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Appraises sensation fiction as a genre that struggled for cultural respectability due in large part to its mass market appeal. Identifies how these controversial narratives are represented by mid-Victorian opponents as both the outcome of and response to a cultural craving which mainstream society has failed to appease. Traces the social misgivings confronted and processed by literary sensationalism. Asks what this sub-genre of Gothic fiction has to offer twenty-first century readers of Victorian literature.

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Introduction

Two or three years ago nobody would have known what was meant by a Sensation Novel; yet now the term has already passed through the stage of jocular use (a stage in which other less lucky ones will sometimes remain for whole generations), and has been adopted as the regular commercial name for a particular product of industry for which there is just now a brisk demand.

([Anon.], 'The Queen's English', *Edinburgh Review* 70,
July 1864, p. 53)

To this sardonic correspondent, writing for the 1864 *Edinburgh Review*, the 'Sensation Novel', instead of being the rich multivalent form that critics hail nowadays, was a self-evidently substandard literary category, synonymous with the swift growth of industrial capitalism and the emergence of large urban centres with newly exploding populations and new social classes. Defined by its position as an example of mass-produced popular fiction, riding the crest of 'a wave of materialism',¹ the sheer ubiquity of this genre seemed both the upshot and symptom of seismic shifts affecting mid-Victorian reading habits.² As we shall see in Chapter One, the genre struggled for cultural respectability due in large part to its mass-market appeal. So why was the sensation novel 'the literary rage'³ in the 1860s, given that this subgenre of Gothic fiction does not belong exclusively to that time-period? What social misgivings and hidden fears did literary sensationalism confront and process, and what, if anything, does it have to offer twenty-first-century students of Victorian literature? These questions dominate recent criticism and this Guide will scrutinize the most trenchant interventions, as well as indicating worthwhile directions that future research into the genre might take.

'Sensationalism' becomes such a modish slogan or buzzword in 1860s periodical discourse that it takes on increasingly diffuse and perplexing connotations. However, its aura of condescending disapprobation is a keynote of countless reviews as pundits brandished the term as a means to demarcate novels deemed injurious from their more anodyne competitors. By 1867 the novelist and biographer Margaret Oliphant (1828–97) grumbled that 'all our minor novelists, almost without exception, are of the school called Sensational.'⁴ *Fraser's Magazine*, reporting on the phenomenon at the apex of the vogue, noted that

‘a book without a murder, a divorce, a seduction, or a bigamy, is not apparently considered worth either writing or reading; and a mystery and a secret are the chief qualifications of the modern novel.’⁵ This half-appalled, half-jocose estimation, with its catalogue of scandalous and highly spiced ingredients, actually serves as a working definition of the Victorian sensation mode, one that Mary Elizabeth Braddon (1835–1915) exploited in her droll portrayal of the sensation novelist Sigismund Smith in *The Doctor’s Wife* (1864). Smith remarks that his readers revel in ‘plot, and plenty of it; surprises, and plenty of ‘em; mystery thick as a November fog.’⁶

Though some applications of the word ‘sensation’ were new to commentators in the 1860s, the social trend to which they referred was perhaps more familiar. William Wordsworth (1770–1850), in the 1800 Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, lamented the ‘craving for extraordinary incident’, the ‘degrading outrageous stimulation’ that afflicted his countrymen. Perhaps this regrettable relish for shocks, thrills and the outlandish, Wordsworth speculated, was a peculiarly modern malaise, explained by ‘the accumulation of men in cities’ and ‘the rapid communication of intelligence.’⁷

To contemporary reviewers and literary historians alike, the sensation novel, with its emotionally and socially provocative plots and plurality of generic affiliations, has seemed at once readily identifiable and difficult to delineate with exactitude (‘fast novels’, ‘bigamy novels’, ‘crime novels’, and *Punch*’s witty coinage ‘arsenical novels’ are sometimes equated with, sometimes distinguished from the genre). In a literary culture that fostered the merit of convenient classificatory concepts and devised an array of strategies for drawing narrow distinctions, sensationalism repeatedly called the parameters of social, textual and even organic categories into question. Indeed, the act of naming the sensation novel is an endeavour to fix something that might more usefully be surveyed as adaptable and nebulous – as a procedure designed to unsettle the concept of genre as a cluster of intrinsic textual characteristics. In spite of frequent censure of the hackneyed, cliché-ridden nature of the sensation novel, it becomes clear in hindsight that the genre’s capacity to subvert sentimental and generic expectations derived substantially from its status as a multifaceted formal and ideological hybrid. The novelist, dramatist and journalist Charles Reade (1814–84) offered an early classification of sensation narrative as a ‘Matter-of-Fact Romance’, a term which implies how the partitions between domestic sanctuary and the public sphere of economic enterprise, propriety and indiscretion, genteel and lower-class, cannot prevent the cross-pollination of these categories, highlighting the brittleness of the markers that seem to segregate them.

Like stage melodrama, with which it had so much in common, sensation fiction was, as Charles Dickens (1812–70) wrote of *The Moonstone* (1868) by Wilkie Collins (1824–89), ‘wild yet domestic’.⁸ This phrase suggests the extent to which the genre employed its paraphernalia of psychic disintegration, duplicates, spectres, and transposed identities to erode the seemingly solid and respectable structures of mid-Victorian domesticity. Reviewers frequently branded sensation fiction the genre of emotional excess, not only for its dependency on heightened incident and unbalanced protagonists, but also for its stylistic mannerisms. George Henry Lewes (1817–78) was one among many who belittled popular novels for their ‘detailism’, a plethora of visual data that overwhelms descriptive lucidity and debunks realism’s sober mimetic capacity. Indeed, as David Skilton notes of this period, ‘at no time were the techniques and subject matter of fiction under more vigorous and more public debate’ than in the 1860s.⁹ Critics argued that the Victorian sensation novel was ‘not really a distinct genre’¹⁰ at all; rather than being a coherent literary movement it represented a strain of morbid naturalism, an English form of the racier French fiction of George Sand (1804–76), Gustave Flaubert (1821–80), Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850) and Emile Zola (1840–1902).

This Guide interrogates the cultural aspects and critical reception of the sensation controversy, surveying the pressing issues of scholarly inquiry from the genre’s 1860s heyday to the present. After years of unwarranted neglect, serious attention is now devoted not only to these narratives but also to their contexts: what they disclose about the social, economic, political and discursive milieu they helped shape. The serialization of Collins’s *The Woman in White* in Charles Dickens’s new weekly magazine, *All the Year Round*, between 26 November 1859 and 25 August 1860 has been ‘heralded as the birth of the sensation novel’,¹¹ and was so lucrative that it created a genuine publishing bonanza, as well as a panoply of commercial spin-offs such as bonnets and dressing gowns fashioned after the dress of its title character. *The Woman in White* even inspired two new dances: a Woman in White Waltz and a Fosco Gallop.¹²

The publisher George Bentley (1828–95), summing up the literary year in his diary on the last day of 1863, noted the phenomenal success of sensation fiction generally and saluted Collins as ‘king of inventors [...] the grand inaugurator of the vogue.’¹³ *Vanity Fair* would publish Collins’s caricature and crown him simply as ‘The Novelist Who Invented Sensation’ in 1872.¹⁴ M. E. Braddon herself proclaimed that Collins was her ‘literary father’¹⁵ and that she owed *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) to *The Woman in White*. *Punch* gave its official recognition in 1863 to the genre by producing its own sensational serial, ‘Mokeanna; or, The

White Witness: A Tale of the Times.¹⁶ While other sensation novels, such as *East Lynne* (1861) by Ellen (Mrs Henry) Wood (1814–87), a bestseller of 400,000 copies, have remained in print, many others, such as *Hard Cash* (1863) by Charles Reade, who was acclaimed in 1867 by Margaret Oliphant as ‘one of the greatest artists in the realm of fiction’,¹⁷ have vanished from public view over the years.

Concentrating on secondary scholarship, it is manifest that the re-evaluative enterprise it typifies has been both the outgrowth of and catalyst for the reissue of hitherto overlooked texts: the Oxford World’s Classics and Broadview series, both useful barometers for such trends, have in the last 15 years brought out annotated editions of novels by Braddon, Wood, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu (1814–73) and Collins. Interest in sensation fiction has radically altered the contours of a Victorian canon that once accorded the genre only ‘a marginal space in the history of English letters.’¹⁸ In 1928 for instance, the modernist poet and critic T. S. Eliot (1888–1965) offered an (in)famous appreciation of Collins which measured the author as a ‘man of talent’ against Dickens as the ‘man of genius.’¹⁹ But in the past decade Collins’s oeuvre has undergone a literary reassessment that has prompted some pundits to place him ‘nearer the first tier of Victorian novelists than he has ever been.’²⁰ Victorian sensation fiction is also showing signs of a popular resurgence, with film adaptations of Collins’s novels *The Moonstone* and *Basil* (1852) released in 1997 and 1998.²¹ The musical adaptation of Collins’s *The Woman in White* by Andrew Lloyd Webber (born 1948), premiered in London in 2004, and an \$11 million Broadway production opened in late 2005. As Richard Fantina and Kimberly Harrison remark in their ‘Introduction’ to *Victorian Sensations: Essays on a Scandalous Genre* (2006), ‘[t]hese Victorian thrillers, often involving themes such as bigamy, illegitimacy, drug abuse, murder, inheritance scandals, and adultery’, captivated Victorians and ‘continue to interest contemporary audiences.’²²

Today, sensation narratives whether adapted for the stage, broadcast on television, premiered in cinemas, or delivered in print, are unlikely to trigger an outcry among audiences inured to graphic depictions of crime and sexuality. But this genre’s ‘intense appreciation of flesh and blood’, according to Margaret Oliphant in 1867, provoked defensive ire and alarm on the part of religious, political and literary authorities. The Archbishop of York, William Thomson (1819–90), preached a sermon against it as one of the ‘abominations’ of the age in November 1864; the Dean of St. Paul’s and Waynflete Professor of Moral and Metaphysical Philosophy at Oxford, H. L. Mansel (1820–71), insisted that the spawning of these vicious narratives, with their language of nervous excitability, and depictions of people almost literally taken out of themselves in moments of shock and awe, was a species of decadent

drug potent enough to corrode the reader's morally contemplative responses. H. F. Chorley (1808–72), reviewing Collins's *Armadale* (1866) for the *Athenaeum*, found in the popularity of sensation novels undeniable evidence that he lived 'in a period of diseased invention' of which 'the coming phase [...] may be palsy.'²³

There has always been and still remains an acute difficulty in classifying the genre, enclosing its dimensions and its chief practitioners, as evidenced by the frustrations of Victorian reviewers who grappled with tenuous distinctions among a plethora of fictional modes. Charles Reade averred that sensation was the constitutive facet of all compelling fiction: 'Without [it] there can be no interest.'²⁴ Was Dickens really a lowbrow sensation author masquerading as a fastidious practitioner of high art, as some declared after reading *Bleak House* (1852–53) and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870)? *Belgravia* claimed him as the 'founder' of the sensation school,²⁵ while Margaret Oliphant in *Blackwood's* reviewed *Great Expectations* (1860–61) along with all the other current sensation novels, judging it markedly inferior to Collins's *The Woman in White* as a specimen of the genre: 'With the most fantastic exaggeration of means, here is no result at all achieved, and no sensation produced upon the composed intelligence of the reader. [...] In every way, Mr. Dickens's performance must yield precedence to the companion work of his disciple and assistant.'²⁶ Was Thomas Hardy (1840–1928) a secret member of the sensation school? Ellen Wood? Wood's stories of dislocated individuals prompted the *Athenaeum* to tag her, rather than Wilkie Collins, as the 'originator and chief of the sensation school of English novelists.'²⁷ Yet, in other investigations of her oeuvre, Wood was construed as an elegantly restrained and fortifying proponent of domestic realism, whose novels were distributed as Sunday School Prizes, cultivating a different mode of fiction from that of her 'fast' rival M. E. Braddon.

Chapter One appraises the 'Rise, Fall and Revival' of the sensation genre. I begin with H. L. Mansel's condemnation of these 'electrifying' narratives in 1863, which was 'a landmark year for sensation fiction in Britain', according to Christine Ferguson.²⁸ For Mansel and many other 1860s reviewers, these novels became the focus of interrelated social tensions, confusions and disputes. Was sensationalism a *cause* of socio-cultural decay, or a *symptom* of a deterioration that was already happening? If a key aim of realism was to teach its readers to see with mature and measured detachment, the contrasting role of sensation, according to Mansel, was to generate a lurid spectacle that would physically stimulate its readers while simultaneously eroding the barrier between their bodies and those of the central protagonists. Though mid-Victorian commentators tended to situate sensation fiction as one of numerous subgenres within the fluid category of popular literature,

sensation narratives were often showcased in the same periodicals that serialized what Victorian readers deemed as 'substantial' and 'wholesome' literature. Sensation fiction was also judged in these journals, albeit frequently in terms of derogatory comparison. As Jonathan Loesberg remarks, in his 1986 essay 'The Ideology of Narrative Form in Sensation Fiction', '[b]ecause the genre, at least at first, was as much a creation of the literary journals who grouped the novels together as it was of the novels themselves', classifying it 'solely in terms of internal features presents classic problems' of either characterizing it 'too broadly or too narrowly.'²⁹ What Margaret Oliphant designated as a new school in fiction was in fact an incredibly broad church. My first chapter evaluates how, and why, these novels fell so drastically out of favour by the early-twentieth century. In addition I chart the continuing critical implications of the initial, often stinging reviews for those who have contributed to the genre's rehabilitation as a field of academic research, inquiry and exposition.

Chapter Two canvasses the obsession with crime and detection in Victorian sensation fiction, and to what degree these novels are, according to Thomas Boyle, 'riddled with details which recall widely reported criminal occurrences of the time.'³⁰ I begin by showing how the typical sensation narrative has been assessed as a 'novel with a secret' in which the solving of puzzles becomes a principal ingredient in its extraordinary commercial impact. The chapter goes on to consider the questions of transgression and containment, or discipline, which have engrossed late twentieth-century criticism. In literary terms, Victorian sensation fiction is often perceived as 'the cradle of detective fiction'³¹ and I conclude with the figure of the 'private eye' or amateur sleuth, who is an enigmatic presence in many of these texts, and whose intervention in the diurnal rhythms and rituals of the middle-class home implies the permeable boundaries between private and public space.

Given that the 1860s was the decade of a second Reform Bill, with widespread discussion on expanding the Parliamentary franchise, primarily in terms of working-class men, as well as the establishment of the National Society for Women's Suffrage (1866), it is no surprise that shifting or disintegrating class identity is a core theme of sensation fiction. The language of caste, including metaphors of stratification, pervades the critical reception of the genre at a historical juncture when cheaper methods of printing made it increasingly feasible to disseminate more texts to a larger reading public. Moreover, literacy itself was no longer a guarantee of 'social standing.' In Chapter Three I address the sensation novel's reflection of contemporary arguments about unstable or porous class boundaries, again through the lens of both mid-Victorian reactions and current analyses of the genre as an ardently contested site of literary value during the 1860s and 1870s, so

that 'the literature of the Kitchen [becomes] the favourite reading of the Drawing-room.'³² Here is a deep-seated cultural unease about the rapid and prolific production of sensation fiction, which imperils the social regulation that safeguards rigid class divisions.

Proclaiming the sheer enjoyment of reading *Lady Audley's Secret*, *The Times* (18 November 1862) contended that '[t]his is the age of lady novelists, and lady novelists naturally give the first place to the heroine.'³³ Chapter Four gauges the critical response to woman as writer-subject-reader of sensationalism. Heated debates surrounding gender have distinguished the genre's signal impact from the beginning. Pamela Gilbert, in *Disease, Desire and the Body in Victorian Women's Popular Novels* (1997), follows the lead of many mid-Victorian and current commentators to aver that 'sensation novels as a genre are perceived as feminine'³⁴ in that, even in fiction produced by male writers such as Collins, the vital focus is on forceful, venturesome and assertive women. Much recent scholarship documents how this 'sensational heroine' affronts the nineteenth-century discourses of women as weaker vessels or compliant conduits of a transcendent notion of femininity.

The chapter goes on to evaluate the female body as a specific site of cultural uncertainty in these novels, as well as the particular traits in the 'sensational heroine' that mark her off as more dangerously free-spoken and intransigent than those figures drawn by canonical writers such as Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray (1811–63) and Anthony Trollope (1815–82). Were representations of the 'ill-regulated' or aberrant female protagonist as discomfiting to the reading public as we might assume? An early study, *Corrupt Relations: Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, Collins and the Victorian Sexual System* (1982) by Richard Barickman, Susan MacDonald and Myra Stark, implies one way in which this comparative question might be scrutinized. Another might be to test whether sensationalists evinced 'a conservative modernity', in that they queried the laws governing marriage as a form of legal servitude for women but psychologically were unable – or unwilling – to progress towards a more outspoken and demanding stance.³⁵

Among the more ephemeral titles of the period that reflect authors' resolve to portray female sexuality with unprecedented candour – *Woman Against the World* (1864), *Which Shall it Be?* (1866), *Hidden Fire* (1867) – it is *Treason at Home* (1865) which supplies the 'bridge' to Chapter Five. The elaboration of the female body as a source of corruption in sensation fiction also expresses disquiet about the mid-Victorian 'body politic' and the security of the 'homeland'. Here I explore a range of approaches to the dizzying modernity and topicality of sensationalism, and how 'the presence of the present',³⁶ in Richard Altick's memorable phrase, affects the genre's ominous delineation of the domestic

sanctuary. The deployment of nervousness in these texts – revealed in its protagonists, elicited in its audience – is a complicated reaction to a metropolitan experience of cognitive dissonance in the face of radically reconfigured relations among urban, national, and global terrains as imperial rapacity fused with nineteenth-century capitalism. The chapter concludes by focusing on the sensation novel's coding of the foreign interloper at a time when empire building was at the very forefront of public consciousness.

Chapter Six furnishes a chronological reading of the sensation novel's influence throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century. This chapter opens by considering the strange case of Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, whose novel *Uncle Silas: A Tale of Bartram-Haugh* (1864), published at the height of the sensation vogue, has been viewed as both a single-minded continuation of an older Gothic tradition and a harbinger of *fin-de-siècle* uncanny strategies. David Punter and Neil Cornwell assert that Le Fanu, rather than following an existing literary fad, actually instigated a new technique of writing about psychological terror that pushed the sensation genre towards the symbolist novel and the later fiction of Henry James (1843–1916).³⁷ This makes Le Fanu an especially rewarding case study in a wide-ranging account of the sensation legacy.

Andrew Maunder counsels against talking of 'sensation fiction as though it were all of a single type or of equal merit'.³⁸ This work encourages us to think about the problems of labelling, and how the genre becomes a phantom presence in novels by more established late-Victorian writers. We can locate sensational echoes in the writings of George Meredith (1828–1909), Anthony Trollope, George Eliot (1819–80), Thomas Hardy, Rhoda Broughton (1840–1920), Ouida (Mary Louise de la Rame or Ramée 1839–1908), and Dora Russell (1874–1907). This survey of the mutation of sensation is brought into the early-twentieth century via Joseph Conrad (1857–1924) who impeaches the social, political and ethical relevance of the genre. My final chapter ends by gesturing towards the genre's resurgence in the work of contemporary authors, especially the so-called neo-sensation school.³⁹ The proliferation of fictional accounts of the Victorian period in the last few decades constitutes an ambitiously diverse and textured portrait of an era that continues to captivate the contemporary imagination.

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