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*Inherited Behaviour in Wilkie Collins's *The Legacy of Cain*: Victorian Studies and Twenty-First-Century Science Policy*

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Abstract

The Legacy of Cain (1888), the last novel Wilkie Collins published before his death, is structured as a case study of the respective influences of nature and nurture. The central question is whether the daughter of a murderess will reveal a 'hereditary taint' or whether a loving and religious environment will prove the stronger influence on the child's character. The Victorians knew nothing about genetics, but scientists and novelists alike shared a vigorous discourse about the hereditary transmission of behaviour and whether 'character' was heritable. In the wake of genetic and epigenetic discoveries, we find ourselves faced with a situation comparable to that Collins encountered in the 1880s, when evolutionary theory was unsettling many things Victorians held dear. Exploring how novelists and scientists in the late-nineteenth century attempted to cope with notions of inherited behaviour without genetics sheds an interesting light on twenty-first-century reactions to the news that acquired characteristics and behavioural traits may be passed on to future generations through mechanisms other than the gene. The emergence of an influential, semi-autonomous zone of activity known as the policy arena, which occupies an intermediate position between the disciplinary specialist and the public sphere, enables humanists to participate in science policy today in ways comparable to the contributions made by Victorian literary figures such as Wilkie Collins, George Eliot, Matthew Arnold and Samuel Butler.

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