



## UNRAVELLING THE THREADS OF SANITY:

### An analysis of the theme of Madness in Braddon's Victorian Masterpiece, Lady Audley's Secret

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The Victorian period was an era filled with paradoxes and controversies. There were certain regulations that both men and women had to obey when it came to marriage. The responsibility of a man in marriage was to demonstrate to society that he could provide a satisfying living for himself and his family, with content referring to a supply of status and wealth. Women, on the other hand, were expected to be extremely submissive in nature and character and stand in support, behind their husbands with a grin on their faces, regardless of how happy they were in their marriage. A woman was denied the opportunity for education because it was exclusive to men. It was the women's obligation to develop and preserve the family's reputation via deeds of dignity and grace. Divorce was nearly considered taboo at the time, and it was regarded with disdain and humiliation. As a result, bigamy was a regular occurrence. Bigamy is defined as the act of entering into a marriage with one person while still legally married to another. People who were dissatisfied in their marriages sometimes committed acts of bigamy rather than divorce because of the embarrassment they would experience as a result of it. Issues like these (marriage, bigamy, etc.) grew popular and pervasive in Victorian culture, and some authors were bold enough to write about it and have their writings printed in order to disclose the reality of Victorian marriages. Another important concern present during that period was madness or lunacy, which was more common in women than in men. In regard to the mentally ill, the Victorians held conflicting views. The notion that some forms of lunacy were unique to women and the way that women and madness were associated in nineteenth-century England implies that labelling women as "mad" was an attempt to control them.

Frequently, occurrences like religious fixation, physical ailments, sorrowful incidents, childbirth, or immoral marriage were blamed for the causes. Many authors and novelists have fallen into a condition of insanity. As a result, writing about it not only may have aided in the cure but also enabled them to share their experiences with others and raise awareness of these disorders.

In some ways, gender roles made a significant contribution to society; males were expected to be physically strong and active, whilst women were supposed to be homemakers. During the Victorian period, women were expected to take on specific obligations, the majority of which were domestic in nature, before and after marriage. Their sole purpose was to find a partner who would offer them a perfect existence, according to Victorian ideals and standards. However, there

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(1) "Bigamy", Merriam Webster Dictionary, 2022, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bigamy](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bigamy)., Accessed 2 April. 2022.

(2) Beveridge, Allan, and Edward Renvoize. "The Presentation of Madness in the Victorian Novel." *Bulletin of the Royal College of Psychiatrists*, vol. 12, no. 10, Oct. 1988, pp. 411-414, [pdfs.semanticscholar.org/9af1/ba2742b81363efa4fd70734c337b04e1a7de.pdf](https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/9af1/ba2742b81363efa4fd70734c337b04e1a7de.pdf), <https://doi.org/10.1192/pb.12.10.411>.

(3) Bachman, Savannah. "Shutting Her Up:" an Exploration of the Madwoman and the "Shutting Her Up:" an Exploration of the Madwoman and the Madhouse in Victorian Literature. 2017.

were many controversies surrounding marriage during this period. Despite the fact that women were supposed to comply and perform their household tasks, many women rebelled against the standard of being a housewife. If women behaved differently, they were thought to be on the verge of insanity. Initially, readers will notice Lady Audley and conclude that she conformed to the stereotype of a Victorian housewife, but as the story progresses, they may disagree.

Ironically, the novel is titled, *Lady Audley's Secret*, which originally indicates a narrative with secrets, yet all of these buried secrets come to light. Although the title contains the word "secret," hinting at only one secret, the novel is filled with secrets. The novel's first chapter hints at the mystery and intrigue that would pervade every page and sentence of the entire novel. The mystery and tension continue to rise as the reader turns each page; this is what keeps the reader reading, the expectation of what will happen next. The author's use of discontinuity is a very significant and excellent strategy in the novel. Discontinuity occurs when each new chapter does not start up where the previous one left off; instead, each chapter continues in a different manner. This discontinuity, this ingenious yet insane tactic, may be the novel's beginning of lunacy, if not for the characters, then for the reader.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines madness as the quality or state of being mad, such as:

a: a state of severe mental illness — not used technically, and;

b: behaviour or thinking that is very foolish or dangerous: extremely folly. *Lady Audley's Secret*, Braddon's novel, is centred on the concept of madness. Apart from this, she employs two crucial tactics that run throughout the novel to further accentuate the concept of insanity: secrecy and bigamy. Lady Audley is classified as mad in the novel, owing to her violent operations against men, which serve as a natural self-defence mechanism to safeguard her shameful lies and secrets. Whenever she perceives a threat to her current domestic life, she decides to commit acts of insanity. When confronted with the prospect of being exposed for her crimes, she uses her insanity as an excuse, claiming that it was her insane state of mind that drove her to perform such acts. Perhaps her actions might be interpreted as an attempt to shield oneself from marital failures and the stability that was meant to be supplied to Victorian-era women, as she had previously experienced one failed marriage. This work presents Victorian marriages in a terrible light, leading the reader to believe that the only option for women to safeguard their rights was to commit and indulge in acts of lunacy. Throughout the novel, the author teases the reader with minor signs that may point to Lady Audley's lunatic state of mind and as the reader progresses further into the story, Lady Audley's actions are frequently called into doubt. The uncertainty of not knowing Lady Audley's true state of mind is what allows and promotes her manipulative behaviour.

The narrative begins with an astonishingly flawless description of Lady Audley as nearly goddess-like, without flaws or imperfections. However, as the reader continues to turn the pages, they realise that she is far from perfect. The narrative places a great focus on her physical beauty rather than her cerebral abilities. She is well aware of the influence her charm and attractiveness

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(4) Boyle, Kiera. "Hysterical Victorian Women." *Www.historic-Uk.com*, [www.historic-uk.com/CultureUK/Hysterical-Victorian-Women/](http://www.historic-uk.com/CultureUK/Hysterical-Victorian-Women/).

(5) "Madness", Merriam Webster Dictionary, 2022, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/madness](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/madness)., Accessed 29 April. 2022.

have on everyone around her, hence, she exploits it to her advantage, by manipulating others to help her accomplish whatever twisted ambition she has. She is highly conscious about her financial status because she grew up in poverty; so much so that she selfishly marries George Talboys because he comes from a wealthy family. Unfortunately for her, he eventually runs out of money and chooses to embark on a fortune-seeking expedition to Australia, abandoning his wife and son in the process. Soon after he abandons her, Lady Audley, or "Helen Tolboys," fakes her own death, publishes her obituary details and flees to another city, under the guise of Lucy Graham, in order to leave her previous marriage, child, and prior life behind her. Naturally, bigamists attempt to hide their trails, and a good number of them may have been successful in doing so. The reader's first assumption may be that if a woman is leaving her child behind, it must be for the child's welfare, as the mother may not be able to offer the best life for her child, due to her poor financial circumstances. But which mother would abandon an infant with her alcoholic father to begin a new prosperous life just for her own selfish gain? After relocating, she begins working as a governess for Mrs. Dawson and immediately catches the attention of Sir Michael Audley. She decides to marry Sir Michael Audley, not because she loves him, but because of his wealth and prestige. However, while still married to George Talboys, she marries Sir Michael Audley. This might be considered as her first symptom or act of lunacy in the novel.

After three and a half years, George Talboys inexplicably returns from his fortune-seeking expedition in Australia, only to discover that his wife, Helen Talboys, has died. Robert Audley, his close friend and Sir Michael Audley's nephew, accompanies him to Audley Court to console him. Here, she feels gravely threatened when she learns of the arrival of her first husband. Lady Audley is threatened not just by the revelation of her previous marriage to George Tolboys, but also by the threat to her new and prestigious domestic life. She seeks to murder George Tolboys in order to eliminate the risk of being exposed. It may be evident that her motivation for murdering George Tolboys was a dread of abandonment and failure in her marriage to Sir Michael Audley; after all, since her previous husband deserted her, it is only fair that she feared a history of repentance. Lady Audley, like many women during that period, is a prisoner of the system of the perfect Victorian marriage, obligated to perform the role of an ideal wife.

Lady Audley is thought to be insane since she defies the stereotypes of what a normal Victorian woman should be like - modest and quiet. While engaging in such behaviour, women were expected to conform to society's understanding of what it meant to be a "woman." Gender roles and the Victorian understanding of insanity were closely intertwined with the multifaceted problem of identity. Lady Audley clearly breaks the moral requirement of being a lady by becoming a killer, demonstrating her level of lunacy. This is when the readers witness a character change: she goes from being a meek, quiet wife to being a killer for her own twisted motives. The author emphasises these issues in the narrative, demonstrating that expecting a perfect Victorian

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(6) CAPP, BERNARD. "BIGAMOUS MARRIAGE in EARLY MODERN ENGLAND." *The Historical Journal*, vol. 52, no. 3, 4 Aug. 2009, pp. 537-556, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X09990021>. Accessed 23 Mar. 2021.

(7) Adella Irizarry, "The Secret of My Life: Madness and Transgression in *Lady Audley's Secret*", 2012

(8) Lynn M. Voskuil, "Acts of Madness: Lady Audley and the Meanings of Victorian Femininity" *Feminist Studies*, Vol 27, No. 3, pp-611-639

woman is nearly impossible. Alarmed critics lashed out in practically every major and minor Victorian publication, emphasising on Lady Audley as a figure who had falsely misrepresented the natural responsibilities of women in many circumstances. Lady Audley accepts her rebellious streak as a part of herself, which comes out in full force at unstable times, causing a loss of self-control and eventual insanity.

As the story proceeds, Robert Audley begins looking into his friend's unaccountable disappearance, and as his enquiry progresses, his clues bring him closer to the truth, revealing Lady Audley's secrets. He confronts Lady Audley with the facts, but she accuses Robert of being insane, presumably, because she does not want her filthy secrets revealed. Here, they play a game of accusing each other of being insane, and Lady Audley threatens him with telling Sir Michael Audley that his nephew is insane, in case he ends up divulging her secrets. Madness appears once more, but this time, it is more blatant rather than veiled. Previously, readers suspected Lady Audley was insane based on her conduct, but here she is accused of being insane right immediately. Of course, accusing Robert of being insane would only provide a temporary answer to her difficulties. Whether Lady Audley is indeed insane or not is a critical question that hangs heavy in the air. When confronted by him, she exclaims, "I killed [George] because I AM MAD!," blaming her devious crimes on her insane state of mind, or rather concealing them behind it. This makes the reader probe the genuineness of her insanity. This spectacular genre is typified by elements such as the deceitful character of Lady Audley and reflections on dramatic issues like the nature of insanity and murder.

To finally end her threat, she goes to Castle Inn, locks the room Robert was meant to be sleeping in, and sets one of the curtains on fire, aiming not only to murder Robert but also to entirely destroy Castle Inn. To ease her position, Luke Marks, who is the husband and cousin of Phoebe Marks, enters the Inn inebriated, allowing her to inform everyone that Luke's addiction to alcohol drove him to be so intoxicated that he sets fire to the Inn. Once again, she resorts to murder in order to protect her marriage to Sir Michael Audley and prevent the revelation of her old life. Despite the fact that Lady Audley has attempted to murder almost every male she has been remotely related to, it is safe to make the assumption that the reason she hasn't attacked Sir Michael Audley is because she is content with the stability their marriage provides her, or she doesn't want to give up her wealthy life.

When examined, Dr Mosgrave simply states that her acts appear nearly rational and are not proof of a disturbed mind and that her calm cleverness and lack of feminine tenderness or regret serve as evidence of "latent insanity" (Braddon 379). In this case, the situation may seem paradoxical; Lady Audley refers to herself as a lunatic, while Dr. Mosgrave, a medical specialist, asserts that she is dangerous but not insane. But once again, instead of accepting responsibility for her actions, she blames George Talboys for driving her to the point of insanity. Braddon chooses to conceal herself behind Lady Audley's insane and violent activities while choosing to expose the collapse of a perfect Victorian marriage in society. However, Dr. Mosgrave also believes that Lady Audley is unlikely to undergo her moments of insanity unless she is upset by anything. However

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(9) Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, (Open Road Integrated Media, Inc., 2010) p 234

(10) Hayes, Corey . *The Beauty and the Barrister Gender Roles, Madness, and the Basis for Identity in Lady Audley's Secret*. [digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1424&context=honors](http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1424&context=honors).

(11) Florschuetz, 66-67

after witnessing her behaviours, he concluded that she was exceedingly detrimental and dangerous to society, and as a result, Robert committed her to an institution. Admitting her to an institution may be a method to not only offer her professional assistance but also, to put a stop to her hazardous and shameful behaviour, which has the potential to harm reputations.

In the middle of all of these, the reader learns that Lady Audley's mother was also insane. Lady Audley asserts that she was a madwoman since her mother was one as well because lunacy was hereditary at the time. Lady Audley had been troubled by her mother's desertion since her mother became a lunatic after childbirth and left, so much so that when she decided to leave her old life and child behind, she felt she had suffered her mother's illnesses. She commits acts of insanity as a response and defence to whatever threat that comes her way throughout the novel, without so much as blinking an eyelash. Readers have gained psychological insight into the protagonist's thinking as a result of these occurrences. Lady Audley is committed to an asylum and locked away for violating patriarchal conventions in Victorian society. Because she defies the notion of an ideal woman by committing bigamy and attempting several murders, she also represents many other women of her period. The imprisonment of a madwoman to the madhouse is aptly compared to "shutting her up" in Victorian gothic and sensation fiction dealing with lunacy.

Madness or insanity has been connected with femininity and feminine fears from the dawn of humanity. A vast number of Victorian-era authors had a significant number of readers because they addressed issues that were prevalent in society at the time. *Lady Audley's Secret* was created during an era when insanity and madness were at the centre of the social circle's attention, as a result of which the narrative depicts the difficulties individuals had in attempting to comprehend the notion of madness. This narrative demonstrates how Victorians believed that craziness or lunacy was an inherent part of the female anatomy, but that it was unacceptable and incompatible with their domestic existence. To reach a broad audience, female writers raised their voices to speak about the private domain and its socio-psychological impact on women via writing. Psychologists at the time stated that a female diagnosed with hysteria was not genuinely ill but was simply more womanly than other women. Furthermore, it was considered that insanity was inherited and passed down through generations. Because the mother was mad, it stands to reason that her child is insane as well. While some readers may agree with the preceding remark, others may rationalise and agree with the heroine and her acts by claiming that her insanity was solely acquired from her mother.

In conclusion, *Lady Audley's Secret* stands a remarkable piece of literature that transcends traditional norms. The novel's success is attributed to its unique, yet enthralling narrative, as well

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(12) Savannah Jane Bachman, "Shutting Her Up: An Exploration of the Madwoman and the Madhouse in Victorian Literature", diss., Bard College, 2017

(13) Soukayna Alami, "Madness in the Female Character of Mrs. Audley in *Lady Audley's Secret* by Elizabeth Braddon", diss., U of Debrecen, 2019

(14) Alami, 61

(15) Angela Florschuetz, "Madness as Domestic Defence in *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Jane Eyre*", *Articulâte*: Vol. 4, Article 8

(16) Corey Hayes, "The Beauty and The Barrister: Gender Roles, Madness, and the Basis for Identity in *Lady Audley's Secret*", diss., Liberty University, 2014

as a diverse cast of characters and personalities. And, while it may be too great to suggest that this piece is the impetus for a shift in how gender roles were perceived, it is surely plausible to believe that characters such as Lady Audley, undermine the image of the angel in the household. This story also functioned as an excellent vehicle for exposing the unaddressed issues that might arise in a dysfunctional Victorian marriage. Lady Audley, on the other hand, would be judged insane not because of the deeds she conducts, but because she manifestly breaches the rules of a domestic housewife. Some may argue that she poses a threat to society and family reputation, only due to her disobedience of home conventions of what it is like to be an ideal Victorian woman. As a result, any woman who violates cultural and marriage conventions would be judged insane and deserving of confinement in an institution or madhouse as punishment. Braddon's masterpiece not only enthralls with its skill as a storyteller, but it also prompts reflection about gender roles, cultural standards, and the severe consequences faced by those who defy the expectations of their day. Of course, we as readers will never know if Lady Audley was truly mad or whether it was all a ruse, but that is perhaps the beauty of Braddon's story; its ambiguity.

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