

Fascinated by Self-Fabrication: Exploring Early Sensation Fiction's Interest in Dress and Identity

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Abstract

Dress is a facet of identity that is often overlooked by literary criticism and the wider scholarly community. Inspired by the fruitful research carried out by sociologists, dress historians and a small cadre of sartorially interested literary critics, this thesis addresses a crucial gap in Victorian literary criticism. It asks two questions: how does dress contribute to the construction and reception of identity in modern literature? And more specifically, why is the sartorial registered so strongly in early sensation fiction of the 1860's?

Throughout its textual analysis of *The Woman in White* (Wilkie Collins, 1860) and *Lady Audley's Secret* (Mary Elizabeth Braddon, 1862) this thesis demonstrates that their themes, characterisation and plots are communicated discursively through the deployment and reception of sartorial cues. Consequently, this thesis contends that sensation fiction texts are inherently sartorial narratives, in which their authors deploy significant descriptions of dress to position and engage with their readers. Sensation fiction's generic features are also re-examined to highlight how Collins and Braddon use sartorial cues to appropriate detective and gothic fiction elements to reflect on contemporary concerns regarding dress and identity in their novels. In doing so, this thesis asserts that sensation fiction captured the mid-Victorian fascination with sartorial self-fabrication.

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Introduction

Dress is a facet of identity that is often overlooked by literary criticism and the wider scholarly community. History attests that a fascination with self-image and its relationship to social identity is endemic to our sentient humanity (Entwistle 6), with self-presentation constituting a fundamental component of daily social interaction in effectively any culture. It is regrettable then, that when compared to other social pressures affecting identification, such as professional or amateur occupations, social and cultural discourses, nationalism, religion, ethnicity, political persuasion, philosophical positions or other critical perspectives, the visually arresting means of self-fabricating identity through dress emerges as relatively ignored by literary critics (Hughes 5).

As posited by Elizabeth Wilson in her classic account of the social function of dress *Adorned in Dreams*, dress derives its enduring allure from its ability to ‘force(s) us to recognize that the human body is more than a biological entity,’ (Wilson 1987: 2). The full significance of this assertion is brought to bear when the definition of dress presented by sociologists and dress historians is adopted. Within these disciplines, discussions of dress are not limited to clothing; the hairstyles, physiques, piercings, tattoos, shoes, deformities and scars that map a seemingly endless variety of images onto the biological bodies of individuals are also considered examples of dress. Kim Johnson and Sharron Lennon articulate this position best with their definition of dress ‘as all the modifications made to the human body and supplements to the body,’ (1), and highlight that the significance of dress lies in its productive properties, rather than in the static elements traditionally referred to as articles of clothing.

Conceptualising dress as part of a process that actively invests people with a meaningful, visual identity opens up an extremely fruitful vein of inquiry into the nature of social existence and its depiction in fiction. Considered from this perspective, dress is not a shallow veneer that is ignored during social interaction, or donned exclusively to serve a logical or utilitarian purpose (Wolfendale and Kennett 6, Wilson 50). Nor is it an index of a person's life that can be considered in complete isolation. Rather, visual appearances betray an array of slippery significances that reflect the desired, or impact on the perceived, identity of the wearer (Entwistle 10, 97, Hughes 2009: 11). Holding to Wilson's argument that fashion 'is more than surface,' (1987: 11) and the assertion that, 'relying on appearance to guide personal decisions and social interactions is not only natural, it is inescapable,' (Johnson and Lennon 1), the impact dress has on identification in both society and literature emerges as an extremely relevant field of discussion.

Shedding light on what takes place when individuals make decisions about how to express themselves visually and interpret the significance of the acts of self-fabrication made by others is the key interest of this thesis. As readers of fiction all engage in the process of sartorial self-fabrication, the process requires consideration in literary criticism. Consequently, this thesis will address two key questions. Firstly, how does dress contribute to the construction and reception of identity in modern literature? And more specifically, why is the sartorial registered so strongly in early sensation fiction of the 1860's? Drawing out the implications that arise from these questions will not only highlight the manner in which dress and identity are handled and represented in a genre of Victorian fiction, but also the pressing relevance of the issue to broader understandings of individuals and society as well.

Appealing to the discipline of modern history, and its sub-discipline of dress history, presents ample justification for working within the temporal and generic scope of 1860's sensation fiction.

A large body of historical evidence has been amassed by dress historians such as Christopher Breward, Brett Shannon, W.H. Fraser, Gareth Shaw, H. Pasdermadjian and John Benson that dates the development of modern forms of production, distribution and consumption of clothing and other paraphernalia to the second half of the Nineteenth century. The picture that emerges from the historical record is that inventions like the sewing machine in 1851 and early attempts to mass-produce ready made clothes (Wilson 53, 73, Shannon 609-610) worked alongside the burgeoning success experienced by department stores from the beginning of the 1860's (Pasdermadjian 1, Shannon 608, Shaw 140) to affect great changes in the availability and significance of dress in Victorian England. In her survey of the emergence of the modern consumer fashion market facilitated by these market conditions, Rosy Aindow posits that these developments 'transformed the way in which the British population conceptualised dress, particularly those from lower income groups,' (2010: 1).

As a broader range of people in society grew aware of the capacity for dress to affect dramatic self-transformations and shifts in identity, the 1860's were marked by a fear of social upheaval. Increasingly affordable and mass-marketed clothing challenged pre-existing ideas of rigid social order, 'as access to fashion was one of the key attributes that defined the middle and upper classes, increasing opportunities for lower social groups to participate in this world was a potential threat to the existing social hierarchy,' (Aindow 2010: 16). While it is important to note that a complete 'democratisation of clothing,' did not take place (Aindow 2020: 22), the developments described above did provoke public interest in the socially empowering possibilities that might stem from a wider access to personal control over dress. Consequently, 'sartorial anxieties,' (Aindow 2010: 39) are registered on an unprecedented scale in novels of the mid and late Nineteenth century, which were marked by an, 'obsession with the ambiguity of clothing as an expression of changing societal relations,' (Aindow 2010: 9).

The publication of two of the 19th Century's most popular novels at the beginning of the 1860's further establishes the decade as a suitable temporal scope for this study, and introduces its generic scope. As well as enjoying unprecedented public success, Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (1860) and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) stand as the foundation of the sensation fiction genre. The link between the emergence of the extremely popular genre in a decade marked by a perceived threat of social upheaval is widely recognised, but the role changes in the perception of dress played in this has not been fully considered. Apart from Rosy Aindow and Clair Hughes, literary critics handling sensation fiction texts have failed to register the centrality of dress and identity to the genre.

The research questions given above have been carefully selected in order to contribute to this gap in the literary discussion. *Fascinated by Self-Fabrication* will achieve this by critically evaluating how two immensely popular works of early sensation fiction are constructed by their authors as sartorial narratives. This thesis contends that sartorial narratives are fictional texts structured around and driven by representations of identity that are visually constructed, registered, maintained or modified through descriptions of dress. Furthermore, whenever descriptions of dress are present in the narrative discourse, this thesis posits that they are acting as sartorial cues, which mimic their everyday social function as coded visual referents¹. In the manner of generic cues, sartorial cues are motivated by authorial intent, actively positioning the reader to register specific themes, respond to characters and accept plots presenting radical social metamorphoses and deceptions as plausible.

As will be established throughout the course of this thesis, Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon mobilise sartorial cues extensively throughout their respective novels *The Woman in White* (1860) and *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) to highlight thematic interests and establish

¹ Dress as a form of coded communication will be discussed in detail later in this introduction.

generic features, produce character and propel plot. The construction, manipulation, and detection of duplicitous visual identities that destabilise or threaten social order are registered as key thematic interests in both of the books selected for critical study, rendering them sartorial narratives that provide a prime corpus of texts to work with while considering my research questions. Identifying these two foundational sensation fiction texts as sartorial narratives will highlight that both authors and readers of early sensation fiction were fascinated with the impact self-fabricating identity through dress has on daily life, personal identity, social interaction and society.

As well as enriching broader discussions of dress and identity in Victorian literature and society, this critical method will contribute to a deeper understanding of the thematic interests and discursive mechanics of sensation fiction. As will be developed throughout this thesis, the sensation fiction genre's sustained presentation of dress as a central narrative device in the form of sartorial cues goes a long way to account for the popularity and success of these sartorial narratives. In presenting new knowledge to an existing discussion of sensation fiction, this thesis will demonstrate what Clair Hughes calls 'the power of dress for the writer of fiction,' (2) and consequently highlight the continuing need for other literary critics to engage actively with dress in narrative.

Pursuing research questions and supporting a thesis seeking to account for the fascination in which authors and readers of sensation fiction held the socially productive quality of dress requires an interdisciplinary methodology. While appeals to history have already enabled this project to limit its discussion to early sensation fiction texts of the 1860's, conducting an analysis of sartorial self-fabrication in the selected literature requires a bridging of the disciplines of literary criticism and sociology. Synthesising literary and sociological research methodologies is an effective means to supplementing existing scholarship on the novels in question, as it will

offer inroads into understanding why sartorial cues are present, and how they operate, at the heart of one of Victorian fiction's most popular genres.

The ground-breaking work of literary critics John Harvey, Clair Hughes and Rosy Aindow provide templates for this approach, as each in turn has demonstrated the effectiveness of appealing to the lexicon of sociology when considering why identity and dress are intertwined in Victorian fiction and society. Following their lead, the critical engagement with *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret* presented in this thesis will be driven by a sustained attention to the sartorial cues deployed by their respective authors. Discussions of identity construction native to these texts will thus be framed within larger processes of reader-response and authorial selection, with characterisation presented as a reflection of real-life modes of sartorial self-fabrication and identification.

Turning to sociology provides a theoretical framework within which a discussion of the productive qualities of dress and its usefulness in contributing to a greater understanding of its role in fiction and society can take place. Firstly, sociology provides both useful definitions of key terminology that will refine the discussions in this paper and reinforce its central thesis. In line with sociologists Elizabeth Wilson (1987: 58), Joanne Entwistle (6), Calefato (1) and Elizabeth Hurlock (44), who challenge traditional definitions of dress limited to clothing, this paper draws a distinction between the biological body, and the visually registered social body. From the perspective of sociology, dress is used to continually adorn and augment the physical body in preparation for social interaction (Entwistle 42).

As Elizabeth Wilson and Amy de la Haye preface in the introduction to *Defining Dress: Dress as Object, Meaning and Identity*, 'the body is now explicitly understood not as a biological given but as a social construct producing multiple meanings. Dress is clearly part of that construction

of meaning,' (3). Patrizia Calefato draws on Levi Strauss's analysis of Maori face-tattoos to demonstrate that even in the absence of 'conventional' forms of dress like clothing, this distinction between the physical body and dressed body is endemic to human societies and interaction:

The dual representation of the face, as depicted by the Maori, is indicative of a more profound doubling: that of the 'dumb' biological individual and the social personage that s/he has the task of embodying. (Calefato 6)

What emerges from this current scholarship is that the body we interact with and use socially is artificial and individually fabricated, and due to this process of necessary self-modification, inherently significant and worthy of serious investigation.

Fashion, while not the specific focus of this paper, is intimately enmeshed in any discussion of dress and identity. Referring to 'rapidly changing styles,' (Wilson 1987: 16), fashion encapsulates the result of cultural forces that inform what articles of dress individuals select and wear (Aindow 2010:5, Entwistle 43). Not to be confused as synonymous with dress, the distinction between dress and fashion as action and motivation respectively is rendered in the works of Pierre Bourdieu, Roland Barthes and Ferdinand de Saussure as inimical to an understanding of the visual properties and social function of dress.

As part of his hegemonic theory of society, Bourdieu has repeatedly offered *habitus* and *field* as the two principles defining taste and appropriate action. 'Necessity internalised and converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practices and meaning-giving perceptions,' (Bourdieu 170), the habitus of an individual is the accreted experience that determines their taste and potential course of action (173). Habitus invests dress with meaning, as the adorned body stands as a physical embodiment of their personal history or present identity (Entwistle 13). *Field*, is similarly useful when considering dress and identity, as it maps out the range of different subject positions or roles an individual adopts in different circumstances or in pursuit of

specific goals (Hanks 72-73). Fashion is a form of field exerting influence on the individual's habitus of dress practices, as are attempts at social mobility or challenging gender norms that feature heavily in Sensation Fiction.

While some critics have argued that dress is a language (Lurie 10-11), present scholarship agrees that it is a signifying process more akin to a coded sign system (Aindow 2010: 5, Calefato 5, Davis 5, 12, Harvey 11, Hughes 2, Wolfendale and Kennett 6, Wilson 50), due to its fluidity and variation in meaning. Identity presented and interpreted from dress is therefore inherently ambiguous (Davis 8-9), which is a trope that is heavily exploited by Sensation Fiction writers and real people alike. As a form of coded communication, dress is understood to operate 'allusively', prompting the responder to making temporal, geographic, social, cultural, occupational, political, physical, sexual, and gendered references among a host of other possibilities. These references position dressed individuals in relation to one another, as they demarcate similarity, difference, personal or collective taste and stances of allegiance in crude and sophisticated ways (Davis 4, Hughes 2009: 11, Johnson and Lennon 2, Wolfendale and Kennett 6). In light of the research produced in sociology, dress stands as a socially re-produced form of visual communication that when observed at work in fiction, can open up new thematic pursuits for the literary critic.

These methodological preoccupations, and a sustained attention to the significance of sartorial cues, will drive the close textual analysis that will be presented as evidentiary support of this thesis in the three chapters that follow. In each chapter *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret* will be examined together as a specific function of dress in sensation fiction will be considered. The opening chapter 'Navigating the Masquerade: Unmasking Duplicitous Representations of Identity Rendered as a Modern Necessity' will outline how sartorial cues draw attention to the thematic interests of the sensation fiction genre. The emergence of the two

texts and the genre will be situated within their social context, which was rocked by the challenge mass-marketed fashion posed to pre-existing understandings of identity. Textual analysis of the detective fiction elements of the two novels will serve to inform a consideration of sensation fiction's representation of the crucial role appraisals of duplicitous dress strategies played in the changing social landscape of modern life.

The second chapter will focus on another significant formal element of the sensation fiction genre that contributes to its thematic representation of the relationship between dress and identity. Titled 'Articulating Mass Anxiety: The Gothic Threat of Identification Divorced from Personal History,' this chapter will examine how Collins and Braddon appropriate the Gothic register of the uncanny and relocate sources of anxiety and madness to the domestic space to articulate contemporary fears. Foremost amongst them was the concern that the relative anonymity afforded by the dense urban population centres of mid-Victorian England, coupled with the publically registered capacity for individuals to fabricate false identities through dress, would result in a catastrophic dissolution of social hierarchies and render identity unacceptably fluid. Examples of this feature drawn from *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audely's Secret* will establish that their authors use sartorial cues to encourage their readers to draw the conclusion that dark betrayal or sinister conspiracy lurks behind the fabricated social façade of every stranger or individual whose past they could not verify.

'Enthralled by Dress: The Centrality of Sartorial Cues to Characterisation and Plot in Popular Sensation Fiction' will round up the body of this thesis by complementing the analysis of formal elements presented in the first two chapters with a sustained engagement with the discursive mechanics behind these sartorial narratives. This chapter will hone in on how the social process of self-fabricating identity through dress is translated to the elucidation of character and selection of plot events in sensation fiction. Building upon the contemporary concerns and practices

surrounding identity and dress examined in detail in the preceding chapters, ‘Enthralled by Dress’ will posit that the success of *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley’s Secret* lies in their commitment to a sartorial discursive agenda. The critical discussion presented in this third and final chapter will begin by illustrating how characterisation in both novels is consistently framed by sartorial cues to engage and position their readers. It will also assert that the sartorial cues signpost events before they take place in the narratives, enabling their readers to more readily follow the convoluted plots presented by a genre that utilises both detective fiction and gothic elements in its representation of the relationship between dress and identity.

Chapter One

Navigating the Masquerade: Unmasking Duplicitous Representations of Identity Rendered as a Modern Necessity

The Woman in White and *Lady Audley's Secret* were amongst the best selling novels of the 19th century, and generated a lasting legacy by inspiring the rise of the sensation fiction genre, which remained popular throughout the 1860's and 70's. Re-examining the hallmarks of the genre inspired by these novels as products of a sartorial narrative process driven by sartorial cues offers this thesis a means to draw new conclusions concerning signification and significance in these popular mid Victorian texts. This opening chapter will begin by considering how Collins and Braddon used sartorial cues in *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret* to invest the sensation fiction genre with detective fiction elements. In doing so, *Navigating the Masquerade* will demonstrate that this generic feature of *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret* highlights the importance interrogating and interpreting visual appearance had on the process of identification for contemporary Victorians. Ultimately, it will contend that sensation fiction texts use sartorial cues in place of criminal clues to emphasise that the detection and exposure of false fabrications of identity became a skill necessary for survival in modern society.

With plots overflowing with intrigue and deception, sensation fiction texts echo many features of the detective fiction genre that flourished later in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As Lilian Nader notes in her brief survey of the detective fiction genre, 'it cannot be neatly distinguished from sensation fiction,' (17). The significance of Nader's assessment is further compounded by sensation fiction's role in translating the generic features of Edgar Allan Poe's early detective fiction into Victorian realism. Recognising that Collins, Braddon and other sensation writers presented 'complex plots depicting crime, deception, secrets, and their almost inevitable concomitant, detection,' (Debenham, 211) is crucial to an understanding of both the

role dress plays in sensation fiction, and the genre's involvement in the development of Victorian detective fiction. The adoption of narrative structures built upon detection afforded early sensation fiction writers the means to work within the established conventions of Victorian realism, which offered plausible plots, everyday characters and recognisable settings in an effort to construct texts that accurately reflected society (Levine 84), whilst exploring sensational and shocking subject matter.

Sensation fiction is not the only genre to appropriate other generic features to navigate the demands of the realist novel. Caroline Levine remarks that, 'numerous fictions in the Victorian period are inclined to mix realist features with elements that are typically considered anti-realist,' (85), and the sensation novel's obsession with melodrama and conspiracy is a clear example of subject matter that appears incongruous with the genre. However, realism's obsession with the depiction and significance of material objects (Levine 95) resonates heavily in early sensation fiction novels. As inherently sartorial narratives, they focus on the social body individuals fabricate for themselves with dress, and like any realist text, 'persistently ask(s)– and invites us to ask – which objects matter, and why,' (Levine 95). In the case of *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret*, Collins and Braddon prompt their readers to reflect directly on the significance dress has in their narratives, and by extension, everyday life.

As co-founders of the sensation fiction genre, Collins and Braddon achieved this sartorial agenda by investing their narratives with a new form of internal logic that appealed to the commonplace lexicon of dress as evidence of elaborate and shocking social crimes. The description of readily recognisable and mundane sartorial cues, rather than gruesome or cryptic criminal clues, allow Collins and Braddon to explore visually affected falsehood and identity theft as modern, immediately relevant and arresting crimes. In line with this, both novelists present their readers with detectives and a cast of supporting characters who are all actively aware of the importance

of dress to uncovering the truth about identities tied to their plots. Consequently, *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret* are prime examples of how sensation fiction texts mobilise sartorial cues within a detective fiction framework to render the far-fetched scenarios they explore plausible within the established conventions of Victorian realism.

An appreciation of the developments in the fashion market leading up to the 1860's facilitates a deeper understanding of the sartorially focused discursive agenda of these two works of early sensation fiction. By the 1860's Victorian society was beginning to feel the full effects of modernisation instigated by the industrial revolution begun in the previous century. Dress and fashion historians such as Christopher Breward, Brett Shannon, W.H. Fraser, Gareth Shaw, H. Pasdermadjian and John Benson outline at length the precise nature of the changes and the forces that propelled them. Through their research efforts, it has been determined that department stores defined marketplace by the 1860's (Wilson 147), and that ready-made clothes were available to purchase as early as the 1830's and 40's (Wilson 73). The department store enabled mass-produced goods, including an unprecedented variety of clothes and accessories, to be made conveniently available to a wide body of consumers. By 1865, the scale on which dress was distributed to the English population approached modern proportions, with Bainbridge's Newcastle establishment encompassing 'a stretch of buildings over 500 feet long,' (Wilson 147). The appealing range of goods offered at low prices, coupled with innovation sales techniques including free fitting and delivery, fixed and marked pricing and no-obligation browsing, allowed the department store to invite more people to actively partake in self-fabrication (Wilson 146).

The early beginnings of a mass-marketed fashion industry marked by the success of the 1860's department store had a lasting impact on the way people identified themselves and one another. According to Elizabeth Wilson, it was at this time that, 'fashion became part of the popular

consciousness, and the mass manufacture of clothing enabled it to become part of popular culture,' (157). While Wilson appears overzealous with her attribution of the word popular, since the reality was that the majority of society was still too disadvantaged to effectively participate in the mass-consumption of any products, a wider appreciation of the significance of dress is still registered by historians. It is this recognition that dress actively contributed to identity, and that visual identity was artificial and malleable rather than an innate and stable reflection of social status, which marked a fundamental shift in modern identification (Wilson 1987: 9). A larger body of individuals than simply the established elite became aware that decisions about how to fabricate their social body through dress visually produced their identity.

This preliminary contextual discussion opens up a deeper and more pressing issue of relevance to this thesis, the impact of modernity on mid-Victorian popular consciousness and identity. In the definition of modernity offered by Christopher Breward and Caroline Evans as 'the development of consumer culture in the wake of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century industrialisation,' (1, see also Wilson 2005: 10), they allude to the connection between modern identity and the department store. Mass production and mass distribution of clothes provided the conditions for dress to play an increasingly significant role in the production and reception of identity for a broader segment of society. The middle class reflected this development most prominently, actively dressing to stake and maintain their claim to social equality with the landed gentry. It is important to note as well, that the density of modern urban population centres (Breward and Evans 2) exposed the poorer elements of society who were still cut out of the fashion market to the masquerade of fashion, further entrenching dress as an issue registered in popular consciousness. Anthony Giddens contends that the end-result of the mass-market saturating Victorian cities and other modern population centres with people making purposeful decisions about their appearance was that 'reflexivity or self-scrutiny,' became a defining feature of modern subjectivity (Breward and Evans 2, see also Wilson 2005: 10).

As individuals who were ‘aware of being read by his or her appearance,’ (Entwistle 73), Victorians of the 1860’s displayed the ability to recognise dressing as an act that constituted a wilful fabrication of self that was communicated and registered visually as their social body. This new interest in dress and sartorial identity that permeated all levels of society can account for the representation of the potential for individuals to exploit dress to pursue nefarious deceptions as a central theme in *The Woman in White*, *Lady Audley’s Secret* and other sensation fiction texts that followed them. In the crowded streets of the modern city, appraising accurately the identities suggested by sartorial self-display whilst exerting a healthy level of scepticism as to their truthfulness became an increasingly important activity. Wilson states ‘it became essential to be able to read character and proclivity from details that were immediately perceived,’ (Wilson 137) in crowded urban environments where the possibility of strangers to embody false identities became a commonplace reality. Rosy Aindow highlights the ambiguity urban living invested in the nature of identity, since as people drew assumptions about the social position, occupation, political allegiance, or threat posed by strangers based on the arrangement of their self-fabricated social body, they also confirmed that ‘ultimately [dress] can be employed as a means of subverting identity,’ (Aindow 2010: 8) as well.

Accordingly, the possibility that wider access to personal self-fabrication could result in social interaction being undercut by deception demanded modern Victorians to adapt. The detection and denunciation of inaccurate sartorial identities fabricated for fraudulent purposes became a skill necessary to successfully navigate modern society. Looking past the social mask in search of ‘the secret of the self,’ (Wilson 137) consequently invested a new layer of complexity to the Victorian understanding of identity as dress took on a more integral social function, embodying a desired identity rather than simply functioning as an outlet for conspicuous consumption.

Textual analysis of the detective fiction elements of *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret* reveals how Collins and Braddon approach representing the appraisal of visually fabricated identities as a new, modern necessity. Detection within these narratives takes place during social exchange, and their sustained focus on assessing the meaning of sartorial cues constantly foregrounds the significance of dress during identification. The discussion that follows will begin by exploring the two key sartorial narrative strategies deployed by Collins and Braddon to successfully appropriate detective fiction as a means to explore the role unmasking duplicitous representations of identity played in modern life. This preliminary analysis of the discursive mechanics of *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret* will demonstrate the motivations behind the sensation fiction genre's adoption of detective fiction features. An appraisal of how these narrative elements are used by Collins and Braddon to position their readers to reflect on the necessity of applying the detective process presented in these novels during their daily lives will conclude this chapter's consideration of dress and identity in sensation fiction.

Outlining how Collins and Braddon mark the principle protagonists Walter Hartwright and Robert Audley as detectives constitutes the first step in exploring the motivations and discursive results of the detective tropes appropriated in early sensation fiction. The privileged focal position is awarded in both *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret* to Walter and Robert respectively, ensuring that the reader follows their investigations throughout the course of the novels. As their efforts result in the resolution of each novel's intricate plot, the significance of the detective as a discursive element in *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret* is evident from the outset.

Collins and Braddon employ different approaches to narration to maintain the focus on their principle detectives as integral to their sensation fiction narratives. In *The Woman in White*,

narration is delivered by five major characters and five minor characters as part of a folio of evidence compiled by Walter. A structure Collins would use again in *The Moonstone* (1868), each of the accounts is delivered in the first person, and offer a presentation of a select series of events in the past tense. Julian Symons contends that this fragmentary narrative structure was inspired by the content of French criminal records (12). While narration is only focalised through Walter in five of the novel's thirteen sections, Collins sustains interest in him and his role as the novel's primary detective by drawing the reader's attention to the purpose that inspired the collection of the accounts that make up the novel. Walter is presented by Collins as the sole force motivating the selection and composition of the materials made available to the reader during the first chapter of the family solicitor Vincent Gilmore's account. In his narration, Mr. Gilmore states 'I write these lines at the request of my friend, Mr Walter Hartwright,' and that:

the plan he has adopted for presenting the story to others, in the most truthful and most vivid manner, requires that it should be told, at each successive stage in the march of events, by the persons who were directly concerned in those events at the time of their occurrence. My appearance here, as narrator, is the necessary consequence of this arrangement. (150)

Such self-reflexive narration compounds the effect of adopting a narrative structure intended to mimic criminal witness statements gathered by criminal investigators, firmly allying the reader with Walter the detective as the novel's main protagonist. The realisation on the part of the reader at this point that they have gained access to the same body of evidence used by the narrative's detective also encourages them to follow the detective methodology built upon the appeal to sartorial cues Collins develops throughout the novel.

While the witness statements that make up the narrative discourse of *The Woman in White* overtly imply that it is a piece of detective fiction, narration is executed in a more traditionally realist fashion in *Lady Audley's Secret*. Braddon instead delivers her narration through an omniscient narrator that fluctuates between the first and third persons. However, the only element of narration that directly evokes detective fiction tropes is the narrator's ability to share

the thoughts and suspicions of the detective Robert Audley directly with the reader. The earliest example of this taking place outside of dialogue occurs in chapter nineteen of volume one, where Robert's thoughts, "she is altogether a different being to the wretched, helpless creature who dropped her mask for a moment, and looked at me with her own pitiful face," (Braddon 145) draw the reader's attention to his awareness that Lady Audley is hiding her true identity, and foreshadowing his ultimate goal as the detective in *Lady Audley's Secret*.

Unlike conventional detectives however, the protagonists in *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret* are not principally interested in solving crimes against the crown or state. While they do incidentally close cases of suspected murder, bigamy, inheritance fraud and unlawful detainment during the course of their investigations, the primary goal of the detective in sensation fiction is exposing the social crime of duplicitous self-fabrication. Both Walter Hartwright and Robert Audley are constantly engaged in the modern social activity of unmasking duplicitous sartorial representations of self. Ascertaining this practice as the methodology motivating the investigations of Walter and Robert highlights how the sensation fiction genre utilised detective fiction to configure the deception of others through fabricating wilfully misleading or falsified identities through dress as a social crime. Both detectives share an interest in revealing or restoring the true identities of people in their social network. In doing so, they directly oppose efforts to exploit the malleability of identity greater access to dress afforded individuals and the modern preoccupation with communicating personality visually.

While carrying out this role in their narratives, the two detectives Walter and Robert seek to achieve very different sets of goals. Walter accumulates a multitude of tasks throughout *The Woman in White*, which opens with his determination to identify the woman in white with the aid of Marian Halcombe. Upon achieving this by tracing the connection between Mrs. Fairlie and Anne Catherick, the duo embark on the immediately pressing issue of determining the

intentions of Laura's unscrupulous husband Sir Percival Glyde and his apparent accomplice the Count. Following the execution of their conspiracy to fake the death of Laura and dupe an asylum into accepting her as Anne Catherick, Walter moves on to the task of exposing the identities of Sir Percival Glyde and Count Fosco as fraudulent and re-asserting the true identity of Laura in a bid to restore social order.

Robert Audley on the other hand, initially sets out to discover the whereabouts of his beloved friend George Talboys, then his perceived murderer, before finally settling on his ultimate task of uncovering the true identity of Lady Audley after her actions arouse his suspicion. While Robert appears to handle a smaller case than Walter and Marian, Robert effectively acts alone in *Lady Audley's Secret*, where his detective mission is conspicuously framed as the only defence of social integrity mounted against the alluring and manipulative Lady Audley.

The necessity for the detectives in *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret* to appraise the sincerity of the social identities embodied through the dress choices of their antagonists at every turning point of the narratives is tied to an attempt to resolve the ambiguous quality of identity created by dress. In his discussion of this particular characteristic of self-fabricated identity, Fred Davis notes that ambiguity is endemic to such a fluid form of communication as dress, and that ambiguity:

Recognizes the possibility of alternative, contradictory, or obscure interpretations. And it is upon this recognition that any number and variety of ingenious equivocations, calculated duplicities, and artful conceits come to be constructed in everyday life as much, perhaps, as in art itself. (Davis 22)

The decision made by Collins and Braddon to cast their main protagonists as detectives thus clearly emerges as a reaction to the contemporary vacuum of characters and plots that navigated the masquerade of modernity. Walter and Robert indirectly function as guardians of social order while unmasking duplicitous identities fabricated for fraudulent purposes, a process of detection that relies on their ability to identify and discard ambiguous sartorial cues in their pursuit of the

true identity of their wielders. Communicating the logic of this socially-situated detective methodology to the reader is achieved by Collins and Braddon through direct focalisation that invites their readers to pursue the detective process of unmasking false identities alongside their main protagonists.

In chapter 15 of *Lady Audley's Secret's* first volume, Robert Audley takes on the role of detective, rather than barrister as he claims, during his declaration to Lady Audley that he will search for the murderer and body of George Talboys to set his heart at rest (Braddon 119). Braddon foregrounds the significance sartorial cues will play in his search for clues pointing to his whereabouts, through Robert's expression of his interest in pursuing a methodology based on, "circumstantial evidence...that wonderful fabric which is built out of straws collected at every point of the compass, and which is yet strong enough to hang a man," (Braddon 119). To consolidate the sartorial-focus of this detective method, Braddon inserts two articles of dress as Robert lists examples of circumstantial evidence: "a shred of some torn garment; the button off a coat," (Braddon 119).

Braddon consolidates for her readers the sartorial focus of detective efforts in *Lady Audley's Secret* through a passage of dialogue that reveals Robert is acutely aware that reflecting on the significance of a person's visual appearance is part of the process of constructing someone's identity. During an exchange with his younger cousin Alicia, Robert is shocked by her failure to consider that the assumptions about identity she unconsciously draws from peoples' dress may not be certain or accurate. His rebuke, "do you suppose that because people don't wear vinegar tops, or part their hair on the wrong side...they may not be just as sensible of the merits of a dear little, warm-hearted, and affectionate girl as ever their neighbours can be?" (Braddon 124-125) draws attention to the potential for individuals who are not conscious of the communicative properties of dress can be easily deceived by the self-aware dresser. The inclusion of this

exchange by Braddon so shortly after Robert commits to applying a detective method heavily informed by attention to dress to solve the disappearance of his friend George Talboys further positions the reader to take extra care to notice the clothes, hair, jewellery and other articles of dress worn or referred to by characters in the novel.

Collins also highlights for his readers the significance of sartorial cues in the detective methodology employed by Walter Hartwright early in his narrative. The episode begins with Walter recounting his application of deductive logic to infer the age of Mr. Frederik Fairlie during their first meeting. While narrating the event, Walter pre-emptively defends his assumptions by appealing to a line of logic that inferences about identity can be made from the manner in which an individual fabricates the social body through dress:

If a man's personal appearance, when he is out of his dressing-room, and when he has passed forty, can be accepted as a safe guide to his time of life- which is more than doubtful – Mr Fairlie's age, when I saw him, might have been reasonably computed at over fifty and under sixty years. (Collins 65)

Of even greater significance is the demonstration that follows shortly after of Walter's ability to draw more complex, socially poignant connections between dress and identity. Following an extended description of Mr. Fairlie's attire that included the references 'little womanish bronze-leather slippers,' and, 'two rings adorned his white delicate hands, the value of which even my inexperienced observation detected to be all but priceless,' (Collins 66), Walter hastily moves to distance himself from Mr. Fairlie. His conclusion that his overall appearance produced an unsettling androgyny (Collins 66) leads into his damning assertion that he is consumed by 'selfish affectation,' and that he is merely acting as an invalid for personal satisfaction (Collins 66). These observations of age, character and motivation after a cursory appraisal of his dress, and the process of inference informed by sartorial cues that supports them, prepares the reader of *The Woman in White* to accept detection as the key to following its intricate plot.

In addition to the investigations carried out by their principle detectives, other characters in *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret* also draw conclusions about the accuracy of social identity embodied in dress. These second tier detectives act to further entrench within the reader a firm awareness that sartorial cues form a chain of logic throughout the narratives. Marian Holcombe in *The Woman in White* operates as Walter's shadow detective, and provokes the reader to align with her suspicion that Count Fosco is pursuing activities clandestinely. Collins provides sartorial cues as evidence justifying Marian's case in her observation, 'he was hot and flushed, and was not dressed with his customary care and completeness. Had he, too, been out before dinner, and been late in getting back?' (Collins 334). Suspicion is generated here since Fosco has failed to fabricate his social body in a fashion that matches his habitus, signifying to Marian and the reader that some other task consumed the time required to do so.

An episode in *Lady Audley's Secret* goes even further, with Braddon's depiction of an episode where a character wants to be sure Robert Audley is not dressed handsomely in order to lure her into revealing the whereabouts of Mrs. Vincent. Upon approaching a lead in pursuit of the information pointing to the whereabouts of Mrs. Vincent, Robert is asked, "You're not connected with – with the tally business, are you, sir?" and, "Some of the gentlemen who collect for the tally-shops do dress so very handsome, and I know Mrs. Vincent owes a good deal of money," (Braddon 230). The distrust expressed by this character is justified by an appeal to the practice of debt-collectors dressing in a gentlemanly and disarming fashion, and consequently acts as another instance of sartorial cues in sensation fiction being used to draw attention to the possibility for individuals to craft duplicitous identities.

The reader of *Lady Audley's Secret* and *The Woman in White* is also invited to focalise through a number of characters who demonstrate an acute and conscious awareness of the meanings coded into dress, what certain individuals can be expected to wear in deference to their habitus or field

of activity, and the possibility for the visual identity individuals embody through dress to be entirely duplicitous. Having been aligned with the detective protagonists Walter Hartwright and Robert Audley and positioned to apply a vigilant suspicion of the visual body's ability to deceive the unwary observer, the reader of *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret* is prompted to consider identity in the real world as equally artificial. Much of the sensational quality of these novels can be attributed to the conflation of identity with the perceived social body a detective focus on sartorial cues generates. The deployment of detective fiction elements also lends authenticity to the social threat posed by individuals capable of fabricating false identities, and the necessity for people to detect and expose these threats.

Socially transgressive masking stands out as a sartorial theme central to both *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret* that drives sensation fiction's agenda of using features of detective fiction to communicate that dress constructs artificial, visually registered identity. Reversing the damage to the cultural institutions of marriage and class wrought by the false identity presented by Lady Audley for instance, requires the detective Robert Audley to make it 'his business to unmask,' (Braddon 360) her and reveal to his unwitting uncle her duplicity. Drawing upon an awareness of identity as visually fabricated through dress, Robert is capable of resisting her 'artifices,' (Braddon 217) and foiling her fraudulent claim to Audley Court.

Similarly, the threat posed by Count Fosco and Sir Percival Glyde in *The Woman in White* hinges directly on their ability to fabricate false identities for themselves and other people, and then maintain them through the performance of dress. Once again, the reader of sensation fiction is forced to value the ability to detect duplicitous visual identities, as Collins repeatedly signals that villains are capable of exploiting dress to their advantage. Walter's dogged determination to uncover the secret of Sir Percival that motivates his cruelty reveals he was never aristocratic at all (Collins 529-530), but an imposter supported by an even more sinister foreigner who gained

weight and dresses like a dandy to evade the detection of a secret society he betrayed (Collins 599-600). Not only is identity in *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret* rendered fluid, malleable and rather than innate or natural, but the appropriation of detective fiction tropes that trade on sartorial cues compels the reader to apply the same degree of vigilance displayed by their principle detectives in order to defend themselves against false fabrications of identity.

Collins and Braddon redefined what the Victorian realist novel could contain by presenting a more socially-contextualised and relevant depiction of identity as fabricated through dress in *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret*. The inclusion of detectives within their novels that sought to unveil false identities crafted through dress stands as evidence that the sensation fiction genre offered inherently sartorial narratives as a means to explore the relationship between dress and identity. Furthermore, detective fiction enabled Collins and Braddon to draw direct attention to modern threat malleable and artificial identity posed to Victorian society, by casting deceivers that manipulate dress as antagonists that openly defy social convention. Finally, the emphasis placed on sartorial cues as the means by which social crimes are committed throughout the novels, galvanises the reader to consider the possibility that they too are being deceived by the visually fabricated identities of others. Readers are positioned to accept that the ability to detect misleading sartorial representations of identity is necessary for survival in modern societies wracked by anxieties concerning the artificiality of perceived identity, as detectives are required to unveil the duplicitous villains at the heart of these narratives. The following chapter will look more closely at these anxieties, and consider how sensation fiction texts communicate them through allusions to the gothic.

Chapter Two

Articulating Mass Anxiety: The Gothic Threat of the Anonymous Stranger

Demonstrating the presence of significant detective fiction elements and themes in sensation fiction that are communicated sartorially stands as the first half of the re-examination of the genre's stylistic features undertaken in this thesis. This chapter will build upon the work presented in *Navigating the Masquerade* by highlighting the presence and purpose of allusions to the gothic in *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret*. While the gothic is figured differently in each text, conjuring the uncanny in the domestic sphere and contemporary urban settings communicates mass anxiety concerning the state of identity and society in mid-Victorian England. Furthermore, since sartorial cues feature as the vehicle through which the gothic enters the worlds of *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret*, this chapter will assert that the sensation fiction genre draws upon contemporary fears concerning the urban stranger's ability to wilfully fabricate identities that afford them unprecedented social mobility. Throughout this contextual and literary discussion, *Articulating Mass Anxiety* will offer evidence that further supports this thesis' contention that sensation fiction texts are fundamentally sartorial narratives engaged with exploring issues arising from the modern nexus between dress and identity.

Opening this examination of the crossover between the gothic and sensation fiction requires an appraisal of the generic features that inform the gothic mode. A genre that first appeared in the 18th century, early British gothic narratives were rigidly conventional, with Jamieson Ridenhour noting that they were almost exclusively set abroad in 'a crumbling monastery, castle, or mansion, equipped with hidden passages, shadowy alcoves, and subterranean catacombs,' (1). Critical discussion of the Gothic frequently returns to the genre's joint depiction of horrific tales of upheaval and social decay as the motivation behind its predilection for setting its narratives in equally dark and chaotic settings. These unknown and forbidding spaces, with their hidden

dangers and dark forces that threatened the hapless characters that inhabited them, captivated contemporary readers. This prominent feature of the gothic highlights the significance of the built and natural environment in the genre, as their plots convey a tension between human psychology as products of conditioning and agency.

Just as geographic and architectural features were stock elements of the genre (Kitson 164), gothic narratives were also defined by an indulgence in excess, melodrama and the supernatural (Ridenhour 2). Early gothic narratives were heavily dependant on deploying the supernatural and the exotic as external manifestations of corrupt or destructive internal states and desires. As a result, they dwell on transgressive and anarchic acts and forces, subject matter that simultaneously invites and repels the curious reader wishing to explore an alternative vision of society. These were dangerous ideas to express in the repressive religious and cultural environment of the 18th century, which accounts for gothic authors' conscious decision to cast foreign characters in medieval settings to foster distance between themselves and their work. This freed gothic authors from suspicion of heresy or anarchism, and enabled them to explore the darker side of the human condition.

In the 19th century, the popularity of traditional gothic had waned, as readers grew fatigued with its endlessly re-produced generic cues. Furthermore, the move towards literary realism demanded narratives rooted in the mundane rather than the numinous explored in the gothic tales of romanticism. However, the gothic proved a resilient literary form for authors interested in exploring human psychology, as evidenced by its revival in the sensation fiction narratives of Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon (Kitson 166). In these, and later novels, the gothic was adapted to appeal to a readership that was ready to accept representations of horror in the home (Debenham 177-178, Kitson 166). Jamieson Ridenhour describes the process that brought the preoccupations of the gothic into the Victorian domestic sphere as a 'geographic shift,' that,

‘occurred in two stages: first a move from the Catholic south to England...and second an urbanization, lifting the moved from the rural and placing it in London,’ (2). As will be demonstrated below, *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley’s Secret* display gothic elements that require identification as texts midway in negotiating this transition, as they are each set in both country estates as well as London and other modern urban centres.

Any conclusions concerning the significance of the sartorial cues used by Collins and Braddon to allude to the gothic in *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley’s Secret* will have to be informed by contextual work akin to the discussion of modernity that prefaced chapter one’s discussion of their detective fiction elements. Life in mid-Victorian Britain was markedly different from the century before, as industrialism changed both the character of the cityscape and the density of population centres. Elizabeth Wilson’s summary of the impact development of the modern metropolis had on the daily life and identity of the city-dweller provides an insight into the role environmental changes played in the emergence of new concerns surrounding identity and dress in the 1860’s:

Industrial capitalism created vast and turbulent new city centres with new characteristics. Cities had always been places where to some extent the individual’s origins could be hidden and in which personal qualities, rather than rank or wealth, were what counted; but the cities of the renaissance were very different from the new, huge industrial infernos where truly the stranger could lose himself or herself or find himself a new identity in the anonymity of the surging crowds. (Wilson 26)

Wilson’s closing statement highlights the crux of the social impact wrought by the steady shift away from low-density rural habitation to high-density urban population centres. The bustling city passively generated anonymity in a way smaller communities actively denied the individual, and so the average city-dweller was radically divorced from their personal history while in public.

Class was a fundamental part of Victorian identity, and as an indicator of status in a larger social hierarchy that was communicated through dress, the authority of class-claims made by strangers was an immediate subject of concern in the 1860's as more people were afforded access to dress. The urban stranger, whose personal history could only be reconstructed by the onlooker in the same manner as their social identity can be inferred from their dress, was incongruous with the system of cultural identification inherited from the 18th century. As an individual capable of successfully embodying any class, profession or station in the absence of anyone aware of his or her true personal history, the stranger exposed identity as inherently performative and visually embodied through dress rather than innate, inherited or class-bound.

For a society that was also coming to grips with an emergent middle-class and the dissolution of social hierarchies that previously defined personal identification and social interaction in fixed forms, the perceived threat of individuals capable of willingly exploiting the anonymity afforded by large bodies of people struck a chord with mid-century Victorians. Just as large bodies of people conditioned the modern individual to quickly detect the identity of people they came across by responding to sartorial cues embodied in their dress, the modern individual also faced the possibility that all representations of identity they encountered on the street may not line up with biographical realities. In response to these developments, the proliferation of the stranger stood as a constant reminder of the malleability, rather than certainty, of identity in the modern city.

Consequently, anxieties concerning the stranger's capacity to move between class and subject positions at will by manipulating their dress, is figured as a key theme in mid and late-Victorian novels (Aindow 2010: 39). Rosy Aindow asserts that 'the notion that clothes did not necessarily correspond to character pervades contemporary fictional works,' of the period (2010: 9). This thematic interest is depicted in sensation fiction by re-presenting gothic tropes in modern settings,

with realist characters and plots structured upon mundane sartorial cues. Exploiting the gothic in this fashion to explore contemporary anxieties stands as an example of Peter Kitson's observation of the gothic's propensity for manifesting 'transhistorical anxieties,' (165) concerning identity. It also points towards the significance of the decision made by Collins and Braddon to incorporate the gothic register in *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret* respectively, as it enabled them to leverage an immediately relevant source of fear to invest their novels with their sensational impact.

This chapter will contend that as well as early appropriating elements of detective fiction to construct a logic of internal plausibility, sensation fiction texts turn to earlier gothic tropes to communicate deep-seated, unconscious anxieties concerning dress and identity. The textual analysis that follows will unpack how Collins and Braddon complement a limited suite of overt gothic tropes with indirect allusions to the genre communicated through sartorial cues. Establishing the means by which the gothic is re-appropriated in their sartorial narratives will open this critical inquiry, and produce a picture of the role sartorial cues play in the sensation fiction genre's domestication of early 18th century gothic features. This chapter will then progress to consider how this domestication of the gothic enabled Collins and Braddon to both trade on contemporary fears of the perceived threat of the stranger to elevate the sensational impact of their plots, and highlight the performative quality of visual identity by emphasising that class and status can be self-fabricated through dress.

The setting of both *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret* conform as indicated earlier to the gothic mode. Collins and Braddon play out their narratives in both rural and urban settings, clearly marking out the role the genre played in the transition of the gothic from the foreign countryside to the Victorian city. Limmeridge House and Blackwater Park feature as the two rural and pseudo-gothic manors in Collins' text, with descriptions of the latter residence as a

turreted building ‘shut in – almost suffocated...by trees,’ (Collins 220) dated to the reign of Queen Elizabeth (Collins 225) with a lake filled with water that according to Marian ‘looked black and poisonous,’ clearly evoking the stock images of decaying old-world edifices germane to early gothic narratives. Audley Court of *Lady Audley’s Secret* is even more self-consciously gothic, with the novel opening with a description of the manor as ‘very old, very irregular and rambling,’ (Braddon 1). This rural setting is invested with even more sinister and foreboding tone with the narrator’s description of the atmosphere hanging over it as: ‘painful from its intensity, and you felt as a corpse must be lying somewhere within that grey and ivy-coloured pile of building – so deathlike was the tranquillity of all around,’ (Braddon 24). This sense of unease is also registered in the dialogue of other characters, with Luke Marks mentioning to Phoebe in its great hall that he ‘heard tell of a murder that was done here in old times,’ (Braddon 28). These traditionally gothic spaces are also complemented by modern urban spaces, as events take place in London in both texts, and Robert’s investigations take him far afield to a number of towns and cities in *Lady Audley’s Secret*.

The instances of gothic re-appropriation that will follow operate on a far more complex and significant level than the brief overview of the overt descriptions of traditional and modern gothic spaces just outlined. Visions of the supernatural and instances of doubling are all contingent on the misinterpretation of ambiguous sartorial cues in *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley’s Secret*. In doing so, Collins and Braddon firmly domesticate the gothic within their narratives. As each gothic feature is explored in turn, their function as part of a larger sartorial narrative agenda that furthers the sensation fiction genre’s interest in the relationship dress has with the process of identification will be established.

The most prominent example of a brush with the supernatural occurs as early as chapter three of *The Woman in White*, where Collins produces an image of a revenant in the road that is

positively gothic in effect, if not reality. As Walter Hartwright narrates his first encounter with Anne Catherick, the woman in white, he exclaims:

There, as if it had that moment sprung out of the earth or dropped from the heaven – stood the figure of a solitary Woman, dressed from head to foot in white garments, her face bent in grave inquiry on mine, her hand pointing to the dark cloud over London, as I faced her. (Collins 47)

His initial description of her as genderless ‘figure’ producing the impression of a woman positions the reader to anticipate an encounter with a female ghost, a suspicion which Collins fosters by drawing attention to her exclusively white attire. This sartorial cue completes the image of the haunting on a high road, rendering the everyday sublime in doing so. It is only when the ‘ghost’ asks for directions that the reader is grounded in reality again, but only after having experienced alongside Walter the uncanny effect produced by Anne’s ghostly attire.

Phoebe Marks, the maid-servant of Lady Audley, is the centre of two haunting moments in *Lady Audley’s Secret* that also draw attention to the ability of sartorial cues to produce ambiguous identities. When introduced by the narrator, sartorial cues suggest that her appearance is whitewashed, creating the uncanny impression that she is fading between the worlds of the living and the dead:

Not one glimmer of gold or auburn relieved the dull flaxen of her hair. Even her dress was spoiled by this same deficiency, the pale lavender muslin faded into a sickly grey, and the ribbon knotted round her throat melted into some neutral hue. (Braddon 25)

The effect Phoebe’s bleached hair and clothes have on other characters in the book is identical to Walter’s first response to the Anne Catherick on the road, with Phoebe’s future husband remarking that, “you came upon me so still and sudden, that I thought you was an evil spirit,” (Braddon 25). Braddon consolidates this misidentification of Phoebe as a ghost through the narration of her wedding where, ‘a superstitious stranger might have mistaken the bride for the ghost of some other bride, dead and buried in the vaults below the church,’ (Braddon 110). In both *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley’s Secret*, stock gothic allusions to the supernatural

rendered through the deployment of sartorial cues are used to cast uncertainty and doubt upon the process of visual identification by exaggerating uncanny outcomes of encounters with ambiguous social bodies. Their occurrence in a suburban street also emphasise Collins' intention to prompt his readers to reflect on the anxiety they feel when attempting to ascertain the identity and intentions of people they meet in public.

Doubling also features prominently in both *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret* as a means to express concern that identity in the modern city is no longer personal and unique but artificial and easily reproduced. Collins actively compares Laura Fairlie, the passive heroine and love interest of Walter, to the ghostly Anne Catherick throughout *The Woman in White*. Laura Fairlie, whose dress palette has also been dominated by white since her childhood (Braddon 84), intended to inspire the reader to associate her as Anne's doppelganger. Additionally, Collins reproduces Walter's uncanny response to Anne's attire when he beholds Laura out on the balcony, where as 'a white figure, alone in the moonlight,' she stands as, 'the living image, at that distance and under those circumstances, of the woman in white!' (Collins 86).

The ghostly Phoebe is also constructed as a double of Lady Audley in Braddon's novel through reference to her dress. Lady Audley alludes to the public recognition of their likeness while Phoebe prepares her hair for the night, a claim that the maidservant staunchly rejects (Braddon 57). In order to dispel her doubts, Lady Audley identifies a lack of colour in Phoebe's hair and wardrobe as the only flaw that needs correction, "you *are* like me, and your features are very nice; it is only colour that you want," (Braddon 58). She then proceeds to mention how products can be used to modify her social body, and present a more striking and commanding visual identity with her assertion, '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,' (Braddon 58). Here Braddon uses the discussion between two characters of an instance of doubling to highlight how

the social body can be actively fabricated through the purchase of various products to reproduce the visual appearance of another. In this way, Braddon, like Collins, uses instances of doubling generated through sartorial cues to prompt the reader to recognise that visually registered identity is fabricated and never personal.

As well as using these allusions to traditional gothic tropes to highlight how dressing renders visual identity ambiguous and malleable, Collins and Braddon deploy their domesticated gothic register to explore a number of other anxieties raised by the especially ambiguous social body fabricated by the urban stranger. First and foremost, Count Fosco and Lady Audley embody contemporary anxieties surrounding the devastating potential of the urban stranger willing to harness their anonymity to enact socially transgressive self-transformations. Secondly, madness, another gothic staple, features in *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret* as a vehicle for expressing different implications the fabrication of identity through dress had on mid-Victorians. Collins uses it as a means to exaggerate the despair felt by individuals denied the agency to self-fabricate their identity in the modern world, while Braddon evokes madness in order to emphasise how Helen Talboy's goal of escaping poverty by reforging her identity anew as the single and virtuous Lucy Graham and performing gentility as Lucy Graham is inherently incongruous with established, contemporary social order.

Collins and Braddon invest their chief antagonists Count Fosco and Lady Audley with traits that render them uncanny and devilish caricatures of evil as a means to explore the perceived threat posed by the stranger whose identity is divorced from an intimate knowledge of their personal history. In social settings where people engage with or cross the paths of strangers everyday, the discursive strategy of revealing the malign intent hidden behind the alluring and attractive facades of these two individuals divorced from their personal history lends a significant contribution to the melodramatic impact of *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret*.

Characterised as a master in everything from doctoring, oratory, chemistry, politics, law, animal taming and a host of cultural pursuits, Count Fosco appears to also possess a supernatural capacity to manipulate those around him. Collins uses sartorial cues to suggest that Count Fosco derives this gravitas and irresistible allure from a visual appearance that demands attention. Marian's curious recognition that in his first two days at Blackwater Park, Fosco 'has appeared in four magnificent waistcoats already – all of light garish colours, and all immensely large even for him,' (Collins 244) foreshadows the bizarre troubling feelings of desire he manages to kindle in her despite her recognition that he is the enemy. Furthermore, it is demonstrated that not only is he capable of compelling his wife to undergo a radical transformation that rendered her utterly subservient to him (Collins 238), the Count is even able to inspire an entire crowd at the Opera to follow his lead simply by clapping with, 'perfectly-fitted black kid gloves,' (Collins 589). The narration of his response to this particular incident, 'the man's voracious vanity devoured their implied tribute to his local and critical supremacy with an appearance of the highest relish,' (Collins 589), evokes the uncanny as Fosco's prodigious capacity to compel people to bow to his will in any and all circumstances suggests he is an embodiment of vanity that derives his power from his sartorial appearance.

Lady Audley is more overtly depicted as a demonic entity in Braddon's depiction of the threatening stranger. Upon gaining entry to Lady Audley's locked boudoir through a classic Gothic tunnel and trapdoor, Robert and George find dresses, jewellery, hairbrushes, china and drapes of fabric everywhere, as well as mirrors and paintings. It is here that they come across the portrait of the Lady herself (Braddon 69), and Braddon invites the reader to consider the possibility that Lucy Graham is some form of demonic figure. After drawing attention to a mouth that has a 'hard and wicked look,' (Braddon 71), Braddon proceeds to allude to chilling demonic imagery in the description that follows. Lady Audley's secret identity as a social vampire or anarchic force of evil within the narrative is foregrounded by the narrator's

observation that in her portrait she has ‘something of the aspect of a beautiful fiend,’ (Braddon 71). Additionally, sartorial cues loaded with symbolism that conjures images of hellfire complete the portrait: ‘her crimson dress...hung about her in folds that looked like flames, her fair head peeping out of the lurid mass of colour, as if out of a raging furnace,’ (Braddon 71). These depictions of Count Fosco and Lady Audley characterise them as forces of chaos and upheaval within their narrative worlds, and are noteworthy examples of sensation fiction’s sartorially domesticated gothic mode being used to evoke in contemporary readers the fear of the urban stranger’s capacity to undermine social order.

While Collins and Braddon both draw upon their domesticated gothic register to characterise the strangers Count Fosco and Lady Audley as paragons of evil that threaten social order, madness is a gothic theme that is also used in both narratives to explore the potential manifestations of the threat posed by the urban stranger. Each author deploys madness to different effect. In *The Woman in White*, the devilishly cunning Count Fosco demonstrates the ability for false identities to be determined for individuals who rendered strangers within an institution. In a shocking plot twist, Fosco convinces the authorities of an asylum that Laura Fairlie is in fact an unhinged Anne Catherick convinced that she is her idol Laura (Collins 438). The Count achieves this by dressing her in Anne’s clothing, sartorial cues that the nurse uses to assert this false identity upon Laura: “Look at your own name on your own clothes, and don’t worry us all about being Lady Glyde...Do look at your clothes now!” (Collins 448).

Collins uses this event to stress that madness is a form of identification that is imposed upon on the individual, and in this case literally denies Laura the ability self-fabricate her identity through dress. Being dressed in someone else’s clothes constitutes a systematic denial of agency for Laura, and highlights that not only is visual identity constructed, but it is also ultimately ascribed meaning by the beholder. Furthermore, this episode, and the crippling effect it has on the

confidence of the already exceedingly passive Laura (Collins 451), generates anxiety in the reader, as the possibility that if they were systematically misidentified by a group or institution they too would appear mad. Fosco's conspiracy thus illuminates identification produced by interpretations of dress as a social process negotiated between the individual and their peers, and that when amongst strangers unaware of their true personal history, individual identity can be ascribed rather than self-determined.

In *Lady Audley's Secret*, madness is used as a device to provide the reader with closure by vilifying Lady Audley as entirely unfit for society following the complete revelation of her faked death, bigamous marriage, murder attempt and fatal arson attack. Braddon opens this gothic resolution to the narrative with Lady Audley's declaration to Robert, "You have conquered – a MADWOMAN!" (Braddon 345). However, Braddon presents little evidence supporting Lady Audley's claim that she is mad. Instead, she is represented as deeply attached to the arsenal of clothes and other paraphernalia used to dress her social body. Narration draws attention to her obsession with clothes, presenting her as a narcissistic consumer more concerned with leaving behind the contents of her boudoir than the revelation of her guilt. Two instances in particular stand out, when the narrator observes that 'My lady wrapped herself in an Indian shawl; a shawl that had cost Sir Michael a hundred guineas,' (Braddon 373) and 'Her mercenary soul hankered greedily after the costly and beautiful things of which she had been mistress,' (Braddon 383).

These sartorial references are used by Braddon to highlight how dependant Helen Talboys became upon visual forms of self-fabrication while embodying the identity of Lady Audley. Her obsession with the clothes and other paraphernalia necessary to dress her social body emphasises that sartorial cues are crucial to identification in *Lady Audley's Secret*. Furthermore, Lady Audley is not truly diagnosed as mad either. Dr. Mosgrave does not confirm her madness; instead he recognises her as an individual who took advantage of her position as an urban

stranger to engage in a bigamous marriage to secure social advancement (Braddon 377). While he concedes she may have hereditary traces of madness, he only attributes her with having acquired the, “cunning,” (Braddon 379) necessary to affect her duplicitous identity. Most significantly of all, Mosgrave’s recommendation that Lady Audley be incarcerated in a foreign asylum on the grounds that she is not, “a woman to be trusted at large,” (Braddon 381) further attests that she is not truly mad. Instead, Helen Talboys is a female stranger perceived as a threat to social order having demonstrated her capacity to transcend her class by wilfully fabricating for herself a new identity, and then cementing her position as Lady Audley through dress. Robert’s unwillingness to recognise that she is not mad, but simply capable of exploiting the thin veneer of social identification to her advantage, pinpoints the threat posed by strangers as the true source of anxiety in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, as madness presents a more comforting resolution than the admission that identity is malleable.

Drawing the gothic into their narratives enabled Collins and Braddon to capitalise on the realist conventions of detective fiction and render the threat posed by strangers to social order an everyday occurrence. This is precisely why their novels are sensational, since they compelled contemporary readers to consider the possibility that any person they do not know from birth may be performing a false identity visually through dress. In a social setting where people engage with or cross the paths of strangers everyday, this brings drama to the experience of reading sensation fiction. As Phoebe’s remarks, “What was she but a servant like me?...You should have seen her shabby clothes, Luke – worn and patched, and darned, and turned and twisted, yet always looking nice upon her, somehow,” (Braddon 27) in *Lady Audley’s Secret* point out, any seemingly innocuous stranger is capable of dramatic self-transformations. Collins and Braddon reappropriated the gothic to explore the darker side of this potential, casting two strangers with mysterious pasts, Count Fosco and Lady Audley respectively, as their primary

antagonists as a means to explore contemporary issues surrounding identification and anonymity in the urban city.

Throughout *Articulating Mass Anxiety*, the reappropriation of gothic features has emerged as a particularly productive stylistic feature of sensation fiction's sartorial narrative agenda. The discussion of the modern experience of anonymity in the urban city that prefaced this chapter's discussion of gothic features in *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret* established a motivation for reappropriating the register of the gothic genre into the domestic space through dress. Furthermore, the gothic is used to exaggerate the threat posed by the urban stranger to social cohesion and traditionally static forms of identification feature heavily in both novels. Finally, sartorial cues are used to support the different roles played by allusions to madness in *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret*, which act as a vehicle for exploring the vulnerability of individuals denied the ability to self-fabricate experienced by Laura and the dependence individuals can develop on dress to self-identify that is suggested by Lady Audley. The stylistic analysis in this, and the previous chapter, has served to illuminate the significant contribution sartorial cues played in sensation fiction's exploration of contemporary issues surrounding dress and identity. The chapter that follows will assert that just as Collins and Braddon were interested in the role dress and visual forms of identification played in the changing social landscape of mid-Victorian England, they were also keen to explore the potential applications of the sartorial cue in narrative discourse.

Chapter Three

Enthralled by Dress: The Centrality of Sartorial Cues to Characterisation and Plot in Popular Sensation Fiction

This chapter will contribute to this thesis's contention that sensation fiction is a genre that presents fundamentally sartorial narratives in order to explore the relationship between dress and identity by moving beyond considerations of generic appropriation. While the examples of generic appropriation presented in the first two chapters demonstrate that Collins and Braddon recognised the utility of sartorial cues as a means of investing their texts with significance that resonated strongly with contemporary readers, this chapter will explore in more detail the fascination the authors had with the sartorial cue on a discursive level. The textual analysis that follows will focus on the prominence of sartorial cues during characterisation, and their use as symbolic referents that help the reader process and anticipate narrative events in *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret*. Highlighting the effect sartorial cues have in these discursive processes will demonstrate that Collins and Braddon were enthralled by the productive qualities of dress as a form of visual communication, and sought to leverage it as a means of offering a life-like form of representation that became germane to sensation fiction.

A number of literary critics provide useful frameworks for considering how Collins and Braddon leverage sartorial cues during the instances of characterisation that occur during their narrative discourse. Turning first to narrative critics interested in dress, Clair Hughes contends that 'descriptions of dress help us fill out our pictures of the imagined worlds of fiction,' (1). Her elaboration that dress is traditionally 'used to portray aspects of personality, particularly when a character first enters the story,' (Hughes 7) forms the starting point for this critical investigation of the fascination with using sartorial cues exhibited by Collins and Braddon during the characterisation that takes place in their narratives. This discussion will consider that as well as

enabling readers to imagine the character of *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret* visually, Collins and Braddon deploy sartorial cues in characterisation as a means to naturalise the way readers respond to them by depicting them with fabricated social bodies that mimic everyday visual representations of identity.

The assertion that Collins and Braddon employ sartorial cues as a means of guiding their readers through responses to characterisation in a realistic fashion is further supported by the foundational research into the mechanics of characterisation carried out by James Garvey and Uri Margolin. Garvey divides the process of reading characters into two stages, identification and characterisation. He asserts that 'identification involves simply the attribution of a name...or a definite description,' while 'characterisation...invests an identified character with an attribute or set of attributes (also called 'traits', 'qualities', or 'characteristics') which add descriptive material of a particular sort,' (Garvey: 63). Both Garvey and Margolin attest that the first stage, identification, hinges on the reader's reception of descriptions produced in narration, which they define as 'narrative attributes,' and 'narrative statements,' respectively (Garvey: 67, Margolin 7). In the case of the sartorially produced characterisation strategy utilised by Collins and Braddon, characters are predominately identified by narration in *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret* by descriptions of dress. These sartorial cues act as the referents that guide how readers respond to the characters.

Garvey and Margolin also assert that when readers respond to identified characters and progress to the act of characterisation, they produce psychologically elaborate entities through narrative implication (Garvey: 73, Margolin: 9). Implication refers to the process of noting the referents provided by authors when introducing individual characters to scenes within the narrative, and then drawing assumptions from them concerning the tastes and desires that constitute their habitus, as well as their immediate psychological and emotional states. Margolin lends support to

the contention that characterisation in sensation fiction is sartorially produced by stating that these inferences are based on the reader's context dependant 'natural logic,' (Margolin: 9), which translates to their habitus. Consequently, the manner in which readers characterise identified characters in sensation fiction is informed by their received understanding of the visual signs embedded in their dress. Collins and Braddon exploit this productive quality of the sartorial cue in *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret* to develop characterisation strategies that offer descriptions of dress as symbolic embodiments of a character's identity in precisely the same way dress is involved in identification that takes place in the real world.

Applying a sustained analysis of the way sartorial cues appear throughout the characterisation strategies of Collins and Braddon demonstrates that both authors were determined to explore the possibilities presented by a sartorial narrative approach. The examples that follow highlight how the selection and presentation of sartorial cues enable both authors to guide their readers during the process of characterisation, leading them towards drawing a desired set of assumptions concerning their habitus. As outlined in the discussion of Bourdieu presented in the introduction of this thesis, habitus constitutes the proactive half of identity, referring to the complete set of acquired values and experiences that delineate the actions an individual may take. Beginning with *The Woman in White*, Marian's narration frequently draws attention to the ostentatious appearance of Count Fosco alongside some preliminary analysis as a means to encourage the reader to consider how his appearance reflects on his identity. One instance of identification in particular illustrates this process at work:

He wore (as if there was some hidden connection between his showiest finery and his deepest feelings) the most magnificent waistcoat he has yet appeared in – it was made of pale sea-green silk, and delicately trimmed with fine silver braid. (Collins 308)

Here Marian's detailed observation of his dress, and her suggestion that his sartorial choices reflect his internal emotional state, prompts the reader to consider that his dress serves as a means of communicating his feelings. Marian later affirms that Collins wishes his reader to attempt to glean the emotional state of Count Fosco through his appearance with her frank appraisal, 'Judging by appearances, the sentimental side of his character was persistently inclined to betray itself,' (Collins 311). Incidentally, this also reveals to the reader that Count Fosco personally places great significance into his attire, foreshadowing later revelations that he carefully self-fabricates for himself a false identity purposefully intended to stave off his Italian pursuers.

In *Lady Audley's Secret*, Braddon uses sartorial cues throughout her characterisation of Lady Audley to frequently draw attention to both the alluring quality, and profound artificiality, of her hair. In doing so, Braddon invites her readers to consider the implication this has on her as an individual, suggesting that by placing an inordinate amount of emphasis on crafting her social body Lady Audley manages to deflect questions concerning her identity by inspiring desire. An episode where Phoebe Marks is described re-arranging Lady Audley's curls 'for the third or fourth time; for the ringlets were always getting into disorder, and gave no little trouble to Lady Audley's maid,' (Braddon 77) draws into focus the work that goes into Lady Audley's visual appearance. Like Count Fosco's predilection for wearing an array of enormous decorative waistcoats, the reader is invited to consider what the effort put into ensuring Lady Audley's immaculately prepared hair reveals about her inner desires. Robert's narration suggests that Braddon is positioning the reader to develop an uneasy recognition that Lady Audley's efforts of self-fabrication are intended exclusively to instil desire in the men around her. This is evidenced by Robert's rapturous description of her to George Talboys offered in the opening chapter: "Such blue eyes, such ringlets, such a ravishing smile, such a fairy-like bonnet – all of a tremble with heartsease and dewy spangles, shining out of a cloud of gauze," (Braddon 56).

The vision of Lady Audley that intrudes upon his thoughts in the first chapter of the book's second volume also stands as another example, which is concluded by the striking image 'his uncle's wife's golden curls danced and trembled in a glittering haze,' (Braddon 156-157). Braddon's emphasis on presenting sartorial cues as the most impressive component of Lady Audley's identity highlights to the reader the artificiality of her social body, that it is constructed purely to evoke desire and ultimately portrays Lady Audley as a character exclusively concerned with surfaced visual forms of communication over meaningful psychological interaction.

Another character portrait presented by Braddon further illustrates the prominence of sartorial cues in the characterisation that takes place in *Lady Audley's Secret*. During the narrator's description of Robert's first meeting with Harcourt Talboys, the stubborn and principled father of his lost friend George, it is suggested that, 'he would have liked to have worn a toga, and wrapped himself sternly in its folds, as he turned his back upon poor George's intercessor,' (Braddon 183). The effect of this initial identification of Harcourt as a stoic and conservative figure is later confirmed by yet another sartorial cue, as Braddon's narrator describes his grey dressing-gown as, 'a severe-looking garment, and was perhaps the nearest approach to a toga to be obtained within the range of modern costume.' (Braddon 186). The reader is positioned by these sartorial cues to characterise Harcourt as an uncompromising man possessing a habitus defined by conservatism, preparing them for his harsh refusal to cooperate with Robert in his bid to ascertain the whereabouts of his son.

As well as offering readers with a means to draw early impressions of the habitus motivating the actions of characters that enter the narrative, the sartorial cues presented by Collins and Braddon during characterisation also signpost specific fields of action. In reference to the introduction again, field constitutes the social pressures of a particular scenario or activity that determine the actions of an individual. In the case of this thesis, fields of activity operate as a factor influencing

what characters wear in specific places and at specific times, and how others react to their choices.

Two early examples of sartorial cues drawing attention to characters failing to conform to the standards of dress set by the field they are in take place early on in *Lady Audley's Secret*. The first occurs when George and Robert enter a coffee house together upon reuniting after George's return from Australia. George's rugged appearance is met with disbelief by the workers, with Robert's narration noting that: 'The waiters at the Westminster coffee-house stared at the hollow-eyed, unshaven stranger, with his clothes of colonial cut,' (Braddon 35-36). Braddon clearly draws attention here to his beard and unfashionable clothes as the source of the social confusion that takes place. In doing so, the reader is positioned to characterise George as an outsider who is not capable of self-fabricating his social body in a manner that matches the expectations of the people in his current social setting.

Likewise, Luke Marks reacts badly to his wife's attempt to dress up in a fashion befitting a noblewoman for their wedding. He clearly presents his case after the wedding with the outburst, "Why can't women dress according to their station? You won't have no silk gowns out of my pocket, I can tell you," (Braddon 112). Braddon uses the explanation Luke offers for his stance to invest additional realism into her characters, as the exchange depicts an awareness of the expectations that govern how individuals of specific genders and classes should dress. Furthermore, it cements the reader's characterisation of Marks as a labourer resistant to forms of self-fabrication that do not readily conform to the conventional attire of inn-keepers.

Collins and Braddon also explore the means by which dress produces beauty in their characterisation. Beginning again with *Lady Audley's Secret*, Braddon overtly contrasts through sartorial references the different ideals of beauty that Lady Audley and Clara Talboys embody

with their dress. The following passage of narration firmly establishes the centrality of dress to the visual presence of Lady Audley:

She dressed herself in her most gorgeous silk; a voluminous robe of silvery, shimmering blue, that made her look as if she had been arrayed in moonbeams. She shook out her hair into feathery showers of glittering gold; and with a cloak of white cashmere about her shoulders, went downstairs into the vestibule. (Braddon 337-338)

One of the most striking passages of narration that encapsulates the opulent, sartorially fabricated beauty evoked by Lady Audley, it demonstrates to the reader that her beauty is contingent on the articles of clothing and hairstyle she adopts. This strategy stands in stark contrast to the way Braddon encourages her reader to characterise the beauty of Clara Talboys. While her dress still draws the attention of Robert, he pays specific attention to her renunciation of conspicuous acts of self-display. The narrator's observation that, 'Her dress, puritan in its grey simplicity, became her beauty better than a more beautiful dress would have become a less beautiful woman,' (200) actively sets her apart from Lady Audley, and encourages the reader to consider her to embody a virtuous or natural beauty in her dress. It is also interesting to note here that this subdued form of self-fabrication that effectively mimics the renunciation of colour popular amongst contemporary Victorian men is ultimately more interesting to Robert precisely because it is unconventional and unexpected of a woman of her position.

Laura Fairlie, the love interest and damsel in distress of *The Woman in White*, who also always 'simply' dressed (75, 80) by Collins, is characterised as a passive woman dependant on the actions of others to liberate her from the clutches of two men seeking to clear their debts by claiming her inheritance. As well as being doubled extensively with the ghostly Anne Catherick, the early impression of Laura that emerges from the description of her offered by Walter as a 'a fair, delicate girl, in a pretty light dress,' (Collins 75) is that she is fragile. Collins consolidates the sense of vulnerability that emerges from this sartorial image of innocence through the

dialogue she delivers to Robert shortly after, where she warns him not to lie to her, “Because I shall believe all that you say to me,” (Collins 78).

As well as using sartorial cues to establish Laura’s identity in the narrative as an infantile figure vulnerable to the manipulation of men, Collins presents her humble mode of dress as her most attractive feature. Walter is drawn to Laura in the same manner Robert’s infatuation with Lady Audley is replaced by his desire for Clara because she is also characterised through her dress as pious and chaste. Collins communicates this to the reader during the narration of a dinner scene, where Walter is struck by an unusual situation where even though, ‘Mrs. Vesey and Miss Halcombe were richly clad...Miss Fairlie was unpretendingly and almost poorly dressed in plain white muslin,’ (Collins 80). Despite being ‘spotlessly pure,’ the dress is sensationally compared to the attire worn by individuals in want of the financial freedom to secure more decorative articles of clothing (Collins 80). Sartorial cues thus characterise Laura as openly defying the conventional expectations of dress in her social field, instead choosing to embody through dress a gendered passivity that compels Walter to devote himself to her.

Sartorial cues also signal intention in *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley’s Secret*, presenting the reader with visual signposts that enable them to follow the events of their melodramatic plots more readily. One of the simplest, but highly effective examples, is the uniform of travel that is systematically applied throughout both books to enable the reader to forecast and follow upcoming events. The two male detectives of each novel, Walter Hartwright and Robert Audley, always don their hats before changing scene, while women constantly reach for shawls and take leave to find bonnets before doing the same. Women are also veiled or hooded during clandestine meetings as a means of symbolising their desire to remain hidden, including Anne Catherick during her graveyard liaison with Walter in *The Woman in White* (Collins 117) and Helen Talboys during the secret conversation she holds with Robert as after his first meeting

with Harcourt Talboys (Braddon 196). These sartorial cues are repeated throughout both books, generating a pattern of activity that associates dress with specific actions to help the reader follow the plot.

Psychological change is also registered in changes to the visually fabricated social bodies of characters in both novels. In *The Woman in White* for instance, the only time the solicitor Vincent Gilmore draws attention to dress in his narration is so that Collins can emphasise that Walter's forced separation from Laura in lieu of her engagement to Sir Percival Glyde weighs heavy upon him. Mr. Gilmore recalls that when bumping into Walter at Euston Square train station, he noticed that:

He was so changed that I hardly knew him again. His face looked pale and haggard – his manner was hurried and uncertain – and his dress, which I remembered as neat and gentleman-like when I saw him at Limmeridge, was so slovenly now that I should really have been ashamed of the appearance of it on one of my own clerks. (Collins 178)

This expression of concern regarding the implications visual expressions of identity have on the wellbeing of a character prepares the reader for the darker, more jaded perspective that will enter Walter's future narration, and his commitment to uncovering the true motivations and identities of Sir Percival and Count Fosco. In stark contrast, no discernable change is registered in the appearance of Lady Audley following the denunciation of her crimes by Robert Audley in *Lady Audley's Secret*. As the narrator states, interior agitation and anxiety is commonly, 'associated in our minds with loose, disordered garments, and dishevelled hair, and an appearance in every way the reverse of my lady's,' (Braddon 338). The lack of any faults in the immaculately fabricated social body of Lady Audley at a time when she is under the most pressure in the narrative is an example of Braddon using sartorial cues to prompt her reader to recognise the command she has over the means of self-fabrication at her disposal.

Braddon and Collins also use sartorial cues to illuminate events motivated by infatuation and desire in the plots of *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret*. In Collins' novel, sartorial simile is used to stress that as an art teacher, Walter's decision to pursue his infatuation with Laura Fairlie constituted an uncharacteristic lapse in professional judgement. While Walter attests in his narration 'I had trained myself to leave all the sympathies natural to my age in my employer's outer hall, as coolly as I left my umbrella there before going upstairs,' (Collins 89), it is apparent throughout the early scenes of *The Woman in White* that he failed to do so. Instead, Walter confesses that he lost his self-control through another statement that hinges on a sartorial cue: 'And now I and my trusty talisman were parted for the first time,' (Collins 89-90). In *Lady Audley's Secret*, Robert's growing infatuation with Lady Audley is also emphatically depicted to the reader through sartorial cues. Braddon presents Robert's inability to explain why he was fascinated by her dress as evidence of him succumbing to her allure. The expression 'I should have asked...why I always noticed and remembered the little changes in her dress that I noticed and remembered in no other woman's before,' (Braddon 90), is an early example of Robert's attention to dress indicating interest that probes beyond the superficial.

Sartorial cues also foreshadow future plot twists in *Lady Audley's Secret* and *The Woman in White*. In Braddon's novel, hair features as part of the false trail of evidence that convinced George that his wife Helen was dead. When asked to identify a lock of hair when visiting Ventnor that is produced as evidence of her death, George initially agrees, but qualifies his statement with the observation 'but it always had a rippling wave in it then, and now it seems smooth and straight,' (Braddon 42). The landlady, who was conscripted by Helen to fake her death so she could take on the persona of Lucy Graham and later Lady Audley, offer the clearly unreliable explanation that hair often, "changes in illness," (Braddon 42). This episode sets the reader up for the shocking future revelation that George's wife never died, as the suspicion that the straight tress of golden hair presented to him could never have belonged to a woman with

curly hair is confirmed by Robert's discovery of a curled lock of golden hair in a book that belonged to her (Braddon 158-159).

Upon narrating the scene where Walter saves the life of the Italian teacher Pesca at the beach (Collins 36), Collins hints that events will unfold throughout *The Woman in White* that will require Walter to call upon Pesca to return the favour (Collins 37). Walter's comment that the events to follow will 'alter me to myself almost past recognition,' (Collins 37) draws a comparison between the comic description of Pesca's attempts to emulate British dress habits in an attempt to conform to cultural norms and the radical transformation that Walter will also undergo as he attempts to thwart the plans of Sir Percival and Count Fosco.

The secret at the heart of *Lady Audley's Secret* is also referred to as early as chapter three through a sartorial cue. As Phoebe and Luke explore Lady Audley's boudoir while she is out, they come across a secret compartment in her jewellery box that hides a treasure even more valuable to her than all of the gems that distract the casual visitor. While Luke is puzzled by what he finds, 'a baby's little worsted shoe...and a tiny lock of pale and silky yellow hair, evidently taken from a baby's head,' (30), Phoebe recognises that these sartorial cues have profound implications on Lady Audley's past life and present identity. That these sartorial cues are then used by the pair to blackmail Lady Audley throughout the rest of the narrative, demonstrates that Braddon decided to present these sartorial cues at this point in her novel to ensure that her readers align with Robert's suspicion that Lady Audley is not who she purports to be.

The contention that Collins and Braddon were both interested in pursuing a sartorial narrative approach throughout their novels is further supported by a discussion of the sartorial cues that appear prominently at the resolution of both *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret*. In

Collins' novel, a manipulation of sartorial cues accounts for the ability of Count Fosco to evade the attention of the Brotherhood, an Italian secret society intent on punishing his betrayal with death. When stalking the Count at the Opera, Walter is surprised that he was struck by terror upon seeing Pesca, which culminates in Pesca explaining to Walter that he is a respected member of the Brotherhood. Walter's subsequent internal monologue presents a wonderfully effective explanation for 'why the recognition had not been mutual,' that is laden with sartorial cues:

A man of the Count's character would never risk the terrible consequences of turning spy without looking to his personal security quite as carefully as he looked to his golden reward. The shaven face, which I pointed out at the Opera, might have been covered by a beard in Pesca's time – his dark brown hair might have been a wig – his name evidently a false one. The accident of time might have helped him as well – his immense corpulence might have come with his later years. (599)

This ability to re-fabricate his social body to forge a new, alien identity is further consolidated by the contrast between the trade's clothes he wore while hiding in France and the opulent clothes he wears while in England. Walter narrates that: 'His clothes, hung above him, showed that he had been himself conscious of his danger – they were clothes that had disguised him as a French artisan,' (Collins 643). Through these references to sartorial cues at the culmination of his novel, Collins consolidates the agenda of exploring the productive quality of dress in narrative he sustains throughout *The Woman in White*.

Braddon also dwells on sartorial cues at the end of *Lady Audley's Secret*. Before Lady Audley commits an act of arson in her attempt to silence Robert, the narration draws attention to her hair, which 'spread itself into a tangled mass that surrounded her forehead like a yellow flame,' (321). This image both alludes to the demonic imagery of the pre-raphaelite portrait, and introduces her resolve to burn down the lodging Robert was sleeping in. The state of Lady Audley's hair is an explicit sartorial cue intended to lead Braddon's readers to recoil from the unfettered desperation that rages inside of her at this point in the narrative. Doing so accentuates her stature as a dangerous and anti-social element in her narrative world.

Finally, the narrator's loaded discussion of the insight the maids who served Lady Audley would have into the disparity between her true and artificially constructed identities is another example of Braddon exploiting the productive quality of sartorial cues. The narrator highlights that the handmaid can easily identify the insincere elements of her mistress' social body since: 'she knows when the ivory complexion is bought and paid for – when the pearly teeth are foreign substances fashioned by the dentist – when the glossy plaits are the relics of the dead, rather than the property of the living,' (336). This insight into how Lady Audley prepares herself body for social interaction incorporates the macabre accusation that her hair is taken from the dead, confirms that her identity has been false throughout the narrative. Ultimately, Braddon uses this discussion of the authenticity of the sartorial cues displayed by Lady Audley to stress to her readers that visually performed identities are at all times an artificially crafted mask, and that true and un-fabricated identity is only exposed in intimate settings.

This final chapter has systematically presented evidence for the sustained interest in exploring the discursive qualities of sartorial cues exhibited by Collins and Braddon their respective novels. It considered how sartorial cues invest their characterisation with an element of realism that draws in the reader by mimicking the real-world practice of drawing conclusions about identity from dress. Furthermore, it drew attention to the manner in which sartorial cues function as signposts that help readers navigate the sensational plots of *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret*. From this survey of the presence of sartorial cues throughout their discourse, the sensation fiction narratives of Collins and Braddon clearly emerge as inherently sartorial narratives.

Conclusion

The discussion presented in the introduction to this thesis established that while dress historians and sociologists agree that dress both facilitates social interaction and affords individuals a means to self-fabricate and embody their desired identity visually, little attention is paid to this process in literary criticism. In order to address the lack of scholarly enquiry carried out by literary critics into the relationship between dress and identity in narrative, this thesis considered two questions. Firstly, how does dress contribute to the construction and reception of identity in modern literature? And more specifically, why is the sartorial registered so strongly in early sensation fiction of the 1860's?

While not intended to offer authoritative or final answers to these questions, this thesis used these questions to set the re-evaluation of the significance of dress and identity in sensation fiction as a primary research goal. As suggested by its title, the research presented in this thesis was fundamentally concerned with exploring and accounting for the interest in dress and identity that is exhibited in early sensation fiction writing. To achieve this aim, the three chapters of present elements of a case that contends sensation fiction texts are inherently sartorial narratives, namely works of fiction that rely heavily on sartorial cues as a means of discursive signification.

In doing so, the research carried out in this thesis directly contributes to the work carried out by other literary critics such as Rosy Aindow and Clair Hughes, who also draw attention to the significant role played by dress in narrative processes as well as real life. While its analysis of the genre is limited to its two most popular foundational texts, Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, this thesis still offers plenty of insights into why the texts in the sensation fiction genre display a sustained interest in communicating ideas concerning dress and identity. The contextual framework in the

introduction and openings of the first two chapters of this thesis firmly established that these sensation fiction texts were published in response to dramatic changes in the social landscape of Victorian England, and register contemporary concerns regarding the impact new modes of production and distribution of dress would have on the traditional understanding of identity as static.

The case of this thesis was presented in two parts, with the first two chapters ‘Navigating the Masquerade’ and ‘Articulating Mass Anxiety’ establishing how the selection and description of sartorial cues enable Braddon and Collins to appropriate detective and gothic features in their narratives to engage with contemporary issues surrounding dress and identity in the 1860’s. The discussion in these two chapters also highlighted that sensation fiction draws its impact from these sartorially produced generic features, as the perceived threat of duplicitous representations of identity and the anonymous urban stranger are articulated through detective and gothic registers respectively.

The third and final chapter concludes the case by outlining how sartorial cues feature prominently in the characterisation strategies of Collins and Braddon. By drawing out a number of detailed examples, this chapter built upon the previous two by providing evidence for this thesis’ claim that not only were the contemporary readers of sensation fascinated by the implications growing access to dress had on modern identity, but that their authors were enthralled by the possibilities of mimicking visual forms of identification in narrative.

What emerges from this thesis is that sensation fiction texts are inherently sartorial narratives, with sartorial cues acting to signpost the generic elements of *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley’s Secret*, inform characterisation and drive plot. Representing the dangerous power and allure of dress through sartorial cues emerges as the central discursive preoccupation of the genre,

which draws its sensational and popular appeal from its conscious presentation of farfetched conspiracies and betrayals made possible by the manipulation of everyday and mundane articles of dress. These narratives are built upon the assumption that their readers also invest in dress the capacity to enthrall the unwitting into believing falsities, and prey on the fear that torrid conspiracies lie hidden beneath the social masks embodied by neighbours, friends, family and lovers. Consequently, the interest in dress and identity that is exhibited throughout sensation fiction texts is attributable to the fascinating recognition by both their contemporary readers and authors that since dress constituted a visually embodied form of communication, identity was now malleable and fabricated at will by the modern individual rather than innate or determined.

There are a number of avenues for pursuing further research that stems from these conclusions. Firstly, the recognition that an attention to sartorial cues can feed a body of research that provides new insights into the mechanics and agenda of sensation fiction is an encouraging sign that a similar methodology can be applied to other Victorian genres. Secondly, while the scope of this paper is limited to fiction from the 1860's due to the requirements of brevity and the expertise of the writer, there is a need to start investigating the sartorial narrative practices in other works of fiction from different countries, genres and time periods as well. Such research could also undertake a cross-examination of how sartorial cues manifest as a means to explore the link between dress and identity in different literary traditions, including for instance British, American and French sartorial narratives. Finally, since this thesis is engaged in shedding light on a social activity that continues to effect identification in the present, it hopes to inspire other scholars from a range of disciplines to pay attention to the role played by dress in both real life, and fictional representations of it.

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