



Neo-Victorianism and Sensation Fiction

Jessica Cox

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ISBN 978-3-030-29289-8 ISBN 978-3-030-29290-4 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-29290-4>

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For Mum and Dad, with love and thanks

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work has had a very long gestation: my interest in neo-Victorianism and sensation fiction began as a side project whilst I was working on my doctoral thesis on Wilkie Collins over ten years ago and has evolved slowly but steadily since then. Inevitably, it has incurred many debts in that time.

I must, firstly, thank everyone at Palgrave who has supported this project, especially Ben Doyle and Camille Davies—not least for their patience whilst I juggled babies, house moves, work, and writing. Additional thanks to the anonymous Palgrave reader, who provided helpful and constructive feedback at all stages.

Ann Heilmann supervised my Ph.D. all those years ago. Since then, she has remained a constant source of support and encouragement—not least on this project—and I cannot thank her enough. More than anyone else I have met, she embodies the notion that a Ph.D. supervisor is for life, not just for thesis.

Thanks to Brunel colleagues and friends, past and present, for all their support. I must here recognise the wider support of my Department and University: I am very lucky to work at an institution that supports family life and flexible working. Without this support, I would have given up trying to juggle an academic career and three children a long time ago. My thanks also to Brunel English students, for enthusiastic and stimulating discussions of all things Victorian.

Fellow neo-Victorianists have provided valuable advice and suggestions along the way. In no particular order and with apologies to anyone I've missed, thanks to Alexia Bowler, Claire O'Callaghan, Nadine Muller, Mel

Kohlke, Rosario Arias, Patricia Pulham, Nadine Boehm-Schnitker, Susanne Gruss, and Mark Llewellyn.

I am eternally grateful to my parents—for always believing in me, and encouraging me, and for endless support with childcare. Thanks too to my brothers, Sam and Joe, for the annual getaways. Special thanks to my mother for proofreading duties—any errors are, of course, hers.

To Murray, for everything, always.

And finally to Keir, Tam, and Effie, without whom this work would have been completed long ago, but who remain my greatest outputs—even if not eligible for the REF.

CONTENTS

1 Introduction: The Victorian Sensation Novel—Afterlives and Legacies	1
<i>Neo-Victorianism and Sensation Fiction</i>	5
<i>Women in White: Wilkie Collins's (Neo-)Sensational Afterlives</i>	13
<i>References</i>	34
Part I Reinventing Victorian Popular Fiction: Genre and Neo-Sensationalism	39
2 Neo-Gothic Sensations	41
<i>Sensational Cousins: Repurposing the Female Gothic in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's Lady Audley's Secret (1862) and Daphne du Maurier's My Cousin Rachel (1951)</i>	47
<i>Women, Art, and (Neo-)Gothicism in Wilkie Collins's The Woman in White (1860) and Joanne Harris's Sleep, Pale Sister (1994)</i>	58
<i>References</i>	70
3 Criminal Sensations: Neo-Victorian Detectives	73
<i>The Victorian Sensation Novel as/and Detective Fiction</i>	76
<i>Neo-Sensation Detectives</i>	84

	<i>The Widow in the Library: Sensational Tropes in the Neo-Sensation Detective Novel</i>	90
	<i>References</i>	101
4	Repackaging the Sensation Novel: Neo-Victorian Young Adult Fiction	103
	<i>YA Fiction and the Sensation Legacy</i>	106
	<i>The Victorian Sensation Novel as YA Literature</i>	112
	<i>YA Fiction and the New Literary Marketplace</i>	115
	<i>Sensation and Symbolism in Philip Pullman's The Ruby in the Smoke (1985) and Mary Hooper's Fallen Grace (2010)</i>	118
	<i>References</i>	135
Part II	Neo-Sensational Tropes	139
5	(Re)Presenting (Sexual) Trauma	141
	<i>Neo-Victorian Trauma</i>	144
	<i>Wilkie Collins's Trauma Narratives</i>	148
	<i>Revisiting/Reimagining Trauma in Adaptations of The Woman in White</i>	152
	<i>References</i>	162
6	Excavating the Victorians: Digging Up the Past	165
	<i>Neo-Sensational Excavations</i>	171
	<i>Archaeology and Cultural Value in Elizabeth Peters's Crocodile on the Sandbank (1975)</i>	178
	<i>Historical and Personal Pasts in Victoria Holt's Shivering Sands (1969)</i>	184
	<i>References</i>	191
7	Sensational Legacies: Tropes of Inheritance	193
	<i>The Inheritance Theme in the Victorian Sensation Novel</i>	195
	<i>Literary Legacies: The Inheritance Motif in Neo-Sensation Fiction</i>	199
	<i>Neo-Victorian Scholarship and the Language of Inheritance</i>	203

<i>Anxieties of Influence/Anxieties of Origin in Charles Palliser's The Quincunx (1989)</i>	207
<i>Literary Inheritances: Mapping the Genealogy of the Neo- Sensation Novel</i>	213
<i>References</i>	215
8 Conclusion: 'Substantial Ghosts'—Sensational Continuities and Legacies	219
<i>References</i>	225
Bibliography	227
Index	239



CHAPTER 1

Introduction: The Victorian Sensation Novel—Afterlives and Legacies

Once upon a time, there was a heroine. She was beautiful and bewitching, and enchanted everyone she met, from servants to royalty. But, despite her attractions, this heroine, people said, was BAD, and exerted a dangerous, poisonous influence on those around her. Nevertheless, her star shone bright, for a short time at least, until eventually she died, and was replaced by other, more worthy heroines. For a long time—over a hundred years—she lay hidden in an unmarked grave, until eventually her name was once again brought into the light, her true worth recognised, and the memory of her deeds restored.

So goes the oft-told tale of the Victorian sensation novel and its fate. It is one of resounding commercial success in the mid-nineteenth century, accompanied by critical disdain, followed by a fall into obscurity a few decades later, before its subsequent revival in the late twentieth century when sensation fiction once again became the focus of critical and cultural attention. And so, it seems, the sensation novel will live happily ever after, its cultural significance and popular success now firmly established. But this is not quite the full story. The genre's revival in the late twentieth century is a critical misperception, for it never truly disappeared. Rather, like the heroines that populate its pages, the sensation novel adopted a series of disguises, and, concealing its true identity, went out into the world in a variety of different forms, exerting its influence on popular and 'high' culture throughout the twentieth century. Some of these disguises barely concealed their roots: radio, screen, and stage productions of

sensation fiction have appeared regularly—from Victorian theatre productions through to twenty-first-century adaptations¹; several of Wilkie Collins's novels remained in print, and he was the subject of critical attention throughout the twentieth century, although in the early decades critics preferred to emphasise his relationship with Dickens rather than his affinity with Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Mrs Henry Wood, and other sensation writers. Other disguises proved more effective: a range of popular fiction genres (especially detective fiction) and radio and television serials drew heavily on the conventions of the sensation novel, whilst rarely referencing it explicitly, and several of the genre's key texts served as intertexts for new cultural productions. Meanwhile, the critical debate around popular culture and its value, begun by Victorian reviewers critiquing the sensation novel, continued throughout the twentieth century, with notable early contributors including Q. D. Leavis and Margaret Dalziel.² All of this preceded the genre's subsequent alleged 'revival' from the 1980s onwards, which has seen a marked increase in scholarship and in cultural productions influenced by the genre. The emergence of neo-Victorian studies in the last twenty years has further highlighted the afterlife of Victorian fiction, and it is a primary contention of this book that neo-Victorianism continues the legacy of the sensation novel, both explicitly and implicitly.

This study traces the diverse and complex legacy of sensation fiction from the nineteenth century to the present day, and in doing so seeks to address two significant gaps in scholarship to date: the pervasive and wide-ranging influence of the sensation novel on twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature and culture, and the role of sensation fiction within neo-Victorian literature, culture, and critical discourses. I consider a diverse range of writers, works, and forms, including popular fiction of the early- and mid-twentieth century by writers such as Agatha Christie and Daphne Du Maurier, contemporary historical detective novels, the literary fiction of authors including Charles Palliser and Joanne Harris, recent

¹ An exhaustive list is not possible here, but examples pre-dating the supposed revival of the sensation novel include film adaptations of *East Lynne* in 1916 (Fox; directed by Bertram Bracken) and 1931 (Fox; directed by Frank Lloyd), a 1930 stage production of *Lady Audley's Secret* at the Cambridge Festival Theatre (directed by Tyrone Guthrie), and a 1947 adaptation of *The Moonstone* for NMB Radio.

² Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (New York: Random House, 2011); Margaret Dalziel, *Popular Fiction 100 Years Ago: An Unexplored Tract of Literary History* (London: Cohen and West, 1957).

Young Adult (YA) works, as well as stage and screen productions, in order to demonstrate the hitherto unacknowledged diversity of the legacy of Victorian sensation fiction. This work represents the first extended study of the afterlife of sensation fiction.³ It is concerned with intertextuality, metatextuality, adaptation, influence, and genre, but also with notions of literary hierarchy, with the role of popular fiction within critical debates, and with the emergence and development of neo-Victorian critical thought. It explores the tensions between popular and literary fiction in relation to cultural reimaginations of the sensation novel, which range from Sarah Waters's Booker-nominated *Fingersmith* (2002; a part-reworking of Collins's *The Woman in White* [1860]) to popular historical detective series by authors such as Tasha Alexander and Emily Brightwell, as well as considering multiple stage and screen adaptations of sensation fiction. This study maps out in more detail than has hitherto been attempted the range and diversity of the sensation novel's legacy, and in so doing offers an important new angle on the growing body of literature which challenges earlier critical dismissals of the sensation novel as a 'minor subgenre of British fiction'.⁴ It also seeks to expand the critical debate around neo-Victorianism by arguing for the central role of popular fiction and culture in establishing and defining the relationship between contemporary and Victorian culture. To this end, then, this study marks a significant intervention into both Victorian and neo-Victorian studies.

Whilst the study encompasses discussion of a wide range of works, there is a particular focus on forms of popular culture. The reason for this is two-fold: to demonstrate the extensive legacy of sensation fiction within popular culture (in contrast to prevailing critical emphasis on its legacy within neo-Victorian literary fiction); and to illustrate the role of popular culture within neo-Victorianism (and in doing so call for a more expansive definition of the form). There is some discussion of what might be termed 'traditional' neo-Victorian literary fiction (Palliser's *The Quincunx* [1989], Harris's *Sleep, Pale Sister* [1994]) but this is limited—

³Several works, including Winifred Hughes's *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860s* (1980) and Lyn Pykett's *The Nineteenth-Century Sensation Novel* (2011), explore briefly the influence of sensation fiction on later genres, but this work represents the first extended study on the subject, as well as the first expansive exploration of the relationship between Victorian sensation fiction and neo-Victorianism.

⁴Patrick Brantlinger, 'What is "Sensational" about the "Sensation Novel"', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 37:1 (June 1982), p. 1.

in part because the scholarship on sensation fiction and neo-Victorianism which has appeared to date tends to privilege ‘literary’ reworkings. Though this speaks to the diversity of the sensation novel’s legacy, and its transformation from popular fiction into something more ‘respectable’, it also functions as a means of cultural appropriation, and in this respect reflects the sensibilities of neo-Victorian criticism: ironically, in the early years of the discipline at least, only ‘highbrow’ reimaginings of sensation fiction were considered appropriate forms for critical investigation. This study seeks to address this hierarchical approach to the sensation novel’s legacy, and to consider its influence on a much wider range of cultural forms, including detective and Gothic historical fiction, and popular stage and screen adaptations. Though, as the title indicates, this work is concerned with neo-Victorianism, one of its central aims is to challenge the chronological and cultural conceptual boundaries of the discipline established in some of its key critical works.

This introductory chapter begins the process of unpicking the relationship between sensation fiction and the emergent discipline of neo-Victorian studies, and attempts to refine the idea of what exactly constitutes a neo-*sensation* text, before illustrating the diversity of the genre’s legacy via an exploration of the afterlife of one of its key texts: *The Woman in White*. The chapters that follow consider some of the key genres and tropes associated with the cultural afterlives of sensation fiction. Part one is broadly concerned with issues of genre, opening with a discussion of the perennial influence of the Gothic novel on (neo-)sensation fiction, before moving on to an examination of the neo-Victorian detective novel and neo-sensation YA fiction. As a whole, this section of the book considers the processes of transformation from Victorian to neo-Victorian (specifically neo-sensational), and examines the diversity of the generic afterlife of the sensation novel, in order to substantiate the premise that the conventions of neo-Victorian subgenres offer useful metaphors for our engagement with the Victorian past. Part Two examines some of the tropes which play a central role in both Victorian and neo-Victorian sensation fiction, specifically trauma, archaeology and history, and inheritance. It considers the manner in which contemporary cultural productions rework key aspects of the Victorian sensation novel to provide insights into issues frequently obscured in Victorian literature, such as sexual abuse. Through a consideration of these tropes, the study further develops its exploration of cultural engagements with the Victorian past, and its examination of the diversity and range of the afterlives of the sensation novel.

NEO-VICTORIANISM AND SENSATION FICTION

The discrepancies which are apparent in the critical narrative of the history of sensation fiction are similarly reflected in critical discourses which seek to map the history of neo-Victorian literature and culture. According to the dominant narrative in this field, the close of the nineteenth century witnessed the rise of literary modernism and a new breed of writers who rejected the conventions of Victorian literature. These were epitomised by Ezra Pound, who declared, ‘the odour of defunct Victoriana is so unpleasant [...] that we are content to leave the past where we find it’.⁵ This attitude, according to this discourse, remained largely unchallenged in literary circles until the 1960s, when several postmodern novels drawing on Victorian literature and culture appeared—notably Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969). These texts, so the story goes, inaugurated the genre of neo-Victorian fiction, which grew rapidly and has subsequently come to be represented by the literary fiction of authors including Graham Swift, A. S. Byatt, and Sarah Waters. This reading of the emergence and development of neo-Victorian fiction depends on a definition of the form which privileges the notion of a text’s ‘self-conscious engagement’ with the Victorian period and its literature.⁶ As an academic discipline, neo-Victorianism initially focused predominantly on ‘highbrow’ literary art, largely excluding or dismissing popular middlebrow and lowbrow texts—those which mimic in a more literal sense Victorian sensation novels. This trend towards excluding certain fictional works from scholarly discussions is evident in critical attempts to define neo-Victorianism and to set the parameters for the genre. These have tended to emphasise the importance of the ‘knowing’ text, which engages in a deliberate way with Victorian literature and history and hence with the ‘knowing’ reader. In her foundational article ‘The Redemptive Past in the Neo-Victorian Novel’ (1997), Dana Shiller defines the neo-Victorian novel as ‘at once characteristic of postmodernism

⁵Quoted in Kate Mitchell, *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Victorian Afterimages* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 1. The quotation is the starting point for Mitchell’s study. Other neo-Victorian critical works begin with a similar evocation of early twentieth-century attitudes towards the Victorians, as is the case in Louisa Hadley’s *Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative*, which opens with Lytton Strachey (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p. 1).

⁶See Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999–2009* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 4.

and imbued with a historicity reminiscent of the nineteenth-century novel.⁷ Daniel Bormann, in *The Articulation of Science in the Neo-Victorian Novel* (2002), similarly emphasises the importance of the text's active engagement with the Victorians:

A neo-Victorian novel is a fictional text which creates meaning from the background of awareness of time as flowing and as poised uneasily between the Victorian past and the present; which secondly deals dominantly with topics which belong to the field of history, historiography and/or the philosophy of history in dialogue with a Victorian past[.]⁸

The definition of neo-Victorianism offered by Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn in their work, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century* (2010), is another case in point:

... a series of metatextual and metahistorical conjunctions as they interact within the fields of exchange and adaptation between the Victorian and the contemporary. ... [T]he “neo-Victorian” is more than historical fiction set in the nineteenth century. ... [T]exts (literary, filmic, audio/visual) must in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*.⁹

These—and other—critical definitions of neo-Victorianism emphasise the importance of the text's *active* engagement and dialogue with history, and hence the necessity of an *informed* and *critical* understanding of the period. Popular historical fiction, which is less likely to engage with metatextual strategies, has thus been largely excluded from the neo-Victorian debate. At the same time, many of the literary descendants of *The Woman in White*—works like *Fingersmith*, Diane Setterfield's *The Thirteenth Tale* (2006), and Harris's *Sleep, Pale Sister*—like Walter Hartright, have climbed the social ladder and undergone a transformation into something more 'respectable'.

To this end, then, the neo-Victorian 'canon' seems to mimic the construction of the wider English literary canon in the early twentieth century:

⁷ Dana Shiller, 'The Redemptive Past in the Neo-Victorian Novel', *Studies in the Novel*, 29:4 (1997), p. 538.

⁸ Daniel Bormann, *The Articulation of Science in the Neo-Victorian Novel* (Bern: Lang, 2002), p. 62.

⁹ Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, p. 4, emphasis in original.

privileging ‘literary’ writers, and excluding popular fiction.¹⁰ In the last few years, these boundaries have begun to shift, and popular fiction and culture now play an increasingly prominent role in neo-Victorian critical debate. Recent neo-Victorian scholarship has encompassed historical detective fiction, *Doctor Who*, *The Wire*, and the steampunk movement, amongst other contemporary cultural interventions on the nineteenth century.¹¹ Marie-Luise Kohlke has argued for a more expansive definition of the genre, which encompasses ‘the full range and diversity of neo-Victorian writing’,¹² asking ‘Why should romances by Fowles, Byatt, and Waters be admissible as neo-Victorian “literature”, whereas mass market historical fictions about the same period are dismissed *a priori* as not making the grade[?]¹³ Heilmann and Llewellyn have also revised their earlier emphasis on ‘self-conscious engagement’ and identified the significance of ‘trace elements of potential engagement with the concepts behind neo-Victorianism’,¹⁴ which allows for the inclusion of a much wider range of texts within the neo-Victorian genre. Despite these proposed boundary shifts, popular fiction continues to receive comparatively little attention within neo-Victorian studies. Kohlke, whilst arguing for the expansion of the neo-Victorian canon, is nonetheless somewhat dismissive of such narratives. Briefly referencing the popular historical fiction of Emily Brightwell and Elizabeth Peters,¹⁵ she concludes they ‘struck me as rather light/light-hearted, seeking to entertain rather than promote serious historical insight or revision’, although she acknowledges that they do ‘revisit

¹⁰For a more detailed analysis of this, see my article ‘Canonisation, Colonization, and the Rise of Neo-Victorianism’, *English*, 66:253 (2017), pp. 101–123.

¹¹See Catriona Mills, “Such a Dazzling Display of Lustrous Legerdemain”: Representing Victorian Theatricality in *Doctor Who*, *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 6:1 (2013), pp. 148–179; Matthew Kaiser, ‘From London’s East End to West Baltimore: How the Victorian Slum Narrative Shapes *The Wire*’, in Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben, eds., *Neo-Victorian Families: Gender, Sexual, and Cultural Politics* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), pp. 45–70; Rachel A. Bowser and Brian Croxall, eds., *Steampunk, Science, and (Neo) Victorian Technologies*, Special issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 3:1 (2010).

¹²Marie-Luise Kohlke, ‘Mining the Neo-Victorian Vein: Prospecting for Gold, Buried Treasure and Uncertain Metal’ in Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss, eds., *Neo-Victorian Literature and Culture: Immersions and Revisitations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), p. 25.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁴Heilmann and Llewellyn, ‘The Victorians Now: Global Reflections on Neo-Victorianism’, *Critical Quarterly* 55.1 (April 2013), pp. 24–42 (p. 24).

¹⁵For a discussion of Brightwell’s Mrs. Jeffries series, see Chap. 3. On Peters’s *Amelia Peabody* books, see Chap. 6.

nineteenth-century class and gender issues in ways that readily mesh with existing neo-Victorian criticism on these topics'.¹⁶ Kohlke's description of these works is significant: it suggests a tension between her desire to expand the neo-Victorian canon and a perceived lack of critical value in these types of texts. Particularly relevant to this study is that it also suggests the parallels between the Victorian sensation novel and popular historical fiction: both are 'light' rather than 'serious' literature, but both exhibit a particular concern with questions of gender and class. It is clear, then, that a significant part of the sensation novel's legacy lies in the popular fiction traditionally overlooked or dismissed as irrelevant by neo-Victorian scholarship. This complex relationship between 'literary' and 'popular' fiction reflects, in some respects, Victorian literature: whilst the sensation novel was repeatedly constructed as a form of popular or 'light' literature—appealing to a mass readership and lacking 'literary' qualities—sensational tropes are persistently employed in more 'respectable' Victorian fiction, including the work of George Eliot (*Adam Bede* [1859]), Charles Dickens (passim), and the Brontës (*Jane Eyre* [1847], *Wuthering Heights* [1847], *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* [1848]). The work of the Brontës, in particular, anticipates later sensation fiction, employing many of its central tropes, include domestic abuse, family secrets, bigamy, and (upper/middle-class) criminality. Victorian sensationalism, then, is not exclusive to popular cultural forms, just as neo-Victorian sensation fiction exists beyond highbrow, 'literary' fiction.

This blurring of the boundary between popular (sensation) and literary fiction is also evident in the contemporary literary marketplace. Whilst the notion of 'popular' fiction might evoke the types of texts which typically feature in the Richard and Judy Bookclub, and 'literary' fiction suggest those which find their way onto the Booker shortlist, providing a definitive list of distinguishing features of each of these 'types' is not straightforward. The primary aim of popular fiction is often to entertain, but literary fiction also seeks to do this in varying degrees. Literary fiction may be said to exhibit an overarching concern with narrative art—with how the story is told—whilst popular fiction is typically plot-driven. This distinction forms the basis, broadly speaking, for the manner in which the terms are employed in this study, but, as is demonstrated in the critical readings of neo-sensation fiction, narrative participation in the genre of popular fiction does not preclude an engagement in metatextual games. Similarly,

¹⁶ Kohlke, 'Mining the Neo-Victorian Vein', p. 34.

‘literary’ fiction—as evident in the neo-Victorian novels of Sarah Waters, and Michael Cox, amongst others—often draws on the conventions of (Victorian) popular fiction. Much also depends on the reader: the critical, academic reader approaches a text in a different manner to the general reader whose primary aim may be entertainment or diversion. Critical expertise may enable the academic reader to understand subtle allusions to earlier narratives and histories. The *meaning* of a text, then, is dependent on the reader’s ability to interpret it.

In the Afterword to his epic neo-Victorian novel *The Quincunx* (1989), Charles Palliser observes that a novel, in his view, represents ‘a structure of possible meanings which the reader is entitled to interpret in any way that is appropriate’.¹⁷ For Palliser, then, reader response is crucial in determining narrative meaning. Reader response theory might also be usefully employed to address the thorny issue of identifying neo-Victorian narratives, and defining the problematic and much disputed term, by shifting the emphasis from the ‘knowing’ text to the ‘knowing’ reader, so what becomes pertinent is not the narrative as self-consciously engaged text, as Heilmann, Llewellyn, and others have argued, but the reader, as self-consciously engaged interpreter of that text. For the ‘unknowing’ reader, unfamiliar with the Victorian literary and cultural landscape, the distinction between a ‘self-consciously engaged’ narrative, and one which is not rooted in historical accuracy or replete with intertextual references to Victorian texts, is not necessarily clear, so the distinction which Heilmann and Llewellyn draw between neo-Victorian fiction, and ‘historical fiction set in the nineteenth century’ is rendered redundant: it depends entirely on the reader being able to respond to these different narratives in a particular way. For the ‘knowing’ reader, that distinction is, of course, evident, but what also becomes clear is the extent to which fictions seemingly lacking in historical accuracy may nonetheless be informed by literary traditions and narrative conventions which are indebted to the Victorian (popular) novel, even when the authors themselves may be unaware of this. Though not necessarily articulated as such, critical responses which emphasise the ‘self-conscious’ engagement of narratives represent a particular *reader response* to those narratives, and this then informs the critical construction of the wider genre. Such constructions are problematic, because the extent of a text’s ‘self-conscious engagement’ with the period

¹⁷ Charles Palliser, ‘Author’s Afterword’ in *The Quincunx: The Inheritance of John Huffam* (London: Penguin, 1989), p. 1205.

which would render it ‘neo-Victorian’ is difficult to both qualify and quantify, depending necessarily on a subjective perspective.

What, then, is the relationship between sensation fiction and neo-Victorianism? Those works which rework the sensation novel and engage self-consciously with their Victorian forebears, thus fitting neatly into early critical definitions of neo-Victorianism, have, inevitably, received the most attention to date: *Fingersmith*, *The Thirteenth Tale*, *Sleep, Pale Sister*, and James Wilson’s *The Dark Clue* (2001), which all rework elements of *The Woman in White*, have been subject to neo-Victorian critical analysis, although much of this is not directly concerned with the narratives’ relationship to the Victorian sensation novel. Within Victorian sensation studies, there has been some limited exploration of the genre’s afterlife, although most of this criticism is not explicitly concerned with the genre’s influence on neo-Victorianism. Grace Moore’s contribution to Blackwell’s *A Companion to Sensation Fiction* (2011), ‘Neo-Victorian and Pastiche’, is a notable exception to this. Moore claims, crucially, that ‘neo-Victorian fiction has been in an almost constant dialog with the sensation genre since its inception’¹⁸ and posits ‘neo-sensationism’ as a subgenre of neo-Victorianism.¹⁹ However, the works Moore identifies as belonging to this subgenre, including Palliser’s *The Quincunx*, Dan Simmons’s *Drood* (2009), and Michael Cox’s *The Meaning of Night* (2006), all fall into the category of *literary* fiction, and thus her definition appears to implicitly exclude those works of popular fiction which draw on the conventions of the Victorian sensation novel: historical novels focused primarily on plot whose central aim is to entertain the reader. This trend is also evident in one of the only other studies to date to identify neo-sensation writing as a potential subgenre: Kelly A. Marsh’s ‘The Neo-Sensation Novel: A Contemporary Genre in the Victorian Tradition’ (*Philological Quarterly*, 1995). Marsh similarly identifies authors of literary fiction, including Byatt, Swift, and Margaret Drabble, as the proponents of this form, again excluding works of popular fiction. A more recent article by Rosario Arias, ‘Neo-Sensation Fiction, or “Appealing to the Nerves”: Sensation and Perception in Neo-Victorian Fiction’ (2016), also examines *Fingersmith*, alongside John Harwood’s *The Asylum* (2013)—the latter being a work which in some respects bridges the gap between ‘literary’ and popular

¹⁸ Grace Moore, ‘Neo-Victorian and Pastiche’, in Pamela Gilbert, ed., *A Companion to Sensation Fiction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011), p. 627.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

historical fiction.²⁰ Arias's focus is distinct from mine, in concentrating on revisions of 'the perception and sensory aspects of the Victorian sensation novel'.²¹ Mariaconcetta Costantini identifies Charles Palliser's *Rustication* (2013) as an example of neo-sensation fiction²²—another work which fits easily into critical definitions of self-consciously engaged neo-Victorian fiction. Beth Palmer, in her exploration of the legacies of the sensation novel in contemporary fiction (in relation to the literary marketplace) also privileges Waters, alongside Michel Faber's epic neo-Victorian novel, *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002).²³ Whilst these various works do indeed represent part of the sensation novel's afterlives, there is a significant irony in the idea that its *primary* legacy lies in the award-winning literary fiction of writers such as Waters and Byatt, given the genre's own position as a key form of Victorian *popular* culture. Amongst other things, this study seeks to address this process of exclusion, and to posit a more expansive definition of neo-sensationalism.

This, then, necessitates an attempt to critically define 'neo-sensationalism'. In its broadest sense, this might refer to any work which draws implicitly or explicitly on the workings (plot, characters, tropes, themes, structure, effect) of the Victorian sensation novel. This definition, though, is in danger of becoming obsolete as a consequence of its expansiveness, so it is worth establishing some clearer generic parameters. Drawing on definitions of either sensation fiction or neo-Victorianism in order to assist this process is problematic, as both terms are the subject of intense critical debate, with no agreed definition. Nonetheless, some of the central concerns of the sensation novel must also feature prominently in neo-sensation narratives: crime, secrets, identity, transgressive women, the family, and the apparently 'respectable' home. Paradoxically, the blurring of different generic conventions might also be seen as a defining feature of the form: the sensation novel combines elements of melodrama, the Gothic, the Newgate novel, detective fiction, and literary realism, and

²⁰ See Chap. 7.

²¹ Rosario Arias, 'Neo-Sensation Fiction, or "Appealing to the Nerves": Sensation and Perception in Neo-Victorian Fiction', Mariaconcetta Costantini and Saverio Tomaiuolo, eds., *Neo-Victorian Deviance*, Special Issue, *RSV*, 40 (2016), p. 14.

²² Mariaconcetta Costantini, 'When Deviance Becomes the Norm: Neo-Sensational Excess, Pastiche, and Textual Manipulation in Charles Palliser's *Rustication*' in Costantini and Tomaiuolo, eds., *Neo-Victorian Deviance*, pp. 51–68.

²³ Beth Palmer, 'Are the Victorians Still With Us? Victorian Sensation Fiction and Its Legacies in the Twenty-First Century', *Victorian Studies*, 52:1 (Autumn 2009), pp. 86–94.

generic instability is also a feature of neo-sensation narratives. Those texts which explicitly adapt specific sensation novels are easily identifiable as examples of neo-sensationalism, but other works engage more subtly with these conventions—popular historical detective series, for example. Much neo-Victorian writing draws heavily on the conventions of the Gothic, and indeed this is a key influence on the sensation novel itself. Sensation fiction, though, transforms the Gothic in several key ways, as discussed in the following chapter, but most importantly for a definition of neo-sensationalism is the undercutting of supernatural elements in favour of a rational explanation, although notions of fate and destiny do feature in the work of Wood, Collins and their contemporaries. With this in mind, an additional feature of most neo-sensation texts is the absence of the supernatural.

The question of ‘when’ is also pertinent here. At what point do neo-sensational cultural forms emerge? The 1960s is widely acknowledged as a key period in the emergence of neo-Victorianism, although some earlier works, such as Marghanita Laski’s *The Victorian Chaise Longue* (1953), have been identified as neo-Victorian.²⁴ As the opening of this work evidences, contrary to dominant critical discourses, the Victorian sensation novel is never relegated to obscurity: rather it survives in multiple and various guises. Indeed, it appears in what we might term its ‘original’ form until at least 1916, the year in which Braddon’s final novel is published. At what point, then, does the sensation novel become the neo-sensation novel? Sensation fiction as a genre is constantly adapting not only other literary forms and texts, but also itself. Both Wood’s *East Lynne* (1861) and Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) rework elements of *The Woman in White*, whilst all three of these genre-defining works owe something to Charlotte Brontë’s proto-sensation novel *Jane Eyre* (1847). Read as a reimagining of *The Woman in White*, then, does *Lady Audley’s Secret* become a neo-sensation novel? Although this suggestion seems slightly preposterous, I argue that neo-sensation fiction *did* appear in the nineteenth century: Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Sign of Four* (1890), which draws on Collins’s *The Moonstone* (1868), is one potential example, whilst a clearer representative of the form is evident in Austin Fryer’s *A New Lady Audley*

²⁴ See Marie Luise Kohlke, ‘Neo-Victorian Female Gothic: Fantasies of Self-Abjection’ in Marie Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben, eds., *Neo-Victorian Gothic: Horror, Violence, and Degeneration in the Reimagined Nineteenth Century* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012), pp. 221–250.

(1891), which satirises Braddon's work.²⁵ This study, then, does not restrict the definition of 'neo-sensation' to works appearing in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but argues that the legacy of sensation fiction begins, paradoxically, shortly after the genre's first emergence in the mid-nineteenth century. In the final section of this chapter, I begin the process of evidencing this, as well as considering the diversity of that legacy, via an exploration of the cultural afterlives of *The Woman in White*—the narrative which serves most frequently as an intertext for subsequent works. Whilst the conventions of the sensation genre more generally obviously inform its afterlives, and other narratives—notably *The Moonstone* and *Lady Audley's Secret*—are also employed as intertexts, it is Collins's most successful novel that remains the dominant reference point in cultural reimaginings of sensation fiction.

WOMEN IN WHITE: WILKIE COLLINS'S (NEO-)SENSATIONAL AFTERLIVES

In Tim Kelly's 1975 stage adaptation of *The Woman in White*, advertised as an 'astonishing and inspiring melodrama'²⁶ and entitled *Egad, The Woman in White*, the woman of the title, Anne Catherick, is rendered speechless. She appears on stage at the end of Act One, Scene 3, 'points a damning finger after [the villain] Percival and starts to condemn him, but all that comes out of her mouth is incoherent gibberish' (35). She re-enacts the same performance in the following scene, 'points her finger at Percival, and, again, gives out with vindictive gibberish with the single word "villain" clear every now and again' (42). She dies shortly after this, Percival having placed her next to an open door during a blizzard in order to exacerbate her final illness. Her inability to speak her experience is suggestive of the problem of articulating the past in the present: she represents something which cannot be clearly expressed, can only be understood through a range of discordant, fragmented, and not necessarily representative voices and narratives. In a departure from Collins's novel, via a convoluted plot, in Kelly's version Anne's mother is imprisoned in an asylum, and encouraged to act out the role of Queen Victoria. The reference leads Marian to question Walter Hartright: 'has Percival locked up the real Victoria and placed a look-alike on the throne of England?' (59) Though

²⁵ For further discussion of Fryers's work, see Conclusion.

²⁶ Tim Kelly, *Egad, The Woman in White* (London: Samuel French, 1975), p. 1.

part of the production's comic melodrama, the question nonetheless highlights the complexity of the relationship between Victorian and neo-Victorian cultural iterations: neo-Victorian writers and producers are engaged in a process of masquerade, disguising their cultural productions as Victorian narratives, presenting audiences with idiosyncratic images of the past and encouraging them to look beyond the imitation. This is evident in contemporary reworkings of the Victorian sensation novel, and particularly in the plethora of adaptations of *The Woman in White*, which, via its central tropes of haunting, doubling, and detection, provides a series of metaphors for the wider neo-Victorian project. This study explores these tropes at length: in part one, via an exploration of the genres of Gothic, detection, and YA neo-sensation fiction, and in part two through a detailed examination of some of the key themes and motifs of the contemporary genre—specifically (sexual) trauma, historical investigation, and inheritance.

The influence of Victorian sensation fiction is ubiquitous, infiltrating contemporary cultural forms from 'literary' fiction to soap opera, and rendering neo-sensationalism a varied and disparate genre, resistant to critical definition and containment. Haunting this literary and cultural landscape is the figure of the woman in white. The most self-evident and identifiable descendants of the sensation novel are works which explicitly rewrite, reimagine, or adapt specific Victorian sensation narratives, and *The Woman in White* has proved particularly influential in this respect, spawning an increasing number of literary, stage, and screen adaptations, as well as other multimedia, including a computer game and an online reading project.²⁷ The apparent return from the dead of Collins's heroine, Laura Fairlie, suggests an apt metaphor for the novel's repeated literary and cultural returns. It seems apposite that Collins's woman in white, Anne Catherick, whose ghostly appearance in the middle of a moonlit road in the dead of night enthralled Walter Hartright and a generation of Victorian readers, should continue to haunt the literary and cultural imagination, providing the starting point for a neo-Victorian return to a past which remains a spectral presence.²⁸ She exerts a particular appeal for what

²⁷The online reading project presented the novel in its original parts for the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of its publication (see http://www.web40571.clarahost.co.uk/wilkie/etext/womaninwhite/twiw_front_00.htm). Big Fish Games produced a hidden object computer game based on Collins's novel in 2010.

²⁸Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham's edited collection, *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Possessing the Past* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), explores the Victorian past spectral presence in contemporary fiction at length.

Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss term that ‘collective imagination’ which ‘keeps appropriating the Victorian age, and keeps turning it into a contemporary phenomenon (or phantom)’.²⁹

The remainder of this chapter considers the afterlife of Collins’s seminal sensation novel via an examination of its literary and cultural reiterations, as a means of initiating an exploration of the broader legacy of sensation fiction. The focus is on works which specifically adapt and appropriate plot and character from Collins’s novel—what Kohlke terms ‘self-conscious appropriations of prior nineteenth-century sources’.³⁰ In this sense, the discussion is concerned with texts which Julie Sanders defines as ‘adaptations’ (those texts which specifically adapt *The Woman in White*) and ‘appropriations’ (works which ‘affect a more decisive journey away from the informing source’,³¹ but which are nonetheless clearly indebted). In line with Sanders’s definitions, adaptations include screen and stage versions of Collins’s novel, which largely maintain Collins’s plot and character, while appropriations refer to (particularly literary) works which appropriate elements of the text (for instance, the doubling of Anne/Laura and the consequent false imprisonment in the asylum), but create a distance with the source text by introducing alternative characters and settings. The discussion includes an overview of re-visitations to the novel from the 1860s to the present day, and examines some of the contemporary concerns and contexts which shape these returns. The novel’s place as a key source text for both neo-Victorianism and neo-sensationalism is explored, in relation to the multitude of media, forms, and genres which have laid claim to the narrative. The final part of the chapter considers *The Woman in White* and its legacy in light of the wider neo-Victorian project through an exploration of the narrative tropes and motifs which represent both a focal point for literary and cultural returns to the text, and a series of metaphors for the relationship between past and present.

Victorian Literary Afterlives

Along with a select number of other Victorian works, *The Woman in White* stands as a key source text within the neo-Victorian genre. Notable

²⁹Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss, ‘Introduction: Fashioning the Neo-Victorian—Neo-Victorian Fashions’ in *Neo-Victorian Literature and Culture*, p. 15.

³⁰Kohlke, ‘Mining the Neo-Victorian Vein’, p. 24.

³¹Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 26.

amongst these narratives are *Jane Eyre*,³² Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847),³³ Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861),³⁴ and, from the *fin de siècle*, Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897),³⁵ and Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898).³⁶ Linda Hutcheon, employing the language of evolution, observes:

Some [stories] have great fitness through survival (persistence in a culture) or reproduction (number of adaptations). [...] Stories do get retold in different ways in new material and cultural environments; like genes, they adapt to those new environments by virtue of mutation—in their “offspring” or their adaptations. And the fittest do more than survive; they flourish.³⁷

Why, then, do some Victorian narratives ‘flourish’ more than others, despite parallels in reception, popularity, and critical attention? Why do certain stories appeal so strongly to contemporary writers, producers, and audiences? Sally Shuttleworth notes that ‘In the looser arena of what is now most commonly termed neo-Victorian fiction, the presiding genius seems less George Eliot and more Wilkie Collins’.³⁸ A brief consideration

³²Notable adaptations include director Cary Fukunaga's 2011 film version, artist Paula Rego's lithographs (2002), and, most famously, Jean Rhys's 1966 novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

³³Although a popular neo-Victorian source text, *Wuthering Heights* has resulted in fewer adaptations and appropriations than *Jane Eyre*. In her 1996 work, *Brontë Transformations: The Cultural Dissemination of Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights*, Patsy Stoneman (1996) identifies over forty novels influenced by *Jane Eyre*, compared to less than twenty inspired by *Wuthering Heights*, though additional works related to both have appeared since.

³⁴Dickens's novel has been subject to at least twenty screen adaptations, and inspired several works of fiction, including Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* (1997), Lloyd Jones's *Mister Pip* (2006), and Ronald Frame's *Havisham* (2014).

³⁵The character of *Dracula* features in over two hundred film and television productions, while literary adaptations include Elizabeth Kostova's *The Historian* (2005) and Dacre Stoker and Ian Holt's *Dracula: The Un-Dead* (2009). Theatrical and computer game adaptations also proliferate.

³⁶The cultural afterlife of James's novella includes an opera (Benjamin Britten, 1954), ballet (Royal Ballet, 1999), several notable films including *The Innocents* (1961) and *The Others* (2001), multiple stage adaptations (most recently, Tim Luscombe's 2018 production), and a plethora of neo-Victorian novels including John Harding's *Florence and Giles* (2010) and A. N. Wilson's *A Jealous Ghost* (2005).

³⁷Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 32.

³⁸Sally Shuttleworth, ‘From Retro- to Neo-Victorian Fiction and Beyond: Fearful Symmetries’ in Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss, eds., *Neo-Victorian Literature and Culture*, p. 182.