Lady Audley's Secret

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MARY ELIZABETH BRADDON

Mary Elizabeth Braddon was born in London to solicitor and writer Henry Braddon and his Irish wife, Fanny White. Her parents' marriage broke down due to Henry's infidelity and financial irresponsibility when Mary was only five years old. In 1857, Mary began acting in order to support herself and her mother. Three years later, she published her first novel and met publisher John Maxwell. She began an affair with the already-married Maxwell, whose wife lived in an asylum, and gave birth to their first child together in 1862. The same year, she experienced her first commercial success with *Lady Audley's Secret*. Throughout her life, Braddon produced novels at a prolific rate and founded her own literary magazine, *Belgravia*, dedicated to sensation fiction. She and Maxwell eventually married upon the death of his first wife in 1874. They had six children together. Braddon died in Richmond in 1915.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Lady Audley's Secret offers commentary on English society during the Victorian era, the time period of Queen Victoria's rule from 1837 to 1901. During the Victorian era, society expected women to be dedicated to the care of family and home. The majority of women were completely financially dependent upon their husbands and had few rights of their own. The wife and mother of a family was meant to create an environment of harmony and civility within her home and to remain largely out of the public sphere. The Victorian era also saw dramatic economic growth and the rise of the middle class in England. Shifting wealth caused many members of the upper class to fear ambitious, social-climbing members of the lower classes—an anxiety clearly reflected in *Lady Audley's Secret*.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Lady Audley's Secret is one of the most popular examples of sensation fiction, a genre of mid-19th century British literature that covered "sensational" subjects, such as crime, and explored Victorian era social anxieties. Critics credit Wilkie Collins and his novel, *The Woman in White*, with creating the genre. Like *Lady Audley's Secret*, *The Woman in White* portrays a character—here a young man—compelled to unravel a series of secrets related to marriage, family, and madness. *Lady Audley's Secret* also shares several thematic elements with *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, particularly in its focus on the crime of bigamy—of which Jane Eyre is an unsuspecting almost-victim and Lady Audley is a willing participant—as well as the Gothic element of doubles. Both novels also portray women expressing their agency within the restrictive gender roles of England in the mid-1800s. A year after publishing *Lady Audley's Secret*, Braddon published a follow-up novel, *Aurora Floyd*, which also concerns a woman living in a bigamous marriage while attempting to assert her agency within the confines of Victorian society.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Lady Audley's Secret
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** 1862
- **Literary Period:** Sensation Fiction
- **Genre:** Fiction, Sensation Novel
- **Setting:** England, mainly Essex
- **Climax:** Robert, having survived the Castle Inn fire, confronts Lady Audley about her crimes and she finally confesses
- **Antagonist:** Robert Audley, Lady Audley (depending on one's perspective)
- **Point of View:** third person

EXTRA CREDIT

An Abomination? *Lady Audley's Secret* was one of the most popular and successful novels of the 1800s, but the work was not universally loved. Many Victorian era cultural critics condemned Braddon for sensationalizing the crimes of bigamy and murder. One critic went as far as to call Braddon's writing, "one of the abominations of the age."

Literate Legacy. Two of Braddon's sons with John Maxwell also became novelists, W.B. Maxwell and Gerald Maxwell.

PLOT SUMMARY

The grand, historic Audley Court has fallen into disrepair. The stately Essex mansion, which contains secret passageways and a secluded grove, is home to Sir Michael Audley, a kind, wealthy old bachelor, and his will-full, eighteen-year-old daughter, Alicia.

Lucy Graham comes to the village near Audley Court to work as a governess for Mrs. Dawson. No one knows much about her past, but everyone in the neighborhood enjoys her charming company and beautiful appearance. Sir Michael soon falls in love with Lucy and begins to court her, assuming that, if she

returns his feelings, it will because of the purity of his love rather than his wealth and fortune. When he proposes to Lucy, he requests she disregard all financial considerations and think only of her feelings for him as a man. She says she cannot do so, because she will always be influenced by her impoverished upbringing. The couple agrees to marry anyway. Alice resents her new, young stepmother.

George Talboys returns to England after spending three and a half years abroad seeking his fortune in Australia. He wishes to reunite with his son and wife, whom he abandoned because he couldn't provide for them. Meanwhile, back at Audley Court, Phoebe Marks, the plain maidservant of Lady Audley, discusses the decadence of her lady with Luke Marks, Phoebe's cousin and fiancé. The couple snoops around Lady Audley's chambers and discovers a baby's shoe and lock of hair. Phoebe begins to form a blackmail scheme to get Luke money to start a public house.

Robert Audley is the lazy, indifferent nephew of Sir Michael. Though he is a barrister, Robert takes little interest in his profession. Upon running into George, an old friend from his school days, the latter tells Robert about his search for his wife, Helen. The two find a newspaper containing the announcement of her recent death. George is distraught, and the two men go to visit George's father-in-law, Lieutenant Maldon, who confirms that George's wife is indeed dead. Upon leaving, George makes Robert the legal guardian of his son, Little Georgey, who is staying with Maldon.

A year later, George still feels intense sorry for his wife. He and Robert go to visit Audley Court, but Lady Audley keeps coming up with excuses not to meet them. Eventally, Robert and George visit while Lady Audley and Sir Michael are away, responding to a telegram Lady Audley received from her dying former employer, Mrs. Vincent. In their absence, Alicia shows George and Robert a secret passageway into Lady Audley's private quarters, where they view a portrait of the lady. Afterwards, George seems agitated, but Robert assumes he's simply afraid of the raging storm outside. The next day, George disappears without a word to Robert. Robert goes to Audley Court and discovers that George had briefly been there but has not been seen since. Robert begins to worry for his friend.

Robert goes to Lieutenant Maldon to ask if he has seen George. Maldon says that George visited the night before but then left for Australia. Robert finds a half-burned telegram in the fire place, which appears to repeat the exact same information Maldon just told Robert. Upon traveling to Liverpool, however, Robert cannot find George's name on any of the recent ships' passenger lists. Growing suspicious, he begins to keep a list of all the mysterious facts surrounding George's disappearance, fearing that George never left England and may be dead.

Meanwhile, back at Audley Court, Lady Audley offers Phoebe and Luke Marks money so that they may get married and start a public house. Luke tells Lady Audley that she will give them much more, implying that he is now blackmailing her. He and Phoebe use their new money to buy an ugly, drafty building named the Castle Inn.

Hunting season arrives, and with it a group of bachelors, including Robert, come to Audley Court. Robert does not care for hunting and stays inside, chatting with Lady Audley about his suspicions concerning George's disappearance. Another bachelor, Sir Towers, proposes to Alicia, but she rejects him because she loves Robert. Lady Audley tells Sir Michael that Robert must leave their home because he pays an inappropriate amount of attention to his young aunt. Robert then takes a room at the Castle Inn, where Lady Audley comes to visit him and ask about his investigation into George's disappearance. Robert mentions that he wishes to study George's old letters. Soon after, Robert discovers later Lady Audley has left for London.

Robert returns to his home in London only to find all of George's letters, including those written to him by Helen, missing. Robert finds a few books that George left behind, one containing Helen's handwriting. When he sees the handwriting, he comes to horrible realization he doesn't utter. Robert visits Maldon and confronts him about the burnt telegram. Maldon weeps, looking so pitiful Robert doesn't question him further. Robert removes George's son from the home and places him in a boarding school.

Robert feels heavy-hearted about the dark matters he's investigating and makes a deal; he will only continue the investigation with the blessing of Mr. Harcourt Talboys, George's estranged father. Harcourt has an unwavering, unforgiving view of justice and disowned his son for marrying beneath the family's station. Robert fails to convince Harcourt to care about his son's disappearance and leaves the Talboys' mansion relieved his investigation is over.

As he leaves, Robert is confronted by Clara, George's sister. Clara begs Robert to avenge her brother's death. Her passion enhances her physical beauty, convincing Robert to continue his investigation. Soon after, Robert receives a letter for Alicia saying Sir Michael is sick and would like to see him. Upon returning to Audley Court, Robert questions Dr. Dawson about the history of Lady Audley, his former employee. Dawson says he knows nothing about her except that she came recommended by Mrs. Vincent.

Robert tracks down Mrs. Vincent, who tells him she knows little of Lucy Graham's backstory. She also says she was not, in fact, deathly ill previous year, nor did she send a telegram calling for Lucy. Her other employee, meanwhile, Miss Tonks is able to provide the exact date that Lucy came to their school. Miss Tonks also gives Robert access to Lucy's trunk, on which Robert finds one label, bearing the name of Lucy Graham, pasted upon another. He peels back the top label and with these clues, becomes convinced that George's wife and Sir Michael's wife are, in fact, the same person. Troubled by this revelation,

Robert visits the town Helen Talboys grew up in. There, he meets the Maldons' landlady, Mrs. Barkamb, who gives him letters Helen had written to her father. In these letters, Helen explains that she must abandon her old life and speaks of a "secret" motivation her father knows about.

Before returning to Audley Court Robert stops at a nearby church, where he runs into Clara. He tells her he thinks he knows who killed George but that he doesn't want to give her a name before he's absolutely certain. Robert then meets with Lady Audley and tells her all the evidence he has collected, without explicitly accusing her of murder. He says the woman who murdered George should flee the country, so that he will not have to reveal the awful truth. In response Lady Audley calls him mad and says she won't allow him to accuse her. Robert leaves and Lady Audley tries to convince Alicia and Sir Michael that Robert has gone mad.

That night, Lady Audley sits alone contemplating her appearance. She considers how she realized at a young age that she could use her beauty to get what she wanted. She contemplates Robert's accusations, and decides only death will stop him. Just then Phoebe Marks arrives to inform her that Robert is staying at the Castle Inn, and that unless Lady Audley pays the Marks' rent, Luke will tell Robert her secrets. Phoebe admits she wishes Luke would leave the public house, as he gets so drunk and careless she fears they are at risk of being burnt in their beds. Phoebe hands Lady Audley a letter from Robert stating that if Helen Talboys is alive, Robert will bring Mrs. Barkamb to identify her.

Lady Audley tells Phoebe to take her to the Castle Inn so that she can pay the landlord herself. When they arrive, Lady Audley says she feels faint and goes inside to get some water. While in there, Lady Audley double-locks Robert's room and then purposely sets a lit candle very close to some curtains. As the two women walk away from the inn, Phoebe sees the flames and accuses Lady Audley of starting the fire.

The next morning, Lady Audley chats casually with Sir Michael and Alicia and then says she feels sick and needs to lie down. After a deep sleep, she invites Alicia to go for a walk with her on the mansion's grounds. They run into Robert, who reveals that he did not sleep in his room in the inn the previous night and, being a light sleeper, woke up before the fire could engulf him. No one died in the fire, although Luke was severely injured. Having learned from the Markses that Lady Audley set the fire, Robert will no longer be merciful to her and will expose all her secrets.

Lady Audley tells Robert to go get Sir Michael because she's going to confess. She declares she's mad and that she killed George because he pushed her towards insanity. When Sir Michael comes in she confesses her life story, beginning with her discovery that her own mother was institutionalized for madness. She describes her marriage to George and how living in utter poverty drove her to madness. She then describes abandoning her child and her old life, marrying Sir Michael for status and wealth, and faking her own death using the body of the daughter of her father's housekeeper, Mrs. Plowson. Her confession devastates Sir Michael. Robert convinces Alicia to leave with Sir Michael, and then sends for a physician.

Dr. Musgrave arrives and determines that, while Lady Audley is not mad, she suffers from mania in times of stress and, as such, is dangerous. He gives Robert a letter that will admit Lady Audley to an asylum in Belgium under a false name. Before leaving, she becomes angry and tells him how she pushed George to his death in an old well on the grounds of Audley Court. Distraught at George's horrible fate, Robert returns to Essex to see Luke. Before dying from his burns, Luke tells Robert he found George alive right after Lady Audley's murder attempt. He took George to his house and healed him. George then left, saying he was going to sail to Australia. Robert asks Clara to marry him and go looking for George in Australia together. She accepts, but before they can leave, George returns to London. He was in New York, but returned because he missed his dear friend Robert.

Two years later, Robert has developed a successful career as a barrister. He lives with his wife Clara, their infant son, and George Talboys. Little Georgey often comes from school to visit them. Alicia has finally accepted Sir Towers' proposal, Sir Michael has moved, and Audley Court is empty. Lady Audley died of illness in the Belgium asylum. Thus, the story ends with everyone at peace.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Lady Audley / Lucy Graham / Helen Maldon Talboys – The titular character of the novel, Lady Audley is the wife of both George Talboysand Sir Michael, the daughter of Lieutenant Maldon, the stepmother of Alicia Audley, and the aunt by marriage of Robert Audley. With her blue eyes, rosy cheeks, and bouncing **golden curls**, she possesses a childlike beauty that she uses to manipulate and deceive those around her. Having grown up in poverty, Lady Audley is extremely concerned with elevating her social and financial status. The fact that her mother was institutionalized for madness has also haunted Lady Audley throughout her life. Selfish and scheming, she marries George Talboys because he comes from a rich family. When George later abandons her and their child, Georgey, she changes her name to Lucy Graham and begins posing as an unmarried governess until she ensnares an even wealthier husband in the form of Sir Michael. Lady Audley proves willing to go to extremes—including arson and attempted murder—to protect her many secrets. Robert exposes her crimes nevertheless, and she ultimately dies in an asylum. In her audacious social climbing, Lady Audley reflects

the fears and prejudices of the Victorian upper class. Despite her wickedness, Lady Audley also represents the impossibility of conforming to Victorian society's rigid, frequently contradicting expectations of women, and her story reveals the few avenues such women were afforded to control their own fates.

Robert Audley – Robert Audley is the nephew of Sir Michael, the cousin of Alicia Audley, the friend of George Talboys, and eventual husband of Clara Talboys. At the beginning of the novel, Robert embodies the distracted idleness of the upper class, taking no interest in his career as a barrister and instead spending his time reading French novels and smoking German pipes. He develops a purpose in life, however, when George goes missing. Believing his friend to have been murdered, Robert feels compelled to avenge George by solving his disappearance. His investigation leads him to Clara Talboys, whose passion encourages Robert when he wishes to abandon the increasingly dark investigation. Upon eventually discovering that George's wife, Helen, is in fact also his uncle Sir Michael's wife, Lady Audley, Robert attempts to spare his uncle public embarrassment by getting Lady Audley to flee before he must expose her. Though she refuses, this action reveals Robert to be considerate and merciful in his pursuit of justice. Robert is ultimately the one who commits Lady Audley to an asylum abroad. By the end of the novel Robert has matured from a lazy, passive young man into a husband and father, forged by his determination to help his friend. One could interpret Robert as the protagonist of the novel, given his dedication to uncovering the truth of Lady Audley's secrets. One could also view Robert as an antagonist, however, in that he is a member of the upper class who looks down upon the lower-class Lady Audley for her social climbing. He also at times expresses disdain for women and upholds patriarchal ideals by punishing Lady Audley for violating Victorian expectations of female behavior.

George Talboys – George Talboys is the friend of Robert Audley, the first husband of Lady Audley, and the brother of Clara Talboys. He comes from a wealthy family and was a dragoon (a mounted infantry man) in the British army before falling in love with and marrying the beautiful yet impoverished Helen Maldon (a.k.a. Lady Audley). As a result, George's strict father, Harcourt Talboys, disowns his son for marrying below his station. Without his father's wealth, George, Helen, and their infant son Georgey live in poverty. George decides his family would be better off without him and abandons his wife and son to go gold prospecting in Australia. At the beginning of the novel, George is returning to England after three and a half years abroad when he finds a newspaper announcement of his wife's recent death. George's subsequent, mysterious disappearance after visiting **Audley Court** motivates Robert to seek justice for his friend. At the end of the novel, it is revealed that, fearing discovery, Lady Audley had pushed her husband down a well; unbeknownst to her, George survived the fall. George can be viewed at once as a victim of Lady Audley's cruel manipulations and a patriarchal villain, whose abandonment of his wife and child is what forces Helen to remarry in order to escape a life of abject poverty.

Phoebe Marks – Phoebe Marks is Lady Audley's maidservant and the wife and cousin of Luke Marks. Described as very pale and plain, she is nevertheless similar to Lady Audley in appearance. Her lack of fine clothes, however, keeps her from being considered a great beauty like her lady. Phoebe was previously a servant in Mr. Dawson's household at the same time as Lady Audley. Phoebe is a willing participant in the blackmail of Lady Audley, though she later claims that Luke forced her to marry him and to threaten to reveal Lady Audley's secret identity. Phoebe represents the kind of ambitious member of the lower class whom the upper classes feared during the Victorian era, as she is willing to use her proximity to her lady to gain wealth through malicious tactics. Her physical similarity to Lady Audley further reveals the superficiality of Victorian society's perceptions of class, as the two women are nearly identical but for a few minor, material characteristics.

Luke Marks – Luke Marks is the husband and cousin of Phoebe Marks, who, along with his wife, attempts to blackmail Lady Audley. Luke uses information Phoebe gives him concerning Lady Audley's past to leverage Lady Audley for money in order to purchase and maintain his public house, the Castle Inn. Luke is described as brutal and ugly in both appearance and behavior. He selfishly desires increasing amounts money yet drinks away his funds and mismanages his public house. In order to stop the blackmailing—and simultaneously kill her other enemy, Robert Audley—Lady Audley sets fire to the Castle Inn. Luke is badly burned but does not die. Later, however, upon becoming deathly ill, Luke reveals to Robert that Lady Audley did not actually kill her first husband, George Talboys. George survived his fall down the well and, with Luke's help, fled the country.

Sir Michael Audley – Sir Michael is the second husband of Lady Audley, the father of Alicia Audley, and the uncle of Robert Audley. At the beginning of the novel, he is an old, wealthy widower who falls in love with the poor governess Lucy Graham. He tells Lucy only to marry him if she returns his feelings and not to consider his wealth and status in comparison to her own. The two marry, and all their neighbors in Essex consider their union to be very romantic. Sir Michael himself is happy and protective of his young and beautiful new wife. For a while, he and Lady Audley appear to be living the ideal of a Victorian marriage. This ideal is revealed to be an illusion, however, as Robert begins to unravel Lady Audley's secrets of bigamy and attempted murder. As Robert draws closer to discovering the truth, Lady Audley repeatedly uses Sir Michael's love for her to keep Robert away from **Audley Court**, and, failing that, finally tries to convince Sir Michael that Robert

is mad. Sir Michael listens to and sides with Lady Audley, showing how a woman can use her agency to influence men for her own self-interest. When Lady Audley finally confesses her crimes to Sir Michael, he is devastated and flees to continental Europe with his daughter in order to recover.

Alicia Audley – Alicia Audley is the daughter of Sir Michael, the stepdaughter of Lady Audley, and the cousin and admirer of Robert Audley. She is the opposite of Lady Audley in appearance, with dark, thick curls and a tan complexion. Though willful and spoiled, Alicia is generally well-liked by her family and those who meet her. She diverges from the gender norms of Victorian society in several ways. While family harmony and social decorum were goals of Victorian women, she refuses to get along with the stepmother she loathes. She also enjoys the typically masculine pursuits of riding and hunting. She rejects the proposal of Sir Towers even though the match would be socially advantageous because she desires her disinterested cousin, Robert. By the end of the novel, however, she has consented to marry Sir Towers, suggesting the limits of a woman's ability to assert her own agency within the gendered expectations of the Victorian era.

Clara Talboys – Clara Talboys is the sister of George Talboys who collaborates with and eventually marries Robert Audley. Clara resembles her brother and Robert describes her as handsome, her beauty made even greater by her passion. Robert first meets Clara when he visits her and George's father, Harcourt Talboys, in order to consult with him about George's disappearance. At first, Robert assumes Clara is as apathetic towards George as her father is. She then pursues Robert, however, and urges him to avenge her brother. Clara, like Lady Audley, shows how a woman can use her agency to exert influence over a man in order to get what she wants, as she drives Robert forward in his investigation when he wants to quit. Robert sees Clara as an example of how woman are often stronger and more hard-working than their male counterparts. The narrative rewards Clara's agency, as at the end of the story, thanks to her efforts towards revenge, she has made a loving and advantageous marriage to Robert and has had her brother returned to her. This contrasts with Lady Audley's fate of being committed to an asylum; Clara's happy ending thus suggests that Victorian society rewarded female agency provided it fit in with larger societal expectations for female behavior.

Lieutenant Maldon – Lieutenant Maldon is the father of Lady Audley, the father-in-law of George Talboys, and the grandfather and caretaker of Georgey. An alcoholic in constant need of money to support his lifestyle, Maldon uses his beautiful daughter to ensnare a wealthy son-in-law to lend him money. He borrows so much money from his daughter and her husband, however, that their already precarious financial situation turns into outright poverty. His dismal circumstances and addiction provide a realistic depiction of the harshness of Victorian-era poverty.

Mr. Harcourt Talboys – Mr. Harcourt Talboys is the father of George and Clara Talboys. Wealthy, judgmental, and prideful, Harcourt disowns George for marrying Lucy Maldon, a person of a lower class. He also refuses to help Robert Audley in his attempts to solve George's disappearance. Harcourt represents a cold, apathetic form of justice that contrasts with the merciful justice exemplified by Robert. He also represents the rigidity and cruelty of certain members of the upper class, who, in trying to keep members of the lower class out of their bloodlines, end up losing the family they were attempting to preserve.

Georgey – Georgey is the young son of Lady Audley and George Talboys, the grandson of Lieutenant Maldon, and the ward of Robert Audley. After both his parents abandon him, Georgey spends his early years growing up in poverty with his grandfather. Robert eventually removes Little Georgey from Maldon's care and places him in a boarding school. At the end of the story, Georgey lives in peace and happiness with his father, Robert Audley, and Clara Talboys.

Mrs. Vincent – Mrs. Vincent is Lady Audley's former employer. She provides the reference that earns Lady Audley (then going by the name Lucy Graham) the governess job with Mr. Dawson. Lady Audley later lies that Mrs. Vincent is deathly ill and has sent for Lady Audley, as an accuse to avoid a run-in with George at **Audley Court**. During his investigation, Robert finds Mrs. Vincent hiding out from her debts in London and confirms that she has never been deathly ill nor sent for her former employee. Mrs. Vincent remembers liking Lucy Graham very much and not questioning her about her background, given Lucy's beautiful and seemingly innocent appearance.

Miss Tonks – Miss Tonks is another employee of Mrs. Vincent. She reveals to Robert Audley the exact dates of Lady Audley's arrival at Mrs. Vincent's school, thus allowing Robert to connect the timelines of Helen Talboys and Lady Audley. Miss Tonks also provides Robert with Lady Audley's trunk, which contains labels bearing both the names of Helen Talboys and Lucy Graham—the most substantial piece of evidence in Robert's investigation thus far.

Mrs. Dawson – Mrs. Dawson is the wife of Mr. Dawson and former employer of Lucy Graham. She councils Lucy after Sir Michael's proposal, telling her that while this match would mean a huge boost in Lucy's status and wealth, she must reject Sir Michael if she does not love him back. Mrs. Dawson's comments underscore the difficult and contradicting expectations Victorian women lived under, given that they could and were often encouraged to marry for wealth and status yet had to act as though they were only marrying for love.

Sir Towers – Sir Towers is a wealthy bachelor who proposes to Alicia. In his love for the typically masculine pursuits of hunting and riding, he serves as a foil to Robert Audley, who enjoys the

more typically feminine pursuits of reading French novels and staying indoors to chat with his female relatives. Alicia initially rejects Sir Towers' proposal because she has feelings for her cousin Robert, but eventually accepts and marries Sir Towers.

Dr. Mosgrave – Dr. Mosgrave is the doctor Robert Audley calls to assess Lady Audley's sanity after she confesses all her crimes. Dr. Mosgrave determines that Lady Audley is not in fact mad, but that, in times of stress, her behavior makes her dangerous. He commits Lady Audley to an asylum under a false name.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mr. Dawson – Mr. Dawson is the surgeon who employs Lucy Graham as a governess for his children. He is the friend and neighbor of Sir Michael. Robert Audley questions him for details of Lucy's past, which Mr. Dawson knows little about.

Mrs. Maloney – Mrs. Maloney is Robert Audley's often incompetent housekeeper.

Mrs. Plowson – Mrs. Plowson is Lieutenant Maldon's housekeeper and the mother of Matilda Plowson.

Matilda Plowson – Matilda is the daughter of Mrs. Plowson. She bears a passing resemblance to Lady Audley. She dies of illness and is buried in Helen Talboys's grave.

Mrs. Barkamb – Mrs. Barkamb is the former landlady of Lieutenant Maldon and Helen Maldon (a.k.a. Lady Audley). She provides Robert Audley with the dates of Helen's departure from her old life as well as with letters Helen once wrote to Lieutenant Maldon.

Miss Morley – Miss Morley is a governess with whom George Talboys converses on the ship from Australia to England. They both have someone in England with whom they are anxious to meet, but Miss Morley is far more pessimistic than George is when predicting how her lover will welcome her.

Monsieur Val – Monsieur Val runs the asylum in Belgium to which Robert commits Lady Audley at the end of the novel.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

WOMEN AND POWER IN VICTORIAN ENGLAND

The Victorian ideal of the perfect woman was one who was pretty but modest, who made a socially advantageous marriage but was not ambitious, and who submitted to her husband in all matters. At the beginning of *Lady Audley's Secret*, Elizabeth Braddon's 19th century novel of romance, bigamy, and murder, Lady Audley appears to fit into this model perfectly. As her many secrets are revealed, however, it becomes clear that Lady Audley subverts and defies such restrictive gender expectations for her own self-interest. Braddon uses her female characters to highlight the conflicting demands placed on Victorian women, ultimately suggesting that achieving the Victorian ideal is impossible. Furthermore, the story reveals how women can manipulate rigid gender roles to obtain power in a world that routinely denies them agency.

One of the most obvious contradictions Victorian women faced was on the marriage market, since they could (and were often encouraged to) use marriage to advance their status yet were expected to give the outward appearance of marrying for love. This dilemma is what initially shatters Lady Audley's image as an ideal Victorian woman. Posing as the poor governess Lucy Graham, she ensnares the rich and respected Sir Michael, whose proposal she accepts solely for his fortune despite the fact that he urges her to only marry him if she reciprocates his love. Mrs. Dawson, Lucy's employer, further emphasizes the contradicting messages of marrying for love and marrying for status when counseling Lucy about Sir Michael. She specifically comments on his "splendid income" and the fact that Lucy's "position would be very high" through such a marriage,

yet in the same breath tells Lucy she must be "entirely guided by [her] own feelings." This is why, when Lucy does marry Sir Michael and becomes Lady Audley, she signals (disingenuously) to those around her that she returns his love. Indeed, the couple's neighbors later remark how "romantic" the pair is. Nevertheless, Lady Audley tells Sir Michael that she cannot separate her desire for him from his wealth, and when she accepts the proposal, she remarks to herself how she is now free from the dependence and drudgery of poverty. In this way Braddon presents association with men as an invaluable means to power.

This power that women gain through marriage is important, since women in Lady Audley's world were denied genuine power of their own. For example, Lady Audley's abandonment by her first husband, George Talboys, leaves her penniless in an era when women depended upon men for financial survival. Lady Audley thus relies on her traditionally feminine attributes—her beauty and charm—to find a new husband and obtain the financial security she needs. This leveraging of traditional femininity to gain agency is not limited to Lady Audley, either: the beautiful Clara Talboys, George's sister, similarly uses her influence over men to get what she wants—namely, revenge for the alleged murder of her brother. She compels Robert Audley—George's friend and Sir Michael's nephew, who, not incidentally, has fallen in love with Clara—to continue his investigation when he wants to give up.

Of course, while both Lady Audley and Clara manipulate

traditional femininity to gain power over men, they meet very different fates. At the end of the novel, Lady Audley dies in an asylum while Clara is happily married and has her brother back. This can be read as a commentary on the moral value society has assigned to their behavior. Clara's manipulations are never brazen enough to fully undermine others' image of her as an ideal Victorian woman. By contrast, Lady Audley's real transgression, it seems, is the blatancy with which she rejects the role of a submissive woman and the lengths to which she goes to in order to shape her destiny; when George and then Robert threaten to expose her crimes, she attempts to murder the former by pushing him down a well and then sets a fire to try to kill the latter. In displaying such obvious ambition, greed, and selfishness, Lady Audley defies stereotypical femininity to the point that those around her deem her evil. Despite her misdeeds, however, Lady Audley ultimately serves as a critique of strict Victorian gender roles and the ways in which they circumscribe women's opportunities and choices. Braddon's titular anti-heroine ultimately exemplifies the extremes to which one may go when denied control over her own life.

APPEARANCES AND DECEPTION

The fact that Lady Audley uses her distinctly feminine appearance to fool the community surrounding **Audley Court** is one of many elements of deception in *Lady Audley's Secret*. Braddon uses such rampant deception to emphasize the foolishness of trusting in appearances alone. In highlighting how drastically most characters misjudge Lady Audley, the novel suggests the specific danger of underestimating one's capacity for treachery based on beauty.

The most obvious deception in the novel is the fact that Lady Audley is actually Helen Talboys—the supposedly dead wife of George Talboys. When George initially leaves Helen for Australia, a desperate Helen assumes a new identity in the hopes of creating a new life. Upon learning that George will be returning home, she finds a near-death young woman who resembles her, Matilda Plowson, and presents this woman as herself; upon Matilda's death, Helen is able to shed her old identity and become the unattached Lucy Graham. This initial deception leads to many others, from the minor (tricking Sir Michael into leaving Audley Court when George, who would recognize Lady Audley, visits), to the extreme (attempting to kill George and then covering up the alleged murder). These ruses work specifically because those around Lady Audley readily accept her stories at face value. They are quick to believe that Helen's body double is Helen herself, fail to raise questions about Lucy Graham's background until the end of the book (at which point there is more than enough evidence to prove that she is not who she says she is), and, above all, conflate Lady Audley's childlike beauty with goodness, morality, and innocence.

Indeed, nearly every character in the novel remarks on Lady Audley's beauty, and her rosy cheeks, blue eyes, and bouncy **golden curls** are said to give her a childlike appearance. The narrative also describes her mannerisms as echoing those of a little girl. When Lady Audley refuses to host Robert and George Talboys at Audley Court, for example, her stepdaughter, Alicia Audley, accuses her stepmother of being immature and spoiled. Ironically, Alicia's assumption that Lady Audley is immature blinds her to a more sinister truth: Lady Audley doesn't want George to visit because he is her first husband, and him seeing her would expose her bigamy. In this, Alicia is not alone. Multiple characters assume Lady Audley's appearance must reflect an innocent and pleasant nature. Even the well-respected, well-educated Sir Michael defends his wife against his nephew Robert's accusations of murder, because he cannot believe that such a physically lovely person could commit such a morally ugly act. Only when Robert—who at first is infatuated with his young aunt—investigates beyond superficial pretenses does he discover the truth. Upon acquiring a trunk that belonged to Lady Audley when she was a governess, he removes the label bearing the name "Lucy Graham" to find another reading "Helen Talboys"—literally peeling back the surface to reveal Lady Audley's trickery.

Through Lady Audley's seemingly innocent appearance, Braddon shows that one cannot trust what they see at first glance. Beauty, in fact, proves the perfect vessel to disguise ugly secrets, and only those who question the evidence of their eyes will find the truth.

POVERTY AND WEALTH

Lady Audley's brazen social climbing and pursuit of wealth reflect a common anxiety among the upper class during the Victorian era. As the economy grew and the English middle class arose, members of the upper class feared the encroachment of ambitious lower class individuals on their way of life. Braddon argues that economic stratification harms everyone, however, as characters like Lady Audley go to desperate lengths to escape poverty while the wealth of men like Harcourt Talboys and Robert Audley nearly leads to their own undoing. Both extreme wealth and poverty engender moral decay in the novel, allowing Braddon to suggest the danger of both covetousness and decadence.

Braddon details the devastating realities of poverty to underscore why her lower-class characters are willing to commit crimes in order to elevate their social status. When Lady Audley explains her life's motivations, for example, she specifically describes feeling the "bitterness of poverty" from a young age. Her mother was forced to live in an asylum because Lady Audley's father had to work for a living and could not take care of a madwoman. As a result, Lady Audley was left with a cruel foster mother. As an adult, she continues to feel humiliation at barely being able to scrape by, especially after

her first husband, George, abandons her. She admits to marrying Sir Michael, even though she is already married to George, in order to lift herself out of the drudgery of poverty. She later attempts to murder George, Luke, and Robert in a desperate bid to keep her secret of bigamy safe and preserve her newfound wealth. Without excusing the horror of her actions, Braddon emphasizes the demoralizing affects that poverty has had upon Lady Audley in order to help the reader understand why she goes to such extremes to gain and maintain wealth.

Braddon turns to the characters of Harcourt Talboys and Robert Audley to reveal the ways in which the upper class also suffers from Victorian England's rigid class structure. Harcourt is especially militant in his adherence to this structure, and his strictness about class undergirds his moral failings as a father. So concerned is he with keeping members of the lower class out of his family that he disowns his only son, George, simply for marrying the poor Lucy Graham. Harcourt ironically fractures the very family he was attempting to protect; George's resultant poverty causes him to abandon his wife, setting in motion a chain of events that eventually leads to George's disappearance and presumed death. Robert's privilege is associated with moral decay as well. At the beginning of the novel, he doesn't care for his profession as a barrister and instead spends all his time on his hobbies of smoking and reading novels. His idleness in life translates to carelessness towards others, as he is too relaxed and easygoing to appreciate his cousin Alicia's love for him or to take note of Alicia's conflict with her stepmother Lady Audley.

Only when Robert turns away from the luxuries of his upper class life is he able to discover a true sense of purpose. Once George disappears, Robert finds he can no longer enjoy the hobbies he once loved and can only focus on gaining justice for his friend. At the end of the novel, he is rewarded for his hard work with a wife and family. He lives a much more modest life in a rural cottage and has earned respect in his career. By contrast, Lady Audley is committed to an asylum and dies, suggesting that, however broadly understandable, the relentless pursuit of wealth ultimately leads to suffering. Instead, Braddon seems to present an argument for the moral sanctity of the middle class, suggesting through Robert that one must reject excessive luxury and dedicate themselves to more just pursuits.

MADNESS

Because those living during the Victorian era did not fully understand mental illness, its symptoms were often classified as incurable, unmanageable madness stemming from moral deviancy and an inability to conform to society. With no stringent criteria for diagnosing "madness," baseless accusations could lead to institutionalization with relative ease. Such mis-categorizations cause lasting negative effects for the characters of *Lady Audley's Secret*, even as accusations of madness, made by both Robert and Lady Audley, offer short-term solutions to immediate problems. Lady Audley's confession of her own madness, for example, helps her shift the blame of her criminal actions yet also leads to the loss of her freedom. Braddon ultimately suggests that Victorian society's vague conception of madness could be transformed into a both a defense and a weapon, a label that exculpates characters from blame at the cost of being ostracized from society.

As Robert's investigation leads him closer and closer to exposing Lady Audley's secrets, both characters accuse the other of madness. Lady Audley attempts to convince Sir Michael that his nephew is insane so that no one will believe Robert when he reveals her crimes. While this would indeed be a partial solution to Lady Audley's fear of exposure, it would not absolve her of guilt nor address the fact that others, such as Luke and
Phoebe Marks, also know about her bigamy. Relying on an accusation of madness, then, proves a short-sighted and ill-fated idea.

Robert also accuses Lady Audley of madness, though it is unclear whether he believes this to be true or simply an easy means to avoid putting Sir Michael through a lengthy public criminal trial. Indeed, the question of whether Lady Audley actually *is* mad hangs over the end of the novel. Madness was believed to be hereditary at the time, and Lady Audley's mother went mad after childbirth. The secret of her mother's disappearance haunted Lady Audley throughout her childhood, and when she feels compelled to abandon her old life and assume a new identity, she claims to have experienced the first signs of her mother's affliction. When Robert confronts Lady Audley about her indiscretions, she responds by yelling, "You have conquered – A MADWOMAN," continuing, "I killed [George] because I AM MAD!" Lady Audley immediately brings up the "madwoman" label as a defense. Of course, to place the blame of her choice solely on an inherited madness disregards her other motivations, such as her selfishness and vanity or her desire to improve her social standing. Her confession of madness thus may simply be a way for her to avoid accepting responsibility for her crimes of bigamy, arson, and attempted murder.

Lady Audley's claims to madness become all the more dubious when Robert sends for Dr. Mosgrave to examine her. The doctor concludes, that, although she has shown dangerous behavior, Lady Audley is not in fact "mad" because she displays cunning that a truly mad person would not. Nevertheless, Lady Audley further dismisses responsibility by describing her "situational madness," stating that her insanity does not drive her to evil as long as she is happy. She blames George for "goading" her to the point that her mind "lost its balance." She then accuses Robert of similarly pushing her over the edge with

his investigation. Lady Audley believes that other people, specifically George and Robert, are to blame for her actions because they aggravate her mental state. This again would point to "madness" as a solution to immediate problems, albeit a foolish one: because the doctor deems Lady Audley dangerous to society, Robert has her committed to an asylum. As such, all Lady Audley's efforts to keep her secrets and shift her responsibility result in the opposite of her intentions: she loses her freedom rather than preserves it.

At the end of the story, the reader cannot be quite sure whether or not Lady Audley really is mad. Robert has her diagnosed as part of his pursuit of the truth, but this action also conveniently pushes Lady Audley out of his way. Lady Audley could also be claiming hereditary madness in order to excuse her own crimes. Whatever the reality may be, the accusation leads to Lady Audley's expulsion from Victorian society and underscores the drastic impact that suspicions of madness can have on an individual's life.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

AUDLEY COURT

Audley Court represents both the deterioration of the upper class and of the vulnerable Victorian ideal of the family home. Though the mansion is historic and stately, it shows clear signs of wear through its ruined walls and crumbling gables. The mansion's decaying exterior reflects the moral decay of the upper class, as men like Robert Audley fill their time with idle hobbies and lower-class individuals like Lady Audley infiltrate their ranks. During the Victorian era, economic boom and the rise of the middle class within England led many members of the upper class to fear that social climbers would lead to the destruction of their privileged way of life—a fear that proves apt as Lady Audley tears through Audley Court. At the beginning of the novel, however, when the Audleys appear to live in domestic bliss, the mansion also represents the Victorian ideal of home. Victorian England celebrated the home as a place of safety and harmony for the family, and Audley Court's physical and figurative destruction thus represents of the dissolution of this ideal. Braddon chips away at the perception of the home as a safe and loving space by setting many of the novels horrible events in Audley Court. It is where Lady Audley and her stepdaughter Alicia refuse to get along as family, for example, effectively estranging Alicia from Sir Michael. Lady Audley attempts to murder George Talboys on the Court's grounds. She also later plots to kill Robert and makes her final confession in Audley Court, forever shattering Sir Michael's vision of his happy, domestic life. At the end of the novel, Audley Court is empty, a relic of a time past, foreshadowing the end of both the upper class and the concept of the perfect family home.

LADY AUDLEY'S GOLDEN CURLS

Lady Audley's golden curls represent the deceptive nature of appearances. Characters such as Sir Michael and Robert Audley interpret Lady Audley's bouncy curls as evidence of her innocent, childlike nature. Braddon often describes Lady Audley's hair as looking like a halo, further underscoring the notion of her looks as reflective of her supposedly angelic spirit. In reality, Lady Audley uses the beautiful and childlike elements of her appearance, like her curls, to make socially advantageous yet doomed marriages with both George Talboys and Sir Michael. As Robert reveals the secrets of Lady Audley's past, the reader sees how her beautiful curls hide the sinister, scheming mind underneath. In fact, as the plot reveals more details about Lady Audley's deceptions, Braddon even describes Lady Audley's hair, once deemed a halo, as looking like fire—a comparison the evokes images of rage and hell, and which suggests how much the perception of Lady Audley's appearance has changed with the revelation of her sins.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Oxford University Press edition of *Lady Audley's Secret* published in 1987.

Volume 1, Chapter 1 Quotes

"To the right there were the kitchen gardens, the fish-pond, and an orchard bordered by a dry moat, and a broken ruin of a wall, in some places thicker than it was high, and everywhere overgrown with trailing ivy...to the left there was a broad graveled walk...and shadowed on one side by goodly oaks, which shut out the flat landscape, and circled in the house and gardens with a darkening shelter.

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

This description of Audley Court appears on the first page of the first chapter of the novel. The portrayal of this upper-

class mansion sets the scene for most of the major events of the novel, and also creates a mood of mystery. Braddon's description of the "broken ruin of a wall" and the overgrown shrubbery reflect the moral decay present within the house, as the conniving Lady Audley now lives within. Audley Court also represents the upper class, which is grand and historic, but the "dry moat" and broken wall suggest the vulnerability of the upper class as lower-class social climbers infiltrate their ranks. The oaks surrounding "the house and gardens with a darkening shelter" establish the gothic elements of the novel, creating an atmosphere of shadow and isolation, and hinting at the secrets that lie within the mansion.

"You know that nobody asks you to marry Sir Michael unless you wish. Of course it would be a magnificent match; he has a splendid income, and is one of the most generous of men. Your position would be very high, and you would be enabled to do a great deal of good; but, as I said before, you must be entirely guided by your own feelings."

Related Characters: Mrs. Dawson (speaker), Sir Michael Audley, Lady Audley / Lucy Graham / Helen Maldon Talboys

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Dawson advises her employee, Lucy Graham, after Sir Michael begins courting the young governess. By first describing what a "magnificent match" Sir Michael would be due to his wealth in comparison to Lucy's poverty, and then telling Lucy to disregard all those advantages, Mrs. Dawson reveals the contradictions of being a marriageable woman in Victorian England. During the Victorian era, women could and were often encouraged to make marriages that advanced their social and financial statuses, but they were not supposed to appear at all greedy or ambitious, so they must at least appear to marry for love and expectation of future harmony. Also, Mrs. Dawson, as an upper-class woman, may not fully appreciate that marriage is one of the only ways for a lower-class woman such as Lucy to raise herself out of poverty. Ironically, Lucy hears this advice and still marries Sir Michael for his money.

Volume 1, Chapter 4 Quotes

Robert Audley was supposed to be a barrister…He was a handsome, lazy, care-for-nothing fellow, of about seven-and-twenty…Sometimes, when the weather was very hot, and he had exhausted himself with the exertion of smoking his German pipe and reading French novels, he would stroll into the Temple Gardens.

Related Characters: Robert Audley

Related Themes:

Page Number: 32-33

Explanation and Analysis

The novel introduces Robert with this description of his privileged idleness. His attitude reflects the leisurely habits of the upper class during the Victorian era. Because of his station, he does not have to work for a living and can spend all his time enjoying exotic hobbies like his German pipe and French novels. Braddon establishes Robert's purposeless, careless life so that the plot can challenge and transform his character after he feels compelled to investigate his friend's disappearance. This characterization also establishes a contrast between him and his future enemy, Lady Audley, who had to work hard in order to survive, before she married Sir Michael.

Volume 1, Chapter 7 Quotes

Lucy was better loved and more admired than the baronet's daughter [Alicia]. That very childness had a charm which few could resist. The innocence and candour of an infant beamed in Lady Audley's fair face, and shone out of her large and liquid blue eyes. The rosy lips, the delicate nose, the profusion of fair ringlets, all contributed to preserve to her beauty the character of extreme youth and freshness.

Related Characters: Lady Audley / Lucy Graham / Helen Maldon Talboys , Alicia Audley

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

This quote establishes the tension between Lady Audley and her stepdaughter Alicia, and details Lady Audley's

elevated position in the neighborhood. This quote also subtly describes an upheaval in the class structure, as the community admires the low-born woman, Lady Audley, over the high-born woman, Alicia. Lady Audley's traits, specifically her fair complexion, blonde hair, blue eyes, and rosy lips, fit the ideal standard for a Victorian woman. The description of Lady Audley shows how in this society, one's appearance was often connected to their personality, since the community believes Lady Audley's childlike looks mean she possesses a youthful, innocent heart. This assumption will prove ironic as the plot reveals Lady Audley's sinister nature. In fact, the reader will later learn that Lady Audley specifically uses her beauty to fool others into adoring her.

> We hear every day of murders committed in the country. Brutal and treacherous murders; slow, protracted agonies from poisons administered by some kindred hand; sudden and violent deaths by cruel blows, inflicted with a stake cut from some spreading oak, whose very shadow promised—peace…No crime has ever been committed in the worst rookeries about Seven Dials that has not been also done in the face of that sweet rustic calm which still, in spite of all, we look on with a tender, half-morning yearning, and associate with—peace.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator reminds the reader of the deceptive danger of the countryside just as Robert and George are enjoying the rustic setting near Audley Court. This insertion of first-person narration reflects Braddon's style, where she often adds personal observations in order to give the reader more context or further explain a setting or character. The description of murder in the countryside adds to the mysterious and gothic tone of the piece. Violence happening in peaceful situations also contributes to the theme of deceptive appearances. Like Lady Audley, the beautiful, innocent appearance of the countryside can hide the violent nature underneath. The descriptions of rural murder also foreshadow Lady Audley's attempted murder of George later in the plot.

> "Do you know, Phoebe, I have heard some people say you and I are alike?"

"I have heard them say so too, my lady…but they must be very stupid to say it, for your ladyship is a beauty, and I'm a poor plain creature."

"Not at all, Phoebe…you are like me…it is only colour that you want. My hair is pale yellow shot with gold, yours is drab…Why, with a bottle of hair dye, such as we see advertised in the papers, and a pot of rouge, you'd be as good-looking as I any day, Phoebe."

Related Characters: Phoebe Marks, Lady Audley / Lucy Graham / Helen Maldon Talboys

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 54-55

Explanation and Analysis

Lady Audley discusses similarities in the appearances of her and Phoebe, her maidservant and confidant. The similarities between them expose the superficiality of class, as the only differences between the lady and the servant could be easily overcome with the material goods of hair dye and rouge. This quote is also indicative of Braddon's use of irony, as Lady Audley doesn't yet know that she and Phoebe are similar in personality as well as appearance, as Phoebe will later reveal herself to be a schemer, just like Lady Audley, while the reader does know of Phoebe's plans to blackmail Lady Audley.

Volume 1, Chapter 8 Quotes

> No one but a pre-Raphaelite would have painted, hair by hair, those feathery masses of ringlets with every glimmer of gold, and every shadow of pale brown. No one but a pre-Raphaelite would have so exaggerated every attribute of that delicate face as to give a lurid lightness to the blonde complexion and a stranger, sinister light to the deep blue eyes. No one but a pre-Raphaelite could have given to that pretty pouting mouth the hard and almost wicked look it had in the portrait.

Related Characters: Lady Audley / Lucy Graham / Helen Maldon Talboys

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

While Lady Audley and Sir Michael are away, Alicia sneaks Robert and George into Lady Audley's chambers so they can view the lady's portrait. This scene is a pivotal point in the plot, because when George looks upon the portrait he realizes that Lady Audley is his supposedly dead wife, Helen Talboys. Notably, the artist interprets the very aspects that everyone else seems to adore about Lady Audley—her blue eyes, her blonde hair, her "pretty pouting mouth"—as "lurid" and sinister. The artist can see through the falsehood of Lady Audley's appearance to her wicked personality underneath, just as another artist (Braddon) will reveal Lady Audley's scheming nature by depicting her crimes throughout the plot.

Volume 1, Chapter 15 Quotes

❝ "How charmingly she sits her horse! What a pretty figure, too, and a fine, candid, brown, rosy face; but to fly at a fellow like that, without the least provocation! That's the consequence of letting a girl follow the hounds…If ever I marry, and have daughters…they shall never go beyond the gates till they are marriageable, when I will take them straight across Fleet Street to St Dunstan's Church, and deliver them into the hands of their husbands."

Related Characters: Robert Audley (speaker), Alicia Audley

Related Themes:

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

Robert makes this statement after his cousin Alicia berates him for his careless nature and then runs off with the hunting party at Audley Court. Here, Robert's sentiments reflect the traditional expectations of women during the Victorian era, as he states that women should remain within the home and should always be submissive to men. Robert also shows his carelessness towards others here, because if he had been paying attention to Alicia's romantic advances towards him, he would realize that she did not "fly at a fellow like that, without the least provocation," but instead had a reason for her annoyance with him. His opinions of women and their relationship to men will change once he meets Clara Talboys and appreciates her criticism of him, but for now, his views align with the dominate patriarchy of his time and place.

❝ "Lady Audley," answered the young man gravely. "I have never practiced as a barrister…I have shrunk from those responsibilities and duties, as I have from all the fatigues of this troublesome life: but we are sometimes forced in the very position we have most avoided, and I have found myself lately compelled to think of these things. Lady Audley, did you ever study the theory of circumstantial evidence?"

Related Characters: Robert Audley (speaker), Lady Audley / Lucy Graham / Helen Maldon Talboys

Related Themes:

Page Number: 106-107

Explanation and Analysis

Robert says this to Lady Audley as he lounges inside Audley Court with her during the hunting season. He suspects from the evidence he's gathered that something horrible has happened to George, but he hasn't yet begun to implicate Lady Audley in George's fate. This quote shows his development as a character. Where before he didn't care at all about his career as a barrister (a lawyer, essentially), he now feels compelled to investigate and resolve George's case. At the beginning of the novel, he used his upper-class privileges to avoid all responsibilities and troubles, but now he has taken up the serious subject of a murder investigation. Typical to Braddon's ironic style, Robert doesn't realize he is speaking to the murderess herself. His mention of "the theory of circumstantial evidence" also references the similarities the piece shares with the genre of the detective novel.

Volume 2, Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ [Harcourt Talboys] was like his own square-built, northern-fronted, shelterless house. There were no shady nooks in his character into which one could creep for shelter from his hard daylight…with him right was right and wrong was wrong…He had cast off his only son because his only son had disobeyed him, and he was ready to cast off his only daughter at five minutes' notice for the same reason.

Related Characters: Clara Talboys, George Talboys, Mr. Harcourt Talboys

Related Themes:

Page Number: 156

Explanation and Analysis

This description of Harcourt Talboys, George's father, comes when Robert arrives at the Talboyses' home in an attempt to convince Harcourt to care about George's case. Throughout the novel, characters' homes often reflect their personalities, and the rigidity of Harcourt's home represents the rigidity of Harcourt's personality. He represents one of the moral weaknesses of the upper class, because he is so intent on keeping lower class individuals out of his family that he disowns and destroys the very family he is trying to preserve. His black-and-white idea of justice stands in contrast to Robert's practices based in mercy and care for his friend. Harcourt's strictness also creates more sympathy for George, and thus encourages the reader to invest in both justice and mercy for his case.

Volume 2, Chapter 6 Quotes

"What a wonderful solution to life's enigma there is in the petticoat government! A man might lie in the sunshine and eat lotuses…if his wife would let him! But she won't, bless her impulsive heart and active mind! She knows better than that…She drags her husband on to the woolsack, or pushes him into Parliament."

Related Characters: Robert Audley (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 177

Explanation and Analysis

Robert muses on the influence women have over men after Clara influences him to persist in seeking justice for George. In contrast to the traditionally patriarchal expectations of Victorian England, which dictated women be submissive to men and remain outside of the public sphere, Robert argues that not only *should* women influence men, but they already *do*. His own character has changed, since previously he spent most of his time relaxing, but now he seems almost delighted to be compelled toward hard work. This supports the book's idea that when a beautiful, passionate woman like Clara is moral, she can influence a man for his own good and the good of society as a whole. This stands in contrast to the selfish, harmful influence Lady Audley exerts over Sir Michael.

"I hate women…They're bold, brazen, abominable creatures, invented for the annoyance and destruction of their superiors. Look at this business of poor George's! It's all woman's work from one end to the other. He marries a woman, and his father casts him off, penniless and professionless. He hears of the woman's death and he breaks his heart…He goes to a woman's house and he is never seen alive again."

Related Characters: Robert Audley (speaker), Lady Audley / Lucy Graham / Helen Maldon Talboys , George Talboys

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 178

Explanation and Analysis

Robert says this right after he muses on how women are the stronger sex who use their agency to influence men. Though this comment in itself might seem extremely misogynistic, Robert is also reflecting a common suspicion toward powerful women during the Victorian era, based on the prejudiced assumption that women were less moral than men. This quote shows Robert's growing suspicion that the women (or woman) in George's life have used their agency for evil. Robert's perspective is biased towards men, however, since he blames George's *wife* for George being cut off from his family, when George's father is the one who actually made that decision, and Helen surely cannot be to blame for her own (presumed) death by illness. Even after Robert admits that women are the stronger sex, he continues to uphold the patriarchal values that women like Lady Audley suffer under.

Volume 2, Chapter 7 Quotes

Lucy Audley looked up from her occupation amongst the fragile china cups, and watched Robert rather anxiously, as he walked softly to his uncle's room, and back again to the boudoir. She looked very pretty and innocent, seated behind the graceful group of delicate opal china and glittering silver. Surely a pretty woman never looks prettier than when making tea. The most feminine and most domestic of all occupations imparts a magic harmony to her every movement, a witchery to her every glance.

Related Characters: Robert Audley, Lady Audley / Lucy Graham / Helen Maldon Talboys

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

Robert observes Lady Audley pouring tea after he visits the sick Sir Michael. At this point in the plot, he suspects Lady Audley's involvement in George's disappearance. Despite his suspicions regarding the crime, he acknowledges that Lady Audley looks beautiful and innocent when she engages in a typically feminine activity. This shows how Lady Audley uses the gendered expectations of society to hide her secrets. A Victorian reader would recognize the art of making tea as typically feminine, domestic, and English, and perhaps take comfort in such a familiar display. This makes Lady Audley's secrets and crimes all the more deceptive. This act also serves as a seemingly perfect vignette of upper class life, showing the superficiality of the Victorian ideal of the aristocratic home.

Volume 2, Chapter 9 Quotes

"I am weary of my life here, and wish, if I can, to find a new one. I go out into the world, dissevered from every link which binds me to the hateful past, to seek another home and another fortune. Forgive me if I have been fretful, capricious, changeable. You should forgive me, for you know *why* I have been so. You know the *secret* which is the key to my life."

Related Characters: Lady Audley / Lucy Graham / Helen Maldon Talboys (speaker), Lieutenant Maldon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 213

Explanation and Analysis

Helen Talboys writes this in a letter to her father, a letter that Mrs. Barkamb (Helen's former landlady) gives to Robert. This letter explains the motivations of Helen, aka Lady Audley, for abandoning her former life and then committing bigamy by marrying a man while still being married to another. Braddon shows a realistic depiction of how "weary" living in constant poverty can make a person, thus revealing the circumstances that led to Helen's abandonment of her old life and even her child. This letter also foreshadows Lady Audley's future confession of her supposed madness, the "secret" to which she refers to. Lady Audley uses her mother's madness, which she believes she has inherited, as an excuse for her selfish and greedy crimes.

In terms of the plot, this letter is crucial, as from it not only does Robert learn about Lady Audley's past and get exact dates for the timeline of her life, but he also has another definitive example of her handwriting, which he can use to compare Helen Talboys' hand to Lady Audley's.

Volume 2, Chapter 11 Quotes

"A conspiracy concocted by an artful woman, who had speculated upon the chances of her husband's death, and had secured a splendid position at the risk of committing a crime…but a foolish woman, who looked at life as a game of chance, in which the best player was likely to hold the winning cards, forgetting that there is a Providence about the pitiful speculators, and that wicked secrets are never permitted to remain long hidden."

Related Characters: Robert Audley (speaker), George Talboys, Lady Audley / Lucy Graham / Helen Maldon Talboys

Related Themes:

Page Number: 228-229

Explanation and Analysis

Robert says this to Lady Audley as they walk on the lime-walk, after he discovers circumstantial evidence linking Lady Audley to George's first wife, Helen Talboys. Robert reveals his findings without explicitly accusing Lady Audley, because he has previously stated that he hopes Lady Audley will run away before he has to expose her. Robert's repeated emphasis on the villain being a "woman" highlights his assumptions about women being able to use their agency to commit wicked deeds against men. He also shows his faith in the power of justice to uncover deception in his references to "Providence." The plot later reveals that these accusations are true, but at this moment, Robert only succeeds in threatening Lady Audley to the point where she begins to plot his destruction.

"Mr. Audley may be as you say, merely eccentric; but he has talked to me this evening in a manner that has filled me with absolute terror, and I believe that he is going mad. I shall speak very seriously to Sir Michael this very night…I shall only put him on his guard, my dear Alicia."

"But he'll never believe you," said Miss Audley, "He will laugh at such an idea."

"No, Alicia; he will believe anything that I tell him."

Related Characters: Alicia Audley, Lady Audley / Lucy Graham / Helen Maldon Talboys (speaker), Sir Michael Audley, Robert Audley

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 238

Explanation and Analysis

After Robert Audley implies that Lady Audley first married and then murdered George Talboys, Lady Audley begins to plot to convince Alicia and, most importantly, Sir Michael that Robert is mad. She uses accusations of madness to discredit a troublesome family member, thus showing how one can use the Victorian era's misunderstandings about mental health for dishonest means. This also shows Lady Audley's moral depravity, as she doesn't care if she must send a sane man to an asylum in order to protect her own secrets. She also shows how a woman can use her limited agency to influence a man for wicked means, as Sir Michael, bewitched by her charm, will (for now) believe whatever she says.

Volume 2, Chapter 13 Quotes

❝ Perhaps in that retrospective reverie she recalled the early time in which she had first looked in the glass and discovered that she was beautiful: that fatal early time in which she had first begun to look upon her loveliness as a right divine…Did she remember the day in which that fairy dower of beauty had first taught her to be selfish and cruel?

Related Characters: Lady Audley / Lucy Graham / Helen Maldon Talboys

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 252

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator speculates on Lady Audley's thought process as she contemplates her appearance, after Robert implies that he will expose her secrets if she doesn't run away. This quote provides vital insight into Lady Audley's development, showing how she first learned that she could use her appearance to achieve her goals, just as she has used her appearance to make two advantageous marriages. This disproves other characters' previous assumptions that her childlike beauty means she innocent, because, in fact, her beauty may be what caused her to become wicked in the first place, once she learned the kind of value and preconceptions society attached to an appearance like hers. It's also notable that the narrator only *questions* what Lady Audley must be thinking—instead of stating her thoughts directly, as is the case with most of the other characters—thus keeping her at a distance from the reader, and allowing her to hold onto her secrets.

Volume 3, Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ "I killed him because I AM MAD! because my intellect is a little way upon the wrong side of that narrow boundary-line between sanity and insanity; because when George Talboys goaded me, as you have goaded me; and reproached me, and threatened me; my mind, never properly balanced, utterly lost its balance; and *I was mad!*"

Related Characters: Lady Audley / Lucy Graham / Helen Maldon Talboys (speaker), George Talboys, Robert Audley

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 294

Explanation and Analysis

Lady Audley makes this confession after Robert survives her murder attempt and returns to confront her once again. Lady Audley's emphasis on her being a "MADWOMAN" in all capital letters, and then the italicized "*I was mad*" shows Braddon's melodramatic style. Claiming to be mad allows Lady Audley to displace the responsibility of her crimes of attempted murder away from herself. Not only does she deny her scheming, saying she had no control once pushed into madness, but she can blame both Robert and George for driving her towards madness. This claim becomes even more dubious as a doctor later states that she is not mad at all.

❝ "The place was indeed select. I had not been there a month before I discovered that even the prettiest girl might wait a long time for a rich husband. I wish to hurry over this part of my life: I dare say I was very despicable. You and your nephew, Sir Michael, have been rich all your lives, and can well afford to despise me; but I knew how far poverty can affect a life, and I looked forward with a sick terror to a life so affected."

Related Characters: Lady Audley / Lucy Graham / Helen Maldon Talboys (speaker), Robert Audley, Sir Michael Audley

Related Themes:

Page Number: 299

Explanation and Analysis

During her confession of her crimes, Lady Audley describes being a young woman and waiting for a wealthy husband she could ensnare with her beauty. She shows how women can use their beauty to make advantageous marriages, even though, as previously established, society discourages them from vanity and ambition. Lady Audley also exposes how Sir Michael and Robert Audley's privilege influences their perspective, just as Lady Audley's poverty impacted hers. This reveals an important aspect of her character, as she explains how her poverty made her selfish and conniving, and also reveals how she acknowledges her own "despicable" nature as a result of her upbringing. The wealthy noblemen can "afford" to hate and scorn her, while she had no choice but to plot and scheme if she was ever to achieve privilege like theirs.

Volume 3, Chapter 5 Quotes

"Because there is no evidence of madness in anything that she has done. She ran away from her home, because her home was not a pleasant one, and she left it in the hope of finding a better. There is no madness in that. She committed the crime of bigamy, because by that crime she obtained fortune and position. There is no madness there. When she found herself in a desperate position, she did not grow desperate. She employed intelligent means, and she carried out a conspiracy which required coolness and deliberation in its execution. There is no madness in that."

Related Characters: Dr. Mosgrave (speaker), Lady Audley / Lucy Graham / Helen Maldon Talboys

Related Themes:

Page Number: 321

Explanation and Analysis

Dr. Mosgrave reports this to Robert after Robert tells him all that Lady Audley has confessed. This quote seemingly disproves Lady Audley's claim and Robert's assumption that she is a madwoman, thus suggesting that Lady Audley may only be claiming madness to avoid taking responsibility for her actions, and Robert may only be accusing madness to get rid of her without embarrassing the family through a public trial. This makes Lady Audley's eventual commitment to an asylum seem like an unjust fate. Dr. Mosgrave also reveals a common misconception about madness, stating that one cannot suffer from mental illness and also be intelligent, an assumption that modern psychology has clearly disproven. This all shows how misunderstandings about madness can cause harm on many levels of society.

Volume 3, Chapter 10 Quotes

Two years have passed since the May twilight in which Robert found his old friend; and Mr Audley's dream of a fairy cottage had been realized…Here amongst the lilies and the rushes on the sloping bank, a brave boy of eight years old plays with a toddling baby…

Mr Audley is a rising man upon the home circuit by this time, and has distinguished himself in the great breach of promise case of Hobbs v. Nobbs.

Related Characters: Georgey, George Talboys, Robert Audley

Related Themes:

Page Number: 378

Explanation and Analysis

This quote opens the final chapter of the novel, and describes Robert's life after he committed Lady Audley to an asylum and reconnected with George. The narrator no longer refers to Robert by his first name or nickname (Bob), but instead by his formal, public name, Mr. Audley, showing how he has matured and become fully involved in high society. Instead of being focused on his idle hobbies, as he was in the beginning of the novel, his life now concerns family, shown by the mention of his nephew and his son, and his career. His rustic "fairy cottage" shows that he lives a modest life, no longer concerned with the luxuries of his upper-class youth (such as his French novels and German pipe). The idyllic picture of Georgey (George's son) playing with Robert's son also set up the romantic and happy scenery of the final chapter.

I hope no one will take objection to my story because the end of it leaves the good people all happy and at peace. If my experience of life has not been very long, it has at least been manifold; and I can safely subscribe to that which a mighty king and a great philosopher declared, when he said that neither the experience of his youth nor of his age had ever shown him 'righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging their bread.'

Related Characters: Alicia Audley, Sir Michael Audley, Clara Talboys, George Talboys, Robert Audley

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 380

Explanation and Analysis

These are the final lines of the novel, delivered by the narrator after describing how the characters of Robert, George, Clara, Sir Michael, and Alicia are happy and successful now that Lady Audley is gone. Though the novel blends the genres of realism and romanticism, this final statement (which quotes a Psalm from the Bible) sides with romanticism in optimistically saying that those who are moral will be rewarded by fate or by God for their goodness. One could also interpret this as a statement of how those who follow gendered expectations and who belong to the upper class are rewarded by society, as gender transgressors such as Alicia and Robert have at last conformed to Victorian expectations of heterosexual marriage, and lower-class social climbers like Lady Audley have been disgraced and died.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

VOLUME 1, CHAPTER 1

Audley Court sits in a secluded country hallow, its dry moat and ruined wall standing out among its overgrown shrubbery. Audley Court is "very old, and very irregular and rambling," with chimneys crumbling from age. Visitors stand in awe when viewing the stately historic house and feel inspired by it to abandon all the cares of life and lounge by its pond.

Audley Court is like the upper class: old and stately but vulnerable and crumbling. The decay on the exterior represents the moral decay on the interior, the source of which is soon revealed to be Lady Audley. The image of an old isolated mansion is also a common trope in gothic fiction (popular in the Victorian era).

The layout of the "**noble place**" is confusing and one can easily get lost. Once, the daughter of current owner Alicia Audley accidently discovered a secret passage in her nursery.

The secret passageway foreshadows the secrets present within Audley Court. This passageway will be used in Chapter 8.

Near **Audley Court**, thick trees cover a lime-tree walkway, making it seem like a place where "a conspiracy might have been planned or a lover's vow registered with equal safety." At the end of the walk, among overgrown weeds, is an old, abandoned well.

The secluded walkway suggests secrets and conspiracies. The old well will become relevant later in the plot as well, as the narrator sets the scene for dramatic and mysterious occurrences.

Sir Michael Audley likes to stroll up and down the lime-tree walk in the evening with his "pretty young wife." Afterward the couple relaxes in the drawing-room, where Lady Audley plays music until her husband falls asleep.

This happy domestic scene appears to fit the Victorian ideal of a safe, peaceful home. Lady Audley appears to be the ideal Victorian wife, serving her husband.

Sir Michael is 56 years old and married Lady Audley, his second wife, a year ago. He had been a widower for 17 years, during which time his daughter Alicia (now 18 years old) acted as the lady of the household. When Sir Michael remarried, his new wife became the lady of **Audley Court**, usurping Alicia's authority and causing a rift between stepdaughter and stepmother.

This passage describes three major characters and their relationships to each other. The tension between Lady Audley and Alicia shows how making decisions within the home was one of the few appropriate ways a woman could express her agency in the Victorian era.

Lady Audley used to be a governess for a surgeon's family in a village near **Audley Court**. No one knows anything about her past.

This section establishes Lady Audley as a mysterious character who has gone from very poor to very wealthy.

Lucy Graham, as Lady Audley was then known, seemed completely content with her modest position as a governess. Everyone in the village thought her to be extremely beautiful, charming, and kind. Sir Michael fell helplessly in love with her.

When the plot later reveals Lucy's hatred of her own poverty, this section's description is revealed to be the first deception of many for her character.

As he courted Lucy, Sir Michael didn't think his status and wealth would influence her attitude towards him because she seemed so innocent and pure-hearted. Instead, he believed he could rescue her from a life of poverty and protect her in her young age.

Sir Michael, due to his wealth, cannot take an honest account of Lucy's impoverished perspective. He also shows the paternalistic attitude Victorian men took towards their wives.

Lucy was so used to being adored that she barely noticed Sir Michael's attention. Mrs. Dawson, her employer, told her that while marrying Sir Michael would be socially and financially advantageous, Lucy should only accept his courtship if she returned his feelings.

Mrs. Dawson reveals the contradictory situation of Victorian women, where they could marry to improve their status but were not supposed to appear ambitious or greedy.

Sir Michael told Lucy she should only marry him if she loved him. She said he asked for too much, because she grew up in poverty and thus could not set aside his wealth and status when making her decision. Sir Michael said if she didn't dislike him, they should get married anyway.

Lucy shows how the ability to disregard money is a luxury exclusive to the rich. Sir Michael notably agrees to an arrangement based not totally on love, showing he conforms to the class hierarchy when it benefits himself.

Lucy remarked to herself how this marriage would mean "no more dependence, no more drudgery, no more humiliations." Upon accepting the proposal, she felt her old life "melted away," except for the ring she hid in her bosom.

Lucy gives a realistic depiction of the demoralizing influence of poverty and how marriage can help improve a woman's station. The ring, as the reader will learn later, is from her current marriage.

VOLUME 1, CHAPTER 2

A young man stands upon a ship, muttering "'Poor little girl, how pleased she'll be...how surprised!" He is George Talboys, a handsome 25-year-old man sailing from Sydney to Liverpool. Everyone on the ship enjoys his friendly nature and joyful spirit. George is anxious to get back to England.

This section introduces us to a major character, George, in a heroic fashion, returning home after gaining success abroad. George's happy nature will contrast to his gloominess after his wife's supposed death.

George converses with a fellow passenger, a pessimistic governess named Miss Morley. Miss Morley has been apart from her fiancé for 15 years and fears that he may have changed or even died while she was gone. George scolds her for spooking him, insisting he has no reason to worry about his own wife, since he has only been gone for three and a half years.

Miss Morley's fears, which startle George, foreshadow both George's discovery of the announcement of his wife's death and the fact that his wife has completely changed both her name and her husband, even though, as he said, he has only been gone three and a half years.

George tells Miss Morley he used to be a cavalryman in the army, when he met his wife. His wife's father was an alcoholic scammer who used his daughter to ensnare a rich son-in-law. George comes from a rich family, but his own father cut him off once he married beneath his station. That estrangement, and the fact that his father-in-law kept borrowing money from George, left the couple and their infant son in horrible poverty.

This scene recounts the backstories of both George and Helen, setting up the poverty that motivates both George and Helen to abandon their old lives and child. It also introduces Lieutenant Maldon's selfish habits and Harcourt's rigidity, two character traits that will later become crucial to the plot.

His wife's misery drove George almost mad with grief and he fled their home, intending to never return. He meant to drown himself, but then heard strangers talking about gold-prospecting in Australia. He left his wife a note saying he had gone to make a fortune abroad and then boarded a ship bound for Australia.

George's decision to leave his family sparked the central crime of the novel, Lady Audley's bigamy. His decision also shows how poverty can drive one to make desperate decisions.

Motivated by his love for his wife and son, George worked hard and made a fortune prospecting gold. Only a week before he departed Australia to return to England did he feel confident enough in his station to send a letter to his wife, telling her where to leave word for him in London. Now George panics, thinking about how his wife could very well have died in the years he was gone, given that he has not heard anything from her. He asks Miss Morley to leave him alone to brood.

George's love for his wife and child make him a likeable character, thus investing the reader in his fate. (Yet at the same time, we might wonder why he hasn't seriously considered how his family might have changed until now.) His fear that his wife might have died will become realized when he reads the announcement in Chapter 4, and his brooding foreshadows the intense grief he will feel after this discovery.

VOLUME 1, CHAPTER 3

Sunset falls upon **Audley Court**, casting the house in deep shades of red. The landscape is still and quiet. Phoebe Marks, the maidservant of Lady Audley, walks out into the gardens. The narrator describes Phoebe as not "pretty" but "interesting." She would be pretty if her pale complexion weren't completely without color. Even her dress is a "sickly grey" that matches her skin. Despite her humble appearance, she has "something of the grace and carriage of a gentlewoman."

The red light falling upon Audley Court foreshadows the violence and evil that will take place there, as the book often associates red with evil and madness. Phoebe looks and acts similar to Lady Audley, a similarity that will become more relevant later. Also, her upper-class characteristics reveal the insignificance of class in terms of grace and dignity. She only lacks the material wealth of an upper-class woman.

A man is sitting on the old well when Phoebe emerges from the lime-tree walk. Phoebe assures him they won't be heard in this secluded area. The man, named Luke, is "broad-shouldered" and "stupid-looking." Luke is Phoebe's first cousin and sweetheart from childhood. They remark on how much money Lady Audley has now that she's married Sir Michael and how wonderful it would be if they too had wealth.

Here and throughout the novel, the lime-tree walk means secrets and seclusion for the novel's characters. Phoebe and Luke recognize Lady Audley as a lower-class social climber, and they too are motivated to increase their wealth.

Phoebe remarks on how just three months ago, Lady Audley was a servant like her. Luke tells her not to worry because they could buy a public house (an inn) and make a lot of money. Phoebe continues to talk about all the material luxuries that Lady Audley owns, as well as about Lady Audley's good looks.

Phoebe recognizes that one can move up in the class structure and seems to desire that for herself. Her obsession with Lady Audley's possessions also suggest a jealousy that will motivate her character.

Since Lady Audley and Sir Michael are away, Luke proposes that he and Phoebe look at all Lady Audley's finery. Inside, Luke mentions a rumor of a murder that happened in the mansion a long time ago. Phoebe says that, "there are murders enough in these times."

Phoebe and Luke's obsession with material wealth continues into an invasion of her employer's privacy. Phoebe's comment about murder foreshadows Lady Audley's attempted murder of George.

Luke considers stealing one of Lady Audley's diamond bracelets, but Phoebe tells him not to. Luke finds a secret drawer containing a baby's shoe and lock of hair. Phoebe says she prefers this find to the diamond bracelet, and that Luke shall get his public house.

The baby's shoe and hair are from Lady Audley's secret son Georgey, as the reader will later learn. Phoebe begins to hatch a blackmailing scheme that will get them the money they need for the public house.

VOLUME 1, CHAPTER 4

Robert Audley enjoys all the privileges of being a barrister (lawyer) but has never actually done any work for his job. The only son of Sir Michael's brother, he is handsome and lazy. He enjoys smoking his German pipe and reading his French novels.

Robert, who doesn't have to work for a living, embodies the privileged idleness of the upper class. His hobbies involve expensive exotic goods, showing his decadence.

Robert is beloved by his uncle Sir Michael and his cousin Alicia. While Alicia, as the heiress to a great estate, would be a good match for Robert, he is too careless to think of marriage or fortunes. When he receives a letter from Alicia detailing her hatred of her new stepmother, Lady Audley, his only thought concerns whether or not their fighting will ruin his stay at **Audley Court** during hunting season.

Robert's carelessness about life translates to a lack of empathy for others, as shown by his reaction to Lady Audley and Alicia's fighting. He also doesn't have to plan at all for the future, or anticipate fitting into the Victorian ideals of marriage and family.

Robert is walking around London when he bumps into a man he does not recognize. The stranger reveals himself to be George Talboys, Robert's old friend from school. Robert is initially excited to see George, but then lapses into his typical carefree attitude. George explains he is going to a coffee-house where he expects to find a letter from his wife. Robert accompanies him. George eagerly describes his plans for his wealthy new life with his wife.

Robert's careless nature is so essential to his character that even reuniting with his old friend cannot change it. The reader also sees here that George is not materialistic or greedy, but only thinks about his wealth in terms of being able to make his wife happy.

At the coffee shop, Robert and George find no letter from George's wife. With George disappointed, they sit down in silence. George picks up a newspaper and discovers an announcement of the recent death of Helen Talboys.

When George sees his wife's name in the newspaper, his dreams of a happy, wealthy life with her are shattered. This transforms him from a happy husband to a grieving widower.

VOLUME 1, CHAPTER 5

Shocked and horrified, George passes out in the coffee-house. He wakes up in Robert's apartment, Fig-tree Court, with Robert sitting by his bedside, smoking a pipe. The room is filled with canaries in cages and flowers. Robert says that George should stay with him while he's in town. George remembers that his wife is dead and is distraught again. Robert tries to convince him it might be someone else with the same name.

Robert's apartment is as decadent as he is. George's passing out puts Robert in the unlikely role of caretaker. This formerly carefree character now must take responsibility for another. Robert's logical conclusion that the announcement could be somebody else contributes to a recurring motif of false assumptions.

George wants to go immediately to Ventnor, where the newspaper said Helen was buried, but Robert convinces him to wait till the next day. They take the train together, discussing how they will find information about his wife. George is pitiful and helpless, placing the usually lazy Robert in an unfamiliar position of leadership.

George's character has transformed from joyful and excited to depressed and despondent. Robert's character is beginning to transform as well, into someone who actively cares for and lead another.

George and Robert find the cabin of Captain Maldon (Helen's father), where they learn Maldon is out with his grandson. In the cabin, they see a portrait of George, but the matching portrait of Helen is missing. George breaks down crying. Maldon's landlady describes Helen's last hours, saying she came to Ventnor only a week before she died.

Several elements of this scene are suspicious. Helen's portrait is gone in case anyone would recognize her as someone else. Helen came to this place only a week before she died so no one would know her in Ventor except her family.

George asks the landlady if Helen spoke of him in her last days. The landlady said that Helen only cried out for her mother. George remarks that Helen's mother died when Helen was a child, so it's shocking that Helen would ask for her and not for him. The landlady gives George a lock of hair she cut off of Helen's dead body. George notes that his wife's **hair** was always wavy, but this hair is straight.

More details about Helen's death do not add up to how George knew her in life. The lock of hair is especially significant, since Helen's golden curls are her defining physical feature. George is too distraught to draw conclusions from these anomalies, but their details will become relevant later.

George and Robert go to see Helen's grave. George stands by the grave unmoving for a longtime, and then purchases a headstone with an inscription ending in "Deeply regretted by her sorrowing Husband."

Braddon depicts the crushing impact of Helen's death upon George. This grief will become the driving motivation of his character.

VOLUME 1, CHAPTER 6

George and Robert go to the beach to find Maldon. Maldon does not seem to recognize George at first because of his beard, but when Maldon realizes it's George, he seems frightened. George yells at Maldon for letting his daughter die. Robert suspects Maldon had a history of mistreating his daughter.

Maldon acts as if he has something to hide from George, thus adding to the air of suspicion surrounding Helen's death. The reader also gains some insight into the relationship between Helen and her father.

A little boy runs up and starts talking to Maldon. George tells the boy, "I am your father…Will you love me?" The boy says he does not know George and that he only loves his grandpa. Maldon admits that Little Georgey has a temper, since he's been spoiled.

Compounded with George's grief is his estrangement from his own son. Georgey's behavior is indicative of an impoverished childhood with little discipline or structure.

Maldon tells George how after George abandoned the family, they moved to Southampton, where Helen taught piano until her health declined.

Teaching was one of the few ways a woman could earn money (though not much) during the Victorian era.


George says Little Georgey should stay with Maldon. George says he will return to Australia as soon as possible. Maldon seems eager for him to leave. Robert thinks George should stay.

Robert cares for George's wellbeing where Maldon just wants him gone (again, possibly hiding some secret). With his wife dead, nothing ties George to society any longer.


George asks the landlady more questions about his wife. She says Helen didn't die in poverty and George wonders where Maldon got the money, but is too weary with grief to ask more questions. He and Robert leave, and George makes Robert the legal guardian of Georgey.

Yet another aspect of Helen's death does not make sense to George, but he is still too distraught to question it. Robert becoming the guardian of George is a dramatic increase in his responsibility.


George discovers that the next ship to Australia does not leave for another month. In the meantime, Robert hatches a plan for them to vacation in Russia together. Before leaving, Robert writes to Alicia and receives a letter back asking them to buy a pair of sable fur coats for her "childish and silly" stepmother.

The formerly careless Robert shows great concern for his friend George. Alicia's letter emphasizes Lady Audley's materialism, and the word "childish" gives a different perspective on what other characters interpret as an innocent, charming spirit.

VOLUME 1, CHAPTER 7

A year later, George and Robert are back at Fig-tree Court. George still feels intense sorrow over his wife. He remarks to Robert about how, unlike physical injuries, one cannot tell a person's emotional injuries from the outside. George also feels regret that he cannot fulfill the role of a father to his own child.

George's words add to the argument that appearances can be misleading and easily misinterpreted. One cannot tell what a person has suffered just by looking at them. George's grief has a lasting impact on his character.

Robert suggests he and George go hunting at **Audley Court**. Robert admits that he does not like hunting but wants to enjoy his uncle's company and meet his new aunt. George passively agrees to go with him, as he agrees to everything his friend says.

Robert, unused to the serious issues of life, assumes that his friend needs to indulge in the upper-class's hobbies, of which hunting was a common activity.

Robert writes to Alicia asking if he and George can visit. Alicia writes back saying that Lady Audley claims that she is too sick to have "great rough men" visit. Robert says they can go to Essex (the neighborhood of **Audley Court**) to stay in a hotel and go fishing. Robert places Alicia's letter in his desk, not knowing that it will someday be crucial to the only criminal case he will ever investigate.

This section foreshadows the criminal investigation into George's disappearance, which will become central to the plot. Lady Audley's motives are opaque still, as she may either actually be sick or have some reason to want to keep Robert and George away from Audley Court.

George and Robert go to the decaying village of Audley, three-quarters of a mile away from **Audley Court**. Meanwhile, Sir Michael has transformed the interior of the mansion with luxurious decorations to compliment his pretty wife. Alicia's contempt for Lady Audley's "childishness and frivolity" grows. Everyone else in the neighborhood adores Lady Audley, whose rosy lips, button nose, and **golden curls** give her an innocent, youthful beauty.

Victorian society upheld the home as a place of family harmony, so Alicia is committing a transgressive act by refusing to get along with her stepmother. The community assumes that Lady Audley's lovely, childlike looks must be reflective of an innocent personality, an assumption the plot will prove false.

George and Robert lounge in the peaceful countryside, but the narrator reminds the reader that people in the countryside commit murders just as violent as those in the city. Sir Michael, Alicia, and Lady Audley pass through the village and Robert runs out to greet them while George hangs back. Alicia wants to meet George, but Lady Audley says she is tired and wants to go home. Sir Michael invites the men to dinner the following day.

The peaceful atmosphere of the countryside is another example of a deceptive appearance. This also foreshadows the violent events that will happen in the countryside later in the novel. Lady Audley continues to keep Robert and George at arm's length, throwing more suspicion on her character.

Alicia teases Robert about falling in love with Lady Audley just like everyone else does, even though she thinks he's ultimately too frivolous to really fall in love. Robert returns to George proclaiming that he has in fact, fallen in love with his aunt. George sighs and thinks sadly about when he first fell for his wife.

Robert's views on love are dramatic and exaggerated, like a love story in a romance novel, showing that he is as frivolous as Alicia says. George relates everything to his own all-consuming grief.

Back at **Audley Court**, Phoebe attends to Lady Audley. Lady Audley is much friendlier with her maid than she is with more upper-class ladies. Lady Audley tells Phoebe that some people say that the two women look alike. With some hair dye and rouge, Phoebe would be just as beautiful as Lady Audley. Lady Audley then asks Phoebe to go to London to run a secret errand for her.

Lady Audley transgresses against the lines of class by being friends with her maid. The similarities between the two women show the superficiality of the idea of "nobility," because it could be imitated with just a few material goods. Lady Audley's "secret" errand hints at her scheming nature.

The next morning, Lady Audley receives a telegram from her former employer, Mrs. Vincent. The telegram states that Mrs. Vincent is very ill and wants to see Lady Audley before she dies. Sir Michael says he will go with her.

This telegram arrives right after Sir Michael invites Robert and George to dinner and Phoebe leaves on a secret errand in London, throwing suspicion on both the telegram and Lady Audley herself.

VOLUME 1, CHAPTER 8

Alicia is in love with Robert and intends to use George to make him jealous. According to the narrator, she won't be successful, however, because Robert is indifferent to and often ignorant of the feelings of those around him. Yet Alicia rides around Essex regardless, hoping she will run into them. Meanwhile, Robert quickly grows bored of fishing and wants to return to London.

Robert's carelessness in life translates into a carelessness towards others. He also does not yet know much about human nature or the desires of others. Alicia also expresses her agency as a woman here in attempting to take an active role in her courtship of a potential husband.

George mentions that ever since Helen's death, he feels as if he is standing on a shore with waves creeping up on him, as if his own demise is approaching him. Robert says he has been eating too many heavy suppers and smoking strange cigars.

George's feelings foreshadow his eventual disappearance. Notably, Lady Audley/Helen is commonly associated with the sea. Robert is typically ignorant of the suffering of those around him.

Before leaving Essex, George and Robert run into Alicia. Alicia shows them a letter from Lady Audley, asking if George and Robert will leave Essex before she gets a chance to properly meet them. Robert remarks on how pretty Lady Audley's handwriting is. George is gloomy as usual and doesn't look at the letter.

Lady Audley may be asking if she'll miss Robert and George because she wants to avoid them. Robert's observation of her unique handwriting will become crucial later on when he sees Helen's letters. Ironically, George might have recognized the handwriting if he had looked at the letter.

George and Robert miss their train because Robert has a headache, so they decide to visit Alicia at **Audley Court**. Alicia shows them around the house, but when she asks Phoebe if they could see Lady Audley's rooms, Phoebe says that Lady Audley locked her chambers before she left. Alicia is sad, because the lady's rooms have the best portraits, but they continue their tour. The house is dark and damp and lit only by candlelight.

The dark, candlelit house establishes the gothic tone within Audley Court, hinting that something sinister will soon reveal itself. Lady Audley's locking of her chambers further builds suspicion around her character. The portraits suggest that Lady Audley's chambers are full of decorative luxury.

Alicia then remembers a secret passageway that leads to Lady Audley's chambers. Robert and George climb through to Lady Audley's dressing-room, which is filled with expensive cosmetics, flowers, and jewelry.

The secret passageway is another gothic trope. Lady Audley's chambers are filled with material markers of her newfound class and wealth.

Robert and George move to a room that contains portraits by famous artists. An unfinished portrait of Lady Audley sits on an easel. George spends a long time looking at the lady's portrait. The painter, a pre-Raphaelite, has portrayed Lady Audley's delicate face as lurid, her blue eyes as sinister, and her pouting mouth as wicked. Her dress, her lips, and her hair all contain elements of red. Robert says, "there's something odd about [the portrait]."

The painter interprets as sinister and wicked (as noted through the use of red) the elements of Lady Audley's appearance that others find innocent. As an artist, the pre-Raphaelite can express Lady Audley's true nature. George spends a long time looking at the painting because, as the plot later reveals, he recognizes its subject.

As George and Robert leave **Audley Court**, they pass Lady Audley's covered carriage. Lady Audley sticks her head out, unable to tell who they are because of the night's darkness. The carriage passes the men and continues into Audley Court. Sir Michael remarks that "the storm will hold off to-night…but we shall certainly have it tomorrow."

The novel is full of narrow misses and missed opportunities like this one, building up the irony and the tension of the story. The "storm" Michael refers to represents the coming confrontation between Lady Audley and George.

VOLUME 1, CHAPTER 9

The storm actually does come to **Audley Court** and the nearby village that night. Robert spends the storm in his usual laziness, while George seems highly agitated. Robert believes that George is frightened by the lightning, even though George angrily denies this and walks out into the rain. They awake the next morning to the weather seeming calm once again, and George seems a little more cheerful than usual. George apologizes for his temper and proposes they do some more fishing before leaving for London.

Once again, Robert fails to look beyond the surface of his friend's motivation and fails to understand the feelings of others. The storm represents George's troubled mental state, as he no double wrestles with the revelation that Helen is not dead and is in fact living as Lady Audley, which he could have inferred from her portrait.

At **Audley Court**, Lady Audley has been up all night, claiming she was afraid of lightning and worrying her husband greatly. She seems much more energetic in the morning, laughing about how easily frightened she is by everyone and everything except for her husband. She then tells Alicia that she knows George and Robert were in her rooms because George left a glove behind.

Lady Audley may be agitated because she knows George saw her outside of Audley Court that night. She is also using Sir Michael's love in order to manipulate him into feeling sympathy for her, building up her defenses in advance if she needs protection from George.

George and Robert go fishing. Robert falls asleep next to the stream. While he is asleep, George abandons his fishing and goes to **Audley Court**. Sir Michael and Alicia are out of the house and Lady Audley is on the lime-walk. George meets a servant at the front door of the house and mutters something about going to find the lady of the house.

The novel has previously associated the lime-walk with secrets, hinting at what George will be speaking to Lady Audley about. This is the pivotal moment in the plot where Robert is separated from George, driving Robert's actions for the rest of the book.

An hour and a half later, Lady Audley returns to the house from the opposite direction of the lime-walk. Alicia has just returned from her ride and her dog growls at Lady Audley. Lady Audley goes to her chambers and sees George's glove. She sharply orders Phoebe to take it away, then quickly changes her tone and tells Phoebe how much she appreciates her.

Lady Audley's agitation suggests that something horrible happened between her and George out on the lime-walk. Also, the fact that Alicia's dog hates Lady Audley implies that the animal can sense something about Lady Audley's nature humans cannot.

VOLUME 1, CHAPTER 10

Robert wakes up to find George missing. When he cannot find George near the stream, he assumes his friend has gone back to the hotel to eat. Then he discovers George has not been back to the hotel. The hotel landlord tells him Sir Michael stopped by to invite Robert and George to dinner, so Robert thinks George might have already gone ahead to **Audley Court**.

George's disappearance begins to become more complicated for Robert. Unconscious of the change in his own nature, Robert now cares about the whereabouts of his friend and is working hard to find him. Notably, this search leads him to Audley Court.

At **Audley Court**, a servant tells Robert that George was there at two o'clock but has not been seen since. Robert begins to feel worried for his friend. He goes to the train station, where he asks the clerk if he has seen George. The clerk is not sure but thinks he saw a man who looked like George get on the train for London. Relieved, Robert decides to dine at Audley Court before taking the next train to London.

Robert begins to feel worried for his friend but is quick to relax again once he believes that George probably went back to London. Robert easily lapses back into his carefree life, but the reader knows something suspicious happened at Audley Court. Robert is not yet the dedicated investigator he will become.

VOLUME 1, CHAPTER 11

Robert joins Sir Michael, Lady Audley, and Alicia in the drawing room, announcing that George has gone back to London without him. Lady Audley seems surprised by this news. Robert admits that he is worried about his friend. When Lady Audley asks why, Robert states that George has seemed troubled ever since the death of his wife. Lady Audley says she didn't know a man could form such strong attachments to a woman.

Lady Audley is surprised by the news that George has gone back to London because, as the reader will later learn, she made sure George wouldn't go anywhere at all. Lady Audley's comments on male attachments suggests she believes men often get over the women that they love, thus making her crime of bigamy less harmful.

Lady Audley says, "It seems almost cruel of Mrs. Talboys to die, and grieve her poor husband so much." Robert thinks that Alicia is right: Lady Audley is childish.

Lady Audley's comment reveals how women's suffering is often seen through a man's perspective, with the woman blamed for actions that are not her fault.

Over dinner, Lady Audley tells Robert about how when she and Sir Michael went to find Mrs. Vincent in London, they could not locate her. Mrs. Vincent had moved from her old address and no one could tell them where she had gone. Robert remarks that Mrs. Vincent was foolish not to send an address with the original telegram.

Robert realizes the telegram situation is strange, but neither he nor anyone questions Lady Audley's intentions because they are charmed by her beauty and do not believe she could ever be anything but the lovely lady she appears to be.

After dinner, Robert chats with Lady Audley, but all he can think about is George. He wishes George was never his friend so that he would not have to care about another person so much. Robert imagines George going down to Southampton to see Georgey, then imagines him looking for a ship to go back to Australia, and finally imagines George dead at the bottom of a stream. Lady Audley asks Robert what he is thinking about, and when Robert says George, she scolds him for acting like something horrible happened to his friend.

The image of George's grizzly death is typical of Braddon's melodramatic style, but not that far off from what has actually happened to George (as the reader will learn later). Robert's regret over his concern for George shows that his character is transforming into one who can care for another person, but this transformation will be reluctant on Robert's part.

Lady Audley plays the piano and Robert turns her sheet music for her. He is mesmerized by her beautiful hands covered in jewelry, but then he notices, beneath a gold bracelet, a bruise on her wrist. The bruise looks like a handprint, but Lady Audley says she got it from absentmindedly winding a ribbon around her wrist. Robert doesn't believe her.

The pleasant domestic scene of Lady Audley playing the piano, complimented by the display of her luxurious accessories, is disrupted by the sign of violence in the form of the bruise. Here, Robert begins to suspect Lady Audley might not be all she seems.

Robert says goodbye to Sir Michael, Lady Audley, and Alicia, telling them that he will go back to London to look for George. If he does not find him there, he will go to Southampton. If he does not find him there, he will "think something strange has happened." As Robert walks back to the inn, he muses on how he could suddenly care so much for a person. The narrator states that although Robert is lazy, one should not underestimate his abilities.

Robert's suspicions about George are beginning to grow. Again, Robert muses on how his life has changed from careless to careful. The narrator's mention of Robert's unrealized potential foreshadows what Robert will accomplish through the events of the novel.

VOLUME 1, CHAPTER 12

Robert returns to Fig-tree Court to find no trace of George. He then goes to Southampton, to Mr. Maldon's cabin. There he finds Mr. Maldon and Little Georgey. Robert remarks how Georgey looks like his father but is completely unlike George in behavior. The house is dirty and smells of tobacco and brandy.

Braddon realistically depicts the rundown dwellings of the Victorian poor. Georgey's difference in personality from his father show the impact one's upbringing can have on their behavior.

Maldon tells Robert that George stopped by late the previous evening but left after an hour. According to Maldon, George intends to go back to Australia and is leaving from Liverpool that night. Robert questions why George would do this without telling him or picking up his possessions. Maldon says George has acted strange ever since Helen's death. Robert still thinks it's not like George to be so cruel.

Despite his previously established questionable character, Maldon's story is plausible, given that George did previously state his intention to go back to Australia. Robert's suspicion grows anyway.

Robert asks Georgey if he saw George last night. The little boy says he didn't. Maldon says Georgey was asleep when George came. Georgey then asks for the pretty lady who gave him his gold watch. Maldon claims that his grandson is talking about Maldon's old captain's wife, and Georgey's watch is getting cleaned.

Georgey often reveals key details contradicting Maldon's story. Being a young child, Georgey is too innocent and too ignorant to lie and keep up Maldon's schemes. The reader will learn later that the "pretty lady" is Lady Audley, the boy's mother.

Maldon reveals to Robert that he pawned the watch because he needed the money. He says that George and others have mistreated him. He continues to lament his poverty and then takes Georgey to bed.

Despite his vices, Maldon views himself as a victim of circumstance, thus showing how one's perspective can contradict the reality that other characters observe, especially when one's perspective is influenced by poverty.


Left alone in the living room, Robert goes to light his cigar on the fireplace. There, he finds a half-burned scrap of paper, part of a telegram that reads, "___alboys came to _____ last night, and left by the mail for London, on his way for Liverpool, whence he was to sail for Sydney." Robert wonders what this could mean and decides to go to Liverpool.

Given that this telegram seems to repeat what Maldon just said to Robert, it becomes a crucial piece of evidence, turning Robert's suspicions into a full-blown conspiracy he feels compelled to investigate.

VOLUME 1, CHAPTER 13

Robert returns to Fig-tree Court to find no letters from George. Exhausted and worried, Robert falls asleep on George's bed. He dreams that he has to go to strange places to uncover the secrets of the telegram, and that he goes to Helen Talboys' grave to find her headstone gone.

The dream foreshadows Robert's discovery that Helen is not actually dead. Robert falling asleep in George's bed also highlights the extreme closeness between the two men that motivates Robert throughout the novel.

Robert wakes to knocking at the door of his apartment. He assumes it is his incompetent housekeeper, Mrs. Maloney, who probably forgot her key again. Another knock comes, then Robert hears the key turning in the door. Mrs. Maloney enters, but says she did not knock at all, and instead just let herself in with her key.

The strange knock at the door builds tension and suspicion for Robert. This scene also establishes the incompetence of Robert's housekeeper (and therefore the vulnerability of his home), which will become relevant later in the plot.

Robert thinks about the mystery of the telegraph, questioning if Maldon purposely separated Robert from George or harmed George in order to get the 20,000-pound inheritance Robert manages for Georgey. He concludes that neither of these options explains the telegram.

Robert's confusion and suspicion over George's case and Maldon's involvement grows, but he needs to investigate in order to gain more information, pressing him on in the case.

Robert goes to Liverpool but does not find George's name on the passenger list for the one ship heading to Australia. The clerk does remember a young man with his arm in his sling going by the name of Thomas Brown, but Robert doesn't think it's George.

As the reader learns later, Thomas Brown actually is George under a false name, but since Robert falls for this ruse, his investigation continues.

Having concluded that George did not leave England, Robert returns to London and begins making a "Journal of Facts Connected with the Disappearance of George Talboys." He reviews the list and then places it in his desk. He decides he will go back to **Audley Court** to look for George.

Despite the fact Robert never cared for his job as a barrister (which is basically a lawyer), he is now performing the methodical investigative and deductive duties of one. He correctly traces the source of mystery back to Audley Court.

VOLUME 1, CHAPTER 14

Sir Michael reads aloud to Lady Audley and Alicia from an ad Robert has put in the newspaper asking for information regarding George, but they soon move on from the subject. Sir Michael scolds Alicia for being disrespectful to her sensitive stepmother. Alicia says she doesn't like Lady Audley and is sorry her stepmother has come between her and her father.

Victorian society upheld the family as the basis for civilization, so the tension between stepdaughter and stepmother and subsequently between daughter and father shows that Audley Court is seriously troubled.

Lady Audley asks Alicia to promise that, even if she cannot love her, she at least promise not to try to harm her. Alicia says that she might not be as amiable as Lady Audley, but that doesn't mean she is evil. Clearly, Alicia and Lady Audley will never be friends, and Sir Michael is often away from home, so Lady Audley has no friend but Phoebe.

Both Lady Audley and Alicia are transgressing against societal norms by not sacrificing their own desires for the sake of family harmony. Further, Lady Audley's closeness with Phoebe not only transgresses class boundaries but also leaves Lady Audley vulnerable to blackmail.

Phoebe is just educated enough to hold a conversation with Lady Audley. They mainly talk about the scandalous stories of French novels. Lady Audley mentions a French story about a beautiful woman who must keep the secret of her crimes.

French novels during the Victorian era were associated with scandal and moral weakness. Lady Audley is interested in this particular French story because it mirrors her own history.

Lady Audley scolds Phoebe for her association with Luke, who has become a groom at **Audley Court** and whom Lady Audley considers to be ugly. Phoebe says she does not love Luke and is only marrying him because she is afraid of refusing him.

Lady Audley shows her superficiality by her judgement of Luke. Phoebe shows her manipulative nature, since the reader has already seen her affection for Luke.

Lady Audley says Phoebe shouldn't marry Luke if she's afraid of him, but if she insists on marrying him, Lady Audley will help them buy their public house.

This reveals a key aspect of Lady Audley's character: that while she enjoys flaunting her wealth, she also uses it to help those less fortunate than her.

Lady Audley meets with Luke and Phoebe and promises them 50 pounds. Luke demands 100 pounds. Lady Audley turns to Phoebe and says, "You have told this man!" Phoebe says that he made her tell.

This section implies that in previously confiding in Phoebe, Lady Audley revealed the secrets of her past life, thus beginning the Markses' blackmail of her.

VOLUME 1, CHAPTER 15

Luke and Phoebe get married and move into their public house in the village of Mount Stanning. The public house, named the Castle Inn, is run down by constant wind. The roof is battered, the shutters are broken, and the walls are discolored. However, the inn had made a healthy profit under its previous owner.

Castle Inn—an ironically grandiose name for such a shabby place—expresses the Victorian upper-class fear that lower class individuals would rise to wealth and then create imitations of upper class luxuries.

Phoebe cries as she and Luke leave their hometown. Luke says that she didn't have to marry him and it's not like he's going to murder her. He then tells her that she will have to wear clothes more fitting to her station now that she is his wife.

Luke expresses the typical Victorian attitude that a man could dictate every aspect of his wife's life, and also that one should present themselves according to their class.

Christmastime brings many visitors to **Audley Court**, mainly young men there for hunting season. Robert is one such visitor. While the other young men are experienced hunters with fine horses and dogs, Robert seems more interested in his meals, his reading, and his smoking. Even Robert's hunting dogs are strays.

Victorian gender expectations defined men's activities as outside the home and women's as inside. Therefore, Robert is slightly transgressing gender expectations by preferring to stay indoors.

Robert prefers to stay inside chatting with Lady Audley. Alicia, who spends her days hunting, teases him for his passiveness and carelessness. She compares him to another guest, Sir Harry Towers, whom she believes "would go through fire and water for the girl he loves," unlike Robert.

Alicia, unlike Robert, enjoys the typically masculine hobby of hunting, making her a character that defies gender expectations as well. Sir Harry, also a hunter, fits the ideal of a Victorian man.

Robert thinks to himself about how Alicia is beautiful and has a troublesome temper. He says this is the consequence of Sir Michael allowing her to ride and hunt freely in the country.

Robert expresses the typical patriarchal views of Victorian society, stating that women should remain within the home for their moral development.

While Lady Audley draws, she and Robert chat about the increase in her fortunes and how she is wealthier now than the people she used to work for. Robert remarks, "It is a change! Some women would do a great deal to accomplish such as change as that."

Robert becomes suspicious of Lady Audley because of her change of classes, thus expressing a common Victorian anxiety that the lower classes would do anything to gain wealth.

A week after Robert arrives at **Audley Court**, Lady Audley asks if Robert has heard anything from George. She listens intently while Robert recounts all the evidence he has gathered about George's disappearance. He states that he believes George never went to Southampton at all and Maldon is lying about seeing him.

Lady Audley, being the intelligent manipulator she is, tricks Robert into revealing all the details about the investigation that concern her (though Robert doesn't yet know she is involved in George's disappearance).

Robert tells Lady Audley that, while he never cared for his profession as a barrister, he now feels compelled to investigate the circumstantial evidence before him. He explains that, while it may seem like mere scraps of information, when one links together all the seemingly disjointed pieces, circumstantial evidence is enough to convict someone of a crime.

Robert recognizes the change in his character now that he is working hard at his profession. This explanation of circumstantial evidence links the work with the genre of the detective novel, which was popular during the Victorian era.

VOLUME 1, CHAPTER 16

Christmastime ends and the visitors gradually begin to leave **Audley Court**. Robert does not leave, however, and Sir Michael says he can stay as long as he likes. Sir Harry Towers, one of the young hunters, remains as well and requests a private conversation with Alicia. During the conversation, Harry expresses his intense feelings for Alicia. Alicia tells him that she respects him, and he should never ask for anything more than that.

Logically, Sir Harry would be an ideal match for Alicia, since he is both wealthy and loves her. But this section reveals that love is more complicated than the Victorian era's assumptions about how love and marriage should work. Alicia exercises her agency by refusing a match she doesn't personally want.

After the conversation, Robert says that by studying Harry's demeaner, he has learned that Harry proposed to Alicia. He asks if Alicia is going to accept or not. Alicia asks him why he should care, since he doesn't care about anything. Robert tells her not to marry Harry if she likes anyone better. Then he adds, "I've no doubt the person you prefer will make you a very excellent husband." She says that he cannot know that, because he does not know who she prefers. Robert thinks that Alicia would be a "nice girl" if she weren't so spirited.

Robert, in his ignorance of others, gives Alicia false hope that he will one day marry her. He selfishly wants to keep Alicia single, waiting for when they will both submit to the expectations of their society—when Alicia is more submissive and Robert consents to what would be an advantageous match for him. That day will never come, of course, because love is more complicated than Victorian ideals of marriage.

Harry leaves **Audley Court** heartbroken. He laments that his wealth is of no use since he has no one to share it with. He is deeply in love with Alicia and never thought that she would refuse such an advantageous match. He says he wanted a strong-minded, smart wife, but not too strong-minded and smart. As Harry was leaving, he and Sir Michael spoke briefly of Alicia's complicated situation with her cousin, given that Robert seems not to care about her.

Harry's opinions show the contradiction of Victorian expectations for women. The ideal Victorian woman must have the attractive qualities of intelligence and passion, but not so much that she dominates the men in her life. Sir Harry also shows an ignorance due to his wealth, given that he couldn't even imagine Alicia refusing his proposal because he is so rich.

Lady Audley asks Sir Michael how long Robert will be staying with him. She implies that Robert's attentions toward such a young aunt are inappropriate. Sir Michael says that Robert shall leave that night if she is uncomfortable. Sir Michael then tells Robert to leave because he pays too much attention to Lady Audley. Robert says he meant no disrespect, though Lady Audley does interest him, but he will leave promptly to avoid any dishonor. Robert leaves and takes up residence at the Castle Inn.

Lady Audley is using Sir Michael's concern for her to manipulate him and keep Robert away from her. She uses her society's gendered expectations (that if a man spends a lot of time with a beautiful young woman, he must desire her) to protect her secrets, showing how intelligent and socially aware Lady Audley is as a character.

VOLUME 1, CHAPTER 17

Phoebe shows Robert through the Castle Inn, which has cheaply made, thin plaster walls. It is a dramatic change from the riches of **Audley Court**, but Robert does not care since he has his German pipe, his French novels, and his dogs to keep him company. Robert asks Phoebe to take a letter to Lady Audley for him.

Though Robert enjoys the privileges of an upper-class life, he is not materialistic like Lady Audley (but this is also because he has never had to worry about financial security). The detail of Castle Inn's thin walls being made of cheap material will become crucial to the plot in Volume 3.

Phoebe still dresses modestly, unlike what one would expect from a wealthy innkeeper's wife. Robert thinks that she looks like someone who could keep a secret, and asks her several questions about Lady Audley's past, such as how long she worked for the Dawsons, where she came from, if she was an orphan, and whether she always as cheerful as she is now. Phoebe gives short affirmative answers to each question.

Robert's questions show that he is beginning to grow suspicious of Lady Audley. Phoebe is a unique character because she is not easily influenced by class or wealth, thus making her effective at keeping a secret (unlike Luke).

Robert hears Luke through the thin walls and decides that the inn-keeper sounds like a fool and that he should go talk to him. Robert asks Luke how he likes living in Mount Stanning. Luke says that he would live in a more exciting place if someone hadn't been so stingy. Phoebe tries to distract her husband with chores. Luke continues to complain about someone being stingy, while Phoebe anxiously calls out his name.

Luke represents the fears upper-class people had of ambitious lower-class individuals, because he always wants more money and will keep using dishonest means, in the form of blackmail, to get it. Phoebe tries to use her influence over her husband to keep him from revealing their scheme, as she is smarter than he is.

Robert remarks on how Luke seems to have powerful secrets on someone, or more likely, Luke's wife holds the secrets. Robert observes Phoebe's already pale face grow paler. With that, Robert says goodnight and goes to bed.

Robert's suspicions about Lady Audley are growing. He is beginning to use the skills of a detective, testing the reactions of other characters to what he says.

VOLUME 1, CHAPTER 18

The next morning, Robert is lounging at the breakfast table when Phoebe announces that Lady Audley has come to see him. Lady Audley comes in looking as youthful and beautiful as ever. She states that she has come to apologize for the silly ideas her husband had about his youthful wife and nephew's proximity. She says that such ideas should not ruin their "pleasant little family circle." Robert says that she should not be alarmed, because he's not troubled by anything.

Lady Audley looks youthful and therefore innocent, even though she is there to manipulate Robert and guard her secrets. As her character often does, she displaces the responsibility of Robert's expulsion on someone else, even though the reader knows she asked Sir Michael to kick Robert out.

Lady Audley asks Robert why he is staying at the Castle Inn. He says he is doing so out of curiosity, adding that Luke is "A dangerous man…a man in whose power I should not like to be." Lady Audley asks what she has done that would make Robert hate her so much. Robert says that since he lost his dear friend, his feelings towards other people are "strangely embittered."

This is the beginning of the cat-and-mouse game that will consume the rest of the plot, as both Robert and Lady Audley are saying more than their words explicitly state. Robert also shows how George's disappearance has darkened his previously carefree perspective on the world.

Lady Audley asks if Robert is referring to George, and he says yes. Lady Audley asks why Robert does not believe that George sailed for Australia. Robert refuses to answer, but then he says that he put advertisements in Sydney and Melbourne papers asking for George to write him, but has received no answer.

Lady Audley asks a valid question, because George could very well be in Australia, but her questioning causes Robert to reveal vital information for both the plot and Lady Audley's deception.

Robert says that if he does not hear back from George, he will act upon his fears. Lady Audley asks him what he will do. Robert admits that he is powerless. George might have died in the Castle Inn, for all he knows. In fact, one may never know what horrible crimes have taken place in the homes one enters. Lady Audley laughs at how obsessed Robert is with such grisly subjects.

Robert's comments show how seemingly safe locations (like Audley Court, as well as the Castle Inn) can be the location of past crimes. Lady Audley's manipulation continues as she tries to make Robert seem like he is the absurd one for obsessing over George's case.

Robert tells Lady Audley that if he receives no answer from George, he will conclude that George is dead and will examine the possessions he left, including the letters from Helen Talboys. He doesn't expect to deduce much from Helen's letters, since few women write in such unique handwriting as Lady Audley. Lady Audley says, "'Ah, you know my hand[writing] of course.'"

This scene foreshadows the moment where Robert will find Helen's handwriting (though not in a letter) and realize that it matches Lady Audley's handwriting. This scene also inspires Lady Audley to go to London (in the next chapter) and steal Helen's letters to George.

Lady Audley says she assumes that Robert does not accept her apology and won't be coming back to **Audley Court**. Robert says he will return to London tomorrow to find George's letters. He escorts Lady Audley back to her carriage.

With the conversation about George over, Lady Audley again brings up social niceties, once more taking on the disguise of a charming, upper-class lady.

Robert later runs into Lady Audley's carriage driver at the inn's bar. Robert asks the driver if he took the lady back to **Audley Court**. The driver says that he actually took the lady to the railroad station, so that she could take a train to London. Robert realizes he must go back to London immediately, and he knows where he'll find Lady Audley when he gets there.

Robert has now fully realized that Lady Audley is actively working against his investigation in George's disappearance. In the process, Lady Audley is exercising her agency by traveling alone and without her husband's knowledge, an uncommon action for a Victorian woman.

VOLUME 1, CHAPTER 19

Robert arrives in London but has to wait a long time to get his luggage. When he finally leaves the train platform, he runs into Lady Audley, who is rushing to catch a train. Robert puzzles at her wretched, helpless appearance, very different from her usually pleasant, cheerful demeanor. Lady Audley explains that she came to town to settle a large bill she did not want her husband to know about. She leaves, but Robert still questions why she really came to London.

Lady Audley's deceptive appearance falters when she is under distress, a phenomenon that will reoccur throughout the novel. This shows that Lady Audley's disguise is carefully curated, and she works hard to maintain her deception. Robert's suspicion of Lady Audley grows even stronger with this concerning incident.

Robert returns to his apartment to find everything in order, with no dust on his portmanteau or his trunk. He calls for his housekeeper, Mrs. Maloney, and asks her if anyone has been here. Mrs. Maloney says just the blacksmith that Robert had ordered to fix a broken lock. Robert did not order a blacksmith, however, and thinks Mrs. Maloney must be drunk. Robert asks if the blacksmith was ever left alone in his apartment. Mrs. Maloney says he was but only briefly.

Robert shows his keen detective eye here, noticing there is no dust on his belongings, meaning that either his usually incompetent housekeeper has been working hard in his absence or that someone else has been inside his apartment. This scene builds the sense of mystery within the work.

Robert goes to see the blacksmith, who appears to be having a celebration with his family, complete with fine wine. He is in the middle of a story about a woman who "walked off, as graceful as you please." The blacksmith tells Robert that he mistook another customer's name and address for his and thus came by accident. Robert remarks on the oddness of the blacksmith's excuse and leaves. He wonders about the story the blacksmith was telling before Robert approached.

The blacksmith's party suggests he has recently come into money, possibly from a payoff by Lady Audley for breaking into Robert's apartment. The woman in the story is, of course, most likely Lady Audley. All these details point towards Lady Audley without explicitly assuring Robert his aunt is involved, thus building tension while keeping the mystery unsolved.

Robert returns home while contemplating how the mystery of George's disappearance seems to be circling closer and closer to Robert's family. He eats his dinner, lamenting that he has not had a good dinner at Fig-tree Court since George disappeared.

The investigation further challenges Robert's carefree nature as not only does he have to delve into dark subjects, but that darkness appears to involve his own family.

VOLUME 2, CHAPTER 1

After dinner, Robert adds more information to his document on George's case. Then he opens the trunk that belonged to George. There, he finds George's letters but cannot find the ones from Helen. He knows they exist because George previously referenced his wife's letters. In the trunk, he finds a few miscellaneous books, which he sets aside.

The missing letters suggest that someone (most likely Lady Audley, given her strange behavior in the previous two chapters) stole them. The books are another example of a crucial clue that is considered insignificant upon first glance.

Robert tries to read his usual French novels and contemplates giving up on his investigation. He worries that the facts seem to be leading him to a conclusion he does not want to know. But he is experiencing a powerful sentiment he has never felt before, giving purpose to his previously careless life. This sentiment is a commitment to justice he cannot waver from. He returns to his investigation, stating, "Justice to the dead first…mercy to the living afterwards."

Robert can no longer care for his idle, upper-class hobbies because the mystery of George's disappearance has transformed him and consumed his life. The powerful sentiments he feels could be interpreted as a commitment to justice, as he perceives it to be, or as an intense love for George, given his personal relationship to the case he now investigates.

Robert studies George's books. In one, he finds a **lock of hair**, which has a similar color but different texture than the lock of hair the Southampton landlady gave to George. In the same book, he finds two pages stuck together. On one of the pages, he finds three inscriptions. The first states that the book belongs to Miss Bince. The second, written by Miss Bince, states that she is giving the book to her friend, Helen Maldon. The third, written by Helen, states she is giving the book to George.

This scene reveals two clues. The lock of the hair, which came from Helen, is distinct from the hair taken from the person buried in Helen's grave. The handwriting is also key, as this is what finally convinces Robert that Lady Audley and Helen Talboys are the same person, since he recognizes Lady Audley's unique handwriting in the inscription in the book.

Robert closes the book, stating that he "thought it would be so." He "prepared for the worst, and the worst has come." He knows that he must first place Georgey in a new home.

Robert fully realizes the consequences of his investigation, given that it involves a complicated plot concerning his own family.

VOLUME 2, CHAPTER 2

In the trunk, Robert finds a letter from George's father, Mr. Harcourt Talboys. Robert had written to Harcourt right after George's disappearance, and Harcourt wrote back that he had dismissed all responsibility for his son when George married so far beneath the family station. But now that Robert is more certain of George's dark fate, he decides to visit Harcourt after he leaves Southampton. He resolves to only continue his investigation if Harcourt wishes him to.

Though Robert has become more serious than he was in the beginning of the novel, he is now looking for a way out of his investigation because it is a dark subject of personal consequence to him. Harcourt's letter once again reminds the readers of his harsh nature and strict adherence to class structure.

On the train to Southampton, Robert feels lonely without George and thinks that he would give up his wealth and privilege if he could have George back.

Robert makes the important revelation that he values friendship over his upper-class lifestyle.

Robert arrives at Southampton and is appalled by the poverty he sees around him. He sees a child's funeral procession and thinks about how if anything happened to Georgey, he would be responsible. He finds Georgey at home with a woman of fair complexion, Mrs. Plowson. Robert notices that Mrs. Plowson seems very anxious as he chats with Georgey. Mrs. Plowson tries to take Georgey away to wash his face.

The child's funeral builds an atmosphere of danger and melodrama, while also depicting a realistic consequence of poverty. Mrs. Plowson's fair complexion becomes relevant in Volume 3, given that her dead daughter passed for Helen in burial.

Mrs. Plowson remains fidgety and seems to know who Robert is. Georgey babbles on about his watch given to him by the pretty lady. Robert asks about the pretty lady. Georgey says that Maldon told him not to talk about the pretty lady but he will anyway. He says that she visited when he was little, gave him the watch, cried, and then left.

Mrs. Plowson's behavior suggests she is directly involved in the larger secrets of the story. Again, Georgey is innocent and ignorant of the schemes of adults and almost gives away clues. The "pretty lady" is Lady Audley.

Mrs. Plowson tries to hush Georgey, saying he might be annoying Robert. Georgey rambles on about Mrs. Plowson's daughter, who was sick. Before he can continue, a drunken Maldon comes in and tells Mrs. Plowson to go wash Georgey's face. Robert realizes that Mrs. Plowson has a stake in Maldon's secrets. Robert remarks that the mystery is growing deeper and "a stronger hand than my own is pointing the way to my lost friend's unknown grave."

Robert repeats this phrase about a "stronger hand" several times in the rest of the novel. The hand could be the virtue of truth and justice, could be George's spirit, or could be the predestined request of someone Robert hasn't even met yet (later suggested to be Clara). Either way, he feels inspired to proceed in his investigation.

VOLUME 2, CHAPTER 3

Robert tells Maldon that he intends to take Georgey away. Maldon admits that he always knew either Robert or George would take Georgey away. Robert says that George is allegedly in Australia, but Maldon says that George might come back someday. Maldon repeats this several times and then struggles to light a cigarette in his trembling hands.

Maldon's behavior here shows how he is broken down both physically and mentally from years of heavy drinking and poverty. Though the novel has previously portrayed him as selfish and swindling, here he could inspire pity in both the reader and Robert.

Robert confronts Maldon and tells him that George never left for Australia, and that Maldon only repeated what the telegram told him to say. Robert says that he is certain George is dead. Maldon begins hitting himself over the head and shrieking that it is cruel of Robert to interrogate an old man when he is drunk.

Maldon's pitiful state becomes even more so. His outburst could be the result of either extreme distress or a way for him to avoid further interrogation. Either way, the extremity of his actions characterizes the novel's melodramatic style.

Maldon breaks down sobbing. Because of this, and the incredible poverty surrounding him, Robert takes pity on him. Robert tells him that he wishes he did not have to investigate such dark matters, but the truth cannot be hidden, and he feels called to discover the fate of his friend. He says that the person responsible for George's death should flee the country, because Robert will not spare them.

Robert's sparing of Maldon shows Robert's specific type of merciful justice. At this point in the novel, he is not committed to exacting legal punishment or personal revenge, only to find out the truth about what happened to his friend. He sends a coded warning to Lady Audley so that she may flee.

Maldon repeats over and over that he does not believe that George is dead. Mrs. Plowson and Georgey reenter the room and Georgey attempts to comfort his crying grandpa by saying that he can have the watch. Mrs. Plowson asks why Maldon is so upset. Robert says it is because George died a year and a half after Helen did. Mrs. Plowson's face shifts slightly as Robert says this.

Georgey displays a childlike tenderness for Maldon, thus creating more sympathy for him. Maldon also appears not to know about the violent aspects of Lady Audley's scheme, showing he is at least less violent than she is. Mrs. Plowson's expression changes because she knows Helen is not dead.

Maldon agrees to let Robert take Georgey away. Robert assures him that he will take Georgey to a good school and will not try to exploit him for information regarding his investigation. Maldon again tells him that he would never hurt George and does not believe that he is dead.

Though Maldon is complicit in Lady Audley's scheme and he is still trying to keep Robert away from the truth, this scene shows him as a morally weak participant rather than a wicked orchestrator like Lady Audley.

Robert finds a good school in Southampton and meets with the headmaster. He tells the headmaster that Georgey is to have no visitors unless they have a letter with Robert's authorization. Robert then attempts to find Georgey something to eat but cannot think of what to get. Eventually he orders Georgey a great feast. Robert decides he will soon leave for Harcourt Talboys' house. Georgey talks of someone named Matilda, but before he can finish his story, he goes off to school.

Robert's inability to properly feed Georgey shows how unprepared he is for the new responsibilities thrust upon him. Georgey's mention of the name Matilda foreshadows Lady Audley's confession in Volume 3, where she will reveal that Matilda is Mrs. Plowson's dead daughter who is buried in Helen's grave.

VOLUME 2, CHAPTER 4

Harcourt Talboys lives in a "prim, square, redbrick mansion." Though he is a country squire, there is nothing rustic or hearty about him. No trees offer shade from the harsh sunlight that shines upon his mansion. He views matters of right and wrong as black and white, with no grey area or exception. He cast off George, his only son and would just as soon cast off Clara, his daughter, if she violated his rules. He is proud of his inflexible nature, and his vanity caused him to separate completely from his son when George married the impoverished Helen. Harcourt is described as being Roman-like in his strict adherence to justice and punishment, reminding Robert of the historical figure Junius Brutus.

Harcourt's rigidity represents a moral weakness of the upper-class. He works so hard to keep lower-class individuals out of his family that he instead destroys the very family he seeks to protect. Junius Brutus is the founder of the Roman republic known for executing his own sons for treason, just as Harcourt punished his own son for "betraying" the family. He practices a harsh, detached form of justice that contrasts with Robert's merciful justice based upon love for George.

Harcourt declared his son dead to him from the day of George's marriage, and George knew better than to try to ask for forgiveness. When Helen suggested that George ask his father for help, he said it would be easier to starve. At the time, Helen openly expressed her disappointment at their poverty, saying she expected men of George's rank in the army to be rich. George did not see any selfishness in this speech because he was so in love with Helen.

This scene adds necessary backstory revealing Helen's motivations for marrying George, suggesting she married him for his money rather than because they fell in love, as George believed. George's ignorance of this shows how love can blind one to the reality in front of them—and Michael Audley is not the first man tricked into assuming Helen's affection for him is pure.

Robert travels to Harcourt Talboys' mansion. Outside, the landscape is sharp and cold, surrounded by snow. Robert's heart sinks as he passes through the iron gate. He is admitted into the house by a servant, who is terrified of Harcourt's "extreme aversion to disorder." Robert gives the butler his card to bring to Harcourt and waits for his response in an undecorated hallway. The butler returns and says that Robert can enter, even though he has interrupted Harcourt's breakfast.

Just as the appearance of Audley Court represents the personality of the lady living inside it, the harsh landscape and sparse decoration of the Talboys' mansion reflects the strictness and formality of Harcourt. Harcourt's name literally sounds like "Hard Court," as in a rigid physical structure or a strict upper class.

Mr. Harcourt Talboys sits at the table dressed in grey, perfectly ironed clothes. Robert sees no resemblance between Harcourt and George. When Robert sees Harcourt, he understands how such a man could write the harsh letter that Harcourt wrote in response to Robert's first letter.

Not only does Harcourt's home express his strict personality, his appearance also suggests formality. The reader can infer from all appearances that the coming conversation will not be pleasant for Robert.

A woman also sits across the room from Robert and all he can tell about her is that she "was young, and that she was like George Talboys." He realizes that it is George's sister, Clara, whom George was fond of and who surely will care about George's fate.

To Robert, Clara's resemblance to George is the first and most notable aspect of her character, thus initially attracting him to her.

Clara stands up to greet Robert, dropping her needlework. Harcourt tells her to sit down without even looking at her, as if he has eyes in the back of his head. Robert picks up the needlework and hands it back to Clara. Harcourt glares at Robert, but Robert is not easily embarrassed. Robert begins to explain that he is there about George. Clara listens quietly, and Robert suspects that she is "as heartless as her father…though she is like George."

Robert falsely assumes that Clara doesn't care for George because she does not outwardly express her emotions. This adds to the theme of deceptive appearances. Again, however, Robert cannot help but note how she resembles her brother, further complicating his feelings for her.

Harcourt says that he no longer has a son. Robert says that he believes that George is dead. Harcourt tells him that he must be mistaken, and that this must be George's trick to get forgiveness from his father. Harcourt states that when George inevitably returns, Harcourt will prove his generosity by forgiving him.

Harcourt suffers from vanity, just as Lady Audley does, though his vanity takes the form of inflating his sense of his own importance. Vanity in the upper-class is common and can take many forms.

Robert tells Harcourt that he has evidence that George is dead, but he does not want to say it in front of Clara. Harcourt tells him to go ahead, and Robert decides that maybe this evidence will move Clara to concern, since she seems so unmoved now. Robert begins presenting his evidence by saying that George was his close friend and he, in turn, was George's dearest friend, since George's father abandoned him and his wife died.

Robert emphasizes the special intensity of his relationship with George, which replaces both the family and the marriage George has lost. This relationship seems to be outside the norm in terms of the Victorian society's emphasis on heterosexual, patriarchal families.

Robert states that if George had died of a broken heart, Robert would have grieved far less than he grieves now. Robert states that he knows that George has been murdered. Harcourt accuses Robert of being either mad or commissioned by George to play a trick on him. Robert says he wishes that were true, and if Harcourt doesn't believe that George is dead after hearing all of Robert's evidence, he will abandon his investigation.

Robert's statement shows how deception and mystery can wear upon a person's mind, keeping one from moving in their grief. Still, Robert longs for his formerly carefree life and seems to want Harcourt to give him an excuse to give up his investigation and possibly maintain hope that George is alive (although he believes this is unlikely).

Robert recounts the details of George's disappearance. Neither Harcourt nor Clara show any emotion during his story, and Robert specifically leaves out the names of Sir Michael and Lady Audley. He then asks Harcourt if his opinion has changed. Harcourt says no. Robert asks Harcourt if he should continue with his investigation. Harcourt says only if Robert himself wants to, because he does not care. Robert declares he will give up his investigation.

Clara's appearance is deceptive, as she reveals in the next chapter that she felt intense grief and anger while Robert spoke of George's likely death. Robert gets what he wished for—a reason to give up his investigation, to stop thinking about such a grim subject and not bring disgrace onto the Audley family.

Robert looks one last time at Clara, whose expression has still not changed. Robert says that he hopes Harcourt is right about George being alive, but he suspects that Harcourt will one day regret his apathy towards his son. Robert determines that Clara is as unfeeling as her father and leaves the house.

Robert remains fixated on Clara, most likely because of her contradictory resemblance to George in appearance but not in personality. At this point in the novel, Robert appears to be regressing to his former idle life.

VOLUME 2, CHAPTER 5

Robert looks out on the harsh grounds of the Talboys' mansion and wonders how someone as kind as George could grow up in such a cruel environment. He determines that "Some One higher" than one's parents must influence one's personality. Robert feels relieved now that he can give up on his investigation into such horrific matters.

Robert's statement that one's upbringing doesn't necessarily determine their personality contradicts Lady Audley's statements that her impoverished childhood forever influenced her perspective.

Robert then sees Clara running toward him. He notices that Clara is "very handsome," with eyes like George's. Up close, her face shows every emotion she is feeling. Clara begs him to listen to her because she must do something to avenge George's death.

Clara proves that her previous indifference was an illusion. Robert's note of her attractiveness in her similarity to George might suggest some latent attraction to his friend as well.

Clara explains that she loved her brother but knew she would not be successful in trying to sway her father's mind. She thought if she waited, her father would eventually forgive George for marrying Helen.

Clara's motivations as a character are revealed—she cares deeply for her brother's wellbeing.

Clara begs Robert to tell her the name of the woman he alluded to being involved in George's disappearance. Robert says he cannot do that until he is sure this woman is guilty. Clara urges Robert to continue with his investigation and "see vengeance done upon those who have destroyed [George]." Robert remembers what he said at Southampton about a hand stronger than his own beckoning him on.

Clara's character is also motivated by revenge, showing that she is more passionate and more determined than Robert. Her intensity inspires Robert, as seen in his remembrance of the phrase about the beckoning hand. Clara now seems to be that hand.

Robert says Clara surely cannot be asking him to continue on in this miserable business of a murder investigation. Clara tells him that he must avenge George's death. If he doesn't, she will do it herself. Robert recognizes that Clara's natural beauty is enhanced by her determination, and realizes that nothing but death will stop Clara in her mission.

Clara diverges from the traditional Victorian ideal of the submissive, always pleasant woman because she is not afraid of the grim subjects of death and revenge. Robert's admiration that argues a woman's true beauty lies in her mind and heart as well as her appearance.

Clara explains that George was her only companion growing up, and that is why she wants vengeance. She begs God to lead her to his murderer so that she may avenge her brother's death.

Victorian society assumed that women were incapable of or should be separated from violence. Clara's statements here contradict that assumption.

Robert notes that unlike his pretty cousin or his lovely aunt, Clara is truly beautiful because her appearance is enhanced by her intense passion. Even her plain dress is made beautiful by her natural beauty. Robert agrees to continue his investigation, especially since he sees that Clara came to the same conclusion—that George had been murdered—that he did when she heard the evidence.

Robert compares Clara to Alicia and Lady Audley to show that she is not like his perception of other woman with their superficial appearances. Clara uses her agency to influence Robert to keep seeking justice for her brother.


Robert asks if Clara has any old letters from George. Clara says that she will send them to him before she leaves to visit friends in Essex. Robert is shocked. Clara deduces that George disappeared in Essex.

Clara proves herself to be equal (if not greater) in her deductions than her male counterpart.


Robert tells Clara she should go inside because of the cold. She says cold is nothing to her when her only companion is dead. Robert remarks again how similar she is to George. Clara leaves, and Robert is filled with a new determination to solve George's case.

Robert assumes Clara will be fragile like the stereotypical Victorian woman, and tries to confine her to the house. She defies these expectations.


VOLUME 2, CHAPTER 6

Robert walks alone and contemplates the nature of happiness. He remarks on how little time one is truly happy and how fondly one thinks of that little happiness. He determines that happiness is completely accidental. Consider marriage: for one to be happy in marriage, one must meet the right woman at the right time. He thinks about how he could have easily missed Clara when she came to talk to him, and then he would have abandoned George's case forever.

Victorian society expected marriages to be made based on a match of both personality and status, so that the marriage would lead to lasting harmony and happiness for those involved and their families. Robert contradicts this expectation by saying that happiness in life and in marriage is completely random.

Robert thinks how life is often cruelly indifferent to the plight of humans. He wonders why more people are not in mad-houses, given that one can feel so much sorrow even as the outside world goes on in a calm, orderly fashion. He remembers that people go on day to day shifting between sanity and madness.

Robert's musings about how one's circumstances lead madness will align with Lady Audley's later argument that her life aggravated her madness. Also, peaceful atmospheres surrounding troubled minds are another example of deceptive appearances.


Robert admits that he submits completely to Clara's will. He expands his musings by stating that men are often lazy and indifferent, but women, being active and passionate, drive them towards the work needed for society. Women are the stronger sex and since they cannot hold much power in society, women instead rule over the domestic sphere. Robert argues that women should be allowed in the public sphere.

Victorian society viewed women as the weaker sex who should not be involved in any sort of leadership. Robert argues that this perception of women is false, given that strong women already influence the men in their lives for the advancement of society.

Robert then states that he hates women, calling them "bold, brazen, abominable creatures, invented for the annoyance and destruction of their superiors." Take George for an example. He married a woman and lost his inheritance. He goes to a woman's house and disappears. Robert also thinks of Alicia, who will no doubt force him to marry her.

While Robert acknowledges women's influence, he observes that this influence isn't always positive, especially if the woman in question is morally weak. He reveals his patriarchal bias here, blaming a woman for actions that were clearly the decisions of men.


Robert returns to Fig-tree Court to find his delivery of French novels, which he has no interest in, and a package from Clara. The package contains two letters from George. One, written right after his marriage, contains every minute detail of his wife. Robert states that George couldn't have known how this description would later be a clue in a criminal investigation.

Robert is no longer interested in his idle pursuits, despite his previous wishes to return to his privileged life, showing Clara's influence over his character. George's letter shows how crime can become wrapped up in ordinary, seemingly innocent life.


VOLUME 2, CHAPTER 7

In the dreariness of winter, Robert wanders around London, lonely and disinterested in the decadent hobbies of his barrister friends. He worries about the "dark cloud" brooding over Sir Michael's house and wonders when his uncle's life will be inevitably ruined. He wishes that "she" would take his warning and run away.

Robert's troubles have alienated him from other members of the upper-class, thus showing how frivolous the Victorian upper-classes could be. The dark cloud represents the influence of a wicked woman at a time when a wife was supposed to have a positive influence on the home.


Alicia writes to Robert telling him Sir Michael is sick (though not deathly ill) and would like to see his nephew. Robert is horrified at the thought of his inaction allowing Sir Michael to die in the arms of a wicked woman.

Robert's imagining of Sir Michael dying, when Alicia specifically said he was not, builds the melodramatic tone and shows his troubled state of mind.

Robert rushes to **Audley Court**. He notices that the bare trees surrounding Audley Court look like "ghostly arms" in the "chill winter twilight." He worries what would happen to Audley Court if Sir Michael should die.

The description of the ghastly atmosphere around the house contributes to the gothic tone and represents the sinister presence that Robert suspects lives in the house (that is, Lady Audley).

At **Audley Court**, Robert walks through the room with the portraits. Lady Audley's portrait, with a mocking smile and "tangled glitter of **golden hair**," is finished. Robert finds Sir Michael in his bedroom, with Alicia and Lady Audley sitting by his side. The narrator remarks that an artist would love to paint this luxuriously decorated interior with "the graceful figures of the two women, and the noble form of the old man." Lady Audley looks like a saint next to her husband.

Victorian society upheld the image of a romantic domestic setting, which this scene appears to convey. Robert, however, knows that this ideal is an allusion, as Lady Audley uses the appearance of a loving and submissive wife to hide her dark secrets and ambitions. The luxurious interior only highlights Lady Audley's moral depravity.

Alicia and Lady Audley greet Robert while Sir Michael is still asleep. Robert studies Lady Audley's face, attempting to detect her trickery. He mentions that Lady Audley must be very anxious since she depends on Sir Michael for her safety. Lady Audley says, "Those who strike me must strike through him." She keeps watching Robert, defying him with her blue eyes and pretty smile.

Robert's words have a double meaning in that Victorian women were dependent upon their husbands for their survival and Lady Audley is specifically dependent upon Sir Michael to keep Robert from exposing her secrets. Robert still believes he can divine Lady Audley's secrets from her appearance.

Sir Michael awakes and tells Robert that he must get along with his aunt. Robert assures him that he is now immune to her charms. Lady Audley explains that she was only afraid of people gossiping.

Sir Michael wishes for family harmony, a Victorian ideal. Lady Audley blames Robert's expulsion from the home on public opinion, again refusing to take responsibility.

Mr. Dawson arrives and examines Sir Michael. As he leaves, Robert follows him out and asks him about Lady Audley's past. Mr. Dawson is suspicious of Robert's intentions, but Robert says he suspects that Lady Audley is not worthy to be the wife of a noble man such as Sir Michael, and that he hopes to clear her name.

Nobility and worth have two meanings here, as Lady Audley may not be morally worthy to be the wife of such a kind man, but she also may not be worthy of the "noble" life she now lives because she is a lower-class social climber.

Mr. Dawson says that Lucy Graham became his family's governess in May of 1856, after answering an ad he put in the newspaper. She had a strong recommendation from Mrs. Vincent, a proprietress of a school in London. He gives Robert the address of Mrs. Vincent. Robert tells Mr. Dawson that he still has three years of Lady Audley's life to uncover before he can exonerate her of suspicion.

Acting like a real detective, Robert is now methodically reconstructing a timeline of Lady Audley's life. Mr. Dawson's lack of knowledge about his former employee throws further suspicion on the already mysterious past of Lady Audley.

Robert returns to Lady Audley and Alicia to find them having tea in Lady Audley's room. Robert observes how innocent and beautiful Lady Audley looks while engaged in the "most feminine and most domestic" act of pouring tea. He cannot imagine a man doing this activity or such a delicate creature in the rough society of men.

Lady Audley uses the expectations and distractions of gender in Victorian society to hide her trickery. Robert sees the falsehood of such gender stereotypes, because he knows that while women may perform innocent and delicate acts, they are also just as capable of evil as men.

Robert mentions to Alicia that she doesn't look well. She says it doesn't matter if she is well or not. She has begun to think like Robert and believe that nothing matters. Robert says that he cares about her health and so does Harry Towers. Alicia returns to reading her romance novel. Robert announces that he will leave tomorrow morning for London, but will return to **Audley Court** the next day.

Alicia remains strong-willed and defiant of both Robert and the Victorian gender role of a submissive, pleasant woman. Ironically, she is reading a romance novel when there is no romance in her life, because she rejected a man who loved her in favor of a man who does not.

Lady Audley asks Robert what he talked to Mr. Dawson about. Robert says that it was a legal matter he cannot disclose. Alicia tries to chat with Robert, but he is lost in thought. Alicia scolds him for being so dull and unintelligent. All Robert can think about is Clara and how he must return to his investigation.

As Alicia notices, Robert's temperament has changed from his formerly careless, lively manner. His motivations are now completely centered on Clara and his investigation into George's disappearance.

VOLUME 2, CHAPTER 8

Robert returns to London and goes to Mrs. Vincent's address. He finds her neighborhood under construction and struggles to find her home. Robert laments that if he were actually acting as a barrister, he would not be doing such hands-on investigating. He finds the address but discovers that Mrs. Vincent has moved. He asks the local baker if he knows where she went, and the baker says he wish he did, because Mrs. Vincent owes him money. Finally, a neighbor tells him where to find Mrs. Vincent after Robert swears that Mrs. Vincent does not owe him any money.

Like Lady Audley, Mrs. Vincent is also a character with secrets and questionable morals. She lives in extreme poverty, meaning that her former employee, Lady Audley, has risen far above her in status and wealth. Robert, who previously wouldn't work hard at anything, begrudgingly pursues his investigation against uncommon difficulties, showing further development for his character.

As Robert goes to Mrs. Vincent's new home, he imagines Sir Michael lying asleep while Lady Audley plays music. He thinks it would be a pleasant image, if he didn't know that it is a sinister lie.

This is another example of a seemingly loving, safe domestic scene that actually hides Lady Audley's secrets and her sinister nature.

Robert finds Mrs. Vincent in a shabby house filled with broken furniture. Robert asks her if she remembers Lucy Graham, and Mrs. Vincent says yes. Mrs. Vincent knows very little about Lucy's past. She has not heard from Lucy since Lucy took the job at the Dawsons. Robert asks if Mrs. Vincent sent a telegram to Lucy last September stating she was deathly ill and needed to see her. Mrs. Vincent says that she did not.

The poverty of Mrs. Vincent's home contrasts sharply with the luxurious decoration of Audley Court described just one chapter before. Lady Audley's character remains mysterious, but this scene confirms her scheming as shown by the false telegram, introduced all the way back in Volume 1, Chapter 7.

Robert asks what date Lucy first came to Mrs. Vincent's school. Mrs. Vincent says that she doesn't remember, but Tonks does. She calls in Miss Tonks, who says that Lucy came in on either the 17th or the 18th of August 1854.

Dates are crucial to Robert's careful, methodical process of reconstructing Lady Audley's past. This shows his newfound focus and use of his detective skills.

Robert asks Mrs. Vincent and Miss Tonks where Lucy came from. Mrs. Vincent says somewhere by the sea, but she's not sure where. Miss Tonks says that Lucy kept her personal information a secret "in spite of her innocent ways and her **curly hair**." Mrs. Vincent reveals that Lucy came with no reference, saying she had quarreled with her father and wanted to be far away from anyone who ever knew her.

Mrs. Vincent and Miss Tonks represent the two different responses characters have to Lady Audley. Vincent, like most characters, is charmed into believing anything she says. Miss Tonks, being more observational, sees through Lady Audley's disguise.

Mrs. Vincent admits that she didn't question Lucy because she was "perfect." Miss Tonks accuses her of being blind to the faults of her favorites and that Lucy was only "ornamental" to the school. Robert asks Miss Tonks if she has any more information. She doesn't, other than that Lucy often referred to herself as an unfairly poor and deprived person.

Tonks clearly resents Lady Audley, a weakness which could expose Audley's secrets. Like her father, Mr. Maldon, Lady Audley views herself as the victim of impoverished circumstances, even though characters such as Robert would view her as a villain.

Robert asks if Lucy left any possession behind. Miss Tonks goes to fetch an empty box that used to belong to Lucy. Robert thinks about how Miss Tonks seems to delight in the opportunity to tear down a fellow woman. Miss Tonks returns with a hat box covered in labels from different railroads and countries. Robert discovers that one label, bearing the name of Lucy Graham, has been pasted upon another. Robert peels back the first label and then the second.

The hat box, which would have been used as a travel suitcase, bears labels from Helen Talboys' travels with George throughout Europe. Though the text doesn't explicitly state so, one can infer that the bottom label reads Helen Talboys. Robert literally peals away the surface of Lady Audley's disguise in order to find the true identity beneath.

Robert bids Miss Tonks and Mrs. Vincent goodbye and takes the two labels with him. He thinks to himself that what he has found today is enough to convince Sir Michael that Lady Audley is a "designing and infamous woman."

Robert has reached a pivotal point in his investigation where he now can reveal Lady Audley's secrets to Sir Michael. Now his moral quandary concerns whether or not to actually tell him, and risk destroying his uncle's life.

VOLUME 2, CHAPTER 9

Robert contemplates how he now has the evidence to connect Helen Talboys to Lady Audley. He knows he must eventually bring this evidence to **Audley Court**, but the thought of bringing destruction to his own family causes him great pain. Robert decides that he must first learn what happened to Helen Talboys in the time between George's abandonment of her and the announcement of her death.

Robert's motives are questionable here. He may be justified in gaining more information to be absolutely certain before he makes an accusation, but he must also be delaying the inevitable embarrassment upon his family because he doesn't want to broach the devastating subject.

Robert writes to Clara asking the name of the town where George met Helen and Mr. Maldon, since George never talked to Robert about Helen after her supposed death. Clara sends a telegram saying that the town is named Wildernsea.

Clara once again proves herself essential to Robert's investigation. The reader is reminded of George's grief from Volume 1.

The landscape on the long train ride to Wildernsea is dismal and lonely, made even worse by the purpose of Robert's journey. When he arrives that night, he is the only one at the station. Robert checks himself into a large and empty hotel. He asks the landlord if he ever knew Captain Maldon. The landlord says that he did and he knew Maldon's daughter too.

All the details of Robert's surroundings remind both him and the reader how lonely he is, being without his companion George and bearing the sole responsibility for all the knowledge he has discovered about Lady Audley and his own family.

Robert asks the landlord how long Helen and Mr. Maldon stayed in Wildernsea after George left. The landlord says that he does not know, but Robert could ask their former landlady, Mrs. Barkamb.

This introduces Mrs. Barkamb, who will become a key piece of evidence in Robert's investigation since she knows so much about Helen.

That night, Robert dreams of **Audley Court** being transported from the peaceful countryside of Essex to the northern sea shore. As waves roll towards the mansion, Lady Audley emerges from the water, looking like a mermaid, beckoning Sir Michael toward destruction. Dark clouds gather over the sea, but then the clouds part as a ray of light shines through. The waves recede, leaving Audley Court safe on shore. Robert awakes feeling relieved.

Lady Audley is often associated with sirens and mermaids, women who use their magical charm to seduce and destroy mortal men. The ray of light represents the truth, breaking up the dark clouds of deception and saving Audley Court and Sir Michael. This dream represents Robert's decision to expose Lady Audley to Sir Michael.

The next day, Robert walks through the town under a gray and cold sky. He sees the pier where George first met Helen. He thinks how the "sweet delusion" of George's love turned into a "fatal infatuation." He marvels at how a previously smart and strong man can be completely overcome by a wicked woman's spell.

The dismal weather of the town reflects the dark subject matter Robert must investigate. Robert feels like he can now see a pattern of morally corrupt women destroying virtuous men.

Robert goes to Mrs. Barkamb's house and asks her for the exact date when Helen left Wildernsea. Mrs. Barkamb says Helen left abruptly. She says that Helen attempted to support herself through music lessons after George's abandonment, but Maldon spent all her money. After a fight with her father, Helen left Wildernsea without her father or her son, but Mrs. Barkamb does not know the exact date.

The details of Helen's past life create more sympathy for her character, as one can understand why she would wish to leave her exploitative father after her husband's abandonment left her in poverty. Her own abandonment of her child is harder to understand at this point in the narrative.

Mrs. Barkamb remembers she has a letter Captain Maldon wrote to her on the day Helen left. She also has a letter Helen wrote to Captain Maldon. The letter from Maldon to Mrs. Barkamb laments being deserted by his daughter after a fight over money. The letter is dated August 16th, 1854.

Once again, Maldon complains about being mistreated when he is the one actually exploiting others for money. The date of Helen's departure is an important addition to Robert's careful timeline of Helen's life.

In her letter to Captain Maldon, Helen writes that she has grown weary of her life in Wildernsea and is leaving to find a new one, shedding every link to her horrible past. She asks Maldon to forgive her if she is "fretful, capricious, changeable" because he knows why she is like that. Helen writes, "You know the *secret* which is the key to my life." Robert recognizes the handwriting of this letter.

In Volume 3, the reader learns that the secret Lady Audley refers to here is her mother's madness, which Lady Audley believes she herself has inherited. She uses this madness to justify her actions, rather than take responsibility for her selfish ambition for a wealthier life.

Robert connects the fact that Mr. Maldon's letter is dated August 16th, 1854 and Miss Tonks said that Lucy Graham arrived at the school on the 17th or 18th of August 1854. Mrs. Barkamb says that she was forced to kick Maldon out in November of that year, at which time he took his grandson and went to London. Robert takes the letters and leaves for London. He intends to find out who is actually buried in Helen's grave.

The consecutive dates regarding Helen and Lucy are examples of circumstantial evidence, which could either be connected or a result of coincidence, as Lady Audley will later point out as a flaw in Robert's investigation. Lady Audley's web of deception is hard to untangle.

VOLUME 2, CHAPTER 10

Robert receives a letter Alicia stating that Sir Michael is feeling better and both he and Lady Audley wish to have Robert back at Audley Court. Robert laments that Lady Audley seems nervous about his investigation and yet she does not run away. Robert states that he wants to do his duty to George, but he doesn't want to punish anyone, so he will give Lady Audley one more warning.

Robert continues to allow love, whether it is his love for George or for Sir Michael, to guide his investigation, thus highlighting his moral strength as a character. At this point, he is not motivated by revenge and is willing to show mercy to Lady Audley, which will change as her crimes increase.

Robert is again overcome with worry about Sir Michael's ruin, fearing that he himself will be the one responsible if he tells him about Lady Audley's secrets. But then he thinks of Clara "beckon[ing] him onwards to her brother's unknown grave."

A hallmark of "Sensation Fiction" is a concern with scandal (like the scandal of Lady Audley's crimes). However, Clara's influence over Robert is stronger than his concern over scandal.

Robert decides that he must confront Lady Audley at **Audley Court**. When he arrives at the mansion, however, the lady is away shopping. Robert laments that this obsession with George's case has taken over his life. What if his suspicions are wrong? But then Robert remembers the clue of the handwriting and knows that he only needs to "discover the darker half of my lady's secret."

Robert concludes that, despite the weaknesses of circumstantial evidence, he has gathered too many clues for the similarities to just be a coincidence. The "darker half" he speaks of refers to the morbid subject of who is buried in Helen's grave.

Robert strolls to a nearby, lonely church. He listens to an unknown organist playing and thinks about how what torments him about George's death is all he doesn't know about it. He thinks about how Lady Audley is now out living the life of a normal upper-class woman, hiding her wicked ways.

Robert's surroundings reflect his isolated situation. Churches symbolize morality, a subject he's wrestling with. Lady Audley is hiding specifically within upper-class society, emphasizing her transgressions.

When Robert goes to greet the organist, he discovers that Clara is the one playing the organ. She is visiting friends nearby. Clara comments that Robert looks ill. Robert says he is not ill, but troubled. He wonders if Clara is suspicious of his attempts to hide Sir Michael and Lady Audley's identities. He thinks that he and Clara are unequally matched because of her beauty and wisdom.

Braddon often uses coincidence to put her characters in situations that challenge them. This scene shows that Robert himself has secrets he wishes to hide, but his secrets are motivated by care for his loved ones, rather than self-interest like Lady Audley.

Before Clara can discover more, Robert says goodbye. Clara reminds him he promised to write her if he discovers any new information. Robert confesses that he has found more circumstantial evidence linking two seemingly unrelated people together. He cannot tell her who those people are until he confirms that the person who lies in Helen's grave is not Helen.

The fact that Robert intends to eventually reveal his secrets once he has more information redeems his currently deceptive behavior. Or, one could interpret his behavior as an avoidance of bringing embarrassment upon his family.

As Clara leaves, she states that she knows Robert will do his duty to George and solve the mystery of his disappearance. Robert says he is "a lazy, good-for-nothing fellow" but he will sacrifice his own feelings in order to discover what happened to George.

Once again, Clara uses her influence over Robert to accomplish her goal of justice for her brother. Because of her actions, Robert is rededicated to his mission.

Clara rejoins her friends, who tell her about the local baronet Sir Michael. They tell her that Sir Michael recently married a poor young governess. Clara asks for the maiden name of this young governess and what she looks like. The friends tell her about Lady Audley's childish beauty and **golden curls**. Clara falls silent, remembering the description of Helen from George's letter to his sister.

Clara quickly reaches the conclusion that Helen Talboys and this Lady Audley are connected, when the same revelation took Robert much longer. One wonders what Clara, being the more intelligent and more dedicated investigator, would accomplish if she had the same freedom and resources that Robert does as a man.

VOLUME 2, CHAPTER 11

Back at **Audley Court**, Robert runs into Lady Audley and Alicia. Robert finds Alicia more annoying than usual. Lady Audley asks Robert where he has been lately. Robert says he was in the town George lived in while married. Lady Audley's face grows pale, but she keeps smiling. She excuses herself to get dressed for dinner but Robert requests to talk to her alone. Alicia assumes that Robert is in love with Lady Audley and her "wax-doll" beauty like everyone else.

Robert judges Alicia more harshly because he compares her to Clara, whom he idolizes. Alicia compares Lady Audley to a "wax-doll," meaning that her beauty is artificially constructed to match society's ideal beauty standard, which is a harsh but accurate criticism of Lady Audley's appearance.

Robert and Lady Audley walk along the lime-walk. Lady Audley keeps making excuses to leave. Robert persists, saying he gave Lady Audley enough warning to escape and now he must be cruel to her. Lady Audley scolds him for frightening her. Robert accuses her of having a "diseased" mind.

Robert and Lady Audley walk on the same path Lady Audley and George walked on the day he disappeared. Robert makes his first accusation of Lady Audley's madness, an accusation that will escalate as the plot progresses.

Robert says George's ghost haunts **Audley Court**. Lady Audley says Robert must be suffering from monomania since he keeps talking about George, who is a stranger to her. Robert recounts how George came back from Australia excited to reunite with his wife. Lady Audley reminds him that George abandoned that wife. Robert continues, saying that all George wanted was to provide for his wife and was devastated when he read the announcement of her death, an announcement that Robert now believes was false.

Lady Audley counters Robert's accusation of madness by accusing him *of madness, showing that such accusations can become weapons in their arbitrary nature. Lady Audley's account of the history between George and Helen shows a different perspective on the event, where George is the villain and Helen is the victim. Two people can view the same events differently.*

Robert says Helen faked her own death because she used George's absence to "win a richer husband." Lady Audley says this claim is baseless. Robert says he found a newspaper announcement from July 1857 saying George was sailing back to England, so someone in Essex would know about George's return. Lady Audley asks what that has to do with Helen's death. Robert says he'll explain that soon.

Robert emphasizes the fact that Helen remarried for money, showing that he perceived her crime to be made worse by the fact she moved up in class by doing so. This depicts Robert as a character who enforces the dominant class structure of the Victorian era.

Robert says Helen and Captain Maldon created a conspiracy. He states that this is a conspiracy made by a conniving woman, who bet upon the likelihood of her husband's death and committed a crime in order to improve her status. He believes the wicked woman didn't care what virtuous man she destroyed in her conspiracy.

Robert shows his gender bias by repeating over and over that a woman *orchestrated this conspiracy. This portrays him as a character who enforces the patriarchal society of the Victorian society. His idea of justice in this situation adheres to the status quo.*

Robert says whoever did this is also a foolish woman, since "Providence" brings down the wicked. He says that if all this woman is guilty of is making the false announcement, then he would detest her, but he believes that this woman is also an "infamous assassin." Lady Audley asks him how he knows Helen is not buried in the grave bearing her name. Robert says that there are only a few people who could answer that, but he'll speak to them very soon.

Providence literally means God's care and plan, meaning that Lady Audley will face divine retribution for her actions—but one could also interpret Robert's words as describing how he will bring her down and punish her for violating the gender norms and class structure of Victorian society.

Robert says he will uncover the truth. He will not be fooled by "womanly trickery." He will find the missing link in the mystery, because he knows of a fair-haired woman in Southampton named Plowson, who seems to share in Captain Maldon's secrets.

The mention of Plowson and her fair hair reminds the reader of another key piece of circumstantial evidence the narrative has not referenced in a while—the original lock of hair supposedly belonging to Helen Talboys.

Robert says he will expose the truth unless the woman at the center of these secrets decides to run away. Lady Audley says that this woman would be foolish to listen to these crazy ramblings. She argues that George had acted strangely since his wife's death and Robert has no actual reason to believe Helen isn't dead.

Lady Audley's arguments are not necessarily untrue, given the lack of certainty surrounding Robert's circumstantial evidence. Taken out of the context, Robert's statements do sound rather crazy.

Robert says he has circumstantial evidence. He has the letter Helen wrote to Captain Maldon. He asks Lady Audley if she would like to know whose handwriting Helen's resembles. Lady Audley says women's handwriting often looks alike. Robert counters that he has a "series of such coincidences" that prove the same point, especially since Helen's letter states that she was leaving her old life to begin a new one.

Robert's detailing of all the evidence he has gathered not only serves as an argument for Lady Audley to run away before she is exposed, but also places all the evidence gathered throughout the plot in a logical sequence for the reader to understand.

Lady Audley tries to leave again. Robert says he will not be fooled by her feminine ploys. He states that Helen deserted her poor father to start a new life. On August 16th 1854, she dropped the name Helen Talboys and on the 17th she became Lucy Graham. Lady Audley accuses him of being mad, saying that just because Helen disappeared one day and she herself arrived at a new place the next, does not mean that they are the same person. Robert says he also has two labels from the same box, bearing the names of Miss Graham and Mrs. George Talboys. Lady Audley is silent. They pass the well at the end of the lime-walk.

Again, Lady Audley points out how circumstantial evidence can easily be explained by coincidence, but now she realizes the depth of Robert's investigation. Lady Audley's silence suggests the internal emotional turmoil Robert's revelations cause within her, turmoil that will build towards the climax of the story. In Volume 3, the reader will learn that the well they pass by is the same well Lady Audley pushed George into on the day he disappeared.

Robert asks her to deny that she is Helen and provide evidence to prove her statement. She says she will not, because Robert is mad, and if he does not stop spreading these accusations, he will be imprisoned in an asylum. Her threat scares Robert because he knows how evil women can be. He knows he is unequally matched against this beautiful, dangerous woman. He knows Sir Michael would believe Robert is mad before he believes that Lady Audley is guilty.

Lady Audley uses the idea of madness to scare Robert, thus showing that she doesn't care if a sane man is committed to an asylum. She reveals a not uncommon occurrence in Victorian England where individuals would accuse troublesome family members of madness just to have them locked away.

Robert envisions Clara's face, serious and honest in comparison to Lady Audley's, and he is filled with determination to save **Audley Court** from Lady Audley's evil.

Clara's moral, encouraging presence in Robert's mind undercuts his previous theory that all women are wicked influences on virtuous men.

Robert remembers that Lady Audley met George somewhere in this garden on the day he disappeared. Robert says that he knows George was murdered on these grounds and will begin a search to find his body. Lady Audley throws her arms up and cries out that she will kill Robert first. She says that Robert is driving her to madness. She draws herself up to her fullest height with "the sublimity of extreme misery." She tells Robert to go away because he is mad.

Continuously dogged by Robert, Lady Audley drops her carefully curated disguise and shows her true emotions. By saying that Robert pushes her towards madness, she blames Robert for her own violent inclinations. This foreshadows her attempted murder of Robert and her eventual confession in Volume 3.

Robert says that since Lady Audley refused to accept his mercy, he will expose her. On their way back to the house, they run into Alicia. Robert wonders how someone as honest as her could be of the same gender as Lady Audley. Robert says goodbye, because he will be staying at Mount Stanning.

Robert continues to compare women to one another to reveal what he thinks are virtuous qualities for women to have. While he once disliked Alicia's boldness, compared to Lady Audley, he loves her for her honest nature.

After Robert leaves, Alicia remarks how strange her cousin has been acting. Lady Audley remarks that he is eccentric. She asks if Robert's mother was also odd. Alicia says Robert's mother always seems reasonable, except for the fact that she married for love. She says Robert's father was also a little odd but generally a nice person.

Lady Audley uses the Victorian misconception that madness was always hereditary to suggest that Robert is insane. While Victorian women were expected to consider love when getting married, to only marry for love was considered to be almost madness.

Lady Audley says, "madness is more often transmitted from father to son than from father to daughter, and from mother to daughter than from mother to son." She tells Alicia that Robert is mad. Alicia doesn't believe her, but Lady Audley says Sir Michael will.

As the reader will later find out, Lady Audley's knowledge here comes from her own family history of madness. She intends to use her influence over her husband for her own self-gain, at the expense of harming another.

VOLUME 2, CHAPTER 12

Lady Audley goes into the library to see Sir Michael, who loves her purely and generously. Sir Michael asks what Lady Audley has been doing since she came home an hour ago. She says that Robert was talking to her but then he suddenly ran off. Sir Michael remarks that Robert must be half-mad, but in truth, Sir Michael only believes his good-natured nephew to be a little incompetent because of his idleness. Lady Audley sees an opportunity to change this opinion and sits down at Sir Michael's feet.

The purity of Sir Michael's love contrasts with Lady Audley's manipulation. Lady Audley sitting at Sir Michael's feet suggests the submissiveness that Victorian society expected of wives. The reader knows Lady Audley is only pretending to be submissive, when in reality she intends to use her influence over her husband to change his opinion of Robert for her own self-interest.

Lady Audley begins to cry, worrying Sir Michael. The very real anguish Lady Audley feels overcomes her and she cannot speak. Her agony moves Sir Michael to the point where he would do anything for her. With much difficulty, Lady Audley says Robert talked to her about horrible subjects and must have inherited madness. Sir Michael says Robert's family has no madness, but Lady Audley says his mother's family could have kept hereditary madness a secret.

Again, strong emotion overcomes Lady Audley's deceptive appearance. One might almost feel sympathy for her agony, if she didn't then accuse a sane man of madness for her own gain. Ironically, Lady Audley accuses Robert's family of hiding madness when, as we later learn, her own family hid her mother's madness.

Lady Audley argues that Robert must have lived alone for too long and read too many novels. She says people can hide their madness for years before they are overcome by their insanity and commit some violent crime. She declares Robert is mad because he thinks George was murdered at **Audley Court**.

Lady Audley reveals a common misconception during the Victorian era, that living outside of conventional society would lead to madness. Ironically, hiding madness until one is overcome is what she will later confess to experiencing herself.

Sir Michael is shocked and says he will go to Mount Stanning to determine whether or not Robert is mad. Lady Audley says usually a stranger identifies the first signs of madness in a person. Then she says Sir Michael must not go because he was recently ill.

Lady Audley is using the guise of a caring wife to keep Sir Michael and Robert separate, so that Robert cannot tell Sir Michael all that he knows.

Sir Michael says Robert will come visit tomorrow. He adds that he really doesn't believe that Robert is mad. Robert may just be saying such outlandish ideas because everyone struggles to understand the tragedies that fall upon others. He says Lady Audley doesn't have to see Robert if she doesn't want to.

Since Sir Michael is still not convinced that Robert is mad, Lady Audley will have to work harder to carry out her plot. Simply never seeing Robert again will not stop him from revealing her secrets.

Lady Audley says Robert accused her of being involved in George's disappearance. Sir Michael finally agrees that Robert must be mad, and says he will send someone to Mount Stanning to talk to him. Lady Audley makes Sir Michael promise that he will never be influenced against his own wife. She leaves the room, certain that she has turned the tables on Robert.

For now, Lady Audley seems to have succeeded in accusing Robert of madness in order to protect her own secrets. She also ensures that she will always be able to use the love of her husband to protect herself from the consequences of her crimes.

VOLUME 2, CHAPTER 13

While Lady Audley and Alicia still hate each other, they don't fight openly because Lady Audley ignores Alicia's temper. Because they never directly confront each other, their relationship cannot change. Lady Audley keeps to her rooms and Alicia spends most of her time outdoors. Sir Michael and Alicia's relationship suffers because of the animosity between stepdaughter and stepmother. Lonely Alicia cannot even confide in her careless cousin Robert.

The harmonious ideal of the Victorian family home no longer exists in any form within Audley Court. Victorian society emphasized politeness to the point of repression of emotion, and these scenes show how such repression can leave interpersonal conflict unresolved, causing harm to everyone in the family.

Per Lady Audley's advice, Sir Michael remains indoors. She cares for him until bedtime and then returns to her own chambers, where she finds her piano, her drawings, and her embroideries. She sits down to think. If an artist walked in, he would see this beautiful, **golden-haired** woman surrounded by all her expensive teacups, cabinets, flowers, and mirrors. Despite all her finery, Lady Audley is more wretched than "many a half-starved sempstress in her dreary garret."

In public Lady Audley continues to pretend to be a caring wife, but when she is alone she can drop the act and express her true misery. Her miserable state surrounded by such finery shows that material wealth cannot bring one happiness, revealing the fundamental foolishness of her pursuit of wealth and status at the expense of crime.

The narrator argues that Lady Audley cannot take any enjoyment in the art around her because her soul is no longer innocent. She can only take pleasure in the destruction of her enemies.

The narrator argues that selfishness and wickedness rob one of all innocent pleasures and only lead to more wickedness.

Lady Audley broods as the fire casts a red light over her face. The narrator speculates that she is remembering her childhood. She could be remembering the first time she looked in the mirror and realized she was beautiful. This moment was the first time her beauty led her toward selfishness, cruelty, and ambition.

The fact that the third-person narrator, who usually reports directly on the thoughts of other characters, only speculates *on Lady Audley's thoughts, reveals how mysterious and depraved Lady Audley has become.*

Lady Audley twirls **her golden hair** around her fingers and makes "as if she would have torn them from her head." But even in her despair, she can't bring herself to destroy her beauty. She speaks to herself, saying that she was not "wicked" when she was young, and that her "worst wickednesses have been the result of wild impulses, and not deeply-laid plots."

Lady Audley's golden curls show that no matter what she is feeling, her vanity is her character's dominating trait. The division of premeditated acts vs. violent impulses will become important later when the narrative deliberates on Lady Audley's madness.

Lady Audley continues her monologue by stating that she knows the "signs and tokens" of madness, snf therefore Robert is mad. Lady Audley begins to wonder if anything will stop Robert but death. She says she can't plot such a crime, but begins to muse upon what would happen if she were to run into Robert alone in the garden. Then a knock at the door interrupts her thought.

Lady Audley's thoughts on Robert reveal that accusations of madness are often subjective, and can easily be based upon another person's self-interest. Lady Audley begins to premeditate on committing a violent crime, thus contradicting her previous statement about never planning her wicked acts.

The knocking repeats before Lady Audley opens the door to find Phoebe Marks. Lady Audley is genuinely happy to see Phoebe, because they are similar in both their looks and their wicked personalities. She confesses to Phoebe that she is deeply troubled, and Phoebe guesses it's about the secret.

Even when someone is as selfish and wicked as Lady Audley, they can still enjoy sympathy and connection with another. Still, Lady Audley is absorbed in her own troubles and doesn't think to ask why Phoebe came all the way to Audley Court.

Phoebe reveals that Robert is at the Castle Inn right now. Lady Audley suspects Robert is interrogating Luke. Phoebe says Luke forced her to come ask Lady Audley to pay the inn's Christmas rent. Lady Audley says Luke will keep asking for money indefinitely.

Lady Audley's realization that the Markses' blackmailing will never end contributes to her eventual decision to kill Luke, as she begins to feel more desperate about her secrets.

Lady Audley contemplates the situation, with Robert and Luke in the same place. She knows the drunken Luke will only become cruel if she doesn't pay. Phoebe says this should be the last payment, since she wants Luke to leave the Castle Inn because he is a horrible innkeeper. She says Luke drinks too much and has nearly caused several horrible accidents.

Lady Audley's desperation grows as she realizes that two of her enemies have come together. Luke's incompetence also exposes the folly of the Victorian expectation that the husband be the head of the household, when Phoebe is much more controlled in her behavior.

Phoebe fears they will all die in a fire, because when Luke becomes drunk he leaves lit candles in precarious places. The Castle Inn, with its cheap materials, could easily go up in flames. Lady Audley thinks her life would be better if Luke *did* die in a fire. Then she admits that it wouldn't matter, because her most dangerous enemy would still be alive.

The almost-fires Phoebe describes probably give Lady Audley the idea to try and burn down the Castle Inn. Lady Audley sees Robert as her most dangerous enemy, because unlike the Markses, he is not motivated by greed.

Phoebe hands Lady Audley a letter from Robert. The letter states that if Helen is still alive, Mrs. Barkamb would be able to recognize her. Lady Audley sinks into horrible despair.

Lady Audley's horrible despair here is the tipping point that will motivate her violent crimes in Volume 3.

VOLUME 3, CHAPTER 1

Sir Michael sleeps peacefully and Lady Audley feels a brief moment of pity for him. But her pity is mostly selfish, because she knows he will be destroyed if Robert exposes her secrets. Then Lady Audley thinks about "her lovely face, her bewitching manner, her arch smile, her low musical laugh" and feels triumphant. She knows Sir Michael will never fall out of love with her charms.

This is almost a redeeming moment for Lady Audley, showing that she can feel empathy for another person, but the moment is soon ruined by her selfishness.

Despite her confidence in Sir Michael, Lady Audley still fears that Robert will expose her unless some calamity silences him. She stops suddenly. Then she walks to her dressing table and composes herself in the mirror. She tells Phoebe they will go together to pay the landlord at the Castle Inn. She ignores Phoebe's protests, and says she wants to make sure the money goes directly to the landlord. They will sneak out of the house so that servants do not see them.

When Lady Audley stops, she is clearly making an important decision. Her actions following this section show that this decision is to burn down the Castle Inn and kill her enemies. This is a pivotal moment when her character premeditates an act of great violence and actually decides to carry it out.

Lady Audley sends Phoebe on ahead and goes to get dresses to go out. An "unnatural colour still burnt like a flame in her cheeks, the unnatural light still glittered in her eyes." The narrator says one can't even fully describe the intensity of Lady Audley's agony.

The unnatural color reflects the violent thoughts within Lady Audley's mind. Braddon's emphasis on Lady Audley's agony creates some understanding for her character.

After 10 minutes, Lady Audley goes to sneak out through a window in the breakfast-room. In the cheerfully decorated room, she passes Alicia's drawing supplies. Lady Audley thinks how happy Alicia would be at her stepmother's defeat. Leaving all the internal doors open so she can find her way back through the house, she climbs out the window.

Lady Audley must pass through a deceptively peaceful domestic scene on the way to commit her crime, as crime can exist even in places that seem happy. Lady Audley's recognition of Alicia's hate shows how Lady Audley now views everyone as an enemy.

Outside, Lady Audley feels as if she is running away. She thinks she could run away, like George did, but she has no money and she can't live in poverty again. She would die from the struggle, as her mother died. She says she will not go back to that life and goes to meet Phoebe. Together they walk to Castle Inn.

Lady Audley makes the important point that running away, which Robert asked her to do, is privilege reserved for men, since the Victorian era offered few ways for a woman to lift herself out of poverty without the help of a man.

Lady Audley walks with an intense courage "born out of her great despair." She notices a light in one window of the Castle Inn, where Luke must be still awake. Lady Audley assumes Robert is asleep in one of the unlit rooms. Lady Audley confirms with Phoebe that Robert is staying at the Castle Inn that night.

The reader can see how Lady Audley's suffering drives her forward. Though the narrative has not explicitly stated it yet, she wants to confirm Robert's location so she can kill him.

Wind blows heavily upon the inn. Luke sits in his chambers drinking with the landlord. Luke's intoxication increases his brutal nature and slurs his speech. With mechanical gestures, Lady Audley enters the room with Phoebe and announces that she has come to settle the debts herself. Luke rudely tells her that she could have given the money to Phoebe. He continues to insult Lady Audley until she turns towards him and stuns him with her beauty. **Her wind-blown hair** resembles flames and her eyes look like those of "an angry mermaid."

Luke's infatuation with Lady Audley shows how beautiful women can use their appearance to influence even the cruelest of men. Her hair resembling flames suggests the hellish thoughts within her mind. The narrative again describes her as a mermaid, the mythological temptress of men, showing that Lady Audley's power is both strong and sinister.

Lady Audley pays Luke and Phoebe offers to walk her home. Lady Audley agrees but says that she feels faint and needs water. She then asks Phoebe where Robert's room is. Phoebe says he is in Room #3, which is next to their own. Lady Audley says she will go to Phoebe's room to use her water basin. She tells Phoebe to wait behind and make sure Luke doesn't follow.

Lady Audley's scheming here shows that her actions are carefully thought out and intentional. This will become relevant later when a doctor deliberates on whether or not Lady Audley is committing this crime because of an uncontrollable state of madness.

Lady Audley takes a lit candle and goes down the hallway. She finds Room #3 and sees the key in the door. Almost in a trance, she turns the key twice, double locking the door. She goes into Phoebe's room next door and dips her hair in the water basin. Then she notices the cheap tapestries Phoebe has hung on the walls. Lady Audley smiles. She carefully places the lit candle close to a mirror's muslin curtains.

The trance Lady Audley appears to be in could be interpreted as either a state of madness or an unquestionable commitment to her crimes. She knows the cheap material will catch and burn quickly but avoids direct responsibility (as she always does) by not setting the fire herself.

Phoebe is waiting by the inn's front door when Lady Audley arrives. Phoebe is alarmed when she realizes Lady Audley doesn't have the candle, but Lady Audley says the wind blew it out so she left it behind. Despite the harshness of the winter night, Lady Audley hurries away with Phoebe.

Lady Audley lies about blowing out the candle and then quickly ushers Phoebe away so that Phoebe cannot stop the fire. Lady Audley is completely committed to the arson and murder.

When they are less than a mile away from **Audley Court,** Phoebe spots the fire off in the distance. Phoebe is horrified, certain it's the Castle Inn. She fears for Luke and Robert inside. Then she remembers Lady Audley's quarrels with Luke and Robert and begs Lady Audley to say that she did not deliberately set the fire. Lady Audley says Phoebe is mad, since she doesn't even know for sure that the fire is coming from the Castle Inn. Lady Audley leaves Phoebe kneeling in the road.

Partly as a result of her blackmailing scheme against Lady Audley, Phoebe loses both her husband and her source of income. This aligns with a common trend in the final volume of the novel, where those who commit deception and violate the norms of society are punished for their actions. Lady Audley continues to avoid punishment by trying to convince others that they are mad.

VOLUME 3, CHAPTER 2

The next morning, Lady Audley emerges from her chambers dressed in fine clothing, but with a pale face and dark-circles beneath her eyes. At the breakfast table, Alicia wonders if Robert will come visit today. Lady Audley is startled at the casual mention of the name of a man she knows is dead.

Lady Audley has sunk so low morally that she cannot hide the outward appearance of her troubled character. Her stress only grows as she hides her secret of setting fire to the Castle Inn, slowly pushing her towards a breaking point.

Alicia rambles on about Robert's poor manners. Sir Michael listens thoughtfully, understanding that Alicia insults Robert because she loves him. Sir Michael mentions that he heard Sir Harry is going to the Continent for a yearlong tour. Alicia says Sir Harry mentioned he would travel if his other plans didn't work out. Alicia says Harry is a good man, unlike Robert. Sir Michael mentions Robert's troubling behavior, as described by Lady Audley, but Alicia counters that Robert is too lazy to go mad.

Alicia continues to show her infatuation with Robert by rambling on about him. Sir Michael allows his daughter the freedom to form her own attachments, rather than asserting his patriarchal authority over her. This scene also shows that Sir Michael is still wrestling with the idea of whether or not Robert is mad.

Sir Michael contemplates how his beloved wife told him about Robert's sanity while she was in a state of agitation. He begins to think he has no evidence to suggest Robert is insane, and that for Lady Audley to accuse him of madness, she would have to be mad herself. Then again, he thinks, Robert has been troubled since George's disappearance, and Robert showed some unreasonableness in not courting Alicia, even though she has expressed her feelings and would be a perfect match for him.

Sir Michael's internal conflict over the subject of Robert's madness is intense, as he weighs his different loyalties to the people he loves. This also shows another troubling aspect of marriage in Victorian society, where one could be perceived as insane for refusing a socially advantageous and seemingly compatible match.

The more Sir Michael thinks, the more he becomes convinced Robert must be mad not to love the pretty, affectionate Alicia, when so many suitors seem to. The narrator points out, however, that love is a mystery, only understood by the individual who suffers from it. Sir Michael cannot see that what some may look for in a partner, others are repulsed by.

Braddon shows that love, and human feeling in general, is more complicated than the norms of Victorian society allow. Love, like madness, can be deceptive if an outsider only makes a surface-level examination of it.

Robert does not love Alicia. He appreciates her pretty looks and her affection for him, but he has lost all romantic interest since he met Clara. He is so attached to Clara he cannot even think about another woman. He feels as if all of society is pushing him to love Alicia, but he simply cannot.

Love defies all societal expectations of what should make a happy marriage (i.e. similarities of class, advancement of wealth, preexisting affection, family approval).

After breakfast, Lady Audley locks herself in her room. From her cabinet, she takes out a bottle labeled "Opium–Poison" but decides she doesn't need to use it now. She anxiously looks in the direction leading to Mount Stanning. Lady Audley tells her maid she has a headache and will lie down.

Lady Audley's contemplation of suicide shows the extreme agitation she is feeling. One can see that for a long time, Lady Audley has been prepared to take drastic action to keep her secrets.

Lady Audley dreams that every person in the house is knocking on her door to tell her about the fire. When she awakens, she dresses herself in her best silk, despite her misery. She finds Sir Michael asleep, so she asks Alicia to take a walk with her.

Lady Audley keeps trying to use fine clothes to disguise her distressed state of mind. She is so distressed she would rather spend time with Alicia than be alone with her thoughts.

Despite her troubled mind, Lady Audley's appearance is completely composed. She asked Alicia to walk with her because she could not bear to wait inside any longer. She wishes time would stand still. She is still troubled by the dream she had during her nap, about a river connecting **Audley Court** and Mount Stanning. Then she wishes news of the fire would come and her agony would be over. She continues wishing someone would come and tell Sir Michael that Robert is dead.

The river in her dream seems to represent the flow of information between the two places. Lady Audley is dogged by her lack of knowledge, showing a similarity between herself and Robert, who has also spent much of the novel agonizing over all the information he did not know about a potential murder. She doesn't care about the pain Robert's death would cause Sir Michael.

Alicia imagines catching a cold on the walk and Robert coming to take care of her in her dying state. Alicia leaves Lady Audley to get dressed for dinner. Night begins to fall, casting shadows over Audley Court. Lady Audley is completely alone until she hears a footstep. She runs to see who it is. She stumbles back and falls to her knees upon discovering it is Robert. He helps her up and leads her inside.

Just as Lady Audley is singularly focused on her secrets, Alicia is singularly focused on Robert's romantic attentions. The discovery that Robert is still alive is a climactic moment that pushes Lady Audley to finally admit defeat and confess her secrets.

VOLUME 3, CHAPTER 3

Robert asks to speak to Lady Audley alone, and they go to the library. Robert tells her the Castle Inn burned to the ground. He escaped only by chance, since he found his designated room damp and chill and chose to sleep on a couch in the sitting-room. Robert knows Lady Audley set the fire, not caring who else she killed in the process. He says he will not show any mercy to her, only to her husband.

In another example of melodrama, Robert narrowly escapes certain death merely by coincidence. Given the escalation of Lady Audley's crimes, Robert now abandons his merciful form of justice, desiring to exact full punishment upon Lady Audley.

No one died in the fire. Robert slept lightly because of his worries. He woke up in time to save Luke, but not before Luke was horribly burned. Afterwards, Luke and Phoebe told Robert that Lady Audley had visited the inn that night.

Though Lady Audley would view Robert as a villain, his death-defying actions in the fire portray him as a romantic hero.

Robert says while before he wondered how such a beautiful woman could murder George, he doesn't wonder now. He knows Lady Audley is capable of any evil deed. Unless she confesses, he will gather witnesses who can reveal her identity and will see her punished for her crime.

Robert's development as a character is shown by how he now sees through superficial beauty to the character beneath, and how he no longer shies away from the dark subject of punishment.

Lady Audley tells Robert to bring Sir Michael in, because Robert has won. She then says that he has conquered a mad woman. She claims managing her insanity has always been a delicate balancing act and when George distressed her, as Robert is distressing her now, she killed him. She asks again for Sir Michael so that she may tell him her life's "secret."

Lady Audley's character has changed in that she is now under too much distress to keep her secrets any longer. She uses the label of madness to deflect responsibility away from herself onto those who have caused her distress, namely George and Robert.

Robert goes to Sir Michael, telling him that Lady Audley has deceived him and now wishes to make her confession. Sir Michael goes into the library, saying, "'Tell me that this man is a madman! Tell me so, my love, or I shall kill him!'" Lady Audley falls at his feet and apologizes. She says he has been good to her, but that she cannot sympathize with others because her own misery is so great.

Sir Michael expresses the full power of Lady Audley's influence over him. Lady Audley's position at his feet suggest submissiveness, or more likely helplessness now that Robert has exposed her. Lady Audley seems to show some remorse for her actions, but she is still self-absorbed.

Lady Audley tells the story of her life. She grew up without her mother. She lived in a lonely village with a caretaker she hated. She rarely saw her father and learned early on "what it was to be poor."

Lady Audley establishes the poverty of her childhood in order to justify her greedy, social-climbing behavior as an adult.

As a child, Lady Audley kept asking where her mother was, but only heard that she was ill and away. In a moment of anger, her caretaker told her that her mother was a madwoman and lived in a mad-house. Imagines of her mother, violent and decrepit, haunted Lady Audley. In her dreams, her mother killed her.

Lady Audley's fears of her own mother reveal a prejudice, common during the Victorian era, that portrayed people suffering from madness as violent and evil. This image literally haunts Lady Audley's childhood.

When Lady Audley was 10 years old, her father returned to take her to school, but she had already felt "the bitterness of poverty." Sir Michael listens to this story in shock, as it is completely different from the previous backstory Lady Audley told him.

Lady Audley sees childhood poverty as irrevocably changing her character. Sir Michael is finally realizing his wife's lies.

Lady Audley says she told her father she knew about her mother. Captain Maldon loved his wife dearly and would have cared for her if he didn't have to work for a living. Lady Audley takes this situation as another example of the cruelties of poverty.

Lady Audley reveals that the idleness of the upper-class is a privilege that the working poor cannot enjoy, thus harming the poor who cannot take care of their families.

Lady Audley continues to tell the story of her past. Before she went to school, Captain Maldon took Lady Audley to see her mother. Instead of a raving maniac, her mother appeared to be a "golden-haired, blue-eyed, girlish creature, who seemed as frivolous as a butterfly." Lady Audley furthers notes that her mother inherited her madness from her own mother (Lady Audley's grandmother), who died mad. Lady Audley's mother seemed sane before Lady Audley's birth, but afterward her sanity declined.

Lady Audley inherited her mother's looks, just as she fears she has inherited her mother's madness. The mother's composed appearance disproves the harmful stereotype of the dangerous, decrepit mad person, showing that appearances do not necessarily reflect someone's internal state.

Lady Audley had to keep her mother's madness a secret, and that secret made her selfish and heartless. As she got older, others told her she was beautiful. Even though she had been cursed with her mother's madness, she realized her beauty could be used to make an advantageous marriage.

Lady Audley describes a pivotal moment in her development, as her whole adult life has centered around using her beauty to make socially and financially advantageous marriages.

At seventeen, Lady Audley moved in with her now retired father in a remote town. She grew impatient while waiting for a rich husband. She says Robert and Sir Michael have been rich their whole lives, so they cannot know how poverty impacts one's life.

Lady Audley makes an important point that Robert and Sir Michael's privileged upbringings may prevent them from being able to fully understand her perspective.

Finally, a rich suitor arrived. His name was George Talboys (at this name, Sir Michael starts). George fell in love with Lady Audley and she loved him as much as someone like her could. She loved Sir Michael more, however, since he elevated her status even more than George.

Lady Audley's love is completely based on wealth and status. One could interpret this as not love at all, but selfishness. This revelation is devastating for Sir Michael, given his former admiration of Lady Audley's supposed purity.

Sir Michael's romantic image of courting his wife shatters with this story. He remembers the "vague feeling of loss and disappointment which had come upon him on the summer's night of his betrothal," but he never fully believed that Lady Audley could marry him solely for his wealth and status.

Sir Michael's thoughts refer back to Chapter 1, when Lucy told him she couldn't set aside his wealth when accepting his proposal. One could interpret this as Sir Michael allowing himself to be fooled for a long time, when Lady Audley was honest about at least this point from the start.

Lady Audley says that after she and George married, they traveled Europe together. When they came back to live with her father, however, George had run out of money and neglected his wife because he was depressed at their situation. She "begged George to appeal to his father; but he refused," and she "persuaded him to try and get employment," but he didn't succeed. She gave birth to their son and "the crisis which had been fatal to my mother arose for me." Lady Audley recovered but was more irritable than before. She called George cruel for dooming her to a life of poverty. He ran away, and left her a letter saying he went to Australia and wouldn't return until he was a rich man.

This section of her story creates more sympathy for Lady Audley's character. She attempted to make her marriage with George work, and in her perspective, he neglected her both financially and emotionally before abandoning her and their son. Modern psychology might diagnose Lady Audley as suffering from post-partum depression after the birth of her son. This shows that the issue of good and evil in this story is not as simple as it might appear.

Lady Audley resented George for leaving her in poverty, having to labor even though George's father was rich. She didn't love her son because he was only a burden to her. She began to have "fits of violence and despair" indicative of madness. She saw that her father recognized the madness she was feeling. She decided to run away from "this wretched home which [her] slavery supported" and go to London.

Victorian society would condemn a mother for declaring she doesn't love her child, but Lady Audley proves that this expectation may not always be possible, especially under the strain of extreme poverty. She also defies the expectation that a daughter should submit to her father.

Lady Audley went to Mrs. Vincent after reading the school mistress's advertisement for a teacher in the newspaper. She came up with the fake name of Lucy Graham. When she came to Essex and Sir Michael proposed, she felt she had fulfilled the ambition she'd had ever since she first realized her beauty. Three years had passed by that point, and she heard nothing from her first husband. For all she knew, George was dead or at least separated from her forever, so she agreed to marry Sir Michael with every intention to be a worthy wife. She remained faithful, despite all the men who desired her.

Lady Audley describes her most triumphant moment when the dreams of her childhood are realized. She argues that she didn't truly do anything wrong, since she had no guarantee George would ever come back and she intended to fulfill the Victorian ideal of a loving, faithful wife to Sir Michael. Again, Lady Audley avoids taking responsibility for the crimes she committed in the pursuit of gaining and protecting her wealth.

Lady Audley says she delighted in her new status and was grateful to Sir Michael. She donated to the less fortunate, empathizing with them since she was once poor. She sent money to her father anonymously. She would have been kind and generous all her life if fate had not intervened. She believed that she could keep her madness in check without anyone in her new life noticing.

Lady Audley's generosity towards the poor and her father creates some sympathy for her character, showing she can empathize with others who also suffer in poverty. But she also blames the following plot on circumstance, rather than her deception or her greedy ambition.

Lady Audley then saw an announcement in the paper saying George was coming home. She realized that unless George believed she was dead, he would never stop searching for her. Again, Lady Audley felt herself sink into madness. She went to meet her father in Southampton and together they conspired to announce Helen Talboys's death in the newspaper. They realized they needed details of time and place for the announcement in order to convince George, due to his determination and hope.

Though Lady Audley previously argued that she only committed wicked acts in fits of madness, this plot shows careful, calm planning on her part. She has a keen knowledge of her situation and also of George's personality, showing an intellect which Dr. Mosgrave will later argue means she could not be suffering from madness.

Captain Maldon broke down in tears due to his anxiety over George. Lady Audley sat down to play with her son, who viewed her as a stranger. When the child's caretaker Mrs. Plowson came in, Lady Audley took her aside to ensure the child was well-treated. Then Lady Audley learned that this pale-faced, blonde-haired, short woman had a dying daughter. Suddenly, Lady Audley had the idea to use Mrs. Plowson and her daughter Matilda in her scheme.

Lady Audley seems to prove Robert's previous argument that women are the stronger sex, given that she keeps thinking while her father breaks down from stress. She is smarter and more conniving than her father as well. Despite her claims she didn't love her son, Lady Audley shows care and concern for her child here.

Lady Audley visited Matilda and confirmed she bore a passing resemblance to herself. Lady Audley bribed Mrs. Plowson and then instructed Maldon to find lodgings and a doctor while referring to Matilda as his daughter, "Mrs. Talboys." When Matilda died, Maldon buried her under the name of Helen Talboys.

Lady Audley uses appearances to fool George into believing she's dead, knowing that even a resemblance as flimsy as she has with Matilda can be effective. Mrs. Plowson is another social climber willing to lie to gain money.

Sir Michael says he cannot listen anymore. He tells Robert to arrange to provide for the woman he once loved. He cannot bear to say goodbye to her, and makes plans to leave Essex.

Sir Michael's character has completely changed. His idealized image of his wife is shattered, and his spirit has been broken along with it.

VOLUME 3, CHAPTER 4

Robert worries about Sir Michael's quiet devastation. He fears Sir Michael in his old age might collapse from despair, but decides he should leave his uncle alone to grieve. Robert runs into Alicia, who is complaining about dinner being late. Robert explains that Sir Michael has suffered a great loss and his daughter must comfort him. Alicia must accompany Sir Michael when he leaves **Audley Court** because he is separated from his wife forever. Robert urges Alicia to never mention Lady Audley's name to her father. He hopes Alicia can make Sir Michael happy again.

This state of despair is a dramatic change for Sir Michael, who began the story full of happiness and spirit. As the story nears a conclusion, Braddon's general defense of the status quo grows clearer. Lady Audley represents a deceitful woman who has ruined an honest man, and also shows a lower-class social climber destroying the noble, moral members of the upper class.

Robert tells Alicia he loves her as a brother, not as Sir Harry loves her. Alicia admits she has been foolish and mean to him, and that now she must care for her father. She prepares for them to leave, and Robert recognizes a new seriousness in her behavior.

Once Robert is honest about his feelings, Alicia is able to move on and show her development as a character by becoming more serious and mature in this scene.

Robert goes to tell Sir Michael that Alicia will accompany him. At first, Sir Michael wishes to go alone, but then he realizes he should go with Alicia. He regrets allowing Lady Audley to estrange him from his daughter. Sir Michael tells Robert that, although Sir Michael is miserable, Robert made the right decision in revealing Lady Audley's secrets.

With the wicked wife and stepmother out of the way, a once happy family can be reunited. Sir Michael's assurance of Robert shows that although the truth comes with sacrifices, living a lie is worse.

Robert returns to the library to find Lady Audley still lying on the floor. He tells her maid to take the lady up to her room because she is sick. As the maid leads her away, Lady Audley asks if Sir Michael is gone, and if anyone died in the Castle Inn fire. Robert says no one died. Lady Audley says she is glad. He bids her goodnight, saying they will talk again tomorrow.

One could interpret Lady Audley's strange calmness here as relief or resignation now that she has confessed all of her secrets. In this scene, she hardly seems like the criminal mastermind described in her previous confession.

Robert sits down in front of the fireplace, wondering at how such a pleasant place as **Audley Court** has been transformed into a house full of despair. He doesn't know what to do next. Alicia and Sir Michael come to say goodbye. Robert promises Sir Michael he will do what needs to be done about Lady Audley.

Robert recognizes the vulnerability of the Victorian ideal of the peaceful, pleasant family home, especially the upper-class manor, to the perceived threat of lower-class social climbers and criminals.

Alone again, Robert thinks the responsibility to deal with Lady Audley must be God's punishment for his previously idle life. God must be teaching him that one can't choose their own fate. Robert asks a servant to send a telegram to London asking for a doctor to come to **Audley Court**.

Robert reflects the common Christian idea that God punishes the sinful and redeems those who are willing to confess and change their ways. This foreshadows the final chapter of the novel.

In the servants' hall, the servants gather around to discuss what has happened based on the few scraps of gossip they could gather. They suspect Robert told Sir Michael of the death of a relative or a loss of family funds. They settle on the loss of family funds and delight in the idea of the family's fall, even though it would mean the servants would lose their jobs.

The servants represent the common anxiety among the Victorian upper-class that members of the lower-class delighted in the downfall of the noble families, even if that downfall ended up hurting the lower-class as well.

Robert sits exhausted in front of the fireplace, remembering that just that morning he woke up to find the Castle Inn on fire. He falls asleep right there and wakes up to a telegram saying a doctor is coming. Knowing he has done "all that he could do," Robert goes to bed. He thinks of Clara and if she has heard of his heroic actions in the Castle Inn fire. In his exhausted state, he imagines "the dark-brown eyes that were so like the eyes of his lost friend."

Clara's influence continues to inspire and uplift Robert. This section clearly expresses his desire for Clara and his wish for her to desire him in return. Once again, he expresses his attraction to her by comparing her to George, showing his still-intense closeness with and longing for his lost friend.

VOLUME 3, CHAPTER 5

Lady Audley sleeps peacefully now that her enemy has defeated her. She hasn't relaxed since George announced his return from Australia shortly after her second marriage, but now the burden of her secrets is gone. She doesn't care about the pain she caused others. The next morning, she eats breakfast like a resigned prisoner. She looks around her apartment and thinks how sad she will be to leave her expensive possessions. She admires her reflection in the mirror. The unnatural light in her face is gone, leaving only her natural beauty that no one can take from her. Lady Audley dresses herself in expensive clothes, clinging to the luxury she fought so hard to attain.

Lady Audley's relief shows that secrets and deception effect the participants as well as the victims of the schemes. She still does not care for anyone besides herself, and only regrets that she will lose the status and luxury her crimes earned her. She also maintains a vain appreciation of her own appearance. The plot has not changed the selfishness or materialism of her character—the only change is the calm relief that has overtaken her.

Dr. Mosgrave arrives at **Audley Court**. Robert ensures the doctor's findings will remain confidential and that the doctor's specialty is treating insanity. Robert recounts the story Lady Audley told last night and Mosgrave listens calmly. Mosgrave asks if Robert wishes to "prove that this lady is mad, and therefore irresponsible for her actions." Robert says yes, thinking how he would like to avoid a murder trial.

Like Lady Audley, Robert uses accusations of madness as a tool for his own self-interest. He does not accuse Lady Audley of madness because he believes this is the truth and he wants to get her help, but instead because he doesn't want to put Sir Michael and the Audley family name through the disgrace of a public trial.

Dr. Mosgrave says he will examine Lady Audley but he doesn't believe she is mad. All her actions came from a desperate situation and she showed intelligence and calm in her schemes. Madness is not always transmitted from mother to daughter. He recommends Robert send Lady Audley back to her first husband. Robert then confesses the second half of the story he has been hiding, about George's disappearance. Dr. Mosgrave asks to speak wish Lady Audley alone.

Dr. Mosgrave's statement contradicts much of what both Robert and Lady Audley have previously stated about madness, specifically the fear that madness is always passed on from parent to child. His advice also shows the complete control most husbands had over their wives' lives in the Victorian era, as they could act as both judge and imprisoner if they so wished.

Dr. Mosgrave returns from examining Lady Audley and declares she suffers from "latent insanity," meaning that, in times of stress, she suffers from mania. He states, however, that Lady Audley is not mad. He adds that she is still dangerous, and that Robert wouldn't succeed in a criminal case because there's no evidence that George is dead. Robert says his greatest concern is avoiding bringing disgrace on his family.

Dr. Mosgrave's comments show the complicated assumptions made about madness in the Victorian era. Madness was not necessarily synonymous with mental illness or insanity, and just because one commits a violent crime does not mean that one is necessarily mad.

Dr. Mosgrave writes a letter to his colleague, Monsieur Val, who runs an asylum abroad, asking him to admit Lady Audley for life. Mosgrave says this is the best way to separate Lady Audley from society, which must be done for everyone's safety.

This is another example of accusations of madness being used as a tool, as Mosgrave is committing Lady Audley not because she is actually insane, but because that is the best way to separate her from others.

VOLUME 3, CHAPTER 6

Robert contemplates how he has become the judge and now the "gaoler" for Lady Audley. His job will only be done once he places Lady Audley in the asylum. He writes to her, telling her to prepare for a journey from which she won't return. Lady Audley delights in packing up her expensive possessions, knowing wherever she goes she can use her beauty to succeed.

Robert's responsibilities are a dramatic change from the beginning of the novel, when he couldn't even bother to act as a barrister. Lady Audley's character remains static, as she holds onto the same vain ideas about her beauty and her material possessions, seeing them as evidence of her agency.

Robert and Lady Audley take a steamship to the Continent. Lady Audley sits comfortably in her cabin surrounded by the luxurious tea cups, vases, and clothing she hoarded. Robert anxiously awaits the completion of his task. He thinks about George with regret and grief.

Lady Audley, remaining vain and greedy, takes comfort in her wealth of possessions. By contrast, Robert has found a higher purpose in his connection to his friend.

Robert and Lady Audley travel to an ancient, remote Belgian town. Lady Audley has not spoken during the journey. Robert leaves her at a hotel in town in order to go make arrangements at the asylum. He returns to take Lady Audley to be committed.

The remoteness of the town reflects Robert's isolation and loneliness as he carries out his mission. It also represents Lady Audley's forthcoming separation for society.

Finally, Lady Audley asks where they are going. Robert answers they are going to a place where she can repent. As they pull up to the asylum, Lady Audley screams. She tells Robert she knows it's a madhouse. They enter the building and Lady Audley tells Robert he cannot treat her as a child and must tell her where they are.

Once again, Robert expresses a belief in retribution and forgiveness from God. Lady Audley expresses one of her greatest fears, a loss of her agency and privilege by being committed to a madhouse. That fear is about to come true.

Robert says they are in a *maison de santé*. Lady Audley says that is just the French phrase for a madhouse. The attendant at the asylum tells Lady Audley that this establishment offers every comfort. Monsieur Val arrives and directs them to an apartment decorated with velvet and black and white marble. Lady Audley examines the dark dismal room and throws herself down in a chair with her face in her hands.

During the Victorian era, madhouses ranged from dismal, chaotic public facilities to luxurious, comfortable resorts for the upper-class, thus explaining Lady Audley's terror. Even in an expensive facility like the one Robert is committing Lady Audley to, a patient lost much of their agency and identity, as Lady Audley fears.

Robert and Monsieur Val talk privately. Robert says Lady Audley's name is Mrs. Taylor and she is a distant relative of his who inherited madness from her mother. He says she should be treated with "tenderness and compassion." She should never leave the asylum without supervision and should meet with a clergyman for spiritual consolation.

Lady Audley has assumed many different identities and appearances throughout the story, but Mrs. Taylor is her final one. Despite all she has done, Robert does not wish to hurt Lady Audley, showing the morality of his character and the mercy present in his form of justice (a mercy that is probably also informed by her gender, class status, and beauty, however).

Robert returns to Lady Audley and explains that her name is Madame Taylor now. Monsieur Val comes in and assures Madame Taylor she shall have every comfort she wants, within reason. Lady Audley hisses at Val to leave her alone with Robert. Val calls her a "beautiful devil" and leaves.

Monsieur Val's labeling of Lady Audley as a "beautiful devil" shows that he understands how a person can be pleasant on the outside and wicked on the inside. Lady Audley's usual tricks will not work with him.

Lady Audley tells Robert that he has brought her to her "grave" and used his "power basely and cruelly." Robert says he has been merciful and asks that, in exchange, Lady Audley repent her sins. Lady Audley says she will not, asking, "'Has my beauty brought me to *this*?'"

Lady Audley can't confess her sins because she doesn't believe she has committed any. In her perspective, her crimes are the logical conclusion of being born into poverty, and with such a powerful beauty.

Lady Audley tells Robert that George's body lies at the bottom of the well at the end of the lime-walk. She says she planned on bribing or begging George into letting her keep her new rich life, but he said he couldn't forgive her for telling the lie that broke his heart. He said he would expose her to Sir Michael, but George didn't know she was mad and therefore dangerous.

George, like Robert, is not motivated by bribery, so Lady Audley only knows how to respond to him with violence. Lady Audley is so desperate to keep her wealth that she will do anything to avoid Sir Michael finding out her secret previous marriage.

Lady Audley told George she would convince Sir Michael that George was a madman and a liar. She tried to leave but George grabbed her wrist, creating the bruise Robert later saw. Lady Audley became mad and pushed George down the well.

Lady Audley's claim that she was overcome with madness argues that she wasn't in control of her actions and therefore not truly responsible for George's death.

Lady Audley says she is making this confession now because she knows Robert would not put Sir Michael through a criminal trial, and no trial could sentence her to anything worse than a madhouse. In despair, Robert says nothing and leaves her forever.

This confession confirms what Robert has been wondering for the majority of the novel. Robert's despair shows that truth, though a virtuous pursuit, can be devastating.

VOLUME 3, CHAPTER 7

Bewildered, Robert travels back to England. He wonders if and how he will tell Sir Michael that the woman his uncle once loved is a murderer. He agonizes over what to do, because if George's remains are found on Audley Court's grounds, the police will investigate and bring disgrace onto the Audley family. Even so, Robert knows he must give his friend a proper burial.

Despite the consequences the truth will have upon his family, Robert remains committed to seeking justice for his dead friend. Just like with his investigation into Lady Audley's secrets, Robert is torn between justice for the dead (George) and mercy upon the living (Sir Michael).

Robert arrives in London and goes to the hotel Sir Michael and Alicia were staying at, only to discover that they have left for Vienna. He goes back to his apartment and finds letters from Sir Michael, Alicia, and Clara. Alicia's letter says she called a doctor to examine her unusually quiet father, and the doctor suggested they take a vacation. Sir Michael's letter offers Robert whatever money needed to deal with a certain woman, provided that Robert never mentions her to him again, a request which relieves Robert.

Alicia's development as a character is shown through her care for her father. Due to Sir Michael's suffering, they have reversed the roles of a typical Victorian father and daughter, with the daughter making the decisions and taking responsibility for her father's well-being. Thus Lady Audley's influence continues to disrupt Victorian ideals of women and family.

Clara's letter states that Luke is in failing health and both he and Phoebe wish to see Robert before Luke dies. Robert smokes his pipe and has pleasant dreams of Clara, but when the dreams fade, he faces the horrible reality of having to go back to Essex. He dreads telling Clara the truth about George and decides it's better for her to falsely hope for her brother's return.

Robert has spent much of the novel pursuing knowledge, but now that he has seen the consequences of knowledge firsthand, he decides that sometimes it is better for one to remain ignorant of the horrible truth.

While he waits for the next train to Essex, Robert contemplates how much his life has changed in a year and a half. He used to care for nothing but his idle hobbies, and now he has felt both love and tragedy. He wonders how Clara would react if he told her his life found new purpose in solving George's case, and he finds an even stronger purpose in his love for her. He thinks if he told her how much he loves her, she would only pity him. He can't hope for anything while he is still haunted by George's murdered body.

Investigating George's case has fully separated Robert from the idle privileged life he lived at the beginning of the novel. Robert has found a purpose in solving George's case and in loving Clara, yet he too must suffer the cost of uncovering secrets, as the ghost of George now seems to haunt him.


Robert paces back and forth. He has no interest in smoking alone and feels alienated from all his old friends, who only care for pleasure and wouldn't understand the horrors he's been through. Finally, Robert leaves for the train, although in his fragile mental state he fears George's ghost invading his empty apartment. The narrator argues one would naturally have such delusions after experiencing the trauma Robert has.

Robert longs for someone who has experienced the same level of tragedy as him. This partly explains his desire for Clara, since they have both lost George. The image of George's ghost represents the lasting impact of the past and the persistence of the truth against deception.

Robert takes a carriage to the train station but still feels pursued by George's ghost. He knows the only way to ease his mind is to give George a proper burial, even if it means bringing Lady Audley back to England for a criminal trial. Robert thinks the late-night journey is dreary, but he will do anything Clara asks of him.

Robert feels compelled to choose to uphold the truth, even when deception would cause him and others less pain. The thought of Clara continues to compel Robert towards doing what's right.


Robert arrives in Mount Stanning, where the wind blows on the charred remains of the Castle Inn. Robert goes to Mr. Dawson, because the doctor has been caring for Luke since the fire. Mr. Dawson leads him to the cottage where Luke lies. He tells Robert that Luke is dying of shock, partly due to his already failing health as a result of his alcoholism.

One could interpret Luke's dying state as his punishment for a life filled with vice and blackmail. One could also see him as a poor victim of Lady Audley's schemes, just like George. Robert seems to sympathize with him in his suffering.

Through the cottage window, Robert sees Luke's wife and mother watching over him. Robert waits while Mr. Dawson tends to Luke. He listens to the dismal ticking of the living room clock. Finally, Mr. Dawson returns stating that Luke is ready to see him.

The dismal atmosphere of the cottage and the gloomily ticking clock represent Luke's dying state, as time is running out for him.

Phoebe watches Luke, fearing death itself but not the loss of her husband. Phoebe has made the room around the dying man neat and orderly. Phoebe tries to speak to Robert alone but Luke objects, saying he wants to undo any trouble he's caused.

Phoebe defies gender roles (and traditional morality) by not caring about her husband's life. She also attempts to keep Lady Audley's secrets, and by extension hide her own crime of blackmail.


Phoebe takes Robert aside and says Luke doesn't remember anything of the night of the fire, but resents Lady Audley for not buying them a better inn. She asks if Lady Audley is gone from **Audley Court** forever, and if she will be treated well wherever she is now. Robert answers yes. Phoebe says she still cares about Lady Audley, since the lady was kind to her.

Phoebe's statement is dubious, since Lady Audley was definitely not acting kindly when she set fire to both Phoebe's property and her husband. Phoebe cares about Lady Audley's fate because they did share a connection, despite all their deception.

Luke demands to speak to Robert alone. Phoebe agrees, but tells him not to say anything against "those that have been good and generous" to him. Luke, still filled with his old, brutal spirit, says he'll say whatever he wants. Robert sits at Luke's bedside and Luke thanks him for saving his life.

Phoebe persists in trying to keep her blackmail scheme a secret, even to the point of making the ridiculous statement that Lady Audley has been "good and generous" to the man she almost killed by arson.

Luke mentions he heard from the Audleys' servants that Robert was very fond of the man who disappeared at Court. Robert tells him not to speak anymore of George because Lady Audley already told him what happened. Luke asks what exactly Lady Audley said. Robert tells him to stop talking about George, since Lady Audley paid Luke to keep quiet. Luke says he has a secret Lady Audley didn't know.

This is a dramatic reversal, since for almost the entirety of the novel, Lady Audley has been the one with knowledge that others scramble to learn. For once, someone else possesses a secret unknown to Lady Audley.

Luke pauses, clearly suffering from a fever. Robert thinks about what he will do now that he knows George is dead. He knows if he sees Clara again, he will be compelled to tell the horrible truth—and that if he tells her, her life will be ruined, or else she will want George's body removed from its unmarked grave. He feels distraught, knowing no one, especially not Clara, cares for him in his despair.

Clara's influence over Robert is so strong that his only option is to avoid her. Braddon emphasizes Robert's intense state of despair at having seemingly lost George and now Clara forever. This mood will then dramatically contrast with Robert's joy once Luke tells him George is alive.

VOLUME 3, CHAPTER 8

Robert's thoughts wander until Luke asks his mother if she remembers the 7th of last September (the date of George's disappearance). Luke's mother says her memory is poor. Robert says it doesn't matter because he doesn't want to hear it. Luke says he wants to tell the truth, since he never told Lady Audley.

Luke's telling of the truth not only defies Lady Audley but allows him to redeem himself for some the deception and blackmail he has committed in the past.

Luke asks his mother if she remembers when he worked at a neighbor's farm before marrying Phoebe. He asks if she remembers him bringing home a gentleman covered in mud and slime with a broken arm, the man they nursed back to health.

The idea of Luke nursing someone back to health presents a new side of him, different from the blackmailing, alcoholic brute he has been for the majority of the novel.

Robert realizes who Luke is talking about and exclaims, "George Talboys is alive!" Luke asks his mother to fetch a box that contains two pieces of paper. The first paper is addressed to Robert from George, saying that something awful has happened and he must leave England forever. The second is to Helen from George, saying he forgives her for what she has done and that she will never hear from him again.

With this revelation, all of Robert's despair throughout the novel turns out to be based on a false assumption. The novel can now have a happy ending, with Robert reunited with the two people he loves most in the world, George and Clara.

Luke says that on the 7th of September he went to visit Phoebe at **Audley Court**. As he snuck through the lime-walk, he heard a man groaning in the bushes. This man then grabbed Luke by the wrist and asked him who he was. Luke could tell by his speech the man was a gentleman. The man told Luke he needed to leave the Court without being seen, and needed a place to mend his broken arm. Luke offered his mother's cottage, and the man said he would pay him for his service.

Luke is not completely altruistic in his aid to George. He infers that George is a member of the upper class, meaning he is most likely wealthy, and George promises payment. This makes his aid of George more in line with his greedy character, though he does seem to feel some real sympathy for this injured man.

Luke brought the man to his mother's cottage, and as they bandaged him up, he seemed unresponsive. Luke gave the man some brandy and he fell asleep. The man awoke some time later and hurried to leave the cottage. Luke walked with him to Brentwood, where they found a doctor to set the man's broken arm. Robert remembers the clerk in Liverpool who mentioned a passenger with his arm in a sling.

George's state of shock, followed by his hurry to run away, show his distress over Lady Audley's betrayal. The detail of George's arm in a sling connects to the very beginning of Robert's investigation into his disappearance.

The man wrote the two letters and left for the train station with Luke. He gave Luke the letters, telling him to deliver them to Lady Audley and Robert. Then the man left. Luke went to the Sun Inn looking for Robert, but Robert had already left for London.

George's letters show that he never intended to leave Robert in the dark about his disappearance, just as Robert knew George would never be so cruel as to leave without a word.

Luke then went to **Audley Court** to visit Phoebe in the garden. When he tried to sit on the well, Phoebe yelled at him not to. Phoebe told Luke she was feeling off because something had frightened her yesterday. She then said Lady Audley would give her the money for a public house. Luke said this news was sudden, and Phoebe should not keep secrets from the man she wanted to marry. Luke asked if a "tall young gentleman" had come to visit Lady Audley yesterday.

Though the narrative doesn't specifically state it, one can infer that Phoebe saw Lady Audley push George down the well. Phoebe possesses a more cunning mind than Luke, since she thought of using the situation for blackmail before Luke did. Once again the novel suggests that women can be crueler and smarter than men.

Phoebe started crying and told Luke she was sitting by a window yesterday when she saw Lady Audley and a gentleman on the lime-walk. She saw what Lady Audley did to the gentleman and could now blackmail Lady Audley. Luke kept George's letter, planning on giving it to Lady Audley if she was always generous to them, which she was not. Luke finishes his story and expects Robert to scold him. Robert takes pity on the dying man, who has already suffered for his actions.

Even Phoebe, who seemed to be like Lady Audley in ruthless ambition, is horrified by Lady Audley's attempted murder of George. Robert's pity for Luke suggests that deception often creates its own punishment. Once again, Robert shows his merciful nature.

Robert sits by sleeping Luke's bedside until daybreak. He thinks about how he can now tell Clara that George is alive. Robert leaves and goes to sleep in a hotel. When he wakes up, the landlord tells him Luke has died peacefully. Robert writes a letter to Lady Audley, telling her George is alive.

Even though the mystery is over, Robert still feels Clara's influence and wishes to make her happy. Luke dies in peace because he has confessed to all the secrets he held, showing that telling the truth can grant a kind of absolution.

VOLUME 3, CHAPTER 9

Clara returns to her home to tell Harcourt that George sailed for Australia on September 9th and will likely return one day to be forgiven by his father. For once in his life, Harcourt reveals his distress, as he had been worrying about his son and wants to embrace him once again.

Harcourt's former rigidity against all transgressions of class has relaxed. Faced with the real loss of his son, he seems to have recognized what is truly important to him.

Robert wonders when George will return to England and questions why he didn't respond to the advertisements Robert put in the Australian papers. He goes to the Talboys' mansion to talk to Harcourt about his son. Harcourt laments Robert's smuggling of Lady Audley out of England, because Harcourt wishes to punish her.

George's lack of response suggests that the mystery of the plot is not yet resolved. Harcourt, though he has softened somewhat, is also not a completely changed man. He still practices a merciless form of justice in response to deceit and societal transgression.

It is now springtime, and Robert strolls through the grounds where he met Clara that winter. Though the mansion is still rigid and cold, Robert is delighted to be there because he gets to take walks with Clara (chaperoned by Mr. Talboys, of course). They talk of George. Robert thinks how he has developed from hating Clara when he first met her to loving her now. He wonders if she notices his love.

Robert's love for Clara shows how first impressions can be deceiving. Characters developing from hate to love was a common feature in Victorian romance novels, most notably in Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice. *These stories almost always had happy endings, and one can assume that this novel will too.*

Other friends come to visit the Talboys and Robert feels jealous of the young men who undoubtedly also fall in love with Clara. While Robert and Clara were at first formal with each other, with time they develop a genuine friendship. Clara lectures him on the purposeless and idle life he used to live, and he delights being scolded by her.

Without the mystery of George's case to bind them together, Robert and Clara must now establish a relationship based on compatibility. Clara's lectures on how to live his life would make her an ideal wife, according to Robert's theory of marriage.

Robert asks Clara if she thinks he will never tire of his privileged hobbies. He is already planning on selling all his bachelor possessions and his apartment in order to buy a plot of land where he can build a cottage. Clara doesn't know this, however, and tells him to study hard and take his profession seriously so that he might be useful to society. Robert thinks he will agree to that if she rewards him with her companionship.

While at the beginning of the novel, Robert never thought of the future, he has matured to the point where he has a detailed plan. This plan involves abandoning his idle hobbies and contributing to society through his career, as long as he has a loving woman to encourage and guide him.

Robert cannot summon the courage to express his love to Clara, so after five weeks at the mansion, he announces his departure. Harcourt says he enjoyed Robert's visit and welcomes Robert back any time. Robert notices Clara drooping her eyes and blushing.

Despite Victorian gender roles, Robert is still shy and submissive to Clara's wishes. But Clara appears to reciprocate Robert's feelings, which gives him the courage to propose to her later.

Robert dreads being away from Clara and is gloomy on his last day at the mansion. He is happy, though, when he has the chance to talk to Clara alone. They discuss George. Clara says if she were a man, she would go to Australia and find him herself. Robert says he will go. Clara says she can't ask that of him. Robert declares he will do anything for Clara.

Clara reveals the unfairness of gender roles that expect women to remain within the home, since she is brave enough to go looking for George abroad. Robert reveals her influence on him directly, rather than just thinking it to himself, as he usually does.

Clara says she has no right to allow Robert to make such a sacrifice for her. Robert says she does have the right because he loves her and will always love her. He drops to his knees and takes her hand. He asks Clara to marry him and go to Australia with him. She doesn't respond, but the narrator states that sometimes silence is the best answer to such a question.

Robert uses Australia to bargain with Clara for her hand in marriage, but as the novel has argued before, Victorian marriage was in reality a complicated agreement based upon both compatibility and other factors.

Later, Harcourt comes into the room and finds Robert sitting alone. Robert tells him what has happened. Robert says their honeymoon trip will be to find George. Harcourt tells Robert that if he brings back his son, he will forgive Robert for taking his daughter.

Though Clara could express her agency by accepting Robert's proposal herself, this conversation reveals that Victorian marriage still largely concerned negotiations between men.

Feeling like a new man with a new life ahead of him, Robert returns to London to arrange for the trip to Australia. When he returns to Fig-tree Court, he is shocked to see George Talboys waiting for him. George reveals that when he landed safely on the slush at the bottom of the well, all he could think about was protecting the woman who tried to kill him. Summoning all his strength, he climbed out and hid until Luke found him.

With George home, the mystery of his disappearance has finally been resolved and the novel can end happily. Also, the fact that George still wished to protect Lady Audley after she married another man and attempted to murder him reemphasizes the depths of his love.

George boarded a ship for Australia, but then changed vessels and went to New York. He lived in exile there but longed for Robert, his friend who guided him through the darkest period of his life.

George acknowledges the common feeling between the two men that has driven Robert throughout the novel.

VOLUME 3, CHAPTER 10

Two years pass. Mr. Audley has built his rustic cottage upon a river, on whose banks an eight-year-old boy now plays with a toddler. Mr. Audley has made a successful career as a barrister. Georgey Talboys is still at school but often comes to the cottage to visit George, who lives there with Clara and Mr. Audley. Alicia and Sir Michael, having survived the latter's grief, also come visit the cottage.

The narrator now refers to Robert as "Mr. Audley" to show that he is a mature adult involved in society. Robert is now living a more modest, middle-class life, having become unconcerned with the decadence of the upper class.

A year before, Robert Audley received a letter announcing the death of Madame Taylor after a long illness. Sir Harry Towers also comes to visit the cottage, and everyone enjoys each other's company on summer evenings.

The plot neatly removes Lady Audley from the narrative, so that all the other characters can live a peaceful, happy life free from her corrupting deception.

Audley Court is empty except for a "grim old housekeeper" in place of Lady Audley. A curtain has been hung over Lady Audley's portrait. The housekeeper shows visitors through the lady's rooms. The visitors "ask many questions about the pretty, fair-haired woman, who died abroad."

Audley Court represents the relics of the upper class, antiquated ideals that are no longer useful to society, but people still revisit and talk about. The gossip of the visitors shows the element of scandal essential to a sensation novel.

Sir Michael lives in London until Alicia marries Sir Harry, and then he lives on his son-in-law's estate. George lives happily with Clara and Mr. Audley and may even find someone to ease the pain of his first marriage. Robert has given away his novels.

Both Alicia and Robert, who once defied the gender roles of their society, have normalized themselves through heterosexual marriage, thus allowing for peace in their lives according to the novel's values.

The narrator ends the novel by stating, "I hope no one will take objection to my story because the end of it leaves the good people all happy and at peace." The narrator states that she may not have been very experienced in life, but she believes the righteous are not forsaken.

The narrator states an optimistic, romantic worldview which argues that those who commit deception will be punished and those who are dedicated to the truth will be rewarded in life.

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