The Reception of the Fiction
of Eugène Sue in Britain
1838-1860

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Abstract

This thesis examines the reception of the novels of the French author Eugène Sue in Britain from 1838-1860, with the aim of furthering the understanding of the intellectual and cultural dialogue between France and Britain and the effect of that dialogue on British fiction during the Victorian period. Sue's novels were widely read throughout the western world during the 1840s, especially amongst the newly literate of the poor and working classes. His success with these new readers helped to feed the controversies of the period surrounding the influence of fiction on public morality. The study of Sue's reception in Britain during that time offers insight into those controversies as well as adding to the awareness of the concerns of an important period in the history of English literature.

Because of his widespread success, Sue's effect on the popular fiction and culture of the period is easily recognized. This study explores the more problematic relationship of Sue's fiction with contemporary British works which now form part of the established canon of English literature. The thesis begins with a brief description of Sue's life and works and his reception in France during his career. Thereafter it focuses on the reception of Sue's fiction in Britain during the same period, including the critical response in the British press to his novels and to dramatic adaptations associated with his *Les Mystères de Paris*, the relationship of that novel with G.W.M. Reynolds's *Mysteries of London*, and other commentary by key literary figures. Particular attention is paid to the relationship Sue's novels bear with some of the British works of the time, notably those of Dickens. It is hoped that this study will advance the appreciation of a nineteenth-century author whose works were significant to his time but whose importance has been largely ignored since.
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Except where indicated in the text, all translations are my own. The original French appears, by chapter, in the appendices, unless short enough to appear in brackets, to avoid distracting from the text itself. I have tried to remain faithful to the French phrasing and precise meaning in these translations rather than to produce versions in elegant English. Some awkwardness in the resulting English is therefore inevitable.
The success of the French author Eugène Sue's fiction and the extent of his fame throughout western culture in the mid-nineteenth century are difficult to imagine given his present relative obscurity. For a few years in the middle of the nineteenth century, roughly between 1842 and 1850, it is unlikely that anyone in Europe or North America, from any sector of society, had not at least heard of, if not read, Sue's works. His name became a byword for the successful novelist. In 1857, the year of Sue's death, Anthony Trollope, musing on the difficulty of finishing *Barchester Towers*, wrote: "What novelist, what Fielding, what Scott, what George Sand, or Sue, or Dumas can impart an interest to the last chapter of his fictitious history?" Sue, along with these other better remembered writers, briefly acquired a mythical status for which even the fame of modern film stars provides inadequate comparison. Enormous international fame is now commonplace, but the extensive celebrity which Sue enjoyed was new to the nineteenth century and its impact was all the greater for that novelty.

Sue's fame became so widespread in part because of the popularity of his later novels with the newly literate. The first half of the nineteenth century saw a significant increase in literacy amongst the working class and the poor in Britain and in France and these numerous new readers opened a lucrative market for authors and publishers. For Sue this was conspicuously the case. His earnings from his two best known works, *Les Mystères de Paris*, 1842-3, and *Le Juif Errant*, 1844-5, became legendary. Because of his commercial success in this new market, Sue was accused in Britain in the late 1840s of appealing exclusively to readers in "the lower orders". In reality his works had wider social appeal both here and in France. The huge correspondence he received while writing *Les Mystères de Paris* reflects that wide appeal. There are as many examples of letters of praise from the middle and ruling classes of France, and elsewhere, as there are from the poor and working class. In Britain his works were read by those in the middle and upper classes, Lady Blessington, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Disraeli to mention just a few of those we can identify, as well as enjoying great success with the poorer readers of the popular press.
Sue's contemporary reputation was distinguished by the exaggerated enthusiasm, the excited horror, and the fervour with which readers greeted the various stages of his serialized novels. The emotional response to his fiction is especially associated with the nineteenth-century serialized novel or "feuilleton", of which Sue was, at one stage, the master. An apocryphal story surfaces in Sue's few biographies of a minister of state in France who began his day during the serialization of *Les Mystères de Paris* by demanding news of La Louve, one of the characters of the novel. Only Dickens seems to have excited the same degree of enthusiasm and his reputation, like Sue's, also became an international phenomenon. Readers famously waited at the docks of New York for ships to bring the latest instalment of British papers and news of the fate of Little Nell a few years before the publication of *Les Mystères de Paris*. Both writers could claim to have influenced the course of the daily lives of their time through their fiction.

Dickens has retained the status of an icon of Anglo-Saxon culture which he acquired in his lifetime. His renown, if anything, has increased and his works are now indisputably part of the accepted canon of English literature. Sue in his time briefly occupied a similar position in French culture, yet now has faded into obscurity, vaguely remembered, perhaps, but not read. Despite once ranking amongst the great novelists of his day, he has become almost as forgotten in France as in Britain.

A number of factors contributed to the decline in interest in Sue's fiction. In France during his lifetime he became inextricably linked with the republican movement of the late 1840s which itself suffered from the political vagaries of the time when the country shifted to the Second Empire in 1850. Sue's republican convictions led to conflict with Napoleon III which ended in self-imposed exile for the author in 1851. In the quiet backwater of Annecy, then part of the state of Savoy, where he spent the last years of his life, Sue remained isolated from French life, most crucially from Paris, the centre of intellectual and cultural life in France. He was then unable to defend his reputation from the detraction spread by the many critics and rivals his rapid rise to fame had attracted. His last novels were officially banned because of their political tenor and only circulated privately to subscribers. The general public, once his most assured market, forgot him.
It must be said, however, that, for the most part, these last novels deserve to be forgotten. They are dull and didactic, ponderous re-workings of the humanitarian themes of his earlier works which had helped to found his republican reputation and his tremendous fame in the 1840s. Sue's last novels are over-ambitious, over-long and, like much of his fiction, poorly constructed. It is possible that even had he remained in Paris, Sue's reputation as a writer would have deteriorated. Indeed, it could be argued that his exile and relatively early death in 1857 at the age of fifty three helped to preserve some of his admirers and advanced his cult status amongst the few who continued to read his works.

In Britain the story of Sue's slide into obscurity follows its own pattern. Here his early works were initially reviewed, in the 1830s, with the same begrudging admiration or mistrust granted the other important French novelists of the time. As in France, his name was coupled here with those of Balzac, George Sand and Hugo, all of whom, though rarely wholly admired, were at least taken seriously. However, after the widespread success of *Les Mystères de Paris* in 1843-44, Sue's reputation in Britain altered significantly. His works became indelibly associated with the period's nascent popular fiction and its attendant contentious social issues. Stigmatized as "popular", Sue's novels were deemed unworthy of the serious attention given to "good" literature. Critics ceased to review his works except from within the context of the debates concerning the influence of popular fiction on public morality.

These debates were intensified by the fear of the threat of social instability which characterized British life in this period. Anxieties in the middle and ruling classes were fuelled by the development of radical British movements such as Chartism and by the actual political unrest on the continent. Sue's recognized affiliation with the republican movement in France which led to revolution in 1848 furthered the developing conservative bias against his works. This bias was compounded in the years following 1845 by the public association of *Les Mystères de Paris* with the British author G.W.M. Reynolds's *The Mysteries of London*, a serialized novel full of radical rhetoric and notoriously "popular" in the sense most mistrusted by middle class Victorians. Sue's novels thus came to be classified in the 1840s in Britain as "popular", both morally and politically dangerous in the perceptions
of the time and without literary worth. They were consigned by serious critics to a body of works disdained and neglected, for the most part, even today.

However, the study of Sue’s fiction does have a literary value. Like all truly popular fiction, Sue’s widely read works can provide an important part of the portrait of the culture of his time on both sides of the Channel. There is an historical usefulness in reviewing what large numbers of people chose to read during a given period. Sue’s fiction was successful, also, at a point in history when the commercial potential of publishing fiction was just beginning to be realized. His spectacular commercial achievement could not have failed to impress other novelists, whether “popular” or not.

Because of their success, features of Sue’s works spread throughout both Anglo-Saxon and French culture and left their influence, if only because they were so widely circulated. Elements of Sue’s fiction can be traced in a number of genres familiar to popular culture today. His serialized novels were precursors of today’s television soap operas. The modern crime novel and film owe significant debts to *Les Mystères de Paris* which memorably focuses on the labyrinthine, sinister world of the city and laces its superficial realism with thoroughly romantic characters and story-line. The novel’s flawed hero, Prince Rodolphe, who is both benevolent and revengeful, prefigures many crime fighting heroes of modern popular fiction and film both in the duality of his character and in his descent to the urban underworld to seek out wrong-doers and avenge injustice. Any examination of the roots of modern popular culture should include a study of Sue’s fiction, especially of *Les Mystères de Paris*.

However, Sue’s fiction is not, in fact, exclusively “popular”. In France in the mid-nineteenth century his works were considered to be both popular and mainstream, a position much less possible within the divisions then defined by British culture. All the important literary figures of the time, Balzac, George Sand and Sainte-Beuve amongst many, read and responded to Sue’s works in their correspondence and the press. *Les Mystères de Paris* excited the most critical attention, provoking debates on the nature of fiction and its social influence in much the same way as it did in Britain. In France, however, the work was admired and criticized equally. Those involved in the development of the early stages of the socialist movement in France
embraced the novel for its humanitarian themes. Later fictional treatments of similar subjects, such as Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, had their base in Sue's work. The realism manifest in *Les Mystères de Paris* was new to French consciousness. The novel significantly informed the transition in literary fashion from Romanticism to what evolved later in the century into French naturalism and the novels of Emile Zola.

In Britain, examination of the reception of Sue's fiction amongst the period's serious literary figures is problematic. Despite the fact that his works were clearly well-known, as indicated by Trollope's remark above, very little comment on them appears in the contemporary correspondence of such figures. The perceived divisions between accepted fiction and "popular" works prevented most overt commentary after 1843-44 once Sue's works had been categorized by the British press as morally and politically pernicious. The British middle class, who, from the evidence of publishers and circulating libraries, read Sue's works at least as much as the readers of the popular press which serialized his novels, did not wish to reveal any serious interest in him.

This study will attempt to chronicle the reception of Sue's fiction in Britain from his early career in the 1830s to its end around 1857, with a view to understanding what impact his works may have had on British writers of the period considered now to be mainstream and thus separate from the "popular" writers whose debt to Sue may be more readily apparent. Victorian Britons were much more familiar with contemporary French fiction than we are today and not enough attention has been given to the importance of the literary influences which crossed the Channel. A strong case has been made for the effect of George Sand's fiction on the course of English literary history during this mid-Victorian period "between the achievement of Scott and Jane Austen and that of the Brontës and George Eliot."\(^3\) Sue was read at least as much and by the same educated, middle class readers as George Sand during the same time. Although his work may not be quite of like calibre, it is possible, though more difficult, to demonstrate that Sue's fiction also played a role in the development of the British fiction of the period. Certainly in some of the mainstream British novels written within the time scale of this study, affinities with Sue's works arise which point to a relationship suggestive of something less than influence but more significant than coincidence.
Since it must be assumed that few readers now are familiar enough with Sue’s novels to proceed to a closer study without some preparation, a brief presentation of the history and purport of Sue’s works will be necessary to introduce this discussion. It is hoped that by presenting a history of the reception of Sue’s fiction in Victorian Britain this study will further understanding of the role played by the literary and cultural dialogue which took place between both sides of the Channel throughout the nineteenth century. French literature, politics, fashions and much else of French life figured in the fabric of British life in the Victorian period much more than is often appreciated by those studying English literature now. The novels of Eugène Sue were, at one significant point, an integral part of the cultural intercourse between the two countries and, for that reason alone, his works and the contemporary reaction to them in Britain deserve consideration.

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Chapter I

‘Roi du Roman-Feuilleton’: Eugène Sue, his life and works 1804-1857

Although much of Eugène Sue’s life is known, he himself remains an ambiguous figure. His rapid rise to fame and fortune, the conflicting roles he played, first as dandy amongst the Parisian beau monde, then as ardent humanitarian and socialist, attracted envy as well as scepticism amongst his contemporaries. There were many who felt that Sue’s positions in the world of letters and in society were not merited. Well-known voices of the period, Alexandre Dumas, Balzac and Eugène de Mirecourt amongst others, commented on Sue’s life but their accounts must be treated with caution. Two of these were his literary rivals and the third was notoriously jealous of Sue’s ease in Parisian salons. Later biographers risked eulogizing the author in attempts to redress the imbalance in these portraits and to advance the appreciation of a writer whose reputation had deteriorated. Reconciling the conflicting views of the author is not always straightforward.

Sue’s detractors were given free rein when he died in exile away from France, unmarried and without descendants. Out of favour with the French authorities, his literary estate had no official sanction to preserve it. Some of the author’s letters were preserved, but these are scattered throughout France, some in the Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris and the Bibliothèque Municipale d’Orléans. Others are held privately. Sue’s modern reputation as a popular author of little literary importance has meant that few efforts have been made to consolidate the material available. Though enough of the details of his life and of the history of his works which are relevant to the examination of his reception in Britain are sufficiently clear for the purposes of this study, a number of questions surrounding the character of Eugène Sue himself remain undetermined.

When Marie-Joseph Eugène Sue was born in Paris in January 1804, his family had been prosperous, distinguished surgeons and physicians, professors of medicine, heads of large hospitals or directors of schools of medicine for four generations. Eugène’s father, Jean-Joseph, was one of the most celebrated of a
venerable family line. Jean-Joseph was a prominent surgeon and scientist whose treatises on the effects of the guillotine, written in 1792, resulted in some celebrity. After the Revolution, he rose to eminence in the republic to become "médecin en chef de la garde des consuls", surgeon in chief effectively to Napoleon Bonaparte, at that point the head of the governing consuls. Joséphine Bonaparte, the first lady of the République, became the baby Eugène's godmother when he was born.

During the Empire, Napoleon promoted Jean-Joseph to "médecin en chef de la Garde impériale". It became fashionable in Paris to attend the doctor's private lectures on anatomy, and ladies of distinction, the Empress herself and Madame Récamier amongst them, did so. His practice prospered. The family bought a country home at Bouqueval to the north of Paris and lived the comfortable, well-connected lives of the haute bourgeoisie. However, not all was as Jean-Joseph would have had it. He is reputed to have aspired to a barony and to have been disappointed when only made a chevalier of the Empire. Other ambitions were apparently thwarted as well when he lost the struggle for certain positions of prestige amongst the medical élite of Paris. Although well-to-do and respected, Jean-Joseph remained just outside the charmed circle of the indisputably successful.

The frustrations of Jean-Joseph's aspirations are significant because they could not fail to compound the bitterness surrounding the other great disappointment of his life, his son Eugène. Troubled parent-child relationships are a persistent motif in Eugène Sue's fiction and these are usually felt to spring from the original source of his own life. It has been suggested, indeed, that he initially took up writing fiction in order further to annoy his bourgeois family, who did not consider the writing of fiction a proper pursuit for a Sue, although this is one of the many examples of apocryphal stories impossible to verify.

Eugène was Jean-Joseph's second child and only son. There was an older half-sister, Adélaïde-Flore, born in 1799, from his father's first marriage and a younger sister, Victorine, born in 1810. The three siblings were fond of each other and Eugène seems to have been a favourite among the women of his family. Sue's mother, however, died in 1820 while her son was still only sixteen. Relations with his father were cold. Jean-Joseph was already middle aged when Eugène was born. He appears to have been a humourless, imposing character, fully aware of his own importance. No
doubt he was also conscious that his only boy would have to represent the family
dignity and carry on the tradition of the practice of medicine. A distinguished cousin,
Professor Pierre Sue, librarian at the Faculté of medicine in Paris, died in 1816 without
children, leaving Eugène as the only male heir to the family name and position.

At school, however, the young Eugène did not distinguish himself. As
an adolescent, some time around 1819, it appears he dropped the beginning of his
name, the ancestral Marie-Joseph, and adopted the simple Eugène instead. After
school it was inevitable he should pursue medical training but at this he was equally
unsatisfactory to an ambitious father. Handsome and rich enough to indulge his
fastidious taste in dress, Eugène began to frequent the Parisian boulevards and to
neglect his studies. A number of anecdotes surround this period of his life which give
an idea of how little attention the young Sue paid to his medical studies. The sources
of these stories, Alexandre Dumas and Eugène de Mirecourt, are hardly reliable;
onetheless it is clear that Jean-Joseph was unhappy enough with his son’s progress to
remove him to the military hospital of which he himself was head for practical
experience instead of academic work. This attempt to distance Eugène from the
wayward youth of Paris must also have failed, since shortly thereafter, in the spring of
1823, Jean-Joseph arranged for his son to be sent to Spain as under-surgeon in the
French military operations there. Sue was nineteen.

The French were engaging in what was effectively a royalist crusade to
reinstate the Bourbons in Spain. They were successful after the famous victory of
Trocadéro, at which Sue was present. After that campaign, he stayed in Cadiz for
another year and then, at the end of his commission in 1825, was transferred to Toulon
on the French coast, again to a military hospital. On his way to Toulon, Sue visited
Paris where he renewed old friendships with, amongst many others, his cousin Langlé,
an old schoolfellow Alfred Desforges, and met a new companion, Alexandre Dumas,
all of whom were young men of fashion and aspiring writers and publishers. In order to
maintain the elegant, bohemian lifestyle this group affected, Sue ran up significant
debts, turning to money-lenders on the strength of his hoped-for inheritance. His father
discovered these indiscretions and Eugène was quickly despatched to Toulon,
accompanied by his friend Desforges.
In Toulon in 1825, Sue collaborated with Desforges to write what is thought to be his first piece of literature, a play entitled *Sur le Sacre de Charles X* celebrating the crowning of the new king. The work was performed with some success at the local theatre. Desforges then decamped to publish a journal in Bordeaux. Shortly afterwards, Sue tired of the provincial limitations of Toulon and requested his release from his position. In November 1825 he returned to Paris.

In Paris Sue interested himself in becoming a painter. However, it appears that he continued to collaborate on various pieces of theatre with Desforges who had also returned to Paris. His cousin, Langlé, had founded a journal, *La Nouveauté*, in his absence and it is in that paper that Sue published his first works of fiction. The *Lettres de l'homme-mouche* began to appear in January 1823. These are a series of observations of Parisian life through the eyes of a former police agent who uncovers the dishonesty behind the façades of respectability around him. Jean-Joseph was sufficiently unhappy about his son's publications and another series of indiscretions, debts, liaisons with women and pranks, to banish him once more from the capital. In February 1826 Eugène was sent to serve on a naval vessel in the West Indies.

Sue served as under-surgeon on a number of different naval voyages around the Caribbean and the Mediterranean until December 1827, when he requested leave. He returned again to Paris and there began to study under the painter Gudin, a successful artist awarded the cross of the Légion d'honneur by Charles X. Their arrangement was, apparently, that Sue, an accomplished horseman, would teach the artist to ride, in return Gudin taught the dandy to paint. Sue pursued painting but seems to have given most of his energy to his social life. He formed part of a group of like-minded young men who idled much of their time in the fashionable cafés, paid particular attention to the details of their dress, their horses and carriages, dallied with actresses, had illicit affairs with society ladies, and gave some of their time to writing or painting. The group included, importantly, Girardin and Véron, the future publishers.

After his leave in Paris, Sue spent another period of service in the West Indies and then returned again in 1829 to find that his friends had begun to realize their literary aspirations. Dumas produced *Henri III et son Cour* in February 1829, with
great success. Girardin began a journal, \textit{La Silhouette}, then another, \textit{La Mode}. Véron founded the \textit{Revue de Paris}. Through these Sue made a new friend, another writer, Honoré de Balzac, five years Sue's senior. Sue's milieu was one of stylish publishers, writers and playwrights. He, too, being a man of fashion, followed the trend and dabbled in literature. In March 1829, he and Desforges produced \textit{Monsieur le Marquis}, a piece of vaudevillian comedy. Articles, mostly on travel, appeared in the fashionable journals of the time.

Writing was still only a fairly insignificant pursuit for Sue and he continued to paint with Gudin. However, the real focus of his life remained the cafés of the Parisian boulevards and the salons of the wealthy and the well-born. He acquired the nickname of the 'beau Sue', prided himself in his horses, his groom, his carriages and his fastidious fashion sense. An inheritance from his maternal grandfather allowed him to indulge all the expensive affectations of the dandy of the time. As a 'bon viveur' he began to spend time with the well-known men of fashion of the period, amongst them Count d'Orsay. Through his friendship with d'Orsay, Sue was later to know Charles Dickens. Although they were still friends and equals at this point, the less moneyed and less handsome Balzac began to resent Sue's easy entry into the beau monde.

Sue's life changed dramatically in April 1830 when his father died. The constraints of his parent's disapproval and ambition were removed and, at the age of twenty-six, Sue was free to drop medicine and the navy and live as he chose. He established himself in Paris and devoted himself to the role of dandy and man about town. His inheritance from both his father's estate and that of his grandfather provided the means to acquire a lavishly furnished home and a mistress, Olympe Pelissier. Olympe was the daughter of an actress who had means of her own and set up a home in Ville d'Avray, on the outskirts of Paris, where Balzac would one day build a country home. Journalists, publishers and artists as well as the beau monde frequented her salon and it was during this period that Balzac and Sue solidified their friendship. The two writers began to publish in the same journals, \textit{La Silhouette} and \textit{La Mode}, their pieces often in the same issues, along with works by Lamartine, Hugo and Dumas.

When Louis-Philippe came to power in July 1830, Sue was one of many who supported the previous regime, the conservative and aristocratic "légitimistes",...
and who therefore viewed the new government with misgiving and contempt. At this point, however, he had no real political involvement or interests. He had begun to publish short novels, Kernok le Pirate in the spring and El Gitano in the summer of 1830, both in La Mode. These led to his acquiring renown as an author as well as a dandy. Both works draw from Sue’s experiences as a naval surgeon and are sea tales in the style of James Fenimore Cooper. The American author was widely read, along with Sir Walter Scott and the poetry of Byron, amongst the fashionable readers of the time in Paris. Sue openly acknowledged his debt to both Cooper and Byron in his prefaces to the tales.

The stories are rich with colour, dramatic scenes of shipwrecks and sea battles and highly romanticized story-lines. Kernok is a bold, handsome pirate who raids the Spanish waters accompanied by a faithful crew and his exotic lover, a beautiful mulatto girl from Martinique. The protagonist of El Gitano is another pirate who terrorizes the Spanish coast with two identical ships which confuse the authorities and prevent his capture. Both characters are fearless, seductively handsome and disturbingly satanic. The stories end with ironic twists. After a cunning defeat of the British sailors patrolling the seas, Kernok’s triumph is embittered by the death of his lover, who is killed in the battle and uses her own dying body to plug a hole blown in the side of Kernok’s ship. El Gitano is captured, tried and executed by the townspeople of Cadiz. A devoted follower avenges El Gitano’s death later by selling the town a shipment of fabric infested with the plague which then rages through Cadiz.

Both tales were well received. La Revue des Deux Mondes praised Sue’s “original and vigorous talent . . .” and his “pictures admirable for their truth.” Sue had prefaced his stories with a tribute to Gudin, describing the painter as the French Cooper. La Revue disagreed, declaring that “the real French Cooper is M. Sue himself.”¹ Three editions of Plik et Plok, as the works were called when combined, were published in 1831. Balzac began to address his friend as “Kernok” and offered his “esteem for your talent which I would wish to see grow.”²

Cooper himself wrote to Sue to congratulate the young writer. Sue opened his next piece of fiction, Atar-Gull, 1831, with a letter to the American, thanking him for his letter, his good opinion and “encouragements”. He goes on to express his concern that the horrible nature of his subject may cause him to be
misunderstood as an "homme abominable, taking pleasure from horror." The nature and scenes of his story are dreadful indeed, and yet, he desires, "through this too exact representation . . . of the treatment of the blacks . . . I wished, not to erect a hybrid and hackneyed polemic on rights which many contest, but to set out facts and figures, through which each opposing party will be able to establish its accounts.--the addition alone will then be left to do." His justification prefigures many such defences in later works when the realism of his fiction became an especially debated issue.

Despite Sue's reference to "facts" and "figures", *Atar-Gull* is more romantic than factual. It is the emotion of the mistreated slave protagonist which pleads the case for abolition. Atar-Gull himself is an African chief sold into slavery by his enemies to a hypocritical slave trader who is pitiless to the families he sells, yet who prides himself on his piety and devotion to his own. His ship is captured by pirates and the pirate captain turns the slave trader over to the Africans, who revenge themselves by eating the trader and his crew. The pirate captain abuses the proud Atar-Gull and then sells him to a rich plantation owner in the West Indies.

In the service of the plantation owner, Atar-Gull finds his old father, sold into slavery before him. The owner sells the old man to the pirate when he is no longer of use. Atar-Gull vows revenge for all his misfortune. With a sinister cunning, he makes himself indispensable to the plantation owner and his family and brings about their ruin from within while posing as the most faithful of servants. The story closes in Europe with the death of the plantation owner and Atar-Gull in tears of frustration at his bedside. He had hoped to prolong his torture of the old man and he grieves for his lost opportunity for revenge. His emotion is misinterpreted by the priest and doctor treating his master and the slave is ironically celebrated for his pious devotion. The work was popular enough to inspire, a year later, a dramatic adaptation, not written by Sue and with a more acceptable, romantic ending.

In April 1831, Sue collaborated on another piece of vaudevillian comedy, *Le Secret d'Etat*, with two others, de Villeneuve and Monnais. He continued to inhabit the important salons of the time, mixing with too long a list of well-known figures to catalogue here, but which included Lamartine, Sainte-Beuve, de Musset, Liszt, and Berlioz. Sue is thought to have had number of mistresses during this period. His name was linked with both Madame Rauzan, the daughter of the Duchess of
Duras, and Madame d'Agoult, wife of the Count d'Agoult, who were the first to open their closed aristocratic circle to “hommes de lettres et artistes.” At twenty-eight Sue felt or affected a worldly cynicism. Writing to Balzac in November 1832 he declares that “at our age, we see too low and too truthfully to count on love” and that he himself is bored “to death” with life. In response to Balzac’s query as to his enemies, Sue appears nonchalant. He has, apparently a “number” which “would give me a great deal of self-love [amour-propre], if I could have it, but it is not my glory of which they are jealous, it is my wealth. According to their slang, I am stealing their bread, I who am rich.” It is likely, as well, that these enemies not only resented the dilettante’s success with his fiction, but also his success with women and his renown as an elegant dandy.

Sue’s apparent hardened sophistication here clashes with other views of the writer. One of Balzac’s private estimations of Sue’s character paints an endearing picture of naïveté. The date of Balzac’s comments here is unclear, however, from the tone, it is possible to speculate that the remark was recorded before the writers’ friendship was embittered by Sue’s great successes in 1843-1845:

He was flexible and loveable like a child, calm like a child, repenting of his faults like a child, which made one pardon him for them like a child: in fact this combination of defects naively admitted and of qualities naively forgotten formed one of the most seductive natures I have known.

Sainte-Beuve, too, found Sue to be “modest and a nice young man even at the moment of his greatest success.”

In the winter of 1832, a cholera epidemic struck Paris. Sue and his milieu survived for the most part but the over-crowded poor sections of the city suffered. By one report, there were 20,000 victims of cholera during the epidemic, which lasted seven months. Some social unrest resulted, adding to the fears of revolution and disorder which underpinned French life throughout the period. At least one large demonstration took place in June 1833 protesting against the insufficient measures taken against the disease.

The increasing urbanization of Paris and other cities had encouraged French anxieties concerning the “dangerous classes” of potential criminals and
revolutionaries thought to be amongst the growing urban poor. The utopian vision of
the Revolution had not resolved the social problems of the poor and dispossessed. In
the 1830s, by one estimate, there were “2 million poor, 300,000 beggars, 100,000
travellers and 300,000 foundlings.” The fear of social instability during this period was
shared, of course, by other countries neighbouring France, certainly in Britain.
However, French history had demonstrated that these could be genuine dangers and
“fears of disorder, anarchy and national decline were greater . . .”9 here perhaps than
elsewhere.

At the beginning of 1832, Sue published a novel in two volumes, *La
Salamandre*. This is another sea tale centring on the exploits of the brave, disciplined
young second officer of a ship, his ineffective captain, a beautiful girl and an evil
figure, Szaffie. The ship, *La Salamandre*, is wrecked because of the incompetence of
the captain. The crew and passengers save themselves on a raft. At sea, Szaffie seduces
the girl, although she really loves the noble young officer. The officer allows himself to
be shot in despair, the girl drowns herself and Szaffie and the ineffectual captain return
to Paris to be find fortune and celebrity awaiting them. Szaffie despises the society
which welcomes him. He moves amongst the salons of the city with a perverse ability
to wound sensitivities, damaging those around him as much as Kernok or El Gitano
had wounded their victims bodily.

*La Salamandre* was applauded for the credibility of its characters in an
article in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* in March 1832. The journal praised Sue for “the
rare talent to create men who live, whom one knows, whom one would recognize.”
His great talent was for a realistic portrayal of life, for “the science of observation . . .
when he holds a true situation, with what truth and what wisdom does he treat it!”
Realism in fiction was a quality much appreciated at this stage by French critics.
George Sand’s *Leila* was praised shortly after this article by the same paper for “la
réalité simple et naive” of her novel.10 *La Salamandre* was seen to reflect the spirit of
the time. The character of Szaffie represented to this critic “an entire century”, the
“depravation of our blase society which is dead to all belief.” This review judged that,
despite its structural faults, the story “will occupy a distinguished rank among the
original works of the epoch.”11 The novel was adapted for the stage and performed in
July 1834, although without Sue’s involvement.
Sea tales became fashionable and Sue continued to publish similar stories. In the spring of 1832 he wrote two more short maritime stories, *Voyages et Aventures sur Mer de Narcisse Gelin*, published in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, and *Relation exacte des Voyages de Claude Bellissan, clerc et procureur* in *Le Saphir*. The first recounts the short life of an overly romantic young Frenchman who takes to the sea in search of adventure and poetry. He is at first disappointed. The sailors are fatuous, interested only in commerce. He is sea-sick. Then they are attacked by pirates, who capture the ship. These are then taken by the British navy which hangs them all, including the young man who cannot speak English and thus explain his innocence.

The second story follows the life of a philanthropic, abolitionist republican who leaves Paris in search of an utopia. He sails to a country ruled by a native king and then in the end is cannibalized by the noble savage he has idealized throughout his life. These short ironic works were followed by *La Coucaratcha* also in 1832. This is a collection of tales, some of which had already been published and which are not set in maritime scenes. Sue continued this trend away from sea tales with his next work, *La Vigie de Koat-Ven*, 1833.

*La Vigie de Koat-Ven* is an historical novel set around the American revolutionary war. The protagonist is a naval captain, but the story also follows him through the salons of the Regency period in Britain, with details of horses, hunting, romantic intrigues and elaborate fashions. Sue is critical, in his ironic way, particularly of the excesses of the nobility and the royal courts. Another short novel, *Cécile, ou une Femme Heureuse*, written at the same time, also centres on the world of society, this time in Paris. Sue still interested himself in maritime life, however, and sought permission from the French Naval Ministry to write a history of the French navy. He was commissioned to do so in August 1834. The project would not be finished until 1837.

During that period, Sue’s life continued to revolve around the fashionable salons of Paris. Writing fiction remained of secondary importance to him. In November 1833 he became an early member of the Jockey Club which sponsored races at the course of Chantilly. At the home of Marie d’Agoult, now the lover of Liszt, Sue met George Sand for the first time. She later recalled in her autobiography how she encountered “many men of letters, artists and some men from the intelligent
Eugène Sue, le baron d’Estein, Chopin, Mickiewicz, Nourrit, Victor Schoelcher, etc. ... Sue began to retreat from city life periodically to the country home of his sister near the Loire and to La Sologne, the area around the city of Orléans beloved of Parisians for its hunting. He developed thereafter an affection for the region, one which Sand remarks upon, again in her autobiographical works, failing to understand his love of the savage, featureless landscape there.

In July 1836, two journals important to the history of publishing in France were founded by rival publishers, La Presse by Girardin and Le Siècle by Dutacq. In an effort to eclipse each other’s sales, these began to publish serialized fiction. Balzac was one of the first to publish a “feuilleton”. La Vieille Fille began in October 1836. It was an immediate success, “a journalistic event.”

The feuilleton format attracted a wider public than had been available to novelists hitherto. Literacy in France had been increasing quickly during this period. In 1833, Guizot was responsible for a law which required each commune to provide primary education for its children, regularizing the process which was to spread basic education to the masses. Secondary and higher education had been instituted by Napoleon, albeit for an elite. Books were expensive commodities, however, and therefore had had a limited market. The “feuilleton” widened the market for fiction considerably and many journals exploited this method to boost their sales. The same development was taking place in Britain, for similar reasons. Dickens’s Pickwick Papers, 1836-7, was enjoying an equal success in that country.

Sue, however, had no need to exploit the serialized format at this point. The audience he sought remained those few who could afford to purchase books in volumes, the “haute société” amongst whom he himself lived. However, the favour he had enjoyed from some of this group began now to decline. Latréraumont, another historical novel, was published in 1837. The story is set around an actual historical figure from the period of the rebellion of the Fronde. Sue’s noble protagonist resembles his other cynical, heroic yet brutal figures, Kernok, El Gitano and Szaffie. The intrigues and egotism of the aristocracy and of the court of Louis XIV at Versailles are described in particularly disparaging terms. Sue’s attempt to re-write history in this novel, coupled with a similarly subjective treatment of his history of the
French navy which was completed around the same time, led to criticism both of the
works and their author.

La Revue des Deux Mondes ridiculed Sue’s “prétentions philosophiques et historiques” in an article by Gustave Planche. Similar criticisms were levelled at
Sue’s naval history in the same paper by Auguste Bussière. The tenor of these two
critical reviews was that Sue had strayed beyond the scope of his talents by attempting
a novel which aimed to be more than simple entertainment and to offer history with the
appeal of fiction. Other papers, La Mode and Le Figaro, were equally scathing.

Sue’s affectations of grandeur became increasingly the target of jealous or
disapproving censors. Rumours circulated that he used an inestimable and ridiculous
number of pairs of yellow gloves, the symbol of male elegance of the time. It was
alleged that he demanded that his letters be brought to him by a servant on a silver
tray. The extravagant luxury of his home and dress had already been the subject of
comment. Balzac had long envied Sue’s elegant tastes and the means to indulge them.

One anecdote is repeated in so many of the portraits of Sue’s life that it
is likely to have some foundation in truth. Even if it does not, the fact that it appears in
an anonymous contemporary collection of notes, statistics and commentary concerning
the history of 1850 attests that Sue’s reputation altered in the mid-1830s. The beau
monde stopped celebrating him as a young man of genius. Indeed, at thirty four, no
longer as slim or as handsome as before, he could begin to be considered middle-aged.
His lavish lifestyle had taken its toll and no doubt his apparent vanity began to seem
absurd. He was sneered at, at least amongst the aristocratic circles of some, as a
parvenu.

The story best illustrating this decline in Sue’s reputation has him
excusing himself to a Duke, unnamed in this source, for failing to visit him. “I never
visit.” The Duke is said to have replied, “You must therefore not be very grateful to
your father who made so many.” The Duke would have been referring, of course, to
the medical visits Jean-Joseph made to patients, thereby calling attention to Sue’s
bourgeois origins. The exchange was said to have taken place during the salon of a
noble lady, a public arena for this sector of society. This kind of enemy would be
unlikely to flatter Sue’s “amour-propre.”
The "feuilleton" had increased in popularity during this time. Soulié had begun *Mémoires du Diable* in *Le Journal des Débats* in September 1837. Balzac had published *La Femme Supérieure*. Sue was encouraged by Girardin to follow suit, but did not do so until he was forced by financial necessity. Indulgences and disregard for expense had led to near ruin. His debts finally far outweighed his means. In December 1837 he began a serialized story, *Journal d'un Inconnu*, in *La Presse*. After two episodes, however, he was unable to continue. Suffering from what appears to modern eyes to be a depression, he left Paris to recover.

At Châtenay, the country home he had acquired earlier, and then in the Sologne, Sue recovered his inspiration and finished the "feuilleton" now entitled *Arthur*. The eponymous protagonist of the story is a fashionable young man who is tired of the superficiality and insincerity of the society in which he moves, but whose very scepticism prevents him from changing. Although there are the familiar settings of sea voyages and shipwrecks, the body of the story focuses on the salons of Paris, the beau monde both of Sue and of his character. Eventually Arthur begins to believe in a force beyond the shallow world of society. He discovers love, is inspired to become philanthropic, supports the poor, founds a school for poor children and assists the efforts of a benevolent priest to help others in need.

*Arthur* was successful enough to allow Sue to install himself in Paris once again. He bought a new home which he furnished, as before, with lavish elegance. However, the pattern of his life changed. He visited fewer salons and the centre of his life became his work. The "feuilleton" was increasingly popular and a growing number of important journals featured serialized stories. Balzac published in *Le Constitutionnel*. Dumas produced for the *Siècle*. His *Capitaine Paul* was thought to have increased the paper's circulation by five thousand readers in three months.18 The "roman feuilleton" became a phenomenon, prompting a critical reaction from one of the country's best known critics, Sainte-Beuve. In his now famous article in *La Revue des Deux Mondes*, 'De la Littérature industrielle', Sainte-Beuve condemns the format and its authors for the manufacturing of fiction without literary worth. The commercial nature of serialized fiction precludes excellence in Sainte-Beuve's view and he singles out Balzac for particular criticism, failing, however, to include Sue in his censure.19
The critics' reaction did not halt the trend. The profits were too manifest to the writers and their publishers. By the time *Arthur* had finished in June 1839, Sue had already submitted three new stories to Parisian journals. In September 1838, he published in *La Presse* a story whose hero is a horse, *Godolphin Arabian*. The horse travels from its birthplace in Tunisia through the royal stables of France to the race course of Newmarket in Britain, its story told with meticulous attention to the technicalities surrounding the breeding and racing of horses. *L'Art de Plaire* appeared in *Le Journal des Débats* in October 1838. It is an ironic tale of a nobleman whose charm is irresistible and who becomes a favourite of the king, Louis XV, as a consequence. At the bedside of the king, the nobleman is infected with smallpox and dies. *Kardiki*, an exotic story of the revenge of a prince on a city, was published in *La Presse* in the early spring of 1839.

More stories followed. Between 1839 and 1840, Sue published a remarkable number of works serialized in important journals; *Un Juge* and *L'Archiprêtre de Cévennes*, *Jean Cavalier* (the sequel to *L'Archiprêtre*), *Les Flibustiers*, *Le Commandeur de Malte*, *Les Aventures de Hercule Hardi*, *Le Colonel de Survile*. In September 1840 he collaborated to produce *Latréaumont* for the stage.

All this activity may have been in part because of Sue’s mounting debts. His love of luxury had led again to his living beyond his means.

In the middle of this period, on March 10 1839, Sue was made a member of the Légion d’honneur, probably in recognition of his completed history of the French navy. A year later, Sainte-Beuve praised him in *La Revue des Deux Mondes* in a critique of *Jean Cavalier* which compares Sue to both Balzac and Soulié and finds these last two lacking Sue’s “good taste”, a quality “very rare today and almost not to be found amongst the men of letters and famous novelists.” Sue’s novel is judged to be “remarkable, interesting and treated with conscience”:

M. Sue, if one takes the totality of his works and if one is clear about the family of novels of which ones speaks, combines the spirit, the style, the fashion [Sainte-Beuve uses the English word], the habit with distinction as I have said. . . to certain of his colleagues [confrères] he has left the right to be unreasonable; if he throws himself into an excess of crudity, it is because he has wished it. He finds himself sheltered from
literary mercenariness; he obeys no other necessity than his own personal taste to observe and to write... The witty, ambitious, incredulous, blasé generation which has occupied the world for ten years is depicted marvellously in the novels of M. Eugène Sue... 

As has been speculated, some of strength of this praise may have been intended to wound Sue's literary rival and "confrère", Balzac, for whom Sainte-Beuve had long felt animosity. Balzac had made the "roman à moeurs" his own special form. Now Sue, whose reputation had been founded on a very different sort of fiction, was admired for surpassing his friend in this genre. The article boosted Sue's literary reputation and his spirits, undoing some of the damage done by the earlier censure from Planche and Bussières. A pattern of response to Sue's fiction was developing. Both he and his work were contentious enough to attract extremes of reaction and this was to be increasingly the case as his career progressed. His next work of fiction abandoned the exotic maritime settings of his earlier fiction altogether and was a long "roman à moeurs", Mathilde, Mémoires d'une Jeune Femme. The novel was serialized in La Presse from December 1840 and was finished the following year in September 1841.

The novel was a huge commercial success. Its suspense held Paris enthralled. Readers began to write to Sue responding to the novel. One urged him in January 1840 from Brussels, where Mathilde was appearing in the Courrier Belge, to let him have the ending of his "délicieux feuilleton" as soon as possible. Others wrote in the following years praising Sue's genius and relating their own lives to Sue's story. The novel had an immediate effect on Sue's female readers who saw themselves in his characters. One wrote anonymously, in 1842, to thank him in moving terms for exposing the "injustice, l'inconstance, la brutalité" on the part of society toward illegitimate children. She gives details of her own story, closely relating them to Sue's portrait of an illegitimate child, Emma. Her response revealed a tendency amongst readers to relate Sue's stories to their own lives which would become particularly striking during the serialization of Sue's next novel, Les Mystères de Paris.

Mathilde is told largely through a series of letters to and from the eponymous heroine in a style reminiscent of Richardson. The opening scenes are wholly unlike the body of the novel and are set in a rough tavern in Paris. The realistic
meanness of poor urban lives importantly prefigures scenes in later works by Sue, notably *Les Mystères de Paris*. Within this framework, the story shifts to portray the opulent lives of French aristocrats, a “roman à moeurs” but one full of melodrama and Gothic influence, as acknowledged by Sue in an allusion to the “terreurs” of the novels of Ann Radcliffe during his story. In contrast to the early scenes, most of *Mathilde* takes place in the countryside outside Paris. Mathilde is a well-born young woman whose parents have died. As a child she has been mistreated and unloved by those responsible for her. Her vulnerability and the pathos surrounding her neglected childhood suggest similar treatment of the story of another of Sue’s important characters, Fleur de Marie in *Les Mystères de Paris*. Mathilde is an heiress who becomes the dupe of a plot to marry her to a corrupt, fortune-seeking nobleman, Gontran.

Although Mathilde marries for love, Gontran is unfaithful and profligate, valuing Mathilde purely for her estate. Their union is miserable. At one point, in order to pay his gambling debts, her husband is complicit in a plot to seduce her by a sinister figure of great power and wealth, Lugarto. This figure, seconded by a group of equally evil servants, abducts the virtuous Mathilde to a deserted house and drugs her in an attempt to rape her. She is dramatically rescued just in time.

Despite her wretchedness and his manifest corruption, Mathilde remains subject to her husband’s will, even when he chooses to abandon her and live with a lover, her depraved cousin Ursule. When his wife wishes to open a school on her estate for underprivileged young women, for example, Gontran houses his hunting hounds in the building she needs and refuses to allow her to pursue her plan. Part of the novel is dedicated to the criticism of the constraints and injustices of the marriage system and its discussions of the subject are particularly sympathetic to the plight of women.

Another character, the Duchess de Richeville, who befriends Mathilde, is an illustration. Before she was married, Madame de Richeville has had a daughter, Emma, the result of an affair with a nobleman she truly loved but was unable to marry. To maintain her position in society, the duchess has been forced to keep Emma’s parentage secret and has presented her to the world as a distant relative. Her secret and her remorse weigh heavily on Madame de Richeville who finally confesses her fault to her daughter in a melodramatic scene. Emma dies of a broken heart, in part because of
the shock of her mother’s revelations. The figure of Emma is intended to focus sympathy for the plight of the illegitimate child, innocent of fault yet condemned by the sins of its parents. The other cause of Emma’s death is her unrequited love for a nobleman, Rochegune. In her struggles to come to terms with her passion, Sue attempts to portray a complex and unlikely combination of purity and sexuality, elements which will figure in his later treatment of the prostitute Fleur de Marie. With the death of her daughter, the bereft duchess enters a convent.

At the end of the novel, Mathilde is freed from her husband’s tyranny by his death. She then marries her true love, the devoted and noble hearted Rochegune, who has been her ally and friend throughout her trials. The novel was produced in volume form very soon after the end of the serialization in 1841, an indication of the commercial power of the story. Sue and Félix Pyat collaborated in September of the following year in a dramatic adaptation in Paris which mirrored the success of the novel.

Critical reaction to Mathilde was mixed. La Revue des Deux Mondes deplored the format of which the novel was such a consummate example, the “feuilleton”, yet acknowledged the story’s interest and power. The journal’s commentator shares the ambivalence of many of Sue’s British critics at this point and hesitates to condemn wholly an author whose talent is manifest despite the structural weaknesses of the format of his fiction. The “feuilleton” itself, according to this review, prevented those who used it to reach the same heights as writers of stature, such as Scott or Rousseau. The form was inherently slipshod and superficial, nevertheless Sue’s novel displayed some excellence:

It is a novel which, despite all its faults, its psychological pretensions, its interminable length, its somewhat juvenile affectations of worldly elegance, excites one’s interest and justifies, to some extent, the curiosity which has surrounded it. . . . all its different characters, all its different situations of varied and changing souls, in fact all which makes up the moral part of Mathilde reveals certainly in M. Sue, or rather continues to show us, a real talent for observation and a profound ability to feel [emotions].

25
Soulie’s latest serial, *Les Quatres Soeurs*, was also reviewed in the same article and found to be beneath comparison with Sue’s works. Although they share similar faults of composition, Soulie’s novel is of “un genre tout différent”.

During 1842 Sue wrote three more serialized novels, *Le-Morne-au-Diable, Paula Monti* and *Thérèse Dunoyer*, which are essentially also “romans à moeurs” with the melodramatic and Gothic elements typical of Sue’s work. *La Revue des Deux Mondes*, while still condemning the “feuilleton” format, found the first of these to be “une fraîche et joyeuse débauche d’imagination”, preferable to *Mathilde* with that work’s too meticulous depiction of aristocratic life following in “la science de Bulwer”. This critique finds that Sue has returned to his area of strength with an adventure story rich with drama and colour. *Le Morne-au-Diable* “offers to the imagination the appeal of one of those long and bizarre tales which one allows oneself to avoid boredom on long voyage.” Its value lies in its ability to entertain the reader. Like the serialized format itself, the novel is too superficial to deserve serious critical attention. This is seen to be regrettable, since Sue’s talent is greater than his “feuilleton” reveals:

In truth, it is a great shame, since this work proves that M. Eugène Sue has preserved an invaluable faculty, which he alone possesses amongst the writers of this time: the ability to emerge from the unhealthy atmosphere of the depths of the psychological novel and return to the air and sunlight of an adventure novel. . . . Even though his last work is nothing but a sketch, and a most incorrect sketch, one distinguishes in it well-placed characters, happily seized details, some perspectives indicated with talent. Finally, if M. Sue may have no other merit, we owe him our gratitude for having pulled us for a moment from the dark, twisted, inescapable labyrinth where M. de Balzac leads us . . .

Balzac is denounced here at length for the fundamental “immorality” of his novel, *Mémoires de deux jeunes Mariées*, as well as for “the incoherence of his thoughts and his style.” His portraits are unrelentingly cynical and, if his story’s realism makes them credible, its immorality is all the more profound. Dumas, too, is criticized largely for his “banal” prose. Sue’s novels are clearly preferred in the genre of serialized fiction. 26
It is interesting that one of the works Sue published this year, *Thérèse Dunoyer*, includes scenes of starvation in a garret of a city slum and introduces worthy but wretched workers as some of its characters. These elements become central to his next novel, *Les Mystères de Paris*, which he had already begun to serialize at the same time as these others, in June 1842. *Les Mystères de Paris* was to become Sue's most successful and best known work. Its publication in *Le Journal des Débats* stretched over sixteen months, from June 1842 to October 1843, and in that time became one of the most important, most widely read works of fiction in France.

*Les Mystères de Paris* opens by inviting Sue's readers to explore a barbaric world unknown to them and yet close at hand, the urban wilderness of the city slums and their criminal underworld. It is clear that Sue initially addressed the middle and upper classes who were the established readers of *Le Journal des Débats*. A popular readership only developed as the serialization progressed and the novel's fame spread.

Much of the narrative is set around the lives of the urban poor which are pictured with painstaking detail. The vivid realism of the scenes of deprivation provide stark contrast to Sue's otherwise romantic, melodramatic story. His central figure is a Germanic prince, Rodolphe, whose benevolence leads him to hazard the underworld of Paris to rectify social injustice and revenge wrongs done to the innocent. He does so in disguise, dressed as a poor worker, which allows him to befriend the inhabitants of this foreign world. Much of the dialogue of the first several passages takes place in argot, which Sue annotates with footnotes, a device which both lends authenticity to his story and stresses the separateness of the world he is describing.

In the first stages of the novel, Rodolphe meets two members of the Parisian underworld who are to become important to the narrative. One, la Goualeuse, is a young prostitute. The other is a convicted murderer, Le Chourineur. Care is taken to demonstrate that their crimes are solely the result of the stresses of poverty and that these are fundamentally worthy characters. Rodolphe takes the girl under his protection and removes her to a farm outside of Paris, called Bouqueval, where he has established a co-operative community of destitute workers. Le Chourineur assists Rodolphe thus joining the network of supporters the prince relies on to implement his
charitable schemes. Many of these are aristocrats, such as Sir Murph, an English nobleman.

Rodolphe is benevolent, as is demonstrated by his compassion and magnanimity, however he also has a dark side reminiscent of earlier figures in Sue's fiction. His presence in the criminal and poor underworld of the city has two objectives, to succour the needy and to revenge wrong-doing. In the latter role, he is implacable, choosing cruel, horrific punishments, such as blinding, for the wicked criminals he catches.

Rodolphe pursues his fight for social justice partly in order to expiate the sin of defying his own father. In his youth, sixteen years before the setting of the story, the prince was married in secret and against the wishes of his family to a Scottish aristocrat, Sarah MacGregor, whose only interest is in Rodolphe's royal crown. His father discovers their secret and almost comes to blows with his son. Rodolphe realizes his mistake, discovers that his marriage is not technically valid and separates himself from Sarah. She disappears, but unknown to Rodolphe, has a daughter whom she then effectively abandons to the streets of Paris.

This daughter is la Goualeuse, also known as Fleur de Marie, whose innate purity is at odds with her role as a prostitute and with the environment in which she lives. Her goodness is acknowledged by the denizens of the underworld in which she lives who have named her after the Virgin Mary. Rodolphe is unaware that she is his child when he places her at Bouqueval. At the same time, Sarah has returned to Paris and is plotting to recover Rodolphe's affections in the hope of marriage and a royal crown. She too is ignorant of Fleur de Marie's true identity. She believes the prince to have fallen in love with the girl and hires a group of criminals, La Chouette and le Maître d'école, to abduct Fleur de Marie and kill her, thus removing an obstacle to her own plans. Fleur de Marie is taken to Paris and ends up in Saint-Lazare, the prison notorious for prostitutes. Here she meets La Louve who later saves the girl from drowning when the criminals plot to murder her. The narrative digresses here and elsewhere to elaborate on the need for prison reform and other contemporary social concerns. These digressions, also a feature of Mathilde, are a salient feature of Sue's later fiction. They accompany the occasional apologia such as that which appeared in
the preface of *Atar-Gull*. Sue was conscious that the realism of his story could shock and he persistently states a moral purpose for his work to justify its subject matter.

Rodolphe, unaware of the girl’s fate, sets up a home in a tenement of Paris in order to better aid the needy and to find the missing son of one of his entourage, Madame Georges. His home here contrasts dramatically with his role as a royal prince amongst the beau monde of Paris and Sue uses the contrasting scenes to highlight both the deprivation of the story’s poorer characters and Rodolphe’s royal status. At a magnificent ball, Rodolphe meets the wife of an acquaintance, Clémence d’Harville. She is unhappily married and her portrait serves to underline this novel’s discussion of the unjust constraints of the marriage system. Rodolphe and Clémence fall in love when he enlists her into his group of followers and initiates her to the joys of charity.

In the same tenement building which Rodolphe inhabits in disguise, live a young, honest, hardworking seamstress, La Rigolette, and a destitute family, the Morels, whose worthy father is a gem cutter. The Morels all live in the same garret room in which their father works his stones in a desperate attempt to provide for his family. They are ill, cold and starving, but the father is not embittered. He believes that if the rich knew of their plight they would come to their aid. “Ils ne savent pas . . . ce que c’est la misère . . .” [They do not know what it is to be miserable.] he tells his wife. Rodolphe does indeed find the family and relieves them of their misery. He flirts innocently with La Rigolette, who shares his compassion for the impoverished family.

The Morels have a beautiful, virtuous daughter who works at the home of a prosperous notary, Ferrand. His outward probity cloaks his criminality and corruption. Driven by greed, he secretly commits a number of evil acts. His one weakness is lust. He desires Louise and eventually drugs, then rapes her. Her story drives her father into madness and Rodolphe vows revenge. The prince sends a voluptuous Créole girl, Cecily, to take Louise’s place in Ferrand’s household. Cecily uses Ferrand’s lust to ensnare him and acquires incriminating documents which Rodolphe then uses to condemn Ferrand.

In the meantime, Fleur de Marie’s identity is revealed. She is discovered by Clémence who reunites father and daughter. Sarah is stabbed by La Chouette. On her deathbed, Rodolphe marries Sarah in order to legitimize his daughter, who
becomes the Princess Amélie. Sarah dies and Rodolphe marries Clémence who also has been widowed. They leave Paris for Gerolstein, Rodolphe’s kingdom.

In her new role as royal princess, Amélie is haunted by her former life. Courted by a young cousin and nobleman, Henri, she falls in love but refuses to marry because of the stain of her past. Clémence leaves for Paris on family affairs. Despite her father’s protests, Amélie enters a convent and then on the day of her vows, she dies, weakened by the combination of her remorse for her sins and the effort of her expiation. Clémence rushes back to Gerolstein to be with Rodolphe. The novel ends with a short, remarkably expressive statement, the simplicity of which contrasts with the elaborate language of the rest of the work: “Rodolphe was not alone on the day of the funeral service for Fleur de Marie.”

It would be difficult to exaggerate the sensation caused by *Les Mystères de Paris*. Sue was said to have earned 26, 500 francs for the work. The circulation of *Le Journal des Débats* increased substantially as readers rushed to buy the paper to follow the episodes of the story with an enthusiasm resembling that reported of Dickens’s readers around the same time. The “cabinets de lecteur” where many readers read journals and novels rather than purchasing them outright began to ration the time available to individual readers in order to satisfy the demand for Sue’s story. The novel’s characters became household names, celebrated in popular songs and poems. A ponderous form of chair became dubbed a ‘*Mystères de Paris*’ by furniture makers because its sides resembled piles of books. Sainte-Beuve described the reaction in Paris:

> In the cafés, they fight over the Débats in the morning; those who have the issue with Sue’s story rent it to others for ten sous for the time it takes to read the episode. When the author is late by one day beautiful society ladies and chambermaids are all in a state of excitement . . . When M. de Chateaubriand has the gout or an honest man of real literature trembles with fever, no one is worried, but with M. Sue! His silence because of a cold has become a public calamity . . .

Sainte-Beuve’s remark was occasioned by the fact that, indeed, Sue had been unwell during the serialization of his novel and had had to publish an open letter to reassure his readers of his return to health and the continuation of the story. The critic’s antagonism to *Les Mystères de Paris* was based on its format, which he
disdained, and its unprecedented success which took him by surprise. He termed the
reaction to the story the “mystification des Mystères de Paris”. Sainte-Beuve
continued to find Sue himself “un assez bon garçon” who had at least the merit of not
taking himself too seriously as a writer and of completely eclipsing other less preferred
authors of “feuilles” such as Balzac and Soulié.

The success of the novel spread very quickly to other parts of the
world. Les Mystères de Paris was read everywhere and by virtually everyone. In 1844
six translated editions of the novel were available in Britain. Others were printed in
almost every European country and in America. Imitations also appeared as quickly
throughout Europe. In France, the novel inspired songs, poems, and a dramatic
adaptation by Sue in February 1844 attracted such crowds that the streets surrounding
the theatre became blocked by people.

The widespread reaction to Sue’s novel was such that Karl Marx, living
in Paris during the serialization, responded with a lengthy series of essays which
eventually formed part of his book The Holy Family published in 1845. Marx gives
detailed attention to his analysis of Les Mystères de Paris, disputing Sue’s fundamental
premise that ignorance prevents the rich from aiding the poor and casting doubt on the
genuineness of the author’s socialism, using Sue’s earlier works to refute the author’s
growing reputation as a political thinker. Modern critics have expressed surprise at
the extent of Marx’s discussion on what is now a little read work of fiction by a little
known author. His interest in Sue and his detailed knowledge of Les Mystères de Paris
can be taken as a clear measure of the importance the novel had in its time.

Sue and Les Mystères de Paris soon acquired mythical status and this
mystification now distorts any portrait of the author. His sudden tremendous fame
polarized reactions to him. Those who had already sneered at his literary and social
pretensions now derided his seemingly new-found humanitarian convictions. Many
were hostile to the novel as well as its author. The realism of Les Mystères de Paris
and its sordid subject matter shocked many. The novel was seen to be potentially
subversive. Sermons were preached against the work. One, quoted in a letter to Sue
sometime in the autumn of 1843, declared “this man without shame . . . is the Voltaire
of those new hordes who are preparing new crimes and new carnage in the
shadows.” The Chambre des Députés debated whether the novel should be banned as
seditious. One conservative French paper, *La Gazette de France*, was consistently
critical of the novel, labelling it “Une attaque systématique contre l’ordre social.”

A review by Paulin Limayrac in *La Revue des Deux Mondes* attacked
*Les Mystères de Paris* as “bursting with vice and crimes.” Works by Balzac and Sand
are criticized for similar reasons but Sue’s novel remains the article’s principal target.
The critic’s views are inconsistent, as was often the case in the early censure of the
novel both in France and in Britain. Sue is praised as well as castigated for the realism
of his characters, the quality once most admired in his fiction. Parts of his story, such
as the history of Fleur de Marie, whose heart stays pure despite her corrupt
surroundings, are found to be too implausible, not realistic enough in fact. Other
portraits, such as those of La Rigolette are admirably so and those of the criminals La
Chouette are immoral because of their very realism. The debates surrounding the role
of realism in fiction which culminated later in the century with the works of Zola are
prefigured by this response to Sue’s novel. The “prodigious success . . . of the book of
M. Eugène Sue” was in itself to be regretted by this critic who felt that the “novel,
which had caused so much evil, is still dangerous. Those who are corrupt find in it
their food, anti-social dreamers a weapon against society . . .”

However, the admiration of the supporters of Sue’s novel was equally
impassioned. Even those who did not approve of the work, such as Sainte-Beuve,
acknowledged its impact. A revealing source of contemporary views of *Les Mystères
de Paris* is found in the collection of letters Sue received during the writing of his
novel. These are in themselves phenomena of interest to both the literary and social
historian. The collection includes some 347 letters written for the most part during
1842-43. The majority of the letters are from French readers although there are enough
from other parts of the world to indicate that interest in *Les Mystères de Paris* was
indeed international. The collection appears to have been selected, it is unclear by
whom, and is unlikely to represent all the letters sent to the author while he wrote his
novel. Sainte-Beuve is reported to have claimed that Sue received 1100 letters
concerning *Les Mystères de Paris*. It was suggested to Sue, at one point, that these be
published separately from the novel; however, they never appeared. The bulk of the
collection appears to have been lost.
The remaining letters are almost all from admirers of Sue's work, although many allude to the novel's controversial role. One correspondent opens her note for example, in February 1843, by declaring that she is not one of those who judge “Les Mystères de Paris an immoral work.” One of the most striking features of these letters is that they are from such disparate members of society. Admiration is expressed from aristocrats, diplomats, businessmen, clerics and workers. There are also notes from well-known figures of the time. Lamartine, for example writes to “my dear great poet in prose.” The popularity of the novel quickly spread into all sectors of French society. A letter honouring Sue's “eloquence” and “powerful imagination” in the cause of the poor was written by the Baroness de Rothschild in July 1843. It follows an especially moving anonymous letter from a clerk signed only “A poor clerk”. He addresses Sue as his “very honoured friend” and finishes his praise with “you are everywhere, especially in the workshop . . . your voice will calm quarrels, in the future it will quell many an implacable hatred and you will be blessed.” Sue's eventual role as a figurehead for the cause of the working classes is evident in the many notes to him of this kind.

That Sue was their friend and sympathized with their individual plights was clearly the perception of all those who wrote to him from the poor and working classes. He was, in the view of a director of the socialist journal, La Ruche Populaire, the “eloquent painter of our misery . . .” Correspondents often confound Sue with his own character, Prince Rodolphe, and many appeal to him for financial help or simply for compassion. A number of letters recount their writers' sad lives, supplying moving portraits of the lives of the period. Parish priests petition for assistance for those in their parishes, indicating that not all of the church was inimical to Sue's fiction. Many of Sue's correspondents respond to specific issues and episodes of the “feuilleton” as the work progresses, suggesting a dialogue between author and readers. A close examination of the letters and the episodes of the novel would be of particular value to a study of the development of the serial format.

The faith of Sue's poorer readers was justified. Many letters in the collection are in gratitude for help which Sue had provided. He acquired a reputation for humanitarian impulses which attracted other like-minded figures. Charitable organizations of all kinds solicited his support, one from Britain established to succour
impoverished Frenchmen there. Others, in France, were involved in the care of abandoned children, or in prison reform. Well-known supporters of humanitarian causes came into contact with Sue, inspired by his work. His novel, and probably the reaction to it, focused Sue’s formerly vague philanthropic views and transformed him into an active socialist. One tragic apocryphal story relates that an impoverished worker, desperate and destitute, hanged himself in the entry lobby of Sue’s home leaving a note explaining that he wished to die “sous le toit de celui qui nous aime et qui nous defend” [under the roof of one who loves and defends us].

Sue began to figure among those forming the socialist political movement of the time. Sainte-Beuve commented: “Béranger, Lammenais, Sand and Sue, the four great socialist and philanthropic powers of our time.”

George Sand and Sue began to correspond at this point, establishing a friendship which lasted until Sue’s death. One of Sand’s early letters, written in April 1843, expresses her admiration of *Les Mystères de Paris* and of the figure of Fleur de Marie:

> I found your style clear, natural and colourful where it needed to be . . . I quite simply wept reading that story [of Fleur de Marie] which was both trivial and sublime at the same time because you brought the mystery of the heart to the mystery of the street . . . no other modern heroine has appeared to me to be as original, as daring, as touching and as poetic as the creation of Fleur-de-Marie.

Sue joined Sand in writing for socialist journals through which he also became acquainted with Agricol Perdiguier, Louis Blanc, Frédéric Lemaître and others involved in the developing republican movement. In June 1844 he began another novel, *Le Juif Errant*, serialized in *Le Constitutionnel*. The paper had been bought by his friend Véron who wished to improve its flagging circulation. *Le Juif Errant*, published until July 1845, was a huge success. Sue was reported to have earned a fortune of 100,000 francs, and the journal’s subscribers rose from 3,600 in 1844 to 20,000 by the end of the serialization. The novel appeared in volume form as soon as it ended in *Le Constitutionnel* and was reported by one source to have 100,000 readers, passed, as the custom was, from hand to hand. Sue’s achievement was such that
Sand solicited contractual advice from him for the publication of her own novel *Consuelo*.48

*Le Juif Errant* was also an instant international success. It was serialized in British popular journals as soon as it appeared in France. Translated editions in book form were published in 1845, at the same time as the French editions, all over Europe. In Britain these were available through private circulating libraries, indicating that the success of the novel spread beyond the popular press into a middle-class readership.49 John Forster, for example, owned translated editions of both *Les Mystères de Paris* and *Le Juif Errant*, which were illustrated by Heath in the three volume format favoured by the private libraries. The novel’s anti-clerical sentiments and urging of social reforms were increasingly topics of concern in both countries. In France Sue became indelibly associated with the political issues of the period.

*Le Juif Errant* is a more overtly political work than *Les Mystères de Paris*. The narrative revolves around two allegorical figures, the Wandering Jew of Biblical legend and his sister, Hérodiade, the mother of Salomé, who represent two victims of social injustice, workers and women. These two supernatural figures frame the story, opening the work viewing each other across a dramatic arctic landscape, divided by ice floes and unable to meet. They have been cursed, by Jesus and by John the Baptist respectively, to wander the earth for centuries, alone and unable to rest or to die. The characters help to unite the remarkable intricacies of the novel’s plot and persistently to signal the injustices towards those they symbolize, women and the working class. The narrative digresses consistently in didactic discussions of specific issues of social reform as had the earlier works *Mathilde* and *Les Mystères de Paris*.

The story-line centres around the recovery of a fabulous legacy left through Hérodiade to her descendants who are scattered around the earth and are as diverse as an Indian prince, Djalma, two young twin sisters, Rose and Blanche, a beautiful aristocrat, Adrienne, a missionary, Gabriel, a factory owner, M. Hardy, and a poor artisan, Couche-tout-nu. A malevolent, powerful network of Jesuits work throughout the story to prevent these legitimate heirs from acquiring their inheritance. The leader of the Jesuits, Rodin, is the embodiment of evil cloaked by outward respectability. A worthy family of poor workers, the Baudoins and especially their poet
son Agricol, serve a purpose similar to the Morel family in *Les Mystères de Paris*, focusing sympathy for the condition of the working class. Rodin conspires successfully to kill all the descendants of Hérodias except the priest, Gabriel, whom the Jesuits control through the young man’s religious vows. Rodin hopes by this means to claim the fortune in Gabriel’s name and deliver it to the Jesuits. However, when he attempts to do so, the Jew who has guarded the money for the true heirs exposes the bodies of Rodin’s victims to him and refuses to hand the fortune to a false murderer. A lever in the side of the marble casket which holds the money allows the Jew to destroy the treasure. The Jesuits’ murderous plan has been futile. Rodin dies in agony, poisoned by a rival. At its end, the novel returns to the Wandering Jew and his sister. They are finally able to meet and to die, redeemed from their curse by the grace of God. In their last moments they look forward to the day when all such as themselves, “la femme et l’esclave... saints martyrs de l’humanité” will be delivered from their struggles. They die blessing God.50

Although the novel’s stance is anti-clerical, Sue’s vision remains fundamentally Christian. The Jesuit villains are seen to be false priests, not true representatives of Christ whose example of compassion is reflected in the genuine piety of the novel’s good characters and which had also underpinned the humanitarian arguments of *Les Mystères de Paris*. Sue’s vague utopianism, with its root in ideals of fraternal unity and its Christian undertones, was typical of the liberal intellectuals of the day who saw their socialist cause as “a moral response” to social problems.51 Both these novels aligned Sue closely with the forces of socialism and republicanism and so involved his name in the political controversies of the time. The undercurrent of conservative anxieties developing throughout the period manifested itself in Sue’s expulsion from the Jockey Club, which used the “prétexe élégante” of non-payment of fees as their excuse.52

*Le Juif Errant* contains all the familiar elements of Sue’s fiction. There are exotic scenes from the Orient, lavish interiors and fashion from the French beau monde, drama on the high seas, melodrama and the realism of urban poverty. However, the story broadens out beyond the confines of Sue’s earlier works to apply to all human history, from Biblical times to his own. This impulse to encompass the breadth of human experience in his fiction and to validate his political vision by so
doing became increasingly apparent in Sue's later works. Many found that his abilities did not match this ambition, especially as he confined himself to the format of the "feuilleton", the faults of which were becoming increasingly apparent. Sand confessed to a friend in August 1845: "I cannot read, between ourselves as one might say, the *Juif Errant*. I've tried my best to do so . . . but it falls from my hands." The novel's structure was disjointed enough to suggest to her that Véron, not Sue, had written the last, unconvincing volumes.

Sand’s disappointment was reflected in an article published by *La Revue Indépendante* which she had founded in 1841 with Pierre Leroux and Louis Viardot. The review recognizes the success of *Le Juif Errant* but considers the work inferior to *Les Mystères de Paris*, much admired here for exposing social ills, if somewhat prone to "l'exagération de ses tableaux." While clearly endorsing *Le Juif Errant*’s campaign against the Jesuits, it is feared that much of the force of Sue’s message of reform will be lost in the loose organization of the "feuilleton":

> In the sacred battalion which has risen against this invasion [of the Jesuits], M. Eugène Sue has taken one of the first places, and his novel is a long treatise against the disciples of Loyola. Certainly the war is a good one, and we can only congratulate the author to have taken up arms in such a struggle. But how much more sure would his blows be, if he had better studied the weaknesses and strengths of his adversaries; carefully combined, wisely thought out, his attack would have been established on a more rational plan. However why speak of careful thought and planning? Is one or the other possible in our serialized literature?

A great deal of the article is dedicated to an examination of the faults of serialized fiction, a form which the critic finds could have been invented for Sue’s stamina, vision and dedication. It is a form which, properly used, is a valuable tool of communication. Yet, because it is so commercially profitable, its strengths can be misused and become “prejudicial to art, morality and the conscience of the author.” Serialized fiction is driven by publishing deadlines and authors must resist the temptation to improvise in order to meet publishers’ demands. It is evident that, although the article couches its warnings in vague terms, it is targeting its appeal to Sue himself as the primary representative of the genre.
La Revue des Deux Mondes was also critical of Le Juif Errant for similar reasons, repeating its charge that Sue’s juxtaposition of the real with the fantastic was not a success: “M. Sue has well been told that once he left the repellent realities and threw himself into its contrast, he escaped from reality and fell into the fantastic.” In 1845 another commentator in the same paper took Sue to task for the overly didactic tone of the novel. George Sand, too, is censured for a similar predisposition. Her work is preferred now over Sue’s: “If, instead of preaching to us, she would charm us again, she would succeed more readily. . . . the laurels of M. Eugène Sue need not keep Mme. Sand from sleeping well.” Sainte-Beuve found Le Juif Errant revolting.

Le Juif Errant was, nonetheless, an unquestionable commercial success. It was one of the most widely read novels of the time in France, matched in popularity only by Dumas’s Les Trois Mousquetaires and Le Comte de Monte Christo. Balzac’s Splendeurs et Misères des Courtisanes, published in the same year, was overshadowed by these rival works. The success of novels he considered to be inferior to his own embittered Balzac and his friendship with Sue deteriorated. Writing to Madame Hanska at this point, Balzac’s rancour is clear:

You know me well enough to know that I have no jealousy or bitterness against him nor against the public. . . . However it is a question of paying one hundred twenty thousand francs of debts and of a decent life . . . and if I don’t envy anything of this victorious tin music box [mirliton], you will allow me to deplore the fact that he is paid ten thousand francs for his volumes while I obtain only three thousand for mine.

The amount of money Sue began to earn from his serialized fiction, and the commercial advantage he represented to his publishers left him vulnerable to the allegation of opportunism. The conservative faction had begun to eye his new-found philanthropy askance with the publication of Les Mystères de Paris. Many critics who did not share his political views found it impossible to reconcile Sue’s socialist convictions with his former persona as a “bon vivant” and the “savage misanthrope” who had written such works as Atar-Gull. The suggestion of hypocrisy coloured much
of the critical commentary of his work after this point. A satiric poem, for example, published in 1844 in _La Revue des Deux Mondes_, ‘Les Trafiquanes Littéraires’, condemned _Le Juif Errant_ and its author whose driving force, it was felt was “l’argent”.  59

In June 1846, Sue followed with another “feuilleton” in _Le Constitutionnel, Martin, l’Enfant Trouvé_. The story of the illegitimate son of a nobleman who is abandoned, becomes a servant, then a criminal, was admired by Sand for its “vérité de tons.” Reading the first instalments, she feared, however, that Sue would soon, in his usual way, sacrifice his realism in favour of a complicated plot and its “drames grossiers”. 60 The pattern of that sacrifice had been increasingly apparent in Sue’s fiction and more critics were becoming intolerant of the contrast of realism with the improbabilities of his plots, the latter often perceived as the natural result of the “feuilleton.” Nevertheless, the story was a popular success and Sue adapted it for the stage in October 1847. The novel also appeared serialized in British popular journals in the same years.

Earlier that year, in March 1847, the distinguished critic Joseph Milsand, whose particular focus of interest was English literature, published a lengthy analysis of the novels of Charles Dickens in _La Revue Indépendante_. His critique draws attention to the links between Dickens’s works and Sue’s fiction. Commentary in the French press had acknowledged Sue’s debts to earlier British writers such as Sir Walter Scott, Ann Radcliffe and Richardson, but very few contemporary comparisons had been made, except with the earlier novels of Bulwer Lytton.

Dickens himself had visited Paris the year before and Sue and he had met through their mutual friendship with the Count d’Orsay. Dickens’s reputation was sufficiently established in France that Sue himself had petitioned Dickens before they had met to respond on his behalf to an invitation to speak in Britain in 1845. However, Milsand’s review is the first in the French press to focus on the British author’s work and to compare the two writers. Previous commentary on Dickens had been cursory, stressing his gift with comic character studies and drawing no comparisons with French authors. In 1843 _La Revue des Deux Mondes_ had briefly mentioned _Oliver Twist_ as a work which exposed life inside the British workhouse “sans pitié”, but no link had been
acknowledged at that point with the then famous serialization of *Les Mystères de Paris* or any of Sue’s other fiction.61

In Milsand’s view, Dickens is an innovator who has reinvigorated the stagnating English novel. His primary gift lies in his ability to disturb British complacency, particularly that of its middle classes who have “the firm conviction that the Anglican religion is the last word of God, that constitutional government is the last word in human intelligence, ... and that England is on the whole the best of all possible worlds.” In a world of increasing social inequality, “the moment has arrived when literature must take into account the state of the people, the rich must listen to the dispossessed; and it is found that through curiosity, through a love of novelty, the public has been irresistibly pulled along to follow Dickens in the new world which he had just opened.”

According to Milsand, in France Sue has followed in the genre established by Dickens, although their styles are “diametrically opposed.” Both authors seek to achieve the same end in their fiction, social reform, yet both employ methods characteristic of differences in their culture. Dickens cannot be deemed to be a “socialist novelist” in the same vein as Sue. Sue’s novels are more intellectual. He writes “to prove a theory”, thus fitting his narrative around his ideas. His characters are more symbolic than those of Dickens. Dickens’s fiction is spontaneous, less propagandistic. His characters are created for themselves rather than to prove his points:

M. Sue is a more knowing scene setter, more skilful at arranging his facts and at tormenting the curiosity [of his readers]; sometimes too his types can become more meaningful, like emblems of philosophic thought. Dickens touches and interests more, his creations are more alive, more real. All this returns to the idea that the two novelists have been what each needed to be to act in their respective countries. If Dickens had discussed with intelligence, rather than stirring emotions, he would have stayed without influence in England.62

Milsand finishes his discussion by stressing that the emotion of Dickens’s works has nothing in common with the sensationalism of the “popular”
novel as represented by the works of Harrison Ainsworth. By implication, Sue's works, too, are not "popular" in this sense. His judgement challenges the views of most British critics of the time, as will be seen later, who maintained that Sue's works were indeed sensationalistic and who categorized his fiction as "popular" and thus without worth.

Sue had established himself again, with the profits of these novels, in the countryside, the Loiret, near Beaugency. He spent an increasing amount of time there, interesting himself in local affairs while continuing to write fiction. Another "feuilleton" in Le Constitutionnel followed in November, the first of Les Septs Péchés Capitaux, L'Orgueil: La Duchesse. This, too, appeared in Britain serialized in the popular press. Political tensions had been growing throughout this period and by the time the second story of the series, L'Envie: Frédéric Bastien appeared in March 1848, revolution had established the Second Republic.

During the troubled time of the early republic, Sue remained for the most part in the Loiret, writing political pamphlets outlining republican principles for the provincial peasantry who, with universal male suffrage introduced by the revolution, were now a political force. He professed to Sand an increasing love of the countryside and its people: "I am like you, Madame, more and more passionate about the life of the country." He continued writing fiction with La Colère: Tison d'Enfer published in September 1848. La Luxure: Madeleine followed in November. Literary figures of his acquaintance, such as Pyat and Hugo, were elected as députés, as was Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, nephew of the Emperor and of Sue's god-mother, Joséphine. Sue made a powerful enemy when he opposed Louis Napoleon in his bid to head the Republic in December 1848.

In 1849 Sue published La Paresse, Le Cousin Michel in Le Constitutionnel and began what was to be his last, most ambitious work, Les Mystères du Peuple ou Histoire d'une Famille de Prolétaires à travers les Ages. As the title describes this was to be the chronicle of a family of workers, symbolic of the working class as a whole, throughout human history from the beginning of man to the enlightened era of 1848. Two families represent the two extremes of society, the Lebrenns are republican and working class, the Plouermels are reactionary nobles. The two heads of these families help each other in times of crisis, one saving the other's
life, and the other releasing his friend from prison, thus linking them in friendship despite their different circumstances. When the son of Lebrenn comes of age, the father reveals his collection of curious historical artefacts and through them recounts the history of the family and, thus, of the working man in general. The instalments of the novel were available through subscription and the scope of the work was such that Sue did not finish his undertaking until just before his death in 1856. Early parts of the story also appeared in the British popular press.

Cholera returned to Paris in 1849, claiming, it is reported, 20000 victims and intensifying the growing tensions between the republican and conservative forces. A number of violent demonstrations augmented fears of further social upheavals. Those politically opposed to the socialists attacked well-known figures of the cause, including Sue, with rumours and press reports. Malicious stories circulated seeking to undermine Sue’s reputation, citing his luxurious lifestyle as proof of the hypocrisy of his professed socialism. Sue himself was moved to write to one provincial paper, in January 1850, to refute the charge that he had not used his fortune to help the poor of his district.65 Old enemies, such as Eugène de Mirecourt, and conservative critics, such as Hippolyte Castille, encouraged the growing conservative antagonism for Sue who was seen to have been instrumental in the unrest which had led to the 1848 uprisings. One anonymous commentator described him thus in 1850: “The difference between father and son is that one cured society while the other poisons it and works to kill it.”66

The deep political divisions of the period are reflected in the tone of this comment. Sue had clearly come to represent one extreme of those divisions. The perception of the author as a figurehead of the liberal socialist forces culminated with his election in April 1850 as a socialist député to the Assemblée Nationale. Sue returned to Paris from the Loiret to serve in his political office.

Sue was not a natural orator and, although he regularly attended sessions in the Assemblée, he did not participate in the debates. His primary occupation was still writing fiction, but the era of the “roman feuilleton” was disappearing. Soulié had died in 1847. Dumas was financially ruined. Balzac died in August 1850. The conservative press, including *Le Constitutionnel* and *Le Journal des Débats*, now disdained to print serialized fiction, condemning the form for inciting the popular
unrest of 1848. Véron adjusted his long-standing contract with Sue so that he would no longer be obliged to print his work. The last stories of *Les Septs Pêchés Capitaux* were serialized in a rival, less conservative journal, *Le Siècle*. *L’Avarice* appeared in 1851, *La Gourmandise* finished the series in 1852. In Britain, the decline of the format was noted with approval in the *Westminster Review* which commented “the *Roman feuilleton* is dying out.”

Sainte-Beuve signalled the fading of the “mode de publication en feuilletons” in a retrospective of the form and its principal authors just after Balzac’s death in 1850. The tone of his comments is more measured, less accusatory than other voices in the conservative press, but his long-standing distaste for the “feuilleton” is manifest. Although he still equates Balzac and Sue in this review, it is clear that Sainte-Beuve, like Sand, was less inclined to admire Sue’s later works and consequently reverses his former preference for Sue’s fiction over that of Balzac:

M. Eugène Sue (let us leave aside the socialist and only speak of the novelist) is perhaps the equal of M. de Balzac in invention, in fertility and in composition. He puts up, to a marvel, great frameworks; he has characters who live as well and who, whether we wish them to or no, have an effect; he especially has action and dramatic machinery which he knows very well how to operate. However, the details are often weak; they are . . . of an observation which is less original and less new than that of M. de Balzac. Eugène Sue does not know how to write as much as Balzac, neither as well nor even as badly . . . this literature [the “feuilleton”] has furnished its own school and its own era; it has brought forth the most vigorous talents, almost gigantic; as much good as bad, one can think today that its force is spent. That it gives us a truce, at least, that it rests itself; that it gives society too a chance to rest after the excesses . . . A terrible emulation and furious contest has been raging these last years between the most vigorous men of this active, devouring, inflammatory literature. The method of publication in feuilletons . . . has pushed the effects and tones of the novel against an extreme, despairing and not for much longer bearable tuning fork . . . in the future let us wish for our society pictures which are, if not less vast, then more soothing, more consoling, and to those who paint them a calming life and inspiration which if not finer, at least milder, more healthily natural and more serene.
However, the events of the last years of Sue's life were anything but serene. In August 1851, *La Presse* began to serialize *Fernand Duplessis ou les Mémoires d'un Mari*. The story came to an abrupt end in December 1851 when Louis-Napoleon, the champion of the conservative forces, staged a coup d'état. In the first confused days of the conflict between republicans and conservatives, many députés were arrested, including Sue. He was released a few weeks later in January 1852. Shipments of the instalments of *Les Mystères du Peuple* were seized and prevented from distribution. A number of liberals, Hugo, Pyat, Schoelcher and others, fled the country to avoid deportation. Offered an opportunity for reconciliation by Louis Napoleon, Sue refused to compromise his political convictions and condemned himself to exile in Annecy, then part of the state of Savoy.

From Annecy Sue continued to write fiction, finishing *Fernand Duplessis* for *La Presse*, which also published *La Marquise Cornélia d'Alfi*. Other stories, *Jeanne et Louise* and *La Famille Jouffroy*, were also printed in the French press. The last stages of *Les Mystères du Peuple*, not finished until 1856, continued to circulate to subscribers, although again some were seized by the French authorities. Away from Paris Sue fell from favour. He was increasingly maligned by the conservatives in power, whose view of Sue was embodied in the scathing portrait put forward by Eugène de Mirecourt who perpetuated a picture of the author as self-indulgent, cynically hypocritical and arrogant. De Mirecourt fabricated descriptions of Sue in exile luxuriating in the same extravagance, the same fastidious elegance of his early days as a “bon vivant” in Paris. The conservative faction had never been able to view Sue's political conversion to republicanism as anything but hypocrisy, since he had once aspired to be one of them. Even Sainte-Beuve, who had never been hostile to Sue himself, assumed that the author was playing with his public in his later novels. It was a representation of Sue which was to prevail some time.

In reality, Sue had long left the extravagance of his youth behind him. His letters to George Sand from Annecy give another impression of his last years. These final notes to an old friend reveal Sue's loneliness, his decline in health, his paranoidic fears of persecution from those opposed to his political views. In 1854, he suggests that Sand write to him using his pseudonym to avoid the “curiosité de la
police”. In another note he laments the loss of a letter she had sent, one which would have been “trop précieuse” in his solitude. A later letter excuses his poor handwriting which is deteriorating as he loses his sight.  

Indeed, it is the sight of these barely legible, plaintive struggles to maintain contact with the world outside his exile which enlist our sympathy and which help to dismiss the persistent suggestion of hypocrisy overhanging some of the contemporary response to Sue’s fiction. It is difficult to imagine that an insincere author as frivolous, as weak-minded, and as self-indulgent as his critics maintained would have continued, voluntarily, in such an unhappy exile. Louis Napoleon would no doubt have welcomed a compromise from the former icon of the republican forces, yet Sue remained in Annecy. He died there at the age of fifty three in August 1857.

His modern biographers suggest that the French imperial government took steps to diminish the effect of Sue’s death on the French public for fear that it would trigger demonstrations. The death received almost no press notice in Paris and a stone without an inscription was indeed all that marked his grave in Annecy for some years. Certainly the date of his death was sufficiently obscured that it continued to be reported inaccurately for some time, in fact still is so in some sources.

Conservative powers in France may indeed have conspired to play down Sue’s death, fearing his power to move the masses. In 1854, Sand had considered that his reputation with the working and poorer classes was powerful enough to benefit a journal she proposed to launch for that group in the provinces: “My feeling is that the association with Sue would be good. He is the most popular of the four of us.” However, the political tensions which had defined his later years in Paris were also already shifting in emphasis. In 1857 the times had begun to change. Sue, who had been so closely associated with the specific concerns of an earlier period, may have been dismissed at that point as a relic of that past.

It is also possible that the reputation of Sue’s fiction had already declined to such an extent that this was the cause of his obscurity following his death. He had been the “roi du roman-feuilleton”, a role which no longer attracted much attention or approbation. The “feuilleton” itself had fallen from favour. Already, in 1849, one critic had dismissed both the format and its chief representative in unmistakable terms:
King of the roman-feuilleton, M. Eugène Sue was able for a long time to be taken as its most complete, most popular personification. In his most famous works, he made the effort to mix, with skilful doses, two disparate elements of popularity: the preaching of a socialism which was beginning to dawn, and the sensual picture of the joys of wealth. These two elements combined, fattened by demagogic passions, worked powerfully towards the revolution of 1848; they served as a prelude, a procession and a commentary for it and it is just this revolution which has destroyed the fashion of the roman-feuilleton, has led to the decline of the masters of the genre, and has condemned M. Eugène Sue to tell his stories in a desert. This fact will allow him to furnish the moral of his last stories, and will remind him, in the form of a proverb, that one is often punished as one has sinned.72

The article was prophetic. Shortly thereafter, Sue was indeed condemned to “to tell his stories in a desert.” His reputation after his death was equally condemned and the obscurity surrounding him at that point has only increased since.

6 Honoré de Balzac, quoted in the archives of the Papiers Jarry, a collection of working notebooks and manuscripts held at the Bibliothèque de la Ville de Paris, MS 131, Folio 203. u.d. Original in Appendix I, 5.
14 Tombs, 136.
16 Bory, 193.
17 Macedoine 1850 An anonymous compilation of anecdote, statistics and commentary held at the Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris, MS 44. Original in Appendix I, 7.
18 Bory, 214.

Bory, 221.

Émile Spruyt to Eugène Sue, January 26 1841, *Correspondance d'Eugène Sue relative aux Mystères de Paris*, Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris, MS P 3937, Folio 5.


Eugène Sue, *Mathilde*, 6 vols. (Brussels, 1845), VI, 86. see note 49.


Bory, 291.

Papiers Jarry, Folio 192-207.


Bory, 290.


Caroline Angebert to E. Sue, 28 February 1843, *Correspondance d'Eugène Sue*, Folio 96-98.

A. Lamartine to E. Sue, 4 November 1843, *Correspondance d'Eugène Sue*, Folio 692.

Baronne Betty de Rothschild to E. Sue, 3 July 1843, *Correspondance d'Eugène Sue*, Folio 258.

Un pauvre greffier to E. Sue, 1843, *Correspondance d'Eugène Sue*, Folio 258, 140-141. Original in Appendix I, 15.

Duquenne to E. Sue, 19 June 1843, *Correspondance d'Eugène Sue*, Folio 212. Original in Appendix I, 16.

Papiers Jarry, Folio 203.

Sainte-Beuve, 6 November 1843 *Chroniques Parisiennes*, 132. Original in Appendix I, 17.


G. Sand to E. Sue, December 1843, *Correspondance de George Sand*, VI, 340-341.

None of the British Circulating Libraries appear to hold records which indicate when they acquired Sue's works. However, most of the editions held, largely of *Les Mystères de Paris* and *Le Juif Errant*, were published in the 1840s, indicating that they were likely to have been acquired as they were published. The London Library, for example, holds editions of *Le Juif Errant* from 1845. This is one of the few private libraries to have the works in the original. Other circulating libraries, for the most part, hold translations. British editions usually appeared as three large volumes (the normal format favoured by the circulating libraries) within which were incorporated the smaller volumes of the French editions, which were often greater in number (e.g. 6 or 10). Sue's later novels were particularly long.


Tombs, 75.

Papiers Jarry, Folio 192-207.


see note 47. Original in Appendix I, 20.
56 *La Revue des Deux Mondes*, 1845, II (Nouvelle Série), 949. Original in Appendix I, 22.
57 Sainte-Beuve, 5 September 1844, *Chroniques Parisiennes*, 263.
64 Bory, 333.
65 Bory, 341.
69 *Fonds George Sand*, manuscript correspondence held in the Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris, MS G5398-5409, Folio 281, 283-4.
Chapter II


Critical response in the British press to the fiction of Eugène Sue in the mid-nineteenth century was also influenced, as response in France had been, by Sue’s great commercial and popular successes. The pattern of that response, however, was peculiar to Britain, determined by concerns specific to the period and to the literary culture of the country. In the 1830s and early 1840s, before his great successes, attention paid to Sue’s works in the British press was similar to that accorded other well-known French writers. British commentary at that point focused on the literary merit or lack of it of an author who had achieved some eminence across the Channel and whose works were available to an educated élite. Indeed, in Britain, as he had been in France, Sue was admired over his fellows. The power of his story-telling and the realism of his characterizations were held to be examples of his superior talents.

After 1843, however, the almost unprecedented popularity enjoyed by first Les Mystères de Paris and then Le Juif Errant, a popularity which was particularly conspicuous in Britain among the newly literate of the working and poor classes, forced those works to be examined within the context of general debates of specific concern to Britain. Both of these novels addressed sensitive topical issues of social reform: the birth of socialism, legislative and penal reform, the condition of women, the injustices of the marriage system, and anti-clerical sentiment. These controversial subjects combined with the remarkable popular success of the novels during a period of growing awareness of, and anxiety surrounding, the popular reader involved Sue’s later novels in the widespread arguments of the period. These more general arguments obscured critics’ views of the literary worth of the novels themselves. Commentary concentrated instead on the social repercussions of popular fiction as a whole using Sue’s fiction merely as examples, for the most part, of the evils of popular fiction.
The debate surrounding the effect of fiction on public morality was not new to Britain. Defoe had prefaced his *Moll Flanders* with a defence of the realism of his story, claiming a moral purpose to his subject in much the same way as Sue was to do in the preface to his *Atar-Gull* and repeatedly in *Les Mystères de Paris*. However, public concern for this issue intensified in Britain in the mid-nineteenth century, during the height of Sue’s popular success, because of the increased literacy amongst the working and poorer classes. Reviewing *Le Juif Errant* in its translated form as *The Wandering Jew* in November 1845, the *Athenaeum* provides a particularly clear example of the position adopted by the mainstream British press when considering Sue’s fiction after 1843. The paper candidly declares that it is the popularity of Sue’s fiction as a whole, especially amongst the working classes, and not simply the novel itself, which justifies its notice. The *Athenaeum* declares that its review of the work is necessary “not so much in consideration of the book itself, as because of the popularity its author has acquired among the class, where, beyond all others, we desire to find a healthy literature in circulation.” Most of the British press adopted a similar stance in its notice of Sue’s fiction after the phenomenally successful *Les Mystères de Paris* appeared in Britain in 1844.

Sue’s earlier novels had been received in a different spirit. Those written in the 1830s were indebted to English and American fiction, borrowing from authors popular in France at the time, Sir Walter Scott, Lord Byron, Ann Radcliffe and James Fenimore Cooper. In France the novels had been appreciated for the depth of the realistic characterizations, a quality not then acknowledged by British critics.

In Britain, the first of Sue’s novels to be made available was *Atar-Gull* in 1837. The book appeared in the original French and in book form, evidence that it was intended for the restricted market of the educated classes of British society who could read that language without translation and who could afford books, either as purchases or through the relatively expensive private circulating libraries. This work and Sue’s other maritime stories were reviewed the following year, in November 1838, in the serious-minded *Foreign Quarterly Review*, a journal directed at that same reading public.
The critique presents a thoughtful, detailed study of three of Sue's novels, *Atar-Gull*, *La Coucaratcha*, and *La Salamandre*, acknowledging the works' links to Cooper, as well as to the British authors Smollett and Marryat. The fiction of each of these three authors is felt to typify the characteristics of his own nation, and the faults found with each are largely those usually levelled at each culture as a whole:

If the difference between Cooper and Marryat [sic] may be considered as characteristic in some degree of the two countries . . . M. Eugène Sue may be considered to hold the same place in relation to the two, that his country maintains with respect to both of theirs. The author's powers of composition are lighter, more various and brilliant, with a more delicate and feminine, though not in the least effeminate, fancy. His love of fun is whimsical, with a touch of sarcasm; his sentiment is imaginative and tender, if not enthusiastic; his fancy is gay, but wandering and desultory, even to affectation. His descriptive powers are considerable, but continually carried to excess in his living characters . . .\(^2\)

In France, as has been seen, the credibility of the characters in the same novels had been especially celebrated. In this early British review, Sue's characters are felt to be "carried to excess." The article goes on to point out that, like the "votaries of one school in France," Sue takes "delight in the savage and revolting." Nevertheless, he is praised for writing with "force and spirit," even while describing "revolting scenes." Any "tendency to sneer at the usual objects of human interest and ambition" is likened to a similar inclination in the great French writer, Voltaire. The French press a number of years later, as has been seen in the previous chapter, also compared Sue to Voltaire. It is an association which surprises the modern reader unfamiliar with Sue's reputation in the nineteenth century.

According to this piece, any defects in Sue's works are not peculiarly his but consummately French; "we are constantly reminded of the restless and versatile susceptibility of the French character in general." The review's overall tone remains ambivalent, wavering between restrained admiration and mild disapproval.

Articles concentrating exclusively on Sue's fiction were still relatively infrequent in the English press at this point. His works were more often referred to in general discussions of contemporary French literature. In these studies Sue's name was
invariably linked with other well-known contemporary French authors, Hugo, Dumas, de Kock, George Sand, Balzac, Lamartine, and others. Although none of these authors was admired without reservation, their works were considered worthy of examination by the intellectual periodicals of the day. Sue was at this early stage in his career plainly regarded as a member of a distinguished company of authors and his fiction was given the attention due such a group.

The opening article of the October 1842 issue of the Foreign Quarterly Review presents an example of just such a general discussion of contemporary French fiction. The piece purports to be a critique of a series of articles on English writers published in the French paper, the Revue des Deux Mondes, by the French critic Philarète Chasles. It is, in fact, a censorious scrutiny of the history of recent French literature. The author of the English article is disparaging of fiction from across the Channel and dedicates much of his twelve pages to an exposition of typical French failings. Though the identity of the critic is undetermined, it is worth noting that the journal was one of the most significant voices commenting on foreign literature in the British press. Its contributors were men of prominence, including Bulwer Lytton, John Sterling, Walter Landor, Robert Browning and W. M. Thackeray.

Amongst other offences, French authors are found in this review to be guilty of the gross exaggeration of the romantic themes they have adopted from English sources, notably Sir Walter Scott. Hugo, Dumas and Chateaubriand are especially condemned for the “worst extravagances” and for a melodramatic “craving for strong emotions.”

Other shortcomings detected in French fiction include a close dependence on the theatre, which produces a heavy-handed sense of drama in French fiction, “the education and inspiration of all French novelists being theatrical.” Scenes of sordid city life are also felt to be too prevalent. There is very little of the natural or rural in French writing. “No French writer has sate down in the solitude of rural life, and given loose rein to his imagination . . .” An English critic could stigmatize the whole body of French writers as cockney. They are at home in the puddle and the pavement, and even George Sand describes the country with the peculiar relish of a cit. Town and theatre are words and things, that go together; and dramatic criticism, in converse as in print, is with the Parisian a
matter of the very first importance. With the French writer it is the same.

The label of "cockney" had been used some years before to disparage a body of English writers, Leigh Hunt and his protégé Keats in particular, and the term may have still carried the resonance of that controversy. Its deliberate use here could have served to further denigrate French literature as a whole.

Sue's works provide examples for this reviewer of many of the common French faults as well as serving as a model for the prevailing French predisposition for the "feuilleton." This is yet another export of English novelists, as this critic is at pains to remind his readers, which French writers have taken to extremes. The French predilection for this format is felt to reveal their fundamental lack of depth, since the "feuilleton" is in essence "very shallow, very superficial." Sue is especially typical of a "romance writer" who had "forsaken the volume for the feuilleton." His recent works of Mathilde and Louis Lambert are cited as examples and the then current serialization of Les Mystères de Paris is briefly summarized.

This last work is criticized in the article for its portraits of the "lowest dregs of the Parisian population." Despite its censure of the story as too full of "cutthroat and slang," however, the review is obliged to acknowledge Sue's scenes as "powerful," and details of the early stages of the novel's plot are described for the paper's readers. None of the other novelists discussed in this article, with the exception of the ostensible subject of the piece itself, Philarète Chasles, is deemed worthy of such thorough attention. 4

The extent to which this article alluded to Sue and his works indicates that the author's career had developed sufficiently in France to warrant fuller notice by those seriously interested in foreign literature in Britain. In this respected paper, his works were coupled with those of the French authors now considered essential to the canon of significant French literature. Indeed, at this point, Sue's fiction was favoured over some of his now better known contemporaries and admired for its appealing vigour, if censured for other faults considered to be typical to his countrymen as a whole rather than specifically his.
By the early 1840s, Sue's reputation in France, as has been seen in Chapter I, had expanded with the publication of two novels which departed from his earlier themes of maritime adventure and exotic sea tales. The new novels depicted contemporary France and particularly the beau monde of which he himself was a member. *Arthur*, serialized in 1838-9, enjoyed success in France but went unnoticed by the British press. On the other hand, *Mathilde*, which immediately followed in 1840-41, did elicit a reaction amongst British critics.

The novel adopted many of Sue's characteristic romantic motifs inspired, as acknowledged in the novel itself, by his reading of Ann Radcliffe. Another feature of the work tightened the link binding Sue to English sources. Like Richardson's novels, *Mathilde* was written through letters both from and to its eponymous heroine. The connection would be acknowledged in a later review of the novel in the *Athenaeum*. The novel was a treatment of a contemporary issue deserving of serious attention in the eyes of one British critic: "the mortification, disappointments, disasters, and struggles of a French wife." Attention was drawn to the work by a detailed review in the *Foreign Quarterly Review* in July 1842, after the work was published in volume form in Paris the same year. Again, the authorship of the article is unclear but the audience for the review, as well as for the novel, would have to have been sufficiently educated to read the original. A translated version of the novel was not available in Britain until two years later in 1844.

The review opens with disapproval of the novel's exaggerated plot. The Anglo-Saxon dislike of the "distortions" of French writers, outlined in the comments cited above from the same journal, found many of the story's events artificial and strained. Nevertheless, this analysis also pays tribute to the work's achievement:

\[
\ldots \text{it has been the most popular book of the season, the most universally read, and not undeservedly so: for it interests, and has a foundation of truth and spirit at the bottom of its extravagances, which draws the reader on from volume to volume.}\]

The value of the novel, to this critic, lies in its realistic portrait of the French female. The realism of Sue's characterizations, already appreciated in France,
now became a subject of approval in Britain. Mathilde was seen as usefully furthering the contemporary discussion on the condition of women in both countries. According to the view presented here, the central character of the work furnishes a more authentic likeness of French women than those “caricatured” in the fiction of Balzac and George Sand. Mathilde represents “a virtuous, high-minded, self-denying female,” and is, as such, “more like the truth of the time.” Modern taste would no doubt reverse this conclusion, but it is interesting to note that in Britain, at this point in his career, Sue’s works were not only granted a generous degree of serious critical attention, they continued to be better received than many of those of his contemporary countrymen. It is especially curious that at this stage, and to at least one serious-minded journal, realism was judged to be one of the chief merits of Sue’s work. Realism was to become central to later debates in Britain surrounding the effects of fiction on public morality and, as will be seen, any realism in Sue’s fiction was later either denied or denounced.

With the publication of his next two novels, Les Mystères de Paris, 1842-3, and Le Juif Errant, 1844-5, Sue’s international renown reached its peak. His reputation in Britain was then transformed. Most of the criticism in the serious literary British journals concentrated on the distaste for what the October 1842. Foreign Quarterly Review had already observed were the work’s pictures of the “lowest dregs” of city life. This focus of critical attention signals that Sue’s works were already becoming associated in Britain with the more widespread concerns of the period and what were then feared to be the pernicious influences of popular literature.

The role of popular literature in public morality became an especially contentious issue in Britain in the middle of the nineteenth century, and Sue’s fiction after 1842 became entangled in this more general and particularly British controversy. It is not the purpose of this study to analyze in detail the industrial and social changes of the early part of the nineteenth century which led to what one critic has described as a “literary revolution.” It is relevant, however, to define briefly the context within which the reception of Sue’s later work in Britain took place.

The industrial developments of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had resulted in the growth of a new urban working class which had
contributed, amongst others things, to an "increase of popular literacy." Improved production techniques, with the mechanization of printing, and the more efficient distribution systems available in the new railways had also lowered the economic barriers of entry to the publishing industry, allowing publishing concerns aimed at exploiting the increasing demand for affordable reading material to increase. The potential of that demand was manifested in just one example of the new periodicals directed at the working class reader. The *Saturday Magazine*, produced by the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (S.P.C.K.), claimed to have sold 450,000 copies with its first issue in 1832 and the journal quickly established a weekly circulation of 85,000 thereafter.  

The S.P.C.K. and the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (S.D.U.K.), its secular counterpart begun in 1825, were two of the educational movements founded by the upper and middle classes in direct response to the increase of the literate poor and working classes. These movements and their publications evolved from a long established tradition of religious associations and their tracts, all of which had an avowed moral and didactic purpose. There was, of course, also a purely commercial response to the growing market. Commercial publishers accurately judged that the need for entertaining literature would expand even more quickly than that for instructive material.

These two responses to the market for cheap literature were fundamentally at odds. The educators and moralists professed the desire to improve the minds and material welfare of their readers. Although they did occasionally resort to a sensational approach to attract readers, the material published by this group maintained a practical, religious or moral character. Behind some of the apparent altruism of their impulse to instruct lay the desire to perpetuate the stability of the social structure of the country. Fear of revolution was a characteristic of British life during the early and mid-nineteenth century. Events on the continent, particularly in France, served as continuous reminders of the potential threat to the status quo represented by the growing working and lower class population. These fears peaked during the years just before the 1848 revolutions on the continent and it was during these years, too, that the public debate on popular fiction was at its most heated.
Commercial publishers of cheap literature, on the other hand, had no motive other than profit. In this they were highly successful and the period of the 1840s saw the large-scale production of penny periodicals and penny dreadfuls (the name given to novels published in penny weekly parts), and also the first systematic and successful attempts to issue full length novels at prices varying between one and two shillings. A whole new reading public came into being.\textsuperscript{12}

The price of these publications was a crucial element. Novels published until this point had essentially been luxury items, beyond the means of the working class and poor reader.\textsuperscript{13} Entertaining fiction for low income groups had hitherto been limited to the inexpensive chap-books, “blue-books,” which were abridgements and imitations of Gothic novels, street literature, such as ballads, almanacs, and broadside sheets which gave lurid accounts of crimes and executions.\textsuperscript{14} The pattern of distribution of forms of literature in England had conformed to the country’s class structure. The educated classes read, or at least claimed to read, what was judged to be respectable. The poorer classes could only afford to read less socially acceptable literature or didactic material with little entertainment value. In reality, no doubt, the boundaries between these two extremes were less distinct. Many educated readers were interested in popular works. Jane Carlyle, for example, used an alias to borrow books of questionable respectability from the London Library.\textsuperscript{15} Nevertheless, contemporary conservative prejudices distinguished popular fiction from reputable fiction. Public insistence on that distinction became increasingly strident as popular fiction expanded coinciding with the growing fears of social upheaval between 1845-1848.

Cheap popular fiction, however, became an undeniable commercial reality in the mid-nineteenth century. The many publishers of cheap fiction who established themselves during the 1840s contributed to the public debate by producing, for the most part, works which were felt to pander to lower tastes. Most of these new companies were based in London. The readily available market of the city’s large poor and working population and the expanding network of rail distribution to the rest of
Edward Lloyd published the first of the penny dreadfuls from Salisbury Square in 1841, giving the name of this location to a certain type of sensationalistic, sentimental fiction. The stories dealt equally in “sensibility and sensation”, with plots centreng on the plight of heroines from humble backgrounds.

Crimes, executions and criminal confessions were also a focus of much of the new fiction, developing into the so-called Newgate novels. Many of these---*Jack Sheppard* by Harrison Ainsworth, for example---were widely successful, further enlarging the market for similar fiction. The central character of this book, and others like it, had been a notorious criminal and the novel was accused of romanticizing crime. The popularity of such works exacerbated the growing conservative concern for the harmful effects of cheap literature on its mass audience.

This concern was compounded within the publishing industry by the problem of plagiarism. Many of the publishers of cheap fiction simply borrowed their stories from more legitimate sources. Dickens especially suffered at the hands of the new companies. G.W.M. Reynolds, for example, who was a key figure in the new market for popular fiction, became notorious for pirating the *Pickwick Papers*. An element of self-interest on the part of established publishers, many of whom had a voice in the established press, added to the public condemnation of such works.

Some of that condemnation was also in reaction to the publication of semi-pornographic material for the low-priced market. A number of companies produced such material from Holywell Street, off the Strand in London, a location which became synonymous with salacious publishing. The names of the men who established these concerns, William Dugdale, Edward and John Duncombe and George Cannon, amongst others, became similarly infamous.

This group of publishers also became renowned for its production of radical works. The enthusiasm for self-improvement through learning, labelled the “march of the mind,” had accompanied the growth of the urban working population and some of the new popular literature encouraged evolving radical political tendencies which also clearly deepened conservative anxieties.
The concerns surrounding the effects of cheap, popular literature on public morality were expressed publicly in a series of journalistic attacks throughout the period. As early as 1838, W. M. Thackeray writing in *Fraser's Magazine*, noted the various elements of the reaction to the increase of popular literature. His article, "Half-a-Crown's Worth of Cheap Knowledge," lampooned the so-called "March of Intellect" and the "intelligence of the working classes." Investigating fifteen cheap new periodicals published for that market, he exposed each as either a plagiarism, a cheap imitation, a useless "humbug," or a disreputable appeal to base appetites. In all the papers Thackeray elected to review, he found that "it is curious that there are only two which pretend to instruct the reader." Clearly, the market for cheap literature which entertained was far greater. The tone of Thackeray's article is full of contempt for the works published to satisfy that demand and his stance, no doubt, reflected that of many of the readers of the journal. To modern readers familiar with Becky Sharp's adventures in *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray's indignant righteousness may seem to be on a precarious foundation. The discrepancy between the license he permits himself in his own fiction and his professed critical views, particularly in relation to his criticism of Sue's works, will receive further discussion in Chapter V.

In 1840, the *Athenaeum* continued in the same vein, deploring the "atrocities of the Newgate school, the adventures of buccaneers, the sea novels, and other types of coarse and exciting adventure," which were published for the working population. The publisher of a low cost periodical, Charles Knight, himself articulated the growing condemnation of such material several years later, in 1846:

cheap weekly sheets . . . appear to have got some considerable hold upon the less informed of the working people, and especially upon the young. There are manufactories in London whence hundreds of reams of vile paper and printing issue weekly . . . All the garbage that belongs to the history of crime and misery is raked together, to diffuse a moral miasma through the land, in the shape of the most vulgar and brutal fiction.

The metaphor of miasma was significant. In the 1830s much of Europe, including London and Paris, had suffered from outbreaks of cholera and other epidemics. Theories of causes and cures abounded, but the prevailing view in Britain
was that diseases of this kind were spread through miasma, foul air arising from the
decomposition of filth. The poorer sections of the cities, because of their squalid
conditions, were felt to be most likely to produce deadly miasma, which added yet
another dimension to the dangers of the growing poor urban population.²⁵

The Examiner made use of the notion, in 1847, in its article “The Moral
Epidemic.”

There are moral pestilences which traverse the world precisely
like the physical. The prevalent one in Europe and America at
this time is a disease of the sympathies. As the cholera makes
its way along the banks of rivers, so the morbid sympathy may
be traced through Courts of Justice. . . . The predisposing
causes are several,—bad nourishment of the mind in romance
reading, and the conceit of remodelling society on the
principles of super-refined humanity, being the most
common.²⁶

In the same year, three articles written by Hepworth Dixon in the Daily
News clearly articulated the contemporary conventional perspective on popular
literature. This literature, Dixon wrote, worked to “its own system of morals and
merits” which were at odds with those of “higher and better known offsprings (sic) of
the press.” The articles declared that one probably could not “exaggerate the power of
the people’s literature in producing and determining national character,” and the author
set about his criticism of such literature with a “fine frenzy of moral indignation.”²⁷

Dixon’s attack was typical of much of the conservative backlash created
by the growth in cheap fiction which was felt to be damaging to the moral fibre of a
large segment of the country’s population. A good deal of the criticism represented
was, it should be noted, inaccurate or distorted its subjects to suit the motives of the
papers’ editors. Much of the fiction denounced by these articles and others was
misrepresented. Often, any attempt at principle by publishers or writers of popular
fiction was ignored so that the editorial polemics could proceed unchallenged.

Edward Lloyd, for example, prefaced the first volume of his Penny
Weekly Miscellany with the desire to “maintain the high majesty of virtue over the
turbulence of vice.”²⁸ Despite this protestation, works by Lloyd and others like him
were held to be “noxious,” and capable of “moral mischief.” The debate surrounding
this issue remained emotionally charged and rarely, in the press at any rate, gave rise to reasoned discussion. The growth of the literate poor, their incumbent social problems and popular literature were all too sudden and too tremendous to be viewed dispassionately by those with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Popular literature became a convenient target for attacks from the British press which sometimes bordered on the hysterical:

Contact with such literature is inevitable corruption. Nothing can prevent it. The readers of such works are of the lowest order of intellect and education; the more perilous it therefore becomes to them.

It was within this climate of concern and censure that British critics considered the works of Eugène Sue after the publication of *Mathilde* in 1840. In early 1843, *Punch* registered a marked shift in tone from earlier commentary with a brief, derisive note of the “great noise . . . being made at present by M. Eugène Sue, in his *Mystères de Paris*”. The piece pokes fun at the novel’s title and lists a series of “mighty” mysteries in London, all equally absurd and bearing no relation to the content of Sue’s novel, which Mr. Punch proposes to make the subject of his own work on his return to Britain. It is clear from his catalogue of London “mysteries” that the author of these notes from Paris, probably Thackeray, had not yet read the work, or enough of it to know its story-line, and is responding solely to the novel’s celebrity. Brief as it is, the note in *Punch* is significant as an early example of Thackeray’s commentary on Sue’s fiction. Thackeray’s public derision of Sue, expressed in a number of widely read journals and at the point when Sue’s works were becoming more generally known in Britain, set the tone for much of the prevailing response to Sue after 1843 and the publication of *Les Mystères de Paris*.

Thackeray reviewed Sue’s novel in greater detail for the *Foreign Quarterly* later that year in April 1843. The title of his piece was, significantly, “The Thieves’ Literature of France”. *Les Mystères de Paris* had just finished its serialization in France at this point. The popularity of Sue’s novel attracts Thackeray’s disdain and its extraordinary commercial success defines Sue here as a “literary merchant” rather
than an author of any intrinsic literary worth. Sue’s “extreme cleverness,” acknowledged with irony, arises solely from his exceptional ability to gauge the taste of a large reading public and to respond with fiction which was “quite as much works of calculation and trade, as any bale of French goods that is shipped to a foreign market.” Thackeray’s comments here recall the criticisms levelled in France in 1839 by Sainte-Beuve in his ‘De la Littérature Industrielle’. Sainte-Beuve, however, had attacked the genre of the “feuilleton” as a whole and had specifically omitted Sue from his censure. Sue had been praised later by the same respected critic for remaining aloof from the mercenary impulses of his contemporaries. Here Thackeray chooses to single Sue out for precisely those qualities which the French critic had felt were least apparent in the author’s work.

Sue’s fiction had been worthy of serious analysis in earlier British reviews, but now he is judged by Thackeray to be

a quack, certainly; but one of the cleverest quacks now quacking; and a great deal more amusing than many dullards of his trade, who have a perfect belief in themselves, and outrage art, sense, and style . . . . Appearing as the work before us does, in almost daily chapters, in the Débats newspaper, the concluding sentence of each section is a mark of extreme ingenuity on the writer’s part. No story-teller on the point of sending round his hat for contributions among the audience, ever stopped in his narrative more dextrously.32

Thackeray dismisses the narrative itself, however, as “sheer folly, bad taste, and monstrous improbability.” Mathilde had been admired before this for its “foundation of spirit and truth,”33 but Les Mystères de Paris is deemed to be “a gross, detestable, raw-head-and-bloody-bones caricature . . . unworthy of an artist.” Despite these faults, the story made compulsive reading. Thackeray, “though compelled to abuse this book, is obliged honestly to confess that he has read every single word of it, and with the greatest interest too.”34 His comments echo the ambivalence felt by earlier reviews of Sue’s works, which found fault with the novels’ distasteful subject matter yet praised their power and success.
However, the force in Sue's fiction formerly appreciated by English critics is considered now to be a merely a measure of the author's mercenary zeal and, worse, a potential moral danger. The novel's power to provoke the reader's compassion for its criminal and other socially delinquent characters leads to "a guilty sympathy for villany [sic]." This criticism is presented as proof of Sue's insincerity and any protestation on his part of the moral purpose of his novel is considered "absurd".35

After his unflattering portrait of Sue, Thackeray summarizes parts of *Les Mystères de Paris*, highlighting the aspects which he feels best expose the book's fraudulent moral stance. The humanitarian message of the novel so embraced by some French readers and critics is disregarded here. Any superior motives claimed by Sue are either derided or ignored and the review's comments centre largely on the unlikely nature of the novel's story and characters.

The article elects, for example, to treat two of the work's key characters, Fleur de Marie and Le Chourineur, with disbelief and sarcasm: Le Chourineur is a "murderer by taste, and though his education was even worse than that of the goualeuse [Fleur de Marie], he retained always the highest principles of honour, and was in fact, as we have stated, the most generous and kind-hearted of men."36 No mention is made of the pathos of Sue's account of this character's life which, in the context of the novel, is meant to eliminate any criminal intent on his part. Fleur de Marie's story is equally ridiculed. The only aspect of her story given any emphasis is the seemingly ludicrous assumption on the part of her author that any vestige of human virtue could survive her life of degradation.

Although the humanitarian principles of *Les Mystères de Paris* were granted far less credence generally in the British press, there were at least two favourable views of Sue which applauded his novel for its serious attempt to encourage reform. Following the publication of the many English editions of the work in 1844, Samuel Ferguson wrote in the *Dublin University Magazine*:

> A great force has been put in operation on civilized society by the literary mission of Eugène Sue. No other writer . . . commanded so vast an audience. . . . all listen . . . not only to a highly exciting narrative of adventure, but also to a
practical sermon of great energy against vice, injustice, superstition, all forms of baseness . . . 37

Sue's role is seen to "call up in thousands of human hearts responsive sentiments of love and goodness, of pity and considerate tenderness." This reviewer likens Sue to Shakespeare in his ability to mitigate scenes of realistic horror by the

judicious interminglement of tenderness, honour and humanity, the baser passions become in a high degree subsidiary to the interest, just as the avarice and malignity of Shylock give grandeur to the magnanimity of Antonio.38

Ferguson supports his interpretation with a more accurate version of the novel than Thackeray had presented. The brief history provided in this article of Fleur de Marie, for example, stresses her role as social victim and recognizes how her "mighty force of gentleness" subdues the bitter hostility of La Louve, and works ultimately to that character's good. Clearly reviewers with less of an "axe to grind", or those whose own views supported those of the novel, were less inclined to misinterpretation in their critiques.

However, even the appreciation for Sue's novel manifested in this last article is overshadowed by a more general debate. The piece also comments on the early instalments of Le Juif Errant, which was just beginning its serialization in France. The Irish critic feels bound to include a prolonged survey of the general role of the Jesuits in response to the anti-clerical feeling the new novel represents.39 Despite this digression, this review avoids the ranting quality which distinguishes the majority of the other British reviews of Sue's later novels. The even tone and just appreciation provide a surprising contrast in this substantial, serious journal which had been praised by the Athenaeum, whose own line on Sue was dramatically different, for its "superior excellence".40

A year later, in 1845, the Brighton Herald praised Les Mystères de Paris for its noble intent:

Sue looks on man in a higher light--a creature of mingled instincts; capable of being raised to the highest point
of virtue, or degraded to the lowest abyss of crime, and this by
the operation of the laws to which he is exposed.41

Other commentary, however, in Britain’s established press remained
severely critical of Sue’s novel, particularly repudiating the novel’s pretensions to
morality. Thackeray’s initial comments on the work in the Foreign Quarterly had at
least been made in a tone of ironic raillery and had been moderated by an admission of
grudging admiration for the skill of the novel’s author. As the controversies
surrounding popular fiction deepened and Sue’s success became more widespread,
later reviews were wholly disparaging of both the author and his fiction.

A review in the British and Foreign Review appeared in 1844 and
presented a condemnation of Les Mystères de Paris on all counts. The tenor of the
article resembles that of the general journalistic crusade against popular literature
characterized by the Dixon articles in the Daily News a few years later. According to
this piece in the British and Foreign Review, Sue is no longer a clever, or even a
particularly skilled author. The very popularity of his work proves, indeed, that his
intellect is limited: “The author . . . who is to please the million must write as the
million think; the average intelligence is a small one.” G.W.M. Reynolds had begun to
serialize his Mysteries of London at this point, a work which was generally
misconstrued to be a plagiarism of Les Mystères de Paris. Some of the vehemence of
these and subsequent comments on Sue may also have reflected the conservative
response to that novel and its author, a possibility which will be discussed in more
detail in Chapter IV.42

The commentator in this review was G. H. Lewes, whose dislike of Sue
and his works persists in articles appearing much later in the Leader.43 Lewes opens his
critique by attributing the “excessive popularity” of Sue’s work to the British
inclination to follow “Opinion,” the “mostly ludicrously arbitrary” principle by which
some works become fashionable. Les Mystères de Paris had become fashionable, yet in
his view it is profoundly immoral and deserves only censure:

For a long while we have contented ourselves with silent
contempt; now it is time for reproof. As long as it was
delight ing and demoralizing the readers of the ‘Journal
des Débats’ we were silent. It has now found its way into thousands of English houses,--thanks to its amazing popularity, thanks also to its almost unparalleled immorality. No one has denounced it as a bad and execrable book; the consequence has been that no one has thought it bad. Its licentiousness, its hideous pictures of civilized depravity, its bold attacks upon existing society and its outrage of existing laws, have all been relished with feverish excitement . . .

As in the case of the prevailing criticism of popular literature in general, Lewes misrepresents Sue’s novel with a view to justifying his case against it. The work is denounced, for example, for two forms of immorality. The first is felt to be the novel’s tacit sanction of what Lewes deems to be the indecent conduct of the two of the work’s central characters, Fleur de Marie and Clémence d’Harville. These are both seen to provide gross examples of female immodesty and Lewes retells sections of the novel in order to prove his contention, misconstruing each case. His account of Fleur de Marie’s descent into prostitution, for example, omits the act of charity which leads to her destitution. It is her desperation to survive despite her abject poverty that forces Fleur de Marie to turn to vice, not, as Lewes suggests, a flighty nature.

Lewes’s description of Madame d’Harville also twists Sue’s real design. Madame d’Harville is represented here as merely an amoral would-be adulteress and her character is allowed none of the depth which Sue is at pains to portray. In Lewes’s retelling of the episode in which Madame d’Harville is almost compromised by a liaison with a worthless fop, no allusion is made to the intrigue perpetrated by one of the book’s villains, the countess MacGregor, of which Madame d’Harville was a victim.

Lewes’s review also accuses Sue’s novel of a second variety of moral transgression. Sue’s attention to social injustices in the book is seen to be directed against social stability and is tantamount to an invitation to anarchy:

That society is in an imperfect state no one will deny; but such writers as Eugène Sue are the last men in the world to perfect it; if for no other cause than this, that they mistake the crudity of the fruit for rottenness. Society is crude, but each stage of its existence is an approach
towards ripeness. . . . It is somewhat remarkable that the ‘Journal des Debats,’ the high conservative, constitutional and moral journal of France, should publish in its columns so undisguised a crusade against the existing laws.45

It is surprising to find such an expression of conservative anxiety in one whose liberal notions are usually more apparent. Much of Lewes’s more reasoned criticism, particularly of Les Mystères de Paris’s exaggerated, melodramatic style and eccentric use of “asterisks, notes of admiration, italics and capitals,” is eclipsed by the emotional response to what was perceived to be potentially subversive in Les Mystères de Paris. Contradicting his earlier remarks, Lewes ends his piece by dismissing Sue’s importance. He concludes that the author’s reputation is already spent: “The trick cannot succeed twice in the same decade [sic]” and Sue’s next novel, Le Juif Errant, is scorned as “pitiable.” According to Lewes, this novel would not be widely read, even though Sue’s earnings for it in France were already reported to be 100,000 francs (4000 L).

Lewes miscalculated the eventual popularity of Le Juif Errant. The novel was in due time at least as widely read as Les Mystères de Paris. Even more translations of the later book were published in Britain, some as late as 1940. The period during which this review was written, 1844-1845, saw the peak of Sue’s popularity in Britain. At least thirteen editions of Sue’s works were published during that short time.

Other reviews of Sue’s fiction during this period were equally guilty of a prejudice against the author’s popularity. In April 1844, the Athenaeum reviewed two translations of Sue’s works, The Mysteries of Paris and Mathilde, concentrating on the role that such popular works played in public morality. Again, as in the article cited earlier, this paper pointed to the wide circulation of the works in question as the justification for its attention. These novels “circulating among the vast and busy millions of American and English readers” demanded notice, although only because of their popularity: “So long as their reputation was local, it was the wiser morality to leave it undisturbed; the case however, is now somewhat changed . . .” 46
The books themselves are then dismissed as “outrageous caricatures” whose “social truths and high moral lessons” are exposed as shams. The portrait presented here of the novelist as a “viveur” laughing up his sleeve at an ingenuous public is reminiscent of Thackeray’s earlier estimation of Sue and of some of the views perpetuated in France by conservative detractors such as Eugène de Mirecourt. Many in Britain too found it difficult to reconcile Sue’s former fame as a dandy with the humanitarian concerns professed in his novels. This critique singles out the central character of *Les Mystères de Paris*, the prince Rodolphe, to demonstrate Sue’s false morality. The prince’s attempts to redress wrongs employ wrongdoing itself, “detecting chicanery by artifice, ... employing trick after trick, to recommend truth and purity ...” and the work’s protestations of moral intent could, therefore, only be spurious. The result is a concentration of all that “is darkest, most filthy, and most mournful:"

an invention so distorted and defective, the result of good will be miserably small, as compared with the bad amount of curiosity stirred, appetite sharpened, and feverish excitement maintained.

In its comments on *Mathilde*, the *Athenaeum* presents a view which is at odds with those which had appeared just two years earlier in the *Foreign Quarterly Review*. In the aftermath of the successes of *Les Mystères de Paris* and *Le Juif Errant*, Sue is dismissed as a “literary curiosity”:

For some dozen years M. Eugène Sue held a third-rate place among contemporary Parisian novelists. His tales were the very things to enchant the heroine of ‘Northanger Abbey,’ being, in the most sanguinary and sulphureous [sic] sense of the word, “very horrid,---with a rough and piratical force, it is true, in certain of the scenes and characters, sufficient to rescue them from utter contempt.

The scornful tone bears little resemblance to the grudging respect voiced by British commentary on Sue’s fiction before 1843. Then preferred to some of his contemporaries and certainly considered an equal among them, Sue’s position as a successful author is regarded now as unexpected and undeserved:
... he has suddenly shot past Hugo, and De Vigny, and Balzac, and George Sand, and Charles Bernard, and Jules Janin; and where they have their hundreds, he has his thousands of readers.

The phenomenal success of Les Mystères de Paris in France serves only to exasperate the Athenæum's critic. He likens the public interest in that country in Sue's fiction to that which had greeted Richardson's Clarissa in Britain, but the comparison is not intended to credit Sue with any literary merit:

The appearance of 'Les Mystères' is commemorated among historical events in the French almanacs; the theatres are besieged from cock-crow when there is any hope of seeing a scene from the same dramatized. Since Richardson was persecuted by correspondents in a passion of suspense as to the fate of his Clarissa, never has been excited a greater ferment of interest and curiosity with regard to the progress of an incomplete work--on the part of some, a matter of mere impatience; --on the part of others (and here we come to a sad and startling fact) from an idea that the story was one developing great social truths and high moral lessons.

Yet even this antagonistic critic admits that Les Mystères de Paris, "this strange book", has changed the prevailing views of the ruling classes in France and made compassion for the "lower order" fashionable. The review goes on, however, to suggest that such humanitarian impulses are unnecessary in Anglo-Saxon societies and therefore do little to justify the otherwise unacceptable face of Sue's fiction:

... our state of society--happily for England and America---is in no respect analogous to that of our neighbours, we cannot err in saying, that for ourselves and our Brother Jonathan's family, the virtue and philanthropy, here introduced, appear in such questionable company that every honest public officer of literary customs must pronounce them contraband and, as such, discountenance--if the laws to not permit him to forbid--their entry.

Although there is no indication of the identity of the author of this review in the Athenæum, later volumes of the journal are annotated and reveal the
author of other pieces on Sue’s novels, written in a similar vein, to be Henry Fothergill Chorley. Chorley had a fairly high profile in British literary circles as a friend of many of the more important figures of the period, Dickens and Thackeray amongst others. He was a significant contributor to the *Athenaeum*, indeed his work for the journal has been said to have been his “only permanent occupation.” However, Chorley’s reviews became particularly known for their outspoken censure of any work falling short of his own definition of high literary standards. One author responded to comments on his work which he attributed to Chorley’s pen by condemning “Mr. Chorley’s infamous trade of defamation and envy against his betters . . . a mean and malignant trader in literature.”

According to annotated volumes of the journal, Chorley reviewed three more of Sue’s novels for the *Athenaeum*. In April 1845, an article appeared on *De Rohan* which reiterated the view of Sue as “one of the least scrupulous of the French romancers.” The *Wandering Jew* was considered by the paper in November of that year, which cited the popularity of the work as the only motivation for its attention. The novel was deemed to be a “mischievous . . . example of power perverted” and was especially censured for its detailed realism, particularly in its pictures of the sufferings of disease. Once praised for just that quality, Sue is taken to task here for the power of his realistic prose, for having “so keen a nose for the charnel-house, so sensitive an ear for the struggles of departing death.”

Chorley is especially incensed that Sue had been invited to address the Manchester Athenaeum and hopes that his comments will help to expose the hypocrisy of “the popular French philanthropist” to the club’s earnest members:

> . . . we should have neglected a duty had we allowed such homage to have been paid to M. Sue by those whose welfare we have so sincerely at heart, without declaring emphatically how coarse and incomplete a thing is their idol. Imposing though it seem, when viewed for a moment, and from a distance, it is a creature of brass, and the feet thereof clay.

Sue’s power to expose social ills is discussed in general terms and is concluded to be at best uncertain and at worst dangerous. The author is seen to
be toying with forces beyond his scope, a criticism recalling the comments made by Lewes in the *British and Foreign Review*. The strength of Sue’s fiction to move and interest his readers has only contributed to social instability abroad and “even in quiet sober England [his works] are intoxicating middle-aged gentlemen into freaks of enthusiasm and angry newspaper professions of faith, diverting indeed to a Mephistopheles, but saddening to all sober persons.” Such power “is not a matter of small consequence”, especially when mixed with Sue’s ability to combine the “seductive” attributes of “Captain Marryat, Mr. Harrison Ainsworth, and Mrs. Trollope.”

A further mention of Sue’s fiction by Chorley in the *Athenaeum* appeared later in the same month, November 1845. Sue’s *Paula Monti* is considered to be nothing more than the usual French story of adultery and passion and, as such, serves to reveal the true nature of Sue’s false pretences of ethical principles: “It seems resolved that the English shall be dosed with Sue (not slow) poison! The poison of unhealthy excitement and false morality.”

These novels all appeared in translations in Britain during this period, an indication of the wider audience the works were expected to reach. Sue’s fiction which had once been available to an élite was now increasingly read by a wider audience. Sue’s later novels also began to be serialized in English in popular, cheap periodicals in 1844. The nature of those periodicals and of some of the translations of *Les Mystères de Paris* presented in book form may help to explain the change which took place in the critical response to Sue’s works in the British press at the same time.

Lewes’s article in the *British and Foreign Review* in 1844 noted, in his opening comments, the many English translations then available of *Les Mystères de Paris*: “translations of all kinds and at all prices,” including, significantly, one published in Holywell Street. An association of Sue’s novel with this notorious group of publishers would certainly have attracted denunciation from the more respectable press.

William Dugdale produced his English version of Sue’s work in 1844, with a predictably free translation. Better known for his publishing of pornography, Dugdale’s version of Sue’s novel was targeted at his usual audience of
the newly literate. When not actually using the underworld argot for which the book became noted, the original language of *Les Mystères de Paris* maintained a certain formality and elegance of phrase. Sue’s initial audience for the novel had been the readers of an eloquent, bourgeois journal. Dugdale’s rendition reflected none of Sue’s refinement. The language used for this English edition was much more colloquial and conversational. Passages were also added to the text which subtly altered its character. The opening section of one edition of Dugdale’s translation, for example, included these comments, non-existent in the original:

> Talk of Heathenism, indeed, and savagery! Just consider how many scores of thousands of savages we have in Paris or London, in Dublin or Edinburgh, or in any other great or populous towns, savages, who at the slightest temptation or provocation, would cut a score of throats.

Sue’s opening passages had only hinted at the violent threat openly defined here. The translation also used its first pages to include its own rejoinder to the criticism surrounding British popular literature as a whole and the Newgate novels in particular. This was a specifically British concern which, needless to say, played no part in the French original:

> And, truly, is there not an immense and intense cant in the censure which divers and sundry critics of various degrees of stupidity lavish upon authors who describe the careers of the bad and the bold? Can you make an interesting fiction without depicting one of those bad bold humanities which . . . display the full bone and muscle of human nature? Well! And if I depict the Turpin or the Sheppard who had lived and sinned instead of drawing upon my imagination for some “Vicious monster that the world ne’er saw,” What then? Why a few boobies hypocrites will cry out against me--every decent and sensible man will cheer me onward.

The language and purport of the passage are clearly not Eugène Sue’s. This rendering of the novel provided a vehicle for this British translator and his publisher to refute the moralists of the conservative British press and their contention
that realistic fiction, as they defined it, was pernicious. The controversy was one of long-standing in Britain.

Not surprisingly for a publisher of semi-pornography, Dugdale's translation of Sue's novel was also much more sexually explicit. A particularly telling example is provided in the portrait of Fleur de Marie. As the girl tells her life story to Le Chourineur and Rodolphe in the original novel, her role as a prostitute is implied rather than stated. If such a story can be told discreetly, it is so told by Sue. The Dugdale version, however, is much more indelicate. In Sue's original, Fleur de Marie ends her tale to the two men with,

"Chaste! My God! And with what would you like me to stay chaste? The clothes I wear belong to the tavern keeper; I owe her for my food and lodging . . . I cannot move from here . . . she would have me arrested as a thief . . . I must acquit myself of my debts. . . ."

The same passage in the Dugdale rendition finished with the much less indirect phrase; "... I belong to her, I MUST PAY FOR MYSELF WITH MYSELF!"

Among the English reviewers, Lewes would probably have read Les Mystères de Paris in French and so was unlikely to be familiar with this version of Sue's novel. The name of this version's publisher and his location at Holywell Street would have sufficed to taint Sue's novel in his and others' eyes.

Dugdale was not the only publisher to show an interest in Sue's works and to present translations of his novels. Another company from Holywell Street, George Vickers, produced its own version of a number of Sue's works. The distinguished company Chapman and Hall did the same in the same year. This company's translation of Les Mystères de Paris, for example, was more faithful in style to Sue's original and its three volumes were extravagantly illustrated. Clearly, the producer of this lavish edition did not regard the market for Sue's fiction to be exclusively amongst the mass of poorer readers. The fact that Sue's later novels were stocked by the private circulating libraries whose customers were invariably middle class is another indication that many sectors of British society continued to enjoy Sue's fiction.
However, importantly, the British periodicals which serialized Sue’s works were all members of the cheap, popular press. Several new cheap journals were founded in the early 1840’s and the three most important of these, the *London Journal*, the *Family Herald*, and *Reynolds’s Miscellany*, were clearly influenced by the success of Sue’s fiction. The vivid example of Sue’s success in France alone, where both the papers which serialized *Les Mystères de Paris* and *Le Juif Errant* had increased their circulation substantially, could not fail to attract the attention of British proprietors hoping to reach a wide audience. *Le Constitutionnel*, the publisher of *Le Juif Errant*, furnished a particularly striking instance of the way in which a popular author could transform the fortunes of a periodical. The paper had been struggling financially, with low circulation figures, before it acquired Sue’s novel. The popularity of his work helped to increase its circulation from 3,000 to 40,000 within a short period.55

The journals which published Sue’s fiction in France were members of the established, respected press, as indicated by the *British and Foreign Review* in the article from 1844 cited earlier. In Britain his novels were featured exclusively in a very different type of newspaper. The new journals were founded as an attempt to meet the demand developing amongst popular readers for stories with a new focus of attention, stories of “haristocrats,” as Henry Mayhew reported later in his *London Labour and the London Poor* in 1851:

The tales of robbery and bloodshed, of heroic, eloquent, and gentlemanly highwaymen, or of gipsies turning out to be nobles, now interest the costermongers but little, although they found great delight in such stories a few years back. Works relating to Courts, potentates, or ‘haristocrats’, are the most relished by these rude people.56

Much of the earlier popular literature, based on broadsheets and chap-books, had featured working and lower class characters or, quite simply, criminals. Tastes amongst popular readers had begun to change, as attested by the popularity of the “Silver Fork” novels of the period.

But the new cheap journals also represented an effort to avoid the growing public censure of popular literature. They published generally instructive
material, hints to the householder, recipes and other useful information, in addition to fiction, and thus combined the features which had traditionally separated the two forms of mass literature. The first issue of the *Family Herald* in 1842, for example, printed as its motto, "INTERESTING TO ALL--OFFENSIVE TO NONE", an indication of the new paper's aspiration to respectability. The *Family Herald*, the *London Journal* and a third, *Reynolds's Miscellany*, produced later by the *London Journal's* first editor, G. W. M. Reynolds, were remarkably successful. In 1854 their circulation was estimated to be in the hundreds of thousands, and all three continued to be published throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. The popularity of Sue's fiction, published by two of these and imitated by the third, *Reynolds's Miscellany*, contributed to their initial success.

The *Family Herald* was founded in 1842, and began to serialize *The Wandering Jew* in July 1844. A week before the story's appearance, a large advertisement announcing its publication was given prominent place in the paper. The story itself was placed on the front page for its opening week and several subsequent weeks, and was accompanied by a further announcement detailing the importance of Sue's work, the amount he had been paid in France by *Le Constitutionnel* and claiming, "Eugène Sue is the most popular of French novelists." Similar indications of the story's importance to the publishers were repeated throughout the rest of 1844.

*Le Juif Errant* finished its French serialization in July, 1845. It was followed a year later by *Martin, l'Enfant Trouvé*. The *London Journal*, opened in 1845 by George Vickers of Holywell Street, serialized the novel in English two months after it began in France, evidence of the eagerness to benefit from Sue's new work as quickly as possible. This serialization was also preceded by advertisements to the paper's readers declaring that Eugène Sue was "the great novelist of the age." The *London Journal* continued publishing serials of Sue's fiction until 1849, as did the *Family Herald*. *The Seven Deadly Sins* appeared simultaneously in both papers from 1847 to 1849.

Translated editions of Eugène Sue's earlier novels also began to appear in some numbers during this period. Both the *Family Herald* and the *London Journal* advertised various editions: *The Mysteries of Paris*, *Temptation; or The Watch Tower*
of Koat-Ven, Matilda, The Female Bluebeard. These editions were generally relatively cheap and clearly aimed at that market. Vicker’s edition of The Mysteries of Paris was announced, for example, in March 1845 as “The Wonder of The World . . . priced Two Shillings and Sixpence, beautifully printed on fine paper, and illustrated with twenty-two superb engravings, THE PEOPLE’S EDITION of The Mysteries of Paris. By M. Eugene Sue.”

The combination of cheap editions of his novels published from Holywell Street, and the high profile his fiction was given in the penny periodicals, would have influenced the general view of Sue’s works amongst the more established press during these years. Sue’s reputation also suffered by association with the works of G.W.M. Reynolds, who had used Les Mystères de Paris as inspiration for his successful serialized novel, Mysteries of London, which started publication in 1844.\textsuperscript{61} The English novel shared some elements in common with the French work. They could both be considered to be a “combination of populist politics, dramatic illustration, voyeuristic revelation of high and low life depravity in the metropolis, the exploitation of established conventional motifs from the Gothic horror canon . . .”\textsuperscript{62} There were fewer links, however, than might have been supposed between the two. Reynolds’s work was unequivocally radical, openly attacking “the enemies of the people.”\textsuperscript{63} It also featured more sexual licence than Sue’s novel. Nonetheless, the two titles and the authors’ names were often linked, a bond whose significance will be discussed further elsewhere. Both works were prominently advertised together in numerous issues of the London Journal.

This affiliation and his huge popularity in the popular press in Britain, coloured the critical response amongst literary and established press of Sue’s works and, again, forced consideration of his fiction into a wider context. By 1847, Sue’s fiction had become synonymous with the worst sort of popular fiction disdained by the established press. In that year, the Examiner continued its campaign of criticism of popular literature as a whole with a piece entitled “The Literature of the Lower Orders.” In this, the paper responded specifically to Sue’s then latest work, Martin the Foundling, as:

the most disgusting production of a writer who was never remarkable for his purity. In these penny numbers,
largely circulated and almost universally devoured by eager female readers, his most obscene and intoxicating details are reproduced with all the minute fidelity of which the English language is capable.64

The tone of these comments underlines the sea-change in the attitudes towards Sue in the British press after 1843. A few years before, the author had been admired in the established British press for the power of his prose. The imperfections of his works had been largely considered to be those of French fiction writers as a whole, in whose number he had been included as a distinguished member. Advertisements had appeared in the same reputable journal responsible for the comments cited above, the *Examiner*,65 for editions both of *Mathilde* and of *Les Mystères de Paris*. Publicity for the current issues of the intellectual journals, the *Foreign Quarterly Review* and the *New Quarterly Review*, had been displayed prominently on the same page.

In spite of this, while other French writers, such as Balzac or Sand, continued to receive serious critical analysis after this point, reference to Sue in the established English press became limited to scathing, more general criticism. The *Examiner*’s remarks on the author alluded to the “darling of the Parisian boulevards” of whose fiction it was impossible to “conceive of anything more miserable, murderous, unmoral and reprehensible.”66 Where Sue’s fiction had once been acknowledged as forceful, it was now considered here to be both “dull” and dangerous. The contradiction inherent in these qualities did not impress the reviewer of the *Examiner*. Sue was guilty both of boring the public and of corrupting them.

The charge of boring his readers was levelled at Sue again several years later, in 1850, in the *Leader*, where, again, the commentator may be supposed to be Lewes who was both co-founder and literary editor of the journal. The thrust of the *Leader*’s criticism of Sue was largely political. Sue’s reputation had shifted in his own country and he was at that point regarded as a prominent socialist figure there. The change in the author’s status provided the context for much of this British journal’s commentary. In March of 1850, in a general discussion of contemporary French authors, the paper announced the publication of Sue’s latest work, *Les Mystères du Peuple*, in these terms:
Eugene Sue makes a gasping attempt to revive his popularity by *Les Mystères du Peuple*, and its socialism has so well supplied the place of genuine power that 10,000 copies have been printed.67

A fuller review appeared in April in which the paper sketches briefly the recent history of the publication of Sue’s works in Britain. The tone of the review is deliberately derisive both of the novels and of their author and recalls the earlier comments by Lewes in the *British and Foreign Review*:

The appetite for trash must be voracious indeed when ten thousand copies of such a work as this be sold in France alone. . . . Here is a socialist novel, dull beyond all known profundities of dulness, ridiculous to a height that almost towers into the sublime, yet moving amidst the agitating scenes of revolution, and pretending to display the radical causes of people’s misery . . 68

The commentary moves on to more general discussion of Sue and his other works in the same contemptuous vein. Sue’s motives here too are attacked and he is deemed to be a

vulgar minded charlatan . . In no one quality of a writer is Sue respectable. He is not sincere: his socialism and democracy are transparent artifices. . . He has no power of depicting human nature, but only a brutal melodramatic power of startling contrasts, and rapid changes of scene. He has no healthy sympathy with what is elevated and heroic. . .

Just a decade earlier, Sue’s fiction had been praised in the established English press for the realism of its portraiture. Shortly before this review, a critic had found the realism of his fiction disturbing. Now Sue is judged here by another to be incapable of that characteristic.

In France Sue’s sincerity as a socialist had been granted much more credence. The author had been elected to the Chambre de Députés on the strength of his reputation. Indeed, the strength of his republicanism was such that he was eventually forced into exile when the conservative forces seized power in 1851. The
authorities were wary of his populist stance and influence for some time thereafter. Despite the radical tendencies of this British journal, however, Sue's protestations of "sincere democracy" are dismissed as "ridiculous." The French author's former role as a dandy of the Parisian boulevards obscures the authenticity of his republicanism in this British critic's eyes. The seemingly sudden "conversion" to republicanism by a representative of the ruling classes was initially mistrusted by most conservative British and, as has been seen, French critics.

Such scepticism clouded the reviews of Sue's works in the *Leader* in the same way that the disquiet surrounding popular literature generally had coloured conservative views of Sue after 1843. *Les Mystères de Paris* is seen by the *Leader* to have excited only a "morbid kind of interest" in its catalogue of crimes and criminals. The novel's popularity "all over Europe" is thought to have been caused solely by "the fascination of what was intrinsically loathsome." *Le Juif Errant* succeeded for the same reason alone, as it "also adroitly moved amidst depravities and horrors." Each subsequent novel is felt to descend further into "the lowest deeps of imbecility and dulness", until *Les Mystères du Peuple* appeared to show that "in the lowest deeps there are deeps yet unfathomable, in the profoundest abysses of stupidity there are vistas of stupidity even more appalling and profound!"

The wider campaign behind some of these comments in the *Leader* is revealed at the end of this piece. The critic then defines his position:

Wherefore have we gone out of our way to notice this book? In general our selection of foreign literature will be made upon a principle of directing the reader to works we consider really valuable; in this case we wished 'to point a moral,' and the moral is this: One of the mischievous effects of repressing or refusing open discussion of great questions is that passions are inevitably roused on both sides, and instead of Inquiry we have Combat. . . . In such a struggle all weapons are good that wound, . . . and hence the lies of a Chenu are made to serve the purpose of discrediting the republican party, and the trash of an Eugène Sue serves to exasperate the rancour of the Republicans against the Conservatives.
The criticism here is, again, somewhat inconsistent. Lewes chooses both to dismiss Sue's fiction summarily and to condemn it for its unhealthy influence. His ambivalence parallels that of so many other British critics who chose to deride or condemn Sue's novels, yet continued to use his works as a focus of their criticism. The far-reaching popularity and distinctly topical concerns of Sue's works continued to force their discussion into broader controversies, in this case a contemporary political debate within Britain itself. The *Leader* continued to refer to Eugène Sue in this context in its political commentary but did not afterwards review his fiction in the paper's literary sections.

In the edition appearing a week after this review, the journal announced Sue's candidature as a Socialist député. His dedication to his cause made no difference to the paper's view of his worth as an author or as a politician:

So EUGENE SUE is to be the Socialist candidate after all! When we last week stigmatized his claims--intellectual and Socialistic--we had little expectation of seeing him gain such a victory; but we anticipated the moral by pointing to the anarchical conditions which could produce such a leader. If wise men and honest will not become leaders of the people, charlatans must be chosen.  

The paper closes its remarks with an explicit statement of its opinion of the influence of Sue's works:

The action of Literature upon Society has sometimes been denied, and the "amusement of a leisure hour" has been the only object accorded to it. EUGENE SUE is an answer to that. The amount of "amusement" derivable from his *Mysteries of the People* is infinitely small; the amount of "influence," however, threatens to become terrible.

Public morality continues to play a central role in the critical consideration of Sue's works at this point.

A month later, in May 1850, the journal felt constrained to defend its position on Eugène Sue. As part of its commentary on the recent Paris election, several paragraphs appeared justifying the *Leader's* previous comments:
We understand that a contemporary has assailed the *Leader* for speaking in a disparaging manner of Eugène Sue. We have done so, not because we resent the freedom of his opinions—quite the reverse; not because we object to his outspoken language—quite the reverse; nor because we are blinded to his undoubted ability. Eugène Sue is a novelist with a stronger melodramatic power for startling effects than any other writer now living. He abuses that power by using it for *effects* of the most revolting kind; revolting to every principle of true art. He assumes doctrines by turns, as if merely to make materials for his literary trade...71

The comments here are decidedly more measured in tone and the literary criticism is consequently more measured. Sue’s fiction does indeed abound in effect and thus carries less weight than the more enduring works of many of his contemporaries. However, again, the view of Sue presented is wholly biased. Not all of Sue’s effects are simply “revolting”. Some of his effects aroused sincere concern and compassion in his readers. He was equally prone to sentimentality and sensationalism, all qualities which are ignored by this article. The *Leader’s* rejoinder had been prompted by recent remarks in the *Examiner*. Sue’s status as a proposed candidate for elected office had impressed that journal sufficiently for it to declare:

All Paris is absorbed in the contest between the stationer Leclerc and Eugène Sue the novelist. Strange it is that the party which pretends to superior intelligence and refinement, should have put forward as their candidate merely a specimen of constabulary violence, an honest policeman in fact; whilst the party accused of consisting of the mere dregs of society has selected one of the most refined and searching intellects of the day.72

The history of Sue’s recent novels is reviewed in this article with much more good will than previously. Indeed, the article is tantamount to an endorsement, surprising in this formerly scathing critic of the author’s work:
If ever a man became a Socialist from conviction, it has been Sue; for his writings clearly show the progress and changes of his mind. From depicting high society and influences he acquired a disgust of them; by diving amongst the vulgar, he discovered virtues whose existence he did not suspect. And though the conclusions he has drawn are erroneous, they would seem to be sincere. It is remarkable indeed to observe how all the great literary geniuses of the day in France have taken the popular side. We know how boldly Lamartine plunged into it. Victor Hugo has taken the same part, and Eugène Sue.

The almost eulogistic tone of these comments signalled yet another shift in response to Sue in the British press. Once again, as it had been ten years earlier, his name is coupled with those of the best known and respected French writers. Sue is now to some a “great literary genius,” rather than a “literary merchant” or “charlatan”, as he had been classed just a few years earlier. Eventually, even the critical Leader modified the tone of its comments. The paper published a review in May 1850, of Sue’s “last novel”, Les Enfants de l’Amour, which suggested that this journal too had begun to subdue its censure. In its brief report, the book is evidently not admired, but Sue is referred to as “the celebrated French romancist [sic].” The novel, it is felt, would at least amuse those readers fond of “thrilling incident” and not “over critical.”

Further restrained commentary on Sue’s political career continued to appear in the Leader. A terse report in July 1850 denies the rumours then circulating of Sue’s extravagance, responding perhaps to the viciousness of the conservative attacks against Sue in the French press. The author’s diminished finances and circumstances are revealed in detail and the paper testifies that Sue’s earnings as an author are at that stage “nominal.”

Sue’s fortune had indeed begun to wane at this point. He himself was exiled from France and, although he continued to publish in the French press, interest in his work on both sides of the Channel declined. Many of the social and political issues which his fiction had addressed had lost their immediacy. Much of the emotion which had accompanied British commentary on his work disappeared as the debate surrounding the growth of popular fiction abated. After 1848, when revolutions
troubled the continent but did not materialize in Britain, conservative fears that popular literature in Britain would lead to insurrection were assuaged.

Political anxieties in Britain diminished, but public morality remained a concern. The distinctions which stigmatized popular literature as potentially pernicious persisted. Sue’s fiction had become branded as such in the late 1840s and the perceived immorality of his works became the primary focus of conservative attention. In 1851, for example, a British academic and divine, Samuel Waldegrave, alluded to Sue in a speech in aid of the British and Foreign Bible Society. The Rev. Waldegrave deplores the fact that it was considered an offence in the [Catholic] diocese of Nice to aid the efforts of the [Protestant] Bible Society; “And this . . . in a place where the works of Eugene Sue are openly exposed for sale . . .”

Commentary on Sue in the British press dwindled thereafter. In 1852 the Westminster Review briefly reviewed his most recent works, remarking that “Eugène Sue has fatigued a patient public.” The commentator is likely to have been George Eliot who referred to Sue again in 1856, just a year before his death, also in the Westminster Review. That critique focuses its attention on Charles Dickens and makes use of Sue and his works as examples of the pitfalls which the British writer should avoid. Having previously been both praised and vilified for the realism of his portraiture, Sue is now taken to task for the over-sentimentality of his character studies. His characters are here considered “idealized proletaires” and are thus “noxious” in that they perpetuate “the miserable fallacy that high morality and refined sentiment can grow out of harsh social relations, ignorance and want . . .” This distinguished analyst recognized Sue’s “realism” as a quality which should be shunned by any author wishing to contribute to a genuine “awakening of social sympathies.” Interestingly, Eliot finds Dickens guilty of the same faults as Sue and she criticizes the British author in much the same way throughout her essay. The relationship between the two writers will receive further attention in Chapter V.

The tremendous popularity of Sue’s work and the topicality of the themes of his fiction had given his reputation in Britain an ephemeral quality. Wide fluctuations in the response to his works took place in France as well, but they were particularly evident in the British press as they touched upon peculiarly British
preoccupations. All fiction is subject to changes in taste and fashion amongst its readers, but Eugène Sue's works seem to have been especially so. The speed with which critical opinion oscillated from approval to opprobrium and back again to approval, particularly in Britain, creates in Sue one of the first examples of the effects of mass culture. One of his modern biographers compared Sue's fame during his life to that enjoyed in modern time by film stars and the comparison is apt. These icons of popular culture today are subject to distortions similar to those which influenced the contemporary reception of Eugène Sue in Britain.

1 'The Wandering Jew', 1 November 1845, Athenaeum, 1049.
6 Ibid.
7 see note 5.
10 Ibid, 16.
11 Dalziel, 4-12.
12 Ibid, 4.
14 Ibid, 4-12.
16 James, 18.
17 Dalziel, 16.
19 James, 45-71.
20 Ibid.
23 Dalziel, 46.
24 Ibid.
27 Dalziel, 47-48.
28 Ibid, 48.
29 see note 26.
30 'Notes from Paris', Punch (1843), V, 182.
31 Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals, II, 166.
33 see note 5 above.
34 see note 32, pp. 240, 233.
36 Ibid, 236.
37 'Eugène Sue', December 1844, Dublin University Magazine, XXIV, 702-717, 702.
38 Ibid, 704.
39 Ibid, 705.
40 Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals, IV, 199.
41 James, 141.
43 Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodical, III, 92.
44 see note 42.
45 Ibid.
46 'Mathilda; or the Memoirs of a Young Woman', April 27 1844, Athenaeum, 374-375.
48 Ibid, 120.
49 'De Rohan; of The Court Conspirator', April 19 1845, Athenaeum, 388.
50 see note 1.
51 Ibid.
52 'OUR LIBRARY', 22 November 1845, Athenaeum, 1124.
55 Nora Atkinson, Eugène Sue et le Roman Feuilleton, (Nemours, 1929), 10.
56 Dalziel, 21.
58 Family Herald, July 20 1844, 161.
59 London Journal, August 8 1846, 368.
60 James, 137.
62 Ibid.
63 Thomas, xiv.
64 'The Literature of the Lower Orders,' 11 November 1847, Examiner, 691-2.
65 Examiner, June 29 1844, 400-416.
66 Ibid.
67 'Literature', 30 March 1850, Leader, 13.
68 'EUGENE SUE's Socialist Novel', 13 April 1850, Leader, 65.
69 Ibid.
70 'Literature', 20 April 1850, Leader, 86-87.
71 'Moral of the Paris Election', 4 May 1850, Leader, 131.
72 'THE PARIS ELECTION', 27 April 1850, Examiner, 258.
73 'ENGENE SUE's LAST NOVEL', 4 May 1850, Leader, 568.
74 'Miscellaneous', 6 July 1850, Leader, 344-346.
75 Samuel Waldegrave, The Bible in Italy in 1851: A Speech (London, 1851), 8.
Chapter III

The Bohemians in London: Critical response to dramatic productions alleged to be adaptations of Les Mystères de Paris 1843-1844

As has been seen, the critical response in Britain during the 1840s to Eugène Sue’s fiction was coloured by wider ranging political and ethical debates after 1843 and Sue’s great popular successes. One factor which contributed to the contemporary reaction of the British press to Sue’s later works was the production in London in late 1843 of dramatic adaptations said to be taken from his Les Mystères de Paris. The plays claiming the French novel as their inspiration appeared just before Les Mystères de Paris was generally available or known to the British public. Their popularity was shorter-lived than that eventually enjoyed by the novel itself, lasting a few months of the autumn and winter of 1843-4. However that popularity demanded enough public and critical attention to include Sue’s name in some of the general controversies in the British theatre of the period, which were similar to those influencing the literary culture of the period.

The press notices of these plays were largely inaccurate, polemical and, as in the case of the critical commentary on his fiction, more often used to provide a platform for general argument rather than to comment on the plays themselves. As in the case of his later novels, the reception of the plays presumed to be adapted from Les Mystères de Paris suffered much from their particular social and historical context.

Dramatic adaptations which were understood to have been inspired by Les Mystères de Paris were first produced for the London stage just after the novel had finished its serialization in France. There had been some early comment on the work’s first installments, as has been seen in the previous chapter, from one serious-minded British journal in 1842. However critical notice of the novel remained limited at this stage. Les Mystères de Paris itself was not to be available generally in Britain until 1844. The reception of the plays with assumed links to Les Mystères de Paris---and there were at least five productions staged simultaneously in London during the late autumn of 1843---helped therefore to create a first impression of the novel amongst much of the British public and critical audience. This impression served to
stigmatize *Les Mystères de Paris* as “popular”, thus predisposing both critics and the public to view Sue’s works accordingly. Reaction to the plays became divided along the same lines as the reaction to his fiction was to be later when his novels were more generally introduced to Britain.

The early impression created by these stage adaptations, coupled with the eventual response to his later novels, helped to polarize opinion of Sue’s fiction in Britain during the 1840s. As has been established, serious critics dismissed his work with increasing condescension, as they were wont to do with most works with a “popular” audience. The popular reader, on the other hand, and the publishers of popular fiction, sought out Sue’s works with increasing relish, presumably for the same reasons the critics disdained it. Ultimately, this worked against a balanced assessment of Sue’s work, weighing consideration heavily on one side of the widespread contemporary concern surrounding the distinctions between “popular” and serious literature.

The tensions apparent in the market for literature in Britain paralleled those at work in the world of British theatre. Although it is inappropriate here to attempt a full study of the complexity of the British theatre during the period, the reception of the dramatic adaptations linked with Sue’s novel must be regarded within their very specific historical context.

Until 1843, only two theatres in London, The Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, and the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, held royal patents which officially allowed them to perform “regular,” spoken drama all year round. One other theatre, the Theatre Royal, Haymarket, was allowed to perform “legitimate” drama only in the summer season. All other theatres were required to present pieces incorporating musical entertainment which were known variously as “burlettas,” melodramas or extravaganzas. A number of taverns and saloons also presented similar plays under the same restrictions as the so-called “minor” theatres.

A century earlier, in 1737, the politician Robert Walpole had sought to limit the overt criticism of his government exhibited on the stage by introducing the Stage Licensing Act. Under the Act, theatres seeking licensing were required to submit plays to the Lord Chamberlain’s office, specifically to the Examiner of Plays, for
official sanction. This official censorship intensified the divide, already instituted by the patent monopoly, between “legitimate” and “illegitimate” dramas.

In 1843 the Theatre Regulation Act finally abolished the patent monopoly after at least ten years of active and passionate debate. Attempts to change the regulation of the theatres had been made in 1832-3 through the House of Commons Select Committee on Dramatic Literature under the chairmanship of Edward Bulwer, later Lord Lytton, who was himself opposed to the continuation of the monopoly. Despite much petitioning from eminent members of the theatrical community, among them the distinguished actors, William Macready and Edmund Kean, and the celebrated dramatist, Planché, the 1832 Act had not then been ratified by the House of Lords and the split between “legitimate” and “illegitimate” theatre had been perpetuated for another decade.²

The restrictions dictated by the Licensing Act, the necessarily limited audiences for “legitimate” theatre, and other economic and social conditions too complex to enumerate here, had led to a “general dramatic debility”³ during the first half of the nineteenth century. The “legitimate” dramatists had struggled and generally failed to present any works worthy of English dramatic traditions. The “illegitimate” theatres, however, had produced huge numbers of their permitted forms—melodramas, spectacles, extravaganza and the “burletta.” This last term had originally nothing pejorative in its use, signifying in the eighteenth century a burlesque of Italian opera. However, by the mid-nineteenth century a burletta was singularly difficult to define. Minor theatres were forced to respect the letter of the law but usually ignored its spirit. Music, if it played any role at all during a production, became “incidental” to their performances.⁴ Nevertheless, although in practice there was often little to distinguish plays performed in the major and minor theatres, the minors became particularly identified with the flourishing popular dramatic forms.

The minor theatres, and the dramatic forms for which they were best known, also became associated with certain types of popular audience. Theatre audiences in the early half of the century in both the major and the minor theatres were notoriously ill-mannered, loud and licentious. Noise, fighting and drunkenness were commonplace. Occasionally actual riots took place. The minor theatres were cheaper
and catered to the poorer classes of society for whom the theatre and taverns were often the only source of entertainment and refuge from a harsh environment. The behaviour of these theatre crowds was particularly "vulgar, unruly and physically obnoxious." Some of this misconduct may have been explained by the technical faults in theatre design which prevented audiences from hearing productions properly. Large crowds, jokes, scuffles and conversations distracted from the already faintly understood actors' performances. There were no reserved places at this point in theatre history and movement amongst theatre crowds, especially amongst the poorer groups who did not have seats in boxes, was an integral part of a theatre production of the period. Theatre gatherings were also used by "actively soliciting prostitutes." These factors all contributed to the identification of minor theatres with moral laxity and corruption in the minds of the middle classes.

Minor theatres were also seen as a potential breeding ground for social unrest, the fear of which underpinned so much of middle class reaction in the mid-Victorian period and which also intensified the debate surrounding the growth of popular literature. A link between popular drama and the growing urban proletariat's disenchantment with working and living conditions had been lately established in the 1830s with a number of successful popular plays mirroring these concerns, such as John Walker's *The Factory Lad* or Douglas Jerrold's *The Factory Girl*, both staged in 1832. During the first half of the nineteenth century political and moral respectability became as much an issue of contention and concern in the theatrical world as it was amongst the literary community.

The established disapprobation of the theatre in general and of the minor theatres in particular was accentuated by the perception in Britain of a playwright as "not a man of letters" and therefore not a gentleman. The topic excited enough general interest in 1814 to elicit a defence of the role of the theatre and theatrical professions from one eminent critic, William Hazlitt. Many of Hazlitt's essays exhibit his efforts to erode the prevalent view of the theatrical community as "extravagant," "dissipated," and of little use to society. The deterioration of the British theatre continued to be a matter of concern thirty years later in 1844. The serious-minded *British and Foreign Review*, under the editorship of John Mitchell
Kemble, an academic who had been appointed as Examiner of Plays in 1840, attempted to refute the charge that "the drama is said . . . to have declined and to be declining,"\textsuperscript{10} in a lengthy article published in July 1844. Despite the journal's defence, however, there was little evidence that official, acceptable drama was flourishing.

Members of the theatrical community itself also joined in the "unceasing struggle for the social and literary recognition of the stage."\textsuperscript{11} The "eminent tragedian," William Macready, made great efforts to improve the public perception of the theatre and to "make himself and his profession . . . socially acceptable."\textsuperscript{12} Amongst those involved with and seriously interested in British drama there was a self-conscious concern with the current condition of the theatre. This contributed to a conservative backlash against the developing popular dramatic forms.

Classic, "regular" theatre may have stagnated during the period, but the market for entertainment in Britain had continued to grow. The "hungry forties" produced large groups of poorly paid workers for whom cheap theatrical productions provided an important escape from the grim realities of poor urban lives. Minor theatres opened throughout London in the early part of the century and competition with the patent theatres had increased accordingly, intensifying the need to abolish the restrictions imposed by the patent monopoly. Popular literature was developing at this time just as quickly as popular drama and for similar reasons. Minor theatres frequently took their inspiration from available street literature, thus inviting the same censure these forms of literature attracted from the social and literary élite. The broadside ballad, chapbook tale and Newgate calendar produced plots for many popular productions at the minor theatres during the 1830s and 40s.\textsuperscript{13}

Newgate drama, for example, developed into as much of a preoccupation to contemporary drama critics as the fiction based on the same source. Critical attention focused on the potential dangers to public morality as it had a century earlier with John Gay's \textit{The Beggar's Opera}. The infamous case of Jack Sheppard, executed in 1724, became the source of a widely read novel by Harrison Ainsworth in 1839 and a number of highly successful stage adaptations from the novel.

The success of the theatrical adaptations of \textit{Jack Sheppard} attracted attention from all quarters and became "the focus for the attack on the Newgate
drama. The work was even used the following year as an explanation for his crime by a servant convicted of stabbing his aristocratic master to death. From Newgate prison, the condemned man claimed that scenes from Ainsworth's novel, and from an adaptation at one of the minor theatres, had given him the idea for his crime. The case became notorious and fuelled fears already rife amongst the ruling elite and middle class. The Lord Chamberlain was petitioned by a great many "parents and masters requesting that such pieces not be exhibited because they had such an ill effect on their sons and apprentices."15

Ainsworth's novel and the stage adaptations of it were "unashamedly sensational," a quality which unified all popular drama forms and which excited the most contempt from serious critics. Adaptation for the stage into a sensational, melodramatic form often diminished a work of fiction. In 1840, Dickens's Oliver Twist was adapted for the stage, although not by the author himself, in five separate versions which linked the novel with Newgate drama and the pernicious effects of glorifying crime. In an article in Fraser's Magazine in 1840, Thackeray accused both Ainsworth and Dickens of producing moral "poison" in their works. Their fiction portrays criminals and prostitutes, such as Nancy—that "sweet Magdalen" as Thackeray sneeringly calls her here—sympathetically thus giving a false impression of reality. His own pastiche of the genre, Catherine, is morally "superior" since he feels "the greatest disgust for the characters he describes, and using his humble endeavour to cause the public to also hate them."16

Thackeray's tone reflects the abhorrence expressed by the middle classes generally for both popular literature and popular dramatic forms. Despite the moral high ground adopted publicly, however, it is evident that, as in the case of literature, much of the criticism reflected more public posturing than sincerity. The high emotion and sensationalism in popular drama, just as in popular literature, had a much wider audience than the terms imply. Popular literature was probably read by all classes of society and popular drama, too, was likely to have attracted audiences from most walks of life. The fact that during this period many theatres began their performances at the early hour of six o'clock has been cited as an indication that the leisured classes attended more of these theatres than their public stance pretended. The
poorer working classes would not have been able to attend theatres until much later in the evening when the working day had finished. Programmes at minor theatres usually changed after the first performance of the evening to farces and extravaganzas beginning at later hours reflecting the taste of a "lower" audience.

The respectability of the theatre, still a contentious issue in the 1840s, was eventually established later in the century. Queen Victoria, while still a young woman, "risked her reputation" to attend various minor theatre productions and her presence did much to help change public perception. In 1843, however, popular drama was openly disdained as pandering to the lowest tastes for high emotion and sensation.\(^{17}\)

Sensationalism is an inherent feature of melodrama, a dramatic form which played an important and complex role in the evolution of nineteenth-century popular theatre. A detailed history of the form is beyond the scope of this study, however understanding some of melodrama's basic elements is useful in the examination of the response to the supposed stage adaptations of Sue's fiction which were presented in this form.

Modern perceptions of melodrama acknowledge the role the form played in the "cultural dynamics" of the nineteenth century.\(^{18}\) The tense emotion and over-simplification of ethical and social conflicts which characterized the form were slighted, however, by serious dramatic and literary critics at the time. As a dramatic form, melodrama is especially bound by convention and distinguished by a number of stock themes, characters and plot formulae, all of which allowed working-class audiences a retreat from a harsh, changing, chaotic environment. During this period the form touched increasingly upon the everyday concerns of its audiences, depicting "social, economic, ethical, and (to some extent) political problems" in a readily understandable format.\(^{19}\) The happy ending requisite to melodrama provided solace while the emotional pitch played a cathartic role for the plays' spectators.

Certain forms of melodrama particularly responded to and reflected the social agitation significant in the 1830s and 40s, a period which saw much political unrest in Britain and actual revolution abroad. The most important of these productions was shown at the Adelphi theatre in October 1839, just four years before
that theatre’s presentation *The Bohemians*, the first play alleged to be adapted from Eugène Sue’s *Les Mystères de Paris*.

The reception of the theatrical pieces which were said to be taken from Sue’s novel, therefore, took place in a climate of controversy which paralleled that surrounding the general debate on popular literature. These plays began to appear on the London stage in November 1843. The first of the British productions which shared titles and themes linking them to Sue’s novel opened at the Theatre Royal, Adelphi on November 6. The play was called *The Bohemians; or the Rogues of Paris* and its performance was reviewed by a number of important London papers and two specialist British journals, the *Era* and the *Dramatic and Musical Review*. However, none of the other plays which appeared shortly thereafter in obvious imitation of the Adelphi’s production received more than a very cursory notice. Significantly, the majority of the subsequent productions similar to that at the Adelphi were ignored by the press, probably an indication that, successful though they may have been, as pieces of “popular” drama these others were beneath the notice of the established journals.

A connection between the Adelphi production and *Les Mystères de Paris* was established at the outset of the play’s relatively long run. Enough press notices of the production openly alluded both to Sue and his novel to allow the assumption of an affiliation. The other plays which appeared in the following weeks in evident imitation of this first production were equally associated with *Les Mystères de Paris* because of this early public link. Any real correlation between the novel and the British plays, however, is tenuous at best.

*The Bohemians*, written by Edward Stirling, bears little or no resemblance to Sue’s work except in a few very minor details. Like the novel, Stirling’s play is set in Paris, includes scenes and characters from the criminal underworld, has a young heroine named Louise who is seduced and abandoned, a scene of entrapment in the cellar of a cabaret or public house and ends with the retribution of wrongs perpetrated by a consummate villain. Any of the main characters from *Les Mystères de Paris*, such as Rodolphe and Fleur de Marie, are conspicuously absent, as are any of the principal features of Sue’s plot. The playbill announcing *The Bohemians* introduces the subject of the drama as
Bohemians--that class of individuals whose existence is a problem--their conditions and their fortunes an enigma--having no resting place, who are never to be found and yet are to be seen everywhere, who have no trade yet live by professions--the great number of whom rise without knowing where they are to dine. Rich today, dying with hunger tomorrow--ready to live honestly if they can and otherwise if they cannot. There are ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND in PARIS.20

This focus on an underclass of society which is also a principal focus of Sue’s novel is perhaps the only direct link which can be drawn between the two works. There are certain confused echoes of the French work in the English play, the name Louise, as indicated above, the possible rendering of Sue’s character, Le Chourineur, into Creve Coeur, and an arch-villain who is very slightly reminiscent of Jacques Ferrand. Otherwise the play is not a recognizable derivation of the novel. Nonetheless, a correlation was presumed either by the author of The Bohemians himself or by the press reporting his play.

Edward Stirling was well-known for his adaptations of French works for the English stage and his reputation may have sufficed to connect his play with what was then the most famous of French serializations. Once the link was unmistakably established in the perception of the public and press, the association was easily extended to the other plays which were quickly contrived to profit from the success of The Bohemians. These dramas were very far removed from the French work indeed, some even with settings in London rather than Paris. Virtually nothing in their plot or characters recalled Sue’s work. However, because of their perceived relation to Sue’s novel, the form, content and the location of these productions helped to influence the British reception of their reputed source of inspiration.

The Adelphi theatre, one of the more important minor theatres, was particularly noted for its production of melodrama. The location of Stirling’s production at this particular venue would have biased certain reviewers’ response to his work. The playwright himself, too, had a reputation which linked him to the sensitive political issues sometimes associated with popular drama. An earlier adaptation of the Guy Fawkes story which Stirling had developed from an Ainsworth
novel, had been refused licensing in 1840 because of its potentially seditious subject matter. Reviews of the Adelphi production of Stirling’s *The Bohemians* reflected the general middle-class prejudice against popular drama. Much of the press made use of the opportunity of their examination of the play to sneer at popular drama forms as a whole, as indeed critics of Sue’s novel eventually used his work to condemn popular literature generally. Some of the theatrical reviews extended their censure explicitly to Sue as the supposed propagator of the play’s seedy themes. Other commentaries simply implied their general criticism of popular drama, the tenor of which was largely on moral grounds. The success of the Adelphi production and the skill of its actors were generally acknowledged, even if the play itself and its subject matter were deplored.

Initial advertisements of Stirling’s production drew no specific link with Sue. Any direct affiliation *Les Mystères de Paris* was not to be made until reviews of the production appeared soon after the play’s first nights. These articles appeared prominently in a number of important periodicals covering specialist as well as general interests. Although not all of the papers referred directly to Sue or his novel, the association of his name with the production was made early enough and conspicuously enough to identify both with Stirling’s production and, consequently, with those which followed in imitation of it.

The *Morning Chronicle* reviewed the Adelphi production on November 7 1843, the day after the play’s first performance. The article opens its comments by referring immediately to the supposed source of the play as Eugène Sue’s *Mystères de Paris* and goes on to condemn the themes of the novel, the habit amongst English “soi-disant dramatists” of borrowing from the French and to some extent the play itself. The review tempers its criticism by its discussion of the dramatic effects of the performance and the skill of the play’s actors and reluctantly accepts that the play is likely to lead to a success, an acknowledgement mirroring the early critical commentaries of *Les Mystères de Paris* itself.
The first general topic of concern in the *Chronicle* review is the failure of English playwrights to produce their own work. The prevailing custom amongst the minor theatres of adapting plays from French sources is frowned upon:

Eugène Sue’s *Mystères de Paris* has excited far too much sensation in France to permit it to escape the attention of our *soi-disant* dramatists, who seem to regard French literature as their natural storehouse of materials, and the scissors and dictionary as the legitimate instruments for their “new and original” dramas.

Sue’s novel, too, is the target for censure here. The work “abounds in rare materials for an Adelphi melo-drame [sic]” and is denounced itself for being

a tissue of the horrible and the grotesque—unveiling frenetic scenes of profligacy and crime, the product of keen observation into the lowest and worst phases of Parisian life, powerfully drawn, and heightened by an imagination very much more fertile than delicate.

This analysis of the faults of the novel implies some knowledge of the work itself, yet the reviewer persists in coupling *Les Mystères de Paris* with Stirling’s play even though the synopsis provided clarifies how little the play owes to Sue.22

The *Morning Chronicle* concentrates part of its disapproval of *The Bohemians* specifically on the incoherence and improbabilities of the play’s plot. These faults are also targeted by the *Morning Herald* in its review published on the same day. This paper accuses Stirling of borrowing from French sources but does not allude specifically to Sue or his novel. The *Herald* article is a much less detailed or informed piece than the review appearing in its rival, but the paper’s tone is equally censorious. The subject of the play is described as “so abundantly melo-dramatic [sic] in its character and so startling in its incident” that a popular success is assured. But “to attempt an analysis of the plot of the *Bohemians* would be to attempt an impossibility so confused is the stirring interest” of the play. The paper then presents a summary which is confused indeed. The character of Creve Coeur, for example, is
misrepresented as Breve Boeur. The *Herald* article too mocks the play's story while praising the performance of the actors and the effect of the production's scenery. The drama is pronounced "a fine mixture of the *Tom and Jerry* and *Jack Sheppard* schools, spiced by a skilful hand, and cooked with strong French sauce" which will have "more than usual run."  

Another critique of Stirling's play appeared the next day in *The Times* of November 8 1843. The production was listed in the paper's usual register of current theatre performances, a selective record of the two royal patent theatres and a handful of the important minor establishments, one of which was regularly the Adelphi. *The Times* gives a fairly lengthy review of the Adelphi's production which, like the other papers, concedes the work's popular success while scorning the play's appeal to that part of the public which wants the aid of scenery, costume, music, dancing, horrors and merriment to stimulate its appetite for scenic representation.

The tone of the article reflects *The Times*'s role as an organ of the ruling classes. The paper was too expensive to have a popular readership at that time although it, too, had its sensationalistic tendencies. *The Times* article points to a French source for Stirling's adaptation, but does not suggest any work in particular. This review outlines the play along lines which are very similar to those which preceded it. *The Times* also rightly predicts that the play will become a "popular and lasting favourite. . . . a 'decided hit.'"

The *Examiner* of November 11 1843 alleged that the Adelphi production was "one adapted from a melodrama now performing in Paris," a mistake which indicates some of the confusion regarding Stirling's supposed source. Although this *Examiner* article does not allude to Sue by name, reports in other papers had already identified *Les Mystères de Paris* as the root of Stirling's play. Sue's novel, however, was not to be produced for the French stage until the following year.

The *Examiner* echoes the tone of *The Times* and also uses its review to give vent to a general distaste for plays of the type represented by Stirling's drama:
The plot is as impossible as the most unreasonable gallery could expect; the effects are such as are endeared by long association, to every steady play goer; and the incidents are of that romantic school which immures its heroes in dark cellars and flings its heroines from bridges; prompts mysterious men to get other mysterious men into their power, for inscrutable purposes; and luxuriates in much grinding of teeth, rolling of eyes, and burning of red fire.

Despite its censure, however, this paper is also obliged to credit the production with popular success. The article refers to the “roars of laughter” and the accomplished acting of the performers and attests to the likelihood of a “long run” for what it calls “Mr. Stirling’s version of the Bohemians,” a turn of phrase which underlines the assumption that the play was an adaptation from an original source. The plot summary provided, however, closely follows the synopses featured earlier in other periodicals and, again, bears no relation to Sue’s novel.27

A journal specializing in theatrical reviews, the Dramatic and Musical Review, published on the same day as the Examiner article, November 11 1843, also pronounced the Adelphi production to be an “adaptation from the French.” The subsequent article briefly sketches the play’s plot in a dry, dispassionate tone, referring in detail to individual cast members and performances. However, the article neglects to name Edward Stirling, much less Eugène Sue. The play is said to have benefited from “considerable and wholesome alterations . . . from the original text,” but otherwise gives no indication of that text or its author.28

Further notice of the play appeared on the same day in the Illustrated London News which also established an unmistakable association between Eugène Sue and the production at the Adelphi. The journal obviously completely misconstrued the assumed source of Stirling’s inspiration, proclaiming that the production at the Adelphi of The Bohemians was “a free adaptation from the French of ‘Eugene [sic] Sue’ by Mr. E. Stirling.” The report consequently reinforced a definite, if confused, association with the French author. Both the purport and the timing of this article furthered the assumption that not only Stirling’s play but also its imitators, which were to begin to appear a few days later, were all adapted from the single source of Sue’s novel.29
A later edition of the same journal, published on November 25 1843, reveals a favourable reaction to the Adelphi production. This issue of the journal features a large, striking illustration of one of the scenes of the play. The drawing is accompanied by a passage praising the scene it depicts as one which “has rarely been excelled on the stage, either in the dramatic interest which it internally possesses, or the pathos and power which have been infused into it . . .” This widely read paper clearly appreciated the Adelphi production, admiring both the play and the actors performing it. The actress playing the main female role is admired as “the queen of domestic tragedy” and her fellow artist is compared to the distinguished Kean. The Bohemians is declared to be “a complete success.”

The success of The Bohemians was indeed complete at this point. Various descriptions of the production in the press indicated the play's sensational progress. On November 13 the Morning Chronicle had listed the play as an “enormous attraction, and unparalleled success . . . having attracted overflowing audiences each night---1000 people visited the theatre over the past week.” Similar terms registered the performance a “brilliant success”, “unprecedented success” with a “triumphant career!”

The Bohemians' conspicuous success attracted imitators very early in its run. On November 13 1843, a play entitled The Scamps of London; or The Crossroads of Life, written by William Moncrieff, opened at the Sadler's Wells, Islington. The production was announced by the specialist journal, the Era, as “founded on The Bohemians” the day before its opening performance and later, on November 19, a review of the play explicitly stated that “the production of The Bohemians at the Adelphi has been followed by a spirited adaptation of the French drama,” which had shifted the scene of its story to London. Shortly after the appearance of The Scamps of London, another play with a title clearly echoing its predecessor at the Adelphi, The Bohemians; or The Thieves of Paris, opened at another minor theatre, the City of London on November 20. This was followed by The Bohemians of Paris; or the Mysteries of Crime, a hint of the presumed tie with Sue, at the Surrey Theatre on November 27. Another, The Bohemians; or the Thieves of Paris, appeared at the Queen's Theatre on December 4. All these plays were licensed
by the Lord Chamberlain and played at well-known minor theatres well into December 1843. Their runs recall the popularity of other notorious popular dramas such as the already mentioned Jack Sheppard. Nevertheless, despite this popular success, or indeed probably because of it, almost no journalistic attention was given to these plays. Most of the imitations of Stirling's work were beneath the notice of the established press.

The one exception was William Moncrieff's *The Scamps of London*. His play received some cursory reviews probably because of its author's established reputation as a popular dramatist. His work was declared by the *Era* to be a "spirited adaptation of the French drama" following "the production at the Adelphi of 'The Bohemians,'" written by the "veteran Moncrieff." Though the tone of the review registers the paper's characteristic distaste both for the play's subject and its form, the piece is admitted to be "a very spirited entertainment out of the revolting mixture of poverty and vice, riches and crime, which inform the mass of beings by whom we are surrounded. Setting aside a few improbabilities, and many distortions of character, the author has very cleverly conducted his plot," which, in the *Era's* synopsis, owes very little to its alleged source and nothing to Sue. Even the Parisian setting which had given some tenuous affinity with Sue's novel to Stirling's play does not feature in this production. Moncrieff's drama, although its title is not mentioned in this review, is identified by name in later editions as *The Scamps of London*. Again, however, the performance of the actors is singled out for approbation in a note of support to the acting community at large.33

As the review implies, William Moncrieff was an established figure in the production of "illegitimate" drama. His best known work had been *Tom and Jerry*, which had been hugely popular and had had the first recorded run of one hundred performances at the Adelphi in 1821. The play's success at that theatre had earlier helped to identify the Adelphi with popular melodrama. Moncrieff's pieces often had topical, "politically sensitive" themes. In 1831, for example, he had written a piece, *Reform*, inspired by the electoral success of the Liberal party in 1830. By 1843, Moncrieff's renown amongst the general theatre-going public was secure and probably carried its own implications for the works associated with his authorship.34
Shortly after the appearance of two of Stirling's imitators, on November 19, an unambiguous link with the Adelphi production and Eugène Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris* was drawn in a review in the *Era*, "the most important theatrical weekly of its day." The journal had an editorial policy based on attempting to defend "the virtue and validity of the theatre" and the journal's critique reflects this stance, making use of its review of Stirling's production for a more comprehensive condemnation of popular drama.35

The article opens with a general reference castigating certain types of drama and reflecting the overall debate surrounding popular theatrical forms. The *Era*, in much the same way that later press reviews of Sue's fiction were to do, justifies its notice of the Adelphi production by citing the play's evident success, admitting that the theatrical community must bow to market forces and follow the general taste for such works:

> Whether the representation of pieces like the present reflect a compliment on the discretionary powers of the Chamberlain, or on the taste of a metropolitan audience, it might perhaps be the duty of journalists to discuss emphatically; but we confess that we shrink from the Augean task, and are forced to believe that our theatres must sail with the stream; must retail French debauchery and sentimentality at second hand, or shut their doors.

The journal goes on to condemn "this class of productions on the stage" in a tone and in terms which echo Thackeray's earlier criticisms in *Fraser's Magazine*. Both Ainsworth and Dickens, "Boz," are rebuked here as well for producing "hotbeds and . . . greenhouses for the culture of the filthiest weeds and plants of low life", using *The Beggar's Opera* as their "prototype." Eugène Sue is then introduced to the article's general argument as "following in the footsteps of Victor Hugo, the most popular, till now, of Parisian novel writers." Sue, it is claimed, now surpasses Hugo in "his researches into the profoundest 'cabarets' of vice . . . to delve his heroes from galley-slaves, burglars, and pickpockets, generally expressed in the term of Bohemians."
An extensive quotation meant to be taken from the opening passages of Sue’s novel depicting his “charnel houses of villany (sic)” is introduced with ironic derision as a “tempting preliminary” to the rest of the work. The passage is given in English and is far indeed from the original. Although the Era does not identify its source, the translation closely recalls later versions of the novel available through the infamous publishers of Holywell Street:

A *flash-ken*, in the language of thieves and rogues, signifies a public-house of the lowest description. A man liberated from the galleys, who, in this foul language, is termed an ogre, or a woman equally degraded, who is called an ogress, are usually the keepers of those taverns which are frequented only by the refuse of the Parisian population, escaped convicts, vagabonds, thieves and murderers, with which it abounds. The reader will discover, from its commencement, that we are about to introduce him to those hideous dens, where, if he accompany us, he will penetrate into those horrible regions, those common-sewers of Paris, swarming with frightful objects, as filthy as the reptile on the slimy shores of the Indian Sea.

The Era goes on to link Sue’s novel and Stirling’s play in an unequivocal statement; “Eugène Sue denominates his tale ‘Les Mysteres de Paris’ [sic] and Mr. Stirling has baptised his drama ‘The Bohemians.’” The assumption of a link between the two works could not have been more explicit. The rest of this review concentrates on the performance itself, outlining its plot and main characters, none of which, again, actually bears any but a very slight affinity to Sue’s novel. The Era also underlines its support for the theatrical community generally by praising individual performances by the actors and by conceding the probable continued success of the production.36

By early December 1843 all the London productions which had opened in the manifest hope of profiting from the popularity of Stirling’s play were listed in the Era, but this was the only important periodical to do this. The major newspapers continued to list only those establishments considered to be the important minors, such
as the Adelphi or occasionally Sadler's Wells. The *Era* reported that *The Bohemians* at the Adelphi was continuing its "brilliant success." Its imitators were also enjoying a profitable run. Moncrieff's piece at Sadler's Wells was "the best local drama". The City of London's production was deemed a "great and incredible success." Clearly the run of these plays created, if briefly, a sensation. The more general press may have chosen to ignore most of the plays, but it could not have been ignorant of their success.

Both the number of these plays and the length of time they all played on the London stage attest to the extent of their success. Other plays appearing at these theatres during the 1840s could usually be expected to last one or two nights. The productions which were thought to be taken from Sue's novel clearly generated a great deal of interest and attention, if only during these weeks. There even appeared at one of the "legitimate" theatres, the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, a new opera entitled *The Bohemian Girl*, which may have been an echo of some the interest surrounding the plays' subject matter. The very notion of a "bohemian", as we now understand the term, may have some of its origin in these successful theatrical pieces.

By Christmas 1843, however, most of these productions had given way to the usual seasonal entertainment such as pantomimes. The "last five nights" of Stirling's play were announced by the *Morning Chronicle* on December 23 1843. It did continue to play, nevertheless, until the end of January 1844 to "crowded audiences." A production of Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* followed at the Adelphi in February. Only one other production inspired by *The Bohemians* was licensed by the Lord Chamberlain during this period, in January 1844. This was called *Love and Crime or the Mysteries of Paris* and was the first straightforward use of Sue's title in an English dramatic adaptation. However, the location of the staging of this production was, significantly, the Albert Saloon, Hoxton. This was one of the more important of establishments of this nature but, as its name implies, it was not exclusively a theatre. There was no mention of this production in any of the British press.

The plays thought to be adapted from *Les Mystères de Paris* may have had only a brief course on the London stage, but during the months of November and December 1843 they dominated the London theatres. The widespread press reports of
their success created a notoriety which was certain to whet the appetites of popular audiences and excite the contempt of serious critics both for the plays and for their alleged source.

The connection these plays were presumed to have with Eugène Sue’s novel created an initial impression of the work in the minds of the British public and critics alike. Ironically, this connection was based purely on assumptions developed by the press themselves. The British productions were, in reality, too unlike their alleged source to have been truly derived from it. The adverse effects of the impression of Sue’s work created by these productions became, nonetheless, apparent amongst British critics. These effects were compounded by a number of factors which were, in truth, also unrelated to Sue or his novel. The reputation of the dramatists who were supposed to have chosen his work for adaptation, the type and the location of the ensuing productions, and the tensions inherent in the British theatre world as a whole all influenced this initial reception of Sue’s novel.

When *Les Mystères de Paris* was introduced to Britain a few months after these dramatic productions, the response to the novel had, in many ways, been predetermined. Sue’s fiction became immediately embroiled in the prevailing controversies surrounding the role of popular literature in public morality which paralleled the corresponding debate at large in the theatrical community.

4 Stephens, 8.
6 Nicolls, I, 8.
11 Hazlitt, 146.
12 Trussler, 227.
13 Ibid, 194-211.
14 Stephens, 65.
15 Ibid.
17 Trussler, 234.
18 Hays and Nikolopoulou, viii.
21 Stephens, 54-5.
22 'Adelphi Theatre,' 7 November 1843, *Morning Chronicle*.
23 'Adelphi Theatre,' November 7 1843, *Morning Herald*.
24 'Adelphi Theatre,' November 8 1843, *The Times*.
26 Bory, 290.
31 'The Theatre Royal, Adelphi,' November 13 1843, *Morning Chronicle*.
32 'The Theatres,' November 19 1843, *Era*.
33 Ibid.
34 Trussler, 215-17.
35 Stedman, 167-8.
36 see note 32 above.
‘Mysterymania’: the relationship between Eugène Sue’s *Les Mystères de Paris* and G.W.M. Reynolds’s *The Mysteries of London*

In October 1844 G.W.M. Reynolds began the publication in penny numbers of his serialized novel, *The Mysteries of London*. The year before, Eugène Sue’s *Les Mystères de Paris* had finished its long, successful serialization in Paris and had already attracted the attention of the British press. Dramatic adaptations of Sue’s novel, or what had been interpreted as such, had briefly dominated the London stage during the last few months of 1843 and six different translated editions of the novel itself appeared in Britain during 1844. In the spring of 1844, W.H. Ainsworth had begun to publish in *Ainsworth’s Magazine* his serialized response to Sue’s novel, the *Revelations of London*, one of the many imitations of Sue’s success. What came to be described as “mysterymania”, a phrase coined by *Bentley’s Miscellany* a year later in 1845, was gathering momentum and Reynolds was not slow to recognize its commercial potential.

Reynolds’s *Mysteries of London*, as indicated by its penny price, was intended for the growing, lucrative mass market of newly literate poor and working classes, the “industrious classes” as Reynolds termed them both in the novel itself and in his publicity. In the first years of its publication the novel was ignored, for the most part, by the established British press. The radical *Morning Chronicle* announced the imminent appearance of the novel once on October 17 1844, thereafter, however, gave the work no further notice. The *Chronicle* continued to feature publicity for works by Eugène Sue as well as Carlyle, Dickens, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, amongst others, throughout the rest of the year and the following but carried no such advertisements for *The Mysteries of London*. In May 1845 *Bentley’s Miscellany* referred to the work briefly in a critical and comic acknowledgment of the contemporary interest in novels of mysteries:

Mysteries, it appears, are no longer to remain so. Authors, with a delightful self-sufficiency, start up, and show to the
world that at least to them there never have been such things as mysteries. The veil of France is torn from her by a Frenchman, who certainly pays no high compliment to his country, by exposing vices of the most hideous character, and which are certainly much better hidden both from the young and old. The moral to be drawn from melodramatic vice and virtue is very questionable. This mysterymania has crossed the Channel. Authors are manufacturing vices by the gross... The pen must be magical indeed that could truly lay open even the mystery contained in an omnibus rolling the length of Fleet Street.... Yet we see "The Mysteries of Paris," "The Mysteries of London"; but who is really capable of lifting the veil and showing the dark reality?3

The article was illustrated by its author, Alfred Crowquill, a pseudonym for Alfred Forrester who, until 1843, had used it jointly with his brother Charles and thereafter on his own. The drawing presents giant devils manufacturing still more demons in an enormous still. The implication is reiterated in the text as "authors are manufacturing vices by the gross...", underlining the prevailing view of the evils of certain types of popular fiction. Although none of the other long established British papers mentioned Reynolds's novel either in publicity or editorial, this direct association of Sue's work with The Mysteries of London would have had a significant impact. The early presumption of a link between the two novels was given further credence in the newly founded popular press.

The new cheap, popular papers of the London Journal and the Family Herald gave Reynolds's novel conspicuous attention. The work was advertised in both throughout 1844-1845, usually referred to in extravagant terms as "the most popular work of the day". Reynolds himself briefly edited the London Journal in 1845 which no doubt contributed to that paper's favourable stance. Once his own popular paper, Reynolds's Miscellany, was published, it too, of course, gave important notice to the work. The readers Reynolds intended for his novel were manifestly those for whom these cheap journals were issued, the rapidly developing popular market of the newly literate, whose significance has already been discussed.

These same popular journals were simultaneously beginning to feature Sue's fiction. The Family Herald serialized its translation of The Wandering Jew from
July 20 1844, giving the story front page prominence for a number of issues. In October the paper began to feature publicity for Reynolds’s *The Mysteries of London* and some of Sue’s fiction in the same space, appearing to confound the two authors’ works:


*The Temptation; or The Watch-Tower of Koat-Ven* by Eugene Sue . . .

The paper continued to advertise Sue’s and Reynolds’s works together, as did the *London Journal*, throughout the period. As late as 1848, publicity in both papers still linked the two authors by promoting their fiction in the same space or page. The apparent connection with *Les Mystères de Paris* established by Reynolds’s title of his novel and his own well-known association with French literature, was no doubt strengthened by the impression created by these papers. The continuing appearance of the papers’ publicity for *The Mysteries of London* with Sue’s works, including *Les Mystères de Paris*, throughout the period ensured that the impression was not a fleeting one.

The supposition that Reynolds’s novel was inspired by, if not an actual copy of, Sue’s story was thus established at the outset, that is to say in 1844, in the popular press. Reynolds’s own reputation as a plagiarist would have encouraged the perception that his work was an imitation, if not an outright forgery of Sue’s novel, particularly amongst those not yet familiar with *Les Mystères de Paris*. It is fair to assume that, because of these conspicuous links in the popular press and the brief connection made in the more established press, the reception of *The Mysteries of London* would have influenced that of Sue’s novel. Equivalently, the popularity of Reynolds’s work with newly literate readers was doubtless enhanced, initially at any rate, by any assumed connection with Sue. Both the *Family Herald* and the *London Journal* which were directed at this relatively new market of readers had chosen to feature Sue’s novels in their first issues in order to exploit the growing fame of Sue’s fiction and ensure their own success. Aside from his novels’ celebrity, as French fiction his works probably carried the usual suggestion of sexual licence attributed to things
French by Anglo-Saxon culture. However, a perceived connection with Reynolds and his fiction would have only served to intensify any developing prejudice in conservative circles against Les Mystères de Paris and its author.

Reynolds had returned to Britain a few years earlier from living in France where he had worked as a journalist, editing an English language newspaper, and witnessed from close quarters the effects of successful serialized “feuilletons” by writers such as Sue, Dumas and Soulié. During his stay in Paris, he had spent his inherited estate in a number of unsuccessful business ventures and when declared bankrupt, had returned to London in 1837. Back in Britain, Reynolds had attempted to improve his failing fortunes through writing and his first works here had aspired to imitate the successes of Dickens. Several pieces plagiarizing Dickens’s works, especially the successful Pickwick Abroad, begun in 1837, and Master Timothy’s Bookcase, 1841, no doubt contributed to Dickens finding Reynolds’s work a few years later “a national reproach.” Certainly these blatant imitations would have helped to establish Reynolds’s reputation as one of the writers denounced by the literary establishment for pirating other authors’ material rather than composing original work.

In 1839 Reynolds published a study of contemporary French fiction, The Modern Literature of France, in which he underlined his admiration for French fiction generally. The work was written to refute an article published three years earlier in the Quarterly Review which had been, in his view, an “assault on the literature and morals of the French” and which he condemned as an example of “disgraceful” and ignorant prejudice, terms which would have estranged him still further from the literary establishment and the respected literary journals of the time. A novel written in the same period, 1839-40, Robert Macaire, or The French Bandit in England, as well as translations of well-known French works, Les Chants du Crépuscule, 1836, and Le Dernier Jour d’un Condamné, 1840, both by Hugo and Soeur Anne, 1840, by de Kock, further linked his work to the French in the public mind at this early stage of his career. In 1840-1 Reynolds also joined the temperance crusade and briefly edited the Teetotaller, establishing a pattern which would repeat itself throughout his career. His tendency to embrace causes with high political profiles and combine social crusading with publishing ventures left him vulnerable to the charge of opportunism.
Before writing *The Mysteries of London*, Reynolds had frequently appeared in the bankruptcy courts in London which further sullied his reputation with the respectable middle classes. His case was heard regularly throughout the decade before the novel was published in 1836, 1837, 1839 and 1840 as attested by one of his critics later in 1850. In each instance, Reynolds had been freed from liability to his creditors and allowed to continue to earn his living as a writer, legally unfettered but morally suspect in the eyes of disapproving commentators.

Eventually Reynolds’s work as a whole came to represent the fears and distaste of the literary and journalistic establishment for certain types of popular fiction and for its producers. *The Mysteries of London* was succeeded later in the period by the serialization of *The Mysteries of the Court of London* which continued to appear until 1856. The huge circulation of the work, which even at the beginning of its serialization was estimated to have been between 30,000 and 40,000 and which was reported to have expanded still further, brought “national celebrity” to the author. However, that celebrity was of a particular kind. The contentious issue of the role of fiction in public morality, especially amongst the working and poor classes, does not need further discussion here. The debate was resonant throughout the period. The boundaries which distinguished acceptable, respectable literature from that which was not, were constantly reaffirmed in the public domain. It is clear, of course, that these boundaries were not so unambiguous in the lives of the nineteenth-century British reader. People as “respectable” as Jane Carlyle or indeed Queen Victoria herself were conversant with works which were officially shunned. Nevertheless these distinctions remained central to the Victorian middle class public literary consciousness.

By deliberately appealing to the mass of readers from the working and poorer classes with sensational and seditious fiction, Reynolds invited the disdain and condemnation of the establishment. In a period when other authors of fiction were at pains to reinforce the respectability of the writing profession, Reynolds’s popular success with fiction which was patently not respectable must have been especially grating. In 1849 Dickens, who was himself particularly sensitive to the notion of respectability, feigned unfamiliarity with Reynolds and then dismissed his name as one “with which no lady’s, and no gentleman’s, should be associated.”
Although originally moneyed and middle-class, Reynolds did not align himself with the gentlemanly classes. His reputation as a plagiarist and a bankrupt attracted disapproval. In addition, his political stance provoked conservative anxieties. Reynolds’s radical sympathies were apparent from the initial stages of *The Mysteries of London*, which openly criticized the monarchy and the aristocracy with particularly revolutionary rhetoric. After the serialization had been running for some years, one bookseller described the novel to Thackeray as a great success with the popular reader because “it lashes the aristocracy!”.

By 1848, Reynolds’s radical political tendencies led to his close involvement with the Chartist movement. In March of that year he led a mass meeting in London’s Trafalgar Square, was elected chairman by the crowd and then was carried back to his home in Wellington Street on the shoulders of what Dickens described later as a “mob”. The incident did indeed end in the crowd’s confrontation with the police and some casualties required medical treatment. The same evening another group marched on Buckingham Palace, breaking windows and street lamps. A week later at another public meeting, Reynolds addressed a large gathering underneath the “revolutionary tricolour banner” with a speech which “attacked the profligacy of the monarchy and the callousness of the aristocracy”. Reynolds continued to address such meetings throughout the country until 1850 when a breach with other Chartist leaders estranged him from part of the movement. It was just such scenes which mid-Victorians feared would eventually lead to outright revolution in the manner of those which had taken place on the continent, notably in France.

Reynolds’s involvement in, indeed apparent instigation of, such violent potentially revolutionary incidents condemned him in the eyes of those for whom social instability was a threat. That Sue was also affiliated with the republican cause during the same period in France would only have strengthened any notion that the two authors and their works were guilty of the same subversive object.

As has been seen, in the first years of its publication, 1844-1846, the established press and members of the respectable literary world did not deign to recognize Reynolds and *The Mysteries of London*. The work was given attention exclusively in the popular, cheap press. It was at this point that any supposed link
between Sue and Reynolds would have most influenced the reception of Sue's fiction amongst the British literary and social establishment. Members of that group not yet familiar with *Les Mystères de Paris* itself may have concluded that Reynolds's novel was drawn from Sue's original and dismissed the French work accordingly. *The Mysteries of London* was, as will be seen, categorically a "popular" piece of sensationalism of the sort most condemned by British conservatives. In France Sue was able to produce fiction which appealed across class barriers, to working class readers and equally to other, more privileged readers. The concept of "popular" fiction as unacceptable was not yet part of French culture. Indeed, although *Les Mystères de Paris* did eventually have a wide circulation amongst the mass of poorer readers of that country, the work was originally addressed to the more moneyed élite and the middle classes. In France Sue was perceived to be a "reputable" author and member of society and in Britain his fiction had been viewed as worthy of review by the respectable press until this point.

So, although popular British fiction and Reynolds himself may have been considered beneath the notice of the British literary establishment, French fiction generally and Sue in particular were and had already been natural targets for criticism from this group. Indeed, French literature was a traditional target for censure amongst the British press. Thus, as the prevailing concern amongst the middle class surrounding the effects of popular literature on public morality culminated in 1846-7 in the series of articles already quoted in Chapter II, Sue's name was prominent amongst those authors condemned. It is probable, however, that Reynolds's notoriety provided a backdrop for many of these articles and that he, too, was an implied, if unidentified target. Dislike of Reynolds's work and reputation probably helped to intensify the censure of Sue as the two authors became linked in the public mind.

The contemporary presumption of a tie between *The Mysteries of London* and *Les Mystères de Paris* was so effective that it persists today. Modern critics in Britain and America have grouped the two works together in studies of "urban mysteries" and popular serialized fiction of the period. The assumptions made by the British press of the 1840s have remained unchallenged. The novels have similar titles, were both serialized in the same period, have elaborate and sensational narratives
and enjoyed success with the popular reader. Indeed superficial details in the lives of G. W. M. Reynolds and Eugène Sue provide parallels striking to a modern eye which may also have helped to reinforce a perceived connection between the two authors.

Born only a decade apart, Sue in 1804 and Reynolds in 1814, both were sons of well-to-do middle class families. Sue’s social position, however, was more firmly established. He was an indisputable member of the French haute bourgeoisie and mixed with France’s ruling elite. Reynolds’s social standing in Britain was by no means as secure. Reynolds’s father had been a minor British naval officer and Reynolds himself had attempted to follow in the family tradition by attending the military academy at Sandhurst. Sue had also initially followed the career path dictated by his family and briefly become a naval surgeon, albeit apparently unenthusiastically.

With the death of their parents, both young men inherited enough wealth to enable them to reject their conventional careers and both subsequently dissipated their fortunes until bankrupt. The desperation of insolvency suggested the career of author and both went on to become prolific writers of serialized popular fiction. Eventually both writers became associated with the radical political movements in their respective countries and pursued political careers while continuing to write fiction.

However, later the surface similarities in their lives dissolved. Sue became exiled as a result of his political involvement as France’s unstable political state swayed from revolution to Second Empire. He died relatively young in 1857, isolated, unmarried and still in exile, branded a dangerous radical by the French authorities. Reynolds, however, married a fellow radical and writer, Susanna Pearson, had a family of three children and died in 1879, a prosperous church warden at St. Andrews church near his London home of Woburn Square, a position somewhat at odds with his rabble-rousing past.

*Les Mystères de Paris* and *The Mysteries of London* also share superficial parallels which conceal more fundamental divisions between the works. Like Ainsworth’s *Revelations of London*, which has some similar traits, they owe a common debt to both Gothic fiction and melodrama and abound in Gothic motif and melodramatic stage craft. All three novels have complicated narratives set in the
tangled, sinister streets of the urban slums of the two great metropolitan centres of Paris and London. All range beyond that world to contrasting scenes of pomp and privilege. All include intrigues, disguise, secret documents, murderous plots, stock villains and heroines and wicked criminals with curious slang nicknames as central characters: La Chouette and le Maître d’école in Sue’s novel, the Sandman and the Tinker in *The Revelations of London*, and the Resurrection Man, the Cracksman and the Buffer in *The Mysteries of London*.

The three novels focus on detailed portraits of the life of the urban poor and attempt to excite an emotional response for their plight. However, all three works are finally essentially dissimilar and any connection, especially between *Les Mystères de Paris* and *The Mysteries of London*, is at best “problematic”, as acknowledged by one modern commentator. The actual distinctions between these two works are of particular interest to this study because of the effect any perceived association between the novels may have had and may continue to have on the reception of Sue’s later novels in Britain.

Although both Sue and Reynolds became involved in populist politics on the strength of the political messages in their fiction, the purport and the tone of those messages are wholly different in both novels. Sue’s novel exposes the horrors of the lives of the Parisian poor to awaken the active sympathy of those in power and to encourage humanitarian reform. His pleas to the more comfortable reader punctuate the novel and his calls for reforms, even when detailed and demanding, are never incompatible with an essentially paternalist view of society.

Sue’s basic premise in *Les Mystères de Paris* is that the rich are, for the most part, well-meaning and humane but are ignorant of the distress and desperation of the poor. Once made aware of the urgency of the social problems around them, his rich readers could not fail, in his view, to respond to improve society. To do so was essentially their duty and to that end he argues his case with the combination of passion and intellectual clarity peculiar to French thought. The destitute but honourable jewel maker, Morel, whose portrait is central to Sue’s political message in the work, outlines the fundamental political position of the novel in a conversation with his long-suffering wife:
Oh! those rich, they are so hard! . . . No harder than others, Madeleine. But they don’t know, do you see, what it is to be miserable. They are born happy, they live happy, they die happy; how do you want them to think of us? . . . they do not know.¹⁴

The implication is that once the rich know of the social wrongs they can put right, they will do so. Prince Rodolphe, the philanthropic protagonist whose acts of benevolence and retribution of wrongs form the core of the narrative, provides the reader with a conspicuous example of a privileged, indeed, in his case, royal figure who acts for the good of those less fortunate. Rodolphe is surrounded by a network of like-minded, caring aristocrats who support his efforts. His attendant and helper, Sir Murph, is an English nobleman who implements many of Rodolphe’s generous schemes. In the opening stages of the story, Rodolphe enlightens his future wife, the Marquise d’Harville, about the joys of active charity and so transforms her frivolous life to one of rewarding purpose.

Sue’s other portraits of the rich and the aristocracy are also, for the most part, sympathetic. These characters can suffer as well as the poor, as in the case of the distressed and ill Marquis d’Harville and the proud Comte de Saint-Remy. This latter has a son who wickedly dissipates his inheritance and sullies his father’s noble name. After his portrait of the depraved young aristocrat, Sue laments the state of the many young rich men who, for lack of guidance and direction, squander their fortunes and are consequently denied useful and rewarding lives:

. . . through a lack of instruction the rich too fatally have their miseries, their vices, their crimes.
Nothing is more frequent or more distressing than these mad, sterile extravagances which we have just described, and which always lead to ruin, discredit, baseness or infamy. It is a deplorable spectacle . . . disastrous . . . as if one saw a flourishing field of wheat uselessly ravaged by a herd of wild beasts.
Without doubt inheritance and property are and should be inviolate, sacred . . . Acquired or transmitted wealth must shine magnificently in the eyes of the poor and suffering classes.
For a long time hence there will be those dreadful disproportions which exist between the millionaire Saint-Remy and the worker Morel. However, as much as those inevitable conditions are sacred, protected by the law, those who possess so much must use it morally, just as those who possess only probity, resignation, courage and passion for their work. In the eyes of reason, human rights and even in the interest of society, of course, a large fortune should be an hereditary deposit, confided to prudent, firm, skillful, generous hands who, charged at the same time to account for as well as to spend that fortune, would know how to strengthen, enliven, benefit all those who had the good fortune to find themselves within their splendid salutary circle . . .

How many young people . . . masters at twenty years of age of considerable wealth, waste it madly with laziness, boredom, in vice, because they do not know how to better employ their riches, both for themselves and for others!15

The passage ends with Sue equating the evils faced by these young privileged members of society with those faced by the poor: “The rich man is thrown into the middle of society with his wealth just as the poor man with his poverty . . .” The author pleads for a closer understanding and cooperation between rich and poor, “an honest, intelligent, equitable association which assures the well-being of the worker without undermining the fortune of the rich . . . and which, by establishing ties of affection and gratitude between these two classes, would safeguard the tranquillity of the state forever.” Social reform is urged ardently in the novel but these are reforms which would unite rather than divide social groups and reinforce rather than threaten the stability of the social structure. Both in his paternalism and in his reasoned plea for sympathy and reform, Sue in fact bears much more resemblance to Dickens, especially in his later novels, than to Reynolds.

In The Mysteries of London the political message is utterly at odds with that of Sue. The wealthy and the aristocracy are deemed to be “enemies of the people” and the author’s tone is designed to excite anger and resentment amongst the novel’s poorer readers. In his prologue, Reynolds sets forth the premise upon which his novel will be written. The passage becomes almost formulaic and is regularly repeated throughout the serialization, continuously reiterating the novel’s emotive revolutionary message:
There are but two words known in the moral alphabet of this great city; for all the virtues are summed up in the one and all vices in the other: and those words are WEALTH. / POVERTY.

Crime is abundant in this city: the lazarus, the prison, the brothel, and the dark alley, are rife with all kinds of enormity; in the same way as the palace, the mansion, the clubhouse, the parliament, and the parsonage, are each and all characterised by their different degrees and shades of vice. But wherefore specify crime and vice by their real names, since in this city of which we speak they are absorbed in the multi-significant words---WEALTH and POVERTY? . . . Crimes borrow their comparative shade of enormity from the people who perpetuate them: thus it is that the wealthy may commit all social offenses with impunity; while the poor are cast into dungeons and coerced with chains, for only following at a humble distance in the pathway of their lordly precedents.

Sue also acknowledged that vice and crime were present in all classes but he did so in order to further better understanding and sympathy between disparate social groups. Here the sentiments encourage discord and hostility amongst the working classes towards the more fortunate groups in the social hierarchy. The rhetoric is, in short, seditious. Reynolds's narrative reflects this and thus is full of unscrupulous, wicked aristocrats, both male and female, who, unlike Sue's aristocratic characters, are only too knowing of the world. The rich characters in The Mysteries of London are, for the most part, self-interested, scheming and immoral rather than simply ignorant and idle.

Reynolds goes even further than criticism of the aristocracy in The Mysteries of London, however, and attacks the monarchy in his novel. For the middle and ruling classes of Britain, the stability of the crown was a great source of pride and security in a changing world. France had rid herself of a crowned head in the Revolution and her history since had reflected nothing but disorder. By attacking the monarch, Reynolds is threatening the very foundations of Victorian society. Indeed, he denounces all the components of the social establishment, including the Church. Sue expressed anti-clerical sentiments in his later novel, Le Juif Errant which was serialized at the same time as The Mysteries of London, but in Les Mystères de Paris the church is not a target for criticism. The only cleric is a benevolent ally in Rodolphe's plan of
redemption for Fleur de Marie. Sue reveres rank and royalty in his novel and makes much, for example, of Prince Rodolphe's exalted status. *The Mysteries of London*, on the other hand, condemns rank, royalty, and the church equally. In one of the many passages describing London's slums, Reynolds indulges in some of the revolutionary rhetoric characteristic of the novel as a whole:

Is it not dreadful to think that we have a sovereign and a royal family on whom the country lavishes money by the hundreds of thousands—whose merest whims cost sums that would feed and clothe from year to year the inhabitants of such a place as Lock's Fields;—that we also have an hereditary aristocracy and innumerable sleek and comfortable dignitaries of the church, who devour the fruits of the earth and throw the parings and the peelings contemptuously to the poor;—in a word, that we have an oligarchy feasting upon the fatted calf, and flinging the offal to the patient, enduring, toiling, oppressed millions;—is it not dreadful, we ask, to think how much those millions do for Royalty, Aristocracy, Church, and Landed Interest, and how little—how miserably little, Royalty, Aristocracy, Church, and Landed Interest do for them in return?17

The slum concerned in this passage is called Lock's Fields and is the setting for another key example of the important distinctions between *The Mysteries of London* and Sue's novel. In describing the poor homes of the slum dwellers, Reynolds follows much of the pattern adopted by Sue in *Les Mystères de Paris* and emphasizes the damp, dark, cold conditions in which the poor are forced to live. However, Reynolds chooses to spell out one of the evils of these dreadful, crowded conditions which Sue had studiously failed to mention in his descriptions of poverty, the likelihood of incest. Reynolds's bald statement defies an especially sensitive social taboo and could only have been meant to shock:

In that densely populated neighbourhood that we are describing, hundreds of families each live and sleep in one room... The wealthy classes of society are far too ready to reproach the miserable poor for things which are really misfortunes and not faults. The habits of whole families sleeping together in one room destroys all sense of shame in
the daughters: and what guardian then remains for their virtue? But, alas! A horrible—an odious crime often results from the poverty which thus huddles brothers and sisters, aunts and nephews, all together in one narrow room—the crime of incest!18

Both the frankness of the language and the voyeuristic dwelling on details of forbidden sexuality are characteristic of Reynolds's treatment of sex throughout his novel and are in complete contrast to Sue. Sue's descriptions of sex and sexuality are restrained. Although parts of Les Mystères de Paris are titillating, such as the flirtation between Rodolphe and La Rigolette, reference to sex almost always remains oblique. There is little to shock the reader. Sue's characters remain fully clothed and personal decency is highly regarded in the novel. Only one character is seen partly unclothed. Towards the end of the novel, the dress of La Louve slips down from her shoulder when she braves the river Seine to save the drowning Fleur de Marie. However, the image is not meant to be sexually alluring. It serves instead to emphasize the raw courage of La Louve's rescue and links her character with the French emblem of the Revolution, Marianne, thus ennobling and endearing Sue's character still further.

Only one passage in Les Mystères de Paris presents sexuality more directly. In a highly suggestive passage, the notorious Ferrand is finally undone by his lust for the beautiful, cunning Cecily. Although the details of her seductive mastery of this evil character are particularly unabashed, the sexuality of scene is not gratuitous. Ferrand's downfall demonstrates not only the evil corruption of lust, but also provides the culmination of many of Rodolphe's schemes of benevolence and retribution. Cecily herself stays fully clothed throughout the episode and then escapes from her victim without any physical contact. He eventually goes mad and both this scene and his obsession for the girl are more reminiscent of a Faustian fable than of mere pornography.

The Mysteries of London, however, abounds in scenes of explicit sexuality which do border on the pornographic. Many of the female characters are deliberately disrobed and sexual activity is openly described in scenes which are uncalled for in the novel's plot. Reynolds's handling of sex in The Mysteries of London
is wholly unlike the indirect approach typical of "respectable" Victorian fiction and would certainly have invited censure. A passage describing the secret lust of one character, the Reverend Reginald Tracy, who, like Ferrand in Sue's novel, is a base hypocrite and maintains outward probity, will serve as an example:

Reginald stepped into the recess formed by the door of one of the bedchambers in that spacious mansion; and scarcely had he concealed himself there when he saw Ellen, with the child in her arms, pass across the landing at the end of the passage, and enter a room on the other side. . . . She wore a loose dressing-gown of snowy whiteness . . . When the rector beheld her descend in that bewitching negligee [sic],--her hair unconfined, and floating at will--her small, round, polished ankles glancing between the white drapery and the little slippers,--and the child, with merely a thick shawl thrown about it, in her arms,--and when he observed a bath in that chamber which she entered, he immediately comprehended her intention. . . . His greedy eyes were applied to the key-hole, and his licentious glance plunged into the depth of that sacred privacy. . . . Reginald watched her proceedings with the most ardent curiosity: the very luxury of the unhallowed enjoyment which he experienced caused an oppression at his chest; his heart beat quickly; his brain seemed to throb with violence. . . . The fires of gross sensuality raged madly in his breast. Ellen's preparation were now completed. . . . she was partly turned towards the door; and all the treasures of her bosom were revealed to the ardent gaze of the rector. . . . His desires were now inflamed to that pitch when they almost become ungovernable. . . . And now the drapery had fallen from her shoulders, and the whole of her voluptuous form, naked to the waist, was exposed to his view. . . . How he envied . . . the innocent babe which the fond mother pressed to that bosom--swelling, warm, and glowing!19

The character of Ellen Monroe further illustrates the important differences between The Mysteries of London and Sue's novel. Ellen is one of the central female figures of Reynolds's novel. At the beginning of the narrative, she is a young, pure-minded girl who is gradually driven by poverty and hardship to pose as a nude model for artists and eventually to prostitution. Her character develops into that of an immoral, self-interested schemer who loses all moral sense:
In sooth, it was a pity that one of the brightest ornaments of female loveliness should have been lowered by circumstances from the pedestal of virtue and modesty which she would have so eminently adorned.²⁰

Sue’s beautiful sinner, Fleur de Marie, had also been forced to turn to prostitution to survive in the harsh world of the Parisian slums, however, her experiences did not taint her soul. Fleur de Marie remains paradoxically pure in heart and is revered as such throughout the novel. The apparent contradiction of a moral, saintly but fallen woman so commonplace in Catholic culture is incompatible with the Protestant conception of women. Reynolds splits the figure in two and presents the counterpart to the wicked Ellen Monroe in a paragon of feminine virtue, the spotless Isabella, who, when she finally marries one of the central figures of the novel, Richard Markham, does so with “a halo of innocence about her . . . an air of purest chastity.”²¹

*Les Mystères de Paris* ends with Fleur de Marie’s tragic death where she too, despite her past, is surrounded by an aura of pious purity. Such complexity and contradiction was unrealizable in *The Mysteries of London.*

*The Mysteries of London* is, in fact, radically different from *Les Mystères de Paris* in every important respect. All links between the two novels are wholly superficial. Nevertheless, as we have seen, the two works were closely associated by the British press in the 1840s just as Sue’s novel was gaining general attention here. Since Reynolds’s work was so utterly a work of sensationalist, seditious, at times, even pornographic, popular fiction, the association was likely to have helped to stigmatize *Les Mystères de Paris,* and therefore Sue’s fiction generally in Britain. Sue’s work thus became affiliated with the worst kind of popular fiction during a period of particular sensitivity to the power and effect of popular fiction. A perceived connection with Reynolds’s novel could only have served to strengthen any developing bias in Britain against Sue’s own novel and ultimately his work in general.

That a deepening of prejudice against French fiction should be the result of an association with Reynolds was both unfortunate and ironic. In 1839 Reynolds himself had presented a reasoned, balanced argument against just such prejudice in his *Modern Literature of France.* The substance of his discussion and his tone are virtually
unrecognizable as those of the author of *The Mysteries of London*. Indeed much of the work could have been written by a judicious, dispassionate commentator today:

Prejudice, which a celebrated political writer very happily denominated "the spider of the mind," has done much to depreciate the value of foreign systems and institutions in the minds of the English. Hence is it that we daily hear even men of most liberal opinions expressing sentiments anything but impartial and just in reference to the French. This is more to be regretted, inasmuch as it is only by comparison, emulation, and research, that we can perfect or improve any system of laws, morals, literature, science or arts. But when we find the leading journals and periodicals of the English press still leaguing together against the French, with all the bitterness and hate which characterized the sentiments of the nation in those times when Napoleon rolled his war-chariot from the gates of Madrid to the palace of the Kremlin, . . . we feel our regret at such injustice commingled with a sentiment of pity, or indeed of contempt, for the narrow-mindedness of our fellow countrymen.

It was not, however, for these considered views which Reynolds was known in the 1840s or for which he has been remembered, for the most part, since. The success and the notoriety of *The Mysteries of London* overshadowed his other works and probably overshadowed the early reception of Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris* as well. The full force of the fear and distaste the literary and social establishment held for British works such as *The Mysteries of London* could be felt in the articles condemning popular fiction which targeted Sue in 1846-7 and helped to colour the perception of Sue's works just as these were becoming widely known in Britain.

Sue's next novel after *Les Mystères de Paris, Le Juif Errant*, was also imitated by Reynolds, who incorporated elements of that work, such as the graphic setting out of economic equations meant to demonstrate dispassionately the realities of social injustices, into *The Mysteries of London*. Later works by Reynolds, such as *Faust* (1846), *Wagner the Wehr-Wolf* (1846-7) and *The Necromancer* (1851-2) also probably borrowed their reliance on the supernatural from aspects of Sue's later work. However these later links between the two authors would have had less significance to the reception of Sue's work. By 1850 the tensions between Reynolds and the British
literary establishment erupted in open debate and Reynolds himself at last became a
direct target for censure.

Dickens's journal, *Household Words*, was founded in 1850, as a
response to the success of the popular press, including if not especially *Reynolds's
Miscellany*. In his opening issue, Dickens sets out his purpose: "We aspire to live in
the Household affections . . . in the bosoms of the young and old, of the well-to-do and
the poor . . . we would tenderly cherish that light of Fancy." He acknowledges that
there are many already publishing works of "high usefulness . . . whose company it is an
honour to join":

But there are others here—Bastards of the Mountain, draggled
fringe on the Red Cap, panders to the basest passions of the
lowest natures—whose existence is a national reproach. And
these, we should consider it our highest service to displace.23

For the next several years Dickens and Reynolds carried open attacks
on each other in their respective journals. After these open confrontations in print,
Reynolds's assumed association with Sue's work lost much of its significance as
conservative disapproval was explicitly focused on Reynolds himself. However, the
impact on Sue's reputation had taken place in the years before this open debate and in
the literary culture of Britain which drew, and to a certain extent still draws, fine
distinctions between popular and acceptable fiction, between "good" and "bad"
literature, Sue had already been generally perceived as a producer of the kind of "
prodigious heaps of nonsense and worse than nonsense . . ." which the British
establishment feared was poisoning the minds of their working classes. That individuals
such as Dickens himself may have on occasion perceived Sue's fiction differently will
be argued later. Nevertheless, an overall impression of Sue's fiction in Britain,
associating it with what Dickens condemned in 1852 as "perilous stuff", was created
during the early 1840s and, to a large extent, persists today.24

2. Morning Chronicle, October 17 1844.

3. see note 1 above.


6. Thomas Clark, A Letter addressed to G.W.M. Reynolds reviewing his conduct as a professed Chartist (London 1850), 19.


8. Clark, 10.

9. Thomas, vii-x.


12. Thomas, xii.


Chapter V
Response to Eugène Sue amongst certain key contemporary literary figures in Britain

Despite the serious reviews of his early works which featured in journals catering to an educated public in Britain and the more widespread press attention surrounding the publication of *Les Mystères de Paris* and *Le Juif Errant*, comment on Eugène Sue in the correspondence of Britain’s principal contemporary literary figures is disappointingly sparse. Observations on Sue’s works are especially limited amongst the private papers of the important novelists of the time and this lack of commentary could seem especially surprising from those whose livelihood and reputations depended on success in the medium of serialized fiction in which Sue was so conspicuously successful. It is possible to speculate that the controversies surrounding Sue prevented a certain amount of candour and that too much display of interest in his work might have been felt to signal potential imitation from his British rivals. Blatant copies, such as G. W.M. Reynolds’s *The Mysteries of London*, would have made imitation by reputable authors, or those aspiring to a reputable status, undesirable.

There may have also been some self-consciousness amongst writers, particularly as they became better known themselves. Dickens, for example, was famously anxious and destroyed much of his correspondence near the end of his career. Others may have hesitated to respond even privately to Sue’s fiction once his works became entangled in the sensitive social and political controversies of the period. Whatever the individual reasons for their relative reticence, it is interesting that British writers whose own works did not directly compete with those of Sue, such as the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning, provide comparably far more comment in their private correspondence.

Nonetheless, the few remarks in the letters of some British authors of fiction suffice to demonstrate that Sue and his accomplishments were not ignored. Affinities with Sue’s works in a number of British novels written after his great popular successes also point to the same conclusion. This is the case even with those writers,
such as Dickens and Thackeray, whose reputations place them above a purely popular audience. Response to Sue's fiction amongst contemporary British writers of serious fiction may have been more significant than the lack of overt commentary suggests.

Chapter V, Part One

"Quacks and Impostors": Response to Eugène Sue

in the papers and works of William Thackeray

Thackeray's response to Eugène Sue was characteristically complicated and provides a useful portrait of the ambivalence inherent in nineteenth-century Britain in attitudes towards fiction generally. Contemporary British criticism of Sue vacillated between condemnation for what was deemed an unpalatable realism and derision for a sentimental romanticism which idealized reality. Thackeray's views of Sue also wavered between these two perspectives and, in spite of their inherent contradictions, he was emphatically critical of Sue on both counts. However, despite his censure, reaction to Sue was to inform some of Thackeray's fiction written during the height of Sue's own success.

As has been seen, Thackeray was one of the early critics of Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris* in the British press, citing the work in his "Thieves' Literature of France" in the *Foreign Quarterly Review* in April 1843. That he would be an early and dominant voice in the reaction to Sue's fiction was natural. Thackeray's knowledge of French language and culture and his experience of life in France gave him an advantage over many of his contemporaries in Britain in the understanding and appreciation of French literature. His acquaintance with French life, however, did not foster a critical impartiality in Thackeray's case. Comments in his *Paris Sketch Book*, published as a collection in 1840, indicate an instinctive mistrust of the French and their way of life. There, he repeatedly voices his distaste for, amongst other things, an apparent lack of a strict moral code:
A French gentleman thinks no more of proclaiming that he has a mistress than that he has a tailor; and one lives in the times of Boccaccio over again, in the thousand and one French novels, which depict the state of society in that country.²

Thackeray's relationship with French literature remained complicated by this bias and Thackeray the critic was almost always Thackeray the moralist, especially when dealing with the fiction of Eugène Sue.

Despite the invective against *Les Mystères de Paris* in his critique for the *Foreign Quarterly*, a piece he anticipated would be "striking" in a letter in January 1843³, Thackeray began to translate Sue's novel for the French publisher Giraldon a year later. Notes from his journal for 1844 indicate that at that stage, while he was involved with an English production, he intended to "puff" the book as a "remarkable manifesto."⁴ The novel was already gaining notoriety in Britain and it may be that any favourable notice from his pen would have been motivated by a desire to encourage sales from which he, as translator, might profit. Earning a livelihood for himself and his young family was then, and continued to be for many years, a major anxiety. The potential "puff", had it been written, would have been yet another indication that, in the midst of his severity, Thackeray did not fail to acknowledge the power of Sue's novel nor the "cleverness" of the author. Not long after the project had begun, however, Thackeray abandoned the translation because he was not paid promptly enough. Further pronouncements from Thackeray on Sue's works continued in his familiar, disparaging tone.

Thorough knowledge not only of *Les Mystères de Paris*, but also of many earlier works and of Sue's history and reputation was unmistakable in some of Thackeray's correspondence of the period. Writing to Macvey Napier, the editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, in July 1845, apparently in response to a proposal to review Sue's work, Thackeray describes the French author thus:

Eugène Sue has written a very great number of novels, beginning with maritime novels in the Satanic style so to speak: full of crime and murder of every description. He met in his early works with no very great success: he gave up the indecencies of language and astonished the world with
‘Mathilde’ three years since, which had the singular quality among French novels of containing no improprieties of expression. In my mind it is one of the most immoral books in the world. “The Mysteries of Paris” followed with still greater success, and the same extreme cleverness of construction and the same sham virtue, It has been sold by tens of thousands in London in various shapes, in American editions, and illustrated English translations. The book just translated is of an old performance; it is called “Latréaumont” in the French original.

How long Thackeray had had such detailed knowledge of Sue and the body of his works as it was then is unclear from his correspondence. The accuracy of his description, however, demonstrates that he had studied Sue’s career and knew his fiction well. Whether this familiarity was acquired in response to the popularity of Les Mystères de Paris or whether Thackeray had encountered Sue’s works in the course of his life in France is perhaps unnecessary to determine, although it is not unlikely that the example of Sue’s international success had sharpened any interest. Les Mystères de Paris had made its author’s fortune. Many of Thackeray’s comments on Sue are tinged with a bitterness inspired by what he clearly felt was an undeserved success. Indeed, reaction to Sue from some of his fellow authors on both sides of the Channel was often couched in similarly embittered tones. Balzac’s later comments on his erstwhile friend echo those of Thackeray. Whatever the timing of Thackeray’s knowledge of Sue’s works, it is clear that, although much of his commentary in the British press at this time was confined to specific discussions of Les Mystères de Paris, his knowledge of Sue ranged beyond that one popular novel.

Though commentary in Thackeray’s correspondence disappears after 1845, response to Sue surfaces in Thackeray’s fiction after this point. Direct references to Sue or to novels by Sue, a few of which appear in Thackeray’s novels or their prefaces, parallel his remarks in the press and are invariably satiric and contemptuous. Within the fabric of the novels themselves that satire is often reinforced by, as one critic identifies it, the “the parodic strata” of the novels “where we find the critical intelligence working within rather than outside the stuff of fiction.” However, almost as often Thackeray’s overt criticism of Sue is challenged by the affinities their fictions
share. There are echoes of Sue in much of Thackeray’s early fiction and the British author’s distaste for his fellow writer can sometimes seem unreasonable. Thackeray’s fiction is often guilty of the faults which Thackeray the critic has identified in others, especially in Sue.

When Sue was at the height of his popularity in Britain, Thackeray was still primarily a journalist by trade. However, writing fiction could be especially lucrative during this period, as the examples of Sue and Dickens demonstrated, and Thackeray had a particular and a persistent need to improve his income. Notes from Thackeray’s journals in 1844 reveal that while writing instalments of *Barry Lyndon*, his “first substantial work of fiction,” it he was also translating *Les Mystères de Paris*. It is not surprising, therefore, to find at least one direct reference to the French work in *Barry Lyndon*, despite their differences in setting and subject matter.

More significantly, however, response to Sue is implicit within Thackeray’s authorial comments on the role of fiction which punctuate his novel. In this work, and even more distinctly later, Thackeray polarizes good fiction and bad and identifies Eugène Sue as the antithesis of himself. Thackeray had already branded Sue as one of those whose works inspire a “guilty sympathy for villany (sic)”. In *Barry Lyndon* such writers are labelled “rose-water novelists”, who make crime and corruption attractive.

Thackeray had established his disdain for a certain type of fiction with his first fictional piece, *Catherine*, written in 1839. This had been a lampooning of the successful works of Newgate novelists such as Bulwer-Lytton and Harrison Ainsworth. Thackeray’s antagonism for such works had also been made clear from articles such as those already quoted here. He had a “special aversion” for fiction which featured crime and criminals yet purported to be moral. His reaction to these works was highly emotional: “crime lightly handled in literature made him splenetic.” By setting *Barry Lyndon* in an earlier century, Thackeray had attempted to follow Fielding, whom he admired, with a morally complex story which would avoid what he saw as the contemporary hypocrisy.

Contemporary tastes served Thackeray’s satiric purpose nonetheless and the fact that Eugène Sue’s novel was fresh in his own readers’ minds was put to good use. Footnotes to the narrative feature in the original instalments of Thackeray’s
novel as they appeared in Fraser’s Magazine, a device also used by Sue in Les Mystères de Paris for the same purpose, to lend authenticity to the story. One of these notes is used by Thackeray to underline his critical position and to justify his morally ambivalent hero. The note begins with an apology to his audience in a manner which readers familiar with Sue would quickly recognize. The French author, too, had recently addressed his “delicate readers” with such a defence. Both authors claim that the sordid scenes within their stories are but an accurate reflection of the reality of their subjects. Thackeray declares:

If the crude way in which these matters are discussed should offend some delicate readers of the present day, let them remember this is an authentic description of a bygone state of society, not a dandy apology, or encomium, such as some of our rose-water novelists invent, whose works from their very charity, become untrustworthy, and are no more natural or veracious, than the legend of Prince Prettyman or the story of Aladdin.11

“A dandy apology“ could suggest Sue to British readers aware of the Parisian dandy whose reputation was beginning to take on mythical proportions at this point. The thrust of Thackeray’s argument here.echoes the opening passages of Les Mystères de Paris, where Sue apologizes for the work’s harsh scenes with a similar appeal to his readers:

We begin mistrusting ourselves in these scenes on two counts. In the first case we fear that we will be accused of seeking out repugnant episodes, and once we have been permitted the license to do so, that we will be found unworthy of the task which is imposed by a faithful, fearless reproduction of these eccentric ways of life.12

Sue reiterates this petition for forbearance on the part of his “lecteurs timorés”13, a phrase which recalls Thackeray’s “delicate readers”, at a number of significant points in his story—before the descriptions of the prison of Saint-Lazare, or the portraits of the murderous Martial family, for example. His doing so becomes a recognizable feature of the novel. Thackeray calls attention to this feature to serve his
satiric purpose, yet he too employs the same device throughout his work, linking the
two novels in a manner he may not have intended.

As his narrative advances, however, Sue’s appeals carry more than a
request for tolerance for his story. Sue asks his readers to extend their sympathy from
himself to his subject, the poor and dispossessed. This notable difference, and Sue’s
earnest tone which contrasts with Thackeray’s sarcasm, are important distinctions
between otherwise similar passages.

However implicit any criticism may be in this first reference in *Barry
Lyndon*, the novel’s concluding lines contain an explicit allusion to the protagonist of
*Les Mystères de Paris*, one which would have been plain to contemporary readers.
Thackeray explains the final good fortune of his undeserving hero, the eponymous
Barry Lyndon, by asserting that the same injustice as often as not occurs in life. “Is it
the good always who ride in gold coaches and the wicked who go to the workhouse?
Is a humbug never preferred before a capable man?” The last phrase is particularly
resonant of the resentment Thackeray displays towards successful authors such as Sue.
Thackeray then sneers at those whose approach is less true to life than his own and so
end their tales happily, meting out “poetical justice”, his own phrase. The world, in his
view, rarely provides the sort of retribution available in novels:

> If this be true of the world, those persons who find their
pleasure or get their livelihood by describing its manners and
the people who live in it are bound surely to represent to the
best of their power life as it really appears to them to be; not
to foist upon the public figures pretending to be delineations
of human nature,—gay and agreeable cut-throats, otto-of-rose
murderers, amiable hackney-coachmen, Prince Rodolphe and
the like, being representatives of beings that never have or
could have existed. At least, if not bounden to copy nature,
they are justified in trying; and hence in describing not only
what is beautiful, but what is ill-favoured too, faithfully, so
that each may appear as like as possible to nature. It is as
right to look at a beauty as at a hunchback; and, if to look, to
describe too . . . 14

This presents a biased interpretation of the central figure of *Les
Mystères de Paris* and is only partly fair. Prince Rodolphe is indeed a preposterously
romantic figure. His retribution of the many and various wrongs in Sue’s novel, no
matter how improbable, dominates its story-line. However, Thackeray ignores what he would certainly have known, that the ending of Sue’s novel was anything but conventionally happy. The Prince remains unable to rectify one glaring evil, the stain of her immoral past which burdens his daughter, Fleur de Marie. It is her pathetic death and the Prince’s subsequent desolation which prevail in the novel’s last scenes. The figure of Fleur de Marie and a significant number of portraits throughout the work suggest that Sue has also been attempting to describe “not only what is beautiful, but what is ill-favoured, too”.

Thackeray’s seemingly wilful blindness here is perhaps explained in part by his reaction to the complicated portrait of the prostitute princess in Sue’s novel. The conflict between Fleur de Marie’s innate innocence and immoral past life is central to the work and its complexity provides a direct contrast to Thackeray’s own female characters, who mostly fall into much more strictly defined categories, either entirely good, but wooden and lifeless, or rather bad, but sexually exciting. When touching upon sexual morality, the tone of Thackeray’s commentary on Sue takes on even more of “splenetic” quality noted earlier. His remarks to Macvey Napier regarding the novel Mathilde provide a clear example. Sexual tension and the role of female sexual morality are the primary concern of that novel which Thackeray dismisses simply as one of the “most immoral” he knows. This a narrow view of the novel whose eponymous heroine in fact remains an example of probity throughout and Thackeray oversimplifies a particularly complex issue with his simple rejection.

Thackeray’s reaction reveals more of his own psychology and personal history than it does of Sue. “For nineteenth-century Anglo-Saxons, . . . Paris was the place to be wicked in”, as one critic has put it, and Thackeray’s own visit to the French city may have been” in the interest of something other than proficiency in the French language.”15 Certainly he was familiar with the seedier sides of Parisian life, the Boulevards where he discovered that “vice is vice”16. In his fiction sexuality outside the “curtained sanctities of Christian marriage” is deplored and “the thought of sexual irregularity threw [him] into unreasoning panic not only as a purveyor of commercially viable Victorian fiction but in his inmost being.”17

The irresistible association of France with sexual licence prevented Thackeray from adopting a dispassionate critical stance when considering French
fiction. He often indicated moral laxity or vacuity in the characters of his fiction by portraying them to be familiar with or to have a predilection for French novels. Sue’s works provided particularly conspicuous examples of French fiction to British readers during these years and Thackeray often made use of Sue and his novels in this way.

Thackeray’s criticism of Sue’s works as immoral can seem to be misplaced when the morality of the central figure of his best known work, Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair*, is considered. Becky’s sexual adventures provide much of the interest of his story and when she descends into prostitution at the story’s end, Thackeray is coy in acknowledging her role, although he also makes her fate unmistakably clear. He allows himself a double standard here, flirting humorously with those issues he renounces in other authors, including Sue. Becky, although patently not a moral character, awakens sympathy in the reader, a sympathy deplored by her author as “guilty” when inspired by other works.

*Vanity Fair* is subtitled *A Novel without a Hero*, pointing to another of Thackeray’s preoccupations, his distrust of hero-worship. He shared with Carlyle an intense dislike of the illusion which the creation of a hero could require, the “sham, flunkeydom, humbug, cant, vanity” as he saw it.¹⁸ Sue’s fiction, especially *Les Mystères de Paris*, stands at the opposite end of this notion, producing just the sort of hero in Prince Rodolphe which both Carlyle and Thackeray would despise. Sue’s fascination with the dress of his characters with its ability to determine rank and social position is another aspect of this difference between them. Finally, Sue himself was briefly elevated to the status of “hero” by his readers who did in some cases almost worship him, as their letters demonstrate. Thackeray was no doubt aware of this element of Sue’s reputation which may have also contributed to the way in which he viewed Sue’s fiction.

There is no direct reference to Sue in *Vanity Fair*, which followed *Barry Lyndon*, beginning publication in instalments in January 1847. French novels serve their purpose as indications of those characters the reader should disdain, but these works remain a generic evil. Later chapters describing the Duchy of Pumpernickel, however, elaborately parody the pomp and circumstance of Sue’s Gerolstein, the royal seat of his Prince Rodolphe in *Les Mystères de Paris*. The connection between the two invented principalities is not made openly, but again
Thackeray is taking advantage of the familiarity his readers would have with Sue’s novel to add dimension to his satire.

It is his next novel, *The History of Pendennis*, begun in the summer of 1848, which provides Thackeray’s most overt response to Eugène Sue in his fiction. In his preface to *Pendennis*, he again appeals to his readers, in this case for tolerance of the potential dullness of his novel. He claims to have consciously avoided a sensational plot in the interest of “a certain truth and honesty” and pleads with his audience to judge him accordingly:

... of a writer, who delivers himself up to you perforce unreservedly, you say Is he honest? Does he tell the truth in the main?... Is he a quack, who shams sentiment, or mouths for effect? Does he seek popularity by claptraps or other arts? ... I ask you to believe that this person writing strives to tell the truth.19

Thackeray had called Sue a quack in some of his earliest commentary in the British press and its use here hints to his readers to identify the French author as his own counterpart, embodying the sham sentiment and virtue opposed to Thackeray’s declared sincerity. The corollary is confirmed a few lines later:

Perhaps the lovers of ‘excitement’ may care to know, that this book began with a very precise plan, which was entirely put aside. Ladies and gentlemen, you were to have been treated, and the writer’s and the publishers’ pocket benefited, by the recital of the most active horrors. ... What more stirring than the contrasts of society? the mixture of slang and fashionable language? ... The exciting plan was laid aside ... because, on attempting it, I found that I failed from want of experience of my subject; and never having been intimate with any convict in my life, and the manners of ruffians and goal-birds being quite unfamiliar to me, the idea of entering into competition with M. Eugène Sue was abandoned. To describe a real rascal, you must make him so horrible that he would be too hideous to show; and unless the painter paints him fairly, I hold he has no right to show him at all.

Again Thackeray is disingenuous in his discussion of Sue. What are Barry Lyndon or Becky Sharp, if not real rascals? Ruffians and other questionable figures people much of Thackeray’s fiction, and three hundred pages after his assertion
in its preface, *The History of Pendennis* shifts to a detailed depiction of the life of the inmates of Fleet Prison.

Comment on Sue, and in particular his two most popular novels, *Les Mystères de Paris* and *Le Juif Errant*, continues to surface in the course of the narrative, usually adding barbs to Thackeray’s satiric characterizations as it had in *Barry Lyndon*. In the idiom of *The History of Pendennis*, the French and their country suggest every wickedness possible. France is where certain dubious characters, such as the trickster Bloundell-Bloundell, flourish. It is there that the rogue Amory continually retreats in disgrace and where he is able to renew his fortunes through gambling. Her affectation of French and rarefied French mannerisms distinguish the scheming, duplicitous Blanche from the sincere, pure-hearted, utterly English heroine Laura. Indeed, Blanche’s adoption of a French name (from the more prosaic English Betty) is one of the first indications of her deceit and pretension.

In a chapter whose tone remains consistently ironic, Thackeray clarifies the nature of this character whose public image is at such variance with her selfish, ill-tempered behaviour behind the closed doors of her home. He uses an oblique reference to two of Sue’s characters to underline his own disdain of Blanche who of course shows a fondness for French novels:

> Missy had begun to gush at an early age. . . . she had . . . improved her mind by a sedulous study of novels of the great modern authors of the French language. There was not a romance of Balzac and George Sand which the indefatigable little creature had not devoured by the time she was sixteen: and, however little she sympathised with her relatives at home, she had friends, as she said, in the spirit-world, meaning the tender Indiana, the passionate and poetic Lelia . . . and the other numberless heroes of the French romances. She had been in love with Prince Rodolph and Prince Djalma while she was yet at school . . .

Thackeray’s confidence that these two last figures would be recognized by his readers without mention of the works from which they come or their author is a measure of the relative longevity Sue’s fiction had enjoyed amongst the British reading
public. Both *Les Mystères de Paris* and *Le Juif Errant* had appeared some years before the publication of this novel in 1848.

The same certainty is apparent in another allusion to the first of these two novels in a portrait of Fleur de Marie which adorns the walls of a minor character, Percy Sibwright. This figure never actually appears in the novel but is caricatured through a description of his bedroom which reveals a predisposition to an effeminate vanity and shallowness which Thackeray clearly despises. Although Sibwright is a lawyer, "scarce anything told of the lawyer but the wig-box beside the Venus upon the middle of the shelf of the bookcase . . ." Narcissism and a slightly *louche* sentimentality characterize the decoration of this young man’s room:

He had a museum of scent, pomatum, and bear’s grease pots, quite curious to examine, too; a choice selection of portraits of females, almost always in sadness and generally in disguise or déshabillé, glittered around the neat walls of his elegant little bower of repose. . . . The Princesse Fleur de Marie (of Rudolstein and the ‘Mysteries of Paris’) was sadly ogling out of the bars of her convent cage, in which, poor prisoned bird, she was moulting away . . .

Shortly after this passage, Thackeray leaps into the future of his protagonists and has the chaste, faithful Laura who clearly represents a Thackerayian ideal of womanhood, confess to her husband “with a blush and a laugh, showing much humour,” that she has read a French novel “once much in vogue.” This husband, who will eventually be revealed to be the novel’s central figure, Pendennis, expresses real surprise that his admirable wife should have ever have come across such a work, “wondering where on earth she could have got such a volume . . .” Clearly, unlike Blanche and other less ideal females, Laura does not waste her time on French fiction. Her contact with the novel has been solely because she has had to lodge in Sibwright’s chambers while nursing Pendennis himself in an illness. Her light-hearted dismissal of the French book is accented by her description of how she also, in the same room, had tried on the lawyer’s little used wig to amuse herself. The earnest, forthright Laura is in no danger of falling in love with Sue’s princes.

In his description, Thackeray mistakenly identifies Prince Rodolphe’s duchy as “Rudolstein”. Although such slips do appear in Thackeray’s works, this
mistake is almost too wide of the mark. It is probably either part of a deliberate parody or an attempt to distance himself and his work from Sue’s notoriety. Yet *The History of Pendennis* shares some common ground with *Les Mystères de Paris* beyond Thackeray’s satire. It is not inconceivable that the power he himself acknowledged in Sue’s fiction had carried some weight with Thackeray as well as with his readers.

One of the most effective settings in *Les Mystères de Paris* is the house on the rue du Temple in Paris where many of the novel’s sub-plots and its principal story-line converge. The city setting of a house in Shepherd’s Inn in London plays a comparable role in *Pendennis*. Here a number of sub-plots also overlap, linked, as in Sue’s novel, by the presence of the central character. Although in general the two novels differ in tone, the rue du Temple is the scene of some of the French work’s highest pathos, for example, while scenes at Shepherd’s Inn remain largely comic, the staging of Thackeray’s work recalls that of Sue. The parallels are especially striking in the passages surrounding the siege of Captain Strong in his rooms by his creditors when the lodgers of Shepherd’s Inn and the porter of the house band together to foil the attempts of the arresting bailiffs. Some of Sue’s minor characters perform a remarkably similar rescue of the jewel-maker Morel in the rue du Temple.

The opening doors, concealed peep-holes and different levels of the central staircase which serve the purpose of melodrama in Sue and of farce in Thackeray reveal a shared debt to the theatre. Thackeray’s use of such a noticeably similar staging as that used in *Les Mystères de Paris* may again be parody, as the comedy inherent in his scenes suggests, or an unconscious mirroring of Sue’s successful novel.

Both authors idealize the pastoral in their novels, using country settings to contrast with comparable corruption of city life. Fairoaks in Thackeray’s novel furnishes all that is good, honourable and faithful in the novel. Laura and Pendennis’s mother, both idealized figures themselves, are inextricably linked to the place. Sue sets an utopian community, the farm Bouqueval, in the countryside and contrasts this world with the evils of Parisian life. Curiously, both fictional settings were inspired by the authors’ own country homes. Fairoaks is generally taken to be Larkbeare, the home of Thackeray’s mother and step-father, and Bouqueval was the name of the Sue family’s country seat outside Paris.
Documents, letters and conspiracies are key elements in the twisting of the plot of *Les Mystères de Paris*, and although these conventional devices are by no means peculiar to Sue, it is interesting that Thackeray also employs them to the same effect in his novel. A particularly useful example is provided by the retribution of the wrongs caused by the servant Morgan. During the course of the narrative, this figure metamorphoses from a facetious caricature into an embodiment of greed, the centre of a network of financial intrigues. The denouement of this sub-plot in *The History of Pendennis* involves a retribution every bit as contrived and sentimental as its parallel in *Les Mystères de Paris*, with the equally evil Ferrand who shares the outward respectability and hidden corruption of Morgan. Both men are brought to a kind of moral rather than legal justice and their innocent victims, in both cases hard-working worthy poor, are avenged by the use of an incriminating letter and conspiracies amongst the more worthy characters of the stories.

These benevolent conspiracies are central to Sue's novel and also feature in *Pendennis*, resolving some of the complications of the novel's plot. The bigamist Amory, for example, is neatly thwarted by just such an intrigue involving the good characters of the story, a convenient letter and the timely appearance of a wife hitherto hidden in the narrative. In fact all the various elements of *The History of Pendennis* culminate in the kind of facile, dextrous, happy ending earlier despised by the work's author. Thackeray has put aside his own tenets respecting good, realistic fiction in favour of the sort of narrative contrivance he had both recognized and reviled in Sue.

*The History of Pendennis*, then, has a conventionally happy ending, one which modern readers could find as sentimental and as unrealistic as the “poetical justice” scorned by Thackeray himself. Indeed, all the disparate threads of the novel's complicated fabric are woven together with a facility which would have inspired derision in Thackeray had it appeared elsewhere. The retribution of wrongs which Thackeray maintained rarely occurs in the real world is as much a feature of his story as it is in Sue's. Pendennis realizes his genuine love for the faithful Laura, the scheming Blanche is denied her rich dupe of a husband, the likeable Captain Strong establishes a prosperous business, the innocent Lady Clavering is saved from bigamy by the timely appearance of a former Mrs. Amory who predates her own marriage to that character,
and so on. It is typical of Thackeray’s reaction to Sue that he is prepared to castigate the French author for just such facility and lack of realism in *Les Mystères de Paris* and yet to make use of these qualities in his own work. Admittedly, Thackeray’s insistent irony, even at his most sentimental, suggests that his “critical intelligence” is always at work and that there are elements of his own story which he himself instinctively distrusts. Such self-consciousness, or indeed insincerity, is wanting in Sue’s fiction.

Thackeray may have felt he avoided sentimentality to some extent by reverting to his former bitter theme of the real injustice of the world in the concluding passage of his novel. There he ends his story by dwelling on the tragic figure of the sympathetic George Warrington whose early folly in marrying beneath him has condemned him to obscurity and solitude. His devotion to the admirable Laura and his friendship for Pendennis become all the more poignant. There is a certain heart-felt and self-pitying quality to Thackeray’s last phrases in the novel which recall both his own tragic marriage and his early struggles to achieve financial and literary success:

> If the best men do not draw the great prizes in life, we know it has been so settled by the Ordainer of the lottery. We own, and see daily, how the false and worthless live and prosper, while the good are called away, and the dear and young perish untimely,—we perceive in every man’s life the maimed happiness, the frequent falling, the bootless endeavour, the struggle of Right and Wrong, in which the strong often succumb and the swift fail: we see flowers of good blooming in foul places, as, in the most lofty and splendid fortunes, flaws of vice and meanness . . .

Thackeray had used similar terms before when railing against the “quacks and impostors”, among them notably Eugène Sue, who had managed to acquire literary fame and fortune despite the faults he himself had observed in their works. It is a familiar stance in Thackeray’s critical and fictional writing, although it became less noticeable as his career developed. Thackeray’s reputation and fortunes had begun to flourish with the publication of *Vanity Fair* and he was increasingly a figure of some stature in the literary and social world of his contemporaries. By the early months of 1848, he had become, in his own words, “a sort of great man . . . all but at the top of the tree . . .” Although the tensions of his personal life persisted and
he continued to live in the shadow of printing deadlines, a habit acquired in early years, Thackeray could no longer claim to feel the acute resentment of an unappreciated genius.

Discussions of Eugène Sue in Thackeray’s work dwindle after their peak in *The History of Pendennis*. His next novel, *The History of Henry Esmond*, written in 1852, is admired for its faithful rendition of an earlier period; clearly any contemporary references would have spoiled the meticulous effect of this historical novel. It is interesting to note that this work is the only one which Thackeray carefully planned and revised before publication. It is possible to imagine, as in the case of Dickens’s earlier *Dombey and Son*, that Thackeray was inspired to attempt the experiment of a different approach to composition after criticism of the ungainly serializations of Sue’s works, amongst others. The faults of serialized fiction in “feuilletons” had been the subject of critical disapproval already in France and in Britain. The confused structure of *Le Juif Errant* had been particularly apparent to critics on both sides of the Channel. The hostile reception highlighted some of the inherent problems of serialized novels, which, in Britain, Anthony Trollope referred to as “a mode of publication in literature by no means very articulate, but easy of production and lucrative.”

However, as it was both “easy and lucrative”, Thackeray returned to writing in instalments with *The Newcomes* published in 1853-1855. This later novel did not address Sue’s work to any significant extent. Allusion to Sue is limited to one brief reference which lacks the resonance of previous comments. Indeed, a sea-change appears to have taken place in Thackeray’s view of the French in general. Colonel Newcome, for example, whose honour and generosity of spirit the reader is meant to admire as much as Thackeray clearly does, speaks French beautifully and this accomplishment only serves to accent his dignity instead of revealing pretension and duplicity as it had in earlier works. The first love of the Colonel, his “great passion”, is a French noblewoman who embodies admirable traits hitherto only portrayed in English women. The scenes of the novel which take place in Paris are no different from those set in London; both societies display similar faults of superficiality and selfishness. The dissipation facing the young Clive Newcome in Paris presents the same threat to that which tempts him in his own country.
One reference to Sue here indicates that the French author's name was still expected to convey a certain *frisson* to British readers. Thackeray has one of his characters describe the scheming duchesse de Florac as "a Médée, a monstre, a femme d'Eugène Sue"\textsuperscript{29}, an allusion too vague to identify in detail since so many of Sue's best known novels contained such figures. However, other French authors, such as Paul de Kock and Balzac, are mentioned in a similar spirit. The disapprobation especially reserved for Sue in former works has disappeared.

Sue's own career, as has been seen, waned after 1850. During the period of political crisis of 1848 and the next few years, his reputation took on a decidedly political rather than simply literary character. By the early 1850s, when Thackeray's novel was written, Sue was a political exile and his fiction was becoming forgotten. His popular and financial success had faded enough that his name and his novels would no longer serve the emblematic purpose Thackeray had found for them earlier.

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8 see note 4 above.
9 see note 1 above.
10 Sutherland, 13.
11 *Barry Lyndon*, 252.
13 Ibid, 423.
14 *Barry Lyndon*, 310.
17 see note 15.
18 Sutherland, 16.
19 *The History of Pendennis*, 33-34
20 *The History of Pendennis*, 253.
21 Ibid, 544.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 *The History of Pendennis*, 785.
26 Sutherland, 8.
29 *The Newcomes*, 379.
Chapter V, Part Two

“Un si spirituel et si galant homme”: Response to Eugène Sue
in the letters and works of Charles Dickens.

In the winter of 1847, when he visited Paris with John Forster, Dickens made it a point to meet his fellow author Eugène Sue. The two writers dined together in the company of Forster and Alexandre Dumas. Forster included the meeting in his account of the life of Dickens although no such record exists in Dickens’s own letters. The omission is curious since there is ample evidence in his correspondence of the extent to which Dickens himself had sought the acquaintance.

Writing to his friend Lady Blessington on the eve of his visit to France in December 1846, Dickens requested an introduction to Sue declaring that he “would rather have [this] from [her] hand than any other.” Lady Blessington’s friend, the Count d’Orsay, knew Sue well and it was eventually through the Count that the two authors corresponded briefly.

Sue and Dickens had been in contact a year before, in October 1845, when it appears that Sue had commissioned Dickens to respond to an invitation to address the Manchester Athenaeum. Dickens declined the “flattering Invitation” on Sue’s behalf in terms which indicate that he had had a direct request to do so from Sue himself:

M. Eugène Sue has begged me to write to you, and acknowledge with many heartfelt thanks the receipt of your flattering Invitation. He requests me to assure you of his high and unfeigned sense of the honor [sic] you have done him; and earnestly entreats me to add that he is gratified by your recognition of him, a French writer, in England... If I could convey to you an adequate idea of M. Eugène Sue’s anxiety that I should do my very best to thank you on his behalf, and to find “strong words” for that purpose, you would feel with me that your remembrance of him has met with a sincere and quick response.

Although it is clear from this letter that the two authors had already communicated, Dickens’s petition to Lady Blessington in 1846 suggests that he felt a formal introduction to be desirable before actually meeting Sue. That Dickens chose to
follow these prescribed forms of politesse and that he elected to do so through such
socially eminent channels is not surprising. Sue’s reputation as a successful author was
equalled by his renown as a dandy and his role as a member of the *haut monde* of
Paris. Dickens’s own social status was less secure and he had remained self-conscious
of this fact despite his literary success. His fragile social confidence may have felt more
at ease, particularly in a foreign city, with the support of the Count d’Orsay as sponsor.

While in Paris in January 1847, Dickens reported to Lady Blessington
that Eugène Sue had left the city and that they had not, at that point, been able to
meet. Dickens forwarded a letter of introduction from the Count d’Orsay to Sue in the
country and the two must have subsequently met with Forster, whose report of the
meeting covers the same period in Paris. As mentioned, Dickens himself does not
remark on the encounter. He does compliment Sue a few months later in April of the
same year in response to a letter from Sue sent through the Count d’Orsay. Dickens
thanks the Count for the letter with warmth and apparent esteem for Sue, although his
regard here may be as much for his noble correspondent as for their mutual friend:

I thank you, my dear friend, for having sent me the letter of
Eugène Sue. I have read it with the greatest interest and I am
charmed to know that I have the honour to be esteemed by
such a witty and gallant man.5

The French terms of his description are especially flattering to Sue [“un
si spirituel et si galant homme.”]. The tone of another note to Forster, written in
September of the same year, somewhat tempers the impression of earlier comments.
Dickens describes his reaction to a notorious contemporary murder case which had
attracted notice in both France and Britain. He compares the sordid nature of the story
to the works of both Sue and Alexandre Dumas: “It is strange to see a bloody
reflection of our friends Eugène Sue and Dumas in the whole melodrama.”6 However,
in this instance as well, Dickens may have coloured his comments to suit his audience.
Forster was decidedly critical of Sue. As editor of the *Examiner*, he would certainly
have sanctioned, if not written, the unmitigated censure of Sue which appeared later
that year in an article already quoted from that paper.
After their meeting in Paris, Dickens comments little on Eugène Sue in his correspondence. There are a few terse notes to correspondents to indicate that he did not have an autograph of Eugène Sue. Two of these date from 1845 and a further record is undated but is probably from 1847, after Dickens’s visit to Paris. No other comment on Sue appears. Again, it is interesting that, having sought Sue’s acquaintance so actively, Dickens appears to remain silent on his impression of the author. It may be that the correspondence of this period was part of that destroyed by Dickens later. It may also be that Sue as a man was a disappointment to Dickens. Sue’s reputation had ballooned by this time and Dickens could have felt that it had promised a figure of more stature, more personal presence than the rather quiet Sue actually presented. It may be that the fastidious Sue was himself disappointed in Dickens. Certainly after 1847 the two seem to have ceased to correspond and Dickens did not pursue the acquaintance as he had before.

Overall, despite their number, Dickens’s surviving references to Sue in his private papers reveal surprisingly little. It is clear that he was anxious to know Sue, but then it would have been singular for a fellow author not to wish to do so. Virtually everyone in the reading public desired to meet Sue, as the requests to Dickens for the French author’s autograph attest. Sue’s fame at the time was such that he often retreated to the countryside to avoid its effects.

Dickens’s other comments on Sue may have been adjusted to suit his various correspondents and could reveal more of his feelings for them than any useful insight on his perspective on Sue. The lack of commentary from Dickens on their meeting equally eludes interpretation. It may be that his silence was deliberate and that Dickens did not wish to recall the interview. In 1847 Sue was still a popular, successful writer and his reputation continued to have a high profile on both sides of the Channel. Had Sue disliked or disdained Dickens, it would not have been very politic of Dickens to call attention to the fact. On the other hand, Sue was also subject to very damning criticism in the British press shortly after their encounter in early 1847. During this period Dickens would undoubtedly have wished to avoid sullying his own name by association, especially as a great deal of the sort of condemnation aimed at Sue had
earlier also been targeted at Dickens's *Oliver Twist*. Like much of the criticism and the history surrounding Sue, these notions are contradictory but equally plausible.

Whatever his views may have been, however, Dickens, unlike Thackeray, did not appear to dismiss Sue or his fiction lightly. Dickens did not, as Thackeray did in some of his prefaces, invite comparison of his works with Sue’s nor did Dickens’s fiction appear to contain direct responses to Sue’s novels. There are no allusions to Sue or his works in Dickens’s novels. Nevertheless, the two authors were linked by their popular successes and the subject matter of some of their fiction, if nothing more. Sue felt he could appoint Dickens as his British spokesman to the Manchester Athenaeum presumably on the strength of this connection. Certainly Dickens was approached for autographs of Sue even before he had met the Frenchman in 1847. The bond between the two authors, however, goes beyond the parallel popularity of their novels. Significant affinities unite their fiction both before and after Sue’s great popular successes.

An association with British fiction in general was recognised and acknowledged early in Sue’s novels. His first stories reflected Gothic elements reminiscent of the works of Ann Radcliffe and maritime themes from Smollett and Marryat. Later novels, the successful *Mathilde* particularly, borrowed heavily from Richardson and acknowledged Ann Radcliffe’s influence openly. *Les Mystères de Paris*, in its turn, bore some resemblance to Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*, published five years earlier in 1838.

The tie between the two novels surfaces in a number of ways. Each focuses its story on the urban poor and their underworld of crime. Both books concentrate on the plight of an orphaned child in moral and physical danger from that underworld. Both narratives employ similar devices with melodramatic overtones: disguise, secret spying from concealed hiding places, entrapments, abductions and dramatic, last-minute rescues.

Certain central figures in *Les Mystères de Paris* recall some of the principal characters in Dickens’s novel. The portrait of Nancy, the prostitute, in *Oliver Twist* is deepened and made sympathetic by her compassion for Oliver, her loyalty to her lover, Sikes, and her moral stance against the corrupting influence of the criminal
Fagin. Nancy prefigures Sue’s Fleur de Marie, whose complex role as a prostitute who is otherwise moral, even admirable, dominates Sue’s novel. Fleur de Marie also serves as the vulnerable orphan figure at the heart of the novel’s intricate entrapments and rescues which provide most of the high drama of *Les Mystères de Paris*, as do the similar episodes surrounding the orphaned Oliver in Dickens’s tale.

La Louve, another important female character in *Les Mystères de Paris*, is also reminiscent of Dickens’s Nancy. La Louve’s otherwise hardened criminal nature is softened by Sue’s description of her loyalty to her lover, Martial, her protection of the unprotected Fleur de Marie and by her secret desire for a better life away from the corruption of her world, all of which directly parallel qualities in Dickens’s character. In Sue’s work, these characteristics redeem both La Louve and her lover and the couple start a new life together in the country, rewarded by Prince Rodolphe.

Dickens’s Nancy dies as a result of her loyalty to Sikes, her yearning away from her sordid life and her protection of Oliver. Sue’s Fleur de Marie also dies, albeit very differently and certainly less violently, largely because of her remorse for her tarnished past.

*Les Mystères de Paris* was published in France in 1842-43 and in English versions in Britain in 1844. The book’s popularity and financial success was quickly and widely established and Sue followed it almost immediately with the equally successful *Le Juif Errant*, published in 1844-45. Dickens had known literary and popular success as well with earlier works such as *The Pickwick Papers* and *The Old Curiosity Shop*. The latter work had sold 100,000 copies in 1840-41 and had inspired the kind of devoted readership which was later seen in France for Sue’s novel.

However, in 1843-44 Dickens’s *Martin Chuzzlewit* had excited comparatively little interest. Sales of the work slumped, creating, according to many critics, a crisis in the author’s career. For a few years after 1844, Dickens published only shorter works—his Christmas books and pieces of journalism. The novels published after this interval of relative quiet, in other words from 1848, represent a period of remarkable productivity and are now generally recognized as his best works.

It has been suggested that the disappointing reception of *Martin Chuzzlewit* forced Dickens to reassess his work during the years 1844 to 1848.
number of elements could have influenced this re-examination. His journey to America in 1842, just before the writing of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, may have played an important role. His experiences in the New World were no doubt significant; however, Dickens's imagination ranged widely and absorbed much. It seems impossible that he would have failed to take note of the remarkable publishing successes Sue was enjoying at this time on both sides of the Channel as well, it must be noted, in America. The popularity of Sue's novels corresponded directly with Dickens's own decline, a decline which had been nothing short of a "blow" to the author. Their differing fortunes would have been especially striking to Dickens since Sue's first great popular success, *Les Mystères de Paris*, addressed issues of social reform which had also been central to his own works. A writer as sensitive to his readership as Dickens was certain to learn from observation of rival works, especially if these were to appear, if only briefly, to eclipse his own.

While he visited Paris in 1847, Dickens was working on the novel which was to follow this lull in his career, *Dombey and Son*, published in serial format from 1846-1848. The work is felt to be distinct from his earlier fiction in that it is "more wholly serious and more carefully planned." In fact, the novel is so carefully laid out as to be rather wooden and less fluid than much of Dickens's other fiction. Although the novel shares no conspicuous link with Sue's works, its timing suggests that the impulse to plan his fiction more deliberately may have been partly in reaction to the growing criticism of the technical flaws of Sue's work.

The predisposition of the authors of serialized fiction to improvise their stories led to structural defects which could often diminish a novel. Even Sue's friends and admirers had commented on the poor quality of the organization of his work. *La Revue Indépendante*, otherwise enthusiastic and supportive of Sue's vision, had warned in 1845 that the lack of planning in *Le Juif Errant* would reduce the novel's power. The "feuilleton" form as a whole was increasingly censured in France, in part for its inherent structural weaknesses. Sue at this point was the primary representative of the genre, both in France and in Britain, thus his technical failings were especially conspicuous. British critics had also commented on the loose organization of Sue's plot, although most had concentrated on other aspects.
Dickens, and Thackeray, as has been suggested already, may have been inspired to examine their own use of the formula of serialized fiction by the manifest structural flaws of Sue’s works and the widespread critical attention given those weaknesses which his works provoked. French critics had already noted some similar flaws in Dickens’s fiction, especially Martin Chuzzlewit. One commentator in 1844 in La Revue des Deux Mondes warned Dickens that “no talent on earth can resist the dangers of this mode of publication” [nul talent au monde resisterait aux dangers de ce mode de publication] which destroys “l’harmonie, la sobriété, la grace, l’heureux équilibre des parties.” There is no direct evidence that Dickens read this article, but the journal itself was widely read in Britain and Dickens shows considerable interest in life in France in his correspondence. Certainly attempts to construct their fiction more tightly occurred at similar points in both authors’ careers, after the publication of Sue’s two great popular successes. Dickens’s Dombey and Son was completed in 1848. Thackeray published The History of Henry Esmond in 1852. Both experiments at a more unified structure resulted in works which stand out from the rest of the body of work of both writers and the novels published by both thereafter benefited from this process of experimentation. Dickens particularly refined his technique and later produced works, such as Bleak House, which were both fluid and unified in structure.

Although there are no overt ties between Dombey and Son and Les Mystères de Paris, the two novels do address some similar issues. Les Mystères de Paris revolves in part around the painful strain between parent and child. There are a number of examples of this concern, the most central involving Sue’s protagonist, Prince Rodolphe. Rodolphe pursues his mission to redress wrongs around him, which forms the basis for the narrative, as expiation for the sin of disobeying and distressing his powerful father. This self-imposed atonement underlines and adds depth to his own complicated, troubled relationship with his lost daughter, Fleur de Marie.

Parental love and responsibility also form the central concern in Dickens’s novel. The principal figure of Mr. Dombey struggles with his misguided views of duty, fails both his children in that duty and particularly abuses his daughter’s love for him until the faithful Florence leads him, at end of the story, to understand his faults:
A spectral, haggard, wasted likeness of himself brooded and brooded over the empty fireplace. . . It sat down, with its eyes upon the empty fireplace, and as it lost itself in thought, there shone into the room a gleam of light: a ray of sun. It was quite unmindful, and sat thinking. Suddenly it rose, with a terrible face, and that guilty hand grasping what was in its breast. Then it was arrested by a cry—a wild, loud, piercing, loving, rapturous cry—and he saw only his own reflection in the glass, and at his knees his daughter! . . .

Unchanged still. Of all the world, unchanged. Raising the same face to him . . . Asking his forgiveness. . . . 'Dear Papa, . . . I never meant to leave you. . . . I am penitent. I know my fault.' . . . As she clung closer to him, in another burst of tears, he kissed her on the lips, and lifting up his eyes, said, 'Oh, my God, forgive me for I need it very much!' . . . they remained clasped in one another's arms, in the glorious sunshine that had crept in with Florence.\(^{14}\)

The reader is meant to read painful irony into Florence's admission of fault. The girl has displayed only faithful devotion to her cold, uncaring parent and finally left him solely because he has driven her, literally by means of a blow, from him. A template for her devotion and the scene of reconciliation with her father could be seen to be in the dramatic closing passages of *Les Mystères de Paris*. Here too a daughter begs forgiveness from her father, ironically claiming a fault the reader finds at least problematic to acknowledge.

Fleur de Marie's guilt is more complex since it involves sexual impurity, not an imagined faithlessness. Dickens's character is utterly and obviously guiltless, except in her own, and, until enlightened, her father's eyes. Sue attempts to mitigate Fleur de Marie's transgressions as much as possible, stressing that her sordid past has been the result of her desertion by her parents, mostly her ambitious, selfish mother, a figure who parallels to some extent the ambitious Edith Dombey. Rodolphe is somewhat exonerated of knowingly abandoning his child. However, despite her parents' part in her story, Fleur de Marie's role as a fallen woman cannot be forgotten and the question of her former sin hangs over her to such an extent that, regardless of his sympathy, Sue finally has her die of remorse in the conclusion of his novel.
In that final scene, recounted through a letter from the prince to his new wife, father and daughter embrace in language and gestures which presage Dickens's scene:

‘My dear father . . . Will you be able to forget my ingratitude? . . . Oh! will you be able to forgive me?’ . . . By way of answering, I pressed my lips to her forehead, she felt my tears flowing. . . .

Fleur de Marie is dying in this last embrace. In Dickens's rendering of the scene, Florence Dombey's embrace of her father represents a new life for them both. Her plea for pardon from her father includes a crucial distinction: Florence has become a mother herself. She offers her new-born son to her father as a model for their new lives together, reconciled as loving father and daughter:

Papa, love, I am a mother. I have a child who will soon call Walter by the name by which I call you. When it was born, and when I knew how much I loved it, I knew what I had done in leaving you. . . . He is the darling of my heart, papa. I would die for him. He will love and honour you as I will. We will teach our little child to love and honour you . . . Kiss me, papa, as a promise that you will be reconciled to Walter--to my dearest husband--to the father of the little child who taught me to come back, papa. Who taught me to come back!  

The child leading the parent to a better self is a familiar trope in Dickens. Sue's Fleur de Marie is particularly embittered by her own distressing recognition that her shame denies her the right, not only to marry, but also to become a mother. She feels “indigne”, unworthy of that sainted role and thus compelled to renounce marriage to her beloved cousin just before the scene above, and to enter the convent where she dies:

‘Oh! My father! I was guilty, I know it, I did not have the right to love; but I expiate that sad love by so much suffering . . . Tell me now that you know all, tell me father, is there another future for me other than the convent? . . . Ah! . . . mother! . . . me! Oh! Never! . . . I am unworthy of that sainted name . . . I would die of shame before my child . . . if I had not already died in front of his father in confessing my past . . . ’
The attention these novels give to the conventional concern of the complexity of familial relationships, and the importance of the duty, love and responsibility dictated by family ties, provides a unifying idiom. Through their various portraits of parent and child, both Sue and Dickens explore the fundamental issue of the nature of evil. In both these works, one significant aspect of evil is defined as the failure to love and to fulfil the responsibility of that love within family relationships. Mr. Dombey’s failure to love is the focus of Dickens’s story. Sue’s prince fails not to love but to support his child, a failure which provides the central tragedy of his story.

A number of the minor characters of both novels underline these main portraits. In Les Mystères de Paris, the criminal Martial family is especially vile because of the lack of normal, familial love between its members. The mother, in particular, is abhorrent because of her unnatural coldness towards her children and her deliberate corruption of them into criminals. The poor but worthy Morels form this family’s antithesis. Their love and support of each other under the duress of extreme poverty is meant to inspire sympathy and admiration.

The importance of familial love and responsibility is universal in Sue’s work and the panoramic range of Les Mystères de Paris includes portraits from all sectors of society. The Vicomte de Saint-Remy and his noble father are part of an intricate sub-plot in which the son’s general wickedness is compounded by his betrayal of his father. The tragic aristocratic mother and daughter, Madame and Mademoiselle de Fermont, excite the same pathos and esteem as the Morels through their mutual devotion and sacrifice. The middle class Madame George is married to the sinister Maître d’école, whose many crimes are exacerbated by his attempts to involve his innocent son.

Dombey and Son contains family portraits which also include a wide range of society. The loving but poor Toodle family contrasts dramatically with the unnatural coldness of the family group surrounding Florence Dombey. The clerk Walter Gay is admired for his devotion to his uncle, who is a surrogate father to him, and whose faithful love of his nephew is the primary element in his own favourable portrait. John Carker’s abuse of his brother’s and sister’s love intensifies his depravity.
"Good Mrs. Brown" is really wicked Mrs. Brown who encourages her daughter’s downfall for gain. The lovely Edith Dombey is flawed because, in her proud conflict with the husband she does not love, she fails to cherish and protect her step-daughter Florence. Edith in turn has been forsaken by her own scheming, cold, ambitious mother who has pushed her to marry a man she does not love. Dickens’s narrative revolves around all of these troubled or happy relationships and, as in Sue’s, the acid test to determine the value of each is the extent to which each character can love and fulfil the familial obligations of that love.

Troubled parent-child relationships continued to occupy a critical position in Dickens’s fiction. The novel which followed Dombey and Son, David Copperfield, written in 1849-50, fictionalized the author’s own younger years and produced the memorably dreadful father figures of Mr. Micawber and David’s step-father the evil, cold-hearted Mr. Murdstone. Sue had also used his own difficult youth and strained relations with his father as the basis for a novel. Arthur had been published ten years earlier, in 1839-40, and had helped to establish Sue’s fame in France as a serious artist. This work had revealed an unfeeling father whose coldness to his son helps to bring about the young man’s decline.

It is not clear from Dickens’s correspondence how much of Sue’s fiction he may have read. Indeed, Dickens only ever mentions the man and not his novels. It seems likely that he would have been familiar with at least the two best known works, Les Mystères de Paris and Le Juif Errant, but it is difficult to conjecture much about Sue’s earlier pieces. Nevertheless, a principal character in Dickens’s next novel, Bleak House, bears a striking resemblance to an important figure in one of Sue’s early works, Mathilde, written in 1840. The two novels share their concern with the ramifications of illegitimacy, although the issue takes a more central role in Dickens’s work.

One of the narrators and main characters of Bleak House is an illegitimate child, Esther Summerson. Through her, the novel explores the complex overlapping of social and sexual morality. Esther’s mother is eventually exposed in the narrative as the beautiful, socially eminent Lady Dedlock, who has hidden her shameful secret from all but herself. A tragic but sincere love has led to Esther’s birth out of
wedlock which Lady Dedlock has then concealed by denying her child and abandoning her to a hard-hearted sister.

The denial of her child and her secret shame have tortured Lady Dedlock, despite her marriage to the distinguished Sir Leicester Dedlock, who reveres her as an ornament to his social position. The troubled mother finally confesses her relationship to Esther, on her knees, in a painful scene where mother and daughter meet as such for the first and last time.

Lady Dedlock’s confession recalls an analogous scene in Sue’s *Mathilde*. In this novel, too, a beautiful, socially distinguished lady of seemingly irreproachable reputation admits her own shameful secret to the product of her sin, her illegitimate daughter Emma. Sue’s Duchesse de Richeville resembles Lady Dedlock closely. She too has been tortured by the knowledge of her hypocrisy. She too has sinned only because of a genuine love, and been forced to hide her child and abandon her to others. And she too, like Lady Dedlock, must accept a tremendous sacrifice because of her attempt to hide her past. Madame de Richeville loses her cherished child, Emma, who eventually dies partly from the strain of discovering her parentage. The duchess turns to religious devotion for comfort but her fate is cold and sad. Lady Dedlock sacrifices her social position and ultimately her life. Her final tragic hours provide some of the most powerful passages in Dickens’s novel, as Esther and the police inspector, Mr. Bucket, fail to stop her in her frantic determination to die at the pauper’s grave which holds her lover, Esther’s father.

The character of Mr. Bucket in *Bleak House* is often held up as one of the first important examples of a police detective in English fiction. A prototype of Mr Bucket appears in *Les Mystères de Paris*. Sue’s police inspector, Narcisse Borel, resembles Dickens’s character in many respects. Both agents pursue crime with the same dogged perseverance. Both display extraordinary omniscience in the obscure mysteries of the criminal underworld and are undaunted by the tangled labyrinth of city streets which can overwhelm other characters in their narratives. The men share certain physical characteristics, a piercing eye and an otherwise bland countenance which allows them to adopt a variety of personae in their pursuit of crime. Sue’s Borel is introduced as follows:
This agent, a man aged about forty years, vigorous and stocky, had a high colour, a fine and piercing eye, a cleanly shaven face which allowed him to take on the many different disguises necessary to his dangerous expeditions; for he had to combine the suppleness of the actor with the courage and energy of the soldier in order to mix with certain bandits with whom he fought with cleverness and determination. Narcisse Borel was, in one word, one of the most useful, the most active of that lowly providence, modestly and vulgarly named the Police.

Mr Bucket, too, is a middle-aged man "stoutly built, sharp-eyed" who disconcerts other characters by his ability to blend into his surroundings and adapt his personality accordingly. He is also, like Borel, treated with a certain humour by the author and provides some of the light relief to his story.

The two characters serve as bridges between the criminal underworlds which feature in both novels and the rest of the narrative. Both men help to unravel the works’ elaborate story lines, conducting the protagonists of their stories through the confusing tangle of city streets in both to the dramatic dénouement of complicated, sinister intrigues. Borel aids Prince Rodolphe to uncover and capture the wicked conspiracy involving the principal criminal figures of La Chouette and the Maître d’école and their theft of Morel’s jewels. Together they find the criminals locked in vicious mortal combat at the bottom of a dank, gloomy cellar of a seedy cabaret forming a melodramatic tableau. Mr. Bucket leads Esther in a breathless chase through the winter countryside into the web of London’s inner-most streets to the dreary, sordid paupers’ graveyard where they find Lady Dedlock, lying dead at its gates.

Lady Dedlock’s dramatic final pose is typical of Dickens’s many troubled female characters. Distraught women in Dickens’s works often resort to the gestures and language of melodrama. They “manifest their distress in a manner which has proven highly distressing to critics: they fall to the floor, and it is rare when they do so quietly.” Although modern critics may have found these histrionics “distressing”, the melodramatic staging of Dickens’s fiction was no doubt one factor in his contemporary success. Their shared debt to the theatre provides another key element in a more general bond which linked Dickens and Eugène Sue.
Sue, like Dickens, had a life-long interest in the stage. He, too, collaborated on a number of theatrical pieces from the beginning of his career as a writer and he brought to his writing of prose a theatricality as striking as the quality which Ruskin identified in Dickens as “stage fire”. His staging of his stories was often admired in the French press. Like Dickens’s novels, Sue’s works abound in melodramatic stagecraft; the devices of peep-holes, hidden chambers, surprise abductions and last-minute rescues. Both writers’ skill in employing these theatrical mechanisms heightened the suspense of their novels, and thus, especially when combined with the advantage of serialization, contributed to their great popular success. Many of Sue’s characters are stock figures from melodrama: evil villains, like the sinister seducer Lugarto in *Mathilde* and helpless females, such as Mathilde herself or the beautiful, vulnerable Mademoiselle de Fermont in *Les Mystères de Paris*.

Sue’s women, like those in Dickens, often express their emotions in movements and speech borrowed from the stage. Beautiful victims clasp their hands and beg for mercy from dreadful pirates in his early sea stories. Mathilde mimics the gesture and throws herself at the mercy of Lugarto, eventually fainting to the floor at her rescue. Emma and Madame de Richeville clutch at each other, bathed in one another’s tears, on their knees, at the duchess’s confession of her guilt.

In *Les Mystères de Paris*, Fleur de Marie first joins her hands in prayer and then falls to the floor on learning that she is a princess and daughter of Rodolphe:

‘Be blessed, my God!’ cried Fleur de Marie clasping her hands.

‘It is possible for me to love my benefactor as much as I do love him . . . He is my father . . . I can cherish him without remorse . . . Be . . . blessed . . . my . . .

She could not finish . . . the shock had been too violent; Fleur de Marie fainted into the arms of her father.22

As the girl’s speech indicates, there has been an undercurrent of sexuality in her reverence of her “benefactor” and her swoon may result partly from her disappointment at the futility of that attraction as much as from her joy at the discovery of her parent. That particular tension remains unresolved in this work until, somewhat later in his story, Sue creates a romantic interest for the princess in her cousin, Henri. Something of the same uncomfortable hint troubles Esther in her
relationship with her guardian, benefactor and surrogate father, Mr. Jarndyce, in *Bleak House*. Here again, the complexity is resolved by Esther’s love for Allan Woodcourt and her guardian’s renunciation of her hand in marriage. The unexpected dimension of forbidden sexuality adds an ambiguity to the scenes of drama surrounding all these characters and deepens the scenes’ effectiveness. In the case of Sue’s novel, the operatic image of the young prostitute unveiled as a princess, and falling, in tears, into her father’s noble arms fixes itself in the sensibility of the reader as a tableau vivant fraught with emotion and power.

The power to create such memorable images, rich with drama and emotion, as well as the use of the mechanical contrivances of the theatre, the staging of their stories as it were, is common to both Dickens and Sue. Sue’s works are especially dependent on this artistry and, in this respect, border more closely on sensationalism than Dickens’s. Despite their extravagance, or perhaps in some way because of it, Sue’s dramatic images contribute much to his capacity to move his readers. Many of his theatrical tableaux have an enduring energy and appeal. One of these resurfaces in a later Dickens novel so recognizably that it is difficult not to draw the conclusion that it is borrowed from the French original.

Madness is a preoccupation both these writers share and in two strikingly similar cases madness is the result of oppression and its attendant hardships. The ensuing portraits serve key roles in the underlying messages of social reform which feature in both novels. In *Les Mystères de Paris* the honest, diligent but destitute gem cutter, Morel, is persecuted by the scheming, hypocritical notary Ferrand. The adversity of Morel’s poverty and his helplessness against his powerful enemy, who threatens to imprison his innocent victim wrongfully, combine to drive the poor craftsman mad. Morel’s insanity manifests itself in his mechanical, repetitious miming of the actions of his craft over an empty table, a desolate attempt to re-establish order in a world beyond his comprehension or control. When the world around him begins to deteriorate, Morel instinctively returns to the physical enactment of the work which has helped him keep his family and himself intact, if only just.

In Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities*, 1859, a central character, Dr. Manette, returns, in his distress, to the activity of shoemaking which has comforted
him during the long dreadful years of his wrongful imprisonment in the Bastille. He mechanically re-enacts the movements of the craft whenever he is threatened or reminded of his captivity, as, for example, when he learns the aristocratic identity of his future son-in-law on the eve of his daughter’s marriage, or when he is unable to come to terms with the strength of the forces against him in the struggle to save that son-in-law during the aftermath of the Revolution. When Dr. Manette loses control of the world around him and of his emotional reaction to that world, when indeed he loses his hold over his own sanity, like Sue’s Morel, he reverts to the mechanical movements of his work which helped him to hold his life and mind together during his time of greatest stress. The similarity between the images and their respective roles in the two novels is too striking to ignore.

*A Tale of Two Cities* contains other affinities with Sue’s works, affinities which are not altogether surprising when we consider that much of Dickens’s novel is set in the city streets which Sue made his own in *Les Mystères de Paris*. Both novels present vast panoramas of society as a whole, or at least of French society since Dickens’s work ranges widest in its French scenes. Like *Les Mystères de Paris*, *A Tale of Two Cities* contrasts the luxury and idleness of the rich French with the extreme poverty of the country’s poor. The former have no redeeming qualities in Dickens’s novel, unlike some of Sue’s aristocrats, notably the caring, compassionate Madame d’Harville. The only good member of this milieu in *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Darnay, chooses to stand aloof from his peers, somewhat in the fashion of Prince Rodolphe although Darnay’s stance is more apparent and Rodolphe’s distance from his world is reflected more in his mental state than in open opposition. Dickens’s novel lacks the pastoral idealism which features in Sue’s book. In Dickens’s story, the countryside suffers from the same deprivation and want as the city, all brought about by the despicable waste and indulgence of Monseigneur and his like.

One of the most memorable members of the poorer classes in Dickens’s novel is the sinister Madame Defarge. She recalls another proprietress of a tavern in a poor quartier of Paris, the “ogresse” in Sue’s novel. The two women resemble each other physically, in their age, colouring and dress and in the threat they pose to the beautiful young heroines of the novels, Fleur de Marie in Sue’s work and Lucy
Manette in Dickens’s. Both Madame Defarge and the “ogresse” usually occupy a perch behind a counter of their establishments from whence they menace the world around them. Both have an evil eye which they fix upon their lovely young prey: Fleur de Marie is fatally reminded of the stain of her past as she flees Paris with Rodolphe by the icy stare of the ogresse they meet by chance in a café. Madame Defarge glares at Lucy, and her little girl, with the sinister intent of fixing their faces in her own memory and thus ensuring their destruction by the blood-thirsty Revolutionary tribune of which she is a part. Both Fleur de Marie and Lucy shiver in recognition of the unspoken menace these women represent to them.

Madame Defarge and the “ogresse” are both coarse, heavy-featured women who wear a variety of bright, garish shawls and cheap furs about their neck. The details given to the descriptions of their clothing point to another general bond between Dickens and Eugène Sue. Both authors were fascinated by clothes, another element of their shared tie to the theatre, and the extent to which clothing determined identity, especially “the extent to which class distinction depended on clothing.”

Sue was particularly given to elaborate descriptions of dress. Indeed the vivid realism of the pictures he produced with these textual details is one of the characteristics of his prose. For Sue, as well as Dickens, clothing helped to distinguish those of different social classes. Rodolphe, for example, in Les Mystères de Paris, is in every respect a gentleman, from his slender, graceful frame to his clean, white, well-manicured hands. Yet this royal prince is able to move amongst the worst of the Parisian poor in disguise of plain, rough clothing which labels him to those around him as a simple craftsman.

The prince’s disguise may seem insufficient, but in the idiom of Sue’s novel, a change of clothes, like a change of costume in the theatre, could be seen to transform a character enough to cross the barriers between the classes. Dickens gave clothing a similar significance. In Great Expectations Pip dons the costume of a gentleman in his attempt to identify himself as such. Lady Dedlock wears the clothing of her maid in order to shed her own distinction as a lady and pass unnoticed in the London streets. Bella Wilfer, in Dickens’s last completed novel Our Mutual Friend, is
obsessed with the trappings of wealth as symbols of her ambition to a higher station away from the ordinary plainness of her home and family.

Adopted by the newly rich Boffins, Bella luxuriates in the ability to dress the part of an affluent eligible girl in London society and the dictates of fashion become the centre of her world. When the superficiality of that society is exposed to her, she abandons the wealthy Boffins to return to her homely former life and family. As she leaves the Boffin mansion, Bella discards her opulent dress and takes on the simple costume of her more modest social class:

She opened all the places where she kept her dresses; selected only those she had brought with her, leaving all the rest; and made a great misshapen bundle of them, to be sent for afterwards.
“I won’t take one of the others,” said Bella, tying the knots of the bundle very tight, in the severity of her resolution. “I’ll leave all the presents behind, and begin again entirely on my own account.” That the resolution might be thoroughly carried into practice, she even changed the dress she wore, for that in which she had come into the grand mansion. Even the bonnet she put on, was the bonnet that had mounted into the Boffin chariot at Holloway.24

Before leaving, Bella has thrown herself in gratitude and affection at the feet of the loving Mrs. Boffin, in the exaggerated movement used by so many characters moved by deep emotion in both Dickens and in Sue. Another strikingly dramatic vignette occurs later in the novel, underlining again the affinities between the two authors.

Lizzie Hexam is the other principal woman in Dickens’s narrative. She devotedly loves Eugene Wrayburn, and is in turn obsessively loved herself by Bradley Headstone. Wrayburn is attacked by his rival and thrown into a river to drown. He is saved by the brave Lizzie, who, with extraordinary courage, presence of mind and supernatural strength, drags his body from the swiftly flowing water. An equally dramatic rescue from drowning features in Les Mystères de Paris. In that story, the innocent Fleur de Marie is the victim of a plot to murder her and the boat in which she
is crossing the river Seine sinks. The criminal La Louve is on a nearby bank of the river and plunges into the running water to pull the girl to safety, displaying the same raw courage and supernatural strength remarkable in Lizzie Hexam. The rescue forms one of the most sensational passages of Sue's novel and it helped to make La Louve one of Sue's best loved characters.

These two parallel rescues span the ten years which separate the two novels. Like the poignant portraits of the troubled Morel and Dr. Manette, the images of La Louve and Lizzie provide a strong argument for a close affinity between the fiction of Sue and Dickens. The individual details of these portraits underline more deep-seated links between the two writers; their shared debt to the theatre, their fundamental interest in the nature of good and evil, both in society and in individuals. The atmosphere of some of their fiction, especially of Les Mystères de Paris and Dickens's later novels, is much the same. The works focus on the mysteries and obscurity of the great cities of Paris and London. Great attention is paid by both to the light and dark contrasts of those cities, to the myriad details of their streets, the dress of their inhabitants, the interiors of their homes as well as their institutions. Les Mystères de Paris describes at length the everyday realities of Paris, its slums, mansions, hospitals and prisons. Dickens's works have the same scope. A London prison, for example, forms the centre of another later work, Little Dorrit, recalling the similar settings of lengthy sections of Les Mystères de Paris.

The link between Sue and Dickens is significant. Sue's work may not have enjoyed the same longevity as Dickens's fiction, yet there is much they share. It is interesting that Dickens's relationship to other European authors, such as Dostoevsky and Balzac, for example, has been explored, yet his probable debt to Sue has had little investigation. As Dickens appears to have done, both Dostoevsky and Balzac themselves recognized the depth and power of Sue's fiction. For Balzac the success of his rival's works rankled deeply. Dostoevsky admired much in Sue and collected editions of Sue's works. In Sue, Dostoevsky found the architect of the modern urban myth, a role more usually assigned now to Charles Dickens. Dickens's ability to learn from the example of Sue's mistakes with the "feuilleton", to absorb the qualities in Sue appreciated by Dostoevsky and envied by Balzac, making those qualities distinctly his
own, is a testament to the power of both writers and to the richness of both of their imaginations.

5 C. Dickens to Count d'Orsay, 5 April 1847, Ibid, V, 52. Original in Appendix V, 2.
6 Dickens to John Forster, 5 September 1847, Ibid, V, 159.
10 Furbank, 11.
11 Ibid, 8.
16 *Dombey and Son*, 738-9.
26 Bory, 414.
Elizabeth Barrett Browning's correspondence is rich with reference to contemporary French literature in general and to the works of Eugène Sue in particular. The number of her allusions to Sue contrasts with the lack of private commentary on Sue by other literary figures of the period in Britain, and this fact alone makes her views useful to this study. However, her observations are also valuable because they are those of a British writer unconstrained by professional jealousy of Sue's success. The reception of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry was not threatened by the popularity of Sue's prose and writing, besides, was not her livelihood. Her independent means allowed her to express an intellectual independence and her disinterested perspective provides yet another facet of the Victorian British reception of Sue's fiction different from those already discussed.

It is also interesting to examine the reaction to Sue's works of a member of one of the social groups critics felt should be most protected from the corrupting influence of French fiction, the unmarried upper and middle class woman. Elizabeth Barrett, before her marriage to Robert Browning, was part of this group in British society. It may be argued that her independence of mind and wide-ranging intellectual curiosity set Elizabeth Barrett Browning apart from any general classification. Nevertheless, her comments must, to some extent, shed some light on the views of her gender and class. Her perspective as a woman provides an interesting counterpoint to much of the other contemporary criticism and commentary on Sue which otherwise is largely by men.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning revelled in the excitement and vitality of French literature. The "wicked Gallic geniuses", she remarked in 1844, "light me up, & make me feel alive to the ends of my fingers."\(^1\) She was predisposed to appreciate
French authors and prepared to say so at length, if at least privately. In November 1842 she wrote from London to her friend Mary Russell Mitford:

Keep my secret--but I have been reading lately a good deal of the new French literature. Not that I wd. let it loose in this house, no, nor in any other--but I was curious beyond my Eve-ship, & besides grew so interested in France & the French . . . that I have been reading these French books. You mentioned Victor Hugo to me, & I had held him, long before, for a wonderful genius. So is George Sand--. . . Then there is Eugene Sue, & Frederic Soulié, & De Queille . . . why the whole literature looks like a conflagration--& my whole being aches with the sight of it,--& when I turn away home, there seems nothing to be seen, it is all so neutral tinted & dull & cold by comparison. Full indeed of power & caprice & extravagance is this new French literature . . .

Elizabeth Barrett Browning was open-eyed about the reputation of French literature amongst the British establishment and fully aware of the delicacy of her position as a woman interested in such fiction. Her stance, like that of so many of her contemporaries in Britain, reflected an ambivalence surrounding the realism of French fiction and the sexuality and "immorality" these works were usually felt to contain. She herself wished to read such literature, and even to discuss it with like-minded friends, but feared for it to be set "loose" in British homes generally. In this letter from 1842 written early in the period of Sue’s greatest success, she felt compelled to be coy about her knowledge of such works. "Now tell me what you think? That it is very naughty of me to read naughty books--or that you have done the same?"

After this early playful recognition, in 1842, of the notoriety of French fiction in British culture, Elizabeth Barrett Browning became more forthright in the expression of her critical opinions. Later commentary in her letters provides a clear-eyed, remarkably modern perspective on contemporary French works in general and on those of Eugène Sue in particular, showing her to be both a discerning critic of Sue’s faults and a wholehearted advocate of the force of his fiction. She both enjoyed and admired Sue’s novels and eventually incorporated elements of one of Sue’s most enduring and powerful portraits, that of Fleur de Marie in *Les Mystères de Paris*, into
her own working class heroine, the figure of Marian Erle in the narrative poem *Aurora Leigh*, a relationship which will be examined at greater length in a later chapter.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning credited the French authors of her time with a greater genius than British writers, at least in prose, and was sensitive to the effect of the French "prose poets", as she called them, on her contemporaries. In 1844 in a letter to Richard Hengist Horne, she pointed out the "most manifest & undeniable" influence of "the French school of imaginative literature" on Dickens, praising Victor Hugo in particular:

Since, two or three years ago, I went regularly through all the romances of the gifted Frenchman, my admiration for our countryman has paled down paler & paler. The fact is, that we have no such romance-writer as Victor Hugo, . . . let us be as anti-Gallic as we please. And anti-Gallicism is the very merest affectation at this hour of the day, upon which all the burning glasses of French genius appear to be concentrated. The indelicacy & want of elemental morality make another side of the question: but the genius is just as undeniable to me . . .

George Sand . . . is a wonderful woman . . . And then Balzac--Eugène Sue--even the Soulie's, & the grade lower! We cannot even wish them to be popular in England, for obvious reasons--but it is melancholy to look round & see no such bloom of intellectual glory on our own literature, in shutting our doors against theirs.

Eugène Sue figured, in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's eyes, amongst the great writers of France at the time. His name is continually linked with Balzac in her remarks and, initially at least, she gave their works equal balance in her praise and criticism. Her attitude reflects the contemporary tendency, especially notable in France, to couple Balzac's name with Sue's. Elizabeth Barrett Browning perpetuated the comparison throughout her correspondence of the period, providing, amongst other things, interesting insight into her own penetration as a critic. Balzac remains part of the accepted canon of French literature, whereas Sue has all but faded from literary memory, especially in Britain. Elizabeth Barrett Browning admired both writers although, eventually, as will be seen, her estimation of Sue shifted as she became less pleased with his later works. The focus of her admiration was *Les Mystères de Paris*
and her enthusiasm for his fiction waned as she read the novels written after that work. Without ever dismissing Sue’s talent, Elizabeth Barrett Browning ultimately preferred Balzac, a preference shared by modern criticism.

The bulk of commentary on Sue in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s correspondence occurs during the period of his greatest popularity, 1844-1847. However, she was clearly familiar with Sue’s work before his popular success as indicated by her note to Mary Mitford from 1842 cited above. In that letter she finds that French works provide the excitement and vigour lacking in the comparatively dull British fiction then available. However, she mitigates her praise: “The want is, of fixed principle. It is as if the soul of the thinker were given to the four winds & the multitudinous waters, without hold or compass,—” The French feuilleton was almost at the height of its popularity in the early 1840s and the form naturally produced some fiction which justified this criticism. The measured tone of her observation contrasts with the sneering faultfinding of some other British critics, such as Thackeray, and the self-righteous stance adopted by much of the British press when reviewing French fiction, especially that of Eugène Sue. British commentary on Sue throughout this period chose largely to consider his fiction from a moral standpoint and from within the context of the prevailing controversies of the time. Elizabeth Barrett Browning approached her reviews of all French fiction, including that of Sue, in a more dispassionate spirit. The focus of her concern remained the literary merit of individual writers and the works themselves which she considered, for the most part, away from the wider social and ethical debates of the time. 6

In February 1844, Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote again to Miss Mitford on the subject of Sue, this time focusing her comments on a specific novel:

As for the mystery of my not speaking to you of the “Mysteries of Paris”, it lies in my mistaking YOU (I honestly confess it) & not by any means in my understating the power of the work. It is a work of genius and power without any manner of doubt, & it remains so classed in my own thoughts. But you will remember, my dearest friend, that notwithstanding your interest & eagerness in the opening of French books we talked of . . . George Sand & Balzac . . . you were somewhat cold in their appreciation . . . You saw their faults so clearly & strongly, that I did not once think of talking to you of Eugene
Sue, . . . who certainly seems to ME, beyond comparison more extravagant & unnatural, & quite as coarse. I thought you detested that odour of the stews, & slang of thieves, from which Bulwer, like Eugene Sue, has drawn his ideals; & I thought you wd. be struck & repelled by the unnatural, or rather supernatural eliciting of that “figure de vierge”, that divine ‘Fleur de Marie,’ from the Parisian dens. To me, who do not look so much at “probabilities” as at effects, these contrasts had a beauty & glory of their own——but I confess to you that I am absolutely astonished . . . and pleased too, . . . at your receiving the work into your admiration.7

Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s own ambivalence surrounding Sue’s realism echoes some of the early criticism of Les Mystères de Paris in the British press discussed in a previous chapter. Like some other British critics, she too judges Sue’s novel to be powerful yet finds aspects of his work, particularly his views of human nature, distasteful:

The Athenaeum, in an incidental mention of these Mysteries of Paris, said “one of the worst of the morally bad French romance”,—something to that effect. & I never set it down in my thoughts (I confess to you) as a hard judgment. For the rest,—whether Sue shows his evil opinions in respect to human nature generally, in this work or not, . . . he does so in other works—and he is, on that particular account, very often, most painful and repulsive.8

Nevertheless, very shortly after these remarks, in the same month, she clarified her real admiration for Les Mystères de Paris:

I know the “Mysteries of Paris” very well, & much admire the genius which radiates, from end to end, through that extraordinary work. If I did not mention it to you, it was because I fancied (forgive me) that you wd. not tolerate it,—& that your perception of its power would not bear you serene through its obvious extravagances & impurities. . . . it is an extraordinary book indeed,—& the writer, if one of less general power than Balzac, is still more copious in imagination & creation. He glories in all extremities & intensities of evil & passion . . . 9
In the same letter, Elizabeth Barrett Browning goes on to outline Sue’s earlier works, expressing a preference for *Mathilde* which “interested me beyond them all, . . . for the insight it gives me into French society.” Interestingly, she most reproaches Sue here and elsewhere for what she perceives to be his bleak view of human nature. *Les Mystères de Paris* as well as many of his other works are guilty of this; “his inferences against humanity are black as ink.”

Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s impression is ironic, since certainly in *Les Mystères de Paris* at least, it is Sue’s faith in the better inclinations of human nature generally that forms the basis of his appeal to sympathy between the disparate groups of society. His humanitarian warmth and sympathy were precisely what were most admired by many of his contemporaries in France, notably George Sand. Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s distaste for his work, however, is often based on a dislike of what she deems to be the cheerless aspect of his vision. On this aspect of what constitutes morally acceptable fiction, Elizabeth Barrett Browning is in concert with most other contemporary British critics. However, she remained at odds with other British critics when considering the sexual morality of Sue’s fiction. That specific quality of “immorality” in his fiction, which so preoccupied many of her British contemporaries, is less of a concern.

The sexual immorality of French novels, as perceived by British critics and British Victorian culture generally, is indeed dismissed by Elizabeth Barrett Browning as of secondary importance to the power of French genius. Again she combines Sue’s name with the other great French writers to defend them all against this charge. In March of the same year, 1844, she expresses, once more to Miss Mitford, her enjoyment of Paul de Kock as “an open, joyous, inconsequent writer, meaning neither harm nor good, nothing but fun . . .”. She places Sue, however, amongst others, above de Kock:

He [Paul de Kock] does not, I confess, suit me particularly, altho’ I can see his power. I like the Balzacs, Victor Hugos, Eugene Sue’s, George Sand’s; & the other kinds of serious, passionate, eloquent wrongness. They purify the air from its vice, by the fire of their earnest genius. And do you not believe . . . in the purifying power of pity & terror? Why the tradition of it is as old as Aristotle; & the influence of it, day by day.10
Her claim that the “fire” of the sincerity and genius of these French authors somehow decontaminates the impure subjects of their works directly recalls a comment made by Sue himself in *Les Mystères de Paris*. Before a description of the prison of Saint-Lazare, Sue justifies his unpleasant scenes of prison life with the hope that they will help to awaken a sympathy for repentance and a turning away from all that is impure and criminal. The moral truth of his story and the sincerity of his impulse, he maintains, will purify its contents:

> . . . can we say that what has sustained us in this long, painful and difficult work has been the conviction that we have awakened in some noble sympathies for those less fortunate . . . for those sincere penitents, for simple honesty . . . and to have inspired disgust, aversion, horror and healthy fear of all which is absolutely impure and criminal? We have not hesitated before the most horrible pictures, feeling that, like fire, moral truth purifies everything.11

The similarity of the imagery used by both writers to convey comparable notions is striking and an indication that Elizabeth Barrett Browning may indeed have known *Les Mystères de Paris* well. The sincerity of his moral intent was the defence used most often by Sue to justify any offensive realism in his stories and his concern to do so lies at the heart of the debate surrounding the role of fiction in public morality.

That Elizabeth Barrett Browning also believed in the “purifying power of pity and terror” and that she chose to credit the French authors she cites, including Sue, with the ability to display that power is another instance of the division between her views and those of many other British critics of the time. Few British commentators were able or willing to see beyond preconceived ideas of French fiction as inherently immoral and give credence to any moral principle professed by French writers. Most British critics were cynical about Sue’s humanitarian reputation. Thackeray, for example, as has been seen earlier, portrayed Sue as a “literary merchant” and many others echoed this sentiment throughout these years.12

Elizabeth Barrett Browning continued to admire much of Sue and especially *Les Mystères de Paris* throughout the period. While still in London before she was married, Elizabeth Barrett quizzed Robert Browning on his knowledge of
The issue of the merits of French literature became the subject of debate between the two poets. When they left Britain in 1846 to live in Italy, her husband, who on the whole had less of a penchant for French fiction, tried to introduce his wife to Italian writers; “Robert in his zeal for Italy & against Eugene Sue, tried to persuade me at first” to read Italian fiction instead of French. She found the Italian works dull by comparison, however, and continued to bemoan the lack of availability of French fiction. Her enthusiasm for French writers was a point of playful contention between them. In January of 1847 she writes to her sister Henrietta Moulton-Barrett:

I have teased & entreated Robert for two things ever since we have been here— to have a piano, and to subscribe to a better library than the purely Italian one, . . somewhere where we could have French books & newspapers—The last point is gained at last—through my perseverance, & the persistent dulness of these modern Italian writers who have‘nt a soul among them all . .

She takes pleasure in winning her point with her husband and is clearly delighted that, once they were able to obtain French publications, Robert “is as pleased as I am, after all his jokes against “his little Ba-lamb” (one of my names!) “Who in spite of her innocense, could‘nt live without wicked books by Eugene Sue.”

The couple continued to debate the merits of French literature during their life in Italy. Again in February 1847, in a letter to Miss Mitford, Elizabeth Barrett Browning describes their disputes thus:

Robert is a warm admirer of Balzac & has read most of his books, but certainly . . oh certainly . . he does not in any general way appreciate our French people quite with our warmth . . he takes too high a standard, I tell him, & wont listen to a story for a story’s sake. I can bear to be amused, you know, without a strong pull on my admiration. So we have great wars sometimes, & I put up Dumas’s flag or Soulié’s or Eugene Sue’s (yet he was properly possessed by the Mystères de Paris) & carry it till my arms ache.

This letter was accompanied by a catalogue of Balzac’s Comédie Humaine sent to her friend. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, like her husband, was a “warm admirer” of Balzac and her interest here in his complete works reflects a
gradual shifting of her critical opinion which had begun to show itself a few years earlier. Her admiration for Sue diminished as she read his next novel and popular success after *Les Mystères de Paris*, *Le Juif Errant*. Although she initially saw some qualities to admire in the work, by the end of the serialization she no longer praised the work or its author. In due time the comparison she made between Balzac and Sue favoured the former, despite her continued admiration of *Les Mystères de Paris*. Her critical views parallel those of the French critic Sainte-Beuve who had also equated the two authors and ended by preferring Balzac's works to Sue's.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning began reading *Le Juif Errant* as early as 1844 while the novel was still being serialized. She would have preferred to read "the whole romance at once, instead of reading it piece-meal" but was forced to read the work volume by volume as it was published. The process of doing so eventually tried her patience and may have highlighted the novel's structural weaknesses to her. Her first impressions, nevertheless, elicited hesitant praise. In October 1844 she writes to Miss Mitford:

\[\ldots\] I have assuredly read the madhouse scene---& a very fine thing it is. How finely the whole treachery is worked up under that damnable doctor (really one cant help using strong words, on the subject of these French books--) from the moment in which he takes snuff & looks into the eyes of the Princesse. Do you remember that moment? Did that look thrill you all through, as it did me?---\ldots Yet I wished for more clear-mindedness at the last,---& a less, feeble (however pathetic) falling into the snare.\ldots Still, it is a scene of extraordinary power, & wrings the withers of the heart. That Eugene Sue has wonderful imagination,--although Balzac is the greater, because the more complete, writer. One is the great enchanter, the other the greater man--is it not so? I do wish I had the other volumes of the 'Juif Errant'---but I suppose they are not written yet.19

Elizabeth Barrett Browning continued to enjoy further volumes of *Le Juif Errant* over the next several months. She refers to the progressive stages of the work throughout the period, noting the various volumes she reads. The novel provided enough interest for her that, in March 1845, she complained of a fatigue which would not respond even to the stimulus of Sue's work; "even the ninth volume of the 'Juif'
would not animate me as it should." Yet a few months later that year, in May 1845, she had begun to lose patience with Sue’s novel. She had started to read Stendhal and in a letter to Miss Mitford contrasted his fiction with Sue’s:

I am delighted that you confess Stendhal! He reminded me of Balzac, & really has almost equal power. Do you know, I put Eugene Sue far below both of them? Sue has great brilliancy, . . . great lightning of imagination—but for sustained power, he fails, it seems to me, & is a far inferior artist. How patchy the ‘Jew’ is,—for instance!—of purple & gold, as are the patches?

The “patchy” quality of the structure of Sue’s novel and its heavy-handed instructive tone ultimately tilted the balance against Sue for Elizabeth Barrett Browning. At the end of the serialization, she sums up her impressions of the novel in October 1845:

As to ‘Le Juif’ I have done with him, & am not sorry to have done. The last volumes fall off step by step. Now is it not true that when people determine professedly to be didactic, immediately they grow dull as school-masters? it seems to me.

Popular as the novel was at the time, her remarks are justified. Interestingly her views directly echo those expressed by George Sand, who also lost patience with the novel and was particularly dissatisfied with the final volumes. Sue’s later works failed in just the same way as Le Juif Errant and their rambling didactic dullness no doubt contributed to Sue’s eventual decline into obscurity. Although Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s interest in Sue continued, Miss Mitford writes to her, for example in October 1847, asking for news of him, her letters no longer indicate the same enthusiastic appreciation of his fiction that was manifest in earlier correspondence. Nevertheless, the impact of Les Mystères de Paris was such that the work and its characters remained with her until, almost a decade later, in 1856, elements of Fleur de Marie surfaced in the portrait of Marian Erle in her poem Aurora Leigh, as will be seen in a later discussion.
Elizabeth Barrett Browning also made one explicit reference to Sue in that poem. His name figures in a list of social reformers studied by one character of the work, Lady Waldemar, in order to impress the object of her affections, the philanthropic Romney Leigh. Lady Waldemar describes to Aurora Leigh, the protagonist of the poem, how she has “read half Fourier through,/ Proudhon, Considerant, and Louis Blanc,/ With various others of his socialists, . . .” She has studied Romney’s speeches on “the social question” and “heaped reports/ Of wicked women and penitentiaries/On all my tables, (with a place for Sue) . . .” Lady Waldemar uses her list to demonstrate her devotion to Romney, since she is otherwise a lady of fashion and not a thinker. Admittedly, Sue’s name here may be intended as an ironic indication of the superficiality of her researches. His works, after all, were popular novels. Nevertheless, it is fair to assume that Sue is included in the passage at least in part because of his renown as a reformer as well as because of his fame as a popular novelist. Lady Waldemar is portrayed as an intelligent schemer and her desire is to impress Aurora with the sincerity of the efforts she has made to fall in with the interests of her would-be lover.  

Sue’s inclusion in this list of serious social thinkers of the period again demonstrates the extent to which Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s views of Sue were different from those expressed by other British critics of her day. Sue was seldom given the same credence as a social reformer in Britain that he was granted on the continent of Europe. The popular success of his novels, the general perception that they were “immoral” and the use the British press made of his works in the debate concerning the role of fiction in public morality obscured Sue’s ideas about social reform for the majority of British critics. Many chose to assume that his attempts to urge social change were hypocritical and mercenary, influenced perhaps by conservative views of Sue in France. Elizabeth Barrett Browning had earlier praised Sue’s novels privately and now, in 1856, in a published work, she chose to identify Sue with the quality least appreciated by other British commentators, his reputation as a reformer.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning possessed an ability to see beyond the more limited cultural prejudices of her countrymen. Even before she had the experience of life abroad she was scornful of the British inclination to dismiss French fiction in
general as "immoral", a tendency which had led to French critics deriding "les puritains d'outre Manche." However, she was equally aware of the power of French literature to shock and of the potential danger, as she saw it, of French novels if read by the general public. The gist of her feeling was that intelligent, cultivated readers such as herself ran no risk in reading French fiction in all its forms, but the typical Anglo-Saxon reader, particularly the Anglo-Saxon female, whom she termed half in jest to Miss Mitford as "la prude d'Angleterre", a phrase curiously reminiscent of the French verdict, was not culturally equipped to understand French works and was therefore likely to misinterpret what she read. In a number of letters which illumine some of her own ambivalence surrounding French literature as a whole and Sue's fiction in particular, Elizabeth Barrett Browning discusses this point at length. These letters, all to Mary Mitford, were written in 1844 at the beginning of the period during which both the success and notoriety of Sue's fiction reached their highest points in Britain. Although her comments are general and do not refer to Sue specifically, they remain of interest to this study.

In November 1844, Elizabeth Barrett Browning discourages Miss Mitford from suggesting to a British bookseller that he order Balzac's novels:

if you really incited Mr. Lovejoy into ordering "all Balzac" for the amusement & edification of English country houses, you wd. both have to take your chance as Guy Fawkeses, & enjoy a gunpowder day set apart for your honour. . . . Indeed I think it wd. never do, to give out Balzac to miscellaneous readers--it wd. do neither for him nor for them. Where you see art, they wd. see evil--& the influence wd. be according to the mode of apprehension . . . as to the list, it can hurt neither Mr. Lovejoy's reputation as a discreet bookseller, nor the "prude d'Angleterre" to procure such books as are clean --if indeed it does not provoke a curiosity about what is kept back. Remember, my beloved friend, how you yourself who are by no means a "prude d'Angleterre," . . . were affected at first. . . . The "abominations of young France" were strong in your nostrils--& now, you know, they are none the less abominable, although you are "acclimated," so as to be able to contemplate the genius & the power of Art in a serene & pure abstraction. How many are able to do this with you? And to how many wd. not the attempt to do be dangerous?
She goes on in another letter later in the same month to clarify why these French works would be dangerous to "miscellaneous readers" and to enlarge on two different strains of Anglo-Saxon narrowness, identifying differences between 'la prude Angleterre' and 'la prude d'Angleterre.' The distinction is not entirely clear to us but her discussion provides yet more insight into her perspective of the differences between the two cultures. 'La prude Angleterre' was apparently in her view "prude by a moral advantage." This moral advantage is approved by Elizabeth Barrett Browning although she does mitigate any moral absolute later in the passage. The other form of British prude, 'la prude d'Angleterre' was "prude by an intellectual narrowness." This form is clearly not one which she commends and it is this narrowness which she mocks in this and many other letters. She elaborates on 'moral advantage' thus:

such a tone of literature as the current one in France, is significant of the tone of the society, & could be audible nowhere without an existent harmony between it & the local manners or morals. Both the scepticism of opinion & the license of manners of the French people are reflected in the current literature,--& what is natural & familiar to France, 'la prude Angleterre' recoils from, --& must recoil from, as long as she retains her views (right or wrong) of the law of marriage and the laws of God. And therefore I say that I sd. be sorry to see this literature popular in England . . . 27

For herself and the few she felt were like-minded, her stricture did not apply. "With eclectic readers like you & me, it is different . . ." she concludes here. However, for British culture generally, whether "right or wrong" in its views, a qualification very unlike the righteous tone of so many other British critics of the time, French literature was not suitable. The differences in the ethical structure of the two cultures prevented mutual understanding according to Elizabeth Barrett Browning whose tone remains remarkably lacking in censure. Her cultural relativism is surprising and unique amongst the stated views of other British critics who considered Sue's fiction in the 1840's. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's concern was to consider French fiction as a whole and the works of Eugène Sue in particular for their literary merit. Her doing so provides valuable insight into her own critical abilities as well as a
glimpse of one aspect of the British reception of Sue uncoloured, for the most part, by the controversies and preconceptions which constrained other British critics.

It is clear that Sue's fiction had an impact on these three individual British writers. In both their private papers and their own fictional works there is enough evidence to trace a reaction to Sue and to speculate on the effect that reaction may have had on their writing. Some of the affinities noticeable between these authors' works and those of Sue may simply be generic. That in itself is interesting and of value to the study of literary history. However, in some cases, the association with Sue is more significant. This is particularly so with Dickens whose works bear such close kinship with aspects of Sue's fiction and whose own importance to the development of the English novel is indisputable.

However, Sue's impact extends beyond these individuals. It is difficult to measure the extent of the reaction to Sue in Britain during the period since there is so little of the sort of evidence cited here. Nevertheless, Trollope's allusion in 1857 used at the beginning of this thesis, amongst many other similar indications, suggest that reaction to Sue spread throughout British culture in the mid-nineteenth century. Certainly critical response to his work after 1843 helped to shape the literary culture of the time, defining distinctions still in place for the most part today. Sue's general contribution to the fiction of the period was also of consequence. This shows itself particularly in two developments notable in the mid-nineteenth century and of long-ranging importance: the "social problem" novel and the figure of the moral prostitute or the poor fallen woman.

1 Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Mary Russell Mitford, 13 March 1844, The Brownings' Correspondence, eds. Philip Kelley, Ronald Hudson and Scott Lewis, 14 vols. so far (Kansas 1984---), VIII, 256. N.B. I have followed the example of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's modern editors and retained her own idiosyncratic spelling and punctuation throughout. For the sake of simplicity, I refer to Elizabeth Barrett Browning throughout, although Elizabeth Barrett did not marry Robert Browning until 1846.
2 Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Mary Russell Mitford, 21 November 1842, The Brownings' Correspondence, VI, 162-3.
3 Ibid.
4 Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Richard Hengist Horne, 20 February 1844, The Brownings' Correspondence, VIII, 210-212.
5 Ibid.
6 see note 1 above.
7 Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Mary Russell Mitford, (6) February 1844, The Brownings' Correspondence, VIII, 189-192.
8 Ibid.
10 Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Mary Russell Mitford, (29 March) 1844, Ibid, 283.
13 Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Robert Browning, 7 September 1846, The Brownings' Correspondence, XIII, 346.
14 Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Henrietta Moulton-Barrett, 7 January (1847), The Brownings' Correspondence, XIV, 93-97.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Mary Russell Mitford, 8 February (1847), Ibid, 115-121.
18 Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Mary Russell Mitford, 7 September (1844), The Brownings' Correspondence, IX, 128.
19 Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Mary Russell Mitford, 24 October 1844, Ibid, 200.
20 Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Mary Russell Mitford, 18 March 1845, The Brownings' Correspondence, X, 126.
21 Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Mary Russell Mitford, 13 May 1845, Ibid, 211.
22 Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Mary Russell Mitford, (27) October 1845, The Brownings' Correspondence, XI, 142-3.
23 Mary Russell Mitford to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, October 1847, The Brownings' Correspondence, XIV, 314.
26 Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Mary Russell Mitford, 14 November 1844, The Brownings' Correspondence, IX, 225-226.
Chapter VI

"Two Nations": Eugène Sue and the British social-problem novel

Two nations; between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other’s habits, thoughts and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets; who are formed by a different breeding, are fed by a different food, are ordered by different manners, and are not governed by the same laws.1

Benjamin Disraeli’s passionate description of the rift between the rich and poor in Britain in the 1840s provides the most enduring passage of his novel *Sybil*, published in 1845. The work is the first chronologically of a group now identified as the “social-problem novels”, all written in the mid-nineteenth century and sharing specific concerns with “large-scale problems in contemporary British society”2, problems which had developed during the early half of the century as a result of the widespread social and economic changes of industrialization.

Although much of nineteenth-century fiction in Britain touched upon issues of social reform, these “social-problem novels,” usually identified as *Sybil, Hard Times, Mary Barton, North and South, Alton Locke* and *Felix Holt*, are bound together by the specific topicality of their subject matter, and by the “non-literary ambition” which it was felt motivated their authors. These writers wished to influence social and political change through the serious debate which could be inspired by their fiction. Their assumption that they could do so entered into the contemporary discussions surrounding the role played by fiction in society generally. The authors of these particular works recognized a valid social and political role for fiction and attempted to fulfill that role in these particular novels. Their novels are thus united by the spirit of that attempt. As a sub-genre, they all share
the perception that social order was under threat from conflicts between various interest groups in society, and particularly from the discontent of the increasingly impoverished and degraded working classes.³

That perception had been vividly defined by Thomas Carlyle in his collection of essays, *Past and Present*, whose opening line in 1843 had coined the phrase by which these novels are also known, “the condition of England”. Carlyle’s essays analyzed the complex economic and social issues of the time and were hugely influential with his contemporaries. *Past and Present* portrays Britain as a nation divided by the uneven distribution of wealth whose institutions are inadequate to the needs of the growing groups of poor. The essays’ arguments make use of the many contemporary studies which sought to measure the social problems of the period as well as the emotional response descriptions of these problems could excite. Carlyle, thus, cites statistics but also depicts with passion the hopeless plight of the individuals those statistics represented. The pattern of Carlyle’s discussion, mixing harsh reality with pathos, was followed by those British authors inspired by his work to write fiction which addressed serious social concerns.⁴

The earliest of the “social-problem novels” in Britain, *Sybil*, memorably set the tone for its successors with its portrait, cited in the passage above, of a nation divided by differences in wealth. The striking picture of a world living within a world, familiar yet foreign, a world whose separateness is determined by the stresses of poverty also vividly recalls the opening of Sue’s *Mystères de Paris* written just two years before. Sue’s powerful description of the world of the Parisian poor as one unknown to his readers, one which was barbaric and alien, yet nonetheless coexisting with their own, implied just the social division spelled out by Disraeli. Sue’s poor “barbarians”, like one half of Disraeli’s divided nation, were “formed by different breeding” and followed “different manners” than those of his readers:

We are going to try to reveal to the reader some episodes of the lives of barbarians who are just as much outside of civilisation as the savage people so well depicted by Cooper.
Only these barbarians of whom we speak are in our midst; we can brush our elbows against them when we risk visiting the dens in which they live . . . these men have their own manners special to themselves, their own mysterious language . . .

Like the British “social-problem novels” which followed it, Les Mystères de Paris carries an implied warning of a “social order under threat” which had special resonance on the continent where political and social instability had been an ever-present danger since the French Revolution. Sue’s novel exposed the hardships of the world of the urban poor to his more comfortable readers as a caution, but he also included an undercurrent of appeal to them to learn from his scenes and act with sympathy and compassion towards those less fortunate. His novel, like Carlyle’s essays, relied equally on the dispassionate presentation of facts and emotive descriptions of the adversity of the lives of the poor. The dual role of Sue’s work created a tension throughout his novel, as one aim was sometimes at odds with the other. The sentimentalism Sue used to elicit sympathy for his story often clashed with the harsh realism of his settings and his reliance on factual evidence. Still, as with Carlyle’s work, both impulses had at their base the desire to promote social reform. Reform was the defence Sue chose to help exonerate his novel when accused of both sensationalism and of a sordid realism which glorified the criminal underworld surrounding the poorer classes.

Thus, Sue’s aspirations in 1842-3 for his novel and the role he believed his fiction could play in social and political change presaged the perspective of the British “social-problem” novelists. Indeed, it was the force of his appeal for social reform in Les Mystères de Paris as well as in his next work, Le Juif Errant written in 1845, which cemented Sue’s reputation as a republican in France in the late 1840s, led to his election to French political office and eventually to his exile when the political tide turned against republicanism in the 1850s.

However, Sue’s reputation in Britain had never fully acquired such serious political dimensions. As has been demonstrated, the British press had, for the most part, reviled his work as sensationalist and pernicious, citing Sue in the general controversies surrounding the role of popular literature in public morality. Sue’s
association, in the British mind, with salacious and seditious popular fiction was strengthened by the general assumption, however inaccurate, that *Les Mystères de Paris* had directly inspired G.W.M. Reynolds’s *Mysteries of London* which began its long serialization in 1845. The series of articles in 1847 in the *Daily News* and the *Examiner* which used Sue’s works as illustrations of their criticism of popular fiction did much to estrange Sue and his works further from “serious” fiction and writers. Later in the period, after the initial impact of his most successful novels, Sue’s sincerity as a social reformer was again questioned in articles and comments written in the 1850s in the *Leader*.

Consequently, although in 1845 Disraeli’s identification of “two nations” in *Sybil* immediately indicates some common ground with *Les Mystères de Paris*, that novel’s association with the later British “social-problem novels” is more problematic. After 1845-47, Sue’s British reputation had consigned his works to a category of fiction which the serious-minded authors of the subsequent British “social-problem novels” would have been unlikely to acknowledge as influential. Nevertheless, enough evidence appears in the novels themselves, if not in any other form, to suggest that *Les Mystères de Paris* and, to a certain extent, *Le Juif Errant*, informed the British works in some ways.

All these novels, French and British, are linked by an underlying intent to educate and influence their readers towards social reform, a quality they share with Carlyle’s *Past and Present* whose influence is manifest in all the British works. A number of generic similarities, however, also connect the British novels in ways which distinctly recall features of Sue’s novels. Whether these affinities with Sue’s works can be traced directly to *Les Mystères de Paris* and *Le Juif Errant* or reflect instead a response to the example provided by *Sybil*, which, it can be argued, is clearly associated with the first of these, is difficult to determine. There is little or no indication of an acquaintance with Sue’s novels amongst any of these British authors, with the exception of Disraeli and Dickens. However, the study of the connections apparent between the British works in the sub-genre themselves and Sue’s novels does at least provide a significant illustration of the various adaptations of similar ideas and
fictional forms in different cultures. It also provides an opportunity to speculate further on the pattern of Sue’s impact on British fiction during this period.

Disraeli encountered Eugène Sue himself on a visit to Paris in 1842. Comments in Disraeli’s correspondence of the time focus on Sue’s membership of “circles of high fashion”: Sue was “the only litterateur admitted into fashionable society here— the rest are savages.”6 The extent of Disraeli’s acquaintance with Sue’s fiction remains undetermined since his remarks are limited to Sue’s role in French society, but it is fair to assume a certain familiarity. A number of years earlier, in 1834, Disraeli had written to Lady Blessington about French novels then in vogue and asked if Balzac, whom he had just discovered, were “better than Sue?”7 The question implies knowledge of Sue’s early works and certainly the example of Sue’s success in 1842-3 in France and in 1844 in Britain would have been difficult to ignore for a fellow author and a British writer interested in both fiction and life on the continent.

Disraeli had travelled widely in Europe as a young man and, as his letters indicate, continued later to show an interest in life there. There was much about Sue to attract Disraeli’s attention. Both men had established their writing careers with successful novels of fashionable life. *Vivian Grey*, written in 1826-27, had “helped to popularise the silver fork genre”8 and had secured Disraeli’s reputation as an author in Britain. Sue’s own novels of fashionable life, beginning with *Arthur* published a number of years later in 1839, achieved equal success in France. Sue’s conspicuous part in the world of Parisian fashion and his renown as a man-about-town and a dandy would also have held some attraction for Disraeli. Disraeli aspired to a similar status in British circles and was himself known for his flamboyant dress. Both authors, too, used their fiction to influence contemporary affairs in their respective nations and were eventually elected to political office partly on the strength of the reputations their fiction had helped to found. Sue’s political career, however, was undistinguished, and Disraeli’s long and celebrated role in British politics contrasts singularly with Sue’s brief, unfortunate time as a French politician.

Given the many parallels in these writers’ lives and the remarkable success of *Les Mystères de Paris* in 1843-4, it would not be surprising to find some relation with Sue’s novel in the work Disraeli wrote in 1845, just after the French
novel was published in Britain. *Les Mystères de Paris* had not only been an undoubted financial success, but had also achieved significant political and social influence when it was adopted by the republican cause in France. Disraeli wrote *Sybil* as part of his own political campaign to promote the "Young England" crusade which sought to involve more of the nation's youth in Tory reforms. A work of fiction which had been credited with as much real influence in the affairs of a nation as *Les Mystères de Paris* was unlikely to escape Disraeli's attention.

Although the plots of the two novels differ in much, the two works are closely connected by significant links, notably through their central characters which have similar features and roles within each narrative. These primary parallels underline a number of other affinities which together provide a convincing indication of Sue's influence on Disraeli's novel.

In *Les Mystères de Paris*, Sue sets out, as is clear from its opening, to portray a world unknown to his middle class readers, that of the urban poor. Throughout his novel, Sue juxtaposes his stark pictures of the distress and misery of that world with equally detailed, elaborate images of life at the opposite end of the social scale. The opulence and luxury of the lives of French aristocrats clash with the dreariness and degradation of the poor around them and Sue's narrative swings between contrasting scenes of both. The device linking these two opposing worlds is the central figure of Prince Rodolphe, whose own solicitude for the poor and dispossessed is used to highlight the lack of compassion in others of his own class. His example is held up as a model both within the narrative itself for characters who subsequently become enlightened to the problems of those less fortunate than themselves, such as Clémence d'Harville, and, by implication, for Sue's less enlightened, privileged readers as well.

Rodolphe is witness to many of the detailed pictures of the poverty and deprivation facing the poor of Paris which play a critical role in Sue's humanitarian appeal in his novel. The scenes in *Les Mystères de Paris* of the Morel family, dying in their garret, had particular impact on the reading public when the work was first published in France. The family's portrait occupied a chapter starkly entitled 'Misère':
We will conduct the reader to this sad dwelling. It is five o'clock in the morning. Outside the silence is profound, the night black, glacial, it is snowing. One candle... barely pierces the shadows of this garret with its sickly yellow light... The floor, of a colour without name, infected and sticky, is strewn here and there with rotten sticks of straw... The cold is so glacial, so penetrating in this garret... here in this narrow space live seven people... seven exhausted, tortured, frail bodies, from the little child to the grandmother...

A child is dying in this filthy, crowded, darkly lit attic and the others are left essentially unprotected since their mother is too ill to care for them. The family are starved and desperate through no fault of their own. Indeed, their innate worthiness is vividly represented in the contrast of the rich materials of Morel's trade, the valuable gems he forms into jewellery, with the grim poverty of the rest of the garret. Morel works these gems with no thought of theft and the material benefit this could provide. Reproach of the frivolous, wasteful lives of the rich is implied in the striking contrast of the brilliance of the jewels with the bleak, comfortless setting where their beauty can serve no purpose. The stark scenes of the wretched conditions faced by the Morel family help to form a template for later descriptions of poverty in some of the British works of the "social problem" sub-genre.

Like Sue, Disraeli uses the noble protagonist of his story, Charles Egremont, to link the social extremes in *Sybil*. In this story, Egremont also becomes a compassionate spectator of the distress of a poor family whose characteristics recall those of the Morels. The father of this family is a diligent weaver who plies his trade, as did Morel, in the same crowded garret room in which his family live. The man is hard-working and honest, but is unable to provide for his family because of the unfair economic conditions against which he struggles. His acknowledgment of these conditions, over which he has no control and of which he and his family are victims, reflect the details of many of Carlyle's economic arguments in *Past and Present*. In this scene too, as in Sue's novel, there is poor light, severe cold and illness. The pathos of the family's condition is similarly intensified by the vulnerability of children, left exposed by the combination of their father's poverty and their mother's illness.
Egremont is moved by this scene and his caring character serves to emphasize the relative indifference of his peers. Like Prince Rodolphe, he plays an emblematic role in the novel, representing “a new generation of aristocracy of England” who are to help institute a “dayspring in the history of this nation” by opening their hearts to “the responsibility of their position.” Egremont’s example, like that of the prince, is clearly intended to apply outside the world of the novel. *Sybil* also features detailed pictures of aristocratic life to the same purpose as those in Sue’s novel, however, Disraeli’s eye is more critical of high society than Sue’s. There are elements of satire in Disraeli’s portraits of the upper classes. The character of Sir Vavasour and his campaign to enhance the importance of the baronetcy, for example, are patently absurd. Sue is critical of the waste represented by some aristocratic lives, the lack of energy and constructive effort amongst them, but he maintains an admiring tone and does not ridicule this class. His own attempts at humour in *Les Mystères de Paris* are confined to a few members of the Parisian poor.

Dialect and slang play an important role in the British “social problem” novels and their use of different speech patterns parallels Sue’s handling of language in his novel. *Les Mystères de Paris* famously employed the argot of the Parisian underworld to lend authenticity to the portraits of the urban poor. The novel uses extensive footnoting to explain the otherwise unintelligible language to its readers. However, Sue’s application of this device is inconsistent. Characters who should perhaps use slang often do not, reverting to formal, accepted forms of French. Worthy characters, such as the Morels, often speak well, while those the reader is clearly intended to mistrust, such as the evil La Chouette or the Martial family, speak in the argot of the criminal and poor classes. Disraeli also employs dialect and slang in the speeches of his poorer characters and annotates these with occasional footnoting to achieve a similar sense of realism. His use of language in his novel is equally inconsistent. The honorable weaver described above, for example, uses flowery, formal English as does the eponymous heroine of the novel, the supposedly humble Sybil herself.

The figure of Sybil provides the other significant parallel between these two novels. Both Sue and Disraeli borrowed heavily from elements of romantic Gothic
fiction, a propensity which clashes with their serious purpose in modern eyes and both of their central female characters personify Gothic conventions. Sybil in Disraeli’s novel first appears at twilight, her small form silhouetted in the ruined arches of an ancient abbey. *Les Mystères de Paris* is full of similar images. Fleur de Marie is introduced dwarfed by the sinister towers of the slum building of the Cité. Her gestures and positions in the narrative often reflect both Gothic fiction, such as when she is abducted in a dark forest, and melodrama, such as when she later dies swooning in the cavernous abbey of a convent. Sybil’s own melodramatic role and postures recall those of Fleur de Marie. She too is threatened, chased and swoons throughout her story.

Sybil’s ethereal blond beauty, her novice’s habit, inherent nobility of character and, especially, her remarkably sweet voice are all qualities of stock heroines also shared by Sue’s character. It is this last feature which most draws attention to the parallels between the two characters. Both authors make much of the ability of their heroines’ voices to charm, to move and to pacify. Rodolphe is transfixed by Fleur de Marie’s soft tones when he first encounters her in the darkness of the Parisian slums. Her physical beauty is secondary and only introduced later:

*The stranger, instead of answering the girl, listened attentively to her voice. Never had such a gentle, fresh, silvery tone reached his ear...*¹¹

Sybil is first presented in much the same manner in Disraeli’s novel. Charles Egremont is mesmerized by the “almost supernatural sweetness” of her singing an evening hymn in the ruins of the abbey with a voice which is “tender and solemn, yet flexible and thrilling.”¹² It is only after her voice has captivated him that Egremont then notices Sybil’s lovely features, which resemble those of Fleur de Marie in their pure, virginal softness. Both girls represent an angelically sweet rather than sensual beauty, a quality commonplace in fictional heroines but somewhat at odds with Fleur de Marie’s role as a prostitute, an inconsistency which will be discussed in a later chapter.

The girls’ reputations as singers provided significant narrative devices in both works. Fleur de Marie, who is also known throughout much of the novel as La
Goualeuse, the Singer, first enchants, and then ultimately converts to their better selves, the hardened inmates of the prison Saint-Lazare, most notably the embittered figure of La Louve. Fleur de Marie's gentle voice plays a key role in this conversion which then becomes a device to bring La Louve further into the narrative. La Louve later becomes Fleur de Marie's protector and saviour in some of the most dramatic scenes of violence in the story. Fleur de Marie's rescue from drowning by La Louve finally leads to the girl's reunion with her lost father, Rodolphe, and the culmination of much of Sue's main plot.

In Disraeli's novel, Sybil's reputation as a singer provides the narrative tool which takes her to Mowbray Castle where the noble family wish to hear her sing. There she uses her voice to quell a mob of enraged factory workers who overrun the estate. In the midst of the violence, she calls to the men she recognizes in the crowd, reminding them of their better natures. Moved by her eloquence, some of the men respond, turn from their destructive course and help to save both Sybil herself and Lord de Mowbray's family. The scene ends with her passionate reunion with her love, Egremont, which culminates their long love story.

Sybil is ironically protecting her own when she faces the mob in Disraeli's scene. She is, in fact, the legitimate mistress of the Mowbray estate, but her aristocratic identity remains hidden for much of the story. Although she lives in relative poverty and is considered one of the people, whose cause she embraces, Sybil's innate nobility of character hints at her true background. Continual reference to her dignity and inner superiority sets her apart from her humble surroundings and companions, who generally treat the girl with an instinctive respect and admiration.

The royal status of Fleur de Marie also remains a mystery until late in Sue's novel. She too manifests qualities which distinguish her from the sordid scenes of her life in the Parisian slums and prisons. Fleur de Marie's very nickname, linking her with the Virgin Mary, amongst the underworld where she is first found, points to the recognition of her superior nature in those around her. Later in the narrative, when she is a prisoner in Saint-Lazare, the other inmates similarly honour the girl as different from themselves. After Fleur de Marie's royal identity is revealed and she has travelled to Gerolstein, she is seen to be more exalted even than other noble members of her
father's court. In the final scenes of the novel, in a convent, Fleur de Marie's fellow nuns demonstrate their esteem by electing the princess as their leader the moment her vows are complete. It is interesting that, although both authors plead the cause of the poor and working classes in their stories, neither is prepared to produce a heroine from those ranks. Both feel compelled to use their female leads to portray life amongst the lower orders with sympathy, yet both revert to the convention of the incognito aristocrat in order to guarantee reader interest and empathy in their characters' stories.

The final abiding image of Fleur de Marie in *Les Mystères de Paris* is the Gothic, melodramatic scene of her death, prostrate with shame and the effort of atonement, dressed in her nun's habit in the gloomy halls of the old abbey church. Sybil also wears the robes of a religious novice in Disraeli's novel, however, the bond between the two characters established by this particular resemblance is wholly superficial. Sue's princess adopts the nun's habit to atone for her past life as a prostitute. Her portrait is greatly complicated by the shame of her former role and that complexity contrasts with Disraeli's straightforwardly pure heroine.

Disraeli is at pains to avoid the sort of ambivalence which surrounds Sue's character and Sybil is unquestionably chaste. Even her deeply felt love for Egremont remains platonic, despite titillating opportunities for it to be otherwise. Those opportunities, when the two young, passionate lovers are thrown together and alone, carry an undercurrent of sexual sensationalism through Disraeli's work, linking it, at least in a modern perspective, to parts of Sue's novel. Sybil is also sexually threatened by Egremont's working class rival, Morley, in an explicit scene reminiscent of similar portraits of sexual tension in Sue. Clearly their higher didactic purpose did not preclude a certain type of excitement in their fiction in the minds of either author, although, in Britain, Sue was more vilified than Disraeli for this aspect of his work.

Disraeli's insistence on his character's sexual purity distances her from Sue's creation and there are other elements which significantly distinguish the two works. The central relationship in *Les Mystères de Paris* is the complex and troubled love between Rodolphe and his abandoned daughter, Fleur de Marie, which is complicated further by the strain between the prince and his own father. The complexities of these relationships are never fully resolved and the father and daughter
remain irrevocably separated by the "crime" of Fleur de Marie's prostitution. The central relationship between a parent and child in Disraeli's work is less complex. Sybil and her father are mutually devoted though they too are estranged in one sense by a crime when the father becomes involved with the Chartists and their planned sedition. The secrecy his scheming demands effectively divides the pair and then they are ultimately separated by his arrest and imprisonment. The same narrative device of crime and punishment employed by Sue to introduce tension and drama into his portraits of a father and daughter is put to use here, although within a much more specific context and with less intensity. Sybil's father's imprisonment reflects the actual details of the history of the Chartist movement in Britain, and, at any rate, his separation from his daughter is short-lived and circumstantial.

Long passages digress from the narrative of Sybil, as in Les Mystères de Paris, to discussions of social injustice and reform, but these invariably apply exclusively to Britain and British life in Disraeli's novel, a specificity which distinguishes it from Sue's work. Sybil shares this expressly British concern with Carlyle's essays whose influence dictates, for the most part, a specifically British bias to the social reform urged by all the British works. Specific details of British history, social structure and ways of life figure importantly in Sybil. Sybil also treats the history of the Chartist movement in Britain, with detailed discussions both of the movement's charter, intent and the actual events associated with it. Discussions of the role of religion in social reform in Disraeli's novel take on another dimension specific to Britain and debate the differences between Catholicism and Anglicanism. Religion was not a central consideration in the French novel, where its role is given a much more general treatment and is, of course, regarded from an exclusively Catholic perspective.

Disraeli's novel ends too in a tone which is unlike that of the conclusion of Les Mystères de Paris. In Sue's work, Prince Rodolphe resolves all the many individual cases of poverty and injustice of the story, setting up in business the various deserving members of the poor, and ensuring the happy union of several couples of minor characters, such as La Louve and Martial and La Rigolette and François Germain. Yet the final passages of the story focus on the self-denial and what is in essence the self-destruction of the figure of Fleur de Marie. The images left at the end
of the novel have particular impact because of the contrast of the girl’s chosen fate with the splendour of her new identity as a noble princess. The narrative has carefully distanced Fleur de Marie from her origins in the Parisian slums and turned the formerly abject waif into an exalted princess in a fairy tale-like transformation. Fleur de Marie appears to deserve the happiness offered her in the marriage proposed with her adoring noble cousin, Henri, yet her remorse for her past sins will not allow her conscience to accept the role of an honoured wife. She chooses instead renunciation and atonement, the force of which eventually kills her.

The happy union of privilege with love does take place in Sybil. With a similar fantastic facility in the narrative, the lowly Sybil is raised to high rank by inheriting the ancient title rightly hers. Charles Egremont takes possession of his conveniently dead brother’s position as Lord Marney and the two noble lovers marry and settle happily on their estate. As in Sue’s work, the novel’s sub-plots culminate happily thanks to the efforts of this story’s noble protagonist. The various formerly disenfranchised workers of the story themselves marry and become prosperous and respectable with the support of this novel’s own caring and powerful aristocrat, Egremont. With its picture of a contented nation, its members in their rightful places working in concert towards prosperity, Disraeli ends his novel with a special plea to his British readers: “That we may live to see England once more possess a free Monarchy, and a privileged and prosperous People, is my prayer . . .”13 Both the tone and thrust of these concluding passages make clear the essential differences between Disraeli’s specifically British social concerns and what had been in Sue’s work a wider appeal to those in power for reform guided by general humanitarian principles in Les Mystères de Paris.

Elizabeth Gaskell’s first novel, Mary Barton, published in 1848, shares that wider humanitarian appeal. Although set amongst British scenes and concerns, the novel had less of a definite purpose than Disraeli’s Sybil. As one critic has pointed out, the work had less of “an axe to grind”.14 It is certainly written with social reform at its heart, yet the author herself prefaces her story with the clear-cut intention to isolate it from the body of any particular political position or thought:
I know nothing of Political Economy, or the theories of trade. I have tried to write truthfully; and if my accounts agree or clash with any system, the agreement or disagreement is unintentional.15

As she explains, her story evolved out of a desire to uncover the “romance in the lives of some of those who elbowed me daily in the busy streets of the town in which I resided.” Her impulse to explore the world of those unknown urban dwellers around her, “the care-worn men, who looked as if doomed to struggle through their lives in strange alternations between work and want . . . “16 recalls, as did Disraeli’s “two nations”, Sue’s proposition at the beginning of Les Mystères de Paris to portray the alien world of the urban poor, a world apart yet near at hand, whose inhabitants we could “coudroyer” or elbow daily. The idea had been striking in 1843, had probably left its impression on Disraeli in 1845 and now could be seen to inform the vision in Mrs. Gaskell’s fiction two years later.

There is no evidence that Elizabeth Gaskell knew of or read Sue’s works. Her correspondence makes no mention of the author or of his works; given her position as a clergyman’s wife and Sue’s eventual reputation in Britain as a writer of fiction deemed to be of questionable morality, perhaps her silence is not surprising. Many of the translations of Les Mystères de Paris in 1844, for example, had appeared from the notorious publishers in Holywell Street, known also for their publication of pornography. However, Elizabeth Gaskell had studied French as a girl and she admired French authors, to the point of contemplating writing a biography of Madame de Sévigné. She read widely, enjoyed Gothic fiction and during 1840 toured the continent where Sue’s reputation had already taken hold with Arthur and Mathilde. It would seem impossible for such a figure as Mrs. Gaskell, who appreciated the fashionable world and who was “no literary snob”, not to be at least conversant with Sue’s reputation if not his works.17

On its surface, the story of Mary Barton bears less resemblance to Les Mystères de Paris than Disraeli’s Sybil. Mary Barton herself, the central female character of the story, is truly a member of the working classes, not the aristocrat hidden amongst the people of both Sue’s and Disraeli’s novels. It is interesting to note,
however, that Mrs. Gaskell's heroine does not speak in the dialect used by the other members of her class. Mary uses accepted English throughout her story, unlike Sue's Fleur de Marie who does at least speak in Parisian slang until she is revealed to be Rodolphe's daughter, when she effortlessly converts to more formal language.

Mrs. Gaskell's novel focuses almost exclusively on that world of "care-worn men" she points to in her preface. The novel ranges very little beyond the scope of that world and is consistently darker and more sombre than Sue's or Disraeli's works as a consequence. Mary Barton does link the lives of the poor with those of the rich in her flirtation with the young Mr. Carson, son of the wealthy mill-owner, but the resulting scenes revealing wealthier lives are of limited significance and effect. None of the glitter of privileged life breaks the dreariness of the world of *Mary Barton*. It has been pointed out that "novels portraying fashionable life" were less in vogue than earlier in the century. Critics had come to take note of the "demise" of the fashionable novel as early as 1845. It may be that, in 1847 when she was writing her first novel, Elizabeth Gaskell confined her work to its narrow world of poor urban life in response to this trend. Certainly *Mary Barton* remained truer to her stated purpose of depicting the lives of the urban poor than either Sue's or Disraeli's had.

Nevertheless, there are a number of noticeable parallels between *Les Mystères de Paris* and Mrs. Gaskell's novel. Both narratives revolve around acts of violence and murder, and vengeance plays a central role in the resolution of their stories. Prince Rodolphe seeks vengeance for the terrible crimes of wrong-doers, such as the Maître d'école and Jacques Ferrand. The prince achieves his end in both cases in sensational scenes adding a disturbingly sadistic dimension to his character which is in opposition to his more compassionate persona. The blinding of the Maître d'école is especially startling and seems cruel, despite this criminal's dreadful deeds. Nevertheless, on the whole vengeance in the novel is seen to be both just and justified and its fulfillment remains central to Rodolphe's character and to the narrative as a whole.

Mrs. Gaskell gives vengeance an equally central role in her own story, but to a different end. In *Mary Barton*, vengeance is used to point to the spiritual struggle faced both by individuals and by society at large against this impulse and to
highlight the importance of Christian mercy. During the strike depicted in the novel, the retribution chosen by the Trade Unions to punish their members’ violation of Union rules shocks John Barton into eventually questioning the Unions’ role and his own part in the strike’s violence. Barton is appalled by the way in which the Unions take revenge on betrayal, throwing vitriol on the offender’s face, a dreadful image which recalls the similarly scarred Maître d’école in Sue’s novel. At length, although by no means at first, Barton’s questioning leads to an enlightened vision of the bond between all men, masters and workers, a vision which ultimately is shared by Barton’s counterpart in the story, the rich mill-owner Mr. Carson. The senior Mr. Carson finally turns away from his intended vengeance of his son’s murder to forgive John Barton for his crime. Carson recognizes the importance of mercy after consulting the Gospel, and his doing so forms the moving culmination of the principal plot of the novel:

His son’s murderer was discovered; had confessed his guilt; and yet (strange to say) he could not hate him with the vengeance of hatred he had felt . . . something of pity would steal in for the poor, wasted skeleton of a man, the smitten creature, who had told him of his sin, and implored his pardon that night. . . . Years ago, the Gospel had been his task-book in learning to read. . . . He fell to that narrative now afresh . . .

His study of the Gospel leads Mr. Carson to appear at John Barton’s death-bed and clasp the dying man in his arms, in a melodramatic movement which recalls a similar theatricality in Sue’s work. Mr. Carson prays for them both in terms which reverberate throughout the novel: “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us.”

At the end of the story, Carson comes to fulfill one aspect of the role played by Rodolphe and Egremont in the preceding novels. The mill-owner has become the enlightened master and a model for those of his class, reflecting the fundamental vision of the author herself as had both protagonists of the earlier novels:
the wish that lay nearest to his heart was that none might suffer from the cause from which he had suffered; that a perfect understanding, and complete confidence and love, might exist between masters and men; that the truth might be recognised that the interests of one were the interests of all . . . that hence it was most desirable to have educated workers, capable of judging, not mere machines of ignorant men; and to have them bound to their employers by the ties of respect and affection, not by mere money bargains alone; in short, to acknowledge the Spirit of Christ as the regulating law between both parties.20

Mary Barton and Les Mystères de Paris both shape their narratives around dramatic chase scenes involving their main female characters. The pursuit, capture and attempt to murder Fleur de Marie heightens the excitement of Les Mystères de Paris. Mary Barton’s brave chase across the country for evidence to clear Jem Wilson at his trial provides form to and adds similar suspense to Mary Barton. The novels’ heroines are, again, both subject to sexual menace in scenes which, as they do in Sybil, provide an undercurrent of sexual tension and titillation, although Sue’s treatment of these scenes is much more overt and insistent than those in Mrs. Gaskell’s novel. Mary Barton is preyed upon by her would-be lover, Henry Carson, in the streets around her home. Her danger is genuine and fairly explicit but relatively transitory. Fleur de Marie suffers from almost continual sexual menace until her transformation to princess elevates her away from that threat.

Early in Sue’s story, the hard-working, circumspect minor figure of La Rigolette befriends the spendthrift Fleur de Marie and tries to convince the less careful girl to live frugally and guard herself from debt. Fleur de Marie disregards her friend’s example which leads to her own insolvency, eventual prostitution and ultimately her death. The equally sensible character of Margaret in Mary Barton also attempts to prevent her friend Mary’s dangerous flirtation with Henry Carson. Both girls provide charming sub-plots in each novel of uncomplicated love stories which serve to contrast with the more troubled lives of the central characters.
Another minor character in Mrs. Gaskell’s novel, Mary Barton’s aunt Esther, touches upon the central concern of the figure of Fleur de Marie, her sexual purity. Fleur de Marie is never allowed to forget the loss of her innocence in Sue’s narrative. The fallen Esther equally haunts Mrs. Gaskell’s novel. Esther’s disappearance and the wistful longing of her loving relatives for her return opens the story. She shadows Mary as the girl’s trysts with the young Carson threaten to condemn her niece to the same “downward path to vice”\(^2\), and she finally dies of shame and the hardship brought about by that shame at the novel’s end. Esther too, like Fleur de Marie, denies herself the chance of earthly redemption offered her by the sympathetic Jem Wilson:

> ‘And now, listen to me. You loathe the life you lead, else you would not speak of it as you do. Come home with me. Come to my mother. . . . I will see that they give you a welcome. And tomorrow I will see if some honest way of living cannot be found for you. Come home with me.’

> She was silent for a minute, and he hoped he had gained his point. Then she said:

> ‘God bless you, Jem, for the words you have just spoken. Some years ago you might of saved me, as I hope and trust you will yet save Mary. But it is too late now; too late,’ she added, with accents of deep despair.\(^2\)

The escape proposed to Esther by Jem lacks the opulence offered Fleur de Marie as a princess and consort to her noble cousin, but in essence the women’s dilemma is the same. Neither can accept a role in normal, “honest” lives after the loss of their sexual purity. Their loss of innocence overshadows both stories and their dramatic deaths add notes of tragedy to both, suggesting severity on the part of their authors for such cases. Yet both Mrs. Gaskell and Sue continually stress the more sympathetic aspects of the women’s stories and highlight their roles as victims of social injustice. A plea for compassion and sympathy underlies both portraits, even if the fundamental question of their morality remains unresolved. Sue’s plea is implicit in Fleur de Marie’s horrific story of her desertion, imprisonment and poverty and in her tragic death. The details of her story are echoed in that of Esther, whose parallel
portrait is accompanied by much more overt handling on the part of Mrs. Gaskell who pleads: "To whom shall the outcast prostitute tell her tale? Who will give her help in the day of need? Hers is the leper-sin, and all stand aloof dreading to be counted unclean." The role of female sexual morality becomes central to a later novel by Mrs. Gaskell, *Ruth*, which bears noticeable affinities with Sue's character and will be discussed elsewhere.

Esther is buried next to her brother-in-law John Barton, whose crime of murder links them both as social outcasts. The need for Christian compassion in both their cases is explicit in the inscription their author places over their joint, otherwise unmarked grave: "Psalm ciii. v. 9 --- 'For He will not always chide, neither will he keep his anger for ever.'" This invocation of forgiveness of sins and for human understanding, this "tenderer humanity," underpins the whole of *Mary Barton* and is why the work transcends the more defined, political message of Disraeli's "social-problem" novel. *Les Mystères de Paris* gave equal emphasis to a more general appeal to humanitarian understanding and in this sense, Mrs. Gaskell's novel bears a closer kinship to Sue's novel than the more apparently similar *Sybil*.

Scenes of a poor family's terrible deprivation and want underline the humanitarian impulse in Mrs. Gaskell's novel as they do in *Les Mystères de Paris*. These are the focus of a chapter called 'Poverty and Death' in *Mary Barton*. The stark simplicity of the chapter's title as well as the details of its subject matter both recall the similar chapter in Sue's work:

You went down one step even from the foul area into the cellar in which a family of human beings lived. It was very dark inside. The window-panes, many of them, were broken and stuffed with rags, which was reason enough for the dusky light that pervaded the place even at mid-day. . . . the smell was so fetid as almost to knock the two men down . . . three or four little children rolling on the damp, nay wet brick floor, through which the stagnant, filthy moisture of the street oozed up . . .

The principal figure in Sue's scenes of poverty, the character of Morel, whose family suffers such want, illness and madness brought about by hardship,
provides the voice which articulates the underlying mood of *Les Mystères de Paris* as a whole. In a dialogue with his despairing wife this character spells out the social message of Sue’s novel to his readers:

Oh! these rich! They are so hard!
--No harder than any others, Madeleine, but they don’t know, do you see, what it is to be miserable. They are born happy, they live happy, they die happy; why should they think of us? How can they have an idea of the deprivation of others? If they are hungry, their joy is greater, they will enjoy their food all the more. If it is especially cold, so much the better, they call it a beautiful frost: it’s very simple, they go for a walk, they return to their comfortable homes, and the cold makes them appreciate their good fires; . . . cold and hunger become pleasures for them. They don’t know, you see, they don’t know. . .

The voice of John Barton is central to Mrs. Gaskell’s work and he echoes Morel in a passage of the novel which distinctly recalls the sentiments of *Les Mystères de Paris* both in the terms it employs and in its essential purport:

‘Thou never could abide the gentlefolk,’ said Wilson, half amused at his friend’s vehemence.
‘And what good have they ever done me that I should like them?’ asked Barton, the latent fire lighting up his eye: and bursting forth he continued, ‘If I am sick do they come and nurse me? If my child lies dying . . . does the rich man bring the wine or broth that might save his life? If I am out of work for weeks in the bad times, and the winter comes, with black frost, and keen east wind, and there is no coal for the grate, and no clothes for the bed, and the thin bones are seen through the ragged clothes, does the rich man share his plenty with me, as he ought to do, if his religion wasn’t a humbug? . . . Don’t think to come over me with th’ old tale, that the rich know nothing of the trials of the poor; I say, if they don’t know, they ought to know. . .

Mrs. Gaskell’s upbraiding of her reader is more severe than Sue’s gentle irony, however, her tone is justified. In 1842, Sue had been introducing new perspectives to his comfortable audience. His call for their compassion, though
heartfelt, could lie under the surface of his shocking images of poverty. By 1847 the events of the Chartist movement and various strikes in Britain, had clarified the urgency of the need for change in Britain and warranted the stridency Mrs. Gaskell adopted. Still, both the gist of these passages and the spirit in which they were written significantly connect these two works.

The fundamental features of *Les Mystères de Paris* which surface in the two British works discussed above continued to show themselves to a certain extent in the later British works which form this sub-genre, Kingsley's *Alton Locke*, Dickens's *Hard Times*, Mrs. Gaskell's *North and South*, and George Eliot's *Felix Holt*. Sue's *Le Juif Errant*, written in 1845 and published in both France and Britain in that year, also addressed issues of social reform and was, if anything, more popularly successful than *Les Mystères de Paris*. This later novel also bears certain elements in common with those British works in this group written after Mrs. Gaskell's *Mary Barton*, although there are fewer recognizable ties with *Le Juif Errant* than with Sue's earlier novel.

The narrative of *Le Juif Errant* features such an elaborate, sometimes fantastic plot that its very intricacy may have prevented any straightforward vision of the novel and its purpose. The work is awkwardly constructed and certainly does not provide the same unity of story-line and characterization as *Les Mystères de Paris*. The fact that the story also featured elements of the supernatural probably gave it less appeal to those British novelists writing later in the period whose purpose was to depict society credibly and thus inspire reform in a real sense. *Le Juif Errant*, too, was especially successful amongst popular readers and was serialized in translation in the popular press. This popularity with the poor and working classes may have stigmatized *Le Juif Errant* even more than Sue's earlier novel in the eyes of serious minded British writers. Even so, two of the later British "social problem novels" do include central characters which recall one of the important figures in *Le Juif Errant*.

It is possible that by the time these later novels were published, some of the generic characteristics of fiction seeking to inspire social reform had been sufficiently established in Britain by Disraeli's and Mrs. Gaskell's popular works. The later novels may have been written in response to those earlier British works without reference on the part of their authors to fiction by Eugène Sue. It is difficult to
determine otherwise, despite the many affinities apparent in these works with those of Sue. However, there is some intriguing evidence that these later works relate to Sue's works, as well as to each other. The fact that two of these later works seem to echo elements of *Le Juif Errant* as well as *Les Mystères de Paris* is part of that evidence.

There are no evident links between Eugène Sue and the author of the next "social-problem novel" to appear in Britain after *Mary Barton*, *Alton Locke*, published in 1850. Charles Kingsley was a serious-minded Anglican clergyman, who "loathed everything 'Romish' and idealised everything 'English'"\(^2\), traits which would have distanced him very effectively from a French author of popular fiction deemed to be pernicious in the eyes of most of the British press. *Alton Locke* owes its most conspicuous debt to Carlyle, whose ideas in *Past and Present* are reflected in the lengthy digressions concerning aspects of British social reform, who is mirrored in the figure of Sandy Mackaye who helps to mould the young protagonist of the novel, and who is named and quoted in the narrative.

Nevertheless, *Alton Locke* still follows somewhat the pattern partly set out in *Les Mystères de Paris* for novels about social reform, featuring many of the same components which show themselves in the earlier novels of the sub-genre. Kingsley was writing, as had been Disraeli, with his own specific agenda for social change and his doing so, of course, provides a different perspective on the these otherwise now familiar features. Curiously, the protagonist of *Alton Locke* also resembles one of the central figures of *Le Juif Errant*.

Sue is reported to have toured Parisian slums to research his story for *Les Mystères de Paris* and Kingsley also visited the sites that were to furnish the urban landscape of his own story. He had written to his wife in 1849:

> I was yesterday . . . over the cholera districts of Bermondsey and oh God! what I saw! people having no water to drink---hundreds of them but the water of the common sewer which stagnated full of . . . dead fish, cats and dogs under the windows. At the time the cholera was raging Walsh (his companion) saw them throwing the rice water evacuations into the ditch and then dipping out the water and drinking it!!!\(^3\)
Disease and water, both as a source of relief from sickness and of infection itself, are inextricably linked in the images of urban poverty which emerge in Kingsley’s novel. In a ghastly scene near the end of his story, the central character Alton Locke is taken to a city slum dwelling where the inmates have died or are dying of disease carried to them by the unclean water around them:

And what a room! A low lean-to with wooden walls . . . and through the broad chinks of the floor shone up as it were ugly glaring eyes, staring at us. They were the reflections of the rushlight in the sewer below. The stench was frightful . . . There was his little Irish wife; --dead--and naked; the wasted white limbs gleamed in the lurid light . . . and on each side of her a little, shrivelled, impish child-corpse . . .

The passage complies, to some extent, with the model for such scenes set out in *Les Mystères de Paris*, reiterated in *Le Juif Errant* and found again in both Disraeli’s and Mrs. Gaskell’s stories. The tableau of the Morel family in *Les Mystères de Paris* compounds its pathos with the trope of a dying child and the other children left unprotected by the helplessness of the ill mother. Morel clasps his hands to his head in a stylized gesture of helpless despair inspired by melodrama, which also dictates the physical postures of the other characters, the women kneeling or prostrate, the children pitifully grouped about them. Darkness dominates the family’s attic, broken only by a little ineffective light. The harsh details of the everyday life of the impoverished, the cold, the lack of colour and the evil smells are unpleasantly convincing.

These features had all been repeated in scenes in both *Sybil* and *Mary Barton* to much the same effect. *Past and Present* had also stressed these everyday horrors of poor life for the same reason. Here the same imagery used by Kingsley takes the prescribed formula to certain extremes. Sue’s descriptions of slum life are indeed horrible, yet the overall impression remains plausible and real. Kingsley introduces an element of the fantastic and the macabre into the slum scenes of *Alton Locke*. The image of the dead mother in the passage above, for example, is reminiscent more of
Dante’s vision of the Inferno. Her dead eyes stare at the living “reproachfully”. Her posture is both melodramatic and metaphorical; her body lies spread out, flanked symmetrically by the twisted, deformed bodies of her dead “impish” children. Most importantly of all, the woman is “naked”. Her “white limbs gleamed in the lurid light”.
Sue’s poor characters, though ragged, are always decently covered and the full horror and exposure of their lives and bodies remain muted compared to this graphic, unrelenting vision. The lives of Sue’s urban poor are certainly hellish, but Kingsley seems to have painted urban slum life here as Hell itself.

The distinction points to a crucial division between the two works.
Kingsley’s novel rests its story upon a profound preoccupation with the role of religion in social order and reform. Although all three of the works discussed thus far concerned themselves to some extent with this issue, Alton Locke pays particular attention to discussions of religion; it was Kingsley’s own “axe to grind”. He therefore adopts an insistently didactic tone which underlies and interrupts much of his narrative. Thus, in the passage above, the issue of temperance is introduced into the description of the poor family’s life. The teetotaler Alton Locke remonstrates with the character Downes, the father of this family, for his need for gin and then realizes that the family’s deaths have been caused by drinking the infected water swirling in the open sewer below the tenement:

“What do you want with gin? Look at the fruits of your accursed tippling. If you had taken my advice, my poor fellow,” I went on . . . ” and become a water-drinker like me—”
“Curse you and your water-drinking! If you had had no water to drink or wash with for two years but that—-that,” pointing to the foul ditch below . . . “
“Do you actually mean that that sewer is your only drinking water?”
“Where else can we get any? Everybody drinks it; and you shall, too . . . and then see if you don’t run off to the gin-shop, to take the taste of it out of your mouth. Drink? and who can help drinking, with his stomach turned with such hell-broth as that—”32
One social evil, the lack of clean water, has led to the greater spiritual evil of intemperance and to the death of this family who are clearly meant to play an allegoric role in the thematic structure of the novel. The Morels in *Les Mystères de Paris*, although of central importance to the novel’s theme as representatives of victims of social evils, carried less symbolic and certainly no comparable spiritual significance in the sense that Kingsley manifestly meant for this scene.

One image used in *Alton Locke*, however, reveals a striking resemblance to another scene from *Les Mystères de Paris*. Again, its use here carries a more profound, spiritual meaning. The character of Alton Locke himself is a poor tailor and many of the scenes of poor and working life depict that craft and those involved in it. Many of the families, like the one pictured above, work by the piece, painstakingly stitching finery for the rich customers of tailors’ shops. Employment of this kind for semi-skilled poor workers was prevalent in France and Britain during this period. Economic and social studies, such as Henry Mayhew’s articles in 1849-50 in Britain and parts of *Past and Present*, featured discussions of such workers as did the fiction and verse, such as Thomas Hood’s *The Song of the Shirt*, 1843, seeking, like those studies, to encourage reform. La Rigolette and Fleur de Marie were both seamstresses, as were most of the other poor female characters in the British “social problem” novels.

In *Alton Locke* the tailors’ extreme poverty contrasts ironically with the bright, luxurious garments they labour over with much the same dramatic contrast unmistakable in Sue’s novel between the destitution of the Morel family and the brilliant jewels of his own craft. This contrast in Sue’s novel serves to implicate the eventual wearers of the jewels in the poor living conditions of the needy family. Sue’s heavy irony points critically both to the waste of the lives of the rich and to their ignorance of the needs of the poor workers who supply the trappings of that waste. The wealthy who will wear the clothing worked over by Kingsley’s impoverished craftsmen, however, inspire more than simply the just indignation of the author. In *Alton Locke* the waste and ignorance of the rich become moral crimes deserving of the ultimate punishment. Kingsley has the clothing which the destitute workers produce carry fatal infections to the rich who wear it. Their consequent deaths from the same
infectious fevers which are killing off the workers intensify the urgency and righteous tone behind Kingsley’s appeal to social reform:

“Dead!”...
“Of typhus fever. He died three weeks ago; and not only he, but the servant who brushed his clothes, and the shopman, who had but a few days before, brought him a new coat home.”...
But the strangest part of the sad story is to come. Crossthwaite’s suspicions were aroused by some incidental circumstance, and knowing of Downes’s death, and the fact that you most probably caught your fever in that miserable being’s house, he made such inquiries as satisfied him that it was no other than your cousin’s coat.”
“Which covered the corpses in that fearful chamber?”
“It was indeed.”
Just, awful God! And this was the consistent Nemesis of all poor George’s thrift and cunning, of his determination to carry the buy-cheap-and-sell-dear commercialism in which he had been brought up into every act of his life!33

The dead man here is Alton’s wealthy, grasping cousin George who is his own counterpart in the novel. Their relationship provides another, if less conspicuous, tie between Les Mystères de Paris and Alton Locke. Kingsley’s work follows its predecessors by presenting portraits of both social extremes and linking these through its central character. Alton leaves London to visit his cousin, who is a student at Cambridge, and the passages portraying privileged life in Alton Locke focus primarily on the wayward lives of wealthy university students who squander their opportunities for learning. Alton is appalled by the lack of appreciation for education amongst the wasteful, hypocritical privileged students he meets through his worldly cousin. Education and its benefits and responsibilities become a pivotal concern in the many rambling discussions of the novel.

Alton himself is self-educated with a refined intellect and respect for learning although he has never enjoyed the privilege of formal education. He is a writer in his free time and expresses his views on social reform and social justice with notable eloquence both in writing and in speech. His character and the role he plays as the
author's mouthpiece bear an interesting resemblance to one of the central characters of *Le Juif Errant*. In that novel, the worker Agricol is also poor, diligent and honourable and has a deep appreciation of learning, intellectual depth and a passionate sense of social injustices. He, too, is a writer in his spare time and his poems about the need for humanitarian reform are clearly used by Sue to express his own humanitarian, republican ideals.

Agricol is eventually imprisoned because of his views which, although they are not meant to incite revolution, are misinterpreted as seditious by the authorities. Alton Locke also becomes embroiled in social unrest as a result of a similar misunderstanding and he, too, is imprisoned. Clearly both authors are seeking sympathy for both the principles and the individuals of the different republican movements in their countries. That Kingsley should do so with a protagonist who so clearly recalls one of Sue's characters is both surprising and fascinating.

Alton's ambitious, shallow cousin steals the object of Alton's early thwarted love, Lillian, and the young man's death later is partly seen to be a punishment for his betrayal of his cousin's trust. However, in due time Alton comes to realize that his love for Lillian, who personifies the shallow, uncaring rich, is misguided and that it is really the high-minded, philanthropic Eleanor he admires. His gradual realization of his love for Eleanor coincides with his own deeper understanding of the issues of religion and social reform with which he has struggled throughout the narrative. Although they are never actually united in the story, the mutual understanding between Eleanor and Alton provides a climax to both these aspects of the novel's story.

The tensions of frustrated love also figure importantly in Sue's plot in *Les Mystères de Paris* reflecting the same parallels in the intellectual and spiritual development of the characters. Rodolphe himself loves the unhappy wife of another, Clémence d'Harville, and although they are not united until the final scenes of the novel, their love, and the inspiration of the example of the caring prince, awaken a charitable purpose in Clémence who then, enlightened to the distress of the poor, becomes a partner in the compassionate schemes of the prince.
Disraeli's narrative revolves around similar tensions between the central characters of Egremont and Sybil. Egremont has a working class rival whose influence over Sybil causes conflict between these three for much of the story. Finally rejecting this other lover, Sybil's love for Egremont develops and she herself grows through that love to understand that the rich need not be the enemy of the poor. Thus, Sybil's love story illustrates the principles of Disraeli's vision as Rodolphe's had that of Sue. Mary Barton frustrates the love of Jem Wilson initially by appearing to prefer his rich rival, young Carson, and her story centres on the resolution of this mistake. Her true love for Jem eventually clarifies his superiority to his wealthy, but shallow, selfish counterpart and forces Mary to reassess her own values. Thwarted love is by no means peculiar to these novels, but it is interesting to note how this convention is employed to illustrate parallel struggles towards social and spiritual truths in their protagonists' minds and to express their authors' views on wider concerns. The happy resolution of the conflicts in the love lives of these characters coincides with an epiphany of clearer understanding of social and spiritual issues in all these works.

There are further minor links in *Alton Locke* to *Les Mystères de Paris*. Alton's relationship with his mother is a deeply troubled one, fraught with the religious conflicts typical of the novel as a whole. Mother and son become estranged by the "crime" of Alton's dissenting views and their subsequent separation continues to be a source of sorrow to Alton throughout the story. The language of the novel's poor characters is inconsistent in a fashion similar to that of its predecessors. Most of the poor characters speak in dialect or slang, but Alton himself, although a member of this class, employs the formal English characteristic of the upper classes in the novel.

Generally, however, Sue's novels and *Alton Locke* are more unlike than like. Although the spirit of social reform unites the works, the specific focus in Kingsley's work on issues such as education and religion as they were then in Britain had received only comparably cursory treatment by Sue. The influence of Carlyle and of the general interest in the details of social problems of the day reflected by studies such as Mayhew's and the parliamentary 'Blue Books' on social statistics is much more apparent. Sue's novels had been written at the beginning of a period of growing concern for such issues, at the outset of what Carlyle referred to as "these dastard new
times”, and thus before many of these issues had been defined in detail. Consequently the social reforms urged in Sue’s novels had been less defined than those urged, for the most part, in the British works. This was increasingly the case in the later British “social-problem” novels. Nevertheless, a few elements of the works written after 1850 continue to be reminiscent of Sue’s novels.

Dickens’s *Hard Times* was written in 1854. As its full title, *Hard Times for These Times*, indicates, the novel focuses on issues of particular contemporary concern in Britain. The social and economic tensions brought about by the increasing industrialization of Britain had become acute by the time *Hard Times* was written and a certain amount of industrial unrest took place in 1854, particularly in the north of the country, which manifested these pressures. The novel was serialized during that year in Dickens’s own journal, *Household Words*, at the same time as Mrs. Gaskell’s *North and South*. Combined, the two works “at first doubled and then quadrupled” the sales of the magazine, indicating not only the popularity of the authors but also the strength of the interest in the issues their works addressed.

Dickens, like Sue and Kingsley before him, sought out personal experience of his subject matter. He travelled to the north of England and visited some of the scenes of industrial conflict there. The resulting novel concentrates on a particular aspect of the problems of industrialization, the dehumanizing of a population working increasingly with machines and denied the satisfaction and fulfillment of more creative lives. Workers’ lives in industrial Britain were not just underprivileged and difficult but also lacked the joy, spontaneity and achievement Dickens felt to be as necessary to life as adequate food and shelter. Carlyle had also addressed this consequence of the increasing industrialization of Britain in part of *Past and Present*, and again his influence is significant to this work of fiction, indeed the novel is dedicated to him. *Hard Times* targets its criticism at those who helped to create this “daily grind” in working class lives, those Carlyle labelled the “Captains of Industry”.

The novel’s scenes of poor life, therefore, depict less of the hardship of hunger and deprivation and more of the bleak state of the workers’ minds and spirits. The pattern of pathos established by Sue’s scenes of poverty which had featured so importantly in
the earlier British "social-problem novels" did not appear as noticeably in Dickens's work.

Nevertheless, *Hard Times* shares common ground with Sue's work. The relationship between Sue's and Dickens's fiction has already been discussed in Chapter V. Much of what linked Dickens's works with Sue in a general sense also surfaces here. Troubled families and the responsibilities of parenthood play the same central roles in *Hard Times* as they have been seen to play in much of both Sue's and Dickens's fiction and especially in *Les Mystères de Paris*. Prince Rodolphe fails in his responsibility to his baby daughter. Fleur de Marie is abandoned to the streets as a small child and consequently is denied the normal joys of childhood, as is made clear in her recounting of her short life at the beginning of the novel. Rodolphe's failure as a father leads to Fleur de Marie's prostitution and its irrevocable stain on her life. The central figure of *Hard Times*, Thomas Gradgrind, similarly abdicates his parental duty. He forsakes his children by binding them to the hard world of factual knowledge, denying the needs of their imagination and their affections. The results of his misguided ethos are children who had never

ever seen a face in the moon . . . No little Gradgrind had ever learnt the silly jingle, Twinkle, twinkle little star; how I wonder what you are! No little Gradgrind had ever known wonder on the subject, each little Gradgrind having at five years old dissected the Great Bear like a Professor Owen, . . .

Gradgrind's failure to nurture his children warps the character of his son and namesake, the unprincipled and selfish Thomas, who comes to believe that self-interest is paramount. Thomas's greed leads him to commit theft, a crime which shames his father and family and estranges him from them. Thomas's sister Louisa is equally misguided by her father's wrong thinking and marries the prosperous scoundrel Mr. Bounderby, believing that there is no better course for her than a loveless but lucrative marriage.

As the story develops, however, Louisa responds to the various examples of selfless love and caring, responsible parents which provide telling
contrasts with her own experience. Similar figures had served the same purpose of contrast and comparison in Sue’s narrative. In *Les Mystères de Paris* a number of devoted parents, Morel the jewel maker, Madame de Fermont the self-sacrificing, destitute aristocrat, Clémence d’Harville the exemplary mother, accent those who have given up their proper roles as parents. Perverted, selfish love in characters such as the lecherous, evil Ferrand and the scheming Countess MacGregor is exposed by its juxtaposition with the sacrifice and selflessness of the love between those others.

*Hard Times* features comparable opposition to the central relationships between Gradgrind and his children in the devotion and sacrifice of Sissy Jupes and her father, the unselfish love between Stephen Blackpool and Rachel, and the warmth and caring between all the members of the Sleary circus. Louisa sympathizes with all of these and her doing so leads to a change of heart in her and, through her in her father himself in the familiar Dickensian trope of a child leading a parent to enlightenment and his better self. At the end of the novel, both father and daughter come to realize “that there ith a love in the world, not all Thelf-intereth after all, but thomething very different . . .” 38 The speaker here is the comic but key figure of the circus manager Sleary who acts as surrogate father to his troupe and who voices much of the underlying message of the novel.

The affection and mutual support in the circus of which Sleary is the centre accompany a vitality and colour singularly lacking in other scenes of the novel. The brightness of the circus scenes clashes with the dismal gray of the world of the rest of the work and underlines the bleakness of that world in the same way in which the brilliance of the portraits of the upper classes had stressed the horrors of poverty in Sue’s novel. *Hard Times*, however, does not scan society at large, featuring the lives of the wealthy only in ironic glimpses of “crack society” through the embittered Mrs. Sparsit and the fantasy of “tiptop fashion” she inspires in the pretentious, duplicitous Mr. Bounderby. The ugliness of this last character is compounded by his betrayal of his doting mother in another example of the importance of the parent-child relationship in the novel.39

*Hard Times* owes a substantial debt to the sentimentality and staging of melodrama in a further bond shared with Sue’s fiction in general. The most striking
examples of sensational staging in both *Hard Times* and *Les Mystères de Paris* are the death scenes which provide theatrical climaxes for both stories. Fleur de Marie's Gothic death tableau is steeped in drama and pathos with its prostrate figure of the dying princess, the kneeling nuns in attitudes of grief and prayer and the gloomy, towering arches of the abbey:

She soon entered . . . Her emotion, her weakness was so great that two nuns supported her . . . I was frightened not so much by her pallor or by the change in her features, as by the expression of her smile . . . It seemed to me to be marked by a gloomy satisfaction . . . Standing in the nave, her two hands clasped on her breast, her eyes lowered, half enveloped in her white veil and the long folds of her black habit, she stood immobile and pensive . . . I saw at each moment her emotion increase, her features become more and more tortured; finally this scene was beyond her strength . . . because she fainted before the procession of nuns had finished.

Fleur de Marie's last words intensify the sentiment of the scene. She begs forgiveness of her father and her adopted mother, both of whom feel her to be blameless of any fault, and whose feelings are echoed in the sympathies of the reader.

The scene of the worker Stephen Blackpool's death in *Hard Times* makes use of similar emotions and theatrical presentation. Stephen has been unjustly accused of theft and has rushed back from his work in another town to the central setting of the novel, Coketown, to clear his name. He takes a short cut across desolate fields and falls into one of the abandoned mining pits outside the town. By the time he is found by the two girls, Rachael and Sissy, he is dying and the townspeople gather round the pit first to witness his rescue and then eventually his death in another dramatic tableau:

A low murmur of pity went round the throng, and the women wept aloud, as this form, almost without form, was moved very slowly from its iron deliverance, and laid upon the bed of straw. . . . the pale, worn, patient face was seen looking up at the sky, . . . 'If aw th' things that tooches us, my dear, was not so muddled, I should'n ha' had'n need to coom heer. If we was
not in a muddle among ourseln, I should’n ha’ been, by my own fellow weavers and workin’ brothers, so mistook. If Mr. Bounderby had ever know’d me right—if he’d ever know’d me at aw—he would’n ha’ took’n offence wi’ me. He would’n ha’ suspect’n me. But look up yonder, Rachael! Look aboove!’ Following his eyes, she saw that he was gazing at a star. . . ‘Often as I coom to myseln, and found it shinin on me down there in my trouble, I thowt it were the star as guided to Our Saviour’s home. I awmust think it be the very star!’ They lifted him up, and he was overjoyed to find that they were about to take him in the direction whither the star seemed to him to lead. . . . They carried him very gently over the fields, and down the lanes, and over the wide landscape; Rachael always holding the hand in hers. Very few whispers broke the mournful silence. It was soon a funeral procession. The star had shown him where to find the God of the poor; and through humility, and sorrow, and forgiveness, he had gone to his Redeemer’s rest.41

Stephen is blameless of any wrong-doing, as he clarifies to the reader in his description of the “muddle” which has led to his accident, and his innocence intensifies the sentimentality and emotion of the scene echoing the pathos surrounding the death of Fleur de Marie.

Stephen’s speech here and that of his fellow workers throughout the story recalls the use of dialect both in Sue’s novel and the preceding British works, although Dickens’s handling of language differences is more skillfully consistent than his predecessors. The members of Sleary’s circus make particular use of a special slang peculiar to themselves and unintelligible without translation to the reader and to the novel’s other characters. Dickens incorporates his translation into his text, rather than employing the expedient of footnotes, nevertheless their circus slang is reminiscent of Sue’s criminal argot and serves the same purpose of highlighting the separateness of the world of the characters who speak and understand it. The language, colour, spontaneity, and affectionate care amongst the circus characters divide their world from the rest of the novel, creating, in one sense, the “different zone” which Disraeli had identified and which Sue’s urban poor inhabited. Dickens’s work, however, gives a different emphasis to the notion which had introduced Les Mystères de Paris and informed both Sybil and Mary Barton. In Hard Times the differences apparent in the
separate world of Sleary's circus provide inspiration for a better world outside it and excite approval rather than pity in the reader.

The tensions of frustrated love play an important role both in the narrative and in the thematic development of *Hard Times* as they had in Sue's novel and the earlier British works. Here, Louisa is prey to a misguided admiration for the handsome Mr. Harthouse and his wooing of her introduces a sexual tension and suspense to the narrative which had also underlined the stories of *Les Mystères de Paris*, *Sybil* and *Mary Barton*. Louisa is a married woman and her flight from the threat of potential adultery results in a scene of reconciliation with her father. Their emotional meeting brings about the first real steps in both characters away from the unfeeling deference to statistics and facts which had starved their lives of warmth and imagination:

'Father, you have trained me from the cradle.'
'Yes, Louisa'
'I curse the hour in which I was born to such a destiny.'
...
'How could you give me life, and take from me all the inappreciable things that raise it from the state of conscious death? Where are the graces of my soul? Where are the sentiments of my heart? What have you done, O father, what have you done, with the garden that should have bloomed once, in this great wilderness here!'
She struck herself with both hands upon her bosom.\(^{42}\)

Gradgrind is unnerved by this appeal and is forced to review the driving force of his life, his belief in a "system" and his denial of human emotions and imagination. Louisa, too, is shocked by her near descent into an illicit love affair into a clearer understanding of her own faults and mistaken values. Clémence d'Harville in *Les Mystères de Paris* is also saved from the brink of adultery when Rodolphe foils the attempt of the Countess MacGregor to compromise Clémence's reputation in a liaison with a would-be lover. Clémence's narrow escape is equally crucial and leads her to her own re-examination of her life and the determination to change it. Rodolphe's rescue of Clémence introduces the two to a closer acquaintance and eventually to love. Through her love and admiration for the compassionate prince, Clémence becomes
enlightened to the problems of the poor and she turns her useless, frivolous life into one dedicated to charity and bettering the lives of those less fortunate than herself.

The example which works the same significant changes in Louisa’s character is found in the loving, loyal Sissy, whose reliance on affection to guide her is so unlike the calculating Louisa. After Louisa’s collapse from the stress of her escape from Harthouse, Sissy nurses the girl back to physical and spiritual health and in her selfless and cheerful caring teaches Louisa the value of love: “In the innocence of her brave affection, and the brimming up of her old devoted spirit, the once deserted girl shone like a beautiful light upon the darkness of the other.”

The subsequent sub-plot surrounding Sissy relieves the conflicts and tensions of the main story. Like the other minor characters of La Rigolette and Margaret, Sissy ends the novel a happily married mother, a happiness and fulfillment denied the chastened Louisa. She is only able to fill that role by becoming a loving, dedicated surrogate parent to Sissy’s family. Louisa ends the story a wiser, if not happier figure, mindful of her past mistakes and embodying the author’s vision in a model clearly meant to apply outside the world of his novel:

. . . she, grown learned in childish lore; thinking no innocent and pretty fancy ever to be despised; trying hard to know her humbler fellow-creatures, and to beautify their lives of machinery and reality with those imaginative graces and delights, without which the heart of infancy will wither up, the sturdiest physical manhood will be morally stark death, and the plainest national prosperity figures can show, will be the Writing on the Wall, . . .

The development of a love story forms the central focus of the “social-problem” novel which was published at the same time as Hard Times, Mrs. Gaskell’s North and South. The romance of its protagonists is used here too to illustrate this story’s wider social message, although the romance in this novel becomes the focal point of its narrative. As the two main characters of North and South grow both to love and to understand each other’s originally opposing points of view, they gain an
enlightened vision of the world as a whole. Thus Margaret Hale, a middle class girl from the south of Britain, learns to love and appreciate the practical, less-polished John Thornton, a representative of the industrial north of the country. The central focus on this single love story, combined with the novel's specific application to the regional differences in Britain, helps to distance the work from much of *Les Mystères de Paris*. Nevertheless, a number of elements of Mrs. Gaskell's work recall the links already established between Sue's novel and her own earlier work, as well as the other British "social-problem novels."

Margaret is forced to leave the pastoral comfort of her life in the south of England when her father, a clergyman, has a crisis of conscience which demands that he live independently of the Church and make his own living as a private tutor. The family's circumstances are thus greatly reduced and they travel to the north of the country to take advantage of the patronage of a northern industrialist. Their reaction to the stark differences they encounter in their first experiences of the region brings to mind the notion of a "different zone", of a world near at hand yet utterly different from previous experience. Margaret herself is especially at odds with her new environment and her visits to the streets of Milton, the town in which they settle, resemble the journey into the unknown world of urban streets which Sue had proposed in his opening passage to *Les Mystères de Paris*. Margaret is jostled by the crowds of strangers, whose manners and speech are decidedly different from her own. Her inability to comprehend them, both their language and demeanour, suggests a foreign world:

In the back streets around them there were many mills, out of which poured streams of men and women two or three times a day. . . . They came rushing along, with bold, fearless faces, and loud laughs and jests . . . The tones of their unrestrained voices, and their carelessness of all common rules of street politeness, frightened Margaret a little at first.45

The language of these rough working people is at first unintelligible to Margaret, and to the reader, and the heavy dialect of the region serves the purpose here that similar use of dialect and slang had in the works previously discussed,
creating a special, separate world in which Margaret feels an outsider. "Yo're a
foreigner, as one may say . . ." she is told by one of these strange people, Higgins,
whose daughter Bessy, Margaret eventually befriends.

Bessy comes to represent Margaret's counterpart for part of the novel. The
girls are the same age, nineteen, yet one is beautiful, refined and educated, the
other deformed, diseased and ignorant. Bessy is a former mill worker who is
dying from lung disease caused by breathing the "fluff" produced by the cotton mills and she
has only known the hardships of the urban poor. She is a victim of the conditions she
has been forced to live and work in and is otherwise a blameless, generous spirited girl.
Her portrait recalls the many similar portraits of the worthy poor in the earlier works,
begining with the prototype of Sue's jewel worker, Morel. Margaret's compassion for
Bessy and her observation of the devotion of the girl's father leads her to value both
characters and appreciate the virtues hidden behind their rough exteriors in the first
step towards her better understanding and compassion of the industrial north as a
whole.

Bessy and her father present one of the many significant parent-child
relationships important to this story. As in the preceding works, the attachment
between these poor characters highlights the failings in a number of other troubled
families which play significant roles in the narrative. Conflicts arise in the central
relationships between Margaret, her absent brother and their parents. Margaret's
mother is unloving to her daughter, preferring her son Frederick who is away at sea.
Mrs. Hale is seen to have failed in her duty as a wife when, through her selfishness and
self-pity, she neglects to support her husband's difficult trial of conscience. Her failure
to do so places that burden on Margaret for whom the responsibility of worry for her
father and the family is particularly stressful. John Thornton, the male protagonist, also
suffers from a strained relationship with his own mother whose stern, judgmental
character makes it impossible for them both to communicate their love to each other.
As in the case of the Morel family in Sue's novel, the mutual support and devotion of
the poor Higgins family are held up as examples for these others.

*North and South* returns to the formula first used by *Les Mystères de
Paris* and followed by many of the other British works and portrays two extremes of
society. Thus, detailed scenes of the lives of the wealthier characters contrast with the harsher realities of the working poor and their contrast serves to awaken both the sympathy of the central character, Margaret, who links these two opposing extremes, and of the reader, as similar comparisons had meant to do in earlier works.

An undercurrent of violent social unrest punctuates the narrative in *North and South*, as it had in all the other British works. This aspect of the British "social-problem novels" sets them apart from *Les Mystères de Paris* where the violence had been of a different order. In this novel by Mrs. Gaskell, a mob forms in response to Trade Union activity in Milton and it storms the home of John Thornton who is a factory owner. The climatic passage which describes the attack on his house calls to mind the theatrical staging and emotional force of many of Sue’s melodramatic scenes. As the mob increases its threats, Margaret first incites Thornton to face them, then braves the crowd herself to protect him from the threat of violence. Alone against the looming backdrop of the house front, the two confront the menacing crowd which spreads before them:

The hootings rose and filled the air—but Margaret did not hear them. Her eye was on the group of lads who had armed themselves with their clogs some time before. She saw their gesture—she knew its meaning—she read their aim. Another moment, and Mr. Thornton might be smitten down—he whom she had urged and goaded to come to this perilous place. She only thought how she could save him. She threw her arms around him; she made her body into a shield from the fierce people beyond. . . . A sharp pebble flew by her, grazing forehead and cheek, and drawing a blinding sheet of light before her eyes. She lay like one dead on Mr. Thornton’s shoulder. . . .

Aside from its debt to melodrama, the scene carries an undercurrent of the sexual tension between John Thornton and Margaret which reflects similar tensions both in Sue’s fiction and in the previous British stories. The drama of this passage also provides a useful device to forward the story’s plot. The emotion of the incident shocks the stern Thornton into confessing his love to Margaret and, although she herself is unconscious, thus reveals the depth of his feelings to the reader. The reader’s
knowledge of his love and Margaret’s ignorance of his attachment deepen the suspense of their thwarted love story which continues throughout the rest of the story.

Margaret is inspired to try to subdue the mob outside Thornton’s house when she sees in it the desperate face of one of the workers, Boucher, whose family she knows, through her acquaintance with the Higgins, to be starving as a result of his loss of work. Descriptions of the Boucher family’s plight serve a similar emblematic purpose as such portraits in the preceding works. When Boucher commits suicide, Margaret is forced to break the news to his widow in her poorly lit, dirty, crowded home where the woman is surrounded by her ill-fed, miserable children. Margaret cradles the distraught woman on her knees, recalling the postures of similar female figures in the scenes from earlier works. The fatherless children particularly intensify the emotion of the scene in the, by now, familiar trope of the child left vulnerable by the consequences of poverty.

Towards the end of this novel, the impoverished Margaret abruptly inherits a fortune which transforms her life, elevates her to a more moneyed status, and enables her to assist John Thornton whose own affluence has declined as a result of the strike. The facility with which this change is introduced to the narrative and Margaret’s easy elevation to a more exalted rank suggest the parallel transformations of the poor Fleur de Marie and Disraeli’s Sybil. The change in Margaret’s condition is key to the plot of North and South, helping to reveal her esteem for him to John Thornton and thus furthering their love story, but it is still surprising to find this device in Mrs. Gaskell’s work. Mary Barton had studiously avoided such improbable facility and its heroine had remained the same poor, working class figure throughout her story.

It is even more unexpected to find something of the same almost fantastic transformation from poverty to riches in the heroine of the last of the “social-problem novels”, George Eliot’s Felix Holt, published in 1865-6. The novel lies just outside the time period defined by this study; however, because it is invariably included in discussions of the sub-genre as a whole, a brief examination of the work’s relationship both to Sue’s fiction and to the other British works is appropriate here.

George Eliot’s companion, G. H. Lewes, played a principal role in the publication of the journal, the Leader, which had published a number of damning
comments on Sue during the 1850s. George Eliot herself had indicated an unequivocal disdain for Sue’s fiction in her essay “The Natural History of German Life” published in the *Westminster Review* in 1856. In that piece, she had accused Sue’s “idealized proletaires” of

encouraging the miserable fallacy that high morality and refined sentiment can grow out of harsh social relations, ignorance and want; or that the working-classes are in a condition to enter at once into a millennial state of *altruism*, wherein everyone is caring for everyone else, and no one for himself.48

An affinity with Sue’s later fiction, which had sought to encourage just that sort of “*altruism*”, would appear to have been improbable in George Eliot’s own works. Nonetheless, affinities do emerge between *Felix Holt* and Sue’s novels. As in the case of the other later British works in the sub-genre, the association with Sue’s work in George Eliot’s novel may be more in response to the earlier British novels which had taken some of their original inspiration from the French novels rather than as a direct reaction to Sue’s fiction. There are, however, particular links with Sue’s fiction even here.

As with many of its predecessors in the sub-genre, *Felix Holt* does follow, to some extent, the pattern originally set out by *Les Mystères de Paris*. The novel presents two extremes of society, the “two nations” identified in *Sybil*, although without featuring the sentimental pathos consistently surrounding the scenes of poverty in the earlier “social-problem novels” and particularly in Sue’s works. George Eliot’s story, however, does insist upon the divisions in society, underlining that each group is a separate world to the other. Class distinctions are seen to be of critical importance in the world of the novel and these are elaborated upon both by descriptions of the material differences between wealthy and poor lives, of their distinct languages and manners and also, most importantly for this work, by an investigation of the attitudes of each to the other. Thus the shame of the adulterous affair of one of the central figures, the patrician Mrs. Transome, is greatly compounded in her own eyes, and in
those of her proud son, by the knowledge that she has stooped beneath her class and loved the less well-bred Jermyn.

Family relationships also form the core of this novel, although the presentation of these families is far less simplistic than in the earlier British novels. Poor families in Eliot’s novel are not automatically used as examples of responsible, loving parents to contrast with the failures of wealthier characters. In *Felix Holt*, the moneyed Transome family is indeed divided by a lack of trust and love between the husband and wife and their son, Harold. However, the relationships in families in the working class are also strained and the working class protagonist, Felix Holt, remains estranged from his mother by her inability to understand his political principles.

Curiously, George Eliot’s treatment of the family figures in *Felix Holt* ties her novel even more closely to Sue’s work than to many of the earlier British works in the sub-genre. *Les Mystères de Paris* and *Le Juif Errant* both present balanced views of family relationships in society. Sue had certainly idealized some poor families, as Eliot found in the essay cited above, but he had also depicted aristocrats, such as Madame d’Harville, and members of the middle class, like Madame Georges, with the same qualities of devotion and self-sacrifice. Selfish, irresponsible parents had figured in the poorer classes as well, in the portraits of the wicked Martials and especially the unnatural Martial mother. The portraits in *Le Juif Errant* are equally even-handed. The well-to-do parents of the sisters Rose and Blanche, are devoted and caring, as are the humble working family of the Baudoins. Portraits of family groups in the other British novels were more stereotypical, contrasting, for the most part, the worthy poor with the less caring, responsible rich. It is unclear whether Eliot did not acknowledge the more balanced views in Sue’s works because she was insufficiently familiar with them, which is unlikely in a critic of her breadth of interest, or whether she was reacting more to the way in which the novels were received generally. Certainly Sue’s characters, from whatever extreme of society, are more “idealized” in the sense she means and thus her comments hold true. It is nonetheless interesting to find these two very different authors linked by this feature of their fiction.

Felix and his mother are eventually separated in the narrative by a crime, following the pattern of the earlier works, when Felix is arrested for his part in
the riots which occur in the story. The social unrest of the story, and the incident in which the innocent Felix becomes involved in a mob’s violence, are reminiscent of much of the earlier British stories which had featured such unrest, especially *Alton Locke*, where Kingsley’s protagonist had suffered the same fate. Felix himself bears much resemblance to Kingsley’s character who in turn recalls the figure of Agricol in *Le Juif Errant*. Felix, too, is a worker, yet a thinker with a refined intellect and respect for learning. When his enlightened views of social justice lead to his unfair imprisonment, his affinity with Sue’s Agricol and Kingsley’s Alton is striking. The separation of Felix and his mother caused by his political views and his imprisonment also points back in a more general sense to one of the persistent motifs of *Les Mystères de Paris*.

The principal female figure of *Felix Holt*, Esther Lyon, forms part of one of the explorations of the duties and demands of family relationships which are key to the story and it is her character which provides the closest connection with *Les Mystères de Paris*. Esther and her father, an educated but impoverished clergyman, are mutually devoted. Rufus Lyon is deeply attached to Esther and his dedication to her happiness is an important element in the portrait of his noble nature. Esther initially fails to appreciate her father’s true qualities, but her love and respect for him deepens as the narrative progresses and her understanding of his worth matures.

The evolution of Esther’s character to a more serious-minded woman includes the gradual realization of her love for the central male character of the story, Felix Holt, a figure who shares her father’s integrity if not his political and religious views. The love story of Felix and Esther recalls the use of romance to underline the unfolding of the understanding of social truths in all the other works discussed. Esther vacillates in much of the narrative between a flirtation with the wealthy, but ignoble Harold Transome and the poorer, yet more upright Felix, reflecting her own indecision between the worlds which both men represent. The pattern mirrors that established in the earlier British works and all of these relationships could be seen to have their prototype in the love story of Sue’s Rodolphe and Clémence in *Les Mystères de Paris*.

A factor of Esther’s personal development in the story involves the same sort of unlikely elevation of her social status and improvement of her material
condition which had affected Fleur de Marie and as well as some of the heroines of earlier works in this sub-genre. Like Fleur de Marie, Esther’s innate character is at odds with her humble surroundings. She lives amongst the urban poor, yet is more naturally delicate and refined than those around her, setting her apart from her environment. As in the case of Fleur de Marie and Sybil, Esther’s inherent nobility reflects a hidden identity. She is the daughter of an upper class couple who have been forced to separate and then have died. She is only the adopted daughter of the modest Rufus Lyon. Her orphaned condition heightens the sympathy surrounding both her own character and that of her adopted father, whose devotion to her becomes all the more poignant. It is interesting, however, to find the convention of the incognito aristocrat used by Sue in 1843 in a novel by such a different writer so many years later.

Esther’s hidden identity allows for the unexpected inheritance of substantial wealth and property which, when unveiled towards the end of the story, transforms her life and transports her into the world of privilege which she has hitherto only viewed from outside. However, Esther’s reaction to her new role forms one of the key distinctions in this novel to its British predecessors and, again, curiously, points more directly to Sue’s work than to these others. Fleur de Marie finds no joy in her elevated status when she becomes the princess Amélie. The changes in her material fortune do not ensure her happiness since her own inner life, in her case her conscience, is not at ease. Esther makes the same discovery, finding that wealth and privilege do not guarantee contentment without some kind of peace of mind, ease of conscience and moral principle. She uncovers the deep despair in Mrs. Transome, whose life has been lived as a lie, the coldness between her and her son and the dullness of a comfortable life which lacks meaning. In the end, Esther renounces her wealth and status to live with Felix who has declared his determination to remain poor but dedicated to his principles at the outset of the novel.

Their union, the culmination of their tense love story, pulls together the disparate strands of this novel, both in narrative and thematic terms. Felix, although still bound by his political principles, has learned to temper these with an appreciation of the human qualities embodied in the less politically inclined Esther. He who had decided never to marry for fear that love for one woman would lead him astray from
his dedication to principle, succumbs to the power of Esther’s affection. Esther’s own revelations concerning more profound values in life allow her to deny her own superficiality and a predilection for fashion and luxury and live as a poor man’s wife. At the novel’s end, the various characters representing the opposite ends of the society of the novel unite to witness their wedding: “Even very great people... went to the church to look at this bride who had renounced wealth, and chosen to be the wife of a man who said he would always be poor.”49 The young people’s combined choice of love and principle over material advantage inspires approval amongst the other characters of the story, whose attitudes are reflected in the comment of one; “It’s wonderful how things go through you—you don’t know how. I feel somehow as if I believed more in everything that’s good.”50

The generality of this comment, which more or less closes Eliot’s novel, suggests an underlying message beyond the specific political precepts debated in the novel. In this sense, *Felix Holt* has less of an association with Disraeli’s *Sybil*, in spite of the many similarities between the two novels. *Sybil* too had closed with the happy union of its protagonists, however the novel also ended with a petition to the people of a particular nation. The message of social reform in *Felix Holt* carries a more widespread application than Disraeli’s invocation to “a privileged and prosperous People”51 of Britain. Mrs. Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* had equally reached beyond that narrow national focus to encourage a more profound, a universal and “tenderer humanity.”52 In this respect, Mrs. Gaskell’s novel has been seen to bear an affinity with the general petition for humanitarian compassion in Sue’s *Les Mystères de Paris* and *Le Juif Errant* whose own pleas for unity between the disparate groups of society had underpinned both novels. George Eliot’s novel, the last of the so-called British “social-problem” novels, repeats this plea both in its deliberate evocation of the earlier works in this group and in the social unity implicit in the vision presented at the end of the novel of the happy marriage between two representatives of the different “nations” of the world of the novel who have learned to compromise their own narrow views in order to better understand and sympathize with each other.

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3 Ibid, 4-5.
7 Benjamin Disraeli to Lady Blessington, 5 August 1834, Ibid, I, 425.
8 John Sutherland, *The Longman Companion to Victorian Fiction* (Essex, 1988), 188.
10 *Sybil*, 237.
12 *Sybil*, 58.
13 Ibid, 359.
16 Ibid, 3.
18 Tillotson, 86-7.
19 *Mary Barton*, 369-70.
20 Ibid, 388.
21 Ibid, 158.
22 Ibid, 163-4.
23 Ibid, 159.
24 Ibid, 392.
26 *Mary Barton*, 60.
28 *Mary Barton*, 10-11.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid, 463.
34 *Past and Present*, 131.
37 *Hard Times*, 54.
38 Ibid, 308.
39 Ibid, 87.
41 *Hard Times*, 284-292.
42 Ibid, 239.
43 Ibid, 248.
44 Ibid, 313.
46 Ibid, 84.
50 Ibid.
51 *Sybil*, 359.
52 Tillotson, 202.
‘That divine Fleur de Marie’: the image of the poor fallen woman in *Les Mystères de Paris*

When, in the opening passage of *Les Mystères de Paris*, Sue invites his reader to walk among the “tribus barbares” of the streets of Paris, one of the first members of that underworld, “en dehors de la civilisation”, to be introduced is the prostitute, La Goualeuse, who later in the novel becomes known as Fleur de Marie. Her figure plays a pivotal role in the narrative and, at the end of the novel, in a further transformation as the princess Amélie, her death forms the culmination of the work’s complicated plot.1

In these early scenes, Fleur de Marie’s role as a streetwalker is implied rather than stated, but it is nonetheless clear. She is first discovered in the night, huddled in a darkened doorway of a Parisian slum with other, similarly shabby female figures. The girl is roughly accosted by the criminal, Le Chourineur, to whom she owes money for drink which she cannot pay because she is already so deeply in debt to the owner, the “ogresse”, of the tavern where she lives. Her situation becomes plain as she then recounts her short life story to the two characters important to these beginning scenes, Prince Rodolphe and Le Chourineur. The recital of her story ends with as explicit a statement of her condition as Sue’s discretion will allow. Fleur de Marie has expressed her desire to change her way of life and live away from the city streets in the country. Le Chourineur teases her:

—Well then! Be honest, my girl [the French term implies chaste in this context] . . . said Le Chourineur.
Honest! My God! And with what would you like me to be honest? The clothes I wear belong to the tavern keeper; I owe her my food and lodging . . . I cannot move from here . . . she would have me arrested as a thief . . . I belong to her . . . I must pay my debts . . . ²
These lines spell out the girl’s role. She belongs to the old woman who runs the tavern and she must repay her in the only way she can. Her heartfelt cry of “My God!” testifies to how trapped she feels and how little she enjoys this life. Fleur de Marie’s role may have been especially clear to some contemporary readers since the pattern of prostitution in the nineteenth century, in both France and Britain, often dictated just such semi-formal arrangements between prostitutes and their quasi-managers. Prostitutes were often liable for their board, lodging and their clothes to keepers of lower-class brothels and taverns as a form of insurance on the part of the keepers to guarantee the co-operation of the women. This was the case in Britain and the pattern was all the more formalized in France. The “tapis-franc” which is the setting for the beginning of Sue’s story is obviously a small, poorer type of brothel like so many of those which existed in both Paris and London during the period.3

Some nineteenth-century readers, therefore, may have recognized the implications of Fleur de Marie’s relationship with the “ogresse”, the tavern keeper, even more readily than modern readers. Certainly the girl’s story and the central role she takes in Sue’s novel would have been more disturbing in the nineteenth century than to modern readers accustomed to a wide variety of subjects in fiction. Sexual transgression was still a sensitive topic in 1843 and prostitution and the plight of the poor fallen woman were then seldom the subject of serious fiction.

Sue had treated certain types of sexual transgression in earlier novels, most notably in the story of the adulterous duchess in Mathilde, a figure discussed in another chapter of this study. Female virtue under sexual threat had otherwise played an important role in much of Sue’s fiction, providing suspense and an undercurrent of titillation and melodrama. Mathilde herself had been the focus of an elaborate intrigue of seduction in that novel. Sue’s early romantic sea tales abounded with scenes of sexuality, of seduction and even the suggestion of rape. However, actual prostitution and the condition of the poor or working class fallen woman had not been featured in his work until Les Mystères de Paris.

The portrait of Fleur de Marie may have disturbed contemporary readers, and interests us now, not just because she is explicitly a commonplace prostitute, but particularly because she is one of the protagonists of Sue’s novel. Prostitutes had peopled, to a limited extent, some works of fiction of the period. The
character of Nancy in Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* is a precursor of Sue’s character, for example. However, Nancy remains a comparatively minor figure in the British novel, although Dickens does concentrate much of his attention on her, indicating that he too was concerned with the plight of the poor prostitute.

Fleur de Marie, however, is the focus of *Les Mystères de Paris*. Much of that novel’s complex plot revolves around her and her restoration to her father, the prince Rodolphe. Both her importance to the narrative and the contrast of her inherently worthy character with her sinful state made Fleur de Marie unique in the fiction of the early 1840s. Her figure became the focal point of much of the attention given to Sue’s novel on both sides of the Channel.

The contradictions of Fleur de Marie’s character touch upon some of the contentious issues surrounding female morality and prostitution which were important concerns of the period. In Britain, some critics chose to dismiss Fleur de Marie and the paradox of her innocence as absurdly unlikely, as has been seen in the earlier discussion of the reaction of the British press to the novel. However, others were moved by Sue’s attempt to address the growing disquiet surrounding this “Great Social Evil.” In a letter written in 1844, Elizabeth Barrett Browning praised Sue for the “the unnatural, or rather supernatural eliciting of that ‘figure de vierge’, that divine Fleur de Marie from the Parisian dens.”

Determining the extent and the pattern of prostitution during the nineteenth century is as problematic to modern historians as it was to contemporaries. Young women who were simply indigent could be labelled as prostitutes and much prostitution was loosely rather than formally organized. Many were poor young women, unmarried yet cohabiting with equally poor men, who were identified thus, indeed identified themselves as such, because of their infringement of the moral standards of the day. Nevertheless, the interest in the problems of prostitution expanded during the mid-nineteenth century along with the growing anxieties about other parallel problems of the poor and working classes, especially in the growing city slums. This was as much the case in France as it was in Britain, as contemporary French studies show. Although prostitutes were also present in rural areas, urban prostitution, predictably enough, increased with the growth of metropolitan centres.
and its increase accompanied the attendant problems of urban life for the poor; sanitation, disease, and want.\textsuperscript{8}

In Britain, the period of the 1840s and 1850s saw a "greater willingness to discuss and attack" prostitution and "a corresponding decrease in tolerance for the men who, as customers, promoted it." Institutions were established in both countries to aid repentant prostitutes both physically, from the venereal diseases they contracted, and in their moral regeneration. A number of well-known Victorians in Britain, such as Dickens and Gladstone, were instrumental in such efforts to correct what they perceived to be an important social problem.\textsuperscript{9}

It is not surprising, therefore, to find the issue of the working class and poor fallen woman in some of the important fiction of the period. However, there is less mention of prostitution and the plight of the poor fallen woman than might be expected, given the social interest in the problem. The scarcity of fictional works which address the issue of prostitution during the period may be a measure of the complex emotions this concern called forth. Certainly the difficult issues of sexuality and morality were ones which troubled the period as a whole and prostitution, of course, touched upon both of these. Victorian prurience and prudery were both troubled by the social reality of prostitution and the dilemma of the poor fallen woman. Authors of fiction appear to have exercised self-censorship in mid-nineteenth century Britain and avoided, to a large extent, touching upon what was otherwise recognized to be an important subject for study outside fiction. It was not until later in the century, with the works of George Bernard Shaw, Trollope and George du Maurier, amongst many others, that the subject became a common topic for fiction and drama.

Some mainstream British works, however, written during the period of concern to this study, directly address the issue of the prostitute and the poor fallen woman, prefiguring the interest shown later in the century. These earlier works all bear particular affinity with the presentation of Fleur de Marie in \textit{Les Mystères de Paris}, indeed Sue's novel could be said to have set a pattern for the presentation of this sensitive subject in fiction. Through Fleur de Marie, Sue sought to encourage sympathy and better understanding of the predicament of the poor fallen woman who all too often was forced into prostitution because of her poverty and because of society's intolerance of her fallen state.
Elizabeth Barrett Browning not only acknowledged her admiration for Sue’s creation of Fleur de Marie in her letters, but also drew inspiration from his novel for her own portrait of a fallen woman in her long narrative poem *Aurora Leigh*. Although the poem was published in 1856, more than a decade after Sue’s novel, it is relatively easy to trace elements of Fleur de Marie in that work. Two British novels written before *Aurora Leigh*, Dickens’s *David Copperfield* and Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Ruth*, also approach the subject in ways which recall *Les Mystères de Paris*. Although, unlike Elizabeth Barrett Browning, neither of these two authors provided evidence in their private papers of their familiarity with and admiration for Sue, the general affinity of some of their fiction with Sue’s works has already been demonstrated.

Fleur de Marie is a specific type of fallen woman. She is described in the beginning of the story at least, as a destitute girl, and assumed, initially, to be an orphan. Certainly, she has spent her childhood in the slums of Paris without the protection of a parent and been cruelly abused by the adults into whose care she has fallen. Abandoned, and betrayed by the evil old woman who has plagued and exploited her, the girl has been imprisoned for indigence while still just a child. After her release from prison, as a young woman of sixteen, Fleur de Marie attempts to support herself through needlework, using the small savings acquired from her prison work to support her efforts. At first she succeeds in her struggle to stay “honnête”, that is to say chaste, and she repulses the tavern keeper who tries to lure her into prostitution with promises of an easy life. “I sent them packing, those old employers, [Sue uses a relatively archaic term denoting those responsible for hiring in rural communities.]”\(^{10}\) she tells Le Chourineur and Rodolphe at the beginning of the story. Then in an act of charity typical of her character, she gives her small capital to help a fellow poor woman, and, as a result, becomes destitute. She is no longer able to resist the tavern owner, who introduces the girl to drink and then traps her into prostitution.

Sue goes to great lengths throughout the early stages of the novel to emphasize the pathos surrounding Fleur de Marie, her status as a social victim and to clarify her pious regret for her fall into sin. The girl patently has been forced into her role on the streets by sheer want and her own vulnerability. The reader’s sympathy is enlisted from the beginning of her story, when she recounts how, as a little girl, she was beaten and abused by an old woman who forced her to sell sweets in the streets. If
the starving girl dared to taste her wares, the woman pulled out her teeth as a punishment. The pathos of the deprivation of her childhood is paramount: “And did you never have a toy [a “joujoux”], Goualeuse? asked the Chourineur. ---Me! Are you silly, get away! . . . Who would have given them to me?”11

Fleur de Marie’s inner character is at odds with her environment and circumstances. The girl’s inherent nobility and superiority to those around her leads the other members of the underworld of Paris to give her her name linking her both to the purity and the eminence of the Virgin Mary. Sue makes constant reference to the way in which her native qualities set the girl apart from the common world. Fleur de Marie is no wayward adulteress or brazen whore. Her remorse for her sins is apparent in the first scenes of the novel when she sighs pathetically during the telling of her life story and her sad regrets continue to burden her throughout the novel. It is this longing for a better, purer life, reminiscent of the same aspiration in Dickens’s Nancy, which causes Rodolphe to take Fleur de Marie under his protection. Rodolphe places Fleur de Marie at a farm in the country which houses an ideal community of impoverished workers which he has founded and supports. Fleur de Marie’s desire to escape the city streets and her preference for country life is one of the many indications within the novel that her character is to be admired. Sue uses the pastoral ideal to contrast with the physical and moral horrors of the urban landscapes of his novel and an appreciation of country life is part of the shorthand he employs to indicate the worthiness or otherwise of his characters.

At the farm, however, after her initial relief at her retreat from the slums, Fleur de Marie is still unable to live at peace. Her tainted state is exposed to those around her and she is hounded by the neighbouring farmers and the other workers on the farm. In despair she turns to the local curé, who teaches her to bear the burden of her guilt through piety. Thereafter in the novel Fleur de Marie lives up to the implications of her name. She becomes indeed, a “supernatural” force for good amongst the poor and dispossessed. Again in prison, as the victim of intrigue, Fleur de Marie influences for good the hardened inmates around her. Her purity of spirit and moral character win over even the worst of these, La Louve, who eventually becomes the girl’s rescuer in one of the dramatic climaxes of the novel’s plot.
When she is finally revealed to be Prince Rodolphe’s lost daughter and becomes known as the princess Amélie, Fleur de Marie continues to impress all around her in her father’s court with her piety, her purity, and her innate superiority. Her figure is saintly in its humility, its moral rectitude and its compassion for those in need. Nevertheless, despite her change of circumstance and the manifest worthiness of her character, Fleur de Marie recoils in horror from the notion of marriage, regardless of her love for the young aristocrat who seeks her hand. The princess is especially appalled by the idea that she should become a mother. She is fundamentally unclean and would sully the pure image of motherhood. There is no earthly redemption possible for her. Fleur de Marie withdraws to a particularly ascetic convent and dies of remorse and a broken heart at the novel’s end.

That Sue should feel constrained to kill off Fleur de Marie, whose native worthiness and whose status as an otherwise blameless social victim dominated his narrative, is striking evidence of both his and his society’s ambivalence concerning the fallen woman. As a novelist, Sue had had the courage to portray a realistic picture of the social conditions which drove poor women to prostitution and to demonstrate that their lack of chastity did not necessarily indicate depravity. Nevertheless, whether because he himself felt a moral ambivalence concerning the fate of the unchaste woman or because the conventions of the period did not permit another outcome for such a character in fiction, Sue fell back on an unoriginal end for his otherwise innovative character. She had already suffered a fate worse than death; thus death itself was the only fate possible. Fleur de Marie’s end, however, also suggests that she is the tragic heroine of the narrative. It may be that Sue, whose attempts to address the injustices faced by women of all classes characterize much of his work, allows Fleur de Marie to die in order to portray his female protagonist as a hero in the classic sense.

In a British novel written a few years after the success of *Les Mystères de Paris*, Dickens’s treatment of the figure of the poor fallen woman is even more conventional than that of Sue. The figure of Little Em’ly in *David Copperfield*, published in 1849-50, follows the dictates of melodrama more closely than Fleur de Marie and is the prey of a seduction plot rather than a victim of harsh social conditions. Indeed, Dickens is at pains to point out Little Em’ly’s protected position as a part of the warm, loving, if eccentric, adopted family of the worthy Mr. Peggotty. Rather than
being a victim of poverty and social vulnerability, Little Em’ly strays as a result of her own wayward nature, her yearning to be “a lady”, and a wicked conspiracy between her seducer, Steerforth, and his immoral servant. Her natural refinement and superiority to those around her parallel those qualities found in Fleur de Marie, although in Little Em’ly’s case these lead to her ruin.

It may be in part that, in this novel, Dickens chose to portray a working class fallen woman thus in order to invite condemnation of her seducer. As was pointed out earlier in this discussion, British society during this period was beginning to turn on the other party to a woman’s fall from grace, the guilty man. Steerforth is not only the cause of Little Em’ly’s loss of home and virtue; he also brings about his own tragic downfall, the terrible waste of his potentially admirable character and an inexorable separation from his mother, his only surviving parent, and her consequent decline into madness. It is Steerforth who is killed off in this novel and his death is clearly viewed to be just retribution for his wickedness. That we are to regret the waste of his life that his debauchery has brought about is plain. When Steerforth’s scheme to corrupt Little Em’ly’s virtue is brought to light, his erstwhile friend David Copperfield narrates:

In the keen distress of the discovery of his unworthiness, I thought more of all that was brilliant in him, I softened more towards all that was good in him, I did more justice to the qualities that might have made him a man of noble nature and a great name, than ever I had done in the height of my devotion to him.12

Dickens’s reverting in Little Em’ly to the stock character of the wronged virgin from melodrama obscures what is considered, according to some historians, the real cause in the nineteenth century of prostitution amongst working class and poor women, their economic deprivation.13 In this respect Sue’s unlikely portrait of the saintly Fleur de Marie reflected more social reality, on its surface at least, than Dickens’s Little Em’ly. Yet Dickens’s story-line focuses our attention on one real aspect of the problem which Sue’s novel had omitted to consider, the role of the male in a fallen woman’s guilt.
As mentioned, it is Steerforth, not Little Em’ly, who must die as a result of moral corruption. A penitent Little Em’ly emigrates to Australia with her adoring uncle Mr. Peggotty. Their departure, nevertheless, is very like a death in some ways. The scene is mournful and leaves a melancholy pall on that part of the story, rather than a note of hope:

We went over the side into our boat, and lay at a little distance to see the ship wafted on her course. It was then calm, radiant sunset. She lay between us and the red light; . . . A sight at once so beautiful, so mournful, and so hopeful . . . Then I saw her, at her uncle’s side, and trembling on his shoulder. . . . Surrounded by the rosy light, and standing high upon the deck, apart together, she clinging to him, and he holding her, they solemnly passed away. The night had fallen on the Kentish hills when we were rowed ashore--and fallen darkly upon me.14

Despite the tone, this is not death and Mr. Peggotty himself returns later in the story to underline that he and Little Em’ly have survived her fall and their new life in exile. However, Little Em’ly remains unmarried, like Fleur de Marie, choosing to see herself as unworthy of an honourable state after her past sins. Her self-denial, based also in part on her loyalty to the man she should have married, Ham, somehow dignifies her character, as the same sacrifice is meant to ennoble Fleur de Marie. Their decision to renounce material and secular happiness is intended to be admired as an indication of their inherent nobility and superiority to others. Ironically, the other fallen woman who has gone with Peggotty, Martha, does marry eventually. That she is able to find an earthly redemption and contentment while this is denied Little Em’ly is one of the many curious contradictions apparent in the treatment of this subject. Martha has actually become a prostitute after her initial sin, whereas Little Em’ly has strayed only with Steerforth and, as a result, is seen to be comparatively less sinful. Even Martha herself points out the distinction between them. “I know there is a long, long way between us.” she says.15

Dickens may have felt constrained to paint the possibility of some kind of earthly redemption for fallen women in his novel since during that period he himself was actively encouraging repentant young prostitutes to aspire to just such a possibility in the home he supported for fallen women in London, Urania Cottage. Dickens was
the "guiding spirit" behind this establishment to reform erring women and the
foundation of his appeal to potential inmates was that, after true penitence, marriage
was possible. The home organized the transportation to the colonies of deserving
penitents and Dickens took pride and pleasure in those successful cases whom he
encountered afterwards when they occasionally returned. Some of the ambivalence in
the novel surrounding Little Em'ly's and Martha's fate may spring from Dickens's
desire to endorse the efforts he was making in the community through his own fictional
portraits of similar cases. However, realism was not always Dickens's aim in his novels
and his first hand experience of the lives of poor fallen women in Britain did not
necessarily translate neatly into his fiction. His sentimental approach to Little Em'ly's
story is, in the eyes of one commentator, one instance of his inability or his reluctance
to express the "whole truth" as he knew it in his fiction.16

The figure of Martha not only provides a vehicle for the author's
message of the rewards of repentance in *David Copperfield*. Martha also allows
Dickens to depict fully the "hushed horror"17 that the shame of prostitution and illicit
sex brought upon young women. Little Em'ly's role as friend and former playmate of
the novel's protagonist limits the extent to which Dickens wishes the reader to be
repelled by her. Her original role in the story has been so appealingly innocent. She is
at first the shining symbol of the pastoral charm of Mr. Peggotty's home in Yarmouth.
In a novel where the image of home and family is sacrosanct, Dickens may not have
wanted to turn the full glare of society's censure on Mr. Peggotty's home's sweetest
ornament. Martha, on the other hand, is a commonplace girl and minor character in the
narrative who falls from grace and then slips into the dreadful trap of life on the
London streets. Through her Dickens is able to paint the full force of society's
repugnance for the poor fallen woman.

Little Em'ly shares the shame that Martha embodies, but she does so by
remaining hidden from the reader in the latter half of the story, appearing only in the
departure scene cited above and once briefly to expose the full breadth of the chaste,
angelic Agnes's compassion for her. Little Em'ly's shame is implied, successfully
enough, by her shrinking from normal life and especially from contact with her former
playmate David. Martha spells out what that shrinking only suggests and her doing so,
in scenes and language reminiscent of melodrama, recalls the tone and language of Fleur de Marie when she discusses her shame in Sue's novel.

In *David Copperfield*, David and Mr. Peggotty follow Martha through the twisted streets of London's slums hoping to enlist her help to find the lost Little Em'ly. They accost Martha on the banks of the Thames where it is hinted she has wandered with an instinctive urge to end her life there. She pleads with Mr. Peggotty:

"What shall I ever do?" she said, fighting thus with her despair. "How can I go on as I am, a solitary curse to myself, a living disgrace to every one I come near!" . . . "Stamp upon me, kill me! When she was your pride, you would have thought I had done her harm if I had brushed against her in the street. . . . Throw me away, as all the world does. Kill me for being what I am . . .

On the eve of what is, in effect, Fleur de Marie's suicide, when she withdraws from the life of her father's court and takes on the rigours of the convent which kill her, she echoes Martha's despair and self-loathing. The prince and his daughter are discussing her proposed marriage to her cousin Henri:

. . . if one day you were to be a mother, it would not just be for yourself that you would have to be happy . . . Ah! exclaimed Fleur de Marie with a heart-rending cry, because this word mother awoke her from the enchanting dream which had been soothing her . . . me? Oh! Never! . . . I am unworthy of that holy name . . . I would die in front of my child . . . if I had not already died of shame in front of his father . . . in confessing my past to him . . . I esteem Prince Henri too much to give him a hand that has been touched by the bandits of the Cité . . .

Martha and Fleur de Marie both see themselves as unclean. The image of contagion and contamination surround both their portraits, as well as that of Little Em'ly. Part of the horror of their lives, after their fall from virtue, is that they feel that the chaste world would not wish to or indeed should not touch them. Fleur de Marie recoils from offering her hand to her virtuous cousin because it might carry the contamination of the corruption of the city slums to him. Martha recognizes that chaste
women, such as Little Em'ly once was, would withdraw from contact from her for the same reason.

The fear and loathing on the part of some of society surrounding poor fallen women was not simply a moral repugnance. Because of the frequency of venereal disease amongst them and a lack of understanding of its cause, prostitutes had been associated with contagious disease, particularly leprosy, since the middle ages. The general dread of epidemics which plagued the nineteenth century, often spreading from the overcrowded city slums, fed this residual fear. Prostitutes suffering from disease were treated in hospitals isolated from the rest of the community and the treatments used, mercury and arsenic, brought about side effects which were almost as appalling as the effects of the diseases themselves. Patients lost their teeth, holes formed in their nasal cavities, they became blind, and developed debilitating kidney disorders. Some of the sense of horror manifest in the stories of fallen women of the period may reflect this physical fear of contagion as well as a shrinking from the moral contamination it was generally felt they represented.

This same nameless horror clings to the portrait of the eponymous heroine of Elizabeth Gaskell’s novel, Ruth, written in 1853, a few years after David Copperfield and ten years after the publication of Les Mystères de Paris. Mrs. Gaskell’s novel bears a close affinity with both Sue’s and Dickens’s works. Her principal aim is to excite Christian sympathy and understanding for the plight of the poor fallen woman for whom the only recourse, after the loss of her virtue, was often prostitution. Like Sue’s focus on Fleur de Marie, Mrs. Gaskell centres her novel on the figure of Ruth and, like Sue, in an attempt to mitigate the distrust and repugnance felt for such a character, she creates a heroine whose inherent goodness is at odds with the perceived image of the fallen woman.

It is this apparent contradiction of their purity of spirit clashing with the accepted notions of their immoral state which most closely links Ruth and Fleur de Marie. The structures of their stories within each novel follow similar patterns as well with certain important exceptions. As in the case of Little Em’ly, Ruth is the victim of seduction and loses her virtue to one lover, Bellingham, rather than being forced by deprivation to support herself on the streets like Fleur de Marie. Like her fictional predecessors discussed here, Ruth is an orphan and poor. Her motherless, unprotected
state is significant. It is this vulnerability which leads to her eventual fall. "She was too young when her mother died to have received any cautions or words of advice respecting the subject of a woman's life . . ."21

Ruth is obliged to work as a seamstress to support herself after the death of her parents as were so many poor working girls of the time, including Fleur de Marie, Little Em'ly and Martha in their own narratives. The scenes of the hardship to which Ruth is subjected are painted in all their harshness and clearly with the aim to awaken sympathy for her deprivation in the reader. However, Ruth does not succumb to Bellingham's advances entirely because of her poverty. He pursues their acquaintance, attracted by the superior grace and nobility which lift her above her station. Ruth eventually falls in love, albeit innocently, and her trust of Bellingham leads her into what is perceived to be a compromising position by her employer who then discharges her. Deprived of her livelihood and lodging, Ruth follows Bellingham to London but she is essentially tricked by him. She remains initially unaware of the ramifications of her act while Bellingham is worldly wise. Ruth is thus the victim both of her impoverished and unprotected circumstances and of a scheming seducer.

Ruth's innocence is finally destroyed, not by the sexual act, for the childlike nature of her character has kept her curiously unenlightened of her fault while living with Bellingham, but by her lover abandoning her. The girl's recognition of what she has become in the eyes of the world is brought about by the taunts of a group of country children, "happy innocents", as Ruth calls them, who discover her lying in a field after Bellingham has left her. Her resulting despair leads to thoughts of suicide. "She threw herself down on the ling by the side of the road in despair. Her only hope was to die and she believed she was dying. She could not think; she could not believe anything."22

Fleur de Marie, too, has been referred to as child-like throughout the early part of her story and she is also driven to a despairing acknowledgement of her position in society by the public condemnation and scorn of a country crowd. Her past is exposed on the farm where she has been sequestered by Rodolphe. A group of farm workers surround her with taunts and she is brought to understand the isolation she must suffer in relation to the rest of the chaste world: "everyone will mistrust me from now on . . . Oh! I will die of shame . . . I will not be able to bear anyone's gaze!"23
It is significant that in both novels the fallen women are rejected by the pastoral world to which they are drawn for its purity and its contrast to the city. Both crave the beauty and peace of the countryside and their doing so is used, in both novels, to point to their better natures. However, both characters are forced to withdraw from the ideal world of the pastoral in their narratives. Fleur de Marie is abducted back to the city streets by criminals and Ruth retreats to live in the industrial town of Eccleston with the brother and sister who become her surrogate family.

Ruth and Fleur de Marie are both saved from the brink of despair and the suicide implied in the scenes described above by men of God and the tenets of Christianity. Fleur de Marie is solaced by the benevolent curé and the dissenting minister Mr. Benson takes Ruth under his care, thereby saving her from turning to prostitution, the fate both know awaits her. Thereafter, in their stories, the girls, and these are both very young women, become shining examples of the Christian ethos. Both demonstrate remarkable compassion and humility in their dealings with others and become powerful sources of benefit to their communities. Fleur de Marie converts the inmates of the prison Saint-Lazare to better lives and Ruth develops into a valued nurse amongst the poor of Eccleston. Christian precepts firmly underlie both these stories of fallen women and the perceptible differences between Sue’s Catholic perspective and Mrs. Gaskell’s Protestantism are fewer than might be expected. The ascetic Fleur de Marie chooses to atone for her sins by entering an austere convent while Ruth chafes to be active in her community and in her own support, reflecting a typical Protestant work ethic. Otherwise the girls are similarly saintly, acting wholly for the good of others.

Ruth is especially noble and self-denying in her relationship with the son who is born as a result of her relationship with Bellingham. Ruth’s motherhood is the one other important distinction between her story and that of Sue’s character. Fleur de Marie is appalled by the idea that, as a fallen woman, she should have a child and partly rejects the possibility of marriage because of her unworthiness to be a mother, as has been seen in the passage cited above. Ruth does give birth, however, and her child Leonard becomes instrumental in her Christian resignation to her fate. She learns to “reverence her child; and this reverence” helps to “shut out her sin.”24
The figure of Leonard also provides Mrs. Gaskell with a further device through which to portray Ruth's admirable qualities of devotion and self-sacrifice and through which to elicit the reader's sympathy. Leonard presents an additional aspect to the problem of the fallen woman in society which *David Copperfield* and *Les Mystères de Paris* had both ignored, the illegitimate child. Mrs. Gaskell struggles with the complexity of the issue of "the miserable offspring of sin", and typically enough, pleads for tolerance and sympathy. Leonard is described as an appealing child, full of the innate nobility and intelligence characteristic of his mother. At the end of the novel, the tearful Leonard, whose mother has died, is tenderly succoured by the formerly unbending Mr. Bradshaw who, until then, has represented the harsher elements of social prejudice. It is clear that Mrs. Gaskell would wish society to reassess its narrow-mindedness concerning the children born to unmarried mothers.25

Through the figure of Leonard, the image of contagion and contamination, familiar to other portraits of fallen women, is introduced to the narrative and with it its attendant horror and isolation. Ruth has lived with the Bensons pretending to be a widow and when her true past is discovered, she herself confronts her son with her "real state." He shrinks from her as unclean: "she saw a strange repugnance cloud over the boy's face, and felt a slight motion on his part to extricate himself from her hold."26 Although they are reconciled after her confession, mother and son learn thereafter the isolation and shame forced on them by Ruth's loss of female virtue. They are shut out by the powerful Bradshaws and shunned by the other townspeople. Leonard as a child suffers especially from this ostracism and Ruth suffers through him.

Yet when she is offered the chance to change their circumstances and marry Bellingham, who has returned to the plot and is once again taken with her beauty and dignity, Ruth refuses to do so. Like Fleur de Marie, Ruth sees herself as unworthy of the honour of marriage. Interestingly, however, she also perceives that her former lover is unworthy as well. Bellingham had been portrayed as a spoiled, favoured only child with an overly indulgent mother very like the figure of Steerforth in *David Copperfield*. His character offers here the same opportunity employed by Dickens to attack the double standard of society which tolerated male transgressions much more than those of women. Bellingham is seen to act as a coward when he
abandons Ruth after their love affair and is shown to be even more despicable later in life. Nevertheless, he is moneyed and outwardly respectable and Ruth’s rejection is a noble sacrifice. She chooses the more spiritually rewarding course and renounces material and temporal advantage in the same spirit as Fleur de Marie.

Ruth’s gesture is all the more noble because she is tempted, as was Fleur de Marie, by her physical love for her would-be husband. She had loved Bellingham as a young girl and still feels attraction for him, with a suggestion of the sexual desire which had also underpinned Fleur de Marie’s feelings for her cousin Henri at the end of Sue’s novel. Bellingham’s voice “thrilled through and through” Ruth’s body when they meet again. This attraction for him leads to her death as it had earlier led to her near-death in the loss of her virtue. An epidemic sweeps through the poorer quarters of the town and, ironically, it is the unclean Ruth who is brave and compassionate enough to nurse the sick and dying. She is immune to the physical threat of the disease until she feels compelled to attend the ill Bellingham. From him she catches the illness which finally kills her. As in Sue’s novel, where Fleur de Marie’s death is viewed to be, even by her devoted father, “an end to her cruel existence”, Mrs. Gaskell appears to view death as the only fate possible, at least in fiction, for a fallen woman, even one as noble and as pure in spirit as Ruth or Fleur de Marie.

That Ruth is noble and pure in spirit and meant to be admired as well as pitied by the reader is evident from the legacy of praise she leaves behind her amongst the poor whom she has helped. Leonard learns of her reputation amongst the poor near the end of the novel and thereafter “walked erect in the streets of Eccleston, where ‘many arose and called her blessed’”.

Such a one as her has never been a great sinner; nor does she do her work as a penance, but for the love of God, and of the blessed Jesus. She will be in the light of God’s countenance when you and I will be standing afar off.

Fleur de Marie, too, had left a similar legacy of praise amongst the members of her father’s court, the convent where she dies, and the poor of the streets of Paris. In their overwhelming goodness, both portraits are, to some extent, inconsistent with the novels’ subject matter. These paragons can hardly be viewed as
representative of most poor fallen women. Yet both Sue and Mrs. Gaskell meant to achieve the same end by overbalancing the characters of their fallen sinners with virtues. Their stories sought to highlight the injustices surrounding society’s treatment of fallen women and to excite Christian sympathy and tolerance, “that gentle tender help which Jesus gave once to Mary Magdalen.”

Despite this design to reform, both authors felt constrained, whether by their own or society’s censure, or by an inability to imagine another fictional course through the complexity of the issues which their subject demanded, to fall back on the conventional end for women who had already suffered a fate worse than death. Again here, however, Ruth’s death is seen to be tragic and her character heroic, which may, too, have figured in Mrs. Gaskell’s plan for her novel.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s portrait of a poor fallen woman relies on similar conventions in her long narrative poem, *Aurora Leigh*, written in 1856. The story-line of the poem follows many of the dictates of melodrama under the surface of its realistic portrait of the hardships faced by the poor in general and poor fallen women in particular. The figure of the poor girl, Marian Erle, in the poem brings to mind many of the elements of Sue’s Fleur de Marie. Both girls are poor and abused and their lives are described in both works with moving and detailed pictures of the hardships and cruelties they face. Marian is mistreated as a child by her depraved parents. Fleur de Marie is thought to be an orphan at the beginning of the story and is harmed instead by surrogate parents, such as the wicked old sweet seller. It is interesting to note, however, that in one of the twists of Sue’s plot, it is discovered that Fleur de Marie’s parents are indeed alive and that they have abandoned her, and thus brought about the torment of her life and its abuses indirectly. Fleur de Marie’s scheming mother is seen to be especially guilty since she is aware of her daughter’s existence and has plotted to leave her to the streets. Marian’s mother, too, schemes against her child. When Marian has grown to young womanhood, her mother seeks to make use of her beauty and offers her as mistress to the local squire:

    ... there a man stood, with beast’s eyes
    That seemed as they would swallow her alive
    ... The mother held her tight,
    Saying hard between her teeth—’Why wench, why wench,
    The squire speaks to you now—the squire’s too good;
    He means to set you up, and comfort us.
Marian’s father is equally dreadful. He drinks and beats his family, including his daughter. Marian’s childhood is patently one without normal childhood joys and nurturing. She too has never had a “joujoux”. So although her parents are alive, their moral depravity leaves Marian as vulnerable as though she were without parents. It is the family’s grinding poverty, as much as the immorality which is in part a result of deprivation, which tempts her mother to sell Marian’s virtue. By emphasizing these factors in Marian’s story, Elizabeth Barrett Browning is closely following Sue’s choice to depict the social realities which led poor women to illicit sex and prostitution. Poor young women in the country were often seduced and then abandoned by the local male gentry and the picture of a poor woman seeking gain in this way is entirely convincing.33

The pastoral ideal is at work in this poem and serves a similar purpose to its use in both Sue’s and Dickens’s novels. Marian responds to the beauty in the natural world of the countryside around her and her doing so points to her inherent goodness and her superiority to her base family and her rough surroundings. She is also naturally compassionate and cares for those even more unfortunate than herself. Her nursing of a dying family brings her into close contact with Romney Leigh, the central male figure of the poem. Marian reveres Romney and loves him with a curious mixture of erotic yearning and filial awe. Her feelings for Romney are as strange a mixture as those which Fleur de Marie is seen to feel for prince Rodolphe at the beginning of Les Mystères de Paris. Until he is revealed to be her father, Fleur de Marie also combines an undercurrent of sexual longing with her gratitude for Rodolphe’s patronage.

Romney Leigh takes Marian Erie under his care in much the same way as the prince does Fleur de Marie. At this point in her story Marian is still chaste, having fled her parents and found her way to London. She manages to resist the trap of prostitution but fears that this will be her fate with an acknowledgement of the horror
which accompanies the lives of fallen women on the street: “how would it be with her .

. let out into that terrible street alone . .” Romney discovers her working, predictably enough, as a seamstress, and proposes to marry the poor forsaken girl as a gesture of pity. He is an active social reformer and wishes to demonstrate the depth of his sincerity by marrying beneath his social station. The concern with the injustices of social divisions, which are seen to be sins against both God and man, is one of the threads which bind the narrative of the poem and this concern underlines the portrait of Marian Erle just as it forms the foundation of *Les Mystères de Paris* and its picture of Fleur de Marie. Romney is the mouthpiece for the poem’s vision of social unity in the same way as prince Rodolphe has been in Sue’s work:

`Marian, I being born
What men call noble, and you, issued from
The noble people,—though the tyrannous sword
Which pierced Christ’s heart, has cleft the world in twain
‘Twist class and class, opposing rich to poor,
Shall we keep parted? Not so. Let us lean
And strain together rather, each to each,
Compress the red lips of this gaping wound
As far as two souls can,—ay, lean and league,
I from my superabundance,—from your want
You, joining in a protest ’gainst the wrong
On both sides.  `35

Romney, however, is loved by another woman from his own class of society, Lady Waldemar, who schemes to separate him from Marian and prevent their marriage. Prince Rodolphe was subject to a similar intrigue on the part of another self-seeking aristocrat, Countess MacGregor. Lady Waldemar convinces Marian that she is selfish to wish to pursue a marriage which would demean Romney socially. She offers to help the girl emigrate to Australia to leave him to marry in his own class. At this point, the narrative takes on the characteristics of melodrama. Marian abandons the idea of her marriage, leaves Romney jilted at the altar, and is spirited away by a woman in the employ of Lady Waldemar. Tricked into trusting her companions, swooning from grief and sea-sickness, the girl is taken to France where in a sordid tavern she is drugged and then raped.
The circumstances of her captivity and loss of virtue recall the details of another figure in *Les Mystères de Paris*, Louise Morel, and the plot in another of Sue’s novels, *Mathilde*, more than they do his insistence on the deprivation which drives Fleur de Marie to prostitution. Elizabeth Barrett Browning did admire *Mathilde*, as has been seen in an earlier chapter. She may have been inspired to depict Marian’s plight in this way because of the sinister power of similar scenes in that novel. That Marian is a victim of rape does, at any rate, effectively communicate the hopelessness and inequity of the fate of poor young women who had had illicit sex. Even though her loss of virtue is through no doing of her own, Marian still suffers all the horrors and isolation of other fallen women. She, too, sees herself to be unclean after the loss of her chastity. While wandering the countryside after her rape, she twice removes the holy medal of the Virgin Mary from her neck, attached to her by sympathetic French peasants, to “keep it clean.”

She is unworthy, in her own eyes, to wear a symbol of such purity. Marian is thus, since unwilling, all the more completely a victim, of her poverty, her vulnerability and of social injustice. Although she does not die because of her sin, Marian constantly refers to her life after she is raped as a living death. She has “past the grave” as she explains repeatedly throughout her story and, therefore, though actually living at the end of the narrative, her fate somehow still resembles that of her precursors Fleur de Marie and Mrs. Gaskell’s Ruth.

Marian’s attempts to support herself honourably as a domestic servant and a needlewoman after her rape are repulsed by women who disown the girl once they know of her history. Yet these women are far from faultless themselves and have only the earthly advantage of outward respectability. Elizabeth Barrett Browning has no patience with such characters and uses them to expose another feature of the hypocrisy which surrounded the figure of the fallen woman who was unable to disguise her sin because of her poverty and vulnerability, and was therefore forced into prostitution. More moneyed women were able to hide their illicit affairs and did not suffer in the same way as the lower classes.

Although Marian rejects the symbol of the Christian saint which the peasants first attach to her, she acquires the saint-like qualities which also distinguish Fleur de Marie and Ruth. Aurora refers to Marian as “my saint” when she first hears
the girl's story. Marian is beautiful, "still and pallid as a saint, . . . like a saint in ecstasy"39 when, later in the narrative, she declines marriage, a second time, to Romney in the pattern of renunciation familiar from the portraits of the fallen women in the earlier novels discussed here. Her gesture is particularly poignant because she is also rejecting, as had Ruth, legitimacy for her adored son born as a result of her rape. Marian's child links her closely with Ruth and both women are meant to be admired for the devotion and selflessness which are revealed through the pictures of their love for their sons.

However, although Fleur de Marie denied herself the role of motherhood, Marian's status as a mother with an adored boy child, curiously enough, significantly links these two characters as well. Fleur de Marie has been so named by the Parisian underworld in recognition of her resemblance to the Virgin Mary. Her qualities of nobility, purity of spirit and humility, seen to be those of that highest saint and mother of God, are constantly reiterated throughout the novel. Although her character does have other names in the narrative, it is as Fleur de Marie that she is most consistently known and is so called at the end of the work, which closes on the day of "the funeral service of Fleur de Marie."40 That Sue should choose to return to that name in his final sentence, after the many passages which immediately precede his finale where, in the court of her father, the girl had been identified as the princess Amélie, indicates how much he wished her identity as a Madonna figure to eclipse even the dramatically appealing persona of the princess. Marian, both through her own name, and through the coupling of her figure with her infant son, is also clearly meant to call to mind that holiest of female saints.

It is the sacred qualities of these particular women and the identification with purity and goodness in all of them which tie together all the various portraits of otherwise sinful poor women discussed here. All these fallen women are closely aligned with both of the Christian saints of Mary Magdalen and the Virgin Mary whose images are recalled in these portraits in order to reinforce the authors' aim to inspire sympathy and respect for their characters. Dickens's characters of Little Em'ly and Martha are less saintly perhaps than Fleur de Marie, Ruth and Marian Erle, but they too do demonstrate their author's desire to portray the fallen woman in a favourable light.
The inspiration behind Sue's compelling portrait of Fleur de Marie had been the wish to inspire tolerance for one of nineteenth-century society's most vilified figures. In order to do so, he created a fallen woman whose purity and goodness were at odds with her circumstances and with the prejudices surrounding such figures in contemporary society. By making Fleur de Marie "divine" and placing her at the centre of his novel, Sue made the issue of her fallen state impossible to ignore. It is not surprising to find that his example was followed by those British authors who wished too to encourage reform of society's unjust treatment of such women. The figure of the moral prostitute, the good yet fallen woman whose poverty and social vulnerability had led to her unchaste state, but who was otherwise inherently innocent continued to have a lasting appeal throughout the nineteenth century, surfacing in such better known characters as Trilby in George du Maurier's novel, written in 1894. Such female figures are now commonplace in fiction and in popular culture. Their original is to be found in Sue's Fleur de Marie and is one of the more enduring aspects of his now largely forgotten, yet influential and innovative novel.

5 Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Mary Russell Mitford, (6) February 1844, The Brownings' Correspondence, VIII, 191.
9 see note 3 above.
13 Mahood, 1-15.
14 David Copperfield, 663-4.
15 Ibid, 559.
16 Collins, 94-116.
18 David Copperfield, 558-9.
20 Mahood, 29-39.
22 Ibid, 94.
24 *Ruth*, 119.
25 Ibid, 120.
26 Ibid, 344.
27 Ibid, 268.
29 *Ruth*, 430.
30 Ibid, 429.
31 Ibid, 350-1.
32 *Aurora Leigh*, 102.
33 Mahood, 40-49.
34 *Aurora Leigh*, 104.
37 Ibid, 295.
39 Ibid, 292.
WHO DID WHICH? or WHO INDEED?

Oft in the stilly night,
When the mind is fumbling fuzzily,
I brood about how little I know,
And know that little so muzzily.
Ere slumber’s chains have bound me,
I think it would suit me nicely,
If I knew one tenth of the little I know,
But knew that tenth precisely.

O Delius, Sibelius,
And What’s his name Aurelius,
O Manet, O Monet,
Mrs. Siddons and the Cid.
I know each name
Has an oriflamme of fame,
I’m sure they all did something,
But I can’t think what they did. . . .

O Tasso, Picasso,
O Talleyrand and Sally Rand,
Elijah, Elisha,
Eugene Aram, Eugène Sue,
Don Quixote, Donn Byrne,
Rosencrantz and Gildenstern,
Humperdinck and Rumpelstiltskin,
They taunt me two by two. . . .

Ogden Nash 1952

As Ogden Nash’s poem demonstrates, Eugène Sue’s name was still resonant, if obscure, a hundred years after his death. It had just the needed amount of vague familiarity to Nash’s Anglo-Saxon readers to serve his comic purpose. Curiously, the same is true in France where recent references to Sue have also made use of his obscurity for the purposes of humour. A well-known radio sketch from the early 1970s featuring two famous French actors pokes fun at the author’s status as a
forgotten figure. To much of the general public in France this sketch is what is now most remembered of Sue. Although the reasons for the decline in the author’s reputation have been specific to each culture, Sue’s modern fate has been strikingly similar in each.

Yet there was a point in the nineteenth century when Sue was taken seriously in both countries. For a number of years in Britain he was so well-known that his name could be used as a byword for the successful novelist, as it was by Anthony Trollope in 1857 in the passage cited at the beginning of this study. In France his contemporary fame was legendary. Briefly, in fact, Sue became an icon of western culture. Almost as quickly, his renown faded. His fiction, especially the later successful novels, crystallized the concerns of a certain period. When the urgency of those concerns abated, his work began to be dated. The topicality of his fiction was both his making and his undoing.

This contrast in the responses of different periods is in itself sufficient reason to examine Sue’s fiction and the various reactions to it. Such a study throws light on the vagaries of literary fashions and, in doing so, on literary history in general. As the “roi du roman-feuilleton”, Sue’s handling of serialized fiction is of real value as well to any examination of the development of that form of the publication of fiction. Other writers, now better remembered and respected, may have learned from the example of the critical reaction to Sue’s serializations. Since his works were so widely read and his themes of such immediate interest to his contemporaries, they are also valuable to the study of the social history of the mid-nineteenth century. Sue’s works are particularly representative of the social culture of his time.

This last claim could, of course, be made for any widely read popular fiction of the nineteenth century. However, the importance of Sue’s fiction extends beyond the mere fact that it was popular. Although this study does not pretend to uncover a forgotten genius of the nineteenth century, it does maintain that Sue’s novels are more significant than many other equally widely read popular works of the period. During his career, Sue’s works straddled the divide between popular and serious fiction. This was perhaps more evident in France where such an apparent incongruity was possible. Judging a work to be “popular” in nineteenth-century French
culture did not preclude serious critical consideration. Indeed, the term “popular” for the most part carried chiefly political implications which in themselves became significant with the development of the republican movement and the political unrest of 1848. Although Sue was regarded with less critical favour after his “popular” successes in France and his subsequent political involvement, this did not prevent the acknowledgement of the importance of his fiction, the influence of which is relatively easy to trace. It is clear that well-known and now better remembered authors, such as Hugo and Zola, drew inspiration from his works. In France throughout their careers, Sue’s name was consistently coupled with that of Balzac, a pairing which would surprise many modern students of literature, especially in Britain.

In Britain, the effect of Sue’s fiction is more difficult to determine. Sue’s contemporary British reputation suffered after 1843 from his association with the nascent popular culture. The prejudices of the period judged a “popular” work of fiction to be unworthy of serious critical attention. The English term implied a social and moral baseness as well as potential sedition. Mainstream and popular fiction were more distinctly divided. British culture would not have equated Dickens with G.W.M. Reynolds as French culture did Balzac with Sue. Contemporary British authors of “serious” fiction, or those who wished to be perceived as such, including Dickens himself, seemed to have hesitated, for the most part, to respond overtly to an author whose works were condemned along with the body of popular literature. Nevertheless, some of the fiction now considered important to the development of the nineteenth-century English novel features elements reminiscent of Sue’s novels.

This is particularly the case with *Les Mystères de Paris*. The novel brings together many of the preoccupations of the 1840s which were to inform serious fiction then and continue to do so later in the century. Indeed it was one of the first works to express some of these concerns in fiction and certainly to do so on such a wide scale. The contemporary popularity of the novel is without question. Its consequent impact on popular culture is readily apparent. However, the effect of the novel on mainstream fiction has not received the attention it deserves. Because they were stigmatized as “popular” when first generally introduced to Britain, it has been largely forgotten that Sue’s novels were written initially “to reflect or flatter the
prejudices" of bourgeois readers. This was the gist of Karl Marx's criticism of the supposed socialism of *Les Mystères de Paris* and his remarks were justified. In Britain as well as in France, Sue's audience had been originally the middle and ruling classes, just those readers whom authors of "serious" fiction wished to reach. His popular readership developed in the wake of his success with those readers.

Thus, there were, in fact, two tiers of contemporary reaction in Britain to Sue's fiction after *Les Mystères de Paris*. The hostile critical reception in the British press to Sue's "popular" works involved his novels in wider social and ethical issues of particular sensitivity, thus preventing discussion of their worth as individual pieces of literature. However, the evidence of the private circulating libraries, the correspondence of a few key contemporary figures and most importantly some of the British fiction of the time indicates that within British culture itself, another form of reception to Sue took place. Sue's novels, especially *Les Mystères de Paris*, were widely read throughout British society and have left their mark in significant ways. Sue's contribution to the development of the English novel is particularly notable in the "social problem" novels of the period, in Dickens's later fiction and in the powerfully emotive fictional figure of the poor fallen woman.

Eugène Sue was one of the many French writers read by large numbers of British readers during the nineteenth century. An interest in the politics, the fashions, the ways of life and the literature of France was commonplace to Victorian society. A constant dialogue took place between the two cultures which played an important role in the self-definition of two growing and changing nations. Sue's fiction formed part of that dialogue at a critical point in the development of the English novel, and although his may not have been one of the most important, his is one of the forgotten voices of his time.

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Appendices

I.

1. talent original et plein de sève . . . tableaux admirables de vérité.

2. estime pour votre talent que je voudrais voir grandir.

3. *homme abominable*, faisant de l’horreur à plaisir . . . à la faveur de cette peinture trop exacte . . . de la traite des noirs . . . j’ai voulu, non élever une polemique bâtard et usée sur les droits que plusieurs contestent, mais bien poser des faits, des chiffres, au moyen desquels chaque partie adverse pourra établir ses comptes.—L’addition seulement reste à faire.

4. à nos âges, on voit trop bas et trop vrai pour compter sur l’amour . . . à périr . . . me donnerait beaucoup d’amour-propre, si j’en pouvais avoir, mais ce n’est pas la gloire qu’ils jaloussent, c’est l’argent. Selon leur argot, je leur vole leur pain, moi que suis riche.

5. Il était mobile et aimable comme un enfant, calme comme un enfant, repentant de ses torts comme un enfant, ce qui fait qu’on les lui pardonnerait comme un enfant: enfin cet ensemble de défauts naïvement avoués et de qualités naïvement oubliées formaient un es d’elles des plus séduisantes que j’ai connues.

6. le rare talent de faire des hommes qui vivent, que l’on connaît, que l’on reconnaîtrait . . . la science d’observation . . . quand il teint une situation vraie, avec quelle vérité et quelle sagacité il la traite! . . . un siècle tout entier . . . depravation de notre société blasée et morte à toute croyance . . . occuperà un rang distingué parmi les ouvrages originaux de l’époque.


8. M. Sue, si l’on prend l’ensemble de ses ouvrages et si l’on représente bien la famille de romans dont il s’agit, se trouve en combiner en lui l’esprit, la mode, la *fashion*, l’habitude, avec distinction je l’ai dit . . . A tel ou tel de ses confrères, il a laissé le droit de dérision; lui, s’il se jette dans l’excès de crédulité, c’est qu’il l’a voulu. Il s’est trouvé par position à l’abri du mercantilisme littéraire; il n’a obéi à d’autres nécessités qu’à son goût personnel d’observer et d’écrire . . . La génération spirituelle, ambitieuse, incrédule et blasé, qui occupe le monde depuis dix ans, se peint à merveille . . . dans l’ensemble des romans de M. Eugène Sue.

9. C’est un roman qui, malgré tous ses défauts, ses prétentions psychologiques, ses interminables longueurs, ses affectations un peu puériles d’élégance mondaine, excite cependant l’intérêt et justifie jusqu’à un certain point la curiosité dont il a été entouré . . . Tous ces différents caractères, toutes ces situations d’âme variée et changeantes, enfin tout ce qui constitue la *partie morale* de *Mathilde*, révèle certainement chez M.
Sue, ou plutôt continue à nous montrer un vrai talent d’observation et une façon profonde de sentir.

10. le Morne-au-Diable offre à l’imagination l’attrait d’un de ces longs et bizarres récits qu’on se fait à soi-même pour tromper l’ennui d’un long voyage sur un grand chemin... En vérité, c’est grand dommage, car cette œuvre ne prouve que M. Eugène Sue a conservé une faculté inappréciable, et qu’il possède presque seul parmi les écrivains de ce temps-ci: celle de pouvoir quitter l’air malsain qu’on respire dans les souterrains du roman psychologique pour revenir à l’air et au soleil du roman d’aventures... Quoique son dernier roman ne soit qu’une esquisse et une esquisse des plus incorrestes, on y distingue des personnages bien posés, des détails heureuses, des perspectives indiquées avec talent. Enfin, quand M. Sue n’aurait pas eu d’autre mérite, nous devons lui savoir gré de nous avoir tirés un instant du labyrinthe obscur, sinuex, inextricable, où M. de Balzac nous ramène...

11. Rodolphe ne fut pas seul le jour des funérailles de Fleur de Marie.

12. Dans les cafés, on s’arrache les Débats le matin; on loue chaque numéro qui a le feuilleton de Sue jusqu’à dix sous pour le temps de le lire. Quand l’auteur retard d’un jour les belles dames et les femmes de chambre sont en émoi... Que M. de Chateaubriand ait la goutte ou qu’un honnête homme de vrai littérature tremble la fièvre, nul ne s’inquiète, mais M. Sue! Son silence par cause de rhume est devenu une calamité publique...

13. cet homme sans honte... est le Voltaire de ces nouvelles hordes, qui préparent dans l’ombre de nouveaux crimes, et de nouveaux carnages.

14. success prodigieux... du livre de M. Eugène Sue... roman, qui a causé beaucoup de mal, est encore dangereux. Les esprits corrompus y trouvent une pâture, les rêveurs anti-sociaux une arme contre la société.

15. Un pauvre greffier... vous êtes partout, surtout à l’atelier... votre voix calmera bien des querelles, apaiser dans l’avenir plus d’une haine implacable et vous serez béní.

16. peintre éloquent de nos misères...

17. Béranger, Lammenais, Sand et Sue, les quatre grandes puissances socialistes et philanthropiques de notre âge.

18. J’ai trouvé votre style clair, naturel, et coloré là où il le fallait... j’ai tout bonnement pleuré en lisant cette histoire à la fois triviale et sublime parce que vous y avez fait entrer le mystère du cœur, dans le mystère de la rue... aucune héroïne moderne, ne m’a paru aussi originale, aussi hardi, aussi touchante et aussi poétique que la création de Fleur-de-Marie.

19. Je ne peux pas lire, entre nous soit dit, le Juif Errant. J’y fais mon possible... mais cela me tombe des mains.
20. Parmi le bataillon sacré qui s'est levé contre cette invasion, M. Eugène Sue a pris une des premières places, et son roman est un long factum contre les disciples de Loyola. Certes, la guerre est bonne, et nous ne saurions que féliciter l'auteur d'avoir pris les armes dans une pareille lutte. Mais combien ses coups seraient plus sûrs, s'il eût mieux étudié le fort et le faible de ses adversaires; si mûrement combinée, méditée sagement, son attaque se fût établie sur un plan plus rationnel. Mais pourquoi parler de méditation et de plan arrêté? L'un et l'autre se trouvent-ils possibles dans notre littérature de feuilletons? . . . fort préjudiciables à l'art, à la moralité, à la conscience de l'écrivain.

21. On avait bien dit à M. Sue que, lorsqu'il sortait de la vérité repoussante et qu'il se jetait dans le contraste, il échappait à la réalité et tombait dans le fantastique.

22. Si, au lieu de nous catéchiser, elle voulait nous charmer encore, elle y réussirait facilement . . . les lauriers de M. Eugène Sue ne peuvent pas empêcher Mme. Sand de dormir.

23. Vous me connaissiez assez pour savoir que je n'ai pas de jalousie ni d'aigreur contre lui, ni contre le public. Mais il s'agit de payer cent vingt mille francs de dettes et une vie décente . . . et si j'envie rien de ce triomphateur mirliton, vous me permettrez de déplorer qu'on lui paie ses volumes dix mille francs tandis que je n'obtiens que trois mille des miens.

24. Ils ont la ferme conviction que la religion anglicane est le dernier mot de Dieu, que le gouvernement constitutionnel est le dernier mot de l'intelligence humaine. . . . et l'Angleterre en bloc comme le meilleur des mondes possibles. . . . Le moment est venu où la littérature devait tenir compte du peuple, où les riches devaient entendre parler des déshérités; et il s'est trouvé que, par curiosité, par amour de la nouveauté, le public a été irrésistiblement entraîné à suivre Dickens dans le nouveau monde qu'il venait d'ouvrir . . . .

M. Sue est plus savant machiniste, plus habile à agencer des faits et à torturer la curiosité; parfois aussi, ses types peuvent être plus significatifs, comme émblèmes d'une pensée philosophique. Dickens touche et intéresse davantage, ses créations sont plus vivantes, plus vraies. Tout cela revient à dire que les deux romanciers ont été ce qu'ils devaient être l'un et l'autre pour agir sur leur patrie respective. Si Dickens eût discuté avec intelligence, au lieu de faire vibrer les sentiments, il fût rester sans influence en Angleterre.

25. Je suis comme vous, Madame, de plus en plus passioné pour la vie des champs.

26. La différence entre le père et le fils c'est que l'un guérisse la société, et l'autre empoisonne et travaille la tuer.

27. M. Eugène Sue (laissons de côté le socialiste et ne parlons que du romancier) est peut-être l'égal de M. de Balzac en invention, en fécondité et en composition. Il dresse à merveille de grandes charpentes; ils a des caractères qui vivent aussi, et qui, bon gré, mal gré, se retiennent, surtout il a de l'action et des machines dramatiques qu'il siat très bien faire jouer. Mais les détails sont faibles souvent; ils sont . . . d'une observation
bien moins originale et moins neuve que chez M. de Balzac. Eugène Sue ne sait pas autant écrire que Balzac, ni aussi bien, ni même aussi mal... cette littérature a fourni son école et fait son temps; elle a donné ses talents les plus vigoureux, presque gigantesques; tant bonne que mauvaise, on peut penser aujourd'hui que le plus fort de sa sève est épuisé. Qu'elle fasse trève au moins, qu'elle se repose; qu'elle laisse aussi à la société le temps de se reposer après l'excès... Une terrible émulation et comme un concours furieux s'était engagé dans ces dernières années entre les hommes les plus vigoureux de cette littérature active, dévorante, inflammatoire. Le mode de publication en feuillets... avait poussé les effets et les tons du roman à un diapason extrême, désespérant, et plus longtemps insoutenable... souhaitons à l'avenir de notre société des tableaux non moins vastes, mais plus apaisés, plus consolants, et à ceux qui les peindront une vie plus calme et des inspirations non pas plus fines, mais plus adoucies, plus sainement naturelles et plus sereines.

28. Mon sentiment est que l'association de Sue serait bonne. Il est le plus populaire de nous quatre.

29. Roi du roman feuilleton, M. Eugène Sue a pu longtemps en être pris comme la personification la plus complète, la plus populaire. Dans ses ouvrages le plus célèbres, il s'est efforcé de mêler, à des doses habiles, deux éléments bien diverses de popularité: les prédications d'un socialisme qui commençait à poindre, et la peinture sensuelle des jouissances que donne la richesse. Ces deux éléments combiné, grossis par les passions démagogiques, ont puissamment concouru à la révolution de 1848; ils lui ont servi de prélude, de cortège et de commentaire, et c'est justement cette révolution qui a détruit la vogue du roman-feuilleton, amené la déchéance des maîtres du genre, et condamné M. Eugène Sue à raconter dans le désert. Ceci pourrait lui fournir la morale de ses dernières histoires, et lui rappeler, sous forme de proverbe, qu'on est souvent puni par où l'on a péché.

II.

1. Honnête! mon Dieu! et avec quoi donc veux-tu que je sois honnête? Les habits que je porte appartiennent à l'ogresse; je lui dois pour mon garni et pour ma nourriture... je ne puis pas bouger d'ici... elle me ferait arrêter comme voleuse... Je lui appartiens... Il faut que je m'acquitte...

IV.

1. Oh! ces riches, c'est si durs!... --Pas plus durs que d'autres, Madeleine. Mais ils ne savent pas, vois-tu, ce que c'est que la misère. Ça nait heureux, ça vit heureux, ça meurt heureux: à propos de quoi veux-tu que ça pense à nous?... ils ne savent pas.

2. ... faute d'enseignements, les classes riches ont aussi fatalement leurs misères, leurs vices, leurs crimes.
Rien de plus fréquent et de plus affligeant que ces prodigalités insensées, stériles, que nous venons de peindre, et qui toujours entraînent ruine, déconsidération, bassesse ou infamie. C’est un spectacle déplorable... funeste... autant voir un florissant champs de blé inutilement ravagé par une horde de bêtes fauves.
Sans doute l’héritage, la propriété sont et doivent être inviolables, sacrés... La richesse acquise ou transmise doit pouvoir impunément et magnifiquement resplendir aux yeux des classes pauvres et souffrantes.
Longtemps encore il doit y avoir de ces disproportions effrayantes qui existent entre le millionnaire Saint-Remy et l’artisan Morel. Mais, par cela même que ces dispositions inévitable sont consacrée, protégée par la loi, ceux qui possèdent tant de biens et doivent user moralement comme ceux qui ne possèdent que probité, résignation, courage et ardeur du travail.
Aux yeux de la raison, du droit humain et même de l’intérêt social bien entendu, une grande fortune serait un dépôt héréditaire, confié à des mains prudentes, fermes, habiles, généreuses, qui, chargées à la fois de faire fructifier et de dispenser cette fortune, sauraient fertiliser, vivifier, améliorer tout ce qui aurait le bonheur de se trouver dans son rayonnement splendide et salutaire... Que de jeunes gens... maîtres à vingt ans d’un patrimoine considérable, le dissipent follement dans l’oisiveté, dans l’ennui, dans le vice, faute de savoir employer mieux ces biens et pour eux et pour autrui... le riche est jeté au milieu de la société avec son richesse, comme le pauvre avec sa pauvreté... une association honnête, intelligente, équitable, qui assurent le bien-être de l’artisan sans nuire à la fortune du riche... et qui, établissant entre ces deux classes des liens d’affection, de reconnaissance, sauvegarderait à jamais la tranquillité de l’État.

V.

1. Nous abordons avec une double défiance quelques-unes des scènes de ce récit.
Nous craignons d’abord qu’on ne nous accuse de rechercher des épisodes repoussants, et une fois même cette license admise, qu’on nous trouve audessous de la tâche qu’impose la réplication fidèle, vigoureuse, hardie, de ces moeurs excentriques.

2. Je vous remercie, mon cher ami, de m’avoir envoyé la lettre d’Eugène Sue. Je l’ai lu [sic] avec le plus vif intérêt [sic], et je suis charmé de savoir que j’ai l’honneur d’etre [sic] estimé d’un si spirituel et si galant homme.

3. ’Mon bon père... Pourrez-vous oublier mon ingratitdue?... Oh! pourrez-vous vous me pardonner?’... Au lieu de répondre, je collai mes levres sur son front, elle sentit couler mes larmes...

4. Oh! mon père! j’étais coupable, je le sais, je n’avais pas le droit d’aimer; mais j’expiais ce triste amour par bien des douleurs... Dites, maintenant que vous savez tout, dites, mon père, est-il pour moi un autre avenir que celui du cloître?... Ah!... mère!... moi?... Oh! jamais!... je suis indigné de ce saint nom... Je mourrais de
honte devant mon enfant... si je n'étais pas morte devant son père... en lui faisant l'aveu du passé...

5. Cet agent, homme de quarante ans environ, vigoureux et trapu, avait le teint coloré, l'œil fin et perçant, la figure complètement rasée, afin de pouvoir prendre divers déguisements nécessaires à ses dangereuses expéditions; car il lui fallait souvent de joindre la souplesse du comédien au courage et à l'énergie du soldat pour parvenir à s'emparer de certains bandits contre lesquels il devait lutter de ruse et de détermination. Narcisse Borel était, en un mot, l'un des plus utiles, les plus actifs de cette providence au petit pied, appelée modestement et vulgairement la Police.

6. 'Soyez bénis, mon Dieu!' s'écria Fleur-de-Marie en joignant les mains. 'Il m'était permis d'aimer mon bienfaiteur autant que je l'aimais... C'est mon père... je pourrai le chérir sans remords... Soyez... bénis... mon...'
Elle ne put achever... la secousse était trop violente; Fleur-de-Marie s'évanouit entre les bras du prince.

7. . . . pourrons-nous dire que ce qui nous soutient dans cette œuvre longue, pénible et difficile, c'est la conviction d'avoir éveillé quelques nobles sympathies pour les infortunés . . . pour les repentirs sincères, pour l'honnêteté simple . . . et d'avoir inspiré le dégout, l'aversion, l'horreur, la crainte salutaire de tout ce qui était absolument impur et criminel? Nous n'avons pas reculé devant les tableaux les plus hideusement vrais, pensant que, comme le feu, la vérité morale purifie tout.

VI.

1. Nous allons essayer de mettre sous les yeux du lecteur quelques épisodes de la vie d'autres barbares aussi endebors de la civilisation que les sauvages peuplades si bien peintes par Cooper. Seulement les barbares dont nous parlons sont au milieu de nous; nous pouvons les coudroyer en nous aventurant dans les repaires où ils vivent... Ces hommes ont des moeurs à eux, langage mystérieux...

2. Nous conduirons le lecteur dans ce triste logis. Il est cinq heures du matin. Au dehors le silence profond, la nuit noire, glaciale; il neige. Une chandelle... perç de s'illuer jaune et blafarde les ténèbres de la mansarde... Le sol, d'une couleur sans nom, infect, gluant, est semé ça et là de brins de paille pourrie... Il fait dans cette mansarde un froid si glaciale, si pénétrant... dans cette étroite mansarde vivent sept personnes... sept corps grêles, chétifs, grelottants, épuisés, depuis le petit enfant jusqu'à l'aïeule...

3. L'inconnu, au lieu de répondre à cette femme, écoutait attentivement sa voix. Jamais timbre plus doux, plus frais, plus argentin, ne s'était fait entendre à son oreille...

4. Oh! ces riches, c'est si durs!
--Pas plus durs que d'autres, Madeleine, mais ils ne savent pas, vois-tu, ce que c'est que la misère. Ça nait heureux, ça vit heureux, ça meurt heureux: à propos de quoi veux-tu que ça pense à nous? Comment se feraient-ils une idée des privations des
autres? Ont-ils grand’faim, grande est leur joie, ils n’en dînent que mieux. Fait-il grand froid, tant mieux, ils appellent ça une belle gelée: c’est tout simple; ils sortent à pied, ils rentrent ensuite au coin d’un bon foyer, et la froidure leur fait trouver le feu meilleur; ils ne peuvent donc pas nous plaindre beaucoup, puisqu’à eux la faim et le froid leur tournent à plaisir. Ils ne savent pas, vois-tu, ils ne savent pas . . .

5. Elle entra bientôt . . . Son émotion, sa faiblesses étaient si grandes, que deux soeurs la soutenaient . . . Je fus effrayé, moins encore de sa pâleur et de la profonde altération de ses traits que de l’expression de son sourire . . . Il me parut empreint d’une sorte de satisfaction sinistre . . . Debout dans la salle, les deux mains jointes sur sa poitrine, les yeux baissés, à demi enveloppée de son voile blanc et des longs plis traînants de sa robe noire, elle se tenait immobile et pensive . . . Je voyais à chaque instant son émotion augmenter, ses traits se décomposer davantage; enfin cette scène fut sans doute au-dessus de ses forces . . . car elle s’évanouit avant que la procession des soeurs fut terminée.

VII.

1. tribus barbares

2. --Eh bien! Sois honnête, ma fille . . . dit le Chourineur. ---Honnête! Mon Dieu! Et avec quoi veux-tu que je sois honnête? Les habits que je porte appartiennent à l’ogresse; je lui dois pour mon garni et pour ma nourriture . . . je ne puis pas bouger d’ici . . . elle me ferait arrêter comme voleuse . . . Je lui appartiens . . . Il faut que je m’acquitte . . .

3. Je les envoie promener, ces vieilles embaucheuses.

4. Et tu n’avais jamais eu de joujoux, Goualeuse? dit le Chourineur. ---Moi! Es-tu bête, va! . . . Qui est-ce qui m’en aurait donné?

5. . . . si un jour tu es mère, ce ne sera pas seulement pour toi qu’il faudra être heureuse . . . Ah! s’écria Fleur de Marie avec un cri déchirant, car ce mot de mère la réveilla du songe enchanteur qui la berça . . . moi? Oh! Jamais! . . . Je suis indigne de ce saint nom . . . je mourrais de honte devant mon enfant . . . si je n’étais pas morte de honte devant son père . . . en lui faisant l’aveu du passé . . . j’estime trop le prince Henri pour jamais lui donner une main qui a été touchée par les bandits de la Cité . . .

6. tout le monde me méprisera désormais . . . Oh! Je mourrais de honte . . . je ne pourrai plus supporter les regards de personne!

7. Un terme à sa cruelle existence

8. les funérailles de Fleur de Marie
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