

SENSATIONAL SERMONIZING: ELLEN WOOD, *GOOD WORDS*, AND THE CONVERSION OF THE POPULAR

By Julie Bizzotto

IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY BRITAIN underwent a period of immense religious doubt and spiritual instability, prompted in part by German biblical criticism, the development of advanced geological and evolutionary ideas forwarded by men such as Charles Lyell and Charles Darwin, and the crisis in faith demonstrated by many high profile Church members, particularly John Henry Newman's conversion to Catholicism in 1845. In tracing the development of this religious disbelief, historian Owen Chadwick comments that "mid-Victorian England asked itself the question, for the first time in popular understanding, is Christian faith true?" (*Victorian Church: Part I* 1). Noting the impact of the 1859 publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* and the multi-authored collection *Essays and Reviews* in 1860, Chadwick further posits that "part of the traditional teaching of the Christian churches was being proved, little by little, to be untrue" (*Victorian Church: Part I* 88). As the theological debate over the truth of the Bible intensified so did the question of how to reach, preach, and convert the urbanized and empowered working and middle classes. Indicative of this debate was the immense popularity of the Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon, who was commonly referred to as the "Prince of Preachers." Spurgeon exploded onto the religious scene in the mid-1850s and his theatrical and expressive form of oratory polarized mid-Victorian society as to the proper, most effective mode of preaching. In print culture, the emergence of the religious periodical *Good Words*, with its unique fusion of spiritual and secular material contributed by authors from an array of denominations, demonstrated a concurrent re-evaluation within the religious press of the evolving methods of disseminating religious discourse. The 1864 serialization of Ellen Wood's *Oswald Cray* in *Good Words* emphasizes the magazine's interest in combining and synthesizing religious and popular material as a means of revitalizing interest in religious sentiment. In 1860 Wood's novel *East Lynne* was critically categorized as one of the first sensation novels of the 1860s, a decade in which "sensational" became the modifier of the age. Wood, alongside Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon, was subsequently referred to as one of the original creators of sensation fiction, a genre frequently denigrated as scandalous and immoral. *Oswald Cray*,

however, sits snugly among the sermons, parables, and social mission essays that fill the pages of *Good Words*.

Today, the nineteenth-century critical reaction to sensation fiction is relatively well-trodden territory, with many nineteenth-century reviews and articles condemning the genre in no uncertain terms, and all citing similar criticisms: plot development over that of character; mass-market appeal and lower-class origins; the use of mystery and shocking incidents such as bigamy, murder, and crime, which were seen to create corporeal rather than cerebral responses in readers; the depiction of transgressive women; and the genre's general moral ambiguity.¹ Since the publication of Winifred Hughes's *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860s* in 1980, the first full-length study of the sensation novel since Walter C. Philips's 1919 *Dickens, Reade, Collins: Sensation Novelists*, the genre has been increasingly liberated from its scandalous origins. Indeed, the vast amount of critical research that followed Hughes's study, even with much of it still concentrating on the transgressive elements of the novels, has combined to transform the sensation fiction genre into a respectable and vibrant field of scholarly study.² Many modern studies have applied interdisciplinary approaches in their examination of the genre and have consequently highlighted sensation fiction's intersection with various discourses, including that of law, medicine, and science. In terms of religion, Mark Knight and Emma Mason's work on the emergence of sensational and religious rhetoric in the nineteenth-century has uncovered how the two ostensibly opposing discourses were intertwined, authoritatively arguing for the "continual slippage between the sacred and the secular," particularly in the popular literature of the day (3). The following analysis of *Oswald Cray* looks to further delineate the intersection of sensational and religious rhetoric in print culture, fiction, and the pulpit, moving beyond Knight and Mason's thesis to understand how *Good Words*' and Wood's unique blend of the sensational and the religious united to create a form of sensational sermonizing that participated in the cultural debates over the most effective and appropriate method of preaching and broadcasting spiritual doctrine. However, it will also be shown, particularly through a comparison with *Lord Oakburn's Daughters*, a serial Wood was simultaneously publishing in the secular miscellany *Once A Week*, how such a fusion of religious and sensational discourses left *Oswald Cray* in a sort of literary nowhere land, resulting in a narrative that received almost universally negative reviews. The critical condemnation of *Oswald Cray*'s narrative was similar to that leveled at Spurgeon and *Good Words*, underscoring the critical anxiety felt at the merging of religious and popular discourses. The blending of religious and sensational rhetoric in Spurgeon's sermons, *Good Words*' content, and Wood's narrative, though, denotes a parallel reassessment of the mode of religious address and the methods of dispatching spiritual ideologies, providing substantive insight into how each worked to construct a modern, popular, and accessible forum from which to communicate religious ideas to an increasingly faithless population.

The "Prince of Preachers"

IN SEPTEMBER 1857, THE *NEW MONTHLY MAGAZINE* published a piece, "How Shall We Preach?," investigating the question "which seems to be growing in importance in the present day" and particularly discussing Spurgeon's role in answering such a question (Roswell 50). Interestingly, the issue of the magazine also included the final installment of Ellen Wood's six-part novella *Parkwater*, suggesting that Wood was aware of the cultural significance of the debate. E. P. Roswell, the author of "How Shall We Preach?," aims "to inquire a little closely

how it is that the ammunition directed from the pulpit against our hard hearts so continually fails,” and, more importantly, to ask “what kind of preaching is most efficacious?” (50–51). To this question Roswell replies that “a practical answer seems to stare us in the face at this time in the amazing popularity of the Rev. Mr. Spurgeon,” in whose attractiveness “we must suppose there is some indication of a general approval of the particular style which he has adopted” (51, 55). Roswell, however, finds Spurgeon’s emotionally infused approach mawkish and ineffective, commenting,

We gathered from Mr. Spurgeon’s remarks that he would be in favour of a vast shaking hands all round, all petty distinctions done away, my butcher, my baker, and my candlestick-maker all greeting me as their neighbour, and giving me a friendly hug on every occasion of our coming in contact. Here would be a delightful state of things. Our streets would daily witness scenes of deepest pathos. . . . But our tears are gathering at the affecting thought. (54)

Roswell’s derision towards Spurgeon is situated in the preacher’s egalitarian ideology and the sermon’s endorsement of a sentimental discourse, which would throw society into the “deepest pathos”; ultimately ridiculing the entire homily with the production of sarcastic, fictitious tears.

However, a letter to the editor of the *Times* in the same year as Roswell’s article commends Spurgeon, comparing his style to more sedate forms of preaching. The author of the letter describes how he sent his children to hear a sermon by an Archbishop. His children, responding to why they could not recount the sermon, replied that they “could not hear a word he said. He is very old, and has got no teeth; and, do you know, I don’t think he has got any tongue either, for, though we saw his lips moving, we could not hear a single word” (“Preaching” 9). The author is then invited to hear Spurgeon preach and describes his very different and exciting experience: “To the hum and rush and trampling of men succeeded a low concentrated thrill and murmur of devotion, which seemed to run at once like an electric current through the breast of every one present, and by this magnetic chain the preacher held us fast bound for about two hours” (9). Chadwick makes a similar distinction between Spurgeon and the Tractarian preacher John Keble, ultimately concluding that “Spurgeon was English religion of the future, preacher to a waste of London, more brash, aggressive, public, biting, and worldly, because haunted by multitudes of souls athirst” (*Victorian Church: Part II* 421). Spurgeon was representative of a new form of preacher, one who was compatible with the evolving social and spiritual landscape of the mid-nineteenth century, a society that was urban, industrialized, unbelieving, and spiritually adrift.

Spurgeon’s performative preaching style, combined with his vast popularity, positioned him, in the language of many critics, in a similar vein to sensation novels: both were derided for eliciting physical and emotional responses; for their melodramatic style; and their mass-market, cross-class appeal and popularity. Moreover, the emotive characteristics of Evangelicalism and many Evangelical preachers incited some critics to situate its religious rhetoric as uneducated and anti-intellectual; again invoking similarities to the discourse surrounding sensation fiction, which was castigated for foregoing intellectual and moral instruction and instead, as Henry L. Mansel declared, “preaching to the nerves” (482). Yet when Mansel made this now infamous claim rebuking the genre, he was in fact citing a comment made in relation to a class of popular sermons, noting,

The remark need not be limited to sermons alone. A class of literature has grown up around us, usurping in many respects, intentionally or unintentionally, a portion of the preacher's office, playing no inconsiderable part in moulding the mind and forming the habits and tastes of its generation; and doing so principally, we had almost said exclusively, by "preaching to the nerves." (482)

Mansel's comment highlights how sensational and contemporary religious discourses are directly interlinked through a parallel rhetoric that promotes emotional stimulation, both physically and mentally, within an audience. The similar practices exercised in both religious preaching and popular literature were attributed to a society in which stimulation and excitement were necessary in order to gain and hold people's attention. In 1856, the *London Journal* remarked on this aspect of religious sentiment, averring,

We do not mean to assert outright that the people want stimulating as to the vital truths of religion, but it is quite evident that the masses cannot be drawn to places of worship in which the pulpits are occupied by very pious, but very dull preachers. The mental pulse of England is beating rapidly, the national mind is voracious, it revels in excitement, and the pulpit must keep pace with it, or be content to occupy an inferior position. ("The Reverend" 264)

The *Christian Remembrancer* observed the same inclination in sensation fiction: "The 'sensation novel' of our time, however extravagant and unnatural, yet is a sign of the times – the evidence of a certain turn of thought and action, of an impatience of old restraints, and a craving for some fundamental change in the working of society" ("Our Female" 210). Society's predilection for sensational, exciting literature and emotional, inspiring preaching is a reflection of the general tenor of the times, in which the population was eager for an affecting mode in its reading and its preaching. *Good Words*, like Spurgeon, looked to capitalize on society's penchant for affective preaching and literature, thereby combining popular and religious elements within its pages. In doing so, the magazine aimed to promote spiritual enlightenment and produce a journal that could compete with popular secular magazines.

Repackaging the Word

GOOD WORDS WAS THE BRAINCHILD of Scottish publisher Alexander Strahan. Patricia Thomas Srebrnik notes that Strahan looked to the publishing industry as a conduit of social and religious reform, believing "in the power of the printed word to educate the masses and thus effect a transformation of society" (3). When Strahan began his publishing empire, which would later include the *Contemporary Review*, *Saint Paul's Magazine* and the *Argosy*, he aimed to create a religious journal that would attract a wide breadth of readers. His first publication venture in 1859, the penny weekly *Christian Guest*, was supplanted after only a year by *Good Words*, which was edited by the popular Scottish clergyman Norman Macleod. Macleod was a generation older than Strahan; yet, like Strahan, he was attuned to the power of the popular periodical as a means of advocating religious ideals. In taking on the editorship of *Good Words*, Macleod declared that his principle motive was not only to "blend 'the religious' and 'the secular,' but [also to] yoke them together without compromise" ("Note" 796). Macleod's statement highlights *Good Words'* wish to redefine the scope of religious periodicals, many of which had tended, hitherto, to segregate religious

material from what was considered weekday reading. Macleod and Strahan were also keen to uphold a non-denominational policy, announcing in the first issue of the magazine that *Good Words* would “have no denominational connexion, but is intended to be a medium of communication between writers and readers of every portion of the Church of Christ” (Macleod, “Prospectus”). *Good Words*’ open forum was another major break with traditional religious periodicals, which typically employed their specific theological viewpoint to separate themselves from other faith-based journals. The combination of Macleod and Strahan thus produced an editor and proprietor both eager to collapse journalistic niches and construct a new literary space in which religious and popular genres could coexist and interact.

However, when *Good Words* began as a weekly in 1860 it received little notice amidst the popularity of Charles Dickens’s new fiction-carrying weekly *All the Year Round* and that of new shilling monthlies such as *Macmillan’s Magazine* and *Cornhill*. In late 1860, Strahan, after studying the phenomenal success of *Cornhill*, whose first issue reportedly sold 100,000 copies, decided to transform *Good Words* from a weekly to a monthly, with the significant difference of charging only 6 pence, half the price of most other family monthlies.³ Macleod’s editorial note in the final weekly issue of the magazine in December 1860 declares this intention in a single sentence paragraph: “The magazine will henceforth be published monthly, and the names of the contributors will almost invariably be added to their articles” (796). The most interesting aspect of Macleod’s note is his farewell, in which he states, “And now I make my Editorial bow, and retire behind the scenes” (796). The statement implies that as the names of the contributors will now be published with their articles, Macleod’s position as conductor, and thus symbolic face of the journal, is diminished. Macleod is positioned “behind the scenes,” leaving the content to speak for itself. The theatrical language of the statement also insinuates that a curtain would now open and some kind of performance or entertainment would begin. And this was in reality true: in entering the monthly market *Good Words* moved into a competitive and inventive medium, a market that in the early 1860s experienced an unprecedented level of growth and one in which fiction and the ability to entertain a broad range of readers elevated the most popular magazines above the rest. For *Good Words* this meant finding a balance within its content that was both engaging and morally uplifting, particularly in the important area of serial fiction. Once in monthly publication, Strahan began to incorporate illustrations and looked to include quality, full-length serials in order to compete with and possibly outsell the preeminent *Cornhill*.

By January 1862, *Good Words*’ circulation had risen to 70,000 copies per month, just behind *Cornhill*’s 80,000 (Srebrnik 38; Houghton 324). In 1863, however, *Good Words* was castigated in the Evangelical press, particularly by the antagonist *Record*, after advertisements appeared announcing the magazine’s publication of a serial by Anthony Trollope. The *Record* attacked *Good Words*’ “mingle-mangle” of secular and sacred material, specifically condemning the inclusion of a serial by Trollope, whom the *Record* described as a sensation writer (Turner 72). The *Patriot*, a nonconformist, Congregational journal, defended *Good Words*, but remarked, “We regret the employment of Mr. Trollope and others of his class, believing that in this entering into competition with the ‘sensation’ magazines, *Good Words* is abandoning its own proper position, and departing, in some measure, from its original design” (Turner 75). Trollope’s novel, *Rachel Ray*, was ultimately rejected by Macleod.

The rebuke of the *Record* and the *Patriot* illustrates the difficulty Macleod and Strahan faced in their attempt to exploit the popular, secular market while maintaining a spiritually

focused journal. Nevertheless, after all the hue and cry over the inclusion of Trollope, who, though popular, was mainly considered a writer of realism rather than sensation fiction, *Good Words*' next full-length serial, running from January through December 1864, was the work of none other than Ellen Wood, a writer frequently aligned with the sensation genre. Mark Turner attributes Wood's inclusion in the magazine at this period to signify the complete transition of *Good Words* from a blend of Sunday and weekday reading to the full commercialization of the magazine to an illustrated monthly, while Srebrnik regards it as evidence of Macleod, the moral watchdog of the magazine, allowing Strahan to have a free hand in the composition of the journal (Turner 85; Srebrnik 64). A close analysis of *Oswald Cray*, though, reveals that there were more underlying issues at play than just the rebalancing of content within the journal or Macleod's neglect. Rather, the inclusion of Wood, with her distinct brand of fiction, specifically her ability to convert sensation's emotional affect into religious allegory, gestures toward *Good Words*' resolve, regardless of the attacks from other religious periodicals, to persevere in their intention of merging the popular and the pious in order to, as Mark Knight describes it, "repackage the Word" (55).

Previous to publishing *Oswald Cray*, Wood had serialized a number of novel-length serials and novellas in other religious periodicals: four had been serialized in the *Quiver*, a penny weekly magazine with a strong Evangelical character, and her 1862 Condition of England novel, *A Life's Secret*, was serialized in the Religious Tract Society's magazine, the *Leisure Hour*. Indeed, Beth Palmer asserts that the "interconnecting discourses of evangelicalism and sensation [was] vital to all of Wood's writing" (189). Palmer's examination of this aspect of Wood's work exposes how Wood "recognized the commonality of the two discourses and put it to profitable use" (189). In *Oswald Cray*, Wood blends the ingredients of sensational and religious rhetoric together in such a way that the narrative actually diffuses any division between the binary forces and unites them in a single discourse of morality and conversion. Consequently, the sensational elements of the narrative are transformed into vehicles that enhance the novel's religious tenets rather than detract from its spiritual message.

Sensational Conversion in Oswald Cray

CENTERED ON THE DAVENAL AND CRAY families, *Oswald Cray* depicts a family drama in which Dr. Davenal and his daughter Sara are forced to keep an illicit secret, obliging Sara to pay all of her inheritance as blackmail money to a devious lawyer. The secret, which is eventually revealed to be the falsifying of bills by Edward Davenal, Sara's brother, is mistakenly linked to the death of Lady Oswald. Lady Oswald, in fact, is killed by an accidental overdose of chloroform given to her by Mark Cray, Dr. Davenal's assistant, against the doctor's orders. Mark Cray's departure from the field of medicine into the world of financial speculation provides a subplot in which he and his wife Caroline experience a financial and social rise and subsequent fall when Mark's corrupt speculation fails, forcing him and Caroline to flee to France. The novel also includes a spurious charge of bigamy against Edward Davenal and the ramifications produced by the false impressions of the meddling, spying servant Neal. Such plot devices are situated as conduits through which to heighten the sensational mode of the novel. The various plot intricacies, though, especially when viewed in the context of *Good Words*, reverberate with a message of patience, redemption, and faith.

The most blatant representation of religious discourse in the novel is Caroline Cray's spiritual conversion in the penultimate installment of the serial.

Wood portrays Caroline as impetuous, selfish, and motivated by materialistic gains. These qualities are strengthened by her marriage to Mark Cray, and their ambitious grasping for material and worldly objects leads them into ruin and disgrace. For Caroline, their financial ascent and descent induces the development of a stomach tumor, which eventually kills her. However, before her death Caroline is spiritually converted when she returns to Britain from France on the night of Prince Albert's death. When Caroline hears St. Paul's bell ringing out the death of the Prince, "a solemn awe . . . laid hold of her, and she felt as she had never felt in her life. Her whole soul seemed to go up in – may I dare to say? – heavenly commune. It was as if heaven had opened – had become very near" (436; ch. 55). Caroline's conversion is described in terms of the agony she had once felt in her distance from God and her consequent relief in finding her faith:

Heaven seemed no longer the far-off mysterious place she had been wont to regard it, but a *home*, a refuge, all near and real. . . . [Prince Albert] did not seem to have gone entirely away; he was only hidden beyond reach and sight for a little while; that same refuge would open for her, Caroline, and others; a little earlier, a little later, and she and all would follow him. Heavy as the blow was in itself, incapable as she was of understanding it, it yet seemed an earnest of the overruling presence of the living God. (436; ch. 55)

Complete and permanent conversion during the nineteenth century was usually seen as an extended process, through which a person gradually came to a fuller and more complete understanding of the existence of an omnipresent God. However, Wood, by using the death of Prince Albert as the impetus of Caroline's conversion, is able to historicize her transition, and, more importantly, to produce the emotional inducement necessary within Caroline and readers to validate the conversion. By centering Caroline's conversion on the death of such an eminent and beloved figure, the narrative creates a tangible connection between Caroline's spiritual response and emotional reaction and that of the audience, all of whom would clearly remember the actual event. Indeed, the narrator distinctly remarks on the inevitability that readers would have felt as Caroline did when she first heard of the Prince's death, noting, "I may be mistaken, but I believe this same feeling was experienced by many in the first startling shock" (436; ch. 55). Miriam Bailin notes the importance of "culturally authorized models of feeling and response," stating that the ethical core of sentimentality "is to transcend distinctions in the interests of a common humanity, [and to create] a shared, organic response to suffering and joy" (1020, 1022). *Oswald Cray's* reference to the demonstrative reaction of readers at the time of the Prince's actual death provides a "culturally authorized" form of expression that captures and validates the universal sadness and emotional impact of Prince Albert's passing; emotions Wood reawakens in readers through her delineation of Caroline's experience. In exploiting such a personalized, sentimental rhetoric, Wood creates empathy for Caroline and makes her spiritual revolution plausible and accessible to readers while also providing a vivid illustration of the possibility and power of conversion.

Moreover, immediately before Caroline's death, her husband repents of his role in her illness, but Caroline interrupts, saying, "Don't regret it Mark, God's hand was in it all. I look back and trace it. But for the trouble brought to me then, I might never have been reconciled to go. It is so merciful! God has weaned me from the world before removing me from it" (493;

ch. 62). Caroline contextualizes all of her and Mark's past troubles as "petty trials" through which "God was always leading" (492; ch. 62). Wood, by positioning Caroline's previous indiscretions and troubles as predecessors to her conversion, and by portraying Caroline's realization of this, authenticates Caroline's transition and situates Mark and Caroline's former transgressions within a larger depiction of conversion, subverting their immoral past within the context of pre-conversion.

This formula follows Evangelical declarations of conversion, which often dwelt on the pre-converted details of the convert's life and explored the deplorable aspects of their character and actions before conversion. Knight and Mason assert that "Evangelical testimonies frequently described in lurid detail the pre-conversion experience of sin" as a means of accentuating "their account of God's work in people's lives" (139). Hilary Fraser highlights how this narrative practice was transferred into the novel, observing, "The development of the novel as a genre can be said to have been profoundly affected by the beliefs, practices and spiritual narratives of evangelicalism, with its assertion of the unique importance of the individual and its focus upon self-examination, moral development, and conversion" (110). Appropriating such techniques, Wood infuses *Oswald Cray* with a series of immoral elements only to then defuse them by establishing such occurrences as part of a larger portrayal of religious conversion. Wood is therefore able to unite the sensational and religious aspects of the serial, producing a narrative that preaches emotional and spiritual awareness, but also endeavors to satisfy the contemporary hunger for mystery and transgression. What is more, once converted Caroline fulfills her spiritual duty and becomes herself a preacher, telling her family, "We shall all be extricated from our misfortunes here. . . . A few years more or less of toil, and strife, and daily care, and then redemption comes" (494; ch. 62). Like many of Spurgeon's listeners, Mark "felt somewhat awed" by Caroline's words (494; ch. 62). Wood thus completes her appropriation of conversion narratives, simultaneously emulating such narratives while transplanting their methodology into the popular, modern form of sensation fiction.

For the two main villains of the text, Mark Cray and the spying servant Neal, there is neither repentance nor forgiveness, but also no punishment. Rather, the narrator only questions what their individual fates will be, wondering if rogues like Neal maintain their treachery – "Will it be so till the end of their career? Will it be so with Neal? I sometimes wonder" (496; ch. 63) – or if Mark would ever overcome his worldly ambitions: "What would be poor Mark Cray's future? Would his unstable, weak mind be dazzled with these illegitimate and delusive speculations to the end, until they engulfed him?" (500; ch. 63). The novel's equivocation toward the fate of the villains is perhaps due to the fact that however mischievous, calculating, and self-serving they are, neither Mark nor Neal commits any act that would truly justify punishing them in the typical melodramatic manner: with death; prison; or transportation. The uncertainty of the antagonists' destinies is instead tied to Evangelic ideas of free will, in which salvation could be freely chosen.

The fundamental conservatism of Wood's fiction, which generally followed the tradition of punishing the villain and vindicating the hero, is thus absent in *Oswald Cray*, yet so is a conventional villain. Edward Davenal, the only actual criminal in the story, is left happily married to a wealthy heiress, barely having made any sacrifice or redemption for his crime. Alfred King, the unscrupulous lawyer blackmailing the Davenals, teeters on the point of becoming a bona-fide villain, with his threatening letters and curling moustache, but his threat is dissolved before it can mature into any real interest for the reader. In fact, beyond

the lack of an exciting villain, the narrative also fails to sustain any real mystery or suspense. The death of Lady Oswald is played out before the readers, leaving no mystery attached to it; a secret midnight visitor to Dr. Davenal, which occurs in the March installment, is revealed to be Edward Davenal in the June installment; and Edward's actual crime turns out to be forged bills, hardly the shocking transgression its drawn out cover-up deserves. It seems between the covers of *Good Words* Wood was reluctant to depict a genuinely wicked villain or a narrative that indulged in too many, or too indecent, sensational incidents.

Wood's hesitation to incorporate vivid sensational components would of course stem from the moral rectitude of *Good Words*, but it may also have been a conscious effort to avoid the objections made in the magazine to contemporary literature's sensational tendencies and habit of flippantly converting villains into heroes. In July 1863, the month the first installment of Trollope's *Rachel Ray* should have appeared, *Good Words* published Henrietta Kiddie's article "A Word of Remonstrance with Some Novelists." Whether this was a planned piece or published in response to the *Record's* recent attack on the magazine is not known, but it is *Good Words'* only article addressing the sensational inclination of contemporary fiction.

"A Word of Remonstrance with Some Novelists" begins by illustrating a number of wicked characters and events from Shakespeare and Sir Walter Scott and how their ends would be twisted and manipulated in contemporary literature so that "Lady Macbeth would wash her little hands quite clean; then having disposed of Macbeth by a lucky accident at Dunsinane, would marry Malcolm Canmore, or become a second wife to Macduff" (524). Kiddie's main censure of current-day literature is its unapologetic redemption of malevolent characters. She notes that

Falseness, dishonesty, murder even, are rapidly claiming our most intense sympathies. It is the old Jack Sheppard mania, with female Jack Sheppards. We began our infatuation by executing the sentence of reprobation on our favourites. We hanged them . . . we banished them – at least, we exiled them and condemned them to die. . . . But now, even this small concession is cast aside, and after a little temporary anguish we bring back our criminals to sit at our tables. (525)

Kiddie continues in this vein, remarking, "I do not protest against the introduction of wickedness into art, living as we do in a wicked world. . . . [But] do not let us have liars and cheats, and false wives, transformed by a touch into dying saints and honorable matrons. Do not let crime or its penalty be the crucible which converts our dross into gold" (525). Given the conversion motif of *Oswald Cray*, Wood would certainly have wanted to distance herself from the charge of transforming transgressive characters "by a touch." Thus Wood's characterization of *Oswald Cray's* villains and Carline Cray's conversion is distinctly unlike the type of redemption described by Kiddie. Mark Cray and Neal's destinies are left in the hands of God while Caroline is neither a fallen woman, a murderer, nor a bigamist, but is merely selfish, inconsiderate, and caught up in the immoral financial schemes of her husband. Her conversion is situated as a real awakening of religious feeling rather than a sinner punished by judicial consequences or poetic justice.

Nevertheless, *Oswald Cray's* blended narrative was not well-received by critics and received largely pejorative reviews. The *Saturday Review* complained that "the whole novel is choked up with all that is most trivial and commonplace in the ordinary actions of men" (Rev. of *Oswald* 203). Most significantly, though, the reviewer attacked the novel for its religious sermonizing: "Last, and most heinous, of the crimes which gather round mere

wordiness is that of sermonizing” (204). The *Athenaeum* placed the blame for *Oswald Cray*’s lackluster plot on its periodical location, noting,

Oswald Cray appeared in the pages of *Good Words*, a periodical in which a writer of fiction is placed under some limitations. Whether Mrs. Wood has not felt herself at ease and liberty . . . we do not know; but it is certain that in *Oswald Cray* her usual skill in weaving a story pleasantly and naturally deserts her. *Oswald Cray* is dull and long drawn out. The incident upon which the interest centres is so weak that the reader is inclined to resent it. (Rev. of *Oswald* 859)

The *British Quarterly Review*, in turn, blamed not *Good Words*, but the story itself, saying, “We have so high a sense of the value of that excellent periodical, that we regret its editor should have suffered so worthless a story to occupy so large a space in its pages. . . . There is no high moral to be inculcated, and no prevailing sin to be rebuked” (Rev. of *Oswald* 256). For these critics, *Oswald Cray* does not include enough sensational elements, and those that it does include are “weak” and “trivial.” Meanwhile, the novel’s religious tone is lambasted as mere “wordiness.” When taken out of the religious framework of *Good Words*, *Oswald Cray*’s narrative of conversion and repentance, rather than calling forth spiritual connotations, was seen as tiresome and dull. Likewise, the mediocre villains, rather than being seen in the light of potential converts, were viewed as uninteresting. By comparing *Oswald Cray* with Wood’s concurrently serialized novel, *Lord Oakburn’s Daughters*, it becomes clear that *Oswald Cray*’s publication in *Good Words* positioned the novel in the critical crossfire between religious and sensational rhetoric, leaving Wood very little authorial space to treat either mode to their full potential.

Murder Makes for Good Reviews

LORD OAKBURN’S DAUGHTERS WAS serialized in the weekly journal *Once A Week*, Bradbury and Evans’s riposte to Dickens’s *All the Year Round*, from 19 March through 8 October 1864. *Once A Week* was designed for liberal-minded, middle-class readers and typically published a mixture of fiction, miscellaneous non-fiction, and high-quality illustrations. Shu-Fang Lia contends that, although *Once A Week*’s editor Samuel Lucas was opposed to the trend of sensation fiction, it was “Bradbury and Evans’ wish to promote sales by means of sensation novels” (18). In such an atmosphere, compared to the more restrained, devout tone of *Good Words*, Wood was able to include more scandalous and lurid elements in her narrative without being accountable to a higher moral purpose, something she knew from experience: *Once A Week* had previously published *Verner’s Pride* (June 1862–Feb. 1863), one of Wood’s more sensational novels, which included the reappearance of a supposedly dead man and the mysterious murder of a young woman. Consequently, though *Lord Oakburn’s Daughters* and *Oswald Cray* share some plot similarities, the different periodical locations yield very diverse narratives. While *Oswald Cray* engages with mediocre villains and a lackluster mystery, emphasizing the ultimate morality of its protagonists, *Lord Oakburn’s Daughters* indulges in a brutal murder and the thrill of uncovering the victim’s true identity, the reason for her murder, and the murderer himself. It seems that in the pages of *Good Words* Wood played up her moral sermonizing, while in *Once A Week* she unleashed one of her most sensational works.

Lord Oakburn's Daughters and *Oswald Cray* both revolve around the lives of provincial doctors; both include the death of a patient in which the wrong doctor is suspected of incompetence; and both focus on the financial ups and downs of the central family, which in *Lord Oakburn's Daughters* is the Chesney family, who are unexpectedly elevated to the aristocracy through a number of surprising deaths, resulting in the Lord Oakburn of the title. The differences between the two serials, though, are suggestive of their respected places of publication. *Lord Oakburn's Daughters* is a fast-paced, incident-driven narrative with a principal crime that creates and sustains mystery and suspense. Whereas in *Oswald Cray* Lady Oswald's death is accidental and never a source of mystery, in *Lord Oakburn's Daughters* the murder of Mrs. Crane, who is actually one of Lord Oakburn's daughters using a pseudonym, is the focal point of the serial. Mrs. Crane's death is ultimately laid at the hands of her husband and doctor, Lewis Carlton, who kills her in order to marry her sister. Compared to the insipid villains of *Oswald Cray*, Carlton, who dies of heart failure in the final installment of the serial, is the quintessential sensational rogue: murdering; lying; scheming; and committing adultery all under the cover of a gentlemanly demeanor. Moreover, the murder of Mrs. Crane and Carlton's ensuing deceits are not seasoned with any moral meaning or message. The story is told to entertain, a fact that the narrator makes clear in the first paragraph of the novel:

A small country town in the heart of England was the scene some few years ago of a sad tragedy. I must ask my readers to bear with me while I relate it. These crimes, having their rise in the evil passions of our nature, are not the most pleasant for the pen to record; but it cannot be denied that they do undoubtedly bear for many of us an interest amounting almost to fascination. I think the following account of what took place will bear such an interest for you. (1)

The *Saturday Review* also noted the novel's value as pure entertainment, remarking that *Lord Oakburn's Daughters*

manifestly aims at no higher or more recondite object than that of helping readers to while away a few dull hours. And few who are content to take up books for the sake of mere passing amusement will grumble at the quality of the article here held out to them. . . . With sufficient complexity of plot to keep up the desirable degree of uncertainty and suspense, with characters freshly conceived and contrasted with clearness and force, with a spice of horrors enough to go down with ordinary lovers of sensation, . . . *Lord Oakburn's Daughters* will probably be pronounced. . . a highly clever and entertaining work. (Rev. of *Lord* 488)

Further, unlike *Oswald Cray*, *Lord Oakburn's Daughters's* narrative does not divulge the mysteries of the story until the very end, embracing the typical hide-and-seek methodology of sensation fiction. Taken as a whole, *Lord Oakburn's Daughters* is much more emblematic of the sensation genre than *Oswald Cray*, and Wood's religious tone in the novel is much more subtle than in *Oswald Cray*.

In *Once A Week*, Wood, as she well knew, had more latitude to indulge in rousing plots and scandalous events. Additionally, the shorter, more concise weekly installments in *Once A Week* allowed and required Wood to continually use a deluge of startling or unexpected incidents in order to keep the plot moving and readers engaged. Whereas developments in a monthly installment could unfold at a slower, more gradual pace, weekly parts had to progress

at a much quicker tempo, and thus required more action and incidents in general. Therefore, not only did the secular, more lenient editorial policy of *Once A Week* provided a marked difference to that of *Good Words*, but the publication format – weekly versus monthly – also produced a distinctly different pace and tone. This is evident in the appearance of a number of secondary subplots in *Lord Oakburn's Daughters* that supply each installment with a self-contained episode but aren't entirely essential to the progression of the main storyline. As a result, the weekly installments of *Lord Oakburn's Daughters* usually contained as much, if not more action than a typically monthly part of *Oswald Cray*, which on average was twice the length of an installment of *Lord Oakburn's Daughters*.⁴

The more entertainment-focused, less pious columns of *Once A Week* provided a periodical location in which Wood could indulge her more sensational side, while writing for *Good Words* she engaged with more sentimental, spiritual features. The ability to write two such diverse serials, each catering to their specific place of publication with such deliberateness, is a mark of Wood's versatility, a quality few serial writers achieved with such ease. Wood's adaptability was, according to Maria Riley, "The key to Wood's phenomenal success" (181). However, *Oswald Cray's* poor reviews emphasize the precarious balance Wood attempted to strike with her sensational sermonizing. Yet, like Spurgeon's sensational preaching and *Good Words's* assortment of secular and religious content, *Oswald Cray's* blended narrative highlights the common trend in the mid-nineteenth century of intermingling religious and sensational discourses as a means of recapturing the public's failing faith in religious doctrine.

Sensational Models of Affect

IN THE WAKE OF MOUNTING RELIGIOUS doubt and ongoing debate surrounding a sensationalized form of preaching, *Good Words's* effort to create a new genre of religious periodical, one that combined religious and popular, secular discourses, was validated by the commercial success of the magazine. However, although Wood's unique style of sensational sermonizing seemed to correspond with the magazine's aim of mixing the popular and the religious, *Oswald Cray's* amalgamation of sensation and religious allegory failed to satisfy proponents of either school. The serialization of *Oswald Cray* in *Good Words*, though, provides a revealing example of how interconnected the sensation genre and Evangelicalism were in the 1860s, even in the face of critical derision. Indeed, in an age when religious doubt was seeping into the current of social thought, the combination of sensational and religious rhetoric emerged as an appealing stop-gap to the flow of unfaith. Challenging traditional methods of preaching, Spurgeon, *Good Words*, and Wood adopted sensational models of affect in an attempt to modernize and renovate religious doctrine by presenting spiritual truths through fresh, inspiring modes of communication, whether from the pulpit or the printed page.

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NOTES

1. For a comprehensive overview of contemporary and modern criticism of sensation fiction see Radford's *Victorian Sensation Fiction*.

2. Hughes's *The Maniac in the Cellar* evaluates sensation fiction in relation to mid-nineteenth-century critical and literary debates. Another important early study of sensation fiction includes Brantlinger's 1982 essay "What is 'Sensational' about the 'Sensation Novel'?" which documents and analyzes the sensational contents and structural components of sensation fiction and argues against Hughes's view of the genre as subversive, noting that sensation writers often backed "away from the deepest truths in their stories" (5–6). Other important modern studies of the genre include Taylor's *In the Secret Theatre of Home*, which reads the novels of Wilkie Collins alongside Victorian discourses of psychology, Heller's analysis of Wilkie Collins in relation to the female Gothic in *Dead Secrets*, Cvetkovich's *Mixed Feelings*, which uses feminist and Marxist strategies to uncover the "politics of affect" constructed in sensation fiction, and Pykett's detailed overview and evaluation of the genre and its legacy in *The Sensation Novel*. For an overview of recent trends in sensation fiction studies see Knight's article "Figuring out the Fascination."
3. See Turner for a full overview of *Good Words*' transition from a weekly to a monthly magazine.
4. A typical installment of *Oswald Cray* was twenty-two pages while that of *Lord Oakburn's Daughters* was nine and a half.

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