Sensation fiction is described, in literary histories of the Nineteenth century and in critical studies of single authors as a distinct sub-genre, represented in a cluster of best-sellers, such as Collins’s *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*, *Hard Cash* by Charles Reade, the over-influential and exceptional *Lady Audley’s Secret* by Mrs. Braddon, and in large number of more or less valuable imitators.

Recently the genre has been explored, especially by feminist and cultural studies, for what it reveals about womanhood, the relationships between the sexes and between family and society in Victorian period. This kind of analysis has been carried on also within a new critical perspective of what is marginal and what is central, what is major and what is minor, and indeed of the usefulness of these terms. But, what is more interesting, the sensation novel has also been recently studied as a narrative form, which has led to a radical re-thinking of the relationship of (or the boundaries between) high and low (popular) culture, to the reconsideration and the re-defining of the canon, and to the re-interpretation of Victorian fiction and Victorian literature and culture at large – and, of course, of Dickens’s work as well.

The exploration and analysis of sensation fiction has started from the definition of the ambiguous term “sensation”, that can be referred to the facts and problems on which it focuses (often taken from real life and in the way they were told and represented in newspapers and what today we would call tabloids), or to the impressive and often frightening descriptions of crime and violence of which these narratives were full, or to the atmosphere of mystery and suspense it created, all of which account for the extraordinary success this kind of fiction enjoyed. Connected with what has been just mentioned, “sensation” was referred to the impact – and the shock – it had on the nerves of the readers.
The forcible incarceration of the sane in lunatic asylums, bigamy
(Lady Audley's Secret) derived its contemporary piquancy from the
Yelverton divorce scandal which rocked England in 1861), murder,
particularly by women (such as the one committed by Madeline Smith who,
in 1857, poisoned her lover by pouring arsenic into a cup of chocolate; or
sweet-looking Constance Kent, who, at fourteen, stabbed her four-year-old
little brother), unsolved crime cases, disappearance of people, indeed
sensational trials, from reality and the front pages of newspapers found their
way into sensation fiction. Plots of mystery, suspense, secrecy, deranged
heroes and heroines, tales of duplicity, deception, disguise, crimes of
passion, stories of violence and murder, are the matter not only of what has
been defined as a “sensation novel”, but most of the fiction in the 1860s. To
such extent that authorities, religious, political, and even literary, were
alarmed. The Archbishop of York preached a sermon against it as “one of
the abominations of the age”; Mrs. Oliphant, on the influential pages of
Blackwood’s Magazine, warns against it as encouraging vice, especially in
women, and even goes so far as to draw parallels between the sensation
novel and the Fall of the Roman Empire (connected with the Fall of Woman
– or The Fall – which, as everybody knows, was woman’s responsibility!).
In Blackwood Magazine, in her horror, she gives a description and a
comment on the female characters in sensation novels: “Women driven wild
with love for the man who leads them into desperation...”; “who marry their
grooms in fits of sensual passion”; “who pray their lovers to carry them off
from husbands and homes they hate”; “who give and receive burning kisses
and frantic embraces and live in a voluptuous dream” (Blackwood’s,
“Sensation Novels”, Vol. 91, pp.564-584). Punch, jokingly but
significantly, describes sensation novels as “devoted to harrowing the Mind,
making the flesh creep [...] giving shocks to the nervous system, destroying
conventional moralities, and generally unfitting the Public for the prosaic
avocation of Life” (Punch, April 1895). Wordsworth defines sensation
novels as “frantic”. Less hysterically and more to the point, Henry Mansel,
on Quarterly Review, insists on the fact that they are “the indication of a
wide spread corruption”.

The sensation novel was indeed transgressive – and seen as morally
dangerous – not only in its obsessive exposure, but in its romancing of
violence and moral decay, in focusing on the “otherness” in Victorian
society, and was especially disturbing in its blurring the boundaries between
the criminal and the domestic, the mysterious and the ordinary, the
“respectable” and the “low”, and, ultimately, the rational and the irrational.
Collins’s *The Moonstone* – a masterpiece of the genre – was defined “wild yet domestic” by Dickens, who pointed out, with admirable synthesis, the centre of attraction and the meaning at the core of the sensation novel, always set in the seemingly ordered, quiet, reassuring middle-class home. Henry James wrote, referring to Mrs. Braddon’s novels, that

Instead of the terrors of Udolpho, we were treated to the terrors of the cheerful country house or the busy London lodgings. And there is no doubt that these were infinitely the more terrible.

At the core of this apparently irreproachable and respectable upper middle-class world, there is a mystery, an unmentionable secret, generally concerning a female character, and the family in which she should be the Angel, the model of all (feminine) virtues. Connected to the secret are greed, crime, violence, madness.

In most sensation novels, and in most of Dickens’s stories, even though everything seems to be “settled”, any moral judgement, as, for that, any solution of the mystery, is vague and ambiguous; obliquity and uncertainty are not, or not completely, dispelled by conventional or generally unconvincing happy endings; identities – particularly feminine – are never definite; the distinction between the domestic ideal and the respectable woman and the villainess is blurred; the idealized family is disrupted by intrigue, lies, greed, persecution, even murder, and if restored to peace and respectability, this often happens by recurring to the law and after spectacular and devastating trials.

All this – and more – is in Dickens’s novels, though in a subtler and extremely more sophisticated fusion of elements, as the result of the elaboration and transformation of literary and narrative modes, from all sorts of sources: realistic narrative; journalism; melodrama; popular and street magazines; Newgate novels; stage melodrama; Gothic and fantastic tales; domestic novels – and what not!

Dickens has long been considered the father of sensation fiction and he undoubtedly created the genre, though there are differences between him and his contemporary “rivals”, whose work nevertheless he anticipated and decisively influenced, making the sensation mode an authentically new fictional form, away from the trend towards conventional realism, dominant in the English novel from the time of its eighteenth-century beginnings, and culminating in the 1850s with the ascendancy of the domestic novel, also present in Dickens, which centred on familiar events and social interactions of everyday life – exactly what sensation fiction disrupts.
As early as 1837, after the success of *Picwick Papers* (where, ghost stories and plenty of sensational elements were inserted!), in *Oliver Twist* all the sensation elements are already present: intrigue, crime, mistaken or denied identities, the theft and hiding of papers, victims and persecutors. Everything originates in the “respectable” family, the middle-class home, and the society of which it is the centre (the beginning of the novel is a grim description of a workhouse), which proves as cruel and violent as the London underworld, its inherent and complementary double. The two worlds are in fact inextricably connected by correspondences and oppositions on which the novel is tightly structured. At the centre of these two inseparable worlds is Oliver, belonging both to the middle-class (as the readers will eventually discover), into which justice will reinstate him, but, for a considerable part of his childhood, forced into the terrible criminal world where Fagin is the boss.

The character of Oliver is a construct of a number of literary forbears: the moral fable (Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* is suggested in the subtitle of the novel: “or the Parish Boy’s Progress”); Fielding’s (mentioned by Dickens in the epigraph to the Preface) re-elaborations of romance in his *Tom Jones: History of a Foundling*, who is not really a foundling, and whose protector, namely Mr. Allworthy, is kin to Mr. Brownlow. Tom’s most dangerous enemy is his step-brother, Blifil, an eighteenth-century less frightening Monks; the picaresque novels, a narrative model inspiring, again, Fielding and Smollett, Dickens’s childhood favourite authors. The picaresque is subtly manipulated to trace a route along which the hero of the novel – as in Fielding – reaches his deserved, positive destination. At the same time, its actual or apparent randomness makes the wanderings within the limits of the labyrinthine city an obsessive, fragmented, nightmarish journey dominated by fear, as in the Gothic novel, where girls in danger move frantically along corridors and climb staircases leading nowhere, in places completely out of their control, and experience disorientation to such extent as to lose consciousness, or to reach a state of constant delirium. The imprisonment of Tom Jones in Newgate (in Fielding, a glimpse at the “other” London – and England – of the Eighteenth century) is connected by Dickens with the so-called Newgate novel, enjoying, especially in the 1830s, a special vogue. A tradition, starting in Gothic fiction through John Gay, down to Byron’s *Corsair*, which had made highwaymen, robbers, and criminals central or even heroic, continued in the 1830s, and obviously seems to inspire, in *Great Expectations*, for instance, the character of Magwitch, a convict, but good at heart, which blurs all definite distinctions between good and evil characters and adds to the many ambiguities (a
typical feature of sensation fiction) of Dicken’s novel – and of his narrative on the whole, but also, for that, of much Victorian writing. Bulwer-Lytton turned from the novels of high society to Paul Clifford, where the hero is a highwayman, and Eugene Aram, about a murder case. Dickens was also a friend of Harrison Ainsworth, and admired his Rookwood. The Newgate novel, dealing with criminals recorded in the Newgate Calendar, was strongly adversed by Thackeray and other intellectuals in Fraser’s Magazine (writing fiction about criminals was mishappprehsended as condoning or advocating criminal behaviour) and was the object of a heated controversy (as were Oliver Twist and Ainsworth’s Jack Sheppard, in Bentley’s Miscellany, founded in 1837) together with its poor relative, the penny dreadful (Gothic tales in eight-page, double column instalments, luridly illustrated with woodcuts, for the working-class reader), which came into general use particularly in the 1840s, whatever intellectuals thought of it, and contributed to the form of the detective novel of the 1880s.

Again the Gothic novel – “Monk” Lewis and Maturin, and especially the macabre elements in their novels, rather than Radcliffe – inspired Dickens for the nightmarish, frightening atmosphere, charged with horror, danger and persecution that dominates Oliver Twist, and transforms the realistic references into a sort of “Kafkaesque reality” of highly symbolic significance. Fagin, Monks (a name recalling “Monk” Lewis, but also the terrible monk in Ann Radcliffe’s The Italian or Mary Ann’s Radcliffe Manfroné – the protagonist of the latter, as the character of Monks in Oliver Twist, with a birth-mark) are like pervading, ever-present, ever-chasing spirits of Evil. The innocent Oliver, as all the good characters in the novel, is incessantly threatened by Evil, which tries to corrupt and criminalize him, and then plots to destroy him; he is constantly the prisoner of an ever-enclosing trap, the victim of an inescapable chase. His labyrinthine wandering is claustrophic, whether it takes place in a city or in a house, as for other characters in novels such as Great Expectations and Bleak House. The plot of Oliver Twist has been criticized, and even ridiculed, for being too contrived, with Oliver attracted to the same people as if by a magnet, for all its coincidences and intersections, but this actually contributes to the atmosphere of fateful danger and evil inescapably surrounding innocence and defencelessness and inexorably trapping it. All the characters are chased in Oliver Twist, also the “bad” ones, as Sikes in Oliver Twist, in one of the most memorable – and sensational – pages in English literature.

The opposing forces of Good and Evil are the main elements of melodrama, the structural dynamics of which have great relevance to Oliver Twist and also to later sensation fiction. It has been written (W. Hughes, The
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Maniac in the Cellar, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1980) that the appeal of melodrama is in the clear-cut dichotomy between Good and Evil. The opposing powers are always outside the self – villains, social orders, natural disasters. Strife or division are entirely projected into the exterior world, the world of action which becomes hostile and menacing. In its pathological extremes, the world of melodrama is paranoid. In its purest form, melodrama tends towards the abstract and the allegorical, towards superficial personifications of Good and Evil; it provides the simplest pleasures of conventional and straightforward conflict, against a background of ideas and emotions widely accepted in a given culture at a certain time. All this is present in Oliver Twist and in other novels by Dickens and will be constant elements and aspects of later sensation novels.

It was particularly in stage melodrama – increasingly interconnected with fiction – both in scripts and in the acting techniques, that Dickens found inspiration for most of his sensationalism: in stage melodrama gestures were inflated, tableaux exaggeratedly elaborated, but the excesses were combined with literal exactness, and real and unreal were paradoxically but intriguingly interwoven. Actions and the conflicts underlying them were portrayed in their sterner, wilder, and tumultuous aspects. Everything, in sensation drama, was subordinated to the thrills it meant to induce, and there was a sort of obligation to the sensation scene, generally the death of the sinful heroine (such as Mrs. Wood’s adulteress in East Lynne) or of the unrepentant adventuress. In Oliver Twist, Nancy, the fallen woman, in Dickens’s quite original treatment of this sort of topos, is “redeemed” by being murdered by Sikes, in a scene of extraordinary sensational impact, in which terrible violence, cruelty and brutality are masterly combined with pathos for the destiny of the defenceless girl; in other novels, Dickens indulges in portraying spectacularly sentimental and emotionally effective death scenes so appealing to most Victorian readers (as Elizabeth Bronfen (1992) so interestingly and convincingly writes in her excellent study to which I am indebted for a series of the remarks that follow). The power not only of death, but of murder, over Dickens’s imagination – and over the Victorian reading public – is connected with the treatment of crime (and leads to the detective novel); but death in all forms remains at the core of Dickens’s sensationalism, both in the sentimental and lachrymose deaths of his good heroines, and in the gothic and macabre horror of Great Expectations, dominated by the extraordinary character of Miss Havisham, at the centre of a mystery, at the same time a living person, a spectre and a devil. Gothic-sensation elements dominate the scene which confronts Pip the first time he sees her:
She was dressed in rich materials – satins, and lace, and silks – all of white. Her shoes were white. And she had a long white veil dependent from her hair, and she had bridal flowers in her hair, but her hair was white. Some bright jewels sparkled on her neck and her hands, and some other jewels were sparkling on the table [...] I saw that everything within my view which ought to be white, had been white long ago, and had lost its lustre, and was faded and yellow. I saw that the bride within the bridal dress had withered like the dress, and like the flowers, and had no brightness left but the brightness of her sunken eyes.

Miss Havisham acts from an empty grave, her dismal barricaded house, the place in which she weaves her malignant plot, staging spectacularly her own death. Pip sees her for the first time as a “ghastly waxwork” in what has become her artificial crypt, “a skeleton in the ashes of a rich dress”, as if dug out of a vault. But “[...] waxwork and skeleton seemed to have dark eyes that moved and looked at me.” The gothic horror effect is intensified by the fact that Miss Havisham recalls a bride, in her white satin laces, her silks and jewels, the long white veil and bridal flowers in her hair. At the same time she is a spectre, “a sign of the bride as a dead woman”. And, in fact, to Pip, her bridal dress looks “like grave clothes”, her veil like “a shroud”, and herself “corpse-like.” She is Life-in-Death, buried herself alive, in a candlelit realm where everything is dust and decay, and where everything once white, the colour of purity, has turned to yellow, the colour of corpses. Like Miss Havisham, her surroundings “have become a superlative sign for mutability and decay, the enactment of death in midst life”.

And when she appears as a living person, she is like a vampire (a common character in popular literature, as in one of the penny dreadfuls so influential on the sensation novel, *Varney the Vampire*): her lawyer compares her to it when he says that she “wanders about in the night, and then lays hands on such food as she takes”; Pip observes her one night wandering through the house “in a ghostly manner, making a low cry” and carrying “a bare candle in her hand” (like the young and innocent heroines in danger in gothic fiction, but also like *Carmilla*, another Victorian transformation of the persecuted maiden, turning into a persecutor herself). Instead of being haunted by ghosts and villains, like the equally white-dressed girls of gothic fiction, it is Miss Havisham that haunts others (in “fancy”, Pip sees a body with her face hang by the neck from the wooden beam on the side of her house “all in yellow white”, as if “she were trying to call me”); she appears in terrible nightmares (dressed like Ophelia, all in white, with white flowers in her hair, and “where her heart’s broke [...]”
there’s a drop of blood”) and even more terrible hallucinations, as when Pip
sees her body, seated in a ragged chair closed to the hearth, catch fire and
turn to black ashes (“her faded bridal dress no longer alight but falling in a
black shower”). She is also a vampire in using the others for her revenge on
the man who deserted her; she sucks life and energy from her adopted
daughter, and transforms her, with her bite, into a revenant. The romance
plot – typically enmeshed with the economic one, as in sensation novels – is
transformed into a story of strife, at least in her plans. Like Frankenstein,
she has moulded Estella into a monster, now we would say a “clone” of
herself, “stealing her heart away and putting ice in its place”.

To the concentration of Gothic, macabre (a supreme touch of it is in
Pip’s final kiss of the “dying bride”, in her burnt clothes, while she is
imploring forgiveness and is, in a very special way, “redeeming” herself,
with her lips “not stopping for being touched”), melodramatic elements in
Miss Havisham, another one should be added: madness. In the form of total
delirium, or of mental derangement or at least of the blurring and confusion
between the rational and the irrational, madness is obsessively present in
sensation novels. Madness has to do with an area outside reality, though
deviously connected with it; it implies a psychological condition of
nightmare, the overthrow of rational order and stability. The insistence on
this state, in which order is eclipsed, or any stability is called into question,
reflects the increasing complexities and anxieties in Victorian society and
culture, perceived in terms of extreme polarities and expressed in
overstatement and emphatic instances. In an age of preoccupation with
rationality and with explanations, the sensation novel seems to have the
function of keeping alive the idea of mystery, the imponderables of human
existence, the apparently inevitable urge to violence. And if the mystery in
detective novels of the time is always solved and explained by “scientific”
means, and criminals are punished, the methodical uncovering of crime is,
in sensation fiction, never definite, or totally clear.

Whether Dickens could not complete his Mystery of Edwin Drood
because of his death, or he left it, as I like to think, “open”, what counts is
not the final solution of a brilliant “whodunit”, but the ambiguous,
disquieting world he creates, and the sense he evokes of the fight between
the forces opposing each other both in Victorian society, exemplified in the
opening of the novel, with the merging of the oriental dream with the
cathedral town, where two unfamiliar worlds are brought together with
sinister implications, evoking and repeating the conflict inside man, as
Jasper’s opium dreams seem to reveal.
Bakhtin’s definition of the sensation novel as socio-historical and socio-symbolical in its balance between realism and the expression of deep anxiety and social tension is confirmed in this intriguing and significant last work by Dickens, where the disorientation of the innocent ends up in his final disappearance, and the author seems to get in touch with the deepest, subconscious anxieties – both collective and individual – of his age.

*Works Cited*