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### Hughes, The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860's

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Winifred Hughes. *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860s*. x, 211. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980. \$15.00.

“What distinguishes the true sensation genre, as it appeared in its prime during the 1860s, is the violent yoking of romance and realism, traditionally the two contradictory modes of literary perception” (p. 16). Winifred Hughes illustrates this “sensation paradox” by isolating the ingredients of this neglected class of fiction and by noting the negative contemporary critical reactions to the genre.

But why devote an entire book to second-rate novelists — to only one decade? Hughes convincingly affirms the importance of sensation fiction as a phenomenon of the Victorian age — which preached morality but practiced immorality: “the sensation novel was almost entirely restricted to one particular decade in literary history ... because it represents a transitional model, at once anachronistic and prophetic” (p. 70).

In the three chapters devoted to novelists Charles Reade, M. E. Braddon, Mrs. Henry Wood, and Wilkie Collins, Hughes traces the Victorian movement from moral certainty, characteristic of earlier romances and melodramas, to moral ambiguity, characteristic of late nineteenth-century and twentieth-century fiction. In her final chapter, Hughes emphasizes the significance of the sensation genre by discussing its influences on realistic novels of the 60's, and finally, on Thomas Hardy's works. Hardy's fiction, she says, “offers a fascinating illustration of the ways in which the imagination of a major novelist can work upon and transform the materials of a popular tradition” (p. 187).

A minor weakness in this otherwise useful study is the often unnecessary redundancy. In Chapter 2, for example, the critical objections to various ingredients of sensation fiction tend to repeat the characteristics of the genre isolated in Chapter 1. When Hughes concludes that the major theoretical objection to sensation fiction was “its implausible mixture of the contrary modes of perception: romance and realism” (p. 66), she does not reinforce her earlier thesis so much as she repeats herself. Similarly, in Chapter 6, in the midst of a discussion about Hardy's revolt against realism, Hughes again describes Victorian melodrama and the change in the “melodramatic vision” accompanying the rise of sensation fiction. Although her point is that Hardy completed the process of transition begun by the

sensation novelists, the section seems digressive and repetitious.

Hughes's intelligent critiques of the individual novels, on the other hand, are perhaps the most outstanding features of *The Maniac in the Cellar*, especially her emphasis on the unconventional and irrational — sexuality (particularly female), repression, violence, masochism, and criminality — until, “‘respectability’ becomes the closest thing to evil” (p. 150). The author's scholarship is also impressive, providing the reader with a wide spectrum of contemporary reactions to sensation fiction.

That still does not answer the question: why read *Griffith Gaunt*, *Lady Audley's Secret*, *Armada*, or a work about them. “The final import of the sensation novel is that things are not what they seem, even — in fact, especially — in the respectable classes and their respectable institutions. At the climax of the Victorian era, the sensation novels portray a society in which secrets are the rule rather than the exception, in which passion and crime fester beneath the surface of the official ideal” (p. 190). Because they provide many truths about the Victorian age that contemporary “realistic” fiction attempted to disguise (or refused to acknowledge), sensation novels are, indeed, significant today. For that reason *The Maniac in the Cellar* is an important book, a valuable tool for the Victorian student and critic in an area needing even more exploration.

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