

5-2019

Feeling Clumsy, Feeling Alien: Gender and Affect in Victorian Sensation Fiction

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Feeling Clumsy, Feeling Alien: Gender and Affect in Victorian Sensation Fiction

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in English

by

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May 2019
University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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Abstract

“Feeling Clumsy, Feeling Alien: Gender and Affect in Victorian Sensation Fiction” explores the interactions between the shock of sensation fiction and the affective potential of the genre using Sara Ahmed’s definition of the killjoy and the affect alien. Obviously, there are alternatives to shooting a man or beating a man to death. However, I argue that the sensation genre, as explained in its name, is potentially useful when thinking about affective ties in the Victorian period. The first chapter, “Tracing Sensations: Finding and Following the Killjoy” explores the affective footwork that readers of sensation fiction are asked to perform in their sympathetic process with the female villains and fallen heroines. Affective tools employed by sensational fiction create an understanding between the reader and the villains that occupied most of sensation fiction. The second chapter, “The Fallen Heroine: Feeling Injustice” discusses a sensational villain that perhaps more easily encourages sympathy: Ellen Wood’s Lady Isabel Vane turned Lady Carlyle in *East Lynne*. Chapter three, “The Villain: Feeling for the Enemy,” questions the easily defined femme fatale category of sensation novels and argues that Lady Audley’s actions in Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* can be attributed to her role as someone that affects the wrong way. Readers cannot entirely sympathize with Lady Audley or Isabel Vane, but they can recognize themselves within the frustrations and extenuating circumstances that create an environment in which the character feels the only course of action is seduction or murder. The affective possibility of Lady Audley and Isabel Vane relies on the proximity of the reader to the character’s situations. To navigate affect is to navigate affective orientation and proximity, and sensation fiction provides the opportunity for disorientation and inappropriate proximity.

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to my thesis director, Dr. Dempsey, for all of his help through the process of writing and planning.

Also, much gratitude towards my fellow writing partners for their comradery during this caffeine-fueled process and to my partner for his support.

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Introduction

“Is there a fatality that follow men in the dark? And is it following us in that woman’s footsteps?” (Armdale 105)

In the often-cited review of sensation fiction, H.L Mansel associated the appeal of sensation fiction with shocks to the nervous system: “Written to meet an ephemeral demand, aspiring only to an ephemeral existence, it is natural that they should have recourse to rapid and ephemeral methods of awakening the interests of their readers... rather than as the solid food, because the effect is more immediately perceptible” (Mansel 485). The transitory nature that Mansel assigns to both sensation fiction and the affects associated with sensation fiction reveal the contemporary nineteenth-century notion of what value the genre held. Sensation fiction, while entertaining, is something of a sugar high because the immediacy associated with sensation fiction served as both a dismissal of the genre and a source of potential concern.

Since authors of sensation fiction specifically wrote for young women, nineteenth-century critics considered sensation fiction to be dangerous because of its scandalous topics and inconsequential because of its supposed literary faults. The literature of the nineteenth-century “sensational sixties” focused on middle to upper-class Victorian households.¹ Sensation fiction warned readers of sinister events occurring not just in isolated castles in the country or in the slums of London, but in the homes and under the noses of the respectable Victorian classes. Sensational villains were often seemingly “innocent” and beautiful young women capable of defrauding class mobility. Unlike a Dickensian portrayal of villains as aesthetically reflective of their sinful natures, sensationalism thrived on taking advantage of preconceived notions of

¹ Sensation fiction carried through to the 1880s and 1890s. However, it enjoyed its major influx during the sensational sixties period.

morality and beauty. Villains were no longer immediately recognizable by their appearance; instead, the reader had to connect specific affects to the characters.

The definition of sensation fiction is complicated. Perhaps Richard Nemesvari says it best, “Sensation fiction is constructed not as a unified form, but as an alterity against which opposed literary/cultural expectations may be recognized” (“Judged by a Purely Literary Standard” 18). In this project, I am using Alberto Gabriele’s four distinct characteristics of sensation fiction as a model: “1. A specific location with the description of a wealthy residence....2. A quiet bourgeois interior with scenes of domestic life....3. A visitor who *breaks* into the secluded peace of the family, *posing*, with the information he carries, a major *threat* to the reputation and economic stability of the family....4. A *suspenseful* ending that closes the chapter” (Gabriele 140, emphasis mine). In the above quote, I have emphasized language in which sensation is indicative of either a disruption or a delay because the temporality of sensation fiction is a key component to the genre. I include a text like *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) under the genre whereas I consider a novel like Rhoda Broughton’s *Cometh Up as a Flower* (1867) a bildungsroman with sensational and sexual content—not as a part of the distinct sensation fiction genre.² Sensation fiction’s work was two-fold; the first, make sure everyone reading the text could not wait to read the ending, and the second, make sure that the plot and character actions surprised them.

² One could argue that the “sensational bildungsroman” is simply a subgenre of a larger sensation fiction genre. While this may be a beneficial distinction to make at some point, for the sake of clarity I am using sensation fiction as Gabriele uses it. For a discussion of *Cometh Up as a Flower* as a sensation novel, see Faber, Lindsey. “One Sister’s Surrender: Rivalry and Resistance in Rhoda Broughton’s *Cometh up as a Flower*. *Victorian Sensations: Essays on a Scandalous Genre*, edited by Kimberley Harrison and Richard Fantina. The Ohio University Press, 2006, pp. 149-159.

Even though sensation fiction was incredibly popular during the nineteenth-century, it remained relatively unstudied—at least in terms of gender—until the 1980s and 1990s when feminists were eager to establish a female literary tradition. Gender critics sought to validate the sensational genre through literary merit or the potential subversiveness of the female authors. Often viewed and categorized as a sub-genre of melodrama or romanticism, arguing that sensation fiction was an amalgamation of other genres is problematic. While it built on and responded to previous genres, sensationalism reflected a very specific and simultaneously lasting cultural moment. By specific, I do not mean a fleeting moment—sensation fiction carried into the 1890s and many fin de siècle texts can be connected to sensational tropes—instead, I mean the result of nineteenth-century Victorian regulations and contradictions of gender, sexuality, power, and most importantly for this project, affect and feeling. Most sensational scholars agree that the genre attempted to complicate the distinction between performance and identity, which is poignant when considering the connection between certain affects and particular genders. If sensational women were asked to perform certain affects, like those of happiness and pleasure, then they frequently refused to perform those affects or alternatively, faked them. Sensation scholarship is increasingly being used to point out alternative responses to strict Victorian notions of gender, class, and nationality.³

³ For a discussion on sensation fiction and race, see Young-Zook, Monica M. “Wilkie Collins’s Gwilt-y Conscious: Gender and Colonialism in *Armdale*.” *Victorian Sensations: Essays on a Scandalous Genre*, edited by Kimberley Harrison and Richard Fantina. The Ohio University Press, 2006, pp. 234-245.

For gender and sensation fiction, see Mangham, Andrew. *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction: Crime, Medicine and Victorian Popular Culture*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Also see, Hughes, Winnifred. *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860s*. Princeton University Press, 1980.

In 1863, another reviewer of sensation fiction wrote that it succeeds by “drugging thought and reason, and stimulating the attention through the more animal instincts... and especially by tampering with things evil, and infringing more or less on the confines of the wrong” (Anonymous, “Our Female Sensation Novelists” 210). The animal instincts, like desire and rage, theoretically oppose reason. The mind and its faculties are supposedly connected to the calm and the rational. The immorality of sensation fiction extends beyond the content itself to the appeal to the reader’s “animal instincts.” Critics feared readers succumbing to or sympathizing with the seductive “evil” of the novel and the characters presented in them. To be fair, there are nineteenth-century reviews that enjoyed sensation fiction; however, these nineteenth-century critics did not see sensation fiction as thought-provoking. Rather, their enjoyment in reading sensation fiction came from the indulgence of reading its scandal.

Because of its quick publication rate and high demand, sensation fiction became popular and reliant on affect—specifically shock. Sensation fiction, typically published in periodicals throughout the year, made its money by combining suspenseful cliff-hangers with usually violent tropes. Someone is either killed, maimed, abandoned, put into an insane asylum, or in charge of finding the perpetrator of those crimes. The shock associated with the genre results from its portrayal of what Sara Ahmed calls an affect alien, or more specifically, a killjoy. Ahmed describes the killjoy as connected to happiness: “The affect alien is thus often a killjoy: the one who gets in the way of the happiness of others or, more simply, the one gets in the way. I have found in the rather animated figure of the killjoy, or to be more specific, the feminist killjoy has... a certain kind of political potential and energy” (*Cultural Politics* 224).⁴ To get in the way

⁴ I do feel it is necessary to clarify that while Ahmed is using killjoy specifically in the feminist killjoy sense, I am not necessarily arguing that sensational villains are feminist killjoys. I am

of someone else's happiness or even of your own happiness is to affect in an unexpected and queer way. How sensational characters respond to or even experience affect is contradictory to what Ahmed calls the general will, or in this case, the patriarchal restraints and expectations of the Victorian period. For instance, instead of trusting her husband, which will supposedly make her happy, Isabel Vane runs away in the canonical sensation text, *East Lynne* (1861).

The general will is what has been deemed the right kind of will, as Ahmed argues, and deviation from it, like in the case of the killjoy, is to “‘snap the bond’ ... understood as snapping the affective tie of the family as well as the bond reproduction, understood as fate, or even fatality” (*Willful Subjects* 113). When a character “snaps those bonds,” we are shocked. The feeling of shock caused by sensation fiction makes the bonds of affective ties to society more obvious. When I, as a reader, feel both disgust and sympathy for someone that does a bad thing, I am forced to ask myself how both of those affects can function in one setting. Readers can indirectly identify with sensational killjoys and feel sympathy for those characters because they recognize something similar in themselves. And so, shock combined with sympathy has the potential to snap those affective bonds or at least make them more visible. As Ahmed argues, “Feminist and queer scholars have shown us that emotions ‘matter’ for politics; emotions show us how power shapes the very surface of bodies as well worlds. So in a way, we do ‘feel our way’” (*Cultural Politics* 12).

Emotions mattered for Victorian readers and even contemporary ones because the mid-nineteenth-century experienced numerous and disruptive social and cultural changes like the Reform Acts and the railway boom. Victorians were being asked to reshape the world around

arguing that they are killjoys and affect aliens. They share characteristics with the feminist killjoy and the willful subject.

them and figure out how the *I* should function within the *we*. Sensation fiction allowed readers to feel their way through shock and sympathy to produce possible action; for example, sensation fiction can and should be connected to the political action of the New Woman movement.⁵ The sensational figure causes the reader to *stumble*—and in this stumbling, readers must notice the grounds they are walking on.

The dangerous and controversial thing with sensation fiction was, and is, that the immorality of the characters was somehow transferable to the reader, much like David Hume's notion of sentiments as contagion.⁶ If affects act like contagions, one could catch the happiness or shame of another—like a disease. Anna Gibbs argues, “Bodies can catch feelings as easily as catch fire: affect leaps from one body to another, evoking tenderness, inciting shame, igniting rage, exciting fear—in short, communicable affect can inflame nerves and muscles in a conflagration of every conceivable kind of passion” (Gibbs). Young women reading the affects of others, like anger and rage, could catch those feelings from the sensational villain. Moralists could not decide whether sensation fiction encouraged bad affect or drew out the bad affect latent within young women. While our typical understanding of Victorian femininity is a version of Coventry Patmore's angel in the house, Andrew Mangham argues in *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction: Crime, Medicine and Victorian Popular Culture* that Victorian society believed there were “explosive materials” inside women, which sensation fiction exploited. Nineteenth-century critics feared the permeability between text and life and the possibility of the female reader acknowledging her own similarities with potential affect aliens.

⁵See Depledge, Greta. “Sensation Fiction and the New Woman.” *The Cambridge Companion to Sensation Fiction*, edited by Andrew Mangham, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 196-209.

⁶ See *A Treatise on Human Nature* by David Hume

In *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Cultural, and Victorian Sensationalism*, Ann Cvetkovich connects what critics have identified as sensational subversion to affective tools. Arguing that affect is discursive and not intrinsically subversive, Cvetkovich points to three canonical sensation texts to argue that the trope of sensationalism produces affects that can be used as a tool for political and social engagement. Cvetkovich ultimately argues that affect can be used to both liberate and dominate. In this project, I am taking the position that certain affects are not inherently liberatory, but that affects have the potential to figure and disfigure the way we think about our world and the way we orient ourselves towards the world.

To do affective work is to do the work of embedding feelings with meaning. If we feel our way through the plot of the sensation novels, what makes us connected to the characters? When we invest feelings with meaning, we decide what feelings are appropriate and what feelings are not. To make the leap from what is initially read as “inappropriate” to what could be considered at least “understandable,” I argue that there is something sympathetic about that process. Sympathy has long been a cornerstone for how we think about justice. More particularly, theorists tend to trace the debate between sympathy to two main philosophers: David Hume and Adam Smith.

For David Hume, artificial rules and virtues are not necessarily benevolent because those rules and virtues come from human self-interest. Adam Smith, on the other hand, viewed sympathetic work as imagining oneself in the position of the other. Smith’s sentimentality separates the person from the object for which they feel sympathy. In imagining myself as the other, I imagine what I would feel in that situation. I feel sympathy for this other person because I can imagine my own reactions and emotions if I were in the same position. In this way, sympathy is projective and Smith’s moral judgment depends on someone’s ability to

sympathetically evaluate the feelings of others. Ahmed describes the difference as follows: “In Smith’s model, sympathetic happiness is more explicitly conditional...you enter into another’s happiness only if you agree with it” (*Promise of Happiness* 238). Smith recognized that this mode is egotistical—I have to decide if I would feel that same way—and in doing so introduced the impartial spectator model. While my first chapter will discuss it more fully, the impartial spectator model assumes that there is a general point of view from which we base our sympathetic tendencies. If the general public would feel shame in the position of the other, then that is an impartial way to evaluate affect. James Chandler describes it as follows: “The now-familiar notion of the ‘impartial spectator,’ [is] an internal principle of general perception that is able to counteract our egotism...because it carries the force of recognition, the sense of truly seeing ourselves, for example, in our own littleness within the world” (561). The hope is that if we use something outside of our own experiences and preferences, we can counteract our own selfishness. The problem becomes what exactly the “general” spectator is made of. The impartial spectator can quickly take the logic of the general will that Ahmed discusses.

Not only does the reader leave their presence in the text by leaving food stains, marginalia, or dog-earing the pages, but the text also leaves traces on the reader. The convenient distinction we make between body and text, senses and reasons, is not so rigid. Borders between the text and the reader, even the lines between right and wrong, are mutable: “The text is a substance that enters the reader and has an effect on him or her. The text is not an inert thing to be merely manipulated, it is active—even opportunistic” (Gilbert 18). Not that the average Victorian woman would condone murder or arson, but there would have been a very real and tangible connection between the circumstances of the reader and the circumstances of the sensational femme fatale that turns shock into sympathy. In this way, negative affects that the

sensational women feel like anger and failure are contagious insofar as the genre requires a type of reorienting. This affective footwork, or affective reorientation, requires the reader to dismiss the notion of an impartial spectator. The whole point of sensation fiction is that you cannot be impartial while reading. This project will seek to connect several strands of sensational scholarship to argue that the Victorian killjoys explored in sensational texts culminate in productive sympathy by combining aspects of feminist studies and affect theory.

The first chapter, “Tracing Sensations: Finding and Following the Killjoy” will explore the affective footwork that readers of sensation fiction are asked to perform in their sympathetic process with the female villains and fallen heroines. Affective tools employed by sensational fiction create an understanding between the reader and the villains that occupied most of sensation fiction. Galia Ofek argues that a canonical sensational text, *Lady Audley's Secret*, reads as “more than one woman’s story, and in some parts it reads like a manual for female readers” (107). To read sensation fiction as a manual is what nineteenth-century critics were afraid of. Reading sensation fiction does not provide a directive, but it does illuminate a different orientation or a different path—one that requires a kind of affective stumbling to “trip” us up as readers. To sympathize with what Ahmed labels a killjoy is to have potential political energy. The sensational killjoy figure will require a division that Ahmed herself does not establish, but that will be helpful for considering the difference between Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s fiction and Ellen Wood’s work. For this project, I put Lady Audley in the female villain category of the killjoy and Isabel Vane in the fallen heroine category of the affect alien. While these distinctions may be necessary for the sake of my argument, I do so with the acknowledgment that to separate the killjoy into two categories—one more acceptable than the other—goes against grain of the readings Ahmed does herself. However, I am framing the affect alien in their discursive

framework not to argue that one is more effective than the other. Rather, both women and both types of affect aliens provide readers with alternative paths even if one is more palatable than the other.

One interesting facet around sensation fiction is that it confuses the separation between villains and innocents. While Lady Audley has redeeming qualities—she has been left by those that should protect her and is punished for her femininity and even her masculine traits—excusing her takes more than a little work. The second chapter, "The Fallen Heroine: Feeling Injustice" will explore a sensational villain that perhaps more easily encourages sympathy: Ellen Wood's Lady Isabel Vane turned Lady Carlyle in *East Lynne*. Lady Isabel Vane runs away with an evil man, Levison, described as a "snake" after becoming convinced that her husband loves another woman. Once she leaves her husband and children, she almost immediately regrets her decision and receives "retribution" from a train accident which disfigures half of her face and kills her bastard child. She returns to East Lynne as a governess for her children so dramatically disfigured that no one recognizes her (not even her husband or her children). On her death bed, she reveals her identity to Archibald, her husband, who ultimately forgives her. Wood is notorious for narrative interjections that warn the reader of the immorality of certain acts or the grave consequences one must suffer if they do certain things. Isabel Vane is a killjoy because she refuses what is supposed to make her happy—and one could even argue that Wood recognizes this. The affective footwork demanded from reading something like *East Lynne* causes stumbling, but because of the ending and the focus of the text being mostly Isabel's misery and punishment after abandoning her family the affective ratio required by sympathy with a female villain makes affective ties more readily available than with a fallen heroine. However, I argue

that the palatability of sympathy for a character like Isabel Vane makes her something like a gateway killjoy or a failed killjoy.

Many canonical sensation novels, such as Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, use the trope of the beautiful but untrustworthy femme fatale: "They... frequently challenged the stability of individual identity and showed a person's outward appearance and social standing to be poor indicators of personality and motives" (Fantina and Harrison xvii). Chapter three, "The Villain: Feeling for the Enemy," will question the easily defined femme fatale category of sensation novels and argue that Lady Audley's actions in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* can be attributed to her role as someone that affects the wrong way. The perceptions of Victorian women today often fall into the trap of being one-dimensional. What Lady Audley does is expose us to feelings we cannot necessarily picture but to which we can react. We cannot picture ourselves murdering someone, but we can feel disgust, anger, and possibly even sympathy for a character doing that. The domesticated woman supposedly had dangerous tendencies lurking underneath her innocent exterior. Lady Audley commits—in no particular order—arson, burglary, breaking and entering, bigamy, fraud, abandonment of her child, attempted murder of more than one person, and the actual murder of her blackmailer. Even though these actions are inexcusable when listed in this way, when a reader delves further, they find that many of the shocking acts of evil and vengeance result from the restraints of Victorian society. For example, George Talboys abandons his wife, Lady Audley, originally Helen Talboys, in search of wealth in the newly discovered Australia. She does not know when, if ever, he would return to England. She cannot legally remarry because her husband is not dead—or at least she does not know if he is alive—and she cannot rise above her family and class because social mobility was especially difficult for Victorian women. The third chapter will explore what

it means for villains like Lady Audley to cause sympathy or perhaps even worse, a kind of identification. If villains like Lady Audley represent aspects of the reader, then the reader confronts their own sense of objectification because they too understand at least a little of what would cause Lady Audley to perform these deeds. If our understanding of Victorian femininity is too often binary—the angel in the house or the always present explosive materials—then the contradictions, shock and sympathy, produced by the sensational characters reflect a greater social critique. Affective charges, like sympathy, shame, and perhaps even empathy, enable identification because of their overwhelming nature and their relatability.

Sensation fiction is so troubling because it is supposed to reveal that which has always been there, but has always been hidden:

We hear every day of murders committed in the country. Brutal and treacherous murders; protracted agonies from poisons administered by some kindred hand; sudden and violent deaths by cruel blows, inflicted with a stake cut from some spreading oak, whose very shadow promised—peace. In the country of which I write, I have been shown a meadow in which, on a quiet summer Sunday evening, a young farmer murdered the girl who had loved and trusted him; and yet even now, with the stain of that foul deed upon it, the aspect of the spot is—peace. (Braddon 91)

Both Lady Audley and Isabel are problematic in similar yet distinct ways, but both characters have a reason to feel negatively. Perhaps readers feel more justified in sympathizing with fallen heroines like Isabel than an unrepentant villain like Lady Audley. It is important to distinguish between the two. Nevertheless, these fallen heroines are still killjoys because they affect incorrectly and have the potential to encourage readers to affect differently. Although the sympathy produced is dissimilar in certain ways between the conventional villains and fallen heroines of sensation fiction, the affects produced in both types of women should be explored and can be connected to the definition of the killjoy. While both characters function as different kinds of killjoy, the result can still be seen as both shocking and sympathetic. The genre, on one

hand, was powerful in its potential affects, and on the other hand, these affects are discredited as indicative of low-brow literature. Specific affects are often associated with women—for instance, hysteria and the infamous rest cure. The affects caused by reading the stories of Lady Audley and Isabel Vane are politically and socially productive because sympathy and shock cause a form of sympathetic stumbling. This doubling allows the readers, typically female, to feel injustice. If the women of sensation fiction were killjoys as defined by Ahmed (having affected the wrong way, some more obvious than others), then the sensational text has the potential to encourage Victorian readers to at least orient themselves differently.

Chapter One

Tracing Sensations: Finding and Following the Killjoy

In 1849, Marie Manning, along with her husband, Frederick, shot Marie's lover, Patrick O'Connor in the head. When the bullet did not complete the job, Marie beat O'Connor to death with a blunt object. The Mannings buried the body under the kitchen and attempted to gain the assets of the murdered man. Their motive is generally thought to be financial, but the sensational nature of Marie Manning's love life and promiscuity remained at the forefront of the newspaper reports and was widely thought to be reflective of Marie's moral character. Several years later in 1860, Constance Kent slit her four-year-old half-brother's throat and stuffed his dead body into the privy. While she confessed to the crime, Kent did not give a motive; however, newspapers speculated that she was trying to protect the actual murderer, or that she was jealous of her father's treatment of his new wife and their son. The actions of these real-life female villains caused an uproar in proper society and moral circles. The essential question became, how could two seemingly moral, normal woman commit such atrocious crimes? And what's more, what does this say about the state of womanhood in general? With the increased circulation of news via the newspaper and the invention of the railways, both upper-class circles, as well as members of the lower-class, discussed such titillating true-crime stories. Much like our current fascination with true-crime, real-life murders inspired numerous adaptations in the form of entertainment. So, when Ellen Wood and Mary Elizabeth Braddon began using these female villains as fictional inspiration for their own literary characters, female readers, in particular, were thought to be potentially susceptible to the pull of the sensational.

The affective nature of the sensations caused by sensation fiction requires a discussion of the ways in which I am using "affect." The affective turn, particularly in feminist and cultural

theory, can be divided into two camps: the ontological or materialist view of emotion and the political and discursive idea of affect. The materialist view, offered by theorists like Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari and Brian Massumi, see affect as “the name we give to those *forces-visceral forces* beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing” (Siegeworth and Gregg 2). This branch of affect theory conceives of affects as material intensities. We feel angry and our heart rate rises and the hair on our skin rises not because we are conscious of these forces, but because our material body is feeling these things. The other side of affect theory theorizes affect as discursive. That is, the way we feel is directed by our outside culture. Theorists that fall into this camp, like Ann Cvetkovich and Sianne Ngai, are interested in the way our politics regulate and code our emotions.

There are, of course, those that fall somewhere in the middle or that borrow from both the material body and the discursive structures that regulate that body. Most notably for this project, Sara Ahmed speaks of affect as proximities to objects which combines both the discursive and the material. Certain affects are attached by others to certain bodies and objects. This is the “stickiness” or contagiousness of affect. Ahmed suggests that willfulness, and many other affects, can stick to objects and other bodies: “[It is the] ‘rippling’ effect of emotions; they move sideways (through ‘sticky’ associations between signs, figures and objects) as well as forwards and backwards” (*Cultural Politics* 41). If we agree that affect is a combination of discursive and the physical, that affect is felt as orientations towards certain objects, then to consciously perform happiness is to move towards or away from particular objects. In other words, orientations are the ways in which we navigate affect. Happiness is sticky because it brings the *I* and the *we* together while the alternative pulls them apart. Those that do not perform happiness

or deviate from that the affective path in some alternative way are often thought of as killing joy or being killjoys.

While there are certainly pros of dividing the camps, I wish to combine the two strands of affect to analyze the ways that the politics of emotions plays out on our bodies, the space we take up, and the ways that we read and are read, and as Ahmed argues, “emotionality as a claim about a subject or a collective is clearly dependent on relations of power, which endow ‘others’ with meaning and value (*Cultural Politics* 4). For example, we feel fear of certain bodies because we are told to fear those bodies. As a woman, I walk alone in a darkened alley late at night, and I see a stranger approaching wearing a hood and his hands in his pockets. I feel fear because society has told me, at least indirectly, that my body is less protected than others. Obviously, sensation fiction earned its title from the physical sensations it caused in the readers—widened eyes, raised eyebrows, raised hairs—but I am interested in the ways that those sensations are interpreted and what function they could possibly perform.

The critical intervention I am making with this project is to argue that Lady Audley and Isabel Vane should be read as killjoys and to argue that the killjoy performance in these novels can cause affective stumbling. When I say affective stumbling, I mean the clumsy way in which sensation fiction requires us to read it. Our feelings for the sensational female characters are ambivalent. We read of Isabel Vane’s plight and we feel both sympathy for her and disgust. To feel both positive and negative responses engenders a kind of affective clumsiness. The sensation novel is a technology that becomes an instrument for disorientation and potential orientation but not necessarily towards the common good. In the *Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed sees happiness as “a technology or instrument, which allows the reorientation of individual desire toward a common good” (59). Affective theorists have only begun to examine the happiness industry

relatively recently. In *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant sees affect as a kind of attachments or “clusters of promises.” The promise of cruel attachments is that, like Ahmed’s unhappiness, it is end-oriented. We orient ourselves towards the genre of the “good life” because it promises us happiness in the future. Berlant argues that we maintain attachment to things that are bad for us because we believe maybe “this time, nearness to this thing will help you or a world become different in just the right way” (2). We maintain fantasies of the good life and desire objects that will provide that life. Cruel optimism is thus that which gives us hope to live in the present while telling us to keep looking forward. This optimism, or something which propels us forward, encourages us to keep chasing after a “cluster of promises” that makes the present livable even if they are harmful or unattainable in the future. While arguing that all attachment is optimistic, that is, attachments depend on a kind of satisfactory futurity, there are attachments, like marriage, romance culture, etc, that we desire despite their potential to be bad for us. For example, I plan my life around “straight time”⁷—I graduate high school, go to college, get married, get a good job, have two-and-a-half kids, and retire at 65—when deviation from that path is considered a deviation away from happiness. Ahmed’s concept of the culture of happiness can be considered one of these cruel attachments. As we get married or have children because it promises us happiness, we are striving for something that may not give us happiness and could actually harm us. Unlike Ahmed’s *Promise of Happiness*, Berlant’s project is not to offer a solution, but rather to call attention to why we format our lives the way that we do. In some ways, happiness is a disappearing act that requires removal of our “natural” orientation.

⁷ For a more thorough explanation of “straight time,” see *In a Queer Time and Place* by Jack Halberstam.

That is, oftentimes we are expected to make certain choices that require removal of what the self actually wants.

This is where Ahmed's affect alien comes in, "My suggestion is that we can reread the negativity of such figures in terms of the challenge they offer to the assumption of happiness follows relative proximity to a social ideal" (*Promise of Happiness* 53). It is important to establish how the "social ideal" functioned in mid-Victorian literature. In 1857, the Matrimonial Causes Act "expanded" women's rights in marriage—at least hypothetically. The act created a separate divorce court but still limited the accessibility of divorce for women. With the new law, men could divorce their wives on the grounds of adultery, and their wives could only divorce their husbands if they proved adultery in addition to things like incest, bigamy, or cruelty. This background information clarifies that divorce, while technically an option for the sensational villains, was not a likely possibility. There is something in Lady Audley and Isabel Vane that erodes the discursive structure of affect that Victorian England so carefully constructed for itself. The common good resembles the common view of sympathy that enables someone to be impartial in Smith's model of sympathy.

The tools for disorientation that the killjoys provide is a way to coordinate sympathy with willfulness. Perhaps negative affects like rage and unhappiness should be at least a part of our consideration of justice. The willfulness that the female villains of sensation fiction perform, running away from home or marrying multiple people, is a refusal of the happiness expectation on those characters. Instead of looking to the future, marriage, children, the whole happy life, the sensation killjoys kill the future to live in the moment. To be both willful and unhappy, or worse, willfully unhappy, is to affect the wrong way. Ahmed argues that the diagnosis of willfulness depends on authority. Someone is read as willful when they refuse an authority figure, and so, a

failure of the correct kind of will is often considered willful: “If authority assumes the right to turn a wish into a command, then willfulness is a diagnosis of the failure to comply with those whose authority is given” (*Willful Subjects* 1). For example, though I may unintentionally or intentionally disobey authority, others read willfulness onto my body and my actions. Ahmed describes those that deviate from affective ideals as affect aliens or those that “snap the bonds of fate” (10). Sensation fiction suggests a failure in aesthetic education because the sensational women are experiencing affects the wrong way. To be willful and to be an affect alien is to choose a different orientation or a different proximity. The impartial spectator is the authority that willfulness denies. Affect aliens feel too much too fast. Isabel Vane has one moment of irrational anger at her husband and ruins the rest of her life. Lady Audley feels rage at George Talboys and pushes him down a well.

For this particular project, I am separating the “killjoy” figure into two similar but distinct character types—the villain and the fallen heroine. I am distinguishing these two according to their reception, their level of “evil,” and their regret relative to that evil. I am not making the argument that one killjoy is inherently more sympathetic than the other; rather, I am arguing that Isabel Vane is good at navigating a flawed system which makes her seem more naturally sympathetic. Lady Audley dies without repenting or even suffering much (rather than embarrass his family, Robert hides Audley away in another country), but Isabel Vane almost immediately regrets her indiscretion and is punished by having a child out of wedlock that dies. Not only that, her once celebrated beauty is marred but a large scar on her face and the need to wear old-fashioned glasses. Once we analyze deeper, we realize that both the similarities and the differences we read between the two depend on our conception of womanhood and a refusal of the temporality in which happiness makes sense. The distinction between the fallen heroine and

the female villain is one that works specifically with sensation fiction. For the purpose of this paper, I am using these categories to point to the ways that power regulates femininity in the Victorian period.

The critical intervention I seek to make here is not the division of the killjoy into the fallen heroine and the villain, although I will use those as categories that apply to Victorian sensation fiction specifically. It is to connect the sensation villain/fallen heroine to the potential for tripping and stumbling, or allowing for contradictory responses to the characters. It would be naïve to say those that read sensation fiction would in turn be killjoys too. Most of sensation fiction readers were middle-class, although the mobility of sensation fiction was, of course, troubling to higher society. There is nothing to suggest that the readers were immediately called to action. But, for killjoy characters “to be in the way of what is on the way” is to be a stumbling block to whatever is “supposed” to happen whether that be the proper new woman or the proper Victorian lady. The stumbling image of the killjoy is a complicated one. These affects do not just end with failure or refusal, rather they provide “the hope that those who wander away from the paths they are supposed to follow leave their footprints behind” (*Willful Subjects* 21). Thus, even though the negative affects that the characters experience and possibly encourage the readers to experience are ultimately negated somehow through marriage or penitence, the rippling of their footsteps have affective potential: “Perhaps we could create a queer ethics out of clumsiness, an ethics that registers those who are not attuned as keeping open the possibility of going another way. Or perhaps we can think of the experience of being out of time as a way of staying attuned to otherness” (5). The suspense involved with a genre like sensation fiction affects our sense of time because we are constantly waiting for someone to pull the rug from under us. After that moment happens, we feel a plethora of emotions like gratification, disgust, relief, etc. The

temporality of sensation fiction works to disrupt Victorian notions of affect and when and why they should occur.

Obviously, there are alternatives to shooting a man or beating a man to death. However, I argue that the sensation genre, as explained in its name, is potentially useful when thinking about affective ties in the Victorian period. Readers cannot entirely sympathize with Lady Audley or Isabel Vane, but they can recognize themselves within the frustrations and extenuating circumstances that create an environment in which the character feels the only course of action is seduction or murder. There is a connection between the shock of seducing your cousin for revenge like in another classic sensation text, *No Name* (1862), or attempting to murder your nephew by burning an inn down and the sympathy we recognize that we have with the lack of options that the female characters had. Ahmed discusses “feel[ing] our way” through both affective and material economies, and I argue that the killjoy as it can be seen in two specific instances, the female villain and the fallen heroine, in sensation fiction, while not necessarily offering a direct path to follow, tells us that the stumbling over affective ties has potential political energy (*Cultural Politics* 12). Ahmed describes a side effect of willfulness as clumsiness:

Clumsiness can be how a subject experiences itself: as being ‘in the way’ of what is ‘on the way,’ as being in the way of itself as well as others.... the feeling of clumsiness can be catchy: once you feel clumsy, you can feel even clumsier; you can even lack the coordination to coordinate yourself with yourself let alone yourself with others. If we are in motion, clumsiness can be registered as what stops a movement or glow. (*Willful Subjects* 50)

The clumsiness of affect in sensation fiction opens up the temporality of affect. It suggests killing the future in favor of the suspenseful now. Instead of feeling required to be happy

sometime in the future or do certain things because they are supposed to make us happy eventually, we should embrace the now and the partiality of reading sensation fiction.

The traces of melodrama in sensation fiction reflects an exaggerated sense of time and an exaggerated sense of what is acceptable. I should state that there are plenty of critics that see the affective potential of sensation fiction as unable to extend beyond the individual: “Sensational literature does reverse expectations on social codes of behavior; the reversal these novels enact, however, is never a shared practice that a community understands through the normative value of the ritual, but rather a challenge to conformity that entails the immediate social ostracism of the sensational figure, when discovered” (Gabriele 127). For example, while Isabel Vane did rebel against her marriage and her attachments to her family, she ultimately dies at the end of the novel. Lady Audley may succeed for a while, but she dies alone in an insane asylum. Perhaps this punishment can be traced back to embellished performance associated with the drama of the plot. Instead of opposing sensationalism to realism, we should consider how these endings serve to displace patriarchal assumptions through what Patrick Brantlinger calls an exaggeration: “It would be best to say that sensation novels seize upon and exaggerate the reductive properties that are already present in serious fiction” (27). The exaggeration of properties is also an exaggeration of feelings. Even if the character’s actions are inflated for the sake of shock, the affective footwork that sensation villains require of readers is useful because it encourages us to stumble and be clumsy.

Just as sensation fiction uses affective exaggeration to potentially cause stumbling blocks, we cannot disconnect affective exaggeration for the sake of the market. Sensation fiction was highly advertised and highly mobile. Alberto Gabriele argues that the reading of sensation fiction was ultimately fragmentary because the novels were packaged in magazines with advertisements

placed beside the actual story: "Fragmentation surfaces in different artistic practices inextricably tied to the industrial means of production and signifies primarily a splintering of the many narratives of preindustrial culture" (40). When reading sensation fiction in its original form, the reader does not know where to look. This sense of fragmentation is consistent with what Gabriele calls a montage effect. Nineteenth-century critics, and even contemporary critics today, dismissed this fragmentary/montage effect as a consequence of mass/popular culture. The realists of the latter nineteenth-century used this as proof that sensation authors concentrated on quantity and not quality. If readers were constantly made to scatter their attention and vision, then they would not be concerned with the production value of what they were reading. While it is important to recognize the publication history of sensation fiction, we cannot discredit the genre simply because it is popular or fragmentary. These characteristics contribute to the affective potential of the genre and help provide the affective paths the genre follows.

The shock of sensation fiction does not completely cover over the relatability of the sensational characters; instead the shock causes us to be reflective and ask ourselves, "What exactly is so shocking about this?" To reconcile the shock and the sympathy of sensation fiction is to recognize its affective potential. This is not to say that the sympathy produced in sensation fiction condones the actions of the villains or even inherently performs any culturally progressive action. But rather, once shock blurs into sympathy, we are forced to notice the affective ties that constructs our society and culture. The affective possibility of Lady Audley and Isabel Vane relies on the proximity of the reader to the character's situations. To navigate affect is to navigate affective orientation and proximity.

Female sensation characters in relation to the killjoy shows us how unhappiness can be sticky. Perhaps even worse, our own participation in the reading of sensation fiction is a kind of

admission to the stickiness of affect: “It is not just that, strictly private subjects, we read about violated, objectified subjects but that, in the very act of reading about them, we contribute largely to constituting them as such” (Miller 162). For affect to be sticky, it is contagious. The affective stumbling required in reading *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *East Lynne* is a kind of stumbling between the shock of being exposed to the terrible deeds of society and the sentiment of understanding the reasons for those deeds. We read Lady Audley and see that she fails to perform her duties according to our cultural interpretations of femininity. The failure of Lady Audley and Isabel Vane is a failure to affect the right way—to be killjoys or affect aliens. They are depicted as abandoning their families and committing acts of murder which exaggerate the affect that no one wants to talk about: unhappiness.

Chapter Two:

The Fallen Heroine: Feeling Injustice

“Never had she experienced a moment’s calm, or peace, or happiness, since the fatal night of quitting her home. She had taken a blind leap in a moment of wild passion; when, instead of the garden of roses it had been her persuader’s pleasure to promise her...she had found herself plunged into an abyss of horror, from which there was never more any escape” (Wood 283)

East Lynne’s main character and protagonist, Isabel Vane, is raised as a gentlewoman.

The character of Lady Audley does not fall from grace because she was never a true gentlewoman—she simply paraded herself as one. Unlike Lady Audley, Isabel Vane begins the narrative as a rich man’s daughter, transitions into a rich man’s wife, and ultimately ends up in a rich man’s household. She is young, beautiful, and kind. But like most sensation characters that begin as the epitome of middle-class propriety, Isabel changes. Her father dies suddenly, leaving his daughter with mostly debt and no fortune. Archibald Carlyle, a simple, trustworthy lawyer, proposes to Isabel, and she accepts with the understanding that though she does not love him, she does not really have a choice in the matter. After having several children together, Isabel becomes convinced of her husband’s love for another by the evil Sir Frances Levison. The two run away together and have a child out of wedlock. After many miserable years, Isabel, finally realizing that Levison has no intention of marrying her once Carlyle files for divorce, leaves with her bastard child. Isabel and her child are in a horrible train accident in France where the child dies and Isabel is disfigured. Archibald, believing that his wife has also died in the accident, marries another, Barbara, who coincidentally is the woman with whom Isabel believed Archibald was having an affair. Isabel Vane, now Madame Vine, then becomes the governess for her own children in disguise. Meanwhile, through some fancy detective work, it is revealed that Levison

is a murderer. Once Isabel's eldest son dies, she quickly follows, but before she dies she reveals her identity to Archibald and receives his forgiveness.

East Lynne contains several intense, emotional, and masochistic scenes of Isabel observing her husband with his new wife. The sympathy encouraged by a killjoy like Lady Audley does not function in the same way as the sympathy produced by Isabel Vane. Because *Lady Audley's Secret* is told from Robert Audley, the narrator keeps the reader at some distance from Lady Audley. In contrast, *East Lynne* provides narrative investment for the reader by closely following Isabel throughout the text. After she watches her eldest son die and is unable to grieve as a mother, the narrator makes almost an exaggerated show of her pain: "Then she lost all self-control.... Crying, sobbing, calling, she flung herself upon him; she dashed off her disguising glasses; she laid her face upon his. Beseeching him to come back to her that she might say farewell; to her, his mother; her darling child, her lost William" (Wood 587). As soon as Archibald enters the room, Isabel has to reposition herself as a governess. The novel is known for emotionally manipulating its audience with dramatic scenes of maternal suffering. While Isabel is a killjoy for just one moment, for just one act, the productive potential of *East Lynne* lies in its refusal of the impartial spectator, or the agreement with the "common" point of view. *East Lynne*, arguably even more so than a text like *Lady Audley's Secret*, appeals to the emotions associated with the feminine like pity, care, maternal instinct. Even Mrs. Hare, the mother of Archibald's new wife, attempts to diminish the gravity Isabel's actions through pity: "She was the sweetest woman, that unfortunate Lady Isabel. I loved her then, and I cannot help loving her still. Others blamed her, but I pitied her" (429). The reader is meant to feel disgust at Isabel's foolish actions; but the reader, after experiencing the maternal suffering alongside Isabel, can also pity her. This affective ambivalence reflects alternative paths.

In *The Queer Art of Failure*, J. Jack Halberstam classifies stupidity as a form of failure that predicates itself on a nonunderstanding: “While unknowing in a man is sometimes rendered as a part of masculine charm, unknowing in a woman indicates a lack and a justification of a social order that anyway privileges men” (Halberstam 55). Isabel performs unknowing when she assumes that her husband is cheating on her, and she performs unknowing when she trusts Levison. Unknowing is a failure to understand what is considered common sense. Understanding Isabel as a killjoy requires understanding her affective failure. Isabel Vane is constantly failing. She tries to love her husband while she is married to him, and she fails. She tries to ignore her feelings for Levison, and she fails. She tries to hold back her own suspicions about Barbara, and she fails. She even tries to approach her husband with the subject, and she fails. The book seems to imply that Isabel’s misery results from her inability to moderate her feelings, and only when she understands the consequences of not moderating (she is no longer Archibald’s love), does she learn her lesson. There are constantly moments of Isabel beginning to show her feelings when she is the governess, someone noticing and commenting on it, and Isabel quickly dismissing the outburst as an effect of her ill constitution. Whereas Lady Audley is perhaps refusing to perform certain ways, Isabel seems to be just too stupid, or too naïve, to do so at times. Once she realizes her stupidity, she tries to rectify it. Failure and refusal can be read as misdirections in the relationship between the readers and authors—perhaps this is one of the reasons that sensation fiction was potentially problematic. Failure can either serve as a warning against whatever caused that failure, or more interestingly, an invitation to perform that particular kind of failure. While one may read Isabel as being stupid in her distrust of her husband and even running away with a man she barely knew, the undertext of the novel points to Isabel as a kind of proto-killjoy. Halberstam’s version of stupidity as unknowing and leading to

new potential ways of knowing can make alternative affective orientations for the reader to experience pleasure when reading.⁸

In Braddon's novel, Robert Audley's interpretation filters most of the thoughts and emotions of Lady Audley; while in Wood's, the narrator is heavily involved in the affective life of Isabel. Helena Michie writes, "The community of female dreamers suggests that *East Lynne's* position of female fantasy is more sympathetic than the one articulated by *Lady Audley's Secret*; Lady Audley operates alone with only her doubles for company; Isabel's desires, Isabel's doubling, are part of a larger world of female fantasy" (Michie 80). In Michie's thinking, sensation texts like *East Lynne* exemplify the doubling that Victorian women were expected to perform in marriage. One must transform completely when married. Isabel Vane is obviously unable to do this, so she dies. A text like *Lady Audley's Secret*, on the other hand, appeals to what one could consider the unfeminine emotions like violence and rage. Michie argues that it is Isabel Vane that "brings to light the doubleness at the heart of Victorian constructions of proper womanhood" because "as a wife, mother, and governess, Isabel embodies the three most sanctioned life possibilities for Victorian leisure-class women...by becoming all of them simultaneously, Isabel contains within her scarred body the contradictions of all three roles with

⁸ Mary Armstrong makes interesting claims about the possibility of queerness in *East Lynne*. Armstrong argues that the ambivalence of detail in Wood's text "relies on the centrality of the heterosexual domestic arrangement but also opens, through a proliferation of beautiful domestic objects, a world of other possibilities for longing" (750). In her article, "Next Week!!—:Desire, Domestic Melodrama, and the Extravagant Proliferations of *East Lynne*," Armstrong argues for a queer detailism: "'The [hetero]sexually symbolic' is not so much 'overwhelmed' by rhapsodic descriptions of the domestic object as much as largely replaced by such descriptions. It possible to understand Isabel's pleasure in things not as a muted or diverted versions of heteroerotics, but as inherent to those objects, that is, as real. This new perspective on 'detailism' effectively queers the erotic trajectories of the narrative and the delightful domestic object moves into and occupies the erotic space created by lush narrative description" (Armstrong 749). While there may be a potential for alternative longings and in turn alternative knowing, the object that the Isabel is oriented to are constantly being held back from her—forever unreachable.

themselves and with each other” (81). The function of Isabel Vane as a killjoy, as someone that affects the wrong way or at the wrong time, is obviously stunted because she herself chooses to return to East Lynne and perform all three identities in some kind of penitence for her sins. However, the point of sensational killjoys is not to fit into our contemporary conceptions of feminism. Rather, it is to show alternative orientations to affective navigations. While Wood most likely wrote *East Lynne* as a kind of warning for the middle-class unhappy reader, what the text does is point to the reasons behind female unhappiness and display an ambivalent view of affect.

A Crying Shame

The relationship between pain and pleasure is interesting for Isabel. What makes Isabel a proto-killjoy, or a fallen heroine, instead of a fully realized one is that Isabel tries to correct her own affective orientation almost immediately after leaving her family: “The very hour of her departure she awoke to what she had done: the guilt, whose aspect had been shunned in the prospective, assumed at once it’s true, frightful colour...a lively remorse, a never dying anguish, took possession of her soul for ever” (Wood 283). Isabella resolves to pay for her mistakes: “It might be difficult; but she could force and school her heart to endurance: had she not resolved in her bitter repentance, to take up her cross daily, and bear it? No; her own feelings, let them be wrung as they would, should not prove the obstacle” (398). The reader feels sorry for Isabel, arguably before she runs away, but certainly after. In this way, the reader is also asked to perform a kind of self-torture. Lyn Pykett argues:

This so-called masochism of the text is clearly an important source of its pleasures for the middle-class woman reader. Isabel's long-drawn-out suffering not only makes the didactic case against female adultery in an extreme form (and hence confirms the reader's official morality), it also affords the reader the opportunity of spectating feelings of anxiety, separation, loss and claustrophobia which arise from middle-class women's

experience of motherhood and domesticity. Thus she also functions as the repository of the text's and the reader's emotional ambivalence and resistance. (131)

The position of the reader is not just one of spectator because impartiality is impossible to maintain when reading sensation fiction due to the stickiness or contagiousness of affect. Rather, the reader both participates and observes in Isabel's affective excess. The reader is invited to fail alongside Isabel. From the beginning of the novel, the narrator gives the reader hints that Isabel will inevitably fall. For example, the narrator tells the reader, "Do not cavil at her thus praised: admire and love her whilst you may, she is worthy of it now, in her innocent girlhood: the time will come when such praise would be misplaced. Could the fate, that was to overtake his child, have been foreseen by the earl, he would have struck her down to death, in his love, as she stood before him, rather than suffer her to enter upon it" (Wood 13). Not only does the narrator insert their own moral judgements on the character of Isabel, but they also both invite and try to dissuade readers from doing the same. Or if they must feel moral judgment of Isabel, at least feel sympathy at her plight.

Failure to regulate emotion threatens to give Isabel's true identity away when she is her children's governess. In the novel, affect is read as being inherently destructive: "Although Isabel's 'torrent of passion' does not result in any *actual* violence, *East Lynne* implies that her actions—as driven by her unchecked emotions—have *inherently* destructive consequences for her children" (Mangham 132). The narrator intercedes on behalf of women in love and writes, "When woman, liable to intemperate fits of passion, give the reins to them, they neither know or care what they say" (Wood 114). Archibald even changes his daughter's name from her first name, Isabel, to her middle name, Lucy because he fears the hereditary taint of her mother. When Isabel is disguised as the governess and she confronts a young boy that plans to court

Lucy when they are old enough, she begs the boy to dismiss the sins of her mother. Archibald, on the other hand, constantly regulates his emotions and is praised for it. When Archibald first sees Isabel, he finds himself with something that “nearly took away his senses and his self-possession” making his calculated marriage to Barbara Hare later seem less passionate and more reflectively sentimental in that he both loves Barbara but also knows their marriage would be pragmatic (11). When he is given the chance to publicly expose Levison as the murderous Thorn after Archibald believes Isabel to be dead, he chooses not to because he does not trust himself to hold his rage and anger back appropriately.

While Wood may have intended for us to admire Archibald’s self-restraint, the ambivalent way that the narrator treats emotions allows us to see alternative footsteps or at least question our own. Many point to the fact that if only Isabel could bluntly tell Carlyle what she is feeling, she would avoid her fate. Cvetkovich argues that “[Isabel’s] position dramatizes for the reader the emotional costs of women’s economic dependence, which forces them to accept hardships without complaint. By depicting Isabel’s suffering as a result of her silence, however, the novel can suggest that relief would be provided if she could only articulate her feelings” (101). Instead of telling her husband that his sister is being a dictator, she suffers in silence: “Oh, that she had the courage to speak out openly to her husband” (Wood 169). While Isabel may fail to express her feelings in traditional ways, Cvetkovich runs the risk of simplifying the reader’s experience.

That Isabel is forever reaching for what she cannot have reflects the reader’s affective experience of reading the novel. Readers are right there with Isabel, feeling what she is feeling. Isabel is unable to perform the role of the impartial spectator when she is viewing her husband with another woman. Instead of looking at the couple and understanding that she has no right to

be angry as she is the one that abandoned her husband and children, Isabel feels sorry for herself and tremendous grief. In one scene, Isabel sees Archibald and Barbara at the window in the same embrace that Barbara saw Isabel and Archibald in: “And by whose act and will had the change been wrought?....And what was she?....an interloper; a criminal woman who had thrust herself into the house” (432). Another moment in which Isabel, and thus the reader, spies an intimate moment between the two: “He stood near...looking down at Barbara.... A smile crossed his lips, the same sweet smile so often bent upon *her* in the bygone days. Yes, they were together in their unclouded happiness and she-she turned away towards her own lonely sitting-room, sick and faint at heart” (506). The narrator seems to be admonishing Isabel for being emotional at this moment, but at the same time the narrator is setting up an obviously melodramatic scene in which a reader is supposed to feel sympathy for Isabel’s character even if she did a terrible thing like abandon her family.

One Mad Act

East Lynne tells us that one act of willfulness, or one act of naïve stupidity, can change the course of our lives. Here willfulness and failure are connected because both involve authority. Someone is willful when they refuse authority, and someone fails when they follow the wrong authority figure. Nevertheless, how can that one act possibly be justified, and if not justifiable, at least sympathetic? Just as many Victorian women were forced to choose between love and social stability, Isabel Vane too chooses to marry Archibald. When Mr. Carlyle first views Isabel to marry him, he imagines her from another world: “A light, graceful, girlish form, a face of surpassing beauty, beauty that is rarely seen, save from the imagination of a painter, dark, shining curls falling on her neck and shoulders smooth as a child’s, fair delicate arms decorated with pearls, and a flowing dress of costly white lace. Altogether, the vision did indeed

look to the lawyer as one from a fairer world than this” (11). He seems to be living in a fantasy world. He may be knowledgeable in business, but he is oblivious to the narrator’s foreshadowing and his wife’s unhappiness because he is not required to navigate her emotions.

The first interactions of Isabel and Archibald frame the financial aspect of their relationship later. Isabel unknowingly interrupts her father selling the estate to Archibald. The home, the sphere associated with women and one that Isabel thinks of as hers, isn’t actually:

Since the previous morning, she seemed have grown old in the world’s experiences; her ideas were changed, the bent of her thoughts had been violently turned from its course. Instead of being a young lady of high position, of wealth and rank, she appeared to herself more in the light of an unfortunate pauper; an interloper in the house she was inhabiting. It has been the custom in romance to represent young ladies, especially if they be handsome and interesting, as being entirely oblivious of matter-of-fact cares and necessities, supremely indifferent to future prospects of poverty—poverty that brings hunger and thirst and cold and nakedness; but, be assured, this apathy never exists in real life. (Wood 97)

Once her father dies and his creditors seize control of his dead body upstairs, Archibald intervenes and informs Isabel for the first time that she truly has nothing. She accepts his proposal because she is literally being beaten in her new home.⁹ We may read her as manipulative or even hard-hearted, but she tells Archibald that she does not love him. Even the narrator explains that “the plain fact was, that Isabel had no alternative whatever” (104). If it is fairly easy to understand her reasoning for marrying Archibald, it is less obvious why she left him. But, if we consider the possibilities for why she left, like her husband ignoring her and her overbearing sister-in-law maintaining a constant presence,¹⁰ her actions become more palatable.

⁹ Her distant cousin, who now holds the name of “Earl” after Isabel’s father dies, has a wife that beats Isabel: “She turned white with rage, forgot her manners, and, raising her right hand, struck Isabel a stinging blow upon the left cheek” (114)

¹⁰ For an interesting discussion on the role of Archibald’s sister, Miss Corny, see Lyn Pykett

The male characters dismiss the affective states of the female characters because they cannot navigate their feelings. Archibald frequently dismisses Isabel because he cannot understand feelings and because he cannot, he laughs them off. When Isabel is afraid to be alone in the room her father died in, Archibald smiles because “he knew that these moments of nervous fear are best met jestingly” (Wood 146). When Isabel asks her husband about Barbara’s obvious infatuation with him, he cannot understand “whatever had put this bygone nonsense into his wife’s head” (181). Perhaps the numerous secret meetings he is having with her that he refuses to explain? In another marital interaction, Barbara’s father will not listen to his wife’s dreams because she must be hysterical. Michie argues that:

Carlyle's ' 'don't have any more of these dreams if you can help it' ' will become, as we shall see, a marker of the clash between male and female, legalistic and emotional discourses in *East Lynne*. The paradoxical injunction to women not to dream will be repeated in less benign form in one of the novel's subplots where the domineering Judge Hare becomes violent whenever his wife admits she has dreamt about their son. Carlyle's gentle admonitions, juxtaposed with Judge Hare's abuse, suggest a pattern of male resistance to female fantasy.... Throughout the novel, female desire is systematically portrayed as both duplicitous and ungovernable, female discourse as a polymorphous and polyvocal challenge to law, order, and institutional power. (Michie 75)

The male characters in the novel dismiss the opinions and fears of women as being too unnecessary, too silly, or too female. The narrator even seems do this: “A jealous woman is mad; an outraged woman is doubly mad; and the ill-fated Lady Isabel truly believed that every sacred feeling which ought to exist between man and wife, was betrayed by Mr. Carlyle” (271). Her feelings cannot possibly be valid, so she must be mad or overly angry. The narrator seems to be refusing that female competition is an inherent part of the Victorian marriage market and that the secret meetings between Archibald and Barbara could be cause for concern. If a woman had no access to social mobility, and if marriage was really the only way to secure Isabel’s future, of course she would wonder why her husband was having secret, intimate meetings with another

woman. Archibald cannot imagine the source of Isabel's unhappiness. His dismissal of her feelings is a dismissal of a certain affective orientation which mirrors the limits of the masculine impartial spectator.

Like any true sensation book, there are multiple and interweaving plots in the text. While we read about Isabel's journey, we are interrupted by the murder conspiracy surrounding the inhabitants of West Lynne. Barbara, Archibald's second wife, has a brother, Richard Hare, who is accused of murdering his lover's father, Hallijohn, after he flees the scene with a gun. The beginning of *East Lynne* takes place several years after Richard has run away with everyone in the community believing that he did indeed commit the murder. At the beginning of the novel, Richard returns from hiding to try to convince his sister that he is innocent and that a mystery man named Thorn actually shot Hallijohn. Barbara informs Archibald and the two begin meeting in secret. These meetings are what causes Isabel to believe that they are having an affair. Several more years pass by, and Sir Levison scandalously returns to West Lynne to run for a government position against Archibald. Richard, still in hiding, returns to his sister and realizes that Levison is actually Thorn after seeing him. Testimony is then given and Levison is convicted and sentenced to death. The sentence is commuted to hard labor, however, and Isabel dies soon after.

The trial conducted for Levison/Thorn mirrors Isabel's own plight. The judge tells Levison after hearing the testimony: "Your counsel urged that you were a gentleman, a member of the British aristocracy, and therefore deserve consideration. I confess that I was very much surprised to hear such a doctrine fall from his lips. In my opinion, your position in life makes your crime the worse; and I have always maintained that when a man possessed of advantages falls into sin, he deserves less consideration than does one who is poor, simple, and uneducated" (574). Readers perceive the aristocracy to reflect innocence or at least that which is civilized. If

we take this admonition and apply it to Isabel Vane, we can read the expectations for happiness that Isabel had. Because she is a member of the middle-upper class, because she was raised as an educated gentlewoman, it is almost worse that she falls from grace. She, of all people, should be confident in her position as Archibald's wife. Perhaps even more so than someone like Lady Audley who really does not know any better to begin with.

The suspense of the novel does not come from the unknown as Braddon's novel does. The suspense of the novel is the anticipation of the capture of the sinner—not the answer to the actual sin itself. The reader knows that Isabel ran away, and they know why she did it. Instead of wondering what crime was committed, we wonder what will happen to the criminal. This feeling is especially fueled by the ever-present knowledge that Isabel has disguised herself and is living underneath her husband's roof taking care of their children. Sensation fiction as a whole seems to deny the impartial spectator, but what *East Lynne* does is require an emotional investment in a character that affects in an alien way and in doing so, encourages readers to affect in an alien way themselves. The more readers are exposed to the underlying arbitrariness of happiness, the more ambivalent common sense and even happiness seems.

Chapter Three:

The Villain: Feeling for the Enemy

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

Whereas feeling sympathy for Isabel Vane is feeling sympathy for a woman that made a poor decision that haunted her for the rest of her life, feeling sympathy for Lady Audley is feeling sympathy for someone that is, in many ways, the contrary of Isabel Vane. Lady Audley is not repentant, she does not seek forgiveness; she represents what Isabel tries to avoid. A combination of the Newgate prison novel and melodrama, sensation fiction fed, or as some contemporary critics would argue, fetishized, the publicized crimes of murder and bigamy. Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s contentious novel, *Lady Audley’s Secret*, shook Victorian conceptions of womanhood and morality. If Isabel Vane is a fallen heroine, Lady Audley is a full-on villain. Lady Audley represents the conflicting ideas of Victorian womanhood; she is both pariah and wife, innocent and bigamist, mother and runaway. Lucy’s complicated relationship with the expectations of Victorian society reflects the contradictory demands of female happiness. Lucy swerves from the happiness path differently than Isabel Vane. While Isabel Vane runs away from her children to be with another lover, Lucy runs away from her child for seemingly no other reason than unhappiness.¹¹ Her killjoyness, her unhappiness at being abandoned and refusing to wait patiently in poverty for her husband to return, caricatures the Victorian happiness directive.

¹¹ Lady Audley goes through several name changes in the novel. She begins as Helen Maldon, then becomes Helen Talboys with her marriage to George. Helen changes her name to Lucy Graham and eventually changes her name to Lucy Audley after her marriage to Sir Michael. For the sake of simplification, I refer to Lady Audley as either “Lady Audley” or “Lucy.”

She is a killjoy—a particularly unlikable killjoy—but a killjoy nonetheless. In *Woman and the Demon*, Nina Auerbach argues that the connection, specifically in the myth of Victorian England, between devil and angel, is not easily read:

It requires only the fire of an altered palette to bring out the contours of the one latent in the face of the other. Lady Audley... need not show a tail or awaken to a suddenly hairy hand: their angelic faces and natures become demonic with a shift of the viewer's perspective. As sacred objects rather than human beings, they assault the sources of power, sexual, social, and divine, whose new vulnerability is woman's new life. Iconoclastic in her essence, the angel becomes a demon by realizing the implication of her being. (Auerbach 108)

Our interpretation of Lady Audley shifts from an innocent angel to a fiendish manipulator as Robert's interpretation shifts. Lady Audley's "killjoyness" not only comes from a refusal to affect the right way (via murder or arson) but also from the reasons for her affective swerve. The question becomes if Lady Audley is reacting to the demands of Victorian femininity (she commits evil deeds to maintain the life that she is told she should have), then what does that say about the demands themselves?

Necessary Madness and Surveilling the Self

The contradictions of Lucy's character and actions make us wonder whether the actions result from necessity and/or a wrong orientation towards objects that should hypothetically make her happy. One could argue that her killing joy is not necessarily orientating herself away from what she is supposed to desire, (like marriage and children) but rather that her killjoyness comes from her caricature of what facing those objects actually requires. If the Victorian woman was expected to be all things at once, Lady Audley performs the role of demon and angel and is called mad for doing so. Albeit in a grossly miscalculated way, Lucy Audley was acting in a way she thought would best maintain her position as Sir Audley's wife. The ambivalence in *East Lynne* comes from the narrator's comments and the main character herself. *Lady Audley's Secret*,

on the other hand, is ambivalent because her affective footprints complicate our understanding of what should make us happy and what is necessary to maintain that happiness

Lady Audley is very aware of the demands of a beautiful woman in the mid-nineteenth century. Her powers of intoxication come with a well thought out acknowledgment that as a woman, she must use her beauty as a tool to evade the social trappings of the lower-class. She knows that her looks really mean nothing: ““Dear me.... I did not think men were capable of these deep and lasting affections. I thought that one pretty face was as good as another pretty face to them”” (Braddon 120). Her beauty is coded with a powerful meaning that can easily be taken away. To save time, it may be useful to list all of Lady Audley’s misdeeds in one space: abandonment, bigamy, attempted murder, attempted double-murder, actual murder, and arson. After attempting to kill her first husband, George, she attempts to murder her nephew that is slowly closing in on her and a pesky oaf that is blackmailing her. But for all her misdeeds, it is not just her physical actions that require us to question her morality, it is that her personhood is intrinsically tied to her femininity and her sexual power. She uses her beauty to disarm: “Miss Lucy Graham was blessed with that magic power of fascination by which a woman can charm with a word or intoxicate with a smile” (Braddon 47). To imply that she is somehow magical in her ability to charm men and other women is to both create a level of mysticism and mistrust in her character as a woman and define her womanhood as mystical. If we view happiness as an orientation or a way to navigate the affective demands of life, and more often to placate the affective demands of that life, Lady Audley’s ability to skillfully navigate an affective terrain that “requires” deception, should make us question the terrain itself.

The very personality and character of Lady Audley reflects Victorian dichotomies that lead to fragmentation. Lady Audley is first described as beautiful and as having a “childish

charm” (90). While describing her many charity visits to the poor, Braddon writes, “Wherever she went she seemed to take joy and brightness with her...Her face shone like a sunbeam... everyone loved, admired, and praised her” (47). Lady Audley is stunning with golden curls “like a pale halo” and a pretty face (49). Sir Michael Audley falls in love with the woman’s youth and gentle nature, and it is as if her beauty signifies her innocence. However, sinister hints undercut the descriptions of her beauty. A similar sense of contradiction is reflected in a description of the countryside: “We hear every day of murders committed in the country....and yet even now, with the stain of foul deed upon it, the aspect of the spot is—peace” (91). Her step-daughter Alicia is the only one to see her cruelty: ““You think her sensitive because she has soft little white hands, and big blue eyes with long lashes, and all manner of affected, fantastical ways, which you stupid men call fascinating.... I’ve seen her do cruel things with those slender little fingers, and laugh at the pain she inflicted”” (136). Because she is beautiful and childish, her husband cannot see past her “innocence” to her cruelty. Her cruelty contrasts her beauty; they are supposed to function as opposites when they actually do not.

Lady Audley is beautiful, lovely, and childish when Robert does not know her background, but she becomes manipulative and conniving when he does discover it. Her looks become a product of her multiplicity and her untrustworthiness. Lady Audley is defiant when Robert Audley confronts her about her involvement with George Talboys, whether because of actual confidence or the necessity of appearing confident. She knows that she is being watched, but she does not believe that the person doing the watching, Robert Audley, is one that matters. She must maintain the appearance of innocence, but she must also remain socially savvy—to do this, she must manipulate. Lady Audley as a character exhibits the multiplicity and acting ability that every successful Victorian woman must perform. In some ways, Lady Audley is performing

for a general point of view. Lady Audley introduces the idea of possible madness as an explanation herself. She tells Robert that after seeing madness as it was manifested through her mother's childlike character, "I went away with this knowledge of this, and with the knowledge that the only inheritance I had expected from my mother was—insanity" (Braddon 359). Lady Audley later explains that her "madness" reared its head when she has her children.¹² It is almost as if she is only "mad" because it is necessary to be so.

In *The 'Improper' Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing*, Lyn Pykett argues that Lady Audley was not alone in her constant checking of herself: "The habits of self-surveillance developed by Helen Maldon/Lady Audley in response to her fears of inheriting her mother's madness are an exaggerated form of that self-scrutiny enjoined upon every woman by prevailing ideas of the proper feminine" (90). For Pykett, being properly feminine means being "the angel in the house." By displaying women as potentially explosive or violent, Pykett argues that sensation female antagonists display an ambivalence towards womanhood: "The sensation heroine...cannot easily be accommodated either to the category of formal, proper femininity, nor to that of deviant, improper femininity.... In each of these cases, as the plot unfolds, the reader is continually required to rethink her conceptions of femininity and proper feminine behavior" (Pykett 19). She specifically references the character of Isabel Vane here, but the character of Lady Audley lend itself to this ambivalence as well. Throughout Robert's research and moments of confrontation with Lady Audley, a noticeable change comes over her outer appearance. When Robert shows no intention of giving up the chase, Lady Audley transformed from "childish" and "babyfied" to "waxen white" with "angry flashes" (168-169).

¹² In "Disclosure as 'Coverup': The Discourse of Madness in Lady Audley's Secret," Jill Matus writes, "If Lady Audley is mad because she has a mad mother, she is also mad by virtue of becoming a mother" (342).

That ambivalence, the shifting between being read as proper or improper, creates the caricature that so distinctly points to the affective ties that make our culture what it is, and we stumble over those affective ties.

After being confronted by Robert, Lady Audley tells him ““You have conquered—a MADWOMAN”” (Braddon 354). Robert and Sir Michael Audley accept that Lady Audley is insane because it explains how a beautiful woman could commit such atrocities. However, this “madness” is actually a necessary punishment to an alternative affective path. Lady Audley’s mind, after being “never properly balanced,” has finally rejected the Victorian ideas of dichotomy in femininity (355). She is both beautiful and immoral, innocent and manipulative. The so-called madness is in response to these contradictions. When Robert calls on a psychiatrist, Dr. Mosgrave, Robert tasks Mosgrave with the challenge of “diagnosing an actress” (Voskuill 633). Before he visits Lady Audley, Mosgrave tells Robert that she is not insane. Mosgrave informs Robert that Lady Audley acted out of necessity. The doctor must sift through Lady Audley’s childish nature to validate Robert’s desire to lock her away. As Richard Nemesvari argues, “The ‘secret’ let out at the end of the novel is not, therefore, that Lady Audley is a madwoman but rather that, whether she is or not, she must be treated as such” (“Queering the Sensation Novel” 83).¹³ Because she is actually both innocent and evil, she is not mad, she is, as Dr. Mosgrave describes her after meeting her, “dangerous” (Braddon 355). Is she dangerous because she attempts murder? Absolutely. But, what is a more interesting possibility is that she is dangerous because her violence is a response to “the proper” affective path, and because in her

¹³ Nemesvari has interesting readings of queerness in Braddon’s novel; however, because of the limitations of this project, I cannot do them justice here.

mind, she is maintaining that path. The reader's ambivalence come from reading her clumsy attempts at maintaining her position and having ambivalent feelings towards her.

Many critics have connected the madness theme in *Lady Audley's Secret* to both a panopticon-like necessity and the commodification of insanity and femininity. Cvetkovich argues that the novel sets the stage for the affective demand of middle-class readers: "*In Lady Audley's Secret's* politics of affect, it is not just sexual desire, whether repressed or liberated, that is at stake; the novel sets into motion that relation between affect and capitalism by displaying the beautiful and rebellious woman as the figure for the desiring consumer and the desired commodity" (Cvetkovich 70). Not only do the men in the novel either love Lucy or seek to destroy her, most of them are obsessed with her because of what she can do for them. Luke Marks capitalizes on her madness by blackmailing her into providing money for his inn. Robert Audley uses Lady Audley's "madness" as a currency in which to get his own happy ending by marrying Clara.¹⁴ Robert uses his financial influence to essentially "get Lucy off" relatively easy by going away to an insane asylum instead of a criminal conviction that would inevitably end in death. The ending suggests that the cure for madness is isolation. Andrew Mangham also argues that it matters less if Lady Audley is actually mad than her supposed madness shows that female insanity is used as ammo, at least by characters such as Luke Marks: "Although Braddon frequently drew on her era's ideas on the links between the female body and violent insanity (an appropriation that ensured at the commercial success of her novels), her texts also contain an

¹⁴ For research on the homosocial triangle between George Talboys, Clara Talboys, and Robert Audley, see Kushnier, Jennifer S. "Educating Boys to Be Queer: Braddon's 'Lady Audley's Secret.'" *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2002, pp. 61-75.

For research on the queer relationship between Lucy and her maid, Phoebe, see Shroeder, Natalie. "Feminine Sensationalism, Eroticism, and Self-Assertion: M.E Braddon and Ouida." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1988, pp. 87-103.

ambivalent exploration of how such ideas could be exploited for individual gain” (Mangham 87). Robert Audley seems to ultimately benefit from Lady Audley’s madness; he is able to have a happy ending with a happy marriage even if his uncle must suffer for it. He is successful in preserving the Audley name and punishing Lucy. Robert Audley threatens Lady Audley’s newly married status, and he spends the better part of the narrative trying to reveal her.¹⁵ When he first meets her, he falls in love with his aunt. After George disappears, however, Robert quickly becomes suspicious.

Each of her controversial actions is preceded by some threat to the carefully crafted artifice: “It spoke very plainly of ever-recurring fears—of fatal necessities for concealment—of a mind that in its silent agonies was ever alive to the importance of outward effect. It told more plainly...how complete an actress my lady had been by the awful necessity of her life” (Braddon 312). After being abandoned by her husband to poverty and single parenthood, she leaves her family to make a fresh start. This action is obviously selfish because it leaves a little boy without a mother and in the care of a well-meaning but drunk grandfather. But, it is also understandable when one considers drowning in an early marriage with a husband that expects her to wait for his undetermined return. Lady Audley is fairly open in the fact that she marries Sir Audley because as a woman social mobility is not an option: “I had learnt that which in some indefinite manner or other every school-girl learns...my ultimate fate in life depended on my marriage” (359). After George realizes that his wife is not actually dead, he corners her in her garden. She offers him money and begs him to allow her to maintain her marriage to Sir Michael Audley, but he is too upset. He roughly gathers her by the wrists, and she makes an impulsive decision to push him

¹⁵ I choose “reveal” purposely. To reveal something is to divulge something—which implies a certain mystery. An uncovering of Lady Audley is an uncovering of femininity for the inexperienced Robert.

down the garden well. This again is not condonable, but one can see that she has sound, if not evil, logic for doing this. If George were to expose her, she would lose everything. Lady Audley sets the hotel on fire in an attempt to kill Robert Audley after he threatens to expose her. It is only an added bonus that the abusive husband of her maid who blackmailed her for money will die too.

It is not the singular male gaze that Lady Audley must surveil herself against; it is the larger pressures of femininity and social expectations that necessitate these atrocious actions. If the premise that Lady Audley committed unspeakable acts as a way to prevent suspicion is accepted, it could be assumed that the contemporary Victorian reader would be encouraged to question their own assumptions about class and gender. After all, “This power is not exercised simply as an obligation or a prohibition on those who ‘do not have it’; it invests them, is transmitted them by them and through them; it exerts pressure upon them, just as they themselves, in their struggle against it, resist the grip it has on them” (Foucault 550). The prisoner of the Panopticon is both passive and active; they have control being exerted on them but also by them. Since sensation fiction found its inspirations in real life British murders, these trash novels were a lens to look through to a larger dialogue between the working-class and the upper-class and the emergence of new types of womanhood and identity. If we accept that Lady Audley acted out of necessity, we may still question her lack of honesty. Why did she not return to her child after securing the marriage of a wealthier man? To tell Sir Audley was to expose herself not only to the guard tower but also to the other inmates. If she had informed Robert, Michael, George, Alicia, etc., of her transgressions, she would be ruined. In this way, she must operate within the system that causes her actions. She does none of this because she must work

within the constraints of a society based on the dynamics of the Panopticon and to maintain those social forces that determine the legitimacy of someone's goodness, beauty, etc.

Killing Joy, Killing Men

The “other” that Lady Audley represents is not the madwoman in the attic nor the angel in the house. What I suggest is that in “diagnosing” Lady Audley as a killjoy, someone that affects the wrong way and more specifically orients themselves towards happiness differently, is that this diagnosis names an other that causes ambivalence. After living in squalor, George sails off to Australia with no warning—leaving a newborn behind. Lucy has no money, no support, and no resources to live on while he is away, and so she leaves her family behind to find work. This action is selfish in that her son has no access to his mother and father; however, it is also a result of a society that has constantly told her she is too beautiful to work too hard: ““As I [Lady Audley] grew older I was told that I was pretty....I had learnt that which in some indefinite manner or other every school-girl learns...my ultimate fate in life depended on my marriage...I concluded...if I was indeed prettier, than my school-fellows, I ought to marry better”” (Braddon 359). Her reliance on her beauty orients her moral compass inappropriately. As a woman, she is celebrated for her beauty but expected to function independently once she is abandoned by the “wandering prince” that society has told her will protect her (361).

The flattery and praise that the male characters give Lady Audley seem to be justified at the beginning of the novel. However, her childlike exterior becomes volatile when she is forced to do something unethical to survive or when she realizes that others know what she has done. For instance, she loses color when Robert Audley confronts her about her role in her first husband's death, but she also becomes flushed before she commits arson to murder several people while they are sleeping. She is still described as a “beautiful fiend” in these moments—

the narrator and the other characters are unable to separate her actions from her looks (Braddon 107). They depend on each other. Because her beauty is inherently and contingently tied to the reader's conception of her, it becomes a recognizable part of her need to appraise herself. Contemporary nineteenth-century readers would have been appalled at the ability for a character to transgress between moral and immoral, beautiful and cruel. Villains should show their character through outer ugliness, not look just like everyone else. Nina Auerbach argues, "The woman I claim is at the center of Victorian woman worship seems a monster of ego. As angel, she is militant rather than nurturing, displacing the God she pretends to serve. As an angelic demon, she becomes the source of all shaping and creative power, dropping the mask of humility as she forecasts apocalyptic new orders" (Auerbach 185). Not only is Lady Audley cruel and beautiful, but she also takes pride in her vanity. Lady Audley seemingly serves Victorian patriarchy while opening possibilities for alternative affect paths that potentially displace that system. It is easy to judge Lady Audley for this; however, I argue that it is more complicated than a quick dismissal.

Lady Audley admits to marrying Sir Michael without loving him: "I cannot be blind to the advantages of such an alliance'" (Braddon 152). She explicitly tells him this, but he is confused for some reason when she reiterates it at the end of their marriage. When George returns and threatens her carefully crafted stability, she attempts to murder him by pushing him down a well. George's return and declaration of their relationship would mean a loss of financial stability that the economics of Victorian society has denied her and a loss of reputation. The reputation as a beautiful, gentle young woman guarantees her survival as Lucy Graham but also her survival as a woman. While murder is obviously deplorable and unethical, many readers will feel something akin to pity for a woman that has been systematically oppressed because of her

gender and social class. Because both poor and rich British citizens were reading the same sordid texts, both groups found different forms of escape in the sensation novel—the lower class could live vicariously through the wealthy of the text, and the upper class could explore criminality associated with the poor safely in their homes.

Even though sensation fiction allowed for escapism, the genre actually served the very tangible and real purpose of questioning the social and political climate of the mid-nineteenth century. This dismissal is often a criticism of popular fiction in general. On the surface, sensation fiction and other popular genres of the nineteenth-century served the purpose of titillation. The villains seem to celebrate their wickedness and the other characters suffered for it. However, the sympathy produced by the villain's extenuating circumstances allows for a kind of doubling between the reader and the villain. After encountering *Lady Audley's Secret*, the reader could ask how the social constraints that are so characterized in Lady Audley represent the cultural restraints of the time. The structures that limit social mobility and sexual and gender freedom in *Lady Audley's Secret* also limited the average Victorian. I argue that this process causes affective stumbling because the reader is simultaneously sympathetic towards and disgusted by Lady Audley.

So, what do we make of the ending? Only one man is killed, Luke, and Lady Audley's unhappiness with George is met with her eventual incarceration in a mental asylum. We expect Lady Audley to be unhappy in her marriage to Sir Audley after realizing George is alive. After all, any decent Victorian woman would eschew her own happiness for the right thing, which would be presumably to give up the disguise and come clean to all parties involved. She finds unhappiness in the objects that are supposed to make her happy, and happiness in the objects that are supposed to make her unhappy. We could read the end as Braddon's interpretation of the

consequences for affecting the wrong way. Pamela Gilbert argues that “the women who really do evil in *Lady Audley’s Secret*...do not do so out of a desire for leadership but out of a desire to avoid the pain inflicted by an active masculine element...Lady Audley’s story shows that most women are most evil when they confront social expectations—a lesson which Robert must deny if he is to take his place as an active male member of the ruling class” (96). While the other parts of the novel may lead the reader to question the role that madness really plays in the narrative, the ending cuts these musings short. Under this view, Lady Audley gets what she deserves and a woman that does the same should expect no less. While this may be a tempting reading, other critics have seen the ending of *Lady Audley’s Secret* as less satisfactory. For example, Pykett argues that the ending of the novel is complicated:

Robert's quest ends in a subtle displacement and merging of aristocratic and bourgeois values, which is complex in its effects. Robert does indeed expel the disrupter of his uncle's household but, significantly, his actions do not result in the restoration of equilibrium, or the reinstatement of the aristocratic family. The patriarch Sir Michael retires from the scene, a broken man, and Audley Court remains empty. The aristocratic family is not so much restored as remade, in the genial companionate union of Alicia Audley (Sir Michael's daughter) and Sir Harry Towers. (104)

In other words, the novel’s ending does not wrap everything nicely in a bow, but rather, the happiness that the marriage plot is supposed to instigate isn’t as satisfactory as we may have believed.

If Isabel Vane is a killjoy, she is for a single moment. Lady Audley on the other hand, is a killjoy until the end—unrepentantly affecting the wrong way almost always. Her refusal to affect “properly” makes Audley a villain rather than a fallen heroine. The messiness of Lady Audley and the affective response of the reader to the novel makes Braddon’s novel more shocking and arguably more successful in the use of the killjoy. While Isabel Vane can more easily navigate the “proper” affective path, Lady Audley allows readers to consider that the affective path is at

least problematic; however, this is not to say that readers of *Lady Audley's Secret* should immediately abandon their family, change their name, and kill to protect their secrets. It would be a much more satisfying end in our contemporary culture for Lady Audley to refuse to marry despite the material necessity. To expect this from a novel written in 1861—much less a novel written in a serialized form and by a woman—is ridiculous: “It is true that in this sense Braddon's feminism does not meet our more modern expectations: it articulates criticism but neglects to outline specific solutions to the limitation of women's roles.... Her feminism is not that of an activist, however, but an ideology based on inside knowledge a lived, experienced reaction to hard social and economic realities (Felber 472,473). When Ahmed describes the killjoy and other affect aliens, she does so intending to point to potential political activism that accompanies the unhappy subject. But the ambivalent “other” that Lady Audley embodies refuses our total sympathy and our total condemnation, thus refusing the impartial spectator. Her ambivalence causes our affective stumbling. She is a villain that remains a killjoy throughout the novel.

Conclusion: Accepting Clumsiness

Sara Ahmed argues, “happiness is often described as a path, as being what you get if you follow the right path. In such descriptions, happiness offers a route” (*Promise of Happiness of Happiness* 9). If we think about happiness as a route or a path to something in the future, something that will eventually make me happy, we should think about what that happiness path actually looks like. The examples I have offered in this project, Lady Audley and Isabel Vane, are clumsy. They run into things and get in the way of things like other people’s happiness and even their own happiness by stepping off the common-sense path. Instead of waiting for her husband with her child, Lady Audley abandons her son and leaves him with her drunk father. Instead of being unwaveringly loyal to Archibald, Isabel Vane mistrusts her husband and abandons her family. The alternative path suggests that the impartial spectator logic is not mandatory because under that logic, the two characters would not be sympathetic. My readings of the novels show that it is possible to feel many different things when reading sensation fiction. The two novels offer readers alternative, or clumsy, ways of looking.

When Robert Audley and George Talboys gaze at the portrait of Lady Audley in her personal chambers, they must take turns looking at the painting. Their gaze feels almost clinical. Alicia tells them she ““has a strange fancy.... that sometimes a painter is in a manner inspired, and is able to see through the normal expression of the face, another expression that is equally part of it, though not to be perceived by common eyes”” (Braddon 108). Robert responds by telling Alicia not to be so morbid: ““The picture is—the picture; and my lady is—my lady. That’s my way of taking things, and I’m not metaphysical; don’t unsettle me”” (108). Robert Audley cannot imagine an alternative to Lady Audley as an innocent and pure woman. And yet the reader can’t help but be metaphysical after the fiendish description of the portrait. Lady Audley is not simply

Lady Audley as Robert understands her. The productivity of the novel lies in its ability to unsettle the readers.

The images of Isabel spying on her husband and his new wife and observing her own son without being able to actually perform motherhood resists the impartial spectator image. For example, Isabel sees Barbara walking with an unknown man who is actually Barbara's brother: "Embrace a strange man! Mrs. Carlyle! All the blood in Lady Isabel's body rushed to her brain. Was she, his second wife, false to him?...Was there any small corner of rejoicing in her heart that it was so? And yet—what was it to her? It could not alter by one iota her own position: it could not restore to her the love she forfeited" (505). She very quickly realizes that no, Barbara is not cheating on Archibald. It is Barbara's brother, Richard, that she embraces. As a family governess, who is Isabel to spy on her employer? It is none of her business. As a former wife of Archibald who cheated on him herself, who is she to scold Barbara? The impartialness expected from her as a governess is impossible to maintain and, in some ways, is impossible for us to maintain.

So what good comes from releasing ourselves from the impartial spectator paradigm, especially when we consider sensation fiction as an example of this? I argue that through narratives from Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Ellen Wood, we can read the productivity of feeling wrong or feeling too much. D.A Miller argues that "It is not just that, strictly private subjects, we read about violated, objectified subjects but that, in the very act of reading about them, we contribute largely to constituting them as such.... Our most intense identification with characters never blinds us to our ontological privilege over them: they will never be reading about *us*" (162). That is, as much as we feel for the characters we read about, we are always not *them* and they are not *us*. While I agree that the nature of reading and fiction requires distance

between the reader and the character, this project has sought to analyze what happens when that distance closes, whether through the explosive violence of Lady Audley, or the emotional demands of Isabel Vane. The result of our affective commitment to both women and their stories is the discovery of alternative orientations. The sensational affect aliens, or killjoys, open up other parts of the map. It is up to us to decide whether or not we follow that path, but the opening up of possibility by clumsy characters demands us to at least consider those affective footsteps.

The impartial spectator requires the feeler to separate themselves from the object they are feeling for. While I have separated Isabel Vane and Lady Audley into two different categories, I do so with the intention that in dividing them, I am not trying to put value on them. Rather, my project has attempted to show that while both characters require different emotions from the readers, what they do have in common is being unhappy—whether for the entire novel or for one mad moment. They are messy characters because of the narrator's treatment of them or their misguided attempts at maintaining their status as a Victorian woman. We as readers recognize an affective investment in both kinds of characters. When we feel emotionally invested in characters that do the wrong thing or feel the wrong way, we should ask ourselves what expectations are being, challenged, suspended, or reinvented. I argue that the affective footwork that this requires—the stumbling—creates a space in which alternative possibilities can be glimpsed.

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