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EMOTIONAL VOID AND IDENTITY FRAGMENTATION: MADNESS AND NARCISSISM IN *LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET* BY MARY ELIZABETH BRADDON (1862)

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Abstract

This research aims at investigating the psychological dimension of the protagonist Lady Audley on the grounds of the dialectic of alleged madness and assumed narcissistic personality disorder related to psychoanalytic literary methodology and criticism. In the light of the first Freudian studies of the first decade of the twentieth century and the subsequent outcomes, we attempt the hypothesis of female identity construction onto typically narcissistic features, in the perspective of Freud's unconscious anticipated by Mary Elizabeth Braddon in her prose generating not only a sensation novel but also an innovative psychological plot depicting the double nature of Victorian society from the perspective of a woman labeled as insane.

Keywords: Bigamy, Braddon, Fake Identity, Lady Audley's Secret, Madness, Narcissistic Personality

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In *Lady Audley's Secret*, the mental condition of distress of the female protagonist unfolds in the vortex of the limbo of madness also shared by Mary Elizabeth Braddon as a young middle class girl, fully supported by her mother, Fanny Braddon, to become an actress with the stage name of Mary Sayton, although the stage only offered her large secondary parts in comedies and a deep sense of frustration for not being the leading lady, thus turning to the career of writer "Having experienced public disgrace herself, Mary Braddon could have desired to take a deeper look at female psychology and behavior in stressful situation" (Razumovskaya, 2012, p. 4).

Accordingly, Braddon and Lady Audley shared this feeling of initial inadequacy in society as young girls searching for their own roles; this sense of anxiety constantly and systematically affects the evolution of the gender identity of Lady Audley since she came into the world with the name of Lucy Graham transforming herself, from an identity point of view, following all those phases of evolution and growth of personality structures that can be associated in many aspects with those identities that Alexander Lowen (1984) illustrates in *Narcissism: Denial of the True Self* within the spectrum of narcissistic personality disorder.

Following Lowen's handbook publication, narcissism is officially included in *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* DSMV-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) among the Cluster B personality disorders even though "The act of identifying an abnormal person could be done by psychotherapists and experts in the field, however; society helps individuals to develop some mechanisms with which they can say this man or woman is insane (Alami, 2016, p. 62) while Giuseppe Giordano states "Lady Audley was presumably affected by antisocial personality disorder since her behaviour was against social norms and obligations and more alike the conduct and disposition of a psychopath or a criminal" (2021, p. 2).

Psychiatry was due to emerge as a medical specialty in a rudimentary way during the Victorian age and the diagnosis of psychiatric conditions was not sophisticated and precise as today since:

> Due to deficiencies of the 1808 Act, counties did not begin mass construction of Asylums throughout the country. It was not until the passing of the County Asylum / Lunacy Act in 1845 did the construction begin to take hold (…) This Act,

> based on the work of John Conolly and Lord Shaftesbury saw the lunatics being treated as Patients and not prisoners (County Asylums, n.d.).

Lucy Graham before evolving into Lady Audley

Lucy Graham's origins, before marrying her first husband George Talboys, thus becoming Mrs Lucy Talboys, are narrated as humble and above all mysterious, opaque:

> No one knew anything of her except that she came in answer to an advertisement which Mr Dawson, the surgeon, had inserted in the Times. She came from London; and the only reference she gave was to a lady at a school at Brompton, where she had once been a teacher. But this reference was so satisfactory that none other was needed (Braddon, 1997, p. 6).

The shadows in the dark and mysterious past deliberately hidden to soothe the deep and unbridgeable wounds of little Lucy, mistreated and psychologically abused by an alcoholic and penniless father and an untrustworthy mother, make her emotional void an unbridgeable abyss. As a consequence, the emotional desert of parental care and attention is nourished while taking the first steps of her life deprived of certainties and points of reference, transitioning the girl into a very accentuated narcissistic personality, since growing up, she gets rid of the most authentic and profound emotional relationships, as an extreme need of conservation and self-protection from external threats, betrayed and unheeded since childhood, thus giving space in a completely pervasive and egosyntonic disorder to an identity based exclusively on the satisfaction of her own needs which cancel out automatically those of others in any relationship dynamic, acting without feelings, placing in the centre of one's pre-established choices a utilitarian logic of full emotional, physical and material energetic exploitation, therefore economic of the chosen victim, partly unaware of her own destructive and manipulative intentions; Otto Kernberg scrutinises the young child's "fusion of the ideal self, ideal object and actual self-images as a defense against an intolerable reality in the interpersonal realm" (1975, p. 264). Braddon offers the reader what a narcissist does not normally do, namely an unreserved confession of Lucy regarding her inability to love authentically when she turns to Sir Michael Audley proposing to her:

> (Sir Michael) Don't ask too much of me," she kept repeating; "I have been selfish from my babyhood." "Lucy—Lucy, speak plainly. Do you dislike me?" "Dislike you? No—no!" "But is there anyone else whom you love?" She laughed aloud at his

> question. "I do not love anyone in the world," she answered (Braddon, 1997, p. 11).

With reference to Janine Hatter, Braddon herself shares with Lady Audley the altered emotion of experiencing a sensation of deep and irrepressible solitude as an adult who has not evolved gradually and in continuity but throughout the breaks of repeated emotional traumas "The distance between adulthood and childhood emphasises one of the main problems with autobiography: memory and its destabilisation. Despite the author's repeated assertion 'I remember', she alludes to this problem through the misunderstandings and memory lapses she had while writing her autobiography" (2015, p. 20).

Accordingly, we may assume that Braddon spontaneously created an abnormal character in the overall sphere of mental insanity that nowadays sociologists and psychologists tend to classify as typically narcissistic according to the framework provided by Alexander Lowen (1984).

In the new disturbed and criminal identity of Lady Audley, Lucy Graham as a bigamous adult, perfectly constructed and modeled, unable to distinguish between the real self and the contrived image that she engages in "doing good to those around her" as a pure exercise of power believes she can become her own world by imagining herself to represent the whole world by living outside the social network, in domestic isolation, not to be dangerously unmasked and thus labeled according to Victorian canons as hysterical, hence insane. Otto Kernberg emphasises the young child's "fusion of the ideal self, ideal object and actual self-images as a defense against an intolerable reality in the interpersonal realm" (1975, p. 231).

Braddon's novel delineates with extreme precision and accuracy all the characteristics and nuances of the psychological traits of the protagonist Lady Audley in a social context that would only welcome the first studies on narcissism with the collaboration between Freud and Breuer coming to fruition in the jointly authored *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), the first psychoanalytic book which advanced the hypothesis that the physical symptoms of hysteria were caused by unconscious emotional conflict. Thus, Braddon in her role as a female writer could to all intents and purposes be considered a pioneer of "new experimental literary laboratories" in the study of what was more

generically labeled as *madness* during the Victorian Age, gender-biased with regards to women, in which all the traits of the "hysterical" or more commonly abnormal personality often converged.

It is precisely from her willingness to abandon her husband, son and father that Helen Talboys initiates a fierce action of narcissistic vindication of her wounded and denigrated ego; her first husband's condition of misery and abandonment follows hers as a mother also deprived of the means and tools to lead the life she considers worthy. As a result, Helen projects an image of the self which fully corresponds to a grandiose ego that she endeavours to protect and redeem with all her mental energy even through the objectification of the things and people around her and of her own body which she socially "kills" in the old identity of Lucy fictitiously buried in Ventnor in order to revive it in the one of Lady Audley with the typically Victorian appearance of the *angel of the house* but with a split and fragmented soul acting cynically, malignantly and criminally, in the most extreme attempt to deceive the true self from which she distances exploiting and absorbing all the energies of *others* who inevitably represent a potential obstacle to the fulfilment of her grandiose life project of pomp and lust for power.

The acting on the stage of life

The Lady's refusal to meet George Talboys on his return from Australia occurs because it is perceived as threatening for her manipulative and criminal intent, contrasting the Victorian morality forbidding any women to plan, as men, a private life potentially generating all kinds of comfort or profit if not for being chosen as wives within the marriage market, the only possible source of self-sustaining outside convents or dungeons of prostitution. Indeed, Helen Talboys before transitioning into Lady Audley shows a strong concern for a tedious and monotonous family life of a caring daughter of a dissented father and afterwards in the role of a caring mother and sad wife abandoned by her squatted man.

Increasingly, with the precise aim of becoming "Lady Audley", Helen acts as a subtle and seductive manipulator with Sir Michael, behaving cunningly as a poor victim, offended and neglected in childhood, willing to a marriage affiliation without reservations provided she is rewarded with money; on the other hand, love is completely

reset by Braddon to foreground even the thirst for power of the disturbed mind of Helen who has no conscience, like all narcissists, of the impact of her consumerism on the emotional balance of others, "Lady Audley is the fallen woman, a symbol of destructive beauty, a bigamist and a pretender" (Eros, 2010, p. 69).

At Audley Court the newborn Lady Audley lives as if she were a child to be pampered and always pleased, her demands on her husband Sir Michael are constant and of all kinds "Her (Lady Audley's) newfound life of luxury is entirely dependent upon him" (Carver, 2010, p. 8) with a typically narcissistic attitude of vested right to receive special treatment from anyone regardless of her intentions and the results of all actions taken before, only for her own benefit, never in the interest of anyone other than the perceived grand self. Lady Audley looks and acts as a narcissistic professional actress; the art of acting with the false mask of her new identity is meant to project the reshaped image. Apparently, in this change of identity she manages to express perfectly because the narcissistic individual always acts, even if not all actors and actresses are narcissists, but it is always the opposite. And as it is typical of all narcissists, she never allows herself to experience deep feelings of pain and especially fear; lastly, this reveals as the true road to madness which threatens the already precarious psychological balance of the narcissist: "Every narcissist is afraid of going crazy, because the potential for insanity is in his personality. This fear reinforces the denial of feeling, creating a vicious circle" (Lowen, 1984, p. 155).

Consistently, Lady Audley does everything to impose her attitude and her beauty as the dominant force of her personality, suppressing any feeling that may contradict her and her own image succeeds in affections to achieve such a dominant position in the domestic sphere of Audley Court and outside in society only in the absence of strong feelings, through the blocking of the function of perception that she might have put into action in all situations of potential deep emotional involvement of her own feelings and those of others:

> Action is taken solely on the basis of reason and logic. One lives in a world divorced from feeling. Indeed, the world of feeling is seen as unreal and, therefore, allied to insanity. Although such a person knows about feelings, he or she cannot let go to feelings – that is, allow them to "dictate" behavior (Lowen, 1984, p. 137).

The burden of the secret

Lady Audley's need to hide her secret slowly turns into a fierce battle for victory and the defeat of not realizing herself in the marriage market becomes a matter of life or death as there is no room for feelings; particularly, when she learns of the return of her husband George from Australia she sees in his physical presence some threatening and disturbing aspects of her own self such as abandonment, misery and failure. Accordingly, she splits the reality in which she lives, some aspects of herself are accepted while the most painful ones are brutally rejected and projected first on George and systematically on all other members of the new acquired family at Audley Court who do question the *purity* of her identity in terms of transparency of her origins "Although the Court is not physically crushed, it metaphorically crushes Victorian domestic ideology by showing that crime inhabits the home, the place where Victorians least expect it" (Naz Bulamur, 2016, p. 105).

In the size of the fake identity designed for Lady Audley we come across an adequacy problem: the new identity projected by Helen Talboys in the metamorphosis towards the "Lady" creates a narcissistic dimension which contains a deep and valuable human meaning to the spirit of Victorian society comparable to what any other non-narcissist woman of the same time could imagine and desire for herself in terms of honesty and moral integrity. Yet, Lady Audley lives in her sentimental universe divided between an irrational anger and a tearful sentimentalism; her rage against the first husband George who suddenly returns from Australia after about three years absence is expressed through a distorted explosion of the Lady who blinded by the fear of being unmasked in her criminal plan tries to kill her husband George pushing him into the ruined well in the garden of Audley Court. Therefore, the sentimentalism towards Sir Michael is a substitute for love, she herself at the beginning of the novel, still living as Lucy Graham, explicitly asserts that she does not love Sir Michael: "But is there anyone else whom you (Lucy) love?" She laughed aloud at his question. "I do not love anyone in the world," she answered" (Braddon, 1997, p. 11). Lady Audley's narcissistic personality structure develops and evolves progressively in the novel on one hand as a compensation for an unacceptable self-image and on the other hand as an act of defense against intolerable feelings; their systematic suppression and denial results in the repression of all those significant and very painful memories of her childhood and adolescence. The

emotional instability is confessed to her husband Sir Michael in an exchange of tenderness speaking and moving physically like a child simulating in her acting the wounded ego of a vulnerable creature:

> She (Lady Audley) stood on tiptoe to kiss him, and then was only tall enough to reach his white beard. She told him, laughing, that she had always been a silly, frightened creature—frightened of dogs, frightened of cattle, frightened of a thunderstorm, frightened of a rough sea. "Frightened of everything and everybody but my dear, noble, handsome husband," she said (Braddon, 1997, p. 63).

Throughout the novel, till the confinement in the asylum in Belgium, the Lady stages as a covert narcissist with a frivolous and cheerful nature, despite the many paradoxes of her character, with a taste for the dark and melancholy music that better gives shape to the fragile notes of her fragmented identity perpetually disturbed by anxiety, anguish and boredom that puts on stage real acts of seduction whose nature is always and only deceptive: “Seduction is not a market place transaction, in which both parties are equal and the rule of caveat emptor applies (…) Seduction occurs only in relationships in which some degree of trust exists. Seduction, therefore, is always a betrayal” (Lowen, 1984, p. 102).

The criminal and manipulative mind

Arguably, in some passages of the novel, the narcissistic nature of Lady Audley assumes malignant traits depicting the most split narcissistic personalities between the mental ego and the bodily self; it is the case of the fire at the inn of Phobe, the chambermaid, and Luke, her *fiancé*, or the most ruthless attempt to get rid of her first husband George Talboys by pushing him down into the well in the garden of Audley Court so as not to leave any trace of his body, in such a way as to erase every spectre of suspicion of the family and especially of the unstable childhood friend of her husband, Robert Audley, amateur detective keen on his technique of investigation backwards. And it is exactly when Robert displays the investigative techniques to reconstruct the unexplained disappearance of George that he oddly notices a bruise on Lady Audley’s wrist, carefully hidden by a bracelet, while playing the piano; the same bruise is then noticed by Sir Michael coming into the room and it is at this moment that the signs of the woman’s madness begin to come out abruptly, as if someone were trying to take away the mask of her perverse narcissistic project:

> What is it, Lucy? he (Sir Michael) asked; "and how did it happen?" "How foolish you all are to trouble yourselves about anything so absurd!" said Lady Audley, laughing. "I am rather absent in mind, and amused myself a few days ago by tying a piece of ribbon around my arm so tightly, that it left a bruise when I removed it." "Hum!" thought Robert. "My lady tells little childish white lies; the bruise is of a more recent date than a few days ago; the skin has only just begun to change color" (Braddon, 1997, p. 71).

Herein, the restless and suffering image of Lady Audley, within the new family nucleus, is also returned by Alicia Audley, Sir Michael's daughter; the stepmother is described as a skilled manipulator in dialogues and actions, seemingly angelic and perfectly in line with the Victorian aesthetic canons of the *angel of the house* of Coventry Patmore. Cunningly, to the eyes of her family and visitors to Audley Court, the Lady speaks and acts with a balanced temperament and polite gestures measured to the point of appearing as fragile and emotionally vulnerable as a child, incapable of any malevolent or even criminal action, just to remove all doubt about the ruthless and destructive nature of her fake self:

> The poor little woman is very sensitive, you know, Alicia," the baronet said, gravely, "and she feels your conduct most acutely." "I don't believe it a bit, papa," answered Alicia, stoutly. "You think her sensitive because she has soft little white hands, and big blue eyes with long lashes, and all manner of affected, fantastical ways, which you stupid men call fascinating. Sensitive! Why, I've seen her do cruel things with those slender white fingers, and laugh at the pain she inflicted (Braddon, 1997, p. 84).

Consistently, Lady Audley's lust for money also takes hold when, in her image reflected in the maid Phoebe Marks, she rebukes the latter who intends to marry a poor squatter boy for love disregarding the abyss of a life without money, imagining herself in the condition of Phoebe through an action of mirroring or projection on her of her own fears and anxieties: "You surely are not in love with the awkward, ugly creature are you, Phoebe?" asked my lady sharply." (Braddon, 1997, p. 87). Furthermore, the need to have a considerable amount of money is a typical narcissist's need, whether a man or a woman as through money the fake self is strengthened in a position of domination in the social context of belonging by corrupting and manipulating the behaviours of others, thus affecting their intentions and choices; and this is exactly the mental scheme that Lady Audley puts into action by progressively debasing and invalidating the identity of George

Talboys with subtle irony when the detective and lawyer Robert Audley narrates about his university mate George at Eton: “Yes, to be sure—Mr. George Talboys. Rather a singular name, by-the-by, and certainly, by all accounts, a very singular person. Have you seen him lately?” (Braddon, 1997, p. 96); also, this depreciation mechanism is part of the typical narcissistic personality disorder tending to not recognize but to the total denial of the identity of others, conceived in the full existential value and dignity, systematically devalued and dismantled in an act of extreme exercise of power and control.

Additionally, since the beginning of Robert Audley’s investigation, Lady Audley feels progressively more tired of observing and keeping under control the actions of detective Robert as if external forces would attempt to tear the narcissistic mask of the fake self off her: “Sitting quietly in her chair, her head fallen back upon the amber damask cushions, and her little hands lying powerless in her lap, Lady Audley had fainted away.” (Braddon, 1997, p. 97). According to the recurring functioning of narcissistic personality, she hides in the oblivion of the unconscious of her divided and fragmented personality all the sorrows and pains of the past existence, since she started teaching at the school of Mrs Vincent in Crescent Villas, although without references that were not requested because initially she didn’t seem to be interested in the salary but after she exploited the director of the school leaving her full of debts, thus acting as a true energy vampire, tending to manipulate others to achieve her own goals, using guilt and fear, emotional blackmail, flattery or threats to control and dominate the victim in the incessant need to fill her pockets with money and material advantages:

> You had no reference, then, from Miss Graham?" asked Robert, addressing Mrs. Vincent. "No," the lady answered, with some little embarrassment; "I waived that. Miss Graham waived the question of salary; I could not do less than waive the question of reference. She quarreled with her papa, she told me, and she wanted to find a home away from all the people she had ever known. She wished to keep herself quite separate from these people (Braddon, 1997, p. 187).

Dramatically, the separation of Lucy Graham from her father, and therefore the narcissistic wound of childhood, was determined precisely by money problems extorted from the father himself to his daughter who managed to earn it carrying out the most humble jobs; it is the same father Henry Maldon to speak of it in a note dated 16 April 1854 addressed to Mrs Barkamb, the owner of one of the cottages that had hosted him together with his daughter Helen and little George at Wildernsea:

> "I (Henry Maldon) am in the depths of despair. My daughter has left me! You may imagine my feelings! We had a few words last night upon the subject of money matters, which subject has always been a disagreeable one between us, and on rising this morning I found I was deserted!" (Braddon, 1997, p. 187).

Inevitably, the Lady's narcissistic wound moves not only through the spectre of money but also with a ruthless *gaslighting* action, an insidious form of manipulation and control addressed to Robert Audley, deliberately and systematically fed with false information after his accusations of the Lady's involvement in the mysterious disappearance of George Talboys, thus, Lady Audley begins to mystify tentatively the unacceptable reality so as to generate destabilizing confusion within the mind of the young detective Robert, ending up considering him a fool and completely turning the situation upside down:

> She (Lady Audley) would be a very foolish woman if she suffered herself to be influenced by any such absurdity," she said. "You are hypochondriacal, Mr. Audley, and you must take camphor, or red lavender, or sal volatile. What can be more ridiculous than this idea which you have taken into your head? (Braddon, 1997, p. 214).

Undeniably, Lady Audley's defense against the attacks of Robert Audley is not only achieved through *gaslighting* but also with *mirroring,* actually typical narcissistic reactions in situations of threats or danger that involve the return of the guilt and responsibility of the action of the narcissistic manipulation when the Lady feels cornered by Robert who puts firmly under her nose the irrefutable evidence of her responsibility in the disappearance of her husband George:

> "(…) If I (Lady Audley) were placed in a criminal dock I could, no doubt, bring forward witnesses to refute your absurd accusation. But I am not in a criminal dock, Mr. Audley, and I do not choose to do anything but laugh at your ridiculous folly. I tell you that you are mad!" (Braddon, 1997, p. 217).

Crucially, in a desperate attempt to divert attention from herself and escape the danger of being framed by the detective's accusations and inducement evidence regarding her husband's disappearance "Lady Audley is doomed to be endlessly observed and investigated" (Ennis, 2012, 87) so she begins to triangulate with ease with Robert and Sir Michael turning to the latter in a desperate attempt to be saved by the moves of Robert to rip off her narcissistic mask, falling on the latter the infamy of madness:

> Robert Audley is mad," she (Lady Audley) said, decisively. "What is one of the strangest diagnostics of madness—what is the first appalling sign of mental aberration? The mind becomes stationary; the brain stagnates; the even current of reflection is interrupted; the thinking power of the brain resolves itself into a monotone (Braddon, 1997, p. 229).

With undeniable mastery of descriptive style and penetration of the protagonist's psyche, lacking of the appropriate tools of psychological investigation that only nearly forty years later will offer Sigmund Freud, Braddon sets up a mechanism of reconstructing memories in Lady Audley's mind, facing her fears and terrors, as only an experienced psychotherapist could do in our times trying to put the adult in close contact with the hidden pain of their narcissistic childhood wound being inflicted in the body or mind, generating a very strong instinct for self-preservation, protection and survival which anaesthetises all feelings of attachment to anyone, of deep love and surrender to the most authentic emotions in order not to lose control over reality and the unforeseeable actions and reactions of others that inevitably pose a threat to the already precarious emotional balance of the narcissistic Lady who manages to survive apparently only through a strong outer, hedonistic appearance or purely sexual relationships, never aimed at a true and deep relationship that can easily become upsetting or disarming for any reason:

> Did she remember the day in which that fairy dower of beauty had first taught her to be selfish and cruel, indifferent to the joys and sorrows of others, cold-hearted and capricious, greedy of admiration, exacting and tyrannical with that petty woman's tyranny which is the worst of despotism? Did she trace every sin of her life back to its true source? (Braddon, 1997, p. 235).

The rigidity of the body

Lady Audley is also presented with a rigid body as if it were her own expression of power and control of the emotions which cross her body in a pervasive way and when they pass the line of the neck such rigidity wraps around her head:

> The lines of her exquisitely molded lips were so beautiful, that it was only a very close observer who could have perceived a certain rigidity that was unusual to them. She (Lady Audley) saw this herself, and tried to smile away that statue-like immobility: but to-night the rosy lips refused to obey her; they were firmly locked, and were no longer the slaves of her will and pleasure (Braddon, 1997, p. 246).

Her body appears subsequently so rigid that it makes one think of a statue, all in one piece, as if that rigidity should serve to resist the pressure of all those unbearable feelings which could lead to the so feared madness that causes horror in narcissist Lady Audley: “Unlike terror, however, horror is not an emotion, because there is no feeling quality to the state of horror.” (Lowen, 1984, p. 132). At her body level, the "armor" takes on different forms which all reflect a certain degree of general rigidity; the expression *armor* was introduced by Wilhelm Reich to describe the process whereby the muscles of the body of any narcissist develop a chronic tension that forms a shield against the insults from the outside world and against the inner impulses. Lowen narrates the breakdown of the connections between head and body as a result of lack of flow of feelings:

> Today I understand more clearly how the break in the connection between head and body is responsible for a person’s lack of feeling (…) the break is caused by a band of tension at the base of the skull, which blocks the subjective perception of bodily events. (Lowen 1984, p. 130).

Surprisingly, at the end of the novel Lady Audley, exasperated and exhausted by the psychological pressures of detective Robert, abandons her identity mask that slowly moves to make room for a story in which the traumatized woman retraces her life, her youth, thinking that she had never been evil, at least intentionally. This impossibility of being totally aware of her actions reinforces my hypothesis of Braddon’s creation of a female character of narcissistic type, certainly responding to all the expectations of wonder and astonishment of the readership of sensation and bigamy novels; any narcissistic personality structure, therefore egosyntonic, is perfectly integrated with the self, unable to perceive some malfunctions or anomalies in their own actions; it is rather the reactions of others that make them reflect upon their own being:

> I (lady Audley) was not wicked when I was young, she thought, as she stared gloomingly at the fire, "I was only thoughtless. I never did any harm—at least, wilfully. Have I ever been really wicked, I wonder?" she mused. "My worst wickednesses have been the result of wild impulses, and not of deeply-laid plots” (Braddon, 1997, p. 236).

The confession of madness

The final surrender comes when the irrefutable evidence of the Lady’s madness and dangerousness become even clearer after the arson at the inn on Mount Stanning and Luke, Phoebe’s husband, remains badly burned. Crucially, Lady Audley becomes

overwhelmed with the incessant psychological pressure of Robert Audley in his obsessive attempt to get a confession from her thus taking her responsibility for her husband's disappearance and be dragged into court and adequately sentenced for all her misdeeds. At the beginning of the third and last part of the novel *My Lady Tells the Truth*, the Lady gives in to her deepest inner pain of the narcissistic wound, of the split and fragmented ego, openly confessing to be mad for choosing to live on the border between sleep and madness, the latter the deepest and uncontrollable fear of any narcissist in the mental condition of *overthinking*:

> You (Robert Audley) have conquered—a MAD WOMAN!" "A mad woman!" cried Mr. Audley. "Yes, a mad woman. When you say that I killed George Talboys, you say the truth. When you say that I murdered him treacherously and foully, you lie. I killed him because I AM MAD! because my intellect is a little way upon the wrong side of that narrow boundary-line between sanity and insanity (Braddon, 1997, p. 274).

Indeed, in the inner emotional emptiness of the disturbed personality of Lady Audley is hidden her inability to feel and perceive love from others and then share and return it in an authentic way, apparently inhibited by her childhood trauma to understand it on an emotional level but only cognitive; for her joining it in the deepest feelings would have meant to retrace the tunnel of trauma of all the frustrations in the dysfunctional dynamics of her family of origin, the absence of a mother locked up in an asylum, thus experiencing the condition of being the daughter of a mentally ill woman and then the misfortune of her father who abused her with money extortion; in the end, the Lady confesses openly all this to Sir Michael Audley, unaware of her first marriage, right in front of the explicit accusations of detective Robert:

> I must tell you the story of my life, in order to tell you why I have become the miserable wretch who has no better hope than to be allowed to run away and hide in some desolate corner of the earth (…) They told me that mother was away. I was not happy, for the woman who had charge of me was a disagreeable woman and the place in which we lived was a lonely place, a village upon the Hampshire coast, about seven miles from Portsmouth. My father, who was in the navy, only came now and then to see me (Braddon, 1997, p. 276).

Since the very first meeting with Lady Audley, Sir Michael was filled with a deep sense of emptiness, of not fully involving Lucy even though she always appeared courteous, polite, beautiful and kind, but in the typical narcissistic traits this attitude

displays only at a superficial level, never at a deep one as it would be dangerously unmanageable, excessively close to the emotional void, which firmly structured in her childhood persisting into her adulthood. Hence, the incessant need of Lady Audley to possess material objects, wealth, money, economic benefits and social status, certainly within any marital union there was no room for sharing deep affectivity and emotions: "I do not believe that Sir Michael Audley had ever really believed in his wife. He had loved her and admired her; he had been bewitched by her beauty and bewildered by her charms." (Braddon, 1997, p. 279).

And it was just when George Talboys left for Australia in search of fortune leaving his wife Helen alone with her elderly, alcoholic father and little George to be raised that Helen, a poor, abandoned mother and wife, began to perceive a mental instability:

> I did not love the child, for he had been left a burden upon my hands (…) At this time I think my mind first lost its balance, and for the first time I crossed that invisible line which separates reason from madness." (Braddon, 1997, p. 280)

And so Lady Audley approached Sir Michael to seduce him by simulating the feeling of love, seemingly aware of her personality disorder which did not allow her to either replace or understand this feeling as it was too painful to go through: "The mad folly that the world calls love had never had any part in my madness, and here at least extremes met, and the vice of heartlessness became the virtue of constancy." (Braddon, 1997, p. 281) but love for the Lady, as well as for every other pathological narcissist, is intrinsically a dimension of madness as the most authentic feelings were buried during childhood so as to remove the pain and confusion caused by the abusing and absent adult in the role of caregiver; as an adult, married to Sir Michael and having achieved a state of social and financial ease, she expresses gradually generosity towards the members of her family in-laws and the visitors to Audley Court solely as an exercise of power over each other, in a constant and obsessive relationship based on who commands and who executes orders and requests with someone at the top and someone else at the bottom of the relationship, without ever expecting a confrontation between equals, because the latter is the only relational model she could see and internalize when she was still Lucy Graham:

> In the sunshine of my own happiness I felt, for the first time in my life, for the miseries of others. I had been poor myself, and I was now rich, and could afford to pity and relieve the poverty of my neighbors." (Braddon, 1997, p. 281).

Lastly, Braddon pushes the action of Lady Audley on the narrative scene of the novel to a confession that the protagonist labels as her "hereditary taint": "I had often wondered while sitting in the surgeon's quiet family circle whether any suspicion of that invisible, hereditary taint had ever occurred to Mr. Dawson." (Braddon, 1997, p. 281) intended more as a narrative impetus of Braddon clearly aimed at restoring the mental order of Victorian society being disturbed from the issue of personality disorders, therefore from non-conforming identities accompanying the display of psychological and criminal narrative plots.

Typically, George Talboys experiences the post-traumatic stress syndrome so much frequent in any victim of narcissistic manipulation when the abuser, the Lady in our case, proceeds with the discard, also violent, as in the circumstance of George being pushed down to the bottom of the well at Fig Tree Court in the attempt to be eliminated permanently as an obstacle to the full realisation of Lady Audley's criminal plan kept in her secret that she accurately built and modeled on herself as a new identity, a rebirth of a rich and powerful woman who for no reason at all would accept the condition to be hindered by the first poor and squatted husband that she shall only address to as a stupid lover, in his childish and detached vision of the deeper dimension of love feeling and deeply vengeful; George is saved by pure chance after falling into the well and although seriously injured he is welcomed at home by Luke Marks, Phoebe's husband, who hears the young man's moans in the bushes:

> I (Luke Marks) crossed the garden, and went into the lime-walk; the nighest way to the servants' hall took me through the shrubbery and past the dry well (…) I was close against the mouth of the dry well when I heard a sound that made my blood creep. It was a groan—a groan of a man in pain, as was lyin' somewhere hid among the bushes (Braddon, 1997, p. 336).

Conclusion

In the final analysis, as it frequently happens in the existence of any pathological narcissist, loneliness, isolation and deep depression dot everyday life which tends to be increasingly impoverished and then finally extinguished in what Braddon labels as

Maladie de Languer of which Lady Audley is diagnosed in the *maison de santé* of Villebrumeuse in Belgium after being officially labeled as insane and criminal: "Lady Audley 'died abroad' which, after all her manic energy, is a notable fictional non-condition. (Indeed, one might also add the postscript: presumed cause of death – boredom.)" (Lee, 2011, p. 134); accordingly, her incurable mental condition in the last part of her life as a recluse presents a typical severe depressive condition, of authentic emotions hidden and forever buried in the darkness of childhood's ingratitude for survival instinct from the incessant mental abuse of her parental caregivers within the family sphere.

Conclusively, certain emotions remain forever locked in the Lady's bodily rigidity, systematically returned to the reader's eyes sitting inexorably at its end, even last trapped in her identity, marked by the stigma of insanity inflicted by the Victorians, respectively the fourth in the order of the shirts of Mme Taylor, thus, getting rid of any trace of impurity connected to the Victorian English territory unlike the French counterpart, apparently more tolerant with certain deformities of identities, Lady Audley's "madness" supplies the audience cultural commentary on how Victorian England was still unprepared to accept and collocate in society both women suffering from mental illness and those who more cunningly used the tool of apparent madness to throw off the chains of poverty or forced marriage as an extreme attempt at social redemption.

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