

THE SOCIAL ECOLOGY OF CHARACTER: BRITISH NATURALISM
AND THE MID-VICTORIAN SENSATION NOVEL

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ABSTRACT

My dissertation tracks an emergent theory of character in the wake of the ecological turn in the mid-Victorian period. It identifies the connection between changing representations of character in the popular sensation novel and developments in contemporary psychology. “The Social Ecology of Character” tells the story of how the idea of character fundamentally changed as a result of the development and popularization of the theory of ecology, the burgeoning notion of organisms as plastic and dynamic, given form by the precarious balance between internal physiobiological expression and external social forces. Rather than an innate quality or the result of “blank slate” impressions, character was conceptualized as a dynamic nexus of internal and external pressures in constant adjustment to its physical and social environment. This, what I call, “ecology of character” is intelligible in the sensation novel, a genre born out of a complicated overlap between the perceived physiological effects on readers and the scandalous storylines and infamous for its complex relationship between character and plot. I demonstrate how the sensation novel dramatizes the dynamic interplay between the internal and external forces that determine psychological development. Drawing on an interdisciplinary combination of literary theory, history of psychology, philosophy of science, theories of realism, gender studies, and novel and periodical theory, my dissertation argues that the sensation genre brings to the foreground the effects of the mid-Victorian ecological turn on literary character and incubates a distinctly mid-Victorian British determinism that anticipates late nineteenth-century naturalism.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The mid-Victorian ecological turn was a paradigmatic moment in modern history in which the understanding of what it means to be human fundamentally and irrevocably changed. As what it means to be human changes, so too do the stories we tell. This dissertation tracks the changing representation of literary character in the mid-Victorian novel, arguing that the popular sensation novel played an important role in the modernization of British culture by developing and disseminating the new conception of character to the general reading public. I define the mid-Victorian ecological turn as a cultural shift in the perception of the human-environment relationship occurring, to borrow Virginia Woolf's famous formulation, on or about the year 1859. The importance of the year 1859 will not require much convincing for historians of the nineteenth century. The monumental impact of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859), which appeared on November 24th of that year, is still felt today. For literary scholars, the year 1859 is also important, as it marks the publication—two days in fact after Darwin's publication—of the first serial installment of Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859), the inaugural sensation novel,¹ in Charles Dickens's influential periodical *All the Year Round*. The significance of these almost simultaneous publications rings in with resounding timeliness what many classify as the “mid-Victorian” period.²

¹ Though *The Woman in White* undoubtedly ushers in the heyday of sensation fiction, there is some debate about which novel was technically the “first” sensation novel, with some suggesting that Collins's *Basil* (1852) was the first.

² I define the “mid-Victorian” period as roughly 1859-1880. See Hadley for further discussion of the significance of these years as period markers.

With Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* came a new conception of the relationship between organisms and their environment. To name this new relationality, German zoologist Ernst Haeckel coined the word "ecology" ("*oecologie*") in *Generelle Morphologie der Organismen* (1866) as a response to his reading of Darwin. In now-famous words, he defined ecology as "the whole science of the relations of the organism to the environment including, in the broad sense, all the 'conditions of existence.' These are partly organic, partly inorganic in nature" (140, in Stauffer). The idea of an interdependent relationality between organisms and their surroundings did not exclusively affect the natural sciences: it had broad interdisciplinary implications for everything from philosophy and religion to sociology and psychology. Haeckel, for one, takes issue with the way "physiology has largely neglected the relations of the organism to the environment, the place each organism takes in the household of nature, in the economy of all nature" (qtd. in Stauffer 141). To be sure, Darwin was a single node in a constellation of intellectuals developing theories of evolution and the dynamic materiality in the relationship between humans and their environs. However, *Origin of Species* convincingly articulated a mechanism (natural selection) for evolution that immediately gained popular, widespread attention, profoundly and irrevocably changing the cultural conception of the individual and her or his relationship to the environment. And it was this popular and wide-reaching success that has imbued Darwin's work with a cultural currency beyond its contributions to evolutionary biology; its success immediately established its place as the cultural reference point for the mid-Victorian ecological turn, the shift in the general British public's cultural consciousness in which the static

conception of the human-environment relationship was replaced with one of dynamism, interdependence, and multi-faceted influence.

The mid-Victorian moment was one in which conflicting narratives of humanity and their place in the universe converged. Enlightenment notions of liberal humanism, individual autonomy, and stadial social progression clashed with new developments in science that decentered the human on the natural and universal stages and revealed powerful, indifferent forces at work in and on the world. The nineteenth century was home to large tectonic shifts in the understanding of history, natural laws, and the universe. Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830-33) suggested a much older planet than had been previously thought and popularized uniformitarianism as a fundamental principle for scientific inquiry.³ Advancements in astronomical technology and method revealed a vast universe in which our planet was assuredly no longer the center. Closer to the mid-century, James Clerk Maxwell's theories of electromagnetism opened new imaginative vistas for conceiving of a dynamic, interactive relationality between people, things, and their physical environs. The ground-breaking developments in modern germ theory, especially by John Snow in London and Louis Pasteur in Paris, introduced a world teeming with life invisible to the naked eye pervasively interacting with and acting on people. Physiological psychology challenged the idea of volitional subjectivity by demonstrating the intertwining connectivity between the physical body and the brain. And Darwin's theory of natural selection provided a plausible mechanism through which evolutionary development could occur, given a large enough span of time. Taken in

³ Uniformitarianism connects the present with the past by positing that the natural laws that are true in the present were true in the past as well. This allowed scientists, such as geologists, to extrapolate backward into history using their present-day observations.

combination, the nineteenth century was home to an intellectual paradigm shift whose ripples were felt across cultural discourses.

I call this paradigmatic moment the mid-Victorian ecological turn: a recasting in cultural consciousness of the relationship between humans and their environments. The ecological turn changed the definition of what it meant to be human. No longer could “human” be defined against other species, the environment, or each other. To be human was to be a part of a whole—connected, interdependent, entangled. Elizabeth Miller emphasizes the importance of this historical moment, arguing that ecology “recast the natural world in scientific rather than religious terms as evolving, relational, and holistic” (653). To be clear, this ecological turn is not limited to a single intellectual or a single text, such as Darwin and his *Origin of Species*. Rather, it is an accretion of intellectual and scientific advancements that challenged the older conception of a static human-environment relationship and prevailing notion that humans had the freewill and agency to enact discrete action in the world. I invoke Darwin here as a shorthand for this larger cultural paradigm shift for two reasons: first, Darwin’s work, via Haeckel, gives us the word “ecology”; and second, *Origin of Species* had a profound influence on the general public in ways that other scientific works did not. This influence can still be seen today, as his work remains *the* popular shorthand for “evolution,” demonstrating the importance of his publication in the Western popular cultural imagination. Much of Darwin’s success with the general public was due to the combination of the accessibility of his writing and ideas and the peripheral discussions about his work that proliferated throughout the general periodical networks in Britain in the form of book reviews, response essays,

defenses, and condemnations.⁴ In addition to these cultural products about Darwin and *Origin of Species*, literary works—published alongside nonfiction and scientific articles in the general periodicals—also engaged Darwin’s ideas and participated in the wider ecological turn.⁵

As what it means to be human changes, so do our literary representations of character. I contend that the second half of the nineteenth century was the epicenter of a fundamental shift in how literary characters are depicted in fiction. My dissertation tracks the fallout of this revolutionary cultural moment through its effects on the ways literary characters were conceived, constructed, and presented, exploring the shift in the conception of psychological and literary character in the mid-Victorian period using the popular sensation novel as my case study. Through close readings of Ellen Wood’s *The Shadow of Ashlydyat* (1863), Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone* (1868), and Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Joshua Haggard’s Daughter* (1875), *The Golden Calf* (1883), and *Phantom Fortune* (1883-84), my dissertation tells the story of how the idea of character fundamentally changed in the mid-Victorian period as a result of the development of ecological theory, the burgeoning notion of the organism as plastic and dynamic, given form by the precarious balance between internal physiobiological expression and external social forces. This manifested in literature through the depiction of the relationship between character and circumstance. Rather than circumstance revealing character through their choices or functioning as an opportunity for character development (as in

⁴ See Ellegård for the classic study of Darwin’s dissemination through the periodicals.

⁵ Beer, Chapple, Levine, Shuttleworth, Garret.

the Bildungsroman), I will demonstrate how multiple circumstances are brought to bear simultaneously on a character in a crucial moment of choice in the narrative. I follow chronologically the development of these center-of-gravity moments in each of the novels and track the gradual shift in balance from individual agency to a social and material determinism.

I define “character” as both a literary and psychological concept. Literary character is the aesthetic rendering of human beings in literature. Psychological character is the various attempts to depict the discrete psychological expression of a human being in literature. This second type of character is informed by the prevailing psychological theory at the time of literary production. In the mid-Victorian period, I demonstrate how character was conceptualized as a dynamic nexus of internal and external pressures always in adjustment to its physical and social environment, based on the physiological psychological model, rather than an innate quality or the result of “blank slate” impressions informed by the associationist model of psychology. My dissertation seeks to track the moments in which multiple narrative circumstances converge simultaneously on a literary character and develop their psychological expression of character. This, what I will call, *ecology of character* is intelligible in the sensation novel, a genre born out of a complicated overlap between the perceived physiological effects on readers and the scandalous storylines and infamous for its complex relationship between character and plot. I demonstrate how the sensation novel dramatizes the dynamic interplay between the internal and external forces that determine psychological development. Drawing on an interdisciplinary combination of literary theory, history of psychology, philosophy of science, theories of realism, gender studies, and novel and periodical theory, my

dissertation argues that the sensation genre brings to the foreground the effects of the mid-Victorian ecological turn on literary character and houses a distinctly mid-Victorian British determinism that anticipates late nineteenth-century naturalism.

Unlike its French and American counterparts, the definitions and discussions of Naturalism in British literature are suspiciously vague. Much is made of authors such as Thomas Hardy, George Moore, and George Gissing in the final decades of the nineteenth century. The familiar scholarly narrative suggests that naturalistic tendencies in literature migrated across the Channel in the early- to mid- 1880s, just as Naturalism in France was reaching its crescendo after two decades of prominence. However, this narrative fails to take into account the significant cultural and literary exchange between Britain and France and, more importantly, the paradigmatic shifts in the understand of the human-environment relationship that underwrote the development and preoccupations of nineteenth-century literary Naturalism. This dissertation seeks to revise this scholarly narrative by demonstrating the existence of a distinct form of British literary naturalism in mid-Victorian sensation fiction.

My dissertation intervenes in the study of the relationship between nineteenth-century literature and science, a field which has played a central role in Victorian studies since the 1980s. In the past decade, this subfield has produced new work on ecology and literary character that continues to invigorate literary studies as a whole. Driven by our current climate crisis and the increased interest in the human-nature relationship, environmental studies and ecohumanities have become prominent focal points. Victorian studies is a natural home for the examination of human-environment relations due to the fact that nineteenth-century Britain was the first generation to reckon with both the

anticipated and the unanticipated effects of the Industrial Revolution and because it set the stage in many ways for the period of social, political, and technological modernity that we continue to inhabit in the present. Additionally, a burgeoning vein of scholarship has opened up new and productive avenues for reassessing the way consciousness, subjectivity, and character were conceived in the nineteenth century. Revising the post-Enlightenment notion of character as shaped primarily by volitional, subjective agency, new research has elucidated the many ways Victorian intellectuals—psychologists, philosophers, literary authors, scientists, physicians—understood character to be shaped by the dynamic interplay of one’s physiobiology, social medium, and lived experience. My work brings both of these trends in Victorian studies together. I track the implications of the mid-Victorian ecological turn on the conception of character; discover a historical moment in which human character changed; and trace the resulting ramifications on literary character in the sensation novel, the implications of which extend far beyond their Victorian provenance.

In what follows, I first establish my project’s theoretical framework by analyzing the use of thin description in the popular science circulating across the general Victorian periodicals; I then contextualize mid-Victorian ecology and physiological psychology and their implications on the relationship between character and circumstance in literature; and then I consider the sensation novel’s role in developing, what I will call, a *social ecology of character* that draws on a combination of British ecology and French Naturalism.

Periodical Contexts: Popular Science and Thin Description

The sensation novels I consider in the following chapters are all part of the Victorian general periodical network, an intertwining ecosystem of political, scientific, cultural, and literary writing.⁶ All of the novels initially appeared in serialized form inside of periodical magazines aimed toward a general middleclass audience. The interdisciplinary interest of the general periodicals, the writers, and the readers gave rise to a complex web of cross-talk among the various discourses, especially science and literature. In this section, I set out the theoretical framework scaffolding my argument about the cross-fertilization between sensation fiction and science by contextualizing the novels within the Victorian general periodical network and defining my use of “thin description.” I conclude with an extended example of thin description from one of the most successful and influential general periodicals of the period, *All the Year Round*.

Much scholarship has been dedicated to demonstrating the way in which scientific concepts were worked through in the fiction of the mid-nineteenth century, and, more recently, a handful of studies have shown how the science of the period was discussed in and disseminated specifically through periodical literature.⁷ Importantly, scientific

⁶ Many of the major literary publications first appeared in serialized format in periodicals. Moreover, reviews of literary works were also published in periodicals, which helped boost the reputations of both particular works and particular writers (Brake et al.; Brake and Codell; Shattock and Wolff). Due to the advancements in printing and distribution technology, nineteenth-century periodicals were numerous and widely distributed. In the *Waterloo Directory*, John North estimates that there were around 125,000 titles published in the nineteenth century. The sheer volume of periodicals provides an important window into nineteenth-century culture. Because of the wide readership and the frequency of publication, periodicals are able to reveal the nuances of debates and the fine-grain development of ideas.

⁷ For the touchstones on the relationship between science and fiction, see Beer and Levine. For the relationship between science and the periodical press, see Ellegård, Cantor and Shuttleworth, Cantor et al., Henson et al., Mussell, Lightman, and Tattersdill.

articles did not just appear in science-specific journals. Science “permeated the content of general periodicals,” Gowan Dawson, Richard Noakes, and Jonathan R. Topham argue, and manifested in a variety of narrative forms “including fictional representations, glancing asides in political reports, and caricatures and allusions in comic magazines” (“Introduction” 1). “From the perspective of readers,” they continue, “science was omnipresent, and general periodicals probably played a far greater role than books in shaping the public understanding of new scientific discoveries, theories, and practices” (“Introduction” 1-2). Dawson, Noakes, and Topham identify a form of science that appears in unexpected places and is, by design, characterized in a way that makes the scientific ideas accessible and relevant to a general audience. I call this a “thin description” of popular science, drawing my definition from the recent methodological debates in literary studies about the affordances, limitations, and purposes of thick and thin description, especially in relation to science journalism and popular psychology.

In his *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), Clifford Geertz argues for the use of thick description in anthropology. He borrows the terms “thick” and “thin” description from Gilbert Ryle in order to critique behavioralism in anthropology. Behavioralism, in Geertz’s view, limits the evidential scope of anthropological study to observable behaviors; its method is a thin description of surface-level phenomenon. This type of thin description is an outgrowth of the attempt in anthropology in the first half of the twentieth century to appear more objective and scientific. Geertz counters this push for the appearance of objectivity by famously arguing that “man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun,” which makes the study of culture “not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning” (5).

Therefore, he argues, anthropologists need a thick description—a description in which evidence and interpretation are tightly intertwined—in order to unfurl the cultural meaning beneath surface-level behaviors. In Geertz’s hands, anthropological ethnography becomes a practice in fiction writing, in that both ethnography and fiction are “‘something made,’ ‘something fashioned’” and ultimately construct meaning via narrative and interpretation (15).

Geertz’s theory of culture and thick description catalyzed epistemological and methodological debates across human-oriented fields of inquiry. Sociologists Wayne Brekhus, John Galliher, and Jaber Gubrium take up the discussion of thick and thin description and make a case for thin description in sociology in “The Need for Thin Description” (2005). They argue that thin description can be useful and necessary depending on what they call the “preinvestigative *empirical purviews*” of the researcher (863; emphasis in original). Particular research questions, in other words, might call for a thin description rather than a thick one. They draw their example from Laud Humphrey’s field notes for his dissertation and subsequent monograph *Tearoom Trade* (1970), which studies anonymous homosexual encounters between men in public restrooms. Humphrey’s field notes reveal that he had a large amount of contextual information about the so-called “anonymous” participants: he had thickly described in his notes their backstory, encounters, and conversations. But in his published work, he only presented a thin description of the encounters. Brekhus et al. suggest that this is because a thin description constructs an atmosphere of anonymity around the encounters, whereas a thick description would reveal that the encounters were not quite as anonymous as they might initially seem. Brekhus et al.’s main point of divergence from Geertz is that they

construe both thick and thin descriptions as attention to surface evidence and only differ in the amount of detail provided. They do note that thin description does not allow for a full understanding of “the processes by which the complex realities of social life are managed and sustained,” but their argument reveals the extent to which both thick and thin description are fictions spun by the researcher for particular ends (864). The connection between the methods used in the social sciences and fiction writing has opened up productive cross-disciplinary collaboration opportunities with literary studies.

In the past decade, a number of literary scholars have argued for a reconceptualization of our theories of description and interpretation. Two special issues that have cultivated an impressive intellectual half-life are Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best’s “The Way We Read Now” (2009) and James English’s “New Sociologies of Literature” (2010). In “New Sociologies,” Heather Love makes a case in “Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn” (2010) for “a method of textual analysis that would take its cue from observation-based social science” because “[t]hese fields have developed practices of close attention, but, because they rely on description rather than interpretation, they do not engage the metaphysical and humanist concerns of hermeneutics” (“Close but not Deep” 375). She positions her method of close-but-not-deep reading within the descriptive turn, drawing on Bruno Latour’s actor-network-theory and Erving Goffman’s microsociology. Love’s reading practice allows for close textual analysis without the problematic reliance on the ethos of the literary critic as “privileged messenger” (“Close but not Deep” 387). She makes a similar argument in “Close Reading and Thin Description” (2013), but she explicitly positions her theory of reading within the methodological lineage of the social sciences’ thick and thin

description (“Close Reading” 404). For Love, thin description allows for an ethical attention to be paid to the object of study, though the interpretive fingerprints of the critic are never entirely absent—a crafted narrative always remains.

To this point, the theorists I have discussed conceive of thick and thin description in terms of the relationship between the observer and the object of study, arguing for varying amounts of interpretation and detail, while retaining the underlying truism that description is always already a constructed narrative, a subjective interpretation. Theodore Porter, however, reminds us of the unintentional repercussions of this conception of description. He argues that thick description (in Geertz’s sense), full of complexity, nuanced interpretation, and meaning-making, undercuts the claim of objectivity in science. Seeing how the sausage is made—that is, understanding the complicated, constructed, and interested nature of scientific practice—reveals just how subjective the research process really is. Porter argues that science since the late-nineteenth century has been “adapting its public voice and some of its inward practices” to the social expectation that the product of scientific research should be “suited to do-it-yourself use and adapted to a worldly politics that perceives subtlety as a cover for self-interested maneuvers tending to chicanery” (222). The sleight-of-hand that Porter performs is the subtle reorientation of the conversation about description from the relationship between the researcher and the object of inquiry to the researcher’s *account* of the object of inquiry and the reader. He identifies the minute ways that the presentation of scientific research has been slowly changing in order to keep up the appearance of objectivity (and therefore credibility) in front of the uninitiated, what he calls “thin description” written for the consumption and use by “outsiders”: thin description “offers

outsiders the opportunity to act and to choose, relying on knowledge without deep understanding” (222). Though he still understands thick and thin description in terms of levels of interpretation, Porter demonstrates the different ways these styles of description in the sciences “travel readily, both through space and across divides of class, ethnicity, language, educational level, and profession, and especially from the academy to government” (221). There is a secondary conversation about description in the sciences, quietly happening around the primary one, about the way the scientific community *describes* its product to the non-scientist.

Jill Morawski picks up on Porter’s reconceptualization of description in the sciences in her contribution to Sharon Marcus, Heather Love, and Stephen Best’s special issue “Descriptions Across Disciplines” (2016). As the title suggests, the issue is designed to track how the practice of description is used and theorized in and across different disciplinary boundaries. Where Love’s work argues for literary critics to borrow from the social scientists, Morawski argues for social scientists, and in particular her psychologists colleagues, to borrow from literary studies. Building from Porter, who raised concerns about the ethicality of thinly-described science crafted explicitly for public consumption, Morawski sharpens the definitions of thick and thin description, applies them to trends in twentieth-century psychology, and acknowledges—without fully endorsing—the positive potential of thin descriptions of science. In her words, thin description is “standardized, uniform, quantified, statistical knowledge” (122). Thin description is the way scientific knowledge is packaged and transmitted to the non-scientists, which, she suggests, often takes the form of easy-to-digest numbers and statistics. Thick description, by contrast, maintains the complexity of science

investigation, the “ever more technically sophisticated instruments and methods, legions of workers collaborating across scientific disciplines, local specificities and variations of knowledge making, and contestations over the validity and meaning of data” (122-23). Morawski connects George Miller’s call for “giving psychology away” in his 1969 American Psychological Association presidential address to thin description. To “give psychology away” means to disseminate psychological findings and theories beyond the discipline to the general public so that they can better understand themselves and their cognitive interaction with the world. This necessarily happens through thin description rather than thick—the presentation of research in a TED talk (thin description) is more accessible and understandable to the general public than research published in a specialized psychological journal (thick description). In order to make scientific knowledge useful to those who have not specifically trained in scientific research, a thin description is needed.

There is a price, however, for easily transportable science. Thin description depicts science stripped of its subjectivity and social construction. Though there are benefits to thinly-described science, there remains a danger in papering over the social influences that affect the production of knowledge. This danger is of course not unique to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Thin descriptions of science and scientific research proliferated within the discursive environment of the mid-nineteenth-century periodical press. The general periodicals, in fact, were one of the most influential communicators of scientific research to the public. Many writers and scientists, known as popularizers of science, translated the new scientific theories into language understandable by the periodical readership. To do so effectively these translators had to

practice a thin description, downplaying or all-together omitting the nuance, the complexity, and, most importantly, the socially-constructed subjectivity of science. While having the benefit of being understandable by a wider audience, thin description sacrifices transparency. In this form, specialized research appears final, definitive, and universal to the non-specialist. The subjectivity of the research process, the contingencies, the multiple interpretations, the interestedness is exchanged for simplicity and the appearance of objectivity.

A theory of thin description begins to help us understand how popular science manifested in the mid-Victorian general periodicals. Dickens's *All The Year Round* is a good representative of a general periodical and its use thin descriptions of popular science. The magazine had a broad readership, published on a wide range of topics in weekly installments, and housed both fiction and nonfiction pieces. Between the magazine's founding in 1859 and Dickens's death in 1870, in addition to publishing a variety of sensation fiction, including Charles Reade's *Very Hard Cash* (1863) and Collins's *The Moonstone*, *All The Year Round* boasted a large number of popular science articles. These articles, however, were not of the same variety and composition as the articles of popular science journalism found in the journals explicitly designed to promote and disseminate science to the middle and working class public. Instead, these articles worked from a thin description of science and explicitly connected them to, or put them in conversation with, social issues that concerned and interested the readers of *All The Year Round*.

Take, for example, a series of articles published in the early 1860s that take up the issue of mental illness, criminal prosecution, and expert testimony. "Of Right Mind"

(1860) argues that the majority of people are not of right mind and suffer from a mental issue, even if just a minor one. The author then suggests that this fact—that most people suffer from a minor mental issue—should limit the definition of mental illness and the way it is used in the courtroom. “Perverse temper, wrong-headed action, undue distress over trifles, and almost uncontrollable impulses to do this or that wild thing” should be considered “points of character to which a full responsibility attaches” (559). “Medical Nuts to Crack” (1861) challenges the validity of expert medical witnesses for mental illnesses by citing several anecdotes of court cases in which the guilt of the person on trial is not clear due to the circumstances and a perceived mental issue. For example, the author asks the reader to consider how accountable someone should be held who commits a crime in the confused moments just after waking from a deep sleep or someone who commits a crime while sleepwalking (the exact issue Collins’s takes up in *The Moonstone*). Ultimately, the article is designed to convince the reader to reconsider the validity of the medical witnesses in cases involving the question of insanity. And “M.D. and M.A.D.” (1862) uses the fact that both the prosecution and the defense summon expert medical witnesses in cases of mental illness to argue that expert testimony is subjective and should not be taken as a strict authority. The author uses this premise to consider the relationship between mental illness and responsibility for one’s actions:

In honest truth, every criminal is a lunatic; but he is a lunatic who would admit, except under the most obviously exceptional conditions, any such plea as a bar to responsibility. We even inherit characters or forms of mind as well as forms of body, and a neglected untaught man may be no more able to control this or that evil turn of character, than he may be able to control the shape of his nose. Nevertheless, human judges who are not All Wise, must give up society to anarchy, or shut their eyes on such metaphysical distinctions. In all human justice, said Montaigne, there is an element of injustice required to make it work. (511)

What all of these articles have in common, in addition to their basic subject matter, is their loose use of physiological psychology (consider all the connections between mental “character” and responsibility for one’s actions) and the application of their various discussions to social interests (in these cases, the relationship between mental illness and responsibility for criminal actions). None of these pieces position themselves as “objective” science, nor do they posture as simple translators of the psychological theories into accessible language. Instead, they all work from a thin description of physiological psychology in order to make an argument about a specific social issue.

My dissertation is couched within this understanding of the way scientific issues were worked through in the mid-Victorian periodicals, and it is informed by a particular deployment of thin description, within the recent methodological debates about description. In both the nonfiction and the fiction appearing in these magazines, thin descriptions of science were used by the authors to interrogate the social and moral implications of the new developments in science. I will demonstrate how the sensation novels I examine engage with the new theories of ecology and psychology and the implications about “character” they conjure through a thin description of popular science.

Ecology, Psychology, and the Circumstance of Character

The relationship between literature and science in the nineteenth century was complex and mutually determining. Disciplinary boundaries were porous, and scientists, philosophers, and literary authors shared many overlapping interests, inquiries, and

techniques.⁸ One of the clearest moments of this cross-disciplinary exchange and shared interests and concerns is the publication of *Origin of Species*. Darwin's publication marked a distinct turn in Victorian socio-cultural consciousness to an ecological understanding of the relationship between organisms and their environment. Though the importance of environments in the physio-biological developmental process was not original to Darwin, *Origin of Species* transformed the idea from a scientific concept into a cultural phenomenon. Seemingly overnight, Darwin brought debates of evolution and biological development to the center of cultural conversation. Part of the success of his work, or at least its notoriety, was the subsequent discussion and dissemination of his ideas through periodical publications. Influential studies such as Gillian Beer's *Darwin's Plots* (1983) and George Levine's *Darwin and the Novelists* (1988) demonstrate the extent and impact of Darwin's work on Victorian literature. Building from Thomas Kuhn's theory of scientific revolutions, Beer argues that Darwin's publication was so impactful because of its influence on the cultural imagination and not just the scientific community, bringing a "congruity between theory and nature" (2). In Levine's words:

Darwin's theory thrust the human into nature and time, and subjected it to the same dispassionate and material investigations hitherto reserved for rocks and stars. [Darwin's] history of the development of species gave authoritative form to a new narrative—or set of narratives—that has permanently reshaped the Western imagination. (1)

⁸ See Shuttleworth, *George Eliot* (1984); Chapple; Brantlinger, *Energy and Entropy* (1989); Gilbert, *Disease, Desire* (1997); Dames; Rylance; and Garratt.

Precisely because of his theory's reach outside of the scientific community and into the general public's consciousness, Darwin ushered in the nineteenth-century ecological turn, a paradigmatic shift which was monumental in its own time and is still felt today.

Ecological studies is a thriving area in Victorian studies in the present. Ecology has been often used in literary studies as a critical framework for ecocriticism or environmental humanities.⁹ Our current climate crisis has brought with an urgency eco-humanities and environmental studies to the forefront of literary studies in general, and nineteenth-century studies has become one of the leading subfields. And for good reason.

As Nathan Hensley and Philip Steer write:

Victorian England was both the world's first industrial society and its most powerful global empire: The nineteenth century therefore stands as the origin of not just the irreversible ecological degradation we have inherited from our nineteenth-century forebears, but also the global interconnection and vast asymmetries of power that are the legacies of the British Empire in the present. (2-3)

This quotation is drawn from Hensley and Steer's introduction to *Ecological Forms* (2018). Their edited collection participates in a flourish of publications from Victorianists on the environment and the nineteenth century, demonstrating the intellectual energy and vigor in this subfield. Other notable voices include Allen MacDuffie, whose *Victorian Literature, Energy, and the Ecological Imagination* (2014) traces the intellectual history of the concept of "energy" to the Victorian concerns about rapid urbanization dependent on finite, nonrenewable resources. Working within the parameters of the long nineteenth century, Heidi C. M. Scott unsettles the definition of ecology as a balanced symbiosis between humans and nature in favor of a "chaos ecology" (3) defined by an imbalanced

⁹ See for examples Nathan Hensley, Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, Jesse Oak Taylor, Sunkanya Banerjee, Devin Griffiths, and Heidi Scott.

relationship between humans and nature in her *Chaos and Cosmos: Literary Roots of Modern Ecology in the British Nineteenth Century* (2014). Jesse Oak Taylor, in his incisive monograph on London fog in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries *The Sky of Our Manufacture* (2016), reads Victorian London as “ground zero for both ‘the end of nature’ heralded by global climate change and the aesthetic encounter with that passing” (2). More recently, in *Extraction Ecologies and the Literature of the Long Exhaustion* (2021), Miller demonstrates how extraction, especially in the form of large-scale mining, became one of the central ways nineteenth-century Britain understood its relationship to the natural environment and remains one of, if not *the*, lasting imprint from the “industrial era” (which she defines as spanning roughly from the 1830s to the 1930s).¹⁰

A vast majority of the work in ecological studies at the present conceives of “ecology” as the concept has been defined and deployed by twentieth-century environmentalism. However, this is not the only way to understand ecology. My work is inspired by the increased interest in ecology in the Victorian period, but my focus is on entangled, mutually-determining relationship between organisms and their environment that “ecology” invokes and the ways in which the mid-Victorians grafted the new natural science theories (especially from evolutionary biology and zoology) onto the burgeoning social sciences and worked through the implications in literature representations of

¹⁰ Miller also served as guest editor for the recent issue of *Victorian Network* on “Victorian Ecologies,” which demonstrates the overwhelming interest in this topic by the upcoming generation of Victorian scholars.

character.¹¹ Devin Griffiths's recent work has returned to the mid-Victorian moment as a way to complicate the understanding of ecology as simply an environmental or holistic system concept and recenter ecology's dynamism and relations to power distribution. In theorizing an ecology of form, Griffiths defines this type of mid-Victorian ecology as:

emergent rather than designed or predefined; densely *situational*, that is, composed of a complex of living and nonliving elements; and centrally concerned with *power*, the uneven distribution of resources and agency, the fact of violence as well as cooperation, of predation along with community. (299; emphasis in original)

Griffiths approaches ecology through Darwin and the natural sciences and applies it here to form, aesthetics, and environmental humanities. Importantly, he draws his interpretive framework for ecology from Victorian power couple George Eliot and George Henry Lewes. In doing so, Griffiths reminds us that though ecology originated from the field of evolutionary biology, the ramifications—both in the mid-Victorian period and subsequent century—were interdisciplinary.

Lewes's work on physiological psychology, Griffiths writes, "emphasized both the open-ended interaction among organism and their environment—their running 'adjustment with certain given conditions'—and the reciprocal impact of those adjustments" (302). Using Lewes, Griffiths reads Eliot's work "ecologically," which means reading with an eye for the subtle "effect that characters have on their wider world" and "the reciprocal impact" of the world on the characters (302). Reading George Eliot this way—that is, through Lewes's ecologically-informed physiological

¹¹ Much of ecological studies incorporates nonhuman elements into their conceptions of environmental relations. My focus is on the way the Victorians extrapolated the theories of ecological relationship explicitly onto the human-social environment relationship via mid-Victorian physiological psychology.

psychological theories—is familiar and fertile ground. The amount of entangled ideas and influences between the Victorian duo is hard to estimate entirely and has given rise to some of the best interpretive accounts of Eliot’s novels to date. Eliot herself articulated an ecological theory in her “Notes on Form in Art” (1868) by defining form as “a limit determined partly by the intrinsic relations or composition of the object, and partly by the extrinsic action of other bodies upon it” (234). However, the usefulness and productivity of reading mid-Victorian novels “ecologically” does not end with Eliot. As Nick Dames has shown, physiological theories informed much of how Victorians thought about their relationship to reading. While Eliot is the most obvious candidate, the literature produced during the historical moment in which she was writing was very much a part of the same cultural network and was informed by the new theories of mind arising from mid-Victorian psychology.

Mid-Victorian physiological psychology is the combination of associationist psychology, phrenology, and physiology. Its fundamental claim is that the brain and body are interconnected. Dames offers this definition: physiological psychology is “the study of the automatic nervous system and its interrelations with cerebral functioning that sought a materialist and organicist basis for the associationism that dominated eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British theories of mind” (8). The interest in the material basis of mind and consciousness began in Britain in the 1840s and continued until the 1890s when experimental psychology became the dominant form of psychological investigation. The mid-Victorian psychologists differentiated their conception of consciousness from the associationist and faculty psychologies that dominated the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries by theorizing a dynamic theory of mind, influenced by a variety of

internal and external forces over time. John Stuart Mill, Alexander Bain, Herbert Spencer, William Benjamin Carpenter, and Lewes, to name a few, developed theories that conceived consciousness to be the result of reciprocal interactions between an organism and its environment.

During the ecological turn in the 1860s and 1870s, Spencer applied evolutionary theory (influenced by both Lamarck and Darwin) to psychological development, which he published in his *Principles of Psychology* (1873). Spencer conceived human psychology to be the result of a long period of evolutionary development, just as Darwinian evolution added a large duration of time to the understanding of biological development. Lewes was highly influenced by Spencer, and he combined Spencer's evolutionary psychology with the study of society and social development in order to posit a theory of psychology that accounted for both the internal forces (physiobiology, shaped by evolution) and external forces (social and natural environments).¹² What both Spencer and Lewes's theories have in common is the inclusion of social relations and influences in their psychology. Though the theory did not originate with him, Spencer is one of the most well-known proponents of an organic social theory, the idea that society functions like a biological organism and is therefore susceptible to analysis along scientific lines. Lewes, as a historian of philosophy by training, was very interested in the relationships between past and present, and he incorporated historical influences—at the level of individuals, species, and societies—into his theories of psychological development. In his *Study of Psychology* (1879), the third series in his magnum opus

¹² Lewes also knew personally and shared work with Haeckel. See Lewes's 1867 and 1871 letters (p. 128 in Baker, Volume II; p. 62 in Baker, Volume III).

Problems of Life and Mind (1874-79), he combines evolutionary biology with Comtean sociology and argues that an individual's psychology can only properly be understood when contextualized within society, as social norms and customs influence the shape of discrete psychological expression.

The incorporation of social influences into the human sciences is one of the defining characteristics of the ecological turn in Britain, and this *social ecology* can be seen not only in the scientific theories but also in the literature of the period.¹³ I define social ecology as the culturally-constructed environs that dictate the available modes of self-expression accessible to human beings in their particular socio-historical context. The most famous example of social ecology in Victorian literature is Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-72). The novel plots the slow but steady quotidian influences of the community on the individual characters. Eliot tells John Blackwood in an 1871 letter that her goal in *Middlemarch* is "to show the gradual action of ordinary causes rather than

¹³ The incorporation of social influences in psychological theory is the result of the mid-Victorian ecological turn, but the full implications were not completely formalized in psychology until the twentieth century when these two conceptual programs—ecology and psychology—would be combined into the psychological subfields cognitive ecology and ecological psychology. Cognitive ecology is "the study of cognitive phenomena in context" (Hutchins 705), with "context" conceived as both natural and social environments. For more on cognitive ecology, see Bateson and Ratcliffe and Dukas. Ecological psychology was pioneered by James Gibson, whose most mature statement on the topic was published in his *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (1979). Though Gibson's focus is on visual perception, he argues that an animal's psychological processes can only be fully understood within its environmental context. Gibson's theory of a dynamic organism-environment relationship was highly influenced by William James (through Edwin Holt) and James's attempt to "connect analyses of mental functioning with biological processes," a theory of mind informed by "the functionalist assumption that biological processes, and correlatively, psychological phenomena, reflect an organism's coming to terms with the character of its environment" (Heft 17). My contention is that the coupling of ecological and psychological theory and the resulting understanding of the organism-environment relationship as one of dynamic interaction extends further back than James to his intellectual forebearers and influencers, the mid-Victorian physiological psychologists.

exceptional” (“To John Blackwood” 168), and in the novel itself she states her intention to analyze the “threadlike pressure of small social conditions that determine both individual and societal development” (*Middlemarch*, 180). However, though Eliot has received the lion’s share of the scholarly considerations on the relationship between the social environment and psychological development in the Victorian novel, the dramatization of internal and external influences on character development was not unique to her. The sensation novel’s peak period of production and popularity coincides exactly with the ecological turn and demonstrates many of the characteristics often associated with Eliot’s late-period psychological realism.¹⁴

As I discuss further in Chapters Two and Four, the sensation novel was at the center of critical discussions of character and circumstance. In addition to being devices of literary construction, “character” and “circumstance” connote the internal and external influences that form an ecological theory of psychological development. Character and circumstance have an intertwining history in the novel genre. The eighteenth-century *Bildungsroman* (also known as the “novel of education”), for example, follows a character through various social situations and experiences and tracks how the character develops, usually from some sort of youthful naiveté to worldly wisdom, as a result of these circumstances. Franco Moretti identifies the key problematic at the heart of the genre as “the conflict between the ideal of *self-determination* and the equally imperious demands of *socialization*” (15). The *Bildungsroman*’s central concern is the tension between the self and society, the balance, in other words, between one’s individual

¹⁴ Collins was a familiar friend to both Lewes and Eliot (see Chapter Three for further discussion of their relationships). Braddon was a dedicated reader of Eliot’s and was at least familiar with Lewes’s work (see Chapter Five). Lewes also read some of Braddon’s work.

psychological development and the external pressures of one's social circumstances. The Bildungsroman was a pivotal novel in the eighteenth century for two reasons: the 1700s saw the rise of the middle class (and the class conflicts this precipitated) and the dominance of associationist psychology, which theorized a one-to-one model of psychological development based on one's experiences. By the mid nineteenth century, however, both social relations and psychology had shifted and new understandings of character and circumstance emerged.¹⁵

In the wake of the ecological turn, character became understood to be something that was shaped by multiple influences, both internal and external, simultaneously. Rather than static, linear development in relation to circumstance, as was depicted in the Bildungsroman, character in the latter half of the nineteenth century was depicted as a dynamic and ever-evolving relationship to one's environs.¹⁶ In *The Science of Character* (2022), Pearl Brilmyer argues that in keeping pace with developments in material science and philosophy the understanding of "character" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries transformed from "the inner truth of an individual into a materially determined figuration produced through shifts in the boundaries between the body's interior and

¹⁵ Nancy Armstrong traces the history of the British novel from the eighteenth and the nineteenth century novel the gothic genre and the evolving socio-psychological developments of the period.

¹⁶ My discussion of character is underpinned by the theory that depictions of literary character are directly tied to understandings of human beings, as defined by the dominate model of psychology of the time. This is not the only way to discuss literary character, though. For example, Deidre Lynch argues that character in the eighteenth-century novel developed in relation to the new privatized, commercial economies and the reorientation of social class this facilitated. Alex Woloch examines literary character through a distributional matrix, considering who gets narrative airtime and why. Catherine Gallagher approaches the characters in the Victorian novel through a history of science lens and demonstrates how character type and particular literary characters reverse empirical logic.

exterior” (12). She argues that literary character in this period manifested as “the expression of an aggregate of qualities that temporarily unify to create the sense of ‘character’” (Brilmyer 11). As I will demonstrate in what follows, this new conception of character—that is, the discrete psychological expression of a person, informed by multiple socially-constructed environmental factors converging simultaneously on an individual—is evident in the sensation novel in crucial narrative junctures in which character and circumstance collide.

Collins famously writes in his Preface to *The Moonstone* that his novel is explicitly invested in upending the familiar relationship between character and circumstance in literature. Rather than circumstance affecting character, he follows “the influence of character on circumstance” (liii). As Helena Ifill has recently demonstrated, the plottedness and strategic deployment of circumstance in narrative construction in Collins’s and Braddon’s fiction is in part a dramatization of the burgeoning theories of biological determinism. Circumstance, as understood in the nineteenth century, was multi-faceted. As Ifill writes:

The term “circumstance” also carried various meanings in relation to both nature and nurture; it could mean the conditions of one’s birth (from physical health, to inherited features of body or mind, to social class and prospects) or the many environmental factors that could have an impact on one’s life (such as upbringing, education, income and so on). (4)

Though Ifill’s focus is on the sensation novel, the relationship between character and circumstance and its representation in literature were omnipresent preoccupations across mid-Victorian novel genres. From Eliot, to Dickens, to Braddon, the tension between incident-driven and character-driven narratives was a pervasive concern. It is in the sensation novel, however, that this tension moves from the background to center stage,

due to the critical narrative about the genre's formulaic construction and the influence of French naturalism on the genre's formal structure.

Sensation, British Naturalism, and the Social Ecology of Character

The sensation novel was an important and popular genre in the second half of the nineteenth century. The sensation novel is a particular species of mid-Victorian fiction containing scandalous storylines—bigamy, murder, and madness—located in recognizable middleclass domestic settings, often concerned with the experiences of women, produced primarily in the 1860s and 1870s. Andrew Maunder traces the genre's origins to nineteenth-century "theatre's 'sensation drama' and the accompanying displays of intense emotion and physical spectacle this encompassed" (x). In addition to melodramatic theatre, the sensation novel added to its wide public appeal by bringing together a combination of popular cultural forms, such as Newgate novels, broadsheet literature, newspaper reports of criminal activity, and Gothic novels (Maunder x).¹⁷ Patrick Brantlinger suggests that one of the genre's most crucial components is the injection of mystery into the domestic sphere, positioning sensation fiction as a mid-Victorian mediator between the Romantic Gothic novels of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and modern day detective fiction ("What is 'Sensational'" 3). The four most famous authors associated with the genre are Ellen Wood, Wilkie Collins, Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Charles Reade, accompanied by a host of secondary

¹⁷ Maunder's *Varieties of Women's Sensation Fiction* (2004) remains one of the best overviews of the genre, especially in terms of bringing new, less-familiar women authors into the tent of "sensation novelist."

authors, such as Rhoda Broughton, Florence Marryat, Mary Cecil Hay, Felicia Skene, and Dora Russell.¹⁸

The sensation genre was highly read and commercially successful. It resonated with and interested a broad section of the reading public, imbuing the genre with a popularity that would be its greatest achievement but also make it a target for literary and cultural critics. From their perceived position as cultural and moral gatekeepers, critics often lambasted the genre for being formulaic and morally impure, and they derided the authors for attempting to capitalize on their readers' low literary standards and seemingly insatiable readerly appetites. One of the most well-known examples of this critical account comes from a now-famous 1863 *Quarterly Review* article by Henry Mansel, in which he defines sensation fiction in a formula, articulating what he perceived to be the literary conventions of the genre. He classifies sensation fiction against an unnamed form of "high" literature, which he imagines as having characteristics such as "deep knowledge of human nature, graphic delineations of individual character, vivid representations of the aspects of Nature or the workings of the soul" (Mansel 486). Mansel generalizes the elements of the sensation novel formula into a series of generic tropes: it is driven by incident and written to amuse or instruct; it contains exaggerated plot and characters; is set at a close temporal and spatial proximity to its readers; and depicts its characters dichotomously (e.g. good and evil, male and female, rich and poor)

¹⁸ Dickens hovers problematically in the background of sensation fiction. Many of his novels feature sensational elements, and he was closely associated and occasionally collaborated with Collins. Recent scholarship, though, tends to treat Dickens on his own, as an extension of romanticism, or as a social realist. For an older work that groups Dickens with the sensationalists, see Phillips.

and completely interchangeable.¹⁹ Margaret Oliphant describes the sensation authors as “[w]riters who have no genius and little talent” and “make up for it by displaying their acquaintance with the accessories and surroundings of vice, with the means of seduction, and with what they set forth as the secret tendencies of the heart” (258-9). This critical narrative about the sensation novel was pervasive and well-known, but that did not slow the genre’s market success or popularity: people read sensation novels, and this fact alone gave the genre a cultural currency.

Despite Mansel’s and other critics’ claims of the genre’s literary simplicity and lack of narrative or character depth, the novels of Wood, Collins, and Braddon are strikingly complex, especially in their engagement with contemporary science and psychology.²⁰ In the same *Quarterly Review* article, Mansel draws on French materialist philosopher and physiologist Pierre Jean Georges Cabanis to make the association

¹⁹ Despite Mansel’s attempt at a working definition of the genre, no clear consensus exists about what exactly defines sensation fiction as sensation fiction, not even in our scholarly accounts. It is sometimes defined as a scandalous subgenre of mid-Victorian fiction in the 1860s and 1870s; it is sometimes used as a catch-all term for any “popular novel” written in the latter half of the nineteenth century outside of (what is now) the established canon of Victorian novelists (Dickens, Gaskell, Eliot, Trollope, Thackeray, Hardy); and it is sometimes used to mean any novel written by any of the “big three” sensation novelists, Braddon, Collins, and Wood. Charles Reade is sometimes grouped in with these writers as the fourth “big” sensationalist, but Reade did not agree with nor welcome this association, and rightly so in my estimation. Reade’s novels have a different narrative texture that sets them apart from the other novelists, and he wrote in a variety of established genres.

²⁰ For scholarship on sensation fiction and science, see *Science, Sexuality, and Sensation Novels* (2011) by Laurie Garrison; “Sensation and Science” (2011) by Susan David Bernstein; and “Evolution and Sensation Fiction” (2021) by James Aaron Green. For readings of Braddon’s relationship to science, see “Ape Anxiety” (2001) by Bernstein and “Sensationalising Science” (2002) by Barbara Onslow. For accounts of Collins’s engagement with contemporary science, “Science and *The Moonstone*” (1983) by Ira Nadel; *Dead Secrets* (1992) by Tamar Heller; *Wilkie Collins* (2005) by Lyn Pykett; and *Wilkie Collins, Medicine, and the Gothic* (2009) by Laurence Talairach-Vielmas.

between the “sensation” of the genre’s title with physiological psychology, famously describing the genre as “preaching to the nerves” (482). He asserts that the sensation novelists attempted to elicit a reaction on their readers’ nerves by resorting to scandalous subject matter, rather than appealing to higher psychological faculties. As I discuss further in Chapter Four, the “sensation” of the genre’s title has its origins in two linguistic registers, simultaneously signifying a physical and a conceptual experience. The act of reading supposedly extracted nervous excitement from readers (the physical) using exciting storylines of immoral or criminal action (the conceptual). The critical narrative surrounding sensation fiction used the physiological psychological lexicon to interpret the reading experience. The sensation novel’s connections to psychology do not end with its generic title, however; the content of the narratives is also deeply attentive to the newly-emerging science of mind. Sally Shuttleworth argues that where Victorian psychiatry attempted to “demarcate the boundaries of sanity and insanity, of pathological and acceptable behavior,” sensation novelists “seemed to privilege pathology” and “locate normality not in the realm of psychological control and socially disciplined behavior, but rather in the sphere of turbulent excess” (“Preaching to the Nerves” 192). Jenny Bourne-Taylor argues that the critical association of the sensation novel with psychology was the result of a perceived decline in cultural values and standards and demonstrates how Collins draws on contemporary psychology in a variety of ways in his novels. Though both Shuttleworth and Bourne-Taylor note the relationship between the sensation novel’s content-level engagement with psychology and the genre’s overarching narrative conventions, it is Ifill’s *Creating Character* that articulates a broader argument about the tension between character psychology and the sensation genre’s narrative impulses. Ifill

argues that Braddon and Collins's notorious use of incident-driven plotlines function as dramatizations of contemporary theories of biological and psychological determinism. Reading the character-incident relation in this way opens up new interpretive avenues for understanding the complexity of the sensation novel's participation in mid-Victorian psychological discourse.

My dissertation reframes the examination of the overlapping interests between the sensation novelists and psychologists by contextualizing their work within the mid-Victorian ecological turn. In what follows, I examine five sensation novels in order to bring into focus the moments of tension between a character's volitional subjectivity and the impersonal social forces that govern the affordances and limitations of personal agency in the social world. It is in these moments of tension that I argue a *social ecology of character* becomes legible. The sensation novel is known for its engagement with the powerful forces of tradition and social convention, often in relationship to the experiences of women. Like Charlotte Perkins Gilman's famous depiction of a woman going insane from being mentally and physically confined by the social circumstances that place her in the control of the men in her life, the sensation novel dramatizes the truncated and limited options for agency and autonomy for many of its female characters. Braddon's most famous novel *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), for example, demonstrates this well through contrasting depictions of its two main characters, Robert Audley and Lady Audley. Robert, a young, wealthy gentleman, has all the options in the world open to him; Lady Audley (or perhaps Lucy Graham) is forced to turn to bigamy, deception, and (attempted) murder to escape poverty and carve out a space for some social power of her own. In Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859), as another example, both Laura Fairlie

and Anne Catherick are manipulated by the men in their lives who wield social and legal power over the women.

However, the social ecology of character, as I conceive it, differs from these examples in that it focuses on moments of tension and contact between characters and their social environments at pivotal moments in the story, rather than worked through as overarching themes developed across the course of the narrative. While Lucy Graham and Ida Palliser have similar social pressures informing the decisions they make, the representation of how those pressures dictate their decisions is presented differently in their respective novels: Lucy's social pressures are background context for the way her character presents in the novel; Ida's social pressures coalesce simultaneously on her in the moment in which she is forced to make her crucial, life-altering decision. This subtle but important difference in representation shifts the emphasis in the novels from familiar social commentary and critique to a dynamic understanding of the individual-social relationship presented through moments of conflict between circumstance and character.

As Woolf reminds us in her famous essay on character "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (1924), when human relations change, so too do our representations of literary character. The notion that literary character is tied to relations in the world beyond the novel is another way of saying that representations of literary character participate in a form of literary realism.²¹ Literary character and realism have an intertwining history,

²¹ For more scholarship on the general relationship between sensation fiction and realism, see Gilbert, *Disease*; Nemesvaria; Brown; and Allan. For work on realism and sensation with an emphasis on legal and cultural relations, see Tromp, *A Private Rod*; Hensley; and Steinlight.

and it is hard to talk about one without talking about the other.²² In “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” for example, Woolf considers depictions of character in fiction to make a larger comment on literary realism, that is, the relationship between the world and its representation in literature. Ian Watt’s formal realism is another case in point. Watt’s well-known argument about the rise of the modern Western novel is that the eighteenth century was home to an epistemic shift from the old realism of Platonic universals to the new realism of individual sensory investigation. This shift is visible, he posits, in the eighteenth-century British novels of Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, and Henry Fielding. These authors make use of a set of narrative procedures, he suggests, such as crafting original storylines rather than drawing from mythology, legend, or history; subordinating plot to individual experience; using past experiences as logical antecedents to present action; and depicting middle-class characters with, for example, recognizably common first and last names.²³ In his view, the familiarity and recognizability of characters in the modern novel is a product of larger developments in an empirically-grounded realism. For all its flaws, of which there are many, Watt’s study remains useful

²² In her essay “George Eliot: Immanent Victorian” (2005), which has proven to have a rich intellectual afterlife, Catherine Gallagher contributes to the character-realism debate by noting the way that the realist novel turns empiricist logic on its head by working from the idea that the species-type is true and the individual character is fictional.

²³ It is worth mentioning that Watt’s account of the rise of the novel is not the only one. Michael McKeon’s account is founded on a dialectical understanding of history, which he then extrapolates to the creation of the novel genre. The eighteenth-century novel, McKeon argues, came into being as a mediator for intractable epistemological (the clash between romance idealism and naïve empiricism) and social (the clash between aristocratic and progressive ideologies) crises. Though fundamentally flawed in its limit to male authors, Watt’s account is of more use to my argument because of his interest in defining literary realism.

because of his connecting of realism and character with larger questions of epistemology. Literature, in this view, functions as both a reflection of the contemporary cultural worldview and a testing ground for further epistemological investigation. This understanding of literature as vehicle for experiments in knowledge production, rather than simply a mimetic representation, is in line with the Émile Zola's definition of literary Naturalism, a nineteenth-century literary form influential on both sides of the Channel.

Like realism, Naturalism in literature has been notoriously difficult to define.²⁴ In its European context, literary Naturalism is broadly defined as a movement in France beginning in the 1860s that harbored aesthetic and philosophical commitments to “documentary description” of specific locales and local inhabitants in order to meditate on the often harsh or unpleasant social and economic realities and is “legitimated by reference to the social and medical sciences” (Hill 7). It was highly influenced by Darwin and his theories: “Darwin created a context that made naturalism—with its emphasis upon theories of heredity and environment—a convincing way to explain the nature of reality” (Lehan 47). Some of the common literary tropes of the naturalist genre are the unflinching depictions of tragic events, especially concerning poverty, alcoholism, and other inherited vices; the directing of character and story development through determinist principles; the façade of disinterested objectivity in the author's approach to her or his subject; and the abundant use of description to construct the material, external

²⁴ Rather than revisiting the philosophical or aesthetic origins of Naturalism, I begin with Naturalism in literature in order to limit the scope of my discussion.

realities of the narrative. Donald Pizer, though thinking specially about nineteenth-century American Naturalism, defines the genre as follows:

The naturalist populates his novel primarily from the lower middle class or the lower class. His characters are the poor, the uneducated, the unsophisticated. His fictional world is that of the commonplace and unheroic in which life would seem to be chiefly the dull round of daily existence, as we ourselves usually conceive of our lives. But the naturalist discover in this world those qualities of man usually associated with the heroic or adventurous, such as acts of violence and passion which involve sexual adventure or bodily strength and which culminate in desperate moments and violent death. (9-10)

There are a lot of overlap in generic style and preoccupations between the French, English, and American schools, including what Pizer describes here as locating the heroic in mundane or ordinary material realities. My interests in this dissertation are in the ways in which the sensation novelists, and Braddon in particular, incorporated influences from the French Naturalist school with the naturalist human-in-nature theory that arose from the mid-Victorian ecological turn.

In France, one of the formalizing moments in the naturalist movement occurred in literary critic Hippolyte Taine's influential 1858 essay on Honoré de Balzac. Taine brings the "naturalist" of the sciences into the literary lexicon in order to describe the philosophy informing *La Comédie humaine* (1829-48):

In the eyes of the naturalist man is not a reasoning creature who is independent, superior, healthy in himself, capable of achieving truth and virtue by his own efforts, but a simple force, of the same order as other creatures, receiving from circumstance his degree and his direction. (106)

Much like the eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century associationist psychologists, Taine held that all knowledge was gleaned through experience. He argues that Balzac is like a natural scientist in that he, with an anatomist's hand, describes people "as they

are—that is, very ugly—crudely, without softening or embellishing anything” (107). This view informed Taine’s conception of literature. As George Becker writes, Taine “tended to reduce psychological phenomena to a physiological level; he thought of the novel as basically an accumulation of data which through the operation of scientific laws would fall into inevitable patterns” (105). In French literature, the naturalist movement began in earnest in the 1860s with novelists like Balzac; Edmond and Jules de Goncourt (especially their novel *Germinie Lacerteux* [1864]); and Zola (especially his *Thérèse Raquin* [1867]). Zola, though, was the champion of the naturalist movement in France. He was very probably highly influenced by Taine, as Zola begins to refer to artists as “naturalists” in the wake of Taine’s essay. Where Taine’s essay is often pointed to as one of the formalized starting point of French Naturalism, Zola’s 1880 essay “The Experimental Novel” often marks the movement’s apogee.²⁵ As I discuss further in Chapter Five, Zola’s theory of the Naturalist novel was influential in bringing naturalism into the cultural conversation across the Channel; however, I content that a form of literary naturalism—with its preoccupations with the human-environment relation and the innovations in the natural and social sciences—already existed in mid-Victorian Britain.

Unlike French and American Naturalism, the movement’s influence and parameters in Britain are not clearly established or delineated. One of the primary critical conceptions of British Naturalism is that it is an extension of nineteenth-century realism,

²⁵ Two other high-water-mark moments are the famous 1877 Trapp Dinner, a celebration of the publication of *L’Assommoir* (1877) attended by Paul Alexis, Henri Céard, Léon Hennique, Joris-Karl Huysmans, Guy de Maupassant, Octave Mirbeau, Gustave Flaubert, Georges Charpentier, and Zola, and the publication of *Les Soirées de Médan* (1880). See Hill for a transnational history of the genre.

following the “high realism” of the mid-Victorian novelists who, the story goes, championed psychological interiority and volitional subjectivity as the pinnacle of character representation in fiction. Late Victorian Naturalism, exemplified by authors such as Thomas Hardy, George Moore, and George Gissing, incorporates “a pessimistic materialistic determinism” (Becker 35).²⁶ The emphasis in naturalistic novels is on the external, the surface, the material, and they frequently take as their subject matter the often futile struggle for fruitful and fulfilling existence by the lower socio-economic classes. However, as I will show, a literary naturalism manifested in Victorian literature well before the final decades of the century as a social ecology of character, informed by the ecological understanding of the human-environment relationship arising out of Victorian scientific naturalism and the new materialist interests of physiological psychology.²⁷

Discussions of Naturalism in literature, especially French Naturalism, compared the literary style to that of the growing field of physiology. Naturalism’s frank treatment of taboo or unpleasant topics in direct, unstylistic language drew parallels to the

²⁶ A notable exception to the theory of Naturalism in British literature as a late-nineteenth-century form is Georg Brandes’s, who argues instead that Naturalism is exemplified in the English Romantic Poets. See *Naturalism in Nineteenth Century English Literature*.

²⁷ Scientific naturalism as a term and practice has a multifaceted and complicated history in the nineteenth century. Huxley famously championed a practice of scientific naturalism in the Prologue to his *Essays on Some Controverted Questions* (1892). He forwarded a scientific naturalism as a counter to supernaturalism as a basis for ontological and epistemological investigations. Huxley positions his argument as part of a longer lineage that spans the second half of the nineteenth century and participates in a variety of discourses, including literary discourse. See Turner, Young, Richards, Secord, van Wyhe, Lightman, Dawson, and Lightman and Dawson for discussions of the complexities of naturalism in scientific contexts in the Victorian period.

physiologist's scalpel and interest in the material body. As I discuss further in Chapter Five, Zola and Braddon participated in this conflation of materialist science and literature. However, though the most common, physiology was not the only science to be put into conversation with Naturalism. William Samuel Lilly, in a Fortnightly Review article titled "The New Naturalism" (1885), argued that the "Old Naturalism" was more psychology than physiology. For Lilly, both the "Old" and "New" Naturalism propose "conformity to nature as its great law" (243). The difference was how they defined "nature." Lilly argues that the older model conceived nature as "the visible expression of an invisible reality" (243) and drew moral qualities and universal principles from the detailed examination of everyday experience. The New Naturalism in contrast, according to Lilly, functions at a material level, only recognizing that which can be empirically "analysed, or dissected, or vivisected" (244). It takes for its subject "the human animal" and allows for "the action of its environment, the compulsion of heredity, [and] the fatality of instinct" (244). The issue Lilly takes with the New Naturalism (embodied by Zola) is that it lacks the ability to address "ethical and jurisprudential problems" in the same way vivisection of animals fails to reveal the "secrets of physical life" (248). Instead, the novelist should function as a psychologist rather than a physiologist, revealing through the material realities of life the invisible realities, such as "sentiments, traits of character, [and] vicissitudes of the soul" (247). What Lilly's argument crucially foregrounds is the way that both modes of literary realism he discusses are forms of "Naturalism," in that they both concern themselves with the relationship between humans and their environments, though they do so from two different conceptions of "nature." The difference he notes between the Old Naturalism's surface-depth focus and the New

Naturalism's surface and material focus is couched in his religious views, but that does not detract from the overarching observation of the shifting interest in nineteenth-century fiction from internal and invisible realities to external and visible realities. This shift maps directly onto the evolving philosophies behind Victorian physiological psychology (which I unpack further in Chapter Three). It is this shift that my project is interested in, and I argue that it is clearly legible in the Victorian sensation fiction novel.

I look to the popular sensation genre as my case study for this naturalistic social ecology of character. The social ecology of character as I conceive it draws from French literary naturalism to create a distinctly mid-Victorian form of Naturalism. It is concerned, as is much of Victorian literature writ large, with the upper and middle classes, rather than the lower classes who feature prominently in French and American naturalistic novels. The sensation genre, as discussed above, inhabits a nexus between character-driven and incident-driven narrative forms. Rather than a literary shortcoming or result of rapid, unimaginative production, I read this tension as a literary manifestation of the friction between humans and their social environs made thinkable in the ecological turn. In this way, the tension at the level of form between character and circumstance functions as a version of literary realism that I argue more closely resembles French Naturalism than what has been traditionally discussed as "Victorian realism."²⁸ Further, I

²⁸ Scholarship on the sensation novel has a history of discussing the genre in relation to realism, either dichotomously or dialectically. Brantlinger argues that the sensation novel contains anti-realist impulses because of the emphasis the genre places on moving beyond a façade of appearances to reveal a mystery or truth not immediately perceptible to the casual observer, which he suggests "runs counter to the common-sense empiricism that informs earlier novelistic realism" (*Reading Lesson* 144). For further discussions, see Allan; Nemesvari; Tromp, Gilbert, and Haynie; and Brown.

argue that the social ecology of character is located in narrative moments, rather than across entire narratives. And there is precedent for thinking about literary realism as charged *moments* rather than as a sustained *mode* of fiction. Fredric Jameson, influenced by Georg Lukacs's theory of the novel, has recently posited a theory that defines literary realism as the result of the tension between the temporal *recit* of the chronological narrative (past, present, future) and the descriptive impulse that he calls "affect." Unlike, say, Roland Barthes, who finds realism in insignificant details, Jameson locates realism in ephemeral moments in which story and description collide. In what follows, I focus on pivotal moments in each chapter, anchoring my discussion on a crucial narrative moment in which character and social forces clash. It is in these moments that I locate the social ecology of character.

Sensation novel lends itself to this type of analysis because part of its generic form is based on crucial narrative moments. The most famous example is from Collins's *The Woman in White*, the novel many point to as the inaugural sensation novel. In the opening act, Walter Hartright encounters Anne Catherick, the eponymous woman in white, wandering lost on a road outside of London. In a sensational scene, drawing on both the physiological and conceptual definitions of "sensation," Anne touches Walter's shoulder in a blood-curdling narrative moment. These types of moments in sensation novels are part redirected energy from their gothic predecessors and part, I argue, narrative-level manifestations of the cultural concerns about the tensions between character and circumstance.²⁹ As we will see in my discussions of my chosen sensation

²⁹ To be clear, this example from *The Woman in White* demonstrates the sensation novel's ties to the Gothic genre. It is not an example of my argument about the social ecology of

novels, not all of these center-of-gravity moments occur at the climax of the narratives. Instead, the moments I focus on are all directly associated with crucial character-defining junctures and participate in the new ecological discourse by dramatizing the new conception of human-environment relationship. Though the human-environment relationship is perhaps the defining feature of the modern Western novel and is often framed as individual-social relations, I argue that the ecological turn in the mid-Victorian period pushes this relationship one step further by breaking from the one-to-one associationist model of development. In the older model, good environments produce good characters, bad environments produce bad characters, or the exact reverse (where good characters emerge from a bad environment, for example), which is explained entirely by their biological “nature.” What is different in the post-ecological turn Victorian novel is the explicit meditation on *multiple* forces converging on a character literary and producing a direct psychological effect. Ultimately, this dissertation analyzes the following five sensation novels at the level of moment and at the level of mode. It is at the moment-level that I locate the social ecology of character. It is at the mode-level that I locate a version of British Naturalism that existed in genre fiction in mid-Victorian Britain before the *fin-de-siècle*.

An additional sub-focus of my project is on the attention Wood and Braddon pay to the unequal distribution of social agency along gender lines in the nineteenth century. Haeckel notably uses “economy” to describe the ecological relationship between organisms and their environment. In Griffiths’s conception of mid-Victorian ecology, the

character. I include it here to serve as an example of the way the sensation novel genre emphasized the importance of narrative moments, even from its earliest examples.

relations to power and “the uneven distribution of resources and agency” are at the center (“*Silas Marner*” 299). Like all economies, the resources, power, and opportunities are not distributed evenly. Wood and Braddon are particularly attuned to the places and situations in which women encounter the limits of their social agency. Many of their readers were women, and the great extent to which the sensation novel is concerned with the experiences of women has become a defining feature of the genre. Important studies like Elaine Showalter’s *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), Gilbert and Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), and Kate Flint’s *The Woman Reader* (1995) laid the foundation for what is now a thriving and robust field interested in the relations between nineteenth-century women readers and writers. In an attempt to do justice to the interests and concerns of the authors I study, all of my chapters on Wood and Braddon keep an eye on the depictions of their female characters and the affordances and limitations of their social environments.

Overview of Chapters

The following chapters track the social ecology of character as it develops in the sensation novel genre, beginning in the early 1860s and continuing through until the middle of the 1880s. In each chapter, I examine the clash between character and circumstance, and I argue that in each the balance of power over the formation of character shifts from personal agency to circumstances beyond one’s control, such as inherited biology or social influences.

My story begins in Chapter Two, “The Shadow of Ambivalence: Superstition, Sensibility, and the Limits of Legibility,” with Ellen Wood’s Gothic sensation novel *The*

Shadow of Ashlydyat. I demonstrate how Wood's traditional conservatism leads her to distrust physiological psychology's ambitious claims about rendering one's inner character legible to others and entirely knowable. *The Shadow of Ashlydyat*'s central interest is character and its legibility to others, which manifests in the novel as the eponymous shadow that supposedly haunts the Ashlydyat family and tinges the novel's domestic realism with a Gothic hue. I examine Wood's treatment of four characters—George Godolphin, Maria Hastings, Charlotte Pain, and Janet Godolphin—in order to demonstrate how Wood worked with a social ecology of character and how this approach reveals a disparity in social agency between men and women. At the center of my reading is the moment in which George steals Lord Averil's deeds from the bank, transforming his character from good-natured but misguided young man into true criminal. It is in this moment that superstition, fate, and subjectivity collide. George's volitional subjectivity ultimately wins the struggle over these opposing forces, a defining sentiment, I suggest, of the mid-Victorian period. This first chapter sets the frame for the rest of the dissertation's argument by demonstrating the social ecology of character in action but also demonstrating a moment in which the character's agency succeeds over the pressures of external forces. In each of the following chapters, that scale tips further toward the external forces and away from individual agency.

The third chapter, "Where the Medical and the Metaphysical Meet: The Texture of *The Moonstone*," picks up the story of social ecology in Wilkie Collins's sensation detective novel *The Moonstone*. In contrast to Wood's conservatism and hesitancy toward psychology's ability to render character, Collins makes a case for the efficacy of scientific psychology and attempts to mediate between the psychologists and the general

public by staging a fictional resolution to the social concerns surrounding physiological psychology's problematic implications for personal agency and social responsibility. I read *The Moonstone* through the dual lenses of mid-Victorian physiological psychology and popular science. Using overlooked connections to George Henry Lewes as my points of entry, this chapter demonstrates how *The Moonstone* engages in physiological psychology's epistemological and methodological debates and argues that Collins's novel dramatizes the physiological psychological investigation into the mystery of consciousness. It considers both how *The Moonstone* situates the reader as active participant in the investigative process through its synthesis of content and form and why it does so, proposing that the novel, as part of the general periodical ecosystem, attempts to mediate between the psychologists and the general public. My reading culminates in the second experiment scene in which external and internal forces, material and metaphysical, collide. Unlike the moment of collision in Wood's novel, the tension in *The Moonstone* results in a balance between the two opposing forces, following Lewes's dual aspect theory of psychology. In my overarching story of mid-Victorian social ecology, *The Moonstone* stands as a moment of equipoise.

The second half of my project examines three under-studied novels by Braddon. "Reading Novel Experience, Sensational Fictions, and the Impressionable Reader," a portion of which is forthcoming in *Studies in the Novel*, argues that Braddon's *Joshua Haggard's Daughter*, her final novel to appear in *Belgravia* under her editorship, deconstructs the criticism of the sensation genre using the same psychological discourse weaponized by the genre's critics. In this fourth chapter, I demonstrate how Braddon dramatizes the ways novel reading can contribute to the experiences that influence one's

possibilities for psychological expression—a process I call *novel experience*—and interrogates the relationship between reader responsibility and physiological psychology’s problematic determinism. The relationship between individual and environment is rendered here in a more complex way. The novel acknowledges the limiting and directing influence of one’s environment but also imagines ways in which a truncated agency can still be cultivated and deployed through one’s available choices, such as one’s consumption of and interpretive engagement with fiction. The gravitational center of my reading is Cynthia and Oswald’s reading of Goethe’s *Sorrows of Young Werther*, in which Oswald becomes a dangerously impressionable reader where Cynthia navigates with poise between the fiction and her reality. I contrast their reading experiences with Joshua Haggard’s, whose misreading of Goethe and subsequent madness demonstrate Braddon’s complicated understanding and presentation of individual agency and readerly accountability.

In the final chapter, I use Braddon’s *The Golden Calf* and *Phantom Fortune* to follow the social ecology of character to its logical conclusion, the transition from the mid-Victorian to the late-Victorian period. In these novels, the central female character is forced to make a crucial life decision. Both women choose incorrectly, according to the moral logic of the novels, and are forced to reap the consequences. However, Braddon situates these women in entangled networks of social influence and methodically identifies the reasons why they make the decisions they do in order to critique the limited social agency of women in the period. Additionally, I discuss the cross-Channel influences between Braddon and the French Naturalists, and in particular Zola. I do so in order to bring the story of the mid-Victorian social ecology of character to its close by

demonstrating where the social forces and circumstance dominate over the individual characters' volitional subjectivity, resulting in the recognizable late Victorian Naturalism and its characteristic traits of pessimistic material and social determinism. I position this shift within the socio-political developments in Britain.

CHAPTER 2

THE SHADOW OF AMBIVALENCE: SUPERNATURAL SENSIBILITY AND THE LIMITS OF LEGIBILITY

“There are some people,” the narrator of Ellen Wood’s *The Shadow of Ashlydyat* (1863) states, “to whom the human countenance is as a sealed book: there are others for whom that book stands open to its every page” (Dec, 1861; 399). This statement sets the thematic frame for Wood’s Gothic sensation novel by foregrounding the intertwining relationship between character and reading. The narrator understands character as a real but ambiguous phenomenon: it clearly exists, but its complete form, with all its edges and intricacies, is only legible to some. “[T]he capacity of reading character,” the narrator continues, is not a skill available to all, as it is something that “[n]either art nor science can teach” (Dec, 1861; 399). Character cannot be interpreted from a single physical attribute, such as the “eyes,” “mouth,” “forehead,” “eyebrows,” or “chin”; rather, the narrator concludes, “to judge of what a man is, you must look to the whole” (Dec, 1861; 399). Wood’s narrator articulates a version of mid-Victorian Britain’s pervasive social skepticism about the developments in nineteenth-century science, especially psychology. The “faculty” of reading character, or “sensibility,” as it was called in the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, the narrator argues is supernatural and thus unknowable by the natural sciences. However, despite the narrator’s sarcastic and sometime contentious rejection of the idea of a scientific psychology—the burgeoning field which claimed to be able to make known character, consciousness, and their interrelation—Wood’s novel, when looked “to the whole,” is much more ambivalent about the legibility of character.

The novel's ambivalence stems in part from the time of its writing and in part from Wood's personal beliefs.³⁰ Written in the immediate wake of the ecological turn, *Shadow* simultaneously incorporates aspects of an ecological theory of character while also clearly demonstrating reservations for the ability of the new psychology to explain and render character completely legible. Both Wilkie Collins in *The Moonstone* and Wood in *Shadow* are asking similar questions: to what extent can the new psychology account for character? As we will see in the following chapter, Collins's answer is a clear endorsement of the ability for psychology—with the proper method—to solve any complicated issues of character that might arise, including drug use, mental reflex, and criminality. Wood's answer in *Shadow* is less confident. Representative of a widespread point-of-view, Wood articulates the necessity of a synthesis between science and the supernatural. She demonstrates her clear reservations about positive science's ambitious aims to explain all natural phenomena and processes without concession to supernatural influences or intervention. Wood specifically addresses the new science of psychology and interrogates its conception of character and its claims to be able to render all aspects of character knowable. *Shadow* takes up the question of character's legibility through sensibility, the innate skill that some people seem to have which makes them better readers of characters than others. This idea manifests in *Shadow* in both the content, as the narrator and characters possess varying levels of sensibility for character reading, and generic form, as the novel incorporates inexplicable supernatural elements into an otherwise realist novel.

³⁰ Serialized between October 1861 and November 1863 in *New Monthly Magazine* on the heels of the resounding success of *East Lynne* (1861), *Shadow* is Wood's fifth completed novel.

The novel's consideration of character is framed within the conventions of the Gothic genre. The central Gothic trope is the eponymous Shadow of Ashlydyat, the mysterious, ephemeral shadow that seems to appear just before a major catastrophe befalls the Godolphin family, or so the family believes, according to an ancient family curse. Wood uses the Shadow as a metaphor for character: it is a partially observable phenomenon which, despite its semi-visibility, remains indistinct and difficult to quantify. Wood ties her thematic foci—character and reading—together through the Shadow and the different characters' varying reactions to their encounters with it. Though many of her novels feature macabre scenes, such as the corpse bride of *St. Martin's Eve* (1866) or the empty casket of Bessy Rane in *Bessy Rane* (1870), *Shadow* is Wood's only true Gothic novel. It is no coincidence that Wood incorporates a liminal, mysterious Shadow into the otherwise familiar world of Prior's Ash and spends so much narratorial energy on establishing its existence and inexplicability. As the novel's Gothic undertones resist the logical explication demanded by the conventions of literary realism, so too does character resist complete legibility by the new psychological science, according to the logic of the novel. Yet, though Wood reveals her conservative reservations about the new psychology's efficacy, she does demonstrate a keen interest in the field's incorporation of the social environment—that is, influences from cultural and communal norms—into the equation of psychological development and the disparity in social agency between men and women it discovers.³¹

³¹ Wood was very much aware of this gender disparity. Like many mid-Victorian female writers, such as Braddon, Wood went out of her way to maintain a carefully crafted public image of a conservative, respectable, middle-class woman. Widowed in 1866, Wood had a level of independence and control over her professional and personal life that many did not, and she actively cultivated her public image by continuing to operate under her married title, Mrs. Henry

Wood's *Shadow* provides a glimpse into the way theories of ecology and character manifested in the mid-Victorian ecological turn in popular literature and discourse. It also demonstrates the hesitancy by some to accept fully the ambitious claims and implications of mid-Victorian science and psychology. Collins finds confidence in the progress of scientific psychology and dramatizes this confidence in his novel of character and character reading later in the decade. Wood, however, demonstrates her ambivalence by acknowledging the potential for an ecology of character in her creation and psychological development of some of her central characters while also retaining clear hesitations about psychology's ambitious and totalizing theory of character through the *Shadow* and the irresolvable Gothic elements. It is in the artificial environment of fiction that Wood is able to work through some of the contradictions between her conservatism and social progressivism.

The Character of *Shadow*: Science and the Supernatural

To say that science and religion were diametrically opposed in the mid-Victorian period is to paper over the nuanced relationship between the two in the nineteenth

Wood. Her socially conservative and matronly image was canonized after her death by her son Charles Wood in one of the few biographies of her life. However, despite the appearance of strict conservatism in her fiction, recent scholarship has begun to reform Wood's legacy through closer examinations of her multi-faceted and often contradictory depictions of women in her novels. Mariaconcetta Costantini's *Mrs. Henry Wood* (2020), the most recent and complete analysis of the sensationalist to date, argues that the subtle contradictions and inconsistencies in Wood's fiction reveal a pervasive social critique embedded just below the surface of her writing. Rather than plot or narrative, Costantini draws attention to the characters in Wood's work as contradictory figures who discover the cultural critique layered into her novels. Costantini is the most recent and most thorough critic to discuss the significance of Wood's characters, but the powerful and skillfully-wrought characters were noted by her initial readers as well. A reviewer in *The Athenaeum*, for example, describes "Wood's especial gift" as her "power to draw minutely and carefully each character" with an "instinctive knowledge of what [the characters] would say and do under the given circumstances" (119).

century. From a modern perspective, the amount of overlap seems a foreign concept, but in the Victorian period the intersections among religious and scientific perspectives were many. One of the main topics of interest was the theory of developmental evolution, often called the “developmental hypothesis.” Many scientific naturalists, including most notably Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, had posited incomplete theories of evolution to greater and lesser appeal. At the mid-point of the century, because of the insufficiencies in evolutionary theories to date, many British naturalists openly conceded a supernatural influence or intervention in the development of humankind.

One of the most influential figures to hold this view was William Whewell. Whewell’s *History of the Inductive Sciences* (1837) and *Philosophy of the Inductive Sciences* (1840) were well-known and represented the view of a influential portion of the scientific establishment. In both works, Whewell openly concedes supernatural influence to explain gaps of understanding in scientific explanations of the natural world. Whewell would eventually collect all of these moments of supernatural concession and publish them in *Indications of the Creator* (1845). In the preface to the first edition, Whewell explains that his purpose differs from “Natural Theology” in that, rather than beginning from a predetermined theological conclusion and approaching the subject of science and the natural world, he begins from a scientific perspective and eventually identifies places in scientific theory that only a supernatural explanation would suffice (31). His main topics are “the Indications of Design in the Creator” and “a Supernatural Origin of the World” (32). Whewell’s acceptance of a supernatural force in natural science was a popular view, even in the scientific establishment, at the moment that Darwin was producing his *Origin of Species*, the text that would bring the conflict between natural

and supernatural theories in nineteenth-century science into the wider cultural conversation.

Darwin's big contribution to natural science was not the idea of evolution but the mechanism through which it occurs, natural selection. Emphasizing the "natural" in natural selection, his mechanism needed no supernatural intervention to explain evolutionary development, and this was controversial. In a later edition of *Origin*, Darwin included a quotation by Whewell as an epigraph in order to mitigate the controversial reactions from the religious establishment. Whewell's quotation notes that the identification of general laws governing the natural world does not abolish the idea of intelligent design because general laws were more likely to be products of intelligent design rather than the result of random processes. Alvar Ellegård argues that Darwin included Whewell's quotation to suggest that "religion had nothing to fear from the substitution of a natural for a supernatural or miraculous explanation of the origin of species" (13). But rather than quieting the turmoil, Darwin "implicitly represented the contrast between a natural and a supernatural explanation as the main theme of the book" (Ellegård 13). The tension between the natural and supernatural was center stage in the immediate reactions to Darwin's work, but it was also prominent in the discussion of many mid-Victorian sciences, including psychology.

Thomas Henry Huxley and George Henry Lewes were both influential in disseminating (generally) positive reviews of Darwin's work through the periodical press and elsewhere. Huxley published reviews of *Origin of Species* in reputable outlets such as *The Times*, *Macmillian's Magazine*, and *Westminster Review*, as well as participating in the famous Oxford evolution debates in 1860. Lewes incorporated a discussion of

Darwin's work in his own consideration of the origin of species in the serialized version of his *Studies in Animal Life* in *The Cornhill* as early as April of 1860. Lewes would circle back in 1868 to a longer, more positive appreciation of Darwin in a series of three articles in *The Fortnightly Review*. It is no coincidence that Huxley and Lewes were interested in both Darwin's theories and physiological psychology. Though neither would have entirely embraced the categorization "materialist," both sought to explain consciousness through natural rather than supernatural explanations, and Darwin's work was a powerhouse in bringing forward natural and convincing explanations for the "developmental hypothesis" into Victorian cultural discourse. The importance of Darwin's publication was not lost on Lewes, who wrote as the opening line to his series of articles in *The Fortnightly Review*, "'The Origin of Species' made an epoch" (353). Just as *Origin* made significant strides in offering a theory that brought evolutionary biology out of the realm of the supernatural and into the natural, so too did psychologists like Huxley and Lewes posit theories of brain-body interconnection that threatened to extract the supernatural out of prevailing conceptions of consciousness and character.³² It is in this cultural debate that Wood places her novel by meditating on the supernatural forces at work in science, psychology, and character.

On the whole, Wood held traditional conservative values and beliefs. She was skeptical of nineteenth-century science's ambitious claims to be able to supply natural explanations without recourse to supernatural intervention or concessions of intelligent design. *Shadow*, the most overtly supernatural of Wood's novels, inhabits a space in

³² For more on Lewes's incorporation of Darwin in his psychological theories, see Richardson.

which forces beyond human ken exist and affect the character's lived experiences within the narrative. The novel forces the characters (and the reader) to reckon with supernatural phenomena that cannot be entirely explained using the rationality of modern science. The most important supernatural phenomenon is the titular Shadow of Ashlydyat, the mysterious shadow that appears from time to time on the "Dark Plain," the back lawn of the Godolphin's family estate. The Shadow is believed to be part of the Godolphin family curse: after the evil actions of one of their ancestors, the "Wicked Godolphin," the Shadow appears just before some ill befalls the family. The Shadow's existence as an empirical reality is repeatedly emphasized throughout the novel, as is the inability to explain the Shadow's true origins or its effects on the family and events of the narrative. The Shadow is a metaphor for the things unknowable to human science, and Wood uses it in this novel as a challenge to the specific science of psychology.

In the opening installment, the narrator sets the supernatural tone by contrasting the Godolphin ancestral superstitions with the overreliance on human intelligence and explanation:

People thought that the Godolphins loved [Ashlydyat] from its associations and traditions; from the very fact that certain superstitions attached to it. Foolish superstitions, you will be inclined to call them, as contrasted with the enlightenment of these matter-of-fact days—I had almost said these days of materialism. (Oct, 1861; 136)

The narrator's sarcastic tone reveals the way she or he feels about the confidence in science to be able to offer an explanation for everything without conceding supernatural influences. Lady Godolphin, who married into the Godolphin family and does not share their regard for the family curse, scoffingly exclaims "I thought we lived in the nineteenth century," in response to hearing Sir George Godolphin's superstitious

reasoning for not wanting to leave Ashlydyat (Oct, 1861; 142). However, the novel allows the supernatural to bleed into the diegetic reality of the narrative. The family's superstitions appear to come to fruition, asserting their existence out of a primordial past in spite of the "enlightenment of these matter-of-fact days" (Oct, 1861; 136). The clearest moment of overlap between the supernatural and reality is the Shadow. The narrator claims to have seen the Shadow first hand and attempted to locate a rational explanation for its existence:

Whence the shadow came, whether it was ghostly or earthly, whether those, learned in science and philosophy, could account for it by Nature's laws, whether it was cast by any gaseous vapour arising in the moonbeams, I am unable to say. If you ask me to explain it, I cannot: if you ask, why then do I write about it, I can only answer, because I have seen it. I have seen it with my own unprejudiced eyes: I have sat and watched it, in its strange stillness; I have looked about and around it, low down, up high, for some substance, ever so infinitesimal, that might cast its shade and enable me to account for it: and I have looked in vain. (Oct, 1861; 137)

The Shadow represents the mysteries of the natural world, emphasized here by the narrator's insistence that those "learned in science and philosophy" are unable to "account for [the Shadow] by Nature's laws," positioning the Shadow as a natural phenomenon that requires a supernatural explanation.

Importantly the narrator also foregrounds the connection between visibility and reality, stating that despite not being able to explain the Shadow's origins—it could be some unknown gas, for all she or he knows—the reality of the phenomenon remains. There it is, the narrator tells us, right before her or his eyes. This tension between empirical and ontological reality is highlighted throughout the novel. Thomas, the level-headed patriarch, does not believe in the curse, but he does admit the existence of the

inexplicable Shadow because he can see it. When Averil and Thomas come across the Shadow, Thomas says:

You and I are rational beings, Averil, not likely to be led away by superstitious folly; we live in an enlightened age, little tolerant of such. And yet, here we stand, gazing with dispassionate eyes on that Shadow, in full possession of our sober judgment. It is there; we see it: and that is all we can tell about it. The Shadow of Ashlydyat is ridiculed from one end of the country to the other; spoken of—when spoken of at all—as an absurd superstition of the Godolphins. But here the Shadow is: and not all the ridicule extant can do away with the plain fact. I see it: but I cannot explain it. (Sept, 1862; 41)

Here the rational Thomas admits the problematic relationship between what he can see and the reality of the phenomenon, stating that he “cannot believe otherwise, with that ocular demonstration” before him (Sept, 1862; 41). Lord Averil echoes Thomas’s sentiment, saying “[a]s Thomas Godolphin said: *there* was the Shadow, all plain to his eyes, to his senses: but of explanation of its cause, there was none” (Sept, 1862; 41; emphasis in original). Consider the emphasis on optics and visibility in the passage in which the narrator makes her or his final case for the Shadow’s existence:

No; there was nothing whatever, so far as *human eyes*—and I can tell you that keen ones and sceptical ones have *looked* at it—to cast the shade, or to account for it. There, as you sat and *watched*, stretched out the plain in the moonlight, with its low, tomb-like bushes, its clear space of bare land, with the archway rising behind. But, on the spot of bare land, before the archway, would rise the shadow; not *looking* as if it were a shadow cast upon the ground, but a palpable fact: as if a bier, with its two bending mourners actually stood there in the substance. I say that I cannot explain it, or attempt to explain it; but I do say that there it was to be *seen*. (Oct, 1861; 137-138; emphasis mine)

The narrator highlights the intellectual disconnect between being able to see something and being unable to explain it, emphasizing the limits of empirically-based sciences to be able to provide an account for the phenomenon.³³

Working within the linguistic tradition extending at least as far back as Plato, sight is used as a metaphor for knowledge—to see is to know. Wood uses this language in particular with Maria, whose major sin in the novel is her inability to see George for who he really is, to discern his “true” character. She blindly trusts him, and her blind trust leads directly to her demise. The first instance in which Margery directly addresses Maria about George’s failings (the lavish lifestyle, the affair), she uses the metaphor of sight for knowledge, saying that Maria lives with “a curtain before [her] eyes” (Mar 1863; 282). Their exchange ends with the narrator stating that Margery’s insinuations about George had only ever fleetingly crossed Maria’s mind, like a “dim shadow” (Mar 1863; 282). This is one of the few instances in the novel in which the word “shadow” is used to describe something besides “the Shadow,” and it foregrounds the connection between shadow—a contrast of light and its absence—and character.

Like the Shadow, the narrator argues that character exists but the ability to read character is an innate skill, something akin to the eighteenth-century concept of sensibility. The “capacity of reading character” is not an ability available to everyone (Dec, 1861; 399), nor is it a skill understandable by contemporary science; it remains unknown and mysterious:

Is it a faculty? or is it instinct? This I do know: that it is one of the great gifts of God. Where the power exists in an eminent degree, rely upon it its

³³ It is worth noting, though, that mystery and curiosity are the first stages in scientific investigation.

possessor is never deceived in his estimation of character. It is born with him into the world. (Dec, 1861; 399)

The narrator emphasizes the supernaturalness of sensibility and then proceeds to criticize the ambitiousness of nineteenth-century science, sarcastically referencing Darwin's recent publication by scoffing "monkeys are discovered to be men—or men monkeys—which is it?" (Dec, 1861; 400). Even, to the narrator's chagrin, "ghosts are reduced to a theory," further emphasizing science's relationship to the supernatural (Dec, 1861; 400). But despite these apparent scientific advancements, the narrator argues that to reduce character reading "to a 'science'" "will be a failure": "Try and do so. Make a school for it; give lectures; write books; beat it into heads" (Dec, 1861; 400). Ultimately, echoing the language used when discussing the Shadow, "[n]either art nor science can teach it; neither man nor woman can make it theirs by any amount of labour: where the faculty is not theirs by divine gift, it cannot be made to exist by human skill" (Dec, 1861; 400).

Like the supernaturalness of the Shadow, the narrator emphasizes the supernaturalness of reading character. And like the Shadow, the ability to read character does seem to exist within the logic of the novel. Some characters demonstrate a poor ability to read character and others a strong ability. The weakest readers of characters are Maria and George, both of whom naively trust others to a fault and are unable to extrapolate from the actions of others to their motivations. Maria's great sin, according to the narrative, is her inability to read George as the shallow and selfish person he is, to see beyond his external façade to his "true" inner character. She trusts him completely and ignores all the external clues to his true self, such as his excessively extravagant lifestyle and extramarital affair. George too is a poor reader of character, which makes him an

easy target for Verrall and Charlotte's schemes. Both Maria and George are solipsistic, though in different ways, but their self-centeredness is tied to their inability to read others effectively. The most efficient readers of character in the novel are Verrall, Charlotte, and Janet. Verrall and Charlotte both use their ability to read character as a means to manipulate the people around them. Verrall immediately identifies George's personal flaws and weaknesses and sets about plotting how to take advantage of them. He exploits George's moral failings for financial gain for years and is the one who encourages George to embezzle from the bank to cover his debts. Charlotte reads the people around her as well, such as Maria, whom Charlotte is able to understand well enough to manipulate in order to keep her in the dark about the affair, and Rodolph Pain, whom she strings along with promises of marriage at an unspecified later date. However, the ability to read character is different from possessing sensibility. Verrall and Charlotte are effective readers of character, but they do not demonstrate the emotional sympathy that is a crucial component of sensibility. The only character in the novel who possesses sensibility is Janet Godolphin, a figure who embodies the rationality and supernatural sensitivity for sensibility.

The Shadow also represents a complicated conception of what it means to "have" character. A shadow is not a thing in itself; rather, a shadow is a projection (or relief) correlated to an underlying reality. The conception of character presented in *Shadow* is similar, in that one's external actions are expected to adhere to or represent an underlying reality. The "bad" characters in the novel—George, Verrall, Charlotte—also *have* bad character because of their duplicitousness. They present to the world a false version of themselves that does not correspond to their internal reality. Like the Shadow, whose

form appears at times more and at times less distorted throughout the novel, these characters' "true" inner selves are only visible for fleeting moments when their external presentation matches their internal reality. This connection between the Shadow and character further complicates the narrator's insistence that the Shadow does not have a material correspondent. On first blush, the lack of material object to project the Shadow seems to suggest that character is an ephemeral, otherworldly quality not tied to a physical corelative. But by the end of the novel it is revealed that there is a material component to the Shadow, the buried remains of the Wicked Godolphin's wife which are unearthed during Averil's renovation of the house. The material object though does not directly reflect the Shadow: the bones could not create the Shadow's form, that of a funeral bier.³⁴ Within the logic of the novel, it is only a supernatural force—such as an ancient curse—that can explain the link between the material object and its external expression.

The Shadow's inexplicable existence represents things outside of the realm of human knowledge—it exists, it is an empirical reality, but it cannot be explained in its entirety. For Wood, character and character reading are similar. They exist, in that people have character and other people have the sensibility to read character, but the claims of totalizing explanations from nineteenth-century science and psychology to be able to

³⁴ Andrew Mangham insightfully notes that the Shadow, one could argue, represents a woman, as the Shadow is of the funeral bier of the Wicked Godolphin's wife. While I do find this reading useful, I would push back on this interpretation by drawing attention to the fact that the Shadow actually depicts a form (the funeral bier) that represents a person who happens to be a woman (Mrs. Godolphin). Without detracting from the undercurrent of violence against women that pervades the narrative and the Godolphin's history to which Mangham brings our attention, I do want to draw out additional available interpretations of the Shadow to include the idea of character as form, a liminal quality, visible but not entirely explicable, which is an explicit thematic concern in the novel.

understand them completely are ambitiously misguided at best and hubristically overreaching at worst. *Shadow* dramatizes real but only semi-explicable phenomena like the Shadow as a metaphor for the semi-explicability of character. As Wood's novel demonstrates in its construction of literary character, many aspects of character are legible and comprehensible, but not all. In the following section, I demonstrate how Wood constructs an ecological environment that renders George's character visible in many ways but not completely due to random circumstances and his personal agency.

“Look[ing] to the Whole”: Reading Character Through Ecology

In *Women Novelists of Queen Victoria's Reign* (1897), Adeline Sergeant wrote a chapter on Ellen Wood in which she frames the mid-Victorian writer in a somewhat contradictory way, claiming that Wood is simultaneously un-literary and a master in the “art of the *raconteur*” (174). One of the most important storytelling skills that Sergeant identifies is Wood's ability to take “the whole town into the story, wherever it may be” (175). She continues:

To take a great group of *dramatis personae*, widely differing in circumstances, in character, in individuality; to keep them all perfectly clear without confusion and without wavering; to evolve from them some central figures on which the attention of the subsidiary characters shall be unavoidably fixed, and to weave a plot of mystery, intrigue, treachery or passion which must be resolved to its ultimate elements before the last page of the book—to do all this is really an achievement of which many a writer, who values himself on his intellectual superiority to Mrs. Henry Wood, might well be proud. (175)

The “central figure” who maintains the attention of the “subsidiary characters” in *Shadow* is George Godolphin. He is not the protagonist in the familiar sense, nor is he an anti-hero, but he is the character in whom the novel is most interested. Wood frequently drew

on the stereotype of the young gentleman with debts in her novels, such as Val Elster in *Elster's Folly* (1866) or Robert Dalrymples in *Court Netherleigh* (1881). George Godolphin is different from these other characters, however, because of the large amount of narrative space dedicated to tracking the forces that influence his character and character development. Rather than just being a static figure who performs certain habits of mind or represents a familiar stereotype, George's character is developed across the novel by a combination of internal and external pressures, which renders his character—to an extent—legible to the novel reader.

George's character is shaped by the internal pressures of his physiobiological inheritances and the external pressures of his social medium and circumstances of lived experience. This concept of developmental psychological formation as a result of simultaneous internal and external influences pervaded the mid-Victorian period. George Eliot, for example, in "Notes on Form in Art" (1868), describes "form" as a complex adjustment "of a nearly equal struggle between inner constitution and the outer play of forces," combined, in the case of the human form, with the harmony of "the intrinsic relation of its part" (434). George's "character" or "form" is rough hewed by the internal force of his physiobiological makeup and the external forces of his social environment and lived experience. However, there are wrinkles in this theory of character formation: chance circumstances and personal agency. One's social environment and circumstances are driven in larger part by chance, which is the same driving force in Darwin's theory of natural selection. Additionally, George's has the ability to exert personal agency in the world. Framed within the backdrop of the ecological pressures which shape the form of his character, the chance circumstances and the choices George makes play an important

role in his character formation. Taken together, the combination of internal and external pressures in character formation make an ecological theory of character, but Wood demonstrates her conflicting attitude toward the theory by acknowledging the randomness and unpredictability of circumstance and the importance of personal agency.

Like most Gothic stories, *Shadow* is deeply rooted in the connections between past and present, and, in the post-Darwinian period in which the novel was written, heredity and physiobiological inheritance are given extra consideration in their role in the formation of character. A common interpretation of the Gothic genre is that the past rises up out of history like a ghostly specter to exert its influence over the present, encapsulated in *Shadow* by the perceived effects of the Godolphin curse; the mid-Victorian interpretative twist is that the present is influenced by the past through physiobiological inheritances—a hereditary haunting of sorts. In *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction* (2007), Mangham notes the way Wood incorporates “emerging discourses on evolution and hereditary psychology” into her novel. He extends this interpretation to Wood’s treatment of the entire Godolphin family, arguing that their patriarchal family line was unable to “adapt to social and environmental changes” in the modern Victorian world (151). Though the whole family is affected by the curse, it is George Godolphin’s actions that are directly linked to his ancestor, the Wicked Godolphin of family lore. The Wicked Godolphin “[k]illed [his wife] by gradual and long-continued ill treatment” because “[h]e wanted her out of the way that another might fill her place” (Aug, 1862; 412). He was also the first in the family to lose ownership of Ashlydyat through gambling debts. The superstitious family curse begins with the Wicked Godolphin and seems to come to fruition in George, whose actions, such as the

mistreatment of his wife and his gambling habits, are similar to his ancestor's. George also pursues an extramarital relationship, which eventually leads to Maria's death.³⁵ George also follows the Wicked Godolphin in that he is the reason that the Godolphins lose Ashlydyat; George's gambling and embezzlement financially destroy the family, resulting in the loss of the family estate. George's fate might have been destined to end in destruction, per the family curse, and the narrator certainly gives this idea space to breath in the narrative. However, Wood clearly incorporates hereditary theories of physiobiological inheritance into George's character construction and development as well. As Wood demonstrates in other novels, character traits—such as Robert Dalrymples's gambling addiction, inherited from his uncle—can be hereditary.

In addition to internal forces, external pressures actively shape the form of one's character. One of the major additions to psychological theory in the mid-Victorian period was the inclusion of the social medium as a powerful influencing force. The idea of a social medium developed out of the concept of *milieu* which circulated in eighteenth-century physics and was made famous in the following century by Auguste Comte's application of the term to biology. In keeping with these developments in contemporary psychology, George's character is influenced by his social environment, which comes with pre-formed grooves that affect the ways in which his character can take shape, subtly directing the paths of expression available to him. As the second son of a wealthy banking family, George inhabits a world of privilege and social expectation. His family's social affluence and financial means allow him to ease through life on the merits of his

³⁵ As is Wood's way, the exact nature and extent of the adulterous relationship is left ambiguous, but regardless of whether it was consummated physically or not, George and Charlotte definitely had a clandestine emotional and intellectual relationship exclusive of Maria.

wealthy and social status. Within this position of privilege, George has been raised to maintain a certain lifestyle, according to his means. This lifestyle expectation gets him in to trouble, though, when his expenses outrun his pocketbook. He holds elaborate dinner parties, keeps multiple servants and carriages, among other extravagances. His excesses get to a point where other people in the town begin to comment on his lifestyle and whether or not he is behaving in a fiscally responsible way. Additionally, his gambling habit is made possible through his disposable income, leisure time, and ability to borrow on credit, all of which are direct results of his social standing.

George's class standing also affects his character development. The Godolphins are described as an old family, but "of no very high ancestry boasted they; no titles, places, or honours; they ranked amongst the landed gentry as owners of Ashlydyat, and that was all" (Oct, 1861; 135). The narrator makes a point to differentiate the Godolphins from the aristocracy and position them as land-owning members of the commercial branch of the middle class. Thomas embodies all of the most valued characteristics of his class: he is hard working, respectable, honorable, virtuous—a true upper-middle class gentleman of the period. The town trusts him with their finances completely. George, though, is different. He is the second son and is not destined to be the paternal head of the family (though he does become the eldest male after Thomas's death). But in other regards he has much of the same opportunities for success as Thomas and benefits from similar class advantages. They share the same parentage, same upbringing, same education, and similar financial access. Thomas even makes George a full partner at the bank because he believes there should be an equal footing between the two. However, their circumstances and choices take the brothers down two very different paths.

Circumstances both shape and reveal character. In a review of Charles Henry Ross's *The Pretty Widow* (1868), Wood writes that "circumstances, whether simple or involved, in the hand of the artist, only exist and have real value as they throw light on personal tendencies and possibilities—in one word, character" (317).³⁶ Here Wood highlights the interconnectedness of circumstances and character, noting that the plot serves to draw out the "tendencies and possibilities" of the characters. This plays out in *Shadow* as well, as the plot slowly discovers George's character development. In the same review, Wood also notes the randomness of circumstance and emphasizes that randomness is part of "life itself," which is full of the "most fertile of surprises, of revelations, of inexplicable coincidences" (317). Many of the circumstances in George's life arise from the Verralls' presence in the neighborhood, which is only possible through a series of chance circumstances. The Verralls arrive because Lady Godolphin does not like Ashlydyat and wants to relocate herself and Sir George Godolphin to her Folly, which forces the Godolphins to rent out Ashlydyat, creating the vacancy which the Verralls fill. George's relationship with Charlotte, which directly leads to his relationship with Verrall, also begins out of a series of chances. The narrator compares George's initial interactions with Charlotte Pain to a boy who drowns at sea after randomly selecting a ship on which to sail, emphasizing the random nature of the situation. This comparison crystallizes when George takes what seems to be an inconsequential boat ride with Charlotte. But it does prove to be of consequence as George gets wet and then takes

³⁶ Between December 1867 and September 1868, Wood ran a monthly series titled "Our Log-Book." Each installment contains reviews of current novels she is reading and comments on the art and craft of fiction writing. Her comments in these articles are some of the few recorded insights into Wood's thoughts on fiction writing.

ill for many months. His illness requires him to be homebound, which leads to him becoming a frequent interlocutor with Charlotte, who lives next door. This is not the only time in which the narrator interjects to draw emphasis to what is happening in George's developmental process. At one point, George says to his maid Margery, "We often do things that we don't 'think' to do" and the narrator directly states back, "Nothing more true, Mr. George Godolphin," drawing attention to the way character and circumstance develop on the whole not through volitional, thoughtful action but by other forces of influence at work (Apr, 1862; 403). When George and Maria are on their honeymoon in Germany, George takes up gambling with Verrall. But George and Verrall's relationship is only able to develop after Maria is almost run down by a passing carriage, leaving her bedridden for several weeks and giving Verrall time to spin his web around George.³⁷ The crucial moments in George's circumstantial development are created out of chance situations, random moments which drastically alter his character development. Like the unexpected but monumentally important appearance of Raffles, whose name conjures allusions to gambling and chance, in Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-2), circumstances are driven by chance.

The circumstances of George's situation are interwoven with the novel's plot. As the novel progresses, so too do George's lived experiences, which is a form of psychological determinism, as Ifill argues, grafted onto the narrative determinism of the

³⁷ Mangham notes that this scene may also be interpreted, if read between the lines, as a miscarriage scene. Maria's subsequent illness and George's sudden avoidance of his new bride suggest that there may be more to the carriage accident than Wood explicitly states.

sensation novel.³⁸ But circumstances are not the only facet of George's development. He still maintains personal agency through his decision making. Whereas the circumstantial developments are plot-driven, George's agency marks moments of psychological development. The novel maps out how George's entangled ecology shape his character, but it also foregrounds the personal agency and choices he makes that finetune him into the morally bankrupt person he becomes. Wood makes a point to note the psychological change in George when he moves from good-natured foolishness to intentional duplicity. After a long night of gambling, Maria comments that George looks "feverish," to which he responds, "The rooms were very hot. [He and Verrall] have been watching them play" (May, 1862; 26). Immediately, the narrator exclaims, "*Watching* them play! It is your first deceit to your wife, George Godolphin; and, rely upon it, no good will come of it" (May, 1862; 26, emphasis in original). This moment, as emphasized by the narrator, marks the first instance in which George willingly chooses to act duplicitously. This is different from the circumstantial developments, such as Verrall moving into the neighborhood, George spending more-than-appropriate time with Charlotte, or his falling ill. George asserts his agency and solidifies his developmental path within the available circumstantial options. In a later scene, the narrator makes another point to interject and draw the reader's attention to George's actions. When George is made aware of his pending debts, he immediately seeks out Verrall, who avoids him. George lies to Maria about the contents of the letter informing him of his overdue debts, telling her that it did not contain bad news, and then turns around and secretly consults Charlotte. The symbolism of George crumpling the paper in his hand in front of Maria and handing it

³⁸ See Ifill's Introduction.

open to Charlotte “for her perusal” is clear: George makes “a bosom friend” of Charlotte, choosing to foster an intimate relationship with her instead of his wife. The narrator again underscores George’s agency: “George, however, made his own bed, as we all do; and George would have to lie upon it” (July, 1862; 282).

The most compelling exertion of agency for George, however, is his stealing Lord Averil’s deeds from the bank. This is *Shadow*’s center-of-gravity moment. Verrall suggests the idea to George, and George follows through on the act. This is a tipping point for both George and the novel. Until this moment, George’s duplicitous acts had been relatively minor, such as lying to his wife; when he steals from the bank, he moves into the new territory of real criminality. The narrator speculates on George’s thoughts just after he commits the deed, emphasizing the finality of the moment:

What were [George’s] reflections? Was he wishing that he could undo the deeds of the last hour—replace in that tin case what he had taken from it? Was he wishing that he could undo the deeds of the last few *years*—be again a man without a cloud on his brow, a more heavy cloud on his heart? It was too late: he could recal [*sic*] neither the one nor the other. (Aug, 1862; 406)

George’s decision to steal from the bank is the key moment of agency in his developmental narrative. All the forces of influence, both internal and external, have positioned George to be able to make this decision, but it is not determined that he will do so. It is a choice he makes willingly.

George is the only character in *Shadow* whose development gets this much narrative time and attention. Wood works within an ecological conception of character, paying attention to the variety of forces that influence how George progresses and the options available to him for psychological expression and development. But Wood’s

ambivalence about this theory of character is evident through the unpredictable aspects of character development, such as the chance nature of circumstances and personal agency. So while George's character is legible to an extent within the bounds of the novel, Wood's conflicting attitude about the ability of psychology to render character completely legible to science is evident. *Shadow* not only challenges the efficacy of a totalizing theory of character but also contains a critique of the social inequalities the theory reveals.

"Il y a des femmes et des femmes!": Reading Ecology Through Character

Though George holds the central focus of the novel, the "subsidiary characters," as Sergeant designates, are of crucial importance to Wood's work. Costantini argues that an examination of the secondary female characters in particular reveals the deeper social analysis in Wood's fiction. Costantini describes *Shadow*, drawing on Gilbert and Gubar, as a "palimpsestic text," a novel which "conveys and camouflages messages that would sound unorthodox to most Victorian readers" (77). The supernatural elements of *Shadow* are often interpreted as Gothic manifestations of the problematic domestic sphere and the experiences of women. Alison Jaquet, as one example, positions the novel in a larger lineage of "non-realist" narratives used to "represent the often marginalized experiences of Victorian women" (245). Jaquet frames the *Shadow* and the supernatural elements of the story as devices that Wood uses within the Gothic tradition in order to "locate a discourse through which to represent the complexity of female experience" (245). Indeed, the compelling contrast between Maria Godolphin and Charlotte Pain and the colorful cast of secondary female characters provide ample fodder for this type of reading. I am

also interested in the supernatural as an alternative discourse, but I have argued that the Shadow represents character rather than—or at least in addition to—the “often marginalized experiences” women. Wood’s novels are, however, clearly interested in the experiences of women, and mid-Victorian discussions of character in both popular and scientific discourses were rife with assumptions, generalizations, and reductive arguments made along gender lines. This section brings the issues of gender into my discussion of character by examining the way Wood’s treatment of the two central female characters, Maria Hastings and Charlotte Pain, reveals a commentary on the unequal distribution of social agency between men and women and ultimately on the way the Victorian conception of character itself is gendered.

At the beginning of the third serial installment, the narrator compares Maria and Charlotte: “A reader of character,” the narrator states, “would have noted the contrast between those two young ladies as they stood there: he would have trusted the one; he would not have trusted the other” (Dec, 1861; 400). The narrator gives lip service to describing Maria as a model Victorian woman and Charlotte as the quintessential “fast girl” of the period.³⁹ However, the narrator also lists the women’s qualities that do not match their overarching characterizations. The narrator describes Charlotte as “kind hearted in the main, liberal natured, pleasant tempered, of a spirit firm and resolute, fit to battle with the world and to make good her own way in it” and Maria as “timid, irresolute, unfit to battle with [the world’s] cares; swayed easily by those she loved; and all too passionately fond of George Godolphin” (Dec, 1861; 400-401). And it is one of Maria’s greatest faults that she was “rather addicted to doing nothing” (Dec, 1861; 401).

³⁹ See Costantini, 78-90.

As becomes apparent in the way the stories of these women play out, the most important difference between the two, rather than their trustworthiness or their suitability to be George's wife, is their ability or inability to "battle with the world." Charlotte is able to fight, to stand up for herself, and to "make good her own way," but Maria is "unfit" in this regard. In this moment, Wood's narrator draws attention to the importance of social agency for women. Maria is neither able to grapple with the responsibilities of her domestic role, nor is she able to find a suitable agential outlet within the domestic sphere. Charlotte's entire persona, in contrast, is of a woman who fights against the social pressures for her to be a certain way or act in a particular manner.

Despite the mixed endorsements, the narrator makes a point to justify the relationship between George and Maria, concluding that Charlotte is "not truthful; not high principled; not one, who I—had I been George Godolphin—would have chosen for my wife" (Dec, 1861; 400). However, the two women's fate in the narrative—one wastes away to death, the other thrives in London's social life—clashes with the narrator's initial reading of the women's characters. It is easy for the narrator in the opening chapters to say that Maria is trustworthy and Charlotte is not, but the events of the narrative as it unfolds over the following two years of serialization challenge this initial assessment. Though George marries the "safe" option in Maria, he does not include her in any of the important facets of his life. She ineffectually inhabits the domestic sphere, which eventually leads to her demise. And this is not entirely George's doing. Maria is very complacent in her limited role, something which several characters chide her for throughout the novel. She enjoys spending her time drawing rather than actively presiding over the day-to-day management of the household. Charlotte, in contrast, shows

herself to be a useful confidant and partner to George and an active force in her world. George confides in her and seeks her assistance repeatedly throughout the novel. And she is a strong woman in her own right, exerting her will where she can and finding a limited amount of social, financial, and personal success. As Anne-Marie Beller notes, Maria and Charlotte handle the events of the narrative in opposite ways: Maria shrinks under the weight of the scandal, eventually succumbing to death; Charlotte rises to the occasion, defying the town's censure and demonstrating strength in the face of adversity. In Maria's final moments, the narrator reflects on her or his initial character reading of Maria. Speaking to the reader, the narrator exclaims:

You may remember it was observed at the beginning of her history that she was one unfit to battle with the world's sharp storms—it had now proved so. Charlotte Pain would have braved them, whatever their nature, have weathered them jauntily on a prancing saddle-horse; Maria had sunk down, crushed with their weight. *Il y a*—let me once more repeat it!—*il y a des femmes et des femmes*. (Oct, 1863; 146)

“The reader is left in no doubt,” Beller writes, “as to which sort of woman Wood approves” (224). As early as 1864, a reviewer in *The Athenaeum* also noted Charlotte's redeeming qualities, stating that “even the female reader” will forgive her, “unprincipled as she is, for the sake of her thorough good-nature” (119).

The narratives of Maria and Charlotte are equally as entangled with George's as with each other. Each of these three characters wields a different amount of agency. George, as discussed above, has a high amount of agency, and he uses that power to self-serving ends. Maria and Charlotte are exaggerated representations of two options for female agency in the period, neither of which is suited for the multi-faceted nature of the women. Maria takes the path of the domestic housewife, adoring her husband, molding

herself to his will, trusting him to a fault. However, she does not thrive in the domestic sphere. Her habit of “doing nothing” is amplified, and it appears to result in her demise, which reads as if the narrative is punishing her for her passivity and unwillingness to rise to the occasion she is called to in the wake of the scandal. Her inappropriate use of her time and energy is dramatized through her hobby of drawing. Maria believes her drawing to be meaningful, demonstrated by her conflation of traditional domestic duties with artistic ones, proudly exclaiming, upon being asked by George whether she had spend the whole day drawing, “I have been so industrious! I have been drawing nearly all day. See! I’ve nearly finished this [drawing]” (July, 1862; 275). The use of “industrious” foregrounds the disconnect in her definition of productivity. Her drawing is neither a harmless side hobby, as she neglects her daily domestic duties, nor a monetized pursuit, as were Wood’s artistic pursuits. Further, Maria’s drawings themselves are still-life landscapes (the one drawing we see is of Bray’s cottage, a scene from earlier in the novel), passive imitations of the natural world. Ultimately, the narrative punishes Maria for her passivity through her progressive decline to death after the scandal.

Charlotte struggles to exert her agency and will, in both senses of “struggle,” and the narrative appears to reward for it. She is a personality to be reckoned with wherever she goes and does things that Janet describes as “unfeminine” such as keeping dogs and riding horses (Apr, 1862; 409). Further, Charlotte does not just ride horses as a general hobby, as did Alicia Audley of *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862). Instead, Charlotte cruelly dominates her animals and her abusive treatment of her horses and dogs is depicted on several occasions (more like Braddon’s Aurora Floyd). Unlike Maria who passively draws the world, Charlotte shapes her world to the extent that she can: “After all,”

Charlotte asks Maria, “where’s the use of [drawing]? The best-made sketch cannot rival its model—nature” (Dec, 1861; 408). Charlotte’s social agency, though, is limited to “masculine” pursuits—such as keeping dogs, riding horses, and hunting—and she is still forced to marry her cousin, Rodolph Pain, despite her objections and disinclinations, because of social custom (as a child she verbally engaged herself to him and she will rise in social status as a wife rather than a spinster). She retains some control over her life after marriage, which is evident by her power over Rodolph depicted in the final scene of the novel, but the cost she pays is being the stereotypical “fast” girl and sacrificing her claims to social respectability in the process (most of townsfolk of Prior’s Ash are aware of the affair). The narrative leaves Charlotte in an ambiguous situation. On the one hand, she has survived the events of the narrative and lives amongst London’s social life; on the other hand, she has gained an unwanted husband and cultivated what power she does have through cruelty to the animals and people around her.

Wood’s complicated and conflicting depictions of Maria and Charlotte ultimately reveal a flaw in the conception of “character” itself. The narrative’s conflicting endorsements of the two women bring into focus the inadequacy of the definition of character. Maria is seemingly censured for her inability to inhabit the domestic sphere productively and failure to do physical and spiritual battle in difficult circumstances, but she is also the narrator’s choice for George and much time is spent developing the reader’s sympathy for her. Charlotte is seemingly censured and respected for her self-assurance, strength, and (limited) agency, which the narrative simultaneously rewards and punishes with her adequate life in London at the novel’s conclusion. It is telling of Wood’s larger concerns that the traits Charlotte possesses are highly valued traits when

present in men. As they present in women, they become coded as out-of-place masculine traits. Charlotte's masculine character ultimately shapes her into one of the villains in the story: she is a willingly duplicitous accomplice to Verrall and George in their misdeeds. The Victorian concept of character is constructed from a masculine perspective to value masculine traits, such as agency and assertion. And, through Maria, Wood demonstrates how the character traits attributed to the model woman, such as passivity, deference to men, inactivity, when carried to their logical extreme, become negative and ineffectual qualities. Not only does Wood critique the limited avenues of social agency available for women in the period, but she also draws attention to the way the Victorian concept of character is itself constructed through a masculine perspective and does not account for nuances among differing qualities, desires, and possibilities between men and women.

The narrator's initial overarching characterization of Maria and Charlotte ultimately proves correct. Though they are both multifaceted and complex women, they struggle to thrive in their restrictive social roles. Maria succumbs to the passivity inherent in the domestic sphere, which leads to her demise, and Charlotte struggles to participate actively in her own life, but to do so she must enact cruelty to gain a semblance of power in her small corner of the world and is eventually forced to suffer an unwanted marriage to her cousin. Though Wood works within an ecological conception of character as she constructs George, looking to the internal and external pressures which shape him, the same treatment is not given to Maria and Charlotte because the range of agential options are not available to them: they either succumb or defy, but in either case they end up an unhappy wife. George's character is brought into focus through the ecological forces of influence around him, reading from environment to character; Maria and Charlotte's

characters enable the social inequalities between men and women and the inadequacies of the definition of character itself to come into view, reading from character to environment.

“[T]he broad road of common sense”: Janet Godolphin’s Alternative

When George goes to the cupboard to retrieve the key to the bank vault, he finds the one he needs is missing. Upon attempting to close the cupboard after frantically searching for the missing key, he finds the key jammed between the lower shelf and the cupboard door with no good explanation for how it got there. “That he dropped it,” the narrator writes, “there was no doubt: but, according to all recognised rules of gravity, it ought to have fallen on to the lower shelf, which lay under the other” (Aug, 1862; 406). George then remarks, “Janet would say it was sent to me as a warning not to use the key—as I am about to use it,” before immediately disregarding this thought and proceeding to the vault, “laughing at Janet and her superstition, the key in his hand” (Aug, 1862; 406). Janet Godolphin is the matronly head of the family, as the eldest sister and an unmarried woman in her thirties with an independent income (bequeathed to her by a distant family member’s will). She is also the keeper of the family’s history, both fact and folklore. Though she is level-headed in many aspects of her life, Janet is also the most consistently superstitious of the Godolphins, buying into the family curse, the Shadow, and all the superstitions associated with Ashlydyat. George thinks of her and her superstitious beliefs in the crucial moment when his character arcs from relatively harmless duplicity to true immorality because she embodies the novel’s thematic concerns and inconsistencies.

Costantini argues that Wood's fiction contains an "indictment of mercenary marriage, represented as a consequence of a socioeconomic system founded on the notion of female dependence on male supply" (34). In place of mercenary marriages, Costantini argues, Wood builds in subtle by compelling alternative models of female independence in the background characters of her novels. One of Costantini's primary examples is the figure of the spinster, a common character in Wood's novels. Mangham, however, argues that Wood demonstrates conflicted attitudes towards gender. He points to Lady Godolphin as his example, the second wife of Sir George Godolphin, who is financially self-sufficient (the novel is written just after the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857), but whose power in the marriage, such as determining where she and Sir George reside, seems dubious. Indeed, the house she builds is provocatively titled "Lady Godolphin's Folly," and it is the relocation of residence from Ashlydyat to the Folly that supposedly initiates, per the curse, the downfall of the Godolphin family. Mangham uses this inconsistency to argue that Wood held conflicted attitudes about the power and amount of independence a woman should have in marriage, to the point that Wood even considered titling the novel "Lady Godolphin's Folly." In some respects, Mangham suggests, Wood viewed female independence as a good thing and in others not. Janet Godolphin's contradictory characterization supports this interpretation of ambivalence on Wood's part: Janet embraces the independence of spinsterhood *and* rigorously supports traditional gender roles and social etiquette, and she is simultaneously very rational and level-headed in some facets *and* the most superstitious member of the family.

Though Costantini does not discuss Janet, the eldest Godolphin sister very much embodies the female independence represented by the marriage-resistant social role of

the spinster. However, Janet is also deeply invested in proper social etiquette along traditional gender lines. When her younger sisters want to walk to the hunting party, she refuses to let them out of respect for propriety. She insists repeatedly that George should show respect to Mrs. Briscow, an elder family friend, and join the arranged family dinner and reprimands George for opting to spend time alone with Charlotte instead. She also understands the delicate power dynamics surrounding household governance and refuses to occupy homes where another woman is in charge. Janet is pervasively the strictest figure in the family, constantly demanding the observance of proper etiquette by everyone. In this way, she is a traditionalist, a strict adherent to social norms and customs. But she also is a spinster who speaks her mind in a blunt and straightforward way. She has an annuity of one hundred pounds a year, which renders her “independent” and able to “live where she pleases” (Apr, 1863; 417). When the family is broken up after George’s crimes are revealed, Janet does not crumple under the weight of the crime but rises to the occasion and successfully mitigates the damage to the family before leaving for Scotland to live on her own. Janet’s adherence to traditional social and gender roles while embodying the spinster figure marks her as an ambivalent character in terms of gender stereotypes.

This is not the only inconsistency in *Shadow*. The supernatural elements lurk in the peripheries of the narrative, being confirmed by the characters in the story but also not being the only explanation for how or why the plot unfolds as it does: in other words, the novel provides both a supernatural and a natural explanation for the events of the narrative. Several nineteenth-century reviewers notice as much as well. An *Athenaeum* reviewer notes that “the old prophecy is so skillfully blended with the practical results of

individual conduct, that it has the effect of an old Greek Fate” (119). And a reviewer in *The Reader* writes that the “whole spiritual element might be cut out without any injury to the story” and the “ghostly visitations never come to any practical result” because “George Godolphin would have gone to the dogs with equal rapidity, even if the ghostly bier had remained at rest in the family vaults” (69). Janet’s character further complicates Wood’s layering of supernatural and natural explanations over the course of the novel.

Janet begins the novel believing that everything negative that happens to the Godolphin family stems from the supernatural ancestral curse; but by the end of novel she is able to realize the very ordinary progression of events that led to the family’s situation. Near the end of *Shadow*, Janet reflects on the circumstances of the narrative, but rather than framing everything in supernatural terms as she had done earlier in the story, she acknowledges the natural progression of events, the series of links in the causal chain which bring George and her family to where they are at the novel’s conclusion. She begins with her father, wondering “[h]ad Sir George’s departure [from Ashlydyat] brought on the ruin—been the first end of the thread that led to it?” (Apr, 1863; 412; emphasis in original). The narrator notes that Janet is “prone to indulge in superstitious fancies to a degree many would pronounce ridiculously absurd,” but in this moment she instead avoids the “by-paths of the supernatural for the broad road of common sense” (Apr, 1863; 412). Instead of attributing everything to an unexplainable curse, Janet foregrounds the moments in which superstition butts up against an explainable reality.

Thinking simultaneously with Janet and the reader, the narrator says:

From the facts that were being brought to light by the bankruptcy, turning themselves up by degrees one after another, it was easy to see that George Godolphin had been seduced into a hornets’ nest, and so been eased of his

money. Whether the process had been summary or slow—whether he had walked into it head foremost in blind simplicity—or whether he had only succumbed to it under the most refined Machiavellian craft, brought subtly to bear upon him, was of no consequence to inquire. It is of no consequence to us. He had fallen into the hands of a company of swindlers, who ensnared their victims and transacted their business under the semblance of bill-discounting; and they had brought George to what he was. (Apr, 1863; 412)

Here Janet attributes George's moral corruption to the influence of the Verralls, whose overtly predatory ambitions, she believes, took advantage of too-trusting and gullible George. Further, she traces the origins of George's downfall to Sir George's removal from Ashlydyat, emphasizing though the natural explanation rather than the supernatural:

Head and chief of this apparently reputable firm was Verrall: and Verrall, there was not a doubt, had been the chief agent in George Godolphin's undoing. But for Sir George Godolphin's quitting Ashlydyat and putting it up in the market to let, Verrall might never have come near Prior's Ash; never have met Mr. George Godolphin. In that case the chances were that Mr. George would have been a flourishing banker yet. Gay he would have been; needlessly extravagant; scattering his wild oats by the bushel—but not a man come to ruin and to beggary. (Apr, 1863; 412)

The narrator makes sure to highlight where the curse overlaps with the “common sense” of the narrative events: “Janet Godolphin was right: it *was* the quitting of Ashlydyat by her father, and the consequent tenancy of Mr. Verrall, which had been the first link in the chain, terminating in George's disgrace, in their ruin” (Apr, 1863; 412, emphasis in original).⁴⁰ In this scene, Janet, the most consistently attuned of the characters to the supernatural influences, offers a rational explanation for the events, amplifying the

⁴⁰ Mangham interprets this recognition of the origin of the events of the narrative with Sir George, rather than George, in terms of male submission to female will, which upsets the patriarchal lineage of the Godolphins, which is based on male violence against women.

inconsistent vacillation in her character and in the novel's treatment of the Gothic elements.

The reader's experience of the novel is similar to Janet's. *Shadow* first provides the reader with enough evidence to interpret the events of the narrative as the result of supernatural forces, such as an ancient family curse designed to enact revenge on the family in the present for the sins of the family in the past. The Godolphin family curse states that the usurpers of Ashlydyat would bring about the destruction of the Godolphin family. And this does come to fruition in the novel. It is the Verralls and Charlotte Pain who rent the house from the Godolphins. And it is also the Verralls and Charlotte who bring about the destruction of the family, if only in an indirect way. The Verralls indeed are the ones who "usurped" Ashlydyat, and they are also the ones who lead George to his downfall, through both Charlotte (infidelity) and Verrall (cheating, stealing, gambling), just as the curse seems to predict. However, it is not clear that the curse has anything to do with this outcome: it just so happens that an opportunistic (to frame Verrall and Charlotte in the nicest of ways) family rents the house, and George decides to throw his lot in with them over his own family. The supernatural events are seemingly explainable through natural causes, and this is what Janet realizes toward the end of the narrative. In a Radcliffian way, most of the superstitious elements give way to rational explanations.

However, despite the potential for rational explanation, the *Shadow* itself remains enigmatic and thus maintains an element of the supernatural throughout the novel. When Averil and Cecil take over Ashlydyat and renovate the Dark Plain, they uncover human remains, presumably belonging to the murdered wife of the Wicked Godolphin. They give the bones a proper burial, which should be, according to the family lore, the act that

finally dissipates the curse. Cecil notes the coincidence of the bones being found at the same time that the curse seemingly comes to fruition. She says, “Is it not a singular coincidence—that they should be discovered just at the moment that the Plain is being dug up? Were Janet here, she would say how startlingly all the old superstition is being worked out” (Sept, 1863; 29). Even in the novel’s resolution there remains a supernatural explanation for the termination of the family’s poor fortunes, and Cecil believes Janet would have landed on the side of the supernatural. But Janet ultimately settles on an ambivalent note on the supernaturalness of the family’s outcome. As she sits and contemplates the family’s situation, she loses herself in a “maze of perplexity” as her thoughts “roam to things ‘beyond their ken’” (July, 1863; 281). She reflects on the appearance of the Shadow at the moment of the Godolphin family’s ruin, asking “*Could they not have gone from their fate?*” (July, 1863; 282; emphasis in original). She associates this question of fate with George: “It seemed a trifling thing to do for George Godolphin, to keep in the right path, instead of lapsing to the wrong one” and eventually comes to the ambivalent conclusion “we are blaming George for it all, but perhaps the lad could not go against the fate. Who knows?” (July, 1863; 282). The reviewer for *The Reader* notes the inconstancies in Janet’s character and marks it up as a failing on Wood’s part. She or he writes, “We give Mrs. Wood credit for too much ability to suppose she seriously believes in twaddle like [the family curse], which is put into the mouth of a respectable, sensible, and well-educated woman” (69). However, instead of demanding a steadfast consistency from the characters as the reviewer does, Janet’s inconsistency is an opportunistic opening for a more nuanced understanding of *Shadow*’s overarching thematic concerns.

“[A]nd so they must remain”: Homely Gothic and Enigmatic Character

After Janet’s extended reverie on the rational machinations of the plot, she relapses back into supernatural explanations, asking whether or not George could have actually have gone “against the fate” (July, 1863; 282). Here the narrator interjects and takes over:

Let us look back to some of the ruin we have witnessed; and marvel, as Janet Godolphin did, whether those whom we blame as its cause, *could* have “gone against their fate.” There are mysteries in this world which we cannot solve: we may lose ourselves as we will in their depths—we may cast ridicule to them, or pass them over with a light laugh of irony—we may talk, in our poor inflated wisdom, of their being amenable to common laws, to be accounted for by ordinary rules of science,—but we can never solve them; never fathom them, until Time shall be no more. (July, 1863; 282; emphasis in original)

Like in the opening discussion of character reading, the narrator compares the process of attempting to comprehend supernatural phenomena like the Shadow to that of “ordinary” science, challenging science’s ability to account for all the “mysteries in this world.” Despite recognizing the potential for rational explanation, Janet ultimately falls back on her superstitious beliefs for explication. Though there are rational answers to be had, Janet chooses to believe that the events were governed by supernatural forces such as fate. Janet’s vacillation between natural and supernatural explanations mirrors the reader’s experience of reading a novel that begins in the Gothic but then slowly reveals itself to be something closer to domestic realism, as the mechanisms of the plot and the development of George’s character are seemingly given clear natural and explainable antecedents. However, just as Janet returns to her superstitions, so to does the novel resist the confines of realism by allowing the supernatural elements to haunt the peripheries of

the narrative through the close of the story. Fred Botting, among others, identifies this as the “homely Gothic,” a generic variation of the Gothic novel unique to the mid-nineteenth century. The homely Gothic genre focuses on the “terrors and horrors that are much closer to home” such as “uncanny disruptions of the boundaries between inside and outside, reality and delusion, propriety and corruption, materialism and spirituality” (Botting 104). Though Botting’s analysis of the mid-Victorian period is primarily of male authors, he does draw explicitly from a short story by Wood titled “Reality, or Delusion?” (1868).

Published in *Argosy* as part of the Johnny Ludlow series, “Reality, or Delusion?” has a lot of similarities to *Shadow*, both in content and generic form. Like *Shadow* the plot centers on a handsome but criminally-inclined man (in this story, Daniel Ferrar) and the two women competing for his affections. The first woman, Maria Lease, is the domestic, local girl who would make a good, and safe, match with Daniel, much like the Maria-George relationship in *Shadow*. Maria Lease competes for Daniel’s affections with Harriet Roe (whose single syllabus last name echoes Charlotte Pain’s), a boisterous, outgoing, and flirtatious girl bred in France. With this base plot, there are clear overlaps between *Shadow* and “Reality, or Delusion?”. The most important overlap, though, is in the generic form, which hovers, as the title suggests, between reality and delusion, realism and Gothic. After the supposed ghost sighting at the story’s climax, the narrator asks:

But what of the appearance Maria Lease saw? Was it reality or delusion? That is (as the Squire put it), did her eyes see a real, spectral Daniel Ferrar, or were they deceived by some imagination of the brain? Opinions are divided. Nothing can shake her own steadfast belief in its reality; to her it remains an awful certainty, true and sure as heaven. (535)

As *Shadow* does, “Reality, or Delusion?” inhabits the space between two distinct genres and, even in the conclusion, resists providing an explanation for the seemingly supernatural events in the narrative. Botting’s gloss suggests that the ghost in Wood’s story represents “a sense of unity, value and spirit,” all things missing from “a thoroughly secular, rationalised and scientifically ordered material world” (121). He concludes by stating that “[g]hosts return from a greater darkness surrounding the culture, from a sense of spiritual loss of which criminality and social degeneration were symptoms” (121). Botting interprets the supernatural elements of “Reality, or Delusion?” as something that represent the spiritual or unknowable aspect of reality, the mysteries of nature and experience which cannot be scientifically quantified and explained. My reading of *Shadow*—Wood’s only Gothic novel—follows this same interpretive line.

The Shadow is a metaphor for seemingly intangible phenomena, and its realistic treatment tinges the narrative with a Gothic hue. Its existence and effects on the novel are left intentionally ambiguous. For example, the Shadow might—or might not—play a role in influencing events in the real world of the novel. When Mrs. Godolphin becomes ill, the Shadow appears, and when she sees it she believes that it foretells her pending death. And she does die shortly after its appearance, but it is unclear whether or not her belief that she was doomed had any affect on her. Because of her belief in the Shadow, she resigns herself to her death; if she had not resigned herself, it is unclear whether or not she would have died when she did. Colonel Max, another Prior’s Ash local, states that “Low spirits never cured anybody yet: but they have killed thousands” (128), noting the connection between mental/spiritual vitality, physical health, and the will to live. In Mrs.

Godolphin's case, it is unclear to the reader whether the Shadow appears because she is going to die, or whether she dies because she loses the will to live after seeing the Shadow and believing that it announces her unavoidable death. Like "Reality, or Delusion?," *Shadow* allows both interpretations to exist simultaneously, never relinquishing its supernatural and Gothic undertones.

The ambivalence of *Shadow*'s genre mirrors the ambivalence its argument about character and character reading. Despite George's character ecology being outlined, the influencing factors of his development being identified, the randomness and unpredictability of circumstance and his personal agency make a complete theory of character difficult, if not impossible, to articulate in its entirety. However through Maria and Charlotte's characters Wood brings into focus the truncated options for social agency available to women: their social environment is not multi-faceted enough to accommodate fully their complexity as individuals and both are forced into roles in which neither flourish. That is not to say that there are not several examples of skilled readers of character in the novel, such as Verrall and Charlotte, but they use their ability to self-serving ends. The only character who possesses a true sensibility for character reading—that is, the ability to sympathize with others on their inner character, rather than class affiliations or status—is Janet.

Janet is an innately skilled judge of character. She sees well in advance the dangers of the growing relationship between George and Charlotte. And unlike the other family members, she reads Charlotte's intentions with George immediately, warning him to "keep out of [Charlotte's] fascinations" (Apr, 1862; 401). It is no surprise that Wood gives one of her female characters a high sensibility for character reading. Writing about

how female novelists understand the relationships among their characters better than male novelists, Wood states, “Generally speaking, women’s instinctive perceptions for [character relationships] are clearer, more powerful than those of men; and this may form one element in their success as novelists” (“Our Log-Book,” Mar, 1868; 397). That Janet, with her tenuously yoked inclinations for both rationality and superstition, should be one of the most attuned to character sensibility suggests that sensibility itself is a combination of reason and superstition, the natural and supernatural. It requires both a rational mind to identify empirical signs of character in another and a superstitious mind to make the interpretive leap needed to extrapolate beyond empirical evidence to motives and a holistic conception. While nineteenth-century science and psychology may be able to make legible aspects of character, there will always remain elements of unpredictability and mystery explainable only through concession to supernatural influence. As *Shadow*’s narrator concludes about the supernatural in the novel, “There are things, as I have just said, which can neither be explained nor accounted for: they are marvels, mysteries, and so they must remain.”

Conclusion

The Shadow of Ashlydyat is ultimately an ambivalent novel. It does not satisfy the reader by positing firm conclusions about its themes. It hovers between a Gothic and realist novel, and its rendering of character it at times clarifying and at others obscuring. In keeping with Wood’s palimpsestic style of fiction writing, *Shadow*’s conclusions are layered; the novel clearly asks provocative questions but fails to provide definitive answers. The narrative itself follows this same unsatisfactory trajectory: the engaging

stories of shadows, embezzlement, and romance are never fully resolved, as the Shadow fades into the background without explanation and George's crimes are forgiven and forgotten with little-to-no consequence. The novel's conclusion is strikingly unsatisfactory and atypical of Wood's work (and perhaps the mid-Victorian popular novel writ large). Thomas and Maria become dispensable collateral damage to George's crimes, Verrall and Charlotte face no repercussions for their roles in the events of the narrative, and Averil forgives George and helps him get a government post in India. The novel closes with George boarding his ship and looking forward to a better future, without having tasted any consequences for his actions. Rather than a narrative shortcoming on the part of the author, the narrative's conclusion should be read for what it is: an ambivalent ending to an ambivalent novel.

George Godolphin operates in the liminal space between two familiar character types of Victorian fiction, the young, handsome gentleman (like a Franklin Blake) and the dastardly bourgeois swindler (like a Godfrey Ablewhite). But Wood does not simply fall back on the familiar literary shorthand that depicts George as someone born bad or purely motivated by self interest, with no explanation of how he becomes the character he does. Instead, Wood details at length the forces that shape George into the controversial and complex character he becomes by the end of the narrative: the novel "looks to the whole" and considers the interplay between the internal (inherited physiobiological) and external forces (social and circumstantial) that shape George's character. However, Wood's ambivalence toward science and psychology is evident as the novel also challenges the impact of these influential forces by foregrounding in crucial moments the randomness of circumstance and George's deployment of discrete personal agency.

Wood's treatment of George's character throws into relief the limited agency of the two central female characters, Maria and Charlotte, and implicitly amplifies a disparity in social power and opportunity. George's character development is a demonstration of an ecology of character, a mapping of internal and external forces that shape him across the narrative; by reading George's ecological environment, his character becomes legible to the reader. In contrast, Maria and Charlotte's characters make visible the truncated forms of self-expression available to women in the period; by reading the women's characters, their limited ecological environments become legible to the reader. Ultimately, Wood's conflicting and contradictory handling of Maria and Charlotte is not about either woman's ability or inability to embody particular traits of character but rather about the insufficiencies and gendered nature of Victorian conceptions of character.

Ellen Wood is known for her progressive-conservative two step. She clearly recognizes social inequalities, especially between sexes, and builds subtle critiques into her novels. But, unlike Collins, who was unabashedly progressive, or Braddon, who was covertly progressive, Wood did hold traditional conservative beliefs, beliefs which were often at odds with her progressive leanings and resulted in ambivalent positions on certain issues. In *Shadow*, Wood demonstrates her hesitancy about nineteenth-century science's ambitious claims and in particular the new scientific psychology's assertions about being able to make legible one's inner character through a materialist physiology. In the artificial environment of fiction, Wood works through these conflicting ideas, acknowledging through the three main characters the affordances and limitations of an ecology of character. As we will see in the next chapter, Collins's *The Moonstone* just a

few years later asks similar questions as Wood's novel but comes up with very different answers.

CHAPTER 3

WHERE THE MEDICAL AND THE METAPHYSICAL MEET: THE TEXTURE OF *THE MOONSTONE*

In a letter dated April 20th, 1868, popular novelist Wilkie Collins requested George Henry Lewes's assistance with "a certain physiological knot which threatens to start up in the texture of [his] new story" ("To G. H. Lewes" 112). Collins's consultation with Lewes, a historian and theorist of philosophy and psychology, begins to reveal the significance of mid-Victorian psychology to Collins's serialized detective novel *The Moonstone* (1868), currently running in Charles Dickens's influential periodical *All the Year Round*. *The Moonstone* is an epistolary-style novel about the disappearance of the Moonstone, a rare diamond, during the night after a party in the Verinder's locked country manor. The narrative uses the first-person perspectives of those involved with the investigation to piece together the events of the evening, culminating in the conduction of a physiological psychological experiment which reveals the innocence of the protagonist Franklin Blake and identifies the true culprit. I begin with Lewes and the periodical environment of Collins's novel because they are the two main points of entry for my argument. In what follows, I contextualize *The Moonstone* within two concentric cultural discourses, mid-Victorian physiological psychology and popular science. The physiological psychologists were investigating the *mystery* of consciousness using a combination of philosophical and empirical methods in order to give shape and definition to the seemingly invisible phenomenon of consciousness, and popular science was actively shaping the psychological discourse circulating in the Victorian periodical networks. Collins's serialized detective novel mediates between the psychologists and the

general public by dramatizing this investigative process in narrative form and staging a resolution to the moral and ethical concerns associated with physiological psychology.

The nineteenth century was a period of epistemological and methodological transition in the history of science and psychology. In the first half of the century, the study of consciousness was a subset of philosophy, and the philosophers of mind were trained to use subjective introspection as their primary method of psychological inquiry. By the end of the century, experimental psychology became the dominant form of psychological investigation and catalyzed the formation of psychology as an autonomous discipline.⁴¹ This shift in method was a symptom of a larger change in psychological epistemology: as what counted as valid psychological knowledge changed, so too did the methods of investigation. The epicenter of this shift was mid-Victorian physiological psychology. Influenced by the materialism of phrenology, the empiricism of physiology, and the emphasis on sensory experience of associationism, the mid-Victorian physiological psychologists based the study of consciousness on a combination of investigative methods, both subjective introspection and empirical analysis of the brain and central and peripheral nervous systems. Lewes and fellow physiological psychologist William Benjamin Carpenter—both of whom directly inform *The Moonstone*—advocated for this combined use of philosophical and empirical methods in order to combine the study of observable surfaces with the invisible depths of consciousness.

Psychology as it was practiced in the nineteenth century was a subset of medicine. However, psychological discourse—its theories, protocols, methods, and implications—

⁴¹ First pioneered by Wilhelm Wundt in Germany and taken up in Britain by James Ward and James Sully, experimental psychology is the study of the mind and consciousness using the scientific method and tested through a variety of experiments. See Rylance; Smith; and Boring.

was of much wider disciplinary interest and was actively shaped in several disciplinary communities, including religion, philosophy, biology, and literature, and a variety of discursive venues, including both specialized and general periodicals. *The Moonstone* participates in the popular science culture, which was constructed and circulated in the mid-Victorian general periodicals. In nineteenth-century Britain, the sciences were in various stages of legitimation, and part of the legitimation process included building the general public's interest in scientific knowledge and practice. Historians of science and literature in recent decades have begun unpacking the important role that general periodicals played in the creation, popularization, and distribution of scientific knowledge to the general public through a variety of popular science discourses. General periodicals like Dickens's *All the Year Round*, for example, participated in the construction of this popular science culture and regularly published popular science articles. Many novels were published side-by-side with these popular science pieces, and they not only thematized some of the thinly-described scientific concepts circulating in the periodical's discursive ecosystem but also fashioned new forms of social-scientific knowledge by considering the science's broader social implications.

This chapter reads *The Moonstone* through the dual lenses of mid-Victorian physiological psychology and popular science. It argues that Collins's novel attempts to mediate between the psychologists and the general public by staging a fictional resolution to the social concerns surrounding physiological psychology's problematic implications for personal agency and social responsibility. Though scholars have considered the science and psychology in *The Moonstone*, the majority of the interpretations of this text

are framed through either narrative or postcolonial theory.⁴² My reading of the novel is able to extend the interpretive scope by using Collins's request for Lewes's assistance—something underexamined in the scholarship—and their long-standing relationship to open the text up to a more nuanced reading of the parallels between mid-Victorian physiological psychology and the serialized detective novel.⁴³

The Moonstone's narrative moment in which the social ecology of character becomes legible is the second experiment scene. The entire plot moves toward this moment, as it is here that the mystery is finally solved. Collins's narrative moment differs from Wood and Braddon's in that rather than focusing on a crucial decision that the character must make it interrogates the social and psychological mechanisms that inform and direct a decision that has already occurred. Chapter Two examined Wood's hesitancy about the new psychology and its ambitious claims to be able to know and read character. Through George, she foregrounds the mysteries—such as free will and fate—that render character illegible in its entirety and make it an untenable subject for scientific investigation. Collins, however, suggests the opposite: his novel addresses the social concerns about the limits of a scientific psychology and argues that with the proper method of investigation practiced by the proper psychologist a full theory of mind and

⁴² For science and psychology readings, see Nadel, Bourne-Taylor, Dames, Talairach-Vielmas; for narrative readings, see Miller, Thoms, and Thomas; for postcolonial readings, see Reed, Heller, Mehta, Nayder, and Goodlad.

⁴³ Sutherland notes that Blake uses one of Lewes's favorite dinner party jokes and suggests that Blake's multi-national personality is in part a comic depiction of Lewes's European sensibility (482). Talairach-Vielmas begins his chapter on *The Moonstone* with a quotation from Lewes and draws connections between Lewes and Collins throughout. However, neither mentions Collins's request for Lewes's assistance.

consciousness can be constructed. The experiment scene functions like a photographic negative. Instead of carefully detailing all of the forces that coalesce in the character's crucial moment of decision in real time, the experiment scene reveals the external and internal forces, which Collins names the "medical" and "metaphysical," following the double aspect psychological theory, that directed a decision that has already occurred.

To this end, I first historicize mid-Victorian psychological epistemology and method and then consider the affordances and limitations of different narratorial perspectives and the shifting methods of investigation in the novel. I then examine the discourses of popular science and psychology in the general periodicals, concluding with a reading of a published exchange between Collins and Lewes. From this exchange I draw connections in the subsequent section to the methods developed by the characters in *The Moonstone* which forward their progress toward the mystery's solution. In the final section I consider the importance of the physiological psychologist's role as detective and the issues of agency and responsibility that are uncovered in the final act of the novel.

Between Metaphysics and Materialism: Victorian Physiological Psychology

From Edgar Allan Poe's "Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), to Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *The Trail of the Serpent* (1860), to Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Sign of Four* (1890), the history of detective fiction is interwoven with the history of what constitutes knowledge and the method through which knowledge is obtained. Likewise, the history of psychology is indivisible from the history of epistemology and method. Both detective fiction and psychology investigate mysteries, one of crime and the other of consciousness. The nineteenth century, more than any other period in modern history,

housed the largest shifts in epistemology and method in the study of consciousness. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Cartesian dualism was the ontological scaffolding of the study of mind. In the nineteenth century developments in psychological methods such as phrenology, hypnotism, and physiology suggested a closer connection between brain and body than had been previously acknowledged. Interest in a scientific psychology in Britain developed in earnest in the late 1840s and early 1850s.⁴⁴ Physiological psychology carved out a distinct area of inquiry that combined the ethical interests and methods of philosophy with the empiricism of physiology, attempting to apply the method of science to the study of mind and to establish psychology as its own discipline alongside the natural sciences.

Part of the empirical tradition which traces its roots to Descartes and Locke, subjective introspection had long been the primary method of accessing and analyzing mental phenomena for philosophers of mind. Nineteenth-century philosophers of mind like James Mill and William Hamilton argued that subjective introspection could be empirical and a valid method of psychological inquiry.⁴⁵ Mill, for example, defined consciousness as *attention* to consciousness: “Reflection,” he writes, “is nothing but Consciousness”; “the notice is the consciousness, and the consciousness is the notice” (137). Working directly from a Lockean definition of reflection, he conflates the method of internal reflection with consciousness itself. However, introspection could not be verified beyond one’s own subjective experience and was susceptible to subjectivism, the

⁴⁴ See Danziger.

⁴⁵ See Mill and Hamilton.

faulty substitution of one's partial experience for the whole and the unsubstantiated extrapolation from a single instance to a general theory. In order to correct for subjectivism, physiologists like Henry Maudsley and biologists like T. H. Huxley advocated for a reductionist and mechanistic psychology that relied entirely on empirical analysis of the material body.⁴⁶

Between these two methodological extremes existed a third group of physiological psychologists who advocated for the combined use of both subjective introspection and empirical analysis of the material body in order to account for the full range—both the psychical and physical aspects—of human consciousness.⁴⁷ Many members of this group, including Lewes and Carpenter, subscribed to the double aspect theory of psychology as justification for approaching the study of consciousness from both the internal and external sides. The double-aspect theory was formally posited by Gustav Fechner in his *Element der Psychophysik* (1860).⁴⁸ The theory

considered mind and matter as two aspects of a single world-stuff viewed from different perspectives. Just as a curved surface appeared convex or concave depending on the angle of vision, so the metaphor went, so phenomena seemed psychological or physiological. (Daston, "Theory of Will" 104)

Though this is a monistic theory of mind, it justified the use of both introspection and empirical methods of psychological investigation in order to understand consciousness in

⁴⁶ See Maudsley and Huxley.

⁴⁷ See Thompson.

⁴⁸ James Sully, friend and intellectual interlocutor to both Lewes and Carpenter, in the first issue of *Mind* credits Fechner with the most successful early combination of the two methodologies. See Sully 26.

the most holistic way possible. Lewes and Carpenter incorporated Fechner's theory into their psychological theories and advocated for a combined method in order to study both the psychical and the physical aspects of mind.

Lewes makes his case for a combination method in his *Problems of Life and Mind* (1874-79), though he began conceptualizing and drafting the theory in the latter half of the 1860s, just as Collins was consulting him on *The Moonstone*. He advocates for the necessity of using both introspection and empirical physiological analysis to investigate both the psychical and the physical aspects of mind. He writes:

the place of Physiology is that of the organic *conditions of production*; the place of Psychology being that of the *products*. Physiology deals directly and chiefly with the objective aspect of sentient facts, and their relation to the visible organism; Psychology with the same facts in their subjective aspects as states of Feeling, not as organic changes. (*Study of Psychology* 13-14; emphasis in original)

Lewes justifies the use of introspection as a form of empirical observation that differs from physiological analysis “only in that the phenomena observed are subjective states or feelings, and not objective states or changes in the Felt” (*Study of Psychology* 82).⁴⁹ But he also insists that empirical analysis of the material body is needed because “every mental fact is at once a state of Feeling and a state of the Organism” (*Study of Psychology* 112). Carpenter also advocated for the combined use of introspection and physiological analysis. In the “Preface” to his *Principles of Mental Physiology* (1874), the work based on the fifth section of his earlier *Principles of Human Physiology* (1852; 1855) from which Collins directly quotes in *The Moonstone*, Carpenter positions his mental

⁴⁹ The first series of *Problems* posits a new theory of empirical metaphysics, which is how he explains how introspection can be empirical. For more on his new metaphysics, see Kaminsky and Thompson.

physiological psychological theories as supplementing “existing Systems of Physiology and Metaphysics, by dealing with a group of subjects, which, occupying a border-ground between the two, have been almost entirely neglected in both” (viii). Namely, his investigation is of the connection between mind and brain (that is, of mental cognition and the physical organ) that he believes to be the necessary approach for the modern psychologist. Carpenter believed the entirety of human psychology—“the *whole* constitution of the individual Man and his relations to the Universe external to him”—necessarily needed to be able to account for all of “the materials furnished by experience of every kind, Mental and Bodily” (3; emphasis original).

All of these approaches were considered empirical and relied upon direct experience of the phenomena. Whether introspection or physiological analysis or a combination of both, direct experience was the basis for ascertaining knowledge. However, experiential knowledge is problematic because the subjective self is unreliable and fallible. Peter Garratt traces the nineteenth-century origin of this instability

from the dominant view that the self was constructed in and through experience, and perforce restlessly alterable and unfinished, while also being central to the methodology of observation underlying the empiricists’ view of the world. The contingent self was conceived simultaneously as the route toward knowledge and its obstacle. (15)

This paradoxical understanding of experience, the subject, and its relation to the objective world is the conflict at the heart of Collins’s novel. As Anne-Marie Beller notes, using *The Moonstone* as her example, the mid-Victorian sensation novel has a “preoccupation with the themes of knowledge and identity,” a preoccupation shared with physiological psychology (49). *The Moonstone* participates in these epistemological and

methodological debates and dramatizes the problem of subjectivism through the affordances and limitations of its characters' perspectives.

Subjectivism in *The Moonstone*

The Moonstone is narrated through a patchwork of first-person perspectives. The opening narrator Gabriel Betteredge, the Verinder family's servant, explicitly addresses the problem of a subjective perspective in the first pages of the novel. As he writes his narrative, he finds that his description of himself and his circumstances interferes with his ability to offer an objective and accurate account of events: "I wonder," he reflects, "whether the gentlemen who make a business and a living out of writing books, ever find their own selves getting in the way of their subjects, like me?" (13). This comment in the opening pages establishes the entire narrative's thematic problem: the subjective perspective (Betteredge's point-of-view) inhibits an unbiased account of objective reality (the events surrounding the disappearance and recovery of the Moonstone). Just like George Eliot's narrators in *Adam Bede* (1859) and *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879), Collins opens his novel with a self-conscious reference to how the subjectivity of the narrator interferes with her or his ability to perceive and communicate the events of the narrative.

The narratives of Miss Clack, Sergeant Cuff, and Franklin Blake exemplify the problem of subjectivism within differing epistemological systems, with increasing levels of self-awareness. Religious zealot Miss Clack's perspective is an exaggeration of a method that over relies on one's subjective point-of-view and interpretation. She consistently conflates what she believes are "facts" for objective, universal truth. She

repeatedly tells her reader that all she can do is “state the facts as they were stated,” as part of her “sacred regard for truth” (194). As a religious fanatic, Clack’s belief system is deductive, in that she relies on *à priori* truth outside of herself and then interprets the “facts” in accordance with her predetermined system. “Fact” is a loaded and problematic term for Collins and Lewes (and within the larger history and philosophy of science⁵⁰). Though her method is empirical and based on experience, in that she is an eyewitness to the events she describes, her unreflective commitment to her own interpretation of “truth” shaped by her external religious system is flawed. D. A. Miller notes Clack’s narrative’s obvious shortcomings: “Clack’s perceptions are so blatantly self-betraying that a reader inevitably revises them to mean something different from what Clack imagines” (55). More than simple comic relief or straightforward indictment of religious fanaticism, Clack’s zealous religious beliefs represent her inability to consider an interpretation of evidence outside of her predetermined belief system and to move beyond her singular subjective perspective, the trap of subjectivism. Her deeply rooted, religiously informed conviction that her way of viewing and interpreting the world is the correct one is a dramatization of a method that does not seek corroboration of one’s interpretation beyond one’s own experiential purview. Clack believes her subjective interpretation is correct and does not expand her view of the external world through alternative perspectives or methods. Her confident assertion that her interpretation is correct is obviously flawed and, like Betteredge, her personal biases directly interfere with her ability to account for and interpret the events of the narrative.

⁵⁰ See Shapin and Schaffer.

Sergeant Cuff, famous professional police detective, serves as an additional example of the problem of subjectivism, though he, unlike Clack, actively—but ultimately unsuccessfully—tries to reason his way beyond his subjective perspective using an inductive methodology. Cuff conceives himself to be an objectively disinterested outside observer to the mystery of the Moonstone’s disappearance. As a seasoned detective, Cuff relies on his previous experiences and supposed disinterestedness to interpret the evidence—the “facts”—in an accurate way. Cuff, like a good scientist, uses the inductive method to work from the evidence to larger hypotheses. And he understands that one’s subjective position necessarily interferes with disinterested interpretation, which is evident when he chides Lady Verinder, Rachel’s mother, for being unable to see the “objective truth” of the events due to her close investment in the outcome of the situation. His solution to Lady Verinder’s problem is to ask her to view the situation from a perspective other than her own. He asks her ““to look this matter in the face, from my point of view as well as from yours. Will you please to suppose yourself coming down here, in my place, and with my experience?”” (163). Unlike Clack, Cuff understands that personal, subjective biases hinder one’s ability to view events accurately. However, he is similar to Clack in his misplaced trust in his own perspective. While he is willing to suggest to other people to consider alternative perspectives, he does not apply this to himself; he mistakenly believes he can reason his way past his own biases by using an inductive method, remaining disinterested, and relying on his past experiences. The shortcomings of this approach are evident through Cuff’s completely inaccurate interpretation of the evidence: he incorrectly believes Rachel stole the diamond to cover for a debt. He insists that this is the correct interpretation of events

based on his numerous experiences with similar circumstances in the past. But his subjectivity clouds his ability to interpret the circumstances correctly—just because he has experience with similar situations does not mean that the present situation will play out in the same way. Additionally, though he believes himself disinterested, he demonstrates obvious interestedness when he willingly returns to the case out of retirement (and out of his prized rose garden) at Blake’s request to see it through to its resolution. Cuff is able to observe the events of the case and is aware of the potential for one’s subjective biases to cloud one’s judgement, but he still misinterprets the evidence, despite his best efforts to corroborate his conclusions through recourse to, what he considers to be, outside sources, such as his past experiences, and to remain disinterested.

The adventurer protagonist Franklin Blake, like Betteredge and Cuff, is conscious of the problem of subjectivism. While working through his recollections of the events from the night of the birthday party, he acknowledges explicitly the way self-knowledge is contradictorily hindered by the self: “When the pursuit of our own interests causes us to become objects of inquiry to ourselves,” he muses, “we are naturally suspicious of what we don’t know” (357). To move past this self-contradiction, he applies to a combination of, what he calls, the “Subjective-Objective point of view” (42). Blake’s character is loosely modeled on Lewes, who also, as we have seen, subscribed to a combination methodology, and, like Lewes, Blake takes an active interest in thinking through issues in terms of subjectivity on several occasions, drawing on thin descriptions of nineteenth-century continental philosophy (especially German idealism).⁵¹ Betteredge

⁵¹ Both John Sutherland in his commentary on the novel and Rosemary Ashton in her biography of Lewes make this connection. See Ashton.

describes Blake as having various discrete character aspects that were developed under a variety of foreign influences and educations (again echoing Lewes), and these character aspects affect the way he works through different situations.

The first situation occurs while Blake and Betteredge are debating the Colonel's motive for leaving the diamond to Rachel. "'This question has two sides,' [Blake] said. 'An Objective side, and a Subjective side. Which are we to take?'" (41). After examining the potential motivations from first the objective and then the subjective view, Blake eventually posits a "Subjective-Objective point of view" (42). The second occasion occurs while Blake and Betteredge consider Rachel's strange actions after the disappearance of the diamond. Blake offers an objective, a subjective, and an "Objective-Subjective" interpretation (172). Like the first instance, Blake's European training leads him to attempt to combine the two interpretative perspectives. The third and final occasion is described by Blake himself in his narrative. After returning from the Continent to continue the investigation into the missing diamond, Blake sits up late into the night attempting to work through various theories. He awakes the next morning "with Objective-Subjective and Subjective-Objective inextricably entangled together" in his mind (355). His "German training," he concedes, led him into a "labyrinth of useless speculations" and left him "doubting whether [he] had any sort of right (on purely philosophical grounds) to consider any sort of thing (the Diamond included) as existing at all" (355).

All of Blake's attempts to combine the subjective and objective perspectives are unsuccessful, but not because it is impossible to do so. They fail because Blake never actually moves beyond his own subjective perspective: in his words, he concludes that his

failure is due to the fact that he remains “lost in the midst of [his] own metaphysics” (355). His attempts are fruitless because he does not actually approach the issues under examination from anything other than his own subjective perspective, which is what he realises after the third attempt. He pays lip service to considering an “objective” and a “subjective” side, but in practice his method is always subjective and leads him directly into subjectivism, crystallized in the image of Blake sitting alone in his room through the night lost in a “labyrinth of useless speculations” and his “own metaphysics.” While Collins is clearly having some fun with his characterization of Blake, the semi-comic and inexact use of philosophical and psychological discourses was a common characteristic of the popular science culture circulating within the periodical networks in which both he and Lewes worked.

Popular Science, Psychology, and the Periodicals

The sciences in Britain developed in significant ways across the nineteenth century, especially in relation to the general public. One of the most productive ways historians of science track the relationship between science and the public is through the popular science discourses in nineteenth-century periodicals.⁵² Popular science writing was a burgeoning field within the periodical ecosystem in this period. Nine popular science journals were developed in the 1820s, and the number increased to twenty-two discrete journals in the 1860s, the high-water mark of popular science writing in the

⁵² See Cantor et al., Cantor and Shuttleworth, and Lightman, *Victorian Popularizers*.

nineteenth century.⁵³ The emergence and success of the popular science periodical indicate an interest in science by the general public. Importantly, popular science discourse was not a monolithic collective; rather, it consisted of many discourses circulated in a variety of periodical systems. One such multi-layered discourse network within the general periodicals actively encouraged the public to participate in the project of science in their own way. Susan Sheets-Pyenson calls this network the “low science culture” (though I will continue to call it “popular science culture” to avoid the problematic hierarchization of a high and low culture). The popular science culture championed an “experiential, inductivist ‘low science’ that could be understood and created by anyone” (Sheets-Pyenson 551). The ideal practitioner of this popular science was an interested amateur or semi-professional who closely observed the natural world, sought scientific truth for truth’s sake, and worked in “the field” as opposed to a sanctioned laboratory setting. This “participatory, republican image of the scientific community” persisted through the 1880s (Lightman 346). After the mid-Victorian period, however, the popular science culture in the periodicals diminished and the image of the ideal practitioner of science began to shift away from the amateur/semi-professional field-worker model towards an exclusively professional model of practitioner who worked in sanctioned settings and used scientific experimentation as the standard method for official knowledge construction.

The figure of the model physiological psychologist maps onto this conception of the mid-Victorian popular science culture “man of science” as it was constructed in the general periodicals. Though psychology in practice—the study and treatment of mental

⁵³ See Sheets-Pyenson.

diseases—was performed by medical professionals, the discourse of psychology was open to a much wider range of participants and its most influential venue of construction and distribution was the general periodical system. Rick Rylance argues that the “high-Victorian psychology of the years 1850-80” was

an unshapely, accommodating, contested, emergent, energetic discipline, filled with dispute and without settled lines of theory and protocols for investigation. The role played by the great generalist periodicals of the Victorian period is crucial in this, and the broad audience for psychology perceived the issues it raised as matters of common, not specialized, intellectual and cultural concerns. (7)

Roger Smith makes a similar argument about the important role the general periodicals played in the formation of psychological discourse. He argues that between the mid 1850s and the mid 1870s “there was a *shaping* of an area of discourse, known as psychology, rather than the *popularization* of knowledge of brain and mind” (82; emphasis in original). “The debate” about what constituted psychological knowledge “was not conducted esoterically and then transferred to a public domain; rather, the shaping of psychology took place in the domain of the periodicals themselves” (Smith 82). After the mid-Victorian period, with the development and eventual dominance of experimental psychology, psychology as practice and discourse moved out of the public sphere, out of the general periodical system, and into the realm of professional and highly-trained specialists. Similar to the way Robert Boyle’s experiments with the air-pump in the seventeenth century moved natural science from the purview of amateur natural philosophers to those trained in the experimental scientific method, experimental psychology at the end of the nineteenth century relocated the practice and discourse of psychology from the realm of the amateur or semi-professional who worked in the field

to that of trained professionals who worked in sanctioned sites with sanctioned methods.⁵⁴ Thus, the true discursive home for both mid-nineteenth-century popular science culture and psychological discourse was the general periodical system.

Collins was an active force—as contributor, critic, and consumer—in the mid-Victorian periodical world, and his exposure to and interest in psychology was shaped by the psychological discourses in the general periodicals and by his association with amateur physiological psychologists such as Lewes.⁵⁵ In 1852, Collins worked with Lewes, editor at the time of the radical weekly periodical *The Leader*, on a series of pseudo-epistolary articles entitled “Magnetic Evenings at Home” (1852). The series ran in six parts from mid-January to early March. Framed as letters to Lewes, Collins describes a display of animal magnetism, mesmerism, and clairvoyance that he witnessed at a semi-private event (in what I call a “public-private” space). The public-private nature of the event is significant, as Lyn Pykett notes, because a public event would suggest a performance, whereas a public-private demonstration could be construed as more trustworthy, though I would add that it is clear performance still plays an important function (Pykett 166). The public-private demonstration also features prominently in *The Moonstone*’s physiological psychological experiment, which I will return to below. Collins’s articles are important because they establish the foundation for his preoccupation with method and experimentation, an interest Lewes shared and

⁵⁴ See Shapin and Schaffer.

⁵⁵ For discussions about the relationship between science and Victorian periodicals, see Lightman, “Popularizers”; Lightman, *Victorian Popularizers*; Cantor et al.; and Cantor and Shuttleworth.

encouraged. In the articles, Collins recounts a series of experiments in magnetism performed by a friend on a woman called “V-- --.” Collins dutifully describes the setting, procedures, shortcomings, and outcomes of the experiments, modeling a scientific approach to a highly subjective phenomenon. For example, he keeps track of time down to the minute and provides several word-for-word transcripts of question-and-answer exchanges (“Magnetic Evenings” 64).

Most scholars read these articles as genuine and accept Collins’s interest in magnetism and clairvoyance at face value. The articles’ simultaneous publication with Collins’s *Basil* (1852), which features animal magnetism, does indeed suggest an interest in the theory. However, the articles should also be read with a healthy dose of skepticism due to Lewes’s presence. Lewes was active in several fields of inquiry and scientific circles over the course of his career and, at this point, was known for his work on the history of philosophy and science. At the time of the articles, Lewes’s most well-known work was his *A Biographical History of Philosophy* (1845). Besides being a respected history of philosophy (it went through four editions in Lewes’s life), the work was (in)famous for its controversial assertion that the future of philosophy and science lay with physics, what he calls “positive science,” and not metaphysics. Collins would have known this, and he would have written his articles with a definite sense of Lewes’s stance on the topics of clairvoyance and mesmerism and their tendency to rely on metaphysics for explication. The idea that Collins believed hook, line, and sinker in the validity of these topics is questionable because of Lewes’s well-known, and very public, skepticism.

The true interest of Collins’s piece is a critical consideration of the method of examination, rather than the validity of the phenomenon itself. Both clairvoyance and

psychology share an interest in invisible phenomena, and their methods of examination attempt to apply scientific protocols to understand something that appears to be real but cannot be empirically assessed. In *The Moonstone*, Collins calls the clairvoyant “a Seer of things invisible to their eyes” (282). The clairvoyant and the mid-Victorian physiological psychologist both attempted to render visible the invisible, given the proper methods of examination, and their interest was in the liminal space between the material and the immaterial.

My claim of the importance of method is further supported by Lewes’s response to Collins’s articles, published on March 27th of that year, which focuses almost exclusively on the method of investigation. In “The Fallacy of Clairvoyance” (1852), Lewes frames Collins’s articles as letters written to Lewes that he subsequently offered to publish because, he writes, everyone is “entitled to a most respectful hearing, even of marvels” (305). One should be wary of taking this call-and-response format at face value, however. Just as public experiments of magnetism suggest performance, so too do public discussions of magnetism and clairvoyance suggest an element of performance. Moreover, despite the title, Lewes’s piece does not actually offer a conclusive dismissal of clairvoyance. Rather, he describes in detail—much like Collins—a series of experiments in clairvoyance, all of which fail. He records the method and protocols of the experiments in order to assess their validity and authenticity. The crux of the piece is a critique of the methods used to prove clairvoyance: the overreliance on “facts” and empirical observation.⁵⁶ Lewes warns of the danger of relying on “facts” because they are hard to recognize (305). This is because it is easy to fool the eye: “people are never so

⁵⁶ See Poovey.

little to be believed as when narrating what they have seen” (305). People are most readily deceived when they “believe their eyes,” he writes (305). A “fact” represents a one-sided perspective of a larger reality, ascertained by observing something with one’s own eyes (something, for example, like the apparent powers of magnetism or mesmerism); the reality of any given situation is much more complicated and multifaceted than just what one can empirically observe on one’s own. From a single, subjective perspective, the objective reality—the “truth”—of an event is difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain.

Lewes’s solutions to this problem are experimentation and perspectivism: it is through multiple and various experiments and perspectives, conducted on “all sides,” he writes, that an objectively verified reality can be—at least in theory—reached (305). Lewes is critiquing an empiricism that is not supplemented with other methods of investigation, such as experimentation, and other perspectives besides one’s own. This is a criticism that he will develop throughout his career. Lewes’s concerns in this article with the problems of subjectivism and empiricism are representative of the concerns of physiological psychology in general. Collins takes up this very same critical consideration of epistemology and method in *The Moonstone*, including the direct attack on the unreliability of “facts” and the problem of subjectivism and empiricism, and both he and Lewes locate the solution in experimentation and perspectivism.

Method in *The Moonstone*

Collins uses the word “experiment” fifty times in *The Moonstone*. Experiment is a central, pervasive, and intentional theme in the novel, which Collins demonstrates in his

revision process. In the section “The Discovery of the Truth,” Blake tries to track down a retired Sergeant Cuff in Dorking. In the manuscript of *The Moonstone*, upon learning that Cuff is away on rose business, Collins originally has Blake wonder to himself, “What form was [his] next *venture* to take?” (496; emphasis mine). However, in the published version, Collins revises the line to appear, “What form was [his] next *experiment* to take?” (355; emphasis mine), deliberately changing “venture” to “experiment.” John Sutherland interprets this revision as Collins dropping hints about Ezra Jennings’s coming experiment later in the narrative, but this explanation only tells half of the story.⁵⁷ While Collins is intentionally hinting at something larger at work in the novel, I argue that he is sustaining the novel’s focus on experiment as method, not simply drawing attention to a single instance of experiment. As in his letters to Lewes, Collins is more interested in the method than the isolated phenomenon itself: *The Moonstone*’s big reveal is not who committed the crime, but the method through which the crime is solved.

As Blake uncovers the clues that will eventually lead him to Ezra Jennings and the solution to the mystery of the missing Moonstone, he gradually begins to take into account other people’s perspectives of the events from the dinner party in order to move beyond his own subjectivism and conducts, what he calls, an “experiment” on Rachel in order to solicit her participation. Bruff, the family lawyer, invites Rachel to his home and allows Blake to surprise her with an interview in the hopes of shocking her into joining their investigation (and reconciling would-be lovers). During the interview, Blake exclaims:

⁵⁷ See Sutherland’s note in *The Moonstone*, 496.

You are the victim, and I am the victim, of some monstrous delusion which has worn the mask of truth. If we look at what happened on the night of your birthday together, we may end in understanding each other yet. (342)

At this point in the novel, Blake acknowledges the misinterpretation of the “truth” and tries to bypass the misinterpretation of the “facts” by combining his perspective of events with Rachel’s perspective. It is only once they combine their perspectives that a more accurate understanding of events begins to be revealed.

The novel suggests that the problem of subjectivism—the misrepresentation of a single perspective for complete understanding of the whole—that almost all of the characters struggle with can only be addressed through a combination of perspectives: only through perspectivism can “facts” be moved beyond. Collins uses “facts” in his novel within the same critical framework that Lewes did in their exchange in *The Leader*. It is only after Blake discovers the “facts” gathered and left by Rosanna Spearman, another servant of the Verinder’s, that he is the one who stole the diamond that he begins to understand their shortcomings: “But there is the witness against me! The paint on the nightgown, and the name on the nightgown are *facts*” (308; emphasis mine). Betteredge responds with “Facts?” “Take a drop more grog, Mr. Franklin, and you’ll get over the weakness of believing in facts!” (309). This is an important turning point in the narrative. The characters realize that a different approach—a different method—is required to make sense of the evidence, a method that somehow moves beyond “facts.” It is only after Blake realizes the potential falsehood of his interpretation of the “facts” that he tries an alternative method to discovering the “truth” and seeks out Ezra Jennings. For Collins, and the physiological psychologists, the solution to the subjectivism problem lies

in perspectivism: when multiple sets of subjective perspectives are combined, like the facets of a diamond, a more accurate assessment of reality can be corroborated (or so the story goes). Collins builds this perspectivism into the form of the novel.

In the preface to the first edition, Collins famously declares that he traces “the influence of character on circumstance,” presenting his narrative through the first-person perspectives of the characters. The “circumstance” is the objective sequence of events that plays out across the course of the narrative (how the diamond goes missing, the steps taken to recover it, etc.). Importantly, the objective sequence of events is interpreted differently by each of the characters: their subjective perspectives “influence” the interpretation of the circumstances, and this influence is what *The Moonstone* is designed to trace. It is only through a patchwork of subjective perspectives that the objective circumstances can—in theory—be ascertained. The multiple narratorial perspectives and their various interpretations of the empirical evidence of the case is a thematized version of psychology’s subjectivism problem. The solution suggested by both *The Moonstone*—through its content and form—and the physiological psychologists is perspectivism, a combination of multiple subjective perspectives, through which “facts” can be moved beyond and the “truth” can be uncovered.

The Moonstone’s use of multiple first-person narrators has been the subject of much discussion.⁵⁸ Using Foucauldian and Bakhtinian analyses, D. A. Miller famously argues that *The Moonstone* is a monological text. Tamar Heller reaches a different conclusion. She argues that the narrative construction facilitates a polyphonic and dialogical discursivity that gives voice to marginalized groups, such as women (153). The

⁵⁸ See Gooch; Lonoff; and Wills.

main point of difference between these interpretations is how genuine one's reading of the different narrative perspectives is supposed to be: does the novel endorse and validate the multiple perspectives it provides or is the polyphonic form simply an artifice that supports a master narrative and ideology? Miller's evidence in support of the latter reading is that despite the novel's apparently subjective formal construction all readers ultimately come to the same conclusion:

A reader is supposed to listen to the various witnesses, and to make up his mind about the validity of their reports as he will, "like a Judge on the bench." To all formal appearances, his reading is deprived of any grounding in an authoritative version. Yet the possibility of an authentic "dialogism" in the text disappears once we recognize that, in every crucial case, all readers...pass the same judgment. (53)

Miller recognizes that there does exist an objective "truth" behind the subjective perspectives of the narrators; the novel does not embrace narrative indeterminacy, such as the contradictory narratives in Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (Miller's example) or, say, the incompatible versions of James Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824). In Miller's reading, the narrative very much suggests that there is a "truth" to be discovered through the differing accounts of the witnesses, a solution to the mystery. Miller interprets the novel's underlying solution as a "single perception of power" that organizes the narrative as if by an "invisible hand" (56). However, Miller's desire to support his Foucauldian analysis of power causes him to privilege the novel's conclusion over the method through which the conclusion is reached. Indeed, the entire conflict between subjectivity and objectivity in *The Moonstone* should be contextualized and considered within the cultural debates over psychological method, which were being

in part worked through in the popular science discourses circulating in general periodical system.

In other words, asking whether or not the multi-perspectival narrative is polyphonic or monological is the wrong question. Collins subscribed to the notion that there is in fact an objective world accessible—if incompletely—through sense perception. His novel is built to *perform* the inescapable fact that one's situated subjectivity—informed by particular perspectives, experiences, and biases—always distorts one's perspective of the objective world and to suggest that physiological psychology's methods of experiment and perspectivism are the best solutions to the problems of subjectivism and isolated empiricism.

The Physiological Psychologist as Detective

When considering this novel as a work of detective fiction, scholars tend think in terms of the proto-Holmesian detective Sergeant Cuff or the Robert Audley-esque Franklin Blake. However, the figure who detects and uncovers the mystery of *The Moonstone* is the amateur physiological psychologist Ezra Jennings. In the final act of the novel, it is revealed that on the night of Rachel's birthday party Dr. Candy, the local country doctor, secretly dosed Blake with opium in order to help Blake get better sleep (and win an argument about the validity of medicine). While in his unconscious state, Blake gives the diamond to Godfrey Ablewhite, a secret scoundrel with a too-perfect public reputation. All of this is revealed by Ezra Jennings, Dr. Candy's assistant, by his performing on Blake a replication of Dr. Candy's initial experiment. The second experiment scene is the novel's center-of-gravity moment. Rather than foreground a

moment in which a character is forced to make a choice, as Wood and Braddon do, Collins's novel focuses on revealing the mechanisms—both social and psychological—that inform a decision that has already been made. Where Wood's novel argues that individual agency directs character and ultimately renders character and psychology outside of the purview of science, *The Moonstone* argues that with the right method practiced by the model psychologist, character and consciousness are viable subjects for science.

Jennings embodies the characteristics of the model psychologist within the popular science culture, and he takes on the role of the detective in the novel, in that he uses a particular method to solve the central crime and mystery. Collins describes Jennings as a figure of combination, of amalgamation, of synthesis: he appears simultaneously young and old, of Eastern and Western descent (319), male and female (369), and his hair is a stark combination of both black and white coloring. He is the embodiment of physiological psychology's combination method.⁵⁹ More importantly though are Jennings's characteristics and circumstances that situate him as a model psychologist within the popular science system: an interested amateur or semi-professional who closely observes the natural world, seeks scientific truth for truth's sake, and works in "the field" as opposed to a sanctioned laboratory setting. Jennings inhabits a semi-professional status, as he is the medical assistant to Dr. Candy. And though he is training to be a part of the professional medical community, his interest in physiological psychology is necessarily amateur. He is writing a book on physiological psychology, which he describes as "a book on the intricate and delicate subject of the

⁵⁹ For a disabilities study reading of Jennings's body, see Mossman.

brain and the nervous system” (369). Importantly, he is not writing the book in order to advance his professional career (he does not believe it will ever be published); rather, he demonstrates a pure love of the pursuit of scientific and psychological truth for truth’s sake—a key characteristic of the ideal “man of science” in popular science culture, the ideal psychologist, and the ideal detective. The final component is the method and location of his psychological investigation. He performs his experiments in “the field,” in a public-private setting, exemplified in the climatic physiological psychological experiment that punctuates the novel.

Jennings’s experiment is a replication of Dr. Candy’s initial experiment, with the express goal of achieving the results of the first. Though a replication, the second experiment has several important and distinct qualities that differentiate it from Candy’s experiment. First, Jennings’s experiment is designed to be observed by several witnesses. While a portion of the first experiment was observed by Rachel and Godfrey, both of whom are eyewitnesses to Blake’s actions, they do not have all of the information about the situation, and they ultimately draw incorrect interpretations of the events. Rachel says, “You stole it—I saw you! You affected to help the police—I saw you!” (349). She explicitly emphasizes her empirical observation—she saw Blake do these things. She is misled by her singular perspective of the empirical “facts” of the case. Jennings’s experiment is set up to be a public-private performance (recalling the exchange with Lewes in *The Leader*) with the express intention of using several sets of eyewitnesses to corroborate the outcome. It is only when multiple sets of eyewitnesses collaborate and join their perspectives together that an accurate understanding of the circumstances can be achieved (according to the logic of the novel). Additionally, Jennings’s experiment

combines both a “medical and metaphysical theory” (384).⁶⁰ Not only are the physical circumstances replicated, such as Blake giving up smoking or taking a dose of opium, but so too are “the moral conditions” replicated, such as his investment in Rachel’s wellbeing and his concern about the Indians (424). Laurence Talairach-Vielmas suggests that “Jennings’s final experiment completely reshapes the mind in materialistic terms” (76). However, if Collins is to be taken at his word, he consulted Lewes explicitly about this scene, and neither Lewes and nor this scene are entirely materialistically focused. Keeping with the combination theory of physiological psychology, Jennings’s experiment is successful because it takes into consideration both physical and metaphysical aspects of consciousness, and this enables Jennings to *read* Blake’s surface actions (the material) and *interpret* his unconscious intentions (the metaphysical).

Collins has Jennings directly quote Carpenter to support the physiological psychological theories that inform the experiment, and the specific quotation Collins chooses is telling.⁶¹ The quotation is from the fifth section of Carpenter’s *Principles of Human Physiology*. Importantly, the fifth section was part of Carpenter’s expansion to his theory of the interconnectedness of the body and mind, which he only included in the fourth (1852) and fifth (1855) editions of *Human Physiology*. (He would later expand this

⁶⁰ Roberts also considers the underlying moral implications in *The Moonstone*, though he frames the implications through Collins’s treatment of domestic crime and British imperialism. See Roberts.

⁶¹ Carpenter even uses the example of the effects of opium on the brain to illustrate his thesis about the interconnectedness of the brain and body. For a reading of Jennings’s citations, see Bourne-Taylor and Pykett.

section on the brain and nervous system into its own discrete work, *Mental Physiology*.) Despite *The Moonstone*'s action taking place between 1848 and 1850, Collins anachronistically references a later edition of *Human Physiology*.⁶² The quotation is of Carpenter's theory of "perceptive consciousness," a theory of unconscious complex action. For Carpenter, "states of consciousness" are the mind's recognitions of changes in the Sensory Ganglia—what he calls the "seat of consciousness" (757). The Sensory Ganglia is the material part of the brain in which external sense impressions and physical alterations in "the cortical substance of the Cerebrum" converge (757). Perceptive consciousness is the mental attention paid to the physical and psychical changes in the Sensory Ganglia. Thus, perceptive consciousness is the mental function that mediates the relationship between external objects and internal sensation, and it forms a theory of human agency that allows for a limited amount of volitional action while also justifying the use of a combined method of both introspection and empirical analysis of the material body for psychology.

Collins's inclusion of this concept in his novel reveals the extent to which *The Moonstone* is directly concerned with the central problem in physiological psychology: the issue of agency.⁶³ The philosophers of mind worked within the tradition that held free will and human volition to be self-evident. This approach granted human beings a large, almost unlimited, range of agency within the world and directly tethered human action to accountability and adherence to particular ethical codes of conduct. The mechanistic,

⁶² For further discussion of Collins's anachronistic use of Carpenter, see Winter.

⁶³ See Daston, "Theory of Will."

physiological-based approach to psychology rendered consciousness reflexive and entirely physical. Carried to its logical conclusion, this theory conceived of human beings as closer to conscious automatons than autonomous agents with the capacity for free will and spontaneous action in the world. The combination group who used both philosophical introspection and empirical analysis attempted to reconcile the metaphysical and materialist traditions by granting humans a limited amount of volitional agency while still recognizing the materialist base of psychology. Carpenter's perceptive consciousness addresses the issue of agency at the center of physiological psychology by theorizing a mode of action that exists independent from one's conscious will. This leaves open, though, questions of responsibility for actions that are taken without conscious will, without volitional direction. Who is accountable for a mental *reflex*? What ethical implications stem from the actions of the unconscious mind?

Physiological psychology was, some believed, in danger of providing a scientific theory that would exculpate people of responsibility for their actions.⁶⁴ *The Moonstone* attempts to mediate between physiological psychology and the general public, and Collins strove to demonstrate to the public that with the model psychological method, practiced by the model psychologist, issues of agency and responsibility could be successfully navigated; social justice for crimes could be located in the proper places and administered to the proper people. And this is what he dramatizes in *The Moonstone*. Blake removed the Moonstone from Rachel's drawer while sleepwalking under the influence of opium. Rachel saw Blake take the diamond but did not realize that he was in

⁶⁴ See Daston, "British Responses."

an altered state of mind; she was misled by the empirical “facts.” The narrative ultimately absolves Blake of the crime and shifts the culpability clearly and unequivocally to Godfrey Ablewhite, through the “detective” work of the physiological psychologist. *The Moonstone* ultimately suggests that with the model psychologist (like an Ezra Jennings) practicing the model psychological method (the combination method, as Lewes and Carpenter would have it), agency and responsibility for one’s actions could be properly assessed and accounted for, and the social implications of physiological psychology could be addressed and the mystery of consciousness solved. It is within a literary narrative that the moral concerns of physiological psychology can be staged and resolved. Collins’s commitments were not to the idealistic conceptions of responsibility and justice in the abstract but to rationality and the progress of modern science in the face of the prejudices and superstitions of an older intellectual model. These commitments were indicative of the mid-Victorian period, a shifting landscape of medical and scientific professionalization.⁶⁵

Conclusion

The archival evidence that Collins sought Lewes’s assistance with *The Moonstone* opens the novel up to new interpretive frames and allows for a closer examination of the two mid-Victorian compatriots’ long-standing personal and professional relationship. It especially brings to the foreground the novel’s preoccupations with perspective and method, the central concerns of both detective narratives and psychology. Like many of

⁶⁵ This transitional period is marked by the passing of the Medical Act of 1858, which established the General Medical Council that regulated medical practice in Britain.

Collins's novels, and indeed many the mid-Victorian sensation novels, *The Moonstone* participates in the popular science project circulating in the general periodical system; and though not as overtly didactic as his later work, Collins's detective novel communicates an understated but coherent message to his readers that the social implications of the new psychology were, like the novel's mystery, solvable.

The overarching argumentative narrative of this dissertation is tracking the development of social ecology, the tensions between the individual and society and the aspects of character these tensions reveal. In *The Shadow of Ashlydyat*, the individual-social relationship was skewed toward the individual. In Wood's conception, the individual's discrete agency retained the final say in character and character development. In *The Moonstone*, we see a balance, a moment of equipoise, in the individual-social relation. With the proper method and practitioner, the new psychology, to Collins's mind, had the ability to make consciousness and character scientific. Where Wood viewed this idea with hesitancy, Collins championed this as the inevitable march forward in the intellectual tradition. The next two chapters shift to Mary Elizabeth Braddon. They examine novels that demonstrate Braddon's contributions to the social ecology of character and the gradual shifting of balance from the individual to the social as the socio-cultural optimism of the mid-Victorian period gives way to the encroaching pessimism of the late-Victorian period and the slow crumbling of the British empire.

CHAPTER 4

READING NOVEL EXPERIENCE, SENSATIONAL FICTIONS, AND THE IMPRESSIONABLE READER

In the climax of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* (1876), the final novel published in her pro-sensation magazine *Belgravia* at the culmination of her decade-long tenure at its helm,⁶⁶ Joshua Haggard gives voice to one of the prevailing cultural criticisms of the sensation novel genre: "Accursed book that taught them to sin!" he exclaims; "they might never have fathomed the wickedness of their own hearts but for thee" (122).⁶⁷ This exclamation occurs as Joshua reads Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), immediately following the revelation that his future son-in-law, Oswald Pentreath, has secretly endeavored to tempt Joshua's wife, Cynthia, into infidelity. The reading of Goethe's novel—a novel known for its own sensational content—by these characters catalyzes the sensational action in *Joshua Haggard's Daughter*, from solicited adultery to murder. However, Joshua holds Oswald and Cynthia only partially responsible for their actions, locating instead the majority of the blame with Goethe's novel for its provision of a model of infidelity for its readers to imitate. Joshua's attachment of responsibility to the novel rather than the reader begins to reveal Braddon's

⁶⁶ *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* was serialized in *Belgravia* between December 1875 and December 1876. John Maxwell, Braddon's husband, sold the magazine to Chatto and Windus in 1876.

⁶⁷ For the most famous examples of the cultural criticism of sensation fiction, see Mansel, Oliphant, and Rae. The criticism of the sensation genre was pervasive in mid-Victorian Britain, and Braddon speaks a great deal about it in her letters to Bulwer-Lytton (see Wolff, "Devoted Disciple") and she created *Belgravia* to be a respectable venue for and defender of sensation fiction (for a Victorian perspective, see Sala; for a late-twentieth century perspective, see Robinson).

larger project. This chapter argues that Braddon examines the role of novel reading in character development, drawing on contemporary physiological psychological discourse. She does so by modeling a variety of reader-novel relationships in her novel. Read through this lens, I argue that *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* is Braddon's defense of the sensation novel. But this novel stands apart from Braddon's other defenses because it does not simply fortify the popular genre against opprobrium: Braddon goes on the offensive and actively challenges the criticism of the popular novel genre for its gendered and reductive premise.

Like many of the sensation novelists, Braddon publicly held conservative social beliefs while subtly pushing the boundaries of middle-class sensibilities in her fiction.⁶⁸ *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* is no exception: the novel is a "palimpsestic text" (drawing on Gilbert and Gubar's formulation), containing subtle social messages which run counter to conventional Victorian standards. The most pointed of these embedded subtleties can be seen in the variety of characters' relationships to novel reading. In Oswald and Cynthia, Braddon caricatures the sensation genre's critics' favorite conjuring—the ominous figure of the impressionable reader. Oswald is an intense reader of Romantic literature who struggles to separate what he reads from reality, and Cynthia is a young, naïve girl with a psychological "blank slate" who is powerfully affected by her reading diet. Her impressionability, however, proves to be a positive characteristic, as Cynthia uses what she reads to help her better interpret and navigate the world around her; Oswald, on the other hand, allows the fiction and his reality to collapse into one

⁶⁸ For a recent discussion of this tension in Ellen Wood's novels, see Costantini.

another, resulting in the violent climatic events of the novel. Oswald and Cynthia represent the positives and negatives of the impressionable novel reader. Joshua and Naomi are their foils: they are dramatizations of the readers who are not practiced in navigating the oscillations between fiction and reality. Joshua misreads Goethe's novel and immediately takes drastic and dangerous action against Cynthia and Oswald. Naomi, on the other hand, is not allowed to read imaginative literature and struggles to make sense of her feelings and the complicated emotional situation at the climax of the novel because she has not been able to cultivate through literature an interpretive framework for navigating the world around her. The discourse around the supposed danger of the sensation genre tended to, like Joshua Haggard, locate the fault in the novel itself, rather than the readers. Braddon challenges this intellectually disingenuous narrative by depicting more nuanced models of novel-reader relationships and by inverting the sex of the supposed impressionable reader from female to male to highlight the gendered nature of the criticism of the sensation genre, a criticism which Braddon ultimately reveals to be nothing more than a fiction itself.

Joshua Haggard's Daughter is a pivotal novel in the prolific career of one of the Victorian period's most successful and influential novelists.⁶⁹ The novel was produced in an important transitional moment in Braddon's life. In 1874, Braddon was finally able to marry officially her long-time partner, John Maxwell, which elevated her into the socially respectable position of a married woman. She also had earned a comfortable income as an author and editor, and she no longer had to make a living by penning novels

⁶⁹ For scholarship on Braddon, see Tromp, Gilbert, and Haynie, and Tomaiuolo. For discussions of the sensation novel genre more generally, see Maunder et al., Harrison and Fantina, and Beller and MacDonald.

exclusively for the masses. Further, *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* was Braddon's final novel published in *Belgravia* while she was in the conductor's seat and serves as her culminating statement on the sensation novel, its critics, and its readers from her position as professional editor. In addition to these factors, the novel is also a successful literary achievement in its own right. Braddon's biographer Robert Lee Wolff argues that it is her best work, a Greek tragedy set against a Devonshire backdrop that would have made Thomas Hardy proud (270). Despite its importance and literary merit, both as a crucial point in Braddon's personal and professional development and as a standalone novel, *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* has not received much critical attention. Pamela Gilbert and Anne-Marie Beller have both written on the complicated tension in the novel's generic construction between sensation and realism, and they both tease out the intricacies of Braddon's strategies for subverting audience and literary expectations. One such subversion, as Gilbert notes, involves critiquing the "attitudes toward popular literature and reading itself" by referencing familiar sensation novels such as Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1861) and Braddon's own *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) (185). My chapter continues the examination of Braddon's complicated treatment of reading in *Joshua Haggard's Daughter*, but, rather than making associations with the early 1860s, I contextualize Braddon's later novel within the period it was produced by drawing out the connections to the new understanding of the practice and function of reading informed by advances in physiological psychological theory.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Several recent scholars have begun to recover the importance of physiological psychology in Victorian literary and reading theory. See Dames, Auyoung, and Coombs.

This chapter demonstrates how Braddon's *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* dramatizes the ways that reading contributes to the experiences that influence one's possibilities for psychological expression, a process I call "novel experience," playing on the double meaning of "novel" as both something new and the long-form prose genre. Using the Victorian physiological psychological discourse around the concepts of reading and experience as a lens through which to examine *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* reveals Braddon's literary maturation and socio-critical acuity at the end of her storied career with *Belgravia*. It also demonstrates how the sensation novel participated in a variety of social discourses, locating Braddon's work within the *longue durée* of cultural conversation about the novel genre and its relation to its readers.⁷¹ To this end, I contextualize *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* in the physiological psychological debates of the 1870s and then examine the way Braddon dramatizes different models of novel-reader relationships. I focus first on Oswald and Cynthia and their reading of Goethe and the way Braddon deconstructs the fictional figure of the impressionable reader, before turning to a consideration of Joshua's misreading of Goethe and presentation of madness. I frame all three of their reading experiences and multi-faceted motivations as Braddon's complicated understanding of agency and accountability. By way of conclusion I consider what we can learn from *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* about Braddon's position on the sensation genre and its readers at a pivotal moment of transition in her personal life and professional career.

⁷¹ My reading of the sensation novel and psychology is indebted in particular to Bourne-Taylor, Shuttleworth, and Ifill.

“[P]ower over the formation of our character”: Reading, Psychology, Circumstance

Throughout her career, Braddon was very much attuned to both the real and perceived relationships between reading and women.⁷² In part, this was due to the fact that many of her readers—the readers of sensation novels—were women. Because of the genre’s reach into the proverbial sitting rooms of middle-class female readers, cultural and literary critics imbued a high moral standard on the genre, a standard which the sensational novel and its authors were derided for continually failing to meet. The vivid depictions of immoral actions, the multi-faceted and thus sympathetic unvirtuous actors, and the exciting, fast-paced narratives were all perceived to be morally, psychologically, and physically dangerous for the “vulnerable” female readers. Aware of this stereotype for the sensation genre, Braddon actively countered this critical narrative by depicting various models of women readers in her novels. The most frequently discussed novel is Braddon’s *The Doctor’s Wife* (1864) for its revision of Flaubert’s avid novel consuming heroine.⁷³ Dorothee Birke argues that the model of reading in *The Doctor’s Wife* is not a “cause-and effect model,” where reading bad books directly results in bad behavior, but rather an exploration of “the process by which patterns found in fiction become templates that are then used to deal with the real world” (126). Birke’s argument is based on a psychological conception of the benefits of novel reading. Rather than providing a one-to-one model for one’s actions, fiction affords readers with a framework for interpreting

⁷² For more on the sensation novel and women readers, see Flint, Cvetkovich, and Golden.

⁷³ For discussions of *The Doctor’s Wife* and reading, see Phillips, Heilmann, and Sparks. For a discussion of reading and women in the novel immediately preceding, *John Marchmont’s Legacy* (1863), see Odden.

the world around them. Gilbert makes a similar claim about *Joshua Haggard's Daughter*, arguing that the novel suggests “[e]xperienced readers” are “better trained to interpret reality than those who have been kept from books” (188). Gilbert’s discussion is one of the few examinations of women readers in Braddon’s novels beyond the 1860s, and it is largely consistent with interpretations of Braddon’s earlier works. I would argue that, in addition to bolstering the position Braddon had consistently held, *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* integrates new elements to her defense of the sensation genre and its readers: informed by Braddon’s accumulated experiences as a successful novelist and enterprising editor of a pro-sensation magazine, *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* contains an offensive move against the cultural criticism of the sensation genre, a criticism informed by new discourses in physiological psychology. Physiological psychology in the mid-Victorian period was a heterogeneous and cross-disciplinary discourse that was shaped and circulated in the general periodicals, often alongside sensational fiction.⁷⁴

Joshua Haggard's Daughter was published during the 1870s, the decade in which the debates among the physiological psychologists about how a viable theory of freewill could exist within a materially-based psychology reached a crescendo.⁷⁵ T. H. Huxley famously argued in his 1874 presidential address to the British Association for the

⁷⁴ For discussions of the relationship between psychological discourse and periodicals in the period, see Rylance and Smith. For a specific discussion of science, sensation fiction, and periodicals, see Onslow and Bernstein.

⁷⁵ G. H. Lewes published the first volume of his *Problems of Life and Mind* in 1874, and the journal *Mind* was founded in 1876. The journal’s subtitle, *A Quarterly Review of Psychology and Philosophy*, further demonstrates the interest of these intersecting fields in the mid-1870s. For a discussion of the way psychologists worked through issues of freewill and determinism, see Daston.

Advancement of Science, subsequently published as an article in *Fortnightly Review*, that human beings were “conscious automata” (577). His mechanical determinism was controversial, to say the least, and elicited a variety of direct responses. One such response was William Benjamin Carpenter’s “On the Doctrine of Human Automatism” (1874), which appeared in *The Contemporary Review*. Carpenter argues for a more nuanced conception of the relationship between an individual’s capacity for decision-making and the material basis of consciousness. Rather than reducing the complex issue of psychological choice to an either/or construction (either an unbounded freewill or a mechanical determinism), he posits a middle-of-the-road theory that retains the complexity of consciousness by acknowledging the physiological mechanics of the brain while still allowing for a limited amount of volitional agency. He argues that individuals have a limited amount of agency to choose freely among a truncated range of options (not an infinite number) at any given moment.⁷⁶ The options available to choose from are determined by one’s circumstances.

While Carpenter’s article responds directly to Huxley’s determinist claim, Carpenter had published these theories in a variety of places, including his *Mental Physiology* (1874). In the “Preface,” he quotes John Stuart Mill on the ability of individuals to alter their circumstances, even as their circumstances construct their character—a limited but materially-grounded theory of freewill. Adding his own emphasis to Mill’s words, he writes, “*we have real power over the formation of our own character*” through the ability of one’s will to influence one’s circumstances and thereby

⁷⁶ Also see Carpenter, “Physiology of the Will.”

“modify our future habits or capacities of willing” (x-xi). In psychological discourse, “circumstance” carries two meanings. As Helena Ifill notes in *Creating Character* (2018), circumstance means both “the conditions of one’s birth,” such as physiological and genetic inheritances and social class, and “environmental factors,” such as socio-cultural influences and lived experiences (4). While the conditions of one’s birth are beyond one’s control, one’s socio-cultural influences and experiences were conceived to be, to an extent, malleable. In this way, “character” and “circumstances” inhabit a feedback loop: character is formed by circumstances, but some aspects of circumstance can be determined by one’s character. Mill and Carpenter’s preoccupation with theorizing some form of self-formative power was a symptom of the larger cultural concern in nineteenth-century Britain about physiological psychology’s material determinism.⁷⁷

The period in which *Joshua Haggard’s Daughter* was conceived and produced was saturated in these cultural conversations about freewill and determinism. With the rise in new technologies of production and distribution, coupled with increased literacy and leisure time in the middle class, these concerns were central to the social anxieties about reading and, in particular, the now dominant genre of fiction, the novel.⁷⁸ The terms “character” and “circumstance” were center stage in Victorian literary discourse. While generic delineations between “realism” and “sensation” tended to be more porous, there was a clear distinction among the Victorian cultural and literary critics between

⁷⁷ Material determinism is the theory that all aspects of life, including the biological, psychological, and moral, are physical and therefore subject to physical laws.

⁷⁸ For a discussion of the social relations of reading in the period, see Brantlinger.

novels of character and novels of circumstance. Sensation fiction was (in)famously associated with novels of circumstance, or plot-driven narratives. However, given the intertwined theories of character and circumstance, freewill and determinism, proliferating out of physiological psychology and into peripheral social discourses, the clean compartmentalization between novels of “character” and “circumstance” as realist and sensation novels respectively begins to break down. Ifill in fact has recently argued that “sensational representations of character formation are rooted in, challenge and anticipate the ideas of the scientists, physicians, and physiologists who were at the forefront of mid-Victorian deterministic thinking,” resulting in a sensation genre in which characters are “portrayed equally as enmeshed in biological and social determinants as characters in realist novels” (10, 9). Thus, rather than a literary shortcoming, the sensation novel’s reliance on “circumstance” reveals a nuanced engagement with wider cultural discourses on determinism, both literary and psychological. This tension between character and circumstance was not isolated to just the content of novels; the same conversations were extended outward to include the act of reading itself.

Reading—its practice and power—was at the center of the social anxieties about the sensation novel. The “sensation” of the title belongs to two linguistic registers, simultaneously denoting a physical and a conceptual experience. The “sensation” of the sensation novel comes from the physiological psychological lexicon. In a now-famous 1863 *Quarterly Review* article, Henry Mansel associates “sensation” with physiological psychology, describing the sensation novel as “preaching to the nerves” and drawing on French materialist philosopher and physiologist Pierre Jean Georges Cabanis to make his

argument (481).⁷⁹ Literary and cultural critics argued that the genre predatorily extorted nervous excitement from its “vulnerable,” often female, readers (the physical) and controversially depicted immoral ways of being in the world (the conceptual). For Victorian physiological psychologists, experience played a fundamental role in influencing psychological development, though what counted as “experience” was actively debated. David Coombs has recently demonstrated that physiological psychologists identified two forms of knowledge in the nineteenth century, knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description, epistemological categories created to help navigate between empirical and propositional knowledge (27). Knowledge by acquaintance is obtained through direct, sensory access and knowledge by description is an intellectual, abstract knowledge gained through conceptual learning. Both are forms of experience—one sensory, the other conceptual—and it was an open question whether novel reading could facilitate their cultivation in the reader. Coombs argues that Victorian physiological psychologists believed fictional descriptions in novels could produce this conceptual form of knowledge in the reader. In this sense, reading a fictional description of something absent from direct sensory experience still had a tangible effect on one’s body and one’s conceptual understanding of the object. For the Victorians, Coombs states, “the experience of reading exemplifies experience more broadly” (4). Reading descriptions of experiences in a novel could, physiological psychologists suggested, affect one’s cognitive development in the same way as experiencing something in the real world through one’s sensory perception.

⁷⁹ For a discussion of the intertwining relationship between psychology and sensation in the 1860s, see Garrison.

The sensation novel, its critics argued, inhabited the nexus between these two forms of experiential knowledge: it was conceived to be both a bodily experience, titillating the nerves of its readers, and a conceptual experience, depicting immoral social behavior. The theory that reading could influence psychological development appeared to support the sensation novel's critics' fears, and conservative critics and cultural gatekeepers weaponized this argument about novel reading against the sensation genre, pushing it to the forefront of the social arguments about fiction and its moral responsibilities. Margaret Oliphant, for example, one of the genre's most well-known and vocal critics, argues that the sensation novel describes "sensuous raptures" and an "eagerness of physical sensation" "as the natural sentiment of English girls, and is offered to them not only as a portrait of their own state of mind, but as their amusement and mental food" (259).⁸⁰ Part of its perceived moral and literary deficiency was the sensation novel's use of description. In a sermon entitled "Sensationalism" (1874), for example, the Bishop of Derry William Alexander argues that two of the defining characteristics of the sensation novel are its use of "*caricature* of individuals, and *physical description*" (268). For Alexander, description was pervasive in the genre because of it was easy to do, as compared to the heavy lifting that is rendering "the marvelous contexture of a human soul" (268). Another critic, writing in *Temple Bar* the same year, argues that the fault in popular contemporary novels lies in its descriptive-heavy realism, its tendency to portray "things as they are," rather than didactically striving to edify and elevate its readers

⁸⁰ Oliphant's criticism is well-known but by no means was she alone in her critique of sensation fiction. For other examples, see "Our Female Sensation Novelists" and Cobbe.

(253).⁸¹ Both of these critics take issue with the genre's use of description, but they render their definitions of description in opposing terms, with one invoking an exaggerated, burlesque-like description and the other a proto-naturalist photographic realism of "things as they are." As these examples illustrate, the critics of the sensation novel tended to define the genre in whatever way best fit their critical narrative and superimpose their own interpretations of its literary failings across an entire body of discrete novels, rather than engaging the texts on their own individual terms. Between the dual experiential modes and extensive use of novelistic description, the sensation novel, because of how it was discussed by its critics, was a central focus in the discourses about the relationship between reading and psychology. In *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* Braddon participates in the cultural conversation about this perceived relationship by dramatizing how the circumstances experienced through novel reading could influence one's psychological development.

"It seemed all intensely real": Reading Novel Experience

Joshua Haggard's Daughter participates in the nineteenth-century conversations about reading and psychology by depicting different models of relationships between readers and what they read. Jim Haggard enjoys reading adventure stories. He uses what he reads in the adventure novels to color his repetitive quotidian pattern with an excitement that is absent from his lived experience in the Haggard's repressive household. When faced with Oswald's romantic expressions of interest in her, Naomi

⁸¹ Though the author does not explicitly name the sensation novel, he or she would most certainly have had the sensation genre in mind when discussing the mass-produced, mass-consumed contemporary novel.

Haggard uses some of the few stories she knows as a way to understand her own situation. While trying to make sense of her budding relationship with Oswald, Naomi compares her circumstances to a fictional story: “But then,” she considers, “Love has a knack of spanning such gulfs, and the good old story of King Cophetua and the beggar-maiden is always being acted over again after some fashion or other” (47). The King Cophetua story, which Naomi most probably knows from Shakespeare, rings similar to her own situation of marrying across class boundaries, and she uses it to understand her own relationship with Oswald. Both Jim and Naomi use their readerly diet to help them think about the world and its relation to their life in different ways, while at the same time not being overly influenced by the fictions, which is Joshua’s great fear for Naomi (though notably not Jim).

Aware of the potential for imaginative literature to influence its readers, Joshua explicitly forbids Naomi from reading novels, “lest the unrealities she would find in them should give her a false picture of life, and encourage her to form baseless hopes or foolish desires” (65). This backfires on Joshua as Naomi’s lack of exposure to imaginative literature limits her ability to navigate complex real-world situations or imagine new ways of being in the world. When asked what she would do if she left Combhollow, Naomi’s states that she would like to become a missionary in India. She only desires this, however, because this is her only experience of life beyond her home, which she learns about through the stories that Joshua reads to her (19). The narrator makes a point to note that Naomi only wants to be a missionary because “[n]o fairer scheme of life offered itself to her girlish fancy” (30). It is telling that Naomi’s desire to be a missionary is gleaned through stories. Reading imaginative literature has the ability

to widen one's experiential horizons and to diversify one's understanding of the world, but because of Joshua's rule that Naomi is not allowed to read anything other than the Bible or approved (by him) religious texts, she is unable to cultivate the beneficial results of novel reading. Ultimately, though, Joshua's concerns that his daughter will be immorally influenced by imaginative literature are unfounded. Instead, the impressionable reader that Joshua so fears appears not in Naomi but in the characters Oswald and Cynthia.

Oswald expects the world around him to reflect the things he reads. When he proposes to Naomi he assumes she will act like the women he reads about in the Bible, to act the way "Esther received the crown, or Ruth gave herself to Boaz" (50). He is surprised when her reaction does not match the stories, because his relationship to the literature he reads tends to be mimetic and imitative. In addition to the Bible, Oswald reads Romantic literature, such as Byron's *Manfred* (1817) and the novels *Rob Roy* (1817), *Caleb Williams* (1794), and *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). He filters his understanding of the world and of himself through what he reads and is described by the narrator as having a "Byronic temperament." The Byronic young man easily susceptible to influence rings of the sentimental hero Harley from Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* (1771) or the vacillating eponymous hero of *Waverley* (1814). Like an embellished version of the man of feeling from the sentimental novel, Oswald is easily influenced by what he reads and immoderately models his actions on the literature he consumes. Braddon makes it clear, as I will demonstrate, that Oswald's inconstancy and willingness to be influenced by what he reads are negative, not positive, characteristics,

as they cause him to break his marriage proposal to Naomi, secretly woo a married woman, and lead to his eventual death.

But the character who most reveals Braddon's investigation of the relation between reading and psychological development is Cynthia. When Joshua first meets Cynthia, she has just run away from the traveling circus that she had been with since childhood. She is presented as a naïve young girl with little-to-no worldly or social experience, a psychological "blank slate" of sorts. Joshua is kind to her, in a fatherly way, and finds her a position as a maid in a nearby town. He instructs her to read the Bible and learn its lessons, claiming that "you will know many things that you do not know now" (36). This statement exemplifies the way reading is equated with the acquisition of a particular type of knowledge: it is through reading that Joshua expects her to learn how to be in the world. This connection between reading and knowledge will be the primary force that shapes Cynthia's character over the course of the narrative. She takes to reading the Bible as instructed, and it immediately begins to bolster her imaginative and interpretive capabilities. When Joshua returns to see her after a year's time, the narrator describes Cynthia's relationship to what she had been reading:

She had read the New Testament with fervid interest. The sacred story, new to her girlish mind, had been verily a revelation, and she had accepted this new creed—the first ever offered to her understanding—with faith and affection that knew no limit. It seemed all intensely real to her ardent nature. Her imagination pictured every scene, filled up every detail: she could see the divine face shining upon her, the little children gathered round the gracious Teacher; the blind, the sick, the lame, the leper, the outcast, seeking comfort and healing from that inexhaustible fountain of mercy. She saw all these things in holy waking dreams—saw them as really as some hysterical nun in her ecstatic trance. (62)

Braddon goes to great lengths to emphasize the impact reading the Bible has on Cynthia, and Braddon does so in language laden with vivid sensory experiences. Cynthia is described as being psychologically impressionable—“her girlish mind”—and she construes the stories in a way that seem “intensely real” to her, even to the point of appearing as “waking dreams” (62). Her imagination runs wild, picturing every scene in intense detail and imagining she sees the characters from the stories in front of her. The narrator explains that Cynthia understood herself part of a “blessed history” of those “happy and elected souls chosen to share the Master’s rest when earth’s brief pilgrimage was over” (62).⁸² It is important that Cynthia associates reading with the development of a personal history, which she believes has an immediate impact on her present and future possibilities. Like Coombs’s knowledge by description, Cynthia is acquiring experiential knowledge (conceptual), and it expands her psychological potential. Braddon depicts the way reading functions as not just distant, abstract knowledge, but something that can immediately impact and direct one’s present life course through the new exposures to histories and the cultivation of experiences through literature, a process of novel experience.

The intense experience of reading and the imaginative and interpretive activity it produces is crucial to Cynthia’s personal development, and the narrator makes a point to note that Cynthia had never been exposed to other forms of artistic expression:

Of romance she knew nothing; poetry was a dark language to her, save the mute poetry of stars or flowers, earth’s loveliness or heaven’s sublimity. She had never heard fine music or seen a stage-play... The garden of her young mind was a fertile soil. (64)

⁸² Braddon uses the language of Calvinism, such as “elected souls,” despite the fact that Joshua is a Methodist not a Calvinist.

Cynthia is presented as a psychological blank slate. She is not, however, a blank slate: she is a runaway from a traveling circus. Her past life experiences as a member of the circus are about as far away from a “blank slate” as one can get. It is telling that Braddon chooses to give Cynthia this colorful and rich history and then ignore it completely as if it never happened, moving forward with Cynthia’s psychological development from the moment she meets Joshua as if her life magically begins at their encounter. Rather than Cynthia’s understated background as a circus runaway being a mistake or a cursory detail, the subtle description of Cynthia’s personal history is a telling insight into Braddon’s purpose behind Cynthia’s character: she is a caricature—a carnivalesque exaggeration—of the “impressionable” female reader who the critics of the sensation novel feared would be immorally affected by reading sensational stories.⁸³

Importantly, Cynthia’s novel experiences dictate the types of choices she is able to make. When Joshua proposes to her, for example, she does not have a variety of models to help her navigate a multitude of options. Instead, she only knows how to feel towards Joshua the way the Bible models one should feel toward God and religious teachers: a mixture of reverence, respect, and admiration. Upon proposal, Cynthia tells Joshua that she loves him the way she has “been taught to love God,” and the narrator describes her affection as “humble childlike love...so blended with reverence that it had something devotional in its character” (68). However, over time, Cynthia’s “vivid and romantic mind began to find something wanting in [Joshua’s] surroundings” (87). She wants a “wider horizon, yet scarcely knew what she desired” (87). Her desires at this

⁸³ The “impressionable reader,” women, and psychology have a rich and intertwining history in British literature and criticism. See Bray and Dale.

point have no shape, no form, but she is vaguely aware of her inability to express herself fully. It is through her meeting Oswald and their reading of Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* that her experiences begin to diversify and new models of ways of being in the world—new options—open up to her.

“It is my own story”: Sensational Fictions and the Impressionable Reader

The climatic events of *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* are catalyzed by the reading of Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. The characters who read the novel are exposed to new psychological ways of being: the “experiences” of Werther within Goethe's novel become the “experiences” of the characters within Braddon's novel. But why Goethe? Anne-Marie Beller suggests that Braddon specifically uses Goethe in order to place herself and her novel within a larger romantic tradition (175). Gilbert equates Goethe with the sensational literature of the era predating the mid-Victorian sensation novel. While this may be, I want to suggest also that Braddon chooses *Sorrows of Young Werther* because of its infamously powerful affect on its readers, which is discussed within Braddon's novel itself. The narrator of *Joshua Haggard's Daughter*, while recounting the influence of Mr. Martin's deathbed confessional of a young woman in his congregation, states that “[o]n the female mind in Penmoyle [Mr. Martin's] book had exercised as strong an influence as had the *Confessions of Rousseau* or the *Sorrows of Werther* on the world in general” (60). The affect Goethe's novel had on its readers is used in *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* as an allusion to the types of literature that can powerfully influence its readers. When Oswald first introduces Goethe's novel, he describes it as having “set Germany in a blaze” (101). Whether or not there actually was

an epidemic of copycat suicides after the novel's publication, it is true that it had strong influences on its readers, which makes Braddon's use of it in her narrative even more pointed.⁸⁴ In Judith Haggard's words: it is a "bad book" that "puts bad thoughts into people's heads" (106).

In order to confess subtly his forbidden love for Cynthia, Oswald decides to read *Sorrows of Young Werther* out loud to Naomi and Cynthia. Though Naomi treats the novel as she does any other story, Cynthia has a profound reaction to it:

For the first time she heard the story of a love that was fatal—not like Rebecca's unrequited passion, elevating and strengthening the soul by the ordeal of a silent sorrow—but an over-mastering love taking possession of a weak nature, and holding it as the seven devils held their fated prey. (102)

It almost immediately begins to open up new psychological avenues of expression that she had not before known, similar to her reaction to hearing biblical stories for the first time. The narrator continues:

And this was what love meant sometimes in the world; not a reverential affection, not gratitude, esteem, respect, such as [Cynthia] had given to Joshua, and which had made marriage with him seem the highest honour that Providence could bestow—but blind, unreasoning passion—a fire kindled in a moment, and consuming the soul. (102)

And the effects are immediate: Cynthia "longed intensely to follow that devious path" of Werther's (102). The biblical stories provided her with an expanded range of experiences, and the story of Werther continues this expansion. With each new literary experience the choices available to her become more complex and multi-faceted. With an increase in options, though, comes an increase in potentially dangerous choices and consequences.

⁸⁴ For a brief discussion of the recorded suicides influenced by Goethe's novel, see Thorson & Öberg. For an in-depth discussion of the English reception of the novel and its influence on British literature, see McGuire.

The biblical stories seem to develop only positive developmental experiences in Cynthia, but Goethe's novel, with its questionable subject matter, opens up the potential for Cynthia to follow "devious" paths.

As Oswald reads the story out loud to Cynthia, Braddon's novel *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* collapses into *Sorrows of Young Werther*. The eighteenth chapter is titled "The Sorrows of Werther," and Oswald's identity, the narrator tells us, merges with Goethe's eponymous character (102). In the sentence immediately following this statement, the pronoun "He" is used, but it refers simultaneously to both Werther in Goethe's novel and Oswald as Werther in Braddon's novel. The sentence reads, without quotation marks, "He came to the pretty house on the skirts of the forest, and the picture of Charlotte cutting hunches of black bread for the eager little brothers and sisters before setting out for the ball" (102). The next several paragraphs continue like this, conflating Goethe's literary character with Braddon's literary character. Just as he is apt to take on a Byronic temperament after reading Byron, Oswald takes on the identity of Werther while reading Goethe. Here, Braddon fictionalizes Oswald's tendency to interpret the world and himself through literature by having him become—through a brief but telling grammatical slippage—a literary character within the diegetic logic of her own novel, blending knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description.

Both Oswald and Cynthia represent two different types of novel readers: for Oswald, Goethe's novel models the way he feels and acts toward his beloved; for Cynthia, the novel provides new experiences that diversify and extend her interpretive options for ways of being in the world. These two models of reading practices overlap again in the double climax scene in which Oswald concludes his reading of *Werther* to

Cynthia. Oswald comes over to the Haggards' house to read to Cynthia and Naomi as he usually does, only to find Cynthia by herself. The scene in Braddon's novel—with Oswald reading to Cynthia as she sits and sews—mirrors the scene in Goethe's novel, the exact scene Oswald is reading, in which Charlotte is seated at the harpsichord and Werther reads his translation of Ossian to her. Here, though this time in quotation marks, Braddon includes the entire paragraph that details Werther and Charlotte's last meeting. As the drama reaches a crescendo, the two novels once again collapse into each other. Cynthia is affected physically by the story: she sits with "dilated eyes and hands tightly clasped, as if the whole scene were reality—as if she could see Werther there, at her feet, groveling on the ground. There stood the open harpsichord at which Charlotte had been playing. The vivid picture shaped itself before her eyes" and she "clasped her hands before her face, and burst into tears" (104). Here is the sensation of the sensation novel. Here is the image of the young, impressionable female novel reader, distracted from her housework by a story, affected physically, nerves titillated, offered the opportunity to enact the morally corrupt scene from the novel.

Braddon dramatizes the critics of sensation fiction's greatest fear—and then turns it on its head. Cynthia, instead of collapsing into the fictions of the novel and immediately modeling her actions on the characters in the story, resists. Instead, it is Oswald who throws himself violently down at Cynthia's feet, claiming that "it is my own story" and confessing his willingness to die for her like Werther: "And now bid me die, my Charlotte, and I will slay myself like Werther" (104). He is the dangerously impressionable reader, allowing the things he reads to influence him in all the ways the critics of sensation fiction feared. Cynthia's immediate reaction is to shame Oswald for

his actions, his willingness to break his engagement to Naomi, and his inappropriate insinuations to her. Sensational fiction, the critics claim, leads the young impressionable female mind to immoral ends. But Braddon depicts a much subtler and nuanced way to think about sensational fiction, one which accounts for both the negative and the positive: novel experience negatively affects the inconstant Oswald, as he allows his character to be immoderately influenced by the literature he consumes; but novel experience also provides Cynthia with expanded psychological potential, as she is able to think about her real-world situation and relationships to Joshua and Oswald in new ways, with new languages of expression.

Cynthia is a challenge to the critics of sensation fiction who claim that the socially subversive characters and storylines negatively influence its female readers. She is a young woman naïve to worldly experience and easily impressionable—the exact reader the critics of sensation fiction worried would be easily manipulated by the sensational subject matter. And she is affected by her reading experiences, but in positive ways. By reading the Bible, Cynthia learns how to participate in a wider community of fellowship; and by reading Goethe, she learns different modes of self-expression in the world, including, but not limited to, potential infidelity. Significantly, she does not follow through with the infidelity. She remains loyal to Joshua and their marriage and encourages Oswald to honor his engagement to Naomi. Cynthia—the supposed impressionable woman reader—succeeds where the men around her fail. But Braddon’s larger point is that the stereotypical female “impressionable reader” conjured by the critics does not exist. There are no “blank slate” female readers of sensation fiction, easily manipulated into mimetically acting out what they read, because there are no blank

slate readers at all. This point is underscored by Cynthia's almost comically significant backstory of growing up in a circus—a history far away from a “blank slate.” *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* exposes the criticism of sensation fiction to be nothing more than a sensational fiction itself.

“Accursed book that taught them to sin!”: Joshua Haggard's Misreading and Madness

The novel is titled *Joshua Haggard's Daughter*, but Braddon seriously considered calling it *Joshua Haggard*. Why she toyed with the title change is clear after reading: Naomi (Joshua Haggard's daughter) is an important character, but so too is Joshua Haggard himself. Joshua serves as a foil to Oswald and Cynthia. As we have seen, Oswald and Cynthia demonstrate the positives and negatives of impressionable reading. Joshua's struggles with Goethe and his subsequent actions demonstrate the dangers of not reading imaginative literature well, which, Braddon's novel suggests, leads to an inability to navigate in a healthy way the relationships between fiction and reality. However, Braddon does not settle for a tidy, didactic message in her novel; instead, as she does with Oswald and Cynthia, she challenges the straight-forward interpretation that Joshua's murder of Oswald is due his (mis)reading of Goethe by suggesting that Joshua suffers from a mental illness. This complicating wrinkle opens up questions of accountability and consequence for one's actions and brings in the issue of reader responsibility into the critical discussion of sensation fiction and its readers.

Joshua is an avid reader of religious texts, and especially the Judeo-Christian Bible. While it is novel reading that features centrally for Oswald and Cynthia, it is

biblical stories that affect Joshua. This juxtaposition—between novels and scripture—is key to Braddon’s comment on the uses of reading. She demonstrates how the Bible, rather than being a straightforward moral instruction manual for every situation, is used as an interpretive framework to help its readers navigate the multitude of situations in which they find themselves and extends this way of thinking about reading as an interpretive tool—rather than a mimetic mode—to other forms of imaginative literature. In part this is because religious texts are very commonly used in this way: they represent to the reader both a literary and cultural history of a particular group of people and an interpretive model for present-day readers. Take for example this early exchange between Joshua and Mrs. Jakes, a fellow member of Combhollow. Joshua reprimands Mrs. Jakes, owner of the local inn, for selling alcohol to drunkards. She deflects this comment by telling him that it is not her business to police drinking in the town but to sell alcohol, a business she was “brought up” in and which she is “obliged to abide by” to make a living and provide for herself and her family (10). Joshua condescendingly responds with a lofty and impractical reference to “how the sparrows are cared for,” a biblical passage in which Jesus suggests that God takes care of those who put their faith in him as he does the sparrows in the field (12). Mrs. Jakes retorts with a practical comment about human action and work: “I fancy Providence meant us to do for ourselves, and do the best we can in the business we’re brought up to” (12). This exchange exemplifies the way Joshua interprets the world through the things he reads. In this case, he grafts his interpretation of a biblical quotation on to Mrs. Jakes’s lived experience. She has to make money to survive, and Joshua overlooks the practical demands of worldly self-care in favor of an interpretation of the world based on his reading experience. In other scenes in the novel,

Joshua explicitly uses biblical scripture to manipulate his audience, such as when he reads “[v]erse by verse” “the description of Solomon’s temple,” which he embellishes “in glowing language” in order to drum up “funds for a chapel, which might be built for three or four hundred pounds” (63), because he is cognizant of the power of reading and interpretation to influence an audience.

Returning to the quotation which opened this chapter, it is important that though Joshua blames Goethe’s novel, he also acknowledges, if only in passing, that Oswald and Cynthia’s desire preexisted their reading of the German author: “‘Accursed book that taught them to sin!’ he exclaimed; ‘they might never have fathomed the wickedness of their own hearts but for thee’” (122). Joshua’s failure to distinguish properly between the novel’s role in Oswald and Cynthia’s relationship and the “wickedness” that must have already existed in “their own hearts” is emblematic of his pervasive inability to consider perspectives other than his own. Joshua is not an insightful character. Though Braddon presents him as a level-headed, rational hyper-masculine figure, he is also the one who consistently makes poor decisions (from allowing his daughter to marry across class lines to marrying a teenager). His poor decision-making comes to a climax when he banishes Cynthia and murders Oswald after his misreading of Goethe’s novel. Just as he is aware of the power of reading to influence readers but has a blind spot to the Bible’s influence on himself, so too is he affected by his reading Goethe in ways he does not seem to realize:

For [Joshua], too, the book was a confession and a revelation. Werther was Oswald Pentreath; Charlotte was Cynthia; and they loved each other, overflowing with tenderest sympathies, with unspeakable affection; and fate, duty, religion, and honor stood between them in the person of the unloved husband, separating them forever. (116)

And it is here that Joshua first begins to contemplate murder as the solution to his problem, feeling himself in the position of Albert (Charlotte's husband), who lived happily with Charlotte "when Werther was dead" (116).

However, Braddon resists the easy answer of influence from fiction to action. In the same way that Oswald and Cynthia's actions cannot be entirely chalked up to their reading of Goethe because of their preexisting "wickedness," Joshua's motivations for Oswald's murder are complicated by Joshua's presentation of madness in the final act of the novel. Though everything in the novel leading up to the murder works to establish several potential motivating factors for Joshua's actions, Braddon resists an easy answer to why the murder takes place. She intentionally undercuts all the viable motivations by questioning Joshua's sanity. Like *Lady Audley's Secret*, the character who commits the crime is diagnosed as mad. Lady Audley claims that madness runs in her family, and the physician called in by Robert Audley to examine Lady Audley confirms the diagnosis. Lady Audley is then taken to an asylum to spend the rest of her days. However, this ending feels only surface-deep; Braddon goes to great lengths to establish very tangible motivations for Lady Audley's actions (financial gain, class mobility, lack of other fulfilling life paths, poor treatment in her past). The final diagnosis of madness reads as if no one—besides, perhaps, Lady Audley herself—truly believes it. It is instead a cop-out, a paper-thin justification for the actions of an ambitious woman in a historical moment in which ambition was reserved for men. In *Joshua Haggard's Daughter*, however, the diagnosis of madness is taken seriously by the characters, the narrator, and, by extension, Braddon herself, and it should also be taken seriously by the reader.

After he murders Oswald, Joshua presents as a man suffering from a form of madness. The first character to note this is Oswald's brother Arnold. During a meeting between Arnold and Joshua, Arnold tells Joshua that his brother (Oswald) did not go to America as he claimed he was going to do. Joshua does not react to this surprising information, leading Arnold to think to himself, "Why, the fellow is not a man but a machine" (137). But Arnold is only the first of many to note something amiss in Joshua's actions. After an uncharacteristically fire-and-brimstone sermon by Joshua, Naomi overhears a member of the congregation exclaim that Joshua is very obviously "a madman" (157). Naomi is also conflicted about her father's actions towards Oswald after his disappearance. She believes Joshua murdered him and feels personally guilty because she, in a moment of jealousy, gave her father the condemning letter that alerted Joshua to Oswald and Cynthia's infidelity and to their secret meeting place, where Joshua eventually murders Oswald. By the time she overhears the diagnosis of "madman" from the bystander, Naomi had already been entertaining suspicions of insanity, and this observation from an external source confirms her suspicions. But surprisingly this is a comforting thought to her:

If reason had left him in the hour of temptation, if the light was quenched before he did that fatal deed, her father was not accountable for his sin. It was not with his whole mind that he had broken the Divine Law. The clouded brain had not taken the measure of the act. (157)

And later, when she confronts her father about his actions, he responds with a "hardness of tone" that Naomi understands to be "an unconsciousness of the weight and measure of his crime," an unconsciousness that Naomi believes can only be explained by madness (158). Through Naomi, Braddon explicitly connects Joshua's mental status to his

accountability for his crimes. If his brain was “clouded,” if his “reason” had left him, then he cannot be “accountable” for his actions (157).

But it is not only Naomi or other diegetic characters who entertain Joshua’s potential insanity. The narrator also describes Joshua using the familiar nineteenth-century language of insanity. While describing his state of mind, the narrator tells us “[Joshua] wanted nothing between him and that awful solitude in which he had lived of late—the isolation which a mind unhinged makes for itself” (160). Joshua spends most of his time sitting alone in his bedroom, and the narrator mounts a long analysis of his state of mind across several pages. The passages are rife with descriptions meant to question Joshua’s sanity:

but his mind was not always so clear, or his views so fixed and resolute. There were moments to-night, as he sat in the summer dusk, while the shadows grew and deepened in the lonely old-fashioned room, grotesque shadows of familiar things which he had known from childhood—there were intervals in which his brain grew clouded, and past and present were alike dim and distorted. His thoughts flashed far and wide like the erratic gleams of a lantern—now alighting upon some picture of the past, now plunging into the dark gulf of the future. (160)

The reasoning, powerful preacher whom the reader has come to know throughout the novel is gone. In his place is a man whose mental faculties are “erratic,” divorced from logic and reason, slipping between contemplations of the past, present, and future (160).

The narrator continues:

That intense egotism which is one of the characteristics of a mind off its balance had taken possession of him. He felt himself the centre of the universe. The Bible had been written for him. He stood face to face with his Creator, and felt himself worthy to be saved. (161)

The “intense egotism,” which might also be accurately described as “delusions of grandeur,” is one of the signs and symptoms of monomania, a common psychological diagnosis in the period and a well-used trope in the sensation novel genre.

In the final periodical installment, Joshua confesses to the murder in a letter to Arnold. He frames the events as a “fair” duel that Oswald willingly forfeited by firing his pistol in the air instead of at Joshua. After learning this, Arnold immediately proposes to Naomi because he now believes he does not have to pursue Joshua for foul play. However, despite the confession, Naomi refuses to believe that Joshua acted sanely. Instead, she continues to try and convince Arnold of Joshua’s madness: “He was not in his right senses that awful day. I saw him go through the wood. Yes, I was there watching for him, fearing evil. His face has haunted me ever since. It was the face of a madman” (164). And she repeats in order to drive home her point, “He was not in his right mind that day” (164). While one might want to dismiss Naomi’s assertion of Joshua’s madness as simply her desire to exculpate her father of his crimes in her mind, the narrator does not allow for this singular reading. In the chapter immediately following Joshua’s confession, the narrator continues to describe Joshua through a lexicon on mental illness. As Joshua frantically tries to get to Cynthia (who is staying with friends in a nearby town) in order to reconcile, the narrator underscores Joshua’s disjointed mental state by telling us that he was “unconscious of time or distance” and was acting “mechanically” (164). To describe Joshua as acting mechanically is important because it grounds his mental functioning in his material body and borrows the mechanistic language of physiological psychology. While encountering other people on his journey, Joshua

continues to demonstrate the almost textbook symptoms of insanity, as conceived in the period:

He answered their inquiries and acknowledged their civil speeches mechanically, dimly conscious of their identity. He had a curious feeling of superiority to all these people, as if the universe had been planned for him, and they were only accidents in it, like the great black flies buzzing round the heads of the patient blinkered coach-horses, to whom Providence had given no special mercy except mane and tail. (165)

The mechanical actions, the extreme, perspective-less assumption of personal superiority over others to the point of thinking the universe itself had been created for him, the stark contrast between Joshua at this moment against how he had been portrayed up until this point in the novel all indicate a psychological issue too much emphasized by both the characters and the narrator to be dismissed out of hand.

Joshua's madness is another wrinkle in Braddon's consideration of the relationship between reading and readers. Oswald and Cynthia allow the fictional stories they read to influence and inform the way they understand and interpret the world. It is unclear both to the reader of *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* and to the characters within the novel itself whether or not Oswald and Cynthia would have done what they did if they had not experienced it through the reading of Goethe's novel. *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* questions the autonomy of discrete action and the extent to which a person should be held accountable for their conduct, given the influence of outside forces, such as a "bad book" or a physiologically-based mental illness. In the context of reading, Braddon brings the responsibility of readers into the conversation. The critics' narrative about the dangers of reading sensation fiction imagine impressionable readers easily affected and influenced by what they read without genuinely considering the role of

reader responsibility. It is hard to imagine a world in which everyone is so heavily susceptible to influence that they model their actions on what they read. Oswald is this type of reader. Cynthia, on the other hand, is affected by what she reads, but she does not mimetically model her actions on the readerly material; instead, she uses what she reads as an interpretive tool to help her navigate her world with a much more robust set of informed options. Joshua, as Gilbert points out, is an inexperienced reader of fiction, and what he does read, such as religious texts, he reads as one “who reacts to uncertainty by imposing his own concerns on the text and refusing to be open to material that does not reinforce his own sense of mastery” (188). If there is an antagonist in *Joshua Haggard’s Daughter*, it is Joshua, the character who forces his own interpretations on to what he reads, rather than meeting the texts on their own terms. Joshua in many ways is like the cultural and literary critic who forces his or her own interpretation of the world and of literature onto others, and his inability to cultivate a healthy relationship with literature leads to sensationally devastating ends.

Conclusion

The reader of *Joshua Haggard’s Daughter* is left feeling sympathy for Oswald and Cynthia, the two novel readers, though Oswald clearly demonstrates the dangers of conflating fiction and reality. With Cynthia, Braddon turns the critics’ gendered assumption about the impressionable female novel reader on its head by depicting not only a male reader who is equally as impressionable but also illustrating ways in which novel reading—when practiced in a healthy way—provides new experiences and new models for participating in the world beyond its pages. It is fitting that Braddon ends her

tenure as conductor of *Belgravia* with a novel that so clearly speaks to both the cultural criticism and the readers of the sensation novel, an appropriate culmination to an influential chapter in her career and an enduring contribution to the Victorian literary landscape. Braddon pioneered the popular sensation genre as an author, but she was also one of its most articulate and insightful advocates, illustrated by the self-reflexivity on display in *Joshua Haggard's Daughter*. At the close of her editorship, she leaves her readers and her critics with a demonstration in fiction of the gendered and reductive premise of the criticism leveled at the sensation genre and provides instead an alternative model for a more genuine way to cultivate relationships to what we read.

In the larger trajectory of social ecology in sensation fiction that this dissertation is tracking, *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* demonstrates a consciousness of the effects of the social environment on individual development. Braddon's pervasive interest in the experiences of women foregrounds the individual-social relationship in the novel's female characters, and especially Cynthia, but all of the central characters are to some extent limited by their environs. What makes this novel of Braddon's representative of this section in the history of mid-Victorian social ecology is the two-step of acknowledging the forces that shape character that are beyond one's control but also believing that there is room for the individual to cultivate the circumstances that form character as well. In *Joshua Haggard's Daughter*, individual agency manifests in the form of reading: what one chooses to read affects one's character, to an extent. In the fourth and final chapter, this positivity recedes in the face of a social environment that seems to solidify around the individual, restricting autonomous agency and directing discrete development along pre-formed pathways.

CHAPTER 5
DETERMINED WOMEN: THE ENDS OF MID-VICTORIAN SOCIAL
ECOLOGY

In an 1913 interview, Mary Elizabeth Braddon reflects on the shifting expectations of readers across the second half of the nineteenth century: “The days for golden hair have passed away. Less detail of heroines is wanted now and more character study. Readers are not satisfied with incidents alone; they like to see character evolve as events move.”⁸⁵ The “golden hair” Braddon references is an allusion to Lady Audley, the infamously beautiful and dangerously ambitious antagonist of *Lady Audley’s Secret*, the sensation novel which springboarded Braddon into fame almost overnight and overshadowed the rest of her long and productive literary career. However, as we have seen, Braddon was much more than a one-trick novelist. Though her early sensation novels would be her most well-known accomplishments, Braddon was a skilled literary artist whose work, style, and genre continued to evolve over her almost four-decade long career.

As her comment suggests, Braddon’s novels developed from the often incident-driven sensation novel into character-driven narratives that have more in common with the naturalist novels of Émile Zola, Thomas Hardy, or George Gissing than the sensation novels of Ellen Wood, Wilkie Collins, or Rhoda Broughton. Written about seven years after *Joshua Haggard’s Daughter, The Golden Calf* (1882-83) and *Phantom Fortune* (1883) represent a new phase in Braddon’s career and, I will argue, a shift in the larger literary landscape in Britain. As I posited in the preceding chapter, *Joshua Haggard’s*

⁸⁵ Quoted in Carnell (224).

Daughter contains an inherent optimism, characteristic of the mid-Victorian period. Written and published just after Braddon had finally been able to marry John Maxwell and as she brought her successful career with *Belgravia* to a close, Braddon's personal and professional lives were culminating in a high-water-mark moment in her career, and this buoyancy is evident in *Joshua Haggard's Daughter*. Despite Joshua's oppressive and controlling rule over his wife, Cynthia is able to develop her experiential horizon by reading novels and challenges the sensation novel's critics' claims about the effects of novel reading on women. Novels and women, of course, were primary interests of Braddon's, but the implications of her overarching argument extend further: *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* dramatizes the prevailing mid-Victorian sentiment that circumstances could be actively cultivated and one's character, to an extent, could be developed in desirable ways through individual agency.

The present chapter brings our story of mid-Victorian social ecology to its close. Using two late Braddon novels as its examples, this chapter argues that the early-to-mid 1880s was home to the transitional moment in British literature from mid-Victorian social ecology to late-Victorian naturalism, using a transitional period in Braddon's career as its case study. The first half of this decade marks Braddon's turn toward more recognizably realist novels and overt incorporation of French literary influences into her work. Her first biographer Robert Lee Wolff defined her literary output during these years as her "Zola period." However, though she was heavily influenced by French novelist Émile Zola, Braddon's brand of literary determinism, or social ecology of character, as I have called it, is distinctly her own: her proto-naturalist novels are born out of the convergence of British ecology and French literary naturalism with a particular focus on the social

influences that dictate the agential limits of women. French literary naturalism, and Zola's version in particular, focuses on the way social convention and inherited biological traits influence individuals and determine their choices and paths of personal development, often with a negative tinge. As her unpublished 1885 essay on Zola's naturalism makes clear, Braddon very much understood the intricacies of the French author's literary tendencies and, more importantly, his shortcomings. Braddon takes Zola to task for his one-dimensional and self-serving representations of women in his novels.⁸⁶ Braddon's "Zola period," then, is defined not by simple imitation or light influence but by nuanced repurposing. The Victorian novelist deployed her own social ecology of character, a combination of ecology and naturalism concerned with the depictions of women in fiction and their agency—or lack thereof—as dictated by their social environments. In *Joshua Haggard's Daughter*, Braddon's social ecology included a balance of reciprocal relations between the individual and their environment; in *The Golden Calf* and *Phantom Fortune*, a shift in the scales is evident, as social convention dominates over autonomous agency.

In both of these novels, a woman is forced to make an important decision in a crucial moment. Braddon makes a point to detail all of the external pressures that shape their available choices and the reasons they ultimately make the ones they do. The novels, written and published back-to-back, are inverted reflections of each other and when read in tandem demonstrate the way one's social ecological relations determine one's character and exemplify the transition from mid-Victorian social ecology to late-

⁸⁶ For an in-depth discussion of Braddon's critique of Zola's treatment of women, see my introduction to Braddon's essay.

Victorian naturalism. In *The Golden Calf*, Ida Palliser accepts a marriage proposal from a man she believes to be someone else, but her acceptance is coerced by circumstance: poverty, deliberate falsehoods from her friends, public humiliation and shaming, and lack of alternative options. This moment occurs in the first third of the novel, and the rest of the narrative tracks the fallout of her choice, from punishment to redemption. In *Phantom Fortune*, Lesbia Maulevrier is not so lucky. Like Ida, Lesbia too is coerced into accepting a marriage proposal but only after she has been manipulated by the people around her, driven into deep financial debt, and lied to by her closest friends and family. Where Ida's crucial decision occurs early in the novel, Lesbia's occurs in the final act. She is not granted a redemption arc. Instead, Lesbia is punished by all around her and forced to suffer the consequences for her actions for the rest of her life. Taken together, Braddon's novels provide literary depictions of the social ecologies and truncated avenues for discrete agency available to women in the period, and they demonstrate the late-Victorian cultural attitude toward social convention and its overpowering pressure and inevitable influence on an individual's development and agency.

From Contradiction to Convention: Where Social Ecology Meets Naturalism

The mid-Victorian period is marked by contradiction. On the one hand, there was an atmosphere of optimism, a prevailing belief that individual willpower had a tangible influence on character development in the face of larger socio-political, biological, or psychological forces. In the socio-political landscape, the middle portion of the century saw Britain's economic prosperity on the global stage, evidenced by the fact that by 1860 Britain was responsible for a quarter of the world's trade; the enfranchisement of the

urban working man in the Reform Act of 1867, which doubled the voting electorate in Britain; and the publication of influential works like John Ruskin's "The Nature of the Gothic" (1853) and J. S. Mill's "On Liberty" (1859) and *The Subjugation of Women* (1861), all of which championed individualist and humanist principles over systemic forces like capitalism, the tyranny of the majority, and patriarchal social structures. In literature, as one example, the social realism of Dicken's exaggerated realist-romances always communicated an underlying feeling that if the issues his novels dramatized were addressed, things could change for the better. With the right dose of humanity, the Scrooges and Gradgrinds could change their environs for the better.

However, this cultural optimism was at odds with the increasing visibility of violence sanctioned and performed by Britain's imperialist project and the socio-economic inequality at home. In *Forms of Empire* (2016), Nathan Hensley argues that the mid-Victorian period's conceptions of liberalism, social progress, and modernity were founded on conflicting internal logics. He demonstrates how the major literary forms—especially realist, sensation, and adventure novels—were preoccupied with the contradiction that a liberal society legally sanctions violence within formal boundaries. Despite all the social and economic successes of this time, the violence of the imperialist project that funded this prosperity, made visible through conflicts like the Indian Mutiny of 1857 or the murder of over 400 black men, women, and children in the wake of the Morant Bay Rebellion of 1865, and the increasing economic inequality between classes in Britain were difficult to reconcile with the positive cultural atmosphere of day-to-day

life for middle-class Britons.⁸⁷ As Lauren Goodlad demonstrates, Victorian Britons cultivated a mythos of liberal and cultural autonomy through their perceived intellectual heritages supported by “the myth of pre-Norman Anglo-Saxon liberty, the civic republican tradition, Puritan dissent, Lockean individualism, laissez-faire political economy, and...aspects of the romantic movement, including German philosophical influences” (3). All of these perceived cultural influences created a sentiment in many Britons that “local control, civic voluntarism, personalized philanthropy, and individualized self-help” were better alternatives to centralized government control (4). The mid-Victorian period was defined by this contradiction between individual agency and macro-level social forces. Despite the increasingly visible social issues, narratives of individual prosperity proliferated for some (though not for others), and this was reflected in the literature, such as Braddon’s *Joshua Haggard’s Daughter*, where the influence of social circumstances on individual development was acknowledged, but the individual retained a certain amount of discrete agency and personal autonomy.

The late-Victorian period marks a shift in the scales from the perceived balance between individual-social relations to an overt dominance of impersonal social forces. I use the shorthand “convention” to refer to these forces without clear origins or endpoints that affect the lived experiences of individuals. Plotted by visible socio-political events such as the Royal Titles Act of 1876, in which imperialistic violence was given further political sanction, and the First Boer War of 1880-1881, the first true military loss for Britain since the American Revolution, the latter portion of the nineteenth century was a

⁸⁷ See Elaine Hadley’s *Living Liberalism* for a further discussion of the tensions in Britain from 1859 through the early 1880s.

turning point in British history: the Empire was beginning to show signs of decay. In his essay “Realism Wars” (2016), Jed Esty posits that the shift from mid-Victorian high realism to late-Victorian naturalism, with its hyper-focus on material objects, is a result of the tectonic shift in global economic power from the British Empire to the American Empire. Using Giovanni Arrighi’s definition of a “long century,” Esty argues that the year 1880 was the beginning of the end for the British Empire due to a national economic decline resulting from, among other things, an excess of profit accumulation, a subsequent decrease in trade and production, and financialization.⁸⁸ Late-Victorian literature reflects this twilight era in British history. There is an inherent pessimism in the two primary literary forms of this period, decadence and naturalism.⁸⁹ Decadence represents the retreat of the individual away from the social into aesthetics. British literary naturalism dramatizes the victory of social convention over the individual and, as a literary form, was influenced by the extravagance and hollowness of French literary naturalism’s depictions of social life, the proliferation of evolutionary theories into adjacent cultural discourses, and Britain’s socio-political events that foretold the waning power of the Empire. The most notable British naturalists were Grant Allen, George Moore, Thomas Hardy, and George Gissing. Hardy and Gissing, the two most enduring and well-known of the Victorian naturalistic writers, did not reach their stride until the late 1880s and early 1890s, but the shift towards naturalism in Britain began in the early 1880s.

⁸⁸ To be clear, Esty’s essay is not interested in realism itself as a literary form but rather the critical debates about realism.

⁸⁹ Sub-genres such as the “New Woman” novel, though, challenge this pessimistic trend.

Part of the impetus for this shift was Zola's now-famous publication of "*Le Roman expérimental*" (1880), which quickly became the defining theoretical articulation of the naturalistic novel.⁹⁰ Drawing on Claude Bernard's theory of experimental medicine, which sought to transition the practice of medicine from an art to an experimental science, Zola argues for a "literature governed by science" (1). His experimental fiction is ontologically based on the principle of "absolute determinism," the belief that all natural phenomena are dictated by physical and material conditions (Zola 3). Despite Lukács's accusations that Zola's naturalism was a form of flaccid photographic realism, Zola argues that an experimental novelist both observes his characters and their environment closely and actively develops a hypothesis and implements an experiment that will either confirm or deny said hypothesis.⁹¹ Zola, referencing Darwin, brings the importance of "surroundings" into the center of his theory of naturalism: "Man is not alone; he lives in society, in a social condition; and consequently, for us novelists, this social condition unceasingly modifies the phenomena" (20). Thus, the ultimate task of the experimental novelist, the "great study," is to track "the reciprocal effect of society on the individual and the individual on society" (20). Zola's essay articulates a mode of literary naturalism without specifying the content or subject matter. In other words, he is interested in how the novelist approaches novel writing and why, rather than the classes of people or social groups under examination.

⁹⁰ As I discussed in the Introduction, Zola's essay, rather than a moment of origin, formalized naturalism at the relative end of its dominance in French literature.

⁹¹ Lukács makes this argument in both "Narrate or Describe?" (1936) and *Studies in European Realism* (1964).

Though the French naturalists would become known for depicting lower class life and immoral actions (like poverty-inspired alcoholism or violence), naturalism in Britain in the early 1880s avoided the social “sewers” and concerned itself with the middle and upper classes but did foreground the relationship between society and the individual.

The most well-known examples of this type of British naturalism in the period are Grant Allen’s *Philistia* (1884) and George Moore’s *A Mummer’s Wife* (1885). Allen would go on to be known as a popular novelist, producing sensation novels and ghost stories for *Belgravia* (among others) and eventually writing the influential “New Woman” novel *The Woman Who Did* (1895). However, Allen began his career as a science writer and quickly gained notoriety as a champion of both Darwinian and Spencerian evolutionary theory and would write a biography of Darwin. The influence of evolutionary theory on Allen’s literary endeavors is most evident in his first foray into fiction, *Philistia*, a “serious” novel which ultimately proved financially unsuccessful and convinced him to write more commercially-viable pieces in the future. In the second chapter, Harry Oswald and his sister Edie conceptualize the irresistible influence of “society” by imagining it to be part of a mathematical equation, calling it “Pi” (35). Harry continues: “the practical master of the situation is Pi, sitting autocratically in many-headed judgment on our poor solitary little individualities, and crushing us irretrievably with the dead weight of its inexorable cumulative nothingness” (37). The rest of the novel goes on to demonstrate this bleak view of the social medium and its influence on “solitary little individualities,” as the narrative follows the slow but steady process of social pressures—reputation, finances, familial responsibilities—draining Ernest Le Breton of his Socialist idealism. Published the following year, Moore’s *A Mummer’s Wife*

was one of the first British versions of a Zola novel. Moore spent much of the 1870s in Paris studying to be an artist and socializing with the major Gallic intellectuals, including Zola, and these influences are clearly evident in *A Mummer's Wife*, which follows the failed life of Kate Ede from bored wife to promising business owner to lonely alcoholic, a very Zola-like storyline. However, not all of Moore's influences were across the Channel. As David Baguley notes in the conclusion to his monograph on naturalist fiction, *A Mummer's Wife* contains an extended reference to Braddon's novel *The Doctor's Wife* (1865), which is described as one of Kate's favorite books (229).⁹² Between Allen, who was a regular contributor to *Belgravia*, and Moore, who indirectly alludes to her earlier French adaption, Braddon's importance in the British naturalist movement is clear.⁹³ However, while Allen's novel is open about its interest in the individual-social relation and Moore's is open about its Zolaesque influence, it is in Braddon's novels *The Golden Calf* and *Phantom Fortune* that a subtler, more mature, form of social ecology can be seen.

Braddon's social ecology brings to the fore not just the relationality between the social environment and the individual but also, as Devin Griffiths puts it in his essay on

⁹² Christopher Heywood also writes about the intertwining influences between Flaubert, Braddon, and Moore. Heywood was convinced *The Doctor's Wife* was more influential in British literature than scholars have given it credit, writing a piece on Braddon's novel potentially being an inspiration for *Middlemarch*.

⁹³ Allen only began writing with *Belgravia* in 1878, after Braddon had stepped down as editor, but it stands to reason that he was familiar with her and her work, especially since he would go on to write several sensation novels. Braddon's influence on Moore was much more explicit. In his *Confessions of a Young Man* (1886), he writes about his reading of *Lady Audley's Secret*, which inspired him to "read its successor and its successor" until he came to *The Doctor's Wife*, which awoke his interest in the Romantic poets (3).

mid-Victorian ecology, the “uneven distribution of resources and agency” (299).

Braddon’s social ecology maps an uneven system, revealing not only the social inputs that shape character but also their unequal distribution, especially along gender lines. Braddon’s interest in the experiences of women, the social environment, and their representations in literature was pervasive throughout her career. From the patriarchal social system that corners Lucy Graham in poverty unless she lies and attempts murder to become Lady Audley to the suppressed lives of Naomi and Cynthia Haggard and their empowerment through novel reading in *Joshua Haggard’s Daughter*, Braddon’s deep investment in women and fiction remained constant. Perhaps her most explicit writing on the topic is her unpublished essay “Émile Zola and the Naturalistic School, or Realism in French Literature” (1885), written shortly after *The Golden Calf* and *Phantom Fortune*. In it, Braddon demonstrates her familiarity with Gallic literature by contextualizing Zola within the French realist tradition and expertly analyzing his *oeuvre* to date. However, as my introduction to the essay notes, Braddon’s “invested interest in the depictions of women in fiction shapes the essay’s analysis of Zola’s novels and his literary naturalism” (97). Braddon subtly but unrelentingly critiques the way Zola constructs the women in his work. She points out his tendency to hypersexualize women and reduce them to one-dimensional characters disconnected from the social influences that shape their available avenues of self-expression. And it is in this critique that Braddon’s hand is most evident (she intended to publish the work anonymously). Throughout Braddon’s avid consumption of Zola’s work, out of interest and in preparation for writing her essay, she was clearly struck by the French naturalist’s incongruent treatment of men and women. Where Zola expertly crafts the determining influences that guide the development (or

decay) of his male characters, his women are not given the same treatment (except, perhaps, Gervaise of *L'Assommoir* [1877]). Just as Braddon adapted and revised Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856) in her *The Doctor's Wife*, Braddon repurposed Zola's naturalism to bring into focus what Zola too often failed to do: create full, nuanced depictions of women and their social relations.

“[E]very man is his own master”: *The Golden Calf*

The influence of Zola on *The Golden Calf* has been noted by both of Braddon's biographers, Wolff and Jennifer Carnell. Both, however, focus on Zola's theory of heredity and Brian Walford's descent into alcoholism, neglecting almost entirely the novel's actual protagonist, Ida Palliser. Carnell, who dedicates only a handful of sentences to the novel, notes the undertones of “Zola's interest in theories of heredity” (223) before quickly critiquing the novel for collapsing its realist narrative into “coincidence and melodrama” in the final act (224). Wolff gives a longer treatment of the novel in *Sensational Victorian*, but he focuses almost exclusively on Brian Walford's drinking problem. To be sure, the close plotting of a man's gradual undoing due to alcohol is straight out of Zola's *L'Assommoir* (1877). Braddon even goes as far as to have Brian suggest that his issue is due to a “hereditary instinct,” which is as direct a reference to Zola as one can make without mentioning him explicitly. However, Wolff does note in passing how Braddon revises Zola's theory of hereditary influence through Ida, who blatantly rejects Brian's attempt to shift responsibility away from himself to “hereditary instinct” by arguing that “every man is his own master—he can mould his life as he likes.” While a nice sentiment, even a casual reader would be struck by the incongruity of

this statement with the way Ida's life plays out across the narrative. Brian might have the agency to "mould his life as he likes," but Ida is not given the same luxury.

Leading up to Ida's pivotal decision to marry Brian Walford, the first third of the narrative functions like a pressure cooker: it clearly identifies each factor that contributes to Ida's decision to marry him. The rest of the novel is spent following the repercussions of this decision and Ida's redemption after years of dutiful submission and obedience to circumstance and custom. The narrative condemns Ida for her decision to marry poor Brian, moralizing her choice to marry someone she does not love while potentially harboring predatory ambitions for wealth and status. However, Braddon goes to great lengths to plot meticulously all of the factors that contributed to Ida's decision, making sure to delineate clearly the variety of reasons that shape Ida's course of action, and bring them all to a crescendo in the moment in which Ida is pressed to choose marriage or not. While *The Golden Calf* does draw on and critique Zola's hereditary themes, Braddon uses her own social ecology to draw attention to the limits of agency for women as delineated by the social conventions of the period.⁹⁴

The initial chapters establish Ida's poverty and the resulting social powerlessness that underwrites her sense of self and her future opportunities. The opening scene is a public humiliation of Ida at the hands of Miss Pew, the headmistress of the school where Ida is apprenticed. Pew, who resents Ida's beauty, intellect, and poverty, reprimands Ida in front of the class for the disorderly state of her desk. Ida is made to feel powerless and is forced to beg to have her cherished picture of her younger brother returned to her. This

⁹⁴ Braddon does include a reference to Darwinian evolution in *The Golden Calf*: Horatio states, "I found a tadpole in an advanced stage of transmutation. Given a single step and you may accept the whole ladder. If from tadpole frogs, why not from monkeys man?" (41).

public humiliation is one of several for Ida and establishes the power dynamic between Pew and Ida that will come to a crescendo in Ida's dismissal scene. Though Ida does not lack the necessities of life, she palpably feels her want of the luxuries and, more importantly, future expectations that belong to the other girls at the school, despite her intellect and talents. Her two main schoolfriends represent two versions of financial and social privilege: Bessie Wendover is a kind hearted and well-meaning girl who comes from an old, aristocratic family; Urania Rylance is a haughty, self-centered girl who comes from the professional class, as her father is a "fashionable physician" (20). Both girls have more material means and ready money than Ida, and Ida is made to resent this. Bessie does not recognize her privilege and cannot understand Ida's social position, and Urania goes out of her way to throw Ida's poverty in her face. Ida is made to feel conscious of the lack of power in her social status, despite the successes her natural abilities and hard work in school have afforded her, such as winning the school's annual talent show.

Language plays a crucial role in Ida's social ecology. The things she says and the things said about her by others shape her perception of herself and her relationships to the people around her. Beginning in the 1860s, philologists and psychologists identified language as a distinctly human activity (and for some, *the* distinctly human activity) with the power to shape social relations and therefore also human psychological development.⁹⁵ In the wake of Pew's humiliation and Urania's spiteful needling, Ida resentfully declares that she will marry for money, not for love. Though she declares this in an emotional moment and later retracts the statement, the verbal articulation has real

⁹⁵ See Rylance 258. One of the main contributors to this topic in Britain was Lewes.

effects: Bessie and Urania plot to trick Ida into marrying Bessie's poor cousin Brian under the false pretense that he is Bessie's rich cousin Brian. When pressed further and given time to cool off, Ida reflects that marrying for money is "a revolting sentiment" and explains that it "was wrung from [her] by the infinite vexations of poverty" (56). Nevertheless, Ida's declaration about marrying for money sets the plot against her in motion. Bessie naively wants to marry Ida to her poor cousin out of an unrealistic romantic ideal out of touch with the material needs of a lower social class, and Urania maliciously wants to see Ida further trapped in poverty because of her jealousy and anger that her father proposed marriage to Ida. Additionally, Ida's genuine confessions of admiration and fondness for Wendover Abbey are twisted against her by the Wendover family. She uses the discourse of love to describe her attraction to the old Abbey, making declaration about how much she "adore[s] it" (41). Because she is so open about her attraction to the old building, the people around her—especially the Wendovers—begin to define her in those same terms. When she is first introduced to Brian Walford, the very next thing that is said about her is that "[s]he is desperately fond of the Abbey" (62). After her name, this is the next defining characteristic attached to her by others. When Dr. Rylance proposes to Ida and she refuses him, his cutting retort is to accuse her of holding out for a fortune larger than his: "Perhaps the temptation is not large enough," said Dr. Rylance. "If I had been Brian Wendover, and the owner of Kingthorpe Abbey, you would hardly have rejected me so lightly" (61). When Ida tries to explain her actions to the Wendover family after Brian Walford publicly announces their marriage, she is accused again of having fallen in love with the Abbey and not the owner of the Abbey. Though the Abbey is used as a synecdoche for the title and wealth it represents, Ida's

initial attraction to the house, the narrator makes clear, is genuine and innocent of ulterior motives. However, she does eventually develop ambitious thoughts, despite herself. She daydreams of what it might be like to be mistress of the house, a flame which is fanned by Bessie, who continually tells Ida that she and Brian might fall in love (though Bessie has Brian Walford in mind for Ida). This is another instance in which Ida's perception of herself is molded by language, as Bessie states repeatedly that Ida and Brian are falling in love with each other to the point that Ida herself has trouble interpreting her feelings. She admits to Bessie that she has difficulty separating the man from the building in her mind: "I cannot dissociate him from that lovely old house and gardens. Indeed, to my mind he rather belongs to the Abbey than the Abbey belongs to him" (67). As Ida begins to understand the nature of Brian Walford's feelings towards her, she is taken aback, and her mind races with all of the associations that she has attached to him, as the owner of the Abbey:

that this man of all others, this man, sole master of the old mansion she so intensely admired, her friend's kinsman, owner of a good old Saxon name; this man, who could lift her in a moment from poverty to wealth, from obscurity to place and station; that this man should look at her with admiring eyes, and breathe impassioned words into her ear, was enough to set her heart beating tumultuously, to bring hot blushes to her cheeks. (77)

Importantly, Ida's feelings for Brian Walford are not romantic love for his person; instead, her mental image of him is entirely formed by the things she associates with him, from the Abbey, to his family name, to his wealth and class status. For Ida, "the man himself, considered apart from his belongings, his name and race, she cared not at all" (77). Braddon makes clear language's power to affect lived experience. The things others

say about her, such as her supposed scheme to marry wealth or the nature of her feelings toward Brian Walford, slowly pressure Ida into making the decision she does.

Braddon's treatment of wealth and poverty is one of the clearest places in which gender becomes a significant factor. On the surface, the narrative is constructed to punish Ida for choosing to marry for money instead of love. Ida is aware of the "meanness" of her "longing for worldly wealth" (117). It especially strikes home for her as a woman. She feels guilt and shame for her "willingness to stoop to falsehood in the pursuit of a woman's lowest aim, a good establishment" (117). However, Ida's options are extremely limited. When she imagines her future, she has three possible scenarios: she could return to her family and live off of them; she could work as a governess, which is what she is training to do at Pew's school; or she could marry wealth. The first option is not a great one for Ida. Her family is poor, and she would be a burden to them, especially since she would struggle to obtain work without Pew's letter of reference. The chapter immediately following her first marriage is titled "A Bad Penny," referring to the way Ida's family feels about her returning to them in shame. The chapter title also conflates Ida's person with monetary value, further demonstrating her connection of her sense of self with social and financial value. Her second option of living as a governess is certainly viable, but Ida's intellect, talents, and desire to retain the same social status as her classmates cast domestic servitude in an undesirable hue. Urania further problematizes this option for Ida by reminding her that she would be serving haughty people like Urania, despite what Ida believes to be her superior beauty, ability, and accomplishments.

The moment of crisis comes for Ida when Miss Pew hears that Brian, who has followed Ida to the school, forces his company on Ida on her walks and kisses her

without consent. With trace echoes of Ophelia being dragged to her death by the natural environment in *Hamlet*, what is striking about the crucial, nonconsensual kissing scene is the way Braddon constructs Ida's passivity. Through the point-of-view of a young boy who has been tasked by Pew to spy on Ida, the scene is described as follows. When asked if Ida and Brian kissed, he responds:

‘Yes, miss, just one as they parted company. She was very stand-offish with him, but he cotched hold of her just as she was wishing of him good-bye. He gave her a squeegee like, and took her unawares. It was only one kiss, yer know, miss, but he made it last as long as he could.’ (90)

The boy's account of the scene, which has a monumental impact on Ida's life, frames Brian as the aggressor. Ida is “stand-offish” but Brian “cotched hold of her,” “took her unawares,” and “made it last as long as he could” (90). Brian kisses Ida, but it is Ida who is punished. Miss Pew finds out about the kiss and makes a point to humiliate Ida publicly again by dismissing her for her misconduct in front of the entire school. Pew goes as far as to deny Ida any letters of recommendation, hamstringing any prospect of future employment. In the heat of the unfair public dismissal, Ida defends herself to Pew and the rest of the school by claiming that she and Brian are engaged to be married. Like her declaration that she would marry for money and not love, Ida's public statement, even though made in an emotionally distressed state, have immediate and lasting consequences. Brian takes advantage of her expulsion and subsequent mental and emotional confusion to press his proposal for marriage. Ida has no idea where to turn, other than back to her family, where she knows she will be a financial burden. And without letters of recommendation, she knows she will struggle to obtain a position. Brian presses repeatedly for a hasty marriage, and Ida eventually acquiesces. The

marriage takes place the following day, before Ida has a chance to consider any other course of action or reflect upon the events.

The novel, Ida herself, and the people around her all condemn her for marrying Brian Walford. Yet, what Braddon gives the reader is a portrait of a young girl without viable options for future financial employment, who is manipulated and deceived by Bessie, Urania, and Brian, cast out by her family, publicly humiliated by Miss Pew, and taken advantage of by Brian's nonconsensual, and very public, kiss. The cards have been stacked against her. When everything comes to a head, there seems only to be the option of marrying Brian, whom she believes to be wealthy, which would solve just about all of her problems. As soon as she makes this split-second decision, the rug is pulled from under her. Brian quickly reveals that he is not his wealthy cousin; her family vehemently chastises her for marrying impulsively; the Wendover family view her as a predator of their wealth and insist that she make good on her marriage vows, regardless of the deception, and be a dutiful wife to Brian Walford. Ida redeems herself in the eyes of the narrative by sacrificing several years of her life to caring for Brian and being dutiful to him, despite the fact that he spends her family's money (which she inherits later in the novel), lives the life of a bachelor in London without her, and develops severe alcoholism. Only after Brian perishes as a result of a house fire he started in the midst of his delirium tremors is Ida finally socially, legally, and morally exonerated.

“[E]ntangled in a web”: *Phantom Fortune*

When Lord Maulevrier hears that his sister Lesbia is being courted by Horace Smithson, a wealthy but ill-reputed tradesman, he warns her that “Smithson is not a man

to be trifled with. You will find yourself entangled in a web which you won't easily break through" (247). Lesbia responds, "I am not afraid of webs" (247). *Phantom Fortune* is a novel of relations. The central male characters are judged by their past and present relationships in and to the social world. Lesbia rejects Jack Hammond/Lord Hartfield's marriage proposal because he refuses to provide any information about his personal history or social standing. He refuses this information in order to win his wager with Lord Maulevrier that he can obtain a wife without revealing his wealth and status. Smithson and de Montesma are both enigmatic and untrustworthy because they intentionally conceal the origins of their wealth, which they obtained through the slave trade. Lesbia's family—including Lord Hartfield, who by this point in the story is married to Lesbia's sister Mary—are disgusted with Smithson and de Montesma's secrecy and underhanded dealings because the family members feel they have a right to know all associations and relations in regards to Lesbia's suitors. Hartfield clearly does not recognize the irony of the situation, as he demands the very same information he refused Lesbia, but it is not lost on the reader. In the logic of the novel, the male characters are legible as good or bad through their social relations. Lesbia, however, is not provided the same opportunity. Though she is entangled in a web of forces beyond her control, to echo Maulevrier's warning, her missteps are considered personal failings, and she is punished accordingly. Like she does with Ida, Braddon meticulously identifies the various aspects of Lesbia's social ecology, the determining relations between her and her social environment. Unlike Ida, however, Lesbia is not given a chance at redemption. Her fateful decision occurs in the final act of the novel, and her punishment extends indefinitely beyond the final page. Saverio Tomaiuolo argues that the novel portrays the "influence of French realism and

[Braddon's] interest in new social questions" (175). These two strands are interconnected: Braddon's repurposing of Zola is centrally concerned with women and their social relations.

Lesbia's entrapment in the "web" of social life begins while "still in the nursery" (36). The process of shaping Lesbia to fulfill Lady Maulevrier's social ambitions is referred to by several characters as Lesbia's "education." "To this end," the narrator states, Lady Maulevrier "had educated and trained [Lesbia], furnishing her with all those graces best calculated to please and astonish society.... She knew exactly what Lesbia could be trained to do; and to this end Lesbia had been educated" (28). Lady Maulevrier's social ambitions are two-fold. First, because of the shame brought on the family by Lord Maulevrier senior, Lady Maulevrier's plan requires Lesbia to marry someone with a large enough fortune to make society forget the sins of the past. Second, Lady Maulevrier wants her granddaughter to marry Lord Hartfield because Lady Maulevrier had loved Hartfield's father when she was younger but gave him up to marry for financial advancement rather than love. She grooms Lesbia to believe that only someone like Hartfield deserves to be her husband. Lady Maulevrier's influence on Lesbia is substantial and very apparent to those around her. Hartfield and Maulevrier both recognize the powerful influence that Lady Maulevrier has on Lesbia. Hartfield acknowledges this to Maulevrier as the reason Lesbia is haughty and arrogant:

Lady Maulevrier's influence, no doubt, has in a great measure determined the bent of your sister's character: and from what you have told me about her ladyship, I should think a fixed idea of her own superiority would be inevitable in any girl trained by her. (55)

Maulevrier responds by confirming that “Lesbia’s mind” had been “steeped” in the “ideas and prejudices” of their grandmother (55). It is clear from the beginning to all around her that Lesbia’s character had been molded into the shape desired by her grandmother; Lesbia’s early, impressionable period is completely dominated by Lady Maulevrier’s influence.

Further, Lady Maulevrier intentionally isolates Lesbia from the rest of the social world. As Maulevrier explains to Hartfield, Lesbia “has been buried alive here [at Fellside]; except parsons and a few decent people whom she is allowed to meet now and then at the houses about here, she has seen nothing of the world” (48). And Lesbia is aware of her limited social horizons, describing herself as a “wild woman of the woods” because of her lack of experience with “the civilized world” (38). Lady Maulevrier’s complete control over Lesbia’s life does not allow her opportunities to develop socially or psychologically along other paths other than the ones laid out for her by her grandmother. Patricia Marks describes the social environment in *Phantom Fortune* as an extension of the familiar sensation novel theme of imprisonment⁹⁶:

Braddon constructs the domestic space around imprisonment, but she also predicates existential and cultural prisons on the social level. Lady Maulevrier’s ‘crime’—confining her vicious, debauched husband and living a false widowhood—pales in the light of the greater evil, the imprisoning social hierarchies, rules, and expectations that mask a social void. (287)

Lady Maulevrier’s crimes, however, extend beyond confining her husband to living entombment in their house. She is also complicit in subjecting Lesbia to the “imprisoning social hierarchies, rules, and expectations” without the appropriate tools for successful

⁹⁶ Elaine Showalter, in *A Literature of Their Own*, identifies a covert solidarity between author and reader about the frustrations and limitations of the social context (180).

navigation (Marks 287). The constraints on Lesbia's development begin with her grandmother but do not end there: when Lesbia is introduced to London society, she gains a broader social horizon but also new social restraints. Her web widens but also thickens.

Lesbia's ability to balance her personal desires with the pressures of the social environment is hamstrung by her grandmother, and this opens her up to being taken advantage of by the people around her. Lady Kirkbank, like Lady Maulevrier, manipulates Lesbia to her own ends. When Kirkbank takes Lesbia shopping for the first time, the extravagance of the new experience physically disorients Lesbia. Kirkbank uses Lesbia's confusion to insist that Lesbia purchase everything "*carte blanche*" (215) so that she never learns the total price of her collected expenses. Lesbia's trip to the dressmaker is described by the narrator as taking "a lamb to the slaughter-house" (210). On the surface, it is clear that Kirkbank uses her relationship with Lesbia as a way to stay relevant in London social life. It is only later revealed that Kirkbank stands to gain financially by providing Smithson a wife. To corner Lesbia into marriage, Kirkbank takes financial control over Lesbia and runs her into debt. When Lesbia refuses Smithson's first proposal, Kirkbank secretly requests all the merchants to send their bills simultaneously to make Lesbia feel the weight of her debt and financial distress all at once. And Kirkbank's strike finds its mark. Lesbia is horrified by the three thousand pounds she owes, and it psychologically haunts her:

Three thousand pounds! The sum was continually sounding in her ears like the cry of a screech owl. The very ripple of the river flowing so peacefully under the blue summer sky seemed to repeat the words. Three thousand pounds! (264)

Immediately after receiving the bills, Lesbia allows Kirkbank to put makeup on her for the first time, something she had previously resisted, symbolically signaling the triumph of the social environment over her person as a direct result of her very real material need.

The final strands of Lesbia's web are the manipulations and deceptions of the men in her life. Lady Maulevrier and Lady Kirkbank misuse and manipulate Lesbia in overt, recognizable ways; the men deceive and manipulate her in subtle, insidious ways. Hartfield, the novel's "hero," is guilty of deceiving Lesbia by wooing her as John Hammond. He treats her as a prize to be won, betting on his ability to coerce a marriage proposal acceptance out of her without revealing his true person. When Lesbia eventually learns that Hammond is Hartfield, she says "I never professed to be a heroine. He knew that I was a woman, with all a woman's weakness, a woman's fear of trial and difficulty in the future. It was a cowardly thing to use me so" (308). And though the novel seems to condone Hartfield's actions by rewarding him with the classically virtuous and submissive wife in Mary, it is clear that he set Lesbia up for failure, as he knew in advance that she had been raised since birth to fulfill Lady Maulevrier's ambitious ends. As a wealthy aristocrat, his flippancy for the necessity of money is informed by his social position and inherited wealth. It is an impractical and ill-advised decision to marry without regards to one's social and financial position, and Lesbia understands this, but the novel punishes her for not blindly throwing herself at Hammond's feet. Lesbia's two other suitors are also deceitful and manipulative. Smithson promises to pay Lady Kirkbank for a wife, and he expertly dangles his wealth in front of Lesbia until she is forced to accept his proposal out of financial necessity. De Montesma deceives Lesbia into believing he loves her and eloping with him, with no regard for the dire social and

moral repercussions which would befall her. Between his desire to sabotage Smithson's marriage out of spite, his history as a slave trader, and that fact that he is already married, it is clear that he never had Lesbia's interests in mind and conned her into absconding with him out of sport.

Lesbia's decision to elope with de Montesma is a mirror image of her earlier decision to reject Hartfield. In both instances, Lesbia believes she is in love. However, in the first instance, Lesbia is not permitted to consider marrying for anything short of her grandmother's expectations. When Lesbia approaches her grandmother about Hartfield's proposal, Lady Maulevrier lathers guilt onto Lesbia in order to harden her heart to her feelings for her suitor:

My life has been a hard one, child; hard and lonely, and loveless and joyless....Of [my son's] three children, you are the one I took to my heart. I did my duty to the others; I lavished my love upon you. Do not give me cursing instead of blessing. Do not give me a stone instead of bread. I have built every hope of happiness or pleasure in this world upon you and your obedience. Obey me, be true to me, and I will make you a queen, and I will sit in the shadow of your throne. I will toil for you, and be wise for you. You shall have only to shine, and dazzle, and enjoy the glory of life.
(89)

Lady Maulevrier claims that she has been good and kind to Lesbia and demands "measure for measure" (89), to which Lesbia's life-long training does not allow her resist. The narrator reinforces this by stating that for Lesbia "[d]efiance was out of the question" (91). Lesbia will come to regret her decision to listen to her grandmother, and she feels emotionally crushed when she learns not only that Hammond was Hartfield all along but that Hartfield has moved on and married her sister instead. So when, from her perspective, she is faced with another opportunity to marry for love in defiance of her family's wishes, she takes the plunge with de Montesma. But in this instance, she has

chosen the wrong suitor, requires rescuing by her family, and is punished for her choice. The novel ends with an older Lesbia, now a spinster, educating Hartfield and Mary's daughter on the pitfalls of London's social life.

As Smithson's scheme to marry Lesbia becomes public knowledge, Mrs. Mostyn, a minor figure in Lesbia's social circle who fancies herself an amateur scientist, condescendingly comments on Lesbia's intentions:

'You don't suppose that after having studied the habits of *gnats* I cannot read such a poor shallow creature as a silly vain girl. Of course Lady Lesbia means to marry Mr. Smithson's fine houses; and she is only amusing herself and swelling her own importance by letting him dangle in a kind of suspense which is not suspense; for he knows as well as she does that she means to have him.' (emphasis in original)⁹⁷

Mostyn appears occasionally at dinner parties to subject the other guests to her surface-level understanding of contemporary science and psychology. At one point, the narrator sarcastically comments that Mostyn "favoured [the guests] with a diluted version of the views" (262) of William Benjamin Carpenter from his *Principles of Mental Physiology* (1874). In the quotation above, Mostyn likens her ability to "read" gnats through their habits to her ability to read Lesbia through her social habits. Her claim—which draws science and the social into tenuous dialogue—that habits, or repeated actions, make character legible assumes that actions are entirely determined by the animal, but like her gloss of Carpenter's psychological theories, Mostyn's reading of Lesbia is a misreading.

It is easy for the other characters in the novel and the reader to blame Lesbia for her situation and outcome. In fact, Braddon constructs the surface-level narrative to do

⁹⁷ This exchange was cut from the edition of *Phantom Fortune* that I was able to obtain through my university access. The full version of the novel is available here: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/10905/10905-h/10905-h.htm>

just that: on first blush, it appears Lesbia is the only one to blame for her sad ending. This is achieved by presenting a series of incidents throughout Lesbia's story in which Lesbia demonstrates the appearance of discrete agency by choosing one thing over another. She is the one who ultimately denies marriage to Hammond/Hartfield, for example; she is courted by several suitors in London before Smithson, all of whom she rejects; she is the one who enjoys expensive dresses and the attention they bring. However, the sub-surface narrative tells a different story: Lesbia's agency is a façade, an appearance. By the early 1880s, physiological psychology in Britain had convincingly problematized the concept of discrete, autonomous agency. As we saw in the last chapter, the 1870s were the height of the automaton debates in which material determinists argued against the existence of will power and agency. Physiological psychologists, though, like Carpenter (and Lewes) argued for a middle-ground between absolute determinism and unbounded freewill. Lesbia does have a limited amount of agency to choose between different options when presented, but Braddon makes clear that Lesbia had been "educated" from birth to be the way she is, and it is this education that informs the decisions she makes. Just as Carpenter argues for a socially-contextualized understanding of psychology, so to does *Phantom Fortune* clearly situate Lesbia in an entangled web of social relations from which she cannot break free.

Conclusion: Circumstance and Impotent Agency

Braddon's image of gnats is apt, conjuring a mental picture of small animals who, despite their activity, are inevitably guided by the movements of larger forces. As we saw in *The Moonstone* (Chapter Three) and *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* (Chapter Four), the

main conflicts in the plots were resolved through the individual agency of the characters. Franklin Blake and company finally solve the mystery of the missing Moonstone by using the proper method to bring to the visible surface the hidden subconscious character, demonstrating the potential successes in practice of the new psychological theories. Cynthia stands firm in her moral and matrimonial commitments despite the sensational narratives she reads about in fiction. Both of these novels develop a social ecology in which characters are shaped by a negotiation between external input and internal desires, leaving clear room for individual agency to affect the outcome of the narrative. *The Golden Calf* and *Phantom Fortune* are governed by different forces. A familiar refrain in Braddon criticism is how weak her endings tend to be. She is often criticized for allowing her novels to “collapse,” to use Anne-Marie Beller’s word, into sensation, regardless of the “realism” of the rest of the narrative. However, where *Lady Audley’s Secret* is judged for a hasty and conventional conclusion, the endings to Braddon’s later novels breathe with an intentionality. In these later novels, social convention has overtaken the power of individual agency. The resolutions to these novels, like mirror images, are brought about through circumstances beyond the characters’ control: *The Golden Calf* through Ida’s inaction and random incidents, and *Phantom Fortune* despite—not because of—Lesbia’s attempted but ineffectual agency.

The plot’s conflict in *The Golden Calf* is Brian Walford and Ida’s marriage, which stands in the way of the better relationship between Ida and Brian Wendover, and it is ultimately resolved for Ida through two convenient plot devices, the death of her cousins in a sailing accident and the death of Brian Walford through his own misguided actions. Ida’s cousins Sir Vernon and Peter perish in a tragic sailing accident in the Hebrides. The

unexpected death of these two young, healthy men transfers the ancestral fortune and baronetcy to Ida's father and raises her financial and social status. At the end of the novel, Brian Walford, in the midst of alcohol withdrawal, accidentally (it is assumed) starts a fire in the middle of the night, burning down the house and perishing in the process. It is these two incidents, both of which were entirely out of Ida's control, that position Ida to marry Brian Wendover at the novel's conclusion. As I have argued, taking cues from Ifill, incident-driven plot devices in the sensation novel correlate to literary depictions of circumstance. Read in this way, Ida's problems and solutions are circumstantial: her poverty, her decision to marry Brian, her inheritance, and Brian's death are determined by circumstance rather than acts of defiant freewill. Circumstance giveth and taketh away.

Phantom Fortune is the mirror image of *The Golden Calf*. Rather than circumstance driving the plot forward to its resolution through random and extraordinary incidents, Lesbia is given the opportunity to enact agency in a significant moment in the plot when she makes the impulsive decision to run away with de Montesma. However, her agency is rendered impotent and ultimately powerless as the men in her life track her down and forcefully bring her back home with them. After succumbing to the pressures of her social environment, shaped by her grooming, marriage expectations, reputation, financial need, and manipulation and deceptions by all around her, Lesbia funnels all of her energy into a reckless act of freewill (or so it appears), only to find out that once again she has been deceived and manipulated. When the truth of her failed elopement and disgrace are brought home to her on de Montesma's yacht, she attempts to throw herself in the ocean. But "Hartfield's strong arm" "caught her, held her as in a vice, dragged her

away from the edge of the deck” (389). This image encapsulates all of Lesbia’s impotent agency. Even in a moment of suicidal desperation, Lesbia’s ability to act for herself is thwarted by Hartfield, to the approval of all those around her.

The Golden Calf and *Phantom Fortune* are novels concerned with the often overpowering social environments that women inhabit. When considered together, the similarities between Ida and Lesbia become apparent. Though they come from slightly different backgrounds and financial situations, both women are pressured into making momentous life decisions under false pretensions. The people, customs, and material needs that make up their social relations prove to be powerful forces that dictate the avenues along which their characters can develop. Braddon’s social ecology of character is dynamic, as she expertly brings to bear multiple social forces simultaneously on her characters in crucial moments, and foregrounds how power is distributed unevenly, as Ida is redeemed and Lesbia demonized. As several scholars have noted, the sensation novelists forged subtle but strong connections with their readers. At this later stage in Braddon’s career and this transitional moment in British literature from the mid-Victorian to the late-Victorian period, however, the tie between Braddon and her readers is not only one of solidarity but also one of implication: it requires astute, active readers to parse the inconsistencies in the treatment of the two women, or else the readers risk ending up like Mrs. Mosytn, misreading action for intention, divorced of the social context.

After an apparent disagreement between Braddon and John Maxwell over whether or not she should sign her name to her Zola essay, Braddon withdrew the article. The public not only lost the opportunity to see Braddon’s prowess as a literary critic but also her profound investment in the depictions of women in fiction. When read in light of her

unpublished essay, *The Golden Calf* and *Phantom Fortune* become alternative paths to the same end, and Braddon's distinct brand of literary determinism, drawing on British ecology and French literary naturalism concerned with women and their social environment, comes into focus. This transition in Braddon's literary career from pioneering sensation novelist to fledgling naturalist is emblematic of the larger shift in British literature from the optimistic realist-romances of the mid-Victorian novel to the pessimistic social determinism of the late-Victorian novel. It is fitting that Braddon's career maps the contours of Victorian literature so well. We still have much to learn from one of the most prolific and influential novelists of the period.

CHAPTER 6

AFTERWORD: SENSATION, PSYCHOLOGY, ECOLOGY

Victorian studies has been at the forefront of developing histories of literary character, the novel genre, and their socio-cultural relations. Though the eighteenth century retains the claim-to-fame of giving birth to the modern Western novel form, it is in the Victorian period, with its increase in mass literacy and technological advances in printing and distribution, coupled with the innovations in modern science, that the novel became the dominant literary form, dethroning poetry as the most influential aesthetic mode of expression. Since the 1980s, Victorian scholars have convincingly demonstrated that no small part of the Victorian novel's success was due to its engagement with contemporary science and participation in a social-science discourse in the wide-reaching periodical networks. Innovations in biology, sociology, and psychology in the middle decades of the century provided fertile ground for novelists to cultivate new ways of depicting and developing characters in their works, and scholars of Victorian literature have created a large corpus that tracks convincingly the reciprocal influences between artistic and scientific fields.

One familiar scholarly narrative is that the Victorian realist novel is the pinnacle of psychological interiority represented in prose fiction—the representation, in other words, of realist character. Indeed, the study of character in fiction is very often directly correlated to the study of psychology. Psychology provides the underlying theories that make possible particular depictions and theories of fictional character development, and fiction has the potential to elicit new insights and avenues of psychological exploration. A recent vein of Victorian scholarship—what I and others have called the “anti-

subjective” turn, echoing the larger trend in literary studies—has begun challenging this familiar narrative in Victorian studies by reassessing the extent to which Victorians understood subjectivity and consciousness as defined only by one’s interior, voluntary mental life. This body of scholarship has opened up new and productive ways through which to understand the definitions of consciousness and forms of knowing built into Victorian depictions of character and character development. Recent works such as Elisha Cohn’s *Still Life* (2015), Benjamin Morgan’s *The Outward Mind* (2017), Elaine Auyoung’s *When Fiction Feels Real* (2018), David Coombs’s *Reading with the Senses* (2019), and Pearl Brilmyer’s *The Science of Character* exemplify this trend.⁹⁸ Brilmyer describes this shift in the Victorian conception of character as a transformation from “the hidden kernel of an individual personality into an impersonal phenomenon that formed through corporeal interactions” and emphasizes “the role of physical encounters and bodily impulses in character formation” (6). My project participates in this critical turn by examining the dynamic interplay between the mid-Victorian psychology and one of the most popular novel genres of the period.

What I have attempted to trace in this dissertation is the progressive development of a literary naturalism in the British sensation novel. Naturalism’s core conflict is between hereditary and environment, an equation which does not leave much room for personal agency. As I demonstrated across my chapters, the sensationalists reckoned with the social and moral ramifications of the developing material sciences while still

⁹⁸ Though not as explicitly concerned with psychology, I would also suggest that recent work by Jonathan Farina, Daniel Wright, Rachel Ablow, Sebastian Lecourt, Michael Tondre, and Megan Ward participate in this reevaluation of the conception of subjectivity in Victorian literature.

attempting to find space for discrete agency. This faith in personal autonomy and action dwindled across the decades in tandem with the increased visibility of imperial violence and social and economic disparity, thrown into stark relief in the long twilight shadows of the crumbling British Empire. The sensation novel's tension between circumstance and character at its formal level, wide readership, and participation in the popular science discourse in the periodical network make it a literary epicenter for the mid-Victorian ecological turn's affects on how character—literary and psychological—is depicted in fiction. As our understanding of the complicated relationship between humans and environments continues to develop in our present, it is crucial that we keep our histories in clear view.

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