

“I veer about between hope and despair”: Utopian Visions in Victorian Sensation Fiction

Tara MacDonald

Abstract

The following article questions what role the present moment can play in our scholarship on Victorian popular fiction. More specifically, it argues that the feelings of lost or strange time associated with pandemic living find resonance in Victorian sensation novels. The genre is invested in describing the state of ‘the meantime,’ a period that is a mix of stasis and progress when one waits, wastes time, or meanders. This also describes the period when one is waiting for social change to occur. The article then situates sensation fiction within Victorian ideas about utopias, focusing especially on feminist utopias. It suggests that sensation novels present utopian visions, glimmers or partially realised forms of utopian existence, which are characterised by female opportunity, care communities, and happiness. Finally, case studies of two novels by Wilkie Collins, *Man and Wife* (1870) and *The Fallen Leaves* (1879), are presented to demonstrate how Collins crafted utopian visions for how to survive life in the meantime.

Keywords

Wilkie Collins; sensation fiction; temporality; utopia; feminism; happiness.

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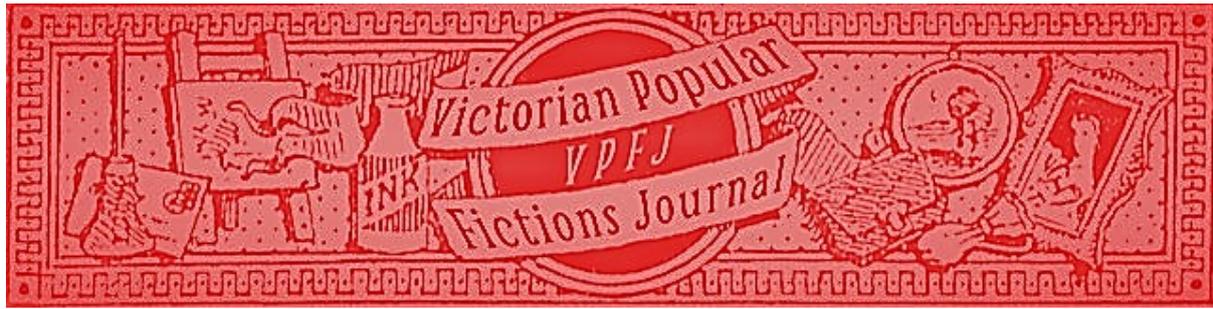
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“I veer about between hope and despair”: Utopian Visions in Victorian Sensation Fiction

Tara MacDonald

What could Victorian sensation fiction possibly have to say about a global pandemic and the feelings of lost or strange time associated with this period? This is what I asked myself in spring 2020 when Covid-19 hit my small corner of the United States. I was working on a book on Victorian sensation novels, and I witnessed other scholars making productive connections between pandemic life and Victorian literature. But by the summer of 2020, I found myself largely abandoning my scholarly work. My own scholarship felt irrelevant in ways that it had not before, and despite my many privileges, I felt stuck and anxious about the future. I worried that we were receding backwards in time as the pandemic disproportionately impacted – and continues to impact – women, many of whom were required to return to the domestic sphere, to home-school their children while also working full-time, or to give up their jobs in order to take on such care work. I realise now, with some distance, and despite the ongoing pandemic, that Victorian sensation fiction was relevant to my experiences, and the experiences of others, in some surprising ways. As many of us around the world grappled with life in the early stages of the pandemic, I was inspired by conversations circulating about the need for us all to *not* return to normal but rather to reimagine how things could be better. I tried to take on such work in my pedagogy and in my care for family, friends, and colleagues, but I still contended with feeling stuck in the meantime: time was moving slowly and future social changes, if they indeed would happen, would take time.

In *Guilty Pleasures*, Arielle Zibrak explores the pleasures of lowbrow feminine forms like romance novels and reality television, finding that a key function of such supposedly escapist forms is that they help you “*survive in the meantime*” (2021: 76):

For people who live with their own oppression, it is always the meantime – and the meantime is very long. The real and important desire to overthrow the circumstances of one’s own oppression does not contain within it a solution for the meantime. In the meantime, we must find ways to experience pleasure amid the circumstances of shame and violence that form our daily lives.

(76)

Zibrak’s claim presents an excellent argument for reading Victorian popular fiction in the current moment as we deal with exhaustion, new forms of political unrest, and the inequalities that the pandemic has put into stark relief. I argue in what follows that Victorian sensation novels are particularly invested in describing, and even attempting to find solutions for, the state of ‘the meantime.’ These novels are filled with female characters that are unhappy, eager for more, or frustrated by the limited social options available to them. Such female figures are not confined to sensation fiction, of course: we can find them across a range of Victorian literature, especially in ‘Woman Question’ novels from the mid-century, like Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) or George Eliot’s *Mill on the Floss* (1860), or in late-century New Woman novels. But sensation fiction’s temporal placement in the 1860s and 1870s is important, as this was a period that saw *some* of the effects of the women’s movement but not the radical change of the *fin de siècle*. Indeed, sensation characters are fascinating case studies in resilience. That said, I certainly am not advocating that we use unhappy figures like Lady Audley, Isabel Carlyle, or Lydia Gwilt as guides for how to survive in the meantime or for how to process trauma. Talia Schaffer, in her recent *Communities of Care: The Social Ethics of Victorian Fiction*, cautions that she will not insist “that each of us turn to Victorian fiction for life lessons” (2021: 13). Schaffer explains that she does not hope “to transform all small groups into mutually loving care communities through the magic of Victorian fiction” (13). Yet, the “magic” of her own work is that it both makes visible care relations in Victorian fiction and can also encourage readers to think about the ethics of care more broadly, even in our own lives.

Inspired by what we have lived through in the past two years, we might ask: how did Victorian popular authors theorise ‘the meantime,’ this state that feels like a mix of stasis and progress for many? How did they make space for utopian visions – or even just moments of joy or levity – in what could feel like dystopian times? “I veer about between hope and despair” is a sentence spoken by the tortured Mrs. Farnaby in Wilkie Collins’s *The Fallen Leaves* (1879), whose entire life is about waiting for a bright future in the form of a reunion with her lost daughter, all the while knowing that it is likely not to arrive (Collins [1879] 1899). Although I echo Schaffer’s cautions, I nonetheless hope that the answers to the questions that I pose above might in some way benefit readers, critics, and teachers today. I acknowledge, too, that not everyone is experiencing the same temporal feelings that I articulate here. The hope for pandemic relief may be a feeling at odds with grief for a loved one who has died or the dread associated with climate change. More broadly, then, I ask: what role does the present moment play in our scholarship on Victorian popular fiction? In what follows, I first argue for sensationalism as a genre grappling with the meantime. I then situate the genre within Victorian ideas about utopias, focusing especially on feminist utopias. I argue that sensation novels present utopian *visions*, glimmers or only partially realised forms of utopian existence, which are characterised by female opportunity, care communities, and happiness. Finally, to test out these theories, I offer case studies of two novels by Wilkie Collins, *Man and Wife* (1870) and *The Fallen Leaves* (1879).

Sensation in the Meantime

My daughter Penelope has just looked over my shoulder to see what I have done so far. She remarks that it is beautifully written, and every word of it true. But she points out one objection. She says what I have done so far isn't in the least what I was wanted to do. I am asked to tell the story of the Diamond and, instead of that, I have been telling the story of my own self. Curious, and quite beyond me to account for. I wonder whether the gentlemen who make a business and a living out of writing books, ever find their own selves getting in the way of their subjects, like me? If they do, I can feel for them. *In the meantime*, here is another false start, and more waste of good writing-paper. What's to be done now? Nothing that I know of, except for you to keep your temper, and for me to begin it all over again for the third time."

(Collins [1868] 2008: 13; my emphasis)

As Gabriel Betteredge suggests in this passage from Collins's *The Moonstone*, the meantime can describe the period when one gets distracted, wastes time, or meanders. At its most basic, the term means the time in between one event and the next. Given this, sensation fiction might seem like an odd choice of genre to discuss the meantime since these novels were supposedly characterised by fast plots and consistent action. Winifred Hughes notes in an early piece of criticism on the genre, "It is the mixture of different 'realities,' the startling contrast between the event and its mundane surroundings, that gives the sensation novel its special pungency and produces its undeniable effect" (1981: 17). Yet sensation not only combines startling events with ordinary surroundings; the genre also explores the "mundane" time in between moments of heightened drama, time that can feel strange or disorienting. While critics such as Nicholas Daly and Eva Badowska have identified "time consciousness" or "temporal anxiety" within sensation fiction, what I emphasise is how these novels convey a sense of temporal dissonance, a feeling that time – or, more precisely, one's orientation in time – is somehow wrong or out of place (Daly 2010: 48; Badowska 2009: 158).

The notion of time feeling either too long or short is most often articulated in scenes featuring characters waiting, whether for news or for another character's arrival. Isabel Carlyle's painful, liminal period in disguise as a nanny to her own children in Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* can be regarded as a long period of the meantime. Daly is certainly right when he calls the sensation novel a "novel of suspense," yet it can also convey not merely suspense but boredom (2010: 47). Both boredom and suspense stretch time; with each affective state, time becomes long. How they differ is that suspense demands a deep interest and a wish for futurity, while boredom can be linked to disinterest, *ennui*, or even calmness. Robyn Warhol argues that feelings of boredom are a necessary counterbalance to heightened moments of suspense and tension for readers of serial fiction, and characters in these novels, too, fluctuate between these states (2003: 80). Often, and perhaps ironically, scenes of waiting in sensation fiction frequently feature a character who tries to read a novel to pass the time but who is too distracted to read. In Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, Alicia is waiting for her cousin, Robert Audley, to arrive when her stepmother, Lady Audley, asks her to join her on a walk. Alicia agrees, confessing, "I have been yawning over a stupid novel all the morning, and shall be very glad of a little fresh air" (Braddon [1862] 2012: 288). Braddon's narrator notes wryly

Heaven help the novelist whose fiction Miss Audley had been perusing, if he had no better critics than that young lady. She had read page after page without knowing what she had been reading; and had flung aside the volume half-a-dozen times to go to the window and watch for that visitor whom she had so confidently expected.

(288).

Much more dramatically, and simultaneously, Lady Audley is awaiting not Robert himself but news of his death after she has set fire to the inn where he is staying. Experiencing suspense rather than boredom, she wanders her rooms wearily and considers suicide, anxiously watching “the clock over the archway” (285). “How slow time is,” she says, “how slow, how slow! Shall I grow old like this, I wonder, with every minute of my life seeming like an hour?” (285). When she decides to walk with her stepdaughter, the narrator records her dread of the dramatic revelation that she assumes is about to occur: “She would rather have suffered anything than that slow suspense, that corroding anxiety, that metaphysical dry-rot in which heart and mind seemed to decay under an insufferable torture” (289). While Alicia and Lucy wait for dramatically different things – a loving reunion and a death announcement – the meantime for both characters is a space of stasis, torture, and slowness. Every minute feels like an hour. Alicia is “yawning” and distracted, while the narrator uses melodramatic language to convey Lucy’s torturous “decay.”

This emphasis on slowness and waiting might be surprising given the many associations between sensationalism and speed. Daly, in *Literature, Technology, and Modernity, 1860-2000*, argues that reading sensation fiction can be paralleled to the speed and sensory experience of riding the train: the sensation novel attempts to accommodate the “speeded-up railway age” and thus provides “temporal training” to anxious readers (2010: 37). Many Victorian commentators described railway travel as an “assault on the fragile nervous system of the traveller,” recalling the way in which reading sensation fiction itself “was characterized,” and so traveller and reader alike were “thought to be harnessed into a particular apparatus” (44). Daly’s qualifiers – sensation “was characterized” and “thought to be” a fast, sensory assault – demonstrate that he is discussing the discourse *surrounding* these novels, which admittedly categorised them in a very specific manner. As is well known, critics condemned the frequency of shocking revelations, and related the novels’ fast pacing to the notion that they were quickly written, cheap, and disposable. It’s worth noting, too, that sensation novels were dubbed “fast” due to their scandalous content; Braddon, in particular, was called a “fast” novelist. In contrast, Wood, who paired her sensational content with Christian moralising, was placed in both “slow” and “fast” categories: she is included in the group of “Slow Lady Novelists” published in *Reader* in 1865. Of the novels themselves, however, Daly doesn’t simply claim that they are fast or take pleasure in situations of suspense, but that they articulate a new anxiety associated with timekeeping and feelings of “powerlessness in the face of rapid change” (44). Indeed, speed in sensation novels is often terrifying. This is a key point, and one that serves to modify the exaggerated and sometimes crude claims of conservative Victorian reviewers.

Again, what I locate in many sensation novels is not merely anxiousness related to speed but the notion of time feeling *wrong*, or, drawing from the concept of cognitive dissonance, what we might call temporal dissonance. Perhaps the best metaphor for temporal dissonance is the clock tower described in the opening pages of *Lady Audley’s Secret*, which is “a stupid, bewildering clock, which had only one hand – and which jumped straight from one hour to the next, and was therefore always in extremes” (Braddon [1862] 2012: 7). The focus on “extremes” might seem counter to my claim that the sensation novel is invested in the meantime as it appears, instead, to stand in for the idea that these narratives jump from one extreme event to the next. But the narrator registers the clock as “stupid” and “bewildering” due to the missing minute hand, which records the in-between time. The narrator complains that the “stupid clock ... knew no middle course” (61). This makes it not only extreme, but misleading. When Robert and George walk underneath it, it is “pointed to seven” but is actually “nearer eight” (61). It is also incongruous with other clocks in the novel: the old clock on the

church steeple in the village has hands that mark the “slow progress” of “rustic life,” and the clock in Lucy’s boudoir has a minute hand that she watches closely. The novel relies on accurate time keeping to solve the mystery of George’s death and Lucy’s identity. Yet these various clocks and watches also, and perhaps ironically, serve to emphasise the fact that time is subjective and inconsistent.

Sarah Sharma, in *In the Meantime: Temporality and Cultural Politics*, revises the work of “cultural theorists of speed,” whom she says focus on the ways in which new technologies and “faster moving capital” function to accelerate everyday life (2014: 6). Indeed, this sounds very similar to the ways in which Victorian commentators talked about these issues. Yet such accounts of the synchronisation of the body and technology, Sharma argues, can fail to account for “the complexity of lived time” and “everyday material relations” (6, 7). She offers a contemporary example of a business traveller calling a taxi with a cell phone, and the taxi driver then texting his partner to say that he won’t be home until the morning. Temporality for Sharma means *lived* time – she is interested not just in the discourse of speed but in the threads of time between people and how they find themselves in and out of time. In the same way, I am interested less in the popular discourse surrounding sensation novels, as fascinating as it is, and more in descriptions within these novels, namely descriptions detailing characters’ lived experiences of time. While Lucy and Alicia are anxious for time to move more quickly so that they are relieved of their anxiety, many characters wish for time to slow down as the speed of their life or the sudden events within the narrative make them disoriented.

In Margaret Oliphant’s *Salem Chapel* (1863), young preacher Arthur Vincent is caught up in his sister Susan’s scandalous disappearance and sudden reappearance. He leaves her recovering on her sick bed and wanders into his room

where he went into the darkness with a kind of bewildered uncertainty and incomprehension of the events about him. To think that this day, with all its strange encounters and unexpected incidents, was Sunday, as he suddenly remembered it to be – that this morning he had preached, and this evening had to preach again, completed in Vincent’s mind the utter chaos and disturbance of ordinary life.

(Oliphant [1863] 1986: 331)

This is of course not merely ‘the meantime’ since it relates Arthur’s attempt to process the events that have led to his sister lying in bed insensible. The meantime for Arthur may in fact be best characterised as the period when he is waiting for his sister to return. Yet I want to call attention to the space that Oliphant gives here to Arthur’s temporal processing, to what Sharma calls “the complexity of lived time.” Arthur’s mind is overwhelmed – with relief as well as anxiousness – and he must take time alone to understand what has occurred: “Confused as he was, with his brain still full of the pulsations of the past, he was so far conscious of what had happened. He sat in his reverie, regardless of the time, and everything else that he ought to have attended to” (332). While some events in sensation fiction may indeed occur with rapidity, these are not just ‘fast’ novels, but novels that are deeply invested in the *feeling* of time. Depending on how one is oriented towards the future – with, say, dread or hope – the meantime can feel either too fast or too slow.

While I am discussing specific characters in specific temporal situations here, I also want to argue for the 1860s as historical space of the meantime. Earlier, I referenced the fact that the 1860s was a period of slow development for the women’s movement. The 1850s (namely, 1854, 1856, and 1857) saw parliamentary debates about divorce and the Matrimonial Causes Act, which resulted in the creation of an English divorce court in 1857. While Parliament debated married women’s property in 1857, married women were not given

the right to own property until 1870. In 1862, at the height of the sensation novel craze, Frances Power Cobbe published “Celibacy vs. Marriage,” which proclaims that the divorce court had “revealed secrets which must tend to modify immensely our ideas of English domestic felicity” (1862: 234). Who could have imagined, she asks, “that the wives of English *gentlemen* might be called on to endure from their husbands the violence and cruelty we are accustomed to picture exercised only in the lowest lanes and courts of our cities”? (234). Sensation novelists did, of course. Writers like Cobbe, Collins, and Braddon seem to see the 1860s as a time of change for women but also a period still reconciling such legal change with women’s lived reality. This is similar to the way in which Daly frames the period as one of rapid technological progress that also witnesses the public’s trepidation of, and struggle to adapt to, such progress.

This sense of in-betweenness is also registered in the places and homes of sensation fiction, like Blackwater Lake in *The Woman in White*, which Marian records “had been gradually wasted and dried” (Collins [1860] 1998: 207). The lake is a space of stagnation and decay, a boat marking its slow progress from lake to swamp land: “lying half in and half out of the water, the rotten wreck of an old overturned boat, with a sickly spot of sunlight glimmering through a gap in the trees on its dry surface” (207). Audley Court, with its mix of different time periods, in which “no one room had any sympathy with another,” is another example (Braddon [1862] 2012: 8). Despite the clear historical markers present in the Court, Eva Badowska argues that sensation novels are “interested in acts and events that leave no trace” (2009: 165). She suggests that in *Lady Audley’s Secret* specifically, time serves to erase or revise the past, just as Lucy’s bruise heals, leaving no mark of her crime. Braddon’s novel is “alarmed ... by the possibility that modernity itself will keep crumbling, falling rapidly to ruins,” a sentiment that seems to frame it as near apocalyptic (158). Indeed, Badowska claims that Braddon resists any utopian impulses in *Lady Audley’s Secret* and that the novel is “savvy about temporal passage: it indulges neither in retrogressive nostalgia about auld lang syne ... nor in triumphant visions of the coming Utopia” (165). Instead, she suggests that it speaks “to an anxious feeling of uncertainty about the reality of apparent progress and the meaning of the present moment” (165). Indeed, the narrator’s coy, “I hope no one will take objection to my story because the end of it leaves the good people all happy and at peace,” seems to suggest that she herself is not convinced by the novel’s happy ending (Braddon [1862] 2012: 380).

Badowska may be right that the novel engages in more dystopian than utopian thinking, thinking that is intimately tied to notions of time and progress. Daly, too, relates sensationalism to dystopian impulses when he suggests that these novels betray a “dystopian vision of the modernized body” (2010: 50). These visions are attached to differing affective alignments with the future. At its simplest, utopian thinking is about hope for a better future, rather than merely dread. Where can we locate that hope in sensation novels, a form that, at least on the surface, seems more committed to showing women’s pain and suffering than visions of egalitarian fantasy? Tied up in that pain, however, are articulations for *what could be*, counterfactual fantasies for a better world. Sensational heroines and anti-heroines alike long for a world with more personal and professional options and more space for happiness. Sensational male characters, too, might long for a gentler world with more opportunities afforded to them, but I agree with early critics on the form such as Kate Flint and Lyn Pykett, who argue that the genre is an especially compelling expression of women’s dissatisfaction and frustration. Flint argues that the disruptive potential of the genre was not merely in women’s

“capacity to express powerful, emotional reactions, but in the degree to which it made its women readers consider their positions within their own homes and within society” (Flint 1993: 276). A familiar sensation plot might be: a woman marries, regrets her decision, and then leaves or murders her husband. Such a plot explicitly or implicitly challenges the institution of marriage and Victorian sexual codes. And, again, while such stories may sound dystopian, embedded within such tragic narratives are imperfect utopias.

Victorian Feminist Utopias

When discussing Victorian utopian narratives, scholars have tended to turn to late-century fiction that explicitly crafts utopian worlds, like William Morris’s *News from Nowhere* (1890). Yet mid-century popular fiction like sensation novels present important – if more measured – utopian visions. A utopian vision is similar to what Fredric Jameson, in *Archaeologies of the Future*, calls “a Utopian impulse detectable in daily life and its practices” (2005: 2). Jameson is invested in separating what he calls utopian programmes, which are conscious and deliberate, such as entire new societies, intentional communities, or utopian literature, with utopian impulses, which are “more obscure and more various,” such as individual reforms or buildings. The latter is similar to what I identify in sensation novels. I’m reluctant to call them “impulses” as, while they are not mapped or planned in the manner of a programme, they are also not entirely impulsive and tend to be the result of some degree of intentionality. Jameson does use the word “vision” at one point, and I prefer this term, one of the standard definitions of which is the “ability to conceive what might be attempted or achieved” (2021: *Oxford English Dictionary*). I thus understand utopian visions as minor, temporary, or not fully realised utopias, which are nonetheless instances in which women achieve, however briefly, livable forms of utopian existence. Sensational narratives certainly deal with dystopian visions too, especially in their candid treatments of domestic abuse, but they nonetheless show how feminist utopian possibilities lurk within those dystopian-feeling worlds and within the meantime of oppression.

Sometimes these utopian visions pop up in sensation fiction through counterfactual expressions. The counterfactual, or the antecedent condition, poses the question “what if?” or the counterfact “if x, then y.” As Catherine Gallagher explains in *Telling It Like It Wasn’t: The Counterfactual Imagination in History and Fiction*, it is a “past-tense, hypothetical, conditional conjecture pursued when the antecedent condition is known to be contrary to fact” (2018: 2). An example of a historical counterfactual she offers is, “If John F. Kennedy had not been assassinated in 1963 and had lived to be a two-term president, the war in Vietnam would have been over by 1968” (2). Andrew Miller has located the counterfactual on the level of character within the Victorian novel; specifically, he locates counterfactual lives in the novels of Dickens, Eliot, Hardy, and James. For example, Pip envisions a counterfactual life for himself in *Great Expectations* (1861) when he imagines that if he had never left home and gone to London, life would have been better for him. In *David Copperfield*, David articulates this manner of thinking when he “considered how the things that never happen, are often as much realities to us, in their effects, as those that are accomplished” (Dickens [1850] 1996: 825). Miller argues that counterfactual thought was popularised in the Victorian period due to a variety of historical factors but most explicitly because increased class mobility opens up the possibilities for one’s professional and marital decisions, a fact that foregrounds and makes melodramatic the idea of the *event*, as each past decision takes on great significance. I would note, too, that the state of the meantime – the notion that things are changing but people are still struggling to adapt to such changes – can lead to counterfactual thinking. Miller’s book

appeared in 2008, the same year as Hilary Dannenberg's *Coincidence and Counterfactuality*, and she too notes that Victorian authors (Brontë, Eliot, and Hardy in her case) "contain counterfactual plots of biographical development" (2008: 4). She argues that these "alternate plots can be seen as attempts to break out of both the intertextual and cultural pressure of the ... marriage plot and other unrealistically euphoric forms of closure" (4).

While neither Miller nor Dannenberg pay extensive attention to gender, the stakes of whom to marry or what professional possibilities are available vary wildly for Victorian men and women. Put simply, "what if" questions for female characters can have larger stakes. Collins's *The Woman in White* is filled with wished-for events or circumstances that might have happened but did not, many focused on the counterfactuality of sex and class. Marian imagines, "If poor Hartright had been the baronet ... how differently [Laura] would have behaved!" (Collins [1860] 1998: 186). Later Laura tells Marian, "I used to fancy what I might have been, if it had pleased God to bless me with poverty, and if I had been [Walter's] wife" (263). And, perhaps most significantly, Marian more than once imagines how differently her life would be "If [she] had been a man" (249). These sentence-level instances see characters "fancy what ... might have been" by imagining other, specific possibilities (263). Birte Christ, in an essay entitled, "'If I Were a Man': Functions of the Counterfactual in Feminist Fiction," explores the gendered implications of counterfactual plots and expressions. She begins with Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1914 short story "If I Were a Man," in which a character so longs to be a man that one day she wakes up and is one. This story deals with "the counterfact of gender": "If Molly were a man, she would engage in entirely different daily practices, would act in the world outside of the home, and would experience herself and her position vis-à-vis men and women differently" (Christ 2011: 190). This example shows how counterfactual thinking is vital to feminist critique – and thus to Victorian women's lives – and that it need not necessarily be historically situated; indeed, the counterfactual provides not only a way to revise the past but to forecast possible futures. In *The Woman in White*, after all, Laura *does* get to marry Walter. Marian doesn't get to be a man but she is afforded an ending outside of the conventional marriage plot (even if she must still fit within the confines of Laura and Walter's plot).

Of course, utopian fictions may themselves be considered counterfactual narratives. Jameson insists that the "Utopian form itself is the answer to the universal ideological conviction that no alternative is possible" (2005: 232). Christ ends her article on Gilman's "If I Were a Man" by arguing that "the utopian genre should prove similarly fruitful for interrogations into literary uses of the counterfactual" even though it has not been explored from this perspective (2011: 210). I certainly agree: the genre is a future oriented "what if" that has implications for the present. Utopia, it is worth pointing out, was coined by Thomas More in his fictional 1516 *Utopia*; it has thus always been associated with fiction and the ability of fiction to imagine other possible worlds. That said, utopias have not always been associated with gender equality. More's utopia is not feminist, though examples of historical feminist utopias certainly exist, from Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* (1666) to Sarah Scott's *Millenium Hall* (1762) to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915). In *Herland*, the female-only society is created by the depletion of the male population due to war, a volcanic eruption, and the eventual ability for women to give birth via parthenogenesis. *Millenium Hall* offers a much more feasible utopian community, gradually developed by eighteenth-century women who have been traumatised by guardians, husbands, and lovers. They, with the benefit of their financial resources, retreat to a shared home where they promote education, mutual care, and mothering in the broadest sense, much like the women in *Herland*.

Feminist utopian texts are relatively uncommon in mid-to-late century British fiction though there are exceptions. Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett's *New Amazonia: A Foretaste of the Future* (1889), for instance, is narrated by a late-Victorian feminist who appears to time-travel 500 years into the future to a female-run country after falling asleep at her desk. She constantly makes distinctions between present-day (1889) England and New Amazonia of 2472, which is on the landmass formerly known as Ireland. The narrator discovers that the Amazonian women's independence coincides with a socialist model in which every aspect of society is overseen by the state – a state that is controlled by women, although the country is inhabited by both men and women. Over the centuries of the Amazonian's past and her possible future, she learns that war reduced the male population of England, so that “female competitors” moved into trades and professions typically regarded as male (Corbett [1889] 2014: 60). Yet while men were only a quarter of the population, old conventions still applied and women did not receive equal pay for their work. Dissatisfied with this state of things, women gradually left England to form New Amazonia, which became a “self-governing and independent State,” equipped with fifty million pounds (66). Corbett's New Amazonia doesn't just give women the vote: it also asks, what if *only* women held political office? The novel implies that the result would be women's “self-reliant independence” (147). This dream, quite a leap for a society years away from even getting suffrage, is articulated in other late-century utopian texts as well. In Florence Dixie's *Gloriana* (1890), the protagonist Gloriana disguises herself as a man in order to run for parliament and change gender inequality from the inside. Again, female leadership is tied to a distinctly socialist-feminist model; the final chapter jumps forward into a 1999 in which poverty no longer exists in England. Indian writer Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain also imagines a female-run society in her short story “Sultana's Dream” (1905). The story presents a gender-swap fantasy, in which Muslim women have free reign in public spaces and men are secluded in the home, via the traditional practice of *purdah*. The narrator of Hossain's story ultimately wakes up from this dream. So too does the narrator of Corbett's novel. Dream time is thus another form of the meantime, and both texts read like extended dreams of a counterfactual future. These stories, then, much like the sensation novel, ultimately express the very lack of options available to Victorian women.

Yet even within the sensation novel, utopian visions, however brief or imperfect, do come to light. Within this critical, melodramatic, and presentist genre lies the possibility of better futures – indeed, even better ways of being in the present. In these novels, feminist utopian visions focus on three interrelated factors: 1) female opportunity, 2) care communities, and 3) happiness. By opportunity, I mean the *possibility* of choice or options for a female character. So many sensation novels focus on heroines beset by limited prospects: female characters feel forced to marry a particular man or, once married, feel trapped within their marriage. Opportunity might also mean education or, less often, professional opportunities. Alessa John has pointed out the significance of education in historical feminist utopias, emphasised via educational institutions, conversations, or the act of reading, and we see this in the Victorian sensation novel as well. In addition, Hilary Schor's arguments about female curiosity as driving the realist novel – and her related argument that the novel brings the feminist subject into being – are relevant to sensation fiction. Curiosity, Schor notes, is “a powerful engine of plot-making,” and it also is a key aspect of utopian imagining (2013: 5). Schor explains that “only by choosing badly does the heroine then get the power to choose well” (7). Female choice, such a keynote of contemporary feminism, is also a keynote of utopian thinking in the 1860s and 1870s.

Yet personal choice is not the whole picture. Utopian narratives like *Millenium Hall* and *Herland* depict intentional communities that emphasise shared, communal values. And while utopian visions in sensation fiction, and Victorian popular fiction more broadly, may not focus on isolated communities, they do focus on communities of care. The grouping of Walter, Anne, and Marian in *The Woman in White* is one example, as is the later century grouping of Mina Harker and her band of men in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). These networks focus on a particular crisis, trauma, or problem to be solved, but the characters ultimately come together to care for one another in acts that may extend beyond the initiating event. Schaffer's work on care communities makes the compelling point that "care is an action, not a feeling," an idea to which I'll return (2021: 5). She focuses largely on acts of care for someone who is ill, but in sensation fiction, and in the specific examples that I discuss, it is care for a woman in an abusive relationship that brings together a group. Schaffer describes care communities as "small, personal groups that are not designed for external change but for individual members' comfort" (14). Lest this sound too foreign to the idea of a utopia, she explains that while they are not ideal "for generating major social or political change," they are "good for helping people thrive. And when enough people can thrive, they can produce change" (14).

The notion of characters thriving brings me to the final factor present in sensation fiction's utopian visions: the possibility for happiness. The linkage between happiness and utopias is a contentious one. Jameson insists that utopias aim not at happiness but, rather, "at the alleviation and elimination of the sources of exploitation and suffering" (2005: 11). This certainly rings true in *Millenium Hall*, in which the cast of eighteenth-century women who have been traumatised by men and the inequities of their society commune with one another in a quiet, sexless community. Affect theorist Sara Ahmed is also suspicious of the link between utopian societies and happiness, suggesting that a keynote of some *dystopian* societies is in fact enforced happiness: "The freedom to be happy restricts human freedom if you are not free to be not happy" (2010: 194). Ahmed thus tries to suspend the belief that happiness is inherently good, instead exploring the ways in which happiness is set up as a reward for following certain social norms and ideals; in such contexts, happiness can be disassociated from feminist, queer, and immigrant lives. In turn, she qualifies happiness, linking it to hope and even anxiousness, which are anticipatory and future-oriented affects. A hopeful orientation is certainly linked to happiness in sensation fiction, and I would suggest that these popular novels are also suspicious about the idea of happiness as a reward for good behaviour. We might again recall the conclusion of *Lady Audley's Secret*: "I hope no one will take objection to my story because the end of it leaves the good people all happy and at peace" (Braddon [1862] 2012: 380). Braddon seems uncertain of happiness as closure and reward. In this novel full of many unhappy characters, Braddon might well agree with Ahmed who considers "happiness as a form of worldmaking," which means examining how "happiness makes the world cohere around, as it were, the right people" (Ahmed 2010: 13). These three utopian factors that I identify – choice, community, and happiness – overlap, as the possibility of happiness only comes about for the sensational heroine *through* both opportunity and community.

I now turn to two novels by Wilkie Collins, *Man and Wife* and *The Fallen Leaves*, to explore how utopian visions appear in the meantime of the sensation novel. Like all of Collins's fiction, these novels are concerned with Victorian women's social vulnerability, and they feature sensation plots but are also representative of Collins's later social problem novels.

Man and Wife (1870)

Man and Wife critiques Scotland's outmoded and informal marriage laws, as well as women's limited marital rights in England. The utopian vision that I locate in the novel occurs in the midst of a dystopian scenario: Anne Delamyn is trapped in a cottage with her abusive husband Geoffrey Delamyn and her friends must come to her aid. The care community in this novel is an intergenerational group of men and women who recognise that Anne is in danger. The novel's plot is complex, and like many of Collins's novels, hinges on fate and a second generation cast of characters doomed to repeat the lives of the first – notions of counterfactuality and temporal dissonance are thus integral to the narrative. Anne Silvester and Blanche Lundie are best friends, despite Blanche's clear advantages in life and Anne's more precarious social position. Anne, doomed to repeat the reckless mistakes of her unhappy mother, falls in love with the false Geoffrey Delamyn, becomes pregnant with his child, and believes him when he insists that he will marry her. They even exchange letters addressed to one another as "husband" and "wife." Anne waits for him at an inn where they plan to marry, but when he is called to attend to his family in London, he sends an unwitting friend, Arnold Brinkworth, who is in love with Blanche and hopes to assist Anne. Arnold pretends to be Anne's husband to the landlady so as not to arouse suspicion. Due to a storm, he is forced to spend the night in Anne's rooms, sleeping in the sitting-room while Anne sleeps in the bedroom. The plot then hinges on whether Anne is in fact married to Arthur, Geoffrey, or neither, since a simple proclamation of marriage in Scotland amounts to a legal marriage. Terrified that she has accidentally married the man that her best friend loves, Anne disappears, believing that she must sacrifice her own happiness for Blanche's. Alone and friendless, she bears a child that soon dies.

Yet when Anne's relationship to Arthur remains in question, even after Arthur and Blanche have married, she returns to her friends who gather to affirm just to whom Anne is legally married. To be clear, this is not, at least initially, a care community: the members that are gathered each have differing intensions and affective attachments. Lady Lundie, Blanche's aunt, who stages the gathering, is incredibly suspicious of Anne and protective of her niece. She invites Blanche; Arnold; Geoffrey; Sir Patrick Lundie, Blanche's uncle, an old man who cares deeply about both Anne and Blanche; and Captain Newenden, the uncle of Mrs. Glenarm, a rich widow engaged to Geoffrey. They are joined by two witnesses who worked at the inn and two officers of the law, Lady Lundie's solicitor and Mr Moy, Geoffrey's legal advisor. When Anne produces letters exchanged between her and Geoffrey, in which they refer to one another as husband and wife, the lawyers find that she is in fact married to the cruel, selfish Geoffrey since a "written promise of marriage exchanged between a man and woman, in Scotland, marries that man and woman by Scotch law" (Collins [1870] 2008: 523). When Anne is announced to be "Mr. Geoffrey Delamayn's wedded wife," it produces a "cry of horror from Blanche" and a "murmur of dismay from the rest" (524). Indeed, everyone in the room recognises how devastating the result is for Anne: Geoffrey's hatred of her is never masked and, in this scene and throughout the novel, the narrator comments consistently on Anne's innate goodness and beauty. Her act of producing the letters is clearly a sacrificial action to allow for Blanche's happiness. When Anne leaves with Geoffrey, Blanche clings to her, but Anne insists, "Happier days are coming, my love ... Don't think of *me*" (525). A utopia might be possible for Blanche, but not for her. The crowd watches dramatically as Anne and Geoffrey leave for Geoffrey's lodgings, and Collins's bitter indictment not just of Geoffrey but of the nation is

clear: “Done, in the name of Morality. Done, in the interests of Virtue. Done, in an age of progress, and under the most perfect government on the face of the earth” (527). This sentiment is dystopian in its critique of England’s false utopian narrative (“the most perfect government”).

When Anne arrives at the cottage that Geoffrey rents from Hester Dethridge, she experiences an ironic and horrific honeymoon period, experiencing the cottage and its garden not as an Edenic oasis but rather a gothic enclosure. The affective state that she finds herself in is not happiness but rather dread, more accurately, a “sickening, physical sense of dread – entirely new in her experience of herself” (553). If we return to the affective orientation of the meantime, and that of utopian and dystopian scenarios, Anne is clearly in a dystopian space, feeling dread for her future rather than hope, which “anticipates a happiness to come” (Ahmed 2010: 181). Collins has Anne articulate her emotional state, and the passage is worth quoting in full:

Was there any hope? – hope for instance, in what she might do for herself. What can a married woman do for herself? She can make her misery public – provided it be misery of a certain kind – and can reckon single-handed with Society when she has done it. Nothing more.

Was there hope in what others might do for her? Blanche might write to her – might even come and see her – if her husband allowed it; and that was all. Sir Patrick had pressed her hand at parting, and had told her to rely on him. He was the firmest, the truest of friends. But what could he do? There were outrages which her husband was privileged to commit, under the sanction of marriage, at the bare thought of which her blood ran cold. Could Sir Patrick protect her? Absurd! Law and Society armed her husband with his conjugal rights. Law and Society had but one answer to give, if she appealed to them – You are his wife.

No hope in herself; no hope in her friends; no hope anywhere on earth. Nothing to be done but to wait for the end – with faith in the Divine Mercy; with faith in the better world.

(550-1)

Anne’s wished for “hopes” are clearly tied to choice (“what she might do for herself”) and communities of care (“what others might do for her”). It is because she is legally limited in the former, that the latter is necessary. And despite her distraught thoughts here, Anne’s community is not content to let Geoffrey hide her away.

While Geoffrey does insist on his rights as a husband, Anne’s friends, in turn, insist on their moral imperative to extend care, which Schaffer defines as “meeting another’s need” (Schaffer 2021: 35). Schaffer argues that “care communities have an inherent ethical component because they are relational structures that require dialogue and respect for others and are driven by the ability to put someone else’s welfare above one’s own, even temporarily” (20). Indeed, the need for another must be worked out via dialogue, in which one must “listen carefully, attentively, and receptively” (37). Geoffrey intuitively seems to understand this, however, and works to isolate Anne from her friends and adopted family. Sir Patrick, especially, cares for her but knows that Geoffrey will not permit him to see her, so he convinces Geoffrey’s mother, Lady Holchester, and Geoffrey’s brother Julius that Anne is not the immoral woman that they take her for, but, rather, a victim deserving of their sympathy. They thus agree to visit the married couple. While Sir Patrick waits outside in the carriage, Julius and Lady Holchester enter the house and propose a separation between the husband and tortured wife, but Geoffrey, wanting to keep Anne under his control, refuses. At this moment, “Julius felt Anne’s hand suddenly tighten round his. The desperate grasp of the frail cold fingers, the imploring terror in the gentle sensitive face as it slowly turned his way, said to him as if in words, ‘Don’t leave me friendless to-night!’”

(Collins [1870] 2008: 561). Julius reads Anne's bodily affects correctly and insists on staying the night: "A look flashed on him from Anne, which thanked him as no words could have thanked him" (562). In addition, Lady Holchester slips Anne a note from Sir Patrick. Anne also receives secret letters from Blanche throughout her stay at the cottage. In one, Blanche explains, "If there is not some change for the better in your life in a few days' time, Sir Patrick will find out a way of his own – lawful or not, he doesn't care – for rescuing you from the dreadful position in which you are placed" (609). Recalling Jameson's notion that utopias aim "at the alleviation and elimination of the sources of exploitation and suffering," the actions of Sir Patrick here are clearly utopian in nature (Jameson 2005: 11). Time, Anne's friends recognise, is of the essence.

Anne's care community plans to rescue her, but things are ultimately cut short when Geoffrey is killed by his landlady Hester Dethridge. Hester has been secretly plotting with Geoffrey to murder Anne, but, instead, Geoffrey becomes her victim. When Anne discovers her dead husband, she screams, and Sir Patrick, Arnold, and a policeman, already stationed outside for the rescue mission, rush into the house to find Anne, Hester, and a now deceased Geoffrey. The narrative then wraps up quickly, with an epilogue set six months in the future. Like the ending of *Lady Audley's Secret*, the main characters are gathered together, this time at Julius Holchester's house in London. We learn that old Sir Patrick has surprisingly married while abroad, news that annoys Ladie Lundie, as it moves her "out of her place as the chief woman of the family" (Collins [1870] 2008: 641). When Julius announces the arrival of Sir Patrick and Lady Lundie, the original Lady Lundie "looks at the woman who has taken her place at the head of the family; and sees – ANNE SILVESTER!" (642). This is not such a shock to readers. Throughout the novel, Sir Patrick's reverence for Anne, while mystifying to the somewhat sexist old bachelor, is made explicit. He convinces Lady Holchester that she is "the noblest woman I have ever met with" (529). This is Anne's happy ending, one in which she marries presumably because she chooses to. (Presumably, because this is the final line of the novel, and we never hear from Anne directly after Geoffrey's death.)

This happy ending is marred, at least for this contemporary feminist reader, by two issues: one, the announcement of Anne's marriage is also an expression of the original Lady Lundie's petty jealousy. In a novel that has taken pains to show the value of female friendship through Anne and Blanche, friendship that surmounts jealousy, the Victorian marriage market, and radical class differences, this is a disappointing sentiment with which to end the novel. Second, and ignoring the huge age difference between Anne and Sir Patrick, so common in Victorian fiction, their marriage risks seeming as though Anne is in some way repaying her debt to Sir Patrick. Or, put another way, it risks implying that Sir Patrick helped Anne not out of an ethical obligation but because of his attraction to the young woman. Now that she is out of Geoffrey's grasp, she is simply placed in another imperfect marriage – since the novel has consistently shown how imperfect the institution is for women. Yet, is to view the ending this way perhaps to also miss its radical potential?

Anne's fate is consistently compared to that of her tragic mother's but the ending of the novel also compares her life to that of Hester Dethridge's. Inserted into the final ten chapters that take place at the cottage and relate the attempt of Anne's friends to rescue her, is a manuscript by Hester Dethridge entitled "My Confession," which narrates her life with her alcoholic, physically abusive husband, and her eventual murder of him (581). Throughout her story, she attempts to leave him and enlist the help of others: policemen, landlords, and friends. At every turn, they simply remind her of his legal rights. She writes,

In my experience, I have observed that people are oftener quick than not to feel a human compassion for others in distress. Also, that they mostly see plain enough what's hard and cruel and unfair on them in the governing of the country which they help to keep going. But once ask them to get on from sitting down and grumbling about it, to rising up and setting it right, and what do you find them? As helpless as a flock of sheep – that's what you find them.

(589)

This anticipates Schaffer's point that care is not a feeling but an action. Further, articulating the feeling *without* an accompanying action is akin to gaslighting. This does not excuse Hester's murder, of course, a murder for which she is haunted for the rest of her life and which renders her mute, but it does gesture to a problem within British society. Does the combination of Anne's youth, beauty, and wealthy friends permit her a different future? Certainly. But Collins nonetheless shows that her friends present a utopian vision in translating their feelings – which Schaffer reminds us are not necessary to acts of care – into actions. Again, this is only a utopian vision, a temporary utopian desire within a flawed society, since the larger problems of marital abuse, women's limited legal rights, and England's acceptance of lax Scottish and Irish marriage laws remain. Schaffer argues that if “care ethicists are tight, then a good government should prioritize supporting social ties, not just aim to protect individual citizens' liberties” (2021: 33). In *Man and Wife*, Collins argues this same point, but he also suggests that, *in the meantime*, care communities can model such support. It further, and perhaps more radically, suggests that women like Anne, who many in Victorian society would mark as ‘fallen,’ are deserving of care and even happiness.

***The Fallen Leaves* (1879)**

The Fallen Leaves also challenges the Victorian sexual double standard, picking up themes and plot points from Collins's earlier *The New Magdalen* (1873), and it presents another utopian vision characterised by female opportunity, community, and happiness. Jenny Bourne Taylor calls it Collins's “most politically explicit novel” as it provides a description of an intentional utopian community in its opening pages (1998: 232). The young hero, Claude Amelius Goldenheart, sets off for England, leaving the Tadmor Community in Illinois where he was brought up by Primitive Christian Socialists. With a yearly allowance and “the approval of the Community,” Amelius is “going to London to see life,” where he will judge whether or not to return to Tadmor (Collins [1879] 1899: 41). While Philip O'Neill suggests that Tadmor does not have a foundation in one particular community, it is likely based on the Oneida community, founded by John Humphrey Noyes in 1848 in Oneida, New York, and based on the religious principles of perfectionism (O'Neill 1988: 54). The group shared property and possessions, and eventually sexual relationships, as they grew to practice group marriage or what they called complex marriage, “in which all members of the community were married to each other, and engaged in sexual relations according to a strict set of guidelines and regulations” (Vickers 2013: 4-5). The community dissolved in 1881, though it transformed into silverware company Oneida Limited, which still exists today. The story of the Oneida community is an all-too familiar one for historical intentional communities: one man, in this case Noyes, begins with (arguably) utopian and collective ideals, but the community soon dissolves into a bid for power and a situation in which the female members of the group are likely to be exploited.

Tadmor, however, is depicted positively by Amelius, whose kindness and generosity reflect his Christian socialist upbringing. And while Tadmor is no Oneida, they do have unorthodox rules about romantic relationships and marriage, which Amelius explains to the two men whom he befriends on the steamship. When new members arrive in Tadmor, they are asked three questions:

“Do you come here of your own free will? Do you bring with you a written recommendation from one of our brethren, which satisfies us that we do no wrong to ourselves or to others in receiving you? Do you understand that you are not bound to us by vows, and that you are free to leave us again if the life here is not agreeable to you?”

(Collins [1879] 1899: 59-60).

While this seems to emphasise freedom and personal choice, a key element of the community is the establishment of arranged marriages and the need, more generally, for relationships to be approved by the elders of the community. As Amelius explains, “Our Community becomes a despotism, gentlemen, in dealing with love and marriage” (60). Anyone with a hereditary disease is prevented from marrying, arranged marriages are recommended, and any couple who finds themselves to be falling in love must immediately report it to the “Elder Brother; who, in his turn, communicates it to the monthly council; who, in their turn, decide whether the courtship may go on or not” (61). Amelius praises the system, even as he recognises that it must sound “absurd” to these other men, because it allows for the “greatest happiness of the greatest number” (61). The result of such regulations, he proudly notes, are that “wife-beating is unknown among us; and the practice in our divorce court wouldn’t keep the most moderate lawyer on bread and cheese” (62). Despite his praise for the practical marriages in Tadmor, Amelius almost immediately falls in love upon arriving in London with young Regina Mildmay.

Collins thus sets up a scenario in which Amelius must constantly compare his new life in London with Tadmor. In so doing, Collins exploits, though with ironic effect, the trope seen in utopian fiction of the traveller encountering a new land, present in *Millenium Hall* and *Herland*. Amelius, however, must confront the fact that his ethical ideals are at odds with fashionable London life. He is put off by people’s formal politeness, telling Regina that they “have an inveterately false and vicious system of society in England. If you want to trace one of the causes, look back to the little organized insincerities of English life” (108). Amelius’s past experiences makes him curious and notice things that may escape others’ attention. It further makes him compassionate to people characterised as “fallen leaves,” “people who have drawn blanks in the lottery of life – the people who have toiled hard after happiness, and have gathered nothing but disappointment and sorrow; the friendless and the lonely, the wounded and the lost” (58). He encounters three women who meet this category: one, back in Tadmor, who professes her love to him, and two in London, Regina’s aunt and guardian Mrs. Farnaby, and a prostitute dubbed Simple Sally. Mrs. Farnaby functions in the plot much like Hester does in *Man and Wife*: she is an older, embittered woman whose personal trauma does not make her a more empathetic human being but, rather, hardens her towards others. Like in *Man and Wife*, her dystopian narrative is at odds with the plot of the younger woman (Anne/Sally), whose story functions as a utopian alternative. Unlike Hester, however, Mrs. Farnaby reaches out for help, enlisting Amelius to look for her daughter, whom she had out of wedlock and who was taken from her when she was an infant; she would now be between sixteen and seventeen years old. The girl is recognisable

only by a small deformity: a web between her third and fourth toes. Mrs. Farnaby, accustomed to trusting no one, enlists Amelius's help because she recognises his "sensitive heart" and because she has a dream that he will reunite them, even as she acknowledges the unlikelihood of this happening (122). Again, we see the motif of dream time as a way of imagining a possible future.

The biggest test of Amelius's principles occurs when he accidentally strolls through a poor market at night and meets Simple Sally, whom savvy readers will soon guess is Mrs. Farnaby's daughter. Their connection enables the novel's utopian vision, and it also permits Sally to have a different future than she might have otherwise. Collins sets the stage for this moment as Amelius has just given a speech on Christian socialism that did not sway his London audience. Defeated, he goes for a long walk and accidentally stumbles upon the market, where he is overwhelmed by the poverty that he sees: "The sight of the misery about him, and the sense of his own utter inability to remedy it, weighed heavily on his spirits" (271). He sees a prostitute who looks to be only about fifteen or sixteen who has collapsed, and he tries to feed her. When she is unable to stay conscious, two other young women, "older members of the sad sisterhood," tell him that the only thing to revive her is to take her to the public-house and give her some wine (274). He does so and learns that they call her Simple Sally, "because she's a little soft, poor soul – hasn't grown up, you know, in her mind, since she was a child" (275). He learns too that the man whom she calls father but who is effectively her pimp, beats her. Sally admits that he threw a knife at her last night, cutting her on the chin; and, when prompted by the other women, she also shows Amelius her bruised chest, the result of his abuse. The other women attempt to look out for Sally, and Amelius is moved by their kindness: "All that is most unselfish, all that is most divinely compassionate and self-sacrificing in a woman's nature, was as beautiful and as undefiled as ever in these women – the outcasts of the hard highway!" (275). Amelius's depicts their compassion as innately feminine and transcending their cruel circumstances. Yet as Anne-Marie Beller notes, Collins's idealisation of the women "paradoxically ... weakens his argument against the injustice suffered by this underclass" (Beller 2007: 16). Recognising the women's limitations, Amelius tries to get Sally into a lodging house; when he is unsuccessful, he decides to take her home to his small apartments. Collins insists upon his good intentions, even though Amelius is now engaged to Regina. While the narrator recognises this as an "act of reckless imprudence," for Amelius, it is "nothing but an act of Christian duty" (Collins [1879] 1899: 281). This is just one example of the way in which Amelius's attempts to adopt his Tadmor principles in London risk appearing naïve.

Indeed, Amelius's act of care brings immediate complications with it. His landlady, recognising Sally for what she is, tosses them out the following day. Luckily, Amelius's American friend Rufus intervenes and connects Sally with Mrs. Payson, "one of the managing committee of a 'Home for Friendless Women,'" likely modelled after Miss Burdett-Coutts and Dickens's Urania Cottage (295). Sally enters the Home, while Amelius sets up house in a rented cottage. Yet Sally, unhappy and lonely in the Home, escapes, discovers where Amelius lives, and insists that she will be his servant (thus temporarily worrying Amelius's servant, an older Frenchman named Toff, who comes to quickly care for her). Sally's decision to leave the Home is rash, but she is guided by her own impulses and happiness. Collins emphasises the need for Sally to find

happiness through choice: namely, the ability to choose where and with whom she lives. When Amelius agrees to let her stay, she cries, “I’m never, never, never to go back to the Home! Oh, I’m so happy!” and later, “Oh, how good you are to me; the happy life has come at last!” (366, 388). Collins attempts to mitigate the awkwardness of Amelius living with a young prostitute while he is engaged to another woman not only by stressing his unorthodox past but by emphasising Sally’s childishness and innocence. As Esther Godfrey notes, Sally’s “inability to comprehend the events around her creates a moral loophole for Victorian readers who would otherwise reject the possibility of a prostitute as a socially appropriate other for the hero’s consideration” (2018: n.p.). Amelius takes joy in being Sally’s instructor, offering her lessons and teaching her to read, and he provides one of the tenants of Victorian feminist utopias by way of educating Sally. These new roles seem to define their relationship: “They were to be master and pupil, while the lessons were in progress; and brother and sister at other times – and they were to see how they got on together, on this plan, without indulging in any needless anxiety about the future” (Collins [1879] 1899: 387). They live, essentially, in the meantime. Their disconnection from the forward momentum of time, and well as their disassociation from the world outside Amelius’s home, makes their situation tenuous.

That said, their tiny oasis meets all aspects of a feminist utopian vision in that Sally is educated, and so given opportunity, her care needs are met by Amelius and by his kind older servant, Toff, and she is, as she proudly proclaims, happy. Their life is described as heavenly but solitary:

No longer darkened by the shadows of crime and torment and death, the life of Amelius glided insensibly into the peaceful byways of seclusion, brightened by the companionship of Sally. The winter days followed one another in a happy uniformity of occupations and amusements. There were lessons to fill up the morning, and walks to occupy the afternoon – and, in the evenings, sometimes reading, sometimes singing, sometimes nothing but the lazy luxury of talk. In the vast world of London, with its monstrous extremes of wealth and poverty, and its all-permeating malady of life at fever-heat, there was one supremely innocent and supremely happy creature. Sally had heard of Heaven, attainable on the hard condition of first paying the debt of death. “I have found a kinder Heaven,” she said, one day. “It is here in the cottage; and Amelius has shown me the way to it.”

Their social isolation was at this time complete: they were two friendless people, perfectly insensible to all that was perilous and pitiable in their own position.

(Collins [1879] 1899: 450-1)

Their “perilous and pitiable” isolation is clearly a problem, betraying the fact that they are living on borrowed time: Amelius must at some point tell Rufus and his fiancée about Sally, and Sally must understand that she cannot live with Amelius as his “sister” forever. Along similar lines, while Collins praises aspects of Tadmor, he is ultimately most interested in how such intentional communities may come to impact or engage with the wider world. Sally worries that, when she is out in public with Amelius, she is being recognised as a prostitute: “Is the mark of the streets on me, after all you have done to rub it out?” (465). Eventually, their affection and desire for one another becomes apparent to them both. Godfrey even suggests that “Collins clearly enjoys the unseemliness of this situation, and he lingers over the sexual awkwardness that he has created” (2018: n.p.). As with Sir Patrick, then, Amelius’s motivations for helping Sally become complicated as his attraction to her becomes clear.

Yet rather than succumbing to social pressures about Sally's fallenness, the end of the novel finds Amelius and Sally married. Much like in *Man and Wife*, *The Fallen Leaves* concludes with a marriage announcement without the narrator providing any further information. The conclusion offers differing utopian visions for the various fallen leaves: the prostitutes who help Sally will be sent "out of this country," presumably to America, by Amelius (Collins [1879] 1899: 513). Amelius, too, is the guardian angel to Mrs. Farnaby. While she never gets her wish of "a happy life in retirement with my child," Amelius does provide her with a reunion: when he sees Sally's foot, and realises who she is, he rushes her to meet Mrs. Farnaby as the poor woman is on her deathbed. Her "last beat of the heart was a beat of joy" (408). These imperfect utopian visions – the women starting a new life but only in another country and Mrs. Farnaby getting her emotional reunion but only at the moment of her death – are not unlike the imperfect marriage of Amelius and Sally, whose history they cannot hide from the judgmental world forever.

Indeed, while this novel is in some ways more akin to one of Collins's mission novels than his sensation novels, the logic of sensationalism, that secrets will ultimately find their way out, colours the ending. Amelius's sentiments throughout the second half of the novel when he proclaims things to Sally like, "let's be happy while we can – and let the future take care of itself" can only go so far (463). Collins planned a sequel that grappled with the couple's married life, and in some versions of *The Fallen Leaves*, the narrator ends by gesturing to that next novel. Rufus, upon hearing the wedding announcement, thinks that Amelius would have been happier had he returned to Mellicent, the woman who loved him in *Tadmor*. The narrator's added note then reads:

Were the forebodings of Rufus destined to be fulfilled? This question will be answered, it is hoped, in a Second Series of *The Fallen Leaves*. The narrative of the married life of Amelius presents a subject too important to be treated within the limits of the present story.

(Collins [1879] 2009: n.p.).

Yet Collins never wrote the second series. He could not, perhaps, imagine their marriage within the confines of the Victorian novel. His own unorthodox life of course showed that he could imagine alternatives to conventional marriage beyond the page. Yet the novel's resistance to fully imagining Amelius's married life does not mark it as a failure, as odd as it is, generically. Even if, as a contemporary reader, I may find Amelius and Sally's relationship disconcerting, the radical potential of this novel lies in its insistence that women like Mrs. Farnaby and Sally are, like Anne, deserving of happiness.

Conclusion

In these novels, Collins tries to find utopian solutions for the meantime. As one of the members of Sally's care community, Rufus, puts it, "The world *is* hard on women" (Collins [1879] 1899: 485). If there is any throughline in sensation novels, it is perhaps this sentiment. While fictional utopias like *News from Nowhere* or *New Amazonia* are incredibly important thought experiments, forcing readers to question and imagine other possible ways of living, writing the meantime is a no less important act. Life in the meantime involves experiencing temporal and affective dissonance, as characters fluctuate "between hope and despair," between anxiousness and avoidance. These are the states of the meantime and of our present moment as well. There can be a sort of cathartic pleasure in reading about characters similarly navigating their social environments and struggles. Scholarly claims about Victorian fiction's social and ethical engagements still too often leave

out popular fiction, the kind of fiction that women who saw themselves in characters like Anne Silvester or Mrs. Farnaby were likely reading. In his opening essay in the first volume of the *Victorian Popular Fictions Journal*, Andrew King urges us to embrace the fact that “one of the values of the study of Victorian popular fictions is surely our powerfully affective engagement with them” (King 2019: 29). I certainly agree. I hope that scholars in Victorian studies expand the study of utopian futures to include more popular fiction. I also hope that, for those of us living in the space of the meantime, the texts that we study and teach may also be texts that allow us to process our own mixed feelings and affective attachments in the present moment.

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