

## "Madness within Victorian Society"

Who can ascertain the line between sanity and madness? Throughout history, the definition of madness has been a topic of much speculation. Mary Elizabeth Braddon's novel, *Lady Audley's Secret*, and a great many other novels of the time, reveal a preoccupation with insanity during the Victorian era, which partially stemmed from a growing consciousness of cases of wrongful incarceration that had shaken the Victorian community's faith in the institution of the asylum. This preoccupation was also swelled by the growing association of women with madness throughout the course of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century. Madness is often associated with those who refuse to conform to societal norms. It is used as a weapon to control dissidents by discouraging nonconformity and by separating and thus neutralizing the nonconformists so that society as a whole is shielded from their bad influence. Thus, it is not a surprise that a society so absorbed with female submissiveness to the patriarchal system and with such a narrow view of proper female behavior should associate madness primarily with women. In fact, it can be argued that because women in this period were expected to function under such narrower behavioral constraints than men, they were more likely and had more opportunity to actually commit the offense of "madness." Furthermore, because the submissiveness of women was sought as an assurance of their conformity to Victorian gender norms, an unmanageable woman must obviously be sexually wanton. Thus, madness is more specifically associated in the Victorian mind with licentious females, whose sexuality made them an object of fear and even danger to the Victorian male. For this reason, madwomen became recurrent characters within the popular genre of sensational novels during the Victorian era. Repressed Victorian society was ironically fascinated by the subliminal eroticism within sensational novels, but was spared the need to

apologize for this fascination by the moral nature of these novels, which often concluded by reasserting the established order.

*Lady Audley's Secret* was inspired by Wilkie Collins' own sensational novel, *The Woman in White*. Yet, Braddon diverged and greatly expanded upon Collins' treatment of madness. Collins depicts the wrongful imprisonment of Laura Fairly as a result of a plot by her husband, Sir Percival Glyde, to seize her wealth. The novel thus reflects a fear in this era that private asylums that lacked proper checks on their powers were being used corruptly as a means of promoting greedy pecuniary interests. It also alludes to the use of the madhouse to dispose of troublesome wives and to the inequitable way in which the behavior of a "mad" person was seen to reconfirm their insanity. Braddon expands upon this allusion through her depiction of a woman whose actions prove that she might actually belong in a madhouse. Lady Audley has to be "buried alive" in an asylum because she is a dangerous woman (382). Yet, while there is no denying her dangerousness, Braddon leaves the actual criminal insanity of Lady Audley ambiguous thus making an indirect social criticism on the arbitrary way in which a person may be identified as insane.

While Lady Audley has committed or proved herself capable of committing a variety of acts of depravity, it is left uncertain whether her actions result from desperation or true madness. What is certain is that her committal into a madhouse is a means of preventing her scandalous behavior from tarnishing the reputation of the aristocracy, specifically her husband Sir Michael Audley. In fact, this scandalous behavior is in itself seen as a sign of madness by Robert Audley, who makes the Victorian association between madness and dissidence when he thinks that Lady Audley's crime of bigamy and her attempt to fake her own death combined with "the taints of hereditary insanity" will be enough to convince Dr. Mosgrave of her lunacy even though these

crimes only display her immorality and the selfishness of her nature (377). Even Lady Audley herself had previously made this association between madness and dissidence when she attempted to cast doubt on Robert's own sanity through the evidence of his nonconformist "eccentric" behavior, which he supposedly inherited from his "eccentric" parents (277). Thus, Robert is the one with the hereditary taint. While Robert and Lady Audley are willing to associate madness and dissidence, Dr. Mosgrave at first refuses to see a woman who acted with such "coolness and deliberation" as insane on the basis of a hereditary taint that might not even have been transmitted to her (377). Yet, after he discovers that she may have killed her first husband and definitely attempted to kill Robert, Dr. Mosgrave ends up confirming the necessity of placing Lady Audley in an asylum while not actually confirming the prognosis of lunacy. In fact he says, "The lady is *not* mad.... She has the cunning of madness, with the prudence of intelligence. I will tell you what she is, Mr. Audley. She is dangerous" (379). Thus, Dr. Mosgrave makes the decision that, despite the fact that Lady Audley may have committed her crimes purely out of desperation, she is still not "a woman to be trusted at large" because she is a danger to the established order (381). Thus, her quick removal from the outside world, accomplished in a fashion that would not expose Sir Michael Audley to any disgrace, would be a "service to society" (381).

The problem of Lady Audley's mental balance is driven by her own uncertainty of her sanity. Haunted by her mother's mental illness, she worried that her own blood was tainted with insanity. Such a fear in itself surely had an adverse effect on her mind causing her to experience moments of madness that she might never have undergone were she not aware of her mother's lunacy and the possibility that she might inherit it. Her certainty that she had a proclivity to lose her sanity makes her interpret her "fits of violence and despair" as the result of madness and not

the result of poverty and the desertion of her husband, which are in and of themselves good reasons to suffer a breakdown (353). When she later pushes her first husband down a well, she once again blames it on her madness, when it could have been just as likely caused by her hatred for the husband who deserted her and her selfish desire to keep the wealth and social status that she had attained. Thenceforth, madness becomes Lady Audley's excuse for every act of self-preservation. Whether or not she was actually insane or even driven insane by the fear of her tainted blood is left ambiguous. Yet, this ambiguity is important in exploring the 19<sup>th</sup>-century conception of madness. When Lady Audley accuses Robert of insanity she calls him a "monomaniac" (287): "Robert Audley has thought of his friend's disappearance until the one idea has done its fatal and unhealthy work" (287). The reader knows, however, that it is not Robert Audley but Lady Audley who is mad and therefore the more likely to be the monomaniac. Her constant preoccupation throughout the course of her life has been the contemplation of her own sanity or lack thereof. Could this preoccupation in itself have caused her madness?

Braddon also adapts Wilkie Collins' work to further commentate on the arbitrary way in which the behavior of a "mad" person was seen to reconfirm their insanity. Both Laura Fairly and Lady Audley were treated as ideals of femininity in their respective novels. Yet, because madness is associated with highly-sexed females, their very femininity assists to associate them with madness. This is most obvious in *Lady Audley's Secret* where both the readers and her fellow characters are prepared to see Lady Audley as a madwoman not only because she is a dangerous bigamist who does not conform to Victorian social standards but because of the very sensuality of her nature, which is in itself a threat to the patriarchal system of an era that sought to practice absolute control over women's sexuality. The pre-Raphaelite painting of Lady Audley in chapter 8 not only confirms her sensuous looks with the voluminous "masses of

ringlets" and the "pouting mouth" but also her dangerousness as "a beautiful fiend" surrounded by the "flames... of a raging furnace... the crimson dress, the sunshine on her face, the red-gold gleaming in the yellow hair, the ripe scarlet of the pouting lips." The imagery is suggestive of both hellfire and sexuality. This association is reconfirmed by the French doctor of the maison de santé who calls her a "beautiful devil" and as such, very fit for the madhouse (391).

While there is no denying Lady Audley's dangerousness, Mary Elizabeth Braddon leaves the question of Lady Audley's actual criminal insanity unanswered. Yet, this ambiguity serves to emphasize the social reasons for which Lady Audley needed to be "buried alive" (382). Whether or not she is actually a madwoman, she is still "insane" under the Victorian conception of the word. Madness in Victorian society was associated with dissident behavior, especially the dissident behavior of unmanageable and sensuous women who were a danger to society and as a result were constrained within the institution of the asylum where they could do no harm.