

**LADY AUDLEY: A MAD WOMAN, A SELFISH WOMAN, A NEW WOMAN**

**Drd. Diana Alexandra AVRAM (ȘANDRU)**  
**Universitatea „1 Decembrie 1918” din Alba Iulia**

**Abstract:** *By the end of the nineteenth century, women's sensation novels sparked some of the most heated discussions of their time. Mary Elizabeth Braddon was a female sensationist who contributed to the development of a cultural movement in which the central focus was the image of the unconventional woman. Lady Audley's Secret is a sensational blend of criminal and domestic affairs, and since its publication, it has been met with contradictory judgments, ranging from harsh criticism to warm admiration. Women's sensation novels, which reached peak popularity in the 1860s, and New Woman writing, which emerged in the 1890s, are often considered two distinct types of fiction. However, both are rooted in female writers' attempts to sketch new models of women striving to redefine their roles in society. This study examines the representation of a new type of woman as depicted by Braddon. Lady Audley's character is analysed through the novel's prevalent theme of madness, as well as through selfishness and her role in constructing the New Woman archetype. Additionally, we explore the mental pictures, the perceptions of women as visualized by the male characters in the novel.*

**Keywords:** *sensation, New Woman, madness, selfishness*

### **Introduction**

Mary Elizabeth Braddon's most famous novel, *Lady Audley's Secret* (1861), played a significant role in shifting social attitudes regarding gender relations and the status of women. This sensation novel explores themes of madness and unconventional behaviour, blending multiple literary techniques. It transitions seamlessly among detective fiction, mystery, literary realism, and a broader focus on the representation of the New Woman, all wrapped in the dramatic outer layer of sensationalism. Sensation fiction, without a doubt, aimed to create a reality far removed from what Victorian society was accustomed to.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, advancements in communication spurred rapid cultural transformation. With industrial development came a better-educated and more informed public, driving demand for diverse forms of entertainment. Journals and newspapers began serializing novels, aiming to captivate readers and sustain their interest. This expanding book market encouraged sensation fiction authors to craft stories filled with shocking and secretive scenarios designed to provoke unease, fascination, and heated discussions.

The term „sensation”, as used by Victorian literary critics, had two distinct meanings. On one hand, it denoted a general sense of interest and curiosity about the events being described; on the other hand, it referred to the public excitement and fervent discussions that such stories inspired. *Lady Audley's Secret* epitomizes sensation fiction, drawing readers in with its portrayal of a mysterious woman whose

ethereal beauty contrasts with her gradually revealed duplicity. The novel tackles sensational topics, including bigamy, child abandonment, murder, insanity, and arson. Beyond these shocking elements, it challenges Victorian domestic ideals and mirrors the power struggle between genders. Braddon introduces a new type of woman, one who makes her own decisions and works tirelessly to change her destiny.

In this respect, *Lady Audley's Secret* can be seen as a precursor to New Woman novels. It portrays an autonomous woman with a rebellious attitude toward the male-dominated society of her time. Lyn Pykett argues that sensation fiction and New Woman writing should not be viewed as distinct genres but as interconnected movements. She explains that New Woman authors reshaped and refined the model established by sensation fiction, blending its dramatic style with more introspective and socially conscious elements. "The sensationalists brought together, in varying ways and proportions, the dominant female forms of the early nineteenth century: female gothic, melodrama and domestic realism. The New Woman writers reworked and recombined melodrama, gothic, sensationalism and the domestic, as well as developing new modes of 'feminine' writing, such as introspective reverie, dream sequences and, in some cases, a distinctive, idiosyncratic and highly wrought lyricism"<sup>1</sup>.

Sutherland calls *Lady Audley's secret* a "hyper-sensationalist"<sup>2</sup> novel, in which Braddon strove toward Collin's ground-breaking style that had produced a shock effect in 1859 with *Woman in White*. However, Braddon's fiction also presents a new and unusual occurrence, by deviating from the predefined image of the black-haired immoral woman, and succeeds into creating a fiction that presents a woman struggling to gain a foothold in a world dominated by men. The journalist Stead W. T. traces perfectly the outline of this new wave in the world of literature: "the New 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"<sup>3</sup>. Indeed, Braddon is the example of a woman who not only wrote about, but also lived a sensational life, as for fourteen years she had been the mistress of a married man, with whom she had six children until the death of his wife. Some of the negative criticisms attributed to bigamy and anomalous affairs alluded to her private life,

Disapprovals also derived from the refusal to accept the change in literary realism and hinted and the credibility of the novel's events. For example, Rae made the critical judgement that Phoebe was the only realistic character in the novel<sup>4</sup>. A harsh anonymous review from 1867, which appeared in an article entitled *Novels*, calls the novel "one of the most noxious books of modern times". It was later

<sup>1</sup> Lyn Pykett, *The 'improper' feminine: The women's sensation novel and the New Woman writing*, London/New York, Routledge, 1992, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> John Sutherland, *The Stanford companion to Victorian fiction*. Redwood City, Stanford University Press, 1990, p. 55.

<sup>3</sup> Stead William Thomas, *The book of the month. The novel of the modern woman*, Review of Reviews, 1894, p. 64.

<sup>4</sup> Rae W. Fraser, *Sensation novels Miss Braddon*, The North British Review, vol. 43, 1865, p. 190.

confirmed that Margaret Oliphant, ardent advocator of domestic realism, was in fact the unenthusiastic greeter of this new style of writing. “Lady Audley is at once the heroine and the monstrosity of the novel. In drawing her, the authoress may have intended to portray a female Mephistopheles; but if so, she should have known that a woman cannot fill such a part [ . . . ] Her manner and her appearances are always in contrast with her conduct. All this is very exciting; but it is also very unnatural. The artistic faults of this novel are as grave as the ethical ones”<sup>5</sup> This opinion was shared by a group of critics who condemned the influence of this type of fiction, describing it as “one of the abominations of the age”<sup>6</sup> or as a “disgusting” work of literature. Braddon’s style was highly disparaged because it was believed to depict a corrupt and improper world to the young female readers. However, Braddon’s reaction to the words of her critics showed a composed, well-balanced judgement, by which she expresses her interest in sensation fiction, no matter the critical opinion against this literary genre. In one of her letters to her literary mentor, dated January 1866, she stated that “If I listened to the howling of the critics and abandon what they call sensation I should sink into the dullest namby-pambyism”<sup>7</sup>.

In the wake of this definable genre, Braddon seems to be eager to approach a style that portrays mysterious and diabolical characters, even though she is fully aware of the potential harsh criticism and even of the possibility of failing. In 1872, she makes the observation that her books which focus on murderous acts, “sell better than any others”<sup>8</sup>, despite the critical opinion that vehemently opposes these acts and their acknowledgement in literature. Braddon shows promptness in exploiting this new genre and the way the publishing market is trying to engage its readers, at all times mindful of the judgement of the conservative public. “I have never written a line that has not been written against time. [...] I have written as conscientiously as I could; but more with a view to the interests of my publishers than with any great regard to my reputation”<sup>9</sup>.

### **Lady Audley’s secret identities**

The “secret” referred to in the title is a word which implies the obscurity of Lady Audley’s persona. From the very beginning, the narrator weaves the story around the character of Lucy Graham, who is presented as a charming governess. Sir Michael Audley, a wealthy and much older widower, falls in love with her and makes a proposal of marriage. She accepts and from that moment on she receives the name Lady Audley. The baronet’s nephew, Robert Audley, pays a surprise visit to the mansion, and brings with him his good friend George Talboys, who had suffered the loss of his beloved wife. Following a violent storm and a disturbed behaviour, George goes missing without a word. Robert is determined in discovering the truth

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Oliphant, *Novels*, Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine, vol. 102, 1867, p. 263.

<sup>6</sup> Rae W. Fraser, *Sensation novels Miss Braddon*, The North British Review, vol. 43, 1865, p. 180.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Lee Wolff, *Devoted disciple. The letters of Mary Elizabeth Braddon to Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton, 1862-1873*. Harvard Library Bulletin, vol. 22, 1974, p. 130.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 158.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Lee Wolff, *Sensational Victorian. The life and fiction of Mary Elizabeth Braddon*, New York, Garland, 1979, p. 11.

about his friend's disappearance and starts an investigation. To his surprise, he finds out that Lady Audley was in fact married to his friend and she had faked her death to cover up the bigamy. As the tension builds, Lady Audley's behaviour suffers sudden changes and culminates with a criminal behaviour, in the attempt of eliminating the danger of being exposed. In the end, Robert Audley thwarts her mischievous plan and forces her to reveal her true identity. She explains that she suffers from madness, as her mother did, and she ends up in a mental asylum.

A great number of studies have been dedicated to elucidating this mysterious character. The most common analyses have been produced in order to discover whether Lady Audley is truly mad. The opinion of psychologists that lived during those times was that women had a natural tendency for exhibiting a behaviour of uncontrollable emotion. Medical studies often referred to literary texts and to their approach to the women's behaviour. For example, in a study in psychology, Richet<sup>10</sup> stated that it was a common misbelief among romancers to consider hysteria an erotic disease, when in fact its symptoms had no sexual causes, but were inflicted by a nervous condition. According to the psychologist, hysteria was nothing more than a "disposition"<sup>11</sup>, since it was common for women to carry their feelings to an extreme. In Braddon's fiction, hysteric disposition can easily be perceived in Lady Audley's behaviour, from the very first chapters. She is frequently depicted as she switches from an amiable and happy state of mind, to a serious and melancholic mood.

However, in opposition to hysteria, insanity was described by Victorian psychologists as a disease, because it was believed to affect the intelligence<sup>12</sup>. If it is to take this assumption into account, Lady Audley does not prove to have her mental skills affected. She plots her moves with judgement and she is fully aware of her actions. When George recognizes her and confronts her, she first tries to bribe him into keeping her secret, even when he becomes violent. It is only when he threatens with finding a witness to denounce her that she realises she stands no chance to his determination and she pushes him into a deep well. Even though she attributes this to her "madness", she shows discernment immediately after, as she wants to make sure that he is dead: "I waited for nearly a quarter of an hour—God knows how long it seemed to me!"<sup>13</sup>, she confesses towards the end. This only proves her cold-blooded personality and firmness of purpose. Moreover, from the moment she finds out that Robert Audley is looking into his friend disappearance, she uses her charming manner and seductive appearance to gain knowledge of his plans, so that she could get ahead of him. Again, the murder attempt is just a final desperate act to guard her secret. In the end, she has the courage to accept the defeat and she proves strong enough to make a declaration in front of Sir Michael and to admit her mistakes. All of these prove that she is not insane, but fully aware of her actions.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Richet, *Hysteria and demonism. A study in morbid psychology*, Popular Science Monthly, vol. 27, 1885, p. 87.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 89.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 90.

<sup>13</sup> Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, Natalie M Houston Ed. Toronto, *Broadview literary texts*, 2003, p. 378.

Another widely accepted supposition of the era was that insanity was passed down from one generation to the next. A practical worker in medicinal psychology, D.H. Tuke<sup>14</sup>, believed that insanity was predetermined by the genetic material. Lady Audley fears that she would go mad, as her own mother did. In the first chapter, when being proposed to by Sir Michael Audley, a wealthy bachelor, Lucy speaks about her childhood marked by poverty and briefly mentions her mother, as a person she finds difficult to think of. In chapter five, when George is being presented the last days of his wife, the landlady mentions that before dying, she had started talking about her mother and “about the cruel shame it was to leave her to die in a strange place”<sup>15</sup>.

According to Lady Audley’s account, her actions have been mainly dictated by this state of uneasiness, resulting from the anticipation of a fantasized threatening event of an abnormal mental condition. In her opinion, insanity was the only inheritance she had to expect from her mother, so her entire life she concentrated her energy around this possibility. We argue that for this reason she considers her actions as part of her “madness”, because she allowed herself to behave recklessly at the thought that she could be hit by this genetic curse at any moment. According to her statement, all her life she tried to keep the balance between “reason and madness” and she experienced several episodes in which she “crossed that invisible line”<sup>16</sup>.

The baronet uses this common knowledge of hereditary insanity as an argument in favour of Lady Audley’s presumed madness. Even though he feels betrayed and shocked at the disclosure of his wife’s actions, his true intentions are to protect her against the reach of justice, by obtaining a medical reason. Of course, by doing that, he also protects the honour of his noble name. As an older man, with life experience, he was able to read his young wife’s behaviour, from the instant he proposed: “Beyond her agitation and her passionate vehemence, there is an undefined something in her manner which fills the baronet with a vague alarm.” Perhaps it was a risk that he took, because it served his interests. Out of selfishness, he calculated the amount of satisfaction a joyous and bright behaviour could bring in his monotonous life.

However, Dr. Mosgrave dismantles the idea of inherited insanity, stating that it is a mental condition which is not necessarily transmitted from mother to daughter. It could skip one generation and appear in the grandchildren. It is strange that after the brief talk with Lady Audley, which the narrator intentionally keeps out of the knowledge of readers, the physician reaches the conclusion that “the Lady is not mad; but she has the hereditary taint in her blood. She has the cunning of madness, with the prudence of intelligence”<sup>17</sup>.

After giving birth, it seems like she experienced postpartum depression, as she states in her declaration: “My baby was born, and the crisis which had been fatal to my mother arose for me”<sup>18</sup>. However, she then briefly specifies that she “escaped”

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Hack Tuke, *Modern life and insanity*, Macmillan's Magazine, vol. 37, 1877, p. 135.

<sup>15</sup> Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, Natalie M Houston Ed. Toronto, cited edition, p. 80.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 361.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 385.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 361.

and recovered, without offering further explanations. Little Georgie, Lady Audley's son, offers more details on the matter, revealing that he wasn't fond of his mother as she "was always crying"<sup>19</sup> and showed him no affection.

One *Youtube* channel, *Victorians Exposed*, supports the idea that her madness could be considered authentic, if it is recognized as an extreme form of postpartum depression, called puerperal mania. This disease causes once calm women to attack physically and verbally. At its most extreme it could even result in suicide or infanticide. According to the channel, Lady Audley shows symptoms of suffering of this condition, including the fact that she is described as "a chilly little creature", that her complexion is always rather pale and that the stressful episodes of sudden shock, anger or fright, trigger her to relapse into the disease. Taking into account her determination and the theatrical acts she puts together in her advantage, we argue that this hypothesis cannot be proven. It is common for all women to feel cold and as for the episodes which caused her to experience strong feelings, her emotions are always intensified by her ardent passion of not getting caught. All her actions are taken in a rational manner, proving cleverness, tenacity and an alert mind. She is never described as violent towards her son and she states that she never had the courage to kill herself.

As people living during the Victorian era did not completely understand mental illness, its symptoms were often considered to be irrecoverable, uncontrollable madness originating in moral deviancy and an inability to conform to the norms of society or to exercise self-control. "Madness is envisaged less as an inescapable physiological destiny, than as a partial state, to which anyone under stress is liable, and which endures only so long as passion overturns reason"<sup>20</sup>. Thus, the intense controversies in the conservative views and values of nineteenth-century Britain sprang mostly from the issue of morality.

Victorian society supported the principle of moral conduct and was not accustomed with the idea that people should be entitled to create their own happiness and to direct all their efforts towards becoming happy. In this respect, the issue of egoism is closely related to the morality of a person undertaking the necessary actions to obtain happiness. In Sidgwick's opinion, considered one of the most prominent ethical philosophers of the Victorian era, egoists are those who are aware of both the pleasures and the pains of their actions, but who choose to put themselves in those situations that provide a bigger amount of delight over misery<sup>21</sup>. Indeed, Lady Audley can be considered as a selfish person. According to her own statement, she spent entire nights plotting and scheming to shield herself. She did not show any remorse leaving her son, who she perceived as "a burden"<sup>22</sup> or causing sentimental pain to her first husband. She even admits that she resented her father's indulgence

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 127.

<sup>20</sup> Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian psychology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 35.

<sup>21</sup> Jerome Schneewind, *Sidgwick's ethics and Victorian moral philosophy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 353.

<sup>22</sup> Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, Natalie M Houston Ed. Toronto, *Broadview literary texts*, cited edition, p. 361.

and weakness while she was struggling to provide for herself and her family. She felt as “a slave” and she could not bear the thought of her working, while her husband’s sister and father were living in “luxury and respectability”.

Lady Audley seems to have used all the necessary effort to run away from poverty. First, she marries a rich country man, but when all the money is gone and she is left alone with a drunk father and a child to support she decides to forget all about that life of misery and to marry one more time, an even richer man. According to her declaration of truth, she resented the poverty-stricken life and the burden of keeping the secret of her mother’s madness made her “selfish and heartless”. From a very young age she became aware of her potential and decided to use her beauty in her advantage. Raised in utter poverty, she could not stand the idea of ending up like her mother, “in a hideous garment”, pacing up and down a narrow confining cell. This was her motivation into striving to obtain a wealthy lifestyle. But according to the social rules of the epoch, a woman with an unwavering mind, who strove to live a life of ease, was something uncommon and those were urges which could only emerge from a precarious mental state.

Many critics believe that the reason for committing the crimes is to avoid the suffering inflicted upon her by the men in her life and to continue to take advantage of the socially and financially healthy lifestyle as the wife of a baronet. Florschuetz states that Victorian beliefs put a high amount of pressure on the domestic role of wives and on their “submissive role”<sup>23</sup> towards their husbands, who, in turn, had to provide for their well-being. However, in the situation of men failing to offer financial and emotional stability, women appeared to be unguarded and helpless, so as an act of defence oftentimes they would commit aggressive acts of extreme anger. Ever since she was a little girl, she was left only with a drunk father who could offer her the life of poverty which she greatly despised. She knew she had to take life into her own hands, but, once again, she found herself abandoned, with “no protector”, as her husband fled in an attempt to become rich again. Lucy did not lose her temper, but she studied and became a governess. Although her actions point at a selfish woman, she reveals in the end that from the moment she became rich, “she took pleasure in acts of kindness and benevolence”<sup>24</sup> and sent anonymously money to her father and son.

The novel portrays an independent woman, who uses her intelligence and beauty to manipulate people and to obtain her desired goals. But beyond that, she seems to be perfectly capable of operating modern technology and media in her own advantage. These features encompass a new style in describing women, as Henry James observes: “The novelty lay in the heroine being, [...] an English gentlewoman of the current year, familiar with the use of the railway and the telegraph”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Angela Florschuetz, *Madness as domestic defense in Lady Audley's Secret and Jane Eyre*, *Articulate*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1999, p. 65.

<sup>24</sup> Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, Natalie M Houston Ed. Toronto, *Broadview literary texts*, cited edition, p. 362.

<sup>25</sup> Henry James, *Miss Braddon*, *The Nation*, 1865, p. 593.

Moreover, she could be perceived as a skilled “villainess”<sup>26</sup> who successfully fakes her death, changes her identity, and handles shrewdly any obstacle that might stop her from obtaining what she wants.

In a Victorian society where people are still trying to figure out how to define madness, Braddon seems to suggest to her readers to try and find a motivation behind a woman’s unethical behaviour. Furthermore, Lady Audley is presented as a mad woman only at the end, and not throughout the entire novel, which stands proof as an excuse for a deviation in conduct. In the end, her criminal attempts prove to have been unsuccessful, and perhaps she even took all the precautions, as she did not try to kill brutally, and every murderous act could have been avoided by the two men. The physician called by Sir Michael to prove his wife’s madness, offers a logical explanation for her criminal actions. There is no madness in looking to have a better life or in conspiring to keep the high standards of an acquired position<sup>27</sup>. This is in fact the secret of Lady Audley: shaping an identity based on her own perception of herself, not inheriting the legacy of her parents, and not following the directions imposed by a wavering husband.

### **The question of woman**

Although Lady Audley is the main character in the novel, the author attributes the “good” traits to a man. The feeling of excitement is created by gradually unravelling the image of a villainess, while engaging the readers in a battle of genders. Mid-Victorian society was still offering limited privileges to women and mostly casted them to the domestic sphere. However, this novel brings into discussion a different type of female character, and throughout its content, men are captured while speaking their minds about women.

Heilmann argues that “rooms that belong to and are controlled by men do not allow for female development”<sup>28</sup> and that Lady Audley’s “private apartments” are not safe from the “intrusion” of the three men in her life. This could be seen as a metaphor to describe the development in the female status. We see a woman that no longer wishes to be absent from the decisions that shape her happiness and we are presented a fierce competition of intrigues and intellectual games conceived by the two sexes. After her secret life has been revealed, the narrator represents the situation as a “game”. “I do not think that my lady had thrown away a card, or missed the making of a trick which she might by any possibility have made; but her opponent's hand had been too powerful for her, and he had won”<sup>29</sup>.

The inherited pattern of thought and symbolic imagery, derived from the biblical story of Eve and the serpent, gave substance to the science of psychiatry in

<sup>26</sup> Lyn Lee, *Lady Audley's Secret. How does she do it?, Sensation Fiction's technologically minded villainesses*, Paul Karl Gilbert (Ed.), *A Companion to Sensation Fiction*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2011, p. 136.

<sup>27</sup> Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, Natalie M Houston Ed. Toronto, *Broadview literary texts*, cited edition, p. 383.

<sup>28</sup> Ann Heilmann, *New woman fiction. Women writing first wave feminism*, 2000, London, Macmillan Press, p. 183.

<sup>29</sup> Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, Natalie M Houston Ed. Toronto, *Broadview literary texts*, cited edition, p. 378.



the Victorian era<sup>30</sup>. Usually, women were portrayed as intelligent creatures, but completely impoverished of moral responsibility. This idea appears several times in the novel. While Robert Audley reflects on the idea of marriage, he implies the resemblance of women with snakes: “Who shall decide from the first aspect of the slimy creature, which is to be the one eel out of the colossal bag of snakes?”<sup>31</sup>. In his opinion, no matter how morally repulsive women may be, they bear the fundamental quality of making a man happy.

Apart from some occasional mood swings, Lady Audley proves to be a strong, determined woman, who uses her beauty and childish traits to conceal her true intentions and to deceit people into believing that she is an innocent, frivolous creature. The narrator shares everybody’s opinion on her, right from the first chapter: “everybody, high and low, united in declaring that Lucy Graham was the sweetest girl that ever lived”<sup>32</sup>. This proves that her angelic looking figure was automatically attributed to a childish and dim-witted personality.

The two husbands of Lucy seem to consider her docile and innocent. George Talboys calls her a “poor little girl”<sup>33</sup>, while Sir Michael refers to her as to a “poor little woman”<sup>34</sup>. These collocations are meant to suggest the protective nature of the two men and the widely spread opinion on wives. Lady Audley borrows this last term of endearment when visiting Robert to inquire him about his investigation on the death of his friend. It appears to be a form of cover, as to conceal the true nature of her determined mind.

Robert Audley is not only depicted as the fierce opponent of the main character, but also as a man who displays strong feelings towards women. He calls Lady Audley “a poor little creature”<sup>35</sup>, hinting at something that has been created to be dependent upon a human being. He also refers to women several times by using the metaphor “female creature”, as to highlight the lack of understanding and mistrust toward them. In his view, women not only are inferior to men, but they seem to be unidentifiable beings, difficult to understand.

One chapter is built around some moments of reflection that Robert has while resting between the events. This happens towards the end of his investigation. At this moment he feels exhausted and drained of energy and even recognizes “the power of a mind superior” to his own<sup>36</sup>. He then proceeds into contemplating the agitated, restless nature of women, “bold, brazen, abominable creatures, invented for the annoyance and destruction of their superiors”<sup>37</sup>. He finally realizes that he got

<sup>30</sup> Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian psychology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 13.

<sup>31</sup> Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley’s Secret*, Natalie M Houston Ed. Toronto, *Broadview literary texts*, cited edition, p. 225.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 48.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 54.

<sup>34</sup> Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley’s Secret*, Natalie M Houston Ed. Toronto, *Broadview literary texts*, cited edition, p. 120.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 269.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 227-228.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 229.

trapped into understanding the mind of a stubborn woman and that all women are nothing but troublesome, restless “creatures”.

As he conducts his investigation, Robert also engages into observing women’s character. “How pitiless these women are to each other”<sup>38</sup>, he thinks, while looking for an answer from the two women that instructed Lucy into becoming a governess. He despises women’s behaviour of attacking one another and condemns their lack of solidarity: “This one knows intuitively that there is some danger to the other lurking beneath my questions. She sniffs the coming trouble to her fellow female creature, and rejoices in it, and would take any pains to help me. What a world it is, and how these women take life out of her hands”<sup>39</sup>.

From the remarks of the men in the novel, there is no doubt how little their understanding of women is. However, Robert Audley seems to grasp their complicated nature and even admits their superiority in showing firm determination and in fighting for what they believe in. Referring to his investigation against Lady Audley, he admits his defeat in the exertion of vigour, but, nevertheless, he decides to fight until the end for exposing the reality, and perhaps for proving men’s “superiority”.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this research was to provide an analysis of Lady Audley’s character, and a representation of the image of women, as perceived by the male characters in the novel. Throughout the study, we have analysed the narrative constructions, the conversations between characters, and the innermost thoughts of Robert Audley. By investigating these passages manually, our intention was to discover the real identity of the main character and the projected concept of women, as interpreted by the male characters.

Taking into account the aspects presented throughout this paper, we may conclude that mid-Victorian readers are presented a new type of woman. Beneath the layer of sensationalism, Lady Audley suffers identity alterations and shows a desire for independence. In the end, she comprehends this transformation, “from a frivolous, childish beauty into a woman, strong to argue her own cause and plead her own defense”<sup>40</sup>. She may be a mad woman to Sir Michael, who tries to find a plausible excuse to protect his reputation, and even to herself, as a safe response to criminal charges and as an answer to a behaviour considered improper by the rules of the society. She may also be considered a selfish woman, for trying to provide for herself a wealthy lifestyle, but above all these, she represents a woman that stands up for herself and takes control of her life. In a patriarchal society, where men are used to minimise the value of women, Mary Elizabeth Braddon offers for discussion a type of woman strong enough to stand up to the men in her life.

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 256.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 256.

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