



**“The mystery of the Myrtle Room”:  
Reading Wilkie Collins’ *The Dead Secret* as an Early Female Detective Novel**

**Elizabeth Steere**

**Abstract**

While Wilkie Collins’ novels *The Moonstone* (1868) and *The Woman in White* (1859-60) have long been accepted as part of the early mystery canon, Collins’ earlier novel *The Dead Secret* (1857) is rarely included. *The Dead Secret* is here reconsidered as one of the earliest English female detective novels, revealing its heretofore unrecognised significance to the genre of detective fiction and the evolution of the literary female detective. *The Dead Secret*’s protagonist, Rosamond, is almost Holmesian in her methodical collection of evidence and tactical lines of questioning to arrive at the solution of the mystery, but she also employs techniques more often attributed to female detectives, demonstrating the importance of emotion, intuition, surveillance, and proximity. In solving the mystery, Rosamond also disrupts the status quo, as is more typical of sleuthing heroines of sensation fiction. *The Dead Secret* demonstrates Collins’ innovations to the emerging genre of detective fiction, before its tropes become typified by Sherlock Holmes, and reveals the overlap of tropes that originate with sensation novels.

**Keywords**

Wilkie Collins; *The Dead Secret*; sensation fiction; detective fiction; female detective; mystery fiction

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## **“The mystery of the Myrtle Room”: Reading Wilkie Collins’ *The Dead Secret* as an Early Female Detective Novel**

**Elizabeth Steere**

### **Introduction: Early English Detective Fiction**

Much scholarship on detective fiction asserts that Wilkie Collins’ short story “The Diary of Anne Rodway” (1856) features the first female detective in English literature (Clarke 2022: 394). The novel that Collins published next, *The Dead Secret* (1857), which began serialisation less than six months after this story, has received far less critical attention, despite its central protagonist also being a female investigator. Indeed, while Collins’ novels *The Moonstone* (1868) and *The Woman in White* (1859-60) have long been accepted as part of the canon of mystery fiction, *The Dead Secret* is rarely included in critical histories of the genre; scholars tend to view it as an exemplar of one of his early sensation novels, when it is mentioned at all. Being labelled a “minor” sensational Collins text has limited serious scholarly consideration of *The Dead Secret*, although the novel exemplifies how detective fiction emerges from the school of sensation fiction even in the latter genre’s earliest years. The innovative structure of *The Dead Secret* is a direct predecessor of the “howcatchem” format most associated with twentieth-century detective stories, and Rosamond Frankland, its sleuthing heroine, embodies the bold, independent spirit of a typical sensation heroine while also successfully solving the mystery through keen observation as would become typical of later literary detectives. A reconsideration of *The Dead Secret* as one of the earliest English female detective novels reveals its heretofore unrecognised significance to the detective fiction genre and the evolution of the female detective in particular.

As Kathleen Tillotson enduringly described the genre, a sensation novel is a “novel-with-a-secret,” a definition that equally applies to a work of mystery fiction (1969: xv). Even Collins’ contemporaries noted the centrality of the mystery to sensation fiction: in 1865, Henry James famously characterised the genre as exploring “those most mysterious of mysteries, the mysteries which are at our own doors” (James 1865: 593). Many novels of the mid-nineteenth century straddle the boundaries between “mystery” and “sensation novel,” since the bounds and tropes of those genres were still being defined. Charles Dickens’ *Bleak*

*House* (1852–53), Collins' *The Woman in White*, and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1861–62), among others, have elements inherent to both genres.

The detective novel, as a subgenre of mystery fiction, is also not easy to define. For example, while *Bleak House* features a detective figure in Inspector Bucket, he is not a central character in the story, so the book's status as a "detective novel" remains open to debate. Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841) is most often named as the first English-language work of detective fiction, and its protagonist, C. Auguste Dupin, while not a professional detective, exhibits many traits that we expect from literary detectives. In a tradition that would reach its apotheosis in Sherlock Holmes, Dupin is eccentric and brilliant, employing ratiocination to ingeniously piece together clues to solve the mystery, but Dupin never appeared in a novel.

There are many candidates for the first English-language detective novel, though their characters may not always explicitly be called detectives. The London Metropolitan Police would not establish a professional detective force until 1842, and the use of the word "detective" as a noun was not recorded until 1850, but many novels before that time featured crimes and mysteries that their characters feel compelled to investigate (OED). If the scope of what constitutes a "detective" is not limited only to characters who work professionally or primarily as detectives, but is broadened to encompass those who collect clues to solve a mystery, more novels can be considered part of the early canon of detective fiction. For example, Michael Cohen has suggested that William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794) anticipates elements of future detective novels (1998: 203). In an unpublished biography of Catherine Crowe, Geoffrey Larken proposed that Crowe's 1843 novel *Men and Women; or Manorial Rights* might be one of the first detective novels by a female writer and might even be "the earliest full-length English novel in the style of the present-day 'whodunnit'" (qtd. in Sussex 2010: 55). Another contender is Mary Elizabeth Braddon's first published novel, *Three Times Dead* (1860), revised as *The Trail of the Serpent* (1861), which features police detectives who become involved in the mystery plot (Panek 2011: 122-3). *The Notting Hill Mystery* (1862–63) by the pseudonymous Charles Felix has also been suggested as a candidate for the first English-language detective novel (P. Collins 2011: BR23).

Wilkie Collins' contributions to the detective genre cannot be underestimated: even as early as 1872, a reviewer of his novel *Poor Miss Finch* noted how Collins "made what may be called the 'detective' novel his own" ([Williams] 1872: 203). *The Moonstone* in particular has long been recognised for its innovative and absorbing detective plot. In his introduction to the 1928 edition, T. S. Eliot famously dubbed it "the first, the longest, and the best of modern English detective novels" (1928: xii). While *The Moonstone* may be Collins' best-known contribution to the genre of detective fiction, his works are also notable for their preponderance of female detectives: "The Diary of Anne Rodway," *The Dead Secret*, *The Woman in White*, *No Name* (1862), and *The Law and the Lady* (1874–75) all feature sleuthing women.

It is unclear who should be considered the first female detective in an English-language novel. In her study of female writers of early detective fiction, Lucy Sussex makes a case for Ann Radcliffe and other "female Gothic" authors as early antecedents of crime and mystery fiction (2010: 26-44); she notes that the Gothic sleuth-heroine had become such a familiar trope by as early as 1818 that it was ripe for parody in Austen's *Northanger Abbey*. Sussex also suggests Catherine Crowe's 1841 novel *Adventures of Susan Hopley; or Circumstantial Evidence* as a candidate for the earliest English female detective novel (2010: 45-53). Mary Elizabeth Braddon, who would include several female detective figures among her novels (including in *Eleanor's Victory* (1863) [see Tomaiuolo 2010: 97]), even mentions the theatrical adaptation of *Susan Hopley* in *Aurora Floyd* (1863). Judith Flanders has also proposed the novel *Ruth the Betrayer* (1862–63) by Edward Ellis (Charles Henry Ross) as a key predecessor

to stories featuring modern female detectives (2013: 298). 1864 was a landmark year for fictional female sleuths, with the appearance of two women who are professional detectives as opposed to amateur investigators: Andrew Forrester Jr. (James Redding Ware) published *The Female Detective*, which introduced Miss Gladden, or “G,” and a few months later, William Stephens Hayward published *Revelations of a Lady Detective*, which featured Mrs Paschal (Janik 2017: 33-5). *The Dead Secret* predates many of these most commonly cited “first” female detective novel candidates.

Scholars have also found prototypes of the female fictional detective in some surprisingly canonical texts: female investigators that scholars have posited as some of the earliest proto-detectives include Mary Barton, Jane Eyre, and Catherine Morland (Salah 2020; Jung 2013; Barron 2010). While Rosamond Frankland, the investigating female protagonist of *The Dead Secret*, is not a well-known character like the others mentioned above, she more unequivocally meets the criteria of a detective: her investigation of the mystery is the central plot of the novel, and it is primarily through her efforts that secrets are uncovered and the mystery is satisfactorily solved.

Rosamond’s omission from the currently recognised canon of detective fiction may be due to *The Dead Secret*’s understudied status as well as its categorisation as an early sensation novel. Rosamond embodies many characteristics of the sensation heroine: she is independent, passionate, adventurous, transgresses class boundaries, and – albeit unwittingly – has a secret identity. She does not fit the mould of the prototypical ratiocinative detective represented early on by C. Auguste Dupin and later codified by Sherlock Holmes; however, it is these same “sensational” characteristics that render her an effective detective. Though Anne Rodway may be the first female detective in English fiction, Rosamond Frankland, appearing less than six months later, is more clearly the forebear of the modern female detective, as exemplified by her extraordinary powers of intuition and observation and her active leadership of the investigation. Reading *The Dead Secret* as a detective novel not only reframes the evolution of the fictional female detective but also reveals Collins’ unique structural innovations to the detective genre.

## **The Structure of *The Dead Secret***

Toward the end of the serialisation of *The Dead Secret*, Edmund Yates published a biographical sketch of Collins, praising how, “in the artistic development of [*The Dead Secret*,] his power of story-telling appears to me to be more vigorous and more perfect than ever” (1857: 357). Later in Collins’ lifetime, George Makepeace Towle described *The Dead Secret* as Collins’ “first novel to attract universal interest, and which exhibited his rare powers of invention, and his genius for constructing a sensational plot” (1870: 278). When Collins died in 1889, his obituary in *The Book-Buyer* named *The Dead Secret* and *The Woman in White* as “the general favourites, among his novels, with the majority of the reading public” (qtd. in Nadel 2008: viii).

However, there is surprisingly little modern criticism of *The Dead Secret*. In broad studies of Collins’ work, this may be attributed to the fact that, as Joseph Kestner points out, Collins is best known for certain canonical titles (*The Moonstone* and *The Woman in White*), and “the writer famous for one or two books often has other achievements which remain unrecognized by the canon” (2016: 229). But even in more focused studies *The Dead Secret* is often overlooked: Robert Ashley’s 1951 article about Collins’ contributions to detective fiction begins with *Hide and Seek* and *The Queen of Hearts* then next considers *The Moonstone*, skipping *The Dead Secret* entirely. While *The Dead Secret* may lack the

scope or larger-than-life characters of Collins' two better-known mystery novels, its inclusion of an early female detective figure warrants a closer look.

*The Dead Secret's* protagonist is Rosamond Treverton, the only heir to her late parents' estate, Porthgenna Tower in Cornwall. At the beginning of the novel, Rosamond marries Leonard Frankland, who is blind. After Rosamond gives birth, she is tended to by the mysterious Mrs Jazeph, who is actually Sarah Leeson, her late mother's former lady's maid, who warns Rosamond not to go into the Myrtle Room at Porthgenna Tower and then flees. Rosamond and Lenny then find and search the Myrtle Room and discover a letter from Rosamond's late mother revealing the "dead secret": "[Rosamond] is a love-child. . . . Her father was a miner at Porthgenna; her mother is my maid, Sarah Leeson" (Collins [1857] 2008: 286).

Though the novel's plot focuses on Rosamond's unravelling of clues to solve the mystery, the book is not a classic "whodunit." While the truth of the secret of Rosamond's birth mother is not explicitly spelled out, an opening flashback scene of Mrs Treverton's deathbed confession certainly provides enough clues for a perceptive reader to make a reasonable guess.<sup>1</sup> In his introduction to the 1861 one-volume edition of *The Dead Secret*, Collins explained his reasoning for the way the novel was constructed, which allowed his readers to readily guess the novel's central secret:

I was blamed for allowing the "Secret" to glimmer on the reader at an early period of the story, instead of keeping it in total darkness till the end. If this was a mistake (which I venture to doubt), I committed it with both eyes open. After careful consideration, and after trying the experiment both ways, I thought it most desirable to let the effect of the story depend on *expectation* rather than *surprise*; believing that the reader would be all the more interested in watching the progress of "Rosamond" and her husband towards the discovery of the Secret, if he previously held some clue to the mystery in his own hand. So far as I am enabled to judge, from the opinions which reached me through various channels, this peculiar treatment of the narrative presented one of the special attractions of the book to a large variety of readers.

(5-6, emphasis original)

Thus, according to Collins' own explanation, *The Dead Secret* is first and foremost a mystery story focused on the art of detection. Most savvy readers will readily discern the "what" and "why" of the "crime," so it is the question of "how" it will ultimately come to light that creates the suspense. This is a deviation from the formula of *The Woman in White* and other subsequent Collins novels, for which, as one critic described, "[e]ach of his stories is a puzzle, the key to which is not handed to us till the third volume" ("The Woman in White" 1860: 249). What Collins appears to have innovated here, in the very earliest days of the mystery genre, is the "inverted detective story," "howcatchem" or procedural – a type of plot later seen in Alfred Hitchcock's film *Rope* (1948) or the TV show *Columbo* (1968–2003). While Collins' preface suggests that his experiment in form was not universally well received, at least one contemporary American journal promoted the novel by declaring that "the plots in it are marvels of ingenuity" ("New Publications" 1877: 22).

Many studies of detective fiction cite the "howcatchem" model of detective fiction as being invented in 1912 in R. Austin Freeman's "The Case of Oscar Brodski," a Dr Thorndyke story (Mannion and Cliff 2020: 19). In the preface to the collection that included this story, Freeman explained why he constructed the story this way. His rationale and even

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, in Mrs Sidney Francis Bateman's authorised play theatrical adaptation of *The Dead Secret*, Sarah herself reveals the story's central secret in a soliloquy at the end of the opening scene, so there was no mystery about Sarah's relationship to Rosamond for the audience at all.

some of the language he employs is remarkably similar to Collins' explanatory preface from 51 years before:

The peculiar construction of the first four stories in the present collection will probably strike both reader and critic and seem to call for some explanation, which I accordingly proceed to supply. . . . The reader's curiosity is concerned not so much with the question "Who did it?" as with the question "How was the discovery achieved?" That is to say, the ingenious reader is interested more in the intermediate action than in the ultimate result.

[In] "The Case of Oscar Brodski"...the usual conditions are reversed; the reader knows everything, the detective knows nothing, and the interest focuses on the unexpected significance of trivial circumstances. By excellent judges on both sides of the Atlantic...this story was so far approved of that I was invited to produce others of the same type.

(Freeman [1912] 2014: 921)

Given Collins' similar claims for the goal of his novel and his anticipated effects on the reader, the origins of the "howcatchem" seem to be much earlier than sometimes claimed. Sussex too has noted that Braddon's *The Trail of the Serpent*, which was published three years after *The Dead Secret*, could also be construed as an early "howcatchem" (2010: 86). A revisit of sensation novels with plots involving mystery and detection reveals just how innovative and diverse detective fiction could be, even in its earliest forms.

## Rosamond Frankland as Detective Heroine

Collins published "The Diary of Anne Rodway," arguably the first English female detective story, in two issues of *Household Words* on July 19 and 26, 1856. On January 3, 1857, he began his serialisation of *The Dead Secret* in the same publication. In *The Dead Secret*, Collins created a female detective who is Anne Rodway's opposite in nearly every way: while Anne is timid, uncertain, and trembling, Rosamond is bold, spirited, and capable. Those who have known Rosamond from girlhood describe her as "[a] very lively, energetic person," and "[a] fine, buxom, warm-hearted, quick-tempered girl" (Collins, [1857] 2008: 47, 49). One admiring comment from a local eight-year-old is especially telling: "She was the only girl I ever saw who was fit to play with boys . . . she could catch a ball . . . with one hand, and go down a slide with both her legs together" (47). Rosamond's liveliness and tenacity will propel her throughout her investigation. Although Anne Rodway relies upon her fiancé and the British justice system to complete the investigation she began, Rosamond is in the unusual situation of her husband being extremely reliant on *her*, as his blindness inhibits him from participating in much of the investigation.

Like many of the later nineteenth-century female detectives, Anne Rodway is driven to investigate to achieve justice – she wants to identify her friend's murderer – and there is little indication that she has ever been inclined to perform detective work before or would do so again. Rosamond, on the other hand, is not motivated by a moral sense of duty or a drive toward justice but is propelled by pure curiosity and the thrill of investigation. She is keen to investigate a mystery before any mystery actually reveals itself. While on her honeymoon, she imagines what it will be like to return to her childhood home with her new, blind husband: "You shall have hold of my hand, and look with my eyes, and make as many discoveries as I do. I prophesy that we shall see ghosts, and find treasures, and hear mysterious noises – and, oh heavens! what clouds of dust we shall have to go through. Pouf! the very anticipation of

them chokes me already” (77). Later, she declares, “I mean to put on the cook’s apron and the gardener’s gloves, and rummage all over [“the ghostly north rooms”] from top to bottom” (121). Rosamond’s reference to donning “the cook’s apron and the gardener’s gloves” demonstrates how her deliberate blurring of class boundaries renders her uniquely suitable for the role of a detective. At this point she does not know it, but her plan also hints unsubtly at her own liminal status as the illegitimate daughter of a domestic servant raised as heir to the estate.

After Rosamond gives birth to a premature infant while travelling from London to Porthgenna, she is attended by Sarah Leeson, who is using the alias “Mrs Jazeph.” Mrs Jazeph attempts to dissuade Rosamond from her planned investigations with an appeal to her class status, saying, “I should have thought that a lady like you would have liked to get as far away as possible from dirt and dust, and disagreeable smells” (124), but for Rosamond, her intense curiosity surpasses any questions of appropriateness. She answers, “I can face worse inconveniences than those, where my curiosity is concerned, . . . And I am more curious to see the uninhabited rooms at Porthgenna than to see the Seven Wonders of the World” (125). Rosamond’s description of her drive to investigate is reminiscent of Sherlock Holmes’ characterization of his own motivation: like Holmes, Rosamond’s “mind rebels at stagnation” and she “crave[s] . . . mental exaltation” (Doyle [1890] 1994: 2). Indeed, as Judith Johnston observes in her study of Collins’ *The Law and the Lady*, a later novel that also features a female sleuth, while curiosity and reliance on emotion are often depicted as “feminine weakness,” for Collins’ female detectives, they also motivate and enable the heroine to solve the mystery (2009: 41).

Rosamond does not learn about the central mystery until Book 3, Chapter 4, when Mrs Jazeph whispers her warning to Rosamond to “*keep out of the Myrtle Room!*” (Collins [1857] 2008: 125, original emphasis). Rosamond’s initial shock quickly turns to eager excitement. The detective fully emerges, and she expresses her desire to “question [Mrs Jazeph herself]” despite her invalid state. Rosamond proclaims that she and her husband must “continu[e] our journey to Porthgenna the moment I am allowed to travel, and . . . leav[e] no stone unturned when we get there until we have discovered whether there is or is not any room in the old house that ever was known, at any time of its existence, by the name of the Myrtle Room” (138).

Rosamond stakes her claim as a female detective when, with “her voice rising, and her face lighting up with its accustomed vivacity,” she tells her husband, “how can you doubt what will happen next? Am I not a woman? And have I not been forbidden to enter the Myrtle Room? Lenny! Lenny! Do you know so little of my half of humanity as to doubt what I should do the moment the room was discovered? My darling, as a matter of course, I should walk into it immediately” (138). Here, Rosamond appears to assert tenacity, or even perverseness, as an inherently feminine trait that compels women to satisfy their curiosity through detection.

## Intuition and Proximity

Just prior to this scene, Rosamond also displays a kind of intuition based on observation and physical proximity that scholars have explored as a common characteristic of female detectives in literature. In *Sherlock’s Sisters*, Joseph Kestner emphasises the importance of the gaze, surveillance, and “reading the legible body” for female detectives (2016: 20). Dominique Gracia too explores how fictional female detectives employ “proximity, keen observation and

intuition” in their investigations (2020).<sup>2</sup> Indeed, when Rosamond is in close proximity to Sarah Leeson, she immediately intuits her biological mother’s secret desires.

When Mrs Jazeph brushes her hair, Rosamond feels uneasy and “snatch[es] the brush out of Mrs Jazeph's hand,” explaining, “I absolutely fancied, when your face was closest to mine, that you wanted to kiss me!” (Collins [1857] 2008: 118). At the end of the novel, when Rosamond reunites with her mother, Sarah confirms, “I did want to kiss you so, Rosamond, when I was brushing your hair” (339). Rosamond peppers Mrs Jazeph with questions that directly pertain to the secret that Rosamond does not yet even know about, asking if Mrs Jazeph is fond of children, whether she has had a child of her own, and even whether she has experienced the loss of a child (119). As Gracia explains, “Far from being a poor imitation of ratiocination, as it is often treated, intuition is a powerful form of subconscious observation and reasoning, involving recognising, and drawing conclusions from, patterns about bodies” (2020). Sarah immediately recognises Rosamond’s ability to “read” her while in her presence as a threat to the preservation of her secret, saying, “If I find myself in Mrs Frankland’s presence again, there is nothing that she might not draw out of me” (Collins [1857] 2008: 218). The prospect of seeing Rosamond, feeling her touch, or being in her presence again provokes “terror” for her (218).

In contrast, Rosamond’s attending doctor, Mr Orridge, also seems to adopt the role of a detective after meeting the mysterious Mrs Jazeph but proves himself to be far less capable of intuiting the truth. He scrutinises her keenly over several pages, taking note of particulars such as her hair, cap, and gown (103). He makes attempts to guess her age and her potential medical conditions. Unlike Rosamond, who almost immediately infers the source of Mrs Jazeph’s pain, the doctor ultimately cannot decide whether to attribute her behaviour and demeanour to having “had some dreadful fright, some great grief, or some wasting complaint” (103). Despite sharing the same proximity with Sarah that Rosamond does, he is unable to make inferences with equal skill.

When Rosamond is afforded the opportunity to observe and discover, she proves herself to be an adept and perceptive detective. However, anticipating what would become the twentieth-century trope of the “disabled detective,” Rosamond cannot act immediately to pursue her investigation herself, as she is confined to strict bedrest away from home after giving birth prematurely.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, she writes a letter to her housekeeper at Porthgenna describing Sarah Leeson in minute detail, which the housekeeper receives just before Sarah and her uncle Joseph show up asking to tour the house. Rosamond asks in her letter for her staff to

take private and particular notice of her conduct from the time when she enters the building to the time when she leaves it. Do not let her out of your sight for a moment . . . we particularly desire you will manage matters with sufficient discretion . . . to prevent her from having any suspicion that you are acting under orders, or that you have any especial interest in watching her movements.

(175)

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<sup>2</sup> By the early twentieth century, the idea of female detectives relying on “intuition” was so pervasive that in 1917, when Grace Quackenbos Humiston, dubbed “Mrs Sherlock Holmes,” cracked a case, she bemoaned, “every time a woman does make a discovery, someone pipes, ‘Intuition!’” insisting that the keys to her success actually were “plain everyday common sense” and “a determination to keep going” (Ricca 2017: 256).

<sup>3</sup> The disabled detective character is further explored in Mintz (2019).



Unfortunately, Rosamond's domestic staff badly botches the investigation: the steward, Munder, detains Sarah and Uncle Joseph and treats them as suspects, demanding that they are "bound to explain [themselves]," prompting Sarah to flee the area (199).

Much to Rosamond's frustration, she is prescribed medical confinement for weeks after the birth and then her term of bed rest is again extended after she catches a cold. She is eager to "start at once for Porthgenna, to question the servants minutely about the proceedings of Mrs Jazeph and the foreign stranger who had accompanied her, and to examine the premises on the north side of the house, with a view to discovering a clue to the locality of the Myrtle Room, while events were still fresh in the memories of witnesses" (226).

When Rosamond is finally medically cleared to travel to Porthgenna, she immediately begins her investigation: she questions the servants and hunts for clues. Since no one knows which room is "the Myrtle Room," she and her household staff look for footprints in the dust of the corridor of the unoccupied wing to see if they can determine where Sarah Leeson went when she visited the estate. This method proves unsuccessful, and ultimately, Rosamond decides that the only solution is to obtain a copy of the plans for the estate with all its rooms labelled. She is offered these plans by her estranged uncle's servant, Shrowl, who has taken them from her uncle's library without his knowledge and is demanding five pounds for them.

## The Permeable Boundaries of Class

Throughout the novel, Lenny has chided Rosamond for her willingness to converse with servants as though they were on equal social footing, but at this point, it is her ability to question the servants and even to bribe them that helps her uncover the vital clue of the stolen plans that will lead her to solve what is referred to as "the mystery of the Myrtle Room" (258). Lenny, on the other hand, deplors the idea that they would "degrade [themselves] by dealing with this servant" (257). While Rosamond's ready willingness to ignore or transcend the boundaries of class is the most frequent source of friction in her marriage, it also proves to be one of her most beneficial attributes in her role as a detective. She is ultimately only able to discover the location of the Myrtle Room by paying Shrowl five pounds for the information.

The novel also reveals how the same act of surveillance is derided as snooping when a servant or similar working-class character does it, but is hailed as healthy inquisitiveness when performed by a detecting protagonist. This double standard is underscored by Rosamond's reaction to being monitored when she is on her honeymoon with Lenny. At St. Swithin's-on-Sea, the Franklands lodge with Mrs Mowlem and her daughter, who take pleasure in observing their every move:

From the moment when Mr and Mrs Frankland entered the house, Miss Mowlem began to study them with all the ardour of an industrious scholar who attacks a new branch of knowledge. At every spare moment of the day, this industrious young lady occupied herself in stealing up-stairs to collect observations, and in running down-stairs to communicate them to her mother. By the time the married couple had been in the house a week, Miss Mowlem had made such good use of her eyes, ears, and opportunities that she could have written a seven days' diary of the lives of Mr and Mrs Frankland with the truth and minuteness of Mr Samuel Pepys himself.

(64)

When Rosamond discovers Miss Mowlem eavesdropping on a private conversation with Lenny, she flies into a rage, stamping her foot at "the height of indignation," and shouting, "You wretch! how dare you come in without knocking at the door?" (70) She rants, "I never

was so insulted in my life – never, you mean, prying, inquisitive creature!” (70). After further berating Miss Mowlem, Rosamond threatens that they will pay their bill and leave immediately.

Later, feeling remorseful, Rosamond vows to ““make it up with her,”” to which Lenny replies, “rather coldly and constrainedly,” that ““nothing more than a polite word or two”” is needed to set things right again (71). Rosamond, however, goes further with her apology, giving Miss Mowlem one of her ribbons and shaking hands with her. Lenny is affronted by this breach of protocol, saying that Rosamond ““forgot [her]self”” in shaking hands with her social inferior, proclaiming that while a handshake ““is an excellent way of making it up between equals,”” she must ““consider the difference between [her] station in society and Miss Mowlem’s”” (73). Rosamond, however, proclaims that she prefers not to observe distinctions of class so severely: ““I think I take after my father, who never troubles his head (dear old man!) about differences of station. I can’t help liking people who are kind to me, without thinking whether they are above my rank or below it”” (73).

This attitude shocks Lenny; he believes that Rosamond ““ought to be the last person in the world to confuse those distinctions in rank on which the whole well-being of society depends”” (73). Rosamond then delivers a speech on the folly of observing class distinctions that is reminiscent of Shylock’s monologue from *The Merchant of Venice*:<sup>4</sup>

“And yet, dear, we don't seem to have been created with such very wide distinctions between us. We have all got the same number of arms and legs; we are all hungry and thirsty, and hot in the summer and cold in the winter; we all laugh when we are pleased, and cry when we are distressed; and, surely, we have all got very much the same feelings, whether we are high or whether we are low. I could not have loved you better, Lenny, than I do now if I had been a duchess, or less than I do now if I had been a servant-girl.”

(73)

Lenny persists in his focus on Rosamond’s superior status, rejoining,

“My love, you are not a servant-girl. And, as to what you say about being a duchess, let me remind you that you are not so much below a duchess as you seem to think. Many a lady of high title cannot look back on such a line of ancestors as yours. Your father's family, Rosamond, is one of the oldest in England: even *my* father’s family hardly dates back so far; and we were landed gentry when many a name in the peerage was not heard of.”

(73)

This dialogue is laden with meaning to the reader who has already figured out Rosamond’s true heritage as the illegitimate daughter of a miner and lady’s maid. Rosamond calls herself a “Radical” laughingly, but her unconventional ideas and actions – from her detective activities to her subversive view of class – “transgress[...] anticipated social norms, forewarning her transgressive origins, and the transgressive behaviour of both her birth mother, and adoptive mother” (Passey 2016: 25).

Once Rosamond learns the truth of her parentage, she breaks the news to her husband by asking him to imagine whether he would still love her if she were a servant:

“I remember I used to offend you . . . by talking too familiarly to the servants. You might almost have fancied, at first, if you had not known me so well, that it was a habit with me because I had

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<sup>4</sup> *Merchant of Venice* 3.1.57-66.

once been a servant myself. Suppose I had been a servant – the servant who had helped to nurse you in your illnesses, the servant who led you about in your blindness more carefully than anyone else – would you have thought much, then, of the difference between us?”

(Collins [1857] 2008: 281)

Earlier in the novel, Rosamond explicitly states that she would never keep a secret from her husband, even for a moment: “I might have had my own little harmless secrets, dear, with another husband; but with you to have even so much as a thought in secret seems like taking the basest, the cruellest advantage of your blindness” (251). It is surprising, then, that when Rosamond finds the letter containing the secret, she reads it in silence. She does not reveal its contents to Lenny until they have left the Myrtle Room, and even then, she initially reveals the truth about her birth under the pretence of describing the plot of a “novel” (282-3). Lenny is so oblivious that he does not initially recognise the significance of what she has said, instead commenting on her “vivid imagination” (283). In this regard, he reveals himself to be blind both literally and metaphorically.

## Sight and Surveillance

*The Dead Secret*, like many detective novels, is preoccupied with sight and surveillance. Rosamond’s eyes are one of her most notable features; she has, as her husband describes how he remembers them from before he went blind, “Brown eyes, large eyes, wakeful eyes, that are always looking about them. Eyes that can be very soft at one time, and very bright at another. Eyes tender and clear...but capable, on very slight provocation, of opening rather too widely, and looking rather too brilliantly resolute” (69). This emphasises Rosamond’s extraordinary abilities of sight in contrast to Lenny’s disability.<sup>5</sup>

While Collins depicts Rosamond as having the instincts and drive of a natural-born detective, by giving her a blind husband, he also frees her from the dependence that the protagonist of “The Diary of Anne Rodway” had on her fiancé. While Lenny and Rosamond discuss the case together and he offers occasional insight – notably, he is the one who first deduces Sarah Leeson must be Mrs Treverton’s former maid – he cannot hunt for clues by sight and must rely on his wife to read the key documents that unravel the case: the letter from her uncle’s servant, the plans of the estate, and the hidden document containing the “dead secret” itself. When the Franklands want to pursue Sarah Leeson to London, the logistics of travel present certain difficulties: not only do they have a newborn to take into consideration, but they also must grapple with the fact that “[if Lenny] went there without his wife, his blindness placed him at the mercy of strangers and servants, in conducting investigations of the most delicate and most private nature” (304-5). Rosamond dismisses “[t]he idea of her husband traveling anywhere, under any circumstances, in his helpless, dependent state, without having her to attend on him . . . as too preposterous for consideration” (305).

Lenny became blind due to illness, and he is embarrassed and frustrated by his disability. Because Lenny fears “being publicly pitied and stared at” as “an object of curiosity on his wedding-day,” the couple wed early in the morning when few lookers-on would be present (45). Lenny’s condition is often a source of distress for Rosamond: during their honeymoon, for example, she weeps and expresses her desire to “help to make up for that

<sup>5</sup> In this regard, Rosamond has an analogue from later Victorian detective fiction: Dorcas Dene, a female detective featured in two collections of short tales by George R. Sims, *Dorcas Dene, Detective: Her Adventures* published in 1897 and 1898. Dorcas too has a blind husband, and his disability prompts her to reluctantly take work as a detective to support them both.

loss” of his sight (66). She declares, “My eyes serve for both of us now, don’t they? you depend on me for all that your touch fails to tell you, and I must never be unworthy of my trust – must I?” (66)

Lenny’s reliance on Rosamond’s eyes is particularly foregrounded during the climactic search of the Myrtle Room. He says, “I am but a helpless adviser at such a crisis as this. I must leave the responsibilities of decision...to rest on your shoulders. Yours are the eyes that look and the hands that search; and if the secret of Mrs Jazeph’s reason for warning you against entering this room is to be found by seeking in the room, *you* will find it” (267, emphasis original).

Accordingly, Rosamond scrupulously describes everything that she sees in the room for him. At one point, desperate to take part in the action, Lenny impatiently says, “Let me try, for once, if I can’t make a discovery for myself,” and runs his fingers over a bas-relief sculpture, declaring it to represent a man sitting among rocks and trees. Rosamond smiles and informs him, “Your man sitting down is, in reality, a miniature copy of the famous ancient statue of Niobe and her child; your rocks are marble imitations of clouds, and your ... trees are arrows [. . .]. Ah, Lenny, Lenny! you can’t trust your touch, love, as you can trust me!” (271) Without Rosamond’s sight and insight, Lenny draws the wrong conclusions from the evidence he perceives.

Interestingly, in Bateman’s authorised play, Lenny is not blind, and yet Rosamond still insists on searching the room on her own, saying “I am determined, when I discover which is the mystical apartment, to find out the secret, whatever it may be; and you, sir, shall be kept in ignorance of it until fully ten minutes longer than I am, as a punishment for your scepticism” (1877: 29). Both versions emphasise Rosamond’s autonomy and prowess as the primary investigator, although the play version dispenses with the premise of Lenny’s blindness as justification for her independence in the investigation, allowing her to be the lead detective purely due to her passion and aptitude for investigation.

## Conclusion

Rosamond’s potential place in the pantheon of female detectives is not easy to determine, in part because she is clearly an amateur. She is not paid, nor does she supplant or supplement an official investigation, so she does not meet the proposed criteria of a professional detective (Nickerson 1998: x; Bredesen 2010: x). Still, other texts that have been named as early examples of detective fiction, such as “The Diary of Anne Rodway,” *The Adventures of Susan Hopley*, and *Eleanor’s Victory*, also feature amateur sleuths, and like them, Rosamond is the heroine of the story, and her leading of an investigation is the primary plot.

The aforementioned heroines also are spurred to investigate by the same motivations that Kestner describes in his study of the fictional female detective from the *fin de siècle*: justice (to support a victim, clear an innocent’s name, or punish the guilty), power/empowerment (to achieve independence, harness the force of the law, crusade for social or political reform, or to gain entrance to otherwise barred spaces), or money (2016: 29–31). Rosamond’s motives to investigate do not neatly fit into these categories. Notably, while many nineteenth-century female characters turn detective for financial gain, Rosamond’s investigation actually threatens to result in her disinheritance. As Madhumita Biswas notes, upon learning the truth of her biological parentage, Rosamond is briefly “doubly disempowered” as “an illegitimate child from the working classes, and . . . a married woman having no property rights” (2022: 34). Once she realises that she is not Captain Treverton’s true legal heir, she feels duty-bound to give her inherited fortune of forty thousand pounds to

her uncle, although he ultimately returns it to her.

In her discussion of “professional” fictional female detectives of the late nineteenth century, Kathleen Gregory Klein notes how “each character’s successful functioning as a woman and a detective is challenged. She is faulted as a detective by failure or inadequacy in capturing criminals or by abandoning her independence for marital harmony; or, she is minimized as a woman who cannot love or define her own identity” (1995: 72). Rosamond’s talents and accomplishments, however, are not explicitly undermined in similar ways: she solves the mystery, tracks down the keeper of the secret, retains independence while cultivating a loving marriage, and even investigates with their newborn in tow. Her sense of self appears to remain intact even as she learns that she is not biologically a member of the Treverton family.<sup>6</sup>

The nineteenth-century female detective is paradoxical by her very nature, since, as Chris Willis has noted, “as a detective she works to uphold the existing social framework, but as an assertive woman she threatens it” (1999). In the case of *The Dead Secret*, however, social order is not restored in the usual sense: while a secret is exposed, there is no criminal to punish, and social codes are subverted multiple times over, since not only is the lady of the house revealed as an unwitting fraud, but she still retains her inheritance after the deception is brought to light.

Some of these differences between *The Dead Secret* and later Victorian works that have been studied explicitly as detective fiction can be seen as tropes that distinguish sensation fiction from detective fiction. While mystery and detection are often central to the plots of novels in both genres, the techniques of detection and the resolution of the mystery reveal key differences between the texts more often labelled “sensation fiction” from the mid-nineteenth century and the texts more often called “detective fiction” from the later nineteenth century.

In an article that appeared in *Clues: A Journal of Detection*, Anne-Marie Beller considers the gendered differences in the detective plots of sensation novels by Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon. Beller sees the act of detection in sensation fiction specifically as an attempt “to control and ultimately understand the world and one’s own place in it,” but notes how “often in these novels, this very process of control is dramatically undermined by the revelation of self-division and incoherence” (2007: 50). In sensation novels, Beller proposes, “the male detective works to contain crime and preserve the status quo, whereas the female detective effectively disrupts convention” (50). Beller contends that “revelatory experiences [resulting from ‘the pursuit of self-knowledge’] foreground the essential nature of the detection process in many sensation novels by Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon” (50). Rosamond follows the pattern Beller identifies here: while her goal as a detective may be to solve the mystery, she ultimately uncovers revelations that disrupt the status quo and alter what she knows about herself. The gendered differences of motivation, method, and results of male and female characters’ investigations may, in part, account for why mid-to-late nineteenth-century novels-with-a-secret are considered “sensation novels” as opposed to early exemplars of detective fiction. While sensation novels are often characterised as precursors to detective fiction, when explored *as* detective novels, we can more clearly see the emergence of tropes and conventions that will become familiar by the twentieth century.

There is great potential for more focused consideration of early female detectives in

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<sup>6</sup> While many female detectives of late Victorian fiction, such as Andrew Forrester’s “G,” disguise themselves as servants in order to pass unnoticed or to gain access to places they would not usually be able to gain entry to, in *The Dead Secret*, interestingly, it is not Rosamond but the former domestic Sarah Leeson who adopts disguises, pseudonyms, and false pretences.

previously overlooked or understudied fiction, as well as in books that may be better known but which have not been fully considered as part of the detective fiction canon. Even in its time, sensation fiction was typified by its inclusion of the detective figure: in her 1862 review of sensation novels, Margaret Oliphant opined, “We have already had specimens, as many as are desirable, of what the detective policeman can do for the enlivenment of literature: and it is into the hands of the literary Detective that this school of story-telling must inevitably fall at last” (568). Scholars of sensation fiction often note its importance to detective fiction, but studies of detective fiction rarely include in-depth consideration of the detecting heroines of novels typically considered “sensation fictions.”

The Holmes stories have served to define what is considered a “detective story,” establishing a detective prototype that an earlier character like C. Auguste Dupin fits neatly into. However, a character such as Rosamond Frankland cannot as readily fit into the Holmesian mould that would be established thirty years later. As Johnston has noted in her study of detection in *The Law and the Lady*, the method of “sensate detection” – perception linked with emotion, intuition, and intimacy – that Collins’ detecting heroines employ is conspicuously distinct from Holmes’ own “ultra-cool” and “rational” approach, but no less effective in solving a mystery (2009: 48)

If the archetypal detective becomes typified by Holmes, and the Holmesian template sets the guardrails for how detective fiction is judged thereafter, it is important to consider what detective stories – and detectives – looked like before the genre had any clear blueprint. As Sussex notes, “retrospective evaluation” of detective fiction is doubly challenging: on the one hand, “[l]ocating early examples of a genre can be a process of hair-splitting definitions, in which the final product is compared to its possibly dubious antecedents, in search of resemblances,” and on the other “is the problem of . . . assessing early crime texts when informed by the more sophisticated works produced subsequently” (2010: 4). Early detective fiction is easy to overlook when held to later, more established tropes. A reevaluation of *The Dead Secret* as a detective novel reveals how permeable these genre boundaries were from the beginnings of the fictional female detective.

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