Sensation in *Lady Audley’s Secret* and its Relation to Theatre

Lotte Hemmen

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Department of English Language and Culture, University of Groningen.

Supervisor: Dr. Kees de Vries

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Abstract

This dissertation approaches Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s sensational novel *Lady Audley’s Secret* as a product of its own historical context. Sensation fiction, in general, was part of a sensational decade; a decade full of sensational events, press, crimes, and scandals. Since sensation is so evidently present in the Victorian society, this dissertation argues that sensation is a cultural phenomenon which is able to manifest itself in multiple mediums. Sensation fiction was one of the chief sensational art forms of this decade and was influenced by many developments in the Victorian period. One of sensation fiction’s main influences was melodrama, and after the emergence of sensation fiction, melodrama evolved into sensation theater. Sensation theater had a strong connection to sensation fiction as many popular sensation novels were adapted for the stage. This dissertation thus looks at the sensational phenomenon in *Lady Audley’s Secret* and its relation to theatre. With the use of reception theory, this dissertation discusses the indispensable impact of sensation fiction, melodrama and sensation theater, as the popular genres received an abundance of criticism and sparked multiple debates. Finally, to explore *Lady Audley’s Secret*’s relation to theatre, this dissertation uses adaptation theory in order to analyse the first stage adaptation of Braddon’s novel by George Roberts in 1863, and argues that sensation, in both the novel and the play of *Lady Audley’s Secret*, aims to create a sensational effect of excitement by preaching to the nerves.
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Lotte Hemmen
List of abbreviations


Introduction

The 1860s was the sensation decade; a decade of sensational events and sensational writing. It was the age of ‘sensational’ advertisement, products, journals, crimes, and scandals; the age of sensational poetry, art, auction sales, sport, popular science, diplomacy and preaching (Pykett, Sensation 1).

This description accurately describes ‘sensation’ as a cultural phenomenon; it can be found in many aspects of the mid-Victorian society, and the ‘sensation novel was among the chief sensations of this sensational decade’ (Pykett, Sensation 2). Sensation fiction emerged in Britain around 1860 and is generally described using the words of contemporary critic Henry Mansel, as he calls sensation fiction a genre that ‘preach[es] to the nerves’, as ‘[e]xcitement, and excitement alone seems to be the great end at which they aim’ (482). These sensation novels were mainly distinguished by their dangerous, devious and, in some cases, insane heroes and heroines, and their complex plots full of horror, mystery, suspense, and secrecy (Pykett, Sensation 4). Sensation fiction was influenced by many developments in the Victorian period; its main influence was Victorian melodrama. Other important influences were penny dreadfuls, the Gothic, and the Newgate novel. Moreover, sensation fiction was also clearly influenced by the sensational press, since real life crime, as reported in contemporary newspapers, became the main inspiration for the plots of sensation novels. Sensation fiction also incorporated and commented on contemporary discussions such as female selfhood and female emancipation, madness, and consumerism. Consequently, ‘sensation novels and the controversies they engendered tell us a great deal about cultural anxieties and social and literary change […] in the Victorian period’ (Pykett, Newgate 19).

Since sensation is so evidently present in the Victorian society, the incentive for this dissertation was to explore the genre’s relation to other arts, and especially theatre. Sensation theater had a strong connection to literature as it got its inspiration for sensational scenes from
sensation novels which eventually led to stage adaptations of these popular novels (Holder 69). This dissertation discusses Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret*, one of the three founding texts of the sensation genre, and explores how this sensation phenomenon manifests itself in this novel and, by looking at the first stage adaptation of Braddon’s novel by George Roberts in 1863, how it transposes mediums. This dissertation thus focuses on sensation as a literary phenomenon and a theatrical event, by both looking at the work itself and how it was received, and argues that sensation, in the case of *Lady Audley’s Secret*, is a cultural phenomenon which is able to manifest itself in multiple mediums. For sensation, in both literature and theatre, aims to create a sensational effect of excitement by ‘preaching to the nerves’, as the analysis of *Lady Audley’s Secret*’s stage adaptation demonstrates that the sensational effect in Braddon’s novel can be recreated in a different medium using a different set of conventions.

As for the structure of this dissertation, the first chapter establishes the historical context of sensation fiction and how sensation is present in *Lady Audley’s Secret*. Subsequently, the second chapter explores the influence of melodrama on sensation and the melodramatic features in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, and how melodrama, after the emergence of sensation fiction, evolved into sensation theater. The third chapter discusses the crucial impact of sensation fiction, melodrama, and sensation theater on society with the use of reception theory. Finally, the last chapter looks at Roberts’s adaptation and analyses how Braddon’s novel is transposed into a different medium.

The theoretical framework for this dissertation consists of reception theory and adaptation theory. The incentive for using reception theory is that the reception of the work is an indispensable element of sensation as the popular genre received an abundance of criticism and sparked multiple debates. Moreover, the fact that popular sensation novels were made into stage adaptations accounts for the inclusion of adaptation theory which is also useful for examining how the phenomenon of sensation can be transposed from one medium to another. Finally, in order to
establish a complete theoretical framework for this dissertation, the remainder of this introduction elucidates the essential points of both reception theory and adaptation theory.

The prominent theory of this dissertation is reception theory; a literary theory that originated from the work of Hans-Robert Jauss in the late 1960s in Germany. Reception theory is concerned with the text and the reader rather than the traditional concern of the author and the literary work. According to this theory, reception is essential to a literary work because it has ‘two interlocking histories, one that derives from the author’s expressed decisions and purposes, and the other that derives from the critical reactions of the various readers’ (McGann qtd. in Machor & Goldstein ix). The prime focus of reception critics is thus the author’s original audience, the genre’s history, and a writer’s life and era (Machor & Goldstein x). Jauss’s reception study focuses on the ‘reader’s constructive activity, which grasps both the author’s historical context or “other” and the reader’s own models, paradigms, beliefs, and values. By examining readers’ changing horizons and sociohistorical contexts, reception study reveals literature’s historical influence’ (Machor & Goldstein xi), which Jauss terms ‘the coherence of literature as an event’ (qtd. in Machor & Goldstein xi).

Jauss’s reception theory thus examines readers’ changing horizons and sociohistorical contexts which reveal literature’s historical influence (Machor & Goldstein xi). In order to understand these changing horizons, Jauss introduces the term ‘horizon of expectations’. Jauss does not give a clear definition of this term, and the term ‘horizon’ occurs in a variety of compound words and phrases throughout his work. In his book Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction, Robert Holub argues that ‘Jauss seems to bank on the reader’s common sense in understanding at least his main term. “Horizon of expectations” would appear to refer to an intersubjective system or structure of expectations, a “system of references” or a mind-set that a hypothetical individual might bring to any text’ (Holub 59). The aim of Jauss’s work is to recreate the ‘horizon of expectations of the reader for whom the literary text was originally written’ (Jauss 17). This could either be achieved ‘through interpretation by disregarding the distance in time and by studying the text alone, or by returning historically to its sources and compiling factual knowledge about its time’ (Jauss 17). Jauss’s theory
prefers the latter approach, and with this in mind, Jauss introduces the notion of a horizon of expectation as a device to analyse the reader’s experience, and as a result:

The analysis of the literary experience of the reader avoids the threatening pitfalls of psychology if it describes the reception and the influence of a work within the objectifiable system of expectations that rises for each work in the historical moment of its appearance, from a preunderstanding of the genre, from the form and themes of already familiar works, and from the opposition between poetic and practical language (Curtius qtd. in Jauss 22).

In other words, whereas reader-response theory stresses the importance of individual reaction to literature, since so many readers create so many interpretations, reception theory treats interpretation as a more general phenomenon (Jauss 22). In addition, Jauss claims that a literary work has an event-character to it, as it is a moment of process ‘in which two horizons are always at play in an active synthesis of understanding. In other words, the horizon of expectation evoked by the work confirms or transcends the horizon of experience introduced by the recipient’ (23). With his use of the horizon of expectation, Jauss ‘wants to call attention to an essential aspect of literature that has been unfortunately neglected by most scholars: literature’s effect on society, a matter that, by contrast, has been of utmost concern for writers’ (Holub 68).

Reception and context are thus essential in the understanding of a text. However, the more important element is how to apply this; Machor and Goldstein claim that the history of the book brings together the theoretical and practical side of reception study (155), and indeed, the ‘history-of-the-book work complements literary-critical study by showing that reception involves such factors as the availability of different types of printed matter, the economics of book buying, [...] and mechanisms [...] through which printed matter has been censored, banned and canonized’ (Machor & Goldstein 156). Similar to Jauss, book historians acknowledge that a text is a product of the time in
which it was read as well as composed (Machor & Goldstein 156). In his essay, ‘First Steps Toward a History of Reading’, Robert Darnton defines the history of the book as a set of practices concerned with ‘the social and cultural history of print’ (qtd. in Machor & Goldstein 155).

Darnton starts his essay with that built in problem Jauss also states: how can one recover what past readers experienced? He argues that reading is an activity which can never be the same as what past readers experienced; for ‘[w]e may enjoy the illusion of stepping outside of time in order to make contact with authors who lived centuries ago. But even their texts have come down to us unchanged [...] our relation to those texts cannot be the same as that of readers in the past’ (Darnton 160-161). With this, Darnton demonstrates that reading has a history, and additionally claims that this history can be recovered in many ways. This history can be recovered by searching, for example, for records of readers in which they express their experience of a work; fanmail, or letters between an author and publishers (Darnton 161). Consequently, the ‘history can show what readings took actually place – that is, within the limits of an imperfect body of evidence’ (Darnton 174). As a result of this, Darnton argues ‘for a dual strategy, which would combine textual analysis with empirical research. In this way it should be possible to compare the implicit readers of the texts with the actual readers of the past and, by building on such comparisons, to develop a history as well as a theory of reader response’ (174).

This dissertation uses reception theory in order to successfully establish the historical context of sensation fiction, Lady Audley’s Secret, melodrama, and sensation theater, and additionally demonstrate their reciprocal influence on society.

In order to discuss the stage adaptations of popular sensation novels, the second theory of this dissertation is adaptation theory. An adaptation is essentially a repetition of a previous story, however, it is repetition without replication as it ‘refashions beliefs, recycles old and used objects and reassembles them into new embodied experiences’ (Laera 1). Adaptations are central to Western cultures as ‘[t]he retelling of stories already told, the reenactment of events already enacted, the experience of emotions already experienced, [...] are and have always been central concerns in all times and places’ (Carlson qtd. in Laera 3). In her book A Theory of Adaptation, Linda
Hutcheon argues that the concept of adaptations can be defined from three distinct but interrelated perspectives (7). First, adaptation can be seen as ‘[a]n acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works’ (Hutcheon 8); this transposition can mean a shift in medium, genre, or even a shift in perspective which can create multiple different interpretations (Hutcheon 8). Second, adaptation can be seen a process of creation which always ‘involves both (re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation’ (Hutcheon 8). Third, ‘seen from the perspective of its process of reception, adaptation is a form of intertextuality: we experience adaptations (as adaptations) as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation’ (Hutcheon 8).

Therefore, adapting is not merely copying prior texts; it is transformed into a new distinct work; however, ‘[w]hen we call a work an adaptation, we openly announce its overt relation to a prior text’ (Hutcheon 6). Therefore, due to this relation, adaptations are ‘haunted at all times by their adapted texts. If we know that prior text, we always feel its presence shadowing the one we are experiencing directly’ (Hutcheon 6).

In addition to Hutcheon’s attempt of defining adaptations, she also discusses what exactly gets adapted, and how. She states that adaptations can resort to the spirit of a work, its tone, or even its style (Hutcheon 10). However, according to most theories of adaptation, the story is the core element of what is being transposed. ‘In adaptation, the story-argument goes, “equivalences” are sought in different sign systems for the various elements of the story: its themes, events, world, characters, motivations, point of view, consequences, contexts, symbols, imagery and so on’ (Hutcheon 10). Themes, characters, and events are all transposed relatively easily; however, changes in point of view or focalisation may lead to major differences. For example, ‘[b]eing shown a story is not the same as being told it’ (Hutcheon 12). The source for an adaptation is often a literary text; however, adapting a literary text has a built in problem because ‘what novels can portray so well [is] the “res cogitans”, the space of the mind. Even screen and stage media have difficulty with this dimension, because when psychic reality is shown rather than told about, it has to be made manifest in the material realm to be perceived by the audience’ (Hutcheon 14). Therefore instead of telling a
story which involves description, explanation, and a narrator who can leap through time and can sometimes venture inside the minds of characters, showing a story ‘as in movies, ballets, radio and stage plays, musicals and operas, involves a direct aural and visual performance experienced in real time’ (Hutcheon 13).

Hutcheon additionally stresses that we use the word adaptation for both the process and the product (15). In the process of adapting, the source is often transposed to another medium, which Hutcheon defines as re-mediations (16). She explains this as adaptations being specific ‘translations in the form of intersemiotic transpositions from one sign system (for example, words) to another (for example, images). This is translation but in a very specific sense: as transmutation or transcoding, that is, necessarily a recoding into a new set of conventions as well as signs’ (Hutcheon 16). This translating relates to the process of creation which always involves (re-)interpretation and (re-)creation (Hutcheon 8). In other words, ‘what is involved in adapting can be a process of appropriation, of taking possession of another’s story, and filtering it, in a sense, through one’s own sensibility, interests, and talents. Therefore, adapters are first interpreters and then creators’ (Hutcheon 18). Again, adaptation is not copying but making the adapted material one’s own (Hutcheon 20). Finally, Hutcheon stresses that ‘no one mode is inherently good at doing one thing and not another; but each has at its disposal different means of expression – media and genres – and so can aim at and achieve certain things better than others (24).

There are all kinds of adaptations; however, this dissertation solely focuses on stage adaptations. Whereas Hutcheon’s book discusses adaptations in general, Margherita Laera’s book *Theatre and Adaptation: Return, Rewrite, Repeat*, merely focuses on theatre. As her title suggests, Laera claims that theatre itself has an inherent tendency to return, rewrite, and repeat, and in doing so, ‘it adapts itself to present contingencies and situations, like an animal species struggling to survive through evolution’ (1). Similar to literature, theatre is one of the oldest art forms in Western cultures and because of this old status, ‘[t]heatre, one could say, never stops adapting its features to the world and the world to its features’ (Laera 1). The similarities between adaptation and
theatricality function, according to Laera, as a memory machine because ‘theatre is the site for the recollection, re-elaboration, and contestation of readily available cultural material, and for the production of new, and newly adaptable, ideas out of established ones’ (3).

In addition, there is a growing field of scholarly research that consider adaptation as a ‘kind of interpretive intervention’ (Laera 4). Indeed, the fact that an adaptation transposes a source into a different medium or genre ultimately leads to different interpretations and meanings. According to Laera, ‘[i]n this intertextual sense, the process of adaptation implies negotiations of numerous kinds, such as interlingual, intersemiotic, intermedial, but also ideological, ethical, aesthetic and political’ (5). Laera finally suggests that this process gets even ‘more complicated when we consider the different mediums, genres, cultures, and historical periods that are involved in the act of stage transposition’ (6). Adaptations can therefore be divided into two concepts: medium and culture. Thus, in terms of medium, adaptations can either be intramedial or intermedial; intramedial means working within the same medium and intermedial means transposing a source to another medium (Laera 6). The same goes for culture, adaptations can either be intracultural or intercultural. ‘An intracultural adaptation involves a transposition within the same culture [...]’; while intercultural adaptation (also known as transculturation) transfers one source from one culture into another’ (Laera 6). Finally, this dissertation uses adaptation theory to explore and analyse the intermedial and intracultural stage adaptation of Lady Audley’s Secret.
Chapter 1: The Sensation Novel and its Historical Context

The introduction on reception theory demonstrated that one main objective of reception theory is to retrieve the responses of the original reader. This can be achieved either by simply interpreting a text and disregarding the distance in time, or ‘by returning to its historical sources and compiling factual knowledge about its time’ (Jauss 17). This dissertation uses the latter approach; however, before Jauss’s approach can be applied, this idea of historical sources requires some further clarification since reception theory does not clearly state what this entails. The work of Stephen Greenblatt helps to clarify this concept. Greenblatt is a New Historicist and argues that ‘New Historicists study literary texts not as autonomous objects but as material artifacts made in interaction with specific social, cultural and political forces’ (Leitch 30). What Greenblatt helps to clarify is this idea that a literary work can be seen as a product of its own historical context. With the inclusion of this concept, the relevance of reception theory in this dissertation becomes clear, as Jauss’s ‘horizon of expectations’ can now be understood as the historical context of a literary work and its contemporary readers. These expectations are then what a reader expects from a work created from a certain historical context, and these expectations can either be met or exceeded. Reception can then be understood as a literary work’s impact on society and readers’ reactions to it. However, before the reception of sensation fiction, melodrama, and sensation theater can be discussed, their historical context has to be defined.

As demonstrated in the introduction, this dissertation recognises sensation as a cultural phenomenon because the ‘1860s was the sensation decade’ and this phenomenon can be found in many aspects of Victorian society (Pykett, Sensation 1). Sensation as a cultural phenomenon can thus be understood as sensation fiction’s historical context and Braddon’s Lady Audley’s Secret is then the actual product made in interaction with these social, cultural and political forces of the sensation decade. However, before the interactions between Lady Audley Secret and its historical context can be discussed, the historical context of sensation fiction in general requires some further elaboration.
Sensation fiction, as a product of the sensation decade, was influenced by many developments in the Victorian period; it was influenced by melodrama, penny dreadfuls, the Gothic, the Newgate novel, and newspaper press. Penny dreadfuls were important influences because many sensation novels also made their first appearance as serials in periodicals. Moreover, ‘[p]enny dreadfuls are both the precursors to and continuous with sensation: indeed, sensation is arguably the middle-class reader’s version of the penny dreadful’s exciting plots and shocking revelations’ (Gilbert, 3). In terms of content, sensation fiction is also influenced by the Gothic. ‘The Gothic, with its emphasis on the surprising, the supernatural, and the mysterious, is a direct influence, though sensation tends to avoid the supernatural as a primary plot element and domesticates the Gothic’s exotic settings’ (Gilbert, 4). Another important literary influence was the Newgate novel, which had its main success in the 1830s and 1840s (Pykett, 19). These novels focused on crime and the lives of criminals, and the Newgate Calendars provided the plots to these novels. The main difference between sensation fiction and the Newgate novels ‘was that sensation fiction dealt with upper- and middle-class crime and transgression in a modern (rather than an historical) setting. […] The sensation novel did not depict the criminal underworld, but rather it explored the dark underside of respectable society’ (Pykett, 34). The change from a historical to a modern setting can be related to the developments in the newspaper press. ‘The growth of cheap newspapers following the abolition of the stamp tax on newspapers in 1855, and the tendency of both the expanding penny press and the middle-class newspapers to include more crime reporting was one factor in the creation of the market for sensation novels’ (Pykett, 32). As a result, real life crime became the main inspiration for the plots of sensation novels.

Sensation fiction additionally incorporated and commented on contemporary Victorian discussions such as female selfhood and female emancipation, madness, and consumerism. Therefore, in order to completely understand the interactions between Lady Audley’s Secret and its historical context, the remainder of this chapter discusses the sensational features in the novel and
looks at how the contemporary discussions of crime, female emancipation and selfhood, madness, and consumerism are incorporated in Braddon’s novel.

_Lady Audley’s Secret_ is thus a product of sensation fiction and simultaneously the sensation phenomenon, and is indeed a sensational novel in every aspect. Lady Audley is exactly the sensational heroine that Lynn Pykett describes; she is a devious, dangerous and perhaps even deranged (Sensation 4). After Helen Talboys’s first husband went to Australia, she decides to abandon her son, fake her own death, and create the new identity of Lady Audley, all in order to pursue money and status. She becomes dangerous when her secret is threatened to be exposed; she throws her first husband into a well and attempts to kill Robert Audley in a fire. She finally accounts for her own actions by proclaiming that she is a ‘mad-woman’. One of the most important aspects of the sensation novel is its use of suspense and secrecy. ‘The narrative satisfactions of the sensation novel depend to a great extent on the gradual uncovering of the central secret(s). To this end the most effective sensation writers developed techniques of narrative concealment and delay or deferral’ (Pykett, Sensation 5). In her novel, Braddon chooses to not always disclose crucial information or to have ‘key events happen off-stage (so to speak) and only revealing their occurrence at the denouement’ (Pykett, Sensation 5). The most important example of such an ‘off-stage event’ is the crucial scene where Lady Audley pushes George Talboys into the well. This is not revealed in the chapter where ‘My lady tells the truth’; where she merely confesses that she killed him (Braddon 340), but she only discloses how she killed George Talboys when she is brought to an asylum and has nothing to lose anymore (Braddon 386). The fact that the novel discloses this at the end is crucial for the narrative’s suspense because Robert Audley, similar to the reader, is unaware of George’s fate, which results in Robert’s investigation becoming a device to gradually uncover Lady Audley’s secret.

Another important technique to create suspense and secrecy is Braddon’s use of foreshadowing. The title of Braddon’s novel suggests that this novel will uncover a secret, and this secrecy can already be found in the exposition of the story. For instance, in the first chapter the Audley estate is described as secretive ‘as if it was in hiding from dangerous visitors, and wished to
keep itself a secret’ (Braddon 8), and ‘Of course, in such a house, there were secret chambers’, and the court yard ‘seemed a chosen place for secret meeting or for stolen interviews; a place in which a conspiracy might have been planned’ (Braddon 9). Even though this reveals nothing specific about Lady Audley’s secret, it does set an ominous and secretive tone. A more specific example of foreshadowing is when Robert Audley receives a letter from his cousin and the narrator states:

If any one could at that moment have told the young barrister that so simple a thing as his cousin’s brief letter would one day come to be a link in that terrible chain of evidence afterwards to be slowly forged in the one only criminal case in which he was ever to be concerned, perhaps Mr. Robert Audley would have lifted his eyebrows a little higher than usual (Braddon 54-55).

This example clearly hints that a criminal case will unfold, however, it does not specifically allude to Lady Audley’s secret; nevertheless, it does create suspicion and leaves room for speculation whether this criminal case will actually involve Lady Audley. Braddon’s use of foreshadowing thus enhances the suspense of the narrative and simultaneously creates a feeling of uneasiness which the characters of the narrative share; for when Robert Audley’s meets Lady Audley, he ‘could not overcome a vague feeling of uneasiness’ (Braddon 89). Overall, Braddon’s use of a devious, dangerous, and ‘deranged’ heroine, a complicated plot full of horror, mystery, suspense, secrecy, and foreshadowing, illustrates that Lady Audley’s Secret is indeed a product of sensation fiction.

In addition to being a product of its historical context, Lady Audley’s Secret also interacts with the social, cultural, and political forces of the sensation decade by incorporating and commenting on contemporary discussions. As previously mentioned, sensation plots were based on real-life crime. Sensation novels were therefore modern as they were concerned with modern England, the England of today’s papers. ‘In the late 1850s the newspapers were […] full of sensational stories of the great social evil of prostitution, and scandals of wrongful imprisonment in lunatic asylums. All of these
things found their way into the plots of sensation novels’ (Pykett, *Newgate* 33). This created an important link between journalism and literature as sensation fiction became a new modern combination of media (Wynne 390). In addition, sensation novels mostly focussed on domestic crime; however, ‘[t]raditionally, critics have suggested that there were two types of sensation novel. Firstly, what was sometimes called “newspaper sensationalism”, often, though not exclusively, associated with male novelists; and secondly, “domestic sensationalism”, associated with female authors’ (Maunder, *Sensation* 6). In the case of *Lady Audley’s Secret*, this domestic sensationalism requires further elaboration. Despite the fact that both types incorporate real-life crime, the Newgate novel and newspaper sensationalism focus on the more obvious criminal underworld, whereas domestic sensation ‘explored the dark underside of respectable society: the family is the locus of crime, and the secrets of the family are responsible for most of the plot complications, and in most cases crime and punishment circulates entirely within the family’ (Pykett, *Newgate* 34). As a result, domestic sensations got their plot inspirations from reports in the press of domestic poisonings, frauds, divorce, scandals, impersonations, and bigamy trials (Maunder, *Sensation* 6).

Indeed, the plot of *Lady Audley’s Secret* was also based on real-life crime as it seems to have gotten its inspiration from the Yelverton bigamy trial.

In this case, which took on the aspect of an exciting serial, Maria Theresa Longworth invalidated a regular marriage between Major Charles Yelverton and a Mrs Forbes by successfully claiming a prior marriage between herself and the Major (the judgment was later reversed on Major Yelverton’s appealing to the House of Lords) (Maunder, *Sensation* 7).

This trial held Britain spellbound for most of 1861, and *Lady Audley’s Secret* can be seen to have derived some of its contemporary frisson from this trial (Maunder, *Sensation* 7). For the plot of
Braddon’s novel fits in well in this domestic setting as Lady Audley commits fraud, bigamy, and with a new identity tries to manipulate her way into a respectable family.

As a result of incorporating real-life domestic crime, ‘sensation fiction made the familiar world strange by probing what lies beneath the veneer of the apparently stable upper-middle-class home’ (Taylor & Croft xiv). Additionally, these plots have the effect of creating the ‘most mysterious of mysteries, the mysteries that are at our own doors’ (James 594). For ‘a tale which aims at electrifying the nerves of the reader is never thoroughly effective unless the scene be laid in our own days and among the people we are in habit of meeting’ (Mansel 489). In order to achieve this, the criminal, in this case Lady Audley, must initially appear as the unexpected criminal. ‘For you see, 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 [...]... everybody, high and low, united in declaring that Lucy Graham was the sweetest girl that ever lived’, and her ‘heart is as true as the light of heaven’ (Braddon 11-12, 22). Even though she is described as the sweetest girl alive, the narrator also hints at some suspicion as ‘[b]eyond her agitation and her passionate vehemence, there was an undefined something in her manner which filled the baronet with a vague alarm’ (Braddon 16); however, more attention is paid to her purity and innocence. This portrayal of Lady Audley as the unexpected criminal demonstrates that domestic sensation exposes the smooth façade of the respectable Victorian family and additionally turns this respected image into something threatening and sinister.

This exposure of what lies beneath this perfect image of the upper-middle-class home can also be found in the scene where Miss Audley, Robert Audley and George Talboys look at the painting of Lady Audley and Miss Audley states that she has ‘never seen my lady look as she does in that picture; but [she] think[s] that she could look so’ (Braddon 73). This indicates that even though Lady Audley appears to be perfect, this does not have to be the case. As the narrative progresses, Lady Audley’s mask is gradually stripped away; for example, when Robert Audley runs into Lady Audley at the train station, she seemed to be caught off guard as Robert Audley states: ‘She is
altogether a different being to the wretched, helpless creature who dropped her mask for a moment, and looked at me with her own pitiful face’ (Braddon 148).

Finally, when Robert Audley learns more of the truth he states: ‘I will go straight to the arch conspirator, and will tear away the beautiful veil under which she hides her wickedness, and will [...] banish her for ever from the house which her presence has polluted’ (Braddon 251). This relates to another aspect of domestic crime in fiction as well as real-life, namely that of trying to avoid scandals and dealing with crime in the family rather than the court room. When Robert Audley finds out Lady Audley’s secret, he decides to invite a physician to the Audley estate in order to declare Lady Audley insane as it ‘was a trial for murder that so long had haunted his dreams. How often had he awoken in an agony of shame from a vision of a crowded court-house and his uncle’s wife, in a criminal dock, hemmed in on every side by a sea of eager faces’ (Braddon 370). Robert Audley chooses to bring Lady Audley to a Belgian asylum where she cannot harm anyone with her secret. Thus the Audley family, as well as many other respectable Victorian families, chose to deal with crime themselves instead of going to court in order to keep up that façade as the ‘greatest fear [was] the necessity of any exposure – any disgrace’ (Braddon 372).

As discussed, the fact that the sensational press started to include more crime reports ‘was one factor in the creation of the market for sensation novels’ (Pykett, Newgate 32). This expanding coverage of domestic crime in respectable societies also engendered suspicion and a shift in focus from crime to detection. According to Pykett:

This change of emphasis may be linked to changes in policing such as the formation of the new Detective Police in 1842, and the development, in the wake of the new divorce laws, of an army of private detectives, those confidential spies of modern times [...], who were charged with rooting out the secrets of the family. It may also be the result of a change in the cultural meaning of crime and the
criminal, and a movement from a society controlled by the spectacle of punishment to one morally managed by discipline (Newgate 34).

As a result of this, crime was not a separate culture anymore as it was present in every class of Victorian society. ‘A world in which everyone was potentially a criminal was a world of universal suspicion in which everyone became a detective or a suspect [...] As D. A. Miller has argued (following Foucault), such a society was a surveillance society, one in which citizens learned to police each other and themselves’ (Pykett, Newgate 34-35). This shift in focus from crime to detection is also present in Lady Audley’s Secret, as the majority of the narrative revolves around Robert Audley trying to uncover his friend’s disappearance, instead of the actual crime which is only revealed at the end of the novel. Robert’s investigation is solely based on circumstantial evidence, which enhances this notion of suspicion, and also the suspense of the narrative. An example of this suspicion and suspense is when Robert Audley states:

For some months past I have struggled with doubts and suspicions which have embittered my life. They have grown stronger every day; [...] I may wrong her. [...] But if I do, the fatal chain of circumstantial evidence never yet linked itself so closely to an innocent person (Braddon, 219).

This example of suspicion illustrates and interacts with this shift in contemporary society from crime to detection and how everyone can either become a suspect or a detective. Overall, the fact that Braddon’s novel interacts with the contemporary discussions around this increasing coverage of domestic crimes, as well as incorporating real-life crime, reveals what is actually behind the façade of the respectable Victorian society.

In addition to Lady Audley’s Secret interacting with contemporary crime, Braddon’s novel also interacts with the contemporary discussions on female emancipation in the 1860s. An essential
feature of sensation fiction ‘was the way in which it represented women and the feminine. Female characters are absolutely central to virtually all sensation novels’ (Pykett, Sensation 6). Pykett describes the sensation novel as a feminine phenomenon as ‘[i]t was yet another symptom of the creeping feminization of literature and culture which began […] in the eighteenth century, and became even more pronounced […] as the nineteenth century went on (Sensation 41). To be more specific:

The period of the sensation novel’s dominance was the decade which immediately followed the agitation leading up to the Divorce Act of 1857 […], the press campaigns on the ‘social evil’ of prostitution […], and the ‘surplus women’ controversy and the associated campaigns for educational and employment opportunities for women (Pykett, Sensation 45).

As a result of these developments, questions about a woman’s right to education, professional training and the right to her own income and property; her right to independence and ability to make her own decisions, were considered ‘by some as a threat to the presumed stability of Victorian patriarchal culture’ (Maunder, Sensation 11). The sensation novel used this anxiety as it reproduced and negotiated ‘broader cultural anxieties about the nature and status of respectable femininity and the domestic ideal at a time when women and other reformers were clamouring for a widening of women’s legal rights and educational and employment opportunities’ (Pykett, Sensation 10). Sensation novels explored all kinds of notions of femininity, for in the 1860s, ‘woman, womanhood, and womanliness all became contested terms, as did the institutions of marriage and the family around which these terms were constructed’ (Pykett, Sensation 44).

*Lady Audley’s Secret* incorporates these contemporary discussions of female emancipation and female selfhood but also interacts with them by commenting on these discussions. A specific example of this interaction is when Robert Audley, in his mental monologue, states: ‘she dresses for
Hemmen

it, and simpers and grins, and gesticulates for it. She pushes her neighbours, and struggles for a good
place in the dismal march; she elbows, and writhes, and tramples, and prances, to the end of making
the most of misery’ (Braddon 207), he continues by stating that ‘women are at the bottom of all
mischief [...]. It is because women are never lazy. They don’t know what it is to be quiet’ (Braddon
208). This illustrates the female emancipation in the 1860s and people’s concerns about this, as
Robert as well as the contemporary society saw the emancipation of women as a threat to the
stability of the respected Victorian society. However, in addition to incorporating these discussions,
Braddon’s novel also interacts with them by commenting on them; for when Robert Audley
continues, he recognises that if women ‘can’t agitate the universe and play ball with hemispheres,
they’ll make mountains of warfare and vexation out of domestic molehills; and social norms in
household teacups’ (Braddon 208). This seems to claim that even though female emancipation is
considered a threat, holding them back is even worse because that is when they become dangerous.
For ‘[t]o call them the weaker sex is to utter a hideous mockery. They are the stronger sex, the
noisier, the more persevering, the most self-assertive sex’. As he finally states: ‘[t]hey want freedom
of opinion, variety of occupation, do they? Let them have it. Let them be lawyers, docters, preachers,
teachers, soldiers, legislators – anything they like – but let them be quiet – if they can’ (Braddon 208).
Even though this scene accurately illustrates the argument for female emancipation, it also indicates
how contested these notions were, because after stating that women should be able to do whatever
they want, Robert Audley concludes with: ‘I hate women, [...] [t]hey’re bold, brazen, abominable
creatures, invented for the annoyance and destruction of their superiors’ (Braddon 208). Robert
Audley’s mental monologue is thus a clear example of how *Lady Audley’s Secret* interacts with its
historical context as it does not merely incorporate these contemporary discussions, it also engages
with them by commenting on these discussions.

As mentioned by Pykett, there were controversies around the campaigns for women’s rights,
and sensation novels contributed to these campaigns and controversies with their representation of
women. For sensation writers tended to do three things when they focused on women: ‘first, to
make a spectacle of femininity, whether of the passive, victimised variety, or in the form of the femme fatale; second to hint at how firmly entrenched the legal, economic and social conventions were under which women lived; third to suggest that women might have other desires beyond acting as a man’s ‘helpmate’ (Maunder, Sensation 13). Braddon’s novel also uses these three tendencies to interact with the controversies and campaigns of female emancipation and female selfhood. First, Lady Audley is depicted as a spectacle; everyone loves her and is enchanted by her female beauty. However, her ‘beauty had first taught her to be selfish and cruel, indifferent to the joys and sorrows of others, cold-hearted and capricious, greedy of admiration, exacting and tyrannical’ (Braddon 293), which makes her an ideal femme fatale and additionally illustrates contemporary views that women despite their appearance are not the weaker sex but are actually capable of being dangerous. Second, Phoebe Marks is an example of how Victorian women have no choice in marriage as she has to marry her cousin Luke Marks even though she is afraid of him. Moreover, George Talboys marries Helen, who has a lower status, and results in George’s father disowning him, leaving Helen again in poverty. This indicates that a woman’s income and possessions are always dependent on men. Robert Audley stresses this when he says to Lady Audley: ‘There is no one to whom my uncle’s life can be of more value than to you. Your happiness, your prosperity, your safety depend alike upon his existence’ (Braddon 217). Third, Lady Audley obviously has other desires than being a man’s helpmate; she seeks independence, wealth, and status. As a result of these interactions with the discussions on female emancipation and the inclusion of multiple, and sometimes contesting, notions of femininity, Lady Audley’s Secret ‘was part of this developing discourse on the modern woman: it was both a response to and part of social change and a changing conceptualization of women. It also became part of the evidence of these changes’ (Pykett, Sensation 45).

The main question about Lady Audley’s actions is whether she is mad or just evil, and with this ambiguity, Lady Audley’s Secret plays on a ‘complex and ambiguous set of debates about the nature of identity and the limits of the inner self that intrigued the Victorians’ (Taylor & Croft xvi). These discussions revolved around questions of boundaries between sanity and madness, the
relationship between madness and inheritance, and what the limits of self-control and criminal responsibilities were (Taylor & Croft xvii). Lady Audley herself claims to be a ‘MADWOMAN!’ (Braddon 340); she claims to have inherited the madness from her mother (Braddon 344-345). However, when she contemplates her own actions she states: ‘I was not wicked when I was young, [...] I was only thoughtless. I never did any harm – at least, never wilfully. Have I ever been really wicked, I wonder? [...] My worst wickednesses have been the result of wild impulses, and not of deeply laid plots’ (Braddon 294). Moreover, she is convinced that she is a victim and that others are the cause of her insanity as she states that ‘because my intellect is a little way upon the wrong side of that narrow boundary-line between sanity and insanity; because when George Talboys goaded me, as you have goaded me [...], my mind, never properly balanced, utterly lost its balance; and I was mad!’ (Braddon 341).

Lady Audley’s sanity is thus rather ambiguous and the novel does not give a clear answer to this question; the only answer it provides is that she is ‘dangerous’ (Braddon 372). However, due to the fact that she justifies her actions to herself, it can be suggested that Lady Audley does not believe herself to be mad, but uses it as an excuse in order to avoid responsibility. Instead she claims to have partial insanity, which ‘was one of the most fraught concepts that faced Victorian mad-doctors’ (Taylor & Croft xxvi). For mid-nineteenth-century mental science ‘constantly wavered between regarding insanity as an aberrant state, something to be contained, controlled and classified, and as an extreme form of “normal” mental activity’ (Taylor & Croft xxv). This partial insanity is what feared the contemporary society as ‘it was those who dwelt in that ambiguous realm of “partial insanity”, [...] who were most vulnerable to the well-meaning but dangerous definitions of the medical expert’ (Taylor & Croft xxix). Part of the frisson of Lady Audley’s Secret regarding this partial insanity is because the newspapers in the late 1850s were full of sensational stories about wrongful imprisonments in lunatic asylums and these stories found their way into sensational plots (Pykett, Newgate 33). This is also the case with Lady Audley; for despite the fact that her sanity is questionable and that she never actually kills anyone, because Luke Marks at the end of the novel
reveals that George Talboys is still alive, she is nevertheless put into a Belgian asylum. With this, Braddon’s novel interacts with the contemporary fear that anyone could be wrongly diagnosed of madness and end up in a lunatic asylum.

With this partial insanity also comes the complex question whether Lady Audley is responsible for her actions. Prior to his examination, Dr Mosgrave asks Robert Audley: ‘You would wish to prove that this lady is mad, and therefore irresponsible for her actions, Mr. Audley?’ Robert Audley responds with: ‘Yes, I would rather, if possible, think her mad. I should be glad to find that excuse for her’ (Braddon 369). Determining whether someone has partial insanity was extremely difficult and Dr. Mosgrave concludes that ‘[t]he lady is not mad; but she has hereditary taint in her blood. She has the cunning of madness, with the prudence of intelligence. I will tell you what she is, Mr. Audley. She is dangerous!’ (Braddon 372). In the case of Lady Audley, where her insanity is not completely determined, the question of her responsibility for her actions becomes a complex one; however, as previously mentioned, it was more important to avoid a scandal than dealing with this in court. Hence Lady Audley’s fate of spending the rest of her life in a Belgian asylum. These complex notions of identity and sanity ‘form a crucial part of its cultural context none the less, and much of the ambiguity of Lady Audley’s Secret depends on the way in which it plays these equivocal and multifaceted debates against each other in its exploration of “modern” identity’ (Taylor & Croft xvii).

Finally, Lady Audley’s Secret plays on the fears that accompanied the rapid growth of consumer culture at the turn of the 1860s (Taylor & Croft xxvi). Margaret Oliphant saw the sensation novel as

both reflecting and compensating for this shift in national mood from confidence to increasing doubt and ennui, and [...] it is “Lady Audley” [...] who most strikingly expresses the fears that the very success of consumer capitalism will turn into an excess that will become morbid and eat into the heart of England. For Lady Audley
is presented from the start as a spectacle; at once a consumer and object of consumption (Taylor & Croft xviii).

Lady Audley is a character with an intense and selfish desire for wealth and power. She ‘seemed as happy as a child surrounded by new and costly toys’ (Braddon 55). As a consumer she becomes extremely materialistic with no regards to costs; for instance, in Miss Audley’s letter to Robert Audley, Miss Audley states: ‘Lady Audley tells me to request you to secure her a set of sables. You are not to consider the price but to be sure that they are the handsomest that can be obtained’ (Braddon 50-51). When Lady Audley’s secret has been exposed, she is not afraid of any legal consequences, she is merely afraid of becoming poor again as she ‘was thinking how much the things had cost, and how painfully probable it was that the luxurious apartment would soon pass out of her possession’ (Braddon 366). Furthermore, when she has to leave the Audley estate she hides ‘away fragile teacups and covered vases of Sèvres and Dresden among the folds of her silken dinner dresses. […] She would have taken the pictures from the walls, […] had it been possible for her to do so’ (Braddon 376). In her obsession with money and things she becomes eager to take as much as she can. As a result, Lady Audley becomes the embodiment of the Victorian consumer culture of the 1860s. Moreover, by ‘peeling away the top layer of secrecy, the narrative makes the performance behind this display a source of suspense and ambiguity, as that most obvious mark of bourgeois success – the leisured and decorative wife – turns into something sinister’ (Taylor & Croft, xviii).

In conclusion, this chapter demonstrates that Lady Audley’s Secret is indeed a product of its historical context as it is a literal product of sensation fiction and was simultaneously made in interaction with specific social, cultural and political forces of the sensation decade. Lady Audley’s Secret interacts with Victorian cultural anxieties as it incorporates and comments on contemporary discussions on crime, female emancipation, madness, and consumerism. This constructed historical context is essential in order to subsequently determine its reception and impact on society with the use of reception theory.
Chapter 2: Melodrama and Sensation Theater

Chapter One illustrates how *Lady Audley’s Secret* was influenced by its historical context; however, as mentioned in the introduction, the main influence of sensation fiction was melodrama. Therefore, in order to construct a complete historical context of sensation fiction and Braddon’s novel, the relation between sensation fiction and melodrama requires further elaboration. In addition to being a major influence, melodrama was also a cultural phenomenon, and it is suggested that melodrama evolved into sensation, and sensation can therefore, to some extent, be seen as the successor of melodrama; which further emphasises that sensation is a cultural phenomenon. Moreover, the fact that melodrama, after the emergence of sensation fiction, evolved into sensation theater, demonstrates that sensation as a cultural phenomenon is able to manifest itself into multiple mediums. Therefore, in order to subsequently discuss the impact of sensation fiction, melodrama, and sensation theater, this chapter establishes the historical context of melodrama, explores the relation between melodrama and sensation fiction, demonstrates how Braddon’s novel incorporates this melodramatic influence, and finally discusses how sensation theater came into being.

Melodrama has its roots in the theatre and at heart represented ‘the theatrical impulse itself: the impulse towards dramatization, heightening, expression, and acting out’ (Brooks xi). As a cultural phenomenon, melodrama came ‘into being in a world where the traditional imperatives of truth and ethics [had] been violently thrown into question, yet where the promulgation of truth and ethics, their instauration as a way of life, [was] of immediate, daily, political concern’ (Brooks 15). In a sense, melodrama as a form ‘underpinned the construction of modern consciousness, providing a lens through which people could make sense of their world’ (McWilliam 55). Therefore, melodrama ‘tells us much about the life of Victorian England, but it also tells us about the Victorian imagination’ (Booth 167).
Since melodrama was a cultural phenomenon, its characteristics are not unique to its genre. In fact, ‘[l]ike a sponge, melodrama absorbed different elements in the culture, from fairy stories to newspaper reports, romantic poetry, and painting’ (McWilliam 56), and it was initially shaped by French and German examples (Rowell 40). According to George Rowell, melodrama ‘was clearly the product of the Gothic extravagance which gripped a Europe bored of the Age of Reason’ (43). Its characteristics are listed by many critics; however, Michael Booth’s description is the most complete as he states that melodrama contains:

- strong emotion, both pathetic and potentially tragic, low comedy, romantic colouring, remarkable events in an exciting and suspenseful plot, physical sensations, sharply delineated stock characters, domestic sentiment, domestic settings and domestic life, love joy, suffering, morality, the reward of virtue and the punishment of vice (151).

The reason for these strong emotions, stock characters and plots is due to the fact that the Licensing Act of 1737 ‘forbade stage speech at theatres not holding a licence to perform the legitimate drama, the early minor theatres playing melodrama resorted to a combination of musical accompaniment and dumbshow to convey plot and meaning’ (Booth 151). Emotions were conveyed through gestures, bodily attitude and facial expression, which long belonged ‘to tragic acting, [but] became extended and habitual in melodrama, at first by legal necessity and then by custom’ (Booth 151).

By 1837 all the necessary and familiar characteristics mentioned by Booth were more or less in place and particular subgenres had already started to emerge. As with sensation, the Gothic was of huge influence to melodrama and this developed into the subgenre of Gothic melodrama. In terms of content, melodrama was similar to that of the Gothic novel and included ‘awful tyrants dwelling in gloomy castle fastness, […] heroes unjustly languishing in dark dungeons, fearful heroines fleeing villainy, […] frightful spectres, much thunder and lightning, desperate combats and the triumph of
virtue’ (Booth 152). In addition to Gothic melodrama, nautical melodrama also came into being as a specific subgenre; ‘Nautical drama had its roots in patriotic entertainments about Britain’s naval victories in the war with France. [...] The war with France created the military and nautical melodrama that glorified British soldiers and sailors and Britain itself’ (Booth 152).

However, the most dominant, and in the case most relevant, was the emergence of domestic melodrama and it was this particular kind of melodrama which made its unique contribution to British drama. When the Gothic and nautical subject became less appealing, melodramatic ‘writers were forced to turn to their own world in their own day for further subjects’ (Rowell 47). As a result, the dominant genre of domestic melodrama became essentially ‘the effort to make the “real” and the “ordinary” and the “private life” interesting through heightened dramatic utterance and gesture that lay bare the true stakes’ (Brooks 14). Domestic melodrama made ordinary people their main characters and depicted mundane actions and with that, ‘for the first time in the history of English drama, it treated lower-class characters and working-class life seriously and with compassion’ (Booth 153). This domestic melodrama found its way into sensation fiction as the subgenre of domestic sensation which also attempted to make everyday people and everyday situations extraordinary. Moreover, domestic realism and domestic sensation both incorporated class struggles of injustice and oppression. ‘The acrimony of melodramatic class conflict is socially interesting as well as dramatically strong, as is melodrama’s muted note of protest against social oppression and legal injustice. Such features are especially prominent in domestic melodrama’ (Booth 153).

In addition, melodrama, also ‘provided women with a central role as wife, mother, or daughter, while sub-genres emerged devoted to fallen women, femme fatale, and mother sacrifice plots’ (McWilliam 58). In fact, the ‘suffering heroine is a melodramatic archetype, necessary to the functioning of the whole genre’ (Booth 160). Overall, melodrama became a medium that ‘laid bare the struggle between good and evil through tales containing heightened emotions and deep passions’ (McWilliam 56). The melodramatic central role of women, the struggle between good and
evil, and heightened emotions all majorly influenced sensation fiction as these features became main characteristics of sensation novels.

In its relation to sensation fiction, the most important feature of melodrama is the incorporation of the villain and its use of crime as most sensation novels were based on real-life crime. Similar to the suffering heroine, the archetype of the hero or villain is also essential as ‘[c]rime and villainy are ubiquitous in melodrama. Almost all melodramas depend on criminal activity, or at least on powerful criminal intent, for their existence’ (Booth 162). The crimes of the melodramatic villain embraced a multitudinous assortment as it included:

- theft, perjury, forgery, coining, fraud, embezzlement, suppression of evidence,
- blackmail, assault, kidnapping, poaching, destruction of property, attempted rape,
- attempted infanticide, smuggling, piracy, arson, treason and murder in many varieties: stabbing, shooting, bludgeoning, strangulation, suffocation, poisoning,
- burning, drowning and defenestration, among others (Booth 161).

Crime and villainy thus became essential to the melodramatic genre; the same goes for the idea of the criminal itself as he ‘lived half on the stage, half in the imagination of audiences, a figure of fun to some but to many more a thing of moral darkness, a temper to be respected, feared and execrated as he moved frighteningly through the deep shadows of his own criminality’ (Booth 167). This is the most important contrast in regards to sensation. Whereas sensation novels got their inspiration for crime from the newspapers, melodramatic crime is mostly fictional, because what melodrama ‘presents, rather, are not social documents but images of crime, enactments of personal and social transgression in which the enactor is defeated and his crimes nullified’ (Booth 167).

Melodrama and sensation are thus both cultural phenomena and the melodramatic characteristics such as; domestic subjects and characters, crime, and the importance of women are
evidently present in sensation fiction as well. To a certain extent, sensation can be seen as the successor of melodrama. Since melodrama, on the one hand, originates from and ‘expresses the anxiety brought by a frightening new world in which the traditional patterns of moral order no longer provide the necessary social glue. It plays out the force of that anxiety with the apparent triumph of villainy, and it dissipates it with the eventual victory of virtue’ (Brooks 20). Sensation, on the other hand, is a somewhat similar reaction; however, this ‘new world’ is not as new as it was when melodrama originated. An example of this difference is the initial melodramatic focus on the fictional anxiety of crime, whereas sensation focuses on actual crime present in society.

With this idea that sensation, to some extent, is melodrama’s successor comes the question: ‘was the sensation novel simply a continuation of what was performed on the Victorian stage? (McWilliam 59). The answer to this question is yes and no. For, when first examined, the sensation novel indeed has a lot of similarities with melodrama. They both contain strong emotions, remarkable events, suspenseful plots; they are both domestic, depict women and have a strong focus on crime. However, as Rohan McWilliam boldly states: ‘[t]he sensation novel of the 1860s represented a cultural upgrading of melodramatic themes for a middle-class audience’ (59). Indeed, whereas melodrama uses archetypal characters and plots, the sensational plots were much more richly plotted and the ‘sensation novel was based around a greater complexity of human motivation than had been the case on stage’ (McWilliam 60). Both melodrama and sensation provided opportunities for female authors; however, after the emergence of sensation fiction, women began to write for the stage and the sensation novel proved to be a ‘vehicle for female novelists to find a voice’ (McWilliam 61). Furthermore, whereas the suffering heroine and the femme fatale were essential to melodrama, sensation ‘novelists tried to go beyond this binary divide to uncover more complex motivations for women and deeper psychological responses’ (McWilliam 61).

Finally, this intricate relation between sensation and melodrama emphasises that sensation is indeed a cultural phenomenon. For the process of melodrama developing into sensation, and
subsequently sensation fiction, resembles the process already discussed in Chapter One: that a literary work is made in interaction with social, political and cultural forces. This interaction also happens with sensation as the historical context of sensation is melodrama. Consequently, *Lady Audley’s Secret* is thus not only a product of sensation fiction and the sensation phenomenon, but also a product of melodrama.

*Lady Audley’s Secret*, therefore, clearly also contains melodramatic features; it contains strong emotions, remarkable events, domestic crime, and an exciting and suspenseful plot. For Lady Audley is a woman, who manages to throw her first husband into a well, manipulates herself into a position of wealth and status, and is not afraid to commit murder. Moreover, as with melodrama, a female is central to the narrative and Lady Audley is also an iconic femme fatale; however, she is more complex than the melodramatic archetype as she is an unexpected criminal. Despite the fact that Robert Audley calls her an ‘actress’, an ‘arch trickster’, and an ‘all-accomplished deceiver’, Lady Audley insistently denies the accusation of Robert Audley (Braddon 254). Furthermore, *Lady Audley’s Secret* does include a lower-class main character: Lady Audley; however, in the narrative she does not belong to the working-class anymore. As with melodrama, crime is an essential theme in the narrative. In melodramatic plays, the ‘world the villain inhabits eventually overcomes him; he is not quite clever or criminally skilled enough for it, but it is environmentally well suited to his criminality’ (Booth 161). This is similar to Lady Audley’s world as she gets caught up in her lies and crimes when Robert Audley tries to uncover her secret.

Another melodramatic feature in the novel is a ‘suspensefully delayed and almost miraculous deliverance of the innocent [as] a common finale’ (Booth 157). Indeed, despite several murder attempts, Lady Audley never actually kills anyone as Robert Audley and Luke Marks manage to escape the fire and the most important reveal of the story is that George Talboys never actually died. Therefore in the end, similar to melodrama, virtue is rewarded and like a melodramatic play ‘all the image of disorder that feature in its narratives, the social order is [...] restored at the end’ (McWilliam
The narrator in *Lady Audley’s Secret* even states: ‘I hope no one will take objection to my story because the end of it leaves the good people all happy and at peace’ (Braddon 436-437).

These melodramatic features in the novel demonstrate the influence of melodrama on *Lady Audley’s Secret*; however, as mentioned in the previous chapter, a literary work interacts with its historical context. The most melodramatic aspect of *Lady Audley’s Secret* is its use of heightened emotions, physical sensations, and deep passions, which the novel uses in order to create that sensational effect of excitement. The most exciting scenes in the novel are between Robert and Lady Audley as these scenes contain the most heightened emotions, physical sensations and deep passions. For example, when Robert Audley insinuates that he is aware of Lady Audley’s secret and that her mind is diseased, he states:

> Shall I tell you why you are nervous in this house, my lady?” “If you can,” she answered with a little laugh. “Because for you this house is haunted.” “Haunted?” “Yes, haunted with the ghost of George Talboys.” Robert Audley heard my lady’s quickened breathing; he fancied he could almost hear the loud beating of her heart as she walked by his side, shivering now and then (Braddon 263-264).

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Braddon uses suspense and secrecy in order to gradually uncover the central secret of the narrative. This scene between Robert and Lady Audley demonstrates that Braddon’s novel uses heightened emotions and physical sensation in order to suggest that Lady Audley is guilty, since Robert only insinuates it and Lady Audley’s involvement can only be deduced from her physical reaction. As a result, the novel’s interaction with the melodramatic features of heightened emotions and physical sensations enhances the suspense and secrecy, and additionally assists in sensation fiction’s objective of excitement.
So far, it can be concluded that melodrama was a cultural phenomenon and is evidently present in sensation fiction, and that sensation, to some extent is melodrama’s successor. Consequently, melodrama can be seen as ‘a mode that could not be contained by the proscenium arch but shaped the wider culture, including human behavior’ (McWilliam 55). Moreover, *Lady Audley’s Secret* is not only a product of sensation fiction and the sensation decade, but also a product of Victorian melodrama as it interacts with melodramatic features to create a sensational effect of excitement.

This dissertation looks at sensation fiction and its relation to theatre and argues that sensation, in both literature and theatre, aims to create a sensational effect of excitement by preaching to the nerves. However, before this can be examined, the historical context of sensation theater requires some further elaboration. The remainder of this chapter therefore discusses the emergence of sensation theater and the subgenre of stage adaptations. For when sensation started to arise from melodrama and sensation fiction came into being, melodrama started to evolve as well. Melodramatic ‘spectacle invaded even London’s most exalted theatres in the early nineteenth century, its excesses were gleefully and promptly parodied’ (Holder 68). Consequently, ‘[i]n terms of production technique as well as content, melodrama became more sensational – thus the mid-Victorian term “sensation drama” – especially at those theatres with large and well-equipped stages. The physical was elaborated and natural catastrophes were multiplied’ (Booth 154). Sensation theater ‘often targeted the great “effects” of successful plays, what would come to be known as “sensation scenes”’, such scenes included ‘moments of wild, uncontrolled emotion [...], violent spectacle [...], and dazzlingly authentic recreation of places and images from “real life”’ (Holder 68). Innovations in stage techniques, lighting and special effects contributed even more to these spectacular sensation scenes. Using those thrilling elements resulted in a theatrical mode that focused on immediacy and directness. For example, most sensation dramas had a loss of suspense as ‘the customary amazing rescue, reappearance, or reclamation in sensation fiction of the lost, exiled,
or presumed dead [...] [happened now] instantaneously’ (Holder 69). Sensation theater, similar to sensation fiction, is thus a product of both the sensation decade as well as Victorian melodrama.

Creating a sensational effect is thus the main aspiration of sensation theater and used gestures and actions large and small in order to evoke such stirring of emotions and thrills. Moreover, ‘many sensation dramas [...] pointedly connect literal and metaphorical levels: scenes of falls, fires, and explosions parallel heightening moments of emotion, ending in violent outbursts or “floor scenes” in which the stricken drop to ground. Fires often provide signs of repressed but finally uncontrolled emotion’ (Holder 73). Finally, due to these new developments and technical innovations, sensation theater, ‘whatever the level of its mis-en-scène, demanded deep physical engagement – among actors, between cast and set, and stage and audience’ (Holder 77).

Sensation theater also had ‘strong connections to the novel and to the visual arts’ (Holder 69) as it got its inspiration for sensational scenes from sensation novels which eventually led to sensation drama adapting sensation novels for the stage. ‘Any novel that had success was certain to appear on the stage – and if it was very successful, it was likely to morph into crowd-pleasing storylines and to include events or scenes designed to highlight the abilities of its actors rather than being true to the author’s vision’ (Gilbert 4). This sub-genre became so popular that ‘by mid-century, the appetite for stage adaptations appeared unstoppable’ (Maunder, Stage 54). Moreover, due to the 1842 Copyright Act, adaptors did not need permission to stage a novel (Maunder, Stage 55). Adaptations sometimes meant a boost in the novel’s sales; however, the authors generally had no influence on the content of the adaptations. Another reason for the popularity of stage adaptations was a financial one. ‘[T]he speed with which an efficient adaptor could knock up a play from pre-existing materials, sometimes not bothering to change the original dialogue,’ was financially attractive for theatre managers, ‘[a]nd if the novel had been – or was currently being – published in instalments it would most likely have a pre-existing episodic quality to it, with perhaps a good cliff-hanger (Maunder, Stage 56). As a result of this, the Victorian period ‘saw adaptations of popular novels produced at what seemed like
industrial speed’ (Maunder, *Stage* 66). In addition, these stage adaptations ‘started to form [their] own aesthetic as new developments in playwriting, technology and performance fed into it. (Maunder, *Stage* 62). The pattern that arose was that adaptations stripped down sensation plots, focused on their sensation scenes, and ‘refitted them with considerable technical ingenuity’ (Maunder, *Stage* 66). What intrigued audiences the most about stage adaptations was ‘the realisation of how excitingly a stage production could translate – and even add to – climatic scenes of a particular novel’ (Maunder, *Stage* 62).

Roberts’s stage adaptation of *Lady Audley’s Secret* is therefore, similar to Braddon’s novel, a product of sensation theater and simultaneously a product of sensation and melodrama. However, an in-depth analysis of Roberts’s adaptation requires the use of adaptation theory which is the focus of the final chapter of this dissertation. Moreover, the impact of sensation fiction, melodrama, and sensation theater has to be defined before this relation between Roberts’s adaptation, Braddon’s novel, sensation, and melodrama can be further examined.

To conclude, this chapter explores the elaborate influence of melodrama on sensation fiction which further emphasises that sensation is a cultural phenomenon and illustrates the interactions between melodrama and *Lady Audley’s Secret*. In addition, it can be concluded that sensation is, to some extent, melodrama’s successor and that they are both cultural phenomena. Moreover, sensation theater is a combination of both, since melodrama evolved into sensation theater, and sensation theater also had strong connections with sensation fiction as popular novels were adapted for the stage. Currently, this dissertation has established a complete historical context of sensation fiction, melodrama, and sensation theatre which will function as a framework for demonstrating their reciprocal impact on society.
Chapter 3: The Impact of Sensation Fiction, Melodrama, and Sensation Theater

Whereas the idea that a literary work is a product of its own history in Chapter One clarified the relevance of reception theory and the need for a historical context, Greenblatt’s work can also assist in further explaining the concept of reception. According to Greenblatt, “old historicism” had always argued [that] history is the background of discourse or literature. But the New Historicism wants to emphasize something quite different. Literature itself has historical agency, the discursive power to influence history reciprocally’ (Fry 250). This idea that literature can influence history can also be understood as the impact of literature on its history. A literary work is thus a reaction to its contemporary society, its impact then is how society in return responds to it. Reception can then be understood as a literary work’s impact on society and readers’ reactions to it. With the use of his term ‘horizon of expectations’ Jauss ‘wants to call attention to [...] literature’s effect on society, a matter that [...] has been of utmost concern for writers’ (Holub 68). The original horizon of expectations of a literary work can thus be established by recreating its historical context. The first two chapters demonstrated that sensation, melodrama, sensation theater, and especially Lady Audley’s Secret are products of their contemporary society and therefore, by looking at sensation as a literary phenomenon and theatrical event, retrieving the readers’ and spectators’ responses will help understand its impact and effect on society.

The introduction on reception theory demonstrated that recovering the experiences of past readers is problematic. Darnton’s more practical approach of the history of the book attempts to overcome this problem by claiming that reception involves factors such as the availability of a text, and responses can be retrieved by looking at ‘records of readers in which they express their experience of a work; fanmail, or letters between author and publishers’ (161). In order to establish the impact of sensation fiction, melodrama, and sensation theater, this dissertation looks at general responses and contemporary reviews published in periodical press. These periodicals were widely available as the Victorian period saw the beginnings of the modern mass media. ‘The outlets for
reviews increased astronomically over the century, doubling over the decade 1854-64 (from 624 to 1,250); with advances in both literacy and printing technology, numbers continued to rise’ (Wilkes 237). These periodical reviews are helpful in establishing the reception of literature and fiction as ‘the periodical press [...] provided a dynamic context for lively argument during a period of unprecedented, unresolved, and irresolvable speculation and debate’ (Fraser 56). Moreover, the periodical press in the nineteenth century was mainly used for literary criticism and there ‘were quarterlies, monthlies, and, increasingly importantly, weeklies [...] which ensured that publications in volume form were reviewed right after their publication date, and that theatrical productions and art exhibitions were also covered extensively and while they were still open’ (Fraser 72). However, when looking at sensation fiction it is important to note that these available responses are from literary critics and professional reviewers; which generally represent the middle-class reader, whereas sensation fiction was enjoyed by all classes. The available responses for sensation fiction are thus rather one-sided, but nevertheless still interesting and relevant.

As for the availability of the text, sensation fiction was mass produced and many sensation novels made their first appearance as serials in periodicals. ‘It was thought to be written and read quickly rather than discerningly; a “mass-produced,” disposable consumer product’ (Gilbert 2). Sensation fiction was a popular genre and the three founding texts of the sensation genre – ‘Wilkie Collins’s The Woman in White, Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s Lady Audley’s Secret, and Mrs Henry Wood’s East Lynne – were numbered among the best selling novels of the entire nineteenth century’ (Pykett, Sensation 5). However, despite its popularity with general readers, ‘the sensation novel was, then, largely dismissed as debased and vulgar, a mere commodity of which the reading public would soon tire. This view tended to be expressed either in terms of fervid condemnation or as a refusal to take the genre seriously’ (Wynne 390). Moreover, the sensation genre was ‘a source of anxiety to early critics, religious commentators, and the upholders of literary taste’ (Wynne 390).

This initial condemnation of the genre expressed itself as mockery since ‘[m]any reviewers suggested that little skill was needed to write what was considered formulaic commercial fiction’
According to contemporary critic Henry Mansel, the fact that these novels were mass-produced affected their quality; for

[w]ritten to meet an ephemeral demand, aspiring only to an ephemeral existence, it is natural that they should have recourse to rapid and ephemeral methods of awakening in the interest of their readers, striving to act as the dram or the dose, rather than as the solid food, because the effect is more immediately perceptible (485).

In a 1865 review of *Lady Audley's Secret*, William Fraser Rae even states that sensation novels ‘glitter on the surface, but the substance is base metal’ (203). Moreover, many thought that the sensation novel was ‘a diseased, feminine genre, relying more on plot complications than on artistry, and more on shock potential than on any solid ethical foundation’ (Tromp, Gilbert, & Haynie xviii). An article by *The London Review* in 1863 illustrates this view as it states: ‘We have already expressed some dislike, on grounds of morality and good taste, for this class of novels. These narratives of unredeemed depravity, while pandering to the morbid thirst for violent “sensation,” can neither chasten, refine, nor invigorate the mind’ (244). Sensation novelists, similar to Newgate novelists were ‘accused of being unrealistic. This time the charge was not that they glamorised villainy, but rather that they presented an exaggerated version of the modern world’ (Pykett, *Newgate* 36). Rae illustrates this contemporary view as he states in his review that ‘[t]he fault of these novels is that they contain pictures of daily life, wherein there are scenes so grossly untrue to nature, that we can hardly pardon the authoress if she drew them in ignorance, and cannot condemn her too strongly if, knowing their falseness, she introduced them for the sake of effect’ (203). However, despite these accusations, ‘the sensation novelists only had to turn to the newspapers in order to validate their own claims to reality of presentation’ (Pykett, *Newgate* 36).
In addition to this condemnation of the genre, critics were also concerned with mixed readership as this genre was popular across a range of readerships. ‘In Britain, there was particular concern about literature that crossed class boundaries, and sensation seemed not only to cross “down” – from mistresses to servants – but also “up,” as startling “penny-dreadful” plots seemed to be moving into the middle-class three-decker’ (Gilbert 2). Contemporary critics considered sensation novels ‘dangerous in [their] evocation of corrupt mass tastes, and [...] fear[ed] that those tastes would in turn corrupt the upper classes who shared the “appetite” for sensation with their social “inferiors”’ (Tromp, Gilbert & Haynie xix). These critics saw sensation as ‘both a symptom and cause of social corruption. The products of a depraved public taste, they corrupted the public appetite by feeding it’ (Pykett, Newgate 36). According to Mansel, the main objective of excitement in sensation novels, ‘cannot be continually produced without becoming morbid in degree [...] ; [for these novels are] called into existence to supply the cravings of a diseased appetite, and contributing themselves to foster the disease, and to stimulate the want which they supply’ (482-483).

Despite the fact that critics worried about this mixed readership, ‘at the heart of many reviewers’ fears about sensation was the fact that they were popular with female readers’ (Wynne 391). The fact that many sensation novels were written and read by women ‘produced a moral panic among the Victorian chattering classes’ (Pykett, Sensation 44). According to critics, sensation novels were ‘novels that contained events and expressed emotions which no proper lady would know anything about’ (Maunder, Sensation 12). Henry Chorley stated in a review of ‘New Novels’ in the Athenaeum in 1866, ‘that women were unstable and particularly susceptible to new trends, arguing that “the ideas of women on point of morals and ethics seem in a state of transition, and consequently of confusion” (qtd. in Wynne 391). Sensation novels were considered contributors to this state of confusion. Thus according to critics, the ‘novels allowed readers to identify with transgressive, boundary crossing characters and live through them – a very satisfying and, many critics thought, a very dangerous experience’ (Maunder, Sensation 16). Above all, ‘Victorian critics
responded with alarm to what seemed to them a frightening new manifestation of female aggression and cultural decay’ (Tromp, Gilbert & Haynie xviii).

Sensation thus received negative responses by middle-class critics and reviewers and, indeed, ‘a minority of reviewers in the 1860s defended literary sensationalism’ (Wynne 391). An example of this is the ‘The Sensational Williams’ in which an anonymous author expresses his irritation with negative reviewers by stating that:

> If any one writes a novel, a play or a poem, which relates anything out of the ordinary experiences of the most ordinary people – some tragedy of love or revenge, some strange (though not impossible) combination of events, or some romance of guilt or misery – he is straightaway met with a loud exclamation of “Sensation!” (qtd. in Wynne 393).

Reviewers such as the anonymous author of ‘The Sensational Williams’ were in fact ‘more perceptive than the reviewers in the heavyweight quarterlies, for they considered sensation novels as new versions of literary sensationalism which had been traditionally been part of English literary culture’ (Wynne 393). Overall, because sensation fiction sparked many debates the genre was distinguished ‘by the tone of the period’s critical responses to it: unwillingly attentive, sometimes even grudgingly admiring, but also censorious of its “low” appeal to physical appetites for “sensations” whether erotic or pleasurably horrifying, its questionable morality, and inadequate or inappropriate style (Gilbert 2). When looking at these responses, it can be concluded that sensation fiction had a considerable impact on its society and sparked a great deal of controversies.

These debates around sensation are important to consider when looking at the reception of *Lady Audley’s Secret*. An interesting response to Braddon’s work is George Eliot’s complaint in September 1860 to John Blackwood ‘about being pushed out of public favour by Mary Braddon
[which] [sounds] peevish and anxious; her comments suggest a strong sense of career envy’ (Maunder, Sensation 1). However, in a fact, ‘Eliot wasn’t alone in feeling this way. Her remarks embody a widespread sense by the 1860s that the pull of “sensation” novels was proving irresistible to novel readers and the “hard-won respectability” of the realist novel was under attack’ (Maunder, Sensation 1). In his 1862 review on Lady Audley’s Secret in The Times, Eneas Sweetland Dallas states that Braddon’s novel should ‘be enjoyed rather than criticized’, and that ‘[t]o these readers we can promise abundance of excitement in the new story, which, indeed, is pitched in a key high enough to attract readers who usually care little for novels’ (4). Dallas thus recognises Lady Audley’s Secret as a popular phenomenon, yet he refuses to take the novel seriously as he merely considers it as entertainment.

Braddon’s Lady Audley’s Secret received criticism for ‘its boldness, its plots and ingenious narrative techniques, but the genre’s “difficult” terrain also offended many reviewers’ (Maunder, Sensation 10). As with sensation fiction in general, Braddon was also accused of being ‘unnatural’. For example, in his review, Rae states that the characters of Braddon’s novel ‘are not like living beings. They prove also how thoroughly ignorant Miss Braddon is of the ways of the world and the motive springs of the heart. […] [N]ot a single personage has any resemblance to the people we meet in the flesh’ (186). Moreover, what contemporary reviewers complained most about was ‘the sensuality and sexual depravity of Braddon’s heroines’ (Pykett, Sensation 57). Reviewers worried that female readers were reading about things they should not know about but Braddon was criticised for this exact reason as she was writing about these things. Thus, in addition to the accusations for being unnatural, Rae also accuses Braddon of being incapable of portraying women, as he additionally states that ‘Lady Audley is at once the heroine and the monstrosity of the novel. In drawing her, the authoress may have intended to portray a female Mephistopheles; but, if so, she should have known that a woman cannot fill such a part’ (186).
However, not everyone agreed on Braddon’s incapability, and some even defended her; Dallas, for instance, argued that:

It is not easy to represent a woman in such a position, or with a character capable of such acts; to combine so much beauty with so much deformity; to depict the lovely woman with the fishy extremities. Miss Braddon would be entitled to rank as the first of lady novelists if she had perfectly succeeded in reconciling these contradictions; nevertheless her portraiture is by no means feeble, and gives promise of great success hereafter (4).

Furthermore, as Pykett accurately puts it, ‘[t]he representation of Lady Audley is a bold assault on the reader’s preconceptions about women in both literature and life. It satirizes the feminine ideal by exaggerating its contours, but it also dramatizes numerous anxieties about that ideal and about the female forces which it is designed to keep in check’ (Sensation 53).

Social and moral corruption thus worried contemporary reviewers and critics; especially ‘the ways in which the plots and narrative methods of sensation novels repeatedly put their readers in the position of having to suspend or revise moral judgements’ (Pykett, Newgate 35). Lady Audley’s Secret indeed plays with these anxieties and the plot was believed ‘to assault the nerves and make the flesh “creep” centred on the depiction of lurid, exaggerated or sensational events in which murder, adultery, bigamy, illegitimacy, kidnapping, madness and fraud proliferated’ (Maunder, Sensation 5). Critics were thus worried about the novel’s questionable morals; Rae even claims that Braddon’s novel is ‘one of the most noxious books of modern times’ (187), and that we should be careful of Braddon’s message as he states that, according to Braddon, ‘crime is not an accident, but is the business of life. She would lead us to conclude that the chief end of man is to commit murder, and his highest merit to escape punishment; [...] [h]er principles appear to us to resemble very strikingly those by which the Thugs use to regulate their lives’ (202). Lady Audley’s Secret thus
shocked many reviewers for all kinds of reasons; nevertheless, Braddon’s best-selling novel also tended to be seen as an artful literary mode. For example, despite the fact that Rae’s review of *Lady Audley’s Secret* is considerably negative, he does end on a minor polite note by complimenting ‘the skill with which she groups her materials, and the manner in which she deals with revolting topics, so as to hinder the startled reader from tossing her volume away in sheer disgust’ (201).

Reception study is a literary theory; however, the question which then arises is whether reception theory can also be applied to theatre and its audiences. The answer to this question is yes and no. Theatre reception also uses this idea that historical context creates a literary work or, in this case, a performance; however, theatre reception calls this the ‘outer frame’. ‘[T]he outer frame contains all those cultural elements which create and inform the theatrical event’ (Bennett 149). This outer frame is thus constructed by history and ‘is confirmed by the existence of commonly acknowledged theatrical conventions’ (Bennett 149). Whereas the aim of reception study is to recover the impact of a literary work, this is more complex in theatre reception. Theatre has a slightly different relation with reception since performance is dependent on an audience, whereas a story in a book still physically exists even though no one is reading it. This relates to the famous quotation of Jerzy Grotowski: ‘Can theatre exist without an audience? At least one spectator is needed to make it a performance’ (2). Theatre is thus an event ‘which relies on the physical presence of an audience to confirm its cultural status’, and theatre, ‘as a cultural commodity is probably best understood as the result of its conditions of production and reception’ (Bennett 114).

In addition to this outer frame, theatre reception also has an inner frame, which can be understood as the production itself. The role of the audience is carried out within the inner and outer frame and at their points of intersection. ‘It is the interactive relations between audience and stage, spectator and spectator which constitute production and reception, and which cause the inner and outer frames to converge for the creation of a particular experience’ (Bennett 149). Whereas the outer frame can be understood as the audience’s ‘horizon of expectations’, the centre of this inner
frame ‘is the combination and succession of visual and aural signs which the audience receives and interprets, some fixed but the majority in flux, and which [...] signify on a number of possible levels (for example, denotative/connotative)’ (Bennett 149). Reception thus occurs at the intersection as it is ‘the combination of these signs which permits the audience to posit the existence of a particular fictional world on stage with its own dynamic and governing rules’ (Bennett 149). The signs from the inner frame can be divided into two groups: those which are part of the actor’s performance and those external to the actor’s performance. ‘These external signs derive from the set, props, lighting, sound, and music. The actor’s performance involves language, voice, movement, and physical appearance (including costume, make-up, and facial expression)’ (Bennett 149).

Theatre reception thus provides a slightly different perspective on reception than reception theory. However, similar to that of sensation, the only responses available are those of contemporary critics and reviewers, and those responses are limited. For the signs from the inner frame are difficult to determine since most adaptations were staged in the 1860s, and their texts do not say anything about the actor’s performance and appearance, lighting, sound, or music; this has to be deduced from the stage directions. Some reviews do mention the décor of the stage and the actor’s performance; however, not much attention or detail is put into this. Therefore this dissertation cannot claim the actual experiences of contemporary audiences; this would merely be speculation. Nevertheless, the general responses to melodrama and sensation theatre remain of importance to establish the impact of both genres.

The critical reputation of melodrama is similar to that of sensation. Both were condemned and ridiculed. Melodrama was often mocked for ‘its absurd plots based on coincidence, its simplistic characterizations, and its preference for spectacle. [...] Melodrama was considered a form of lower-class fiction and therefore inferior’ (McWilliam 55). Similar to sensation fiction, melodrama’s popularity with women affected its reputation. Both sensation fiction and melodrama ‘enjoyed an ambivalent relationship with respectability; actresses were sometimes equated with prostitutes,
whilst female sensation novelist were criticized for exploring sensual matters that Victorian ladies should not know about’ (McWilliam 55). Moreover, the fact that melodrama had working-class people as main characters and used plots which revealed oppression and corruption also damaged its reputation. ‘Whilst melodrama was enjoyed by all classes, it was often rather disapproved of by some middle-class people, especially those who disdained the theater for its artifice and alleged promotion of immorality’ (McWilliam 60). This is similar to the fear of a mixed readership, and like the sensation novel, the melodramatic theatre became an object of suspicion as it threatened to undermine Victorian middle-class authority. However, there is a paradox in this middle-class view: ‘on the one hand many middle-class commentators praised melodrama for arousing a love of virtue and a detestation of vice in the unlettered audience; on the other they declared that the audience itself was inherently criminal’ (Booth 162).

In the early 1860s, when melodrama evolved into sensation theater, ‘the stage was beginning to lose its negative reputation and was courting middle-class respectability (much as the sensation novel took the pleasures of street literature and made them respectable)’ (McWilliam 61). During this decade, almost every popular sensation novel was bound to be put on stage. ‘[S]tage adaptation emerged as a serious competitor for theatre audiences but became stuck with a “low” as opposed to “high” culture label. This label proved difficult to shake off’ (Maunder, Stage 54). For contemporary critics often only saw ‘a cheapening of effect in the adaptations of the works of Dickens, Collins, Wood, Braddon, and others’ (Holder 73). For example, an anonymous review in The Musical World states that the ‘drama founded on Lady Audley’s Secret – at the St. James’s Theatre – will disappoint admirers of Miss Braddon. It does not follow that because a novel is good a play founded upon it must be also good’ (166). Moreover, literary and theatrical critics negatively claimed that stage adaptations ‘always aimed for public approval and a fast buck’ (Maunder, Stage 52). Critics also suggested that adaptations were inherently ‘dumbing down’ sensation novels, and ‘[a]mong purists, there was a sense that because they traded on the cultural memory of a pre-existing text,
adaptations were lazy, superficial and dishonest and thus made unsatisfactory theatre’ (Maunder, *Stage* 55).

As with sensation novels, ‘stage adaptations had become the object of heated discussions’ (Maunder, *Stage* 55). Similar to the concerns of sensation novels, critics were fearful ‘about the messages audiences took away from them to the extent that from the late 1830s the connection between stage adaptations and public immorality was the subject of multitudinous articles’ (Maunder, *Stage* 59). Where critics thought it was dangerous for women to read about things they should not know about, ‘[a] story acted on stage by living, breathing people affected the senses “much more strongly” than did the same story nestling between the covers of a book or in a magazine’ (Maunder, *Stage* 59). Finally, despite the fact that sensation theatre sparked many debates and had a negative reputation which proved difficult to shake off, not everyone disapproved. ‘The ability to be shaken or stirred by such scenes was for Clement Scott not a bad thing, but testament to man’s essential humanity’ (Maunder, *Stage* 59); he claimed that the effect of ‘sensation is good for us’ (qtd. in Maunder, *Stage* 59).

The first stage adaptation of *Lady Audley’s Secret* by George Roberts, was first performed at the Royal St. James’s Theatre on Saturday, February 28th, 1863. As mentioned, the reviews for this play are limited and do not reveal much about the setting or actors’ performances. The only thing that can be deduced regarding the décor is that it had a painted scenery; for *The London Review* mentions that ‘[t]he scenery, expressly painted for this play by Mr. Beverly from the laboured descriptions in the novel, has more than one good pictorial effect’ (245), and *The Rose, the Shamrock, and the Thistle* states that ‘[t]he success of this piece is real and sudden, and this is as it should be, for the stage has rarely, if ever, been adorned by finer scene painting, and by more striking acting in the case of the principal part’ (570). As this last example illustrates, actor’s performances can also be deduced from these reviews, and the reviews for this play mainly mention Miss Herbert’s performance as Lady Audley. For example *The London Review* states: ‘we have no
scruple in giving to Miss Herbert, as an actress, the praise of having thoroughly entered into the spirit
of her part with an intellectual grasp of its utmost capabilities, which even improves upon the
author’s conception’ (245), and *The Rose, the Shamrock, and the Thistle* even claims that ‘Miss
Herbert not only looked Lady Audley, but really was that titled sinner, such as she lives in the book’
(570).

As for the critical responses to this play, Robert’s adaptation, similar to Braddon’s novel, also
had an ambivalent relationship with respectability. People thus often saw a cheapening in effect in
the adaptations of sensation novels, and, as previously mentioned, *The Musical World* stated that
this drama ‘will disappoint admirers of Miss Braddon’ (166). Moreover, as with Braddon’s novel,
Robert’s play was also accused of being unnatural. For example, *The London Review* states that ‘[i]t
will, however, be readily understood, that the unnatural behaviour and the improbable incidents,
upon which the forced complications of “Lady Audley’s Secret” depend, do not become less glaringly
offensive, when detached from the less salient passages of the book and placed in close sequence
upon the stage’ (245). A concrete example of this in the play is the introduction of a new scene: the
confrontation between Lady Audley and George Talboys near the well, and according to *The London
Review*, such scenes

are introduced into this play, to show yet more than in the novel how absurd is
the notion that any woman in that position, though it were to save herself from
an accusation of bigamy, would at once resort to open and deadly violence,
instead of trying, by hypocrisy and blandishments, to disarm the anger of a man
who passionately loves her (245).

In addition to the accusations of being unnatural, the play was also, similarly to the novel, scorned
for its use of questionable morals. *The London Review*, for example, ends it review by stating that this
play ‘has nevertheless, in our judgement, an unwholesome moral tendency. It is an appeal to that
low taste for criminal horrors which is sufficiently catered for by the Old Bailey reports, without enlisting the arts of the novelist or dramatist for its prurient gratification. We cannot approve its succes’ (245). Finally, despite its negative responses the play still managed to draw large audiences (The Musical World 166).

In conclusion, this chapter demonstrates that literature, indeed, has the power to influence history reciprocally, for sensation fiction, melodrama and sensation theater all had a considerable impact on society and sparked several cultural debates and controversies. In addition, Lady Audley’s Secret, was a reaction to its contemporary society; the reaction from society was mostly criticism as it was criticised for its boldness, its depiction of women, its glorifying of crime, and Braddon herself was criticised for the fact that she was a women and was writing about things she ought not to know. Roberts’s adaptation can thus be seen as a product of Braddon’s novel and received similar criticism; however, the fact that the narrative was being performed in real-life worried critics even more about the impact of such questionable morals. Since Roberts’s adaptation is thus a product of Braddon’s novel, the final chapter of this dissertation examines how this impact of the novel and genres is incorporated and interacted with in the play.
Chapter 4: Lady Audley’s Secret Stage Adaptation

Currently, this dissertation has established the historical context and the reception of sensation fiction, melodrama, and sensation theater. This demonstrated that sensation and melodrama are both cultural phenomena; that sensation is, to some extent, melodrama’s successor, and that all three genres had a considerable impact on society and sparked several cultural debates and controversies. So far, it can be concluded that sensation, in Lady Audley’s Secret, is a cultural phenomenon that is able to manifest itself in multiple mediums. Additionally, in order to explore Lady Audley’s Secret’s relationship to theatre, this final chapter uses adaptation theory to analyse the first stage adaptation of Braddon’s novel and examine how sensation can be transposed from a novel to a performance. Finally, this chapter argues that the sensational effect of Braddon’s novel can be recreated on stage using dramatic conventions, as opposed to literary conventions.

As discussed in Chapter Two and Three, stage adaptations of popular sensation novels were produced ‘at what seemed like industrial speed’ (Maunder, Stage 66); but they had a negative reputation. They were considered to be lazy, that they had a cheapening effect of the original, and were accused of ‘dumbing-down’ sensation novels. Adaptations in general are often considered secondary in comparison to the original, especially when ‘[l]iterature will always have axiomatic superiority over any adaptation of it because of its seniority as an art form’ (Stam qtd. in Hutcheon 4). Nevertheless, adaptations have been popular throughout the entire Western history, because of the human tendency to repeat stories (Laera 3). Essentially, as discussed in the introduction on adaptation theory, adaptations are retellings of original stories but are never replications as Hutcheon’s defines adaptations as a ‘transposition of a recognisable work’, and adapting always involves both ‘(re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation’ (Hutcheon 8). The most common, and in this case most relevant, transposition is re-mediation, which means a shift in medium. Every transposition or any kind of change ultimately leads to different interpretations and meanings.
However, the most important feature of adaptation is that it never loses its relation to the original; for they are ‘haunted at all times by their adapted texts’ (Hutcheon 6).

The main incentive for this analysis of *Lady Audley’s Secret* is to see what happens when an essential theatrical form of fiction gets turned back into theater. In other words, how can a sensation novel transpose into a stage performance? This occurs through re-mediation, which means a ‘recoding into a new set of conventions as well as signs’ since every medium has its own rules, forms and conventions (Hutcheon 16). For example, the main difference between the play and the novel is that the story is being shown rather than told. Whereas the novel tells the story in ‘the “res cogitans”, the space of the mind’, a performance is direct, aural, visual, and experienced in real time (Hutcheon 13). Another important difference in medium is the ‘horizon of expectations’ or ‘outer frame’. As discussed, *Lady Audley’s Secret* is constructed out of its historical context and the expectations are what the contemporary reader expected from this work created from this particular historical context. The outer frame of Roberts’s stage adaptation consists of the historical context and the acknowledged dramatic conventions; however, since adaptations have a source text, the impact of *Lady Audley’s Secret* also belongs to the outer frame of Roberts’s stage adaptation. Therefore, the audience of this stage adaptation were probably familiar with Braddon’s novel; however, this is merely an assumption, again, due to limited responses and the fact that this dissertation can only speculate about the experiences of contemporary audiences. Nevertheless, this assumption is essential to the subsequent analysis of Roberts’s stage adaptation.

In addition to the transposition of medium, adaptation is also a process in which stage adapters use the same tools as storytellers: ‘they actualize and concretize ideas; they make simplifying selections, but also amplify and extrapolate; they make analogies; they critique or show their respect, and so on. But the stories they relate are taken from elsewhere, not invented anew’ (Hutcheon 3). In terms of *Lady Audley’s Secret* and transposing the plot from a novel to a play, the story obviously has to be shortened and Roberts’s adaptation indeed has been reduced to two acts.
and nine scenes. Some of those scenes are crucial scenes from the novel such as George Talboys discovering his wife’s death in the papers; Phoebe and Luke Marks discovering the baby shoe; George Talboys seeing the painting of Lady Audley; Robert Audley’s confrontation with Lady Audley about her secret, and the final reveal by Luke Marks that George Talboys is still alive.

When first examined, the play resembles the novel in many ways: the plot is similar and it still incorporates the themes of crime, female emancipation, madness, and consumerism. The actual crime of Lady Audley remains the same; however, she is in the end exposed to the ‘peasants’, whereas in the novel she is put into an asylum in order to avoid a scandal. In addition, Braddon’s Lady Audley is portrayed as the unexpected criminal, whereas the play’s Lady Audley is suspicious from the beginning as she instantly reveals her manipulative ways when she says to Alicia: ‘I must use my influence with your cousin’ (LAS I, III). In fact, the play’s Lady Audley can be seen as a melodramatic glorious villain; for she ‘laughs sardonically’ when her secret is exposed (LAS II, V). In terms of femininity and emancipation, Phoebe Marks still embodies the oppressed wife as she states ‘Why did I ever marry Luke? Because I feared him; often and often’ (LAS II, III). Lady Audley is still the woman who wants to be independent, wealthy, and something else than a man’s ‘help-mate’. In the play she states that whilst married to George Talboys she was ‘a helpless girl’ but with her current activities of becoming wealthy and more powerful she is ‘now a woman’ (LAS I, III). However, whereas the novel tried to create more nuanced and complex female characters, the play, to some extent, returns to the melodramatic feature of stock characters. For all three female characters come across as outspoken and bold; Robert Audley even says to Alice: ‘How you make a poor devil eat his words; you - you’d provoke a saint, Alice’ (LAS I, III). Finally, there is no change in Lady Audley’s obsession with money and objects.

As mentioned in Chapter One, Lady Audley’s sanity is questionable and the novel does not give a clear answer to this question; Lady Audley believes that her actions are necessary instead of wicked and it can be said that she uses madness as an excuse, but the only answer the novel provides
is that she is ‘dangerous’. The play on the other hand, deals with this madness in a slightly different way. For example, whereas in the novel only Lady Audley accuses others of her insanity: ‘because when George Talboys goaded me, as you have goaded me [...] my mind, never properly balanced, utterly lost its balance; and I was mad!’ (Braddon 341); in the play George Talboys also talks about how other people can goad someone into madness as he says: ‘I’m an easy-going fellow, as you know, Bob; but when the wolf once got to the door, I fairly gave way. One night Helen’s tears and reproaches drove me mad. I flew into a rage with her, her father, everybody, and left her, as I swore, for ever’ (LAS, I, I). Moreover, the word ‘eccentric’, which only Lady Audley uses in the novel to declare Robert Audley mad, is used by multiple characters throughout the play. Whereas in the novel, Alice and Sir Michael Audley disregard Robert’s eccentricity, in the play they explicitly call Robert eccentric. For instance, Sir Michael Audley calls Robert Audley an ‘eccentric fellow’ just for insisting to stay at the Village inn (LAS, I, III). Moreover, when Alice suspects Robert Audley of being in love with Lady Audley she says: ‘No, it is his innate eccentricity, that’s what it is. Yes Bob Audley is just the very sort of man to fall in love with his aunt’ (LAS, II, I). Yet the madness of Lady Audley in the play becomes less ambiguous. She, again, justifies her actions to herself, for she thinks her actions are brave instead of wicked and she states: ‘I argued, I reasoned, and last I justified myself. [...] Why should I let his shadow stand between me and prosperity’ (LAS, I, III). However, unlike the novel where it is suggested that she is merely dangerous, the final scene of the play reveals that Lady Audley ‘lapses into a fixed stare, as of madness’ where she is not dead as her ‘soul still lingers, but the mind, the mind, is gone!’ (LAS, II, V). Madness is thus more evidently present than in the novel, and indeed, this ‘rising note of hysteria is a regular feature of such dramas, particularly in female representation, and appears often in adaptations of works of fiction’ (Holder 73).

According to Maunder, ‘there were often quite striking differences between the novel and play, [which was] the result of a refusal simply to cut and paste from one medium to the other’ (Stage 56). Moreover, because theatre and literature are different mediums with different sets of conventions and signs, they have different means of expression to their disposal, and both mediums
are therefore able to present a similar story in a completely different way. Consequently, stage adaptations of sensation novels became a separate form of theatre with their own aesthetics and conventions. One of the reasons for this separate form of theatre is the fact that the outer frame of adaptations includes the reception of the source text; Roberts’s adaptation thus consists of the historical context of Braddon’s novel and its impact. The essential assumption that the audience of Roberts’s adaptation was already familiar with both the historical context and Braddon’s novel itself is thus the result of the adaptation’s relation with the original. For an audience can only experience an adaptation ‘(as adaptations) as palimpsests through [their] memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation’ (Hutcheon 8). The audience of Robert’s adaptation thus already knows Braddon’s original plot; they know what Lady Audley’s secret is, and that George Talboys does not actually die. The adaptation therefore has to anticipate on the foreknowledge of the audience in order to create a performance that is able to have a sensational effect of excitement similar to the novel. Roberts’s adaptation is able to do this by using the same techniques as Braddon but then in a different way, as the adaptation foreshadows to things the novel does not, and constantly alludes to the original text.

First of all, with the foreknowledge of the audience, the adaptation constantly makes minor allusions to the novel and thus plays with the expectations of the audience. The play, for example, constantly hints at the secret of Lady Audley, whereas the novel is more subtle and merely attempts to create a secretive tone at the exposition of the novel. An example of such an allusion is in the first scene, where Robert Audley asks George Talboys about his wife and how he met her and says: ‘you must tell me all about your wife. So now “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth”’ (LAS I, I), which is ironical because the audience is already aware that George’s perception of the truth is false since his wife has a dark secret. Moreover, in that same scene, when Robert tells George that his uncle Sir Michael Audley remarried, George is caught by surprise and Robert responds with: ‘Yes, fallen into the same trap as yourself; bound hand and foot by silken chains and golden locks’ (LAS I, I). Michael Audley and George indeed fell into the same trap, not in the trap of marriage, but the trap
set by the same woman: Lady Audley/Helen Talboys. Here, the adaptation again plays with expectations of the audience which results in irony and suspense as it builds on the audience’s memory of the novel. Finally, explicitly hinting at the secret of Lady Audley thus sets a secretive and ominous tone similar to that of the novel.

The adaptation also foreshadows to things the novel does not. Whereas the novel mostly uses foreshadowing in the exposition in its secretive descriptions and to hint at ‘that terrible chain of evidence’, the play foreshadows to things that only become apparent later in the novel (Braddon 54). For example, when George Talboys talks about his father-in-law he says: ‘Do you think I didn’t see through his pastry-cook dinners and his public-house port, his tricks and rusty straps’ (LAS I, I). This instantly makes the father-in-law suspicious and suggests that he is more evil than in the novel where he just does what his daughter tells him to do and is not extremely suspicious. The most ironical allusion and use of foreshadowing in the play is when Robert Audley states: ‘what would be more to my taste, a good murder. A murder, George, that would do a fellow credit, a tortuous devious plot, clogged with subtle points of evidence, and encumbered with mystery; a case that would take months, not minutes, to master’ (LAS I, I). This is of course exactly what will happen, and with the foreknowledge of the audience, creates a ‘be careful what you wish for’ atmosphere and additionally enhances the suspense of the play. Again, due to the audience’s foreknowledge, the adaptation is able to have a similar suspense, secrecy, and ominous tone to that of the novel.

These alterations regarding the source text, indicate that the play is able to present Braddon’s narrative in a completely different way; George’s adaptation is therefore a retelling, as opposed to a replication. Moreover, despite these alterations, the play is able to achieve a similar sensational effect as the novel, and this is where it becomes clear that sensation in literature and theatre, in the case of Lady Audley’s Secret, aims to create a sensational effect of excitement by preaching to nerves. For sensationalism ‘in the theater must be viewed across a spectrum of effects. The stirring of emotion, the thrill of recognition or revelation, can be evoked in gestures and actions
large and small’ (Holder 73). Therefore, whereas the novel’s sensational effect lies in the keeping of the secret, the play reveals that a sensational effect can also be recreated using different effects and dramatic conventions rather than literary conventions.

One of these effects is the adding and altering of scenes. For example, it is almost instantly revealed that Lady Audley is also Helen Talboys and whereas the novel only discloses that Lady Audley threw George Talboys into the well at the end of the novel, the adaptation makes this into an actual scene in the first act. The fact that this is already revealed in the first act can be seen as a loss of suspense as sensation novels depend on this gradual uncovering of secrets. However, this adding of scenes actually adds to the sensational effect of the adaptation. For audiences were intrigued by this ‘realisation of how excitingly a stage production could translate – and even add to – climatic scenes of a particular novel’ (Maunder, Stage 62). Therefore, despite the fact that the adaptation reveals crucial secrets quite early on, the adaptation offers its audience sensational scenes the novel does not. This particular added scene between Lady Audley and George Talboys creates its suspense on the fact that it is a new unseen confrontation and it is full of heightened melodramatic emotions:

*Lady A.* The covering of my portrait! Who has been here?

*Tal.* *(In a deep firm tone)* Your husband, Helen Talboys. *(LADY AUDLEY utters a faint cry, but recovers, and supporting herself with one hand on a chair, looks steadily at TALBOYS).* Yes, that husband you swore to love and honour till –

*Lady A.* Death parted us. I did, I kept my word George Talboys. You abandoned *me*. You, of your own free will, were dead to me!

*Tal.* What! You justify yourself, you glory in your shame?

*(LAS I, III).*
This added scene is based on the dramatic convention that a performance is direct, aural, visual, and experienced in real time, whereas the novel is based on the convention that the story sets in the space of the mind. This melodramatic confrontation adds a crucial sensational scene full of heightened emotions and thrills, which the novel only talks about in retrospect. For this scene from the novel, ‘in which action and emotion are forced into view and then strongly suppressed […], become, on the stage, extended scenes of wild emotion and frantic movement; they also provide occasions for more interaction than the [source]’ (Holder 73). This example of an added scene thus illustrates how the play uses the immediacy of theatre in order to preach to nerves and create that sensational effect of excitement.

In addition to these sensational scenes which are not explicitly narrated in the novel, Roberts’s adaptation also alters existing scenes and makes them more sensational. For example, in the final scene where Robert Audley confronts Lady Audley about her secret, she screams that Robert has no witnesses who can prove that she is actually Helen Talboys, until,

[Voices without – “It’s not too late. It’s not too late”

Enter PEASANTS bearing MARKS on a rude litter; PHOEBE, by the side of the litter, weeping; a crowd of countrymen and women following.

Mar. (feebly) Lay me down, lay me down. She here! (Looking at LADY AUDLEY.) Then it is not too late.

[The litter is put down the peasants group round the well, so as to shut it from the audience.

(LAS II, V).

Luke Marks then publically reveals that Lady Audley threw her husband into the well to which the peasants respond with ‘Cries of horror’, and when Lady Audley still claims that there is no proof, Luke dramatically says:
The proof – you want the proof? (Motioning to the bystanders to retire from well and pointing to TALBOYS, who has been hitherto concealed by the crowd) There!

[LADY AUDLEY totters and is supported by PHOEBE. She keeps her eyes fixed on TALBOYS.]

(LAS II, V)

This final scene is completely different from the novel; Lady Audley wants to murder Robert instead of breaking down and giving in as she does in the novel. Moreover, Lady Audley does not confess to Sir Michael Audley and she is not sent to an asylum; instead, Michael Audley dies before she can confess to him. This surprise ending goes against the expectations of the audience and results in a supplementary sensational scene. Moreover, similar to the confrontation between George and Lady Audley, this scene also uses the immediacy of theatre in order to create a new sensational scene full of excitement. Roberts’s adaptation succeeds in this as *The Rose, the Shamrock, and the Thistle* in its review states that ‘at this moment, the excitement of the audience is at its highest pitch’ (571).

Roberts’s adaptation of Braddon’s novel thus mainly uses the dramatic convention of immediacy in order to recreate Braddon’s sensational effect of excitement. This immediacy is a response to the novel’s ability to spread suspense over a long period of time as the novel was initially published in instalments. Serial publication and the medium of a novel have the ability to use cliff-hangers and spread suspense over volumes and chapters. Roberts’s adaptation has to create a similar effect in one evening. The story therefore has been reduced to its essential scenes which results in a more condensed immediate experience. Moreover, sensation theatre already had access to all the melodramatic theatre conventions such as, spectacle, action, thrills, heightened emotions, glorious villains, which adaptations could readily use in order to create this sensational effect of excitement. As a result, the story of *Lady Audley’s Secret* acted out ‘on stage by living, breathing
people affected the senses “much more strongly” than did the same story nestling between the covers of [Braddon’s] book’ (Maunder, *Stage* 59).

Finally, whereas Chapter One, Two, and Three argue that sensation is a cultural phenomenon which can manifest itself in multiple mediums, this final chapter argues that, in the case of *Lady Audley’s Secret*, sensation, in both literature and theatre, aims to create a sensational effect of excitement by preaching to the nerves as the analysis of *Lady Audley’s Secret*’s stage adaptation demonstrates that this sensational effect of excitement in Braddon’s novel can be recreated in a different medium using a different set of conventions. In Braddon’s novel, this sensational effect is created with the keeping of the secret and the use of foreshadowing. In the adaptation, this effect is created by playing with the audience’s expectations, the adding and altering of scenes, and the melodramatic conventions, and the overall immediacy of theatre as a medium.
Conclusion

In conclusion, this dissertation approaches Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* as a product of its own historical context and illustrates that sensation fiction was part of a sensational decade; a decade full of sensational events, press, crimes, and scandals. Consequently, the sensation novel was influenced by many developments in the Victorian period. *Lady Audley’s Secret* is therefore a literal product of sensation fiction and was simultaneously made in interaction with specific social, cultural, and political forces of the sensation decade. Braddons’s novel explores the dark underside of the respectable Victorian society, as it incorporates real-life crime and interacts with contemporary discussions on female emancipation, madness, and consumerism.

Since melodrama and sensation were both cultural phenomena, and that sensation, to some extent, is melodrama’s successor, further emphasises that sensation is a cultural phenomenon. Moreover, that melodrama, after the emergence of sensation fiction, evolved into sensation theater, demonstrates that sensation, as a cultural phenomenon, is able to manifest itself in multiple mediums. The fact that melodrama is sensation fiction’s main influence accounts for Braddon’s melodramatic use of heightened emotions and physical sensations in order to create the sensational objective of excitement. *Lady Audley’s Secret* is therefore not just a product of sensation fiction and the sensation decade, but also a product of Victorian melodrama. Stage adaptations of sensation novels are then a product of both melodrama and sensation fictions as they put sensational plots on stage, focused on the novels’ sensational scenes, and enhance their sensational effect by using melodramatic dramatic conventions.

The idea that literature has the power to influence history reciprocally can also be understood as the impact of a literary work on its contemporary society. Reception is a literary work’s impact on society and readers’ reactions to it. Sensation fiction, melodrama, and sensation theater, all had an ambivalent relationship with respectability as they were all initially condemned and mocked, and engendered multiple debates and controversies. The novel and the play of *Lady
Audley’s Secret received similar responses as they were both criticised for their boldness, their depiction of women, and their glorifying of crime.

The analysis of George Roberts’s adaptation reveals how sensation, in the case of Lady Audley’s Secret, can be transposed to another medium. The re-mediation from novel to stage results in a shortened play of two acts and nine scenes, a focus on crucial scenes, a return to melodramatic stock characters, and a rising note of hysteria. As an adaptation, the play has to anticipate on the foreknowledge of the audience and Roberts’s adaptation plays with the expectations of the audience with constant allusions to the novel, added scenes, and altered existing scenes, which results in a more immediate experience. Finally, the analysis of Lady Audley’s Stage adaptation demonstrates that the sensational effect of Braddon’s novel can be recreated on stage using dramatic conventions, as opposed to literary conventions.

This dissertation illustrates that the historical context and impact of sensation, melodrama, and sensation theater, reveal much about the cultural anxieties, and social and cultural change in the Victorian period. The in-depth analysis of the stage adaptation of Lady Audley’s Secret demonstrates how an essential theatrical form of fiction can be turned back into theatre. This suggests that sensation theater is able to prove that sensation’s aim of excitement can be achieved in multiple mediums using different sets of conventions and signs. Sensation as a cultural phenomenon then becomes an important Victorian mode of expression, acting out, and responding to society.

This dissertation is a valuable addition to the existing scholarship on sensation; much has been written about sensation fiction, melodrama, sensation theater, and sensation fiction’s relation to society. However, this dissertation provides a unique perspective on their intricate relation to each other and demonstrates that sensation, in Lady Audley’s Secret, is a cultural phenomenon and mode of expression that exceeds the medium of literature. A suggestion for additional research would therefore be to also explore other sensation novels and their relation to society, history, and other art forms. In addition, this dissertation only includes the first adaptation of Braddon’s novel;
however, adaptations of *Lady Audley’s Secret* remained popular well into the twentieth century. It has been adapted into several stage performances, radio plays, and films. A suggestion for further research would be to explore how these adaptations developed over time and if they indeed focus on creating a sensational effect or if they focus on other things. Finally, the fact that this dissertation includes adaptation theory and theatre studies demonstrates that literary studies can be interdisciplinary.
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