

## SENSATIONS DOWN UNDER: THE SEISMIC CHARGE OF AUSTRALIA IN *GREAT EXPECTATIONS* AND *LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET*

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The First Fleet of convict ships from England arrived in Australia in 1788, beginning an eight-decade era of transportation to the land down under and symbolising the creation of a striking dichotomy between the evils of colonisation and the economic opportunities and benefits of empire building. Australia became a land tainted with dangerous criminals and the exploitation of land and people, yet also offered these criminals the hope for rehabilitation while simultaneously offering England a new economic outpost in the South Pacific. This contrast raises important questions about the overall image of Australia in literature during the nineteenth century. What forces led to such drastic differences, and how were these differences played out in the consciousness of England?

An analysis of the representations of Britain's southernmost colony makes clear that this contradictory image was prevalent during the turbulent decade of the 1860s. This single decade was crucial in the transformation of Australia's image, as it saw the previously dark underworld of convicts and "savagery" more frequently combined with positive portrayals of economic advancement and rehabilitation. This decade also saw the rapid rise to popularity of the sensation novel, and Australia's dual image was successfully converted into seismic charges for the sensation market with two main goals in mind. I argue that the mystery and danger of the colony were advanced to fulfill the expectations of the sensation market, while the opportunistic image of Australia was advanced to justify and promote Great Britain's imperialism to its citizens. Through this dual literary representation, Australia became a colonial space for the analysis of ideological contradictions inherent to what Fredric Jameson refers to as England's "political unconscious." An analysis of the works of Jameson and Freud enables a theoretical framework through which to read two examples of Australia's sensational representation.

The processes and effects of colonisation are inherently complex and many-sided. Although the results of colonisation were obviously brutal for the indigenous peoples of Australia,<sup>1</sup> my focus here is the effects of imperialism upon the metropole of England, and the ways in which such effects influenced and were

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, *Empire and Others: British Encounters with Indigenous Peoples, 1600-1850*. Ed. Martin Daunton and Rick Halpern (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1999).

influenced by the sensation literature of the 1860s. The dark image of Australia involved both the harsh convict settlements known for chain gangs and floggings, as well as the free settlers who were mainly ex-convicts themselves. Until the 1850s, very few British citizens sought passage to Australia of their own accord, since the prevailing opinion in England was that, as Patrick Brantlinger states, "Australia's first colonizers were themselves 'white savages'" (110). Since the hopes for reformation and subsequent reintroduction to British society were slight, the British were happy to leave these criminals where they felt they belonged – on the far side of the world, where, as A.G.L. Shaw states, "at least they would find it hard to come back" (58). Robert Hughes agrees, claiming in his seminal text *The Fatal Shore* that "English lawmakers wished not only to get rid of the 'criminal class' but if possible to forget about it" (1).

Freud's discussion of "the uncanny" can shed light on the workings of this process for the Victorians. He defines the uncanny as "in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old-established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression" (47). Transported convicts were indeed "familiar" and "old-established" for the Victorians, who heard of crimes and captures in news reports, saw the hulks moored in harbours and knew that those aboard awaited passage to Australia, and were aware of the debates surrounding transportation. Still, the Victorians sought to repress all knowledge of those sent away, but were forced to acknowledge their existence when the convicts figuratively "returned" to the consciousness of society through literature. Yet Craufurd Goodwin states that when gold was discovered in Victoria in 1851, this information "flowed from Australia to Britain quickly and in a variety of forms [. . .] which ranged from sensationalist pamphlets" to more detailed publications, creating a "new El Dorado" in the minds of the British (405-6). The discovery of gold, as Catherine Hall states, "set the seal on this transformation from convict settlement to land where fortunes could be made" and Australia finally became "a place for white settlers in the English imagination" (33). New waves of emigrants poured into the colony seeking their fortunes in gold as well as in cattle and sheep farming, and the literature of England found a new location for many characters who could never realistically prosper in England.

So what ideological purpose did this combination of positive and negative representations of Australia serve for the British government and its people? In a time when the British empire was expanding rapidly, serious concerns arose as to the validity and the handling of its claim to these "new" lands. Yet also visible were the opportunities for economic advancement on both the micro and macro levels: individuals who travelled there had excellent chances to earn money or to reform, while the country of England itself was benefiting tremendously from the riches of its farthest-flung colony. Because of this dual representation, Australia became what Fredric Jameson calls an "insoluble logical paradox" (167) for the citizens of England, and they sought a solution to these inherent contradictions. Jameson's

concept of the “political unconscious” can be applied to the ideological workings of literary representations for the Victorians. Because literature functions as a “symbolic enactment of the social within the formal and the aesthetic,” literary representations of Australia allowed Britain to find “the imaginary resolution of a real contradiction” (77). By displacing their concerns about the expansion of empire onto fictional characters and events, people were able to view both the positive and negative impacts of imperialism through situations that were not real. Thus, Australia functioned as a zone in the British imagination that upheld the ideologies of imperialism, instead of an existing place where such horrors and opportunities occurred on a daily basis. “The aesthetic act is itself ideological,” writes Jameson, “and the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal ‘solutions’ to unresolvable social contradictions” (79). The “political unconscious” of Britain during the 1860s was fed such imaginary solutions time and again in its literature, and the dominant ideology that imperialism works for the good of all was thereby upheld and maintained.

By analysing two representative works from the sensation novels of the 1860s, *Great Expectations* and *Lady Audley's Secret*,<sup>2</sup> one can begin to understand how these contradictory images of Australia functioned to produce sensation and “the uncanny,” as well as how the dichotomy played out in the political unconscious of England. Charles Dickens's numerous portrayals of Australia managed to create a lasting image of the colony. One of his novels most instrumental in doing so was *Great Expectations*, published in 1861. Although Dickens is not commonly grouped with the core sensation authors of the 1860s, many critics, including Harvey Peter Sucksmith, feel that “Dickens may be correctly described as a ‘sensation novelist’”(145). In fact, many critics have explicitly compared his techniques to those of Wilkie Collins.<sup>3</sup> *Great Expectations* involves many similar elements to those found in the most popular sensation novels, including crime, suspense, danger and mystery. It also nicely fits Kathleen Tillotson's definition of sensation fiction as “novels with a secret” (xv), the secret here being the true identity of Pip's benefactor. But the darker side of Australia is portrayed mainly through Magwitch, the escaped convict who terrifies Pip in the opening scene, threatening to kill him if he does not rob his sister's pantry and steal a file from Joe's forge to cut off his convict chains. Pip's forced association with Magwitch produces inestimable guilt for the young boy: “under the weight of my wicked secret, I pondered whether the Church would be powerful enough to shield me from the vengeance of the terrible young man, if I divulged to that establishment” (*GE* 23). He immediately begins

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<sup>2</sup> The following abbreviations will be used: *Great Expectations* (*GE*) and *Lady Audley's Secret* (*LAS*).

<sup>3</sup> See Sue Lonoff's “Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins” in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 35.2 (1980): 150-70 and Barbara Hardy's “Dickens and the Passions” in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 24.4 (1970): 449-66.

trying to repress the memory of “his” convict. As Peter Brooks writes, “the fellowship with the convict [. . .] will remain with Pip, but in a state of repression, as what he will later call ‘that spell of my childhood’ – an unavowable memory” (484). Because this association is stained with both the crimes of Magwitch and his own crimes of robbery and theft from his family, Pip desperately attempts to repress all memories pertaining to the convict.

In spite of these attempts at repression, circumstances keep reminding Pip of his association with Magwitch. Pip hears the guns of the hulk nearby signalling another convict escape, and both the leg iron and the file stolen from Joe resurface for different purposes. David Trotter writes: “From the outset, the taint of prison and crime clings to Pip [as] the re-emergence of the past in the future, about the return of the repressed” (xii). Pip’s repressed “friend” constantly returns in other guises, a perfect example of Freud’s “uncanny.” Even though Magwitch cannot come back as himself until much later in the text, he returns in these other symbolic ways to remind Pip of his guilty youth, which bears out Freud’s remark that “[a]n uncanny effect is often and easily produced by effacing the distinction between imagination and reality, such as when [. . .] a symbol takes over the full functions and significance of the thing it symbolizes” (50). Pip’s repression seeks to displace his experiences with the convict into imaginary existence, yet the constant return of what Brooks calls the symbolic “convict-communion material” (487) never lets him forget.

Much later in the text, Pip discovers that Magwitch is his true benefactor, which Brooks reads as a moment of psychic release when “the latent becomes manifest [. . .] as a painful forcing through of layers of repression” (491-2). A large part of Pip’s repulsion towards Magwitch centres on the fact that his convict had been transported to Australia under a life sentence, and the dark images of Australia circulating around England lead Pip to feel ashamed at his further association with such a brutal, low-class and harsh convict. Pip has believed that the money that made him a gentleman has come from the upper-class pocket of Miss Havisham, but instead it now appears to be tainted with convict blood, and his anger and shame make him turn on Magwitch: “The abhorrence in which I held the man, the dread I had of him, the repugnance with which I shrank from him, could not have been exceeded if he had been some terrible beast” (*GE* 319-20). Magwitch tells of how he earned this money for Pip as a “sheep-farmer, stock-breeder, other trades besides, away in the new world [. . .] many a thousand mile of stormy water off from this” (317) after earning his ticket-of-leave in Australia. Not only does Pip have to face the disappointment that Miss Havisham (and especially Estella) had nothing to do with his expectations, but he also has to face the reality that a convict toiling in Australia, the land of punishment, brutality, crime and savagery, has funded his rise to a gentleman.

Dickens chooses to set Magwitch’s prosperity in Australia for several reasons, all of which create sensational effects for the readers of the text. The constant

allusions to and reappearance of Brooks's "convict-communion material" set up suspense for the readers, who wait and wonder when the convict will reappear in the story. In addition, by setting up readerly sympathy and identification with Pip, Dickens prepares us to experience the sensations of the uncanny just as Pip does. Therefore, the overall negative image of Australia is advanced in order to produce shocking and suspenseful energy for the reader through the effects of the uncanny, whereby *Great Expectations* finds success in what Henry Mansel, in his famous definition of sensation fiction, calls "preaching to the nerves" (482).

But Dickens also had other, more positive goals in mind with the portrayal of Australia in *Great Expectations*. After earning his ticket-of-leave, Magwitch is able to earn a small fortune, enough to fund Pip's rise to gentlemanly status, and he returns to England under the risk of death to see "his" gentleman. This prosperity for an ex-convict would not have been possible in England, since few employers were willing to risk their reputations and businesses to hire such dangerous men. Had he not been transported, Magwitch would probably have returned to his former ways of poaching and begging upon release, but instead he finds honest work in the colony and uses his money for acceptable purposes. Michael Hollington states that "in the great return scene it is Magwitch, for all the imprisonment in class-thinking that he shares with Pip, who cuts the more attractive figure [ . . . ] his death has a stoic dignity" (30). Magwitch's transportation to Australia results in a much more dignified, conscious human being, one who seeks not only his own happiness, but that of others. "Dickens too seems to become aware [ . . . ] that alongside the horrors of the colony were also potential opportunities – often far surpassing those on offer in Britain – that many convicts might enjoy, at least once they had earned their ticket-of-leave" (Hollington, 17-18). Therefore, Dickens was able to portray not only the dark side of Australia through convicts and repression, but also the positive ideas and numerous opportunities associated with the colony such as rehabilitation and economic advancement. The novel promotes empire-building to the British people through such characters and events.

Mary Elizabeth Braddon's novel, *Lady Audley's Secret*, functions as another highly representative example of Australia's contradictory image in the nineteenth century. Much as Dickens does with Magwitch, Braddon chooses to represent the dark side of Australia with a character who travels to the Antipodes, only this time he goes of his own accord. George Talboys chooses to leave his young wife and baby son to make a fortune during the gold rush, but he neglects to give his family advance warning. As he tells the governess Miss Morley on the return passage to England, "I left my little girl asleep, with her baby in her arms, and with nothing but a few blotted lines to tell her why her faithful husband had deserted her." Miss Morley is horrified at this revelation and exclaims, "'Deserted her?'" (23). George may not have been a convict, but the fact that he deserts his wife and leaves for a colony in the new world, regardless of noble purpose, points to his unsavouriness as a husband and father and therefore to his low moral worth as a Victorian. The fact

that he travels to Australia is vital to the country's image as a place for nothing but convicts and, as Toni Johnson-Woods terms them, other "English n'er do wells" (120). He may have been involved in empire-building activities that would benefit the macro environment of his country, but on the micro level of his family and Victorian social values, George is nothing but a deserter. Jenny Bourne Taylor argues that: "There is George himself, whose fantasy of colonial conquest is a thinly disguised displacement of his own inadequacies as a husband and father" (xxxiv). George has been unable to earn enough money for his family at home, so he deserts them to head for the land down under.

George Talboys also functions much like Magwitch in *Great Expectations*, because one of the main characters seeks to repress his existence, yet he eventually returns when least expected (and least desired). Lady Audley desperately desires to remain detached completely from her past because after George's desertion, she left her child and changed her identity in order to marry into a higher social standing. In the opening chapter, as her new husband Sir Michael speaks to her, she "looked away – away into another world" (*LAS* 15). It is obvious from the beginning that Lady Audley's mind is not with her present husband, but wandering back to previous experiences in her life. She may have been worrying that her first husband George, far away in Australia, could actually return some day and expose the truth of her bigamy and false identity. In a similar fashion, Pip could never truly hide from Magwitch, the one person he desperately sought to repress. Yet outwardly, Lady Audley displays the sort of neurotic behaviour that Freud associates with repression, such as her nervous excitability and her harsh language towards Robert Audley, the man who continuously irritates Lady Audley in his obsessive quest to discover the truth.

Although Robert may be the detective who discovers clues for the reader, many find themselves identifying with Lady Audley, wondering about her mysterious past and how it will tie into George's disappearance. When readers discover the events that take place, they again put themselves in the position of a character and experience the uncanny through her. This conforms to Freud's idea of something familiar "that has been estranged only by the process of repression" (47). George was obviously something familiar to Lady Audley, since he was once her husband, yet upon his return from Australia he becomes part of the uncanny, "that class of the terrifying" (20), because he has the power to expose her true identity. Australia functions as a space whereby repressed characters can hang in the balance, awaiting their opportunity for return, their chance to produce the uncanny and sensational in both those who repressed them and the readers themselves.

The negative images of Australia in this text function in many of the same ways as those of *Great Expectations* to produce sensation in the readers' bodies. Right from the start, readers question how George Talboys, returning from Australia, fits into the snug picture of family and home life, and when he disappears he becomes a central figure for suspense and mystery for the reader. Was he

murdered? Did he return to Australia in grief over his wife's death? As Robert Audley fits together the pieces of this puzzle, readers become more and more frantic to discover the truth. George is repeatedly discussed in terms of Australia, as a few brief lines of conversation between Robert and Lady Audley clearly portray. When Robert raises the issue of George's disappearance, Lady Audley innocently inquires, "[y]ou mean – the Mr. Talboys who went to Australia?" George replies: "Yes, I mean the Mr. Talboys, who I was told set out for Liverpool with the idea of going to Australia" (*LAS* 143). Through constant repetition, George becomes directly associated with the colony of Australia, and everything dark and sensational about its image is ingrained in the minds of readers. He becomes geographically associated with the deserter and the convict, the man so far away that everyone but Robert Audley seems perfectly happy to forget about him, especially the one person who seeks to completely repress his entire existence. The fact that he is thrown down a well by Lady Audley upon his return now seems appropriate for George's fate; because he had figuratively become Australia, the farthest-flung colony on the other side of the world, it is only proper that he should visit another type of land down under, at the bottom of Lady Audley's well.

Yet he survives this fall, mainly because of skills he had learned in Australia. He escapes from the well because, as he later tells Robert and Clara, "I had my Australian experiences to help me in my peril, and I could climb like a cat" (434). His association with Australia is not completely centered around the dark and hostile environment of the land down under; George also portrays many of the positive images circulating around England about its colony in the Southern Hemisphere. When we first meet George, he is returning home aboard the *Argus* with "an elderly wool-stapler, returning to his native country with his wife and daughters, after having made a fortune in the colonies" (18). George himself has made his fortune in Australia, though it has taken him over three years of toiling in the gold fields to do so. He tells Miss Morley that before leaving for Australia, he was not able to earn enough money for his family, and therefore had decided to commit suicide by drowning himself. Yet upon overhearing some "talk of the Australian gold-diggings, and the great things that were to be done there" (24) he decided to seize this opportunity to finally earn a proper fortune. The image of Australia as a golden land of opportunity not only saved George Talboys from suicide, since he claimed that "[t]his was better than the water at any rate" (25), but also gave him hope for the economic future of his wife and son.

He did eventually earn enough money to return to his family, even though it meant three years of living in "the wilds of the new world" and being "in the centre of riot, drunkenness, and debauchery" (26). He himself experienced "rheumatism, fever, starvation" until he was "at the very gates of death," all dark images of the land down under, yet through this suffering he was finally able to discover "a gold deposit of some magnitude" which made him "the richest man in all the little colony" (26). Just like Magwitch, George worked hard for years before

earning his fortune, and therefore upholds the idea that Australia was a land full of economic opportunities for the hearty and adventurous, for those who could not have found prosperity in England. Coral Lansbury states that "the fortune from Australia" could now be seen as a "credible" alternative to traditional means of enriching characters (116). George returns with the fortune he earned in the Australian goldfields, and serves as an excellent example of why Britain should continue in its path of imperialism. For those willing to take risks, opportunities for economic advancement abounded in the colony. Johnson-Woods states: "When male fictional characters leave domestic confines [ . . . ] they are escaping domesticity in order to experience adventure, the adventure of empire" (114). By portraying the contradictory image of Australia, Braddon was able to satisfy the readers of sensation fiction while upholding the concept of British imperialism. As Johnson-Woods concludes, "thus Australia is a land of contradictions for Braddon; on one hand it is filled with English n'er do wells and, on the other, it provides them with an opportunity to do well" (120). Braddon is careful to portray both sides of this dichotomy, thereby producing sensational results for her readers through the uncanny, while simultaneously promoting the ideas of colonialism.

In the colony of Australia, both Dickens and Braddon, along with many other sensation authors such as Charles Reade, found a space for playing out the political contradictions of their time. Here the people of Britain could read about the dark side of Australia, finding the excitement and mystery of an unknown world, the danger of "savages," the repression of characters and desires, and everything else their nerves sought in sensation fiction. Yet at the same time, they could also see the colony as a land of reformation and opportunity for convicts, and an economically beneficial space for individuals, families, and the metropole of England. Through these literary representations, 1860s Britain could come to terms with the contradictions of empire-building in their imaginations, and as Jameson claims, find an "imaginary resolution of a real contradiction" (77). Edward Said summarises this point when he stresses that the "national and international context" of works from authors such as Dickens should not be lost in the analysis, because it is this context that connects fiction to its historical and geographical world. Said insists that "because of their *worldliness*, because of their complex affiliations with their real setting, they are *more* interesting and *more* valuable as works of art" (526). Such outward-focused analysis, as Said so often performs, can provide inestimable benefits for the study of the culture and the political mindset of an entire nation. Although the political unconscious of 1860s England would also have encompassed their invisibilisation of Australia's indigenous peoples, it is also important to analyse the effects of colonisation upon the metropole of England itself. By studying literature through its historical and geographical lenses, these works of art indeed provide valuable and interesting insights into the political unconscious of England.



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