Suspecting Women in The Leavenworth Case

Andalee Motrenec
California State University, Fullerton

Resumen: *El caso Leavenworth* puede considerarse el punto de partida de la novela detectivesca. Algunas lecturas contemporáneas consideran la novela de Anna Katharine Green como "novela amarilla" apoyándose en el hecho que el crimen tiene lugar dentro del espacio doméstico. Sin embargo, en este estudio problematizo estas cuestiones desde un punto de vista feminista, sin dejar de considerar, por ello, sus cuestiones históricas y estéticas. Las ideas decimonónicas que sostenían que las mujeres eren mental y físicamente incapaces de cometer asesinatos aparecen en *El caso Leavenworth* para revelar la tensión entre los papeles que se le asignan al género. Para llevar a cabo mi argumento me valdré tanto de las ideas de Gilbert y Gubart, como de Himmelfarb, que discutiré con profusión.
Palabras Clave: Anna Katharine Green, novela detectivesca, novel amarilla, literatura del siglo XIX, feminismo, Gilbert y Gubar, la loca en el ático, Himmelfarb, *El caso Leavenworth*.

Abstract: *The Leavenworth Case* stands out at a historically profound point for the development of the detective fiction novel. Contemporary readings label Anna Katharine Green's novel as sensation fiction because the crime occurs in the domestic space. However, this study problematizes labeling novels written by women as sensation fiction instead of detective fiction by analyzing the novel through a feminist, aesthetic, and historical lens. Contemporary 19th century ideas of women as physically and mentally incapable of murder arise in *The Leavenworth Case* and reveal tension between gender roles. Gilbert and Gubar's idea of the image of the angel in the house and Gertrude Himmelfarb's conception of gender in the Victorian home allow for an alternative reading of the deviant female character as violence interrupts gender performance and suspicion provides autonomy to its female subjects in the novel.
Keywords: Anna Katharine Green, detective fiction, sensation fiction, 19th century literature, genre, feminist, Gilbert and Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic, Himmelfarb, *The Leavenworth Case*.

Introduction

> I have always thought that I could not [write], that I would keep all that behind the curtain, that I would not write like a woman, of love and hope and disappointment, but like a man, of the world of intellect and action.
>
> --Margaret Fuller

Women writers of early detective fiction held a unique position against the claim of mental and physical inferiority to men through depictions of deviant female protagonists. Today these early 19th century women writers of detective fiction—Anna Katharine Green, Mary Fortune, and Metta Victor Fuller—are little known. Their novels, inspired by real crimes, Andrew Mangham points out, "confirmed growing suspicions that every home and every woman could harbor the potential for extreme violence" (Mangham 9). The feminist wave of the 60's attempted to reinsert women writers back into the recognized influential works of literary history. However, a few of these women writers of detective fiction were forgotten.

An exhibit at the British Library titled: *Murder in the Library: An A-Z of Crime Fiction* with its minimalist design and boldly colored walls chronicled the important writers, men and women, traversing the gender boundary of detective fiction from its start—yes, A-Z. The exhibit pointed out how a third of all the novels written in English have been crime fiction (British Library). Anna Katharine Green emerged during a critical junction in history, the late 1800's. Many scholars merely allude to her importance in the development of detective fiction and as they do with many other early women writers, they tend to focus on her life and who she married, rather than her actual writing. Green was a highly educated woman who wrote over 37

novels. She developed detective fiction from short story form to a complex full-length novel. Her work drew an international reading audience contributing to the popularity of detective fiction (Sussex 165). *The Leavenworth Case* gained the attention of other mystery writers, such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Wilkie Collins, who admitted to having read it (Champlin 6). However, today it is not uncommon to see Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Wilkie Collins, and Edgar Allan Poe as the founding fathers of detective fiction. For feminists there always exists this historical question of what happened to the women? Nickerson and Lucy Sussex attempted to fill this void of missing women by analyzing Anna Katharine Green's work and its contribution to the development of female detectives rather than deviant female characters. However, this study addresses the issue of placement within genres and focuses on the novel's portrayal of female deviancy historically, aesthetically, and through a feminist lens.

Anna Katherine Green, author of *The Leavenworth Case*

Sensational Detection

> "It is, however, unfortunately impossible to separate the sensational from the criminal"
>
> --Watson 356

The Leavenworth Case, described by Green herself as a Lawyer's Romance, provided the sentimental quality of the sensational novel and the technical language of the law. In *The Leavenworth Case* a man is found murdered in his library and two women are suspected of committing the crime. A lawyer and a detective are summoned to the residence to unravel the mystery. They believe the criminal is still at large. The lawyer, after arriving at the home, stumbles upon a discreet conversation where one of the two nieces, Eleanore and Mary Leavenworth, accuses the other of being the guilty party. The investigation falls on the two nieces who demonstrate both motive and circumstantial evidence for being the murderers. The simple decision on Green's part to frame the murder investigation in the home, the domestic space, and

surrounding women, provides one of the reasons LeRoy Lad Panek and many other readers placed *The Leavenworth Case* in the genre of sensation fiction. Even though the novel's narrative structure and treatment of the image of women differed from the sensation novel, many have still concluded that the novel is not detective fiction.

Sensation fiction utilized narrative techniques from the gothic novel and early detective fiction by portraying violence in the domestic space. In *The Origins of the American Detective Story,* LeRoy Lad Panek includes a small section on "Sensation Novels" where he discusses Anna Katharine Green along with Metta Fuller Victor and Wilkie Collins. Panek explains his conclusion that *The Leavenworth Case* is not a detective fiction novel (Panek 11). He states that detective fiction must:

> 1) revolve around murders, 2) have lawyers–or a lawyer and a law reader–as narrators and amateur investigators, 3) have professional police detectives who solve the crimes, and 4) eventually introduce clues and evidence that bear some relationship to the solution of crimes. (Panek 11)

Panek reasons that although *The Leavenworth Case* falls under all of the main specifications he outlined, Green and Victor's characters are portrayed as "selfless" women with no control over their futures and discredits Mr. Gryce as a reputable detective. In this vein, Lucy Sussex's tribute to Green's life points out that her "heroines are so idealized they lack any character" (170). Both readings attempt to label selfless women as heroines, and yet they critique the novel for lacking dynamic, autonomous characters. Sadly, this kind of reading led to Anna Katharine Green being over looked as a writer of detective fiction. The consequences of downplaying the importance of women writers of detective fiction because they write about womanly topics led to the perception women were not concerned with actions that occurred in the male sphere (crime) and that the origin of detective fiction remains predominantly male. Michael Mallory, a writer for *Mystery Scene Magazine*, remarks, "More than anything, it is these ripe Victorian melodramatics that allowed Green's work to lapse into obscurity" (Mallory). Mallory and Haycraft seem to agree about the abundance of sentimental work being published during this period. Haycraft points out in "Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story," *The Leavenworth Case* became "one of the true historical milestones" at a time "when feminine literary output was slight at best and confined chiefly to sentimental verse" (Haycraft 84). Clearly Haycraft views *The Leavenworth Case* as more than just a "sentimental" novel, and Mallory believes sentimental novels overshadowed Green.

Willard Huntington Wright credits Green for her "tremendous popularity," but comments that *The Leavenworth Case's* importance lay in the fact that it went far toward familiarizing the English-speaking public with this, as yet, little-known genre, rather than in any inherent contribution made by it to the genre's evolution (Haycraft 46).

Wright claims *The Leavenworth Case* is "too intimately concerned with strictly romantic material and humanistic considerations" (Haycraft 46). His conclusion that Green's work touches on "humanistic concerns" coincides with R. Austin Freeman's opinion that in detective fiction,

> Apart from a sustained love interest—for which there is usually no room—a detective novel need not, and should not, be inferior in narrative interest or literary workmanship to any other work of fiction. (Haycraft 13)

Freeman argues that there is "usually no room" for a romantic theme in detective fiction. Romantic themes are connected to what Wright refers to as "humanistic considerations." This idea that detective fiction should not be concerned with romantic triangles or humanistic concerns could explain Green's novel frequently is disregarded as detective fiction. This leaves the question of how Green's work fits in with sensation fiction since critics of detective fiction reject romantic interests in such novels?

Thomas Hardy provides another definition of the sensation novel: "a 'long and intricately inwrought chain of circumstance,' involving 'murder, blackmail, illegitimacy, impersonation, eavesdropping, multiple secrets, a suggestion of bigamy, amateur and professional detectives'" (David 193). At first glance, this definition resembles the detective novel as well. This could be because both the detective fiction novel and sensation novel can credit their origin to the gothic novel. Andrew Radford provides another outline of the plot contents of the sensation novel. He defines it as containing: a murder, a secret, a divorce, a seduction, or bigamy (Radford 4). These plots were usually provocative and emotionally stimulating, which produced the controversy over the readership of sensation literature. Charles Dickens also provided a description of this hybrid genre; "the genre employed its paraphernalia of psychic disintegration, duplicates, spectres, and transposed identities to erode the seemingly solid and respectable structures of mid-Victorian domesticity" (Radford 3). Dickens points out how sensation literature concerned itself with domestic issues. Then he mentions the presence of female protagonists and the fragility of feminine nerves (Radford 12). It seems that both detective fiction and sensation fiction are concerned with domestic life and gender issues. *The Leavenworth Case* most definitely can be read as a sensational novel. Two very popular sensation novels, *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret* shared many of the same thematic concerns with *The Leavenworth Case*. Sensation fiction has been said to contain: bigamous marriages, misdirected letters, romantic triangles, heroines placed in physical danger, drugs, potions, and/or poisons (Allingham). Along with these, the novels may contain characters who adopt disguises, trained coincidences, aristocratic villains, and heightened suspense detailism (Allingham). However, *The Leavenworth Case* only shares a few of these characteristics: the romantic triangle, misdirected letters, and heightened suspense detailism. If the novel does not align with the definition of the sensation novel, then how does it compare to detective fiction? Well, *The Leavenworth Case* contains a murder, a lawyer who is narrator, a professional detective, and evidence that bears relevance to the case. P.D. James, a widely known English crime writer, provides another useful definition of detective fiction on National Public Radio,

> What we have is a central mysterious crime, which is usually a murder. We have a closed circle of suspects with means, motive and opportunity for the crime. We have a detective…who comes in rather like an avenging deity to solve it. And by the end, we do get a solution. (NPR)

She concludes, "In a sense, the detective story is a small celebration of reason and order in our very disorderly world" (NPR). P.D. James defines detective fiction loosely as a mysterious crime that involves suspects and a character with a motive. Her definition allows for any space to enclose the crime and for the criminal to be any gender. So where does the separation between the genre lines occur?

Detective fiction and sensation fiction cease to be similar when the supernatural occurs in the narrative. Although both can credit the gothic for their

development, detective fiction rejected notions of the supernatural as a solution to crime. There is not a single line of *The Leavenworth Case* that can be compared to the sensational specter in *The Woman in White.* Green does not deploy the supernatural as an optional solution to the crime. Instead, her narrative insists on legally, scientifically, and logically derived conclusions. In this way, *The Leavenworth Case* shares more structural qualities to "The Hound of the Baskervilles" and Sherlock Holmes's scientific method. Both assume that there is a logical resolution in which clues lead to a restoration of justice and order. Sherlock Holmes specifically and avidly rejects notions of the uncanny. Similarly, Green does not over emphasize the otherworldly qualities of her characters or even suggest that ghosts or spectres are at the root of the crime. *The Leavenworth Case* does not concern itself with ideas of the supernatural but instead with morality.

Still, the sensation novel shares with detective fiction a concern with gender issues. Green's female characters can be read as autonomous and in opposition to the angelic image. However, the angelic characters depicted by Green reflect a more holy penitent domestic figure, rather than the otherworldly creatures found in the gothic or sensation novel. In light of this difference, many would still insist Green's vestigial attempts at writing detective fiction are still merely sensational and reflect the un-autonomous women characters in gothic literature. Charney provides another viewpoint of detective fiction: "There is no blueprint of the action, but there is a conventional direction to it, which establishes it firmly in its own genre" (xxii). This ambiguous definition of detective fiction allows for nearly any novel to be read as detective fiction and can hardly be helpful to this argument in so much as it draws to light some kind of movement generated in the narrative. This movement can be anything that propels the plot forward in a direction. Green creates a sense of direction that propels the novel by juxtaposing conflicting images of the ideal angel in the house and the autonomous woman.

In conclusion, *The Leavenworth Case* deserves consideration within both genres as a sensational critique of gender roles during the late 19th century and as an aesthetic study of how these images determine narrative direction. A feminist historical reading that closely analyzes the aesthetic contributions to the genre of detective fiction will reveal how these images work to produce suspicion and pave the way for women to be viewed capable physically and mentally of murder. Aesthetics can bridge the gaping void of differing perceptions—between ideals and actualities. Nickerson appropriately points out how *The Leavenworth Case* spends more than half of the novel contemplating if the murder was committed by a woman. This suggests the reader is capable of reading an ending where one of the women murdered their uncle. The leading detective Gryce concludes his first conversation with Mr. Raymond, the lawyer; "I suspect everyone, and no one" (10 Green). Here detective Gryce alludes to the alternative reading Nickerson would like the reader to consider by allowing the possibility where both men and women are suspected of the murder.

Adding to the Infinite Readings of Green

"How could I bear to sit there and see the frightful serpent of deceit and sin evolve itself from the bosom of this white rose!"

--Mr. Raymond

Contemporary 19th century audiences would have found a woman an unlikely candidate as a suspect for murder. Green capitalized on this idea when she created Eleanore and Mary. Gilbert and Gubar provide an effective way of reading female

characters in *The Madwoman in the Attic*. They break down conceptions of women's nature, proper roles, and depictions by men throughout history. They also raise questions about female penmanship and women's contributions to literature, the origin of their exclusion, and the image of women in literature. They reflect on the underpinnings of a male dominated canon and call into question the gendered seat of creativity by showing "the images of the 'angel' and the 'monster' while pointing out how these images of women, written by men, have also pervaded women's writing (Gilbert 17). Their feminist analysis of the angel in the house and the monster image will be useful to apply to Victorian literature because many sensation novels seek to undermine this ideal image. Green capitalizes on this image because it provides more conflict between the characters in *The Leavenworth Case*. The love interest complicates the case because it calls into question the narrator, Mr. Raymond. It also explains why Mr. Raymond finds it difficult to suspect such beautiful women of such a heinous crime. He instead insists on clearing Eleanore's name because she is too beautiful to be guilty. Gilbert and Gubar define this angel in the house as "the aesthetic cult of ladylike fragility and delicate beauty—no doubt associated with the moral cult of the angel-woman—obliged "genteel" women to "kill" themselves into art objects: slim, passive beings whose 'charms' eerily recalled the snowy, porcelain immobility of the dead" (25). This ideal angel exists to aesthetically please society as a "genteel" woman. They describe this ideal angel image as "('angel,' 'fairy,' and perhaps 'sprite')" (19). The two nieces embody the angel in the house through the eyes of Mr. Raymond. However, suspicion of this image is at the nucleus of the investigation and makes the narrative more sensational. Mr. Raymond describes a picture in the hallway of the Leavenworth home;

> A sweet picture—sweet enough and poetic enough to have been conceived by the most idealistic of artists: simple too—vision of a young, golden-haired, blue-eyed coquette, dressed in the costume of the First Empire, standing in a woodpath looking back over her shoulder as at someone following—yet with such a dash of something not altogether saint-like in the corners of her meek eyes and baby-like lips, that it impressed me with the individuality of life. Had it not been for the open dress with its waist almost beneath the armpits, the hair cut short on the forehead and the perfection of the neck and shoulders, I should have not taken it for a literal portrait of one of the ladies of the house. As it was, I could not rid myself of the idea that one, if not both, of Mr. Leavenworth's nieces looked down upon me from the eyes of the entrancing blonde with the beckoning glance and forbidding hand. So vividly did this fancy impress me, that I have shuddered as I looked, wondering if this sweet creature did not know what had occurred in this house since the happy yesterday…The face of the coroner, sternly intelligent and attentive, was as distinctly imprinted upon my mind as that of this lovely picture, or the clearer-cut and more noble features of the sculptured Psyche, shining in mellow beauty from the crimson-hung window. (Green 11)

This long description of both women impresses upon the reader the angelic image and renders a response in Raymond that is arguably sublime. The "baby like lips" give the impression of innocence, as does "the forbidding hand," something destroyed by the act of murder. Much care is taken in describing the clothing and "perfection" in the portrait of the ladies. In another passage, Raymond describes Mary Leavenworth as a "beautiful creature" with "subtle grace," "pale magnificence," and

"perfect form and feature" (Green 42). Clearly he views Mary as the ideal angel in the house because of how his description parallels Gilbert and Gubar's description of the angel in the house. They leave the reader with a sense of otherworldliness that emphasizes some meaning in appearance.

The epigraph from chapter 6 begins with the impartation of "beauty that ensnares" (Green 40). Green follows through with this theme throughout the chapter as Mr. Raymond contends with both his attraction and suspicion of the women. He enters a room in the Leavenworth home to greet the two grieving nieces, and he is overcome by a sense of horror. He overhears one of the nieces accuse the other of murder but cannot place a voice with a face. Green strategically sets up the reader from the epigraph to suspect women, and then makes both female characters equally suspicious. Green also forces Mr. Raymond to contend with his attraction to Eleanore and the idea that perhaps she is the murderess.

Mr. Raymond's assistance in the investigation turns to a question over the aesthetically pleasing image of both women and what he knows of the nature of women. His suspicion of both women lingers on lengthy descriptions of their behavior, appearance, and his observations. At the beginning of chapter 6 he observes, "Instantly a flush of loveliest color burst upon us" from the room (Green 41). Then he describes it as a picture "like a glimpse of azure heaven let unexpectedly into the depths of a gloomy prison" (41). This description with the help of Green's label "picture" provides an image of the room for the reader and a sensation of approaching "heaven." Her technique of descriptive language and otherworldliness are similar to that of Edgar Allan Poe's ratiocination. She utilizes the technique of sensational language but emphasizes the factual value of observing human behavior. Observations of human behavior are important in detection fiction.

Mr. Raymond describes Mary in another passage. He states, "her whole appearance was so splendid, so startling, so extraordinary, that I held my breath in surprise, actually for the moment doubting if it were a living woman I beheld," and then he makes reference to a pythoness. He idealizes Mary in this passage and demonizes her sister when he states, "This beautiful creature, then, was not the Eleanore who could load, aim, and fire a pistol" (Green 42). For this brief moment the reader is apprehended by both the image of the ideal angel and contemplation of the monstrous murderess, as he imagines the gun in Eleanore's hand. However, shortly after admiring Mary, he encounters Eleanore and discovers her equally beautiful. This shatters his expectation of what a murderess would appear like. All of this time, Green spends a great deal of the narrative on aesthetic descriptions of the character's behavior and appearance. This chapter renders an aesthetic image of both women she intends the reader to observe and judge. There would be no other reason to linger on lengthy descriptions other than to produce either important facts or an affect on the reader.

Catherine Nickerson describes Anna Katharine Green and Metta Victor Fuller's work as "domestic detective fiction" in an introduction to *The Figure Eight* (8). She mentions the "aesthetic" which Victor brought to the table when developing the detective fiction novel (Nickerson 13). Clearly there is an aesthetic underlying detective fiction. She points out, "The style of domestic fiction includes a more leisurely pace, with the narrator's voice lingering over details of setting, dress, behavior, and, most importantly, emotion" (Nickerson 13). *The Leavenworth Case* deals with aesthetics because Mr. Raymond is forced to question how the beautiful ideal angel image generates attraction and affects his ability to reason. This reveals to the reader how aesthetics complicate the case. The majority of the narrative relies on observation, as does much of detective fiction.

The beautiful image also exists as a social construct of an ideal. However, the Victorian's were fascinated by murder cases during the 1800's, but horrified by murder's ability to destroy and invade the domestic space. Joel Black applies aesthetics to the concept of murder in *The Aesthetics of Murder* and he provides a point at which detective fiction, sensation, and aesthetics intersect. Black defines aesthetics and art in an opening passage:

> There are two ways that an object, idea, event, or act can achieve artistic status. On the one hand, the object can be created, the idea conceived, the event engineered, or the act performed by the artist with the express intention of making it a work of art, whatever the "artist" may mean or understand by "art." (Black 12)

In this passage Black draws a comparison between the act of murder and the performative act of creating art. He explains that there must be an event, an artist, and a product. Regardless of the art, there must be an intended message. He draws the parallel between art and the act of murder where an event occurs, a murderer becomes an artist, and the artwork is produced, essentially the victim's body. Once he establishes murder can be read as art, he dissects one philosophical argument surrounding beauty. This argument is especially important in providing the link between mimesis and identity formation. He points out that art attempts to mimic reality and replicate it. In this way murder in literature implicates profound discomforts with gender roles. The link is drawn between aesthetic images and identity when Black refers to Foucault's idea of "greatness's 'right to crime'" and the "criminals poetic power" (34). The connection exists in the artist assuming responsibility as a creator of the art. The artist assumes the right to create the art, agency over the material they use to create with, and the label of artist. The process of creating art defines the artist through the process of creating art which assigns a label to the creator of the art. Quite simply, performative behavior labels the performer. Women assume the position of artist, and become inconstant as the artist, rather than the subject of the aesthetic image. Gilbert and Gubar draw a connection between the ideal angel in the house and an image created by male authors of women throughout the history of literature. Black attempts to define the murderous act as also an aesthetic image. Despite it not being beautiful, he validates murder by linking it to the sublime. He states, "Murder is interesting because it is so unsettling; it destroys any idealistic illusions we may cherish about the type of society in which we live" (Black 18). Here he draws a connection between aesthetics and ideal beauty. The key to applying Black's ideas lies in the way beauty is used in *The Leavenworth Case* as a normalizing function. He explains,

> the beautiful was conceived by Burke as a social, civilizing principle of unity, cohesion, and morality, while the sublime was rooted in a primal impulse of self-preservation that was intrinsically amoral and antisocial. (Black 14)

Beauty appeared as an underlying social desire for order. Gilbert and Gubar's conception of the beautiful image of women fits Black's image representing "morality," "unity," and "cohesion." Black's states, "if murder can be experienced aesthetically, the murderer can in turn be regarded as a kind of artist—performance artist or anti-artist whose specialty is not creation but destruction" (14). This idea reinforces and possibly explains the uneasiness of Mr. Raymond at viewing the

women as beautiful angels who could have performed out of character, as angels of destruction instead, because it is an attack on our conceptions of identity. Black points out, "From Hedda to Mishima, the artistic endeavor to 'do it beautifuly' takes the form of an act of violence no longer directed outwardly toward others as murder, but inwardly toward the self—the supreme Illusion upon which all other illusions are founded" (Black 26). The idea murder is art attacking identity also coincides with Kathleen Klein's idea of murder being performative. She explains that the crime is written on the body (173). The performative act of writing the crime on the body links the criminal with the message the murderer creates.

Green sets up this contradictory image in the epigraphs of the chapters. Chapter 4 quotes *Hamlet*, a Shakespearian play that deals with interfamilial conflict and controversial female characters, and another chapter also quotes *Macbeth*. The significance of the meticulously selected epigraphs shows Green's intention for setting up suspicion in the reader. A contemporary reader must have been familiar with Shakespeare in order to understand the selection of these epigraphs and also familiar with the controversy over women's rights during the period the novel was published. Chapter 6 directly encourages the reader to turn a skeptical eye to women. It begins,

> Oh! She has beauty might ensnare
> A conqueror's soul, and make him leave his crown
> At random, to be scuffled for by slaves. (Green 40)

The epigraph forces the reader to focus on an aesthetic image of "she" that has "beauty" and "might ensnare." The idea that beauty can ensnare refocuses the narrative not on dialogue but on an aesthetic image. It also alludes to Gilbert and Gubar's argument that every angel has the potential to turn into a monster; "women can create false appearances to hide their vile natures" (Gilbert 30). Green's tone in this chapter firmly guides the reader to suspect women. In the same chapter with an epigraph from *Macbeth*, Mr. Raymond reflects on words of wisdom: "My son, remember that a woman with a secret may be a fascinating study, but she can never be a safe or even a satisfactory companion" (40). The main female authoritative figure, his mother, passes on her words of warning and suspicion of women. The patriarchal cycle is embedded in the mother figure, and the reader must fall back on his or her own observation of the clues within the text.

Many of Mr. Raymond's observations reveal him fighting his attraction to Eleanore. All of his narrative authority remains subjective. Without the epigraph, the reader might be distracted by Mr. Raymond's idea that the women are incapable of murder, simply because he does not want to suspect either of them. Raymond exclaims, "It does not seem so dreadful to accuse a man of crime. But a woman – and such a woman!" (189) The parallel of the aesthetically beautiful woman does not coincide with Raymond's image of a murderess. Raymond writes a list of reasons Eleanore is implicated for the murder in order to weigh the evidence against her. He reflects on the list, "'She must be innocent; she cannot be otherwise.' I reiterated to myself, and then pausing, asked what warranty I had of this. Only her beautiful face; only, only her beautiful face" (77). He seems sure that innocence can be reflected through beauty, and the link between aesthetics and morality lies in this image. The ugly murderess cannot lie beneath a beautiful mask. He reinforces his testimony by stating, "No one could say after that I was a man to be blinded by a bewitching face, from seeing what, in one with no claims to comeliness, would be considered at once an almost indubitable evidence of guilt" (78). The case rests on both appearance and

evidence, yet the weight of the case is placed on evidence, which makes *The Leavenworth Case* less of a sensation novel.

Mr. Raymond dives further into the mystery of the Leavenworth family murder and remarks on the "serpent of deceit" in the "bosom of the white rose" (Green 51). He visually cannot reconcile the beautiful image with what he imagines a murderess to look like. He sees the vile serpent-like imagery of the monster described by Gilbert and Gubar. The language invoked by Green's descriptive exclamations shows Raymond's limitations as a narrator. The reader is forced to view both women through a biased lens. This image becomes even more fragmented as he comments that suspicion "would cast a shadow over her young life that it would take more than time to utterly dispel" (Green 100). When this passage is paired with one that follows, the text reveals an important point where the angel and monster image occur at the same time. Raymond describes,

> The contrasted pictures of Eleanore standing with her hand upon the breast of the dead, her face upraised and reflecting the glory of the heaven she invoked, and Mary fleeing a short half-hour later indignantly from her presence haunted me and kept me awake long after midnight. It was like a double vision of light and darkness that, while contrasting, neither assimilated nor harmonized. (Green 100)

The passage shows a moment of cognitive dissonance. He sees both the monster and angel image together. Here Raymond must acknowledge women hide their monstrous nature behind an angelic guise, or that he has had a vision of two different kinds of women who both look beautiful. He would rather see "a tender picture of the lovely cousins bowed in anguish over the remains of one who had been dear as a father to them" (Green 39). The idea a beautiful woman could hide her monstrous nature becomes a frightening reality Mr. Raymond encounters. Gilbert and Gubar also describe the "the angel woman" as someone who "manipulates her domestic/ mystical sphere in order to ensure the well-being of those entrusted to her care" (26). They explain how she "can manipulate" or "scheme" and "plot—stories as well as strategies" (26). Gilbert and Gubar conclude that women can plot and scheme within complex situations and Green illustrates this through the example of Mary and Eleanore.

On the other hand, Mr. Raymond cannot accept the autonomous female image in reference to the Leavenworth nieces despite the fact Eleanore and Mary demonstrate measures of autonomy by refusing to provide their alibi. The two women manipulate the investigation by forcing suspicion on themselves for the majority of the novel. Mr. Raymond's unease at the reality of their image reveals the tension between expected gender roles in the novel and the influence of the suffrage movement. This can be seen in both Mr. Gryce and Mr. Raymond's expressions of female behavior. Mr. Raymond inquires about the women's disposition in light of their uncle's murder, "Are the ladies very much overcome?" to which the secretary responds, "It would be unnatural if they were not" (Green 5). Here both men discuss the ideal reaction they expected the women to produce. Gryce observes that they are "in grief, of course, but tolerably composed" casting a shadow of a doubt upon their innocence (8). However, he concludes, "It is not for me to suspect, but to detect" (10). Detective Gryce sets himself up as an impartial observer in this passage by revealing that lingering suspicions have shades of bias, and instead his position is to look for facts that lead to conclusions. The two nieces break free from the ideal angel image as they act against the male authority of the law. They become the inconstant woman described by Gilbert and Gubar. Gilbert and Gubar described this woman as the '"inconstant" self,'

and “individuality” replacing the moral extremes of the ideal angel and monster (19). This woman emerges as something other than angel or monster. Eleanore and Mary provide an example of the autonomous female when they act in a way that contradicts the behavior Raymond and Gryce expect.

Oh, the Inconstancy of It—She!
Historical Rendering of the Victorian Ideal

Green published *The Leavenworth Case* in 1878 during a highly turbulent period for women’s rights. The suffrage movement rose from the ashes of a patriarchal struggle to give “women a 'legitimate' political voice” (Miller 221). Cases like the Roads murder provided controversial material for novelists in a space where women’s capacity for violence could be called into question. The deviant female character directly opposed the patriarchal structure of the law. She threatened the sacred space of the home. Scientists and theorists posed the argument women were mentally and physically inferior to men. Darwin emphasized the importance of women’s reproductive development as a reason for inequalities between male and female development. Herbert Spencer also believed women possessed an inferior ability to reason. These ideas, rooted deep within a fear men would fall behind women in evolutionary progression, only fueled the women’s suffrage movement. One public voice opposing the suffrage movement, George Gissing, stated at the Trades Union Congress in 1877 that he had “little respect for women’s intellectual capacity” (Himmelfarb 94). This idea was not uncommon. In fact, Henry Broadhurst urged men to keep their wives in “their proper sphere at home,” rather than allow women to compete for a living (97). Broadhurst believed that women were most productive as a compliment to men in the domestic sphere. To the Victorians, the domestic space was considered “‘sacred,’” as Andrew Mangham points out in *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction* (49). The home was the idealized center of worship and the woman was at the center. Beatrice Webb, an influential social reformer during the 19th century who resisted the suffrage movement comments,

> Surely we need some human beings who will watch and pray, who will observe and inspire, and above all, who will guard and love all who are weak, unfit or distressed? Is there not a special service of women, as there is a special service of man?
> (Himmelfarb 101)

The words “watch,” “pray,” and “observe” provide a striking resemblance to the imagery of the ideal angel in the house. The ideal woman exists as a model of inactivity within the sacred space of the home. Men perceived the home as a center for identity signification; “we lay aside our mask and drop our tools, and are no longer lawyers, sailors, soldiers, statesmen, clergymen, but only men” (Himmelfarb 59). Victorian men supposedly shed their worldly selves and resided as “only men,” within the home—in simple words, as their true selves. Men’s identity was tightly wrapped up in how women were defined by their role in the domestic space.

Mr. Harwell reveals himself as the artist constructing a message of aggression and jealousy through murder in the final chapters of *The Leavenworth Case*. His testimony assumes that he had control over the case all along by allowing Eleanore and Mary to be suspects. Take, for instance, Harwell’s confession at the conclusion of the novel that he allowed Mary to be suspected of murder. He accepts that he has

power over her being released from suspicion but chooses to keep that power. Here he acknowledges he is in control and the creator of the whole situation. As with many novels concerned with crime, the criminal has the opportunity to explain his motive behind the murder and how he crafted the circumstances. Here both women appear to be the victims and heroines, restored to their proper ideal angel image. However, this argument might support Panek's view these women were helpless throughout the novel, but it ignores the ways in which both women manipulate the case. This testimony also reinforces the idea of violence being produced by men, because the reader discovers in the end neither woman killed their uncle.

Men depended on women's constancy to their angelic image in order to feel safe in their own identity. Himmelfarb's idea of male identity being reliant on women's identity within the home supports the separate spheres ideology. As long as women remained constant, men could define themselves. Murderous acts shatter identification by robbing the victim of his or her identity and gender. Murder disturbed the Victorians because it disrupted the space where expected gender roles were performed. When women stepped out of their designated role through the act of murder, and no longer protected this space, they defied social conventions that allowed for men to carry out their proper roles. Himmelfarb describes women's role within the home as "their entire identity and their sole profession" (Himmelfarb 60). So the violent act appeared as an act of defiance against Victorian identity.

The violent act forced both the male and female sphere to interact. Hanna Charney points out how violence "breaks open this microcosm and forcefully brings in the outside world" (79). It transformed the domestic space from "an originally closed society with its own languages, manners, and morals" to one touched and marred by violence (81). Violence allowed society to come inside the home; investigators and community observers would infiltrate it. In *The Leavenworth Case*, violence forces outsiders to enter the home in order to bring the murderer to justice: the detectives, the lawyer, and the coroner. These men bring with them expectations of how women should act, or have the capacity to act. Violence challenges these expectations by suggesting the ideal image can be rejected.

The ideal image of the Victorian angel in the house, as upholders of prayer and moral codes, shattered when the woman became the aggressor. Yet, if the woman becomes the aggressor, the murderess, or is suspected, then she becomes unfaithful to this ideal image and inconstant. The suspected female borderlines the monstrous inconstant image defined by Gilbert and Gubar. Eleanore Leavenworth takes on the image of the inconstant female through her behavior during the investigation. The coroner questions her about a piece of evidence two people observed her remove from her uncle's table after his body is found:

> One witness has sworn that he saw you bending over the table upon which there were lying several papers, another, that when she met you a few minutes later in the hall, you were in the act of putting a piece of paper in your pocket. (Green 58)

She responds, "I decline answering the question" (Green 59). Her decision to withhold information from the coroner shows her knowledge of the law. In this scene, she recognizes a choice presented to her, to withhold both a piece of evidence and her testimony. Her refusal to submit to the law is an exercise of autonomy. She is not being silenced by a patriarchal figure but uses the patriarchal language of the law to choose to remain silent. Mr. Raymond acknowledges this when he reflects, "It had now become evident to all, that Eleanore Leavenworth not only stood upon her

defense, but was perfectly aware of her position and prepared to maintain it" (Green 59). The most important words in this sentence are "perfectly aware." Here he acknowledges her full knowledge of the situation and the risk associated with her position. This is important because it shows male recognition of female potential. In this scene she becomes the prime suspect of the novel. She no longer remains a stagnant character but exercises her right to offer information or hinder the investigation by withholding her testimony. She becomes an inconstant figure by refusing to submit to the law. However, she retains her beauty, so she is neither angel nor monster. Her actions change the movement of the plot so that the novel focuses on her comments and behavior, and Mr. Raymond acknowledges her ability to commit the murder, although he wrestles with the idea because of his physical attraction to her. When Mr. Raymond suspects Eleanore of being the murderess, he must combat the regressive views he possesses of women.

Kathleen Klein provides a feminist viewpoint of women detectives which coincides with Gilbert and Gubar's argument for inconstancy. She argues, "If female, then not detective; if detective, then not really female. Or perhaps I should say she either is or is not Woman" (Klein 174). Her argument is based on the assumption "the Woman is the body in the library on whom the criminal writes his narrative of murder. On top of that narrative, the detective inscribes his narrative of investigation" (173). This binary opposition assumes that the body of the victim is always feminine. She summarizes, "'the body' in the library – is, despite biology, always female" (173). Gilbert and Gubar also point out that the act of writing is masculine, so it is only appropriate that the "narrative of investigation" would also be masculine. In this way, Both Klein and Gilbert and Gubar agree that crime addresses "a definitionally male space" (Klein 174). She attempts to dissect the binary opposition of detective fiction by analyzing the detective's role. However, her study does not address how the gender of the villain changes this binary, since incorporating the villain would make the dynamic a triad, rather than a binary. She points out that the lesbian detective is a wild card because "Her existence is a challenge" to the designated gender binary, where the man is at the top of the hierarchy. The female villain complicates this power structure. In Klein's argument, the lesbian is the third participant that throws off the binary. Her feminist argument concludes, "When the detective is female, the criminality takes on an aura of inevitability; descendants of Eve, all women are wrongdoers, lawbreakers" (177). She unveils how the woman detective also represents a deviancy from what she describes as "the proper role of Woman" (177). Klein's conceptions of the proper role of women and the assumption that the act of murder being masculine explains why characters in *The Leavenworth Case* have so much trouble imagining a woman in a villain's role. She points out that any position of activity for a woman translates into a role of deviancy—woman detective or woman villain.

Shortly after the coroner questions Eleanore, she faints, and a conversation transpires between Mary and Mr. Raymond. She expresses that she does not believe her cousin committed the murder. Mr. Raymond listens to Mary's impartation, "Won't somebody tell her, then—won't you—that her manner is a mistake, that it is calculated to arouse suspicion, that it has already done so?" (Green 65). Her impartation brings Raymond the realization of "what an actress this woman was!" Their conversation continues and she tells Mr. Raymond she is willing to lie to help her cousin lessen the suspicion surrounding her. He concludes, "Yes, this woman would lie now to save her cousin, had lied during the inquest, but I felt grateful, and now I was simply horrified" (Green 66). This passage shows that Mary Leavenworth knows she has the capacity to manipulate the investigation. She exercises her autonomy in this passage to the horror of Mr. Raymond. Her desire to save her cousin overrides her role as upholder of justice. Roles are inverted, the ideal angel image demands the woman to be the

upholder of holiness and justice in the home, but in detective fiction the man brings the case to justice—the woman is a byproduct of the murder.

Conclusion

> "the descent into female violence marks the end of difference"
> --Cracuin 57

Women's violence threatened to destroy the ideal angel image and difference between the male and female sphere. It also challenged the idea violence belonged only to the male sphere. The violent act identified women as agents of destruction. They could now destroy the ideal image men had created for them and create a new image. It is difficult to ignore the idea of women and violence in late 19th century novels, as they attempted to consider the consequence of these negative notions of female agency. Robert Audley in *Lady Audley's Secret*, a popular sensation novel of the 19th century, reveals how prevalent these ideas were: "he could not but sometimes pity her [Lady Audley] for her womanhood and her helplessness" (Braddon 326). The tone of the passage also reveals reductive notions of female agency. The main protagonist of the novel actually attempts murder, unlike the Leavenworth nieces. These sensation novels challenge the idea women possessed little self-will, and they provide a controversial aesthetic image. Ihsen Hachaichi points out how it is not an uncommon idea "that women are biologically and intellectually inferior to men" in "There is Sex on the Mind: Scientific Determinism and the Woman Question in *Lady Audley's Secret*" (88). The direct way *Lady Audley's Secret* addresses female violence within sensation fiction drew much scholarly attention to Braddon's concern over female inferiority. However, *The Leavenworth Case* also challenges this with the portrayal of women as adept at shooting a gun, in other words being capable of murder. Mr. Raymond's observations also show women as capable of manipulating situations, withholding information from the case, and as knowledgeable about how to manipulate the law to their benefit. A close reading of the novel reveals the underlying tension with male and female identity and the development of their identity in relation to the law.

Kathleen Klein provides an observation of one detective fiction novelist's attempts to eliminate the gender binary within the genre;

> The crimes which Pam solves are ancillary to the hidden crimes which underpin them and which are protected from solution: imperialism, racism, homophobia, misogyny, sexism, sadism, incest, self-righteousness, religiosity. The laws against rape, pornography, prostitution, blackmail, and even murder have little effect against the cultural behavior which engenders them. The crimes which exist before the crimes which are committed are not resolved in the simplistic solutions of the latter; but perhaps even those solutions are not resolutions. (182)

Klein sees the origin of crime rooted in social injustice. In *The Leavenworth Case*, the crime is rooted in the ideal image being portrayed. The inherent misogyny revealed in the text makes Green's work such a profound example of digressive views of women during the period. Her concern with motivations for murder address issues with human nature. The focus on motives brings to light how in *The Leavenworth Case* the murder occurs because of male jealousy over desiring to possess a woman. Green's focus on motives places the novel in close company with other detective

fiction novels concerned with questions of why murder occurs. In *The Leavenworth Case*, the murderer reveals himself and his intentions for killing the uncle. The real crime underlying the crime, as Klein coined, is the male desire to objectify women. It is the murderer's desire to possess the woman he is in love with that leads to murder of the uncle. But it is the suspicion of the women that offsets this balance of hierarchy throughout the novel because women do not remain as object but instead become an agent in the case. Although the murderer ends up being a man, the majority of the novel revolves around suspicion of women.

Popular literature provided a medium for women writers to address female agency to a wide audience during the Victorian era. Some would diminish the importance of popular sentimental literature. However, G. K. Chesterton provides "A Defense of Detective Stories" in which he claims it is not true "that the populace prefer bad literature to good, and accept detective stories because they are bad literature" (Hayward 3). His argument is that popular literature can be good literature. In fact, he continues, "A good detective story would probably be even more popular than a bad one" (3). So if Green's international popularity to a contemporary late 1800's audience is not enough to merit her craft consideration, then surely Chesterton's sentiment is lost on deaf ears. Her novels have taken the brunt of criticism from poor character construction to being unable to have written the novel on her own. When she published *The Leavenworth Case,* one reporter stated that she must have had a man help her write it (Sussex 170). Her work challenged the notion women were incapable of writing great novels. Not only could a woman write an intricately written narrative, but now a woman could be considered the suspect of a murder. The British Library unearthed her work to bring her to light. Regardless if the reader regards *The Leavenworth Case* as detective fiction or sensation fiction, it matters not so long as she has her space in the figurative annals of important novels.

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Recebido para publicação em 19-08-14; aceito em 25-09-14