FACULTY OF ARTS AND PHILOSOPHY

Gender and Gender Identity in Victorian Fiction

How Mary Elizabeth Braddon's "Lady Audley's Secret" Challenges Victorian Social Constructs and Beliefs Regarding Gender

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"The story which I'm about to tell you is not my own story". Indeed it is not. I have spent hours and days reading and re-reading *Lady Audley's Secret* and never did it become boring. I loved the story and the rebellious message I saw between the lines.

Blood, sweat and tears, might be the summary of this (thankfully though without the blood and tears), but I am so happy I was finally able to continue and finish my research.

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Introduction

"I think that sometimes a painter is in a manner inspired, and is able to see, through the normal expression of the face, another expression that is equally a part of it, though not to be perceived by common eyes."

M.E. Braddon, Lady Audley's Secret, p. 78

The crowning of Queen Victoria in Britain in 1837 marked the beginning of the Victorian age, which was named after her. It runs from, but is in practice not limited to her reign; the sixty-four years Queen Victoria ruled the country. During the 1800s the Industrial Revolution made its way to Britain and had a major influence on Victorian society and its way of life. International trade, consumerism, a growing international market, machines and trains operated by steam, were all important factors that helped Britain become "the centre of world capitalism and consumerism" (Purchase, 2006, p. 28).The very first steam-powered railway line, the Liverpool and Manchester Railway, opened in 1830, and approximately twenty years later, all the major cities of England were connected to each other by railway lines (Steinbach, 2012). Susie L. Steinbach (2012) argues that railways had multiple purposes, the main ones being leisure- and urbanisation-oriented: not only were short excursions and holidays to the countryside and seaside made possible, rail transport also brought people who lived in the countryside to Britain's cities to find employment. It is safe to say that Britain was positively characterised by technological, industrial and social change, but also by a negative side of society, such as child labour, poverty, illness, and an enormous gap between rich and poor, men and women. After the Industrial Revolution Britain "changed rapidly from a largely rural to a predominantly urban society" (Purchase, 2006, p. xii). Britain's first modern railway opened in 1830 and led to the development of more railway lines and a better and faster railway system. In 1851 the Great Exhibition was held at Crystal Palace, a building which "paraded Britain's economic success and imperial pre-eminence, and summed up the country's sense of a united purpose and identity" (Purchase, 2006, p. xv). Here, machines and instruments, amongst other things, were displayed: tools and devices the Victorians related to their own country, were proud of and wanted to exhibit to the rest of the world. Purchase (2016) writes that these included "cotton-spinning and printing machines, industrial hammers, engines, locomotives, and the many other engineering and technological 'miracles' which were used in the nation's factories and mills" (p. xvi).

The Industrial Revolution had, as mentioned before, great influence on Britain, led to many economic and social changes, and also altered the structure of Victorian society. With industrialisation came a new division into three categories: the upper class, consisting of the old aristocracy that earned its money through rent and interest, the middle class, to which industrialists and manufacturers belonged who got their incomes from "salaries and profits", and the working-class, those who worked in factories and mines for a wage (Steinbach, 2012, p. 115). The concept of class was related to, but not solely determined by, income (Steinbach, 2012). People from one class were able to become a member of a higher or lower class, even though this did not happen that often, but "marriage across classes was still considered taboo, and any movement across classes seems to have unsettled Victorians greatly" (Purchase, 2006, p. 23). Purchase (2006) claims that the Victorian novel was the perfect way to spread and propagate "middle-class ideologies and values" (p. 186), since Victorian literature was often written and read by members of this middle-class.

Britain was not only characterised by a class division, but also by a division in terms of gender; Victorian society was androcentric, meaning it was male-focused and male-dominated, which led to women quickly disappearing into the background. Women were generally seen as inferior to men, not only when it came to education and employment, but also in terms of rights. Female emancipation led to the establishment of a number of acts improving women's lives, but there was still a long way to go. Victorian society created several social constructs, ideologies, roles and ways of behaviour on the basis of and regarding gender. The ideology of the 'Angel in the House', for example, wanted the Victorian woman to be the perfect daughter, mother and wife who focused on the domestic and private side of life, and who knew her place and role in society. Other ideologies include those of 'Separate Spheres' and the 'Fallen Woman', and numerous other common beliefs regarding female sexuality and true womanhood clouded Victorian society's judgment.

However, as previously stated, some authors used their novels as a way to spread certain values (Purchase, 2006). Accordingly, some female Victorian authors decided to use their voice to introduce and promote feminist ideas and approaches to society by means of literature, and more specifically by means of the Victorian (sensation) novel. Gender inequality seems to be a tale as old as time and can, unfortunately, still be applied to contemporary society, which is why Braddon's novel is, to this day, still being analysed. Her sensation novel *Lady Audley's Secret* has received a lot of scholarly attention since 1862, the year in which it was published. Trying to state what has already been researched and concluded up until now would be an impossible task, nevertheless I hope this research is able to add some new insights and interpretations to the already established ones.

This thesis will research how Mary Elizabeth Braddon challenged Victorian social constructs, ideologies and common beliefs regarding gender in her sensation novel *Lady Audley's Secret*. She used certain archetypes, such as those of the fallen woman and madwoman, but also the melodramatic stock-characters of hero/heroine and villain, and Warhol's (1996) concept of doubleness to create a sense of ambiguity, to question and ultimately subvert these social constructs and common beliefs. These are also the concepts I will be using for my analysis of the novel. In the first chapter of this thesis I will briefly discuss my methodology; my research revolves around certain archetypes, stock-characters and the element of doubleness. In the second chapter I will discuss what women's lives looked like in Britain during the Victorian age. I will look at education, employment and laws/acts regarding women's rights, more specifically the Custody of Infants act, the Matrimonial Causes Act, and the Married Women's Property Acts. In the third chapter I will take a closer look at some of Victorian society's ideologies and common beliefs, such as the 'separate spheres' ideology, the 'Fallen Woman', the 'Angel in the House', bluestockings, female sexuality and true womanhood versus manhood, and I will discuss what they imply. In the fourth chapter, "The Victorian Novel", I will explore the genre of the Victorian Gothic and the sensation novel. In chapter five I will introduce Mary Elizabeth Braddon and her novel *Lady Audley's Secret*. In my last chapter, my analysis of her novel, I will look at the different characters and will prove how they all possess both a male and female identity and how this is used to undermine Victorian ideologies and assumptions.

1. Methodology

In this thesis I use three different 'methods' to conduct my research, which helps create a more focused and narrow analysis of *Lady Audley's Secret*.

1.1. Archetypes

In her writing Braddon, and other Victorian authors, often used certain archetypes, such as those of the fallen woman and the madwoman. According to the Cambridge Dictionary an 'archetype' is a "typical example of something, or the original model of something from which others are copied" (archetype, n.d.). Other examples of archetypes are the angel in the house, the daughter, the mother and the femme fatale. In this thesis I mainly used the archetype of the angel in the house, the fallen woman and the madwoman. I first needed to understand these different archetypes, which I did in chapter two, and I then needed to apply them to the characters of the story in order to see how they use these archetypes to create ambiguity and contrasts that ultimately lead to the subversion of certain social constructs.

1.2. Domestic Melodrama

I based this part on Martha Vicinus's (1981) article ""Helpless and Unfriended": Nineteenth Century Domestic Melodrama". In my analysis I dedicated a subchapter to the hero/heroine and villain, two stock-characters that were used in Victorian melodrama, and I also discuss some melodramatic characteristics and plot structures. I use those passages from Vicinus's article that add value to my research regarding gender, and that confirm that *Lady Audley's Secret* challenges social norms and beliefs. Vicinus (1981) argues that

> Melodrama was […] important for women, who found it to be a reflection of the contradictions in their own lives. […] As the angel in the house, [the middle-class woman] was expected to sacrifice all for the emotional, moral, and physical well-being of her husband and children. It is little wonder that rebellion and self-sacrifice recur so frequently in popular melodrama; they speak to a recurrent underlying emotional tension in women's lives (p. 132-133).

This is what I used as the basis for part of my research. Another important element that recurs in my analysis is that "many of the most attractive characters in melodrama find no fulfilment without radical change" (Vicinus, 1981, p. 137), which can be seen quite clearly when looking at the characters in the novel, and which also helped me find an answer to my research question.

1.3. The Concept of Doubleness

Lastly, I used the concept of doubleness as explained by Robyn R. Warhol (1996) in her article "Double Gender, Double Genre in Jane Eyre and Villette". According to Warhol (1996) 'doubleness' is a recurring element in both Victorian and feminist novels; she argues that "doubleness is figured as both feminine and feminist, as a strategy for negotiating differences between and within male and female, center and margin, inside and outside, public and private, realism and romance" (p. 857). In my research I decided not to analyse the narrative, but to focus solely on thematical doubleness. By applying this concept/method to the characters in the novel, I discovered dichotomies and, more importantly, was able to find doubles in identity: female characters with a hidden male identity and male characters with a hidden female identity. In my research, I also very briefly point out Elaine Showalter's "double-voiced discours" as it seems to go hand in hand with doubleness.

2. Women's Lives in Victorian Britain

Women in Victorian England had a specific role and place in society. They were expected to take care of their household – meaning their husband and children – and were generally viewed as less than their male counterparts. Major differences between men and women could be seen when it came to education, employment and more generally, human rights. This gap between men and women got smaller in the course of the century, though.

This chapter will look at what education and employment meant for women during the nineteenth century, and it will also focus on the stereotype of "the angel in the house".

2.1. Education

Education was one of the main issues when it came to women's rights. Most of the time society viewed women as being capable of only doing domestic work. They took care of the children and did the household chores, while their husbands were expected to earn the money. Women were not able to earn money; a small amount of women did work, but ultimately the money they earned went to their husbands because women themselves were not allowed any property. This changed at the end of the century, when the Married Women's Property Acts were established. In the higher classes of society families expected their daughters to find themselves a wealthy husband, so again there was often no need for an education. Some families did want their daughters to go to school, but were not able to afford it. A lack of education led to girls and women having few skills, which made them more dependent on their husband. Deborah Gorham (1982) argues, however, that even though it were the mothers who taught their children what they needed to know, it was sometimes the eldest daughter who took this task upon her. During the early and mid-Victorian period middle-class families sometimes sent their eldest daughter to school when she became a teenager. When she turned sixteen or seventeen, she would return home and teach her younger siblings what she had learnt.

Advice books written to educate girls and women on female roles and tasks emphasised that girls needed to acknowledge the reason why some of them were allowed an education: "it was to make them pleasant and useful companions to men, and responsible mothers to their children" (Gorham, 1982, p. 102). Girls had to "be serious about improving their minds" (Gorham, 1982, p. 103), but at the same time needed to maintain their sense of femininity. Because women had to stay focused on this femininity when studying, they were never allowed to be "interested in learning for its own sake" (Gorham, 1982, p. 105).

It should once again be noted that even though a large part of Victorian girls was not able to and did not go to school, a minority did receive a thorough education. Some households did not value education and learning, others did. In the latter some young girls would learn how to write and would be given the chance to read books, and ultimately "many early-Victorian girls received a first-rate education in 'papa's study'" (Gorham, 1982, p. 21). The education of girls was often quite superficial: they knew how to draw, sew, play the piano and sing, and they learnt how to read, write and count, but often no more than that. Homeschooling was not the only way for girls to get an education during the early Victorian period: boarding schools and day schools for girls also existed. Because these kinds of schools were not "licensed by any authority" (Gorham, 1982, p. 22), it is difficult to say how many of these institutions existed and how many girls actually went to school. Gorham (1982) writes that mainly orphaned girls and girls who had difficult home/living situations were sent to boarding schools, and usually for about one or two years. However, most middle-class girls "were not educated in a way that would prepare them for the world of gainful employment" (Gorham, 1982, p. 24).

In the 1850s and 1860s a change could be seen regarding the schooling of women: the reformers wanted to standardise girls' education and wanted to bring it out in the open, "out of the private arena" (Gorham, 1982, p. 25). When these transformations were taking place the educators argued that women who went to school, i.e. educated women, would be better wives and mothers than those who were not homeschooled or did not attend any of the available schools. This argument shows that the cult of domesticity was also present in the educational "system" of Victorian Britain.

2.2. Employment

Another issue in Victorian Britain in terms of gender inequality was employment. As mentioned before, men were expected to earn the money so they could provide for their family. The Victorian 'ideal' when it came to work – and who had to work – was that of the adult male, while women stayed at home and looked after their children. But it is at the same time wrong to assume that women did not work outside of the house, on the contrary. Households run by widows show that women had to take it upon themselves to make their own living. These widow households disproved the ideals that existed about employment, more specifically those about men being the sole breadwinners (Hudson, 2011). This can also be seen in *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862): at one point in the story Lady Audley meets a widow who tells her "it was a hard thing for a poor widow […] to have a sick daughter to support, as well as a family of young children" (p. 385).

Women's work was more often than not infrequent and they were paid less than men. Because of this infrequency of work, i.e. women working part-time, in contrast to the full-time job men often had, women's employment was not seen as important enough (Hudson, 2011). Thirty to forty percent of the women from working-class families worked and aided their husbands with the household incomes (Hudson, 2011). Good working-class husbands would give their earnings to their wives, who would in turn manage "the family budget" (Steinbach, 2012, p. 145). Many women were employed as domestic workers, which meant that they had to do the housekeeping for their employer. Many women were also employed in the textile and clothing sectors, which could later be seen in female Victorian periodicals; many periodicals revolved around clothing and fabric.

Women and women's lives were mainly centred around their household and private life. The most essential roles they played were those of wife and mother while their husbands earned a living, even though the money their husbands earned was not always enough. Working-class women provided a

> flexible, cheap and adaptive workforce for factories and sweatshops, and had feminine
> skills associated with some of the most rapidly expanding consumer goods industries at
> the forefront of industrialization such as textiles, pottery, clothing and victualling
> *(Hudson, 2011)*

The textile trade, for example, experienced an enormous growth during the eighteenth century, which led to the creation of new employment opportunities. It was the lower-class, the poor working women, and not the women who formed the middle- and upper-class, that needed to work in these new and booming industries. Women were often chosen by employers because they were cheap and flexible workforces. Many lower-class women needed to work in factories under horrible circumstances, and for the first time women were also deployed in the mines for the extraction of coal (Nardinelli, 1980). Several Factory Acts were implemented during the nineteenth century to improve the work conditions in these factories. The first effective Factory Act was established in 1833 and limited the amount of time children could work per day and week and limited child labour more generally (Nardinelli, 1980). Eleven years later a new Factory Act was implemented. In August 1844 *John Bull*, a Victorian periodical, published an article called "Reports of the Inspectors of Factories", in which four inspectors communicate their findings regarding "the new law". One of these reports goes as follows:

> "females are almost always the persons on whom such labour is imposed, and there will
> be no longer any litigation as to their age, for women of all ages will be protected after
> the 1st of October" *(Reports of the Inspector of Factories, 1844, p. 521)*

Many more Factory Acts were implemented in the course of the nineteenth and even the twentieth century, which prohibited children and women working underground/in mines and those also led to better conditions such as shorter work days, longer breaks, and ultimately measures were also taken when women had given birth. Even though the working conditions for both women and children seemed to be improving during the nineteenth century, countless lower-class working women still had to face the challenges that appalling work conditions and underemployment brought with them (Nardinelli, 1980). Because of this many working-class women ended up in prostitution. Most women that worked in prostitution were part of the lower-class, but this did not mean that middle-class women did not appear in this line of work: Victorian Britain counted considerably more women than men, which meant that as a result large numbers of middle-class women did not marry. They had no source of income, because they had no husband, and therefore had to seek employment and income elsewhere. They could not join the working-class women of society and work for wages, because that would mean losing their honour and integrity. Often these middle-class women became governesses to upper-class and wealthy middle-class families. Kathryn Hughes (2014) claims that a governess was a strange figure in Victorian society, because she was "not part of the family, yet not quite an ordinary servant", she was someone in between. To some extent she acted like a servant and she was paid poorly, but she *was* often respected by the household she ended up in (Steinbach, 2012).

Women were mainly seen focusing on domestic services, but a shift in mentality could be noticed during the nineteenth century. During the Victorian age, the literary world, and more specifically the writing and publishing of periodicals, experienced enormous growth. In the first thirty years of the Victorian age in Britain, 170 new periodicals were established in London alone, which shows the popularity of these periodicals. The world of writing and periodicals opened up to women. George Lewes's article "The Condition of Authors in England, Germany and France" (1847) claims that the original group of – mainly male – authors was now being invaded by women. "Lady Audley's Secret" was published in 1862, which shows this progression in mentality when it comes to female writers. Different types of periodicals were written in the nineteenth century, which made them appealing to a wide audience. Women's magazines/periodicals with a variety of topics were published at this time, ranging from fashion and sewing to more politically charged articles, for example on the suffragette movements. Essays and poems by both male and female writers were also published in these Victorian periodicals: authors such as Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, John Ruskin and Elizabeth Barrett Browning had their works published in monthly magazines.

Women did not only work on periodicals and poetry, but also wrote novels. In the process of doing so female authors were faced with some issues: the world of literature was a male one, even though Victorian readership was for the most part female. Women who wanted to get published often needed to get past a male publisher first, which was not always easy. Charlotte Brontë, for example, sent her poetry to poet laureate and historian Robert Southey, only to receive the response that literature was not suitable for women. Women should focus on their domestic responsibilities, and once they did that they would not have any time left to read or write novels or poetry (Purchase, 2006).

In the 1860s and 1870s a change could be seen: women were more than ever able to enter the male-dominated world of publishing, even though some women had already been working in publishing before this time. Eventually they also managed to "take on increasingly important and influential roles" (Palmer, 2011, p. 3): women became author-editors. They were finally able to combine two types of professions that would have been (and probably were) considered impossible or unwomanly at that time. Many novels were published in what was then one of the most dominant formats: serialisation. Novels published in instalments were made popular by Charles Dickens, who had his "Pickwick Papers" published in serial form from 1836 to 1837. Serialisation meant that novels or longer pieces of non-fiction were published in weekly or monthly instalments. It could take over a year to have a complete novel published, because these "chapters" were relatively short. The writers of these kind of serialised novels therefore had the chance to adapt their stories to the audience's reactions after each instalment. Authors often used plot twists, the element of surprise, at the end of an episode, in order to create intrigue and to spark the readers' curiosity: authors had to make their audience want to read more (Hughes & Lund, 1991). The Victorian novel addressed social issues and portrayed the hero or heroine's struggles in a social context, which often mirrored Victorian society. Before this mental shift, which meant that certain women stopped focusing solely on the household and started to become part of the literary world, women often wrote under a male pseudonym, because if identified as women, their work would be seen as inferior to that of a man. By signing a novel, poem or work in general with a female name, said work was automatically given a certain connotation. It would have been almost immediately categorized under "women's writing", meaning "not as good as" writing and limiting the topics women were allowed to write about. Not only Emily and Charlotte Brontë used male pen names, writers such as Mary Ann Evans, who wrote under the name of George Eliot, decided to do the

same in order to receive the acknowledgement they deserved. Male pseudonyms were often used because women wanted their audience to see their work on its own, not in relation to their gender.

In the 1870s another shift and "widening" could be seen: not only did more women enter the world of literature and publishing, female employment in general transformed and widened (Gorham, 1982, p. 28). Gorham (1982) claims that a "process of 'feminisation' took place" (p. 28) in teaching and in the 1860s almost three-quarters of all teachers in England were female, no wonder since many women were already teaching in households as governesses before this time. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, women had also 'dominated' the occupation of nursing. Both middle-class and working-class women were able to become a nurse because of the reforms in the middle of the nineteenth century. Nursing became a respectable profession for which women had to be trained. The status nursing had before these shifts was not at all an honourable one: it was believed that nurses were "dirty, often drunken, women who took up nursing because they could find no other work" (Gorham, 1982, p. 29). Women also became office clerks and started to dominate the world of retail sales, which "witnessed the greatest increase" (Gorham, 1982, p. 30). Gorham (1982) states that even though middle-class women were underpaid in these 'widened' areas of employment, the opportunities for women in the late-Victorian period in comparison to those of their mothers were still greater. By the end of the nineteenth century considerable changes could be noticed in expectations and beliefs regarding women and employment because of the shifts and reforms that took place. Victorian society came to accept and expect that middle-class daughters would seek and find employment, and that they would eventually even "move out of [their] parents' home and live independently" (Gorham, 1982, p. 31). Middle-class girls and women were therefore expected to leave their private sphere and enter the public, previously male-dominated, one before they got married. Susie L. Steinbach (2012) states that even though it became accepted that women entered the public sphere, "middle-class work was always carefully gender-segregated" (p. 125). Women trained for a certain type of employment and eventually ended up working in an all-female work environment, "such as girls' schools or women's floors of large bureaucratic concerns" (p. 125). Men were paid more and were able to get promoted and boost their career, whereas women were not (Steinbach, 2012).

2.3. Laws Regarding Women's Rights

During the nineteenth century an improvement can be seen when it comes to women's rights. It was clear that a great inequality existed between men and women, and this was even the case in the family household, of which one would think the woman – wife and mother – would form the centre.

2.3.1. Custody of Infants Act

A woman's legitimate children were seen as 'possession' of their father. It was therefore the husband who decided what happened and what those children's rights included. Julia Brophy and Carol Smart (1981) call this phenomenon "father right" (p. 4) and they argue that it was so "taken-for-granted that a father's right to custody was treated as entirely uncontroversial" (p. 4). This was common during the nineteenth century. Men were able to do certain things, they were head of the household and 'owned' their wife and children without any questions being asked, because that was the Victorian ideal – and even the Victorian norm – when it came to society. Even when it was obvious a father was not up for it and did not seem able to properly 'handle' his children, nothing could be done according to the law.

In 1839 the Custody of Infants Act changed this so-called 'father right' and mothers were given more recognition and more rights. A mother was now allowed custody of her young children up to the age of seven, "provided that she had not committed adultery" (Brophy & Smart, 1981, p. 4).

Another Custody of Infants act was established in 1873, which increased the age of children to which a mother was allowed custody. Instead of seven years of age, women had custody of their children until they were sixteen. Through the implementation of these acts the courts – and law – began to realize that children needed their mother's care, and that both the law and husbands in general needed to be aware of and accept this necessary change. By introducing these laws, mothers gained more rights over their children, while husbands slowly lost theirs, and did not have sole custody anymore.

2.3.2. Matrimonial Causes Act

As can be seen in the previous paragraph on the Custody of Infants Acts, great inequality existed between husband and wife in marriage. Prior to the establishment of the Matrimonial Causes Act in 1857, women were unable to request a divorce when they thought their marriage was no longer successful, or – in a more extreme case – when there was talk of bigamy, adultery or even domestic abuse. The Matrimonial Causes Act established a court that had the power to grant those divorces. The act was accompanied by a considerable amount of limitations, though. First of all this newly created court was only present in London, so people with marital problems living outside of that area had a disadvantage compared to those who lived in London. Second, husband and wife could only get divorced on the grounds of adultery. Again, a great difference could be seen between how men and women were treated when it came to proving adultery. A husband simply had to prove his wife's adultery, while a wife had to prove her husband's adultery *and* prove that he had committed another "marital offense" such as (domestic) abuse, desertion, bigamy, incest or bestiality (Savage, 1983, p. 103). And thirdly, with a cost of forty to sixty pounds, getting

a divorce was anything but easily affordable, making it a service accessible by only those wealthy enough (Savage, 1983).

2.3.3. Married Women's Property Acts

Before the establishment of the first Married Women's Property Act in 1870, married women had some severe rules they had to abide by. A married woman was called a 'feme covert' according to the coverture doctrine. Being a 'feme covert' meant that women's rights and responsibilities, that what was expected of a woman, were fused with those of their husband (Shea & Whitla, 2015). Women and everything they owned fell under the "protection" of their husbands (Purchase, 2006, p. 6). They were not individuals and were not part of a whole, but their whole life was absorbed by that of their husband. This was also called the law of coverture: a married woman did not exist apart from her husband (Finn, 1996), she did not have her own identity. All married women were therefore dependent on their husbands and they were not allowed their own property. Everything they owned was ultimately their husband's. These women did have personal property before they got married, when they were still a 'feme sole', an independent and unmarried woman, but after their marriage their money, clothes, household goods, etc. belonged to their husbands.

This settlement changed in 1870, when the first Married Women's Property Act was established. Since this was the first of three property acts, some flaws and limitations could be seen. Married women now owned certain properties again, and they were allowed to own, control, and even invest their property. The restriction here was that only women married after 1870, the year the law was established, received the right to possess property. Mary Beth Combs (2005) claims that even though most historians see this act as a massive step forwards, some historians cannot help but notice that the act itself would quickly get overthrown by other laws, resulting – once again – in equality and the superiority of men in Victorian England.

Because of the implementation of the first Married Women's Property Act, women were slowly – but steadily – starting to become part of a men's world and society in Victorian Britain. Married women went from being a 'feme covert', a woman dependent of her husband, a woman without any sort of personal property, to married women who found and even rediscovered part of their independence. In 1870 women could say that they had regained most of their personal property, that they were no longer part of their husband, but that they could be themselves and could co-exist with their male counterparts. Feminist periodicals such as *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* show that women were not afraid to show their new achievement to the male Victorian society.

As women gained more and more rights – and more recognition – during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, it became clear that one of the most crucial rights was still missing: women still did not have the right to vote. In 1928 – a date which is no longer part of the Victorian age in Britain – women were at last given the right to vote, and their voting rights were finally equal with those of men.

3. Social Constructs: Ideologies and Common Beliefs

3.1. Separate Spheres

The idea of 'separate spheres' implied that men and women in Victorian England – and in the Victorian Age in general – had different work places, skill sets and characteristics in comparison to one another. Each gender therefore had its own sphere: women "dominated" the private, emotional domestic sphere, whereas men were dominant in the public sphere. Sean Purchase (2006) claims that it were the members of the middle class and *nouveau riche* who were mainly responsible for a "cult of domesticity" (p. 44) and for the gender division/separation in society. Deborah Gorham (1982) claims that the Victorian middle-class escaped industrial capitalism by seeking refuge more close to home: "an idealised vision of home and family, a vision that perceived the family as both enfolding its members and excluding the outside world" (p. 4). The separate spheres ideology entailed that men were seen as physically, intellectually and politically superior, as the strongest sex, whereas women were seen as morally "superior", which made them the centre of the domestic sphere (Hughes K. , Gender roles in the 19th century, 2014). One of the assumptions Victorian men and society in general often believed was that women were not as intellectually gifted as well-educated men were. Men were supposedly hardened by their public sphere and it was therefore commonly believed that if a woman should enter that male sphere, she too would be toughened, which was not a very feminine trait to possess. Women were expected to stay in their homes and fulfil their tasks as mothers and wives, if, however, they set foot in the world of their male counterparts they were no longer deemed capable of performing those duties (Gorham, 1982). Gorham (1982) also argues that the ideal of true womanhood consisted of some contradictions, the main one being that it combined "both childlike simplicity with the complex duties of wifehood and motherhood" (p. 7). A woman was expected to be childlike and innocent, but was at the same time supposed to have the feminine strength which was necessary to keep the household up and running.

The women in these Victorian households supported and encouraged their husbands/the men in their lives. They might have had influence in their own private sphere, but this was not the case in the male public sphere, and this idea of inferiority in society was amplified through legal, political and economic measures ('Woman's Rights', a 19th century verse, n.d.). The cult of domesticity restricted women's "political, social and economic rights in the public sphere, restrictions which are still being dismantled in the twenty-first century" (Purchase, 2006, p. 44). Auerbach (1982) argues that these beliefs regarding gender surfaced "unconsciously but persistently in the scattered fragments of a culture's life" (p. 10), meaning that even though not everyone was aware of the existence of these assumptions and stereotypes, they were still present in Victorian society and were still lived by, albeit unconsciously. Purchase (2006) argues that men

were seen as superior because of their status as "husband, father, breadwinner and owner of all family 'property', including his wife" (p. 73).

The situation of upper-class families differed from the separate spheres ideology. The domestic sphere was not only for women, but for men as well: they "existed in the domestic space together" (Steinbach, 2012, p. 130). An upper-class household often threw dinners and parties, and was a "site of political activity" (Steinbach, 2012, p. 130). Work, politics and the setting of the house went hand in hand, which meant that the man in the family often did not have to leave his home to go to work. Men and women worked together, were both in charge of the household and their properties, and "both directed servants and hosted large parties of guests" (Steinbach, 2012, p. 130). The separate spheres ideology therefore did not seem quite as present in upper-class households. Men and women did each have their own "gender-specific responsibilities", but in addition to that they carried out their mutual tasks (Steinbach, 2012, p. 130). Even though they worked together in the domestic sphere, they were not equals.

A set of verses , ironically called "Woman's Rights", written in the nineteenth century by 'M.C.M.R.' views a woman as 'comforter', as someone who is a 'bright sunbeam' and solaces 'the distressed'. The poem concludes in the following way:

> "Such are the noblest woman's rights,
>
> The rights which God hath given,
>
> The right to comfort man on earth
>
> And smooth his path to heaven."

Therefore a woman's principal role was to please and comfort men. The verses confirm the ideology of "separate spheres" and the inferiority of women, and on top of that suggest that these "woman's rights' were a gift, given by God himself to only the noblest of women ('Woman's Rights', a 19th century verse, n.d.). However not all women had a domestic life and became the "Angel in the House", many working-class women had to work in factories, mills, and even in mines in order to earn a living to support themselves and their families (Purchase, 2006). Therefore not all women were solely active in the domestic sphere: working-class women entered the male public sphere and were active in an industrial society.

Queen Victoria and her reign – a female monarch in a male-dominated world – is rather paradoxical: whilst women in Victorian society were seen as subordinate to men and to male power, the queen/monarch – a

woman herself – was superior to everyone and everything, including men (Marsh, n.d.). Victoria was therefore an exception to the norm, she was a woman who dominated and ruled in the public/social sphere which was supposed to be typically male (Purchase, 2006).

Victorian society and its assumptions seemed to function on the basis of extremes: a woman was supposed to be true and the embodiment of the angel in the house, but could at the same time not be too kind and easy-going or she was seen as too desperate. If she was too aware of herself, of her sexuality and of her position in society, if she was too well-spoken and not innocent enough, she was labelled as a fallen woman. When women received an education they had to make sure not to become overly learned or too intellectual, because that was a male trait, but they were seen as less attractive if they had not learnt enough during their adolescence. A woman had to be appealing to men in order to get married, so on the one hand she could not seem too eager because this made her look unwomanly, on the other hand she had to make an effort to be noticed, but again not too much of an effort. Deborah Gorham (1982) writes that "flirting was condemned" (p. 116) and so was "the failure to find a husband" (p. 116). She also claims that if women

> were to achieve gentility, they should never be gainfully employed, or indeed, experience any necessity for independence. If they needed to seek work, they were considered unfortunate; if they wished to seek work or independence for its own sake, they were considered outlandish. If they were seen to step beyond the intellectual boundaries of accomplished young ladyhood, they risked being labelled 'strong-minded' (p. 119)

3.2. The Fallen Woman

The ideology of the "fallen woman" was widely recognized, believed and accepted. Victorian society had high expectations and standards when it came to women, and terms such as "devil"/"fallen woman" and "angel" were used to label them, with often only a very thin line between these different concepts. The "fallen woman" of the nineteenth century was a woman who did not live up to the assumptions regarding women and gender in general. Women were seen as inferior to their male counterparts, and they were expected to get married, be obedient to their husbands and be completely invested in the domestic sphere of life. A true women needed to be the perfect mother and wife. However, a "fallen woman" was none of these things; she was either an unmarried woman, or a woman who was married, but did not live by the rules and principles of marriage. Because this fallen woman was anything but the epitome of true womanhood, she had very few rights and was looked down upon (Watt, 1984).

More generally, the concept of "fallen woman" was used by "the Victorian middle classes to describe any woman who had lost her chastity: the common prostitute, the 'kept' woman" (Mothersole, 1993, p. 189). Terms and beliefs like this one showed the judgemental and condemning nature of Victorian society: women who had lost their "sexual innocence", which led to "social and moral ruin", were labelled as 'fallen women' (Mothersole, 1993, p. 189).

3.3. The Angel in the House

'The Angel in the House' was originally the title of a poem written by Coventry Patmore in 1864 in which he portrays his ideal Victorian wife. He exhibits his own personal ideas on womanhood and on the rules women should follow. Patmore's ideal wife is submissive, dependent and is expected to care for both her husband and children. In his poem a woman is represented as a "sacrificial slave to her husband" (Purchase, 2006, p. 46). Again, this shows how important domesticity and the private sphere were – not only to men, but also to society. A woman's place was at home with her children, and here she had to take care not only of those children, but also of her husband who expected her to do the household chores. Women were often put on some sort of pedestal – without making them superior to men, of course – and were regarded as "humble, self-sacrificing wives, sisters, and mothers" (Ledbetter, 2016, p. 36). According to Deborah Gorham (1982), a middle-class woman was expected to be kind, "gentle and self-sacrificing" (p. 4) and she would display nor have any "trace of anger or hostility" (p. 5). A woman's main role was to turn the house into a home, and therefore to create a place where her husband would feel calm and at peace after a hard day's work in his rough public sphere. Not only mothers, but daughters as well, were subject to societal ideals. A mother saw her daughter as a gift because she was now finally able to share her household work:

> the mother […] sees in her […] the servant of home; the daughter who is to lift the burden
> of domestic cares and make them unspeakably lighter by taking her share of them
> (Gorham, 1982, p. 5)

Even a young daughter was already viewed as mother and was seen in terms of the Angel in the House ideology: she had to be a "little mother" to her siblings and ultimately also a wife and actual mother herself (Gorham, 1982, p. 5).

The "Angel in the House" stereotype shows what was expected of a Victorian woman, emphasised a woman's purity and altruism, and it embodied the domestic ideologies that were present at that time. In addition Sean Purchase (2016) points out the format and structure of Patmore's poem: the metre is constant, and so is the whole poem, which refers to the "reassuring cosiness of the domestic ideal and the gloomy routine of being a Victorian woman" (p. 47).

Elizabeth Langland (1992) claims that the "angel in the house" stereotype is too narrow and has been oversimplified. She argues that women in Victorian England played a more important role, both financially/economically and politically, than one might have expected of and deduced from sources about Victorian ideologies. These sources about the "angel in the house" stereotype and the Victorian woman often dealt with the same views on these subjects: more specifically they acknowledged the inferiority of women to men in all areas of life. Contrary to these claims, Langland states that women were not necessarily equal to men, but that they did take on a more valuable position in the Victorian household than was often written about. Men played a significant role in the "public sphere of commerce" (Langland, 1992, p. 71); they often retreated from the house/home for the purpose of earning money, but ultimately the wives were the ones who accompanied their husbands in their financial undertakings. The wives administered their husband's income/finances in order to "maintain social and political status" (Langland, 1992, p. 31).

Upper-middle class girls in Victorian society no longer needed to be in charge of the household: they no longer needed to help their mothers, because servants were hired to do the household chores. Kathryn Hughes argues that for this reason girls – who had to stay at home, because of the separate spheres ideology – had nothing left to do in the household, and their sole ambition was ultimately to get married (Hughes K. , Gender in 19th-century Britain, n.d.). Hughes also indicates an important paradox regarding middle-class women, which was present in Victorian society: as mentioned before, women were expected to be educated, and this they needed to accomplish by reading. They were therefore expected to "broaden their minds" and gain knowledge on a number of new subjects (Hughes K. , Gender in 19th-century Britain, n.d.). At the same time, though, middle-class women needed to avoid becoming "blue-stockings", see subchapter 3.4. Bluestockings. Middle class Victorians were distressed about these blue-stockings, because they – with their interests in discussions and the "classics" in Latin, Greek and Hebrew – would never be able to attract husbands. Hughes (n.d.) states that Victorian society shared a common idea, the idea that when a woman read too much and looked too much into something, she became masculine in a way – and therefore less attractive to the male sex: "the emphasis was on learning, but not too much learning". Another paradox Hughes (n.d.) addresses is the following: women were judged by their appearance; beauty was of grave importance in Victorian society, but at the same time a woman who was too occupied with how she looked, may have articulated her sexual desire, at a time when women were expected to be passionless and "asexual".

3.4. Bluestockings

The term "blue-stocking" most-likely originated centuries before the Victorian Age in Britain, and was used for intellectual women who "had devoted themselves too enthusiastically to intellectual pursuits" (Hughes K. , Gender roles in the 19th century, 2014). Around the middle of the eighteenth century societies called "Blue-stocking Clubs" were established: gatherings where women had deeper conversations and exchanged words with clever men (The Lady's Monthly Museum, 1808).

As mentioned before, men were seen as intellectually superior, and these 'blue-stocking' women – in the later sense of the word – who pursued education and intellectual enrichment were therefore seen as a threat to men and their intellectual dominance (Hughes K. , Gender roles in the 19th century, 2014). Kathryn Hughes (2014) also states that doctors at the time claimed that studying too much as a woman had a negative effect on the ovaries, creating the fear amongst families that their daughters would become unmarriable.

The household also had a big influence on the husband's status and position on the social ladder. The way in which a family lived determined its social position:

> a man could achieve success through hard work and initiative, and thereby gain economic power, but his social status, if not actually determined through the family he established, was reflected through it (Gorham, 1982, p. 8)

3.5. Conduct Books

Conduct books were manuals that explained how women had to behave, what they had to wear, and what they should and should not say. These instructions were mainly written down and shared so women could find themselves a husband of proper status (Armstrong, 1987). Women not only read books containing advice on how to be a good woman in general, but also on how to be an exemplary mother and on how adolescent girls were to act and behave (Gorham, 1982).

A Manual of Etiquette for Ladies: or, True Principles of Politeness written by "a lady" in 1856 refers to women as the "gentle sex" and mentions the following:

> The gentle sex do well to give especial heed to the rules of etiquette. Their position in society demands this. From them the first elegances and courtesies of life emanated, and to

them the world looks for guidance and example in this particular (A Manual of Etiquette
for Ladies: or, True Principles of Politeness, 1856, p. 4)

The manual gives advice on a wide variety of subjects, which women at that time had to live by – or more importantly, were expected to live by. Subjects such as clothing, morning visits, conversation, dining, friendship, marriage and many more were thoroughly discussed in this work: choosing colours and patterns needed to be done carefully and "elegant simplicity" (p. 9) was preferred. The manual mentions that gossiping with a friend was "the sure sign of an ill-educated woman" (p. 19). During conversation a woman should at all times avoid talking about scandal, as this was assumed to degrade her, and both the disclosure of other women's secrets and duplicity, meaning women who agreed with everything that was said, were unquestionably off the table.

Certain ideas and beliefs from the eighteenth century pervaded Victorian England and its train of thought. Approximately a century before the Victorian age – but before that as well – a significant amount of conduct books were written. The most well-known and acknowledged writer of these books in the 18th century is almost certainly Mary Wollstonecraft with her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* written in 1792. Nineteen years before Wollstonecraft's conduct book was published, a lesser-known female writer, Hester Chapone, made her entrance into the literary world of advice books on manners and attitude. In 1773 Chapone published her *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind, Addressed to a Young Lady*, which consisted of letters written by an aunt to her niece. These letters explain which skills and virtues middle-class women needed to possess and what principles of behaviour they needed to abide by (Jones, 2000). In her sixth letter Chapone (1773) writes the following:

The principal virtues or vices of a woman must be of a private and domestic kind. Within
the circle of her own family and dependents lies her sphere of action – the scene of almost
all those tasks and trials, which must determine her character, and her fate, here, and
hereafter. Reflect, for a moment, how much the happiness of her husband, children and
servants, must depend on her temper, and you will see that the greatest good, or evil, which
she ever may have in her power to do, may arise from her correcting or indulging its
infirmities (p. 100)

3.6. Female Sexuality

In his *Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs, in Childhood, Youth, Adult Age, and Advanced Life, Considered in the Physiological, Social, and Moral Relations*, published in 1865, William Acton (1865) states that many women do not at any point in their lives feel any sexual excitement. He juxtaposes this type of correct and proper woman with the "loose women" (p. 212) hanging around the streets of London, the women who have sexual relationships with multiple men in the course of their lives. Acton also writes the following:

> Many of the best mothers, wives and managers of households, know little of or are careless about sexual indulgences. Love of home, of children, and of domestic duties are the only passions they feel (Acton, 1865, p. 213)

This quote confirms the 'Angel in the House' and domestic/private sphere ideologies: the only passions and fascinations a woman had or could have were regarding her husband, children and household in general. A woman would also only submit "to her husband's embraces" (p. 213) to satisfy/please him and for reproductive purposes only, and not because she herself wanted to. Deborah Gorham (1982) claims that asexuality was seen as a typical feminine trait, it was the "ideal of feminine purity" (p. 7).

Next, Acton (1865) declares that when a woman is true to the young man who gives her attention, she is seen as "an honest woman" (p. 33). If an unmarried woman had sexual relations with different men, she was seen as weak and needed to be avoided. Acton (1865) goes on stating that he had been "in conversation with a lady who maintains women's rights to such an extent that she denied the husband any voice in the matter, whether or not cohabitation should take place" (p. 214) when talking about a woman's pregnancy. He writes how this lady emphasised that a woman had to go through the difficult process of being pregnant, and not her husband: it was the woman who had to deal with carrying a child for nine months, who had to endure all the pregnancy pains and was therefore also compelled to neglect her social life and any other amusements she might have had. Acton (1865) describes his female partner in conversation as a "strong-minded female" (p. 214) and does so with the necessary amount of judgment, superiority and certainty that the male sex is dominant. In Victorian society it was a common belief that women were influenced and controlled by their reproductive systems: they had to make sure not to physically and mentally strain themselves too much, as this would have a negative effect on the womb and therefore on childbearing (Steinbach, 2012).

3.7. True Womanhood Versus Manhood

In her article "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860" Barbara Welter (1966) writes about the concept of 'True Womanhood' and explains that it consists of four qualities by which a woman was judged and evaluated by her husband and other men – and probably women as well, since this 'True Womanhood' was seen as the norm, the standard at that time. These four "virtues" (p. 152), as Welter calls them, were piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Religion or piety was seen as playing a central role in what makes a woman a 'True Woman'. It was the essence of what a woman should be, especially because religion could be practised at home, meaning women did not have to neglect their domestic duties and chores. As has already been stated before, a woman who was too caught up in the world of literature, or who for example focused too much on intellectual and literary works other than the Bible, would be seen as unqualified, incapable and unfeminine, and would in a way not deserve the title of 'True Woman'.

Welter (1966) also claims that purity, the second virtue of 'True Womanhood', was just as crucial to a woman as piety. An impure woman was unnatural, was not even seen as a woman anymore, and therefore belonged to "some lower order" (p. 154). This impure woman was called a "fallen angel". When married, a woman was expected to give her virtue – which she had guarded and kept until that moment – to her husband, from which point forward she 'belonged' to him and was completely dependent upon him. A man could have and also did have sexual relations with different women before marriage, and this was seen as 'normal', as something in their nature that needed to be expressed. Whereas women who had sexual relations whilst being unmarried were looked upon as impure, foolish and were in general regarded as prostitutes. Susie L. Steinbach (2012) states that prostitutes were not perceived as women who "were making an economic choice" (p. 135), more specifically the choice to earn a living, but as "women so unfeminine as to have sexual desire" (p. 135) in a society in which they were expected to be "passionless". It was seen as a man's 'duty' to test women and seduce them, and when a woman was able to "withstand man's assaults on her virtue", she evidently showed that she had the power to not give in to these sexual advances (Welter, 1966, p. 156).

A woman also needed to be submissive, the third value of 'True Womanhood'. Lastly, another important aspect of the true woman was domesticity. A true woman was expected to do her household duties, to be both a mother and a wife, and was supposed to transform the house into a home for her loving husband (Welter, 1966). A true woman was also expected to be skilled at a variety of activities, such as sewing and other sorts of needlework, flower arranging, drawing and playing music. In middle-class families daughters would often help their mothers with household chores and with housework in general: cooking, cleaning and taking care of their younger siblings (Gorham, 1982).

George Burnap (1848) described marriage as

> that sphere for which woman was originally intended, and to which she is so exactly fitted
> to adorn and bless, as the wife, the mistress of a home, the solace, the aid, and the
> counsellor of that ONE, for whose sake alone the world is of any consequence to her (p.
> 64)

In the early and mid-Victorian period one of the most common beliefs was that women needed to get married and that marriage was therefore the "only truly acceptable adult destiny for the middle-class girl" (Gorham, 1982, p. 53). Even though a woman was expected to get married, she was not supposed to look for a husband herself: she had to wait, not interfere and ultimately the right and most suitable man would come along.

Burnap (1848) claims, once again, that a woman/wife lived for her husband and depended upon him: the true woman was seen as someone who helped, advised and listened to her husband. Even though the woman was seen as the 'head' of the domestic/private sphere, in a way it was still dominated by the male sex and men still formed the top tier in the hierarchical system. Women served men, even in the sphere they could call 'their own'. According to Deborah Gorham (1982) it is "through the role of father's daughter and brother's sister that the Victorian idealisation of girlhood was most fully expressed" (p. 38). Mothers were expected to introduce their young daughters to the "feminine role" (p. 79) in early childhood, but even though this was the case, it was acceptable that brothers and sisters learnt and played together in the setting of the home. It was believed that differences in gender developed from puberty onwards, and it was therefore unnecessary for young boys and girls to behave accordingly: in early childhood girls were allowed to act like boys and the other way around, and they were allowed to be treated in the same way (Gorham, 1982).

Welter (1966) describes how marriage was one step in the right direction for the true woman, but it was motherhood that "added another dimension to her usefulness and her prestige" (p. 171). Deborah Gorham (1982) states that a middle-class woman's role was, in theory, to get married, when in fact not all middle-class women did so. Women who did get married, however, had more possibilities for the future than those who did not.

Men, on the other hand, were characterised by the overarching term "manliness". Contrary to women they were expected to be independent, employed and provide for their families, and they needed to have a

"perception of the home as a compensatory refuge and reward" (Steinbach, 2012, p. 133). Men needed to be both independent of their wives and families, but also of other people outside of the home: they had to earn a living in order to support their wives and children without having to ask help from others and the state. Susie L. Steinbach (2012) writes that "men made the domestic sphere possible through their work, but were rarely physically present in it" (p. 134). She also argues that during the early Victorian period, men started to accept and embrace domesticity. The separate spheres ideology made a distinction between the public and private sphere, and therefore emphasised that men and women each had their own area. However, this distinction was not as clear-cut as it seemed to be. Men not only functioned in the public sphere, but also in the domestic one: they "were engaged with and identified with their families and their homes" (Steinbach, 2012, p. 134).

4. The Victorian Novel

4.1. The Victorian Gothic

In the 1860s Victorian England experienced a Gothic revival, but it was difficult to recognise the traditional Gothic genre in this revived fiction. The Gothic novel in its classical sense was set in unusual and unfamiliar places, which often included old castles and ancient ruins (Bowen, 2014). In *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Women's Writing* Ella Dzelzainis (2015) argues that Emily and Charlotte Brontë's works can be seen as a transition between the early Gothic genre and the sensation novels of the second half of the nineteenth century. Both Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, published in 1847, and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, published in the same year, deliberately strayed away from the conventions of the classic Gothic genre and delved into a different perspective, that of the domestic sphere. In the Brontë's works the horror and dread could not always be found in desolate places, remote castles and ruins, instead the home played an important role and contained the terror. This phenomenon can also be seen in M.E. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), in which the home, the domestic sphere and the women in it, are central aspects to the story. "The flat meadows were filled with a grey vapour, and a stranger might have fancied Audley Court a castle on the margin of a sea. Under the archway the shadows of fast-coming night lurked darkly" (p. 369).

The Victorian Gothic novel told the story of middle or upper middle class characters and a recurring setting, the "successor to the convent" of the traditional Gothic, was that of the madhouse (Tilley, 1995, p. 197).

4.2. The Sensation Novel

Sensation fiction was mostly written by middle-class authors, but nineteenth century readers and critics often saw it as a rather low and scandalous genre (Purchase, 2006). It was a genre in which crime and other offenses would be – as the term itself makes clear – sensationalised for what would turn out to be a wide and extensive readership. Sensation fiction focused on the home and on the regular family, but revealed the skeletons in the household's closet (Pykett, The 'Improper' Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing, 1992). It addressed some controversial subjects going from bigamy and taking on a different identity to madness and murder (Diamond, 2003). Other recurring themes were violence, wrongful imprisonment, blackmail and adultery (Purchase, 2006). The sensation novel of the 19th century was first and foremost written by male authors. As mentioned before, Wilkie Collins was one of the most important and popular sensation novelists of his time with his *The Woman in White*. However not only men wrote sensation novels at that time, women were also active in the literary sphere, Mary Elizabeth Braddon

being a perfect example. Because of their scandalous and shocking nature, and a female "heroine" at the centre of the story, sensation novels had a mainly female readership (Purchase, 2006). The protagonist, the female criminal, was very attractive to the Victorian public because she differed from the "true woman", the "Angel in the House", and the traits that accompanied this ideal. As society labelled women as dependent, passive, loving and innocent, the female protagonist in many sensation novels, including *Lady Audley's Secret*, questioned and rejected these ideologies and expectations (Pykett, The 'Improper' Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing, 1992).

Purchase (2006) also argues that it was significant how sensation fiction "preyed on the 'sensations' of the body, giving goose-bumps, […], as well as producing sweats, sudden frights, heightened blood pressure, and worse still, sexual stimulation" (p. 189). The term "sensation" therefore contains two different meanings: on the one hand it signifies a reaction, a physical sensation, on the other hand it implies a feeling, both of which could be provoked through this kind of fiction. The public wanted sensation and authors such as Braddon thrived on this. Sanders (1994) claims that sensation fiction can be "related both to the popular taste for melodrama and to the influence of the criminal fiction of the French writer Eugène Sue and his English imitator G. W. M. Reynolds" (p. 438). Deception, murder and theft – both of material things and of identities – were central elements in sensation stories (Sanders, 1994).

In sensation novels the private sphere was emphasized, which meant that the stories often took place in middle-class domestic settings (Pykett, Sensation and New Woman Fiction, 2015). Sensation authors at the time understood that in order to get their message across, they needed to place their story in an ordinary, mundane setting with which their audiences were and could identify (Diamond, 2003). These stories mainly revolved around a family or household and involved some kind of mystery, secret and/or crime. This is confirmed by Robert Audley in *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862): "whatever the mystery may be, it grows darker and thicker at every step" (183). Peculiar things happened to characters with a (seemingly) ordinary life, either by accident or by fate (Palmer, 2011). In the nineteenth century these novels were serialised in newspapers. This meant that a story was published in instalments. This way of regular publishing aroused curiosity: the author knew how important it was to end an instalment with a cliffhanger and knew this would result in the desire to read the next instalment of the story.

In Mary Elizabeth Braddon's sensation novel *Lady Audley's Secret* the story is centred around a female protagonist, Lucy Audley. It not only shows the readers the goings-on of this character, but also the different relationships she has, what she experiences and more importantly it criticizes the generally believed idea of what a woman should be and how she should act. The heroine at the centre of the story is a

clever woman with an independent mind who deceives the men around her, and almost seems to get away with it, but ultimately does not (Pykett, Sensation and New Woman Fiction, 2015).

Some of the authors who – in their later lives – wrote and published sensational fiction/sensation novels, drew inspiration from the penny dreadfuls that were frequently published during the Victorian age (Hughes K. , Gender roles in the 19th century, 2014). The big difference here was that sensation novelists used a domestic – and therefore familiar – setting to conceal the mystery and drama. Penny dreadfuls were initially called "Penny bloods" and told adventurous and daring stories. Later, the narratives were altered and crime and discovery now became the main components (Hughes K. , Gender roles in the 19th century, 2014). Penny dreadfuls were mostly read by members of the working-class because they were so cheap and because poorer families were not able to afford anything else. Sean Purchase (2016) claims that the "popularity of the penny dreadfuls [pointed] towards a typically Victorian paradox: the attractiveness of that which is repulsive" (p. 139).

Mary Elizabeth Braddon was one of those authors who started her career in penny bloods or penny dreadfuls. Her stories *The Black Band* and *The Mysteries of Midnight* were extremely successful, and as mentioned before in this chapter she focused on the domestic sphere and on middle-class families (Flanders, 2014). Braddon's *The Black Band* and *Lady Audley's Secret* have their beautiful and seductive female protagonist with murderous tendencies in common. It is noticeable that Braddon more often than not put a female character at the centre of her novels/stories, and that this female lead was intelligent and independent, and more importantly able to manipulate those around her.

5. Mary Elizabeth Braddon and her "Lady Audley's Secret"

5.1. An Introduction to M.E. Braddon

M.E. Braddon, better known as Mary Elizabeth Braddon, was a female writer born in London. She was born in 1835 and died eighty years later in 1915, which shows that she lived to see the beginning and end of Queen Victoria's reign and of the Victorian era in general. Braddon was an actress for almost ten years, but ultimately decided to focus completely on writing (Palmer, 2011). She wrote more than eighty novels in her lifetime and she – together with Wilkie Collins, author of, amongst other works, *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone* – introduced a new genre, the sensation novel, to Victorian England. To a certain extend these sensation novels responded to what was happening in society during the mid-nineteenth century: women were seen as inferior to men/to their husbands, they were not allowed to have any property – especially not when married, whatever they owned became their husband's – and the ideology of "The Angel in the House" was widespread. With her *Lady Audley's Secret*, which was published in 1862, it seems Braddon went against certain assumptions made by Victorian society, especially when it came to beliefs about gender and, more generally, gender stereotypes (Sanders, 1994). Her novel exhibits a powerful female protagonist, Lucy Audley – also known throughout the story as Helen Talboys and Lucy Graham – who is not afraid of the male characters that cross her path and who challenges and disputes Victorian conventions and ideas.

Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* was first serialised and published in John Maxwell's *Robin Goodfellow*, but after the bankruptcy of this journal her sensation novel was continued in another one of Maxwell's periodicals, namely *The Sixpenny Magazine* (Palmer, 2011). Instead of being published in instalments, Braddon's novel, *Lady Audley's Secret*, was published in its entirety in 1862. Mary Elizabeth Braddon and her works became so popular that it was possible for her to live off of her income, which was not always the case for female authors at that time (Morris, 1990). Virginia Morris (1990) argues that Braddon achieved such great success and popularity because she wrote exceptionally fast: each year she would write at least two novels and in her lifetime she published full-length novels, poetry, short stories and plays. Braddon and her publisher John Maxwell lived together whilst not being married to one another. At that time, Maxwell was already married to another woman with whom he already had children. His wife had been declared insane and was moved to an asylum, which is when Braddon moved in with Maxwell; they had six children together. When his wife died, Maxwell and Braddon got married (Wolff, 1979).

In 1866 Braddon – together with Maxwell – founded a new periodical/journal called *Belgravia*, of which she also became editor (Morris, 1990). She edited *Belgravia* for a period of ten years, until 1876, and as an

author and editor she used this periodical format to write, reflect on and promote the sensation genre (Palmer, 2011). Maxwell owned other publications, but Palmer (2011) claims that *Belgravia* was his best-selling one. It consisted largely of fiction, but also contained poetry and non-fiction articles on travel, theatre, literature and so on. Braddon herself contributed the most to her own periodical, either "under her own name, under her pseudonym 'Babington White' or anonymously" (Palmer, 2011). Each number of *Belgravia* opened with a piece of Braddon's own fiction, which "set the tone for the rest of its content" (Palmer, 2011, p. 64). At the time sensationalism received a lot of criticism for being too controversial. Braddon therefore used her periodical to get more of her work, both non-fiction and sensational fiction, out into society, and did so to "construct and reinforce her image as a sensationalist" (Palmer, 2011, p. 59). Her editorship came to an end in 1876 when her husband Maxwell sold *Belgravia* to a different publisher, but this did not stop her from writing her novels and other works for periodicals.

It is remarkable that Braddon wrote about seemingly perfect Victorian ladies who indeed at first glance appeared to be perfect, loyal and good-natured, but ultimately without a doubt did not possess these traits. Her stories and characters reflected Victorian society and its morals and conventions (Morris, 1990). Braddon used her works of fiction to discretely criticise these Victorian morals and she used her sinful characters to do just that. Morris (1990) claims that Braddon's themes often depend on "a moral paradox": the characters in her stories can be or seem good-hearted, but have actually committed terrible crimes, or her characters seem amicable at first, because they (seem to) behave in an orderly fashion, but then turn out to be wicked.

5.2. Lady Audley's Secret

Individualism played a central role in Britain's age of capitalism and consumerism, and this can be seen in Victorian literature. Sean Purchase (2016) argues that many of the novels written during the Victorian age are "preoccupied with individuals themselves" (p. 83), which becomes clear when looking at the titles of some of these novels: *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens, *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, but also *Lady Audley's Secret* by Mary Elizabeth Braddon. Quite often in Victorian literature the protagonist battled against his or her society and surroundings, which were "generally static, unchangeable" (Purchase, 2006, p. 84). The protagonist usually underwent some sort of transformation: "he or she generally [started] out poor, ill-educated or single", and ultimately became "rich, married or dead" because of a sudden turn of events (Purchase, 2006, p. 84). The ultimate transformation in Lady Audley's case included her being sent

to an asylum in Belgium. Often the protagonist learnt something about him-/herself and discovered and became aware of his/her individuality.

6. Analysis

From the beginning of the first chapter of this novel the reader is aware of the social class the Audley family belong to. Mary Elizabeth Braddon elaborately describes what Audley Court looks like and calls it both a "glorious old place" (4) and a "noble place" (4). She goes on to describe the different rooms within the house, and how they are a mix of different styles, ranging from a chimney in the style of the Tudors and Norman arches to windows from Queen Anne's reign and a dining room in the style of the time of Hanoverian George I (5). It is all very extravagant. Braddon uses the first pages of her novel to illustrate the wealth and riches of the Audley house and everything that surrounds it. It is therefore evident that the Audley's are no ordinary family, and before moving on to the analysis of the novel it is important to know that they can be seen as part of the upper-class of Victorian society.

I have already mentioned some of the following elements in my methodology, but I am repeating them here, because they are important to my analysis. According to Robyn R. Warhol (1996) 'doubleness' is a recurring element in Victorian and feminist novels; she argues that "doubleness is figured as both feminine and feminist, as a strategy for negotiating differences between and within male and female, center and margin, inside and outside, public and private, realism and romance" (p. 857). Warhol (1996) makes the distinction between structural and thematical doubleness, the former focusing on narratology, the latter, as the term suggests, on the themes of the novel. These doubles are "useful to feminist theory" because they "refuse to settle into one unitary meaning" (Warhol, 1996, p. 872); if a theme or narrative is double, it shows resistance against the "categorization as one thing or the other" (Warhol, p. 857).

Another recognisable element in *Lady Audley's Secret* is, as Elaine Showalter (1977) calls it, a "double-voiced discourse", which "[contains] a "dominant" and a "muted" story" (p. 204). One plot makes way for another plot which had been hiding in the background. At first, in the beginning of the novel, the dominant story is that of Lady Audley with her husband at Audley Court; Lady Audley tries to hide her true self and the reader has not yet figured out what the muted story is. The muted story is Lady Audley's hidden identity and agenda.

6.1. Helen Maldon / Lucy Graham / Lady Audley / Madame Taylor

6.1.1. Domestic Melodrama

Melodrama was a popular genre during the Victorian age. The British melodrama seemed to have found its origin and inspiration in France, where the genre first evolved, but it was because of Britain that it reached a wider, and international, audience (Williams, 2018). Some English melodrama featured working-class characters, dichotomies and themes such as industrialisation, troubles in the regular household, poverty and the search for employment. It was this genre that, for the first time, took the working-class seriously: working-class characters, such as the factory worker or the poor, were not solely used for comical purposes anymore, they were taken seriously and the audience, both working- and middle-class, was able to take a look at these character's lives (Booth M. R., Melodrama and the Working Class, 1989). Michael R. Booth (1981) wrote the following on melodrama:

> Melodrama used spectacle for two main reasons: to imitate social and urban life on a size and scale appropriate to the magnitude of human emotion and the conflict between good and evil at the heart of its being, and to express in striking visual terms the sensationalism inherent in its nature (p. 60)

The characters in such a melodramatic play were called stock-characters, they were characters that kept reoccurring, did not majorly develop throughout the story and upon introduction the audience immediately knew what kind of character they were dealing with. When we look at *Lady Audley's Secret* in terms of characters, we can see that they more or less match the main melodrama stock-characters. Mary Elizabeth Braddon had a background in theatre, so it comes as no surprise that it influenced her fiction. Braddon's sensation novel is not entirely based upon the melodramatic genre, though, for her characters are not that clearly defined. In a melodrama it is clear who is good and who is evil. In *Lady Audley's Secret* these boundaries are less clear. Michael Booth (1964) describes the recurring elements of the melodrama genre:

Melodrama contains every possible ingredient of popular appeal: strong emotion, both pathetic and potentially tragic, low comedy, romantic colouring, remarkable events in an exciting and suspenseful plot, physical sensations, sharply delineated stock characters, domestic sentiment, domestic setting and domestic life, love, joy, suffering, morality, the reward of virtue and the punishment of vice (p. 150-151)

According to Frank Rahill (1967) melodrama used a set of stock characters: the most important ones were the "suffering heroine or hero, a persecuting villain, and a benevolent comic" (p. xiv). In the case of *Lady Audley's Secret* there does not seem to be a character whose actions create a comical effect, and neither was this Braddon's goal, but both the hero/heroine and the villain are present in the story. Melodramas were generally moral and had happy endings that followed the punishment of the villain. At first the melodrama

seemed to (over)simplify things and consisted of extremes: someone was either righteous or wicked, a character was either with or against the hero, in short, everything was either black or white, there was no in between. As the genre developed, though, it became more critical; it started to focus on social, political and gender-related issues and matters (Williams, 2018).

As the genre of the melodrama developed, new subgenres arose, among which domestic melodrama. The focus in domestic melodrama shifted, just like in sensation fiction, towards the house and the household. Female protagonists and characters now played a central role and were endowed "with a heroic stature quite unlike anything seen in those types of melodrama it followed in fashion", and this new subgenre in general dealt with the "struggle to reunite with family, regain friendship, and experience love" (Buckley, 2018, p. 21). Lady Audley can be seen, and was probably often seen, as the villain in the story. The villain in Victorian melodramas was "passionless, secretive, selfish, and calculating" (John, 2001, p. 62). However, Lady Audley can also be seen as the heroine; at the end of the story Lady Audley is locked up in a madhouse where she dies a year later, and once again the 'balance' is restored and the other characters can go their merry way and return to a life of separate spheres and domesticity. But, as Lyn Pykett (1992) argues, there would not have been any sensation story at all, if it were not for "the heroine's 'unwomanly purpose'" (p. 86).

To conclude the chapter on domestic melodrama, Vicinus (1981) claims that

> all the ingredients of melodrama are here: the Oedipal conflict between father and son, the repressed powers of the woman finding an outlet through influence rather than action, the centrality of the weak in solving the mystery, the downfall of the beautiful but overreaching Lady Audley. Clara represents the beauty of self-sacrifice for the family. Lady Audley represents the powerful destructiveness of women within the family (p. 136)

6.1.2. The Cult of Domesticity and Other Social Constructs: Lady Audley as the Angel in the House

As described in chapter four, the ideologies and assumptions that played a central part in the lives of Victorian women were the cult of domesticity, or more generally the two spheres ideology, true womanhood versus the fallen woman and the ideology of the angel in the house. In the beginning of the story, when Lady Audley is introduced as such and the reader does not yet know who she really is, who she has pretended to be in the years before and what she is capable of, she comes across as the perfect Victorian

woman, the epitome of true womanhood. She seems to have all the qualities – beauty, innocence and kindness – necessary to embody the melodramatic archetype of 'heroine'.

Lucy Graham, her name before she became Lucy Audley, was, unlike Sir Michael Audley and his daughter Alicia, not part of the upper-class of society. Before she got married to Michael she was a governess in a village near Audley Court. No one in this village and its surroundings knew who she was, and with only one letter of recommendation she was hired as a governess by the Dawson family. Braddon describes how Lucy took great pleasure in teaching children, and how she was content "as if she had no higher aspiration in the world than to do so all the rest of her life" (8). Victorian society expected her to not be a woman, but a mother and a wife, and as she was neither of those, taking care of children was at least a step in the right direction. Women were also not supposed to have any higher aspirations or passions, or at least no aspirations that left the household or area of teaching. Lucy Graham is introduced as an innocent girl/woman, as someone who comes across as very naïve: "I had no idea of this. It is the last thing that would have occurred to me" (11) she says when Mrs Dawson asks her not to lead Sir Michael on. People who met Lucy Graham noticed that she was always "light-hearted, happy, and contented under any circumstances" (8). Once again the traits a woman was expected to have were emphasised. They were expected to be joyful and accepting of the situation, and everyone "loved, admired, and praised her" (8) for living up to the Victorian standards.

Throughout the story cracks begin to show in Lady Audley's true womanhood: already in the beginning of the novel, when she is married to Michael, she speaks of independence, an uncommon characteristic of the Victorian woman, and certainly one that was looked down upon by male society: "No more dependence, […] every clue to identity buried and forgotten" (p. 14). It is notable that she, so soon in the story, decides to let the reader know she will not be the perfect angel in the house. To say that she is no longer dependent is a significant statement for a woman to make, for women were always seen as just that, dependent on their husbands and their earnings. Braddon alerts her audience that her female protagonist is different from the stereotypical Victorian woman: Lady Audley speaks of independence in a world where dependence in the norm. Robert uses this belief regarding the dependence of a woman against her. According to Robert she must have been very worried when Michael became ill, because her "happiness, prosperity and safety" all depended upon him and "his existence" (p. 236).

It quickly becomes clear that Lady Audley challenges certain beliefs; purity and selflessness were predominant traits a woman was expected to possess. Michael, "the generous baronet", had made some alterations to the house when she first arrived and Lady Audley "seemed as happy as a child surrounded by

new and costly toys" (p. 58). In this situation it is the man, Robert, who is being selfless by spending his money to buy new – and quite useless – things for his wife and who changes his house to make her feel at home, whereas Lady Audley is anything but altruistic and gets her way. Here, it is the husband who turns the house into a home, into a safe haven for his wife and not the other way around. At the same time, though, Lady Audley manifests a typical female Victorian characteristic, namely innocence, and more specifically childlike innocence: "That very childishness had a charm which few could resist. The innocence and candour of an infant beamed in Lady Audley's fair face, and shone out of her large and liquid blue eyes" (p. 58-59). Lady Audley looked seventeen, even though she was already twenty, she looked and acted quite girlish, her figure was slim and fragile, and she loved to dress up in velvets and silks until she looked like a "child tricked out for a masquerade" (p. 59). Here our female protagonist comes across as a true upper-class Victorian woman, a woman who sits at home and does not need to do any of the household chores herself because she has servants. In general it "would have been hard to find in the county of Essex a more fortunate creature than Lucy" (p. 59). Michael does exactly what it is his wife wants him to do, without her even needing to say a word; Lady Audley seems to be a master manipulator who exploits her husband's kindness and good will. She is not only able to manipulate those around her, she is also able to dominate the men in her life; when Luke comes to her saying he knows her secret, she offers him fifty pounds. He threatens her and wants a hundred instead, but Lady Audley is persistent: she looks him "in the face till his determined gaze sank under hers" (p. 120).

Lady Audley uses social constructs such as the angel in the house and the idea of the true woman as a mask to hide her true self and intentions from the outside world. Even though Braddon uses some of these common social beliefs, she questions and manipulates them and ends up using them in a way that discredits them. In general Lady Audley wears a mask, mainly because she does not want anyone to see her true nature. She uses this innocent mask to survive in a "hostile, male-dominated world" (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979, p. 473). The narrator describes Lady Audley as having "many paradoxes in her character", the main one being the "love of sombre and melancholy melodies, so opposite to her gay, frivolous nature" (96). Just as Victorian society consisted of many paradoxes and extremes, so does the protagonist, Lady Audley. Here the paradox is used to once again show her true nature and the mask she is wearing. Braddon describes her in a way that could also represent her personality; she is a "chilly little creature, [who] loved to bury herself in soft wrappings of satin and fur" (p. 65). The soft wrappings she uses to cover herself with represent the mask she wears, her pleasant exterior, and the fact that she is a 'chilly creature' exhibits her anti-stereotypical female core which contains secrets and darkness. She has "many paradoxes in her character", the main one being the "love of somber and melancholy melodies, so opposite to her gay frivolous nature" (p. 96). The former reflects the dark secrets she is trying so desperately to hide, the latter

represents once again the mask she wears. Her 'gay frivolous nature' could also illustrate Victorian beliefs regarding women and gender in general, and her love for melancholy is the part of Lady Audley, her interior, her true self, that fights these beliefs.

She keeps up appearances and tries her best to come across as an innocent, naïve woman, and she does so by partaking in some feminine activities such as playing the piano, sewing, and having her hair done by Phoebe, her maid (pp. 84-85). It is striking how easily the men in the story seem to be bewitched by Lady Audley and her looks; she is able to "[baffle them] by some piece of womanly jugglery" (p. 159). Robert needs to see her only once to be completely captivated by her and her "feathery, gold-shot, flaxen curls, [her] penciled eyebrows, [her] tiny straight nose, [her] winning childish smile" (p. 71). These characteristics of her appearance are all exterior recurring elements when, both men *and* women, talk about her.

Lady Audley changes her identity a couple of times to get where she is at in the novel; she starts out as Helen Maldon, then marries George and became Helen Talboys, she then changes her name to Lucy Graham and starts working as a governess, she marries Michael and becomes Lucy Audley/Lady Audley, and eventually Robert changes her name and identity for her and she turns into Madame Taylor. These changes in identity are acts of defiance; she is not happy in the position she is in and knows that she can do better for herself, so she decides to take matters into her own hands and become someone greater. She might be seen as a woman each time, her gender identity is rather masculine. Stephen Greenblatt (1980) introduced a term regarding sixteenth-century England which was still accurate three centuries later: "self-fashioning". Greenblatt (1980) sees this "fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process" (p. 2), and this is what Braddon shows us through Lady Audley. She manipulates her sense of self, her own identity, and does this multiple times.

Robert tells Lady Audley something important: "I believe that we may walk unconsciously in an atmosphere of crime, and breathe non the less freely. I believe that we may look into the smiling face of a murderer, and admire its tranquil beauty" (p. 154). If we see social constructs regarding gender and the ideology of the angel in the house as this 'atmosphere of crime', it is possible to see men as those who breathe freely. In a male-dominated society men were seen as superior and were not only the head of the household, even though the domestic sphere was female, but also of the public sphere. It was socially accepted that men went where they wanted to go and did what they wanted to do, as long as they provided

for their families in the end. Middle- and upper-class men were therefore definitely more free than women, and were able to breathe freely in a society that prioritised them.

6.1.3. Women and Madness

During the Victorian Age insanity was seen as a trait "developed" mostly by women. In his article "A Curious Dance Round a Curious Tree" Charles Dickens (1852) wrote the following regarding asylums and women:

> The experience of this asylum did not differ, I found, from that of similar establishments in proving that insanity is more prevalent among women than among men. Of the eighteen thousand seven hundred and fifty-nine inmates, Saint Luke's Hospital has received in the century of its existence, eleven thousand one hundred and sixty-two have been women, and seven thousand five hundred and eighty-seven, men. Female servants are, as is well known, more frequently afflicted with lunacy than any other class of persons. *(Dickens & Wills, 1852, pp. 387-388)*

Joan Busfield (1994) explains the concept of madness and makes an important distinction, namely that between madness as a concept of illness, "where the judgement is of physical functioning" (p. 261), and madness as a concept of "wrong-doing or badness, where it is the acceptability of behaviour that is the issue" (p. 261). Not all female characters depicted as mad in sensation fiction or fiction written during the Victorian age in general were ill, more often than not madness was used as an "excuse" – mainly by other, male characters – to justify the woman's criminal, erratic and therefore unwomanlike behaviour. In *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) Robert accuses Lady Audley of being a madwoman. Jan Schipper (2002) argues, as I have already mentioned, that men often felt "safer" (p. 52) when women were declared insane, as this illness provided an excuse for their criminal behaviour and actions: their insanity led them to committing those crimes. It was more problematic for men if the woman in question was not mad, or claimed not to be, because that would mean she herself was actually capable of criminal acts.

Many sources, among which "The Female Malady" by Elaine Showalter (1985), claim that statistics regarding the relation between gender and madness clearly showed that asylums treated more female than male patients. However, Busfield (1994) disagrees: in her article, which she wrote as a reaction to Showalter's book and general claim, she argues that said claim has very little empirical evidence supporting it. By looking at data from individual asylums in the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, she proves that even though there were more female than male patients, "the difference

in the gender balance of the inmate population was not large" (p. 268). She argues that Showalter's (1985) idea of madness as a distinctively female malady is also a result of incorrectly reading and interpreting the available data: female admission rates were not strikingly higher than the male admission rates, and the female patients in asylums were "more likely to survive the experience, returning at some point to the outside world" (Busfield, 1994, p. 268). The beliefs that Showalter (1985) brings forth in her book mirror the beliefs that were present in Victorian society. She claims that there have always been people who argued that it was the social situation of women that led to the high rates of madness, that it was their roles as daughters, mothers and wives that caused stress and misery (Showalter, The Female Malady, 1985). The situation of these women brought about a general feeling of imprisonment in a male-dominated society, and they had to live with the weight of certain domestic expectations on their shoulders. Showalter (1985) herself does not fully agree with this point of view, though. A more common and widespread view is the one of women being situated on one side of the spectrum, the side of irrationality and body, while men were on the complete opposite side, which represented, amongst other things, reason and mind. Female authors of fiction sometimes deliberately decided to include a madwoman – or a woman who was seen as mad by the other characters in the story – to express their own dissatisfaction with patriarchy, with a society ruled by men.

Women were seen as biologically inferior to men, which is supposedly why they were more prone to mental illnesses. Zedner (1991) states that "puberty, menstruation, pregnancy, and menopause were seen as so debilitating that woman was left barely fit for 'normal life'". For a woman this "normal life" consisted of taking care of her husband and children, doing the household chores and making sure that the home was a place of peace and refuge for her husband when he came home. Deviant behaviour, or more specifically criminal behaviour in the case of the sensation novel, was seen as a result of a woman's weak(er) biology and was explained by means of mental and emotional instability.

Elaine Showalter (1977) argues that "Lady Audley's real secret is that she is sane and, moreover, representative" (p. 167). She represents the "unwomanly" Victorian woman, the woman who differs from a lot of social beliefs and who does not want to be associated with the social constructs of that time. This is the woman true men fear. Lady Audley is "dangerous" just because she *is* sane.

6.2. Robert Audley

Robert Audley is the son of Michael Audley's younger brother; he is Michael's cousin. He is a "handsome, lazy, care-for-nothing fellow, of about seven-and-twenty" (p. 36), and calls himself a barrister, even though he does not actually work. The way Braddon describes him rather resembles the way in which a true Victorian woman might be portrayed: Robert is a good and generous-hearted man (p. 36), a man who "would never get on in the world, but who would not hurt a worm" (p. 37). Whereas Lady Audley seems to be more of a male character than a female one, Robert displays feminine characteristics. Just like how a Victorian woman is supposed and expected to be, Robert is good and kind. He is a worldly man; he smokes German pipes and reads French novels (p. 36). His father left him four hundred pounds a year, which shows that Robert, just like Michael, comes from an upper-class family and home, but despite this, he does not seem interested in money. He does not come across as a typical Victorian man: he is not, or definitely does not seem interested in creating opportunities to earn more money, and in developing a relationship with Lady Audley for his own benefit: he never "calculated upon the chances of any part of that fortune ultimately coming to himself" (p. 37).

Robert's identity can be seen as a double: his female identity and his male, somewhat misogynistic side are juxtaposed in the novel. Even though he exhibits some female traits, he remains a man and affirms this by believing in women as angels in the house: "If I ever marry, and have daughters, […] they shall never go beyond the gates till they are marriageable, when I will […] deliver them into the hands of their husbands" (p. 128). He does not speak of sons, but immediately focuses on women. Like a big part of Victorian society, he attaches the label of 'wife' and everything that comes with it to his hypothetical daughters. Robert and his identity are a bit of a paradox; he contradicts himself when thinking about women. He seems to be unable to compliment women and challenge Victorian ideals without ending on a negative and rather insulting note:

> to call them the weaker sex is to utter a hideous mockery. They are the stronger sex, the
> noisier, the more persevering, the most self-assertive sex. They want freedom of opinion,
> variety of occupation, do they? Let them have it. Let them be lawyers, doctors, preachers,
> teachers, soldiers, legislators – anything they like – but let them be quiet – if they can (p.
> 227)

At times he is also more explicit and less euphemistic as he literally says he hates women: "they're bold, brazen, abominable creatures, invented for the annoyance and destruction of their superiors" (p. 227). Whereas he calls women, rather ironically so it seems, superior, the stronger sex, in the latter description they are once again inferior to men.

The abovementioned is one part of his double identity, the other side of him is more positive about women, and about one woman in particular, Clara Talboys. Robert does not seem to dislike or hate Clare, on the contrary. Is Robert enchanted by Clara because she, at first glance, might look like a true Victorian woman, or because he is fascinated by her as a person regardless of gender expectations, or is it because she is George's sister and he sees so much of him reflected in her? Each one of these possibilities is plausible, but if we look at Robert, knowing what we already know, the first and third option seem more probable. Robert thinks a perfect Victorian life with a true woman will await him if he marries Clara. It seems she tries to get the real Victorian man to appear as she "recommended Mr Audley to read hard and think seriously of his profession, and begin life in real earnest" (p. 471). In a way Robert confirms the belief that women were dependent on their husbands, but again he creates ambiguity when he says the following to Clara: "Do you think there is any voyage I would refuse to take, if I knew that you would welcome me when I came home, and thank me for having served you faithfully?" (p. 473). Robert is willing to go to Australia for Clara to find George, but at the same time he uses the verb 'served', which would imply that he is Clara's servant, and not superior to her. Although these elements might point out that Clara indeed comes across as a true Victorian woman, it remains ambiguous, because she also, like so many other characters in the story, displays male traits and therefore a male identity. Robert eventually says that she "was different to all other women that [he] had ever seen" (p. 219). He, a Victorian man, completely surrenders himself to Clara: "I accept the dominion of that pale girl, with the statuesque features and the calm brown eyes, […], I recognise the power of a mind superior to my own, and I yield to it, and bow down to it" (p. 225). After this it becomes more clear that Clara is less of a true Victorian woman as the reader might have thought in the beginning, and that Robert is able to put aside his male persona to become subordinate to Clara. He ends up comparing her to Pallas Athene, the Greek goddess of wisdom, and thinks "how unequal the fight must be between [them], and how can [he] ever hope to conquer against the strength of her beauty and her wisdom?" (p. 280).

Another sign of Robert turning his back on his male identity is that he moves somewhat away from his public sphere: "He had grown moody and thoughtful, melancholy and absent-minded. He had held himself aloof from society; had sat for hours without speaking" (p. 358). Robert briefly leaves his male sphere and enters the female private sphere, where he is overcome by emotion, which was seen as a female characteristic. After he learns about George's supposed death, the narrator gives another sign that Robert seems to have moved more towards the feminine side:

> how could [Robert] sit amongst [his friends], listening to their careless talk of politics and opera, literature and racing, theatres and science, scandal, and theology and yet carry in his mind the horrible burden of those dark terrors and suspicions […]?

Robert steps away from activities and subjects that were, by society, seen as typically male. All the while he is worrying about George, and his thoughts become irrational as he fears George's ghost might come and haunt him because he has not been buried properly, which once again shows a more feminine side of Robert.

At the end of the novel, Robert and his surroundings undergo some changes:

> He went back a new man, with new hopes, new cares, new prospects, new purposes; with a life that was so entirely changed that he looked out upon a world in which everything wore a radiant and rosy aspect, and wondered how it could ever have seemed such a dull, neutral-tinted universe (p. 475)

Again there are two possibilities, either Robert is truly a changed man and he has opened up more to his feminine identity and to the female sphere in general which leads to his world being more radiant and new 'cares', *or* he has rediscovered his true male self because of his new prospects with regards to employment and the public sphere in general.

When we take a look at both Lady Audley and Robert at the end of the novel, it does not seem impossible for the readers to bring up a sense of pity and mercy for Lady Audley. She committed multiple crimes, pushed George down the well at Audley Court and set fire to the Caste Inn in order to kill Robert, but ultimately George Talboys survived the fall, and Robert also lived to see another day. The only casualty was Luke Marks, a working-class man who was uncivilized and bad-mannered and treated Phoebe without love or respect. Robert would have been a "traitor to society" had he not locked up Lucy. Elizabeth Tilly (1995) argues that Robert's society was the male, upper-class one, which explains why Lady Audley remained locked up after the revelation that George was still alive. She had tried to murder him, she had committed a crime against a member of the upper-class, and no matter the outcome, it was still a major offense for which she needed to be punished.

6.3. George Talboys

George Talboys is introduced as a twenty-five year old man, and Braddon characterises him by combining both male and female elements, as she also does when describing Lady Audley and Robert. George has "handsome brown eyes, with a feminine smile in them, […], and a bushy beard and moustache", and besides that he was also "tall, and powerfully built" (p. 16). The reader can notice yet again how Braddon challenges certain common beliefs. When George is on board the ship called the *Argus*, a female fellow passenger comes to him to discuss literature, but he does not seem very acquainted with the subject; he does not engage in conversation and does not seem interested. The passengers on board the ship try to talk to him about poetry, but during this conversation he laughs in the lady's face, "as if poetry were a joke" (p. 17). They also talk about politics, but he does not seem "very deeply versed" (p. 17). Both George and Robert do not seem interested in intellectual topics such as literature and politics, topics which were seen as typically male, since men were supposed to be intellectually superior. If women, just like George's female fellow passenger, were to talk about subjects like these, they would be seen as bluestockings, and therefore a threat to men (Hughes K. , Gender roles in the 19th century, 2014). George is on the *Argus* because he went to Australia to earn a living. His father had decided to stop supporting him, and so eventually George's money ran out. Because he felt the pressure of being a real Victorian man, which meant supporting his wife and child who now had to live in poverty, he decided to earn some money by digging for gold. The wealthy, Victorian male prototype George, and the poor, overcome by passion and emotion George are juxtaposed: before his trip to Australia, George and poverty had become "such old companions and bedfellows" (p. 25) that he wondered whether that "dashing, reckless, extravagant, luxurious, champagne-drinking dragoon could have really been the same man" (p. 25).

The ship George finds himself on is called the *Argus*, which could be a reference to Greek mythology. This does not seem very unlikely, since Braddon uses references to the Greek and Roman world throughout her novel; she for example mentions Pythias and Damon, two characters in a Greek legend, and the old Greek Testament and Eton Latin Grammar which George has in his trunk. In Greek mythology, Argus is a member of the Argonauts, a group of heroic men, for whom he builds the ship the *Argo*. By using this reference, Braddon makes an implicit comparison between the Greek mythology and Victorian society. On their quest to find the Golden Fleece the Argonauts encounter sirens, female mythical creatures who enchant those who hear their song (Smith, 1873).

The sirens represent the women in Victorian society, and the Argonauts, or men in Greek mythology in general, are the Victorian men who fall for the true woman, for a woman's charms and appearance. They eventually see this woman's hidden male characteristics (cf. Lady Audley) and end up not liking, even despising, these aspects, because women were not expected to exhibit male behaviour, and they feel

'caught' by the woman/siren. This reference to Greek mythology is also a double, so two possible meanings can be noticed; I have just explained the first one, the second meaning revolves around Orpheus in the story of the Argonauts. When the group of men encounters the sirens, Orpheus plays his music which drowns out the song of these mythical creatures (Wood, 2018). They can therefore safely pass this dangerous area and continue their quest. When we apply this to Victorian society, the sirens once again represent the women with male traits, and the Argonauts the Victorian men. This time, in contrast with the first explanation, the male Victorian prototype can escape the woman who behaves very unwomanly, and is able to continue his quest for the true woman. If we look even deeper into this metaphor and apply it to some of *Lady Audley's Secret*'s characters, we see that Robert is able to escape Lady Audley's charming song (which would have led to his death) and ultimately finds his, to him, more appropriate Victorian lady, Clara Talboys.

When George approaches England his behaviour starts to change and he seems to be taking over some more feminine characteristics: his emotions come to the surface. He becomes restless, thoughtful, but most importantly, all of a sudden a "passion would seize him, and he would stamp upon the deck, crying out that she was a rickety old craft […]. She was not fit to carry impatient living creatures, with hearts and souls" (p. 18). The ship *Argus*, which he calls a "rickety old craft" could be an allusion to Victorian society and its social constructs and expectations regarding gender. These expectations did not all arise during the Victorian age, and social beliefs seem to be a tale as old as time, which is why Victorian society is called old. George uses this metaphor to show that he does not agree with the society he lives in, and because of the differences between men and women, male superiority and dominance, and the existence of two sperate spheres, he calls the place, society, unfit for people with 'hearts and souls', i.e. feminist women and men who do not believe in this separate spheres ideology.

Still on the ship, George shows another female trait, naivety; he expects nothing will have changed regarding his wife and her feeling towards him after having been away for three years and a half: "I am going straight home to the woman I love; […] and in whom I no more expect to find any change than I do to see another sun rise in to-morrow's sky" (p. 20). When George approaches England, and when his fellow passengers on the ship, i.e. Victorian society, as mentioned before, have made him feel somewhat anxious and worried, the reader can see that the confident George, who is sure his wife will be waiting for him on his return, and the uncertain George, who is suddenly overcome by fear, are juxtaposed.

George displays his male identity when finds out his wife, Helen Talboys, has died; he is stunned, he sits "rigid, white, and helpless" (p. 42) and does not show any emotion, but his female identity quickly takes over when he wakes up and his discovery finally begins to dawn on him. George loses his calm and cries

out: "Helen, my Helen! my wife, my darling, my only love! Dead! dead!" (p. 43). He comes across as manic, out of control, and dominated and consumed by emotions. He becomes even more severely emotionally affected when he comes to the realization that he did not only lose his wife, but his son also, who is now being raised by his father-in-law. George's male side resurfaces when he and Robert are in Lady Audley's chambers. He feels uncomfortable being surrounded by all the feminine things in the room and "wondered to see how out of place he seemed among all these womanly luxuries" (p. 75).

6.4. Robert Audley and George Talboys

The relationship between Robert and George can be called a homosociality, a social, relationship/friendship between two people of the same sex – often men.

Robert crosses paths with George, an old friend of his, and this marks the start of a significant relationship between two male characters. What is peculiar is that this relationship not only contains some male but also very clearly some feminine qualities and characteristics. Robert and George share trust and love, but they also let emotions run their lives, unlike the Victorian man who was supposed to be rational and in control. After George visits his son who is being raised by his father-in-law, he decides to appoint Robert as guardian. Robert calls it "a great responsibility", one he is not sure he can handle as he "never in [his] life could take care of [himself]" (p. 52), let alone of a child, but George trusts his friend nonetheless. This event, once again, emphasises the two spheres ideology which most people in Victorian society lived by: as a man, Robert has never needed to care for himself nor for another human being, because he does not have any children or people to take care of, but mainly because that was the role of women in their domestic and private sphere. The woman took care of their husbands and children in the setting of the home, while their male counterparts were expected to go out and make a living so they could *support*, not *care for*, their wives and children. So in the beginning of the story Robert neither supports, because he does not work, nor particularly seems to care for anybody. Once George has given Robert the responsibility of looking after his son, he takes it upon himself to ameliorate the life of little Georgey, which again puts emphasis on Robert's feminine and therefore caring and nursing side: "he is the legacy of my lost friend, and it shall be my business to secure his safety" (p. 178). In a way Robert sees his good friend George in this child and wants to still feel connected to him through his offspring. It quickly becomes clear that Robert, because he is a man dominating the public sphere, is not very familiar with the female domestic sphere, even though he has a female side: "poor Robert had about as much notion of the requirements of a child as he had of those of a white elephant" (p. 195). This becomes even more clear when Robert leaves little Georgey "in charge of the idle waiter" because he has some things to take care of (p. 196). The child is a boy, which is probably

why Robert, besides his lack of mothering abilities, does not feel the need to keep an eye out for him. He is male and therefore independent enough to have a meal on his own.

As mentioned before, the relationship between George and Robert displayed a sense of femininity. When George disappears, Robert displays his affection for his friend:

> if anyone had ventured to tell Mr Robert Audley that he could possibly feel a strong attachment to any creature breathing, that cynical gentleman would have elevated his eyebrows in supreme contempt at the preposterous notion (p. 90)

Robert, consciously or unconsciously, dedicates all his time to finding George, he seems to have found a (new) purpose in life. The love between George and Robert, and Robert's sudden outbursts of emotion when he cannot seem to find his friend have a feminine core to them. Robert shows yet again that money means nothing to him and that friendship is his top priority:

> I declare that I would freely give up all and stand penniless in the world to-morrow, if this mystery could be satisfactorily cleared away, and George Talboys could stand by my side (p. 176)

Robert's feelings are reciprocated by George: "I yearned for the strong grasp of your hand, Bob; the friendly touch of the hand which had guided me through the darkest passage of my life" (p. 477).

6.5. Michael Audley

Michael Audley, the man of the house and sixty-five years old, had been a widower for seventeen years before he married Lucy Graham. His first marriage had been one out of practicality; he did not love his first wife and had only married her to keep the estate within the family. Michael was not looked down upon for marrying out of practicality, whereas Lady Audley, who marries Michael to improve her own life, status and position in the patriarchy, is judged for her actions.

Michael's marriage with Lucy Graham differs from his first marriage: he falls head over heels in love with this innocent-looking woman and immediately calls her his "destiny" (p. 9). Even though he did not love his first wife, and Lady Audley does not marry him out of pure love, he emphasises the need for love within a marriage: "nothing but misery can result from a marriage dictated by any motive but truth and love" (p. 12). He finds out he is Lady Audley's first and only choice, and knows that he "must be contented, like other men his age, to be married for his fortune and position" (p. 14). Here Michael also challenges what Victorian society called the roles of men and women: he seems to settle; he knows he is getting older, and when a beautiful young woman crosses his path and wants to marry him, why would he

not do so? Even though he wants to marry for love, which he does feel for Lady Audley, he settles for less and marries her because she wants his fortune and high position on the social ladder. Michael is described as having a "splendid income" and as being "one of the most generous of men" (p. 11).

Michael is a good father to his daughter Alicia. In a way, even though he is part of the upper-class and does not need to do any household chores himself, he can still be seen as feminine, for he nurtures and cares for Alicia just like a mother would. He is also obedient and self-sacrificing, which are two feminine traits: he is obedient to his wife, who manipulates him into getting what she wants. We can look at Michael as the mother figure, as someone who is selfless and generous, and would give up anything for his daughter. Lady Audley seems to pull him away from Alicia, though: "Alicia saw her father gradually lured across the gulf that divided Lady Audley from her step-daughter, until he stood at last quite upon the other side of the abyss, and looked coldly upon his only child across that widening chasm" (p. 317).

Michael seems to change over the course of his marriage; Alicia's father, over whom "she had once reigned supreme with the boundless authority of a spoiled child, had accepted another ruler and submitted to a new dynasty" (p. 317). Once again Michael shows the reader his female identity; he is a Victorian upper-class man, but does not seem to be superior to his female counterparts. On the contrary, the narrator uses terms as 'reigned supreme', 'ruler' and 'submitted', which all indicate some sort of submissiveness. Michael finds himself in Audley Court, the home, the domestic sphere, and if this was, according to Victorian society, the only place where a woman was supposed to be, Alicia might as well take full control of the situation and rule over the house and everybody in it – male or female.

6.6. Luke Marks

Luke Marks is depicted as a "big, broad-shouldered, stupid-looking clodhopper of about twenty-three years of age. […] Rosy-cheecked, red-haired, and bull-necked, he was not unlike one of the stout oxen grazing in the meadows round about the Court" (p. 30). Luke and Phoebe are first-cousins and had been "play-fellows in childhood, and sweethearts in early youth" (p. 30). At first, Luke comes across as a real man; when Phoebe talks about Lady Audley's wealth, and how, she too, had started out as a servant, he acts indifferently and does not seem to care about the beautiful clothes, painted ceilings and "great looking glasses that stretch from the ceiling to the floor" (p. 32) Lady Audley possesses. Even though he is indifferent and uninterested at first, he agrees to enter the lady's chambers with Phoebe, and what he sees astonishes him: he is "bewildered by the splendour of the room" (p. 34).

Braddon juxtaposes the riches of Audley Court and Luke as a member of the lower class. Luke's working-class, perhaps lower-middle class, life is reflected in both his looks and his way of talking; the language he uses is often incorrect and does not come across as very intellectual.

When Luke and Phoebe are married, "[Phoebe's] pale eyes were still paler from the tears she had shed, and the red rims which surround them. The bridegroom was annoyed at this exhibition of emotion" (p. 123). Male-dominated Victorian society believed that men were rational and women irrational and therefore emotional. It is clear that Luke does not seem to agree with Phoebe's emotional side, which emphasises Luke's male identity.

It is striking that Luke is the only character who is traumatised and burnt by the fire at Caste Inn, lighted by Lady Audley. The man who comes across as rude, boorish, and unkind to his wife eventually dies from his wounds that were – indirectly – inflicted by Lady Audley, our feminist protagonist with a male identity. This does not seem like a coincidence. It seems that Luke, "the landlord of the Castle Inn [has] undergone no moral transformation by his death-bed sufferings" (p. 444). He is still as disrespectful and impolite to Phoebe as he was before the fire. Luke proves the people around him and the readers wrong, though; he wants Robert to visit him as soon as possible, and once Robert arrives Luke thanks him for saving his life: "when a gentleman goes and puts his own life in danger to save a drunken brute like me, the drunkenest brute as ever was feels grateful like to that gentleman, and wishes to say before he dies – which he sees in the doctor's face as he ain't got long to live – "Thank ye, Sir, I'm obliged to you"" (p. 445). Luke's female identity, which no one knew he had in him, comes to the surface when he is on his deathbed; he has not been kind nor thankful to any of the other characters in the story, not even to Lady Audley who gives them money after they blackmail her, but he is to Robert.

6.7. Phoebe Marks

Nineteen- or twenty-year-old Phoebe Marks is Lady Audley's maid and is described as being quite an ordinary girl, a plain-Jane. She is not extremely pretty nor special, but her appearance is "interesting" (p. 29). Braddon uses the following words to portray Phoebe's physical appearance: "Not one tinge of crimson flushed the waxen whiteness of her cheeks; […] not one glimmer of gold or auburn relieved the dull flaxen of her hair" (p. 29). Phoebe's identity can also be seen as a double: her dominant identity shows her as a true Victorian woman, her muted identity as a woman with male traits. She comes across as an innocent and naïve woman, but she is nothing of the sort. When she is with Lady Audley she acts, and that is exactly what her behaviour is, an act, kind and humble: in a conversation Lady Audley and Phoebe have she says

she has heard people say Phoebe and she are alike, but since Phoebe seems to think less of herself than of her lady, or so she wants her lady to believe, she tries to defend her and replies: "they must be very stupid to say it, for your ladyship is a beauty, and I'm a poor plain creature" (p. 64). At the same time, though, Phoebe goes behind her lady's back and betrays her and her trust. She wears a mask just like Lady Audley, and hides her true nature and ambitions by playing innocent.

6.8. Alicia Audley

Alicia Audley is Michael's only daughter and is described as having black curls, but "nothing like Lady Audley's feathery ringlets" (p. 68), she had pouting lips, a nose that curls up a bit and a dark complexion. She is not too happy when her father remarries; for years she had been the lady of the house, but now "Miss Alicia's day was over" (p. 7). The hierarchy has shifted and Alicia has dropped a spot on the social and familial ladder with the arrival of her new step-mother. Throughout the novel Alicia seems to have a bad feeling towards Lady Audley, and she does not accept her in her home. Alicia calls her step-mother a "wax [doll]" (p. 62), which either shows that she is intimidated and threatened by Lady Audley because she is taking her place in the household, or that she is able to see through the amiable mask that Lady Audley has put on.

Alicia is another example of a character who challenges Victorian gender roles and ideologies. She puts her male identity on display and shows that she has a mind of her own; she is bossy and wants things to go her way. She is also described as "an excellent horsewoman" and "a very clever artist" (p. 7). From the moment Alicia got to know her step-mother, she knew that something was 'off', and she did not trust her. According to Alicia her father thinks Lady Audley is sensitive 'because she has soft little white hands, and big blue eyes with long lashes, and all manner of affected, fantastical ways, which you stupid men call fascinating. […] I've seen her do cruel things with those slender white fingers, and laugh at the pain she inflicted" (p. 114).

Alicia is "not very happy, this frank, generous-hearted girl, for it was scarcely possible that she could be altogether at ease in the constrained atmosphere of the Court" (p. 317). She is constrained by the home, by the setting of the house.

She "[loves] her father very dearly" and cannot stand to hear that he is grieving. Alicia shows yet another deviation from what is expected of her as a woman/lady; as a girl in the domestic sphere, the mother figure was often, or so she was supposed to be, a good example of a true Victorian woman. The mother would pass her knowledge onto her daughters, who would in their turn apply what they had learnt. Alicia's mother

passed away when she was young, and so Michael is both her father and mother figure. It seems obvious that a girl who had spent her childhood, adolescence and adulthood in the private, domestic sphere with her mother, would display affection towards this mother figure, but Alicia does not seem to do so. She does not welcome her step-mother, the new mother figure in her life, with open arms, but instead focuses completely on her father, who, in her eyes, receives the label of 'mother'. Robert tells Alicia that there is only "one woman upon this earth who will love him truly and purely until the last" (p. 392), and she is that woman. Alicia and Michael are connected; throughout the story they get torn apart by Lady Audley and the events that take place, but ultimately they are drawn to each other because Michael exhibits his female and Alicia her male side.

6.9. Clara Talboys

The first time the reader is introduced to Clara Talboys, she is described as being "employed with some needlework" (p. 204). She seems to show no emotions when Robert tells her and her father that he is quite certain George is dead, which is strange as true Victorian women were often seen as overly emotional.

When Robert meets Clara for the first time she stands up as he enters the room and drops a "reel of cotton" (p. 205) on the floor, but she does not seem to care. This small act could be, consciously or unconsciously, an act of defiance; maybe Clara, just like Lady Audley, Phoebe and Alicia, does not want to be a true Victorian woman, nor the epitome of true womanhood. She drops her cotton and therefore also societal expectations and gender roles. It is a man, her father Harcourt Talboys, who commands her to pick it back up and sit down; men were seen as the superior and dominant gender, so Clara is suppressed by her father, and more generally, women are seen as inferior in a male-dominated society. Clara cannot be free and cannot do what it is she wants to do; she needs to "keep [her] cotton in [her] workbox" (p. 205), she is confined by this 'workbox', i.e. male Victorian society.

It eventually turns out that Clara is not as indifferent towards her brother as she seemed to be; she runs towards Robert, who is ready to leave, and tells him she also believes George was murdered. This changes Robert's opinion of Clara and he thinks the following about George's sister: "Now this girl, this apparently passionless girl, had found a voice, and was urging him on towards his fate" (p. 217). Just like Clara drops her cotton as an act of defiance, she is here described as having found her voice, which can be interpreted both literally, she can finally talk when her father is not there, and figuratively. The latter would mean that she can be seen as an emancipated woman who feels safe enough around Robert and his partial female identity to be able to voice her opinion. Said opinion had earlier been repressed by Harcourt

who, at first glance, comes across as a typical Victorian man. Towards the end of the novel Clara utters the important words "if I were a man" (p. 473). If she was a man she would go to Australia herself, and she would "find him, and bring him back; if he was still to be found among the living" (p. 473), but unfortunately she is not, and Victorian society does not want her to be.

Clara is stubborn, she wants Robert to continue his search for evidence, and if he does not want to persist, she will do it herself: "I am of age; my own mistress; rich, for I have money left me by one of my aunts; I shall be able to employ those who will help me in my search" (p. 218). She comes across as very passionate about her brother and about finding out what happened to him, and talks of leaving the private, domestic sphere to do so. The only passions a true Victorian woman was supposed to have were those regarding their children, the home and their household chores (Acton, 1865).
Robert notices that "her beautiful features, naturally statuesque in their noble outlines, seemed transformed into marble by the rigidity of her expression", her face was the "face of a woman whom death only could turn from her purpose" (p. 218). The beginning of that quote is already peculiar because of the words Robert uses to describe Clara's features; the words 'statuesque', 'noble' and 'marble' seem to represent a strong mind and a certain amount of perseverance. Marble is very difficult to damage, and comparing Clara to it could mean that she has hardened herself against male and societal judgement when it comes to who she is, what she does and how she acts. She does not seem to be dependent on anyone, even though she is obedient to her father, and tells Robert that she will "leave home in two or three months, and shall be perfectly free then to act as [she pleases]" (p. 220). Once again her male identity takes the upper hand as she describes her wish and plan to be completely independent.

6.10. Other Minor Characters

Even some of the minor characters show the ambiguous nature of their identity and therefore challenge gender roles and expectations in Victorian society. Sir Harry Towers, Lieutenant Maldon and Harcourt Talboys are three of these minor characters. Sir Harry Towers appears only very briefly in the novel. He proposes to Alicia and is surprised when she rejects his offer: "it's a hard thing that a girl can refuse a true heart and such stables as we've got at the park. It unsettles a man somehow" (p. 138). First of all this could, very basically, mean that this outcome upsets him, which shows part of his feminine side, but it is more likely that he is taken aback by Alicia's answer. At that time it was rather unlikely that a woman would turn down a man's proposal, especially a rich man's proposal, which is exactly what Alicia does. Because of this rejection, Harry is introduced to the possibility of a society that is not male-based nor male-dominant. He eventually comes to the conclusion that he does not want a "strong-minded woman,

who writes books and wears green spectacles, but hang it! I like a girl who knows what she's talking about" (p. 139), which shows that he is step by step opening up to his hidden female identity.

Mr Maldon also shows some female characteristics: when Robert comes to his house and tells him George is most likely dead, he bursts into tears and nothing seems to be able to stop it (p. 188). Mr Maldon openly shows his emotions. Unlike Lieutenant Maldon, Harcourt Talboys seems to be the prototype of the Victorian man at first sight: he is rational and emotionless (p. 204). Upon meeting Harcourt, Robert did not see any resemblances between him and George (p. 204). Towards the end of the novel Harcourt changes, though; he shows emotion and forgiveness: "he had suffered much uneasiness and pain of mind about his only son" and he would "be heartily glad to take his poor boy to his arms, whenever he should return to England" (p. 466). Robert stays at Harcourt's house together with Clara, and he shows signs of friendship towards Robert when he decides to leave and move somewhere else: "you have conformed to our little domestic regulations in a manner which I cannot refrain from saying I take as an especial compliment to myself" (p. 471). He is still not very humble, and expected Robert when he lived there to adapt to *his* way of living – which is probably more male- than female-orientated – but he seems to be opening up to some extent.

The last line of the novel contains a biblical quote from Psalm 37:25: "neither the experience of his youth nor of his age had ever shown him 'the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging their bread'" (480). The 'English Standard Version' of the Bible reads the following sentence: "I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his children begging for bread". As the novel itself mentions religion, God and Providence multiple times, it comes as no surprise that divinity makes another appearance towards the end of the story. In Psalm 37 it is David who makes a distinction between the 'righteous' and the 'wicked' and juxtaposes them. He indicates that the wicked might seem successful, but that this is only an illusion, a false image of themselves that others seem to believe. The Psalm advises the righteous not to give the wicked too much attention, for the success that the latter group projects is but brief. The real victory and triumph belong to those who are righteous, those who persist and pursue justice (Nally Jr., n.d.). If the reader takes into account the social structure and societal beliefs and expectations of the Victorian age, the most righteous characters in this novel are Robert Audley and George Talboys. Lady Audley would then, with her bigamy, different identities and criminal behaviour and actions, be the wicked character of the story. However, if we take another look at these characters and try to see them in a different light, we can notice that Robert might actually be the wicked character and Lady Audley the righteous one.

Conclusion

The Victorian age in Britain from 1837 until 1901 was a time that was characterised by gender roles, social constructs and paradoxes. It was both positively and negatively influenced by the Industrial Revolution, which introduced a new way of life; trade, consumerism, industry and railway lines were welcomed. However, the Industrial Revolution also led to child labour and working-class women working in factories and mines. As a result of this Industrial Revolution, a class division arose, but this was not the only division in Britain. Victorian society was androcentric; it was male-dominated and its social constructs and assumptions regarding gender were commonly believed all over Britain.

The ideal woman was the perfect daughter, mother and wife, and turned the house into a home for her husband. She took care of the children and did all the household chores, while her husband earned money in the public sphere. When it came to education, not all young women were able to go to school or be homeschooled. A minority received a thorough education, but most only learnt very little; the education of girls was often quite superficial. When it came to employment we have observed that working-class women worked in factories or mines. Middle- and upper-class women were not allowed to work, and even if they did they could not keep the money they earned, because they were not allowed any property; everything belonged to their husbands. Women in middle-class homes were expected to be the "angel in the house" and to take care of the home and everyone in it. They were "employed" in the setting of the house. Women in upper-class families were not allowed to work, and also did not have to do any household chores because they hired servants to do that. During the nineteenth century, though, improvements could be seen; the Custody of Infants Act, the Matrimonial Causes Act, and the Married Women's Property Acts were established and ameliorated women's lives.

In the third chapter of this thesis I listed some social constructs and ideologies and explained them. Women were seen as inferior to men and the creation of certain ideologies, such as the "Angel in the House", the "separate spheres" ideology, the contrast between the angel and the demon, also known as the "fallen woman", and the notion of true womanhood widened the gap between men and women. Some female authors wrote feminist fiction and spread their feminist ideas; Mary Elizabeth Braddon was one of them. Braddon challenged Victorian social constructs, ideologies, and common beliefs regarding gender in her novel, which was the main research of this thesis. She used archetypes – the angel in the house, the fallen woman and the madwomen, the melodramatic stock-characters of hero/heroine and villain, and Warhol's doubleness to question and undermine those Victorian social constructs.

Lady Audley can be seen as both the villain and heroine of the story; she tries to murder both Robert and George, and ends up in a madhouse. In the eyes of male society she is seen as a villain because she is anything but the true Victorian woman. In the eyes of female society, she is a heroine. She questions gender and gender identity and therefore also questions male-dominated society and its impossible expectations.

Robert Audley's identity can, just like Lady Audley's identity, be seen as a double; his female identity which shows his love for George, and his somewhat misogynistic side are juxtaposed in the novel. All the male characters in the novel, even Luke Marks who seems boorish and rude throughout the novel, show a feminine side. I, very shortly, analysed some of the minor characters, and even they seem to display double identities. In my opinion, *Lady Audley's Secret* can definitely be seen as a feminist novel that reacts against the impossible expectations and gender roles Victorian society created. With this research I have shown that each and every character in *Lady Audley's Secret* is ambiguous. The male characters have a male and hidden (or not so hidden) female identity, whereas the female characters have both a female and male identity. This shows that gender in general and male and female roles in life were not as clear-cut as they might seem at first glance. These characters and their different gender identities create ambiguity and challenge the social constructs that were so commonly accepted and believed. Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* is a symbol of rebellion that will not be quickly forgotten.

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