

Double Threads

Reading Dress, Fashion, Narrative and Representations of Femininity in Victorian Popular Literature

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Contents

<i>Abstract</i>	iii
<i>Statement of Originality</i>	vi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vii
<i>Introduction</i>	
Sartorial and Narrative Threads: Reading Dress, Fashion, Texture and Textuality in Victorian Popular Literature	I
<i>Chapter One</i>	
White Muslin: The “Woman in White,” “Muslin Martyrs” and Narratives of Ethereal and Ephemeral Femininity	56
<i>Chapter Two</i>	
Silk and Velvet: Colours, Textures and Fashions of Figuring, Disfiguring and Artistic Dress	109
<i>Chapter Three</i>	
The Paisley Shawl: Patterns and Narratives of Femininity, Disguise and Artifice	160
<i>Chapter Four</i>	
Tweed and Wool: The “Woman in Grey,” Tailoring New Identities and the Heroine as Author	209
<i>Conclusion</i>	
(Re)Fashioning and (Re)Writing the Victorian Heroine	264
<i>Notes</i>	277
<i>Bibliography</i>	282

Abstract

In “Clothes: From the Novelist’s Point of View” (1886), Deliverance Dingle states that contemporary novelists have “a genius of taste, and can express a character or indicate a mood by the very colour and texture of a garment, by the play of folds and the sweep of the train of a robe” (266). Taking this statement as its foundation, *Double Threads: Reading Dress, Fashion, Narrative and Representations of Femininity in Victorian Popular Literature* explores the use of dress to fashion femininity and female sexuality and to tell the heroine’s story in British popular literature from 1860 to 1900.

The heroines of Victorian popular literature are women in white muslins, *femmes fatales* or aesthetes in silks and velvets, women in paisley shawls, New Women in grey, and cross-dressing and rational-dressing politicians and writers. *Dress* sites the heroine within fashion history and in relation to Victorian notions of femininity and female sexuality; it also provides the means to refashion them.

Double Threads argues that dress functions within structures of characterisation and narration, and the politics and poetics of representation and genre, in telling the heroine’s story. It examines the sartorial, material, narrative, literary and fashionable threads of Victorian popular literature and their interweaving in representations of the heroine.

This thesis is structured by a chronology of fashions in dress and literature from 1860 to 1900. It traces changes in the colour, texture and style of the heroine’s dress from white muslin, silk and velvet, and the paisley shawl, to wool and tweed, and cross-dressing and rational-dressing in a selection of popular novels and genres from sensation fiction to social realism, the New Woman novel and feminist utopian fiction. Each chapter draws on the histories of sartorial cloths

and styles, as material and literary objects, in contextualising their use and refashioning in popular literature.

Recent scholarship in Victorian literature has treated dress as realist social symbolism. *Double Threads* is the first study to consider the ways in which changes in the colour, texture and styles of dress function to tell the heroine's story in a narrative and representational, as well as a social, sense in Victorian popular literature. The colours and texture of dress represent its use as realist detail, fashion-plate jargon, artistic and sensual detail, expression of individual character, disguise, socio-political and sexual symbol, and metaphor for types of representation. This thesis draws on the double meaning of thread, as both material and narrative, and of fashion, as both a style and a method for its alteration, in its reading of dress and popular literature.

Through this reading, Victorian popular literature is reconceptualised as both a literary style and critical category. It is understood as fashionable literature in the style of the time, and fashioned literature, self-consciously engaging with the means of its own production and consumption. This invites a critical reading which considers the politics and poetics of representation and reading, and is conscious of the ways which the 'popular' is constructed and represented in literary history and criticism.

This is the first study to consider the significance of the materiality and history of sartorial cloths and styles in informing the use of dress in Victorian popular literature; in this way, it provides a model for thinking about the production of dress as a metaphor for the textual construction of femininity and narrative. Drawing on threads of scholarship from fashion and textile history, cultural studies and literary criticism, this study expands the ways in which we

interpret different types of cultural artefacts, suggesting a form of reading which explores the materiality of texts and the textuality of material cloth, the fashionedness of fiction, and the fiction of fashion.

Statement of Originality

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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Introduction

Sartorial and Narrative Threads: Reading Dress, Fashion, Texture and Textuality in Victorian Popular Literature

The heroines of Victorian popular literature are exceptional in their dress, not only inasmuch as they are fashionably and beautifully attired, but also in the amount of attention given to describing their clothes and the level of importance such description is afforded within their narratives.¹ They are represented as angelic women in white muslin, passionate *femmes fatales* or aesthetes in rich silks and velvets, mysterious women in red Paisley shawls, “[New] Women in Grey,” and rational-dressing or cross-dressing writers and politicians. In Victorian popular literature, the heroine’s dress functions within structures of narration and characterisation. In a broader sense, sartorial description indicates a novel’s engagement with contemporary modes of femininity, female sexuality, narrative structure, literary representation and genre. Dress identifies the heroine and sets her on a narrative trajectory; it also provides the means for her to refashion herself and her story. Changes in the colour, texture and style of dress represents her movement and development throughout the narrative; in short, dress tells the heroine’s story.

In Victorian popular literature, the heroine’s dress functions, not merely as verisimilar or frivolous descriptive detail, but as a signifier to be read. The materiality of dress is crucial to its function within a text; the production histories of sartorial cloths and styles establish them as repositories of complex and contested narratives and these contribute to their use in telling the heroine’s story. Furthermore, the varieties of material texture, colour, and pattern, and their coalescence in a cloth’s visual effect, represent dress’ use in various genres of

popular literature. Dress functions as realist detail, fashion-plate jargon, artistic and sensual detail, expression of or analogy for individual character, disguise, socio-political and sexual symbol, and narrative metaphor. The ephemerality of dress and its capacity to be fashioned lends both a playful mutability and serious intentionality to its use in fiction as heroines refashion their appearances, identities and narratives. As both material object and ephemeral fashion, dress also functions as a metaphor for popular literature and its negotiation of contemporary gender and literary politics.

In 1886, Deliverance Dingle wrote of contemporary novelists that “some ... have almost a genius of taste, and can express a character or indicate a mood by the very colour and texture of a garment, by the play of folds and the sweep of the train of a robe” (266); Victorian popular novelists use dress to tell the heroine’s story (266-7). In the following chapters, I will explore how the colour, texture and style of the heroine’s dress represent both changing modes of fashion and representation in a range of popular texts and genres from 1860 to 1900. These chapters will consider the ways in which the modes and methods of fashion and fashioning function in telling the heroine’s story as she negotiates contemporary notions of femininity and female sexuality, literary genre and representation, and the popular.

Published in 1899, Ellen Thorneycroft Fowler’s novel *A Double Thread* self-consciously reflects on Victorian fashions in dress and literary representation. In this novel, Fowler narrates the ways in which the fashionable modes and threads of dress, narrative and the “popular” are interwoven in telling the heroine’s story. *A Double Thread*, therefore, provides an ideal case study for drawing out the material, literary, historical and critical threads which inform this

project and for examining the theories, methods and implications of reading dress in Victorian popular literature.

A Double Thread tells the stories of twins Ethel and Elfrida Harland. After the deaths of their parents, the sisters were separated and their situations and manners are marked by differences of wealth and class as well as temperament. Raised by her working-class maternal grandparents, Ethel is demure and dowdy; she supports herself and her grandparents by working as a governess. Ethel is the ideal Angel in the House, a veritable “phantom of delight” (21); her story is one of hard work and obedience. Conversely, Elfrida is a cynical and arrogant woman of fashion. She lives in a London mansion on their paternal grandfather’s fortune of fifteen thousand pounds a year (151). Elfrida is described as “extremely handsome, and one of the best-dressed girls in London ... a regular woman of fashion” (51). According to the narrator, Elfrida knows everything that is necessary for a woman of her social position: namely, “the table of precedence, the way to put her clothes on, and the art of talking charmingly without saying anything” (9). Elfrida’s narrative is marked by endless parties and entertainments from which she derives little pleasure. In the course of the novel, the omniscient narrator moves between the two sisters and their doubled narratives, intertwining the novel’s eponymous threads. In doing so, the narrator also moves between two types of femininity and modes of representation, essaying the various functions of dress in depicting the heroine and telling her story.

In *A Double Thread*, Fowler establishes a pattern of doubles, dualities and dichotomies through which to think about the function of dress and the ideas of fashion and fashioning in Victorian popular literature. The novel is structured by the doubled stories of the heroines, Elfrida and Ethel, and the narrator’s

movement between them. Elfrida's narrative epitomises the notion of fashion and Ethel's, the lack of it. Through the novel's doubled heroines, Fowler explores the use of dress as a marker of identity, sexuality, class and fashion. She also subverts this, revealing the heroines' dress to be a costume or disguise through which they refashion their identities and stories. This builds up to the revelation that Ethel is, in fact, Elfrida's fashioned and fictional *alter ego*. Thus, the heroines' dress functions as a narrative tool, and fashion and fashioning become the novel's central, and formative, metaphors. The novel's "double threads" are both sartorial and narrative, and 'fashion' both a style and a method for manipulating it. Through these double meanings, Fowler emphasises the inherent constructedness of Victorian femininity.

The changing colours, textures and styles of the heroines' dress structure *A Double Thread*. As a wealthy "woman of fashion" Elfrida dresses in modish gowns of sumptuous silk (51). Ethel, alternatively, wears plain ready-made *ensembles* in old-fashioned styles and "hasn't a proper evening dress in her possession" (24). Fowler uses the voices of the peripheral characters to essay and juxtapose a variety of ways of reading these women's dress. In the first comparative description of the heroines, the narrator states that Ethel's,

features and height and colouring were exactly the same as Elfrida's; but there the resemblance ended, as far as an ordinary observer could see. Instead of having Elfrida's air of finish and fashion, she was plainly, even poorly, dressed; in place of Elfrida's elaborately arranged *coiffure*, Ethel's hair was done up anyhow, in an old-fashioned style, and was, moreover, decidedly untidy. Unlike Elfrida's stately and studied manner, Ethel was perfectly natural and spontaneous; and, in short, Ethel seemed a light-hearted child of nature, while Elfrida appeared to be a spoilt darling of fortune. (25)

Despite their shared antecedents and similarities of appearance, the differences in the sisters' modes of dress signify their individual personalities and manners. Mrs.

Cottle states, “Miss Elfrida Harland has been brought up in wealthy and aristocratic circles; while Ethel has all the pushing self-confidence of a young person who earns her own living” (146). In contrast, Ethel’s plain dress is also interpreted as a sign of her innocence and honesty: “her beauty was so striking that she looked lovely even in ... simple attire” (32). By this standard, Elfrida is “sadly overdressed ... I do not think it is ladylike for young girls to wear silk. She would look far more genteel in something simpler,” declares Mrs. Cottle (144). Elfrida is one of the modern women criticised by Mr. Cartwright for “studying the art of being natural” (173). Within the novel’s structure of dualisms and doubleness, Captain L’Mesurier’s statement that Elfrida is “a regular woman of fashion” (51) takes on a second meaning; it refers to her tendency towards performance and the artful construction of identity. Thus, dress functions as a costume, disguising a woman’s true identity and replacing it with a fashioned one. This is evidenced in the novel’s final chapters when it is revealed that “Ethel and Elfrida are one and the same person” (258).

The real Ethel Harland died as a child and the Ethel we meet is, in fact, Elfrida in disguise. “My mother was an actress, you know, and so acting came easy to me; it was no difficulty to me to play the part of an unsophisticated girl,” she says (262). Elfrida literally fashions a new identity and narrative for herself as the unsophisticated governess. Ironically, however, Elfrida’s performance as Ethel is contrived to prove her authenticity and assert her true identity. She is sick of “being liked only for the sake of her money,” as symbolised by her fashionable dress, and wishes to “find one man who cared for herself alone” (259). She is successful; however, having won the love of Captain L’Mesurier as Ethel, she must convince him that, as Elfrida, her affection is genuine. She argues that a

woman's true identity is not in the clothes she wears. Rather, dress is extrinsic to the self: "it is fine feathers that make fine birds," Elfrida states (259).

In *A Double Thread*, Fowler uses the heroine's dress as a symbol for her fashioning and performance of opposing forms of femininity and sexuality. Ethel/Elfrida's changes in dress structure the novel's build-up, climax and resolution. It closes with the revelation that the authentic woman is, in fact, the artful woman of fashion. Thus, Fowler demonstrates the difficulties of using dress as a method of establishing social and individual identity; it is ephemeral and subject to continual refashioning. In this way, *A Double Thread* also presents different ways of reading dress in Victorian popular literature: as a fashioned costume and as an expression of identity. In the final chapters, the "Double Thread" of the title comes to represent the heroine's double identity and costume, as well as the double narrative of the novel.

The title of this thesis is borrowed from Fowler's novel, appropriating its connotations of dual identities, double meanings, and interwoven and unravelling narratives. It refers to the multiple meanings of "thread," as the long spun fibre which constitutes the warp or weft of a cloth and, then, metonymically and euphemistically, as dress. It also makes reference to a "thread" as that which connects the successive points in a narrative, and to "threading" as the act of drawing materials together. In Victorian popular literature, all of these threads are interwoven in telling the heroine's story. Changes in the colour, texture and style of dress are employed symbolically, metaphorically and analogously in depicting the heroine's progression throughout the narrative as she negotiates contemporary modes of femininity and female sexuality, and literary representation. The notion of fashion and the act of fashioning inform the heroine's dress, representation and

narrative. The textural threads of her dress and the textual threads of her narrative become intertwined. In this project, fashion is also understood in terms of its dual meanings: as denoting the popular modes of the time, and the processes of making and shaping. Fashionable, then, refers to the quality of being stylish or in fashion, and to the capacity to be shaped or moulded. Popular literature can be seen as fashionable literature, and sartorial refashioning as a metaphor for representation and narrativisation.

As well as being a statement of themes, the notions of “double threads” and fashionable texts also underpin this project’s theoretical framework and methods. They refer to its exploration of the materiality of dress, and the textuality of popular literature in representing the Victorian heroine and telling her story. The duality implied by this title and its implications of interweaving and threading together also refers to the way in which this project draws on scholarship and methodologies from literary criticism, cultural studies, and fashion history, and fashions something new which makes a contribution to these fields. As *A Double Thread* self-consciously reflects on the construction and representation of the heroine, so this project considers the ways in which literary criticism and history remember the Victorian heroine and Victorian popular literature. In changing the title from *A Double Thread* to *Double Threads*, I am seeking to expand the ways in which we think about the connections between fashions in dress and in literature through the interweaving of sartorial, narrative, popular and theoretical threads.

The following sections of the Introduction will trace these threads through fashion history, literary theory and criticism. The intersection of the textual and the material underpins this study and, in the next section of the Introduction, I

explore the significance of the materiality of Victorian dress – its styles, colours, textures and modes of production and consumption – to contemporary notions of femininity. This leads into a discussion of emerging theories and narratives of dress and fashion in the mid-to-late Victorian periodical press. I then review studies of dress in Victorian literature from contemporary commentary to twenty-first-century criticism. In the final section of the Introduction, I survey the novels to be examined in this study and consider their status as popular, fashionable and fashioned texts and as subjects of literary analysis. The complex connections between fashions in dress and those in literature provide a way of reconsidering the category of popular literature. I unravel the complex history, politics, poetics of the term, and its application in the field of Victorian studies and reflect on its usefulness in framing this study. The Introduction closes by picking up these threads in a survey of the sartorial and literary fashions of the mid-to-late Victorian period.

Sartorial Threads

The sartorial threads of this study refer to the materiality of mid-to-late Victorian dress – its modes of production and consumption, styles, colours and textures – and its significance in the contemporary construction and representation of femininity and female sexuality.

In “A Talk on Dress,” published in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* in 1881, M. R. Oakley states that “the object of dress may be said to be threefold – to cover, to warm and to beautify” (589). Oakley identifies the colour, texture and style of a garment as crucial to attaining beauty in women’s dress (589). Arguing for the importance of dressing to suit an individual’s figure and colouring, she

states that “each should understand her own style, accept it, and let the fashion of her dress be built upon it” (589). Whilst according to Oakley it is chiefly “from the point of beauty” that the question of dress should be considered, Caroline Stephen argues that there is a fourth “object of dress”: the expression of the character, individuality and condition in life of the wearer (283).

Writing in *Cornhill Magazine* in 1868, Stephen states that: “no toilette is fairly entitled to the praise of individuality which does not distinctly reflect some such quality really characteristic of the wearer”:

delicacy, freshness, simplicity, liveliness, elaborateness, sternness, dignity, caprice, cheerfulness, gloom, evenness or variability of temperament – all these and countless other varieties of character and disposition have their appropriate influence on dress. (287)

Therein, Stephen contributes another object to dress: that of the construction and expression of female subjectivity and sexuality, in short, telling a story, whether real or fictional, of the wearer’s life. The aesthetic and structural elements of dress used in achieving this, however, remain the same as those identified by Oakley: colour, texture – transparency or opacity – pattern, style and form. These characteristics of dress, and their historical and symbolic connotations, are projected onto the woman’s body, replacing its “plain facts with satisfying mythic and fictional verities” and refashioning her identity and her story (Hollander, *Sex* 47). These “fictional verities” and types of femininity are informed by developments in fashion, art, technological and political histories and shifts in the collective and erotic imaginations, and take the form of varieties of cloths, textures, colours and styles of dress (Hollander, *Sex* 47). As W. D. F. Vincent states in “A Lesson in Fashion Designing” in the introduction to *The Cutters’ Guide to the Cutting of Ladies Garments* (1897):

there is a general desire on the part of ladies to have original styles, and whilst we are reminded again and again that there is no new thing under the sun, and that fashion periodically returns, yet the reverse of this is equally true, viz., that ... with the combination of form, colour, and material, each costume may be quite distinct and fresh. (Vincent 10)

The period of 1860 to 1900 saw considerable change in women's dress, informed by such variations in "form, colour, and material" (Vincent 10). Skirts spread over crinolines and were then swept back and up by bustles; they narrowed and shortened and were exchanged for bloomers. Waists, moulded by constricting corsets, rose and fell, busts were forced in and up, and silhouettes straightened and curved anew. Shoulders dropped and were raised, and sleeves lengthened and shortened, broadened and narrowed. The colour palette expanded considerably, and its tones and shades brightened and faded. Textures varied from diaphanous muslins, to rich and sensuous silks and velvets, and practical wools and tweeds. Accessories and trims were added and removed, either obscuring or emphasising a garment's lines. Throughout this period, fashion was theorised, criticised, aestheticised, historicised, rationalised and politicised. Changes in dress both informed and were informed by changing ideas about women's roles, as the Angel in the House gave way to the New Woman.

Since the publication of the first history of Victorian dress in 1909, Oskar Fischel and Max Von Boehn's *Modes and Manners of the Nineteenth Century*, fashion histories of the period have proliferated. Lucy Johnston, Marion Kite, and Helen Persson's *Nineteenth-Century Fashion in Detail* (2005), Elizabeth Wilson's *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (1985) and Madeleine Ginsburg's *Victorian Dress in Photographs* (1983), are excellent surveys of the era. Specific aspects and periods of Victorian fashion and dress have also received attention from scholars over the intervening century, such as: Beverley Lemire on cotton;

Simon Garfield on Perkins's mauve and other aniline dyes; Leigh Summers on corsetry; Frank Ames, Valerie Reilly, Michelle Maskiell and Chitralkha Zutshi on Kashmiri and paisley shawls; Lou Taylor, David Jenkins and Fiona Anderson on wool and tweed; Winifred Aldrich on tailoring; Alison Matthew David on riding habits; Suzanne Keen on Quaker dress; Diana Crane on rational dress and anti-fashion; and Marjorie Garber on cross-dressing. Given the breadth and depth of scholarship on Victorian fashion history, it would be at once presumptuous and unnecessary to undertake such a study here. Instead, it will suffice to draw out the threads of fashion and textile history from these studies which are relevant to my reading of Victorian popular literature. The chapters in this study are focussed on four fashions in women's dress between 1860 and 1900: white muslin, silk and velvet, paisley shawls, and wool and tweed. Changes in the colours, textures and patterns of these cloths function symbolically and metaphorically in telling the heroine's story as she negotiates contemporary notions of femininity and female sexuality, and literary genre and representation.

During the Victorian period, colours and types of fabrics had specific and well-known symbolic functions, and these are both evoked and subverted in the literature of the period. Stephen argues that "form, colour and texture" of dress are "worth studying seriously" and should form a part of "women's education" (282-3). She proceeds to "give a sketch of those leading principles which I should wish to see impressed upon the minds of students": harmony of colour, texture and style (282). Throughout the mid-to-late Victorian period, guides to dressing, tailors' manuals and reports on the latest fashions in the periodical press published lists of the connotations of various cloths and colours. Vincent states that, "it is well known that certain colours have an effect on the sentiments of the beholder

or wearer” (14); however, the meanings ascribed to these cloths and colours shift significantly throughout the period and it is these changing connotations which have significance for the use of dress in contemporary popular literature. As Christine Bayles Kortsch argues, Victorian readers were conversant in both “the language of cloth and the language of print” and they utilised this “dual literacy” (4) “to expose, complicate, and redefine women’s social roles and literary tradition[s]” (20).

In 1866, the *Ladies’ Gazette of Fashion* described two distinct fashions: white muslin morning dresses (“Summary ... May” 46) and “complete *toilettes* of velvet ... [in] violet, dark blue, Havannah brown and black” (“Summary ... Oct.” 86). While white muslin implies a high social status, richly-coloured velvet connotes luxury and sensual indulgence. In April 1870, “Myra,” the fashion correspondent for *The Young Englishwoman* magazine, reported that the new fashions had faded to the “art colours” of “green (water of the Nile), and eau de suez, Scabia (a deep red), claret, Burgoyne, pink, rose, brown, light blue, fawn, dark blue, and Alexandra blue; drab, marine, [and] violet” (206). In 1897, Vincent states that “white suggests purity and brightness. / Black [suggests] guilt and despair. / Grey [suggests] retirement, quiet, &c. / Red [suggests] license, life and daring” (14-5). Texture intensifies the effects of colour and patterns complicate or elaborate the lines and reading of a garment (Vincent 16-7); “complicated and intricate patterns and trimmings seem to shadow forth the complexity and intricacy” of the wearer’s identity, Stephen argues (298). As Dingle states, the colour and texture of dress can “express a character or indicate a mood” (266).

As well as the colours and textures of dress, the history and methods of production of fashionable cloths were significant in influencing the symbolic

meanings attributed to women's dress during the Victorian period. Consumers were interested in the origins of their clothes; this is evidenced in the publication of articles such as "Cashmere Shawls: Of What are They Made?" (*Once a Week*, 1865) and "A Silk Dress" (*Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 1885). W. M. W.'s article on cashmere shawls traces the history of this "invaluable material" and argues that the threads of this garment, both actual and symbolic, connect fashionable Britain to the farthest reaches of Empire (68). In "A Silk Dress," R. R. Bowker summarises the production of a fashionable silk gown through a history of the cloth, from modern sericulture to spinning, dying, weaving and finishing to dressmaking and the splendour and "gayty" [sic] of the ballroom (240). The history and materiality of fashionable Victorian dress and changes in colour, texture, style and symbolic connotation will be traced throughout the following chapters, and the implications of these to contemporary representations of femininity and female sexuality analysed.

While scholars examining dress in fiction have considered the topic in light of the fashion industry, they do not take into account the origins and characteristics of fashionable cloths. Colour, texture and material combine with sartorial style and fashion to produce a variety of visual and symbolic effects. These also change with context and wearer, raising questions about how we read sartorial description in Victorian popular literature. As I begin to move from sartorial threads to narrative ones, then, I will consider the role of the periodical press and the emergence of writing on dress and fashion during the mid-nineteenth century in forming a correlation between the fashioning of identity through dress and in literary representation. During this period, fashioning

emerged as a literal and figurative, textual and material, practice for the construction and representation of identity.

First serialised in *Fraser's Magazine* in 1833-4 and published in book form in 1838, Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, "the tailor re-tailored," was influential in proposing a philosophy and narrative of dress. In the opening chapter, Carlyle states that "nothing of a fundamental character, whether in the way of Philosophy or History, has been written on the subject of Clothes" (3). He is incredulous that, "considering our present advanced state of culture,"

the grand Tissue of all Tissues, the only real Tissue, should have been quite overlooked by Science, – the vestural Tissue, namely wool or other cloth; which Man's Soul wears as its outmost wrappage and overall; wherein his whole other Tissues are included and screened, his whole faculties work, his whole self lives, moves, has its being? (4-5)

Carlyle's protagonist Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, Professor of "Things in General" at the fictional Weissnichtwo University, seeks to redress this by offering a manuscript entitled "Clothes: their Origin and Influence" to the editorship of the novel's narrator. The narrative which follows is at once fictional, satirical, polemical and philosophical, providing a compelling argument for the significance of dress to all aspects of life (C. Hughes, *Dressed* 58). Although it is not the purpose of this study to analyse the style and structure of *Sartor Resartus* or to discuss the nuances of its philosophy, it is important to indicate the significance of Carlyle's work in informing writing about dress and fashion, both factual and fictional, throughout the Victorian period.

Writing through the metafictionally doubled voices of Teufelsdröckh and the unnamed editor, Carlyle explores dress throughout history. Taking the subject both literally and metaphorically, they analyse the "Characteristics" of dress, "Old Clothes," "Organic Filaments," and the role of the "Tailor," and consider dress's

significance as social, symbolic and iconic. Through the negotiations between Teufelsdröckh and the editor, Carlyle also demonstrates the challenges of writing a definitive history and philosophy of dress; chapter titles include “Editorial Difficulties” and “Pedagogy”. Both Teufelsdröckh and the editor also make repeated reference to the “unspeakable” significance and qualities of dress (79). The use of this phrase is itself significant, being at once an assertion of the importance of dress, a reference to its spiritual symbolisation, and an expression of its inherent elusiveness and position outside language and thought. These ambiguities can be seen reflected in fashion theory in the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries. It was not only Carlyle’s discussion of dress that proved to be influential throughout the nineteenth century and beyond, but also his conflation of fashion theory and fiction.

Interwoven with passages of “Clothes: their Origin and Influence” and the editor’s commentary thereon are fragments of Teufelsdröckh’s biography. This narrative structure allows Carlyle to enact the idea that within “the vestural Tissue,” a person’s “whole faculties work, his whole self lives, moves, [and] has its being” (Carlyle 4-5).² Teufelsdröckh’s philosophy of dress, his subjectivity and his story are developed concurrently in the novel. The title and central metaphor of the work, “the tailor re-tailored,” refers to both of these narratives. It is, variously, a literal reference to fashion and sartorial construction, and a symbolic allusion to the processes of writing and editing and to the development of an authorial subjectivity which provides the subtext to Carlyle’s novel. “Tailoring” refers to the analogous processes of sartorial construction, identity formation, and storytelling. Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*, then, was formative in intertwining the threads of dress and literature and informing the ways in which dress was used

analogically and symbolically as an expression of identity and a narrative tool in Victorian literature. As the first modern work of a “fundamental character” to be “written on the subject of Clothes,” it also set the scene for a developing field of fashion journalism in the nineteenth-century periodical press and established its relationship with literature (3).

Throughout the mid-Victorian period, two topics predominated in British women’s periodicals: fashion and literature. Both offered a constant source of novelty and material for enthusiastic endorsement or outraged critique. Frequently, these topics were not broached in isolation, but discussed in conjunction. Publications such as *The Queen*, *The Ladies’ Treasury*, *The Young Ladies’ Journal*, *The Lady’s Magazine*, *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, *The Ladies’ Gazette of Fashion*, *The Girl’s Own Paper*, *The Lady’s World* and *Woman’s World* printed articles on the latest novels alongside reports on fashions from Paris and London, informative articles on the history and modes of production of fashions and fashionable cloths, and advice on how to dress for one’s figure, complexion and condition of life (Stephen 283). Periodicals with a broader readership, such as *Cornhill Magazine*, *Once a Week*, *The National Observer*, *The Scots Observer*, *Temple Bar* and *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* also published works on dress. Such articles were not merely observational or critical, but also theoretical.

In 1865, an anonymous contributor to *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* criticised those who take “a stern conventional view of the subject” of dress, starting that “there has been an immense amount of moralizing about [it], but much of it does not at all go to the root of the matter” (“Dress” 425). In an echo of Carlyle’s *Sartor Restarus*, this article argues that dress is an essential condition of

humanity: “‘I think, therefore I am,’ is the conclusion of adult reason; the baby has leapt to a similar conclusion forty years sooner ‘I have shoes and a red sash, therefore I am’” (“Dress” 435-26). Three years later, Stephen took up this topic and wrote “On Thoughtfulness in Dress,” arguing that clothing reflects, not merely the general essence of the human condition, but the character and individuality of the wearer (287). Like Carlyle, Stephen argues for the importance of dress in developing and expressing individual subjectivity. This interest in the significance of dress in telling a social story of the wearer’s personality and condition in life (Stephen 278) engendered a study of dress as a narrative image or technique in contemporary literature (Dingle 266).

Throughout the mid-Victorian period, theories of dress and literature developed concurrently in the periodical press, becoming increasingly intertwined. Commentators wrote on “clothes in fact and fiction,” and authors and literary commentators also published discussions and treatises on dress (Buck 89). In 1860, Mrs. Craik wrote “On the Subject of Clothes” for *Macmillan’s Magazine*. In 1878, Mrs. Oliphant authored *Dress* for Macmillan and Co.’s “Art at Home” series.

Oliphant opens her work by positioning it within “that wave of new impulse which has so much changed the appearance of our homes, and even the texture and fashion of our manufactures”: Aestheticism (*Dress 2*).³ *Dress* illustrates the blurring of the distinctions between dress and fashion and the arts of painting, theatre and literature in the late-nineteenth century and the tendency to see dress as a matter of art, rather than social necessity. After a discussion of the “Fundamentals” of her topic, chiefly “matters of historical import” and sartorial style, Oliphant undertakes an analysis of “Dress: In the Poets” (8-31). Oliphant

explores the significance of history, social change, art and poetry to both fashions and theories of dress in the mid-Victorian period. Thus, she provides a model for reading dress in contemporary literature. In closing, Oliphant indicates the necessity of future study in Victorian fashion, addressing the question: “What is to be Done?” (64).

Double Threads draws on such sources in exploring the interconnectedness of Victorian fashions in dress and in literature, and the use of dress in a variety of genres of popular fiction from 1860 to 1900. This is the first study to examine the significance of the history and production of sartorial cloths and styles in informing the use of dress in literature; it considers the production of dress as a metaphor for the textual construction and representation of femininity, and as a tool for narrative.

Narrative Threads

In Grant Allen’s *The Type-Writer Girl* (1897), the narrator draws a correlation between fashions in dress and in literature. Of the heroine, she states that:

In every age we fashion ... [her] story anew in our passing manner, dressing it up in our clothes and fitting it to our particular modes and morals. But ‘tis the same to the end through all disguises. The Greeks told it as the tale of Perseus and Andromeda ... Medieval Italy made the sign of the cross, turned the son of Danaë into a Christian martyr, and clad the beautiful nude maiden in clinging silk robes ... The Renaissance came, and Cellini unclothed her again, in his revived paganism ... Our modern [Victorian] novelists dress her up afresh in the princess robe of the day (sage green or crushed strawberry), and turn her loose on that slimy old dragon the world, till Prince Charming comes by as a baronet in a tennis suit, to lay at her feet ten thousand a year and the title of My Lady. (26)

The “modes” referred to in this passage are both sartorial and narrative; the methods which alter them are literal and figurative, material and textual. Together, they fashion the heroine and her story. The association of fashioning, dressing and storytelling constitute the “Narrative Threads” of this study. The following section of the Introduction explores the theories, methods and critical history of reading sartorial description a literary technique, and fashioning as a metaphor for narrative, in Victorian literature.

In his 1881 novel *The Portrait of a Lady*, Henry James essays the problem of how we read the clothed body in Victorian literature, both conceptually and methodologically. Madame Merle asks:

What shall we call our “self”? Where does it begin?
Where does it end? It overflows into everything that
belongs to us – and then it flows back again. I know a
large part of myself is in the clothes I choose to wear.

Isabel Archer, the novel’s heroine, replies:

I don’t know whether I succeed in expressing myself, but I
know that nothing else expresses me. Nothing that belongs
to me is any measure of me; everything’s on the contrary a
limit, a barrier ... Certainly the clothes which, as you say, I
choose to wear, don’t express me; and heaven forbid they
should!

... My clothes may express the dressmaker, but
they don’t express me. To begin with it’s not my choice
that I wear them, they’re imposed on me by society. (205)

As this exchange demonstrates, dress is at once a form of idiosyncratic or artistic self-expression and a social imperative, a boundary or marker of the “limit” of the self or its expressive shell.

Dress is an innate expression of selfhood or subjectivity and a form of masquerade, as in “dress up” (C. Hughes, *Dressed 2*). It is “the frontier between the self and the not-self,” linking “the biological body to the social being, and public to private” (E. Wilson 2-3). Dress also marks the boundary between the

corporeal body and the body as image, object or text (Koppen 2). It expresses private and collective fantasies of identity, gender and sexuality (Warwick and Cavallaro xvi). Dress can emphasise the body and its significance to female subjectivity; it can also disguise, screen or veil the physical body and signal transcendence, bodily absence and “self-erasure” (Kortsch 24). As the narrator of George Moore’s *A Drama in Muslin* (1886) states: “there is always a close and intimate, though not always an obvious analogy, between our mental and physical characteristics” (167).

Methodologically, the significance of dress has been conceptualised as a language (most famously by Alison Lurie in *The Language of Clothes*, 1981) and as a “mysterious art which cannot be reduced to language” (Stephen 282). It is perceived as “a mere amusement, not worth studying seriously” (Stephen 282) and as a “science” governed by “immutable laws” (Gall 551). *The Psychology of Clothes* has been analysed by J. C. Flugel. Dress has been studied from the perspectives of politics, religion, technology and economics; these approaches have recently been summarised in David Jenkins’ edited volumes of *The Cambridge History of Western Textiles* (2003). In 1833, Carlyle proposed both a philosophy and theory of dress in *Sartor Resartus* and Moore, in *A Drama in Muslin*, likened the colours and textures of dress to types of music. In the 1870s, proponents of the artistic dress movement characterised dress as a form of art. In *Seeing Through Clothes* (1978), Anne Hollander pursues this, exploring the use of clothing in representations of the body in Western art, from Greek sculpture and Medieval and Renaissance portraiture, to twentieth-century film and fashion photography. In *Seeing Through Clothes* and *Sex and Suits* (1994), Hollander also views dress as a form of art through which the body is either represented or

obfuscated. Dress, she argues, is a form of fiction which makes a fashioned claim to authenticity and reality in a manner similar to literature (*Sex* 8; *Seeing* xv).

The use of dress in literature at once reflects and interrogates these discourses and methodologies. In mid-to-late-Victorian popular literature, dress performs all of these functions. Its variations of colour, texture and style indicate its use as fashionable description, evocative and sensual detail, expression of or analogy for individual character, disguise, socio-political and sexual symbol, and narrative metaphor. Dress can reveal the heroine's true nature and mood; in *The Woman in White* Laura Fairlie's white gown is said to "innocently betray her purity and truth" (Collins 171). In *Aurora Floyd*, the narrator states that "every fold of muslin seemed to tell how far away ... [the heroine's] thoughts had been when that hasty toilette was made" (Braddon 194). Dress can also function as a costume for the performance of ideal Victorian femininity as in the "mummery in muslin" of Moore's *A Drama in Muslin* (99). Likewise, dress functions as a veil, emphatically disguising the heroine's body and her identity (Doy 113), as in Lady Audley's donning of a "blue dress" (Braddon 79) after the disappearance of George Talboys in M. E. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1861). In the case of the rational-dressing and cross-dressing heroine of the late-nineteenth century, dress can also have a political function. It indicates her rejection of the popular fashions, narratives, and gender politics of the Victorian period; when the hero of H. G. Wells's *The Wheels of Chance* (1896) observes a woman in "rationals" he exclaims, "probably, she was one of these here New Women" (42). As Allen suggests, the woman's story is constantly being refashioned, dressed in the imagery, and fitted to the modes and morals, of the age (*Type-Writer* 26). These modes are not merely sartorial and social, but also narrative and literary. In

Victorian popular literature, dress functions to tell the heroine's story as she negotiates contemporary fashions, notions of gender, and politics of representation and literary genre.

Sartorial description weaves together a variety of historical, artistic, poetic, literary, sartorial, sexual, social and cultural narratives. Such descriptions vary in tone and purpose from passing remarks on colour and style, moralising on the perils of fashion, and lengthy passages of fashion-plate jargon, to more lyrical, artistic and highly symbolic forms. They can be realistic, naturalistic, satirical, ironic, melodramatic or metaphoric. Sartorial description also functions as a self-conscious literary technique. Authors use their heroines' sartorial refashioning as metaphors for their own negotiation of contemporary politics of literature, representation and genre. In doing so, they enact the ways in which dress functions to create fashioned fictions of Victorian femininity.

Oliphant's *Dress*, enacts the shift from seeing dress as a purely material object, subject to social mores and fashionable modes, to viewing it as a literary symbol and repository of narrative. In commencing her examination of "Dress: In the Poets," Oliphant observes that "it is not to be supposed that the poets, to whom the picturesque side of life is so valuable, should have missed out that one of its adjuncts which tells most effectively in all pictures and descriptions": dress (19). "From the earliest times," she states, "there have been found in the tales of the minstrel and the primitive chronicler, references to dress" (19). Oliphant then discusses sartorial description in the works of Geoffrey Chaucer, Edmund Spenser, Robert Herrick and, although cursorily, William Shakespeare and King James I of Scotland.

Oliphant's discussion is primarily observational, limited to quoting apposite passages from the works of the chosen poets. Rather than analysing the significance of dress in these works, she extols the usefulness of such poetic description as a source of fashion history; "no book of costume could make this party or their clothes so visible to the reader" as the works of Chaucer, she states (24). Rather than considering sartorial description as a literary technique in its own right, Oliphant treats it as either an adjunct to other "pictures" and visual symbolism, or a form of social satire (19). Consequently, she does not extend her discussion of dress and literature beyond the seventeenth century, arguing that "it would ... be vain to follow dress through all the poetical comments of the eighteenth century, when all its arts had become conscious, and when no subject was considered more important" (31). Oliphant closes this chapter with a brief reading of Alexander Pope's "The Rape of the Lock" (1712) and proceeds with a discussion of the influence of art history on contemporary fashion. Despite Oliphant's limited scope and approach, this work demonstrates an interest in the relationship between dress and literature in the mid-to-late Victorian period. It is also significant in initiating a discussion regarding the use of sartorial description in contemporary fiction.

Drawing on Oliphant's work, Dingle picks up the topic of dress in literature with her 1886 article for *The Lady's World*, "Clothes: From the Novelist's Point of View".⁴ Where Oliphant considered dress "in the poets" of the previous two centuries, Dingle's focus is on contemporary prose fiction. While Oliphant uses the increased "consciousness" and "importance" of sartorial description in the literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a means of limiting her study, Dingle adopts this as the grounds of her analysis. Surveying

“a number of novels selected at random” (266), Dingle was the first to critically address the significance of “fashion in fiction” as a “conscious” literary technique (Oliphant, *Dress* 31).

Whether employed in a “vague and ... general way” as “abstractedly pretty, without reference to the unities of time, place and person” or as “an important adjunct to the picturesqueness of their *mise-en-scène*” and to express “character – or traits of it –” Dingle argues that dress is the frequent subject of novelists’ “energies and ingenuities” (266). According to Dingle, sartorial description in Victorian literature goes beyond the verisimilar, functioning in the development of character and mood, and contributing to a novel’s narrative structure (266).

The novelists “randomly selected” for examination by Dingle are Charlotte Brontë, William Makepeace Thackeray, Jane Austen, George Eliot, Anthony Trollope, William Black, Ouida, Mrs. Oliphant, Mrs. Mulock Craik and Honoré de Balzac (266-7). Rosy Aindow observes that these authors are predominantly of the realist school (10). Nevertheless, it is the differences in their literary styles and “treatment of the subject” of “fashion in fiction,” rather than any similarities of genre, which is of particular interest to Dingle (266). In the course of the article, she explores the significance of changes in the colour and texture of dress worn by nineteenth-century heroines (266).

Dingle considers the “white muslins” of Austen’s heroines, Dorothea Brooke’s “Madonna-like” grey gowns and Rosamund Vincy’s “butterfly colours” in Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, “Miss Grey’s headwear in ‘The Scarborough Family’ [sic] [by Anthony Trollope],”⁵ the “brown frocks and clean collars” worn by Mrs. Oliphant’s heroines and the aesthetic of contrast – “one colour [is] ... always

‘relieved’ by a slender bit of [a] brilliant contrasting one” – employed by Black (266-7). Dingle associates these variations with differences of genre; Mrs. Oliphant’s use of dress to indicate the morality and virtue of her heroines and Austen’s propensity to “[throw] white muslin over her heroines” lends verisimilitude to their domestic and “provincial” settings and is indicative of social realism (Dingle 266). Brontë, Thackeray and Eliot, on the other hand, rely on the symbolic connotations of colours and textures of dress to develop character – a technique which Dingle likens to pre-Raphaelitism (Dingle 267). “Ouida’s dress, like her other ‘effects’,” Dingle states, “is much more of the impressionist school” and captures the mood of a scene (Dingle 267). Mainly confined to registers of colour, her use of dress functions as “a shimmer, a glow ... but rarely anything more definite” with “no more detail than [a] Turner fantas[y]” (267). Dingle associates this with Ouida’s sensational and romantic literary style.

As well as considering the relationship between fashions in dress and in literary genres, Dingle’s article also addresses the significance of sartorial description in structuring a narrative and indicating the heroine’s movement and development within it. Changes in the colour and texture of dress, and the dynamic “play of folds and the sweep of the robe,” tell the heroine’s story (266). Instead of seeing dress in literature as a static social symbol or icon of the picturesque, Dingle explores the ways in which the heroine negotiates contemporary notions of femininity and female sexuality through changing her dress; her use of the terms “play” and “sweep” are significant in that they imply an agency which is frequently absent from discussions of the Victorian heroine. Thus, Dingle’s article provides an invaluable model for an analysis of dress in

Victorian literature which takes into account changes in fashions and styles in dress and in literature, and textures of cloth and narrative.

Despite this rich, though limited, critical history, literary critics have been slow to return to the topic of dress. Historians of Victorian fashion frequently draw on contemporary literature as sources of “factual and descriptive evidence” (Buck 89), quoting from novels, plays and poems “to lend accuracy and historical ‘feel’ to their work” (Taylor, *Study* 90). As Oliphant suggests, literary “references to dress, descriptive and satirical” are “of the utmost importance” to fashion history (19). In the twentieth century, Anne M. Buck’s “Clothes in Fact and Fiction” (*Costume*, 1983), Rachel Worth’s “Thomas Hardy and Rural Dress” (*Costume*, 1995) and “Elizabeth Gaskell: Clothes and Class Identity” (*Costume*, 1998) indicate a shift in focus from the fashion to the fiction, yet also work to illustrate how literature can be used in fashion history. Lou Taylor theorises the way in which fashion historians employ literature as a historical source in her chapter on “Approaches Using Literary Sources” in *The Study of Dress History* (2002). Literary critics, however, have been slower to return this attention and consider dress in, rather than through, literature.

The first twentieth-century literary critics to consider the role of dress and fashion in fiction were strongly influenced by fashion history. They tend to consider sartorial description as a verisimilar technique by which authors position their heroines relative to the modes and manners of the day.

Accordingly, many surveys of Victorian fiction include references to the colour and style of a heroine’s dress; Dorothea Brooke’s ascetic grey gowns are frequently singled out for attention. In such readings, the heroine’s dress is seen as a realist marker of her class, social position and subjectivity. The first

substantive examination of dress in literature is Kimberly Reynolds and Nicola Humble's chapter on "The Old Woman in New Clothes: Sexual and Body Politics Post-1848" in *Victorian Heroines: Representations of Femininity in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Art* (1993). In this chapter, Reynolds and Humble explore the way in which dress functions to inscribe Victorian sexual and gender politics on the woman's body in mid-century literature (51). Like Buck and Worth, Reynolds and Humble use dress as a key to understanding literature's relationship with social forces. Dress is seen as an application of extrinsic forces onto the body, rather than an expression of interiority, or a negotiation of the two. They conclude that:

the representation of women's clothes and bodies, productive as it is for a reading of covert inscriptions of sexuality, inscribes finally only the objectification of women's bodies as an erotic commodity for a male market – either that of prostitution or marriage – allowing little space for the naming of women's own desires and pleasures. (61)

According to Reynolds and Humble, dress is a social tool, not a literary one. This presupposes a realist reading of a text, aimed at the recovery of the social and fashionable modes of the time and the way in which they are encoded or reproduced within a literary text. In the last twenty years, dress in fiction has become a field of studies within literary criticism, and theoretical and methodological approaches to the topic have diversified; the essays collected in *Fashion in Fiction: Text and Clothing in Literature, Film and Television* (edited by Peter McNeil, Vicki Karaminas and Catherine Cole) evidence the breadth and depth of these approaches and their application to a range of textual and filmic sources. Studies in this field are focussed on representations of women's dress in English prose fiction from the Stuart period onwards, with particular emphasis on

the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is these which I will review in contextualising my study.

Clair Hughes's *Henry James and the Art of Dress* (2001) establishes a methodology for analysing the use of dress in works by a single author, as discussed by Aindow in her survey of the field (2). As Hughes states in her later and broader study, sartorial description "can ... operate as ... [an] author's personal sign-system, conscious or unconscious" (*Dressed* 3). Jennie Elizabeth Batchelor's *Dress, Distress and Desire: Clothing and the Female Body in Eighteenth-Century Literature* (2005) and Aileen Ribeiro's *Fashion and Fiction: Dress in Art and Literature in Stuart England* (2005) were the first critical monographs to survey the use of dress in the construction and representation of femininity in varieties of literature over an historical period. In her monograph, Batchelor examines both canonical and non-canonical texts, including novels, conduct books and women's magazines, "to investigate the pressures that the growth of the fashion market placed on conceptions of female virtue and propriety" (jacket information). In its scope and methodology, Batchelor's work provides a valuable model for my study of the proceeding century.

In modern history, the Victorian period is conspicuous for its vibrant literary culture and its distinctive, ever-changing, fashions. The emergence of highly descriptive realist literature, the proliferation of other popular genres, and the development of the modern fashion industry and the periodical press mean that this period is an ideal field for the examination of dress in fiction. Along with the development of a cultural studies approach to literature in the field of Victorian studies, a number of monographs and journal articles have been published over the past ten years which explore dress and fashion culture in

Victorian literature. Their methodologies and textual and material subjects vary significantly. Together, they constitute the critical tradition and field within which my study is situated.

Hughes's *Dressed in Fiction* is notable in this field. Following a basic chronology, she examines the use of dress in novels from Daniel Defoe's *Roxana* (1724) to Anita Brookner's *Hotel Du Lac* (1984) with a marked emphasis on the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Hughes's work is formative in establishing a way of reading dress as a literary technique within the particularities of both text and author. However, the survey structure of the monograph, moving between discussions of women's and men's dress, and between genres and styles of literature, precludes the possibility of identifying broader symbolic patterns or shifts between various historical periods, texts and genres. This discrete approach aligns with the objective of the study; Hughes is wary of exaggerating the significance of dress within these novels, stating in her Introduction that:

my intention is not to prove that dress is the hidden key to all the mysteries of these texts, but to show how an exploration of the author's employment of dress ... can illuminate the structure of [a] text, its values, its meanings or its symbolic pattern. (6)

In pursuit of this, Hughes approaches dress from a "sociological and historical viewpoint," arguing that "references to dress for both reader and writer contribute to the 'reality effect': they lend tangibility and visibility to character and context" (2). For twenty-first century readers of eighteenth to twentieth-century literature, dress functions as "part of a social system of signs," contributing towards the creation of an "image of the period" and allowing the reader to place the text within its historical context (9). A similar approach is taken by Aindow in *Dress and Identity in British Literary Culture, 1870-1914* (2010).

Despite the generality implied by her monograph's title, Aindow focusses on the representation of fashion and the fashion industry, rather than dress.

"Taking the fiction of the 1870s as its starting point, this study argues that fashion was given a distinctive voice in novels of the period," Aindow states in the Introduction (2). She argues for a more "comparative approach to representations of dress in relation to the wider fashion industry" than has hitherto been taken (2). This work treats dress as a conceptual and ideological, rather than material, product of the fashion industry. Focussing on its function within shifting social and gender hierarchies, Aindow considers the use of dress in constructing and representing individual identities. However, she states that "there are clear problems when using dress as a means of establishing ... identity. Clothing by its very nature is ambiguous" (8). Instead of trying to resolve this ambiguity or considering it as symptomatic of the "problematic relationship between fashion and class," as Aindow does, I view it as crucial to dress' significance within mid-to-late Victorian popular literature (154).

Dress is, inherently, fashioned, material, ephemeral and artificial. It replaces the body's "plain facts with satisfying mythic and fictional verities" (Hollander, *Sex* 47); these can be divested and the symbolic connotations attributed to them refashioned according to the personality of the wearer, and the physical and historical context. As Hollander states, dress makes a consciously "theatrical visual claim" of reality, akin to that of literature (*Sex* 8; *Seeing* xv). It destabilises the categories of the ideal and the real, reality and fiction.

My project considers dress as a tool by which authors mediate between social and sexual codes and notions of identity, and the literary and generic codes of Victorian fiction. Rather than seeing dress as a form of realist social

symbolism, it pays attention to dress's inherent fashioned-ness and the means by which it functions as a metaphor both within and for popular literature and its narratives of femininity and female sexuality. Taking as its starting point Dingle's statement that novelists "can express a character" and create a mood through "the very colour and texture of a garment" and "the play of folds and the sweep of the train of a robe," this project explores the use of dress in telling the heroine's story (266). As Ribeiro states, dress "itself can be said to produce fiction" (1). The materiality of dress, its fashioned-ness, is crucial to this.

In *Dress Culture in Late Victorian Women's Fiction* (2009), Kortsch argues that in the nineteenth century, interpreting textiles functioned as a form of literacy (4). Such knowledge of dress and fashion is gendered feminine (5). It can, Kortsch argues, "be utilized as an alternative to mainstream, patriarchal discourse" (5). "In her work bag, the ideal [Victorian] woman reader carried not only shears and a needle," Kortsch states, "but something more invisible, less tangible – a sophisticated knowledge of the social significance of clothing and of the etiquette surrounding even the simplest of garments" (55). The idea of reading dress and sartorial refashioning as a way of negotiating contemporary ideals and narratives of femininity underpins my analysis of Victorian popular literature. Instead of understanding fashioning as a literal act, as in sewing, this project conceptualises it as a range of symbolic techniques by which the heroine's dress and the meanings ascribed to it, change throughout a narrative. Changes in the colour, texture and style of dress function within narrative structure and characterisation in telling the heroine's story.

While Kortsch provides a general framework for reading cloth in Victorian literature, articles such as Suzanne Daly's "Spinning Cotton: Domestic and

Industrial Novels” (2008) and “Kashmir Shawls in Mid-Victorian Novels” (2002), Suzanne Keen’s “Quaker Dress, Sexuality, and the Domestification of Reform in the Victorian Novel” (2002) and Ann Heilmann’s “(Un)Masking Desire: Cross-dressing and the Crisis of Gender in New Woman Fiction” (2000) provide useful models for reading the materiality of particular sartorial fashions and types of cloth in Victorian literature. However, their analyses are similarly underpinned by realist readings of Victorian literature and do not consider the significance of dress as a narrative, rather than social, tool. *Double Threads* is the first study to consider the way in which the heroine’s dress functions to tell her story in Victorian popular literature, using the materiality and fashion-ness of dress as a metaphor for the textual construction of femininity and as a tool and metaphor for narrative.

Therefore, it is necessary to look outside the fields of Victorian studies and literary criticism for a model for considering dress as a narrative mechanism. In her influential essay on costume in twentieth-century black and white film, “Costume and Narrative: How Dress Tells a Woman’s Story,” Jane Gaines makes a distinction between a text’s primary narrative and its “costume plot” (188). She states that a text’s costume plot:

organizes an idiolect with its own motifs, variations, surprises, anticipations, and resolutions which unfold in a temporality which does not correspond with narrative developments, whose climaxes occur in alteration with narrative scenes, in the undramatic moments. (205)

Costuming also functions to heighten the emotional intensity of a scene (205). Gaines argues that the colour, style and texture of the heroine’s dress function both discretely and in harmony to tell her story (205). Within Gaines’s theory, dress can be seen to have both aesthetic and connotative functions. It draws attention to the heroine’s body, revealing her subjectivity and sexuality, and veils

it, replacing her individuality with conventional notions of femininity (Wilson, *Seeing* 156).

The usefulness of Gaines's theory, however, is limited because the texts with which she deals are chiefly filmic and rely on visual recognition and tangible sensations for their effects. She argues that "texture and style also work together ... to stimulate the viewer's visual appetite for a crescendo of opulence as well as emotion" (205). As Roland Barthes argues in *The Fashion System*, there is an inherent and significant difference between "real" clothing and written descriptions thereof (4; 8); description transforms the object into language (Barthes 12). This process of description, or representation, complicates the narrative function of dress in written texts. *Double Threads* explores this.

Working from Gaines's theory, I consider the ways in which Victorian popular authors use sartorial symbolism within the narrative structures and sign systems of the novel. This reveals their engagement with ideas about verisimilitude and mimesis in representation, and literary genre. In Victorian popular literature, dress both veils and reveals, signalling the structure of build-up, climax and resolution. Dress functions both within the narrative temporality of a novel, and in tension with it. In this way, *Double Threads* refigures and extends Gaines's theory, providing a framework for reading dress within nineteenth-century fiction.

In this project, I use the materiality of sartorial description in Victorian popular literature, and its self-conscious interest in its history and means of production, as a way of thinking about the function of dress within a narrative. This approach charts the materiality of dress throughout the 1860s to 1900, connecting fashions in dress to those in literature and genre. By bringing together studies of novels from a range of popular genres and non-fiction texts such as

fashion histories and periodicals, this project provides a way of thinking about popular literature as both fashionable and fashioned fiction.

Popular and Fashionable Threads

The final threads of this Introduction are at once literary and political, textual and material, theoretical and methodological. They refer to the definition and identification of ‘popular literature’ and the implications of using the term to frame this study.

The texts examined in the following chapters are collectively referred to as popular literature. In using the designation ‘popular’ I am aware that, as many scholars have noted, “popular” is “far from a transparent term” (N. Daly, *Modernism* 5). “Popular” implies unoriginality and unsophistication, mediocrity and ephemerality, success and influence. The “popular” is a site of “ideological conformity” and conservatism, and of the questioning of contemporary socio-cultural values (Liggins and Duffy xiv). It refers to the modes and politics of production and consumption alike; it denotes transience yet is a term of enduring use and significance. As a term, it is at once indispensable and commonplace (Glover and McCracken 1). Popular can be used as a generic marker or as an indication of a text’s reception or sales. It can also be applied retrospectively as an assessment of a work’s significance and influence, or as an analytic framework. According to Nicholas Daly, the “popular” is “a space of negotiation between terms rather than ... a fixed set of texts, or images, or practices” (*Modernism* 6). To refer to this group of texts as popular, then, is not to impose upon them a set of defining characteristics or to suggest a uniformity of style or structure, but to

place them within a shared context of debates about culture, art, fashion, gender, literature, authorship and reading.

The struggle to define “the popular” is ongoing in the fields of literary criticism and cultural theory and studies, with the work of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, E. P. Thomson, Antonio Gramsci and John Fiske remaining both formative and contentious.⁶ Critics, historians and theorists assert that it is the context and the effects of a form of literature, rather than any formal stylistic and generic features, which define it as popular. David Glover and Scott McCracken’s edited collection *Cambridge Companion to Popular Fiction* (2012), essays the discourses and debates surrounding the definition and history of this term. Popular literature has been described in terms of its relationship and relevance to a variety of intellectual, literary, philosophical, economic, technological, political and social movements. In their search for a definition of the popular, theorists and critics look to the quantifiable data of production and consumption, and the more abstract questions of cultural function, aesthetic value and ideology. As Ken Gelder states, definitions of “popular” are imbued within the cultural politics of the moment (1); accordingly, the definition and identification of the “popular” changes over time. That which is popular in one period may be highbrow, or even classic, in the next, a phenomenon evidenced by Charles Dickens’s elevation into the canon during the twentieth century; alternatively, a popular text may quickly fall into obscurity. Equally, a long-forgotten text may receive renewed attention. This instability renders as naïve, at best, Victor E. Neuburg’s bold assertion in *Popular Literature: A History and Guide* (1977), that “what I want to do in this book is to define popular literature, to trace its development in England from the beginning of the printing press to the

year 1897” (11). As Daly argues, the “popular” is a grey area of culture and, by extension, literary criticism (*Modernism* 5). Rather than taking this uncertainty and conceptual slippage as a problem to be resolved, however, I view it as enabling.

The struggle to define popular literature has been so fervent as to almost exclude the possibility that its greyness is, in fact, crucial to formulating an understanding of it – particularly in the context of Victorian literature. Nineteenth-century popular novels mediate between a variety of literary genres, artistic movements, ideologies, and social, political, economic, educational and cultural discourses. As Liggins and Duffy argue, the complex relationship between readers, texts and genres is crucial to understandings of Victorian popular literature (xix). Its greyness, or opacity, then, is produced in the overlapping of these discourses and is vital to its identification. Through exploring the interrelationship of fashions in dress and in literature, and representations of women as writers, heroines and readers of popular novels, this study seeks to provide a new way of thinking about Victorian popular literature and its association with the politics of gender and fashion.

In the field of Victorian studies, popular literature has long been defined in opposition to the canon, its heroines and heroes, and its champions.⁷ Gelder’s statement that:

popular fiction is best conceived as the opposite of Literature ... By Literature, I mean the kind of writing ... produced, for example, by Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, James Joyce, William Faulkner, Saul Bellow, D. H. Lawrence (11)

emphasises the significance of the work of the “great writers” (Terry x) of the nineteenth century in defining Literature and, by opposition, popular literature. In his preface to *Victorian Popular Literature, 1860-80* (1983), R. C. Terry also sees

the identity and worth of popular literature in relation to the canon, stating that, “although popular fiction is short on ideas and enduring literary values, ... it should be considered as part of the scene in which great writers did their noble work” (ix-x). In *Fictions of British Decadence* (2006), Kirsten MacLeod argues that, after 1860, British popular literature positioned itself against the contemporary realist novel (65). However, the definition of popular literature as a form which opposes itself to or sits outside Literature is misleadingly simplistic. Popular literature encapsulates a range of genres, each of which have their own complex relationship with theories of Literature and the dominant literary forms of their time; popular genres of the mid-to-late Victorian period include sensationalism, social realism, the novel of manners, romance, adventure romance, detective or crime fiction, science fiction, utopian fiction, and the politicised genres of the Aesthetic and New Woman movements. As Liggins and Duffy argue, during the nineteenth century, “popular writers were constantly engaged in subverting expectations about genre whilst remaining within the broad confines of generic convention, which helped to give readers more scope for interpretation” (xix). It is not merely artistic considerations which defined popular literature during the Victorian period, but a complex set of concerns surrounding class and gender, and cultures of authorship, circulation, reading and criticism.

Victorian critics defined popular literature in terms of its relationship with the commerce of publishing and book-selling. Writing for *The Quarterly Review* in 1863, H. L. Mansel states that, “no divine influence can be imagined as presiding over the birth of [popular literature]... beyond the market-law of demand and supply” (483). Literature is imagined to be the product of individual genius and is penned, according to George Moore, in a “spirit of scientific

inquiry” (*Literature* 16-7); however, “a commercial atmosphere floats around” popular literature, Mansel states, “redolent of the manufactory and the shop” (483). In her 1856 essay “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists,” George Eliot imagines that popular novels are penned by “destitute women turned novelists, as they turned governesses, because they had no other ‘lady-like’ means of getting their bread” (3). As readers of such works, she states, “we felt the commodity to be a nuisance, but we were glad to think that the money went to relieve the necessitous” (3). Mansel also sees popular literature as a commodity, likening it to fashionable yard-goods (483). As this analogy attests, concerns over the modes of production of popular literature were inherently connected to questions of quality, artistic merit and readership.

In *Popular Literature*, Neuburg states that,

popular literature can be defined as what the unsophisticated reader has chosen to read for pleasure. Such a reader may, of course, come from any class, although the primary appeal of popular literature has been to the poor. (12)

However, literary history contradicts this claim; sensation fiction, the bestselling genre of the nineteenth century (W. Hughes, “Sensation” 260), was criticised by W. Fraser Rae in 1865 as transcending the boundaries of class and wealth “in making the literature of the Kitchen the favourite reading of the Drawing room” (204). The gender, more than the class, of the reader is significant to popular literature’s association with “the unsophisticated” (Neuberg 12).

Victorian readers of popular fiction were, according to contemporary accounts, primarily women. These readers were characterised as poorly educated, naïve, impressionable and dangerous (Phegley 1). Of the heroine of *The Doctor’s Wife* (1863), Braddon states that she:

was not a woman of the world. She had read novels while other people perused the Sunday papers ... She believed in a phantasmal world created out of the pages of poets and romancers. (253)

Female readers were perceived to be attracted to the “physical sensation” (Oliphant, “Novels” 259) evoked by popular fiction, rather than the more cerebral attractions of Literature and history (Mansel 486). In 1887, H. Rider Haggard invited readers to imagine “the consternation of the ladies of England if they were suddenly forced to an exclusive fare of George Eliot and Thackeray” (173). As consumers, women were also said to be drawn to the “flutter,” as Gaye Tuchman and Nina E. Fortin state, of fashion and popular culture (78); Mansel’s analogy of the popular novel “as to literature what a *magazine de modes* is to dress, giving the latest fashion and little more,” also reflects this attitude to popular fiction and its readers (Mansel 484). On cursory reading, this analogy would appear to be a merely derogatory one. However, it reveals a more complex conception of the ‘popular’ and fashion in the mid-to-late Victorian period, and their relationships to issues of poetics, production and politics. The analogy of popular fiction as fashion provides a model for considering the function of dress within patterns of characterisation and narrative across a range of genres of Victorian literature and, by extension, for reconsidering the definition and use of the term “popular” as it applies to these texts.

Mansel’s analogy refers to the production, consumption, style and aesthetics of Victorian popular literature. His statement can also be interpreted as referring to popular literature’s self-conscious interest in its own means of production: its fashioned-ness. The focus of this project is popular literature’s contemporaneity, its self-conscious commentary on its own means of production and its engagement with contemporary fashions in dress, literature and the

periodical press. Popular literature is interested in the means and politics of its own production and consumption; this is evident in the frequent representation of the heroines as readers and authors of popular literature. This self-consciousness is also reflected in Victorian literature's engagement with the politics and ideologies of popular culture and its reproduction, or refashioning, of definitions of the popular. Mansel's analogy of popular literature as mass-produced and fashionable, then, also applies to the production of the "popular" as a literary category.

Like fashion, popular literature can be seen as frivolous, ephemeral and mass-produced. Mansel likens sensation fiction to "so many yards of printed stuff, sensation-pattern," adding that should "the demands of the novel reading public ... increase to the amount of a thousand per season, no difficulty would be found in producing a thousand works of average merit" (483). This homogeneity and mediocrity also implies conservativeness in plot and politics. Frederic Jameson argues that popular culture and popular literatures are inherently conservative, reproducing the ideologies and morals of the age and only incorporating the subversive so as to bolster established norms (25-6). However, fashion has also been seen as progressive, even radical, in precipitating shifts in the cultural politics. According to Tony Bennett, Colin Mercer and Janet Woollacot, popular culture is "the terrain on which dominant, subordinate and oppositional cultural values and ideologies meet and intermingle" (19). Both of these ideas are evident in definitions of Victorian popular literature, both contemporaneous and subsequent. In 2000, Lyn Pykett noted that "the conservative/radical" dilemma has become a "big question" in Victorian studies ("Afterword" 279-80). This question remains unresolved. My project explores the ways in which Victorian

popular literature both endorses and subverts contemporary ideologies in its representation and narration of the heroine's story. Changes in styles of dress represent changing fashions in popular literature and its engagement with, or challenge to, notions of femininity and female sexuality, fashion, and the popular.

The mid-to-late Victorian novels analysed in the following chapters engage with and critique notions of the "popular," and images of women as authors, heroines and readers of popular literature. Some of these novels were bestsellers at the time of publication; *The Woman in White* (Wilkie Collins, 1860), *East Lynne* (Mrs. Henry Wood, 1861) and *Lady Audley's Secret* (M. E. Braddon, 1862) were bestsellers in nineteenth-century Britain (W. Hughes, "Sensation" 260). They are also representative of a new genre of literature in the mid-Victorian period, sensation fiction. Sensation fiction opened up new groups of readers and raised questions about writing, authorship, bookselling, literary value and reading in the contemporary periodical press. Their influence also transcended the realm of the literary; *The Woman in White* inspired fashions for white bonnets and dressing-gowns. *East Lynne*, *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd* (Braddon, 1863) were adapted for the stage. *Aurora Floyd* and *Armada* (Collins, 1865) also sold well, no doubt partially due to the fame of their authors' earlier novels. Each of these works was the subject of vigorous debate and criticism in the popular press, suggesting that their influence surpassed that which their sales records suggest. The heroines of these novels became infamous outside their narratives for subverting traditional and ideal notions of femininity; they have also become icons of the protest against ideal Victorian femininity in contemporary criticism, and twentieth- and twenty-first-century feminist literary

studies. Elaine Showalter states that sensation heroines expressed “a wide range of suppressed female fantasies of protest and escape” (130).

Whilst not bestsellers, other novels nevertheless engaged with these debates and contributed to Victorian understandings of the popular, both contemporary and retrospective. Published with the ascription, “By the Author of ‘Lady Audley’s Secret’, ‘Aurora Floyd,’ ‘Ishmael’ etc.,” *Vixen* (1879) was marketed to take advantage of Braddon’s popularity as “queen of the sensation novel” (Phegley 23); however, *Vixen* is not a sensation novel nor is its heroine a *femme fatale*. In fact, it consciously evokes and undermines the narratives and character models of that genre, subverting readers’ expectations. Instead, *Vixen* is a novel of and about fashion, both sartorial and literary. It implicitly critiques the construction of the “popular” and popular literature in the mid-Victorian period, and associated narratives of femininity and female sexuality (Sears 50).

Similarly, *Miss Brown* (Vernon Lee, 1884), *A Drama in Muslin* (1886) and *A Double Thread* (1899) self-consciously engage with the fashions, both sartorial and narrative, and politics, gendered and generic, of their moments of production. Lee’s *Miss Brown* was met with high expectations in 1884; as Cosmo Monkhouse wrote, “that it would be vivid and brilliant in its description and dialogue, and that its characters would be well defined seemed ... a matter of course” (6). Yet, it was not the style of this “remarkable novel” (Monkhouse 7) but its critique of the sexual politics and morality of the Aesthetic movement which received the most attention (Psiomades 22). Lee engages with fashions in literature, art and fashion in *Miss Brown*, critiquing their representation of the heroine and her story.

Like *Vixen* and *Miss Brown*, Moore's *A Drama in Muslin* was met with high expectations because of its author's reputation. The banning of Moore's earlier novels *A Modern Lover* (1883) and *A Mummer's Wife* (1885) from circulating libraries Mudie's and W. H. Smith led to fierce debate about morality and censorship, the book market and literary value; Moore's response to Mr. Mudie was published in pamphlet form as *Literature at Nurse, or, Circulating Morals* in 1885 (4). It was into this controversy that *A Drama in Muslin* was published the following year. However, in *The Academy* review of "New Novels" in July 1886, William Wallace wrote that *A Drama in Muslin* "is very inferior as a literary performance to its author's previous works" (39). It was critiqued as "daringly and disgustingly suggestive," no doubt on account of its depiction of pre-marital sex and pregnancy, and female same-sex desire amongst the daughters of the Irish gentry (Wallace 40). Wallace closes his article with the question, "one wonders if this sort of thing has a market" (40).

These novels are significant in a discussion of Victorian popular literature on account of their participation in contemporary politics and poetics of the popular, and their construction and depiction of women as heroines, authors and readers. Both *Miss Brown* and *A Drama in Muslin* employ description of varieties of sartorial fashion of the 1880s to critique the gender and sexual politics of the period which rely on women's submission to the ideals of artist's muse and muslin martyr.

Similarly, Fowler's *A Double Thread* is a novel of its time. Reviewed as one amongst a group of "Some Recent Novels of Manners" in 1900, it was met with enthusiastic response (208). The reviewer noted that Fowler enjoys the "immediate vogue that goes to the chronicler of momentary phases" (227). In its

structure, themes and imagery, *A Double Thread* draws on a range of contemporary fashions in literature and dress. As Talia Schaffer notes, the novel is a version of Oscar Wilde's 1895 play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, with the protagonist rewritten as a woman of fashion (58). Fowler borrows Wilde's plot and imitates his witty and epigrammatic style. She also depicts the physical and social worlds of fashionable British society with marked, though mocking, verisimilitude. Her heroine is, alternately, an idle and fashionable heiress and a dowdy governess. The novel's narrative of build-up, climax and resolution is shaped by the changing colours, textures and styles of the heroine's dress. By bringing together these fashions and influences in the story of Elfrida/Ethel, Fowler self-consciously explores the significance of dress as a marker of identity, sexuality and class, and as a narrative tool. Thus, *A Double Thread* epitomises popular literature as fashionable literature in the late-Victorian period; it is conscious of the politics of its own production and consumption, and engages with these debates.

The final group of novels analysed, although not widely popular as individual texts, are representative of an influential genre of the 1890s: the New Woman novel. In 1894, W. T. Stead emphatically stated that the "Novel of the Modern Woman is one of the most notable and significant features of the day" (193). As a manifestation of the mania for the "new" and a fictional response to the debate of the "Woman Question" in the periodical press, and to the activities of the late-nineteenth-century women's movement, the New Woman novel was imbued with the politics of the 1890s (Ledger, *New* 1). Its use of London as a setting and its depiction of modern technologies, such as the bicycle and the typewriter, and fashions, such as the tweed "tailor-made" and "rationals," also

mark the New Woman novel as “of the [present] day” (Stead 193). As Stead emphasises, it was also a much read genre, the influence of which transcended the literary sphere. Allen’s *The Woman Who Did* (1890) and *The Type-Writer Girl*, Ella Hepworth Dixon’s *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894) and Wells’s *The Wheels of Chance* explore the “Woman Question” and broader concerns about gender politics at the *fin de siècle*.

These novels also manifest a new self-consciousness of the politics of reading, writing and gender, placing themselves within a history of popular heroines and female novelists. The distinctions between novelist and heroine are often blurred in the New Woman novel. They narrate the protagonists’ development from ill-fated heroine and impressionable reader, to novelist and modern independent woman (Boumelha 66). In *The Wheels of Chance*, the heroine is a reader of the works of Olive Schreiner and George Egerton (Wells 130) and Mary Erle, of *The Story of a Modern Woman*, dreams of writing a novel which is a “bit of real life” (Dixon 105-6). As Wells and Dixon demonstrate, popular literature engages with and participates in the critical sphere. Victorian popular literature, then, is marked by a self-consciousness of its place within contemporary politics and culture, literary history and genre. In *Vixen*, Braddon confronts her reputation as a sensation novelist and author of *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *Aurora Floyd* and refashions would-be *femme fatale* Vixen as a virtuous heroine. Allen’s and Dixon’s “Type-Writer Girl” and “Modern Woman” are authors of their own narratives of burgeoning female independence. In this way, these heroines also act as historians and literary critics of the future, commenting on their own position within literary history.

The popular, and the category of popular literature, is a critical framework as well as a literary category. Historically, popular literature was associated with voracious, addicted and uncritical reading. Recent scholarship has re-examined these assumptions, considering popular literature in light of the readerships it constructs and the reading practices and communities it institutes, both contemporary and subsequent (Mitchell 122). This involves a self-conscious exploration of the ways in which popular texts are treated as subjects of literary criticism and history. Implicit within this examination of the way in which Victorian popular literature tells the woman's story, then, is an awareness of how these stories are analysed and retold in Victorian studies.

For much of the twentieth century, critics shied away from analysing the popular texts of the previous century in the belief that "popular fiction is short on ideas and enduring literary values" and has little function other than to "offer us a window – and it is certainly no more than this – upon the world of the men and women of the past" (Terry ix-x; Neuberger 12). As Victor E. Neuberger's *Popular Literature* demonstrates, Victorian popular literature was predominantly discussed in general and generalising terms according to "its role in the commercial and critical sphere" without regard for the specificities of textuality, genre and authorship (Terry ix-x). In *Victorian Popular Fiction*, Terry undertakes what he refers to as a "survey" or "sampling" of the works of Oliphant, Rhoda Broughton and James Payn, observing that "to rescue even one good book from oblivion is a critic's richest reward" (165-6). However, Terry's approach is more explicatory than analytic, and succeeds in reinforcing the Victorian hierarchy of high and low literature. In concluding, he states that although these popular texts "could delight the ordinary reader," "traditional standards of literary criticism as

to insight, discovery and innovation admittedly will find them lacking” (165-6). During the 1990s, feminist critics were influential in resurrecting long forgotten texts, genres and authors from obscurity and recalling them to critical attention. Such readings examined the poetics as well as the politics of Victorian popular novels.

The work of these scholars in provoking the re-examination of popular Victorian novels is particularly evident in regard to *The Woman in White*, *Lady Audley's Secret*, *East Lynne*, and, to a lesser degree, *Aurora Floyd* and *Armada*. Such readings are attentive to the ways in which these novels explore and critique prevailing notions of femininity (Pykett, 'Improper' 5). Of this school, the works of Elaine Showalter, Ann Cvetkovich and Lyn Pykett are particularly notable. An overview of the critical work on the selected novels suggests a correlation between their popularity at the time of publication and the critical attention they have received subsequently. As archetypal sensation novels, these texts continue to receive frequent critical attention. Approaches to *The Woman in White* have been many and varied. *Lady Audley's Secret* and its eponymous heroine are the frequent subjects of analysis, with *Aurora Floyd* remaining in the shadow of its predecessor. Wood's representation of transgressive femininity in *East Lynne* has also received attention. For its depiction of British colonial guilt and “one of the most hardened female villains whose devices and desires have even blackened fiction,” *Armada* has recently received critical attention (Chorley 147).

Vixen remains overshadowed by Braddon's better-known novels and is yet to receive sustained critical attention. Albert C. Sears's essay “Mary Elizabeth Braddon and the ‘Combination Novel’: The Subversions of Sensational

Expectation in *Vixen*” is the only recent study of the novel. Sears argues that in order to understand Braddon’s “simultaneous engagement and resistance to the sensation fiction marketplace, we need a reading practice ... that reads for generic expectation but also attends to the ways her narratives surpass generic boundaries” (51). In considering popular literature as fashionable literature, it is also important to have reading practices which are attuned to the way in which secondary scholarship imposes generic conventions onto texts.

Likewise, *A Drama in Muslin* continues to be overshadowed by Moore’s more infamous novels. When it is analysed, *A Drama in Muslin* is frequently identified with contemporary French realist or naturalist novels (as in M. Chaikin’s “Balzac, Zola and George Moore’s *A Drama in Muslin*”). Other scholars, such as Adam Parkes in “Moore, Snow, and ‘The Dead’,” examine the novel’s juxtaposition of contemporary Irish political history with scenes of courtship in depicting “the idea of Irish paralysis” (266). For such scholars, the novel’s exploration of the lives of unmarried daughters of Dublin’s gentry, its “drama in muslin,” is a minor adjunct to its broader political themes and contentious genre. Sally Ledger’s *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* (1997) is the only recent analysis of the novel’s depiction of femininity and female sexuality.

In accordance with its contemporary popularity, the New Woman novel has received much critical attention in the previous two decades. However, as in the case of *A Drama in Muslin*, scholarship tends to privilege politics over poetics. As formative novels of the genre, *The Woman Who Did* and *The Story of a Modern Woman* are frequently discussed. Their relationship with the late-Victorian women’s movement and their function as didactic tools within that

movement, have been explored in depth. Yet, the representational and narrative strategies at work in these novels, and their self-conscious engagement with the tropes of Victorian literature, are rarely considered. Furthermore, the celebration of a select number of New Woman novels had led to the neglect of others, such as *The Type-Writer Girl* and *The Wheels of Chance*. *Gloriana* receives passing comment in Heilmann's "(Un)Masking Desire: Cross-dressing and the Crisis of Gender in New Woman Fiction," but it has received little further attention. The only recent critical reading of *A Double Thread* is Schaffer's appositely titled *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes* (2000). Her focus, however, is on Fowler's "merging [of] the *mondaine* into the Angel by claiming they are really just different personas of the same woman," rather than on the way in which Fowler creates and critiques these opposing versions of femininity (58).

In bringing together this group of texts under the literary and critical umbrella of popular literature, this project seeks to re-examine their position within studies of Victorian literature and culture. This survey approach allows for the examination of shifts in narrative fashions and changes in notions of femininity and female sexuality throughout the mid-to-late Victorian period. It also facilitates the exploration of intertextual references within various genres of popular literature and the way in which the heroines, their gowns and their stories, were continually refashioned between 1860 and 1900.

Victorian popular literature, then, can be defined as both fashionable literature and self-consciously fashioned literature. It enjoys the immediate fashionableness that "goes to the chronicler of momentary phases" ("Some Recent Novels of Manners" 227) and, in this way, chronicles the modes and morals of the period for future readers and scholars. As fashion, it is also closely imbued with

contemporary gender politics: in its genre and representation, and the processes of production and consumption, authorship and readership. Reading dress in Victorian popular literature and giving close attention to its materiality, history and means of production, and the significance of these factors in informing its symbolic connotations, provides a model for reconsidering the various political, socio-cultural, generic, aesthetic and historical influences on the definition and identification of the “popular” in mid-to-late Victorian literature. This leads to a reconceptualisation of popular literature as fashionable literature, chronicling and reproducing the modes and morals of the period, and as fashioned literature, self-consciously engaging with the means of its own production and consumption. Rather than being a genre or literary category, then, popular literature becomes a framework for a type of critical reading which takes into account the politics and poetics of representation and reading and is conscious of the ways in which the “popular” is constructed in contemporary and subsequent scholarship. It is in this sense that I use the term in the following chapters.

Double Threads

Drawing on the threads of dress, narrative, the “popular” and the fashionable, the following four chapters consider the way in which femininity and female sexuality are constructed and represented both within and around these popular novels from 1860 to 1900. They trace how changes in the style, texture and colour of the heroine’s dress chronicle her movement and development throughout the narrative as she negotiates the politics of gender and genre. This is traced through four main sartorial fashions of the period: white muslin, silk and velvet, paisley, and wool and tweed. The notion of double threads facilitates

a movement between strands of material, fashion, cultural and literary history and literary analysis within these chapters, considering the ways in which a variety of aesthetic, cultural, political, technological and economic factors influence the symbolic significance of these forms of dress in Victorian popular literature.

In the course of this study, I trace the heroine's refashioning from the Angel in the House or *femme fatale* of 1860s' sensation fiction, and the fashionable martyr and black-clad rebel of the 1870s and 1880s, to the New Woman of the 1890s. Rather than being a static embodiment of the heroine's subjectivity and social standing, as some critics have suggested, dress represents her progress through the narrative. Changes in the colour, texture and style of the heroine's dress, "the play of folds" and "sweep of [a] train," function within patterns of narrative and characterisation to tell her story (Dingle 266). These aesthetic variations also correspond with dress' varying use as fashionable description, sensual detail, socio-political and sexual symbol, and narrative metaphor in various genres of popular literature. The colour and texture of the heroine's dress are read in relation to these genres' representation of reality and realism, authenticity and fictitiousness.

The structure of the chapters and the organisation of texts within these are informed by changes in the heroine's dress. Accordingly, some texts are discussed over numerous chapters, following the heroine's exchange of white muslin to silk and velvet or wool and tweed, and her complication of these narratives with the donning of a paisley shawl. In other instances, the heroine's change in dress is more subtle and confined to variations of one cloth. Heroines whose wardrobes are limited and their development and narrative, therefore, curtailed are confined

to one chapter. This chronological survey approach allows for an exploration of how dress functions within individual novels' structures of narration and characterisation and, in a broader sense, an identification of broader patterns in how dress is used to represent femininity and female sexuality and tells the heroine's story in various genres of popular literature between 1860 and 1900.

In 1860, Collins's *The Woman in White* established the heroine in white muslin as the ideal Victorian woman: the Angel in the House. Simultaneously, he subverts this by pairing the virtuous and virginal Laura Fairlie with the mysterious and potentially insane Anne Catherick. This ambivalence, wherein white muslin represents vitality and truthfulness, as well as ghostliness, disguise and fatality, is evident in narratives of femininity and female sexuality in popular literature throughout the mid-to-late Victorian period. Chapter One traces the representation of the heroine in white muslin from Angel in the House and duplicitous sensation heroine, to martyr in muslin, New Woman, and feminist icon of the future. It explores the intersection of ethereality and ephemerality in depictions of femininity and female sexuality in Victorian popular literature through examining white muslin's physical transparency and conceptual opacity. It considers the use of white muslin as a symbolic cloth in *The Woman in White*, *East Lynne*, *Lady Audley's Secret*, *Aurora Floyd*, *A Drama in Muslin* and *The Woman Who Did*.

In these novels, the "Woman in White" is paired with another female figure. This heroine is real and corporeal rather than ethereal (N. Daly, *Sensation* 111). She wears heavy, sensual and brightly coloured silks which mould her figure and her story and mark her departure from narratives of feminine purity and passivity. In *The Woman in White*, Mrs. Catherick indicates her departure from ideal femininity in stating "the dress of Virtue, in our parts, was cotton print. I had

silk” (534). Chapter Two explores the heroine’s silk gowns as representative of her emphatic refashioning of her body, identity and narrative. Silk’s rich colours, textures and histories establish it as a symbol of decadence, mysticism, mystery, theatre, sensuality and sex. Dressed in silk, Victorian heroines reject the ideal of the Angel in the House. In this chapter, I trace this narrative and symbolic trajectory in Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret*, *Aurora Floyd* and *Vixen*, Moore’s *A Drama in Muslin* and Lee’s *Miss Brown*. In these novels, silk and velvet are used to negotiate the old and the new, the fashionable and out-dated, the exotic and the erotic, the sensual and the sexual, the real and the unreal, in representations of the heroine.

The paisley shawl complicates the connections between dress, the body, subjectivity and sexuality by overlaying the heroine’s silk gown with intricate patterns and narratives. Chapter Three examines the ways in which authors utilise this garment’s complex history to tell the heroine’s story and weave their own narratives within the patterns and mysterious symbolism of the paisley shawl. This chapter begins by tracing the paisley shawl through history and literature to the draperies and novels of nineteenth-century Britain. It then picks up these threads of association and narrative in analyses of *East Lynne*, *Lady Audley’s Secret*, Collins’s *Armada* and *Miss Brown*. These authors draw on the paisley shawl’s traditional and imperial connotations and write new narratives which connect them to predominant sartorial, artistic and literary fashions.

Chapter Four explores the New Woman’s story through the ambiguous symbolism of grey wool and tweed. The “Woman in Grey” is a shadowy, though ubiquitous, figure in late-Victorian popular literature. Depicted as a cyclist, sportswoman, shopgirl, type-writer girl, feminist activist, anarchist, social

reformer, dress-reformer, or feminist novelist, she represents new, or newly perceived, varieties of femininity and female identity in the late-Victorian period (Richardson and Willis 1). Her grey woollen dress represents her appropriation and retailoring of the stuff of traditional masculinity as she traverses the streets of London and the pages of popular literature in pursuit of education, emancipation and equality. Grey symbolises the heroine's unstable gendered and social position, trapped between the idea of white muslin ideal of Victorian femininity and a dark martyrdom to the future of the women's movement. It also represents her ambivalent narrative and literary position; the "Woman in Grey" is depicted as heroine, reader and author, thus enacting the construction of new narrative possibilities for the heroine at the *fin de siècle*.

In the closing years of the nineteenth century, the Victorian heroine undergoes a final refashioning. She exchanges her grey wool and tweed for white rational dress. Thus attired, she becomes the feminist icon of the future: a figure of equality, strength, honesty and hope. *Double Threads* closes with a discussion of this new female figure. In *Gloriana; or, The Revolution of 1900*, Lady Florence Dixie refashions the "[New] Woman in Grey" as a feminist icon in white and rewrites the conventions, both sartorial and literary, which limit the scope of the Victorian heroine's narrative. This "[New] Woman in White" is a double for the angelic or theatrical white muslin-clad heroine of the mid-Victorian period. In this iconic figure, Dixie also creates an image of the future for studies of dress in Victorian popular literature, and for the broader field of Victorian studies.

Double Threads is the first study to consider the significance of the materiality and history of sartorial cloths and styles in informing the use of dress in Victorian popular literature; in this way, it provides a model for thinking about

the production of dress as a metaphor for the textual construction of femininity and narrative. Drawing on threads of scholarship from fashion and textile history, cultural studies and literary criticism, this study expands the ways in which we interpret different types of cultural artefacts, suggesting a way of reading which explores the materiality of texts and the textuality of material cloth, the fashionedness of fiction, and the fiction of fashion.

Chapter One

White Muslin: The “Woman in White,” “Muslin Martyrs” and Narratives of Ethereal and Ephemeral Femininity

The dress of the nineteenth century virgin ... [had] to subtly convey family status as well as personal desirability; seductiveness, albeit virginal; along with apparent submissiveness ... The ethereal qualities of the Angel in the House must ... be combined with the suggestion of sufficient health and strength to bear a large family. (E. Wilson 123)

White, worn for morning or ordinary in-door dress, necessarily implies a certain high standing in social position. It is only a lady of the *grand monde* who can reasonably indulge in the expensive elegance of white morning dresses ... The morning dress now fashionable consists of a long skirt of white percale or cambric muslin, and a small *casaque* of the same. (“Summary of the Modes ... May” 46)⁸

How ... can we be really noble and pure, while we are still decked out in innocence, virtue and belief as ephemeral as the muslins we wear? (Moore, *Drama* 101)

White muslin captures a plethora of social, moral, and sartorial connotations in its fine weave and transparent folds. It is fashionable and ephemeral, and timelessly elegant. It evokes ethereality, innocence, youthfulness, purity, virginity, blankness, death and ghostliness. White muslin is fashioned into garments of elaborate frivolousness and liberating simplicity (Ashmore 69); it is the stuff of *debutantes’* gowns, wedding gowns, tea gowns, evening gowns and shrouds, its symbolic connotations changing with its use.

The woman in white muslin is a ubiquitous figure in Victorian literature, popular culture, and visual and performing arts. As an Angel in the House or “muslin martyr,” she is endowed with the ethereal virtues of innocence, passivity

and virginity as she is “decked out” with a wardrobe of delicate muslin gowns (Moore, *Drama* 99). These traits are as ephemeral and fashioned as the cloth which contain them, however (Moore, *Drama* 99). Dingle states that “Jane Austen has a way of throwing white muslin over her heroines” which is at once nonchalant and highly significant (266). Whether as Austen’s “perfectly well-dressed” heroine, the naïve and seducible victim of Gothic literature, the “perfectly religious” heroine of the domestic realist or High Church novel (Eliot, “Silly” 301-2), the duplicitous sensation heroine or the New Woman novel’s “white soul[led]” proponent of “free love” (Allen, *Woman* 49; 22), the woman in white muslin plays a variety of social and narrative roles in nineteenth-century literature. Depictions of women in white muslin at once reinforce and interrogate nineteenth-century notions of femininity and female sexuality.

This chapter considers the representation of the heroine in white muslin in a range of mid-to-late Victorian popular novels, examining the significance of the chromatic nullity and dynamic transparency of this cloth and its significance in representations and narratives of ideal and transgressive femininity. As an embodiment of the ideal virginal and virtuous Angel in the House, the woman in white muslin is an icon of the Victorian period, both in contemporary popular literature and subsequent social and literary history. Her white gowns represent her youthfulness, purity and honesty. However, white muslin also belies more complex histories and symbolic connotations. In exploring these, this chapter begins by essaying current scholarship on Victorian white muslin from the fields of literary criticism, cultural studies and fashion history. These yield a series of apparently contradictory readings of this cloth. In tracing these and their use in Victorian literature, I summarise the history of Victorian muslin, tracing its

symbolic threads to the ancient Middle East, through the developments of the industrial revolution, to the fashions of Victorian Britain. This history is charted against a literary history of white muslin as a symbolic cloth, drawing connections between the material stuff and its symbolic resonances. These narratives complicate the reading of white muslin as chromatically null and symbolically blank. Drawing on the rich histories and narratives of this cloth, this chapter traces representations of the woman in white muslin from 1860 to 1900. It explores the intersection of ethereality and ephemerality in depictions of femininity and female sexuality in popular literature through examining white muslin's physical transparency and conceptual opacity through readings of *The Woman in White*, *East Lynne*, *Lady Audley's Secret*, *Aurora Floyd*, *A Drama in Muslin* and *The Woman Who Did*.

In *Dressed in Fiction*, Hughes states that the white muslin gown was the “mandatory formal wear of the *jeune fille*” or Angel in the House of Victorian literature (115). Dressed in white she is “the ideal woman in feelings, faculties and flounces” (Eliot, “Silly” 302). Equally, however, she is a fiction of the ethereal feminine ideal, dressed, as Hughes suggests, in a costume of muslin; her white gown symbolises the construction of “the idealized [female] image ... as a *representation* of the ideal woman – the sign of the ideal woman and not the woman herself” (Elam 50). White muslin represents the ephemerality and artifice of idealised representations of femininity and female sexuality. However, current critical work on white muslin has overlooked this artifice and self-consciousness and, instead, emphasised the cloth's chromatic nullity.

Fashion historians and literary critics are frequently reductive in their analyses of the historical, literary and aesthetic significance of white muslin. The

woman in white muslin is identified as a ghost, an apparition, a corpse, a mourner, an angel and a bride (N. Daly, *Sensation* 3; 32; C. Hughes, *Dressed* 78; Harvey 205-6). White muslin signifies innocence, virtue, fidelity, self-effacement, “infantine beauty,” ethereality and the sublime, joy, and virginity, vulnerability, victimhood and death (C. Hughes, *Dressed* 71; 106; 78; N. Daly, *Sensation* 1; Harvey 205-6). In 1902, Mrs. Eric Pritchard stated that white is associated with “a significant touch of purity” (39). According to Hughes and John Harvey, white muslin also symbolises festivity, formality (*Dressed* 70) and heavenly radiance (205). At the same time, white muslin’s diaphanousness and transparency render it scandalous (Ashmore 69). As well as being the costume of the virtuous woman, muslin was also considered a form of non-dress akin to nudity, erotically revealing the female figure (Moore, *Drama* 167; Michie, *Flesh* 17). In cataloguing these symbolic connotations of white muslin, literary critics such as C. Hughes, Daly, Aindow and Harvey gesture towards a variety of representations of the female body, femininity and female sexuality in Victorian popular literature; however, the ways in which these images and meanings are constructed are not considered.⁹ The “Woman in White” is considered a static representation of angelic and virginal femininity, victimhood or death. Such readings reinforce the ideal of the Victorian woman as passive and lacking self-determination or narrative agency. They also disregard the symbolic complexity of white muslin and its potential to signify several, apparently contradictory, notions of femininity simultaneously. Instead of accepting the “Woman in White” as an embodiment of the feminine ideal, this chapter explores the way in which white muslin is fashioned and refashioned in telling the heroine’s story as she negotiates, and even transgresses, ideals of femininity and female sexuality.

Muslin's chromatic nullity and textural transparency are crucial to readings of its symbolic and narrative significance; its fluidity and blankness also explain the diverse range of meanings ascribed to this cloth. As either an item of fashion or a literary symbol, white muslin's significance is far from transparent, however. Victorian popular literature provides a way of thinking about this signifying opacity. In popular literature between 1860 and 1900, white muslin is employed as a symbolic textual surface on which a variety of narratives of female subjectivity and sexuality are inscribed. Ephemeral muslin is fashioned and re-fashioned as the narrative progresses and the heroine alters her subjectivity. In this way, muslin functions as a palimpsest, containing a multiplicity of stories, histories and meanings. Muslin's lightness of colour and texture also mean that its appearance and significance changes according to its narrative context and physical environment. Lisa Cohen argues that, as a literary symbol, cloth has a "dynamic transparency and opacity" (151). Cloth "characterizes the open secret ... [it] allows a particular fact to be at once acknowledged and disavowed, seen and unseen" (L. Cohen 151). In Victorian popular literature, white muslin manifests this dynamic texture; it is both a sign of ideal virginal femininity and of the artifice or fictitiousness of this representation. Muslin's fluidity and dynamic transparency allow the heroines of popular literature to be at once ethereal feminine ideals, alluring *femmes fatales*, ephemeral women of fashion, "muslin martyrs," theatrical mummers and "women who did" (Moore, *Drama* 99; Allen, *Woman*). This chapter explores the intersection of ethereality and ephemerality in depictions of femininity and female sexuality in Victorian popular literature through examining white muslin's physical transparency and conceptual opacity.

White Muslin

Nineteenth-century muslin is a finely woven cloth in variations of white and unbleached cotton (Calasibetta, and Tortora 332-3). It is soft to the touch and notable for its weightlessness, ethereality and diaphanousness (Ashmore 8; Johnston, Kite, and Persson 48; 8). Muslin is either plain-weave or embellished with subtle woven patterns or surface embroidery. In June 1886, *The Lady's World* listed some of these textural variations: “muslin sprigged, muslin plain, muslin spotted, muslin embroidered . . ., or tamboured” (Dingle 266). These intricate monochromatic patterns evidence the physical, textural and conceptual variations of muslin. They also function as material symbols for the different connotations of white muslin evoked in Victorian popular literature. Muslin's intricate and subtle patterns of white on white represent the complex narratives contained within the stuff, rendering it texturally and conceptually opaque. The first of these intricate narratives is the history of the cloth.

As Sonia Ashmore states, muslin's “insubstantial delicacy has veiled a rather darker story . . . woven into the history and politics” of imperial trade for centuries (8).¹⁰ The muslin favoured by fashionable Britons in the nineteenth century has its antecedents in the distinctive cotton cloth woven in northern India and the Middle East since the first century CE (Yafa 35). This cloth was traded between India, the Middle East, China, Thailand, Burma, Greece and Egypt. In Persian, the cloth also had a variety of poetic names, each denoting different weights and uses; *abrawan* (running water) and *shabnam* (evening dew) were very fine, whilst *jhuna* was worn by dancing girls and *mulmul khas* were reserved for royalty (Ashmore 17). In the fourteenth century, Persian poet Amir Khusrau wrote of a cloth so fine that “a hundred yards can pass through the eye of the

needle ... [and] so transparent and light that it looks as if one is in no dress at all but has only smeared the body with pure water” (qtd. in Yafa 35). The name muslin was coined by Marco Polo, Venetian merchant and traveller, in the thirteenth century in reference to cloth woven in the northern Iraqi city of Mosul (Ashmore 8). When muslin was introduced into European fashions during the mid-seventeenth century, it not only retained the connotations of purity, luxury and sensuousness, but gained those of fashionableness, ephemerality and ethereality (Ashmore 8). This history contributes to the cloth’s conceptual opacity and its potency as an item of fashion and a literary symbol during the nineteenth century.

The history of muslin as an item of fashion in Britain is intrinsically tied to the rise of the Empire and imperial trade.¹¹ The cloth was introduced to British consumers by the East India Company in the mid-seventeenth century, the Company ensuring that this luxurious cloth soon became a fashion commodity in high demand (Ashmore 8-9). During the 1690s, the East India Company established the Bengali city of Dacca (Dhaka) as the centre of production for muslin for the British market, with the stuff woven on handlooms in newly-built workshops (Ashmore 27-8). The trade was so lucrative that, in 1701, a ban was placed on wearing Indian calicos (Ashmore 34). In 1721, a further act was passed to ban the importation of cotton cloth to protect the British textile industry; henceforth, raw cotton was imported from India and the West Indies and woven in northern Britain (Ashmore 34; Yafa 31; Lemire, *Cotton* 60; 3).

Handloom weaving of muslin was attempted in Paisley, Glasgow and Lancashire from 1700; however, the quality of the cloth was poor (Ashmore 35). It was not until the invention of the Spinning-Jenny in 1764, water-powered

machinery in 1771, and the power-loom in 1784 that cotton could be woven to an acceptable quality (Yafa 45). Bolton, Norwich and Canterbury became centres of muslin production (Ashmore 35). As production became faster, muslin also became cheaper (Lemire, *Cotton* 60). In Jane Austen's 1818 novel, *Northanger Abbey*, Mr. Tilney accurately estimates the cost of the muslin of Mrs. Allen's gown at nine shillings a yard although, he states, he recently got a "prodigious bargain" on a "true ... muslin" for his sister at merely five shillings a yard (17). This discussion, possibly literature's most notable discourse on muslin, emphasises the cloth's connection to commerce, consumerism, fashion, and, by extension, popular culture and literature, during the nineteenth century.

Cotton, particularly muslin, is uniquely enmeshed within the development of popular fashion in Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Lemire, *Cotton* 33). Coeval with the industrialisation of muslin production was the rise of the serial press and fashion journalism; as a result, descriptions and sketches of the latest fashions could be disseminated faster than ever and the fashion for muslin as an alternative to silk quickly grew (Yafa 36; Lemire, *Fashion's* 169; 13). Throughout the Georgian and Regency periods, white muslin was fashionable for women's gowns. The fineness of the muslin and the transience of fashionable styles meant that these gowns were inherently ephemeral. Mr. Tilney states that heroine Catherine Morland's white muslin gown,

is very pretty ... but I do not think it will wash well: I am afraid it will fray ... But then ... muslin always turns to some account or other; Miss Morland will get enough out of it for a handkerchief, or a cap, or a cloak. (Austen, *Northanger* 28)

As Tinley suggests, muslin's fineness also renders it suitable for refashioning, its symbolic and social connotations changing with its use. Social and political changes also influenced the ways in which muslin was worn and what it signified.

During the nineteenth-century, muslin played a part in political unrest which, while it went beyond domestic Britain, also contributed to the cloth's role in fashion and its conceptual opacity as a sartorial, social and literary symbol.

Whilst Miss Tilney wears a "real India muslin" gown, the continued growth of the British textile industry throughout the nineteenth century led to the importation of raw cotton from America as well as India (Austen, *Northanger* 17). By 1860, 80% of cotton woven in Britain was imported from America's southern states (Yafa 165). After the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1833, the reliance of American cotton producers on slave labour became a contentious issue in Britain (Yafa 37). Any political intervention was precluded when, in 1860, the American Civil War led to the cessation of the cotton trade between America and Britain. This resulted in the Lancashire cotton famine of 1861 to 1865 (Yafa 165). However damaging it proved to the local textile industry and its workers, the "cotton famine" had little long-term effect on the fashionableness of white muslin. In the summer of 1866, the British *Ladies' Gazette of Fashion* triumphantly announced the revival of "a fashion which, during several years past, has been almost wholly laid aside" – the white muslin day-dress ("Summary of the Modes ... May" 46). Such day-gowns were thought the epitome of class and style, and continued to be fashionable throughout the 1870s and 1880s ("Summary of the Modes ... May" 46). Towards the end of the century, muslin again became a "contentious political issue;" this time in India (Yafa 37). This posed a new threat to the British cotton industry and fashion.

During the course of the nineteenth century, British imperial growth in India saw the increased cultivation of large areas for growing cotton (Yafa 36). The raw product was then woven in Britain for the local market; it was also sold

back to India, although at a highly inflated price (Yafa 37). Yafa argues that “by depriving India of the fruits of its own labour, England had all but guaranteed that the crop would ... come to symbolize colonial subjugation and provide a rallying point against it” (37). By the end of the nineteenth century, the destinies of the cotton industry and Indian self-rule became inextricably intertwined (Yafa 37). Nevertheless, muslin remained fashionable into the first decade of the twentieth century, as if in defiance of Indian demands for self-rule. White muslin, then, became a sign of luxury, conspicuous consumption, and the strength and pride of the British Empire. The ultimate expression of this is the white muslin-clad Angel in the House, the bastion of British social and moral order.

The “Angel in the House,” as named in Coventry Patmore’s famous mid-nineteenth-century poems, was the custodian of British morality and the symbol of familial and social order throughout the Victorian period (Walker 24). As wife and mother, this female figure was at the centre of the most important social, cultural and political unit – the family. Social order relied upon her virtue (Walker 24). The historical and political complexity of white muslin – which juxtaposed ethereality with the erotic, and fashion with slavery and colonial subjugation – defined the context within which white muslin was seen as the “mandatory dress” of the Angel in the House from the 1860s (C. Hughes, *Dressed* 115). These dichotomies also shaped the combination of erotic sensuality and carefully regulated sexuality which, Elizabeth Wilson argues, defined the Victorian cult of female beauty and virtue (123).

When worn by the Angel in the House, white muslin symbolises both her “seductive, albeit virginal” sexuality and the health and strength necessary to rear a large family (E. Wilson 123). This coming together of potentially contradictory

ideas is embodied by muslin's simultaneous potential to appear opaque or transparent depending on its style and physical environment. Muslin's chromatic nullity references ideals of womanhood and female sexuality. Fine, pale and gently flowing, white muslin has Biblical connotations of virtue and purity, appearing as the "white wings of [an] angel" (Braddon, *Aurora* 158). Dressed in white, the woman is a manifestation of an ethereal and virginal ideal of femininity. Muslin's transparency reveals that such an ideal is a fashioned and fashionable fiction rather than a representation of *actual* femininity. Inherently, then, though somewhat subversively, its conceptual opacity registers the possibility of aberrant female sexuality and behavior which transgresses the angelic ideal; this possibility is played out in popular literature throughout the Victorian period.

The Woman in White

From her appearance on Hampstead Heath in the opening scenes of Wilkie Collins's 1860 novel, *The Woman in White*, the woman in white muslin became an icon of popular literature (Daly, *Sensation* 10). As ghosts, *debutantes*, fiends in disguise and "muslin martyrs" (Moore, *Drama* 101), heroines in white muslin occupy ball-rooms and drawing-rooms, bed-chambers and lunatic asylums, open heaths and shadowy twilight scenes. These women are depicted attempting murder, committing bigamy and adultery, abandoning their children, agitating for women's rights and, even, harbouring sexual desire for other women. As Nicholas Daly suggests, the "Woman in White" is an ethereal, even vulnerable figure who, yet, has the power to spellbind, fascinate and even to seduce (*Sensation* 2). She is both an ideal and a symbol for the inevitable failure of this ideal. Beneath her

appearance of purity and innocence, the heroine's white muslin gowns hold the possibility of seduction and corruption, connoting white linen, the boudoir and the bed (Harvey 205).¹² In Victorian popular literature, heroines negotiate these contemporary notions of femininity and female sexuality, refashioning their subjectivities and inscribing their own stories on the evocative blankness of their white muslin gowns.

Victorian white muslin is associated with 'the popular' and ephemeral in both literary and sartorial fashions. Sensation fiction was the most fashionable and popular literary form of the 1860s. Nicholas Daly argues that "whiteness and sensation" are two threads in the cloth which is the cultural milieu of the 1860s (*Sensation* 10). Sensation novels depict a feminine and domestic world of "muslins, confidences, and illicit conversations" (Moore, *Drama* 107). Their heroine is "a pale young lady in a white dress, with a dagger in her hand, evidently prepared for some desperate deed" (Mansel 485). Sensation novels broach subjects which many Victorians thought inappropriate: murder, adultery and bigamy, and placed them in domestic settings (Brantlinger 5-6). As a result, they were labelled as "noxious" (Rae 186) and "fancy portraits of repulsive virtue and attractive vice" by contemporary critics (Mansel 499). Morality was not the only basis of criticism levelled at this genre, however. In the *North British Review*, W. Fraser Rae stated that "the artistic faults of this ... [genre] are as grave as the ethical ones" (186).

A deficiency of verisimilitude yet penchant for descriptive detail was identified as the genre's main artistic fault (Rae 189). Female sensation authors Mrs. Henry Wood and Mary Elizabeth Braddon are particularly noted for the way in which they delight "in lavish minutiae of dress, furnishings, jewelry, and

trinkets” (W. Hughes, “Sensation” 265). The detailed scenes of novels such as *The Woman in White*, *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *East Lynne* were thought to be marked by an extravagance and sensuous indulgence which exceeded the level of description necessary, according to contemporary realist authors, to tell a story (Rae 189). However, material objects – as symbols, metaphors, and circumstantial evidence – are crucial to the narrative structure of the sensation novel.

On narrative and thematic levels, the sensation novel was governed by the idea that innocence and verisimilitude mask guilt and mystery (Brantlinger 14). The acts of dressing and undressing, cloaking and uncloaking, literalise this narrative unveiling. The story of the woman in white muslin revealed physically (by the changing of her gown) and narratively (through the machinations of the would-be detective) to be a *femme fatale* or “female Mephistopheles” is the basis of many sensation novels (Rae 186). Authors of this genre, such as Collins, Wood and Braddon, employ white muslin’s multiple textures and its potent and well-established symbolic significance both to demurely veil and sensually display the bodies and narratives of their heroines. The dynamism and diaphanousness of white muslin becomes a symbol for the multiplicity of female subjectivities depicted in these novels. As Diane Elam states, the Victorian “Woman in White” “appears as the figure of reference ... haunting the representational claims of the realist novel” (50). Moreover, the “Woman in White” appears as the ghost of the angelic realist heroine; authors evoke the image of the white muslin-clad angel in order to critique and subvert it. The women in white of sensation fiction are, variously, domestic angels, ghosts, madwomen, adulterers, actresses and martyrs. Her white muslin disguises the heroine’s dark secrets.

In *The Woman in White*, Collins also employs the heroines' white muslin gowns as textual surfaces on which to re-write their identities and stories.

White muslin is a tool for both identifying and disguising the heroines and, as such, is central to the novel's sensational narrative. Alternately crisp, pure and transparent, and limp, soiled and shadowy, white muslin connotes innocence and virtue, and guilt, madness and death. Walter Hartright must unravel these symbolic and narrative threads in order to "clear ... up the mystery of the woman [or women] in white" (30).

The Woman in White

In the opening chapter of Collins's 1860 novel, *The Woman in White*, Hartright meets "a solitary Woman, dressed head to foot in white garments" on Hampstead Heath in the "dead of night" (24). Momentarily, Hartright is unsure whether she has "sprung out from the earth or dropped from the heaven" (24). Either heavenly or earthly and without either history or identity, this "Woman" is a shadowy and indistinct figure; thrown into relief by the darkness of the scene, her white gown is replete with meaning, yet also signifies the unknown. At once an angel, a fallen woman, a fiend, a ghost and a shadow, this female figure haunts the ensuing narrative, functioning as a repository of the desires and anxieties of others. Throughout the novel, the "Woman in White" reappears as Laura Fairlie, the virtuous and virginal Angel in the House, and the mysterious and potentially dangerous Anne Catherick. White muslin's delicate weave, dynamic texture and symbolic instability function as metaphors for the intertwining identities, stories and fates of Collins's women in white in the ensuing narrative.

Soon after this encounter, Hartright is contracted to Limmeridge House as “drawing master” to Laura Fairlie. Upon meeting his pupil, Hartright is struck by her similarity to “the woman in white” of Hampstead Heath; Laura, too, is “dressed in white muslin” (56). In the domestic comfort of the drawing-room rather than the eerie darkness of the Heath, Laura’s gown appears light, diaphanous and “spotlessly pure” (56). Rather than bearing the shadows of secrecy and mystery, Laura’s dress “innocently [betrays] her purity and truth” (171).

As her name would suggest, Laura Fairlie is an image of the fair-haired, blue-eyed and virtuous feminine ideal of the Victorian period; likened to an “angel or ... [a] child” (67), she gives “life, light and form to our shadowy conceptions of beauty,” Hartright states (52). Throughout the novel, Collins’s descriptions of Laura’s white muslin gowns are cast within discourses about ethereality, purity and light. Her gowns are snowy, airy and transparent; they portray her identity as the childlike Angel in the House without any pretence or artifice. She is “unpretendingly and almost poorly dressed in white muslin,” the narrator states (56). The transparency and purity of her dress also prove that Laura harbours no sensational secrets, representing her passive role within the narrative. At the same time, however, white muslin provides a blank surface onto which other characters project their own secrets, desires and fears, refashioning her in their own image. One such character is the novel’s other “Woman in White,” Anne Catherick. Ghost-like rather than angelic, Anne’s white muslin gowns are opaque and reflect her guilt, her secrecy, and her active role within the narrative.

When Anne first appears as the “woman in white” on Hampstead Heath, her gown is etiolated by the darkness of her surroundings and the mystery of her

identity (24). The cloth appears heavy and opaque rather than light and diaphanous. Throughout the novel, the narrator describes Anne's white muslin gowns by a set of signifiers antithetical to Laura's. Whilst Laura epitomises angelic femininity, a "the woman in white" newly "dropped from heaven," Anne is a more earthly "Woman in White:" a fallen woman and a madwoman (24). Dressed all in white, Anne looks "so peculiar" (102). Instead of snow and light, her white gowns are the opaque white of a low hanging fog (257) and "impenetrable Gloom" (555). Rather than revealing her purity and truth, then, Anne's white dress evokes deception and guilt (171). Both the similarities and the differences between the white clad figures of Laura and Anne drive the novel's sensational plot.

The narrative of *The Woman in White* revolves around the interconnected lives of Laura and Anne, for which white muslin is the central metaphor. As women in white, Laura and Anne are similar in appearance; however, their similarity extends further than this material surface. Both narrator and characters describe each heroine with reference to the other. The narrator observes that Anne is "the living likeness, in her hair, her complexion, the colour of her eyes, and the shape of her face" of Laura (62). The key to solving "the mystery of the woman in white," and the novel, lies in unravelling this co-dependence (30).

In the opening chapter of *The Woman in White*, Anne escapes from a private asylum and encounters Hartright *en route* to London. Laura, meanwhile, is preparing for her marriage to Sir Percival Glyde. Anne writes to Laura to warn her against this union, claiming to know Glyde's secret. Thus begins the narrative entanglement of the two women in white. The women meet on numerous occasions. These meetings take place in the semi-dark: in the fog by the lake and

in the twilight of the graveyard. These are liminal narrative spaces, poised between life and death, appearances and reality, truth and deception, and ghostliness and the angelic. Accordingly, the distinctions between Laura and Anne, innocence and guilt, virtue and vice become increasingly blurred as the narrative progresses towards its climax.

Whilst Hartright, having assumed the role of detective, endeavours to unveil the truth, Glyde and Count Fosco work to obscure it. These narratives of detection and deception advance concurrently. As the narrative point of view shifts, the truth is partially revealed and then reconcealed. Attempts by readers and critics, both contemporary and subsequent, to resolve the mystery of the “Woman in White” are equally fraught. Critics disagree as to the interpretation and identification this enigmatic figure and her achromatic gowns. “The woman in white” who Hartright meets in the novel’s first chapter is later identified as Anne. However, Harvey identifies “The Woman in White” of the novel’s title as angelic and virtuous Laura Fairlie; she is “technically the novel’s heroine,” he states (Harvey 206).

This uncertainty of interpretation, both inside and outside the narrative, is echoed in the dynamic transparency and opacity of the heroines’ white gowns as they move between scenes of light and shadow. In this narrative half-light, Glyde takes advantage of the similarity of Laura and Anne, and the symbolic mutability of white muslin, in order to disguise the identities of both heroines. He imprisons his wife in an asylum under the name Anne Catherick. Meanwhile, the real Anne Catherick dies and is buried as Lady Glyde, allowing Sir Percival to inherit the Fairlie fortune. The whiteness of Laura’s dress now symbolises her loss of identity; she hovers in the liminal spaces between life and death, innocence and

guilt. This sequence of events relies on white muslin's association with both, light, vitality and truthfulness, and ghostliness, disguise and fatality, and plays out the contention between these two readings of this cloth. Throughout the remainder of the novel, Collins gradually differentiates between these sets of symbols and the variations of cloth textures which underpin them, as Hartright uncovers Glyde's crimes and restores each heroine to their rightful identities and narrative fates.

The similarities of appearance between Laura and Anne play a vital role in the narrative of *The Woman in White*; however, so do the subtle differences (Reynolds and Humble 56). Reynolds and Humble argue that "Laura's white dress is not Anne's, and Laura and Anne are not identical" (56). The differences between the two women in white are described as variants of texture and tone, rather than colour or form, and are symbolised by the textures of their muslin gowns. They are couched within the terms of illness and madness. Glyde states, "fancy my wife ... with a touch of something wrong in her head – and there is Anne Catherick for you" (333). Anne's white gowns bear the taint of her madness. Describing her dress in the first part of the novel, the narrator notes that they are darkened "with the shadows of after events" (26). These "after events" are the discovery of Anne's madness and illegitimacy and her implicit role in the theft of Laura's identity and her imprisonment. As Reynolds and Humble conclude, although Anne and Laura are not identical, "Anne represents what Laura might become and Laura, indeed, stands in place of Anne when she is incarcerated in the asylum under her name" (56).

The spectres of illegitimacy, sexual transgression, madness, illness, death and loss of identity haunt the narrative of *The Woman in White* (Gaylin 304).

Glyde is discovered to be an illegitimate child and, therefore, the wrongful heir to Blackwater Park. It is in the figure of Anne, however, that these discourses are fully played out. Anne is suspected as being a Fallen Woman when Hartright encounters her on the Heath, but is ultimately revealed to be the illegitimate child of Mr. Fairlie and, therefore, Laura's half-sister. Nevertheless, the possibility of female sexual transgression, and the taint of the Fallen Woman, mark Anne's white muslin and differentiate it from Laura's "spotlessly pure" robes (56).

Anne's white gowns are tainted by her illegitimacy, her madness and her active role within the narrative. Without Laura's gentility and passivity, Anne is unsuited to the role of the Angel in the House. Other characters in the novel are determined that Anne should change her white robes for the lavender purple uniform of the asylum or the shabby blue wool of the working classes. Either of these would be more suited to her social position and her narrative role. Her fixation with white muslin is depicted as an obsession from which she cannot be swayed, however. It began in her childhood when, the narrator notes, the benevolent Mrs. Fairlie (Laura's mother) tells her that young ladies look "neater and better all in white than in anything else" (61). Anne resolves to "always wear white as long as I live" in homage to her benefactress (61). Anne's white gowns are, therefore, a uniform or disguise – a reference to the feminine ideal of innocence and virginity which she strives towards but never realises.

Collins suggests that Anne's determination to "always wear white" is a manifestation of her desire to be Laura, the archetypal Angel in the House and daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Fairlie (61). Jonathan Loesberg argues that concern about the "loss, disguise, and change of identity" is central to the sensation novel (119). Both this concern and Anne's desire are realised in *The Woman in White*

when Glyde swaps the heroines' identities. Laura is made to change her genteel and dainty muslin for penitential purple and coarse cotton underclothing with the name "Anne Catherick, as plain as print!" inked on them (427). Here Collins plays out the idea that a woman's clothing is the chief constituent of her social identity. This sartorial change renders Laura Fairlie "socially, morally, legally – dead" (413). Laura's loss of sartorial, social and narrative identity is emphasised by the inscription of a name on a second white surface: that of "Laura, Lady Glyde" on the white marble tombstone in the Limmeridge churchyard. Thus, the heroine suffers both a legal and a social/sartorial loss of identity. Her new identity as Anne Catherick is – literally – inscribed on her body through her clothes. The heroine's white muslin gown becomes a textual surface as well as a symbol. This literalises the idea that dress tells the heroine's story. Collins also makes the tombstone an analogous white narrative surface on which notions of femininity and female subjectivity are inscribed and reinscribed as the story and mystery unfold.

In the closing chapters of the novel, Laura and Anne are restored to their rightful identities and narrative fates. Laura's virtue and innocence is rewarded. Glyde dies and she is free to marry Hartright. The couple return to Laura's ancestral home where she is reinstated to her position as wife, mother and authentic Angel in the House. As fallen woman, madwoman and woman in disguise, Anne is destined, according to Victorian literary codes, to die. Her opaque white gowns connote fatality and, the narrator clearly indicates, prefigure her entombment in white marble. This narrative fate is realised by the re-inscription of "Anne Catherick, July 25th 1850" on the marble tombstone in the Limmeridge churchyard (413).

Instead of becoming an eternal figure of Heavenly femininity upon her death, however, Anne remains an unquantifiable female figure: a ghost. In closing, Hartright states,

the ghostly figure which has haunted these pages ... goes down into the impenetrable Gloom. Like a Shadow she first came to me, in the loneliness of the night. Like a Shadow she passes away, in the loneliness of death. (555)

With her death, Anne becomes the mysterious “Woman in White” once more, and passes into the realm of the symbolic and iconographic. She becomes a figure of reference, “haunting the representational claims of the ... [contemporary] novel and thus upsetting the pretension to present the truth” (Elam 50). She leads readers “to question whether or not we can get at the truth of [the] representation” of femininity and womanhood (Elam 50). It is not merely Anne’s ghostliness, but also Laura’s angelicness which haunts representations of femininity in Victorian popular literature.

Despite the efforts of the characters and the readers to identify “The Woman in White” of the novel’s title and opening scene, she remains elusive and indefinable. Laura becomes the white-clad domestic ideal and Anne a shadowy and spectral figure. Both are untouchable and even mythical figures: representations of the ideal and the aberrant. It is this juxtaposition which defines Collins’s “woman in white”. As the duplicitous titular heroine – at once angel and fiend, heavenly and earthly – they haunt the pages of Victorian literature and Victorian studies, becoming a symbol for the unreliability of appearances, the loss of identity and the spectres of madness, sexual transgression and female criminality.

After the publication of *The Woman in White*, the image of the “Woman in White” behaving outside middle-class gendered norms became an icon of the

moral and aesthetic depravity of the sensation genre. Mansel describes a display of sensation novels in a British railway station:

a highly-coloured picture, hung out like a sign-board ... giving promise of the entertainment to be had within. The picture, like the book is ... of the sensation kind ... A pale young lady in a white dress, with a dagger in her hand, evidently prepared for some desperate deed. (485)

Braddon's *Lady Audley* (of *Lady Audley's Secret*) and *Aurora Floyd* (of *Aurora Floyd*) and Wood's *Lady Isabel Carlyle* (of *East Lynne*) are all women in white muslin prepared for, and executing, "desperate deed[s]" (Mansel 485). Such deeds include attempted murder, bigamy, adultery and falsifying a death. These heroines are infamous for looking the part of the domestic angel but refusing to actually "be" her (Voskuil 613). They combine Laura's angelic looks and Anne's deceitfulness, potential madness and aberrant sexuality. This is made manifest in the use of white muslin. These heroines refashion the pure muslin robes of the Angel in the House, inscribing their own stories on its white surface. In *East Lynne*, Wood depicts the "Woman in White" as an actress artfully preforming ideal and virginal femininity.

East Lynne

Wood's *East Lynne* tells the story of the appositely named Isabel Vane. Dressed in a "flowing dress of costly white lace," Isabel appears the quintessential angel (11). She is "graceful, girlish" (11), "generous and benevolent ...; timid and sensitive to a degree; gentle and considerate to all" (13).

In the novel's opening chapters, Isabel's father dies, leaving her destitute. His lawyer, Archibald Carlyle is overcome by Isabel's angelic beauty and falls in love with her. She agrees to marry him in order to ensure her material comfort and

high social position. Isabel's married life is not a happy one, however. She is convinced that Carlyle is in love with their neighbour Barbara Hare and she becomes consumed by jealousy. Francis Levison, a serial womaniser and the novel's chief villain, preys on her insecurities and goads Isabel into abandoning her husband, home and children and running away with him. Levison then refuses to marry her and Isabel bears him an illegitimate child. Their child is killed in a train accident which also leaves Isabel severely injured. Upon her recovery, she assumes the persona of Madame Vine and takes work as a governess; Isabel Carlyle is reported as having been killed in the accident. Permanently disfigured and disguised in a thick veil she takes up a position at her ancestral home, East Lynne, as governess to her own children. Consumed by guilt for her transgression, Isabel dies of "a broken heart" in the final pages of the novel (619). This tale of female sexual transgression is set against the main mystery narrative of *East Lynne*.

This mystery regards the murder of Mr. Hallijohn. Richard Hare, Barbara's brother and the lover of Hallijohn's daughter Afy, is accused of his shooting. Barbara and Archibald are convinced of Richard's innocence and collaborate to discover the true culprit. This undertaking, and the secrecy it necessitates, fuels Isabel's fears of Archibald's infidelity. This plot bears all the characteristics of the sensation novel – murder, sexual transgression, double identities, disguise and the amateur detective/s. The sensation plot is woven throughout Isabel's story and functions as an allegory of her transgressions.

Like Isabel, Richard refashions his identity, assuming a new name and a sartorial disguise in order to deflect suspicions of his guilt. Both are forced to take up work which is below their class status in order to maintain this subterfuge.

Archibald and Barbara's work to discover the identity of the murderer is matched by the gradual revelation of the true identity of Madame Vine. In the final volume of the novel, the murderer is revealed to be Francis Levison. Simultaneously, Madame Vine is unveiled as Isabel Vane, Levison's lover and victim. While Levison's trial marks his very public shaming, Isabel is slowly, and very privately, dying. Wood deliberately juxtaposes the different forms of punishment apportioned to these characters. Whilst Isabel is absolved of her crimes and, most importantly, sins, Levison is ridiculed and sentenced to hard labour. Thus, he is portrayed as the novel's ultimate villain; Isabel, like Hallijohn and Richard, is irrevocably characterised as his victim. This is highlighted by Wood's symbolic use of white muslin throughout the narrative.

White muslin, as the stuff of angelic femininity, plays an important part in *East Lynne*. Isabel's vestment in and divestment of this evocative cloth marks her passage through the novel from angel, to demon, and back to angel. In the first chapters of the novel, Isabel is taught how to dress as a lady. She trades her girlish "frock" (18) for an extravagant "white lace dress" (11). Thus dressed, she appears "like a young princess in a fairy-tale": an image of an angelic feminine ideal of social and literary convention (133). When Archibald first sees Isabel he asks, "who – what – was it? ... [he was] not quite sure whether it was a human being: he almost thought it more like an angel" (11). This fine, pale cloth is a blank surface on which the author and characters project their fantasies of fairy-tale beauty and ideal angelic femininity. Isabel was raised, the narrator states, "as an English girl should be, not to frivolity or foppery" (10). As the narrative progresses, however, Isabel's gowns become more opaque as she begins "dressing in self-gratification"

(79). Her change in dress functions as an emphatic textural build-up to Isabel's elopement with Levison.

After her marriage, Isabel changes her pure white gown for one of silver-grey silk and then a "costly black lace dress, its body and sleeves trimmed with white lace ... and ornaments of jet" (158). Instead of reflecting her purity and truthfulness, these gowns are almost theatrical in their effect. The narrator states that Isabel lingers in her dressing-room at length, selecting a gown which will most closely represent her mood and her identity. Despite the narrator's protestations that "her intentions were pure" and pleas for the readers to "never doubt the principles of poor Lady Isabel, her rectitude of mind, her wish and endeavour to do right," her gowns suggest otherwise (218). Her divestment of the purity of white muslin is portrayed as a sign of her move away from the moral and sexual purity of the ideal Angel in the House in favour of more sensual models of femininity and female sexuality. Her grey and black function as a portent of her sexual relationship with Levison. Their dark colours also prefigure the drab woollen gowns which she will wear upon her return to this house as Madame Vine and, in their appropriation of the trappings of mourning in black silk and jet, foreshadow her eventual death.

As Madame Vine, the heroine adopts the dark clothing of the wicked witch of a fairy-tale rather than the princess. She replaces her diaphanous white muslins and sensuous silks and laces with "dark and disfiguring" gowns (389). The narrator states that "sometimes her dresses were rich, sometimes plain and quiet; but the material was inevitably the same: black silk" (516). This black garb is a symbolic mourning costume, a lamentation for the loss of her identity as wife and mother. These gowns are also significant in the way in which they veil

Isabel's body. Rather than sensually revealing her body, her mood and her identity, they "disfigure" and disguise them.

As a disguise or costume these dark wool and silk gowns are the textural, symbolic and narrative antitheses of the white muslin gown of ethereal, ideal and fairy-tale femininity. This textural opacity represents deceitfulness, mystery and the spectre of the Fallen Woman. Later remarking on the revelation that Madame Vine is his ex-wife, Archibald Carlyle remarks that: "it was the disguise he ought to have suspected ... the likeness was not sufficiently striking to cause suspicion" (620). Here, Carlyle gives voice to the premise of sensation fiction: that transgression is costumed in innocence and verisimilitude is a sign of mystery rather than of truth or reality (Brantlinger 14). This is resolved through a final change in the colour and texture of Isabel's dress in the final chapter of the novel.

On her deathbed, Isabel is again depicted in diaphanous white; she wears "white cashmere shawls" and in a "white cap and bands" (486). Archibald Carlyle goes to her bedside and forgives her for her desertion. Remorseful and absolved of her sins, Isabel is depicted as a Heavenly, rather than domestic, angel. She is divested of her disguise and, therefore, of the dual spectres of female artifice and aberrant sexuality. Isabel dies a martyr to the "Victorian mythos of love, motherhood ... [and passive] female sexuality" (Walker 29). As in *The Woman in White*, white muslin is the symbolic stuff through which Wood rewards the heroine for her virtue. This narrative resolution solves the problem posed by transgressive sensational heroines and, moreover, that posed by the idea that appearances are deceptive; Isabel's death renders her "one of those shadowy figures" of Heaven: a veritable white angel (488).

In the figure of Isabel Vane/Madame Vine, Wood explores white muslin's connotations of ethereality and ideality. In the character of Afy (Aphrodite) Hallijohn, on the other hand, she explores the cloth's association with ephemerality and the "popular," and the connection between dress, artifice and female sexuality. Like Collins, Wood juxtaposes the narratives of the two white-clad heroines. In *East Lynne*, she self-consciously explores the connection between the ephemerality of fashions in dress, represented by white muslin, and those in literature, represented by sensation fiction and the circulating library.

In a "green-and-white checked sarcenet, flounced up to the waist, over a crinoline extending from here to yonder ... [and] delicate white gloves" (529), the narrator states, Afy is "dressed up to a caricature" (604). She minces along,

in all her vanity ... her lace handkerchief flourishing from one hand, and her flounces jauntily raised with the other, to the display of her worked petticoat. (530)

"Trust Afy to follow the fashion, however preposterous it may be," the narrator adds, suggesting that there is an indecency about the extravagance and fashionable excess of Afy's dress (530). This is exacerbated by its marked ephemerality. Sarcenet is a fine and very cheap silk fabric which was mainly used for linings. Its use as outerwear, then, is an attempt to imitate, or caricature, the effect of fine white muslin with its diaphanous texture, connotations of ideal femininity and "stamp of aristocracy" ("Summary of the Modes ... May" 46). Afy's gown is a theatrical costume – at a distance it has all the effect of high fashion and ideal femininity, however, close inspection reveals it to be a cheap imitation of these ideals. The theatricality of Afy's dress draws attention to its role as a symbol in the novel. Afy represents contemporary anxieties about the sexual, the sensational, the fashionable, the "popular," and the ephemeral.

Afy, the narrator states, is a “brazen hussy” (351). She has a string of aristocratic lovers, amongst them Hare and Levison, and a bevy of besotted working-class suitors. It is her sexual promiscuity which catalyses the sensational plot of the novel and leads to Isabel’s affair. Dressed in white, Afy is Isabel’s double; she prefigures Isabel’s narrative of seduction, demotion to the serving classes and trial. Both women are held accountable for their transgressions: Afy in the assizes court and Isabel at her death. Whilst Isabel is a lady working as a governess, Afy is a maid who refers to herself as a lady’s companion and fantasises about being the lady of the house. She is as at home in the servants’ hall as the drawing-room, the court-room and the street. The fact that her gown is not the pure white of the Angel in the House, but is checked in green (as if stained by her class envy) reinforces this. Like Anne Catherick, Afy aspires to ideal white-muslin femininity but is forced to settle for an inferior imitation. Symbolically, Afy’s purity is marked by her aberrant sexuality and her low social status. In the figure of Afy, dressed in cheap sarcenet, Wood represents the contemporary fear that “high culture would be infiltrated but the ‘popular,’ decked out in imitation finery made possible by the new techniques of mass production” (Jay x).

Both sarcenet and sensation fiction are “popular” products of these “new techniques of mass production” (Jay x). Sensation fiction transgressed class boundaries in that it was the favourite reading of both the kitchen and the drawing-room (Rae 204). Mediating between the serving and upper classes and dressed in imitation fashionable dress, Afy also transgresses these boundaries. She is a caricature of angelic and ideal femininity and contemporary fashion as depicted in popular literature. She is also a representation of the reader of such fiction. She borrows new novels from the circulating library and fashions herself

in the model of their heroines. Thus costumed, she is a caricature of the sensation heroine. In this figure, then, Wood combines fears about the sexually transgressive woman dressed up as an ideal lady and the threat she may pose, as heroine or reader, to high culture and to the mid-Victorian domestic idyll, the home.

In *East Lynne*, Wood depicts the “Woman in White” as both a “transgressive adulteress and suffering victim” (Cvetkovich 97). By refashioning their white muslin and saracenet gowns, Isabel and Afy mediate between classes and contemporary notions of femininity and female sexuality. Their narrative fates represent the two possibilities for the transgressive heroine: death and disgrace. In *Lady Audley’s Secret*, Braddon combines these feminine identities and narratives in the figure of Lady Audley. Braddon’s heroine is a governess, an Angel in the House, a “transgressive adulteress,” a bigamist and a murderess (Cvetkovich 97). She is representative of sensation fiction, Ann Cvetkovich argues, in that “the impossibility of recognizing her wickedness from her appearance adds to her power both to fascinate and threaten” (46).

Lady Audley’s Secret

In a contemporary review of *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1861), Rae states that Lady Audley:

is at once the heroine and the monstrosity of the novel ... Whenever she is meditating the commission of something inexpressibly horrible, she is described as being unusually charming. Her manner and her appearance are always in contrast with her conduct. All this is very exciting, but also very unnatural. (186)

Sensation novels such as *East Lynne* and *Lady Audley's Secret* mark a decided shift in representations of the white-clad heroine. Instead of depicting her as the Angel in the House, she is a duplicitous figure whose potential to act outside contemporary sexual, moral and legal strictures is disguised by the purity and transparency of her white muslin gowns. The mystery of such narratives is shaped by the manipulation of these cloth textures and of the narrative trajectory of concealment and revelation.

Lady Audley's Secret tells the story of Lucy. Lucy is working as a governess when she meets Sir Michael Audley and accepts his proposal of marriage. She makes no attempt to disguise her purely financial motivations for doing so. The sensational action of the novel begins when Robert Audley and his friend George Talboys visit the newlyweds at Audley Court. The pair breaks into Lady Audley's room to view a portrait of the heroine. Soon afterwards, George mysteriously disappears. This leads Robert on an investigation – through a series of circumstantial clues – to the discoveries that Lady Audley is George's wife, Helen Talboys, and that she has pushed George down the Court's well. Despite the revelation that Lady Audley's actual crimes are bigamy and attempted murder, the central mystery of the novel, and that which is the object of Robert's search, is her double identity (Loesberg 130). Lady Audley's "secret" is that she is at once wife and mother Mrs. Talboys, governess Miss Graham, and Lady Audley, lady of the manor. The heroine's crimes are crimes of fashion as well as passion.

Lady Audley's white muslin gowns are at times light and airy, connoting angelic innocence and virtue. At other times, however, they are heavy and static and, as in the case of Collins's Anne Catherick, bear the taint of female sexual transgression and madness. They also contain Lady Audley's sensational secret.

In *Lady Audley's Secret*, the textural and physical variations of white muslin symbolise the heroine's dual identity. Unlike Laura Fairlie and Anne Catherick, Lady Audley knowingly and deliberately negotiates this; rather than having her identity fashioned for her, she manipulates her own dress in order to take advantage of white muslin's multiple symbolic meanings. Lady Audley is amongst the first in a group of more active heroines of Victorian popular literature.

Dressed in flowing white muslin Lady Audley is initially cast as the authentic angel, with no "shallow artifice" about her (7). With her "soft and feathery" golden hair forming "a pale halo round her head," she is the image of the Angel in the House (8). As the narrative progresses, however, the texture of the white muslin changes, as does its narrative function. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, white muslin is associated with dramatic and sensational moments in the plot. These scenes are marked by a deliberate tension whereby the reader is unsure if the cloth is light and airy – connoting innocence, truthfulness and ideal femininity – or more opaque, taking advantage of these appearances and signalling deception, artifice and aberrant female sexuality. It is this play with the cloth's dynamic texture and iconography as a narrative symbol which informs the mystery of the novel.

When Sir Michael proposes to Lucy, Braddon describes her crouching at his feet, "her thin white dress clinging about her" (11). Lucy's subordinate, almost devotional posture evokes the Victorian ideal of passive and saintly femininity (Talairach-Vielmas 9). Motionless and with her face almost as white as her muslin gown, Lucy appears a statue or icon of this ideal. However, the symbolic weight of this usually diaphanous cloth suggests that it is charged with a significance

which is yet to be revealed. “Clinging about her,” the white muslin gown makes her physical body the centre of this scene and characterises her as a sexual being (11). The white muslin gown is simultaneously a sign of Lady Audley’s transparency, vulnerability and innocence, and her sexuality, artifice and opacity.

This textural and narrative duality is continued in the next scene where Lucy is described “sitting on the edge of the white bed; still and white as the draperies hanging round her” contemplating her upcoming marriage (12). Thus concealed, she whispers “every trace of the old life [is] melted away, every clue to identity buried and forgotten ... except these,” extricating from beneath her gown “a ring wrapped in an oblong piece of paper” (12). The white drapery gives the illusion of transparency and lightness, but also functions as a veil, disguising the secret of her identity in its dense gathers. The curtains and her white gown function as textural irony; they draw attention to “these” but continue to veil their secret. As well as disguising the heroine’s secret, the curtains also provide a space within which she can fashion a new identity. Lucy’s past, present and future identities are contained in this opaque textural and narrative space.

In a narratological sense, the white drapery hangs about this scene like a metaphoric pall signifying the death of Helen Talboys/Lucy Graham and veiling the moment when the heroine consciously fashions her identity as Lady Audley. Braddon plays with white’s dual significance as a sign of fatality and of vitality. The layering of the white dress, white paper and white curtains in this scene represent the merging of these multiple, seemingly contradictory, symbolic meanings. Together these white layers reveal both her guilt, as Lucy is about to embark upon a bigamous marriage, and her disguise. This testifies to Braddon’s

employment of muslin's dynamic transparency to simultaneously allude to and conceal secrets (L. Cohen 151).

Throughout *Lady Audley's Secret*, readers are made aware that Braddon is intentionally obscuring the clues of the sensation narrative (Brantlinger 14). As in the proposal scene, white muslin is the veil which effects this disguise. The diaphanous cloth is rendered opaque by its multiplicity of symbolic associations. White muslin connotes ethereality, virginity, female virtue, passivity, blankness and festivity. To these are added the connotations of mystery, death, madness, sexual transgression, artifice and ephemerality, as played out in *The Woman in White* and *East Lynne*. Lady Audley draws on all of these meanings; she employs the evocative white muslin gown of the Angel in the House as a costume in which to commit murder and then absolve herself of guilt. When she returns to the Court after having pushed George down the well, Lady Audley appears "gentle, innocent ... [and] unusually charming" in a pale muslin gown (Rae 186). Her angelic appearance belies her criminal agency. The cloth's light texture symbolises Lucy's happiness that she is now free from the ties of her first marriage. After George's supposed death, Lucy exchanges her muslin gowns for dark and sensuous velvets and silks and an ostentatious fur coat. These heavier cloths symbolise the deliberate reinforcement of her legal and social position as wife of Sir Michael Audley. As Robert begins to discover her history, however, Lucy is forced back into crime and her angelic disguise of white muslin.

When Lady Audley discovers that Robert knows the secret of her identity, she lights a fire at the inn in which he is residing in the hope of killing him. The next day, Lady Audley is "exquisitely dressed in a morning costume of delicate muslin, elaborate laces and embroideries," appearing gentle and angelic (328).

The delicacy of her white gown signifies light-heartedness and innocence and is a deliberate attempt to deflect suspicion of her guilt. However, the effect of white lace layered on white muslin suggests a depth of narrative meaning. This intricately textured image is described in conjunction with Robert's revelation and full explanation of Lady Audley's dual identity and other, more violent, crimes. In this scene, the readers are made fully aware of the demonism veiled by Lady Audley's white muslin and caught in the patterns of her "elaborate laces and embroideries" (328). We read her multiple and intricately fashioned identities in the fine patterns and textures of her attire. Throughout *Lady Audley's Secret*, the heroine's changes in and out of variously textured cloths give form and texture to the novel's narrative of secrecy and revelation. This interplay of transparency and innocence, and opacity and transgression, continue in Braddon's next novel, *Aurora Floyd* (1863).

Aurora Floyd

Aurora Floyd, more so than Lady Audley, is an actress costumed in evocative white muslin. Like Lady Audley, Aurora has "*a secret*" (175). In *Aurora Floyd*, the changing textures of the heroine's dress emphasise the narrative structure of build-up, climax and resolution of this secret. Braddon uses sartorial symbolism in conjunction with a dramatic narrative structure and imagery; the novel is structured by carefully laid-out dramatic scenes in which Aurora frames herself as object of the reader's gaze. These scenes self-consciously draw attention to the way in which setting, costume, colour and texture are used as visual signs in telling the heroine's story. As a reviewer in *The Spectator* noted, the novel's "pictorialness" tends towards the theatrical ("*Aurora*" 1586). In *Aurora Floyd*,

Braddon utilises a dramatic structure and relies heavily on stage metaphors (“*Aurora*” 1586). The plot of *Aurora Floyd* is divided into three dramatic acts, each of which revolves around a key scene in which Aurora is dressed in white. Braddon draws on white muslin’s concomitant evocation of the ethereal and the ephemeral. In fact, she conflates these by depicting white muslin as a sign of the ephemerality of the ethereal Victorian feminine ideal. From the opening scenes of the novel, readers are aware that Aurora is acting the part of the virginal and angelic heroine (“*Aurora*” 1587).

The first act of the novel opens on the evening of the Aurora’s seventeenth birthday. She stands “in the dark grandeur of her beauty ... crowned with scarlet, and robed in white” (29). In this scene, Aurora is described as an “imperious creature,” a “Cleopatra in crinoline” (33). In delicately draped white, she appears as an icon of the ethereal feminine ideal. Her white gowns, however, disguise a rebellious and passionate nature and a “dark” history (29). As the narrative progresses, this history begins to show through the purity of her white gowns.

Aurora’s beauty instantly commands the attention of Captain Talbot Bulstrode and the couple is soon engaged. Soon after their engagement, Bulstrode becomes aware that, during her youth, Aurora ran away from a Parisian finishing-school and was absent from home for a year. When pressed for an explanation, Aurora replies, “I cannot tell you, Talbot Bulstrode. This is my secret which I cannot tell you” (103). Bulstrode then breaks-off the engagement, declaring that “there must be *no* secret between my wife and me” (104). “The past life of my wife must be a white unblemished page” (105), as “spotless as her own white robes” (40), he states, “which all the world may be free to read” (105). He later marries Aurora’s blonde and angelic cousin, Lucy Floyd who satisfies his notion

of subservient, passive and angelic femininity. He prefers “the white wings of the angel” to the “spell of the siren,” he admits (158). Aurora, meanwhile, marries the rambunctious John Mellish who, when told of the existence of her secret, says “I could not love you as I do . . . if I did not believe you to be all that is best and purest in woman” (126). His confidence in Aurora’s purity is in stark contrast to Bulstrode’s concern about her past.

Aurora is married in a sumptuous white silk dress and with a Mechlin lace veil, as if performing Mellish’s notion of feminine purity. This layering of white silk and lace captures both her secret and her artifice in its intricate patterning.

Self-consciously reflecting on the story at this juncture, the narrator states,

Now my two heroines being married, the reader versed in the physiology of novel writing may conclude that my story is done, the green curtain is ready to fall upon the last act of the play . . . Must the play needs be over when the hero and heroine have signed their names in the register? Does man cease to be, to do, and to suffer when he gets married? And is it necessary that the novelists, after devoting three volumes to the description of a courtship of six week’s duration, should reserve for himself only half a page in which to tell us the events of two-thirds of a life-time? Aurora is married . . . but it does not therefore follow that the story of her life is done. (163)

As the “curtain” falls on this act of the novel, however, it signifies theatricality rather than finality.

After the marriage, “the great drama” of the novel begins (157). Upon their return to Mellish Park, John employs a new stable groom, James Conyers. Conyers had been an employee of her Aurora’s father and it is later revealed that Aurora eloped with him from the Parisian school. As in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, white muslin is associated with dramatic and sensational moments in the drama of revelation in *Aurora Floyd*. After the arrival of Conyers, Aurora is walking in the park. Describing this scene, the narrator states that Aurora was

very pale, almost as pale as her white dress ... which hung about her in loose folds that gave a statuesque grace to her figure. She was dressed with such evident carelessness that every fold of muslin seemed to tell how far away her thoughts had been when that hasty toilette was made. (194)

Her gown speaks not of the theatricality or intention of dressing, but of her preoccupation with hiding the secret of her past. During her walk, Aurora receives a letter from Conyers. She reads the epistle then “[thrusts] it into the bosom of her dress” (195). This act literalises the idea that Aurora’s white muslin veils her secret. Instead of being light and airy, Aurora’s white muslin is rendered heavy, clinging and opaque by her deception; each fold of her gown bespeaks of her “*secret*” (175) but keeps it obscured. The contents of the letter are equally hidden by the white cloth of her gown. Her white muslin is, therefore, texturally and narratively opaque. This textural clothly and narrative effect is replicated the following day when Aurora confronts Conyers.

As in the stage drama, setting, *mise en scène* and lighting are crucial to *Aurora Floyd*. Dressed in a white evening gown, Aurora goes to talk to Conyers. In the twilight, her white gown, like Anne Catherick’s, appears mysteriously opaque, symbolising her deception. Mrs. Powell, the novel’s amateur detective, “watch[es] the white dress receding in the dusky twilight” (203). “The white dress was motionless for some time,” then, “No! The white dress was no longer motionless,” she exclaims (203-4). The image of Aurora’s white figure becoming lost among the shadows is a metaphor for her secrecy. In her description of this scene, Braddon employs the white gown a metonym for the angelic heroine. She depicts the “white dress receding” from view as a symbol of Angel in the House behaving outside the conventions of femininity (203); Mrs. Powell does not watch

Aurora, rather, she watches the iconic “white dress” as its symbolic purity becomes overshadowed by doubt and guilt.

This scene marks the beginning of the third act of *Aurora Floyd* and is the first in a series of climaxes. The emotional intensity of Aurora and Conyers’s meeting is emphasised, in dramatic fashion, by a storm. This climatic event indicates a shift in the narrative, symbolised by a change in the texture of Aurora’s white gowns. Aurora returns to the house with “water hanging in her muslin dress ... and the folds of her lace shawl clung tightly about her figure” (212). The water renders her white gown limp and transparent. Clinging “tightly about her figure,” her dress transparently and erotically reveals her body and her past rather than opaquely veiling them (212). Aurora’s nighttime *rendezvous* stains her white muslin and, by symbolic association, her virtue. This change in the texture of the heroine’s white muslin gown is matched with a change in the novel’s narrative structure. Henceforth, Aurora attempts to rid herself on evidence of her youthful transgression, instead of merely disguising it.

The next night Aurora wears a “maize-coloured silk with voluminous flouncings of black lace” (273). The volume and bright colour of this silk gown render it the textural and chromatic antithesis of her clinging wet muslin gown. It disguises her body and is an obvious attempt to challenge Mrs. Powell’s suspicion that she is having a relationship with the groom. The minutiae in which Braddon describes this silk *ensemble* emphasises its function as a theatrical costume. Thus dressed, Aurora melodramatically performs her role as perfect wife and hostess in this scene, thereby increasing this suspicion. During this evening, Aurora goes out again, this time to pay Conyers’s bribe to leave Mellish Park. The next morning, he is found murdered. While the body is being laid out, “a paper” is found “sewed

up between [the] stoof and linin” [sic] of his waistcoat (252). The paper is Aurora and Conyers’s marriage certificate. This discovery echoes the earlier scene in which Aurora deposited Conyers’s letter inside her gown in order to hide it. Instead of disguising their secret union, this piece of paper reveals Aurora’s seduction and her bigamy. It also puts her in the frame for another crime: Conyers’s murder.

After the murder Aurora again assumes an evocative white dress and performs her role as the virtuous and angelic wife of John Mellish. She poses herself “lying upon the sofa, wrapped in a loose white dressing-gown” (271). In this scene, Aurora performs her femininity in a distinctly provocative manner (Nayder, “Threshold” 190). She resembles the ethereal “Woman in White” but also combines this with her siren-like power to fascinate and even to seduce (Daly, *Sensation* 2). “Her cheeks were flushed with a feverish crimson,” the narrator notes, “and one small hand lay under her head twisted in the tangled masses of her [ebon] hair” (271). Aurora is conscious of the sexual and theatrical gesture she is making. She appropriates the erotic power of the virtuous and innocent virgin to disarm John’s suspicion of her.

When John goes to the inquest into Conyers’s death, Aurora impatiently waits, dressed in white muslin and sitting in the curtained window of his study. Her position at the threshold of the house represents her liminal position between guilt and innocence, respectability and infamy, angel and demon, wife and actress at this point in the narrative. The layering of her white gown with the diaphanous stuff of the curtains embodies this duality. Surrounded by the curtains, Aurora is personified as an actress on centre stage, the readers avidly awaiting her next move.

Finally overcome by fear of her husband's discovery of her bigamy and suspicion for murder, Aurora flees to London still wearing her "white morning-dress" (356). Walking the London streets at night, Aurora evokes the image of Anne Catherick escaped from the asylum and also dressed in white. At night her gown is etiolated, making a spectacle of this figure of transgressive femininity. Whilst Anne disappears from sight before she reaches her destination, the readers follow Aurora into the home of Talbot and Lucy Bulstrode. Once inside, Aurora's gown is revealed to be transparent, limp and "none the fresher for her journey" (356). As "two of Lucy's dresses joined together would scarcely have been largely enough for [Aurora]," she is forced to continue wearing her soiled muslin despite the fact that convention and fashion dictate that she changes (356). This suggests that Aurora is made to wear her stained white gown as a mark of and punishment for her transgression. Thus dressed, Aurora confesses her elopement, bigamy and deception to Bulstrode but maintains her innocence of Conyers's murder.

In *Aurora Floyd*, Braddon delights in subverting the expectations of readers familiar with sensation fiction, in particular *Lady Audley's Secret*. Whilst Lady Audley's angelic looks deflect suspicion from her, Aurora's dark hair and dark secrets lead readers to suspect her guilt (Ofek 108). As Galia Ofek states, "dark hair signified fallen or dangerous female sexuality" in Victorian literature and popular culture (103). Aurora's passionate elopement with her father's groom conforms to this model. However, it is Aurora's artifice, rather than her appearance or even her sexuality, which is of most concern.

As readers, we first come to know of Aurora as a potentially dangerous and sensational woman through the brief narration of her mother's career as an

actress (Tatum 510). Eliza Floyd (née Prodder) was known for her renditions of Shakespearean heroines dressed in “dirty white muslin, red-cotton velvet and spangles” (8). Aurora, Braddon states, is “her mother’s own daughter, and had the taint of play-acting and horse-riding, the spangles and saw-dust, strong in her nature” (21). From the start, Aurora is characterised as an actress and her white dress as a costume. In the opening scenes of the novel, Talbot Bulstrode states that he “wished for an opera-glass as he watched Aurora’s graceful gestures and the play of her sparkling eyes” (47). Aurora frequently poses at the window, “half in and half out of the room” and framed by the curtains as if she were on stage (171). This combination of theatrical symbols leads the readers to interpret Aurora’s virtue and innocence as a carefully choreographed and costumed, but inevitably ephemeral, performance.

Braddon’s reliance on theatrical symbolism and visual clues in developing Aurora’s identity as a demonic and murderous heroine is, however, a dramatic representational performance designed to mislead the readers. In the final chapters of the novel, Braddon reveals that it is the revengeful stable-hand Steve Hargreaves who is guilty of the murder. As Clair Hughes states, “Aurora ... has her secret, but it is not really bigamy [or murder] she conceals; it is a traditionally angelic heart beneath a hoyden’s surface” (*Dressed* 74). Thus, Braddon inverts the defining premise of the sensation novel; whilst appearances of innocence disguise guilt, so too can appearances of guilt mask innocence. With this revelation, the curtain falls on the final dramatic act of the novel. The final scene of *Aurora Floyd* is cloyingly sentimental and domestic rather than extravagantly dramatic. She is legally married to John Mellish and becomes the quintessential Angel in the House, wife and mother.

Throughout *Aurora Floyd*, Braddon explores the “opposition between the natural and the artificial, the authentic and the artfully constructed” (Nayder, “Threshold” 190). She does this by juxtaposing the novel’s dramatic structure and sensational themes against its conservative moral ending. Braddon depicts the “Woman in White” as a duplicitous actress but finally reveals her to be a veritable domestic angel. This serves, not to reinforce this ideal of virtuous and passive femininity, but to reveal the ephemerality of the fashioned fiction which associates a woman’s subjectivity and sexuality with her dress. Like many popular novels of this period, *Aurora Floyd* questions the representational claims of realism (Elam 50); appearances and reality are not seamlessly linked. White muslin is the symbolic stuff of this critique.

“The woman in white,” Elam argues, “appears as the figure of reference ... haunting the representational claims of the realist novel and thus upsetting the pretension to present the truth ... [it leads] us to question whether or not we can get at the truth of [the] representation” of femininity and womanhood (50). In popular literature of the mid-to-late-Victorian period, white muslin’s evocative and “dynamic transparency and opacity” enact this duality (L. Cohen 151). It is at once angelic and ethereal, and ephemeral and worldly. White muslin functions as both a sign of ideal virginal femininity and of the fictitiousness of this representation of femininity. From the 1880s, this became increasingly self-conscious.

In the late-Victorian period, the ideal of women as passive, dependent and chaste was deliberately transformed (Stubbs xiv). Heroines of popular literature “became sexual, sensuous” and increasingly independent beings (Stubbs xiv). In his 1886 novel, *A Drama in Muslin*, George Moore dramatises the problems of

representing the truth of women's lives through his use of sartorial symbolism. He plays on white muslin's connotations of conceptual transparency and evocation of truthfulness and authenticity. Instead of representing his heroines as white-clad domestic angels, Moore emphasises white muslin's potent and complicated symbolic function and depicts his heroines as white-costumed mummers in a drama of the construction of femininity and female sexuality. This theatricality is compounded in the novel's narrative structure.

A Drama in Muslin combines elements of the realist novel and stage drama in telling the stories of its five heroines. These differing literary forms are symbolised by Moore's use of white muslin as alternately fashion and costume. Moore's heroines wear various textures of white cloth as they negotiate their identities and sexualities as "muslin martyrs": sacrificed to contemporary ideas about literature, representation, morality, sexuality and fashion (99).

A Drama in Muslin

Moore's *A Drama in Muslin* tells the stories of five *debutantes* in 1880s Dublin. It traces their transition from the sheltered world of the convent school onto the "marriage market" (172). In the opening chapter, Moore describes a *tableau vivant* of the Birth of Christ, performed by the heroines. As the Madonna, Violet:

seemed representative of an intelligent virginity, and in a long, white dress she knelt at a *prie-dieu*. Olive, with a pair of wings obtained from the local theatre, and her hair, blonde as an August harvesting, lying along her back, took the part of the Angel. (14)

This *tableau vivant* is the first of the novel's many dramatic performances. As well as depicting the Birth of Christ, it also functions as an allegory for the heroines' emergence onto the "great muslin [marriage] market" as *debutantes*

(172). Dressed in white muslin, Moore's heroines not only play the parts of the Madonna and biblical Angels, but also act in the role of the Victorian domestic angel, and ideal wife and mother. The *tableau* emphasises the performativity and artifice which underpin these feminine ideals; delicacy and youthful innocence are juxtaposed with artful self-consciousness (Elam 49). The narrator suggests that the innocence, virtue and ethereality of the heroines are as fashioned and ephemeral as their white muslin costumes and borrowed wings (101). This *tableau vivant* is an "awful mummery in muslin" of the Victorian feminine ideal (99). Throughout the novel, Moore employs such carefully costumed dramatic scenes as allegories to explore and critique the representation of white-muslin femininity in contemporary popular fiction.

A Drama in Muslin, A Realistic Novel, takes both of the literary forms it references in its title. It is at once *A Drama* with grand themes, detailed *mise en scène*, careful costuming, dramatic *tableaux*, and powerful speeches as well as a *Realistic Novel* in the naturalist or French realist style.¹³ In its social themes and settings, verisimilitude, and attention to detail, *A Drama in Muslin* is, demonstrably, a realist novel. However, its narrative is structured around costumed theatrical scenes which dramatise the construction and representation of femininity and female sexuality in realist literature. In combining these two literary forms, Moore interrogates the representational claims of contemporary realism (MacLeod 65).

Moore's use of sartorial symbolism attests to the novel's bifurcated genre and form and is integral to its critique of Victorian social, sartorial and literary fashions. At times, the heroines' gowns are described in the dispassionate, meticulous and verisimilar detail of the fashion magazine. The narrator catalogues

the features of a “dress of snow satin, skirt quite plain in front. Bodice and train of white poplin; ... veils of silver tissue softened the edges of the train” (175). Such fashionable descriptions equip the audience with a realist social and moral index through which to view the heroines (C. Hughes, *Dressed 2*). At other times, however, Moore describes the heroines’ dress in the lyrical language of poetry and music. Here, dress is used, not as realist detail but as dramatic costuming; the heroines gowns are described “in connection with dramatic conditions ... actions” and scenes in the narrative (C. Hughes, *Dressed 34*). In the choice of their presentation gowns, the heroines “expend... all of the poetry of their natures,” the narrator states (175). Dress-makers’ assistants display “the armouries of Venus” from which they select the cloth for their gowns:

armouries filled with the deep blue of midnight, with the faint tints of dawn, with strange flowers and birds, with moths, and moons, and stars. Lengths of white silk clear as the notes of violins playing in a minor key; white poplin falling into folds statuesque as the bass of a fugue by Bach; yards of ruby velvet, rich as an air from Verdi played on the piano. (162)

In such descriptions, Moore expresses chromatic and textural variations in dress through metaphors of light and shade, and nature and music. White muslin is juxtaposed with heavier and more sensual cloths as a form of moral and sexual *chiaroscuro* (N. Daly, *Sensation 32*). In this way he renders their effects sensual, palpable and emotional rather than cerebral and rational. In this drama, muslin is seen as the theatrical garb of the ethereal feminine ideal with which the heroines are kitted out to appear as “white ware[s]” on the stage of the “great muslin market” (172). The novel’s opening scene introduces the five heroines and encapsulates Moore’s use of white muslin as a symbol in his drama of representation.

In this scene, Moore describes a garden-party at the Convent of the Holy Child. “All around,” he states, “the white dresses of the girls fluttered through the verdurous vistas like the snowy plumage of a hundred doves” (1). “Suddenly,”

a rearrangement of the figures on the terrace made one group of girls the centre of the vast panorama. They seemed like a piece of sculpture ready to be taken from the peace and meditation of the studio and placed in the noise and staring of the galleries. (2)

The figures revealed at the centre of this idyllic scene are also at the centre of the “drama in muslin” (99). They are Alice Barton, Lady Cecilia Cullen, Olive Barton, Violet Scully and May Gould. All are dressed in white muslin gowns and white stockings (4). Moore describes the composition of this “harmonious group” (2) in great detail. He catalogues the attitudes, appearances and personalities of the heroines with the meticulousness of a playwright issuing stage directions; Alice and Cecilia sit side by side on the bench. Olive lounges on the lawn with her arms carelessly “thrown over her sister’s knees” (24). May stands behind, “her hand ... affectionately on Alice’s shoulder” whilst Violet occupies the other end of the bench (3). This *tableau vivant* literalises the Victorian feminine ideal which imagined *debutantes* as finished artworks. The heroines’ white, classically draped gowns contribute to this aesthetic.

In his description of the heroines’ muslin gowns, Moore draws heavily on contemporary fashion. Such gowns had a “soft dreamy look” which combined the resonance of virginal sexuality and “high social standing” of previous fashions with a certain sexiness (Johnston, Kite and Persson 8). His description of this style extends beyond the realist and into the symbolic. In this novel, Moore describes the textural variation of white muslin to express the different characters of the heroines and to distinguish between their “dramatic” costuming and “realistic” dressing. These clothly textural variations are matched in the variations of style

and texture in the narrative of the novel. In *A Drama in Muslin*, the realist plot runs alongside the dramatic “costume plot” (Gaines 205).

The costume plot of *A Drama in Muslin* is marked by linguistic, sartorial and stylistic excess; its realist plot, conversely, is driven by “the spirit of scientific inquiry that is bearing our age along” and is more restrained (Moore, *Literature* 16-7). In this novel, Moore uses a variety of theatrical metaphors to emphasise his shifts in narrative registers. Primary amongst these is the curtain or veil. The theatrical curtain is a symbol of conceptual opacity and of the impossibility of representing the truth. Alice states that her story is shaped around a series of costumed social acts with a “‘curtain’ at the end of each” (193).

The *debutantes*’ presentation ball is one such dramatic act. As the climax in the novel’s “costume plot,” this scene is also pivotal to Moore’s self-conscious dramatisation of the construction of female identity and sexuality through sartorial symbolism. Moore describes Olive’s presentation gown of “white Surat silk”

[as] chaste, beautiful [and] delicious as that presentiment of shared happiness which fills a young girl’s mind when her fancy awakens in the soft spring sunlight; the white *faille Française* with tulle and garlands of white lilac, delicate and only as sensuous as the first meetings of sweet-hearts. (164)

Amongst the other *debutantes*,

trains of blue sapphire *broche* looped with blue ostrich feathers, [were as] seductive and artificial as a boudoir plunged in a dream ... dove-coloured velvet trains adorned with tulips and tied with bows of brown and pink – [as] temperate as the love that endures when the fiery day of passion had gone down; ... trains of white velouture festooned with tulle; trails of snow-drops, icy as lips that have been bought, and cold as a life that lives in a name. (164)

In this description, each technical and textural feature of the presentation gowns is associated with one of the qualities of the virginal feminine ideal (99). The

different textures of the embellished white cloth connote chasteness, happiness, virtue and delicacy. Moore also hints at the artificiality of this image, however. These gowns are as sensuous, fantastic, “seductive and artificial as a boudoir plunged in a dream” (164). Moore’s evocation of the various symbolic functions of white muslin – through description of its various textures – disrupts the text’s pretension to reality and truth by rendering opaque the line between reality and fantasy, realism and drama.

The novel’s most demonstrative and symbolic dramatic act functions in a similar way. Here the heroines perform in a musical sketch of “King Cophetua,” adapted from Tennyson’s poem by Alice Barton. As the King, May Gould wears “a long garment, something between an ulster and a dressing-gown” (9). May is an inveterate performer. “Excited by the presence of an audience, by the footlights” and confident in the knowledge that “her well-shaped legs could be seen” through her robe, May “strolled about like a man” (10). Olive, “dressed in a tight-fitting gown of pale blue,” plays the Princess (10). “Everyone was enchanted” by the performance except Alice (13). She “alone saw how the beauty of her thoughts had been turned into hideousness in the representation; the ideal as it passed into reality had been polluted” (13). This scene functions synecdochically for the plot of the novel.

Moore plays out the idea that the ideal of female purity is “turned into hideousness” in representation (13). This “hideousness” takes the form of a knowing female sexuality, female duplicity and a questioning of the validity of socially, and sartorially, constructed gender distinctions. The fear of the “pollution” of the feminine ideal by such hideousness is also played out in the novel proper. Moore dramatises this through the heroines’ adoption of brighter

and more textural forms of dress in place of their virginal white costumes. In its use of costuming – as a specific form of sartorial symbolism – this scene allegorises the problem, as Elam articulates it, of getting at the truth in the representation of femininity and womanhood (50). It narrates the shift between a transparent muslin narrative of femininity and a narrative made opaque through the density of its symbolism.

In the final chapters of *A Drama in Muslin*, Moore's Alice, May and Cecilia trade their *debutante's* white muslin for gowns of grey and black wool, and colourful silk and velvet. This reflects their departure from the virginal ideal for different forms of late-nineteenth-century femininity: the New Woman, the Fallen Woman and the lesbian. Instead of ethereality and ephemerality, gowns of silk and velvet connote sexuality, sensuality, glamour, wealth and decadence, and those of wool suggest independence, intellectual seriousness and self-denial. The significance of these cloths and the narratives which they represent will be discussed in Chapters Two and Three. Despite Moore's heroines' rejection of ethereal and ephemeral white muslin, the story of the "Woman in White," traversing the bounds of innocence and virtue, martyrdom, disgrace and self-denial, persists in popular literature into the 1890s. Allen's 1895 novel *The Woman Who Did* tells the story of Herminia Barton: Girton girl, New Woman, proponent of free love, and martyr in white muslin.

The Woman Who Did

In the first chapters of *The Woman Who Did*, Herminia meets and falls in love with Alan Merrick. Alan reflects that she "appeared at all points so nearly to approach his ideal of womanhood. She was at once so high in type, so serene, so

tranquil, and yet so purely womanly,” he thinks (18). Instead of manifesting the theatricality of Moore’s fashionable heroines, she is dressed in a “simple white morning-dress, a mere ordinary English gown, without affectation of any sort” (18). The “half-classical drapery” of her gown, with its “reminiscence of a flowing Greek chiton,” “exactly suited the severe regularity of her pensive features and her graceful figure” (18).¹⁴ Its whiteness also reflects her purity. However, Herminia is not a white-clad *debutante*, eagerly awaiting a proposal of marriage and elevation to the status of Angel in the House. She says,

I know what marriage is – from what vile slavery it has sprung; on what unseen horrors for my sister women it is reared and buttressed; by what unholy sacrifices it is sustained and made possible. I know it has a history. I know its past; I know its present; and I can’t embrace it. (39)

She is determined to martyr herself to the “cause of truth and righteousness” of women’s rights (238). Thus, her white dress becomes a sign of her “translucent simplicity and directness of purpose” (37); she, too, is a “muslin martyr” (Moore, *Drama* 188). Instead of being martyred to the institution of marriage and the cult of the Angel in the House, Herminia sacrifices herself to their antitheses, “free love” (22) and the ideal of the “free women” (38).

To Alan she says, “I love you . . . But I must keep my proper place, the freedom which I have gained for myself by such arduous efforts” (39). Instead she proposes that they live together in a free-union as unmarried “friends” (39). Alan questions if he could “accept the sacrifice this white soul wished to make for him?,” (49); is he “to be condemned for having dragged down to the dust that angel whose wings he felt himself unworthy to touch with the hem of his garment?” (50). Despite his concern and his father’s disapproval, he acquiesces. In respect of her independence, Alan moves into Herminia’s cottage in Chelsea. When he arrives, “the door [is] opened by Herminia in person” (77). She is:

dressed from head to foot in a simple white gown, as pure and simple as the soul it covered. A white rose nestled in her glossy hair ... Some dim survival of ancestral ideas made Herminia Barton so array herself in the white garb of affiance for her bridal evening. Her cheeks aglow with virginal shrinking as she opened the door, and welcomed Alan in. But she held out her hand just as frankly as ever to the man of her free choice as he advanced to greet her. Alan caught her in his arms and kissed her forehead tenderly. And thus was Herminia Barton's espousal consummated. (77-8)

In contradiction to the arbiters of Victorian morality, who would speak of "Herminia's shame and degradation," Allen does not characterise his heroine as a Fallen Woman (53). Her commitment to truth, righteousness and justice and insistence on sacrificing herself for the future freedom of her sex render her a paragon of moral purity. Throughout the novel, the narrator makes reference to Herminia's "purity," honesty, innocence and her "stainless soul" (241).

When Herminia becomes pregnant, the couple travel to Italy to avoid gossip. Soon after, Alan falls ill and dies. Sitting by his bedside, she is both an image of the devoted wife and Angel in the House and "a white marble statue" (129). Alan's death signals her transformation from an angel to a martyr. Herminia returns to London with her daughter Dolores, not as a "Woman in White," but as a black-clad widow (142).

Despite poverty and prejudice, Herminia works as a journalist and raises her daughter with the hope that she will mature to be an apostolate for women's rights. However, as she approaches womanhood, it becomes evident that Dolores's "ideas – nay, worse, her ideals – were essentially commonplace" (191). She "seemed to attach undue importance to the mere upholsteries and equipages of life – to rank, wealth, title, servants, carriages, jewellery" and fashion (193-4). She rails against her "mamma's ridiculous fancies" and Fabian friends (207-8).

When Dolores receives a marriage proposal from a wealthy gentleman, she estranges herself from her mother and takes her father's name.

In the final chapter of *The Woman Who Did*, Herminia becomes a "Woman in White" once more. She dons a

fresh white dress, as pure as her own soul, like the one she had worn on the night of her self-made bridal with Alan Merrick. In her bosom she fastened two innocent white roses. (239-40)

This plain white gown contains a plethora of symbolic meanings. In echoing her "self-made" bridal gown, it gestures towards her innocence and purity.

Simultaneously, it alludes to the sexual consummation of her espousal with Alan, revealing the price she must pay for her decision. As a sign of her "translucent simplicity and directness of purpose" (37), her white gown represents Herminia's readiness to sacrifice herself for the emancipation of women (73). As a symbol of ethereality, this gown also foreshadows her death and ascendance to Heaven as an angel (239). Thus dressed, she performs the ultimate act of martyrdom, committing suicide in order to free her daughter from any social "trouble" which may result from her illegitimacy (239).

Rather than being a final concession to the dictates of nineteenth-century morality, as many contemporary and subsequent critics have proposed, Herminia's suicide is the ultimate martyrdom "to the cause of truth and righteousness" (238) and her belief that women should be free to live and love according to their own convictions (Ledger, *New* 14). In a note left for her daughter, Herminia states that: "I set out in life with the earnest determination to be a martyr to the cause of truth and righteousness as I myself understood them. But I didn't foresee this last pang of martyrdom" (238). With her death, Herminia is elevated to the realm of the ethereal and mythical. Dressed in purest white

muslin, she is both an angel and a “martyr ... to humanity” and a heroine of late-Victorian feminism; although “Herminia Barton’s stainless soul had ceased to exist for ever,” “from [her] ... grave... shall spring the church of the future,” Allen states (240).

Instead of being a symbol for socially and culturally constructed ideality of femininity and female sexuality, white muslin represents true moral goodness and honesty of purpose in Allen’s *The Woman Who Did*. Despite entering into a free sexual union, Herminia remains a “Woman in White,” whose muslin gowns reflect her “stainless soul” and her dedication to the “cause of truth and righteousness” and women’s emancipation (238). Instead of being a duplicitous and deceitful heroine or a *debutante*, sacrificed onto the marriage market, Herminia is a heroine of the late-Victorian women’s movement.

Conclusion

As angel, bride, martyr, ghost, mummer, fantasy, fraud, figure of fashion or feminist icon, the woman in white muslin predominates in Victorian popular fiction. She negotiates the allegorical, metaphoric, symbolic, social and sartorial significances of the cloth she wears and writes her own narrative on its blank surface. Even when she is absent, flitting in and out of visibility and narrative, the “Woman in White” is a symbol of ideal Victorian femininity and its fictitiousness. She is the fashionable, moral, sexual and textural antithesis of women dressed in bright silks and sensual velvets, paisley, and wool and tweed. As we continue this analysis of cloth and texture in Victorian popular literature, then, we must bear in mind the dictum of Collins’s *The Woman in White*, “Don’t forget: a woman in white” (31).

Chapter Two

Silk and Velvet: Colours, Textures and Fashions of Figuring, Disfiguring and Artistic Dress

Silk well deserves the esteem in which it has been held for at least three or four hundred years. Because of its fineness, strength and lustre, as well as its affinity for rich and delicate dyes, it has enabled the weaver and embroiderer to produce, by the intersection of its threads in various combinations, the most beautiful and elaborate designs, and to colour them with the tints of the rainbow. (Hooper 1-2)

The favourite colours are golden pheasant, garnet, plum colour, ruby, marine blue, reddish purple, lavender ... Vesuvius red, Orient grey and a deep orange ... For the evening ... beautiful *poult-de-soie*, pale blue, orange, mauve or pearl-grey shot with white. (*Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* 1869 qtd. in Ginsburg 174)¹⁵

The sort of shimmer, as of the two tints in a shot [silk] stuff, of reality and unreality. (Lee 2:57)

These two approaches to the veil – as a cloth which hides truth and knowledge and as a covering suggesting unattainable desire – sometimes overlap. (Doy 131)

These epigraphs capture the most striking characteristics of Victorian silk: its rich and sensual textures of airy gauze to supple satin and downy velvet, its luminous and jewel-like colours, and its visual and conceptual indistinctness. While white muslin is the stuff of ethereal ideality and ephemerality, silk and velvet are the cloths of decadence, mysticism, theatre, sensuality and sex. In *The Woman in White*, Mrs. Catherick indicates her departure from ideal Victorian femininity in stating: “the dress of Virtue, in our parts, was cotton print. I had silk” (Collins 534). In Victorian popular literature, silk dress evokes a multitude of visual and textural sensations, complex histories and narratives, and symbolic connotations.

Silk and velvet figure vividly in the narratives of popular literature from 1860 to 1900. From 1860, the heroines dress in fashionable gowns of silk satin, taffeta, shot silk, sarcenet, bombazine, Grenadine, faille, *poult-de-soie*, *crape*, *broche*, grosgrain, foulard and velvet. These silks range in colour from the aniline purples, reds, greens and yellows of the 1860s, to the Aesthetic “art colours” of “amber, tawny, sage green, peacock blue, salmon, apricot, navy blue, cream, olive, citron, and teal” of the 1870s, and the deep sobriety and mournfulness of timeless black (Schaffer, *Forgotten* 109). These heroines furnish their drawing rooms and *boudoirs* with the patterned silks of William Morris, Thomas Wardle & Co. and Liberty & Co. and drape their shoulders in exotic silk shawls. However, silk and velvet have more than a purely material presence in Victorian popular literature.

According to R. R. Bowker, silk is the “richest and most splendid fabric known to man” (240). This richness is not only textural and chromatic, but also narrative and symbolic. In an 1885 article for *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* entitled “A Silk Dress,” Bowker surveys the history of silk production in Europe. He narrates the production of a fashionable silk gown from silk worm and mulberry tree, through harvesting, spinning, dyeing, weaving and finishing, to dressmaking and the splendour and “gayty” [sic] of the ballroom (240). This article demonstrates an interest in the history and modes of production of fashionable gowns amongst Victorian readers and consumers; it also foregrounds the significance of the silk gown’s materiality and history to its function as a symbolic object. Thus, silk has a narrative as well as material presence in Victorian popular literature. Within its textural weaves, rich colours and intricate seams, the silk gown of Victorian fashion contains a variety of complex histories

and narratives, and symbolic connotations. In popular literature, these colours, textures and symbolic resonances function to tell the heroine's story as she negotiates contemporary notions of femininity and female sexuality, and the politics and poetics of representation and genre.

Chapter Two explores the significance of silk and velvet within fashions of dress and literature in a range of popular novels and genres from 1860 to 1900. I begin by surveying the history of silk and velvet. Exploring its varying textures and visual effects, its fashionableness, and its modes of production and consumption provides as a means of unravelling silk's significance as a cultural artefact and literary symbol. Silk's rich colours, textures and histories evoke the decadent, mystic, mysterious, theatrical, sensual and sexual. In Victorian popular literature, a silk gown represents the heroine's rejection of ideal and virtuous femininity; she emphatically refashions her body, her identity and her narrative. As a sartorial symbol, silk also represents challenges to ideas of reality and realism in representation, narrative structure and genre in Victorian popular literature.

Picking up the narrative and sartorial threads of Chapter One, this chapter examines the heroines' exchange of their white muslin for gowns of silk and velvet; it considers the significance of these changes within patterns of characterisation, narrative and genre. I begin with analyses of Braddon's sensation novels *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd*. The heroines' richly-coloured gowns indicate their nascent, and potentially dangerous, sexuality. They also represent the vivid descriptions, daring subject matter and sensational structure of this new genre of popular literature; the heroines' gowns function as textual disguises within the narrative structures of build-up, climax and resolution.

Braddon refigures these sensational sartorial and literary fashions in *Vixen* (1879). The heroine refashions her silk gown as a sign of her engagement with and rejection of sensational modes of narrative and femininity. During the 1870s and 1880s, silk and velvet became associated with theatrical and artistic dressing. This is evident in Moore's *A Drama in Muslin*, where variations of colours and styles in the heroines' silk and velvet gowns represent their refashioning of femininity and sexuality in telling their stories. The colours and textures of silk and velvet represent the different forms of late-Victorian femininity and sexuality represented in the novel: the Angel in the House, society *belle*, fallen woman, New Woman and lesbian. Moore's juxtaposition of drama and realism in his use of sartorial description reveals the fashioned-ness of the ideal of the heroine as "muslin martyr" (99). This chapter closes with a discussion of the use of silk and velvet to negotiate the old and the new, the fashionable and the out-dated, the exotic and the erotic, the sensual and the sexual, the real and the unreal in Lee's *Miss Brown*.

Silk and Velvet

The colourful and intricate history of silk production begins in China 5000 years before Queen Victoria's accession to the British throne and the commencement of the period of fashion and history which would take her name. The precise origins of sericulture are unknown; however, by the year 2,500 BCE, woven patterned silks were traded from China to India, Persia, Greece and Rome. The worth of such cloths exceeded their weight in gold (Hooper 19). Sericulture was introduced to India in 300CE and silk swiftly became crucial to India's sartorial, decorative and religious cultures (Hooper 21). During the British occupation of India in the

nineteenth century, silk textiles were the most popular of the artefacts brought home by soldiers and members of the colonial administration (S. Daly, “Kashmir” 238). These textiles were admired for their striking colours, elaborate patterns and exceptional quality (King 2). Victorian fashions for silk are informed by these traditions and the rich history of European and British sericulture.

Despite a long history of trade in silk textiles between Asia and Europe along the Silk Road, sericulture did not flourish in Europe until the twelfth century (Hooper 21). In 1146, King Robert of Sicily returned from the Second Crusade with a group of captured Greek silk weavers (Bowker 241). These artisans provided the requisite knowledge and skills to establish a silk industry in Italy and the European market for such goods soon grew (Bowker 241). For centuries, the Italian industry remained Europe’s most productive and well-known (Hooper 21).

During the Renaissance, weavers from Florence and Siena were famous for their figured velvet, silk *ciselé* and multi-coloured silk *lamé* (Landini, “Throne” 76; 97). These luxurious cloths symbolised the wealth, privilege and power of these city-states and their secular and religious elite (de’Marinis, “Realm” 9). The “noblemen, princesses, sovereigns, knights, great merchants, *condottieri*, and ambassadors,” courtesans, priests and Popes rendered immortal by the great artists of the Renaissance are dressed in this lavish and highly symbolic cloth (de’Marinis, “Realm” 9). Fabrizio de’Marinis argues that silk had a strong hold on the artistic and sartorial imagination of Renaissance Italy and has become an icon of the period in later histories (“Realm” 9). Antique Italian silk textiles captured the imagination of collectors, artists, textile designers and clothiers during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Silk weaving began in England in 1717, using techniques, styles and fashions adopted from the Italian tradition (Hooper 21). Mills were established in Spitalfields, Derby, Southport, Macclesfield, Congleton, Leek and St. Albans (Hooper 21). From the end of the Napoleonic wars, the British silk industry flourished. Silk became fashionable, replacing the white cotton lawn which had dominated women's fashion (Byrde 894). With the introduction of the French Jacquard loom to Britain in 1820, weavers in Spitalfields and Coventry began producing speciality silks for the fashion market (Thunder 1; Rothstein 793). During the 1830s, brightly and boldly patterned silks dominated fashion and lent it an "exuberant and playful air" (Byrde 896).

Despite a shift in preferences towards more sombre colours and styles of dress during the 1840s, silk remained the most desirable cloth (Byrde 896). A ladies' shopping manual of 1844 lists "bombasins, brocades, crapes, Florentines, gros de Naples, gauze handkerchiefs of various kinds. Italian net, lustering (black, white, and coloured.) Sarcenets and satins, (ditto, ditto.) [And] Serges" amongst the most popular types of silk cloth (*Ladies' Handbook* 11). The Italian influences on British silks and fashion is evident in the names of these silks.

Fashions for antique Continental-style silks persisted throughout the mid-to-late Victorian period. In 1888, "Messrs, Debenham and Freebody" exhibited:

some exquisite Italian fabrics of rich texture, pattern and colouring – plain and striped silks from Como, Zoagli velvets, and brocaded and tinselled silks from Turin, Venice velvet, Genoa velvet, and tapestry silk from Milan, rich portieres, coverlets, scarves, and table-covers from Schiavio, Fratelli & Co., Gorla de Veleso. ("Notes [July]" 25)

In November the following year, Mrs. Johnstone described the fashion for a "magnificence of material," such as richly-coloured brocades, brocatelles, velvet brocades, embossed velvets, Matelasse and "frise brocades on a velvet ground ...

of Medieval richness” which “might have been designed for a princess of the House of Medici” (Johnstone, “November” 18). In both the visual and literary arts, proponents of the Pre-Raphaelite, Aesthetic, and Arts and Crafts movements were drawn to silk’s beauty and its history as an artisanal and luxury object. Silk also became a symbol of the decadence, tending towards degeneration, of these movements.

The hero of Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Grey* is a passionate collector of antique Italian silk textiles. Dorian possesses:

a gorgeous cope of crimson silk and gold-thread damask, figured with a repeating pattern of golden pomegranates ... Another cope ... of green velvet, embroidered with heart-shaped groups of acanthus leaves, from which spread long-stemmed blossoms, the details of which [are] picked out with silver-thread and coloured crystals. He [has] chasubles, also, of amber-coloured silk, and blue silk and gold brocade, and yellow silk damask ... dalmatics of white satin and pink silk damask, ... [and] altar frontals of crimson velvet. (134)¹⁶

He wears a “dressing-gown of silk-embroidered cashmere wool” (91). These textiles and garments represent Dorian’s status as the archetypal decadent aesthete. The narrator notes the exotic and almost supernatural fascination which his antique textiles hold for Dorian: “in the mystic offices to which such things were put,” he states, “there was something that quickened [his] imagination” (134). This “something” is silk’s multiplicity of historical uses, associations and symbolic reverberations (Warwick and Cavallaro 70). These textiles are suggestive of religious piety, Popery, power, prestige, fantasy, and phantasmagoria (Hartzell 60-4). In Dorian’s response to them, there is also a suggestion of fetishism, illicit desire, decadence and the supernatural (Hartzell 60-4). Dorian appropriates these rich textiles and their narratives of mystery and opulence and puts them to his own “mystic offices” (134).

When Dorian notices the changes in his portrait, he searches for a veil to hide this evidence of his moral degeneration. He seizes a “large purple satin coverlet” which, “would serve to wrap the dreadful thing in” (115). The coverlet is “heavily embroidered with gold, a splendid piece of late seventeenth-century venetian work” (115). It “had perhaps often served as a pall for the dead,” Dorian reflects, but “now it was to hide something that has a corruption of its own, worse than the corruption of death” (115). This silk textile serves to veil Dorian from the evidence of his own moral and physical decay. Unlike a pall, however, it functions to symbolically forestall death. As the symbolic double of his embroidered dressing-gown, which Dorian significantly dons after his initial discovery of the portrait’s uncanny properties, it also functions as a sign of his indulgence and moral decay and as a harbinger of his dramatic bodily degeneration. In *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, antique silk textiles challenge notions of life and death, representing both immortality and ageless beauty, and degeneration and decay. This illustrates silk’s dual capacity to contain, disguise and reveal multiple contradictory meanings. On a broader level, these artefacts are representative of a pervasive fascination with the artistic and symbolic elements of antique silks and their histories in Victorian popular culture, fashion and literature.

Throughout the Victorian period, the market for fashionable silks was subject to drastically changing whims (King 52). One of the most notable influences was the growth in consumer demand for “Indian textiles, designs and colours” after 1850 (King 52). The first Indian textiles to appear in Britain were brought back by soldiers and members of the colonial administration during the early-nineteenth century. Interest in and demand for such goods steadily grew and

at the 1851 Great Exhibition, Indian woven and printed silks were exhibited alongside silk products from across Europe (Rothstein 797-8). British woven jacquards and dress silks were exhibited alongside Indian “satins, brocades, gold and silver *kincobs*, silk *bandhani*, fine plain weaves of undyed golden *tasar*” (King 127). The exoticism of Oriental silks created a new market for Indian textiles and influenced tastes for fashionable British goods. Between 1860 and 1900, silk and velvet became “fashionable exotica” (King 1).

Throughout the mid-to-late Victorian period, silk became more affordable and less exclusive. Technological and chemical advances, political shifts and artistic innovations saw the popularisation of mass-produced chemically dyed silk taffetas, exotic but inexpensive Indian silks, reproduction Renaissance velvets, and exclusive “art fabrics”. Such diverse tastes drew significantly on the connections forged, at exhibitions such as the Great Exhibition, between silks as *object d’art* and as fashion; this meant that silk retained rich connotations of exoticism and mysticism, and gained those of luxury and conspicuous consumption. Like white muslin, silk had a dual symbolic function; it was at once an exotic foreign or historic artefact, and a sign of fashionable and proper Englishness (S. Daly, “Kashmir” 237).

Histories of silk as a sartorial textile are rife with such binaries, dualities and contradictions. Silk is inherently ambiguous. Texturally it is slippery and downy, diaphanous and opaque. Visually, it is lustrous or dull, ranging from the luminosity and chromatic play of shot silks, to the transparency of silk gauze and the rich depth of velvet (King 61). In its history, silk is both European and Asian. As an object, it is both modern and mass-produced, and antique and exotic. Conceptually, as Lee and Doy identify in the epigraphs to this chapter, silk is both

a disguising veil and the sensual evocation to touch and unveil. Silk, then, poses questions about the gap between appearances and reality, surface and depth, veiling and unveiling, and signifier and signified. Its fascination as a symbolic object, in fashion, art and literature, lies in its intricate interweaving of these characteristics and influences.

During the mid-to-late Victorian period, exhibitions, such as the Great Exhibition, captured the public imagination and established commodification, exhibitionism, objectification and spectacle as important cultural practices (Miller 7). The fashion for silk can be viewed in this light; during the Victorian period, silk was both an important commodity and an exhibited artefact or exotic spectacle. The popular exhibition and the burgeoning of illustrated periodicals established silk and the woman in a silk gown as icons of the mid-to-late Victorian period. As Andrew H. Miller states, the Exhibition inspired Victorian commentators to see women as beautiful objects exhibited under glass (10). As a site of conflicting symbols and narratives, the woman in luminous silk and colourful velvet was observed and scrutinised as an exhibited artefact; as Gen Doy states:

much of the pleasure to be gained from the sight of silk was due to the fact that it seemed to move. To get the full benefit from the sight of silk, therefore, the woman wearing the silk had to move, or the viewer had to move around the person wearing the dress, in order to see the light falling on the fabric from different directions. (111)

The heroines of popular literature, however, manipulate and, at times, resist this tendency toward exhibitionism, negotiating their subjectivity and sexuality in light of contemporary ideas about literature, art, fashion and morality. They employ silk's symbolic richness and visual indistinctness to fashion their identities and narratives.

Since Dingle's 1886 reference to the "vivid colour[s]" and "silken folds" worn by Ouida's heroines, the significance of the silk gown in Victorian popular literature has received little critical attention (267). In *Dressed in Fiction*, Hughes uses the designation "Women in Colour" to differentiate the daring heroines of sensation fiction from their angelic and demure counterparts in white (70). Focussing chiefly on Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, Hughes explores the "dramatically loaded effects" of changes of colour and, albeit secondarily, of style, in the heroine's dress throughout the narrative (75). Hughes associates these "colour-notes" – on a "superficial level" – with Braddon's use of Pre-Raphaelite art as a symbol for "sensation," in all of its varying forms (74). Despite her close attention to the effects of colour in Lady Audley's dress, Hughes discounts the significance of the materiality and texture of these gowns in producing these chromatic and symbolic effects.

The nature of dyes and dying in the mid-Victorian period was such that the richly and brightly coloured gowns which Lady Audley and her contemporaries wear would, by necessity, be of silk or silk-blend cloths. Silk was the ideal vehicle for the new aniline dyes of the 1860s, such as scarlet and violet (Hooper 1-2). The different weaves and textures of silks – from gauze to satin and velvet – lend these aniline colours both a richness and luminosity that are crucial to their symbolic effects; a gown of scarlet satin has different connotations to one of scarlet velvet. However, Hughes only uses the terms "silk" and "velvet" adjectively to indicate sartorial styles, differentiating a silk travelling gown from a velvet evening gown. This is indicative of Hughes's approach to fashion as a set of social and stylistic rules which contribute to a novel's "reality effect" (2). The complex and varied textures of silk, however, complicate its "reality effect" as a sartorial symbol; a

silk gown can function alternatively to disguise and evocatively reveal the heroine's body, story and secrets. As Lee states, the various colours and textures of silk mingle to create the effect of "[a] sort of shimmer ... [of] reality and unreality" (2:57).

In addition to its sartorial and sexual symbolism, authors use silk's various textures, colours and visual effects to engage with and challenge ideas about reality and realism in representation, narrative structure and genre. In sensation fiction, richly coloured and textured silk gowns represent the novelty and fashionableness of the genre, its narrative structure of build-up and revelation, its poetics of representation, and its heroines' challenge to ideal forms of passive and virginal femininity.

Sensation Fiction

1860 was a significant moment in British literary and fashion history. A new genre of popular literature emerged in sensation fiction with the publication of Collins's *The Woman in White*. The heroine of this genre was extravagantly dressed in gowns of white muslin, and silk and velvet; she was beautiful, daring and dangerous. Her dress and her story were informed by contemporary art, popular culture and fashion. The Chevalier-Cobden Treaty, signed in January 1860, removed the restrictions on the importation of French cloth to Britain and resulted in greater competition in the market for dress silks. Silk became more readily available and more affordable. The invention of Perkin's Mauve, the first aniline dye, in 1859 revolutionised the fashionable colour palette of these cloths. From 1860, British women abandoned their figured muslins and muted poplins for vividly coloured silks (Byrde 897). These new dyes had evocative names:

Havannah, Prussian and cerulean blues, (“Summary of Modes ... Jul.” 72), Britannia Violet, aniline violet, pink, magenta, yellow and crimson (Rothstein 802), Vesuvius and Congo reds, Nenuphar and Perkins greens (*Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine* 1869 qtd. in Ginsburg 174-5), Bismarck or Manchester browns (Garfield 79-132), and “blue” “raven” and “glacé” blacks (King 87). Like the sensation heroine, aniline-dyed silk was shockingly new, extravagant, vivid, and daring; together, these became the defining fashions of the decade.

As C. Hughes states, “the invention of chemical dyes in the 1850s [created an] exaggerated and colourful femininity” (*Dressed* 62). The fashion of this period was marked by an “extravagance of cut and colour” (Thomson 100).

Fischel and von Boehn state that the extravagance of women’s dress of the 1860s,

corresponded to the extravagance of their behaviour:
crying colours, daring cut, masculine style of attire ...
They wore military coats of yellow velvet with Chinese
embroidery, red velvet mantles trimmed with black lace,
black tulle dresses with gold lace. (100)

As the antitheses of innocent and virginal white muslin, these ostentatious and vividly coloured gowns were interpreted as symbols of active, and potentially dangerous and sinful, female sexuality (Valverde 171).

In *On Human Finery*, Quentin Bell argues that “fashion ... governs our behaviour, informs our sexual appetites, colours our erotic imagination ... and determines our aesthetic valuations” (62). During the 1860s, aniline dyes re-coloured the erotic imagination and aesthetic values of Britain. These new colours required a new vocabulary to describe them and a new set of symbols and connotations to understand them (Garfield 172). Fashions in women’s clothing were seen in new relationships to sexuality and the erotic in their use of colour. These conceptual and aesthetic shifts had a marked impact on the way in which femininity and female sexuality were represented in popular literature: bright

colours became symbolic of daring, flirtatious, passionate, sensuous and sexualised forms of femininity. These new colours and fashions also became analogical for a range of new ideas and cultural forms of the period, namely sensation fiction. Fashions in literature and the visual arts during this period were described as extravagant, vivid and brilliant, and gaudy and faddish. This was particularly observable in the figure of the sensation heroine. Dressed in gowns of crimson, blue and yellow silk, she was characterised as “heroine” (Rae 186), “monstrosity” and “demon” of sensation fiction (Oliphant, “Novels” 263).

The woman in white muslin is acknowledged as a cultural and artistic icon of the 1860s (N. Daly, *Sensation* 2). As Nicholas Daly suggests, however, “if the woman in white is one icon of the decade, we must imagine another figure, darker and more fleshy, as its foil” (*Sensation* 25). This figure is real and corporeal rather than ideal and ethereal (N. Daly, *Sensation* 111). She wears heavy, sensual and richly-coloured silks which mould her figure and her story and mark her departure from existing narratives and images of feminine purity and passivity. Dingle refers to the sensuous “silken folds” and “vivid colour[s]” worn by heroines of sensation fiction (267). The vividness, luridness and sensuousness of the sensation heroines’ gowns not only represent their sexuality, but are also metaphors for the plot and themes of the sensation novel.

In sensation fiction, colour is not merely a matter of the heroine’s dress, but “also of description, representation and [their] associated properties” (C. Hughes, *Dressed* 72). Sensation fiction was condemned by contemporary critics for its lurid, aestheticised, fetishised and sexualised details (Felber 472). Henry James wrote of Braddon that “like all women, she has a turn for colour; she knows how to paint. She overloads her canvas with detail” (“Miss Braddon” 116). Such

detailed description transgressed both literary and moral codes. It escaped the bounds of realist description and, in its vivid and fetishistic excess, was suggestive of illicit female sexuality. Mansel denounced sensation novels as “highly-coloured fancy portraits of repulsive virtue and attractive vice” (499). Sensation fiction infamously made bigamy, elopement, adultery and murder narratively compelling and characterised their perpetrators as beautiful and seductive heroines.

Contemporary reviewers continually drew connections between the literal colour worn by the heroines, the vividness of the descriptions, and the metaphoric colour of the genre’s subject matter.

The use of a language of colour in criticism of popular, and specifically sensational, Victorian literature continues into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Winifred Hughes refers to the “lurid tone” of the genre which, she argues, “tinged” contemporary popular culture (*Sensation* 264; 731). Inversely, Pykett states that sensation novels were “tainted” by their association with “the popular” (*Improper* 8). The subject matter of the sensation novel also continues to be discussed within a vocabulary of colour. Sensation novels are commonly seen as immoral and their depiction of female sexuality as “colourful” and “vulgar” (Jay xxxiii). This language of colour, far more than being merely euphemistic or analogical, reflects the significance of colour and its variations to the imagery and narrative structure of sensation fictions and its politics and poetics of representation. This chapter will explore the connection between texture, colour and femininity in popular literature. It will begin by examining the significance of colours and textures of silk and velvet in the representations of femininity and female sexuality in Braddon’s sensation novels *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *Aurora Floyd*.

Lady Audley's Secret

In the first volume of *Lady Audley's Secret*, Braddon describes a portrait of the novel's heroine. The portrait, the narrator states, was "like and yet so unlike" its sitter:

as if you had burned strange-coloured fires before my lady's face, and by their influence brought out new lines and new expressions never seen in it before. The perfection of feature, the brilliancy of colouring, were there; but I suppose the painter had copied quaint mediaeval monstrosities until his brain had grown bewildered, for my lady, in his portrait of her, had something of the aspect of a beautiful fiend. (71)

The use of colour in this portrait brings out new expressions and influences in the appearance of heroine which are "monstrous" and fiendish (71).

Lady Audley is not a "Woman in White" in the model of Collins's Laura Fairlie but, rather, "a Woman in Colour" (C. Hughes, *Dressed* 71). As discussed in Chapter One, Lady Audley begins the novel dressed evocatively in white muslin. The transparent folds of these gowns belie the secret of her bigamy and her active sexuality. Throughout the narrative, though, she exchanges them for richly-coloured silks and velvets. These gowns symbolise her active refiguring of her body, identity and narrative; they also foreshadow her crimes and eventual punishment. As C. Hughes states, "the colouring of her appearance is bound up with her 'secret' – a secret contained in Braddon's images of her, images closely allied to pictorial 'sensations' of the period" (*Dressed* 71). Braddon draws on the symbolic connotations of different colours and textures of silk in the depiction and development of her heroines, drawing on contemporary fashions in dress, visual art and literature.

Pre-Raphaelitism was the main artistic sensation of the mid-Victorian period. Contemporary critics and commentators criticised Pre-Raphaelite art for its strong colour palette, *risqué* or sensuous subject matter and depiction of improper female sexuality (Pykett, *Improper* 35). As in the case of sensation fiction, these two criticisms were considered analogically: colourfulness denoted immorality. Braddon explores this, both implicitly and more self-consciously, in her novels. Pykett states, “Braddon’s [1860s] women rise up from the page like the heavily sensualised female subjects of Pre-Raphaelite paintings, and are offered as the object of the reader’s rapt gaze” (*Improper* 98). Remarking on the portrait of Lady Audley, the narrator suggests that “the painter must have been pre-Raphaelite”:

No one but a pre-Raphaelite would have painted, hair by hair, those feathery masses of ringlets with every glimmer of gold, and every shadow of pale brown. No one but a pre-Raphaelite would have exaggerated every attitude of that delicate face as to give a lurid lightness to the blonde complexion, and a strange, sinister light to the deep blue eyes. No one but a pre-Raphaelite could have given that pretty pouting mouth the hard and almost wicked look it had in the portrait. (70)

Throughout the novel, Lady Audley “appears in a sequence of highly-coloured, lavishly dressed set-pieces” which hark back to this image (C. Hughes, *Dressed* 73). She changes her dress from diaphanous and delicate gowns of “muslin, elaborate laces and embroideries” to sumptuous “silks and velvets” (382). This change emphasises Lady Audley’s transformation from angelic and innocent governess, to lady, bigamist and would-be murderer; she comes to resemble her demonic portrait.

Colour plays an important role in the narrative of *Lady Audley’s Secret*. Clair Hughes argues that the “dramatically loaded effects” of colour symbolism propel the narrative towards fruition (*Dressed* 75). The textures of the heroine’s

dress are also significant in producing these effects. Throughout the narrative, silk and velvet are used to seduce, surprise, disguise and reveal. Unlike the “Woman in White” who hides in the shadows of uncertainty, the woman in silk is the centre of attention. The change in the heroine’s dress also represents a broader move away from the ideal of blank and ephemeral femininity towards a more sensual, visual and sexualised model of femininity in fashion, popular literature and art. Where white muslin indicates ethereality, ephemerality and uncertainty, silk and velvet represent sensuality, sexuality and sensationalism. In their textural richness silk and velvet veil and refigure the body, raising questions about the authenticity of femininity, the nature of reality and the capacity of literature to represent either. In her choice of richly-textured silks, Lady Audley participates in a form of dressing which Helena Michie describes as “disguise, costume and self-conscious figuration” (*Flesh* 72).

At the novel’s climax, Lady Audley attempts to murder her first husband, George Talboys, by pushing him down the well. While this is taking place in the grounds, Lady Audley’s maid is inside re-fashioning her “blue dress” (79). The simultaneity of these incidents suggests a connection between them which is subtle but nevertheless significant. Both of these acts mark a critical change in Lady Audley’s identity as heroine. After the attempted murder, she changes her style of dress in order to reinforce her social identity as Lady Audley, wife of Sir Richard Audley. Instead of the angelic goodness and ethereality of her white muslin gown, this specially fashioned gown in dark and heavy silk is a sign of her artifice and deception. This gown is altered to fit her new identity as a *femme fatale*. Its richness evokes the pre-Raphaelite image of the heroine as a “beautiful fiend” (71). Equally, and inversely, though, the blue gown also reshapes her

identity in accordance with her heinous act; the murder stains the whiteness of her innocence with the dark taint of evil. In swathing the body in the textural depth of these opposing discourses and interpretations, Lady Audley's blue silk gown complicates the relationship between appearances and reality. It acts as a form of disguise which, as well as disguising her body and her guilt, obscures the clues of the sensation narrative (Brantlinger 14).

Aesthetically, dress gives the body a second form composed of the combination of colour, texture and style (Eicher, Evenson and Lutz 294). In doing so, it also gives the body a secondary narrative. Manipulations of these aesthetic qualities shape the narrative of a text, lending it suspense, climax and resolution. A text's "costume plot," Gaines suggests, has its own motifs, surprises, anticipations and resolutions which unfold in a temporality which does not correspond with the primary narrative (205). As the narrative plot of *Lady Audley's Secret* tends towards revelation, the sartorial plot proceeds towards concealment. Lady Audley's gowns become darker in colour, richer in texture and more opaque and obscuring in their symbolic narrative effect.

This process is narrated alongside the primary narrative in which amateur detective Robert Audley is becoming suspicious of Lady Audley. As suspicion intensifies, her gowns become more colourful (C. Hughes, *Dressed* 8). The refashioned "blue dress" is exchanged for a "long blue cloth habit" and finally for a "dark violet velvet dress" (79; 107-8). These gowns function as self-conscious disguises. As Eva Badowska suggests, Lady Audley attempts to divert suspicion of her past and her crimes by fashioning a fictional narrative of identity through several name changes and shrouding herself in layers of rich silks and velvets (161).

When Robert finally confronts Lucy about the disappearance of George Talboys she “dropped her mask for a moment” (145), appearing “a helpless, babyfied little creature,” lost in the folds of her thick clothes (138). She then composes herself and self-consciously “[re-arranges] the huge velvet mantle in which her slender little figure was almost hidden” before commencing an explanation and justification of her murderous and deceitful actions (145). The heightened visual symbolism of Lady Audley’s velvet gowns and mantle is narratively aligned with Robert’s revelation of her invisible crimes. They function as a conspicuous veil in Doy’s epistemological sense; on the surface Lady Audley’s silks and velvets gesture towards her disguise and artifice. They also gesture towards the possibility of lifting the veil and discovering her guilt: “the veil [signifies] revelation and concealment at the same time” (Doy 130).

On the night following Robert Audley’s accusation, Lady Audley sleeps “peacefully nestled in her downy bed, under the soft mountain of silken coverlet, and in the sombre shade of the green velvet curtains” (372). She is relieved of the “horrible burden of an almost unendurable secret ... and her selfish, sensuous nature [resumes] its mastery of her” (372). The sensuous side of her nature is symbolised by the rich cloths. Under the cover of these silks and velvets, “the delicate rose-tints of her complexion, and the natural luster of her blue eyes” return (373). The “unnatural light which had burned so fearfully the day before” and brought to mind the “strange-colour[s]” and fiendish light her portrait, fades (71). On the following morning, the narrator states that,

my lady smiled triumphantly as she contemplated the reflection of her beauty. The days were gone in which her enemies could have burned away the loveliness which had done such mischief. (373)

These rich silks, therefore, provide cover for Lady Audley to recover her bewitching appearance as an ethereal and innocent angel. However, Lady Audley's guilt has already been proved and her fate decided; she is to be sent to a Belgian asylum.

Significantly, Lady Audley does not dress in silk or velvet for her journey. Rather, she wears a white morning-dress of "soft lace and muslin" (356) and "her favourite Russian sables" (383). In this scene, Lady Audley does not dress for visual effect, but as a way of expressing her wealth. This reemphasises the theatricality of dressing, but also represents sensation fiction's impetus towards subverting expectations and playing with the relationship between appearances and reality. In the novel's final scenes, Lady Audley also wears her white cashmere shawl. The significance of this garment in tying together the threads of the novel's costume and sensational plot will be discussed in Chapter Three.

In sensation fiction, the juxtaposition of "ideal" and transparent white muslin with "real" and opaque silk is symbolic of the genre's negotiation of different types of femininity within "the limiting aesthetic of [nineteenth-century] realism" (Pykett, *Improper* 24-6). Sensation fiction famously upsets the simple realist association between signifier and signified which governed much contemporary literature. In the sensation novel, innocence cloaks evil and reality serves as a mystery until the sudden revelation of guilt (Brantlinger 14). In its textural richness, deep colours and potent symbolic resonance, silk and velvet represent this process. Sensuous garments of silk and velvet disfigure the bodies of the heroines. In doing so, they function as metaphors for the narrative veil which exists between the story and its readers. This is particularly evident in Braddon's next novel, *Aurora Floyd*.

Aurora Floyd

As Aurora Floyd stands nonchalantly on the balcony in the opening volume of the novel wearing “a white silk dress, and a thick circlet of dull gold upon her hair” the narrator remarks that she appears “like Cleopatra” (65). Over this diaphanous gown is “an opera cloak; no stiff, embroidered, young-ladyfied garment; but a voluminous drapery of soft scarlet woolen stuff, such as Semiramide herself might have worn” (67). Aurora’s white silk gown displays her innocence and virtue, and her classical or divine beauty. Her red cloak, on the other hand, connotes sexuality and desire, sensuality and secrecy. It evokes the power and strength of a Babylonian queen rather than the virginal passivity of the Victorian feminine ideal.

Aurora’s red cloak has a range of symbolic and narrative functions; it is not delicate, embroidered or ladylike but, bold, colourful and theatrical. Because of its use for stage curtains, red velvet is associated with artifice and theatricality (Pennati 150). Aurora’s red cloak, therefore, alludes to her theatrical inheritance. Aurora’s mother was a “poor itinerant performer decked in dirty white muslin, red-cotton velvet and spangles” (8). Aurora, Braddon states, “was her mother’s own daughter, and had the taint of play-acting ... strong in her nature” (21). Also dressed in white muslin and red cloth, Aurora acts in the roles of Cleopatra and Semiramide in the ensuing narrative. She refuses Talbot Bulstrode’s proposal of marriage but offers no explanation for this decision. Her refusal, like her cloak, is seen as deceptive, theatrical and unladylike (67). It is later revealed that her refusal is based on her youthful elopement with James Conyers. Her red cloak, then, also represents her active sexuality; Aurora is not the virginal would-be bride which either Bulstrode or Braddon’s readers expect. The symbolic threads

of this garment represent Victorian discourses about femininity, female sexuality, and identity, and tie the heroine to the sensational narrative. In its potent symbolism and bold colour, the red cloak obscures Aurora's body and casts a shadow over the angelic and virginal whiteness of her gown. The garment's volume magnifies its symbolic function as a veil. It both disguises the heroine's body and stimulates, potentially erotically, the desire for revelation. Aurora's cloak is both a literal sartorial and symbolic narrative veil.

Warwick and Cavallaro argue that the power of dress lies in its capacity to threaten boundaries: boundaries between "self and non-self, the individual and the collective, discipline and transgression" (xxi). Veils

epitomize duplicity and the co-existence of concealment and revelation, presence and absence. Such aporetic garments invite an examination of the workings of the gaze, and, relatedly, of issues pertaining to truth and simulation. The ambiguously screening garment conceals and arrests the flow of the gaze whilst simultaneously stimulating it, by provoking and increasing the desire for discovery and possession, hence effecting a magnification of the erotic. (xxi)

Aurora's *ensemble* of virginal white dress and veiling red cloak symbolises sensation fiction's threatening of the boundaries between proper and improper femininity, and between reality and theatricality. In the course of the novel, Aurora's secret is gradually unveiled for the reader. Like *Lady Audley's Secret*, the "costume plot" of *Aurora Floyd* unfolds through mystery, anticipation and resolution according to changes in the colour and texture of the heroine's dress (Gaines 205).

In the novel's second volume, Aurora marries John Mellish, again alluding to her "*secret*" (175). Once she is married, Aurora changes her white gowns for fashionable styles in richly-coloured silks and velvets. She wears velvet riding habits and evening gowns of blue, black and purple. These gowns function as

layers of symbolism which are gradually stripped away as her deception is unveiled.

On the night of Conyers's murder, Aurora is dressed, "in maize-coloured silk with voluminous flouncings of black lace" (273). The bright colour and elaborate embellishments of this gown are echoed in Braddon's fetishistic description. Together, the bright colour of the silk and the metaphoric colour of the description indicate the importance of this scene to the narrative. Before she leaves the house,

Aurora took up a shawl she had flung upon the sofa, and threw it lightly over her head, veiling herself with a cloud of black lace, through which the restless, shivering diamonds shone out like stars in a midnight sky. (277)

This adds another layer of complex signification to her dress; the intricate lace suggests hidden meaning. Her colourful mode of dressing and deliberate veiling of her face suggest that Aurora is guilty of Conyers's murder. This turns out to be a false signifier, however, and Aurora is soon absolved of this charge. In the final chapters of the novel, dress ceases to be a tool through which we can successfully read character. In this way, Braddon self-consciously confronts and rewrites her own model of sensational authorship.

In *Aurora Floyd*, the narrator expresses the desire to "use our scissors and needle again, and re-fashion the past by the experience of the present": to "take the fabric of our life to pieces, as a mantua-maker unpicks her work, and make up the stuff another way" (241). As a consummate rewriter, Braddon repeatedly does so in her novels. She unpicks the symbolic and narrative patterns of her work and makes them up afresh in response to changing ideas about fashion, femininity, female sexuality and literature in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Her characters continue to wear brightly coloured and richly textured silks; however,

the symbolic and narrative uses to which they are put change. In her 1879 novel, *Vixen*, Braddon uses chromatic and textural variations of silk and velvet to interrogate representations of femininity and female sexuality within the aesthetics and poetics of nineteenth-century literary genres and sartorial fashions (Pykett, 'Improper' 24-6). She refashions the heroine from "the Pre-Raphaelite 'stunner'" and "the indomitable sensation-novel heroine" to aspiring New Woman (Schaffer, *Forgotten* 42).

Vixen

Although best known for her earlier sensation novels, Braddon continued to publish popular fiction throughout the late-nineteenth century and into the twentieth century (Schaffer, *Forgotten* 37). Throughout her career, she responded to changes in literature, culture, politics and fashion (Schaffer, *Forgotten* 39). In *Vixen*, the narrator describes the "sumptuous fabrics, antique lace[s and] Indian shawls" which typified 1870s' fashions (Schaffer, *Forgotten* 39). Such descriptions contextualise the novel; they are also central to its engagement with the idea of fashion and the way in which it shapes narratives of femininity and female sexuality in popular literature.

Mrs. Winstanley, the heroine's mother, analogises the development of the human soul and individual identity with the dying and printing of cloth. Presiding over her tea-table, she is supremely happy. "Of course, there might be a superior form of happiness beyond earth," Winstanley muses, but

to appreciate that the weak human soul would have to go through a trouble-some ordeal in the way of preparation, as the grey cloth at Hoyle's printing-works is dashed about in gigantic vats, and whirled upon mighty wheels, before it

is ready for the reception of particular patterns and dyes.
(210)

In its use of dress to tell the woman's story, *Vixen* dramatises the process by which, as Mrs. Winstanley suggests, human nature and identity are marked by the patterns of experience, and fashions in dress and literary representation. In the course of *Vixen*, the heroine confronts and negotiates contemporary ideas about femininity and female sexuality. She is depicted alternately as a "pretty horse-breaker," an artist's muse, an objectified woman of fashion, an Angel in the House, a bride and "the kind of girl to go round the country lecturing upon woman's rights" (223-34).

Albert Sears states that *Vixen* is a novel, "about fashions, new and old" (50). It is set in a social *milieu* constantly threatened by "convulsions" of "changes in fashion" (Braddon 242). "The world of fashion," *Vixen* states, "seems ever on the verge of a crisis [as] awful as that which periodically disrupts the French chamber" (242-3). Old-fashioned dress represents out-dated fashions in literature and narrative. Braddon uses changes in sartorial fashion as a metaphor for refashioning the narrative conventions of sensation fiction and its models of femininity and female sexuality; *Vixen*'s determination to dress according to her own fancy represents her identity as a new kind of heroine. It also indicates a new way of using dress which transcends the sensational and sensual symbolism of Braddon's earlier novels.

In one of the novel's many conversations about dress, *Vixen* declares that her mother's "bronze and blue" shot-silk travelling-gown is "detestably" old-fashioned (83). *Vixen* also deplores the French novels which her mother reads for being immoral and overly explicit in their representation (13). In these scenes, Braddon ventriloquises earlier reviewers' criticism of her sensation novels as lurid

and “highly-coloured” (Mansel 499) in their representation of femininity and female sexuality (Sears 48); with her gaudy shot-silk gown and improper taste in novels, Mrs. Winstanley is an embodiment of both the sensation heroine and the female reader of sensation fiction. Through her use of such intertextual references, Braddon reflects on changing fashions and narrative conventions in *Vixen*; the novel is shaped by convulsions in the world of fashion, as *Vixen* states. In *Vixen*, Braddon employs a descriptive and symbolic vocabulary of colour and cloth texture which departs from 1860s brightly-coloured shot-silk towards Aesthetic inspired browns, greens and grey. In this way, Braddon uses dress to tell the woman’s story and to narrate her own authorial process of development away from the genre of sensation fiction.

Vixen is “not a sensation novel” (Braddon, *Doctor’s* 358). Rather, it subverts readers’ expectations of Braddon’s work (Sears 45). Critical treatment of this novel is scarce, however; critics mostly read *Vixen* in light of Braddon’s experimentation with literary genres other than sensationalism (Sears 44). Sears identifies it as “anti-sensational,” a reflection of the author’s eagerness to be taken seriously as a novelist (43-4). Ellen Miller Casey argues that *Vixen* “apprehends social reality clearly” and, in doing so, reveals much about Victorian ideas about popular literature (72). According to Casey, Braddon makes concessions to Victorian morality and propriety to the detriment of the novel (75-7). However *Vixen* is categorised, it is clear that in writing the novel, Braddon combines a series of complex images and narrative styles that she borrows from contemporary fiction. These are represented by the heroine’s differing styles of dress and the narrative and symbolic uses to which they are put in telling her story. *Vixen* is dressed sequentially in gowns of brown velvet, Lincoln green wool, pale blue

muslin and grey silk (15; 199; 243; 377). With their various and potent symbolic resonances for the Victorian heroine, these gowns function as metaphors through which Braddon questions the narrative and sartorial conventions of contemporary popular literature and its depiction of femininity.

Vixen is described in the first chapters of the novel as “A Pretty Horsebreaker” (1). Dressed in a “picturesque brown velvet frock; a scarlet sash was tied loosely around her willowy waist, and a scarlet ribbon held back the rippling masses of her bright hair,” Vixen is described as “a study in red and brown” (15). She is a headstrong, flirtatious and brilliantly charismatic heroine (Schaffer, *Forgotten* 42). The vividness of her hair and her dress are associated with her vivacity and tempestuousness. Her richly-coloured silk and velvet gowns and red hair give Vixen the appearance of a Pre-Raphaelite woman. In descriptions of her appearance, “Violet has potential to be a ‘Vixen’, a character formed out of Braddon’s earlier strong-willed and transgressive heroines” (Sears 49). However, in the course of the novel, Braddon unpicks and refashions the sartorial and narrative fashions which would tie Vixen to her fate as a sensational heroine in the model of Lady Audley or Aurora Floyd. In fact, Vixen actively resists such characterisation. As a young girl, Vixen pushed a boy into a pond for tormenting a mastiff-pup. This incident has parallels in Lady Audley’s attempted murder of her husband and in Aurora Floyd’s attack on Hargreaves for kicking her dog. When Vixen’s father relates this, the heroine replies:

It’s very horrid of you, papa, to tell such silly old stories ...
Everybody undergoes a complete change of ... all the
tissues in seven years. I’m not the same Vixen that pushed
the boy into the pond. There’s not a bit of her left in me.
(17)

Throughout the course of the narrative, this theme is continued; Vixen repeatedly resists the violent behaviour which characterised Braddon’s earlier heroines.

Vixen tells the story of Violet (Vixen) Tempest as she matures into womanhood. The novel ends with her marriage to childhood sweetheart Roderick Vawdrey. Vixen is aware of the conventionality of this, remarking: “and for it all to end in my being engaged to be married. It seems such a commonplace ending, does it not?” (250). The narrative that leads to this ending, though, is not commonplace within Victorian popular literature. As Vixen does in posing the question – “it seems such a commonplace ending, does it not?” (250) – Braddon draws the readers’ attention to the ways in which she subverts contemporary literary and sartorial fashions in telling the heroine’s story.

In the course of the novel, Vixen faces many challenges which test her character, her dedication to Roderick and her resolve that she is not the same impulsive “Vixen that pushed the boy into the pond” (17). Early in the novel, Vixen’s father dies and Roderick becomes engaged to his cousin Lady Mabel Ashbourne. Under the weight of these two heartbreaks, Vixen and her mother leave the family estate to travel. During this time Vixen meets Captain Winstanley and he proposes to her. The proposal takes place at Vixen’s unofficial presentation ball. “A tall graceful figure,” Vixen is dressed in “billowy black tulle” (78). Fashion and custom dictate that as a *debutante* Vixen should wear white as an expression of her youthfulness and virginity. Her choice of a black gown is an expression of her grief: it functions as a prolonged symbolic mourning. It also signals her rejection of fashion and its production of socialised femininity (78).

Vixen also wears a “black and gold mantle folded around her” (80). For readers familiar with *Aurora Floyd*, this capacious garment symbolises disguise and is a sign of the heroine’s desire to refigure her body and her narrative. In

Vixen, though, Braddon subverts this sensational expectation (Sears 45). Unlike the proposal scene in *Aurora Floyd*, *Vixen* gives a reason for her refusal. She states that she has a “passive dislike” of her suitor which, she says, could easily become “active hatred” (81). After Winstanley’s proposal, *Vixen* is said to be “shivering a little with agitated feeling, in spite of that mantle of scorn in which she had wrapped herself” (81). Her “black and gold mantle” is an embodiment of this scorn (180). Like her mantle, *Vixen*’s scorn is put on. While talking to Winstanley, she draws it “closer around her” to emphasise her indifference (81). The richness and depth of this garment, however, signal the true depth of her feeling; as Gaines states, the costuming of a despondent heroine “works somewhat like the surrogate sufferer device” (208). A richness of feeling is represented by a richness of texture: “velvet, wool jersey, chiffon, satin, bugle-beading, or sable are often used on the bodies of these heroines. These fabrics seem to capture and hold the pathos before our eyes” (Gaines 208). The mantle functions as a veil to both disguise and reveal *Vixen*’s feelings. This trope is developed throughout the novel. After the ball, *Vixen* and her mother leave Brighton to return home. *Vixen* is dressed for this journey “wrapped in black furs, a little black fur *toque* crowning her ruddy gold hair” (83). This outfit functions according to Gaines’s idea of empathetic costuming (208); her black furs, like the sables Gaines cites, capture *Vixen*’s despondency in their textural and symbolic depth.

Upon her return to Abbey Hall, *Vixen* resumes her childhood pursuit of riding. Wearing in a gown of “dark green cloth” with a “plain linen collar,” *Vixen* is “the picture of healthful beauty” (223). “All *Vixen*’s morning costumes,” the narrator states, are of a

compact style of dress which interfered with none of her rural amusements. She could romp with her dog, make her

round of the stables, work in the garden, ramble in the Forest, without any fear of dilapidated flounces or disheveled laces and ribbon. (223-4)

The simplicity and forthrightness of Vixen's dress represent her complete lack of artifice. The colours of these gowns are the browns, greens, russets and grays which typified artistic or Aesthetic dress. As well as being a reference to contemporary fashion, these colours are also the "beautiful ... ever-varying lights and shadows" of the woods in their "ripe summer beauty" (237); they are the "tender green" of beeches, "the amber glory of the young oak-leaves" and the "snowy white" of hawthorn (237). These colours indicate Vixen's sympathetic identification with the forest. This is evident in Chapter XXXII, entitled "A Midsummer Night's Dream". This intertextual reference evokes images of Vixen as a woodland fairy, an embodiment of freedom and independence. Vixen's clothing does not always indicate her independence and rejection of normative models of fashion, femininity and female beauty. Her wardrobe and her narrative are frequently linked back to the fashions of popular literature.

After being rejected by Vixen, Captain Winstanley proposes to her widowed mother. Vixen objects to this match, telling her, "that man is destined to do us some great wrong" (77). Nevertheless, Mrs. Tempest accepts the Captain's proposal. For the wedding, she orders Vixen a gown in a "tasteful combination of cream colour and pale azure" (157) with "a cream-coloured hat – the Van dyke shape – with a long blue ostrich [feather]" (151). A combination of blue and white, the colours of the Virgin Mary, represents the ideal of female innocence and purity. However, Vixen refuses to be present at the wedding, saying "I shall look like the wicked fairy" (160). This alludes to her previous representation as a woodland fairy, with the change in colour indicating the novel's shift from woodland or bucolic fantasy of female independence to the limiting wedding

narrative of the Victorian novel. Chromatically, texturally and stylistically, this gown is opposed to Vixen's plain and practical riding dress. It is fashioned by *couturier* Madame Theodore, contributing to its status as a symbol of fashioned femininity; it represents her mother's attempts to refashion independent Vixen as an ideal Victorian heroine. Vixen acquiesces and she stands "among the [wedding] guests, no gleam of colour on her cheeks except the wavering hues reflected from the painted windows in the low Gothic chancel" (162). Dressed in cream and blue silk, Vixen becomes a reflection of others' images and narratives of ideal femininity. This foreshadows the events of the second part of the novel.

After the wedding, Vixen is thrust into fashionable society in her step-father's attempt to marry her off. She is presented in London by Winstanley's aunt and suffered to attend a variety of social functions. On one such occasion,

Violet found herself meandering about an unknown croquet-lawn, amongst unknown nobodies, under a burning sun, looking at other girls, dressed like herself in gowns *à la* Theodore, with the last thing in sleeves, and the last cut in train, all pretending to be amused by the vapid and languid observations of the cavalier. (236)

Vixen's individuality, autonomy and power over her own dress and narrative are taken from her during these chapters. She is forced to attend a ball "shrouded from head to foot in a white cloak ... [Vixen] looked all white and solemn in the moonlight, like a sheeted ghost" (219). Her joyless life is symbolised by her colourless dress; Vixen is transformed from a vivacious and colourful heroine into a "Woman in White" whose clothing functions as "a blank canvas on to which the observer's desires and fantasies can be sketched" (Humble and Reynolds 53). Despite the whiteness of her gowns, Vixen is not a model of angelic femininity.

One evening, Vixen returns home from riding with Roderick to find her step-father awaiting her. He confronts Vixen about her activities, saying: "such

conduct as you have been carrying on of late is a shame and disgrace to your sex” (258). In the ensuing argument, Vixen “grasped the lamp” from the table intending to throw it at Winstanley (259). In a moment of indecision the lamp falls to the floor and the carpet is set alight. For a moment, “they two – Vixen and her foe – seemed to be standing in an atmosphere of fire” (259). This scene echoes Braddon’s earlier description of Lady Audley as a “beautiful fiend” with “her crimson dress ... [hanging] about her in folds that looked like flames” (*Lady* 71). Flames, both literal and metaphoric, represent female passion and transgression.

In the wake of this incident, Captain Winstanley banishes Vixen, alone, to the Isle of Man: “feminine helplessness is going out of fashion; and one would expect an Amazon like you to be independent of lady’s-maids and milliners” (266). Again, Vixen is punished by the removal of her capacity to dress herself according to her own taste and sense of self. During this part of the novel, Vixen’s dress is barely described, suggesting that her identity and her narrative of development are in stasis. She is waiting to come of age and become independent of her step-father. In the interim, Vixen studies religious theory and Egyptology. In doing so, she fulfills her potential as an intellectual Amazon or “the kind of girl to go round the country lecturing upon woman’s rights” (223-4). She could also be seen as a precursor to the intellectual New Woman heroines of the latter decades of the nineteenth century. The novel’s ending, though, signals a return to the narrative fashions of Victorian realist fiction. In the final chapters of the novel, Mrs. Winstanley dies and the tyrannous Captain disappears. Roderick is released from his engagement when Lady Mabel elopes with a Lord Mallow. Vixen and Roderick are free to marry. The heroine is married in a “gray silk traveling-dress,

with gray hat and feather” (377). After their marriage, the couple returns to live in Vixen’s beloved ancestral home, Abbey House.

In *Vixen*, colours and textures of dress are used to chart the heroine’s maturation in the context of contemporary models of fashion, femininity and narrative. Sartorial symbolism is also a tool through which Braddon self-consciously explores issues of representation, literary genres and changing notions about femininity and female sexuality during the mid-to-late Victorian period. As Vixen is depicted fashioning her own gowns according to her sense of self and resisting characterisation as a sensation heroine, Braddon refashions herself as author. *Vixen* provides a narrative of the changing genres, narratives, images and heroines of popular literature after 1870.

Moore’s *A Drama in Muslin* (1886) also dramatises the construction of femininity and female sexuality. It is a drama, not just in muslin, but in silk, velvet, lace and wool. Moore uses dress and cloth as evocative visual and textural symbols to examine the ways in which late-nineteenth-century literature constructs sexuality, gender and identity, as well as textuality and literary genre. Like Braddon, Moore writes heroines who resist martyrdom to contemporary ideas about literature, representation, morality, sexuality and fashion. Whilst white muslin is associated with the theatricality or falsity of the angelic feminine ideal in *A Drama in Muslin*, silk and velvet are symbols of the heroines’ sexuality and actual sexual experience.

A Drama in Muslin

In *A Drama in Muslin*, silk and velvet, as well as veiling the female body as they do in Braddon’s novels, also stand symbolically and texturally for that which they

disguise. They, therefore, perform the dual function of the veil which Doy articulates. Garments of silk and velvet obscure the body as an object of desire whilst also inviting sensual unveiling (Doy 98; 130). This unveiling is not the metaphoric narrative uncovering of the heroine's secret which earlier popular literature performs, but a more literal and explicitly sexualised undressing. While undressing, Moore's heroine Olive remarks to her sister:

Do you know that I think I look better in my stays than any other way? And I am glad of it, for I want to look well in a ball-dress. It must be a funny sensation to walk into a room half-dressed, before a lot of men; for, you know, we shall be just as undressed in our ball-dresses as we are now. (30)

The presentation ball is a formative scene of the novel. It not only marks the heroines' entry into society but is also crucial to Moore's use of sartorial description and symbolism to characterise the heroines and set up their narratives.

Entering the ballroom as a *debutante*, Olive wears a gown of "white Surat silk" (164). During the Victorian period, white gowns were considered mandatory formal-wear for young unmarried women (C. Hughes, *Dressed* 115). Thus dressed, Olive appears to embody Moore's notion of the "muslin martyr," symbolically sacrificed onto the marriage market. This is juxtaposed by Olive's earlier statement that likens being dressed in a ball-gown with appearing "before a lot of men" wearing only "stays" (30). Olive has a sense of sexual self-awareness which is at odds with the ideal of the white muslin-clad angel. This awareness is indicated by Olive's choice of a white silk gown in place of traditional muslin. The silk blends with "the cream tints of her skin" and molds the body, displaying "every line of her supple thighs, and every plumpness of the superb haunches" (88). With its opposing connotations of ethereality and virginity, and silken sensuality, Olive's ball-gown negotiates the sartorial and symbolic space between

the Victorian feminine ideal and female sexuality. In *A Drama in Muslin*, silk and velvet are used symbolically to tell the heroines' stories in contradistinction to the costumed "drama in muslin".

Whilst Olive is dressed in white Surat silk, Moore's other *debutantes* depart more distinctly from the white "costume" of the young unmarried woman in their choices of "presentation dresses" (164). They wear,

trains of blue sapphire *broche* looped with blue ostrich feathers, [as] seductive and artificial as a boudoir plunged in a dream ... dove-coloured velvet trains adorned with tulips and tied with bows of brown and pink – [as] temperate as the love that endures when the fiery day of passion had gone down; ... trains of white velouture festooned with tulle; trails of snow-drops, icy as lips that have been bought, and cold as a life that lives in a name.
(164)

Here, silk and velvet function not only to display the body as a sexual object but also, in their textural and chromatic range, to symbolise different types of female sexual experience. A woman's appearance, subjectivity and sexuality are tied together by the threads of her silk gown. Diaphanous "*faille Française* with tulle" symbolises the innocence, youthfulness and delicacy of first love, "dove-coloured velvet ... with bows of brown and pink" indicates an absence of fiery passion whilst "blue sapphire *broche*" is seductive and evokes images of the shadowy and sensual *boudoir* (164).

In this passage, Moore shifts between detailed description of fashionable sartorial styles and a more lyrical and metaphoric descriptive mode. His sentences are long and fluid, mimicking the fluid lines of the gowns he describes. The poetic and linguistic excess of the writing mimics the sartorial excess of colours, textures and detailed embellishments of these gowns: both writing and gowns are eroticised for the reader. Throughout *A Drama in Muslin*, Moore shifts between these descriptive modes. In so doing he unveils the social, sartorial and narrative

conventions whereby dress is used to fashion femininity and female sexuality in Victorian popular literature. Moore, unlike many Victorian novelists, does not depict the heroines elaborately dressed as a natural state in which they appear before the reader; rather, he narrates the careful selection of their gowns, their dressing and undressing and their associated “bedroom talk” (W. Wallace 40). Referring to this, contemporary critic Wallace labeled *A Drama in Muslin* as “daringly and disgustingly suggestive, and descriptive of what ordinary writers of fiction commonly leave undescribed” (40).

Moore depicts the selection of the heroines’ ball-gowns as a ritualised sexual initiation which prepares them for their presentation onto the “marriage market” (172). He describes their visit to the dressmaker as

a witches’ Sabbath, and out of [the] terrible cauldron each was to draw her share of the world’s gifts. Smiling and genial, Mrs. Symonds stirred the ingredients with a yard-measure; the girls came trembling, doubting, hesitating. (164)

The selection of the presentation gowns is a supernatural or ritualised process, likened to a witches’ Sabbath. The girls come forward to the dressmaker’s cauldron “trembling, doubting, hesitating,” like sacrificial virgins, to select their gowns (164). The contents of the cauldron are “beautiful silks” which “hissed as they came through the hands of the assistants” and velvet which fell with “cat-like ... footfalls” (164). Again, Moore uses an excessive and lyrical descriptive mode. The sibilance of the phrase “silks hissed” is onomatopoeic. Likewise, the repetition in the line “cat-like the velvet footfalls of the velvet fell” has the muffled sounds and dense resonances of the cloth it describes (164). These poetic techniques and the mythical allusions of this passage exaggerate the symbolic and narrative significance of the heroines’ selections. The “gifts” that they extract

from the cauldron are not merely sartorial; they are the gifts of their identities and stories.

The heroines' presentation gowns frame their bodies, literally and figuratively, within late-Victorian ideas about femininity and female sexuality. Dressed in different colours and textures, they represent models of Victorian heroine-ship: the Angel in the House, the society *belle* and the fallen woman. They also represent female subjectivities which were new to late-Victorian readers: the New Woman and the lesbian. Moore explores the symbolic and narrative potential of such cloths in telling the stories of these five women.

Olive Barton represents the quintessential heroine of the mid-Victorian romance (Ledger, *New* 138). Her face is "full of all the pseudo-classicality of a cameo" and her body has a "chaste slenderness" (4). Olive is the "*belle* of the season" (177). In an inversion of the popular Victorian romance, however, she remains unmarried at the end of the novel and is forced to tread the boards at the "muslin market" for another season (268). The traditional marriage ending is reserved, though also altered, for Olive's sister Alice.

Alice is striking rather than pretty (2). In a simple gown of "white corded-silk" she is described as a true Madonna (85). Alice is also, somewhat ironically, an atheist. Unlike many ethereal and angelic heroines of Victorian fiction, Moore states that Alice is neither "doll nor victim" (270); rather she is a writer and New Woman. When her fellow *debutante*, May, falls pregnant outside marriage, Alice pays for her nursing with the money she has made writing for a monthly magazine. "Buttoned into [her] faded dress," Alice appears "pale and over-worn" with anxiety about her complicity in May's disgrace (261). The novel ends with Alice's marriage to Dr. Reed. Their union is described in intellectual rather than

sexual terms. The couple engages in a series of benevolent works and Alice states that “we ... bear life’s burden equally,” or “as nearly as Nature will allow” (311).

There is a “marked distinction ... observable,” the narrator states, in the dress of the Barton sisters (21). Early in the novel, Olive and Alice visit a dressmaker; she

seemed to recognise an inequality between the two sisters, and when she was trying on Olive a cream-coloured dinner-dress, trimmed with pale yellow satin ... an assistant showed Alice a black silk, trimmed with *passementerie*, relieved with a few bits of red ribbon, and a ball dress in white corded silk. But it was not until Olive put on a dark green cashmere (a coquettish cape with a bow placed on the left shoulder), and Alice a terra-cotta serge, buttoned down the front, that ... [the differences between them] became too glaringly apparent. Then Olive and Alice might have passed for mistress and maid. (21)

In this passage, Moore employs textural and chromatic symbolism to highlight the differences between the personalities and appearances of the sisters; his technical description takes on a symbolic significance. Each textural, chromatic and sartorial detail has an antithesis: “dark green cashmere” contrasts “terra-cotta serge”. Such contrast is also used in Moore’s dressing and characterisation of the other heroines.

Of the five heroines, Violet Scully most closely represents the Angel in the House. Her face is “neat and delicate” and marked by her modesty, goodness and kindness (3). Violet is always elegantly dressed in white. Her goodness is rewarded when, in the final chapters of the novel, Violet graduates to the most rich and prestigious white gown: the wedding gown. Violet makes the most financially and socially advantageous marriage of any of the heroines. May Gould, however, is “a very different type of girl” (3).

May prefers to “[gratify] herself with a lover” rather than “[seek] a husband” (232). Her “sensuous nature” is reflected in her appearance; she has

violet eyes and copper-red hair with “vermillion hues” (4). The narrator anatomises May, stating that “the rolling roundness of every part of the body definitely announced a want of fixed principle, and a somewhat gross and sensual temperament” (167). This description evokes images of the seductive red-haired women of pre-Raphaelitism. May’s body, like that of the pre-Raphaelite stunner, is rendered more sexual when clothed in richly sensual and brightly coloured velvet. Such descriptions foreshadow May’s sexual transgression. The novel’s fifth heroine, Lady Cecilia Cullen, also departs from the Victorian strictures of femininity and female sexuality. Like May, Cecilia is anatomised in Moore’s description. Her aberrant sexuality is depicted as an effect of her physical abnormality.

Cecilia is a “girl cripple” (301). She has a hunchback and is considered “not a little queer” in her appearance and moods (3). Cecilia is passionately, even jealously, devoted to her friend Alice. Yet, she says to Alice, “I am more than a friend, [yet] I cannot tell you how I love you; I do not know myself, and I am often afraid of my love, so strange does it seem” (61). Ledger argues that Cecilia is amongst the earliest depictions of a lesbian in British fiction (*New* 139). Cecilia’s sexuality is reflected in her dress. She does not share her companion’s love of fashion: rather, she wears plain dark colours which are seen as a reflection of her physical and sexual “queerness” (3).

Moore uses chromatic symbolism in his depiction of both May and Cecilia. May is associated with the sensual richness and erotic extravagance of silk velvet, whilst Cecilia is associated with the penitence, misery and self-denial of coarse black serge (298). Early in the novel, May is described wearing

a costume of Prussian-blue velvet and silk; the bodice (entirely of velvet) was pointed back and front, and a

berthe of *moresque* lace softened the contrast between it and the cream tints of her skin. (85)

This gown is so tight, May declares, that “you can’t wear petticoats ... one can’t move one’s legs as it is” (85). Her sensuous curves and sensual nature, then, are firmly molded in the rich blue silk and velvet. In the rich colours and texture of this velvet gown, lie “the spirits of the shadowy bed-chamber” (85).

During the nineteenth century, “velvet was very popular ... and silk plush, with its long, soft nap, added to the luxurious quality, resembling fine down or sleek fur: brilliant colours such as green and violet were very much in favour” (Johnston, Kite and Persson 112). An 1866 issue of *The Ladies’ Gazette of Fashion* describes:

complete *toilettes* of velvet, consisting of robe and paletot of one colour ... The fashionable colours for velvet dresses are violet, dark blue, Havannah, brown and black. When the robe and paletot are both of velvet of one colour, the paletot should be trimmed with *passemmentiere*. (“Summary of Modes ... Oct.” 86)

Moore’s description of May’s velvet gown draws emphatically from similar periodicals of the 1880s and closely resembles the fashion of that decade. Moore describes women dressed in this style as “silken exquisites” (171). However, “velvet has more than a merely physical nature: it carries a wealth of symbolic meanings” (Warwick and Cavallaro 70). Moore utilises this in *A Drama in Muslin*. It emulates the downy softness of the skin and, therefore, functions as a symbol for this intimate and sensitive bodily surface (Hartzell 69-70). Its rich textures inspire the desire to touch (Hartzell 63). This physical contact is seen as a fetishised substitute for skin-to-skin contact. Conceptually or symbolically, then, gowns of rich velvet are suggestive of sexual contact with the heroine. Moore’s description of May’s velvet gowns is not just a performance of sexual

attractiveness or an erotic fantasy, then, but is indicative of active female sexuality.

Whilst the other heroines fulfill their roles as virginal “muslin martyrs,” May is seduced by Fred Scully. She falls pregnant and leaves for Dublin where she gives birth in secret. When she returns, May is dressed, again, in velvet. This time it is a “green ... [gown with] a small bonnet with mauve strings” (261). May’s choice of dress accords with the Victorian idea that ostentatious and brightly coloured cloths were a sign of female sexual sin (Valverde 171). May reinforces this by immediately entering into another sexual relationship: this time with an older man. Cecilia’s aberrant sexual relationships are also represented by Moore through a combination of chromatic symbolism and sexual sartorial contact.

Cecilia states that her “sharp keen [agonies], and mad sorrows” have made her life “black, a sullen martyrdom” (301) rather than the white “muslin martyr[dom]” of her companions (99). When Alice talks of her attraction to the author Mr. Harding, Cecilia cries bitterly (231). She laments, “It is Harding, all Harding! All I love is gone! ... The whiteness, the purity the feminacy, all is gone!” (231). In Moore’s depiction of female sexuality and desire, whiteness, purity and femininity are juxtaposed with agony, madness and blackness. This is reflected in Cecilia’s dress and narrative fate. At the end of the novel, Cecilia retires into the deeper blackness of self-denial and religious martyrdom. She says to Alice,

I have sinned, and deeply, for I desired more than God had willed to give me, and I have suffered accordingly. Yes, Alice, I had desired more than God had willed to give me, for I desired you. I desired to possess you wholly and entirely. (298)

In penitence for her sins, Cecilia adopts “the veil ... and those beautiful black robes” of the convent (306). She lives “a pure ecstatic life untouched by any degrading passion, unassailed by any base desires” (300).

Dress also functions more obliquely to represent female experiences of sexuality in *A Drama in Muslin*. Dress is a metaphor through which Cecilia expresses her feelings for Alice; the clothly surface of the dressed body is a site of displaced sexual contact. Cecilia says to Alice, “I was jealous of the flowers you wore on your bosom” (298). When Alice’s hair becomes entangled in a chair and is loosened by an officer, Cecilia says “I could have spat in his face; I could have killed him; I hated him” (298). These are moments of symbolically displaced sexual contact between the two heroines, similar to those offered by May’s tactile velvet gowns. Moore uses dress, both literally and figuratively, to explore and represent women’s sexual desires and experiences in an age when such topics were closely veiled. Reading the novel through its use of sartorial symbolism, then, provides a way of thinking about how popular literature negotiates contemporary notions and representations of femininity and female sexuality.

In this novel, Moore employs the textural and chromatic variation of white muslin and silk and velvet to differentiate between the heroines’ dramatic costuming and realistic dressing. Dressed in white muslin, they are shadowy embodiments of the feminine ideal. In colourful silks and velvets, though, the five heroines explore other types of femininity and pursue sexual experiences; they are realities in colour. Moore represents these two forms and narratives of femininity through combining two plots: the costumed dramatic plot (associated with white muslin and discussed in Chapter One) and the realistic plot of silk and velvet (discussed in this chapter). The threads of these plots and genres are delicately

interwoven to create a narrative which, in its complexity, challenges Victorian notions of sexuality, gender, identity, and, ultimately, textuality and literary genre.

In its rich chromatic and textural depths and variety of luminous woven effects, silk poses a challenge to ways of looking and conceptualising the significance of visual symbolism. It is bright, sensual, textural and palpably real, and luminous and visually indistinct. In *Miss Brown*, Lee describes this function, stating that events had “the sort of shimmer, as of the two tints in a shot [silk] stuff, of reality and unreality” (57; vol. 2). In its use of sartorial symbolism and metaphors of cloth and fashion, *Miss Brown*, like *A Drama in Muslin*, responds to late-Victorian debates about realism and verisimilitude (Pykett, ‘*Improper*’ 28). Both novels negotiate the fashionable “French Naturalist mode” with late nineteenth-century British realism (MacLeod 61). Like Moore, Lee depicts Victorian femininity as a theatrical performance for which fashionable dress is a costume. The heroine of *Miss Brown* is dressed in a white silk gown designed by an artist and fashioned by a “stage dressmaker” (Lee 307; vol. 1). Thus dressed, she negotiates late-Victorian sexual and Aesthetic politics.

Miss Brown

Published in 1884, *Miss Brown* is an anti-Aesthetic novel (Psiomades 22). Kathy Psiomades argues that *Miss Brown* “explicitly criticizes Pre-Raphaelite aestheticism’s sexual politics, particularly its use of the female body as the raw material for an art that exploits women as objects of heterosexual masculine desire” (22). The heroine’s dress is the symbolic stuff of this critique. The changing textures and colours of silks and velvets both literally and figuratively

mould the heroine's body according to contemporary artistic notions of femininity.

During the 1880s, women's fashion was strongly influenced by Aestheticism (Thompson 101): "the aesthetic woman's body was aesthetically and minimally draped" (Schaffer, *Forgotten* 106). "Light and far from durable stuffs," silk cloths such grenadine, organdie, *étamine*, *mousseline-de-soie*, *crêpelisse*, voile and silk gauze, "became the rage" during the 1880s and 1890s (Thompson 101). According to Schaffer, "Aesthetic fashion provided both a visible spectacle and an intimate tactile experience of a new kind of body" (*Forgotten* 102). This "virginal, graceful body" was dressed according to a "love of the mythic eighteenth-century past" (Schaffer, *Forgotten* 102).

This interest in the artistic and sartorial sensibility of the past is reflected most distinctly in Aesthetic fashions in richer and more textural cloths such as silk brocades, satins and velvets in colours such as dark blues and greens (Schaffer, *Forgotten* 105). Female aesthetes evoked the "antiquarianism and exoticism" of the Italian renaissance through their imitation of antique silk textiles (Schaffer, *Forgotten* 107). As Schaffer states, "the desirable woman covered her body with gowns made of expensive materials, such as silk and velvet" with "intricate, fragile, multi-layered trimmings" (*Forgotten* 74). These gowns were worn without the substructure of corset, crinoline or bustle and, as a result, hung closely and sensuously around the body in long folds which were modelled on the classical aesthetic of flowing draperies (Schaffer, *Forgotten* 105-6). These "limp and stayless garments" (300; vol. 1) framed the female body in the model of the great painters of the Renaissance: Giotto, Piero della Francesca and Raphael (de'Marinis, "Realm" 9). This style of dress also framed the female body as

sensualised and sexualised object of male desire. Lee encapsulates these versions of Aesthetic fashion in her description of a group of aesthetes. They are, she states, an odd array of

old ladies in velvet and diamonds, young ones in Worth toilets, or weirdly attired in lank robes and draperies, with garlands of lilies or turbans, or strings of sequins in their disorderly locks. (4; vol. 2)

The Aesthetically dressed woman is draped, not just in reproduction Renaissance velvets and exotic silk, but in a wealth of historic, artistic, symbolic connotations.

The aesthetes thought that dress “should be art not fashion” (Schaffer, *Forgotten* 1-3). It should be “timeless, transcendent, symbolic, and meaningful,” rather than “ephemeral, transitory, frivolous, and meaningless” (Schaffer, *Forgotten* 103). The Aesthetic dress was codified more than any previous sartorial style. This was achieved through the development of a new genre of fashion writing published in journals such as *Woman’s World* and *Scots Observer*. Authors such as George Fleming, Rosamund Marriott Watson and Mary Eliza Haweis approached fashion writing, not from the position of the observer or social commentator as earlier in the century, but as a form of art criticism. They aimed to dictate fashion rather than report on it. Fleming “asked her readers to imagine themselves as figures in a painting and dress themselves according to the rules of composition” (qtd. in Schaffer, *Forgotten* 103). Line, colour and style were considered to be symbolically important (Schaffer, *Forgotten* 105). Unlike previous styles of dressing, then, where symbolic meaning is attached to a style or gown externally and retrospectively, the rich symbolism of Aesthetic dress is a crucial part of its sartorial construction. This changes the way in which dress is used to tell the woman’s story in the literature of the 1880s.

For authors of popular literature in the 1880s, Aestheticism was “an important new signifying system” (Schaffer, *Forgotten* 39). It expanded their symbolic repertoire by assigning “particular meaning to certain flowers, colours, fabrics, styles, facial features, and knick-knacks” (Schaffer, *Forgotten* 39). Like Aesthetic dress, Aesthetic literature was written for an audience who “had been trained to see everyday material culture as deeply symbolic” (Schaffer, *Forgotten* 249). However, the use of sartorial symbolism in such literature was complicated by Aestheticism’s edict that dress has no moral function or relationship to individual identity or subjectivity (Schaffer, *Forgotten* 113). Dress was not thought of in its potential to tell the story of the development of the woman as an individual but, rather, of her development as an aesthete: a beautiful and mindless artistic ideal (201; vol. 1).

Miss Brown explores this disjunction. It tells the story of Anne Brown as she is transformed from a governess and minor domestic servant to an Aesthetic beauty (17; vol. 2) and, finally, discovers her true identity and vocation as a rational humanist and New Woman. As in *A Drama in Muslin*, sartorial and literary fashions are used as backdrops for a drama over representations of the female body, femininity and female sexuality. Lee uses the rich symbolism of Aesthetic fashion to tell the heroine’s story, whilst also questioning the capacity of such artifice to represent a character’s true identity.

Anne begins the novel as the governess to the daughters of artist, Mr. Melton Perry. Dressed “in a close-fitting white vest and white skirt,” Anne appears “a beautiful and sombre idol” (24; vol. 1). While thus employed she meets disillusioned pre-Raphaelite artist, Walter Hamlin. Hamlin describes Anne as a “beautiful and dramatic creature ... striking, admirable, picturesque,

consistent,” “a mere soulless body” (125; vol. 1; 50-1; vol. 1). He adopts her as his muse and undertakes to transform her into a lady. Hamlin is “pleased that the creature whom he was going to teach how to think and feel, did not manifest any particular mode of thinking and feeling of her own” (201; vol. 1). He also assumes that Anne does not manifest any individual mode of dressing. Hamlin interprets Anne’s plain white dress as a blank canvas on which to fashion an ideal of Aesthetic femininity.

Anne is forced to wear a gown fashioned for her by Hamlin:

It was a Cretan silk, not much thicker than muslin, which is woven in minute wrinkles of palest yellow white; it was made, it seemed to her, more like a night-gown than anything else, shapeless and yet clinging with large and small folds, and creases like those of damp sculptor’s drapery, or the garments of Mantegna’s women. (306; vol. 1)

When Anne looks in the mirror, “she was almost terrified at the figure which met her,” the narrator states. Anne thinks, “that colossal woman, with wrinkled drapery clinging to her in half-antique, half-medieval guise, – that great solemn, theatrical creature, could that be herself?” (307; vol. 1). Psomiades argues that,

Anne shrinks from the image of herself that masculine desire had made because it elevates the textual body (theatrical, costumed, pictorial, sculptural) over the natural body (herself) and at the same time opens both bodies to the erotic gaze of masculine desire. (23)

Thus dressed, Anne is a “vague formless ghost” of the Aesthetic ideal (5; vol. 1).

In *Miss Brown*, Lee uses silk’s luminous surface as a space where artistic and theatrical renditions of femininity are projected and fashioned. In this way, she draws attention to the disjunction between a woman’s dress and her sense of identity.

Henceforth, Hamlin exhibits Anne at Aesthetic social functions. He says:

you know that it's only artists and poets of our school who will appreciate you really, although the others would hawk you about as a sort of professional beauty. (17; vol. 2)

Anne is dressed for these occasions in gowns of Hamlin's design which are made-up by a theatrical *costumier*. This form of display is overtly sexual. A guest says to Anne, "it is disgusting ... [to] make all the people stare at you as if you were a burlesque actress" (17; vol. 2). Lee uses sartorial symbolism and theatrical metaphors to tell the story of Anne's "development as an aesthete" (Schaffer, *Forgotten* 113). As the narrative progresses, though, the heroine develops her own identity and opinions. She pursues an education outside that offered to her by Hamlin and aspires to attend Girton. This is reflected in her change of dress. Instead of the diaphanous silk gowns of the aesthete, Anne wears the plainer gowns of the independent New Woman.

In the final chapters of the novel, however, Anne's narrative of female independence is foreclosed when she becomes engaged to Hamlin. In preparation for their engagement party, she trades her plain gown for a "wonderful garment of cloth-of-silver" (304; vol. 3). The guests are similarly dressed and the narrator likens the scene to "a perfect exhibition of fantastic shawls and opera-cloaks" (315; vol. 3). This image represents the exhibitionism which informs *Miss Brown* and fashions the heroine's story. The paisley shawl also represents the many conflicting narratives of femininity and female sexuality in the novel. Anne is at once a female aesthete, an ideal bride, and an independent New Woman; these narratives are contained within the complex pattern of paisley shawl. This will be explored in detail in Chapter Three.

Conclusion

In Victorian popular literature, silk and velvet are employed as symbols of the artistic and literary constructions which would frame the woman and tie her to her narrative fate. In their strong lines, rich textures and bright or dark colours, gowns of silk and velvet frame the body within social, symbolic, sartorial and artistic discourses of femininity and female sexuality. They fashion the woman as a society *belle* or an artist's muse, foreshadow her seduction, unveil her as a duplicitous (potentially criminal) *femme fatale* and punish her for her sins. They also symbolise women's entrapment within the narratives and aesthetics of the period. Travelling to Victorian Britain along the trade routes, fashion magazines and art galleries of history, silk and velvet carry a wealth of symbolic meanings. Innovation during the mid-to-late-nineteenth century re-coloured the collective erotic imagination and aesthetic values and presented a range of new symbolic meanings which were explored in the popular literature of the age. Literally and figuratively, depictions of silk and velvet in Victorian popular literature enabled authors to negotiate the old and the new, the fashionable and the out-dated, the exotic and the erotic, the sensual and the sexual, the real and the unreal. In this, as Wilde stated, there is something which quickens our imagination (*Dorian* 134). Paisley, although it shares a historical and cultural narrative with silk, has a markedly different symbolic function.

While gowns of silk and velvet frame or mould the body and, in doing so, tie the woman to her narrative fate, the detailed and intricate patterns of paisley and printed cloth erase the bodies beneath them, indicating fantasy, mystery, mystique and the unknowable (Michie, *Flesh* 77). In his 1866 novel, *Armadale*, Wilkie Collins depicts a mysterious woman in "gown and bonnet of black silk and

a red paisley shawl” (70). The intricate patterns of paisley resemble print and offer a secondary narrative in which we read the stories of femininity and female sexuality.

Chapter Three

The Paisley Shawl: Patterns and Narratives of Femininity, Disguise and Artifice

[A] marvellous mingling of materialism and mystery.
(Tomson 536)

Complicated and intricate patterns and trimmings seem to shadow forth the complexity and intricacy which is the distinguishing characteristic of the middle period of life. They also, if well arranged, bear witness to the gradually increasing mystery in the art which has been acquired since the early days, when to plan a simple white dress was enough for the beginner; while, later in life, any such elaborate arrangements would become burdensome or lifeless. (Stephen 298)

[The paisley shawl's] invaluable material might give us a thread, so to speak, of direct communication with those remote regions of Chinese Tartary and Eastern Turkestan of which by the way ... ordinary readers have learned little more than was known to the Italians of the thirteenth century, after the return of Marco Polo. (W. M. W. 70)

In its patterned complexity, the paisley shawl destabilises the connections between dress, the body, subjectivity, sexuality and narrative. While white muslin's transparent nullity disguises a multitude of identities and the richness of silk and velvet mould and display the female body, paisley's intricate patterns and textures veil, even erase, the body beneath it (Michie, *Flesh* 77). Its complex and intricate patterns facilitate a mysterious and artful form of dressing (Stephen 298). The paisley shawl swathes the female body in a richness of pattern and symbolism which is at once beautiful, complex and enthrallingly unreal.

During the nineteenth century, the Indian shawl of traditional dress and legend was transformed, through processes of imperialism, trade, industrialisation and artistic evolution, into the paisley shawl of British fashion (Trilling 106).

Through these processes, the symbolic connotations of the garment changed in subtle, but nevertheless significant, ways to fashion the evocative garments worn by Victorian heroines Isabel Vane, Lady Audley, Lydia Gwilt, and Anne Brown.

The paisley shawl figures as a spoil of Empire, an exotic artefact, a mass-produced fashion accessory and an *objet d'art* in Victorian popular literature. Its threads connect nineteenth-century Britons to the depths of history and the farthest reaches of the Empire. As such, the paisley shawl functions as a repository for a variety of sartorial, artistic, intellectual, literary and political narratives in popular literature from 1860 to 1900. This chapter examines the ways in which authors utilise the garment's complex legacies to tell the heroine's story and weave their own narratives within the intricate patterns and mysterious symbolism of the paisley shawl. I begin by tracing the paisley shawl through history and literature from fifteenth-century India, along the trade routes of Asia and Europe, and the politics of the British Empire, to the draperies and novels of nineteenth-century Britain. This informs the use of the paisley shawl within patterns of narrative and characterisation in popular literature from 1860 to 1900.

I then pick up these threads of association and narrative in analyses of Wood's *East Lynne*, Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, Collins's *Armadale* and Lee's *Miss Brown*. These authors draw on the paisley shawl's traditional and imperial connotations and write new narratives which connect them to the predominant sartorial, artistic and literary fashions. The paisley shawl has a metaphoric as well as material presence in Victorian popular literature. Authors use the paisley shawl, with its complex patterns and histories, as a metaphor for the intertwining threads of their narratives. Following these threads reveals the ways in which stories of femininity and female sexuality are told through the

manipulation of visual symbols and narrative structures in popular literature from 1860 to 1900.

The Paisley Shawl

According to a popular nineteenth-century legend, the weaving of intricately patterned shawls began in northern India with the return of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin of Kashmir (1420-1470) from exile in Samarkand (Ames, *Kashmir* 16; Sharrad 69). He sent artisans to Iran and Central Asia to learn the art of Islamic design. These influences are discernible in the shawls' characteristic design motif of "a teardrop with a bent tip" known as the *buta* and, later, as the "paisley" (Sharrad 69; Maskiell 29). Another foundational narrative attributes the development of the Kashmiri shawl industry to the first Mughal Emperor of that province: Zahiruddin Babur (Maskiell 33). According to this legend, Babur established the custom of rewarding allies with locally woven shawls (Maskiell 33). This tradition was continued by his grandson, Akbar, who encouraged the production of these distinctive textiles (Maskiell 33).

These legends function as part of the rich Oriental fantasy which Victorian consumers constructed around the imported Indian shawls (S. Daly, "Kashmir" 240). However, as Frank Ames states, there is little historical evidence to suggest that shawls were being produced in this style prior to 1600 (*Kashmir* 15). Twentieth-century scholarly consensus dates the production of these distinctive and intricately patterned shawls in Kashmir to the reign of Mughal Emperor Jehangir (1605-1627) (Ames, *Kashmir* 15-6). In its design motifs and production processes, the Kashmir shawl continued to develop over the next three centuries (Ames, *Kashmir* 15); these developments were influenced by "times of peace and

war, of famine and prosperity,” and periods of foreign political rule and changing royal patronage (Ames, *Kashmir* 15).

The passage of the Kashmir shawl into European fashion along the trade routes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is part of an ongoing process of imperial conquest and cultural exchange (Sharrad 69). The shawls’ intricate patterns read as maps tracing the exchange of influences, design motifs, religious and cultural symbolism, and patterns of power and wealth across the empires of Asia and Europe for centuries. During the seventeenth century, Kashmir shawls were traded into Central Asia, China, Russia, Iran and the Ottoman Empire (Maskiell 31-2). The shawls were prized throughout these regions for their workmanship and beauty. Far from being mere practical garments, the shawls were bestowed as symbolic gifts, holding political and religious significance (Maskiell 32). Michelle Maskiell states that in the Iranian empires of Safavid, Zand and Qajar, shawls were bestowed as *khil’at* or “robes of honour” in political and religious practices (32). Their presentation established a “hierarchical relationship between the giver and the receiver” and, as such, symbolised complex relationships of power and submission (Maskiell 32-3). From the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, members of the Mughal Imperial court in Kashmir purchased large numbers of shawls, many of which were given as gifts to visiting dignitaries (Maskiell 33). Maskiell states that unique patterns were woven into these shawls to denote imperial patronage (33). The rituals of Mughal India continued into British India and shaped the political, economic and cultural exchange between Kashmir and its British *suzerain*.

In March 1846, the Kashmir Valley, and its renowned shawl industry, became part of the fast-growing British Indian Empire. Under the Treaty of

Amritsar, the Valley became part of the new princely state of Jammu and Kashmir and the region was made over to the Dogra ruler Gulab Singh (ed. Aitchison 20-2 qtd. in Zutshi 424-5). Article X of the Treaty states that:

Maharaja Gulab Singh acknowledged the supremacy of the British Government and will in token of such supremacy present annually to the British Government one horse, twelve shawl goats (six male and six female) and three pairs of Kashmir shawls. (ed. Aitchison 20-2 qtd. in Zutshi 424-5)

Of these gifts, the shawls are particularly significant. They function within the Mughal tradition of *khil'at* and symbolise the acquiescence of the Kashmiri state to the sovereign authority of Britain. As British Queen and Empress of India, Victoria continued this tradition. She frequently presented Indian shawls to visiting royals and dignitaries (Munich, *Queen* 147). Indian shawls, then, provided Britain with a symbol of Empire; a symbol already rich with connotations of the rituals and power of numerous historical empires (Munich, *Queen* 147). As Sharrad states, in appropriating the Kashmir shawl, Britain “took over the panoply of oriental grandeur and ritual performance” of Indian rule (Sharrad 73).

Paisley shawls provided Britain with a pre-existent symbol for its colonial authority in India and also offered Britain a new aesthetic sensibility (Sharrad 73). Indian shawls were introduced to Britain and Europe by soldiers returning from service in the Orient during the late-eighteenth century (S. Daly, “Kashmir” 238). They soon gained currency as exotic artefacts and were adopted into fashion. In response to their popularity, the British East Indian Company began importing shawls from Kashmir to London during the 1780s (Reilly 7). This trade continued into the nineteenth century and is depicted in Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* (1848). Joseph Sedley is employed as a “collector” in the “East India Company Civil Service” and sends shawls and oriental “knick-knacks” home (27).

As well as being desirable items of fashion, Indian shawls were championed as works of art during the Victorian period. The skill in pattern design, knowledge of form and weaving skills they exhibited, as well as their use of strong and complex colour palettes, inspired British textile manufacturers (King 34). Indian design motifs were soon integrated into English design practices (King 5). By the mid-Victorian period, the paisley shawl was a fashionable, as well as exotic and obscure, motif in popular culture (S. Daly, "Kashmir" 245).

Simultaneously, the paisley shawl functioned as an evocative symbol of Empire: of the political and economic power of Britain and the exoticism and mystique of the Orient (S. Daly, "Kashmir" 251). Becky Sharp, of *Vanity Fair*, imagines herself as the wife of East India Company Civil Serviceman Joseph Sedley and making "a visit in ceremony to the grand Moghul" dressed "in an infinite array of shawls, turbans and diamond necklaces" (Thackeray 27). The paisley shawl also became a sign of the appropriation of such qualities by the British fashion industry. As Suzanne Daly states, the paisley shawl was both an exotic artefact and a "marker of proper Englishness" ("Kashmir" 237). This is evidenced later in Thackeray's novel when Mrs. Sedley wears her Cashmere shawl "in state at church at Brompton, and was congratulated by her female friends upon the splendid acquisition" (496). The paisley shawl was a portable form of wealth for nineteenth-century women, and a crucial sign within the elaborate systems of class demarcations which operated around women's dress (S. Daly, "Kashmir" 251). Despite, or perhaps because of, the multiplicity of its symbolic associations, the paisley shawl is also a tantalising enigma. The intricacy of its patterning is a constant reminder of what cannot be understood: of symbolism which is beyond the cultural knowledge of the viewer. Its popularity in

fashion and home-furnishing throughout this period can be ascribed to its “frisson of the unknowable” as much as to its beauty (S. Daly, “Kashmir” 245).

Throughout the mid-Victorian period, the popularity of Indian shawls in Britain grew. This presented an economic opportunity for the struggling British textile industry (Byrde 896). Production of imitation Kashmir shawls began in Edinburgh and Norwich using mechanised weaving techniques during the 1780s (Reilly 7-15). The industry in the Scottish town of Paisley was established in the first years of the nineteenth century (Reilly 7). Initially, shawls produced in Paisley were known as “Thibet shawls,” after that region (Maskiell 44). By 1840, shawls from Paisley dominated the market (Reilly 9). In her history of the paisley pattern, Valerie Reilly states that, during the mid-Victorian period, drapers’ shops would offer their customers a selection of “paisleys” (9). The term “paisley” became “firmly fixed in the Victorian mind in association with both the shawl and the pattern it bore” (Reilly 9). This shift in vocabulary marks the appropriation of both garment and pattern into the style and vernacular of British popular fashion.¹⁷ As Trilling notes, “whilst Indian shawls retained the cachet of their exotic origin,” the creative, sartorial and economic balance had shifted decisively to the West (109). Throughout this period, weavers in France and Russia also produced shawls in imitation of those from Kashmir.¹⁸ A small number of these continental imitations found their way onto the British market; however, those woven in Paisley and Norwich were most popular with British shoppers. This is one of the few instances during the nineteenth century, in which British textiles and fashions were preferred over those of Paris (Reilly 32). In *East Lynne*, Wood explores this scenario, representing a debate over the origins and authenticity of a shawl as a struggle over British taste and nationalism. Mr. Carlyle buys a

“splendid” shawl for his sister Cornelia. “I hope I have not been taken in,” he adds, “the vendors vowed it was true Parisian cashmere” (27). “For my part, I don’t see why foreign goods should bear the palm over British,” he adds, “if I wore shawls, I would discard the best French one ever made, for a good honest one from our own manufactories, Norwich or Paisley” (27).

“The Kashmir shawl and its British equivalent from Paisley and Norwich,” favoured by Wood’s Mr. Carlyle, were indispensable items of fashionable dress from the 1780s until 1870 (King 52). During the first two decades of the nineteenth century, paisley stoles or scarves were worn with fashionable empire-line gowns of white muslin (Byrde 882).¹⁹ The shawls’ intricately coloured patterns and soft fall complemented the classically inspired drapery of these gowns (Byrde 893). Changes in the silhouette and palette of fashion in the ensuing decades, though, saw changes in the dimensions and colours of fashionable paisley shawls. The narrow stole style was supplanted by square shawls and then by the “plaid” (Reilly 35).²⁰ “Plaids” were folded diagonally and worn with the point hanging down the back (Reilly 35). When Queen Victoria came to the throne in 1837, she brought this mode of dress into popular fashion (Reilly 39).

With the invention of aniline dyes in the 1860s the colour palette used in paisley shawls, as well as dress silks, drastically changed (Reilly 24). Soft traditional colours of plant and mineral based dyes such as indigo, saffron, madder and walnut brown gave way to the artificial colour palette of mauves, oranges and teals (Ames, “Guide” 98). The style of the shawls also changed. Technological developments made it possible to weave shawls with an all-over pattern rather than those with a deep border and plain central section; fashion soon favoured this bolder style. Paisley shawls of the 1860s were far larger and more richly coloured

and patterned than those of previous decades. Such shawls were worn as over-garments with the fashionable crinoline style gowns of the period (Byrde 905).

By 1870, the paisley shawl had epitomised British women's fashion for almost 100 years (Reilly 32). Whilst it owed its popularity to the vagaries of fashion, its decline came in the same guise. The outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war in 1870 disrupted the trade of fashionable goods between the East, Europe and Britain and this reduced the supply of Indian shawls (Reilly 60). However, it was the upsweep of the full skirts of the crinoline to the back, forming the new bustle silhouette, which truly portended the end of the paisley shawl's reign of fashion (Byrde 897). This sartorial style was characterised by the lengthening of the bodice and the addition of a pad or cage at the back to support the drapery (Byrde 897). A frilled and flounced overskirt was fashioned to accentuate this silhouette (Byrde 897). This style could not accommodate the softly draped lines of the plaid shawl, nor were its intricate patterns sympathetic with these heavily embellished gowns (Byrde 897). Tailored jackets and pelerines were fashioned as outerwear for the bustle gown (Reilly 9). However, the shift in fashion from capacious and patterned shawl, to plain and tailored jacket was neither as dramatic nor as conclusive as some fashion historians have suggested.

In 1878, *The Ladies' Treasury: A Household Magazine* published instructions for re-fashioning a paisley shawl into a "useful ... carriage wrap" ("Indian" 48). The magazine's readers are instructed to make:

two pleats ... in the length of the scarf; it is then placed on the figure and crossed over to one side, going round the back, and forming an end ... It is thus firmly tacked or pinned in shape so it cannot get disarrayed. The other side is then made to represent the front ... and when finished the back is fastened with passementiere ornaments.
("Indian" 48)

This garment is labelled an “Indian Scarf Wrap,” and may be fashioned from “an Indian scarf, or one from Norwich or Paisley” (“Indian” 48). This is symbolic as well as sartorial refashioning. By changing the style of the garment, the woman is also changing its symbolic connotations. It is no longer an unfashionable “paisley shawl,” but a “carriage wrap” in the style of a fashionable pelerine. This refashioning changes the form and purpose of the shawl to those sympathetic with the fashions of the late 1870s. The addition of the fashionable embellishments of the period in the form of “passementiere ornaments” emphasises this transformation (“Indian” 48).²¹ Such garments literally seamed the exoticism and prestige of the Indian shawl, with the strict tailoring of the pelerine. This refashioning exemplifies a broader shift in the symbolic and decorative purposes to which the Indian shawl was put in the late-nineteenth century.

In 1886, the Royal Commission (led by the Prince of Wales) held a Colonial and Indian Exhibition in South Kensington. The Exhibition, one of the many which took place across Britain and Europe in the wake of the 1851 Great Exhibition, featured a series of “Courts” displaying the products and industries of the British Empire. The “Kashmir Court” was filled with rich and multi-coloured chintzes and shawls from the Maharajah’s *tosha-khana* (*Official Catalogue* 58). Specimens of “shawl stuff woven from the unbleached and undyed *pashmina* or under-wool of the shawl-goat” were also exhibited (*Official Catalogue* 59). Exhibitions such as this brought Indian shawls, as examples of skilful workmanship, back to the public attention.

From the 1880s and into the first decade of the twentieth century, there was an increased interest in and demand for Indian textiles (Liberty 27). The Aesthetic and Arts and Crafts Movements decried the poor state of British design

and manufacturing, and promoted the values of fine, original and handmade applied arts (King 144). Leaders of the movement, Thomas Wardle, William Morris and Arthur Lasenby Liberty worked to preserve the traditional Indian techniques of spinning, dying and weaving and replicate them in their British workshops (King 145). This represented a “revolt against mid-Victorian taste” (Zutshi 437) and the exploitative conditions of modern mass-production (King 144).

In 1875, Liberty set up his eponymous department store in London to appeal directly to this taste (Zutshi 437). He brought exotic goods from the far reaches of the “Orient” and displayed them in his “elegant [Regent Street] premises” (471). These textiles also inspired a range of British “art fabrics” produced by Liberty & Co. and Thomas Wardle. In 1894, Liberty wrote that their “colour combinations and designs are ... sought ... from among the classic examines of ... the far East”; their exoticism was crucial to their appeal (29). In the “Notes of the Month” for June 1891, *The Lady’s Magazine* suggested that:

Ladies who needed rich brocades for their court trains flocked to the Exhibition of Silk Brocades manufactured in England, which was held at Chesham House, Regent Street ... The silk was of the best texture, and the colours were artistic and tastefully combined, the designs were excellent, many of them bearing traces of Oriental origin. (471)

In an 1894 article on “Shopping in London,” A. E. F. Eliot-James states that “Liberty’s is the chosen resort of the artistic shopper” (6). “Note,” he states

this Lady robed in “Liberty silk” of sad-coloured green, with rather more than a suspicion of yellow in ribbons, sash, and hat ... who talks learnedly to her young friend – clothed in russet-brown, with salmon-pink reliefs showing in quaint slashings in unexpected places – of the “value of tone,” of negatives and positives, of delicious half-tones, and charming introductions of colour. (6)

As a proponent of the Aesthetic Dress movement, Eliot-James's "Artistic One" ("Shopping" 6) construes dress as a matter of art rather than of fashion (Schaffer, *Forgotten* 103). To her and her contemporaries, dress was considered to be "timeless, transcendent, symbolic, and meaningful" rather than "ephemeral, transitory, frivolous and meaningless" (Schaffer, *Forgotten* 103). The artistic originality and rich symbolism of the Indian or paisley shawl, then, typified the aesthetic and theory of the Aesthetic or Artistic Dress Movement. It also established it as a symbolic and meaningful cultural artefact and literary symbol.

As Paul Sharrad states, the paisley shawl is a metaphor for "the kinds of contending meanings we commonly expect from literary texts" (66). The paisley shawl, then, is both a material object and a narrative (Sharrad 66); its beauty and fascination lie in its artful weaving of these literal and symbolic threads. The paisley shawl's symbolic use in Victorian popular literature reflects the layers of myth and legend which surround the origins of its eponymous pattern (Reilly 10).

The paisley shawl has held an important place in the literary imagination, as well as the fashion, of Britain since its introduction in the trunks and narratives of returning soldiers during the eighteenth century (S. Daly, "Kashmir" 238). In 1840, Charles White, a Captain in the Coldstream Guards who had served in the Middle East, wrote a novel entitled *The Cashmere Shawl: An Eastern Fiction*. Narrated in the first person, the novel explores the subjectivity of the cashmere shawl. It tells the story of the shawl's journey from the hillsides of Central Asia to the fleece markets of Yarkhand, and the looms of Islamabad, to the courts of Arab Sultans and the imperial states of British India. White uses the shawl to weave an intricate "Eastern Fiction" which connects the outposts of Empire with the nexus of colonial power in Britain.

“I have witnessed many singular adventures,” the shawl recalls, “both in the east and in the west”:

I have been envied by the inhabitants of harems, palaces
and bagnios. I have shaded the brows of sultans, Pachas,
Omrahs and Khans. I have girded the waists of Sultanas,
Princesses, Khanums and Bayaderes. I have passed
through many hands; enjoyed great glories. (White ix)

Then, “when worn out, soiled, tattered and thread bare ... I was sold to a rug merchant. From his impure clutches, I found my way into the boiler of a paper manufacturer, and thence ... behold what I am now” (White x): “a quire of that delicate, hot pressed, coloured paper, adorned with an embossed tracery of cupids and flowers” (White vii). It is these pages which, “striving to open their gilded edges” to speak, tell the novel’s story (White viii). This shawl’s movement through the courts of “sultans, Pachas, Omrahs and Khans” and states of the British Empire to finally become a text on the desk of a colonial official, represents the more general process by which the paisley shawl, with its own multitude of histories, arrives in the homes and literature of Victorian Britain (White ix). The shawl’s conversion into an actual text which, quite literally, tells its story, is a self-conscious reference to the way in which the paisley shawl functions as a symbol and metaphor for narrative in Victorian popular literature. As W. M. W. wrote in *Once a Week* in 1865, the paisley shawl, and its “invaluable material,” functions as a literal, symbolic and narrative “thread” which connects the “remote regions of Chinese Tartary and Eastern Turkestan” to ordinary British readers and consumers (70).

In her 1814 novel, *Mansfield Park*, Jane Austen also fictionalises the shawls’ passage from India to fashionable Britain. Mrs. Norris appeals to William Price to bring her two shawls from the East Indies when he takes a commission in the navy (318). In donning a paisley shawl, however, the heroine of Victorian

popular literature swathes herself in a multitude of narratives and contested symbolic meanings which transcend this desire for the latest fashion. For women such as Mrs. Norris, the paisley shawl was a garment of “majestic drapery,” redolent of the exotic and mysterious East (Brontë, *Villette* 77).

In Elizabeth Gaskell’s 1855 novel *North and South*, Margaret Hale wears a “large Indian shawl, which [hangs] about her in long heavy folds” (63). She carries it with the pride and grace with which an “empress wears her drapery” (63). Margaret’s laboriously and artistically hand-woven Indian shawl symbolises her detachment from the brutality and mass-production of the local cotton industry: an industry against whose effects she protests throughout the novel. In its style and symbolism, then, Margaret’s Indian shawl represents her nobility and virtue of character. In Gaskell’s earlier novel, *Mary Barton* (1848), however, the shawl is a sign of assumed, rather than authentic, virtue and respectability (Valverde 172).

Esther, a fallen woman and aunt of the novel’s eponymous heroine, visits a pawn-shop and exchanges her street-walker’s finery for a plain “black silk bonnet, a printed gown, [and] a plaid shawl” (Gaskell, *Mary* 236). Thus dressed, she returns to the respectable working-class neighbourhoods of Manchester to visit her family. These garments are, Esther thinks, “the appropriate garb of [this] happy class to which she could never, never more belong” (Gaskell, *Mary* 236). During the early-to-mid-Victorian period, plain stuff gowns and large shawls were the standard garb of British “factory girls” (Gaskell, *Mary* 6). In *Mary Barton*, Gaskell describes this style as modest and “not unpicturesque” (6). Esther’s shawl, however, is a veil of hardworking respectability which hides her sexual and

sinful body (Valverde 172). This is juxtaposed with Mary's modest and truly virtuous garb of "blue gown and ... plaid shawl" (Gaskell, *Mary* 282).

Throughout the novel and a succession of misfortunes, Mary Barton studiously avoids the inducement to follow her aunt into the doomed life of a street-walker. Instead, she supports her father through her work as a dressmaker. Gaskell draws a pointed contrast between Mary's work, the sale of clothing, and her aunt's sale of her body. This is made all the more obvious when, in a moment of sheer financial desperation, Mary attempts to barter her plaid shawl for a boat fare to Liverpool (Gaskell, *Mary* 298). The sale of the shawl is seen as a proxy for the sale of the female body; the paisley shawl, as Michie indicates, replaces the body beneath it (Michie, *Flesh* 77). The plaid shawl, then, represents forms of financial as well as symbolic and social capital for the heroines of *Mary Barton*. This is also the case in later Victorian novels. In Charlotte Brontë's 1853 novel, *Villette*, Mrs. Svini uses her "Cachemire" shawl to manipulate her economic and social position and refashion her cultural identity.

When heroine Lucy Snowe arrives at the *Villette pensionnat* of Madame Beck, she meets Mrs. Svini, nursery-governess to the Beck children. Mrs. Svini acquired this privileged position on the basis of her "pure" London accent and her possession of "a real Indian shawl – 'un veritable Cachemire'" (77-8). The shawl, like Mrs. Sweeny's accent, is crucial to her performance of proper English respectability (78). Without it, Lucy adds, "she would not have kept her footing at the *pensionnat* for two days" (77-8). Lucy is instantly suspicious of Mrs. Svini and her tale of English gentility. Her gowns, the heroine states, are ill-fitting and of "rather suspicious splendor" and her accent is "a smothered brogue, curiously overlaid with mincing cockney inflections" (77-8). Drawing on her knowledge of

English cultural, social and sartorial codes, Lucy exposes Mrs. Svini as an impostor. “Mrs. Svini (I presumed this Mrs. Svini, Anglicé or Hibernice, Sweeny)” is not an upper-class Londoner, Lucy states, but “a native of Ireland” (77). She is soon dismissed and Miss Snowe hired in her place (77).

In its intricate and awe inspiring pattern, Mrs. Svini’s “veritable Cachemire” shawl captures a wealth of conflicting cultural references and intricate narratives of nationality (77). It is authentically Indian, but, when evoked in a continental European context, a sign of proper and “pure” Englishness.²² As Brontë shows, by 1853 the Indian shawl had been absorbed into English society and its codes of class, taste and fashion. So potent is this symbolism, it allows Irishwoman Mrs. Sweeny to masquerade as the daughter of a London Marquis. Mrs. Sweeny’s accent, however, calls into question the authenticity or veracity of “the Cachemire shawl” and, by extension, her English identity. The shawl, too, could be a coarse imitation with its origins in Scotland or Ireland rather than India or London. The shawl’s conflicting narratives of Indianness and Englishness, authenticity and imitation, function as a model for Mrs. Sweeny’s refashioning of her own national and cultural identity.

In E. M. Forster’s *Howards End* (1910), heroine Helen Schlegel imagines a dinner party hosted by Queen Victoria in which the guest list includes the champions of the Aesthetic movement: “Leighton, Millais, Swinburne, Rossetti, Meredith, Fitzgerald, etc.” (41). The Queen, she states, would wear “a clinging Liberty tea-gown instead of a magenta satin ... with an Indian shawl over her shoulders ... fastened at the bosom with a Cairngorm pin” (Forster 41).²³ This scene not only enmeshes the Indian shawl firmly within this new fashionable aesthetic by pairing it with gown of Liberty “Art fabric” and a “Cairngorm pin,” it

also completes the symbolic imperial and fashionable cycle. By placing the paisley shawl back on the shoulders of Victoria, British Queen, Empress of India and leader of fashion, Helen emphasises its function as a robe of honour, a symbol of Empire, an item of fashion and, most importantly, an evocative literary symbol. In *Howards End*, the paisley shawl is a repository for nineteenth-century sartorial, artistic, intellectual, literary and political narratives. Like Forster, authors of popular literature from 1860 to 1900 inherited the cultural and literary histories of the paisley shawl. This chapter will now consider their use of paisley shawls as sartorial and narrative symbols.

In her 1860 novel, *East Lynne*, Wood uses an evocative white cashmere shawl as a sign of the heroine's departure from and, eventual return to, the realm of genteel and angelic femininity (609). This garment functions as a narrative symbol which veils the body of the heroine and frames its story of dangerous and subversive femininity. Instead of erasing this narrative, however, the paisley shawl captures the richness and mystery of Isabel's story in its intricate patterns and complex and conflicting symbolism. It is both a narrative symbol and a symbol for narrative.

East Lynne

In the first chapter of *East Lynne*, Lady Isabel Vane is dressed in accordance with her characterisation as a virtuous, innocent and angelic heroine. She wears "a flowing [evening] dress of costly white lace" (11). "At the conclusion of dinner," Wood states, "a maid entered the room with a white cashmere mantle [and placed] ... it over the shoulders of her young lady" (12). Dressed in white Isabel appears "light, graceful [and] girlish": she belongs to "a fairer world than this," the

narrator states (11). Their costliness also represents her wealth and social position. The emphatic placing of the cashmere shawl over this already evocative garb indicates an accumulation of complex and mysterious symbolism onto the body and narrative of the heroine. The significance of this act of dressing is explicated as the narrative continues.

In appearance, Isabel, as discussed in Chapter One, is the incarnation of the innocent and childlike Angel in the House of mid-Victorian domestic ideology. She is also, however, vain and seducible. Early in the novel, she marries Archibald Carlyle and indulges her vanity amongst the wealth and opulence of her new social position. In the course of the novel, however, Isabel sacrifices both social position and virtue for her passion for vagabond Francis Levison. In her ill-fated affair with Levison, Isabel trades her white gowns for sensual robes of silk and velvet. This form of dress refigures her body as that of the sexualised *femme fatale* or fallen woman. This process of refiguring is continued, when, after Levison abandons her and their child, Isabel is injured in a train accident. As a result, Isabel is forced to exchange her fashionable finery for a “disfiguring [black] dress” and a heavy veil in order to disguise her injuries (389). This form of dress dramatically disfigures, rather than refiguring, Isabel’s body and her story.

The process and narrative implications of Isabel’s change from ethereal and transparent white to heavy and disfiguring black is discussed in Chapter One. Its symbolic and narrative significance is, though, intricately tied to her donning of the white cashmere mantle in the novel’s opening scene (12). Isabel’s disfiguring and disguising veil replaces the white cashmere mantle. The white cashmere cloak prepares its wearer to leave the warmth and security of the drawing-room; similarly, her heavy veil and dark woollen gowns prepare Isabel to

leave the comfort of the upper classes and build a new life for herself as governess Madame Vine. These garments are coarse and sombre, in marked comparison to her diaphanous and luxurious white *ensemble*.

After the accident, Isabel Vane, disguised as governess Madame Vine, returns to her marital home to care for her children. The weight of her guilt overwhelms her, however, and her health begins to fade. Throughout her illness, Isabel's dark clothing also fades. Her black gowns become lighter and her heavy veil is substituted for "a broad band of grey velvet coming down low upon her forehead" (389). Madame Vine's complexion and hair also become greyed; the narrator asks,

what resemblance was there between that grey, broken-down woman, with her disfiguring marks, and the once lovely Lady Isabel, with her bright colour, her beauty, her dark flowing curls, ... Mr Carlyle himself would not have known her. But she was good looking still, in spite of it all, gentle, and interesting. (389)

This process of chromatic lightening symbolises the lightening of her conscience as she returns to the domestic sphere and her responsibilities as nurturer to her children. It also symbolises her gradual death. In the novel's final chapters, Isabel asks to see Mr. Carlyle to confess to her true identity and apologise for her infidelity.

When he arrives at her bedside, he finds her pale and serene (609). "There she was," the narrator states, "Lady Isabel: changed, certainly, very very much; but still her The silvered hair fell on either side her face, as the silky curls had once fallen; the sweet, sad eyes were the eyes of yore" (611). Her pale face, "free from its disguising trappings" was lying on the pillow (609). Instead of "the band of grey velvet, the spectacles, the wraps for the throat and chin, [and] the huge cap" she wore "a white cashmere shawl over her shoulders, her night-cap off"

(609). The removal of her cap and “disguising trappings” represents the death of her *alter ego* Madame Vine: “I am as one dead,” she states (609). The replacement of this disguise with an evocative “white cashmere shawl” emphasises this symbolic death and the reassumption of the heroine’s identity as Mrs. Carlyle (609).

In these final scenes, Isabel’s “white cashmere shawl” symbolises her forgiveness and redemption. It also foreshadows her elevation to the realm of Heaven (488). The shawl’s luxuriousness also represents her return, at least partial, to the fashionable and wealthy upper classes. Most significantly, however, this garment functions as a symbolic and narrative echo of the “white cashmere mantle” worn by Isabel in the novel’s first chapter (11).

Wood’s detailed description of Isabel’s paisley shawl completes the narrative cycle of *East Lynne*. The shawl indicates Isabel’s return, physical, mental and symbolic, to her marital home and her children. Whilst her white cashmere cape is a blank symbolic and narrative surface, indicating Isabel’s adherence to the ideal of the Angel in the House, the intricate patterns of her paisley shawl symbolise her narrative progression from Angel to wife, mother, lover, *femme fatale* and governess, and back to angel through the textural and chromatic symbolism of white lace, black silk and faded grey wool. The textual and textural narrative of *East Lynne* is inscribed on the surface of her white cashmere shawl. Thus, in putting on the shawl, Isabel is literally donning the symbol of her transgression; her entire story is contained in this garment.

Like *East Lynne*, Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* closes with the description of its heroine punished for her transgressions and dressed in an evocative Indian shawl. In *Lady Audley’s Secret*, the paisley shawl functions as

the final symbol in a narrative of transgressive, even criminal, femininity. While in *East Lynne*, the heroine's cashmere shawl reveals Isabel's true identity and tells the story of her transgression and redemption, in Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* the shawl's fashionableness and connotations of wealth and luxury actually disguise the heroine's body and her story; instead of revealing her goodness and consigning her to the realm of heaven, Lady Audley's paisley shawl symbolises her mercenary and duplicitous nature and consigns her, disgraced, to a Belgian asylum. The paisley shawl is the last, and highly evocative, garment in which Lady Audley refashions her identity.

Lady Audley's Secret

In Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, the heroine continually fashions and refashions her identity through changing her name and swathing her body in gowns of diaphanous white muslin, red silk and sensuous blue velvet. These gowns, and their different symbolic associations, tell the story of Lucy's transformation from childlike Angel in the House to fiendish *femme fatale*. In the novel's final chapters, Lady Audley's transgressions and deception are revealed. She is accused of attempted murder, bigamy, child abandonment and madness. She is also stripped of her many aliases and her identity as Lucy Talboys (née Maldon) is revealed. Devoid of her rich trappings of fashion and fictionalised identity, Lucy appears plain and vulnerable.

Lady Audley quickly responds to these revelations by wrapping herself in layers of exotic cloth and mysterious narrative in the form of "an Indian shawl" (373-4). Her motivations in choosing this garment are unclear. The narrator states,

I think she had an idea that it would be well to wear this costly garment; so that if hustled suddenly away, she might carry at least one of her possessions with her. Remember how much she had periled for a fine house and gorgeous furniture, for carriages and horses, for jewels and laces. (373-4)

For the narrator, Lady Audley's Indian shawl is one of the many luxury items in which the heroine has invested her identity and influence and which she secretes amongst her luggage for her journey to the Belgian asylum. She hides Sèvres china and Dresden vases in the folds of her silk dinner gowns and gathers up her Russian sables (383). The narrator adds that Lady Audley would have "taken the pictures from the wall and the Gobelin tapestry from the chairs, had it been possible for her to do so" (383). These luxury items are the cultural currency of her position as Lady Audley, the ennobled wife of Sir Michael Audley. They have realisable monetary value and are signs of Lady Audley's wealthy cosmopolitanism.

Lady Audley's shawl is "Indian" in the same way that her furs are Russian, the Dresden vases German and the Sèvres china and Gobelin tapestries, French. This nationalistic nomenclature is a reflection of the wealth of exotic and luxury items available to the British aristocracy, rather than a reference to the cultural origins of these items. The addendum that the Indian shawl "cost Sir Michael a hundred guineas" (373) supports this reading.²⁴ The shawl's monetary value, rather than its sartorial or symbolic value, is emphasised by the narrator. However, the way in which the narrator frames this interpretation draws it into question.

When the narrator states, "I think [Lady Audley] had an idea that it would be well to wear this costly garment," it is one of the few instances in the novel when the narrator intrudes into the story in the first person. In order to substantiate

this interpretation, the narrator implores the readers to “remember how much [the heroine] had periled for a fine house and gorgeous furniture” (373-4).

Nevertheless, this narrative intrusion causes the readers to question the significance of the Indian shawl. Throughout *Lady Audley's Secret* the slightest change in the heroine's attire has significant narrative implications. The paisley shawl, therefore, becomes a symbol of uncertainty and mystery: uncertainty and mystery, not merely as to the motivations of the heroine, but also as to the reliability of the narrator in telling her story.

When Lady Audley wraps herself in her Indian shawl, she not only dons a beautiful and expensive garment, but also a symbolic veil which obscures her body and her narrative. Stephen argues that “complicated and intricate patterns and trimmings ... bear witness to the gradually increasing mystery in the art [dressing]” which characterises “the middle period of life” (298). By choosing to put on her evocative Indian shawl at this time in the narrative, when her deceit has been revealed, Lady Audley is reinstating the mystery of the art of dressing. She wraps the shawl around the shoulders of her morning gown and, in so doing, materially changes its symbolic significance. She replaces the transparency and symbolic nullity of the white muslin with the rich and obscure symbolism of the paisley shawl. As Michie argues, intricate patterns erase the bodies beneath them, replacing their narratives and refiguring their identities (*Flesh* 77). Lucy's many self-fashioned identities and stories are contained within the complex patterns of the paisley shawl. Symbolically, she unravels the sartorial and symbolic stuffs of her white muslin and sumptuous silk identities and weaves a new garment and a new narrative of identity: that of the innocent, though mad, Madame Taylor.

Like in Wood's *East Lynne*, in *Lady Audley's Secret* the paisley shawl functions as a self-conscious reference to the mysterious complexity of the narrative. For both authors, the paisley shawl is both a fashionable disguise and narrative symbol. It functions as a closing symbol which encapsulates the many conflicting narratives and identities of the novel and, in so doing, self-consciously reveals the importance of dress in fashioning femininity and telling the heroine's story. It is also a symbol for the progression of the narrative and its interwoven threads, both literal and metaphoric. In Collins's 1865 novel, *Armadale*, the paisley shawl represents the complex political, economic and cultural exchanges of the British Empire. It is also a sartorial disguise and narrative metaphor. The paisley shawl's intricately interwoven threads represent its multitude of complex narrative functions.

Armadale

Armadale is a novel of inherited curses, espionage, embezzlement, fraud, murder, deceit, mistaken and false identities, and illicit desire. This mysterious and emphatically sensational narrative is woven across England, the Continent, the port cities of the Mediterranean, and the British colonies of the West Indies. Like Collins's later novel, *The Moonstone* (1868), *Armadale* uses the passage of exotic artefacts from East to West to represent other, less tangible, legacies and stories which connect Britain and its imperial colonies. Chief amongst these is the "red paisley shawl" worn by the novel's mysterious antagonist: Miss Lydia Gwilt (70). In order to uncover Lydia's malicious motivations and criminal past and, thereby, solve the mystery of the novel, the protagonists must disentangle the symbolic and narrative threads of the paisley shawl (17). In *Armadale*, the paisley shawl

functions as an evocative colonial symbol, a potent sartorial disguise and a tool and metaphor for narrative. Paisley's complex patterns and symbolic instability infuse the novel with a *frisson* of the exotic unknown and the dangerous unknowable inherited from the pattern's contested Indian and colonial histories (S. Daly, "Kashmir" 245).

Armadales tells the story of the incorrigible Allan Armadale, the son of Allan Armadale (commonly known as Fergus Ingleby) of Barbados. Allan is born and raised in genteel poverty in England and, during his youth, befriends Ozias Midwinter, a youth of swarthy complexion and mysterious heritage. Unbeknown to Armadale, Midwinter is his second cousin and was also christened Allan Armadale (after his own father). The intricate genealogy of the central characters establishes *Armadales*'s pattern of obscured and dual identities, doubles, repetitions and coincidences: a pattern which recurs as the novel's mystery unfolds.

Armadales opens with the death-bed confession of Midwinter's father. In his last hours, Mr. Armadale dictates a letter in which he confesses to the murder of his cousin (Allan's father), on a French timber-ship off the coast of Madeira twenty years previously (20-50). Mr. Armadale's letter, bequeathed to Midwinter upon his majority, is the first of the many textual fragments and artefacts through which the narrative is told. The letter's revelations have far reaching consequences for *Armadales*'s protagonists; they tie Allan and Midwinter to each other and to a fatal and fatalistic chain of events which would lead them to repeating their fathers' crimes.

Mr. Armadale's confessional letter begins with the story of his inheritance of the "great Armadale property" in Barbados and his taking of the "fatal

Armadale name” (27). Mr. Armadale (Midwinter’s father) inherited the estate in place of the natural heir, Allan’s father, whose “[disgrace]... beyond redemption” led to his disinheritance (28). As a condition of the bequest, Midwinter’s father rejects his birth name of Wrentmore and takes that of his uncle and benefactor: Allan Armadale. Determined to seek revenge for his disinheritance, the original Armadale heir also changes his name and, under the alias of Fergus Ingleby, insinuates himself into his cousin’s confidence. He takes advantage of his intimacy with Armadale and poisons him. Ingleby then woos his cousin’s *fiancée*, a Miss Blanchard of Madeira, and convinces her to elope with him. Ingleby is assisted in this by Miss Blanchard’s maid, “a marvel of precocious ability” (34). Ingleby’s motivations are vengeful rather than romantic; he wishes to seek revenge for his disinheritance and regain his position as Armadale heir. Armadale realises Ingleby’s deception and exacts his own revenge by locking Ingleby in the cabin of the sinking vessel.

In his dying hours, Armadale regrets his actions. He wishes to break the cycle of revenge which has tied together the lives of the two Allan Armadales. In the final lines of his letter, Armadale begs his son to “never, to your dying day, let any living soul approach you who is associated ... with the crime which your father has committed” (48). “Avoid the maid whose wicked hand smoothed the way to the marriage,” Armadale senior implores, but, most particularly, “never let the two Allan Armadales meet in this world. Never, never, never!” (48). However, Midwinter and Allan are fated to replicate their fathers’ intimacy. Midwinter resolves to leave the past behind them and be loyal to his friend; however, their friendship is threatened by the pernicious influence of Miss Lydia Gwilt: the

maid, a *femme fatale* of most “wicked dexterity” (34), and the woman in the paisley shawl.

In the first volume of the novel, Allan unexpectedly inherits the Blanchard’s Norfolk estate of Thorpe-Ambrose. His inheritance is the result of a succession of accidents in which the first three Blanchard heirs tragically die; this mirrors Mr. Armadale senior’s earlier inheritance of the West Indian property. The chain of fateful events which lead to Allan’s elevation into property begins when a lady, “dressed in black silk, with a red Paisley shawl over her shoulders, and ... her face hidden behind a thick veil,” throws herself off a river-boat into the Thames (79). Arthur Blanchard, the third heir, dives in to rescue her. The lady is recovered and her life saved; however, Blanchard becomes ill and dies (80). Driven to distress and recklessness by the death of their son and brother, the first and second heirs hasten their return to England from the Continent. Their carriage becomes lost and is later found at the bottom of a precipice. Both men are killed in the accident (80-1). “So,” the narrator states, “in a clear sequence of events, a woman’s suicide-leap into a river had opened to Allan Armadale the succession to the Thorpe-Ambrose estates” (80).

Parallel to this sequence of events runs another, equally fateful, which also affects drastic change in Allan’s familial, financial and social position. Whilst her uncle and cousin meet their deaths on the Continent, Allan’s mother receives a visitor at her Somersetshire home. Her caller is a woman of respectable appearance who is neatly dressed in “a gown and bonnet of black silk and a red Paisley shawl” (70). The mysterious woman introduces herself as Mrs. Armadale’s ex-maid (70). The maid, who withholds her name, extorts money from her ex-mistress in exchange for keeping the secret of the events surrounding

her ill-fated marriage and the death of her husband. The shock overwhelms Mrs. Armadale and she soon dies (73).

Alarmed by the simultaneity, gravity and apparent coincidence of these chains of events, Midwinter begins to investigate the historical and narrative threads which connect them. He appeals to Mr. Brock, a clergyman and friend to Mrs. Armadale and her son, for information of the mysterious visitor. “What was she like?” Midwinter asks. “She kept her veil down. I can’t tell you,” Mr. Brock answers. “You can tell me what you *did* see?” Midwinter urges and Brock replies,

“I saw, as she approached me, that she moved very gracefully, that she had a beautiful figure ... [S]he wore a thick black veil, a black dress, and a red paisley shawl. I felt all the importance of your possessing some better means of identifying her than I can give you. But, unhappily –” He stopped, Midwinter was leaning eagerly across the table, and Midwinter’s hand was laid suddenly on his arm. ... “Do you remember the woman who threw herself from the river steamer?” asked the other – “the woman who caused that succession of deaths, which opened Allan Armadale’s way to the Thorp-Ambrose estate?” ... “*That* woman,” pursued Midwinter, “moved gracefully, and had a beautiful figure. *That* woman wore a black veil, a black bonnet, a black silk gown, and a red paisley shawl –”. (105)

“Can it be the same?” Midwinter asks, “*is* there a fatality that follows men in the dark? And is it following *us* in that woman’s footsteps?” (105). Miss Gwilt’s intricately patterned paisley shawl represents fate, fatality and the recurring narratives and patterns of history which structure *Armadale*. The pattern of the novel, like that of the paisley shawl, is one of intricacy, circularity and repetition. These intricate patterns and multiple contending histories are replicated on a structural level by the novel’s collection of a variety of narratives and textual artefacts.

The story of *Armadale* is told, not through an omniscient narration, but, rather, through the narrator’s collection of textual fragments: letters, dream

narratives, extraneous jottings, diary entries, confessions, suicide notes, wills, newspaper reports, and telegrams. These texts are tied together by threads of third-person narration from the perspectives of Midwinter, Mr. Brock and Miss Gwilt and, occasionally, other minor characters. The narrative, then, is at once fragmentary and incomplete, repetitious and conflicting. Collins uses this instability and uncertainty to explore the interplay of history, fate and chance as narrative constructions and structures. Midwinter believes in a fatality which shapes his life; for him, the events of the past haunt the future in the figure of the woman in the paisley shawl (105). Allan, on the other hand, believes in chance: declaring, “chance is on my side” (113). In *Armadale*, readers and protagonists alike must pick up and follow “the thread[s] of the narrative” which are entangled throughout this collection of texts and conflicting interpretations (17).

By coincidence and contrivance, Allan and Midwinter’s story re-enacts the events of Allan senior’s epistolary narrative. The letter’s role in foreshadowing the plot of the novel becomes evident in the second book when Allan and Midwinter embark on a cruise to visit a ship wrecked off the coast of the Isle of Man. They board the wreck and, having failed to secure their own vessel, become marooned. This scenario reminds Midwinter of his father’s West Indian voyage and his horror at this is exacerbated when he realises that the wreck is, in fact, that of *La Grace de Dieu*, the French timber-ship of their fathers’ ill-fated journey. “The Shadow of the Past” haunts Allan and Midwinter’s night on the ship (123). It also haunts the structure of the novel and, by extension, our reading of it. The title of the chapter, “The Shadow of the Past,” draws our attention to the fatality which connects Allan and Midwinter and their fathers (123). In this episode, Collins also foreshadows the future, suggesting that past, present and future are

connected in an intricate and pre-existent narrative structure. This takes the form of a premonitory dream.

Whilst on-board, Allan dreams of numerous disjointed and increasingly sinister encounters between “The Shadow of a Man” and “The Shadow of a Woman” (142). Midwinter is alarmed by his companion’s dream and insists upon transcribing a detailed account of it in his pocket-book (133). Midwinter’s account becomes the novel’s second textual fragment and, as such, provides a structure for the second part of the novel. “The Past” overshadows the dream and the scenario of Midwinter’s recording of it. Like Armadale’s letter, the account of “The Dream” also provides “[A] Shadow of the Future,” as the title of the chapter emphasises (139). This “future” is realised as the narrative unfolds (139).

In the course of the novel, the scenes of “The Dream” are realised, with paisley-clad Miss Gwilt in the role of Woman and Allan and Midwinter, variably, in that of Man.²⁵ However, it is not merely the corporeal shadows which take form as the scenes of “The Dream” are acted out, but also the intricate histories which connect them. As Lydia brings colour and life to the role of the “Shadow of a Woman,” her paisley shawl and the complex narratives and identities it represents fill in the details between the shadowy past and hazy futures of *Armadale*’s main characters. “The Dream,” then, (fore)shadows *Armadale*’s plot; the events of the past, present and future are enacted (or re-enacted) as the narrative unfolds. In the course of the novel, the Shadow of the Past, The Shadow of the Man, the Shadow of the Woman and the Shadow of the Future take form.

Jonathan Loesberg argues that sensation novels, such as *Armadale*, are structured by a “narrative of inevitable sequence” in which “it is not the precise content of the incidents of the plot that is significant but the connection between

one incident and another and the movement between them” (129). In *Armadale*, the “Dream” represents the inevitability or fatality that structures the narrative. It foreshadows the main incidents of the plot and provides a model for our reading of the text. “The Dream” not only foreshadows the act of story-telling, then; it also anticipates those of interpretation and analysis.

In *Armadale*, interpretation necessitates following the threads which connect the scenes of “The Dream” and the numerous textual fragments which constitute the novel. “The Dream” and, by extension, the novel, can be interpreted from either a “supernatural” or “an essentially practical point of view” (143); Collins’s characters perform both acts of interpretation. Allan, guided by Dr. Hawbury, traces the origins of “The Dream” to the quotidian details of his life. Midwinter, on the other hand, sees it as an ominous harbinger of events to come. Midwinter believes that “fulfilments of the dream will mark the progress of certain coming events, in which Mr. Armadale’s happiness, or Mr. Armadale’s safety, will be dangerously involved” (151). “Do you seriously tell me you believe this?” Allan incredulously asks, “I seriously tell you I believe it,” Midwinter replies (151). Allan and Midwinter’s debate over how to interpret the significance of “The Dream,” and its distinctly dressed heroine, in their own narratives, is also played out in the critical reception of *Armadale*. These conflicting interpretations, both within and about the novel, reinforce *Armadale*’s structural and thematic tension between past and present, reality and unreality, the supernatural and the rational, and the contrived and the coincidental.

Since the publication of *Armadale* in *Cornhill* in 1864, critics have enthusiastically critiqued and analysed the novel, its approach to narrative and its depiction of issues of gender, race and class (Young-Zook 234). *Armadale*,

Collins writes in the novel's foreword, "oversteps, in more than one direction, the narrow limits within which ... [Victorians] are disposed to restrict the development of modern fiction". These directions are both thematic and narrative. With its narrative of deceit, deception and desire, *Armada* was an affront to Victorian readers' moral sensibilities and artistic tastes. Collins represents this view in the novel in the character of Dr. Downard. The Doctor states that there,

may be plenty that is painful in real life – but, for that very reason, we don't want it in books. The English novelist ... must understand his art as the healthy-minded English reader understands it in our time. He must know that our purer modern taste, our higher modern morality, limits him to doing exactly two things for us, when he writes us a book. All we want of him is – occasionally to make us laugh; and invariably to make us comfortable. (637)

Although *Armada* may make its readers laugh, it certainly does not make them comfortable. With its themes of crime and illicit desire, its uncertain and unstable narrative and circuitous plot, *Armada* both thrilled and unsettled contemporary readers. Most alarming, though, was its heroine. In a contemporary review, Henry Forthergill Chorley labelled Lydia "one of the most hardened female villains whose devices and desires have even blackened fiction" (147).

Lydia continues to fascinate critics of mid-Victorian literature and culture into the twenty-first century and is the focus of many critical readings of the novel. Positioned within a tradition of feminist literary criticism, this thread of analysis considers Collins's depiction of Lydia Gwilt in light of the tradition of the sensation heroine or *femme fatale*. "With her ... red hair and smouldering sexuality," Lydia is the epitome of dangerous mid-Victorian femininity (Ofek 112). Like Isabel Vane, Lady Audley and Aurora Floyd, Lydia accentuates her good looks and sexual attractiveness in order to, literally, get away with murder. She dyes her hair, applies cosmetics and refashions her body by wearing padded

undergarments, silk gowns and an opaque veil and shawl (312). Whilst her looks may be artificial, her power and the threats it poses are very real. In the course of the novel, Lydia attempts suicide and murder, commits blackmail, forgery and fraud, takes laudanum and incites others to desperate and fatal deeds.

Jennifer Hedgecock, Galia Ofek, Lisa Niles and Laurence Talairach-Vielmas explore Collins's representation of Lydia's dark devices and desires, interrogating Chorley's characterisation of the heroine as a *femme fatale*. They argue that, in *Armadale*, Collins challenges mid-Victorian ideas about femininity and female sexuality. In his depiction of Lydia, he fuses the figure of the virtuous Angel in the House with that of the scheming, criminal *femme fatale* (Talairach-Vielmas 147). He also, however, exposes the artificiality of this bifurcated representation of femininity by casting his heroine as an actress who manipulates her appearance through her use of dress and cosmetics. "[Lydia's] duplicity," Hedgecock states, "exposes the spurious nature of cultural and gender representations" (142). As a *femme fatale*, Lydia threatens and distorts the social order (Hedgecock 142). Talairach-Vielmas argues that Collins uses cosmetics and dress to investigate and challenge ideas about feminine self-definition in *Armadale* (150). Lisa Niles also explores Lydia's use of cosmetics and dress to modify her appearance (66). She argues that Lydia is successful in the marriage market by her fashioning of an illusion of youthful sexual desirability and fertility (Niles 66). Like Collins, such critics use the heroine's body as a site for exploring the dark side of Victorian femininity and sexuality. In *Armadale*, Collins also explores the dark side of British colonialism and nationalism. He depicts the inheritances and legacies, both literal and metaphoric, of a century of imperial

exploitation in the colonies of the West Indies. This aspect of the novel continues to garner critical attention.

Positioned within a post-colonial framework, this body of criticism emphasises the novel's representation of colonial guilt (often referred to as colonial "Gwilt" in deference to the novel's heroine) (Reitz 92; Young-Zook 234). Both Caroline Reitz and Monica M. Young-Zook argue that, in *Armadale*, Collins uses the idea of a "colonial patriarchy and hierarchy" (Young-Zook 235), with its bequeathed fortunes and inherited curses (Young-Zook 241), to explore the racialised power structures of the British Empire and the legacies of colonialism (Reitz 92). Young-Zook argues that Collins compares the racial disenfranchisement of Britain's colonial subjects with the class- and gender-based disenfranchisement of the metropolis (241). Lydia rebels against her subordinate class and gender position by entering into an elaborate deception in order to inherit the Armadale/Blanchard fortune: a fortune made through exploitation and slave labour in Barbados and Madeira (Young-Zook 242-3).

As Talairach-Vielmas states, however, *Armadale* is darkened by something other than a shadow of the economic and humanitarian crimes of empire and the strictures of the Victorian gender binary (157). Shadows of "the fatalistic nature of the plot" inform the themes and characterisation, as well as the narrative structure, of Collins's novel (Talairach-Vielmas 157). This reading explores fate as a theme and narrative construction in *Armadale*; fate is the narrative thread which connects representations of empire and colonialism, gender and sexuality in the novel. With its dual connotations of ordinary and fashionable Britishness, and occult and unknowable exoticism, the paisley shawl embodies such threads in *Armadale*. The intricate and endlessly repetitive pattern and

multiple and contested histories of the paisley shawl provide an outline for my reading of *Armada*.

Currently, discussions of narrative, those of gender and sexuality, and those of colonialism in *Armada* take place in parallel, though rarely convergent, critical traditions. In this chapter, I want to redress this by considering the narrative and symbolic significance of Lydia's "red paisley shawl" (70). The threads of the paisley shawl connect Lydia with the complex power structures of empire, and to the Victorian semiotics of dress, gender and sexuality. They also connect her to Victorian notions about narrative and plot, acting as a symbol for story-telling. The paisley shawl is both a visual and narrative symbol which provides a formative pattern for the novel's fatalistic structure. The threads of the paisley shawl, both literal and figurative, then, can also connect post-colonial and feminist approaches to reading, and, in so doing, weave a new, and more holistic, interpretation of Collins's novel.

When amateur detectives Midwinter and Brock begin the process of uncovering Lydia's identity and her past, they have no "better means of identifying her" than a brief description of her dress (105). Throughout the first book of the novel, Lydia is known merely as the woman in the "black veil, ... black bonnet, ... black silk gown, and ... red paisley shawl" (105). This description and its repetitive syntax represent the accumulation of layers of cloth, symbolism and narrative on the body of the heroine. These textual and textural layers function simultaneously to construct an image of Lydia and to obscure her identity and her history. The black silk gown forms a symbolic basis of Lydia's story.

Silk, as discussed in Chapter Two, has a distinct symbolic function in Victorian popular literature. In sensation novels such as *East Lynne*, *Lady*

Audley's Secret and *Aurora Floyd*, silk symbolises female sensuality and sexuality. In its textural and chromatic richness, silk at once moulds and veils the female body. It functions as a form of disguise, “costume and self-conscious figuration,” informing how we read the woman’s story (Michie, *Flesh* 72). In *Armada*, Lydia disguises her body and her identity in the opacity and symbolic richness of black silk. In its depth of colour and texture, black silk registers an emotional and symbolic intensity. It also represents the absence thereof. Black is associated with death, mourning and self-denial. Whilst the transparency and blankness of white muslin represents the Victorian ideal of the virginal Angel in the House, the dark nullity of black silk represents the sobriety, maturity and respectability of the widow. Dressed in mourning black, the Victorian woman was socially and sexually invisible. In *Armada*, Lydia utilises this invisibility. In a gown and bonnet of black silk and a black veil, Lydia assumes full mourning dress; for her, however, black silk is a blank and dark disguise and a sign of her desire for anonymity rather than an expression of grief. Her anonymity is reflected in her position in the narrative at this time. Rather than having a distinct identity and active role, she is a dark and obscure “Shadow of a Woman” like the heroine of Allan’s “Dream” (142). As an ominously ethereal presence, an inversion of the white-clad angel, Lydia haunts the protagonists and, in her dark and mournful garb, represents the fatality which foreshadows their progression through the novel. This narrative, and Lydia’s role in it, is complicated, however, by her “red paisley shawl” (70).

The addition of this colourful and distinctive garment adds another layer of symbolism to Lydia’s costume and the fiction of her identity. As “the woman with the red paisley shawl,” this garment defines Lydia’s subjectivity (70). The

intricate and exotic pattern indicates her sexual agency and signals her entry, as an active antagonist, into the narrative. Dressed in her paisley shawl, Miss Gwilt does not merely symbolise the fate which “haunts” Allan and his companion, she is, in fact, the agent of this fate. Her exact role in the plot, though, remains obscured by the exotic patterns and complex narratives of the paisley shawl. The paisley motif infuses her identity and her role within the story with an air of the unknowable which is both dangerous and titillating.

By placing this shawl over her gown of black silk, Lydia Gwilt participates in the fashionable aesthetic of the mid-Victorian period. The paisley shawl was a fashionable over-garment for silk crinoline gowns from the 1840s into the 1860s (Byrde 905). As Mr. Brock says, “there are thousands of women in England ... who are quietly dressed in black silk gowns with red paisley shawls” (106). Whilst the bright colours and complex patterns of the paisley shawl identify the heroine, the ubiquitousness of the paisley shawl means that it also functions as a disguise for Lydia. She transforms herself into a fashionable “everywoman” and becomes merely *a* woman in a paisley shawl.

After the death of Mrs. Armadale, Brock follows the figure of the woman in the “red Paisley shawl” through the streets of London to her home (70). He then interrogates her companion, Mrs. Oldershaw, as to her connection to Madeira and the Armadales. In her answer, Oldershaw portrays Lydia as a reformed character who is soon to join her husband in the Brazils (212). The pair guarantee Brock’s confidence in this fiction by dressing a housemaid in the “the clothes [Lydia] wore ... to-day” and sending her out on an errand while Lydia makes her escape (216). The portability of the paisley shawl across class boundaries emphasises its instability as a sign of identity. This incident also emphasises the capacity of the

paisley shawl to contain a variety of complex and conflicting narratives. The women are assured of Brock's gullibility because, as Mrs. Oldershaw states, there is little reason to think that he would "remember [Lydia's] figure, in a summer dress, after he had only seen it in a winter dress" (210).

As this statement suggests, Lydia's complex sartorial disguise also functions at symbolic and narrative levels in *Armadale*. Rachel Brownstein argues that the Victorian heroine is bound to her fate "along the lines her body generates" (81). Physically and conceptually, dress frames the body; it marks out its boundaries and tethers them to notions of gender, sexuality and identity. By placing the evocative and intricately patterned paisley shawl over the bold lines of her silk gown, Lydia complicates any reading of her dress and, thereby, her motivations and her narrative. The multiple lines and patterns of the shawl offer numerous alternate readings of her story which erase, or at least obscure, the silken-bound lines of her body.

During the mid-Victorian period, the paisley was a sign of both authentic Britishness and unknowable exoticism (S. Daly, "Kashmir" 245). In swathing her shoulders in this garment, Lydia evokes each of these connotations and, by combining them, disguises her identity and her history. The garment's fashionableness denotes her as an average British woman. At the same time, its exoticism and connection to empire represent the mystery which surrounds her identity and her story; like the paisley shawl, Lydia's history is tied up in that of the British Empire. The combination of these meanings and narratives, contained and represented by the garment's intricate patterns, render the heroine unknowable. Dressed in this highly evocative garment, Lydia is an elusive and

enigmatic figure, the embodiment of the mysterious fate which haunts Allan and Midwinter and connects them to their fathers' histories and crimes.

Like those of the mysterious "Shadow of the Woman," the lines of Lydia's body, her identity and her story are unclear. As the narrative continues, however, they become more distinct. This is achieved concomitantly through Lydia's change of dress and through Midwinter and Brock's investigation of her identity and history. The process of literal unveiling and figurative or symbolic narrative unveiling occur simultaneously in *Armada*.

In the second book of the novel, Allan and Midwinter encounter a "living Woman, in the Shadow's place" for the first time (266). She is a "lonely figure" on the Norfolk Broads, "standing with [her] back turned on them, fronting the setting sun" (266). Silhouetted against the horizon, her shadow is lengthened and her identity as the Shadow is emphasised. Advancing a few paces, however, this figure presents herself as "Major Milroy's governess ... Miss Gwilt" (266-7). Her figure and face become visible and Allan and Midwinter are surprised by "the sudden revelation of her beauty" (266). This begins the process wherein the "Shadow of the Woman" takes form and her influence on the lives of the heroes, foreshadowed in "The Dream," begins its fatal course (266-7). Has "Fate or Chance" led her to Thorpe-Ambrose? the narrator asks in the title of this chapter (255). This echoes the question that structures *Armada*: "Is there a fatality that follows men in the dark? And is it following [the heroes] in ... [Lydia's] footsteps?" (105). Lydia's control over the fate of Allan and Midwinter and the plot of the novel is revealed in the ensuing chapters. Miss Gwilt's objective in moving to Thorpe-Ambrose is not to be "Major Milroy's governess," but to establish her own position as a gentlewoman: specifically, to marry Allan and

become Mrs. Armadale (266-7). Allan, however, is already in love with the Major's sixteen-year-old daughter, Eleanor. Allan and Eleanor soon become engaged, thus barring Lydia's way to the inheritance.

Idle and despondent, Lydia resolves to "dawdle over my dresses, and put my things tidy" (444). Writing in her diary she recalls that, "I was only looking over my things; I was as idly and as frivolously employed as the most idle and most frivolous woman living. I went through my dresses and my linen. What could be more innocent?" she asks (444). In this apparently innocent occupation, however, Lydia finds the solution to her problems in the form of an old newspaper article.

"A married woman," she reads,

charged with fraudulently representing herself to be the missing widow of an officer in the merchant service, who was supposed to have been drowned. The name of the prisoner's husband (living), and the name of the officer ... happened to be identically the same. (445).

Upon reading this, Lydia realises that "*I may impersonate the richly-provided widow of Allan Armadale of Thorpe-Ambrose, if I can count on Allan Armadale's death in a given time*" (445). Taking the "married woman" as her model, Lydia resolves to marry Midwinter under his birth-name and then kill Allan Armadale before presenting herself publically as Mrs. Allan Armadale: widow and heir to the fortune (445). This journal article functions as another textual fragment in *Armadale*. Like the letter and the dream transcript, this text foreshadows the events of the next part of the novel. Lydia knowingly acts out the plot of this old text, seducing the hapless Midwinter into the role of "the prisoner's husband" (445). Lydia's discovery of this textual fragment and key to her predicament in the layers of her dress foreshadows the revelation, soon to be made by the novel's

detectives and readers, of the heroine's true identity and past hidden in the layers of her disguise and narrative.

Lydia's marriage to Midwinter (as Allan Armadale) functions as both climax and *dénouement* in *Armadale*. In many genres of Victorian popular literature, the marriage of the heroine marks the climax of the narrative. In sensation novels such as *East Lynne* and *Lady Audley's Secret*, marriage is a solution to financial hardship; it allows the heroine to refashion her identity and her social position. In *Armadale*, the wedding marks the point at which Lydia fashions her new identity as the wife (and soon to be widow) of Allan Armadale and is the key, or so she thinks, to acquiring his fortune. Most significantly, though, the wedding also marks the moment at which her true identity and her history, both marital and criminal, are revealed. Thus, the wedding also functions as the *dénouement* of the novel.

As Midwinter lifts Lydia's veil and takes her as his lawful wife, the novel's detectives unveil her unlawful past. Lydia is revealed to be the young maid whose deception and forgery played such a crucial role in the marriage of Miss Blanchard and Mr. Ingleby in Madeira. After leaving their service, she worked as a confidence trickster in the casinos of Europe and was tried for the murder, by poisoning, of her first husband. Her true age, use of cosmetics and laudanum addiction are also revealed. It is, thus, revealed that fate *has* been haunting but also, most importantly, manipulating Allan and Midwinter in the form of Miss Gwilt. Since leaving Mrs. Armadale's service, Lydia has plotted her revenge against Ingleby and Miss Blanchard for setting her on her path of criminality and unhappiness. Consumed by this desire for revenge, she lures Allan and Midwinter to a London sanatorium and establishes Allan in a room equipped

with a gas apparatus. In so doing, she sets in motion the final act narrated in the newspaper article: the murder of the husband.

In preparation for the murder of her husband, Lydia trades her wedding veil for another veil of opaque black stuff. She visits “the great mourning house in Regent Street” and is dressed entirely in a costume of “*widow’s weeds*” (594). These garments, reminiscent of those she wore in the opening book of the novel, reemphasise her desire for anonymity; she is no longer distinctive as the woman in the red paisley shawl and is able to move around the sanatorium, effecting her fatal plan, unnoticed. Her black garb also represents her assumption of a “new character” as Mr. Armadale’s widow and heir to the combined Blanchard and Armadale estates (594). Playing on both of these symbolic connotations, Lydia becomes a dark “Shadow of a Woman” and ominous agent in the fate of the novel’s protagonists (266-7).

Thus dressed, she administers the lethal gas which will kill Allan Armadale and, thereby, pave the way to inheriting the fortune: “she smiled with a terrible irony ... ‘I shall be your widow,’ she whispered, ‘in half an hour’” (661). This act, however, precipitates a chain of events which will end in another death; Lydia’s black dress anticipates her suicide in the final pages of the novel.

Unbeknown to the would-be murderess, Armadale and Midwinter have swapped rooms. Upon realising this, she opens the door and drags Midwinter out of the noxious gas. She “laid him down, and, taking off her shawl, made a pillow of it to support his head” (665). By removing her shawl at this moment, Lydia is divesting herself of her feigned mourning and, therefore, renouncing her hold on the Armadale fortune. She is also removing the garment which has marked her out as a mysterious and dangerous *femme fatale* throughout the novel. In placing the

shawl under her husband's head, Lydia performs the sort of selfless act which typifies the Victorian feminine ideal. However, this altruism cannot redeem Lydia; in an act which is redolent of both moral self-punishment and literary poetic justice, Lydia goes into the poisoned room and, in shutting the door, commits suicide.

Before she succumbs to the noxious gas, she picks up Midwinter's pocket book and

some pages fell from it as she unfastened the clasp. One of them was the letter which had come to him from Mr Brock's death-bed. She turned over the two sheets of note paper on which the rector had written the words that had now come true – and found the last page of the last sheet a blank. On that page she wrote her farewell words, kneeling at her husband's side. (665).

"I am worse than the worst you can think of me," she writes:

You have saved Armadale by changing rooms with him to-night – and you have saved him from Me. You can guess now whose widow I should have claimed to be, if you have not preserved his life; and you will know what a wretch you married when you married the woman who wrote these lines. Still, I had some innocent moments – and then I loved you dearly. Forget me, my darling, in the love of a better woman than I am. I might, perhaps, have been that better woman myself, if I had not lived a miserable life before you met with me. It matters little now. The one atonement I can make for all the wrong I have done you is the atonement of my death. It is not hard for me to die, now I know you will live. Even my wickedness had one merit – it has not prospered. I have never been a happy woman. (665-6)

In this act, Lydia literally rewrites her story, correcting and amending Brock's narrative of her crimes. This confessional note is the novel's final textual fragment. In keeping with the novel's structure of repetition and circularity, Lydia's note mirrors Mr. Armadale's letter, also addressed to Midwinter, which opened the novel and set in motion its ill-fated chain of events. Like Armadale, Lydia confesses to the murder of "Allan Armadale". In the failure of this murder,

and her own death, Lydia breaks the circular narrative pattern. Lydia's letter closes the chain of events which tied the four Allan Armadales to their fates and, thus, opens the way to a future not overshadowed by past events.

In the epilogue of *Armadale*, fate is seen to run its course, and poetic justice done. Miss Gwilt has met her death, Mrs. Oldershaw has undergone a religious awakening and has turned to popular preaching and Dr. Downward continues his work at the Sanatorium under the pseudonym of Le Doux. Midwinter is on the brink of an illustrious career in literature and Allan is preparing for his wedding to Miss Milroy. In these narrative fates, Collins approaches the neatly contrived conclusion which contemporary readers expect of a sensation novel. However, not all of the "threads of the narrative" are so neatly tied up (77). Reflecting on the events of the novel on the final page of the epilogue, Midwinter begs for "one word more ... a word which will take us, this time, from past into the future" and achieve narrative closure (677). He returns to the topic of the Dream or Vision, as he now calls it, in an attempt to confess his true identity and history. However, Allan interjects, saying, "I have heard all I ever want to hear about the past ... and I know what I most wanted to know about the future" (677). The "Shadow of the Past" and the "Shadow of the Future" are, therein, divested of their power. Allan, therefore, obviates a conclusive ending to the novel. Alluding to this, Collins appended an explanation to the 1866 one-volume edition of *Armadale*. He writes:

my readers will perceive that I have purposely left them, with reference to the Dream in the story, in the position which they would occupy in the case of a dream in real life – they are free to interpret it by the natural or the supernatural theory, as the bent of their minds might incline them. (678).

Armada ends in uncertainty rather than closure. The novel's protagonists revel in this freedom: "Who knows what great things may happen before you and I are many years older?" Allan asks, and "who need know?" Midwinter replies (677).

The narrative threads of the paisley shawl remain unanchored in symbolic associations at the end of the novel; the significance of the garment as both an exotic artefact and narrative symbol remain unstable and unknowable. In *Armada*, Collins uses the paisley shawl's resonances as both an Eastern artefact – with connotations of the exotic and the unknowable– and a ubiquitous item of fashion to weave the story of Lydia Gwilt. It cannot contain this figure, however; the paisley shawl is both the means of identifying her and articulating her criminal potential, and the means by which she eludes definition and capture according to this characterisation of dangerous femininity. The paisley shawl facilitates her disappearance into the crowded London streets as an unexceptional "everywoman". It also marks her transformation into the selfless wife who gives her life for her husband. In death, she again becomes the elusive "Shadow of the Woman" of *Armada*'s dream and Victorian readers' nightmares (266-7).

Lydia's "red paisley" shawl, then, represents sensation fiction's destabilisation of mid-Victorian narrative, moral and artistic standards (70). Beautiful yet dangerous, Lydia Gwilt embodies contemporary concerns about the corruption of ideal, innocent and domestic femininity both within and in response to sensation fiction. Her intricately patterned paisley shawl represents the other processes of modifying the female body and the stories it tells which Lydia undertakes in the course of the novel. Dangerous, duplicitous and yet desirable in her brightly-coloured paisley shawl, Lydia represents the stylistic and sensuous excess of sensation fiction and its depiction of femininity and female sexuality.

In her 1884 novel, *Miss Brown*, Lee uses the “sumptuous fabrics, antique lace[s], Indian shawls” (Schaffer, *Forgotten* 39) and narratives of Aestheticism as a counter to the sensational and brightly coloured fashions of earlier decades. Lee’s shawls are not the bright and fashionably sensational garments of the 1860s, but the muted and artistic artefacts which adorned Aesthetic drawing-rooms during the final decades of the nineteenth century. In *Miss Brown*, Lee also juxtaposes the elaborate, frivolous, and potentially suspicious sartorial symbolism of the paisley or Indian shawl with the heroine’s simpler and more modest choice of dress. This reflects the decline of the garment from popular fashion in favour of plainer and more tailored forms of dressing during the late 1870s and 1880s. It is also indicative of a concomitant change in depictions of femininity in popular literature. Instead of Isabel Vane’s sensuality, Lady Audley’s conspicuous consumption or Lydia Gwilt’s deceptiveness, *Miss Brown* weaves a new narrative of femininity in the intricate patterns, complex meanings and contested histories of the paisley shawl.

Miss Brown

In the final chapter of *Miss Brown*, Anne Brown and Hamlin celebrate their engagement amongst the “melancholy thin Cupids of Burne Jones, [and] the mournful mysterious ladies of Rossetti, which [adorn] the walls” (303; vol. 3). Their guests, dressed in “black coats ... and fashionable dresses” (301; vol. 3), resemble these artistic idols. Anne is artistically dressed in a “wonderful garment of cloth-of-silver” and a string of antique pearls (304; vol. 3). As the narrator remarks, “there was no one as yet in [this] highly aesthetic study that had not been turned into a perfect exhibition of fantastic shawls and opera-cloaks” (315; vol. 3).

The narrator's characterisation of a group of Aesthetes as an "exhibition" is indicative of the movement's emphasis on seeing dress as a matter of art rather than fashion (315; vol. 3). It is also, though, a reference to the way in which sartorial and other material symbolism is used in the course of *Miss Brown*; each object and garment is endowed with artistic, historical and aesthetic significance in a manner redolent of an exhibition. The "fantastic shawl," with its wealth of exotic symbolism and yet evocation of the mysterious and the unknowable, functions as a metonym for this way of looking and reading. In this novel, Lee criticises Aestheticism's sexual politics and the way in which it objectified the female body as a blank artistic surface.

Throughout *Miss Brown*, the heroine struggles under the influence of Hamlin's Aesthetic ethos. In the first volume of the novel, as essayed in Chapter Two, Miss Brown is content to be dressed and exhibited as a paragon of Walter's Aestheticism. As the novel progresses, however, she undergoes a *Bildung* in which she is awakened to the injustices and inequalities of the Movement. She is repulsed by Aestheticism's perception of the picturesque of poverty and suffering. As an antidote to this, she frequents the Working Women's Club and assists in educating London's working-class women. She also expresses a desire to attend the Cambridge women's college of Girton and, thereby, refashion herself as an emancipated New Woman heroine.

Stylistically and narratively then, *Miss Brown* prefigures the New Woman novel of the 1890s. Although she fails in her desire for an Oxford education, Anne takes off her theatrically fashioned silk gown in favour of a plainer and more subdued style of dressing in the form of subduedly coloured tailored *ensembles*. This sartorial shift is indicative of a symbolic and narrative shift in the ways in

which women's stories were being told in popular literature in the last decades of the Victorian period. Instead of being enmeshed in the intricately patterned and symbolic description of the paisley shawl, they are told in the plain, forthright and strong-minded style of the "tailor-made".

Miss Brown, like *East Lynne* and *Lady Audley's Secret*, closes with the image of the heroine dressed in an evocative paisley shawl. In this instance, though, the symbolic significance accorded to the garment is different. For Lee, the delicate and intricate patterns of the paisley shawl encapsulates, not just the narrative of her novel and its heroine, but an extended literary history. In *Miss Brown*, the paisley or Indian shawl is not represented as a symbolic item of clothing, but as a narrative object. It is exhibited amongst a collection of Aesthetic objects and books, and evoked as analogy or metaphor in the text. This emphasises its status as text to be read and interpreted. Lee reads and re-interprets these pre-existent texts, both "clothly" and literary, in her characterisation of Anne. Lee refashions the representational, narrative and sartorial modes which exemplify Isabel Vane, Lady Audley and Lydia Gwilt as ill-fated sensation heroines and creates a heroine who fashions her own sense of identity and tells her own story in opposition to these styles of sensational femininity. By removing the paisley shawl, *Miss Brown* heralds a new form of narrative, femininity and subjectivity for the Victorian heroine.

Conclusion

When, in 1870, the paisley shawl disappeared from the wardrobes and periodicals of fashionable Britain, weavers in the Scottish town of Paisley adapted their looms in response. They began production of "tartan and fancy check plaids,

shawls, and shoulder handkerchiefs” (Stewart 32) which the new fashions demanded. These new products “were heavy, milled and raised woollen goods, totally unlike in design and material their [patterned] predecessors” (Stewart 32). Instead of evoking the exoticism, mysticism and tantalising unreality of the East, these stout woollen textiles were indicative of modernity rationality and intellectual seriousness; tweeds and tartans were the stuffs of action, rather than exhibition. They were fashioned into practical and trimly cut “tailor-made” daywear for metropolitan British women. Thus dressed, the women of the 1890s were not inconspicuous domestic angels, *femmes fatales* moulded in sensuous velvet, or beautiful and fascinating enigmas in paisley, but New Women who, dressed in utilitarian grey wool, traversed the streets of London and the pages of popular literature in pursuit of independence, education and equality. These, as Grant Allen wrote, are “Latter-Day heroine[s]” (*Type-Writer* 23).

Chapter Four

Tweed and Wool: The “Woman in Grey,” Tailoring New Identities and the Heroine as Author

Introduc[ing] a Latter-Day Heroine. (Allen, *Type-Writer* 23)

BEHOLD! the “new woman” is coming apace!
Athletic in figure, with resolute face;
In rational dress, is she coming to stay?
With firmness of purpose she’s pushing her way.

Behold she had mounted her “bike” for a ride,
She’s wearing her bloomers, and sitting astride!
Her limbs are unhampered with feminine skirts,
She loves her cravats, her coats, collars and shirts.

If she and a male-friend are out for a round,
The one with the other we nearly confound!
The “new woman’s” dress now has reached such a pitch,
‘Tis difficult often, to tell which is which!
(Oates 248).

The “Woman in Grey” is a ubiquitous figure in late-Victorian popular literature. An embodiment of the New Woman, an identity codified by Sarah Grand in *The North American Review* in 1894, she became the celebrated and vilified heroine of the periodical press and popular literature at the *fin de siècle* (Richardson and Willis 1). Depicted as a cyclist, sportswoman, shopgirl, type-writer girl, feminist activist, anarchist, social reformer, dress-reformer, politician, or feminist novelist, she represents new, or newly perceived, forms of femininity and female identity. Her practical dress of grey tweed represents her rejection of the fashionableness, frivolousness and idleness of contemporary femininity and her tailoring of a new female identity as a rational, serious, active and self-conscious “Latter-Day Heroine” (Allen, *Type-Writer* 23).

This chapter explores representations of the “[New] Woman in Grey” and considers the way in which grey tweed and wool signify the tailoring, stylistic and sartorial, of new narratives of femininity and female sexuality in late-Victorian popular literature. It examines depictions of heroines in grey as modern New Women, female cyclists, type-writer girls, politicians and, finally, authors of New Woman fiction. In this chapter, I consider the significance of the materiality, colour and historical connotations of their grey dress. I will begin by discussing Alice Meynell’s representation of the New Woman as “A Woman in Grey” in her 1896 sketch of the same title and examine the ways in which she sets up the heroine’s grey dress and cycling as representative of new forms and narratives of femininity in the late-Victorian period. I will then disentangle the historical, literary, social and sartorial threads which contribute to this representation. I undertake a survey of a heroines in grey in in early-to-mid Victorian literature, from Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and George Eliot’s *Dorothea Brooke* to Braddon’s *Phoebe Marks and Clara Talboys*, as a way of establishing a genealogy of non-conventional heroines in grey, and of considering the way in which this literary history was appropriated by New Women as they refashion themselves as heroines and authors. Then I provide a history of British wool and tweed, exploring these cloths’ relationships to nineteenth-century questions of gender, class and nationalism. In particular, I consider the ways in which heroines of late-Victorian popular literature appropriate these cloths and forms of dress as a challenge to notions of class and gender. These images and narratives are then pursued in analyses of Dixon’s *The Story of a Modern Woman*, Wells’s *The Wheels of Chance* and Allen’s *The Type-Writer Girl*. This chapter closes with a discussion of the use of metafictional techniques and metaphors of cross-dressing

and rational-dressing in *Gloriana; or, The Revolution of 1900*. In this utopian novel, Dixie refashions the “[New] Woman in Grey” as a feminist icon in white and rewrites the conventions, both sartorial and literary, which limit the scope of Victorian heroine’s narrative.

The Woman in Grey

In her 1896 sketch “A Woman in Grey,” Meynell narrates “the train of thought that followed the grey figure of a woman on a bicycle in Oxford Street” (210). This woman, she writes, is “quite alone:” “immediately dependant on her nerves,” she is free, independent and confident (210-1). Narrated in the third person, this train of thought could be attributed either to the protagonist or to an observer. In this way, the narrative enacts the destabilisation of the boundaries between author, heroine and reader which characterise much New Woman fiction (Boumelha 66). Its path, like that of the cyclist, is meandering, pursuing various strands of debate over gender, the position of women and social mobility at the *fin de siècle*.

Meynell’s “Woman in Grey” is in the midst of the ceaseless movement and progress of modern London. Around her, “omnibuses and carriages, cabs and carts” move at “different paces,” “some with an impetus that carries them curving into ... [an]other current and ... some making a straight line right across Oxford Street” (210). Vehicles are constantly “overtaking and being overtaken” (210). “Besides all of the unequal movement,” “there are stoppings. It is a delicate tangle to keep from knotting,” she states (210). Meynell’s description of the momentum, competing currents and “delicate tangle” of London traffic functions as a metaphor for the tension between tradition and modernity and different models of progress during this period (210). With her bicycle, grey cycling costume, “a

watchful confidence” and “such perfect composure as no flutter of a moment disturbed” (211), the “Woman in Grey” negotiates London and these competing narratives of progress.

Her bicycle affords her literal, as well as figurative, mobility and agency (Ledger, *New* 5). Instead of assuming the “stationary repose” of ideal Victorian femininity, Meynell’s “[New] Woman in Grey” leads a life of independence and liberty (212). She has “the judgement, the temper, the skill, the perception, [and] the strength of men”: “she does not dwell either in security or danger, but ... pass[es] between them” (211). Balanced on her bicycle, practising confidence in “things in motion” and learning “the difficult peace of suspense,” she progresses towards a modern egalitarian future (211).

The “[New] Woman in Grey” cycles the streets of London and the pages of popular literature in pursuit of education, emancipation and equality. She negotiates the traffic of Oxford Street and the unstable boundaries between security and danger, stasis and progress, and convention and modernity. Her dynamic equilibrium and confidence amongst the motion and suspense of the traffic are literal representations of her active participation in the social and political progress of the 1890s. They also, however, symbolise her precarious social position; traversing London, the “[New] Woman in Grey” also negotiates Victorian notions of separate spheres and the gender equality of a projected, modern future (Ledger, *New* 5). Her grey dress symbolises the liminality and precariousness of this new female subjectivity; dressed in grey, the New Woman is at once iconic and indistinct.

Despite extensive theorising on black and white, grey has remained vague and undefined in the fields of fashion history and theory. White signifies

innocence, purity, goodness, ethereality, sublimity, virginity, festivity, formality, “infantine beauty,” vulnerability and victimhood (C. Hughes, *Dressed* 70-1; 106; 78; N. Daly, *Sensation* 1). The “Woman in White,” as both a generic figure and heroine of Collins’s 1860 novel, is an icon of the 1860s (as discussed in Chapter One). She represents the virginal and passive feminine ideal of the Angel in the House. In Victorian popular literature, culture and the visual arts, “The Woman in White” is depicted as a bride, mother, corpse, ghost, apparition and angel (N. Daly, *Sensation* 3; 32; C. Hughes, *Dressed* 78). In *A Drama in Muslin*, Moore depicts his *ensemble* of white-clad *debutantes* as “muslin martyrs,” sacrificed onto the marriage market as embodiments of innocence, passivity and virginity (99). The chromatic nullity and purity of white can also disguise the heroine’s dark secrets. White muslin, then, becomes a symbol of the artful construction and representation of ideal femininity. The characterisation of the “Woman in White” as the youthful feminine ideal, however fictitious, is dependent on her juxtaposition with the darker and more mysterious woman in black, and vice versa. While white is the colour of the virginal bride-to-be, Gwendolen Harleth, heroine of Eliot’s 1876 novel *Daniel Deronda*, states that “black is the only wear when one is going to refuse an offer [of marriage]” (220).

The woman in black is a darkly sombre and mournful figure in Victorian popular literature. Black represents death, mourning, piety and self-denial (Hollander, *Sex* 114). In Allen’s *The Type-Writer Girl*, heroine Juliet, herself a “Woman in Grey,” is disparaging of women of the “black-satin order” (102). Here, black satin is a sign of conventional, widowed and matronly femininity. It signals social respectability and strict adherence to distinctions of gender and class. As Allen suggests, the nuanced sartorial coding of black had great social

currency during the Victorian period. In her 1890 article on mourning, “Suits of Woe,” Rosamund Marriott Watson states that variations in shade and texture of “mourning black” as “infinite as the hues of night,” register the “subtlest *nuances* of grief” (91). In “Jay’s House of Mourning” on Regent Street, “there are woolens, [crapes and bombazines] in all of them, and each with every possible effect of stripe the most variegated afflicted could desire” (91).

In Braddon’s *The Doctor’s Wife* (1864), the heroine’s horror at the death of her husband is increased by “the trying-on of mourning garments which smelt of dye and size, and left black marks upon her neck and arms” (399). This change of dress and the imprints it leaves on her body represent Isabel’s awakening from a fantastic dream into the reality of her new life as the doctor’s widow. Her mourning garb symbolises both the loss of her husband and of her naïve and dreamy innocence. In Collins’s *Armada*, Lydia’s “widow’s weeds” disguise her true identity, representing the darkness of her deception and guilt (594). They also foreshadow her suicide in the novel’s final chapters. As well as mourning and death, black symbolises pious self-denial, transgression, sexual perversity and guilt in Victorian popular literature.

In Moore’s *A Drama in Muslin*, lesbian Lady Cecilia Cullen changes her white gown for a habit of coarse black serge, and her “muslin martyr[dom]” (99) for a “black, [and] a sullen martyrdom” (298) after the marriage of her friend and would-be lover, Alice (301). In *The Woman Who Did*, Herminia Barton arrives at Charing Cross Station “clad in a plain black dress, with her baby at her bosom” (Allen 142). Herminia’s black attire is an expression of her grief at the death of her lover; it also represents her sexual and social sin of bearing a child out of wedlock. For Victorian heroines, then, black represents both adherence to and

rejection of social conventions. It symbolises death, mourning, loss of innocence, perversity, guilt and self-denial. At the same time, however, black represents the sobriety, respectability, professionalism and power of modern masculinity (Hollander, *Sex* 93-114).

In *Sex and Suits*, Hollander traces the sartorial and stylistic development of the black three-piece suit alongside the construction of modern Western masculinity. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, men's clothing became plain and practical in opposition to the frills and furbelows of women's fashion. The suit represents intelligence, modesty and probity, and its clean and straight lines function as a metaphor for the rationality, respectability and restraint of modern masculinity (72-9). The suit's tight fit also emphasises the virility of the adult male body (113). The black suit, then, represents the conflation of biological maleness with socially constructed masculinity and patriarchal power (Heilman, "(Un)Masking" 83). Whilst white and black have fixed symbolic meanings, grey indicates an obscuring of these absolutes; it mediates between the extremes of white and black, innocence and guilt, youth and death, femininity and masculinity, and passivity and power.

Grey is the colour of uncertainty, shadowiness, indistinctness and mundanity (Blodgett 143). It has neither the transparent purity of white nor the sombre opacity of black but exists, chromatically and conceptually, between these extremes. Grey's indistinctness precludes any definitive statement of its meaning; it is inherently uncertain and mutable. As Harriet Blodgett states, grey represents "the limitations ... and futility of absolute standards" (134).

During the Victorian period, grey clothing played a variety of sartorial and social roles. Grey represents a lightening of grief and "deep mourning" in the

form of “half-mourning” (Watson, “Suits” 91). Watson states that female mourners,

delight of exactly rendering a gradation of anguish in paramatta or in crêpe; of gently suggesting the presence of a certain shadow of consolation in the language ... of variegated woollens – emphasised as it were with sober interjections of braiding and astrakhan; of bodying forth (in heliotrope and grey) the dawn of comfort to which the deep night of sables has perforce to give place. (91)

Grey is symbolically, as well as chromatically, mediatory, vague and indistinct.

Grey is also the colour of everyday mundanity. In *Howards End*, Forster states that the heroines “struggle... against life’s daily grayness” (140). Grey dress is similarly ordinary: “Englishwomen invariably dress in colours greyer than their climate,” Mrs. Pritchard observed in 1910 (68). Grey dress is utilitarian and renders the female body socially invisible. It also connotes passivity and non-assertive femininity (Blodgett 144). Michie characterises the governess as “the heroine’s shadow-double, the figure in muted grey or brown who follows the gaily dressed heroine ... and is always one step behind her in her progress through the novel” (*Flesh* 46). In Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret*, maid Phoebe Marks takes this role. Phoebe is a grey shadow to the wilful, beautiful and colourfully dressed Lady Audley. “There are certain dim and shadowy lights,” the narrator states, “in which, meeting Phoebe ... you might have easily mistaken her for my lady” (104-5). On her wedding day, Phoebe wears a “rustling silk of delicate grey, that had been worn half a dozen times by her mistress” (110). She is:

a very dim and shadowy lady; vague of outline, and faint of colouring; with eyes, hair, complexion, and dress all melting into such pale and uncertain shades that, in the obscure light of the foggy November morning, a superstitious stranger might have mistaken the bride for the ghost of some other bride, dead and buried in the vaults below the church. (110)

Thus dressed, Phoebe resembles “an evil spirit” or a ghost bride, a shadowy and spectral rendering of Lady Audley. This description (fore)shadows the heroine’s evil crimes, committal to an asylum and eventual death.

Phoebe is not the only women in grey in *Lady Audley’s Secret*. Clara Talboys’s dress is “puritan grey in its simplicity” (200). During the nineteenth century, grey dress was associated with Puritanism and Quakerism (Blodgett 138). The grey-clad Puritan or Quakerish heroine is the model of modesty, neatness, serious-mindedness and reticence (Keen, “Quaker” 211-4). Simultaneously, however, Quakerish dress “identifies characters that move, or threaten to move, outside of the customary place of women of their class” into the public sphere in Victorian literature, Keen argues (“Quaker” 214). In *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Middlemarch* (1872), Brontë and Eliot dress their heroines in Quakerish grey dresses as a sign of their intellect, sobriety and self-determination.

As a student at Lowood School, Jane Eyre wears “a cloak of grey frieze” (48).²⁶ The enforcement of plain grey dress is intended to “mortify in these girls the lust of the flesh,” Mr. Brocklehurst states; they must learn to “clothe themselves with shame-facedness and sobriety, not with braided hair and costly apparel” (49). These “Lowood notions of the toilette” have a marked impact on Jane’s development as a quiet but strong-willed heroine. When Jane is faced with transformation from paid dependant to mistress of Thornfield, she refuses to change her dress. By way of validating their union and pre-empting Jane’s promotion into the upper classes, Mr. Rochester takes her “to a certain silk warehouse ... to choose half-a-dozen dresses” (268). He declares that “*I will attire my Jane in satin and lace*” [emphasis added] (258). Jane, however, “hated the

business” (268). “By dint of entreaties expressed in energetic whispers,” she recalls,

I reduced the half-a-dozen to two: these, however, he vowed he would select himself. With anxiety I watched his eye rove over the gay stores: he fixed on a rich silk of the most brilliant amethyst dye, and a superb pink satin. I told him in a new series of whispers, that he might as well buy me a gold gown and a silver bonnet at once: I should certainly never venture to wear his choice. With infinite difficulty ... I persuaded him to make an exchange in favour of a sober black satin and pearl-grey silk. (268)

Jane will not acquiesce to Rochester’s desire for her to become “my Jane,” “Jane Rochester,” instead maintaining her independence and individuality. “Don’t address me as if I were a beauty,” Jane protests (129); “I am your plain, Quakerish governess” (259). Jane refuses to be addressed and dressed as a beauty; fashionably and extravagantly attired, she states, “I shall not be ... Jane Eyre any longer, but an ape in a harlequin’s jacket – a jay in borrowed plumes,” “then you won’t know me” (258). As well as reflecting her modesty and sobriety, then, Jane’s Quakerish grey dress represents her individuality; she actively refuses to refashion her femininity to please Mr. Rochester. Jane will neither be “a beauty” (259) nor a domestic angel: “I will be myself,” she emphatically states, in my “usual Quaker trim” (129).

In *Middlemarch*, Dorothea also dresses in “Quakerish grey” (Eliot 189). Her appearance is marked by “the entire absence from her manner and expression of all search for mere effect” (88). She is described as “an agreeable image of serene dignity ... in her silver-grey dress” (88). Her “blue-gray pelisse” represents the tenderness and “sentient commingled innocence” which define her character (273). Dressed plainly in grey, Dorothea appears saintly and gentle, “but,” the narrator states, “these intervals of quietude made the energy of her speech and emotion the more remarked when some outward appeal had touched her” (88).

Thus, her grey dress also symbolises Dorothea's "reforming motivations, by imitating the dress of Quakeresses who acted in the public space" (Keen, "Quaker" 214). This is manifested in Dorothea's plans to improve the living conditions of the local tenants.

In mid-to-late Victorian popular literature, grey dress represents a variety of opposing forms of femininity. The "Woman in Grey" is a ghost-bride, corpse, governess and reforming Quakeress. She is at once passive and socially invisible, and self-confident, independent and outspoken. Through imagery and action, then, the "Woman in Grey" directs readers "to admit the possibility of grey rather than thinking only in terms of black and white" (Blodgett 134). In late-Victorian popular literature, heroines appropriate grey's visual and conceptual ambiguity and shadowiness in order to tailor new forms of femininity and re-write the woman's story from Quakeress or ghost-bride to active New Woman. The "[New] Woman in Grey" adopts Jane Eyre's assertiveness and self-possession, as well as Dorothea Brooke's seriousness, reforming motivations, and disdain for showiness. She also appropriates the cloths and styles of men's wear and their connotations of strength, rationality, respectability and influence. Thus dressed, the New Woman traverses the streets of London and the pages of popular literature in pursuit of freedom and equality.

As Meynell's Oxford Street muse, Dixon's "Modern Woman," Wells's cyclist or Allen's type-writer girl, the late-Victorian "Woman in Grey" represents a contradictory set of responses to dominant discourses of dress, gender, sexuality and modernity (Anderson, "Sporting" 183). Ambivalently gender-coded, grey tweed and wool free women from the complex social, sexual, sartorial and narrative codes of fashionable femininity – codes which tied them to matrimony,

the asylum, death or spinsterhood – and open up their narrative possibilities (Anderson, “Sporting” 180). As Meynell states, the “Woman in Grey must have passed a childhood unlike the ordinary girl’s childhood if her steadiness or her alertness had been educated” (210). Her narrative of progress and the development of a new form of active and independent femininity, occupies a range of popular literary genres during the 1880s and 1890s. Realist, “Woman Question,” “Modern Woman,” self-reflexive, romance, adventure and utopian novels all tell the story of the “Woman in Grey”. Her grey tweed represents the heroine’s narrative and sartorial refashioning from white-clad Angel in the House and silk and paisley-clad *femme fatale* to “Latter-Day Heroine” and New Woman (Allen, *Type-Writer* 23).

Since the re-emergence of the New Woman in feminist and Victorian studies in the 1990s, novels such as *The Woman Who Did* and *The Story of a Modern Woman* have received critical attention. *The Wheels of Chance*, *The Type-Writer Girl* and *Gloriana*, however, remain less widely discussed. As the “Woman in Grey” blurs the boundaries of socially constructed gender, this chapter blurs those between historically constructed literary genres. It draws connections between these novels and their treatment of genre, narrative, and ideas of femininity and female sexuality through representations of the “Woman in Grey”. This chapter, like the New Woman, enters a grey zone of literary criticism and literary, social and fashion history. In doing so, I will now undertake a history of British wool and tweed, exploring their relationships to nineteenth-century questions of gender, class and nationalism.

Tweed

During the Victorian period, tweed had currency both as a fashionable cloth and a cultural symbol. In *The Tweedmakers*, Clifford Gulvin argues that the fashionable tweed of the late-nineteenth century has its origins, technologically and stylistically, in the 1820s' revolution in Scottish weaving (70). Traditionally, wool production and weaving were home industries in Scotland. The undyed raw product was spun and hand-loom woven into grey "hodden": the clothing staple of the working and agricultural classes throughout the Medieval and Elizabethan periods.²⁷

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, economic and technological developments led to the strengthening and standardisation of the Scottish weaving industry (Jenkins 761-3). From 1830, mills began producing fine luxury cloths as well as traditional weaves (Gulvin, *Tweedmakers* 17). Fancy woollen cloths such as Shepherd Check, Cheviot, Saxony and Homespun, later collectively known as tweeds, were popular amongst clothiers and tailors in Edinburgh, London, Europe and the United States of America (Gulvin, *Tweedmakers* 70; Anderson, "Spinning" 285).²⁸ These patterns evolved from hodden cloths and bore names which made reference to Scottish cultural and agricultural traditions (Anderson, "Spinning" 284). The Shepherd Check originated in the plaids of natural black and white traditionally used by Scottish shepherds to protect themselves and their lambs from the cold (Anderson, "Spinning" 284). Shepherd Check became a fashionable men's trousering cloth during the 1820s and 1830s (Anderson, "Spinning" 284-5). Its popularity was influenced by the celebrity of Scotsmen Sir Walter Scott and Lord Brougham (Lord Chancellor of Great Britain) both of whom favoured this cloth (Anderson,

“Spinning” 284). Despite the shift in context from the rugged Borders to the streets of London, the traditional use and significance of Scottish wools were important in shaping the fashionableness of tweed throughout the nineteenth century.

Between 1840 and 1870, woollen mills in the Scottish Borders produced tweeds alongside paisley shawls (Anderson, “Spinning” 287).²⁹ A decline in the demand for shawls in the 1870s led to a shift in emphasis toward tweed and production of this cloth increased and diversified. These new cloths “were heavy, milled and raised woollen goods, totally unlike in design and material their [paisley] predecessors” (Stewart 32). This dissimilarity extends to the fashionable use and cultural connotations of the two textiles. The paisley shawl was an exotic and frivolous accessory. Tweed, on the other hand, was viewed as serious, practical and simplistically elegant. Whilst the paisley shawl was the garb of the idle and fashionable woman, tweed was the stuff of active, stalwart and modern, masculinity.

Despite tweed’s association with modernity in the late-nineteenth century, its reputation as a masculine cloth can be traced to the eighteenth century. This is seen in Robert Burns’s 1795 song “For A’ That and A’ That” in which he refers to the class and gender connotations of tweed. He juxtaposes a Man’s “hamely” (homely or plain) hodden cloth with the extravagant silks of “fools” and “knaves” (602). “What though on hamely fare we dine,” Burns writes:

Wear hodden grey, an’ a that;
Gie fools their silks, and knaves their wine;
A Man’s a Man for a’ that. (602)

For Burns, grey wool represents a tradition of stalwart rural Scottish masculinity.³⁰ The influence of this persists throughout the Victorian period.

The mid-Victorian period saw the rise in popularity of the rural sports of shooting, fishing and deer-stalking amongst middle- and upper-class men. Being robust, breathable and light-weight, tweed was ideal for sporting-wear. Shooting jackets, trousers, coats, cloaks and cycling attire were tailored in this cloth (Anderson, “Spinning” 287). With its connotations of traditional rural masculinity, bravery, physical strength, endurance and stalwartness (Anderson, “Spinning” 170) borrowed from the heroes of Scott and Burns, tweed lent an historical gravitas to these leisure activities. The colours of the cloths, inspired by and named for the wild landscapes of the Scotland – heather, bracken, grass, moss and rock (Anderson, “Spinning” 170) – also suggested a return to the sublime rural landscapes and the simplicity of the rural lifestyle for modern urban men. Tweed was the “characteristic cloth of the hardy sportsman, whose sartorial appearance was modern, yet indicative of manly worth” (Anderson, “Spinning” 171). In Allen’s *The Woman Who Did* (1895), Dolly remarks that men in “tweed suits and fine linens” with “horses and dogs and guns” are “real men” as opposed to her mother’s Fabian friends in “soft felt hats and limp woollen collars” (208). As Fiona Anderson suggests, by the late-Victorian period, tweed had become a sign of modernity (“Spinning” 171); the connotations of rurality and tradition had become interwoven with contemporary notions of cosmopolitanism and modern masculinity (“Spinning” 171).

Tailoring New Identities

Developments in fashion and tailoring techniques during the 1860s saw the informal shooting-jacket transformed into the casual lounge-jacket (Anderson, “Spinning” 287). This garment was paired with a matching tweed waistcoat and

trousers and became popular as the modern lounge, or business, suit (Anderson, “Spinning” 287). These innovations influenced the social contexts within which tweed was worn and the symbolic significance it was accorded (Anderson, “Spinning” 287). Suits and pea-coats of Cheviots and Saxonies were fashionable morning-wear for middle- and upper-class cosmopolitan men. Towards the end of the Victorian period, such suits became respectable work attire. Rather than being a sign of upper-classes leisure, then, tweed became the stuff of middle-class professionalism.

The popularity of tweed amongst professional men attests to the rapid growth of the working middle-classes during the mid-to-late Victorian period. It also symbolises the shift of economic and political power from rural estates to the metropolis. Tweed brought connotations of respectability and earnest purpose to the city. These were both translated and transmuted from the bravery, physical strength, endurance and stalwartness of traditional rural masculinity (Anderson, “Spinning” 170). In Wells’s *The Wheels of Chance*, draper Mr. Hoopdriver learns to cycle dressed in a “new brown cycling suit – a handsome Norfolk jacket thing for 30s. ... [and] thick cheque stockings” (22). Thus dressed, he congratulates himself, he looks quite a “bounder” (253) and could be taken for “a baronet’s heir *incognito*” (235). With this change of clothes, “the draper Hoopdriver, the Hand, had vanished from existence,” the narrator states, “instead was a gentleman, a man of pleasure” (29-30). As Wells illustrates, tweed represents the possibility of self-improvement and class transformation in the late-Victorian period.

As Britain’s professional men were celebrating the cultural and political currency of their suits, women were also refashioning their identities in tweed; they appropriated its styles and symbolism and, in doing so, challenged the

sartorial, social, sexual and political coding of gendered roles. When women of the 1880s and 1890s traded their tea-gowns of lace and muslin for rational outfits of grey tweed, they were refashioning a series of older fashions, and anti-fashions, and symbols.

Tweed was adopted for women's outer-garments and sporting-wear during the mid-nineteenth century. In November 1889, Mrs. Johnstone wrote of the "craze for 'walking in woollen attire'" (75). Tweed was also the favoured cloth for riding, hunting, coaching, golfing, hockey and, in the 1890s, cycling (Pritchard 64-77). Walking costumes, riding habits³¹, bloomers, cloaks, capes, ulsters, paletots and coats were tailored in tweed and woollen broadcloth (Anderson, "Spinning" 172; Pritchard 70). These were modelled on the functionality of menswear rather than the fashions for women's wear (Taylor, "Wool" 33). Tweed sporting-wear prefigured the "tailor-made" ensembles worn by the New Women in the 1890s. David argues that,

the riding habit's combination of style and practicality launched the fashion for more gender-neutral, utilitarian garments and heralded the advent of the twentieth-century woman's uniform: the tailored suit. (179)

In *Vixen*, Braddon narrates the parallel transformation of the mid-Victorian horsewoman and sensation heroine into the New Woman of the *fin de siècle* and the riding habit into the "tailor-made". Vixen embodies contradictory notions of Victorian femininity. She is both a fast, sexually promiscuous or transgressive "pretty horse-breaker," liable to lure men away from good marriages or to elope with her groom, and an eccentric and masculine Amazon who is "independent of lady's-maids and milliners" (266).³² She wears a "Lincoln-green habit ... [and] a coquettish little felt hat" (6). She accompanies her father on the hunt, taking the jumps in contravention of her mother's advice, and returns "flushed" and "with

her plain stuff habit splattered with mud” (150-1; 6). In her freedom, independence and masculine habits (behavioural, intellectual and sartorial), Vixen is a precursor to the New Woman of the 1890s who trades her horse for a bicycle and traverses London in pursuit of education, emancipation and equality. Later in the novel, Vixen trades her habit for a plain day-gown and Mrs. Winstanley remarks that Vixen looks like “the kind of girl to go round the country lecturing upon woman’s rights” (234). In the 1890s, this woman became the New Woman, and the day-gown was refashioned as the tweed “tailor-made”.

In an anonymous article published in *Cornhill* in 1894, the New Woman is described as “dressing simply in close-fitting garments, technically known as tailor made”: “Always close-fitting – always manly and wholly simple” (“Character” 217). During the late 1880s and 1890s, the “tailor-made” was fashionable daywear for urban women (Anderson, “Sporting” 172-3); Arthur Lasenby Liberty called it “a great improvement” on earlier fashions (28). This outfit, comprising a jacket and matching skirt and waistcoat, was tailored in tweed or woollen broadcloth (Byrde 898). Worn with a muslin or silk stock, a fitted “silk batiste or flannel shirt” (Pritchard 70) and a double-breasted swallow-tailed coat with exaggerated revers, collars and cuffs “like a man’s” (Pritchard 67), it connoted the power and rationality of modern masculinity (“London” 537); it also connoted the sportswoman’s strength, self-confidence and independence.

The “tailor-made” blurs the boundaries between “gender coded garments and cloths” (Anderson, “Sporting” 180). As Anderson notes, the wearing of tweed by women in the late-Victorian period reflected a complicated set of responses to the dominant discourses of gendered, sexual and sartorial identities (“Sporting” 182-3): “it demonstrated a sense of agency on behalf of women in their

appropriation of potent symbols of masculinity and modernity” (“Sporting” 182). The “tailor-made” represents the New Woman and her new narratives of femininity and female sexuality.

The New Woman

From her presentation to the reading public in *The North American Review* in 1894, the New Woman became a heroine – alternately, protagonist, antagonist and scapegoat – of popular literature and the popular press. In her pivotal 1894 article, “The New Aspect of the Woman Question,” Grand characterises the New Woman as one who has long sat apart from the masses of the “Bawling Brotherhood” and “thinking and thinking ... at last ... solved the problem and proclaimed for herself what was wrong with Home-is-the-Woman’s-Sphere, and prescribed the remedy” (271). She set out to “prove that woman’s mission is something higher than the bearing of children and the bringing them up” (“Character” 217).

Grand’s pensive protagonist was amongst the first of the New Women who met readers on “every page of literature written in the English tongue” during the 1890s (Ouida 610). As well as being a heroine and a reader, the New Woman was also a writer. As Ledger states, “the New Woman of the *fin de siècle* had a multiple identity. She was a feminist activist, a social reformer, a popular novelist, a suffragette playwright, [and] a woman poet” (*New* 1). Many late-Victorian women identified with this figure; in her article, Grand shifts between a first and third person point of view, identifying herself as a New Woman and, thereby, participating in the activism she describes. As Penny Boumelha notes, the New Woman blurred the boundaries between heroine, author and reader (66).

However, the New Woman “was ascribed more opinions, positions, and beliefs

than any real woman could have absorbed in a lifetime” (Schaffer, “Nothing” 50). First and foremost, the New Woman was a “fictional construct, a discursive response to the activities of the late-nineteenth century women’s movement” (Ledger, *New* 1). She “signalled new, or newly perceived, forms of femininity which were brought to public attention in the last decades of the nineteenth century” (Richardson and Willis 1). In her roles as heroine and author, she participated in vehement debates surrounding the “Woman Question” (Grand, “New” 272). The New Woman’s dress is crucial to her role as representative of a new form of female subjectivity and as an agent of social change in the late-Victorian period.

In 1894, Liberty wrote that dress should “be regarded as an expression of the *fin-de-siecle* aspiration towards equality of the sexes” (28). Fashionable dress “is one of [the New Woman’s] pet aversions” (“Character” 217). Instead, her dress is an expression of her refusal of the conventions of Victorian femininity and female sexuality. This is manifested in a variety of ways. In *A Writer of Books*, George Paston describes the New Woman author as “look[ing] as if she were dressed off the stall of a ‘rummage sale’” (87). In her 1894 article, critical of the New Woman, Ouida asks: “Now, why cannot this orator learn to gesticulate and learn to dress, instead of clamouring for franchise?” (612-3). In many literary and visual representations, the New Woman is dressed in a composite garb combining the stylistic, sartorial and symbolic elements of masculine tailoring with the radical and progressive styles of Bloomerism, the Artistic and Healthy Dress Movement, and the Rational Dress Movement. Frequently, the New Woman is depicted dressed in grey “tailor-mades” of fitted skirts or voluminous bloomers and masculine Norfolk or Eton jackets with hats of the boater, deer-

stalking, bowler or top style (De Blaquièrre 12). Plain, darkly coloured and unadorned, the “tailor-made” symbolised a marked departure from “conventional sartorial femininity, associated with lace, fine silks, delicate appliqués, soft or light fabrics” (Taylor, “Wool” 38). This form of dress evoked the styles and connotations of men’s wear. Thus dressed, the New Woman could “climb the hills, or run, or ride a wheel,” George F. Hall enthusiastically states (39). Thus, the “tailor-made” facilitates both physical and political mobility.

The safety bicycle, or “wheel” as it was colloquially called, revolutionised women’s lives as a means of transport, exercise and emancipation during the 1890s (De Blaquièrre 12). As Mrs. Pritchard states, the bicycle also “revolutionised the whole idea of [female] dress” as well as ideas about femininity, female agency and female sexuality (Pritchard 72). Throughout the 1890s, copious advice was targeted to female cyclists in the popular press, much of which related to dress. This advice came from doctors, experts in etiquette, proponents of women’s sport and women’s liberation, the various rational and healthful dress associations, and fellow cyclists. Cycling-wear needs as “careful fitting as the habit, and should be of the tailor order of things,” Pritchard wrote in 1910: “a trailing skirt would, of necessity, be incongruous as well as dangerous” (72). From the late-1880s, London tailors and habit-makers patented safety cycling costumes of pleated or gored divided skirts and of knickerbockers and gaiters disguised by button-on overskirts (De Blaquièrre 14).³³ “Rational Costumes,” or “rationals,” as they were also-called, of bloomers or knickerbockers and neatly tailored jackets, were the safest and most popular cycling-wear (De Blaquièrre 12); as “semi-masculine garb,” they were also the most radical (De Blaquièrre 13). As Charlotte Oates wrote of the New Woman in

her 1900 poem, “A Cynic’s Opinion...,” “her limbs are unhampered with feminine skirts, / She loves her cravats, her coats, collars and shirts,”

If she and a male-friend are out for a round,
The one with the other we nearly confound!
The “new woman’s” dress now has reached such a pitch,
‘Tis difficult often, to tell which is which! (248-9)³⁴

In *A Study in Bloomers* (1895), Hall’s “Model New Woman” states that bloomers are “the most sensible idea in woman’s dress that has been advanced in centuries” (36). They facilitate mobility, healthful exercise and, most importantly, independence of mind and body (Hall 36-9). An avid cyclist, Hall’s heroine wears “bloomers of the regulation pattern”:

cut quite full, and gathered neatly just below the knee, thus
leaving exposed a plump calf and delicately moulded
ankle, for the boots were low-cut. (30)

“She is certainly a study, this girl in bloomers,” Hall states (35).

As the cultural and literary currency of the figure of the “Woman in Grey” suggests, “the most popular material” for British female cyclists was tweed or wool and “dark grey, almost black” was the favoured colour (Pritchard 67). From the 1880s, cloth manufacturers produced fine woollen tweeds, cords, broadcloths, checks and plaids for this new female market (Taylor, “Wool” 30). Scotch tweeds with names such as Ellesmere, Balmoral, Gainsborough, Abbotsford, Musgrove, Bancroft, Kilverdale Plaid and Glenmore Check were very popular (“Notes [June]” 471; “Notes [May]” 133). In 1896, *The Illustrated Queen Almanac* lists a costume of Bannockburn tweed and covert coating and natural homespun amongst the “Latest Bicycling Costumes” (62-3). The names of these cloths connect them to Scottish traditions of patriotic and masculine power; in other iterations, however, new woollen cloths subverted such traditions, referencing innovation and models of independent femininity.

In December 1897, Manchester clothiers “Lewis’s” advertised a new range of woollen cloths. Alongside the “Covert Coatings” and “Armure Suitings” are listed a range of “New Bicycle Tweeds” and “New Amazon Habits” (“Lewis’s” 420). The names of these cloths emphasise novelty and female independence over traditional Britishness; they were, unmistakably, the stuff of the modern, cycling New Woman. The use of the term “Amazon” signals the New Woman’s reinvigoration of the tradition of the horsewoman. Like the Amazon, the New Woman challenges “biological notions of sexual difference deployed to rationalise women’s political disempowerment” (Heilman, “(Un)Masking” 83). Tweed cycling-wear greys the boundaries of socially and sartorially constructed gender (Anderson, “Sporting” 180).

As descriptions of the “new woman” (Oates 248), the “girl in bloomers” (Hall 35) and the “Woman in Grey” (Meynell 210) attest, tweed “tailor-mades” and grey cycling “rationals” represented the outspoken and radical New Woman in literature and the popular press during the 1890s. These “Latter-Day heroine[s]” traversed the streets of London and the pages of popular literature in pursuit of education, emancipation and equality (Allen, *Type-Writer* 23). They also visit the British Library or the National Gallery and “take... to literature,” self-consciously writing their own stories and essaying new authorial identities and narratives of femininity and female sexuality (Paston, *Writer* 87). The New Woman’s dress of tailored tweed reflects her appropriation “of potent symbols of masculinity and modernity” and their associated political, intellectual and sexual freedoms (Anderson, “Sporting” 182). Grey represents intelligence, rationality, respectability (Hollander, *Sex* 72-9). At the same time, though, it reflects the New

Woman's status as an embodiment of the late-Victorian women's movement: a fictional and fundamentally elusive figure (Ledger, *New* 1).

In late-Victorian popular literature, representations of femininity and female sexuality are embodied, but also shadowed by, the ubiquitous figure of the "Woman in Grey". In the following sections of this chapter I consider how authors use the obscure and ambivalent symbolism of grey tweed to tell the New Woman's story as she negotiates prevailing discourses of gender, styles of femininity and patterns of narrative. As fictional readers and authors, the heroines of these novels engage with the popular fiction of the New Woman and, literally and figuratively, tailor new female and literary identities in the final decade of the nineteenth century.

The Story of a Modern Woman

Published in 1894, the year in which the New Woman first appeared in the journalistic work of Grand and Ouida, Dixon's *The Story of a Modern Woman* narrates the New Woman's emergence from the "sickly yellow twilight" of the drawing-room into the "glaring sunshine, rioting wind" and busy "blue-grey" streets of London (43). In the course of the novel, heroine Mary Erle changes from the white frock and pinafores of girlhood and the black "cape skirts and cloaks" (117) of mourning to a "grey dress" and "grey waterproof" (136). Thus dressed, she leaves the sanctity of the domestic sphere and traverses the city in search of an occupation and independence (43). Her movement from her father's book-lined study to the "curious, shifting world of the Strand" and Grub Street, where she applies to the editors of various "popular weekly journal[s]" for work, represents Mary's transformation from reader to author (107). Through her

depiction of Mary's journalistic and fiction writing, Dixon metafictionally explores the way in which the "Novel of the Modern Woman" (Stead 193) rewrites the narrative, sartorial, social and sexual conventions of popular literature and tells the New Woman's story. In an 1894 review of the novel, W. T. Stead noted that,

The Novel of the Modern Woman is one of the most notable and significant features of the day. The Modern Woman Novel is not merely a novel written by a woman, or a novel written about women, but it is a novel written by a woman about women from the standpoint of Woman. (193)³⁵

According to Stead, *The Story of a Modern Woman* is representative of this new genre of popular literature (193).

As the title suggests, *The Story of a Modern Woman* tells the story of the development of a modern female subjectivity. Dixon's *Bildungsroman* of Mary Erle, reader, heroine, author and "Woman in Grey," represents the broader development of the women's and suffrage movements in the late-Victorian period.³⁶ Mary's grey dress identifies her as a New Woman. It represents her rationality, respectability and readiness to participate in urban life; it also symbolises her unstable position as a fictional embodiment of the women's movement and a mediator between conventional and modern forms of femininity (Ledger, *New* 1). Indistinct, she disappears down the misty streets of London in her "grey waterproof" (136). In telling the New Woman's story, Dixon also metafictionally tells the story of the emergence of the New Woman and the New Woman novel onto the urban and literary landscapes of the *fin de siècle*.

In the opening chapter of *The Story of a Modern Woman*, Dixon establishes the heroine as a woman typical of her class and time; "The life of Mary Erle":

like that of many another woman in the end of the nineteenth century, had been more or less in the nature of an experiment. Born too late for the simple days of the fifties, when all it behoved a young woman to do was to mind her account-book, read her Tennyson, show a proper enthusiasm for fancy-work stitches, and finally, with many blushes, accept the hand of the first young man who desires to pay taxes and to fulfil the duties of a loyal British subject ... Mary was yet too soon for the time when parents begin to take their responsibilities seriously, and when the girl is sometimes as carefully prepared, as thoroughly equipped, as her brother for the fight of life. A garden full of flowers, a house full of books, scraps of travel: these things were her education. (49-50)

Dixon's account of Mary as "A Young Girl" depicts her negotiating these conventional and modern forms of femininity (63). She dreams of becoming the angelic feminine ideal. "She was aware that a wife was a person who began by wearing a beautiful white satin train, with white flowers and a veil," Dixon states,

a person who was as imposing as that angel which nurse said her mother had become, although she had not, of course, any wings. The child was not sure whether she would best like to be a bride or an angel. The latter, it was true, had the additional attraction of a golden halo; but she thought, probably, that matters might be compromising, and that she could be a wife and have a halo too. (53)

At the same time, though, her reading offers her a window into other narrative possibilities for the heroine than those which culminate in marriage (represented by the bride) or death (represented by the angel). Mary "lay concealed among the footstools under the long dining-room table, poring over *The Ancient Mariner* ... or thrilled with the lurid emotion of *Wuthering Heights*. A little later *Villette* became her favourite book" and her heart ached with the torment of "poor drab, patient, self-contained Miss Snow" [sic] (54-5). She also reads *Émile; ou, de l'éducation*, *Le Contrat Social* and *David Copperfield*. "From her books and newspapers," Mary "began to understand something of life ... The world, she could see was full of injustice" (55).

The Story of a Modern Woman tells Mary's story, from this pivotal moment of awakening, as she "Tries To Live Her Own Life" (Chapter IX) and develops from "A Young Girl" (Chapter IV) to the mature and reflective "Woman in the Glass" (Chapter XXIV) of the final chapter. She is transformed from vain and spoilt child with "the most definite theories about the dressing of hair" (117) and fantasies about wearing a white gown and being an angelic bride, to a modest, intelligent and independent woman in a "little grey dress" and "grey waterproof" (136).

After the unexpected death of her father, Mary must find work in order to support herself and her profligate younger brother. As the title of Chapter One suggests, this event marks both "An End and A Beginning" for Mary (43);³⁷ she must sell the family's "tall London house" and make her own way in the modern city (43). After a term at the Central London School of Art, an unsuccessful bid for entry into the Royal Academy and the termination of her longstanding engagement to Vincent Hemming, Mary turns to writing. She writes short stories and art criticism for *The Fan, Illustrated* and *The Comet*. As well as her journalistic work, Mary also writes "for the fun of it" (130). "Why – I've even written a novel," she states: an "observed" "bit of real life" (130). Despite "several journeys to various publishers," however, her novel remains unpublished (130). It is "too sad, 'too painful' ... for British readers," she is told (130). Instead, she is commissioned to write

A three-volume novel on the old lines – a dying man in a hospital and a forged will in the first volume; a ball and a picnic in the second; and elopement which must, of course, be prevented by the opportune death of the wife ... in the last. (130)

The heroine of this story must be a romantic "young lady in a tulle ball-dress reading a three-cornered note" (105-6). Mary, however, rails against the version

of femininity and the woman's story represented in this style of popular literature: "What had girls in ball-dresses to do with life; with life as it swirled and rushed by her, with its remorseless laws, its unceasing activity[?]" she asks (105-6). Like Stead, she believes that the novel of the age is the "Novel of the Modern Woman," rather than the three-volume romance of the conventional heroine (193).

The romantic and ill-fated fictional heroine of Mary's popular novel is one of the many women whose stories are juxtaposed with Mary's narrative of development as an independent "Modern Woman". Her friend Alison Ives is Mary's most obvious double.³⁸ Alison is a model New Woman. She wears a black "tailor-gown" fashioned by Worth on purpose that she could "go ... on the top of those charming trams" and omnibuses (76). She practices her belief that "all we modern women ... [should] help each other" by doing charitable work amongst the destitute women of London's East End (164). Contrarily, Alison also represents the angelic woman; in the second half of the book she dies from consumption contracted in the course of her work.

Mary is also juxtaposed with Evelina, Fallen Woman and unwed mother, whose "little story" of disgrace is "common enough down [in] ... the East End" (75). Evelina's narrative is a parody of the conventional marriage plot. In the final chapters of the novel, she marries the father of her baby. Her wedding outfit is a soiled second-hand "white silk dress" and a "veil and orange blossoms" which Mary declares quite ridiculous and "pathetic" in their parody of virginal bridehood (114). Most significant, though, is Mary's doubling with "Number Twenty-Seven," an abandoned and suicidal mistress who is dying of "rapid consumption" in Whitechapel Hospital (151).

Mary first sees “Number Twenty-Seven,” when she is in Regent’s Park awaiting the return of her *fiancé* Vincent Hemming. This woman, too, is “waiting about for someone” and Mary experiences a form of fellow-feeling towards her (115). Then, “one day at the end of July ... she [“Number Twenty-Seven”] waited a long time ... but he didn’t come,” Mary recalls (165). On the next morning, “Number Twenty-Seven” is pulled out of the “slimy green canal” having attempted suicide (165). Like Alison, she soon dies of consumption.

Her knowledge of the fate of “Number Twenty-Seven” influences Mary’s story by opposition. When, after he had broken off his engagement with her and is unhappy in marriage to Violet, Vincent pleads with Mary to become his mistress, she recalls the fate of “Number Twenty-Seven” – dying disgraced, anonymous and alone – and refuses him. Her decision is also informed by consideration for Mrs. Hemming and Mary’s promise to Alison to never “deliberately injure another woman” (149).

These four women embody different types of late-Victorian femininity and female sexuality and different narrative possibilities for Dixon’s “Story of a Modern Woman”. They are the romantic heroine, the martyr, the wife and mother, and the Fallen Woman. Mary, however, resists these models of femininity, literally rewriting the social, sartorial, sexual and narrative conventions which tie her fictional “young lady in a tulle ball-dress” (105-6), Alison, Evelina and “Number Twenty-Seven” to their respective narrative fates. Instead, Mary “Liv[es] Her Own Life” of freedom and independence (53). This freedom and opportunity is emphasised when, in the final chapter of the novel, Mary stands “alone on the heights” with London literally “at her feet” (192). She has only to reach out and “grasp the city spread out before her,” the narrator states (192). The

heroine's grey dress and water-proof represent her rejection of conventional femininity and her acquisition of the physical capability, political agency and cultural currency to embrace modern London and the possibilities it affords. Instead of being a white-clad bride or angel, a romantic heroine in a tulle ballgown, or a fashionable woman in a "tailor-gown," she is a modern "Woman in Grey". In *The Story of a Modern Woman*, Dixon narrates the story of the New Woman's emergence from the home to participate in the social, economic and intellectual commerce of modern London. In telling this story of the [New] "Woman in Grey" and her development from reader and ill-fated heroine to author, Dixon metafictionally represents the development of the New Woman novel as "one of the most notable and significant features [of literature] of the day" (Stead 193).

In *The Wheels of Chance*, Wells depicts his heroine, Jessie Milton, as a reader of such novels. Inspired by the New Woman heroines of Dixon, Schreiner and Egerton, she escapes Surbiton with dreams of "writing Books," "or doing Journalism, or Teaching, or something like that" (281). Accordingly, she adopts the New Woman's garb of grey "rationals". Initially, Wells's heroine is conspicuous as an "Unconventional" New Woman (193). This is evidenced in her continued identification as the "Young Lady is Grey" (33). Instead of becoming subsumed into the modern city in the course of the novel, Jessie's grey dress and independent will gradually fade. She is trapped within the romance narrative's mechanisms of chance and fate. Jessie's pursuit of freedom ends with her return to the drawing-room and its ideal of femininity (193). Unlike Dixon's Mary, she does not achieve her dream of authorship, nor does she successfully refashion the narrative conventions which consign her to domestic femininity. Using the bicycle

as both a symbol of the New Woman's freedom and the cyclical narrative mechanisms which curtail this same freedom, Wells explores the different routes to social advancement and self-improvement offered to men and women in the late-Victorian period.

The Wheels of Chance

Wells's *The Wheels of Chance* (1896) depicts the "holiday adventure" of Mr. Hoopdriver, a draper at "Messrs. Antrobus & Co. ... of Putney" (3). In the novel's opening chapters, Hoopdriver sets out on "a Cycling Tour. Along the South Coast" of England (15). His journey is not merely a physical one, but also a social and intellectual one.³⁹ Wells uses the perpetual motion and freedom of cycling as a metaphor for social mobility and self-improvement (Choi 102). In the course of his journey, "the draper Hoopdriver, the Hand, ... vanished from existence," the narrator states, "instead was a gentleman, a man of pleasure" (29-30).

Hoopdriver's narrative of development is paired with that of Jessie Milton.

As he leaves London, Hoopdriver encounters a cycling "Young Lady in Grey" "at the fork of the roads" (33). As they approach, Hoopdriver is possessed by "strange doubts ... as to the nature of her nether costume" (33). His suspicions are confirmed when their roads converge and Hoopdriver realises, "the things were – yes! – *rationals!*" (34): "probably, she was one of these here New Women," he reflects (42).

This "Young Lady," later revealed to be Miss Jessie Milton, is an aspiring New Woman (42). Like Hoopdriver, she is on a journey of liberation and self-improvement. Dressed in grey "rationals" and riding a bicycle which "couldn't have cost much under twenty pounds" (42), she escapes the conventionality of

Surbiton with the desire “to Live her Own Life (with emphasis)” (193). Her “motives are bookish,” the narrator notes, and “written by a haphazard syndicate of authors, novelists, biographers, on her white inexperience” (110). She dreams of “writing Books,” “or doing Journalism, or Teaching, or something like that” (281).

As Hoopdriver suggests, Jessie’s grey “rationals” clearly identify her as a New Woman (33). The colour and style of Jessie’s attire are typical of depictions of the New Woman in contemporary popular literature and journalism. Rather than being a reflection of her individualism and desire for emancipation and independence, however, Jessie’s dress, and its connotations of novelty and progress, are shaped by and mediated through these pre-existent New Woman narratives. Her evocative grey dress is fashioned by the writing of New Woman and feminist attitudes and narratives onto the “white inexperience” of her identity (110).

When Hoopdriver first encounters Jessie, “she was dressed in a beautiful bluish-grey, and the sun behind her drew her outline in gold and left the rest in shadow” (33). Jessie’s identity and aspirations, like her figure, are vague and uncertain. She bears the outline of the archetypal New Woman; however, her body and character are grey and undefined. Significantly, Jessie wears the same grey “rationals” throughout the novel. This represents the strength of Jessie’s commitment to pursuing a life of “Unconventionality” (193). At the same time, though, it signals her failure to develop from an archetypal New Woman into an autonomous individual and to “Live her Own Life” (253).

In Victorian popular literature, changes in the colour, style and texture of dress tell the heroine’s story. Without such change, Jessie is trapped within the

conventional romance narrative. Unlike Hoopdriver, who is transformed into a determined and self-confident gentleman, Jessie's development is foreclosed by the forces of chance and fate which structure *The Wheels of Chance*. Jessie's journey is a circular one. It culminates in realisation, resignation and return, rather than transformation and liberation. This ending is foreshadowed by the image of Jessie's figure, swathed in grey tweed, shadow and uncertainty. The uncertainty of Jessie's self-determination renders her susceptible to the influence of others. This is demonstrated when, within hours of commencing her journey, Jessie is entrapped by Mr. Bechamel.

Bechamel, a married man, convinces Jessie of his desire to accompany and help her in her pursuit of independence. It soon becomes obvious, though, that Bechamel's motives are sexual rather than altruistic. When Jessie reviews her plan of leaving her home and *Living Her Own Life* (42), he says: but you have not "left [your] home," you have, in fact, "eloped with me" (102). Bechamel tries to persuade Jessie to enter into a sexual relationship with him, arguing that she has already compromised her virtue (103). "You took the hints," he says:

You knew. You *knew*. And you did not mind. *Mind!* You liked it. It was the fun of the whole thing for you. That I loved you, and could not speak to you. You played with it -. (103)

As well as being a vehicle for female independence, the bicycle was also considered a sign of active and transgressive female sexuality because of the opportunity it afforded for women to travel unchaperoned (Wintle 72-3). Jessie, however, resists characterisation as a Fallen Woman cyclist. She refuses Bechamel's advances but, feeling herself trapped between him and disgrace, she continues travelling with him.

Chance comes to her rescue, however, in the character of Hoopdriver. After his first encounter with the “Young Lady in Grey,” Hoopdriver rode on. “But the ill-concealed bladdery of the machine, the present machinery of Fate, the *deux ex machina*, so to speak, was against him,” the narrator states (61). “The bicycle, torn from this attractive young woman, grew heavier and heavier, and continually more unsteady” until Hoopdriver is compelled, by sheer exhaustion, to stop in the next town (61). Here, he encounters the “Young Lady in Grey” and her companion (61). Observing her discomfort, Hoopdriver aids Jessie’s escape from Bechamel.

Henceforth, Hoopdriver becomes Jessie’s companion. As they tour the South Coast, she develops her plan of living in central London like her New Woman heroines (254). “I am resolved to be Unconventional – at any cost,” she states:

“But we are so hampered. If I could only burgeon out of all that hinders me! I want to struggle, to take my place in the world. I want to be my own mistress, to shape my own career. But my stepmother objects so. ... And if I go back now, go back owning myself beaten –” ... She left the rest to his imagination. (193)

As a New Woman and heroine, Jessie is hampered by both social and narrative conventions. Soon after this conversation, Jessie’s step-mother and ex-governess, aided by a group of enthusiastic gentlemen, set out on a “Rescue Expedition” to return Jessie to Surbiton (216-7). The rescuers are impeded, however, by their inability to acquire a horse or hired conveyance. They are forced to buy a tandem bicycle in order to continue their pursuit.

The group struggle to master the vehicle. As the narrator suggests, Jessie’s stepmother and her friends belong to the older world of carriages and conventionality. They must learn confidence in “motion” and “suspense” in order

to catch up with Jessie (Meynell 211). Their lack of mobility represents their failure to keep up with the pace of progress and modernity. As accomplished cyclists, Hoopdriver and Jessie represent the social mobility, egalitarian values and optimism of a projected, modern, future (Ledger, *New* 5). However, the rescue party eventually catch up with Jessie. With “copious outpourings about Ideals, True Womanliness, Necessary Class Distinctions, Healthy Literature and the like,” her stepmother persuades her to give up her dreams of a career and return to Surbiton and “Conventionality” (302).

In the opening chapters of *The Wheels of Chance*, the draper and the “[New] Woman in Grey” meet at cross-roads on the outskirts of London. In the final chapter of the novel, Hoopdriver and Jessie part at another. This time, it is a narratological and metaphoric, rather than literal, cross-roads. Hoopdriver returns to Putney as a newly self-confident young man, rejoicing in the possibility of education and social mobility. Jessie, however, returns to Surbiton with the realisation that her desire “to do something in the world, to be something in the world, something vaguely noble, self-sacrificing, and dignified,” is disingenuous and ultimately futile (299).

Wells depicts Jessie’s failure to succeed in “Living her Own Life,” not as a failure of her individual determination or of the ideals of the woman’s movement, but as an inevitable effect of the mechanisms of chance and the pre-existent narratives of gender and social organisation which structure the novel. While Hoopdriver, optimistic of a romantic conclusion for himself and the “Young Woman in Grey” rejoices in the machinations of fate and chance which bring them together, Jessie rails against the social and narrative forces which render her

dependent on male help: “I find myself in life, and it terrifies me,” she says (191): “I seem to be like a little speck whirling on a wheel, suddenly caught up” (191).

The wheel on which Jessie feels herself caught is the wheel of chance of the novel’s title; it is also the mechanism of the conventional romance narrative. She is saved from disgrace by a modern knight-errant who has traded his shining armour for a tweed Norfolk jacket and his white steed for a bicycle; her salvation, however, entails a return to suburban conventionality and proper femininity. She must either be the seduced Fallen Woman or an ideal and “inaccessible Young Lady” (302-3). There is no narrative alternative available to the New Woman in *The Wheels of Chance*. Unlike Meynell’s “[New] Woman in Grey,” who finds independence amongst the ceaseless movement and progress of Oxford Street, Wells’s Jessie is hampered by social and narrative conventions at every turn in her road. “So the story ends, dear Readers” (310), the narrator concludes, with Jessie “an inaccessible Young Lady again” rather than a New Woman (303).

In the course of the novel, the vividness of Jessie’s dreams of Living Her Own Life as a New Woman and writer gradually fade (253). She cannot progress from an impressionable reader to an author, capable of writing her own story outside the strictures of fate and chance which structure the romance narrative (281). From the grey of the progressive cycling New Woman, she returns to the whiteness, innocence, inexperience and “stationary repose” of ideal domestic femininity (Meynell 211); no longer a “[New] Woman in Grey,” she fades into a conventional and angelic “Woman in White”. In the final chapters of the novel, Jessie resignedly admits that “the Young Lady in Grey is mythical”; like the New Woman, she is a fictional representation of the late-Victorian women’s movement (215). “Women write in books about being free, and living our own life, and all

that kind of thing. – No one is free ... unless at the expense of someone else. I did not think of that,” she reflects (299).

In *The Wheels of Chance*, Wells metaphorises the conventions which hamper the New Woman as the narrative mechanisms of chance and fate. The New Woman reader is refashioned as the ideal heroine and “Woman in White”. In Allen’s 1897 novel, *The Type-Writer Girl*, the heroine realises Jessie’s dream of having a “flat and go[ing] to the British Museum and writing leading articles for the daily newspapers” (281). *The Type-Writer Girl* tells the story of Girton girl, rational dresser, type-writer, cyclist, anarchist and author Juliet Appleton. In this novel, Allen dramatises the transformation of the New Woman from the celebrated and vilified heroine of the popular press and the ill-fated female cyclist, doomed to return to the home and conventionality, to the independent working woman and, finally, the author and self-conscious (autobiographical) heroine. This transformation is portrayed figuratively through the heroine’s cycling and type-writing. Juliet’s cycling is a symbol of female independence and her typing enacts the self-construction of her identity as heroine and author of her own story. In this way, Juliet negotiates late-Victorian notions of femininity, and female identity, agency, and authorship. Juliet’s dress is crucial to these doubled processes of social progression and narrativisation.

Throughout the novel, Juliet alternates between brown tweed “rationals,” a plain black gown, a travelling gown, and a diaphanous white and pink evening gown. This symbolic re-dressing symbolises Juliet’s engagement with divergent late-Victorian notions of femininity and female sexuality. It also represents her adoption, editing and refashioning of a variety of gendered literary personas in telling her story. This, in turn, reflects the complex fiction of gendered authorial

identity within which Allen, through Juliet's first-person narration and under the pseudonym Olive Pratt Rayner, positions the novel.

The Type-Writer Girl

In the first chapter of *The Type-Writer Girl*, Allen "introduces a latter-day heroine" in Juliet Appleton (23). In her dress, habits, education and occupation, Juliet is a prototypical New Woman. She wears rational knickerbockers and a plain "black dress and hat," bicycles around England in pursuit of adventure and anarchy, smokes tobacco, and treats the National Gallery as her private drawing-room (40). In the course of the novel, she works as a stenographer and type-writer (71). She reads Greek mythology, folklore, poetry, world history, and political theory. "From all of which you may guess that I am a Girton girl," she remarks (27). She is also narrator and self-conscious author of her own story, likening it to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and Homer's *The Odyssey*. This "story I am setting out in my own way to tell you" (135), she states, is "my little odyssey": "I am the type-writer girl" (139).

After the death of her father, Juliet, like many New Woman heroines, begins "the struggle for existence" which, she states, "has become one of the rights of women" (28). In the novel's first chapter, she obtains the position of "Short-hand and Type-writer (female)" at the office of lawyers "Flor and Fingleman's, 27B, Southhampton Row" (28-9). She suspects, however, that she obtained the position on account of her "face and figure [rather] than [her] real or imagined pace per minute" (30); standing before the clerks in "my little black dress and hat," she recalls, "I felt like a Circassian in an Arab slave-market" (31). Juliet soon tires of the way in which the male staff "[run] their eyes over [her] as

if [she] were a horse for sale” and resigns her position (30). Despite her lack of employment and capital, Juliet rejoices in being a “Free Woman” (60). After all, she says, “I [have] still my faithful bicycle,” both a means of and symbol for female independence (42).

Acting on impulse, Juliet leaves London “bent for the Holy Land of Anarchy” (60): a community near Horsham (42). In preparation for her journey, Juliet dons her “pretty brown cycling suit,” which, she explains, “like all else about me (I trust) is rational” (42). As a rationally dressed cyclist, she is the embodiment of late-Victorian female independence. “When man first set woman on two wheels with a pair of pedals, did he know,” she muses, that:

he had rent the veil of the harem in twain? I doubt it, but so it was. A woman on a bicycle has all the world before her where to choose; she can go where she will, no man hindering. I felt it that brisk May morning as I span down the road. (42-3)

“‘This,’ thought I to myself, ‘is truly my Odyssey,’” she adds (43). This journey signals the beginning of Juliet’s narrative of personal development. She changes her plain black gown, in which she was objectified, to tweed “rationals” in which she is a “Free Woman,” admired for her sagacity (60). This change and the accompanying declaration – “this ... is truly my Odyssey” (43) – also indicates a shift in the tone of the narrative as Juliet self-consciously constructs her identity as author and heroine within the context of contemporary notions of gender, sexuality and authorship. Juliet models her story on a classical heroic narrative of freedom and personal development; however, she soon comes to realise that “to play at being a latter-day Ulysses in London ... is like a child’s game – too much make believe” (43).

Refusing to relinquish her sexual autonomy, as well as her material property, to the Community, Juliet leaves. Her belief in female sexual freedom

renders her “too anarchic for the anarchists,” she states (58). However, the Community lays claim to her bicycle, preventing her departure: “whatever any comrade brings into the Community is common property ... this machine is ours,” they insist (59). Juliet’s struggle to reclaim her bicycle – in which she deploys her knowledge of the vocabulary, if not the substance, of “the law of England” (58) – is a metaphor for her “struggle for existence,” freedom and independence (28). Her success in the greater struggle is both facilitated and foreshadowed by the recovery of her bicycle at this point in the narrative. Juliet then embarks for London, a “Free Woman” once more (58); her odyssey is not without further challenges, however.

En route, Juliet collides with fellow cyclist Michaela. Juliet and Michaela represent opposing versions and narratives of the late-Victorian femininity. Juliet’s beauty is that of a “gypsy American fantasy” (113); Michaela, on the other hand, is innocent in appearance, with blue eyes and an angelic halo of amber hair (61). Whilst Juliet is rational, adventurous and independent, Michaela is timid and reliant on the support and protection of others; when the damage to both bicycles precludes the continuation of their journeys, Michaela insists that Juliet accompanies her to London in a first-class train carriage because she is afraid to travel alone or, worse still, “with a man” (67). Juliet acquiesces to the arrangement and the pair part at Clapham Junction. Clapham functions, not merely as a railway junction, but also as a narrative junction for the two women. Michaela returns to Soho and Juliet departs to find work and lodgings in the East End.

Like the near collision in Wells’s *The Wheels of Chance*, this incident prefigures the intersection of the two characters’ narratives later in the novel.

Michaela becomes both antagonist and helpmate to Juliet in her pursuit of a living, freedom and, later, love. In narrating/writing her modern female “Odyssey,” Juliet knowingly constructs her subjectivity as a “Free [New] Woman” (28), heroine, and author in opposition to Michaela’s model of passivity and “perfect ladylike[ness]” (113). In telling her story, Juliet adopts a self-conscious and confessional manner and openly rejects the narrative, social and symbolic mechanisms which structure the archetypal romance narrative and “Novel of the Modern Woman” (Stead 193).

In the first chapter of *The Type-Writer Girl*, Juliet “stands on the shore of the vast sea of London” and invents the stories of the “men with small black bags, bound for mysterious offices” that surge into the city every morning (23). In telling her own story, however, she eschews such fantastic and imaginative impulses, instead professing complete honesty. After essaying and analysing various historical models of female authorship in the first part of the novel, in Chapter 11 Juliet ventriloquises the reader/critic of own her narrative, suggesting that “this story, is deficient in love-interest” (74). “My dear critic, has anybody more reason to regret that fact than its author?” she replies:

I have felt it all along. Yet reflect upon the circumstance. Ten thousand type-writer girls crowd London today, and ’tis precisely in this that their life is deficient – love interest.

... The professional novelist keeps in stock in her study a large number of vats, each marked (like drinks in a refreshment-room) with the names of their contents in gilt letters – “Sensation,” “Character sketches,” “Humour,” and so forth. She turns on the taps, mechanically as they are needed. But by far the biggest vat is labelled “Love-interest”. No matter what plot the professional novelist may invent, she lets this tap run, as soon as her puppets are devised, and drenches the whole work with an amatory solvent, exactly as the chemist dilutes his mixtures with distilled water to eight ounces, I however, who am narrating the actual history of one stray girl among ten

thousand in London, – what can I do but wait for the love-interest to develop itself?

My name is Juliet; you may well believe I have had moments when I thrilled with the expectation of a Romeo. But Romeos do not grow on every gooseberry bush. (74)

However, neither Juliet nor her readers have to wait long for a “love interest” to develop (74).

Upon her return to London, Juliet begins work as a private secretary and “Lady type-writer” (37), “certainly not as a (parenthetical) female,” in a publishing house (75).⁴⁰ She trades her “rational” cycling outfit for a black stuff gown, joining the throng of black-clad office workers whose stories she earlier imagined. This event, and its accompanied change of costume, marks a second shift in the narrative; instead of self-consciously and critically performing female authorship, Juliet begins to perform the role of the ill-fated romantic heroine. She begins a fantastic romance with her engaged employer, a man of undisclosed name but who is referred to by Juliet, according to a “prophetic fantasy,” by the sobriquet of Romeo (84). Although their romance is presented as reality by narrator Juliet, Allen’s use of intertextual and metafictional references suggests that it is an “epic of the imagination” rather than of fact (24).

Romeo and Juliet’s romance, as their names suggest, is doomed from its inception. Allen reimagines the family feud which separates Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet as a late-Victorian “social barrier” (105). Whilst Juliet is part of the growing class of independent working women, Romeo belongs to “what called itself ‘good society’” (105). Romeo’s mother, a veritable Lady Montague, is of the conventional “black-satin order” of women and objects to the romance (102).⁴¹ She “attache[s] an excessive importance to the ... quality of ladylikeness:” a quality which Juliet thinks “somewhat negative” and studiously avoids (105).

When “Lady Montague” condescendingly remarks: “so you type-write at the office! How fatiguing it must be!” Juliet responds, “at least it preserves me from being a perfect lady” (107).

Despite this rejection of “ladylikeness” (105), Juliet fashions herself as “a woman, not merely a type-writer” in her romance with Romeo (103); she changes her rational “brown cycling suit,” “knickerbockers” (60), and “poor black [woollen] dress” (70) for an evening gown of white silk “shot with faint streaks of the daintiest pink” (35). This change in dress represents Juliet’s shift from rational New Woman author to romantic heroine. Juliet’s altering of her evening gown reflects her refashioning and editing of a variety of literary personas, both male and female, throughout the novel. Here, she fashions herself as Shakespeare’s Juliet rather than Homer’s Ulysses. She comments on the intersection of narrative and sartorial fashions, stating that, “in every age we fashion the [romance] story anew in our passing manner, dressing it up in our clothes and fitting it to our particular modes and morals” (26). Contemporary novelists, Juliet continues, dress the heroine “in the princess robe of the day . . . , and turn her loose on that slimy old dragon the world, till Prince Charming comes by as a baronet in a tennis suit” (26).

In *The Type-Writer Girl*, Juliet refashions this story and Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* as a New Woman narrative of female sexual agency. She states that:

Men novelists have depicted us as men wish us to be; we have meekly and obediently accepted their portrait: to some extent, even, we have striven against the grain to model ourselves upon it. A man’s ideal is the girl that shrinks, the sweetly unconscious girl who scarce knows he loves her till his strong arm glides round her and he clasps her to his heart: then, with a sudden awakening, she awakens to the truth and knows she has loved him long,

loved him from the beginning. That, I say, is a man's woman. (111)

Despite her assumption of the romantic heroine's diaphanous dress, Juliet is not a "man's woman" in this model; she remains a progressive New Woman, pursuing her ideals of female independence and sexual freedom (111). When Romeo banishes himself to Venice in an attempt to forget his love for Juliet, she follows, hoping to woo him away from the "insipid graces" of his "perfectly ladylike" *fiancée* (113). In preparation for this journey, she buys a "new travelling costume" in the tailored fashion of the period (136). Anticipating readers' criticism of her actions and her dress – "unwomanly, you say" – she rebuts: "What a false convention" (111).

Allen's Venice is the image of Shakespeare's Verona. In the chapters entitled "O Romeo, Romeo!" and "Wherefore Art Thou Romeo?" Juliet pursues the hero through the canals, churches, and *piazze* of Venice. Lovelorn, she stands at "the balconied window of [her] bedroom" and calls "Romeo, Romeo, Romeo" (131). When the pair finally meets, it is revealed that Romeo's *fiancée* is Juliet's fellow cyclist Michaela. Upon the realisation that she is playing Juliet to Michaela's Rosalind, Juliet relinquishes her romantic hold on Romeo. This romantic entanglement echoes Juliet and Michaela's collision in the first chapters of the novel. Again, the pair part, Michaela lending the impoverished Juliet a first-class fare to London. Michaela commences life as wife and Angel in the House to Romeo, whilst Juliet returns to work as "a type-writer girl – at another office" (139). In the final lines of the novel Juliet says, "If this book succeeds I mean to repay Michaela" (139).

In the course of the novel, Juliet casts herself in the roles of Ulysses, Shakespeare's Juliet, Biblical heroine Esther, Bizet's Carmen, mythical heroine

Cleodolind, and a Circassian in an Arab harem. She also acts the part of cycling New Woman heroine, embarking on a modern Odyssey of freedom and independence. These changes are echoed in her dress as she refashions herself from working woman to rational cyclist, romantic heroine and New Woman. The final and persistent image of the novel, though, is of Juliet as grey-tweed-clad author in “the struggle for existence” (28).⁴² She likens herself to the “nameless Sappho, ... prehistoric Charlotte Brontë, ... [or] inchoate Elizabeth Barrett Browning” who, according to Samuel Butler’s contemporary theory, authored *The Odyssey*. Her adoption of masculine-style rational and travelling dress represents Juliet’s play with the gendered and generic conventions of late-Victorian popular fiction and authorship.

In *The Type-Writer Girl*, Allen appropriates the narrative structure of *The Odyssey* in order to dramatise the transformation of the New Woman from the celebrated and vilified heroine of the popular press and the ill-fated female cyclist, to the independent “type-writer girl” and, finally, autobiographical author (139). As “type-writer girl” and author, Juliet literally tells, writes and types her own story. She models the novel’s episodic and anecdotal structure on the “vague, elusive ... and hazy” style of the classical text (24-25).⁴³ She also edits her Shakespearean namesake’s tragic demise and rewrites the New Woman’s disillusionment and inevitable return to the home and conventionality.

By casting Juliet in the roles of reader, heroine, narrator and author in *The Type-Writer Girl*, Allen negotiates late-Victorian politics of gender, identity and authorship. By fictionalising female authorship, Allen self-consciously essays how to tell the heroine’s story in response to social, political and literary change, entering debates concerning gender and sexuality, and their representation in

fiction. In doing so, he writes new possibilities for women as heroines and authors. In the first pages of the novel, Juliet uses Butler's "eccentric theory that a woman wrote *The Odyssey*," to reflect on the gendering of authorship in the late-nineteenth century (23). In *The Type-Writer Girl*, Allen self-consciously manipulates his own position as a *fin-de-siècle* author, using Juliet's fictional authorship to explore new authorial subjectivities.

The Type-Writer Girl was published, not under Allen's own name, but that of Olive Pratt Rayner. In assuming this pseudonym, Allen performs female authorship, mirroring Juliet's performance of heroic masculinity when she casts herself as a modern Ulysses. Whilst Juliet is an independent and unconventional heroine, "Olive Pratt Rayner" is a testament to the conventions of Victorian gender politics (Suranyi 10). The novel is dedicated to "Theodore Rayner and Oliver Wendell" with "A Wife's Homage, A Sister's Love". Allen characterises his pseudonymous author as "a woman who sees herself only in relation to the men in her life" (Suranyi 10). Allen's "narrative [and authorial] cross-dressing" creates "the illusion of authenticity," extending the fiction that the novel is written from "the experience of the type-writer girl ... herself" (Suranyi 10). In characterising the author as devoted wife and sister, Allen writes an extra-textual romantic, and conventional, ending for the novel's type-writer girl. Echoing Butler's theory regarding the authorship of *The Odyssey*, Allen fictionalises and re-genders the authorship of *The Type-Writer Girl* and, like Juliet, readers "love to believe it," "without thinking it true" (25).

In *The Type-Writer Girl*, Allen repeatedly blurs the boundaries between heroine, author and readers. Boumelha's assessment of the New Woman novel as quintessentially metafictional is particularly relevant here; as she suggests,

it is as if ... there is no mediating narrator; the writing of the fiction becomes for a time its own action, its own plot, enacting as well as articulating the protest of the text. (66)

In *The Type-Writer Girl*, Allen enacts as well as articulates the construction of the text; Juliet's typing is a metaphor for the writing of the fiction and Allen's creation of the authorial persona of Olive Pratt Rayner is subsumed into the narrative of Juliet's development of female authorial subjectivity. In *apologia* for her narrative style, Juliet states, "unless you let me tell ... [my story] in my own wayward way, I can never get through with it" (25).

Both Juliet and Olive perform New Woman authorship and demonstrate the fluidity of gender boundaries, and socially and literarily constructed narratives of female subjectivity and sexuality in the late-nineteenth century (Kortsch 95). For both fictional authors, this involves "an act of impersonation or masquerade" in the form of cross-dressing (Suranyi 10). Juliet adopts a cycling *ensemble* of masculine-style rational dress in order to escape enslavement to "the Grand Vizier and his satraps" (62) at Flor and Fingelman's and, later, from Caliban and his anarchist comrades in Horsham (59). In her pursuit of a career as a writer, she imagines herself as Butler's gender-crossing author of *The Odyssey*.

Allen also performs an act of authorial cross-dressing. In Olive Pratt Rayner, he fashions a pseudonymous female author and constructs the fiction that the novel is written from "the experience of the type-writer girl ... herself," now a dutiful wife (Suranyi 10). In *The Type-Writer Girl*, then, cross-dressing draws attention to the artful construction, and inherent instability, of gendered identities. This is represented within the narrative in Juliet's adoption of masculine-style rational dress of wool and tweed. Similarly, the metafictional representation of writing, represented by Juliet's work as a type-writer and author, draws attention to the construction of narrative and representations of fictional and authorial

subjectivities. Thus, cross-dressing becomes a symbol for metafiction; together, they reflect on, and subvert, the ways in which dress is used to construct femininity and female sexuality and tell the heroine's story in Victorian popular literature. This is played out on a larger scale in Dixie's utopian *Gloriana; or, the Revolution of 1900* (1890). In this novel, the performance of the construction of gendered identities, in cross-dressing, and of narrative, in metafiction, anticipate the refashioning and rewriting of narrative possibilities for women as authors, readers and heroines in the twentieth century and beyond.

In *Gloriana*, Dixie re-imagines the cycling, rational-dressing “[New] Woman in Grey” as a cross-dressing political activist, soldier, and female Prime Minister. Dixie combines the symbolic and narrative characteristics of the New Woman novel with the “social blueprint” (Beaumont, “New” 218) of the utopian novel and transports readers to a time when the gender inequality of “the *Nineteenth Century* has become a thing of the past” (Corbett 7). As an activist and self-conscious author, her heroine is no longer restricted by the social and narrative strictures of conventional femininity but is free to “to map out her own life” and tell her own story (Dixie 38). In looking beyond 1900, *Gloriana* depicts the nineteenth-century heroine's final refashioning: from obscurity to feminist idol; grey to white; heroine to author; Angel in the House and *femme fatale* to New Woman and, finally, to soldier, Prime Minister and icon.

Gloriana; or, The Revolution of 1900

In *Gloriana* (1890), the heroine's transformation from New Woman, to cross-dressing Prime Minister and, finally, rational-dressing and feminist icon of the future, functions as a metaphor for the refashioning and rewriting of social,

historical and narrative conventions for the Victorian heroine at the *fin de siècle*. Dixie's novel tells the story of eponymous heroine Gloriana De Lara. In the first chapter of the novel, the young Gloria is awakened to "the wrongs that girls and women have to suffer" (7). In a "living dream" she addresses an audience of girls and bids "them rise as one and right these wrongs" (7). In this vision, both Gloria and the readers see "the elements of a great revolution" which is to occupy the ensuing narrative (7). In order to realise this dream, she resolves to "go to school" (9). "It must be a boy's school," she informs her mother: "you must send me to Eton" (9).

Gloria assumes boy's clothing and gains admission to Eton under the alias of Hector D'Estrange. Hector "[takes] the school by storm" and

does everything tiptop. Splendid batsman, bowler,
oarsman, wonderful at racquets, undefeatable at books ...
[She is] beautiful as an Adonis, and clever past expression.
(19)

Hector attracts public attention as the "schoolboy" author of "Woman's Position in the World," an essay published in the *Free Review* (24). Hector's writing functions as both a metafictional and polemical tool and marks the beginning of the novel's utopian narrative. On the force of her reputation as an author, Hector infiltrates another bastion of British masculinity, Oxford. She then enters parliament and becomes Britain's first female (and transvestite) Prime Minister.

In adopting men's clothing, Gloria enters a long tradition of female cross-dressing in nineteenth-century culture, drama and fiction (Crawford 286). In 1889, Emily Crawford penned an article for *The Woman's World* on "Women Wearers of Men's Clothes". Crawford surveys notable female cross-dressers of history and the present day, and discusses the modern phenomenon of cross-dressing from the Aesthetic perspectives of "hygiene," "liberty and personal convenience" (283).

She relates an incident in which fencer Mme. Dielafoy was refused admittance to a Parisian theatre because “she went there in her masher’s suit” (Crawford 283).

She makes reference to Rosa Bonheur and George Sand (Crawford 285).

Crawford also discusses “occasions in which it was not only convenient but decent for women to wear men’s clothes,” such cases include Joan of Arc, Grisel Cochrane, Duchess Mazarin (Hortense Mancini) and Olympia, Constableness of Colonna (285). She states that, “liberation will be found in the growth of moral courage, and still more the general agreement that each should be free to dress as she is minded” (Crawford 284). Although Crawford’s case studies in cross-dressing are predominantly French, this article evidences the correlation between rational-dressing and cross-dressing, and emphasises the significance of “Women Wearers of Men’s Clothes” in late-nineteenth century British culture.

During the mid-to-late Victorian period, male impersonator acts were popular features of variety theatre and music hall entertainment (Oram 4-12). In literature, cross-dressing functions as a “vibrant metaphor” (Heilmann, “(Un)Masking” 83) for the disruption of concepts of gender difference and for demonstrating the inherent performativity of gender (Wheelwright 7). Dressing in men’s clothes allows heroines to “live out an adventure that transgresses sexual boundaries” (Wheelwright 13). This is reflected in Florence Marryat’s 1876 novel, *Her Father’s Name*, where heroine Leona Lacoste assumes various tailored suits and male identities and travels the world in an attempt to clear her father’s name of an accusation of murder.

In the New Woman and feminist fiction of the 1880s and 1890s, cross-dressing recurs as a symbol, metaphor and narrative device and, increasingly, as a political statement. As Heilmann argues, female-male cross-dressing is “indicative

of female discontent with the restrictive norms of femininity” and, inasmuch, reflects the social reality of the time (“(Un)Masking” 83). Cross-dressing heroines are depicted in Sarah Grand’s *The Heavenly Twins*, *Ideala* and *The Beth Book*.

Heilmann argues that, during the late-Victorian period, cross-dressing “reinvigorated the Amazon tradition by challenging biological notions of sexual difference deployed to rationalise women’s political disempowerment as the product of nature” (“(Un)Masking” 83).⁴⁴ This idea is echoed in the “Preface” to *Gloriana*. Dixie states that:

There is but one object in “Gloriana.” It is to speak of evils which DO exist, to study facts which it is a crime to neglect, to sketch an artificial position – the creation of laws false to Nature – unparalleled for injustice and hardship. ... If, therefore, the following story should help men to be generous and just, should awaken the sluggards amongst women to a sense of their Position, and should thus lead to a rapid Revolution it will not have been written in vain. (Dixie ix-x)

Cross-dressing provides Gloria with a means of subverting the limitations placed on women’s engagement in the political sphere and, from a position of power, to break down these “laws false to Nature” by drawing attention to the essential constructedness of notions of sexual difference and the institutions they buttress (Dixie ix-x). In *Gloriana*, cross-dressing functions as a narrative device, informing the novel’s structure of build-up, climax and resolution, and as a metaphor for the novel’s feminist utopian function.

Descriptions of Hector’s dress, though frequently limited to the brief mention of a garment or accessory, are numerous and highly significant. At the Melton Steeplechase in 1894, Hector is admired as a fine horseman. Appreciative of the attention she is receiving, the narrator states that Hector “raised his[/her] hat politely” (40). The hat and her gallant tipping of it represent Hector’s performance of late-Victorian masculinity and gentlemanly behaviour. This is a crucial chapter

within the plot as readers are presented with sufficient evidence to identify Hector D'Estrange as Gloria De Lara. However, it is still some time before Hector reveals her identity and gender to her political colleagues. This structural irony is both symbolised and emphasised by Gloria's performance of a male sartorial subjectivity. In this way, Dixie demonstrates the novel's thesis, articulated in Hector's essay and restated in her maiden parliamentary speech, that:

where a girl had fair play, and is given equal opportunity with the boy, she not only equals him, but far outruns him in such; and ... that given the physical opportunities afforded the boy, to develop and expand and strengthen the body by what may be called "manly exercises," the girl would prove herself every inch his equal in physical strength. (Dixie 25)

In her first speech to the British Parliament, Hector applies this argument for equality to women's political enfranchisement. In presenting this Bill, she says "I make no apology" for this "simple act of justice offer[ed]... to repair the wrongs which [men] have done ... [women] in the past" (125).

This political act is also emphasised through a change in dress. Hector dresses for parliamentary sittings in a men's three piece suit. In doing so, she both emphasises and asserts her political power. These dressing-room scenes signal climaxes in the debates surrounding women's rights and universal suffrage in the parliament and, hence, within the narrative. By cross-dressing, Hector is "preparing to do battle for her sex" (17). This battle is literalised later in the novel in the "Revolution of 1900". Hector's "simple act of justice" precipitates the "Revolution" of the novel's subtitle: a violent conflict fought on the streets of central London between the all-female "White Army" and the political institutions of *fin-de-siècle* Britain. The climax in the novel, however, comes with Hector's revelation of her gender and the ensuing Revolution.

In response to parliamentary critics of women's suffrage, Hector offers herself as evidence of women's ability to participate in politics. "You will not acknowledge that a woman can equal man, and with fair opportunities rise to power and fame," she states; "My lord, and gentlemen . . . I declare myself . . . In Hector D'Estrange, the world beholds a woman – her name, Gloria De Lara" (173). Upon the revelation of her gender, Hector changes her masculine three-piece suit for the androgynous uniform of the White Army and joins her followers in battle as Gloria De Lara. This uniform represents a clear departure from the highly gendered fashions of the Victorian period. Designed to facilitate physical activity, it is a version of rational dress. As well as being practical, it also has a symbolic purpose. As androgynous and chromatically blank, this form of dress represents the erasure of biological notions of sexual difference and socially constructed notions of gender. Its whiteness also represents the purity and honesty of the Army's aim to redress the wrongs which law has imposed upon Nature and achieve the complete emancipation and enfranchisement of women (ix-x; 125). During the course of the struggle, Hector is believed to be killed. Such is the "D'Estrangeite" (318) legacy that the revolution continues and is eventually successful.

In the final chapters of the novel, however, she returns as the heroine Gloria De Lara, Britain's first *female* Prime Minister, and "The Mighty Champion of Women's Freedom and the Saviour of her People" (348). "Gloria" is transformed from a politician and soldier into an allegorical figure. Dressed in the androgynous white uniform of the "Women's Volunteer Forces," she is an embodiment of "the first great effort made by woman to shake off the chains of slavery" and Victorian ideals of femininity (91).

Early in the novel, Gloria reflects that, had the Victorian woman,

been in a position to map out her own line of life, what a different tale might [have] be told! She was not. [Convention] ... denied her the right to choose her future; it curtailed her line of action within certain bounds. (38)

Gloria's utopian narrative realises these possibilities. Dixie uses metafictional techniques and metaphors of cross-dressing and rational-dressing to refashion the Victorian heroine and rewrite the conventions, both social and literary, which limit the scope of her narrative. This is embodied in Gloria's transformation into the "Statue of Liberty" in the novel's epilogue (345).

Gloria's white-clad figure is immortalised in the "gleaming gilded" "Statue of Liberty" (345). This statue is representative not only of an egalitarian future for the *New Great* but of Dixie's self-conscious writing of this in her utopian history of Hector/Gloria. In enacting the refashioning of the novel's protagonist from late-Victorian feminist Hector D'Estrange – an alien figure and one who bullies or harasses – to Gloriana De Lara – a glorified figure and protector – Dixie provides a model for the future of the women's movement and the way in which it will be remembered in the histories and city monuments of the future.⁴⁵ Instead of being a *fin-de-siècle* Briton, subject to contemporary notions of gender and sexual difference, the protagonist becomes an ahistorical and sex-less icon. Dixie uses the heroine's dress as a symbol for her utopian rewriting of history. It concomitantly signals her engagement with *fin-de-siècle* debates about the gendered body and the fashioning of these in a new vision for the future.

Conclusion

In looking beyond 1900, *Gloriana* depicts the nineteenth-century heroine's final refashioning: from obscurity to feminist idol; grey to white; heroine to author;

Angel in the House and *femme fatale* to New Woman and, finally, Amazon, soldier, Prime Minister and historian of the future. The “Woman in Grey” represents new, or newly perceived, forms of femininity and female identity in Victorian popular literature. Her dress of wool and tweed signal her appropriation of the styles and connotations of traditional men’s wear in tailoring new narratives of femininity at the *fin de siècle*. The “[New] Woman in Grey” is depicted as reader, cycling heroine and self-conscious autobiographical author, refashioning the social, sartorial, narrative and authorial conventions of the Victorian period. In *Gloriana*, Dixie refashions the Victorian heroine for the final time in the white-clad figures of Gloria and the utopian “Statue of Liberty”. Instead of being enmeshed in the movement, progress, politics and literature of *fin-de-siècle* Britain, her statue of liberty stands apart from it, reflecting on its position in history. In this way, Dixie anticipates the task which I, as a twenty-first century literary critic and cultural historian, have undertaken in the preceding chapters: to reflect on the representation of women in Victorian popular literature and to explore the ways in dress is used to fashion femininity and female sexuality and tell the woman’s story. Dixie also provides a model for the future of the study of dress in Victorian popular literature.

Conclusion

(Re)Fashioning and (Re)Writing the Victorian Heroine

In Sarah Grand's novel *The Heavenly Twins*, heroine Angelica reflects, "Isn't it surprising the difference dress makes?" (452). This question is applicable, not only to Angelica's transgressive transformation from a "substantial young woman" into a "slender, delicate-looking boy," but also to the stories of Victorian heroines and their negotiation of ideals and narratives of femininity more broadly (452). Angelica's expression of surprise at the significance of dress in fashioning female identities and sexualities, and telling women's stories, is also registered in much scholarship on Victorian literature.

Many works on dress in fiction commence from an assumption that dress is fashionable and ephemeral, and that sartorial description constitutes merely frivolous detail within a text. Their conclusions, then, are inflected with surprise at "the difference dress makes" within characterisation and narration (Grand, *Heavenly* 452). Such scholars conclude that dress functions in a multitude of ways: as a social or historical symbol, to indicate a mood (Dingle 266), as "part of the author's personal sign-system," to disguise or express a character, and as a metaphor for narrative (C. Hughes, *Dressed* 3).

Drawing on such scholarship and on mid-to-late Victorian theories of dress, fashion and identity, *Double Threads* is premised on the idea that dress functions within structures of characterisation and narrative in Victorian popular literature. It proceeds to explore this thesis through examining changes in sartorial and narrative fashions and their significance to representations of femininity and female sexuality in a range of popular texts and genres from 1860 to 1900.

Double Threads argues that in Victorian popular literature, the heroine's dress functions, not as verisimilar or frivolous descriptive detail, but as a signifier to be read. Changes in the colour, texture and style of the heroine's dress represent her movement and development throughout a narrative; in short, dress tells the heroine's story. Structured according to a chronology of fashions in dress and literature, this thesis explores the material, literary, historical and critical threads of reading dress, fashion, texture and textuality in Victorian popular literature. In this Conclusion, I reflect on the interweaving of these threads and the symbolic, narrative and critical patterns they create, and propose future directions for this field of scholarship.

In mid-to-late Victorian popular literature, the heroines are transformed from angelic, or devious, women in white muslin, to passionate *femmes fatales* or aesthetes in rich silks and velvets, mysterious women in paisley shawls, New Women in grey, and rational-dressing and cross-dressing writers and politicians. Superficially, these descriptions testify to changing fashions in women's dress during this period. They also indicate changing social and narrative possibilities for heroines within contemporary notions of femininity and female sexuality, and within styles and genres of popular literature.

This study opens in 1860 with the "Woman in White" muslin and her entry into popular literature and the cultural imagination with Collins's *The Woman in White*. As a woman of fashion, an embodiment of the ideal of the Angel in the House, and a heroine of sensation fiction, the "Woman in White" is an icon of the mid-Victorian period. Ethereal and pure, her white gowns represent innocence, passivity and virginity. They also function as a metaphor for the heroine's narrative and its representative; as Talbot Bulstrode states in *Aurora*

Floyd, the ideal heroine's story must be "a white unblemished page" (105) as "spotless as her own white robes" (40). Muslin's chromatic nullity and textural transparency are crucial to readings of its symbolic and narrative significance. The heroine's white dress is perceived to be an artless expression of her moral and sexual purity. This association of white muslin with virginity, purity and honesty also renders it an ideal disguise.

The heroines of *East Lynne*, *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd* are infamous for looking the part of the domestic angel but refusing to actually "be" her (Voskuil 613). In these novels, Wood and Braddon dress their heroines in white muslin. However, the chromatic nullity and purity of white disguise the heroines' dark secrets. White muslin, thus, becomes a symbol of the artful construction and representation of ideal Victorian femininity. This is also evident in the 1886 novel *A Drama in Muslin*, when heroine Alice asks "how ... can we be really noble and pure, while we are still decked out in innocence, virtue and belief as ephemeral as the muslins we wear?" (Moore 99). Muslin's lightness of texture and history as disposable fashion reveal the ephemerality and constructedness of Victorian femininity. In the course of this novel, Moore's muslin-clad heroines are martyred to the feminine ideal of marriage and motherhood.

The heroine of Allen's *The Woman Who Did* is also a martyr in white muslin; rather than being martyred to the Victorian cult of domesticity, however, Herminia sacrifices herself to their antitheses: "free love" (22) and the ideals of "free women" (38). Her white dress is a sign of her "translucent simplicity and directness of purpose" (Allen, *Woman* 37), and her dedication to the "cause of truth and righteousness" of the late-Victorian women's movement (Allen, *Woman*

238). White muslin's dynamic transparency and opacity, and ethereality and ephemerality, represent the multiplicity of female subjectivities depicted in popular literature throughout the mid-to-late Victorian period.

While white muslin is the stuff of virtue, ethereality and ephemerality, silk and velvet are the cloths of decadence, mysticism, theatre, sensuality and sex. In Victorian popular literature, silk evokes a multitude of visual and textural sensations, complex histories and narratives, and symbolic connotations. The varied textures of silk complicate its reality effect as a sartorial symbol; a silk gown can function alternately to disguise, evocatively reveal, and remould the heroine's body, her story and her secrets. The cloths' symbolic and narrative functions shift with changes in their colours and textures, and with changing fashions in literary genres and the poetics of representation throughout the period.

Braddon's Lady Audley and Aurora Floyd are quintessential *femmes fatales* of sensation fiction. In the course of their narratives, they change their white muslin gowns for richly coloured and textured silk and velvet, refashioning their identities and deflecting suspicion of their guilt. Their use of silk and velvet represent significant moments in the novels' narratives of suspense, build-up and resolution. In *Vixen*, Braddon evokes and then subverts such imagery and narratives of sensational femininity. In doing so, she comments on the artful construction of fictions of femininity in mid-Victorian literature.

In *Miss Brown*, Lee's eponymous heroine is dressed, against her will, in the diaphanous silks and rich velvets of Pre-Raphaelite art and Aesthetic fashion; these gowns represent her fashioning as muse for this new form of feminine beauty. Lee uses the rich symbolism of Aesthetic fashion to tell the heroine's story whilst also questioning the capacity of such artifice to represent a character's

true identity. As the narrator notes, the various colours and textures of silk mingle to create the effect of “[a] sort of shimmer ... [of] reality and unreality,” complicating any reading of the heroine’s dress and her story (57; vol. 2).

The paisley shawl also swathes the female body in a richness of pattern and symbolism which is beautiful, complex and enthrallingly unreal. Its patterned complexity destabilises the connections between dress, the body, subjectivity, sexuality and narrative. Both *East Lynne* and *Lady Audley’s Secret* close with the image of the heroine dressed in a paisley shawl. This functions as a self-conscious reference to the mystery and complexity of the novels’ sensational narratives. For Wood and Braddon, the paisley shawl is a fashionable disguise and narrative symbol. It encapsulates the many and conflicting narratives of their novels and, in bringing these together in the final scenes, self-consciously reflects on the importance of dress in fashioning femininity and telling the heroines’ stories. In *Armada*, the paisley shawl functions as a sartorial disguise, Imperial symbol and narrative metaphor. Its intricately interwoven threads represent this multitude of complex functions.

Throughout the novel, Lydia is dressed in a “red paisley shawl” (70). This garment both identifies the heroine and disguises her true identity. In order to uncover Lydia’s malicious motivations and criminal past and, thereby, solve the mystery of the novel, the protagonists must disentangle the symbolic and narrative threads of the paisley shawl (77). In *Armada*, the paisley shawl functions as an evocative colonial symbol, a potent sartorial disguise and a tool and metaphor for narrative.

In *Miss Brown*, Lee narrates the paisley shawl’s shift from item of fashion to artefact. During the 1870s and 1880s, paisley and Kashmir shawls adorned

Aesthetic drawing-rooms as exotic and artistic artefacts. In such contexts, they represent the complicated and contested histories of British imperialism whilst also evoking the shawl's more recent literary history as a symbol for alternative narratives of femininity. By employing the paisley shawl as narrative, rather than fashionable, object, Miss Brown self-consciously rewrites her narrative as heroine and prefigures new types and narratives of femininity at the *fin de siècle*.

Whilst white muslin, silk and velvet and the paisley shawl already had rich histories as fashionable garments and literary symbols by 1860, the grey tweed "tailor-made" or cycling "rationals" were new forms of women's dress in the 1880s and 1890s. They represent new social and narrative opportunities for women and symbolise the radical re-writing of Victorian literary conventions in the New Woman and cycling adventure novel. Grey tweed represents the New Woman's appropriation of the traditions, iconography and connotations of men's tailored sporting and business-wear. The "[New] Woman in Grey" refashions herself as heroine and author, rewriting her own story.

In *The Story of a Modern Woman*, Mary's grey dress represents her transition from the drawing-room to the streets of London and her attendant refashioning from reader to New Woman author. The heroine of *The Wheels of Chance* appropriates this style of dress and its narrative significance; however, she is trapped within the mechanisms of the romance narrative and cannot complete her transformation. In the novel's final chapter, her grey dress and her dreams of independence fade. In Allen's *The Type-Writer Girl*, Juliet alternates between brown tweed "rationals," a plain black gown, a travelling gown, and a diaphanous white and pink evening gown. This re-dressing symbolises the heroine's engagement with divergent late-Victorian notions of femininity and female

sexuality. It also represents her adoption, editing and refashioning of a variety of gendered literary personas in telling her story.

This study opens with the image of the 1860s' heroine, an angelic figure in white muslin martyred to the ideal of marriage and motherhood. It follows a historical trajectory, informed by changing fashions in dress and fiction from the 1870s to the 1890s, and closes on the eve of the twentieth century with another white figure: Dixie's utopian "Statue of Liberty". In *Gloriana*, Dixie uses cross-dressing and rational-dressing, and a range of metafictional techniques, to refashion the Victorian heroine and rewrite the conventions, both social and literary, which limit the scope of her narrative. She draws attention to the constructedness of Victorian fashions and fictions of gendered identities and rewrites them for the twentieth century.

Gloriana closes with a view of London in 1999. The reader is characterised as a passenger in a hot air balloon, surveying the legacies of the novel's titular "Revolution" and the progress of the intervening century. London, we are told, is

vastly changed since 1900. Somehow it wears a countrified aspect, for every street has its double row of shady trees, and gardens and parks abound at every turn. This London, unlike its predecessor, is not smoke-begrimed, nor can it boast of dirty courts and filthy alleys like the London of 1900. (345)

We look "down with interest ... [Our] gaze wandering across the mighty city, [is] ... arrested by two gleaming gilded statues" (345-6). These are the "Statues of Liberty," memorials to "the first great effort made by woman to shake off the chains of slavery" and to the Revolution's and novel's heroine, Gloria De Lara/Hector D'Estrange (91). These "gleaming statues" are also textual artefacts, representing Dixie's depiction of this struggle and the utopian refashioning of the

Victorian heroine and metafictional rewriting of the conventions which limit the scope of her narrative. Dixie's passenger is an embodiment of the social and literary historian of the future who also views the legacies of the Victorian period. She uses the material and textual artefacts of the Victorian period to write her own history as a late-Victorian feminist and writer and initiates a colloquy between the nineteenth and post-twentieth centuries. In her late-Victorian visions of the future, then, Dixie's heroine suggests directions for the future of this study of dress in Victorian popular literature and for the broader field of Victorian studies. As well as functioning as a symbol of the success of the nineteenth-century "effort made by woman to shake off the chains of slavery," this white-clad statue also represents the historical span of this project, from 1860s' *Angel in the House* to feminist icon of the future, and its exploration of how dress is used to narrate this effort in contemporary popular literature (Dixie 91).

Through this reading, Victorian popular literature is reconceptualised as both a literary style and critical category. It is understood as fashionable literature in the style of the time, and fashioned literature, self-consciously engaging with the means of its own production and consumption. Paying attention to the significance of the materiality of cloths and their modes of production and consumption in informing their use as narrative symbols provides a model for thinking about a text's structures of narrative and characterisation; both are informed by changes in form and style throughout the mid-to-late Victorian period. This invites a form of critical reading which takes into account the politics and poetics of representation and reading, and is conscious of the ways in which the "popular" is fashioned and represented in literary history and criticism.

Double Threads reveals numerous patterns: in fashions in Victorian popular literature; in the styles of dress worn and types of femininity represented in British popular literature between 1860 and 1900; in the ways in which sartorial description is used within structures of characterisation and narration; and in dress's relationship to the politics and poetics of representation and genre. The heroine is transformed from the Angel in the House and *femme fatale*, to self-conscious Aesthete, New Woman, politician, author and feminist icon. These changes are mapped against changes in the colour and texture of her dress: from the obscure symbolism of white muslin, which replaces the heroine's identity with the fictional ideal of purity and virginity; to silk and velvet, which remould the heroine's body and her story; to the paisley shawl which functions as a metaphor for complex and contested narratives; to the novelty and forthrightness of grey tweed and, finally, the self-consciousness of rational-dressing and cross-dressing.

The changing styles and symbolic functions of dress throughout this period also represent the different genres of popular literature and their forms of representation. These are informed by the histories of sartorial cloths and styles, as both material and literary objects. White muslin's dynamic texture as transparent and opaque, ethereal and ephemeral represents the sensation novel's structure of revelation wherein innocence and verisimilitude mask guilt and mystery (Brantlinger 14). The heroine's change from white muslin to silk and velvet represent sensation fiction's anxiety regarding "loss, disguise, and change of identity" (Loesberg 119). Later, the woman in diaphanous silk became representative of the Aesthetic movement and its narratives of female sexuality. The cycling "Woman in Grey" was characterised as, at once, the author, reader and heroine of the New Woman novel. Her plain and rational dress represents her

rejection of the conventional fashions and narratives of femininity. Cross-dressing and rational-dressing heroines enacted the feminist utopian novel's "hope for the reworking of gender" and anticipation of a modern egalitarian future (Beetham 94).

This chronology of fashions in dress and literature could be extended and the critical approach employed in this project applied to Edwardian and twentieth-century literature. Clair Hughes, in her study of the art of dress in Henry James's fiction, and Randi Koppen, in *Virginia Woolf, Fashion and Literary Modernity*, have begun work on this period. Future studies in this field could look beyond the modernist canon to consider shifts in the use of dress with changes in style and genre throughout the twentieth century.

In her utopian history of the future, Dixie demonstrates the ways in which authors of the *fin de siècle* look beyond the temporal, social and narrative conventions of the Victorian period to the future. In her twentieth-century visitor, we find our likeness as twenty-first century scholars of Victorian literature and culture. As readers and writers, Victorianists and citizens of the twenty-first century, we sit at our desks surrounded by the material and textual artefacts of the nineteenth-century, and consciously position our work within the historical discourses and critical traditions of the intervening century. In this way, Dixie provides a model for the future of the study of dress in literature.

In opening his survey of *Heroines of Fiction* in 1901, W. D. Howells suggests that decades and centuries are mere conventions of chronologers and historians (1; vol. 1). He states that he "is by no means bound to date the heroines of nineteenth century fiction from the close of the eighteenth century, even if the whole world were agreed just when that was" (1; vol. 1). This sentiment is echoed

by later historians of the Victorian period who argue that the dates of a monarch's reign are a poor frame for a historical period, and the influences which spread beyond it (Flint, "Why" 230). Continuing this critical colloquy between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries, then, we can consider the ways in which material objects function as repositories of narratives – both fictional and historical – in Victorian studies and contemporary representations of the period.

In the twentieth and twenty first centuries, dress and fashion have become one of the chief media through which writers of historical fiction fashion images of the Victorian period for their readers. In many cases, the use of dress transcends the realistic and becomes iconic; the woman in the crinoline has escaped from fashion history and become representative of the Victorian period and attendant narratives of gender and sexuality. As Howells suggests, it would be possible to reject the boundaries of genre and periodisation that assign the Victorian heroine to the nineteenth-century novel and consider the ways in which dress is used to fashion the heroine in neo-Victorian fiction. Such a project would consider the ways in which authors of neo-Victorian literature draw from fashion history and the Victorian conventions of style, genre and representation in the use of dress in telling the heroine's story. It would also consider dress's status as a historical, as well as material and literary, artefact. Such a study would provide a point of contrast with the styles and novels discussed and patterns identified in *Double Threads*. Drawing on another thread of this research, popular literature could be further reconceptualised within the twenty-first century literary marketplace and critical field. The self-consciously postmodern genres of historiographic metafiction and the double-narrative historical novel could be reconceptualised as fashionable and fashioned fiction.

This study has drawn together the threads of literary criticism, fashion and textile history, and cultural studies. It has suggested a way of thinking about materiality of texts and the textuality of material objects. This critical approach could be applied to the representation and narrative significance of other artefacts. Victorian literature is full of objects and artefacts, from Sèvres tea-cups and Gobelin tapestries, to chairs, hat boxes, scrapbooks and forgotten letters. These objects furnish the scenes of Victorian novels; they also function as symbolic artefacts and repositories of narrative. Texts themselves are also viewed as artefacts. Illustrated volumes are *objets d'art* and periodicals, disposable ephemera. Letters and scraps of paper function as narrative clues within Victorian novels. Collecting, cataloguing and exhibition function as cultural, intellectual and narrative practices (Pykett, "Material" 1).

In the last decade, a field of Victorian studies has developed, drawn from studies in "Thing Theory," which examines the signifying power of "things". In 2003, Lyn Pykett referred to the "The Material Turn in Victorian Studies" (1). Jennifer Sattaur provides an updated survey of this field in *Victorian Literature and Culture* in 2010. However, much more work could be done in this field. Popular literature's own status as an ephemeral object, and its engagement with other facets of popular culture, render it an ideal field for such scholarship. The present project provides a conceptual and methodological framework for such studies.

Double Threads is the first study to consider the significance of the materiality and history of sartorial cloths and styles in informing the use of dress in Victorian popular literature; in this way, it provides a model for thinking about the production of dress as a metaphor for the textual construction of femininity

and narrative. Drawing on threads of scholarship from fashion and textile history, cultural studies and literary criticism, this study expands the ways in which we interpret different types of cultural artefacts, suggesting a form of reading which explores the materiality of texts and the textuality of material cloth, the fashionedness of fiction, and the fiction of fashion.

Notes

¹ As Reynolds and Humble state, the term “heroine” is a problematic and contested one (3). In its broadest definition, the heroine is the female protagonist of a story. In romantic literature, the term is associated with the “beautiful, passive, love-objects” of this genre (3). Heroine also refers to a woman distinguished by the performance of courageous or noble actions or admired for her great qualities or achievements, as in the classical figure of the demi-deity (3). In this thesis, my concern is with the representation of women as protagonists of Victorian popular novels and the way in which their femininity and sexuality is constructed and represented. Although in some instances these women have been celebrated as representative figures, such as the New Woman of the 1890s, it is their position within a narrative rather than outside it which is the focus of this study. Accordingly, the term “heroine” is used in its broadest understanding.

² In this passage, Carlyle paraphrases the Bible: “For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring” (The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha, Acts 17.28).

³ Under the editorship of Oscar Wilde, *Woman’s World* published articles on “Beauty, From the Historical Point of View I” (Graham R. Tomson), “Dress in Politics” (Richard Heath) and “The Romance of Dress” (William S. Beck) all of which draw from art and statuary in their analyses of modern fashion. Mary Eliza Haweis’s series on *Art of Beauty* and *Art of Dress* also implored readers to fashion their clothes on models from art and history (Schaffer, *Forgotten* 103). The impact of Aestheticism on fashion and dress is discussed in depth in Chapters Two and Three.

⁴ Little is known about Deliverance Dingle, whether as a pseudonymous or actual author (Aindow 10). It is unknown whether she is speaking “From the Novelist’s Point of View” personally in this article, as the use of the singular noun and definite article would suggest, or making a more general assessment.

In the interest of contextualising this article, *The Lady’s World*, later to become *Woman’s World* under the editorship of Oscar Wilde, was *A Magazine of Fashion and Society* targeted to a female audience. Unlike many contemporary women’s periodicals, *The Lady’s World* does not merely offer a summary of the latest fashion and gossip. It engages with contemporary artistic, social and political debates, publishing informative and critical discussions of current events. Alongside Dingle’s analysis of fashion in contemporary fiction, the November 1886 issue included articles on “The Wild Silks of India: Tussur Silk” [sic] (A. E. F. Eliot-James), “A Run Through the Galleries,” “A Chat About Books” (Aunt Agatha), “The Rational Dress Movement,” “Art in Dress I: Colour,” “Pastimes for Ladies: Hunting,” and reviews of current fashions, exhibitions, theatre and music.

“Clothes: From the Novelist’s Point of View” evidences a coalescence of such critical approaches to fashions in dress, the arts and fiction. Its examination of the significance of colours and textures of dress from an authorial perspective reflects an interest in the history and modes of production of fashionable cloths, the art of dressing and the use of colour as an expression of identity and indication of mood, and in the materiality of dress. These interests are reflected more broadly in *The Lady’s World*. In this way, Dingle’s article provides a model for the materialist analysis of dress in Victorian popular literature to be undertaken in this project. Dingle’s apparently “random” selection of novelists and novels which span many genres of popular literature and her discussion of the significance of dress to the narrative style of these works also informs the structure of my analysis (266).

⁵ The title Dingle gives is incorrect. She is referring to Trollope’s novel *Mr. Scarborough’s Family*.

⁶ Nicholas Daly explores this in *Modernism, Romance, and the Fin de Siècle*.

⁷ For an analysis of the development of the literary canon and associated theories of Literature/literature, see Trevor Ross's *The Making of the English Canon* (1998) and Jonathan Brody Kramnick's *Making the English Canon: Print Capitalism and the Cultural Past* (1998).

⁸ A *casaque* is a loose-fitting blouse.

⁹ Aindow undertakes a brief, though compelling, analysis of the significance of white dress to social and moral codes in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* as an exemplar for her discussion of "The Function of Dress in the Novel" in *Dress and Identity In British Literary Culture, 1870-1914* (2010).

¹⁰ The histories of muslin presented by Sonia Ashmore in *Muslin* (2012), Beverly Lemire in *Cotton* (2011) and *Fashion's Favourite: The Cotton Trade and the Consumer in Britain, 1660-1800* (1991) and Stephen Yafa in *Cotton: The Biography of a Revolutionary Fibre* (2005) differ in detail. These differences are attributable to the range of primary documents available which offer different, occasionally contradictory, accounts of the cloth, its antecedence and its production. Disagreements between the secondary sources are merely interpretative differences and are not an indictment of the scholarly rigour of any of these works.

The historical summary given in this chapter is a delicate interweaving of these histories. It does not profess to be a definitive or exhaustive history of muslin, but to place nineteenth-century muslin within its broader context and to draw out the threads which inform its popularity and symbolic connotations in the Victorian period. In doing so, this overview seeks to reflect the complexities of histories of the cloth rather than to elide them. Like muslin itself, the cloth's history is a palimpsest which bears the marks of multiple, and oftentimes conflicting, influences and stories from a variety of sources, places and times.

¹¹ Cotton's history also extends beyond the British Empire throughout Asia, Europe and the Americas. As Ashmore states, muslin and other cotton cloths played a vital role in global trade from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries (8). This chapter does not address the broader history of muslin production and consumption. For a detailed history of the cloth, see Ashmore, Lemire and Yafa.

¹² Harvey states that beneath white's appearances of purity and innocence, "one should speculate about an alternative under-association, and see the white dresses ... as being open to a less cold affinity, with white linen and bed-sheets, the boudoir and the bed" (205).

¹³ In the 1880s, Moore was an active participant in debates about realism and romance as literary forms (Ledger, *New* 138). In his fiction, though, he firmly aligned himself with the realist and naturalist schools (Ledger, *New* 138). Milton Chaikin notes that in his choice of themes, style and narrative methods Moore was heavily influenced by French authors Balzac and Zola (540-2). Moore's 1880s novels have been labelled "an attempt to improve on Zola's method" and reconcile it with the work of Walter Pater (MacLeod 60).

¹⁴ A *chiton* (or *chyton*) is an ancient Greek tunic. In the late-nineteenth century, the *chiton* was celebrated by artistic dressers and "reformers of Fashion" (Oliphant, *Dress* 69) as providing "the breath of health" (Oliphant, *Dress* 67). The *chiton* also became an object of satire for those opposed to dress reform. In her contribution to the "Art at Home" series in 1887, *Dress*, Oliphant suggests improvements the "comfort and beauty of dress" (64); however, she states that "it would be vain to attempt to discuss [the *chiton*] ... with any seriousness" (68). "The French revolution was nothing to it," she states; "it would be more possible to disestablish the Church, abolish the House of Lords, and cut the sacred vesture of the British Constitution into little pieces, than to translate English garments into Greek" (68).

¹⁵ *Poult-de-soie* is a firm, double-faced twill weave silk with a dull finish. It is also known as *peau de soie* (Yarwood 373).

¹⁶ A cope is a liturgical mantle or cloak, often highly embellished.

¹⁷ The question of the appropriate terminology to refer to Victorian shawls in this style is an implicit and ongoing one in fashion and cultural history. The adjectives “Kashmir,” “Cashmere,” “Paisley,” “paisley” and “Indian” are used interchangeably to refer to these distinctive textiles of both Indian and British/European manufacture. For the purpose of this study they will be referred to as “paisley shawls”. The currency of this term is evident in its continued use today to refer to the “pine pattern” and items which carry it. In making this decision, I am very aware of the colonial and cultural baggage which accompanies it in this post-colonial political and academic environment. Sharrad addresses this in his article “Following the Map: A Postcolonial Unpacking of a Kashmir Shawl”.

¹⁸ Frank Ames explores the history of these industries in *The Kashmir Shawl and Its Indo-French Influences*.

¹⁹ Throughout the nineteenth century, changing fashions dictated changes in the size and shape, as well as the patterns and colours, of paisley shawls (Reilly 35). The “scarf or stole” was fashionable from 1800 to 1820 and was of long and narrow dimensions which complemented the slim-fitting Empire-line gowns of contemporary fashion (Reilly 35). They generally measured 9 feet by 20 inches (Reilly 35).

²⁰ Square shawls were woven in any size up to 6 feet square (Reilly 35). The most popular size shawl was of rectangular dimensions and was known as the plaid (not to be confused with the Scottish Plaid). These came in full size (generally 10 feet by 5 feet) and three-quarter size (generally 8 feet by 4 feet) (Reilly 35). The “plaid” was worn over crinoline gowns during the mid-Victorian period (Reilly 35). Such shawls could be plain, fancy-weave or paisley (Reilly 35).

²¹ *Passementiere* are a style of ornamentation comprising cording, beading and frogging.

²² *Villette* is set in the town of the same name (Villette meaning “little town” in French) in the fictionalised Catholic state of Labassecour (meaning farmyard) (Cooper xxi). Critics have argued that Villette is a fictionalised rendering of Brussels, where Brontë lived and worked between 1842 and 1844 (Cooper xi). Helen Cooper argues that Brontë used this fictionalised setting to explore the historical relationship of Belgium and Britain, and the more complex and contentious one between France and Britain (xxiii).

²³ A Cairngorm pin is a long pin set with yellow or brown crystalline quartz. The pins are traditionally worn with a Scottish kilt.

²⁴ This monetary figure suggests that Lady Audley’s shawl is a veritable Indian textile, rather than a cheaper imitation from Paisley or Paris.

²⁵ The fact that Allan and Midwinter are interchangeable in the role of “Man” is indicative of their shared identity as Allan Armadale.

²⁶ Frieze is a coarse napped woollen cloth.

²⁷ Hodden cloth is a coarse cloth made of undyed wool, formerly worn by the Scottish peasantry. Grey hodden is woven by combining black and white fleeces in a ratio of one to twelve.

²⁸ There is some contention regarding the origins of the term “tweed” as it is applied to a woollen cloth. In one foundation story, a clerk of the London tailor James Locke misread *tweel* (twill), referring to the cloth’s characteristic weave, as tweed, leading to the adoption of the term. Others argue that the name is derived from that of the Tweed River (Anderson, “Spinning” 286). It is likely that both of these factors came together in informing the popularity of the term.

²⁹ A brief history of this industry is outlined in Chapter Three.

³⁰ Hodden grey is also worn by the London Scottish Regiment (established in 1859), emphasising its association with Scottish masculinity and national pride.

³¹ The riding habit, part femininely draped skirt and part masculinely tailored jacket, embodies the tensions between liberty and constraint, femininity and masculinity and conformity and transgression which characterised Victorian representations of the horsewoman. David explores this in depth in “Elegant Amazons: Victorian Riding Habits and the Fashionable Horsewoman.”

³² In her characterisation of Vixen, Braddon rewrites the sensational narrative of her earlier horsewoman, Aurora Floyd.

³³ Dora De Blaquièrre gives a detailed overview of these garments in her 1895 article “The Dress for Bicycling”.

³⁴ Cartoons in the popular press frequently depicted the New Woman being mistaken for a young man.

³⁵ A reviewer in *The Athenaeum* disagreed, arguing that Dixon’s Mary Erle is not representative of the New Woman as “there is no ‘modernity’ in her” (“New Novels” 770).

³⁶ Allen’s *The Woman Who Did* (1895) also follows the *Bildungsroman* in narrating the New Woman’s emergence from the home into the modern city.

³⁷ The death of a parent is a frequent way in which the New Woman begins her story; it liberates her and necessitates her pursuit of independence.

³⁸ Mary and Alison are separated by differences of class and social position. After the death of her father, Mary is compelled to find work to support herself and her younger brother. Alison, however, comes from a wealthy London family and her work is a matter of conscience rather than economic necessity.

³⁹ Wells revisits these themes in his later satirical story, “A Perfect Gentleman: A Bicycling Adventure and What Came of It” (published in *The Woman at Home* in 1896 and reprinted in *The New York Tribune* in May 1897). As in *The Wheels of Chance*, the hero of this story is an inept cyclist with dreams of social advancement who harbours romantic aspirations towards a cycling New Woman whom he meets on the road. Their romance is as ill-fated as Hoopdriver and Jessie’s.

⁴⁰ In emphasising the use of “Lady” in Juliet’s job title, as opposed to “parenthetical female,” Allen emphasises both gender and class as significant social and narrative forces. As Suranyi notes, in *The Type-Writer Girl*, discourses of class, gender and the position of women intersect to reveal the precarious social position of women in the late-nineteenth century (9).

⁴¹ Here, Allen uses black satin as a cipher for conventional widowed and matronly femininity; this was an identity predicated on standards of strict class and gender distinctions, and social respectability.

⁴² Novels about New Woman writers were popular in the late-Victorian period. *The Woman Who Did*, *The Story of a Modern Woman*, *The Wheels of Chance*, *The Type-Writer Girl* and *A Writer of Books* all depict heroines who write, or aspire to write, “Novel[s] of the Modern Woman” (Stead 193).

⁴³ Butler’s *The Authoress of the Odyssey* was published in 1897.

⁴⁴ Heilmann’s “(Un)Masking Desire: Cross-dressing and the Crisis of Gender in New Woman Fiction,” provides an overview and analysis of cross-dressing in New Woman fiction. She argues that female cross-dressing emerged as both a theme and metaphor in *fin-de-siècle* feminist fiction (84-5). Cross-dressing represents a challenge to “biological notions of sexual difference” and demonstrates that “it was the costume, not the body, which inscribed gender and assigned social power to the wearer” (83).

⁴⁵ Hector means to bully, intimidate, badger or torment someone. D'Estrange indicates an alien, or alienated figure. Gloriana means glory and Lara comes from the Latin for protection. This is also foreshadowed in Gloria's mother's name, Speranza, meaning hope.

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