative journalists, and they made use of realistic and gothic effects, like those found in sensation fiction, to make their reports both readable and affective. As mentioned in my discussions of genre, Grace Kehler identifies “gothic technologies” used to mobilize feelings as the core of the journalists’ pedagogy: alarming images of working-class homes and communities as putrefying bodies which assault the eye with their rot and the nose with their repulsive odor suggest that the long-standing neglect of the poorer regions has emerged with a vengeance to lay its claim before middle-class readers (439-450).

### **Social Reform**

Reform movements were reactions to the startling vision of a social corpse: they sought to isolate and purge its corruption and to revive it, if possible. In the early nineteenth century, political reform laid a foundation for later improvements by extending the franchise and redistributing parliamentary seats. Historian Glenn Everett identifies the agitated time leading up to and following the passing of the First Reform Bill of 1832 as a period of jarring illumination for the British public which brought manifold issues to light. After the bill, approximately one in five men could vote and the pool of voters for the first time included working- and middle-class men (Everett *Victorian Web*). Conservative leader Robert Peel disapproved of the “levelling” effects of uniform qualifications for suffrage which enrolled any male householder of a property worth £10 or more in the electorate, yet he proved prophetic in his proclamation that this reform bill would not be the last, as it had, for the first time, made a clear distinction between the “voting and voteless classes” (quoted in Woodward 79). The voteless classes had been made

painfully aware of their political muteness. What Ernest Woodward calls the “first great political movement of the laboring class,” arose as the manifestation of the worst fears of opponents to electoral reform: Chartism (133-134).

Benjamin Wilson, who was involved in the movement, expresses in his memoir *The Struggles of an Old Chartist* (1887) that Chartists were not interested in plundering the economic stronghold of the upper classes: “What they wanted was a voice in making the laws they were called upon to obey; they believed that taxation without representation was tyranny, and ought to be resisted” (quoted in Bloy *Victorian Web*). Likewise, social theorist Harriet Martineau commented in 1849 that, “Those who have not looked into Chartism think [it] one thing — a revolution,” but those who have looked into it “conclude at last that it is another name for popular discontent” (quoted in Bloy *Victorian Web*). Chartist rallies occasionally became violent and met deadly consequences, as in the 1839 Newport Rising which according to Woodward resulted in the deaths of twenty-four Chartist demonstrators (126-133). The fear of an explosive working-class, ready to force its way through social boundaries at any time, was dramatized in sensation fiction including the three novels in question.

In another sphere, reformers desperately wanted to see more energy: namely, the law. Dickens makes the stagnation of the legal process a subject of several of his novels, but *Bleak House* is the most obviously concerned with legal reform, and specifically the reform of Chancery. The Victorian legal system was composed of the Court of Chancery and the Court of Common Law: the first had jurisdiction over matters of equity such as property disputes, wills, and the like while the latter dealt with criminal offenses. Because Chancery is so central to Dickens’ novel, this study will focus on that branch of the court system. The reform of Chancery had begun long before Dickens had even dreamt of his novel with the first motions for

improvement beginning in the 1830s. As was the case with other reform movements, investigation proved key to agitation. That investigation was largely internal as lawyers produced comprehensive reports for journals such as the *Legal Observer*, the *Law Review*, and the *Law Times*. However, the efforts inspired by those exposés had little effect. Woodward states, “[Chancery] remained a lumber-room of pedantry and a rich source of income for lawyers” well beyond the 1860s and ‘70s (453-454). Lawyers purposefully prolonged cases to increase their incomes, sinecure positions drained finances, and over all—legal scholar Michael Lobbon observes—Chancery suffered from the “Old Corruption” characteristic of an *ancien régime* institution (389-390). The machinery of Law, as Walter Hartwright suggests in the opening of *The Woman in White*, was always lubricated with more than a moderate application of the “oil of gold” (Collins 5). After many attempts to alter the existing institution, Chancery was incorporated into the Supreme Court of the Judicature between 1873 and 1875, clearing up the paralyzing fog at last.

While legal reformers were wading through institutional corruption, sanitary reformers were addressing the corruption of city gutters. Investigative journalists like Mayhew and Edwin Chadwick ventured into ghastly slums to gather information for reports which intrigued and frightened readers with their “gothic technologies,” in Kehler’s words. Their writings appealed to the senses, but among them smell is often given the greatest consequence. Mayhew writes in his article “A Visit to the Cholera Districts of Bermondsey” (1849), “the air has literally the smell of a graveyard [...] thickly charged with deadly gas” rising in “heavy bubbles” from the water of ditches; furthermore, “the inhabitants themselves show in their faces the poisonous influence of the mephitic air they breathe” (in Flint 165-166). Mayhew’s emphasis on the “deadly” and “poisonous” nature of the air in slums is not accidental: most sanitation reformers believed

disease was spread, not by the transfer of bacteria, but by contaminating vapors or “miasmas” issued from decaying animal and vegetable matter. Stench was, therefore, considered a signal that infection was in the vicinity. Medical scholar Socrates Litsios outlines the development of this theory of disease transmission, known as miasmatic theory. It first gained public importance in 1838 when Chadwick, as the leader of the Poor Law Commission, ordered an enquiry into the causes of fever as a response to severe outbreaks of typhus and influenza in London. Southwood Smith, a physician participating in the enquiry, attributed the infections to the contaminating gases emitted by decaying matter and poor ventilation, popularizing miasmatic theory (Litsios 187). It was adopted by most reformers including Chadwick and Mayhew as well as Dickens himself. Despite his abhorrence of Chadwick’s Poor Law reform, Dickens was impressed by his 1842 *Inquiry into the Sanitary Conditions of the Laboring Poor*, and he soon became one of Chadwick’s most outspoken supporters. Litsios observes that only after 1843 did miasmatic theory become prominent in Dickens’ novels (190). Because of the theory, sanitation reformers sought to improve water delivery and drainage in urban areas to remove the sources of the “Great Stink.” The problem simply could not be ignored. In 1858, it literally paralyzed the state when the smell from the cesspool that was the Thames was so overpowering that Parliament had to be suspended, according to the records of the Thames Water Utilities Corporation. However, the process of cleansing London and other cities of sewage and waste was bound to be slow because of the tremendous scope of the mess.

If miasmas emanating from rotting vegetable and animal matter had truly been the source of disease, then one depository of cast-off matter posed an unequalled threat to public health: the burial ground. George Alfred Walker, sometimes known as “Graveyard Walker,” was the most vocal proponent of burial reform. In his investigative reports *Gatherings from Graveyards*



(1839) and *Burial Ground Incendiarism* (1846), Walker adhered to the miasmatic theory, connecting outbreaks of influenza, typhus, and cholera to mismanaged internments. His *Series of Lectures on the Actual Condition of the Metropolitan Graveyards* (1847) provides eyewitness accounts of the exhumation of coffins several weeks after their burial in slum graveyards which were so densely packed with corpses that new coffins had to be beaten into their graves. Once exhumed by professional gravediggers, coffins were broken up to be sold as firewood and the mutilated bodies forced into whatever space could be made in the ground. This awful spectacle is all the more horrible, Walker argues, because the burial ground in question was adjacent to a hospital, “so situated that the living invalids are compelled to breathe the putrid miasmata of this charnel-house” (Walker quoted in Flint 159-161). Dickens was familiar with Walker’s work and quite aware of the governmental investigations which it inspired. In 1851, when he was beginning to write *Bleak House*, reforms of London’s burial grounds were already underway, although it took several years for the bans on interments within the city’s borders to take effect. As Trevor Blount explains, the contagion spread from Nemo’s graveyard in Dickens’ novel is not “merely a metaphor invented or exaggerated by Dickens to suit his plot or manifest his moral in a further guise,” but a product of ongoing efforts to raise awareness of the dangers of the negligent and inhumane treatment of the dead (376).

Sensation fiction has its share of dishonored corpses, of course, but it was also preoccupied with the dishonor of those among the living who had limited legal rights, such as women and the mentally ill. The events of each Collins’ and Braddon’s novels in particular expose multiple facets of the Woman Question debate, especially issues surrounding the legal status and limitation of acceptable social roles for women. Prior to the passage of the Married Women’s Property Acts of 1870 and 1882, the legal personhood of any woman was absorbed

into the legal status of her husband upon marriage. Rachel Ablow states that a married woman under coverture forfeited control of her personal property, land holdings, and any inheritance she received before or during the marriage to her husband (par. 1). Unmarried women could maintain control of their own property unless prevented from doing so by male family members, but they faced the difficulty of finding suitable employment. Once industrialization transformed the family economy, working-class women were expected to work outside of the home. Middle- and upper-class women, on the other hand, had few respectable options for employment. Until the mid-nineteenth century, if married women found that their husbands took advantage of the principle of coverture to squander their fortunes or if marriages proved abusive, legal separation could only be granted by a special act of parliament. In the event of a couple separating informally, the husband would retain control of all property and custody of any children. In 1836, the passage of the Act for Marriages made it possible for couples to have a civil marriage outside of the Anglican Church, recognizing the marriages of nonconformists, Roman Catholics, and non-Christians as legitimate. “[The] reform of divorce procedure,” Woodward states, “was the logical consequence of the introduction of civil marriage,” and in 1857 the Matrimonial Causes Act created the divorce court (454). Other legislation such as the Custody of Infants Act of 1839 and the aforementioned Married Women’s Property Act gradually established protections for the rights of married women.

Charles Reade, the author of the sensation novel *Hard Cash* (1853), expressed in an 1864 letter to Rosina Bulwer Lytton<sup>2</sup> his amazement at the “facilities the lunacy law affords, for

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<sup>2</sup> Rosina’s own experience in her unhappy marriage to Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton was worthy of sensation fiction. After their informal separation in 1836, Rosina was divided from her children and left to support herself. When she retaliated by sabotaging her estranged husband’s political career, he bribed doctors to have her incarcerated in an asylum. John Sutherland proposes that given Lord Lytton’s acquaintance with Collins, Rosina may have been the original Woman in White (Introduction xix).

disposing of inconvenient wives” (cited in Blain 212). The exile of “inconvenient wives” and mothers to asylums was apparently more common than one would like to think. Natalie Houston reveals in her introduction to *Lady Audley's Secret* that Braddon's close friend and publisher John Maxwell had a wife, Anne Crowley Maxwell, who was housed in a mental institution in Dublin after a “severe mental collapse.” Meanwhile, John Maxwell befriended Braddon in 1860. They began an affair, cohabited for more than a decade, had six children together, and eventually married in 1874 after the first Mrs. Maxwell's death in Dublin (Houston 9). Additionally, the recent discovery of a cache of letters at Harvard has given further evidence of Dickens' own plot to have his wife Catherine imprisoned in an asylum prior to their separation in 1858 (Bowen). Andrew Scull explains that prior to the nineteenth century, the mentally ill were “assimilated into a much larger, more amorphous class of the morally disreputable, the poor, and the impotent, a group which also included vagrants, minor criminals, and the physically handicapped,” but by mid-century, “they found themselves incarcerated in a specialized, bureaucratically organized, state-supported asylum system which isolated them both physically and symbolically from the larger society” (13-14). With the development of psychiatry, more and more attempts to define insanity appeared, but, understandably, no consensus could be reached and the “arbitrariness” of definitions led doctors to a continual exercise of “verbal gymnastics” (Scull 227-234). Given the looseness of diagnoses, certification depended largely upon which doctor was consulted (and likely the gold in one's pocket). According to Paul Fennell, the movement to reform the treatment of the mentally ill began in 1814. At that time, “scandal broke when Godfrey Higgins discovered in York Asylum (of which he was a governor) thirteen women in a cell twelve feet by seven feet ten inches, and that the deaths of 144 patients had been concealed” (Fennell chap. 1 par. 2). The Board of the Metropolitan Commissioners in Lunacy was created in 1827 to oversee

asylums in London, and an act of 1842 extended the Board's jurisdiction to all of England and Wales. In 1845 the passage of the Lunacy Act and the County Asylums Act created a network of county-managed public asylums which were to be monitored by the Home Secretary and the Lunacy Commission.

The facilities available to house and assist the mentally ill depended largely upon one's financial position. Andrew Roberts explains, workhouse and county asylums were almost exclusively occupied by "pauper lunatics" who were supported by the poor rates dispensed from the Poor Law Commission (sec. 5.1.3). Licensed houses, did not accept pauper patients. Anne Catherick and Laura Fairlie in *The Woman in White* were admitted to a licensed, private asylum near London. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, Lady Audley dreads the possibility of being sent to a pauper's asylum because of the haunting memory of seeing her mother kept in such a place. The grounds of certification for the insane were not well-defined by any of the Lunacy Acts, and there was a significant number of cases in which bribery and deception resulted in false incarceration. As Sutherland observes, in the summer of 1858, a year before the publication of *The Woman in White*, there were three highly publicized cases of wrongful confinement (xix).

### **Analysis of the Texts**

The preceding overview of the generic and contextual elements which shaped these three sensation novels into unique channels for social investigation can now lead into close readings of the texts themselves. Each novel, as stated in the introduction, incorporates investigation on two levels: firstly in the events of the mystery plot which uncovers the guilty party and secondly in the narrative activity which uncovers social abuses. The reader is involved on both levels. Just as he or she is engaged in the guesswork of interpreting the clues which detective figures in the plot use to discover the perpetrator, he or she is also engaged in interpreting clues which point to

particular social problems. Additionally, the differing narrative forms of the novels shape reader engagement. *Bleak House* uses two interwoven narratives to give the reader a broader, more sarcastic view of events through the eyes of a third-person narrator, and a more limited, sentimental view through the eyes of Esther Summerson. The reader may find Esther unreliable because of her exaggerated self-effacement. Nevertheless, the alternation between narratives keeps the reader in suspense and each narrative contributes to the investigations on both levels. *The Woman in White* is written as a compilation of witness statements arranged to ensure that the character with the most definite knowledge of the course of events is being heard at any given time. Walter promises in his preamble, “As the judge might once have heard it, so the Reader shall hear it now” (5). This collection of testimonies lends believability to the narrative and gives the reader a chance to evaluate each witness’s biases and motivations as a judge would. *Lady Audley’s Secret* is written from only one perspective, that of an omniscient narrator. However, the narrator primarily accesses the thoughts of Robert and Lady Audley, pitting the two against each other in a game of cat and mouse, and keeping the reader absorbed in the tension between them. Using their distinct narrative forms, the novels weave exciting mystery plots and simultaneously uncover clues to explain the causes of social decay, the corpse politic.

The first three chapters of *Bleak House* introduce the three problems which will be central to the investigations within its mystery plot: the legal puzzle of Jarndyce and Jarndyce, the secret of Lady Dedlock’s relationship with an impoverished law-writer, and the question of Esther’s parentage. As discussed above, the novel is divided into two intertwined narratives: namely, Esther’s narrative and that of the third-person narrator. Much of the work of detection is situated in the latter; although Esther’s observations contribute to the social investigation, she plays a largely passive role in the discovery of secrets surrounding her own life. Meanwhile, the

third-person narrator follows an array of major and minor characters engaging in detective work. The puzzle of Jarndyce and Jarndyce grips the attention of lawyers like Mr. Vholes and Conversation Kenge, but it is Krook's and the Smallweeds' opportunistic hoarding and sifting of documents which finally uncovers the authoritative Will, ending the case. Mr. Tulkinghorn, Mr. Bucket, and Mr. Guppy are all involved in the investigation of Lady Dedlock's youthful romance with Captain Hawdon—later, Nemo—and the birth of the couple's daughter, Esther. Their investigations of Lady Dedlock eventually lead them to the truth of Esther's parentage. Curiously, the only actual criminal investigation in the story, Mr. Bucket's inquiry into Tulkinghorn's murder, shrinks into the background, becoming a facet of the drama surrounding Lady Dedlock. The murderess Hortense is apprehended and carried off to her punishment before the pursuit of Lady Dedlock begins. In the three central problems, justice can only be partial: all of the Jarndyce fortune is consumed in fees and the heir lost to consumption, the drama of Lady Dedlock's past is defused by her death and that of her antagonist Mr. Tulkinghorn, and in the end Esther cannot be restored to her parents. The incomplete restitution in the plot could bolster the cause of social reform by leaving the reader with a desire for more effective justice than is found within the novel.

Unlike *Bleak House*, *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret* limit the work of detection to only one or two characters seeking to right wrongs done to their loved ones. In Collins' novel, Walter Hartwright and Marian Halcombe investigate the identity of Anne Catherick (the Woman in White), Anne's relationship to Laura Fairlie, Sir Percival Glyde's volatile secret, and Sir Percival's scheme with Count Fosco to seize Laura's fortune. Both amateur detectives are primarily motivated by their attachment to Laura. Through observation and the gathering of documentary evidence, the pair articulate a reasonable account of events,

which is recorded in the novel's testimonial format. Anne—Walter and Marian learn—was Laura's half-sister from Mr. Fairlie's intrigue with Mrs. Catherick. The same Mrs. Catherick had helped Sir Percival, a friend of Mr. Fairlie, forge documents to conceal the fact that "He was not Sir Percival Glyde at all, [and] he had no more claim to the baronetcy and to Blackwater Park than the poorest laborer who worked on the estate" (Collins 521). When Anne claimed to know that secret, Sir Percival had her imprisoned in an asylum, from which she escaped at the beginning of the novel. He later partners with Count Fosco in a scheme to seize Laura's inheritance by marrying her and faking her death. The villains bury Anne's body in the guise of Laura and sent Laura to the asylum in the guise of Anne. Walter and Marian are never able to produce sufficient evidence to bring Laura's case to court: they have no documentation of the date when Anne was brought in as a substitute, Sir Percival destroys himself along with a piece of vital evidence in a fire, and Count Fosco is assassinated by his secret brotherhood of political revolutionaries. Furthermore, Laura seems to be permanently damaged by her traumatic experience. The detectives are able to convince her neighbors and friends that she never actually died, but their failure to exact justice within the plot may leave the reader unsatisfied and more attentive to injustices in the real world.

In *Lady Audley's Secret*, Robert Audley, who "was supposed to be a barrister" but in fact did very little besides read French novels and smoke cigars, assumes the role of detective with unwonted zeal when his friend George Talboys disappears (71). Having recently returned from living in Australia for three years, George is devastated to learn that his wife, Helen, died just days before his arrival. Similar descriptions of Helen Talboys and Lady Audley, the new young wife of Robert's uncle, lead Robert to suspect that Lady Audley was George's wife. By tracing her movements up and down the country, Robert discovers how she adopted a false identity,

abandoned her alcoholic father and her son, and eventually tried to kill her first husband in her efforts to gain a more secure social position. Robert's investigations into his young aunt's past and her activities at the time of George's vanishing are greatly helped by the fact that she is, frankly, an inept criminal, acting too impulsively and leaving traces of her deceit at every turn. She does not, in fact, succeed in killing George when she pushes him into a well on the estate of Audley Court; instead, he climbs out, eventually revealing his survival to Robert. Lady Audley fears that, in the course of his detective work, Robert will discover her secret. That secret, surprisingly, is not that she has assumed a false identity, that she is a bigamist, or that she attempted to kill her first husband: it is that she believes she has an "invisible hereditary taint" of insanity which she inherited from her mother and grandmother, each of whom suffered from mental illness (Braddon 363). Because she has the "cunning of madness, with the prudence of intelligence," as one doctor tells Robert, Lady Audley is "dangerous" but not definitively mad (385). She is sent to an asylum in Belgium, where she soon dies. Robert is reunited with George, and he marries George's sister Clara, who aided him in his investigations and served as his inspiration.

Just as the bodies of victims prompt several of the investigations described above, the image of a decaying body politic lies at the center of the narrative activity of social investigation. Each of these sensation novels consistently envisions both urban and rural communities as disordered organisms where the grit of realistic detailism and the anxiety of the gothic's permeable boundaries coincide. The ruinous scenes of inner-city slums were familiar to readers of investigative journalism, but these novels carry similar details of decomposition into rural towns and country estates, demonstrating a comprehensive breakdown of civil order. The



reader's inquiry into this societal murder must begin with an examination of the social body and a search for meaningful clues; therefore, we will also conduct that examination.

### *Bleak House*

Of the worlds of the three novels, that of *Bleak House* is most obviously portrayed as dead, as from the first page England is shown to be buried in mud and fog, but analysis will show that the cause of death which the narration initially suggests—namely, the Court of Chancery—may not be the only offender. As Dickens' contemporaries noted, his novel appeared decades after reforms had begun in the Court; however, the text's allusions to the future construction of railways in Lincolnshire in the 1840s have led scholars such as T.W. Hill to situate the action of *Bleak House* in the late 1830s, placing it amid legal reforms, several years after the 1832 Reform Act, and before the sanitary reform movement began in earnest (cited in Ford and Monod, 654). In the England of the novel, Chancery has "its decaying houses and its blighted lands in every shire [...] its lunatic in every madhouse, and its dead in every churchyard" (7). Among the "blighted lands," the most infamous is only several streets away from the Court itself: the slum of Tom-all-Alone's. The ownership of the property has been disputed for generations in Jarndyce and Jarndyce. It is described by John Jarndyce as "a street of perishing blind houses, with their eyes stoned out," where "every door might be Death's Door" (89). The narrator's description, on the other hand, suggests that death has already seized the slum: "As on the ruined human wretch, vermin parasites appear, so these ruined shelters have bred a crowd of foul existence that crawls in and out of gaps in walls and boards" (197). The bureaucratic limbo of Chancery has left the property petrified, a tempting refuge for the impoverished, yet the third-person narrator makes it clear that the state of Tom-all-Alone's is not a problem for only the Court. The population of the slum is continually "fetching and carrying

fever, and sowing more evil in its every footprint than Lord Coodle, and Sir Thomas Doodle, and the Duke of Foodle, and all the fine gentlemen in office, down to Zoodle, shall set right in five hundred years—though born expressly to do it” (197). Although the decay of the property began because of the Court, it has now become a social problem in and of itself as a source of contamination. Responsibility is passed to the government, in whom the narrator shows little confidence with the sarcastic remark that all the fancifully named lords in office cannot perform the one job they were “born expressly” to do. Thus, the law and the legislature are presented to the reader as culprits in the murder of society.

Like Tom-all-Alone’s, Krook’s Court is a disordered community, but this community does not threaten contamination so much as combustion. Krook’s Court is the twin of Lincoln’s Inn where the Court of Chancery lies, for Krook himself is called the Lord Chancellor, and the two neighborhoods are narratively linked. At the start of chapter 32, the clogged lamps in the windows of Lincoln’s Inn are “like the eyes of Equity, bleared Argus with a fathomless pocket for every eye,” and by these lamps draughtsmen and conveyancers toil to entangle real estate “in meshes of sheepskin” (391-392). The body of the law, which should be the heart of civil order, is decaying and mutating. The “fathomless pockets” of the eyes of Equity could be unseeing eyes worn out with age, or they could be deep sockets emptied by rot. Meanwhile, the entanglement of new “meshes of sheepskin” deforms the existing body with unnatural membranes. Chancery is figured as a monstrous body, anticipating the freakish event which is about to horrify the neighboring court. In Krook’s court, the community is deteriorating and suspicion looms: boys lie in ambush for travelers, housewives gossip, and the policeman checks doors and windows “on the hypothesis that every one is either robbing, or being robbed” (393). In this state of disorder, “the appointed time” is depicted as the Final Judgement. The reader is told, “It is a fine steaming

night to turn the slaughter-houses, the unwholesome trades, the sewage, bad water, and burial grounds to account, and give the Register of Death some extra business” (393). Like the sea and Hades giving up their dead, the filth of the urban landscape—sewage, bad water, and burial grounds—is exposed (Rev. 20: 13 NIV). These realistic yet apocalyptic sanitary problems are intertwined with Krook’s demise, and the narrator will call upon those problems to account for it.

The details of the imagery and the narrator’s shift into the second-person assault the reader’s senses, drawing him or her into the shock of one of most sensational scenes in all of Dickens’ works. Mr. Weevle and Mr. Guppy await “the appointed time” when Weevle is to meet Krook and buy Lady Dedlock’s packet of letters. While they wait, the time and air seem ripe for a gothic breakdown of the boundaries between natural and supernatural, past and present. In Nemo’s eerie room, they whisper by the light of a candle with an ominously “long winding-sheet,” and their whispering “seems to evoke an atmosphere of silence, haunted by the ghosts of sound [...] the tread of dreadful feet that would leave no mark on the sea-sand or the winter snow” (396, 400). Like Weevle and Guppy shivering with gothic terrors, the reader is transfixed by the evidence of an unnatural happening. Guppy taps his fingers on the windowsill and discovers “A thick yellow liquor defiles them, which is offensive to the touch and sight and more offensive to the smell. A stagnant, sickening oil, with some natural repulsion in it” (401). The narrator leaps into the present tense and second-person address: “look here—and look here! When [Guppy] brings the candle, here, from the corner of the window-sill, it slowly drips, and creeps away down the bricks; here, lies in a little nauseous pool” (402). Despite the disgusting imagery, the reader can hardly turn away when directly addressed, and the scene becomes engrossing.

When the revelation comes, the narration frames the bodily disaster as a political crisis. Weevle and Guppy approach the “crumbled black thing” by the fireplace: what looks like “the cinder of a small charred and broken log of wood” is now “all that represents” Krook (403). His death has rendered him completely unhuman, leaving only bones which might as well be bits of charred logs. The statement that this is all which “represents” him may cause the reader to ask what really represented Krook before. Without the property or status to be enfranchised, he certainly could claim no political representation, and now even the tangible representation of his body has been taken away. The narrator, in chorus with Weevle and Guppy, cries “Help, help, help! come into this house for Heaven’s sake!” The reader is again drawn into the action and “into this house” by the blurring of the lines between the characters and the narrator. Although “plenty will come in” out of curiosity, “none can help” (403). The narrator then addresses the Monarch, and symbolically the nation:

Call the death by any name Your Highness will, attribute it to whom you will, or say it might have been prevented how you will, it is the same death eternally—inborn, inbred, engendered in the corrupted humors of the vicious body itself. (403)

Because of statements such as this, Kate Flint reads this scene as “a metaphor for the spontaneous combustion which must inevitably take place within a corrupt body politic” (*Social Problems* 135). Krook’s body was certainly corrupted, and one could assume that his high alcohol content made him somewhat more inflammable, yet the above passage shifts the discourse to a universal body which is of national concern, accumulating for the reader more incriminating evidence against the government.

Although Krook is not a sympathetic figure, his death demands a recognition of the fact that he did not choose his fate. His death is attributed to inborn corruption yet also the contamination of “sewage, bad water, and burial grounds” (393). Furthermore, the closing

address to “Your Highness” is mirrored sixteen chapters later in the narrator’s lament over the death of Jo:

Dead, Your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day. (572)

Appealing to the audience of the present while addressing events which, if Hill’s dating of the plot is accurate, would have taken place decades beforehand suggests that the sufferings depicted were not confined to the past but still plague the nation. Like Jo, Krook—as repugnant as he can be—is a victim. He has labored to teach himself to read and done what he could to make a living from the refuse of his legal neighbors. His death is arguably the narrative’s most memorable event, and its position effectively divides the novel in half. No reader could have possibly anticipated such an awful end for the, essentially, harmless old man; however, the gothic horror of the accident can draw the reader’s attention to the realistic circumstances of the victim. Dickens did not give his plot this jolt simply to eliminate Krook once he had served a narrative purpose or simply to add sensation to the story. This memorable scene testifies to the fatal consequences of social and sanitary corruption: a disintegrating civil order and an explosive working class.

The decomposition of social order in urban space is tied to unsanitary conditions, ineffectual legislation, and legal stagnation; meanwhile, similar decomposition in rural space is tied to the empty pomp of the aristocracy and the Old Corruption of political bribery. The emblem of the aristocracy and the world of Fashion in the novel is the Dedlocks’ place in Lincolnshire, Chesney Wold. It is a “dreary” place beside a “stagnant river” on grounds “punctured all over, all day long, with falling rain.” The dead Dedlocks materially haunt the place with their venerable dust, as the little church holds a “general smell and taste” of them in

their graves (11). The continued veneration of the departed Dedlocks frays the boundary between the living and the dead. Fashion itself is characterized as “a jewel wrapped up in too much jeweler’s cotton” which “cannot hear the rushing of the larger worlds, and cannot see them as they circle around the sun [...] It is a deadened world, and its growth is sometimes unhealthy for want of air” (11). The aristocracy is too insulated from the realities of the larger world, and its self-enclosure has led to ignorance and suffocation. Nevertheless, this class remains in control of the government and its resources. In chapter 40, “England has been in a dreadful state for some weeks,” since the nation has been without a government because of personal hostilities between Lords Coodle and Doodle (495). After Doodle finally “condescended” to take the office of prime minister and bring in with him “all his nephews, all his male cousins, and all his brothers-in-law,” the London social season ends early as the Doodleites and Coodleites leave in order to “throw [themselves] upon the country—chiefly in the form of sovereigns and beer” (496).<sup>3</sup> While Chesney Wold awaits the return of the Dedlock family and their hangers-on at the season’s end, it sits “needing habitation more than ever, is like a body without life”; it is like the state itself which had recently been left without a pilot “to weather the storm” because of political bickering (498, 495). The motionless and unthinking body of the aristocracy and ruling class represented by Chesney Wold demonstrates to the reader the failure of the British government to attend to the nation’s most significant problems.

The Jarndyce family home of Bleak House is another more modest country house. As its position in the title suggests, the house is somehow central to the world of the novel and perhaps representative of the abuses of Chancery. Esther describes it as “delightfully irregular” and filled

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<sup>3</sup> Ford and Monod hypothesize that this pair of fictitious and nonsensical politicians may have been inspired by George Canning—to whose poem “The Pilot That Weathered the Storm” Dickens alludes—and his rival Henry Brougham, who served as Lord Chancellor in the 1830s, when Chancery reforms were beginning (495).

with “pleasantly irregular” furniture, a house where “you come upon more rooms when you think you have seen all there are.” She admires the “cottage-rooms” with “lattice windows and green growth pressing through them” (62). The house is, like the country houses in *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley’s Secret*, a jumble of structures from different time periods. Since John Jarndyce inherited the house prior to the action of the novel, he has brought vitality back to it, symbolized by its vibrant gardens and the comfortable atmosphere of its interior. However, it was once blighted by Chancery when Tom Jarndyce’s obsession with his Case and his eventual suicide left the home uninhabited and untended: John tells Esther, “When I brought what remained of [Tom] home here, the brains seemed to me to have been blown out of the house too; it was so shattered and ruined” (89). Esther insistently reminds John of the improvements he has made to Bleak House by disregarding the pressures of the Chancery Case and giving his attention to the restoration of the domestic space which Tom left to rot. As housekeeper, Esther steps in as the new restorer of Bleak House, a kind of domestic reformer. Yet, if Bleak House is meant to in some sense to stand in for the social body which has suffered because of Chancery and other problems, it is troubling that, instead of the old home being fully restored, a new house is established. John Jarndyce, having promised to make Esther mistress of Bleak House by marrying her, arranges a substitution of home and groom by naming Woodcourt’s cottage Bleak House and allowing Esther to marry its owner. As Kate Flint notes, this quaint retreat seems to be an evasion of the problems which they leave behind in London (*Social Problems* 10). The survivors of Jarndyce and Jarndyce—John, Ada, and Ada and Richard’s son—are the only ones to remain in the original house. Esther and Woodcourt’s cottage provides an idyllic—though awkward—ending, and the presence of Ada’s baby Richard at Bleak House promises a happier future for the Jarndyce descendants, but the resurrection of Bleak House itself and the decaying

body of England is left incomplete. Having been shown substantial evidence of how the social ills of legal corruption, poor public sanitation, and ineffectual politicians are related to the decay of the fictional world, the reader is left to consider to what extent such issues assault the real world.

### ***The Woman in White***

The imagery of social decomposition in *The Woman in White* is less explicit than that of *Bleak House*, but with careful attention to the evidence of the narrative the reader can identify instances and causes of corruption. In Collins' novel, London is a place of "heat and gloom," where Walter Hartwright feels, "The prospect of going to bed in my airless chambers, and the prospect of gradual suffocation seemed [...] to be one and the same," but the city is not imagined as dead (19). In later descriptions, it is a "house-forest" and an "illimitable sea" of thousands of people where Walter, Marian, and Laura can seek refuge in anonymity (441-442). The metropolis is crowded and unpleasant, but not void of life. It is in the burgeoning industrial town of Welmingham in Hampshire that the reader encounters true urban decay. Mrs. Clements, Anne Catherick's adopted guardian, tells Walter that she was Mrs. Catherick's neighbor in the village of Old Welmingham before the name was doubled: she says, "[Twenty-three years ago] they built a new town about two miles off, convenient to the river—and Old Welmingham, which was never much more than a village, got in time to be deserted" (476). Despite its newness, the industrial town of Welmingham remains lifeless. When he arrives there seeking Mrs. Catherick, Walter wonders if there is "any wilderness of sand in the deserts of Arabia [...] any prospect of desolation among the ruins of Palestine which can rival the repelling effect on the eye, and the depressing influence on the mind, of an English town, in the first stage of its existence, and in the transition state of its prosperity" (493). While the deserts of Palestine lack



the resources that support life, the growing cities of England lack something far more essential: the hope that supports life. The very traits which should make the city modern and efficient make it sterile, with its “clean desolation,” “neat ugliness,” and “prim torpor” (493). In its squares, “dead house-carcasses [waited] in vain for the vivifying human element to animate them with the breath of life,” and it is emblematic of a “civilized desolation” and “modern gloom” of which the deserts of the Middle East are incapable (493). Walter’s descriptions, it is worth noting, come through the eyes of a painter who may be generally displeased with urban aesthetics, but the fact that he sees a living community in London and not in Welmingham demonstrates that his complaint is not purely aesthetic.

As Mrs. Clements indicated, the village of Old Welmingham was largely abandoned when the new town was built, and scenes of the village, its church vestry, and events there shed light on Walter’s perception of social disorder. Some of the houses in the village had been “left to decay with time” while others were still inhabited, but only by the poorest class (506). The parish clerk who lets Walter into the vestry tells him several times, “We are all asleep here! *We* don’t march with the times” (508). The “remains of the village” are inert, and its vestry reflects that fact (506). The space which, in a lively village, would be in constant use for the registering of marriages and births is instead “a dim, moldy, melancholy old room,” lined with wooden cupboards, “worm-eaten and gaping with age.” Its doors are so seldom used that one of them no longer opens (508). Scattered on the floor lie plans for the restoration of the church and a collection of crumbled wooden carvings to be sent to London for repair. The clerk explains that six gentlemen planned to restore the church, but the project ended in a dispute; no one cares to help the people of this “lost corner” he says (510). Old Welmingham has lost all characteristics of life and growth, and those with the means to revive it cannot work together civilly to do so.

As is evident in the story about bickering church restorers, the decline of Old Welmingham is largely the result of a breakdown in interpersonal relationships. The rafters of dry wood, rolls of builders' drawings, and straw packed into boxes make the vestry a tinderbox. When Sir Percival steals into it to burn the register in which he decades previously forged an entry for his parents' marriage, the whole structure catches fire before he can escape. Walter is one of the first to arrive at the scene and attempt a rescue. His account combines narration of the fire's progress with his alarm at the villagers' lack of reaction. He writes, "I was horror-struck by a heavy thump against the door, from the inside. I heard the key worked violently in the lock—I heard a man's voice, behind the door, raised to a dreadful shrillness, screaming for help" (527). Walter is roused to action to try to save his nemesis. Meanwhile, "the scanty population of the village, haggard men and terrified women, clustered beyond in the churchyard" (528). The villagers—corpse-like amid the graves—are irresponsive. Only when Walter pledges five shillings apiece to all who will help him do they take action. He comments: "That ravenous second hunger of poverty—the hunger of money—roused them into tumult and activity in a moment" (529). Sir Percival's own hunger for wealth drove him to corrupt dealings which in turn sparked the fire that now consumes him. The reader can discern that the baronet's avarice and the villagers' dire want have replaced the motivation of fellow feeling and led to decay.

Marian's diary entries about Blackwater Park reveal that the home which Sir Percival gained through his forgery is no more animated than either New or Old Welmingham, prompting the reader to wonder if it is, more specifically, Sir Percival's actions which infect these locations. Stephen Bernstein describes "the oppressive claustral interdependence of the novel's numerous locations," among which he sees Blackwater Park as the most symbolically significant, but he does not address the fact that Sir Percival is link between these oppressive settings (301). Marian

writes of the Park, “The house is situated on a dead flat, and seems to be shut in—almost suffocated, to my north-country notions, by trees. I have seen nobody, but the man-servant who opened the door to me, and the housekeeper” (199). The ancestral home, which could provide a setting for any generic gothic story, does not suit Marian’s taste in the slightest, and her commentary subverts gothic tropes. Instead of being frightened by the “hideous family portraits” which add to the dismal aspect of the galleries, Marian wishes she could burn them all; when the housekeeper offers to give her a tour of the ancient portion of the house, she declines, begging to protect her petticoats and stockings from dust; and she observes that “good judges” of architecture who have admired the ruined old wing must not share her aversion to “damp, darkness, and rats” (204-205). The building itself is a “wonderful architectural jumble,” the “main body” of which is Elizabethan with a “half-ruined wing on the left” from the fourteenth century and a Georgian wing on the right (204). Because of the haphazard retention of historical styles, both the infrastructure and the aesthetics of the house are faulty. When she visits “the black and poisonous” lake which gives the estate its name, she notices that “[it] had been gradually wasted and dried up to less than a third of its former size. I saw its still, stagnant waters, a quarter of a mile away from me in the hollow.” Around the lake, frogs croak and rats dart about “like live shadows themselves” while a snake sits coiled on the wreck of an old boat (207). The lake has been wasted and drained like the Glyde fortune in Sir Percival’s hands, and now it can support no wholesome life. Because the reader only learns of the estate from Marian’s perspective, there is no record of the conditions of the home before Sir Percival acquired it, so it is unclear whether he as an individual or the landed gentry in general is to blame for its condition. Nevertheless, two of the most corrupt spaces in the novel, Old Welmingham and

Blackwater Park, are linked by his deceptions. Without explicit accusations like those in *Bleak House*, the reader is left to trace those connections to Sir Percival independently.

Just as the activities of Sir Percival link decaying locations, those activities link particular social problems: namely, the treatment of the mentally ill, women's property rights, and the efficacy of the law. The narrative subtly but effectively brings these problems to the reader's attention, ultimately stirring the reader's sense of justice but leaving the issues without resolution. When Walter learns that the young woman in white whom he helped on the road to London was an escapee from an asylum, he is confused and alarmed: though he found her "naturally flighty and unsettled, [...] the idea of absolute insanity which we all associate with the very name of an Asylum, had, I can honestly declare, never occurred to me, in connection with her" (28). He wonders if he has assisted "the victim of the most horrible of all false imprisonments to escape; or cast loose on the wide world of London an unfortunate creature, whose actions it was my duty, and *every man's duty, mercifully to control*" (28-29, my emphasis). Walter grapples with a distinction between flightiness—a characteristic well-represented by *Bleak House's* Miss Flite, who is not definitively mad—and the image of stereotypical insanity. In the case that Anne is insane, Walter expresses a common nineteenth-century belief that it is a matter of public concern to place her under the "merciful control" of a mental institution as soon as possible. Although he is reluctant to call Anne insane, he is still troubled by her behavior, leading him to ask Marian if she knows of the girl's purported connection to the late Mrs. Fairlie. In one of Mrs. Fairlie's letters, they find her account of Anne's condition as a child: "The poor little thing's intellect is not developed as it ought to be at her age," she writes; a doctor concluded "she will grow out of it," but it is crucial that extra care be taken in her upbringing (58). Only Sir Percival and Mrs. Catherick believe that Anne's

“mental affliction” makes it “a matter of necessity to place her under proper medical care.” They place her “in a trustworthy private Asylum” because Mrs. Catherick “felt the prejudice common to persons occupying her respectable station, against allowing her child to be admitted, as a pauper, into a public Asylum” (132).

The uncertainty of Anne’s diagnosis draws further attention to the treatment of the mentally ill. From the observations of the other characters who knew her, Anne’s condition did not make her a threat to herself or others, and it seemed that she would have only required an attentive caregiver, like Mrs. Clements, to keep her safe and well. She does not demonstrate the “absolute insanity” which Walter describes. By all accounts, it seems that she is a victim of false imprisonment at the hands of Sir Percival, who feared she knew and would reveal the secret of his illegitimacy. Although Walter acknowledges that Anne has been wronged, he still conceives of Laura as the primary victim. He states that “the fatal resemblance between the two daughters of one father” gave rise to “the conspiracy of which Anne had been the innocent instrument and Laura the innocent victim” (569). After Anne is finally buried with Mrs. Fairlie as she always wanted to be, Walter imagines her as a ghost looming over the lives of the other protagonists:

Through what mortal crime and horror, through what darkest windings of the way down to Death, the lost creature had wandered in God’s leading to the last home that, living, she never hoped to reach. In that sacred rest, I leave her—in that dread companionship, let her remain undisturbed. So the ghostly figure which has haunted these pages as it haunted my life, goes down into the impenetrable Gloom. (569)

The mentally ill, illegitimate daughter displaces the legitimate one in the grave, and the sane legitimate one replaces her sister in the asylum. Anne’s trials end in the grave, but Laura bears the psychological taint of her time in the asylum even at the close of the novel. Tara Macdonald states that despite the narrative’s focus on the restoration of Laura’s identity rather than Anne’s fate, “[the novel] reveals how the social and psychological identities of these two women are

both so fragile that they merge strangely into one being” (133). Walter is more sensitive to Laura’s suffering because of his affection for her, but the reader understands that the sisters are inseparable in their victimization. Although Walter is content to let the curtain fall on Anne’s tale and imagine it has been suitably resolved, the reader may not believe that atonement has been accomplished.

As mentioned in the introduction, Anne’s story played upon public fears surrounding several renowned cases of false imprisonment, but it is Laura’s marriage to Sir Percival which, in the words of her lawyer, despite its “peculiar complications,” is a case “most unhappily, common” and indicative of the “sad state of society” (119). Laura’s engagement, Marian tells Walter, “is an engagement of honor, not of love.” She is “in the position of hundreds of other women, who marry men without being greatly attracted to them or greatly repelled by them, and learn to love them (when they don’t learn to hate!) after marriage, instead of before” (72). Marian becomes a mouthpiece for indignation against the circumstances of women and married women in particular. Men, she says, “are the enemies of our innocence and our peace—they drag us away from our parents’ love and our sisters’ friendship—they take us body and soul to themselves, and fasten our helpless lives to theirs as they chain up a dog to his kennel” (183). Marian’s commentary responds to the doctrine of coverture and the absorption of a married woman’s autonomy into her husband’s legal identity, reducing the woman’s rights to those of “a dog” chained up to its kennel. Laura is an heiress in her own right, but upon marrying Sir Percival her property passes entirely into his hands.

In his narrative, the Fairlie family’s lawyer Mr. Gilmore outlines the conditions of Laura’s inheritance and her marriage settlement. Critics, such as a writer for the *Saturday Review* in August of 1860, questioned Collins’ knowledge of property law because Gilmore’s

descriptions imply that Laura has more control over her property after marriage than a woman normally would (cited in Sutherland 675). The lawyer explains, Miss Fairlie's "expectations" were "of a two-fold kind; comprising her possible inheritance of real property, or land, when her uncle died, and her absolute inheritance of personal property, or money, when she came of age" (149). Essentially, her inheritance is comprised of two elements, land and money; it seems that her father's will had established an "absolute" sum of twenty thousand pounds which is to be hers when she comes of age. Sir Percival rejects his initial marriage settlement because it states that if he should survive his wife her fortune of twenty thousand pounds will be distributed among her relatives and friends, including Marian. He demands that the fortune be secured entirely for his use if Laura dies before him and leaves no heir. Even after he carries his point and bullies Mr. Gilmore into drafting an altered settlement, portions of Laura's inheritance remain out of his reach: shortly after they return from their wedding tour, he tries to trap his wife into signing a loan which would transfer her fortune to him in advance of her death, but she refuses to do so (273). Since the Married Women's Property Act would not be enacted until two decades later, contemporary critics were correct in saying it would have been nearly impossible for any sum of Lady Glyde's fortune to be kept from her husband. In a way, this overly optimistic representation of Laura's financial situation furthers the novel's critique: if in reality a married woman cannot retain control of any portion of her property, are not women in the real world even more in danger of being exploited for their inheritance than this fictional woman?

In the narrative, the failures of property law are worsened by limited access to the courts and avenues of justice. The novel opens with an explicit indictment of the English legal system: Walter writes,

If the machinery of the Law could be depended on to fathom every case of suspicion, and to conduct every process of inquiry, with moderate assistance only from the lubricating influences of oil of gold, the events which fill these pages might have claimed their share of the public attention in a Court of Justice. (5)

As in *Bleak House*, the court system is defective and corrupt: “Equity, bleared Argus with a fathomless pocket for every eye” again fails “to fathom every case of suspicion,” and innumerable offenses sink into oblivion (*BH* 391-392, *TWIW* 5). Walter presents the Law as a faulty mechanism which is sure to freeze up unless lubricated with bribery. After Sir Percival’s scheme deprives Laura of her inheritance, she and her friends have no funds to hire legal advisors, let alone the free-flowing “oil of gold” for bribes. If they did bring evidence against Sir Percival and Count Fosco, those two gentlemen would certainly have more resources at their disposal to protect themselves. Marian laments, “Even if we had the means of paying all the law expenses, even if we succeeded in the end, the delays would be unendurable; the perpetual suspense, after what we have suffered already, would be heart-breaking” (574). Marian, Walter, and Laura would almost certainly have suffered the fate of Dickens’ worn-out watchers of Chancery and wasted away in the expectation of Judgement Day if they tried to act within the channels of the law, but instead Laura’s friends take the law into their own hands. Walter eventually celebrates his independence from the bureaucratic legal process and the limitations of police detection, noting that “the poverty which had denied us all hope of assistance, had been the indirect means of our success [...] The Law could never have obtained me my interview with Mrs. Catherick. The Law would never have made Pesca the means of forcing a confession from the Count” (636). The narrative posits that when the law proves insufficient to answer abuses, the individual’s resolve can discover truth and secure any reparation that is possible. This proposition invites the reader to examine the mechanisms of the law from his or her individual perspective and make a judgement.



The social problems and scenes of decay discussed above are all tied to Sir Percival and the Count's plot against Laura and Anne. While other urban and rural locations like London and Limmeridge House are free from disease and taint, the sites of Sir Percival's conspiracies have been corrupted. The doubled communities of Welmingham have been sapped of life by hunger for money—perhaps reflecting the doubling of human victims in Laura and Anne. Meanwhile, Blackwater Park and its lake show signs of being poisoned. Sir Percival's exploitation of injustices against women and the mentally ill functions to expose those injustices in their own right; meanwhile, his partner Count Fosco's commentary gives the narrative bearing on a societal scale. Fosco is an infinitely more imposing villain than Sir Percival. His massive intellect, eccentric personality, and physical size make him truly larger than life; he is the mastermind of the scheme against Laura and Anne. He is eventually assassinated by members of his own secret international brotherhood of anarchists. With his expertise in intrigue and crime, he offers startling insight: "English society, Miss Halcombe, is as often the accomplice, as it is the enemy of crime" (238). The police "machinery" society has set up on the premise that "crimes cause their own detection" is ineffective, and he concludes "that there are foolish criminals who are discovered, and wise criminals who escape" (236). The most dangerous, most successful crimes, therefore, are the ones which are never discovered. The fault, in his assessment, is not in individuals but in institutions that are too complacent and too rigid to respond to the intelligence of criminals who can seize upon unjust legal loopholes and outcast social groups to promote their own interests. According to the Count, England has created an environment favorable to crime because a crafty man can make crime pay. The reader presumably agrees that a society which inadvertently encourages crime and injustice is disordered and bound to disintegrate if not

reformed; however, the evidence pointing to such a conclusion about societal guilt is nebulous and requires attentive reading to uncover.

### *Lady Audley's Secret*

In the world of *Lady Audley's Secret*, social decay is present in both urban and rural settings, but it is most pronounced in Audley Court and other locations associated with Lady Audley. The majority of scenes taking place in London are situated near Robert Audley's chambers in Fig Tree Court off Fleet Street. The bachelor's retreat is envisioned as a haven from the cares of the world: There, "sun-light [sparkles] upon the fountain of the Temple Gardens," and Robert is always sure to find his canaries singing, geraniums flourishing, and his apartment "in the same prim order" (124). This idyllic space could not be more different from the foggy, apocalyptic vision of the City in *Bleak House*. More typical imagery of urban filth is applied to Shoreditch in the East End of London, where Robert goes in search of the schoolmistress whom Lucy Graham, who would be Lady Audley, claimed as a reference. In that neighborhood, "The roads were sticky with damp clay, which clogged the wheels of the cab and buried the fetlocks of the horse," and the place has "that awful aspect of incompleteness and discomfort which pervades a new and unfinished neighborhood" (247). The only signs of life are "three empty-looking, pretentious shops," including a bakery exhibiting "some specimens of petrified sponge-cake in glass bottles" (248). Outside of the capital, there are similar scenes of new but lifeless urban and suburban space. Robert travels to Southampton to see Mr. Maldon, Lady Audley's father, who lives in "one of those dreary thoroughfares which speculative builders love to raise upon some miserable fragment of waste ground hanging to the skirts of a prosperous town" (187). The speculative builder of this neighborhood apparently speculated beyond his means and "hung [sic] himself behind the parlor door of an adjacent tavern while the carcasses were yet

unfinished”; likewise, “the man who bought the brick and mortar skeletons had gone through the Bankruptcy Court.” The reader is told, “Ill-luck and insolvency clung to the wretched habitations” (187). As with Welmingham in *The Woman in White*, new urban growth lacks vitality as if bereft of life before fully formed. In such places, there is infrastructure, but no human community.

In a survey of Audley Court after the marriage of Sir Michael to Lucy Graham, it becomes clear that England’s rural infrastructure in the world of the novel is no more wholesome than that of its cities. Instead, the fine estate bears a deadly taint. The lawn is “dotted with groups of rhododendrons, which grew in more perfection here than anywhere else in the country,” and “strangling ivy” covers the house (43-44). Nature itself seems to have turned deadly, as poisonous rhododendrons thrive and the ivy, which should represent fidelity and wedded love, strangles the household.<sup>4</sup> On the grounds, there lies the disused well into which Lady Audley later pushes George Talboys. In the light of the sunset, the well with its “dank weeds and the rusty iron wheel and broken woodwork” seems to be “flecked with blood,” tainted by violence even before the altercation occurs (64). The house itself is “a noble place; inside as well as out” whose “irregular and rambling” structure could only have been planned by Time “who, adding a room one year, and knocking down a room another year [...] had run up such a mansion as was not elsewhere to be met with throughout the county of Essex” (45). Like Bleak House and Blackwater Park, the Court’s irregularity embodies the problems of retaining outmoded social structures. At times, it is so quiet it is “almost oppressive,” and the “repose” of the place makes one feel “as if a corpse must be lying somewhere within that grey and ivy-covered pile of

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<sup>4</sup> According to Kate Greenaway’s late nineteenth-century guidebook *Language of Flowers*, ivy bore the meaning of “Fidelity. Marriage” and rhododendron bore that of “Danger. Beware” (23, 36). Rhododendron was known to be poisonous even in ancient times: the leaves, flowers, and nectar of some varieties contain Grayanotoxin, as documented in a Food and Drug Administration report (“Natural Toxins” 249-252).

building” (64). Audley Court is calm, yet the evidence of violence and poison glint from behind its antique charm. Aeron Haynie remarks of these passages, “the novel deconstructs the image of the pastoral, showing it to be stagnant and yet pregnant with violence.” In her entrance into the Audley family and estate, Lady Audley becomes “the catalyst for the destruction of Audley Court” (Haynie 72). The reader perceives that the estate and the rural aristocratic tradition it represents have been corrupt, but more evidence is required to conclude that Lady Audley is the source, as Haynie states, of its decline.

The architectural and metaphorical heart of the house is Lady Audley’s apartment which is in a continual state of disarray. In her dressing-room, there are heaps of “dresses flung about a sofa” and the “glittering toilette apparatus lay about on the marble dressing-table” (69, 105). “The rich odors of perfumes in bottles whose gold stoppers had not been replaced” render the atmosphere “oppressive,” and hothouse flowers sit “withering” from neglect on a table (105). Her adjoining boudoir contains “every evidence of womanly refinement” with sheets of music and works of art “scattered” everywhere (307-308). It is “the shrine of her loveliness,” but the precious relics it holds breathe courtly excess rather than saintliness, relics including cabinets bearing the cipher of Marie Antoinette and a miniature of Jeanne Marie du Barry, another victim of the guillotine (308-309). The portrait of Lady Audley which betrays her real identity to George has her dressing-room as its background, and in it she presides as “a beautiful fiend” (107). Much like the world of Fashion in *Bleak House*, she sits in her apartments luxuriating in her vanities and enclosed from the toils of the wider world she once knew. The narrator attributes the beautiful fiend’s wickedness to her rich surroundings:

Did she remember the day in which that fairy dower of beauty had first taught her to be selfish and cruel, indifferent to the joys and sorrows of others, cold-hearted and

capricious, greedy of admiration, exacting and tyrannical, with that petty woman's tyranny which is the worst of despotisms? (310)

Enthroned in her "fairy dower," Lady Audley exercises dominion over Sir Michael and his noble household. The greed for extravagance feeds her ruthless campaign against George, Robert, and anyone who threatens to dethrone her. From the heart of the house, her "tyranny" spreads like fever.

Lady Audley is not the only low-born character to have assumed dominion over a house; Luke and Phoebe Marks gain the Castle Inn from blackmailing Lady Audley. Their surname could have implications of an overturned class structure in its echo of Karl Marx, while the name of their public-house figures Luke the publican as a king. He and Lady Audley, therefore, are usurpers of class identity, but both are unfit to rule. Luke is a violent alcoholic, "ten times more brutal in his drunkenness, when the few restraints which held his ignorant, everyday brutality in check were flung aside" (331). Phoebe complains "I can't get him to be careful or steady. He's not sober; and when he's drinking [...] it isn't likely that his head can be very clear for accounts" (315). His carelessness endangers the Castle. The structure is "all tumble-down wood-work, and rotten rafters," and no company will insure the building for fear it would "blaze away like so much tinder" (317). Luke frequently leaves candles unattended, and Phoebe reports that in the six months they have kept the Castle, he has started three small fires (317). Lady Audley and Luke are both associated with incendiarism: while he is heedless of his candle, she sits in her dressing-room looking into "the red chasms in the burning coals," staring "upon the yawning gulf of lurid crimson" (309). When Phoebe informs her that Robert Audley is staying at the inn and trying to extract her secret from the drunken publican, Lady Audley exploits the expectation that Luke would be the one to set his Castle up in a blaze. She imagines the inn "reduced to a roofless chaos of lath and plaster, vomiting flames from its black mouth and spitting sparks of

fire upward towards the cold night sky” (318). The inn takes on a monstrous body, “vomiting flames” as it consumes her enemies and collapsing into anarchist chaos without the structure of a roof to rule over it. Keeping her plans hidden from Phoebe, she accompanies her back to the inn and leaves a burning candle against a curtain in an empty room before retreating back to Audley Court. With a spark, the Castle goes up in a blaze which parallels the class-charged episodes of Krook’s spontaneous combustion and Sir Percival’s death.

Infrastructures of social disorder in Braddon’s novel are tied to the career of Lady Audley, just as the social decay of *The Woman in White* was tied to Sir Percival’s activities. Strands of commentary on injustices which drive Lady Audley and other characters to desperate measures reveal the sources of the corruption of her morals and her surroundings. The desire to escape poverty is the apparent motive which pushes Helen Maldon along her path of abandonment, fraud, and bigamy until she secures her position as Lady Audley. She warns Sir Michael before she accepts his proposal:

Remember what my life has been; only remember that. From my babyhood I have never seen anything but poverty. My father was a gentleman; clever, accomplished, generous, handsome—but poor [...] Do not ask too much of me, then. I cannot be disinterested; I cannot be blind to the advantages of such an alliance. (52)

Her father may have been a gentleman in the eyes of his daughter, but George claims, “He was a drunken old hypocrite, and he was ready to sell [Helen] to the highest bidder” (59). She later admits to Robert and Sir Michael that she was always aware of the limited resources available to her to escape from the fate of her birth, confessing, “I had learnt that which in some indefinite manner or other every school-girl learns sooner or later—I learned that my ultimate fate in life depended upon my marriage” (359). After she was abandoned by George, she found what work she could, eventually resorting to the “dull slavery” of being a governess to earn her living under the name of Lucy Graham (361). Sir Michael’s proposal, therefore, offers her an escape from her

weariness and insecurity. He first begs her not to marry him for anything besides love, but having heard her confess the undeniable material advantages of the match, he compromises and makes a “bargain” with her which will promote his happiness and her comfort (53). This bargain, however, has its consequences; he walks away feeling “as if he had carried a corpse in his bosom. He carried the corpse of that hope which had died at the sound of Lucy’s words” (53).

The figure of Phoebe Marks also contributes to the novel’s commentary on women’s social status: she, like Helen Maldon, has limited opportunities for social mobility because of her class and gender and risks dangerous consequences in order to improve her lot. Before she became Lady Audley’s maid, Phoebe was a nursemaid in the household where Lucy Graham served as governess. Though she is “a simple country girl,” she has something of “the grace and carriage of a gentlewoman” (65). In her promotion to lady’s maid, she “found her wages trebled and her work light” and was “the object of envy amongst her particular friends as my lady herself in higher circles” (65). Despite this improvement, Phoebe is still subject to the control of her violent cousin Luke, her childhood sweetheart. She feels that she has no choice but to keep her promise to marry him or else face his murderous wrath. Her wedding day is drearier than any funeral, and she becomes a specter under her husband’s command: “In the obscure light of the foggy November morning, a superstitious stranger might have mistaken the bride for the ghost of some other bride, dead, and buried in the vaults below the church” (143). Although her name is unchanged because she already shared it with Luke, her independent life is subsumed into that of her abusive husband. They begin their life together in the Castle Inn, which, as mentioned above, they obtained through blackmail. To obtain the funds for the public-house, Phoebe exploits evidence of her mistress’ former life which she finds in her dressing table—“a baby’s little worsted shoe rolled up in a piece of paper, and a tiny lock of pale and silky yellow hair” (70).

Thus, Luke becomes the master of the Castle, and she leaves service to become its mistress: they obtain a higher and more independent social position, but their success is short-lived.

Phoebe and Helen resort to disastrous marriages and criminal activity because of their limited opportunities for social mobility and the difficulties of maintaining themselves independently. Their parallel stories become an extreme illustration of the consequences of restrictions on women's social roles, a problem discussed within the broad debates of the Woman Question. Additionally, several details within the novel tie it directly to the questions of marriage law and divorce addressed in the mid-nineteenth century. For example, Braddon's selection of the names Helen Maldon and Lucy Graham divides the name Helen Graham, an alias used by Helen Huntingdon in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), a novel which also engages with matters of marriage law and divorce. In each novel, a woman named Helen takes a false name and moves into a distant neighborhood seeking to escape from a troubled marriage and abusive home. Helen Talboys goes so far as to fake her death to cover up her past identity, and the supposed date of her death gives another clue directing the reader's awareness towards marriage law. The Matrimonial Causes Act was passed by Parliament on August 28<sup>th</sup>, 1857; Helen Talboys is reported to have died August 24<sup>th</sup>, 1857 (81). The Act did not come into effect until January of 1858, and even then the Talboys would not have had the resources or sufficient cause under the legislation to gain a divorce; however, the proximity of Helen's death to the passage of the Act certainly suggests a connection between her course of desperate actions and the difficulties of obtaining a legal divorce.

As previously mentioned, the secret alluded to in the novel's title is not Lady Audley's bigamy, attempted murder, or any of her sensational crimes but, rather, her insanity. As in *The Woman in White*, this circumstance draws attention to injustices against the mentally ill. The



narrative explores the internalized stigma of mental illness which haunts Lady Audley. The knowledge of her mother's disorder had a profound effect on her imagination in childhood, and she recalls, "I brooded horribly upon the thought of my mother's madness. It haunted me by day and night. I was always picturing to myself this madwoman pacing up and down some prison cell" (357). Like Walter Hartwright, she has a stereotypical view of violent, animalistic insanity. When she finally sees her mother in the asylum where she has been kept, she is shocked to find that she is "a golden-haired, blue-eyed, girlish creature, who seemed as frivolous as a butterfly" (358). The unexpected reality of her mother's condition makes it impossible for Helen to distinguish between sanity and insanity: if her mother can be charming and beautiful while being insane, Helen can no longer cling to the stereotypical image she once held. She begins to realize that disorder is not always externally visible. The hereditary nature of her mother's condition and the possibility of hidden madness lead her to believe that she is doomed to suffer the same fate. She laments, "The only inheritance I had to expect from my mother was—insanity!" (359). However, her "hereditary taint" saves her from the shame of a criminal trial when Robert appeals to a physician "to prove that the lady is mad, and therefore irresponsible for her actions" (363). The physician is reluctant to deem her mad, but he acknowledges that the taint of madness is in her: something about her is deeply disordered. Despite her crimes and selfishness, Lady Audley commands some of the reader's compassion because of her terror of inborn mental illness and her limited means of providing for herself. If her actions cannot be wholly excused, they can be clearly accounted for by her circumstances.

The presentation of the *maison de sant * where Robert and his uncle send Lady Audley instead of turning her over to the state authorities suggests that for the mentally ill death-like exile could be a preferable alternative to imprisonment on English soil. The place is described in

a chapter aptly titled “Buried Alive”: “The remote Belgian city was a forgotten, old world place, and bore the dreary evidence of decay upon every façade in the narrow streets, on every dilapidated roof, and feeble piles of chimneys” (389). The asylum itself is characterized by “a dismal and cellar-like darkness” with “a saloon furnished with gloomy velvet draperies, and with a certain funereal splendor which is not peculiarly conducive to the elevation of the spirits” (393). The infrastructure of the city and the interior of the asylum clearly show social death and decay, but it is significant that the place was in this state long before Lady Audley’s arrival. While Sir Percival’s activities seemed to be the contaminant in locations of social decay, Lady Audley’s activity is not the primary cause of decay in the world of the novel if this town was corrupt before her arrival. At Audley Court, her “petty woman’s tyranny which is the worst of despotisms” injured and disorganized the domestic society over which she presided, but there are deranging forces external to her own assumptions of power (310). Instead of the actions of the individual revealing the ease with which social ills can be exploited for gain, as in *The Woman in White*, or the pervasive influence of dysfunctional institutions strangling the whole society, as in *Bleak House*, the world of *Lady Audley’s Secret* shows how social problems drive an individual to rash actions and simultaneously punish her for those actions. The injustices she faces because of her class, gender, and predisposition to mental illness are evidence in themselves of societal deformities, and her attempts to overcome those problems with her crimes only add to the existing disorder.

## **Conclusion**

In the course of their sensational investigations, *Bleak House*, *The Woman in White*, and *Lady Audley’s Secret* each name different injustices as the destroyers of society, and each case is based upon different narrative clues. The events and details of *Bleak House* raise the most

explicit evidence and blame the problems of legal and political corruption and unsanitary conditions; however, the historical overview of reforms in those areas revealed that the movements, with the exception of sanitary reform, predated Dickens' novel. In this regard, it could not have played a major role in agitating for the legal reform it seems to demand, but it could have contributed to discourse on public sanitation. Furthermore, the awkward attempt at a conventional marriage plot ending in Esther's narrative unsettles the earlier mystery plot and seems to gloss over the continued threat posed by the specified problems. Perhaps with an ending which resists neat closure, one like either of the two separate endings Dickens wrote for *Great Expectations* (1861) which does not try to please the reader, the call for reform would have been stronger. Regardless, the investigative work of the narrative as a whole is clear and decisive.

*The Woman in White* ties issues of the care for the mentally ill, women's property rights, and dysfunctional legal processes to the crimes at the center of its mystery plot through the imagery of decay in the wake of Sir Percival. The guilt for those crimes, instead of falling directly on the heads of Sir Percival and Count Fosco, is cast on society which is envisioned as self-destructive or at least dangerously negligent. Although its narrative also attempts to resolve in the blissful ending of a marriage plot, the reader's knowledge of Anne's miserable and lonely death, Laura's incomplete recovery, and the problems of Walter's somehow too convenient elevation of rank leave an aftertaste of suspicion. Presented as a court case missing its final verdict, the novel successfully communicates its accusations to the reader if he or she approaches the text attentively.

Finally, *Lady Audley's Secret* obliquely casts blame for social disintegration on the circumstances of women and the mentally ill. It is difficult to draw a direct connection between the civil decay evident in the world of the novel and the course of Lady Audley's activity, but the

novel does posit that existing social abuses provoked her desperate crimes. The reader sees how the inheritance of injustice, like the inheritance of madness, could seem inescapable. Reform of the issues which agitated Lady Audley and upset the existence of the Audley and Talboys families is obviously desirable, but the novel does not offer hope that it is fully possible. As in any investigation of human error, there always seems to be an earlier source of ill to blame, like the gothic emergence of some awful fault from the past, the sins of the father. These sensational investigations do not suggest that reparation is ever fully possible for the characters and their world. The reader, then, turns from the sensational to the real and wonders what can be done to enliven a disintegrating society, desiring to, in some small way, restore the justice which supports life.

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