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Sensation Novel Literature Review

The sensation novel which almost appeared out of nowhere in the 1860s caused a large disturbance from critics of the time period. Some worried that it would morally corrupt society while others dismissed it as meaningless literature that was not worthy of the paper it was printed upon. Contemporary critics tend to disagree with the critics of the Victorian Period especially on the point that sensation novels have nothing to offer the literary community. Although most scholars in the field agree on the characteristics of sensation novels—such as the suspenseful complex plots that “preach to the nerves” which contain depictions of crime, secrets, betrayal, bigamy, impersonations, seduction, and insanity—there are numerous theories regarding how sensation novels can help one understand the changing culture and rise of modernity during the Victorian period including the issues that arose with them.

One major insight that Sensation Novels offers the reader is into the changing nature of social class during the Victorian Period. The Victorians had a tendency to classify systems of thought into rigid categories with strict boundaries. Sensation Novelists play with these boundaries in their novels as a way to question many of the institutions or conventions of Victorian society. As Ronald R. Thomas points out, many of the plots in sensation novels show how class boundaries can be altered using economic means. Thomas argues that sensation novels

are more concerned with tracing the ways in which traditional class boundaries have been restructured through social technology rather than through natural inheritance (483). Similarly, Kylee-Anne Hingston examines how the body can be manipulated and constructed into an identity that can transcend class boundaries through clothing and narration. Thomas asserts that this blurring is a reaction to the instability and concern about class boundaries in the Victorian time period which resulted from the rise of the middle class (482). According to Thomas, the decline of the old gentry and rise of the professional class as the ruling social elite is evident in the weak counterfeit gentry characters that are presented next to the professionals who contain the power of giving identity to persons in sensation fiction (488-490).

While Thomas focuses on the implications that the characters within the novel set for this topic, Debenham examines how the novel itself acted as an instrument to blur the social classes of the Victorian readers. According to Debenham, the novels had a way of appealing to both the “cook and the mistress” which deteriorated the class distinctions of education and taste in Victorian society. She also notes that this sort of blurring brought worry to the Victorian public that the proliferation of reading from the lower classes brought on by the novel would raise the lower class to power (213). This blurring of class lines in sensation can be seen as an indication of the changing class systems of Victorian society largely due to the rise of the middle class.

Sensation Novelists also attempted to undermine the Victorian notion of identity and the body being a natural or controllable force. Thomas notes how identities in many sensational novels are defined or redefined through a legal or medical case rather than the assertions of the family or social class, thus putting professionals in the position to define one’s identity, turning identity into something that is legally constituted not something that one is born into or chooses. He argues that this resituates identity into a legal construction rather than a natural inheritance

(488-494). Thomas also argues that sensation novels also often portray identity as a completely fictitious construct that can be commodities to be bought or changed through economic means (482). Hingston agrees that in sensation novels character's identities are constructed, however she believes they are constructed by narration, naming, and clothing which are more social forces rather than legal or medical, like Thomas suggested. In addition, Hingston examines how the modes of constructing identity are also attempted to be used to control characters' bodies (128). Thomas's idea of identity being tied to economic or modern means could indicate the Sensation Novelist's attempt to show how identity construction has changed in the modern world, where as Hingston's argument could indicate that the social ties still remain in the world of modernity.

In addition, sensation novels reflected the modern social debate of gender in the Victorian time period. Pykett notes that there starts to be a shift to exploring strong females in sensation literature, often as detectives. Debenham agrees that sensation literature challenges the traditional assumptions of women's roles and forces the reader to question what female identity consists of through the strong female characters that contribute to crimes and secrets while provoking danger (211). Thomas asserts that there were two versions of Victorian femininity present within sensation novels—both the “idealized vigin” and the “devious siren”—which were placed to contrast each other in the novel with one to be “mildly respected and awarded” and the other “marveled over and yet chastened” (496). Unlike Pykett and Debenham, he asserts that there can be two ways to read the female roles in the texts: as a warning of the dangers associated with breaking out of the Victorian traditional female roles or as a model of resistance that can be used to critique the Victorian ideas of femininity by “exposing the house as an asylum in disguise and the angel as an artificial idea” (497).

The scholars also provide insights into how these depictions of women were received. Pykett notes that this portrayal of women did receive some negativity from critics of the time due to the “openness” of the female mind in the novels (35-36). Debenham and Thomas also point out the fear of threat to the domestic home that was present during the time due to these novels (Debenham 211 and Thomas 496). Thomas argues that the portrayal of women in the text was an attempt to address the “woman-question” of the mid 19th century (496) whereas Debenham relates it to the call for increased education, employment opportunities and legal rights for women by society (211-212). Each view point offers contemporary readers many insights into the gender roles of the Victorian Period as well as the issues revolving around those roles.

The link between fiction and reality in sensation novels is a strong area of focus for Victorian scholars. While Debenham, Pykett, and Thomas focus on the general ties between Victorian society and sensation literature—such as the link to newspaper articles, realist fiction, and modern documents (ex. railway timetables)—other scholars focus on specific examples of how sensation novels offer insights into how the period dealt with the rise of modernity especially in regards to the senses and anxiety. There is agreement among Debenham, Pykett, and Thomas in regards to the sensation novel’s purpose of appealing to the senses, but Meegan Kennedy draws the comparison between the sensation novel and the modern invention of the sphygmograph to argue that sensation novels act as an instrument to both record sensations in the body of the characters as well as to elicit sensation in the body of the reader (452). Kennedy argues that the reason sensation novels trace the “shocks and pulses” of their characters so uninterruptedly is because of the invention of the sphygmograph which gained popularity in the 1860s as well (453). This machine was able to trace and record the inner bodily experiences on to paper much like a sensation novelist does with their characters creating a narrative that can be

permanent, visible and compared to others. Both instruments have the possibility of endless recording and contain series of climatic events that are compiled into a narrative that only gains its meaning from the compilation of said points (Kennedy 456). Just as Kennedy draws from modern inventions of the time to show the societal interest in the senses, Hingston examines the advertisements and articles that surround the serial publication of Wilkie Collins's *No Name* in order to gain insights into the anxiety about class boundaries and the shifting nature of bodies as well as products used to transform female identity (119). Both show how the Victorian public were now interested in the senses and nervous about the changing society.

Another scholar was interested in exploring both modern inventions and their relation to Victorian senses and nerves. Nicholas Daly draws comparisons between the sensation novel and the railroad by describing the reader like a passenger in a train who is forced to follow the novel to the end by its' "powerful narrative motor" while the nervous system undergoes "constant assault" much like many passengers on a train suffered from nervousness associated with train travel. Daly credits the invention of the railroad as a reason for sensation literature and argues that the literature was created in correlation with the railroad in order to train the body into a constant low level anxiety in order to deal with the forces of modernity—especially the railroad. Daly agrees with the other scholars in that sensation novels were written to react to the anxiety of the time, but he asserts that the suspenseful time dependent plot was a way to negotiate and train one's body to deal with the anxiety that came with standardized time and the rise of new technologies in the Victorian time of modernity. Thomas agrees, "Sensation novels made visible and narratable the complex set of forces involved during this time and traced the imprint of these forces on the nerves and bodies of ordinary characters and readers" (484-485). Daly also argued that the use of technologies in sensation novels such as trains and telegrams were to bring readers

up to “mental speed” on these new technologies and show the usefulness of them since the victors of the novels were the ones who were able to most effectively master these technologies. All of these comparisons show the Victorian preoccupation with the sense and their state of anxiety about changing society as well as how the sensation novel tries to grapple with these issues.

These scholars draw conclusions from sensation literature that helps in the study of Victorian culture and how it reacted to the shifting of many of its conventions during a time of modernity. Each contribution seeks to offer an insight into how the sensation novel was both affected by its historical context as well as how the novel affected the society with which it was written. This contribution can help the contemporary reader grapple with the themes and issues that are present within sensation literature by understanding what affected the writing of the novel as well as how the novel affected the Victorian reader.

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