

Reviews



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Helena Ifill. *Creating Character: Theories of Nature and Nurture in Victorian Sensation Fiction*. Manchester UP, 2023, paperback. 240 pp. ISBN: 9781526171818.

As signaled by its title, *Creating Character: Theories of Nature and Nurture in Victorian Sensation Fiction*, originally published in 2018, is deeply interested in the contradictions faced by Victorians intent on writing ‘character’ as a product of inheritance. Helena Ifill’s thorough investigation of sensation fiction by M. E. Braddon and Wilkie Collins asks us to consider instead how some authors of the period wrote alternative ‘fictions’ of character as negotiating so-called inheritance, alongside social forces or forms of ‘cultivation,’ such as education. Ifill’s history therein charts the rise of sensation fiction as a genre deeply invested in complicating (if not even challenging) Victorian narratives of individualism – from mid-Victorian debates on monomania to late-Victorian theories on degeneration and eugenics. Ifill’s reading of the subversive narratives within these sensation stories includes discussions of both race and gender – looking at, for example, the power of education (albeit, by a future husband and/or leaders of empire) to check regressive traits. *Creating Character* is also certain to appeal to scholars interested in class. Ifill asks how it was that the most socioeconomically vulnerable people in nineteenth-century Britain came to be blamed for their own poverty.

Creating Character is divided into three sections (I. Self-control, Willpower and Monomania; II. Hereditary and Degeneration; and III. Education, Environment and Circumstance), each containing chapters devoted to a single novel (I.1 *Basil and No Name*, I.2 *John Marchmont’s Legacy*; II.3 *The Lady Lisle*, II.4 *Armada*; III.5 *Man and Wife*, and III.6.

Lost for Love). The first subsection of *Creating Character*, “Self-Control, Willpower and Monomania,” begins with a chapter on Wilkie Collins’s *Basil* (1852) and *No Name* (1862). Ifill offers an overview of the mid-Victorian concept of monomania, comparing it with other diagnoses like “moral insanity.” In this section, Ifill explains how nineteenth-century attitudes toward mental health privileged the power of one’s will as overcoming disruptive passions (and possible mental breakdown). Yet, characters like Magdalene show us that some people “naturally possess more or less willpower and/or powerful emotions than others,” and that, depending on life circumstances, some more than others “will have more chance of successful self cultivations than others” (56).

The second chapter, on *John Marchmont’s Legacy* (1862-1864), is also interested in questions of self-control and (or as limited by) inheritance. This chapter notes Braddon’s representation of ideal Victorian womanhood as self-sacrificing, only to point out the negative cost and difficulty of attempting this ideal for some women; Olivia Marchmont suffers a mental breakdown after suffering the tension between natural instinct and “self-imposed ethical standards based on Victorian ideals of religion, class and gender” (68). The chapter ends by putting Braddon’s and Collins’s early sensation fiction back into conversation regarding moral management and monomania. Both authors, Ifill argues, question the extent to which individuals can control their behavior in order to counter what are actually the social forces (not internal) which precipitate breakdown.

The second section, “Heredity and Degeneration,” reads Braddon’s *Lady Lisle* (1862) as exploiting Victorians’ mounting fears around social degeneration. As Ifill explains in this third chapter, Braddon “pick[s] and choos[es]” emergent theories on inheritance in order to “fit the requirements of the plot” --using heredity, for example, “as a tool to put an errant working-class member firmly back in his place” (99). Subsection titles such as “A Gentleman by Nature” (an analysis of “the Lisles’ generative unproductivity’ [103]) and “A Scoundrel by Nature” (focused on James Arnold and class) draw from theories on inheritance as determining one’s character (as well as class) in this novel. Indeed, regarding class, Ifill convincingly reads *Lady Lisle* as calling attention

both to social inequity and how those with status are often afforded more leeway.

While Braddon's novel alludes to class privilege, Collins's *Armada* (1864-1866, the subject of chapter 4) outright encourages readers to "sympathize with characters who are morally, socially and possibly hereditarily dubious" (118). Readers are presented with Midwinter, a "mixed-race, potentially criminal, nervous, sometimes hysterical social outsider and a prospective degenerate in numerous ways, who refers to his childhood self as 'an ill-conditioned brat, with my mother's negro blood in my face, and my murdering father's passions in my heart'" (123). Ifill shows us how, in this work of sensation fiction, Collins pushes back against the kind of social and emotional distancing, typical of Victorian degeneration theories; instead, Collins invites readers to sympathize with the degenerate's personal struggle to overcome larger forces of inheritance—both without (crimes of the father) and within (moral insanity).

Part three of *Creating Character* shifts attention to "Education, Environment and Circumstance" – or Braddon's and Collins's 'sensational' characters in the context of fin-de-siècle eugenics. The final two chapters in this section read Collins and Braddon as likewise interested in (and expanding upon their own earlier) ideas of inheritance. Unlike eugenicists, however, Collins continued to insist upon the (need for) cultivation of character, even in the upper classes. In *Man and Wife*, for example, Geoffry Dalamyn's inadequate (overly "muscular") proves Collins's point that "degenerate types are produced by society rather than breeding" (172).

Ifill's final chapter reads Braddon's *Lost for Love* as advocating women's intellectual cultivation while still working within the confines of dominant hetero-patriarchal social (and narrative) norms. This chapter is truly a pleasure to read, not only for this deft analysis of (the heteronormative limits to) Braddon's feminist plots, but also for its deep historical analysis of the different debates around women's education – including references to key figures such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Taylor Mill, Millicent Fawcett, T. H. Huxley, alongside conservative voices like Herbert Spencer and John Ruskin. For both its research and

argument, this chapter is certain to become assigned reading in many dissertations on Victorian Gender and Social Reform.

It is worth turning to Ifill's own concluding remarks for insight into the relevance of this work today, especially in light of gender and class. As someone who works on nineteenth-century class, I found Ifill's history of degeneration theory to be especially exciting. One might also take heart in Ifill's analysis of Braddon's proto-feminism. As Ifill writes, "Braddon also insists that the happiest marriage is one in which a woman is neither pushed into matrimony before knowing her own mind, nor restrained from achieving her full intellectual potential" (207-208). *Creating Character* could not be more relevant today, in a world where women's right to such hard-won choice feels increasingly under attack – the right to any real such choice when it comes to education and careers, let alone family planning or autonomy over our own bodies.

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