

Now I Feel Ashamed

If she had been faultless, she could not have been the heroine of this story; for has not some wise man of old remarked, that the perfect women are those who leave no histories behind them, but who go through life upon such a tranquil course of quiet well-doing as leave no footprints on the sands of time; only mute records hidden here and there, deep in grateful hearts of those who have been blest by them.

—M.E. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*

As puzzling as questions about Hilda Blake's place in the class order were questions about her femininity. Tramps, everyone knew, could be violent and potentially murderous, but women outside of fiction did not buy guns, never mind shoot other women in the back. When the Brandon Collegiate Literary Society debated 'Women's influence for good is greater than man's', the affirmatives won hands down.¹ In *The Female Offender* (1895), the influential nineteenth-century criminologists Cesare Lombroso and Guglielmo Ferrero had codified what everyone knew: the 'occasional [female] criminal' did her deed remorsefully, only in great extremity; or reluctantly, only at the suggestion of a heartless lover; and her femininity could even be admired if she later shaped her testimony to defend that heartless lover in court. On the other hand, the radically different 'born [female] criminal' showed neither altruism nor self-sacrifice, and 'a strong proof' of her 'degeneration' was 'the want of maternal affection'.² Some of the events during Blake's jail stay—notably the fear she raised in the