

Cox, Jessica. *Neo-Victorianism and Sensation Fiction*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. 251 pp. ISBN: 978-3-030-2989-8

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Sensation fiction was irresistibly popular yet problematic during the nineteenth century, often because it attempted to subvert nineteenth-century values and social norms and scandalized Victorian society. Its contestable position and the intricate relationship with the historical period that created the genre itself made sensation fiction a distinctive genre in both academic and popular interest in Victorian literary studies. Its enormous influence on twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature and the apt for reading Victorians from a contemporary and postmodern perspective show the acknowledgement of the genre in critical discourse.

In *Neo-Victorianism and Sensation Fiction*, Jessica Cox elucidates the cultural and literary legacies of the sensation genre and the way the genre survived in numerous neo-Victorian novels. Cox aims to discuss various key facts, such as “the role of sensation fiction within neo-Victorian literature, culture and critical discourse” (2), dividing her book into two parts; the first half deals with the operation of how Victorian has turned into neo-Victorian. Her research mainly centers upon the subgenres of popular fiction (e.g. Gothic, detective fiction, and Young Adult fiction). The second part investigates several neo-sensational tropes, including the representation of (sexual) trauma, connections with archaeology and history, and matters of inheritance, to demonstrate the diversity of the sensation genre’s legacy. The monograph gives us a full-length critical overview of neo-sensation writing, spanning its Victorian sensation forebears. The book seems to be a valuable source for future research with its variety and quality of chapters that are carefully organized and supported by diverse examples from (neo-)Victorian sensation novels.

Cox logically structures her chapters according to the above-mentioned subgenres, making them easy to follow and informative. In the introductory chapter, she addresses the issue of focusing more on literary fiction within the neo-Victorian critical discourse and explains her deliberate choices of the texts and subgenres from popular fiction. By discussing the role of sensation fiction within neo-Victorian popular novels, she aims to prove its (i.e., neo-Victorianism’s) indebtedness to one of the iconic forms of nineteenth-century popular fiction, which “marks” her contribution to the field as “a significant intervention” (3). Nonetheless, in the following section of her introduction, she draws attention to Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* (1860), aiming to demonstrate the diversity of sensation fiction’s legacy through Collins’s literary piece and its neo-Victorian afterlives.

The next chapter, “Neo-Gothic Sensations,” briefly outlines the transformation from Gothic fiction to sensation novel in which boundary-crossing women heroines are substituted for Gothic evil characters. As Cox’s choice of works illustrates, there is not an uncanny depiction of Dr Jekyll’s Hyde; there is Lady Audley instead, who is so charming yet she uses pleasing manners as a *façade* to manipulate others and to cover her offences. Cox then points out that sensation novelists demonstrate their concerns that are related to the past by rewriting Gothic figures (e.g., the spectral returns of characters).¹ The resonances of this interest in the past and reworking the Gothic elements also reverberate in neo-Victorian fiction.

Cox brings the theme of “Gothic doubling” (46) to the heart of her discussion in the second chapter. While she illustrates the parallel storyline between Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) and Daphne Du Maurier’s *My Cousin Rachel* (1951), she also evinces that the hidden subtexts appear as one of the essential doublings in both novels because they unveil how women experienced male authority. Cox moves further from Du Maurier’s novel to Joanne Harris’s *Sleep, Pale Sister* (1994), one of the reworkings of Collins’s novel, stating that the patriarchal structure discloses itself throughout the story. Through her detailed examination of four texts, Cox argues that the Gothic trope of imprisonment is a recurrent topic to accentuate in what ways patriarchal structure suppresses women in all literary texts. Herein it seems that Du Maurier’s *Rebecca* (1938) would also be an appropriate work to make a comparison between two genres in relation to Gothic tropes.

In the third chapter, Cox’s analysis centers upon the connection between the detective genre and sensation fiction, acknowledging the first as the “most successful and enduring legacy” (74) of the latter. She first focuses on illustrating “the prevalence of detective elements in the sensation novel” (78) through three well-known works: *The Woman in White*, *Lady Audley’s Secret*, and *East Lynne* (1861) by Ellen Wood. In doing so, she outlines the prominent features of sensation-detective fiction (e.g., the amateur detective, family secrets, and domesticity). However, although sensation fiction penetrated detective novels in the nineteenth century, the earliest examples often conceal the relationship between the two genres, such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Sign of Four* (1890). Nonetheless, this *concealed* relationship turns into a legacy in neo-Victorian afterlives. The “amateur detective” (86), for example, is employed heavily in neo-sensation detective fiction, while there is also the concept of “the widow-detective” (90) that is associated with one’s marital status, which echoes the Victorian ancestors/predecessors. However, in the case of the widow-detective in neo-sensation detective novels, marriage is no longer a burden. To fully understand the theme of the widow-detective in neo-sensation writing, Brian Thompson’s *Bella Wallis Victorian Mysteries* series would be useful works to explore and analyze.

Moving from detective to Young Adult fiction, chapter four explores the several parallels between Young Adult and Victorian sensation fiction, in which Cox considers the Victorian sensation novel as YA literature. Both blur the lines between genres, and

1 In sensation fiction, characters are not haunted by ghosts/supernatural beings, but often by the secrets of their past. The spectral returns of characters (i.e., Lady Audley’s fake death) appear as a recurrent theme in sensation fiction.

“encompass [. . .] multiple genres” (107); they “are distinctly contemporary genres, concerned more with the present than the past” (114). There are, of course, many similarities between the two genres and the influence of sensation fiction on YA neo-Victorian novels is precisely traceable. Yet, the essential point for Cox is that “the representation of feisty, assertive female leads in contemporary YA neo-Victorian fiction” (115) functions as “a direct echo” (115) and a legacy of the sensation novel. The latter part of this chapter discusses Young Adult fiction and its place in the New Literary Marketplace. To underpin her claims, she analyzes two specific neo-Victorian Young Adult novels, Philip Pullman’s *The Ruby in the Smoke* (1985) and Mary Hooper’s *Fallen Grace* (2010), both of which share parallels with sensation fiction.

In the fifth chapter, Cox addresses one of her central themes by stating that “[t]he notion of the past haunting the present is central to both Victorian and neo-Victorian sensation fiction. The reason for this haunting often lies in the traumatic events of the past and their long-lasting effect on those involved” (141). She focuses on representations of (sexual) trauma in Collins’s *The Woman in White* and its several afterlives. Cox first demonstrates how the concept of trauma is manifested in the novel and in Collins’s other works, such as *Men and Wife* (1870); in doing so, she calls attention to Collins’s use of the trauma narrative.² She then moves on to the concept of trauma in adaptations of *The Woman in White*, which proves that its neo-Victorian counterparts reuse such abuses. For instance, James Wilson’s *The Dark Clue* (2001) shows that Walter’s obsession with Marian culminates in rape and, as Cox puts it, “in [Sarah] Waters’s *Fingersmith* [2002], Maud is exposed to pornographic materials from a young age” (153).

In chapter six, Cox calls attention to historical and archaeological explorations, because they appear as recurring themes in neo-sensation fiction. As she suggests, the reason for this often comes from the interest in “writing of the past from the perspective of the present, and constructing a narrative that is of both past and present” (170). The chapter investigates the “representations of archaeology in popular historical fiction” (166), such as Victoria Holt’s *Shivering Sands* (1969) and Elizabeth Peabody’s *Crocodile on the Sandbank* (1975). She highlights the issue of the reconstruction of the past in a contemporary period. More precisely, excavated artefacts prove/suggest that the Victorian past can only be fully perceived by assembling small pieces, which require “restoration” (166). Yet, this will lead to a possible “misconstruction” (166) because, as Cox suggests, “the impossibility of recovering an entirely authentic past [...] will inevitably damage or taint those objects from the past which remain” (188).

The seventh chapter deals with the motif of “inheritance” as a recurrent sensational trope in neo-Victorian novels, which in this case marks them as “neo-sensation.” It also delves into “the implications of the pervasive use of the language of inheritance in neo-Victorian criticism” (195). By exploring inheritance as a legacy of Victorian sensation, Cox points out that “exploring issues of identity through the figure of the mother” (200) comes to the forefront in neo-Victorian novels, such as *The Quincunx* (1989) by Charles Palliser, *Her Fearful Symmetry* (2009) by Audrey Niffenegger,

2 Collins’s use of the trauma narrative is often concerned with the “portrayal of an abusive marriage,” “illicit sexual relations,” and the figure of “the sexually abused woman.”

and *The Asylum* (2013) by John Harwood. Nevertheless, Cox ends her chapter by highlighting that the inheritance theme functions as a tool for conceiving the intricacy of the present by calling for “an examination and understanding of the past” (199).

The concluding chapter discusses Austin Fryers’s *A New Lady Audley* (1891) as a “parody-burlesque of *Lady Audley’s Secret*” (219) and its possible position as a potential neo-sensation novel written during the Victorian age. Although there are several alterations in the parodic version (e.g., the absence of the original characters), “the ‘magnificent ancestral home’” and “grounds which have been subject to significant improvements” (222) remain the same. Yet, as Cox suggests, the storyline of Fryers’s novel “contains strong echoes of the earlier narrative” (222). This relation might invite a more complicated discussion, because this parodic adaptation was written in the nineteenth century, yet, in a way, it functions as a neo-Victorian sensation afterlife. To argue in favour of demonstrating such a complex example, Cox would include another possible work to strengthen her analysis: Sarah Grand’s *The Heavenly Twins* (1893). The reason for her doing so is that Grand’s novel was not only written in the nineteenth century, but also contains sensational tropes, such as hauntings and doublings. It would even be worth deeply researching the relationship between the sensation genre and New Woman fiction, possibly offering another chapter.

The weight of the evidence suggests that the influence of sensation fiction is evident in neo-Victorian literature, which, in fact, marks neo-Victorianism itself as an important legacy of the sensation genre. Although Cox offers a number of popular Victorian and neo-Victorian novels in relation to sensation fiction, it seems that the legacies of the genre might not be seen as clear-cut as she proposes due to its intermingled nature with other genres. Nonetheless, though there are possible above-mentioned weaker points in her research, it seems fair to side with Cox: her well-rounded examination of neo-Victorian writers’ persistent return to many sensational tropes proves neo-sensation fiction’s noteworthy and critical position within neo-Victorian scholarship. Furthermore, her focus on popular fiction distinguishes her investigation from many previous attempts which discuss neo-Victorian legacies, since she disagrees with the idea that neo-Victorianism can only be perceived by literary fiction that addresses/examines the past. She also calls attention to the general neglect of sensation fiction’s influence on popular culture by neo-Victorian critical scholarship. Therefore, she chooses her primary texts from the subgenres of popular fiction (e.g., YA fiction and the Gothic), challenging those criticisms that often privilege literary fiction.³ Cox successfully provides the basis for a future work on (neo-)sensation fiction. A great merit of her approach is that she offers a scholarly discussion of works that have largely been overlooked in critical scholarship.

3 Grace Moore (2011) and Beth Palmer (2009), for example, both comment on the afterlife of the Victorian sensation novel, concentrating on certain literary novels such as Sarah Waters’s *Fingersmith*.