

Lady Audley's Duplicitous Hair

Tara Puri

[...] 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 so exaggerated every attribute 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 to that pretty pouting mouth the hard and almost wicked look it had in the portrait.

It was so like and yet so unlike; it was 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 medieval monstrosities until his brain had grown bewildered, for my lady, in his portrait of her, had something of the aspect of a beautiful fiend.(1)

This is the description of Lady Audley's portrait that is discovered in the middle of the novel, and forms a significant clue to the secret that is the core of the mystery. Since much of Victorian realism relies on detailed descriptions of outward appearances, the physiognomies of the characters being intrinsically linked to their 'real' inner selves, Lady Audley's person is repeatedly and eloquently described throughout the novel. Read as the externally interpretable signs of a private, perhaps subconscious, self, exterior detail is as important as patent psychological insight and it is no wonder that her personality is rendered through depictions of her clothing, her gestures, her hair. It is this last feature that I will be focusing on here, examining how given this propensity to read physical attributes, a woman's hair becomes a text that explains her. I will be looking at the power and signification that is infused into hair in *Lady Audley's Secret* (1861-62), as well as the way in which it is intrinsically linked to Lady Audley's duplicity and the mystery that drives the narrative.

British fiction in the 1860s saw the emergence of the 'sensation novel', a genre that quickly claimed mass appeal as well as an equal amount of castigation in the popular press. Explaining the sensationalism of the new writing, Patrick Brantlinger writes: 'The sensation novel was and is sensational partly because of content: it deals with crime, often murder as an outcome of adultery and sometimes of bigamy, in apparently proper, bourgeois, domestic settings'.(2) Though its various writers had their own special brand of structural and stylistic particularities, it was, more generally speaking, a hybrid form that was firmly rooted in the contemporary domestic realism of Victorian literature, while also borrowing freely from an earlier tradition of Gothic romance. 'Sensation' was not just a psychological category that elicited a nervous, emotional response, but also a moral category that gestured towards a cultural crisis most overtly embodied in its transgressive women. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* converges the seemingly antonymous qualities of both genres in the figure of a threatening anti-heroine who subverted the very domesticity and its attendant femininity that made her alluring in the first place.

The novel excited considerable comment when it was first published centering as it did around a beautiful bigamous murderess. Tapping into the stir caused by sensation fiction itself, the novel was a commercial success though it met with much criticism for its supposed lack of morality and its intent to shock the readers rather than to appeal to them. A year after the appearance of the novel, Henry Mansel published an essay in which he accused sensation writers of 'supply[ing] the cravings of a diseased appetite', (3) and producing an indiscriminating mass of readership that read only for 'the pleasure of a nervous shock'.(4)

Numerous critics compared it to an addictive, narcotic substance that created a form of mania in its readers, a large number of whom happened to be young women whose inexperience made them prey to its corruptible influence.(5) So pernicious was its supposed effect that even the Archbishop of York preached a sermon against sensation novels in the Huddersfield Church Institute in 1864.(6) But what made *Lady Audley's Secret* different was that, as Showalter argues, it was not only 'a virtual manifesto of female sensationalism, but also a witty inversion of Victorian sentimental and domestic conventions'.(7) In Braddon's novels gender roles are often unbalanced, the women usually taking over the properties of the Byronic hero, and therefore the shock of this novel is not the act of bigamy itself, but the fact that the 'bigamist is no longer Rochester, but the demure little governess'.(8)

Apart from the usual objections that its publication aroused, Mrs Oliphant found an additional element of discomfort with the novel. In her 1865 review of Braddon's works she upbraided the writer on making hair 'one of the leading properties in fiction. [...] What need has woman for a soul when she has upon her head a mass of wavy gold?'(9) Mrs Oliphant had perceptively recognised the prominence and symbolic authority of Lucy Audley's golden hair in the novel, and the unexpected way in which the mystery of the novel hinges on it. Mrs Helen Talboys' suspicious transformation into Miss Lucy Graham, who then goes on to become Lady Audley, is finally given away by the magnificence of her golden hair. Her every appearance in the novel is marked by a description where her hair is the focal point, pregnant with proliferating meaning. Her locks are described as 'the most wonderful curls in the world - soft and feathery, always floating away from her face, and making a pale halo round her head when the sunlight shone through them'.(10) The phrases used are redolent of radiance and innocence - for instance, 'sunshiny ringlets', 'gold-shot, flaxen curls', that 'flashed hither and thither like wandering gleams of sunshine'.(11) It is her untouched beauty that makes her, at least outwardly, the ideal of the Victorian domestic angel, uncontaminated by the outside world, offering her husband the joys of the eden-like, virginal space that is her body.

While all clothing is an unmistakable kind of display, hair is a more nebulous category that exists in a liminal zone between the body natural and the body social. Since it is an extension of the body itself, it exudes a more organic sense of the true workings of a personality, but at the same time, it is a pliant, manageable feature that may be molded into a chosen pattern. It then functions as a kind of 'natural display', that is somehow more honest in what it reveals, and therefore more difficult to control, as well as to decipher correctly. The fascination with 'reading' women's hair - unraveling its meaning, mining its symbolic value, and using it as an extended metaphor for inner motivations - is evident in the kind of attention that it receives in Victorian writing. There are hardly any women characters in Victorian fiction whose hair does not garner at least a cursory descriptive glance, and more often it is described with recurrent deliberation and profuse detail, as critics like Gitter, Michie and Ofek point out.(12) 'The brown, neatly combed heads of the virtuous governesses and industrious wives; the tangled, disorderly hair of the sexually and emotionally volatile women [...]; the artfully arranged curls of the girl-women [...] are all familiar, even conventional, elements in Victorian character description'.(13) These generous portrayals of blonde, dark, auburn women, with curls, plaits or bands of straight hair become permeated with an abundance of meaning that goes beyond the descriptive fact to become crucial elements in reading not just the woman herself, but also various aspects of the novelistic world.

This preoccupation with hair becomes even more acute and conspicuous in the sensation novel. Indeed, the sensation novelists were striking at the very foundation of Victorian conventions of physiognomy and its link with morality by disconnecting the golden haired woman and her angelic femininity. By this overt stylistic technique they proceeded to suggest that 'no external sign could possibly capture modern womanhood, which was unfathomable, resisting unconditional univocal definition or "reading"'. The

representation of women's hair thus facilitated the authors' engagement in a debate which challenged traditional social and literary conventions, and explored new definitions of the feminine, the heroine, and the novel.'⁽¹⁴⁾ Even as hair was impressed into a carefully created form, every stray curl that escaped from the tight coiffure, or every curl that was assiduously combed into it, tapped into an expressive economy that is located outside of mere representation. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, in being both a vivid signifier of the approved version of Victorian femininity as well as a threatening female sexuality, Lucy's golden hair releases itself from pre-formatted stereotypes and becomes in itself something more fluid and potent: a cipher for a self that is hidden behind these various impersonations. It then, I argue, moves beyond the culturally ascribed codes associated with it, and becomes a highly expressive medium of voicing individuality.

In analysing the powerful figure of the golden haired woman, Gitter's argument is based on the continued significance of blonde hair in western imagination. She asserts that this cultural fixation took on an even richer symbolism in the nineteenth century because it most fully embodied the Victorian preoccupation with both wealth and female sexuality. Though this is largely true, hair in general, irrespective of colour, was becoming a highly complex site where cultural and sexual anxieties about women could be displaced. It was not just the golden hair that was significant, as Gitter argues, but rather women's hair itself which had evolved into a intensely articulate and emotive attribute. Though the fair-haired women who inhabit Victorian fiction seem to be representative of an ideal of femininity that demanded a desexualised, unthreatening, domesticated quality, because of the value-laden charge of blondeness, and its auxiliary features, it became coveted for itself. It then had the potential to transform its possessor into a sexualised, powerful woman who was aware of her own value, and also thus conscious of how to use it to her own advantage. This was the other extreme of the angelic blonde, whose sexuality had been defused and channeled into marital blissfulness.

This kind of equation has a specific context: golden hair had increasingly gained its overtones of a corrupted materiality and unwomanly greed from the public debate on what was known as the 'Woman Question'. The New Woman was emerging and making her claim on the public sphere, to a right to higher education, to her own property, to suffrage, and to a certain economic and physical freedom. In 1857, the Divorce Act was passed and the bill to amend the Married Woman's Property law was presented to parliament in the same year. Both of these called into question traditional familial structures and challenged them from a position that was chiefly financial. This implication easily translated into the gold that was women's hair, and was already present in the discourse on sexuality that often took place through that obvious symbol of femininity. This gold hair then transformed the woman who possessed it into the ultimate commodity while also making her, in a perverse twist, intensely powerful as the mistress of that which was so highly estimated.

This symbolic appraisal of hair also has a direct link to the actual economic value that it was endowed with, adding another layer to the cultural and political matrix that fetishised it. The manifold implications surrounding women's hair were compounded by the premium placed on it by a culture where the dictates of fashion made it a highly coveted commodity. Long hair was admired and envied, and hairstyles were increasingly so gigantic and elaborate that hair itself was in much demand. Fake hair was a necessity for recreating the voguish hairstyles of the day, and by the late 1850s, the supplying of artificial hair had become a major industry, with hair from France, Germany and Italy being the most desirable. Paris was the major hair market of the world, and it was reported in 1862 that about a hundred tonnes of hair was bought in the Paris market alone. Hair was then imported in large quantities into England by wig-makers to meet the market for fake hair that the new styles had generated. This requirement was fulfilled by

young women suffering from poverty or as a regular occupation where women grew their hair to be sheared for paltry sums and then sold for huge profits by the hair merchants.(15)

The idea of the dazzlingly blonde Angel in the House that the Victorian woman is typically associated with, becomes less and less helpful as a basis for evaluation. The highly disturbing compound of the untainted, childlike but sexualised blonde female makes this formulation of the coherent, domesticated woman highly suspect. The proper Victorian wife morphs into the dangerous, powerful, sexually aware woman who lures men through the promise of her erotic charms, leading them to their doom in the figure of Lady Audley. She is made doubly dangerous by her own appreciation of the power of her burnished hair, and she deftly manipulates it in her ambition for social ascent. Hair then emerges as a powerful force even outside of the blonde women who support it, disengaging itself from the connotations it derives from its colour, to become a force of its own: intensely eloquent, sexually charged, and commercially viable.

This new kind of heroine, or rather anti-heroine, inverted the stereotype of the domestic novel and expressed female rage, frustration and sexual energy, as well as a gender hostility that often erupted in violence towards men. Wicked women have usually been brunettes, not blonde, simpering creatures that charmed all with their dimpled smiles and bright blue eyes. But there is a secret that Lady Audley's golden beauty conceals and whose existence is hinted at by those same overflowing ringlets that typify her as the household angel. Though the exotic and remote settings of Gothic fiction here give way to the upper-class, aristocratic home of Sir Michael Audley, the links between the two are kept alive in the strangely medieval architecture of the mansion which is then transformed into a modern mirrored paradise that reflects every luxury that offsets the new bride. And though the overtly supernatural devices of horror stories are abandoned by Braddon, the new locus of mystery and suspicion is Lady Audley's body itself. The sense of the uncanny is achieved by focusing on her redolent golden hair, which becomes the signifier of that something unsettling yet indescribable that lurks behind the veneer of the apparently stable home. The private, enclosed space of the family becomes the site of mystery that will result in the peeling away of the layers of secrets that the mistress of the house has built up, revealing her beauty to be a masquerade without meaning.

In employing a descriptive technique that revolves around an excessive detailing of Lucy's appearance and an over accentuation of her embodiment of the feminine ideal, the novel has the effect of making Lucy the cynosure of the reader's attention, just as she is the centre of all attention and drama in the novelistic world. Constituted as an object of scrutiny, she is made into a spectacle at the textual, as well as the narrative level. Not the passive child-bride she appears to be, Lucy manipulates her appearance to hide an intelligent, grasping hunger for upward mobility behind what Alicia contemptuously terms 'a blue-eyed wax-doll' charm, an 'ideal of beauty [that] was to be found in a toy-shop'.(16) In this thoughtless remark, Alicia is closer to the truth than she thinks, for she likens her stepmother to an artificial, synthetic commodity. But though Lucy appears to be ornamental, frivolous, and therefore benign, she in fact forms the greatest threat to bourgeois culture in the novel by too closely mimicking and thus parodying its ideal, revealing it to be an empty icon. It is a replicable idol that can be produced and reproduced inexhaustibly in its various versions – the unsullied orphan, the respectable yet vulnerable governess, the complacent wife – by an actress as consummate and driven as Lucy herself. In the novel, it is the innumerable repetitions of flowing hair that link all her performances and postures, for it is 'Lucy's most serialized accessory and perhaps the novel's most persistent token of her hyperfemininity'.(17)

As the novel progresses through a series of *mise en abyme* disclosures, the secret that is at the centre of Lady Audley becomes further obscured. The plot thickens, twisting and looping at every point like her own sinuous curls, till it leads us back to Lady Audley. In spite of all her cunning, carefully cloaked in

infantile blondness, her secret is uncovered by Robert Audley, her nephew by marriage. He plays the role of the idiosyncratic detective who first falls for Lady Audley's charms, only to be disenchanted as she is revealed to be a 'poor unhappy little golden-haired sinner'.(18) In a climactic scene that lays bare a concealed aspect of her personality, Robert and George Talboys, her first husband, are shown the way of penetrating into Lady Audley's locked private rooms. The entry to this inner sanctum is shown by Alicia, her step-daughter, after a query by Robert Audley: "Isn't there a secret passage, or an old oak chest, or something of that kind, somewhere about the place, Alicia?"(19) This entire episode of the hidden passageway and the first real clue to Lady Audley's identity is a clear parody of Gothic conventions. As the two men delve into an inky, subterranean secret corridor, full of unexpected bends and turns, they seem to be mining into the dark passages of Lady Audley's mind and body. They finally emerge into her voluptuous, untidy boudoir where they find a painting of her, commissioned by the infatuated Sir Michael and painted by a meticulous Pre-Raphaelite. It is this portrait, the description of which I started this paper with, that reveals the sinister truth behind her angelic features.

This painting that is so like and unlike Lucy lays claim to a semantic realm of its own: it captures the defining essence of the woman, recognising the various layers of identity which envelope her, and in the process of this recognition becomes a text against which her body needs to be read. Every single painted feature becomes a dysmorphic reflection of the living woman that then turns out to be a truer likeness. As every strand of hair takes on a life of its own, becoming invested with an independent energy, it takes over the entire Pre-Raphaelite work of art, its undulating curves replicating the paintings' typically ornate frames. It then dwarfs the woman at the centre of the piece, becoming a framing device itself, a setting in which to read the woman.

Pre-Raphaelite paintings seem eloquent in the way in which they depict women as larger than life emblems of a hallowed feminine complaisance or as icons of female power and sexuality. It was a style that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century and shocked the public and the artistic establishment by its 'sensational' realism. It's almost photographic attention to every detail, its exaggerated naturalism bordering on the grotesque, its conflation of physiognomic accuracy and symbolic meaning, turned the 'self-conscious use of particular aesthetic conventions into an intricate debate on looking and knowing'.(20) It is on looking at this intensely suggestive painting of Lucy that Robert begins to fathom the secret shadow of her concealed identity, something that Alicia intuits, much like her dogs and horses who sense that there is something not quite right with Lady Audley. It is also this scene where Talboys recognises his dead wife in the face of the new mistress of Audley Court, and begins to comprehend the extent of her deceit.

Both Michie and Gitter, look at the models of Pre-Raphaelite paintings as obvious symbols of feminine authority and erotic energy, who derive their transcendent vitality partly through their magic hair. The Pre-Raphaelite painting that holds the secrets of Lady Audley's body and identity is itself the icon of Victorian female sexuality, and as such, it articulates and elaborates the paradoxes of Victorian representation. This image of the golden-haired goddess, at once emblematic of the idealised woman and at the same time disconnected from her, then expresses most fully the shifting and equivocal attitudes to the power and worth of female sexuality. Michie looks at this ambivalence, elaborating it on the body of the painted woman: 'On the one hand flamboyantly sexual, on the other, cloaked - even smothered - in layers of clothing, figuration and myth, Pre-Raphaelite paintings become at once the code of codes and the key to their unraveling'.(21) It is the portrait of Lady Audley that distills, codifies and projects her essence onto the painted body of the Pre-Raphaelite model, with all her representational implications and insinuations, and these in turn contrive to provide the fundamental clue to the truth of her character, and in doing so participates in the debate about the self that is central to the novel.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 'Lady Lilith' (1864-73) seems to be an incarnation of Lady Audley herself, the 'amber-haired syren'.⁽²²⁾ Rossetti's model embodies the same ambivalence, playing out the tension between an alluring sensuality and a troubling culpability. She is the ultimate *femme fatale* with voluptuous coral-red lips, enticing half-closed eyes, thick lustrous hair, and a curvaceous figure. As she narcissistically gazes at herself in the mirror, the viewer is invited to look at her - not only does the woman commodify her beauty, she too is a commodity that is available to the public gaze. Poised with her fingers combing her flowing hair, laying bare the wide expanse of her neck and chest, she is evocative of the mermaids who sit on rocks combing their long hair, leading wandering mariners to their death. This lush display of hair embodies an obvious sexual exhibition, with the manifest suggestion that the abundance of hair is directly proportional to the potency of the sexual invitation.

Accompanying the painting 'Lady Lilith' was a sonnet, 'Body's Beauty' (1868), with Lilith as Adam's first wife, whose 'enchanted hair was the first gold' (l.4).⁽²³⁾ She could deceive even before the serpent appeared and as she sat contemplating herself, drawing 'men to watch the bright web she can weave' (l.7), she put her spell on one so that it 'left his straight neck bent/ And round his heart one strangling golden hair' (l.13-14).⁽²⁴⁾ In this image, Lilith becomes a strange compound of Penelope and Medusa: one consigns her to the double faced fate of the virtuous wife and the devious woman, and the other to that of a vengeful, emasculating fury.

The Medusa is a frequently recurring trope in Victorian literature and forms a compelling image that combines the idea of female monstrosity with womanly tragedy. Though critics like Bram Dijkstra insist on the horrific, mutated, and gorgon-like aspect of Medusa and see her as a misogynistic figure used repeatedly, pre-dominantly by men, in paintings and literature of the late Victorian period, she is also the undisputable signifier of a disfigured beauty, a self-torturous specter of punishment.⁽²⁵⁾ Many elements of the myth, despite the ambiguity caused by the differing versions, suggest the tragic nature of the tale: admired for her beauty and her lustrous hair, Medusa offended Athena who then changed her locks into hissing serpents, thereby rendering her appearance so terrifying that no one could look upon her without being petrified into stone.

However, it is the kind of monstrous Medusa that Dijkstra talks about that is evoked in a critical passage in *Lady Audley's Secret*. Though the novel has had a varied publishing history, the text has remained largely consistent but for a three substantial revision.⁽²⁶⁾ In the chapter entitled 'Troubled Dreams', the account of Robert Audley's dreams was more explicit in the *Sixpenny Magazine* version but removed from all subsequent editions. It is one of these deleted passages that I want to examine here. In disturbed sleep, the terrifying image of Lucy as Medusa resurfaces in Robert's subconscious, providing another intuitive, spectral clue to her identity. In the manner of Gothic tales, *Lady Audley's Secret* too depends on a kind of knowledge that seems to emerge from the supernatural, finding utterance in portraits and dreams. So it is in Robert's dream that the 'feathery masses of ringlets' that the Pre-Raphaelite painter had rendered with such precision are mutated into Medusa-like serpentine locks:

[H]e was walking in the black shadows of this long avenue, with Lady Audley hanging on his arm, when [she] suddenly [...] wound her slender arms around him, crying out that it was the day of judgment, and that all wicked secrets must now be told. Looking at her as she shrieked this in his ear, he saw that her face had grown ghastly white, and that her beautiful golden ringlets were changing into serpents, and slowly creeping down her fair neck. (27)

This dream is as disquieting as the oneiric episode of the portrait. In both Lady Audley's hair becomes a bizarre metaphor for the duplicity that hides behind surface realities, the seemingly stable familial and feminine identities. The serpentine flexibility of Lucy's hair and its sinuous, meandering grasp on Robert's masculinity and even his physical person becomes equated with Medusa's venomous weapons. The allure of Lucy's radiant beauty and her luminous hair is only a trap that is given away by this configuration where her delicate complexion becomes 'ghastly white' and her golden hair itself metamorphoses into slender serpents. Dijkstra remarks that by using the symbol of the snake, with its associated ideas of cunning and perversity, writers could be 'somewhat less graphic and yet satisfyingly symbolic'.(28) For him this serpentine feminine bestiality is an image of what he calls 'idols of perversity', and closely linked to the idea of the *vagina dentata*: a jawed, alarmingly aggressive, predatory female sexuality. The dry, ruined well into which Lucy pushes George Talboys, attempting to murder him and keep her secret to herself, could be seen as a variation, or rather a concrete materialisation, of the *vagina dentate*. Situated at the end of the lime-walk in the garden, suggestively, the well is reached through a winding path, neglected and half-choked with weeds. The 'unheeded decay among the tangled masses of briery underwood' and the 'patch of rank grass',(29) that surround the forgotten well become extended metaphors for Lucy's sexual depravity and her moral barrenness. Deceived, cuckolded and seriously injured, Talboys is barely able to escape with his life and climbs out of the swallowing well covered in 'green damp and muck, [...] scratched and cut to pieces'.(30) The entrapping well with its cover of briar bushes becomes another synecdoche, almost like her boudoir into which the two men had earlier made their way, for Lady Audley's body itself but here it takes on an added aggressive violence. Extending the metaphor of her hair and her body then, the voluptuousness of the hair becomes increasingly, though only furtively, suggestive of pubic hair and its imputations of a vigorous though rank sexuality.(31) The connection between the display of overflowing, luxuriant hair and an explicit sexual invitation that both the literary portrait of Lady Audley and the painted image of Lilith explore and exploit, here takes on a more grotesque aspect as the scene of the crime that is central to the novel takes on a surreptitious sexual charge, mapping the act on a terrain that reads like Lucy's bodily topography.

Another myth associated with the Medusa is that of Narcissus: both myths characteristically used for women, both playing upon the idea of a gaze so powerful that it has the ability to hypnotise. It is through the construction of this hypnotically beautiful, sunny haired protagonist that Braddon enters the contemporary dialogue about the prevailing notions of feminine identity, its need for negotiation and redefinition, its association with material consumption and Victorian commodity culture, as well as its deployment as a fraught site where all conflictual cultural and gender complexities could be played out. She wittily uses the stock images of femininity that trade in the symbolic and actual value of blonde hair - the binaries of the angel and the *femme fatale* - but in doing so emphasises the pliability and plasticity of that hair, thereby revealing the constructed nature of those representations, and of gender itself. The same gold could at one time become the glowing aureole over the devoted wife, while at another time it could become a web or a trap that would ensnare gullible, enchanted men, giving the golden hair the potentiality for denoting both saintliness and sexual enticement.

It is in the yawning gap between the idealised blonde woman and the associated natural goodness she is supposed to possess that Braddon arranges her mystery, making the possibility of interpreting the self through an exteriority that was natural and transparent impossible. This necessary disjunction between the real and the superficial is what she harnesses, making her heroine a compelling figure, engendering as well as entrapped in the illusion of her magical hair. Even as Lady Audley personifies the angelic wife viewed by Robert Audley at the beginning of their acquaintance, sitting with her Berlin-wool work in the embrasure of a window, 'her fair face, surrounded by its bright aureole of hazy, golden hair', a narratorial remark punctures the scene of domestic perfection. Her needle-work is the 'embroidery which the

Penelopes of ten or twelve years ago were very fond of exercising their ingenuity upon'.(32) In Homeric myth, Penelope was the faithful wife of Odysseus, who kept her suitors away during her husband's absence by weaving a shroud for her father-in-law, which she cunningly unraveled every night. She is then also a weaver of fictions, fabricator of untruth. By metaphorical extension, Lady Audley is then not only creating the myth of the ideal, golden-haired wife, but also believing in it and living it, but as the weaving of lies gets more dense, so the domestic myth becomes a snare in which she will be trapped.

Brantlinger argues that most sensation novels confined their startling disclosures to the family circle, but since the family itself was the touchstone of bourgeois values and morality, the effect of these 'voyeuristic, primal scene revelations' was highly subversive.(33) So the loving relations on which the household was balanced were exposed as being based on a forged respectability that concealed bigamists, adulterers, murderesses, vampires, imposters, and all varieties of criminal behaviour. They subverted the conventions of realist fiction and the truths it creates about familial and domestic life by using it in a modified form: these writers 'import[ed] romantic elements back into contemporary settings, reinvesting the ordinary with mystery (albeit only of the secular, criminal variety), and undoing narrative omniscience to let in kinds of knowledge that realistic fiction had often excluded'.(34) *Lady Audley's Secret* is insistent in showing truth and reality to be hidden entities, buried and concealed behind hollow facades that can only be exploded by trusting the intuitive signals. It is then not surprising that it is in a portrait, in a dream, and in Lady's Audley's own hair that the clues to the mystery are embedded.

The narrative thread slowly unwinds itself to reveal that behind Lucy Graham, the docile governess, lurks Helen Talboys, bigamist and suspected murderess. But the secret of the title is hidden behind yet another layer, and in a surprising twist, it is disclosed that behind Helen Talboys lies Helen Maldon - a woman with a self-confessed legacy of insanity. All these identities are subsumed under the name and facade of Lady Audley, who then herself is 'finally, and chillingly, hidden away under the invented, arbitrary name of 'Madam Taylor''.(35) This last fictitious name is the only one that is not made up by her, but is bestowed rather by the Audley heir, Robert, in his desire to protect the centuries old name of the family and to keep her from spending the end of her days in a prison. But even then, the name is suggestive of Lucy's extraordinary inventiveness, her ability to self-fashion endlessly.

From the very beginning Lucy is presented as an innate actress, intuitively acting to perfection all her roles, and as Taylor points out, in the process she undercuts the distinction between the natural and the artificial.(36) What connects and perpetuates her different roles are her acts of consumption and she slips from one role to another with increasing ease, led by her heightening consumerist aspirations. So the threat of Lucy's multiple performances lies not just in the gender relations that she destabilises but also in the class barriers that she transgresses. A deserted wife, the mother of a young child, and burdened with an alcoholic father, she poses as an orphan to get the post of a governess. It is in this position that she is asked by Sir Michael to be the mistress of Audley Court. What makes this proposal thinkable is her respectability as the governess to an honourable family, her refined manners coupled with her golden beauty, and the absence of a sordid, working class background. Her hair then works as a contrivance that helps her create the identity of compliant, good-natured, young woman who has seen life's hardships without being marred by them.

By foregrounding Lady Audley's impersonation of the proper feminine the novel harnesses the anxiety that that ideal of femininity is perhaps only a form of acting. The naturalness and rapidity with which Lucy moves from one role to another is part of the debate about identity, its stability, its potential for loss and duplication, that is a major concern of the sensation novel. Another aspect of the same concern shows itself in the idea of the doppelganger, or motifs of doubling that often appear in Gothic tales. So,

ministering to Lucy's cosmetic needs and starring in the role of the female confidante, is Phoebe, her washed-out maid who bears an uncanny resemblance to her mistress. This is a likeness that both maid and mistress notice, and Lucy even goes on to remark:

[...] you *are* like me, and your features are very nice; it is only colour that you want. My hair is pale yellow shot with gold, and yours is drab; my eyebrows and eyelashes are dark brown, and yours are almost - I scarcely like to say it, but they're almost white, my dear Phoebe; your complexion is sallow, and mine is pink and rosy. Why, with a bottle of hair-dye, such as we see advertised in the papers, and a pot of rouge, you'd be as good-looking as I, any day, Phoebe.(37)

With the appropriate make-up then the working-class girl could as easily transform into Lady Audley; a transformation that would replicate poor Helen Maldon's transformation into a Helen Talboys, who morphs into Helen Graham, who is then in a final fairy-tale twist asked to become Lady Audley.

But what makes Lucy so different from the various other look-alikes that surround her is that she seems to have a 'colour', an authenticity that they lack. Her resemblance to Phoebe and to Matilda Plowson, the unfortunate woman who substituted her in the grave, is one that makes her hair look particularly bright. Phoebe's colourlessness, and her washed-out, faded complexion and Matilda's lank, sunless hair are no match for the vital energy of Lucy's appearance. However, what is even more threatening than these numerous doubles is the suggestion that perhaps Lucy is not the original, genuine article. Being an artificial, cleverly constructed idol, she is only one of the duplicates. As Lyn Pykett points out, the novel 'raises the spectre that femininity itself is duplicitous, and that it involves deception and dissembling'.(38)

The real Lucy is lost in the proliferating versions of herself that she creates, but as each layer of identity is peeled away to reveal what lies beneath, it is the golden hair that links every assumed personality together. The very first clue in the novel falls in the hands of Phoebe and her fiancé, Luke, as they wander through Lucy's private rooms in the early pages of the novel, in a chapter called 'Hidden Relics'. Looking into one of her jewellery caskets, Luke pushes open a secret drawer, lined with purple velvet and containing 'neither gold nor gems; only a baby's little worsted shoe rolled up in a piece of paper, and a tiny lock of pale and silky yellow hair, evidently taken from a baby's head'.(39) Though not knowing the particulars of that infantile curl, it is a discovery that Phoebe shrewdly recognises the value of and is a secret that she hoards for a later date, something that might be useful in negotiating the price of a public house for Luke in exchange for silence. Though this is a strand of the narrative that remains unresolved, it does suggest the crucial role that hair of that uncommon glittering hue would play in the novel.

The second clue is also a lock of hair, but it is a specious keepsake given to Talboys by the landlady of the cottage where the supposed Helen Maldon had breathed her last. It is a long tress of hair wrapped in silver paper that she had cut off as the young woman lay in her coffin. Even in that moment of sorrow, Talboys' response hints at the cruel substitution: "'Yes," he murmured; "this is the dear hair that I have kissed so often when her head lay upon my shoulder. But it always had a rippling wave in it then, and now it seems smooth and straight"'(40) And he leaves the landlady's explanation that it changed in illness uncontested. This second memento returns to reveal Lady Audley's fraud, along with its genuine counterpart that is found by Robert Audley as he's looking through his friend's books. Looking for a piece of writing, or a fragment of letter that might prove to be useful in his detective pursuit, he comes across 'a bright ring of golden hair, of that glittering hue which is so rarely seen except upon the head of a child - a sunny lock, which curled as naturally as the tendril of a vine; and was very opposite in texture, if not different in hue, to the soft, smooth tress which the landlady at Ventnor had given to George Talboys after his wife's death'.(41)

All of these facts come together towards the end of the novel and form the denouement of Lady Audley's secret. As the seams of gender fabrication are unraveled thread by thread, it is made clear that the secret that hides at the heart of the novel is that Lady Audley is neither insane nor criminally inclined but rather that she is a consummate actress, successfully acting out desires for social and financial mobility. Lynn Voskuil points out that what outraged early critics was not the mere fact of Lady Audley's theatricality but its mode: 'that she has exposed Victorian femininity as an act is less alarming than the way in which she plays it'.(42) Her tool in the quest for the gold that the position of the mistress of Audley Court holds out is literally her golden hair. Its presence is vital to her success and the novel reads almost like a manual that exposes how it can be manipulated to attract a suitable husband. By her own confession, Helen/ Lucy/ Lady Audley had first begun to look upon her blonde loveliness as 'a right divine, a boundless possession which was to be a set-off against all girlish short-comings, a counter-balance of every youthful sin'.(43) And even in her distress she never forgets the beauty that she can use to her advantage, always being alive to the importance of outward effect. In her moment of utmost crisis, threatened by exposure and on the brink of a breakdown, having twined her fingers in her loose amber curls, her 'mute despair' gives way to 'the unyielding dominion of beauty [...] and she released the poor tangled glitter of ringlets, leaving them to make a halo round her head in the dim firelight',(44) still undeniably angelic in appearance if not in reality. The Medusa-like serpentine locks and their accompanying sexual threat have been reduced to pathetic, powerless disorder. The same image has been inverted and it here has the suggestion of a tragic feminine destiny, a wasted beauty, and a self-inflicted pain that Dijkstra's analysis leaves no room for.

When she is entombed in the remote sanatorium, far in a forgotten Belgian city, which is to be her home for the rest of her life she finally surrenders herself to an anguished despondency, refusing to repent: '[...] I *cannot!* Has my beauty brought me to *this?* [...] She plucked at the feathery golden curls as if she would have torn them from her head. It had served her so little after all, that gloriously glittering hair; that beautiful nimbus of yellow light that had contrasted so exquisitely with the melting azure of her eyes. She hated herself and her beauty'.(45) But in spite of this eventual conclusion to Lady Audley's adventurous life, she continues to the proper lady. As the narrator notes at the moment she confesses her crime: 'All mental distress is, with some show of reason, associated in our minds with loose, disordered garments, and disheveled hair, and an appearance in every way reverse of my lady's'.(46) By not employing these conventional signifiers Braddon is once again emphasising the arbitrary logic on which they are based and therefore making visible the ease with which someone with the appearance and intelligence of Lady Audley could insert herself into the role of the accepted upper middle-class Victorian woman.

Having recognised the value of her hair, she had traded on her infantile beauty to bigamously marry into a title, thereby creating a transfer of meaning - her hair no longer being a sign of inward purity, but infused by greed, ambition, and a murderous cruelty. Hair enters the realm of commerce by becoming so infused with signification, and at her most virtuous, the woman would save it to spend in the marriage market, purchasing herself wedded bliss in return for her good management. In her more menacing incarnation, the hair and its value would either be thoughtlessly squandered or be deceptively used to create a web for sexual entrapment. But as Gitter points out, '[w]hether she is purchasing domestic happiness or vicious profit, [...] in using her hair the woman compromises its value as an emblem of sublimity'.(47)

So while Pykett claims that Braddon's descriptive excesses typified her 'habitual fetishisation of woman's hair',(48) it really displays Braddon's incisive understanding of a society that had fetishised hair in fashion, trade, artistic and literary representations, and even in mourning convention. It was reduced to a highly estimated commodity in the social and cultural marketplace - a thing of obsessive attention that finds its most curious manifestation in the hair jewellery that was so popular at the time. In novels like

Lady Audley's Secret where these descriptions are in excess of the demands of realism, hair takes on its own semantic realm, moving from being a psychological and emotional landscape to something animate. It actively claims possession to a life of its own, becoming independent and energetic, at times aggressive, erotic and wild, at times potently, austerely elegant. Lady Audley's sensational hair, with all its Gothic overtones of stealth and deceit, becomes a metonym for the crux of anxieties about the New Woman of the period. It is a cipher for the erotic and commercial overvaluation of hair, but it is also a subversive element that finds its way into the new sensational aesthetics and becomes a prominent focus of narrative pleasure in the text.

1. Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, ed. Jenny Bourne Taylor (London: Penguin Classics, 1998), p. 72.
2. Patrick Brantlinger, 'What Is "Sensational" about the "Sensation Novel"?', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 37.1 (1982), p. 1.
3. Henry Mansel, 'Sensation Novels', *Quarterly Review* 113 (1863), p. 483. As quoted in Krysta Lysack, *Come Buy, Come Buy: Shopping and the Culture of Consumption in Victorian Women's Writing* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008), p. 44.
4. *ibid.* Mansel, p. 489.
5. This is an idea that Braddon herself explored in the later novel *The Doctor's Wife*, where the heroine is an enthusiastic acolyte of sensation novels and a firm believer in the truth of the fictions it purveys. Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *The Doctor's Wife* (1864), ed. Lynn Pykett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).
6. Brantlinger, 'What Is "Sensational" about the "Sensation Novel"?', p. 7.
7. Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (London: Virago, 1982), p. 164.
8. *ibid.*, p. 165.
9. Margaret Oliphant, 'Novels', *Blackwood's*, p. 263, 369. As quoted in Galia Ofek, 'Sensational Hair: Gender, Genre, and Fetishism in the Sensational Decade', *Victorian Sensations: Essays on a Scandalous Genre*, ed. Kimberly Harrison and Richard Fantina (Athens: Ohio State University Press, 2006), p. 103.
10. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p.13.
11. *ibid.*, p. 32, 66, 125.
12. Elisabeth G. Gitter, 'The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination', *PMLA*, Vol. 99, No. 5, (Oct., 1984); Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women's Bodies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); Galia Ofek, 'Sensational Hair: Gender, Genre, and Fetishism in the Sensational Decade'.
13. Elisabeth G. Gitter, 'The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination', p. 941.
14. Ofek, 'Sensational Hair: Gender, Genre, and Fetishism in the Sensational Decade', p. 103.
15. Richard Corson, *Fashions in Hair: The First Five Thousand Years* (Hairdressers' Technical Council, 1966), Chapter 12. The cutting of hair in most Victorian novels is shown as a remarkably traumatic experience and the wearing of false hair as an act of grievous feminine duplicity. In Hardy's *The Woodlanders*, Marty South is cajoled and seduced by the village barber into selling the wealth of her hair to be made into the fake braided locks that will adorn Mrs. Charmond's head and draw Winterborne to her. Marty's eventual decision to cut her hair arises out of poverty, but also out of disappointment in love, and signifies a kind of loss of innocence and hope. Thomas Hardy, *The Woodlanders* (1887), ed. J. Gibson (London: Penguin Classics, 1981).
16. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p. 262.
17. Lysack, *Come Buy, Come Buy*, p. 65.
18. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p. 250.
19. *ibid.*, p. 69.
20. Jenny Bourne Taylor, ed., Introduction to *Lady Audley's Secret*, p. xxii.
21. Michie, *The Flesh Made Word*, p. 123.
22. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p.280.
23. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Collected Writings*, ed. J. Marsh (J.M. Dent, 1999).
24. *ibid.*
25. Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).
26. Natalie M. Houston, ed., Introduction to *Lady Audley's Secret* (Broadview Press, 2003), p. 34.
27. *ibid.*
28. Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, p. 308.

29. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p. 270.
30. *ibid*, p. 414.
31. I am indebted to the anonymous reader who suggested these connections between the Medusa image, the *Vagina Dentata*, and the dry, abandoned well that entraps George Talboys.
32. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p. 122.
33. Brantlinger, 'What Is "Sensational" about the "Sensation Novel"?', p. 26-27.
34. *ibid*.
35. Taylor, p. xv.
36. *ibid*, p. xix-xx.
37. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p. 60.
38. Lyn Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 90-91.
39. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p. 34.
40. *ibid*. p. 45.
41. *ibid*. p. 160.
42. Lynn M. Voskuil, 'Acts of Madness: Lady Audley and the Meanings of Victorian Femininity', *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Autumn, 2001), p. 615.
43. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p. 293.
44. *ibid*, p. 294.
45. *ibid*, p. 384.
46. *ibid*, p. 333.
47. Gitter, 'The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination', p. 946.
48. Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine*, p. 98.