

Contents

Introduction	1
1. The shadow of insanity from Hippocrates to Victorian psychiatry	7
2. Victorian medicine and literature: female pathological minds and sensation fiction	45
2.1 <i>Sensationalism</i> and the rebellious New Victorian Woman	45
2.2 Obscure female minds: sexuality, medicine and spiritualism	59
3. Sensational Pathology	75
3.1 Female mental instability in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's and Ellen Wood's sensation fiction	76
3.2 Nervous Women in Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu and Wilkie Collins	97
4. Stigmata: human degeneration in sensation fiction	115
Bibliography	135

If woman had only shown enough sense to remain content with her role as the passive human clay which man could mould according to his fantasies, [...] everything would have been well.¹

¹ B. Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity, Fantasies of Feminine Evil Fin-de-Siecle Culture*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1986, p. 237.

Introduction

A strong personal interest in gender issues, the female body in history, mental fragility and Victorian medical theories is what mainly inspired this challenging research. I decided to focus my attention on Victorian literature and to work on the allegedly 'defective' mental activity of fictional female characters who populated Victorian sensation literature from the 1860s onwards. This work aims to consider not only a common perception related to the female body in the period. As a matter of fact, the central point of my research has become the Victorian interpretation of the mechanisms of the female mind. Women were repeatedly accused of being the unstable, fragile and marginal objects of a phallogentric society. Therefore, 'imperfect' mental processes and mental illnesses were used, in Victorian time, as a justification and excuse to deny legal rights, to isolate and silence women. The general Victorian conviction that the woman's mind was faulty and repulsive has led me to investigate, among medical texts and cultural stereotypes, both the private and the public position of women, specifically in nineteenth-century British medical discourse and fiction. Tired of obeying men and of limiting their personality, as well as their instincts and impulses, vindictive and hysterical women – portrayed by sensationalists – overturned the rules of the game.

The nineteenth-century unstable female mind, therefore, became the mirror of a hysterical society affected by social and domestic turmoil, as well as by the unexpected reformulation and reinterpretation of gender roles and positions. A world that was mainly based on austere and inflexible male voices and thoughts could only stigmatise every decision and action that was not in compliance with male choices and impositions. Victorian sensation literature, therefore, reaped the fruits of an era that brought to maturity millennia-old speeches on the inferiority and imperfection of the female mind. Sensation novelists themselves drew the shape of a new woman who dared to struggle and dared to use violence against husbands or relatives in order not only to assert her existence, but also to soothe her instincts. However, according to the common idea of the time, those women that wanted to usurp male areas and that found the courage to release their desires were going against nature: public denigration and

scandal were on those fallen women.

Therefore, this thesis contextualises four literary works – *Lady Audley's Secret* by Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *St. Martin's Eve* by Ellen Wood, *The Rose and the Key* by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu and *The Legacy of Cain* by Wilkie Collins – within the nineteenth-century medical research in the field of the human mind. I investigated not only how the numerous nineteenth-century advances in the medical branch of psychiatry influenced the Victorian cultural and popular panorama, but also how those medical developments were exploited in the four novels taken into account here. The revolutionary psychiatric progress which characterised the entire nineteenth century had an enormous impact on Victorians who were constantly surrounded by photos and treatises displaying and explaining insanity as close and threatening. In addition, the great number of asylums under construction were about to change the British landscape: the Victorian institution *par excellence* became the place to experiment and carry out research in order to find out cures, which were to be proved, in many cases, useless and inefficient. The fear of psychiatric failure fostered obsessions and anxieties among British people, who sighted the threat of human degeneration looming on the horizon.

Discussions on insanity and human reversion inextricably intertwined with the infinite number of discourses accusing women to be biologically imperfect and to represent the most futile sector of society. Nineteenth-century rumours and proofs of female social and familiar rebellion confirmed the idea proposed, supported and spread by alienists and physicians: the menacing woman could be the ruin not only of the Victorian social and marital order, but also of the entire human race. In fact, female public and home protests made women be accused of carrying the very seeds of insanity, which would seal the destiny of the entire nation, condemned to mar and perish.

The four novels analysed here may show the clear connection existing between discourses ranging from Victorian medicine to popular beliefs and obsessions related to women. Not by chance, especially from the 1860s onwards, novels that could be categorised as examples of *sensationalism* used the theme of female insanity to give voice to women's desires and expectations, blocked and limited by a society which found it particularly convenient to denigrate and silence women by sending them to asylums. Sensationalists portrayed hysterical, jealous and, most of the time, criminal

women looking for power and social revenge, as in the case of Braddon's Lucy, Wood's Charlotte, Le Fanu's Barbara and Collins' Elizabeth, Eunice and Helena. While reflecting the circulating ideas of anthropologists, phrenologists and alienists of the time, sensationalists sometimes exacerbated the danger represented by women in their private life. However, they managed to provide their readers with a possible ideal reproduction of several secret Victorian domestic scenarios: in such views, rampant violence and infectious insanity had possibly already reached and conquered Victorian hearths and homes.

The first chapter introduces the concept of insanity as difficult and never truly fitting any single definition. In history, several theorists, thinkers and physicians have tried to provide an explanation for madness and have worked to solve its mysteries. After centuries of segregation and incarceration of the insane, as well as centuries of fears and exorcisms, eighteenth-century physicians transformed numerous houses of confinement into places for experimentation. Physicians were looking for plausible answers and cures for insanity. It was in the nineteenth century that psychiatry became a new medical branch aiming to study nervous derangement.

Despite the numerous Victorian advances in the investigation of the human mind, insanity, under the name of *hysteria*, was still interpreted as a plague affecting women solely. Mesmerism, phrenology, and in general the commonly-held view that insanity could be transmitted and inherited, reinforced the idea that women were the weakest, the most contagious and the most defective sector of humanity. Along with mesmerists and phrenologists, alienists and physicians often worked on women to reinforce the idea related to female inferiority and female nervous instability. Battie, Pinel, Esquirol, Conolly, Chricton-Browne, Bell, Hall, Trélat, Charcot and Freud were only some of the numerous male minds who, within their asylums, devoted time and energy to explain the reason why women were to them more likely than men to suffer from insanity. Beside the success of mesmeric shows and the innumerable photos of the insane that circulated at the time, the enormous number of nineteenth-century symptomatic discourses upon women's fragile nerves, as well as the architectural impact of asylums themselves, had such a strong power over popular culture that *sensationalism*, from the 1860s, became one of the most widely spread literary genres, with its unstable women infecting Victorian domesticity.

The second chapter analyses the role played by sensation novels in society. Apart from using crime, mystery and female mental illness, sensationalists exploited real and yet unbelievably bloody crimes in order to write their stories. Sensational narrations were perceived as scandalous and outrageous and were often criticised because they could actually spoil, especially female readers: readers could be contaminated by those fictional rebellious women fighting against social and familiar impositions. In fact, familiar life and domesticity became fundamental features of sensational stories: coincidentally, the combination of domestic settings and rebellious women increased the social anxieties related to the complete subversion of what was perceived as an already falling and decaying social order based on authoritarian masculinity. Sensationalists chose the right psychological moment to put into writing general rampant manias: political decisions rewarding women with the possibility of divorcing, suffragettes protesting and claiming for their rights, medical and psychiatric assumptions related to women, men in panic for a world in subversion turned the second half of the nineteenth century into a nightmarish time span. The splendour of the Great Exhibition was crumbling.

In addition, sensational women were described as so strong and brave that they could even end up killing their husbands, relatives and children. Undoubtedly, sensation women refused the female angelic role and transformed *the household nun* into a demonic entity, led by an insatiable thirst for social and marital revenge. Of course, the description of these women fighting in their domestic space could not ignore the gloomy presence of insanity, criminal inclinations and, consequently, of asylums. Medical theories related to the female 'defective' biology – affected and threatened by menstrual, sexual and mental instability, as stressed by the largest majority of Victorian physicians – were used as the justification to keep women under control. Improper femininity – as portrayed by sensationalists – was the opposite of the passive and submissive Charcot's women. Mindful of the political, cultural and medical panorama of their time, sensationalists put into writing the transformation of women from chaste, polite and cute subjects into violent, uncanny, rebellious and deranged inhabitants of Victorian houses. Dirty, uncouth and filthy female psychologies invaded Victorian domestic places.

The third chapter is concerned with the analysis of the four Victorian novels in

question – *Lady Audley's Secret* by Braddon, *St. Martin's Eve* by Wood, *The Rose and the Key* by Le Fanu and *The Legacy of Cain* by Collins – that were written in the '60s, '70s and '80s. The research aims to consider the most relevant passages of the novels dealing with female insanity, asylums, Victorian mental care, as well as with the firm Victorian belief that nervous derangement and hysteria could be transmitted and, as a consequence, inherited. Sensation women – aggressive mothers, scandalous daughters and disrespectful wives – are victims of an uncontrollable duplication of identity, which is commanded and generated by their psychiatric instability and by their inability to keep their nerves under control. Sensationalists uncovered the truth of several families; even the aristocracy, within its own sumptuous dwellings, found itself threatened by pathological womanhood. In other words, the consideration of these four novels finds its very *raison d'être* in the numerous references that one can find in them in relation to the Victorian medical sphere, psychiatry, hysteria and insane female marginalia. Literary analysis, in other words, uses the medical and cultural context of the nineteenth century to clarify and consider the Victorian common ideas regarding women and mental illness. Braddon's Lucy, Wood's Charlotte, Le Fanu's Barbara and Collins' Elizabeth, Eunice and Helena can be seen as the outrageous examples of a society which was slowly perishing.

The fourth and last chapter takes into account the innumerable nineteenth-century discourses upon human reversion and degeneration. The connection between *sensationalism* and human decay is summarised in the role played by evil female protagonists. By the beginning of the second half of the nineteenth century, psychiatric theories were progressively losing power and people associated the increasing number of lunatics in Victorian asylums to a menacing human devolution. Women became the tangible embodiment of a horrifying process of social degeneration because they were thought of as directly responsible for the transmission of faulty and degenerative traits and genes from one generation to the other. Discourses on the inheritance of insanity became central in asylums and soon invaded the nation. Therefore, insanity was perceived as a sort of pandemic, as contagious as venereal illnesses.

A large amount of theorists, physicians and scientists wrote treatises and articles about the possibility of reversion, and in many cases it was science and medicine that accused women to be the real problem. Morel, Darwin, nineteenth-century

sociobiologists, Lombroso, Jackson, Maudsley, Nordau all confirmed and reinforced the idea that degeneration was a female affair. The animalisation of sensation female protagonists, as a consequence of their psychopathology, was the proof that the process of human reversion had its very beginning and roots in women's minds and in their wombs. Thus, sensation women might be the faulty mothers of that army of degenerative fictional characters populating British literature in the last decades of the long nineteenth century. Women's bodies became the scapegoat of a falling society.

Sensationalists' narratives, therefore, entered into dialogue with theories about degeneration and psychiatric axioms, depicting a woman who was too weak – but at the same time dangerously strong – to claim her rights to speak, to express her opinion, to show her feelings, to free her sensations and emotions. The Victorian woman, beneath a possible veneer of beauty, became the emblem of a defective animal. She was thought of as highly contaminating and infectious: according to numerous Victorian male authorities, British society was running the great risk of decay. The improper sensation feminine embodies jealousy of the exclusive capacity of men to reason and take decision independently; impulses of sensation women explode in streams of anger and nervousness. Sensation women's minds, and consequently their bodies, were possessed by internal and mysterious entities that forced sensation women themselves to behave outrageously, unexpectedly, violently and unacceptably according to the masculine rigour of the time.

In conclusion, this research gives the reader the opportunity to understand how nineteenth-century psychiatry and medical studies in the field of women's body actually managed to influence the perception people had as far as women were concerned. Victorian medicine played a fundamental and crucial role while shaping the destiny of thousands of wives, daughters, widows and prostitutes. The courage some women used to protest for their rights was conveniently interpreted by scientific men as harsh manifestations of madness. Sensationalists, exploiting their daily reality, used women and explored their alleged insanity to portray a society that, in mad and rebellious women, saw the apocalyptic fall of humanity and the unacceptable subversion of rules. What emerges is that *sensationalism* clearly appears to be one of the Victorian literary genres that more used medical discourses and more succeeded in demonstrating how influential they were in fostering anxiety and terror.

Chapter 1

The Shadow of Insanity from Hippocrates to Victorian Psychiatry

Venturing into the entangled history of madness might be risky, especially taking into consideration the lack of a clear, specific and single definition of the murky concept analysed here. The ghostly, mysterious, mighty and shady presence of *madness*, or *insanity*, throughout history has been acquiring, in fact, a large amount of diverse meanings. Should one be asked to write down only a few of the mental and physical manifestations related to madness in history, then, depression, anxiety, nervousness, hopelessness, fears, emptiness, uselessness, obsession, sleeplessness, epilepsy, mental instability, psychopathy, nervous breakdown, mental invalidity, love-sickness, dementia, manias would be only some of the numerous labels used to call and identify an endless quantity of symptoms which outline the existence of any sort of mental fragility, varying, of course, *ad infinitum*. Since the seventeenth century, all the symptoms listed above have been categorized as *nervous illnesses*, whereas, in other historical periods, all these different labels might have been assembled under other nomenclatures, such as, for instance, *hysteria* or *insanity*, which both had – as I will try to demonstrate – a very strong impact on Victorian popular culture, especially from the 1860s. However, leaving here the terminological issue aside, what should be kept in mind is that what is conventionally considered to be mad today was not necessarily and forcibly deemed to be mad yesterday, and the other way round.

Thus, we will here focus our attention on the historical evolution of 'madness' as a concept, and I will take into account – specifically – the impact it had on Victorians. Psychiatry, the alleged highest level of knowledge related to the human unconscious sphere, was a creation of the Victorian age, when innumerable new medical theories were moulding the collective idea related to the controllability of one's mental processes. Scientists invested their time to demonstrate that their eyes could penetrate

people's brain and could understand its varying and unforeseeable processes dictated by sentiments, instincts and sensations; and women, in this regard, were considered more biologically geared towards enabling senses and affections to command their actions and reactions. Insanity, for a very long time investigated, was – in Victorian time – often applied to explain and justify inexplicable murders, social rebellions and gendered requests.

Madness, and its consequent acts of delirium, has not only always aroused enormous and intense curiosity in society, but it has also been carefully observed and deeply studied. One could now say that delirium – one of the visible manifestations of madness – is the condition of being unable to reason and act due to inner confusion. Madness, in other words, appears to be an illness of the soul, a fragility of the mind, a sort of personal burden. At the end of the nineteenth century, after centuries of medical research, one of the most important minds in the study of insanity, Sigmund Freud, defined what he generally used to call *hysteria*: he stated that it manifested itself through acts of alteration, either permanent or temporal, of mental faculties; in fact, as Freud argued, “[...] these attacks are nothing but phantasies projected and translated into motor activity and represented in pantomime. It is true that these phantasies are unconscious but otherwise they are of the same nature as those that may be observed directly in day-dreams or revealed by an interpretation of nocturnal dreams”.²

Metaphorically speaking, madness might be compared to a gloomy and foggy landscape, to mental opacity and blindness, to a heavy black curtain over the eyes, separating and isolating the individual from the surrounding reality. In 1854, Sir Daniel Noble (1810-1885) defined insanity as “a perversion of *ideas*”.³ Similarly, according to the legal point of view offered by Paolo Zacchia (1584-1659), considered not only one of the founders of European legal medicine, but also a revolutionary jurist that introduced several innovations in the field of the legal handling of psychopathology, madness was an effective incapability to distinguish between reality and fantasy, between dreamy hallucinations and visible truth.⁴ One of the most effective visual representations of this apparently clear definition can be observed in *Don Quixote* by

² S. Freud, *Dora – An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, Touchstone, New York, 1997, p. 120.

³ D. Noble, “Elements of Psychological Medicine”, in *The Edinburgh Medical and Surgical Journal: Exhibiting a Concise View of the Latest and Most Important Discoveries in Medicine, Surgery, and Pharmacy*, Vol. 81, Adam and Charles Black, London, 1854, pp. 187-190, p. 188.

⁴ M. Foucault, *History of Madness*, Routledge, New York, 2006, p. 241.

Gustave Doré (1832-1883), the well-known nineteenth-century painter who – similarly to other numerous painters in history, such as Michelangelo, Van Gogh, Edward Munch or Salvador Dalí – made the attempt at sketching the mysterious shape of madness and its delirious effects. The French painter succeeded in giving material and visible borders to madness and to do that, not by chance, he chose to draw the hallucinations of one of the most famous visionary characters in the history of literature – Don Quixote – during one of his innumerable dreamlike visions influenced by reading: the presence of a book in the painting and the fact that Don Quixote is reading it are two fundamental details in our discussion. In fact, Doré's masterpiece shall be taken into consideration again in the following chapter in connection to the possible effects of literature on nerves and mind and the numerous Victorian's obsessions in relation to that. In the painting by Doré, madness appears the contact zone between a distorted blindness of the mind and an invented reality, which embraces – in this specific case – Don Quixote, lost in a hurricane of misleading and deviated affirmations of falsehood and untouchable nothingness.

While speaking about a possible history of madness, it seems inevitable to go back to the very origins of the history of medicine. Thus, the following short reference to Greek medicine – humoral medicine, to be precise – is not a useless deviation, since the theory of temperaments, based on humoral medicine, was often applied to explain and justify several human behaviours, influenced by the four elements at the core of human humours: blood, black and yellow bile and, finally, phlegm. It was Hippocrates, the father of medicine, and his provision that helped the theory of humours and humoral therapy develop rapidly. Humoral medicine included diet, physical exercise and massages, meant to cure different kind of illnesses, such as, for instance, madness or, more specifically, hysteria. What Hippocrates had in mind was, in other words, the restoration of the harmony and of the equilibrium in the patient's body.

Greek epistemology offered new interpretations of madness, supported, for example, by Plato and Socrates, who thought that madness could actually be a new possible way to see and interpret reality. While reason remained for many the only possible instrument to achieve knowledge, for others it was madness itself that might provide humanity with the right key to open the door of human wisdom.⁵ Subsequently,

⁵ A. Scull, *Madness in Civilization – A Cultural History of Insanity, from the Bible to Freud, from the*

Hippocratic humoral medicine was moulded by the ideas of Rufus of Ephesus, an important Greek doctor, and it was further significantly reinterpreted by Galen, who focused his attention on spirits, rather than on humours. According to him, when the vital blood, supplied with crucial elements coming from recently ingested food, reached the brain, via the carotid artery and the aorta, it was then immediately sent to the nerves, responsible for motions and, above all, for personal sensations.⁶ Therefore, Galen, as well as Hippocrates, was convinced that there was a very strong relation between food, blood, brain, nerves and sensations.

One might thus conclude that food – both liquid and solid – was long perceived, in ancient Greece, fundamental in order to maintain a healthy nervous system. Nonetheless, this idea did not remain within Greek borders only and the link between good food and good health soon spread all around Europe. Several other physicians used Greek thinkers' ideas and enriched the latter with their own interpretations. For instance, according to Bernard de Mandeville (1670-1733), Dutch physician and philosopher, famous in Britain for his studies on nervous illnesses, the functioning of the brain, and consequently of nerves, had a direct connection with the quality of food and the efforts made by the stomach to extrapolate the best from food itself.⁷ In other words, while unhealthy and poor blood might mean poor temperaments, healthy blood might foster a strong personality. Being convinced that humans were constantly struggling to win against passions and likely to fail to follow reason, Bernard de Mandeville wrote that the suffering of the brain was the main cause of the interruption of the act of thinking, leaving space, as a result, to hysteria and to any kind of possible mental instability.⁸ Thus, not only for Hippocrates and Galen, but also for Bernard de Mandeville and many other physicians and philosophers in history, madness, or mental fragility in general, should have been absolutely imputed to the quality of food and, of course, of blood, which would become – in the nineteenth century – the core of several terrifying discourses upon inheritance and transmission of genes and traits from one generation to the other.

Leaving Greek theories and their long historical influence aside, according to

madhouse to Modern Medicine, Princeton University Press, Princeton (New Jersey), 2015, p. 36.

⁶ W. F. Bynum, *The History of Medicine*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008, pp. 10-18.

⁷ B. de Mandeville, *A Treatise of the Hypochondriack and Hysterick Diseases*, Collected Works, George Olms Verlag Hildesheim, New York, 1981 (1730), p. 240.

⁸ *Idem*, pp. 242-243.

Edward Shorter, Professor in the History of Medicine at the University of Toronto, it was only when psychiatry – with its diverse and numerous therapies – was shaped and became one of the most important Victorian medical branches for the comprehension and interpretation of the human inner world that madness, or hysteria, achieved effective status of curable pathology within those institutions called *asylums*.⁹ However, asylums were just the result of a very long history of houses and institutions devoted to the cure (or isolation) of madness. According to Andrew Scull, in fact, it was already during the Byzantine Empire that the very first hospitals for the insane started to be built. These hospitals seemed to be anything but oases in the middle of the desert. In fact, the insane was often enchained at the walls of the hospital and brutally beaten, something that would be, in the years to come, considered very good for patients' health by Avicenna (980-1037),¹⁰ Persian philosopher and great contributor to the history of medicine and to the treatment of depression. Soon after the Edict of Milan in 313 – when the Byzantine Empire progressively got closer and closer to Christianity – drastic and violent exorcisms for mad people became part of the Christian rites of purification, which was expected to heal people suffering from madness or from any possible form of possession. The idea of madness connected to demonic possession was a common belief during the Byzantine Empire: Christian religion and its fear of evil, especially until the sixteenth century, rapidly became common and contributed to the diffusion of obsessions throughout the entire Middle Ages.

Mediaeval dark obsessions related to the evil were reinforced by a general malnutrition and famine affecting the largest majority of the population, as well as by rampant contagions that exacerbated the situation. Poor, haggard, abject, crippled, sick and crazy people were everywhere and, most of the time, the Bible became for them the only possible and concrete way of salvation. An incredible number of shrines were assaulted by hordes of people looking for health, remedies and solace; medieval lunatics normally slept in churches and were subjected to continuous attempts at exorcism¹¹ – even voluntarily sometimes – and, when exorcism failed and the person still clearly showed visible mental weakness, new measures had to be taken urgently – as the Spanish Inquisition would not fail to demonstrate from the fifteenth century onwards –

⁹ E. Shorter, *A History of Psychiatry*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Canada, 1997, p. 4.

¹⁰ A. Scull, *Madness in Civilization*, cit., p. 65.

¹¹ *Idem*, pp. 69-77.

to avoid a possible massive epidemic. Not surprisingly, insanity and contagion are often found to go hand in hand in the history of madness; up until the very last decades of the nineteenth century, in fact, insanity was seen as a sort of stigma inherited by new generations from parents, and the concept of transferability of the illness from one generation to the other became definitely crucial while discussing the danger represented by mental illnesses in the Victorian age.

Seen mainly as an inexplicable possession of the mind in the Middle Ages and up until the early modern age, insanity was perceived as the absolute struggle between humans and the most obscure powers of the world. During the Middle Ages, the mad was the person that had been provided with the possibility to experience diverse inner and outer worlds, the individual that could see other realities, belonging to other spheres that had nothing to do with the earthly one. The insane, in addition, could be not only the person who had been touched by the evil, but also, more rarely, by the divine. Nonetheless, the largest majority of lunatics were thought to have been touched by devilish hands and, as a result, were accused to practice black magic and to share nocturnal experiences with Satan. Consequently, a large number of persons affected by hallucinations and by all means innocent were sentenced to torture – subsequently, to death in fire – for their being unreasonable, asocial and a menace for the rest of the reasonable population. Medieval madness was the visible limit of reason itself: insanity was darkness and reason was light, moon and sun confronted, in spite of what Foucault would argue, “equilibrium begins in madness”.¹²

Even though a mad individual – in the Middle Ages – was mistrustfully seen by the majority as a person experiencing a relation with a good or dangerous invisible entity, there were also voices denouncing a very distressing relation between madness and nothingness, so much so that madness and the insane were also perceived as nefarious presences continuously reminding people that the end of the world was getting near: reversion became a possibility.¹³ More accurately, madness was not only an inexplicable sort of possession, it could also be interpreted as an expression of a possible divine message announcing an imminent end,¹⁴ as underlined by Allen Thiher. Likewise, the

¹² M. Foucault, *History of Madness*, cit., p. 40.

¹³ *Idem*, pp. 12-14.

¹⁴ A. Thiher, *Revels in Madness: Insanity in Medicine and Literature*, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor (Michigan), 1999, pp. 46-47.

message brought by madness throughout the Middle Ages regarding an existence that was slowly fading away was also at the core of the Renaissance. Gothic cathedrals, with their architectural symbolism – such as the numerous gargoyles defending Christianity from the evil – displayed the new way to perceive European reality: the world became a deep well of possible nightmarish experiences. Darkness was getting closer and closer and anxiety was looming on the horizon; the end of the world and eternal punishment seemed to be behind the edge. In fact, the idea connecting insanity to social retrogression and to a possible end had a great success up until the nineteenth century, when many European thinkers started formulating their own theories about atavism and degeneration, discussed in the last chapter.

Due to its bewitching power and its being so dangerously charming, during the Renaissance, madness started to be rigorously confined and legally persecuted by national institutions. The insane was a bad example for the entire society and had to be hidden. All around Europe, there were places where the insane would be confined; in France, for instance, the Hôtel-Dieu in Paris or the Melun Châtelet in Caen¹⁵ were visible examples of exile and strict isolation of the insane. However, while denouncing and isolating the lunatic became a very common ritual, a sort of witch hunt against people with opposite and divergent opinions and points of view, the invention of printing enabled the cultural diffusion of Galen and Hippocrates' ideas within European universities during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; madness could then be studied through the eyes of Greek medicine. Hospitals for pilgrims, travellers, orphans and for lunatics started to be built throughout Europe, taking inspiration from the Bethlehem Hospital, originally founded in London in 1247.

It was specifically the sixteenth century that embraced the concept of mental insanity, considering the presence of madness in daily life somehow absolutely obvious, making – as a consequence – the pillars of reason and rationalism falter.¹⁶ Influenced by the ideas of Cornelius Agrippa (1486-1535) about black magic and witchcraft, as well as by medical investigation of Paracelsus (1493-1541), Erasmus and Montaigne, the two fundamental representatives of European humanism, were strongly convinced that madness was a fundamental part of life and, in fact, it was Montaigne that believed that

¹⁵ M. Foucault, *History of Madness*, cit. p. 9.

¹⁶ *Idem*, p. 169.

living within a human body was a form of madness in itself. Similarly, in his *Praise of Folly*, one of the major masterpieces of European humanism, Erasmus eulogised the power of madness and supported his idea regarding the absolute necessity of insanity in daily life. Thus, according to these two famous thinkers, nothing would be possible without insanity and the literary production of that period seemed to agree with their opinions. The sixteenth century and the very first decades of the seventeenth century attributed enormous importance and credits to madness, in fact, insanity played an enormous role in a large number of works of literature, from *Don Quixote* by Cervantes to numerous plays written by Shakespeare, like *Macbeth*, *Othello* and *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Foucault, in his *History of Madness*, while dealing with the use of madness as a topic in several literary works of the period in question, said that insanity could count on a “multiple presence in the literature of the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth century”.¹⁷

On the contrary, the importance attributed to madness in the sixteenth century was about to vanish soon after the very beginning of the seventeenth century. A wind of innovation blowing across Europe would almost completely delete that passion for the numerous secrets of madness. Protestants and Christians were still obsessed with the presence of evil and many thought that madness was a spiritual affliction. Madness – after the freedom it had found in the sixteenth-century imaginary and literature – had to be confined again: mental otherness was too scary to be left free to roam in the city. As a result, it was in the seventeenth century when a significant large quantity of houses, aimed at hosting thousands of mad people, were erected. Britain, for instance, was being filled with numerous great hospitals: houses of confinement were spreading all around.

However, to be precise, the British history of confinement dated back to the Elizabethan period. In fact, it was specifically during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603) when poor people and vagabonds were sent to the so-called houses of confinement, also known as houses of correction or, later in time, workhouses. Elaine Murphy clearly explains that “[...] the Elizabethan Poor Law legislation of 1601 was the administrative foundation on which the system of care was constructed”.¹⁸ Those people – forced to spend their life in a house of confinement – were sentenced by a commission

¹⁷ M. Foucault, *History of Madness*, cit., p. 35.

¹⁸ R. Porter, D. Wright, *The Confinement of the Insane*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, p. 334.

of judges who were apparently able to understand who deserved to be kept in isolation from the rest of society. Mad people, part of the category of poverty and social exclusion, fell into the cauldron. Furthermore, in 1630, in accordance with the decisions taken by previous monarchs, king Charles II suggested that vagabonds, poor and idle people should be pursued and sent to public houses of correction: the inmates had to be kept occupied and busy. A further royal act in 1670 modified the management of those houses of confinement and, in the late seventeenth century, new poorhouses were rapidly built up.

While all those huge houses of correction were expected to be places of charity, the myth of benevolence soon disappeared. Workhouses were turned into either public hospitals or private madhouses, secular houses of seclusion, where the poor was punished, confined, sentenced and condemned to desperate isolation, as well as to physical and mental frustration.¹⁹ During a very bad period characterised by the diffusion of plagues all over Europe, as the English contagion of the 1665 and 1666, madness and poverty seemed to go hand in hand. According to Foucault, houses of confinement took the place of medieval leprosariums,²⁰ where the poor, the idle and the mad were condemned to compulsory labour. “Houses of confinement were no longer simply the lazar house on the edges of towns, but became themselves a form that scared the face of the town [...]”.²¹ In other words, while Cervantes and Shakespeare, for instance in their *Don Quixote* or *King Lear*, imagined an insane free to move in daily light, in the seventeenth century Reason vindicated its supremacy: the numerous houses of confinement and correction were interpreted as the perfect instrument in order to maintain that fundamental and coveted control over the unreasoning impulses and thoughts of the insane. The asocial had to be neutralised, once and for all.

While madhouses were growing in number in a significant way, something absolutely unexpected befell the royal family. Opposing several new European theories concerning madness as an illness going hand in hand with poverty, health conditions of a royal member in London rejected the idea that mental fragility was just an affair for renegades. The English crown, King George III, who held the reins of the country from 1760 to 1820, became victim of insanity as a consequence of porphyria, which made

¹⁹ M. Foucault, *History of Madness*, cit., pp. 47-57.

²⁰ *Idem*, p. 71.

²¹ *Idem*, p. 355.

him suffer from delirious ravings and baffling hallucinations. Convinced though he was, the King was soon contradicted by his physicians: his health was not fine. There were conflicting ideas about the mental health of the King and many physicians did not think that the head of the country was simply nervous, as the King thought: he was merely mad in doctors' opinion.²²

As a result of the rapid changes in society, of industrialization and probably as a consequence of the King's mental instability, a consistent number of treatises about the condition of 'being nervous' was being written and published in Britain during the second half of the eighteenth century and during the early nineteenth century. For example, a renowned chemist and natural philosopher of the seventeenth century, famous for his studies on the brain and nerves, George Cheyne (1671-1743), important Scottish physician, elaborated his own theory about mental disorders. In accordance with Hippocrates and Galen, he guessed that breeding was the main vital function that had to be controlled in order to avoid possible mental breakdowns; in fact, having being victim of obesity for a very long time, Cheyne himself was a patient of his own theories related to diet and, as Bynum underlines, he made the adjective 'nervous' obtain some of its modern connotations, in fact, consulting the dictionary of Samuel Johnson, published in 1755, being nervous could be also associated to the fact of having diseased and disturbed nerves.²³ Nervousness, in other words, was becoming very important in society, so much so that the term 'nervous' deserved its own place in the most influential dictionary of that time.

Another brilliant mind in the field of insanity was William Cullen. The history of madness owes to Cullen (1710-1790) the invention of the term “neurosis”.²⁴ While the large majority of his colleagues still supported the idea that nervous pathologies were related to humours produced by the liver, the Scottish physician was the first in history to declare that neurosis had to be imputed to a dysfunction of the nervous system. Later in time, it was Sir Thomas Trotter, a pupil of Cullen, who stressed the fact that the fast change related to the development of factories at the end of the eighteenth century and the necessarily rapid adjustments to the new social organization had significantly and predominantly contributed to the growth in number of a large quantity of cases of

²² A. Scull, *Hysteria, The Biography*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009, p. 24.

²³ W. F. Bynum, R. Porter, M. Shepherd (eds), *The Anatomy of Madness*, cit., p. 91.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

nervous diseases. According to Trotter, in fact, the only possible solution to nervous problems was allegedly the act of returning to an simpler and less frenetic life, with simple food, trying to avoid arguments and many other complications already existing between genders.²⁵

As Cullen and Trotter demonstrated, like several other theorists did, the explanation, as well as classification, of nervous diseases were great preoccupations for European physicians. Doctors from France, Britain and many other European countries had long been trying to categorise and to provide a taxonomy of mental diseases. In this context, it is worth remembering the name of Philippe Pinel (1745-1826), who became famous for his division between the concepts of “dementia” and “imbecility”. While the former, in his opinion, was characterized by immobility and paralysis, the latter was described as the pure and fast fluctuation of the mind, causing disordered sensations and physical uncontrolled movements.²⁶ Another important physician of the seventeenth century was Thomas Sydenham (1624-1689), the English Hippocrates and father of English medicine,²⁷ as underlined by Andrew Scull in his *Hysteria, The Biography*. He told “mania” and “melancholy” apart and specified that mania had to be considered as the very latest stage of melancholia.²⁸ Thus, the Victorian age and psychiatry owed to Sydenham and his colleagues – Cullen, Trotter and Pinel – the origins of a long tradition of studies and theories linked to the concept of madness and cerebral activity. The study and categorisation of those different mental symptoms were surely on the agenda of several physicians.

Focusing specifically on hysteria and its historical developments, despite the consistent amount of medical researches carried out throughout Europe, hysteria remained – for a very long time – an illness that was attributed and associated to women only. This basic notion is crucial in this context because it gives the reader the chance to realise how a pathology – a gendered one indeed – was used by men against women, up until the twentieth century. The role played by hysteria in Victorian time was crucial, because this gendered pathology became the excuse used to deny legal rights and remove faculties. Hysteria – from the Greek, *ὑστέρα* (uterus) – had long been considered

²⁵ W. F. Bynum, R. Porter, M. Shepherd (eds), *The Anatomy of Madness*, cit., p. 91.

²⁶ M. Foucault, *History of Madness*, cit., p. 262.

²⁷ A. Scull, *Hysteria, The Biography*, cit., p. 26.

²⁸ M. Foucault, *op. cit.*, pp. 274-275.

as the incapability and impossibility to master and control movements, as well as sensations and desires. Hysterics were thought to be those persons whose sentiments and sensitivity were more acute and, as a result, women biologically seemed to be more likely than men to fall into this category. Since Greek times, at least, the female body had been seen as a crossroad of emotions and inner movements mainly caused and particularly influenced by the womb. For example, according to Celsus, Greek philosopher, the womb – an animal which was continuously looking for the generation of offspring – could wander within the female body, squeezing other organs and generating, subsequently, dysfunctions and inner confusion.²⁹

With Christianity, female hysterical convulsions and nervous dysfunctions became demonic possession: only flames could redeem those women.³⁰ It was commonly thought that the sensitivity of their fragile mind and, more accurately, of their organism made women more likely to suffer from nervous illnesses. It was especially in the Victorian age that people witnessed the evident division between feminine madness, fragility and stupidity and male rationality and firmness, as ironically underlined by Mary Wollstonecraft in *Maria; or the Wrongs of Woman* in 1797.³¹ Therefore, what should maybe clarified here is that, even if burning the female insane – because of her alleged demonic possession – was a surpassed medieval tradition, the illuminated Victorian age found other ways to demean female bodies and minds. Victorians used insanity to bind women to the lowest levels of the evolutionary scale. Madness placed women and men on different social levels: men managed women and controlled their lunacy, as painted by Tony Robert-Fleury in his *Pinel Freeing the Insane* in 1887³² or by Pierre Aristide André Brouillet in his *A Clinical Lesson at the Salpêtrière*.³³ These two paintings are significantly important in this context because they display the typical pre-Victorian and Victorian woman, subjected to men and social impositions.

Therefore, until William Cullen, head of the Faculty of Medicine in Glasgow, the first physician that thought out of the box and glimpsed hysteria also in men, hysteria itself had been obstinately perceived only as a female affair. Furthermore, madness was

²⁹ A. Scull, *Hysteria, The Biography*, cit., p. 14.

³⁰ L. Appignanesi, *Mad, Bad and Sad. A History of Women and the Mind Doctors from 1800 to the Present*, Virago Press, London, 2008, p. 143.

³¹ E. Showalter, *The Female Malady. Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1985, p. 1.

³² A. Scull, *Madness in Civilization*, cit., p. 152.

³³ E. Showalter, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

also often interpreted as the reason for those silent and veiled numerous protests of women against social constraints related to sexuality and hierarchy,³⁴ which became two fundamental issues noisily discussed by women in the Victorian age. From the eighteenth century onwards, women started to make their voices heard and society was doubtlessly shocked by those attempts at subverting social rules. Those female rebels were just insane for the public opinion. As suggested by Thomas Laycock (1812-1876), one of the most important physiologists interested in women and author of *A Treatise on the Nervous Diseases of Women* (1840):

it is quite true that cases have occurred occasionally in the male sex, presenting the phenomena of convulsive hysteria: but so rarely, and under such circumstances, that even if their exact similarity to the hysterical paroxysm of the female be admitted, like other exceptions, they but serve to prove the general rule, namely, that it is the nervous system of women which is implicated in thus affections.³⁵

A few years before the birth of Laycock, Johann Joseph Gassner (1727-1779) was suggesting his remedy against insanity and his pseudo-medical treatment of madness based on exorcism.³⁶ In the same years, Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815) had proposed his own theory – largely mentioned in Victorian popular fiction – based on a property he referred to as “animal magnetism”,³⁷ which was explained in detail in his *Sur La Découverte Du Magnétisme Animal*, published in 1779. Mesmer was convinced that he had discovered a physical liquid that could affect the nervous system and cure every disease. According to Mesmer, diseases were simply flow blocks in the body. By using the method proposed by Mesmer, a physician could cure his patients either with the force of his gaze, or with the movement of his hands without touching the surface of the patient's body, or with the heat of his hands over the liquid block.

On the winds of the French Revolution, Mesmerism landed on English coasts and soon found a huge number of supporters: mesmeric salons were opened everywhere in

³⁴ N. Yarom, *Matrix of Hysteria. Psychoanalysis of the Struggle Between the Sexes as Enacted in the Body*, Routledge, New York, 2005, p. 192.

³⁵ T. Laycock, *A Treatise on the Nervous Diseases of Women*, FB & Ltd, Dalton House, London, 2015 (1840), p. 8.

³⁶ A. Scull, *Madness in Civilization*, cit., p. 177.

³⁷ A. Scull, *Hysteria, The Biography*, cit., p. 58.

Britain in order to display the incredible “truth” Mesmer thought he had discovered. And not by chance, “[t]he subjects were generally hysterical women. Their imagination was greatly excited and the same thing recurred to them as now happens to those persons we hear of as being afflicted with religious mania, etc. – they were hypnotized”.³⁸ Those mesmerized women would be categorised and labelled by Michel Foucault as “subjugated knowledges”. Foucault, in fact, argued that those female knowledges could be “disqualified as inadequate to their task or inefficiently elaborated”.³⁹ Women were more and more perceived as perfect examples of mental fragility and defenceless stupidity. Their nature was perceived as evidently opposed to male supremacy.

In addition, this hurricane of innovation brought by that astonishing pseudo-medical mesmeric treatment to cure nervous illnesses was accompanied by the development of another pseudo-medical branch: phrenology. In 1796, Professor Franz Joseph Gall was teaching cranioscopy in Germany. He had a strong professional relation with his collaborator, Johann Gaspar Spurzheim (1776-1832), who brought into vogue the use of the term “phrenology”. In the years to come, both would be defined responsible for a large number of theories spreading all around Europe, disseminating the message that the shape of the skull could speak volumes with regards to personality.⁴⁰ This pseudo-branch of medicine had such an impact on the nineteenth century that several theorists, such as Lombroso, wrote volumes and volumes that fostered ideas related to human behaviours as determined by shapes of skulls. “Theoretically, phrenology provided a clear physiological explanation of the operations of the brain, one that permitted a unified account of normal as well as abnormal mental functioning”.⁴¹ Therefore, while mesmerism was supposed to cure nerves illnesses, phrenology could, according to its supporters, discover the hidden insane: a new witch hunt was going to get started.

The development of a large number of new scientific and pseudo-scientific discoveries and disclosures in the field of medicine in Britain – but also in Europe –

³⁸ M. Regnard, “Sleep and Somnambulism. II”, *Science*, Vol. 2, No. 50 (Jun. 11, 1881), pp. 270-274, p. 270.

³⁹ C. Gordon (ed.), *Power/Knowledge, Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, Michel Foucault, The Harvest Press, New York, 1980, pp. 78-108, p. 82.

⁴⁰ A. Scull, *Madness in Civilization*, cit., p. 214.

⁴¹ *Idem*, p. 216.

were somehow contributing to the health of that part of the population affected by insanity, which – as physicians were strongly convinced – seemed to be so easily curable through the use both of drugs and of diverse treatments. While the insane had been victims of physical violence in the previous centuries, while madness had been confined, isolated, abandoned and hidden within madhouses, prisons and workhouses, the intentions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were different. Physicians and therapists significantly started investigating new models and ways to cure or, at least, limit madness.

Victorian psychiatry undeniably was the most mature fruit of centuries and centuries of medical and pseudo-medical research in the field of madness. It was the pure response that had been provided by long centuries of intense medical developments, infinite treatises and passionate research, meant to give humanity a possible treatment to cure nerves and mental illnesses. Victorian developments in the field of psychiatry were interpreted as a watershed between the mere isolation and exclusion of the hopeless insane and the effective medical treatment of the lunatic. Psychiatric medical specialism – with its diagnosis, treatment processes and preventive suggestions – was an invention of the nineteenth century and, in fact, from that century onwards, history of madness can no longer be taken into consideration separately from the history of psychiatry, which had an enormous impact on Victorian popular culture and society, in general. Moreover, what should be underlined and specified before going deeper into the history of this medical branch is that if the Victorian alienist or any brilliant medical mind of that time “could circumscribe madness, it was not because he knew it but because he mastered it”.⁴²

The Enlightenment did flatter itself that studying the insane was possible and finding a solution to lunatics' problem could be the following necessary step. Physicians got on their carriages or embarked and travelled to collect pieces of information about innovations and discoveries of their colleagues all around Europe; a net of scientists was working, discoveries in the field of madness and nerves were innumerable and every single medical goal was seen as an opportunity to save hundreds of lunatics. As a result, as observed by Edward Shorter, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the horrors of jails and prisons for the insane were over, according to Johann Christian Reil (1759-

⁴² M. Foucault, *History of Madness*, cit., p. 505.

1813), German doctor that recognized the numerous efforts made by physicians at the beginning of the new century to stretch a hand and save the insane not only from the deep well of his mind,⁴³ but also for the devilish hands of his persecutors within those horrifying madhouses.

Institutions for mad people were presented as necessary to keep social order. One of the first physicians, still in the eighteenth century, to recognize and display the benefits of institutionalizing the insane was William Battie (1703-1776), author of *A Treatise on Madness* in 1758 and founder of the St. Luke's Hospital in London.⁴⁴ According to him, madness was a pathology that could not be controlled only, it could be literally cured, as many other kinds of human distempers. It is precisely with Battie, according to Shorter, that the British history of psychiatry got effectively started.⁴⁵ While the British psychiatric basic notions regarding the treatment of the insane and of the management of the new spaces for the observation of madness in asylums were due to Battie, in Italy, Vincenzo Chiarugi (1759-1820), in Germany, Johann Christian Reil, and in France, Philippe Pinel devoted themselves to laying the foundations of a new European practical and theoretical treatment of madness.

In 1793, imbued with Enlightenment ideas and full of reformist ideals, Pinel was asked by the French Government to organize the Bicêtre Hospice.⁴⁶ Gazing with “pity” at all the lunatics that had been long isolated and abandoned in Parisian madhouses, Pinel immediately opted for the elimination of chain pinioning. However, as argued by Foucault, Pinel should not be considered as a messenger from paradise; in fact, while cold showers and baths, for instance, were used in the Renaissance to refresh nerves of people, with Pinel, “the use of cold shower became openly juridical, and a shower was a usual punishment meted out by the simple police tribunal that permanently sat in the asylums”.⁴⁷ In addition, two years after the elimination of chains at the Bicêtre Hospice, Sir Philippe Pinel became director of the Salpêtrière, where chains were soon abolished too: the insane was no longer a monster to be persecuted and tied, he apparently became a patient in need of attentions. This innovative decision to free the insane and substitute chains with straitjackets was not what made him particularly famous throughout Europe

⁴³ E. Shorter, *A History of Psychiatry*, cit., p. 8.

⁴⁴ *Idem*, p. 9.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁶ *Idem*, p. 11.

⁴⁷ M. Foucault, *History of Madness*, cit., p. 501.

(Vincenzo Chiarugi, for instance, had the same revolutionary idea in Italy). In fact, Pinel became particularly renowned in 1801 for the publication of some of his notes. Even though he was suggesting that the asylum was the right place to carry out medical experiments to attempt to find a solution for madness and nervous pain, as Battie had already suggested, that revolutionary text by Pinel, according to Edward Shorter, failed to specify the way in which an asylum could literally become a real therapeutic place.⁴⁸

It was a disciple of Pinel, Jean-Etienne Esquirol (1772-1840), who effectively put the revolutionary ideas of his Professor into practice. After attending Pinel's lectures during his university career in Paris, Esquirol soon began his professional climbing and became particularly famous for his studies on monomania, which turned into the mental illness of that time. Once he became professor of psychiatry, Esquirol started thinking of the way to improve the ideas of Pinel with regards to the possibility of turning the asylum into a real therapeutic place for the insane. Convinced that passions were at the core of mental instability, Esquirol guessed that isolation from the rest of the world would be the best way to improve the health of his lunatics. In his view, keeping distance from relatives, friends, domestic passions and habits would be the right path to follow for the achievement of happiness and solace.⁴⁹ All these French ideas and innovations in the field of psychiatry, carrying the name of Pinel and Esquirol, spread not only in Europe, but also all over the world, such as in the United States of America, where the organization of detention of the insane was also renewed and rethought. In fact, after the arrival of European innovative suggestions, the American Psychiatric Association was eventually founded by Benjamin Rush (1746-1813), who has been considered as the father of American psychiatry since 1965.⁵⁰ Worldwide, physicians could clearly perceive that a new medical branch was definitely and finally taking shape. Medicine, doctors and asylums were ready to make the life of lunatics possibly less hopeless all around the world and that numerous researches and achievements had a very strong impact on masses and culture.

In addition to the efforts made by French physicians, an English male mind was praised by several colleagues for his ability to alleviate the pain of many suffering from mental illnesses. John Conolly (1794-1866), for many the English successor of Pinel,

⁴⁸ E. Shorter, *A History of Psychiatry*, cit., p. 12.

⁴⁹ *Idem*, p. 13.

⁵⁰ *Idem*, p. 15.

brought considerable material for reflection and innovation in the field of British psychiatry. *An Inquiry Concerning the Indications of Insanity*, published in 1830, is a masterpiece about mental weakness. His main aim was improving treatment in British asylums and he kept stressing that the disappearance or aggravation of mental dysfunctions was actually related to the context in which the patient lived.⁵¹ Therefore, the inadequate treatment to which most of the British lunatics were subjected had to be seen as one of the major causes of insanity itself, rather than a cure. In other words, not only psychiatry was attempting to improve the condition of lunatics, but also asylums themselves were being radically changed in their therapeutic organization.

If the medical horizon was somehow brightening and physicians were perfecting the creation of that medical branch – psychiatry – that would provide Victorians with a new perception of human inner reality, it was yet not very clear what that new discipline was to deal with. The history of madness had showed that mental illnesses could vary *ad infinitum* and that nervous illnesses needed to be categorized. Physicians opining on insanity offered their own interpretations. William Battie, inspired by Boerhaave, considered madness as a sort of obstruction of the vessels which brought blood to the brain: the obstruction pressed the nerves, generating mental fragility; moreover, while Vincenzo Chiarugi's thought that madness found its dwelling in the brain, core of the nervous system, Benjamin Rush was firmly convinced that madness inhabited the veins running through the brain.⁵² However, in spite of these three prominent examples displaying the enormous confusion on the causes of madness, at the beginning of the new century, hopeful founders of psychiatry would surely have agreed with Michel Foucault when he stated that madness “has the status of an enigmatic thing: it may for the moment in fact be inaccessible in the totality of its truth, yet we do not doubt that one day it will split open and deliver up its secret to our knowledge”.⁵³

While no common definition of madness existed, the biological inheritance of nervous illnesses was generally agreed upon. The concept of hereditary insanity became really important especially in Victorian time when fears of women – with their apparently innate insanity and the possible infection of the offspring – turned into nightmarish preoccupations. Physicians were convinced that once mental diseases

⁵¹ W. F. Bynum, R. Porter, M. Shepherd (eds), *The Anatomy of Madness*, cit., p. 112.

⁵² *Idem*, p. 27.

⁵³ M. Foucault, *History of Madness*, cit., p. 462.

appeared in a family tree, it could be taken for granted that madness, sooner or later, would affect other members of the same family. Pinel, as well as Esquirol, attributed credits to the theory of heritability of madness, finding in their hospitals a large number of examples of mothers having handed down their infected genes to the offspring, suffering from headaches, asthma, hysteria, insanity, neurasthenia and other mental pathologies. “Victorian and Edwardian assumptions about the nerves temperament in fact depended heavily on heredity”.⁵⁴

In 1890, Jules Gabriel François Baillarger (1809-1890) published a research he had carried out concerning the heredity of mental illnesses. Following the ideas of Baillarger, Prosper Lucas (1808-1885), another French physician and alienist, in 1850 published *Philosophical and Physiological Treatise on Natural Heredity*, in which he supported Baillarger: to him, insanity could be effectively transmitted and inherited.⁵⁵ Another example was Ulysée Trélat (1798-1879), a physician working at the Salpêtrière, who spoke about inheritance of madness in his *Le Folie Lucide* published in 1861; in his opinion, lucid madness was the result of the transmission of insanity from parents to children.⁵⁶ Nonetheless, despite the fact that more and more doctors were agreeing with the inheritance of insanity, all these new ideas about the transmission of madness were inconsistent and, in many cases, inconsequential.⁵⁷ The more doctors spread the idea that insanity was transmissible, the more people's obsessions grew in number and, even if this school of thought definitely brought a few innovations and meaningless contributions to mental medicine, its impact on Victorian society was amazingly great, as demonstrated by sensation novels analysed in the third chapter and nineteenth-century degenerative theories discussed in the fourth.

Moreover, while before 1828 madness could be handled by any kind of physician, mainly asked to provide the patient with a rough and superficial diagnosis and with the prescription of some curative drugs, after the Madhouse Act in 1828, the role played by the alienist in asylums became essential. In fact, professionalism was finally taking shape and the act reinforced the voice of alienists in the diagnosis and treatment of madness. In 1841, mad-doctors even inaugurated their own *Association of Medical*

⁵⁴ J. Oppenheim, *Shattered Nerves, Doctors, Patients, and Depression in Victorian England*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1991, p. 89.

⁵⁵ W. F. Bynum, R. Porter, M. Shepherd (eds), *The Anatomy of Madness*, cit., p. 191.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁷ *Idem*, pp. 199-200.

Officers of Hospitals for the Insane – turned, some years later, into the *Association of Medical Officers of Asylums and Hospitals of the Insane* and, in 1865, it was transformed into the *Medico-Psychological Association* – to keep stressing their difference from the mass of doctors in other branches of Victorian medicine.⁵⁸

The roots of psychiatry found a fertile ground in the nineteenth century as a consequence of the several advances in the study of nerves. From 1810 to 1826, a well-known Scottish physician, Charles Bell (1774-1842), studied and displayed the constitution and formation of nerves, which are formed by filaments that could be divided into two main categories: nerves for sensations and nerves for movements. Furthermore, new researches on the spinal cord were carried out. Marshall Hall (1790-1857), early neurologist and physiologist, focused his attention on the function of the spinal cord and his achievements in the field of nerves were absolutely remarkable.⁵⁹ In addition to Hall's discoveries, the neurophysiologist Thomas Laycock – mentioned before – supported his theory concerning the brain's reflex action. Another brilliant mind was Charles Handfield-Jones (1819-1890), English physician, author of *Studies on Functional Nervous Disorders* (1870).⁶⁰ He had already carried out important researches on the liver when he decided to focus specifically on nervous disorders: he stressed that achieving a systematization of mental disorders was a mirage, even if physicians from the University of Edinburgh – the Athens of the North – were confident that a classification could be found.⁶¹

With regards to Edinburgh, while London appeared as a dense net of prominent personalities and scientists of all kinds who exchanged ideas and discoveries, “a magnet for anyone wishing to make his mark in science or medicine”,⁶² Georgian and Victorian Edinburgh “possessed by far the largest medical school in early nineteenth-century Britain”.⁶³ Edinburgh could effectively count on one of the best medical universities in Britain and in Europe, home to the best alienists that would become the heads of a large number of asylums in the decades to come, for example James Crichton-Browne, who, from 1866 to 1876 was head of the West Riding Lunatic Asylum in Wakefield which

⁵⁸ J. Oppenheim, *Shattered Nerves*, cit., p. 24.

⁵⁹ W. F. Bynum, R. Porter, M. Shepherd (eds), *The Anatomy of Madness*, cit., p. 94.

⁶⁰ *Idem*, p. 95.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*.

⁶² W. F. Bynum, *Science and the Practice of Medicine in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994, p. 110.

⁶³ *Ibidem*.

was one of the most important asylums in Britain, at the forefront of scientific research in the field of nervous illnesses.

The West Riding Lunatic Asylum had already been directed by William Charles Ellis (1780-1839), a famous English phrenologist, whose leadership considerably enlarged the asylum, which could host more than a thousand patients. Nevertheless, if the contribution of Ellis can be remarkable, it is surely nothing if compared to the efforts made by James Crichton-Browne (1840-1938), a crucial character of Victorian mental medicine. A close friend of Charles Darwin, Crichton-Browne turned the asylum into one of the most active sites for medical research in the field of insanity. Advances in the analysis of neuropsychiatric diseases, human brain, spinal cord and investigations into pharmacological preparations for assuaging damages, problems and the ache caused by delirium are just some examples of the activities carried out within Crichton-Browne's asylum.⁶⁴ The study of two particular pathologies was remarkable: epilepsy and paralysis, widely common and present in every asylum in Britain, had found someone who was willing and eager to study them.

Son of the notorious supporter of Scottish psychiatry, William Alexander Francis Browne, James Crichton-Browne was really famous for his significant contributions to the changes of asylums' organization and he became a crucial man in the history of the evolution of British psychiatry. He influenced Victorians with his ideas that mental illnesses were the awkward meeting of psychological and physiological elements. The numerous goals achieved by phrenology, which had identified, by the time, thirty different areas of the brain, allowed Sir Crichton-Browne to deepen his work on mental illnesses; however, even if phrenology is considered by Janet Oppenheim one of Crichton-Browne's main sources of inspirations, it was his stay in Paris, where he shared ideas and opinions with Pinel and Esquirol in the late 1820s, that considerably moulded his vast experience.⁶⁵ After his Parisian adventure, he went back to Scotland, where, from 1857 to 1861, he studied in Edinburgh. There, he found eminent Professors, whose names not only still resonate now in the corridors of the university, but are also remarkable pillars in the history of medicine. For instance, Crichton-Browne met James Syme, professor of clinical surgery, Robert Christison, professor of

⁶⁴ W. F. Bynum, R. Porter, M. Shepherd (eds), *The Anatomy of Madness*, cit., p. 96.

⁶⁵ J. Oppenheim, *Shattered Nerves*, cit., p. 56.

toxicology, Lyon Playfair, professor of chemistry, and John Goodsir, professor of anatomy. However, the most influential professor, who metaphorically walked Crichton-Browne through his experience with nervous illnesses, was Dr. Thomas Laycock, professor of medical practice, expert at cerebral physiology and mental disorders.

One of the most important researches carried out under the directorship of Crichton-Browne at the West Riding Lunatic Asylum in Wakefield was that of David Ferrier (1849-1928), whose studies were actually expected to contradict or confirm the work of Spurzheim and Gall, the two famous fathers of European phrenology.⁶⁶ Despite the fact that phrenology was, just apparently, losing credibility, Crichton-Browne continued to suggest that the shape of skulls actually could be indicative of one's attitudes, behaviours and professions. While supporting a large number of researches carried out by his colleagues, such as Ferrier's, Crichton-Browne went on cultivating his own interests, such as the effect and consequence of cerebral injuries on mental abilities. After the Anatomy Act in 1832, all those who died in public institutions could legally be anatomised and, as a result, he could scrutinize the reports of numerous autopsies of epileptics.⁶⁷ His long list of interests and the permission to touch human flesh and study the inner human world granted by the Anatomy Act gave Crichton-Browne the opportunity to become one of the most important characters in nineteenth-century insanity. His fame and cleverness turned him into an example for several colleagues and his influence was substantial, both in medicine and in social studies. In fact, his most astonishing effort was the study of the facial expressions of the insane. This study related to speech, facial muscles and expressions, memory failure, wobbly limbs was his masterpiece, and it would greatly influence his friend Charles Darwin in the years to come.⁶⁸

While Crichton-Browne was devoting himself to experiments, scientific contributions and active research, on the other side of the English Channel, in France, Jean-Martin Charcot (1825-1893), contemporary of Sir Crichton-Browne, became famous for being an incredible and sensational psychiatrist, despite the fact that he was simply an internist and, above all, was rather unaware of the innumerable innovations

⁶⁶ W. F. Bynum, R. Porter, M. Shepherd (eds), *The Anatomy of Madness*, cit., p. 97.

⁶⁷ J. Oppenheim, *Shattered Nerves*, cit., p. 69.

⁶⁸ P. Prodger, *Darwin's Camera, Art and Photography in the Theory of Evolution*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009, pp. 92.

and discoveries in the field of the psychiatry that were taking place, especially in Britain and France, his mother country.⁶⁹ Leaving his poor preparation regarding insanity aside, his glorious career started relatively late, at the age of thirty-seven, when he was appointed chief physician at the Salpêtrière in Paris. There he could study the nervous illnesses of women, due to the enormous number of female patients present in the Parisian asylum *par excellence*. By the 1860s, the hospital – also used as prison for prostitutes and female criminals – became one of the most famous institutions in Europe for the treatment of insanity not because Charcot was effectively honouring the names of his predecessors, Pinel and Esquirol, but because he managed to transform the treatment of an illness into a popular spectacle, as clearly demonstrated by several novels of the second half of the nineteenth century. In the 1870s, Charcot rapidly became, without any doubt, the most famous physician in France and, unable to define a formless mass of neurotic impulses, he decided to use the term *hysteria* to group several symptoms that, in his opinion, could stay under the same terminological umbrella.⁷⁰

As underlined by Andrew Scull, Charcot considered the Salpêtrière as a living pathological circus⁷¹ where he could train his clinical abilities. While many pathologies were displaying their real shape and several symptoms were being categorized, hysteria seemed to be a garbage-can where to throw all the symptoms that had not been catalogued or had not found an explanation yet. Charcot became famous for his insisting that hysteria was a specific illness, still perceived as mainly female. According to him, hysteria affected the nerves and manifested itself through headaches, loss of sensation of body's parts, convulsions, and, in women only, ovarian tenderness. Furthermore, he became famous also for his peculiar way to treat hysteria; in fact, Charcot was – nationally and internationally – praised for his interest and discoveries in hypnosis, especially from the 1870s.⁷² As had happened to Mesmer and his successful and astonishing shows all over Europe in the previous century, spectacles displaying, not by chance, hysterical women hypnotized by Charcot soon became a bait-and-switch for several physicians and ordinary people. As an obvious result, the shows multiplied in number. It is impressing that Joseph Babinski (1857-1932), French neurologist, some

⁶⁹ A. Scull, *Hysteria, The Biography*, cit., p. 111.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁷¹ *Idem*, p. 105.

⁷² *Idem*, p. 113.

years after the death of Charcot in 1893, affirmed that hysteria was a “maladie de la persuasion curable par la persuasion”,⁷³ demonstrating that the influence of Charcot had been preponderant and was still reigning after his death. Medical art seemed to have been turned into wizardry.

If today it might be clear that hypnotism is simply a matter of personal persuasion, in Charcot's opinion, the success of hypnotism demonstrated that the patient was hysterical.⁷⁴ “Charcot se réfère à un processus psychologique: la suggestion”.⁷⁵ Among several female patients of Charcot, Blanche Wittman is today considered Charcot's performer *par excellence*; also known as 'the queen of hysterics', she frequently accompanied Charcot during his innumerable shows. Charcot's pet hysteric,⁷⁶ as Andrew Scull labels her, was expected to display the diverse phases of hysterical attacks that had been identified by Charcot; practically she performed on command. Being a woman, Blanche Wittman was basically deemed the perfect example of hysteric for the time.⁷⁷

Charcot's ideas had already colonized Europe and many of them reached Vienna, which, at the turn of the century, would rapidly become the new centre in the field of insanity: a new way to cure mental fragility was to be refined there. After the death of Charcot in 1893, the term *hysteria* rapidly disappeared from French asylums – reluctant to use Charcot's hypnotic practices already in the last half of the 1880s – and moved to Vienna, where Sigmund Freud was ready to embrace and adopt it.⁷⁸ The very first decades of the twentieth century were characterized by the evolution and diffusion of a psychiatric practice that would influence the entire century. Freudian psychoanalysis transformed Freud into the only one who actually managed to wrest psychiatry from neurology, according to Edward Shorter.⁷⁹ In fact, looking back at the history of psychiatry, one might perfectly realize that the study of the nervous system, from an anatomical point of view (neurology) and the study of diseases that can affect mental faculties (psychiatry) had never been divided and had – for a very long time –

⁷³ G. Paicheler, “Charcot, l'hystérie et ses effets institutionnels: du 'labyrinthe inextricable' à l'impasse (Commentaire)”, *Sciences Sociales et Santé*, Vol. 6, No. 3-4, 1988, pp. 133-144, https://www.persee.fr/doc/AsPDF/sosan_0294-0337_1988_num_6_3_1107.pdf, 25/06/2018, p. 142.

⁷⁴ E. Shorter, *A History of Psychiatry*, cit., p. 138.

⁷⁵ G. Paicheler, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

⁷⁶ A. Scull, *Hysteria, The Biography*, cit., p. 119.

⁷⁷ *Idem*, p. 125.

⁷⁸ *Idem*, pp. 133-134.

⁷⁹ E. Shorter, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

unconsciously shared the same space. In other words, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) was the first man to grant psychiatry a place of its own, taking it out of asylums.⁸⁰ While the majority of practices that had been used in asylums up until the nineteenth century were more likely to be interpreted as punishments rather than as beneficial treatments, psychoanalysis was meant to make the patient feel comfortable. It did not look at the brain, a mere membrane of the mind; psychoanalysis' objective lies in the research of the unconscious, already investigated by Pierre Janet (1859-1947), a pupil of Charcot. Since the unconscious was considered to be the deepest mental layer that governed human action, psychoanalysis had to be necessarily based on introspection, meant to dig into one's past experiences.

After graduating in medicine in 1881 and becoming Professor in neuropathology in 1885, on 13th October 1885 a young man got off the Orient Express at the Gare de l'Est. After changing his mind and leaving his apparent interests in zoology aside, Sigmund Freud, 29 years old, decided to travel to France where he ardently wanted to attend Professor Charcot's lectures, one of the most spectacular attractions about hysteria of the century. With his first patients he experimented not only hypnosis, but also electrotherapy and baths, which were ordinary practices in European asylums. Bewitched by the suggestions of Charcot, he considered the eminent Professor a unique case of perfection and, as a result, during a conference in Vienna, while the most brilliant minds of Austrian psychiatry, such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Heinrich Bamberger and Meynert, were all ears, he dared to praise the work of the French Professor in front of the audience: he had just dug his own grave. Supporting the ideas of Charcot was the reason why Freud would be warmly invited to leave the university: he fell into disgrace within the Viennese faculty of medicine and his colleagues isolated him.⁸¹ It was only Joseph Breuer (1842-1925), an Austrian internist, who, some years later, took pity and proposed to Freud to work together. The result of that collaboration was a book, *Studies on Hysteria*, published in 1895, dealing with female mental fragility.

“[...] We have instigated over a period of years the different forms and symptoms of hysteria for the purpose of discovering the cause and the process which first provoked

⁸⁰ E. Shorter, *A History of Psychiatry*, cit., p. 146.

⁸¹ *Idem*, p. 149.

the phenomena in question, [...]”⁸² but “it was necessary to hypnotize the patients and reawaken the memory of the time in which the symptom first appeared, [...]”.⁸³ After analysing a series of female minds with the help of Charcot's hypnosis (abandoned by Freud in the late 1890s), Breuer and Freud came to the conclusion that hysteria was the result of sexual trauma either in childhood or in adulthood. In other words, the first convictions of psychoanalysis were related to the enormous power of sexuality over human minds, as underlined in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, published in 1905.⁸⁴ Furthermore, Dr. Sigmund Freud explained that “hysteria is the oldest, the most familiar, the most striking neurosis under consideration”⁸⁵ and the treatment of that sign of perversion and degeneration “[...] requires the full consent, the full attention of the patients, but, above all, their confidence, for the analysis regularly leads to the inmost and most secretly guarded psychic processes”.⁸⁶ Patients – mainly women, of course – had to let their spontaneous and involuntary ideas out, with no resistance, in order to cure hysteria.⁸⁷

As well as hysteria, another late-nineteenth-century mental illness – schizophrenia – preferred women, who kept being in the spotlight. It was only with the arrival of the First World War that genders acquired almost the same importance while speaking about insanity. In fact, it is not by chance that, so far, we have been encountering alienists – mad-doctors, in general, or simply physicians – handling and studying nervous illnesses mainly looking at women. Most of the time, the largest majority of nervous weaknesses were actually attributed to women, that, due to menstruation and pregnancy could undergo long periods of depression or – in worse cases – irrecoverable lunacy: “women's nervous systems were so intertwined with their reproductive function, doctor assumed”⁸⁸ that anything seemed to depend upon that. Men were obviously victims of mental breakdowns as well, yet doctors preferred to keep male insanity hidden and write about and deal with women, whose mental fragility had become a widespread and well-known stereotype and whose inferiority to men had a very long history. Women –

⁸² J. Breuer, S. Freud, *Studies on Hysteria*, Beacon Press, Beacon Hill Boston, 1950, p. 1.

⁸³ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁴ A. Scull, *Hysteria, The Biography*, cit., p. 146.

⁸⁵ J. Breuer, S. Freud, *op. cit.*, pp. 192-193.

⁸⁶ *Idem*, p. 198.

⁸⁷ S. Freud, *La psicoanalisi in cinque conferenze*, Newton Compton Editori s.r.l., Roma, 2014, pp. 102-103.

⁸⁸ S. M. Archimedes, *Gendered Pathologies – The Female Body and Biomedical Discourse in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel*, Routledge, New York, 2005, p. 34.

deprived of their right to speak – were simply supposed to wait for male judgements.

What strengthened the already existing and common belief that it was mainly women who could run mad and what made numerous ideas about femininity and hysteria or schizophrenia spread more rapidly among people in Britain was the possibility of seeing both the faces of these alienated women or, even better, the chance to stare at those numerous women during their delirium. Photography, in fact, was effectively becoming the greatest ally of a further development of the concept related to female malady in society. As underlined by Sachsman and Bulla, “The popularization of visual images [...] revolutionized the nineteenth-century press. To attract readers, publishers sought visual context that was often sensational and violent”.⁸⁹ As a consequence, photography inspired a large number of novelists and, as a result, Anglophone literature was rapidly filled with numerous mad women.

Moreover, not only did the invention of photography in the first half of the nineteenth century constitute a way to divulge stereotypes and a very mighty source of inspiration for popular culture, but photography itself provided a great medical tool in the management of female mental weakness. It was often said that female mental hospitals were much more difficult to manage than male asylums because women constantly talked, screamed and were always agitated. Therefore, an English physician at the Surrey County Asylum, Sir Hugh Welch Diamond (1809-1886), director of the female department, used photography within his wards as a diversion for women themselves in order to keep them quiet; photography seemed to help women recall their memories about their physical appearance, increase their vanity, and make them feel gratified by their own portraits.⁹⁰ Women seemed to calm themselves down and, in addition, photography enabled doctors to record the many stages of convulsions or hallucinations in order to, subsequently, analyse them with greater care.

Apart from the fact that, as already stated, the dichotomy between male rationality and female malady-emotionalism, as highlighted by Diamond's photos, was already rooted in Greek history, Victorians were naturally and traditionally led to think that women were inferior and mentally defective. Nineteenth-century medical discourses were the perfect tools used by Victorians to prove that women did not deserve those

⁸⁹ D. B. Sachsman, D. Bulla (eds), *Sensationalism, Murder, Mayhem, Mudslinging, Scandals, and Disasters in 19th-Century Reporting*, Routledge, New York, 2017, pp. 53-97, p. 53.

⁹⁰ E. Showalter, *The Female Malady*, cit., p. 86.

rights women themselves were asking for. In fact, taking for granted that Crichton-Browne was deemed one of the best alienists in Victorian time, he firmly believed that, in their physical development, girls' brains stopped developing before those of boys, who were, as a result, expected to be biologically more likely to be intelligent and more likely to honour their gender.⁹¹ While this female mental inferiority, according to Crichton-Browne, could be demonstrated looking at cerebral anatomy and cranial evolution of women, for Paul Broca (1824-1880), a well-known cerebral physiologist and anthropologist from Paris, not only were women cerebrally defective, but they were also physically inferior to men.⁹² In fact, in 1888, in his *Mémoires sur le Cerveau de l'Homme et des Primates*, Paul Broca stressed that there was, in his opinion, a “différence profonde qui sépare de notre temps l'éducation intellectuelle de l'homme de celle de la femme”,⁹³ confining women to an inferior rank.

Far from being anachronistic, discourses about the damages caused by the ovaries and, mainly, by the uterus were still in vogue, still extraordinarily charming and apparently historically indelible. As briefly alluded to in the previous pages, despite the fact that the theory concerning the wandering womb of Celsus had started losing its credibility during the Georgian period, in the Victorian age the uterus was still imagined as the cause of a large amount of illnesses affecting nerves. In addition, gynaecology, whose fathers – two Victorians – were Lawson Tait (1845-1899) and James Marion Sims (1813-1883), confirmed what medicine had been going on stating for centuries. The uterus could confine a woman to solitude and sadness, as also highlighted by Samuel Ashwell and E. J. Tilt.⁹⁴ In fact, in 1853, the disciple of the French gynaecologist Joseph-Claude-Anthelme Récamier (1774-1852), Edward John Tilt (1815-1893), spoke about menstruation and ovarian activity as the main evident causes of female inferiority and irritability, which could be prolonged even during the period of menopause and pregnancy.⁹⁵ In other words, Victorians and, later, Edwardians were convinced that, if men could be, once in a while, subject to mental breakdowns, women could fall into the well of depression and violence every time the very nature of their body mandated. Women, therefore, were likely to lash out more frequently than men due to *uterine fury*,

⁹¹ J. Oppenheim, *Shattered Nerves*, cit., 184.

⁹² *Idem*, pp. 185-186.

⁹³ P. Broca, *Mémoires sur le Cerveau de l'Homme et des Primates*, C. Reinwald, Paris, 1888, p. 214.

⁹⁴ J. Oppenheim, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

⁹⁵ *Ibidem*.

as hysteria had been called by Jacques Ferrand in the seventeenth century.⁹⁶

Leaving the effects of masturbation on nerves aside, pregnancies, abortions, menstruations and menopause seemed really valid reasons explaining why a woman – married, widowed or alone – became hysterical and began to show clear signs of emotional fragility. Married women were prey to hysterical attacks due to pregnancies, whereas single women or widows, escaping the authoritarian control of a man, were seen as special cases of social outcasts (although Queen Victoria herself, the head of the country, was a widow). However, there were physicians who did not think that hysteria depended on female biology only. According to Edward Tilt, “menstruation was so disruptive to the female brain that it should not be hastened but rather be retarded as long as possible, and he advised mothers to prevent menarche by ensuring that their teen-age daughters remained in the nursery, took cold shower baths, avoid feather beds and novels, eliminated meat from their diets, and wore drawers”.⁹⁷

Furthermore, Sir Edwin Lee, a Victorian physician and writer of the first half of the nineteenth century, would have been highly critical of Robert Lee, a colleague of him writing on hysteria some years later, in the second half of the century. In fact, in 1833, Edwin Lee noted that “the opinion that hysteria depends on disorders, or irritation of the uterus, was generally adopted by the ancient physicians, and is the prevalent one of the present time: the disease being classed with diseases of the uterine system in most elementary works on the practice of medicine”.⁹⁸ On the contrary, in the second half of the nineteenth century, Sir Robert Lee, author of *A Treatise on Hysteria*, wrote in 1871 that “although the disease appears to begin in the alimentary canal, yet the connection which the paroxysms so often have with the menstrual flux, and with the diseases that depend on the state of genitals, shows that the physicians have at all times judged rightly in considering this disease as an affection of the uterus and other parts of the genital system”.⁹⁹ In relation to what was being affirmed by his colleagues, another prominent mind, Thomas Laycock, resumed hysteria and female fragile mental equilibrium in few lines:

⁹⁶ D. A. Beecher, M. Ciavolella (eds), *Jacques Ferrand. A Treatise on Lovesickness*, cit., p. 263.

⁹⁷ E. Showalter, *The Female Malady*, cit., p. 75.

⁹⁸ E. Lee, *A Treatise on Some Nervous Disorders*, W. Glindon, Haymarket, 1833, p. 51.

⁹⁹ R. Lee, *A Treatise on Hysteria*, Edwards and Co. Printers, London, 1871, p. 14.

There are certain peculiarities in a hysterical patient, which ought not to be passed over, because they are very useful in limiting the field of inquiry. These, in the aggregate, have been termed the hysterical manner, or expression. It is difficult to define this hysterical expression. It often closely resembles that of the insane; it indicates an irresoluteness, as if the patient cared nothing about the world or its affairs. The manner of the patient is characteristic of impatience, restlessness, hurry, and fidgets. Questions are answered in monosyllables, or not at all. The pain experienced is always acute, and greater than is warranted by the general indisposition; a slight touch, or even the attempt to touch the part complained of, will cause the patient to shrink, and sometimes to scream.¹⁰⁰

All these discourses and theories – confirming the commonly shared idea of that time related to women's inferiority – are relevant to understand how many novelists of the second half of the nineteenth century replied in opposition to – or probably supported and paraphrased in their novels – those medical discourses. Not only popular knowledge was imbued with medical discourses related to both female inferiority and women's imbecility, but the percentage of female patients in Victorian asylums seemed to confirm those doctor's assumptions and suggestions. Asylums undoubtedly occupied a crucial position in Victorian age and their existence actually demonstrated that insanity had to be kept distant from public and private places. Taking for granted that insanity was perceived by the largest majority as biologically transmissible, that *cordon sanitaire* – a metaphorical barrier against infectious diseases – found its physical and tangible manifestation in asylums, meant to stop any possible transmission and contagion of insanity.

Foucault, providing his own opinion concerning asylums, argued that “[i]t is true that people were often confined so that they might escape judgement, but they were confined to a world where all was a matter of evil and punishment, libertinage and immorality, penitence and correction. A world where, beneath those shadows, liberty is hidden”.¹⁰¹ Seen from outside, Victorian asylums could seem to be wonderful buildings with separate sections for women and men, great windows, very large wards, a big

¹⁰⁰ T. Laycock, *A Treatise on the Nervous Diseases of Women*, cit., p. 207.

¹⁰¹ M. Foucault, *History of Madness*, cit., pp. 513-515.

garden for relaxing walks and for wonderful views in the middle of flowers, bushes and trees. In addition, in Victorian asylums, a kind staff was generally expected to accompany the patient through his or her deliriums and the medical treatment would be followed by diverse kinds of entertainment: apparently, patients could be solaced with leisure activities including, for instance, reading, riding, fishing, sewing, drawing and playing instruments.¹⁰²

Nonetheless, these few lines describing a typical Victorian asylum ought not to mislead the reader. In 1860, in *A Journal of Medical Science*, John Conolly published an article where he stated that “[t]he unhappy patients are presented as being placed in buildings unsuitable for them; they are, in many cases, half starved [...]”.¹⁰³ In fact, the more people were institutionalized, the more the level of care decreased. In several cases, the asylum, presented as a welcoming place, could become nothing but a nightmarish detention place. If the asylum could actually be a good solution for someone, for many others it became a prison, an impassable road; the asylum, for them, had no way out. According to Mark Stevens, doctors' ideas could rapidly turn into prejudices about one's behaviours, and this perfectly applied to several women who, perhaps, did not properly conform to male rules and habits.¹⁰⁴ In those cases, leaving the asylum became impossible. Insanity was such a variable concept that a simple bout of anger or sadness could be interpreted as a visible symptom of hysteria, prolonging, as a consequence, the patient's stay at the asylum: that thin line separating sanity from insanity unfortunately disappeared or became very vague in asylums.

At the end of the eighteenth century, asylums were old and shabby buildings and their conditions were literally deplorable. In Foucault's terms, “just as confinement was ultimately a creator of poverty, a hospital was a creator of a disease”.¹⁰⁵ France, Britain, Germany and many other European countries had inherited a long tradition of confinement of the patient, who was not allowed to know what freedom of action was. That confinement was essentially represented as a mere abandonment of the patient to his delirium and delusions, often followed by beatings, in the middle of fleas and rats.

¹⁰² M. Stevens, *Life in the Victorian Asylum – The World of the Nineteenth Century Health Care*, Pen & Sword Nooks Ltd., Barnsley, South Yorkshire, 2014, p. 5.

¹⁰³ J. Conolly, “Recollections of the Varieties of Insanity – Part I. The Hanwell Asylum, No. II”, in *The Medical Times and Gazette, A Journal of Medical Science, Literature, Criticism, and News, Volume I for 1860*, John Churchill, London, 1860, pp. 111-114, pp. 113.

¹⁰⁴ M. Stevens, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

¹⁰⁵ M. Foucault, *History of Madness*, cit., p. 416.

Moreover, among rats and innumerable parasites, rapists found their perfect habitat in female asylums, where they could satisfy their own cravings, obliging weak women to have sex with them. Bearing in mind this horrifying context, it is when the real conditions of asylums in the second half of the eighteenth century came to the surface that alienists thought it was time to reconsider madness, patients' conditions and their detention.

In fact, an English physician, William Tuke (1732-1822), after being informed about the incredible treatment that lunatics had to stand in 'the English Inquisition', as asylums were called by Alexander Cruden (1699-1770),¹⁰⁶ decided to open his own asylum – the *York Retreat* – where people could find inner peace and avoid further sufferance, as suggested by the name of his asylum. Once the attention of the Government was drawn to the real situation within British asylums, in 1774 and then, again, in 1815-1816, an inquiry brought to light the truth: people in asylums were treated as monsters to be eliminated secretly. The Select Committee on Madhouses wanted a clear view of the degradation of buildings and the humiliations to which prisoners/patients were subjected. Asylums had to change and fulfil the expectations of the Parliament, once for all.

As observed by Mark Stevens, a professional archivist looking after the Broadmoor and Fair Mile Hospital archives and expert in British mental health, in a Chelsea asylum, poor Mrs Smith did not show specific symptoms related to madness, yet her husband had enough money to get rid of her making her spend some years within an asylum.¹⁰⁷ The discovery of several similar shocking situations made the government opt for an act – the Madhouses Act of 1774 – that was meant to reinforce the system of inspections and controls, which appeared necessary in order to avoid the transformation of the asylum into a place in which annoying relatives could be isolated and kept silent. The incredible growth in number of lunatic people had to be supported by an efficient public service, which took almost fifty years from the Madhouse Act in 1774 to reach, at least vaguely, a good standard quality. After the case of Sir Edward Oxford, who attempted to kill Queen Victoria in 1840, the medical field, together with the political sphere, thought it was time – again – to seriously reconsider madness in Britain, and the

¹⁰⁶ A. Scull, *Madness in Civilization*, cit., p. 139.

¹⁰⁷ M. Stevens, *Life in the Victorian Asylum*, cit., p. 9.

results were the influential Lunatic Asylums Act in 1845 and the Lunacy Act, that actually contained every single disposition and condition that would make her Majesty's subjects go to an asylum or leave it. Everything had been written, nothing could be changed, there was neither time, nor space, for exceptions. Henceforth, the two acts were the decisive steps that created a sort of unified and common national health care related to madness.

Being a candidate for the asylum was simply a matter of social judgement, rather than effective and real physical imperfections and psychological diseases. Unbecoming behaviour in women – or, less frequently, in men – were perfect reasons to be sent to an asylum. If denouncing people's attitudes was very easy, it was the family of the alleged insane who had to ask for assistance. Doctors would examine the candidate and express their opinion, as regulated by the Medical Act of 1858.¹⁰⁸ The list of symptoms identified by the Medical Act that enabled a doctor to decree the confinement of the insane were, for instance, laughing and speaking with no clear reason, wandering with no clear aim or destination, inadequate clothes, unusual requests and desires, unusual facial expressions and rapid movements of the head and arms, as well as inexplicable fears and obsessions. Once the doctor had ascertained the existence of some of these manifestations, the prognosis was ready: madness dwelt in that mind.

“Insanity is a most peculiar state and defies attempts to contain it within one label or another. Modern alienists recognise this, and [...] patients [...] will usually be considered to have mania or dementia, while of the remainder. Around half are considered melancholic”.¹⁰⁹ The main forms of madness that could be found in normal public asylums and in the diagnoses written by doctors were, first of all, mania, an illness causing the patient's inability to sleep and rest long. Patients affected by mania tended, for instance, to spew out words without communicating much. Mania was often associated to the manifestation of another dangerous symptom: general paralysis, as in the case of hysteria. Second, dementia was another mental disease doctor thought it deserved a specific ward in an asylum. Those persons suffering from dementia were those that were somehow unable to follow rational thoughts. Rarely did they take care of themselves and think about their hygiene. Third, melancholia was another branch of

¹⁰⁸ M. Stevens, *Life in the Victorian Asylum*, cit., p. 15.

¹⁰⁹ *Idem*, p. 42.

madness which counted on innumerable strained representatives in British asylums. While several patients of an asylum tended to be aggressive and dangerous for themselves and for their mates, those affected by melancholia used to be passively lost in their thoughts. Fourth, patients suffering from monomania had their own ward. They were people who had gone through very tough delusions and, as a consequence, their mind had started creating schemes and images that were anything but faithful to reality. In fact, monomania included long moments of hallucinations, filling the head of the patient with invented animals and dangerous characters inhabiting the ward. Fifth, moral insanity was, according to Mark Stevens, the most difficult pathology to be diagnosed.¹¹⁰ As elaborated by James Bruce Thompson (1810-1873), the medical criminologist that analysed the concept of moral insanity,¹¹¹ reason had not been lost in patients affected by moral insanity; on the contrary, reason had been distorted and perverted. Infractions of social boundaries and sexual transgression were two very forms of moral insanity that was, in fact, a form of madness¹¹² to be controlled and locked. Finally, leaving those affected by feigned insanity aside, there were patients affected by amentia, idiocy and imbecility. Victims of amentia were normally described as simple idiots or imbeciles. They could be both blind and deaf, hence they had a clear form of inability. Malformed heads, weird faces and disproportionate limbs were, for many cases, the obvious and undeniable signals of the presence of mental instability.

Patients were never alone, the Commissioners of Lunacy watched over them annually, according to the impositions contained in the diverse acts drafted by the Parliament. A group of lawyers, doctors and august gentlemen belonging to the House of Lords were supposed to inspect asylums in order to control the efficiency of the staff and the quality of the detention of patients. Normally, for two days per year, this group of eminent minds followed the staff in the ordinary activities at the asylum, taking notes and judging every single activity developed in the building. The standards that had been approved by the Parliament in the first half of the nineteenth century had to be followed and respected rigorously. In other words, the Lunatic Asylums Act of 1845 had sentenced that every asylum was to be provided with a board of at least twelve people belonging to the upper classes, meant to supervise and speak on behalf of the Parliament

¹¹⁰ M. Stevens, *Life in the Victorian Asylum*, cit., p. 50.

¹¹¹ L. Appignanesi, *Mad, Bad and Sad*, cit., p. 96.

¹¹² S. M. Archimedes, *Gendered Pathologies*, cit., p. 38.

in the asylums.¹¹³

Drugs and medical treatment were the two aspects the Commissioners were more interested in. The rapid growth in number of lunatic people in the nineteenth century had contributed to the increase of the request for powerful medicines. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, the doses of drugs which were prescribed to patients by doctors were incredibly massive and, as any Victorian would have said, “the action of the mineral poisons, mercury, arsenic, antimony, iron, gold, lead, silver, zinc, mercury, bismuth, and iodine, on organs implicated in hysteria, and on the nervous system in general, in causing and curing paralytic, spasmodic, and neuralgic affections, is a subject of the highest importance and interest”.¹¹⁴ Even if the list does not include opium, it remained for a very long time the most widely used drug against shattered nerves and depression, in and out of asylums. According to a large number of physicians, opium had the effective power to relax the nerves and, in addition, could dampen spirits and enthusiasms. In his work *Réflexion sur l'usage de l'opium* (1726), Philippe Hecquet (1661-1737), French physician, underlined that the body was simply a mixture between solids and liquids and its equilibrium was the balance between these different elements; even if opium is a solid, once inhaled, it becomes airy and penetrates veins and moulds blood composition, giving the patient an immediate relief and solace.¹¹⁵ Thus, opium was meant to re-establish that equilibrium between irregular movements of the soul. In addition to opium, blood transfusions were expected to cure madness, since purity of blood had been long considered the main cause of delirium. Blood became, especially in Victorian time, the brutal enemy of Victorians' tranquillity: contagions, venereal diseases, hereditary transmission of diverse and numerous diseases from mothers to children were nightmarish fears for Queen Victoria's subjects, whose obsessions became part of popular culture and were often described, for instance, in novels.

Although the Government opted for regulatory laws (the Arsenic Act in 1851 and the Pharmacy Act in 1868), physicians – more accurately, alienists – did not find many obstacles in their path and continued to prescribe very dangerous medicines, such as codeine, atropine, morphine, quinine, strychnine, antimony, and so forth.¹¹⁶ All these

¹¹³ M. Stevens, *Life in the Victorian Asylum*, cit., p. 112.

¹¹⁴ T. Laycock, *A Treatise on the Nervous Diseases of Women*, cit., p. 155.

¹¹⁵ M. Foucault, *History of Madness*, cit., p. 299.

¹¹⁶ J. Oppenheim, *Shattered Nerves*, cit., p. 112.

kinds of drugs, along with opium, were actually expected to lower the manifestation of nervous weakness and, in addition, they were expected to give firmness to the whole nervous system of the patient, as in the case of Thomas Henry Huxley who often used both quinine and strychnine to fight against physical debility and, above all, against depression. Furthermore, together with these numerous drugs, arsenic was such a well-known remedy against nervousness and insanity, that Charles Darwin abused it and was forced to go through a long period of intoxication. The real limitation of the use of some of these very dangerous remedies against mental and nervous fragility was introduced just in 1908 with the Pharmacy and Poisons Act.¹¹⁷

Undeniably, there were different kinds of Victorian drugs and doses for different kinds of Victorian patients. In fact, there were private patients, whose health was first checked and were admitted only after having certified the presence of a real pathology. Then, there were the chancery lunatics, who could benefit from a sort of protection from the law: they were richer than other patients. Finally, there were those that were called criminal lunatics which were particular interesting to sensation novelists from the 1860s onwards. For criminal unstable minds “the appropriate place of detention is usually Broadmoor, the national Criminal Lunatic Asylum for England and Wales”,¹¹⁸ which was inaugurated with a woman accused of infanticide in 1863. Broadmoor and its staff followed the same rules imposed to public asylums' employees all around the island and was periodically visited by the Commissioners of Lunacy for their inspections.

Despite the rigid control of the commissioners, as underlined by Mark Stevens, “many patients were also social pariahs, exhibiting less the signs of mental illness than some form of personality trait preventing them from being accepted in society. Public asylums were in danger of becoming a dumping ground, and stigma and dehumanisation set into asylum life”.¹¹⁹ The failure of asylums was being followed by the failure of alienists. Neurology and developments in physiology, by the first years of the twentieth century, seemed to be the medical avant-garde. Psychiatry, with its private or public asylums, seemed no longer apt to explain mental insanity. “In fact, the more neurology flourished before World War I, the more psychiatry floundered”.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ J. Oppenheim, *Shattered Nerves*, cit., p. 114.

¹¹⁸ M. Stevens, *Life in the Victorian Asylum*, cit., p. 116.

¹¹⁹ *Idem*, p. 149.

¹²⁰ J. Oppenheim, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

To conclude, even though psychiatry would fail and give way to neurology in the first half of the twentieth century, its advances and developments in the Victorian age, as well as the numerous pseudo-medical spectacles exploring the female mind, undeniably influenced the entire nineteenth-century and its cultural and literary panorama. Medical treatises, mesmeric shows and public speeches of physicians hysterically fostered public imagination and fears related to madness. Furthermore, general beliefs that insanity was mainly a female problem kept shaping public ideas about women. Even if their social and legislative position appeared to be somehow changing in Victorian time, women, once again, were being reminded by that developing medical branch – psychiatry – that their inferiority was certain: their brains were perceived as imperfect and faulty. Mesmerized and subjugated women, theories about inheritance of insanity, obsessions with biological and cultural degeneration, as well as innumerable photographs of hallucinated improper women, were invading Britain. Attracted, though frightened, by insanity, Victorians witnessed “The Rise of the Empire of Asylumdom”,¹²¹ which significantly moulded Victorians' minds. Maybe particularly influenced by the extraordinary spread of mesmeric shows, by the increasing number of lunatics and of asylums, literature – especially in the second half of the nineteenth century – was rapidly populated by fragile female minds and mad-doctors, ready to eradicate the real social problem: female deranged nerves and the rebellious seeds of a gender affected by psychopathology.

¹²¹ A. Scull, *Madness in Civilization*, cit., p. 190.

Chapter 2

Victorian medicine and literature: female pathological minds and sensation fiction

1. *Sensationalism* and the rebellious New Victorian Woman

“A class of literature has grown around us, usurping in many respects, intentionally or unintentionally, a portion of the preacher's office, playing no inconsiderable part in moulding the minds and forming the habits and tastes of its generation. [...] The sensation novel, be it mere trash or something worse, is usually a tale [...] which aims at electrifying the nerves of the reader”.¹²² In 1862, with an article in the *Quarterly Review*, Henry Longueville Mansel (1820-1871), English philosopher and Professor of Ecclesiastic History at the University of Oxford, concerned himself with what English literature had been outrageously producing since the arbores of the 1860s. He vehemently attacked that transgressive literary genre which was culturally emerging from the endless shower of Darwinian pages about natural selection, struggle for existence and racial preservation, from advances in the psychiatric field, the increasing number of asylums being built all around Britain, industrial progress and social changes, as well as from numerous new scientific theories discussing, for instance, the possible end of the world and the imminence and menace of human degeneration, atavism and inheritance of insanity. Sensation fiction, from the 1860s, was being highly criticized because it dared to shake not only the spirits of its readers, but also the pillars of a culture and society *hysterically* attached to a fixed hierarchy of genders. While depression was afflicting Queen Victoria who was going through the darkest period of her life after the excruciating loss of her beloved Albert in 1861, literature was brazenly bringing to light all those familiar contradictions, false stereotypes and private counter-senses of the nineteenth-century, mainly domestic, Britain.

¹²² S. Regan (ed.), *The Nineteenth Century Novel – A Critical Reader*, Routledge, New York, 2001, pp. 45-47.

For Mansel, that new way to write fiction, in which social and gender boundaries were not respected, had to be perceived as socially dangerous and threatening.¹²³ Mansel was alerting both Victorians, in general, and sensation fiction's readers to the possibility of irremediable consequences.¹²⁴ As underlined by Joy Wiltenburg, the noun used to identify that literary genre of the 1860s, *sensationalism*, was a pejorative term used in the second half of the nineteenth century to label those works of literature that aimed to arouse brute emotional thoughts and reactions in the readers:¹²⁵ the psychological issue is very present in sensationalism. At the beginning of the '60s, rampant sensation novels, variously defined as *crime novels*, *adultery fiction*, *sensation mania* or *bigamy novels*, had already conquered the admiration and attention of a considerable number of middle-class members. "Shootings, poisonings, adultery and bigamy all sold newspapers, so it is hardly surprising that novels too should exploit the same themes".¹²⁶

The largest majority of the readership of sensation novels was female, and that female predominance was obviously a very worrying issue, according to Professor Mansel.¹²⁷ The English philosopher was manifesting a serious fear: readers, especially fragile women, could take inspirations from the plots of those scandalous, outrageous and hyper-stimulating novels, contributing to increasing, thus, the numbers of female pathological cases in asylums. Even if the tradition of dangerous novels could be date back to the eighteenth century, sensation novels seemed to be particularly dangerous especially because they presented characters – mainly women – rebelling against social, but particularly, domestic and familiar order. Since sensation novels were full of unleashed emotions and uncontrolled sensations, Professor Mansel thought that they would surely cause a "corporeal rather than a cerebral response in the reader".¹²⁸ Therefore, it was deemed that the new genre could effectively and dangerously affect the nervous system of female Victorians, who would probably destroy conventional moralities, disobey social rules, forget about the right and pondered avocations of their

¹²³ S. Regan (ed.), *The Nineteenth Century Novel*, cit., p. 45.

¹²⁴ *Idem*, p. 46.

¹²⁵ J. Wiltenburg, "True Crime: The Origins of Modern Sensationalism", *The American History Review*, Vol. 109, No. 5, December 2004, pp. 1377-1404, JSTOR, 27/06/2018, p. 1378.

¹²⁶ M. Diamond, *Victorian Sensation, Or, The Spectacular, the Shocking and the Scandalous in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, Anthem Press, London, 2003, pp. 189-217, p. 189.

¹²⁷ S. Regan, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-46.

¹²⁸ A. Radford, *Victorian Sensation Fiction*, Palgrave Mcmillan, New York, 2009, p. 11.

life and waste domestic time, as painted by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882) in *The Day-Dream* (1880),¹²⁹ in which a woman is lost in her thoughts allegedly inspired by the book she has on her legs.

The reference to Doré's *Don Quixote* in the previous chapter, the reference here to Rossetti's *The Day-Dream* and the mighty power of books over imagination – as displayed by the two paintings – are in this context crucial to better understand criticism against sensation novels and sensation novelists. In fact, pointing the finger at *sensationalists*, such as Collins and Braddon, Mansel observed that “excitement, and excitement alone, seems to be the great end at which they aim. [...] And as excitement, even when harmless in kind, cannot be continually produced without becoming morbid in degree”,¹³⁰ therefore, these literary works were expected to “supply the cravings of a diseased appetite, and contributing themselves to foster the disease, and to stimulate the want which they supply”.¹³¹

Partially agreeing with Professor Mansel, Margaret Oliphant Wilson (1829-1897), Scottish writer, very well-known for her being an active contributor to the Scottish *Blackwood's Magazine* (founded in 1817), wrote about the *diablerie* of different types while discussing sensation novels of the '60s.¹³² According to Mrs Oliphant – as she often signed her novels – a frantic rebellion against nature itself was at work; she alarmingly and worryingly observed that literary sensational agitation was somehow replete with mystery, horror and the black arts. In addition, not by chance considering the nineteenth-century medical development in the field of insanity, Mrs Oliphant stressed that “mad psychology”,¹³³ in relation to black arts, was another fundamental ingredient of sensation novels. “The result is no doubt a class of book abounding in sensation; but the effect is invariably attained by violent and illegitimate means”.¹³⁴ As long as sensation novels benefited from madness, murders, crimes, violence and outrageous characters, the effects on the readership would be frighteningly dangerous: “This, in the interest of art, it is necessary to protest against. [...] This is dangerous and foolish work, as well as false, both to Art and Nature. Nothing can be more wrong and

¹²⁹ B. Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, cit., p. 95.

¹³⁰ S. Regan (ed.), *The Nineteenth Century Novel*, cit., p. 45.

¹³¹ *Ibidem*.

¹³² *Idem*, p. 40.

¹³³ *Ibidem*.

¹³⁴ *Idem*, p. 41.

fatal than to present the flames of vice as a purifying fiery ordeal, through which the penitent is to come elevated and sublimed".¹³⁵

However, the position of Mrs Oliphant was undeniably quite controversial. Her initial position of anti-feminist changed and her novels were soon filled with "burden women; carriers, like herself, of other people's rejected obligations".¹³⁶ Her original position of rejection against sensation novels was mitigated by her esteem for Wilkie Collins in particular. While she defined the work of sensation novelists as dangerous and alarming, she eulogised Wilkie Collins and his literary production as a whole, but particularly she expressed her admiration for his *The Woman in White* (1860),¹³⁷ namely the novel which had inaugurated the "sensational decades to come". Nevertheless, Mrs Oliphant also underlined that Collins had not been the first of sensation novelists who had contributed to that new literary creation in Victorian fiction. After explaining that sensationalism had already found a place in American fiction, with the publication of *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne in 1850, Mrs Oliphant watched the rise of European sensation fiction with jealous eyes and, speaking about Collins, she argued that he "has given a new impulse to a kind of literature which must, more or less, find its inspiration in crime, and, more or less, make the criminal its hero".¹³⁸ She was so evidently attracted by that new type of mysterious fiction that, after writing his essay in 1862, she published *Salem Chapel* (1863), whose plot involved an alleged female criminal and a second improper woman, guilty of an attempted murder.

Thinking now of a possible family tree for sensationalism and drawing a map of its origins might actually sound ventured and complicated. However, trying to limit this generational literary investigation to the very first half of the nineteenth century, Victorian literary genres and sub-genres that inspired sensationalists could be found already in the 1830s, when plots of novels were imbued with mystery and bloody scenes. In fact, since the tradition of dark plots is very long in Victorian literature, a careful and curious reader, for instance, could question the real difference existing between sensation fiction and a very similar, though different for one clear reason, branch of nineteenth-century literary sub-genres known as Newgate fiction, connected

¹³⁵ S. Regan (ed.), *The Nineteenth Century Novel*, cit., p. 43.

¹³⁶ D. Basham, *The Trial of Woman: Feminism and the Occult Sciences in Victorian Literature and Society*, Macmillan Professional and Academic Ltd., Hong Kong, 1992, pp. 164-165.

¹³⁷ S. Regan (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 40.

¹³⁸ *Idem*, p. 44.

to the famous London prison, burnt at the beginning of the 1780s.

The very evident difference between the two kind of fiction is that Newgate literature, which particularly developed in the '30s and the '40s, was merely produced by male authors.¹³⁹ On the contrary, sensation fiction included a conspicuous number of female writers, such as Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Ellen Wood, for instance. The Newgate fiction undoubtedly exerted a very strong influence on the fictional representation and description of crime and criminals of sensation and detective fictions of the second half of the nineteenth century. With its crime, intrigues, punishments, trials, betrayals, haunted criminals and the tendency to mingle characters belonging to different social classes, Newgate fiction might have represented the main source of inspiration for sensationalists. Its main representative was Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1803-1873), who had published in 1830 *Paul Clifford*, considered the very first Newgate novel.¹⁴⁰ Furthermore, another evident difference between Newgate fiction and sensationalism is the diverse approach the two sub-genres presented to crime and individual psychological inclination towards crime. According to Lyn Pykett, while in Newgate fiction crime was represented as a world separated from the rest, in sensation fiction crime became part of ordinary life, in fact, the perception of crime and criminals had already radically changed after the advent of the Detective Police in 1842.¹⁴¹ Cities seemed to be crowded with possible murderers and more social control was needed. Expanding suburbs and increasing numbers of middle-class and low-class people, new sciences, like phrenology and psychiatry, as well as theories about atavism, degeneration, hereditary insanity, were alarming people with regards to possible dark souls wandering in the city or inhabiting private houses.

Apart from the connection with Newgate fiction, after proclaiming Dickens as their prototypical writer, sensation novelists provided a new amoral vision of Victorian reality, full of anxieties and concerns, hidden behind a mask of vanishing and decadent splendour, as it was observed by Winifred Hughes in his *The Maniac in the Cellar*.¹⁴²

Although the foundation of British sensation fiction is normally and generally attributed

¹³⁹ L. Pykett, "The Newgate Novel and Sensation Fiction, 1830-1868", in M. Priestman (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, pp. 19-40, pp. 19-20.

¹⁴⁰ *Idem*, p. 21.

¹⁴¹ *Idem*, p. 34.

¹⁴² W. Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar. Sensation Novels of the 1860s*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1980, p. 5.

to Collins, Braddon and Wood, according to Mirella Billi, as underlined by Andrew Radford, the real and wise father of sensation novels was Charles Dickens himself, whose novels had already presented the most peculiar characteristics of a typical sensation novel:¹⁴³ “For some critics in the early years of the debates of the 1860s he was the leader of the sensation novel”.¹⁴⁴ In fact, it is undeniable that in *Oliver Twist*, *Great Expectations* or in *David Copperfield*, for instance, the reader can easily detect crime, intrigue, as well as hidden identities and mystery, justifying the position of Lyn Pykett who suggested that “Dickens's writing career is, of course, a prime example of the novel's close association with crime”.¹⁴⁵ On the other hand, while Dickens particularly influenced the male sensationalism of his friend Wilkie Collins or of Charles Reade, in Mrs Oliphant's opinion, Charlotte Brontë, with her *Jane Eyre* (1847), inspired female writers of the '60s.¹⁴⁶ With regards to *Jane Eyre*, Robert B. Hilman stresses that “in her flair for the surreal, in her plunging into feeling that is without status in the ordinary world of the novel, Brontë discovers a new dimension of Gothic”;¹⁴⁷ in fact, her tendency to describe feelings and Jane's experience of psychological self-discovery were already paving the way for sensationalists.

With regards to Gothic, sensation novels owe to the Gothic innumerable characterising features. Apart from the influence of Dickens and Brontë, other novelists were undoubtedly read by sensation writers, who took inspiration from their great gothic colleagues. George William MacArthur Reynolds (1814-1879) and William Harrison Ainsworth (1805-1882) were undoubtedly among the most famous writers of the Gothic genre during the first half of the nineteenth century. Inspired by *Les mystères de Paris* (1842-1843) by Eugène Sue, in his *The Mysteries of London* – published weekly in short parts from 1844 to 1856 – Reynolds had successfully reached the working-class audience with a plot full of mysteries and social shadows.¹⁴⁸ London and its sky had been presented as a very narrow cage, in which any Londoner had been supposed to spend his entire life under strict social pressure and rigid control. A sense of

¹⁴³ A. Radford, *Victorian Sensation Fiction*, cit., p. 20.

¹⁴⁴ A. M. Beller, “Sensation Fiction in the 1850s”, in A. Mangham (ed.), *A Cambridge Companion to Sensation Fiction*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013, pp. 7-20, p. 9.

¹⁴⁵ L. Pykett, “The Newgate Novel and Sensation Fiction, 1830-1868”, cit., p. 27.

¹⁴⁶ A. M. Beller, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

¹⁴⁷ S. Regan (ed.), *The Nineteenth Century Novel*, cit., p. 213.

¹⁴⁸ A. Milbank, “Victorian Gothic in English Novels and Stories, 1830-1880”, in J. E. Hogle (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002, pp. 145-165, p. 148.

social oppression had also been displayed by Ainsworth in his *The Lancashire Witches* (1848) – inspired by the trails of the so-called 'Lancashire witch trials' in 1612 – where low-class characters were continuously chased by rigid and extremely austere norms of social order.¹⁴⁹ Both Ainsworth and Reynolds, according to Alison Milbank, turned gothic fiction into a sort of stage for the numerous preoccupations of the lower and middle classes, perhaps the same the reader can find in sensation novels.¹⁵⁰

In the '40s, Charlotte Brontë, influenced by Reynolds and Ainsworth, added to the gothic tradition that typical personal and intimate internalisation of those several social oppressions and the consequent mental mechanisms – applied by her characters – to digest them. Each one of her female protagonists started displaying her inner world and thoughts, full of colours, drama and vivid intensity, in a society in which women were not supposed to narrate their own feelings.¹⁵¹ In addition to social constrictions, Dickens enriched plots with social and legal abuses, as in *Bleak House* (1852-1853). In other words, Gothic writers of the early nineteenth century and of the '40s and '50s, followed by sensation novelists from the '60s, tried to find a possible way to give a voice to the psychology of people, mainly focusing their attention on Victorian women. Female domestic and social powerlessness was undeniably displayed by both Charles Dickens and Charlotte Brontë, who fostered sensation fiction's veiled, though strong, criticism against social parameters and obligations. Haunted minds and haunted characters are the mirror of a haunted society displayed by Gothic writers and, later, by sensationalists.

In 1856, Walter Bagehot (1826-1877), English journalist, wrote his comment about those 1840s and 1850s novels that would exert their influence over the literature of the decade to come: they were rubbish.¹⁵² The characteristic violence of the plot, the profusion of secrets and massive complications were, in his view, fostering the deterioration of Victorian literary Realism, mainly busy describing the miserable conditions of the British industrial society. Andrew Radford refers to Patrick Brantlinger's view that the growth of sensational success determined the crisis of realism in literature.¹⁵³ Formally, sensation fiction appeared anything but realistic; in fact, any sensation novel seemed to contain a sort of grotesque and unnatural

¹⁴⁹ A. Milbank, "Victorian Gothic in English Novels and Stories, 1830-1880", cit., p. 146.

¹⁵⁰ *Idem*, p. 149.

¹⁵¹ *Idem*, p. 153.

¹⁵² A. M. Beller, "Sensation Fiction in the 1850s", cit., p. 9.

¹⁵³ A. Radford, *Victorian Sensation Fiction*, cit., p. 15.

exaggeration, that could be perceived as clearly opposed to natural and real experiences. Since sensation novels' protagonists – especially women eligible for an asylum – behaved in an unnatural way that was the opposite of Victorian composure and behavioural canons, the largest majority of Victorians thought that those characters could be interpreted as pure delirious fantasies of their authors. Therefore, as underlined by Winifred Hughes, those sensation characters were perceived by the largest majority of Victorians as fictitious characters,¹⁵⁴ even if their very physical presence in Victorian reality was undoubted, considering the innumerable cases of insanity in asylums. Victorian aristocratic and bourgeois moral and respectability, in fact, had to face the truth offered by those novels: sensationalism was about to display what secretly laid in the shadow of the glorious Crystal Palace, the magnificent symbol of Great Exhibition. Sensation novelists would unfold what had been hidden by decades of an allegedly magnificent Queen Victoria's reign with its rigorous social rules, inside and outside the houses of Victorians.

Leaving aside this brief nineteenth-century literary excursus among diverse literary genres, sub-genres and sensationalism's literary influences and focusing now our attention on the specific features of sensation novels, Patrick Brantlinger, to put things in order, identified three elements that enable the contemporary reader to recognise a sensation novel, avoiding almost any confusion. The first of these elements, obviously, is linked to the period in which the novel was written.¹⁵⁵ As stated before, the decade of the '60s is often associated to the great production and publication of sensation novels, even if other sensation novels were written also in the '70s and '80s. However, should the year of publication be unknown, a sensation novel might be very easily confused with a gothic narration, as stated before, since these two genres organise their plots similarly. Lyn Pykett commented that “like gothic romances, sensation novels were generic hybrids [...]. [...] Their complicated plots, like those of gothic romances, were concerned with terror, mystery, suspense, secrecy, deception, and disguise, and they frequently [...] involved the persecution and incarceration of the heroine”.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ W. Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar*, cit., pp. 48-49.

¹⁵⁵ P. Brantlinger, “What is 'Sensational' About the 'Sensation Novel'?”, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Vol. 37, No. 1, June 1982, pp. 1-28, JSTOR, 28/06/2018, p. 2.

¹⁵⁶ L. Pykett, “Sensation and the Fantastic in the Victorian Novel”, in D. Deirdre (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Novel, II edition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001, pp. 192-211, p. 203-204.

Nevertheless, the possible difference existing between the two genres – otherwise similar and liable to be confused – is that, while mysterious Gothic novels, such as *Frankenstein*, “explore the deepest recesses of human psychology, always stressing the macabre, the unusual and the fantastic”,¹⁵⁷ sensation novels peep into Victorian houses, probe the domestic ground and penetrate into the darkest edges of the mind of their inhabitants. Sensation novelists turned those gothic mysteries into domestic dramas or tragedies and, as a consequence, domesticity became a fundamental component in sensation narrations. In addition to the evident *fil rouge* connecting sensationalism and Gothic fiction, sensation novels also bloomed from the fertile ground of Victorian melodrama, whose mysteries were first brought to the stage by Thomas Holcroft (1745-1809) with his *A Tale of Mystery* of 1802. As argued by Lyn Pykett, melodrama was a peculiar feature of Victorian culture and it had particular resonance among those whose social conditions was rapidly changing,¹⁵⁸ as in the case of Queen Victoria's middle-class subjects. Thrilling and violent actions, aristocratic villains, wrong maidens, sentiments and sensibility characterised both nineteenth-century melodrama and the sensationalism from the '60s.

In Brantlinger's view, the second element useful to distinguish sensation novels is undoubtedly mystery.¹⁵⁹ The reader is walked through an entangled jungle of situations and facts that aim to discover the guilty party, the criminal, as in the case of Newgate fiction. Moreover, the typical sensational third-person omniscient narrator – the authorial voice – provides the reader with all the necessary clues, pieces of information and hints that make the reader speculate on the criminal. “For many Victorians, readers and critics alike, the personality of the narrator was one of the most attractive features of the novel”;¹⁶⁰ the narrator was expected to be reliable and she or he was supposed to be the person in charge of leading to the solution of the mystery. However, sensation novels normally showed a narrator who unfortunately ended up losing her or his credibility: the narrator, in fact, knows the organisation and the structure of the crime, as well as the mind of the criminal, and cannot provide the reader with a neutral view of

¹⁵⁷ R. Carter, J. McRae, *The Routledge History of Literature in English, Britain and Ireland*, Routledge, New York, 2001, pp. 197-315, p. 244.

¹⁵⁸ L. Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine. The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing*, Routledge, London, 1992, p. 75.

¹⁵⁹ P. Brantlinger, “What is 'Sensational' About the 'Sensation Novel'?”, cit., p. 2.

¹⁶⁰ B. Dennis, *The Victorian Novel*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, p. 61.

things. Technically, the only person that the reader can trust is the detective, who is present in any sensation novel. The role played by sleuths in sensation novels was undoubtedly influenced, once again, by the institutionalization, in 1842, of the Detective Police, that had evidently confirmed and even reinforced the idea related to the necessity of strict social control, order and civil protection. “The detective as a specialist who unravels criminal mysteries expresses a wish fulfilment shared by all of us, to be able to know or to read just a few things very well, like clues, but through reading them very well to penetrate the deepest mysteries of life”.¹⁶¹

Crime and criminals seem, thus, to be at the core of sensation novels. As argued by Walter Besant (1836-1901), founder of the Society of Authors in 1884, “the so-called sensational novels generally turn upon some such catastrophe. Most of them show the downward progress of a character only weak at first, reckless at last. [...] In this class of novel we have, it is true, plenty of incident; but we have [...] all the sorrow and suffering that surround the fall of a man from his high estate of self-respect. [...] The problem of suffering and sorrow is that which lies at the root of all novels: it forms the interest and pathos of every life [...]”.¹⁶² The highest point of that sorrow and of that despair was undoubtedly represented by crime, murder, poisoning and, as a consequence, when foolish and brutal, yet premeditated, crime was presented as a part of daily life, as a routine, the reader had to get used to it and find a way to justify it. As a consequence, the best way to find a justification for crime – especially when female – was the reconsideration of the role played by insanity itself. The connection between criminal instincts and insanity, in fact, became more and more visible from the second half of the 1830s, as demonstrated by the *irresistible impulse* concept that had already been formulated in Ohio almost twenty-five years before the 1860s.¹⁶³ In fact, the irresistible impulse was considered as the uncontrollable instinct that drove a person to commit a criminal act and, when judges thought that the so-called *irresistible impulse* was the cause of the homicide, an insanity defence was legitimate and acceptable.

By the time Queen Victoria was celebrating her Golden Jubilee in 1887, novels were considered as the most popular form of art of the century, even if the first decades of the

¹⁶¹ P. Brantlinger, “What is 'Sensational' About the 'Sensation Novel'?”, cit., p. 17.

¹⁶² E. McNees (ed.), *The Development of the Novel, Volume II, The Nineteenth-Century Novel*, Helm Information Ltd, Mountfield, 2006, pp. 181-203, pp. 187-188.

¹⁶³ G. C. Davidson, J. M. Neale, *Abnormal Psychology*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., New York, 2000., p. 531.

nineteenth century still witnessed the supremacy of Romantic poetry.¹⁶⁴ If novels – widely spread in society – were expected to have an educational mission, they forcibly situated the reader in front of a choice, which, of course, involved moral and ethical consequences. Therefore, it seems appropriate to affirm that sensation novels, from the '60s onwards, made evil, crime, physical and mental pathology, illicit loves, violence, heinous and premeditated murders become part of the lives of many readers. In addition, sensation novels invited readers to reason and formulate their own opinion about all those dark issues. As underlined by Barbara Dennis, the novel was not only “in itself a psychological necessity in an era of chaotic change”,¹⁶⁵ but it could also be read as a form of psychological escapism. Thus, novels could effectively foster dark thoughts.

The third characterizing feature of sensation novels analysed and explained by Patrick Brantlinger is related to the psychological element and individual personality of sensation characters.¹⁶⁶ The evolution of psychiatry in the nineteenth century deeply influenced the drafting of the largest majority of sensation novels. Even if the connection between medicine, womanhood and sensation novels shall be better discussed in the following section, what can be anticipated here is that the connection between the three elements listed above is so strong that Patrick Brantlinger speaks about an evident *fil rouge* between Freudian psychoanalysis and the role played by the sensational detective,¹⁶⁷ who is meant to analyse the past and the present in order to foresee future developments of the story and all those mental mechanisms of other characters. The interpretation of thoughts, dreams and the penetration into people's mind became central parts in sensational novels, despite the fact that it seems somehow premature to speak about psychoanalysis already in the 1860s. Criminals or, more generally, guilty parties are often depicted by sensationalists as empty souls, lost in their thoughts and unable to control their psychological mechanisms. “The novels reveal a recurrent preoccupation with the loss or duplication of identity”,¹⁶⁸ as wisely argued by Winifred Hughes.

¹⁶⁴ M. Frawley, "The Victorian Age, 1832-1901", in P. Poplawski (ed.), *English Literature in Context - Second Edition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2017, pp. 364-469, p. 395.

¹⁶⁵ B. Dennis, *The Victorian Novel*, cit., p. 53.

¹⁶⁶ P. Brantlinger, "What is 'Sensational' About the 'Sensation Novel'?", cit., p. 3.

¹⁶⁷ *Idem*, p. 23.

¹⁶⁸ W. Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar*, cit., p. 21.

Sensation fiction, in other words, challenged the privacy of personal feelings. Sensationalists exploited the power of profoundly hidden public and private secrets, to introduce a deep-rooted obsession and dependence linked to transgression of rules and psychopathology, both in the aristocracy and in the working-class. Moreover, sensation novels redrew the history of criminal law and delinquency in Britain, displaying the difficulties related to family management, inheritances, wills, human rights, especially when dealing with women: “Sensation fiction generally shadowed and foreshadowed the Victorian reformulation of attitudes to crime, and examined how the parameters of the new criminal system were delineated and violated throughout this period. This is evident in the complex legal plots to do with wills and the inheritance of property, and with issues arising from women's lack of legal identity and rights”.¹⁶⁹ Sensationalism was turned into a great occasion for Victorians to deepen their understanding not only of gender issues and criminology, but also of scientific studies on psychopathology, which accused women of carrying the seeds of folly. “Sensation fiction engages in an intense focus on the domestic space of marital house – the desired goal of the domestic heroine – which becomes in the sensation novel [...] the locus of passion, deception, violence and crime”¹⁷⁰ and, according to Brantlinger, “[t]he plots of sensation novels lead to the unmasking of extreme evil behind fair appearances. In doing so, they threatened their first readers' cherished assumptions about women, marriage, and the fair appearances of the Victorian scene”.¹⁷¹

Numerous characteristics of sensationalism can also be found in several other novels of the late nineteenth century. In fact, sensationalism was reused and transformed by the numerous novelists of the 1870s, 1880s and 1890s. Sensation novels clearly left their legacy, namely the revival of romances and tales related to the fantastic.¹⁷² The revisitation of romance and the fantastic used the characteristic elements of sensation novels, such as the psychological investigation of characters, intrigues, dark mysteries, as well as scientific and medical advances in the field of psychiatry. *The Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) by Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) by Oscar Wilde, *Dracula* (1897) by Bram Stoker, *The Sorrows of*

¹⁶⁹ A. Radford, *Victorian Sensation Fiction*, cit., p. 40.

¹⁷⁰ L. Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine*, cit., p. 74.

¹⁷¹ P. Brantlinger, “What is 'Sensational' About the 'Sensation Novel'?”, cit., p. 11.

¹⁷² L. Pykett, “The Sensation Legacy”, in A. Mangham (ed.), *A Cambridge Companion to Sensation Fiction*, University Printing House, Cambridge, 2013, pp. 210-223, p. 214.

Satan (1895) by Marie Corelli, *The Time Machine* (1895), *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), *The War of the Worlds* (1898) by H. G. Wells, are only some examples of late nineteenth-century novels that were influenced by sensationalism. Furthermore, other texts of the end of the century, such as Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, seem to have a lot in common with sensation novels. In fact, fantastic literature and sensational fiction are both forms of personal and political unconscious,¹⁷³ as explained and largely discussed by Lyn Pykett in *Sensation and the Fantastic in the Victorian Novel*. Sensationalism, therefore, was influenced by other literary genres and influenced in return several narrations of the end of the century.

Bearing in mind past influences and future contributions of sensationalism, as well as its main features, what the reader also ought to take into account is the crucial impact of the Victorian legislative and cultural context on sensation novels and novelists. The Victorian legislative context played a fundamental role in moulding sensation novels from the '60s onwards. In fact, both the legal and the cultural context, influenced by industrial progress, were consistently and rapidly changing women's *status quo*. While “[f]or most of the century, most women could not vote, own properties, bring lawsuits, or divorce their husband”,¹⁷⁴ the second half of the nineteenth century witnessed women's conquest of a sort of independence in society, mainly due to industrial development and the change of gender roles. More importantly, women's position in marital life was somehow changing, even if it is undeniable that several wards in asylums were full of rebellious women that had dared to speak against social and familiar impositions. While women had long been seen as the quiet and obsequious *angel in the house*, silently devoted to looking after husbands, bearing, taking care of several children, cleaning and cooking, sensation novels made a new woman emerge from the industrial dust of Britain. “[...] [T]he female self, so much subjected to male power and violence in eighteenth-century gothic novels, is here independent and autonomous, playing upon the clichés of ideal femininity [...]”.¹⁷⁵

The 1857 *Divorce Act* moved the jurisdiction related to marriage from clerical to civil power, turning marriage itself into a sort of contract, rather than an inflexible

¹⁷³ L. Pykett, “Sensation and the Fantastic in the Victorian Novel”, cit., pp. 212-213.

¹⁷⁴ R. Ablow, “Victorian Feelings”, in D. Deirdre (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Novel, II edition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001, pp. 193-210, p. 197.

¹⁷⁵ L. Talairach-Vielmas, “Sensation fiction and the gothic”, in A. Mangham (ed.), *A Cambridge Companion to Sensation Fiction*, University Printing House, Cambridge, 2013, pp. 21-33, p. 28.

sacrament. Despite the fact that the *Divorce Act* was not exactly a legislative manoeuvre in favour of women, the document gave women themselves more chances to divorce their husbands, such as for instance in cases of adultery, desertion and domestic cruelty. Together with the *Divorce Act*, the publication of *The Subjection of Women* by John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), as well as financial insecurity and female dependence from husbands and worries linked to speculative capitalism, paved the way to the *Married Women's Property Act* of 1870, which allowed women to own the sums of money they earned and to inherit family properties.¹⁷⁶ The second half of the nineteenth century apparently elevated women from a legislative point of view. However, medically and biologically speaking, women were still defined and firmly thought of as inferior to men, as underlined by several alienists.

Moreover, together with Victorian wives, another category of women would be ruled some years after the *Divorce Act* of 1857. In 1862, Victorian prostitutes witnessed the promulgation of an act regulating their personal health. Prostitutes, in fact, could be forcibly brought by the police to hospitals for checks to prevent venereal diseases. The *Contagious Diseases Acts* of 1862 evidently demonstrated how women and their bodies were still heavily and passively subjected to the power of men; in fact, while women could be obliged to see a doctor, those men (mainly members of the army), who enjoyed their nights with prostitutes, were not inspected at all.¹⁷⁷ In other words, those sexual seductresses were women rejected by God's forgiveness and they were normally labelled as *fallen women*. Fallen women, by definition, represented the evident and material opposite of the cute, pure and obedient *angel in the house*. If the concept related to the *fallen woman* had first been associated to prostitutes or victims of male mental and physical violence, such as in the case of *Pamela* or Nancy in *Oliver Twist*, "social historians note that the moral panic that invariably accompanied discussion about the predominance of prostitution masked anxiety about the inability of society to control women".¹⁷⁸ Thus, it was the entire female sector that looked uncontrollable in the second half of the nineteenth century and sensationalists put in writing all those male social and domestic worries.

¹⁷⁶ L. Fernando, "New Women" in *the Late Victorian Novel*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, USA, 1977, pp. 1-25, p. 11.

¹⁷⁷ G. Watt, *The Fallen Woman in the 19th-Century English Novel*, Croom Helm Ltd, Fyshwick, Australia, 1984, p. 2.

¹⁷⁸ M. Frawley, "The Victorian Age, 1832-1901", cit., p. 436.

Men felt they were somehow losing control over women, who were in a state of turmoil. In fact, the revolutionary movement of the suffragettes was effectively created and organized at the end of the 1860s and it had been inspired by the same ideals of John Stuart Mill, who had proposed women's suffrage already in 1865. The cultural context, as well as literature and sensationalism, were drawing the new external and internal shape of Victorian women, who appeared more independent and – apparently – freer from male constrictions. Owing to the threat they presented to Victorian values, those female pioneers became targets of criticism and strong wrath. Begun at the end of the 1850s, the debate on the New Woman Question became, in the 1890s, visibly strident and brutally fierce. Noteworthy, in this regard, is what Lyn Pykett highlighted: “[t]hroughout the 1860s and 1890s commentators on the contemporary scene used the sensation novel [...] as evidence or symptom of social movements”.¹⁷⁹ Women were socially changing their position, as expressed by sensation novels.

2. Obscure Female Minds: Sexuality, Medicine and Spiritualism

If the legislative context was crucial for sensation novelists and for the creation of that new female image presented in those novels, Victorian medical discourses on psychiatry and asylums, news in journals, as well as Victorian manias, also became fundamental sources of inspiration for sensation novelists. The 1860s abruptly opened at the scene of a bloody and brutal murder. In 1860, Constance Kent (1844-1944), a sixteen-year-old girl from the village of Road in Somerset, was accused of the murder of her three-year-old stepbrother, found in the garden with his throat cut. Constance's case caused such a stir that in a few days the news went all around Britain. The young girl was immediately sent to jail and only some months later she was dismissed. Her case had been grubby until the girl herself confessed and was then immediately condemned to death. Subsequently, the sentence was changed and judges finally opted for life imprisonment.¹⁸⁰

The Great Crime of 1860, a book published in 1861, warned readers that a young

¹⁷⁹ L. Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine*, cit., p. 21.

¹⁸⁰ J. Sturrock, "Murder, Gender, and Popular Fiction by Women in the 1860s: Braddon, Oliphant, Yonge", in A. Maunder, G. Moore (eds), *Victorian Crime, Madness and Sensation*, Ashgate Publishing Company, Burlington (USA), 2004, pp. 73-88, p. 73.

middle-class woman had been able to commit such an inexplicable, brutal and scandalous murder.¹⁸¹ The fact significantly shocked Britain and touched Victorians' nerves and sensibility, not because Britons had never heard of murders, but because, in this specific case, a woman, and a very young one indeed, had been involved and had played the bloody role of the protagonist. By the 1860s, “sensationalist phraseology such as 'shocking violent outrage', 'unspeakable violence', 'murderous assaults', and 'crime of dreadful depravity', were commonplace [...]”.¹⁸²

“Evil or antisocial action is no longer the direct result and expression of evil character, as in conventional melodrama, but derives from combinations of circumstances, weakness, insanity, impulse, 'sensation' at its most basic”.¹⁸³ In sensation novels, the psychology of the protagonist, as well as the analysis of his inner world, constitute a crucial and inevitable ingredient of the plot. Psychopathology seems to justify the crime and the subversion of social norms. Thus, the largest majority of sensation novels turned the middle-class family and the marital institution, in general, into a degraded system, where jealousy, fury, violence and madness indisputably reigned. In dealing with the sensation novel *par excellence*, *The Woman in White* by Collins, D.A. Miller observes that “the meanings we find in the novel are intricately bound up with the ways in which it operates on our nerves. [...]. Nervousness in the nineteenth century was regarded as an essentially feminine malady”,¹⁸⁴ as often underlined in the previous chapter.

Sensation novels, therefore, were considered to be particularly dangerous because they had the power to touch nerves and their effects could be absolutely uncontrollable and destructive in fragile women. Sensation fiction objectified and victimised women's nerves. As stressed by Mrs Oliphant, sensation novels displayed a kind of woman, a disrespectful (anti-)heroine, who was able to subvert ideologies related to femininity.¹⁸⁵ Andrew Radford, commenting on Mrs Oliphant's point of view, writes that “sensation fiction reveals saintly, self-sacrificing womanhood as a tepid fatuity, merely a puppet outfitted with 'conventional coverings'. This movement, according to Oliphant, will

¹⁸¹ J. Sturrock, "Murder, Gender, and Popular Fiction by Women in the 1860s: Braddon, Oliphant, Yonge", cit., p. 73.

¹⁸² J. Rowbotham, K. Stevenson (eds), *Behaving Badly: Social Panic and Moral Outrage – Victorian and Modern Parallels*, Routledge, New York, 2016, pp. 121-162, p. 140.

¹⁸³ W. Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar*, cit., p. 58.

¹⁸⁴ S. Regan (ed.), *The Nineteenth Century Novel*, cit., p. 421.

¹⁸⁵ *Idem*, p. 40.

initiate the next generation of wives and mothers into a set of values that did not appear to be constrained by hegemonic institutions such as the family or the Church of England”.¹⁸⁶ In addition to this “sensational” process of initiation of next generations, if Victorian mesmerism and mesmeric shows had convinced women that they could be so easily hypnotised and controlled by men, sensation novelists made their best to free women not only from social impositions, but also from male control over those women's minds.

Those sensational women refused the angelic role – embodied by Florence Nightingale – that Victorian society wanted them to play. In fact, that “[w]omen, then, both inside and outside of marriage, were to aspire to the vestal purity of the nun”¹⁸⁷ was a surpassed and obsolete concept in sensationalism. They were women that not only dared to have multiple husbands, in some cases, but they were also ambitious and ready to do anything to achieve their aims, even when illegal. “[I]n their many different versions of extremity, these women take bullets and poison, commit bigamy and murder, lie, steal, cheat, go mad, turn detective, and disappear. [...] So the domestic angel becomes a she-devil [...]”.¹⁸⁸ If this is the kind of woman presented by the outrageous sensation novelists, one may come to the conclusion that the typical sensation novel stimulated and influenced the creation and proliferation of those very feelings and reactions in women that, according to the largest Victorian male majority, should be suffocated, repressed and even condemned.

As Henry Maudsley (1835-1918) would theorize in medicine in 1886,¹⁸⁹ the human mind in sensation novels seemed to be physiologically and materially accessible. From the point of view of sensation novelists, the mind appeared deeply penetrable, so much so that sensation novelists entered and narrated all the mysterious mental processes, obsessions and premeditations of their characters, confirming, intentionally or ingenuously, what medicine had been stressing for centuries: insanity, or lunacy, was – mainly – female. The concept of female malady kept being interpreted by several physicians and theorists, as well as by the largest majority of Queen Victoria's male subjects, as fundamental to reinforce the conventional social hierarchy: men had the

¹⁸⁶ A. Radford, *Victorian Sensation Fiction*, cit., p. 90.

¹⁸⁷ B. Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, cit., p. 14.

¹⁸⁸ E. Allen, “Gender and Sensation”, in P. K. Gilbert (ed.), *A Companion to Sensation Fiction*, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, Oxford, 2011, pp. 401-413, p. 405.

¹⁸⁹ H. Maudsley, *Natural Causes and Supernatural Seemings*, Trench & Co., London, 1886, p. 56.

biological right to rule those women, lost in their own stream of dangerous and delirious thoughts. Women were supposed to be under male control.

As highlighted by Elaine Showalter in *The Female Malady*, an English gynaecologist and president of the Medical Society of London in 1865 – Dr Isaac Baker Brown (1812-1873) – believed that women ought to be deprived of the right to experience sexual pleasure through clitoridectomy, in order to better control their attitude, instincts and lives and prevent possible imminent social and domestic catastrophes.¹⁹⁰ Victorian women were to turn into a serious social burden at the very moment in which their lives 'hysterically' changed as a consequence of their “imperfect” biology. In Elaine Showalter's words, “[...] menstruation sharply marked the beginning of a different and more limited existence. [...] A girl's growing awareness of this social dependence and constraint, the realization of her immobility and disadvantage as compared with her brothers, and other boys, may well have precipitated an emotional crisis”.¹⁹¹ It was not simply female psychology that was in the spotlight then: Victorian men's attention that specifically moved onto female sexuality, as the main apparent reason of women's mental fragility.

“[...] The senses become morbidly irritable, the memory and intellectual faculties impaired, the complexion assumes a chlorotic or jaundiced hue, the appetite is capricious, the tongue furred, the function of the chylopoietic viscera deranged, menstruation irregular and scanty, headache is almost always present, the extremities are cold, the pulse frequently irregular, the sleep unrefreshing and disturbed by dreams”.¹⁹² Should Edwin Lee – mentioned in the previous chapter – have been a reader of sensation novels, he would have found the same symptoms he had analysed and discussed in his *A Treatise on Some Nervous Disorders* (1833) in those female characters of sensation novelists. Heroines of sensation novels had to be punished due to their atypical, amoral, outrageous, scandalous and insane behaviour: the asylum became the perfect place for their seclusion and incarceration. That female “unnatural” freedom of thought and action had to be an exception, rather than an obvious attitude influenced by biological characteristics. Victorian psychiatry, managed by men, was confirming that those sensational female characters were nothing but perfect cases for an asylum.

¹⁹⁰ E. Showalter, *The Female Malady*, cit., pp. 76-77.

¹⁹¹ *Idem*, p. 57.

¹⁹² E. Lee, *A Treatise on Some Nervous Disorders*, cit., p. 47.

They had to be detected, confined and hidden.

As highlighted by Cynthia Eagle Russett, “[t]he phenomenon of menstruation was alone fully sufficient to explain why women could never hope to stand on a level of social and professional equality with men”.¹⁹³ For James McGrigor Allan (1827-1916), menstruations were that biological feature that got women really close to inferior animals and he also added that any possible aspiration within the intellectual kingdom was to be denied to women for their being monthly victims of menstruations.¹⁹⁴ In opposition to the ideas of Charles Delucena Meigs (1792-1869), famous American obstetrician, who, in his *Woman* observed that “I do not believe that women are inferior beings. I regard them, on the contrary, as the ministering angels of the race”,¹⁹⁵ Hermann Schaaffhausen (1816-1893), German anthropologist and contributor to the *Anthropological Review*, in 1868 underlined that women, with their physical and mental inferiority, had to be considered on a par with primitive peoples.¹⁹⁶ Therefore, “[w]omen's nervous systems were so intertwined with their reproductive function, doctors assumed, that any minor emotional disturbance could upset the menstrual cycle, causing problems ranging from simple fatigue to insanity and even death”.¹⁹⁷ Paradoxically, that angelic nature of women discussed by Delucena Meigs was constantly challenged by the risk of diseases.

As highlighted by Thomas Laycock in 1840, in his *A Treatise on the Nervous Diseases of Women*, the menstrual period had long been considered as similar to the so-called heat of lower animals; thus, he confined women to the rank of irrational creatures.¹⁹⁸ Puberty and fecundity were described as a sort of nocturnal transformation of a young girl into a monster. Menstruations “consist in tumour of the mammæ, with a darker tint of the areolæ, weight and irritation about the pubes, pain in the loins, yawning, fastidious appetite, nausea, and not unfrequently a sense of tension in the muscles of the neck, headache, and alternate pallor and redness of the cheeks: in addition, there is a flow of a sanguineous fluid from the vagina, varying in quantity

¹⁹³ C. Eagle Russett, *Sexual Science. The Victorian Construction of Womanhood*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1989, p. 30.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹⁵ C. D. Meigs, *Woman: Her Diseases and Remedies*, Blanchard and Lea, Philadelphia, 1854, p. 383.

¹⁹⁶ C. Eagle Russett, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

¹⁹⁷ S. M. Archimedes, *Gendered Pathologies*, cit., p. 34.

¹⁹⁸ T. Laycock, *A Treatise on the Nervous Diseases of Women*, cit., p. 43.

from one to eight ounces”.¹⁹⁹ The connection between menstruation, mental disorders, nervous irritation and hysteria is very clear in Laycock's ideas. Therefore, according to the ideas of the time, every girl, achieving puberty, became a possible hysterical subject and a dangerous case for the rest of the community.

“It may be remarked that the whole nervous system is excited by the sexual stimulus, as much as by opium or other powerful nervine alteratives. This fact has been already stated with respect to frogs; it is obvious in women, especially in cases of nymphomania [...]”.²⁰⁰ Thus, in Laycock's insight, when women achieved fertility and puberty, the only way they had to relax nerves was represented by the presence of a partner. There seems to be a very clear link between Laycock's reference to nymphomania and the concept of *vagina dentata* (toothed vagina): the dangers of female voracious sexuality and allegedly ill biology were real male obsessions and women, in sensation novels, were transformed not only in simple pathological cases for an asylum, but they also were perfect examples of 'praying mantises'. Women, in sensation fiction, were supposed to ensnare their victims. They were a sort of Medusa with irresistible and petrifying gaze. Women turned into a sort of She-snake that wraps and crashes, a new Eve that has domesticated her enormous, sinuous and shining snake, as painted by Franz Von Stuck in his eerie *Sensuality* (1891). “[L]a femme sert de médiatrice entre l'homme et le sacré ou surnaturel, surtout entre l'homme et le démoniaque”.²⁰¹

The *household nun* was then darkened by the shadow of social and intimate female rebellion; feminine ferment was frightening an apparently solid phallogentric social system. Influenced by sensationalists, and by the numerous medical developments, Nicholas Francis Cooke (1829-1885) published *Satan in Society* (1871). Cooke uncovered the shocking domestic secrets and vices of young girls and expressed his deepest concerns with relation to female life in private houses. Dealing with female sexuality, he suggested that “[w]e are bound to accept human nature as it is, and not as we would wish it to be, and both Christian and pagan philosophy agree in detecting therein certain very dangerous elements. Among the most dangerous and inevitable is the sexual instinct, which, implanted by the Creator for the wisest purposes, is, perhaps,

¹⁹⁹ T. Laycock, *A Treatise on the Nervous Diseases of Women*, cit., p. 45.

²⁰⁰ *Idem*, pp. 74-75

²⁰¹ K. M. Bulver, *La Femme-démon, Figurations de la Femme dans la Littérature Fantastique*, Peter Lang Publishing Inc., New York, 1995, pp. 17-55, p. 40.

the most potent of all evils when not properly restrained, retarded, and directed”.²⁰² Recognising women as active sexual subjects, free to practice their own domestic vices without the presence of a man and his – apparently useless – seminal power, was the same as admitting that women could actually become independent from any possible point of view.

In regard to this, Lyn Pykett wisely tells two different kinds of woman apart. On one level, she identifies the so-called 'proper' woman, whereas, on another level, she describes the 'improper' feminine, put into the spotlight by sensational writers. According to Pykett, “the system of the proper feminine may be represented by the following set of polarities (the list is by no means exhaustive): the domestic ideal, or angel in the house; the madonna; the keeper of the domestic temple; asexuality; passionlessness; innocence; self-abnegation; commitment to duty; self-sacrifice; the lack of a legal identity; dependence; slave; victim”.²⁰³ On the contrary, the symbolic and prototypical 'improper' feminine, imagined by sensationalists, is a sort of Le Fanu's *Carmilla*, a demon, an evil soul, a rebellious and dangerous spirit, pursuing independence and self-fulfilment. This improper feminine is a woman that somehow frightens but, at the same time, is so inexplicably attractive, especially for sensationalists.

Men of the second half of the nineteenth century were scared, on one level, of the autonomy women were gaining in the legal sphere, and, on another level, they were fascinated by the highly transgressive liberty of women's body and mind. Even though sensation novels did not deal with blood-drinkers and vampires, the *fil rouge* linking the two different, yet similar, images of the feminine seem undeniable. According to Bram Dijkstra, “[f]or the men of the second half of the nineteenth century – who strove to soar upward into the empyrean of intellectual transcendence upon the shoulders of their ever-pliant, gratefully suffering wives – it seemed that the pleasure of the body were to be paid for with death. The womb of women was the insatiable soil into whose bottomless crevasses man must pour the essence of his intellect in payment for her lewd enticements”.²⁰⁴ Menstrual affliction gave women the power to become a living abomination with hysterical criminal intentions: “the criminal woman is consequently a

²⁰² N. F. Cooke, *Satan in Society*, J. S. Goodman & Co., Chicago, 1873, p. 53.

²⁰³ L. Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine*, cit., p. 16.

²⁰⁴ B. Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, cit., pp. 334-335.

monster”,²⁰⁵ as suggested by Lombroso and Ferrero.

In other words, medicine and the presence of the unavoidable pathological element motivated plots and shaped characters. What moulds the female protagonists of these novels, in fact, is their nervousness, as well as their ability or inability to control instincts, impulses and sensations. In agreement with Meegan Kennedy, Pamela K. Gilbert highlights that madness, especially when female, is a fundamental part of sensational plots, as well as mad-doctors: the content of sensation novels revolves around the inexplicable, but really visible, dangers of female shattered nerves.²⁰⁶ With regards to doctors, they are depicted by sensationalists as men lacking humanity and unable to create connections between themselves and their patients. The doctor is presented as a magician that has inexplicable powers to read the mind and to understand its codes; he normally is the most mysterious and unapproachable character of the novel, and the social distance he keeps from his patients and people is tangible and evident.

The fact of considering and categorising the physician as a person owning supernatural abilities, which are able to sneak into women's mind in order to find out her most obscure and secret instincts, can be clearly interpreted as a legacy of mesmerism and Charcot's shows. However, while Charcot's women, victims of hypnosis, were immobilised and subjected to male will, sensational women are, on the contrary, rebels against male power; their minds are surely stronger than animal magnetism and Charcot's convictions. They are anything but women who Charcot would easily hypnotize: sensation women can reason and act in the dark, even without male permissions. They are led by obscure forces that foster their perverted thoughts through mysterious paths. These women, undisturbed, wander from room to room trying to tame those very instincts that would be the cause of their imprisonment in an asylum. The double personality of sensational female protagonists, most of the time, forces those women to spend the rest of their lives within the walls of a Victorian house of mental care.

Together with Charcot's hypnosis, the correlation between sensationalism and the

²⁰⁵ C. Lombroso, W. Ferrero, *The Female Offender*, D. Appleton and Company, New York, 1898, p. 152.

²⁰⁶ P. K. Gilbert, “Sensation fiction and the medical context”, in A. Mangham (ed.), *A Cambridge Companion to Sensation Fiction*, University Printing House, Cambridge, 2013, pp. 182-195, p. 186.

black arts expressed in 1862 by Mrs Oliphant's,²⁰⁷ as well as Cooke's preoccupations explained in his *Satan in Society*, seem to be connected to the shape of a woman that is somehow guided by inexplicable supernatural powers. As argued before, sensational women appear to own a double personality. They were seen as weird creatures who, losing the control over their mind and body, experienced the uncontrollable possession of either a new self or of an external obscure and mysterious force. While dealing with hysterical women, sensation novelists taken into account here – Braddon, Collins, Le Fanu and Wood – referred to devilish possession copiously. What the reader should be reminded of is that the fearful power of witches over society had not disappeared at all. Witches were – undoubtedly – the embodiment *par excellence* of a double personality which split uncontrollably: even medicine and psychiatry could not cope with such abilities of identity duplication. Sir Cunning Murrel, from Essex, is mentioned here because his story seems to reflect the prototypical Victorian beliefs in the existence of witches and evil possessions. After his death in 1860, Murrel left a truck full of books and notes reporting pieces of information with reference to alleged conversations he had had with fairies and witches,²⁰⁸ confirming, thus, the great Victorian interest in supernatural and spiritual possessions. Witches and hysterical women of sensation novels surely have a lot in common. In fact, “[t]he term 'possession' covers a group of symptoms which can be considered theologically, medically and psychoanalytically”.²⁰⁹ Leaving theology aside, the reference to medicine and psychiatry is almost obvious if we consider the hysterical delirium as the double self emerging from the deep unconscious of sensation women. While witches are thought to be women possessed by a devilish dominant identity coming from the external dimension, female hysteria might be seen as a form of possession coming from the inner depth. As a devil, hysteria – in sensation novels – takes the control over the female patient, who is transformed into a protean creature, whose instincts and mental mechanisms are unpredictable.

In connection to witchcraft, Victorians, who had eulogised the spectacular abilities of mesmerism to distance women from their earthly and corporeal reality through hypnosis, saw in women a great and fascinating spiritual propensity, as confirmed by the numerous female mediums and clairvoyants in Victorian Britain. Women, then, not

²⁰⁷ S. Regan (ed.), *The Nineteenth Century Novel*, cit., p. 40.

²⁰⁸ B. Rosen, *Witchcraft*, Edward Arnold Publishers Ltd, London, 1969, p. 8.

²⁰⁹ *Idem*, p. 227.

only were more likely to come in contact with devilish entities, as well as more likely to suffer from insanity, they also were those that could speak with the dead more easily. Spiritualism, namely the Victorian belief in the possibility of communicating with the other bank of the river Acheron, is really similar to the loss of identity experienced by female sensation protagonists, whose minds were pervaded by uncontrollable instincts. While mediums came into contact with outer identities of their own self and were possessed by the dead, sensation women met inner personalities and presences which are portraits and reflections of their own distorted mind.

In Lombroso and Ferrero's *The Female Offender*, the connection between evil possession and psychopathology is very clear. While describing the case of a woman from Palermo, the so-called *Vecchia d'Aceto*, the two Italian thinkers recalled the relation between insanity and demonic possession. In fact, the old woman, who had poisoned several persons for her obsession with money, was presented as clearly under the powerful hand of a diabolic entity, which turned the woman's steady gaze into a "satanic leer, suffices to itself to prove that the woman in question had born to do evil [...]".²¹⁰ Likewise in sensation fiction, the role played by doctors and mesmeric prophets is similar to that of those numerous Victorians interested in seeing beyond reality through the female eyes of a medium. It is women, both in Victorian reality and in sensation fiction, that are able to connect reality with other fascinating, though dangerous and scary, mental and spiritual dimensions; the doctor simply tries to hold the reins of an indomitable female personality. The doctor, in fact, makes the attempt at separating the conscious and the unconscious reality from the delirious fantasy created by pathology. Margaret Fox (1833-1893), Annie Besant (1847-1933), Maria Hayden (1826-1883), Madame Blavatsky (1831-1891), Anna Kingsford (1849-1888) were only some of the numerous nineteenth-century women that were actually considered able to see beyond life, and it seems clear that sensationalists also recalled the ability attributed to those visionary women. Sensation female protagonists cannot foresee the future or speak with the dead, but their insanity allows them not only to experience a sort of duplication of identity, but also to discover – unconsciously – the most hidden spheres of their own inner self.

Leaving aside now female private scandalous sexuality and different forms of

²¹⁰ C. Lombroso, W. Ferrero, *The Female Offender*, cit., pp. 72-73.

possessions affecting women, it also seems to be worth stressing the importance of anthropology in Victorian time. Anthropology – influenced by medicine – had a lot to say about the endless list of differences between men and women. From the '50s, Victorian anthropologists focused their attention particularly on three dimensions while studying genders: anatomical differences between women and men, physiological discrepancies between the genders and cranial asymmetries. “While it is true that the main thrust of physical anthropology was toward the classification of races, the problem of sexes posed too many similarities to ignore”.²¹¹ Nineteenth-century phrenology, furthermore, did not oppose the ideas related to the inferiority of women supported by medicine; it rather confirmed them. Women apparently presented a physiologically different skull: they were physically inferior to men, according to phrenologists such as Lombroso. Victorian women were deemed anatomically smaller than men and their body childlike. They were seen as imperfect men or silly children and they were considered incapable of reasoning and acting properly in innumerable situations and contexts. In his studies of evolution and reproduction, Charles Darwin had noted a remarkable discrepancy between male and female intellect, which “depended upon the accuracy of several elements: natural selection, sexual selection, and the transmission of characteristics from male to male”.²¹² Women seemed to be excluded from the Darwinian process of transmission of possibly good genes to the offspring. What emerges is that, as Herbert Spencer said, women's brain appeared to be too small and too affected by the reproductive system²¹³ to afford the effort required by the transmission of positive qualities to new generations.

For others, the dimensions of skulls, as well as female faulty biology, menstruations and female violent sexuality, were simply excuses. The real cause of the female rebellion in the second half of the nineteenth century was the result of dangerous gendered pathologies, like hysteria or dementia, affecting indiscriminately any woman, according to some thinkers of the time, like Julien Joseph Virey (1775-1846). In fact, according to these physicians, hysteria and the related incapability to control nerves were anatomical dysfunctions present in every woman. The reason of female mental fragility was neither the skull containing the brain, nor the womb: the entire body of any

²¹¹ C. Eagle Russett, *Sexual Science*, cit., p. 27.

²¹² S. M. Archimedes, *Gendered Pathologies*, cit., p. 31.

²¹³ *Ibidem*.

single woman was a fertile ground for the flowering of hysteria.²¹⁴ Jean-Louis Brachet (1789-1859) had no doubts while affirming that women were not different because they owned a womb: they were different because they were trapped in a body which was thought to be biologically faulty. Brachet asserted that the fact of putting the blame on the uterus would be too obvious and simplistic: the real causes of hysteria and female mental fragility had to be imputed to the very nature of women's body.²¹⁵ In *Satan in Society*, Cooke noted that “the temperament of women exposes her to the most singular inconveniences and inconsistencies. Extreme in good, she is also extreme in evil. She is inconstant and has pursued with the great ardour. [...] Capable of the most heroic actions, she does not shrink from the most atrocious crimes”.²¹⁶

Beneath the skin of any nervous woman, then, a possible criminal soul and mind reigned, as demonstrated by sensationalists. Sensational novels used criminology and medicine of the nineteenth century as the main elements to link female biology to alleged female biological mental fragility. Crime and revenge were the result of female insanity and the two elements were the pivots of the whole sensational narration. Once again, this connection between criminology, mental fragility and women was confirmed by Cesare Lombroso, who was convinced that the shape of the skull demonstrated that women had a higher level of monstrosity in their brains. However, while Lombroso often stressed the strong relation between female criminal acts and prostitutes or low-class women, sensationalists admitted that female murderers, thus, mad women, were also members of the upper class. Sensation women often lived in great villas and palaces, where civic and social rules were expected to be rigorously respected and preserved, under the firm hands of aristocratic men.

Lombroso and Ferrero, in their *The Female Offender*, affirmed that “while the majority of female delinquents are led into crime either by the suggestion of a third person or by irresistible temptation, and are not entirely deficient in the moral sense, there is yet to be found among them a small proportion whose criminal propensities are more intense and more perverse than those of their male prototypes”.²¹⁷ The small portion of women-born-criminals identified by Lombroso and Ferrero seemed to present

²¹⁴ E. Ender, *Sexing the Mind. Nineteenth-Century Fictions of Hysteria*, Cornell University Press, New York, 1995, p. 31.

²¹⁵ *Idem*, p. 32.

²¹⁶ N. F. Cooke, *Satan in Society*, cit., pp. 280-281.

²¹⁷ C. Lombroso, W. Ferrero, *The Female Offender*, cit., p. 147.

specific characteristics that made them different from their male colleagues. Female cruelty in committing the crime, according to the Italian anthropologist, was evidently and visibly much more intense than in criminal men. That female propensity to be cruel derived, according to the two authors, from the likeness existing between women and children, whose moral sense was described as deficient. In Lombroso's opinion, women were “revengeful, jealous, inclined to vengeance of a refined cruelty” as children normally are.²¹⁸

Medical advances and sensation novels, then, went hand in hand. As Shelley's *Frankenstein*, with its references to anatomy and vivisection, reflected the medical panorama of the end of the eighteenth-century and the first decades of the nineteenth-century Britain and Europe, sensation fiction strongly depended on medical and pseudo-medical developments of researches in psychiatry and insanity carried out by Victorian physicians. While Victor Frankenstein is secretly interested in touching and sewing human flesh, sensational protagonists appear to be keen to probe human mind with its mechanisms, secret, obscure connections and reflections. Moreover, if the interest in medicine and science, in general, of sensational novelists and Mary Shelley is pretty similar, the approach to medical developments is radically different. Mary Shelley, in fact, isolates Victor Frankenstein from the rest of human beings and she hides Victor's prohibited experiments in a mysterious and secret laboratory. On the contrary, sensationalists located psychiatric experimentation and investigation in private houses and asylums. Science is no longer presented as a dark practice; science, in sensation novels, is part of daily routine. That secret and mysterious science of Mary Shelley and Victor Frankenstein became, in sensation novels, a domesticated version of science itself. Distorted scandalous minds meet domesticity: monstrosity inhabited private Victorian houses.

Criminality and domestic space became a combination and convention in sensation novels,²¹⁹ as underlined by Diana C. Archibald. Anthea Trodd explains that “[t]he representations that we find in the fictions of the mid-Victorian period were formulae evolved to describe the conditions of the Victorian household and the relationships

²¹⁸ C. Lombroso, W. Ferrero, *The Female Offender*, cit., p. 151.

²¹⁹ D. C. Archibald, "Of all the horrors...the Foulest and Most Cruel", *Sensation and Dicken's Oliver Twist*, in K. Harrison, R. Fantina (eds), *Victorian Sensations: Essays on a Scandalous Genre*, Ohio State University Press, Ohio, 2006, pp. 53-63, p. 55.

between its members and with the outside world”.²²⁰ In an era in which the industrial revolution and the polluted air of London made people think that the only possible place to find inner peace was the domestic place, sensationalists dismantled every belief related not only to the *angel in the house*, but also to the peaceful and holy house itself. It was, in effect, in 1862, when Elizabeth Braddon published her *Lady Audley's Secret*, that criminal insanity, domesticity and femininity became an inseparable trio for sensationalists writing in the years to come: “Multiple murder within the family became the most widely featured pattern of sensationalist reporting, with emphasis on violation of the ties of blood”.²²¹

Phrenology, gynaecology, psychiatry, mesmerism, anthropology, spiritualism and the chronicles of the time – inaugurated by the murder committed by Costance Kent – provided sensationalists with the perfect atmosphere for their domestic stories in which women justified all the Victorian obsessions linked to female sexuality and nervousness. As highlighted by Joy Wiltenburg, “[t]he sensationalist portraits of family violence dramatized the ways in which familiar relations could go terribly, inhumanly wrong. Such accounts furthered confessional aims by encouraging a posture of fear in the face of unthinkably horrifying invasions of domestic and civic peace”.²²² With their violent wives, widows, old or young women, sensational novels were signalling and evidencing the preoccupations of Victorians related to menstrual, sexual and mental female instability. The female mental pathologization – and the consequent transmission of the illness to the future generations – is undoubtedly at the core of sensationalism. In fact, medicine was suggesting that insanity could become a plague and this aspect of insanity largely and decisively impressed sensationalists, as suggested by sensation novels' plots. Female lunatics were thought to be responsible for infecting their offspring: “not only women were more prone to insanity than men, they were also more responsible for hereditary transmission”,²²³ as asserted by Francis Galton, Charles Darwin's cousin, in his 1865 *Hereditary Genius*. Confirming the position of Galton, data coming from asylums were continuously demonstrating that the largest majority of patients in

²²⁰ A. Trodd, *Domestic Crime in the Victorian Novel*, The Macmillan Press Ltd., London, 1989, p. 3.

²²¹ J. Wiltenburg, “True Crime: The Origins of Modern Sensationalism”, cit., p. 1388.

²²² *Idem*, p. 1394.

²²³ S. Shuttleworth, “Demonic Mothers: Ideologies and Bourgeois Motherhood in the mid-Victorian era”, in L. M. Shires (ed.), *Rewriting the Victorians, Theory, History and the Politics of Gender*, Routledge, New York, 1992, pp. 31-51, p. 36.

asylums were deemed ill because of “hereditary taint passed within the blood”.²²⁴

To conclude, while numerous groups of Victorian women were manifesting and protesting in order to obtain the right to vote, the right to education, the right to hold public positions, the right to enjoy the same rights of men, the right to economic independence and autonomy, the right to divorce their husbands, psychiatry and physicians were instead confirming that women were biologically unable to control their instincts. The general opinion on women still remained very negative. Women had to keep their position of inferiority and men had to keep their control over their daughters and wives' thoughts. As it will be demonstrated in the following chapter, sensation novelists, reflecting the medical panorama of the time, put into writing the social and domestic transformation of women from chaste and pure subjects into revengeful and criminal monsters affected by mental instability. “The female body [...] is intrinsically pathological, and the subject inhabiting that body was erratic and unstable”,²²⁵ as demonstrated by two novels of the 1860s, Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) and Ellen Wood's *St. Martin's Eve* (1866). Furthermore, Sheridan Le Fanu's *The Rose and the Key* (1871) and Wilkie Collins' *The Legacy of Cain* (1888) will be also discussed and analysed in the following chapter with the specific aim to show how Victorian sensationalism, with its dangerous pathological women, was still alive even after the end of the 1860s.

²²⁴ M. Stevens, *Life in the Victorian Asylum*, cit., 127.

²²⁵ K. Hurley, *The Gothic Body, Sexuality, Materialism and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, pp. 117-141, p. 120.

Chapter 3

Sensational Pathology

This chapter takes into account and tries to analyse four Victorian novels that are – or might be – catalogued within “the opiate of sensation fiction”²²⁶ of the second half of the nineteenth century. As a consequence, I will consider the most relevant passages which are related to Victorian mental care and asylums, to Victorian fears of female insanity and to the Victorian belief of its alleged biological transmission. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, Wood's *St. Martin's Eve*, Le Fanu's *The Rose and the Key* and Collins' *The Legacy of Cain* have been chosen, first of all, to analyse how the issue of mental pathology was dealt with in sensation literature, and second, to support the idea that sensationalism did not constitute a mere literary fashion of the 1860s only. Moreover, this corpus intentionally includes two novels written by women and two written by men. Working on this specific group of literary works is an intention to verify whether there are differences in the way in which women and men exercised or, very often, sympathised with the mentally fragile women they portrayed. For my analysis of the novels I will take into account discourses about women encompassed within both the – sometimes scandalous – Victorian collective cultural imagery connected to womanhood and Victorian inflexible social rules. “In a society that not only perceived women as childlike, irrational, and sexually unstable but also rendered them legally powerless and economically marginal, it is not surprising that they should have formed the greater part of the residual categories of deviance”.²²⁷

²²⁶ K. Flint, *The Woman Reader, 1837-1914*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993, pp. 253-293, p. 293.

²²⁷ E. Showalter, *The Female Malady*, cit., p. 73.

1. Female mental instability in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's and Ellen Wood's sensation fiction

Born in Soho, London, in 1835, Mary Elizabeth Braddon was the third child of Henry Braddon, a failed Cornish solicitor, and Fanny White, an Irish English-educated woman. After Braddon's parents separated when she was only four, she remained with her mother, in whom M. E. Braddon found her main source of inspiration. Educated in different schools, Braddon was a ravenous and keen reader, whose passion for literature was not only fostered by her mother, but it was also influenced by the family cook, Sarah Hobbes, who introduced Braddon to the works of Reynold, Dickens and Bulwer Lytton.²²⁸ Not only was she a passionate reader, but she also was a precocious writer. In fact, at the age of eight, she started writing her first short stories dealing with intrigues and secret domesticity: as observed by Lyn Pykett, this first period as writer was followed by an attempt at imitating Charlotte Brontë's stories and, as a consequence, Braddon's works became imbued with desperate and sad hearts loving in vain.²²⁹

In the 1850s, due to the financial failures of her father, Braddon undertook the scandalous career of actress: that was a real shame for a Victorian girl. In fact, when Braddon and her mother were in need of money, Mary acted in theatres and, while she toured the theatres of Britain with her company, she began to cultivate the passion her mother had transmitted to her: she started to write, and plentifully. She inaugurated her career with poetry, but soon after she opted for prose. In the 1850s, the largest majority of her works, melodramatic serials, appeared in the *Maxwell's Halfpenny Journal*.²³⁰ By the beginning of the 1860s Braddon was undoubtedly already an accomplished writer, but in 1862 the great success of *Lady Audley's Secret* finally came (even Queen Victoria was told to have read it).²³¹ After the publication of her masterpiece, writing became her main occupation and up until 1871 she would publish other twenty novels, such as *The Doctor's Wife*, *Eleanor's Victory*, *John Marchmont's Legacy* and *Aurora Floyd*, keeping moulding her style and characters to the changing interests of her most loyal readers. A

²²⁸ M. E. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2012 (1862), p. viii.

²²⁹ *Ibidem*.

²³⁰ Literature Online, Mary Elizabeth Braddon's biography, 28/09/2018, https://literature.proquest.com/searchFulltext.do?id=BIO002593&divLevel=0&queryId=3083156081712&trailId=16652B75E0B&area=ref&forward=critref_ft.

²³¹ *Ibidem*.

very intense literary period lasted until 1868 when, after the death of her mother, Mary went through a very deep and serious period of nervous breakdown.

Her prototypical sensation novel, *Lady Audley's Secret*, was serialised in three different magazines which had very different readers and the *Daily Telegraph*, by the turn of the century, defined Braddon as 'the Queen of living English novelists'.²³² The fact that Mary Elizabeth Braddon was a woman – and a fallen one due to her career as actress – made her the target of numerous attacks. She was strongly anathematized as a scandalous and disrespectful woman because her work was rumoured to actually inspire her readers with the uncontrollable desire to replicate the crimes she narrated. Readers could take inspiration from her sensational violent (anti-)heroines. In spite of widespread criticism attacking her theatrical background, the Victorian thirst for crimes, revenges, blackmails, familiar and domestic envies and jealousies, murders and prohibited adventures turned Braddon into one of the most prolific and genial minds of the second half of the nineteenth century and *Lady Audley's Secret* success was the material testament to that.

The novel opens with the description of a garden full of ruins that are scattered all over. That garden is the yard surrounding the Audleys' house, which in the past was a convent with strict rules. Nuns walking hand in hand in the garden and the sacred past of the house are clearly opposed to the current tenebrous aspect of the building and to Lady Audley's story which is to be unfolded. Mentioning the past of the house gives Braddon the opportunity to tell two really different kinds of women apart, from the very beginning of her novel. In fact, the clear reference to Time – the “good old builder”²³³ – helped Braddon underline not only how the aspect of the house had changed, but also enabled her to refer to the way in which the situation of women was presumably changing: devout nuns in the past and criminals-to-be in her present. Under the shadow of enormous oaks, the house is presented as a place full of mystery and secrets. In fact, the presence of locked, impenetrable and mysterious chambers in the house alarms the readers: that ancient convent is rotten by the hypocrisy, the subterfuges and by the devilish beauty of Lady Audley.

²³² Literature Online, Mary Elizabeth Braddon's biography, 28/09/2018, https://literature.proquest.com/searchFulltext.do?id=BIO002593&divLevel=0&queryId=3083156081712&trailId=16652B75E0B&area=ref&forward=citref_ft.

²³³ M. E. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, cit., p. 8.

Lucy Graham's beauty and joy are the two elements that most emerge from the general description of the Audley's family. "Wherever she went she seemed to take joy and brightness with her. [...] Miss Lucy Graham was blessed with that magic power of fascination by which a woman can charm with a word or intoxicate with a smile".²³⁴ That absorbing and toxic beauty hides a tenebrous mind: Lady Audley is surely one of those women who paved the way for numerous other scandalous women of the years to come. In addition, the other fundamental counterpart of the narration is Robert Audley, Lady Audley's nephew. Robert plays the fundamental role of the detective. In fact, he tries to find answers and reasons for the sudden disappearance of his friend George who has recently come back from Australia. After spending some time together, Robert invites George to visit the Audleys' Court. When Lady Audley glimpses Robert's friend, everything starts going wrong in Lady Audley's mind. The woman, from that moment onwards, is represented as shy, agitated, nervous and as a grumpy character. The past seems to be assaulting her and the reader is somehow led to think that there must be a very strong, yet still unrevealed, connection between Lucy and George.

"The truth was that Lady Audley had, in becoming the wife of Sir Michael, made one of those apparently advantageous matches which we are apt to draw upon a woman the envy and hatred of her sex":²³⁵ the advantageous position that Lady Audley achieves after marrying Sir Michael Audley is in contrast with her past precarious economic situation that was anything but good. Lucy Graham's previous life seems then to match George Talboys' regrets about his past. In fact, speaking about the premature death of his wife, George tells the reader the story of his sad wedding and the reason why he decided to leave Britain in order to go to Australia; "[p]oor little girl, she was very low-spirited; and when I told her that my London expedition had failed, she fairly broke down, and burst into a storm of sobs and lamentations, telling me that I ought not to have married her if I could give her nothing but poverty and misery".²³⁶

In contrast to George's poverty are the numerous opulent, joyful and cheerful public balls at which Lady Audley often appears. These balls are, in turn, symbolically the opposite side of the numerous murders committed in the country. Braddon, in fact, presents both the lavish and the dark side of society: "Brutal and treacherous murders;

²³⁴ M. E. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, cit., p. 11.

²³⁵ *Idem*, p. 10.

²³⁶ *Idem*, pp. 22-23.

slow, protracted agonies from poisons administered by some kindred hand; sudden and violent hands by cruel blows, inflicted with a stake cut from some spreading oak, whose very shadow promises – peace”.²³⁷ Oaks' shadow recurs again, bringing to mind the shadow of those very oaks in Audley's garden. And the very same shadows readers can find in the garden are present in Lucy Graham's mind. Mental shades of Lady Audley sometimes turn her into a very reserved woman, whose thoughts are impenetrable: she seems to be premeditating something obscure. The more her thoughts darken, the more her heart gets angry. Her previous life is an ominous presence and George is a sort of ghost coming from the deep well of her past to remind her that she has done something wrong, illegal or amoral: her past is a dark page of sorrow.²³⁸

Lucy Graham is undoubtedly as mysterious as the great portrait she owns. A marvellous pre-Raphaelite painting hangs at the wall of her boudoir, the secret chamber of Lady Audley, and both George and Robert are eager to stare at it. “The two young men looked at the paintings on the walls first, leaving this unfinished portrait for a *bonne bouche*. [...] By this time it was dark, the one candle carried by Robert only making one bright nucleus of light as he moved about holding it before the pictures one by one”.²³⁹ Although there are several paintings at the wall, both Robert and George are attracted by Lady Audley's portrait only: Lucy – like Thomas Millie Dow's *The Kelpie* (1895)²⁴⁰ whose gaze attracts – seems to be painted as an enchantress and a charmer. Moreover, the impending arrival of a storm increases the level of suspense and secrecy. The meteorological element here serves to introduce the real storm that is going to strike both the two young men, Robert and George, and, of course, Lucy Graham. While Robert is not particularly impressed by the force of the violent stormy weather, “the storm had a quite different effect upon George Talboys”,²⁴¹ who stays at the window, looking at the tempest hitting the country. On the other side of the house, “Lady Audley confessed herself terribly frightened of the lightning”:²⁴² lightnings, then, seem to be an enemy for both George and Lucy and that terror is only another element they seem to have in common.

²³⁷ M. E. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, cit., p. 51.

²³⁸ *Idem*, p. 61.

²³⁹ *Idem*, p. 64.

²⁴⁰ B. Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, cit., p. 230.

²⁴¹ M. E. Braddon, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

²⁴² *Idem*, p. 69.

Some days after staring at the portrait, George mysteriously disappears and Lady Audley's nervousness starts increasing more and more. Compunction or regret seem to dwell Lucy's soul and that state of mind forces her to find out a compliance – her maid Phoebe – not only to share the burden of her mysterious sins, but also to divide the weight of “the secret which is the key”²⁴³ to her life. “Do you remember, Phoebe,' she said presently, relaxing her pace, 'do you remember that French story we read – the story of a beautiful woman who committed some crime – I forget what [...]. Do you remember how she kept the secret of what she had done for nearly half a century [...] and how [...] she was tried, found guilty, and condemned to be buried alive?’”²⁴⁴ The fictional Lucy Graham and the metafictional beautiful French woman mentioned by Lady Audley share the same sins and faults: the role played by reading and women reading is anew presented by Braddon as one of the main Victorian fears and preoccupations.

The more Robert deepens her investigations, the more Lady Audley grows anxious and insane. Robert is convinced that Lucy Graham is keeping a secret which involves the house itself. Confirming that one of the most important elements of sensation fiction is domesticity combined with familiar secrets, Braddon wonders “[w]hat do we know of the mysteries that may hand about the houses we enter?”²⁴⁵ Robert's stubbornness and insistence bring to light some letters that evidently connect the past of Lady Audley's to the past of his friend George: Lucy has a double life. “She disappeared as Helen Talboys upon the 16th of August, 1854, and upon the 17th of that month she reappeared as Lucy Graham”²⁴⁶.

A “wicked woman, who did not care what misery she might inflict upon the honest heart of the man she betrayed”²⁴⁷ she is a foolish woman, who took the advantage to change her life, “forgetting that there is a Providence above the pitiful speculators, and that wicked secrets are never permitted to remain long hidden”²⁴⁸ Surely influenced by photos of the insane being circulating in her time, such as those by Sir Hugh Welch Diamond, interested in capturing female lunatics at the Surrey County Asylum, Braddon

²⁴³ M. E. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, cit., p. 213.

²⁴⁴ *Idem*, p. 95.

²⁴⁵ *Idem*, p. 123.

²⁴⁶ *Idem*, p. 231.

²⁴⁷ *Idem*, p. 228.

²⁴⁸ *Idem*, p. 229.

portrays an irritable, decaying and hysterical, yet aristocratic, Lady Audley that painstakingly controls her nerves and reactions. Her insanity slowly emerges and she wonders whether Robert is aware of the numerous problems he can come across while fighting against such a diabolic, though miserable, mind. “Do you know what it is to wrestle with a madwoman? [...]”.²⁴⁹ The symptoms of insanity are more and more evident and she is so mentally fragile that she fails to defend herself from accusations: “the words died away inarticulately upon her trembling lips. A choking sensation in her throat seemed to strangle those false and plausible words, her only armour against her enemies”.²⁵⁰

The description of the effects of lunacy on Lady Audley's body must be the obvious consequence of Braddon's interest in treatises and news related to psychiatry and criminology. As often said in the previous chapter, Kent's case and several other news related to murderers and murderesses, the numerous treatises about insanity and the continuous research carried out within British asylums undoubtedly influenced Braddon and her Lady Audley. The novelist, in fact, could count on a good personal knowledge of madness: Braddon had been living for a very long period with Sir John Maxwell, her publisher, and his wife, who was mentally ill. Braddon and Maxwell had a secret love story, but managed to marry only after 1874; in fact, madness of one member of the couple was not a plausible reason to call for the right to divorce.²⁵¹ Supporting the idea that Braddon was perfectly informed about Victorian psychiatry, Elaine Showalter observes that *Lady Audley's Secret* echoes the very similar Doctor John Conolly's real case, which involved a female lunatic and a man expatriating.²⁵² Braddon's excellent knowledge concerning hysteria and insanity is further confirmed by the fundamental theory of inheritance of malady carefully applied and used in its essence by Braddon in the novel.

In fact, Braddon teaches the reader that insanity was mainly perceived as a hereditary illness, in accordance with the numerous medical theories of her period. She underlined

²⁴⁹ M. E. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, cit., p. 235.

²⁵⁰ *Idem*, p. 241.

²⁵¹ Literature Online, Mary Elizabeth Braddon's Biography, 28/09/2018,

[https://literature.proquest.com/searchFulltext.do?](https://literature.proquest.com/searchFulltext.do?id=BIO002593&divLevel=0&queryId=3083156081712&trailId=16652B75E0B&area=ref&forward=critref_ft)

[id=BIO002593&divLevel=0&queryId=3083156081712&trailId=16652B75E0B&area=ref&forward=critref_ft.](https://literature.proquest.com/searchFulltext.do?id=BIO002593&divLevel=0&queryId=3083156081712&trailId=16652B75E0B&area=ref&forward=critref_ft)

²⁵² E. Showalter, *The Female Malady*, cit., p. 71.

that “[p]eople are insane for years and years before their insanity is found out”,²⁵³ and – not by chance – that was the reason why phrenology was so immensely important in the field of insanity: phrenologists were convinced that they could find out and discover insanity by simply studying the skull of people, without any direct manifestation of the illness. Braddon was, thus, perfectly aware of the scientific and medical discourses of her time. At certain points, in fact, the novel itself seems to turn into a medical treatise on insanity. For instance, Braddon often describes the effects of the hallucinations and delirium brought by madness. She observed that “the mind becomes stationary; the brain stagnates; the even current of the mind is interrupted; the thinking power of the brain resolves itself into a monotone”,²⁵⁴ and, drawing the attention of the reader on the effects of insanity on Lady Audley, Braddon wrote that “with her head bent forward, her eyes dilated, and her lips still parted [...], she sat blankly staring at the fire”.²⁵⁵ Lady Audley is affected by an “unnatural activity of her mind. Her attitude reflected the state of that mind – it expressed irresolution and perplexity. But presently a sudden change came over her; she lifted her head – lifted it with an action of defiance and determination”.²⁵⁶

Moreover, in the previous chapter I have tried to pinpoint the possible relation existing between spiritualism, sensation novels and dark possession: in *Lady Audley's Secret*, Braddon confirms this relation. While Phoebe describes the weird and criminal attitude of Lucy Graham, she refers to the alleged diabolic presences inhabiting the body of her lady: “my lady hurried along the hard dry highway, dragging her companion with her as if she had been impelled by some horrible demoniac force which knew no abatement”.²⁵⁷ The seeds of madness, as well as the seminal power of a 'demonic other', are clearly present in the deranged woman in question, whose “brain is on fire”²⁵⁸ and seems “to decay under an insufferable torture”.²⁵⁹ Furthermore, Robert Audley accuses Lucy of being a satanic creature, a Miltonian *fallen angel*: “[h]enceforth you must seem to me no longer a woman; a guilty woman with a heart which in its worst wickedness has yet some latent power to suffer; I look upon you henceforth as a demoniac

²⁵³ M. E. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, cit., p. 244.

²⁵⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵⁵ *Idem*, p. 254.

²⁵⁶ *Idem*, p. 270.

²⁵⁷ *Idem*, p. 276.

²⁵⁸ *Idem*, p. 311.

²⁵⁹ *Idem*, p. 289.

incarnation of some evil principle”.²⁶⁰

'[...] God knows I have struggled hard enough against you, Mr Robert Audley. [...] You have conquered – a MADWOMAN!' [...] When you say that I killed George Talboys, you say the truth. [...] I kill him because I AM MAD! because my intellect is a little way upon the wrong side of that narrow boundary-line between sanity and insanity [...].'²⁶¹

After confessing her insanity, the hideous Lucy puts the blame on her mother, reinforcing the Victorian idea that insanity was transmitted by mothers to daughters. She tells the story of her mad mother who was jailed in an asylum. From that moment on, Lady Audley starts untangling her thoughts and leads the reader through the recesses of her mind. Here again Braddon displays her knowledge of the different ideas circulating at her time in relation to insanity and its hallucinations: “I brooded horribly upon the thought of my mother's madness. It haunted me by day and night. I was always picturing to myself this madwoman pacing up and down some prison cell, in a hideous garment that bound her tortured limbs. I had exaggerated ideas of the horror of her situation. I had no knowledge of the different degrees of madness; and the image that haunted me was that of a distraught ad violent creatures, who would fall upon me and kill me if I came within her reach”.²⁶² Bearing in mind that Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) stressed the idea that women were unable to transmit positive qualities to their progeny because they were too busy mastering their faulty biology,²⁶³ Lady Audley justifies her acts explaining that what she does and the way in which she behaves are the direct results of the only thing she could actually inherit from her mother: insanity.

Furthermore, Braddon's journey through Lady Audley's mental mechanisms confirms the doubleness of her persona. Braddon compared Lady Audley to a masked French man, known as the *Iron Mask*, imprisoned in 1717 and left in jail for thirty-four years during the reign of Luis XIV.²⁶⁴ Braddon's reference to the *Iron Mask*, who was the protagonist of Alexandre Dumas' *The Vicomte of Bragelonne* (1847-1850), is clearly connected to the alleged double personality of the man. As the mask hid the real

²⁶⁰ M. E. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, cit., p. 294.

²⁶¹ *Idem*, p. 294.

²⁶² *Idem*, p. 296.

²⁶³ S. M. Archimedes, *Gendered Pathologies*, cit., p. 31.

²⁶⁴ M. E. Braddon, *op. cit.*, p. 393.

appearance of that French man, Lady Audley's beauty is a sort of curtain over insanity that threateningly waits for its prey. As a consequence, “[s]he is a second Iron Mask who must be provided for in some comfortable place of confinement”:²⁶⁵ Lady Audley must be sent to a place where she can spend her days in peace, away from sources of distress and nervousness.

Under the care and supervision of Dr. Mongrave, Lady Audley is finally labelled as insane, even if her insanity is potential. In fact, the physician states that “[t]here is latent insanity! Insanity which might never appear; or which might appear only once or twice in a life-time. It would be dementia [...]: acute mania. [...] The lady is not mad; but she has the hereditary taint in her blood. She has the cunning of madness, with the prudence of intelligence. [...] She is dangerous”.²⁶⁶ Since she is affected by dementia, thus, acute mania, she has the characteristics that matched with Victorian asylums' standards: according to Mark Stevens, dementia was the illness that, together with manias, more affected people in Victorian asylums.²⁶⁷

Lady Audley is finally condemned to seclusion and exile²⁶⁸ in Monsieur Val's mental care house – a *maison de santé* – in the town of Villebrumeuse. The reader can easily recognize a clear link between the alleged foggy atmosphere of the village, evoked by the name of the town itself, and the opacity which reigns in the head and mind of Villebrumeuse's inhabitants:

The coachman rang the bell, and a little wooden door at the side of the gate was opened by a grey-haired man, who looked out at the carriage, and then retired. He appeared three minutes afterwards behind the folding iron gates which he unlocked and threw back to their full extent, revealing a dreary desert of stone-paved courtyard. [...] My lady [...] looked up at these casements with an earnest and scrutinising gaze. One of the window was shrouded by a scanty curtain of faded red; and upon this curtain there went and came a dark shadow, the shadow of a woman with a fantastic head-dress, the shadow of a restless creature, who paced perpetually backwards and forwards before the window.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁵ M. E. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, cit., p. 317.

²⁶⁶ *Idem*, p. 323.

²⁶⁷ M. Stevens, *Life in the Victorian Asylum*, cit., p. 44.

²⁶⁸ M. E. Braddon, *op. cit.*, p. 325.

²⁶⁹ *Idem*, p. 329.

A desperate woman, a dark and unidentified *creature*, indeed, who compulsively spends her days walking maniacally and restlessly in front of a window, is the first image of nineteenth-century British asylums provided by Braddon. Admitting the condition of exile of people inhabiting the asylum, the author makes her protagonist complain because Lady Audley, after entering the asylum, finds herself in a sort of “living grave”.²⁷⁰ Thus, William Tuke's *York Retreat*, the symbol of Victorian therapeutic asylums, seems to be far from Braddon's idea on the treatment asylums allegedly provided: “[...] law could pronounce no worse sentence than this, a life-long imprisonment in a mad-house”.²⁷¹ In Braddon's view, asylums were anything but places for cures; they still remained places of punishment and isolation. For Lady Audley and Braddon, asylums then increased the dose of pain for those many minds that “must tremble upon the narrow boundary between reason and unreason, mad to-day and sane to-morrow, mad yesterday and sane to-day”.²⁷²

The circle closes with a further reference to Lady Audley's portrait in her abandoned and dusty boudoir at Audley's Court. The narcissistic obsession of Lady Audley with staring at her own image and beauty – summarised in that painting at the wall – is suppressed after her incarceration in the asylum. Likewise, the reader is finally denied the opportunity to admire that diabolic and criminal portrait: a thick and heavy curtain hanging “before the pre-Raphaelite portrait [...]”²⁷³ hides the splendid young face and sensual body of the lady. Once Lady Audley is departed, the house – abandoned by the entire family – “is often shown to inquisitive visitors, [...] and people admire my lady's rooms, and ask many questions about the pretty, fair-haired woman, who died abroad”.²⁷⁴ Dishonour and shame even force the Audleys to deny the existence of Lucy Graham, whose existence is, in fact, testified only by that portrait.

Lady Audley's Secret is a prototypical sensation novel because it is actually imbued with preoccupations presented by Victorian newspapers' reports of that time: such preoccupations were related, for instance, to some scandalous and unacceptable bigamy cases. In effect, even if bigamy actually was a widespread practice, it remained something unmentionable. One example was the Yelverton bigamy-divorce case, “in

²⁷⁰ M. E. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, cit., p. 333.

²⁷¹ *Idem*, p. 336.

²⁷² *Idem*, p. 176.

²⁷³ *Idem*, p. 379.

²⁷⁴ *Ibidem*.

which Maria Theresa Longworth sought to invalidate the marriage of Major Charles Yelverton to Mrs Forbes by proving that she herself was the Major's lawful wife"²⁷⁵ in 1858. Together with preoccupations related to bigamy and unconventional marital situations, reports of wrong confinement, as well as familiar revenges through the use of asylums and the excuse of mental insanity, became a very well-known issue in mid-nineteenth-century Britain. What Braddon actually did in her *Lady Audley's Secret* can be defined as the main mission of sensation novels: sensationalists wanted to find reasons for and give voice to uncontrolled female Victorian 'nervousness'.²⁷⁶

Braddon dealt with the theme by comparing Victorian women with shattered nerves to successful female characters that had gloriously populated past history. "[W]omen are never lazy. They don't know what it is to be quiet. They are Semiramides, and Cleopatras, and Joan of Arcs, Queen Elizabeths, and Catherine the Seconds, and they riot in battle, murder, and clamour, and desperation".²⁷⁷ Braddon mentioned an Assyrian Queen, an Egyptian one, the mystic Jeanne d'Arc, a Queen of England and Ireland and an Empress of Russia: each one of them could represent in Braddon's mind the real potential power of each woman. Braddon ridiculed men's opinion related to the mental and physical fragility of women underlying that considering women the weaker sex was 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 [...]",²⁷⁸ and Braddon warned that if women were not given the freedom and rights they were claiming, those who were forcibly confined at home could "turn their frustrations against the family itself".²⁷⁹

Together with the positions of power that, according to Braddon, every woman could aspire to, the author used references to mythological figures in order to describe the mysterious and monstrous force attributed to women throughout history. In some of his nightmares, Robert Audley sees the pale and chilling face of Lady Audley looking out of the sea foam: the woman, in fact, appears "transformed into a mermaid".²⁸⁰ Out of Robert's nocturnal visions, Phoebe witnesses the manifestation of Lucy's anger and her

²⁷⁵ M. E. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, cit., p. XXV.

²⁷⁶ *Idem*, p. XXVI.

²⁷⁷ *Idem*, p. 177.

²⁷⁸ *Idem*, p. 178.

²⁷⁹ E. Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own. British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*, Virago Press, London, 1979, p. 168.

²⁸⁰ M. E. Braddon, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

eyes are victims of a mighty metamorphosis: “There was another flame in her eyes – a greenish light, such as might flash from the changing hued orbs of an angry mermaid.”²⁸¹ Again, it cannot be by chance that Braddon referred to mermaids in order to describe Lady Audley's behaviour.

“Mermaids [...] submerge themselves not to negate their power, but to conceal it”,²⁸² as explain by Nina Auerbach. Lady Audley extracts the mermaid from her inner self in order to reinforce her position and, consequently, to achieve her specific goals. Mermaids inhabiting the long nineteenth century were, in fact, the mothers of those iconic serpent-woman, whose demonic gifts attracted and destroyed. In Victorian iconography, in fact, the mermaid seems to be the predecessor of the attractive hybrid she-snake. “Lady Audley and her mermaidlike sisters need not show a tail [...]: their angelic faces and natures become demonic with a shift of the viewer's perspective. [...] Iconoclastic in her essence, the angel becomes a demon by realizing the implications of her being”.²⁸³ While in real life womanhood – with its mental capacities – was tragically reduced in order to mould women's role in accordance to men's expectations and convenience, in Braddon's novel, women regained power and disobeyed any sort of social and familiar rules through psychopathology.

In Braddon's pages, women became dangerous creatures and revengeful presences that kept reminding Robert Audley that women had an enormous power of dissimulation that could challenge and finally crush him/men: “he remembered the horrible things that have been done by women, since that day upon which Eve was created to be Adam's companion and help-meet in the garden of Eden”.²⁸⁴ The reference to the biblical Eve in the novel is mixed with two sinful *Magdalenes*, Lucretia Borgia and Catherine de Medici: two cases of extremely powerful women associated to familiar – and highly sexualized – violence. Braddon wondered what pleasure these two women could effectively count on when “the dreadful boundary line between innocence and guilt was passed”.²⁸⁵ These women, like Lady Audley, are condemned to an inner silent struggle led by “the three demons of Vanity, Selfishness, and Ambition”.²⁸⁶

²⁸¹ M. E. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, cit., p. 273.

²⁸² N. Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon. The Life of a Victorian Myth*, Harvard University Press, Massachusetts, 1982, p. 7.

²⁸³ *Idem*, pp. 107-108.

²⁸⁴ M. E. Braddon, *op. cit.*, p. 233.

²⁸⁵ *Idem*, p. 252.

²⁸⁶ *Idem*, p. 253.

Like Mary Elizabeth Braddon, another woman later ventured into sensationalism, female rebellion and frustrations. Exactly “[b]ecause they were women, writing about the sins of women, both of them were subject to reproof”.²⁸⁷ Ellen Wood, also known as Mrs. Henry Wood, was born in 1814. The young girl spent the largest part of her childhood with her maternal grandmother. However, her joyful youth would prematurely be destroyed by the shadow of an illness. In fact, at a very young age, Ellen Wood was diagnosed a spinal disorder – a curvature of the spine,²⁸⁸ to be precise – that forced her to spend the largest majority of her days on a reclining chair. In spite of the disease, at the age of twenty-two, she married Sir Henry Wood, who became the father of Ellen's five children. A prolific writer since a very young age, Ellen Wood published her most famous novel – *East Lynne* – in 1861, inaugurating her fruitful career as writer. From 1861 onwards, Wood wrote almost two novels per year, becoming soon a popular novelist. After the death of her husband in 1866, more and more Wood's novels were soon populated by crimes, obscure presences and detectives, turning the novelist into one of the forerunners of detective fiction of the late nineteenth century.

Maunder and Liggins noted that it was Wood's ability to foster and stimulate curiosity and shake her readers' nerves that labelled her as a “unique contributor of the genre”.²⁸⁹ What might be of interest and particularly relevant is the contrast between the real composed life of Mrs Wood – severely devoted to Evangelical Anglicanism – and her plots and fictional female characters. Her being a condemned *angel in the house* – as a consequence of the illness – is in stark contrast with her fervid imagination related to female rebellion and liberty. After her death in 1887, her son Charles wrote *Memorials of Mrs Henry Wood*, published in 1894, where he depicted his beloved mother as the perfect Victorian housekeeper: she was indeed described as the *angel in the house* personified.²⁹⁰ Undoubtedly, the fact of using the surname of her husband as pen name reinforces the suggestion of her son: her submission to the family was doubtless. Wood, then, was portrayed as the perfect mother and perfect wife, whose life had never known excesses and naughty fantasies (apart from her disguising as a monk in order to enter a

²⁸⁷ W. Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar*, cit., p. 107.

²⁸⁸ *Idem*, p. 110.

²⁸⁹ A. Mangham, “Ellen (Mrs. Henry) Wood”, in P. K. Gilbert (ed.), *A Companion to Sensation Fiction*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2011, pp. 244-256, p. 245.

²⁹⁰ L. Sussex, *Women Writing and Detectives in Nineteenth-Century Crime Fiction. The Mothers of the Mystery Genre*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2010, pp. 101-119, p. 102.

monastery at night to attend a mass at The Grand Chartreuse,²⁹¹ in the French Alps, near Grenoble).

What seems relevant is that every story imagined and created by Ellen Wood has something to do with domesticity,²⁹² as underlined by Winifred Hughes. Moreover, Hughes observes that *The Saturday Review* had defined Ellen Wood's novels as the meeting point of sensationalism and domesticity, emotional repercussions and hysterical characters, dark betrayals and obsessive persecutions, murders and hopeless passions, and, her very popular *East Lynne*, together with Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, had been classified as two of the British best sellers of the second half of nineteenth century.²⁹³ Female rebellious psychopathology fostered the readership's interest in those novels. Nonetheless, *East Lynne* is not the only novel by Wood that is replete with combinations of pathological sins and feelings, of course. In fact, what I want to demonstrate here is that Ellen Wood's *St. Martin's Eve* – undoubtedly less famous than *East Lynne* – might be seen as a fundamental novel while discussing the relation between Victorian popular fiction of the second half of the nineteenth century, medical advances in the field of psychiatry and Victorian rebellious femininity. Despite the fact that the novel is not one of the most well-known literary works signed by Mrs Wood, *St. Martin's Eve* is absolutely representative and significant in this context for its drawing the reader's attention particularly to mental mechanisms and psychopathology of the main characters, especially in the case of Charlotte, the undisputed protagonist.

Using Andrew Radford's words, “medico-legal associations between female and violent insanity and women's biology throw into relief Charlotte's manipulation of her sexual allure to gain a legitimate foothold in society”.²⁹⁴ The use of female mental derangement serves Ellen Wood in order to justify and emphasize female criminality, which is, of course, the crucial and the outrageous element of the plot. Mindful of the very typical elements of sensation novels identified by Patrick Brantlinger, Wood's *St. Martin's Eve* completely fulfils the possible expectations of a readership interested in sensationalism. Crime and intrigues, deranged womanhood, unstable minds and domestic settings harmonically intervene to give birth to a splendid novel that deserves

²⁹¹ L. Sussex, *Women Writing and Detectives in Nineteenth-Century Crime Fiction*, cit., p. 102.

²⁹² W. Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar*, cit., p. 111.

²⁹³ *Idem*, p. 112.

²⁹⁴ A. Radford, *Victorian Sensation Fiction*, cit., p. 95.

being classified as a perfect example of Victorian sensation novel. As *The Saturday Review* commented with regards to *St. Martin's Eve*, “Mrs. Wood has spared no pains to accumulate the materials for a curiously thrilling story”.²⁹⁵

Death is presented as though it was the main character of the story. In fact, from the very first page of the novel, Wood anticipates that death is going to be a very crucial presence within the narration: “Excitement in that house there indeed was, but of gaiety none; for grim Death was about to pay it a visit [...]”.²⁹⁶ Likewise, mental fragility is also introduced in the very first chapter. Some days after bearing Benjamin, the little heir, the wife of George Carleton St. John dies and, speaking about her, the narrator warned the reader that her pain “was not pain of the body: of that she was free in this, the passing: but pain of the mind. An anxious care, one of the many she must leave on earth, was pressing upon that lady's brain”.²⁹⁷

George St. John, some time after the death of his beloved wife, starts looking for a second chance in life. He seeks not only company for himself, but also for the miserable motherless Benjamin who does not deserve to spend his childhood far from maternal cares. In order to exorcise the possibility of spinsterhood, Charlotte takes the opportunity and becomes George's second wife, although Mrs. Darling, Charlotte's mother, has warned her – and the reader – that this decision might not be a good choice. Disappointed at her daughter's determination, Mrs. Darling anticipates that her daughter is affected by a sort of incapability to handle and cope with jealousy. Soon after getting married, Charlotte bears George on the very same day of Benjamin's birthday. “[I]n proportion to her love for her own child, grew her jealousy of Benja – nay, not jealousy only, but dislike. [...] [T]he jealousy and the dislike had come”.²⁹⁸ Dark passion, jealousies and anger are presented as enemies of Charlotte's shattered nerves, which make her become very violent. “[H]er condition seems to have more in common with the behaviour of puerperal maniacs”,²⁹⁹ afflicted by volcanic imagery and dangerous instincts. Hate, which Oscar Wilde – in his *De Profundis* – would define as a hereditary disease,³⁰⁰ is marring Charlotte's nerves. From the very first chapter of her novel, Wood

²⁹⁵ H. Wood, *St. Martin's Eve*, Macmillan and Co., New York, 1903 (1866), p. iii.

²⁹⁶ *Idem*, p. 1.

²⁹⁷ *Idem*, p. 3.

²⁹⁸ *Idem*, p. 40.

²⁹⁹ A. Mangham, *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction: Crime, Medicine and Victorian Popular Culture*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2007, p. 75.

³⁰⁰ O. Wilde, *De Profundis and Other Prison Writings*, Penguin Classics, Harmondsworth, 2013, p. 79.

presents a revolution taking place not only in Charlotte's mind, but also – more importantly for Victorian male preoccupations – in a very respectable and aristocratic Victorian family: “In that one moment she was a mad woman. [...] A strange, wild look on his wife's face, telling, as it seemed to him, of madness; a wail of reproaches, such as had never addressed to him from woman's lips; Benja struck to the ground with a violent blow, and his cheek bleeding from it, [...]. She had sunk on the sofa; pale, trembling, hysterical”.³⁰¹

While Charlotte is obsessed with little George, Sir St. John seems to have sweet words and thoughtfulness only for his first son, Benjamin, who is constantly in danger. Furthermore, the sudden death of Sir St. John's endangers more and more the motherless Benjamin. In effect, the little heir is now the master and this situation often leads Charlotte to premeditate and think of his death. Dark thoughts, almost the same that Mrs Oliphant and Professor Mansel guessed would stress the nerves of fans of sensation novels, populate Charlotte's laboured and stormy mind. “[I]f Benja were to die, her child would be the inheritor. [...] She strove against this dislike – it might be better to call it hatred, for it had grown into that – and she had to exercise a constant check upon herself in her behaviour towards him”.³⁰² Although she tries to dominate her ill-regulated mind, it grows chaotic and rebellious.

“His little head was struck against the table, his costly new birthday-dress was torn. He screamed with pain, Georgy screamed with terror”.³⁰³ Charlotte's repeated manifestations of violence against Benjamin precede the sudden, inexplicable and mysterious death of Benjamin in a fire. Honour, Benjamin's supervisor, “became conscious of a smell of burning, as of wool. [...] A dark mass smouldering on the floor at the far end of the room, the carpet smouldering, [...], no trace of him, save that shapeless heap from which the spirit had flown”.³⁰⁴ Benjamin is eventually dead and the cause of that fire is imputed to the feeble-minded protagonist that is described as “ [...] two-faced, thoroughly sly and artful”.³⁰⁵ Nonetheless, the coveted death of Benjamin is definitely not the solution to Charlotte's preoccupations. “What struck Mr. St. John more than anything else in this visit, was the exceeding *stillness* that seemed to pervade Mrs.

³⁰¹ H. Wood, *St. Martin's Eve*, cit., p. 43.

³⁰² *Idem*, p. 127.

³⁰³ *Idem*, p. 148.

³⁰⁴ *Idem*, p. 151.

³⁰⁵ *Idem*, p. 162.

Carleton St. John. She sat in utter quietness, her hands clasped on her knee, her black dress falling around the slender form in soft folds, [...]. The expression of her bent face was still, almost to apathy; her manner and voice were subdued”.³⁰⁶ The more Charlotte's mental stability seems to fade away, the more does Georgy's health worsen. The death of Benjamin has had a very strong impact on Charlotte's son, whose “spirit failed”.³⁰⁷

Moreover, before dying, little Georgy confesses that her mother, Charlotte, often sees and meets Benjamin's spirit in the house, especially during the night, in her nightmares, when she hides her face for fear under Georgy's skinny body. Spiritualism and psychiatry intertwine here. The Victorian conviction related to the possibility of seeing ghosts is linked to the hallucinated psychopathology of the deranged protagonist. After the announced death of Georgy, Charlotte's mental instability is more and more visible. Wood used terms which were being circulated in order to describe the development of Charlotte's mental illness. “The paroxysms occurred almost nightly: and Mrs. St. John grew into a terribly nervous state [...]. She sometimes drank a quantity of brandy, [...]: not, poor thing, from love of it, but as an opiate”.³⁰⁸

In addition to Charlotte's serious psychiatric situation, those scary nightmares start turning into real hallucinations that she cannot control: “Now it seems that the dream had passed into reality, and these were a thousand Benjas, in flesh and blood, come to mock her”.³⁰⁹ The distorted countenance and those dark devilish eyes are the portrait offered by Wood of that woman, whose story, pathology and crime are compared to those “queer and horrible tales [...] of people killing or injuring others”³¹⁰ being narrated in Victorian time. Resembling the traits of famous Victorian murderesses, such as Amelia Dyer – accused of numerous infanticides – and Mary Ann Cotton, Charlotte's facial expressions can be anything but sane: “I have seen a strange look in her face more than once, [...] a wild, awful expression in her eyes, that I don't believe *could* visit the perfectly sane”.³¹¹

Moreover, like Braddon, Wood used a concept which was very well-known at that

³⁰⁶ H. Wood, *St. Martin's Eve*, cit., p. 187.

³⁰⁷ *Idem*, p. 188.

³⁰⁸ *Idem*, p. 327.

³⁰⁹ *Idem*, p. 331.

³¹⁰ *Idem*, p. 391.

³¹¹ *Idem*, p. 406.

time. Hereditary madness, whose success in the '60s could be surely attributed, for instance, to the publication of Ulysée Trélat's *La Folie Lucide* (1861) and Francis Galton's *Hereditary Genius* (1865), was a widespread idea, especially because upper-class Victorians were increasingly obsessed with fears of contagion coming from, for instance, the colonized and the primitive, from prostitutes and from the 'Great Unwashed'. By the first half of the '60s, madness had undoubtedly already been added to the list of contagious diseases: insanity itself could secretly penetrate houses and any other domestic space. Trélat undelined that “[l]es médecins des hôpitaux, qui observent un grand nombre de malades, les médecins des asiles d'aliénés surtout, qui voient les familles de tous leurs malades, sont frappés de la constance de cette loi d'hérédité, qui transmet aux enfants la forme extérieure et intérieure de leurs parents [...]”.³¹² Charlotte, whose insanity was transmitted to her by Mr. Norris – her father – could have surely been a pathological case of interest to Sir Trélat. “Mr. Norris, of Norris Court, had died *mad*. The widow, subsequently Mrs. Darling, had hushed the matter up for the sake of her child, and succeeded to keep the secret”.³¹³

What is very interesting is the different way in which insanity manifests itself in Charlotte and in her father. Even though Charlotte's father had died mad, “he had been (unlike his daughter) perfectly well all his life, betraying no symptoms of it”.³¹⁴ Here Wood seems to support the large amount of medical theories spreading all around Britain which were trying to (and managed to) convince people that women were more fragile and inclined to insanity than men, as discussed in the previous chapters. What Charlotte actually inherited was “her father's jealousy of disposition”.³¹⁵ Finally, abandoned by her dear Georgy, by her beloved husband George and accompanied by the nightmarish presence of the ghost of Benjamin, Charlotte is warmly invited to leave the house: “Mr. Pym told her as gently as he could, that it was deemed necessary she should have a change of air”.³¹⁶ A private asylum is then her destiny, as explained by Rose, Charlotte's sister, who is worried about the treatment Charlotte will receive in the mental care institution.

³¹² U. Trélat, *La Folie Lucide, Étudiée et Considérée au Point de Vue de la Famille et de la Société*, Adrien Delahaye, Libraire-Éditeur, Paris, 1861, pp. 314-329, p. 319.

³¹³ H. Wood, *St. Martin's Eve*, cit., pp. 414-415.

³¹⁴ *Idem*, p. 424.

³¹⁵ *Idem*, p. 426.

³¹⁶ *Idem*, p. 444.

Both Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* and Wood's *St. Martin's Eve* end with the heavy and obscure presence of an asylum, the fundamental Victorian institution gathering together literally every possible case of insanity and nervous disorder. The Victorian medical turmoil linked to female insanity, asylums, treatments and conservation and protection against madness are remarkably present in both novels. As underlined by Ruth Sherry, “[f]or women, reading literary works in which their own experiences are reflected can be an important authentication of that experience, and of their own identity and values. For men, reading literary works by women can provide insights, perhaps sometimes surprising ones, about those with whom they share the planet and, probably, their daily life”.³¹⁷ Sensation novels with their mad women – written by female authors – could actually be used as a weapon to detect female rebels in society and eradicate not only the wicked and dangerous female patient, but also the influential female writer. “The idea that women may find their most significant freedom through fantasy and imagination need not imply any commitment to madness. Saner visions of the imagination as salvation, which underlie many pre-twentieth-century novels about and by women and at least a few autobiographies, substantiate the possibility that the liberated inner life may create new freedoms of actual experience”.³¹⁸ Braddon's and Wood's female fictional creations, then, could actually be interpreted as real and influential reflections of their authors' instincts, which might have been based – at least partially or only intentionally – on personal denial and avoidance of imposed familiar norms. As in the case of Breuer's very famous patient, Anna O., any Victorian woman – from the lowest to the highest levels of society – could be affected by dark instincts and hysteria as the logical result of impositions, as well as of “boredom and futility of her daily life”.³¹⁹

Dealing with social impositions and Victorian marriage, Braddon and Wood indirectly focused their attention on the debated financial dependency that marriage itself implied. The cumbersome presence of marital life is what Braddon and Wood insisted on in both plots and, furthermore, the fact that the authors in question are two women is an element that is worth being considered. Marriage – the Victorian godly

³¹⁷ R. Sherry, *Studying Women's Writing. An Introduction*, Colset, Singapore, 1988, p. 6.

³¹⁸ P. Meyer Spacks, *The Female Imagination. A Literary and Psychological Investigation of Women's Writing*, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1976, pp. 36-77, 113-189, 276-314, p. 314.

³¹⁹ E. Showalter, *The Female Malady*, cit., p. 156.

duty – and marital aspiration, thus, seem to become the main social threat recognized by the two novelists. “In their investigation of internal and external female experience, they often question, overtly and covertly, marriage as a happy ending [...]”.³²⁰ While Victorian women normally saw “love as the paramount destiny and desire, displacing all others”,³²¹ as underlined by Jan March and Pamela Gerrish Nunn, Braddon and Wood wondered whether love could really exist in marital relations. In fact, in both novels, marriage is presented as anything but a happy ending: both female protagonists – Lucy and Charlotte – seem to start losing their health from the very moment in which they get married. Marriage, then, can be metaphorically associated to a little spark that ignites the fire in the morbid mind of the protagonists analysed here. According to Wood, in fact, English women of her time were normally obliged to get married and, as a consequence, they seldom loved: there laid the danger. As Wood wrote, once marriage comes “the heart is at rest; its life has left it”.³²²

Patricia Mayer Sparks observed that “[w]hen the artist is a woman, both the function of aspiration and the nature of frustration assume characteristic forms”,³²³ so, the novel became, for a woman writer, the mirror in which to reflect her own personal aspirations and the pulpit from which she could shout out her oppressive frustrations. Furthermore, supporting this idea, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in *The Woman in the Attic*, specified that “the madwoman in literature by women is not merely, as she might be in male literature, an antagonist or foil to the heroine. Rather, she is usually in some sense the *author's* double, an image of her own anxiety and rage”.³²⁴ In effect, while men in Victorian society had obviously more possibilities to compensate their inner misery by something externally gratifying, women – whatever social class they belonged to – had in some ways to accomplish their condition and content themselves with what they had. The English economist and sociologist Martha Beatrice Webb (1858-1943) defined marriage as the only possible vocation for a woman and, as a consequence, “the woman who finds her vocation in it may seem to escape the social limitations of femininity. Functioning as mind rather than body, she avoids the problems that often determine

³²⁰ P. Meyer Spacks, *The Female Imagination*, cit., p. 77.

³²¹ J. Marsh, P. Gerrish Nunn, *Pre-Raphaelite Women Artists*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1998, pp. 10-53, p. 27.

³²² H. Wood, *St. Martin's Eve*, cit., p. 206.

³²³ P. Meyer Spacks, *op. cit.*, 159.

³²⁴ S. M. Gilbert, S. Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic, The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, Yale University Press, Yale, 1984, p. 78.

female destiny”.³²⁵ The idea expressed by Webb was totally opposed to the Braddon and Wood's insight into marriage, which becomes the symbol of social impositions in both novels. As a consequence of limitations and social stereotypes, psychopathology appeared as the only emergency exit from that rigid and too strict marital world.

Ruth Sherry – excluding Braddon and Wood from the list of female novelists under consideration in her book *Studying Women's Writing, An Introduction* – suggests that several nineteenth-century female novelists not only depicted female constraints in their novels, but they also underlined the fact that their female characters were capable of very significant and impressive moral actions.³²⁶ However, if Sherry deals with female moral actions in response to social and marital impositions, I guess Braddon and Wood should be inserted in the group of feminists discussed by the author. “Women writers were united by their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers”:³²⁷ Braddon and Wood were women writing about women and both were surely probing female thoughts irritated by cultural and social limitations; both were undeniably interested in the “exploration and dramatization of secret fears and emotions, perhaps of elements of the unconscious”.³²⁸ Both were also aware that an enormous number of women would read their works and that those novels could, somehow, encourage them to be strong and rebellious, even if Lucy's and Charlotte's behaviour is an absolute exaggeration.

In fact, Lucy's and Charlotte's behaviour fell into the criminal category which is the maximum expression of female insurgence and protest. “[W]orks written by and for women can help us to understand the force of prevailing stereotypes”³²⁹ and, furthermore, according to Kate Flint, what is true for many novels written by women is “the fact that a reader may be implicated, placed in a position of complicity with a heroine's transgressive, yet highly understandable desires, confirms that sensation fiction in fact did not take the stability of this moral universe entirely for granted”.³³⁰ In other words, what Braddon and Wood were offering their female readers was a list of allusions to the very cultural and social ambit that readers and main characters shared.

As explained by Elaine Showalter, female sensation novelists, such as Braddon and

³²⁵ P. Meyer Spacks, *The Female Imagination*, cit., p. 282.

³²⁶ R. Sherry, *Studying Women's Writing. An Introduction*, cit., p. 51.

³²⁷ E. Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, cit., p. 15.

³²⁸ R. Sherry, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

³²⁹ *Idem*, p. 17.

³³⁰ K. Flint, *The Woman Reader, 1837-1914*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993, pp. 253-293, p. 282.

Wood, “made a powerful appeal to the female audience by subverting the traditions of feminine fiction to suit their own imaginative impulses, by expressing a wide range of suppressed female emotions, and by tapping and satisfying fantasies of protest and escape”.³³¹ Not only did female sensationalists give a voice to their own fantasies, but they also articulated their female readers' instincts, even if sensation writers seemed to warn their female readership of the possible consequences deriving from dangerous and inappropriate choices. Braddon and Wood, like others, were probably not inviting women to gain their rights by the means of violence, but they were presumably urging the strict male Victorian society to give women their rights and freedoms in order to avoid possible familiar and social disasters. “Feminist ideology temporarily diverted attention from female experience to a cultist celebration of womanhood and motherhood. It was inevitable and necessary that women novelists confront male society and culture, and that they rebel against the feminine tradition”.³³²

2. Nervous Women in Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu and Wilkie Collins

This section takes now into consideration one novel by Joseph Thomas Sheridan Le Fanu and one by Wilkie Collins, respectively *The Rose and the Key* and *The Legacy of Cain*, which, although rarely mentioned by critics, undoubtedly represent the genre I am dealing with. Joseph Thomas Sheridan Le Fanu was born in Dublin in 1814 and spent his youth studying at a military school. From the very first years of his life, Le Fanu was educated following the rigid canons of the Church of Ireland, since both his father and his mother were members of families with ancient clerical traditions. Writing and inventing stories was undoubtedly his only love and a stay in London in 1838 confirmed his passion for letters.³³³ However, letters had surely been his unique love until he met Susanna Bennett, who became his wife in 1844. Despite the harmony of the first period, marital magic would soon disappear. As underlined by Norman Donaldson, one of the

³³¹ E. Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, cit., pp. 158-159.

³³² *Idem*, p. 181.

³³³ Literature Online, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's biography, 28/09/2018
https://literature.proquest.com/searchFulltext.do?id=BIO002773&divLevel=0&queryId=3083156002557&trailId=16652B6C370&area=ref&forward=critref_ft.

most thorough of Le Fanu's biographers, W. J. McCormack, suggested that Le Fanu's wife was in poor health. As McCormack's *Sheridan Le Fanu and Victorian Ireland* (1980) proved, Susanna was actually a very nervous woman, obsessed with religion and persecuted by numerous other anxieties.³³⁴ As a result, she was said to have spent great part of her marital life in agony, when in 1858 she had a strong hysterical attack and, two days later, died at the age of thirty-four. What is clear, thus, is that, while writing about hysterical women and lunatics, Le Fanu was perfectly (and personally) aware of all the discourses about insanity, treatments and asylums' patients of his time.

In 1861, Le Fanu became the owner of *The Dublin University Magazine*. Between his editorial duties and his motherless children, he always found time to spend at Beaumaris in Anglesey, in Wales,³³⁵ from which he may have taken inspiration for the green Welsh landscapes described at the very beginning of *The Rose and the Key*. Not only did the Welsh landscape surely influence Le Fanu, but diverse British writers contributed to moulding the style of the eclectic author of *Carmilla* (1871), published in the same year of *The Rose and the Key*. In fact, even if more and more critics now tend to categorise Le Fanu as a writer of sensation fiction, he preferred to be described as the heir of Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832), the Scottish poet and novelist.³³⁶ Nevertheless, although many critics, such as Anna Maria Jones, now consider Sheridan Le Fanu an effective member of sensationalism, other critics and theorists, such as Andrew Radford, are hesitant about including Le Fanu on the list of sensationalists; in fact, Radford defines Le Fanu as a “intriguing cultural hybrid in the Victorian sensation canon”.³³⁷ What is clear is that, despite the fact that Le Fanu's works might not respect all the typical canons of sensation novels, the Irish writer shared the same Braddon, Wood and Collins' preoccupations related to domestic violence, marital private murders and thrilling familiar secrets. “Le Fanu's hybrid voice articulates its most primal fears through a fixation of the subject of the house”.³³⁸

Without considering or commenting *Uncle Silas*, Le Fanu's Gothic-sensation novel

³³⁴ J. S. Le Fanu, *The Rose and the Key*, Dover, New York, 1982 (1871), p. vi.

³³⁵ *Ibidem*.

³³⁶ Literature Online, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's biography, 28/09/2018

[https://literature.proquest.com/searchFulltext.do?](https://literature.proquest.com/searchFulltext.do?id=BIO002773&divLevel=0&queryId=3083156002557&trailId=16652B6C370&area=ref&forward=critref_ft)

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³³⁷ A. Radford, *Victorian Sensation Fiction*, cit., p. 148.

³³⁸ *Ibidem*.

par excellence, I will here take into account another of his novels. Even though the novel was not published in the '60s and, for this reason, some critics would not categorize it as a sensation novel, *The Rose and the Key* – published weekly from January to September 1871 in Dickens' *All the Year Round* – has to be seen as a novel having almost all the very peculiar features of a typical sensation novel. The novel can undoubtedly be considered as one of the offshoots of sensationalism “in the ghost stories of Sheridan Le Fanu”³³⁹. Keeping in mind that, as underlined by Anna Maria Jones, those Gothic castles, houses and mysterious and scary monastery crypts were transformed into “modern-day prisons and asylums”³⁴⁰ in sensation novels, a gloomy asylum and dark minds are important presences in Le Fanu's plot.

To be precise, the novel actually lacks a very significant sensation fiction's typical element, which is crime with its criminals. Although crime is not to be found in the novel in question, the psychiatric fragility and weird attitude of one of the protagonists, the greedy and cantankerous Barbara Vernon, suggests the possibility of very dark and murderous implications and intentions against the daughter, Maud Vernon. If the material manifestation of the criminal element is effectively missing, the psychopathology and, perhaps, the alleged criminal mind premeditating a possible imminent homicide are undeniably present features. To do that, Le Fanu exploited his doubtless knowledge of psychopathology and asylums in a magnificent way, offering the reader a brilliant description of lunatics and of the treatment of insanity within Victorian asylums. What seems worth underlining is the fact that Le Fanu abandoned the widespread idea of inheritance of insanity, which had largely been applied by Braddon and Wood in their *Lady Audley's Secret* and *St. Martin's Eve*. Discourses about degeneration and atavism were rapidly spreading all around Europe especially in the second half of the nineteenth century, and insanity was perceived as a possible dangerous pandemic. Yet, Le Fanu offered the portrait of a family in which the offspring had been surprisingly and unexpectedly preserved by the axe of insanity and by the nervous instability of the matriarch.

Although the use of insanity differs from *Lady Audley's Secret* and *St. Martin's Eve*, the frame of the story is very similar to the novels analysed before. The beginning of Le

³³⁹ W. Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar*, cit., p. 189.

³⁴⁰ A. M. Jones, “Sheridan Le Fanu”, in P. K. Gilbert (ed.), *A Companion to Sensation Fiction*, cit., pp. 270-280, p. 274.

Fanu's novel, in fact, resembles the very first chapters of *Lady Audley's Secret*. In fact, the protagonist, Maud Vernon, looks at a distant storm, which is the perfect description of her sense of foreboding. A one-eyed persecutor, an evangelical called Elihu Lizard, keeps following Maud and she still does not know the reason of that inexplicable macabre presence. That surname, *Lizard*, seems to anticipate that something is crawling, penetrating, sneaking into Maud's daily life. In fact, Maud, a very young and clever lady, perceives that something is going wrong and warns the reader that she has “a presentiment that some misfortune impends”.³⁴¹ In addition to Elihu Lizard's mysterious and distressing presence, Maud has to deal with a very gruff mother, Barbara, who continuously demonstrates arrogance and grouchiness. Whenever Maud tries to have a sort of conversation with her mother, they always end up quarrelling and “Maud's heart swelled with bitterness as she left the door”.³⁴²

The unmarried condition of Maud gives Le Fanu the possibility of speaking about an issue which was very dear to sensationalists: women and their marital condition. Marriage, women, folly and crime go hand in hand, as suggested by Le Fanu who seemed to be reporting news read in a journal of his time; “a woman who marries once is a fool, [...] but a woman who marries twice is a criminal. [...] [T]here was [...] a woman who married immediately after her husband's death, without the slightest suspicion, who, ten years later, was convicted of having murdered him, by hammering a nail into his head while he was asleep”.³⁴³ Actually Maud is kept distant from marriage because her becoming wife would limit her widowed mother's power over the entire property of the 'Rose and the Key' dynasty. The reader is continuously reminded of the bitter and angry presence of Barbara Vernon in Maud's life and, allegedly inspired by religious obsession of his wife, Le Fanu describes Barbara as a decaying woman, who, in spite of her strong faith, seems to hide a devilish monster in her soul, justifying the discourse about devilish possession in the second chapter. “In the corner of the deep and dark cell she occupies, there stands, as it were, an evil spirit, and there ripples in and fills her ears, with ebb and flow, the vengeful swell, but too familiar to her soul, of another psalm – a psalm of curses. [...] Had she abused the Word of God; and was the

³⁴¹ J. S. Le Fanu, *The Rose and the Key*, cit., p. 23.

³⁴² *Idem*, p. 60.

³⁴³ *Idem*, p. 86.

spirit she had evoked her master now?”³⁴⁴

Misunderstandings and quarrels between Maud and her mother occur repeatedly and Barbara grows angrier and angrier. The more Barbara's anger grows, the more her double personality becomes visible, even if she perfectly knows how to hide her instincts behind her classy composure. She suggests that “if people can't control their feeling, they can, at least, control their words”³⁴⁵ and tries to convince Maud that she – her daughter – has worrisome difficulties to master her own passions and she has no self-control. Barbara pretends to be on the right side, while she is perfectly aware that it is her own passions that are growing uncontrollable. “With a womanly weakness she walked to the mirror close by, and looked into it, and perhaps was satisfied that traces of this agitation were not very striking”.³⁴⁶

Female insanity, thus, constitutes a pillar of the novel's plot and Le Fanu seems to recall the very words of many contemporaries of his – theorists and physicians – speaking about the influence of desire, nerves and thoughts on the brain. “As a rule, the brain does not lead. Is it the instrument and the slave of desire. [...] It is the desire that governs the will, and the will the intellect”,³⁴⁷ and Barbara undoubtedly “has a strong will”.³⁴⁸ Barbara has, in fact, her specific reasons to be so strict and strong: she has a secret past life and a secret son, Elwyn Howard, that torment her mind and nerves. Elwyn and Maud, apparently attracted one by the other, are blissfully unaware of their relation of brotherhood. The apparent incestuous relation existing between Elwyn Howard and Maud and the matriarch's jealousy – mixed up with a strong desire to keep Maud away from any possible temptation to get married – transform Barbara into a dark entity. Pictures of a tragedy loom on the horizon and Barbara's worshipped God is no longer of use. In fact, resembling the story of Le Fanu's wife, Barbara, obsessed with sins and failings towards her God, “shut the big Bible, that still lay open, with an angry clap. 'I have asked for help, and it is denied to me,' she said fiercely to herself, with an odd mixture of faith and profanation”.³⁴⁹ Once God has abandoned her, Satan seems to possess her body, which is constantly victim of a sort of Ovidian metamorphosis due to

³⁴⁴ J. S. Le Fanu, *The Rose and the Key*, cit., pp. 97-98.

³⁴⁵ *Idem*, p. 115.

³⁴⁶ *Idem*, p. 120.

³⁴⁷ *Idem*, p. 193.

³⁴⁸ *Idem*, p. 126.

³⁴⁹ *Idem*, p. 199.

her unstable nervous apparatus and her fragile mind. Thus, Barbara is depicted as a wretch, but also as the magnificent *Aglaonice*, a mysterious and nocturnal “Thessalian witch”,³⁵⁰ able to command the movement of the moon and fully conscious of her enviable power.

Apart from being defined as a witch, it is not by chance that Barbara Vernon is a widow, presumably a refined and aristocratic version of a typical Victorian old maid. Resembling Miss Havisham in Dickens’ *Great Expectations*, the diabolical, hideous and pathological Barbara Vernon secretly imposes her will on her daughter, who unconsciously becomes her mother’s marionette. Barbara Vernon, therefore, the symbolic aristocratic widow *par excellence*, a perverted Queen Victoria, turns into a new kind of fallen woman, affected by insanity and solitude, as well as by envy and jealousy, which lead her to the ill and compulsive instinct of revenge. If one accepts the fact that Barbara Vernon can be seen as a new facet of Victorian fallen womanhood, she is a clear manifestation of a whole decaying culture, which, step by step, was going towards degradation. Even if the aristocratic Barbara Vernon cannot be labelled as a representative of “prostitutes, unmarried women who engage in sexual relations with men, victims of seduction, adulteresses, as well as variously delinquent lower-class women”,³⁵¹ her insanity and her unstable nerves make her part of the circle of those Victorian women accused of infecting, marring, disturbing and spoiling the ‘pure’ Victorian society.

Barbara’s insanity and her shattered nerves cannot easily be detected because her effective powerful position in the family and in society keeps her mental instability hidden. Le Fanu, here, could be questioning – as many others were doing – the relation existing between women and power: an issue that was not of interest to feminists only. In fact, “[i]n the nineteenth century the dialectic between womanhood and power was so central and general a concern, one so fundamental to the literature, art, and social thought of the period, that it is misleading to pigeonhole it as ‘feminist’ as though it were the concern of one interest group alone”.³⁵² Barbara Vernon, in fact, exerts such a command over all the other characters that she herself becomes the character around

³⁵⁰ J. S. Le Fanu, *The Rose and the Key*, cit., p. 200.

³⁵¹ A. Anderson, A., *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces. The Rhetoric of Fallenness in Victorian Culture*, Cornell University Press, New York, 1993, pp. 1-22, p. 2.

³⁵² N. Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon*, cit., p. 188.

whom the entire narration revolves.

Along with the powerful – though decaying – position of Barbara Vernon, another significant character is, of course, Doctor Antomarchi, who is able to read the mind and understand its secret codes. Dr. Antomarchi, whose surname might bring back to mind Napoleon I's physician (Francesco Antommarchi), is recognized as a very powerful mesmerist. If one takes into consideration the numerous mesmeric shows in Britain and Ireland that significantly spread after 1870s and became part of Victorians' daily life, one can easily come to the conclusion that Le Fanu, as other Irish and British writers, was perfectly aware of those shows and, as a consequence, exploited the several notions about mesmerism invading Britain and Ireland in those years. Mesmerism is “the language of the eyes”³⁵³ and Doctor Antomarchi is the mysterious man who is able to mould women's fragile minds. He enters the plot because Maud has to be dominated: Maud's feelings, thoughts, desires and instincts are a real obsession to Barbara. “You saw Captain Vivian to-day. [...] You shall now and here write me a letter renouncing Captain Vivian”³⁵⁴ otherwise “‘take the consequences of your insanity,’ said Lady Vernon, almost in a whisper, but with an audible stamp on the floor”³⁵⁵

The more Barbara Vernon's nerves get irritated, the more Le Fanu describes her symptoms and uncontrollable physical spasms. “Sometimes, for five minutes, her eyes were closed; sometimes wide open for as long. She heard the pulse of the artery in her temple drum on the pillow; and the heart beat harder than a heart at ease is wont to throb”³⁵⁶ Maud can no longer stand the situation and her mother's health increasingly worsens. Maud finally leaves the house and – unwillingly, of course – experiences a new nightmarish period of her life. Convinced that she is simply going to visit the very great house of Lady Mardykes, Maud is deceived into entering an asylum with “good locks, and safe windows, and high walls [...]”³⁵⁷ Maud is locked in an asylum because Antomarchi, collaborating with Lady Vernon, has his reasons to believe – or pretend to believe – that Maud is fool, as happens to Laura in *The Woman in White* by Collins. “I have heard of your language, of your violence, of your convert menace of forcing an escape, or committing self-destruction. Sufficient precautions are taken in this

³⁵³ J. S. Le Fanu, *The Rose and the Key*, cit., p. 215.

³⁵⁴ *Idem*, pp. 236-237.

³⁵⁵ *Idem*, p. 237.

³⁵⁶ *Idem*, p. 239.

³⁵⁷ *Idem*, p. 366.

establishment to render that crime impracticable. [...] This, you understand, is not punishment; it is precaution, and a process, though painful, strictly of a sanatory kind".³⁵⁸

The description of the asylum with its inhabitants and its practices provided by Le Fanu demonstrates the knowledge and alleged experience Le Fanu himself could actually have with such institutions. "She heard other men's voices, now in low and vehement dialogue, and sounds of shuffling feet, of gasping, tugging, and panting, as if a determined struggle were going on; once or twice a low laugh was heard; an then came a yell loud and long, which seemed passing further and further away, and was soon lost quite in the distance; a door clapped, and the place was silent":³⁵⁹ while reading these few lines, Le Fanu transports readers inside the asylum and makes them share Maud's own fears. The house is described as full of mad people, whispering or screaming. Given Doctor Antomarchi's special skills, mesmerism is of course considered by asylums' inhabitants as the solution to every possible problem, even though it is not presented as the only treatment that patients can experience: showers, baths and shocks of electricity are also present in the plot.

The Duchess of Falconbury, a poor wretch inhabiting the lunatic asylum, is described as a motionless and breathless woman with gleaming eyes and white lips. Her saturnine attacks are portrayed by Le Fanu as real devilish possessions; the woman becomes an evil female python and the shower an exorcism:

Now her struggles, being hopeless, became frightful; she yelled, she foamed, the veins of her forehead started and darkened, and her eyes rolled. Her handsome figure writhed and quivered in the contortions of the pythoness. But all could effect nothing. She was quietly and completely overpowered, and hurried, now uttering long despair screams, but no longer offering active resistance, swiftly across the grass of the terrace, and so disappeared into the door through which she had lately emerged in so different a mood.³⁶⁰

Once she is blocked with a strait-waistcoat, the shower-bath is deemed the best

³⁵⁸ J. S. Le Fanu, *The Rose and the Key*, cit., p. 353.

³⁵⁹ *Idem*, p. 303.

³⁶⁰ *Idem*, p. 345.

solution to relax her nerves. Violently hit by the water of the shower, “[t]he yells became sobs, and the sobs subsided. And still the rush of water thundered on”.³⁶¹ The patient seems to be drowning but Doctor Antomarchi thinks that this is one of the best remedies to lunacy. Here Le Fanu suddenly blocks the narration and provides the reader with a real lecture – no fiction in that – on Victorian history of insanity, illustrating the use of shower-baths in asylums and how this treatment was perceived by the Commissions in Lunacy, envisaged and created after the Lunatic Asylums Act of 1845:

The peculiar use of the shower-bath in the treatment of the insane is no fiction. The Commissioners in Lunacy preferred an indictment against the medical superintendent of an English asylum, for having, as they alleged, caused the death of a pauper patient, by subjecting him to a continuous shower-bath of *thirty* minutes' duration, and for having administered to him, soon after his removal from the bath, and whilst in a state of vital depression, a douse of white-coloured mixture, alleged to have contained two grains of tartar emetic. [...] [I]f a patient is 'violent', 'noisy', 'excited', and 'destructive', 'quiet' and 'docility' are legitimately to be induced by 'overwhelming' him, and 'prostrating the system,' by a continuous shower-bath of monstrous duration, followed up on his release from the bath by a nauseating emetic, still further to exhaust an already prostate system. This practice is no longer countenanced by the faculty.³⁶²

Unlike Braddon and Wood, Le Fanu put forth a problem that had already been individualised by the Madhouse Act in 1774: asylums had become enormous areas for the isolation of unwelcome relatives. Apart from denouncing the inefficiency of the Madhouse Act of 1774 and the ease with which alienists could be corrupted, Le Fanu was indirectly also highlighting the inability of the Commissioners in Lunacy to control the high numbers of people entering asylums. Maud, in fact, is all but deranged, although her mother's power has maliciously convinced the corrupted Doctor Antomarchi to find a place for her in his asylum. The asylum, then, becomes in the novel the prison where Maud is – at least apparently – forced to spend the rest of her days as a consequence of her being rebellious against the devastating monotony of her

³⁶¹ J. S. Le Fanu, *The Rose and the Key*, cit., p. 357.

³⁶² *Idem*, p. 359.

domestic and secluded life. Maud is one of the numerous cases of Victorian abuses of the concept of insanity to silence rebellious women. In accordance with Alison Milbank, Le Fanu turned his plot into a feminist denunciation.³⁶³

The incarceration of Maud within the asylum seems the perfect solution for Barbara's nervousness, but Mr Dawe discovers Lady Vernon's numerous secrets and accuses her. Visited by Doctor Damian, Maud is finally released by those accusations of insanity; there is no trace of mental fragility or suicidal impulse in her. "Trembling, Lady Vernon sat down. There is always a 'devil's advocate' to pervert the motives and distort the conduct of the saints, and hers had just been with her. Does not Satan plague scrupulous consciences with dubitations and upbraidings utterly fantastic?"³⁶⁴ Desperate, miserable and rejected by her only daughter, she found herself alone: "[t]he great and faultless Lady Vernon is by this time cooling and stiffening rapidly, on the sofa [...]. The tints on her cheeks fade naturally into the proper hue of death [...]"³⁶⁵ The anxious wretch, the elegant and aristocratic fallen woman, is finally abandoned in her own personal asylum: the prison of her dirty and uncouth conscience. The death of the fictional Barbara Vernon would somehow anticipate Le Fanu's personal agony; the fictional Barbara and her creator had a common habit – opium – that helped them try to master anxiety. The writer's decline has to be attributed, in fact, to the doses of opium he used and to his addiction to drugs against depression and anxiety which were the two causes that eliminated him from the Victorian literary scene.³⁶⁶

Drugs and depression were two afflictions that united Le Fanu with a contemporary of his, Wilkie Collins, perhaps the master sensationalist, even though his literary production ought not to be dismissed as merely sensationalist. According to Robert P. Ashley Jr., Wilkie Collins died almost forgotten and it was, in fact, only in 1927 when T. S. Eliot named him in one of his essays that Collins returned onto the literary stage.³⁶⁷ The novel I analyse here – *The Legacy of Cain* (1888) – is a work that has never reached the successful position of *The Woman in White*, his most famous novel and a source of inspiration for any other sensation novel from the '60s onwards. After the peak of

³⁶³ A. Milbank, "Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu: Gothic Grotesque and the Huguenot Inheritance", in J. M. Wright (ed.), *A Companion to Irish Literature*, Blackwell, Chichester (UK), 2010, pp. 362-376, p. 375.

³⁶⁴ J. S. Le Fanu, *The Rose and the Key*, cit., p. 391.

³⁶⁵ *Idem*, p. 429.

³⁶⁶ *Idem*, p. viii.

³⁶⁷ R. P. Ashley, "Wilkie Collins Reconsidered", in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, University of California Press, 1950, pp. 265-273, JSTOR, 27/06/2018, p. 267.

success achieved with the publication of *The Woman in White*, poor health became the real enemy for Collins. “Increasingly poor health undoubtedly aggravated this lessening of creative vitality”:³⁶⁸ *The Legacy of Cain* was published just one year before his death. Contemporary critics have praised his works so much that, according to Ashley, “[i]f Conan Doyle was the father of English detective fiction, then Collins was the grandfather”.³⁶⁹

Probably due to his difficult birth in 1824, Collins came into contact with diseases and physical deformities from the very first years of his existence. Apart from a deformation of the skull (a bulge on his forehead), Collins was said to have a very poor eyesight and abnormal hands and feet.³⁷⁰ Even if his father had tried to find him a job in a tea company, he kept feeding a secret interest in novels and writing. Furthermore, since he was considered a good actor, Collins joined Charles Dickens' theatrical company in 1852, inaugurating a very long friendship with Dickens that would last until this writer's death in 1870.³⁷¹ While his public life was mainly based on the collaboration with Charles Dickens, his private life was founded on unconventional relations and bohemianism.³⁷² He never married, despite the fact that he lived with Caroline Graves and her daughter. Moreover, in the same period Collins would also enjoy the company of another woman, Martha Rudd, under the assumed name of Dawson.

Criticized and branded as a failed writer after the great success of the '60s, his novels of the '70s and '80s continued to use issues related to his contemporary life. “[S]uburban development (the dark, risky places of English society in his novels are often emerging London suburbs), the legal boundaries of marriage in England and Scotland, the plight of fallen women, the anti-vivisection movement, wrongful incarceration, the experience of the disabled (including the blind and deaf), the legal limitations of wills and estates, and the physical health movement of the 1860s and 1870s”³⁷³ are the very topics that a

³⁶⁸ R. P. Ashley, “Wilkie Collins Reconsidered”, cit., p. 269.

³⁶⁹ *Idem*, p. 273.

³⁷⁰ Literature Online, Wilkie Collins' biography, 28/09/2018
https://literature.proquest.com/searchFulltext.do?id=BIO000508&divLevel=0&queryId=3083155764659&trailId=16652B4F2CA&area=ref&forward=critref_ft.

³⁷¹ *Ibidem*.

³⁷² D. Martin, “Wilkie Collins and Risk”, in P. K. Gilbert (ed.), *A Companion to Sensation Fiction*, cit., pp. 184-194, p. 185.

³⁷³ *Ibidem*.

reader can actually find in Collins' novels. Moreover, psychopathology is also undeniably present in Collins' works. In fact, as underlined by Mariaconcetta Costantini, even though the effective pathologization of female crime is much more limited in Collins' production than in other sensationalists, *The Legacy of Cain*, for example, is a means “to explore the depths of the female criminal mind”.³⁷⁴

Still in line with Costantini's ideas, in *The Legacy of Cain* Collins actually questioned the legacy of insanity. Even though Victorians often believed in hereditary insanity and in its contagious transmission from mothers to their offspring, Collins demonstrated that insanity was not forcibly inherited from mothers and, furthermore, the novelist also stressed the idea that criminal inclinations were absolutely not the compulsory consequence of mental fragility, but rather a very personal conscious choice,³⁷⁵ contradicting the largest majority of Victorian presumptions and convictions regarding the relation between womanhood, female insanity and criminality, fostered by theorists and doctors, such as Henry Maudsley. In fact, it was Maudsley that, in 1874, affirmed that “enquêtes ont mis fortement en relief c'est que le crime est souvent héréditaire”,³⁷⁶ such as madness, according to Victorians. Just a few years after Braddon and Wood, and more evidently than in Le Fanu's *The Rose and the Key*, Collins overturned the recurrent discourse on hereditary insanity which can be found in *Lady Audley's Secret* and in *St. Martin's Eve*. To him, insanity is no longer contagious. As Costantini states, with his revolutionary and unconventional ideas, as well as with his attitude to counteract, Collins shocked many of his readers and critics who were “disturbed by his pungent criticism, which revealed the volatility of many psycho-social and ontological constructs”.³⁷⁷

The novel, in fact, is clearly anti-conventional and revolutionary from the title itself. The use of the term *legacy* immediately draws the reader's attention to something that can be transmitted from one person to another. The title manifestly refers to Cain, one of the main characters of the Genesis. In the first book of the Bible, in fact, Cain is presented as the first son in the history of humanity; he is the oldest son of Adam and

³⁷⁴ M. Costantini, “Writing Murderesses. Feminine Crime and Autobiography in Wilkie Collins”, in *L'Acte Inqualifiable, ou le Meurtre au Féminin. Unspeakable Acts: Murder by Women*, 2016, pp. 127-143, p. 130.

³⁷⁵ *Idem*, p. 140.

³⁷⁶ H. Maudsley, *Le Crime et le Folie*, Librairie Germer Baillière, Paris, 1874, p. 27.

³⁷⁷ M. Costantini, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

Eve, and he is the brother of Abel. Jealous of God's appreciations of his brother's sacrifices, Cain murders his brother Abel, becoming, as a natural consequence, the very first murderer in the history of humanity. What must be stressed here is the fact that Cain was a man, whose jealousy was so uncontrollable that he ended up killing his brother. With his title, Collins was presumably provoking readers, who – by the time the novel was published – normally associated jealousy to women only. What Collins was possibly trying to highlight was that if insanity and criminal or murderous instincts were thought legacies, than the blame had to be put on Cain himself: a man, a father and the male *original* and *genetic* criminal mind. Criminal women, therefore, are just a mere consequence of the mental fragility of a man.

The novel starts with the Governor's taking over of the new-born daughter of a mad murderess condemned to death. In fact, after the desperate request of Elizabeth Chance – the murderess – to look after her daughter *in loco parentis*, Reverend Abel Gracedieu decides to take care of little Eunice, even if her mother's insanity already seems to overshadow Eunice's future. A doctor warns the Reverend and asks him: “[a]re you one of those people who think that tempers of children are formed by accidental influences which happen to be about them? Or do you agree with me that the tempers of children are inherited from their parents?”³⁷⁸ Collins presents those ideas being circulated in his days, “[v]ices of the parents are inherited by the children”.³⁷⁹ The Doctor goes on illustrating his discoveries in the field on insanity, providing the contemporary reader with a clear panorama of late-nineteenth-century Victorian psychiatry. What the doctor actually lists recalls the writer’s own physical deficiencies. Imitating what had been done by Francis Galton (1822-1911), the doctor, in fact, explains that he has been studying “the question of hereditary transmission of qualities; [...]. Children are born deformed; - children are born deaf, dumb, or blind; children are born with the seeds in them of deadly diseases. Who can account of the cruelty of creation?”³⁸⁰ In other words, Collins exploits and displays his knowledge of notions related to insanity and some of the doubts about distorted and uncouth procreation, as well as degeneration, being discussed in his time.

Apart from this alleged reference to contemporary discourses on psychiatry and

³⁷⁸ W. Collins, *The Legacy of Cain*, Amazon Fulfillment, Poland, 2018 (1888), p. 21.

³⁷⁹ *Idem*, p. 26.

³⁸⁰ *Idem*, p. 27.

degeneration, Collins uses other references to his daily life. Elizabeth Chance asks the authorities to remember to take the cap off her face once she is executed. The reason for asking this might be related to the Victorian love for the spectacularisation both of insanity and of criminality. From the '60s onwards, Sir John Conolly had been urging actresses playing the role of the Shakespearean Ophelia in theatres to go and visit asylums in order to study the real attitude of madwomen:³⁸¹ asylums themselves had become the Great Exhibition of insanity. “In the autumn of last year I was taken to see some waxworks. Portraits of criminals were among them, there was one portrait –’ She hesitated; her infernal self-possession failed her at last’:³⁸² this reference could be immediately traced back to Madame Tussaud's *Chamber of Horrors* in the Wax Museum in London. Victorians were so attracted by those horrific representations of the insane, of the criminal, of the other, that these spectacles and permanent exhibitions became as famous as mesmeric shows. Displaying distorted otherness and insanity was the perfect way to foster denigrations, suspicions and disrespect, as well as discourses about degeneration.

The relation between Eunice and Helena, the Reverend's biological daughter, seems to be peaceful, at least until Philip Dunboyne appears. Both Eunice and Helena fall in love with him and he becomes the very reason why the two sisters' relation starts degenerating: jealousy again is the cause of nervousness. Helena wonders why her faultless behaviour is slowly, yet visibly, changing: “What has become of my excellent education? I don't care to inquire; I have got beyond the reach of good books and religious examples. Among my other blameable actions there may now be reckoned disobedience to my father. I have been reading novels in secret’.³⁸³ It seems that those very novels – criticised by Mrs. Oliphant and Professor Mansel in the '60s – are here presented as the real and effective reason of Helena's misbehaviour. However, if Helena is losing control on her nerves, the situation for Eunice and Reverend Abel Gracedieu is not very different. Poor Abel Gracedieu, the Reverend, is in a state of violent mental agitation and, similarly, Eunice is absolutely unable to keep control over her nerves when she meets her sister in the arms of Philip. “I don't know what other persons might

³⁸¹ E. Showalter, *The Female Malady*, cit., p. 90.

³⁸² W. Collins, *The Legacy of Cain*, cit., p. 31.

³⁸³ *Idem*, p. 131.

think of me, or how soon I might find perhaps in an asylum”.³⁸⁴ she speaks about a sort of devil that might have possessed her body and now controls her instincts and wills. Hallucinations start inhabiting her conscious mind and uncanny voices lead her towards the formulation of the darkest possible thoughts. Elizabeth’s voice suggests that Eunice should kill her stepsister Helena: “The whisper sounded again, close at my ear. It echoed my own thought, when I called to mind the ways of killing which history had taught me. It said: 'Kill her with the knife' [...] 'Kill her openly,' the tempter mother said”.³⁸⁵

The private house of the degenerated family starts being populated by doctors that come and go in order to check Reverend's nerves, which are completely shattered: “he is on the verge of madness”³⁸⁶, according to Mr. Wellwood, the doctor. Collins' association between Victorian manhood and madness is pretty outrageous, yet interesting, connection; “[h]e is as weak as a woman; I threw him into hysterics, and had to give it up, and quiet him, or he would have alarmed the house”.³⁸⁷ Disdain and shame are on the withered Reverend: he is a Victorian religious man who is unable – like women, according to Victorian doctors – to control his own nerves and instincts. The precarious condition of the father is constantly endangered by the continuous quarrels between Eunice and Helena. Finally, the Reverend realises that the familiar situation is becoming uncontrollable and rather unbearable. Contradicting the Victorian belief that “a woman's dress is the mirror in which we may see the reflection of a woman's nature”,³⁸⁸ a double demonic entity seems to dwell in his aristocratic and elegant daughters, even if they have been educated in a very rigorous and religious family;

[...] [I]t was not my sweet girl; it was a horrid transformation of her. I saw a fearful creature, with glittering eyes that threatened some unimaginable vengeance. Her lips were drawn back; they show her clinched teeth. A burning red flush dyed her face. The hair of her head rose, little by little, slowly. And most dreadful sight of all, she seemed, in the stillness of the house, to be listening to something. If I could have moved, I should have fled to the first place of refuge I could find. If I could have raised my voice, I should have cried for help. I could do

³⁸⁴ W. Collins, *The Legacy of Cain*, cit., p. 154.

³⁸⁵ *Idem*, pp. 165-166.

³⁸⁶ *Idem*, p. 244.

³⁸⁷ *Idem*, p. 280.

³⁸⁸ *Idem*, p. 22.

neither the one nor the other. I could only look, look, look; held by the horror of it with hand of iron.³⁸⁹

However, while Eunice visibly manifests signs of insanity, Helena is secretly planning a murder with the use of *digitalis*, a widespread drug which, by the time of Collins, was largely used to relax nerves. “The doctor's sworn information stated the whole terrible case of the poisoning, ranging from his first suspicions and their confirmation, to Helena's atrocious attempt to accuse her innocent sister of her own guilt”.³⁹⁰ Helena is immediately condemned to jail. This is a very interesting choice on the part of Collins: the novelist did not confine and isolate Helena in an asylum. Prisons and asylums in this novel are kept separated. In opposition to many other colleagues of his, Collins did not consider criminality as a clear consequence of insanity, and vice versa. Contrasting Victorian beliefs, insanity and criminal instincts are presented in *The Legacy of Cain* as not forcibly connected.

Focusing now on the names that Collins chose for his characters and for the title of her novel, the biblical reference to Cain must be, of course, connected to the name of the Reverend, Abel. Religion is undeniably constantly challenged in the novel. The odd name chosen by Collins for the daughter of the murderess is *Eunice*, which might refer to the mythological *Nereids*, women belonging to Greek tradition. Eunice was actually the name of one of the *Nereids*, who were splendid and tempting sea nymphs. The connection to dangerous women is here made visible again, as in the case of *Lady Audley's Secret*. Collins mixed Christianity and mythological violent womanhood in his plot, confirming what Nina Auerbach suggests with regards to angelic women with a snakelike body: “[n]o doubt she was originally intended to point up woman's responsibility for the fall of the race, but over the years she moves beyond the garden, her hybrid form becoming the standard type of female demon, while her mixed allegiances to official Christianity, ancient legend, and modern monstrosity define woman's anomalous position in the spiritual hierarchy”.³⁹¹

Furthermore, Collins blasphemously dared to mention the most significant woman in Christianity, whose aspect is abhorrently compared to the lunatic murderess of the

³⁸⁹ W. Collins, *The Legacy of Cain*, cit., p. 325.

³⁹⁰ *Idem*, pp. 338-339.

³⁹¹ N. Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon*, cit., p. 93.

novel:

Visitors to the picture-galleries of Italy, growing weary of Holy Families in endless succession, observe that the idea of the Madonna, among the rank and file of Italian painters, is limited to one changeless and familiar type. I can hardly hope to be believed when I say that the personal appearance of the murderess recalled that type. She presented the delicate light hair, the quiet eyes, the finely shaped lower features and the correctly oval form of face, repeated in hundreds on hundreds of the conventional works of Art to which I have ventured to allude.³⁹²

Free from hesitations, Collins compares the holy Virgin to the murderess, challenging the rigid Victorian attachment to religion and canons. Like the guilty beauty of Braddon's Lady Audley, Wood's Charlotte and to the innocent beauty of Le Fanu's Maud, the criminal, yet divine, beauty of Collins' Elizabeth was outrageously used as a tool to denounce a society which oppressed and suppressed women but, contradicting its own precepts, at the same time venerated their beauty.

Apart from mixing Christianity with criminality and mythology by subverting theories and devaluing ideas of physicians of his time, Collins actually questioned the truthfulness of the transmission of insanity from mothers to daughters. “[T]here are virtues that exalt us, and vices that degrade us, whose mysterious origin is, not in our parents, but in ourselves. When I think of Helena, I ask myself, where is the trace which reveals that the first murder in the world was the product of inherited crime?”³⁹³ In addition to this open critique against biological inheritance in relation to mental instability and criminal instincts, Collins provides the reader with his personal idea about women. Once Helena leaves the jail, she migrates to the United States, where she herself becomes the Reverend of a community. After presenting Helena's redemption, Collins underlines that “[w]e hail in her the great intellect which asserts the superiority of woman over man”.³⁹⁴ Collins thus bravely eulogised the role played by women in society and, challenging the cultural panorama of his time, dared to speak about the

³⁹² W. Collins, *The Legacy of Cain*, cit., p. 14.

³⁹³ *Idem*, p. 355.

³⁹⁴ *Idem*, p. 356.

superiority of women over men: a personal revolution indeed from any possible point of view.

In conclusion, Collins and his sensational colleagues – in similar, yet different, ways – managed to provide the reader with a very clear idea about Victorian insanity of the second half of the nineteenth century. In the four novels in question, women – deranged and oppressed by a male society – are depicted as nervous, agitated and pathological cases spoiling a nation which was thought to be slowly degenerating. Bearing in mind the nineteenth-century progresses in the field of psychiatry and the innumerable medical discourses about insanity used against Victorian women that I took into account in the previous chapters, I think it should be dramatically clear that sensationalists' narrations can effectively be trustable and sad reports of numerous Victorian women's daily life. Braddon, Wood, Le Fanu and Collins, therefore, exploited the themes of Victorian womanhood and the widespread idea that women were incapable to control their nerves in order to denounce a set of common stereotypes related to women themselves. Sensationalists' ability to portray those demonically strong women not only challenged men, but also inspired women: sensational novels became the very manifesto of Victorian women's desires and claims attacking a decaying and falling male society.

Chapter 4

Stigmata: human degeneration in sensation fiction

After taking into account the role played by sensationalists and by their dangerous female characters in literature, I dedicate this last chapter to discussing the undeniable *fil rouge* connecting Victorian psychiatry, the Victorian convictions concerning women's mental derangement and Victorian discourses about human degeneration. Evolution and devolution are two issues that were largely discussed in the British context especially from the '60s. In fact, it was in the '60s that the Darwinian theory of evolution undeniably jeopardized Victorian society and fostered an endless quantity of new theories, which suggested that, even if Victorians thought themselves as the highest point of civilization and perfection, evolution itself could also come to an end, with the consequent possibility of reversion. A diseased body, as well as an “irreparable folly”,³⁹⁵ were sufficiently clear signals to Victorians that humanity was about to degrade and mar. It is not by chance that it was in Victorian psychiatry that the concept of human degeneration found its very roots: “Alienists proved incapable of delivering the high proportion of cures that they had promised, and the accumulation of chronic patients inevitably began to clutter up the asylum”.³⁹⁶ The impossibility of an antidote to the insanity of a large quantity of patients and the inability of alienists to master those minds led Victorians to think that nothing could be done in order to save humanity from the mark of retrogression and decay. The term *extinction* was undeniably a word resonating within the greatest majority of British – and European – asylums' wards.³⁹⁷

As long as the atavistic and the degenerate was the poor, the colonized and the freak, the situation could somehow be controlled (eugenics, for instance, was about to provide its own solution to cope with the problem of contagious human retrogression). However, already sceptical about the human status of women, Victorian men used to see

³⁹⁵ J. S. Le Fanu, *The Rose and the Key*, cit., p. 45.

³⁹⁶ A. Scull, *Madness in Civilization*, cit., p. 229.

³⁹⁷ *Idem*, p. 243.

in the allegedly inhuman nature of women the seed of decay: “the humiliation of the female sex is an essential feature of civilization as well as barbarity”.³⁹⁸ When women – at times considered inhuman creatures, the weak and nervous mothers of new generations – became one of the main embodiments of British degeneration, Victorians started thinking that any possibility of blocking decay was lost. “He did not know the hidden taint that I had sucked in with my mother's milk”:³⁹⁹ the concept of heredity and transferability of insanity grew so relevant that Victorians, as demonstrated by sensationalists, found themselves powerless in the face of widespreading insanity.

As a consequence, the largest percentage of Queen Victoria's subjects rested all their hopes in alienists, even if throughout the '60s and '70s anti-psychiatric sentiments were undeniably abundantly growing.⁴⁰⁰ Sensation fiction found itself in the middle of a hurricane of discourses of alienists discussing the possibility of degeneration as a tangible and visible menace present in their own patients. Bearing in mind the enormous impact that the concept of the inheritance of insanity had on sensationalists, I will here attempt at disentangling the complicate relations existing between Victorian psychiatry, biological heredity, women, sensation fiction, criminality and degeneration.

Despite the fact that human decay and ruin are two concepts that sensation novels are replete with, a careful reader must surely notice that, even though there are only some references to the term *decay*, there are no references at all to the term *degeneration* within the novels analysed in the previous chapter. The Victorian theory of degeneration found its origins in inherited disease, as sensationalists were absolutely aware of. “[I]f Lady Vernon should marry, [...] her power over the estates is increased very considerably, but your reversion – I mean, your right of succession – cannot be affected by any event but the birth of a son”.⁴⁰¹ Sheridal Le Fanu, for example, ambiguously applied the term *reversion* to the concept of succession, making the issue of degeneration and heredity coincide.

While discussing the issue of lunacy and its alleged transferability, sensationalists managed to offer a very clear description of Victorian theories about degeneration that would influence the entire second half of the nineteenth century, surely up until the very

³⁹⁸ K. Marx, F. Engels, *The Holy Family, or Critique of Critical Critique*, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1956 (1845), pp. 217-275, p. 259.

³⁹⁹ M. E. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, cit., p. 335.

⁴⁰⁰ A. Scull, *Madness in Civilization*, cit., p. 242.

⁴⁰¹ J. S. Le Fanu, *The Rose and the Key*, cit., p. 94.

fin de siècle and further on. If female lunacy could infect, spoil and ruin children, it was obvious that new generations could not escape that dark destiny: children could only grow more and more insane, with the obvious consequent return to a threatening animalistic phylogenetic past. The blame *had* to be put on women: Lucy Audley, Charlotte St. John, Barbara Vernon, Elizabeth Chance, as well as Eunice and Helena Gracedieu, are the fictional and sensational representations of a lunatic society which was not only falling, but also losing its control over instincts and nerves. The more Victorian psychiatry demonstrated its inability to master insanity, the more sensationalists increased the dose of nervousness in their female protagonists. “Everything dropping to ruin and decay, and the cold flicker of the sun lighting up the ugliness of the earth, as the glare of gas-lamps lights the wrinkles of an old woman”:⁴⁰² the decadence of the world and its ugliness are summarized in a female face.

The changing position of women both in the domestic and in the public field, as well as the shameless and disturbing representation of the female subject in Victorian sensation fiction, were clearly common anxieties in society. As far as sensationalism was concerned, what worried Victorians was not only that the insanity depicted in sensation novels was being described as biologically and virally affecting the new generations to come. They were also frightened that those hyper-stimulating novels could affect and spoil new generations of female readers. All those preoccupations, which had been and were being largely expressed, for example, by Professor Mansel and by Mrs Oliphant, must be interpreted as a very manifestation of a deep fear of social degeneration and contagion, which was slowly percolating the literature of the second half of the century. If insanity could be transmitted from mothers to daughters or, more generally, from parents to their offspring, then similarly, degenerative female rebellion could be inherited by Victorian women from scandalous female sensational protagonists. Improper women's invasion of sensation literature was a cause and – surely – a symptom of human degeneration. While Victorian men were supposed to transmit the most innovative and selected genes, Victorian women were thought as the cause of the degenerative and atavistic traits:⁴⁰³ in other words, human reversion had to and could be imputed to women only.

⁴⁰² M. E. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, cit., pp. 94-95.

⁴⁰³ L. Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine*, cit., p. 13.

“Degeneration was no longer a slippery moral slope, but was determined by the lines of force of the human milieu, or by the law of physical heredity”:⁴⁰⁴ the connection between degeneration and heredity was very clear to Victorians and sensationalists. If faulty traces could be found in a family tree, those same defects would be re-encountered in the generations to come. What actually seemed to still remain unexplained was how Victorian society – with all its splendour, magnificence, colonial power and great industrial development – could actually be getting closer and closer to degeneration. Reminding Victorians that evolution was as likely to take place as degeneration, the concept of human reversion sneaked out of asylums where failure and decay were already very heavy and threatening presences. In 1880, Edwin Ray Lankester (1847-1929), in his *Degeneration: A Chapter in Darwinism*, observed that “[w]ith regard to ourselves, the white races of Europe, the possibility of degeneration seems to be worth some consideration. [...] It is well to remember that we are subject to the general laws of evolution, and are as likely to degenerate as to progress”.⁴⁰⁵ As underlined by Sheridan Le Fanu in his *The Rose and the Key*, reversion could become dangerously destructive: “[i]f we could sum up the amount of the sins and sorrows of the human race, purely mental and unexpressed, for the most part, that result from [...] destructible reversions, and possible godsend and windfalls, the total would be possibly rather shocking”.⁴⁰⁶

Insanity and the fact that “heart and mind seemed to decay under an insufferable torture”,⁴⁰⁷ as well as the possible criminal acts deriving from the inability to control one's own nerves, were effectively tied to the spreading concept related to biological inheritance, first studied by Pinel and Esquirol, and transformed later into a real mid-nineteenth-century mania, as brilliantly demonstrated by Victorian sensationalists in their novels. The uncontrolled fear and anxiety linked to infectious illnesses represented indestructible enemies to Victorian society that, with the realization of asylums and the development of psychiatry, had tried to limit social damages with the seclusion of any possible “strange” case. Culturally speaking, psychiatry and the concept of degeneration were constantly put together: the term *degeneration* was often used in order not only to

⁴⁰⁴ M. Foucault, *History of Madness*, cit., p. 375.

⁴⁰⁵ E. Ray Lankester, *Degeneration: A Chapter in Darwinism*, MacMillan and Co., London, 1880, pp. 59-60.

⁴⁰⁶ J. S. Le Fanu, *The Rose and the Key*, cit., p. 163.

⁴⁰⁷ M. E. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, cit., p. 289.

label and classify symptoms that, in fact, still remained nameless, but it was also applied in order to fill diagnostic gaps.⁴⁰⁸ The shadow of degeneration, therefore, went hand in hand with the development of the so-called *Victorian Asylumdom*,⁴⁰⁹ as well as with the increasing number of Victorian medico-psychiatric investigations. The considerable number of rebellious women in and out of asylums were perceived as clear intertwined signifiers of cultural and social failure.

In 1857, a scientific work laid the foundations of the numerous researches that would be carried out in terms of European degeneration: *Traité des dégénérescences physiques et morales de l'espèce humaine* by Dr. Bénédicte Augustin Morel (1809-1873), who particularly influenced the second half of the European nineteenth century. Victorian alienists undoubtedly drew a lot from his treatise. In the 1850s, Morel was largely writing on cretinism. He was firmly convinced that that illness could not be cured and, as an obvious consequence to Morel's ideas, cretinism itself became one of the first reasons why European scientists started dealing with the scary presence of degeneration: if a disease could not be cured, it was a menace for the entire society.⁴¹⁰ Morel's conviction that cretinism could actually be transmitted from parents to their faulty progeny fed numerous Victorian fears of contagion, confirmed, for example, by the British Contagious Diseases Acts which were passed by the Parliament in the mid-nineteenth century. By the 1850s, the concept of inheritance of mental disease and, more generally, of insanity had undoubtedly become a central issue to many psychiatrists and novelists. “Nous n'entendons pas exclusivement par hérédité la maladie même des parents transmise à l'enfant, dans son développement et avec l'identité des symptômes de l'ordre physique et de l'ordre moral observés chez les ascendants; nous comprenons sous le mot hérédité, la transmission des dispositions organiques des parents aux enfants”.⁴¹¹

Hereditarianism of insanity was one of the most monumental limits for psychiatrists. In fact, mental medicine was being proved useless and inefficient since it was clearly unable to handle with the largest majority of pathological cases which would incessantly infect one another. Morel was not only worried about the progressive

⁴⁰⁸ D. Pick, *Faces of Degeneration, A European Disorder, c. 1848 – c. 1918*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, p. 8.

⁴⁰⁹ A. Scull, *Madness in Civilization*, cit., p. 190.

⁴¹⁰ D. Pick, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

⁴¹¹ B. A. Morel, *Traité Des Dégénérescences Physiques, Intellectuelles et Morales de l'Espèce Humaine*, J. B. Baillière, London, 1857, p. 565.

number of lunatics locked within asylums, but he also feared the foretold failure of European psychiatry. As a result, asylums, as described by sensationalists, possibly never managed to be therapeutic places for mental cures: the asylum and its role were rapidly shaped and re-shaped in order to seclude and segregate the dangerous and the filthy degenerate.⁴¹² The “*déviaton malade du type primitif ou normal de l'humanité*”⁴¹³ was only controllable through the limitations of contagion and inheritance in society. The fact of isolating the insane became the only possible solution Victorians could count on in order to limit pandemics. According to Morel, “problems of history were displaced into the problem of inheritance”.⁴¹⁴

Moreover, like sensationalists that provocatively dealt with women as violent, deranged, and nervous subjects, treatises on degeneration and human decay often referred to decaying women and their inability to control nerves. “Women, shown to be a crucial agent of degeneration either [...] by bringing new pathological cases into the world or [...] by failing to reproduce in sufficient quantity healthy children for the nation, were also seen as peculiarly violent and atavistic in gatherings”.⁴¹⁵ This common opinion about women would justify the increasing number of women in asylums and in Victorian literature concerning degeneration. Women were perceived not only as one of the main causes of human failure and fall, but also as directly responsible for the transmission of defects from one generation to the other. They were regarded as the incubators of an ill, imperfect, repellent and disgusting nature, which was progressively generating decadence. “By analogy with the so-called lower races, women, the sexually deviate, the criminal, [...], and the insane were in one way or another constructed as biological 'races apart' whose differences from the white male, and likenesses to each other, 'explained' their different and lower position in the social hierarchy”.⁴¹⁶

Geographically closer to Victorians than the ideas formulated by Morel in the '50s, Charles Darwin's revolutionary insights into evolution shocked mid-nineteenth-century Britain. Sensationalists were surely overwhelmed by the turmoil provoked in 1859 by the theory of evolution proposed by Charles Darwin, who would ingeniously,

⁴¹² D. Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, cit., p. 55.

⁴¹³ B. A. Morel, *Traité Des Dégénérescences Physiques, Intellectuelles et Morales de l'Espèce Humaine*, cit., p. 15.

⁴¹⁴ D. Pick, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

⁴¹⁵ *Idem*, p. 89.

⁴¹⁶ S. Karschay, *Degeneration, Normativity and the Gothic at the Fin de Siècle*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2015, p. 49.

unconsciously and unwillingly worsen the already weak position of women in Britain, and in Europe: “[t]heories of biological sexual difference generated by Darwin and his disciplines gave the full weight of scientific confirmation to narrow Victorian ideals of femininity”.⁴¹⁷ As stressed in the second chapter, sensation fiction could obviously not avoid the enormous impact of Darwinism and, undoubtedly, could not dodge the numerous other theories which dealt with the possibility of decay that emerged from Darwinism itself. As in the case of French asylums, the enormous quantity of British mental care houses, symbol of a great society which presumed it could master insanity, turned into the emblem of human decadence affecting every level of society. Insanity was no longer a matter of wealth or intelligence, as sensationalists pointed out, it proved an illness with no social preferences, but still with a favourite gender.

British newspapers, novels, journals, treatises, public shows and speeches kept reminding Victorians that insanity was the most unpredictable and most infamous among illnesses: in many cases it could not be cured and, in many others, it could not be easily detected. Victorian psychiatrists could just try to limit the contagion, even though the concept of heredity and replication – confirmed by Darwin and wrongly manipulated by other scientists and psychiatrists – was on everyone's lips. “[W]hen evolutionary models of natural change informed all aspects of the physical and social sciences, British neurologists and psychiatrists were ready to furnish a scenario of pathological heredity passed from one generation to the next and predicated in the cumulative deterioration of the brain and nerves”.⁴¹⁸

As presented in *Origin of Species* (1859), Darwin suggested that physical and mental traits were passed from one generation to the other. Thus, insanity had to be enlisted among the possibly transmitted features. The Darwinian theory of evolution was essentially based on three closely tied concepts. Natural variation, first of all, was related to the alleged endless abundance of diverse features and characteristics which can be found in nature; second, the Darwinian transferability of features from one generation to the other significantly contributed to increasing the number of Victorian fears of degeneration,⁴¹⁹ defined by Ray Lankester as “a gradual change of the structure

⁴¹⁷ E. Showalter, *The Female Malady*, cit., pp. 121-122.

⁴¹⁸ J. Oppenheim, *Shattered Nerves*, cit., p. 271.

⁴¹⁹ D. C. Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea, Evolution and the Meanings of Life*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1995, pp. 11-84, 313-521, p. 343.

in which the organism becomes adapted to less varied and less complex conditions of life”;⁴²⁰ third, Darwinian evolution suggested that species were expected to vary and adapt to the environment in order to survive and preserve their species.⁴²¹ However, Darwinian evolution, which was initially only related to plants and wild animals, was soon reinterpreted and wrongly, yet consciously, applied to humans.

The inheritance of traces – whatever they could be – was what more shook Victorians: if insanity and criminal inclinations were inheritable features, asylums could no longer contain the problem; marred features could have already been transmitted by those institutionalized mothers to children wandering out of asylums' gates: “She, my mother, had been, or had appeared, sane up to the hour of my birth; but from that hour her intellect had decayed [...]”.⁴²² From 1859, with the publication of the *Origin of Species*, and later with the publication of the *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* in 1871 and *The Expression of Emotions in Men and Animals* in 1872, Darwinian theories of human evolution and adaptation shaped the Victorian imaginary giving birth to a large iconographic and theoretic repertoire which was not necessarily consistent with Darwinian scientific data and results.

As pointed out by Janet Oppenheim, from the 1860s onwards, the concept of nervous degeneration gained the hard race against the strong conviction of Victorian psychiatrists that humanity was the result of nervous development.⁴²³ Industrial progress, pollution, the chaos of British cities, the expansion of British control over the world were, all together, considered plausible causes for the growth of cases of shattered nerves. In other words, evolution was collapsing: it appeared no longer sustainable. People seemed unable to stand the rhythm of an evolution that was possibly too fast, evolution was turning into devolution and thus a social abyss. As a consequence, Darwinian theory of evolution, as well as the concept of degeneration, became pillars of a frightened and anxious society. The shadow of the insane was everywhere and what contributed to increasing the terror were not only novels dealing with a pervasive lunacy and criminality, but also the innumerable photographs being circulated by the press and by scientific works alike.

⁴²⁰ E. Ray Lankester, *Degeneration*, cit., p. 32.

⁴²¹ D. C. Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, cit., p. 343.

⁴²² M. E. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, cit., p. 298.

⁴²³ J. Oppenheim, *Shattered Nerves*, cit., p. 271.

By the '60s and '70s, photography had surely become a largely accepted tool to capture empirical events⁴²⁴ and, as in the case of Darwin who was scrutinized and produced an endless quantity of photographs for *The Expressions of Emotions in Men and Animals* (1872), sensationalists were surely being exposed to widely spread photographic influences: in fact, as observed by Phillip Prodger, in 1860 the British Post Office counted almost one hundred and fifty photographic studios in London.⁴²⁵ The infinite sequence of photos coming from asylums were spreading panic and, attracted by them, Charles Darwin turned those photos into his special area of study. Inspired by *The Mechanism of Human Facial Expression, or an Electro-physiological Analysis of the Expression of the Passions Applicable to the Practice of the Fine Arts* by the French neurologist Guillaume-Benjamin Duchenne and by the photographic researches carried out by the Victorian psychiatrist Hugh Welch Diamond, Darwin, supported by Dr. James Crichton-Browne from the West Riding Lunatic Asylum and by Dr. Henry Hering from the Bethlem Royal Hospital, started collecting the illustrations and notes to write his *The Expressions*.⁴²⁶

Photos of the insane and the manipulation of Darwin's theory of evolution panicked people. Reinventing, moulding and applying Darwin's suggestions about evolution to humans, sociobiologists – like Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), father of Social Darwinism, and Francis Galton (1822-1911), father of eugenics – strengthened the idea that future human behaviours and health could only result from the genes passed from one generation to the other:⁴²⁷ if Morel had spread the notion of biological inheritance in France, Darwinism and, more effectively, sociobiologists made it colonize the whole Britain. As a consequence to the transmission of faulty genes from one generation to the other, society had to accept the plague of extinction, which was, in Darwinian terms, irreversible and inevitable.⁴²⁸ The more Victorians attributed credit to the theory of inheritance of insanity, the more blood, of course, became the element through which contagion occurred. The person who could actually survive and grow stronger, according to Spencer, was the person that presented the fittest blood and the best

⁴²⁴ P. Prodger, *Darwin's Camera, Art and Photography in the Theory of Evolution*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009, p. 4.

⁴²⁵ *Idem*, p. 15.

⁴²⁶ *Idem*, pp. 92-93.

⁴²⁷ D. C. Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, cit., p. 472.

⁴²⁸ *Idem*, p. 89.

capacities to cope with the surrounding environment.⁴²⁹ lunatics – especially if they were women – undoubtedly did not fit into this categories and the increasing numbers of women locked in Victorian asylums became the cause of a common sense of real desolated foreboding; the future was gloomy, as Collins underlined in *The Legacy of Cain*.⁴³⁰

Biological inheritance and its implications were further investigated by the ideas suggested by Théodule Ribot in 1873, when his *Heredity, A Psychological Study of Its Phenomena, Laws, Causes, and Consequences* was finally published. He meticulously analysed the issue of hereditary transmission and observed that “[t]he transmission of all kinds of psychological anomalies – whether of passions and crimes, [...] or of hallucinations and insanity, [...] – is so frequent, [...] and that morbid psychological heredity is admitted even by those who have no suspicion that this is only one aspect of a law which is far more general”.⁴³¹ He stressed that, since every element of the organism could actually be transmitted, insanity was one of the numerous parental pathologies and biological features that could spoil the offspring.⁴³² In Collins' ironic insight, an army of faulty creatures was about to be churned out by indecent British mothers transmitting the rotten seeds of merciless and deadly defects to their unconscious children.⁴³³ Moral insanity, according to Ribot, was the kind of hereditary illness transmitted to children, who would find themselves affected by a blood bearing the characters “somewhat of a tiger and of the brute”.⁴³⁴ Given the reference to a ferocious beast and to the uncivilized brute, the mark of degeneration was, according to Ribot, visibly present in the barbarous and inhuman blood of those violent and nervous people that were commonly and abundantly displayed by the media. The “infectious disorder”,⁴³⁵ according to Ellen Wood, kept being a mysterious and frightening presence in society.

Another fundamental thinker in the field of degenerative theories was the Italian Cesare Lombroso, who had an enormous and doubtless influence on the European

⁴²⁹ G. Beer, “Extinction, Now and Then”, in C. Pagetti (ed.), *Darwin nel tempo, modernità letteraria e immaginario scientifico*, Monduzzi Editoriale S.r.l., Milan, 2011, pp. 65-78, p. 67.

⁴³⁰ W. Collins, *The Legacy of Cain*, cit., p. 186.

⁴³¹ T. Ribot, *Heredity, A Psychological Study of Its Phenomena, Laws, Causes, and Consequences*, Dr Appleton and Company, New York, 1875, p. 119.

⁴³² *Idem*, p. 121.

⁴³³ W. Collins, *The Legacy of Cain*, cit., p. 27.

⁴³⁴ T. Ribot, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

⁴³⁵ H. Wood, *St. Martin's Eve*, cit., p. 33.

culture of the second half of the nineteenth century. He was progressively being recognized by everyone in Britain after Sir Havelock Ellis (1859-1939) started popularizing Lombroso's works among Britons.⁴³⁶ Born in Verona in 1835, Lombroso devoted his life mainly to physical anthropology and to explaining heredity laws. Influenced not only by Morel, Darwin and sociobiologists,⁴³⁷ but also – and maybe more directly – by Ernst Haeckel's ideas⁴³⁸ that ontogeny is a repetition of phylogeny,⁴³⁹ he spent the great majority of his existence studying skulls, faces and facial expressions. “Crime, hysteria, superstition, parasitism, insanity, atavism, prostitution, crowds, peasantry and brigands became the circulating figures of disorder in a language which sought altogether to stave off metaphor”.⁴⁴⁰ For him, criminality was natural but unacceptable: it was natural because it was of course transmitted biologically from mothers to children, but it was unacceptable for its social implications.⁴⁴¹

What is particularly relevant to our discussion is the fact that Lombroso pointed out that in many cases the hideous traces of degeneration did not spoil women's face.⁴⁴² Signs of degeneration could be hidden behind amazing beauties, like the several protagonists analysed in the previous chapter. And the invisibility of insanity, the invisible transmission from one body to another through procreation and the unseen mark of degeneration on women's faces turned the issue into a new witch hunt. Female criminals, accused of poisoning, of fires, of infanticides and homicides, were, in Lombroso's view, very clear examples of degeneration: in female subjects, according to Lombroso and Ferrero, degeneration could actually turn into monstrosity,⁴⁴³ confirming the idea of unstable and criminal women offered in Victorian sensation novels, as in the cases of Collins' Helena Gracedieu, whose process of premeditation of her crime, associated with her biological retrogression, progressively made her lose her beauty but

⁴³⁶ G. Panjabi Trelease, “Time's Hand: Fingerprints, Empire, and Victorian Narratives of Crime”, in Maunder, A., Moore, G. (eds), *Victorian Crime, Madness and Sensation*, Ashgate Publishing Company, Burlington (USA), 2004, pp. 195-206, p. 196.

⁴³⁷ D. Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, cit., p. 112.

⁴³⁸ Ernst Haeckel thought that ontogeny (the origination of an organism and its historical development in a lifespan) was the recapitulation of phylogeny (term that refers to the entire historical development of a whole species or group). Therefore, in Haeckel's and Lombroso's idea, ontogeny was nothing but the very repetition of the main genes and traits present in phylogeny.

⁴³⁹ S. Karschay, *Degeneration, Normativity and the Gothic at the Fin de Siècle*, cit., p. 49.

⁴⁴⁰ D. Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, cit., p. 115.

⁴⁴¹ *Idem*, p. 126.

⁴⁴² C. Lombroso, G. Ferrero, *La Donna Delinquente, la Prostituta e la Donna Normale*, Fratelli Bocca Editori, Torino, 1903, p. 335.

⁴⁴³ *Idem*, p. 480.

this is counter your argument,⁴⁴⁴ or Collins' Eunice, who turned into a violent and wild animal when she found her sister cooing with Philip.⁴⁴⁵

“La principale inferiorità della intelligenza femminile rispetto alla maschile è la deficienza della potenza creatrice”:⁴⁴⁶ describing women as inferior to man once again, Lombroso observed that women were surely more inclined to suffer from the so-called *moral insanity*; as demonstrated by sensationalists, in fact, women were deemed more likely than others to lose control over instincts, with the consequent incapacity to protect – or even preserve – the life of the people around them. In Lombroso's terms, moral insanity had to be seen as the highest form of degeneration:⁴⁴⁷ this point supports my hypothesis on the moral insanity of sensation women as a perfect example of human degeneration. Being morally guilty of homicides and betrayals, those female protagonists of sensation fiction were the visible and living representatives of a rampant loss of control over rationality and, as a consequence, over canonical human behaviour: evolutionary possibilities were undeniably at stake.

Dealing with women and decadent traits, in *La Donna Delinquente*, Lombroso pointed out that women were not able to easily forgive and they could frequently suffer from sentiments such as envy and jealousy: it is not by chance that Lombroso, like many others, was firmly convinced that women were more inclined to be revengeful.⁴⁴⁸ Thirst for revenge was, according to the Italian theorist, more visibly present in children and women:⁴⁴⁹ comparing women to children was in itself a proof of reversion. Lombroso observed that women shared many characteristics with children and criminals; in Lombroso's terms, women were deprived of the best features generally belonging to men only. In other words, from Lombroso's point of view, women had the visible mark of degeneration stamped on their brain.⁴⁵⁰ Female degenerative cruelty – refined and diabolical – is what the reader finds both in sensation novels and in Lombroso's texts. Hate and cruelty, in fact, were the two elements that freed women, in Lombroso's view, from any control over their own body, making them become violent:

⁴⁴⁴ W. Collins, *The Legacy of Cain*, cit., p. 130.

⁴⁴⁵ *Idem*, p. 148.

⁴⁴⁶ C. Lombroso, *Delitto, Genio, Follia*, Bollati Boringhieri Editore s.r.l, Torino, 1995 (1872), p. 607.

⁴⁴⁷ *Idem*, p. 613.

⁴⁴⁸ C. Lombroso, G. Ferrero, *La Donna Delinquente*, cit., p. 113.

⁴⁴⁹ *Idem*, p. 114.

⁴⁵⁰ *Idem*, p. 115.

“la passione del male per il male”.⁴⁵¹ Already in the '60s, Braddon, like Lombroso a few years later, offered the vision of a cruel human existence getting closer and closer to desolation and despair: “[w]e are apt to be angry with this cruel hardness in our life – this unflinching regularity in the smaller wheels and meaner mechanism of the human machine, which knows no stoppage or cessation, though the mainspring be for ever broken, and the hands pointing to purposeless figures upon a shattered dial”.⁴⁵²

While Lombroso was formulating his theories in Italy, in Britain, the neurologist John Hughlings Jackson (1835-1911) reinforced the idea Victorians already had concerning nervous derangement as one of the very first reasons of human deterioration. Jackson hypothesised that the human nervous apparatus was the result of a hierarchy of higher, middle and lower levels that had been developing during the long history of animals.⁴⁵³ According to Jackson, the most recently developed, thus the highest, functions of the nervous apparatus were exactly those that would not be able to cope with the possible presence of a disease: as an obvious consequence, the interruption of the highest functions of the brain would forcibly cut the communication with the levels below, generating a chain reaction of extinction.⁴⁵⁴ Furthermore, it is not by chance that the discourses of Jackson were soon incorporated into the issue of degeneration; in fact, his use of the term *dissolution*,⁴⁵⁵ as opposite to evolution, included his work into a set of discourses related to the imminent extinction of humanity.

People were “crushed by the miserable discovery of the decay of [...] faculties”:⁴⁵⁶ fostering the obsessions of a falling society and supporting the ideas of Victorian sociobiologists, another psychiatrist invested his time to study the effect of insanity on human decadence. Influenced by the ideas of Dr. Jackson, Henry Maudsley (1835-1918) could actually be deemed the living point of connection between Darwinism and psychiatry, criminology and madness, as well as the human link existing between the theory of inheritance and the widespread theory of devolution. Maudsley was certainly a pillar of British mental medicine: at the beginning of the '60s – a fundamental decade in this connection – he was just a humble physician of mental illnesses but he would

⁴⁵¹ C. Lombroso, G. Ferrero, *La Donna Delinquente*, cit., p. 282.

⁴⁵² M. E. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, cit., p. 175.

⁴⁵³ J. Oppenheim, *Shattered Nerves*, cit., p. 274.

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵⁶ W. Collins, *The Legacy of Cain*, cit., p. 196.

rapidly become Professor of medical jurisprudence at the University College in London; he became an eminence in the field of European psychiatry and degenerative theories.⁴⁵⁷ If the theories proposed by Morel and, later, by Lombroso were seen as distant and geographically inoffensive for British society, Maudsley would instead shatter any Victorian illusion and confirm already vague and veiled premonitions: degeneration had invaded Britain. In the '50s and '60s, moreover, the *Journal of Mental Science* repeatedly confirmed that the geographical separation from Europe had not managed to preserve Britain from a rampant human decay.⁴⁵⁸

Powerfully influenced by Morel, Darwin and by Lombroso, Maudsley's description of the brute and the insane perfectly matched with the description of Victorian female derangement offered by sensationalists:

I should take up a long time if I were to enumerate the various brute-like characteristics that are at times witnessed among the insane; enough to say that some very strong facts and arguments in support of Mr. Darwin's views might be drawn from the field of morbid psychology. We may, without much difficulty, trace savagery in civilization, as we can trace animalism in savagery; and, in the degeneration of insanity, in the *unkinding*, so to say, of the human kind, there are exhibited marks denoting the elementary instincts of its composition.⁴⁵⁹

Mindful of the ideas of Morel, Darwin, Lombroso, Jackson, and Victorian sociobiologists, from the '60s onwards Maudsley progressively reinforced the idea that criminal instincts and madness could be transmitted and, obviously, inherited. Maudsley was, according to Pick, "the Victorian psychiatrist most widely read and quoted in Italy, France and Germany at the time" for the shrewdness and sharpness of his works.⁴⁶⁰ Repeatedly mentioned by his contemporaries, such as Charles Darwin, Maudsley became particularly famous in 1867, when his *Pathology of Mind* was published for the first time. Degeneration was there discussed but it was actually not presented as a serious menace: the insane were merely the useless scrap of human evolution; the

⁴⁵⁷ D. Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, cit., p. 206.

⁴⁵⁸ *Idem*, p. 178.

⁴⁵⁹ H. Maudsley, *Body and Mind*, D. Appleton and Company, New York, 1871 (1870), p. 51.

⁴⁶⁰ D. Pick, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

insane and those unable to control their feelings were just social rubbish.⁴⁶¹ Not surprisingly, women were part of that rotten, infective and pathological part of society.

The elaboration of the concept of degeneration culminated in 1892 when Max Nordau (1849-1923) concluded his “retrograde investigation”⁴⁶² of the degenerate and his *Entartung* was published for the first time. A Jew and a Zionist, Max Nordau confirmed the unremarkable connection between madness and degeneracy. In his discussion of insanity, degeneration and hysteria are two faces of the same coin.⁴⁶³ After collecting, re-using and summarizing the numerous ideas of his predecessors, Nordau explained that “[w]hen under any kind of noxious influences an organism becomes debilitated, its successors will not resemble the healthy, normal type of species, with capacities for development, but will form a new sub-species, which, like all others, possesses the capacities of transmitting to its offspring, in a continuously increasing degree, its peculiarities, these being morbid deviations from the normal form – gaps in development, malformations and infirmities”.⁴⁶⁴ In Nordau's terms, in fact, new generations were the mirror of their ancestors.⁴⁶⁵

Degeneration remained a female affair. In fact, male hysteria – one of the worst plague for a man's reputation – and degeneracy had to be kept separate: women were the prototype of human degeneration.⁴⁶⁶ As pointed out by Paul Karschay, degenerate individuals were not only singled out, but they were also clearly visible and recognisable:⁴⁶⁷ women surely were at the forefront of social rebellion and, as a consequence, they represented the main tangible expression of human failure. By that time, a society in which male power could run the risk of being defeated by the force of women had to be interpreted as a fallen society. The social invasion of the insane and of rebellious women could have been compared to the condition which Nordau described as a decline towards the “the mind of the Decadent”.⁴⁶⁸ According to Nordau, the person infected by the pathology had to be perceived as “more or less fallen into degeneracy”:⁴⁶⁹ in other words, the pathological body and the unstable mind of

⁴⁶¹ D. Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, cit., p. 208.

⁴⁶² M. E. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, cit., p. 180.

⁴⁶³ M. Nordau, *Degeneration*, William Heinemann, London, 1920 (1892), p. 46.

⁴⁶⁴ *Idem*, p. 16.

⁴⁶⁵ *Idem*, p. 552.

⁴⁶⁶ *Idem*, p. 45.

⁴⁶⁷ S. Karschay, *Degeneration, Normativity and the Gothic at the Fin de Siècle*, cit., p. 2.

⁴⁶⁸ M. Nordau, *op. cit.*, p. 316.

⁴⁶⁹ *Idem*, p. 481.

sensation women could be seen as the degenerate womb moulding and shaping the fictitious – yet also dramatically probable – protagonists of the novels of the end of the century.

Although it is cultural icons as famous as Dr Jekyll, Dorian Gray, and Dracula that are normally associated to late-nineteenth-century human degeneracy, in my opinion, sensational women should count as the mothers of those monstrous and perverse minds. Sensation fiction, in fact, might be the very first Victorian literary genre that, by using discourses about psychiatry of that time, incorporated ideas closely related to degeneration and human failure. Resembling a hideous contagion, sensation fiction fostered the idea that madness could be inherited and, above all, could spoil even rich and aristocratic families: the “infection of evil”⁴⁷⁰ could affect anyone. “British sensationalist fiction [...] drew heavily on similar examples of shocking subject matter – mental instability, moral insanity, venereal disease, and their threat to the sanctity and purity of marriage and family”.⁴⁷¹ The use of transferability of insanity and discourses about the inefficiency of psychiatry to cure its patients were fundamental instruments for sensationalists that, without directly mentioning the concept of degeneration, paved the way to numerous dire ideas.

The insanity of sensational female protagonists analysed before was never presented as a visible element until there were specific external dynamics that provoked it. In the largest majority of cases, in fact, insanity was traceable only after being solicited by an external incentive. It is not by chance, therefore, that in the 1860s scientists, physicians and especially psychiatrists were discussing the issues of expressions and grimaces: any sneer could help scientifically-minded men to detect the insane. In fact, sensation detectives, like Victorian psychiatrists, often investigated facial expressions and, waiting for the sign of the female mental pathology, tried to capture useful pieces of information from them in order to understand whether insanity laid hidden in the female body in question.

Taking into account more specifically *The Expression of Emotions in Men and Animals* by Darwin, the most interesting chapter of the treatise is surely the one devoted to manifestations of hatred and anger. Once again, one can find an apparent connection

⁴⁷⁰ W. Collins, *The Legacy of Cain*, cit., p. 222.

⁴⁷¹ A. Scull, *Madness in Civilization*, cit., p. 248.

between Darwin's discussion and the bursts of anger and uncontrollable nervousness of sensational female protagonists. Even though the reference to degeneration in the novels analysed is never clearly present, as previously anticipated, Darwin's ideas foster the suggestions that sensation novels were undoubtedly dealing with the theme of human animalisation. In fact, as sensationalists had already explained, lunatics were thought of as undergoing a sort of metamorphosis: from humans to animals. “Whence come the savage snarl, the destructive disposition, the obscene language, the wild howl, the offensive habits, displayed by some of the insane? [...]. I should take up a long time if I were to enumerate the various brute-like that at times witnessed among the insane [...]”:⁴⁷² one’s brutal and violent ancestors had finally found a door to penetrate Victorians' houses.

De-contextualising Karschay's discourse on Stoker's *Dracula* and his women⁴⁷³ and applying the same discussion to sensation fiction, the sensation woman – strongly marked by signs of degeneration and, of course, by the incurable and indelible sign of criminality – was represented as possessing a high capacity to command and manage other people's lives. A woman who dared to kill was obviously seen as masculine: not only were sensation women seen as degenerate for their being mentally incurable, but they were also deemed a visible example of social decay for their excessively masculinized behaviour. In fact, possessed by their invincible insanity and uncontrollable instincts, sensation women turned into a living manifesto of defeminisation. As pointed out by Showalter, after years of intense research, in *The Descent of Man* (1871), Darwin observed that men were thought as naturally braver than women:⁴⁷⁴ however, the criminal women of sensation fiction were undoubtedly endowed with great ‘masculine’ courage. As an army of *fin-de-siècle* Salomés, sensation women – from the '60s to the '80s – led “the world of this purveyor of vice and degeneracy”.⁴⁷⁵

Andrew Maunder clearly identifies degeneration in Wood's *East Lynne*.⁴⁷⁶ I also see

⁴⁷² H. Maudsley, *Body and Mind*, cit., p. 51.

⁴⁷³ S. Karschay, *Degeneration, Normativity and the Gothic at the Fin de Siècle*, cit., p. 149.

⁴⁷⁴ E. Showalter, *The Female Malady*, cit., p. 122.

⁴⁷⁵ C. Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects, The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy, and Culture of the Fin de Siècle in Europe*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2002, p. 104.

⁴⁷⁶ A. Maunder, “‘Stepchildren of Nature’: *East Lynne* and the Spectre of Female Degeneracy, 1860-1861”, in A. Maunder, G. Moore (eds), *Victorian Crime. Madness and Sensation*, Ashgate Publishing Company, Burlington (USA), 2004, pp. 59-69, p. 60.

degeneration in the works analysed here. In fact, the personal degeneration of Lucy Audley, Charlotte St. John, Barbara Vernon, Elizabeth Chance, Eunice and Helena Gracedieu is surely central to the narration. Through the use of bloodline, sensationalists investigated the topic of aristocratic decline: not only were the lower classes marring society, but the aristocratic resistance against contamination was definitely failing. Following Darwin, in sensationalists terms, aristocracy could therefore be saved only through a process of adaptation to the general social scenery characterized by insanity and decay. By the 1860s, almost every well-read woman and every well-read man would have identified the tenets of the degenerative theory in sensation novels and, as a consequence, every reader would have condemned – or possibly imitated – sensation women accordingly.

To conclude, sensation novels, thus, cannot simply and merely be interpreted as narrations dealing with women fighting against their psychopathology, but they must be considered as reflections of a specific cultural and scientific panorama imbued with anxieties and fears connected to insanity and failure of the human species. Sensationalists, therefore, largely exploited medical theories, as well as their cultural and social panorama, and transformed real domestic and public stories concerning several Victorian women into narrations full of mystery, nervous derangement, hate and rancour against a society in which patriarchy and male impositions determined the destiny of every single woman. Sensationalists' women are the best representatives of the enormous number of Victorian women looking for their independent position in family and society. Female domestic rebellion and the voice of women's nerves were the only instruments that those fragile protagonists had, according to sensationalists, in order to struggle against familiar and social limitations and obligations. Female instincts and impulses, suffocated since time immemorial, violently and abruptly exploded in sensation fiction in order to vindicate all those women that, apart from deleting and abandoning personal desires, had always bowed their head in front of a man. Violent sensation women were the unpleasant and disturbing insects eroding a society that was collapsing and falling under the abominable shadow of gender rebellions and female cries of claim, messed up and categorised as cries of madness. The force of sensation women's nerves derives not only from their deep and heartfelt desire to achieve their rights, but also from their insatiable and ravenous appetite for asserting their being. The

deviated, degenerated and misleading mind of the sensational woman stands as the banner of a new woman that, while reflecting and confirming the stereotypes spread by doctors and theorists, fought to show her destructive force and determination. In line with what Gilbert and Gubar suggest, psychologically speaking, “[i]t must be debilitating to be *any* woman in a society where women are warned that if they do not behave like angels they must be monsters”.⁴⁷⁷

⁴⁷⁷ S. M. Gilbert, S. Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, cit., p. 53.

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