This essay seeks to explore the way in which the connection between freakishness and extraordinary bodily forms is further illuminated when we turn to the representation of female monstrosity in the sensation novel of the 1860s. It is suggested that the intersection of sentimentalism and spectacle can be found in the sensation novelist’s response to the image of female physicality. To this end, the essay is divided into three parts. The first part considers the historical and social context of freak shows in order to better understand the disturbing cultural images of human oddities. It also leads a discussion of how showmen utilize deformity as a device and manipulate bodily differences for sensation and sentiment. The second part places the freak phenomena within a larger context, examining how peculiar cases of anomalies provide a forum for medical discussions and scientific investigations. The intriguing issue of the missing link is addressed so as to locate creatures with monstrosity within a scientific framework. The third part makes a critical inquiry into the cultural image of female monstrosity in Wilkie Collins’s The Woman in White (1860), arguing that the sensation novel is closely bound up with the ideological production of freakishness and monstrosity. It is a prime site not only for the construction and justification of bodily variations but for the subversion of gender ideology. The Woman in White is sensational in its exposure of the antithesis to Victorian ideals of fair womanhood and angelic femininity, in particular through the narratives of a bearded and simian-like woman. My reading of Marian Halcombe, a female figure with masculine traits in the novel, will exemplify this point. The ambiguously gendered figure of Marian is indicative of how freakishness is regarded as a social, historical, and cultural phenomenon reflecting many of the cultural anxieties of Victorian society. The portrayal of the hybrid form of Marian’s body, a combination of masculinity and femininity, human and animal, represents an ideological mirror that reflects the link between the
anonymous body and the missing link. By exhibiting a transgressive woman’s bodily spectacle through the trope of monstrosity, I hope to provide an outlook on the problematic gendered identity in Victorian society.