

Unveiling Lady Audley's Secret: Navigating Femininity, Autonomy, and Societal Constraints in Victorian Literature

Xuan Tu

School of Foreign Language Department, Guangzhou College of Technology and Business, China

Abstract: The paper analyzes *Lady Audley's Secret* in the context of Victorian gender inequality. During this era, women faced societal expectations rooted in domesticity, limiting their access to education and public life. Braddon's novel challenges these norms, portraying a complex heroine, Lady Audley, who engages in criminal activities to navigate the constraints of her gender and social expectations. The novel explores themes of economic dependence, the limitations of marriage, and the use of madness as a societal tool. Lady Audley's character embodies paradoxes, reflecting the tension between societal ideals and individual desires. Braddon's portrayal of ordinary women's struggles provides a nuanced perspective on femininity, challenging the prevailing stereotypes of the time. The analysis examines the societal implications of madness and the consequences of resisting prescribed gender roles. *Lady Audley's Secret* emerges as a subversive work that addresses the invisible lives and personal conflicts of ordinary women, contributing to the broader discourse on female autonomy in the Victorian era.

Keywords: Sensation Novel; Madness; Female Autonomy.

1. Introduction

Gender inequality was pervasive in the Victorian era. Nevertheless, it is still regarded as a crucial turning point, signifying the transition of women from the domestic realm of household and family to the public sphere as active participants in society and workplaces (Fraser 905). An expanding female Victorian labour force engaged themselves in mill and fabric factories. Participation in the labour market enabled women to achieve economic independence to a certain level. Their diversified life experience heightened their motivation for psychological autonomy. According to Berstein, there is a noticeable increase in the readership of new lower-middle class women (227). The disparity of payment in the labour market and the burden of family caring doubled the plight of working women. When reading, women were not searching for ideal Victorian women who confined to a sheltered existence. Conversely, in literary works, the notion that "virtue no longer consists of literal obedience to arbitrary standards set by community or church but rather in conduct consistent with a growing personality" was embraced by the emerging groups of readers (Garrison 79). As a result, more writings emphasis on personal features, private ambitions, and the raised significance of intrinsic female value.

However, the focus on household duties and limited access to public education reduced the possibility of women attaining long-term economic autonomy. They were expected to fulfil their responsibilities as mothers and household managers. Working women faced gender-based discrimination and received inadequate payment. As Spencer argues, society has traditionally strongly discouraged women from pursuing any vacation other than fulfilling their duties within the household (285). Consequently, women were constantly reminded of their prescribed societal responsibilities and inadequate understanding of themselves. Female authors suffered from these prejudices as well. Showalter points out that the talents and credibility of female

authors are greatly underestimated as "the Victorians had defined women as angelic beings who could not feel passion, anger, ambition, or honor" (79). Critics undervalue the literary achievements of female writers, believing their hollow minds are incapable of carrying out the complicated process of receiving, interpreting, and conveying feelings. Despite the substantial quantity of literary works are authored by women, only a few manage to generate widespread interest on the market, with a great amount of works being neglected. Furthermore, female authors are criticised for gratifying a vulgar curiosity and depicting "a degenerative culture of boundless desires" (Berstein 231). Moreover, female authors are often subjected to criticism and reaction regarding their private lives or moral integrity. Female Victorian novelists, like their predecessors in early modern England, have to assume male pseudonyms.

Though women remained unrecognised and underappreciated, the Victorian era also recorded the endeavours of women managed to challenge the male monopoly in the publishing industry. Mary Elizabeth Braddon, a celebrated Victorian novelist, was widely recognised for her steady success as a bestselling author. However, she faced abundant negative reviews from the public due to her private life and her previous profession as an actress. Charlotte Brontë, a highly skilled woman, faced discouragement when seeking professional guidance from Robert Southey, a prominent figure in male-dominated fields. Southey outright denied her, stating that literature should not be a woman's pursuit. The implementation of a dualistic criterion failed to intimidate female authorships. Victorian writers resisted the prevailing societal convention of idealizing angelic figures. Alternatively, they depicted private sectors that were constantly disregarded or deemed as invisible. The literary works of female authors encompassed distressing circumstances, including the deplorable working and family situations, an oppressive patriarchal society, and the intricate social encounters in assuming social roles. The self-representation resonated with the unfolding of female life

experiences. Through the interaction of “a lived, experienced reaction to hard social and economic realities” (Felber 472), female authors were able to consolidate their literary authority by delving into the living experience of women.

The rise of sensation novels during the Victorian era, described by Hughes, is a danger to social hierarchy (42). The heroines in some fictions challenge the presumed gender norms instead of affirming the alleged “natural stability and passivity.” These novels empower heroines who, rather than blindly following arbitrary standards set by the community or church, embrace self-awareness and self-determination. This change is not in line with the traditional Victorian schemes of sexual temperament, but with a focus on conducts that align with personal growth and development (Garrison 80). When confronted with conflicts of interest, the heroine would employ feminine sexuality and manipulate traditional expectations to establish herself in the male-dominated society. Domestic violence, fraud, bigamy, arson, murder, and several other scandalous elements are common plots in sensation novels. These settings are meticulously reproduced to portray regular women's lives, their struggles without authority, and their hesitations within middle-class settings (Brantlinger 1). Sensationalists prioritise describing a wicked and corrupted angel than endorsing another motionless mechanic doll. They also delve into the true reasons that result in her degeneration. This genre, according to Berstein's definition, is characterised by the inclusion of criminal activities that take place in domestic settings and are depicted with intense tension in order to evoke a strong reaction from the readers (215). Though being criticised for the glorification of extraordinary evil, writers engage themselves with a “much more open discussion of the female's plight” (Garrison 75). The utilisation of female sexuality and unconventional offenders function as the means for intruding on the public sphere and facilitating upward social mobility. The struggles and triumphs over the hardships meet the needs of ambitious brides and dissatisfied wives.

2. Exploring Femininity and Constrains Though the Unveiling of the Secrets

This paper examines Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, a sensational novel masterpiece both in terms of its success in the marketplace and its contribution to the representation of diverse womanhood. It is a significant publishing success as it is never out of print while Braddon was alive. Braddon manipulates the prevailing belief that marriage is commonly accepted as the sole legitimate and acknowledged means of altering one's personal identity. Women were dependent on their spouses to obtain new identities, which signifies a turning point in life, whether it be positive or negative. Another unspeakable rule was that women were forbidden to forsake or to preserve their original identities. However, in *Lady Audley's Secret*, the alternations of woman's identity are achieved through criminal activities. The heroine, Lady Audley, is blessed with extraordinary beauty and an actress in performing submissive conducts. Nevertheless, committing to the conventional social roles is incapable of preventing her staying away from deprivation and suffering. The extraordinary beauty of the heroine fails to guarantee her long-term stability and dignity. By depicting a malevolent criminal not being produced due to nature but rather nurture, Braddons presents struggles and

hardships faced by women throughout their lives. Unjust oppression and hardships play vital roles in the degeneration of “the angel in the house”. The heroine's self-assertiveness and self-awareness challenge the anticipated gender roles, which makes the punishments of criminal activities questionable.

The *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) talks about the story of a charming and endearing governess with modest origins who marries Sir Michael and assumes the esteemed title of honourable Lady Audley. The immense elevation of social status does not alter the approach she interacts with others. She befriends her maid and makes herself agreeable to everyone. She dutifully serves as a precious ornament to her second husband, Sir Michael. Even her later arch enemy, Robert Audley, finds it hard to resist her performed feminine charms. However, underneath her seemingly innocent grins, she is a femme fatale who engages in bigamy, arson, murder, and has signs of mental instability. In order to cover her secret, she fabricates an emergent telegraph to avoid the upcoming meeting with her former husband, George Talboys. When he threatens to expose her real identity, she pushes George Talboys into a deep well. Robert Audley becomes vigilant upon the abrupt vanishing of George Talboys. With the encouragement of Clara Talboys, George's sister, Robert starts to investigate the concealed reality that leads to his friend's vanishment. Lady Audley does not flinch at Robert's warnings even though plenty of evidence is gathered against her. Instead, she actively takes measures to prevent Robert, even as far as deliberately igniting a fire at the hotel where he is staying. Ultimately, she admits to her wrongdoings and is immediately abandoned by her second husband, Sir Michael, who used to vow to adore her intensely. In the end of the story, Lady Audley ends up perishing in a ‘madhouse’ under an assumed identity. While George Talboys, the alleged murder victim, returns to life and reunites with his friend Robert. Audley Court is left deserted due to these unsatisfying memories.

2.1. The Hinted Doppelgänger

Before being addressed as Lady Audley, she goes by the name of Miss Lucy Graham, particularly within in the surroundings of Audley's estate. Even though Miss Lucy Graham's modest wages doesn't align with her excellent recommendation letter and dedicated working attitude, she appeared to be content with her current position. Lucy Graham's innocence and carefree nature are so remarkable that “everybody, high and low, united in declaring that Lucy Graham was the sweetest girl that ever lived” (Braddon 9). In addition, she possesses extraordinary beauty, her soft and melting blue eyes, her tender voice and her glowing blonde hair make it impossible to resist her female lures. Upon their initial encounters, the widower Sir Michael, is profoundly affected by “the terrible fever called love” (10). Despite of a strong disdain for his previous marriage, which he regards as a monotonous and unexciting arrangement, Sir Michael makes the decision to pursue what he believes to be his true calling.

In contrast to this amiable and gorgeous Miss Lucy Graham, the introduction of Phoebe Marks, her maid, is featured with obscurity, greyness, and suppression. If Miss Lucy Graham is the representation of the whole compliments, then the eyes, hair, complexion, and clothing of Phoebe Marks all blend into pale and uncertain shades. The intended vague descriptions make it challenging for readers to visualise her appearance.

However, as the story progresses, Braddon explicitly states that there are similarities in appearance between these two ladies. These details effectively convey her role as the shadowy counterpart to Lady Audley. In contrast to the cunning Lady Audley, she possesses the ability to express her malevolent thoughts and execute her wicked actions without concealing them, even Phoebe's husband comments, "I thought you was an evil spirit" (30). This remark also announces the later destiny of Lady Audley, whose husband also intimidates by her vicious thoughts.

Not only do they bear physical resemblances, but their life trajectories are also interconnected. Coming from modest origins, they have to support themselves by working as governess and lady's maid. The challenges and involvement in public arenas heighten their aspiration to ascend the social hierarchy. Upon receiving a marriage proposal from Sir Michael, Lucy Graham, although displaying no visible signs of happiness, is pleased that her previous suffering is coming to an end. She looks forward to a future without reliance on others, tedious work, or feelings of shame. Phoebe, on the other hand, grasps the opportunity to blackmail Lady Audley once she finds out her secrets. Contrary to Lucy Graham secretive calculations, Phoebe expresses explicitly her craving for the improvement of social status and her desires for its accompanied benefits. Uttering "what was she but a servant like me" (31), Phoebe identifies herself as Lady Audley and bitterly rejects the idea that social positions are fixed and unalterable, and suggests that marriage is a convenient means to ascend the social ladder.

Lady Audley's deliberate aloofness functions as a narrative device in concealing her inner feeling. While the depictions of the words and actions of her *doppelgänger*, Phoebe, serve as the windows to observe and to connect to Lady Audley. Her trespassing into Lady Audley's room unveils the hidden side of the most virtuous Angel for the first time. Meanwhile, she acts as a catalyst who facilitates the revelation of Lady Audley's secret. Several indications and clues regarding Lady Audley's malevolent intentions are either anticipated or concealed within Phoebe's actions and utterances. Even the night before the fire, it is Phoebe that hands her the lethal candle. Described as "the prettiest littler creature" (Braddon 69), Lady Audley's unwavering resolution, determination, and resources in fulfilling the social expectations are witnessed, spoke, and carried out by Phoebe Marks.

Both individuals experienced a rise in their socio-economic status to different degrees. Consistent with the Victorian tradition of heroines refraining from erotic cravings, both Lucy Graham and Phoebe Marks' marriages are not driven by sexual impulses. In fact, Lady Audley several marriages are for the purpose of acquiring wealth. Phoebe, on the other hand, enters marriage for the apprehension of being murdered. The contradictions and hesitations in marriage intensify the condensation of anxieties in Victorian heroines. The elevated social status brought by marriages do not provide life-long security for Lady Audley and Phoebe Marks. Beauty, pleasing, and docility fail to hinder them from abandonment and marital earning. Through concrete descriptions of the life experiences of the protagonists, Braddon constructs an unsettling moral framework that debases the established social conventions. Lucy and Phoebe are empowered to priorities their own needs and desires, yet they are confined by social constrains. Regardless how crystally clear in entering marriage, it is beyond the individual's capability to escape from the confines of the domestic realm.

2.2. The Uncharted Desires

This book also explores insatiable desires. Realising that she is the most attractive among her schoolmates, Helen Talboys, also known as Lady Audley or Miss Lucy Graham, understands the need of marrying someone of higher social status. She weds George Talboys, the sole heir of a wealthy gentleman. When George is cut off the financial support from his father, she once again experiences destitution. Adding to the already unbearable situations, George leaves for Australia just leaving a note for Lucy and their son. Helen, feeling abandoned and disappointed by her ex-husband for three years, expresses her dissatisfaction by stating her refusal to accept any form of compensation. In her letter, she determines to disconnect all her unpleasant pasts and starts a new life under the persona of Lucy Graham.

The portrayal of Lady Audley is not to depict a conventional image of femininity that arouses sensual and maternal desires. Instead, Braddon means to expose the inner thoughts and emotions of her characters, where their personal awareness is constantly contradicted to social suppressions and prescribed gender norms. Under her pen, Lady Audley is an atypical Victorian heroine with a high degree of complexity. She can be a "childish, helpless, little creature" (156), but she can also be a cunning, proactive and involved in illegal activities. Showalter contends that the young girl, who has been taught deceitfulness as a secondary trait of her gender role, is portrayed as a charming and attractive individual (3). Therefore, Braddon provides insight into the factors that contribute to the transformation of women and the diverse forms of femininity.

Lady Audley is punished for her cruelty in making decisions and aspirations for a better life. However, her sufferings and reasons for her transformations are left unjustified. In contrast, George faces no charges for his act of deserting his wife and kid in the first place, and neither does he express any remorse for his irresponsible acts. Even on the day he returns to look for Helen, George reproaches her and firmly states that he would never pardon her for her falsehood (440). It never occurs to him that his reckless and irresponsible behaviours exert detrimental damages to the family in the first place. It is socially expected that Helen would castrate all her emotions and patiently wait for her husband's return. Instead, Helen commits to her own desire and accuses Robert Audley being "as merciless as" Georgy Tallboys (440). Asserting her entitlement to personal happiness and rejecting to the predicaments enforced by her neglect husband. Helen forsakes her unwanted child and coward father. However, the profound emotional abuse she endures remains crippling or insignificant to the general public. Helen, or Lady Audley's anguish is not an isolated incident. An increasing number of women are also limited by the indoctrination of female roles in the public sphere and the fatigue of isolation in the domestic sphere. Lady Audley's confession does not result in a just trial. Her uncontrollable malevolent conduct was so detrimental that she is deemed unfit to be considered a woman. As a rebellious figure who dares to resist societal expectations, Lady Audley serves her "sentences" for an uncommitted crime. The endeavours she undertakes to defy the social conventions are extinguished, together with her perception as a woman and her existence as a human being.

2.3. The Detached Marriages

Bigamy constitutes Lady Audley's third secret, together

with her hidden identity and murder. When being suited by Sir Michael, Lucy Graham shows no emotion even though she fully aware of the benefits of this union. She even confesses to Sir Michael that she has been “selfish from her babyhood” (14). It is Sir Michael who persuades her that it is not much more sinful for a woman to marry a guy she does not love (13). Lucy Graham displays a genuine and heartfelt sincerity throughout the proposal. On the other hand, Braddon provides significant details of how Lucy Graham contemplating the marriage. Lucy Graham divulges herself into the misty twilight and “dim landscape that far away beyond the little garden” (13). This gives Sir George the impression that she mentally transports herself to another world. The sense of distance and detachment creates ambiguities, allowing Lucy Graham to exercise her female self-assertiveness without external intrusions. Similar situation occurs with her doppelgänger, Phoebe Marks, who marries her first cousin despite being incapable of loving him. Therefore, instead of the declaration of mutual love and affection, social and economic stimulus are more appealing in marriage, or “bargain”, as Sir Michael describes. Lady Audley’s once asks Phoebe Marks prior to her wedding, “Do you think, then, if murder is in him, you would be any safer as his wife?” (123). From the novel, we know that Phoebe marries her first cousin eventually. Once again, her doppelgänger fulfills the prophecy of Lady Audley’s own destiny. Knowing the potential risks of exposing herself, Lady Audley engages in the battles of safeguarding her secrets patiently and intends to influence Sir Michael with her female sexuality. Her performative image is so gullible that her step-daughter, Alicia Audley, describes her as “so irretrievably childish and silly” (5). Even Robert Audley “watched her with some touch of pity in his eyes” (Braddon 156). Braddon reveals glimpses of her innermost emotions through Phoebe’s repeated endeavours to surreptitiously enter her dressing room. The portraits in her room and costly mirrors announced the awakening her female sexuality and confidence to exercise her female sexuality. Frivolity and infantile exuberance are variable means to exercise manipulations.

Although Lady Audley exhibits deviant behaviours and poses a challenge to societal norms, it is difficult to classify her as a fully rebellious female protagonist, as she nonetheless adheres to traditional ideals of femininity. Her “doll-like” appearance cater to the idealised female image (Reynolds & Humble 106). On the one hand, she represents the ideal model of passive femininity. She accepts Sir Michael’s proposal for the expansion of material achievement and the social mobility. She also derives satisfaction arousing desire in everyone she encounters, even being objectified from the male gaze (32). Moreover, unsettling controversial elements are incorporated into the formation of new femininity. For Lady Audley, committing herself to social expectation and conventional roles are instruments to manipulate, and feminine sexuality and self-consciousness are effective in attaining her goal. Lady Audley is anachronistic in enriching the diversity in the representation of women. Her sufferings and her triumphs blur the general conception of morality. Therefore, Lady Audley is a woman embodied a multitude of paradoxes.

2.4. The Stigmatised Madness

In her confession, Lady Audley acknowledges that her mother’s madness is the secret she wishes to conceal for she deems it would harm her in the future (393). As a result of mental illness, her mother is compelled to live in the

psychiatric institution. Critics discredit the name of Lady Audley claiming that her behaviours are so out of order that she should be addressed as Lady ‘inorderly’. Lady Audley blames the hereditary madness as the primary force for committing crimes. This paper would like to argue that her biggest secret and the root of her tragic life lies in the discrepancies between her increasing self-consciousness and the stagnant social conventions surrounding her. Despite the significant disgrace and social stigma associated with mental illness, the procedure of diagnosing the symptoms is very controversial and predominately reliant on subjective judgement. In the novel, Dr. Mosgrave reaches the conclusion that “she is not mad” and the possibility of having acute mania “would only arise under extreme mental pressure” after his private counselling with Lady Audley (425). Even with his own diagnosis, Dr. Mosgrave assists Robert in hospitalizing this mentally-sane woman. He even assures him of denying her of all worldly connections. It is beyond unsettling that the presence of insanity and the resulting humiliation diminish Lady Audley sense of worth, leading her to feel obligated to stay quiet and unseen.

Hence, this paper argues that the term ‘madhouse’ is a formidable weapon for authority to suppress individuality. “Orderly” is an intriguing word, which implies that a significant amount of people is marginalized due to their inability to conform to societal norms and expectations. It is even concerning that people do not question the institutionalised society which generates these problems. Instead, they humiliate and treat those who suffer from mental insanity. The symptom “madness” serves as an effective tool to accuse those who have the audacity to question social conventions. Lucy Graham’s hesitation on whether accepting Sir Michael’s proposal is viewed as clear act of “madness” in the eyes of the Dawsons. They find it unreasonable for a broken girl to decline the possibility of an elevation of social status and the growth of wealth. They attempt to reason with Lucy in order to keep her mind on track. In fact, madness is a prevalent strategy employed by those in power to enforce their dominating ideals and impose their ideology on others who are resistant. Lady Audley also attempts the “madness” tool by framing Robert Audley as mentally unstable, but she is unable to accomplish this without male authority. As she convinces Sir Michael to accept Robert Audley’s insanity, Robert, on the other hand, abuses his power by imprisoning Lady Audley into a living grave.

3. Conclusion

As the paper discussed previously, Lady Audley lacks the qualities of a true rebellious heroine. By demonstrating her unsettling sufferings, her suppressive agony, and her fruitless endeavours, Braddon sheds the light on the living realities of ordinary women. She intends to oppose gendered-based power distributions on various grounds, ranging from trivial details to significant decisions. Braddon describes a sharp juxtaposition when Lucy Graham sees her mother for the first time. Contrary to her long-held perception of encountering a violent and aggressive being, the woman standing before Lady Audley appears charming with golden hair and blue eyes. She greets Lady Audley with “radiant smiles, and gay, ceaseless chatter” (392). The situation is both disturbing for Lady Audley and for the readers because her mother bears a striking resemblance to the archetypal Victorian figure. Moreover, Braddon provides an alternative connotation of lunacy. In her confession, Lady Audley admits that she

experienced several times of losing control before committing crimes. The evil concepts provoke a surge of blood and causes her heart to beat rapidly. Therefore, madness empowers her to experience an exalting and ennobling passion with any limitations. Even if it means resorting to criminal acts.

The depiction of Lady Audley's social experience complicates the process of making judgements. Poverty, inadequate support from her family, and departure of her first husband, Lady Audley has no one to rely on but herself to safeguard her interests. Exploiting her physical attractiveness, Lady Audley makes great efforts to reach her goals. Her exceptionally gorgeous appearance also distracts Robert Audley, who tries to free himself from her "feminine prevarication" and "womanly trickery" during his investigation (301). However, her exceptional beauty does not guarantee her a prosperous family in the long run. Her seemingly innocent appearance makes her especially dangerous and arouses different waves of overt correctness on her behaviours. Furthermore, her apparent docility is an identifiable cultural trait. Her marriages and her schemes effectively portray her determination to defy limitations and delve into self-discovery. Moreover, Braddon challenges the perception of being femininity passed through generations. She examines various possibilities of womanhood in different roles through manifestation of manifold Victorian society. Despite facing criticism, her dedication to promoting female autonomy has had a far-reaching impact.

Lady Audley's Secret achieves great commercial success during its time. Showalter attributes the popularity among readerships to its successful portray of "invisible of daily lives, the physical experiences, the personal tragedies and conflicts of ordinary women" (9). It is generally acknowledged that women are described as "lustful, deceitful, shrewish, domineering, extravagant, proud, vain and selfish" in the Victorian era (Henderson and McManus 47). As expressed by Wollstonecraft, negative attitude towards women has been influenced by the belief that their complaints are mere follies and caprices (6). As in the novel, Robert mocks women's ambitions in acquiring "freedom of opinion and variety of occupation" and accuses them of instigating conflict, committing murder, and generating despair (Braddon 233). It is particularly subversive when female authors who intend to compete in the male dominated publishing sphere. Their creative works are invalidated due to scrutiny of their private life and personal morality. Similar to Lady Audley's act of adopting a false identity to pursue a better life, female authors are compelled to anticipate scrutiny from reviewers of their time, regardless of the distinctiveness of their subjects or styles (Showalter 73), unless she chooses to use male pseudonym.

The society exerts stringent standards on women, which are reflected in the plot constructions of sensation fictions. The realisation of the ideal concept womanhood requires dependence on male authority. Meanwhile, exploitation of education deprives the chances for women at large to voice the living realities. Prior to being recognised as equal individuals, they are initially classified as females. When these innocent angels start to voice their ideas and desires, they are soon considered wicked creatures. Her female identity is the first to be revoked as the punishment for

behaving in unordered way. Thus, prior to the availability of reliable and efficient birth control methods, marriage, household, and family serve as primary means of economic sustenance and social approval for most women (Fraser 856). The discourse of stereotyped female inferiority is often discussed in an abstract manner, without considering the living realities of sufferings and limitations of ordinary women. Up to now, an increasing number of female writers expand the perspective of viewing women in more depth. The autonomy of personal decision-making is heightened. The validity of prescribed gender roles is questioned. Additionally, the enlightenment and clarification are employed to assist in the development of one's own identity. In response to biased reproaches, Mary Elizabeth Braddon refutes the accusation with the statement "Just as I am!" (qtd. in Janine 3). She is proud that her personal experience spring her thematic contents and gains widespread appreciation from the readers. Female authors' literary works and efforts for respectability are strong cases for establishment of diversified femininities.

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