

Lady Audley's Secret

Points to Ponder: Session 2, November 2026

What is the significance of Phoebe Marks and her alleged likeness to lady Audley?

What is Braddon telling the reader here?

"Every thing dropping to ruin and decay, and the cold flicker of the sun lighting up the ugliness of the earth, as the glare of gas-lamps lights the wrinkles of an old woman. Shall I ever grow old, Phoebe? Will my hair ever drop off as the leaves are falling from those trees, and leave me wan and bare like them? What is to become of me when I grow old? She shivered at the thought of this more than she had done at the cold, wintry breeze"

Why do you think Lucy Audley would say this? Why is it dull and why might she be better off as a governess to the doctor's family? What did she have there that is not at Audley Court?

"It is a dull place, Phoebe," she said, "though it doesn't do to say so to my dear old husband. Though I am the wife of one of the most influential men in the county, I don't know that I wasn't nearly as well off at Mr. Dawson's; and yet it's something to wear sables that cost sixty guineas, and have a thousand pounds spent on the decoration of one's apartments."

Braddon makes some very telling comments on society through her characters as well as her narration. What is she saying about love and marriage and how typical of men is Luke Marks?

I don't think I can love him. We have been together from children, and I promised, when I was little better than fifteen, that I'd be his wife. I daren't break that promise now. There have been times when I've made up the very sentence I meant to say to him, telling him that I couldn't keep my faith with him; but the words have died upon my lips, and I've sat looking at him, with a choking sensation, in my throat that wouldn't let me speak. I daren't refuse to marry him. I've often watched and watched him, as he has sat slicing away at a hedge-stake with his great clasp-knife, till I have thought that it is just such men as he who have decoyed their sweethearts into lonely places, and murdered them for being false to their word. When he was a boy he was always violent and revengeful. I saw him once take up that very knife in a quarrel with his mother. I tell you, my lady, I must marry him.... "don't try to thwart me in this—don't ask me to thwart him. I tell you I must marry him. You don't know what he is. It will be my ruin, and the ruin of others, if I break my word. I must marry him!"

What might Phoebe mean by the last remark?

"Very well, then, Phoebe," answered her mistress, "I can't oppose you. There must be some secret at the bottom of all this." "There is, my lady," said the girl, with her face turned away from Lucy.

What impressions do Braddon's descriptions of Phoebe and Luke's wedding create?

Upon a lowering morning late in November, with the yellow fog low upon the flat meadows, and the blinded cattle groping their way through the dim obscurity, and blundering stupidly against black and leafless hedges, or stumbling into ditches, undistinguishable in the hazy atmosphere; with the village church looming brown and dingy through the uncertain light; with every winding path and cottage door, every gable end and gray old chimney, every village child and straggling cur seeming strange and weird of aspect in the semi-darkness, Phoebe Marks and her Cousin Luke made their way through the churchyard of Audley, and presented themselves before a shivering curate, whose surplice hung in damp folds, soddened by the morning mist, and whose temper was not improved by his having waited five minutes for the bride and bridegroom.

Luke Marks, dressed in his ill-fitting Sunday clothes, looked by no means handsomer than in his every-day apparel; but Phoebe, arrayed in a rustling silk of delicate gray, that had been worn about half a dozen times by her mistress, looked, as the few spectators of the ceremony remarked, "quite the lady."

A very dim and shadowy lady, vague of outline, and faint of coloring, with eyes, hair, complexion and dress all melting into such pale and uncertain shades that, in the obscure light of the foggy November morning a superstitious stranger might have mistaken the bride for the ghost of some other bride, dead and buried in the vault below the church...Mr. Luke Marks, the hero of the occasion, thought very little of all this. He had secured the wife of his choice, and the object of his life-long ambition—a public house.

What would you say was the stereotype of Victorian masculinity? Does Robert Audley fit the male stereotype? Which of the male characters fit the stereotype and which don't? What are your reasons?

In what ways do the female characters challenge or uphold female stereotypes?

Sensation Fiction has close connections with the theatre and Braddon was an actress. Which scenes in this section do you think would easily transfer to the stage and why?

What effect might this scene have on the reader? How might it be unsettling?

Ah, Lady Audley, you remind me how very powerless I am in this matter. My friend might have been made away with in this very inn, and I might stay here for a twelvemonth, and go away at the last as ignorant of his fate as if I had never crossed the threshold. What do we know of the mysteries that may hang about the houses we enter? If I were to go to-morrow into that commonplace, plebeian, eight-roomed house in which Maria Manning and her husband murdered their guest, I should have no awful prescience of that bygone horror. Foul deeds have been done under the most hospitable roofs; terrible crimes have been committed amid the fairest scenes, and have left no trace upon the spot where they were done. I do not believe in mandrake, or in bloodstains that no time can efface. I believe rather that we may walk unconsciously in an atmosphere of crime, and breathe none the less freely. I believe that we may look into the smiling face of a murderer, and admire its tranquil beauty."

What are your views on Robert Audley by the end of the section? How does he fare as a detective?