Are the Victorians Still with Us?: Victorian Sensation Fiction and Its Legacies in the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract

This essay argues that sensation fiction’s most significant legacy is its selfconsciousness about how print culture both constructs the present moment and mediates the past. These resonances are particularly evident in the work of neo-Victorian novelists Michael Faber and Sarah Waters, who, like the sensationalists, are writing at a time of great stress and change in the publishing and print industries. Faber and Waters's self-awareness of the materiality of writing echoes concerns raised in Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s Lady Audley’s Secret and Wilkie Collins’s Armadale, both of which draw attention to the importance—and the fallibility—of print while still recognizing their own embeddedness in print culture.

In Victorian Afterlife, John Kucich and Dianne F. Sadoff argue that “the cultural matrix of nineteenth-century England joined various and possible stories about cultural rupture that, taken together, overdetermine the period’s availability for the postmodern exploration of cultural emergence” (xi). When it comes to 1860s sensation fiction, one of the most significant of these stories has to do with the cultural emergence of a “modern” print culture in the mid-Victorian period, which saw a proliferation of printed material due to developments in technology and the abolition of taxes on knowledge. These changes meant that literature could be produced and consumed more easily and cheaply. Whether or not these changes were accompanied by an increase in the number of readers is a thorny issue, but Victorian commentators, like Wilkie Collins in his essay “The Unknown Public,” certainly thought so. They saw the 1860s as the moment of a new kind of print culture newly available to what Collins called a “monster audience” (221).

New, modern, mass-produced sensation novels were particularly well-placed to capitalize on these conditions. Like most novels, they were first serialized and then published in volume form, but sensation novels, with their cliffhangers and red herrings, made good use of serialization. What is more, most sensation novelists were connected to the press in one way or another. Many, like Collins, were journalists as well as novelists, or, like Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Joseph Sheridan LeFanu, Ellen Wood, and Florence Marryat, edited their own magazines. These writers had a strong grip on the material conditions of their own work, and this was one of the reasons they were criticized: if their sensation novels were produced in various formats and available to readers of varying means, they could make the “literature of the Kitchen the favourite reading of the Drawing room,” as W. Fraser Rae feared (204). Unlike popular novels by Charles Dickens, or a best-seller like Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852), sensation novels did not seem to have any moral impetus which might have made their massive popularity easier to stomach for critics. Sensation aimed to stimulate readers’ nerves, not their moral faculties. The sensation novel then was situated at the center of these anxieties about a rapidly technologizing print culture and its perceived effects on readerships and was very conscious of its status as such.

In their twenty-first-century pastiches, writers like Sarah Waters and Michael Faber take up the sensation novels’ awareness of material culture. If, as Linda Hutcheon argues, postmodern fiction reveals the past as ideologically and discursively constructed, then the neo-Victorian sensation novel depicts the past it pastiches as the selfconscious construct of print and paper. I’ll focus on a small selection of novels by the sensationalists Braddon and Collins, and neo-Victorian writers Waters and Faber, to argue that sensation fiction’s most significant and lasting legacy is a self-consciousness about how the contemporary moment is constructed in and by print culture.

Braddon’s Lady Audley’s Secret (1862), one of the best-selling and most frequently read of the 1860s sensation novels, is supremely self-aware of its status as a printed product. Both Nicholas Daly and Patrick Brantlinger have argued that sensation novels provide their readers with the different kinds of training needed to operate in a modernizing and technologizing world (Daly 34–55; Brantlinger 142–65), and Lady Audley’s Secret provides a kind of meta-narrative about how readers might navigate their way through a newly complex print culture. Robert Audley, the amateur detective of the piece, proves adept at reading in the periodical form. (The novel’s own readers would have needed equal skills to keep track of the novel’s plotline when its publication switched from Robin Goodfellow to the Sixpenny Magazine when the former went bust.) Robert is
often seen perusing newspapers, and it is a “greasy Times newspaper” that his friend George Talboys takes up “from a heap of journals” in a café to discover his wife’s obituary: “On the 24th inst., at Ventnor, Isle of Wight, Helen Talboys, aged twenty-two” (36). From an early point in the novel the status of print is scrutinized. George cannot unequivocally believe the obituary and does not entirely trust The Times. It is only when he visits Ventnor in person that he feels Helen’s death is confirmed. He then orders the inscription for her tombstone, personalizing the same information he found in the newspaper. Written in stone rather than fallible newspaper print, her death becomes more real to him. Soon, however, he must revise even that feeling of certainty, when his dead wife, now Lady Audley, shows herself alive and promptly attempts to kill him.

Much of the rest of the novel is devoted to Robert’s efforts to forge a chain of circumstantial evidence that links the “beloved wife of George Talboys” to Lady Audley and to George’s disappearance. This is a paper chain made up of the passenger records of shipping firms, the label on a trunk, notes, letters, and telegrams (many of which signify new modes of communication and technology). Print and non-print forms of writing come together to form a particularly vital clue in an annual found among George’s possessions. Robert skips through the mildewed illustrations and verses and “[does] not stop to read any of these mild productions” (158) until he finds a lock of hair and a handwritten dedication implicating Lady Audley, his uncle’s wife. The old-fashioned form of the annual is updated when Robert skims it for relevant information, like a railway timetable or a newspaper column. He is a “modern” reader who navigates his way through different types of print and handwritten clues to reveal Lady Audley’s deceptions. Original readers were invited to follow Robert’s detective processes closely but also to identify their own reading processes as serial readers with Robert’s detection. Both are piecing together paper chains, Robert’s of various kinds of evidence, the readers’ of serial installments. Braddon’s readers, aligned with Robert, are invited to see themselves as confident navigators of the story and of its wider print context.

In Collins’s novels, too, the newspaper becomes a focal point for sensation’s self-awareness of its place in modern print culture. Armadale (serialized in Cornhill Magazine from 1864–66 and published in two volumes in 1866) prints advertisements from The Times’s missing-person column. The second of these advertisements reverses the effect of Helen Talboys’s bogus obituary and brings Allan Armadale (alias Ozias Midwinter) back to life. It reads, “SU PPOSED TO BE DEAD —To parish clerks, sextons, and others. Twenty Pounds Reward will be paid to any person who can produce evidence of the death of ALLAN ARMA DALE ” (76). In response to this advertisement, Midwinter/Armadale comes forward to prove himself alive. (Incidentally, John Sutherland writes that Collins’s manuscript of Armadale “paid minute attention to details of interruptive typography: the italics, white and black lines . . . and dynamic paragraphing” [viii]; it seems Collins wanted his novel to reproduce a newspaper advertisement as if it had literally been pasted in.) As in Lady Audley’s Secret, though, this advertisement does not just function straightforwardly as a marker of modernity or a turning point in the plot. It manifests the prevalence and persistence of print culture and its power over identity, life, and death.

Amongst the various forms of print matter in which it deals, Lady Audley’s Secret, perhaps unsurprisingly, figures the sensation novel itself as the most significant. Sensational literature helps Robert structure the story he tells in pursuing and incarcerating Lady Audley, but Braddon also references various texts to differentiate her work from other kinds of sensation. From our first meeting we are told that Robert enjoys reading French novels, but the plot he is attempting to unravel soon overtakes those of his favorite pastime. On returning home after uncovering more of Lady Audley’s lies

> the yellow-papered fictions on the shelves above his head seemed stale and profitless— he opened a volume of Balzac, but his uncle’s wife’s golden curls danced and trembled in a glittering haze, alike upon the metaphysical diablerie of the Peau de Chagrin and the hideous social horrors of Cousine Bette. (156–57)

Robert is prevented from reading either Balzac novel because Lady Audley’s secrets are more compelling.4 Collins uses a similar trick in Armadale when Allan reads a “highly-spiced narrative of Travelling Adventures” to Midwinter and succeeds in sending him to sleep (118). It is Allan’s reckless adventuring—that is, the more sensational adventures in which Midwinter is personally involved—that wakes him. Braddon, more explicitly than Collins, consciously situates her work amongst other risqué fiction: Lady Audley’s Secret supplants its competitors. This is a confident move, one that links Braddon’s writing to similar works while maintaining its priority as special or new. When Robert, alone in his chambers, fears a haunting from George Talboys’s ghost and states, “I haven’t read Alexandre Dumas and Wilkie Collins for nothing. . . . I’m up to their tricks, sneaking in at doors behind a fellow’s back, and flattening their white faces against window panes, and making themselves all eyes in the twilight” (402), Braddon again employs a sensational self-reflexivity. These sensational stories have taught Robert what to do in strange scenarios and how to absorb sensational
shocks.5 But, as with the references to Balzac, Braddon also distinguishes herself from Dumas and Collins. Her sensational story does not need ghosts to make the spine tingle. Braddon initiates a meta-narrative about the function of the genre in which she writes, as well as its place in print and literary culture, while also positioning herself at the genre’s forefront.

How do contemporary neo-Victorian fictions respond? Sarah Waters and Michael Faber are modern, media-savvy novelists who participate in book festivals and give interviews, and whose texts are available in the latest e-book formats for download. Both Faber and Waters, with their publishers and agents, have succeeded in capitalizing on the success of their neo-Victorian texts. For example, Waters’s Tipping the Velvet (1998) and Fingersmith (2002) have been serialized on film by the BBC, and Faber followed up The Crimson Petal and the White (2002) with a spinoff volume of stories about its characters, called The Apple: Crimson Petal Stories (2006). We might say that they, like Braddon and Collins, are writing in a moment in which print culture is changing rapidly (indeed, print culture is a term that needs supplementing to recognize the various new technologies by which we might read: online, via e-books, or through our mobile phones). While Faber and Waters are knowing novelists, aware of contemporary changes in publishing, their neo-Victorian novels demonstrate that self-consciousness regarding a book’s place in print culture is a legacy of the sensation novels they pastiche.6

This self-consciousness is perhaps most obviously demonstrated in terms of form. The sheer size of Faber’s The Crimson Petal and the White demonstrates an awareness of the material form of the Victorian novel and an attempt to replicate it. Reviewers repeatedly point out its 800–page girth, as if its size alone positions the novel belatedly, with Dickens or Dumas, even before the spine is cracked. In addition, Faber, like Braddon and Collins, brings a range of print and non-print forms (advertisements, newspaper articles, diaries) into his narrative in order to tease out the ways in which these forms structure the thoughts and behaviors of his characters, along with our reading. Chapter 30 of The Crimson Petal and the White begins with a newspaper report detailing the tragic death of Agnes Rackham, the hero’s wife, who has in fact been spirited away by Sugar, the hero’s mistress turned governess, in order to save her from the indignity of the lunatic asylum. The headline reads “SECOND TRAGEDY BEFALLS RACKHAM,” and the page splits into two columns to provide a brief, and entirely fabricated, account of Agnes Rackham’s “death” (693). Here, the printed story covers up the truth, and has power over life and death, just like the fake obituary in Lady Audley’s Secret.

In formal terms, though, Waters’s novel Affinity (1999) is much closer to a Collins sensation text than The Crimson Petal and the White. Like several of Collins’s novels it is written through intersecting diary narratives, and in contrast to Faber there is no intrusive narratorial voice to adjudicate between them (Faber’s narrator nods toward Fowles’s The French Lieutenant’s Woman in this respect).7 Waters interweaves the diaries of Margaret Prior, the educated but troubled heroine, and Selina Dawes, the spirit-medium she visits in Millbank prison. Even the heroine’s name, Prior, hints that the book rewrites or revisits a previous moment or genre. In its form, then, Waters’s novel reflects its Victorian predecessors but also marks the author’s awareness of the materiality of her text: Margaret’s and Selina’s diaries are printed in different fonts.

Both Faber and Waters invoke a range of Victorian and pre-Victorian literary texts in their works. As with Braddon and Collins, this device of situating their own novels in comparison with others serves to give readers a framework for how to read these texts. In The Crimson Petal and the White, the prostitute Sugar has read Collins, Rhoda Broughton, and Ellen Wood, as well as Balzac, Dickens, and Hugo. For Sugar, as for contemporary readers of sensation novels, reading these texts provides training in modern, urban behavior, and, more specifically, deception. When Sugar recommends that William employ a detective to hunt down the wife she has spirited away, the narrator acknowledges in an aside: “(She knows nothing about detectives beyond what she’s read in The Moonstone, but she hopes the bumbling Seegrave[s] outnumber the clever Cuffs)” (677).

Affinity too is steeped in references to Victorian literary and print culture. Margaret sees herself and Selina “as if we were a pair of footpads from the penny presses,” and, through Margaret, Waters demonstrates an awareness of the saturatedness of Victorian culture with print (286). In the spiritualist reading room Margaret writes that “newspapers and magazines” were hung out upon wands “like dripping laundry” (128). When Margaret’s locket goes missing she turns to a sensation novel for an explanation, thinking “perhaps [she] rose with her own sublimated sexuality and the storytelling strategies she practices. For example, when visiting the kitchen at Millbank as the male prisoners are leaving, Margaret “had a sudden vision then of the men as
goblin men, with snouts and tails and whiskers” (35, emphasis original). Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” invades Margaret’s imagination, while the reader is invited to trace a pattern between old and new representations of female creativity and female partnership: Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Aurora is linked to Marian, and Waters’s Margaret to Selina. While seemingly inevitable, these connections lead us, like Margaret, down a false trail. She comes to believe in Selina’s spiritual powers and her affection, only to realize too late that another woman is Selina’s partner: Margaret is merely their dupe.

Faber and Waters’s self-reflexive interest in the materiality of print culture and the status of their novels in comparison with others is an inheritance from the sensation fiction of the 1860s. This legacy is fundamental to their rewritings and underlies many of their aesthetic choices. Of course, that legacy is also transformed in the postmodern pastiche framework, and the pivot of that transformation is sex. In The Crimson Petal and the White, Sugar’s novel (about a prostitute who avenges womankind by murdering her male clients in a variety of gruesome ways) and Agnes Rackham’s diaries are purposefully contrasted as the consequences of the over- and underexposure to sexual knowledge, while in Affinity the physical process of writing itself becomes strangely sexualized. The words Selina writes in Margaret’s notebook are charged with illicit desire for both the self-affirming process of writing one’s own name (pen and paper are forbidden in Millbank) and also, apparently, for Margaret herself. When Margaret later sits in her bedroom looking out into the night and writes, “In one of those shadows Selina is lying—Selina—she is making me write her name here, she is growing more real, more solid and quick, with every stroking of the nib across the page—Selina” (117, emphasis original), writing gains an even greater erotic frisson. Writing and the body are spookily, erotically interwoven in this tumescent passage.

If writing by hand can be seen as a process of embodiment, and a means of acting out desire, the relationship between body and print is troublingly contradictory in Waters and Faber. Reading Little Dorrit aloud to her mother makes Margaret imagine her own solitary life passing before her without Selina. She thinks, “I shall grow dry and pale and paper-thin—like a leaf, pressed tight inside the pages of a dreary black book and then forgotten” (201). Similarly, in Faber’s novel, Sugar cannot bring herself to destroy all of Agnes’s diaries, even though they might incriminate her, because “it would be like pretending she never existed; or, no, that she began to exist only when her death provided the meat for a newspaper obituary” (767). These anxieties about selfhood and transience in relation to a rapidly technologizing and increasingly powerful print culture are not specific to neo-Victorian texts: they are the legacy of Victorian sensation. As Eva Badowska recently argued, “If the sensation novel modernizes the subject, it also trains it to apprehend its inevitable historical passage and incipient obsolescence” (158). Daily newspapers or monthly serials seem to mark the swift passage of time in their fleetingness, but they also shape and, indeed, outlast individual lives. The framing of these anxieties through metaphors of print and paper makes these twenty-first-century novels all the more convincing in their attention to the self-conscious concerns of the sensation novels that they echo and pastiche.

NOTES

1 As Judith Johnston and Catherine Waters argue, “Perhaps the excitement of modernity emerges most pronouncedly in publishing” (4).
2 For example, both Deborah Wynne and Jennifer Phegley argue that the sensation novel is particularly aware of its place in magazine culture.
3 More recently, Mark Llewellyn makes a similar point when he writes that “neo-Victorian texts are, in the main, processes of writing that act out the result of reading the Victorians and their literary productions” (168).
4 See Edwards for more on Braddon’s use of Balzac and other French novelists, particularly Flaubert.
5 See Daly 34–39.
6 Jay Clayton writes that “like today’s Internet pioneers, [Dickens] showed genius in creating new channels of distribution for his writing” (3).
7 Collins, in The Moonstone (1868) and The Woman in White (1860), favors an internal device whereby one of the characters places the narratives in order. In Affinity the interweaving of the two diaries is spookily unexplained.
WORKS CITED


