

WHAT LIES BEHIND THE MASK:
THE LEVELING OF GENDER IN *LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET*

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The mark of beauty conceals the character. It bares the image of sexuality that lures manipulation and deceit. Superficial looks have conceived false faces and inertly false hopes. Shiny locks and eagle piercing eyes disguise what really lies beneath the surface. Beauty is used to cover what is ugly in Victorian society. It covers the true identity, character, integrity, and truth. It is a mask that creates a false persona. But beauty's meanings, symbols, and mechanisms are brilliantly used in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's sensational novel, *Lady Audley's Secret*, to shape the plot and create a beautifully mastered tale of reversed gender roles and the power behind the woman's marks of beauty.

Lady Audley's Secret is a twisted tale of an "innocent-seeming governess, who, terrifyingly, seems to have collapsed within herself the previously separate roles of both tormented, murderous madwoman and respectable heroic" (Hopkins 83). She "looked the part" of Victorian woman and wife but refused to "be" it inside (Voskuil 613). Lady Audley is a controversial figure who is determined to rise through marriage and in doing so, she created a wide-range of questions about the nature of women, the self, others, and society.

Current scholars hold that *Lady Audley's Secret* represents a number of social changes and the resultant anxieties that occurred during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, centering primarily on changing gender roles and expressions of sexuality. This sensation novel also considered to go "against common standards and taboos concerning class boundaries and the gender roles" (Podgorski 3). Braddon instigates social change for an apparent rise of the fallen women and intrigues the audience with a superior blend of gender, class, and society. The most intriguing aspect of this novel lies within the oppression women exerted upon men instead of the previously observed reversal of oppression.

Lady Audley's Secret is a tale of women whose prevailing strengths consequently upset the gender stereotypes in Victorian society. With the role of gender being an apprehensive concern amongst citizens of England, Braddon wrote a tale that stirred the pot in various directions of societal expectations and gender roles. E.S. Dallas argued that in *Lady Audley's Secret*, "man is represented as made and ruled by circumstance; he is the victim of change and the puppet of intrigue... [he] posed a challenge to conventional notions of social roles, [in] particular femininity" (Braddon xiv). *Lady Audley's Secret* is "epitomized [with] unresolved social problems agitating women and men during the high Victorian period. Individual morality, sexuality, and female participation in political and economic spheres" (Vicinus 134) are all apart of the plot and rising conflict.

Previously, Victorian women were commonly viewed as "the angel in the house", a domestic servant, a help-maid to their husbands, and "the general of the house". They were dependent upon their husbands for financial security and a healthy lifestyle. In exchange for their loyal servitude and utter submission, they lived comfortably and were consumed by their economic security. The obedient housewife was to be submissive in all areas of public and private civility. They were to always a gracious host who committed all effort and time to serving others. Consequently, Victorian women were valued by their idleness and fortitude within the home and family.

To step outside this frame of the domestic sphere was considered to be a threat to Victorian society and masculinity. Women were controlled by the male society of church and state. They are economically dependent on males and vulnerable because of this financial and social dependency. The role of Victorian women is first brought to mind in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. This novel placed women in two statuses- happily married or dreadfully

single. To be without a husband was as close to social suicide as possible. Women mere existence was to marry a man of fortune (whether small or large) and be a submissive housewife who served every waking moment tending to domestic duties. It is a sad existence in the mind of those in the twenty-first century, but it was the gender role and social placement that controlled women's ways of living.

Women of the Victorian Era were bound by the male-based society into a domestic sphere that strangled their passion, activity, and intellect. They were removed from public society, forced into domestic submission, and chained to familial duties to serve the superior society. Deprived of worth and value, Victorian women were conformed into societies' ideal image of what an acceptable women should be; they were slaves to their society, broken in spirit, and oppressed by economic dependency. They were oppressed by their need for marriage, their expectations to be angelic creatures, and their domestic duties as helpmates.

To further demonstrate this point we may look to Elizabeth Gaskell's novel *Ruth*. In this novel women were considered to be the victims of males who used their power and persuasion to manipulate the inferior sex and get their desired outcome. Ruth was a victim due to her naïve understanding of the world and was casts as an outside for breaking the social norms and having a child out of wedlock. Women, such as Ruth, were oppressed; but this apparent female inferiority was soon to change as in the case of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's novel, *Lady Audley's Secret*.

Women's submissive roles and diligent duties were undergoing significant transformation when Mary Elizabeth Braddon wrote her sensation novel in the 1860's. Braddon sought to break the social norm and give women a voice in society. Women were no longer to be considered dormant beings in the social realm. They had a piercing influence, power, and

place that resided in their power of sexuality and feminine attraction. Women were passive, sentimental, and emotional. But this quality seems to no longer exist as women began to exert their power and persuasion upon the transposing sex.

At this point in Victorian literature, men are at a greater danger from their sentimental feelings than women. There is a surprising reversal of gender roles that clearly defines men to be the more emotions, vulnerable, weaker, and passive gender. Men are now shown to be pitied instead of blamed. They are no longer the source of women's misery, but instead have become the victims of women's fatal attraction.

At this time, females now played a significant role in matters of affairs. They were now the puppeteers who were able to direct their lives in the direction they desired. Their control allowed for a new classification of female and male gender. Victorian women were climbing the social ladder and leaving a mark upon society. If they could not have a voice in social and economic affairs as seen before, they would manipulate the men through attraction, sexuality, and intrigue to give them the voice they so deeply desired.

Lady Audley womanly possessed many of the passive attributes associated with the ideal Victorian women. These attributes resulted in an angelic image that was considered both clean and pure. She was noted to have "certainly look[ed] the part of the authentic devoted wife. To the other county residents, her blond beauty seems to verify the earnestness of her alms-giving, churchgoing, good works" (Voskuil 614). The narrator even goes as far to note that, "Everybody, high and low united in declaring that Lucy was the sweetest girl that ever lived" (Braddon). She obtained the eloquence and beauty that masked her true identity. Her power she was "hidden behind the masquerade of femininity- the infantile beauty, the bubbling laugh, the gracious manner" (Rosenman 37).

Victorian women were viewed to be an artistic illusion. Their silent nature allowed for a projected story to be conjured in males' imagination. Lady Audley used this aesthetic allusion to her advantage. Her exterior beauty allowed men to paint a picture of what they wanted to see in her. Victorian women, including Lady Audley, were considered to be pieces of art that were presented to be attractive, simple beings that held a sense of morality. Yet, in *Lady Audley's Secret*, this is not the case.

Lady Audley is a desirable female figure that threatened the masculine society. She was "pretty enough to attract male attention and unfortunate enough to have no other source of security" (Gilbert 221). She was very beautiful, somewhat childish, and behaved kindly to everyone around her. Katherine Montwieler noted in her essay, "Marketing Sensation", that Lady Audley represented "at least one Victorian ideal of womanhood: the child-bride who appears to be entirely subservient to her husband whom she gives the feeling the he is her master and protector" (52). She exerted a spell over men that enticed them and brought sexual attraction over them. Her exterior beauty hid her criminal personality. Her aesthetic gifts allowed her to improve her social status from a daughter of a drunken, retired marine to the widely admired Lady of Audley Court. She had a ruthless ambition to leave behind the unpleasant life of poverty and low-class society. Thus she used her greatest asset, beauty.

Lady Audley used her charming looks and mannerisms to her advantage to conceal her hopeful fate and manipulate men into her desired outcome. It is to Lady Audley's advantage that she first lived as a governess where the "undomesticated woman is naturalized within the domestic setting: thus, her nature is disguised and she is enabled to make contact with "good society" like Sir Michael" (Gilbert 223). It is through this position that she met Sir Michael

Audley and became an immediate infection upon his heart. It is stated in the novel that Sir Michael Audley:

... forgot that love, which is a madness, and a scourge, and a fever, and a delusion, and a snare, is also a mystery, and very imperfectly understood by everyone except the individual sufferer who writhes under its tortures... who lies awake at night until he loathes his comfortable pillow and tumbles his sheets into two twisted rags of linen in his agonies. (332)

Sir Michael Audley had become a victim of love and beauty. He was now under the spell of an enticing and powerful woman. Yet it seems that he was always under the control of females if it was not first his daughter Alicia Audley who “had reigned supreme in her father’s house since her earliest childhood” (Braddon 10).

Men are shown to be increasingly weak and in need of a strong woman to take control. This is made clear through the use of the character, Sir Michael Audley, a man of immense respectability and finances security. He sought to marry a young, seemingly beautiful wife who ruled him in all matters of affairs. His submission to her in marriage provided the claim that too much love and compassion from a male can be the weakness and downfall to their gender.

Not only did Sir Michael Audley become a fool to the game, but his lethargic nephew, Robert Audley became a victim of the madness. Robert quickly became the main focus of the novel, not through masculine strength, but by his role in the various relationships between himself and George Talboys, Sir Michael Audley, Lady Audley, Alicia, and Clara Talboys.

Robert Audley’s profession as a non-practicing barrister is due to the influence of his friends to pursue such an authoritative career. But he only pursues law because he believed it

would be less trouble to comply with rather than oppose his peers. He is a “blatant contradistinction to Victorian ideals of manliness, he idles away his time without any purpose apart from smoking and novel reading” (Klein 163). He seems to be a man of very little concern and interest until his friend, George Talboy, accidentally reunites with him.

George returns home from his lengthy voyage to Australia where he ran away in hopes to recover from his fear of failure. He returned home with wealth to soothe his wife, Helen Talboy’s, fear of inferior and insufficient living arrangements. Yet he returns home to find an obituary in the newspaper stating of the death of his wife. George falls apart and loses all sense of being by the devastating news of his beloved’s death. Robert who sees his young friend’s heart melt away instantly takes him under his sleeve, invites him in his home, and cares for him deeply.

Klein noted that “Robert seem[ed] to have [finally] found a purpose in his life through caring for his friend like a faithful wife” (164). Here it is obvious of the reversed gender roles as Robert takes on the womanly role of caregiver, comforter, and friend. His sympathy and compassion is poured upon George until the day that George disappears and Robert becomes a completely transformed person whose mere existence is consumed with finding his lost friend. He was determined to bring George’s disappearance to justice.

Despite the title, *Lady Audley’s Secret*, the novel is not about Lady Audley, but is instead about Robert’s journey toward knowledge of his friend’s disappearance. During this journey he comes to “both denounce women and to associate them with evil” (Gilbert 224). He even goes further to declare “that woman were at the bottom of all mischief... because women are never lazy” (Braddon 207). This statement is ironic due to the opposed nature of the lethargic Robert who only gained momentum through his seemingly homosexual desire to trace his friend’s

whereabouts and disappearance. He then goes on to state that woman “riot in battle, and murder, and clamor, and desperation... To call them the weaker sex is to utter a hideous mockery... I hate women” (207). However, Robert is not just denouncing women, he is rejecting his own femininity “in order to take on the active masculine role as judge of Lady Audley” (Gilbert 224). In his rejection of women, he is insinuating the message that women are superior and by no means the weaker sex. Robert rejects women and femininity for his new found role in life as an active member of society. He is forced to pull together his social status and elicit himself among the socially ambitious in order to assert his control and sense of masculine strength.

According to Robert, women were not only behind all the ruckus and commotion but were considered to be “evil when they have masculine ambitions and take on masculine roles” (Braddon 224). This is constantly mentioned by Robert due to his inferior complex as a weak male. He mentions the masculinity of women simply because he lacks such masculinity. Everything Robert says about women carries an ironic undertone that only seems to mock his own feminine attributes.

Robert is greatly affected by her close friend and soon results in waddling in sadness and passivity. Robert “feels pressured, beleaguered, and endangered- his cousin Alicia wants to marry him; the charismatic Clara Talboys challenges him to investigate his friend George’s sudden disappearance; Lady Audley first captivates him and then excites his suspicious about her shadowy past” (Rosenman 32). Robert is a puppet to the desires and female influences in *Lady Audley’s Secret*. He is captivated and overwhelmed by their significant impressions upon him. It is no surprise that the agents of his distress are women who possess “the slippery nature of truth” (Gilbert 225).

Robert was first intrigued and fascinated his aunt, Lady Audley. Yet he soon loses sight of this sexual interest and only investigates her to seek control of the situation at hand and elicit masculine dominance. Soon he tires of such activity and only continues to search due to the woman that possesses him, Clara Talboy. He first was the object of Lady Audley, then George Talboys, and finally the object of Clara Talboy's desire.

Clara's strength is that she can be the passive ideal women while navigating under the oppression and strict mannerisms of her father to drive Robert to bring her brother's disappearance to justice. It is important to note that Robert only acts when he is guided and encouraged to. He becomes a subject to women when he is encouraged to continue and solve the mystery of his dear friend. It is through this journey that he becomes closer and more interested in women than ever before because according to him, "It is all women's work from one end to the other" (Braddon 207).

If it was not for the disappearance of George Talboys and the remarkable influence of women, Robert would be utterly content in his sluggish lifestyle of reading French novels, toiling with his stray dogs, surrounding himself in rooms with flowers and songbirds, and avoiding hunts that end in death. He is a passive and weak male who experiences change throughout the novel as he continually works to uncover the mystery and become a respectable member of society.

George Talboy, the cause of Robert's immense movement and journey, is another character distinguished by the reversal in gender role due to the overwhelming manipulation by beautiful women. He clearly takes an interest in women and is engrossed by his wife Helen Maldon. He marries her despite his father's wishes and is rejected from the family for marrying below his class to a daughter of a belligerent veteran. At first George Talboys appears to be

polar opposite of Robert Audley due to his active and interest in women. Yet when studied in more detail, he is just as passive as Robert. He seems to only react to events instead of acting himself. He is not a leader, a strong social member, or a masculine figure. He is fearful of women and their rejection and avoids all obstacles that come his way. George is thus an inactive member and a fearful male of women's power.

George abandoned his wife after she complained that her dreams of fortune were not being fulfilled. Instead of staying home and fixing the problem, he deserts her without a word and runs away to Australia in pursuit of possible wealth. He runs away from the responsibility of his child and also runs when confronted by Lady Audley, who we soon find out to be Helen Maldon, his wife. He is not a man who faces his problems but flees when the waters begin to rise. Where is the masculine strength in this?

It is apparent that men are manipulated and used by Lady Audley, but what about women? Alicia does not become a fool to her charming looks and childish ways. She battles with Lucy Audley for the affection and attention of her father. Yet she is the complete opposite of her stepmother who possessed the femme fatale mark of beauty. Alicia's appearance and behaviors are often attributed to masculinity. She is bold, loud, too free, and assertive. She acts the part of a man in courtship, is direct, enjoys sporting activities, and has a bouncing gait that is negatively commented upon by Robert. Yet despite her strong masculine tendencies she brings about the attraction of a country gentleman named Sir Harry Towers who is noted to "appear to be quite her slave" since she is apparently "the stronger partner" (Klein 167).

Alicia demonstrates the transgression of gender roles and the apparent conflicting social norms given to men and women. She is the character that brings about the question of appropriate and acceptable gender. It is apparent that she may be the most masculine figure in

the book due to her strength, perseverance, and strong attitude. Yet her strong attributes also seem to level the playing field between men and women.

The other notable woman in *Lady Audley's Secret* is Phoebe Marks. Phoebe seems to obtain an instant attachment to the Lady and a bond that is unfamiliar between social classes. This is due to the likeness the two women share. They both manipulate men to gain a better social position, even though Phoebe seems to do so on a smaller scale.

Women are thus cast in the battles of the sexes and conquer men and their "masculinity". The novel is not a story of patriarchal roles as suggested by such critics and Elaine Showalter and David Skilton, but rather is concerned with the "subversive deconstruction of gender stereotypes" (Klein 162) that were disenfranchised by women's petty looks and mannerisms. The strong familial force of Lady Audley and Clara Talboys demonstrates the inadvertently oppressed male characters that are marked to act more like women than strong masculine men.

Lady Audley and her unearthly beauty and exquisite cheerfulness are played upon by Braddon to make a point of showing the foolishness of accepting people at face value. Yet behind the mask of beauty, the luxurious locks, and enticing personality lies a woman who has climbed the social ladder and has become a stern instrument of persuasion and manipulation. Beauty can be deceiving and a tool of manipulation. But when used accordingly, like Lady Audley, it can clear a path and resurrect the fallen women.

As apparent in *Lady Audley's Secret*, women were no longer the weaker sex. Behind their smiles and pleasant domineers lies a powerful influence that will shape not only the future, but the future of society as women become and active participant in both the social and domestic realm. Women have placed themselves amongst the social leaders and have been marked as significant elements in the once masculine society.

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