Two Parts of a Whole

A Study of Sororal Relationships in 19th-Century Literature

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Abstract

This thesis studies three pairs of sisters in works of literature written and published during the 19th century, namely in Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White* (1859) and Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” (1862). There are several similarities between these three pairs, mainly that the two sisters I have focused on in each text are given diverging personality traits by their respective authors. To simplify, Collins’ Marian and Laura represent the masculine and feminine, Rossetti’s Laura and Lizzie represent the sinful and the virtuous, and Austen’s Elinor and Marianne represent sense and sensibility. This thesis has endeavored to map the portrayal of these individual sisters, and how their sororal relationships affect their fates. My findings suggest that the dichotomies between the sisters are used mainly as plot points and literary devices used to drive a narrative forward. Arguably, the authors’ projects when portraying binary sisters, are aimed at promoting closeness and to demonstrate the importance of bonds between women of the 19th century, and that these bonds need to exist within a space not affected by patriarchy. As this thesis will attempt to show, sisterhood provides an arena in which to portray both positive and negative emotions between women. In order to bring out the significance and power of these emotions, the sisters in question are presented as dichotomous.
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1 Introduction

This thesis explores the significance of sister relationships in three works from the 19th century, namely Sense and Sensibility by Jane Austen, published in 1811, The Woman in White by Wilkie Collins, published in 1859, and “Goblin Market” by Christina Rossetti, published in 1862. Portrayals of sisters and sister relationships are and have been ubiquitous in literature throughout the ages. From the trio of sisters in Shakespeare’s King Lear (1606) to the evil stepsisters in the Brothers Grimm’s Cinderella (1812) to Disney’s modern Frozen (2013), the topic and subject matter seem to have had an endless appeal to readers and consumers of literature. Eva Rueschmann observes that “the patterns of antagonism and competition between sisters abound in classical literature and myth” (2), and the literary canon is filled with examples that confirm this particular observation. Rueschman further highlights the traditional pattern of sister relationships in fairytales from around the world: three sisters are in conflict, the youngest being the focalizer of the story, the fairest, kindest and prettiest, and always the father’s favorite. The two older sisters are often envious to the point of being evil and are punished for their wickedness towards the end of the story. This hackneyed pattern appears in stories, novels, poems, plays and movies.

My thesis will focus on three 19th-century works, but the sister-dynamics in these stories differ from the ones mentioned. In the stories discussed in this thesis, the sisters have close relationships, some even bordering on the incestuous. Interestingly, the sisters in these three selected texts are characterized as innately different, representing separate parts of a spectrum. Presumably, and this is among the things that I would want to find out, there is a reason for the use of this literary device in these three works.

In the process of doing my research for this thesis, the first thing that struck me was the blatant differences between Marianne and Laura in The Woman in White. The novel is Wilkie Collins’ fifth published novel. It is widely regarded as one of the first in the genre of “sensation novels” and, with the use of multiple narrators, it tells the story of what in the end turns out to be three half-sisters. The story revolves around Walter Hartright, a young teacher of drawing, who falls in love with the alluring Laura Fairlie and befriends her half-sister Marian Halcombe. As the story unfolds, the reader understands that the titular “woman in white” is, in fact, Laura Fairlie’s half-sister, who has been imprisoned in an asylum. The
story ends with Laura and Walter marrying and having a baby, and with Marianne living with the pair as a friend of the family.

The differences between the two sisters are so conspicuous and the choices made by Collins in creating two sisters (albeit half-sisters) so ostensibly and overtly dissimilar are indeed interesting. The first chapter of this thesis will discuss this textbook example of two sisters seen as part of a whole. The two protagonists have diverging character traits, but the relationship between the two is loving, codependent, even bordering on incestuous. I will explore this dichotomous relationship and explain how the sisters’ codependence helps paint a picture of larger societal issues. Firstly, I will focus on the character of Marian Halcombe. She is portrayed as the masculine half of a whole, and I am concerned with what her character’s frequent asides about gender and gender injustice say about her. Furthermore, what does Marian’s expressed and inherent “masculinity” and her dependence on the more feminine Laura tell us about her role as a woman in 19th-century society? Finally, I will examine how Marian is “domesticated” at the end of the novel. After this, I will explore the character of Laura Fairlie. She is portrayed as a feminine beauty. Does her inherent femininity and passivity constitute the ideal Victorian woman? If so, why does the “ideal woman” need the masculine Halcombe?

The second chapter will focus on Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market”, with a focus on sororal desire. The poem tells the story of two sisters living alone in a cottage. Every night they hear goblins begging them to buy their exotic fruits. One of the sisters, Lizzie, wisely runs home every time she hears the goblins, while her more curious sister, Laura, finally succumbs to the goblins’ pressure and buys and eats the fruit. This results in her almost dying, before she is saved by her sister’s courage. Lizzie also buys the fruit and endures the goblins’ rage when she refuses to eat it. Completely covered with fruit juices, Lizzie lets her sister lick her clean with the result that Laura comes to and is healed the next day. The poem ends with the two sisters married and telling the story of the goblins to their own daughters, at once cautioning them of the dangers of curiosity and reminding them that there is no love like that of a sister. The two sisters represent the Victorian tropes of “the angel in the house” and the fallen woman, the “good” and the “bad”. Helena Michie claims that the marriage of the “sexually wayward” sister at the end integrates her into the world of the “good” sister, and that this repeals the initial divide between the two (405). I will discuss how and why this view is problematic, both with regards to Rossetti’s poem and the two novels in question here. However, as Rueschman observes, “the splitting of sexual roles in sisters serves a narrative function and shows the inscription of cultural and ideological values in fictional
sibling relationships” (20). This pertains not only to Rossetti’s poem, but to the two novels as well, and is a point worthy of further discussion.

The third chapter will discuss Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility* and the relationship between the two eldest Dashwood sisters, Elinor and Marianne. Austen’s first novel is the earliest work of literature discussed in this thesis. While it might have been structurally logical to discuss the novel in Chapter 1, the pair of sisters portrayed in *Sense and Sensibility* serves as a contrast to the other two pairs of sisters. This fact warrants the novel’s placement at the end of this thesis. The other two pairs of sisters both consist of opposites, namely masculine/feminine and sinful/virtuous, and thus the women make up two parts of a whole. As I will discuss further in Chapter 3, the Dashwood sisters are not as binary as Austen’s title might lead its reader to believe. While I argue that the two other pairs have very dissimilar character traits and examine the purposes of this, the Dashwood sisters are, in the words of Christina Rossetti, two blossoms of one stem, and they represent sisterhood slightly differently than Rossetti and Collins’ heroines. There are still similarities between the three pairs, but I have felt that the opportunities *Sense and Sensibility* offer for metareflection on the topic in question, motivates its place at the end – the Dashwoods work as a contrast to the other sets of sisters, while they all at the same time share interesting likenesses that I will look further into.

The novel is set in the late 18th century and tells the story of the three Dashwood sisters and their widowed mother as they must move from their estate after Mr. Dashwood’s death. Due to the rule of primogeniture, their older half-brother inherits the estate, and leaves the four women to look for a new home. The women rent a modest home on the property of a distant relative, where they experience romance and heartbreak. Although there are three sisters, the story revolves around the two eldest ones, Elinor and Marianne. It is widely assumed that the two have been attributed with one adjective each from the title, and this thesis will examine how the two are dichotomous. Which characteristics have Austen attributed to her two heroines, how do their personalities contrast, if at all? Are they, as Marian and Laura, two halves of a whole, or are they more similar than first assumed? I argue that the terms “sense” and “sensibility” roughly correlate to reason and emotion in Jane Austen’s novel, as Ashley Bonin observes: “critical judgments of the novel treat Elinor and Marianne as paradigms of sense and sensibility, Elinor almost always emerging as the superior” (30). However, the sisters may be more complex than what this argument might imply, and the dichotomous relationship between the two might also exist within the individual characters. The two Dashwood sisters are not as codependent as Marian Halcombe
and Laura Fairlie, but their relationship is filled with contrast and competition, as they are both single and both looking for a husband. How can we understand their separate identities as part of a larger composite, and what does this imply for their individuality and independence?

Finally, the three works warrant a discussion on the toxicity of sisterhood. For the women discussed in this analysis, finding a suitable husband appears as their main vocation. As one of two or more sisters, one can imagine that the act of standing out, of having a clear identity and being different from the other siblings, would be increasingly important, to avoid being indistinguishable in the marriage market. Presumably, this need to break free from a community inherent in the nuclear family could create a breeding ground for competition and competitive relationships. *Sense and Sensibility* casts doubt regarding which of the sisters will marry Colonel Brandon, and although this doesn’t develop into a larger plot point, it still creates tension between the Dashwood sisters. This tension is what I call the toxicity of sisterhood. In this thesis I will consider whether this toxicity can be viewed as a continuation of systemic oppression, and if toxicity between sisters is a symbol of patriarchal subjugation.
2 Theory and Methodology

My approach to the works discussed in this thesis is informed by feminist theory, and not least by a few prominent feminist literary critics, mainly Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar and Helena Michie. Gilbert and Gubar’s idea of the “angel” and the “monster” has been imperative in my understanding of the women portrayed in the three texts. In this thesis, I examine the roles given to the women portrayed, and problematize the dichotomies between the sisters. My methodology has been close readings of the works cited, a historic contextualization and a discussion of existing literature on the topic, most importantly the works of Amy K. Levin and Sarah Annes Brown.

The three works of literature discussed in this thesis presumably portray young women belonging to the upper echelons of society (presumably, as we don’t know much about the financial status of Lizzie and Laura in “Goblin Market”). Their main vocation in any case seems to be the finding of a suitable mate with whom to secure their future. Helena Michie argues that “nowhere is the staging of female identity through sisterhood more dramatically rendered than in Victorian melodrama, sensation novels and canonical literature” (20). In other words, Victorian authors took advantage of the confines of both sisterhood and the domestic sphere in order to create conflict and competition between women. Women were ensconced within the four walls of the house, their sphere was the domestic one, and it was widely assumed and concluded that a woman’s first duty was to find a suitable husband and raise a family. This cultural myth was canonized and immortalized in Coventry Patmore’s “The Angel in the House” from 1854. James Eli Adams notes that “In what [was] the most enduring icon of Victorian antisensualism, the domestic woman was “the angel in the house” […], a quasi-spiritual being selflessly dispensing love and moral guidance to her family, largely untroubled by personal wayward personal desires – including erotic longing” (129). In other words, the ideal woman was made to adhere to a narrow standard, and any “personal desires” or ambitions she might have, should and would be secondary to societal expectations.

In addition, as Amy K. Levin observes, sisters were largely redundant in the Victorian nuclear family. “The custom of primogeniture assigned differing roles to brothers; sisters participated alike in household tasks. If one married, the next youngest would take over her chores” (17). In short, one could argue that it was a woman’s vocation to find a suitable husband. Levin continues to observe that “The identical position of sisters within the family
further created a need to insist on difference. The most common way sisters defined themselves was (and still is) in opposition to each other” (17). Furthermore, and as mentioned above, with sisters bearing equal dowries, the need to establish difference and independence from each other would become extremely important in the marriage market. Consequently, the need to develop a separate identity different from that of a sister, would seem essential to women. With few individual choices to speak of for women at the time, and little individual agency, it seems clear that the separation from a sibling would be viewed as imperative.

Confining oneself to mimetic assumptions about real life and literary characters may nevertheless do the authors of fiction a great disservice. Helena Michie maintains that “sisterhood as a metaphor both relies on and enables contrast between pairs of women” (406), and Amy Levin agrees, stating that “the use of sisters in novels serves certain purely literary functions […] , the most obvious one being that sisters generate plot” (19, my emphasis). The prevalent literary presence of sisters, both of the metaphorical and biological kind, seems to support this argument. It is important to note that the women portrayed in these works of literature are sisters for a reason, meaning that an author has actively chosen to create these three pairs of women sisters. It is as though differences between women become more interesting when confined to a familiar stereotype. The reader is encouraged to understand how something can be so similar, cut from the same cloth, and yet so different. Repetition is frequently used as a literary device, and, arguably, the figure of sisterhood is an embodiment of this device.

Furthermore, “sisterhood provides a place and a vocabulary for the representation of a range of stereotypically unfeminine feelings and behaviors” (Michie, 21). Famously, sisters can be jealous, vindictive, resentful and belligerent of each other, but without any of these feelings threatening their inherent femininity, as if envy within the confines of the nuclear family might almost be expected. Toni McNaron points out that sisters frequently take on opposing roles in the family, and that each sister assigns herself a role in relation to the other (8). In other words, it is important, even today, to create dichotomies within sororal relationships, and this can be viewed as an action and reaction independent of societal expectations. Terri Apter discusses what she calls the “sibling trauma”, namely the sudden realization that we are not unique in our family configuration. The competition a younger sibling introduces into the safe environment of the nuclear family is not to be overlooked, she argues, and in this context it becomes easier to understand the terror of losing a parent’s love, or the anxiety induced by competition. “These features of the psyche are often relegated to female weakness, but in the sibling perspective they emerge as part of a common human
condition” (20), Apter notes. She furthermore observes that the fear of being replaced is prevalent in our crowded contemporary society, more so than at any other time (ibid). But the fear of being replaced, or redundant, was no doubt just as widespread in the 19th century, due to the innate burden of being born female, as well as competition not only for familial love, but for romantic love as well. Out of the three works analyzed in this thesis, the interchangeability between the sisters is most evident in *Sense and Sensibility*, when “Colonel Brandon chooses to marry Marianne rather than Elinor” (Levin, 38), no matter how fervent the two have been in asserting their independence from each other.

Most sisters grow up with the same family background, in the same geographical area and are exposed to the same socioeconomic environment. It is likely that most sisters will have more or less similar experiences of their parents and that they will be subject to a similar upbringing. They will probably have comparable ambitions and compete for the same things. Apter argues that these circumstances “may appear to promote similarities between them, but they actually result in differences” (68), as they will enhance the need to create an identity distinct from a sister’s. It might be precarious to accept these similarities in upbringing as a general rule, though, as differences appear within families and groups of siblings as often as similarities. However, when sisters’ differences are used as a literary device, it might be interesting to consider why these differences are present, despite any possible differences in upbringing. In the case of Marian Halcombe and Laura Fairlie, it can be safely assumed that they have been raised quite differently, as they are only half-sisters. Collins still chooses to make the two women sisters, as opposed to friends, and this clearly does something to the interaction between the two. The sister bond can enhance both loving and antagonistic feelings between Marian and Laura, without these feelings being threatening to the endurance of the relationship.

Roberta M. Gilbert discusses the concept of sibling position and how it is related to the concept of the family as an emotional unit. “It is easy to see”, she writes, “how all our patterned behaviors are developed out of the original family fusions we find ourselves in” (86). Gilbert indicates that there are eleven sibling positions, only two of which will be interesting to discuss with regard to this thesis: oldest sister of sisters and youngest sister of sisters. Gilbert argues that because these people will have had no experience of growing up with a sibling with the opposite sex, they will not understand the other easily. Furthermore, oldest children seem to be at risk of overfunctioning, just as youngest children are at risk for underfunctioning. Amy K. Levin argues that the readers of novels about sisters are presented with two or more protagonists and forced to side with one of them (21), and that she must
participate in a struggle for detachment from the other sister(s) in the text. In *The Woman in White*, we are, as noted above, introduced to a pair of sisters that seem to be two parts of one whole. Marian is almost a modern woman in her traditionally masculine approach to the society of which she is a part. One can argue that her sister Laura, on the other hand, is representative of the feminine ideals of Collins’ time. Michie argues that the differences between sisters, the “good” and the “bad”, the “virtuous” and the “sinful”, is reproduced explicitly as sexual difference. She continues, noting that “In Victorian culture, sexual difference between women is expressed and contained within the capacious trope of sisterhood” (404). Although this might be accurate with regard to the Fallen Sister in Christina Rossetti’s “The Goblin Market”, it might be too narrow an argument in regards to the sisters in both *Sense and Sensibility* and *The Woman in White*, something which I will come back to.

The three pairs of sisters discussed in this thesis all consist of opposites, to a larger or smaller extent. Sarah Annes Brown observes that “although they cannot opt out of sisterhood, sister heroines are generally presented with some power to choose their own destiny” (3). Traditionally, when sisters are portrayed in fairy tales, poems, novels or movies, the reader is supposed to root for the younger sister. She is often prettier, fairer, has better morals and is more good-natured than her older sisters, and she somehow uses her limited power to behave unexpectedly. This is true of Cinderella, it is true in the myth of Psyche, in *Antigone* and in *Beauty and the Beast*. As I shall discuss in greater detail, the sisters examined in this thesis are stripped of this power, as they all end up in more or less happy, or at least complacent, domestic situations. Brown continues by making an argument especially pertinent to the sisters analyzed further down, however: “Each [sister] experiences the need to find her niche, and subconsciously selects opposing aspects of her potential character to develop at the expense of those cultivated by her sister” (ibid). Arguably, this is true, especially for the Dashwood sisters. They are the ones with most to gain from separating themselves from the other – as they are portrayed as the ones who have most to gain by finding a suitable mate, and most to lose by remaining alone. McNaron comments that “it is as though unconsciously the pairs […] evolve a system in which they develop only certain parts of themselves in order to cut down or avoid altogether the powerful pull towards competition found within virtually any family” (4). This is especially true of Marian Halcombe. She knows she cannot physically compare with her more beautiful sister, and distances herself from the things which come naturally to Laura. It is as though Marian nurtures the masculine aspects of her personality, and thereby refrains from joining a competition she knows she cannot win. By
virtue of being sisters, and thus similar from birth, the women are forced to cultivate separate identities and differences in order to stand out from their sisters.
The sisterly relationship in Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White* is unusually complex. Marian Halcombe and Laura Fairlie are, as noted in the Introduction, half-sisters who share a mother. Laura also has another half-sister, the illegitimate child of her father. When *The Woman in White* was published in 1859, it was to mostly damning reviews, although it became widely popular with its audience (Symons, 713). Collins tells his detective story with the use of multiple narrators, and his piecing together of the story is comparable to how a story in a court of law is pieced together by multiple witnesses. The main narrator is Walter Hartright, drawing master and employee of Frederic Fairlie. His students are Mr Fairlie’s niece, Laura, and her older half-sister, Marian Halcombe. On his way to their estate, Limmeridge House, Mr. Hartright stumbles upon an escapee from the nearby asylum, a woman dressed in white, who turns out to be Laura’s illegitimate half-sister, Anne Catherick. After having spent some time at Limmeridge house, Walter falls in love with Laura and befriends Marian. Because Laura is engaged to Sir Percival Glyde, Walter decides to leave the estate. As it turns out, Sir Glyde only marries Laura to receive her inheritance. Glyde ends up dying in a fire, but not before he and the villainous Count Fosco kill Anne Catherick and bury her as Lady Glyde, while imprisoning Laura Fairlie in a madhouse. After some twisted turns of events, and several deus ex machinas, Walter ends up marrying Laura, they have a son and the three move into Limmeridge House with Marian.

The main protagonist and narrator in Collins’ mystery novel is Walter Hartright, but it is arguably the women in the story that drive it forward. The plot revolves around the three sisters and through her diary notes Marian even serves as narrator for approximately one third of the story. The stark differences between the half-sisters Laura and Marian are used as both a literary device and a plot point. Laura Fairlie is a midpoint in this structure, with the physically similar Anne Catherick on one side, and the vastly different Marian Halcombe on the other. For the purposes of this thesis, I will focus on the differences between Laura Fairlie and Marian Halcombe. Helena Michie observes that Marian serves as “a sororophobic foil to Laura’s beauty and passivity” (58). The term sororophobia, coined by Michie, describes the negotiation of sameness and difference, the need to have a separate identity while at the same time yearning to identify with other women. In *The Woman in White*, Marian and Laura play out this sameness and difference between sisters, while at the same time representing two parts of Walter Hartright’s ideal woman.
3.1 Marian Halcombe – Masculinity

When Collins’ reader is first introduced to Marian Halcombe, it is through the eyes of Walter Hartright, and his description of her turns out to be less than favorable. At first, Walter is “struck by the rare beauty of [Marian’s] form” (29) and he illustrates her physical beauty in great detail, until the moment he actually sees her face. When Marian turns to greet Walter, he reacts with shock: “I said to myself (with a sense of surprise which words fail me to express), the lady is ugly!” (30). Marian’s physical appearance is conflicting, and Walter has a hard time accepting it. “She had a large, firm masculine mouth and jaw, […] her expression – bright, frank, and intelligent – appeared […] to be altogether wanting in those feminine attractions of gentleness and pliability” (31, my emphasis). Marian herself, then, inhabits the differences that also exist between the protagonist half-sisters. Walter’s resistance to Marian’s physicality reveals a truth about not only him, but also the Victorian society of which he is a product – Walter has difficulties accepting that Marian transgresses Victorian ideals of beauty already before she has uttered a single word. Ann Gaylin makes the claim regarding Marian’s appearance that “traditional notions of feminine beauty combine with hints of the woman yet to be encountered” (313). The “woman yet to be encountered” presumably refers to Marian’s more traditional masculine traits, her intelligence, fearlessness and bravery. D. A. Miller claims that the older Halcombe sister represents "anima virilis in corpore muliebri inclusa": a man's spirit imprisoned in a female body (127), and while this might be to simplify the complex character of Marian Halcombe, the statement does have some merit, as this chapter will explore further.

I would claim that Marian Halcombe represents one of the more complex female characters in the literary canon. Ann Gaylin observes that “Marian presents a female character who, even before her defiant act of eavesdropping on Count Fosco and Sir Percival's conversation in the library, violates established Victorian assumptions about gender even as she continually utters them” (313). Arguably, Marian has internalized her shortcomings as traditionally beautiful, and does what she can to distance herself from the Victorian ideal, mainly in how she speaks about her own gender, but also in how she conducts herself. It is easily argued that Marian’s femininity is only located in parts of her appearance, namely from the neck down, and that these feminine aspects of her are subordinate, especially to the story as a whole. It is her traditionally masculine disposition that is of importance to the narrative. Additionally, Ms. Halcombe seems to be attractive to
other men (note that Count Fosco finds her irresistible, and not in spite of her physicality), and that Walter's resistance to her appearance might imply a rupture in his masculinity. Furthermore, it is important to remember that Collins’ narrator unreliable, and that although Marian’s description of herself is unfortunate, “I am dark and ugly, [my sister] is fair and pretty. Everyone thinks me crabbed and odd (with perfect justice; and everybody thinks her sweet-tempered and charming (with more justice still)” (32), the reader only has Walter’s characteristics of her to rely on. It is clearly important to the narrative itself that Marian is undesirable to Walter. The two become close friends, and it is as though his love and affection for Laura would have been tainted and unbelievable to the reader if sexual attraction towards Marian even were a possibility.

Brianna Kuhn argues that Marian is neither feminine nor masculine, but androgynous, and that she proves this when she speaks about her own sex. “She seems frustrated throughout the novel that she was born female, and she seems to suggest that she would have been perhaps happier if she had been born a male” (13). Kuhn argues that many of Marian’s asides about her own gender support this claim, for instance when she comments: “You see I don’t think much of my own sex, Mr Hartright […] no woman does think much of her own sex, although few of them confess it as freely as I do” (33). Kuhn argues that Marian’s opposition to the norm that women were supposed to keep their opinions to themselves and “merely agree with their husbands (or men in general)” (14) is what underlines her androgyny. However, it is tempting to imagine that many women felt this opposition even in the 19th century. Mary Wollstonecraft writes her feminist manifesto *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* as early as 1792, and the first mass women’s suffrage petition was presented to the House of Commons as early as 1866, only seven years after the publication of *The Woman in White*. Three years later, John Stuart Mill publishes his famous essay “The Subjection of Women”, arguing for equality between the sexes. The fight for women’s rights is well on its way when Collins publishes his novel. “The Woman Question” was heavily debated in Europe during this time, and the fundamental roles of women dominated the public discourse. Furthermore, the industrial revolution brings lower-class women into the work space, and this challenged men’s reign in the public sphere. Thus, one can argue that what makes Marian androgynous is not that she has issues with how society views and treats her gender, this must have been a debate she was surrounded by. What makes her androgynous is rather how freely she expresses the qualms she has regarding the oppression of her gender.
Presumably, Marian has little patience towards overt femininity, as evident in her comments about her sisters’ illness: “[Laura] is in her own room, nursing that essentially feminine malady, a slight headache” (31), she says and manages to distance herself from both her sister’s weakness and things “essentially feminine”. However, when Walter joins the sisters for dinner during his first night at Limmeridge House, he describes Marian wearing “the delicate primrose-yellow colour which matches so well with a dark complexion and black hair” (54). Casey Sloan notes that “the adoption of clothing that shows her to advantage reveals that Marian respects the world of female culture more than her ironic diatribes suggest and more than scholars have admitted” (805). In other words, Marian succumbs to certain expectations of her gender, and does what she can to enhance her looks. Sloan also comments that “[Marian] uses a rhetoric of clothing that was readily available to Victorian women to communicate important points about her character” (803). Although she might have accepted, even internalized, the fact that her sister is her superior when it comes to physical looks, Marian adheres to expectations and dresses in fashionable attire, while at the same time choosing to go without stays, a supportive undergarment designed to constrict the waist. This might be a sign of agency or subversion, but it might also be, as Sloan concludes, “a statement within contemporary discourse about women’s fashion” (804) and might indeed indicate a feminist stance. Marian’s choice to forgo stays is quite overt, and Walter notices it immediately. This transgression tells the reader something about Marian’s innate desire to break with societal expectations. Ann Gaylin comments that “[Marian] is shapely, yet that shape is visible because she does not restrict her body with the usual accoutrements of fashion: the stays that normally confine a woman’s body” (313). However, stays constrict the waist, support the bust and enhance a woman’s figure while at the same confining her movement in order to make her more traditionally “ladylike”. If Marian had donned the stays, her body would have been more caricatured and feminine. In other words, Marian again shows the dichotomies within herself by knowingly choosing to dress fashionably and in a color that suits her, while subverting expectations by going without the proper undergarments.

Most of Marian’s comments about her own gender are directed at Walter. It is possible to argue that her disdain for her own sex is somewhat of a performance directed at Mr. Hartright and that she plays up her own masculinity as a way of distancing herself from a possible romantic relationship. Gaylin notices Marian’s ability to manipulate language, both oral and written, and comments that “irony becomes the rhetorical signature of doubleness” (315). Arguably, Marian is aware of her limitations as a Victorian woman, and she uses
ironically distant language as a means of escape and to create a divide between herself and others.

Marian is a study in opposites. As mentioned, Walter describes her physical form as both attractive and hideous, feminine and masculine. Furthermore, Marian has no money of her own, unlike her wealthy half-sister, but she still serves as Laura’s protector: “In stooping over to kiss her, [Marian] saw the little book of Hartright’s drawings half hidden under her pillow, just in the place where she used to hide her favourite toys when she was a child” (103). The language Collins uses to describe this tender scene between the sisters puts Marian in a maternal role and emphasizes the difference in power between them. Although Marian is clearly dependent on her sister to maintain her lifestyle (not that the relationship ever comes across as exploitative), it is the older, poorer sister who takes care of the younger, richer one.

At the end of the novel, Walter ends up marrying Laura and the two have a son. The married couple moves into Limmeridge House, and Marian joins them, as a glorified nurse maid – “there is no parting [the three of them], till the last parting of all” (696) she says, and the reader is made to believe that this is a happy ending for the three. Brianna Kuhn goes so far as to suggest that, in Marian, “Collins creates an androgynous heroine who thrives at the close of his novel” (6). This view is problematic in more than one way, I would argue. Firstly, the assumption that Marian thrives in the role as the Hartrights’ “plus-one” undermines the possibility that the older sister might have romantic desires or the yearning for a romantic relationship of her own. Leila Silvana May claims that “Collins’ masculinization of Marian figuratively transformed [the relationship between Marian and Walter] into a homoerotic tie between brother and brother” (96). However, and as much as Marian’s masculinity, or androgyny rather, has been highlighted and emphasized throughout the novel, she remains a woman. To argue, as May and Kuhn do, that Marian is thriving in a presumed homoerotic relationship with her brother-in-law seems unjust to the enigmatic character Collins has fleshed out. The Woman in White starts by promising its reader a story of “what a Woman’s patience can endure, and what a Man’s resolution can achieve” (1), and in doing that, the narrative has also introduced us to the resolve of Marian. As Gaylin notes: “The Woman in White also presents Marian's transgression of the unwritten laws of proper female behavior, and the ensuing discipline and incarceration to which she is subject” (309). Throughout the story, Marian has transgressed to a larger or smaller extent. Choosing to go without stays can be characterized as a silent demonstration of identity and agency. To actively climb out on to the roof in order to spy on Fosco and Glyde might be construed as quite an apparent protest against the limitations put upon her gender. It is, however, telling
that when the story closes, Marian sits as patiently and quietly as any Victorian woman, with
a baby on her lap, domesticated and feminized, a “castrated, heterosexualized ‘good angel’ of
the Victorian household” (Miller, 125). She has broken too many rules of conduct, and must
be domesticated in order to placate the Victorian reader, and even Collins himself.

3.2 Laura Fairlie – Femininity

Laura Fairlie represents Marian’s opposite, and Marian’s much discussed masculinity or
androgyny serves to enhance Laura’s femininity and fragility. When Walter describes
Laura’s face, it is by “commenting on a watercolor portrait of her” (May, 90), as though he is
unable to give the reader a proper description of his future wife without an aid. “Her hair is of
so faint and pale a brown – not flaxen, and yet almost as light; not golden and yet almost
glossy – that it nearly melts, here and there, into the shadow of the hat” (49). Laura has
“lovely eyes in color, lovely eyes in form – large and tender and quietly thoughtful” (49). Her
body, however, is never described, and Laura Silvana May comments that “it is as if Walter
would have preferred Laura’s head on Marian’s body”. The sisters represent two parts of a
whole, and not only their physical appearance. It is as though the qualities of the two sisters
combine Walter’s ideal woman, as he says: “two women, one of whom possessed all the
accomplishments of grace, wit and high-breeding, the other all the charms of beauty,
gentleness and simple truth, that can purify and subdue the heart of a man” (65).

Laura, as opposed to her sister, never has the opportunity to narrate her own story. While Marian, through her diary, narrates large parts of the novel, Laura barely has any lines, and while conversations between Marian and Walter are rendered in great detail, the reader is almost never subject to any dialogue between Laura and her husband-to-be. Sarah Annes Brown argues that Laura has a “powerful enemy outside the fiction of the text, Collins himself” (42). In other words, one can argue that Collins strips Laura entirely of agency. There are several voices within the narrative, even Lady Glyde’s tombstone, but Laura is never allowed to communicate with the reader. “The text conspires against and disempowers [Laura] at the same time as it opposes itself to [her] ill treatment at the hands of the novel’s villains (42). Collins only shows Laura Fairlie to his reader and gives her no power of her
own and barely an identity apart from being Marian’s foil. Laura can never win, she serves
mostly as a narrative instrument. Laura is important, mostly to highlight the masculinity in
Marian and the latter’s transgressions. Even the text is against her; she has no right to participate.

Presumably, Laura, in great opposition to Marian, represents the Victorian ideal in that she manages to “hold her tongue”, something which her sister struggles to do. Leila Silvana May observes that “Collins has created the two sisters according to the typical Victorian formula of contrasting physical and personality types” (89). Laura is the angel of the house, and Marian declares so herself: “she is an angel; and I am – Try some of that marmalade, Mr. Hartright, and finish the sentence, in the name of female propriety, for yourself” (32). Marian explicitly describes Laura as an angel, but stops before calling herself a devil, presumably under the guise of female decorum. Casey Sloan argues that “Laura Fairlie actively uses fashion rhetoric to reject class distinctions and link herself to her loved ones” (809). This becomes especially evident during Walter’s first dinner at Limmeridge House, where he remarks on Marian’s choice of yellow dress. He also notices that Laura wears a plain, white dress, “the sort of dress which the wife or daughter of a poor man might have worn” (55). Walter later learns that this is an active and knowing choice by Laura, in that she intentionally dresses down, so that “Marian and Mrs. Vesey are not outclassed by a display of her family wealth”(809), as Sloan adds. In other words, and as is evident by her fashion choice, Laura strives to make bonds with the other two women of Limmeridge House, independent of class. It is also telling that Laura honors a promise she made to her father on his deathbed and chooses to marry a man closer to her uncle in age, as opposed to the man she actually loves. This refusal to say “no” to Percival can be seen as a commentary on the patriarchy to which Victorian women were subjected. Laura has little to no agency, and as the proverbial angel of the house, she is left with no choice when faced with the promises she has made to two important men in her life – both her father and her betrothed. However, Laura’s failure to reject Sir Glyde is also an important plot point, and her stubborn passivity can be seen as an instrument to move the plot forward.

When Walter later marries Laura, he seems to do so out of obligation. Although Walter claims to love Laura at the beginning of the novel, it is an attraction based on exterior qualities rather than a deeper connection, like the one he shares with Marian. Rachel Ablow makes the claim that Laura is the second woman to “alter Walter’s pulses” (166) in the course of the novel. “By the time [Walter] meets [Laura], his heartbeat has already been arrested by her half-sister on the moonlit highway” (166). Presumably, it is the physical appearance of both Anne Catherick and the similar Laura that catches Walter’s fancy. Moreover, Laura is arguably infantilized after having spent time in the asylum, under the
pretense that she is actually Anne Catherick. However, as mentioned, Marian already treats her like a child, her own child, and the infantilization of Laura is present even before her experience in the asylum. As the story closes, “the desire between Laura and Walter has been reabsorbed in a fuzzy, warm and erotically confused world of sibling love” (May, 95). At the story’s close, Walter narrates and relays how the married couple “must forget [them]selves, and think only of [Marian]” (697). The couple voluntarily invites Marian, a third person into their household, and she answers the invitation by exclaiming that “there can be no parting between us, till the last parting of all” (696). By inviting Marianne into their domestic sphere, the married couple effectively turn themselves into a trio. Walter has previously explained how he leaves Laura “in her sister’s care” (696) when travelling, stipulating that his wife is unable to take care of herself. Thus, Laura is degraded from Walter’s love interest to his sister, daughter even.

3.3 Marian and Laura – Codependence

The relationship between the two half-sisters warrants more analysis. Amy K. Levin argues that the women in Collins’ mystery novel are “essentially static; they are not working out an identity through or in opposition to each other” (29). However, as Michie notes, “Laura Fairlie’s identity is always subject to the criminal manipulation of others” (59), and as one of the few characters in Collins’ narrative who don’t wish Laura any harm, and who actually loves her regardless of her physical beauty, Marian serves as an important and crucial presence in Laura’s existence. Although the two might not use each other to “work out an identity”, they are not static characters, as they go through significant changes throughout the story. The two sisters are set up as opposites and as two halves of Walter’s ideal woman, but the sisters’ bilateral relationship is also important - not only to the narrative of this particular novel, but such a relationship is in itself ubiquitous in Victorian literature and therefore meaningful.

As established earlier, the differences between Marian and Laura are clearly evident, in fact almost parodic. Sarah Annes Brown comments that “In nineteenth-century literature such differences between sisters are often accounted for by quirks of heredity. Sisters’ characteristics may be traced back to one parent or another” (3). In the case of Collins’ heroines, Michael Cohens approach might be more viable – the variation between two sisters
with only one common parent. We know very little about Marian’s parents, and the only impression the reader has of Laura’s ancestry is her hypochondriac uncle Frederic Fairlie, who is nervous to a fault, similar to his niece. Regardless of our knowledge of the sisters’ heritage, their differences are apparent, and this, Cohen argues, was a strategy favored by Victorian writers as a way of explaining moral differences between sisters (121). Even if there is little to no apparent moral difference between Laura and Marian, the choice to make them half-sisters might be a stroke of genius on Collins part – this choice leaves him room to flesh out the contrasts between the two, while at the same time reassuring his reader that their sororal bond is unbreakable, in spite of their diversities. Brown continues to argue that it is a typical strategy on the Victorian author’s part to make “one sister more conventionally beautiful, with regular features, but identify the other as more ‘attractive’, perhaps more striking or lively” (5). This is clearly applicable to Laura and Marian, Laura being conventionally attractive, while Marian is the lively sister. Interestingly, towards the end of the novel, the two sisters lose some of the characteristics which make them so vastly different. Laura, after her stint in the asylum, loses her beauty, as Walter notes: “My poor faded flower! My lost afflicted sister” (499). Walter calling Laura his sister can be seen as the final nail in the coffin for their romantic relationship. Leila Silvana May quite rightly observes that Marian and Walter continue to patronize the young Laura. They relish the time they have alone without her as “[they] could speak to each other without restraint” (500). In other words, as a companion, Marian is vastly more important to Walter than her sister. As the story unfolds, it becomes evident that he chooses to marry Laura based solely on her physical appearance. Marian, on the other hand, also regresses as the narrative develops, and this is evident both in the text itself and in her behavior. Through her diary, Marian has narrated almost one third of the book. The second half of the novel, however, is narrated almost entirely by Walter. When Marian cradles her nephew, she has lost her agency, androgyny and voice, and has been domesticated into the ranks of subservient Victorian women. This regression is interesting, as it highlights the challenges women of the era faced. It is possible to argue that Marian’s regression is a symbol of the Woman Question and the challenges yet to be fought.

Leila Silvana May notes that “The Woman in White, like so many texts contemporary with it, is in many respects a treatise on sisterhood” (82). She argues that the narrative could have been structured around a parent-child relationship, a lovers’ relationship or a matrimonial one. When the author chooses to make a pair of sisters the center of his story, May continues, it is because it is the relationship best suited to entertain his Victorian reader,
as sororal love “in its immaculate state [...] justifies the familial organization upon which society is based, while its potential anarchic and erotic intensity threatens to undermine the very edifice that contains it” (82). In other words, the sororal relationship contains more possibilities of transgressions than any other familial relationships. Sisters and women were expected to conform to nineteenth-century standards of purity and fidelity. When, and if, someone within such a relationship overstepped existing rules of conduct, the result was arguably more fascinating than if the same transgression occurs between friends. Thus, if an author were to suggest, indicate and even explore indelicate behavior, the confines of the sister relationship comes across as ideal.

Tellingly, even though sororal love is regarded as pure, the relationship between Laura and Marian has a dimension of something illegal and incestuous. May observes that “Laura and Marian express their love physically and fervently. The dullest reader would have difficulty failing to notice its erotic components” (92). Before Laura’s marriage to Sir Percival, Marian writes in her diary that “Before another month is over our heads, she will be his Laura instead of mine! His Laura! I am as little able to realize the idea which those two words convey [...] as if writing of her marriage were like writing of her death” (201). Interestingly, it is Marian who has pressured Laura into accepting Sir Glyde, and it is she who told Walter to leave Limmeridge house after realizing that there was a romantic attraction between her sister and the drawing master. It is as though she steers Laura away from true love and pushes her into a marriage based on what she perceives to be moral obligation. On Laura’s wedding day, Marian writes “we have kissed each other” (212). May continues: “We see then that the orphaned sisters live in a self-contained world of love, fidelity, respect and (at least a hint of) erotic fulfillment” (92). Without each other, the sisters, Laura in particular, are lost. An argument can be made that Laura needs Marian’s love and devotion, and Marian only stays with her younger sister because of her financial needs. The two are equally codependent, however, as evidenced by Marian’s enthusiastic outburst when she is expecting Laura back from her honeymoon: “The bare anticipation of seeing that dear face and hearing that well-known voice of tomorrow, keeps me in a perpetual fever of excitement” (217). Evidently, and as shown by the novel’s closing chapter, the two sisters end up where they need to be – together.
Christina Rossetti published the narrative poem “Goblin Market” in the collection Goblin Market and Other Poems. The poem was accompanied by two of her brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s designs, and although it was written and produced for adults, the child reader was nevertheless implicit. In her review of the book for Macmillan’s Magazine, Caroline Norton wrote that “[“Goblin Market” is] a ballad which children will con with delight, and which riper minds may ponder over, as we do with poems written in a foreign language which we only half understand” (qtd. in Kooistra, 250). It is easy to imagine how the poem could be construed as a children’s tale, as the many repetitions and descriptions of fable-like beings are reminiscent of children’s fairytales, in addition to the appeal of the nursery-rhyme meters and presence of pictures. In 1893 the poem was published as a separate volume illustrated by Laurence Houseman, and was more explicitly directed at adult audiences. Lorraine Janzen Kooistra observes that “the principal question troubling the first readers of ‘Goblin Market’, then, seems to have been whether the poem was a moral ‘allegory against the pleasures of sinful love’, or an immoral narrative extolling the delights of the flesh” (252). Arguably, and as I shall discuss further in this chapter, the poem is neither one nor the other.

“Goblin Market” tells the story of the twin-like sisters Laura and Lizzie, who live alone in a cottage. The poem’s narrator emphasizes the point that the two are maidens, and every morning and night they hear the cries of goblins selling exotic fruits. It is implied that only maids can hear the goblins’ clamor. After having collected water from a nearby stream, one of the sisters, Laura, stays behind after her sister has gone home. Even though Lizzie, the other sister, has warned her against purchasing anything from the goblins, Laura uses a lock of her golden hair to buy fruit, and even takes a kernel home. When Laura returns home, Lizzie reminds her sister about what happened to Jeanie, another maiden who ate the goblins’ fruit. She “pined away in the moonlight” and “died at first snow”. Furthermore, grass or flowers never bloom on Jeanie’s grave, implying that she lost her fertility after having eaten the fruit. The next morning Laura awakes, hungry for more of the goblins’ merchandise, and after a long day of daydreaming about the fruit, she goes looking for the goblins. However, she can no longer hear them, and the kernel-stone fails to yield any fruit. Unsatisfied, Laura begins to age, her hair turns gray and she becomes a shadow of herself. Lizzie, who still hears the goblin men, seeks them out with a silver coin in her purse to buy more fruit for her sister. Lizzie refuses the goblins when they try to force fruit down her throat, leaving them fuming.
with anger and herself covered in juice and pulp. When Lizzie returns home, Laura licks the fruit juices off her “with a hungry mouth”. The taste of the fruit is now revolting to Laura, and she collapses, but is comes to again and is restored to full health the next morning.

The poem concludes with a scene set years later. The two sisters are mothers and tell their children the story about the goblins, how Lizzie saved Laura, and the redeeming love of sisters. The poem is wrought with Christian allusions to Adam and Eve, forbidden fruit and temptation, and is “frequently read as an allegory of the ‘sexual fall’ and redemption by a sister” (Rueschman, 90). The poem has elicited multiple interpretations over the years, but my focus here will be on the relationship between the sisters, both the differences and similarities between the two, and finally on images of doubling.

4.1 Laura – Sin

The story in “Goblin Market” revolves around the choices and actions of Laura. Her transgression is what separates the two sisters, as the two are described as “Like two blossoms on one stem,/ Like two flakes of new-fall’n snow,/ Like two wands of ivory” (188-190). The two are described as twin-like, at least in appearance. The difference between them lies in their ability to withstand the goblins’ temptations. Laura is unable to resist the goblins’ cries, transgresses Victorian codes of maiden behavior and becomes symbolic of “the fallen woman”. Several critics assert that the fruit in “Goblin Market” represents sexual knowledge, and furthermore that Laura, in buying the fruit, loses her virginity to the goblins (Gilbert and Gubar, (566) Casey, (69), Rueschman, (91)). The language Rossetti uses is charged with sexual undertones, such as when Laura “suck’d [the fruit] until her lips were sore” (136), and the connection between the goblin’s fruits and the loss of virtue is easily made. Laura’s sister, the virtuous Lizzie, however, remains a virgin and withstands the goblins’ violent assault. Even though the girls know that “We must not look at goblin men/we must not buy their fruits” (42-43), because “Who knows upon what soil they fed/Their hungry thirsty roots?” (44-45), Laura’s appetite, sexual or otherwise, is presumably too overpowering for her to control. Sarah Annes Brown argues that “both the method of payment and her insatiable desire for the fruit strongly hint that Laura has undergone some kind of sexual initiation” (46). In other words, by communicating with the goblins, tasting their fruit and even enjoying
it, Laura has transgressed, becoming a sexual being. She, in this account, represents the antithesis to the angel in the house and becomes a symbol of the fallen woman.

As observed by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, after buying and consuming the fruit, Laura loses her value and is unworthy of further seduction (566). Even the kernel she has brought with her from the encounter fails to produce fruit. Both Laura and the things she has touched have become barren. One might argue that by succumbing to her desires, sexual or otherwise, Laura has effectively rendered herself obsolete in the eyes of Victorian society. Janet Galigani Casey interestingly observes that “feminist readings of the poem […] argue that Rossetti has created a world which deliberately excludes men” (63). This point is valid, since there are no human men depicted in the poem. The two sisters live alone, and although the goblins are men, they are closer to animal than human in appearance and behavior: “One had a cat’s face/One whisk’d a tail/One tramp’d at a rat’s pace/One crawl’d like a snail” (71-74). At the very end, when the sisters are married with children, their husbands are not mentioned, and it is assumed that the two only have daughters.

However, even though the men are absent from the poem, traditional female roles are nevertheless present. When Laura transgresses, she not only loses her fertility, but she also becomes uninteresting in the eyes of the goblins: “Laura turn’d cold as stone/To find her sister heard that cry alone” (253-254). It is as though Laura is tainted and impure, and this mirrors the ideal of staying virtuous until marriage, and how unmarried, promiscuous women had virtually no value. In addition, Laura withers and goes gray. After having tasted the fruit, she loses her beauty, her decaying looks further underlining her increasing undesirableness. “Her exaggerated fall has, in fact, intensified the processes of time which for all humanity, began with Eve’s eating of the forbidden fruit, when our primordial parents entered the realm of generation,” Gilbert and Gubar argue (566). It is easy to compare the first woman created to Laura. They both taste the forbidden fruit, and thereby fall from grace. But while Eve was cast out of her garden due to her wrongdoings, Laura is saved by the one thing she has that Eve lacks – her sister. Later, while the two sisters still perform their domestic chores the day after Laura consumed the fruit, she keeps daydreaming about the goblins and their merchandise, waiting for the evening so that she can venture out to acquire more. In other words, not even in the domestic sphere does Laura perform according to Victorian ideals.

The sisters’ physicality is never described in detail in the poem. But, as mentioned above, they are at least described as “two blossoms on one stem”. The two are twin-like, in fact the only thing that separates them is the sexual difference between them. Helena Michie observes that “in Victorian culture, sexual difference between women is expressed and
contained within the capacious trope of sisterhood, which allows for the possibility of sexual fall and for the reinstatement of the fallen woman within the family” (404). This is the case also with Rossetti’s heroines. Laura is fallen but saved by her sister and thus reinstated into the domesticity of the nuclear family. Gilbert and Gubar equate Lizzie with Christ and argue that Lizzie rehabilitates Laura “just as Christ redeemed mankind from Original Sin, restoring at least the possibility of heaven to Eve’s erring descendants” (566). While the comparison is just, it can come across as overly didactic. It is possible to argue that it simplifies the author’s active choice to make the two girls sisters, as opposed to friends. The sororal relationship is both complicated and also easily recognizable, and there is room within the confines of the relationship to express a multitude of complex feelings. As Amy K. Levin notes, “a sister, like brother cannot be selected, given away or substituted. This circumstance gives the bond a privileged position, utterly unlike a friendship, which relies on mutual affinities” (17). In other words, the sororal relationship comes with certain confines and duties incomparable to other relationships. Feelings of love, friendship, duty, envy, competition and disgust can be equally present without necessarily being a threat to a relationship between two sisters.

When Lizzie saves Laura, she thus does so without condoning her sister’s actions, she even condemns them. She has warned Laura about the dangers of the goblins multiple times: “Their offers should not charm us/Their evil gifts would harm us” (65-66) and “Dear, you should not stay so late,/Twilight is not good for maidens:/Should not loiter in the glen/In the haunts of goblin men” (143-146). When Lizzie later decides to seek out the goblin men, she does so not until she sees “Laura dwindling/Seem’d knocking at Death’s door” (320-321), in other words not until Laura is in danger of dying. Eva Rueschmann claims that Lizzie “decides to confront the goblins to restore her former intimacy and unity with Laura” (92), and while this might be one of the reasons why Lizzie decides to face the goblins, Rueschman overlooks the sense of duty Lizzie feels towards her sister. I would suggest that Lizzie acts not only out of the goodness of her heart and of sisterly love, but also from a sense of moral obligation. In writing about sister-brother relationships Deborah Gorham explains that a sister “was supposed to act as her brother’s moral guide [...]. A sister’s capacity to act as her brother’s moral derived from the purity she retained by being cloistered within the private sphere” (45). Although Rossetti tells the story of two sisters, Gorham’s point is nevertheless applicable. The reader of “Goblin Market” understands that the two sisters, Lizzie in particular, spends the majority of her time being the domestic angel, doing household chores and playing house. As soon as she hears the goblins’ cry, Lizzie swiftly returns to the cottage, and she fits the description of a woman “cloistered by the private
sphere”. It is fitting, then, that she saves her more adventurous sister, who arguably shows masculine curiosity when she wanders into the world and encounters the goblins. Gorham continues by noting that “A girl’s relationship to the female members of her family […] was depicted as one of close, supportive companionship, of an intimacy based on the fulfilment of a shared role” (48). The intimacy Gorham describes is also present in the relationship between Laura and Lizzie. The choice to refrain from saving Laura would have been doubly impossible for Lizzie. The virtuous angel in the house needs to fulfill her moral commitment to her sister, who, in this instance, takes the role of a brother.

Furthermore, Laura’s survival seems a necessary plot point. In “Goblin Market”, Rossetti employs her two heroines with polarizing character traits – Laura is the curious one, the rebellious and sexually subversive sister. Lizzie, on the other hand, is careful, dutiful and virtuous. The sisters are both opposites and similar, but their opposite qualities work as “a fragmented part of a whole” (Levin, 20). It is possible to argue that plot-wise, the one sister cannot exist without the other, as the story is dependent on the pair. Levin concludes that authors are, through a pair of opposite sisters, able to enact an inner struggle: “One sister is frequently designated as the conventional one, and the other as a rebel, permitting the author to satisfy and undermine conventions within the same text” (20). In the case of Rossetti’s poem, Laura has the role of the rebel, but she is also a part of the twin-like pair, a unit, and this unit needs to exist in order to complete the narrative and to make it interesting and relatable to the reader. “The existence of sisters generates tension as the reader seeks to understand how something can be at once similar and different”, Levin notes (20). In other words, if Laura had succumbed to the lethal magic of the goblins, Rossetti’s reader would be left without a foil with which to balance Lizzie’s virtuousness, and the poem could have been in danger of being rendered incomplete, even uninteresting. Laura’s survival is, in other words, a necessary plot point.

In “Goblin Market”, Laura symbolizes difference. This is a difference shown within the sororal relationship, a sexual difference and a difference from the established ideal. Michie stresses the fact that this difference is present even in Rossetti’s language, as the goblins’ fruits are described in detail, each verse dedicated to different fruits: “Apples and quinces/Lemons and oranges/Plump unpeck’d cherries” (5-7). Michie continues by noting that “the seductiveness of the goblin cries lies in the power to specify, to list, one after the other, a series of fruits” (415). The goblins themselves are also described as different from each other, and although they are all compared to animals, not one is the same. They are cat-faced, rat-faced, snail-paced and parrot-voiced. The fruit and goblins are, through what are
presumably carefully chosen words, described as different from each other. In opposition to Laura, who is one part of a whole, the fruits and the goblins are identified, articulated and made into separate entities.

In this way, the temptation represented by the fruits and the goblins is one of difference. The fruit may also represent sexual knowledge, but to Laura the difference itself, the condition of being different, may be equally alluring as a sexual experience: “The generic association of fruit and temptation is particularized until particularization itself, the ability to generate lists of objects, becomes the temptation to which Laura, the poet and the reader succumb” (Michie, 415). In other words, one can argue that the separation from her sister, the need to exert her individuality and difference, is as much a temptation to Laura as are sexual independence and knowledge. In a continuation of this argument, Levin notes that the bond young girls develop with their mothers, as members of the same sex, contributes to difficulties when establishing an individual identity (17). This is important, because presumably these difficulties will increase if the young girls in question not only have their mothers to compare themselves to, but also, as is the case with Rossetti’s heroines, a sister to compete with. Levin offers Freud’s theories of female development as an explanation for the competition among sisters: “As a girl’s Oedipal attachment to her father grows, she may vent hostility and envy not only on her mother, but also on her sister, a less powerful female rival for his attentions” (17). Arguably, the need to form an identity separate from that of their close female relatives will have a profound impact on familial relationships, and in the case of Laura, her demand and craving for autonomy almost lead to her death.

4.2 Lizzie – Virtue

“Goblin Market” never informs us as readers of which of the sisters is the older one, or the prettier one, as many Victorian novels and poems are wont to do. This is presumably so in order underline and highlight any differences in character between two sisters. Wilkie Collins humorously writes that “[...] an ardent attachment to anything like an established rule, simply because it is established. I know that it is a rule that, when two sisters are presented in a novel, one must be tall and dark, and the other short and light” (113). In this thesis I have already discussed the physical differences between Marian and Laura in Collins’ own *The Woman in White* from 1859 at length. Although not as conflicting, Jane Austen’s heroines are
famously given an adjective to which their personalities match (something which I will return to in Chapter 3). Dorothea and Celia Brooke in Middlemarch, published in 1871-1872, are other representatives of this dichotomy – the younger Celia is described as being a great beauty and more sensual than the older Dorothea and does not share her sister’s temperance and frugality. The Jenkyns sisters in Elizabeth Gaskell’s Cranford, published from 1851-1853, are also stark opposites, the younger Matty playing the part of the conventional, pleasant and popular woman. In contrast, Deborah, her dominating and imperious elder sister, is the matriarch of Cranford who devises the town’s rules of etiquette. In other words, Victorian literature is wrought with sisters, and many of them are portrayed as direct opposites.

Laura and Lizzie, however, are practically interchangeable, and this is underlined by the similarities in their names. The only apparent difference between the two is Laura’s curiosity towards the goblins and Lizzie’s restrictions and fear of them and, presumably, what the goblins represent. Lizzie is, as mentioned, cautious and never strays from the established Victorian ideal. She hurries home as soon as she hears the goblin men, and refuses even to look at them: “Laura, Laura/You should not peep at goblin men/Lizzie cover’d up her eyes,/Cover’d close lest they should look” (48-51). When the virtuous Lizzie saves her sister, she does so by enduring what can easily be interpreted as rape. When she refuses to enjoy the fruit and “feast” with the goblins, their dispositions change, and they become aggressive. The goblins “cuff’d and caught her/Coax’d and fought her/Bullied and besought her/Scratch’d her, pinch’d her, black as ink” (424-427), while Lizzie refuses to taste the fruit. Rossetti’s language here is full of allusions to abuse and rape, and this scene is quite an extended one. Rossetti doesn’t shy away from violent descriptions. However, Lizzie is described as being steadfast in her virtuousness: “White and golden Lizzie stood/Like a lily in a flood, -/Like a rock of blue vein’d stone/Lash’d by tides obstreperously” (408-411). The text and the descriptions of Lizzie enhances and supports the reader’s impression that she is relentless in her morality.

When Lizzie later returns to her sick sister, she is covered in pulp, which she offers to Laura: “Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices/ […] Eat me, drink me, love me” (468/471). Dorothy Mermin suggests that Lizzie’s ability to withstand the goblins’ advances galvanizes her virtue, and that she is triumphant in her endeavor: “[Lizzie’s] story has to do not with temptation resisted – neither the goblins nor their fruit attract her, and what she is resisting is attempted rape – but with danger braved and overcome, an heroic deed accomplished” (112). Mermin, in other words, advocates that Lizzie never desired the fruit, and that therefore her
declining it is not necessarily a great feat. What Lizzie withstands, however, is the threatening nature of the goblins, and their attempts of rape. However, and as Sarah Annes Brown argues, Lizzie’s virtue might not be as clear-cut as first imagined. When she leaves the glen, covered with fruit juice and pulp, she does so “In a smart, ache, tingle” (447), all adjectives “suggestive of sexual initiation” (Brown, 145). Brown suggests that Lizzie’s joy comes not from eluding the goblins’ sexual advances as Mermin suggests, but rather that she has “co-opted the goblins’ sexuality for use with her sister free from male interference” (146). Mermin thus reads lesbian incest into the scene where Laura sucks her sister dry of fruit juice. But although the language might support associations of incest, I would argue that Lizzie’s joy might also stem from the knowledge that the two sisters, the two blossoms on the one stem, are together again. Leila Silvana May compares the relationship between The Woman in White’s Laura and Marian to the one between Laura and Lizzie. “It is a relationship of closeness, intensity, self-sacrifice, mutual dependence and physical demonstrativeness” (91). The two pairs of sisters have several similarities in their relationships, and the women are thus representative of sororal relationships in the Victorian era. The underlying incestuous and erotic components are present, even blatantly so, but it is possible to dismiss these components as tabloid instruments, used to enhance plot points and stir emotions within the reader. Even though we are never introduced to the husbands of the sisters in “Goblin Market”, they must exist nonetheless, as evidenced by the women’s children. In contrast to this, one can read the hints of romantic relations between the two pairs of sisters as a feminist comment on the patriarchal society of the 19th century. It is, in other words, possible to argue that the sororal relationship in “Goblin Market” simultaneously represents two things. If one gives weight to the incestuous relationship pursued the two sisters, one may read Rossetti’s poem as a blatant critique of the contemporary situation of women. If one focuses on the two women ending up as mothers, raising their children together, one can read “Goblin Market” as a comment on women’s need for unity and safety in their bilateral relationships.

At the end of the poem, Laura, with Lizzie’s help, has retreated into the safe space of domestic life, devoted to warning her own children of the goblin men. Gilbert and Gubar question the quality of life Laura has after being saved by her sister. After awakening from her near-death experience, Laura has “retreated to a psychic stage prior even to the one she was in when the poem began” (Gilbert and Gubar, 567). By presumably living to protect her daughters against the same dangers that threatened her, she “reject[s] any notions of sexuality, of self-assertion, of personal pleasure” (567). The curious Laura depicted at the
beginning of Rossetti’s poem has all but been erased, and left is the nurturing mother. The Laura who seized what little autonomy and power she had is gone. What is left of her is the domesticized sister, in indebted to Lizzie, her “other half”.

Rueschman supports Gilbert and Gubar’s position. She observes that “Even though ‘Goblin Market’ appears to end on a conventional note – traditional roles for women and mothers and wives are affirmed – the poem as a whole focuses on two twin-like sisters who must differentiate and reintegrate split off parts of themselves” (93). Rueschman continues by arguing that Rossetti splits the fallen and the innocent woman in order to suggest their implicit kinship, and that this is a story about a struggle towards mutual growth: “Lizzie must confront her own lack of experience as much as Laura needs to reconnect with her sister” (94). However, I would argue that Rueschman’s opinion that Laura has a need to reconnect with Lizzie, might be too simple. As previously stated, I see the two sisters as two parts of one whole, and that the narrative needs them to be united. Laura’s last utterance seems almost nostalgic when she tells her children about “the wicked, quaint fruit-merchant men”, and the fruit they sell that is “honey to the throat/But poison in the blood”. Although the warning of the fruit and their poison is a powerful one, it is possible to imagine that the domesticated Laura misses the freedom of that fateful night. However grateful Laura is to Lizzie for saving her life, it is with a twang of resistance that she says “For there is no friend like a sister […] To fetch one if one goes astray”. In other words, Laura is not free to go or do where or what she pleases, she knows she will be “fetched” by Lizzie. There is a sense of imprisonment or confinement in what Laura expresses, and this seems to apply to both her life as a mother and “angel in the house”, and her role in her sororal relationship. Laura is stuck. As such, she shares her fate with Collin’s Marian Halcombe, who is also domesticated at the end of her story. Marian loses both her voice and her agency and is left a glorified nurse maid. It is easy to compare the two women, because even though Marian is described as unattractive and we don’t know anything about Laura’s exterior, one could to argue that they both take control over their own fates, much to their common detriment. Laura is close to losing her life, while Marian becomes seriously ill. They both end up in what is possibly unfortunate, or unfulfilling, relationships. Collins strips Marian of most of her agency, and someone who started out as a compelling and subversive female character ends up as a domesticated nurse.

There is evidence in “Goblin Market” to support the argument that Laura longs for a freedom she can never achieve. The fact that she is tempted by the goblins in the first place, suggests that she has a masculine curiosity that she shares with Ms. Halcombe. Possibly, this curiosity is quenched at the end of the poem. The impossibility of a free existence for Laura
is evident, as she succumbs to the domesticity that is expected of her and her sisters – both in the literal and figurative sense. Both Marian and Laura are, I will argue, used as literary devices – they start their stories as incomplete characters, tropes, necessary to drive a narrative forward. Both women are the driving forces of their respective narratives when they transgress in relation to society’s expectations, and both Marian and Laura are paramount in serving as a foil for the more timid and virtuous sister. It may be telling then, of Victorian expectations of women, that they both lose their agency and identity, and become unified with the sister who serves as an example of the Victorian ideal. Arguably, this fate is the only possible outcome for these two women. As women of the Victorian era, they are bound and limited by the confines of the domestic sphere, and a different destiny would simply be unthinkable.
5 Sense and Sensibility

When Jane Austen’s first full-length novel was published in 1811, it was to great acclaim. By 1813 Sense and Sensibility had sold out its first print run of 750 copies. The novel grants its reader a look into the everyday lives of upper-middle-class women in early 19th-century England, and focuses on the importance of family life. The narrative centers around the Dashwood family, most importantly the two eldest sisters, Elinor and Marianne. The traditional interpretation of the title of Austen’s novel is that the author has attributed one adjective to each of her heroines, Elinor representing “sense” and Marianne representing “sensibility”. While the differences between the two sisters play an important role in the novel, this chapter will argue that the conjunction and between the title’s adjectives suggests a relationship between the terms, rather than a sharp disconnection. Gilbert Ryle makes the observation that several of Austen’s titles “are composed of abstract nouns. Sense and Sensibility is really about the relations between Sense and Sensibility, or […] between Head and Heart, Thought and Feeling, Judgement and Emotion” (351). In other words, “sense” and “sensibility” roughly correlate to reason and emotion in Austen’s work. In her title, Austen has prepared her reader for two dichotomous characters, and while this description of the two Dashwood sisters might be superficially correct, it seems to obstruct further discussion. Although Austen, as Ashley Bonin observes, repeatedly uses the two nouns to describe the dispositions and tendencies of her characters, “a repetition that ostensibly delineates a divide between the two terms” (32), this chapter will try to show that Elinor does in fact embody more “sense” than her sister, and that Marianne possesses more “sensibility”, but also that the two are not only one or the other: they both possess both traits. In contrast to the other two authors discussed in this thesis, Austen opens her narrative by painting a picture of two seemingly dichotomous protagonists. As the story closes, the attentive reader will have understood that the sisters have a number similarities, however, and that this can be viewed as a symbol of women sharing a common fate, that is as being under the subordination of men.

As members of the upper-middle class in the early 19th century, finding a suitable husband is, clearly, the Dashwood sisters’ most important task. Without a fortune of their own, and without a wealthy husband, 19th-century women became a liability to their extended families, or reduced to poverty. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar observe that “In all her novels Austen examines the female powerlessness that underlie female pressure to
marry, the injustice of inheritance laws, the ignorance of women denied formal education” (136), and maintain that this vulnerability is a truth hidden behind the graceful and elegant surfaces of English society. Few women had any skills to speak of. They were inadequately educated and were unable to earn money of their own, in other words completely helpless if left to spinsterhood. At the start of Austen’s story, the Dashwood sisters have already been made crudely aware of this possible future.

When their father dies, leaving his fortune to his first wife’s son, the task of finding a mate becomes increasingly urgent for the Dashwood sisters. Gilbert and Gubar read the beginning of Sense and Sensibility as an inverse retelling of King Lear. They contend that Austen’s “reversals imply that male traditions need to be evaluated and reinterpreted from a female perspective” (120). In other words, the culture in which the Dashwood sisters exist is one invented for and by men. The women described by Austen have to find what little room for agency they can within these confines, and are, for financial and cultural reasons, not at liberty to break free from said restrictions.

In Austen’s narrative, the women are deprived from a promised annual income, as their brother and his wife persuade themselves that “five hundred among [the four women]” (10) is much more than they will need. Hence, the women’s bereavement of their home and their inheritance is a symbol of patriarchal control. Amy K. Levin perhaps stretches the argument of patriarchal oppression to far, however, in claiming that physical poverty is a metaphor for emotional deprivation, and furthermore that John Dashwood considers his half-sisters “unnecessary encumbrances and perpetual annoyances” (46). It is important to remember that Mr. Dashwood himself is married. The narrative strongly implies that Fanny Dashwood affects her husband’s stinginess: “I am convinced within myself that your father had no idea of your giving them any money at all, […] it would be very strange and unreasonable if he did” (11-12), she says. Fanny, while portrayed as selfish and greedy, is also a product of her time, and is thus taught to look out for herself. Imaginably, and if one were to give her the benefit of the doubt, Fanny Dashwood is behaving as is expected of her – she is simply doing what she can to secure her own fortune.

As is common in Austen’s novels, when the story closes, the girls are secure in stable and loving relationships, but not without having had to endure several setbacks, misconceptions, heartbreak and emotional trials. However, as Gilbert and Gubar deduce, and even though Austen’s narrative ends with the “overt message that young women […] must submit to the powerful conventions of society by finding a male protector” (172), there are characters in the novel who circumvent these conventions. The despised Mrs. Ferrars is a particularly
interesting character in this context. She can be construed as a representative of contravention when she strips her eldest son of his inheritance, thus proving that the construction of primogeniture is ultimately arbitrary. Mrs. Ferrars herself becomes complicit in the same patriarchal conventions that subjugate her and is an example of a woman working within the confines of a patriarchal society, however atrocious her actions might be. Sense and Sensibility is a story of social mobility, a portrayal of 19th-century women’s need for economic stability and a critique of patriarchal control.

5.1 Elinor Dashwood – Sense

Elinor Dashwood is the oldest of the three Dashwood sisters, and as such it is fitting that she is the voice of common sense. Michael Kerr maintains that “An older sister with a younger sister wants to stand on her own and take care of others. She may act more sure of herself than she really is” (314). In a related argument, Kerr observes that “every family emotional system generates certain functions. These functions are performed by specific individuals in the system. When one individual performs certain functions, other individuals will not perform them” (315). Tellingly, at the novel’s opening discussion of money, Elinor is referred to as “prudent” and with “steadier judgement” (13) than her mother and sister. Here, Elinor exhibits her need to take care of her family and fills the role of caretaker to such an extent that her sisters and mother don’t need to. Matt Fisher claims that Elinor is “the epitome of reason” (216), and if one were to judge the eldest Dashwood sister only by these very early scenes, he would be correct. Elinor dissuades her mother from moving to a house “too large for their income” (13) and favors Barton cottage because of its “uncommonly moderate” (20) rent. When the women discuss financial issues, the older sister seems like the only pragmatic voice of reason. It seems as though she is the only one of the three women who has come to terms with the reality of the situation that the family are facing: they are not in a fortunate financial position. Levin notes that Elinor “appears admirable for performing fatherly duties for her mother and sisters” (47), but one can argue that this practical stance is a result of Elinor’s place in the family. Additionally, Austen needs Elinor to start out as the reasonable and rational sister, or else her story will come to a halt. Furthermore, as Levin also observes, “when the sensitive Marianne behaves selfishly, readers’ sympathies are engaged on Elinor’s behalf” (39). As a plot device, it is crucial that the reader has one character to identify with
and cheer on, and the practical Elinor is handed this role at the story’s inception. When the two sisters discuss finances with Edward Ferrars, it becomes evident that Marianne’s imagined base level of comfort in order to live happily is much higher than that of Elinor: “‘Perhaps,’ said Elinor, smiling, ‘we may come to the same point. Your competence and my wealth are very much alike, I dare say, […] your ideas are only more noble than mine’” (67). Elinor is again portrayed as the more reasonable and economical of the two, and the reader is conceivably supposed to think of Marianne as overly extravagant and rather high maintenance when she argues that “money can only give happiness where there is nothing else to give it. Beyond a competence, it can afford no real satisfaction, as far as mere self is concerned” and continues: “two thousand a-year is a very moderate income” (67). In comparison, after her father’s death, Austen herself lived with her mother and sister on an annual income of 460 pounds (Johnson, 67). By painting Marianne as so overtly distant from her very real financial circumstances, and as excessively demanding, Austen gives her reader no choice but to be compassionate with the older Dashwood sister.

Sarah Annes Brown observes that “it is generally felt that Elinor is the privileged heroine, the novel’s moral focus” (60), and Ashley Bonin argues that “Elinor and Marianne [are] paradigms of sense and sensibility, Elinor almost always emerging as the superior” (30). Here, Bonin may have identified with the older Dashwood sister, as readers are expected to do. One can argue that it is a dangerous exercise, however, to make a general assumption based on such an identification. In opposition to Bonin, Rachel Brownstein comments that the narrative “refuses to choose between Marianne and Elinor” (43), proving that identification with a character is necessary to deem her superior to another. Austen herself describes Elinor as having “strength of understanding and coolness of judgment”, but with strong feelings, and Marianne as “sensible and clever, but with abilities that are ‘in many respects quite equal to Elinor’s’” (8). The sisters are, in other words, not as dissimilar as the reader at first is led to believe. Marianne is indeed more romantic, she enjoys literature, art and the landscape of Norland, she believes in love at first sight and trusts her feelings more than her older sister. Elinor trusts conventions. When Marianne has been to Allenham alone with Willoughby, Elinor reacts with scorn: “‘I am afraid,’ replied Elinor, ‘that the pleasantness of an employment does not always evince its propriety’” (52). Here, Elinor thinks of any social ramifications this endeavor might have, how society views such actions, and, by extension, her sister. Marianne, on the other hand, believes that “if there had been any real impropriety in what I did, I should have been sensible of it at the time, for we always know when we are acting wrong, and with such conviction I could have had no pleasure” (52,
Marianne maintains that she cannot compromise her own feelings. Firstly, she argues that she is always able to know when she transgresses. Secondly, that if and when she does, she will not be able to enjoy herself. Therefore, there has been no transgression in the meeting with Willoughby, as it was a pleasant one, and that “[she] never spent a pleasanter morning in [her] life” (52). The sisters continue to debate the importance of decorum, and Elinor maintains that even if the grounds of Allenham “’were one day to be your own, Marianne, you would not be justified in what you have done” (52). In other words, even if the pair were engaged to be married, Elinor feels that Marianne has violated what is seen as dignified. This is, I would claim, one of the more telling scenes between the two sisters. It underlines how controlled Elinor is by tradition and etiquette, how much faith Marianne has in her feelings, and how she lets them control her.

The difference between the sisters, as Gilbert Ryle argues, is that while Marianne lets her feelings “so overwhelm her that she behaves like a person crazed [,] Elinor keeps her head” (287). Elinor’s actions are often premeditated, and she at least appears collected and pragmatic. In both language and actions, her disposition is much more restrained than that of her younger sister. When a note is brought to the cottage, Marianne believes it to be for her. It turns out to be for Mrs. Jennings, but Elinor cannot help herself, she asks her sister about her expectations. Marianne is slightly evasive when confronted with this question, and Laura berates her for having no confidence in her. This elicits a reaction from Marianne where she sums up the different approaches the two sisters have to communication: “’Nay, Elinor, this reproach from you – you who have confidence in no one!’”, Marianne exclaims. “’Me!’” returned Elinor in some confusion; “Indeed, Marianne, I have nothing to tell.’” (120). Elinor keeps her cards close to her chest, and this outburst again shows her affinity for restraint and self-control. “’Nor I,’ answered Marianne with energy, ‘our situations then are alike. We have neither of us any thing to tell; you, because you do not communicate, and I because I conceal nothing’” (120). In this scene, Marianne underlines the difference between the two sisters – and that it is one of attitude and ways of communication, not necessarily that the one feels more than the other.

Elinor’s pragmatism and constraint are further demonstrated by the fact that she feels relief when confronted with Edward Ferrars’ engagement to Lucy Steele. Sworn to secrecy by Lucy, Elinor has experienced feelings of torment, both because of the content of the secret, but also because the act of secret-keeping itself is challenging. In one of the more dramatic scenes between the Dashwood sisters, after the engagement has been made public, Marianne accuses Elinor of “[not having] felt much” (186), and in an uncharacteristic rant
Elinor makes her internal struggle apparent. Elinor has been made to “labor under the weight not only of her broken heart, but of all the social duty” (Ruth ApRoberts, 361). It becomes clear to the reader that Elinor not only possesses deep feelings for Mr. Ferrars, but that it is her disposition that prevents her from showing these feelings. This is one of the narrative’s more conspicuous examples of the duality that exists within Elinor.

5.2 Marianne Dashwood – Sensibility

Marianne Dashwood ostensibly represents sensibility and cannot help letting her feelings show. She believes that one should be controlled by feelings, not logic. Michael Kerr’s description of younger sisters seemingly fits her perfectly: “A younger sister with an older sister opts for an adventurous and colorful life. Rather than being motherly or bossy, she tends to be feminine, capricious and willful” (314). On the last evening before the Dashwood family leaves Norland, it is as though Marianne mourns the death of the estate. She contemplates that the trees will “continue the same”, but wonders “who will remain to enjoy you?” (22). This display of despair would have been unthinkable coming from Elinor, who has a more pragmatic attitude towards their move. Another blatant display of “sensibility” from Marianne is when Willoughby evasively and abruptly leaves Barton cottage for London. Marianne reacts by staying awake the whole night, crying. When she wakes up the next day, “She got up with a headache, was unable to talk, and unwilling to take any nourishment; giving pain every moment to her mother and sisters, and forbidding all attempt at consolation. Her sensibility was potent enough!” (62). Here, Marianne almost cultivates her feelings of anguish, she shies away from any compassion shown by her family and dives deep into her feelings of abandonment. This early scene highlights the Marianne’s immaturity. She spends the following day playing Willoughby’s favorite songs on the piano, and the reader is left with a feeling that she actually may enjoy these outbursts of excessive emotion.

In her improper amorous involvement with Willoughby, Marianne definitely epitomizes “sensibility”. The couple’s romance starts suddenly and ends just as abruptly, with Marianne catching an almost deadly fever. Gilbert and Gubar comment that “Marianne’s indulgence in sensibility almost causes her own death, the unfettered play of her imagination seeming to result in a terrible fever that represents how imaginative women are infected and
sickened by their dreams” (156-157). Gilbert and Gubar seem to argue that imagination in
women was viewed as toxic and something harmful. It is, however, also possible to view the
fever Marianne contracts as something galvanizing, and that it has an important function on a
narrative level. When Marianne starts to improve from her illness, she relays to Elinor her
plans of “reading only six hours a-day [to] gain […] a great deal of instruction which [she]
now feel[s] [her]self to want” (243). After her fever, Marianne is starting to adjust her plans
and adopts Elinor’s approach to the future. In other words, the fever, which was a result of an
excess of emotion, results in a transformation in Marianne, or perhaps rather a strengthening
of characteristics already present in her.

To reduce Marianne to an “imaginative woman” only controlled by her overly
emotional impulses is thus to do the character a disservice. Ashley Bonin emphasizes the
importance of the younger Dashwood sister’s use of language, and argues that “Marianne’s
language is never contrived” (36), and that her sincerity “occasionally reveals itself in
sarcasm” (37). Although sarcasm can often reveal itself to be overly planned, Marianne’s use
of it “connotes a sincerity of sentiment” (37) and she is not, for instance, afraid of offending
Elinor. In one scene, Elinor chides her younger sister for being too vocal and open with
Willoughby and asks: “how is your acquaintance to be long supported, under such
extraordinary dispatch of every subject for discourse?” Furthermore, Elinor argues that the
two “soon will have exhausted each favorite topic” (37). Marianne answers with exasperation
and a great deal of sarcasm: “I see what you mean. I have been too much at my ease, too
happy, too frank […] I have been open and sincere where I ought to have been reserved,
spiritless and deceitful” (37). This scene, I would suggest, reveals two truths about the
younger Dashwood sister. Firstly, that it is unthinkable for Marianne to act in a manner that,
while it perhaps is socially more expected and acceptable, feels insincere to her. Furthermore,
that she uses sarcasm in order to defend her own conduct. “Marianne’s intentional
commitment to sincerity exemplifies her natural capacity for reason, or sense, in simultaneity
with her sensibility” (Bonin, 38). In other words, she, just like her sister, inhabits both of the
titular traits.

After having learned the truth of Willoughby, that he has impregnated Colonel
Brandon’s 15-year-old niece, the reader could suspect Marianne of reacting in spite of
herself. Her response when learning the news is that she is “now perfectly satisfied, [she]
wish[es] for no change” (247). Marianne has found that she “could never be happy with
[Willoughby]” (247), and in contrast to the overreaction she had to his departure for London
earlier in the story, she now behaves so calmly that Elinor gives her praise: “‘You consider
the matter’, said Elinor, ‘exactly as a good mind and a sound understanding must consider it’” (248). Marianne behaves in a manner more expected of Elinor, but it is her own reflections that warrant this behavior. Her character has developed and her views on love are changing. Marianne’s decision to marry Colonel Brandon is no doubt the ultimate “sensible”, in the modern sense of the word, step in her life. Austen claims that she learns to love the Colonel before she marries him, but the decision is one made on the basis of common sense. Deborah Weiss concludes that “Marianne certainly has lost her vitality in the conclusion, and her willingness to marry to please her family makes her seem like a reward to Brandon for services rendered” (261). However, if one takes into account the duality within the younger Dashwood sister, it is fitting that she succumbs to the expectations of both her family and the society of which she is a part. In choosing to marry Colonel Brandon one can argue that she shares her fate with Marian Halcombe of *The Woman in White* and with Laura of “Goblin Market”. A final fate of domesticity is shared between the more willful characters of the three works discussed in this thesis. It is as though identity and agency are used as plot devices, characteristics that must be quenched towards the stories’ respective ends, in order to make the three individuals palpable to the Victorian reader.

5.3 Elinor and Marianne – “Two blossoms on one stem”

Elinor and Marianne Dashwood are, as Christina Rossetti describes her own two heroines, indeed two blossoms on one stem. As discussed above, Elinor and Marianne function, not as sharp contrasts, but rather as complimentary partners. The reader is obviously supposed to look for binary patterns and dichotomies in the narrative, something that is evident already in the title. It is also a plausible reaction from the reader, when reading about two sisters, to look for similarities and differences. This reaction might be especially pertinent when one is seemingly presented with two characters who allegedly are on either side of a scale. Amy K. Levin argues that the reader is forced to side with one sister when presented with two options: “The reader must […] participate in a struggle for detachment from the other sister(s) in the text, and, in doing so question her own values” (21).

To read about sisters might ultimately be about choosing a favorite. By doing this, the reader is forced to face certain truths about herself, and to distance herself from what is presumably unfavorable characteristics. Arguably, in Austen’s first published work, this
detachment is unnecessary, and even impossible. As Ruth ApRoberts observes, “The evaluation of each character is adjusted and changed as the novel proceeds” (357). In other words, *Sense and Sensibility* in fact offers its reader two sisters with similar character traits, and not two binary characters, as the reader might at first be inclined to believe. Labeling Elinor as “sense” and Marianne as “sensibility” is an oversimplification that robs Austen’s story of its deeper layers. As opposed to the two other pairs of sisters discussed in this thesis, Austen paints her heroines as what is ultimately a complementary pair, and although Marianne’s outcome is similar to that of Marian and Laura, it is explicitly stated that she experiences love and happiness. These feelings are on the whole missing from the destinies of the Victorian sisters I have considered in this thesis.

In both *The Woman in White* and “Goblin Market” the language used suggests lesbian incest. Although the same language is not in use in *Sense and Sensibility*, Sarah Annes Brown makes the point that “marriage can bring sisters closer together” (147) and that Elinor and Marianne’s marriages “ensure easy access to each other” (147). It is plausible, in other words, that Austen’s project not only is to highlight the difficulties of being a woman in the late 18th-century and early 19th-century, including the necessity and essentiality of finding a mate. One can imagine that Austen, by ensuring that her heroines stay in close proximity to each other, reminds her reader that closeness between women is imperative. Moreover, in a biographical reading, Susan S. Lanser argues that Jane Austen’s anxieties regarding her own sister’s engagement can be felt in the novel. “[The plot] seems to reconcile marriage and sisterhood” (147). In other words, the Dashwood sisters are dependent not only on a secure financial situation, but also on each other. They have this in common with the two other pairs of sisters discussed in this thesis, and are thus examples of the importance of sororal relationships, both in the literal and figurative sense.
6 Conclusion

Sisters: two or more women, related by blood, adoption, marriage, or religious commitment and service; or, large groups of women drawn together by bonds of feminist though and practice. (Toni A. H. McNaron, 3)

In this thesis, I have discussed relationships between three pairs of sisters in literature written during the 19th century, namely Marian Halcombe and Laura Fairlie of Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White*, Laura and Lizzie of Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” and Elinor and Marianne Dashwood of Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility*. There are several similarities between these three pairs, mainly that the two sisters I have focused on in each text are given diverging personality traits by their respective authors. To simplify, Collins’ Marian and Laura represent the masculine and feminine, Rossetti’s Laura and Lizzie represent the sinful and the virtuous, and Austen’s Elinor and Marianne represent sense and sensibility. This thesis has endeavored to map the portrayal of these individual sisters, and to demonstrate how their sororal relationships affect their fates.

I have argued that the authors’ choice to make the women sisters, as opposed to friends, gives room for a number of complicated emotions. Sororal relationships, as opposed to friendships, can accommodate complex feelings without threatening the foundation of these relationships. Helena Michie notes that Victorian melodrama, sensation novels and canonical literature are at the forefront when it comes to using sisterhood as mode of communicating complex relationships between women. (20) The sororal relationship is particularly suitable for this purpose because of its innate properties. Within the confines of such relationships, women can express negative feelings without the risk of being ostracized from a larger community. In other words, the confines of sisterhood make for a suitable arena in which to explore female identity. Michie continues by observing that “Captivated by contrasts between women, and uneasy about alliances among them, Victorians took advantage of the domestic, often sentimentalized, trope of sisterhood simultaneously to contain and project hostility, competition and sexual rivalry among women” (20-21). The experience of taboo feelings within confines of sisterhood was viewed as less offensive, as has been shown through the relationships discussed in this thesis. Sororal relationships may thus be seen as a venue for the exploration of social taboos in the literature of this period. Elinor and Marianne are more honest, direct and explicit with each other than with any other
characters in Austen’s novel, and while this can be viewed as hostile behavior, it can also be construed as an indication of true closeness and intimacy. “Structurally, fictional representations of sisterhood provide a place and a vocabulary for the representation of a range of stereotypically unfeminine feelings and behaviors. Victorian texts frequently enrich and complicate feminist notions of sisterhood, as they undermine our most dearly cherished tropes of female unity”, Michie observes (21). Victorian authors used the trope of sisterhood to communicate “unfeminine”, or transgressive, emotions in women without these appearing alarming to their readers. Furthermore, as Leila Silvana May notes: “The Victorian presupposition which goes unwritten into [The Woman in White] - the love of a sister is the single most powerful, indestructible, and pure of passion. It is the only pure passion, the only love that is wholly uncontaminated” (148). When this sort of sisterly love is widely accepted as the foundation of a relationship, any other negative feelings that might blossom are more easily disregarded.

With regards to the differences between the sisters, there may be several reasons why this literary topos was particularly popular in Victorian literature. Toni McNaron observes that “A sister can be seen as someone who is both ourselves and very much not ourselves – a special kind of double” (7). The differences between the characters may very well be a result of a fashion within certain literary modes or used to further and enhance plot points. Furthermore, several scholars observe that differences between sisters are a natural occurrence. McNaron remarks that “Either one sister encourages the other to play out some complementary self that she does not or cannot become, or forces around them are such that complementarity becomes the pattern within both act out their adult lives” (3). The competition between sisters creates differences in both character and disposition. Amy K. Levin notes that “The Victorian concept of separate spheres imposed on women an ideal of harmonious relations and calm within the home”, and she continues by claiming that “The ‘good’ woman learned to suppress or conceal enmity or rivalry. Polarization assisted in this process; having assumed opposite positions, sisters had little middle ground for which to compete” (18).

One can argue that in the Victorian era, confinement to the domestic sphere aided in the development of contradictory dispositions, as demonstrated in Rossetti’s heroines. The two are presumably living alone in a cottage, and while one is pious and careful, the other has developed a curiosity traditionally considered masculine. The binaries between the two do not challenge their relationship, however, as Lizzie is responsible for Laura’s survival. McNaron points out that “Christina Rossetti believed that her sister Maria had certain
qualities that she herself lacked, qualities having to do with Christian piety and acceptance of one’s lot” (10). Rossetti wrote a poem about her own sororal relationship, it has been claimed, and she incorporated what she believed was her sister’s most positive virtues in Lizzie. Although this might be true, I would argue that it is a precarious exercise to reduce “Goblin Market” to a biographical poem. To do so would be to ignore the many layers of Rossetti’s work, and to ignore all the more general comments the poem may be seen to make about women in mid-19th-century Britain.

The three novels all end on a happy note. The women are all installed in seemingly stable domestic situations. Interestingly, the sisters also all end up together, or in close proximity to each other. The three authors end their narratives by marrying at least one of the sisters off to a, presumably, suitable husband. As noted on several occasions throughout this thesis, it is possible to argue that each of the pairs consists of one sister more accepting of, and in tune with, society’s expectations, and one more transgressive sister. At the end of each story, it is worth noting, the transgressive sister becomes subdued. Marian Halcombe and Laura Fairlie find themselves in a sexless ménage-a-trois. Laura and Lizzie are married, but their husbands are nowhere to be seen. The Dashwood sisters marry, but still end up living very near one another. This might suggest that, while marriage in the 19th century was viewed as important, crucial to survival even, the closeness and intimacy of the sister bond contributed with an emotional stability that a marriage didn’t offer. As Sarah Annes Brown argues, “The drive to separate sisters, to force a choice between them, is paradoxically the spur to their greater closeness […]. Opposition is figured as complementarity rather than rivalry, and the sisters may be seen as two halves who must unite to form a whole” (11). The closeness between sisters might be viewed as a consequence of their differences.

Furthermore, the confines of sisterhood help constitute a space less affected by patriarchy. The relationships discussed in this thesis all play out mainly within the domestic sphere and are as such traditionally within women’s domain. Even though men play important roles in all of the three works discussed, the sororal relationships are just that – between sisters. Men are not privy to, nor interested in, coming between two sisters. Walter Hartright even invites his sister-in-law into his marriage. In all of the three works, the women are typically caricatured as being one half of a larger whole, and consequently a separation is impossible. Finally, it would have been interesting to examine the notion of separation in light of feminist theory. Are there any links between the urge to break free from sororal confines and the ideas of individualist feminism? Furthermore, are the contrastive feelings of wanting and needing to belong to a larger whole, namely a family, versus the need to
experience individuality and autonomy, compatible with belonging to a sisterhood? Additionally, this thesis has not discussed sisterhood in the figurative sense of the word. There are numerous works of literature that portray the bonds between women, seen as sisters in a figurative sense. How are female friendships depicted in 19th-century literature? How does the space of friendship differ from that of sisterly bonds? If it had been within the scope of this thesis, these are questions that I would have liked to explore further.

To conclude, portraying sisters can in the end be viewed as a feminist project, designed to promote closeness and the importance of bonds between women. It can also be viewed as a comment on society’s subjugation of women, as the three works discussed all portray one sister with more agency and autonomy than the other. The sister with most agency in each narrative is domesticized towards the end of their respective stories. Even though they all end up on the margins, their transgressiveness has been established, and the norms of patriarchy have been shaken. One can argue that by portraying transgressive sisters, the authors of the three works discussed subtly suggest that women need agency without the fear of being silenced.
7 Bibliography


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