

The Sensation Mania and the Victorian Psychological Underworld

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Abstract

This paper reconsiders the emergence and growth of the sensation mania of the 1860s that broke from the accepted social norms and tried to unearth aspects of criminality and passion beneath the respectable surface. It addresses some important questions concerning the members of this group, the popularity it achieved, the factors that helped its emergence, what the ensuing moral panic reveals about the society in which the novels were set, the impact of this phenomenon on later novels and novelists, and the emergence of the neo-sensational novel in contemporary literature. Moreover, the paper tries to probe the link between these novels and the Victorian psychological underworld and the political unconscious of their age. This is done on four interrelated levels: The gender roles, the legal aspect of the family, the social class and relations between classes and finally. A fourth and last level deals with 'property' and its effect on the family.

Keywords: sensation mania, respectable surface, neo-sensational novel, Victorian psychological underworld, political unconscious, gender roles, legal aspect

Introduction

The sensation novel was a literary genre of fiction that flourished in Britain in the 1860s featuring dramatic thrilling events. Its plots often revolved around sinister conspiracies, hidden secrets, crimes, and villainous schemes. It distinguished itself from other contemporary genres by introducing these themes in a genteel domestic setting. These novels — dubbed as fast novels, bigamy novels, or adultery novels — took the Victorians by the throat and became immediate best sellers. The added notoriety derived from reading them served only to contribute to their popularity, and propelled their sales into millions, and for the first time ever got those above stairs reading the same stories as their servants.

However, high brow critics writing in academic journals of the day decried the phenomenon and criticized its practitioners and readers in the harshest terms. The archbishop of York fulminated against them in his sermons; they spread panic through the pages of *The Times*; and in a famous review, the Oxford Professor of Philosophy, Henry Mansel (1863), called them "unspeakably disgusting" with "ravenous appetite for carrion".

This paper tries to address some important questions concerning the new phenomenon. Who are the members of this group of writers who started it? How did sensation achieve such an incredible popularity so quickly, and what are the factors that helped its emergence? What did the ensuing moral panic reveal about the society in which the novels were set? And in terms of its literary reputation, does this racy genre deserve to languish so far behind Victorian realism, its more respectable and steadier cousin? And finally, what is the impact of this phenomenon on later novels and novelists, and the emergence of the neo-sensational novel in contemporary literature?

The term sensation was used, initially by critics at the time and increasingly by readers and some of the writers themselves. It started with *The Woman in White* (1860), Mrs Henry Wood's *East Lynn* (1861), Mary Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862).

In addition to these, the list includes other members of this family of sensation writers like Charles Reade, George Meredith, Caroline Norton, and one or two of the lesser well-known writers like Susan Warner and Felicia Skene.

These novels are thought of as sensational partly because they are thrillers, very exciting and they got sensational subjects matters in them. In her review in *Blackwood Magazine*, Mrs Margaret Oliphant (1862) described these novels as "sensation novel" and within a year or two the coinage spread and became an accepted term. Their emergence coincided with some mid-century key events that led to their popularity such as the repeal of the stamp duty on paper in 1855 which dramatically increased the circulation of newspapers and generated a larger reading public for them. Identically, the increase in the numbers of readers was the net outcome of the social revolution taking place and the increase in population. Other important factors such as the proliferation of circulating libraries, where "triple-decker" Victorian novels were plentiful and easy to obtain, the tabloid journalism and the lack of available wholesome recreation that favoured the sensation novel as an inexpensive form of entertainment, serialized fiction to maintain a stable readership, and notorious public trials, contributed to its emergence.

The term "sensation fiction" started as pejorative and quite soon it ceased to be so. There were many respectable people who were happy to enjoy reading these novels. The question is what were these writers like Collins and Miss Braddon doing?

They were combining two things: some exciting and perhaps scandalous or controversial subject matters; some implicit sexual subjects connected with adultery, unhappy marriages, people cheating on each other, and the form of it which people criticized or relished peculiarly for being exciting and stimulating. Most of these novels were published in instalments in magazines. Some of them weekly, some monthly, and Collins took the necessity of exciting. He said "make them laugh, make them cry, make them wait".¹ He turned these curtain scenes into an extraordinary art form. Readers can remember probably in the very first section of *The Woman in White* where the narrator encounters this mysterious woman on the highroad at midnight and he feels a little tap on his shoulder, and there is that woman distracted, mysterious does not know her way and he helps direct her, and strangely she mentions to him in the course of their brief conversation that she has some knowledge of this place in Cumberland where he is shortly to go as an art teacher, and then she disappears in a coach and two men follow her and he overhears them asking a policeman if he has seen a woman in white who has escaped from asylum and that's it, and readers have to wait for a week, and in fact waiting which Collins developed in a sort of extraordinary exciting art form which, according to Kendrick (1978), made Victorian England line up at the publisher's to get his next installment -- and sing "The Woman in White Waltz," and wear 'Woman in White' perfume, and bring out the first printing of that book in a day. It has not been out of print since, and has been turned into a play and a handful of movies.

Similarly, *East Lynn* has its sensational impact because whereas most of sensation novels were concerned with bigamy, *East Lynn* is concerned with adultery. It is a novel about Lady Isabel Carlyle, a beautiful and refined young woman who leaves her husband whom she suspects of adultery and elopes with Captain Levison. After he deserts her, she returns to England and finds her husband has remarried. She cannot bear to be away from her family, so dons a disguise and takes the position of governess in the household of her former husband and his new wife. When her young son, Willie, dies she is unable to comfort him as she would like, and she too dies.

In *Lady Audely's Secret*, Braddon's bigamous heroine deserts her child, pushes husband number one down a well, thinks about poisoning husband number two and sets fire to a hotel in which her other male acquaintances are residing.

What is really new about sensation fiction is that it took these features from the gothic, from penny dreadful, from new novels of mystery and crime. It took those issues and brought them home. It brought these things into the lives of suburban villas, in respectable middle-class lives. That was new and that was what made the sensation for those who were first reading them in the early 1860s, so exciting, so disturbing, and so useful to them as a way of exploring anxiety, preoccupations, and the inclinations of their minds.

What is also new about these novels is the fact that they were read by people upstairs and downstairs. Different social classes which seemed very settled almost very fixed in their boundaries started to seem much less settled, that those people in the upper middle class, indeed the aristocracy, famously the Prince of Wales, was a huge fan of *East Lynn*, and Prime Minister William Gladstone had the same interests and the same appetite as those who were preparing dinner for the Prince of Wales. The success of these novels was so strong that serious and realistic fiction of the time like *Silas Marner* and *Middlemarch* had suggestions of the sensation phenomenon.

In their treatment of adultery, bigamy, secrecy, murder and madness these novels expose the social instability of the period. They reflect this question of things not being what they seem. You can't trust appearances and this reflects anxiety about uncertainties within the social structure. They also offer the novelists who are exploring these issues the opportunity of watching and looking and detecting. These are novels that are deeply interested in examination of what might look respectable, might look happy but it isn't. You need to look beneath the surface in these novels, and the readers are recruited alongside the characters as detectives. What makes these novels valuable to students and readers in literary circles and seminars, is that in reading them we feel as if we are discovering something about the Victorians which surprises us and reflects our own preconceptions.

It is worth asking here how seriously did the Victorians take these novels? In answering this question we can say that the Victorians did take them seriously in moral terms. They were seen as moral touchstones and there was a lot of outrage about what these novels were doing. But they were also taken seriously in underground aesthetic debate. There were numerous reviews of these novels which say that they are good stories and the reviewers had no objection to reading them. A review in *All the Year Round* called *The Sensational William* (1864), wondered "Why is it necessarily immoral to shadow forth the awful visitations of wrath and evil and punishment, or to depict those wonderful and unwonted accidents of fortune which are just as real as anything", and answers his fellow writers and conservative readers who waged their campaign against these novels "It is very easy to cry "Sensational!" but the word proves nothing. Let it be granted that such things are sensational; but then life itself is similarly sensational in many of its aspects, and Nature is similarly sensational in many of her forms, and art is always sensational" and he concludes with the serious claim that that what the sensation novel was doing was really rather what Sophocles and Shakespeare were doing, dealing with extreme emotions, with passion, dealing with it in a compelling way:

"The (Edipus of Sophocles is in the highest degree sensational; so are half the plays of Shakespeare, at a moderate computation; so is the Satan of Paradise Lost; so is Raphael's Massacre of the Innocents; so is the Laocoon; so, one may say, are the Oratorios of Handel, since they deal with tremendous elements of suffering and wonderment, of aspiration and triumph. Whenever humanity wrestles with the gods of passion and pain, there, of necessity, is that departure from our diurnal platitudes which the cant of existing criticism denounces by this single word". (p. 14).

They are the same, and according to him, the only difference, is that this is done in modern society.

With Freud looming in the view, the question is, does he have a place in this discussion? There has been a tremendous tendency among critics and students to find in these novels a kind of Victorian psychological underworld. They argue that what people get out of reading these novels has something to do with the Victorian psychological underworld. If we take Freud in the vocabulary, what we discover is the repressed release; that repressed energy which lies beneath that respectability that we might expect.

On another level, these novels tell us as much about the political unconscious of the Victorian age. They register all sorts of concern about social and cultural change, about social mobility, and about the most central contemporary social tensions and anxieties of the Victorian middle-class. In the 1850s and the 1860s there was a lot of agitation, a lot of feminist agitation about the marriage laws, about the women's rights within marriage, about the rights of women in relation to custody of their children and many of these novels dealt overtly and directly with these situations. A fair number, if not all, revolved around the cornerstone of Victorian society, namely the family.

This is done on four interrelated levels. The first level is concerned with gender roles, marriage, and the role of the woman in the family.

There is a lot of discontented women who do not fit into conventional marriage easily, and young men who do not seem to know what their proper social role is, and the plots of these novels often embed the young man more securely in middle class society by the end. The second level is involved with the legal aspect of the family and the role of the law in regulating and organizing the Victorian family. A third level looks at social class and relations between classes. A fourth and last level deals with 'property' and its effect on the family. On each of these levels, the family is debunked as an "illusory sanctuary" (Pykett: 1994). As such, the Sensation Novel can be seen as an intervention in contemporary social. Focusing on how these novels reflect Victorian thought and social change, modern critics have resurrected the sensation novel and reinstated it as a valuable part of literary history.

Although the form is often spoken of as a phenomenon of two decades it remained vibrant throughout the rest of the century, and well into the next one. Its influences may well be detected in works written after 1880, including the novels of Thomas Hardy whose first effort, *Desperate Remedies* is very much in the Sensation vein. Modern critics like Walter M. Kendrick sees *The woman in White* as "more than a historical artifact or a primitive precursor of Agatha Christie" It is very much "concerned with the problems of plot and character, form and imitation, artifice and authenticity, which occupied the debate over literary sensationalism" (Kendrick, 1978). While Kelly Marsh tends to believe that the Victorian sensation novel has re-emerged on the scene of contemporary British fiction. The neo-sensation novel uses the conventions, themes, and even the agenda of the Victorian sensation novel (Marsh, 1995). Between the Victorian version and the contemporary version lies a transition period exemplified by the works of Thomas Hardy and George Gissing.

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Endnotes

1. 'Make 'em cry, make 'em laugh, make 'em wait' . This adage is widely attributed to Collins (though sometimes also to Dickens) there is no evidence he ever wrote this phrase down. It is not in any of his published writings and nor is it in any of his known letters. He may have said it, but my recollection is that it first appeared attributed to him long after his death.