Mattering: Agentic Objects in Victorian Literature

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MATTERING: AGENTIC OBJECTS IN VICTORIAN LITERATURE

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A time of rapid industrialization and burgeoning consumerism, the nineteenth century was full of things, a physical reality that is mirrored in the heavily material story worlds of Victorian literature. My dissertation investigates how objects *do* things in texts, exhibiting a mattered, agentic existence that decenters the human and proposes a materially-centered textual reality. In the writings of Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Wilkie Collins, and others, a particular set of objects—portraits, dresses, dolls, and letters—is characterized by their shared representation of the human body and the ways in which they act with, against, and independently of the characters they represent. These texts and objects emphasize the essential material components of textual realities and the ways in which objects have agency within the narrative to redefine the mattered framework of the text.

The objects in this study operate on a spectrum of agency that emphasizes their role as active matter in their parent text. Going beyond the historical and cultural models that usually inform readings of things in Victorian literature, I investigate how these objects are active in upending the primacy of the human and constructing new assemblages of possibility and potentiality that cannot be accessed by the human alone. Each chapter traces the development of the agentic object in one or more texts as they reshape the structure of their fictional reality to allow objects to exist alongside with, rather than subservient to, their human creators and audiences. Acknowledging the ways in which things in texts have functioned historically and culturally in the nineteenth century, this dissertation examines how they operate textually, offering a differently centered narrative world that reimagines the role of objects as primary actors in constructing fictional realities.

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INTRODUCTION

One face looks out from all his canvasses,
One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans;
We found her hidden just behind those screens,
That mirror gave back all her loveliness.
A queen in opal or in ruby dress,
A nameless girl in freshest summer greens,
A saint, an angel;—every canvass means
The same one meaning, neither more nor less.
He feeds upon her face by day and night,
And she with true kind eyes looks back on him
Fair as the moon and joyful as the light:
Not wan with waiting, not with sorrow dim;
Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright;
Not as she is, but as she fills his dream.

--Christina Rossetti, "In an Artist's Studio"

In Christina Rossetti's innovative sonnet "In an Artist's Studio" (1856), the unnamed speaker of the poem meditates on the repeated figure of a woman captured in a cache of portraits found in an anonymous studio. Thanks to William Rossetti, who published the poem after C. Rossetti's death with a note of interpretation, most scholarly work examines this poem through a biographical lens.[1] The anonymous artist becomes Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the unnamed model is thought to be Elizabeth Siddal, and the portraits, as objects, are given a rigid specificity with the historical and biographical interpretation, subsuming their potential for a more active role. But what becomes of the poem if the portraits are at the center of a materially informed reading? In this project, I investigate the relationship between representations of fictional objects and reality in nineteenth-century literature, specifically, how fictional objects become vital actants in redefining

[1] For biographical readings of this poem see Chapman 85, 94 and Hassett 154.

the reality of their parent texts.[2] Quotidian things—such as portraits—emerge as agentic objects in nineteenth-century literature when they begin to be characterized by their own materiality, circulation, alterity, and permanence, granting them unprecedented agency and implication in constructing the representational world of Victorian literature. Given Rossetti's history of verbal-visual pairings, and the proliferation of canvases in the poem, the representations of artistic work demand attention in their function as linguistic representations of physical objects.[3] The portraits establish materiality and independence from the overwhelming figure of the artist and his frenzied focus on female stereotypes.

The language of the poem jumbles person, subject, and portraits, resulting in a constant shift between image, representation, and corporeality. Though the first two lines of the poem introduce the subject and the various attitudes she takes in the paintings, the third and fourth lines depict the moments when the portraits are discovered: "We found her hidden just behind those screens / That mirror gave back all her loveliness" (264). The important word in these two lines is "her." While the first line of the poem ends with the noun "canvasses," the third and fourth lines do not include any language to differentiate between the subject of the painting and the paintings themselves. Is the "her" that the speaker of the poem discovers a person or a portrait? For a moment the possibility exists for either option, before the sonnet resolves into a list of the different portraits. This linguistic slippage between subject and object is also a material slippage

[2] I define vital using Jane Bennett's definition of "vitality" from *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*: "By 'vitality' I mean the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own" (viii).

[3] For a discussion of Rossetti's complex relationship with illustration and poetry see Kooistra 5, 58.

between the human body and its artistic representation. It is not the living model who waits behind the screen, but the paint and canvas representations of the model.

The slipperiness of the language at this point in the poem is intriguing because the elusive "her" grants equality to the portrait as both an object and a subject. This is a potentially troubling interchangeability that could be read as a reduction of the human woman to a material thing. If, however, the portraits as objects are understood as active matter with independence and agency then the equating of a human being—specifically a marginalized woman—with the object does not reduce the human to an inert, ownable thing but transforms her into an agentic, mattered object that is a site of power and agency. The artist in the poem has subsumed his model in an array of paint and canvas iterations, stripping her of individualism and agency and transposing her into a nameless object. The portraits, in their insistent materiality and their refusal to merely reflect the artist's intentions, help to recuperate the subject's objectification by redefining the role of objects from inert to active. The portraits, as the material core of the poem, consistently represent the subject, bringing her to the audience's attention and giving material presence to her non-corporeality in the poem. Rather than being seen as a reduction of personhood to objectness, the melding of subject and object allows the material thing to empower the subject through its active materiality.

Traditionally, "In an Artist's Studio" is read as a concern for how women are depicted and silenced in nineteenth-century art. [4] These readings of troubling depictions and silences are recuperated by a materially centered interpretation that places the

[4] See Smulders 126-127 for a reading of the silencing of women in Pre-Raphaelite art.

portraits at the center of the poem, shifting attention from the manipulative artist and the silenced subject, to a material voice and presence through the insistent objectness of the portraits. The subject-object divide disappears in this reading, providing a transformation that empowers both the subject and the object in a new relationship of mutual representation. By shifting the focus from the artist and his interpretation of the unnamed model, the portraits work to break down the social and artistic power structures that attempt to silence the female model and keep the portraits inert or inactive. The portraits are powerful actants for change in the sonnet as they create a literary reality that challenges its contemporary actual reality through both linguistic and political activism.

Things in Nineteenth-Century Literature

Rossetti's portrait-laden poem is paradigmatic of Victorian literature and its heavily material story worlds. The practice of looking at things in nineteenth-century literature has a rich critical history that has helped to shape my own approach to objects in texts. In 1989 Asa Briggs published *Victorian Things*, a historical examination of the things of the nineteenth century that was concerned with historical rather than literary objects. Briggs's study begins with the Great Exhibition of 1851 as he works to "reconstruct 'the intelligible universe' – or, more properly, universes, for there was more than one – of the Victorians" (31). A time of rapid industrialization and increased production, the nineteenth century was full of things; Briggs explains both the progress of sets of objects as well as the relationships people had to individual things such as coal and hats. My own project began in the history of actual things, using the nineteenth-

century material archive to provide a foundation for my more speculative approach to literary objects. By grounding my knowledge of nineteenth-century objects in the actuality of artifacts, I was able to better see the nuanced differences between real and fictional objects and the ways in which they behave. Brigg's factual account of Victorian things provided a model for how to approach the historical object.

His practice of looking at sets of things with a historical and cultural lens has carried over into the exploration of things within literary criticism such as Bill Brown's *A Sense of Things* (2003), Elaine Freedgood's *The Ideas in Things* (2006), Deborah Cohen's *Household Gods* (2006), and John Plotz's *Portable Property: Victorian Culture on the Move* (2008). Brown, who examines both the material world and literary materiality in *A Sense of Things*, is interested in the ways in which "the materialized world begins to shift," a way of thinking that examines the relationships between things and humans and allows for a multivalent interpretation of things and the way they function (14). Freedgood, in her postcolonial readings of hidden meanings in the language and goods of the Victorian novel, uncovers what she terms a "critical cultural archive" that has been unread in fictional objects (1). When read, this archive exposes "meanings and resonances these objects may have had for earlier readers" and develops a "thing culture" that exists before commodity culture (51-52). While Freedgood examines the relationship between past and present readers and the ways in which they read objects as making meaning, Deborah Cohen is concerned with the ways in which Victorians made meaning for themselves through household furnishings. Tracking the development of furniture and interior design as a moral force in the nineteenth century, *Household*

Gods examines the relationship between objects, self, and consumption. Cohen's work opens up the complexity of reading things in the nineteenth century as their roles, both actual and fictional, were constantly changing. The roles of things were not the only changes occurring in the nineteenth century, however. The boundaries of England as a nation were also constantly expanding, putting things and literature into wider and wider circulation. John Plotz explores the influence of portability and locale on both property and the novel form, considering objects that have both sentimental and fungible value—a complicated binary that the novel, as an object, shares. His work exposes the complex nature of objects that are represented in yet another object that shares their same state of being.

These texts, which establish foundational arguments for the ways in which objects are read in Victorian literature, look at multiple types of objects through one unifying idea. More recent work has narrowed its focus to a particular object: Isobel Armstrong's *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830-1880* (2008) examines the mass production of glass in the nineteenth century, using a philosophical approach to explore nineteenth-century glass and its relationship to modernity. Leah Price examines the role of books and the multiple uses to which they are put in *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian England* (2012). These works are primarily concerned with the interpretative function of the objects, what Elaine Auyoung calls "the hermeneutic approach" in "Standing Outside *Bleak House*" (2013). Auyoung proposes a phenomenological approach to the absent or hidden objects that texts, such as *Bleak House*, refer to. This type of reading encourages the reader to consider the material world

of the narrative itself, even the parts of the world that cannot be explicitly read about in the text.

My own work utilizes elements of both the cultural, interpretative type of reading and a more perception-based approach combined with contemporary theories of materiality. But what is central to all of these critical arguments is the idea that objects are commodities that are available in a marketplace. Karl Marx offered the definitive definition of a commodity in *Capital*, first published in 1867: "The commodity is, first of all, an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind" (125). His meditation on the use- and exchange-value of commodities and their relationship to the laborer changed the face of economic theory and fleshed out his theories of historical materialism.[5] For Marx, commodities are material things but are also implicated in a relationship with the human, specifically the human who labored to produce the commodity. He recognizes the materiality of the things: "If we subtract the total amount of useful labour of different kinds which is contained in the coat, the linen, etc. a material substratum is always left. This substratum is furnished by nature without human intervention," but the true nature of the commodity is, for Marx, galvanized by interaction with the humans who create and consume it (133).

Marxist readings in Victorian studies have typically focused on the relationships between people and objects. These relationships become more complicated, however, when the literary form being interpreted is also a commodity; the novel was increasingly commodified throughout the nineteenth century, turning publishing, authors, and texts

[5] Peter Singer and Jon Elster provide helpful definitions and interpretations of Marx's concept of historical materialism; see Singer 41, 55 and Elster 169.

into yet another set of fungible objects. Andrew Miller described this atmosphere of commodification in *Novels Behind Glass* (1995): "among the dominating concerns motivating mid-Victorian novelists was a penetrating anxiety…that their social and moral world was being reduced to a warehouse of goods and commodities, a display window in which people, their actions, and their convictions were exhibited for the economic appetites of others" (6). This anxiety that Miller identifies is a necessary lens through which to study objects in Victorian literature, but my project examines objects that are not involved in the culture of commodification and fungibility within the marketplace. Rather, the objects I examine are objects that *do* things in texts—that move beyond functions of exchange or historical and cultural context and act independently within their parent texts to redefine the role of fictional objects.

The Complicated History of Things

I propose a materially centered way of reading that uncovers the potentiality of fictional representations of active matter and the ways in which these objects open up new ways of being within the reality of their parent texts. The material turn in scholarship surrounding the Victorian novel tends to use a historical, materialist lens to examine objects, placing them firmly in networks of production and consumption that allows the reader to better understand the social and cultural work of the object within the text. While acknowledging this engagement with the actual, I further this exploration of the role of things in Victorian literature to consider fictional representations of real nineteenth-century objects and the ways in which they have independence and agency

within texts. My understanding of the agentic capabilities of matter is drawn from new materialist thought, specifically the concept of active matter proposed by Diana Coole and Samantha Frost. Coole and Frost argue that

> …materiality is always something more than 'mere' matter: an excess, force, vitality, relationality, or difference that renders matter active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable. In sum, new materialists are rediscovering a materiality that materializes, evincing immanent modes of self-transformation that compel us to think of causation in far more complex terms; to recognize that phenomena are caught in a multitude of interlocking systems and forces and to consider anew the location and nature of capacities for agency. (9)

I take this radical conception of active and self-transformative matter one step further to argue that representations of matter possess similar modes of agency. Turning away from the Cartesian definition of matter as inert, I examine fictional representations of objects that are not only active, but resist subordination by human characters.[6] This mattered agency "disturbs the conventional sense that agents are exclusively human," aligning these fictional objects with post-human philosophies of subjectivity, and advocating for a sense of reality that has expanded to become an assemblage of human and non-human actors (Coole and Frost 10).[7]

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[6] For Renè Descartes theory of matter see *Principles of Philosophy* (1989).

[7] Rosie Braidotti, addressing our future social and ethical positions as humans in *The Post-Human* (2013), says "the post human condition urges us to think critically and creatively about who and what we are actually in the process of becoming" (12). The question of subject formation is universal and as necessary to examine in the material world as it is in our own society. I am using the term "assemblage" from G. Deleuze's and Fèlix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980). In *Reassembling the Social*, Bruno Latour defines actor as "*any thing* that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor—or, if it has no figuration yet, an actant. Thus, the questions to ask about any agent are simply the following: Does it make a difference in the course of some other agent's action or not?" (71).

The nature of things has always been of interest to various disciplines ranging from philosophy, to the interdisciplinary field of material culture studies, to thing theory, to the new materialist thought explored above. Martin Heidegger's lecture "The Thing" asks the question "What is a thing?" and explores it through his meditation on a jug as a thing. Heidegger argues that "the thingly character of the thing does not consist in its being a represented object, nor can it be defined in any way in terms of the objectness, the over-againstness, of the object" (167). His claim, "But how does the thing presence? The thing things," participates in a conversation that removes things from the Marxian milieu of labor and production, to consider the inherent nature of things. Heidegger does not remove humanity from the equation entirely, but he offers a new way of thinking when he says, "When and in what way do things appear as things? They do not appear *by means of* human making. But neither do they appear without the vigilance of mortals. The first step toward such vigilance is the step back from the thinking that merely represents—that is, explains—to the thinking that responds and recalls" (181). His call to do more than merely represent or explain the things that surround us is not rooted in the fictional materiality that I explore, but it does offer a way of thinking that privileges the thing in its thingness, rather than the thing in relation to the human.

Material culture studies, a field that began to emerge in the 1980s, started with what Daniel Miller describes as "the insistence that things matter and that to focus upon material worlds does not fetishize them since they are not some superstructure to social worlds" (3). Though rooted in the same fascination with the thing as Heidegger's more philosophical work, material culture studies is more concerned with the ways in which

things and people interact and create each other. David Kingery describes this process as "connecting a characterization of inanimate artifacts—attributes, frequency, associations, distribution—with the human activities associated with materials selection, processing, design, and realization on the one hand and use, function, and performance effectiveness on the other" (ix). Chris Tilley expands on this way of thinking in his own description of material culture studies: "Material culture studies in various ways inevitably have to emphasize the dialectical and recursive relationship between persons and things: that persons make and use things and that the things make persons. Subjects and objects are indelibly linked" (4). Material cultural studies have informed much of the critical work done on objects in literature as the relationships between people and things, including production, use, and preservation, form the basis for interpretations such as Freedgood's *The Ideas in Things*. What this interdisciplinary field has offered to my project is a method for understanding the actual archive of nineteenth-century objects that inform the fictional representations of objects in Victorian literature, providing an index for the ways in which actual and fictional objects behave similarly and where textual objects begin to diverge from their real counterparts.

Throughout the critical conversation about things—in literature, in culture, in philosophical thought—revolves a perennial debate about language: what is it that we are actually examining, objects or things? While material culture studies uses the terms fairly interchangeably, Bill Brown, editor of and contributor to *Things*, the inaugural work on thing theory, uses the distinction between the terms to elucidate what, actually, is being studied:

> As they circulate through our lives, we look *through* objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture—above all, what they disclose about *us*), but we only catch a glimpse of things. We look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretative attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts. A *thing*, in contrast, can hardly function as a window. We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation. (4)

Two central ideas emerge from this description: that an object becomes a thing when it stops behaving in expected ways, and that a thing "names…a particular subject-object relation." Brown's conceptualization of the difference between objects and things echoes Heidegger's claim that "the thing things," acknowledging the alterity of material things and the way in which they should be perceived and understood. The subject-object relationship that results from this way of looking at things displaces the subject, work that I see happening very similarly in the active, vital matter of new materialism. These tendencies are not only present in actual, physical matter, but in the representative matter of nineteenth-century fiction.

The objects that I examine are "agentic objects," fictional things that possess an innate agency that is not granted to them by characters or the reader. Rather, this agency is a result of what I call "mattering," a reshaping of fictional materiality that depends on the relationship between matter and language to create a subtle, nuanced way of making meaning that challenges traditional concepts of reality. An essential element of this definition is the active or dynamic nature of fictional matter borrowed from Karen Barad's conceptualization of matter and mattering: "matter is a dynamic intra-active becoming that is implicated and enfolded in its iterative becoming. Matter(ing) is a dynamic articulation/configuration of the world" (151). The dynamism of fictional matter, expressed through language and embodied in the reader's imagination, constructs new textual realities that de-center the human and propose a more equitable assemblage of agency and vitality.

Objects & Texts

This project examines four sets of objects—portraits, dresses, dolls, and letters—that are all fundamentally linked through their representations of the human body and the ways in which they work to decenter the human. Portraits, dresses, and dolls overtly mimic the human form, while letters act as a synecdoche of the body. The representation of the human body by these objects provides a general taxonomy of recurring objects that circulate in nineteenth-century literature, a stable body of evidence that highlights moments when objects exhibit agency. Rather than a return to human primacy, however, this relationship to the human form emphasizes the ways in which these fictional objects

subvert expected subject-object relationships as they act independently of the characters they seem to represent. The nineteenth century—with its obsession with stuff, increasing industrialization, and burgeoning consumer power—and its literature are poised for a mattered reading as things proliferate across literary forms and genres. The bulk of this project is concerned with the Victorian novel, particularly realist and sensation novels; the first, in its concern with realism and the prevalence of what Roland Barthes identifies as the "reality effect," provides an array of objects to examine.[8] The second, in its sensational approach to familiar things—including women's clothing and the seemingly mundane letter—provides an already de-familiarized space in which to explore a more speculative approach to objects and their role within the reality of story worlds. I also bookend this project with readings of Christina Rossetti and Robert Browning, demonstrating the flexibility and necessity of this type of reading across Victorian literature more broadly.

Each set of objects acts differently within their parent texts, providing a complex network of agencies and actors. Chapter One, "Victorian Portraits and the Boundaries of Reality," reads the portraits Jane paints in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* as possessing an agency that is not dependent on anything but the representational objects themselves. Analyzing nineteenth-century art history alongside Brontë's own artistic ambitions, I trace the ways in which the actual physicality of nineteenth-century art is presented and then surpassed by the agentic portraits that provide emotional and social mobility for Jane, draw attention to their physicality and ability to self-create, assert the relentless

[8] See Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect," *The Rustle of Language* (1986).

physicality of their presence in the text, and emphasize the ways in which these objects call attention to themselves through their engagement with the plot. The portraits in *Jane Eyre* restructure the shape of reality by mattering and acting in unexpected ways that allow the objects to exist materially in the text alongside with, rather than subservient to, their human creators and audiences. Fictional artwork, unlike its real world counterparts, does not have to ascribe to a primary function of exhibition or provenance, allowing it to accrue an assemblage of functions throughout the text. The insistent materiality of the portraits that Jane paints pushes against the boundaries of reality in the novel, creating concrete, agentic physicality that is complicit in its own creation and existence within the novel.

Brontë's fictional portraits still engage with the representatively embodied human as they interact with the fictional artist and subject, as well as the fully embodied reader, but the relationship between fictional objects and bodies begins to fray in a collection of texts from the mid-nineteenth century. Chapter Two, "Sartorial Insurrection and the Sensational Female Body," argues that the fictional female dress is able to exist in an intimate role of substitution and even subsumes and replaces its human wearer. This is an unusually active claim to make for fictional objects, but it is one that is verified by the representation of dresses in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853), Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859), and Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1861). The fictional dresses create, manipulate, and eventually erase identity through their interactions with the human bodies of Lady Dedlock, Laura Fairlie, Anne Catherick, and Isabel Vane. The dresses in these novels operate on a spectrum of agency ranging from complicity with the

human body to full insurrection against the body. I connect the provocative fluidity of real, physical clothing with the shared mobility of fictional clothing, particularly that of the disguises that are central to these three texts. These fictional objects challenge the reality of the human body and our own insistence on its centrality, forcing text and reader to consider a differently centered and differently realized world, one which encourages a wider reading of identity-forming actors in nineteenth-century fiction.

After the insurrection of the object against the human body in Chapter Two, Chapter Three, "Desiring Bodies and the Human-Doll Hybrid," argues for a symbiotic surrogacy between young women and their dolls in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* (1865). This partnership relies on a dual agency, granted by the human and already innate in the object, that creates a human-doll hybrid possessing limitless potentiality. By engaging with the unruly and unexpected bodies of Maggie Tulliver and Jenny Wren, the dolls in these novels create, act out, and become containers for multiple futures. Given their limitless possibility in comparison with the socially and physically bounded bodies of their surrogates, the dolls in these novels challenge the limits of the text by creating parallel realities and possible futures that are not realized in the narrative itself but in the fictional materiality of the dolls. By hybridizing the real and the artificial body, dolls are able to do that which the human cannot, acting out the emotional and physical desires of their owners and makers.

Desire is a connecting thread between the active dolls of Chapter Three, and the curiously resistant objects in Chapter Four, "Permanent Ephemerality and Victorian Letters." This chapter considers the letters and other paper ephemera in Charlotte

Brontë's *Villette* (1853) and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) as material players in the immaterial written worlds of the novels. I argue that these letters and papers create networks of power and desire that are rooted in the permanent ephemerality of fictional paper—their resistance to destruction and disappearance despite the actions of the characters—and its ability to remain concretely present despite its apparent fragility. Influenced both by concerns of paper manufacture and the implementation of an affordable and reliable postal system in England, fictional letters exert their materiality to expose and subvert their human writers and recipients.

This project offers a way to read Victorian literature that challenges our previously historically driven understandings of Victorian realism. As I demonstrated with my reading of Rossetti's "In an Artist's Studio," dedication to purely historicist or cultural readings obscures the essential material components of the textual reality. It is not that these readings do not have value or cannot serve as a foundation for more speculative interpretations, rather, they should not be the default interpretation. As we inhabit a post-human world, it is necessary to actively de-center the human from the position of primacy it has traditionally occupied. The material turn in literary and Victorian studies has been essential in focusing our attention on objects and things in the novel; by considering the agency and independence of these things, I work to materialize the material turn—to examine the active matter of fictional objects and the ways in which it redefines the reality it inhabits. This materially centered reading, I argue, acknowledges and privileges the agency of fictional representational matter and the ways in which it opens up our understandings of the mattered realities of nineteenth-century novels and

poetry. These expanded realities work to create a world in which the object becomes a primary actor alongside humans, establishing a network of possibilities that cannot be accessed by the human alone.

1.0 CHAPTER 1: VICTORIAN PORTRAITS AND THE BOUNDARIES OF REALITY

> [H]e found himself at first gazing at the portrait with a feeling of almost scientific interest. That such a change should have taken place was incredible to him. And yet it was a fact. Was there some subtle affinity between the chemical atoms that shaped themselves into form and colour on the canvas, and the soul that was within him? Could it be that what that soul thought, they realized?-that what it dreamed, they made true?
>
> --Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890)

Any discussion of portraits in the Victorian era naturally begins with Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the tale of a portrait functioning as a preternatural fountain of youth. But strangely active portraits actually proliferate in Victorian literature from the beginning of the period to the turn of the century, appearing as a constant fixture across genres and forms. Portraiture was a popular, if tenuous, art form in the nineteenth century, soon to be replaced by the cheaper and more accessible photograph. The creation of the National Portrait Gallery in 1856 and the omnipresence of portraits throughout Victorian literature shows a preoccupation with the role these representations played in creating and manipulating reality. Portrait miniatures—small, portable, and usually personal—abound in texts like *Frankenstein* (1818), *Vanity Fair* (1848), and *Middlemarch* (1871), providing small moments of memorialization. *Bleak House* (1853) and *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) include revelatory full-sized portraits—larger, public, with greater access—that threaten to expose Lady Dedlock's and Lady Audley's secret identities. *David Copperfield* (1850) features portraits of Mr. and Mrs. Wickfield that seem to transfer their painterly characteristics to the physical body of Agnes Wickfield, allowing David to read her virtues as easily as he reads the paintings. Walter Hartright,

whose narrative voice shapes *The Woman in White* (1859), is an artist who spends pages giving a detailed description of a watercolor portrait he drew of Laura Fairlie—the description serves as a point of reminiscence and nostalgia. In *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), Philip Wakem uses his portraits of Maggie to tell his father of his feelings for her, allowing the objects to express the emotions he cannot verbalize in the face of his father's feud with the Tullivers. Margaret Oliphant's short story 'The Portrait," in *Stories of the Seen and Unseen* (1881), centers around a portrait whose deceased subject possesses her son in order to right familial wrongs, a tale of the supernatural that segues easily into Wilde's 1890 text.

The portraits in Victorian literature do not exist in a vacuum. Rather, they engage with the artistic and cultural currents of the nineteenth century, a century that saw a rapid growth in art museums and exhibits as well as growing audiences for art. Dehn Gilmore, in *The Victorian Novel and the Space of Art: Fictional Form on Display*, provides compelling numeric evidence of the burgeoning nineteenth-century art world:

> The Victorians' was a contemporary art world where the Royal Academy exhibition went from hosting 90,000 visitors in 1848, to hosting close to 400,000 by the end of the 1870s; where the development of institutions like the Art Union clubs meant that "the British art-buying public…for the first time included people of limited means"; where the new large-scale exhibitions had become newly welcoming to what the *Illustrated London News* described as everyone between "the wealthier classes and their dependents"; where thirteen publications devoted to the arts in 1840 could turn into fifty-seven by 1890; and where the number of

> public museums soared, even as the nation's most famous museums – the National Gallery and the British Museum – swelled their visitor rolls tenfold in mere ten-year periods (the Gallery's numbers climbed from 60,321 visitors in 1830 to 503,011 in 1840, and the British Museum's attendance figures shot from around 80,000 in the late 1820s to over a million in 1851). (9)

Art became more available and accessible to the English population; periodicals such as *Bentley's* and *Blackwood's* routinely published articles describing art exhibits for those who were not able to attend, while other journals published articles on new artistic methods and practices and weighed in on particular types of art.[9] As more people bought, looked at, and made art, it was inevitable that certain art forms were more popular than others. Though the golden age of British portraiture is considered to have started with Van Dyck and ended with Sir Joshua Reynolds, portraiture retained its position as a popular form of art. Lionel Lambourne claims that, "From the era of Hilliard and Van Dyck to that of Reynolds and Gainsborough, the British nation has always been fascinated by the face of the individual, and by artists' attempts to capture a likeness on vellum, ivory, paper, or canvas" (65). The individual face could be seen everywhere, from the prestigious Royal Academy exhibitions to the sketchbooks of amateurs. The portrait, especially the portrait miniature, was able to hold emotional meaning and memory in ways that history or genre painting could not.

[9] For examples of articles on art in nineteenth-century periodicals see *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 319; "Art and its Vehicles," 255-58; "Thoughts on Portrait Painting," 108-12; "Miseries of Portrait-Painters," 223-227; Vanderdoort 53-62.

Portrait miniatures, with their small size and portability, were used as jewelry, decoration, and most commonly, as gifts. These small portraits acted, as Joe Bray has said, as "a significant means of establishing or strengthening relationships" (51). They also engaged with ideas of ownership and possession within relationships; Katherine Coombs traces the relationship between actual nineteenth-century miniatures and their fictional counterparts, claiming:

> The proliferation of miniatures in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries ensured a place for them in the emotional and social life of the day, reflected in literature and even in painting. Eighteenth-and-nineteenth century novels employed the idea, first used by Shakespeare of the miniature as a symbol of intimacy and possession…Ozias Humphrey pointed out the particular way in which the intimate size of the miniature, its ability to be carried on the person, made the symbolism of its ownership quite different from larger portraits. (114)

Though photographs replaced the portrait miniature around mid-century, the South Kensington Museum (now the V&A) held its first exhibition of miniatures in 1865 (Coombs 117). With the support of the populace, as well as nationally sponsored museums such as the National Portrait Gallery and the South Kensington Museum, portraits were central to the evolving cultural and historical understanding of identity and interiority as something to be owned or possessed, roles that were reflected in both real and fictional portraits.

Against the background of actual, real world portraits, fictional portraits tend to act in one of two general ways: they are implicated in grand narrative gestures, acting as

prop pieces to further the narrative or expose characters often by supernatural means, or they serve as small moments of memory and memorialization. Certain fictional portraits operate outside of these categories by possessing a more nuanced, subtle way of mattering that allows them to participate more materially in the text. These portraits in literature are uniquely suited to make a set of claims about the nature of reality because of the portrait's status as a created object that is able to interact with its subject, creator, and audience by pushing against the boundaries of reality. These portraits are fully materialized in the text through the language of the narrative and their own concrete physical presence. The insistently material nature of these drawings, and paintings, such as the portraits in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), directly contrasts with the supernatural or magical literary devices that are often used to grant portraits agency in other texts.

Before turning to *Jane Eyre*, however, it is helpful to understand the role portraits play in Victorian literature as representational and agentic objects—objects that have agency that is not dependent on a character or the narrator. This analysis begins with a new understanding of how matter is able to function within a text, drawn from new materialist though as set out by Diana Coole and Samantha Frost:

> Conceiving matter as possessing its own modes of self-transformation, self-organization, and directedness, and thus no longer as simply passive or inert, disturbs the conventional sense that agents are exclusively humans who possess the cognitive abilities, intentionality, and freedom to make autonomous decisions and the corollary presumption that humans have the right or ability to master

> nature. Instead, the human species is being relocated within a natural environment whose material forces themselves manifest agentic capacities… (10)

This passage presents the radical idea that matter is active rather than passive, possessing agency and existing equally alongside the human. College and Frost are interested in how matter functions in the actual physical world, while I propose that the same intentionality of actual, physical matter is mirrored in literary matter as well. Literary portraits are complicated objects because they not only represent their subject, but, in the real world, they would stand on their own and matter fully as material things. Two instances from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* emphasize the agency and intention that the physical object of the portrait possesses beyond that accorded to it by the characters and the text.

The first example is the relationship between the artist Basil Hallward and his painting of Dorian, a manifestly different relationship than that between Dorian and the same painting. Basil makes some of the same claims that Dorian does about the portrait and the nature of the soul:

> "Harry," said Basil Hallward, looking him straight in the face, "every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who, on coloured canvas, reveals himself. The reason I will not exhibit this picture is that I am afraid that I have shown in it the secret of my own soul." (Wilde 9)

Basil's declaration takes place before Dorian is introduced in the text; his only presence is through the unfinished painting that stands in the center of the room. While Dorian is

the subject of the painting, Basil does not name him. Instead, the artist claims the position of the subject for himself, relegating Dorian as the sitter to an "accident" or "occasion" that resulted in the advent of the painting. Basil also claims that the picture shows his own soul, an argument that is quickly disavowed by the painting's own materiality as it mutates to showcase Dorian's interiority rather than Basil's. At this early point in the text the painting has yet to change, but when it does it exhibits both intention and choice by changing to reflect Dorian, the sitter, rather than Basil, the artist, despite their competing claims of being the true subject of the painting. The painting's own resistance to being managed is reflected in its material change that does not need the hands of an artist to occur.

At the center of the novel is the perennial question of what, exactly, the portrait is—magical? Supernatural? Possessed? The portrait is a representational fictional object, a complicated linguistic and imaginative image that calls into question the reader's understanding of materiality and the reality of the world of the narrative. Even without venturing into the later transformations of the portrait, the moment when Dorian sees the finished painting for the first time highlights the active nature of the role of the painting in this novel. When faced with his representative double, Dorian is unable to cope with the longevity of his likeness as compared to his mortal body:

> "…I know, now, that when one loses one's good looks, whatever they may be, one loses everything. Your picture has taught me that…youth is the only thing worth having. When I find that I am growing old, I shall kill myself."

> Hallward turned pale, and caught his hand. "Dorian! Dorian!" he cried, "don't talk like that. I have never had such a friend as you, and I shall never have such another. You are not jealous of material things are you?—you who are finer than any of them!"
>
> "I am jealous of everything whose beauty does not die. I am jealous of the portrait you have painted of me. Why should it keep what I must lose? Every moment that passes takes something from me, and gives something to it." (Wilde 29)

The apparently unchanging nature of the portrait sparks Dorian's resentment towards his likeness. The portrait captures a frozen moment in time while he inhabits a living, aging body. Basil, despite his earlier declaration that his soul inhabits the painting of Dorian, is quick to establish a hierarchy between "material *things*" (emphasis mine) and Dorian as a living being. And therein lies the paradox of agentic objects such as the fictional portrait: the painting is "merely" a representation of the human body and yet it somehow possesses attributes such as agency, mobility, and mutability.

Dorian's portrait is useful as a model of agency for objects in nineteenth-century literature, in that the portrait rejects interpretations such as Basil's claims of sympathy, blurs the lines between material thing and human being, and effects its own material change as it reflects Dorian's interiority. Unlike the portraits in *Jane Eyre*, however, Dorian's portrait is a magical object, meaning that though the reader can see manifestations of its agency (a changing surface, Dorian's perpetual youth), the actual operation of the agency is invisible, performed beyond the parameters of reality.

Ultimately, Dorian's portrait exists within its own category, agentic but magical, material but unreal. If, as I propose, agentic fictional objects work to redefine reality in nineteenth-century literature, I believe this redefinition occurs within recognizable, if elastic, realities—realities whose boundaries are made flexible through the vital objects that help construct them.

1.1 *JANE EYRE*

Charlotte Brontë dallies with the stability of her text's reality through the inclusion of supernatural elements in the narrative. The fluidity of Jane's own perception of the world around her contributes to this sense of instability. The novel treads a careful line between realism and the supernatural, lending itself to agentic readings as events and objects exist in a fluid narrative reality. Jane, as the narrator, constantly references folk and fairy tales and Rochester apostrophizes her as a "malicious elf," "sprite," and "changeling" (Brontë 274). The scene in the red room, with its hints of ghostliness, is only brought back to the pragmatic through age and time when Jane says, "I can now conjecture readily that this streak of light was, in all likelihood, a gleam from a lantern…but then, prepared as my mind was for horror…I thought that the swift-darting beam was a herald of some coming vision from another world" (Brontë 17). Later in the novel, the oddly traveling voices of both Jane and Rochester are never even explained, Jane claiming that the incident is "too awful and inexplicable to be communicated or discussed" (Brontë 448). Jennifer Gribble, in her article "Jane Eyre's Imagination," examines how the practice of making art contributes to this fluid view of reality, claiming

"in the very terms of imaginative activity itself, it [the novel] reveals how shifting is the sense of 'reality,' or that which the mind plays upon, how uncanny is the power of the imagination to anticipate and transform the stuff of experience to forge its own version of the facts" (282). Gribble's analysis connects both the narrative and Jane's artistic practices, emphasizing the relationship between the two and their ability to manipulate the reality of the text. Through references and scenes like these, Brontë establishes a narrative world whose boundaries appear to be more elastic than the reader's own reality. This elasticity predisposes the reader to pay attention to small details and to lend credence to what may appear unlikely events.

Just as Jane's reality is shaped by imaginative and artistic elements, art played a central role in the life of Charlotte Brontë who harbored ambitions of becoming a visual artist. Ellen Nussey, in her "Reminiscences of Charlotte Brontë," describes her friend's attachment to art as well as her high standards: "Charlotte passed a great part of almost every day in drawing or painting; she would do one or the other, for nine hours with scarcely an interval….At one period she set her heart on miniature painting but she did not succeed to her own approval" (Smith 603). Brontë's skill was well-known enough for W. S. Williams, her publisher, to suggest that she illustrate an edition of *Jane Eyre* in 1848. Brontë declined, claiming that, "I have not the skill you attribute to me. It is not enough to have the artist's eye; one must also have the artist's hand" (Smith 40-41). These unrealized career plans influenced the role art and artwork played in her fiction, specifically in her depiction of characters and their own artistic creations. Recent scholarly work examines the relationship between Brontë's written work and her artistic

output and involvement. Christine Alexander's and Jane Sellar's groundbreaking work, *The Art of the Brontës* (1995), examines the artwork of the Brontë siblings and the influence it had on their writing, while *The Brontës in the World of the Arts* (2004), edited by Sandra Hagan and Juliette Wells, explores the broader influence of both music and the visual arts in the lives and work of the Brontë siblings. These works are central to establishing the artistic context of Charlotte Brontë's visual imagination, as well as elucidating the highly structured and gendered world of nineteenth-century amateur art. I propose that since Jane Eyre is an amateur artist like her creator, this biographical and historical work provides important context for the types of drawings and paintings she creates in the novel.

Brontë's own ambitions as an artist existed in a confluence of gender, class, and personal expectations. Alexander and Sellars illuminate both the artistic aspiration of Charlotte Brontë and the obstacles she faced:

> Only gradually did Charlotte realize that the system of art education she was taught was directed more towards fitting middle-class girls for society and prospective husbands, than towards acquiring the skills necessary for entering a profession in art. It was adequate for the needs of a governess, but she had hoped for more than this for herself. On her return from Roe Head in May 1832, she put her newly acquired skills into practice with a view to becoming a professional artist. All evidence points to the fact that this was the period in which her hopes of earning a living by painting were seriously considered. It seems likely that she

> thought of becoming a miniaturist, painting tiny portraits, scenes and flowers for ornamental use. (51-52)

The art education that Charlotte Brontë received took a few different forms: she received instruction at Roe Head, Patrick Brontë seems to have hired a drawing master from Keighley for the children (though accounts differ as to whom), and the parsonage library was known to contain at least one drawing manual that Brontë would have had access to as both a child and an adult (Alexander 40-59). Antonia Losano explains that "At the end of the eighteenth century and into the early decades of the nineteenth, painting and drawing were required accomplishments for women in England….drawing and watercolor painting formed part of the standard education for middle-and-upper class ladies" (23). Christine Alexander and Margaret Smith helpfully flesh out the nebulous term "accomplishment" in *The Oxford Companion to the Brontës*:

> Defined by the OED as 'an ornamental attainment that completely equips or perfects a person for society', ladylike accomplishments increased a young woman's chances of marriage, relieved the boredom of long leisure hours for the 'gentlewoman', and, in the case of the Brontës, added to their professional skills as teachers and governesses. Accomplishments usually denoted 'extras' in a school curriculum, subjects not considered part of a basic education but likely to be decorative additions to one's skills…(1)

Thus, Brontë's skill with a brush or a pencil was located in a complicated space between socially acceptable—and even required—accomplishment and potentially marketable skill either as a governess or a professional artist.

For women, art instruction largely took the form of copying: "The generally accepted view was that a carefully graded series of copies should be made before a student was experienced enough to translate nature" (Alexander 42). Drawing manuals abounded, providing a range of different types of instruction. *The Artist, or Young Ladies' Instructor in Ornamental Painting, Drawing, &c.* (1835) by B. F. Gandee, takes the form of a didactic dialogue between a young woman and her cousin who teaches her various types of painting. Accompanied by several plates that illustrate the different methods being taught, the manual is mostly dialogue that gives instructions as well as modeling common mistakes and how to fix them. *The Handbook of Useful and Ornamental Amusements and Accomplishments, Including Artificial Flower Making, Engraving, Etching, Painting in All Its Styles, Modelling, Carving in Wood, Ivory, and Shell, also Fancy Work of Every Description* (1845) by a Lady, does not includes plates or illustrations but provides detailed instructions for several different types of painting as well as the best way to mix colors and paint on specific surfaces. This manual is intriguing because it mixes art with handcrafts, a "ubiquitous cultural practice" that had little to do with the nineteenth-century art world (Schaffer 3). *The Miniature Painter's Manual, Containing Progressive Lessons on the Art of Drawing and Painting Likenesses from Life on Card-Board, Vellum, and Ivory; with Concise Remarks on the Delineation of Character and Caricature* (1844) by N. Whittock, has detailed expository descriptions accompanied by small images to illustrate certain points as well as plates from which to copy. Whittock's manual, though it offers instruction on how to draw from life, also includes plates to copy presumably before turning to real life models. Though drawing

outdoors and painting from models such as friends and family was encouraged, women amateurs were largely taught to copy engravings of famous paintings, other illustrations, or finished drawings; professional women artists were not allowed to draw nude models at art institutions such as the Royal Academy until the end of the century (Alexander 64). This small sampling of drawing manuals effectively highlights the type of art education Charlotte Brontë received and the model on which she may have imagined Jane Eyre's own accomplishments.

Charlotte Bronte's own artwork shows signs of a traditional education, including drawings that can be identified as copies from extant drawing manuals (Alexander 40). Nancy V. Workman, in her article "The Art of the Brontës," emphasizes the structured nature of the Brontë sisters' drawings, claiming that, "For the girls, as Charlotte's letters and even drawings attest, drawing lessons primarily consisted of a series of structured practice sessions based on the examination of source materials like engravings, woodcuts, mezzo prints, or illustrations…" (254). Examining surviving examples of Charlotte Brontë's artwork, whether through high-quality reproductions, in person at the Brontë Parsonage Museum, or as part of her recent 200th birthday exhibit at the National Portrait Gallery, provides a realistic counterpoint to the examination of Jane's fictional artwork. There is an immediacy to actual physical objects that cannot be gleaned from reproductions; the delicacy of brush strokes and the fineness of detail are not readily reproducible through photographs or language. But actual physical objects have history and provenance that can easily overshadow the objectness of the portrait with the reality of biography. The ability of Charlotte Brontë's artwork to act independently of their

creator is often curtailed by the wealth of knowledge that accompanies them as the paintings are overwhelmed by historical and individual information. Workman argues that "future scholarship needs to decontextualize the work from the artists' lives and literary works so that fresh appraisals of the works can situate it in different contexts, especially that of Victorian visual culture" (262). The insistent presence of biography is a common theme in Brontë scholarship, however; Carol Bock, while discussing the social and cultural response to Charlotte Brontë's works through time claims that, "Perhaps the most striking feature of the history of response to Brontë's novels is a persistent concern with biographical background, what Miriam Allott aptly calls 'the Brontë story'" (23-24). Marianne Thormählen argues that "Whatever the topic of a scholarly text on a Brontë-related matter, some aspect or aspects of the Brontës' lives will be woven into it, in ways and on a scale that does not happen with other writers" (2). The role of the actual object and its relationship to biography is, of necessity, complicated but not always unproductive.

Brontë's biography provides a compelling framework through which to understand the nineteenth-century art world, but the artwork in *Jane Eyre* operates in its own fictional reality, providing evidence of the actual in the text. The dynamism of the real, historical portraits is not as readily apparent as the fictional objects. Fictional objects, as created, imaginative matter are more fluid than their real-world counterparts. Unencumbered by history, biography, and physical setting, fictional objects are able to make meaning in multiple, multi-faceted ways. Though real objects, such as Brontë's portraits, are vital in complicated and even political ways, their primary function of use is

as objects to be displayed. Fictional objects do not have to ascribe to a primary function and are not limited by the historical distance or the distancing of the exhibition; rather, fictional objects are able to accrue an assemblage of functions through their actions within the text. The elastic nature of narrative realities allows this collection of functions to continually grow and expand. The reader and the readerly imagination contribute to this expansion when the objects disappear into the text. Though the narrative has released the objects, they are suspended in the reader's consciousness, able to reappear and continue their agentic growth throughout the reader's experience of texts and objects, not limiting them to their parent text. In *Jane Eyre*, Jane's portraits intrude on the plot in highly visible and active ways, demanding the attention of the reader as the paintings assert their concreteness within the text. An awareness of the role of art in Brontë's work, as well as the existence of her own visual art, is compounded by the time and detail given to her drawings in the novel, as well as the portraits' own insistence on their materiality and presence within the text.

Overall, *Jane Eyre* is a highly visual novel, full of detailed descriptions of people, domestic interiors, and nature. Though this can be said of most nineteenth-century novels, *Jane Eyre* is especially evocative as it immerses the reader in a sensory narrative. From the lovingly detailed description of Miss Temple, to the numerous descriptions of Thornfield's interior rooms, to the wildness of the heath surrounding Moor House, Jane is a sensitively descriptive narrator of the visual and material environment in which she moves. Losano argues that "*Jane Eyre* is in fact shot through with the language of vision; the verbal texture of the novel is built on references to sight perception, both in its literal

manifestation as bodily vision but also metaphorically in the sense that the entire novel might be read as a justification of Jane's 'point of view'" (97). This claim is born out through the extensive body of critical work examining the visual world of the novel, from early reception such as George Henry Lewes's review in *Fraser's Magazine*, to more contemporary work on the novel such as Elaine Freedgood's study of mahogany furniture in *Jane Eyre*. Central in these discussions of Jane's descriptive and highly visual narrative style is the presence of things in the novel. Artwork is not the only object to gain critical attention: books, attics, interior design, and clothing (to name a few) have all been the subject of critical work, demonstrating the centrality of material objects in the fabric of the narrative.[10]

Elaine Freedgood in particular has helped to establish the practice of looking at things in Victorian novels. She argues "that critical cultural archives have been preserved, unsuspected, in the things of realism that have been so little or so lightly read" (1). Her own critical archive in *Jane Eyre* is the history of slavery and deforestation that lies in wait in the mahogany furniture that furnishes Gateshead and later Moor House. Freedgood's uncovering of the inscription of violence in the things that populate *Jane Eyre* is instructive in its thorough detailing of the history and cultural positioning of objects within texts. One of the problems that Freedgood grapples with is what she calls "temporal displacement," the difficulty of recovering original readers' reactions to the items contemporary readers are now considering.

[10] For a range of arguments predicated on objects in *Jane Eyre* see Kreisel 103-105; Chase 60, 65; Heritage 450, 454; Borie 110; Shrimpton 21; Klotz 12-13; Freedgood 31; Fletcher 69; Norrick 74; and Deiter 36.

My project has different intentions in that it studies how agentic objects work within texts themselves rather than only readers' (past or present) understanding of them. I will push my readings of portraits as agentic objects beyond historical and narrative consequences, to ascertain how the literary things themselves contribute to and shape the reality of the text. It is not enough to understand an object's history or how its real-world counterparts have engaged in political and empirical struggles; rather, it is essential to push this type of analysis to its outer limits in order to grasp how objects such as the portraits in *Jane Eyre* are able to influence their narrative reality and the reality in which they were and are read.

The portraits in *Jane Eyre* are paid surprisingly little attention in the critical work surrounding the novel. Many, though not all, critics focus instead on the three watercolors in Jane's portfolio that Rochester examines so closely. Discussion of the artwork in the novel falls into distinct categories. Beth Newman, Jane Millgate, and Lawrence Moser analyze the subjects of the watercolors ad argue that they contribute to the structure of the novel as well as to Jane's interiority.[11] Newman and Millgate bring the reader's attention to the watercolor's use of imagery from Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Thomas Bewick's *British Birds*, while Moser argues for a surrealistic interpretation of the paintings. [12] Antonia Losano and Margaret Goscilo focus on the social work Jane's artwork accomplishes; Losano argues that Jane's artwork critiques "gender and class politics"

[11] For their detailed arguments on the watercolors and their role in novel structure and the development of Jane's interiority see Newman 158-160; Millgate 315-316; and Moser 275.
[12] Judith Wilt, in her essay "Reading the Arts in the Brontë Fiction" in *A Companion to the Brontës* (2016), also makes a connection between Jane's watercolors and her early reading of Bewick saying, "Jane reads *Bewick's Book of British Birds* in the first chapter at Gateshead and later improvisationally "interprets" its illustrations in the highly original (self)-paintings she shows at Thornfield Hall" (463).

(99), while Goscilo sees Jane's disciplinary portrait painting as exemplifying "the period's conventional paradigms for female identity" (101). The most common reading of the three watercolors is to understand them as a narrative tool designed to foreshadow or prophesy events in the novel. Thomas Langford, Barbara Gates, Robin St. John Conover, and Jane Millgate all offer interpretations of the painting as a method of foreshadowing; Laura Rennert reads the paintings' symbolism as "simultaneously prophetic and retrospective" (161).[13] The prophetic function of the paintings overlaps with the interpretation of Jane's artwork as what Millgate identifies as "outward manifestations of her emotional state at particular moments" (315-16). Lawrence Starzyk argues that the "pictorial elements" of the novel "indicat[e] an intellectual process by which the self-reflecting soul attempts to make sense of a present" (307); Conover makes a distinction between the watercolors and Jane's later portraits, claiming that the watercolors "emanate entirely from her subconscious self rather than represent any realistic image reproduced from life" (175). Laurence Talairach-Vielmas argues that the paintings trace "the vanishing of the heroine's body as she compares herself to more attractive models of femininity" (128). The work of these critics provides a thorough and wide-ranging framework for the discussion of Jane Eyre's artwork within the novel. Through all of these readings, however, the analysis, even when examining the subject of the pictures themselves, tends to focus on Jane and how she interacts with her artwork as the primary subject. I propose that the portraits Jane creates expose the essentialness of visual and

[13] For their arguments regarding the watercolor's role in foreshadowing and prophecy see Langford 47, 231; Gates 36; Conover 174, 176; and Millgate 316.

material culture to the text and the concreteness that is so central to these expressions of materiality. While other critics privilege the heroine's body, or focus on Jane as an artist and an emotional subject, or examine the paintings as a narrative tool, I will privilege the materiality of the portraits. It is not the body being painted, or even the body doing the painting that matters, but the materiality of the portrait itself.

Jane Eyre, as a character, shares her creator's artistic propensities and can be read as an artistic figure within the novel both in the way she sees and perceives the world around her, as well as through her physical acts of painting and drawing. These two strands of artistic ability run through the novel, from the opening scene where young Jane examines the illustrations in Thomas Bewick's *British Birds*, to the end of the novel where she becomes the physical embodiment of Vision as she sees for her blind husband. Examples of Jane's work range from her first crooked cottage drawn at Lowood, to the more sophisticated portfolio that Mr. Rochester admires and even exhibits to houseguests (Brontë 74, 128). Despite this one scene of appreciation and discussion of the watercolors, the text itself privileges the portraits that Jane draws while at Thornfield and during her time as a schoolteacher in Morton. The narrative takes special care to emphasize the creation of these portraits, tracing their development from inception to execution. The list of portraits is fairly small: a self-portrait of Jane, a painting of Blanche Ingram, a pencil drawing of Mr. Rochester, and painting of Rosamond Oliver.[14] These

[14] Jane mentions drawing portraits of her cousins while she is at Gateshead for Mrs. Reed's illness saying, "They both seem surprised at my skill. I offered to sketch their portraits; and each, in turn, sat for a pencil outline" (Brontë 234). Since this is the extent of the cousinly portraits, I have omitted them from the list of finished portraits in the novel. The same consideration was used in not including the sketch of one of Jane's pupils at Morton.

works, with their range of subjects, are all united by the shared form and physical object of the portrait.

1.2 "PORTRAIT OF A GOVERNESS" AND "BLANCHE, AN ACCOMPLISHED LADY OF RANK"

The first two portraits that the reader sees Jane create in the novel have both real and imagined subjects: she draws a self-portrait and then paints a concept painting of Blanche Ingram, a woman who—at this point in the text—Jane has never met. She is only able to imagine Blanche through Mrs. Fairfax's description. Earlier in the novel when Jane is attempting to understand her new employer's character, Mrs. Fairfax is described as being a person who seems "to have no notion of sketching a character, or observing and describing salient points, either in persons or things," yet she gives a fairly vivid description of Blanche (Brontë 105). Jane Millgate argues that Jane "still further heightens and romanticizes the colours and the details" of Mrs. Fairfax's description, emphasizing the imaginative work that goes into the painting (316). Despite the seeming contradiction of Mrs. Fairfax's descriptive abilities and Jane's artistic license, Mrs. Fairfax's purely visual assessment of Blanche reduces her to a surface which is then reiterated by Jane's own description of the imaginary woman she intends to paint. This focus on bodily surfaces relegates Blanche to the status of an object, whose primary purpose is to be looked at even as Jane uses the imaginary body to examine her own interiority. Jane, rather than Blanche as her intended subject, becomes the central figure in this moment of creation. Memory is invoked in her artistic process not to recall

Blanche's face, but as a witness to Jane's own emotional state: "Arraigned at my own bar, Memory has given her evidence of the hopes, wishes, sentiments, I had been cherishing since last night—of the general state of mind in which I had indulged for nearly a fortnight past…" (Brontë 160). Since Jane has never met the subject of the portrait she will paint, memory is invoked in her own self-assessment rather than in recalling Blanche's face. As the passage continues, Memory is aided by Reason and Jane acts as a self-condemning judge who issues an edict that utilizes art as a type of self-discipline. Jane's punitive use of her artistic skills reflects the didactic purpose of drawing manuals such as Gandee's, whose text combines art instruction with life lessons for young women. Though Jane acts as her own moral instructor in this passage of the novel, her practice of using art to address behavioral flaws follows contemporary methods of art education expressed in nineteenth-century drawing manuals. The lengthy quotation below gives the reader a full account of Jane's creative and imaginative process, effectively highlighting the different approaches she takes for her self-portrait and the imagined portrait of Blanche:

> "Listen, then, Jane Eyre, to your sentence: to-morrow, place the glass before you, and draw in chalk your own picture, faithfully; without softening one defect: omit no harsh line, smooth away no displeasing irregularity; write under it, 'Portrait of a Governess, disconnected, poor, and plain.'
>
> "Afterwards, take a piece of smooth ivory—you have one prepared in your drawing-box: take your palette, mix your freshest, finest, clearest tints; choose your most delicate camel-hair pencils; delineate carefully the loveliest face you

> can imagine; paint it in your softest shades and sweetest hues, according to the description given by Mrs. Fairfax of Blanche Ingram: remember the raven ringlets, the oriental eye…Recall the august yet harmonious lineaments, the Grecian neck and bust: let the round and dazzling arm be visible, and the delicate hand; omit neither diamond ring nor gold bracelet; portray faithfully the attire, aerial lace and glistening satin, graceful scarf and golden rose: call it 'Blanche, an accomplished lady of rank. (Brontë 161)

This passage gives the portraits a verbal iteration before their physical creation. With each repetition, the actual body of the subject moves farther away and the representation of the body moves into being. The portraits are not merely mentioned in the text, but carefully created through the layering of verbal descriptions that precede the act of creating a physical object. This language shifts attention from the human subject to the creation and presence of the portrait, drawing the reader's attention to the object.

Jane's approaches to her self-portrait and to the portrait of Blanche are remarkably different, beginning with the materials she chooses to use: Jane draws her self-portrait in chalk and focuses on what she perceives as her physical "defects."[15] Despite the lengthy description of what the other woman will look like, Jane's own face and figure are characterized by the words "defect," "harsh line," and "irregularity." Though such "defects" certainly contribute to her individuality, Jane is unable to perceive herself visually as anything other than flawed. Jane withholds her name from her own

[15] Brian Allen in his essay "The Age of Hogarth," explains that "one branch of portrait painting that had become popular by the 1740s was crayon or pastel painting" (157). This was a much cheaper medium than oil paints and therefore more affordable though it was more popular in France than it was in England (Allen 157-65).

likeness, merely designating it "Portrait of a Governess," a title that identifies her by her occupation, a nebulous term that works to negate the individuality of the subject. Blanche's portrait, however, is painted using the best materials including a specially prepared surface, delicate brushes, and carefully blended paints.[16] Rather than focusing on physical defects, the portrait is anchored by the numerous perfections of the offstage Blanche. Her imagined body is described in a detailed yet fragmented catalogue with each body part being enumerated and described. Though these details show a care and attention for another woman's body that Jane's self-portrait does not afford her own body, they also dissect Jane's rival, casting Blanche as a collection of parts rather than a unified whole. The fragmentation foreshadows the unpleasant personality of the real Blanche Ingram in an unacknowledged moment of prescience on the part of the portrait. It also invokes the poetic blazon tradition in its catalogue of body parts; Brontë gives a linguistic and poetic tradition a visual representation, expanding the literary tradition as well as giving the fictional portrait yet another function in its ability to visually represent language.

The title of the second portrait attempts unification by using both a proper name and a designation: "Blanche, an accomplished lady of rank." Without an occupation, Blanche is identified by her accomplishments and her socio-economic status. Jane, too, included her own economic status in the title of her self-portrait but omitted any mention

[16] Margaret Smith, the editor of the Oxford edition of *Jane Eyre*, explains the "ivory" that Jane paints Blanche's portrait on saying, "Charlotte Brontë probably had in mind 'ivory paper', i.e. thick paper or thin cardboard with a finely prepared polished surface" (*JE* 161). It is also possible that Jane was painting on actual ivory; both *The Miniature Painter's Manual* and *The Handbook of Useful and Ornamental Amusements and Accomplishments* give instructions on how to prepare ivory for painting.

of her various accomplishments, including the very artistic abilities that allow her to create the artwork in the first place. Beth Newman broaches the question of whether Jane's accomplishments are merely the product of education or if they are "part of her essence…independent of her material circumstances" (159-60). She argues that "[Jane's] artistry signifies her radical difference not only from those socially beneath her…but also, and especially, from those conventionally placed above her, like Blanche, whose purely performative (and therefore more unabashedly exhibitionistic) art seems distinctly soulless and brittle" (Newman160-61). By allowing the portraits to elide her accomplishments as well as her physical appearance, Jane creates a limited portrait of her self that does not take into account her innate or acquired talents. The self-portrait, both in its creative process and eventual realization in the text, is characterized by omission: of detail, of time and care, of the various facets of the character that novel has revealed in its titular character and narrator. The portraits work to reveal far more than the attraction Jane has perceived in herself towards Mr. Rochester. The drawn and painted surfaces embody Jane's perception of herself and another at this moment in the text, but they do so by drawing the reader's attention to Jane's inability to see people in their entirety.

The overt, acknowledged use of the portraits answers Jane's intention of self-discipline and regulation:

> I kept my word. An hour or two sufficed to sketch my own portrait in crayons; and in less than a fortnight I had completed an ivory miniature of an imaginary Blanche Ingram. It looked a lovely face enough, and when compared with the real head in chalk the contrast was as great as self-control could desire. I

> derived benefit from the task: it had kept my head and hands employed, and had given force and fixedness to the new impressions I wish to stamp indelibly on my heart. (Brontë 162)

Jane focuses on the act of creation, the employment of her hands and mind rather than the objects as physical presences. But once she creates the portraits they become a material part of the narrative world. Their concrete presence, rather than their former imaginative presence, allows them to begin operating on their own terms within the text. Beyond the avowed purpose of self-regulation, the portraits also grant Jane a specific agency as both a creator of others and a self-creator. Despite her inability to see beyond her own surface appearance (at least in this passage, though Jane's greater awareness of her individuality and interiority are apparent in many other places in the novel), Jane's self-portrait emphasizes her autonomy and self-reliance. Painting Blanche's portrait gives Jane the power and mobility to move beyond the world she inhabits, and, in a way, to take possession of Blanche, at least in imagination, as she paints a woman she has never seen, in a social setting she has never experienced. This psychological and social mobility is a product of the portraits; they allow their creator access to people and places far beyond her present state of being.

Despite the attention given to Blanche's portrait and what it should look like, the first instance of portrait painting is not a detailed account of the actual act of painting, but a list of instructions for the artist and for the reader. These instructions help the reader to imagine the portraits, a process that Elaine Scarry explores in her work on vivacity and readerly imagination. Scarry is particularly interested in how solidity and space are

achieved through writing, claiming, "it is impossible to create imaginary persons if one has not created a space for them" (7). Jane, who has already had a space created for her by Brontë as the author, now creates spaces for her self and her imagined rival, utilizing the materiality of the textual reality in which she exists to create a detailed set of instructions for the creative act. The above passage from the novel not only creates imaginary people in the mind of the reader, but also creates imaginary portraits of those people through the list of instructions that Jane gives herself as well as the reader.

The creation of art work in texts is known as ekphrasis; defined by James Heffernan as "the literary representation of visual art," it is certainly the foundation of the narrative work Jane's art accomplishes in the novel (1). Jane, as narrator and artist, describes her work in vivid visual terms, allowing the reader to "see" the paintings and drawings she creates. But, as W. J. T. Mitchell has claimed,

> A verbal representation cannot represent—that is, make present—its object in the same way a visual representation can. It may refer to an object, describe it, invoke it, but it can never bring its visual presence before us in the way pictures do. Words can "cite," but never "sight" their objects. (152)

It is certainly true that words alone can only "cite" a visual representation in a text, but matter and the embodied reader must also be taken into account. Though Jane's watercolors are described purely ekphrastically, the portraits enter the text with a crucial difference. The portraits create their own materiality in several different registers, usually beginning with the creation of the portrait. This creation, whether it is the instructions Jane gives herself or the directive will of drawing, requires both artist and reader to create

the portrait on paper and in imagination. More than a simple act of ekphrasis, this scene requires the reader to actively participate in the imagined creation of the drawings. Visual representation is replaced by material creation; the portraits begin to matter through the work of the embodied reader, taking up space in the narrative and the imagination as they obtain materiality. The illusion of solidity and materiality of the portraits is achieved through the list of instructions, what Scarry helpfully identifies as the counter-fictional nature of the verbal arts that "displac[es] the ordinary attributes of imagining—its faintness, two-dimensionality, fleetingness, and dependence on volitional labor—with the vivacity, solidity, persistence, and givenness of the perceptible world" (21-22). For the first two portraits the physical act of creation is glossed over fairly quickly in a sentence that merely denotes the length of time it took to create both the self-portrait—"an hour or two"—and the imaginary portrait—"less than a fortnight"—without accounting for the actual physical act of putting chalk and brush to paper. Both Mr. Rochester's portrait and the painting of Rosamond Oliver offer more explicit accounts of their creation, but in the instance of the first two portraits the narrative focuses on Jane's visual imagination and the thought process behind her acts of creation. Thus, the material presence of the portraits dominates the scene rather than their creation, allowing the purpose of the portraits to signify.

The drawn and painted surfaces reflect the characters that they represent, revealing Jane's shifting abilities to represent herself and foreshadowing Blanche's later, acerbic personality. Most importantly the portraits grant Jane agency, mobility, and emotional control over herself and her subjects. The portraits do away with constraints of

time and distance to allow Jane access to the physical and social reality of Blanche Ingram. After Jane creates the portraits, they are never seen in the text again. Jane briefly refers to her imagined portrait when she first meets Blanche, but other than this brief comparison the portraits drop out of sight. This disappearance does not negate the portraits; such carefully created objects may disappear but they are not excised from the narrative. Instead, they wait in the background, contributing an added depth to the reality of the narrative world and setting emotional developments within Jane into motion in ways that will have repercussions throughout the rest of the novel.

1.3 MR. ROCHESTER'S PORTRAIT

The second instance of portrait painting in the novel explores the act of creation in greater detail as the materials and the object themselves dictate the shape of the drawing. Having returned to Gateshead to see Mrs. Reed on her deathbed, Jane turns to art for "occupation and amusement" in the face of her cousins' superciliousness: "Provided with a case of pencils, and some sheets of paper, I used to take a seat apart from them, near the window, and busy myself in sketching fancy vignettes…One morning I fell to sketching a face: what sort of face it was to be I did not care or know" (Brontë 233). In direct contrast to the self-portrait scene, Jane uses her skills for positive occupation and stimulation rather than self-discipline and emotional regulation. Unlike the carefully instructed production of the earlier portraits, in this scene the portrait itself takes over as a will outside of Jane's dictates what is to be drawn. Without the extensive soul searching or the detailed instructions of the previous drawing, this portrait is established differently in the

text by its initial lack of detail. The reader does not know what to expect and has to watch the portrait come into being. This becoming challenges both the reader's imagination as well as Jane's role as the artist. Jane's assertion that she "did not know or care" what type of face it is that she was drawing leaves room for the reader to wonder if someone other than Jane cares about the outcome of the drawing, perhaps even the portrait itself. This passivity on the part of the artist could be interpreted as shifting the agency of this scene onto the creative impulse that inspires Jane to pick up her pencil, or identified as her own subconscious longing for Rochester, but, as the passage continues, it is the portrait itself that comes to the forefront of the narrative as it takes on the responsibility of its own creation.

The following passage moves from active to passive voice and back again, shifting between the will of the artist and the will of the portrait in an intriguing instance of object self-production:

> I took a soft black pencil, gave it a broad point, and worked away. Soon I had traced on the paper a broad and prominent forehead, and square lower outline of visage: that contour gave me pleasure; my fingers proceeded actively to fill it with features. Strongly marked horizontal eyebrows must be traced under that brow; then followed, naturally, a well-defined nose, with a straight ridge and full nostrils; then a flexible-looking mouth, by no means narrow; then a firm chin, with a decided cleft down the middle of it: of course, some black whiskers were wanted and some jetty hair, tufted on the temples, and waved above the forehead. Now for the eyes: I had left them to the last, because they required the most

> careful working. I drew them large; I shaped them well: the eyelashes I traced long and somber; the irids lustrous and large. "Good! but not quite the thing," I thought as I surveyed the effect: "They want more force and spirit;" and I wrought the shades blacker, that the lights might flash more brilliantly—a happy touch or two secured success. (Brontë 233)

This passage starts with Jane drawing the outlines of a face, but the use of the verb "traced" does not call to mind spontaneous creation as much as the idea of copying something that already exists on paper. Few critics have noticed this self-creation, though Robert Bernard Martin does describe this episode as being "sketched almost automatically, in a kind of trance divorced from her [Jane's] rational volition" (107). He interprets this portrait as an unreliable expression of reality given Jane's state of mind; I would argue that this portrait extends the reality of the narrative by drawing attention to its own activity in the text. Mr. Rochester's face appears to inhabit the drawing materials and, as the paragraph progresses, the unnamed (though obvious) subject exerts more and more control over the artist. The next clause of the sentence is "my fingers proceeded actively to fill it with features," a semi-passive construction that cedes control not to Jane's mind or her artistic inclination but to her hands. While this emphasis on the artist's hands could be read as a synecdoche for the artist herself, this distinction between Jane and her hands separates her body and mind and introduces the will of the portrait and the inevitability it contains; given the language of this passage, Jane's hands could not have drawn another face. The separation of Jane's hands from her body, and the role the creation of her hands might play, is consistent with contemporary nineteenth-century

debates concerning mechanization and the laborer's body. As Peter Capuano has so clearly argued, "The Victorians were highly cognizant of the physicality of their hands precisely because unprecedented developments in the mechanized industry and new advancements in evolutionary theory made them the first people to experience a radical disruption of this supposedly distinguishing mark of their humanity" (2). Jane's hands may make her human, but here they collude with a physical object to create without a human creator.

The fourth sentence of the paragraph is constructed entirely in passive voice, overtly calling into question who or what is responsible for the portrait that is taking shape in the text. This sentence is fascinating because even though the reader knows that Jane is still speaking, the sentence does not name her as either narrator or artist. Instead, the portrait draws itself in a series of imperative clauses: "Strongly marked horizontal eyebrows *must* be traced under that brow; then followed, *naturally*, a well-defined nose" (233, emphases mine). This is not a carefully considered or planned portrait but an impetuous sketch that appears to be drawing itself, utilizing Jane as a conduit to execute the desired result. The description continues, claiming that "*of course*, some black whiskers were *wanted*" (233, emphases mine). By whom or what were these whiskers wanted? It is by the subject? The drawing itself? The imagination of the artist? The reader, who is beginning to recognize the person being portrayed? The passivity of this sentence is contrasted with the activity of the portrait as the drawing dictates what it needs and wants to the artist. This unusual reversal of the role of drawing and artist only lasts for a brief moment before returning to Jane's more assertive "I" as she finishes the

eyes of her drawing. The section's slip into a passive construction is remarkable for the agency that the portrait presents; it is no longer a mere representation of Mr. Rochester, but an agentic image that has established its own identity and ability to become in the text. Rather than being a constructed or created object, the portrait becomes a self-created thing in the demands, wants, and natural progression expressed in the above passage. It not only draws attention to its presence and physicality, but it creates its own materiality by directing both artist and reader into creating the portrait in their imaginations and on paper. The narrative construction that fluctuates between active and passive voice requires the reader to imagine the act of drawing and the resultant product more strongly than a simple list of creative instruction could. This active engagement on the part of the reader goes beyond a simple act of ekphrasis as the language of the text elicits a participatory act of imaginary creation from the reader. In the act of creating itself, the portrait also draws Jane out in intriguing ways.

Throughout the entire paragraph detailing the emergence of the portrait Jane never acknowledges who she is drawing. Unlike the earlier portraits that she used for self-discipline and clearly labeled in an attempt to remind herself of the difference between a governess and a lady of rank, Jane does not force herself to name the head that she is drawing in this passage. Though there can be no question of the subject of the drawing given the detailed physical directions that appeared earlier in the novel, the delayed naming of Mr. Rochester is striking because it lends credence to the claim that the portrait is actually self-aware as it directs the artist and the reader in its own creation. Despite Mr. Rochester's masterful personality, it is not a memory of him or a request that

guides the production of the picture, rather, it is the portrait itself that demands to be drawn, clearly establishing a distinction among artist, subject, and object. The self-awareness of the object is short-lived, however, as the narrative re-centers on Jane. When she finished the picture, Jane describes it, saying, "I had a friend's face under my gaze…I looked at it; I smiled at the speaking likeness: I was absorbed and content" (Brontë 234). Her absorption and contentment are both short-lived and personal: Eliza and Georgiana Reed, upon seeing the portrait, are simultaneously interested in *who* the subject is and repelled by his physical appearance. Neither cousin is aware of the portrait, as an object, having any function or abilities beyond their curiosity. Without the personal connection that Jane attaches to the portrait, it loses its agency and power over the viewer. It becomes merely another "fancy head" in Jane's portfolio, unnamed and forgotten in the present demands of her cousins (Brontë 234).[17] Jane's reluctance to name the subject of her portrait to her cousins or even to herself, reveals the intimate nature of this portrait but also emphasizes Jane's lack of control over the drawing.

Mr. Rochester's portrait blurs the lines between artist and created object, upending the subject-object relationship and calling into question the need for the artist and, more fundamentally, the human body at all. Returning to Basil Hallward's claim that a sitter is merely the accident or occasion for a portrait, the image of Mr. Rochester reverses this idea as it slips in and out of agency and action, emphasizing that the

[17] Sally Shuttleworth defines the term "fancy head" as "a portrait of an imaginary person" (Brontë 473). Jane also mentions drawing "fancy vignettes" a page earlier (Brontë 233); Shuttleworth similarly defines these as "imaginary scenes" (Brontë 473). Jane's use of the word "fancy" turns on what she identifies as "the ever-shifting kaleidoscope of imagination" (Brontë 233). Objects are implicated in Jane's understanding of the imaginary as she considers her own imagination a tangible, if mutable, object. Brontë's own portfolio includes many such "fancy heads" as the novel describes, portraits of imaginary people drawn for practice or pleasure without a real-life referent.

physical object of the drawing is no longer subservient to the artist or her gaze. The drawing does share characteristics such as force of will and solid physicality with its subject, however, narrowing the divide between human and thing and reminding the reader of the reality of the narrative world beyond Jane's drawing paper.

1.4 ROSAMOND OLIVER'S PORTRAIT

The fourth and final portrait in *Jane Eyre*, and the last time Jane is shown to draw or paint in the novel, is a painting of Rosamond Oliver. At this point in the novel, Jane is operating under the assumed name of Jane Elliot and not only her identity but also her history and many of her accomplishments are obscured by her acceptance of the humble teaching post St. John Rivers obtains for her. When Rosamond discovers Jane's drawing supplies she immediately asks Jane to draw her, a naively egotistical desire that reflects the shallowness of her character. This is the first time that a character asks Jane to draw them and, besides the self-portrait, the first time that the reader observes Jane drawing from a real life model rather than relying on imagination or memory. Rosamond is surprised by Jane's abilities in a scene that casts Jane more strongly as an artist than in any other scene of painting or drawing in the novel:

> "Had I done these pictures? Did I know French and German? What a love—what a miracle I was! I drew better than her master in the first school in S---. Would I sketch a portrait of her, to show to papa?"
>
> "With pleasure," I replied; and I felt a thrill of artist-delight at the idea of copying from so perfect and radiant a model. She had then on a dark-blue silk

> dress; her arms and her neck were bare; her only ornament was her chestnut tresses, which waved over her shoulders with all the wild grace of natural curls. I took a sheet of fine cardboard, and drew a careful outline. I promised myself the pleasure of coloring it; and, as it was getting late then, I told her she must come and sit another day. (Brontë 369)

From its inception, this portrait is different than the others because it is not created in the same solitary vacuum in which the other three portraits were drawn and painted. It is conceived at the request of the subject as a gift: Rosamond does not ask for the portrait for herself, but for her father. From the intensely private portraits of Blanche Ingram and Mr. Rochester, Jane now progresses to a much more public portrait—one that not only has a live model but is conceived for an outside audience. This move away from the private, imagined, or remembered portrait casts Jane much more strongly as an artist figure rather than an amateur using her abilities for self-discipline, or to while away empty hours. More importantly, this larger audience allows the reader to see the ability of Rosamond's portrait to influence characters other than Jane. This larger arena extends the power of the portrait rather than limiting it to interactions with its fictional artist, broadening the implications of the agentic object beyond the individual.

In her self-portrait, Jane labeled herself as a governess, when she draws Mr. Rochester she and subject are friends, but when she goes to draw Rosamond, Jane assumes the title of artist. She acknowledges her abilities to Rosamond when she says, "I felt a thrill of artist-delight," more strongly claiming an artistic ability and identity than she has in the rest of the novel (Brontë 369). Favorably compared to a drawing master,

Jane describes her subject in evocative, highly visual terms. But when the actual creation is to take place, the verbs do not echo the confidence that the language of the rest of the passage exudes. Jane's "thrill of artist-delight" comes from "the idea of *copying* from so perfect and radiant a model" (Brontë 369, emphasis mine). She then draws "a careful outline," and looks forward to "colouring it" (Brontë 369). These verbs do not reflect creation; rather they depict the type of rote drawing that Charlotte Brontë herself practiced at Roe Head while she was a student (Alexander 51). As verbs, copying, outlining, and coloring reflect a static image rather than an original, mobile creation. Not only has the evidence of independence or agency been taken away from the image itself, but Jane as an artist seems to be rendered moot. The contradictory language of this passage, by laying claim to an artistic identity while inhabiting the learned behavior of nineteenth-century middle-class female amateur artists, complicates the portrait and the act of creation within the novel. It both establishes Jane as perhaps more talented than previously imagined, while taking refuge in the banality of rote copying work. The language of the text attempts to bury the portrait through these enigmatic contradictions, but the portrait refuses to be subsumed. Instead, it keeps making insistent appearances in this section of the novel; the account of its creation and its interaction with its audience is the most detailed portrayal of process and response of all the other portraits in the text. Rosamond's portrait, in its prominent and influential position in the novel, serves as a culmination of the insistent materiality and agency portraits possess and exhibit in *Jane Eyre*. This particular portrait inhabits a material narrative space that is not dependent on

Jane as the artist; instead, the portrait and its materials hold their own meanings within the text, dictating the plot by its own physicality.

Rosamond's portrait, with its wider audience, opens up possibilities for the object that the earlier portraits were never privy to. When St. John Rivers finds Jane at work finishing the painting, she offers to paint him a duplicate of Rosamond's likeness. Jane, who has already transgressed the amateur tradition of copying by drawing Rosamond's portrait from life, further flouts convention by offering to copy her own work, a practice usually reserved for important and well-known artists whose prints and engravings would be published or collected in albums or even rented out for aspiring artists to copy. Jane's offer of duplication does more than transgress middle-class artistic tradition, however. This illicit copy of Rosamond's likeness, for a man who loved her but was not her suitor, to carry to the far reaches of the world, breaks boundaries of self, propriety, and female mobility. The intimacy of the portrait miniature and its cultural portability, as well as its active materiality, would anchor St. John to both Rosamond Oliver and England, despite his renunciation of a relationship with both.[18]

Jane, as both creator and owner of the painting, offers to manipulate the image but it is the portrait itself that has the ability to influence those who behold it. Indeed, St. John, and subsequently the reader, cannot stop looking at the portrait—it draws the character's as well as the narrative eye: "He continued to gaze at the picture: the longer he looked, the firmer he held it, the more he seemed to covet it…he had laid the picture on the table before him, and, with his brow supported on both hands, hung fondly over it"

[18] For a discussion of cultural portability see Plotz, specifically Chapter 2.

(Brontë 371-72). The portrait becomes the center of the scene, despite St. John's initial reluctance to admit to and the final rejection of his strong, emotional reaction to the object. Even when St. John denounces Rosamond, both the person and the likeness, and tries to separate himself from the representation, the portrait reasserts its presence not through its own representative surface, but through the materials that conspire to create it:

> He drew over the picture the sheet of thin paper on which I was accustomed to rest my hand in painting to prevent the cardboard from being sullied. What he suddenly saw on this blank paper, it was impossible for me to tell: but something had caught his eye. He took it up with a snatch; he looked at the edge; then shot a glance at me, inexpressibly peculiar, and quite incomprehensible: a glance that seemed to take and make note of every point in my shape, face, and dress…replacing the paper, I saw him dexterously tear a narrow slip from the margin. It disappeared in his glove; and, with one hasty nod and "good-afternoon" he vanished. (Brontë 376)

Despite St. John's attempts to hide the portrait, to separate himself from the likeness it represents and the concrete offer of a copy that he cannot allow himself to accept, the portrait asserts itself within the plot in this section of the narrative. When the representation of the image is covered, the materials that cover it inhabit the same agentic space of the text, calling the characters' and readers' attention to the covered material object on the table. By placing a piece of paper over the portrait, St. John reinforces the materiality of the portrait and its ability to take up actual space in the narrative by causing it to interact with another material object. The portrait turns this reminder of its

materiality to good use by revealing Jane's true identity. The paper, as part of Jane's painting paraphernalia also exerts artistic influence: St. John is not an artist but the look he gives Jane while he holds the paper encompasses the same type of looking as that of an artist in that it sees "…every point…shape, face, dress," every element, in fact, that is present in Jane's description of Rosamond's portrait. As the reader comes to find out, the paper contains Jane's signature written in "some moment of abstraction," a pen-and-ink portrait that establishes her identity even more than her self-portrait earlier in the novel (Brontë 381). Roberta White reluctantly attributes this pivotal moment in the plot to Jane's art, claiming that "in a roundabout and gratuitous fashion, Jane becomes rich through someone's looking at her art" (49). The role Jane's art plays in the novel, however, makes this moment far from roundabout or gratuitous. Instead it is the natural progression of the agentic object as it moves from emotional regulation, to self-creation, to plot manipulation throughout the novel.

Once the work of the portrait and the signature are finished they, like the other portraits in the novel, are put aside, never to intrude their materiality on the reader's perception through overt narration again but still existing in the material world of the narrative. These quiet disappearances after their creation link all of the portraits in the novel. Jane's self-portrait, the imaginary portrait of Blanche, and the drawing of Mr. Rochester are most likely consigned to Jane's portfolio, and the portrait of Rosamond is ostensibly sent to Mr. Oiver, but none of these outcomes are recorded in the text. Instead, the portraits simply disappear into the background of the narrative after they set ideas and events into motion. The first two portraits are careful lists of instructions on how to

conceptualize and execute a portrait. Mr. Rochester's portrait actually follows the act of creation rather than just exhibiting the end result like the previous two pictures. The first two portraits are agentic in their ability to provide emotional and social mobility for Jane as the artist. The third portrait moves beyond this altruistic agency to actual self-production as it directs its own creation, drawing attention to its physicality and ability to self-create. Rosamond Oliver's portrait exhibits the relentless physicality of fictional objects and the ways in which objects call attention to themselves through their engagement with the plot. Substantial time and detail is afforded the creation of these portraits in the novel by Jane as both artist and narrator, Charlotte Brontë as author, and even the portraits as objects with agency capable of self-production. But beyond the precipitous disappearance of each picture, the portraits' afterlives are not considered within the novel; the portraits disappear into the text, sinking below the readable surface and only leaving behind traces of their agentic natures.

Where do these objects go in the text and elsewhere? Do they continue to exist in the imagination of the reader? Some objects that disappear in the narrative reappear at unexpected moments, like the pearl necklace Rochester wears as a memento of Jane, but the portraits remain resolutely out of sight (Brontë 446). Actual objects cannot exist on the two-dimensional page of a novel but these linguistic representations inhabit a story-world of tactility and three-dimensionality. Characters handle fictional objects, participating in the tactility and presence of these things: they pick objects up, put them down, run into them, and, in the examples in *Jane Eyre*, create them. Readers also participate in this realization of dimensionality as they imagine the scenes and objects

they are reading about. Wolfgang Iser, in *The Act of Reading*, argues that the action of reading "is when the text begins to unfold its potential; it is in the reader that text comes to life" (19). "In reading," he continues, "we are able to experience things that no longer exist and to understand things that are totally unfamiliar to us" (19); I would add that readers are able to experience both things that no longer exist as well as things that never existed, such as the fictional portraits in *Jane Eyre*. Yet, once agentic objects enter a reader's psyche it becomes almost impossible for them to disappear. The text may try to subsume or even erase the object, but the embodied reader, by giving imaginative space and materiality to these objects, will not allow them to disappear. Characters' interactions with objects and readers' imagining of objects combine with the active matter of fictional objects themselves to construct a world through the lived experience of all three actants. This formula leads to a new definition of reality, one in which linguistic representations have agency and become something more definite than even real objects themselves.

This attention to a literary reality of vital matter rather than merely inert things, offers a new way to read not only *Jane Eyre*, but the objects within this and other novels. The portraits in Jane Eyre reshaped the reader's understanding of the reality of the narrative in their agentic purposes; if fictional objects can redefine the shape of the reality in one novel, what can they do in others? In the real, physical world? The historical reality of the nineteenth century, a century filled with *stuff*, can no longer by understood in the same way once the vitality of objects has been recognized, but must be reevaluated in light of this newly understood relationship between objects and the nature of reality. The portraits in *Jane Eyre* restructure the shape of reality by mattering and acting in

unexpected and agentic ways that upend the subject-object relationship, allowing the objects to exist materially in the text alongside with rather than subservient to their human creators and audiences. By working with a recognizable reality, through nuanced, mattered ways of meaning, the portraits in *Jane Eyre* contribute towards a new definition of reality, one in which objects participate in active, purposeful ways even when constructed through literary and imaginary means.

2.0 CHAPTER 2: SARTORIAL INSURRECTION AND THE SENSATIONAL FEMALE BODY

> The pure and simple 'representation' of the 'real,' the naked relation of 'what is' (or has been) thus appears as a resistance to meaning; this resistance confirms the great mythic opposition of the *true-to-life* (the lifelike) and the *intelligible*; it suffices to recall that, in the ideology of our time, obsessive reference to the 'concrete' (in what is rhetorically demanded of the human sciences, of literature, of behavior) is always brandished like a weapon against meaning, as if, by some statutory exclusion, what is alive cannot signify—and vice versa.
>
> ---Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*

What happens when the borders between objects and the body begin to break down under the impetus of narrative language? When, in keeping with Barthes's argument, does something that is not alive replace that which is living in its position to signify? Barthes's conception of the 'real' and its role in the reality effect has been a primary factor in understanding the material world of novels, but here he raises the question of meaning and who and what is allowed to make meaning; central to this question is the role of animation and how both the animate and the inanimate may signify. This chapter considers the ability of dresses to replace the central acting human subject, a sartorial insurrection that depends not on a sudden animus of the clothing in question, but on the way in which bodies and clothing are constructed through the language of the text. Unlike the other objects this project has examining, dresses both exist apart from the body and are inhabited by the body, inscribing a relationship that moves beyond the representational connections of portraits and dolls. Paintings and toys always exist at a distance from the human form of either the sitter or the child/player; the dress is able to exist in an intimate role of substitution and as I shall show, in certain novels, even subsumes and replaces its human wearer. This is an unusually active claim to make for

fictional objects but it is one that is verified by the representations of dresses in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853), Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859), and Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1861), as they create, manipulate, and eventually erase identity through their interactions with the human bodies of Lady Dedlock, Laura Fairlie, Anne Catherick, and Isabel Vane. The bodies of these women are all erased in their respective novels as they are replaced by the dresses that they wear. The human form becomes a vehicle for objects as clothing usurps the role of the acting subject. Without reference to the corporeal form that exists within them, dresses manipulate and eventually determine the identity of the wearer. This erasure of the human upends the traditional subject-object relationship, decentering the human and privileging dresses as active and identity-forming objects.

This chapter focuses on the instability of human identity and the drama of competing identities between humans and non-humans. Material objects in these novels have identities that resist collapse, creating a dynamic narrative when object and human co-exist in the same embodied space. Despite this unique space of co-existence the dresses in *Bleak House*, *The Woman in White*, and *East Lynne* are not co-dependent on the bodies of their wearers. Rather, these fictional representations of dresses demonstrate an individual identity, exerting their own will beyond that of the physical body they clothe. The bodies of the wearers must contend with the dress and, in these three novels, are either unable or unwilling to dominate the struggle for identity and individuation. This struggle is not always a negative, contentious battle, but it allows the material objects to exhibit different kinds of agentic capacities, from the ability to erase the human

body, to the ability to protect the human body through a sheltering disguise. The question of sartorial agency and identity provides a new understanding of the relationship between representations of dresses and the bodies they clothe. These complicated expressions of identity emphasize the necessity of examining clothing in fiction as an active member of the narrative that is not always in agreement with the body of the character that supports it.

Because of its interactions with characters, clothing is often central to the descriptive world of novels. Claire Hughes, in *Dressed in Fiction* (2006), argues that "Descriptions of dress help us to fill out our pictures of the imagined worlds of fiction. But…too much information, too great an emphasis on dress, is often felt to be distracting, even suspect" (1). This statement is an excellent example of the paradoxical position representations of clothing occupy in texts. Clothing necessarily provides material depth to the world of the narrative, but it should not be paid too much attention to in case it distracts the reader or exposes a superficiality in the narrator or even the author. Similarly, Karen Tennant examines the different roles fictional clothing can play, claiming that "In its detailed accounts of the wearing, display, and interpretation of female dress, the novel implicitly instructs the reader to recognize and interpret sartorial cues, and also provides and intriguing reflection upon female morality" (116-17). Tennant further exposes the complicated nature of fictional clothing as she examines the multiple ways in which clothing is read in novels. Not only do fictional clothes establish status and socio-economic levels, but they also engage with the abstract concept of morality, giving it a concrete, physical manifestation. Hughes's and Tennant's work is

indicative of the layered nature of criticism surrounding clothing and fiction; clothes as they are described in fiction are necessary to create multiple levels of meaning, from the reality effect to a moral barometer, while also carrying complicated implications of reality.

Fashion, as an institution, has always had subversive potential and the developmental trajectory of female dress in the nineteenth century is no exception. A central concern since the eighteenth century was the democratization of dress. In the nineteenth century, the advent of the sewing machine, the proliferation of paper patterns in women's periodicals, as well as industrial and economic expansions, all contributed to increased buying power and sartorial creativity as lower-class women mimicked and modeled the fashions of the upper class.[19] The iconic, and universally adopted, silhouette of the mid-to-late 1800s was that of the crinoline introduced in 1856 (Breward 152). Jane Ashelford explains that since crinolines "could be produced quickly and cheaply they became the first fashion to be adopted universally by all ages and classes. They were worn under every type of dress from a maid's uniform to a duchess's ball gown" (218). The production and price of the crinoline made it perhaps the most fluid article of clothing in the century, standardizing fashion across classes. Rosy Aindow claims that clothing played a large role in the formulation of social identities as "it allowed individuals to formulate and express a response to those who surround them" (4). But Aindow continues with a warning against seeing or reading clothing as the sole means of establishing identity: "Clothing by its very nature is ambiguous. It can be taken off,

[19] For detailed accounts of nineteenth-century dress history including primary source material see Aindow 4; Ashelford 204-242; Jameson 22-26; Joslin ix; Steele 53-84.

removed, or used as a form of disguise. Ultimately it can be employed as a means of subverting identity" (8). The ability of clothing to subvert identity, which is the first step necessary for a dress to replace a human subject, is perhaps its most dangerous quality. This mutable and egalitarian ability of clothing disturbed traditional class hierarchies and posed a threat of sartorial if not social mobility in the nineteenth century.

It is the mobility of fashion that makes clothing such a provocative object. Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass argue that "clothes are detachable, they can move from body to body. That is precisely their danger and their value: they are bearers of identity, ritual, and social memory, even as they confuse social categories" (5). Though critics have argued that despite their similarities in style, lower-class and upper-class nineteenth-century clothing would have been easily distinguishable through materials and cut, it is not the actual materials of the clothing that matter as much as clothing's inherent nature and ability to move between bodies and bear witness to identity.[20] The fluidity of clothing connects real and imagined clothing: real-world dresses have the ability to replace the human, a characteristic that is shared by fictional dresses.

The similarities between real nineteenth-century dresses and fictional dresses are easy to track due to the highly accessible nature of nineteenth century clothing thanks in large part to the periodicals, patterns, fashion plates, design books, and extant clothing that creates an abundant material archive. Nineteenth-century dresses, which can be seen in archives such as The Clothworkers' Centre for the Study and Conservation of Textiles and Fashion, offer a fascinating record not only of textiles and dress history, but also of

[20] For further discussion of class differences in clothing see Ashelford 214; Steele 71, 83.

the embodied lives the dresses once led. A sampling of three dresses from the Clothworkers' Centre collection (two day dresses and an evening gown) is instructive both in presentation and material.[21] Archival dresses are displayed flat on a table and can only be handled by a curator who wears gloves. The dress no longer retains a human shape and has only limited access to the bodies of curators and none at all to the bodies of researchers.[22] It would seem that divorced from the bodies that provide the essential structure or shaping for clothing, dresses should become static. The opposite is in fact true as the dress retains its own shape, materials, and even traces of the human such as ragged hems, worn buttons, and sweat stains. These dresses serve as a record for the human who wore them but are not subsumed by provenance or history; instead, long after the wearer has become unknown or forgotten, the material objects live on, informing researchers' understanding of nineteenth-century fashion and the actuality of the clothing itself.

But what is the relationship between the material archive of dress history and the fictional archive of material representations? Hannah Grieg, in the collection *Gender and Material Culture in Britain Since 1600*, offers the following rationale for examining physical objects which I believe can be readily adapted for the study of fictional objects as well:

[21] The Clothworkers' Centre, T.190-1917; T.165-1964; T.83-1978.
[22] Interestingly, one of the dresses had rolls of foam and tissue in each sleeve in a facsimile of an arm and shoulder. The conservator explained that this helps to take stress off the weakest part of the dress while it is in storage, commenting that the impression of the body allows the conservators to keep the dress safe. In some ways the dresses are protected by the body even while use contributes to the destruction and wearing out of the objects.

> By viewing the objects of the past as inanimate and inactive as compared with the living, breathing humans who made, exchanged and used them, we can miss the dynamism of the object-person interactions that took place many decades or centuries ago…By stopping to consider the ways in which objects were made, used, exchanged, lost, adapted, and even destroyed, we can reinvigorate our view of historical artefacts otherwise disassociated from human action by the distance of time and place. (6-7)

Grieg argues for a focus on the active elements of objects' relationships to people; I shift this focus to the active elements of fictional objects' relationship to characters. This chapter is especially interested in the dynamism of fictional representations of dresses and how it influences the relationship between dress and body in the text. Though readers are often not able to trace the history of a dress from its creation to its destruction as Greig suggests, the material and ideological agitation of fashion in the nineteenth century was not restricted merely to reality, but it informed fiction as well. Through its creation by representation in narrative language and its relationship to fictional bodies, fictional clothing becomes more active than its realistic counterparts in the novels this chapter examines. If real, physical clothing can restore a part of history and grant social status and sartorial independence to its original owner, fictional clothing can erase fictional bodies entirely, not only absorbing the identity of the body but developing and asserting one of its own.

Bleak House, *The Woman in White*, and *East Lynne* provide unique spaces in which fictional representations of the dress are able to replace the central human subject

due to the novel's ties to the sensation genre. *The Woman in White* and *East Lynne* were wildly popular sensation novels; the famous scene where Walter Hartright meets Anne Catherick on the road to London is often heralded as the advent of the sensation novel, and *East Lynne* joined both *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret* as one of the "best selling novels of the nineteenth century" (Pykett 6). Though *Bleak House* is not commonly labeled a sensation novel, Anne-Marie Beller, in her chapter "Sensation Fiction in the 1850s" in *The Cambridge Companion to Sensation Fiction*, argues that "Dickens…was a key figure in the development of literary sensationalism…who provided a blueprint for sensationalising everyday life and domestic relations" (9). Beller invokes the preface of *Bleak House* claiming that Dickens's often-quoted statement in the preface to *Bleak House* "that he had 'purposely dwelt on the romantic side of familiar things' could be applied with equal validity to any later sensation novel…" (9). These three novels, as representatives of the sensation novel and its antecedents, play with ideas of reality. Whether it is the romanticizing of the familiar that Dickens employs in *Bleak House*, or the more melodramatic questions of self, identity, and the institutions of marriage and family that Collins and Wood explore in their respective novels, the realities of the narratives are both recognizable and distancing. Lyn Pykett identifies this uneasy relationship to reality as one of the primary functions of sensation fiction:

> One of the most shocking and thrilling aspects of sensation fiction, as far as its first readers and reviewers were concerned, was the fact that the action of the fast novels of crime and passion usually occurred in the otherwise prosaic, everyday, domestic setting of a modern middle-class or aristocratic English

> household. In fact both modernity and domesticity are more than simply the *mis-en-scene* of the sensation novel, they are also among its main preoccupations; they are topics of discussion and investigation. (8)[23]

This charged relationship to reality and examination of the sensationalism of the everyday is the perfect setting for alternate readings of reality through the representation of vital objects. As these novels challenge the status quo of the Victorian family, the understanding of self, and the legal institutions of marriage and divorce, they do so in an atmosphere of materiality. Misplaced wills, purloined diaries, and disfiguring glasses are just a few examples of the objects that inform these novels, creating a conducive environment for particularly active clothing. With their fluid relationship to reality, *Bleak House*, *The Woman in White*, and *East Lynne* provide a particularly fertile space for the object of the dress to challenge traditional understandings of reality and the relationship between women and their clothing.

The dresses that exhibit the most activity in these novels are always disguises—a departure from the normalized, everyday dress that the women typically wear. Disguise, as a category of misappropriated or misdirected clothing, inhabits an entirely different material space from that of the everyday dress; disguises are structured to blur the parameters of reality, a function that they perform, I argue, by displacing and erasing the body beneath. This is a bold and potentially controversial claim, but it is rooted in the ability of a disguise to destabilize clothing as a stable marker of identity or social class. This destabilization is followed, as I will show, by a sartorial manipulation of the body

[23] For further interpretations of the role of reality and the domestic setting in the sensation genre see Kent 53; Pedlar 50; Reynolds 99.

itself. The disguises that characters such as Lady Dedlock or Isabel Vane assume do not always conform to the desires of the bodies that wear them, but assert their own materiality and identity in startling ways that erase and replace the human body.

2.1 *BLEAK HOUSE*: LADY DEDLOCK'S DRESS

As an author, Dickens is characterized by his evocative descriptions, including his extensive use of metonymy as a shorthand for the characters in his densely populated novels. These metonyms focus on close contact and proximity, usually being created on or through the physical body of the character in question; clothing items such as Charley's oversized bonnet or Mr. Vholes's gloves depend on the body of the wearer and the idiosyncratic manner in which they wear the metonymic object.[24] This close association with the body has led to criticisms of Dickens's use of metonymy and its dehumanizing effects on the characters he creates. Elaine Freedgood remarks that, "There is also the disturbing sense that Dickens makes people into things" ("Commodity Criticism" 160). Robyn R. Warhol assigns a gendered roles to Dickens's metonymy that,

[24] A particularly intriguing instance of Dickens's creative involvement in the clothing of his characters is seen in *Barnaby Rudge*, first published in 1851. The novel's famous description of Dolly Varden not only inspired several paintings by William Powell Frith (including one that Dickens purchased after seeing the original), but the sale of Dickens's copy of the painting may have caused a brief adoption of tilted hats and polonaise-style dresses in the 1870s (V&A; Cunnington 261). The description in the novel may have been based off a colored plate in Dickens's copy of *Anecdotes of the Manners and Customs of London During the Eighteenth Century* by James Peller Malcolm. Now held in the Special Collections at Wake Forest University, Dickens's copy of the Malcolm has a brief note reading "Dolly Varden" over a figure on one of the text's colored plates that matches the description of Dolly. According to the *Catalogue of the Library of Charles Dickens from Gadshill* (1870) this inscription was made in Dickens's own hand. Though the handwriting does not appear to have been verified since Dickens's library was catalogued after his death it does offer at least circumstantial evidence that Dickens occasionally considered the attire of his characters beyond its metonymic purpose. Rebecca N. Mitchell's recent talk, entitled "Recurrent Ephemerality and the Dolly Varden Dress," delivered as part of the Ephemeral Dickens panel at MLA 2018 was helpful in thinking about the recurrence of this particular costume over time.

rather than turning characters into things, turns them into abstractions: "male novelists such as Dickens, Trollope, and Thackeray tend to use descriptive metonymies to move away from the material persons being described and toward abstract principles they come to represent" (78). John R. Reed, though writing about *Oliver Twist* in his article, "The Gentleman in the White Waistcoat: Dickens and Metonymy," claims that, "The gentleman in the white waistcoat is interesting because he remains nameless and is identified chiefly by this one article of clothing and by his vicious sentiments…The gentleman in *Oliver* is thus entirely surface to us" (417). Benjamin Joseph Bishop even identifies the use of metonymy in *Bleak House* as "excessive," an "aggressive use—or, perhaps better, abuse" of the linguistic device that he sees as contributing to the strained relationships between representation and production in the novel. These critics assign a variety of role to Dickens's use of metonymy in his novels, emphasizing the centrality of this particular literary device in his fiction. While the metonyms of Dickens's various narratives to do relate characters to things, abstract ideas, and surfaces, they also adorn a physical body. Without the body that wears the distinctive clothing, or has an apologetic cough, the metonym cannot exist. Thus, the relationship between bodies and things cannot be so easily separated in the literary practice of metonymy. I propose that, in *Bleak House*, rather than metonymy "mak[ing] people into things," as Freedgood has it, it is the breakdown of metonymic narrative language that results in the erasure of the body and the insurgence of the identifying object: the represented dress becomes the primary actor rather than the human character.

Lady Dedlock, whose identity and personality are characterized by the rigidly structured world of high society, surprisingly assumes the most mutable clothing in the novel. The dresses that she wears haunt the narrative, appearing at unexpected times and in unexpected places. Assumed as disguises, the dresses engage with her body through the changing narrative language of the text, eventually excising her body from the novel. Two fictional dresses in particular act differently from the more normalized dresses of characters such as Esther and Ada: the dress Lady Dedlock borrows from her maid, Hortense, and the dress that she trades with Jenny, the brick-maker's wife. The transformation of the dresses from metonymic markers to agentic objects is not simple; the fictional dresses make several attempts to assert their agency within the narrative before they achieve success. Their agency is eventually established through the language that is used to describe them, as well as their presence and mobility within the text. How the language of the text represents both the clothing and body that wears it is essential to the eventual replacement of body by object. Careful close reading reveals a narrative language that is troubled by the idea of the independence of the fictional dress and struggles to equate body and dress with each other. The dress, as a fictional object, is working to assert its independence and establish its own identity within the text; the language of the narrative, through its use of neutral pronouns, a lack of proper names, and an attention to the actions of the dress rather than its description is able to foreground the rising presence of the dress in the novel. In order to accomplish this rise, the body of the wearer must be completely subsumed, an event that can only occur once the fictional human body has been destabilized through literary and sartorial means.

The first instance where Lady Dedlock's dress calls attention to itself and the troubled relationship between the clothing and the body beneath is when she appears in Lincoln's Inn Fields after hearing of the death of Nemo:

> But they are not all like the woman who now leaves him and his house behind; between whose plain dress, and her refined manners, there is something exceedingly inconsistent. She should be an upper servant by her attire, yet, in her air and step though both are hurried and assumed – as far as she can assume in the muddy streets, which she treads with an unaccustomed foot – she is a lady. Her face is veiled and still she sufficiently betrays herself to make more than one of those who pass her look around sharply. (Dickens 260)

Lady Dedlock, who is not named in this passage, is utilizing a disguise to learn the details of her dead lover's life and death. Her disguise is not sympathetic with her body, however, creating a noticeable discord between dress and body. The disparity is initially observed between Lady Dedlock's "plain dress, and her refined manner," opposing the concrete reality of the servant's dress she wears with the abstract and non-physical "air" she possesses. With neither dress nor body in control of the other, the two coexist somewhat disjointedly, failing to create a recognizable or coherent identity. Despite the materiality of the disguise and the body that it attempts to hide, corporeality is not the primary consideration in the above paragraph. Instead, the disguising dress and the body are both subsumed in the abstract nature of the figure's status as a "lady." The language of the passage avoids the use of proper nouns, rather the common noun "lady" troubles the disguise without identifying the body beneath. Subject (Lady Dedlock) and object

(her borrowed dress) remain separate in this first instance of disguise with the generic nouns and pronouns of the text attempting to bring the two into harmonious representation. It is the narrative that has agency here and its success lies in conveying the mismatch between subject and object. Though the dress is unable to reach its potential to inscribe and create identity in this particular passage, the narrative itself exposes the troubled identity of Lady Dedlock and the dress she assumes.

As the paragraph continues, the body within the dress gains solidity and supremacy over the dress as the body becomes more visible through motion. The paragraph begins with a focus on the woman's air, then traces her step, her step becomes her foot, and her foot draws the eye upward to her face in an increasingly concrete textual representation of the body that resists the dress's efforts to redefine it as someone else. The dress and veil that attempt to obscure Lady Dedlock's body are here described as unable to confine her refined physicality. It is not that the body is in any biological way different than the servant's body that normally inhabits the dress—foot, hand, and face are all in their accustomed places—but the personality of the body is the site of the inconsistency. The dress appears, at this point in the text, to be secondary. In its function as a disguise, the outfit is unable to fully achieve its goal of obfuscation. The inability of the object to make the body subject to its own sartorial identity is due, in large part, to the language of the passage. Though unnamed, the lady is clearly the subject of the paragraph. Her disguise is mentioned twice, once described as a "plain dress," and the second time only referred to as "attire." There is no description of the clothing beyond the narrator identifying it as the outfit of an upper servant. The woman herself is described,

albeit abstractly, in greater detail and the paragraph contains eleven female pronouns, giving the passage an overwhelming focus on the person rather than the disguise. The clothing attempts a distraction but does not achieve it, leaving the body that wears the clothes at the center of the text. At this point in the novel, the narrative language that constructs sartorial representations still focuses on the supremacy of the human body; the dress has yet to assert its agency over its wearer. In order for the dress to exhibit agency, the body must first be destabilized in order to break down the identity inherent in Lady Dedlock's physicality.

Lady Dedlock's bodily identity is destabilized by her use of disguise, as well as other factors that contribute to the process. Esther Summerson, Lady Dedlock's illegitimate daughter, is perhaps the most important non-sartorial element that begins to erode Lady Dedlock's aristocratic and marital identity. Though clothing has no part in this familial fragmentation, it is important to understand the conditions under which Lady Dedlock's body is undermined. When Esther first sees her mother in the church at Chesney Wold, Lady Dedlock is once again not immediately identified in the text:

> But a stir in that direction, a gathering reverential awe in the rustic faces…forewarned me that the great people were come…Shall I ever forget the rapid beating at my heart, occasioned by the look I met, as I stood up! Shall I ever forget the manner in which those handsome proud eyes seemed to spring out of their languor, and to hold mine! It was only a moment before I cast mine down – released again, if I may say so – on my book; but, I knew the beautiful face quite well, in that short space of time. (Dickens 290)

Only a "beautiful face" and "handsome proud eyes" are mentioned, though there can be little doubt as to who has entered the church and caused Esther such agitation. Her coy narrative does not use the name of her mother, however, delaying identification of a body already troubled, as I have shown, by its largely unsuccessful attempts to assume a disguise a few chapters earlier.

Esther's narrative in the church continues, with Lady Dedlock's body subjected to further fragmentation and questioning due to Esther's own confusion concerning their relationship:

> And, very strangely, there was something quickened within me, associated with the lonely days at my godmother's; yes, away even to the days when I had stood on tiptoe to dress myself at my little glass, after dressing my doll. And this, although I had never seen this lady's face before in all my life – I was quite sure of it – absolutely certain.
>
> It was easy to know that the ceremonious, gouty, grey-haired gentleman, the only other occupant of the great pew, was Sir Leicester Dedlock; and that the lady was Lady Dedlock. But why her face should be, in a confused way, like a broken glass to me, in which I saw scraps of old remembrances; and why I should be so fluttered and troubled (for I was still) by having casually met her eyes; I could not think…This made me think, did Lady Dedlock's face accidentally resemble my godmother's? It might be that it did, a little…Neither did I know the loftiness and haughtiness of Lady Dedlock's face, at all, in any one. And yet *I – I*, little Esther Summerson, the child who lived a life apart, and on whose birthday

there was no rejoicing – seemed to arise before my own eyes, evoked out of the past by some power in this fashionable lady… (Dickens 290)

Esther associates the face she sees entering the church with her own face, the act of dressing, and her aunt. Oddly, she does not equate her actual body with Lady Dedlock's as much as she calls to mind her own reflection at her "little glass." This remembrance is especially evocative because it forms a triptych of dressed bodies: Esther's doll, young Esther, and the image reflected in the mirror. Lady Dedlock's own body is responsible for the recollection of these images, prefiguring the dissolution of her carefully crafted aristocratic identity due to the biological connection she shares with Esther.[25] The actuality of Lady Dedlock as she is present in the church begins to dissolve under the onslaught of fragments and reflections Esther remembers, forcing her to recall the reader's attention to "this fashionable lady," a direct appeal to Lady Dedlock's clothing and carriage rather than her lived and experienced body.

The scene in the church is a welter of bodies and images, most of them taking place in Esther's head. Bodies, both remembered and actual, are overwhelmingly present but never actually resolve into concreteness in this indeterminate scene. Esther, Lady Dedlock, and Miss Barbary are all evoked in the nervous moments in the church as the identities and appearances of all three women get jumbled together by Esther's own physical experience of memory, heart palpitations, and uneasiness. Lady Dedlock, whose

[25] Carolyn Dever has interpreted various other bodies and identities in this scene such as that of a mother figure or the image of the dead baby that appears throughout the novel. She reads this moment as particularly maternal, "Without knowing that she is looking at her mother, Esther occupies a maternal position, seeing herself as a child dressing by herself in a very un-mothered mothering moment, seeing that child playing mother to that doll, the doll who is simultaneously a mother-substitute and a dead and buried baby" (57). Dever's analysis brings other objects and bodies into play, emphasizing the complicated nature of identity and its varied levels of construction in the novel.

identity has been increasingly called into question through the events surrounding Nemo and her disguised visit to his grave, is here firmly established as an unstable body—a body whose identity and physical boundaries are not concretely defined in the narrative—presaging her eventual replacement by a dress at the end of the novel.

Lady Dedlock's first appearance in disguise shows a body and dress at odds with each other. Esther's reaction to Lady Dedlock's entrance into the church works to destabilize her body as it is fragmented through memory, broken reflections, and the corporeality of both Esther and her aunt. After this point of destabilization in the text, the dress slowly begins to replace the body, characterized by increasing confusion as to whose body inhabits whose clothing. The narrative begins to revolve increasingly around questions of sartorial recognition; even Jo, the crossing-sweep who "knows nothink," is certain of sartorial markers even when he cannot reconcile the interior body with the exterior clothing. This divide between interior and exterior is particularly fraught in this novel. Vacillating between an omniscient third-person narrator and Esther's self-censored first-person narrative, the novel is constantly slipping between and questioning the interior lives of its characters. As exteriors, such as Lady Dedlock's various disguises or Esther's scarred countenance, change and become mutable in the novel the relationship between exteriors and interiors becomes more complicated, creating a space in which the dress begins to craft and assert its own identity.

In a material representation of the shifting relationship between exteriors and interiors, Lady Dedlock's disguises further trouble this division by working to negate the

body. The servant's dress that Lady Dedlock initially uses as a disguise returns, and, in this second iteration, works more concretely to replace the human body:

> "There she is!" cries Jo.
>
> "Who?"
>
> "The lady!"
>
> A female figure, closely veiled, stands in the middle of the room where the light falls upon it. It is quite still and silent. The front of the figure is towards them, but it takes no notice of their entrance and remains like a statue.
>
> "Now, tell," says Bucket aloud, "how you know that to be the lady."
>
> "I know the wale," replies Jo, staring, "and the bonnet, and the gownd."
>
> "Be quite sure of what you say Tough," returns Bucket, narrowly observant of him. "Look again."
>
> "I'm looking as hard as ever I can look," says Jo, with starting eyes, "and that there's the wale, the bonnet, and the gownd." (Dickens 363)

This passage is remarkable in the anonymity of the figure that Jo is expected to identify. Jo, never having known the name of the woman he helped, calls her "the lady," a term that can be either an aristocratic title or used to designate a specific social or moral status. The passage continues, designating the lady that Jo sees as a "female figure" and "it," repeating each word two or three times in as many sentences, the language of the narrative hammering home the blankness of the body wearing the clothes. The woman is compared to a statue and her role in the situation calls to mind a mannequin: an interchangeable female form that provides a necessary but unnamed, skeleton for the

dress it wears. The blankness of the body is in direct contrast to the easily identifiable clothing; it is the dress that draws the characters' and readers' attention rather than the neutral language surrounding the body. The clothing asserts its own identity, aided by Jo's recognition of the clothes, while the woman wearing the clothes remains silent.

Jo's identification is, at first, dependent solely on the clothing: "I know the wale…and the bonnet, and the gownd." The dress and its necessary accessories are essential for Jo's validation of the dressed figure. He even repeats his assertion that he recognizes the woman's clothes, reiterating his triple identification—"that there's the wale, the bonnet, and the gownd"—adding emphasis to his recognition through the phrase "that there" to fully grant credence to his recognition. But when Bucket brings Jo's attention to the rings he claimed that the lady wore, the anonymity of the mannequin dissolves:

> "What about those rings you told me of?" asks Bucket.
>
> "A sparkling all over here," says Jo, rubbing the fingers of his left hand on the knuckles of his right, without taking his eyes from the figure.
>
> The figure removes the right hand glove, and shews the hand.
>
> "Now what do you say to that?" asks Bucket.
>
> Jo shakes his head. "Not rings a bit like them. Not a hand like that---Hand was a deal whiter, a deal delicater, and a deal smaller…"
>
> "…Do you recollect the lady's voice?"
>
> "I think I does," says Jo.

The figure speaks. “Was it at all like this. I will speak as long as you like if you are not sure. Was it this voice, or at all like this voice?”

Jo looks aghast at Mr. Bucket. “Not a bit!” (Dickens 363)

Jo’s attention is to sartorial detail, as evidenced by his ability to identify not only clothing but also jewelry; when the body that wears the clothes tries to pre-empt the clothing, he immediately rejects it. As soon as hand and voice are implicated in the identity of the dress, the situation crumbles. The body is summarily rejected as too dark, too coarse, too large. The voice—shortly revealed to be that of Hortense, Lady Dedlock’s maid—seals Jo’s distress. Instead of asserting itself as the human subject, with power over the wearable objects, the body of the “female figure” is rejected while the identity of the clothing is maintained. Even once Hortense is named as the model, her body is consistently rejected by the men who paid her to exhibit her clothing. Mr. Tulkinghorn sets Hortense aside once she is no longer useful, a rejection that leads to his murder at her hands. Though her body is necessary to exhibit clothing, her identity or selfhood is not necessary for the investigation and is therefore ignored. Instead, the reader’s attention is insistently brought back to the clothing as Bucket continues the exercise of identification with Jo:

“Then, what,” retorts that worthy, pointing to the figure, “did you say it was the lady for?”

“Cos,” says Jo, with a perplexed stare, but without being shaken in his certainty, “Cos there’s the wale, the bonnet, and the gownd. It is her and it an’t her. It an’t her hand, nor yet her rings, nor yet her voice. But that there’s the wale,

and the bonnet, and the gownd, and they're wore the same way wot she wore 'em, and it's her height wot she wos, and she giv me a sov'ring and hooked it."

(Dickens 364)

Though it is Jo and his reactions that are the focus in this part of the text, the clothing quietly but consistently dominates the scene in its central role of identification. The dress is continuously kept in the reader's attention by the repetition of the items of clothing with Jo's idiosyncratic pronunciation adding to the memorability of the objects.

The dress, which is never actually described in the text, relies purely on the linguistic representation of its materiality. Though the next few paragraphs in the novel show that the clothes' proper wearer and owner is Hortense, they have now developed an identity and physicality of their own through their reappearance in the text, the reiteration of the component parts, and their ability to survive without being inhabited by a body, replacing both the disintegrating body of Lady Dedlock as well as the overly physical body of Hortense. Jo's bewildered comment that "it is her and it an't her…" opens a middle ground for the dress to exist as a third identity that is not dependent on a human body but operates on its own material terms. This third identity is not yet realized by other characters; Bucket explains the curiously separate dress as a mere disguise when he claims, "There an't no doubt that it was the other one with this one's dress on…" (Dickens 365). Despite his practical deduction concerning Lady Dedlock's disguise, Bucket's language is still ambiguous: no names are used, gendered pronouns disappear, and, despite a claim of ownership, the peripatetic dress remains unsettled.

The agentic implications of the dress continue to develop as the novel progresses but Dickens's traditional use of metonyms to keep track of characters begins to fall apart later in the novel. For every episode that examines clothing, there is a concomitant episode that troubles identity and the body through Dickens's use of doubling and tripling throughout the text. Clothing is not always so easily separated from the body and the dress's ascendancy over the body is an uneasy one in this text, complicated by the shifting nature of identity and the female body in the character of Lady Dedlock and her doubles, Esther and Hortense. Jo's attempts to sort out the shifting clothing and body that seem to haunt him are excellent examples of the giving way of traditional metonyms:

> "He has been talking off and on about such like, all day, ma'am," said Jenny softly. "Why, how you stare! This is *my* lady, Jo."
>
> "Is it?" returned the boy doubtfully, and surveying me [Esther] with his arm held out above his burning eyes. "She looks to me the t'other one. It ain't the bonnet, nor yet it ain't the gownd, but she looks to me the t'other one." (Dickens 490)[26]

Here dresses are not a factor as much as genetics: despite her different clothes, Esther looks like her mother. In this instance the body takes precedence rather than the dress, overriding Jo's associations with the dress that keeps coming under scrutiny.

Jo's comprehension of Esther's biological connection to the veiled woman that he helped is not decisive and occurs in a textual passage that once again refuses to use

[26] The uneasiness of identity and bodies is a recurring theme in Dickens's work: Jo's use of "t'other" and the tripling of Lady Dedlock, Esther, and Hortense prefigures Riderhood's use of "t'other gentleman" and "t'otherest" to describe Eugene Wrayburn and Bradley Headstone in *Our Mutual Friend* (1865).

proper names. Jo asks Charley for reassurance in his confusion, "If she ain't the t'other one, she ain't the forrener. Is there *three* of 'em then?" (Dickens 493). Since this is occurring in one of Esther's portions of the narrative, it is being told in first person with no chance mentions of her name. Even Jenny refers to Esther as "*my* lady," a linguistic echo of her mother's title, and Jo has never known Lady Dedlock's or Hortense's names, only their clothes. The layers of identification are too close and he has to verify how many women there are as bodies slip into each other. Granted, Jo's entire experience of this particular meeting with Esther is largely influenced by the fever he is fighting, but the tripling of the three women has a fever dream quality to it even for the healthy. The stability of the human body, especially the female body, is constantly shifting in the novel, leaving gaps in the language of the text that allow the dress to emerge in new and intriguing ways.

As the novel moves towards its climax, the more traditional metaphors and metonyms of Dickens's usual narrative mode begin to fall away. The destabilizing effect that the dress, as a marker of identity, has had on Lady Dedlock gives way completely to the replacement of her physical body by the dress. The object first disguises and then replaces the interiority it once helped illustrate, departing from the traditional role of metonymy in which the body is necessary for the metonym to act. This final shift in language and the emergence of the fully agentic dress is presaged by the third-person narrator in the last paragraph of Chapter 56 of *Bleak House*.

Bucket, in his desperate search for Lady Dedlock, shares a moment of interiority with both the narrator and Esther's handkerchief; it becomes unclear who is speaking and

to whom. The melding of Inspector Bucket, the narrator, and the fabric of the handkerchief emphasizes the fluidity of interiority and the porosity of the boundaries between bodies and objects:

> Where is she? Living or dead, where is she? If, as he folds the handkerchief and carefully puts it up, it were able, with an enchanted power, to bring before him the place where she found it, and the night landscape near the cottage where it covered the little child, would he descry her there? On the waste, where the brick-kilns are burning with a pale blue flare; where the straw-roofs of the wretched huts in which the bricks are made, are being scattered by the wind; where the clay and water are hard frozen, and the mill in which the gaunt blind horse goes round all day, looks like an instrument of human torture;—traversing this deserted blighted spot, there is a lonely figure with the sad world to itself, pelted by the snow and driven by the wind, and cast out, it would seem, from all companionship. It is the figure of a woman, too; but it is miserably dressed, and no such clothes ever came through the hall, and out at the great door, of the Dedlock mansion. (Dickens 864)

Though the passage above initially claims that only an enchanted power would be able to unlock what the handkerchief has seen, the rest of the paragraph discloses that information without any use of magic. The handkerchief becomes an actant as it grants its information through the medium of the narrator, disclosing its knowledge through material and narrative means. As Bucket muses on what the handkerchief could reveal,

objects begin to gain a level of influence formerly unreached in the novel.[27] The handkerchief is not anthropomorphized—Bucket does not expect the handkerchief to speak—but rather, the object is imagined to have the ability to reveal and that flight of fancy becomes reality as the passage unfolds.

The revelation of the handkerchief explicitly shows an unnamed Lady Dedlock, who has disguised herself in Jenny's clothes. Once again, names are lacking in this passage: Lady Dedlock's name is replaced by the neutral pronoun: "she." Unlike earlier passages where pronouns were used instead of names to help maintain disguises, there is only one person being sought here, and therefore no reason to hide her name. The progression of negation reflected in the substitution of Lady Dedlock's actual name for the title "her ladyship," to the less descriptive "lady," to the eventual use of the pronoun "she," emphasizes movement away from interior identity to the object of the dress. Closing with a focus on the miserable clothing rather than the figure that wears it, the last clause of the last sentence in the above quotation identifies the clothing by what it is not: "No such clothes ever came through the hall." Though this phrase is used to negate the possibility that the miserable clothing might contain Lady Dedlock, it also highlights the mobility and independence of the fictional dress and foreshadows Bucket's inability to find his quarry due to his focus on the metonymic and class features of Lady Dedlock's dress without realizing that there has been a fundamental change in the sartorial object.

[27] Dever has also examined the handkerchief, identifying it as "the autobiographical narrative of Esther Summerson," and "a veil, simultaneously marking and masking the plurality of 'Esther Summersons' that are loosed within this novel" (54). Though not specifically mentioned in her article, the handkerchief also draws on Warhol's theory of "visceral apperception" as it invokes the unseen reaches where Lady Dedlock may be hiding.

The handkerchief, as an object with its own agency, is able to do what Bucket and Esther cannot: see both the dress, as an object in its own right, and the body beneath it, without using one to create the identity of the other. Body and clothing are divorced in the handkerchief's vision as the dress no longer represents the identity and interiority of the body that wears it. Instead, the dress is described as having moved beyond the destabilization of identity Lady Dedlock's earlier disguises achieved within the text and fully replaced the human body as the central acting subject in the novel. It is intriguing that this change, though brought about by a shift in narrative language, is at first only fully understood by a fellow object rather than the human characters.

As the ending of the novel unfolds, Bucket's assurances to Esther at each stage of the manhunt emphasizes his commitment to following Lady Dedlock's aristocratic dress. This is an odd decision given Bucket's familiarity with Lady Dedlock's use of a disguise earlier in the novel, though it is a decision that aligns with Dickens's usual sartorially metonymic practice. The destabilization of Lady Dedlock's body and identity throughout the novel leads to this particular chapter in which her body falls out of the corporeal world of the text, replaced linguistically and materially by the dress:

> When we were changing horses the next time, he came from the stable-yard, with the wet snow encrusted upon him, and dropping off him – plashing and crashing through it to his wet knees, as he had been doing frequently since we left St. Albans – and spoke to me at the carriage side.

> "Keep up your spirits. It's certainly true that she came on here, Miss Summerson. There's not a doubt of the dress by this time, and the dress has been seen here." (Dickens 881)

Bucket's confidence in his mode of following the outfit rather than the woman, and Esther's implicit trust in his method, replaces the body with the detail. Though an object has indeed replaced Lady Dedlock, Bucket chooses the wrong object, resulting in a disastrous manipulation of things and bodies that concludes in the loss of Lady Dedlock in the text, the fictional landscape, and eventually life itself.

Fascinatingly, Bucket's and Esther's determined association of Lady Dedlock with the dress that they are following fits so well, at first glance, into Dickens's traditional narrative techniques. Throughout the body of his work, including *Bleak House*, Dickens uses clothing as a metonymic marker to identify characters. But in the last few chapters of the novel, the dress slips from traditional narrative practice and replaces the body that wears it, forcing the reader to consider the object rather than the human. Bucket explains that "There's no doubt of the dress by this time, and the dress has been seen here," making the dress the grammatical subject of the sentence as well as the focus of their investigation. But Bucket and Esther are chasing the wrong dress; Lady Dedlock, having switched clothes with Jenny, is not inhabiting the dress that they are pursuing. For two of the most insightful characters in the novel, who are uniquely able to see other people in the text with great clarity, this failure can be difficult to reconcile. J. Hillis Miller considers Bucket's failure a lapse in timing, arguing, "The masterpiece of Bucket's art is his tracking down of Lady Dedlock after she has run away and is seeking

to lose herself…And yet he fails. However rapid his intuitions and deductions, however omniscient his clairvoyance, he is always a moment or two behind the event itself" (175). Robyn Warhol examines Bucket's practical omniscience claiming that "Bucket's special relationship to time and place affords him a viewpoint on spaces that borders on omniscience. The urgent pacing of the novel's climax…hinges on the question on which spaces his mind's eye can perceive" (614). Both Miller and Warhol recognize Bucket's abilities while also recording his surprising failure but neither reading explores the reasons for the failure. Bucket's and Esther's inability to identify the woman wearing the dress instead of just the garment itself is the final indication of the dress's ability to forge its own identity independently of the body that wears it.

Lady Dedlock's body is not only replaced by the object of the dress through the language and agentic actions of the fictional dress, but it is also physically replaced by Jenny's body. This physical replacement exposes a shared interiority between the two women. Jenny and Lady Dedlock are two women who share an emotional and psychological condition. Both women are mothers who have lost a child, who are involved in marriages that are emotionally restrictive; both are women who leave their marriages to pursue an independent, mobile escape from a threatening situation.[28] Though Jenny's escape is only temporary and Lady Dedlock's proves to be deadly, their ruse allows the dress to play out its role in upsetting metonymy and breaking down the boundaries between objects and bodies, opening up not only ideas of objects having

[28] For more resources on Lady Dedlock as a mother figure see Nicholls 43; Goodman 154-55; Wilson 210.

interiors and agency, but also momentarily questioning the blind adherence to exteriority that drives *Bleak House*.

After fruitlessly pursuing Lady Dedlock's dress across the countryside, Bucket realizes his mistake in following the dress without paying any attention to the body it encloses:

> We came to the end of the stage, and still the lost trace was not recovered. I looked at him anxiously when we stopped to change; but I knew by his yet graver face, as he stood watching the ostlers, that he had heard nothing. Almost in an instant afterwards as I leaned back in my seat, he looked in, with his lighted lantern in his hand, an excited and quite different man.
>
> "What is it?" said I, starting. "Is she here?"
>
> "No, no. Don't deceive yourself, my dear. Nobody's here. But I've got it!" (Dickens 884)

Bucket claims "nobody's here," a frightening admission that the language which attempted to refigure the body through the detail of the dress has resulted in the complete negation of both the body that actually inhabited the dress (Jenny's) and the body that Bucket thought he was pursuing (Lady Dedlock's). With this complete negation of various human bodies by the object of the dress, the narrative begins returning to its more traditional techniques, relegating the object back into its role as a sign post and ending its agentic interaction with identity.

Bucket's use of the phrase "nobody's here" is particularly evocative because of its immediate resonance with Nemo's chosen name and the scene where Esther is conscious

of the slipping away of self as she falls asleep at the Jellybys' thinking, "Lastly it [the sleeper she held] was no one, and I was no one" (Dickens 63). This linguistic triangulation of the family that was never together in person is touching and yet disheartening. Captain Hawdon dies alone, Esther is disfigured by an illness, and Lady Dedlock dies trying to reach the grave of her dead lover. All three bodies are, at various points, linguistically and materially dissolved through assumed identities, illness, and disguises. Lady Dedlock's body and its boundaries are replaced by language, events, and finally objects that form their own identities independently of the body with which they engage. For Dickens, the human body is fragile, and once its boundaries have been broken down it is very difficult for his narrative style to repair them. Esther's body manages to recover, due in large part to the host of characters who work to restore her identity, but Lady Dedlock is not so fortunate.

The snowy chase of the dress through the suburbs of London ends in the city itself:

> At last we stood under a dark and miserable covered way, where one lamp was burning over an iron gate, and where morning faintly struggled in. The gate was closed. Beyond it, was a burial ground…On the step at the gate, drenched in the fearful wet of such a place, which oozed and splashed down everywhere, I saw, with a cry of pity and horror, a woman lying – Jenny, the mother of the dead child. (Dickens 913)

Despite Bucket's deductions on the road, Esther is still under the mistaken idea that the exterior dress validates the interior body. The agency of the dress that has been tracked

outside of London means nothing to her without the body beneath it as she searched for her mother. Thus, for Esther, Jenny's clothes must contain Jenny's body. Bucket attempts to explain but language and ideology collide for Esther in the following passage and she is unable to comprehend what is being said. This is the last linguistic struggle that the novel records, as the language of the narrative attempts to herald the agency of the objects rather than the supremacy of the body:

> They changed clothes at the cottage. I could repeat the words in my mind, and I knew what they meant of themselves; but I attached no meaning to them in any other connection.
>
> "And one returned," said Mr. Bucket, "and one went on. And the one that went on, only went a certain way agreed upon to deceive, and then turned across country and went home. Think a moment!"
>
> I could repeat this in my mind too, but I had not the least idea what it meant. I saw before me, lying on the step, the mother of the dead child. (Dickens 915)

Esther's sudden inability to understand language could certainly be interpreted as a symptom of her emotional condition at this point in the novel. But this passage can also be read as a complete breakdown of narrative language as the ambiguous language surrounding Lady Dedlock and the representations of dress throughout the text culminates in Bucket's attempts to explain the situation to Esther. Lady Dedlock, and the language used to describe her, has been undermined by the active fictional dress to such an extent that Esther is unable to process Bucket's explanations. Instead, this passage

highlights the last moments in which the dress serves a purpose independent of the narrative as Esther equates Jenny's dress with Jenny as an identity. She is unable to process the language that Bucket uses to try and explain that Lady Dedlock and Jenny switched dresses at the cottage; Bucket's refusal to use names, and his insistence on continuing to use neutral (and confusing) pronouns such as "they" and "one," keeps the question of language, clothing, and identity present for the reader. Until Esther actually touches the body of the dead woman, anchoring her perception through the corporeality of the body, it is still the dress that exerts agency in this scene, establishing an identity that its interior cannot possibly hold. It is only when the text represents touch as reestablishing materiality rather than language that the dress subsides, relinquishing its active role in creating a separate identity for itself. In *Bleak House*, narrative language conspires with the disguises assumed by Lady Dedlock—it erases the human subject while creating identity for the sartorial object. The dresses that Lady Dedlock wore as disguises become mobile and determinate through the destabilization of her body and the breakdown of metonymy. Though the text eventually re-centers around Lady Dedlock's body, the relationship between clothing and the human never quite recovers.

The agentic dress in Dickens's *Bleak House* is a precursor to similarly active dresses and disguises in other nineteenth-century novels, foregrounding anxieties concerning identity and how it is created in the material world. The dress's ability to subsume and eventually replace the human as the central acting subject forces the reader to reimagine a reality where objects redefine the relationship between humans and things, calling our attention away from the human to other central actors that have been

displaced or ignored in the text. Fictional objects, as the catalyst for this type of re-imagination, work with both the language of the text and the embodied reading experience of the reader to create new experiences of representational fictional worlds.

2.2 *THE WOMAN IN WHITE*: Laura Fairlie & Anne Catherick

Though the dress in *Bleak House* eventually releases the body that it encloses, the same cannot be said for the dress as it functions in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859). Women's clothing plays a central role in Collins's novel of doubles, mistaken identities, and illegal marriages. Though there are two women who are described as "the woman in white," their plural identities are elided in the singular title, prefiguring Anne Catherick's and Laura Fairlie's conflation in the text. This titular elision characterizes the nature of clothing in the novel: a woman's dress becomes the sole marker of her identity, challenging and even usurping the individuality of the female body and mind. As Ann Gaylin says, "That the evocative woman of the title can refer to many of the text's female characters indicates the tenuousness of women's identities in the narrative" (113). Dresses, capitalizing on this tenuousness in *The Woman in White*, subsume and eventually replace the female body, emphasizing the ability of female clothing to determine identity. This ability of fictional clothing is reflected in actual nineteenth-century society; Jane Ashelford explains that, "The importance of being correctly dressed was not new, but during the Victorian era it was socially disastrous to be inappropriately dressed. It was essential…to be conversant with the minutiae of the etiquette of dress to gain access to the right social set" (241). Capitalizing on both the lived and fictional

experience of active dresses, representations of women's clothing in the novel decenter the human-focused reality of the text through acts of insurrection that shift the reader's attention to the vitality of material, sartorial objects.

The first instance of sartorial insurrection occurs when Walter Hartright meets Anne Catherick, the first "woman in white" of the novel:

> There, in the middle of the broad, bright high-road—there, as if it had that moment sprung out of the earth or dropped from the heaven—stood a 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…She held a small bag in her hand: and her dress—bonnet, shawl, and gown all of white—was, so far as I could guess, certainly not composed of very delicate or very expensive materials. (Collins 63)

In this scene, which Charles Dickens thought was "one of the most dramatic scenes in literature" (Collins 63), Wilkie Collins introduces his notorious woman in white. Her introduction is startling due to her sudden appearance and her strange behavior, but it is the woman's clothing that draws my attention in this passage rather than her sudden eerie appearance. Walter uses the term "dress" to indicate her entire costume, broadening the noun to include accessories and outerwear, an inclusion that serves to emphasize the strangely monochromatic nature of the woman's clothing. Walter also describes the quality of her clothing as well as its unusual appearance, but he does so by identifying what the clothes are not. Anne's clothing is not "very delicate" or made from "very expensive materials," distinctions that complicate the reader's and narrator's attempts to

ascertain the social position of the woman, including her respectability and her right to assistance. The quality of the clothing, combined with its whiteness are all essential to Walter's understanding of the woman who asks for his help. As Elana Gomel and Stephen Weninger explain, "A white dress is a degree-zero fashion statement. In the dress-code of the time, white is literally a blank page, inscribed neither with the costly colors and embroidery of haute-couture nor with the drabness of domesticity. Anne Catherick is disturbing to Hartright precisely because she cannot be 'placed'" (45).

For a defining marker, Anne's white clothing is remarkably indistinct. The narrative does not offer an in-depth description of her clothing; Walter's catalogue of each generic piece, as well as his rapid assessment of the quality of the items, encompasses the only physical description of the clothes that the reader receives. Yet, the white dress, bonnet, and shawl continue to serve as the primary sources of Anne's identity despite their descriptive and material blankness. When Walter witnesses her pursuers, the only characteristic they use to describe her is her clothing:

> "Policeman!" cried the first speaker. "Have you seen a woman pass this way?"
>
> "What sort of woman, sir?"
>
> "A woman in a lavender-coloured gown—"
>
> "No, no," interposed the second man. "The clothes we gave her were found on her bed. She must have gone away in the clothes she wore when she came to us. In white, policeman. A woman in white." (Collins 70)

Anne's decision to wear the clothing that belongs to her rather than that provided by her captors, is a particularly independent sartorial move. Though it is later described as the product of Anne's childhood conversation with Mrs. Fairlie, as well as a symptom of her mental illness, Anne's decision to wear white grants a small amount of agency and intention to Anne Catherick as a person separate from her clothing. This separation is short-lived because once she is dressed, the white dress completely overrides her identity. This small moment of independence, however, does serve to establish Anne as an individual with a will, even if it cannot withstand the eventual force of her dress.

The men who are looking for Anne further erode her individuality with the phrase "a woman in white." Walter calls Anne "*the* woman in white" (emphasis mine); the specific article grants a slightly more distinct attempt at individuation than the two men's more impersonal "a." By refusing to name her, the men deny Anne an identity, and by their focus on her clothing, they deny the existence of her body and her mind. The only details they provide for the policeman grant supremacy to her white dress, prefiguring the coming confusion of bodies and identities that is brought about through the medium of dress. As such a seemingly simple detail in the sensational opening of the novel, it is easy to overlook dress as merely another oddity of Anne Catherick's character. Given the focus on the color and manner of her clothing, however, the white dress begins to assert itself as an independent object in the text as it shapes Anne's identity while obscuring her physical body.

The whiteness of the "woman in white" of the title seems to promise a blank slate on which any identity can be ascribed. Laura Fairlie, Anne Catherick's physical double

and half-sister, is introduced shortly after Anne, also dressed in white. The two women are alike in physical appearance as well, but it is their shared wearing of white dresses that becomes more remarkable as their clothing more and more replaces their speaking, living bodies:

> I was struck, on entering the drawing-room, by the curious contrast, rather in material than in colour, of the dresses which they now wore. While Mrs. Vesey and Miss Halcombe were richly clad (each in a manner most becoming to her age), the first in silver-grey, and the second in that delicate primrose-yellow colour, which matches so well with a dark complexion and black hair, Miss Fairlie was unpretendingly and almost poorly dressed in plain white muslin. It was spotlessly pure; it was beautifully put on; but still it was the sort of dress which the wife or daughter of a poor man might have worn; and it made the heiress of Limmeridge House, so far as externals went, look less affluent in circumstances than her own governess. (Collins 94)

Here Laura, as a second iteration of a women in white, is seen through the lens of both Walter's gaze and her choice of clothing. The details of the dress are once again left undescribed though Walter pays the same amount of attention to the quality of the fabric as he did to Anne Catherick's dress; Laura is described as being "almost poorly dressed," an economic analysis that provides yet another similarity between Anne and Laura despite their different social standings. Walter claims that Laura's dress is "plain" in contrast with the richer fabrics worn by Marian and Mrs. Vesey and that it does not represent her actual economic standing. The dress is both "spotlessly pure"—an obvious

reference to Laura's virginity—and "beautifully put on." How the dress is put on returns the reader's attention to Laura in relationship to her clothing. Though the reader can assume that Laura has at least chosen her own dress, if not dressed or helped in dressing herself, the sentence is passive neglecting to tell the reader who has put on the dress and not referencing the body it covers in any way. Laura's actual physical body and its ability to move or even exist is called into question as the body is made invisible by the agentic dress.

Granted agency, or at least primacy by its centrality in the narrative and the passivity of the body, the dress captures the narrator's and reader's attention by its color and material, focusing the gaze on the dress rather than the body that wears it. The ability to turn the gaze from the human body to the clothing it wears is a hallmark of the fictional dress; by interacting with the reader to provide the register of identity, the representation of the dress becomes both active and directive. This ability is seen not only in Laura's appearance as her white dress diverts the attention away from her body, but also in the description of Marian. Described as wearing "delicate primrose-yellow colour, which matches so well with a dark complexion and black hair," Marian's complexion and hair are acknowledged but her statuesque body as well as the face that bears the dark complexion are not acknowledged here, despite Walter's minute attention to them earlier in the novel. Walter does not seem to recognize the obscuration of the body as he continues to focus on the dress. He does recognize that there is more than a surface to the dress when he claims that "so far as externals went" Laura did not look well off. This sentence establishes the idea that externals must be balanced by internals, a body that

wears the dress and a mind that controls the body, but Walter does not grant Laura either of those. While his interpretation of her outfit can be read as valorizing her modesty it can also be read more negatively as belittling the reasoning behind Laura's choice to wear muslin. As the narrator explains, Laura's clothing is a conscious choice born out of sympathy and consideration; Walter's focus on the clothing itself rather than Laura furthers the overriding power of her clothing and instigates the negation of her mind and body that continues throughout the rest of the text.

The dress, as a fictional object that has its own agency and independence, is able to replace the female body in this novel because both Anne's and Laura's bodies are created as significantly insubstantial. Their bodies do not need the destabilization that Lady Dedlock's requires before the dress is able to assert its identity because they are already inherently unstable. Indeed, sensation novels as a genre provide provocative sites of agency for objects because of the emotional and physical instability of many of the female characters they portray. Andrew Mangham claims that sensation novels "call it what we may—queer, other, liminal, uncanny—the sensation novel is obsessed with 'in-between' spaces that provide a no-holds-barred area for asking controversial questions" (4). To borrow Mangham's phrase, the dresses this chapter examines occupy the ultimate "'in-between' space" as they navigate the divide between subject and object, sentient and non-sentient, body and identity. Since the bodies dresses clothe are already volatile, it becomes easy to craft identities and replace the overwrought female body with the dress because the fabric of the clothing often carries greater weight and reality in the narrative than the bodies that wear it.

Both Anne and Laura inhabit particularly ephemeral bodies that are easily manipulated by outside forces. Walter, when comparing the two women, wonders at the likeness between them and claims that, "If ever sorrow and suffering set their profaning marks on the youth and beauty of Miss Fairlie's face, then, and then only, Anne Catherick and she would be twin-sisters of chance resemblance, the living reflexions of each other" (Collins 132). His construction of Anne and Laura as reflection of each other without the referent of a concrete subject emphasizes their interchangeability within the text. Walter first describes Laura as "fair" and "delicate," with hair that "nearly melts, here and there, into the shadow of the hat" (Collins 89). Anne shares this transparency when she is leaving the graveyard where she and Walter have their last interview: "I looked at Anne Catherick as she disappeared, till all trace of her had faded in the twilight—looked, as anxiously and sorrowfully, as if that what the last I was to see in this weary world of the woman in white" (Collins 141). Anne and Laura both fade into their surroundings, disappearing slowly into the scenery or their own clothing, actions that bring to mind spirits or ghosts rather than concrete corporeal forms. In fact, Anne had been mistaken for a ghost by a child the day before she and Walter encounter each other at Mrs. Fairlie's grave. She is particularly unsubstantial in this scene among the tombstones; her white dress is covered by a dark blue cloak in an attempt to make her less "particular" but it only succeeds in further obscuring her body.

The novel describes Anne and Laura in a shared textual language that centers on transparency and the dissolvable nature of their physical bodies. Formally, both women are voiceless as they are not accorded their own narratives in the text, but rely on other

characters to serve as the narrators of the events that dictate their lives.[29] Their bodily ephemerality is contrasted by the solidity of their white dresses, dresses that continue to serve as the distinguishing feature of both women regardless of what else is transpiring in the novel. Laura and Anne's transparency is made all the more significant by the lack of a similar lightness in other women in the text, particularly Marian Halcombe. Marian's relationship to her clothing emphasizes the need for solidity in women's clothing and the dangers of attempting to alter this physical and sartorial state. When Marian decides to eavesdrop on Count Fosco and Sir Percival in order to discover their intentions for Laura, she begins by undressing in order to better sneak about the rooftop. Her relationship to her clothing, specifically its size and weight, is characterized by the solidity of the dress and its physical autonomy from the body it clothes:

> A complete change in my dress was imperatively necessary, for many reasons. I took off my silk gown to begin with, because the slightest noise from it, on that still night, might have betrayed me. I next removed the white and cumbersome parts of my underclothing, and replaced them by a petticoat of dark flannel. Over this, I put my black travelling cloak, and pulled the hood onto my head. In my ordinary evening costume, I took up the room of three men at least. In my present dress, when it was held close about me, no man could have passed through the narrowest spaces more easily than I. (Collins 336)

[29] Lenora Ledwon and Camelia Raghinaru both consider the voicelessness and lack of agency female characters experience in *The Woman in White*. Ledwon examines the legal position of women, while Raghinaru explores the idea of rationality and its relationship to language; both critics understand Walter Hartright's position to be that of the patriarchal voice that supplants the female voice through much of the text.

For Marian, the body and the dress can be separated, though not without consequences. Her "ordinary evening costume" asserts its solidity and materiality through the physical space that it takes up, regardless of the size of the body it encloses. When Marian is dressed she takes up the physical space of three men and her dress does not take up any less space when it is not being worn. Once she is undressed, however, the slightness of her body is revealed. Despite this reduction in size, Marian is no less solid or autonomous (unlike Anne who automatically loses her sense of self when she is bereft of a white dress); in fact, Marian is more mobile than usual in only a petticoat and a traveling cloak, proof that she has not been replaced as the acting subject by her own clothing.[30]

Through the act of partial undressing, Marian is able to gain mobility and freedom from the usual confines of her clothing. While the mobility of her partially undressed body challenges the agency of the dress, the repercussions of her eavesdropping and its attendant discarding of clothing are actually highly detrimental to her physical body. The dress is able to replace the human body, but when the movement towards replacement is initiated in the reverse direction the body is not successful. Marian is caught in the rain while she listens to Fosco and Sir Percival and she returns to her room and her normal clothing to find herself dangerously ill. Though Marian's clothing does not operate as a marker of her identity in the same manner that Anne's and Laura's white dresses do, the female body in this novel is not free from the consequences of attempting to separate and potentially have ascendancy over the dress. Rather, female clothing always retains at least some control over the body and its fate, leveraging the role of the dress into one of

[30] Casey Sloan makes a persuasive argument for the agency that clothes and community create for Marian in the novel; see Sloan 805.

subversion and manipulation. Gomel and Weninger offer the following analysis of this passage in the novel, acknowledging the control clothing has even over Marian: "The exigencies of the Victorian plot demand that she be stuffed back into her crinoline afterwards and, indeed, after the eavesdropping scene Marian is struck down by typhus and emerges from it as a pale, tame shadow of her former self…" (48-49). The text cannot deny the solid presence of Marian's body in the same way that it does with the fading bodies of the women who wear white, but it can and does punish her body for attempting a separation between body and dress that was not initiated by the clothing itself.

Up until this point in the novel, the woman have all worn dresses of their own choosing: Anne reclaims her white clothing, leaving behind the lavender dress of her captors, Laura chooses her white muslin dress in an attempt to do away with the economic divisions between herself and her friends, and Marian undresses and redresses by her own choice and through her own volition. The first provocative description of clothing determining the status of a body without the wearer's permission or agreement occurs when Laura Fairlie is committed to an asylum under the name Anne Catherick. Her mistaken identity is the result of human machinations but her clothing plays the largest part in the conspiracy, emphasizing the ability of female clothing to determine identity despite the biological and psychological evidence of the body itself:

> This was the Asylum. Here she first heard herself called by Anne Catherick's name; and here, as a last remarkable circumstance in the story of the conspiracy, her own eyes informed her that she had Anne Catherick's clothes on.

> The nurse, on the first night in the Asylum, had shown her the marks on each article of her underclothing as it was taken off, and had said, not at all irritably or unkindly, 'Look at your own name on your own clothes, and don't worry us all any more about being Lady Glyde. She's dead and buried; and you're alive and hearty. Do look at your clothes now! There it is, in good marking-ink; and there you will find it on all your old things, which we have kept in the house—Anne Catherick, as plain as print!' And there it was, when Miss Halcombe examined the linen her sister wore, on the night of their arrival at Limmeridge House. (Collins 435)

Though Laura is called by Anne Catherick's name, it is the markings on her clothes that the nurse uses to convince her of her identity. The nurse first asks Laura to "Look at your own name on your own clothes," an appeal to a combination of naming and ownership seen in the physical reality of the marked clothing. When this appeal is not successful, the nurse repeats herself, changing the order first to clothes and then the name saying, "Do look at your clothes now!" It is the name on the clothes that the nurse is trying to persuade Laura to examine but the woman appeals to the materiality of the clothes themselves as having a particular veracity in their concreteness, including the physical component of the name that is written on them, the "good marking-ink" and the legibility of the writing "as plain as print" playing supporting roles to the very fabric of the clothing itself. The evidence of Laura's own body, and most frighteningly, her own mind, is denied in the face of the reality of Anne Catherick's clothing.

Once a dress has replaced the woman, it is difficult (and legally perhaps even impossible) to reinstate the body to its proper identity. Even after Marian rescues Laura from the asylum and returns her to Limmeridge House and her own clothing, Mr. Fairlie refuses to acknowledge that Laura is, in fact, Laura. The rest of the narrative is spent laboring to reinstate Laura to her own identity in the eyes of the world, a task made remarkably difficult by the ability of the white dress to manipulate, obscure, and eventually replace the body wearing it. The agentic dress does away with Laura Fairlie and replaces her with a composite identity that remains unsettled and ephemeral throughout the rest of the novel. The dress is aided and abetted in this work by Count Fosco's nefarious plot to legally and materially turn Laura Fairlie into Anne Catherick as well as Walter's more well-intentioned, though equally misguided, silencing of both Laura and Marian through his editorial privilege and manipulation of the narrative. Clothing and gender are implicated together in the destruction of Laura's identity, complicating the agency of the white dress and its ability to manipulate identity.

The clothing that serves to identify Laura and Anne, their transparency in the text, and their eventual disintegration as individual identities, is particularly tied to feminine articles of dress and the female body. The earlier example of Marian and her clothing emphasized that not all dresses determine identity, but even Marian's body did not escape manipulation when she tampered with the social role of her clothing. The same type of manipulation on the part of the dress is not present for male characters in the text.[31] Count Fosco and Pesca wear thoroughly detailed costumes that attempt to make them

[31] For a more detailed discussion of how gender and class are present in the clothing of *The Woman in White* see Gomel and Weninger 30.

what they are not, but both fail in their endeavors. Pesca dresses in the garb of his adopted nation but remains resolutely un-English:

> The ruling idea of his life appeared to be, that he was bound to show his gratitude to the country which had afforded him asylum and a means of subsistence, by doing his utmost to turn himself into an Englishman. Not content with paying the nation in general the compliment of invariably carrying an umbrella, and invariably wearing gaiters and a white hat, the Professor further aspired to become an Englishman in his habits and amusements, as well as in his personal appearance….firmly persuaded that he could adopt our national amusements of the field, by an effort of will, precisely as he had adopted our national gaiters and our national white hat. (Collins 52)

The sartorial markers of an Englishman are easy to identify and even emulate, but the assumption of a "national" costume is not enough ultimately to change Pesca into an Englishman. His diminutive physical body, despite his attempts to dress it in English clothing and engage it in English sports, remains resolutely un-English. For Pesca, English clothing fails to replace the human and his body resists the disintegration witnessed in Laura and Anne. Instead, Pesca's body, characterized by its restless energy and its foreign identity, remains stubborn and separate from his clothing, as permanently part of the text as the brand of the Brotherhood on his arm.

Count Fosco, whose corpulence and physical presence are constantly discussed throughout the text, abandons his "magnificent waistcoats" at the end of the novel in an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to escape detection by the Brotherhood (Collins

244).When Walter visits the morgue in Paris, he does so to view Fosco's body, a body that resists any sort of attempt to diminish it. Even in death it is celebrated for it good looks and "immense size" (Collins 613). Though the appearance of the body is discussed in detail, Walter gives only a passing mention to the clothes that he wore, saying, "His clothes hung above him…they were clothes that had disguised him as a French artisan" (Collins 614). Despite his attempts to hide his body, Fosco's identity cannot be obscured by a disguise. In *The Woman in White* clothing is agentic only insofar as it can manipulate the female body—male bodies in this novel are impervious to such manipulation. The steadfastness of Pesca's and Fosco's bodily identity is maintained despite the different costumes they assume, while Laura, Anne, and Marian find their identities troubled or erased by the clothing they do and do not wear.

Thus, the linguistic transparency of Anne Catherick and Laura Fairlie contributes to the ability of the fictional dress, as an object with its own identity and independence, to replace them as the acting subject, making their own identities subordinate to that of the white dress. This ability is troubled by other, more fully fleshed-out characters in the novel such as Marian, but the text creates a particular space in which the female body is a uniquely productive site for the agency and insurrection of objects. Male bodies in the novel do not share this type of sartorial and personal fluidity, a fact that throws the erasure of Anne and Laura in the text into sharp relief. Even Marian Halcombe, the novel's most assertive female figure, cannot withstand the control of her clothing; when she attempts to leave part of her clothing behind she is physically punished with a severe illness and narratively punished as Fosco invades her diary—an invasion so violating that

D. A. Miller characterizes it as "virtual rape"—and Walter usurps her position as narrator (162). Collins's novel is a highly gendered space even in the object world, where female dresses and disguises are represented as operating more strongly on their female subjects than similar clothing does on male subjects. Female bodily transparency and ephemerality is contrasted with male solidity—one provides a space in which clothing can usurp and erase the human, while the solidity of the male body is not made malleable by male clothing.

2.3 *EAST LYNNE*: FROM LADY ISABEL VANE TO MADAME VINE

Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* revolves around cases of mistaken identities and misconstrued motives; between the main plot involving Lady Isabel Vane, her elopement, and subsequent identity change, and the subplot concerning the murder of Hallijohn by the shadowy figure of Thorn, the novel continually raises questions concerning the nature of self and self-identity. For every self-assured character like Archibald Carlyle or his sister Cornelia, is another character who struggles to know and understand their self not only within the wider world of the text, but even within the confines of their own bodies and minds. Isabel is the epitome of this psychological uncertainty as she attempts to navigate her roles as wife, mistress, and finally governess, and the relationships that accompany each new identity. In *Bleak House* Lady Dedlock knows her true self but it committed to living out the social sham she perpetrates, and Laura Fairlie in *The Woman in White* has a sense of self so non-existent it takes both Walter and Marian to construct it for her. Isabel Vane's sense of self is far murkier and further complicated by a bifurcation

of mind and body. This division between the identity her mind resolves to carry out and the biological identity inherent in her body is made ever more complex by the relationship that each holds to her clothing, specifically the disguises she assumes as the governess Madame Vine. The replacement of the female body affected by the relationship between dress and narrative language in *Bleak House* and *The Woman in White* evolves in *East Lynne* to a volatile, symbiotic relationship between self, identity, and object.

The plot machinations of the novel are not limited to Isabel's marital and legal status but extend to, and are in fact often driven by, her sartorial changes and effects. When Isabel is first introduced in the novel, she is described in highly visual terms:

> A light, graceful, girlish form, a face of surpassing beauty, beauty that is rarely seen, save from the imagination of a painter, dark shining curls falling on her neck and shoulders smooth as a child's, fair delicate arms decorated with pearls, and a flowing dress of costly white lace. Altogether the vision did indeed look to the lawyer as one from a fairer world than this. (Wood 49)

Isabel is described as a catalog of parts and objects—face, neck, shoulders, arms, pearls, curls, lace—a catalogue that is only united when, in the last sentence, it becomes focused through Mr. Carlyle's gaze and interpretation. Karen Odden reads this paragraph as a ritual of commodification, arguing that it supports a "conception of Isabel's position as an object to be transferred between…men like…property" (130). Deborah Wynne claims that in this passage the "movement from Isabel's body to her jewels and expensive dress is barely perceptible" (69) while Vicky Simpson interprets it as "signal[ling] both Isabel's

and Carlyle's appreciation for fine objects" (586). Along with Odden, I read this passage as slightly more insidious; in the early part of the novel, unless Isabel can be categorized by her dress or accessories or made whole by the male gaze, she rarely exhibits a cohesive sense of self. Instead, she is taken to pieces by the cataloguing voice of the narrator or the judgmental gaze of fellow characters, a gaze that is most often focused on her clothing and jewelry as well as how inappropriately she is dressed for specific occasions.

Shortly after her introduction to Mr. Carlyle, Isabel joins her cousin for an evening party. Wearing only the pearl bracelets mentioned in the earlier quotation, as well as a small cross set with emeralds, she is an object of Mrs. Vane's ridicule:

> "Why, I declare you have nothing on but that cross and some rubbishing pearl bracelets!" uttered Mrs. Vane to Isabel. "I did not look at you before…Why did you not put on your diamonds?"
>
> "I – did – put on my diamonds; but I – took them off again," stammered Isabel.
>
> "What on earth for?"
>
> "I did not like to be too fine," answered Isabel with a laugh and a blush. "They glittered so! I feared it might be thought I put them on *to look* fine."
>
> "Ah! I see you mean to set up amongst that class of people who pretend to despise ornaments," scornfully remarked Mrs. Vane. "It is the refinement of affectation, Lady Isabel." (Wood 54)

Mrs. Vane believes that Isabel has a responsibility to society to dress well since she is an Earl's daughter. Conversely, Isabel feels a responsibility to her mother's memory and to a fear of looking "too fine," as well as being guilty of a desire to be looked at. Whether she courts the gaze of others or not, Isabel is constantly being looked at—by her cousins, by the young men at the ball she attends, by Carlyle, by the narrator and his or her audience of readers—and her sartorial choices are the source of continual scrutiny that erodes any sense of self or individuality she seeks to cultivate.

Only rarely does Isabel assert her own claims and individuality even when it comes to clothing; once, in a small moment of intentional display, she wears her diamonds to a country concert despite the risk of ridicule, saying, "But I did it on purpose, Papa; I thought I would show those West Lynne people that *I* think the poor man's concert worth going to, and worth dressing for" (Wood 119). Despite her earlier reluctance to wear her jewels, Isabel knows the ability of dress to influence other people's minds and perceptions and here exhibits a deliberateness in her clothing choices. In her mind, her clothing, and especially the diamonds, give a sense of worth and weightiness to the occasion. She does not deliberately credit the clothing as the emphasized "*I*" of her statement retains the agency of choice for herself, but it is her clothing and accessories that carry the day at the concert. Granted, it is not quite in the manner she hoped, as the inhabitants of West Lynne silently criticize her for vanity, but even in their criticism her neighbors do not credit Isabel with dressing herself. As Mrs. Ducie, Isabel's chaperone for the evening, tells her own daughters, " 'The poor motherless girl is to be pitied, my dears,' she whispered: 'she has no one to point out to

her suitable attire: this ridiculous decking out must have been Marvel's idea'" (Wood 122).[32] Isabel's deliberate choice is credited to her maid, eroding the mixture of independence and compassion that prompted her costume. Despite her best intentions, Isabel's clothing is given its own social connotations by the narrative, emphasizing the lack of control that her body and mind are able to assert.

These early scenes of Isabel Vane establish her as a beautiful young woman, though largely defined in pieces or by the clothing she wears. The visual fragmentation of the female form (similar to the extension of the blazon tradition seen in the previous chapter in relation to Blanche Ingram's portrait), foreshadows the physical fragmentation of Isabel's body later in the novel. The subject of a violent train accident, Isabel's body is broken so badly that she is proclaimed dead. This is a stark departure from the disguised bodies seen in *Bleak House* and *The Woman in White*: neither Lady Dedlock, nor Laura Fairlie, is corporeally altered despite the dresses' ability to subsume and eventually replace their disguised bodies. The female form in *East Lynne* is not only subsumed by the dress, but physically altered and disfigured. Isabel's disfigured body provides another layer to her disguise while joining the mutable and transparent bodies of Lady Dedlock and Laura Fairlie as sites of sartorial insurrection and replacement.

[32] Ellen Bayuk Rosenman makes a fascinating argument that servants act as surrogates for their upper-class employees to describe clothing in novels, effectively calling into question who is allowed to know, understand, and describe articles of dress: "Novels distance themselves from fashion knowledge by stigmatizing it with these class-and-gender markings, working-class experts serve as middlemen—or women—by providing details about beautiful clothes without directly implicating the novel in them" (50).

The physical changes to Isabel are so great that the narrator has to assure the reader of her identity. Due to physical and sartorial changes, the reader's own perception can no longer be trusted and the narrator becomes highly directive:

> Look at the governess, reader, and see whether you know her. You will say no. But you do, for it is Lady Isabel Vane. But how strangely she is altered. Yes; the railway accident did that for her; and what the accident left undone, grief and remorse accomplished. She limps slightly as she walks, and stoops, which takes from her former height. A scar extends from her chin above her mouth, completely changing the lower part of her face; some of her teeth are missing, so that she speaks with a lisp, and the sober bands of her grey hair – it is nearly silver – are confined under a large and close cap. (Wood 445)

"Look at the governess, reader," the narrator commands as the text questions the reader's own ability to perceive. Since the form of the governess is only represented through language and the text has yet to describe the altered Isabel, the reader is left blinded in the first three sentences of this passage. The narrator assumes the duty not only of description, but of dictating where and what the reader should see. The narrator invokes the familiar catalogue but focuses on body parts and injuries rather than clothing: Isabel's limp, stoop, scar, lisp, and graying hair are given in careful detail so that the reader can accurately trace the changes to the body. This particular narrative technique privileges the narrator over the reader, questioning the validity of the reader's perception by its heavy-handed instructiveness. Even for a fairly didactic text, the imperative narrator of this

passage is unusual for the novel as it emphasizes Isabel's new appearance through form as well as content.

There are two types of changes that alter Isabel past readerly recognition: traumatic, physical change, and psychological, emotional change. Her limp, missing teeth, and scar are direct results of the railway crash; they are the physical and visible inscriptions of trauma on the human body. Her gray hair and altered demeanor are the results of the less tangible "grief and remorse" that characterizes her life after she abandons her marriage. The same physical changes do not accompany her lover, Sir Francis Levison. Instead, it is only the female body that is so visibly marked by tragedy as to be unrecognizable. Not only is Levison unmarked by his liaison with Isabel, he has not changed in the decade since he murdered Hallijohn, a bodily immutability that leads to his eventual arrest. As a melodramatic trope, male and female bodies are understood to be inscribed differently by trauma (physical, psychological, or emotional), with male bodies remaining impervious to it while female bodies are forced to suffer marked physical changes. Similarly, when Isabel adopts her disguise, her body consistently betrays her even though her mind wills the disguise to stay in place. Levison, however, adopts a disguise which is not discovered for almost ten years. He is finally betrayed by the large diamond ring he wears and his habitual manner of tossing back his hair, a partnership of clothing and body that is not granted to Isabel anywhere in the text.

Accompanying the highly gendered physical changes in Isabel after the railway crash are equally drastic sartorial changes that largely contribute to her unrecognizable appearance:

> She herself tries to make the change greater, that the chance of being recognized may be at an end, for which reasons she wears disfiguring green spectacles, or, as they are called, preservers, going round the eyes, and a broad band of gray velvet coming down low upon her forehead. Her dress, too, is equally disfiguring. Never is she seen in one that fits her person, but in those frightful "loose jackets" which must surely have been invented by someone envious of a pretty shape. As to her bonnet, it would put to shame those masquerading things tilted on the back of her head, for it actually shaded her face; and she was never seen out of doors without a thick veil. (Wood 445)

Isabel's disguise is unique among the novels I am examining because the reader is complicit in the disguise from its inception. Unlike the confusion that swirls around Lady Dedlock's disguised figure, or the sleight of hand that takes away Laure Fairlie's name and identity, the narrator of *East Lynne* meticulously catalogs the ways in which Isabel uses clothing to avoid detection and recognition. For the reader, there is to be no mistaking whose body is beneath the disguising layers, but this privilege does not extend to the rest of the characters in the novel, as least as long as Isabel remains within her disguise. Antonia Losano characterizes the new identity Isabel creates through clothing in the following manner: "Madame Vine is merely a shell of apparel" (109). Losano's description accurately represents the impenetrable nature of the disguise for the other characters in the novel, as well as how dependent Isabel's new identity is on the physical nature of her clothing. Mirroring the earlier descriptive catalogs of the young Isabel, her glasses, velvet bands, veils, and loose jackets work to hide the body rather than allowing

it to be resolved through another's gaze as it was earlier in the novel. The disguise actually grants Isabel some agency over her own body rather than allowing it to be dictated by other characters' gaze or approval.

For much of the remainder of the novel, Isabel's disguise is effective in its ability to transform her from the disgraced Lady Isabel Vane to the respectable, if eccentric, Madame Vine. But the disfiguring clothing that she wears is only agentic as long as it is in contact with the body; as soon as body and dress are separated the novel insists that biological identity reassert itself and Isabel is left exposed. At one point in the novel, she loses her veil and spectacles in a high wind: "What should she do? The veil was over the hedge, the spectacles were broken; how could she dare to show her unsheltered face to the world?" (Wood 524-25). Here her disguise is understood as a shield or protection, a partner with Isabel's conscious mind as the two work together to replace her actual physical body with the fictitious body of a governess. Isabel chooses to disappear, allowed and aided by her clothing, but her physical body refuses to be erased so easily. Miss Carlyle, when the partnership between Isabel's mind and clothing is momentarily destroyed by the loss of her veil and spectacles, immediately reacts to the body beneath the disguise: "That face rosy just then, as in former days, the eyes were bright, and Miss Carlyle caught their expression, and stared in very amazement. 'Good heavens above!' she muttered, 'what an extraordinary likeness'" (Wood 525). Isabel's physical body, despite disfigurement and disguise, refuses to be erased. The body instead takes every opportunity of undressing or exposure to assert its identity despite Isabel's attempts to subdue it.

In *East Lynne*, Isabel's body is pitted against her mind, a conflict that is mediated by the agentic nature of the dress. The distinction between body and mind is not made explicit in the text, but appears when Isabel's own choices to deny her identity and create a new one, largely through clothing, are denied by the physical reality of her body. Isabel's thoughtful choice and development of her disguise emphasize her attempts to be the agent of change in her appearance, but the insistence of bodily identity and the potential revelations of her own clothing are difficult to overcome:

> She first of all hunted over, her desk, everything belonging to her, lest any scrap of paper, any mark on linen might be there, which could give a clue to her former self…She next saw to her wardrobe, making it still more unlike anything she had formerly worn: her caps, except that they were simple, and fitted closely to the face, nearly rivalled those of Miss Carlyle. (Wood 456)

Similarly to the way in which marks on linen were used to convince Laura Fairlie that she was Anne Catherick in *The Woman in White*, Isabel fears that a stray mark will betray her true identity. Both women's clothes are used to define identity, but Isabel is complicit in the construction of her new identity in a way that Laura is not. Isabel acknowledges and even embraces the agentic ability of her clothing and accessories, depending on them to conceal her from discovery. While Lady Dedlock's body is made to disappear through layers of disguise and shifting narrative language, and Laura Fairlie's identity is manipulated by the clothing that she wears, Isabel embraces the concealing and agentic nature of the dress only to have it threatened by her body's refusal to submit to the dictates of dress. Isabel's body's insistence on its own identity, separate from that of the

mind and of her clothing, complicates the more straightforward sartorial insurrections of *Bleak House* and *The Woman in White*; in *East Lynne* both bodies and objects are represented as having the ability to create and manipulate identity, and both refuse to be subsumed by the other. In the case of Isabel's decision to assume an alias, clothing acts as a mediator that attempts to reconcile these various parts into a cohesive assemblage, a project in which it succeeds only when it is actively in touch with the physical body. Once divorced from the body, the clothing can only guarantee its own identity but has no control over the separated physical form.

The relationship between clothing and the body is essentially symbiotic in this novel, requiring contact to remain in effect. When Isabel is seen without her disguise, despite the disfigurement of her body, her original identity reasserts itself:

> Ah! There could no longer be concealment now! There she was, her pale face lying against the pillow, free from its disguising trappings. The band of grey velvet, the spectacles, the wraps for the throat and chin, the huge cap, all were gone. It was the face of Lady Isabel, changed, certainly, very very much: but still hers. The silvered hair fell on either side of her face, as the silky curls had once fallen; the sweet sad eyes were the eyes of yore. (Wood 678)

On her sickbed, Isabel cannot retain her disguise and she is recognized as herself. But the language of this passage is intriguing because, when she reemerges in her original identity, the narrative catalogs used to describe her at the beginning of the novel also reemerge. Carlyle still provides the focusing gaze that resolves the fragments of a woman that the narrative describes into a cohesive being. At the end of the novel, despite the

body's mostly successful attempt to reassert its true identity, Isabel is still only allowed to be parts of a woman: she is a face, hair, and eyes. [33] Her body, sick and disfigured, is most excised from the text along with her clothing, and she is diminished to the scope of her face and hair. Regardless of the dispute between mind, body, and clothing, all three registers had offered full expression of identity to Isabel, providing her with multi-valent readings and expressions of self. The narrative return to the catalogue restricts Isabel to her bodily identity by attempting to reject the sartorial and personal identities she had crafted with the help of Madame Vine's clothing. If, in discovery, her multiple identities are not acknowledged, in death the ambiguity of Isabel's final identity is preserved. Buried close to her father in the West Lynne cemetery with only her initials and the date of her death on her tombstone, Isabel's final resting place reflects the variant registers of identity created by her body, mind, and clothing throughout the novel. The lack of a name on her tombstone leaves her identity indeterminate at the end of the novel as all of the material, physical, and psychological parts that worked together to build her identity no longer exist in partnership with each other.

Dresses stand out particularly in this project because they exist on a spectrum of agency; they are not limited to one intention or one way of acting but are represented as engaging in a multiplicity of agentic actions and relationships. Some of these relationships have negative consequences such as Lady Dedlock's death due to her

[33] Interestingly, even critical response to Isabel's death scene maintains the linguistic tool of the catalog such as Gail Walker's claim that Isabel's death is "a sacrificial offering to the Victorian mythos of love, motherhood, and female sexuality" (29). The prevalence of the catalog in relationship to Isabel as both a character and a source of literary analysis is perhaps the greatest testament to the agentic ability of her disguise to hold her together as a cohesive identity.

exchange of clothing, or the erasing effect of the white dresses on both Laura Fairlie's and Anne Catherick's physical bodies. Lady Isabel's disguise covers a "fallen" and mutilated body, but it positively provides her the cover she seeks when she returns to her family home. Thus, the nature of the agentic object is just as complicated as the subjects who engage with, and are eventually replaced by, it. These objects, as fictional matter, do not inhabit a moral space. Rather, they are actants that exist along a spectrum of agency that engage in multi-valent ways with other actants including (but certainly not limited to) human beings. While agentic objects can act to empower women, recuperate the term object, and otherwise engage with characters in text, they do not do so merely to promote the human. Instead they work in a manner idiosyncratic to matter in that they engage—with vitality and vibrancy—in networks of relationships that challenge the understood nature of reality. Dresses, by erasing the bodies that they clothe, challenge the reality of the human body and our own insistence on its centrality, forcing text and reader to consider a differently centered and differently realized world. By crafting a range of different identities within these texts, fictional dresses expose the problematic nature of a human-centered definition of identity and encourage a wider reading of identity-forming assemblages in nineteenth-century fiction.

3.0 CHAPTER 3: DESIRING BODIES AND THE HUMAN-DOLL HYBRID

> The doll has an ancestry nearly as old as the human race….dolls shared the fears and hatreds, blessings and curses, worship and magic of countless centuries of its human prototypes. Can we trace how this inanimate little companion of humanity came to be?
>
> ---Alice Early, *English Dolls, Effigies and Puppets* (1955)

Human figurines have been early and continuous sites of power; Alice Early's description of dolls as partaking in the "blessings and curses, worship and magic" of humans emphasizes the range of activities dolls have participated in over time. At the heart of these activities, as well as both the popularity and the fear of dolls, lies the question of animation. Are dolls animate and inanimate? Toy designers work to make dolls that can walk, talk, eat, and sleep, granting the objects a lifelikeness that allows their child owners to replicate the activities of daily human life. Doll historians, however, repeatedly insist on the inanimate nature of the doll, an insistence founded, perhaps, on the eeriness or uncanniness of the imitative doll and its relationship to the human body.[34] It is their ability to interact with human beings that grants dolls their power—their representational human form and their capacity for activity makes them both avatars and agents. For the Victorians, three-dimensional representations of the human body abounded from wax figures used for anatomical pursuits, to popular waxworks, to the rise of the baby doll in the early part of the century. [35] Dolls represent the human body far more directly than the portraits and dresses this project has examined so far in that they mimic the dimensionality of the human figure as well as the flexibility of identity. Dolls can provide

[34] See Early 13 and Goodfellow 8 on the inanimateness of the doll.
[35] See von Boehn 56; Fawdry 112; Fraser 160 for history of the doll in the nineteenth century.

multiple identities from the generic facelessness of the standard toy doll, to the specific identity and likeness of the portrait doll, made popular in the later nineteenth century. Their role in Victorian literature is equally diverse as dolls serve a variety of purposes: ubiquitous markers of childhood and femininity, the central object in affection-based relationships, or complicated emotional psychological repositories, to name a few. One only has to think of the doll Jane Eyre cherished during her lonely childhood at Gateshead, or the secret-laden doll that Esther Summerson buries in the back garden after the death of her aunt to begin to understand the fraught relationship between literary women and their fictional dolls. Dolls, as fictional objects, become especially active in their relationship to the human bodies represented in the text.

This chapter uncovers the complicated expression of the human desires and emotions through the representative body of the doll in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* (1865). Rather than trying to separate themselves from the body like the insurrectionist dresses of the last chapter, the dolls in these novels contain and express the emotional and physical desires of their owners and makers. The human bodies of Maggie Tulliver and Jenny Wren—unruly, unconventional, and unwanted—are often not allowed or not able to act on their desires within the text due to physical, familial, or social restrictions; the unrestricted doll, however, has the freedom and the representative ability to absorb and act out those desires. The represented body of the doll thus engages in a dual agency that relies both on its relationship with the human as well as its own active capacity to do that which the fictional human body cannot. Maggie's and Jenny's dolls create parallel realities as

products of human desire and their own ability to contain these desires. They carry out imagined actions and serve as physical and emotional surrogates for the young women who they interact with, creating human-doll hybrids that extend the lives of Maggie and Jenny beyond the traditional boundaries of nineteenth-century womanhood and challenge the fixed narrative possibilities of the text itself.

Two factors contribute equally to the power of the doll both in and out of fiction: its representation of the human body and its ability to embody desire and potentiality. The dolls in Dickens's and Eliot's novels participate in the historical reality of dolls as sites of power and human involvement, a history that spans from the earliest appearance of human figurines to the present day. When thinking through the historical development of the doll, Max von Boehn claims that "For adults it [the doll] possessed an occult significance with mystical-magical associations which in an inexplicable way united the present and the past and reached deep into the world of the unseen" (24). Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace, in her work on the wax doll and its relationship to the wax votive object in the eighteenth century, argues that "to reconsider the story of wax objects [like dolls] is to illuminate a cultural history of deep spiritual beliefs and practices that bespeak an ongoing relationship to the physical world and that defy rational explanations" (55). Lois Rostow Kuznets traces the progression of toys, including dolls, from spiritual and ritual objects to their contemporary relationship to childhood, claiming that "Such artifacts originally appeared as ritual objects in adult ceremonies of fertility, funeral, and ancestor-worship rites and as sacrificial substitutes and fetishes…In them can be recognized educational tools meant to train the young in such orthodox societal roles as

mother- and soldier-hood" (1). As these scholars show, the same power that once resided in fetishes, votive images, and effigies remains—perhaps latently—in the stuffed bodies and waxen limbs of their nineteenth-century counterparts, granting dolls religious, emotional, and psychological significance far beyond the confines of the toy box. The dolls that Maggie plays with and Jenny dresses participate in a material history of power and significance, despite their seemingly innocuous or domestic status in the material worlds of the novels. The toys are able to embody the desires and potentialities of the human with whom they interact, inhabiting a liminal space of desire and acting as a repository for the imaginings of Maggie and Jenny. The dolls are able to create possibilities in the imagination of the reader that move out beyond the recorded narrative, offering alternative, and even utopian, realities.

Dolls emerged as toys primarily in the late seventeenth century, shifting away from the religious and sartorial roles they had previously filled.[36] Wood was the predominant material for dolls as playthings, until it gave way to composition—"a variety of pulped wood-or-paper-based mixtures from which dolls' heads and bodies are made"—in the eighteenth century, and was eventually supplanted by poured and molded wax in the nineteenth century (Goodfellow 10-11, 20). In the 1800s, England became known for its wax dolls due to two significant doll-making families, the Montanaris and the Pierottis. Both immigrant families, they were known for their lifelike wax modeling

[36] The history of the doll is complicated in its movement between adults and children, religious or other functional use and plaything. Susan Stewart captures this complex movement in the following manner: "It must be remembered that the toy moved late to the nursery, that from the beginning it was adults who made toys, and not only with regard to their other invention the child. The fashion doll, for example, was the plaything of adult women before it was the plaything of the child" (57).

and their prize-winning dolls (Goodfellow 34).[37] Several examples of work by the Montanari and Pierotti families are available for viewing at the Museum of Childhood, Bethnal Green. The museums holdings of Pierotti dolls range from drawers of tiny, delicate wax models of heads, to a portrait doll of Queen Victoria, to a lovely poured wax doll. [38] The doll's head, shoulders, lower arms, and legs are made of delicately tinted wax with a smooth, slightly grainy finish. The rest of her body is sewn of white muslin and is attached at the joints of the wax pieces with cotton string. Though this doll shows signs of careful handling and preservation (it belonged to the Pierotti family and was given directly to the museum by a family member), other dolls in the collection show more signs of use and wear. Whatever their condition, the museum pieces are treated with care and precision—researchers must wear gloves, dolls rest unclothed in individual boxes, and fragile wax models are stored in foam-lined drawers—quite different from their fictional and therefore less fragile counterparts who endure all sorts of vagaries, real and imagined, at the hands of their owners.

The extensive written history of dolls, as well as the physical archive that remains in England alone, emphasizes the cultural and social importance of dolls, particularly in the lives of the children who interact with them. Maggie and Jenny represent two types of engagement with the figure of the doll as they are, respectively, a player and a maker. Critics commonly write about both young women and their dolls, especially Maggie's

[37] The Pierotti family even introduced the concept of Royal Babies to their English audience, modeling dolls that resembled Queen Victoria's children as infants for the loyal public's consumption (Fawdry 112). Queen Victoria was herself a particular fan of dolls; her collection of small wooden dolls, painstakingly costumed, catalogued, and archived by the young princess and her governess still exists today, exhibiting an intriguing blend of plaything and powerful object as they remain influential cultural objects (Low 2-3).
[38] V&A Museum of Childhood, Bethnal Green. Special thanks to Esther Lutman, the Assistant Curator at the museum, for her expertise and a tour of the doll room.

interaction with the doll she calls the Fetish. But current scholarship tends to focus on the humans and their motives rather than the objects; I argue that the characterization of Maggie and Jenny is impossible without the uniquely active role of the dolls and their ability to serve as surrogates within the text. Maggie's and Jenny's encounters with the flexible identities and porous emotions of their dolls allows these young women room in which to test the limits of their lives. Since Maggie and Jenny are trapped within their own social moment and narrative structure, it falls to the dolls to carry out the frustrated desires and movements of the young women. In this becoming, the doll, as a fictional object, acts as a hybrid expression of human and object to effect movement and change. This hybridization is extraordinary in that Maggie and Jenny do not become static dolls, nor do the dolls become limited humans, but a third actant emerges in the figure of the human-doll hybrid and its limitless potentiality.

Maggie, as a child of comfortably-off parents at the start of Eliot's novel, owns dolls in an easily recognized pattern of childhood possession. George Eliot creates a heroine that, as Alain Jumeau explains, "aims at psychological realism and is wary of sentimentality…tak[ing] quite seriously not only the joys of childhood…but its sorrow and anguish" (156). Maggie uses her dolls primarily in expressions of play and emotion; these two are often unexpectedly fused in the text, emphasizing the depth of Maggie's imagination and the emotional range made available in the body of the fictional doll. Her dolls are capable of far greater possibilities than their fairly fleeting presence in the novel may suggest. Indeed, the dolls are central to Maggie's social and anti-social roles within the text as they break boundaries and transgress social normalcy through their flexible

bodies and identities. Maggie's fraught relationship towards her two dolls in *The Mill on the Floss* shows that they are incapable of being "just" toys as they become a crucial performative component in Maggie's emotional and mental life.

Jenny, the disabled daughter of an alcoholic father, works in the toy trade as a dolls' dressmaker, plying her wares to support herself and her father as a maker of dolls and their wardrobes. Traditionally, Dickens is known for creating fairly flat characterizations of women as either sweetly angelic or criminally devious. He also sentimentalizes the role of children in his novels, a tactic Adrienne Gavin recognizes as a nineteenth-century convention when she argues that "sentimentality was often used to invoke social consciousness about childhood" (9). Jenny Wren, however, does not fit neatly into any of Dickens's usual character categories or types. Defined variously as a monstrous child, a designer, and a creative maker, Jenny Wren—a self-named, independent entrepreneur—moves beyond sentimentality to push the boundaries of typical Dickensian gender roles and bodies.[39] Jenny's dolls, which she considers clients, not only pay the bills, but represent her lost childhood; she uses the doll clothing she makes to live out the lives she imagines for herself beyond her reality of work and pain.

The dolls in *The Mill on the Floss* and *Our Mutual Friend* meet in a shared space of imagination and desire—both Maggie and Jenny engage with their dolls to create various potentialities for their own lives. The dolls are effective vehicles for potentiality because of their fluidity of representation. Able to be anything or anyone, dolls embody possibility while eschewing any sense of finality of identity or action. In contrast, the female human

[39] See Boehm 150; Gooch 87-88; Hardy 135. For more on Jenny's pseudonym see Hardy 134; Gooch 87; Slater 293; Kaplin 260; Schotland 3; Sedgwick 246-247.

bodies represented by Maggie and Jenny can only act with the constrained finality dictated by the physical and social boundaries of their textual worlds. Their dolls allow the young women to imagine futures for themselves and their fellow characters that are not constrained by social or gender roles, or even the pressures of time that operate in the novels.

The relationship between Maggie, Jenny, and their dolls is complicated as dolls both represent the human body and require the human body, as they can only be animate when they are played with or manipulated by human hands. Antonia Fraser argues that "Pleasure, fantasy, and imitation therefore seem to be the first three elements of the nature of toys" (9). I will go further and identify one of those elements not only of toys, but of dolls more specifically, as *desire*: a desire to help, heal, harm, move, live, or be in ways that the actual human body cannot, for a variety of reasons, accomplish. The potential-laden dolls of Eliot and Dickens are not anthropomorphized by these desires but are complicit with the characters in the text as they push the boundaries of what the figure of the human can achieve through the active body of the doll.[40] As actors in their own right, fictional dolls engage in a symbiotic surrogacy with the humans who surround them, extending the physical and emotional lives of the human beings who interact with them. This surrogacy depends on the duality of the human and her desires and the active body of the doll as it acts upon those desires, but the doll, as the final actor, experiences a broader range of independence.

[40] This lack of anthropomorphism sets the dolls represented in Dickens and Eliot apart from the narrators and main characters of it-narratives such as R. H. Horne's *Memoirs of a London Doll*, or "Mary Mister, The Adventures of a Doll," in *British It-Narratives*.

Maggie, Jenny, and their dolls are implicated in these questions of desire and imitation as they create a nexus of potentiality by playing, dressing, and even abusing the dolls in their care. The dolls this chapter examines are not generic but rather specific objects that emerge at particular moments in the text. Maggie has two dolls: a shabby wax doll and a fragment of a wooden doll that she calls the Fetish. Jenny's dolls are, necessarily, more numerous and in various stages of repair and undress; I will examine the pieces that make up the work that Jenny does as well as a few specific dolls that are singled out in the novel. The dolls, as repositories of desire, and actants engaged in potentiality, exist in a shared space of imagined realities and potential narratives. They take the constrained, finalized female bodies that they represent and replace them with the infinite potential of the doll body. These active objects thus break social and cultural boundaries and offer a range of possible narrative futures as yet unattainable by their human subjects.

3.1 *THE MILL ON THE FLOSS*: MAGGIE TULLIVER'S DOLLS

George Eliot's famous depiction of childhood in *The Mill on the Floss* centers on the character of Maggie Tulliver, an extraordinarily active little girl who seems to have little in common with the disabled character of Jenny Wren in Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*. The two characters intersect, however, in their involvement with dolls and in the unruly and unexpected nature of their physicality. Jenny, with her disabled body, lives with pain and faces the dual challenges of a lack of mobility and poverty. Maggie, though she is healthy and active, finds her physicality consistently entrenched by

the social and cultural boundaries of her family and the small community in which they live. June Skye Szirotny captures Maggie's unwelcome physicality arguing that:

> Her world of "unimaginative, unsympathetic minds" (VI, iv, III: 59) sees her as constantly doing harm. Not only does she exasperate her mother by refusing to be ladylike, and provoke her brother, Tom, by forgetting to feed his rabbits, by thoughtlessly eating her larger jam puff without sharing it with him, and by accidentally toppling his card-house and spilling his wine; but, when criticized, she takes revenge, hiding in the attic, dunking her head in water, cutting off her hair, pushing cousin Lucy into the mud and running away….Moreover, her family sees her as unnatural. (180)

Many of Maggie's faults involve her body and its inability to conform to her family's expectations; her reaction to their disappointment or strictures is to act out in even more physical ways. These restrictions on Maggie's body and mind result in her interactions with two different dolls in the text as she develops behaviors to combat unfair boundaries. She has two dolls in the novel, a worn wax doll and the provocatively named Fetish, which is the remains of an old wooden doll. The wax doll makes the first appearance in the text when Maggie is sent away from a conversation between her father and a friend:

> Maggie shut up the book at once, with a sense of disgrace, but not being inclined to see after her mother, she compromised the matter by going into a dark corner behind her father's chair, and nursing her doll, towards which she had an occasional fit of fondness in Tom's absence, neglecting its toilette, but lavishing

> so many warm kisses on it that the waxen cheeks had a wasted unhealthy appearance. (Eliot 19)

Maggie, with her unruly hair and her thirst for approbation and acknowledgment of her intellect, is here seen attempting to fit into a traditional model of childhood femininity. Disgraced first for choosing the wrong book and secondly for knowing too much about the pictures of the devil in *Pilgrim's Progress*, Maggie compromises her desire for an intellectual conversation with her father's adjuration to find her mother—a move that would effectively ban her from the realm of male conversation—by taking up her doll (Eliot 19). By performing acceptable feminine behaviors, Maggie is able to camouflage her presence; the appearance of domesticity makes her acceptable, or at least less noticeable.

Dolls are only mentioned twice in *The Mill on the Floss* as Maggie is more apt to play outdoors or with Tom and his accoutrements than with typical female playthings. Even when she does take up her doll, Maggie does not play with it "correctly." Her fondness for the toy is only "occasional" and the narrator carefully points out that Maggie does not care for or create clothes for her doll even though sewing was one of the main didactic purposes of dolls in the nineteenth century. Instead, Maggie lavishes affection on her toy, so much so that the doll's face has been faded by too many kisses. Adrienne Gavin, in her work on depictions of children in literature, describes Maggie as "torn between a 'masculine' desire for books and education and a 'feminine' desire for love and approbation" (121-22). Maggie attempts to reconcile these conflicting desires in this

scene by visually and physical performing femininity while remaining within the earshot of the conversation concerning education that her father is having with Mr. Riley.

This small and seemingly innocuous tableau serves as a metaphor for Maggie's social interactions throughout the novel. She is consistently relegated to the female domestic spaces that the novel affords, despite her desire to participate in the male intellectual and commercial spheres. Yet even in these domestic spaces, Maggie is unable to do things correctly. She has no desire to find or help her mother and even her silent interactions with her doll, while more acceptable than overly-perceptive reading, do not fulfill the traditional toy-child relationship. Rather than watching Maggie play with the toy, the reader watches Maggie lavish the love and affection that she would happily direct towards her father and brother onto the unresponsive doll. Sent away from the male sphere of conversation, and un-attracted by the female domesticity offered as a replacement, Maggie and her doll occupy an unnamed in-between space within this scene. Maggie creates her own hidden space that combines her desire for physical proximity to her father with an appropriate, gendered behavior. The doll, as an object, is essential to Maggie's small deception both to provide cover as well as serving as the subject of Maggie's search for affection and inclusion after she is rebuffed by her father. Without the veneer of acceptable feminine occupation represented by the wax doll, it is likely that Maggie would have been more definitively sent out of the room. The doll, though unnamed and apparently static, here acts in partnership with Maggie to create the outcome she desires. The doll's involvement does not require activity as much as it requires a necessary passivity; by acting as a receptacle for Maggie's affection and

allowing itself to be manipulated, the representation of the doll provides the fiction of domesticity and acceptable female behavior. This scene is one of nesting fictions, as the reader of the narrative watches Maggie and her doll create a smaller fiction within the text.

The way in which Maggie plays with her doll emphasizes her defining characteristic of passionate enthusiasm. Her lavish caresses of her toy reflect the same passions that she exhibits for whatever occupies her at a given moment. When remembered, the doll is treated with extravagant affection and, when forgotten, it is treated with equally extravagant neglect: "'Father,' broke in Maggie, who had stolen unperceived to her father's elbow again, listening with parted lips, while she held her doll topsy-turvy, and crushed its nose against the wood of the chair—'Father, is it a long way off where Tom is to go? shan't we ever go to see him?'" (Eliot 24). At this point in the text, Maggie seems unaware of the necessary partnership between doll and human. As her attention turns back towards her brother and their impending separation, Maggie's doll recedes in importance and, far from caressing it, Maggie seems immune to the doll's uncomfortable position. Though Maggie does not recognize it, the doll in this passage is representative of Maggie's own social and domestic boundaries and difficulties. Though loved by her father, Maggie's comfort and advancement is often forgotten or pushed aside in favor of Tom's wants and needs. Similarly to how Maggie treats her doll, her family gives her attention and affection as long as it is convenient or necessary. Much like the ignored doll, Maggie twists herself into uncomfortable and unheeded physical

and emotion positions—cutting her hair, crying in the attic—when she is ignored, sent away, or otherwise confined by the social strictures or her community.

If this were Maggie's only doll, my claim of the doll's ability to contain desire and embody potentialities would seem to fall short, given Maggie's unconsciousness of the relationship and the passive nature of her relationship with the wax doll. But the wax doll that Maggie nurses behind her father's chair is not the only doll she interacts with, providing the reader with a more active, independent human-doll relationship. Maggie's second doll, the Fetish, lives in the attic where Maggie visits it for very specific purposes:

> This attic was Maggie's favourite retreat on a wet day, when the weather was not too cold; here she fretted out all her ill-humours, and talked aloud to the worm-eaten floors and the worm-eaten shelves, and the dark rafters festooned with cobwebs; and here she kept a Fetish which she punished for all her misfortunes. This was the trunk of a large wood doll, which once stared with the roundest of eyes above the reddest of cheeks; but was not entirely defaced by a long career of vicarious suffering. (Eliot 28)

Several details of this passage contribute to the significance of Maggie's relationship to this particular fragment of a doll. The Fetish, in the worm-eaten attic, is very far removed from the corner of the sitting room where Maggie plays with her wax doll. While the wax doll allows Maggie to form a personal space between the male world of intellectual conversation and the domestic, female world, the Fetish exists outside the normalized reality of the novel. The attic, removed from the family and their day-to-day space, and often a signifier of the unconscious mind, is the scene of Maggie's darker desires where

she enacts revenge on her doll for her own misfortunes. This scene tends to be examined by anyone writing on *The Mill on the Floss* with a particular focus on Maggie's behavior towards the doll. Margaret Homans describes Maggie as "a powerful fetishist, using a disfigured doll…to work through—to acknowledge and cover up—her anger about her powerlessness within her family" (176). Lois Kuznets agrees, arguing similarly that the novel depicts "not only intense absorption in the doll but abusive acting out of negative emotions on its body" (95). While Homans eventually sees Maggie becoming a "passive fetish" herself, Kuznets returns to empirical studies of the relationship between dolls and violence. Gavin characterizes Maggie's actions towards the Fetish as "both aggressive and self-abasing: she secretly abuses her doll by pounding nails into its head and internalizes the harshly-critical atmosphere that surrounds her to the point where she is unable to act on her own behalf for her own happiness" (122). Peter Logan claims that George Eliot uses "domestic primitivism to represent Victorian life as a reversion to an earlier stage of social development, most familiarly in her portrayal of the Dodsons" (28). Utilizing August Comte's definition of primitive fetishism, a definition that Eliot was familiar with, Logan draws attention to the position of both Maggie and the narrator in this scene, claiming that "The narrative voice adopts the anti-fetishist stance here—a stance that is strongly compassionate, while also detached….This passage contrasts the highly developed narrator's voice with the primitive fetishism of the Tullivers, but it is a compassion that…parallels the benevolence of the colonizer for the colonized" (36). All of these critics offer perceptive readings of Maggie's interactions with the Fetish, but the focus is consistently on the representation of Maggie herself rather than the object at the

center of the action. By turning to the object itself—its material, its age, its name, and its role in Maggie's emotional life—the reader is able to witness the active nature of the doll as it gathers and contains Maggie's emotional and physical desires.

The Fetish is the remains of a wooden doll, one of the oldest and earliest materials from which dolls were made. Its age grants a history or a past to the doll that is left undisclosed. The reader can only wonder what deprived the doll of its limbs or toned down the bright colors of its painted face even before it encountered Maggie. Its name, drawing from a colonially inflected definition of *fetishism*—objects believed to be imbued with power—and still years away from Marx's publication of *Capital* and its introduction of the *commodity fetish* or Freud's link between fetishes and sexuality, is deliberately provocative as it raises questions of power, pain, and feeling and the representation of the human body.[41] The fluidity of representation which the Fetish inhabits is one of its most intriguing aspects of Maggie's interactions with the object. The Fetish is not a complete representation of the human body as all that remains of the doll is the head and torso. While this fragmentation may dehumanize the doll, it also offers more space for Maggie's imagination as the truncated body can become whoever is the object of Maggie's anger and its hard surface can withstand the punishments she chooses to inflict. For the object itself, this fragmentation serves to emphasize the potentialities the doll embodies: by breaking with the traditional human form, the representative nature of the fictive doll is expanded, broadening and deepening its ability to act on the desires of

[41] See Marx 165, 176 for his definition of the commodity fetish. Freud's "On Fetishism" was published in 1927.

its human partner since the object itself is no longer bound by the limits of the represented human body.

The violence of Maggie's interactions with the doll are characterized by a need for catharsis as well as a developing sense of sympathy:

> Three nails driven into the head commemorated as many crises in Maggie's nine years of earthly struggle; that luxury of vengeance having been suggested to her by the picture of Jael destroying Sisera in the old Bible. The last nail had been driven in with a fiercer stroke than usual, for the Fetish on that occasion represented aunt Glegg. But immediately afterwards Maggie had reflected that if she drove many nails in, she would not be so well able to fancy that the head was hurt when she knocked it against the wall, nor to comfort it, and make believe to poultice it, when her fury was abated; for even aunt Glegg would be pitiable when she had been hurt very much, and thoroughly humiliated, so as to beg her niece's pardon. (Eliot 28)

Maggie's childhood troubles here take on Biblical proportions as she enacts her desired revenge on the mutable body of the Fetish who, in her imagination, becomes the body of whatever family member has mistreated her. This mutability does not stop at imagined identities, however, as the Fetish also retains some semblance of its individual identity. In order for the punishments she inflicts to have their desired cathartic effect, Maggie realizes that the doll must still be able to feel; for Maggie, pain can only be real if it is felt and then soothed. Her eventual comforting and poulticing of the Fetish, even in the character of aunt Glegg, marks her development of sympathy (though it does not

diminish the sadistic overtone of the passage). The doll's ability to be both victim and individual by reason of its own materiality emphasizes its ability to engage with Maggie's vengeful desires and to act out the necessary futures she requires.

Maggie's dolls are hybrid figures in the text, both maintaining their own identities as plaything and Fetish, while also serving as representations of other human bodies, including Maggie's own unruly body. Constantly monitored, censored, and corrected, Maggie's body is too active for the environment in which she lives. Whether she is exercising her intelligence by discussing books with visitors or laying claim to her own body by cutting her hair, Maggie consistently breaks the boundaries of the expected female body in the text. Her wax doll, often forgotten under the more powerful influence of Tom and pushed into dark domestic corners, is an apt image of Maggie's own childhood. Despite her father's affection, Maggie's intellectual and emotional needs are often passed over in favor of Tom's as the only son while she is confined to the limited domestic and educational roles of the nineteenth-century woman. The Fetish, while representing aggressors for Maggie, also actively represents her own unacceptable body—one that is disruptive, punishable, and out of place in the typical domestic scene, but that still desires and even needs love and affection to continue participating in social and familial life.

As Maggie ages in the text, leaving childhood and dolls behind, she turns the work of the Fetish inward, punishing her own body through abnegation and self-sacrifice. Unlike the doll body, however, Maggie's human body does not possess the flexibility to inhabit the possibilities the Fetish represents. Instead, her constrained female form exists in a

closed, protracted space made up primarily of social boundaries and personal privations. When Maggie, imitating her childhood toys, attempts to explore potential futures through her meetings with Philip or her aborted elopement with Stephen, familial and social restrictions inhibit her experiments. The doll body, acting *for* the human, is a site of possibility made actual by its unique relationship to the human form it represents, is manipulated by, and departs from in active ways. When the nineteenth-century female body tries to adopt the doll's ability to perform alternative or ideal futures, it does not find the concomitant freedom.

Limited by social and gendered expectations that are not imposed on dolls as things, Maggie cannot break free from the restricted human space in which she resides. The Fetish, in its object-ness, as well as its fragmented form, recasts the mold for possibility; despite her best efforts, Maggie's resolutely human body—less mutable, lacking the fluidity between past, present, and future, bound by physical and socio-cultural restraints such as family, age, gender, marriage, and death—fails in its attempts to embody her desires. Instead, the worn and fragmented bodies of her dolls act as surrogates, performing the futures Maggie cannot realize. The body of the doll, as an object that can both contain and act out desire, is necessary for the full expression of Maggie's physical and emotional needs. Maggie and Jenny Wren both share the ability to imagine lives for themselves and others that are more to their liking; these desires, whether vengeful or conciliatory, are only made possible through the represented (and representative) bodies of the dolls.

3.2 *OUR MUTUAL FRIEND*: JENNY WREN, DOLLS' DRESSMAKER

Jenny Wren inhabits a relentlessly material reality within *Our Mutual Friend*; her disabled body and the ways in which it shapes her somatic experience of the world keeps the substance of things in the foreground of her characterization. Her occupation as a dolls' dressmaker allows her to manipulate the material body of the dolls, and even other human women, in direct contrast to the limitations of her own painful body. Helena Michie, who argues that Dickens uses pain in his novels to create "a discourse of and for the female self, of and for the female body," reads Jenny's occupation and characterization mediated through the materiality of her body and her occupation:

> Jenny's sewing becomes a metaphor for the possibility of…female transformation and transfiguration. Although there are moments when Dickens' depiction of her verges on the sentimental, her power as a character and as a challenge to self-erasure is overtly material; transfiguration occurs through the association of fabric, body and pain. (210)

Michie understands Jenny's sewing small dolls into life as a reflection of the similar ways in which she crafts the lives and futures of other characters. Her painful, disabled body shapes her imagination and the ways in which she responds to the materiality of the world around her. This duality of imagination and reality is particular to Jenny and her creative ability within the novel; Sara Schotland claims, "Part of Jenny's genius is her ability to mediate between the imaginative sphere of angels and fairies and the everyday world of hard labor….Jenny is as creative in her narrative and imaginative power as is Dickens in his own fiction" (9). The painful material reality that Jenny lives with in the

text does not limit her, but proves to be the basis for her role as a creator of possibilities and futures through the immaterial lives of other characters and the more solid materiality of the dolls she sews and sells.

Jenny Wren's occupation in the novel seems, at first glance, to be an idyllic, childlike venture. She creates tiny clothing for dolls, fashioning identities and imaginary worlds through the work of her hands. But in reality, Jenny is eking out a living in a miniaturized version of the demanding occupation of seamstress and milliner. Though diminutive, her occupation and its necessity reveal a tenuous economic and familial position as she supports and cares for an alcoholic father. In the canon of Dickens's children, Jenny's situation is not uncommon. Rosemarie Bodenheimer aptly states that, "A Dickensian childhood is defined by its abnormality. It achieves its literary effects through its implicit violations of the ordinary, familiar assumptions about the nurturance, growth and safety of children" (13). Jenny is rarely even acknowledged to be a child, preferring to call herself "the person of the house," a title that confuses the adults she interacts with, but reflects the unusual position she holds in her narrative world of broken families and avaricious consumption. But though Jenny's childhood may look familiar, she is an unusual character who does not fit neatly into the typical categories of Dickensian children or woman. Jenny is defined well by Amberyl Malkovich's construction of the "imperfect child" in Victorian literature, a child she claims exists in a "transitory, blended space, such as occurs between the transition from the 'real' to the fantastic world" (1-2). Her facility of moving between worlds is made especially apparent by her ability to imagine other futures for herself and the people who surround her, as

well as her constant creation of toy worlds peopled by her own work. Leon Litvack identifies the ways in which Jenny imagines futures as "an extension of her trade" where she "creates alternative life-models for those around her" (440). Her imaginative skill seems to stem largely from the ways in which she has had to manipulate the reality of her own life in order to survive both a physical disability as well as a difficult home situation.

Jenny's introduction in the novel forecasts the unique position she occupies between the reality of the narrative and the world of things that she creates. Displaced from the natural course of childhood by her family situation, and living with a disability, the narrative has difficulty categorizing Jenny's body and personality:

> The boy knocked at a door, and the door promptly opened with a spring and a click. A parlour door within a small entry stood open, and disclosed a child – a dwarf – a girl – a something – sitting on a little low old-fashioned armchair, which had a kind of little working bench before it. (Dickens 222)

The unexpected nature of Jenny's personality and her body, for both her visitors and the readers, is established linguistically by the inability of the narrative to identify Jenny when Charley Hexam and Bradley Headstone first pay her a visit. Her open door "disclosed a child—a dwarf—a girl—a something," a narrative stuttering that engages not only with a physical uncertainty but manages to create a weird hierarchy within its search for identity. First hesitantly defined as a child, then a dwarf, and only then as a girl, Jenny's sex is relegated to third place on the list, privileging other bodily attributes over her identity as a woman. This identification is closely followed by an almost complete negation of Jenny as a person as she is finally identified as "a something."

Unable to place her in the world of humans, the narrator instead contextualizes Jenny in the world of things in which she labors. Not only is her body "a something," nameless, formless, and unable to fit into the typical parameters of human description, but the same formlessness seems to accompany the things that surround her. Her chair is "little, low, old-fashioned" and accompanied by a "kind of little working bench before." The indeterminate descriptions of the armchair and the bench, along with the vague "something" of Jenny's own body, establishes a similarity or a rapport between objects and humans as Jenny's body resists identification in the monolithic, male-dominated society inhabited by Hexam and Headstone. Instead, she is aligned with the objects that she creates, a descriptive move that establishes a symbiotic relationship between Jenny and the dolls that she clothes.

This alignment of Jenny's body and objects continues as her trade becomes a topic of conversation among the three humans. Just as Jenny is presented as fragmented, made up of bits and pieces of humans and objects, the pieces of her occupation resist wholeness under anyone else's scrutiny other than hers:

> …the little figure went on with its work of gumming or gluing together with a camel's-hair brush certain pieces of cardboard and thin wood, previously cut into various shapes. The scissors and knives upon the bench showed that the child herself had cut them; and the bright scraps of velvet and silk and ribbon also strewn upon the bench that when duly stuffed (and stuffing too was there), she was to cover them smartly. The dexterity of her nimble fingers was remarkable, and, as she brought two thin edges accurately together by giving them a little bite,

she would glance at the visitors out of the corners of her grey eyes with a look that out-sharpened all her other sharpness.

"You can't tell me the name of my trade, I'll be bound," she said, after taking several of these observations.

"You make pincushions," said Charley.

"What else do I make?"

"Pen-wipers," said Bradley Headstone.

"Ha! ha! what else do I make? You're a schoolmaster but you can't tell me."

"You do something," he returned, pointing to a corner of the little bench, "with straw; but I don't know what."

"Well done you!" cried the person of the house. "I only make pincushions and pen-wipers, to use up my waste. But my straw really does belong to my business. Try again. What do I make with my straw?"

"Dinner-mats?"

"A schoolmaster and says dinner-mats! I'll give you a clue to my trade, in a game of forfeits. I love my love with a B because she's Beautiful; I hate my love with a B because she is Brazen; I took her to the sign of the Blue Boar, and I treated her with Bonnets; her name's Bouncer, and she lives in Bedlam. – Now, what do I make with my straw?"

"Ladies' bonnets?"

"Fine ladies'," said the person of the house, nodding assent. "Dolls'. I'm a Dolls' Dressmaker." (Dickens 223)

Hexam and Headstone are unable to name Jenny's principle occupation from the fragments they are able to observe. Indeed, the pieces they see are, as Jenny acknowledges, the "waste" from her real occupation. Despite his education, Bradley Headstone is unable to assemble the parts of Jenny's work into a coherent whole, even when she gives him hints and even though she is able, in her sharp-eyed manner, to instantly read the people and situations she observes.

The clues that Jenny gives are couched in the familiar pattern of a nursery rhyme and they are essential in that they indicate the complicated nature not only of Jenny's industry—dolls' dressmaking—but also dolls as objects themselves.[42] Her use of Headstone's first initial reflects the fragmented nature of her work; instead of using the more straightforward letter "D" to name the dolls that she creates, Jenny gives clues for the letter "B" which eventually allows Headstone to guess at the part of her trade in which she uses straw. By focusing on the bonnets she creates for the dolls Jenny's choice of letter follows the internal logic of the rhyme, but also emphasizes the number of moving parts that make up her relationship to the dolls she works for. As actors in a complex network of human and non-human elements, Jenny, the doll bonnets, and the dolls themselves are interdependent in creating the dolls as active objects.

[42] "I Love My Love" can be found in James Orchard Halliwell-Phillips's collection *Nursery Rhymes and Nursery Tales of England* (1853), p. 32. The rhyme is listed in the section titled "Scholastic," indicating that it may have been used to help students learn the alphabet and familiarize themselves with the practice of alliteration.

The first two clues give character traits to the dolls: they are beautiful and brazen, an intriguing combination of appearance and personality that belies the fact that, at this point in the novel, no dolls are visible. Despite their absence in this scene (though they may exist in parts on the worktable), the dolls that Jenny dresses maintain an abstract presence through her description of their bodies and minds. What is most significant about the beautiful, brazen dolls is that they are able to be these things without human interference; Jenny may be acting as a spokesperson for the dolls at this moment but their beauty and their personalities appear to be the domain of the fictional dolls themselves rather than just traits Jenny randomly assigns to them.

To highlight the fluidity of both dressmaker and dolls, the two clues revert to human agency as Jenny acts upon the body of the fictive dolls to metaphorically bring them on outings and treat them to new clothes. She is able to engage in the world of dolls due to her own creative power—she helps construct the dolls and their world and seems to have privileged access to their diminutive reality. The last few clues she offers Headstone return to the imagined lives of the dolls, as she recites a name, "Bouncer," and a residence, "Bedlam." That the residence is in Bedlam creates layers of meaning, identifying the nursery as a place of chaos, calling into question the mental state of the dolls, and problematizing the role of dolls and children, as well as mental health professionals and their patients. This exchange is dominated by a fundamental confusion or flexibility between human and object in the text. Jenny is able to move back and forth between the "real" world of the novel and the imaginary world of the dolls with ease, mediated by the dolls that she works with and for. Katherine Inglis claims Jenny "acts as

a mediator between the mythic and material drives….a seer of angels who is attuned to the mythic potential of the novel's apparently lifeless world…an adept practitioner of material reconstitution" (20). Jenny's game of forfeits does much more than reveal her occupation to her visitors: it exposes the complicated nature of the dolls in *Our Mutual Friend* as they move easily between the fragmented human world where they are created, manipulated, and destroyed and the more fluid and agentic object world, where they appear to take shape and exist without the intervention of the human.

The unconventional nature of Jenny's business and the products she creates emphasize the porousness between human and object worlds, a lack of boundaries that carries over into the economic side of Jenny's livelihood:

> "I hope it's a good business?"
>
> The person of the house shrugged her shoulders and shook her head. "No. Poorly paid. And I'm often so pressed for time! I had a doll married, last week, and was obliged to work all night. And it's not good for me, on account of my back being so bad and my legs so queer."
>
> They looked at the little creature with a wonder that did not diminish and the schoolmaster said: "I am sorry your fine ladies are so inconsiderate."
>
> "It's the way with them," said the person of the house, shrugging her shoulders again. "And they take no care of their clothes, and they never keep to the same fashions a month. I work for a doll with three daughters. Bless you, she's enough to ruin her husband!"
>
> … "Are you always as busy as you are now?"

"Busier. I'm slack just now. I finished a large mourning order the day before yesterday. Doll I work for, lost a canary-bird." (Dickens 224)

This conversation, with its discussion of profits and loss, appears to place Jenny and her work firmly in the nineteenth-century marketplace. Jenny and her dolls do not appear in a standard pattern of childhood plaything; rather, the dolls she dresses are products of labor. This is perhaps the most significant difference between the dolls in *The Mill on the Floss* and their Dickensian counterparts, as Maggie's dolls are already in her possession and quite removed from their original identity as commodities. Despite the ostensible market value of Jenny's dolls, however, they are never observed in a strict relationship of exchange—the reader never witnesses money changing hands—just as they are never observed in a state of play or possession. The dolls are supposed to participate in patterns of socio-economic exchange, but they never appear as straight commodities. Dickens uses scenes of Jenny's production to demystify consumer culture, drawing attention to how commodities are created and what other fungible objects exist in the text. By refusing to participate in all aspects of the equation of production and sale, Jenny's handiwork exists in a liminal space between commodity and possession that allows the objects to be more active due to fewer boundaries and expectations when they do not inhabit clearly recognizable positions in the marketplace.

The above passage plays with the uncertain market economics of Jenny's business by plunging into the confusing realm of who, exactly, Jenny works for. The content of Jenny's discussion of her work is common enough for dressmakers in the 1800s: large, sudden orders, inadequate pay, long hours, physical taxation, and the difficulties of large

mourning orders were standard challenges faced by seamstresses (Jameson 25). Making and selling set Jenny's dolls apart from Maggie's, labelling them commodities rather than playthings, but Jenny views the dolls she dresses in more relational terms. She replaces the humans who patronize her business with their wax and porcelain effigies, a transference of agency that aligns Jenny firmly with the material world of already active objects. " 'I had a doll married last week,'" Jenny claims, excising the human women involved with the use and ordering of doll clothes as neatly as she cuts out patterns. Her engagement is with the doll rather that its child-owners, or, perhaps more importantly, the paying parent. Interestingly, Bradley Headstone plays along with the substitution when he expresses regret over the "fine ladies" and their lack of consideration. This could be genuine confusion on his part; the entire chapter makes clear that neither Headstone nor Hexam know quite what to make of Jenny Wren or how to respond to her alternately playful and incisive conversation. But when a character as incapable of play or sarcasm as the headmaster appears to willingly enter into this type of conversation, playing along with Jenny's multiple fictions and complicated material world, it gives even greater validity to the influential nature of the dolls in Jenny's life and work.

The sins of Jenny's employers, however, do appear to move in and out of the object world. Who, exactly, is "the doll with three daughters"? Is that one doll with three little girls who play with her? Four dolls? Or does the doll represent the human mother and her children? When Jenny predicts ruin for the doll's husband, the threads of economics, financial straits, and the corrupting power of money that weave throughout the whole novel are suddenly pulled tight. The manufactured and manipulated economic

identities of characters such as the Veneerings and the Lammles are suddenly implicated with the manufactured bodies of the dolls in an intriguing replacement of the human with the toy. The ruinous doll's habits appear strikingly similar to those of the high fashion world: "they take no care of their clothes, and they never keep to the same fashions a month," with bankruptcy as a shared result, uniting them both. This passage forces the reader to observe the elasticity of the boundaries that exist between human and object in this novel as dolls and humans slide interchangeably into each other's worlds and fortunes (or debt). Jenny mentions a doll losing a canary bird, a small moment of possession that erases the human connection between both object and animal. Inglis connects the work of Mr. Venus to Jenny's through the canary bird claiming that, "they share a client" (20). Venus's skilled hands give animation and expression to the dead bird, further blurring the question of where the world of the humans ends and the world of objects begins.

Life, and the reality of it, is always in question in *Our Mutual Friend*, especially for characters who live as much in their imaginations as they do in the actual world of the novel. Eugene Wrayburn, Lizzie Hexam, and Jenny Wren all imagine lives outside of the narrative—Eugene sets up a tiny kitchen in which he imagines he will receive moral influence, Lizzie traces futures in the glowing embers of the fireplace, and Jenny crafts entire lives for her dolls—that are only possible through collections of objects. Jenny, though an extraordinarily active body in that she is always working or in motion as part of her work, is a disabled body in the text, unable to pursue the same physical activities as her fellow characters or even the dolls that she makes. While the human bodies around

Jenny do what she physically cannot, the bodies of the dolls contain or act out the human desires she expresses or imagines in the text. Fellow humans can understand and help alleviate the physical difficulties of Jenny's life but the life and body she desires is most clearly illustrated through the active bodies of the dolls:

> But previously, as they were going along, Jenny twisted her venerable friend aside to a brilliantly-lighted toy-shop window, and said: "Now look at 'em! All my work!"
>
> This referred to a dazzling semicircle of dolls in all the colours of the rainbow, who were dressed for presentation at court, for going to balls, for going out driving, for going out on horseback, for going out walking, for going to get married, for going to help other dolls to get married, for all the gay events of life. (Dickens 430)

There is pride as well as desire in this moment. Jenny is proud of her work and the display that it offers. The dolls and their clothing are decisively claimed as part of herself and she bids Riah, her companion, to look at them, engaging body and object in a visual relationship. Once the gaze of the characters has been engaged, the narrative shifts to the dolls themselves and the various activities Jenny has equipped them to complete, from court presentations to "all the gay events of life." What is fascinating about this passage is the fact that Jenny's involvement with the clothing of the dolls disappears in the second paragraph. The dolls are referred to as being dressed for a variety of activities but the paragraph is surprisingly passive. Though their dressmaker is standing before them, the description of the dolls is not from Jenny's point of view or even that of the dolls.

Instead, the narrator is tasked with describing Jenny's wares in a passage that is surprisingly lacking in details. The reader knows that the dolls are arranged in a semicircle and dressed in many different colors, but any further visual interpretation is preempted by an overwhelming catalogue of activities that are all offered as possible futures for the dolls, futures that are expressed and mediated through the clothing Jenny has created for them. The repetition of "for going" establishes an array of potential activity or possibility on the part of the dolls.

Arranged in the shop window, the dolls are in a liminal space between creation and purpose—they are toys meant to be played with but in this passage they are potentialities, holding the desires of their maker, their audience, and their eventual owners in the container of the doll body. They are poised on the threshold of "all the gay events of life," the events of an object world mostly untouched by the pain and suffering of the actual world they mimic. Due to Jenny's imaginative musings, in which she considers her future and builds imaginary lives for herself, we know that the dolls hold the possibilities of all the life events Jenny imagines for herself such as walking without pain, visiting friends, and eventually marrying (Dickens 429-30). The dolls, as physical products of Jenny's hands and mental products of her desires and imagination, are a complicated amalgamation of bodies and desires that becomes even more complex when Jenny explains her process of creation to Riah.

Though Jenny's imagination is clearly at work in her creations, other human bodies are implicated in the creative process as well, specifically, the bodies of the aristocratic women who serve as Jenny's unwitting models:

> "Glad you like 'em," returned Miss Wren, loftily. "But the fun is, godmother, how I make the great ladies try my dresses on….I squeeze among the crowds and I look about me. When I sees a grand lady very suitable for my business, I say 'You'll do my dear!' and I take particular notice of her, and run home and cut her out and baste her….I dare say they think I am wondering and admiring with all my eyes and heart, but they little think they're only working for my dolls." (Dickens 431)

Jenny explains to Riah that she uses the "great ladies" as unsuspecting inspiration and models for the dresses she sews. Humor and a certain amount of socio-economic revenge are at work in this moment as Jenny turns the wealthy, mobile, privileged lives of the women she watches to her own occupational account. Victoria Ford Smith sees this interaction as a way to upend expectations and the relationship between doll, dressmaker, and client as Jenny "acts in cooperation with her creations, directing the doll's transformative potential toward the social hierarchy that has defined her as a working-class woman…reversing the relationship between the seamstress and the patron" (185-86). But even as she puts these women to work, there is a corresponding physical toll on Jenny's part: such creative inspiration requires hours of walking around London, a difficult task for her disabled body. As Peter Gurney says, this allows readers to "see something of the human labor that has produced these commodities in the novel" and exposes "the social life of toys" (239). By combining the privileged bodies of the models with the toll they have taken on Jenny's painful body, the dolls become objects that are informed by both privilege and pain, human emotions that they convert into the variety of

desired lives that they promise in the shop window. The dolls, as vehicles of the imagination, are able to be both repositories of human lives and desires and individual objects crafting their own identity and future. This duality of agency is dependent on the dolls' relationship to the human—both Jenny and the oblivious model—as well as their own inherent independence as active objects.

Jenny's practice of developing patterns for her dolls' clothing from the bodies of actual women is both original and manipulative as the objects of her gaze are unaware of the use they are being put to by the attentive young woman who watches them. Jenny's position as subject, rather than object, places her in a position of power that allows her to create new objects and identities; she is, in many ways, filling the role of the author as she creates narratives and peoples them with the work of her hands. Jenny even names her dolls after the ladies whose clothes she copies, tying doll and human together through shared identity: "There was Lady Belinda Whitrose. I made her do double duty in one night…And I made her try on – oh! – and take pains about it too…That's Lady Belinda hanging up by the waist, much too near the gas-light for a wax one, with her toes turned in" (Dickens 431). The relationship of materiality is upended in this passage as Jenny reverses the usual relationship between fashion dolls and women in the nineteenth century; fashion dolls were used as models for the latest European fashions, especially dresses and hairstyles from Paris, and were then copied into clothing for actual women.[43] Agentic materiality, in the doll's ability to be who and what it pleases, also meets ephemerality as Jenny points out the delicate nature of the wax doll in question and its

[43] For more information on the role of the fashion doll see Fraser 103-107; Wallace 159; Smith 185; Early 113, 155; Goodfellow 8-9; von Boehn 136; Peers 97-168.

susceptibility to heat and rough handling. The object is, in many ways, still dependent on the human to maintain its represented materiality in the novel, yet the doll-object refocuses attention on sheer materiality: wax that can melt is also an image of similarly vulnerable flesh. This passage insists on the materiality of the fictional doll body and the represented human body, but Jenny's desires and imagined futures remain immaterial and thus able to survive even the careless handling of a wax doll.

The infinite possibilities that exist in Jenny's wares usually encompass her own desires, but they also interact with the economic and imaginative desires of Jenny's clients. After her father's death and funeral, Jenny turns the service to good occupational account:

> "You wouldn't mind my cutting out something while we are at tea, would you?" she asked her Jewish friend, with a coaxing air.
>
> "Cinderella, dear child," the old man expostulated, "will you never rest?"
>
> "Oh! It's not work, cutting out a pattern isn't," said Miss Jenny, with her busy little scissors already snipping at some paper. "The truth is, godmother, I want to fix it while I have it correct in my mind."
>
> "Have you seen it today-then?" asked Riah.
>
> "Yes, godmother. Saw it just now. It's a surplice, that's what it is. Thing our clergyman wear, you know," explained Miss Jenny, in consideration of his professing another faith.
>
> "And what have you to do with that, Jenny?"

> "Why, godmother," replied the dressmaker, "you must know that we Professors who live upon our taste and invention, are obliged to keep our eyes always open. And you know already that I have many extra expenses to meet just now. So, it came into my head while I was weeping at my poor boy's grave, that something in my way might be done with a clergyman."
>
> "What can be done?" asked the old man.
>
> "Not a funeral, never fear!" returned Miss Jenny, anticipating his objection with a nod. "The public don't like to be made melancholy, I know very well…But a doll clergyman, my dear, – glossy black curls and whiskers – uniting two of my young friends in matrimony," said Miss Jenny shaking her forefinger, "is quite another affair. If you don't see those three at the altar in Bond Street, in a jiffy, my name's Jack Robinson!" (Dickens 715-16)

Here Jenny's experience and her usual manipulating of reality are tangled up in the death of her father, who, because of his dependency on her, Jenny had called her "poor boy" in a reversal of the normal parent/child relationship. Childish things continue to supersede typical adult topics in this portion of the text as dolls are sold to pay funeral expenses, and Jenny turns the clergyman at the burial into a miniature version of himself to officiate at doll weddings. Jenny's impulse to reorder the world on a smaller scale capitalizes on what Susan Stewart explains as "the capacity [of the miniature] to make its context remarkable; its fantastic qualities are related to what lies outside it in such a way as to transform the total context" (46). The dolls' dressmaker has little control over the world around her, but by creating the world in miniature she is able to reframe the events of her

life. A funeral becomes a wedding, or a synthesis of the privileged aristocratic body and the poor, pained body becomes a doll dressed for "all the gay events of life" that neither actual woman will experience in the narrative. The above passage shifts back and forth between the sordid realities of Jenny's actual life—her penury, her father's death from alcoholism, her lack of family—and the lighter, happier material reality of the toys that she creates. Jenny is constantly shaping the world around her through the dolls and clothing that she makes, creating an alternate reality where the hybridized bodies of her dolls become actors in the imaginary lives she creates for herself and others.

These imaginary lives that occur beyond the edges of the narrative, are only possible through the dolls who consistently return to the materiality of the active miniature body. It is the ability of the doll to exhibit a dual agency that requires it to be the repository of human desires as well as an independent object that allows for its symbiotic relationship with the human. The diminutive body of the doll is especially capable of this surrogacy, Stewart argues, because of its size:

> That the world of things can open itself to reveal a secret life—indeed, to reveal a set of actions and hence a narrativity and history outside the given field of perception—is a constant daydream that the miniature presents. This is the daydream of the microscope: the daydream of life inside life, of significance multiplied infinitely *within* significance. (54)

Jenny's own "daydream of the microscope" allows her to find meaning and hope for the future within the material reality of her occupation.

Due to beneficence of her friends, Jenny eventually finds herself more comfortably off at the end of the novel, though she still plies her trade. Her part in *Our Mutual Friend* ends with a beginning: the first meeting between Jenny Wren and Sloppy—the mentally disabled carpenter the Boffins adopt—an introduction that Dickens uses to foreshadow a potential wedding. The two, who both create material realities as they work with their hands, spend most of their time together discussing possibilities for the future, a role that, up until this point in the novel, has resided solely in the figure of the doll. This potential future for Jenny is voiced by human characters rather than occurring in her imagination or in the body of a doll, and it represents a significant departure for Dickens; Schotland explains that "While typically the disabled woman in the Victorian novel is denied a reproductive future, Jenny is an exception. Dickens was ahead of his time in providing a suitor for Jenny" (1). Though Sloppy meets Jenny because he has come to pick up a doll that Jenny has made for Bella and John Harmon's daughter, no money changes hands in this scene. Instead, the currency of the passage is potentiality as the non-traditional bodies and minds of Jenny and Sloppy gesture towards a future wedding with the possibility of children. Jenny and Sloppy are both "makers," tied to ideas of production and creation through the concrete, physical action of their hands—this creativity seems to extend to the possibility of children between the two. By placing Jenny in the normalized marital and domestic setting of the nineteenth-century woman, Dickens, rather subversively, suggests a future where multiple types of material bodies are allowed futures. While he chooses to end Jenny's story without the definitive closure of a narrated wedding, the implications of her future—mediated through the dolls

she dresses—have the potential to fulfill the desires that Jenny has coded into her wares and into the futures in miniature that she has imagined for herself.

In the end, both Maggie and Jenny pursue lives that are reflected in the bodies of the dolls they engage with in a relationship of desire, agency, and potentiality. The dolls in these two novels, though not as overtly active as the other objects I have examined, have a subtler role of agency as they actively carry out and express the imaginings of the young women who play with and create them. This symbiotic relationship does not devolve into simple surrogacy, but instead examines the role of the imagination not just between the reader and the objects in the text, but also between characters and the objects in text. The roles of fictional objects are not limited by their implication in the agentic world of things but are instead always expanding as these representations push against the boundaries of narrative as they create parallel realities outside the scope of the text.

4.0 CHAPTER 4: PERMANENT EPHEMERALITY AND VICTORIAN LETTERS

Paper is made from the *rags* of things that did once exist.

---Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution*

Thomas Carlyle, in his seminal work on the French Revolution, famously declared the turn of the nineteenth century "The Paper Age." Though his comments were directed at the paper money printed by the revolutionary forces in France and its inherent material and economic ephemerality, Carlyle's choice of this particular commodity engages with questions of how paper maintains permanency and meaning (McLaughlin 1-2). His assertion that paper is made "from the *rags* of things that did once exist," describes a material object that holds within it the past lives of other things (Carlyle 24). For Carlyle, these ghostly material presences within paper seem to have contributed to its ephemerality, but, when considered from a purely mattered point of view, paper's connection to its past and future forms contribute to its preservation. Of all the objects this project considers, paper, in both novels and reality, is paradoxically the most materially ephemeral while also being, apparently, the most indestructible. The rag paper of the early to mid-nineteenth century existed in an extended cycle of use; Leah Price tracks the cyclical nature of paper in the following manner, claiming "Newspapers were handed down a chain of households…; letters were torn to light a pipe; broadsheets pieced out dress patterns or lined pie plates" (219). As paper-making materials shifted to wood pulp and other more disposable fibers later in the century, paper and paper products began to lose their ability to serve multiple uses as they degraded more quickly over time. Thus, paper exists on a continuum of change in the 1800s as different types of paper were

more or less stable or ephemeral than others. For the Victorian novel, paper objects, particularly in the form of letters and other correspondence, create a paradoxical relationship between destructibility and longevity. The more destructible a paper object seems, the harder it is for characters to excise it from the material world of the text; letters and other correspondence endlessly circulates in nineteenth-century novels. Despite attempts by characters to burn, crumple, or hide letters and telegrams, they persistently reappear in the text at key moments, refusing to be destroyed. I define this material resistance to destruction by fictional paper objects as "permanent ephemerality," a term that acknowledges both the active permanence of the object as well as it possible, but often circumvented, material fragility.

Letters and paper documents abound in the Victorian novel. Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853), with its piles of legal papers, hidden wills, and revelatory love letters, is most often examined in relationship to the role of paper in the nineteenth century novel.[44] Letters in both *Cranford* (1853) and *Wives and Daughters* (1864) by Elizabeth Gaskell hold memory and emotion in their material surfaces. Anthony Trollope, who worked for the post office for most of his adult life and implemented the use of letter-boxes in England, wrote many postally-inflected novels including *John Caldigate* (1878) with its legal case that depends on the veracity of a postmark, and *The Way We Live Now* (1875) with its meditation on the meaninglessness of paper currency, correspondence, and IOUs. Wilkie Collins and Bram Stoker wrote novels that were

[44] Kevin McLaughlin discusses paper as symbolic of the institution of home in *Bleak House*. Richard Altick also makes a convincing argument for paper in *Our Mutual Friend*, specifically newspapers and other public printed documents and their relationship to literacy.

dependent on collections of fictional paper documents, including letters, in *The Woman in White* (1860) and *Dracula* (1897) building on both the epistolary and found manuscripts tradition. One of the most recognizable letters in nineteenth-century literature is, of course, the letter Tess writes to Angel in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891). Slid under Angel's door, Tess's letter never serves its function as a read or experienced object since it is lost in the small space between the floor and the carpet (Hardy 211). Tess's letter is the antithesis of the permanently ephemeral paper object in its obscuration and eventual destruction. Though this is by no means an exhaustive list, all of these novels help to contribute to the ubiquity of letters in the nineteenth century and exemplify the different roles they can play within the texts. The most materially active letters, however, are those that reject narrative content to focus on the material nature of the letter—its handwriting, weight, paper, or seal—and the permanent ephemerality that fictional letters exhibit particularly in patterns of power and desire, such as the letters in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853), and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862).

Bodies mirror paper in these novels as characters are increasingly associated with the letters they read, write, send, and attempt to destroy. The letters that Lucy Snowe buries halfway through *Villette* reflect the complex nature of her relationship to Dr. John, and the letters that crisscross *Lady Audley's Secret* determine the fate of Lady Audley herself. Both novels contain representations of letters that act as individualized and evidentiary objects; these letters, by virtue of their represented material properties, act as surrogates for specific physical bodies within the text, as well as providing circumstantial

evidence of physical and emotional actions and experiences. The longevity of the fictional letter is implicated in the agentic nature of the object that refuses to be reduced to ashes or pasted over in an attempt to hide it. Letters seemingly cannot be destroyed within the realities of these novels; rather, they continuously circulate, disappear, and re-emerge at opportune moments, engaging in relationships with characters that are motivated by desire and power.

I am primarily interested in what I will call private epistolary paper: the materiality of letters in the novel that do not engage in a public framework either of the legal system, such as in *Bleak House*, or in the arguably public forum of the newly reformed post office that allows for the delivery of letters in Gaskell's and Trollope's novels. *Villette* and *Lady Audley's Secret* contain letters that work within a relatively limited private circle of readers and writers. This isolation privileges the fictional object through the narrative's focus on the material components before turning to the content.

Novels that privilege letters in the nineteenth century clearly owe a large narrative debt to the epistolary fiction of the eighteenth century, where letters were the essential element of narrative form. Though the epistolary novel formally gives way to the realist and sensation novels of the 1800s, letters do not disappear from the novel.[45] Famously exemplified by Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748), the epistolary form was, as Mary Favret explains, "the most popular and widely practiced fictional form in western Europe" (22). Ruth Perry defines the rise of the epistolary novel as a "response to certain specific social conditions—a new literary industry, broader literacy in the

[45] Tamara Wagner identifies the change in the use of letters between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as "an ongoing reworking, even resistant redeployment, of changing forms" (132).

population, the evolution of the female audience, the development of a few writers among middle and upper class women—it was a form well suited to a detailed working through of moral issues" (26). Along with a rapidly (and often revolutionarily) changing society, Janet Gurkin Altman identifies the epistolary form as "unique in making the reader (narratee) almost as important an agent in the narrative as the writer (narrator)" (88). These scholars examine the epistolary novel as a narrative form with the letter as the vehicle for social, moral, and literary development. But as the novel comes into the nineteenth century and shifts away from the epistolary form, it is necessary to examine letters as a fictionally material object rather than as a formal object.

Letters depend on two major elements, one material and the other institutional: paper and the post. Mark Kurlansky suggests that paper is not necessarily the straightforward commodity it appears to be to a contemporary audience:

> Paper seems an unlikely invention—breaking wood or fabric down into its cellulose fibers, diluting them with water, and passing the resulting liquid over a screen so that it randomly weaves and forms a sheet is not an idea that would logically come to mind, especially in an age when no one knew what cellulose was. (xv)

The English did not start making their own paper until 1495 when John Tate opened the first paper mill in England (Kurlansky 179). Various materials were used for different grades of paper from linen and cotton rags for finer paper to more diverse materials such as "netting, cordage, canvas, bagging" for cheaper papers (Shorter 23). As paper became culturally ubiquitous, so too did the industries necessary to support it; Richard L. Hills

explains that "In England, mills existed in 1851 in every county except Rutland," a proliferation of paper mills—despite an excise tax that was levied against paper until 1861—that speaks to the demand for paper for many different purposes (17, 36). This demand only increased with the postal reforms of 1839 and 1840; Laura Rotunno "locate[s] the letters of Victorian novels in an era of reform" (6).

Parliament voted in the Penny Postage Bill in 1839 and it was implemented in 1840, standardizing the cost of postage throughout England and effectively democratizing the postal system. Catherine Golden explains that with this reform "the post became an inclusive network and a public service, not just a privilege for the wealthy and the noteworthy" (4). The amount of mail being sent increased significantly: "in 1839, 4,818,552 chargeable letters passed through the London General Post; in 1840, the number jumped to 10,115,641 and, in 1841, it grew to 15,058,508" (Rotunno 8). Along with increasing correspondence, postal inclusivity came with an intimacy within the mailbag as "letters [were] jostling and bumping up against multitudes of other letters sent by a variety of different and unfamiliar people," a material proximity that equalized letters as objects rather than focusing on their content (How 4). Kate Thomas sees postal reform as the key element to replacing epistolary fiction with its turn to the things that drive the need for a postal service:

> …the postal took the place of the epistolary in the cultural imagination. Things that were ancillary to the latter—envelopes, stamps, postmarks, and even postman's thumbprints—became narratively all consuming. Epistolary fiction, in

other words, gave way to postal plots, in which literary interest lay not in the interiors of letters, but rather their outsides: the letter became inverted. (1-2)

This inversion, and its attention to the letter as object rather than content, occurs simultaneously with the establishment of new networks of communication and contiguity. Alan Shelston argues that the development of the railway system and "new systems of post office efficiency…gave the Victorians a communications system unique in its efficiency and unrivalled for speed until the telegram" (51). These developments of communications systems are mirrored in the literature of the nineteenth century as fictional letters participate in similar networks of communication and movement while also establishing their own networks of materiality and permanence.

In both *Villette* and *Lady Audley's Secret*, the insistently material representations of fictional letters establish the primacy of the physical attributes of the letters themselves: the weight of physical substance of Lucy's letters from Dr. John and M. Paul, or the specific shape and character of Lady Audley's handwriting. Against the historical backdrop of paper production and postal reform, fictional letters act upon the bodies of characters, perpetuating relationships of desire and power, exposing both emotional and physical identity, and resisting the characters' attempts at destruction of both material and content. The permanently ephemeral letters in *Villette* and *Lady Audley's Secret*, with their capacity to be destroyed balanced by their refusal to permanently disappear, engage in a relationship of power and desire with their writers and readers, implicating the bodies of both writer and recipient in a material relationship that reimagines the networks of power that form between letters and humans in narrative.

4.1 *VILLETTE*

Though *Jane Eyre* is more famously remembered for the illegal imprisonment of Bertha Mason, *Villette* is also a novel of systemic enclosure and even physical burial of female bodies reflected in the material and metonymic burial of letters. The letters Dr. John writes to Lucy establish the innate power of the letter as an object and the ways in which the letter supports and manipulates desire through its material presence. The fictionally material letter retains a sense of autonomy and individuality that is not afforded to Lucy, as its recipient. Instead she is involved in a pattern of containment and enclosure, both physically and emotionally. Wagner claims that "the consequent 'containment' of emotion in the retrospectively framed letters has notably been seen at once as the novel's most fascinating and most vexing feature" (132). This entombment begins with the legend that surrounds Madame Beck's school on the Rue Fossette:

> There went a tradition that Madame Beck's house had in old days been a convent. That in years gone by – how long gone by I cannot tell, but I think some centuries – before the city had overspread this quarter, and when it was tilled ground and avenue, and such deep and leafy seclusion as ought to embosom a religious house – that something had happened on this site which, rousing fear and inflicting horror, had left to the place the inheritance of a ghost story. A vague tale went of a black and white nun, sometimes, on some night or nights of the year, seen in some part of this vicinage. The ghost must have been built out some years ago, for there were houses all around now; but certain convent-relics, in the shape of old and huge fruit-trees, yet consecrated the spot; and, at the foot of one

> – Methuselah of a pear-tree, dead, all but a few boughs which still faithfully renewed their perfumed snow in the spring, and their honey-sweet pendants in autumn – you saw, in scraping away the mossy earth between the half-bared roots, a glimpse of slab, smooth, hard, and black. The legend went, unconfirmed and unaccredited, but still propagated, that this was the portal of a vault, emprisoning deep beneath that ground, on whose surface grass grew and flowers bloomed, the bones of a girl whom a monkish conclave of the drear middle ages had here buried alive, for some sin against her vow. Her shadow it was that tremblers had feared, through long generations after her poor frame was dust; her black robe and white veil that, for timid eyes, moonlight and shade had mocked, as they fluctuated in the night-wind through the garden-thicket. (Brontë 117-18)

This solitary site at the foot of the pear tree lies at the end of an "alley" in Madame Beck's garden, a spot that Lucy Snowe frequents saying, "the very gloom of the walk attracted me" (Brontë 119). The parallels between Lucy and the nun can be seen in the difference that sets them both apart—the nun's romantic desires, Lucy's foreignness and Protestantism—and the space they share in the secluded walk. Lucy's preference for the shadowed and possibly haunted walk denotes a semi-burial of the self as she voluntarily excludes herself from the school community. While this is neither as tragic nor as legendary as the mythic burial of the nun, it establishes a bodily connection between the two women and allows for an exploration of Lucy's emotional state. At this point in the novel, Lucy views the nun's supposed death with compassion and even pity. She describes the setting in gothic details—the slab, "smooth, hard, and black," and its role as

the "portal of a vault"—but refers to the nun as a girl and references her "poor frame" and its return to dust in a far more sympathetic manner than the timid storytellers who have claimed to see the ghostly nun's figure appear over time. Lucy also aligns herself in the similar positioning of their bodies, not only in her preference for the secluded walkway, but also through her figurative "burial" at Madame Beck's *pensionnat*. Even when Lucy discovers family friends in Villette, she still remains largely within the walls of the school. Lucy and the nun share a common bond as they both waste away, either physically or emotionally, and their bond only appears to be strengthened when Lucy is chosen as the recipient of the ghostly nun's seeming hauntings.

While the nun's walkway may seem an unlikely place with which to begin a discussion of letters and letter-writing, the fabled grave eventually becomes an actual grave when Lucy buries her correspondence with Dr. John in the selfsame spot. The letters between Lucy and Dr. John are emotionally fraught from their inception:

> 'Lucy,' – stepping after me – 'shall you feel very solitary here?'
>
> 'At first I shall.'
>
> 'Well, my mother will soon call to see you; and, meantime, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll write – just any cheerful nonsense that comes into my head – shall I?'
>
> 'Good, gallant heart!' thought I to myself; but I shook my head, smiling, and said, 'Never think of it; impose on yourself no such task. *You* write to *me*! – you'll not have time.'
>
> 'Oh! I will find or make time. Good-bye!'

> He was gone. The heavy door crashed to: the ax had fallen – the pang was experienced. (Brontë 254)

Letter-writing is constructed in several ways in this brief passage. Dr. John imagines it as a way to alleviate Lucy's solitude, an extension of the visits his mother intends to make, and necessarily light-hearted. He promises to write "just any cheerful nonsense" in an effort to keep Lucy from feeling lonely, a genuine—if rather trivial—offer of friendship and communication. Lucy resists his generosity, however, turning the possibility of cheerful news into a weightier "task"; she even asks Dr. John not to "impose" on himself such an occupation and argues that he will not have time to write her. Dr. John's description of his forthcoming letters is light and playful, but Lucy's is far more serious, already attributing a sense of weight and emotional or psychological depth to the letters before they have even come into being. The very idea of a correspondence with her godmother's son makes Lucy uneasy; in her carefully hidden emotional life the promised letters immediately take on a mythic significance. She attempts to stop Dr. John's letters from being created but he easily overturns her requests, claiming that he will "find or make time" (Brontë 254). While his disavowal of Lucy's concerns for his schedule may appear to be a kind-hearted reassurance to a lonely friend, they also indicate a carelessness towards her desires and a clear indication of the power dynamics of the relationship. Dr. John, in his position as the creator of the promised letter, dominates this particular exchange. Lucy, in her position of letter recipient, has no material means to resist the offer of correspondence but relies instead on self-deprecation and politeness. The role the letter will play is prefigured here in the social positioning of the characters

around the object before it even appears in the text; the letter's materiality exerts itself through the bodies of its writer and recipient by causing them to imagine the possible futures it may create.

The first-person narrative obviously stays with Lucy when Dr. John leaves Madame Beck's so the reader is not privileged to know what he might have thought about the discussion of letter-writing. Lucy's thoughts about the promised letters, however, reveal the importance with which she imbues the act of writing and its material productions:

> 'If,' muttered she [Reason], 'if he *should* write, what then? Do you meditate pleasure in replying? Ah, fool! I warn you! Brief be your answer. Hope no delight of heart – no indulgence of intellect: grant no expansion to feeling – give holiday to no single faculty: dally with no friendly exchange: foster no genial intercommunion….'
>
> 'But I have talked to Graham and you did not chide,' I pleaded.
>
> 'No,' said she, 'I needed not. Talk for you is good discipline. You converse imperfectly. While you speak, there can be no oblivion of inferiority – no encouragement to delusion: pain, privation, penury stamp your language…'
>
> 'But,' I again broke in, 'where the bodily presence is weak and the speech contemptible, surely there cannot be error in making written language the medium of better utterance than faltering lips can achieve?'
>
> Reason only answered, 'At your peril you cherish that idea, or suffer its influence to animate any writing of yours!' (Brontë 255)

This passage exposes the difference between the representation of Lucy's physical body within the text, her conversation, and her written self. It is not only Dr. John's writing that Reason warns her against, but her own abilities to better capture her feelings in a letter than she can in speech. By "making written language the medium of better utterance," Lucy contemplates using a letter as a physical surrogate, allowing her to exhibit a strength and intellect that she cannot normally express through verbal means (Brontë 255). Unlike Dr. John, Lucy is all too aware of the innate power of the letter as an object. She fears the exposure of her carefully repressed inner life and takes a direct, material approach to prevent this from happening:

> To begin with: Feeling and I turned Reason out of doors, drew against her bar and bolt, then we sat down, spread our paper, dipping in the ink an eager pen, and, with deep enjoyment, poured out our sincere heart. When we had done – when two sheets were covered with the language of a strongly-adherent affection, a rooted and active gratitude…when, then, I had given expression to a closely-clinging and deeply-honouring attachment…then, just at that moment, the doors of my heart would shake, bolt and bar would yield, Reason would leap in, vigorous and revengeful, snatch the full sheets, read, sneer, erase, tear up, re-write, fold, seal, direct, and send a terse, curt missive of a page. She did right. (Brontë 282)

The object of the letter has dual purposes for Lucy: it is both a conduit for emotion and a repressive tool to keep that same emotion in check. Both drafts of her letters to Dr. John represent a different facet of her personality but Lucy is all too aware of the revelatory

nature of the letter. She does not allow the first draft of a response to Dr. John to ever be seen by another person; in fact, she barely finishes the sheets herself before she tears them up and rewrites her answer.

Three personalities are present in the above passage—Feeling, Lucy, and Reason—creating a fractured sense of self that is never quite able to fully cohere. Reason is necessarily the dominant element in Lucy's personal emotional trinity and not only orders the destruction of the first drafts, but dictates and manages the pitiless send-off of a "terse, curt missive" (Brontë 282). Lucy's destruction of her letters reads as self-destruction, and perhaps even self-harm. In tearing up her first, emotional response to Dr. John's letters, she is tearing up pieces of herself and discarding them, never to be regained or pieced back together. This self-destruction extends to the materiality of the letter: the drafts Lucy tears up stay destroyed. These letters do not have the same permanent ephemerality other representations of letters throughout the novel and the nineteenth century so insistently own. This important difference rests in the fact that Lucy can destroy her drafts because they never enter into circulation. All the letters and papers that refuse to disappear, be burned, or thrown away, are always witnessed in some way or another—whether it is the physical witness who signed a will, or the postman who delivered a letter to Madame Beck's. Lucy's unusual ability to destroy her own letters is defined by their lack of circulation; they can be destroyed because they are not yet real within the circulation economy of the novel. By not entering into communion with the postal system, or any other human contact, the representations of Lucy's fictional letters become actually ephemeral in the reality of the novel.

Dr. John's letters, with their more conventional relationship to their writer and the postal system, are not so easily disposed of; in fact, they maintain a physical weight and significance from their first introduction into the text until their ceremonious burial. Lucy waits anxiously for Dr. John's letter, but is not able to receive and read it in a straightforward manner. Instead the letter, as an object, passes through several hands before it reaches her, with every person considering it in a different light. Rosine, the portress, is the first person seen handling the letter, though it can be inferred that Dr. John wrote it and it was handled by postal employees as it made its way across Villette:

> One afternoon in crossing the carré…I saw, standing by one of the large windows, Rosine, the portress. Her attitude, as usual, was quite nonchalante. She always 'stood at ease;' one of her hands rested in her apron-pocket, the other, at this moment, held to her eyes a letter, whereof Mademoiselle coolly perused the address, and deliberately studied the seal.
>
> A letter! The shape of a letter similar to that had haunted my brain in its very core for seven days past. I had dreamed of a letter last night. Strong magnetism drew me to that letter now; yet, whether I should have ventured to demand of Rosine so much as a glance at that white envelope, with a spot of red wax in the middle, I know not. (Brontë 265)

The first glimpse of Dr. John's letter is intriguing because the letter is not even visible. Rosine and Lucy both look at the envelope, with its address and seal, rather than the actual letter. The trappings of correspondence are here just important as the letter itself. Rosine is nonchalant, cool, and deliberate, but certainly still interested in the object that

she holds. Whether it is a natural inclination to gossip (Lucy's interpretation), or merely a desire to know whom to direct the letter to, Rosine's attention indicates that the fictional object of the letter has power and influence beyond Lucy herself. Though her existence is not centered around the possibility of the letter as Lucy's seems to be, the portress's attention establishes the letter as an object that exerts an influence on the bodies around it.

Letters, as generic things, have shaped Lucy's conscious and unconscious mind: she claims to have been haunted with "the shape of a letter similar to that," and to have even dreamed of a letter. These insubstantial experiences—haunting, dreaming—emphasize the substantial presence of the letter when it does arrive in the text. Interestingly, Lucy makes no claims to having been haunted by, or dreamed of, a specific letter. Even when she receives Dr. John's letter, she never mentions his name, though she does specify his initials on the seal. The letter, as a represented thing that occupies fictional space in the novel, is given greater depth to its fictional materiality by the attention with which both Rosine and Lucy attend to its material surface. This attention to the object of the letter, rather than the writer or what he has written, fundamentally changes the way in which the reader views the object, redirecting our attention to the physical attributes of the fictional letter and how the material properties affect the bodies and emotions of the characters who handle it.

When Lucy is finally given her letter by M. Paul, her narrative becomes enraptured with the physical attributes of the letter:

> …placing on my desk a letter – the very letter I had seen in Rosine's hand – the letter whose face of enameled white and single Cyclop's-eye of vermilion-red had printed themselves so clear and perfect on the retina of inward vision. I knew it, I felt it to be the letter of my hope, the fruition of my wish, the release from my doubt, the ransom from my terror. (Brontë 265-66)

The envelope becomes a face, the red wax seal is described as the eye of a creature from Greek mythology—an allusion, incidentally that indicates the contest of nearly epic dimensions between Dr. John's will and Lucy's desires—and Lucy imagines that the letter embodies wishes, hopes, release, and ransom. The represented materiality of the letter creates multiple bodies and identities through its material surface and the reader has yet to move beyond the envelope—all of this bursts on Lucy before she has even picked the letter up off her desk. When she does finally pick the letter up, her description and understanding of the letter becomes even more rapturous:

> …I held in my hand not a slight note, but an envelope, which must, at least, contain a sheet: it felt, not flimsy, but firm, substantial, satisfying. And here was the direction, 'Miss Lucy Snowe,' in a clean, clear, equal, decided hand; and there was the seal, round, full, deftly dropped by untremulous fingers, stamped with the well-cut impress of initials, 'J. G. B.' I experienced a happy feeling – a glad emotion which went warm to my heart, and ran lively through all my veins. For once a hope was realized. I held in my hand a morsel of real solid joy: not a dream, not an image of the brain, not one of those shadowy chances imagination pictures, and on which humanity starves but cannot live; not a mess of that manna

> I drearily eulogized awhile ago….It was neither sweet hail, nor small coriander-seed – neither slight wafer, nor luscious honey, I had lighted on; it was the wild savoury mess of the hunter, nourishing and salubrious meat, forest-fed or desert-reared, fresh, healthful and life-sustaining. It was what the old dying patriarch demanded of his son Esau, promising him in requital the blessing of his last breath. It was a godsend; and I inwardly thanked the God who had vouchsafed it. (Brontë 266)

Lucy gives a clear and detailed description of her letter, from the address to the impeccable seal. She reads Dr. John's hand in the writing and can even see his fingers in the impress of the stamp. The letter embodies its writer while performing its own material presence. Lucy takes pains to describe the weight and solidity of her prize to the reader: it is a "morsel of real solid joy," not a dream or a product of her imagination.

The letter here begins to embody a range of objects in Lucy's efforts to understand her relationship to it, drawing mainly from Biblical, even Catholic, descriptions. The letter is not manna, coriander-seed, or honey, but neither is it a "slight wafer," an evocation of the communion host used in the celebration of Mass. Instead, Lucy describes the letter as venison, drawing a comparison between the letter and the meat that Esau prepared for a dying Isaac. This metaphor is troubling because Esau's wild game is usurped by his brother Jacob in disguise, resulting in the loss of his father's blessing. By aligning her letter with this particular story from the Old Testament, Lucy implicates the objet in eventual betrayal even as she claims that "For once a hope was realized" (Brontë 266). Rachel Jackson argues that Lucy's description of the letter as a

"morsel of solid joy" actually "performs…a constriction of her desires. It is the replacement of the erotic body with the semiotic one" (102). Jackson does not question the solidity of the letter so much as the emotional reaction to the physical object. As the physical body of Dr. John is not available, Lucy turns to his ink and paper surrogate for the emotional and physical nourishment that she desires.

Lucy continues to describe the letter as a treasure and as something to be eaten or tasted, even consumed, with the letter serving as a revealing synecdoche for the desired body:

> Did I read my letter there and then? Did I consume the venison at once and with haste, as if Esau's shaft flew every day?
>
> I knew better. The cover with its address; the seal, with its three clear letters, was bounty and abundance for the present….I opened a drawer, unlocked a box, and took out a case, and – having feasted my eyes with one more look, and approached the seal, with a mixture of awe and shame and delight, to my lips – I folded the untasted treasure, yet all fair and inviolate, in silver paper, committed it to the case, shut up box and drawer, reclosed, relocked the dormitory, and returned to class, feeling as if fairy tales were true and fairy gifts no dream. Strange, sweet insanity! And this letter, the source of my joy, I had not yet read: did not yet know the number of its lines. (Brontë 267)

Described as both "strange, sweet insanity" and "joy," Dr. John's letter seems to be full of contradictions. At once material in its representative surface and immaterial in its unreality, the letter establishes itself as a primarily present object. At the end of this

passage Lucy finally mentions the content of the letter itself, a content that she has not yet viewed and which the reader, ultimately, will never see. Lucy is preoccupied by the materiality of the letter itself while the content seems to be secondary. While this could be seen as a contradistinction to *Lady Audley's Secret*, my later analysis will show that it is not the narrative content of Lady Audley's letters that is important as much as it is the material content of her handwriting. Lucy's inattention to the content serves to ground the reader's somatic experience in the weight and physicality of the letter rather than the actual words it contains.

When Lucy finally reads her letter in the solitude of the garret, the reader is still not privileged to see what is written inside. She describes the contents but the letter itself remains only as a physical rather than a textual object as she holds, reads, and loses it when she is startled by the sudden apparition of the nun:

> Dr. John had written to me at length; he had written to me with pleasure; he had written in a benignant mood, dwelling with sunny satisfaction on scenes that had passed before his eyes and mine, - on places we had visited together – on conversations we had held – on all the little subject-matter, in short, of the last few halcyon weeks. But the cordial core of the delight was, a conviction the blithe, genial language generously imparted, that it had been poured out – not merely to content *me* – but to gratify *himself*. (Brontë 272)

The description of the letter is fairly generic, a summary of the preceding chapters in the novel, and the events and conversations that Lucy has already recounted in her role as narrator. But the last sentence in the passage indicates a shift away from her emotional

response to reading the letter towards Dr. John's emotional response to writing the letter. She claims that "the blithe genial language" imparted the sense that Dr. John not only wrote to please her, but also to "gratify *himself*" (Brontë 272). This description seems to promise a letter that is fulfilling for both writer and reader. But on closer inspection, as well as the subsequent action of the chapter, Lucy's description serves to emphasize Dr. John's selfishness as a correspondent. His desire to gratify himself precludes Lucy's comfort and enjoyment, an interpretation made all the more valid by his reclaiming of his letter when Lucy drops it upon the first appearance of the nun:

> 'Oh! they have taken my letter!' cried the groveling, groping, monomaniac.
>
> 'What letter, Lucy? My dear girl, what letter?' asked a known voice in my ear….Did I now look on the face of the writer of that very letter?....'Was it *my* letter Lucy?' (Brontë 274)

Dr. John linguistically lays claim to the letter and Lucy echoes his ownership answering, "Your own: yours—the letter you wrote to me…", seemingly abdicating her own relationship to the object (Brontë 274). In fact, she has little say in the matter as Dr. John physically lays claim to the letter as well: "His quick eye had seen the letter on the floor where I sought it; his hand, as quick, had snatched it up. He had hidden it in his waistcoat pocket" (Brontë 274-75). The reading of the letter evokes the writer—the two are linked through the physical production of the fictional object. The letter, in its fictional form, was written by Dr. John and cannot, or chooses not to, sever that material link. When given the chance, the letter returns to the site of its own creation in the physical form of

Dr. John. This inextricable physical connection shows that despite Lucy's careful preservation of the letters, they are never actually hers. She cannot fully grasp the materiality of the letters due to her relationship to them as only a reader. The letters insist upon a dimension of material presence that can only be accessed by the writer of the letter, a connection between the represented fictional body and the represented fictional object that is rooted in their shared act of creation. Though Lucy believes the letter is a symbol of affection offering concrete proof of the sometimes mercurial favor of her friends, the letter's swift return to its writer claims otherwise in an act of material abandonment.

The fictional letter mimics the fluid nature of the relationship between Lucy and Dr. John in its ability to move between both parties with an easy switch of allegiance. The representation of the letter, in its mobility and fluidity, is adaptable in the hands of Dr. John as he uses it to threaten and then to coerce information from Lucy about the apparition of the nun that she had seen in the attic. The letter, already solidified in its physical and material effect on Lucy, here transcends the material to the emotional. Dr. John utilizes his relationship with the letter to manipulate Lucy's emotions. For Lucy, the letter and those that follow it become an outward manifestation of her own happiness:

> It was three weeks since the adventure of the garret, and I possessed in that case, box, drawer up stairs, casketed with that first letter, four companions like to it, traced by the same firm pen, sealed with the same seal, full of the same vital comfort. Vital comfort it seemed to me then: I read them in after years; they were kind letters enough – pleasing letters, because composed by one well-

> pleased….Time, dear reader, mellowed them to a beverage of this mild quality; but when I first tasted their elixir, fresh from the fount so honoured, it seemed juice of a divine vintage; a draught which Hebe might fill, and the very gods approve. (Brontë 281)

Lucy's interactions with the letters emphasize that she does not see them as passive things but as objects that have a purpose and vitality to them. Her use of the term "vital comfort" most likely adheres to the more traditional definition of something essential or necessary but it is fascinating to consider in light of Bennett's theoretical use of "vitality" and its relationship to matter and lived experience. [46]

The letters were alive to Lucy in ways they were not to any other reader; they provided her with comfort, sustenance, and enough emotional support to lead to "a belief in happiness" (Brontë 281). She does not seem to notice the ways in which the letters always remain somewhat irrevocably with their writer, but the strength of the letters does begin to wane under the influence of time: when the letters cease coming for seven weeks, and Lucy only has recourse to her packet of five letters rather than any new material, she acknowledges that the letters, "from incessant perusal were losing all sap and significance" (Brontë 297). In the retrospection of the novel, Lucy acknowledges that in the larger lapse of time between receiving the letters and when she writes the narrative the letters have been "mellowed" by time, progressing from divine draughts to merely kind and pleasing correspondence. Interestingly, Lucy continues to think of the letters in

[46] Jane Bennett defines vitality as "the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own." (viii)

organic terms; the letters lose “all sap and significance” but “mellow” over time, a vocabulary that is reminiscent of food and plant life and relates back to her earlier comparisons of the first letter with other consumables.

Though Lucy is able to admit in later years that the letters were merely a friendly correspondence, they remain a precious possession at the time they were written and received. Two circumstances shift the letters from the position of treasured objects: the changing relationship between Dr. John and Polly Bassompierre and the surveillance of Lucy’s stash of correspondence by Madame Beck and M. Paul. Both of these events are marked by a need for protection: Lucy is forced to protect herself from the hope the letters offer, and she feels the need to protect the letters from prying eyes, however well-intentioned. She first tries to protect against her own emotional entanglement with the five letters Dr. John has written to her as she witnesses the death of hope:

> In the end I closed the eyes of my dead, covered its face, and composed its limbs with great calm.
>
> The letters, however, must be put away, out of sight: people who have undergone bereavement always jealously gather together and lock away mementos: it is not supportable to be stabbed to the heart each moment by sharp revival of regret. (Brontë 326)

Hope is anthropomorphized in this passage, given a human body, and composed for burial. Lucy understands herself as someone who has been bereaved and the letters are mementos that represent both love and regret. Interestingly, though the letters do not participate in the same humanization of hope, they do engage with an actual burial rather

than the more symbolic interment of Lucy's emotions. Hope, though mentally given a human body, is still only a representation of emotion. Letters, though they are only representational fictional object, carry weight and materiality in the text. Hope can be mentally composed to rest, but the letters—in their too tangible and accessible state—demand a physical burial. A suitable grave not only places the letters beyond the reviving impulse of hope but also ensures they do not fall into unsympathetic hands.

The choice to bury the letters rather than burn or otherwise destroy them is indicative of Lucy's attachment to the material object and the letters' own resistance to destruction. Kathryn Crowther carries this idea of materiality even further, claiming that the "narrative of *Villette* insists on the personal nature of writing and emphasizes its material forms through its production of textual relics" (129). Unlike Lady Audley, who attempts to destroy letters in order to protect her newly formed identity, Lucy buries her letters in order to protect them while providing material distance from the objects themselves. Crowther's term "textual relics" echoes the religious language of Lucy's earlier descriptions of the letter and is particularly apt for describing the buried letters. The material vitality that they exhibited in relationship to Dr. John, and the emotional vitality that Lucy experienced from them, is reflected in the letters' insistent role in the text and their eventual relationship with the myth of the nun:

> While pondering this problem, I sat in the dormitory window-seat. It was a fine frosty afternoon; the winter sun, already setting, gleamed pale on the tops of the garden-shrubs in the 'allée défendue.' One great old pear-tree – the nun's pear-tree – stood up a tall dryad skeleton, gray, gaunt, and stripped. A thought

> struck me – one of those queer fantastic thoughts that will sometimes strike solitary people….Methusaleh, the pear-tree, stood at the further end of this walk, near my seat: he rose up, dim and gray, above the lower shrubs round him. Now Methusaleh, though so very old, was of sound timber still; only there was a hole, or rather a deep hollow, near his root. I knew there was such a hollow, hidden partly by ivy and creepers growing thick round; and there I meditated hiding my treasure. But I was not only going to hide a treasure – I meant also to bury a grief. That grief over which I had lately been weeping, as I wrapped it in its winding-sheet, must be interred. (Brontë 328)

The material and the immaterial are inextricably mixed in this passage. While the letters remain unrelentingly material and present, they are associated with such insubstantial elements as a dryad's skeleton, a mythical nun, and a strongly embodied grief. Lucy's mingling of metaphor and materiality is made all the more complicated by her earlier assertion that she read the letters again in later years, hinting at an exhumation and a survival of the letters before they have even been properly interred.

The burial itself is thorough and carries a certain weight of finality; Jackson refers to its as a "perverse textual murder" (103), while Mary Jacobus explains that "Lucy here both hides a treasure and entombs a grief" (50):

> Well, I cleared away the ivy, and found the hole; it was large enough to receive the jar, and I thrust it deep in. In a tool shed at the bottom of the garden, lay the relics of building materials, left by masons lately employed to repair a part of the premises. I fetched thence a slate and some mortar, put the slate on the

> hollow, secured it with cement, covered the whole with black mould, and, finally, replaced the ivy. This done, I rested, leaning against the tree; lingering, like any other mourner, beside a newly-sodded grave. (Brontë 328-29)

A language of humanization surrounds this part of the text as Lucy compares herself to a mourner at a newly covered grave. The burial of the letters on the same spot that is rumored to house the body of the nun draws a careful correlation between Lucy's letters and the young woman who was supposedly buried alive. The letters and the nun are victims of unacceptable desire; unruly and subversive, desire must be put to death and buried beneath layers of dirt and stone. In their complicated materiality in the novel, letters serve as representations of material objects that have their own desires, as well as serving as reflections of the desires of others.

Lucy's first letter desires to be reunited with the hand that wrote it, exposing the intricate nature of ownership and power within correspondence. The subsequent letters serve as material representations of her desires for friendship, companionship, and care, even as she explains that they did not hold the same power in later years. When these desires are thwarted by Dr. John's and Polly's courtship, and Madame Beck's interference, the letters become the symbol of Lucy's disappointment and need for privacy. She is a practiced hand at subduing and burying her emotions within a complex psyche, but the fictional object of the letter requires more than a mental or emotional burial. Instead, it joins the nun in an intriguing synthesis of material and immaterial representation. The nun—ostensibly a myth—and the letters—ostensibly concrete in the reality of the novel—move between the material and the immaterial in their appearances

and disappearances. Power remains with the material as the spectral vision of the nun that Lucy believes she is seeing turns out to be Ginevra's suitor, Arthur de Hamal, in a disguise, and the letters that become a paler cousin of their first passionate interpretation, still remain a material presence in their burial scene. The concrete object of the letter resists the projected emotionality of the reader and remains in allegiance with the generative power of the correspondent; the innate power of the object, rooted in its fundamental representation of materiality, resists its death in the text, exerting its physicality through the need for a grave rather than a pyre.

Letters in *Villette* are associated with power, desire, and materiality, but Dr. John's letters are not the only letters Lucy receives. The final letters of the novel are directly contrasted with the shallow letters Lucy enjoyed from Dr. John, casting M. Paul as an ideal correspondent who nourishes rather than deprives and engages in a mutual exchange rather than a manipulation:

> By every vessel he wrote; he wrote as he gave and as he loved, in full-handed, full-hearted plentitude. He wrote because he liked to write; he did not abridge, because he cared not to abridge. He sat down, he took pen and paper, because he loved Lucy and had much to say to her; because he was faithful and thoughtful, because he was tender and true. There was not sham and no cheat, and no hollow unreal in him. Apology never dropped her slippery oil on his lips – never proffered, by his pen, her coward feints and paltry nullities: he would give neither a stone, nor an excuse – neither a scorpion, nor a disappointment; his letters were real food that nourished, living water that refreshed. (Brontë 546)

As with all the other letters in the novel (with the exception of Mrs. Bretton's), the reader is not privileged to see what M. Paul writes in his letters. What is also missing from the account of his correspondence is the eulogizing of the address or the shape of the seal that accompanies Dr. John's letters; the mythical eye is gone, indicating the lack of tension or conflict between the writer and the recipient. Lucy does not relate the physical properties of the object, instead she focuses on what the letters offer to the reader. She describes M. Paul's letters in New Testament terms, evoking echoes of Christ teaching his disciples—a direct contrast to the contentious Old Testament story she uses to describe Dr. John's letter—and calling it "real food that nourished, living water that refreshed" (Brontë 544). The use of the term "real" is intriguing in this context, because though Lucy also compared Dr. John's letters to food, his correspondence was contextualized through a story of betrayal and theft, of food too mythical and superlative to be real. Lucy links M. Paul's letters to reality, establishing a concrete connection between the fictional reality she inhabits and the role M. Paul's letters play within it. The material attributes of his letters are simple: they nourish and refresh. This more simplistic materiality allows for a mutuality to exist between Lucy and the letters, offering a glimpse of a harmoniously balanced relationship between fictional letters, their writers, and their readers. Though this moment of balance is not allowed to last as the ambiguous ending of *Villette* gestures towards M. Paul's death and Lucy's subsequently solitary life, these final letters are not consigned to a grave. The triangulation of Lucy, Dr. John's letters, and the buried nun is broken through the "real" object of M. Paul's letters and their ability to give Lucy emotional contentment.

The letters in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* actively create relationships of power and desire through their concrete materiality within the text. Dr. John's letters, with their loyalty to the writer, emotionally manipulate Lucy, who finds herself entombed by desire and the physical object of the letter. Her burial of Dr. John's correspondence gives her physical distance, while privileging the physicality of the letters and their permanence within the text. M. Paul's letters conceive a special relationship to reality, as they are grounded in ideas of nourishment and expansion rather than manipulation. His correspondence offers a more hopeful interpretation of the role the object of the letter plays within the nineteenth-century novel, nuancing the ways in which desire can be expressed through the active, vital object.

4.2 *LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET*

Lady Audley's Secret is both literally and narratively constructed on a backbone of paper. The structure and plot of the narrative depend on the represented paper objects that inform the novel, just as the actual object of the text itself depends upon the paper on which it is printed. Letters are the primary objects in the novel, but they are supported in the agentic work by paper ephemera as well—newspapers, book endpapers, and bonnet-box labels all play a part in the material world of the text. This relationship with paper begins with the death announcements that narratively bookend *Lady Audley's Secret*. The action of the story is set in motion when George Talboys discovers the news of his wife's supposed death in a day-old newspaper. The novel concludes with a "black-edged letter, written upon foreign paper" that records the actual death of Madame Taylor, sometimes

Lady Audley or Helen Talboys (Braddon 445). The newspaper death announcement is painfully public; George discovers it while waiting to collect a letter from his wife at a coffeehouse. The text is simple, almost sparse, "On the 24th inst., at Ventnor, Isle of Wight, Helen Talboys, aged twenty-two," but its effect on George is visceral: he is dazed, overwhelmed by the physicality of his present moment, and then loses consciousness (Braddon 76-77). The announcement is regarded as concrete fact based largely on its appearance in print—"there it was, in black and white"—and then later confirmed by visiting Helen's grave. Despite this emotional visit, however, it is the object of the newspaper and its unyielding materiality that provides the necessary framework for the ensuing action of the novel.

Letters continue to proliferate in the novel, providing a literal paper trail for the plot to follow. Despite the initial framing of the plot through the communal newspaper at the coffeehouse, however, the novel relies on the individualized object of the letter—an object created by and for an individual reader—and its competing claims of privacy and universal materiality. The first indication that the correspondence of the novel will have a bearing on the text itself is deliberately signposted by the narrator when Robert Audley receives a letter from his cousin, Alicia Audley:

> He held the twisted letter to the feeble spark of fire glimmering in the grate as he spoke, and then changing his mind, deliberately unfolded it and smoothed the crumpled paper with his hand.
>
> "Poor little Alicia!" he said thoughtfully; "it's rather hard to treat her letters so cavalierly—I'll keep it;" upon which Mr. Robert Audley put the note

> back into its envelope, and afterward thrust it into a pigeon-hole in his office desk marked *important*. Heaven knows what wonderful documents there were in this particular pigeon-hole, but I do not think it likely to have contained anything of great judicial value. If any one could at that moment have told the young barrister that so simple a thing as his cousin's brief letter would one day come to be a link in that terrible chain of evidence afterwards to be slowly forged in the one and only criminal case in which he was ever to be concerned, perhaps Mr. Robert Audley would have lifted his eyebrows a little higher than usual. (Braddon 89)

The contents of the letter itself seem fairly innocuous: Lady Audley is too ill to entertain visitors, cannot host Robert and his friend, and has deputized her step-daughter to inform her cousin. Robert's first reaction to the letter is to use it to light his pipe, a not uncommon use of wastepaper in the nineteenth century. What appears slightly out of the ordinary is his decision to save the letter after all. Half-burnt letters are often used as plot devices in Victorian novels (including a half-burnt telegram later in *Lady Audley's Secret* itself) but here the reader sees Robert check the destruction of the letter, rescuing the piece of paper from the fire and determining to save it. What is intriguing about this unexpected rescue is that the contents of the letter do not influence Robert's decision as much as his momentary flash of affection for his cousin. "Poor little Alicia!" is his first object of concern, a surprising diminutive for his tall, healthy, horse-loving cousin. In this passage, the twisted and crumpled letter stands in for the woman who wrote it; the neglectful treatment of the note coincides with Robert's rather careless treatment of Alicia herself. Robert not only treats her letters cavalierly—though Alicia is his only

consistent correspondent throughout the novel—but often does the same to Alicia herself. He pigeon-holes his cousin as thoughtlessly as he pigeon-holes the letter; Alicia's feelings toward him are, like the content of the letter, unimportant, though Robert cares for both person and object in his own detached manner.

The narrator turns away from the ways in which the letter interacts with its writer and recipient to draw attention to the manner in which the letter is saved. The narrative voice reminds the reader of Robert's occupation and his lack of legal abilities, including the lack of any court papers of significance. This invocation of the law and the court immediately recasts Alicia's note in a different light, introducing ideas of evidence and legality to the crumpled paper. Robert's sudden conviction to save the letter appears to be a passing whim, but the narrative does not let the reader disregard it. Instead, the narrator draws particular attention to the way in which the letter is stored, as well as the type of document it promises to become. This narratorial distinction redirects the reader's attention to the objects of letter and envelope rather than Robert's and Alicia's roles as sender and recipient. Materiality trumps humanity as the text turns away from Alicia's and Robert's roles in creating and reading the letter in a definitive move towards the material object and its concrete and necessary presence in the narrative; Alicia's letter, even though it does not contain the most important piece of evidence that Robert will gather, does establish the primacy of the letter and the role that it will play in the text.

The handwritten letters in the novel often act as physical surrogates for the humans who write them. This reflective quality of the letter is most clearly seen in Robert's interpretation of a note Lady Audley writes to Alicia:

Miss Audley took a letter from the pocket of her riding-jacket as she spoke—a pretty, fairy-like note, written on shining paper of a peculiar creamy hue.

"She says in her postscript, 'Be sure you answer my question about Mr. Audley and his friend, you volatile, forgetful Alicia!'"

"What a pretty hand she writes!" said Robert, as his cousin folded the note.

"Yes, it is pretty, is it not? Look at it Robert."

She put the letter into his hand, and he contemplated it lazily for a few minutes, while Alicia patted the graceful neck of her chestnut mare, which was anxious to be off once more.

"Presently, Atalanta, presently. Give me back my note, Bob."

"It is the prettiest, most coquettish little hand I ever saw. Do you know, Alicia, I never believed in those fellows who ask you for thirteen postage stamps, and offer to tell you what you have never been able to find out yourself; but upon my word I think that if I had never seen your aunt, I should know what she was like by this slip of paper. Yes, here it all is—the feathery, gold-shot, flaxen curls, the penciled eyebrows, the tiny straight nose, the winning childish smile, all to be guessed in these few graceful up-strokes and down-strokes. George, look here!" (Braddon 100-01)

The note is first described in purely physical terms without any mention of its contents or the details of the writing. The physical attributes of the note include its appearance—

"pretty, fairy-like"—and the description of its materials. The "shining paper of a peculiar creamy hue" echoes the descriptions of Lady Audley elsewhere in the novel as glittering, glowing, or being surrounded by gilded and sparkling objects. Though she and her golden curls are not present, Robert claims that he can see them through the surrogacy of the letter, particularly in the handwriting. This marked attention to Lady Audley's handwriting is a productive theme in Braddon criticism. Saverio Tomaiuolo reads Robert's analysis of Lady Audley's handwriting as a "foreground[ing] the function of the act of writing as a synecdoche for the writer's personality," and even links the letter to the similarly active portrait of Robert's aunt (84-85). Peter Capuano examines hands in the nineteenth century by way of mechanization and the ways in which the individual hand was being replaced or overridden; for him, Lady Audley's distinctive handwriting is part of an older, more individualized way of life when he says, "Despite all of the industrial and modernizing components that Lady Audley uses to transform her life, it is…the invariability and uniqueness of her hand (penmanship) that eventually betrays her" (218). For both these critics, the writer and their relationship to the written word is of paramount importance but the object of the letter is not. The vehicle for the handwriting is, of necessity, the material page, but the focus on handwriting engages the letter in a complicated expression of the material and the immaterial.

Even though the narrator gives the reader a material description of the letter, Robert focuses on the part of the letter that the reader is not privileged to see in his attention to Lady Audley's handwriting. This is a condition peculiar to literary letters; even in epistolary novels, where the entire text is told through letters, the novel depends

on the reader's belief in letters that were never written or exchanged by people and whose physical appearance, for all intents and purposes, is the same uniform type as each subsequent page.[47] In fact, this particular note of Lady Audley's depends largely on what cannot be seen by the reader. The only snippet of text that the reader is allowed to see is the postscript which, while emphasizing the importance Lady Audley places on how long Robert and George will be staying, elides its importance by the casual way in which it is inserted into the conversation. The appearance of the letter seems far more important to Robert than his aunt's desire as to whether she will see him and his friend; he does not even catch the slight barb against his cousin, couched as it is in playful language. The concrete description of the letter, its color, and texture, merges with the more immaterial appearance of Lady Audley's handwriting, forcing the reader's attention away from what the letter is actually saying. Robert's focus on the materially-created, though optically invisible, handwriting, forces us to reimagine the meaning of "contents" as the letter directs our attention not to *what* is written, but *how* it is written. Robert's fascination with his aunt's handwriting, understood by the reader only insofar as Robert's and Alicia's assurances that it perfectly embodies Lady Audley, foreshadows Robert's eventual fascination with any correspondence that passes under Lady Audley's hand, particularly the use that it might be put to as a way to identify the writer. The postal bits and pieces that have so far described and catalogued Lady Audley—differentiated from Alicia's material but generic letter that depends more on content than physical features—begin to

[47] For a further discussion of authenticity in the epistolary novel in the eighteenth century see Shelston 52.

increase from this moment in the text as Robert begins to follow the paper trail his aunt has left throughout the novel.

Though he is initially unconscious of the events he set into motion when he pigeonholed Alicia's telling letter earlier in the novel, Robert becomes aware of the importance and ability of correspondence when he accidentally discovers a half-burnt telegram while visiting George Talboys's father-in-law. The telegram, ostensibly destroyed, remains intact enough to catch Robert's attention first as yet another pipe-lighter, and then as an alarming hint at foul play:

> A twisted piece of paper lay half burned upon the hearthrug; he picked it up, and unfolded it, in order to get a better pipe-light by folding it the other way of the paper. As he did so, absently glancing at the penciled writing upon the fragment of thin paper, a portion of a name caught his eye—a portion of the name that was most in his thoughts. He took the scrap of paper to the window, and examined it by the declining light. (Braddon 128)

Unlike the letter that Alicia sends him, or the later trail of letters that Robert follows, the half-burnt telegram is not intended for Robert at all. Originally sent to Captain Maldon by the duplicitous Lady Audley, Maldon attempted to burn the telegram so as not to leave evidence of his daughter's true identity or the lengths that she has gone to in order to conceal what she believes is the murder of her husband. Two matters appear to be coincidental in this passage: the first, that the telegram is only half-burnt, and the second, that Robert finds it at all. The attempt to destroy the telegram is a strong example of the epistolary object's refusal to be destroyed; Leah Price and Natalka Freeland identify this

characteristic as the " 'conservation of information' governing mid-nineteenth century detective fiction…any document that a character tries to destroy will come back to haunt him" (qtd. in Price 251). Even more than disembodied information, however, the telegram's return emphasizes its materiality within the text as it insistently returns despite the attempt to destroy it. The telegram, in its apparent indestructability, allows first for discovery and second for legibility. Just as the separate parts of Lady Audley's note allow Robert to picture his aunt, the fragmented text of the telegram and its half-destroyed state evoke George Talboys and a significant chain of events.

Unlike the elegantly compact note of Lady Audley's that Robert has read metonymically, the telegram that he examines is literally fragmented by fire:

> It was part of a telegraphic dispatch. The upper portion had been burnt away, but the more important part, the greater part of the message itself, remained.
>
> alboys came to last night, and left the mail
>
> for London on his way for Liverpool, whence he was to
>
> sail for Sydney.
>
> The date and the name and address of the sender of the message had been burnt with the heading. Robert Audley's face blanched to a deathly whiteness. He carefully folded the scrap of paper, and placed it between the leaves of his pocket-book. (Braddon 128-29)

Both Robert and the narrator treat this telegram differently than Lady Audley's note. The narrator assigns importance to particular parts of the correspondence, identifying the

"greater part of the message itself" as the "more important part." Lady Audley's note, though it is used as a metonym for various parts of her body, retains its material wholeness despite the blazon that Robert uses it to perform. The telegram, similar to the relationship between letter and handwriting, complicates the ways in which the individualized object engages with materiality and immateriality within the text.

Instead of evoking the body of the sender, the telegram conjures a missing person in its half-obscured text. The handwriting—which received such laudation in Lady Audley's letter—is here barely registered, merely described in the earlier passage as "the pencilled writing." Dictated to a telegraph clerk, the telegram lacks the surrogacy of a personally handwritten letter, but makes up for its inability to substitute for the writing body by inversely conjuring up the body of Robert's missing friend. The telegram's relationship to the subject rather than writer is mirrored in its own anonymous form. Untraceable due to their lack of handwriting, or other identifying materialities such as personal stationary, telegrams help to confuse and hinder the mystery of Lady Audley's avoidance of Robert and George, as well as pushing Robert towards more detection.

The paper telegram is a material representation of an immaterially sent message that is divorced from the body of the writer or, as Rudyard Kipling describes it, "a Power troubles the Still that has neither voice nor feet" (138). The narrator, given the telegram's lack of connection to the body of the writer, becomes a more important mediator for the object of the telegram as opposed to the letter. In this passage, the narrator dismisses the name and address of the sender as not as important as the message itself. In a novel that increasingly comes to revolve around questions of identity and material evidence, the

name and address of the sender would have solved the mystery of the telegram almost as soon as it was introduced. Instead, the narrator focuses on the fragments of the text that survive the fire in one of the paradoxes of epistolary objects within the novel: though correspondence maintains its own materiality (refusing to be burned, directing attention to its various parts including weight, thickness, and metonymic ability), there is a more overt narratorial or authorial intervention in the permanence and impermanence of paper ephemera than in some of the other objects examined in this project. Braddon, in her role as author, makes use of the permanent ephemerality of literary paper objects, even as that permanence is inherent in the representation of the objects' materiality rather than in any overt linguistic or literary intention.

The role of paper is increasingly circular as the novel progresses: paper generates more paper, gradually becoming a mass that Robert can no longer ignore. Robert Audley actively contributes to this amassing by his careful collection of the bits of correspondence that act so integrally in the disappearance of his friend and the deception being played upon his uncle, and by writing and contributing his own cache of documents in the form of a catalog that he titles "'Journal of facts connected with the disappearance of George Talboys, inclusive of facts which have no apparent relation to that circumstance'" (Braddon 133). This record lays out the action of the novel but revolves mainly around the letters and notes written back and forth between Alicia, Robert, and Lady Audley and concludes with the "telegraphic message" (Braddon 135). Besides impressing Robert with his own orderly and perhaps even legal mind, the journal is

important because of the fact that it has been created and exists alongside the other papers used to show the course of events so far:

> When Robert Audley had completed this brief record, which he drew up with great deliberation, and with frequent pauses for reflection, alterations, and erasures, he sat for a long time contemplating the written page.
>
> At last he read it carefully over, stopping at some of the numbered paragraphs, and marking several of them with a pencilled cross; then he folded the sheet of foolscap, went over to a cabinet on the opposite side of the room, unlocked it, and placed the paper in that very pigeon-hole into which he had thrust Alicia's letter—the pigeon-hole marked *Important*. (Braddon 135)

Robert is struck by the gravity of "the written page" in a way that his own mental cataloging of the events surrounding the disappearance of George Talboys is not able to accomplish. The physical concreteness of the created written object and the way in which it is organized, yet still malleable, gives it more flexibility than its active but more static paper counterparts. Robert's catalog acts as a bridge between the insistent permanence of the correspondence and his own steady accumulation of evidence. The completion of the journal allows Robert to marshal all the disparate parts into a "convincing" case against his aunt and, even then, the evidence would never hold up in court. The last sentence of the above passage is intriguing in its use of several objects to emphasize the importance of the record that Robert has created. The paper is placed within a pigeon-hole within a cabinet, physically joining Alicia's letter and metaphorically being added to the pile of evidence Robert is beginning to construct. Lest the reader miss the significance of this

moment, with its triple iteration of objects, the pigeon-hole is finally marked *Important*, a rather obvious moment of explication that still aligns itself with the prominent objects in the novel through its shared nature of text.

Robert himself avers the importance of things and the role they can play in legal cases when he, in the course of a discussion with Lady Audley about George's disappearance, explains to her what circumstantial evidence is:

> "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. Upon what infinitesimal trifles may sometimes hang the whole secret of some wicked mystery, inexplicable heretofore to the wisest upon the earth! A scrap of paper; a shred of some torn garment; the button off a coat; a word dropped incautiously from the over-cautious lips of guilt; the fragment of a letter; the shutting or opening of a door; a shadow on a window-blind; the accuracy of a moment; a thousand circumstances so slight as to be forgotten by the criminal, but links of steel in the wonderful chain forged by the science of the detective officer; and lo! the gallows is built up; the solemn bell tolls through the dismal grey of the early morning; the drop creaks under the guilty feet; and the penalty of crime is paid" (Braddon 152).

Materiality is essential to most of Robert's discussion of circumstantial evidence; he first identifies it as a "wonderful fabric," a phrase that gives a physical tactility and weight to the abstract concept that he is explaining to his aunt (as well as referencing the cotton and linen rags that were used in the paper industry). This cohesive fabric is made up of

fragments that are inherently ephemeral while also asserting a concrete, material nature. Maia McAleavey identifies the mixed metaphors that Braddon uses, particularly in relation to the "page," as a way to "construct a spatial rather than temporal relationship between past and present" (153). This use of materiality helps to construct the plot in a material rather than just a narratological way, emphasizing the role the letters play as individualized and evidentiary objects.

Ann-Marie Dunbar identifies circumstantial evidence as a form particular to the sensation novel claiming that, "The use of circumstantial evidence signaled a movement away from direct testimony—eyewitness testimony and confession….In other words, first-person knowledge of an event was replaced with expert interpretation" (99). I propose that the materiality of the evidence, as opposed to mere interpretation of the evidence, helps us see sensation fiction as a mattered, material fictional reality, where material evidence replaces the eyewitness as fictional objects lend weight to the threads Robert traces throughout the novel. He runs through a list of possible objects and actions that could help a "detective officer" in his work, including two that have already been helpful in his own search for his missing friend: "a scrap of paper" and "the fragment of a letter." While this passage serves as a warning to Lady Audley, as well as a rather questionable account of how evidence might work in a nineteenth-century legal case, it continues the work of the cabinet, letters, and pigeon-holes that helped establish the centrality of object to the novel two chapters previously.

All of these small objects and words or actions come together to create a "fabric" of evidence that then leads to "links of steel" and builds a gallows to execute the accused

criminal. The objects' ability to accuse and incriminate the guilty party seems to exist in their unity—objects or parts of objects work together to form an overwhelming material presence against the accused. The detective officer, though he may put the pieces together, is merely the vehicle for the chain of evidence that eventually emerges. The objects implicate the criminal, rather than the person who gathers the objects together. The burden of proof is on the objects as agents rather than on the detective as interpreter, a paradigm shift that recognizes the agentic nature of things and lessens the role of the human. This material agency in the role of justice exonerates Robert from any guilt he may be feeling about looking into the possible culpability of his uncle's wife and centralizes the role of the object as the evidence leads to material creations and outcomes. The essentialness of the paper objects Robert is gathering is reflected in this passage as they remain the only tangible proof he is able to track and find as he attempts to unravel the mystery surrounding his friend's disappearance.

The physical nature of the evidence that Robert gathers is not enough, however, to provide him with all the answers that he is looking for. The materiality is further enhanced by individual particularity, especially in regards to handwriting. Lady Audley's handwriting, which was so remarked upon by both Alicia and Robert, is obviously distinctive and could, therefore, be used as a means of identification. Nineteenth-century handwriting was a handwriting in transition, from the more formal copperplate of the eighteenth century, to the more legible system designed by Vere Foster in mid-century and eventually adopted by the civil service in England (Hensher 68-69). In both fiction and etiquette manuals, however, ladies' handwriting was consistently maligned as

illegible. The anonymous author of *The English Gentlewoman or, A Practical Manual for Young Ladies* (1849), claims that "women are addicted to writing a fair, illegible hand, fine to look upon but woeful to read," and Robert describes female handwriting below as "the usual womanly scrawl" (197; Braddon 171). The particularity of Lady Audley's handwriting, a material expression of individual embodiment, becomes damningly identifiable because of its legibility and distinctive style. Lady Audley herself inquires whether Robert has ever seen a letter from George's late wife when he intimates his intention to look through George's effects to see if they could provide any more information:

> "Have you ever seen any of the letters written by the late Mrs. Talboys?" she asked presently.
>
> "Never. Poor soul! her letters are not likely to throw much light upon my friend's fate. I dare say she wrote the usual womanly scrawl. There are very few who write so charming and uncommon a hand as yours, Lady Audley."
>
> "Ah, you know my hand of course."
>
> "Yes, I know it very well, indeed." (Braddon 171)

More than a merely agentic or evidentiary object, the letters that Robert seeks are individualized objects that bear the marks of their creators. Unlike the more anonymous written messages such as the telegram, the letters may reveal who wrote them, despite Robert's disparaging comment about women's handwriting, which really only serves to throw Lady Audley's own charming handwriting into relief. Robert is never able to see the letters that Helen Talboys had written because Lady Audley, knowing the distinctive

nature of her handwriting, circumvents the barrister and manages to have the letters stolen so that they are never actually seen in the text.

Lady Audley's orchestration of the theft of her letters creates an absence in the material world of the novel. Ideas of absence and presence are inherent in letters: Shelston claims that letters "record absences…the call for a letter only arises when one of the parties involved is separated from the other" (49).[48] Initially written in response to George's absence, Helen Talboys's letters have to be made doubly absent to cover for Lady Audley's secret identity. Helen Talboys's letters were stolen and destroyed on the orders of Lady Audley in an instance of a human circumventing the exposing role of an object. This type of intervention is unusual in that it is effectively used against the protagonist; successful destruction of letters in the nineteenth century novel is usually instigated by the protagonist in a planned moment of protection or privacy, such as Miss Matty's destruction of her family's correspondence in *Cranford*. Lady Audley's destructive intervention even goes against conventional uses of letters in sensation novels, described by Mariaconcetta Costantini as "exploit[ing] the subversive potential of letters for a common aim: that of unveiling the dangers lurking beneath the apparently safe façade of bourgeois respectability" (9). When the letters are taken out of play, however, a new paper object inserts itself into the narrative in the character of George's books. Though the books are "no very brilliant collection of literature," they are individualized objects through the descriptions they bear. The fateful inscription, in an easily recognizable hand, is found in an annual from 1845: "The third paragraph was

[48] For a more philosophical discussion of absence and presence in writing, see Derrida 129-160.

dated September, 1853, and was in the hand of Helen Maldon, who gave the annual to George Talboys; and it was at the sight of this third paragraph that Mr. Robert Audley's face changed from its natural hue to a sickly, leaden pallor" (Braddon 185). Lady Audley's handwriting, which has acted as a metonym for her character throughout the novel, here becomes proof of a shared graphological identity between Helen Talboys and Lady Audley.

With a sample of Lady Audley's handwriting, the definitive piece of evidence that Robert needs in order to prove that Lucy Audley neé Graham was once Helen Talboys is not a letter, per se, but is yet another paper object: a forgotten, pasted-over trunk label. Robert finds the label at the home of former employer of his aunt's, in a failed palimpsestic attempt to obscure her original identity:

> The only direction which had not been either defaced or torn away was the last, which bore the name of Miss Graham, passenger to London. Looking very closely at this label, Mr. Audley discovered that it had been pasted over another…He damped the upper label several times before he could loosen the edges of the paper; but after two or three careful attempts, the moistened surface peeled off without injury to the underneath address….Mr. Audley repeated his operations upon the lower label, which he removed from the box, and placed very carefully between two blank leaves of his pocket-book. (Braddon 257)

The insistent permanence of the active object cannot be obscured by human machinations in the novel. Lady Audley, despite her ability to destroy her earlier letters, is unable to fully anticipate the influence of the written label. The power of the evidentiary object in

Lady Audley's Secret is not limited or connected to the will of the writer, but operates in its own pattern of morality and exposure. The trunk label in the novel is in contradisctinction to the buried letters in *Villette*: Lucy Snowe is able to distance herself from the manipulative power of Dr. John's letters while Lady Audley succumbs to the active exposure of paper ephemera despite her attempts to destroy it. McAleavey characterizes these ephemeral paper objects as the "irrefutable detritus of a discarded past life" (136). The individualized, evidentiary objects of Lady Audley's paper trails resists destruction in order to preserve its own identity as well as that of the person who created them.

Paper, and the power it holds, results in the eventual resolution of the novel. This resolution occurs in a perfect flurry of letters, but the two of most import are the letters written by George Talboys explaining the circumstances of his disappearance and held by Luke Marks for the remainder of the novel. Just as the novel is set into motion by the advertisement George reads in the paper, the mystery of the novel is concluded by the written word:

> They were two leaves torn out of pocket-book, and they were written upon in pencil, and in a hand-writing that was quite strange to Mr. Audley. A cramped, stiff and yet scrawling hand, such as some ploughman might have written.
>
> "I don't know this writing," Robert said, as he eagerly unfolded the first of the two papers, "What has this to do with my friend? Why do you show me these? (Braddon 423)

Before he has read the content, Robert is concerned by his inability to identify the handwriting. With the emphasis placed on Lady Audley's handwriting and its role in uncovering her deceptions, the unrecognized hand brings with it questions of reliability and authenticity. Even when the content is read, Robert still questions the veracity of the objects:

> Robert Audley sat staring at these lines in hopeless bewilderment. They were not in his friend's familiar hand; and yet they purported to be written by him, and were signed with his initials.
>
> He looked scrutinisingly at the face of Luke Marks, thinking that perhaps some trick was being played upon him.
>
> "This was not written by George Talboys," he said.
>
> "It was," answered Luke Marks, "it was written by Mr. Talboys, every line of it; he wrote it with his own hand; but it was his left hand, for he couldn't use his right because of his broken arm."
>
> Robert looked up suddenly, and the shadow of suspicion passed away from him face. (Braddon 424)

Just as Lady Audley's dainty handwriting and creamy letter paper were able to evoke her feathery gold curls and charming smile, George's handwriting reflects his physical body. But rather than reflecting the strong, healthy friend that Robert was searching for, the letters encapsulate the physical reality of the moment when they were written. George's handwriting is not recognizable because he wrote the letters with his left hand due to a broken right arm, an anomaly that is allowed because it can be traced to the altered

physical state of the writer. Mental, rather than physical transformations, are not reflected in writing in the same way. Lady Audley's handwriting does not change over time, space, or identities, though her physical circumstances as she moves around the country and up the social ladder seem to be at least as disruptive as George's trip down the well. Though this passage points towards a dubiously gendered mattering, it is the paper's ability to restore equanimity that is essential at the end of the novel. George's letters, with their traces of the human body in the unrecognizable handwriting, and their concrete appearance at the opportune moment, serve as the final individualized and evidentiary objects, closing a circuit of power and discovery that began with the newspaper account of Helen Talboys's death.

The permanently ephemeral nature of the paper object in the Victorian novel exists in patterns of power and desire, especially between writer and recipient. These objects, in their resistance to destruction, exposure of physical and emotional identity, and ability to influence the texts which they inhabit, exist within a network of material power in the representative reality of their parent texts. No longer the mere product of the human writer, fictional letters are material players in the immaterial world of nineteenth-century fiction, forging new networks of power and influence that are rooted in active and vital representative matter.

CODA

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
Will 't please you sit and look at her? I said
"Frà Pandolf" by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to myself they turned (since none puts by
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there; so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 't was not
Her husband's presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps
Frà Pandolf chanced to say "Her mantle laps
Over my lady's wrist too much," or "Paint
Must never hope to reproduce the faint
Half-flush that dies along her throat:" such stuff
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
For calling up that spot of joy. She had
A heart—how shall I say?—too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
Sir, 't was all one! My favour at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace—all and each
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
Or blush, at least. She thanked men,—good! But thanked
Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
In speech—(which I have not)—to make your will
Quite clear to such an one, and say, "Just this
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
Or there exceed the mark"—and if she let
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
Her wit to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,
—E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose

Never to stoop. Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet
The company below, then. I repeat,
The Count your master's known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretence
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

---"My Last Duchess," Robert Browning

The scholarship surrounding Victorian objects has, perhaps, been unduly focused on the novels full of stuff that typically characterize the century's relationship to things. Yet an active materiality exists at the heart of one of the nineteenth-century's most recognizable poems, Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess." The poem is notorious for its callous narrator, the tragic fate of the duke's previous wife, and the questionable future of his next marriage alliance, but it is anchored by the portrait of the duke's first wife and its imperviousness to his manipulations and its resistance to eradication. Throughout the poem, from the proprietary opening lines, to the museum-like conditions of the portrait's exhibition, the duke and the portrait are the center of a struggle for power. In a recuperative alliance, similar to that seen in Rossetti's sonnet, the object of the portrait works with its represented subject to overthrow the patriarchal power structure it exists within. The material world that the portrait creates proposes a democratic partnership between object and the represented subject in a relationship that is challenged but not

defeated by the duke. Unlike the rest of the texts and objects addressed in this project, the portrait at the heart of "My Last Duchess" is not contextualized in a nineteenth-century setting. Thus, agentic fictional matter is not bound to the nineteenth century, but continues to materialize through language, despite the historical setting.

The poem opens with the duke exhibiting a painting of his late wife: "That's *my* last Duchess, painted on the wall" (Browning 83, emphasis mine). In this phrase, the speaker establishes his right to ownership over both the person and the painting. The two are fused in this opening phrase, with no distinction being made between the human subject and the physical object. This early lack of distinction characterizes the double nature of the portrait throughout the rest of the poem. As the duke vacillates between describing the painting and describing his wife, the portrait embodies them both. The duke treats them interchangeably as objects to be manipulated and controlled. Emphasizing the "my" of the opening establishes ownership as a central theme—what matters here is not so much the painting he is showing a guest but the fact that he *owns* the painting and the figure it depicts. Ownership implies control and so the duke reiterates his possession of the portrait despite the fact that it increasingly moves out his control throughout the poem.

The portrait, as a work of art, is not described in great detail. It lacks the exploration of the creative process of the portraits in *Jane Eyre*, or the multiple descriptions of poses and identities in Rossetti's "In an Artist's Studio." The duke gives the portrait a truncated creative chronology, explaining that "Frà Pandolf's hands /

Worked busily a day, and there she stands" (Browning 83).[49] Browning then uses a series of actions to create the object of the portrait and convince the reader of its materiality before describing one small, but essential, aspect of the object. The duke, while initially describing the portrait, focuses his descriptive powers on the subject of the portrait rather than the object itself. The duke asks his silent audience, "Will't please you sit and look at her?" (Browning 83). This simple question creates a representatively material world in which the portrait exists both as a singular object and as part of a physical environment that includes an embodied audience. The three-dimensionality of a body that can sit on a bench or a chair in order to gaze at the portrait creates an immediate physical world in which the portrait materializes. While the details of the space in which the portrait hangs remain ambiguous, L. M. Miller has argued convincingly that, "The most appropriate position for a portrait curtained for reasons of jealous possessiveness, conservation, and censorship would be in the private ducal apartments" (192). He goes on to identify "the Duke's studiolo" as the setting for the poem claiming that, "The studiolo was the sanctum of the master and housed his collection of fine paintings, books, manuscripts, antique and neo-classical bronzes, medals, and other objects of *virtu*" (192). Miller's argument helps to lend concrete detail to the type of environment the portrait is represented as inhabiting, building a museum-like setting that compliments James Heffernan's reading of the duke as "the prototype of the modern museum director" (141). All of these material elements, from the imagined body of the audience, to various interpretations of the space in which

[49] The rapid execution of the portrait has engendered discussion as to what type of painting the poem represents. For discussions of various types of paintings possible see Miller 188- 203, and Jerman 488-493.

the portrait exists, work together to create a representative environment where the portrait can strongly materialize.

Three-dimensionality is granted to the representation of the portrait itself a few lines later when the reader learns that a curtain covers the portrait; the duke claims "none puts by / The curtain I have drawn for you, but I" (Browning 83). Just as St. John Rivers uses a sheet of paper to cut himself off from the portrait of Rosamond Oliver in *Jane Eyre* in order to curb his natural propensity towards her, the duke utilizes a curtain to contain the portrait of his late wife (Brontë 376). These portrait covers works to establish the material existence of the portraits in each text—something cannot be covered if it is not tangibly present in the literary space—while also being utilized as symbols of control by male operators.[50] Covering, or in any way denying the visual presence and power of a portrait, paradoxically contributes to the material presence of the actual object. The portrait in Browning's dramatic monologue, though it is covered when the poem starts and ostensibly covered again at the end of the poem, does not disappear or fade into the background materiality of the text. The object remains tenaciously present in the text, mirroring the resistant presence of its subject.

The poem offers only the briefest visual description of the portrait's subject, offering the reader the vague detail of "a pictured countenance" with an "earnest glance" before begrudgingly doling out details such as a "spot / of joy" on the Duchess's face, or the way her mantle falls over her wrist (Browning 83). After this parsimonious description of the painted subject, the duke shifts his monologue from the portrait as an

[50] See Scarry 7, 17 for a discussion of how authors create solidity within texts.

object to his late wife's character, attempting to subsume the resistant object through fault and memory. He indicts the duchess on the basis of her personality: "She had / A heart—how shall I say?—too soon made glad, / Too easily impressed; she liked what'er / She looked on, and her looks went everywhere" (Browning 83). The duchess's faults seem to be matters of generosity and kindness (if read positively), or perhaps flirtatiousness (if read negatively). One of the more intriguing aspects of the duke, however, is his inability to fully articulate what it is about his wife—and by extension, her portrait—that so displeases him. Heffernan examines this inarticulateness through the lens of rhetoric and domination:

> On the surface at least, this master of rhetorical manipulation sounds supremely in control.
>
> What he actually expresses, however, is the *will* to sound controlling, to dominate the picture with his words. His failure to dominate it—more precisely to dominate the person it represents—emerges plainly in the middle of the poem, where he repeatedly interrupts himself with commonplace interjections about his own incapacity to explain or regulate the duchess's character… (142)

The duke continues in this vein, interrupting his exposition to his silent audience several times: "She thanked me,—good! but thanked / Somehow—I know not how— / …Even had you skill / In speech—(which I have not)—" (Browning 83-84). In the face of the steadfastly representative portrait, the duke's linguistic control begins to slip. Heffernan argues that the "instability of his language…shows only too clearly that he has not destroyed the power of her glance" (144). This analysis is apt and helps the reader see the

power exerted by the largely invisible portrait and its conflation with its human subject. As the duke begins to fall apart at the level of language, the portrait maintains its unblemished surface.

The portrait retains the precise moment of the duke's displeasure in its depiction of its human subject but it is, intriguingly, not locked in stasis. Despite the duke's best efforts to obscure the duchess's representation by curtains or his own jealous narrative, the portrait keeps her constantly present and gestures towards an unbroken future of insistent materiality. Even with its almost invisible visuality in the text, the portrait consistently draws the reader's attention back to its presence through the duke's language, the silence of the audience, and the setting that establishes its reality in the poem. The painting of the duchess does not rely on visual aspects or description but on the fictional object of the portrait in its concrete physicality that is established through several other registers in the text, allowing it to occupy a central and prominent position of power.

The duke bookends his exhibition of the portrait of the duchess with the phrase: "As if she were alive" (Browning 83-84). The first time he uses this phrase is in the first two lines: "That's my last Duchess painted on the wall, / looking as if she were alive" (83); the second time comes towards the end of the poem when the duke draws his audience's attention back to the business at hand by attempting to dismiss the portrait with the repeated phrase, "There she stands / As if alive" (Browning 84). The portrait has allowed for a suspension of time by effectively pausing the duke's new marriage arrangements while he exhibits the portrait. The object also more generally suspends time

by bringing into play ideas of mortality and immortality, particularly in the duke's phrase "as if." The duke's overt machinations of control expose a fear of his own mortality, the death he ordered, and the perceived immortality of his wife's personality through the representative materiality of the portrait. He acknowledges the uneasiness he feels surrounding questions of life and death in the poem by dropping the word "looking" from the second iteration of the phrase. As the end of the poem, the duchess no longer merely *looks* as if she were alive, but "stands / as if alive," a powerful testament to the active nature of the portrait in its representation of the duchess. By dropping the verb "looking," the duke acknowledges the independence of the portrait in its refusal to merely represent its subject.

The poem ends with a return to the proprietary, curatorial nature of the duke as he remains oblivious to the ways in which the portrait exposes his weaknesses. He says, almost as an aside, as he and the envoy descend the stairs, "Notice Neptune, though, / Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity, / Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!" (Browning 84). The duke attempts to regain control over the art objects he collects by drawing his guest's attention to a sculpture that has none of the agency that the portrait possesses. The scene captured in bronze is one of domination and control, a sculptural representation of the reality the duke is attempting to create in his relationship to the duchess's portrait. The sentence also ends with a return to the possessive that characterizes the beginning of the poem; Browning's choice to end the poem on the pronoun "me" appears to re-center the text on the duke and his ability to possess any one and any thing that he desires. But the mattered world that the portrait has helped to create

cannot be so easily set aside. Having been created through language, movement, and the construction of a representative three-dimensional environment, the portrait, despite the poem's shift away from it and back to the duke, tugs at the reader's awareness. The duke and his guest depart at the end of the poem, but as soon as the duke stops speaking, the reader ceases to follow his movements. Instead, the reader it left in the hall containing the portrait that refuses to be manipulated through domination or to disappear along with the duke. The materiality of the fictional object continues on even after the text has ended, encouraging the reader to consider the ways in which fictional objects create and maintain physicality within their parent texts.

The portrait in Browning's "My Last Duchess," in its representation of fictional matter, encourages a new way of reading Victorian literature that does not privilege the human speaker, author, or reader but follows the emerging materiality of the fictional object. This linguistic mattering creates a richer, deeper narrative world that is awash in possibility and potentiality. No longer dominated by representations of the human, fictional objects create mattered worlds that offer a new reality in which to create more balanced futures. The portrait's resistances to abuses of male power in "My Last Duchess," is paradigmatic of the ways in which fictional objects in the nineteenth century can work to recognize and suspend manipulation and dominance. By taking the object out of the nineteenth century, this poem offers a more universal approach to the fictional object and the necessity of materially-centered reading across time and space.

Though this project was conceptualized as a Victorian project due to the patterns of appearance and recurrence of objects within nineteenth-century literature, it offers a

model of reading that encourages the acknowledgement of the multivalent actors that populate fictional realities and the ways in which mattered agency may influence our own realities. By de-centering the human, materially centered reading recognizes formerly silenced or marginalized objects within texts. This same consideration, when applied to our own realities, begs the question of who or what has not been acknowledged as active and independent? And can a mattered awareness change the ways in which we interact with those—people and things—that have been denied agency? The vitality of fictional matter is insistent in the texts this project has addressed; once the human reader's perspective has shifted from the primacy of the human character to the assemblage of actors that make up a text, the material skeleton never again recedes into the background of the narrative, creating a differently structured story world. In an increasingly divisive world, this same restructuring is necessary, if not imperative, in our actual material relationships if we hope to continue mattering in responsible, inclusive ways.

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