

**The Female Characters In The Pre-Raphaelite Novel:
M.E. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*
(An Extracted Research of Master Degree Letter)**

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Abstract

Victorian age is known as a time of perpetual change. It is a time of new industrialization, increased urbanization and new technology. Therefore, one of the strongest undercurrents of this is the position of women. Woman at that time was viewed as "an angel in the house" especially this who belongs to the upper-middle class. She is described in such term because she spends much time in her domestic domain. Therefore, she should be passive, obedient and dependent.

Despite the Victorian society contains several classes; women are defined under two labels: the angel and the demon or the whore. The angel woman can be any woman from the lower middle class to the aristocracy, while the whore refers to any working class woman. The difference between the two is that the second type has to work outside to earn the living. Living in a patriarchal society, both types of women are oppressed. The first type, the angel, should not have the right to be independent or even to make any choice and if she does, she will be mad, dangerous and demon, while the second type is considered rebellious and whore for being seen among the outsiders. Thus and as result, both of them are mistreated as outcasts.

The Pre-Raphaelite writers are daring and so interested in the issue of woman because of the reasons mentioned above. One of them is Mary Elizabeth Braddon. In her novel, *Lady Audley's Secret*, she tries to show the position of women and the Victorian attitudes towards them through the symbol of the characters especially the female characters. There are no much details about them in the novel because they are used as symbol to bring the attention of the readers to social and moral problems concerning the Age. This can be clearly seen in the character of Lady Audley. She stands for the threatening woman who tries to make a change in a patriarchal world. The female characters in the novel represent the fear of women's independence. Lady Audley is considered a devilish and dangerous woman and should be buried alive in an asylum because she violates the prevailing traditions. She portrays the fears of many people in the patriarchal society including even the women as Alicia, Phoebe, and Clara. Lady Audley shows that even those women, who are obedient, are oppressed by the severe society. They are the victims of the filial and marital power.

Concerning classes, Lady Audley shows that it is a crime for the lower class to intrude high class. They are considered criminal and deserve punishment while the high class has the authority to do anything. Because Lady Audly intrudes the upper class by marrying Sir Michael, she is considered a criminal.

Lady Audly is not a mere character. She is a new heroine and representative because she stands for all female characters who try to make changes in a patriarchal world.

الشخصيات النسوية في الرواية ماقبل الرفائلية (سر السيدة أودي) للكاتبة ماري اليزابيث براودن

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الخلاصة:

التقنية	بزمن التغيير الدائم. فهو عصر التصنيع الجديد والتحضّر	عُرف	التيارات التحتية لهذا العصر هو التيار الف
هذا	ند كان يُنظر لله	انها (بيت) الكثير
	طبة الغليا. فهي		
	البيت عليه فهي مطيعة، وغير		
	المجتمع توري يحتوي على طبقات اجتماعية عدة	عنوانين:	والشيطان العاهرة. المرأة الملائكية يمكن ان تك
بين	الارسطراطية. العاهرة فانها تشير		
	العيش وكونهن يعيشن	يجب يعمل	العنوانين هو
	ك، يجب ان لا	مضطهدتين.	الطبقتين
فانها	بنونة، وشيطانة. بينما	فانها	اختيار
	كلاهما	هكذا وكنتيجة	عاصية عاهرة لانها
	الاسباب المذكورة اعلاه. ان احد هؤلاء	الرفائليين فاهتموا كثيرا بقضية	بين
	السيدة اودلي) ان تبين التيار النسوي	في رواية (هو ماري اليزابيث ب
	وبالاصح الشخصيات النسوية. فلا	الشخصيات	ن الفكتورية نحوهن
	انتباه القراء الى المشاكل الاجتماعية	يهدف	يوجد تفاصيل كثيرة عنها
	في شخصية السيدة اودلي. انها تمثل	يحاول	والاخلاقية يتعلق بها
		يُرى	المهددة
	لثة استقلال المرأة. فالسيدة	التغيير في	الشخصيات النسوية
	لانها انتهكت القوانين الساد	الرواية	شيطانية وخطيرة ويجب
	ماء اليسا، فويب، وكلارا. تم	من حية	الكثير
	البنوية والزوجية.		بانها
	البنوية والزوجية.	المطيعات مضطهدات لانهن ضحايا	فيما يتعلق
العليا جريمة	الدنيا	تبين السيدة	يجب يعاقب عليها بينما
يُنظر اليها	السيدة	العليا	لانها
	السيدة	الارسطراطية السير مايكل ويجب يطبق عليها	واخيرا،
جميع	جديد لانها	ليست شخصية	السيدة
		فهي	يحاولن التغيير

Victorian Women and Their Conditions

Victorian society is characterized by its division into social classes and class distinction especially in the late 18th and early 19th century. This matter leads to the idea known the ideology of separate sphere, the domestic and public sphere. In other words, the division between classes leads to the appearance of the different functions the men and women have to do. These separate spheres show the principles that¹

Men possessed the capacity for reason, action, aggression, independence, and self-interest [thus, they belong to the public sphere]. Women inhabited a separate, private sphere, one suitable for the so called inherent qualities of femininity: emotion, passivity, submission, dependence, and self-lessness, all derived, it was claimed insistently, from women's sexual and reproductive organization².

By following such principle, the Victorians believe that men are rational, brave, independent, and the governing sex. They are the only persons who have the strength and the authority to dominate society. Women are regarded as irrational, dutiful and sensitive. Susan Kent observes; "women were so exclusively identified by their sexual functions that nineteenth century society came to regard them as "the sex"³.

According to the class distinction, the Victorians have severely defined the role of women. In the Nobility and gentry's class, women's role is very hard and important. They are expected to manage the home and the household⁴. Unmarried women spend a great deal of time either with other unmarried women or in social parties, balls, and dancing. And once they marry, their role start changing to manage the household. In the middle class, women depend heavily on marrying up into the upper class to begin social prestige⁵.

In the third class, the working one, women work in certain positions as in shops, bookkeepers, and teachers. Women in this class may fall into poverty after the death of their father so they are forced to work as governesses⁶.

The last one is the lower working class. It includes women of domestic service. They are desperately poor and single. Most of them are described as "able-bodied"⁷ because they are expected to work hard to support themselves. Women of this class are desperate because they suffer a long period of time in working. In other words, they suffer the restraints and repression imposed on them because of hard work.

Thus, this rigid division between classes in the late 18th and early 19th centuries defined women's role. It gave her no other alternative to do:

Victorian era was very difficult for her because of the vision of the “ideal women” shared by most in the [patriarchal] society. The legal rights of married women were similar to those of children. They could not vote or see or even own property. Also they were seen as pure and clean. Because of this view, their bodies were seen as temples which should not be adorned with makeup nor should it be used for such pleasurable things as sex.[their role was to have children and tend to the house. They could not hold jobs unless it was that as a teacher nor were they allowed to have their own checking accounts or saving accounts. In the end, they were to be treated as saints, but saints that had no legal right⁸.

Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s Life

It should be taken into consideration to talk about Braddon’s life because it has some bearing upon her works. Her home life was far from conventional and she was not expected as a respectable Victorian woman. In 1861, she lived with the publisher John Maxwell who could not marry her because his first wife was still alive, and imprisoned in a lunatic asylum. Braddon was the stepmother to his five children⁹ but as she was living out of wedlock with an already married man, her reputation was immediately tarnished. And it was worsened as she also bore Maxwell’s six illegitimate children. Even when she married him in 1874, on the death of his wife, her reputation was still damaged. This can clearly be seen in her famous novel which featured bigamy very prominently, *Lady Audley’s Secret*, and *Aurora Floyd*. The journal, *New York Times*, stated: ‘Having, like so many of her heroines, committed a species of bigamy, she has at last been found out[...] she thus became, not indeed a bigamist, but, at least, as accomplice in bigamy’¹⁰.

Though Braddon was injured by her private life, she became public. She was talent for multi-tasks she did. She was the mother to six children, five of whom survived infancy, and the stepmother of five other children, and still she was able to produce over eighty books and edit two successful monthly publications.

Braddon was a prolific novelist. She produced around two novels a year: one sensational in the broadest sense of the term and the other trying to fulfill her aspirations of higher literary endeavor¹¹. She also had a very strong interest in French writers. She studied the French realist writers like Flaubert, Balzac and Zola extensively and wrote along critical essay on Emile Zola¹². Thus, though she was a bigamist, she was educated woman with a real talent for satisfying the public tastes with her sensation fiction, who strove to achieve greater literary ideals at the same time.

E. Braddon is the “Queen of sensation fiction”¹³ because in most of her novels, she tries to maintain and naturalize social inequities. Like the Pre-Raphaelites, she tries to construct the concept of femininity through nature and

reality. She shows that woman as “an angel in the house” is a cultural construction. It is the “conventional coverings”¹⁴ that motivate the “angelic woman” to be aggressive because of her intense and confined desires that lead her to be a transgressor with dual personality. The writer introduces two different images which may simultaneously exist in the same woman: the angelic and the aggressive. Such a woman becomes a threat and a social catastrophe for Victorian society because she will undermine the domestic tranquility and the role of man and lead to the decline of “family values”. Sensation fiction comes to prove that such a woman is a new type of heroine in the Victorian fiction, as Margret Oliphant says in her review in 1867:

We have grown accustomed to the narrative of many thrills of feeling...What is held up to us as the story of the feminine soul as it really exists underneath its conventional coverings is a very fleshy and unlovely record. Women driven wild with love for the man who leads them on to desperation...women who marry their grooms in fits of sensual passion; women who pray their lovers to carry them off from husbands and homes they hate; women who give and receive burning kisses and frantic embraces, and live in voluptuous dream... such are the heroines who have been imported into modern fiction¹⁵.

The Female Characters of the Novel

Lady Audley

She is a beautiful young woman who skillfully creates a new identity for herself after her husband, George Tallboys, has abandoned her alone helpless with a little child and a poor father, to seek fortune in Australia. She is very ambitious to the degree that she leaves her family to survive. She commits certain sensational acts as bigamy by marrying a wealthy elderly baronet, Sir Michael Audley, to gain a high social status, and murder as she attempts to kill her first husband by pushing him in a well in order not to scandalize her; in addition to that, she commits arson and fraud because she wants to maintain her entitled identity as a “Lady”. Her bigamous marriage fails to continue when the baronet’s nephew, Robert Audley, tries to search for his friend, George Talboys, who has disappeared mysteriously soon after his return to England. Robert suspects her of her husband’s murder; therefore he accuses her of madness and works to have her locked in an asylum. Some look at her as a villain because she transgresses the “conventional coverings” of the domestic sphere. According to the novelist, Braddon, Lady Audley is a fallen angel. On the surface, she is an angel in the house but underneath she is a transgressor and deserves punishment, but burying her alive in a lunatic asylum is not a convincing and fair punishment because she is mistreated as a mad outcast while in fact she is not insane. Mr. Mosgrave discusses her case: “there is no evidence of madness in anything that she has done”. (377) The doctor notes that

Lady Audley commits crimes to ensure her own survival and prosperity in a world dominated by men. The writer shows the unjust attitude of society towards Lady Audley in Dr. Mosgrave's words to Robert Audley about her madness:

The lady is not mad; but she had the heredity taint in her blood. She has the cunning of madness, with the prudence of intelligence. I will tell you what she is, Mr. Audley. She is dangerous! (379)

Dr. Mosgrave advises him to bury her alive in an asylum because, "as a physiologist and an honest man I believe you could do no better service to society than doing this."(381)

Society looks at her as insane and should be buried alive in the house of madness though she is not mad. Society considers women mad if they transgress against the traditions, and if they try to assert themselves, they should be cast off as if they were not human beings.

Unlike Lady Audley, Alicia, Sir Michael Audley's daughter, and lady Audley's stepdaughter represents the ideal woman of the Victorian time in the way that she is naïve, obedient and subject to her father's decision. She only thinks of beauty and marriage. She hates Lady Audley and feels jealous for her beauty. She even describes her as a "wax doll": **"oh, of course! Now, she is the first woman of whom I ever heard you say a civil word, Robert Audley. I'm sorry to find you can admire a wax doll."**(56)

Clara Tallboys is lady Audley's sister-in-law and Robert Audley's beloved. She is a respectable and honorable according to traditions. She is also naïve and incapable of acting on her own because she is under the control of her father but it is her love to her brother that inspires her to avenge his death with the help of Robert who will marry her after discovering Lady Audley's real identity as Lucy Tallboys. These exceptions are used significantly to show the two different kinds of womanhood: Lucy as ambitious and villainous, and Clara as pure and passive.

Phoebe is Lady Audley's servant. To talk about Phoebe, Braddon resorts to the Pre-Raphaelite use of the color imagery. Phoebe seems to take "no color from the outer world" (131) She always dresses in grey and this makes her appear as Lucy in the point of shadowy truth. In other words, both of them are oppressed by others. This can be noticed when she puts on the grey silk which the Lady casts off on her wedding day. The narrator says:

The likeness which the Lady's maid bore to Lucy Audley was, perhaps, a point of sympathy between the two women...there were certain dim and shadowy lights in which you might have easily mistaken Phoebe for my Lady (104-105)

But Braddon makes a difference between the two by resorting to the use of Pre-Raphaelite color imagery. She uses grey color to stand for subjective, passive and non-assertive female as Phoebe and Clara unlike Lucy, Phoebe always appears in grey dress to refer to her submissiveness and acceptance of the verbal and physical abuse in marrying the alcoholic Luke. This can be seen in Phoebe's argument with Lucy who objects to Phoebe's decision to marry him:

I promised, when I was little better than fifteen, that I'd be his wife...**I daren't refuse to marry him.** When he was a boy he was always violent and revengeful. I saw him once take up that very knife in a quarrel with his mother. I tell you...I must marry him (107)

Unlike Phoebe, Lucy is the heroine who is associated with color, especially Pre-Raphaelite bright colors that reflect her ambition, self-assertion and defiance of the conventional codes of the Victorians. Lucy is not a passive woman because she refuses to accept her husband's abuse by deserting her helpless alone with her little child and helpless father. This is illustrated in the conversation between her and Robert Audley:

"When my friend, George Tallboys, returned to England", Robert began gravely, "the thought which was uppermost in his mind was the thought of his wife"
"Whom he had deserted," said my lady quickly. "At least," she added, more deliberately, "I remember your telling us something to that effect when you first told us your friend's story" (266)

Conclusion

It's concluded, through the characters of women, that Braddon wants to tell the readers indirectly that though the Lady appears to be a miscreant, she is also a heroine and a victim of doubtful insanity. According to Braddon, the Lady is a victim because she is mistreated by society. Most critics agree that Lady Audley, Braddon's transgressive heroine, is contained at the end of the novel. In other words, they try to show that putting the lady in a lunatic asylum at the end of the novel is a reference to the triumph of conservatism especially where the masculine/feminine boundaries imposed by the patriarchal society, are concerned. While according to Braddon, she tries to reveal that women are not suppressed at the end of the novel. On the contrary, women are able to cross the boundaries imposed by patriarchal society quite easily and to relocate themselves in a new, genderless society. Of Braddon, David Skilton writes, "Like Goerge Eliot, Braddon lived a life which made her actually aware at every turn of a woman's disadvantages, and like Goerge Eliot, though in a different fictional mode, she used her experience in framing many of her novels."¹⁶ In *Lady Audley's Secret*, the major female

characters suffer some sort of disadvantage either from filial or marital obligations. For example, Alicia suffers from the second marriage and Clara from her first marriage. Both of them share the same disadvantage in the obligation they owe to their respective fathers. Phoebe Marks's disadvantage rests in her obligation to her husband. Lady Audley herself is the ultimate disadvantaged woman since she faces both filial and marital disadvantages. Nevertheless, she is unlike them because she is able to transcend these undesirable obligations and challenge the patriarchal power. In other words, Lady Audley(Helen Tallboy) reflects the irony of the age. She shows that woman to be "an angel in the house"; she should be weak, passive and obedient. More specifically, woman should be deprived of any right. Braddon is somehow hopeful and sympathizes with Lady Audley. She shows that though Lady Audley is a criminal, she is a heroine because she has the courage to transcend the stiff limitations of the Victorian society. She is able to escape her helpless life and to succeed in acquiring a very desirable position. Lady Audley's criminality is due to the ills of patriarchal society which never gives her the opportunity to work or even to divorce her husband, George. Braddon justifies her actions because she is completely subject to the power of the men in her life which renders her unable to make the right decision. She is finally locked up in an asylum because she is seen as a threat to their patriarchal society. Braddon seems to suggest that Lady Audley can open a window for women to struggle against the shackles of society and defend their rights or else they will end up like Hellen Tallboy. The Victorians look at her as a demon in the house for her situation which is different from Alicia and Clara who have never made an outlet from their respective fathers' rule and a fellow sufferer with whom to sympathize. Their situation becomes unbearable because both fathers suffer from poor judgment. For example, Sir Michael Audley's weakness is his attraction to Lucy (Lady Audley), whereas Harcourt Talboys's weakness is a lack of compassion for Clara's brother, George.

End Notes:

1 Susan Kent, *Sex and Suffrage in Britain 1860-1914*(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p.30

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid,p.32

4 "Woman of Victorian England",

[URL:http://www.crazyray.tripod.com/clpage/writings/other/victorian_women.htm](http://www.crazyray.tripod.com/clpage/writings/other/victorian_women.htm)

5 Ibid.

6 Philip V. Allingham, "The Figure of The Governess: Based on Renold Pearsall's *Night Black Angels*". The Victorian Web. On line. Retrieved April 21,2002.

7 Marjorie Levin-Clark. "Engendering Relief: Women, Ablebodiness, and the New Poor Law in Victorian England", *Journal of Women's History*. v.11.4.1991.p.107.

8 "Women of Victorian era", [URL:http://www.spiritustemporis.com/women-in-the-victorianera/](http://www.spiritustemporis.com/women-in-the-victorianera/).

9 Mary E. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*. ED.David Skilton.New York: Oxford University Press,1987.

10 "Miss Braddon as a Bigamist", *New York Times*, November 1844.p.1.

11 Robert Lee Wolf, *Devoted Desciple: The Letter of Mary Elizabeth Braddon to Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton, 1862-1873*. Harvard Literary Bulletin 12.1974.p.25.

12 Robert Lee Wolf, *Sensational Victorian: The Life and Fiction of Mary Elizabeth Braddon*. New York and London: Garland Pub. 1979.

13 Susan David Bernstain, "Dirty Reading: Sensation Fiction, Women, and Primitivism": *Criticism*, Issue 2, Vol.36. Wayne State University, Gale Group, 2002.

14 Mary E. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*. ED.David Skilton.New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

15 Ibid

16 Nicole P. Fisk, "Lady Audley as Sacrifice: Curing Femal Disadvantage in Lady Audley's Secret, *Victorian News Letters*.URL:<http://www.directesseys.com/viewpaper/31100.htm>. Retrieved March 22,2004.

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