



The Stigma on “the Tigress-Cub”: Late-Victorian Psychiatric Genetics and Wilkie Collins’ *The Legacy of Cain*

Stefano Rossi

Università di Padova (<stefano.rossi.1@unipd.it>)

Citation: S. Rossi (2025) The Stigma on “the Tigress-Cub”: Late-Victorian Psychiatric Genetics and Wilkie Collins’ The Legacy of Cain. Serie Speciale “Quaderni di *Lea* – Scrittori e scritture d’Oriente e d’Occidente” 7: pp. 69-79. doi: <https://doi.org/10.36253/lea-1824-484x-16029>.

Copyright: © 2025 S. Rossi. This is an open access, peer-reviewed article published by Firenze University Press (<https://oajournals.fupress.net/index.php/bsfm-lea>) and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

Abstract

This article explores the intersections of Victorian medicine and literature by examining medical treatises on hereditary psychosis and criminal instincts and Wilkie Collins’ *The Legacy of Cain* (1888). It first considers the ideas of Prosper Lucas, Bénédict A. Morel, and Henry Maudsley, focusing on the supposed role of women in perpetuating the phenomenon of human degeneration, as claimed by many Victorian physicians. Second, it analyses *The Legacy of Cain* as a fascinating example of the reciprocal relationship between literature and medicine. Through clinical rhetoric, the novel critiques theories of hereditary degeneration and infectious motherhood, challenging prevailing beliefs about biological determinism.

Keywords: Degeneration, Heredity, Maternity, Psychosis, Women

In fin-de-siècle Europe, the notions of biological heredity and degeneration garnered substantial interest among both scientists and the general public. As observed by Sally Shuttleworth and Melissa Dickson, “late-nineteenth-century theories and treatments of the diseases of modern life and [...] hereditary degeneration were [...] deeply embedded in social and cultural operations” (2021, 173). The predominant belief in society held that progeny – the future of the country – was fated to inherit not only favourable physical and cognitive traits from parents and ancestors but, more easily and frequently, moral deficiencies, vices, deplorable instincts, and mental disabilities. Alongside concerns about devolution and human decay, the pervasive preoccupation of scientists and physicians with biological heredity was amplified in the columns of newspapers and scientific journals. In this regard, notable examples include *The Lancet* (established in 1823), *British Medical Journal* (1840), *Journal of Mental Science* (1853), *Brain* (1878), and *Macmillan’s Magazine* (1859-1907). Indeed, following Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species*, published in 1859, mass-market journals

and newspapers contributed to disseminating the news that evolution and devolution were inseparable processes, with the latter primarily rooted in inherited degeneracy. National prestige appeared to be overshadowed by the spectre of inherited pathology, which the English physician James Whitehead (1812-1885) defined as “a constitutional evil, destined to stamp its character upon generations to come” (1851, vii).

Driven by a fascination with genetic determinism and motivated by the belief that they could avert human collapse among Victorians, several physicians dedicated a great portion of their research to the study of the principles governing the transmission of biological traits from parents to progeny. As claimed in a number of medical works published in the second half of the nineteenth century, e.g. Whitehead’s *On The Transmission, from Parent to Offspring, of Some Forms of Disease and of Morbid Taints and Tendencies* (1851), the future of the nation was threatened by inheritable deterioration. On this issue, Maurizio Ascari remarks that “the Victorian faith in progress coexisted with a widespread fear of decline, which fostered a climate of anxiety and helped engender a culture of decadence” (2007, 146). The unsustainable effects of rapid industrialisation, the agonising quest for efficiency at any cost, the severe pollution of London and its main artery, the Thames, along with the suffocating pace of modernity and the radical upheavals which Europeans experienced in the last decades of the nineteenth century, all contributed to the increase of pauperism, social disarray and the rise in mental illness cases. The country’s health was at risk: the germs of degeneration passed on invisibly from one subject to another, striking family after family, generation after generation.

Degeneration was not solely understood as a phenomenon impacting more significantly on working classes. Discourses concerning heritability and human regression were strongly intertwined with gender issues and, not surprisingly, were highly prejudicial towards women. In this respect, William Greenslade contends that “the subject of heredity is inseparable from questions of gender” in fin-de-siècle society (1994, 165). Widely regarded as irrational beings lacking self-control, owning minds and bodies feared to be flawed, women were scrutinised by physicians as the primary culprits behind the decadence that was spreading in society. By transmitting faulty traits to their offspring, mothers were believed to exacerbate decadence and jeopardise racial purity, a notion that was central to social Darwinism and criminal anthropology. In fact, the escalating numbers of degenerate subjects relegated in asylums and the ever-growing population of criminals made discussions about biological heredity extend beyond the walls of psychiatric institutions and reach the bustling streets of European cities, where people crowded in, eager to learn about the fate of mankind.

With this historical and cultural panorama in mind, I set out to explore, first, medical beliefs regarding genetic inheritance, womanhood and the alleged responsibility of women in transmitting faulty genetic heritages to the progeny. I thus take into consideration clinical works by three crucial figures in European psychiatry and hereditary degeneration: Prosper Lucas, Bénédict Augustin Morel and Henry Maudsley. Second, I wish to interrogate the osmotic relations between Victorian medicine and literature and concentrate on Wilkie Collins’ last novel, *The Legacy of Cain* (1888), a text that never attained the same prominence as his earlier works, including *The Woman in White* (1859), *Armada* (1864), or *The Moonstone* (1868). Although all of Collins’ novels are rich with references to the realm of (psycho)pathology, I contend that *The Legacy of Cain* offers a more profound insight into the theme of biological heredity. Indeed, this novel is an exploratory journey into debates about the arguably inevitable transmission of psychosis and criminal instincts from mothers to children and it can be read as a provoking inquiry into the “woman question” in the framework of late-Victorian psychiatric genetics.

1. Late-Victorian Psychiatry Genetics

US psychiatrist Kenneth S. Kendler observes that, from the late eighteenth century, physicians primarily used the family history to diagnose the causes of diverse forms of psychosis. This enabled doctors to assess “the presence or absence of disorders in the close and sometimes more distant relatives of their patients” (2020, 491). As Kendler stresses, up to the 1880s, most biologists and nearly all medical practitioners believed that “active insanity in a parent” could “contribute to the egg or sperm, thereby increasing illness risk in offspring” (502). Indeed, in the mid nineteenth century, the European medical community intensified studies on inheritance, with 1848 marking a crucial moment in biological determinism related to psychopathologies. In that year, Bénédict A. Morel (1809-1873), a central figure in hereditary degeneration, was appointed director of the Asile d'Aliénés de Maréville at Nancy. His appointment had a significant impact on the study of the hereditary nature of mental illness and played a crucial role in Morel's formulation of degeneration theory. British historian Daniel Pick underlines that in 1848 the adjective “hereditary” “hardened into a key term in many aspects of medicine and anthropology” and remarks that “1848 was an important moment in heredity's petrification as the perceived central problem of nationality, madness and crime” (1989, 48).

Nevertheless, it is likely that Morel's focus on hereditary degeneration would not have reached the same depth without foundational contributions to psychiatric heritability that preceded him. Notably, before Morel, a pioneer in the study of genetic inheritance and degeneracy was Prosper Lucas, whom Kendler describes as “a unique figure in the history of Psychiatric Genetics” (2021, 261). Born in Saint-Brieux in 1808 and died in Mennecy in 1885, Lucas authored a considerable number of essays on inheritance of genetic information, genealogy and biological susceptibility to certain pathologies. His meticulous work examined multiple family histories and documented cases of mental disorders across diverse generations, providing convincing evidence for the hereditary nature of physio-morphological traits and mental disorders.

Among his most impactful works is *Traité philosophique et physiologique de l'hérédité naturelle*, appeared in two volumes published respectively in 1847 and 1850. Lucas' wide-ranging treatise garnered much acclaim and swiftly became reference point for several of the most eminent figures of the scientific community of those years, including Charles Darwin, Francis Galton, Henry Maudsley and Morel himself. In this regard, Ricardo Noguera-Solano and Rosaura Ruiz-Gutiérrez contend that “Lucas's work was influential not by the answers he gave to problems of hereditary transmission, but due to the paths that he indicated to those that followed” (2009, 696). For instance, in *The Origin of Species*, Darwin emphasised the importance of heredity and stated that

any variation [from one generation to another] which is not inherited is unimportant for us. But the number and diversity of inheritable deviations of structure, both those of slight and those of considerable physiological importance, are endless. Dr Prosper Lucas' treatise, in two large volumes, is the fullest and the best on this subject. (1960, 28)

Darwin praised Lucas' contribution and expressed his agreement with the conclusions achieved by the French psychiatrist. Lucas had collected a significant body of empirical data which allowed him to demonstrate that the mechanisms governing the similarity between offspring and parents were consistent across diverse family contexts. Similarly, Darwin observed that this phenomenon takes place regardless of the degree of dissimilarity between the progenitors, whether they belong to the same variety, different varieties, or even to different species (315).

Alongside explorations of inheritance of physio-morphological traits, Lucas devoted extensive sections of his work to the inheritance of behavioural traits and diverse typologies of psychic disorders. His investigations highlighted that vices and mental pathologies, similarly to other health impairments, such as diabetes, are often transmitted from parents to descendants. He argued that “ce qu’il y a de transmissible par voie de génération, ce sont le tempérament et la constitution, contre lesquels celui qui a des parents aliénés doit réagir, pour ne pas devenir fou” (1847, 756-57). He observed that cases in which the transmission of psychic disorders from progenitors to offspring did not occur were quite extraordinary and suggested that, to identify the origin of the patient’s disorder, one simply need to look back at the clinical history of the patient’s ancestors (795). In line with Lucas, some years later, Whitehead – mentioned before – would state that “nothing is more common than to see the offspring of an intemperate parent become demented” (1851, 35).

By keeping almost unchanged the intrinsic features that constitute the nature of a species and transmitting them to future generations, the laws of biological heredity formulated in the mid-nineteenth century provided valid responses to “family cases gathered during centuries, concerning inheritance of a criminal tendency, of an alcoholic tendency and a great list of illnesses, such as blindness and mental disease” (Noguera-Solano and Ruiz-Gutiérrez 2009, 693). Lucas thought that the transmission of mental disorders, which he referred to as “hérédité fatale” (1847, 758), did not imply the acquisition on the progeny’s part of a mere predisposition to mental pathology. Quite the opposite. He believed that children of subjects suffering from psychic disorders, suicidal or homicidal instincts and diverse types of addictions, such as alcoholism or substance use disorders, were fated to inherit the complete spectrum of their progenitors’ disorders. He commented: “on a vu des familles entières se tuer, [...] comme des familles entières devenir aliénées” (780).

In the wake of Lucas’ pioneering research, several scientists and physicians delved into genetic legacies and, consequently, accounts of inherited degeneracy became commonplace in a large body of clinical texts. For instance, Morel’s *Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles et morales de l’espèce humaine*, published in 1857, played a significant role in shaping discourses on psychiatric genetics. Fuelling fears of regression and human decadence, Morel cautioned that, barring exceptional cases, the progeny of degenerate individuals exhibits an incorrigible tendency towards decadence. With an outlook steeped in pessimism, he maintained that at the base of human degeneration was hereditary transmission and pointed out that “l’observation rigoureuse des faits nous démontrera, qu’à moins de certaines circonstances exceptionnelles de régénération, les produits des êtres dégénérés offrent des types de dégradation progressive” (1857, 4-5).

Similarly, some years later, in *Physiology and Pathology of the Mind*, published in 1867, Henry Maudsley (1835-1918), “a spokesman and advocate” (Showalter 1987, 112) of Darwinian psychiatry, highlighted that “the more exact and scrupulous the researches made, the more distinctly is displayed the influence of hereditary taint in the production of insanity” (1867, 212-13). Maudsley’s assertions reinforced prevailing beliefs among Victorian physicians that genetic heritages were decisive for the onset of psychosis in patients with parents affected by mental impairments. In *Responsibility in Mental Disease* (1874), Maudsley called this phenomenon “predestination to madness” (1874, 276). In his view, “any sort of disease of the nervous system in the parent seems to predispose more or less to this ill condition the child, the acquired deterioration of its parent becoming its inborn organic feebleness” (1867, 76). He emphasised that inherited pathologies bring about a progressive erosion of racial purity and specified that

It is not that the child necessarily inherits the particular disease of the parent, for diseases unquestionably undergo transformations through generations; but it does often inherit a constitution in which there is a certain inherent aptitude to some kind of morbid degeneration. (204)

In this process of “dégradation progressive”, as Morel called it, parents bore differing degree of culpability. In fact, although in the lines above Maudsley appears to allude to an equal responsibility of men and women in the transmission of pathological conditions to the progeny, a closer examination of Victorian clinical works on biological inheritance shows a different reality. Indeed, it was common for psychiatrists to ascribe mothers a primary role in the transmission of health disorders to children. As proof of this, in *Physiology and Pathology of the Mind*, Maudsley labelled women the feeblar sex and remarked that “there is in woman, by virtue of her sex, a slightly greater predisposition to insanity than in man” (208). After claiming that “women are necessary to the gratification of man’s passion, indispensable to the comfort of his life” (202-03), he underlined that “insanity descends more often from the mother than the father, and from the mother to the daughters more often than to the sons” (216). Women were regarded, as Pick suggests, as agents of human decay either “by bringing new pathological cases into the world or [...] by failing to reproduce in sufficient quantity healthy children for the nation” (1989, 89).

In *Dangerous Motherhood*, Hilary Marland maintains that childbirth was “woman’s paramount duty and most rewarding purpose in life” (2004, 6). Surrounded by a dense web of social pressures and expectations, ranging from the idealised image of the self-sacrificing mother to fears of bearing defective children, maternity held a central place in woman’s identity. Women were in fact expected to comply with the biological imperative inextricably linked to their bodies: they had to propagate the family, ensure the continuity of the species, and contribute effectively to the future of the country through the generation of healthy subjects. However, widespread cases of mental illness and the increasing growth in number of criminals in society suggested that the health (and decorum) of the nation was declining. Shuttleworth emphasises that middle-class women, “with their languid airs and nervous ailments, were increasingly singled out as the prime culprits of this feared decline” (1992, 34): “symbolic associations of women with disease were strengthened by the” common belief “that not only were women more prone to insanity than men, they were also more responsible for hereditary transmission” (36).

2. *Literary Portrayals of Hereditary Degeneration*

Late-Victorian literature did not remain unaffected by scientific turmoil around hereditary pathology and contagious motherhood. Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* (1879), Émile Zola’s *Dr Pascal* (1893), Emma Brooke’s *A Superfluous Woman* (1894), Matthew P. Shiel’s *Prince Zaleski* (1895), or Sarah Grand’s *The Heavenly Twins* (1893) are only a few examples in which complex motherhood and transmission of flawed traits by means of procreation take central stage. Inherited physical or psychic disorders and detrimental maternity established themselves as central preoccupations of many literary genres, especially sensation fiction. Indeed, with its numerous portrayals of insane and criminal feminine, sensation fiction played a crucial role in British cultural milieu of the late nineteenth century.

Criticised by many for their power to thrill readers’ nerves, sensation novels often depict mothers, wives, widows and daughters as social polluters and incubators of human decadence. According to Shuttleworth,

the writing of the sensation novels offers a fascinating insight into the workings of Victorian maternal ideology. We find here, writ large, all the demonic figures and anxious preoccupations with heredity which filled contemporary medical texts [...]. Notions of heredity taints abound, and of woman as outwardly fair and controlled, but inwardly the hidden source of corruption of both her class and race. (1992, 49)

In 1871, in *The Rose and the Key*, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu referred to an “irreparable folly” (1982, 45) that was spreading in society. “The infectious disorder” (1903, 33), as Mrs. Henry Wood called it in *St Martin’s Eve* (1866), moved invisibly from body to body, flowing under the skin and infecting generation after generation.

Widely considered as the father of sensation fiction, Wilkie Collins had a remarkable knowledge of contemporary medicine and a great mastery in incorporating clinical discourses into his narratives. Jenny Bourne Taylor observes that Collins “could draw on a range of psychological and experimental scientific methods, speculatively and hypothetically” (1988, 211). His various portrayals of physical and psychological afflictions not only showcased his deep understanding of the complexities of multiple forms of (psycho)pathology, but also contributed to the dissemination of medical knowledge among his readers. For instance, in *The Woman in White* and *Armada* he delves into hereditary madness; in *Jezebel’s Daughter* (1880) he explores the universe of toxicology; in *The Law and the Lady* (1875) he investigates the outburst of psychosis; and in *The Moonstone* he tackles the effects of drug addiction.

However, I leave here aside Collins’ most discussed novels and I concentrate on his last work, *The Legacy of Cain*, published in 1888, a text that gardened less attention by his audience and critics. While discussing inheritance and biological determinism, the novel appears to be extremely relevant. Graham Law and Andrew Maunder maintain that it is precisely in *The Legacy of Cain* that “the deterministic nature of contemporary theories of hereditary is explored and exploded” (2008, 127). In view of this, the novel can be approached through what Laurence Talairach-Vielmas refers to as “the prism of contemporary scientific, medical and psychological discourses, from debates revolving around insanity to those dealing with heredity and transmission” (2009, 7).

A journey into the obscure labyrinth of a woman’s criminal mind, the novel explores and problematises medical assumptions concerning womanhood, hereditary degeneration and faulty procreation. In 1889, the British journalist James Ashcroft Noble (1844-1896) observed that *The Legacy of Cain* is a protest “against the fatalism which is more or less bound up with any full acceptance of the modern doctrine of heredity” (1995, 243-44). Similarly, Bourne Taylor articulates that the novel “is explicitly set up as a debate with the post-Darwinian theories of hereditary criminality and insanity that had become so pervasive by the late 1880s²” (2006, 94). A parable that puts the spotlight on a world where Evil, in the form of hereditary pathology and crime, seems to be dominant, *The Legacy of Cain* depicts a society riddled with phobias concerning inherited criminal instincts, human degeneracy, contagion and pathology. Yet, by leveraging the rhetoric of hereditary criminality and psychosis, the novel serves an educational purpose. Indeed, Collins urges his readership to reject the idea that pathologies and brutal instincts of parents constitute a stigma for the offspring. For him, what in fact guides one’s actions is not genetic heritages but, instead, free will and discernment, namely the innate ability of individuals to distinguish what is good from what is deplorable.

Written within the cultural framework shaped by social Darwinists and degeneration theory, *The Legacy of Cain* is a provocative text from its very title. The deliberate use of the noun “legacy” carries a significant meaning that should not be overlooked. From the outset of the novel, Collins seeks to intertwine the realm of psychiatry with the biblical narrative, embodied here

in Cain, the firstborn son of Adam and Eve and brother of Abel. Consumed with jealousy over God's favour towards Abel, Cain commits fratricide, thereby becoming the archetypal murderer in human history. By choosing this title, Collins seems to invite readers to a reflection: if one accepts, in accordance with late-Victorian medical beliefs, that madness and criminal instincts are traits transmitted from parents – and especially mothers – to descendants, one should also acknowledge that those genes, carriers of immorality, homicidal rage and derangement, trace their origin back not to a woman, but to a man, Cain, father of Enoch. By invoking the biblical figure of Cain and emphasizing the term “legacy”, Collins opens his novel by presenting an alternative perspective that challenges the established notion in Victorian time that women were the primary source of inherited evil. In doing so, he subtly critiques the idea that criminality and madness are mainly transmitted through the maternal line, suggesting instead that these traits could equally, if not more fittingly, be traced back to a male progenitor. Collins hence takes a nuanced stance, defending women against the widespread cultural narrative that held them responsible for the transmission of moral corruption and faulty traits.

The novel begins “within the walls of an English prison” (Collins 2018, 7), where a murderess, Elizabeth Chance, is spending the rest of her days, sentenced to death for “one of the most merciless murders committed in [her] time” (28). Before the woman is executed for the murder of her husband, the prisoner asks Reverend Abel Gracedieu to save Eunice, her young daughter. In the presence of the Governor and a doctor, the merciful Minister accepts the prisoner's plea and agrees to take care of the little girl, although the shadow of the heinous crime committed by her mother, “that detestable creature” (42), blackens the future of the infant who is victim of what Morel called “germes d'une transmission dégénérative” (1857, 58). As Collins puts it, “the poor child's life might have been darkened by the horror of the monster's crime, and the infamy of the monster's death” (2018, 36).

Concerned for the Reverend's decision to adopt little Eunice, the doctor – most likely an alienist – warns Abel Gracedieu about the invisible danger that is inherent in genetic legacies:

Are you one of those people who think that the tempers of children are formed by the accidental influences which happen to be about them? Or do you agree with me that the tempers of children are inherited from their parents? The Doctor [...] was still impressed by the Minister's resolution to adopt a child whose wicked mother had committed the most atrocious of all crimes. Was some serious foreboding in secret possession of his mind? (21)

The physician reflects on his two-decade investigation into biological determinism and argues that parental vices and mental disorders tend to be inherited by offspring more frequently than virtues and good health. On this subject, in the second volume of his treatise, Lucas maintained that

L'hérédité de l'aliénation mentale est d'une observation presque aussi ancienne que celle de la maladie. Il n'est, pour ainsi dire, point de pathologiste qui ne l'ait aperçue, au premier regard jeté sur cette page si obscure et si triste de l'histoire des affections humaines. (1847, 756)

In light of this, the conclusion reached by the doctor in the novel is that the progeny of criminal or insane parents enter the world with inescapable disadvantages, such as deplorable instincts, mental disabilities or chronic pathologies. The outcome of his research leaves the physician discouraged about the future of humanity and leads him to contemplate the cruelty and actual purpose of life:

For twenty years past, my friend, I have been studying the question of hereditary transmission of qualities; and I have found vices and diseases descending more frequently to children than virtues and

health. I don't stop to ask why: there is no end to that sort of curiosity. What I have observed is what I tell you; no more no less. You will say this is a horribly discouraging result of experience, for it tends to show that children come into the world at a disadvantage on the day of their birth. Of course, they do. Children are born deformed, children are born deaf, dumb, or blind; children are born with the seeds in them of deadly diseases. Who can account for the cruelties of creation? Why are we endowed with life – only to end in death? (Collins 2018, 27)

In the wake of the doctor's warnings, the governor elucidates that the "ill-fated baby's chance of inheriting the virtue of her parents is not to be compared to her chances of inheriting their vices; especially if she happens to take after her mother" (28). Worries of the doctor and the governor confront the reader with a world doomed to failure, where inherited psychosis and criminal tendencies shatter any prospects of human evolution. To pick up from Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902), "a dreadful fate overhung" (2007, 17) the family of the Reverend.

After devoting the first pages to an investigation into biological determinism, to Elizabeth Chance, her crime and Eunice's potential heredity of her mother's criminal nature, Collins explores the chance that one's brutal impulses can "be overcome by the better parts of human nature" (Mangham 2007, 198). By engaging with morality, compassion and religion, Collins challenges the entrenched belief among Victorian physicians that a subject's inner negative forces cannot be overridden by moral principles instilled via education and loving nurture. The text in fact encourages readers to reconsider the weight of environmental influences in shaping one's behaviour and reflects on the potential for personal transformation that is offered by love and education. This thematic exploration reaches its core in the second part of the novel, when Collins guides readers into the domesticity of the Gracedieu family and provides an intimate view of the diaries of Eunice, now a young lady, and of her stepsister, Helena, the Reverend's biological daughter. Through Eunice's and Helena's personal diaries, Collins reveals the complex dynamics and tensions that define the relationship between the two stepsisters. Unaware that their bond is not rooted in blood, the two girls get along very well, at least until Collins brings into the narrative Sir Philip Dunboyne, a handsome man who instantly captures the hearts of both sisters. A burning jealousy consumes the young women and their relation swiftly deteriorates. Outbursts of wrath and physical violence between the two undermine the psychological serenity of the Reverend, whose peace of mind is also challenged by the recent death of his beloved wife, an ailing woman.

In the grip of nervousness and bewildered by her inability to control instincts, Helena, defined as a girl with "the temper of Lady Macbeth" (Collins 2018, 196), becomes perplexed about the disappearance of her impeccable education: "what has become of my excellent education? I don't care to inquire; I have got beyond the reach of good books and religious examples" (131). Similarly, Eunice falls victim of what Collins calls "the infection of evil" (222). Consumed with jealousy for Philip and overwhelmed by uncontrollable thoughts of revenge, Eunice wonders whether one is "bewitched when you don't understand [one's] own self" (154), and claims: "I don't know what other persons might think of me, or how soon I might find myself perhaps in an asylum" (*ibidem*). Hallucinations torment Eunice as the voice of her biological mother emerges from the depths of the past and urges her to kill Helena: " 'Kill her with a knife. [...] Kill her openly,' the tempter mother said. 'Kill her daringly. Faint heart, do you still want courage? Rouse your spirit; look! See yourself in the act!' " (164-66). Nevertheless, in spite of the relentless influence of the spectre and the supposed menace of the inherited nature running through her veins, Eunice resists the malevolent thoughts that plague her mind and wins the battle against her criminal self. Her moral sense proves capable

of overcoming the evil traits inherited from the murderess. Eunice's brute self is hence defeated by her conscience, which Darwin described in *The Descent of Man* (1871) as the most crucial "of all the differences between man and the lower animals" (1871, 70).

A process of brutalisation and degeneration affects not only the two young women. The struggle between Eunice and Helena overwhelms the health of the Reverend and the more strained the relation between the two stepsisters, the more Abel's mental stability worsens: the Reverend is a weak man in the grip of "derangement of his nervous system" (Collins 2018, 170). Alongside enduring the conflicts of the two girls, the religious Minister carries the burden of the secret that one of his daughters is not his own flesh and blood. He confides: "nobody in this house knows that one of the two girls is not really my daughter" (175). "On the verge of madness" (244) and diagnosed with shattered nerves, Abel is, as Collins specifies, "as weak as a woman" (280). Disdain and shame descend on the religious man, whose main concern is the poor mental health of his biological daughter, victim of a regressive metamorphosis. Indeed, while Eunice triumphs over the voice of her tempting mother, Helena plots her revenge. Driven by brutal instincts, Helena premeditates Philip's murder with foxglove, a plant rich in glycosides that are lethal if taken in high quantities. Filled with rage at Helena's attempt to kill Philip, Eunice cannot hide her hatred towards the stepsister. Yet, Eunice remains harmless; she would attack only to defend herself and her recovering lover from Helena's diabolical grasp.

After Philip recuperates from the poisoning, he proposes marriage to Eunice. As the two make arrangements for the wedding and Helena languishes in prison, the Governor discloses to Eunice the truth that he has kept hidden for his entire life: "[Helena's] father is not your father, [Helena's] mother was not your mother. I was present, in the time of your infancy, when Mr. Gracedieu's fatherly kindness received you as his adopted child" (348). Based on what Maudsley suggested in *Body and Mind* (1871), that owing to "evil ancestral influences, individuals are born with such a flaw or wrap of Nature that all the care in the world will not prevent them from being vicious or criminal, or becoming insane" (1871, 68), it should be Eunice spending her days in prison for attempted murder. Such a conclusion, however, would have betrayed the provocativeness of the novel, which ends with a thought-provoking question that Collins poses to readers, making them reflect on the effective inheritability of criminality and insanity:

there are virtues that exalt us, and vices that degrade us, whose mysterious origin is, not in our parents, but in ourselves. When I think of Helena, I ask myself, where is the trace which reveals that the first murder in the world was the product of inherited crime? (2018, 355)

The novel concludes in the same way it begins, with the figure of Cain serving as the overarching backdrop for the entire narrative. Alongside hereditary degeneration and infectious maternity, religion is a connecting thread across all sections of the novel. For instance, Collins' choice to name the Reverend "Abel" is a further allusion to biblical narratives and the blood relation between Cain and his brother. However, the biblical allusions go beyond Adam and Eve's sons. Indeed, in one of the novel's opening pages, Collins boldly juxtaposes the graceful features of the Holy Mother with the sinister beauty of Elizabeth Chance, and writes:

Visitors to the picture-galleries of Italy, growing weary of Holy Families in endless succession, observe that the idea of the Madonna, among the rank and file of Italian painters, is limited to one changeless and familiar type. I can hardly hope to be believed when I say that the personal appearance of the murderess recalled that type. She presented the delicate light hair, the quiet eyes, the finely shaped lower features and the correctly oval form of face, repeated in hundreds on hundreds of the conventional works of Art to which I have ventured to allude. (14)

Here, through this daring comparison between the Virgin Mary and Elizabeth Chance, Collins not only defies the religious orthodoxy of his time, but also ridicules Lombrosian criminal anthropology and the presumptions of phrenologists and physiognomists who claimed to be able to detect insane and criminal minds simply by examining skulls or facial features. Comparing the murderess' appearance to the immaculate figure of the Madonna, Collins contests these pseudoscientific beliefs, exposing the flaws in their methodologies and highlighting the superficiality of their judgements.

Finally, Collins delves deeper into the character of Helena and investigates the potential of women in society. After her two-year sentence, Helena leaves the prison and emigrates to the United States of America, where she regains her mental serenity. Determined to follow her father's footsteps, there she becomes reverend of a women's community. The Governor stresses that Helena "is now the distinguished leader of a new community in the United States. We hail in her the great intellect which asserts the superiority of woman over man" (355-56). Conscious that such an assumption could not go unnoticed by his readers and critics, Collins championed the idea that women are capable of achieving greatness and surpassing their male counterparts in both intellect and moral fortitude. *The Legacy of Cain* is, therefore, not only a challenge to the idea that, as Maudsley argued, various types of human degradation are "transmitted as evil heritages to future generations: the acquired ill of the parents becomes the inborn infirmity of the offspring" (1867, 204). The novel also serves as a powerful critique of gender inequality and a call for recognition of women's rightful place as equals to men. Exploring Helena's redemption in the United States, Collins meditates on the central position of women in society and their crucial role in shaping the future of the country, yet not merely as bearers of new progeny.

In conclusion, beneath the narrative of the events that befall Elizabeth Chance and the Gracedieu family lies a critique of contemporary medical beliefs concerning biological heredity, flawed womanhood and infectious motherhood. Addressing discourses on inherited degeneration, in *The Legacy of Cain* Collins asserts that psychosis is not determined by gender or social class and brutal instincts are not necessarily the outcome of genetic heritages. Collins posits that one's behaviour is not solely predetermined by inherited genes, but it is also influenced by factors such as conscience, education, love, compassion and capacity for empathy. By evoking Cain's murder and chronicling Eunice's struggle – and ultimate victory – over her mother's malign influence, Collins contests the deterministic views of psychiatric genetics prevalent in his time and demonstrates that Eunice in fact possesses the capacity for sound judgment and self-control, two qualities that instead are absent in the clergyman's descendant. Highlighting the central role of conscience, discernment, free will, and ethical principles, Collins ultimately advocates for a more nuanced understanding of human behaviour and makes clear that the "tigress-cub" does not forcibly "take after its mother" (2018, 25).

References

- Ascari, Maurizio. 2007. *A Counter-History of Crime Fiction. Supernatural, Gothic, Sensational*. Basingstoke-New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ashcroft Noble, James. 1995 [1889]. "From an Unsigned Review, *Spectator*, January 1889". In *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*, edited by Norman Page, 243-44. London: Routledge.
- Bourne Taylor, Jenny. 1988. *In the Secret Theatre of Home: Wilkie Collins, Sensation Narrative, and Nineteenth-Century Psychology*. London-New York: Routledge.
- . 2006. "The Later Novels". In *The Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins*, edited by Jenny Bourne Taylor, 79-96. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Collins, Wilkie. 2018 [1888]. *The Legacy of Cain*. Sady: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

- Conan Doyle, Arthur. 2007 [1902]. *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. London-New York: Penguin Classics.
- Darwin, Charles. 1871. *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*. London: John Murray.
- . 1960 [1859]. *The Origin of Species*. New York: P. F. Collier & Son Corporation.
- Greenslade, William. 1994. *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel, 1880-1940*. Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Kendler, Kenneth S. 2020. "The Prehistory of Psychiatric Genetics: 1780-1910". *The American Journal of Psychiatry* vol. 178, no. 6: 490-508. doi: 10.1176/appi.ajp.2020.20030326.
- . 2021. "Prosper Lucas and His 1850 'Philosophical and Physiological Treatise on Natural Heredity'". *American Journal of Medical Genetics* vol. 186B, no. 5: 261-69.
- Law, Graham, and Andrew Maunder. 2008. *Wilkie Collins. A Literary Life*. Basingstoke-New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lucas, Prosper. 1847. *Traité philosophique e physiologique de l'hérédité naturelle dans les états de santé et de maladie du système nerveux*. Paris: J. B. Baillière.
- Mangham, Andrew. 2007. *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction. Crime, Medicine and Victorian Popular Culture*. Basingstoke-New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Marland, Hilary. 2004. *Dangerous Motherhood: Insanity and Childbirth in Victorian Britain*. Basingstoke-New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Maudsley, Henry. 1867. *The Physiology and Pathology of the Mind*. New York: D. Appleton and Company.
- . 1871. *Body and Mind: An Inquiry into Their Connection and Mutual Influence, Specially in Reference to Mental Disorders*. New York: D. Appleton and Company.
- . 1874. *Responsibility in Mental Disease*. New York: D. Appleton and Company.
- Morel, Bénédicte Augustin. 1857. *Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles et morales de l'espèce humaine*. Paris: J. B. Baillière.
- Noguera-Solano, Ricardo, and Rosaura Ruiz-Gutiérrez. 2009. "Darwin and Inheritance: The Influence of Prosper Lucas". *Journal of the History of Biology* vol. 42, no. 4: 685-714. doi: 10.1007/s10739-008-9175-7.
- Pick, Daniel. 1989. *Faces of Degeneration. A European Disorder, c.1848-c.1918*. Cambridge-New York-Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.
- Sheridan Le Fanu, Joseph. 1982 [1871]. *The Rose and the Key*. New York: Dover Publications.
- Showalter, Elaine. 1987 [1985]. *The Female Malady. Women, Madness, and English Culture: 1830-1980*. London-New York: Penguin Books.
- Shuttleworth, Sally. 1992. "Demoniac Mothers: Ideologies of Bourgeois Motherhood in the Mid-Victorian Era". In *Rewriting the Victorians. Theory, History, and the Politics of Gender*, edited by Linda M. Shires, 31-51. London-New York: Routledge.
- Shuttleworth, Sally, and Melissa Dickson. 2021. "Disorders of the Age: Nervous Climates". In *Literature and Medicine. The Nineteenth Century*, edited by Clark Lawlor and Andrew Mangham, 157-73. Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Talairach-Vielmas, Laurence. 2009. *Wilkie Collins, Medicine and the Gothic*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.
- Whitehead, James. 1851. *On the Transmission, from Parent to Offspring, of Some Forms of Disease and of Morbid Taints and Tendencies*. London: John Churchill.
- Wood, Henry. 1903 [1866]. *St. Martin's Eve. A Novel*. London: Macmillan.