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Taxonomies of Stimulation: Science, Gender and Sexuality in the Sensation Novel Debate

The invention of the sensation novel: three early reviewers

The sensation novel is a curious phenomenon of the Victorian press. No single author pioneered a new sensational form of novel writing and no group of authors planned a sensational assault on the domestic novel. Rather, the authors grouped under the term ‘sensation novelists’ were united by a large number of reviews that placed them within this category. Wilkie Collins, Mary Braddon, Mrs Henry Wood and Rhoda Broughton are the authors most commonly designated as sensation novelists across the 1860s, the sensation decade. Many others, such as Charles Dickens, Charles Reade, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Caroline Norton, Catherine Crowe and Ouida, were occasionally cited as sensation novelists, but these authors were also frequently associated with a variety of other genres. Works termed sensational were also disparate in terms of style and content. Collins’s *The Woman in White*, which for Margaret Oliphant was the ultimate representation of sensationalism, has little in common with either the domesticity of Wood’s *East Lynne* (1860–61) or the interest in female villainy in Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1861). Dickens’s disturbingly cold female heroine-victims hold little in common with the heated intensity of passion experienced by Broughton’s rebellious heroines. Inclusion within the category may therefore appear to materialize at random, but reviewers did see a common element across these texts: a penchant for inspiring physical excitement in the reader. Sensation novel reading depended on bodily responses, often at the expense of higher, more intellectual stimulation according to some reviewers.

The most intense period of debate about the sensation novel took place throughout the 1860s and the early 1870s. Dozens of reviews of
sensation novels appeared in a wide variety of magazines and some were more influential than others. Three early extended articles, all titled ‘Sensation Novels’, held much influence in establishing the terms of the debate. These were Margaret Oliphant’s 1862 article in *Blackwood’s*, the Reverend Henry Mansel’s 1863 article in the *Quarterly Review* and an anonymous 1863 article in the *Medical Critic and Psychological Journal*. These articles were often alluded to if not directly cited in later reviews, in defences of the sensation novel and in the many parodies of the sensation novel debate. In addition, individual sensation novels and their authors were given ongoing attention in the less highbrow literary weeklies such as the *Spectator*, the *Athenaeum* and the *Saturday Review*. Defences of the sensation novel and critiques of the reaction to it were offered in 1864 in *All the Year Round*, edited by Dickens, and the *Dublin University Magazine*, edited by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu. Later in 1864, William Thomson, Archbishop of York, delivered a sermon on novels, which was transcribed and published in *The Times*. His scathing assessment of the genre was critiqued in various editorials between 1866 and 1867. Extended reviews again appeared in *The Christian Observer*, the *Westminster Review* and *Blackwood’s* – again in the form of a contribution from Margaret Oliphant. At this point, M.E. Braddon's *Belgravia* launched a campaign of defending the sensation novel by publishing defences by George Augustus Sala. Braddon also struck back at reviewers by parodying the sensation novel debate in her novels *Aurora Floyd* and *The Doctor's Wife*. Other magazines followed Braddon’s editorial lead, such as the *St James's Magazine*, another defender of the genre, which published *Groweth Down Like a Toadstool*, a light-hearted take on Rhoda Broughton’s novels and the broader sensation novel debate. In short, across a small number of years, this abundance of press attention caused conventions of discussing the sensation novel to take shape, and these conventions would occasionally resurface right up into the early twentieth century.

The most dominant of these conventions was a preoccupation with defining the characteristics and varieties of sensation novels. The reviewers’ definition and identification of examples of sensation novels in the 1860s were activities highly fraught with disagreement not only about which works were sensational, but what made them so. In these reviews, the term ‘sensation’ was loaded with multiple and complex meanings. ‘Sensation’ meant pleasurable physical sensation and it referred to the scientific study of sensation. It also described the scandalous behaviour of characters as well as the status of many of these novels as runaway bestsellers. However, various reviewers also offered their views on how