

All in the Timing: Timekeeping and Detection in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*

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Illustration for *Lady Audley's Secret* of Robert Audley and Lady Audley. *London Journal* (June 13, 1863).
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Introduction

While little read today, Mary Elizabeth Braddon was a bestselling Victorian author, whose novels, along with those of Wilkie Collins and Ellen Wood, helped found sensation fiction, a popular 1860s literary genre whose shocking and mysterious content delighted readers. *Lady Audley's Secret* (1861–62), Braddon's most famous novel and the one that launched her career, scandalized readers with Lady Audley's murder attempts and bigamy, challenging Victorian norms of femininity. Contemporary reviewers of the novel, such as Henry James, attributed the novel's popularity to Lady Audley's familiarity with modern technologies: "The novelty lay in the heroine being, not a picturesque Italian of the century, but an English gentlewoman of the current year, familiar with the use of the railway and the telegraph" (James 593). Using a historicist and narratological approach, my project tracks the novel's formal and material representations of another key modern technology: timepieces.

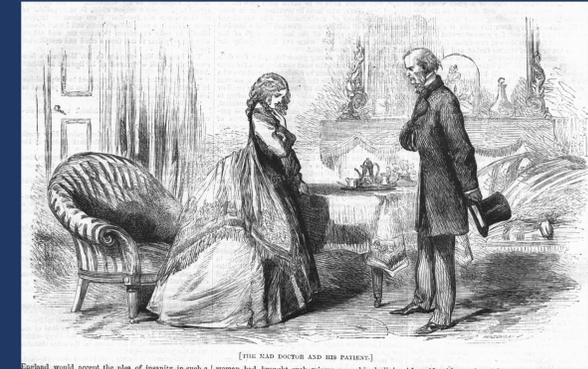


Illustration for *Lady Audley's Secret* of Lady Audley and Dr. Mosgrave. *London Journal* (July 18, 1863).
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Timekeeping and Detection

Social historians such as E.P. Thompson and Wolfgang Schivelbusch have shown how the industrial revolution engendered the internalization of time-discipline (a social order wherein workdays are structured around clock time rather than solar time), and the expansion of the railway in Britain necessitated the standardization of timekeeping, making timepieces essential tools of industry and producing by the mid-nineteenth century a Victorian populous obsessed with time. *Lady Audley's Secret* is especially time-conscious in its narrative preoccupations with chronology, suspense, and timekeeping. Vain and materialistic, Lady Audley covets timepieces both as markers of her newfound class position and, more practically, as tools to perfectly time her nefarious deeds, embodying a modern industrial time-discipline at odds with the novel's pastoral setting. Moreover, the text metonymically conflates Lady Audley with timepieces when her secret abandoned child can only remember her as "the pretty lady" who "gave [him his] gold watch" (Braddon 93). Robert Audley, Lady Audley's new step-nephew and the novel's languid protagonist, takes on the role of an amateur detective, tracking Lady Audley's secret history: "I must trace the life of my uncle's wife backwards, minutely and carefully, from this night to a period of six years ago" (Braddon 220). Succeeding in his detection, Robert reveals Lady Audley's bigamy and reunites with his presumed-dead friend George Talboys, Lady Audley's first husband, whom she had pushed down a well.

Conclusion

Using timepieces to assemble the chronology of Lady Audley's narrative, Robert rejects his life of aristocratic leisure and internalizes the industrial time-discipline that governs Lady Audley's nefarious actions to reveal her dark secrets. Robert's appropriate adoption of time-discipline transforms him into a productive member of modern society, whereas Lady Audley's excessive time-consciousness leads to her ruin. Robert's newfound time-consciousness mirrors readers' original experience of the novel, which would have been read in serial magazine installments, with the suspenseful narrative unfolding over time. The novel thus trains its readers to identify with Robert's time-discipline maturation, reinscribing a contemporary industrial time-consciousness in both its form and content.

"Circumstantial evidence ... that wonderful fabric which is built out of... infinitesimal trifles ... [including] the accuracy of a moment tested by one of Benson's watches: a thousand circumstances so slight as to be forgotten by the criminal, but links of iron in the wonderful chain forged by the science of the detective officer."

—*Lady Audley's Secret*, pp. 119–20.

Works Cited

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