Introduction

> What is SELF? … the representation of an integral individual human being—the organisation of a certain fabric of flesh and blood, biassed [*sic*], perhaps, originally by the attributes and peculiarities of the fabric itself—by hereditary predispositions, by nervous idiosyncrasies, by cerebral developments, by slow or quick action of the pulse, by all in which mind takes a shape from the mould of the body;—but still a Self which, in every sane constitution, can be changed or modified from the original bias, by circumstance, by culture, by reflection, by will, by conscience, through means of the unseen inhabitant of the fabric.[1]
>
> (Edward Bulwer-Lytton, 'On self-control', 1863)

Caxtoniana: A Series of Essays on Life, Literature, and Manners, by the popular and prolific novelist Edward Bulwer-Lytton, was serialised in twenty monthly parts in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* between February 1862 and October 1863.[2] In it Bulwer-Lytton offers reflection, advice and opinions on (as the accommodating subtitle suggests) eclectic topics, from the everyday to the philosophical, often both within the same piece. 'On self-control' is one such essay, which uses examples of historical figures to illustrate what Bulwer-Lytton considered to be the true nature of self-discipline. Bulwer-Lytton acknowledges, however, that before he can discuss the control of the self, he must first ask what "Self" is.

This question – 'What is Self?' – was certainly not a new one, but the way in which it interested, preoccupied, and troubled many Victorian thinkers was clearly influenced by their particular socio-historical moment. Both the contemplation of the question and its numerous possible answers were prompted by, and had an impact on, social developments and changes that took place throughout the Victorian period. As in Bulwer-Lytton's essay, the question could arise from the most practical and everyday issues – here the matter of personal conduct. The relevance

and context of the question itself changed as social, scientific and religious transformations meant that conceptions and theories of self were contested, altered and created throughout the century. How the self was perceived could radically influence how it was seen to be integrated within its immediate environment and within vaster schemes, both spiritual and secular. So by asking 'What is Self?', the Victorians were asking not simply about individual ontology, but about the multiple complex networks in which they were enmeshed.

Questions of the nature of the "Self" were intimately connected to questions of the extent to which the self was either fixed or malleable, and the forces to which it might be subject. To what extent, it was asked, were humans able to control their actions and desires, to exert free will and thereby be responsible for their own behaviour? Were people at the mercy of their biological composition, their inherited characteristics, their upbringing, their inherent intellect (or lack thereof)? Or were they free, and therefore accountable beings who could make choices and act upon them without constraint? The degree to which individuals could be improved or spoiled not only by their own actions, but by those of the people around them, and by their environment, was also of great importance: what individuals *necessarily* were, and what they *could* be, was vital not only to each person, but to the family unit, wider communities and the nation.

Bulwer-Lytton's own response to 'What is Self?' exemplifies how interrogating the nature of the self inevitably entails some consideration of its creation and development. Whilst not suggesting that the self is a purely physical entity, Bulwer-Lytton defines it in 'flesh and blood' terms of hereditary transmission, the cerebral and nervous systems, and the circulation of blood through the body, all of which may affect the developing 'mind'. He is therefore acknowledging that physiological constitution is a fundamental, formative part of each individual. At the same time this self is modifiable by the influence of external forces such as 'circumstance' and 'culture', and of internal, non-physical forces such as 'reflection', 'will', 'conscience' and 'the unseen inhabitant of the fabric', which we may think of as soul or mind. Ultimately, according to Bulwer-Lytton, that 'complex unity' which comprises 'Self' is alterable and manipulable by those around it and through *self*-modification. It is with such internal and external influences, how the mid-Victorians perceived them and how they were represented in popular fiction, that this book is concerned.

As Heidi Rimke and Alan Hunt observe, many Victorians believed, like Bulwer-Lytton, that the various aspects that made up a human personality were modifiable:

> Despite their variant conceptualizations the will, the passions, the soul and the character share the crucial attribute of being suitable objects of governance; they can be worked upon, trained, developed and thus reformed. It is of particular significance to note that the governance of the will can be effected either by individuals themselves or by others; that is, their governance can be both internal and external.[3]

The majority of the mid-Victorian men and women who wrote about the nature of selfhood, including many of those introduced in the following pages, attached great importance to the individual's potential for free will. They held compatibilist views that acknowledged to a greater or lesser extent the many deterministic factors that played on the development of each individual whilst maintaining a belief in the freedom of the willpower to dictate behaviour responsibly. Yet the will itself was something to be cultivated and strengthened; this was crucial because the will was believed to control the passions and regulate the conscious behaviour of the individual.

The raising of people who were capable of self-control, of acting as responsible beings, was often a key concern to those Victorians engaged in the formation of social policy. It was hoped that by employing the correct external determining forces from an early enough age, internal governance could be developed to the point where it could reliably guarantee acceptable personal conduct. Pamela K. Gilbert has demonstrated, for example, how Victorian housing and sanitary reform was based on the belief 'that character is created in the home', and so aimed to make the poorest classes suitable for citizenship by altering their domestic desires and behaviour so as to render them more congruent with those of the bourgeoisie.[4] Left to themselves, the poor were not deemed capable of self-control or self-improvement – their self-determining actions were not to be relied upon, their wills would pursue the wrong desires – and so it was deemed necessary for the State to take a deterministic role in the management of their lives.

Both the above quotations from Bulwer-Lytton and Rimke and Hunt include reference to the influence of what can usefully be called "nurture" on "nature", and of external influences on internal constitution. However, the Victorians who thought and wrote on this subject

rarely reduced it to a simple battle between nature and nurture or the internal and the external. The interplay between nature and nurture was acknowledged to be complex and often impossible to disentangle, with the channels of influence working in both directions. The very words that are used to talk about these factors can be tricky. The definition of the word "nature", for example, and what it meant to different Victorians in any particular instance, is debatable: it could be synonymous with "congenital", but it was also frequently observed that nature, or what was natural to a person, could change (or be changed) as a result of behaviour dictated by environmental and social influences. This understanding filtered through all levels of society throughout the period. The morally improving *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal* reminded readers in 1849 that 'habit … being second nature, is still more difficult to overcome than nature itself', but went on to assert that habit could also have 'corrective properties'.[5] In 1889 the penny periodical the *London Journal* explained to its readers that 'men of great fortune' continue to work, rather than 'resting and enjoying themselves', because 'long habit becomes a second nature' and they would view rest as 'the severest punishment'.[6] Meanwhile, the more highbrow *Contemporary Review* ran articles on topics such as 'the hereditary transmission of acquired Habits' that became 'secondary instincts' that could then be passed on to the next generation.[7] The term "circumstance" also carried various meanings in relation to both nature and nurture; it could mean the conditions of one's birth (from physical health, to inherited features of body or mind, to social class and prospects) or the many environmental factors that could have an impact on one's life (such as upbringing, education, income and so on). Although there is often a tacit understanding of what is intended by such words, they can become slippery when meanings elide, mutate and carry ambiguous or multiple connotations.

Although desirable or detrimental inherent traits might be respectively enhanced or counteracted by external influences, Victorian theorists were aware that there were factors at work that could contradict or overpower any efforts they made to determine the outcome of an individual's development. The inexorable forces of heredity, of inherent constitution, and of social and environmental circumstance could assert themselves in unpredictable and unwelcome ways. The developing personality of an individual was therefore a site of potential danger and vulnerability, as well as opportunity.

The sensation novel

Bulwer-Lytton's 'On self-control' is just one example of a popular nineteenth-century author displaying interest in issues relating to determinism. Sensation fiction, the controversial literary genre that dominated the scene in the 1860s, contains numerous representations of deterministic forces that are variously internal and external, naturally arising and socially engineered, complementary and conflicting. Sensation fiction was a genre that engaged with current and provocative issues, including many of those that sparked discussions about determinism and character formation in Victorian society, such as class relations, gender roles, the diagnosis and treatment of insanity, educational reform, and the ethos of self-help. The two leading sensation authors of the 1860s with whose work this book is concerned, Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Wilkie Collins, were both popular and prolific; their widespread appeal meant that readers from all levels of society were exposed to their portrayals of character formation.[8]

Yet the very popularity of the sensation genre generated criticism. With its staple attributes of crime, murder, adultery and bigamy, all taking place in the supposed sanctity of the domestic sphere, sensation fiction was contentious, censured as commercial, plot-driven and cheaply playing on the senses of the reader. Whereas "respectable" literature could be highly valued as 'at once the cause and the effect of social progress',[9] sensation fiction was, as numerous critics have observed, 'seen to be symptomatic of the degeneration, not only of literature, but also of moral values'.[10] In fact it was believed to be not only an effect, but also a cause of moral corruption: 'there were very real concerns that readers – particularly female readers – would be adversely influenced by the amoral characters to be found in these works' (Maunder and Moore, 'Introduction', p. 5). Reviews of sensation fiction were not uniformly damning,[11] but Braddon and Collins regularly received harsh criticism. The *Athenaeum*, for example, described Collins's *Basil* (1852) as:

> a piece of romantic sensibility,—challenging success by its constant appeal to emotion, and by the rapid vehemence of its highly wrought rhetoric … The style of 'Basil' is as eloquent and graceful as its subject is faulty and unwholesome. There is a gushing force in his words, a natural outpouring of his sensibility, a harmony, tone, and *verve* in his language.[12]

Similarly, John Dennis writing for the *Fortnightly Review* in 1865 claimed that

> Cleverness, indeed, is perhaps the most striking characteristic of [Braddon's] tales. They are defective as works of art, their moral tone is seldom healthy, they abound with errors of composition and improbabilities of plot; but they display so much ability that the reader willingly overlooks deficiencies, and is satisfied to be excited and amused.[13]

Both reviewers acknowledge the engaging, amusing nature of sensational writing, but these very attributes make it a seductively dangerous form of moral corruption. Such reviews figure sensation fiction itself as a kind of negative determinant, corrupting the populace.

Contrastingly, the critical reappraisal of sensation fiction, which began in the late twentieth century, reframed it, and the journals that carried it, as a genre that served the positive end of educating readers, training them to be discerning and reflective thinkers who would interpret perceptively. Solveig C. Robinson, for example, asserts that *Belgravia* (edited by Braddon) aimed to raise 'readers' tastes', and that 'Braddon drove home the point that *popular* taste didn't necessarily have to mean *bad* taste', whilst Jennifer Phegley argues that family literary magazines such as *Belgravia* 'empowered women to make their own decisions about what and how to read'.[14] From this perspective, sensation fiction is a positive influence.

As well as being morally ambiguous, sensation fiction has often been seen to consist largely of "novels of circumstance", which privilege 'the supremacy of the story', as opposed to Victorian realist fiction's supposedly superior "novels of character".[15] In literary criticism, determinism has traditionally been closely related to realism, particularly with the works of George Eliot.[16] Realism is generally associated with the careful drawing of psychologically nuanced personalities embedded in detailed social networks, whose behaviour leads to logical consequences that are made evident to the reader by an omniscient narrator. Sensation fiction, contrastingly, deals in chance, wild coincidences, the playing out of providential design or the forces of Fate, and is broadly seen as "oppositional" to realism.[17] As Patrick Brantlinger has observed, 'the world of … the sensation novel is very much one in which circumstances rule characters, propelling them through the intricate machinations of plots that act like fate'.[18]

As part of the disparagement of sensation fiction's 'subordination of character to plot' (Brantlinger, p. 12), Victorian reviewers often dismissed

its characters as sketchy, improbable and unconvincing. For example, one critic complained that Braddon's fiction contained 'no real thought, no analysis that is worth the name, no insight into human nature. Everything is shallow and thin. Her men and women are puppets.'[19] Dennis similarly declared that the actions of Braddon's characters were 'marked by the wildest improbability, and it is essential to the plot that they should be', adding that 'in novels of the class represented by Miss Braddon, we look more for an exciting story than for a careful and consistent delineation of character' (p. 512). W. F. Rae, writing for the *North British Review*, dismissed Olivia in *John Marchmont's Legacy* (1863) as 'but a creature of Miss Braddon's imagination … as unreal as a hobgoblin' (p. 195). Braddon was aware of this perception of her work. Writing to Bulwer-Lytton, her literary mentor, about *John Marchmont's Legacy*, she claimed that she had tried to write a novel in which 'the story arises naturally out of the characters of the actors in it, as contrasted with a novel in which the actors are only marionettes, the slaves of the story', but went on to admit regretfully that 'even my kindest reviewers tell me that it is not so and that the characters break down when the story begins'.[20] H. F. Chorley, one of Collins's most caustic critics, regarded such subjecting of character to plot as a sign of moral and literary laxity: 'Those who make plot their first consideration and humanity the second,—those, again, who represent the decencies of life as too often so many hypocrisies,—have placed themselves in a groove which goes, and must go, in a downward direction, whether as regards fiction or morals.'[21]

Whereas Chorley felt that Collins's prioritisation of plot indicated a subordination of 'humanity' as a theme, reading Collins's and Braddon's fiction in the light of contemporaneous theories of determinism offers an alternative interpretation of their emphasis on plot. Their stories can be read as an acknowledgement of the interplay of determining factors that lead individuals into certain situations (perhaps that of the jilted lover or the disinherited child), and dictate how they will act in those situations (with saint-like resignation, resolute defiance or seditious plotting). Like the works of many contemporary scientists and physicians, Braddon's and Collins's fiction reveals a conflict between a conception of the will as a decisive force and an awareness that a person's personality, abilities and actions are dictated by determining factors over which they have little or no control. This book highlights sensation fiction's attentiveness to the impact of uncontrollable circumstance on the development of the personality, and to the unpredictable external forces that may ensnare and control the individual. Rather than failing to consider

humanity adequately, as Chorley claimed, sensation fiction's emphasis on plot can be interpreted as considering the human condition in a manner that acknowledges that a combination of internal and external pressures drive the individual through life, often precluding the possibility of truly independent action.

Supporters of sensation fiction frequently asserted claims to some form of realism in the genre. In a defence of Braddon and her work, George Augustus Sala argued that her novels are 'like dwellers in the actual, breathing world in which we live', and refers the reader to the sensational events related in newspapers and police reports as proof.[22] Brantlinger notes that because they drew on the scandalous, sensationally reported crimes of the day, sensation authors 'could even claim that to sensationalize was to be realistic' (p. 9). Sensation authors employ theories of character formation in the same way that they draw on the news for inspiration: to at once satisfy their readers' craving for what Braddon described as 'strong meat' and to provide some form of realism (Wolff, 'Devoted disciple', 9 December 1864, p. 28). As critics such as Sally Shuttleworth have acknowledged, although they wrote 'from a very different position within the cultural spectrum, and following very different generic rules … to very different effect', sensation authors often 'drew explicitly on the vocabulary and diagnoses of psychiatric discourse'.[23] For example, the distinctly unladylike, but very thrilling, behaviour of some sensational fictional heroines can be explained in the light of contemporary theories of female biology, and the shocking behaviour of sensational villains is often informed by theories of insanity and criminality.

The 'effect' created by sensation fiction that Shuttleworth mentions is in part a depiction of the self that conflicted with the image of the stable, predictable self, steadily and soberly revealed in realist fiction. This is the dominant critical interpretation of sensation fiction by its founding and foremost critics. It is seen as a genre that 'explicitly violated realism's formal rules of coherence and continuity and the psychological models of selfhood on which those works were founded. Disorder, discontinuity, and irresponsibility are the hallmarks of these feminine texts' (Shuttleworth, 'Preaching', p. 195). Jenny Bourne Taylor writes that 'In sensation fiction masks are rarely stripped off to reveal an inner truth, for the mask is both the transformed expression of the "true" self and the means of disclosing its incoherence.'[24] Lyn Pykett shows how Collins's fiction reveals gender to be 'not something natural and fixed, but produced and subject to change'.[25] More recently, Anne-Marie Beller has

shown how the process of detecting the secrets at the heart of sensation plots consistently involves the 'revelation of self-division and incoherence'.[26] Similarly, Kylee-Anne Hingston has read Collins's *No Name* as a novel in which 'stable identities and healthy bodies prove to be illusory', and Lilian Nayder agrees that 'sensation fiction destabilises social categories, treating identity as fluid'.[27]

I acknowledge that sensation fiction provides an unstable, fragmentary, alterable view of the self, but my focus is on how different determining factors are employed to create that view. As the following readings of Braddon and Collins show, they frequently provide clues to the reasons behind their characters' personalities, and lay the foundation for characters' actions by revealing details of family history, upbringing and inherent constitution. As well as drawing on recognised psychological states to explain characters' behaviour, Braddon and Collins often show how those states are brought into being. Maria K. Bachman observes that 'unlike Dickens, who uses caricatured figures for comic or bizarre effect, Collins explores the inner psyches of his mental deviants, examining what it means to be cast as "other" and relegated to the margins of society in Victorian England'.[28] It is important, taking this further, that both Collins and Braddon portray respectable people who *become* deviants; they are not simply looking at 'what it means' to be other, but how one may become that way. Characters in sensation fiction are portrayed equally as enmeshed in biological and social determinants as characters in realist novels.

My readings of Braddon and Collins also qualify the idea that sensation fiction 'highlights the uncertain relation between the outer and inner forms of selfhood' but without the 'possibility, as in realist fiction, of pursuing a course of revelation until the "true" self is unveiled' (Shuttleworth, 'Preaching', p. 196). Whilst in the course of a plot characters may undergo various transformations, there is often, in fact, an initial core of selfhood within each character (itself created by determinants such as hereditary transmission), with potential for development or ruin. Melynda Huskey does acknowledge that there is a 'self "underneath"' the 'public self' of the sensation heroine, but only uses this to point out the importance of 'double lives' in sensation fiction and goes on to emphasise 'the recreating and revising of female identity as an inexhaustible topos'.[29] Both Braddon and Collins tend to portray characters as possessing a particular set of traits (an original constitution, to use the physiological language of the period) that is then worked on – for better or worse – by circumstances throughout the novel.

Braddon and Collins display an alertness and receptivity to the major issues that raised awareness of, and led to engagement with, theories of character formation in the mid-Victorian period. Many of these issues are staples of the sensation genre that have proved popular with modern scholars, such as criminality, insanity, and the role of women in society: critical discussions that touch on character formation tend to do so whilst focusing on these other issues (as in the example of Gilbert above). John R. Reed has written an overview of the free-will debate in Victorian fiction, and some critics, such as Goldie Morgentaler, have explored one particular form of determinism.[30] *Creating Character* takes a different approach by foregrounding the multiple determining factors that are employed by Braddon and Collins, and exploring the numerous functions they can serve, including as a means of addressing other social issues. It also looks at how these sensational representations of character formation are rooted in, challenge and anticipate the ideas of the scientists, physicians and physiologists who were at the forefront of mid-Victorian deterministic thinking.

Victorian notions of character formation

Bulwer-Lytton's decision to describe the self in terms of mental and physical, internal and environmental deterministic forces is typical of many Victorians who addressed this subject either directly or indirectly, but such an approach was not unproblematic for them. Traditional Christian beliefs placed humankind as separate from, and superior to, the rest of the material world. Yet it became increasingly evident, and accepted, that such segregations could not be clearly maintained. In 1876 Thomas Henry Huxley, for example, observed that

> We have almost all been told, and most of us hold by the tradition, that man occupies an isolated and peculiar position in nature; that though he is in the world he is not of the world; that his relations to things about him are of a remote character; that his origin is recent, his duration likely to be short, and that he is the great central figure round which other things in this world revolve. But this is not what the biologist tells us.[31]

Huxley, rhetorically privileging the scientific knowledge of 'the biologist' (which is what, in fact, he was) over 'tradition', challenges the concept of man as a favoured being. In his depiction of the traditional view of humanity, Huxley purposely emphasises a dualist, Christian

perspective, in which 'man' refers to the spiritual aspect of each person that is 'in' but 'not of the world', and 'remote' from the physical environment. This physical environment includes the brain and body in which a person's soul or mind was believed to reside temporarily, a discrete non-worldly entity, 'ontologically distinct', as Rick Rylance puts it, and 'remote from the determinations of the body'.[32] As Huxley's speech above suggests, however, new theories and discoveries in biology, as well as (to name but a few) medical, geological and ethnological fields raised contentious questions about the position of man within the world, how he had come to be there and how much he could really be perceived as 'not of the world'.

The revelations of the biologist (and others) provoked a variety of responses, particularly in the periodical press as contributors reassessed (or actively refused to reassess) their views of the world and of themselves in the face of scientific developments. The distinguished Quarterlies both disseminated and contested new scientific theories. Responding to Charles Darwin's *The Descent of Man* (1871), the conservative *Quarterly Review* argued that 'man is the only rational [animal] known to us, and … his rationality constitutes a fundamental distinction – one of *kind* and not of *degree*', and went on to assert that man is 'also a free moral agent, and, as such—and with the infinite future such freedom opens out before him—differs from all the rest of the visible universe by a distinction so profound that none of those which separate other visible beings is comparable with it'.[33] The article reflects Huxley's description of the traditional view of man, explicitly separating him from the rest of the 'visible' world and awarding him a privileged position, unattainable by other creatures.

Whilst such debate was often conducted in the Quarterlies and upmarket periodicals, other journals also engaged with these deliberations over the nature of humankind and its position in the world. One article in Braddon's middle-brow *Belgravia* (so named as 'bait for the shillings of Brixton & Bow'; Wolff, 'Devoted disciple', 9 August, 1866, p. 138), addresses the 'extreme' views of modern culture, and observes that we 'are even told that Christianity must soon be abolished, and retreat before the superior sciences of sociology and biology'. The article also points out that reformers 'tell us that, having progressed from a brutish and barbarous state, we have our golden age to come', linking the revelations of science to a revaluation of man's level of development and position in the world.[34]

Whilst such works as those mentioned above draw a distinction between the traditional Christian and scientific ways of viewing humanity, the divide was rarely so clear-cut, so 'extreme', even for 'the biologist'. The eminent mid-nineteenth-century physiologist William Benjamin Carpenter is one significant example. Carpenter wrote numerous well-respected physiological works, medical textbooks and periodical articles for educated laypersons. Reed identifies some of the problems people such as Carpenter faced: 'at the same time that scientific studies were lending apparent proof to the theory that man was on an ascending plane of progress, they were presenting unwelcome evidences of man's bondage to the earth' (p. 184). Whilst Carpenter did not allow new discoveries and ideas to shake his Unitarian faith, he acknowledged the need to accommodate new physiological evidence about human nature alongside his religious beliefs: 'I cannot regard myself, either Intellectually or Morally, as a mere puppet, pulled by suggesting-strings; any more than I can *dis*regard that vast body of Physiological evidence, which proves the direct and immediate relation between Mental and Corporeal agency.'[35] Carpenter reveals a concern with the possible consequences of new scientific knowledge, and a desire to affirm individual free will, to be more than 'a mere puppet'. Here, he is differentiating between his own beliefs about human nature and those of atheist materialists; like many scientific thinkers of the time, he is attempting to 'tread a tightrope between materialism and automatism on the one side and unscientific metaphysics on the other'.[36] Such delineation was necessary, as Carpenter's own theories offered a 'basically materialist model of brain process'.[37] Carpenter wrote extensively on the reflex action of the nervous system, developed the theory of unconscious cerebration and was influenced by Darwin's theories of evolution – his work was certainly grounded in an understanding of the physical aspects of the human body even as he attempted 'to hold a developmental conception of nervous function and action in balance with dualist assumptions about the existence of the soul and the agency of the will'.[38] Carpenter objected to 'materialist' depictions of man as 'but a *thinking machine*, his conduct being entirely determined by his original constitution, modified by subsequent conditions over which he has no control, and his fancied power of self-direction being altogether a delusion'.[39] He expressed disapproval of literature such as Henry George Atkinson and Harriet Martineau's *Letters on the Laws of Man's Nature and Development* (1851), which, through contentious statements such as 'man has no more power to determine his own will than he has wings to fly', seemed to do away with the concept of autonomous agency.[40]

Materialism was often denounced in the periodical press. For example, the *British and Foreign Medico-Chirurgical Review* spoke out against those (such as Atkinson and Martineau) who

> declare that there is no personal Deity, (which is the same as saying that there is no God at all,) that man and external nature are everything, that this world is all, and that we are utterly destitute of all power to shape our own course, but are entirely what our organisation and circumstances make us.[41]

As a scientist who was also a Christian, Carpenter had carefully to negotiate a way between his own faith and the facts that science was revealing to him, and assured his readers that his theories were 'strictly conformable to the highest teachings of religion' (*Human Physiology*, p. 555), and this meant that he needed to assert the existence of free will. A person had to be free to act in a morally independent and responsible manner if he or she was to gain salvation. This free will, however, was reliant on some part of human nature being external from the constraints of the material world. The increasing realisation of 'man's bondage to the earth' during the nineteenth century contributed to the shift towards increasingly deterministic views of humanity (Reed, p. 184). These views emphasised the organisational and circumstantial influences that dictated the development of an individual's personality. Such scientific advances also raised questions about how much humanity had been in control of its progress so far, and how much it could hope to be in charge of its further development.

The mid-Victorian period saw the growth of a number of important scientific theories that precipitated or were a response to a move towards less dualistic, increasingly determinist thinking: 'the scientific world view shifted attention from acts to contexts, from the conscious human actor to the surrounding circumstances, whether in one's environment or one's constitution' (Wiener, p. 162). The publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) is undoubtedly a defining moment in the century; although the development of humankind was not explicitly referred to, the theory of evolution by natural selection caused many who read *Origin* (or read about it) to re-evaluate Victorian society's place in the universe and to find a new 'scale for the human'.[42] Darwinian theories were swiftly applied to concepts of human social development. Huxley, in 1869, spoke of 'that struggle for existence, which goes on as fiercely beneath the smooth surface of modern society, as among the wild inhabitants of the woods'.[43] In this way the theory of natural selection and the

struggle for survival (Herbert Spencer coined the term 'survival of the fittest' in 1864) raised awareness of the influence of both hereditary and environmental factors on the human race.

The early 1860s, when sensation fiction was at its peak, were, in many ways a time of progress, but also of tumultuous uncertainty. As Taylor puts it, this was:

> a moment of extraordinary diversity within contrasting and overlapping discourses of inheritance, transmission, and genealogy. Notions of progress begin to transmute into degeneration; the concept of continuous transmission is transformed by adaptation; a unilinear narrative of change combines and clashes with plurality, diversity, and chance, even as organic metaphors and models are overwhelmingly deployed to fix social and sexual identity and to naturalize difference.
>
> (p. 135)

At this time the seeds of later, more decidedly deterministic theories begin to germinate whilst earlier ideas continue to persist, modified in the light of new theories. Sensation fiction drew on old (sometimes out-of-date) and new (sometimes only nascent) notions of character formation, and so an overview of some of the key changes will be helpful here.

There was an overall shift in "moral rule" through the mid-century from a focus on "sin" to one on 'the distinction between the normal and the pathological' (Rimke and Hunt, p. 60), as bad behaviour came to be viewed less in a purely moral light, and more as a sign and result of a poor physical and/or mental constitution. In the early-to-mid-Victorian period emphasis was placed by scientists, physicians and social theorists on both the power of the passions, and the individual's ability to control them through the exertion of willpower – to determine one's own behaviour. This meant that each person was viewed as morally responsible for his or her own actions or, at least, as having the capacity to be responsible. The caveat is necessary because external social influences – an abusive childhood, or defective education for example – were acknowledged to impact on the development of the personality. By the 1860s the need to train the will had come to be seen as crucial in the achievement of self-control and curbing of any wayward impulses. Popular periodicals, often using the metaphor of a horse and rider, encouraged readers to remember that their passions may be unruly but that their will had the power to tame them. The family magazine *Bow Bells* cited the Revd Ward Beecher explaining that 'vanity' and 'pride' may 'bound, and resist, as much as they please, but they can easily be rendered manageable by a determined will'.

Beecher adds, however, that this means that 'where there is this strong and brute instinct, you cannot eradicate it, but you are under obligation to control it'.[44]

This belief in the possibility of personal self-control informed social and medical perspectives and influenced legal policies, particularly in relation to two of the staple themes of the sensation novel, criminality and insanity. Martin J. Wiener's extensive study on Victorian conceptions of the criminal shows how early Victorian penal policy was based on the assumption that people were rational and should therefore be able to perceive both the consequences of their actions and the deterrent of threatened punishment. Criminals were understood to be people who allowed their behaviour to be dictated by uncontrolled passions, and crime was seen in terms of 'defective self-management'; the 'remedy' lay in 'reforming and developing the characters of offenders and potential offenders'. These conceptions of human character led to practical measures being taken to create 'a visible force for social surveillance [e.g. uniformed police], a more predictable and systematic hearing process, and a prison system subjecting its inmates to a discipline that would without violence both deter and build character' (Wiener, p. 49).

Closely linked to the management of criminals was the management of the insane. Like the early Victorian criminal, the insane were seen to be victims of their own overruling passions and weakened willpower. For example, John Barlow's *On Man's Power over Himself to Prevent or Control Insanity* (1843) insisted that 'he who has given a proper direction to the intellectual force, and thus obtained an early command over the bodily organ by habituating it to processes of calm reasoning, remains sane amid all the vagaries of sense'.[45] The Victorian asylum practices of moral management and non-restraint relied on the idea that individuals could, when placed in conducive surroundings, learn to subdue their emotions through the exercise of willpower. The physician James Cowles Prichard, for example, asserted in his successful *Treatise on Insanity and Other Disorders Affecting the Mind* (1835) that 'lunatics' are not only 'susceptible of moral discipline', but that it 'constitutes indeed a very important and essential part of the means of cure'.[46]

These early and mid-Victorian theories about the possibilities and limitations of self-control and willpower inform Part I of *Creating Character*. Collins's *Basil* (1852, revised 1862) and *No Name* (1862), and Braddon's *John Marchmont's Legacy* (1863) all depict the difficulties and dangers attached to attempts to control one's own behaviour in the face of harmful circumstances and inclinations. In these novels characters act

in socially unacceptable ways both *in spite of* and *because of* their inherent natures and the situations in which they find themselves. The discussion of these texts also introduces a recurring theme of this book – the depiction of monomania in sensation fiction.

As its name suggests, this particular form of insanity was commonly defined as a condition in which an individual suffered from *one* delusion. The presence of delusion was, for many doctors, a fundamental requirement in the diagnosis of monomania. However, 'by the mid-nineteenth century [monomania] had become a widely used term that could be stretched to mean almost any kind of irrational obsession' (Taylor, p. 47). Monomania could be the result of a number of causes: an insufficient assertion of self-control, a traumatic experience or hereditary transmission. Most medico-historical studies of monomania have centred on French sources, as the condition was first identified and categorised by the French physicians Philippe Pinel and J. E. D. Esquirol.[47] Perhaps the most famous literary monomaniacs are American: Herman Melville's Captain Ahab in *Moby Dick* (1851), and Edgar Allan Poe's delusional obsessives (the narrators of 'Ligeia' (1838), 'The black cat' (1843) and 'The tell-tale heart' (1843) for example). British physicians began to refer to monomania in the 1830s and it quickly made an appearance in the popular press as a condition that could both shock and fascinate readers (which is of course a key reason why it is so suited to sensation fiction). In 1833 *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal*, for example, related 'cases of monomania' in which people experienced strange hallucinations (an invisible guest, a 'vision of a huge dog' and a worm-ridden corpse).[48] The media coverage of controversial cases such as that of Daniel M'Naughton, who suffered delusions of persecution and in 1843 assassinated the Prime Minister's private secretary Edward Drummond, helped to raise public awareness and spurred masses of public debate about the definition and use of insanity in criminal cases.[49] Given the ubiquity of accounts and representations of monomania in mid-Victorian medical circles, in the press and in literature, to the point of becoming 'itself a kind of obsession', the condition deserves more critical recognition.[50]

A number of critics have recognised Victorian literary characters as exhibiting elements of monomaniacal behaviour: Graeme Tytler identifies Emily Brontë's Heathcliff; Diane Mason George Eliot's Latimer; and Ellie Cope Thomas Hardy's Boldwood.[51] Such characters are rarely explicitly described as monomaniacs, but the pervasiveness of the condition in the popular press means that many Victorian readers would have picked up on literary allusions to monomania that readers today may

overlook. While some literary critics (such as Tytler and Cope) enter into a detailed discussion of monomania, the definition of the condition, what it meant in the Victorian medical mind and popular imagination, and the heterogeneity of representations of monomania (which was really a broad range of sometimes loosely associated conditions) in Victorian culture have been somewhat overlooked. Critics tend to discuss monomania in relation to only one gender, and as either pathologised obsession or compulsive behaviour.[52] *Creating Character* reflects the diversity of accounts of monomaniacs in Victorian Britain and shows how even in the work of just Braddon and Collins we can find a variety of monomaniacs – they are male, female, obsessive and/or compulsive, amatory and murderous, suffering from *idées fixes* and from hallucinations.

Like other forms of insanity, monomania generated much discussion in the Victorian period about self-management and self-control, and the representation of the condition is one of the key ways in which Collins and Braddon engage with ideas of character formation. Monomania's primary association with obsession allowed writers to figure it as an inner conflict between different aspects of the self; sufferers could be aware of their condition and struggle (often unsuccessfully) to overcome it. The idea of monomania is complementary to the traditional elements of sensation fiction in a number of ways: its emphasis on overpowering emotions and obsessive desires, often described in medical writing as being cunningly concealed by the sufferer, harmonises with the dark secrets and hidden passions of sensation fiction. Both of Braddon's and Collins's most famous works include references to the condition. In *The Woman in White* (1860) Walter Hartright fears that his incessant association of every strange occurrence with Anne Catherick is 'almost like a monomania'.[53] Similarly, Robert Audley in *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) fears that his compulsion to discover the truth about George Talboys's disappearance may be developing into a monomania, and he is later accused of being a monomaniac by Lady Audley.[54]

Chapters 1 and 2 concern novels that display a much more extended engagement with monomania. Chapter 1 demonstrates two of the many ways in which Collins makes use of monomania in his writing. *Basil*'s melodramatic villain Robert Mannion appears almost supernatural in his untiring pursuit of the eponymous narrator. Collins shows Mannion to be subject to monomaniacal impulses, thus providing a recognised medical condition as an explanation for his outlandish behaviour. The relation of monomania to the idea of character formation becomes apparent as Collins traces the origins of Mannion's condition to a series of perceived

social injustices and unfortunate occurrences. However, there is no real sense of Mannion's struggling against this state of affairs, and this is true of the majority of *Basil*'s characters, who are swept along by their own uncontrolled passions and by the forces of circumstance; the result, as circumstance and passions converge, is obsession and monomania. Collins uses the dramatic and emotive feelings associated with the domination of unruly passions described in early-nineteenth-century theories of insanity, in which the environment of a lunatic was paramount to his or her recovery. In *Basil* social conditions are contrived by Collins to increase the monomaniacal feelings of the characters, making the novel intense, oppressive, but also compelling reading. At the same time, the characters are shown to contribute to their own mental deterioration, eagerly throwing themselves into the dramatic and devastating events that constitute the plot.

Like *Basil*, *No Name* depicts a character whose emotions are out of control to the extent of developing monomaniacal tendencies. Unlike Mannion, however, Magdalen Vanstone endures a series of internal conflicts between her "better" nature and her monomaniacal urge. Collins's portrayal of monomania in *No Name* facilitates a contemplation of the different aspects that make up the individual personality, and draws on Victorian theories of will and willpower. Magdalen is actually a very *wil*ful character, but her willpower is channelled in the wrong direction as she has never been trained to manage it correctly. Magdalen's struggle against her own overwhelming dominant idea reflects the changes in the nineteenth century concerning the extent to which the individual was viewed as possessing self-control; the will came to be seen as increasingly fragile, manipulable and reliant on physical influences. For example, the renowned mental physiologist Henry Maudsley argued against 'the notion of an ideal or abstract will unaffected by physical conditions', and observed that each moment of consciousness was dependent upon a 'long series of causes', and that it was 'a deliberate fooling of one's self to say that actions depend upon the will, and then not to ask upon what the will depends!'.[55] Collins's depiction of Magdalen's monomania shows a combination of internal and external determining factors in which the influence of upbringing and social surroundings is particularly important. However, her monomania is formidable because of the force of her own personality, and proves resistant to all outside influences. Circumstance brings out the worst in Magdalen, but she has intrinsic reserves of moral strength that are not attributed clearly to heredity or her life experiences, and it is these that save her in the end: it is eventually Magdalen's

own better nature that overcomes the destructive aspects of her *own* personality.

Most of the social groups discussed here (the upper and lower classes, criminals and lunatics) were generally seen to be in some sense manipulable; their wills could be cultivated, their defects bred or educated out, or they could be stopped from breeding altogether. When notions of determinism were discussed in relation to gender, things were somewhat different because of the dominant essentialist belief that men and women possessed natural, distinctive traits and capacities that were determined by their biologies. Women especially often found themselves hindered by a general acceptance of the dominance of their reproductive systems. In 1851, for example, one contributor to the *Journal of Psychological Medicine and Mental Pathology* attributed a vast range of medical afflictions in women (including hysteria and moral insanity) to the 'influence of the reproductive organs'.[56] The increasing debates over the rights, education and employment of women often centred on their intrinsic nature and capabilities, and the extent to which they were physically, morally and intellectually different from men. Chapter 2 of this book, on Braddon's *John Marchmont's Legacy*, shows that there was often a blurring of the boundaries between what was seen to be ideal or desirable in women and what was understood to be natural and essentially feminine. This chapter features, like *No Name*, a monomaniacal character with a wilful personality but, unlike Magdalen, Olivia Marchmont is an example of deviant behaviour incited by the *suppression* of natural personality traits. Intellectually brilliant, Olivia is unable to find satisfaction from life as a dutiful rector's daughter and develops a disastrous obsession with her handsome young cousin. Olivia's consequent malevolent actions are read in the light of Victorian medical texts about the nature of women, which often depicted them as volatile and potentially dangerous, and also in relation to Victorian ideas about the ideal woman. Braddon highlights the discrepancies between prevailing images of womanhood and suggests that expecting women to conform to an ideal for which they may not be suited can have destructive consequences. Whilst Olivia's extreme behaviour can be put down to the determinations of her female biology, it is also implied that if her environment had not been so restrictive, disaster could have been averted, and her potential released. Importantly, it is also insistently demonstrated that Olivia's own clashing conceptions of herself, of ideal femininity and of ideal Christian behaviour are equally to blame for her downfall. Whilst Magdalen calls disaster upon herself by pushing beyond gender, social and moral boundaries, Olivia's inability

to either conform to, or happily deviate from, the norm has a crippling effect.

Writing that addresses the nature of insanity also inevitably, if implicitly, reflects upon the definition of sanity; tracing what mental processes have gone awry suggests how they should function, and how they should be cultivated. In the Victorian period social conceptions about what was "normal" often became conflated with what was "good": moral, socially acceptable behaviour was seen to be normal, and deviancy was a sign that something had gone wrong at some stage of an individual's development. Gradations and definitions of normalcy and deviancy became increasingly significant as the century progressed, especially in relation to ideas of hereditary transmission that were progressively more influential throughout the century. Although eugenics was largely a late-nineteenth- to early-twentieth-century phenomenon, Francis Galton's 'Hereditary talent' was published in *Macmillan's Magazine* in 1865, and suggested to readers that through the careful selection of a spouse desirable traits could be passed on and enhanced with each generation.[57] Despite the dangerous social policies it would lead to (such as sterilisation practices in America[58]) Victorian eugenics was promoted as a "positive" way of thinking as it aimed to identify, preserve and enhance strengths and desirable characteristics with each generation. Indeed, Galton's initial speculations are naively optimistic: 'what an extraordinary effect might be produced on our race, if its object was to unite in marriage those who possessed the finest and most suitable natures, mental, moral, and physical!' ('Hereditary talent', p. 165).

In contrast to this comparative optimism of eugenics, another concern gained prominence in later decades about indiscriminate breeding between objectionable individuals. Degeneration theories offered a negative spin to both Darwinian theories of natural selection and theories of acquired characteristics (based on J. B. Lamarck's widely accepted early-nineteenth-century theory that organisms learnt traits or skills useful for survival and then passed them on to offspring). Heredity was no longer merely something to be taken into consideration, as it had been earlier in the century, nor was it something to be harnessed for social development, as in eugenicist thought; with degeneration the power of heredity held sway and could destroy entire family lines, threatening (in its most extreme models) the health and progress of society. Maudsley, for example, declared that 'there is a destiny made for a man by his ancestors, and no one can elude, were he able to attempt it, the tyranny of his organization'.[59] Whilst the specific theories themselves varied, the general idea

was that once a weakness (physical, mental or moral) entered a family line it would be passed on and enhanced through each generation. Often the only hope for stopping the development of the inherited flaw was the assumption that it, whatever *it* was in any particular case, would lead to sterility and death – the self-destruction of the bloodline.

Daniel Pick identifies 'two different trajectories in the conception of degeneration': a drive to 'isolate a social threat – to reveal, transport, castrate and segregate "noxious elements"', and a concern that 'degeneration lay everywhere'; this led to the question of whether it was 'separable from the history of progress (to be coded as "regression", "atavism" or "primitivism")', or whether it revealed 'that the city, progress, civilisation and modernity were paradoxically, the very agents of decline'.[60] Both ideas of degeneration were reliant on notions of character formation, on whether it was believed that people were being damaged by their environment, or that there was an atavistic threat hidden within the race, which circumstances merely brought out. Such concepts were ideal for exploitation in the sensation novel, a genre that deals in extremes, in modernity, and that shows events escalating towards alarming and destructive conclusions.

The second section of this book emphasises the links between heredity and determinism in sensation fiction that are often overlooked, taken for granted or touched upon only briefly by critics.[61] The form of inheritance that is usually discussed in relation to sensation fiction is financial, owing to the almost ubiquitous plot feature of the disputed, lost, stolen, invalidated or counterfeit last will and testament. Sensation characters frequently murder, marry and commit forgery in order to gain an inheritance that the law says should belong to someone else, and the hero or heroine's reward at the close of the novel is to have that inheritance secured for themselves or their children. Part II discusses two novels in which financial inheritance is still at stake, but in which ideas about biological inheritance (as much as biological inheritance itself) play a key role in determining the depiction of characters and the outcome of plots.

The interplay between "nature" and "nurture" in the formation of the individual is explored in Chapter 3. Braddon's underexamined *The Lady Lisle* (1862) raises questions about the malleability or fixity of the personality: characters in the novel are described and defined in terms of their physical constitutions and hereditary characteristics, and the possibility of altering the development of the individual through upbringing and education is explored and contested. *The Lady Lisle* features a near identical pair of young men from different ends of the social spectrum. The impoverished murderer's son is raised in such a way as to bring out his

supposedly inherent negative traits, whereas the heir to the Lisle fortune is given an upbringing that negates his detrimental qualities. Braddon combines education and hereditary degeneracy to segregate the lower classes, and to bring the morally upright middle classes together with the affluent upper classes.

Chapter 4 begins with a reading of Collins's 1855 short story about hereditary insanity, 'Mad Monkton', before turning to *Armadale* (1866), in which a murderous father fears that his sinfulness will be passed down to his son. Collins's imaginative speculations about heredity foreshadow developing degenerationist and eugenicist theories, including the idea that morality was something that could be transmitted through the generations. By applying different "types" of degeneration to different characters (informed by concepts such as miscegenation, atavism and negative heredity), and by offering different reasons for the development of that degeneration, Collins raises questions about class and race. The examination of *Armadale* demonstrates how sensation authors and scientists were drawing on the same fund of social anxiety about the strength and purity of the nation. However, even as Collins explores ideas of hereditary decline, he also uses them to create sympathy with, rather than to reject or isolate, social outsiders. *Armadale* opposes the view that morality is irrevocably hereditary at the same time as it highlights that there would be fearful consequences if it were. This goes against the prevailing drive of degenerationist thinking that 'was at the root of what was, in part, an enabling strategy by which the conventional and respectable classes could justify and articulate their hostility to the deviant, the diseased and the subversive'.[62]

As with theories of biological determinism, ideas about social and environmental influences could be both constructive and disheartening. External circumstances such as social position, education and upbringing are significant determinants. An article in *Belgravia* emphasised the importance of earliest experiences: 'associations, cradle-environing circumstances, are potent to produce an effect everywhere. The groove in which we are to run is ready hollowed for most of us before we cut our earliest teeth.' The article provocatively argues that squires' sons will like guns and Jews' sons will be money-lenders: 'the employers of labour, and those who supply the want, are almost designated from the beginning'.[63] *Temple Bar*'s 'The management of servants' argued that employers should be more lenient on servants who have not only had little or no training, but have been brought up in 'poverty, ignorance, selfishness, vulgarity, and prejudice', which are 'poor nurseries for the infancy and early childhood

of servants'.[64] Such lines of thinking meant that the poor and destitute were feared to be criminals and deviants in the making on account of their living circumstances and lack of moral role models. On the other hand, it was believed that if children could be given a correct upbringing, they could be trained from an early age to be upright, responsible citizens.

Although many such articles focused on the management of the lower classes, education was also seen as essential for the middle and upper classes. Huxley was certain that individuals could be given a better chance in the world with a good education, and argued in 1870 that each child was

> a member of a social and political organisation of great complexity, and has, in future life, to fit himself into that organisation, or be crushed by it … their affections should be trained, so as to love with all their hearts that conduct which tends to the attainment of the highest good for themselves and their fellow men, and to hate with all their hearts that opposite course of action which is fraught with evil.[65]

Huxley's words draw attention to the vulnerability of individual people within a society that is bigger and more powerful than themselves; if they do not comply with its workings (because they have not been 'trained' to) they will be the worse for it. However, it was also understood that, in the same way that hereditary degeneration was not simply a threat to a single family but something that may spread to the nation as a whole, if masses of individual children were receiving poor educations, the consequences for society were not promising. These issues of education and environment are discussed in the final part of *Creating Character*, which covers two novels published at the end of the sensation genre's high-point. In *Man and Wife* (1870), Collins emphasises the influence of society and upbringing on his characters. This is partly because at this point in his career Collins began to turn towards the didactic "novel with a purpose", and in *Man and Wife* he aims to show the detrimental influence of poor education on a whole generation of young men, as well as the destructive nature of the marriage laws. *Man and Wife* depicts the force of external circumstance and social context on characters and shows how their behaviour is dictated by their previous experiences. The novel portrays entire generations, social groups, and the nation as a whole in a state of decline, but that decline is due to poor education and environment, not bad heredity.

The final chapter considers Braddon's *Lost for Love* (1874), a novel that has received little critical attention until now.[66] Like *Man and Wife*,

this novel depicts education as a strong determining factor in individual development, and like *John Marchmont's Legacy* it explores themes of female potential and intellect, but *Lost for Love* is far more optimistic in its portrayal of these subjects. In this novel Braddon vouches for women's intellectual capacity and implies that defective education is to blame if this is not fully developed. At a time when women were campaigning for greater rights, including the right to pursue university education, Braddon shows that women are capable of intense intellectual study. However, both of *Lost for Love*'s heroines are educated by, and for, the men who become their husbands, and the conservative notion of woman's role as the helpmate of man is endorsed rather than challenged in the novel.

In the sensation fiction of Braddon and Collins the forms of determinism brought into play are manifold; they portray biological, social and environmental influences as powerful determining factors for a variety of reasons. In his discussion of George Eliot and determinism, George Levine warns readers that although determinism 'informed her artistic vision', they should not be tempted to 'treat George Eliot as a philosopher rather than an artist' (p. 268). Readers of sensation fiction may not be so inclined to regard sensation authors as philosophers, but it is still worth noting that Levine's point is applicable to the following readings of Braddon and Collins: these authors are, first and foremost, crafters of entertaining fiction. The regularity with which they raise questions about nature and nurture suggests that this was a subject they felt would be relevant and interesting to their readers. Eliot takes pains to represent faithfully the determinism that she saw 'working even in the routine actions of ordinary life' (Levine, p. 269). Contrastingly, Braddon and Collins may make assumptions about how character formation works, but they are more willing to pick and choose concepts and theories that will serve their literary purpose at the time of writing. Sometimes the authors interact directly with ideas of character formation; sometimes their views can be inferred from their fiction; sometimes they may be questioning established notions; sometimes they may be drawing on them to provide a "realistic" character background or to promote their own opinions about class, gender and society. For Braddon and Collins, medical, scientific and sociological theories of character formation are fascinating subjects for literary portrayal, and literary devices that can be used in the creation of sensational characters and plots.