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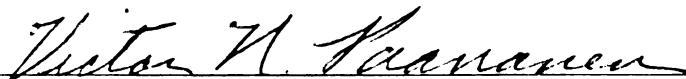
THE SEXUAL THREAT AND DANGER OF THE FEMME  
FATALE IN VICTORIAN LITERATURE

presented by

JENNIFER LEE HEDGECK

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PH.D. degree in ENGLISH



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**THE SEXUAL THREAT AND DANGER OF THE FEMME FATALE IN VICTORIAN  
LITERATURE**

**By**

**Jennifer Lee Hedgecock**

**A DISSERTATION**

**Submitted to  
Michigan State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of**

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**Department of English**

**2005**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **THE SEXUAL THREAT AND DANGER OF THE FEMME FATALE IN VICTORIAN LITERATURE**

By

Jennifer Lee Hedgecock

This dissertation is a Marxist-Feminist reading of the femme fatale in nineteenth-century British Literature that examines the changing social and economic status of women and rejects the stereotype of the mid-Victorian femme fatale that typically reduces her to simply a dangerous woman. The femme fatale gains agency by struggling against and overcoming major adversities such as poverty, abusive male characters, abandonment, single-parenthood, limited job opportunities, the criminal underworld (that we identify in *Armada* with Lydia Gwilt), and Victorian society's harsh invective against her (which unlike the fallen woman she usually ignores). To overcome these hardships, she reverses her socioeconomic vicissitudes, an act which demonstrates her self-reliance compared to other Victorian feminine literary figures. Hence, the femme fatale becomes a precursor to the Campaigns against the Contagious Diseases Acts and the emergence of the New Woman, movements that illustrate more empowering subject positions of women during the later part of the nineteenth century and subvert patriarchal constructions of domesticity and "fallenness" used to undermine women. The femme fatale in mid-century fiction, particularly as seen in sensation fiction, is the protest against representations of women as fallen and domestic.

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## Introduction

There are a number of reasons why the Victorian femme fatale provokes such interest among readers. For one, she is very difficult to fix definitions to or to stereotype. Her socioeconomic class is often obscure; she transgresses social boundaries and overtly—even mockingly—rebels against conformity. In addition, unlike the meek domestic woman or the martyred fallen woman of the nineteenth century, the femme fatal scares us, threatens us, but never bores us. It is no surprise to the reader, then, that the femme fatale is often rewarded for her unscrupulous scheming or lascivious behavior, reaping the benefits of wealth from men whom she guilefully destroys, even though her victory is usually short-lived. We may sigh with disdain each time she triumphs, but we are invited to secretly relish her victory. Why?

While studies of fallen and domestic women dominate literary criticism, the femme fatale is clearly overlooked, despite the fact that she appears frequently in several Victorian novels.<sup>1</sup> In 1848, she becomes a popular literary motif in W. M. Thackeray's realist novel *Vanity Fair*. By the 1860s she is a recurrent figure in sensation fiction in major works by Elizabeth Braddon and Wilkie Collins. She suddenly resurfaces in the 1890s as the Gothic anti-heroine in *Dracula* and *She*, novels coincidentally published with the emergence of the New Woman.

Though the femme fatale exists throughout centuries of art, poetry, and literature, from Biblical Lilith and Shakespeare's Cleopatra to Pater's Mona Lisa, in *The Fabrication of the Late Victorian Femme Fatale*, feminist critic, Rebecca Stott, argues that the femme fatale is most prominent in late-nineteenth-century literature. In my opinion, the femme fatale is equally conspicuous in mid-Victorian fiction, but she is

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constructed differently than the vampires or she-devils characterized by late-nineteenth-century novelists. Bram Stoker and Rider Haggard portray the femme fatale as a one-dimensional, dangerous woman, the succubus or the barbaric African queen, whereas in mid-Victorian literature she is much more complex; to name her as appallingly wicked is too simple a generalization. Her socioeconomic dilemmas drive her to commit bigamy or murder as an escape from poverty, and her resilience to such economic hardships undermines any specific definition of her.

Critics who allude to the portrayal of dangerous female characters in mid-Victorian fiction often name Charles Dickens' Estella in *Great Expectations* or Wilkie Collins' Lydia Gwilt in *Armadale* as the classic nubile femme fatale who uses her sexual prowess to torment and to destroy her male victims.<sup>2</sup> But these same critics do not explain why she appears so often in other Victorian novels, and they do not assume that she is a relevant literary figure. In this study of 1840s and 1860s fiction, I argue that the femme fatale is a literary signpost of the changing roles of women in the nineteenth century, a period when middle-class women begin organizing more radical feminist movements, and that she foreshadows later protests against society's treatment of women.

The emergence of the femme fatale in Thackeray's 1848 publication of *Vanity Fair* appropriately coincides with the emergence of the late 1840s middle-class feminist movement. In his portrayal of Becky Sharp, Thackeray is really the first Victorian novelist to identify oppressive sexist roles among middle-class women, and to show a female character blatantly subverting her assigned domestic role as constructed by

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By emphasizing the harmful effects of restraint and passivity on women in his characterization of Amelia Sedley, Becky Sharp's foil, Thackeray forces us to take a serious look at the complicated roles that women played in the 1840s. By the 1860's, a mere twenty odd years later, middle-class feminists denounced bourgeois ideals that relegate women to the domestic sphere and prevent them from entering into public life. By challenging censorship, insisting on greater sexual freedom, rejecting biased divorce and property laws, and opposing the Contagious Diseases Acts, these women demonstrated their refusal to be subordinated to men. But these social changes also caused much hostility towards women, which is reflected in an ambivalent attitude toward sexual relations between men and women.

The femme fatale is part of this evolving assertiveness on the part of women. By characterizing the femme fatale as a specific danger to men, sensation novels in the 1860s implicitly suggest the degree to which an independent woman is viewed as a threat to the fabric of Victorian culture.<sup>3</sup> Collins's Lydia Gwilt and Braddon's Lady Audley represent these unconstrained women breaking both legal and moral laws as they struggle for self-reliance. As a single, educated woman, the femme fatale, having escaped the polar definitions of domestic or fallen women, was a threat to bourgeois ideology in that she was thought to damage the structure of the family and moral purity. In a society ruled by patriarchal thinking, many saw the Women's Movement as a threat to British culture in the same way that the femme fatale in Victorian literature is seen to corrupt middle-class values.

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The link between Thackeray's realist novel and the bizarre situations and illicit passions described in sensation fiction may appear too casual a connection, but both genres address turbulent socioeconomic problems and burlesque the get-rich-quick schemes carried out by sly female heroines. In *The Maniac in the Cellar*, Winifred Hughes points out, "the realists and the sensationalists are trying to come to grips with the same overwhelming experience of urban, technological society; both reflect a diminished stature of the individual amid the crowding and the complexities of modern existence" (57). All characters are ruled by these external circumstances, yet the femme fatale concocts wily machinations to avoid poverty and attempts to direct the action of the plot in her favor.

Images of the femme fatale are more pervasive during social and economic troubled times that coincide with the publication of *Vanity Fair* and the sensation genre and reflect sexual ambiguity in Victorian society. Her sudden emergence signals societal hardships and anxieties especially experienced by fictional dominant male figures ruled by precarious circumstances that jeopardize their authority and power. By the mid-century, society is plagued with sanitation problems, overcrowding in London, prostitution, underpaid wage-labor, and inequality within the new social class system. The femme fatale embodies the cruel conditions of modern life in which poverty, sickness, disease, slum dwelling and prostitution echo the moral turpitude of the nineteenth century, and she mirrors social anxieties that conflict with prudish and often unrealistic ideological standards of modern Victorian life.

Despite nineteenth-century critics' sententious reviews of sensation fiction, especially their attacks on libertine female characters, Victorian women flocked to

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Mudie's lending library to read novels that delineate fatal women, increasing the popularity of dangerous female characters throughout the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> In rapid perusal of this fiction describing the antics of the femme fatale, these readers more than likely related to the degree to which conventional mid-nineteenth-century ideals about a woman's purity were simply used to keep her confined to the domestic sphere. Thus this feminine trope of the dangerous woman seems unabashedly to subvert the bourgeois ideology that disenfranchises a woman who transgresses social boundaries and exploits men for their power and wealth. Unlike the domestic or fallen woman, mid-nineteenth-century femme fatales take action against such conventional restraints by threatening men who represent the dominant Victorian ideology that oppresses women.

Cunning, strong-mindedness, independence, and unconventionality—these are the traits certainly that characterize the femme fatale, but these features alone do not earn her the name. So why do I recognize certain female Victorian characters as femme fatales while other self-sufficient heroines like Jane Eyre are not? How and why does the femme fatale warrant that name?

Elements of mythical and historical women influence traits of the mid-century femme fatale, which cannot be ignored. According to Mario Praz in *The Romantic Agony*, Shakespeare's Cleopatra is the first Romantic incarnation of the Fatal Woman, and her exoticism appropriately reflects the passionate energy of the early nineteenth century (214). Though the Fatal Woman became pervasive in Romantic literature, Praz clarifies that "there is no established type of the Fatal Woman" (201). The femme fatale embodies different types of female characters from Shakespeare's early sixteenth-century vision of a somewhat mannish yet provocative Cleopatra, to Matthew Lewis's Matilda, a

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diabolical beauty in *The Monk* (1797). Throughout Romantic poetry the erotic signifying power of the femme fatale is often associated with death and violence that ends in the destruction of her male partner or nemesis. While Shakespeare's version of the femme fatale in his characterization of Cleopatra (her strength and guile) powerfully influenced the Romantics, mid-nineteenth-century poets and novelists simply borrowed elements of the dangerous woman from John Keats and Matthew Lewis to build on their own conceptualizations of the sexual danger of the femme fatale in Victorian culture. For example Keats's poetic interpretation of the Fatal Woman in *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* (1820) led to the mysterious background in *Une Nuit de Cleopatre* (1845) by Theophile Gautier, where male admirers worship Cleopatra because she is unattainable. The power of Cleopatra's sexuality is an end in itself when she murders her lover, his premature death enabling her to run off with his wealth.

Yet, the mid-century femme fatale is different from historical figures such as Cleopatra, Salome, Helen of Troy, or the sirens because she does not always bear a sexuality that is blatantly predatory. In the 1840s, the femme fatale is introduced as a middle-class, educated woman who enters mainstream Victorian culture without being detected as dangerous. At first this stealth is a necessity because of the power and repressive force of patriarchal thinking. She is young and attractive, yet dangerous specifically because she so convincingly blends into mainstream society, and, until the plot develops, usually other characters regard her as innocuous due to her reticent manner and modest physical appearance.

A vivacious, buxom femme fatale, like Lydia Gwilt, makes a strenuous effort to conceal her magnificence and sexual prowess, using these qualities only once, when she

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catches her victim in a vulnerable moment and attempts to seduce or destroy him. In *Armadale*, Lydia makes desperate efforts throughout the novel to disguise her identity under a heavy paisley veil and virtuous manners, yet she startles Ozias Midwinter with her dazzling beauty when he first meets her. Lydia's striking red hair, sensual lips, and stunning figure threaten to give away her true identity as the once-married woman found guilty of poisoning her husband. Beauty figuratively connects Lydia to her sexual past, a concern that Mother Oldershaw placates by suggesting that Miss Gwilt, with "[her] appearance, [her] manners, [her] abilities, and [her] education, can make almost any excursions into society that she pleases" (199). Lydia therefore de-emphasizes her physical exuberance that suggests she is a seductress in order to convince aristocratic men that she is a lady, "remarkably soft and winning" (125). A good education and respectable manners make her disguise as a domestic ideal complete enabling her to exact revenge on the Armadale family and embezzle their fortune by first seducing and disarming Armadale's protector and best friend, Midwinter.

In this way, Victorian femme fatales, like Lydia Gwilt, seem to resist their objectification as seductresses. Until she manipulatively exposes the vices or vulnerabilities of her male victims, the mid-century femme fatale carefully conceals the seductive nature of her sexuality. In a moment of passion Lydia Gwilt subdues Midwinter, exposing his vulnerabilities, and causing her nemesis to fall in love with her. Similarly Becky Sharp uses her beguiling charm to become Lord Steyne's mistress reaping money and expensive gifts from him.

Despite the harsh consequences Becky Sharp suffers, she ultimately prevails by reinventing herself as a governess, a wife, an actress, and a widow. Though "somebody

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[comes] and [sweeps] it down rudely” each time she makes “a little circle for herself with incredible toils and labour”, she begins anew (690). Becky’s reputation inevitably catches up to her in each new setting and circle of aristocratic friends, yet her sense of humor and carefree attitude allow her to proceed with new plans. Becky, in fact, is the only high-spirited character in *Vanity Fair* because she lives by her own rules without taking herself or her reputation too seriously. Her indefatigability suggests that culture’s harsh moral invectives can be frivolous and ineffective when rumors about her character fail to discourage Becky from hatching new schemes to marry gullible men for economic security and respectability.

Physical appearances still play a significant role in the characterization of the mid-century femme fatale but only to construct an acceptable image of women, such as the domestic ideal suitable by bourgeois standards. Sophisticated beauties, like Dickens’s Lady Dedlock in *Bleak House*, or plain-featured women, such as Thackeray’s Becky Sharp, use their assets to cross the boundaries of respectable homes. The waif-like physique of Becky Sharp seemingly poses no threat, while Lady Dedlock appears too noble a figure to have made any moral transgressions. Though Braddon’s Lady Audley is beautiful, she disguises her beauty behind a façade of child-like innocence. Lady Audley, unlike Becky, is beautiful, but her delicate features conceal her rapacious nature. Overall Braddon’s popular Victorian femme fatale seems too harmless to be taken for a fatal woman. Yet such camouflage is necessary if dangerous women are to invade aristocratic homes and marry wealthy men. Additionally these disguises help guarantee the femme fatale’s success when she decides to break from poverty and pursue better options in upper-class homes by enchanting elderly gentlemen.

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Victorian novelists implicitly warn readers against such deceptive appearances, for beneath a pretense of domesticity, the woman could really be a murderess. It is her predisposition to scheme against men and against the social order that most distinguishes the femme fatale in the literature of the mid-nineteenth century. Her ideological function is to subvert detection by the very persuasiveness of her disguise. The male detective often has trouble proving that she is a threat to middle-class morality because no one finds his claim convincing. The femme fatale's disguise renders social boundaries and dominant ideology powerless when aristocratic and bourgeois homes unsuspectingly welcome socially inferior women.

By the later part of the century, the physical image of the femme fatale in art and literature transforms. Dante Rossetti represents such women in art with masculine features, implying that the subject positions of women change from the frail domestic ideal commonly portrayed in early to mid-nineteenth-century fiction by Jane Austen, George Eliot, and Charles Dickens to more decadently epic figures of women in art beginning in the 1860s. In *Femme Fatales*, Patrick Bade explains, "the curves of breasts, waist and hips are hidden or suppressed" (13). Even a woman's sexuality is obscured in art by stronger and more robust features, reflecting a shifting representation of women from docile, domestic goddesses to aggressive bourgeois women. Dominant masculine features characterized in Rossetti's paintings explicitly reflect the daunting nature of the femme fatale.

Relationships between the femme fatale and her male victims resonate with fear in mid-Victorian fiction when dangerous, murderous women easily prey upon infantile often spoiled, youthful males such as Robert Audley or Allan Armadale. To identify a

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female character as a femme fatale, a sheltered and naïve male protagonist must be present. Physically he is inferior and is no match for her exuberance. The male victim's gullibility is tested in the presence of the femme fatale, who threatens to destroy him. Here we see one of the main characteristics of the femme fatale: she affects men and must have an effect on them; unless the male protagonist is present, the woman is not fatal. Frequently he becomes the novel's detective, a role forcing him into manhood. Robert Audley's investigation specifically compels him to face his fears and obsessions about women. He complains about Alicia Audley because she is domineering while he obsesses about Clara Talboys who seems cold and inaccessible; Lady Audley embodies his fear of women, eliciting feelings of inadequacy and inferiority demonstrated in his relationships with Alicia and Clara. Sexual tension is inevitably present between the sexually repressed male protagonist and the sexually experienced femme fatale, and is often threatening to the male protagonist who lacks knowledge about the power of erotic desire.

Since the femme fatale is the subject of an investigation in which the detective strives to uncover her true identity, she must cunningly subvert his inquiries into her past, usually by plotting to murder him. Here we see another subversive subtext; the role of the male protagonist signifies order, stability, and authority, all of which must be restored by the end of the novel, while the femme fatale represents disorder and ambiguity. In fact this plot line completes the male protagonist's transition from a spoiled aristocrat to protector when he risks his life to guard his family and wealth against the threat of the femme fatale who undermines powerful aristocratic families. But when we consider

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Robert Audley's misogynistic views about women, such order really means keeping women oppressed and powerless.

Praz refers to the predatory nature of the femme fatale in relation to her male victims as "sexual cannibalism" (215). This definition accurately captures the murderous plots of the mid-century femme fatale, though she does not necessarily kill for sport like Cleopatra. Rather Lydia Gwilt, Becky Sharp, and Lady Audley inexhaustibly pursue the task of gaining wealth against all odds; they want to be rich, and they strive for social power. That objective usually requires seeking out an available wealthy male suitor and damaging family relations or the family's reputation. Seeking revenge, the femme fatale either murders a family member or forces the family to abandon their home in order to escape the stigma caused by her. Destroying the structure of the family enables her to settle old scores against aristocrats who undermine her or treat her as inferior.

In *Vanity Fair*, Becky Sharp relentlessly pursues Jos Sedley to prove that he is no more scrupulous or worthy than is she. When Jos Sedley first meets Becky Sharp, George Osborne announces that it is in poor taste for Amelia to introduce "a little nobody—a little upstart governess" into the Sedley home (59). By interrupting "the success of [Becky's] first love passage" with Jos Sedley, George feels that he saves himself the trouble of disrepute by being associated with a lower class woman married to his wife's brother (14:143). Unlike the fallen woman who tolerates such patronizing attitudes, the femme fatale refuses to let bourgeois culture treat her rudely as an inferior; instead she strikes back, enticing other more prominent aristocrats, manipulatively gaining their trust, and figuratively turning the bourgeois ideal on its head by negating all family values.



Despite his protests that “Miss Sharp must learn her station”, George Osbourne fails to persuade other members of his class that Becky is a low woman (7:61). When Becky becomes Lady Crawley, George proclaims to Captain Crawley “she was a sharp one, a dangerous one, a desperate flirt” (143). According to George Osborne, the position of a lady compared to a governess is incompatible. Becky Sharp rebels against Osborne’s rigid views controlled by the Victorian dogmas, and her tactics liken the femme fatale to the preying Mantis or black widow in relation to the male when Becky figuratively corrupts family values, by exposing Osborne’s hypocrisies in his subsequent adulterous affair with her. In short, her sexuality, alone, is not the only power by which the femme fatale threatens her male victims in mid-nineteenth-century literature. She combines her sexuality with knowledge about domestic ideology and has as her objective to undermine that ideology, pointing to bourgeois double standards, for these same families preach moral purity, while desperately hiding their own duplicitous infidelities in the shadows of respectability. The whole structure of society more generally, rather than any particular individual, tends to be her main target.

While nineteenth-century society generalizes and polarizes women as either virtuous or fallen, the femme fatale subverts these dichotomous categorizations. She imitates the domestic woman convincingly, but in fact she is neither a domestic nor a fallen woman. Despite her sexual transgressions, she will not tolerate society’s degradation of her, as does the fallen woman Emily, for example, in Dickens’ *David Copperfield*. Escaping to the murky miasma of London’s underground, Emily cannot face her family after running away with the egocentric aristocrat, Steerforth. In contrast, the femme fatale reinvents herself and immediately reintegrates into society, all the while

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Though the mid-century femme fatale conjures up devious schemes to exploit men, and often plots to murder them, she actively changes traditional representations of women as domestic or fallen by shamelessly rejecting bourgeois moral imperatives meant to restrict women. In fiction, she suggests that disaffected middle-class women, marginalized from other privileged bourgeois women, will risk everything to gain power. They see social boundaries as a challenge to be transgressed and manipulated at will. Stalwart men, who cannot even distinguish such women from those who uphold moral codes, cannot, therefore, force women outside mainstream boundaries. Furthermore, subversive images of women lead young Victorian female readers to believe that rebelling against social codes is not a moral crime. As a result of a woman’s economic and social powerlessness and sexual repression, female readers related to the agitation and frustration the femme fatale experiences in her social climbing adventures. Hence the Fatal Woman is not simply a cliché, but rather this figure makes a profound impression on nineteenth-century popular culture, embodying the socioeconomic vulnerability of the Victorian woman.

Meanwhile, her goals and independent aspirations undermine middle-class conventions meant to protect the class system as the dominant social structure. The Victorian femme fatale isolates herself from social and political orthodoxy and challenges prescribed moral and sexual ideology, which ultimately brings about major changes in the portrayal of women as more assertive and less likely to submit to

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oppressive social codes. Since attitudes about women changed as a result of small feminist uprisings and different depictions of women in popular fiction, Victorian culture desperately codified sexuality as a means to control women. At first, most men and even numerous middle-class women feared cultural changes symbolized by the *femme fatale*. Men feared losing social power to ambitious women, while other women feared losing their economic security should fewer men decide to marry. Conservatives referred to mid-century sensation writers such as Florence Marryat or Rhoda Broughton as revolutionaries and anarchists because they threatened the existing British social order. However, mid-century novels written by these women initiate an examination of changes concerning society's perception of women, hence beginning a re-evaluation of women's roles.

Though sexuality, as Foucault explains, is an "object of great suspicion" (69), conservative reformers like William Acton and W. R. Greg produce a proliferation of debates leading to a plethora of feminine representations that attempted to categorize and to reinforce control over different types of women.<sup>5</sup> Sexuality inevitably became a very public issue in the nineteenth century. Gender differences, as an aspect of sexuality, became more ambiguous in the 1860s when novelists characterize women as ambitious, adventurous and aggressive, traits usually attributed to men. Victorian perceptions of women shift from the passive and meek domestic woman to a more assertive and demanding dominant role. As a new representation of Victorian women, the *femme fatale* shows literal signs of self-empowerment and a willful energy, by resorting to desperate measures that include adultery, bigamy, or murder. Since her sexual past involving these crimes is really the central mystery in the novel, the *femme fatale* is

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figuratively meant to embody hidden secrets of feminine sexuality, while the male detective battles for control over this knowledge. In the opinion of nineteenth-century conservative reformers, feminine sexuality, particularly characterized in sensation fiction, destabilizes the hegemonic power structure. By punishing dangerous women, and by subordinating domineering, assertive bourgeois women into their proper domestic roles, the detective re-establishes order.

Corrupt women must be discovered, rooted out, and replaced by the cultural ideal in order to defend social dogmas. Mid-nineteenth-century laws, such as the Contagious Diseases Acts, fiercely attempted to protect these boundaries. Conservatives of the nineteenth century, like Acton, argued for regulation of prostitution to establish boundaries in retaliation to this “social evil.” Many Victorians set out to generate different representations of women in order to keep women in fear of this stigma and from transgressing moral codes or from struggling for social power.

Similar to the male protagonist who obsessively investigates the femme fatale’s sexual history to define her as a dangerous woman, medical science explains that a woman’s biological function can categorize women as decent or immoral. Male detectives look for clues that enable them to arrive at such conclusions about a woman’s character. For example, a gold lock of hair and a baby’s shoe allude to Lady Audley’s sexual experience and eventually link her to the disappearance of George Talboys, her first husband. Robert Audley vigorously follows the clues in order to discover that Lady Audley is a mother, a bigamist, and a murderess. These methods used to define women or exploit their sexual histories are meant to implement rigid social and economic boundaries in Victorian society.

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Compared to the mid-century, the social order represented in late-Victorian literature is re-established once the femme fatale dies, usually a violent death, such as the vivisection of Lucy Westerna in *Dracula*, the fiery disintegration of the deadly woman in Haggard's *She*, or the slow physical deterioration of the corruptive courtesan in *Nana*. As social changes become more prevalent in the late nineteenth century, when women begin demanding equal opportunity in traditionally male-defined roles like writing, art, and political activism, the femme fatale develops into a more stereotypical image, increasing this fear of feminine sexuality in order to keep women from pursuing male-oriented professions. By the 1890s the femme fatale is less complex and more of an archetype, which is coincidentally meant to undermine the emergence of the New Woman who shows much strength and stamina concerning her beliefs, characteristics of the earlier fictional femme fatale.

There are some striking similarities between the femme fatale portrayed in the mid-nineteenth century and the New Woman, the harbinger of cultural, social, and political protest against sexist Victorian gender ideology. Due to her prevalence in Victorian literature where she expresses socioeconomic concerns shared by middle-class women readers and because she implicitly attacks male-defined moral standards of women, the image of the femme fatale helps shift the concepts of gender. I believe that a comparison between the femme fatale and the New Woman is thus important.

For example, both types of women pose a threat to male dominance and authority. The New Woman is different from the femme fatale because she threatens to change social and economic conditions of women by entering male domains such as education, politics, and employment. Publicly defending the rights of women and exposing the

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abomination behind marital respectability, the New Woman struggles against sexist oppression, but she is not sexually fatal like the femme fatale and does not use such secret stratagems.

The femme fatale, on the other hand, projects an imaginary realm of fantasy and mystery that is essentially feminine, therefore provoking male desire, characteristics that are not related to the New Woman, whose sexuality is not to be bartered or controlled by men in marriage. Rather the New Woman demands a woman's rights over her own body. In New Woman novels, such as Gissing's *The Odd Women*, male characters persistently pursue unavailable women by attempting to domesticate and eventually dominate them. The sexual threat is literally removed from New Woman novels, while she defies patriarchy, which keeps women economically dependent on men.

To analyze and explain the significance of the femme fatale motif as a major nineteenth-century literary construction, I will divide this study into five chapters that define the femme fatale in mid-century literature, provide an historical perspective, and explain my theoretical approach. This project specifically discusses the mid-Victorian femme fatale in *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Armadale* among a number of other Victorian novels.<sup>6</sup> In the concluding chapter, I will compare the femme fatale and the New Woman. Though the fictional femme fatale and the New Woman subvert traditional paradigms of domestic or fallen women, and they are viewed as a revolt against established culture, they indeed represent two very different threats to patriarchal power and bring about different social views concerning women. The New Woman is an agent of social and political transformation; she actively aligns herself with the women's movement and political causes that include socialism and protests for personal liberty and

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equality. The femme fatale, however, only desires socioeconomic mobility and power. She strives for her financial independence and a place within the upper class but does not wish to subvert the social order. The New Woman would certainly not identify herself with the femme fatale who depends on the marriage market in order to integrate into mainstream bourgeois society.

The first chapter discusses Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and addresses a central debate taken up by literary critic, Rebecca Stott, who maintains that Tess is a femme fatale. Though Tess demonstrates some predatory actions, I argue that she is not a femme fatale because she does not seek or plot revenge against her male victimizers. Furthermore, she is not ambitious or driven by power and greed like traditional femme fatales. Rather Tess is autonomous; she neither wishes to subvert the social order nor desires to change it, but only wishes to be self-governing.

The second chapter defines the femme fatale by distinguishing her from other prominent Victorian female characters: the fallen woman and the domestic woman. By making these distinctions, I hope to show that the femme fatale is a significant object of study. To make these distinctions clearer, this chapter discusses boundary markers, namely the domestic sphere and public space, which metaphorically keep women "in their place." When a woman crosses the boundary between hearth and home into public life, she figuratively transgresses moral and social codes, and therefore she is marginalized from mainstream society; her transgressions are well exposed as a warning to other characters in the novel. The fallen woman, in short, is a victim of the male protagonist, and the crime committed against her signifies her fall, unlike the predatory femme fatale who deliberately beguiles and deceives aristocratic male characters.

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Middle-class married women influenced by the feminist movement in the nineteenth century often identify with the fate of fallen women by proclaiming that marriage is a form of legalized prostitution.<sup>7</sup> In fact, middle-class women recognized that they really have no more social power than do fallen women because their power is circumscribed by domestic life; the difference is simply that the fallen woman has transgressed cultural boundaries by invading male space, the public sphere. Society stigmatizes her for this transgression as a tainted and impure woman. Radical feminists, and especially the New Woman, unabashedly challenge such standards, transgressing social boundaries between the domestic and public sphere, and thwarting domestic and marital conventions. They literally threaten public life defined as the professional, political, and social pursuits of men.

The third chapter addresses the question of where the femme fatale originates and why she becomes so prevalent in nineteenth-century literature. For example, why is she of such importance to Victorian writers? What causes her to emerge during a period of social and economic change? Why is there no established “type” of the femme fatale? What cultural phenomena influence her characterization? By studying the peculiar behavior of “the Fatal Woman” and the darker aspects of her erotic sensuality, I explain the ideological function of the femme fatale in Victorian literature on two different levels concerning feminine sexuality and socioeconomic concerns. First, from the dominant ideological perspective of the nineteenth century, the salacious features of the femme fatale motif legitimize middle-class cultural values and protect the bourgeois family from “contagion and contamination,” in an effort to enforce social class boundaries discussed in Chapter 2. Conservative, respectable Victorian critics, such as Mrs. Oliphant, found

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the femme fatale in sensation fiction particularly contemptible and treat her as a marginal because she threatens the security of the middle-class. In particular, anti-feminist critic, Eliza Linton, mobilized stereotypes of the fatal woman to discredit new female subjectivities. Secondly, while the femme fatale, in my opinion, has been often misconstrued as a “conservative backlash” against the Women’s Movement organized by middle-class women in the 1850’s, I am not interested in demonstrating how the femme fatale strengthens dominant ideology of the nineteenth century. Rather I argue that the construction of the femme fatale offers an empowering image of women that challenges Victorian readers’ stereotypes about women.

Sensation fiction establishes the femme fatale as a central motif of mystery and intrigue in the Victorian novel, making this feminine trope a cultural phenomenon. When novelists such as Wilkie Collins, Mrs. Henry Wood, Emma Robinson, and Elizabeth Braddon characterize the femme fatale, they similarly show that her parentage, poverty, and social class marginalize her from polite bourgeois society, circumstances over which she is powerless. For these very reasons, she threatens “external boundaries, margins, and internal structure” by mobilizing herself into respectable aristocratic homes (Douglas 1 15). Becky Sharp, Lydia Gwilt, and Lady Audley, for example, are often pathological, criminal, abnormal, sexually deviant and aggressive. Focusing on these dangerous aspects, however, undermines the complexity of the femme fatale. These female villains convey a common message that they refuse to be victims in society despite broken homes, unreliable husbands, and economic hardships. The hero of the novel must defeat the femme fatale because she threatens patriarchal power and middle-class standards of morality and purity. But he cannot help being completely obsessed by her image though

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he may loathe and despise her. Increased popularity, especially in the circulation of sensation novels, proves that Victorian readers had become similarly engrossed by the femme fatale and moreover titillated by her criminal activity.

Sensation fiction is important to this study, not only because readership among women during the 1860s increased, but also because more women wrote and published sensation fiction than did men. These novelists' contributions to this literary genre construct a different femme fatale that reflects the economic and social realities of women in the nineteenth century. The femme fatale in sensation fiction embodies socioeconomic problems, such as abandonment, poverty, and spinsterhood, that real-life, unmarried, middle-class women must overcome. Mrs. Henry Wood writes about these conditions in *East Lynne*, and Emma Robinson addresses them in her novel *Madeline Graham*, a parody of the infamous Madeline Smith murder trial. These women novelists were fully cognizant of the "Woman's Question", even before Eleanor Marx coined the term, and the need to bring it to the forefront of public consciousness by becoming active in socio-political issues.

Both Marryat and Robinson, for example, wrote letters to their publisher, Richard Bentley, urging him to grant them permission to give public lectures on women's issues. In a letter dated July 5, 1878, Florence Marryat complained that she "so often applied to [Bentley] w/o success."<sup>8</sup> Though Bentley apparently had little regard for Marryat's undertaking, she, like other women, made rigorous efforts to promote her message about oppressive marriage laws and the exploitation of women's roles despite these unpopular views. Though Marryat and Robinson may be considered minor writers in a contemporary study of sensation fiction, they had a significant influence on women and

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the public during the nineteenth century. It was not, for example, uncommon that their personal lives were publicized, usually by critics of sensation fiction who wanted to construct a scandalous image of these pioneering female novelists.

By providing an analysis of *Lady Audley's Secret* in the fourth chapter, I examine those qualities that define the femme fatale and stresses her complexity. Before she becomes Lady Audley, Helen Maldon struggles against and overcomes major adversities such as poverty, abandonment, single-parenthood, limited job opportunities, and Victorian society's harsh judgments of her. To demonstrate her independence, Helen Maldon simply reinvents herself by posturing as the domestic ideal, and eventually marries an aristocrat. In Braddon's novel, the use to which the femme fatale puts her sexuality is not stereotypically that of a vamp or seductress, and is complicated by the fact that she must imitate dominant cultural ideals, which require women to be pure and chaste.

A woman's sexuality is forbidden, taboo, hidden, and secret. Yet feminine sexuality is also furtively used by the femme fatale to gain power, in part because other avenues to power are blocked, such as access to the economic, the political, and the social spheres that would allow women to speak more freely about gender oppression.

Chapter five argues that the Victorian femme fatale resists objectification as an exotic beauty. Upon her first meeting with Collins' Allan Armadale, Lydia Gwilt conceals her sexuality in order to gain trust among her male adversaries and eventually victimize Allan Armadale, running off with his family fortune; by suppressing a powerfully sexualized image, the femme fatale manipulates impetuous aristocratic males and plots their demise. Unlike the historical femme fatale, Cleopatra, Lydia Gwilt in

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*Armadale* poses a central contradiction against the sexualized stereotype since Lydia conceals her fatality, conservatively dressing in “a thick black veil, a black bonnet, and a black silk dress” (125), a convincing disguise while trying to escape the harsh realities of spinsterhood, poverty, and despair.

A closer study of her position within the hegemonic power structure helps define the deadliness of the femme fatale. Based on outward appearances, Lydia Gwilt defies the image of the sexually threatening woman, and this contradiction disrupts the stereotypical construction of the femme fatale. Even Midwinter, who recognizes Lydia as the fatal woman, still marries her paradoxically convinced by her feigned helplessness and virtue. The male protagonist loses power by yielding to the sensations or desire he experiences in the presence of the femme fatale. Nevertheless, a struggle to apprehend the dangerous woman persists throughout the novel after the protagonist suspects her duplicity. The role of the detective, his pending investigation of the dangerous woman, and his obsession with decoding dreams and symbols, reflect the control over women that Victorian gender ideology gives to men in courtship and marriage. The male protagonist wants to master or be master over the femme fatale—or more generally—women all together. So long as her schemes go undetected, Lydia unmans her lover, making Midwinter the hysteric, enabling her to undermine the ideological apparatuses of courtship and marriage.

Yet, by the very nature of her sexuality, the femme fatale eventually subdues dominant male characters, who symbolize law and order, and construct social boundaries for women. Though by the end of the novel Lydia abandons all her schemes to destroy *Armadale*, he and Ozias Midwinter dangerously succumb to Lydia Gwilt’s influence and

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power. Removing the sexual threat of the femme fatale in *Armada* does not render the hegemonic power structure less vulnerable to Lydia's dangerous influence until she finally surrenders.

Images of women that both threaten nineteenth-century dominant ideology and undermine conventional representations of women illustrate the significance of the femme fatale. The hegemonic power structure codifies characteristics of dangerous women; yet categorizations of women really only allow Victorian society to oppress, exploit and objectify women. Images of fictional dangerous women lead to more serious disruptions within the dominant power structure when middle-class Victorian women create new opportunities for themselves as writers, artists, and professionals who question the so-called respectability of marriage. This transformation of women's opinions, values and attitudes marks the age of the late-nineteenth century New Woman.

Marriage and gender inequality are two central issues against which both the fictional femme fatale and New Woman struggle in order to improve their socio-economic status. While in fiction the femme fatale surreptitiously conceals her past and generates new schemes to undermine patriarchal power, the New Woman turns to journalism and popular literature to promote political and cultural agitation and to transform public opinion of the social conditions of women. Unlike the femme fatale, the New Woman is a revolutionary who wants to change the structure of society, while the femme fatale does not struggle for such change. She simply uses the hegemonic power structure to her own advantage. In this way, the femme fatale is aloof and refuses to commit to a social cause whereas the primary concern of the New Woman was social and economic independence. Though the femme fatale resents economic dependency on

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male characters and incites a backlash against male-defined morality, she marries to satisfy her primary purpose of social and economic advancement. By transforming public opinion concerning the oppressive double standard and generating new female identities for women misrepresented and undermined by male definitions, the New Woman wants to do away with this subordination altogether so women are no longer forced to marry men for economic security. Despite these differences, both Victorian representations of women offer a stronger, more influential image of women that inspires middle-class women to revolt against sexist oppression.

Like the femme fatale, the New Woman embodies female rebellion, exposing sexual exploitation in marriage and gender inequality. As a writer, artist, or social reformer like Eleanor Marx, Olive Schreiner or Sarah Grand, the New Woman is a feminist activist undaunted by ideological apparatuses that sexually exploit women. Marx, Schreiner, and Grand aggressively sought new professional options for women in male-dominated fields and looked for alternatives to marriage. These options allowed a Victorian woman to be a spinster, a sexual libertarian, or an unhappy married woman pushing for divorce. The femme fatale, in contrast, is still subjected to the double standard though she implicitly points to limited options for single bourgeois women employed as governesses while seeking wealthy male suitors who can increase her social and economic status.

In “Marketing Sensation: *Lady Audley’s Secret* and Consumer Culture,” Katherine Montwieler asserts that the femme fatale functions as do conduct books by teaching young, determined, impoverished women middle-class social codes and manners. But unlike conduct books, the example of the femme fatale is really a device

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enabling marginalized women to invade upper-class homes and manipulate powerful aristocratic men who implement laws of morality. By resourcefully constructing herself as the domestic ideal, a façade she uses to dupe aristocratic men into marriage, the femme fatale manipulates and exploits the marriage market. An exemplary enterprising gold digger, the femme fatale marries for wealth and respectability in order to satisfy her social climbing aspirations. Appalled by the duplicity of such ambitious women, respectable society is similarly offended by the New Woman's sexual anarchy.

While the femme fatale figuratively exploits domesticity as a marketing tool for young, enterprising women, the New Woman novel puts marriage upon its trial. New Women writers Sarah Grand and Olive Schreiner explore alternatives to marriage and create heroines with strong sexual urges though these novelists do not mean to abandon the marriage concept altogether. Rather they encourage sexual openness and advocate sex education for middle-class women. By attacking the double standard inscribed in Victorian family life, the New Woman is really attacking sexual repression—not sexual relations. Male-constructed sexual ideology suggests that female desire is unnatural, immoral, and impure while encouraging Victorian men to have sexual experiences. For the New Woman, this double standard prevents women from constructing themselves as sexual subjects and keeps them subordinated as sexual *objects*. Though the femme fatale does construct herself as an object of male desire for the purpose of capitalizing on the vulnerability of eligible, aristocratic bachelors, she similarly shows that bourgeois men have forced middle-class women to be the upholders of decency and examples of male-defined morality, a dehumanizing burden. In retaliation, the femme fatale corrupts Victorian conceptualizations of a woman's purity.

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The New Woman is an agent of social and political transformation while the femme fatale warns middle-class female readers that marriage disempowers a woman unless she can exert more control over the marriage market by determining her value and marrying above her social rank. Hence femme fatale characters may indicate the need for social and political change or different alternatives for women; but unlike the revolutionary New Woman, the femme fatale really desires power without making any sacrifices.

My definition intends to show that the femme fatale disempowers male-defined representations of women. In contrast to the Angel in the House or the fallen woman, the femme fatale gains agency by threatening male dominance. She contemptuously communicates her indifference toward dominant bourgeois ideology by treating social codes, domestic ideals, and respectable manners as role-playing devices that allow her greater power within the social class system, meanwhile meeting her needs at the expense of other characters. Though such craftiness may be expected among femme fatale characters, respectable aristocrats are also culpable, attempting to use her for their own selfish purposes. The femme fatale simply subverts their schemes against her by carrying out designs of her own.

Literary images of these complex, manipulative, and shameless, yet unconventional, and strong female characters illustrate women's struggle against sexist oppression in Victorian England. It is certainly not my intention to show the femme fatale as yet another stereotype, but to prove that the femme fatale reflects the socioeconomic struggles of nineteenth-century British women, and that ambitious Victorian women must take unorthodox measures in order to reverse their cruel economic

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circumstances. By explaining the demeaning effects of reducing women to cultural constructions, this dissertation demonstrates the significance of the femme fatale in mid-century fiction and that her image inevitably leads to more serious and realistic descriptions of women in fiction with the emergence of the New Woman.

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## Chapter 1

### Fallen or Fatal? Feminine Representation of Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*

"For she you love is not my real self, but one in my image . . ."

Tess in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, 1895

In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Thomas Hardy defends his heroine against readers and censors who judge Tess to be immoral, or at a minimum, a temptress, as a consequence of her actions, for which Hardy claims she is not responsible. Some nineteenth-century scholars go so far as to argue that this book, in fact, puts Tess's moral purity on trial. This is a rather flawed interpretation since Hardy seems to argue that socioeconomic pressure leads to the exploitation of Tess in a world where women are powerless against conventional rules of morality and moral purity constructed by patriarchy. But it is misunderstanding characteristic of much of the criticism dealing with female identity in the nineteenth century. This chapter discusses some of the critical commentary, both past and contemporary, relating to women, and especially to the femme fatale, and points out how my own understanding uses this criticism as a point of departure or as a foil. I find the nineteenth century critics' treatment of Tess to be symptomatic of women's condition in that century. I also find some of the contemporary criticism, in reaction, to err in other directions.

Thomas Hardy disputes conventional fixed images of a woman's purity, and the reigning rigid polarities between pure and impure, virgin and whore, innocence and guilt used metaphorically by mid-nineteenth century ideologues to designate social boundaries for women. Tess, however, wishes to escape these repressive definitions and to live in an authentic identity that is not fixed for her. In essence, she searches to discover her self in

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a society that does not value a woman's desire for autonomy and self-discovery. Tess desperately struggles against these polarities and social representations of women, ultimately only to lose the battle. In this struggle, Tess epitomizes the on-going struggle of Victorian women to try to escape the suffocating social definitions used to circumscribe their freedom of action.

As part of this critical discussion, I hope to clarify distinctions between "fallen" and "fatal" as these features apply to *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, a classic Hardyean heroine, in order to give sharper definition to the characteristics of the femme fatale. For example, literary scholar, Rebecca Stott claims in her essay, "'Something More to be Said': Hardy's Tess," that Tess is "a predatory femme fatale," while at the same time Tess "eludes categorization," even though readers and critics consistently try to "fix and name" Tess (178). Many contemporary critics attempt this very re-interpretation to subvert conventional readings of the archetypal fallen woman,<sup>9</sup> only, ironically, to fall into another over-general categorization. Feminist critics want to defer the representation of Tess as an exploited and violated woman in order to give her agency. As an ardent reader of *Tess*, I am inclined to do the same, but not by means of assigning to her the label, femme fatale. I try to demonstrate here, just as Luce Irigaray has elsewhere, that a woman's sexuality is "multiple and non-unified" and that one cannot give an exact definition of women (79).

Stott makes additional important contributions to the discussion of the representation of Tess by discussing the continued attempts of male characters in the novel to try to fix and name Tess (178). Stott attempts to subvert these male-defined characterizations of Tess as the victim or fallen woman by arguing that Tess can also be

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viewed as the predatory femme fatale. She claims that Hardy moves “away from the powerful polarities of sexual typing” by “shifting uneasily between readings between Tess as victim and as fatally degenerate sexual being” (198). This is a neat inversion, but I am not convinced that Tess is dangerous to other men and patriarchal codes. Many critics of nineteenth-century literature similarly argue that Hardy subverts representations of fallenness, though none whose work I have read name Tess as a femme fatale.<sup>10</sup> Properly so, I think, because naming Tess as a femme fatale simply creates a new definition for her when Hardy is trying to subvert clearly defined cultural representations of women.

In this chapter, I will frequently revert back to Stott’s essay, not because I agree entirely with it, but because I find her argument both provocative but flawed, since in reacting to early readings of Tess as a fallen woman, Stott asserts that Tess is a femme fatale. I think this misreads both Hardy and Tess: Tess is not a femme fatale. Tess’s violent nature, Stott asserts, constructs her as a fatal woman. But violent tendencies, alone, do not justify defining a woman as fatal, a term that will become clearer as I develop my definition of the nineteenth century femme fatale.

Overall, I believe that Hardy’s novel and his portrait of Tess are very useful points of departure for this study since he develops several ambiguities which help define the differences between fallen women and femme fatales. Thus, contrary to Stott’s image of Tess as a fatal woman because she murders her oppressor Alec d’Urberville, Hardy seems pointedly to make her an innocent victim of great socio-economic forces intent on suffocating her robust, natural impulses. I do understand, however, how Tess’s fall from innocence coupled with her violent reaction against d’Urberville, her oppressor,

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might suggest that these two representations of women, fallen and fatal, are ambiguous because both the fatal and fallen women fall outside the permissible identities constructed for women by nineteenth century society.

I agree with Stott that the femme fatale dodges conventional representations of women, and that Tess is not a quintessential Hardyean victim. But there are several problems with the way Stott affixes the term “fatal” to Tess. According to Stott, loaded contradictions in the novel suggest that “her beauty and sexual charms are not only tragic but fatal” (163). Stott’s explanation of Tess’s physical attributes implies that she is both a victim and a predator since men in the novel both exploit Tess and later become her prey. But here I would like to note that the danger is only to her oppressor and not to men in general.

This argument, however, is somewhat problematic since tragic and fatal do not bear the same meaning, even though both conditions may bring about disastrous results. To claim these consequences are the same is a gross-oversimplification. A noble, aspiring figure, can be brought low by social and economic pressures, and in the process bring one or more of her “tormentors” down with her, without being “fatal”, if by that term one means a woman is dangerous by calculation and by her very nature. Finally, Tess cannot be held to be responsible for her beauty and her charms, only for the uses to which she puts them; and it is clear that she does not seek to use these charms to ensnare men in a dangerous manipulated web.

Stott attempts to prove that Tess is really a femme fatale in the guise of a fallen woman by describing her beauty and charm as fatal. This conclusion is, I believe, wrong because it confuses the *consequence* of her prominent feminine sexual traits with the *use*

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to which they are put. It is fatal use that defines the femme fatale, not fatal consequence, which may or may not be tragic. Furthermore, through some tortuous reasoning, when Tess murders Alec d'Urberville, he is characterized as the victim.

Ignored is the fact that Tess's beauty and buxom figure *unintentionally* excite d'Urberville's obsession, leading him to chase her across the countryside while Tess endures several tribulations. Despite her protests, d'Urberville relentlessly pursues Tess until she finally submits and becomes Alec's mistress as a result of her family's economic vicissitudes, which she is unable to ameliorate on her own, finding no work and practically becoming a mendicant. When Tess becomes Alec's mistress she is much changed from a simple country girl to a woman whose "natural beauty was rendered more obvious by her attire" (55:349). This transition from the fair country dairymaid to a decadently dressed mistress causes Tess to loathe the woman she has become, adored and loved for her physical beauty. In a moment of rage after Angel Clare returns to claim his wife, Tess murders d'Urberville, figuratively killing a degraded and unnatural image of herself. Moreover, given Tess's nature, her being cannot survive with Alec d'Urberville in the urban setting of Sandbourne, a city dwelling, on the contrary, usually compatible with the femme fatale. Add to this difference the fact that Tess repudiates materialism, progress, and social advancement, values embraced by the femme fatale, and we see how inappropriate the label is.

In addition, Tess is not responsible for Angel's spiritual and physical deterioration. Angel's romantic longings and attitudes are quite conventional, a product of his age, and nature, and almost unrelated to Tess's essential nature. And because he does not take into account the essence of Tess's womanliness, that Tess's "corporeal

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blight had been her mental harvest" (19:115), he becomes a victim of his own blindness, not of Tess's wiles, of which there are none—her silence and reticence, concerning her fall, are well justified by his later response. Tess is changed from a simple country girl to a reticent yet enlightened woman, and her transformation can be identified by her sadness, which Angel Clare fails to recognize or understand.

Since society viciously slanders Tess following her rape / seduction by Alec d'Urberville, Tess is acutely sensitive to the injustices in the world against women who fall—or more accurately, are thrown down. Though Tess often alludes to these injustices, Angel Clare refuses to listen. Tess even attempts to confess her sexual history in a letter that Angel never receives, implying that such a confession is useless against his infantile idealizations. But Angel, too much a dreamer, personifies Tess as the essence of chastity, seeing in Tess "a fresh virginal daughter of Nature" (18:111). According to G. Wickens in "Hardy and the Aesthetic Mythographers," Angel mistakenly assumes that Tess can live up to his mythologization of her (88). Hardy understood that even if she could, did Angel have a right to impose it on her? The answer he gives, is no.

While seeming to disparage this mythologizing of Tess, naming her a *femme fatale* also fails to acknowledge Tess's essential nature, and it still leaves questions about improper categorization of women unresolved. Stressing the *femme fatale* motif over the fallen woman trope, as Stott does, does add complexity to Tess who "signifies the fallen woman." But it errs in claiming that Tess in the garden scene is "a predatory *femme fatale* in stalking the object of her desire," Angel Clare, like "the hunter stalking her prey" (Stott 178-9). Such a misreading undermines the very complexity it seeks to establish. On the contrary, in the garden scene Tess is simply a woman in love who

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wishes to realize her dream of love. Tess is not in any way trying to corrupt or harm Angel Clare in the way that the predatory femme fatale plots revenge against her male victims. More particularly, Tess does not seek to use Angel Clare to change her economic or social status, which is a central motive of the femme fatale.

Stott asserts that Tess's complicity in her fall and her desire for Angel Clare indicate that "Tess is mad with desire" (179). For me, these exaggerated claims negate Tess's subjectivity, for they imply that she is a degenerate. Once again, I do not believe that Hardy meant to present Tess as a figurative hunter, stalker, or woman "mad with desire." Furthermore, if these interpretations are meant to define the femme fatale, then such characterizations, I contend, fail. Surely, if the femme fatale represents anything, she personifies a stalker or a hunter, but in order to study and understand her actions and how they constitute the actions of a hunter, it is necessary to determine what motivates her, what causes her to succeed, and why she is so often defeated without ever really becoming the victim.

According to Stott, Angel Clare's context for understanding Tess is the Madonna / whore dichotomy. [Jennifer, I would delete the next sentence it just interrupts the argumentative flow.] She is both a victim and a mistress, prey and murderess. But again, this simple dichotomy is unworthy of Hardy's complex conception. When Tess claims that she is only an idealized version of who her lover, Angel Clare, desires her to be, she is correct, for she will eventually find out how axiomatic and conventional his interests really are when she confesses her seduction/rape story. Angel proves incapable of maintaining his image of her and regards "her in no other light than that of one who had practiced gross deceit upon him" (37:233).

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In **fact**, Tess is no different from the woman Angel first meets—she does not try to hide what **she** is. But Angel refuses to see anything in her character other than what he constructs; **nor** does he seek to escape the conventional Madonna-whore dichotomies that rule the **Victorian** conception of women. Thus, unlike the typical femme fatale who intentionally **poses** as a paragon of domesticity when her character is really corrupt, Tess is not at all **duplicitous**. But for Angel Clare, after she tells him her story, Tess becomes a different **woman**. He cannot come to terms with the fact that she embodies contradictions within women: for Angel Clare, she is either innocent or corrupt.

After Tess returns to Marlott following their wedding, Angel's actions confirm that "**deeper shade . . . of his own limitations**" (39:244). Because Angel's world view is still **limited by** custom and conventionality, he reconstructs his image of Tess based on her faults. **Despite** these tragic events governing her life, the exploitation of her virginity and the **oppressive** nature of her socioeconomic difficulties, she is still a simple field woman, **an ingenue**. Angel does not understand that Tess is as worthy as any other woman "**not by achievement but by tendency**" (39:244).

The irony is that both nineteenth-century readers and critics alike were equally subject to such mis-readings, judging Tess's character according to simple and resolute dichotomies. Victorian readers sympathize with Tess, or they blame her for her fall from rigid moral standards. Not surprisingly, Hardy's Tess internalizes these Victorian doctrines by blaming herself for being "coveted by the wrong man" (5:35), but for Tess, this injustice does not become a manifestation of resentment or bitterness. In contrast to Tess's acceptance, the femme fatale usually disregards attacks by other characters; she **simply** internalizes such slander as further motivation for revenge against upper class

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In "*Tess of the d'Urbervilles: Sexual Ideology and Narrative Form*," feminist critic Penny **Boumelha** explains that Tess's responsibility for "her undoing" (15:89) achieves an "**o**vert maleness in the narrative voice" (120) even though she is conscious of "incidents in **w**hich she had taken some share" (15:89). In other words, she takes responsibility **f**or her actions rather than blaming Alec d'Urberville. However, her story and her **narrative** are suppressed, hence replacing her voice with the narrator, Thomas Hardy. We **n**ever hear Tess's story of seduction or rape from her perspective although the **narrator** implies her feelings of accountability, perhaps explaining why Tess cannot forgive **h**erself. Furthermore, Tess in her own mind figuratively implicates herself when she **a**grees to ride away with d'Urberville on the evening he seduces her.

**B**ut **Boumelha's** assertion is problematic, implying that Victorian women really cannot **h**ave agency even in Hardy's attempt to subvert conventional constructions of women. If Tess's purity is figuratively on trial, the male narrative voice suggests that only patriarchy has the power to judge whether Tess is pure or impure. Angel Clare's and Tess's wedding night confessions additionally suggest that only men can be outspoken about their sexual experience whereas women must remain virginal or conceal the details of their sexually active past, which denies women subjectivity. When a woman cannot tell her story for fear of retribution or when her story must be censored from the text because Victorian readers and publishers find such narratives too salacious, then really women still portray ideological definitions of masculinity. [Jennifer, this last thought is obscure. It needs further amplification and clarification.] But other critics use

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the same **material** to claim that because Tess subverts definitions of fallenness, she must be predatory, **aggressive**, or even violent. I disagree because Tess's struggle for survival, her refusal to **emulate** social codes of deception preached by her mother show that she desires **autonomy**, to be independent and self-governing. Tess rejects the notion that women must **force** themselves into patterns of cultural ideals.

Rebecca Stott's attempt to apply the femme fatale motif to this novel partially succeeds in **eluding** conventional readings of women, but this attempt is still incomplete and indeed **errs**. Eluding conventional readings of women causes Stott to group different representations of women together. But in contrast to Stott's interpretation of Tess, which **ignores** the degree to which Tess internalizes society's conventional judgments, I stress the **degree** to which the femme fatale ignores conventional readings. In other words, the **femme fatale** does not take society's "rules" about conduct seriously unless she has **something** to gain, as she does when acting the part of the domestic woman. Usually **she** satirizes conventions, and she certainly does not, by internalizing them to her detriment, **become** a victim encumbered by malicious slander against her should her disguise **be** discovered as a hoax. Rather such discoveries lead the femme fatale to make other plans.

In contrast, Tess is not role-playing; she is simply a dairymaid who does not desire the economic advancement or social mobility that is the primary motivation of femme fatale characters. Tess simply wants Angel Clare to love her and accept her **despite** all her flaws. In novels where femme fatale characters appear, falling in love can sometimes be an unintentional consequence of the femme fatale's scheming, which **certainly** occurs in *Armada* when Lydia Gwilt falls in love with Ozias Midwinter, but it

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is almost **never** the primary goal. For the added complexity of love has a deadly and destructive **impact** on the femme fatale, usually resulting in her death. Falling in love actually **subverts** the femme fatale's plot against her male victim though it is not usually her intended **victim** with whom she carries on her affair. When in love, the femme fatale becomes **more** authentic, which also causes her to be vulnerable, like Tess, and certainly less **dangerous**. As a result, the femme fatale tries to avoid entering into these relationships; **attachment**, affection, and devotion to another male character distract her and usually **result** in her defeat.

Interestingly, the lover of the femme fatale accepts and overlooks the dangerous woman's **faults**. Forgiveness has a redemptive quality that develops the femme fatale's character. Collins' Lydia Gwilt, for example, must be raised to Midwinter's moral level, which **emphasizes** her self-sacrifice and subdues her passion when she commits suicide rather **than** murder Allan Armadale. Unlike the male characters coupled with the femme fatale, **Angel** cannot accept Tess's flaws unless he can somehow idealize those defects, such as **her** rural dialect or limited education, traits, which he deciphers as innocence incarnate.

Tess, of course, can be misread as a femme fatale because both Hardy's heroine and femme fatale characters become an embodiment of contradiction. Like Tess, the femme fatale subverts contradictions between good women and bad women, purity and impurity, victim and murderess, virgin and prostitute. But these are still insufficient to **define** Tess as a femme fatale. For the femme fatale, these contradictions are merely part of **her** performance. In almost all aspects, she appears to lean toward the latter of the **above** polarities. In other words, she changes and develops. The femme fatale performs

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domestic roles, a masquerade meant to charm and enchant her audience or particularly her male victims. Yet she too has been a victim of social and economic degradation, which goads her into action, generating new plans to change her circumstances to seek social and economic advancement that will liberate her from poverty. I do agree with Stott that Tess's "polarities are dissolved and neutralized" (182), which define a woman's character, but not because she is a femme fatale. The femme fatale similarly eludes binary oppositions between masculine and feminine because she really does not fit any of the representations of women as fallen or domestic. The implication that she is fatal or dangerous really means that the femme fatale believes that society is corrupt, and she uses its hypocrisy as a justification to be immoral. The femme fatale is obviously not an ideal, but she is involved in a profound refusal of the social order—she is a rebel who wants to live on her terms. Her survival instincts derive from the fact that though she internalizes conventional hypocrisies, she does not use them against herself, hence punishing herself as do fallen women.

For all its faults, there is some value to Stott's analysis of Tess, for it sets perimeters on my definition of the femme fatale. While the application here of the seductress femme fatale is flawed, her general assertion is correct that Tess's "dual active / passive sexuality and personality are stressed" (178) in order to resist conventional representations of women that categorize them as virtuous or impure. And it was certainly part of Hardy's intention to debunk this web of interpretations made by Victorian readers and critics such as Mrs. Oliphant who use such categories to define Tess as a fallen woman. The incident of her past means that Tess transforms from girlhood to womanhood; she suffers, and she endures. Her fall tests the true nature of her

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**Much like** Hardy, Stott also attempts to provide a different meaning to Tess's actions. **But here**, too, the compulsion to negative judgment is strong: Tess is either a fallen woman **or** a femme fatale. Somehow, we cannot accept her elusive complexity; we must define **her**. By claiming that Hardy obscures conventional textual readings when he compares **Tess** to caged animals and later personifies her with predatory cat-like qualities, **Stott** still fails to clarify how Hardy tries to free the reader from the constraints created by **the** representation of fallen women (179). Building on Stott's argument, but departing significantly from it, I argue that Tess is consciously aware that her sexuality causes **quite a** stir among male admirers. But she also recognizes that conventional Victorian **attitudes**, which assume that her buxom figure and sexual history signify her character **as a** wanton woman, are really false perceptions even though conventional opinions **still** have their affect on Tess and divide her into a "subject" and an "object." Unfortunately, this polarity between subject and object keeps Tess socially constrained within the **narrow** stereotypes of fallen women.

Stott is correct in asserting that Tess is the subject of her own story, and someone who consciously understands that she is the object of the male gaze when she tries to disguise her appearance by dressing in shabby clothes, cutting her eyebrows, and tying a **handkerchief** around her neck. She is aware of her "sexual force," but unlike the femme fatale, far from seeking to exploit it to her advantage, she seeks to suppress and escape it. Unfortunately, feminine sexuality binds Tess to male images and fantasies such as

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Angel's over-intellectualized "virginal child of Nature" (19:111) and Alec's melodramatic "witch of Babylon" (47:298).

In *Art of Darkness* Ann William clarifies the victim / victimizer role between the fallen woman and the male seducer by explaining that "the possessor of the gaze, a man who sees a woman, is in the position of power. Any woman who becomes an object of the male gaze, may never be anything more than an object, and a focus of unconscious resentments against the feminine" (109). This resentment—really against independent being—is particularly apparent concerning Angel Clare; his idealization of Tess is a form of objectifying her beauty. When Angel learns about Tess's fall, he realizes that "the notion of having Tess as a dear possession was mixed up with all his schemes and words and ways" (39:240). The word, "possession" is significant.

Angel Clare transitions from middle class life marked by religious doctrines to working class life embodied by an idyllic setting and a rejection of bourgeois values. But he fails to understand that his perceptions of the world are still controlled by old conventional doctrines. And he uses these narrow conventions and stereotypes to demoralize Tess. Angel figuratively views Tess as an object meant to complete this transition between bourgeois life to provincial working class life. Following her wedding night confession in which Tess admits that she is not virginal and had an illegitimate child, Angel Clare's ardent and affectionate feeling towards Tess reverts to temperamental indifference. His idealized image of Tess is "Dead! Dead! Dead!", and he treats her as a base, low woman, "too childish—unformed—crude, I suppose. I don't know what you are" (36:219).

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Such constructions of Tess's sexuality do violence to her nature, which is vulnerable, **modest**, and reticent. Tess never declares that she is either virginal or sexually **available**. She refuses to play the coquette and resists objectification, while Angel Clare's illusions and dogmatism prevent him from "look[ing] behind the scenes" of this "**idyllic**" creature, Tess. It renders him impervious to her specific experiences as a wronged **woman**, and as a struggling, working class, provincial woman (32:188). Angel Clare, not **Tess**, is the "slave to custom and conventionality . . . surprised back into his early **teachings**" (39:244).

Though Tess recognizes and understands the meaning of Victorian moral doctrines, **she** does not internalize these social injustices by seeking revenge or **developing** and intention to harm Angel Clare; this refusal enables her to be autonomous and to **subvert** conventions that attempt to construct her character. She struggles **desperately** to resist these constructions. Though she is a conventionally a "wronged woman," **she** does not sustain this over-simplified exonerating but ultimately dis-empowering definition. Rather she struggles against male domination, refusing to be the paradigmatic victim.

Tess is most vulnerable when other male characters objectify her beauty and sexuality. As an object of male desire, Tess's body is used figuratively as a sign of economic and social exchange. But she continues to develop her subjectivity throughout her struggles to find work, to submit to oppressive labor conditions and starvation wages, and to assist her family throughout their economic hardships in order to be liberated from male economic dependency.

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Furthermore, though her past sexual experiences with d'Urberville mark a significant **change** in Tess, she still retains a kind of innocence that allows her to make a fresh start **and** travel across the heath for better options and a better life at Talbothay's Dairy. Tess **accepts** the consequences of her fall and continues to survive and earn a living. **Hence** this combination of subject and object enables Tess to define her own boundaries **concerning** space, gender, and morality. [Jennifer, your use of subject-object here is not **clear**.]

Like Tess, the femme fatale also struggles against oppressive social forces. However, **she** contrives a strategic plan to overcome economic adversity by cunningly **constructing** herself as an image of purity and domesticity. On the contrary, when Tess works at Talbothays as a dairymaid and meets Angel Clare, a desirable catch for young, single, **working** class dairymaids, she at first avoids his company though he pursues her. If Tess **were** a femme fatale, she would anxiously construct situations that might hasten Angel's **courtship**. Though the femme fatale is a strong-willed and independent woman, she too **sometimes** objectifies her physical appearance and characteristically imitates certain **conventional** mannerisms to lure a likely husband, while Tess, in contrast, resists such objectification and expresses her growing concern over Angel's idealization of her. Objectification does not always mean that the femme fatale necessarily uses her beauty, if she is beautiful, to capture a well-to-do suitor since beautiful women are often perceived as **dangerous**. As a governess, for example, Lady Audley understates her beauty by **emphasizing** conventional domestic codes to attract Sir Audley who later acts more like a **protective** father figure spoiling a child than as her husband.

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Stott accurately notes that images of Tess constructed by Angel and Alec are always inadequate. But in general, nineteenth century literary texts develop or challenge representations of gender, especially regarding women. In response to nineteenth century sexual ideology, contemporary feminist critics try to subvert traditional feminine representations such as the fallen woman because these representations deny women subjectivity and autonomy. One major topic for critical debate concerns narrative voice in *Tess* and whether Tess is denied subjectivity when Hardy suppresses the telling of her story, particularly in the wedding night confession and other passages that refer to Tess as the fallen woman. The reader never knows the details of the seduction / rape scene from Tess's point of view.

In "Breaking with the Conventions: Victorian Confession Novels and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*," Jeannette Schumaker claims that Tess's wedding night confession is an act of self-abnegation and argues that Hardy "criticizes the convention of sacrifice that causes the fallen woman to punish herself for disobeying the double standard" (449). In essence, Hardy criticizes the Victorian polarities of whore and angel. I do not entirely agree with these claims. Certainly Hardy is confronting socially constructed polarities that subjugate women to categories of fallen or pure. But I disagree with Schumaker that confession, particularly in *Tess*, "makes women see themselves as inferior to men" (450). I do not agree that Tess's confession is meant as a form of self-sacrifice though Tess understands that she risks losing Angel Clare's love by making such a confession before he confides in her his own "fallenness." The telling of her story, I argue, is meant to give Tess agency, and also a function of her craving for an authentic life with Angel.

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Tess reveals her past history to Angel Clare only after he recounts his sexual experience. Without hesitation, Tess forgives Angel never doubting his character; yet his hypocrisy prevents Angel from absolving her from blame. [Jennifer, hypocrisy may not be the right word unless you develop it. Conventional is more accurate—conventional in his belief that men and women are ruled by different laws of sexuality.] Rather his severity becomes a reaction to conventional codes that suggest to him that he is a middle class dupe entrapped and cuckolded by a scheming lower class woman. Angel's rejection of Tess not only points to the demoralizing affects of sexism and class prejudice, but Angel clearly lacks autonomy because he internalizes these social standards though he initially believes that he had escaped such class consciousness by marrying Tess.

In comparison to Tess, Angel is less free of conventions. Tess, on the other hand, believes that Angel is free from social codes that construct gender. Both her and Angel's confessions are meant to show that both men and women fall yet have redemptive qualities. But really her confession engenders in him the old double standard which causes Angel's hurtful reaction against Tess.

In *The Sense of Sex: Feminist Perspectives on Hardy*, Margaret Higonnet asserts that omens and folklore about the natural world characterize the "curious fetishistic fear" of women's language (203). In *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Luce Irigaray contends that nature itself is held accountable for the power structure of gender ideology that keeps women subordinated (71). Yet this fear often expressed by men in *Tess* implies that women's language can powerfully subvert conventional double standards. Men generate representations of women to signify a woman's character, which puts women outside cultural values unless women participate in them by prescribing these codes. If, however,

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Several scenes in *Tess* allude to men looking for signs in nature that signify impure or fallen women. But Hardy tries to emphasize that these are only myths that in reality fail to determine a woman's natural character. In *Tess*, men, not women, are often superstitious, and they acknowledge signs in nature that frequently identify Tess as a fallen woman at the most critical moments in Tess's life.

For example, on their departure from Talbothays the incessant crowing alluding to Tess's sexual history and portending her fate, symbolically declares the cuckolding of Angel Clare who unknowingly marries a fallen woman. The men-folk murmur "That's bad," suggesting that the bride is not a virgin (34:199) while Mrs. Crick dismisses the occasion to mean "a change in the weather." Her denial actually strengthens the symbolic meaning of the crowing by the bird's unusual coloring that figuratively marks Tess. Men read these signs to append sexual or cultural meaning to a woman's character, which denies her autonomy. Tess struggles against such readings. Education and social codes have no influence over Tess's values or desires. She does not base her moral values on conventional double standards or attitudes about women because she recognizes that such standards are hypocritical when a husband's past sexual fall can be justified, but he cannot forgive his wife for having made the same error in judgment. She condones Angel's abandonment, not necessarily as a punishment alluded to by Schumaker, but as a condition that Angel Clare must reconcile these barriers fixed by class and gender that come between himself and his wife.

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Other critics, Mary Jacobus and Laura Claridge assert that the narrative voice and contradictions about a woman's character in *Tess* do not constitute what should be "the norms for ethical sexual conduct" (Claridge 325). In other words, Tess attempts to escape judgments of her moral character. But according to these critics, this escape fails, and Hardy, too, is constrained by the ideologies that construct cultural representations about women. In "Thomas Hardy, A Study in Contradiction," Patricia Stubbs claims that while Hardy tests the terms dictated by moral conventionalists, he does not escape fictional representation and language that constructs gender ideology. In other words, critics, like Stubbs, contend that Hardy does not lead us out of the Victorian polarities between pure and impure, fallen and domestic.<sup>11</sup>

While it is true that no one can completely escape their time and culture, I think it is important at the same time to remind readers that Hardy was under the harsh pressure of censorship, and incessantly pressured by editors to revise his original version of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, in order to keep Hardy within the harsh boundaries of Victorian ideology. This pressure led to a series of revisions that eventually caused Hardy to challenge censorship. Hardy, as all critics mentioned seem to agree, challenged moral double standards, but he was only able to do so through fictional representations that editors and publishers found acceptable. It is important also here to note that publishers who published uncensored material risked imprisonment. Vizetelly, for example, was tried, found guilty and incarcerated for publishing Zola's work in England. These conditions under which Hardy wrote *Tess* greatly affected his attention to the moral judgment of Tess. But given these circumstances, Hardy was not unsuccessful in his attack against hypocritical Victorian attitudes that propagate the sexual double standard.

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[Jennifer, this is just a personal aside, and not something you need directly to deal with in your dissertation. If one believe that men and women's sexual natures are so fundamentally different that men's casual sexual encounters mean one thing and mean another when engaged in by women, the double-standard is not hypocritical. It may be wrong, may be unjust, but it is not hypocritical because it is rooted in a since belief about reality. Hypocrisy always involves an element of insincerity. I think many Victorians sincerely believed men and women were so different sexually that different moral codes were needed to regulate their behavior.]

The central question, which might lead us out of this reading, still needs to be asked: Is Tess to blame for her fall. Stott uses the femme fatale motif to avoid this very conundrum and to negate the fabrication of Tess as a stereotypical fallen woman by explaining the affects of Tess's fatal characteristics on central male characters, Angel Clare and Alec d'Urberville. But really, Stott merely confronts the cause and effect of these conventional representations, implying that the study of Tess as a fatal character can lead critics and readers of nineteenth century literature out of conventional feminine tropes.

Though Tess is a literal threat to d'Urberville, even violent towards him before she becomes his mistress, she poses no threat to the hegemonic power structure, whereas the femme fatale specifically undermines patriarchy and dominant ideology by mimicking its social codes. Irigaray suggests that women can undo the effects of phallogentrism by overdoing its codes, a practice utilized by the femme fatale. In patriarchal societies, the status of women is analogous to commodities; [Jennifer I think some qualification is needed here. Yes, patriarchal societies can and do see women as

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commodities, but they may also invest them with idealistic qualities which they believe perishable if permitted to confront social brutality.] the femme fatale specifically sees herself as a commodity on the market—thus internalizing some of the pernicious attitudes of the society--but she also undermines these perceptions of women by using such codes in her favor, showing that these representations are false and hypocritical. The femme fatale thus suggests that a woman cannot escape patriarchal codes; such an escape is impossible. Yet Tess makes this very attempt.

As a result, convention dooms Tess for refusing to imitate its codes, while mimicry leads to the femme fatale's success and survival until her crimes are discovered. Through self-abnegation, Tess exposes the destructive nature of conventional social codes that women are either good or bad despite their struggles. Though dominant ideology does not necessarily ignore the fact that a woman, like Tess, can be a victim of circumstance, the woman is still blamed and marginalized from mainstream society. For example, Angel Clare's middle-class brothers show no compassion for Tess who can be viewed as a victim of rigid social codes. Whether fatal or fallen, Tess is still powerless over Victorian moral doctrines. Her experiences show that a woman who struggles for autonomy will suffer, especially when she tries to undermine false representations of women when she avoids d'Urberville after his seduction or confesses her story to Angel. Taking responsibility for the consequences of her life is not an act of self-induced punishment as Schumaker claims (449). Tess wants moralists, conventionalists, and do-gooders to simply leave her alone. Yet she does not despise the class system, nor does she resent Angel Clare. She is above it, resisting its enculturation, and thus, in this way,

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Tess is liberated from the inner—but not the outer--consequences of social injustices the femme fatale perpetually internalizes.

Though Tess is not cynical, she is still economically and socially helpless. Her moral crime has fatal implications for the way that society forever stigmatizes her. But only the fallen woman suffers this fatality—not the male victimizer, Alec d'Urberville who continues to demoralize Tess—in both senses--by keeping her as his mistress. Even when Alec commits immoral acts, seducing Tess, who Hardy implies is only sixteen, he does not suffer the consequences society imposes on fallen women. Alec's hypocritical conversion to religion and his entreaties to Tess are a desultory atonement for his crimes against her. Alec's purported gallantry, his constant attention, and desire to lead Tess out of economic hardship force Tess into servitude to a male oppressor. Alec d'Urberville metaphorically represents external forces that attempt to bind Tess to the social order, particularly because she desires autonomy. She craves liberation from such social constraints.

One cannot ignore that in *Tess* society's resentment focuses most intensely on fallen women who struggle for autonomy, precisely because patriarchal society fears the empowerment of women. Power among lower class women is unnatural within the cultural laws that govern Victorian culture. The femme fatale, in contrast, aggressively threatens that power structure. In *Tess*, working women are exposed to exploitative labor conditions where they work harder and for lower wages. Tess gets by on wages that leave her ill-dressed and ill-lodged; she is denied all pleasure, including love, maintaining that working class women, such as Tess, are most powerless within the framework of Victorian culture and therefore suffer most.

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Ironically, in contrast to the hidden femme fatale, Tess's tenacity and struggle for survival really do not threaten patriarchal ideology. Tess still becomes Alec's mistress, and she is punished for her crimes when she murders her oppressor. When Tess surrenders to her captors, declaring, "I have had enough" (58:366), the conclusion suggests that a woman who struggles for autonomy is defeated by external forces beyond her control and is doomed to suffer. The femme fatale, however, defiantly foils this fate, achieving a triumph that stems from her bitterness and resentment against the social class system.

Hardy implies that Victorian culture is structured in such a way that working class women have few opportunities in which they can prevail against social injustices. The fate of working class women is dramatically emphasized at Flintcombe Ash when the threshing machine becomes a metaphor for the destroyer of life. The machine works blindly "like the productive and reproductive laws of nature" that metaphorically exploit and disempower lower class working women, an analogy of ideological laws that disenfranchise women, negating their rights to social or political power within the Victorian class system.

The consistent tension between these two worlds, the natural and the social, show clearly the dilemma between dogmatism and skepticism, retrospection and progressiveness. In general, society limits Tess's subject position as young maid, mother, wife, mistress, murderer, and when she retaliates, she suffers, literally hunted down and killed. A woman in this novel is symbolically "idealized or demonized," accused of being deceptive, duplicitous, and unstable in order to protect Victorian ideological codes.

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The femme fatale, on the other hand, capitalizes on these ideological codes to deliberately conjure new schemes to transgress social boundaries. Dangerous women always turn hypocritical social codes to their favor. Tess, in contrast, is not capable of such deception—nor does she desire it—and so she suffers the consequences of her authenticity and her transgressions.

From one perspective, Tess's body can be viewed as a figurative text that attempts to mark her as a wily woman, which evokes specific readings about feminine sexuality and the working class. These readings actually protect the social class system by marginalizing lower class women outside its boundaries. While traditional femme fatales use their bodies to signify power, a working class, "fallen woman" like Tess, finds that her sexuality renders her defenseless against conventional readings. When a converted man in *Tess* writes in bold letters—"THY, DAMNATION, SLUMBERTH NOT," this moral formula obscures the "peaceful landscape" and stifles "the blue air of the horizon" (12:71). The vermilion lettering violates nature, and the red paint marks symbolize the stain that brands Tess as a "fallen woman." Hardy links Tess to nature, but its defacement manifested by the male voice, also connects the man's text to Tess's sex. In this passage, the female body is seen as a signifier for sexuality. The bright letters deface nature and the woman whose image the marks defile.

The dogmatic convert exemplifies the assaults that society uses against Tess throughout the novel. While Alec d'Urberville defiles Tess's virtue, society defiles her existence. "But you should read my hottest ones—them I kips for slums and seaports. They'd make ye wriggle! Not but what this is a very good tex for rural districts . . . I must put one there for dangerous young females like yourself to heed" (12:72). By

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insinuating that Tess's social class breeds "dangerous young females," the text painter attacks the working class and implies that a "field woman" lacks morality.

Hardy, whose view is complex, is not, I think, maintaining that society is responsible for a woman's fall. Culture's rigid social codes, like the converted man, characterize the fallen woman as an object and the cause of man's fall. But making society responsible for a woman's experiences and actions denies a woman agency. In effect, her character is not her own but formed by agencies beyond her control, and this polemic on agency is central to Tess's struggle. She does not want to be a slave to circumstances: she wants to be autonomous and loved for who she is. By taking responsibility at some level for the rape / seduction and the birth of her illegitimate child, who dies, she shows that her experiences shape her subjectivity and that she deserves to move on with her life, earning a living as a self-supporting woman and reintegrating into mainstream working class life.

So where does this image of the femme fatale lead us in our analysis of *Tess* in the nineteenth century? In using this category of the femme fatale, how do we escape making other narrow cultural constructions about women like those that exist in the old dichotomy between fallen and domestic women? More importantly, does the study of the femme fatale offer us a different perspective on Victorian women, one that does not deny women subjectivity?

This essay seeks to investigate and explore one central question: Does the femme fatale motif enable writers to portray female characters who have subjectivity and agency and to portray women who resist the patriarchal status quo? Is their recurrent appearance in Victorian fiction a sign of incipient rebellion against women's condition in the larger

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society? The traditional dichotomy of fallen woman and domestic woman makes clear the two traits they have in common: they are both passive, and they are both subject to patriarchal codes. In the femme fatale, we see a difference: She rebels against patriarchy, even though she may role-play as either a domestic or a fallen woman in order to manipulate male characters who represent economic and social power.

Tess, I argue, is the antithesis of the femme fatale because she strives not for success in its conventional meaning in society but for autonomy, and she suffers greatly as a consequence. Because Tess *is* autonomous, she can find fulfillment as a simple country girl or dairymaid. On the contrary, the femme fatale is not content with her lot; she is ambitious; she encourages attention from male suitors as a necessary means toward economic independence, reaping the benefits that come from upward social mobility. The femme fatale really does not crave autonomy, but she desires independence, a self-sufficiency that will give her a feeling of empowerment. Furthermore, the femme fatale absorbs Victorian ideology concerning domestic and fallen women even though she despises the bourgeois class system from which she emerges or reintegrates.

*Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, I feel, is an appropriate starting point for this discussion of the femme fatale. Unlike the other female characters I discuss in this project, Hardy's heroine genuinely desires an autonomous self unencumbered by vast social changes such as technological progress, urbanization, or industrialization. Hardy's novel recognizes a woman's struggle for autonomy—and a modest, unpromising woman at that—which, for me, is significantly different than the femme fatale's ambitious aims toward materialism and wealth, goals that make it imperative she conceal the true nature of her ominous demeanor among other respectable characters who embody rigid Victorian codes.

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Though Victorian double standards construct the image of Tess, these conventions do not dictate or define the hallmarks of her character. This is the major polemical difference that we discover between autonomous female characters and the femme fatale, who, on the other hand, is influenced by social changes and social codes. Though the femme fatale secretly rebels against society, her rebellion stems from past experiences, much like Tess, where she is exploited as a fallen woman or victimized by social conventions. Her resentment against Victorian society is a manifestation of her refusal to be a victim, which is reactive rather than autonomous. Therefore, the femme fatale is heavily influenced by social judgment. By having suffered from the injustices of class prejudices and gender inequality, she decides to be the judge within the framework of Victorian moral orthodoxy. This transition does not liberate her from moral absolutes and archetypal patterns of feeling and judgment.

In novels that feature femme fatales, a woman's moral purity is still on trial as it is in *Tess*, only the femme fatale recognizes the immoral practices within Victorian society that enable bourgeois hypocrites to flagrantly lash out against powerless women. Unlike Tess, the femme fatale is unaffected by social turbulence; rather she revels in chaos that cause other characters harm. Though the femme fatale rebels against an unjust social order, she is not interested in transforming the world or subverting gender oppression. She simply rebels against the injustices that place socially and economically disadvantaged Victorian women in a victim role, unlike Tess who just wants to be free.

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## Chapter 2

### The Fallen Woman and the Femme Fatale

In taking issue with Rebecca Stott's reading of Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, I have done so in order to define the femme fatale more sharply by distinguishing her from other conventional Victorian female characters, namely the fallen woman. Tess is not a femme fatale at all because she is neither possessed of the femme fatale's social ambition nor does she internalize social injustices against her, nor resent society for them. Victorian culture represents Tess as the fallen woman because she becomes an unwed mother. Yet she seems to escape this feminine trope as well, gaining agency by subverting the many male-defined readings of her used to represent women in Tess's difficult socio-economic position.

The stereotype of the mid-Victorian femme fatale undermines shrewd and rebellious female protagonists as a dangerous woman. But this is something of a simplification. On the contrary, the portrait of the femme fatale enables the reader to recognize the limited options available to women who struggle socially and economically during the nineteenth century. Far from being a dangerous woman, the femme fatale in the mid-century Victorian novel, this second chapter argues, is more complex. By defying stereotypes and other traditional characterizations of women as domestic or fallen, she provides a different and richer perspective on the lives of women in Victorian England.

Unlike Stott's misreading of Tess, the femme fatale is not simply a fallen woman with a vengeful spirit, though it was common for novelists to combine features of fallen and fatal to generate images of disease, anxiety, contamination, and fear of women. In

“The Painter of Modern Life,” Charles Baudelaire, for example, mixes themes of fallenness and fatalness when he claims that fallen womanhood is women in “revolt against society” (37).

In *Prostitution in Victorian Society*, Judith Walkowitz explains that by the mid and late nineteenth century, female rebellion in Victorian society was generally “an ominous sign of the times,” and literature reflects this rebellion (1). For the male artist, the prostitute subverts cultural norms and reflects an image of himself. This identification between artist and fictional prostitute is, in a sense, appropriate since the artist perceives himself and the prostitute as iconoclastic. Similarly in *Femme Fatales*, Patrick Bade asserts that the artist, like the prostitute or rebellious woman, does not believe that he is bound to the rules of bourgeois culture (9).

A cultural analysis of prostitution exposes numerous false assumptions about “fallenness” though such themes proliferated in mid-century literature to warn women against illicit sexual taboos also signified by the femme fatale. This categorization defines Victorian women who fail to live up to middle-class standards of morality. Though these myths about fallenness seem to emerge from the impoverished condition of prostitutes, fallenness also obscures the sociological truth about the character of Victorian prostitutes. As a literary motif, fallenness is incorporated within bourgeois ideology to undermine the power of feminine sexuality, to reduce the growing rate of prostitution, and to prevent the spread of venereal disease.

Both Patrick Bade and Judith Walkowitz assert that fallen women were believed to be the carriers of contamination and disease. Approximately one out every sixteen women in nineteenth-century London resorted to prostitution as an economic means of



survival (Bade 9). Bade explains that the prevalence of prostitution in Victorian society led to popular literary and artistic themes on love and death, or beauty and disease usually associated with the femme fatale. Given the prominence of prostitution in Victorian culture, the image of the prostitute mixes with themes of fatality and permeates popular consciousness. Male artists, poets, and writers generate images of fatal women working as courtesans or prostitutes; great passion combined with fear in the figure of the prostitute contribute to the image of the femme fatale. Early nineteenth-century poets such as Keats enhance this fear of the woman by expressing anguished sensuality mingled with death, dissipation and self-surrender.

Unlike male artists and writers, Victorian women grow increasingly concerned over the dehumanizing effects of the Contagious Diseases Acts that registered prostitutes and marginalized these women from mainstream working class culture, forcing them to be treated at lock hospitals where they are often misdiagnosed. These social conditions emphasized women's powerlessness. Fallen women are thus blamed for the social ills in Victorian society while upper-class males are free of culpability. Women writers such as Mrs. Henry Wood and Florence Marryat retaliate against the double standard by creating strong-minded women, who, while considered threatening, expose the licentious behavior of men. These female artists imply that debauchery exists because corrupt, aristocratic men generate a high demand for such activities.

In contrast to the femme fatale, the combination of impoverished working class women, and prostitution influences the construction of the fallen woman. Nineteenth-century male writers use the fallen woman motif to mythologize prostitution. Charles Dickens, for example, likens the prostitute to a persecuted wretch who lacks autonomy

and whose identity is fractured. I believe that Dickens specifically implies that such women are only capable of reform if bourgeois Victorian society becomes more tolerant, allowing these women to reintegrate into the mainstream working class without the constant stigma attached to their past lives. This intervention additionally implies that bourgeois ideology is imperative to reordering and stabilizing society. Walkowitz's research on prostitution in nineteenth-century London guides my study, and leads me to conclude that historically, the real character of the Victorian prostitutes are more similar to the anti-heroines in sensation fiction than to the fictitious fallen woman.

For example, documented biographical accounts of the Victorian prostitute are similar to conditions experienced by Braddon's Lady Audley. Though Lady Audley never resorts to prostitution, she escapes destitution and single-handedly reverses her fortune. Braddon's portrait challenges patriarchal representations, which disempower women by constructing women as passive. Thus aggressive literary female characters, such as Lady Audley, challenge the status quo. Since Victorian men fear prurient feminine sexuality and its destructive potential, representations of domestic and fallen women are used as ideological devices to suppress these anxieties. Victorian male artists, writers, and critics demonstrate, therefore, that they are unwilling to concede any larger social and economic responsibility for the widespread problem of prostitution and venereal disease when they conveniently construct women as the source of contamination, whether such women are characterized as fallen or fatal.

In contrast, the domestic ideal establishes moral order; her image enforces gender boundaries constructed by Victorian ideology. In *Desire in Domestic Fiction*, Nancy Armstrong explains that conduct books published in the early nineteenth century

specifically construct the domestic sphere, shape the domestic woman trope, and influence the practices and habits of middle-class women. In summary, conduct books controlled the meaning of the domestic woman (Armstrong 119). Domestic fiction imitates conduct books by reflecting categories of women that determine whether they were marriageable or unmarriageable. Internally structured systems in Victorian novels, particularly marriage and the home, keep all Victorian women conscious of the ideals embedded within this domestic ideological system. The internal structure is most powerful because it is supported by beliefs in controlled forms of power, such as marriage and family.

According to social critics in mid-Victorian England, unmarried women, such as the governess, are social problems because they threaten the function of this ideal and patriarchy's control over women. The femme fatale in fact usually works as a governess in order to enter bourgeois families where there are several available well-to-do bachelors. Another woman in the house generates an invitation to infidelity, and conventionalists fear this disruption to family life, and a woman working for money was morally questionable since Victorian society believed that independent, moneymaking women transgress rigid moral codes. The femme fatale is really the same, though she attempts to make her money-making practices less overt to prevent scaring off a potential husband.

Boundaries inside and outside domestic spheres define and construct gender. Victorian women are taught that men desire the accomplishments of female virtues described by conduct books. The domestic woman's function really was to serve within

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the framework of Victorian ideology, which constructs her subjectivity. She upholds her part simply by playing her role.

Masculine features in a woman, however, suggest that she will not manage the household well. For example, in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, Mrs. Norris, a domineering and controlling woman, figuratively tries to replace Lord Bertram when he goes away. But her command over the family ends disastrously. By encouraging her niece's vanity, Mrs. Norris causes Maria Bertram to run away with Henry Crawford and thus dishonor the family. Women are therefore discouraged from taking more authoritarian roles as if such roles negate a woman's femininity and become a destructive force within the household.

Passive women, on the other hand, such as that of Lady Bertram, suggest that a good mother cannot be a meek supervisor of household duties. Lady Bertram lacks a work ethic to manage the household or to guide her family with strong moral values; and thus she fails to exercise authority within the boundaries of her home. Jane Austen demonstrates that the household must be a manifestation of good orderly conduct or the tranquility in the home will be jeopardized.

In *Uneven Developments* Mary Poovey claims that the nineteenth century woman becomes man's "moral hope and spiritual guide" (10). On the surface, the domestic woman renders no economic value or status in Victorian England. Rather her contribution to the prosperity of the family is incarnate virtue, morality, affection, and emotional nurture. In domestic fiction, a woman's household duties are non-alienated and express her selflessness; she specifically works for the principles and values of bourgeois middle-class morality. This fiction formulates the ideology of the household and

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suggests a woman has nothing personal to gain besides the livelihood and productivity of her family. Poovey clarifies that this ideological trope of women relegates and contains women within a specific socially constructed space: the domestic sphere. Even women who played a large civic role, such as Florence Nightingale, in humanizing and civilizing society, rigidly enforced domestic ideology.

Yet not all Victorian women share these views, and the literary *femme fatale* proves that these boundaries are weak and ineffective. Nineteenth-century women revolutionaries struggled to change the domestic ideology that constructs a woman's subjectivity. Women—and men—novelists in the 1840s, particularly the Brontes, hint at their contentions against these images of female domesticity, which really translate into female subordination and powerlessness. In his portrayal of Amelia Sedley, Thackeray insinuates that feminine domesticity is emotionally damaging to women, and he argues that Victorians must be free from conservative-romantic attitudes toward sexuality (Clarke 11). Even at the time of its publication, *Vanity Fair* was touted by *The Examiner* as one of “the most original works of real genius”, which “will take a lasting place in our literature” (468). By exposing the hypocrisy of bourgeois ideology, Thackeray questions different phases of Victorian life, especially when the most virtuous of domestic women, Amelia Sedley, is denounced as vain and selfish, and easily collapses under the pressure of economic hardship.

This is particularly important since the primary date of my study really begins with *Vanity Fair* in 1848, a year when themes of marriage and domesticity in the novel finally generate empowering images of women who subvert the social order. Early aristocratic, scheming, self-centered female characters such as Henry Fielding's Lady

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Belloston or Jane Austen's Lady Susan strongly resemble mid-century femme fatales, particularly in sensation fiction of the 1860s. But eighteenth-century femme fatales border on satirical characterizations of women. The mid-nineteenth century femme fatale, on the other hand, develops into a more complex and less stereotypical threatening woman.

In 1848, Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* coincides with the publication of *Vanity Fair* and redoubles the challenge against stereotypical representations of women. Armstrong points out that Thackeray and Bronte question the oppressive nature of a domestic life in which marriage breeds violent scenes of punishment (177). In the concluding illustration of *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray implies that Becky Sharp plots to murder Jos Sedley for his insurance money. Similarly in *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason tries to set Rochester on fire. Thackeray and Bronte's portraits express contentions against marriage and feminine passivity. Unlike Byron's Gothic heroines or Austen's domestic archetypes where women risk becoming victims of male protagonists, the roles are reversed and women are now dangerous, figuratively revolting against patriarchal oppression.

By the 1860s, women Victorian novelists, such as Emma Robinson, Mrs. Annie Edwards, and Florence Marryat introduce female characters who defiantly rebel against middle-class virtues out of a necessity for sexual liberation. Female novelists not only utilize the femme fatale as a means to depict married life as socially oppressive, but also argue for sexual expression among women which critics, like Mrs. Oliphant, condemn as immoral. Unlike the feminine archetypes produced by Marryat and Robinson, other writers like Braddon and Thackeray point out that the femme fatale desires inclusion

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within the domestic circle only in order to advance her socioeconomic status. Yet Armstrong makes clear that marriage, which advances a woman's social position, seldom results in happiness. Indeed Thackeray and Braddon seemingly treat marriage as a kind of business transaction encouraged by the femme fatale, and happiness and love are usually irrelevant in such an arrangement. We simply see ambitious female characters like Becky Sharp performing domestic duties solely for the sake of appearances, in order to increase her socioeconomic position and to advance her self-interests. Jane Austen alludes to similar hypocrisies in the conventional setting, which appear in early nineteenth-century aristocratic households where young debutantes feign good breeding.

In *Mansfield Park*, sanctimonious, spoiled daughters, Julia and Maria Bertram, fail to properly "govern their inclinations and tempers by that sense of duty which can alone suffice" (48:338). Maria Bertram deserts her husband, Mr. Rushworth, to run off with the duplicitous and selfish Henry Crawford; meanwhile Julia Bertram elopes with a capricious aristocrat, Mr. Yates. In *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray expands on this theme of upper-class hypocrisy by placing a threatening, marginalized adventuress within the boundaries of aristocratic homes. Although Becky Sharp intensifies the plot, these particular households already suffer from moral depravity, though aristocratic women like Lady Crawley vehemently deny such infidelities.

Charlotte Bronte argued that Austen only "[delineates] the surface lives of genteel English people" because none of the women seem to suffer the horrific socio-economic hardships experienced by real Victorian women, specifically working class women, who are considered fallen (Armstrong 191). Even characters like Maria and Julia are protected from the censure of Victorian moralists whereas fallen women suffer from

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abject poverty, isolation, abandonment, and loneliness. It is clear that “genteel English people” do not represent the majority of Victorian women and the circumstances that they must endure.

The social status of the fictional Victorian femme fatale borders on the same social status as the Victorian prostitute only because her economic situation is so precarious. Though education increases the femme fatale’s social status, she too must struggle to escape poverty “by the awful necessity of life” (Braddon 13:295). Therefore, the femme fatale masquerades in conventionally acceptable domestic roles to enter the marriage market. Patrick Bade likens the femme fatale to the prostitute since both archetypes stimulate a fear of feminine sexuality among men in fear of disease and fear of being ruined by a dangerous woman. But a study of social class differences reveals more about the similarities and differences between the femme fatale and the prostitute.

In contrast, the prostitute’s ostentatious apparel suggests freedom from the working conditions of other women in her class. Bright, colorful, and often gaudy clothing worn by the prostitute leads her to feel that she can improve her economic conditions, negotiate her own price, and barter and sell her body as a commodity, which figuratively undermines men’s power to determine a woman’s social value. But unlike the fictional femme fatale, the prostitute lacks the power to transgress social boundaries. The prostitute’s mode of rebellion is different from that of the femme fatale only because she wants to attract attention to herself and to publicize her economic independence. The femme fatale, on the other hand, prefers to blend into mainstream bourgeois society, using social codes to pose convincingly as a paragon of domesticity which allows her to integrate successfully into bourgeois life.

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By donning garb uncharacteristic of her social class, the prostitute was not only trying to appear to have more status and wealth than she did, she was also violating the conventional dress codes that existed in Victorian society for each class. In a sense she is declaring both her independence and also rebelling against the economic and class stratification of Victorian society. Through her apparel, meant to signify bourgeois status, the Victorian prostitute mocks codes of respectability and established patriarchal ideals about women; she exposes, like the *femme fatale*, the exploitive and oppressive nature of the hegemonic power structure that limits economic and social opportunities for women.

Though they do not dress alike, *femme fatales* and real-life Victorian prostitutes both demonstrate their economic independence through finery and material possessions. In the Public Records Office of March 1858, a police officer explains that prostitutes endeavor “to imitate the style of ladies at dinner parties and the theater” (Walkowitz 26). To these “outcast women,” their attire signified an improved social status that working class women were otherwise denied. They therefore banded together in order to flaunt “an outward appearance and a more affluent style of life that distinguished them from other working-class women” (Walkowitz 26). When Victorian prostitutes flamboyantly advertised their wares by their dress code, middle-class women complained that these painted women provided “a pernicious influence on impressionable servant girls in the neighborhood,” expressing the fear common to bourgeois women, who like men, wanted to protect the status quo (Walkowitz 26).

The apartments and belongings of working class prostitutes certainly do not match the wealth described in Lady Audley’s chambers. Yet prostitutes still tried to

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advertise economic progress though sometimes their garments only consisted of “a dirty white muslin and greasy cheap blue silk” (Walkowitz 26). Even when the appearance of fanciful clothing may have seemed convincing, medical physicians examining prostitutes in lock hospitals often commented on their dingy or tarnished “valuables” and undergarments. James Greenwood, employed at the Westminster House of Corrections, noted that parcels of clothing belonging to prostitutes were nothing more than “a gaudy hat and feather and a fashionably made skirt and jacket of some cheap and flashy material and nothing besides in the way of under-garments but a few tattered rags that a professional beggar would despise” (131-32).<sup>12</sup> Figuratively the prostitute’s flashy appearance was only a façade hiding the true squalor of her living conditions. Material objects, then, are used to create a new image for the working class prostitute who has felt the pressure of poverty, even if this image is superficial because it does not change her social status from a working class girl.

In working class society, women who did not harbor close attachments to mothers or fathers could more easily rebel against conventional norms by turning to the streets. Orphaned women in particular in the mid-nineteenth century found an oppressive work regime to be as exploitive as prostitution. According to Walkowitz, these women declared that the only difference in prostitution is that a woman could determine the value of her worth whereas she had no influence in determining the value of her labor.

In fact, working class women who moved into prostitution argued that they attained the kind of independence and assertiveness rarely seen among other women in their social class. Though women were “not free from a life of poverty and insecurity,” prostitution offered a “temporary refuge”; even some working class women who were not

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orphans or unskilled laborers and lived among prostitutes regarded prostitution “as the best of a series of unattractive alternatives” (Walkowitz 31). Given the conditions of prostitution in the early 1860’s—its brief stage of a woman’s life, superior health and improved standards of living—laboring poor women believed prostitution was the only choice by which women could empower and assert themselves (Walkowitz 46).

Both the fictional *femme fatale* and real-life Victorian prostitute are typically orphaned, abandoned, aggressive, reckless, and poor. Education, however, helps the *femme fatale* integrate back into the dominant social class, by giving her more social power than is available to the prostitute. Her education signifies her middle to upper class social status and thus increases her exchange value, not only because she is more desirable, but simply because she fits, or can appear to fit, the standards of middle-class values.

Yet like the Victorian prostitute, the *femme fatale* also experiences social injustices, and rebels and reacts against the class into which she reintegrates. These are important shared features, not by virtue of the fact that both types of women have experienced the bitter realities of poverty, but by virtue of the effect poverty has on these women and how they react to their hardships. Both women refuse to give up and abandon themselves to a life of poverty, doomed to work hard for a living without prospects, respectability, and luxury.

Though they desire economic independence, both types of women still must rely on men for the commodification and exchange of their physical selves to survive. The *femme fatale* usually turns to the marriage market, or she becomes a courtesan. The nineteenth century literary courtesan exhausts her male suitors and squanders their wealth

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until these men have nothing left to offer their mistresses. But even literary *femme fatales* working successfully as courtesans, namely Zola's *Nana* and Balzac's *Valerie Marneff*, are punished for exploiting men when they suffer a most heinous death, a grotesque deterioration of their physical bodies implicitly caused by venereal disease. Their fate is paradoxical since physical beauty enabled Valerie and *Nana* to manipulate men for money and social power. Zola expresses a misogynistic terror of the power of female sexuality, suggesting that such women must be destroyed.

Though she markets her beauty and sets her own price, the Victorian prostitute is exploited by patriarchal society. Women as commodities still do not have equal value among each other, and men figuratively determine a woman's value based on male-defined Victorian ideals (Irigaray 177). A woman must suit the image of those ideals. Zola's *Nana* increases her exchange value, signified by her body, simply because she has many suitors who desire her; therefore she is a competitive commodity.

London especially exerts a large influence on working class women since the class system is so deeply embedded within the urban scene, and representations of Victorian women proliferate here. Women in the service of middle-class families are exposed to the comforts and conveniences of bourgeois life that working class people are denied. Economic status and leisure hours experienced by middle-class women increase their social status against lower class servant women, giving them more power and rendering them unsympathetic toward the socio-economic struggles of working class women.

Yet the *femme fatale* is not content to be relegated to second class status; she desires the luxury afforded by bourgeois life, an ambition that drives her to put her

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schemes into action. Bankrupt families, dissolute husbands, and growing up parentless cause the femme fatale to be marginalized though her status is often middle-class. In contrast, Victorian prostitutes in nineteenth-century England lack education and usually come from broken working class homes, signs of lower class status which kept them out of the marriage market.

The middle-class was aware of and feared this assimilation of marginalized and undesirable women. Sensation fiction expresses this social concern as it depicts the elusive femme fatale slyly integrating into respectable, mainstream homes. In contrast, to this insidious danger, the Victorian prostitute posed a clear and palpable threat should she cross class boundaries in marriage. Since many young lower class girls who worked as clandestine prostitutes as the result of economic vicissitudes typically reintegrated into respectable working class life after leaving prostitution, society promulgated this fear of such integration in bourgeois life. The femme fatale is a manifestation of this fear.

Thresholds are important to understanding the elusive nature of the femme fatale since she disingenuously crosses many metaphorical thresholds representing social and economic class. These boundaries bear great significance since they are established specifically to protect middle-class purity and morality. According to Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger*, thresholds, such as “crossroads, arches, new seasons, new clothes”—any kind of symbol that we can recognize in everyday life—are metaphorical social boundaries; “thresholds symbolize beginnings of new statuses” (115) that the femme fatale wishes to achieve.

By understanding the circumstances that led women into prostitution, I hope to eradicate assumptions that the femme fatale is a sexually promiscuous woman whose

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primary purpose is to cause men harm. This harm, where it occurs, is merely a casual consequence of her true goal. The fictional femme fatale, having had experiences similar to those of the Victorian prostitute, desires integration into mainstream bourgeois life without detection in order to gain wealth and power. In other words, she simply wishes to have the same comforts enjoyed by other bourgeois women.

Artists and novelists in the nineteenth century, however, frequently stereotype such women as a personification of disease and contamination in order to generate attitudes that might protect bourgeois values. But a closer examination of the fiction reveals that it is the middle class, itself, that is corrupt, thriving on these negative images of women in order to protect its power from aggressive or ambitious women.

In *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation, and the City*, Deborah Nord claims that Victorian literature creates myths about prostitution, dramatizing uncertainties “about the nature of selfhood, character, and society” (1). Victorian society treats the prostitute as a “fallen woman” in order to disparage its attractiveness, and to reduce the number of women involved in it. Also since prostitution was so prevalent in both the West End and East End of London, “nice girls and decent women” were exposed to it, and there was a fear—justified or unjustified—of a general loosening of society’s moral constraints. In essence the “immoralization” of prostitution may have been an attempt on the part of middle-class society to preserve its social order and stave off the erosion of its moral conventions. In *Prostitution*, nineteenth-century venereologist William Acton declares that a prostitute’s lifestyle irrevocably impairs her sense of morality (756). On the contrary, Walkowitz discredits assumptions that suggest these

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women are immoral, incapable of reform, and sexually deviant. Many women worked in prostitution simply for economic reasons—as a job—and were largely untouched by it.

Unlike Zola's Nana who reverses the degradation of women in prostitution by demoralizing her male patrons, the Victorian prostitute did not want to stay in prostitution. Sometimes lower class women worked seasonally to supplement their meager wages. Or abandoned wives took to the streets to support their children. Poverty and starvation wages were the primary causes of prostitution. The stereotype of a seduced, pregnant, and abandoned young girl as a result of a middle-class rake was largely fictive. In contrast, the Victorian prostitute gains some agency by determining her own value in a voluntary, and non-institutionalized, free trade market.

Nineteenth-century women who became prostitutes are not ambitious like Nana, and do not perceive the use and exchange value of their bodies as a long term business pursuit. Unlike the Victorian prostitute, Nana's experience on the streets leads to a career in the theater as an untalented actress, yet one whose success is forged by the use of her body. She sustains a devoted male audience when really Nana simply models herself after fantasies constructed by her male conquests, such as Count Muffat or Foucarmont who satisfy "growing needs of her luxury," thus enabling her to "finish off a man at a single bite" (406). In reality, prostitution only constituted a stage in a woman's life that lasted approximately between the ages of nineteen to twenty-one (Rescue Society Abstract).<sup>13</sup>

Victorian British literature typically suggests that gentleman seduce working class women. *David Copperfield* exploits this myth when Lil' Emily, a working class girl, personifies the mythical "fallen woman" seduced and abandoned by Steerforth, an

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aristocrat. Police and hospital records chronicling the social lives of Victorian women, however, confirm different governing factors.<sup>14</sup> In Walkowitz's study, the Victorian prostitute usually had sexual relations with a man in her social class before working as a prostitute. Middle-class men were usually not in fact responsible for these women's first sexual experiences.

Working from a convention, mid-century novelists often portray aristocratic males as bounders, hence warning young, impressionable, middle class girls that a woman is only as good as her virtue. Such men were not to be trusted. Yet novelists, like Dickens, warn readers that a woman of an inferior class usually cannot integrate into a higher class, especially if she uses her sexuality to transgress class boundaries. These messages in literature express a prevailing fear of class transgressions, and reflect society's deep-seated hostilities toward women, as for example when women are blamed for the spread of venereal disease.<sup>15</sup>

But the prostitute is not a passive victim as she is often portrayed in literature. Though these women may have been subservient with family members at home, when they became public women, they were usually outspoken and aggressive. Middle-class society patronized the laboring poor, generalizing them as shameless and fallen. Due to economic differences, the working class often failed to assimilate to middle-class moral values while bourgeois women were protected from economic blights affecting working class girls. By necessity, all working class women were exposed to wage labor conditions and economic hardships, of which middle-class women had no experience. In *Culture and Anarchy*, Matthew Arnold addresses this polemic involving assimilation among working classes particularly to avoid social uprising since an increasingly

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prosperous middle class lifestyle largely depends on docile well-mannered subservience from the lower classes. In both literature and Victorian society, the working class, because of its growing unruliness within the social order, raises anxieties, which further justifies and encourages the middle class to maintain the segregation of the classes.

While dominant ideology characterized fallen women as a moral infection undermining society's need for people to know their place, middle-class conventionalists and moralists obviously failed to understand or even empathize with the struggles of working class life. Working class women could not necessarily afford to be modest and submissive when they were faced daily with the brutal realities of industrialization, low-wage labor, slum-dwellings, overcrowding, and poverty.

In *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces: The Rhetoric of Fallenness in Victorian Culture*, feminist critic, Amanda Anderson, unlike Walkowitz who investigates actual case studies of prostitution and the impact of the Contagious Diseases Acts, studies the figure of the prostitute as a representation of the fallen woman in nineteenth-century literature. This literary image suggests that a different type of woman became a prostitute from those who actually did, as described by Walkowitz.

Walkowitz is specifically representing the social history of women. Various networks of women in prostitution struggled inexhaustibly against social, economic, moral and political issues that attempted to keep these women oppressed and exploited. But the fallen woman in Victorian literature is, on the contrary, submissive and appears to accept her fate. In other words, both the fallen woman trope and the literary portrait of the prostitute are really meant to keep women subordinated to patriarchal power, while at the same time providing a convenient scapegoat for the moral turpitude in Victorian

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society. In popular Victorian literature, society prevents fallen women from reintegrating into mainstream culture, such as the debased Martha Endell in Dickens' *David Copperfield*. The prostitute, more particularly, becomes a justification for men's hostilities toward women, enabling men to blame women for the spread of syphilis and other infectious diseases, while that same culture condones sexual experience among men.

The literary Victorian fallen woman also lacks subjectivity compared to the masculine subject, usually portrayed as the hero. Yet the fallen woman is not only a victim, but also portrayed as a threat. Her fall issues forth an entire signifying system that constructs meaning out of her sexual experiences on the streets, representing her as pollution or a woman who literally loses control over moral values.

Charles Dickens frequently uses this trope to help explain the harsh economic realities of women who have no alternatives other than prostitution. Popular literature warns readers of the consequences suffered by exiled fallen women forced into alienation, poverty, slum dwelling, and suicide. In *David Copperfield* when Martha falls, she is ostracized by her community, "trod underfoot by all the town" (22:396). In an appeal to Emily for help, Martha implores her "have a woman's heart toward me. I was once like you!" (397). Though Emily sympathizes with Martha's plight, society shuns respectable working class who keep any associations with fallen women. Even Emily's uncle, earnest and "tender-hearted," cannot see Emily and Martha "side by side, for all the treasures that's wrecked the sea" (397).

The townspeople punish Martha for her fall by treating her as an outcast, which suggests that society will not welcome back a fallen woman regardless of how long she

repents. Male figures, such as Ham who is more like a brother to Emily, or Peggotty, a surrogate father figure, use their authority over Emily to prevent her from associating with women like Martha. The men fear that an association could lead to negative influences on Emily's pure and chaste character. Eventually Emily does fall and seeks refuge with Martha.

Working class women represent suffering and social pain within the Victorian ideological structure; they are casualties of the urban world. Even Martha insists that she must go where "No one knows me there. Everybody knows me here" (398), and abandons her coastal town for London where she acclimates to the miasma and contamination of city life. As a fallen woman, she realizes that society will not empathize with her economic difficulties or her struggle to survive on the streets. While searching for Emily, David catches up to Martha on a river's edge where legend has it that "one of the pits dug for the dead at the time of the Great Plague was here about, and a blighting influence" (47:748). Her surroundings appropriately emulate "that nightmare condition" of her life where she has no friends, no family and no home (748).

When David confronts Martha after she attempts to throw herself in the river, she declares that the stench and filth of the river is "like me . . . I know that I belong to it. I know that it's the natural company of such as I am!" (47:749). This debilitating guilt and self-blame internalized by Martha, along with the severity with which society punishes such women, fractures a woman's identity in order to sustain the power structure in Victorian culture. Although David Copperfield and Peggotty, both merciful agents, show sympathy for the women's ill usage and rescue Emily and Martha from more misfortune, moving them to Australia, this conclusion suggests that fallen women must be removed

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from British culture so that they do not put other women at risk of such contaminating influences. Furthermore according to Dickens, the fallen woman is not capable of improving her status unless outside agencies contribute to this cause. As a social determinist, Dickens feels that outside agencies play a considerable role in saving fallen women.

Dickens, himself, made several appeals to administrative agencies on social reform and established Urania Cottage, a refuge for fallen women. Like Dickens, John Stuart Mill claims in *A System of Logic Ratiocinative and Inductive* that fallen women have “been formed . . . by agencies beyond [their] control” (537-38). Hence these powers are partly responsible for making available institutions that will actually help women to reform rather than ridiculing women for their past mistakes. On the contrary, ideologues such as W.R. Greg fiercely struggled to keep fallen women or prostitutes from reintegrating into Victorian society, as if this could resolve the spread of poverty or venereal disease.

Dickens is not denying the fallen woman her humanity, and obviously he sympathizes with her tragic calamities. But he seems to believe that fallen women are powerless over the economic hardships that leave them homeless and desperate, therefore suggesting they lack agency. Because these women need social assistance, society must empathize with women’s struggles, an opinion evident in a letter written to Burdette-Coutts where Dickens makes the following argument when he discusses women at Urania Cottage:

Society has ill used her and turned away from her, and she cannot be expected to take much heed of its rights or wrongs. It is destructive to *herself*, and there is no

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hope in it, or in her, as long as she pursues it. It is explained to her that she is degraded and fallen, but not lost, having this shelter; and that the means of return to Happiness are now about to be put into her own hands, and trusted to her own keeping (Dickens 79).

Anderson claims that Dickens denies these women selfhood through social assistance since Dickens suggests that having suffered social injustices, the moral character of these women has been damaged, and they may end up in the same economic straits that originally forced them on the streets (104). Therefore, Dickens believes that society needs to take some responsibility in rehabilitating these women, and in helping fallen women reintegrate into society rather than debasing them for the conditions of their past as do the Contagious Diseases Acts.

Dickens believes that reform among women is possible, and he does not doubt the fallen woman's desire to change her life. He "[describes] a kind of active repentance in their being faithful wives and mothers of virtuous children" (35). He confides to Angela Burdett-Coutts that his compassionate portrayal of Martha Endell is intended "for readers of all classes and all ages of life; but I have not the least misgiving about being able to bring people gently" to the consideration of prostitution (165). In this passage, Dickens is aware of society's judgment against fallen women, but he endeavors to change their opinions and to illicit a more sympathetic perspective by encouraging all classes to re-evaluate narrow conventions and socio-economic pressures that put women on the streets.

According to Dickens, the prostitute is a tragic victim of social forms and therefore powerless over her own reform, a belief confirmed by society's acrimonious moral judgment against Emily and Martha in *David Copperfield*. In his novel, he implies

that society needs to generate more redemptive institutions to rehabilitate and eventually reintegrate fallen women. But, nevertheless, Dickens also feels that such reintegration is impossible because English society is still not tolerant and too disparaging of fallen women. Considering the fallen woman, Dickens declares that it is ridiculous to talk to a prostitute of her duty to society: “society has used her ill and turned away from her, and she cannot be expected to take much heed of its rights and wrongs” (20). Rather she must be “tempted to virtue” by kindness and encouraged to gain her sense of self-control. Consequently, “there must be no emphasis on a harsh or vindictive morality” (18-19).

Though Dickens may have disagreed with segregating fallen women from England, he perhaps felt that British society would be less persuaded of their reintegration. Given this consideration, Urania Cottage, under his charge, released reformed women in “distant parts of the World” where “[they] could be sent for marriage, with the greatest hope for their future families” (Dickens 78). Dickens may have felt strongly that such reintegration would be much more successful abroad, and therefore he was by no means sentimentally deluded by the practices of government offices, dominated by wealth and privilege, concerning former prostitutes. Dickens expressed a human interest in these women, that constructed vivid images of people, and therefore he hoped to attract more support for social reform.<sup>16</sup>

Though they seem to agree that Dickens exposes social hypocrisies, both Deborah Nord and Amanda Anderson still maintain that social determinism negates a woman’s subjectivity. Nord asserts that in *Bleak House*, Dickens shows that “the danger to middle-class survival and renewal is posed in the form of debased womanhood” (84). Anderson, though less critical, similarly contends that “Dickens engages . . . in the





Victorian cultural practice that wards off perceived predicaments of agency by displacing them onto a sexualized feminine figure” (106). For Anderson, Dickens’ characterization of Emily and Martha are still “scapegoating mechanisms” that undermine autonomy (107). Fallenness allows Victorian society to objectify the woman. Once the woman is exiled from her community and labeled “fallen,” she additionally suffers a loss of identity connected to her family and working class community. But Anderson also concedes that though Dickens believes in freedom from social constraints, one does not have power over these social forms; autonomy, especially among fallen women, is “unobtainable.”

Moreover, Dickens juxtaposes the suffering fallen woman of the working class with the threatening upper-class woman to emphasize that working class women become casualties of urban life. *David Copperfield* elaborates on the conflicts between the suffering working class fallen woman, Emily, and the menacing, disparaging upper class woman, Rosa Dartle, who epitomizes the consumptive femme fatale. In contrast to Emily, who becomes a victim of urban life, Rosa Dartle functions as a threat, specifically attacking Emily, who she feels divides the upper class home that Rosa seems to rule. As a relative and companion of the Steerforth family, Miss Dartle sadistically scorns Emily, echoing moral censure against fallen women. When David investigates the disappearance of Emily, Rosa Dartle summons David with startling news about Emily’s whereabouts, confirming suspicions that Emily ran away with Steerforth.

After Steerforth abandons Emily in Naples, suggesting that the girl marry “a very respectable person,” she suffers a nervous breakdown and escapes from the villa. During Mr. Littimer’s report of Emily’s misfortune, Rosa Dartle gloats with “vaunting cruelty” and readily announces that David’s childhood friend “may be dead!” (46:735). Although

Rosa expresses no sympathy for Emily's fate, she too has been treated cruelly by Steerforth and just as quickly discarded, figuratively placing her in the same category as Emily, fallen and low class, which she viciously resents. Rosa claims:

"This devil whom you make an angel of, I mean this low girl whom he picked out of the tide-mud may be alive, --for I believe some common things are hard to die. If she is you will desire to have a pearl of such price found and taken care of. We desire that, too; that he may not by any chance be made her prey again. So far, we are united in one interest; and that is why I, who would do her any mischief that so coarse a wretch is capable of feeling, have sent for you to hear what you have heard" (740-741).

That Rosa sees Emily as the predator and Steerforth as the prey is rooted in her belief that Emily has used Steerforth to elevate herself to a better social level, perhaps the level that Rosa Dartle, a motherless spinster, desires. Considering Rosa's struggle to dominate Steerforth, and Emily's fascination with Steerforth as an upper-class gentleman, it is important to note that during this part of the century, women desperately competed for eligible husbands and were often forced to imitate respectable manners and feign a higher social class (23). Since Steerforth takes a longer and more serious interest in Emily, Rosa implies apprehensively that Emily may have succeeded in marrying Steerforth.

According to Nord, in Dickens' novels, the sexually suspect woman, who embodies moral turpitude and threatens the survival of the bourgeoisie, connects unrelated individuals to different classes and neighborhoods (82). When Emily is seduced by Steerforth, Rosa figuratively links the upper class with "that sort of people", illustrating the injustices and prejudices of the privileged class against the lower classes (352). By

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comparing the working class to “animals and clods, and beings of another order” (352), she refers to her class superiority by literally de-humanizing the working class. Yet when Rosa Dartle later alludes to her tabooed incestuous relationship with Steerforth, she points not only to her own double standards, but also to that among aristocrats who patronize laborers as coarse people. Both Steerforth and Rosa Dartle act reprehensibly, using “common” people for their own selfish ends, or viciously reproaching and scapegoating young girls who interfere with failed lovelorn relationships with unreliable upper class men.

By tempting and seducing both Rosa and Emily, Steerforth conveys differences between fallen and fatal women though showing they fall for similar reasons; Steerforth compels them to be seduced, his sexual drive indicative by his name. But while both women suffer from his abuse, Emily suffers most. Because she represents fallenness, Emily is powerless, a legible character, easily read and understood, and simply forced underground. Rosa, however, is a liminal figure hard to place within any representation; she resents Emily, though bitterly recognizing her as a rival, while appearing as the duped and abused abandoned woman who had mistakenly expected Steerforth’s devotion in return. As a *femme fatale*, she wreaks vengeance on other rivals and male characters who try to protect vulnerable women. Like Steerforth who marks Rosa as his concubine, she also stakes him out as her man, regardless of consequences to other women who will be harmed; Rosa is a domineering and possessive woman.

David fixates on Rosa’s scar, trying to read “the old writing on the wall” (353), concluding that “she never said anything she wanted to say, outright” (350). He is consumed by her titillating portrait and distorts her image through his imagination to fix a

meaning to her character. But such an image fails. The fatal woman, Rosa, disrupts categorizations of women; she even personifies masculine and aggressive traits that do not characterize the fallen or domestic woman. When David readily presumes that Rosa loves Steerforth “like a brother”, Steerforth corrects David, claiming, “Some brothers are not loved over much; and some love—” (353), pausing to suggest that Rosa Dartle and Steerforth are much more than sister and brother and have had more intimate relations. The scar on Rosa’s lip left by Steerforth’s “handiwork” (870), symbolically binds Rosa Dartle and Steerforth together, figuratively marking Rosa as his woman. Rosa later confesses, “If I could have been his wife, I could have been the slave of his caprices for a word of love a year” (871). Tauntingly, Rosa adds: “he loved me. Yes, he did!” (872), confirming her obsession with Steerforth. Her thin figure and large eyes metaphorically reflect a deformed heart conjuring images of sadistic Victorian moralists who treat weak fallen women as the enemy, while her scar symbolizes Rosa’s own fallenness.

Rosa’s relationship with Steerforth is similar to relationships that the *femme fatale* has with her male victim, a youth, somewhat fickle, and inferior to her function as an insatiably consumptive woman as described in the introduction. Rosa, however, sublimates her resentment toward Steerforth by loathing Emily. Later Rosa admits that Steerforth objectified her as a passing fancy that “died out” (872). When she is no longer the love object of Steerforth, he de-feminizes her, “a mere disfigured piece of furniture” (872). She explains: “I descended—as I might have known I should, but that he fascinated me with his boyish courtship—into a doll, a trifle for the occupation of an idle hour, to be dropped and taken up, and trifled with, as the inconstant hour took him” (872). As a seducer, Steerforth works on innocent girls who he considers worthy of his

efforts. Emily is “a most engaging little Beauty” when Steerforth meets her (21:376). Once Emily surrenders to Steerforth, she loses her power. For male characters, like Steerforth, who have a “false and corrupt heart,” the ideal image he constructs of Emily easily changes to repugnance. Yet as readers, we still imagine Emily as David Copperfield’s innocent and sweet childhood friend, separated from her family and abandoned to city streets. Dickens humanizes Emily, thus causing Rosa’s unforgiving, vindictive temperament to be reprehensible.

David is especially unsettled when Rosa questions *his* innocence, which suggests she is reading David in the same way she reads Emily as “a depraved worthless set” (532), a judgment that alludes to David’s class inferiority insinuating that he too is an impostor. Rosa is a vindictive moralist denouncing the flaws of other characters while finding no fault in her own fall. Copperfield subverts Rosa’s opinion of him by attempting to be a moral guide and protector to Emily in addition to trying to assimilate to the social status of Steerforth. But a true blueblood like Steerforth agrees with Rosa Dartle that “there is a pretty wide separation between them and us . . . they have not very fine natures, and they may be thankful that, like their coarse rough skins, they are not easily wounded” (352). Steerforth suggests that the lower classes have no feelings and therefore do not deserve to be treated better, a belief confirmed when he ruins and abandons Emily.

Anderson contends that David resists such readings because he wants to define himself against categories of “fallenness”, which always indicate legible signs. In other words he escapes inferior representations associated with the working class and women who are exploited by aristocratic males. To make these connections might make him a

victim like Emily, which figuratively unmans him. Therefore he tries to dominate and control women who really are victims, such as Martha and Emily, by eventually reforming them. In his efforts to save Emily and Martha from the vicissitudes of poverty and prostitution, the fallen woman retains her categorization as female victim of urban suffering, pain and poverty, while Copperfield escapes class inferiority attached to his working class affiliations with Peggotty and Emily.

Literature builds on ideological middle-class values, not simply by acknowledging that economics force some working class women into prostitution, but also warns readers about the dreary fate of fallen women and pontificates about morality. Dominant Victorian ideology fears the reintegration of former fallen women and desires their marginalization. For one, conventionalists feared that a fallen woman's character could never be restored to acceptable moral behavior. Therefore these women might have a corrupting influence on innocent girls. Dickens novels seemingly conflict with Walkowitz's study of prostitution in Victorian London where women may have worked as domestic servants by day and supplemented their income as clandestine prostitutes by night, but always returning to mainstream working class life within a brief amount of time.

The woman of the streets is the nexus of this fear, associated with unsanitary urban conditions, diseases, vagrancy and poverty, and the middle class literally treats the fallen woman as if she were the cause of these social problems. The literary fallen woman fears the workhouse and readily accepts her punishment without a struggle. Because she is weak, she is less likely to rebel against social codes or force her way back into mainstream culture. Dickens seems not only interested in trying to resolve these complex

economic problems, within the framework of Victorian ideology, that beset young working class women, but also in addressing issues that encumber a rapidly industrializing society.

Much like his fictional fallen character Martha, Dickens's *Sketches by Boz*, a book which curiously attracted male readership according to Deborah Nord, similarly portrays women as victims of Victorian moralizing forces. In "The Hospital Patient" the victim is a young working class woman, badly beaten by a male assailant, and she lies dying in her hospital bed. Not only does this image project a vision of ugliness and debasement in modern urban life, but Dickens also seems to question male dominance and patriarchal culture since the image insinuates that a woman is always powerless against her abuser. In this presentation, Dickens understands and is sensitive to the moral limits enforced with a vengeance by Victorian conventionalists. Once again, he tries to illicit a more compassionate response from his readers, suggesting that women must be liberated from social constraints that otherwise keep them in abusive marriages. Dickens bleakly describes the patient:

Her long black hair had been hastily cut from about the wounds on her head, and streamed over the pillow in jagged and matted locks. Her face bore frightful marks of the ill-usage she had received: her hand was pressed upon her side, as if her chief pain were there; her breathing was short and heavy and it was plain to see that she was dying fast (257-58).

Nord argues that the sketch serves a dual purpose. While the reader sympathizes with the abused woman, strict bourgeois Victorian ideology undermines her image, portraying the female victim as a signifier for contamination and disease. Dickens implies that such



conventionalists are hypocritical, preaching morality, yet failing to offer other economic alternatives for women. This just creates a moral quandary in which working class women—not bourgeois society—suffer. The pain and ugliness of early modern life experienced by the fallen woman was pervasive, an agent of contamination and disease. Yet the middle class, who often imposes moral limits, ignores the conditions illustrated by the gruesome details in Dickens's "The Hospital Patient."

The woman is a precursor to Nancy in *Oliver Twist*. Like Nancy, this woman faces the same doom common to such women, that of being badly beaten by her lover, who we also believe is her panderer, though she denies his abuse or guilt. Though the virtue of the domestic woman is related to her lack of vanity and self-involvement, the fictional prostitute or fallen woman in nineteenth-century literature is also expected to be and is portrayed as similarly self-abnegating. In *Oliver Twist*, the prostitute Nancy, for example, saves Oliver's life at the cost of her own. By sacrificing herself, Nancy becomes a symbolic mother figure. But viewed from the perspective of upward social mobility, such a self-abnegating strategy is self-defeating. Thus, while Dickens portrays a humanized version of the fallen woman / prostitute, other characters meant to represent the hypocrisies of moralistic Victorian society do not make these sacrifices by acting benevolently, though they do judge bitterly.

"A social outsider and a social connector" represents the moral turpitude of the Victorian period, the "dangerous aspect of the urban condition" (Nord 75). Hence, for Nord, Dickensian female characters convey the same message that women put society at risk if they are let out of the domestic sphere. Yet, as we've already indicated, such contamination can already exist within the home, a theme repeated again in *Great*



*Expectations.* Dickens suggests that feminine sexuality, itself, is a perpetual threat to culture when it is unleashed in a predatory fashion, such as when Miss Havisham constructs Estella as a femme fatale to wreak havoc on other men. But Dickens also insinuates that men are also flawed, but particularly by bad influences perpetuated by the ruling class. Steerforth's sexuality is undoubtedly disruptive and destructive in that it weakens and divides strong working class families. He uses his social rank to increase his attractiveness among impressionable girls like Emily.

Working class women are easily more denigrated when they fall because their alternatives are considerably limited, compared to middle class girls tempted and seduced by bourgeois men. Fallenness is thus typically defined as a working class problem. In *Tess*, for example, Mercy Chant, originally destined to be Angel's wife, and Angel Clare's brothers patronize working class women who lack the ease, comfort, and opportunities experienced by the ruling class. When Angel's brother reflects upon Angel's marriage to Tess, he claims: "Poor Angel, poor Angel! I never see that nice girl [Mercy] without more and more regretting his precipitancy in throwing himself away upon a dairymaid, or whatever she may be" (44:276). The brother implies that Angel degrades himself by marrying Tess. Similarly Angel takes Tess's confession as proof that she embodies the lowness of her class. Mercy Chant echoes this rash criticism when she discovers Tess's boots concealed behind a bush, declaring, "Some impostor who wished to excite our sympathies," (276) reflecting the unfeeling nature of the privileged class.

In contrast to the victimized fallen woman, the femme fatale projects traits of egoism and vice; she seldom sacrifices herself for another character, which is perhaps

indispensable if she is to overcome the obstacles placed in their path. Atypical is Collins's Lydia Gwilt, who takes her own life in order to save Midwinter. Vice is usually associated with recalcitrant self-interest. Ironically, the femme fatale more closely resembles the traits of a hypocritical moral society, suggesting that social success requires such a hypocritical disguise. She embodies all the traits of self-interest--vanity, capriciousness, deception, self-indulgence.

In contrast to this matrix of vices, the literary fallen woman rarely portrays these traits. Rather, she symbolizes the external forces of poverty, abandonment, and isolation. Though the femme fatale functions as a villainous agent intent on changing her social condition, the fallen woman seems incapable of such actions. Fallen women are often identified as working class, which gives the illusion that middle-class homes are protected from such vice. However, in *Bleak House* Dickens suggests that the fallen woman is no longer the stereotypical working class victim forced to suffer the harsh judgments of her community. Rather Lady Deadlock goes unnoticed as an outwardly respectable upper-class woman who successfully conceals the history of her illegitimate child, Esther Summerson, hence blurring the distinction between the woman of "the hearth" and the woman of "the streets." Invading middle-class homes and dishonoring respectable bourgeois families more adequately characterizes the femme fatale, Lady Dedlock, since transgressions of the femme fatale render these families vulnerable to public scrutiny.

While literary convention demanded that society castigate her as a wicked woman, the femme fatale commits moral crimes that are of little importance to her; she escapes society's judgment by undermining society's dicta. Disapproval from society is

viewed as a tiresome obstacle that slows down her progress toward independent wealth and status. Though society similarly chastises the femme fatale, unlike the fallen woman, she “retains a resilient agency” (Anderson 41), and because she is “eager for advancement, and greedy of opulence and elegance, angry with the lot that had been cast her, and weary of dull dependence,” she victimizes others (Braddon 296). The femme fatale, because she is so single-minded in her goal, and so unencumbered by conventional moral considerations, usually makes a quick recovery from her poor judgment and social blunders.

A growing underclass resulted in a multitude of changes generally affecting London. In Victorian culture, society desperately tries to code and represent sexual differences; however these codes fail to represent real women, especially those who demand gender equality. Really the femme fatale embodies social and economic confusion caused by the Industrial Revolution, the convergence of production and reproduction, urbanization and technology. Victorian London is in such a state of vast economic and social change in the advent of new technology and an emerging class system, that there is a desperate need to code and represent these changes. Hence Victorian society is governed by reordering its environment and making it conform to an idea. Like Foucault, Douglas argues that this reordering must have ideological meaning for society—that is, it must keep society ordered and contained. More specifically, such a reordering of culture and society requires laws to establish ideological codes. According to Foucault the form and function of ideas and rules are created through a proliferation of discourse.

The class system, for example, provides representations for both the bourgeoisie and the working class. But this system exploits lower classes that have less power, such as the working class. The lower classes have little influence over Victorian ideology, yet they are expected to conform to bourgeois codes of respectability. Everyone has his or her own place in society, just as the femme fatale should know her place is either in the home as a domestic woman, or on the street as an abject fallen woman. But the femme fatale will not submit to such categorization; she undermines the representation of both class and gender and she disrupts this order by using the home as fertile ground of seduction. Finally, she vehemently refuses to be treated as a pathetic, helpless fallen woman once her true identity as a seductress is discovered.

Thus, within the fabric of Victorian culture provided for women, the femme fatale is “out of place”: she subverts all standards for nineteenth-century middle-class women—that they must be chaste, domestic, or subordinate to men. In literature, these women are portrayed as corrupting bourgeois society because they defiantly refuse to be helpless or conform to such oppressive restrictions against women when they murder husbands, barter their bodies for money, or carry on scandalous affairs with married men. Whatever it takes to escape poverty, they are prepared to do it.

Returning to an earlier point, female rebellion is quite pervasive within Victorian society, and ideologues wanted to cripple defiance among women. Such rebellion among women represents everything bourgeois culture detests: contamination, pollution, poverty, and criminality. Yet literature undermines this threat by rendering her as the powerless fallen woman within society. On the contrary, the femme fatale refuses to be a victim who surrenders to such severe social indictments endured by fallen women. Her

defiance against conditions of poverty and dependence calls into question ideological premises that provide no alternatives for women.

The femme fatale is indifferent to society's judgement except to the extent that it serves her purpose, using pity as a tool to force her way back into middle-class life. Her story leaves out her bad behavior, while enumerating harsh realities she has suffered, such as abandonment, immoral husbands, or poverty. Though she shocks her listeners, who include naïve men, good-hearted middle-class women, or self-absorbed aristocrats, she arouses their sympathy, a ploy that promotes her scheming.

Victorian critics declare that these examples of women suggest to readers that it is okay for a woman to cheat, lie, or steal in order to change her dreary fate. Yet upon a closer examination of social oppression, so deeply rooted in Victorian culture, such portraits suggest that women must live by these means in order to survive. This characterization of "immoral" women generates another discourse on sexuality, which Foucault further explains by noting that the law only "[posts] limits" (85); ideas and rules are a tenuous representation of power, which enables dominant social groups to exploit subordinate social groups. In this case, bourgeois men enforce moral and judicial laws that exploit women of all social classes. When the femme fatale breaks laws, she is delineated as immoral and dangerous. However, moral laws do not prevent the Victorian femme fatale from challenging male authority. She disrupts the order of Victorian life, threatening the tranquility of the bourgeois home, causing the death of innocent men, and destroying the virtue of young women.

The femme fatale fiercely enters into this marriage market, ready to outwit both men and women in order to obtain a worthy match, usually by indirect means, such as

using cultural constructions to create an assumed identity that would be suitable and welcomed in respectable circles. Posing as a domestic woman serves the Victorian femme fatale's economic and social advantage. She masters this particular trope in order to advance her economic interests. If she is fallen, social gossip does not discourage her from triumphing over economic blight. In Victorian life, there are a growing number of adult women in the marriage market, who are driven by ambition and other desperate considerations, a fact that contributes to this prevalence in literature of women who hunt and ensnare men, only to make them miserable in unhappy marriages.

According to Bade, Carl Jung claimed that when men mistreat women, the wicked woman is a manifestation of men's fear of retribution that women will reverse gender roles and become dominant over men. The oppressed and exploited position of women in the nineteenth century thus leads to a plethora of femme fatales in literature, images of women who manifest this fear among men. Explosive social issues which included the Contagious Diseases Acts in 1864, the parliamentary introduction of women's votes in 1867, and the Married Women's Property Act in 1870, by granting women more influence and power, certainly escalated men's anxiety about women. The increase in the number of such laws suggests that men's authority over women grew increasingly tenuous throughout the century.

In either case, the constructions of both fallen and domestic women are so minute and distinct to keep Victorian women within rigid boundaries. Yet the femme fatale, who possesses characteristics identified in both domestic and fallen women, undermines Victorian critics' assertions that a woman's subjectivity is socially constructed. Just because these women identify social codes about femininity and masculinity, good



women from bad women, does not imply that all women are ready to overthrow these categories that keep women subordinated. The femme fatale takes a more conniving approach where she has a better chance of independence, some autonomy while not suffering from the stigma and criticism usually attached to women who overtly challenge patriarchal ideals, like the revolutionary woman. The femme fatale desires a reordered society and understands that the social injustices suffered by fallen women are unfair and often iniquitous. But the femme fatale is not willing to pay that price, usually at the cost of her own socio-economic freedom, to change a highly stratified society that defines women within categories and limits their access to various options. The femme fatale, just like other women who later became revolutionaries, does not desire to be put into an ideological box or representation. So she rebels against these false representations by creating her own opportunities. She still takes risks, the risk of being caught. Yet her image makes a lasting impression among Victorian women reading about her, whether it be favorable or adverse. For this reason, the femme fatale is iconoclastic.

### Chapter 3

#### The Cultural Phenomenon of the Victorian *Femme Fatale*

The previous chapter dealt with two principal representations of femininity common in Victorian literature--the fallen woman and the domestic woman. But categories of “domestic” and “fallen” are insufficiently capacious to satisfy the growing interest in seeking to assess a woman’s private—that is, sexual—and social value. The changing status of women, together with a growing weariness at how oppressive the domestic ideal had become, resulted in Victorian women’s growing identification with the disingenuous femme fatale heroine in a protest against the repressive pre-defined roles of faithful daughter, devoted wife, and nurturing mother. Mrs. Henry Wood and Elizabeth Braddon are just a few Victorian women novelists who form characters from their own experiences that cannot conveniently be characterized as a “domestic or fallen woman.” On the contrary, these characters elude such categories and voice complaints which male novelists appeared incapable of understanding.

Victorian critics, novelists, and feminist writers addressed their concerns about the marginalization of ambitious, independent, or self-sufficient women in literary and cultural representations. Contemporary feminists, in studies of the sensation novel and New Woman fiction that negotiate the definition of women, reveal how problematic these representations of mid-nineteenth-century women were. Conservatives simply declared that these outcast women threatened to subvert conventional attitudes enforced by the nineteenth century hegemonic power structure. In opposition to this straitjacketing of female identity by conservatives who were generally male, feminist critics sought to stabilize the differences between men and women in order to reject the conventional feminine ideal as an unrealistic fictitious portrayal of women.

This chapter seeks to explain the actual social conditions that led to the emergence of the femme fatale. The first section analyzes the condition of women in Victorian England and the subsequent feminist rebellion against it. The second section explains discourses that resist this role-defining movement and discourses that acknowledge something must be done to improve social conditions, but which do not support feminist proposals. The third section introduces the general discourse and popular fiction that led to the femme fatale. And the fourth section discusses the femme fatale as an exploration of the complex strategies ambitious, independent women had to develop in order to negotiate around the defined, imprisoning roles that sought to marginalize them.

#### Social Conditions of the Victorian Woman

Interest in the social changes affecting women are already implicitly evident as early as the 1840s when *Vanity Fair* (1848) was published. Thackeray specifically responds to the needs of a female community that seeks agency, a theme unequivocally explored in sensation fiction. In “Vision and Satire: The Warped Looking Glass”, Robert Lougy explains that Thackeray’s artistic vision intuits “changes that politics or economics can effect” (82). In *Thackeray and Women*, Michael Clarke claims that *Vanity Fair* is a product of the women’s movement, an indictment of “the economical and educational limitations placed on women” (Clarke 86). The very issues addressed by Thackeray epitomize the unsettled social climate of the late 1840s, one which led to a re-examination of women’s roles and their increasing need to find alternatives to marriage, such as female employment, as a source of economic security.

Ironically, Thackeray's publication coincided with the Governess' Benevolent Institution, established for the higher education of women not trained in scientific or political fields, or in interests associated with the public and professional sphere dominated by men (Clarke 86). Though, as J.S. Mill explains, women may desire "admission into professions and occupations that they have been denied" (442), women are discouraged from professional and educational endeavors enjoyed by men, and are rather trained to entertain prospective husbands.

In her article, "Review: *Vanity Fair*, *Jane Eyre*, and *The Governesses' Benevolent Institution—Report for 1847*", Lady Eastlake expresses her concerns for the women trained to become governesses, calling the governess "a different kind of victim" since she signifies the comfort of the bourgeois home yet is marginalized by it and forced to procure work in her field.<sup>17</sup> The economic vulnerability experienced by the governess could happen to any middle-class woman. Lady Eastlake readily defends the governess, explaining that her situation is one of "circumstances and luck" forcing her to procure work in her field. According to Eastlake, the governess, like the married middle-class woman, is a lady and represents the same educated class, maybe even more than the family for whom she works. Though Eastlake maintains that the manners of the governess are not offensive, she still distinguishes different categories between the governess as a marginalized woman and the married bourgeois woman as the domestic ideal.

Considering economic disadvantages, Eastlake insists on "the necessity of women's dependence," as if this will solve the economic hardships of the governess who fails to find a suitable middle-class man to marry. Eastlake discourages women from

uniting together and resisting dependence on men. The femme fatale similarly chooses dependency on men encouraged by Eastlake. But this female protagonist in fiction depends on the governess trope, and uses it as a means to gain access to respectable homes; her true object, of course, is to change her socioeconomic condition. The portrait of the governess further heightens these concerns of promiscuity and adultery, especially when she is forced into a fixed position and uses the patriarchal system to gain economic power. Though a Victorian woman has a chameleon-like nature, regardless of class, profession, or social rank, she is self-conscious of her social role.

Despite Eastlake's assertion that the governess has misplayed her chances, the fictional femme fatale suggests the contrary to her readers, namely that a woman must resort to duplicitous means if she is to escape genteel poverty: she must use respectable homes as hunting grounds for available, well-to-do men.

Conventional texts portray the unmarried governess as undesirable, "ugly," and incapable of attracting a male suitor. Thackeray, Braddon, and Wilkie Collins modify this perception, by portraying female characters who rely on the governess trope to mimic the domestic ideal as part of a duplicitous plot to subvert existing gender and class systems. Becky Sharp, for example, renders this stereotype inaccurate by seducing a worthy match. As a consequence of hiding behind the governess trope, where she plots against the hegemonic power structure, the image of the femme fatale masquerading as a governess begins to generate anxieties in middle-class homes even though she appears to be the very image of respectable domesticity. The femme fatale is clearly too ambitious to be satisfied with the genteel poverty of a true governess.

When the femme fatale is married, she has no illusions about her husband's sensitivity and fidelity as does the typical domestic ideal woman. Both Becky and Lydia are in marked contrast to the stereotypical governess, who is meant to neutralize temptations experienced by her male associates. Instead the femme fatale baits her victim in order to generate better opportunities for herself as a marginalized woman, going so far as to do away with her boorish husband if that proves necessary. In *Armada*, Lydia Gwilt does not mollify her abusive first husband; rather she retaliates by poisoning him.

Eastlake, by rejecting female emancipation, inadvertently promotes romantic ideals of marriage. In *The Beth Book* (1897), Sarah Grand addresses cultural assumptions of marriage alluded to earlier in the century by Eastlake. Grand provides a realistic analysis of men and women by noting that a woman marries to escape her oppressive home life. While a young woman may fantasize that life with her newlywed husband will be liberating, Grand clearly indicates that rash decisions concerning marriage can and do lead to objectification, helplessness, and even emotional abuse.

This oppressive form of socioeconomic dependency eventually increased middle-class women's desire for liberty and equality. Issues at home emphasize a growing concern with divorce laws, education for women, and professional alternatives that would allow well-educated bourgeois women to earn a living and to sustain their socioeconomic position independent of marriage.

In *Women's Oppression Today*, Michele Barrett explains that romantic love constructs marriage as an ideal where women worship their husbands, and husbands cherish their wives. But rogue heroines like Becky Sharp view romantic ideals of marriage with profound skepticism. Thackeray's adventuress reckons that the marriage

market only concerns economic advantages and security for women—not romantic love. When Sir Pitt proposes to Becky after she already marries Rawdon, “she is not so much surprised into the avowal, as induced to make it by a sudden calculation” (Thackeray 154). She marries Rawdon for pecuniary purposes; later measuring her new husband’s assets opposite Sir Pitt’s fortune, she decides Sir Pitt would have been a more lucrative match.

Romantic idealism also conceals more brutal facts about Victorian married life. Years after the Matrimonial Causes Act was passed in 1857, allowing women to divorce if they could prove their husband’s abuse or adultery, married women, according to Mill, still tried to hide abuse, and if abuse was discovered, they tried to protect their abuser (443). Sexual oppression thus became a central issue among middle-class women.

Though the Matrimonial Causes Act recognized the potentially oppressive nature of marriage, it still limited a woman’s petition to obtain a divorce from her husband. Proving a husband’s cruelty was a most humiliating and difficult ordeal. According to Barrett among the offenses included were “rape, domestic violence, pornography, prostitution, a denial of female sexual autonomy” (42). Violence at home often curtailed a woman’s independence and kept her subordinated to her husband because she feared him in addition to being humiliated.

These social problems are similarly expressed in *Vanity Fair* when Amelia Sedley simply tolerates George Osborne’s vices, which include gambling, adultery, and neglect, so Amelia can sustain the image of a devoted wife, though the image is suspect. In Gissing’s much later New Woman novel, *The Odd Women* (1893), Monica Widdowson consents to her husband’s caresses though she despises him, having no alternative but to

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tolerate Edmund Widdowson, having been abandoned by the father of her child and concealing the truth from her husband about her transgression. Domestic violence, adultery, and oppressive servitude remain consistent concerns in married life for over three decades. Yet Victorian wives are expected to meet their wifely duties regardless of their feelings.

Given how common unhappy marriages were for many Victorian women, several contemporary critics agree that sensation fiction drew attention to the oppressive nature of domesticity in the nineteenth century by its portrayal of fatal women who desert their husbands.<sup>18</sup> Novels such as *Aurora Floyd*, *East Lynne*, and *Lady Audley's Secret* confirm that Victorian women often entered into unhappy marriages under the guise of domestic bliss.

Emily Robinson's satire on the real-life murderess Madeline Smith, whose crime coincided with the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act, undermines romantic illusions about marriage. The titled character, *Madeline Graham*, is forced to plot against a conniving deceptive suitor, the fictional Le Tellier, who blackmails her and threatens to expose himself as her lover, while she is engaged to marry a wealthy aristocrat, Mr. Behringbright. Robinson's novel captured the spirit of the age when more women, faced with unpleasant married lives and tyrannical husbands, demanded that they keep their own property in order to protect themselves from fortune hunters like L'Atelier, the real-life poisoned lover of Madeline Smith, who exploited the wealth and status of a young, naïve middle-class woman, hoping to marry her for her fortune.

The tensions of domestic life experienced by the real Madeline Smith became a central theme in sensation fiction's treatment of female protagonists who rebel against

oppressive social laws. In essence, the plots parody modern Victorian criminal cases. Contemporary feminist critics, like Elaine Showalter and Jennifer Carnell, even concur that sensation fiction was a product of respectable women going on trial. Specifically modeled after the highly publicized Smith case, *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Madeline Graham* are the first novels to borrow their sensation novel plot from an actual murder trial.<sup>19</sup> In time, it became a convention for Victorian murderesses in crime stories or penny part fiction to poison husbands or lovers, a popular alleged method of foul play (Hartman 6).

The code of manners assumed by respectable middle-class women differs greatly from the actual actions carried out by accused murderesses. The Victorian feminine ideal was used to construct women as intellectually inferior, yet morally superior; she was physically frail, but practiced strong moral convictions. But for many women, the domestic ideal stamps out feminine sexuality. Like the feminine ideal, the original Smith seldom rebelled against middle-class conventions until her crime was discovered. In fact she often conformed "to expected standards of behavior for women of their class" (Hartman 4). Even *The Daily Express* confirmed that Madeline was a good church-going Christian (1857). Smith never promoted or supported liberal ideas that were contrary to middle-class beliefs. In similar fashion, femme fatale characters usually adhere to domestic conventions as a means to assimilate into respectable middle-class homes.

If sensation fiction is indeed a product of reported crimes committed by respectable middle-class women, then how does this fiction become a commentary on the economic pressures and social problems experienced by women in the mid-nineteenth

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century? And how does this all get translated into the emerging portrait of the femme fatale?

First, let us be candid and admit that a number of women novelists employ the femme fatale as a backlash against patriarchal oppression, but this motif is also a precursor to more assertive social movements organized by women. Shocking as the sexual taboos played out by murderess women were to many Victorians, matters which came out only following their crimes and sexual problems experienced by these women tell us a great deal about the tension felt by ordinary Victorian women who would never dare to commit crimes or transgress prescriptive moral codes. For these female protagonists in fiction, accused murderers reported in newspapers, and nonviolent respectable women at home do share something more than the social class they represent; similarly they endure unhappy marriages, financial insecurity, domestic abuse, and fear of spinsterhood. These are the conditions that drive murderesses to commit crimes that generate the fascination with femme fatale characters as a vehicle for female rebellion, and that remind Victorian women of how oppressive their condition is.

Hartman claims that financial advancement was not a dominant motivation for murder among women in her study. Rather Hartman concurs that these women were trapped by traditional and modern conventions that required women to maintain the appearance of middle-class respectability. I agree that social pressure pushed Madeline Smith to murder her lover. Her betrothed, William Minnoch, who stood “in good Glasgow society . . . [had] made honorable proposals of marriage, had been accepted, and the marriage date was fixed” (*Daily Express*). Such formalities are expected in reputable middle-class homes. Yet Smith duplicitously carried on an affair with a man while

promised to another, and in line with nineteenth-century social codes, Smith “was already the wife of another [L’Atelier] at the time of [her] engagement [to Mr. Minnoch]” (*Daily Express*).

Though evidence suggests that Smith feared dishonoring her family if she were caught carrying on a secret affair with L’Atelier, newspaper journals still reported that she “had lost her womanhood in the pit of sensuality” (*Daily Express*) and was therefore no longer a lady. According to witnesses, L’Atelier was a philanderer and “paid his addresses to some ladies, seduced others, and been compelled to leave [Dundee] by the importunities of a third class of the fair sex” (*Daily Express*). The young Frenchman’s fickleness with women and unscrupulous behavior lead to other questions concerning Smith’s character; she may have shared L’Atelier’s moral depravity as suggested by her carrying on an affair with such a man.

Despite Hartman’s argument concerning social decorum, I assert that her behavior was really rooted in the socioeconomic condition of Victorian women; in other words, the threat of financial instability greatly influenced Smith’s behavior. When Smith confessed to her father that she loved the “strange youth from the Anglo-French isles,” L’Atelier, her father “ordered her to desist thinking of poverty when she might and must have riches” (*Daily Express*). Mr. Smith’s aspirations that his daughter socially and economically advance her opportunities influenced his daughter’s decision to murder a self-seeking, avaricious lover who eventually threatened her economic security.

Ironically and also significantly, the crime committed by Smith actually united women of her class, particularly at her trial where middle-class women surprisingly rallied support and sympathy for her in an outcry against social inequality. This

outpouring came as a shocking surprise to Victorian society.<sup>20</sup> The *Daily Express* explains that while “rude women scattered at rare intervals among the crowd,” in the courtroom “there are pure, noble hearts that burn with the best feelings of humanity, and a single glance will suffice to prove that the attendance is not wholly the fruit of mere idle curiosity” (July 11, 1857). At the Smith trial, *The Daily Express* declared, “excitement” of “such romantic interest . . . would suffice to engage the mind for months” (July 11, 1857). Murderesses act on social problems and tension already experienced by other respectable women in their class, and the murder trial sublimates their frustration. While Smith may have disobeyed the legal system in order to protect her family from dishonor, bourgeois women attended Smith’s trial and figuratively transgressed social laws that do not permit women to support other notorious women.

Hartman additionally suggests that it was “wise to be female and respectable if one intended to dispose of somebody in the nineteenth century” (1). Historians generally agree that social attitudes about educated upper class women led to the acquittal of Smith.<sup>21</sup> According to Hartman’s study, of the thirteen respectable English and French women accused of murder, six were acquitted and none of them were sentenced to death (1). Victorian society simply could not believe that young, fragile, and sheltered decent girls were capable of committing crimes. Equally shocking to sensation readers were female protagonists who embody the traits of the feminine ideal, yet make transgressions. Similar to alleged murderess Madeline Smith, the femme fatale never suffers legal retribution though, perhaps for reasons of poetic justice, she pays for her crime in some other way, by committing suicide or by being forced into sanitariums.

Feminist historians like Mary Hartman and Judith Walkowitz explain that early nineteenth-century, middle-class feminists, who criticize bourgeois ideologues for limiting women's socioeconomic opportunities, desired better education and challenging job opportunities not only as a rebellion against family and home, which stifled these possibilities, but also as a means to escape them.<sup>22</sup> Therefore Victorian middle-class feminists view women's work as the only option out of unhappy marriages and toward social independence.

So serious was the threat of women who questioned the values of British society was felt to be, that women who supported the women's movement were called revolutionaries or anarchists, a label often inappropriately assigned to the femme fatale because of her rebellious nature. Rebecca Stott notes that "moral purity in this moment of crisis was paramount" and used to subordinate women and to protect British culture (15). Portrayed as mannish and antagonistic, revolutionary women organize debates that threaten the establishment. In *Diana of the Crossways*, George Meredith expresses irascible anxieties about the Radical Woman: "A woman, Sir Lukin held, was by nature a mute in politics. Of the thing called a Radical woman, he could not believe that she was less than monstrous" (81). According to Sir Lukin, women need to accept socially assigned gender roles; "radical" women who transgress male-defined terrain by promoting their sociopolitical opinions are out of place.

Throughout this period, feminine representations, which were meant to limit women's public roles, only led to women's resistance, and as a consequence to growing anxieties among the Victorian ruling caste that its social system rooted in the domestic order, marriage, and public and private domains, is under attack. Victorian women

struggled to defeat the double standard and put an end to demoralizing stereotypes of women. From the 1840s onward, reformers and feminists attempted to destabilize gender categories, and yet contemporary discourses continue to reproduce, rework, explore and negotiate the dominant definitions of the function of women within culture.

Fictitious nineteenth-century feminine representations in domestic fiction tended to rile Victorian women whose changing attitudes led them to object to sexual stereotypes. In 1861 woman novelist, Isa Jane Blagden, captures the restlessness and frustration shared by middle-class women who resisted images of the domestic ideal, by denouncing social boundaries that deny women access to public life:

the so-called happy homes of England belie their name miserably. A family of grown up daughters . . . debarred from freedom of action and freedom of opinion, with miserable little occupations which fritter away, but do not occupy time—often prohibited the healthy exercise which is as necessary to the mind as the body, and systematically leaving the intellect, the heart, the blood, in total stagnation—is it surprising that such women grow old as sickly invalids or confirmed hypochondriacs? (163).

Such remarks indicate how little freedom from mundane household activities most domestic women had at home.

Some middle-class Victorian women eventually retaliated against these limiting feminine ideals by demanding equal education, property rights, legislative reform of the divorce laws, and equal access to the public sphere. In 1857 when women organized the Association for the Promotion of the Employment of Women, Victorian feminists attempted to produce alternatives to marriages of convenience. A number of economic



circumstances also led to interests in social change among middle-class women. For one, increasing socioeconomic struggles prevented women from entering into stable marriages, and as a consequence there was still a surplus of unmarried middle-class women who required some kind of employment to survive. Spinsters found employment either as a governess or as a domestic servant. The old conventional life of courtship and marriage was becoming less a reality and more an ideal rooted not in present conditions but in the past.

Victorian conventions concerning propriety and a woman's so-called natural destiny as a wife still hindered women's employment options. Marriage, according to Hartman, is a Victorian woman's "sole and natural vocation" (85). Otherwise female employment among middle-class women in the nineteenth century is restricted to underpaid teaching positions or spinsterhood, limited options usually secondary to marriage. Contemporary feminist critics of nineteenth-century literature agree that financial uncertainty keeps women in helpless bondage to the marriage market while female emancipation leads to economic insecurities where employment for women is restricted. Even though feminism had become a respectable cause among a majority of bourgeois women by the end of the nineteenth century, there were still only a small number of radical women determined to revolutionize the existing order.

Walkowitz and Deborah Nord note that few middle-class women were ready to denounce marriage altogether.<sup>23</sup> Similar to the fictional *femme fatale*, middle-class women still enjoyed the financial conveniences that married life offered them and were not willing to give up economic security for independence. Walkowitz indicates that "marriage remained the approved female destiny for all classes" (CDD 64). Women in

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Victorian culture still perceived marriage as a primary purpose for which they prepared even though they often became dissatisfied with married life.

Even though marriage was a preferred alternative, the number of women who married became significantly fewer among educated women in the late-nineteenth century. In 1887, Eleanor Mildred Sidgwick conducted a study of former students from Oxbridge women's colleges that showed that only "thirty percent of former students were likely to marry" (Walkowitz CDD 64).<sup>24</sup> Accounting for these statistics, Sidgwick explained that low percentages were not due to any flaw of educated, professional women, but rather the "shortage of suitable men" (65). According to statistics gathered at that time, the number of women who chose not to marry only increased slightly by the end of the nineteenth century. Educated women did not necessarily revolt against the institution of marriage, they simply failed to obtain an appropriate marriageable bachelor.

Though marriage became an increasingly less attractive option by the 1860s and 1870s, the active *femme fatale* still denotes women's fear of economic hardship where women struggle in an uncertain male-dominated job market. Only a small community of single independent women insisted on changing "social practices and personal styles" concerning marriage (Walkowitz CDD 61), and in the 1880's they formed an independent network that included Eleanor Marx, Beatrice Webb, Olive Schreiner, and Amy Levy.<sup>25</sup>

By the mid-nineteenth century, women gradually entered male dominated territory such as the courtroom by rallying support for accused female murderers, or they pushed for new parliamentary bills concerning Divorce Laws, and stepped into the public sphere by propelling women's employment and forming the Ladies National Association

to campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts. Feminists increasingly left the home to promote their ideas publicly, and conservatives often criticized them for reneging on their natural duties as wives and mothers. Women's participation in these different spheres, public and private, inevitably led to redefining feminine roles. As a result, these women and their actions generate new anxieties for men and society.

To maintain order, the codification of sexuality seemed a likely solution to reinforce social codes and prohibitions against rebellious, discontented bourgeois women. Women, aware of how restrictive economically such codes were, began to form their own codes and opinions about their status in society by suggesting that all women, regardless of social class, are subject to prescriptive feminine representations.

The function of ideas and rules multiplied through various discourses in newspapers, magazines, weekly journals, and literature. Yet, as Foucault explains, social codes perpetuated by this codification of sexuality could only "[post] limits" on sexual activity (Foucault 85); in other words conventional beliefs may be a tenuous effort to enforce dominant ideological power, but enforcing the sexual double standard exploits women of all social classes. It is clear that conventional standards, tenuous though they may seem, can bear severe consequences if they are transgressed. Women who break such laws are therefore castigated as dangerous, and usually they are abandoned by their families.

#### Mid-Century Debate on the Representation of the Victorian Woman

In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault explains that the Victorians fanatically debate the issue of sexuality and use the codification of sexual behavior as a strategy by which to exercise power in society. This section discusses discourses on

socioeconomic conditions, feminist discourses, the variety of organizations and establishments, including medical science, domestic labor, popular literature, and education for women that were used to initiate this debate on sexuality and to multiply the possible representations of women. This socio-political and cultural debate on women's nature in education, employment, and medical science, especially between George Drysdale and William Acton, and in popular literature, leads to new areas of sexual investigation, filling the pages of mainstream nineteenth-century periodicals and news journals. All of these areas were brought into the battle to preserve the codification of women's behavior and, moreover, the categorization of the femme fatale as a reprehensible type.

In an effort to protect society from the increasing rate of pornography and prostitution and to limit cultural changes relating to the social status of women, feminist critics argue that Victorians produce new categories of deviant sexuality.<sup>26</sup> In this system created to classify sexual behavior, the Victorian woman becomes a central figure. However, despite the proliferation of such representations, their very existence is evidence that Victorian ideology sought to deny women subjectivity.

Medical institutions, in fact, sought assiduously to sway society to accept representations of women as either domestic or fallen by imposing regulations on women and sexuality and by defining women by their reproduction and domestic functions as a means to protect conventional codes. In *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs*, William Acton constructs the feminine ideal (1857) which becomes a general rule for representing normal femininity in the mid-nineteenth century. Acton's definitions distinguish the respectable woman from the deviant woman, and

these categorizations became Victorian culture's general perception of the female sex. Studies by Acton and George Drysdale defined aberrant sexualities and perversions as abnormal sexual behavior that led to new categorizations of women.

Acton's representation of a proper and normal Victorian lady is similar to the construction of the feminine ideal in early nineteenth-century conduct books, essays on morals and manners in popular Victorian journals, after which heroines in domestic fiction were modeled. Conduct books and domestic fiction specifically tried to keep feminine sexuality repressed as part of the constructed feminine ideal by producing ideas and rules about sexuality, ideological power mechanisms working in the form of social law (Foucault 83). Though Acton's definition of women may have been an outdated mode when he wrote *Functions and Disorders*, the image itself is still ubiquitous throughout novels in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, such as Trollope's waif-like portrayal of Lucy Morris in *The Eustace Diamonds* or his later characterization of Hetta Carbury in *The Way We Live Now*. Acton attempted to undermine emerging feminist concerns that reject this traditional ideal, claiming that only immoral women have sexual desire while in *most* women this desire does not exist.

the majority of women (happily for society) are not very much troubled by sexual feeling of any kind. What men are habitually, women are only exceptionally. It is too true, I admit, as the divorce courts show, that there are some few women who have sexual desires so strong that they surpass those of men, and shock public feeling by their consequences. I admit . . . the existence of sexual excitement terminating even in nymphomania . . . but with these sad exceptions there can be no doubt that sexual feeling in the female is in the majority of cases

in abeyance, and that it requires positive and considerable excitement to be roused at all. Many persons, and particularly young men, form their ideas of women's sensuous feeling from what they notice early in life among loose, or at least low and vulgar women (1857:133).

Acton attempted to police sexuality by creating rigid distinctions between masculine and feminine roles, or between decent women and immoral women. Any young Victorian woman, not restricted to domestic space, was suspected of being a source of corruption, disease, and pollution. This pervasive sexual policing generated an outcast class of women who were categorized as "sexually deviant" females. Prostitutes and criminal women were obviously placed in this category, but attempts were also made to place ambitious women, such as those who became femme fatales, into this category. By typecasting and defining women who divorce their husbands as sexually aggressive, Acton undermines women who seek female emancipation.

In *The Improper Feminine*, contemporary feminist critic Lyn Pykett maintains that Acton indirectly "inscribes a fear of female sexuality" (16), which I argue, is later personified by the femme fatale. In his construction of women, Acton, moreover, fails to acknowledge that all individuals have desires, regardless of gender. This image of the feminine ideal only increased the frustration experienced by middle-class women, who, perhaps in consequence, found an outlet by identifying with femme fatale characters as suggested by the popularity of this motif in sensation fiction.

In this complex discourse that continued throughout the period, medical scientist, George Drysdale, in *The Elements of Social Science* (1860), seemed to sympathize with women. In this work, he argues against Acton's representation of women. But needless

to say, Drysdale does not repudiate Acton's work without creating yet additional categorizations of women. In essence, most attempts to redefine women's roles by subverting traditional feminine representations only lead to new categorizations of women, hence new stereotypes.

Though the *Saturday Review*, to cite but one example, was a conservative journal, it too played a polemical role in the construction of femininity by reflecting Victorian culture's obsessive need to classify different types of women. In a January 1868 reprinted article from the *SR*, published in *Modern Women and What Is Said of Them*, Eliza Linton claims that "[in] an age when everything seems pretty well discovered . . . it is an amazing relief to know that an unsolved, nay . . . an insoluble mystery is standing on one's very hearthrug" (109). Pykett explains that Linton debunks "three decades of conflicting and changing definitions about woman's nature and a woman's role" (11).

Despite her anti-feminist orientation, Eliza Linton attacks the belief that women are simply decorative objects. Domesticity, in her opinion, allows women to serve a viable purpose in the home as nurturers and by managing the demands of domestic labor and household duties. Modern Victorian attitudes simply deny women agency by subverting these roles in the image of duplicitous women who simply role-play the domestic ideal. Victorian women have served as domestic objects for too long, and economic dependency on men denies women agency when really, according to Linton, women carry out a moral purpose in the home. In essence she argues that Victorian women gain agency by resisting cultural changes that demean the role of domesticity, which she does not perceive as an example of sexual oppression that protects patriarchal authority, but rather as a responsibility that gives women agency.



This mystery referred to by Linton alludes to the struggle to define the function of feminine sexuality at a time when husbands and wives sense an increasing difference between their interests and sympathies. During the 1860s, sensation fiction frequently treats these disparities by using a male protagonist to investigate both modern married life and the secret lives of women. It is against this disquieting public discourse about women's public and private nature that the unsettling image of the femme fatale emerges.

Linton pointedly sharpens these anxieties by asserting that it is this image of the femme fatale in sensation fiction that characterizes marriage as "the legal barter of [a woman] for so much money, representing so much cash, so much luxury and pleasure" (1868:340). Her article in the *SR*, by attempting to re-establish the role of married, middle-class women whose purpose is to be a moral guide to their families rather than being idle or inefficient, strengthens established categories of the ideal Victorian woman. In doing so, in her articles featured in the *SR* she satirizes domestic ideology. But she readily dismisses the belief in a growing surplus of unmarried women who end up destitute in a society where marriage is really the only option for women's work as Linton understands the role of married women.

Later in *The Subjection of Women* (1869), John Stuart Mill more poignantly recognizes that the "nature of women" in the nineteenth century is "artificial": women are restricted to the home and expected to meet prescriptive, idealistic images of the domestic woman that portray them as useless and senseless. Mill agrees that women have evolved into domestic objects with no real purpose in Victorian culture; but he also points out that this is a consequence of a society that offers no alternative to women besides marriage.

Linton does not explore this reality of modern Victorian life, while sensation fiction facetiously attacks this issue concerning limited options for women.

Only three months after Linton's article appeared in 1868, she published an editorial exploring a plethora of definitions applied to modern women in sensation fiction. In addition to the unsettling effects of this public discourse, rapid cultural changes exacerbated social fears, leading to more constructions of women: the "unwomanly" woman, the improper woman, and Eliza Linton's euphemism in the *SR*, "the Girl of the Period" (March 1868: 197). Linton generates new categories of sexually deviant women in order to satirize the demeaning stereotypes that attempt to construct the character of women. Her point, which is repeated again and again throughout debates about women during this period, is that femininity has simply become a role to be acted out by women, that such charades mock women who embody domestic virtues, a motif often identified in sensation fiction. Contrary to Linton's opinion, sensation fiction actually explores women's self-perception and investigates a variety of problems concerning the culture that surrounds women. By revealing the contradiction between positive norms and definitions of sexually deviant behavior, sensation fiction exploits these fears that the feminine cannot be fixed.

Some Victorian novelists, like Charlotte Bronte, had already challenged early constructions of women without sexual desire, seeming to dramatize the impracticality of this delineation. Bronte criticizes inadequate portrayals of women that apply old conventional stereotypes and ignore the realities of economic or domestic pressure on women. In *Jane Eyre*, Bronte confronts the truth about unhappy marriages caused by gender inequality and sexual repression, and notes that the result can be madness and

self-destruction. Implicitly Bronte maintains that women must be liberated from sexual repression, and men and women must be equal partners in marriages.

According to Lyn Pykett, George Drysdale “mobilized the categories of the improper feminine in order to provide a new definition of women” (17). False images of the domestic woman, by making women socially and economically dependent on marriage, are degrading and comprise “the bedrock of the double standard” (Pykett 18). Drysdale argues that marriage is “a form of economic and sexual enslavement” (355). By presenting polar oppositions, Acton and Drysdale helped to popularize a nineteenth-century debate on the representation of the Victorian woman, a debate that was going to create the tensions that lead finally to the creation of an enormous number of portraits of ambitious, rebellious women, subsumed under the label, the “femme fatale.”<sup>27</sup>

#### The Emergence of the Femme Fatale in Sensation Fiction

Reactions against oppressive marriage and property laws, biographical accounts of the Victorian murderess, and women’s labor are pressing issues in sensation fiction and go into the construction of the femme fatale. Sensation fiction chiefly identifies the dangerous subversive aspect of ambitious women in the figure of the femme fatale, hence establishing this motif as a cultural phenomenon. Responding to this trend, dominant Victorian ideology classifies and represents the fatal woman as taboo and off limits. In general, the sensation novel crystallizes and shapes social views and ideas concerning outcast, sexually deviant women.

Removed from the stodginess of Victorian life, sensation fiction introduces us to a representation of the nineteenth century woman, appropriate in view of the fact that in no other culture had more centers of power existed, or attention focused, on the subject of

sexuality than in Victorian history, which Foucault calls “a society of blatant and fragmented perversion” (47). By attempting to regulate sexuality so thoroughly, to silence, censor, and prohibit erotic desire, Victorian society according to Foucault caused “a perverse outbreak” (47). Rigid cultural gender barriers both in cultural institutions and in social discourse resulted in the production of manifold sexualities all meant to enforce restrictions over women’s bodies and their pleasures. This general social ferment may also have contributed to Victorian society’s increasing fascination with the images and escapades of the femme fatale, a figure who begins to pervade nineteenth-century art, literature, and Victorian social consciousness. In sensation novels, conventional “barriers” fail to prevent the transgressions of the femme fatale, whose vigorous independence becomes itself a satire on domestic fiction and conduct books.

I have already suggested some of the reasons for the pervasiveness of the femme fatale motif. But while conduct books produce domestic fiction, leading to the Angel of the House representation of women, sensation novels directly introduce the fatal woman, and in doing so, mark the spirit of an age of female rebellion in the 1860s. Exploding onto the literary scene, this image of the principal villain as a charming, sophisticated, and coy lady whose physical delicateness is meant to satirize or attack cherished Victorian conventions of passive domestic women portrayed as victims, was quite astounding. And, indeed, penny-part fiction, crime stories, and sensation novels increase the popularity of this cultural trend toward reconfiguring women. So attractive was this genre and the possibilities it suggested that critics of sensation fiction attempted to combat it by labeling this new image a “widespread corruption.”<sup>28</sup>

The mid-century literary femme fatale, then, derives from these literary periodicals, such as penny part fiction—themselves rooted in objective social conditions—which serialized crime stories and appealed specifically to the working classes. Surprisingly, despite the unsettling literary themes prevalent in working class entertainment, such as shocking crimes and licentious female criminals, the cheap penny bloods from the 1830s and 1850s later attracted middle-class audiences in great numbers, thereby attesting to the fact they touched on something that resonated with a wide female audience. The popularity of sensationalism led critics to fear transgressions of social boundaries between working and middle-class society, an emerging reality embodied by sensation fiction’s penetration of the mainstream market. In *Disease, Desire, and the Body in Victorian Women’s Popular Novels*, Pamela Gilbert asserts that “sensation” became “a thinly veiled euphemism” for contamination (80-81). In “Sensation Fiction” in the *Quarterly Review* 1863, H.L. Mansel, dean of St. Paul’s, refers to sensationalism as “a virus spreading in all directions, from the penny journal to the shilling magazine, and from the shilling magazine to the thirty shillings volume” (505-6).<sup>29</sup>

New popular literary genres point to women’s increasing discontent, encouraging women to escape the boredom of household duties by catching up on the latest intrigues of the “Other Victorians” in sensation novels, whose latest preoccupation “is enough to take away the breath of any quiet gentleman.”<sup>30</sup> The subversive nature of femme fatale heroines contributes to the growing economic and social anxieties created by trash literature. Mrs. Oliphant, an inexhaustible critic against sensation fiction, unrelentingly criticizes “women [in fiction] driven wild with love”, specifically “the school called sensational” for introducing vice, seduction, and “secret tendencies of the heart” into

fiction ("Novels" 257). Pykett, Showalter, and Winifred Hughes concur that Mrs. Oliphant "conducted a one-woman campaign against the genre" (Pykett 40) even though these sententious reviews did not hinder the popularity of such fiction. Many Victorian critics, holding views similar to those expressed by Mrs. Oliphant, condemn sensation fiction solely on the grounds that it promoted sexual promiscuity among young female readers. In *Dead Secrets*, Tamar Heller claims that Mrs. Oliphant linked sensation novelists with "frustrated revolutionary aspirations"; in other words, according to Oliphant these writers crave some "fundamental change in the working of society" (87).

Declaring that these female novelists were "wicked women" who encourage the behavior of wayward girls, Mrs. Oliphant wrote anonymous letters to Blackwood's, claiming that these novelists concentrate more on "stories of bigamy and seduction, those *soi disant* revelations of things that lie below the surface of life" (258).<sup>31</sup> Precisely like other critics, Oliphant fears that this love for reading crime stories figuratively unearths

this intense appreciation of flesh and blood . . . this eagerness of physical sensation, is represented as the natural sentiment of English girls, and is offered to them not only as the portrait of their own state of mind, but as their amusement and mental food" (259).

The story itself presents a "dangerous" amusement for young decent English girls who may inevitably act on impulses aroused by sexual passion.

M.E. Braddon plays with this very theme when a dangerous, working class upstart, James Conyers in *Aurora Floyd*, surreptitiously marries a naïve aristocrat, corrupts the gentry, and causes working class and upper class worlds to collide. He is punished for his transgression when he is murdered. But really the aristocratic daughter,

Aurora Floyd, brings about these calamities by acting impulsively and marrying James Conyers without seeking moral guidance.

Such corruption, Braddon implies, exists in both upper and lower class worlds even though improprieties committed by aristocrats are often ignored. By protecting class definitions and social hierarchies obscured by the sensation novel, Oliphant disregards insinuations that bourgeois society and aristocrats are also the cause of vice and that they too are capable of licentious behavior. Blaming sensation fiction for planting hazardous ideas in young minds, she declares that these novels lack meaning because the characters are not well developed, but seem superficial and perfunctory, making such reading frivolous and unnecessary (Oliphant 259).

Showalter explains that the female protagonist does not necessarily surrender to vice and corruption, but she acts on her desire to “escape from sexual bonds and family networks” (105). However, Mary S. Hartman in Victorian Murderesses argues that novelists do not attempt to understand their subjects but reduce real-life Victorian murderesses to categorizations of “freaks or lunatics” (3). Hartman’s criticism misses key aspects of feminine revolt and feminine sexuality in the mid-Victorian sensation novel.

It is true that sensation fiction often oversteps narrow boundaries of Victorian respectability, resulting in this debate over appropriate subject matter for fiction. But by testing these boundaries, sensation novelists, especially female novelists like Rhoda Broughton and Mrs. Henry Wood, focus on the feminine point of view, drawing upon portraits of restless, even sexually aroused women, yet women who are mature, sophisticated, and charming and who shrewdly disguise hidden desires.

Braddon insisted that sensation fiction was not new but had always existed, even if the term had not, citing perhaps magazines that Braddon read voraciously as a young girl. The family cook, Sarah Hobbs, often supplied young Mary Braddon with copies of these magazines (Carnell 202). These detective stories simply made a significant resurgence during the early 1860s in the sensation genre. Inspired by her early fondness for the shadowy heroine, Braddon published Lady Audley's Secret, in G.W.M. Reynolds's serialization, Robin Goodfellow, a journal that went out of circulation after only a few issues. When Robin Goodfellow ceased publication, readers begged Braddon to finish Lady Audley's Secret, which was shortly thereafter serialized and completed in Sixpenny Magazine that secured Braddon's success as a writer. The World, which later reprinted adverts of Braddon's yellowbacks, declared Braddon "Queen of the circulating libraries" (147).<sup>32</sup>

Despite the short-lived publication of Robin Goodfellow, contemporary historians of the nineteenth century believe that Reynolds, publisher of other serializations including Mysteries of the Courts of London, paved the way for Collins and Braddon. Reynolds' penny part-fiction, serialized weekly between 1849 and 1856, acquainted readers with intrigues about scandalous, murderess women. Particularly popular among young bourgeois women, Lady Audley's Secret and Aurora Floyd shamelessly invoke criminal trends such as bigamy, a frequent and fashionable crime in Victorian culture with up to 884 cases between 1853-1863 (Hartman 5). Incorporating bigamy as a central plot device in her novels, Braddon yields to Victorian readers' fascination with misbehaving.



The inclusion of these controversial issues, and Braddon's portraits of rebellious females did not turn readers away; ironically, they attracted a wider audience for her fiction. The femme fatale is almost invariably denounced by society, which claims that she is deviant and therefore off limits to respectable male characters, but, paradoxically, her vaguely disreputable quality increases the number of her admirers, thereby exposing decent society's obsession with "immoral" women. She has a similar affect on her readers, but one fraught with ambivalence. Sensation novelists incorporate this dangerous image, allowing nineteenth-century readers to live vicariously through the femme fatale's latest exploits. This fascination suggests a perverse secret obsession with her, and indicates that while Victorian society is mistakenly stereotyped as prudish, mainstream readers entertain a voracious appetite for novels that portray devious female characters.

With the success of Braddon's stories, penny-part fiction flourished in the 1860s. Liberal subject matter in these stories reflects a kind of Bohemian world by celebrating marginalized women and London's dangerous counter culture in stories like The Black Band, first appearing in the Halfpenny Journal, a periodical originally geared towards the lower classes, but which inevitably reached a wider middle-class audience. Publisher, John Maxwell, issued a second publication, Welcome Guest, which went into circulation on July 1, 1861, changed its format and price, and eventually incorporated into The Halfpenny Journal by December 17, 1864. Condensing these journals into a single publication increased the popularity of sensation stories by making the journals cost-effective for working class readers. To attract middle-class readers, Maxwell published serialized stories by Mrs. Desmond Humphries, Emma Robinson, and Florence Marryat

as triple-decker best sellers. Maxwell pressured young and inexperienced women to agree to poorly paid contracts, a method he used to exploit the labor of women who wrote stories for his periodicals. Meanwhile, he profited from brisk sales.

While these fictional forms of the triple-decker novel and literary magazines were meant to indicate cultural and intellectual differences between the social classes, sensation fiction and penny part periodicals tended to obscure socioeconomic boundaries. Articles in penny magazines concerning domesticity imitated bourgeois conventional decorum. By including articles on etiquette, education, handwriting, religious editorials, and culinary matters, subjects that appeared to be more appropriate for the leisured classes, working class journals attempted to satisfy lower class readers who desired assimilation to the social codes of middle-class respectability.

Furthermore, the stories in penny part fiction carry a moral for the working class, namely that they must avoid decadent, upper class behavior. At the height of their popularity in the 1860s, penny-part magazines characterize the working class as servants or policemen, a social status suggestive of ethical value since they either perform domestic duties, or they help solve crimes. These stories suggest that whenever crime taints respectable homes, the protection of the dominant ideological values of society depends on the morals and skills of the working class (Carnell 207).<sup>33</sup>

Yet popularity of penny-part fiction among the middle-class suggests a preoccupation with a sordid criminal underworld, which they identify with working class neighborhoods like the East End. Though the bourgeois class preferred an appearance of respectability, middle-class readers harbored a hidden fascination for the more salacious aspects of criminal life satisfied by crime stories. Penny fiction was a catalyst for this

bourgeois obsession with transgressions and vice. By imitating the format of the brand leader, The London Journal, a publication geared towards middle-class readers, The Halfpenny Journal published articles on self-improvement to appease the literary taste of the middle-class and to reduce the shocking aspects of working class journals' fiction. Though the detective embodied integrity, goodness, and hard work, critics believed that these features alone would not suffice to appeal to bourgeois taste. But really dangerous elements, they believed, pervaded Victorian consciousness, marking the femme fatale as a middle-class cultural phenomenon despite her frequent appearance in working class journals; in essence, the femme fatale was "a guilty pleasure." Unanimous criticism in journals such as The Athenaeum, The Saturday Review, Blackwood's Edinburgh Review, and The Quarterly Review, which censured sensation fiction and its characterizations of women, failed to decrease readership among either the lower or the middle-class.

The plot in both penny fiction and triple-decker novels revolves around domestic space, where threatening women increase anxieties, implying that the existing social boundaries cannot eradicate pernicious elements of social contagion and disease. Sensation novels not only express a fear of the unknown, they make clear that real-life crime can happen in the home, that the police could fail to protect the middle-class, a fact conventional Victorians want to ignore. Yet as Jennifer Carnell argues, these readers "expect, or more dangerously hope for the unconventional and to be titillated by unnatural events and irregular behavior" (153). Moral codes figuratively fail to keep prurient elements outside of domestic boundaries, and seductive women and rampant promiscuity in fiction amplify these actual transgressions.

In general, the Victorian novel reproduces conventional ideological codes to determine which characters represent respectable society, and which literary characters remain outside culture's boundaries. Sensation fiction applies these codes in a similar fashion, but it dualistically reverses the "positive norms" that construct women by exposing the contradictions embodied in the feminine ideal, by forcing men to confront their fear of feminine sexuality, and by portraying the inaccuracies of clearly defined categories for women.

As a liberal, Braddon credits subversive French novelists for their insight at a time when respected British literary critics typically undermined ideas current in French literature. While Braddon felt that French novelists confront and embrace those women's issues similarly addressed in sensation fiction, Oliphant declares that French ideas are "quite foreign to our insular habits" (258). She agrees with Braddon, that French literature influences sensation fiction—but only for its prurient nature as she explains:

For there can be no doubt that a singular change has passed upon our light literature. It is not that its power has failed or its popularity diminished—much the reverse; it is because a new impulse has been given and a new current set in the flood of contemporary story-telling. We will not ask whence or from whom the influence is derived. It has been brought into being by society, and it naturally reacts upon society.<sup>34</sup>

Oliphant maintains that "the working of those loves and passions which are not in accordance with our rules of respectability" cause the novel to be too scandalous for ordinary conversation.<sup>35</sup> In Mrs. Oliphant's opinion, French novelists and their influence are unruly because their ideas about assertive, sexualized women undermine British

social decorum, where women are expected to be silent concerning the nature of sexual relations between men and women and suppress their sexual passions. Otherwise French novels liberated these desires, and as Braddon confirms, had a profound influence on sensation fiction, a reaction upon society addressed by Mrs. Oliphant who blames French literature for its candor on sexuality. Likewise, Mrs. Oliphant condemns women complicit to ideas produced by sensation fiction, which from a feminist perspective, only reflects women's struggle for a female emancipation that strikes Mrs. Oliphant as inappropriate or immoral.

Braddon admitted to Escott "I owe so much to French literature and I am such an ardent admirer of the great French novelists that to depreciate their work would be to turn upon my chief benefactors" (December 6, 1879).<sup>36</sup> In a study of Zola attempted by Braddon, she alludes to Zola's revolutionary ideas, especially concerning realism. Though Braddon expresses real admiration for Zola, she also acknowledges that he was a controversial figure in British society, which may explain why she wrote to Escott, declining an offer to write about Zola's literary work.

I feel very sorry for having given you so much trouble . . . there would have been no reason to withhold my name: but I was attracted by Zola's phenomenal position in literature, and felt impelled to write about him. Now I know this little world of ours so well, altho' I quite agree with you that a woman of my age who has practiced the profession of literature for nearly a quarter of a century has earned the right to read everything, I am sure there would be all kinds of ill-natured remarks made upon, to say nothing of those respectable friends who would be shocked at my familiarity w/ certainly the coarsest writer of any epoch

(letter 62).

Braddon greatly admired Zola's work because he deals so profoundly with subjects concerning prostitution, moral decay, and capitalist decadence, topics that Braddon felt she "could only approach with lightest touch some of those questions which he handles so boldly" (December 22, 1884). But fearing retribution from other critics, she declined the opportunity to write a more thorough essay on Zola's work. Familiarity with Zola's novels would more than likely lead to slander that could be quite damaging to both Braddon's character and her career. In most cases, especially considering the anonymous publication of her stories in penny part fiction, Braddon made great efforts to avoid such libel.

Reading Braddon's letters to her editors, one cannot ignore that she still depended on and appealed to the advice of her male colleagues whenever she wrote her novels, which also reflects traces of her more conservative sociopolitical opinions that conflict with her otherwise liberal views concerning women. In one letter to Escott, Braddon clearly declares herself a Tory praising the last vestiges of the British Empire—"that grand Period in the History of British Valour" (November 3, 1879),<sup>37</sup> and protesting that British occupation of outside territories must continue to be enforced. Braddon's conservative political views influence themes on capitalism and patriarchal power in *Lady Audley's Secret*. Though her views may seem patriotic, they conflict with her feelings that the roles permitted to women require social change.

Braddon seemingly ignores the fact that the British Empire colonized and forced other races into submission, and Victorian women are similarly subjected to patriarchal control. Contrary to my view that Braddon was conservative on many issues unrelated to

those dealing with women, Pykett and Showalter surprisingly ignore these views that Braddon expresses in her letters written to Escott in 1879. It is quite possible that her political attitudes, as well as advice from conservative male colleagues, may have advertently or inadvertently contributed to the characterization of the femme fatale in Braddon's novels as someone who is always punished by the end of the story for her transgressions.

Showalter maintains that Braddon is broadly liberal-minded since Braddon experienced a past that was scandalous, working as a stage actress, living with a married man, and bearing five children before they married (109). According to Lillian Nayder, critics like Showalter "downplay the conservative bent of Braddon's novel" and that Braddon willingly supports patriarchal norms despite her own subversive past (36). Braddon often seems divided between social changes for women and a proclivity to internalize conventional codes.

But regardless of sensation fiction's popularity and the receptivity of many middle-class readers toward female novelists, due to the controversial aspect of the genre, these women writers still preferred anonymity. My studies confirm that Braddon insisted that her short stories be published in penny part fiction without her name. In fact, a dispute between *The Athenaeum* and Maxwell ensued over this very issue concerning Braddon's anonymity. The review blatantly challenged Maxwell when Maxwell denied that Braddon was the author of the following books. Mr. Morgan with *The Athenaeum* wrote:

As Miss Braddon does not seem inclined to "give her explanation" as to whether she is or is not the author of *The Black Band* (*Diavola*, I believe, is not denied)

but is content that Lady Caroline Lascelles (whoever she may be) should have the credit of it, I think on looking at the facts, there will be no difficulty in setting this vexed question at rest . . . Surely all this would lead up to the fact that the Lady Caroline Lascelles of the *Halfpenny Journal* is the Miss Braddon of *Belgravia*; and surely in the interest of literature it behooves Mr. Maxwell that he should lose no time in giving his explanation of this scandal, which may be used to Miss Braddon's disadvantage (March 2, 1867).

Maxwell indignantly responded that

Mr. Hugh Morgan displays an unaccountable intimacy with my name and business. Under these circumstances, I deny his right to demand information from me, and I protest against the bad taste of threatening Miss Braddon with the risk of 'disadvantage' if I decline, as I do, to gratify his curiosity (March 9, 1867).

This heated discussion persisted for months in 1867 with Mr. Morgan pestering Maxwell, not necessarily to reveal the author's identity, but for the pleasure of Morgan's own amusement by irritating Maxwell.

#### Strategies of Female Sensation Fiction

Despite their preference for anonymity, mid-century women novelists, especially Annie Edwards and Rhoda Broughton, continued to discuss and raise social anxieties about the fixity of gender boundaries and prescriptive codes of middle-class respectability. Women writers specifically mark a cultural "change" by calling for sexual liberation. Considering earlier femme fatales like Jane Austen's *Lady Susan*, written between 1793-94, *Lady Susan*, the anti-heroine, does not antagonistically point to the hypocrisies of the dominant ideology. In contrast, mid-century Victorian women



novelists do precisely this and proceed to make bold statements about feminine sexuality and female revolt during an age characterized by surveillance and containment.

In Victorian life, parents, families, and husbands exerted pressure on women to conform to cultural standards, governed by household duties, chastity, and family honor. In the process, these families compel daughters and wives to hide no secrets, a practice, which if followed, would give bourgeois families even greater hegemonic power and control over young, impressionable women. Hence society communicates the message that only coarse women hide secrets. In sensation fiction, where the femme fatale appears, all duplicitous women are caught and punished for their transgressions by the investigator, who is always the leading male protagonist and usually an aristocrat (unlike penny part fiction) who probes the secret past of the leading female character. The male signifies order and stability; any woman, even respectable characters, who also wish to restore rightful heirs and protect old aristocratic families, cannot subvert his position. When a woman attempts to do such detecting, the male character usurps her role, as he does in *The Woman in White*, when Walter Hartright replaces Marian Holcomb as the chief detective even though she has risked her life to investigate the formidable Count Fosco. By investigating and eventually revealing the private lives of female characters, Braddon poses her challenge to the prescription that decent women should not have secrets, showing that it is impossible for women not to keep secrets when Victorian society forces them to sustain this idealistic image of purity and perfection.

The femme fatale characteristically conceals secret desires from respectable society; such “masking” persists throughout sensation novels, where a woman often leads a double life, in order to escape her past and embark upon a better future. Though

sensation fiction portrays themes of false identity, “the respectable masking the disreputable”, (Carnell 154) Braddon, by exploring women’s lives and using the novel as a vehicle for social change, insinuates that all women have secrets in order to confront social injustices throughout her novels concerning the welfare of illegitimate children, fallen women, and the mentally ill—social issues that specifically affect women. Whether it was her empathy that may have predisposed her to side with the socially oppressed, Braddon’s novels challenged the accepted order of things and questioned conventional morality.

It is important to recognize that Helen Talboys is completely powerless over her economic and social conditions. As a single mother with no income, no knowledge of her husband’s whereabouts, and no prospects of a second marriage, it seems amazing that she reverses her fortune. As noted earlier, so powerful was the hold of the dominant ideology and the real distortions it created in some women, that like Thackeray, Braddon, too, seemed troubled by incompatible personal beliefs.

Themes of false identity and sexual double standards point to the tenuous nature of secrets—that once told, the truth is still not what it appears to be since women are complex. A woman’s secrets metaphorically signify her sexuality, and therefore the detective exposes her sexual history to solve the novel’s central mystery, though in the case of *Lady Dedlock*, it is the lawyer—not the detective—who plans to expose her. The codification of sexuality attempts to reveal all secrets, and such investigations do not lead to female subjectivity; they simply categorize her as “good” or “bad.” Other critics like Showalter assert that fatal women in fiction who are “seduced and betrayed” gain agency not by feebly submitting to punishment carried out by society but by dominating their

environment and taking charge of a personal crisis (111). Even though the female protagonist is discovered as an adulteress, a bigamist, or a murderer, secrets kept by the femme fatale are not so obvious and usually remain unresolved. Readers are shocked that so delicate a creature could really be a career criminal bent on freeing herself from economic and emotional bondage. Surprising is that the woman who embodies domestic ideology is capable of violent crimes. The investigation, therefore really involves discerning her true character beneath the appearance of respectability and submissiveness.

Fair-haired, blue-eyed, petite rebellious women in sensation fiction mark a sign of unrest and perseverance among women writers and female readers alike. Florence Marryat, novelist and editor of *London Society*, declared that “the most questionable novels of the day should be written by women.” The rise of the female novel is equated with realism because women convey thoughts and emotions with which men are unfamiliar. Contemporary feminist critics agree that in the nineteenth century, women novelists were more attuned to the “typical Mudie’s customer, a leisured middle-class wife or daughter like themselves” (Showalter 109). Since social change in the nineteenth century is frequently centered on the subject of women, especially on the codification of sexuality, Marryat feels only women are in a position to comment on the oppressive nature of these subjects.<sup>38</sup> Men, according to Marryat, do not understand the circumstances of women, and therefore cannot write about these conditions.

Marryat and Rhoda Broughton alike tested “respectable” social boundaries with the “most sexually pro-active heroine of the period” (Carnell 170), and were perhaps more seriously watched, like Braddon, due to their unconventional lifestyles. According

to Michael Sadlier in *Things Past*, locals nearly forced Broughton out of Oxford when she was mistaken for Miss Braddon (93). Similarly, Marryat passed herself off as a widow in order to avoid confrontation since she was really a divorcee. While Marryat and Broughton risked their anonymity, even happiness, by writing on similar topics based on past experiences, these women never received the kind of critical acclaim that was later acknowledged to Braddon. Rather critics accused Marryat and Broughton of immorality and poor taste, though they later acknowledged them as staunch revolutionaries.

In spite of different responses to their work, women novelists show that it is impossible to obtain an absolute prescriptive rule of life as so often represented by the feminine ideal in conduct books and domestic fiction. Sensation fiction offers a refreshing departure from these oppressive and unnatural roles of women. As a result of socioeconomic instability, the femme fatale, for example, moves liminally in dangerous margins where she can manipulate social boundaries and rules.

Despite the greater sensitivity of women novelists to women's plight, nineteenth-century male novelists of sensation fiction also appear to make an effort to subvert traditional ways of viewing or understanding women. Carnell claims that male writers use the novel as a channel "for protest at social strictures" (154). Some male novelists, like other female authors, were interested in creating powerful women. Victorian critics were typically preoccupied by "the challenging representation of women by Collins and Braddon" (154). Unlike the domestic ideal, which envisions women passive, apathetic and feeble, the heroines of Collins and Braddon throb with sensuality, "irresistible seductresses, barbarous, intoxicating, dangerous, and maddening" (Showalter 105).

Moreover, male writers, and not necessarily sensation novelists, such as Trollope and Thackeray, also used the femme fatale motif, not only to empower the image of women, but also to comment on women's roles in society.

Yet these same novelists, as well as Collins, fail to really demystify the stereotypes. Despite these unconventional depictions, portraying the dangerous woman still suggests one of two things: the woman must be destroyed, or better opportunities should be available to women. By the end of the novel, the femme fatale almost invariably suffers in some form, by being married to charlatans, institutionalized in asylums, or committing suicide. The literature, thus, still perpetuates a fear of independent women, insinuating that rebellious women are and must be punished when they use subversive means to change their social status.

Acknowledging in a letter to his mother his fear of calculating women, Thackeray notes that he still suspected independent women of being manipulative. Despite presenting more realistic images of heroines in their fiction, male writers are conflicted over new alternatives for women who desired socioeconomic advancement within the patriarchal power structure. Paradoxically, this very fear of women is perpetuated because ambitious women must distort their personalities in order to please aristocratic men and because they must seek economic improvement by manipulatively trading on the archetype of domesticity. In this process, women pervert their own individual nature, surrendering to some imagined myth about the ideal woman.

In *Femme Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*, Mary Ann Doane argues that the femme fatale is specifically a nineteenth-century trope that threatens the maternal representation of women in bourgeois ideology. No longer are women simply a

symbol of fertility and production embodied by the domestic ideal. Lady Audley and Becky Sharp, by prioritizing money and ambition before motherhood, escape the category of the maternal figure. The femme fatale herself recognizes that the ideal of womanhood produces stable families and “productive” children, but she despises these domestic duties, for they fix her position and are impediments to her social climbing ambition. It is no wonder, therefore, that these women rebel against ideals of wifely and motherly duties in favor of the pursuit of pleasure and self-indulgence.

The underlying message, then, of almost all this mid-century literature suggests that a large number of women are dissatisfied with the oppressive nature of domestic ideology and frustrated with the limited opportunities for women in Victorian culture. In sensation fiction, the femme fatale inscribes unconventional beliefs concerning sociopolitical issues and thereby disrupts traditional roles between men and women. Moreover, by gaining socioeconomic power as a result of her own efforts within that structure, the femme fatale undermines the conventional dualistic representation of women as either domestic or fallen. By implication, she suggests that women who show signs of weakness and passivity will forever continue to be oppressed by patriarchal control.

In sensation fiction, all women—not just the femme fatale—act duplicitously to gain power—and must so act if they are to succeed against the forces arrayed against them—though, as Pykett explains, women caught rebelling against the domestic ideal were often considered “primitives, savages, whores, and hysterics” (16). These prejudices will be more thoroughly explored in Chapter 5 where the domestic ideal, Miss Milroy in *Armada*, proves to be just as conniving as the femme fatale, Lydia Gwilt, in

order to gain economic security. As a result of prejudices against unmarried and marginalized women, mid-century Victorian female characters sought to evade detection by creating a web of deceit, often assuming domestic roles or using motherhood to neutralize men's distrust and contempt for women.

Yet by existentially exposing faulty representations of the ideal domestic woman, the femme fatale gains agency, asserts her subjectivity, and seeks to escape tyrannical classification. Thus, contrary to the pervasive feminine representations meant to subordinate Victorian women, the mid-century femme fatale obscures the clear outlines that seem to delineate categories of domestic or fallen. She is not simply dangerous; she is "shapeless," incapable of being fit into and within the pattern of the bourgeois social class system. Yet, by means of disguise, she also blends into mainstream society.

In art and literature the femme fatale, in fact, exemplifies the real social struggles in which women were engaged, whether they were defined as fallen, fatal, or domestic. Compared to the fallen woman, the femme fatale's mockery of social codes makes her a less likely target for subordination, though she, like the fallen woman, is always a subject of ridicule. Her wit and cunning, however, make her a more formidable force, and one that intimidates other male characters who try to belittle her. Male detectives laboriously investigate the femme fatale outside domestic boundaries, but she often baffles them and foils their investigation. Furthermore, unlike the domestic and fallen woman, the femme fatale seeks to triumph over society, and for a time she succeeds; she does not surrender to socioeconomic hardship like the fallen woman, nor does she deny herself pleasure like the domestic woman.

In “Family Secrets and Domestic Subversion: Rebellion in the Novels of the 1860s,” Elaine Showalter notes that wives in sensation fiction pursue independence after marrying a wealthy aristocrat, one of the few avenues of upward mobility for women. The sensation stories about women “seeking desperate remedies” call into question the unequal marriage laws that deny women rights and entitle a husband to assume ownership of his wife’s property (Showalter 101). Until 1882 with the passage of the Married Women’s Property Act, a wife could not control her separate property.

Though the characterization of the femme fatale points to legitimate social and legal concerns of women, the majority of Victorian readers and critics tended to marginalize the femme fatale as a dangerous woman, one who is neither entirely outside bourgeois boundaries nor accepted within them. If she is beautiful, then beauty only becomes another asset to better serve her interests. And yet by showing the inconsistencies among male characters that seem to praise the domestic ideal yet who prove to be self-centered, sometimes even vulgar and degenerate, the femme fatale exposes the hypocrisies that exist within bourgeois Victorian society. While feminine ideals dictate the manner in which women should live and behave in Victorian culture, male characters, who represent patriarchy, seldom adhere to the moral codes they impose on women. The widely divergent portraits of the femme fatale simply show us that patriarchy itself is also responsible for corruption and debauchery, and that it is sheer hypocrisy to stigmatize women who act on these same impulses.

Throughout this period, while feminists were striving for social change concerning the condition of women, and other women were exploring the proper social relations between men and women and women and society, unlike all of them the femme



fatale desires not understanding or social change but rather the privilege and status enjoyed by the bourgeois class, and she vents her resentment not by social action against the class that seeks to obstruct her entry into it, but by plotting against bourgeois homes when, perchance, her schemes to marry an aristocrat fail.

## Chapter 4

### Social Class Anxieties and Gender Definition in *Lady Audley's Secret*

As discussed in Chapter Three, Victorian women novelists use the literary femme fatale motif as a way of dramatizing the cultural and socioeconomic conditions of women in mid-nineteenth century England. Contrary to contemporary critic, Patrick Bade, who argues that few female artists in the nineteenth century produce images of the femme fatale, mid-century women novelists M.E. Braddon, Emma Robinson, Rhoda Broughton, Florence Marryat, and Mrs. Henry Wood consistently use this motif to satirize domestic ideology and to illustrate the socio-economic vicissitudes of marginalized women. Nineteenth-century women writers, despite the pervasive anti-feminist criticism of the 1860s, find a way to express their growing concern regarding the precarious economic conditions of women. The literary femme fatale, then, exposes the simplifications and falsehoods created by the cultural constructions of fallenness and domesticity that render women passive or powerless.

In novels where the femme fatale appears, bourgeois culture's strict adherence to social codes helps to marginalize women deviating from moral conventions. The idea was to catch them and root them out of society. Portrayed as pathological, criminal, abnormal, sexually deviant and aggressive, Lady Audley, Madeline Graham, and Lady Isabel thus pose such a threat to bourgeois ideology. Because of her poor socioeconomic class, lack of social status, and unlawful activity, the femme fatale is always "a marginal" creature, one who occupies the space outside of normality, order, light, masculine logic, and culture. These women, in sum, are viewed by the reader as villains, emphasizing a common subtext: the detective, always a male protagonist, must subdue her in order to

restore male dominance and patriarchal power. In essence, he proves his heroism by unmasking, unveiling, and making legible the threat of the femme fatale.

Though the fatal Victorian woman frequently uses her domestic activities to hide her predatory nature and sexual assertiveness, her more licentious characteristics nevertheless show through this façade of decency when moral codes become impediments to her success. Her sexual experience, combined with a violent temperament, sets the femme fatale squarely outside middle-class margins. When Lady Audley poses as the paragon of domesticity, she undermines the internal class structure which Victorian ideologues idealistically attempt to use to establish rigid domestic cultural standards meant to protect respectable society from inferior women. Lady Audley's transgressions include bigamy, female ambition, and murder, all of which clearly expose her as the fatally destructive woman. But so adroit is Lady Audley in her maneuvers that though no home is safe from her corruption, she is never identified as an imposter until she has irreparably damaged the family.

By means of a close reading of *Lady Audley's Secret*, this chapter seeks to explain why the femme fatale epitomizes pervasive fears of marginalized women. And by analyzing the effect of the femme fatale motif on middle-class Victorian women—particularly Braddon's influence compared to her male cohorts—I mean to show that while her socioeconomic status marginalizes her, the femme fatale embodies by means of a literary shorthand the disempowerment experienced by all middle-class women who depend on marriage for economic security in patriarchal society. If middle-class women could not find suitable bachelors to marry them, they ran the risk of economic powerlessness. Lady Audley's behavior suggests that if women are forced to depend on

patriarchy in order to achieve economic security, then why shouldn't they manipulate bourgeois social codes in order to empower themselves?

Though she constructs herself as the archetypal domestic commodity-object, Lady Audley in fact breaks the law in order to sustain a pure image among male aristocrats. But as a result of her hidden transgressions, she implicitly challenges the full measure of Victorian ideology that represses female desire and female agency through the commodification of women. As a deserted wife, Helen Talboys determinedly refuses to submit to the categorization of herself as "fallen" by masterfully manipulating patriarchal authority, and by eventually using feminine power to reinvent herself as the type of woman desired by Sir Michael Audley. Lady Audley does not deliberately challenge social boundaries, but she exposes domestic codes as a sham tenuously used to subordinate women.

Helen Maldon

Lucy Audley's circumstances bear a striking resemblance to the oppressive conditions discussed in Chapter Two that were typically experienced by young working class girls, whose economic hardships often led to prostitution. Abandoned by her mother, who is reportedly "a madwoman" (343), the former Helen Maldon grows up "[feeling] the bitterness of poverty and [runs] the risk of growing up an ignorant creature . . . because [her] father was poor" (344). Like other working class girls who would like to escape poverty, a younger, less refined Helen Maldon is told that she is "beautiful-lovely-bewitching" (13:345). Recognizing that her "very childishness had a charm which few could resist" (7:55), she aspires to "be more successful than [her] companions" and concludes that her "ultimate fate in life [depends upon marriage]" (13:345). At seventeen

she hunts for “a rich suitor” until she finally meets George Talboys (345). Even though Talboys sees through the “shallow tricks” of her father, used to catch a wealthy bachelor “for his pretty daughter”, George is still smitten by her loveliness and innocence and becomes Helen’s “highest bidder”, marrying the daughter of “a drunken old hypocrite” under the pretense of saving “the poor little girl” (23). As a consequence of marrying Helen, George’s family disinherits him, leaving him penniless.

With the ruthless honesty typical of the femme fatale, she admits that her happiness with him could only last as long as his money remained, and proceeds to upbraid her husband. To satisfy his young wife, George Talboys abandons her “to seek his fortune” in the Antipodes (347). When George never returns, Helen Talboys packs up her belongings, leaves her child with her father, and reinvents herself as Lucy Graham, a governess working for the respectable Dawson family rather than helplessly surrendering to economic vicissitudes as a penniless mother. Her final transformation is that of Lady Audley. With almost reckless abandon, she escapes poverty and detection by audaciously committing bigamy and eventually murder: she marries her wealthy aristocratic second husband and murders her first husband, Talboys, when he appears unexpectedly at Audley Court and threatens to expose her. As a femme fatale, Lady Audley aggressively and successfully pursues economic advancement by means of the very social conventions constructed by Victorian society to constrain women; here she both subverts the law and acts as a hidden predator.

The young and inexperienced Helen Maldon represents the lower class woman conventionally exploited within the socioeconomic structure. As Lady Audley, she capitalizes on the delusions of older, wealthy, available men who have fortunes to spare.

She uses domestic conventions embedded within bourgeois ideology to social climb and therefore exploits a system that otherwise keeps a young, penniless daughter of “a tipsy old half-pay lieutenant”, (23) marginalized from respectable society.

Though Lucy Graham increases her social value with an average to above average education, she is marginalized by poverty, a much more salient indicator of status, thus demonstrating that even educated women are economically powerless. If beauty and education are not put to a more conniving use—securing an appropriate match—these advantages, in short, can be of little consequence to the middle class Victorian woman. As a governess, Lucy Graham depends upon her cunning to bring about better circumstances, which implies that each woman must use duplicitous means to gain power. Hence, both the femme fatale and the single, domestic middle-class woman depend on marriage as a way out of economic difficulty; education is of use only to the extent that it helps single women construct a respectable marriageable image of themselves.

An unlikely victor, Helen becomes a more provocative—and predatory—Victorian female character than Braddon’s Aurora Floyd, a spoiled simple-minded and impetuous daughter of a wealthy banker, who runs off with a lackey. Helen Maldon / Lady Audley is wise to the difficulties with which women must struggle, and she certainly does not allow herself to be hoodwinked by a common charlatan. Rather she does the deceiving.

It appears to be no accident that Lucy Graham goes to work as a governess for the Dawson family, a wealthy household, where she is likely to meet available aristocratic men, using this angle as a governess by providing good references from Miss Tonks and

demonstrating the value of her education by teaching the Dawson girls “to play sonatas by Beethoven, and to paint from Nature after Creswick”, talents that Victorian bourgeois culture encouraged women to develop (I:1:11). Miss Graham is not only “amiable and gentle . . . light-hearted and happy” but humbly attends church “three times on Sunday”, establishing her virtue through outward appearances as a well-respected member of the community (11). On her visits to the poor, old women “burst out into senile raptures with her grace, her beauty, and her kindliness” (I:1:11), attributes causing the community to declare unanimously that Lucy Graham “was the sweetest girl that ever lived.”

As a result of her domestic activities, Sir Michael Audley inevitably makes the acquaintance of Lucy Graham—an ostensible spiritual guide and abstract ideal.

Appearances in society and within the home, in sum, are extremely important to the success of the femme fatale. She can succeed if her talent and charm can hide her self-interests. Fooling all people “high and low”, Lucy Graham has “that magic power of fascination by which a woman can charm with a word or intoxicate with a smile” (I:1:12).

While the earlier version of Lady Audley, Helen Maldon, lacks more worldly experience, she later recognizes that to attract a wealthy gentleman suitor she must appear as if she is unavailable and perpetuate the image of the ideal, virtuous young girl. The courtly love rituals, carried out by Sir Audley, demonstrate Žižek’s claim that “A man pretends that his sweetheart is the inaccessible lady” when really a poor, destitute young woman like Lucy Graham will readily marry a wealthy suitor to change her circumstances. Lucy’s feigned lack of interest and her increasing aloofness only make her

more desirable, while generating a convincing illusion of Lucy Graham as the Angel of the House.

Sir Audley concludes that the Dawson governess is “his destiny” and that “he had never loved before” (12). The baronet compares “*this* love” to his first marriage, a “jog-trot bargain” (12). Winifred Hughes claims that, similar to male social activists embarking on missions to save fallen women from the streets, other respectable men also desired restoring the governess to her proper place in genteel society by marrying her (30-1). Sir Audley convinces himself that benevolence—not sexual desire—motivates him to marry Lucy Graham; “his hope was that as her life had been most likely one of toil and dependence” he might win her by his “protecting care” (13). Never does he estimate that “his wealth [and] his position” are strong incentives for Lucy Graham to agree to his proposal. When Sir Audley entertains romantic delusions that “one so lovely and innocent” could not value herself against wealth and status, his fascinations guarantee the success of such a crafty governess.

As both a lovelorn suitor and a father figure, Sir Audley desexualizes the image of Lucy Graham. He tries “to recall to her the father” that she reportedly lost, and that he will “win her young heart” (13). He views himself as her protector, while really Miss Graham, “used to admiration from every one, high and low” (13), triggers these sympathies through a rather calculated evasive, child-like pretense. Sir Audley falls in love with his idealized constructed image of Lucy.

By impersonating the virtues of a domestic governess, Lucy Graham bewitches him though his “conduct [makes] very little impression upon her” (13). While he represents the prospect of wealth and economic security, Lucy expresses no real affection



or love for Sir Audley. She admits later that she can only love a man “as much as it [is in her] power to love anybody” (3:346), though her pretensions are not meant to persuade only men. Even when Mrs. Dawson sympathetically declares, ““it only rests with yourself to become Lady Audley”” (14), Lucy acts surprised and unaware. Her outward nervousness, her blush, and her embarrassment at the prospect of being “mistress at Audley Court” are meant to confirm her innocence, and such performances set Lucy Graham to her best advantage.

Yet Lucy is not entirely misleading after Sir Audley’s proposal, exclaiming: “I have never seen anything but poverty . . . I cannot be blind to the advantages of such an alliance. I cannot!” (I:1:16). Though disappointed by her response, stifled with “an unsatisfied longing which lay heavy and dull at his heart”, he decides to be contented “to be married for his fortune and position” (17). Despite his disenchantment, Lady Audley still beams with “a charm that few could resist”, and she is “better loved and more admired than the baronet’s daughter” (55). Acknowledging that physical beauty will eventually fail to sustain men’s attention or respect, Lady Audley declares:

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, and that when number one with blue eyes and fair hair died, they had only to look out for number two with black eyes and hair, by way of variety (I:11:88).

Lady Audley increases her value with her refined manners and innocent flirtations. After marrying Sir Audley, rich dressing gowns and priceless jewels reinvent a new image of Helen Talboys, concealing the truth about her past. Surrounding herself with luxurious objects, she blends into the commodity culture. Moreover, her beguiling mannerisms

invite “unqualified admiration” among respectable men (89). By fluttering her wide blue eyes, flaunting her soft golden hair, and coquettishly flirting with other men, Lady Audley perpetuates the belief that she is as innocent as a child and therefore depends on male guidance, protection, and security. Domestic virtues coupled with rich material objects construct Lady Audley’s social value. Meanwhile, Lady Audley is really a self-serving woman, marketing her beauty in exchange for economic mobility and security.

#### Lady Audley

Braddon’s description of Lady Audley as a fair-haired, blue-eyed, well-mannered, educated woman with child-like features demystifies the stereotypical dangerous sexualized femme fatale, and in doing so satirizes the stereotype of the frail Gothic heroine constructed in the early nineteenth century. Missing, as well, are the sensual and erotic features often associated with traditional femme fatales. Her delicate features allow her to move inconspicuously through respectable society. By murdering her first husband, Lady Audley most shockingly subverts conventional stereotypes of the domestic Victorian woman, meant to set the standard for middle-class female readers. In other words, she figuratively weakens male authority.

Many critics agree that Braddon mocks Collins’s characterization of women by contrasting Lucy Graham’s appearance to Laura Fairlie’s in *The Woman in White*.<sup>39</sup> Both women look alike, only Laura Fairlie submits to male dominance while Lady Audley aggressively outwits her male nemesis, Robert Audley. Delicate physical attributes associated with domestic women put Lady Audley’s victims off-guard, but this simply furthers the subversion of Victorian notions about femininity. Though capable of murdering a military dragoon, Lady Audley’s description is rich with suggestions of

chastity, “one so lovely and innocent” (13), resembling an angel with “liquid blue eyes . . . rosy lips, the delicate nose, the profusion of fair ringlets,” a vision of “extreme youth and freshness” (55).

By cleverly disguising Helen Maldon, a single mother, as an ingenue, Braddon further undermines traditional representations of fallenness. The femme fatale is socially powerless like the fallen woman. Nevertheless Helen Maldon succeeds in undermining the ideological impediments existing in the class system to keep inferior women out of the domestic circle. By refusing to become a victim of cultural codes concerning sexuality, experienced women like Lady Audley, driven by her ambitious desire for wealth and status, escape categories of fallenness, and in the process, present the reader with a more empowering view of women who shrewdly look for different alternatives to destitution. In advancing her social status as mistress of Audley Court, Helen Maldon / Lady Audley, rather than affirming social boundaries between the upper class and the lower class or between respectable women and fallen women, obscures the class boundaries and undermines gender definition.

The pre-Raphaelite portrait of Lady Audley, an image of femininity often used in art to commodify women as art objects, conveys the paradox of Lady Audley’s sensual and erotic nature being obscured by domestic activities and genteel manners. Kathy Psomiades explains in *Beauty’s Body* that women painted by Rossetti were commodity objects that established types of femininity marking women as either accessible or inaccessible (146-47). The inaccessible woman in Rossetti’s portraits is much like that described in the painting of Lady Audley, a visual object that has the power to compel men. Yet her beauty poses a series of unresolved contradictions between delicate and

wicked, brightness and darkness, innocence and sexuality, “so like and yet so unlike”, bringing “out new lines and new expressions never seen in it before” (72).

No one but a pre-Raphaelite would have so exaggerated every attribute of that delicate face as to give a lurid brightness to the blonde complexion, and a strange, sinister light to the deep blue eyes. No one but a pre-Raphaelite could have given to that pretty pouting mouth the hard and almost wicked look it had in the portrait (I:8:72).

Missing are Lady Audley’s child-like impersonations. These juxtapositions between child and sexualized woman embody the mystery of Lady Audley that causes Robert Audley to gaze compulsively at the woman in the portrait. Such polarities make Lady Audley an art object that attracts male viewers; hence the portrait is a metaphor of a trap used to ensnare men drawn to her. Though her history remains a secret, the portrait touches upon her erotic and aesthetic value, thus intensifying the onlooker’s desire for the woman, “that fascinating fiend” who beguiles male spectators under her pretended guise of innocence (The Spectator 1303). Beauty has a high, incalculable aesthetic value depending on how the viewer translates its meaning. Even Lady Audley’s “feathery masses of ringlets” signify “[her] translatability into a system of economic value” figuratively meant to equate sexual and economic exchange, while also empowering her by becoming men’s obsession (13).

Upon sneaking into Lady Audley’s chambers with George Talboys and Alicia Audley and viewing the painting for the first time, Robert Audley exclaims, “I don’t like the portrait; there’s something odd about it” (I:8:73). Alicia, who already detects Lady Audley’s falsehoods, disagrees, and argues that “sometimes the painter . . . is able to see,

through the normal expression of the face, another expression that is equally a part of it, though not to be perceived by common eyes" (73). The portrait is disturbing to Robert Audley for two reasons: First the painting contradicts Lady Audley's innocence, hinting at her sexual experience as a mother, revealing the truth about her character as opposed to the kind of woman she pretends to be. Secondly the portrait evokes Robert Audley's fear of women, prompting his urge to force, not only Lady Audley, but also other domineering or powerful women into submission.

In "Marketing Sensation: Lady Audley's Secret and Consumer Culture," Katherine Montweiler supports my analysis of the commodification of the femme fatale, by asserting that Braddon's novel is figuratively a conduct book for lower class female readers, one that teaches them how to become a Lady Audley by pretending to be a member of a class to which they do not belong (43). Advertisements in *Robin Goodfellow*, where *Lady Audley's Secret* first appeared, constructed images of femininity that specifically appealed to working class women in order to generate a female consumer market. By purchasing the product, middle-class and working class women figuratively become more desirable representations of the Victorian feminine ideal, a sophisticated bourgeois woman free from exploitive labor conditions. Lower class women are marginalized from the commodity culture because they have no purchasing power, and therefore they cannot afford rich dressing gowns or jewelry that signify the bourgeois class. Middle and upper class women, on the other hand, increase their value by commodifying themselves into material objects.

Realistically, it is doubtful that lower-class women could convincingly perform the masquerade with the same success as Lady Audley. Even though Phoebe Marks,

Lady Audley's maidservant, imitates social codes performed by her mistress and is often mistaken for her lady, her propriety does not lead to the success of marrying an aristocrat like Sir Audley. Mistaken identity in fact suggests that Phoebe Marks and Lady Audley are one and the same, yet Phoebe lacks the kind of cunning and determination that characterize Lady Audley. And it is certainly not realistic that a working class reader of sensation fiction will become a femme fatale who so deftly exploits ideological codes to transgress class boundaries without discovery. Really the camaraderie between Lucy Audley and Phoebe Marks exposes vulnerabilities experienced by women of all social classes, a "likeness" that bears "a point of sympathy" (108).

As discussed in Chapter 2, despite Victorian bourgeois women's consternation of prostitutes imitating middle-class social codes, the popularity of sensation novels suggests that violating class boundaries and gaining social power "beyond her entitlement" is acceptable or at least understandable when society fails to offer unmarried, vulnerable women better options in education and employment. In contrasting Helen Maldon, "the covetous young [girl] to whom advertisements are addressed," to her later success as Lady Audley who "represents the woman of the advertisements" (Montweiler 49), Braddon clearly does not intend to discourage young working class female readers from making class transgressions. Lady Audley projects an image of feminine power, while young Helen Maldon aspires to become that image. Though the success of such endeavors is, in real life, seemingly incredible, in her portrayal of Lady Audley, Braddon proposes ways to furtively cross class boundaries by dissembling one's social status.

This underlying notion that lower-class women can advance their socioeconomic condition as a result of their good conduct in fact reflects “the rise of the working classes” at a time when there is much tension between the bourgeoisie and laborers. According to Montweiler, Braddon highlights aspects of “the marketing of the gentrification of society”, insinuating that all classes will eventually assimilate to social codes enforced by the dominant ideology (43). In British life, the working classes are still denied the economic security found only in the bourgeois class, yet, given the hegemonic power structure’s control over society and its interest in curbing a working class revolt against capitalism and the class system, they are still expected and compelled to conform to middle-class standards of respectability.

Furthermore, contemporary feminist critics claim that the commodity culture—though it may appeal to Victorian women—does not necessarily give women agency: they are still powerless over the exchange and commodification of themselves. Lady Audley, for example, is “ornamental; a person to be shown off to visitors, and to play fantasias on the drawing-room piano”, the stereotypical trophy wife (Braddon 235). According to one line of reasoning, the commodity culture undermines a woman’s subjectivity by constructing her as an object. However, Lady Audley uses this commodification not only as a backlash against oppressive feminine representations of the ideal woman that really distort a woman’s character, but also as a weapon against bourgeois superiority over the lower classes when she masters bourgeois codes better than aristocrats themselves. In fact, mass culture, capitalism, and commodification in the novel conspire to weaken class boundaries because anyone, regardless of social rank, can

aspire to a higher social position despite the bourgeoisie's widespread warnings against the social climbing of inferior classes.

Helen Maldon's social climbing aspirations subvert the exploitation of the laboring class when she manipulates bourgeois social codes and aristocratic men for their wealth, a plot enabling her to wallow in capitalist decadence. Lady Audley encourages her male benefactors to lavish gifts upon her so that she can "loll on . . . the sofas in her luxurious dressing-room, discussing a new costume for some coming dinner party, or sit chattering to the girl, with her jewel box beside her, upon satin cushions" (55). Having escaped dependence, drudgery, and humiliation—"every trace of the old life . . . every clue to identity buried and forgotten" (17), she uses material objects to figuratively signify her own value.

The femme fatale arouses fear and dislike among aristocrats, like Robert Audley, who have never grappled with the kind of economic hardships that Lady Audley has endured. By not understanding the obstacles posed by class differences, Robert Audley fails not only to empathize with her circumstances, but he fails even to respect her ambitious undertaking to change or improve her status. Similarly, Alicia finds the lower classes inferior and vents her disdain, angrily charging that Lady Audley is an imposter:

You think her sensitive because she has soft little white hands, and big blue eyes with long lashes, and all the manner of affected, fantastical ways, which you stupid men call fascinating. Sensitive! Why, I've seen her do cruel things with those slender white fingers, and laugh at the pain she inflicted (107).

"Sweet smiles" and "pretty words" fail to deceive Alicia of her stepmother's intentions and only arouse her jealousy. For Alicia Audley, the femme fatale embodies "pollution



dangers”, a metaphor for transgressing social class borders discussed by Mary Douglas, which alludes to Lady Audley’s treachery and falseness within the aristocratic family (105).

Some contemporary feminist critics agree that Braddon legitimized middle-class cultural values by subduing and punishing Lady Audley at the end of the novel.<sup>40</sup> But this is just one reading. The more I read about Braddon and study her philosophy, the more I find she really is not trying to enforce patriarchal boundaries that oppress women, but to express some disquiet about them. In *Lady Audley’s Secret*, the image of a dangerous woman really does threaten the bourgeois family, by literally corrupting the home. Though Lady Audley is subdued because she is dangerous, I agree with feminist critics like Jennifer Carnell who claim that Braddon’s fiction acknowledges “a certain turn of thought and action . . . an impatience with old restraints, and a craving for some fundamental change in the working of society” (157).

The conflict in the novel largely revolves around this struggle to restore order and to establish laws by solving a single crime, a popular theme in sensation fiction. Detective fiction establishes this pattern in which the femme fatale generates social class conflict by defying conventional power represented by the male protagonist. Exposing such mysteries of the femme fatale re-establishes the thriving force of male authority. Evidence such as baby’s shoe, a ring, and a stamped trunk incriminates Lady Audley as a woman with a past, a fallen woman, alerting the suspicions of Robert Audley, who fittingly represents the patriarchal social structure. Her crimes furthermore exacerbate Robert Audley’s misogynistic feelings against women, as when he blames the whole sex as being duplicitous and untrustworthy, declaring: “I hate women! They’re bold, brazen,

abominable creatures, invented for the annoyance and destruction of their superiors” (II:6:208). Here he graphically conveys his view that women are inferior to men. Although Robert Audley eventually recognizes Lady Audley as an “arch trickster . . . an all-accomplished deceiver” (II:10:254), it is her “hellish power of dissimulation” that “[chills Robert] to the heart” (II:11:271). Among men, the femme fatale signifies men’s potential loss of power to women who use cunning to rebel against their social and sexist oppression, even going so far as to commit bigamy and murder.

Oppressive feminine conformist stereotypes that characterize women as docile and frail, in fact, contribute to Lady Audley's dissatisfaction, restlessness, and boredom. Without acceptable alternatives to poverty, she means to use culturally acceptable attributes of her gender, such as passivity and submissiveness, to expertly outwit male adversaries. Clever, resourceful, courageous, and patient, Lady Audley possesses generally accepted male qualities, readily accepting reversals of fortune by pragmatically considering other options; she is a calculated threat to the establishment. The metaphorical war, a battle of the sexes, between Lady Audley and Robert Audley specifically deals with gender issues and treats socioeconomic differences as well.

Robert defines his investigation—not as a mystery—but as “a battle” between himself and Lady Audley. He repeats to himself “again and again . . . Why doesn’t she run away” (10:250). Given the power struggle between Lady Audley and Robert Audley, it is important to note that they share many common characteristics, in effect making them doubles even though their motives may differ. The two rivals are selfish, spoiled, and relentless. Furthermore, Robert’s obsession with Talboys seems to stem from a homoerotic desire that makes Lady Audley more than just a threat as a murderess; she is

Robert Audley's rival made apparent by his fixation on George Talboys, and by his unfulfilled desire sublimated by an investigation of Lucy Audley. His reactions strongly resemble those of a jealous lover rather than an old, schoolboy friend. The closer Robert Audley comes to exposing the secret of Lady Audley's crimes, the more mockingly does he watch this "babyfied creature" with "some touch of pity" (18:141), an attitude that suggests that his detective work is not only intended to bring Lady Audley to justice, but to intimidate her and drive her away.

Lady Audley's value resides in social standards of respectability often determined by one's socioeconomic status. To be rich and aristocratic, for Lady Audley, seems to grant her some power. Therefore, to assert that Lady Audley is autonomous is false because she is not free from the system that subjugates women to aristocratic male authority that controls all exchange values and the circulation of commodities, and therefore assigns a woman her social value within the class structure. Ambitious women rely on this system to advance themselves socially and economically; for that reason they must acquiesce to standards set by dominant ideology to increase their social value. Young impressionable readers agree that Lady Audley represents greater economic freedom, for the femme fatale rebels against a system that attempts to keep inferior women subjected to poverty. However, when the femme fatale wittingly uses this very system to gain power, she is really not self-governing but reactive; nor does she desire to change cultural codes or to make it easier for other women to enter higher social classes: she is merely self-serving and has no better interests.

Yet her struggles against sexist and economic oppression suggest that being born a woman is a social misfortune because she lacks the same freedom as men. Considering

these struggles, Tamar Heller in *Dead Secrets* raises an excellent point that sensation novelists not only reflect upon concerns about class instability and social inequality, but they also link gender definition to these problems in the social class system. In *East Lynne*, *Lady Audley's Secret*, and *Armada*, socially displaced femme fatale characters trigger not only “class fear” and ideological tensions, hence “blurring social hierarchies”, but also the threat that even women who are not subversive will become insubordinate to patriarchal control (Heller 87). Helen Talboys, who may appear non-threatening, pursues liberties experienced usually by men, drifting from the home and single-handedly improving her circumstances; and such aspirations threaten Victorian definitions of gender and class divisions.

In “Some Call it Fiction: On the Politics of Domesticity,” Nancy Armstrong posits that “sexuality provides the basis of all economic exchange” (69). Women who look for husbands are figuratively on the market and used as objects of economic exchange, the exchange value something determined by men. In *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millet explains that class division is defined by and “relevant only to men” since women are economically dependent on men (24). Despite a woman’s birth or education, class division really only pertains to men since men control wealth. Therefore, women’s socioeconomic power is inscribed by the status their fathers and husbands hold in society, emphasizing the social powerlessness of nineteenth-century women. In *The Main Enemy*, Christine Delphy agrees that even though marrying a man of a capitalist upper class can raise a woman’s standard of living, “it does not make her a member of that class” (Barrett 14). This marginalization of women within the marriage market is most apparent in sensation fiction when the woman is often treated as an outsider.

For example, although Lady Audley rises to a higher station, Alicia Audley, her stepdaughter, only acknowledges her as an imposter—not as an equal. In *Aurora Floyd*, references made constantly to Aurora's mother, the actress, a morally deplorable profession for Victorian women, always suggest that she is not a member of the capitalist class that Aurora's father, the banker, represents. In these novels, women have no control over capital; therefore social status is only gained through marriage—not by an independent means. In an understanding of Michele Barrett's paradigm of Marxist Feminism in *Women's Oppression Today*, these women are proletarians since their birth and education are not relevant to class divisions. Marriage, according to Barrett, is a domestic mode of production and a patriarchal mode of exploitation.

One cannot understand the existence and nature of the femme fatale without seeing clearly that in Victorian culture domestic roles and social class associated with their married life define the character of nineteenth-century women. Lady Audley astutely senses the tendency of Victorian society to objectify women and to frame women's household duties, beauty, and other talents as assets to and within the domestic sphere. Women, in effect, function as an object of exchange among men. Victorian ideology implies that a woman can only gain agency through marriage and maternity giving her a certain social purpose. Detesting parenthood as an option, the femme fatale seldom makes for a doting mother. Both Lady Audley and Becky Sharp abandon their children to seek better opportunities, while Mrs. Henry Wood's Lady Isabel is the only character to return to her child under the guise of a governess. To claim her child, who is left with her father in a port town, would allude to Lady Audley's fallenness, while Becky Sharp gladly deserts her child to pursue her ambitions.

Women, in effect, fulfill a specular image of the Victorian ideal as it was constructed by patriarchy. This discourse between women role-playing social codes and women who desire socioeconomic independence is pervasive in Victorian literature written by women as they seek to grapple with the dichotomy between women as Subject and Object by identifying and deconstructing fixed models of sexuality. The woman who usually signifies Otherness, particularly the femme fatale, becomes dangerous in the process of becoming a Subject / Self; such is the case of a woman who gains independence by murdering her unsuspecting husband.

In *This Sex Which Is Not One*, a feminist study of capitalist societies, Irigaray explains that our culture is structured upon the exchange of women, and all exchanges take place among men (192); the value of a woman is literally constituted by “the *material* support of her body” by the fact that she can produce children (175). In contrast Mary Ann Doane explains that a woman’s sexuality embodies all her secrets. Similarly Showalter explains that the façade of domestic tranquility conceals a plethora of secrets, making the femme fatale’s “threat” equivocal (103).

Irigaray privileges the reproductive function of women, naming the female body as a commodity, and claiming that in capitalist society her maternal function is viewed as her most useful and powerful asset. On the contrary, for abandoned Victorian women, like Helen Talboys, motherhood denies women socioeconomic power, compelling them to place sole reliance on their husbands. I believe that the reproductive function of women, discussed by Irigaray, really does not empower Victorian women, especially in Braddon’s novel, as evidenced by the fact George Talboys leaves his young wife and son, neglecting his role as a husband and a father and failing to provide for Helen. While

Irigaray emphasizes the reproductive use-value of women, Braddon indicates that the marriage market measures a woman's worth on a different scale, one based on her presumed virtue or innocence, and middle-class men use their property and wealth as a means to mediate and transact marriage proposals with highly valued women (69). In any case, from a less romantic perspective, position and wealth makes courtship and marriage possible. By encouraging her male conquests, George Talboys and Sir Michael Audley, to construct her at will as an idealized domestic object, Lady Audley gains power. As discussed in Chapter Three, patriarchy in the nineteenth century insists on the reproduction of feminine images to sustain the hegemonic power structure; in effect, they abolish women's complexity by valuing them almost exclusively for their maternal use-value, constructing women as moral guides to their husbands and children, expectations which middle-class women must fulfill.

The marriage contract requires a woman to submit to domestic rituals of daily life, generating nuances of female subjectivity. Household duties standardize domestic ideology by giving these tasks specific meanings that signify love, family, or moral guidance, aspects that respectable bourgeois Victorian male protagonists look for in potential wives. Lucy Graham's veneer of moral integrity, established while working for the Dawson family, coupled with Sir Audley's economic and social status, makes the marriage exchange look promising. By emulating domestic images, Lady Audley produces an image of the ideal aristocratic Victorian household.

Her minuscule activities about the house, of course indicate that domestic duties in conduct books really involve nothing more than becoming "the right kind of woman to represent the household" (Armstrong 79).

[flitting] from room to room in the bright September sunshine-now sitting down to the piano to trill out a ballad, or the first page of an Italian bravura, or running with rapid fingers through a brilliant waltz-now hovering about a stand of hothouse flowers, doing amateur gardening with a pair of fairy-like silver-mounted embroidery scissors-now strolling into her dressing-room to talk to Phoebe Marks, and have her curls re-arranged for the third or fourth time (79).

While Montweiler argues that Lady Audley epitomizes the idle woman, an ornament in the household, who otherwise has no purpose, I argue that Lady Audley—not Sir Audley—gives the home signification as a result of her household activities. She earns respect among the community, beautifies the home, and appropriately follows cultural guidelines, showing that the Victorian woman has the power to increase the social value of the household she represents, one of the few measures empowering nineteenth-century women. Education, good manners, and moral conduct maintain an appearance of nineteenth-century decorum. While a husband's status in patriarchal societies largely determines his wife's social value, the household is still quite dependent on the outward appearances of the women in the home.

Victorian men do not understand daily domestic activities. Women, however, valorize idealized domestic tasks used to compete against each other in the marriage market. For this reason, Alicia Audley sees beneath her stepmother's pretense, recognizing that she is "a vain, frivolous, heartless little coquette . . . a practiced and consummate flirt" (106). Katherine Montwieler points out that domestic attributes are much less convincing and more infuriating to women because women understand the artfulness of other women and are aware of the powerful effectiveness of such role-



playing. Lady Audley's fantastical affects only emphasize that she is not an aristocrat. Alicia does not fear Lady Audley, but admits that her new stepmother has come between Alicia and her father, "and robbed poor Alicia of the love of that dear generous heart" (I:14:107). Female characters perceive the femme fatale as a nuisance rather than a deadly threat.

The Victorian household figuratively demarcates social class boundaries designed to keep different types of women, fallen or domestic, "in their place." The internal structure of the domestic sphere protects women from "falling." But such protection is always incumbent upon the woman staying within the domestic sphere and not entering into public space either by way of literally leaving the home or by pursuing personal interests that do not benefit the family. A Victorian woman's integrity is based on her commitment to the home. The ambitious femme fatale, by thwarting constraints imposed by household duties, secretly undermines these social codes. Throughout the novel, Lady Audley vacillates between private and public spheres, running off to London and Southampton to warn her father of Robert Audley's inquiries in an effort to protect her true identity.

Moreover, symbols such as "crossroads, arches, new seasons, or new clothes" represent boundary markers between public and private life and emphasize Lady Audley's transgressions when she leaves Audley Court and clandestinely investigates the findings of Robert Audley. Figuratively the different identities of Lady Audley—Helen Maldon, Helen Talboys, Lucy Graham, and Lady Audley—mark her as a fallen woman masquerading as a "girlish . . . fragile figure . . . as if she had just left the nursery" (55). Lady Audley forges different social or domestic identities with each new alias, and

Audley Court is appropriately “a house in which you incontinently [lose] yourself”, thus shedding the identity of one’s former self (8).

Lady Audley uses assumed names to role-play each type of woman depending on the desires of her suitor—innocent girl, devoted mother, abandoned wife, naïve governess, and child-wife. Her disguises persuade male conquests that she is an authentic version of each role, which Victorian readers found shocking only because Lady Audley so convincingly conceals her identity as a bigamist and murderess. Until Robert Audley rigorously investigates the disappearance of George Talboys, her charade goes undetected. Finally the crossing of thresholds, often identified in the gothic setting at Audley Court, points to the tenuous nature of class boundaries. By playing according to society's rules, Lady Audley shows that the social class structure is not strong enough to keep single, ambitious women outside its boundaries.

Thresholds, such as arches, secret chambers, hidden pathways, and assumed names, symbolize social boundaries and demarcate the upper class from the lower class, subversive women from decent women, and public space and domestic space, used figuratively to distinguish a woman’s social inferiority. The identities of Helen Maldon / Lucy Graham convince both Talboys and Sir Audley that she is pure and untainted. In succeeding, she escapes the categorization of a woman as “low”, in which socioeconomic hardship usually places working class girls. Her male suitors succumb to her idealized feminine persona. Boundary markers, however, such as the lime-walk at Audley Court or various aliases implicate her as an imposter who endangers men, particularly George Talboys who becomes her first victim by failing to give her money, wealth, and prestige.

Hidden chambers, narrow staircases, and high narrow windows at Audley Court metaphorically represent a labyrinth in which secrets are stored and identities protected. There are several arches under which one must pass, the first leading to Audley Court through the gardens, which ironically refers to a turning point where women commit crimes. Braddon's visit to Essex inspired the unmistakable Gothic setting of Audley Court, where she remarked that the lime-walk leading up to the court "suggested something uncanny" (Carnell 144). Robert Audley conjures up images of the Garden of Eden, where Eve—the first femme fatale—is blamed for the fall of man. It is in the lime-walk of the garden at Audley Court where George Talboys confronts his wife and threatens to expose her crime. Though the garden is meant to symbolize a safe enclosure, a cultivation of life, even virginity, or movement from season to season where life is ordered, it ironically comes to represent a deathtrap for George Talboys, conjuring up more biblical images of temptation and punishment. Lady Audley lures Talboys into the garden's hidden enclosure where she murders Talboys, who suffers the final consequences in his constant failure to see through Lady Audley's deception.

Paradoxically, sensation novels, by suggesting that the establishment is corrupt, even hypocritical, by airing moral prejudices, and by patronizing the working classes while it is guilty of vice and debauchery, challenge the whole order of society (177). Audley Court represents the best of society where seemingly nothing evil or mysterious happens, yet Lucy Audley is an intruder in the domestic scene that disrupts the traditional order of the household. Despite appearances, Audley Court, a former convent, houses and protects a bigamist and a murderess. While the Court signifies ideal power and greatness, the superior scheming of a woman undermines its authority. Bigamy and

murder cause Sir Audley to flee the Court, a “place hateful to him”, by “a sudden and an unlooked-for sorrow” (4:355).

After Lady Audley confesses her crimes to Sir Audley, she does not regret her actions by which she achieves her position, nor is she sorry for losing Sir Audley’s admiration, feeling “not one tender recollection in her mind of the man who had caused the furnishing of [her] chamber . . . a mute evidence of his love” (5:366). Rather she thinks about “how painfully probable it was that the luxurious apartment would soon pass out of her possession” (3:5:366). Declaring “I AM MAD!” (341), Lady Audley presumes that madness will exonerate her from her crimes. Dr. Mosgrave observes Lady Audley before he commits her to an asylum in Belgium, explaining to Robert Audley that “[she] has the cunning of madness, with the prudence of intelligence. I will tell you what she is, Mr. Audley. She is dangerous!” (3:5:372). Greed and ambition recklessly undermine the representation of feminine sexuality as constructed by patriarchy in the nineteenth century.

She committed the crime of bigamy because by that crime she obtained fortune and position. There is no madness there. When she found herself in a desperate position, she did not grow desperate. She employed intelligent means, and she carried out a conspiracy which required coolness and deliberation in its execution.

There is no madness in that” (5:370).

The doctor’s distinction between insanity and fatality reveals an often misleading perception in Victorian culture that undermines women, regardless of social class, an ideological belief insinuating that women are too incompetent to carry out such schemes. Victorian society generally felt that sexual or criminal activity in respectable middle-class

women was impossible. Nineteenth-century doctors agreed that murder could only be the result of mental instability. Yet fictional female characters and real-life murder trials of Constance Kent and Madeline Smith suggest that women are driven to homicide by real exigencies, such as to escape from the family, conditions at home, or destitution.

Braddon negates patriarchal images of women, which suggest that women are deviant or insane if they break from bourgeois class convention. By transgressing moral codes and taking matters into her own hands despite the consequences, Lady Audley is not insane at all. Though the femme fatale tries to use madness as a defense for her crimes, madwomen really cannot feign an appearance of domesticity; they always fail as a result of mental or physical illness suffered by such fictional characters as Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*. Unlike Lady Audley who becomes a self-production of domestic femininity for men, Bertha Mason resists constructions about feminine sexuality by refusing to be the object of desire. She rejects conventions of bourgeois subjectivity and does not “behave like the docile object of the male gaze” (Armstrong 194). Like the femme fatale, the madwoman is marginalized, literally living outside social institutions. But the madwoman vehemently refuses to adapt to the household, rebelling against social and gendered boundaries and rejecting the whole belief system posed by domesticity. Monstrous women step outside “middle class origins” and resist adaptation to Victorian bourgeois social codes whereas the femme fatale desperately wants to assimilate to aristocratic social cliques and persistently evades detection as an imposter.

What ideological purpose does the femme fatale serve in mid-Victorian literature? Lady Audley exploits the capitalist system and bourgeois ideology by using these principles for her own self-seeking purposes. Inadvertently, Lady Audley exposes the

corruptive nature of capitalism by turning its ideology of marriage and of family against itself. Marriage is meant to keep men and women controlled within the boundaries of Victorian capitalist culture. The femme fatale is a border figure, socially inferior, while her charm, artistic skills and sometimes her physical attributes allow her to traverse beyond cultural margins and social borders. Though marginalized, the femme fatale can outwit and undermine the most powerful aristocratic circles. But do her transgressions work in any way to change the status of women? No: women are still powerless, and when they attempt to cunningly improve their socioeconomic status, the social order neatly fits them into yet another categorization of women, the madwoman, the criminal, the deviant rooted out of society and left to “[wear] out the remnant of her wicked life in the quiet suburb of the forgotten Belgian city” (433).

Bad behavior certainly contradicts domestic ideology and the pervasive image of the Victorian woman that as Mary Poovey points out “legitimizes . . . England’s sense of moral superiority” (9). While the domestic ideal, according to Poovey, “depoliticize[s] class relations” (9), I argue that the femme fatale becomes a necessary apparatus to antagonize such complacency with a rather distorted and artificial image of women. The fatal woman’s mischief in sensation fiction and Victorian drama changes the image of women. The author compels us to keep asking what are the lady’s secrets, which society finds so forbidden and taboo. On the other hand, to characterize women as “flesh, desire . . . susceptible [to] impulses and passions” is also inaccurate (Poovey 9-10). The image of the femme fatale points out the necessity for different alternatives for women dissatisfied with marriage and the other restrictions that society imposes against them. Though

Victorian society may appear to uphold beliefs about virtuous women, novelists such as Braddon seem to question this ideal.

## Chapter 5

### Sexual Danger and the Threat of the Femme Fatale in *Armada*

Particularly among traditional femme fatales like Salome or Cleopatra, who are proportionately buxom or shapely, forming a more imposing appearance, the feminine body gives the femme fatale agency. But as I argued in Chapter Four, few mid-century femme fatales have these physical features, therefore subverting “distorted” images of ambitious women as over-sexualized dangerous criminals. While facetiously playing on conventional beliefs that small figured women cannot possibly be threatening, Thackeray describes Becky Sharp as a rather frail woman, attractive, but not beautiful, in order to satirize domestic ideology and to increase the obscurities of sexual difference that prompt fears and anxieties among Victorians. Though dangerous, Miss Sharp fits into conventional stereotypes about the domestic woman who is seemingly passive and meek. Compared to traditional shapely beauties, whose ambitious endeavors are sometimes made easier by their physical attributes, the frailty of Becky Sharp causes powerful men and women to underestimate her threat. By applying cultural ideals of delicately built women to gain trust among men and women, Becky enchants and manipulates potential male suitors. Unlike such femme fatales previously discussed in other chapters, Wilkie Collins’ Lydia Gwilt, a dazzling beauty, is one exception.

By analyzing the sexual threat of the femme fatale in *Armada*, this chapter expands my discussion on the different representations of women that Victorian social reformers attempt to codify. Foucault explains that such codification proliferates as a means to regulate sexuality; yet this classification system simply gives way to an abundance of questions and discourses centered on feminine sexuality. The theoretical



approach in this chapter clarifies the meaning of sexual danger and of power in the figure of the femme fatale. Theories concerning sexuality and pollution dangers discussed by both Foucault and Mary Douglas tend to overlap and thus prove helpful in my discussion.<sup>41</sup> As Foucault focuses on the codification of sexuality, Douglas explains how pollution dangers actually mirror the larger social system and its external pressures on restrictions within boundaries and margins (Douglas 2). At times I refer to Žižek's study of the courtly love motif to explain why the male protagonist still desires the femme fatale even though she incites fear and anxiety and endangers the male protagonist.

I recognize the femme fatale as a dominant symbol for this discussion on sexuality in the mid-nineteenth century since she violates all gender and social boundaries, by playing on domestic ideals. Furthermore, the femme fatale's body signifies power, a figurative manifestation of the novel's central mystery that signals suppressed desire of the male protagonist. By controlling the desire of men and suppressing her true identity, the femme fatale clandestinely uses her sexuality to disrupt binary oppositions between dominant and subordinate groups, hence disempowering her male victim. Yet as this chapter will show, the femme fatale really does not have power; rather she threatens the power structure, the establishment controlled by men, when her actions suggest that even domestic women can be duplicitous and that cultural representations are really spurious.

Feminine sexuality is the nexus of this power struggle, an agency that "dominates us" by concealing meaning or a secret. Foucault clarifies that the codification of power directly reflects the processes of the body—"to bodies, functions, physiological processes, sensations, and pleasures" (152), meaning that one's sexuality determines the

behavior of men and women, hence constructing identity based on their gender. In an analysis of *Armada*, this chapter largely asks whether Victorian women can be free from cultural representations constructed by their sexuality. Foucault insinuates that such an endeavor is idealistic because these representations not only code masculine and feminine behavior, but also construct one's subjectivity. The ambiguous nature of sexuality in *Armada*—that not all women are passive nor are all men aggressive—obscures these cultural representations and threatens the social order. The femme fatale in *Armada* is a manifestation of the split woman: the deviant woman and the domestic woman, which suggests that her sexuality is not easily codified and that she is not simply wild, deviant, criminal, promiscuous, or mad. Sensation fiction and later the New Woman novel amplify this negotiation of the categories of women between the femme fatale and the feminine ideal.

This chapter begins with an analysis of literary reviews by Victorian critics of Lydia Gwilt as a stereotypical immoral woman. By demystifying this criticism of Miss Gwilt, this chapter will demonstrate the cause of her crimes, giving a more rounded definition of her character. The following discussion of the inheritance plot argues that the femme fatale is not the only villain in the novel, but that her actions ironically reflect the false and treacherous nature of members of the upper classes driven by greed and self-interests. Collins alludes to the hypocrisy of cultural ideals constructed by patriarchy that fails to apply these same codes to its own class.

### The Villainous Woman

When *Armada* was first published in 1866, *The Athenaeum* denounced Lydia Gwilt as “one of the most hardened female villains whose devices and desires have ever

blackened fiction” (732). H. F. Chorely asks: “What artist would choose vermin as his subjects?” (147). Initiating one of the major misconstrued readings of *Armada* that at first provoked much interest in Lydia Gwilt, *The Athenaeum* stereotyped her as a dangerous woman. Similar to criticism of sensation fiction by Mrs. Oliphant, Chorely disregards the complexity of Miss Gwilt’s character and ignores the cause of her fatality, that as a child she is corrupted and abandoned by adults and expected to survive by her own wits. In general these critics fail to recognize the oppressive nature of domesticity, which Victorian novelists incessantly begin to question. I believe that in *Armada*, Wilkie Collins writes as if he is stuck in this very conundrum between the stereotypical evil woman and a woman pushed into action by neglect, criminal influences, and poverty.

But I do not believe it was Collins’ intention to stereotype his heroine as a “hardboiled villain” as she is delineated by *The Athenaeum*. Rather Collins emphasizes that duplicity not only applies to wanton women or the criminal underworld but also reflects the rather self-righteous attitudes of the bourgeois and aristocratic classes. Any middle-class woman pressured to marry as a result of economic hardship and fear of poverty is just as capable of deception as the femme fatale, and bourgeois society inherently advocates this behavior by offering few, if any, alternatives for women. Considering these factors, I assert that Lydia Gwilt is unfairly judged as “a hardened criminal” for having survived economic difficulty, an abusive husband, and limited job opportunities.

Sensual and erotic in the description of her physical features, Lydia Gwilt evokes traditional images of dangerous sexualized femme fatales, though disguised as a well-mannered, educated woman. Because advantages of beauty in *Armada* fail to sustain

the attention of male admirers, Miss Gwilt conceals her beauty beneath a heavy paisley veil and conservative clothing, knowing that her radiant features could possibly lead to fears, warning detectives that she is an imposter. Even though he is attracted to her upon their first meeting, Midwinter immediately suspects Lydia. Aware of his suspicions, Lydia identifies Midwinter as her nemesis, “a very awkward obstacle in [her] way” (346).

Though Ozias Midwinter confesses his fear about the mysterious veiled woman who stalks Mrs. Armadale, causes her death, and shortly after, appears at the death scene of two more men from whom Allan Armadale coincidentally inherits a fortune, he still marries this very woman who incites all of his anxieties. So why do those dark shadows lurking around the femme fatale entice her male conquests even more? Is it folly that society encourages such men to marry one sort of woman while they secretly harbor a fascination for the other?

Moving beyond such a reading that only sexualized women commit murder and create havoc, Collins shows us that the femme fatale can be a governess and a staunch critic of other domestic women also capable of being duplicitous. While insinuating that appearances always give away a woman’s corruptibility, Collins reveals that even Miss Milroy, demure and chaste, could really be a dangerous woman in disguise. Though Lydia Gwilt, a murderess, a thief, and an adulteress, metaphorically spreads disease, contamination, and sexual danger, she more importantly exposes the hypocrisies of middle-class values, by showing that the hegemonic power structure leads all women to such deception. Therefore the ruling class proves hypocritical in its expectations of women to be pure and obedient.

## The Inheritance Plot Linked to Miss Gwilt

The first generation of Armadales is specifically characterized as deceitful, treacherous, and murderous. The story begins in Barbados where the British Empire uses its power and wealth to exploit colonial territories and to enforce patriarchal ideology on other races. Midwinter's father inherits the West Indian property originally meant for Mr. Armadale's son (Allan's father) whose "misconduct" disgraces the family and leads to his disinheritance (31). Midwinter's father takes Armadale's name as one of the conditions for his inheritance, therefore depriving Allan Armadale's father, the "outlawed son," of his birthright, and disrupting the order of heirs. In a dishonest attempt to regain his fortune, the first generation Allan Armadale forms a friendship with his rival. Posing as Fergus Ingleby, Armadale is "admitted to [Midwinter's father's] closest confidence" (35), a scheme used to avenge his disinheritance by marrying Miss Blanchard, the woman promised to Midwinter's father. Eventually Midwinter's father murders the original Armadale by locking him inside a sinking boat in which the villain and his new wife attempt to flee.

This introductory plot in which the identities of characters are obscured leads to a larger theme where characters, whose class, race, or gender are inferior to British dominant ideology, emphatically desire assimilation into westernized mainstream bourgeois culture. Bloodlines signify identity, representing the proper heir to the Armadale fortune, yet linking the precarious conditions of heirs to the inheritance plot. Despite betrayal, abandonment, and eventually murder committed among these characters, Thorpe Ambrose, the Armadale estate where the second generation form a

new bond, paradoxically represents “a purely conventional country house”(161) where such crimes do not exist.

The colonial plot, which begins the novel, represents Midwinter’s father as the “dark Armadale” and Allan Armadale as “the lighter Armadale”, implying that light and dark personify conventional themes of good versus evil, the criminal underworld opposed to a moral society; such polarities dominate the novel. Traditional bloodlines are literally cut off from family fortunes, while a distant relative is embraced like a son. Opposite worlds eventually collide and bring about chaos that circulates throughout the plot.

The deathbed confession of the father appears to have “poisoned the mind of the son” (157) when Midwinter makes “his father’s belief in Fatality . . . his own belief” (160), which suggests that crimes are carried in the blood. By transferring the father’s guilt to the son, repeatedly abusing him, and figuratively punishing his father for singularly loving Miss Blanchard, Midwinter’s mother causes her son to flee from her home and seek out the son of his father’s rival. In an effort to prevent future transgressions, both Armadale’s mother and Midwinter’s father prophetically declare “never let the two [younger] Armadales meet in this world” (56). Despite these warnings, Midwinter concludes that the second generation of Armadales can redeem past transgressions of their fathers by first putting the property into the hands of the rightful heir. Secondly, fearing that “the fatal resemblance of names has descended to work its deadly mischief with the sons” after “working its deadly mischief with the fathers” (54), Midwinter changes his name from “Armadale” in an effort to conceal his identity and remove this cycle of guilt, certain that his father’s crime taints his character. Although the

two Allan Armadales are meant to be rivals as heirs to a fortune, they instead develop a loyal friendship unlike that of the first generation.

But despite Midwinter's efforts to prevent some impending catastrophe, "the mischief's done, and the caution comes to late" (160). By metaphorically traversing external and internal boundaries, by hiding his identity from Armadale, by interpreting dreams, by crossing different worlds between the supernatural and the natural, the past and the present, by transferring rightful ownership of the Armadale estate, Midwinter actually endangers young Armadale. His uncanny dreams warn Midwinter of Armadale's impending doom. By linking these worlds together, Midwinter imperils the second generation repeating the same catastrophes from the past. As a result of Lydia's interference, "the woman who tried to drown herself; the woman who caused a series of accidents which put young Armadale in possession of his fortune", the inheritance is restored to the original heir (513). Her crimes, once again, adulterate the bloodlines, restoring the inheritance by means of criminal activity that curses the second generation of Armadales.

The second part of the prophecy orders Midwinter to desert that woman, Lydia Gwilt, if she is "a link between you and him" (56). Yet Miss Gwilt continues this cycle of treachery, joining the past with the present two generations of Armadales. As a 12-year-old child she plays a formidable role; her complicity brings about the original dramas and tragedies, and at 35 she plots the son's ruin. The mixture of bloodlines between the two Armadales is circuitously linked to sexual danger signified by Lydia Gwilt whose forgery "paved the way securely for the marriage" of the first Allan Armadale and Miss Blanchard (39). In her vengeance against Miss Blanchard, the same

woman plots more crimes against the second generation. Though Midwinter intuitively connects Lydia's connection between the past and present by interpreting Armadale's cautionary dreams, he represses this knowledge hence, guaranteeing this cycle of fatality, which fulfills his father's prophecy; each effort to subvert potential catastrophes simply results in more mischief.

#### The Battle between the Fatal Woman and the Domestic Ideal

Because Lydia Gwilt is an older woman, survives within the criminal underworld, and lacks the protection of the conventional Victorian family, she does not fit the pattern of bourgeois society, and she is clearly out of place within the fabric of Victorian culture. Yet respectable male characters in *Armadale* praise Lydia Gwilt as the impeccably well-mannered, graceful governess. Male characters do not suspect Lydia, whose demeanor belies her hatred of Allan Armadale and disguises her intense aversion of the upper classes. By transgressing social class boundaries, Lydia implicitly rebels against cultural rules, perverts ideological values, mocks social codes, and corrupts the establishment. However, when it is convenient, she hypocritically supports the class structure, using her knowledge of feminine representations and social codes to attack other female rivals, by undermining their merits.

For women, such as the venomous Mrs. Milroy and her daughter Neelie, Collins reflects powerlessness experienced by middle-class women who are economically dependent on men, a vulnerability felt by all women since husbands can always abandon their wives or lovers, leaving them penniless. Acting on the baser patterns of women's jealousy, Mrs. Milroy automatically denounces Lydia as the stealer of husbands and the shame of families. In her opinion, Miss Gwilt deliberately exploits her sexuality to



subdue male conquests. Though the servants and nurse spy on Lydia for Mrs. Milroy, extorting financial and material rewards from the invalid, they similarly distrust a beautiful woman, often “[staring] at [her] with a mischievous expectation in their eyes,” scrutinizing her “face and figure” (345). While women disparage her, men, such as Major Milroy, admire her, which enrages Mrs. Milroy whose “cruel calamity” of illness blights both her life and beauty and intensifies her jealousy. Obsessive behavior and self-imposed delusions goad Mrs. Milroy’s conviction that Lydia covets her husband, Major Milroy. Furthermore the bourgeois home is figuratively under surveillance by the “idle woman” charged with conjugal and parental obligations, though Mrs. Milroy is not so motherly declaring to her daughter, “I was finely disappointed, I can tell you, when you were born” (389). Like other female characters, Mrs. Milroy is ruled by self-interest, and her mental illness only increases her cruelty.

Despite contradictory stereotypes, both the femme fatale and domestic woman behave similarly to compete for the male protagonist, indicating that the domestic ideal is really a foil of the femme fatale. As Miss Milroy’s governess, Lydia believes that she has a greater advantage over her charge, tyrannizing the feminine ideal and deriding her pretentious innocence. Compared to her rival, Lydia Gwilt is beautiful and exacerbates Miss Milroy by “keeping [her] temper” (344). To “[hate Lydia] like poison . . . is a great comfort” to Miss Gwilt because jealousy actually disempowers her enemy. Lydia is more calculating under pressure, while Miss Milroy reacts like a firebrand.

In order for the feminine ideal to sustain her desirability, sexuality in the novel is figuratively policed. For the sake of appearances, Miss Milroy is accompanied by her father or by Miss Gwilt whenever she meets Allan Armadale. Domestic boundaries keep

feminine sexuality contained within a specific space so that she can be viewed, but figuratively, never tempted. Enforced restrictions and supervision of young women keep Miss Milroy a pure woman, generally enforcing beliefs that middle-class women must be chaste in order to be marriageable. Bourgeois conventions prohibit women from overtly expressing their desires and label such behavior as deviant or improper. Miss Milroy pretends not to desire Allan Armadale in order to be preferred by him; hence she maintains some distance from Armadale until he finally marries her at the end of the novel. This distance frustrates him and intensifies his desire for Miss Milroy. Keeping the domestic ideal virtuous and matching proper women with respectable gentlemen help to impose strict codes of sexuality. Even stirrings of desire are considered as transgressive as the act itself, and the domestic ideal must be guarded from such libidinous excitement.

Courtship rituals, more appropriately, sublimate Armadale's sexual desire for women in the novel. In other novels where the sexualized femme fatale is a central character, male protagonists judge women only by their beauty and sexual prowess. Gripped by sensual pleasure, Count Muffat in *Nana* or le Baron Hulot in *Cousin Bette* are incapable of carrying on any relationship with women, especially their wives. Men who succumb to Nana's sexual power are fools "courting their own ruin" (33). According to Jann Matlock in *Scenes of Seduction*, Valerie Marneffe amasses a fortune from men, by making "observations about society around her; she uses indictments of gender and class to empower and enrich herself, and she desires freedom, self-possession, and sexual liberty" (185). Men in Balzac's novel who remain in this first stage of sensual pleasure are impotent and weak, empowering the femme fatale socio-economically. Thus their

behavior is often infantile, and they more easily succumb to the sensuality of the fatal woman, as does Armadale upon his first introduction to Miss Gwilt; he is infatuated, though he suppresses his desire for her. Courtly love, a central motif in *Armadale*, not only signifies the relationship between the beloved and the lover, but also shows how the characters change and mature throughout the course of the novel. Pure love enables the lover to desire more than simply a beautiful woman. In the most advanced stages of a courtship, sexual desire is less important when the hero is paralyzed by his uncanny devotion to the woman.

*In Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, Rene Girard advances this argument, explaining that “[physical] qualities of the object play a subordinate part” (88). Armadale’s relationship with Miss Milroy is slow to develop, almost adolescent, whereas Midwinter immediately feels the effects of his attachment to Lydia. Miss Milroy and Armadale are an appropriate match for reasons other than the rigid practice of social standards. For one, Allan Armadale is selfish and immature, not quite the gentleman he poses to be. He is fickle, and the reader is led to question whether his love for any woman is genuine. First he impulsively desires Miss Milroy, then submits to Lydia’s charms, and eventually returns to Miss Milroy because Lydia’s character proves to be false. During his first meeting with Lydia, Armadale idealizes the femme fatale’s beauty, in which he idealistically constructs and represents the woman’s character as good and orderly. Unlike Miss Milroy, Lydia Gwilt innocuously toys with Allan Armadale, promoting her charms by entertaining guests with her piano playing. Miss Milroy is less attainable since middle-class codes create impediments against Armadale’s flirtations with her. But really, Collins suggests that the so-called moral, young chaste woman is not much

different from the voluptuous, experienced older woman, only Miss Milroy performs social conventions with greater success as a result of her youth, social class, and her father's protection.

For Armadale, love hinges on an illusion of the feminine ideal. Any flaw in the woman easily shatters that image for some, while for others such flaws are hastily overlooked and ignored in order to sustain the ideal image. When Armadale learns that Lydia is really "a miserable fallen woman," she loses "her place in his estimation" (415-416). Miss Milroy sustains Armadale's image of the ideal woman; she plays by his rules whereas Lydia is discreet and mysterious, a condition impelling Armadale to investigate her past.

Miss Milroy, however, is not so innocent and does not necessarily behave like the domestic ideal when she secretly meets Armadale where Lydia Gwilt spies on the couple. After learning that she will be sent to school, an arrangement encouraged by Lydia to keep her rival completely out of the way, Miss Milroy laments leaving Mr. Armadale now that they are "friendly" again. But the garden scene between the "proper" young lady and the squire is an act performed by the young girl, meant to cunningly procure a marriage proposal from Armadale. Lydia observes that "[for] downright brazen impudence, which a grown woman would be ashamed of, give me the young girls whose 'modesty' is so pertinaciously insisted on by the nauseous domestic sentimentalists of the present day!" (520).

Similar to the femme fatale who role plays social bourgeois codes in order to integrate into respectable society, even Miss Milroy impersonates these same conventions, making the domestic ideal even less believable among readers because no

woman can realistically meet these false images of purity and innocence. Rather Collins suggests all women are actresses vying for husbands in a competitive marriage market, and the domestic ideal is really a farce. When Armadale offers to marry Miss Milroy, she protests, using her father's objections to Armadale as a pretense. The squire then proposes running away, in which, she retorts, is a "heartless" and "disgraceful" suggestion. After Armadale leaves, Miss Milroy "[smiles], took a few steps on tiptoe to look after him; turned back again, and suddenly burst into a violent fit of crying" (521).

This image leaves a satirical, yet unflattering perspective of young women purportedly considered the feminine ideal, ingenuous and trustworthy. Yet this scene is typical of domestic women keen on advancing their socioeconomic status. The so-called domestic ideal is as equally deceptive as is the femme fatale, only her performance is more believable among other characters simply because no one suspects young, inexperienced, plain and simple, middle-class girls of being duplicitous. Miss Milroy more successfully fulfills bourgeois codes because of her middle-class family, which is really a veneer of propriety considering the mother's mental instability. The discovery of Lydia's past, due to Mrs. Milroy's interference, guarantees her daughter's success with Armadale. While she artfully performs the role of a desperate, innocent girl torn between her family and her feelings for Armadale, Miss Milroy's role-playing secures Armadale's affections.

Unlike Lydia, Miss Milroy creates obstacles that increase her value in Armadale's estimation; she is figuratively desired for her moral status. Like Thackeray's Becky Sharp, Miss Milroy proves that even the plainest girl can attract a suitable husband by adhering to social codes. Similarly, Lydia and Miss Milroy fear poverty and manipulate

Armadale for his wealth. By pursuing this course, Lydia Gwilt and Miss Milroy craftily exploit domestic ideology for their own purposes and expose the hypocritical nature of the class system. On the other hand, Miss Gwilt entertains other purposes for marrying Armadale, such as revenge and murder, which distinguishes her as “fatal” while her ward, the purported “ideal,” desires *to be* desired.

Collins characterizes Armadale as impulsive, frivolously falling in and out of love, while Midwinter is mysterious—that “shadowy” figure associated with ghosts from the past. Upon meeting Miss Gwilt, Midwinter experiences a passion that “he had never known” (364), and Lydia’s physical attributes coupled with impractical ideals of women become less relevant as he falls in love with her and learns more about the essence of her character. The development of this relationship in general, demonstrates that the *femme fatale* is a complex woman, not just a sensual beauty to be observed and desired. She must have more merits than as a fashionable or beguiling attraction.

When he sees her, Midwinter is overwhelmed with both anxiety and desire, struck first by her luxuriant hair:

the one unpardonably remarkable shade of colour which the prejudice of the Northern nations never entirely forgives—it was *red!* . . . The woman’s lips were full, rich, and sensual. Her complexion was the lovely complexion which accompanies such hair as hers—so delicately bright in its rosier tints, so warmly and softly white in its gentler gradations of colour on the forehead and the neck . . . nearer and nearer, and fairer and fairer she came, in the glow of the morning light—the most startling, the most unanswerable contradiction that eye could see, or mind conceive, to the description of the rector’s letter. ” (334-335).

Male characters in *Armada* wonder in awe at Lydia Gwilt, that *red* hair, a symbol of aggression, vitality, and strength, the antithesis of characteristics associated with domestic idealism. But gazing at Lydia, Midwinter feels shocked and ashamed, reeling from “instantaneous revulsion of feeling” (337). Lydia provokes the uncanny feeling that “the fatal fulfillment of the first Vision of his Dream” (337) is already in progress. Inevitably, he attaches Lydia to the shadowy figure in Armadale’s dreams where Armadale’s life is at risk, emphasizing her fatality. When Mr. Brock describes a woman he follows, thinking she is Lydia Gwilt, Midwinter immediately identifies the real imposter at Thorpe Ambrose, warning Mr. Brock that “the woman whom [he] had identified in London, were not one, but Two” (337). This distinction incites Midwinter’s fears.

Contrary to Midwinter’s feelings for Lydia, she also represents a sexualized object in his visions that signify corruption, contagion, and disease. “The revelation of her beauty was in no respect answerable for the breathless astonishment which had held him spell-bound up to this moment” (336). Ozias Midwinter recognizes a kind of fatal beauty, because her beauty poses contradictions about her delicate and refined manners, “an elegant woman, and of kind words, modestly and gracefully spoken to him” (337). Despite this perilous dichotomy, Midwinter is attracted to Lydia, which causes him to feel culpable in her plot to harm his friend. Though the hero may desire the femme fatale, her duplicity alone undermines the male protagonist by making him feel inadequate and incapable of performing his duties. Intuition coupled with his father’s prophecy leads Midwinter to feel that intimacy with this woman is impossible, showing that she is dangerous to him. But his increasing attachment to her develops regardless of

his instincts, and he cannot suppress “the passion that she [has] roused in him for what it really was” (364).

According to Žižek in “Courtly Love, or Woman as Thing,” erotic pleasure is figuratively sublimated by a challenge to subdue the love object (132). On their second meeting, Midwinter looks at Lydia “with new eyes and a new mind” (364). Instead of immediately pursuing her, he still insists on repressing his desire, this time recognizing Armadale as a figurative rival. He therefore abandons Lydia “before the woman who had possessed herself of his love had possessed herself of his power of self-sacrifice and his sense of gratitude itself” (365). Midwinter does not necessarily abandon Thorpe-Ambrose out of loyalty to Armadale, who also expresses his romantic interests in Miss Gwilt. Rather he fears Lydia, and he represses his desire by imposing obstacles formed by both rivalry and his loyalty between him and Armadale.

When Lydia is first introduced to Midwinter, she too suspects that he has “done something or suffered something, in his past life” that similarly resembles her own history (346). “More or less mysterious”, Midwinter poses a greater threat to the success of Lydia’s plot to destroy Armadale because he is “no rattle-pated fool”, more knowledgeable and experienced about worldly affairs compared to other male characters, and he is her double, (346), and, like many of the characters investigating Lydia, Lydia is forced to ask herself “more suspiciously” if Midwinter “[is] what he appeared to be” (506).

Both Lydia and Midwinter truly identify with one another because they are marginalized and flawed, having survived violent abuse and abandonment from early childhood. Lydia, for example, is “beaten and half starved” (633); similarly Midwinter is



horsewhipped, starved, and shabbily clothed throughout childhood and adolescence (105).

The woman first commissioned to nurse Lydia, physically abuses her; the Oldershaws use her for their exhibits and abandon her at a convent. Though Lydia is often described as elegant and charming, as a youth her beauty leads to her dismissal from the grounds of the convent because “she was too nice looking for the place”, and the priest declares that she is “possessed by the devil” (636). Meanwhile, adults capitalize on Lydia’s beauty and vulnerability, while also serving as her role models throughout her “birth, parentage, and education”(633). This manipulation culminates and backfires by the time Lydia meets the Blanchards when she now becomes the deceiver, prompting her new caretaker, Miss Blanchard, to marry the wrong man. Eventually Miss Blanchard, Lydia’s last guardian, leaves her penniless presumably at the age of seventeen, prompting Lydia to blackmail her and later pursuing the son. Not only does Lydia want to marry Armadale for his wealth, but she wants to destroy the man who “especially . . . turns [her] dislike of him into downright hatred, by sometimes reminding her of his mother” (343). Unlike Lydia, Midwinter tries to atone for past abuse and neglect that he has suffered when he repeatedly rescues Armadale. Lydia, however, desires revenge on past misdeeds done to her: “I want a husband to vex, a child to beat, or something of that sort” (198).

Jemmy Bashwood’s investigation of Miss Gwilt’s past implies that she has depended on men to survive economic vicissitudes. To escape impoverished conditions, Lydia basely exploits her sexuality to gain favors from worthwhile male suitors. Despite her plotting, all endeavors end in her own ruin. Once she is abandoned by the Blanchards, Lydia “[supports] herself by playing the pianoforte . . . [where] men lay siege

to her” (637). Eventually her adventures introduce her to a wealthy Englishman, Mr. Waldron, who promises to protect her. After marrying Mr. Waldron, he becomes ill-tempered, quarrelsome, and jealous, but when he horsewhips Lydia, she retaliates by poisoning and murdering him. Captain Manuel risks incarceration after Lydia’s husband dies, and an inquest discovers that the captain plotted to elope with her. Though she uses men, her self-exploitation implies that all male protagonists are enemies who voyeuristically use Lydia for self-gratified erotic pleasure. While operating on the vices of these men to exploit them for their wealth, her erotic sexuality leads to greater disasters. Lydia always seems either trapped between the men who exploit her or her self-destructive revenge plots deny her happiness.

Although Midwinter and Lydia do not discuss their past with each other when they first meet, they automatically recognize similarities and begin distinguishing different hidden motives concerning their relationship with Armadale. One intends to protect him while the other means to harm him. Yet on the contrary, Lydia is subsequently incapable of ruining Midwinter because he is “one of the men whom women all like” (807). Midwinter humanizes the vengeful, hateful aspects of Lydia, and she similarly effects him, causing him to sacrifice her and to suffer a great loss in order to prove that he is an honorable man. While the femme fatale is commonly the “woman thing” driven by greed and capricious demands, she consequently atones for her crimes, she still dies and leaves him with “an aching heart . . . hopefully on the brink of a new life” (814-15).

Regardless of whether the hero is capable of truly loving the femme fatale, or of the fact that Lydia falls in love with Midwinter, she is really a greater threat to Midwinter

who rigorously sets out to prove his honor and good character. His romantic involvement with the femme fatale inevitably results in his fall and he of her fall. While Lydia Gwilt “attempts to raise herself above her impoverished condition through dubious means, Peter Thomas, in *Closing the Sequence*, agrees that she “consequently struggles with the good and evil in herself” (115). This inner struggle leads to uncertainty about her motives. Is she good or is she evil? If the femme fatale has compassion, then she cannot be stereotyped as a wicked woman.

### Surveillance and Detection of the Femme Fatale

In the Victorian novel, sexuality serves as a trope for power relations. Nancy Armstrong explains the significance of desire: men are taught what to desire in women, and women are taught how to be desired. For Victorian women, ideological apparatuses, such as marriage, religion, education, and the social class system, control female desire. But when the woman cannot submit to such conventions, state apparatuses, for example, lock hospitals and asylums, are used to control and contain her impulses. A proliferation of prostitution and the spread of Venereal Disease in the nineteenth century generally caused such an aggressive attack on women. Such institutions treated women’s bodies as objects to be examined and investigated, namely resulting in the Contagious Diseases Acts, giving more specifically the police, asylums, and other medical institutions the authority to keep women under surveillance.

Collins reveals the hypocritical practices of such surveillance of women when Mr. Brock, Jemmy Bashwood, and Armadale, use this pretense of protecting the interests of the family from dangerous women in order to spy on Lydia. Exposed is their voyeuristic obsession and erotic fascination in watching Miss Gwilt that excites and stimulates more

than just fear; the threat posed by the femme fatale arouses male characters rather than frightens them. As a reader, we too are involved in this game where Lydia is a spectacle of observation motivating the reader's insatiable desire "to know" more about her.

Once Mr. Brock and Allan Armadale find a reasonable excuse to "inspect" Lydia, they relentlessly pursue her. Mr. Brock, a surrogate father to Armadale, transgresses his own moral code of propriety by obsessively keeping watch over Lydia's apartment, later admitting that the surveillance of Lydia Gwilt is "degrading [to himself] in [his] own eyes in consequence." But he justifies his actions, claiming that he "must do this violence to [his] own self respect, or [he] must leave Allan" (7:287). His fatherly duties, out of respect for Armadale's deceased mother, are questionable at best. Similar to all the other male protagonists, Mr. Brock sublimates his desire for the sexually taboo woman, while subconsciously he fixates on her and obsesses about her. Even after he explains that the matter is better suited for his lawyers, he still insists "I am most unwilling to trust this delicate and dangerous matter in other hands than mine" (287). In the same letter he admits that he is "trifling" with the business by following the mysterious woman in London, though unwilling to terminate his surveillance of the imposter. While he may recognize his transgressions, he disregards his own self-imposed code of conduct.

Major Milroy brings attention to such moral hypocrisy, chastising Armadale in a letter against this implicit debauchery.

According to that code, if a man made private inquiries into a lady's affairs, without being either her husband, her father, or her brother, he subjected himself to the responsibility of justifying his conduct in the estimation of others; and if he evaded that responsibility, he abdicated the position of a gentleman (423).

Major Milroy's questions are never answered, and Armadale and Mr. Brock never do produce sufficient evidence as a reason to look into Lydia's past. Rather their surveillance simply objectifies Lydia, causing the femme fatale to appear less threatening, while her "fatality" dualistically emphasizes her provocative sexuality.

By "[following] his impulses as usual" (399), Allan Armadale embarks on a wild chase, a trap set by Mrs. Milroy, to discover Lydia's past, a whimsy directing him in all matters of emergency when he surrenders to "an all-mastering curiosity" about Miss Gwilt. Rather than implicating her in any wrongdoing, Armadale's investigation only reflects suspicion upon himself among his neighbors and "[throws] off the mask" of Mrs. Milroy's plotting in her determination to remove "that red-haired hussy" from her home (3:1:373). While Mr. Brock and Armadale try to control Lydia by exposing her past and discovering her secrets, they appear controlled by their own desires. In this case, the femme fatale is a sexual threat for the very reason that she remains both literally and figuratively out of reach of the male protagonists. Miss Gwilt controls and steers the mystery in the novel.

Despite his own misgivings concerning Miss Gwilt, Midwinter declares that spying on Lydia is "cruelly unjust" and "no necessity whatever could excuse any proceeding so essentially base in itself as the employment of a spy" (489). While the majority of characters spy on each other, Midwinter turns inward to examine himself, constantly trying to interpret his dreams and looking for meaning hidden in the supernatural. Midwinter embodies themes of self-surveillance, by first embarking on his own private investigation to understand versions of his history revealed in his father's prophecy. By relying on confessions from the past, Midwinter generates meaning and

discovers truth. Yet he becomes increasingly hypersensitive in his modes of interpretation, by attempting to liberate himself from the past through confession, a process that begins when he reveals his true identity to Mr. Brock at the start of the novel.

On the contrary, Armadale insists upon gaining knowledge about other groups and characters, hiring detectives to conduct his investigations. Yet Armadale's methods insinuate a false sense of empowerment and only generate defense mechanisms preventing Armadale or the rector from looking inward. Unlike Midwinter, Armadale sublimates self-analysis by looking into the past history of other characters and ignoring his own foibles.

#### The Threat of Lydia Gwilt

Unlike other male protagonists who follow and observe Lydia, Midwinter seems to run away from her, confused by his own psychological struggle. Though Midwinter loves Lydia, he fears her more than the other male characters who, on the contrary, are even more predatory in nature. Midwinter confesses that "I believe that if the fascination you have for me draws me back to you, fatal consequences will come of it to the man whose life has been so strangely mingled with your life and mine" (497). Subconsciously Midwinter avoids "fatal consequences" that he predicts will lead to Armadale's demise if the two remain together. But at the same time, he cannot stand being away from Lydia. Not only does Midwinter neglect his own obligations guarding Armadale's best interests, but he desperately tries to suppress his sexual impulses for Lydia Gwilt, poring over his investigation instead of spending time with Lydia in Naples. Midwinter is the hysteric, the feminized self—not Lydia. Matlock explains that often "hysterical" young, bourgeois women suffer from "unfulfilled sexual desire" (1). Matlock's point has certain validity

simply because women were allowed no expressions of sexual desire, which were culturally taboo. But ironically, Midwinter embodies these repressed psychological conflicts characteristic of the submissive Victorian woman, while Lydia is quite the opposite.

When Midwinter begins secretly meeting Lydia at Thorpe-Ambrose, he realizes “there is no turning back”, and he collapses in “unutterable torture . . . a passion of sobs and tears” (504). Excessive desire causes Midwinter’s outburst. On the contrary, Lydia shows no signs of hysteria, complaining “Oh, dear, how old I felt, while he was sobbing his heart out on my breast! How I thought of the time when he might have possessed himself of my love!” (504). Comforting Midwinter as if she is soothing a child, Lydia “[shudders as she] touched him . . . yet [she] did it. What fools women are!” (504). Whether Lydia pities Midwinter or not, she is compelled to console him. When he confronts Lydia concerning her whereabouts in Madeira, deeply embedded bourgeois ideological moral values that Midwinter desperately practices, conflict with his desire for a woman who he knows is taboo. His moral conflict is much like the hysterical woman who suffers from “unfulfilled sexual desire” yet cannot control these urges (Matlock 1). The facts regarding the Armadale legacy and Lydia’s connection to that family lead to Midwinter’s hysterical illness, symptomatic of moral illness (131). Though Lydia is duplicitous, she distinguishes between truth and falsehoods. But like Midwinter she is not free from social codes, and similarly, she internalizes these codes, especially fearing Midwinter’s judgment when he discovers that she has made him culpable in the plot to murder Armadale.

Lydia may be constructed as the victimizer, a stereotypical polluted, contagious woman, described by Chorley earlier in this chapter. Yet she has also been a victim of the other characters' wrongdoings, and she suffers, falls, and resurfaces as the swindler, a condition showing no symptoms of hysterical illness. Whereas Midwinter falls apart, Lydia adroitly handles abusive characters and threatening situations. Still using Midwinter to inherit the Armadale fortune, Lydia vicariously subjugates her passion for Midwinter in favor of economic advancement, which does not lead to autonomy. Both Midwinter and Lydia suppress their passions for each other when Midwinter inadvertently undermines Lydia by evoking her sense of guilt, while she deliberately plots against Midwinter.

By marrying Allan Armadale, she would inherit a fortune should an accident befall the young squire. Yet she does not desire him, and like the other characters, Lydia is also governed by her impulses. A marriage between Lydia and Armadale, urged by Mother Oldershaw, rouses her disgust and anxiety, causing her to recollect past occasions when men objectified her. She self-deprecatingly discusses exploiting herself as a sexual object to gain economic power from other men, even admitting to Mother Oldershaw, "After the horrors I have gone through, I have no vanity left" (347). These memories culminate when Midwinter asks Lydia to marry him, and she panics: "The moment I had shut [my eyes] the darkness seemed to open as if lightning had split it: and the ghosts of those other men rose in the horrid gap, and looked at me" (507). Compared to her craftiness in the past, loving Midwinter conflicts with her compulsory habits of deception and manipulation, and his affect upon her causes Lydia to yearn for Midwinter when she confesses "I never longed in my life as I longed to see him again" (498).



Like Midwinter who records his dreams and looks for symbols in darkness and shadows, Lydia Gwilt documents her activities in a diary, explaining reasons for recklessly abandoning and continuing her murderous plot that leads to suicide. Two processes emerge when Lydia unfolds her story, documenting her vulnerabilities, her manipulations, and her anxieties. First Lydia reveals a split self, which suggests she is both good and bad. Her diary suggests that she is a paradox, calculating yet impulsive, coolheaded but obsessive. On the one hand, she is also a strong, resourceful, independent woman, while she is a romantic vulnerable to Midwinter. Yet her vulnerabilities need not immediately cause her to abandon such devious plots.

In *The Sensation Novel: From the Woman in White to the Moonstone*, Lyn Pykett asserts that writing letters and keeping a diary shows Lydia's "capacity for redemption" and that "misplaced desire is the source of Lydia's transgressiveness" (27). In her journal, Lydia freely expresses her own ideas and opinions, showing that she thrives on instinct, passion, and strategy. Her actions are not censored as is the case with other heroines like Hardy's Tess who never has the opportunity to tell her story. But in *Armada*, the reader catches insightful glimpses of Lydia Gwilt in her diary and letters to Mother Oldershaw, which allow us into her private world where she records inner turmoil, desires, and dramas.

The diaries recording romantic or perverse feelings, insecurities and longings lead to repentance. Falling in love with Midwinter shows that Lydia is more than a murderer and a thief, and her romantic involvement is unusual since the femme fatale never falls in love. Some literary critics even claim that her fascination and affection for Midwinter is difficult to believe.<sup>42</sup> But although Lydia uses Midwinter in her plot against Armadale,

her conscience is burdened by conflicting moral principles. By loving Midwinter, Lydia feels responsible for his fate, and she wants to protect him. As the sole survivor throughout two generations of Armadales, Lydia embodies the polarities between innocence and guilt; her psychological journey, evident in her diaries, begins with moral depravity and ends in moral strength when she dies.

Secondly in the diary, we know from the beginning Lydia's motives for her crimes. Yet her plotting does not simply revolve around murdering for wealth and rank. Other issues are involved, which include revenge against the Armadales when Allan's mother abandons Lydia as a young girl. Though marriage is an intense focus of constraint among women in the nineteenth century, by protecting virtuous women and by enforcing the categorizations of normal women and deviant women, Miss Gwilt deliberately breaks marriage laws, poisoning her first husband, while plotting to marry and murder a second husband. Eventually Midwinter aggressively confronts Lydia, suspecting that "she [is] false" (782). Schemes to poison Armadale's drink in Naples and to betray him to Manuel at sea are defeated when Armadale's letter from the Adriatic Sea reports attempted robbery and murder. This second failed attempt on Armadale's life only leads to yet another failed trap at Dr. Downward's Sanitarium. Though "twice [she] had set the deadly snare for him, and twice Armadale had escaped [her]" (728), Lydia simply resorts to a different plan, insisting that Midwinter marry her by his real name, "Armadale," so that she can murder the other Armadale, pose as his widow, and swindle the Thorpe-Ambrose estate. By signing the marriage certificate with his true surname, the prodigal son ignores his father's warning, unwittingly exposing Armadale to a similar fate as the first Armadale "ignorant . . . of the terrible future consequences to which the

act of that morning might lead" (655), Midwinter figuratively makes Armadale the husband of Lydia.

Dressed in widow's weeds, she uses her marriage certificate to pass herself off as Alan Armadale's widow when Alan reportedly perishes at sea. But when success of her plot seems imminent after Dr. Downward agrees to pose as her witness at the fabricated marriage of Allan Armadale and Lydia Gwilt, her "courage feels shaken" after she thinks about violating Midwinter's trust (iv:3:719), alluding to a pun from the name "Gwilt" on the word "guilt;" she cannot face the "day of reckoning with [Midwinter]" (720) when he discovers her "false character" (725).

Confessing that "The one atonement I can make for all the wrong I have done you is the atonement of my death. It is not hard for me to die, now I know you will live" (806), Lydia internalizes the treachery of her crimes, imploring Midwinter to forgive her. Ultimately, Midwinter's influence overpowers Lydia, leading to her final decision to take her own life rather than that of Armadale. His mere presence discourages Lydia's scheming, alluding to her transformation from the femme fatale into the sentimentalized, self-abnegating fallen woman; he elicits her feelings of shame, leaving her paralyzed with an "inner agony that [tortures] her" (756). Ironically by the end of the novel, she is relieved that her wickedness "has not prospered" (806). Moreover, confession leads to the possibility of autonomy where Lydia can be liberated from the pressures posed by economic ambition, self-interests, and corrupting forces that bully her into these devious schemes. But conclusively, the object of the vision, the woman whose hand smoothed the way to deception, the link between Midwinter and Armadale, is rooted out, thus removing the Armadale curse.

The deadly woman ironically restores order in the Armadale legacy. By saving Midwinter, only Lydia Gwilt has the power to remove the curse and corruption from the Armadale name. Collins subverts the conventions of early Victorian literature by endowing his heroine more liberally with intelligence and daring; she is unscrupulous, yet she is also capable of unyielding compassion and love. Living by her own principles, Lydia obscures the conventional struggles between Good and Evil when the so-called dangerous woman is capable of generating her own morals and applying personal codes of conduct when she deems it is necessary.

#### London—The Setting for Urban Crime

London literally becomes a cultural grid in which fatal women obscure social boundaries. Walkowitz describes the topography of London as having “conflicting and overlapping representations of sexual danger,” which weakens boundaries that give women social agency (5). Traditional representations of women in Victorian London, which cast women as either domestic or fallen, cannot place Lydia. Critics like Tamar Heller in *Dead Secrets* asserts that Lydia is fallen (6). Yet while society vehemently discourages respectable women from walking alone through city streets, Lydia remains anonymous in her pedestrian adventures. She “seldom [shows herself] in public, and never of course in such a populous place as London, without wearing a thick veil and keeping that veil down” (259). Lydia functions as a liminal figure that destabilizes domestic ideology, once again demonstrating that women cannot so easily be subjugated to either “fallen” or “good” women. When Lydia hires a housemaid to masquerade as herself, she figuratively transforms and reintegrates into society without sacrificing or even compromising her identity, causing Mr. Brock to falsely identify a lower woman—

not Miss Gwilt. Given her freedom to roam, Lydia threatens patriarchal order that attempts to keep women restricted to the home and punished for entering the public sphere.

The closer that Ozias Midwinter comes to unraveling the central mystery in the novel, the more he crosses respectable Victorian society at Thorpe-Ambrose with the criminal underworld in London. Chasing Lydia Gwilt brings Midwinter into the degradation and seediness of her past and present. As a result Mr. Brock and Allan Armadale mingle with profligates like Dr. Downward, an abortionist, and Mother Oldershaw, a procuress and restorer of decayed beauty. On the surface, it appears that the underworld retaliates by infiltrating and infecting the foundations of Victorian society. Tension between the underworld and aristocratic communities in *Armadale* reflect “divisions, inequalities, disequilibriums” between marginalized groups and mainstream Victorian culture (Foucault 94). Mother Oldershaw and Dr. Downward perform abortions, corrupt young girls like Lydia, and swindle bluebloods. But in the end, they must also submit to these very values in order to escape imprisonment. Hence, Collins suggests that no character can escape the power structure; even one who resists social laws eventually assimilates to cultural standards. When these characters resist, new boundaries are fixed to keep them controlled. In detective fiction, cases of resistance such as murder, bigamy, and adultery are absolutely necessary to show how powerful patriarchy is by rooting out such peril. Ultimately the criminal classes desire wealth, security, and status enjoyed by the bourgeois and aristocratic classes and are willing to adopt social codes in order to achieve this appearance of respectability.

In *The Maniac in the Cellar*, Winifred Hughes contends that the counter-world “begins to take over, threatening, infiltrating, and at times replacing part of the established moral and social order” (145). But I disagree; the criminal world does wish to replace the established order, but wants to reap the benefits enjoyed by the ruling class. Dominant ideology, similarly, attempts to force its domestic conventions onto strands of marginalized society, even though the dominant class still retains social and economic power while keeping these marginalized groups subordinated. Though Lydia rebels against hegemonic power that protects wealthy families from fatal women, her scheming will never be successful because eventually both groups, the criminal underworld and respectable bourgeois society, target Lydia as a scapegoat, which suggests the femme fatale is a victim.

Bourgeois ideology embraces these modes of behavior that thrive only on appearances. Ironically, Lydia Gwilt, Dr. Downward, and Mother Oldershaw dichotomously mirror bourgeois ideals represented by the squire and the clergyman, while also representing London’s criminal underground “filled with wicked secrets, and people rightly represented as perpetually in danger of feeling the grasp of the law” (415). Aristocrats regard the criminal class as despicable, immoral, and depraved. Yet detection throws these two societies together when they both try to gain information about each other.

Hiring himself out to both sides and mediating between these parties, Jemmy Bashwood is delineated as reprehensible even though he and the respectable Mr. Brock are both guilty of spying on Lydia. Information about Lydia, procured by Bashwood, enables each party to threaten or blackmail the other side. This doubling of the

aristocracy and underworld points to the hypocrisy of dominant ideology. Armadale, Mr. Brock, and Mr. Pedgift prescribe middle-class virtues, yet fail to meet their own codes of morality. Allan is impulsive like a woman, and Mr. Brock, a “peeping tom,” is not so puritanical. Victorian society projects images of propriety while sexual taboos and deviant behavior also characterize the class that tries to enforce strict values. Mr. Brock, Armadale, and even Miss Milroy, too, have fallen from their self-imposed idealism, and they are as guilty for that fall as Lydia is for hers.

Aristocratic families are restored to respectable Victorian life when Armadale inevitably marries “the ultra-feminine” and feeble Neelie Milroy, reproducing not only another generation of “Armadales,” but also generating the ideological values tied up in that union. Deceit, dishonor, and murder destroy the first generation of Armadales when the first Allan Armadale commits fraud, posing as a different man to ruin Midwinter’s father, and running off with the promised wife of another man. Midwinter’s father avenges this deception by murdering Allan Armadale’s father. But by the conclusion of the novel, the new Armadale family figuratively redeems the sins of the father and poses as a standard of Victorian respectability and self-discipline. The final wedding scene is symbolic by showing that sexuality thematizes “political operations [and] economic interventions” (Foucault 146). For example, the Milroy fortune that had been squandered is restored in this final episode when Miss Milroy proves she is a marriageable and virtuous lady, and Armadale’s family duties are rewarded with what appears to be a proper and respectable wife.

The ending is rather suspicious and superficial because religious conversion among these characters seems like yet another performance rather than a genuine

transformation though we are less clear concerning *what* the femme fatale represents. Despite all the scheming and plotting with the second generation of Armadales, Lydia Gwilt is the only victim in the novel despite her fatality to other characters. Mother Oldershaw redeems her nefarious ways, and Dr. Downward gives up the asylum and his profession as an abortionist to practice psychiatry. Lydia Gwilt makes the only believable transformation, developing from a stereotypical villain into a complex woman capable of protecting and sacrificing herself for another character. As for Armadale marrying Miss Milroy, both characters appear one-dimensional and undeveloped. The ending is like every ending in a Victorian novel whereas the only difference is that we are left with an impending feeling of doom and loss when Lydia dies and Midwinter journeys aimlessly through life. Real love between men and women still seems impossible, and bourgeois ideology prevails despite the fact that it spuriously represents human nature.

Mrs. Milroy, Mr. Brock, Mr. Pedgift, and Mr. Bashwood spy on Lydia and even threaten her; but these characters do not render Lydia vulnerable whereas Midwinter exposes Lydia's vulnerabilities because she loves him. Other femme fatales, like Lady Audley, are invincible even when they are caught because their type of fatality prevents them from falling in love and revealing their weaknesses. The femme fatale is typically not self-sacrificing like Lydia Gwilt. Danger is somewhat tentative in Collins's novel because other characters that are not femme fatales, are either capable of greater violence or they are despicably self-absorbed. In *Armadale*, all the other characters particularly embody these traits with the exception of Midwinter. Mrs. Milroy is unusually cruel though she is not a femme fatale. Allan Armadale is selfish, infantile, and narcissistic.



Mother Oldershaw simply uses Lydia to extort money from wealthy families, yet showing no concern for Lydia's welfare.

Struggles and confrontations can strengthen or reverse organizations of power where female characters appear to gain power over male protagonists, yet male characters eventually restore order in the hegemonic power structure. Victorian women cannot simply be stereotyped as evil or good, especially when the *femme fatale* repents and redeems herself, nor can the domestic woman be represented as virtuous and honest. A woman's worth should not be incumbent upon how well she performs the role of the domestic ideal. The active *femme fatale*, Lydia Gwilt, embodies all characters in the novel; she poses as a reflection of their flaws, shortcomings, or hypocrisies, from the spoiled, self-centered Armadale, to the dark, marginalized and abused Midwinter, and to the duplicitous and pretentious Miss Milroy. Collins' characterization of Lydia enables the reader to identify the function, though often hypocritical, of the social class system—its corruptive nature. Resistance against the class system, however, is always futile because conclusively patriarchal order is restored and dangerous characters, like the *femme fatale*, are punished.<sup>43</sup> Rebellion therefore empowers patriarchal order because the boundaries become more sophisticated and more resilient to their influence.

## Conclusion

### The Image of the Femme Fatale and Emergence of the New Woman

In *The Fabrication of the Late Victorian Femme Fatale*, Rebecca Stott names the femme fatale, the sexually aggressive woman identified in Haggard's *She* and Stoker's *Dracula*, as a stereotype manufactured by these texts (31). In my introduction, I agreed that certainly these late nineteenth-century female characters are one-dimensional and lack the kind of depth which mid-Victorian literature otherwise shows by reflecting the socioeconomic vicissitudes experienced by real nineteenth-century middle-class women. Rather the stereotype discussed by Stott marks a fear of dangerous women, who must be forced into submission. Stott explains that the late Victorian femme fatale:

expresses a plethora of anxieties at once, or rather she is a sign, a figure who crosses discourse boundaries, who is to be found at the intersection of Western racial, sexual and imperial anxieties. The femme fatale emerges as a recurring figure in late nineteenth-century fiction alongside the emergence of degeneration discourses, invasion anxieties, and an increase in the classification of the abnormal and pathological (30).

Central to the last four decades of the nineteenth century was the naming and ranking of all kinds of marginalized groups, generating various classification systems, among them. Ideologues categorize women whose behavior is considered deviant or subversive including that of the femme fatale, women who exist outside the boundaries of mainstream culture. But I have also argued that these women, specifically characterized in mid-Victorian literature, cannot simply be reduced to a label—their internal and external struggles for survival suggest that they are pragmatists who shrewdly use the

hegemonic power structure to serve their own means, marking a significant difference between the mid-and late-nineteenth century femme fatale. Classifying different types of women, a strategy used to deal with anxieties and the breaking down of cultural boundaries, attempts to deter frustrated or hostile middle-class women from challenging and hence disrupting the sociopolitical power of the hegemonic structure. By stigmatizing women who fall away from patriarchal norms, conservative reactionaries cause young female readers of such fiction, where strong independent women appear, to be presumably less likely to question the status quo, let alone rebel against it.

Considering *Dracula*, the image of the femme fatale, epitomized by Lucy Westerna, changes dramatically from Thackeray's 1848 rogue heroine, Becky Sharp; the vampires in *Dracula* violate all cultural taboos constructed by patriarchy, marking the social collapse of the western world and blurring the distinctions between men and women. Similarly in *She*, the woman is characterized as a beast bent on destroying men. Convincing is Stott's argument in her study of these texts that "the nature of woman and the nature of savage are quite identical" (108). The novel suggests a kind of moral crisis before the turn of the century and figuratively blames the radical attitudes among some middle-class women who inevitably emerge as the New Woman as the primary cause. It is my opinion that the turn of the century femme fatale develops into more of a stereotype that embodies anxieties concerning the threat of sociopolitical movements of nineteenth-century feminist activists. But while the fictive New Woman has similar characteristics with that of the femme fatale, radical feminist activists share less the kind of independence and autonomy characterized by the femme fatale and rather experience deep internal conflicts between their social ideology and unresolved dependencies in their

personal lives that lead to self-laceration, even suicide. What these women fail to achieve is an autonomous self, less so than the femme fatale who is ruled by her self-interests. This conclusion will discuss the use of these terms—autonomous and independent—to illustrate the personal and social crises experienced by the turn of the century woman.

The femme fatale emerges as a transitional figure between the domestic ideal and the New Woman, metaphorically giving birth to the New Woman who aggressively confronts issues of marriage, property, and social class. The 1860's literary femme fatale alludes to the middle class woman's growing antipathy towards domestic oppression, and these frustrations eventually help to forge the socialist feminist movement in the 1880s. The fictional New Woman really marks the spirit of nineteenth-century radical feminists who attempt to change the social order, gaining more socioeconomic freedoms and rights for women. Epitomized by Sarah Grand's title heroine in *The Beth Book*, the New Woman trope, similar to the femme fatale, is rebellious, socially aware, complex, and frequently misunderstood. But the femme fatale, as I mentioned in the introduction, certainly has no desire to bring attention to her scheming, by venting publicly her denunciation of nineteenth-century bourgeois society; she desires anonymity where her plotting is concerned, unwilling to make such bold sacrifices as the New Woman.

This transition really marks socialistic influences among a collective group of radical middle-class women anticipating a new political climate and struggle for social change. Although their principles contradict socially accepted codes of conduct for women, socialist feminists take great risks to live by their own set of values. Women acquire job skills in clerical and secretarial work to compete with men, and like Olive Schreiner and Sarah Grand, pursue careers as authors, writing about women who divorce

or about unmarried women who leave home and have children. These stories undermine conventions about marriage and family in popular Victorian literature.

Deborah Nord, in *Walking the Victorian Streets*, explains that the eighties woman was called “neither pairs nor odd . . . neither coupled nor committed to celibacy” (183). She was neither the disillusioned domestic married woman represented by Marie Widdowson in *The Odd Women*, or the celibate woman, more closely related to the early twentieth century woman who chooses spinsterhood as a political gesture, such as Gissing’s Rhoda Nunn. Beatrice Webb, Eleanor Marx and Margaret Harkness, and Amy Levy carried on relationships with men while pursuing their independence, and their professional work subverted the idea of women’s work which implied that a woman’s public service “must be an extension of domestic virtues” (Nord 183). Rather these women aimed for male-dominated fields that allowed them greater access to the public sphere, aspirations which were not always understood or accepted by their male companions. Feminists, like Eleanor Marx, recognized their marginality not only because of their career goals but because they often stood for political socialist reform which contradicted bourgeois ideals. Nevertheless, like the literary femme fatales I discussed, each of these women is unique in her own way.

While both the femme fatale and New Woman act on their own principles, their intentions, on this very point, are quite different. Each has an agenda, and the primary concern of the New Woman is to integrate her values into mainstream culture, while the femme fatale is a kind of receptacle, internalizing the values and beliefs of society and accepting this consensus in order to render her scheming successful. Her identity, however, is not formed by these rigid social standards that appropriate the status of

domestic women. The appearance of conformity, to the femme fatale, is essential for any successful action, while the New Woman resists conformity in order to have a desired effect upon society that entails greater political and social freedom for women. But overall, both femme fatale characters and the New Woman have specific standards by which to judge other characters and to identify ideas or social codes to follow; certainly neither of these paradigms render an image of helplessness; rather both types of women rely first on their value-judgments.

New Women novels, for example, reveal horrors behind the veneer of “marital respectability.” Non-consensual sex, venereal disease, double standards, and incessant child bearing are common oppressive aspects of a woman’s married life in these novels. In her characterization of these conditions, the New Woman novelist challenges censorship, insists on greater sexual freedom, and rejects the marriage institution. Leading feminist figures, Harriet Martineau, Eleanor Marx, and Annie Besant, specifically write about these sociopolitical issues that concern women, promoting the idea, also supported by John Stuart Mill, that the bourgeois representation of their sex places women in “a state of bondage to some man” (Mill 432).<sup>44</sup>

The Glorified Spinster is yet another archetype of women emerging in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, pursuing their independence through voluntary spinsterhood and a career, and adopting a separatist attitude where “the best way to keep one’s independence” is to “avoid the society of men” (Walkowitz 64). Though only representing a small portion of middle-class women, the Victorian spinster satisfied her appetite for urban amusement, insisted on having careers, and renounced the marriage market. Regardless of their small community, these women tried to imagine new possibilities, though they sometimes still

acquiesced to social boundaries and gender divisions. This set of feminist principles negates the belief that women must be deviously threatening or dangerous, like the femme fatale, in order to undermine patriarchal power.

According to Nord, the 1880s produced a generation of these women who achieved social and economic independence, who lived in London (an escape from the constraints of family life and domesticity), resisted conventions of family and marriage for a time, chose alternative domestic structures, and helped mark this decade of a loosely organized community of unmarried women (181).

Working as novelists, socialist reformers, and political activists, women swarmed to London, creating this rather Bohemian environment that transgressed conventional boundaries between public and domestic lives. London could also be a threatening place for women who lived alone. Despite changing attitudes in the eighties, women still were not supposed to be seen aimlessly wandering the streets. Without male escorts, women were considered sexually available, and therefore sexually vulnerable according to Virginia Woolf in her novel *The Pargiters*. The 1880s, needless to say, were a pivotal time in the public lives of women living in London, a city combined with opportunity and danger, and a city eventually terrorized by the ominous figure of Jack the Ripper.

Many of these women, as Nord indicates, were “at odds with family or with some aspect of social convention” because they regarded marriage as “an undesirable fate” and chose London to do professional work. In a letter she wrote to her cousin Beatrice Webb, Harkness considered whether her aspirations were selfish or if by marrying she “could have made their lives easier” (187). She also complained that in London, “life is hard

and work heavy” but concluded that “one has more liberty and freedom here than in other places” (187).

Similarly Webb considered herself “a glorified spinster.” Both Potter and Harkness considered their work a struggle against “religious difficulties” and too far beyond domesticity to talk “of cooks and baby linen” (letter in *Diary of Beatrice Webb* 1:139). In her book *Reuben Sachs*, Amy Levy critiques the bourgeois Jewish marriage market in London as “crass, hypocritical and cruel” (188). Only money, not love, provided such motives to marry. Yet, regardless of a woman’s intelligence or talents she could only promote her status by marrying.

The feminist community specifically formed a revolt against these conventions of bourgeois culture, rejecting the feminine ideal, producing a different understanding of women in their published essays and public lectures, and giving women agency, a new identity. Marx, Schreiner, and Besant confronted cultural forces that usually determined the value of women. While the Victorian femme fatale reinvents herself through her domestic roles enabling her to enter into respectable society, the New Woman also reinvents herself, but only to attack these very domestic roles by cross-dressing, remaining unmarried, and competing in male-oriented professions. By calling for personal styles or professional pursuits, noting that women “are not inferior to men” (61), these women became a trope for “female disorder.” While the euphemism “Georges Sandism” denounced women who imitated George Sand’s “transgressive life and behavior” (Walkowitz 62), the cross-dresser embodied this subversive transition from home and hearth to public life. In Theophile Gautier’s novel, *Mademoiselle du Maupin*, the leading female protagonist experiments with cross-dressing in order to understand the



male sex, their interests, their intellect, their obsessions, and their feelings toward women. Though she comes to despise the sex for its vice, she revels in the kind of freedom and liberation that she experiences as a man. Likewise, late Victorian feminists embraced “the manly woman” as a kind of archetype symbolizing “women’s genius” and rebellion against sexist oppression.

Nineteenth-century feminists who strove for socioeconomic independence fought the establishment and acted on a collective set of values at the risk of sacrificing their economic stability and happiness. In *The City of Dreadful Delight*, Walkowitz explains that marriage was “still the approved female destiny for all classes” (64). Nevertheless late Victorian heroines in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, *Diana of the Crossways*, and *Esther Waters*, not characterized as New Women, show the demoralizing affects of marriage, and they adamantly reject moral imperatives perpetuated by bourgeois ideology. By presenting female characters disillusioned and simply tired of trying to pass themselves off as the domestic ideal, late Victorian novelists, Thomas Hardy, George Meredith, and George Moore, similarly delineate a realistic view of women as do New Woman novelists. In George Meredith’s *Diana of the Crossways* (1885), Diana finally leaves her husband due to “his detested meanness, the man behind the mask”, and Diana is “deformed by marriage, irritable, acerbic, rebellious, constantly justifiable against him” (Meredith 123). This novel is a criticism against the social standard where marriage becomes a form of bitter servitude among women.

In *The Beth Book* Grand uses two different narrative forms, the marriage trope and autobiographical form, to structure her novel. I assert that these narrative forms specifically promote the interests of women by politicizing feminist issues. In contrast,

novels that portray femme fatale characters expose feminine oppression when women struggle for economic power by bartering themselves in the marriage market. By portraying the female character as the young artist coming of age, art provides women access to public life, especially since art responds to the condition of life. Traditionally art is in the public sphere, and men conventionally occupy that domain. Beth's entrance into this world as a female novelist suggests that art is an available mode of expression for women. The novel therefore constructs feminist culture by making available a path for the feminist artist.

By using the marriage plot, Grand exposes the operations of gender privilege that allow men absolute authority over their wives, hence challenging cultural assumptions about marriage and providing a realistic analysis of men and women. Regardless of how powerful and autonomous Beth appears, she still marries to escape her oppressive home life with her mother, and she romanticizes that her life with her suitor Dan will be different. Yet Beth is even more oppressed by being objectified and emotionally abused by her husband. Grand does not reject the constructions of the marriage plot; she does not leave out women's idealization of marriage before they enter into "the sexual contract." Marriage appears attractive to women, yet the reality never lives up to their expectations. In contrast to Grand, Elizabeth Gaskell suggests that marriage and domesticity signify safety and protection, which is implied when Margaret Hale, in *North and South*, marries, and social and personal problems in the novel are resolved. Grand, however, posits that marriage is not safer than being unmarried and destitute, especially when husbands ill-treat their wives.

Finally the autobiographical form suggests that although women are largely denied a voice in the public sphere, by the turn of the century, women break these barriers and develop a new ideology. Though in a letter to Frederick Henry Fisher, Grand denies using personal background to write her novels, maintaining “I see the papers are announcing that *The Beth Book* is an autobiography . . . I should think the announcement must begin to fail in its effect” (Fisher 4 December 1897), according to Theresa Mangum in *Married, Middlebrow, and Militant*, she later acknowledged that some of the scenes had been taken from her married life and girlhood (144). Grand’s autobiographical style posits alternatives for women by relating real life and literary representation, leading to female agency.

Despite this criticism of traditional values, the New Woman is not rejecting marriage altogether, but more realistically suggests that marriage must be one of equals, as Sarah Grand concludes in *The Beth Book* when her heroine meets and falls in love with the artist who she nurses back to health. In “The Debrutalisation of Man” (1895), Blanche Leppington argues:

With all its contempt for the accepted moralities, [New Woman fiction] is helping to carry the pressure of the moral question into the sacred enclosure of marriage itself, from which all questioning has been too long excluded; and it is perhaps hardly too much to say that no service could well be greater than this.

In her treatment of Leppington’s argument, Ann Heilmann explains that New Woman fiction plays a central role in the cultural deconstruction of marriage; literature chiefly begins the process of restructuring society (77). New Woman writers and feminist activists were, for the most part, serious about exploring alternatives to marriage and

traditional notions of sexuality. While marriage is the resolution to all the femme fatale's problems, it became the origin of the New Woman's problems setting her squarely against sexual exploitation by men. But to a degree, the femme fatale does not allow the kind of exploitation of men tolerated by real women activists such as Eleanor Marx in her relationship with Edward Aveling who, often accused by her friends, was believed to have ill-used Marx for her various social connections and for economic purposes.

By emphasizing the failure of marriage, feminist novelists touch upon a vision of marital reconstruction, putting an end to the sexual double standard and shifting attention away from female morality. Writers, like Schreiner, envision long term relationships—marriage in principle, though not in name. In this modernist redefining of marriage, both partners were guaranteed individual freedom and the exclusive right to their own bodies. Only under these conditions of freedom could feelings be allowed to develop naturally between men and women. Some feminists, like Marx, lived unmarried with their partners, though bearing the brunt of public disapproval. Marriage according to other “free love writers” gave men sexual license over women. Dominance is oppressive, but equally so is sexual isolation, and according to Schreiner, this was more terrible for women than for men. For these purposes, 1880s feminist literature avoided stereotypes of the New Woman as the dangerous, formidable figure, which still conveyed the struggle for one sex to have superiority over the other. Yet mainstream Victorian culture still saw the New Woman as a threat since she encouraged other women to break from the bulwarks of Victorian middle-class culture, namely marriage and family.

According to Barbara Taylor in *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, women's inferiority is not due to any mental or physical deficiencies, but the “product of a male-defined

social order which consigned women to a stultifying, crippling way of life” (4). As late as the 1880s, these strands of inferiority are played out in George Gissing’s *The Odd Women* when Monica Maddon marries Edmund Widdowson; she becomes a decorative accessory to her husband, expected to do nothing but supervise servants and “serve male leisure hours with sexual pleasure” (Taylor 4). After they are married, Monica confesses that her marriage with Edmund “was unnatural,” and she felt herself constrained by “a hateful force when he called upon her for the show of wifely affection” (200). In late-nineteenth-century fiction marriage really becomes a more principal source of criticism as the origin of women’s dependency and oppression whereas such criticism was subtler in mid-Victorian fiction where femme fatale heroines appear.

*The Odd Women* marks different ideologies about women in the late-Victorian period, and yet indicates that despite nearly fifty years since the publication of *Vanity Fair* where the first bourgeois femme fatale emerges, women are still oppressed by patriarchal codes. While the New Woman’s objections to marriage concern women’s socioeconomic dependency, marriage still seems to be the natural alternative among women in 1888, and this convention undermines any radical transformation in the social status of women. Society still feared economic and professional equality among the sexes. Though Gissing’s more subversive female character, Mary Barfoot in *The Odd Women*, tries to help the surplus of unmarried middle-class women, she still believes that women should naturally marry. Everard Barfoot, the male protagonist who purportedly has liberal ideas, desires a non-conjugal relationship with Rhoda Nunn. But though he delights in her “independence of mind he still desired to see her in complete subjugation to him” (261). Barfoot makes assumptions about the Women’s Movement, and desires

the best of both worlds, freedom from a committed relationship, while benefiting from the domestic and sexual advantages that married life traditionally offers men. Rhoda Nunn relies on her own resources such as her professional career and her education to organize a feminist community. In this community of women, Rhoda would “have girls taught that marriage is a thing to be avoided rather than hoped for. I would teach them that for the majority of women marriage means disgrace” (99). But as her relationship with Everard progresses, Rhoda wants him to practice formal conventions by obtaining “a license from the registrar of the district . . . a repetition of the old story—a marriage like any other” (266). Because she had previously rejected non-conjugal relationships, Barfoot decides that “she is not the glorious rebel he had pictured. Like any other woman, she mistrusted her love without the sanction of society” (267).

Rhoda Nunn eventually resists conventional institutions, such as marriage, that, for her, imply male ownership of women. The marriage contract subordinates women by treating them as property whereas Rhoda prioritizes her feminist aims over her relationship with Everard Barfoot whose marriage proposal she eventually rejects. Rhoda’s feminist mission, her desire for both a career and love cannot be reconciled in the Victorian tradition where married women are confined to the home. Ironically, however, Rhoda, who embodies New Woman principles, entertains idealistic notions about love and married life. The romantic ideology that she fosters almost leads her to abandon her ideals by marrying Everard. In fact the reason why she does not “marry” him is that she insists on a conjugal relationship, and he rejects this “religious form” (264), conventional marriage that legitimizes their union. The free modern woman, for

the most part, stays “out of reach” of men, by refusing economic dependence or domestic servitude.

Everard’s brand of female emancipation is predatory in nature, desiring women’s sexual submission while not wishing to be married. Fortunately Rhoda does not relent. The novel’s climax alludes to Gissing’s own skepticism that not only concerns social structures, but also human nature when Rhoda later admits to Mary Barfoot that “she never felt confidence in [Everard]” (293). Despite modern and advanced cultural and liberal beliefs among some Victorian men and women, they still desired to dominate one another to serve their own purposes, hence demonstrating strong insecurities where love is concerned. Love is not a power struggle where built in weaknesses are sharply exposed and exploited. Such a struggle conflicts with New Woman novelists’ conviction that equality can exist between men and women. But Gissing seems to disagree, implying that such a belief is idealistic as long as there is distrust between the sexes. Marriage appears to forcibly mask such apprehensions about love, while really it fails to eradicate entrenched dependencies, jealousies, or insecurities.

But while these ventures may appear liberating, this still leads one to question whether this is a society of autonomous individuals or is merely a support group for reactive women who have not figured out how to resolve their inner conflicts and so withdraw from the fray. Autonomous people do not need liberating; they are liberated. This leads to yet a bigger question concerning subject-object dominance. Why doesn’t the femme fatale feel objectified by the male gaze, but rather objectifies the male as the prey rather than the predator, and why does the New Woman resist this objectification? Though the New Woman appears independent by means of her activism, a further

investigation into the personal lives of Eleanor Marx and Olive Schreiner suggests that these women endured disturbing, unsettled conflicts rooted in their relationships with men from which the fictional femme fatale suffers little and moves on with her life.

In their struggle for economic independence, Olive Schreiner and Eleanor Marx often expressed in their letters their own feelings of vulnerability and alienation. Marx wrote in a letter to Schreiner: “we have money troubles enough to worry an ordinary man or woman into the grave. I often don’t know where to turn or what to do. It is almost impossible for me now to get work that is even decently paid for.”<sup>45</sup> Marx’s lack of work was often due to the dissident spirit of her lectures and politics, which provoked much contemptuous public reaction. In a letter to George Bernard Shaw, Marx discusses the backlash that ensued as a result of her political opinions. Rather half-jokingly, she admits that “Yes—the boycotting was rather mean. But I am getting so used to being boycotted. You never come to see us now, and I have, sometimes wondered whether you were boycotting us too” (Dec. 16, 1887).

In another letter to Olive Schreiner asking her to invite Havelock Ellis to spend a day with them, Marx writes, “There is so little in me to like or interest people. I can’t believe such a man as [Havelock Ellis] could care for me, except just to please you.”<sup>46</sup> Ellis refers to Marx’s self deprecation as “a modest estimation of herself.” But as a superior thinker who marked the socialist feminist movement, Marx broke with many sexual and political conventions, which led to harsh criticism among larger conservative bourgeois society. The subversive nature of her ideology was often the cause of her exclusion from several social groups and from other more lucrative professional opportunities, and as a result, Marx could not escape profound feelings of inferiority.



Furthermore, personal conflicts concerning relationships with men marked profound unresolved issues with these women. At the age of sixteen, Schreiner was seduced by an older man, Julius Gau, who apparently used her more than he loved her, and his betrayal caused internal feelings of dependency and insecurity in relationships with men who followed. She was sexually trusting, and instead Gau abandoned her. Schreiner denied her feelings of guilt, even though her parents expressed their abhorrence regarding sexual transgressions attached to carnal pleasure. In *Olive Schreiner's Fiction: Landscape and Power*, Gregory Monsman referred to Schreiner's public work as a "public exorcism." But this is too simple an explanation. Having experienced the humiliation of rejection from a man whom she trusted and to whom she gave herself willingly, Schreiner was additionally burdened by a sense of shame inscribed by Victorian ideology, emphasizing a woman's powerlessness.

When Schreiner's relationship with Julius Gau ended, she admitted to Havelock Ellis, "I would like him to tread on me and stamp me into powder" (4: MSS 70572). When Ellis repeated Schreiner's statement in his transcripts, he underlined "him" and hand wrote Gau's name to emphasize the cause of her emotional vulnerability. When Schreiner lived on Guildford Street, "she feared to go out of the house, lest he should come when she was away. She used to feel just as if she was a prostitute in those days. For years almost she lived in the daily expectation of seeing him; every ring at the bell made her ready to sink to the floor" (4: MSS 70572). Gau's rejection reflects an inward desire for Schreiner to do harm to herself. Her feelings express a struggle for autonomy over her desire to be loved and respected.

These signs of self abasement persisted as Havelock Ellis reported in his transcripts of Olive Schreiner that while she was in Cape Town, “she was peculiarly miserable and thinking of suicide” (3: MSS 70572). Though women like Schreiner appear to desire freedom from domestic duties associated with marriage and to be free to embark upon a professional career equal to that of middle-class men, she is caught in a conundrum by her unresolved dependencies on men for love, which lead to her anxieties of being alone, earning a living, and surviving in rather precarious economic times. Lack of love seemed to increase Schreiner’s commitment to political causes and social concerns among women. While she became more involved in her work, her health declined, and Havelock Ellis noted that she was more eccentric and hysterical. Monsman suggests that Schreiner’s lack of companionship led to unresolved resentments that only resulted in doubling her sociopolitical causes (154).

In *Story of An African Farm*, Schreiner expresses two views of love in her characterization of Lyndall, the central protagonist. The first is of friendship, passion, and worship, while the other represents the male as aggressive and masterful; the wife is subservient and powerless. Perhaps in a clear attempt to understand the cause of such disparity between her personal and public life, Schreiner attempts to more clearly define love, first by a personal definition that could lead to equality, and secondly by its conventional, more oppressive standards.

Although she is not liberated from the social order or from the stigma placed upon marginalized women, the fictional femme fatale certainly does not suffer in failed relationships this degree of self-laceration or suicidal tendencies experienced by some of the most noteworthy nineteenth-century feminist activists of that age. So why does a

New Woman like Schreiner fall hopelessly in “love” with a man who does not grant her that same feeling? Why is she prone to falling in love with men who reject her? A woman who is shattered by a failed love affair to the point of self-abasement and suicidal feelings has deeply unresolved attachments to men from which she may be trying to hide, or that she may feel are humiliating to her and so arouse her resentment, which could either be blamed appropriately on her upbringing or that could merely be displaced onto society so she does not need to confront them within herself. What is clear is that she is not autonomous, and her independence figuratively compensates for her demoralization in her failed relationships, giving her some sense of empowerment. So while she cannot resolve problems within personal relations with men, she may be able to change society’s perception of middle-class women who desire to be treated as equals in their pursuit of typically regarded male-oriented professions.

Male protagonists in mid-century Victorian literature such as Collins’ *Armada* or Braddon’s *Sir Audley*, obsess over women as domestic objects, forcing their definitions of femininity onto women they claim that they love. The Victorian romantic ideal of a man serving his lady conventionally provides women with a kind of fantasy or substance of their identity, all the features of so-called identity that define women. But the *femme fatale* completely rejects these romantic ideals. She identifies these beliefs for what they really represent: that the woman must be elusive and mysterious, yet respectable in order to sustain her suitor’s attention. By the 1880s, women ask whether these conventions are necessary in conjugal relations or whether equality in relationships is possible. In other words, must women continue playing the role of the elusive, mysterious woman for men when they find no satisfaction in performing such roles?

Genuine love reduces antagonisms in the relationship between man and woman by eliminating courtship games. But as Žižek clarifies, fulfillment is blocked by a fascination for partial objects, that women must be only an object and not the subject. This is true where genuine love does not exist.

To be a subject gives women equality in relationships with men, and where love exists she has it. Traditionally in the nineteenth century, however, women are denied equality to which the *femme fatale* responds by playing conventionalized subservient roles to serve her purpose of economic survival. Marriage holds out the promise of security and affection, and the fictional *femme fatale* understands this. In taking one more look at Schreiner, a woman who marked the sign of the times in the 1880s, her adolescent experience taught her that Victorian conventions of courtship and marriage are unfortunately incongruent with emotional honesty, therefore, exposing her to female vulnerability. According to Cherry Clayton in *Olive Schreiner*, the memory of her relationship with Julius Gau “haunted her adult years” in other incidents that rendered her vulnerable to gossip about her unconventional sexual behavior (10).

To give oneself sexually to a man outside of marriage was to expose oneself to harsh censure within a society that drew a fine line between married women and prostitutes. Much of Schreiner’s frustration arose from these oppressive conventions. But these very conventions and her refusal to follow them are what caused her to lose her power in her relationship with Gau. Virginity is the single most powerful bargaining tool among Victorian middle-class women, a convention strongly acknowledged and used by the *femme fatale*, though she is seldom pure and virtuous. An upwardly mobile businessman, like Gau, would not accept “a penniless young woman” who lost her virtue

to him before marriage (Clayton 11). Such relations complicate the institution of marriage, and trigger old stigmas of adultery, male sexuality, and the madonna-whore neurosis. By ignoring conventions concerning marriage, Schreiner, therefore, lost the right to meet with Gau on equal terms, first due to Schreiner's inability and her unwillingness to be the kind of woman Gau wanted, and secondly for granting Gau the right to objectify her.

The affair suggests a kind of degradation suffered by Schreiner that was doubly impacted by her resistance or horror at her inner compulsions. These unresolved vulnerabilities of shame and guilt would make Schreiner both rebellious and self-lacerating in her feeling of humiliating dependency, which is why she might feel like a prostitute as Ellis noted. In contrast, Tess does not submit to this objectification and neither does the femme fatale, who resolutely rises above it. The question that needs to be addressed is why didn't they, and why did the ostensibly more liberated New Woman become ruled by her vulnerabilities, for it reflects a real conflict between who these women are existentially in terms of their dependencies and who they wish to be in terms of their ideology of independence and autonomy?

But to say that the New Woman acts so much like the stereotypical weepy, forlorn dependent woman in love is also inaccurate. The modern woman is certainly not autonomous just because she holds what might be mistaken as fashionable contemporary views. But she attempts, like Schreiner, to subvert traditional stereotypes of women and to show that a woman also has human desire by virtue of her own experience. While they suffer great criticism in their romantic relationships, exposed to shame, hidden agony, and cruel gossip, it still becomes a radical act. Professional opportunities were severely

circumscribed for women, and as a consequence they were hemmed in as to how they could actualize their potential. By mockingly masquerading as the virginal, virtuous domestic woman, the femme fatale is a danger to society because she furtively undermines cherished traditions of marriage and family, ideologies which empower one gender while disempowering the other. The femme fatale is responsible for committing crimes against bourgeois culture, but moreover, men are responsible for succumbing and being controlled by desire and passion stimulated by the femme fatale.

The femme fatale channels corruption in middle-class society, but corruption flows in all directions because it speaks to human weakness and viciousness; it flows from the top down and from the bottom up. It also flows from left to right and from right to left. These New Women are stuck in a quandary. Unlike the femme fatale who desires the comforts and stability of domesticity, they desire both independent professional lives and relationships with men who can treat them as equals. The femme fatale does not desire equality in relationships; rather she prefers to have power over men though she still recognizes her own social and class inferiority that she attempts to stamp out.

Femme Fatales do not fit the standards of Victorian middle-class society, but they were, in my opinion, definitely not representations of the New Woman because their popularity in upper-class society and their success depended on capturing desirable male suitors. In *Actresses as Working Women*, Tracy Davis points out that “male-dominated culture defined normative rules for female sexuality, activity, and intellect” (3). The New Woman strives to break this mold by defying socioeconomic prescriptions about “genderized social roles and working spheres for good women” (6).

Social and political choices made by the New Woman reinforce the tenuous nature of the “late Victorian independent woman’s life” (Nord 186). In her diary, Beatrice Webb marked this age, calling it “these terrible days of mental pressure” (341).<sup>47</sup> Amy Levy who seemed to suffer most among these women, died in 1889 at the age of twenty-seven when she took her own life. Eleanor Marx shortly followed her in suicide. Though these women may have erred in many ways, their struggle for autonomy was fierce, by negotiating between oppressive conventions and personal vulnerabilities in order to achieve relationships that are both equal and liberating. It took courage to fight against mainstream culture, its ideals, social codes, and standards forced upon women. As a result, they were inevitably compelled to face their own internal weaknesses and did so in an environment where they were often alienated by their sociopolitical cause.

The femme fatale frequently struggles against these same battles, always suffering and sometimes losing. In *Armada*, Lydia Gwilt takes her life by the end of the novel, confessing “I have never been a happy woman” (806). But she insinuates that her life was a matter of choice, and had she chose differently, she could have become a finer person. “I might, perhaps, have been that better woman myself, if I had not lived a miserable life before [Midwinter] met with me” (806). She takes responsibility for committing crimes against powerful men. This marks the difference between the femme fatale and New Woman. The femme fatale desires autonomy and understands the oppressive nature of the social class system that keeps her subordinated, yet she enters into it by performing the role of the domestic woman. Though the New Woman also understands these bourgeois structures, her work specifically attempts to break down boundaries and to influence change that will lead to sociopolitical equality.

The idea of “play” signified by such mischievous femme fatales as Becky Sharp suggests that women need to be creative in order to subvert patriarchy. In Grand’s novel, Beth’s labor, the production of her literary art, implies that women “play” but only by breaking man-made rules about feminine sexuality that the femme fatale usually imitates yet uses these rules against men. Beth’s labor enables her to be independent. And unhappy marriages do not bring women “nearer to life” unless women leave abusive husbands. When other female characters challenge bourgeois ideology, like Hardy’s Tess, they pay with their life. Grand’s argument is that ideology needs to be *reformed* in order to meet female concerns benefiting both men and women. A combination of the experiences of the New Woman, her ideological values concerning gender, and the femme fatale’s playful yet pragmatic attitude continue to evolve into new ideas about our views of women into popular consciousness. Yet the struggle for female autonomy seems, still, forever unresolved.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Most feminist criticism of Victorian literature—including works by Elaine Showalter, Dorothy Ingram, Deborah Epstein Nord, Amanda Anderson, Susan Gubar, Sandra Gilbert, and Lyn Pykett—deals with the traditional dichotomy between domestic and fallen women. In my opinion these two central paradigms create too neat a polarity, and thereby undermine a woman's autonomy and devalue the significance of both working-class and middle-class women in Victorian England. In contrast, the femme fatale offers a more resourceful and self-reliant image of women, one that reveals a good deal about women's status, options and about the Victorian age's view of them.

<sup>2</sup> Ingham 37-38. Hughes 155-161.

<sup>3</sup> The novels I am specifically addressing here are Wilkie Collins' Armada and Elizabeth Braddon's Lady Audley's Secret and Aurora Floyd.

<sup>4</sup> Guinevere Griest. Mudie's Circulating Library and the Victorian Novel. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1970. Griest discusses the popularity of the circulating libraries among middle-class Victorian women during the period of the rise of the sensation novel (12).

<sup>5</sup> Foucault argues in The History of Sexuality that medical science based woman's behavior and her social role on her reproductive functions. This representation is meant to regulate women's sexuality but inevitably issues forth an unrelenting public debate throughout the nineteenth century on the subject of feminine sexuality and different representations of women.

<sup>6</sup> These novels include Aurora Floyd, by M.E. Braddon, David Copperfield by Charles Dickens, Vanity Fair by W. M. Thackeray, and East Lynne by Mrs. Henry Wood.

<sup>7</sup> Studies by Judith Walkowitz, Luce Irigaray, and Barbara Taylor agree with this claim.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Bentley, The Bentley Papers. Ms. 59632. British Lib., London.

<sup>9</sup> Elaine Showalter, Penny Boumelha, and Rebecca Stott are a few feminist critics to which I allude this central argument about subverting conventional representations of femininity in Tess.

<sup>10</sup> Parker, Lynn. "'Pure woman' and Tragic heroine? Conflicting Myths in Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*." Studies in the Novel 24 (1992): 273-81. Wickens, Glen. "Hardy and the Aesthetic Mythographers: the Myth of Demeter and Persephone in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*." University of Toronto Quarterly 53 (1983): 85-106. Boumelha, Penny. "*Tess of the d'Urbervilles*: Sexual Ideology and Narrative Form." Tess of the d'Urbervilles / Thomas Hardy. Ed. Peter Widdowson. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982. Casagrande, Peter J. Tess of the d'Urbervilles: Unorthodox Beauty. New York: Twayne, 1992.

<sup>11</sup> These critics include Mary Jacobus, Laura Claridge, and Rebecca Stott.

<sup>12</sup> Greenwood, James. In Strange Company: The Notebook of A Roving Correspondent. (London, 1873).

<sup>13</sup> "Abstract of the Case Book." Twenty-sixth Annual Report of the Rescue Society. 1878: 22-41.

<sup>14</sup> George Drysdale and William Acton were outspoken activists on the subject of prostitution during the mid-nineteenth century. Acton's views were quite reactionary, and he felt that women were to blame for the spread of venereal diseases. George Drysdale also supported the regulation of prostitution, yet he argued that registered prostitutes "performed a valuable and virtuous service." Though Drysdale also supported sexual reform and was regarded as being liberal in his views, my study concludes that both Drysdale and Acton had devalued the roles of women, an attitude that kept women subordinated to men.

<sup>15</sup> "Controlment of Syphilis," Lancet 2 (1846): 510-11.

<sup>16</sup> My findings on Dickens involvement with social reform among prostitutes and his contributions to Urania Cottage, which he founded, were largely researched in his letters written to Angela Burdett Coutts who contributed to Dickens charity work, and she established the first home for fallen women at Shepherd's Bush.

<sup>17</sup> Micael Clarke in Thackeray and Women recants Lady Eastlake's discussion on the role and duties of the governess (82-86).

<sup>18</sup> Feminist critics Elaine Showalter, Jennifer Carnell, and Lyn Pykett are feminist critics who generally take this position, undermining the veneer of tranquil domesticity. Their study includes novels by Mary E. Braddon, Isa Blagden, Emily Broughton, Mrs. Annie Edwards, and Florence Marryat.

<sup>19</sup> Hartman, Mary S. "The Waiting Games of Brides-to-Be: The Cases of Madeline Smith and Angelina Lemoine." 51-84. "The Singular Outcasts: The Cases of Celestine Doudet and Constance Kent." 85-129. Victorian Murderesses, New York: Schocken Books, 1977.

<sup>20</sup> Newspapers such as The Daily Express, The Brighton Herald, and The Saturday Review in 1857, 1860, and 1865 explain that the trials attracted widespread support from Victorian middle-class women. Apparently these women sympathized with the circumstances of both Kent and Smith.

<sup>21</sup> In The Criminality of Women, Otto Pollak provides evidence that coincides with my studies of newspaper articles written about the trials in 1857 and 1865.

<sup>22</sup> See Judith Walkowitz, The City of Dreadful Delight and Mary Hartman, Victorian Murderesses.

<sup>23</sup> In Walking the Victorian Streets, Deborah Nord describes radical late-nineteenth-century feminists such as Amy Levy, Margaret Harkness, and Beatrice Potter Webb who adamantly refused to have their public work compared to the domestic virtues of women's work. Though these crusaders were linked with a wide variety of other acquaintances, their organization was very radical for the age in which it was formed.

<sup>24</sup> Sidgwick's study appears in The City of Dreadful Delight by Judith Walkowitz.

<sup>25</sup> Nord discusses the New Woman of the 1880s in her chapter "Neither Pairs Nor Odd."

<sup>26</sup> Lyn Pykett and Winifred Hughes explain that the presence of the villainess "who demands the spotlight" conflicts with "the conventional social role assigned to women" (45).

<sup>27</sup> See Pykett, The Improper Feminine, 17-20, for a discussion of medical representations of Victorian women.

<sup>28</sup> "Sensation Novels" 482. The Athenaeum.

<sup>29</sup> "Sensation Novels." Quarterly 128 (April 1863): 505-06.

<sup>30</sup> In "Homicidal Heroines," which appeared in The Saturday Review on April 7, 1866, the author wrote that "Mr. Mudie's lending library will soon become a sort of Newgate Calendar" and that the "crime and crinoline" of these heroines "is enough to take away the breath of any quiet gentleman" (161).

<sup>31</sup> Lyn Pykett, Elaine Showalter, and Jennifer Carnell agree that Mrs. Oliphant was a principal Victorian reviewer attacking sensation fiction.

<sup>32</sup> Jennifer Carnell explains that Braddon's pseudonym, "Queen of the circulating libraries" was attributed to her as a result the record sales of her novels, their increasing circulation in lending libraries, and their popularity among middle-class female readers.

<sup>33</sup> Carnell suggests that sensation fiction in penny part periodicals always features a moral working-class character. I assert that this element in street journal fiction is meant to influence the conduct of the lower classes so that they will try to imitate the values portrayed by these characters. Articles on domestic care and proper social conduct serves as a rule book of sorts helping the working class assimilate to middle-class ideology, especially if this class sees themselves as protecting Victorian cultural values. This gives them a significant place within society while also keeping the working class subordinated to the middle-class.

<sup>34</sup> Mrs. Oliphant. "Novels." Blackwood's Edinburgh Journal 102 (September 1867): 258.

<sup>35</sup> Nicholas Rance, Wilkie Collins and Other Sensation Novelists (London: Macmillan, 1991) p. 31 quotes a review of *No Name*, Reader, 3 January 1863.

<sup>36</sup> Braddon to T.H.S. Escott, Escott Papers. Ms. 58786. British Lib., London. December 6, 1879.

<sup>37</sup> Braddon to T.H.S. Escott, Escott Papers. Ms. 58786. British Lib., London. November 3, 1879.

<sup>38</sup> Michael Sadlier, Things Past. (London: Constable, 1944) 93.

<sup>39</sup> Jennifer Carnell, The Literary Lives of M.E. Braddon. (Hastings: The Sensation Press, 2000) 152-155. Elaine Showalter, "Family Secrets and Domestic Subversion," The Victorian Family: Structure and Stresses, ed. Anthony S. Wohl. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978) 103.

<sup>40</sup> These critics include Tamar Heller, Winifred Hughes, and Elaine Showalter although they agree that Braddon develops more empowering images of women.

<sup>41</sup> In Purity and Danger and The History of Sexuality, both Douglas and Foucault assert that nineteenth-century ideological boundaries are extremely tenuous and easily transgressed even though Victorian society tries to rigidly enforce these cultural boundaries. Foucault, in many ways, debunks myths suggesting that the discussions concerning sexuality were taboo during the nineteenth century. Rather he asserts that these issues are of paramount importance leading to debates over the Contagious Diseases Acts, Divorce Laws, prostitution, and social and political positions of women. Sexuality became a more public issue in journals and newspapers that addressed these social problems. Victorian feminine tropes reflect the culture's own neuroses when ideologues try to shape social perspectives of women and control cultural changes stimulated by rapid industrial growth in London.

<sup>42</sup> Heller, Tamar. Dead Secrets: Wilkie Collins and the Female Gothic. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992. Tamar Heller explains that critics in the nineteenth century argue that Lydia Gwilt epitomized the polluted feminine trope. Other critics refer to her as fallen; but I argue that she is not the fallen woman.

<sup>43</sup> These novelists include Wilkie Collins, Mary Braddon, Charles Dickens, and Anthony Trollope.

<sup>44</sup> Taylor, Barbara. *Eve and the New Jerusalem*. Taylor explains that women organize themselves and generate journals that enable them to voice their opinions publicly.

<sup>45</sup> Ellis, Havelock. Havelock Ellis on Eleanor Marx. Ms 70557. British Lib., London.

<sup>46</sup> Ellis, Havelock. Havelock Ellis on Eleanor Marx. Ms 70557. British Lib., London. 187-188.

<sup>47</sup> Webb, Beatrice. The Diary of Beatrice Webb. Ed. Norman Mackenzie and Jeanne Mackenzie. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982.

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