

Crime, Class, and Gender in Victorian Sensation Fiction

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Abstract. The popularity of Victorian sensation fiction reflects social and cultural changes in the Victorian age. This high demand for sensational stories, whether they were real or fictional, is connected with the social structure of Victorian England and the genre's challenging of the conventional understandings of criminality. Accordingly, this paper explores the reasons for the recognition of sensation fiction in the mid-Victorian age, elaborating public perceptions of crime and their subversion. With reference to reviews on its content and effects on Victorian society, it investigates the realism of sensation fiction in relation to real criminal cases.

Keywords: Victorian sensation fiction, crime, popularity, class, gender

1. Introduction

Sensation fiction flourished in England as a literary genre in the late 1850s and reached a conspicuous popularity in the 1860s and 1870s (Ascari 110). As it narrates crimes and scandals in middle and upper-class houses, many reviewers stigmatized its popularity and influence on society. It typically deals with certain felonies and sensational transgressions such as fraud, murder, bigamy, and adultery in upper-class and domestic settings. In addition to its subversion of Victorian social values, it manifests unconventional criminal identities such as aristocrats and women. However, works belonging to this genre can be viewed as reflections of Victorian ambivalent attitudes about crime and scandals because these kinds of stories both frightened and amazed the Victorians. Besides, this popularity reflects social and cultural changes in the Victorian age, and explanations for the high demand for such stories, whether they were real or fictional. This is closely connected with the social structure of nineteenth century England, conventional understandings of criminality, and the quick spread of news reports and fictional stories through newspapers. Accordingly, this paper explores the reasons for the popularity of sensation fiction in the mid-Victorian age, elaborating public perceptions of crime. With reference to reviews on its content and effects on Victorian society, it investigates the realism of sensation fiction in relation to real criminal cases.

2. Crime in the Victorian Age

For a further elaboration of the popularity of sensation fiction, it is necessary to investigate the social and cultural transformations which have significant effects on society starting from the early nineteenth century. The Industrial Revolution and technological advances afterwards engendered prominent changes in society, economics, and politics in England. Through the accelerating number of factory workers and urban population in cities, the gap between the social classes broadened (Case and Shaw 3). With an increasing working-class population and

the terrible conditions of the poor, criminal activity also grew (Gilfillan 13). The working class was regarded as a threat to the social order and values maintained by the middle and upper classes. Moreover, criminality was commonly attributed to the working class because of higher crime rates in poor areas. Working class proclivity for crime was foregrounded as a way to control the members of this group. For this reason, in the early Victorian period, conventional understandings of criminality were mostly based on social class, gender and also ethnic background. Underprivileged members of society were pigeonholed as criminals most of the time, and criminality was generally viewed as a male activity, not a female one. (Gatrell 277). This mindset is substantially related to gender bias, and the Victorian image of women as submissive and inferior to men.

These established beliefs about crime played a significant role in the construction of criminal identity, and crime became an attractive subject due to the rise of illegal activities in the early nineteenth century (Gatrell 249). Although people were frightened of criminals, they were craving for crime stories as well. This brings us to the entertainment side of these stories. As there were not many things to be interested in these urban communities, people wanted to entertain themselves with criminal narratives. Thus, stories about offenders and their crimes had already been interesting for people since Gothic fiction was established in the eighteenth century. F. S. Schwarzbach comments on penny dreadfuls and broadsheets "that specialized in sensational crimes and gallows confessions", and how they achieved high number of sales (233). People wanted to learn about criminals and the offenses they committed, so they just needed to pick up a newspaper to satisfy this desire. The reduction in "taxes on knowledge" made newspapers cheaper and easily accessible for the lower classes, too (Diamond 1). Together with the success of these journalistic publications, Newgate novels became popular in the 1830s. They were narratives based on the lives of real criminals in the Newgate Prison which were published in the *Newgate Calendar*. Although the *Newgate Calendar* was initially meant to offer moral guidance, it became a way of entertainment rather than a lesson. Newgate novels gained popularity with the effect of preceding recognition of the *Newgate Calendar*. Similarly, stage melodramas about the lives of these malefactors were the ones getting public interest and popularity (Flanders 2011). Melodramas in that period were initially inspired by real crime stories and the plots of Newgate novels.

Crime was already a startling matter; however, if the criminal or the victim belonged to the upper class, it became a much more sensational incident. Michael Diamond stresses the role of social hierarchy in this interest in criminals from the higher ranks of society, and "a wicked baronet always seemed wickeder than a villain without a title" in real life and in fiction (6). If a crime event involved a woman or a member of the aristocracy, it became a more shocking incident which attracted several people. That is to say, violation of social class norms and gendered ideals brought sensational criminal cases into the public, and they became considerably popular. Accordingly, people would crowd crime scenes, trials, and public executions until this form of punishment was banned after the mid-nineteenth century.

The public reaction and enthusiasm during these displays of capital punishment stand for the great Victorian interest in criminal cases. Michael

Diamond states that an estimated 40,000 spectators watched François Courvoisier's execution, and around the execution area, certain places at the windows of neighbouring houses were sold for large amounts, and roofs were filled with curious people wishing to see the execution from a better place (157). François Courvoisier was a Swiss butler and valet who was convicted of murdering his master Lord William Russell in 1840 (Diamond 154). Although there were not many proofs of him being the murderer, he was executed, and he confessed the murder on the scaffold. Maria and George Manning's trial was as thrilling as Courvoisier's. They were convicted of murdering Patrick O'Connor whose body was found under the flagstones of their kitchen. (Flanders 158). As Maria Manning was a Swiss woman formerly working in some upper-class houses, she was the one who caught public attention. She became a public figure with her strict features and character in contrast to her husband, and even a statue of her was made in Madame Tussaud's in London (Flanders 174).

One of the other Victorian cases involving upper class criminals was that of Madeleine Smith. She was the daughter of a wealthy man, and she was convicted of murdering her ex-fiancé in order to marry a richer and socially higher man (Diamond 171). She was charged with poisoning her former lover when he started blackmailing her about their sexual affair. Although there were proofs that she possibly poisoned him with arsenic, she was acquitted. Her case became famous partly because of signifying the injustice in the British legal system and partly because it was about an upper-class female criminal. In the late nineteenth century Jack the Ripper became the most well-known murderer of the period. Five women were murdered violently in 1888 and 1889, and the perpetrator of these violent murders could never be found. As the bodies were cruelly and skilfully mutilated, the murderer is believed to have had medical education. Moreover, the murderer was linked to some members of the aristocracy and even royalty because the women were prostitutes and some of them may have had affairs with these men. (Diamond 184). The police were unable to find this serial killer and investigations were halted soon after, so this cover-up intensified these suspicions about the identity of the murderer as a highly placed individual.

Murder was not the only offense that amazed the public. People were also intrigued by sex scandals and divorce cases as much as murder. As Michael Diamond expresses, sex scandals mostly proceeded from the court, especially the Divorce court, which was the main place of sensation (120). In other words, private secrets could be revealed in these courts, which the public and journalists were highly interested in. Because only the privileged could afford the expenses of a divorce suit, the secrets and crimes of the higher classes were inevitably revealed (Diamond 124). Therefore, details of bigamy and divorce cases could be made even more public by newspaper reports (Pykett, "Sensation Novel" 2). Hence, the popularity of sensation fiction is not surprising in such a time filled with scandalous circumstances.

3. Victorian Sensation Fiction

Sensation novels incorporate the accounts of crime in Newgate fiction and the prevailing atmosphere of terror in Gothic romances, but these elements are

manifested in different ways in the sensation genre. Patrick Brantlinger argues that "the sensation novel involves both the secularization and the domestication of the apparently higher (or at any rate, more romantic) mysteries of the Gothic romance" ("What is sensational" 4). Sensation fiction transforms the romantic and religious overtones of Gothic fiction into more realistic forms with its settings and subjects. In addition, Patrick R. O'Malley points out that Gothic fiction, with the psychological theories in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, focuses on somatic effects of terror on the mind in relation to spaces like castles or monasteries (85). Sensation fiction, through industrialisation, trade, and the rise of the middle class, rather touches Victorian materialism and financial issues. While doing that, it revolves around domestic settings because it deals with "the hidden secrets of the family [...] and the specifics of *British* life" (O'Malley 90). It intrudes the homes and private lives of the upper-class characters who generally have monetary motives and reasons for the crimes they commit.

Besides Gothic conventions like mysteries and terror, Patrick Brantlinger points out that sensation novels were sensational because "their plots involved transgressions of gender and class proprieties and boundaries" ("Class and race" 430). In a similar way to real criminal cases, subversion of these ideologies about gender and social class were among the most prominent factors for sensation fiction's popularity. That is, these works showed that crime did not only concern the lower levels of society, but the upper classes could be involved in scandals and sensational events too. Christopher Pittard explains that sensation fiction displayed the transition of crime narrative from the streets and slums to the confidential spaces of the family home, and it marks "a type of invasion, the threat of a working-class literature of crime usurping the settings of the middle-class romance" (107). This could be paralleled with the shift of crime from the working-class areas to inside the upper-class genteel homes. That is to say, conventional perceptions of crime based on class identity were no longer regarded as mainstream. Picturing upper class and female transgressors in respectable or aristocratic environments is one of the most notable factors that made these works shocking in a capitalist and conventional age.

Concerning transgressions of social boundaries, sensation novels represent a juxtaposition of narratives and characters belonging to different levels of society. Because these works also addressed middle and upper-class female readers in addition to working class readers, they were seen as invading the respectable literary marketplace. As Deborah Wynne notes, with its origins in Gothic romances, melodramas, and cheap fiction, the sensation novel is the first Victorian genre that contains "aspects of its 'low' origins [...] while still appealing widely to 'respectable' readers" (*The Sensation Novel* 14). Just as it combines high and low forms of literature by attracting the readers from all social classes, it includes characters from different social strata, including servants. Besides the prominent position of the upper-class genteel characters in many sensation novels, servants play significant roles in their plots. For example, Wilkie Collins usually includes servants as witnesses with their testimonies in the revelation of the secrets and crimes committed in respectable families.

The portrayal of unconventional women in sensation novels and the rise in the number of female writers were among other reasons why these works were criticized and considered to be controversial (*The Sensation Novel* 40). Female

sensation novelists explored problems that many Victorian female readers experienced. Furthermore, the challenging image of the women depicted in these novels generated anxiety about this genre, which therefore resulted in stern disapproval by certain scholars. Some critics also form a connection between the popularity of sensation novels and reforms for women's legal rights in marriage and social life. As Deborah Wynne points out, the fact that these novels were popular with female readers was indirectly ascribed to the feminist movement in the 1850s which sought legal, economic, and social equality with men ("Critical responses" 391). Almost every sensation novel features a woman who can solve mysteries or take matters into their hands. (Pykett *The Sensation Novel* 6). Therefore, it is believed that this focus on gender issues may have triggered legal reforms about women's property and divorce rights in the second half of the nineteenth century (Maceachen 139).

Along with gender and class issues, Patrick Brantlinger relates the popularity of sensation novels to the influence of stage melodramas, sensational journalism, bigamy trials and the divorce law reform in the Victorian age ("What is sensational" 2). People were preoccupied with such controversial issues, so sensation novelists make these the most common topics in their works. Accordingly, sensation novels became so popular among female readers that even different products about these works started to be merchandised. Kimberly Harrison notes that sensation novels were products of a "commercialized literary marketplace" that met the demand for sensational stories, and Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860) even inspired products such as bonnets, cloaks, dances, and perfumes (529). These merchandised products of sensation novels show the extent of their popularity.

As reflections of real criminal cases and newspaper reports about scandalous stories including upper-class men and women, novels illustrating upper class crime narratives started to become more common in the 1850s. Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853), though not exactly a sensation novel, features an aristocrat, Lady Dedlock, with her secret past challenging Victorian moral certitudes. The family lawyer, Mr. Tulkinghorn, bothers her upon revealing that she had a baby out of wedlock before her current marriage. After the disclosure of her disreputable previous actions in contrast to Victorian merits, Dickens's introducing her as one of the suspects of Mr. Tulkinghorn's murder foregrounds the sensational side of the novel. However, as it covers only a small part of the work with its major focus on the flaws in Chancery court, the novel is not totally included in sensation fiction. Nevertheless, it can be seen as a pioneer work for the development of this genre.

Apart from *Bleak House*, it is appropriate to delve into two of the most obvious examples of sensation fiction. Although they have been studied widely, it is important to demonstrate what they offer about Victorian society and the popularity of the genre. The first one, Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*, was serialized in Dickens's magazine *All the Year Round* in 1859 and 1860. The novel is broadly accepted as the first example of sensation fiction, for it incorporates almost all the essential elements of the genre with its mystery, crime, and scandalous events in the plot. The story's main subject is on the fraud and crimes committed by Sir Percival Glyde and his Italian ally, Count Fosco. Following his marriage to Laura Fairlie, Sir Percival Glyde is revealed to be after his wife's

fortune to repay his debts. The story narrates how Walter Hartright and Marian Halcombe, Laura's half-sister, endeavour to reveal the mystery behind Glyde and Fosco. Thus, Wilkie Collins challenges traditional perceptions of crime by portraying two aristocratic villains and the startling crimes they commit throughout the novel.

The novel starts with Walter's encounter with Anne Catherick, the woman in white, and her terrifying impact on Walter with her horrifyingly sudden presence. Collins catches the reader's attention from the very beginning with such a mysterious and eccentric woman. Deborah Wynne describes the sensation fiction's "concern with secrets and mysteries" as a distinctive feature of the genre (*The Sensation Novel* 4). These secrets, linked to crimes and scandals, usually disturb the lives of the upper classes. In the novel, the secret of Anne Catherick breaks into Limmeridge House and makes Walter and Marian follow her mystery which leads them to discover the misdemeanours of Sir Percival Glyde and Count Fosco.

In a similar way to earlier Gothic novels, Collins illustrates upper classes who commit fraud, incarcerate women, and even cause one character to die of a heart problem. Sir Percival Glyde seems like a "gentleman born and brought up, who ought to have set a better example" (Collins 421). However, his social identity is totally overthrown by some criminal deeds to overcome his financial problems. He forges his parents' marriage record to eliminate his illegitimacy and inherit his father's property. Also, social conflict is clearly presented when Walter Hartright as a lower-class teacher starts tracing these aristocrat criminals to reveal their secrets. Walter, in a way, replaces Sir Percival by marrying Laura and violates Victorian social boundaries. For the sake of saving Laura from Sir Percival, Walter bears many hardships, then becomes the Heir of Limmeridge House and an aristocrat through the social status of his new wife. This transgression of social boundaries is one of the features that makes the novel sensational. However, as Walter is not an offender or villain, but an amateur detective, his position does not seem vexatious and provoking.

Collins draws attention to the situation of women because Laura Fairlie is subjected to emotional and financial abuse by Sir Percival Glyde through his indifference to her and his pressure to get her fortune due to the legality of their marriage. There is also a clear reference to the property rights of married women and the severity of divorce laws. On the other hand, Collins creates one of the most peculiar female characters in Victorian fiction. Marian Halcombe does not totally fit into the norms of Victorian femininity with her appearance and character. She is pictured as an "ugly" lady with "a large, firm, masculine mouth and jaw" (Collins 24), and this image is strengthened through the description of her head's contradicting with her "masculine form" (Collins 25) and body. In addition to her physical appearance, her following remarks about men display that her character is different from traditional Victorian women:

No man under heaven deserves these sacrifices from us women. Men! They are enemies of our innocence and our peace – they drag us away from our parents' love and our sisters' friendship – they take us body and soul to themselves, and fasten our helpless lives to theirs as they chain up a dog to his kennel. (Collins 159)

With these ideas on women placed in subordinate positions, she stands for non-conformist women seeking equality with men. Additionally, for unearthing the real identities of Glyde and Fosco, her efforts as an amateur detective are as crucial as Walter's endeavours. Thus, Collins refers to the need for equality between men and women and defies Victorian principles and gendered subjectivity through an unorthodox female figure.

Besides these controversial topics, social demand and curiosity for trials apparently influenced Wilkie Collins on the novel's narrative structure. He constructs the novel in such an interesting way that his inspiration from trials of scandalous cases is obvious. The story in *The Woman in White* is narrated by Walter Hartright with his collected statements from different characters. As Lyn Pykett suggests, Walter undertakes a kind of lawyer role by collecting all the evidence and testimonies and presenting it to readers (*Wilkie Collins* 57). This could be a deliberate reference to trials where curious people would crowd the courts. Through the novel, Collins presents his readers with the excitement they would feel in a courtroom while listening to the particulars of a sensational lawsuit. The characters give a lot of details about the villains and the victims who belong to the upper class. Together with the influence of the newspaper reports, the narrative style is affected by this enthusiasm and curiosity of people about surprising incidents.

Another notable sensation novel is *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) by Mary Elizabeth Braddon, one of the representative female sensation novelists. As the title suggests, the main character is a woman, and the novel revolves around her mystery and shocking crimes. When her husband does not come back from Australia for years, Helen Talboys disguises herself as a governess with a different name, Lucy. After a while, she gets married to an aristocrat, the rich Mr. Audley. When Mr. Audley's nephew arrives with Lucy's ex-husband coincidentally, Lady Audley commits several crimes in order not to disclose her real name and her previous marriage. As observed, Braddon includes secrets and scandals in a very sensational story. Lady Audley commits murder, bigamy, and she is kept in an asylum in the end. The novel is inevitably among the most important sensation novels with its plot and features that make it a perfect example of the genre.

Lady Audley challenges both social and gender norms of the Victorian age. The fact that she transgresses social boundaries by entering the aristocracy from a lower-class environment is sensational and shaking the social order (Brantlinger "Class and Race" 433-434). Furthermore, she subverts gender ideology by committing misdemeanours unexpected from an aristocratic Victorian lady because such figures usually stand for gentility, innocence, and morality. However, Lady Audley commits bigamy, arson, and even attempted murder throughout the novel. As a female writer in a conventional period, it is not surprising that Mrs. Braddon questions Victorian gender conventions and refers to real scandals in aristocratic homes. In Natalie Schroeder's words, Braddon's "sensation novels are especially significant today for what they reveal about Victorian women's resistance to conventionally prescribed social norms" (87). She portrays Helen Talboys as courageous enough to change her name and social status to live a better life, although she leaves her son behind with her husband's father.

Braddon emphasizes the core of sensation novels' plots when Robert Audley, the amateur detective in the novel, points out the crimes committed in seemingly peaceful houses in the following words:

What do we know of the mysteries that may hang about the houses we enter? If I were to go to-morrow into that commonplace, plebeian, eight-roomed house in which Maria Manning and her husband murdered their guest, I should have no awful prescience of that bygone horror. Foul deeds have been done under the most hospitable roofs; terrible crimes have been committed amid the fairest scenes, and have left no trace upon the spot where they were done. [...] I believe that we may look into the smiling face of a murderer, and admire its tranquil beauty. (153-154)

Whilst Robert Audley implies his suspicions about Lady Audley's mystery and criminality in this extract, Braddon refers to important facts about real criminal cases and sensation novels. She emphasizes that even a supposedly innocent and privileged lady could be a felon. Although Lady Audley's actions can be thought of as exaggerated and unreal in a fictional story, figures like Maria Manning and Madeleine Smith show that such a fictional character is credible and realistic. Thus, Lady Audley's alleged innocence and beauty mask her crimes. That is to say, respectable houses may be places concealing mysteries, scandals, and crimes. On the other hand, after her real identity is revealed to the reader, she is described like a monstrous creature with the "flame in her eyes – a greenish light, such as might flash from [...] an angry mermaid" (Braddon 347) and the "horrible demoniac force" (Braddon 351). Braddon embodies this unconventional depiction of a woman as a recurrent motif encountered in several sensation novels.

These novels were often criticized for their immoral subject matter and unrealistic plotlines with melodramatic overtones (Wynne "Critical Responses" 390). However, it can be observed that they were not such exaggerated narratives with regard to real criminal cases and scandals. Besides, most writers of sensation novels admitted they had been inspired by newspaper reports for their plots. Charles Reade, one of the most renowned writers of sensation fiction, usually states that he takes ideas for his novels from the newspapers. John F. Quinn suggests that Charles Reade was highly concerned with newspaper reports which were sources for his novels, and he kept several volumes in which he compiled interesting reports and articles clipped from newspapers (4-5). Charles Reade usually admitted that he found his story lines in the pages of *The Times*, and Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens both similarly declared that some of their works were influenced by real-life criminal trials (Diamond 189). Hence, sensation fiction's credibility and exaggeration should be criticized bearing in mind the newspapers' contents. As Lyn Pykett claims, "the sensation genre was a journalistic construct, a label attached by reviewers to novels whose plots centred on criminal deeds, or social transgressions and illicit passions" ("The Newgate novel" 33). Thereupon, sensation novels presented readers with the thrill of reading scandalous crime stories in newspapers.

4. Conclusion

As sensation fiction was a prolific genre in the second half of the nineteenth century, its effects on Victorian society and the literary marketplace cannot be overlooked. Even though the sensation novel continues significant elements of Gothic fiction and Newgate novels, it mainly focuses on material culture and financial subjects in the context of the Victorian industrialisation. Sir Percival incarcerates and abuses Laura psychologically to steal her fortune as a way of reaching financial stability and keeping his social reputation. Lady Audley commits several crimes to maintain her comfortable life and higher social status because her former husband, with the aim of earning more money, leaves her destitute and alone for a long time. The characters generally have financial motives for most of the crimes in these works. With this in mind, the sensation novel shows that supernatural beings are not the ones that cause horror anymore, but social hypocrisy and upper-class criminality cause real terror and harm in Victorian industrial society. With the appearance of middle-class houses, it becomes more realistic unlike the haunted castles and fortresses employed in Gothic fiction. Integrating the features of gothic literature and Newgate novels, it paves the way for the development and the popularity of detective fiction in the late nineteenth century.

Although sensation fiction was denounced for its corrupt content by some reviewers in the Victorian age, it tells us a lot about social and cultural fears and ideas in the period. It displays anxieties about crime, family life, financial insecurities, gender and social boundaries, and transgressions of these concepts. As observed, the sensation novel did not influence Victorian morality negatively because similar stories had been published in newspapers for decades before its popularity. On the contrary, it mirrors Victorian debates and concerns about crime, scandals, and hypocrisy in aristocracy and bourgeoisie. Accordingly, it raises social awareness and accelerates reforms in legal and societal matters. The writers of sensation novels challenge perceptions of crime based on social rank and gender in the Victorian age, which can be seen in real criminal cases in that period. These writers and their works show that criminality and scandals are present in genteel homes as much as they are in underprivileged districts. In addition to mysteries and gothic stories in their storylines, sensation novels represent subversion of Victorian moral and social norms and the rigidity of these values. What is more, the popularity of sensation fiction could be attributed to public demand and craving for criminal and sensational stories. It is also deep-rooted in human nature, as it is normal to feel curiosity and take an interest in sensational events which people do not often encounter in their normal lives. In a similar vein, it is not surprising that novels and TV shows including violence, nudity, and intrigues are globally popular even today.

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