Constructing Femininities: Mrs. Henry Wood’s *East Lynne* and Advice Manuals of the Nineteenth Century

Master dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree “Master in Language and Literature: English-Spanish” by EMME LAMPENS

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Acknowledgements

During my first three years as a student of English (and Spanish) at Ghent University both my interest in feminine and/or feminist topics and my interest in Victorian literature and culture were sparked. It was because of these interests that I was immediately intrigued by Dr. Marianne Van Remoortel’s suggestion to examine discourses of femininity and domesticity in Victorian (household) manuals written for a female audience. This suggested topic ultimately inspired my decision to write a Master dissertation about the representation and construction of femininity in both fictional and non-fictional nineteenth-century literary sources.

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1. Introduction

The Victorian age is well known for its creation of a strong domestic ideology, often called the “cult of domesticity.”¹ This domestic ideology is related to the Victorian age’s division of upper- and, especially, middle-class society into two separate (gender-related) spheres: a male, public (economic and political) sphere and a female, private (domestic) sphere.² The private or domestic sphere (in other words, the Victorian home) was idealized as the place of refuge from the chaos, pressure and decadence of the public sphere.³ Since this blissful domestic sphere was ideally presided over by women, the Victorian period’s “cult of domesticity” also entailed the idealization and definition of proper femininity or true womanhood.

During the Victorian period, the domestic ideology and its accompanying views on proper womanhood were included in and disseminated by several public sources such as conduct literature (advice manuals and etiquette books), periodicals (mainly women’s magazines and family magazines), and even fiction. Nineteenth-century conduct literature, especially the advice manuals written for a female readership, constitutes an important source of information about the Victorian age’s views on womanhood since its specific aim was to provide detailed information about all the duties properly pertaining to the female sex. Interestingly, fictional literary works (intentionally or unintentionally) often included information about the Victorian period’s ideals and habits as well. For instance, in A Literature of Their Own, Elaine Showalter indicates that “domestic realism” (or “domestic fiction”), a notable (early) nineteenth-century literary genre mainly written by and for women, typically served to demonstrate “woman’s proper sphere.”⁴

The aim of this dissertation is to examine the construction and portrayal of (ideal) femininity in both fictional and non-fictional nineteenth-century literary sources. This dissertation will, thus, be based on two sets of primary sources which will be related and compared to one another: the Oxford World’s Classics edition of Mrs. Henry Wood’s three-volume novel East Lynne (originally published between 1860 and 1861) and a selection of nineteenth-century advice manuals (and etiquette books). Mrs. Henry Wood’s sensation novel East Lynne constitutes an interesting subject of research for several reasons. Firstly, sensation fiction was a popular literary genre of the 1860s and 1870s that

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¹ Deborah Gorham: 4.
² Gorham: 4.
³ Gorham: 4.
⁴ Elaine Showalter: 20.
was hugely influenced by “domestic fiction,” the early- to mid-nineteenth century women’s genre that typically demonstrated the proper roles and duties of women in the domestic sphere. Secondly, Mrs. Henry Wood’s fiction is often described as some sort of “domesticated sensationalism” because it typically mingles a rather careful sensational plot, a thoroughly domestic setting, and much elaborately-described domestic detail.\textsuperscript{5}

Thirdly, Mrs. Henry Wood’s fiction generally featured female protagonists and (consequently) mainly appealed to a female readership. In \textit{The ‘Improper’ Feminine}, Lyn Pykett writes about \textit{East Lynne} that it is “not only a feminine narrative, [but] also a narrative of femininity” because “[m]ost of the central characters are women” who each represent a certain feminine stereotype.\textsuperscript{6} To sum up, \textit{East Lynne} lends itself perfectly to an investigation into the construction and portrayal of femininity.

Since the late twentieth century, both nineteenth-century conduct literature and nineteenth-century popular fictional genres, such as the sensation novel, have been gradually rediscovered by historians and literary critics. Interestingly, both genres have also drawn the attention of feminist scholars. With regard to conduct literature, Jacques Carré has indicated that gender studies have recently started to research its different forms in order to “assess the social and cultural effects of [its] prescribed patterns of femininity and masculinity.”\textsuperscript{7} Since the late 1970s, the genre of the sensation novel has increasingly been considered as an interesting subject of research by feminist literary critics as well.\textsuperscript{8}

The huge interest of feminist scholars in nineteenth-century sensation novels is probably related to the fact that sensation novels were mainly written by women, also mostly read by women, and often about women and the female sphere. I intend to frame my research about femininity in Mrs. Henry Wood’s \textit{East Lynne} and nineteenth-century advice literature within the field of feminist literary criticism by means of consulting the work of feminist critics such as Elaine Showalter, Lyn Pykett, Ann Cvetkovich, E. Ann Kaplan, and others.

As can be seen in the table of contents, this dissertation consists of two main parts: a historical part and an analytical part. In the first part, “History: The Feminine Ideal in

\textsuperscript{5} Jennifer Phegley: 183 & Deborah Wynne, “See What a Big Wide Bed it is!: Mrs Henry Wood and the Philistine Imagination” (\textit{Feminist Readings of Victorian Popular Texts: Divergent femininities}): 90.
\textsuperscript{6} Lyn Pykett: 119.
\textsuperscript{7} Jacques Carré: 1.
\textsuperscript{8} In her 1977 publication \textit{A Literature of Their Own}, Elaine Showalter was one of the first feminist scholars who reconsidered the sensation genre as a possibly subversive, rather than simply conservative, Victorian novelistic genre.
Victorian Culture,” I intend to provide a synthetic overview of the most relevant information pertaining to each of the following three topics: the life and work of Mrs. Henry Wood, the genre of the sensation novel, and the genre of conduct literature. The aim of this first historical part is to familiarize readers with the history and characteristics of, and also the previously-published studies about, the main material that informs this study. In the second part of this dissertation, “Analysis: Constructing Femininities,” I intend to analyse Mrs. Henry Wood’s depiction of femininity in her sensation novel East Lynne taking into account the idealized version of femininity that was contained and explained in nineteenth-century advice literature. This second part will be divided into three chapters which discuss the novel’s treatment of, what I consider, the three most important domains of ideal Victorian femininity: domesticity, maternity, and morality.9

Finally, I would like to point out that several literary critics (particularly Emma Liggins) have observed and (sometimes briefly) discussed the link between Mrs. Henry Wood’s view on femininity (in East Lynne) and the advice provided in nineteenth-century advice manuals.10 Nevertheless, to the best of my knowledge, so far no studies have been published which expressly apply the knowledge and advice contained in Victorian advice literature to the analysis of a (feminine) novel like Mrs. Henry Wood’s East Lynne. By taking such an approach in this dissertation, I hope to make a valuable contribution to feminist literary criticism and other studies which centre upon the construction of femininity in Victorian society and culture.

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9 The discussion of woman’s status as a wife or spouse (which, of course, was one of the essential feminine roles or tasks) will be included and discussed as part of the first feminine domain: domesticity.
10 In “Good Housekeeping? Domestic Economy and Suffering Wives in Mrs Henry Wood’s Early Fiction,” Emma Liggins (53) essentially claims that “[i]n the 1860s Mrs Henry Wood picked up on the contradictory nature of [the] feminine ideal, borrowing from key texts on household management and the fulfilment of marital duties by writers such as Sarah Ellis and Isabella Beeton in order to expose women’s dissatisfactions with domesticity.” In “The House in the Child and the Dead Mother in the House: Sensational Problems of Victorian ‘Household’ Management,” Dan Bivona (111) briefly remarks that “Wood was thoroughly familiar with the best-known etiquette guides and household manuals of the day, which typically assign a role to the middle-class wife that complements that of her husband, and which usually drum home the point that only those who are self-controlled can manage others effectively.” In “Demonic mothers: Ideologies of bourgeois motherhood in the mid-Victorian era,” Sally Shuttleworth (47) also links East Lynne to nineteenth-century advice literature: “The novel [East Lynne] highlights the class-based assumptions of contemporary advice texts.”
I. HISTORY: THE FEMININE IDEAL IN VICTORIAN CULTURE

2. Mrs. Henry Wood: A Biographical Sketch

Mrs. Henry Wood (1814-1887) was a prolific and popular British novelist and story writer during the second half of the nineteenth century. Wood truly rose to fame with the publication of her second novel *East Lynne*, which was initially serialized in the *New Monthly Magazine* from January 1860 to September 1861, and which appeared in its first three-volume version later in the autumn of 1861. Afterwards, she managed to maintain her popularity by means of the regular publication of another forty novels or so and over a hundred short stories. By the end of the nineteenth century, Wood’s many books sold so well that Margaret Oliphant described her as “the best-read writer” in Britain. Nevertheless, nowadays Mrs. Henry Wood seems to belong to the long list of forgotten authors; a state of affairs which Andrew Maunder attributes to “Wood’s apparent refusal in her fiction to subvert Victorian clichés [which] has meant [that] she is categorized as conventional, conservative.”

Mrs. Henry Wood, née Ellen Price, was born in Worcester on 17 January 1814 as the eldest daughter of Thomas Price, the owner of a glove manufacturing business, and his wife Elizabeth. Even though she was originally born into a large family of seven children, during the first years of her life Ellen Price was raised basically as an only child by her paternal grandparents. It was not until the age of seven, after the death of her grandfather, that she returned to her parents’ home. At the age of thirteen, Ellen Price was diagnosed with a spinal disorder (a severe curvature of the spine) which affected her growth, strength, and mobility. Often confined to the couch during adolescence, she was able to read lots of books and to profit from the classical education which her father provided for her brothers. It is said that Ellen started experimenting with writing from youth onwards, but that she herself destroyed her earliest works.

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11 The basic biographical information about Wood provided in this section is based on a combination of three main sources: (1) the Literature Online biography of Mrs. Henry Wood, (2) “Ellen Wood – A Biographical Sketch” from The Ellen Wood Website, and (3) Elisabeth Jay’s introduction to the Oxford World’s Classics edition of East Lynne.

12 Margaret Oliphant, “Men and Women” (*Blackwood’s Magazine* 157, Apr. 1895: 646), qtd. in Andrew Maunder, “Ellen Wood was a Writer: Rediscovering Collins’s Rival”: n. pag.

13 Maunder, “Ellen Wood was a Writer: Rediscovering Collins’s Rival”: n. pag.

14 Michael Flowers (*The Ellen Wood Website*, 2001-2006) contends that “Wood started writing in childhood, but she destroyed these early compositions, which included poetic lives of Lady Jane Grey and Catherine de Medici.”
On 17 March 1836, at the age of twenty-two, Ellen Price married Henry Wood, who worked for his family’s banking and shipping firm in France. For the next twenty years, the couple lived in France, in the Dauphine Alps, during which Ellen Wood had two daughters and three sons. One of the daughters died from scarlet fever during childhood; and according to Elisabeth Jay, Wood, as a devoted mother, afterwards “seems to have had a nervous breakdown, from which her husband, assisted by their devoted French housekeeper, nursed her back to health.”

During the 1850s, while living in France, Wood began to contribute to the novelist Harrison Ainsworth’s periodicals The New Monthly Magazine and Bentley’s Miscellany. Initially Wood maintained an amateur status as a writer, making unpaid contributions to these periodicals on a voluntary basis. Nevertheless, in 1856 Henry Wood’s firm collapsed and the Wood family moved from France to Upper Norwood in South London. According to Jennifer Phegley, “[a]fter her husband’s business failure in 1856 Wood became increasingly attentive to negotiating lucrative terms for copyrights, contracts, and royalties.” Since she had now become the sole breadwinner of the family, Wood tried to persuade Ainsworth to allow her to publish a novel in one of his journals. Ainsworth, however, refused to cooperate because he “wanted to keep Wood’s talents under wraps so that he could continue to capitalize on her work without paying her what she deserved.” Consequently, Wood decided to enter a novel-writing contest held by the Scottish Temperance League. Her quickly written first novel, Danesbury House, won the £100 prize and was published early on in 1860.

After winning this contest, Wood was finally able to persuade Ainsworth to publish a novel of hers in one of his periodicals. Her second novel, East Lynne, was serialized in The New Monthly Magazine from January 1860 to September 1861. Even before the serialization drew to an end, Wood began to look for a publisher who was prepared to release her novel in book form. Although Wood’s manuscript was turned down a couple of times, the noted publisher Richard Bentley accepted it, and East Lynne appeared in its first three-volume version in the autumn of 1861. An extensive review of the novel, which appeared in The Times on 25 January 1862, stated that “the authoress [had] achieved a

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15 Elisabeth Jay: xvii.
17 Phegley: 184.
considerable success, which [had] brought her into the very foremost rank of her class.”¹⁸

Michael Flowers indicates that this review “seems to have drawn the book to the attention of a wider public,” and that by the end of 1862 East Lynne had already gone through five editions.¹⁹ In other words, the novel became an instant success and Wood’s literary career was officially launched.

During the seven years that followed the publication of East Lynne, Wood published another fifteen novels, most of which were sensational in tone, such as Mrs. Halliburton’s Troubles (1862), St. Martin’s Eve (1866), and A Life’s Secret (1867). In 1867 (after the death of her husband the year before) Wood became the proprietor and editor of The Argosy, a literary magazine of which the reputation had recently been damaged by the serialization of Charles Reade’s unusually frank sensation novel Griffith Gaunt. Wood managed to keep the magazine afloat mainly by means of her own literary contributions. From 1867 onwards nearly all of Wood’s new novels were serialized in The Argosy before appearing in book form. On a monthly basis, The Argosy also published Wood’s extremely popular “Johnny Ludlow tales.” These tales, based on her childhood years spent in Worcester, are often considered to be some of Wood’s best work. Nevertheless, Wood initially published the “Johnny Ludlow tales” anonymously, under the pen name Johnny Ludlow, so as to conceal the fact that she herself created most of the magazine’s content.

During a seaside sojourn in Kent in 1873, Wood contracted diphtheria and grew extremely ill. Even though she slowly recovered, she never managed to regain her former health. Wood’s failing health seems to have affected her literary production, which slowed down during the last decade of her career. As Flowers observes “1874 was the first year since 1860, in which a new novel by Wood failed to appear.”²⁰ In 1876 Wood’s youngest son Charles William started writing for The Argosy as well, probably to compensate for his mother’s diminished productivity. On Christmas Eve 1886, Wood caught a bronchial cold and started to suffer from breathlessness. About a month later, on 10 February 1887, she died at home from heart failure. Doctors afterwards suspected that Wood’s spinal disorder had started to interfere with her heart function. On 16 February 1887, Mrs. Henry Wood

¹⁸ qtd. in Andrew Rudd, “Wood, Henry, Mrs., 1814-1887” (Literature Online biography, 2004).
was buried, together with her husband, in Highgate Cemetery in north London, where an impressive Romanesque tomb decorates their final resting place.

After the death of his mother, Charles William Wood took over *The Argosy* magazine and became the manager of his mother’s works and copyrights. Under his supervision several more of Wood’s stories and novels were published posthumously. In 1894, Charles William Wood also published the only biography ever written about his mother: *Memorials of Mrs. Henry Wood*. Andrew Maunder remarks that this biography is “most striking for the way in which [it] downplay[s] Wood’s role as a professional author in favour of her role as wife, mother and household manager.”

For example, in his memorial Charles Wood writes: “It has been said of many literary people that they are not domesticated. It is not so with Mrs. Henry Wood. [...] The happiness of those about her was ever her first thought and consideration. Her house was carefully ruled, and order and system reigned.” Charles Wood’s domesticated image of Mrs. Henry Wood as an author is confirmed by the following observation made by one of Wood’s contemporaries:

She was a very nice woman, but hopelessly prosaic. Calling upon her one day when she was alone I hoped that perhaps she would reveal some hidden depth yet unseen. But alas! The topics she clung to and thoroughly explored were her servants’ shortcomings, and a full account of the cold she had caught.

Nevertheless, both Andrew Maunder and Jennifer Phegley observe that Wood “embodied an ambiguous, shifting persona throughout her life.” On the one hand, she was this exemplary wife and mother who shunned publicity; but, on the other hand, she was also a highly professional female author who earned her own income. Phegley interprets this ambiguity as part of a strategy carefully devised by Wood in order to gain access to the literary profession. She states:

> Since professionals necessarily commodified themselves, professionalism was hardly available to a “proper” woman. Thus, [...] Ellen Price Wood broke into publishing by cultivating an image of herself as an amateur, [...] [and by] emphasizing her roles as a proper wife and mother, and insisting that her works

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21 Maunder, “Ellen Wood was a Writer: Rediscovering Collins’s Rival”: n. pag.
23 Mrs. E. M. Ward, qtd. in Jay: xvi.
24 Maunder, “Ellen Wood was a Writer: Rediscovering Collins’s Rival”: n. pag.
be published under the name of Mrs. Henry Wood, even after the death of her husband.  

Phegley argues that Wood especially openly began to develop a professional image as editor of The Argosy, because “Wood used it to forge a more professional image of herself not only as a novelist but also as a formidable critic who argued that her own work combined the best elements of writers like George Eliot and Wilkie Collins.”

While Wood’s works often received positive reviews and were extremely popular with the general public, Wood had some adversaries as well. As Phegley points out, “in a few reviews she is deemed to be ‘a novelist in the second grade of romantic artists’ whose books might be judged improper ‘for young ladies.’” For the more negative reviewers and intellectuals, the obvious sensational and melodramatic aspects of Wood’s novels and stories generally formed a stumbling block. Nevertheless, according to Phegley, in The Argosy Wood attempted to distance herself from contemporary sensation novelists by means of defining her literary style as the ideal combination of realism and sensationalism. As Phegley explains, realism was considered to be sensationalism’s high cultural opponent since “the term realistic was applied to domestic novels about middle-class families that were considered to have an appropriately moral message, that achieved an acceptable level of verisimilitude, and that focussed [sic] on character development over plot.”

Indeed, aside from the sensational aspects, Wood’s novels are generally characterized by a certain moral weight, a middle-class focus, and a high level of domestic detail. Consequently, twenty-first-century critics such as Phegley, but also Deborah Wynne for instance, prefer to define Wood’s literary style as “domesticated sensationalism.” Wynne even seems to suggest that the sensational elements (such as “gossip, innuendo and mild vulgarity, comic episodes, sentiment, pathetic deathbed scenes, mysterious events, and [the] standard criminal plots”) are added by Wood “[t]o avoid producing novels which

26 Phegley: 183.
27 Phegley: 193.
28 Phegley: 187-188.
29 Phegley: 187.
In her essay “Mrs. Henry Wood” (1897), the nineteenth-century novelist Adeline Sergeant described Wood’s oeuvre in a very similar way, especially valuing it for its domestic, realistic traits:

Mrs. Wood’s stories, although sensational in plot, are purely domestic. They are chiefly concerned with the great middle-class of England, and she describes lower middle-class life with a zest and a conviction and a sincerity which we do not find in many modern writers, who are apt to sneer at the bourgeois habits and modes of thought found in so many English households. [...] It is her fidelity to truth, to the smallest domestic detail, which has charmed and will continue to charm, a large circle of readers, who are inclined perhaps to glory in the name of “Philistine.”

To conclude, Phegley rightly contends that, aside from being an exemplary wife and mother, Wood was also a highly professional author who used her power as editor of The Argosy to “simultaneously domesticate sensationalism and her own image as author, thereby making her one of the most successful writers of her time and, unfortunately, indirectly contributing to her neglect for the next two centuries.”

3. The Sensation Novel

3.1. Defining the Sensation Novel

The sensation novel was a very popular, and also widely disputed, literary genre in Britain during the 1860s and 1870s. The work of authors like Wilkie Collins, Charles Reade, Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Mrs. Henry Wood was termed “sensational” mainly because of its content. The nineteenth-century sensation novel presented a lengthy, (usually) mysterious plot that dealt with violence and crime, especially crimes such as murder, adultery, and bigamy. Consequently, sensation fiction was received as a popular or low literary genre

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31 Wynne, “See What a Big Wide Bed it is!: Mrs Henry Wood and the Philistine Imagination” (Feminist Readings of Victorian Popular Texts: Divergent femininities): 97.
32 Adeline Sergeant, “Mrs. Henry Wood” (The Ellen Wood Website, 2001-2006). This essay originally appeared in the book Women Novelists of Queen Victoria’s Reign which was published in London in 1897 by Hurst & Blackett, but can now also be found on The Ellen Wood Website.
33 Phegley: 194.
34 Most of the information about the sensation novel provided in this section is based on Patrick Brantlinger’s article “What Is ‘Sensational’ about the ‘Sensation Novel’?,” in which Brantlinger has attempted to define the genre structurally.
that, through its “sensational” and mysterious content, was related to earlier popular literary forms such as the eighteenth-century Gothic novel, the Newgate novel (1820s-1840s), and the penny dreadfuls (advent: 1830s). Nevertheless, as Patrick Brantlinger rightly observes, the sensation novel is actually “a genre of fiction that stands midway between [...] popular and high culture forms – a genre, in other words, that [...] is itself a mixture of sometimes contradictory forms, styles, and conventions.”

Indeed, the nineteenth-century domestic novel (a realistic, high culture genre that is generally situated between 1820 and 1860) also influenced the structure of the sensation novel, which typically introduces its sensational elements into a contemporary, mundane, and domestic middle-class or aristocratic setting. Lyn Pykett insightfully describes the significance of this domestic setting when she argues that “[i]n the female sensation novel the family was not simply a refuge from change [...], but also, more emphatically, the site of change[,] [...] of a struggle in which [the] abstract moral categories [of good and evil] were destabilised.”

The particular mixture of suspense and domesticity was also characteristic of another nineteenth-century literary form: the stage melodrama. From this stage genre the sensation novel is said to have borrowed “many of its plot situations, character types and rhetorical devices.” As Pykett observes, Peter Brooks’s definition of the Victorian melodrama singles out those characteristics which sensation fiction also displayed: “The indulgence of strong emotionalism; moral polarization and schematicization; extreme states of being, situations, action; overt villainy, persecution of the good, and final reward of virtue; inflated and extravagant expression; dark plottings, suspense, breathtaking peripety.”

In relation to the similarity between these two genres, Brantlinger observes that “[p]erhaps the overriding feature of both melodrama and the sensation novel is the subordination of character to plot.” Indeed, the sensation novel generally presents rather stereotypical and static characters ruled by circumstances which “[propel] them through the intricate machinations of plots that act like fate.”

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35 Patrick Brantlinger: 3.
36 Lyn Pykett: 76.
37 Pykett: 74.
38 Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (New Haven, 1894: 11-12), qtd. in Pykett: 75.
39 Brantlinger: 12.
40 Brantlinger: 13.
Henry Wood’s *East Lynne* and Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret*, were often adapted for the stage.

In *The ‘Improper’ Feminine*, Lyn Pykett examines the sensation novel entirely from a feminine point of view. She argues that sensation novels were written and read mainly (although not exclusively) by women, and that they also generally feature female transgressive protagonists, or, to use Pykett’s words, “passionate, devious, dangerous and not infrequently deranged heroines.”  

One of the sensation novel’s conspicuous (and once dreaded) features is its morally ambiguous treatment of the transgressive heroine, who is often simultaneously condemned and defended by the narrator. In his discussion of the sensation novel, Brantlinger also recognizes “the morally ambivalent role of the narrator” as a distinctive feature of the genre. Nevertheless, he attributes the narrator’s ambivalence not to his or her treatment of the heroine, but to his or her treatment of the mysterious plot. According to Brantlinger, sensation novels generally present a third-person omniscient narrator who, although presumed all-knowing, withholds information with regard to the novel’s mystery, leaving one of the characters to function as some sort of detective who gradually unravels the mysterious plot for himself and the reader. Thus, Brantlinger contends that “[i]f the content of the sensation novel represented a challenge to bourgeois morality, one way that challenge shows up structurally is in the undermining of the narrator’s credibility.”

### 3.2. The Historical Context of the Sensation Novel

Several critics, such as Patrick Brantlinger, Lyn Pykett, and Ann Cvetkovich, have alluded to the importance of examining the sensation novel within its specific historical context. These critics have attempted to point out that even though sensation fiction caused quite

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41 Pykett: 47.
42 Brantlinger: 15-16.
43 Brantlinger: 15-16.
44 Brantlinger: 15.
45 In “What Is ‘Sensational’ about the ‘Sensation Novel’?,” Patrick Brantlinger (2) alludes to both the cultural and historical context of sensation fiction when defining the genre from a “historical [perspective], involving the situating of certain novels and novelists in their 1860s context of Gothic and domestic realism in fiction, the powerful influence of Dickens, stage melodrama, ‘sensational’ journalism, and bigamy trials and divorce law reform.” Ann Cvetkovich (15) even claims that the sensation novel has been studied mainly from a historical (and cultural) perspective: “As defined by the Victorian critics, the term ‘sensation novel’ refers more to the genre’s status as mass culture than to its particular narrative style or content. Thus, histories of the sensation novel that assume it to be a distinct subgenre and attempt to explain or define it in terms of its plot are limited in scope.” In *The ‘Improper’ Feminine*, Lyn Pykett devotes two whole chapters (“Surveillance and control: women, the family and the law” and “Spectating the Social Evil: fallen and other women”) to the particularly feminine historical context of the sensation novel, more specifically to the debate about women’s legal status (especially in relation to divorce laws) and the debate about prostitution.
the cultural and moral upheaval during the nineteenth century, its condemnable characteristics and topics, and to a certain extent also its popularity, were in fact related to much-discussed contemporary issues.

First of all, it is important to consider the sensation novel as a product of the nineteenth century’s growing literary market and consumer culture. As Cvetkovich points out, during the nineteenth century literary critics became increasingly aware of the fact that the novel was being introduced into the commercial spirit of the age, and this awareness ultimately led to “the splitting of the novel into a high-culture form and a series of popular or mass-produced subgenres.”\(^{46}\) The sensation novel was one of those popular and commercial (sub)genres which, especially through its typically serialized medium, achieved high sales and a wide public by means of mass production and cheap publication. As the nineteenth-century critic H.L. Mansel’s comment indicates, the extremely popular sensation novel was basically a commodity, part of the nineteenth-century vogue for thrilling, easy, and rapidly consumable forms of entertainment:

> No divine influence can be imagined as presiding over the birth of his [the sensation novelist’s] work, beyond the market-law of demand and supply; no more immortality is dreamed of for it than for the fashions of the current season. A commercial atmosphere floats around works of this class, redolent of the manufactory and the shop. The public wants novels, and novels must be made – so many yards of printed stuff, sensation-pattern, to be ready by the beginning of the season.\(^{47}\)

This comment also indicates that for nineteenth-century critics the sensation novel’s huge popularity and its fast production and consumption was a cause for concern about the genre, as those critics feared for its corrupting effects on the quality of literary publications in general.

Secondly, it is important to consider the sensation novel’s link with sensational journalism since it exposes the (otherwise conventional) Victorians’ preoccupation, or even fascination, with crime and transgression. Andrew Maunder and Grace Moore argue that during the second half of the nineteenth-century a mutual influence was established between these two popular strands of writing which both satisfied the age’s craving for

\(^{46}\) Ann Cvetkovich: 15.
\(^{47}\) H.L. Mansel, “Sensation Novels” (Quarterly Review 133, April 1863: 483), qtd. in Cvetkovich: 18.
sensation. Sensation novelists did not only borrow from newspaper crime reports for the construction of their mysterious plots, but journalists also started to employ the sensation novel’s techniques and rhetoric “to increase the circulation of daily newspapers.” Lyn Pykett argues that, like the sensation novel, sensational journalism was particularly interested in crime and transgression within the domestic sphere as it presented “[a] vogue for lurid reporting of divorce cases following the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act, and of trials concerning domestic murder and domestic crime in general.” Consequently, Pykett concludes that both sensational journalism and the sensation novel “were part of a mid-century explosion of discourse on woman” that was brought about by contemporary societal issues such as the debate about women’s limited legal rights within marriage (which was related to the negotiation of divorce laws) and the debate about the “social evil” of prostitution.

3.3. The Reception of the Sensation Novel

Even though sensation fiction actually seems to have catered to the tastes of the general public, within higher, critical circles the genre’s respectability was greatly questioned and disputed. A first cause for concern was the sensation novel’s content; more specifically, its immoral topics, immoral characters (especially transgressive heroines), and morally ambiguous narrators. Of course, many Victorian critics considered the sensation novel’s mysterious and criminally tinged topics to be inappropriate; but, they especially condemned the genre for its contemporaneity and moral ambiguity. They feared that, through the introduction of inappropriate topics and transgressive heroines into a contemporary domestic setting, the sensation novel formed a very real threat to the Victorian ideal of the home:

It is on our domestic hearths that we are taught to look for the incredible. A mystery sleeps in our cradles; fearful errors lurk in our nuptial couches; fiends sit down with us at table; our innocent-looking garden walks hold the secret of

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50 Pykett: 54.
51 Pykett: 54. In the two subsequent chapters “Surveillance and control: women, the family and the law” and “Spectating the Social Evil: fallen and other women” Pykett elaborately explains and discusses the nineteenth-century debates about women’s legal status and prostitution.
treacherous murders; and our servants take a year from us for the sake of having us at their mercy.52

The novelty lay in the heroine being, not a picturesque Italian of the fourteenth century, but an English gentlewoman of the current year, familiar with the use of the railway and the telegraph. The intense probability of the story is constantly reiterated. Modern England – the England of to-day’s newspaper – crops up at every step.53

In other words, nineteenth-century critics especially feared the unfavourable effect of sensation fiction on its female readers, since women were considered to be the guardians of domestic bliss. This unfavourable effect was dreaded not only because of the sensation novel’s contemporary and domestic setting, but also because sensation fiction was believed to exploit women’s sympathetic nature through its use of a morally ambiguous narrator who urges the readers to sympathize with the plight of the transgressive heroine.

Ann Cvetkovich argues that many nineteenth-century critics seemed even more concerned about the affect (the emotional state or intense feelings) that sensation novels produced than about the actual content of those novels.54 She, for instance, mentions the Archbishop of York’s objection to sensation novels: “Sensational stories were tales aimed at this effect simply – of exciting in the mind some deep feeling of overwrought interest by the means of some terrible passion or crime.”55 Cvetkovich also refers to Margaret Oliphant’s discussion of sensation fiction to point out that the sensation novel was especially condemned for the sexual affect it produced by “[representing] women as sexual beings.”56

What is held up to us as the story of the feminine soul as it really exists underneath its conventional coverings, is a very fleshly and unlovely record. Women driven wild with love [...] in fits of sensual passion [...] who give and receive burning kisses and frantic embraces. [...] She waits now for flesh and

52 Alfred Austin, “Our Novels: The Sensational School” (Temple Bar 29, 1870: 424), qtd. in Kate Flint: 276.
54 Cvetkovich: 19-20.
56 Cvetkovich: 22.
muscles, for strong arms that seize her, and warm breath that thrills her through, and a host of other physical attractions.  

Furthermore, Cvetkovich states that “the term ‘sensation’ was used to describe the content of the novels, the affects they produced, and the sales they achieved.” Indeed, as I have already pointed out (in section 3.2.), the commodification (the mass production and mass consumption) of sensation fiction also worried nineteenth-century literary critics because it seemed to stimulate the production of works of diminished literary value. This remark was made especially with regard to the sensation novel because the genre entailed the introduction of lower-class values and interests into bourgeois, middle-class circles. Consequently, as Cvetkovich observes, “[f]ear that sensation novels were destroying the market for novels of greater aesthetic merit pervade[d] the reviews [of the period]:”

Sensationalism must be left to be dealt with by time, and the improvement of the public taste. But it is worthwhile stopping to note, amidst all the boasted improvement of the nineteenth century, that whilst Miss Braddon’s and Mr. Wilkie Collins’ productions sell by thousands of copies, “Romola” with difficulty reaches a second edition.

Still, all of these negative comments did not prevent the sensation novel and novelist from becoming hugely successful during the second half of the nineteenth century; in fact, the popularity of novels like East Lynne and Lady Audley’s Secret was helped along by the occasional good review. In her discussion of sensation fiction, Kate Flint refers to those who defended the work of the sensation novelists, especially valuing it for its psychological realism, its life lessons, and its escapist and diverting value.

3.4. Rediscovering the Sensation Novel

Since the late twentieth century, popular or low literary genres such as the sensation novel have gained renewed critical interest. Given the fact that the nineteenth-century sensation novel and its contemporary criticism both hugely focused on the female and the feminine experience within the domestic sphere, it is not surprising that many present-day discussions of the genre also focus on femininity.

57 Margaret Oliphant, “Novels” (Blackwood’s 102, September 1867: 259), qtd. in Cvetkovich: 22.
58 Cvetkovich: 21.
59 Cvetkovich: 17.
61 Flint: 278-281.
Feminist analyses have played an important role in reassessing romance fiction, including sensation fiction, by approaching it as a subversive rather than an orthodox and conservative type of fiction. In *A Literature of Their Own*, for instance, Elaine Showalter was one of the first to offer a subversive feminist analysis of the sensation genre. According to Showalter, “[women sensation novelists] made a powerful appeal to the female audience by subverting the traditions of feminine fiction to suit their own imaginative impulses, by expressing a wide range of suppressed female emotions, and by tapping and satisfying fantasies of protest and escape.” In other words, in *A Literature of Their Own*, Showalter indicates how the women’s sensation novel articulated women’s domestic unease and frustrations by presenting as their secrets “women’s [covert] dislike of their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers.” Nevertheless, Showalter still concludes that women sensationalists “deeply internalized their feminine conflicts” rather than fully exploring their subversive inclinations because they were still constrained by social conventions.

Through the structure of the three-decker, they repeatedly acted out their inability to confront their own feelings and to accept the force of their own needs. Typically, the first volume of a woman’s sensation novel is a gripping and sardonic analysis of a woman in conflict with male authority. By the second volume guilt has set in. In the third volume we see the heroine punished, repentant, and drained of all energy. *The fear of being morbid, unnatural, and unfeminine* kept women writers from working out the implications of their plots.” (my italics)

Lyn Pykett argues that the ambiguity and inconsistency, perceived in both sensation fiction and sensation criticism (such as Showalter’s), is, in fact, an inherent feature of the Victorian ideologies and the Victorian culture:

We need to see it [sensation fiction] not simply as either the transgressive or subversive field of the improper feminine, or the contained, conservative domain of the proper feminine. Instead we should explore the sensation novel as a site in which contradictions, anxieties and opposing ideologies of

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62 Elaine Showalter: 159.
63 Showalter: 158.
64 Showalter: 180.
65 Showalter: 180.
Victorian culture converge and are put into play, and as a medium which registered and negotiated (or failed to negotiate) a wide range of profound cultural anxieties about gender stereotypes, sexuality, class, the family and marriage.66

As I mentioned above (in section 3.3.), a common concern with regard to sensation fiction was that it exerted a possibly negative influence, especially on its female readers. This accusation has also been addressed in several twentieth-century analyses of the sensation genre. Pykett, for example, has countered the popular nineteenth-century belief that sensation novels uniformly aimed for a corruptive identification of the female reader with the transgressive heroine:

[A]lthough she is of central importance in the sensation novel, the heroine is not necessarily or uniformly the central point of, and for, the reader’s identification. Indeed, both Braddon and Wood employ a complex manipulation of point of view, and offer their readers a variety of perspectives and positions within the text which permit a dispersal of narrative identifications: the female reader may, at various points, identify with or share the perspective of the heroine, other female characters, or various of the male characters.67

Similarly, Kate Flint attempts to demonstrate that sensation novels prompted an active, rather than passive, reading experience because the readers were expected to actively take part in the novels’ processes of construing meaning:

[W]hat these novels share is a posing of moral questions, rather than a dictating of the answers. Whilst the manipulation of a reader’s desire, through the suspended outcome, the concealment of clues, the frustration of a heroine’s wishes is a continual part of the fictions, so, too, as we have seen, are both references to literature, and addresses to a reader’s presumed knowledge of life. The reader is habitually acknowledged as possessing a wider, more subtle interpretative system than that granted to the heroine. The ability to read

66 Pykett: 50-51.
67 Pykett: 80-81.
literature carefully is equated (as in so many advice manuals) with the ability to read life.⁶⁸

In other words, Flint argues that, through the devices of intertextuality and contemporaneity, sensation novelists encouraged their (female) readers to rise above the morally ambiguous messages, heroines, and narrators of sensation fiction, and to become autonomous interpreters of the novels’ moral messages.

4. Nineteenth-Century Advice Manuals and Etiquette Books

4.1. The History of Conduct Literature⁶⁹

As Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse have stated, “an unbroken tradition of [...] instruction books for women extends from the Middle Ages to the present day.”⁷⁰ Naturally, through the ages, such instructional literature presented itself in different forms and went through several substantial changes, of which the most important one occurred at the outset of the eighteenth century.

Nancy Armstrong, Leonard Tennenhouse, and Jacques Carré all situate the rise of actual conduct literature at the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century. According to the same scholars, another form of instructional literature was produced before the eighteenth century, mainly during the Renaissance. This earlier form of instructional literature has been termed “courtesy literature,” and was primarily designed for an aristocratic readership. Carré indicates that many of the earliest courtesy books published in England were “translations or adaptations of continental works,” such as Baldassare Castiglione’s famous work *The Book of the Courtier*.⁷¹ Both these continental works and the originally British courtesy books served “to nurture leaders and administrators who should both be and look competent and respectable in the eyes [of] the lower orders.”⁷² It is therefore not surprising that Armstrong found that “[u]ntil sometime around the end of the seventeenth century, the great majority of conduct books were

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⁶⁸ Flint: 293.
⁶⁹ The information provided in this section is based on a combination of three sources: (1) Jacques Carré’s introduction to *The Crisis of Courtesy*, (2) Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse’s introduction to the literature of conduct in *The Ideology of Conduct*, and (3) Nancy Armstrong’s chapter “The rise of the domestic woman” in *The Ideology of Conduct*.
⁷¹ Jacques Carré: 2.
⁷² Carré: 3.
devoted mainly to representing the male of the dominant class” (my emphasis).\textsuperscript{73} Even though they were in the minority, courtesy books for women were produced during the Renaissance as well, and they were designed for the social education of “the wives and daughters of the aristocracy” and of “would-be court ladies.”\textsuperscript{74} Whether intended for male or female readers, Renaissance courtesy books presented the aristocratic woman as the feminine ideal. According to Armstrong and Tennenhouse, the aristocratic woman was considered “more valuable precisely because she was unavailable to men of [...] lower rank.”\textsuperscript{75}

Around the beginning of the eighteenth century, the discourse on conduct underwent a major change. The authors of eighteenth-century conduct books increasingly “portrayed aristocratic women [...] as the very embodiments of corrupted desire,” while the frugal domestic woman of the middle ranks in society became the new desired subject, the new feminine ideal.\textsuperscript{76} The Victorian ideology of the domestic goddess or “the angel in the house” thus had its origins in the eighteenth century, the century during which domesticity for the first time obtained a desirable status. To diffuse and ensure this new feminine ideal, conduct literature increasingly addressed a female reading public; and, as Armstrong and Tennenhouse indicate, “during the eighteenth century the publication of conduct books for women actually surpassed in quantity and variety those directed at men.”\textsuperscript{77} The eighteenth-century conduct book, thus, registered the decline of courtesy, of aristocratic values, as it obtained an increasingly worldly and mundane emphasis. According to Carré, the new conduct literature’s primary aim was “to ensure a smooth running of daily life,” whilst simultaneously “moralizing public life”; and, therefore it addressed and emphasized “[v]irtues distinctly foreign to the aristocratic world such as the proper management of time and the dedication to hard work.”\textsuperscript{78} Consequently, Armstrong and Tennenhouse characterize conduct literature as a body of literature that, for the first time in history, came to represent “the interests of those in the middle ranks of society.”\textsuperscript{79} Armstrong even situates conduct literature at the basis of the formation of the middle class in England. She contends that, through its mundane emphasis and a readership including people from various levels of society, eighteenth-century conduct literature “helped to generate the

\textsuperscript{73} Armstrong: 98.
\textsuperscript{74} Armstrong and Tennenhouse: 4.
\textsuperscript{75} Armstrong and Tennenhouse: 7.
\textsuperscript{76} Armstrong: 97.
\textsuperscript{77} Armstrong and Tennenhouse: 4.
\textsuperscript{78} Carré: 5-6.
\textsuperscript{79} Armstrong and Tennenhouse: 10.
belief that there was such a thing as a middle class with clearly established affiliations before it actually existed.”

Finally, Armstrong and Tennenhouse ascertain, from the nineteenth century onwards, a decrease in the production of conduct books; a decrease occurring “not because the female ideal [conduct books] represented passed out of vogue,” but rather because “by this time the ideal had passed into the domain of common sense.” Armstrong and Tennenhouse suggest that:

By the mid-nineteenth century, [...] middle-class power had become so well entrenched in England and France, and that power so clearly identified with the domestic woman and the private domain she was supposed to oversee, that books describing the character formation and household duties of this woman were no longer necessary.

Nevertheless, the nineteenth century still displayed a great vogue for advice manuals and etiquette books, which (through their combination of practical and moral advice) directly stem from the eighteenth-century conduct-book genre. As the above-mentioned quote by Armstrong and Tennenhouse also suggests, in the nineteenth century, the bourgeoisie had basically substituted the aristocracy as the most important social group; and, this power of the middle-class had partly been made possible through the separation of the male (economic) and female (domestic) spheres. Consequently, one might argue that conduct literature (in the form of advice manuals and etiquette books) remained an important genre in the nineteenth-century because it was meant to function as a social device for the maintenance of those separate spheres and the corresponding domestic ideology with the ultimate goal of upholding the power of the middle class within society.

4.2. The Characteristics of (Nineteenth-Century) Conduct Literature

Jacques Carré has indicated that during the nineteenth century the genre of the etiquette book started to flourish and increasingly took up a larger part of the age’s conduct

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80 Armstrong: 103. On one of the preceding pages, Nancy Armstrong (101) cites the historian Harold Perkin in order to demonstrate that “in England, [...] there was no word for bourgeoisie ‘until the nineteenth century,’ because ‘the thing itself did not exist, in the sense of a permanent, self-conscious urban class in opposition to the landed aristocracy,’” but that eighteenth-century conduct books, nonetheless, already “addressed a fairly wide readership with fairly consistent social objectives, [in other words,] a middle class that was not actually there.”

81 Armstrong: 100.

82 Armstrong and Tennenhouse: 15.
Nevertheless, as Emma Liggins correctly observes, hugely successful works such as Sarah Stickney Ellis’s *The Women of England* and Mrs. Isabella Beeton’s *The Book of Household Management* testify to the continuing demand for advice manuals used to educate women on domestic matters.

Etiquette books were generally smaller and shorter works providing rather concise and straightforward rules of (often public) conduct or behaviour, such as: “Two ladies may with perfect propriety each take an arm of one gentleman, but one lady cannot, with equal regard to appearance, take the arms of two gentlemen” (*The Hand-Book of Etiquette* 8). Generally speaking, the authors of etiquette books, thus, limited themselves to enumerating all practical matters and norms related to social events (such as dinner parties, balls, weddings, etc.), social contact (such as letter-writing, conversation, etc.), and public appearance (especially dress). Since etiquette books were primarily concerned with educating and regulating society at large, they were generally designed for both male and female audiences. In spite of them not primarily attempting to regulate the home, the authors of etiquette books still did not refrain from occasionally denoting women’s domestic and moral duties. The (unknown) author of *The Hand-Book of Etiquette*, for instance, allowed himself/herself to dwell from his/her strictly regulatory advice on wedding etiquette to remind his/her readers that true happiness is to be found in domestic life, and that such happiness will be procured “[i]f harmony, method, and economy prevail at home” (59-62).

Still, for my research about the construction of femininities, I will mainly focus on nineteenth-century advice manuals, which were almost exclusively written by and for women, and were clearly concerned with delineating women’s responsibilities and behaviour within the domestic sphere. While works such as Ellis’s *The Women of England* and Beeton’s *The Book of Household Management* were designed for the middle-class wife and mother in general, some advice manuals aimed at a more limited target audience. For example, Mrs. William Parkes’s *Domestic Duties; or, Instructions to Young Married Ladies* was (as the title indicates) designed especially for the newlywed wife, and T. S. Arthur’s *Advice to Young Ladies* was meant specifically for young, adolescent girls who were still to become wives and mothers.

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83 Carré: 7.
84 Emma Liggins: 54.
85 Throughout this dissertation the bibliographic information pertaining to all quotes from the advice manuals will be included in the text.
In the nineteenth century, advice manuals still presented the “hybrid form” that Armstrong ascribed to eighteenth-century handbooks for women, combining information about practical domestic matters, moral and religious duties, and proper conduct.\textsuperscript{86} Obviously, the aim of the advice manual was to provide the middle-class wife with a domestic education as complete as possible. That such an education was deemed necessary for middle-class women is clearly noticeable in Ellis’s \textit{The Women of England}. In this conduct book, published in 1839, Ellis complained that “the women of England [were] deteriorating in their moral character” (14) and that they urgently needed to “win back to the homes of England the boasted felicity for which they once were famed” (vii). According to Ellis the deterioration of the domestic character of English women was partly the result of “modern education,” which failed to prepare young women “for faithfully performing the duties which devolve[d] upon them immediately after their leaving school, and throughout the whole of their after lives,” and which, instead, rather encouraged society’s tendency to copy the idle behaviour and habits of the aristocracy (\textit{The Women of England} 53).

The educational purpose of advice literature also shows from some of the typical formal and structural characteristics of the genre. Firstly, advice manuals are written in, what Kate Flint accurately describes as, a “conversational, occasionally sententious, guiding” tone.\textsuperscript{87} The advisory voice of such manuals usually takes up a superior position, either as a more mature or more experienced person advising a generally younger and/or less experienced readership. With regard to this feature, Mrs. Parkes’s manual forms an interesting example because the author chose to present her advice in the form of conversations between a young, inexperienced newlywed (Mrs. L.) and an older, thoroughly experienced housewife (Mrs. B.):

\begin{quote}
MRS. L. – Will you tell me what are the qualifications requisite in a housekeeper?
MRS. B. – Trust-worthiness is an essential quality in a housekeeper; but, if she be not as vigilant as she is honest, she cannot discharge her duty well. As she is the deputy of her mistress, she should endeavour to regard every thing around
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{86} Armstrong: 103-104. As Nancy Armstrong (104-105) also indicates, while darting a glance at the table of contents of an advice manual one immediately perceives this typical mix of topics. By way of illustration, the appendices contain some tables of contents of some nineteenth-century advice manuals.

\textsuperscript{87} Kate Flint: 71.
her with the keenness and interest of a principal, rather than with the indifference of a servant. (126)

Secondly, many advice manuals contain a certain number of exemplary anecdotes which serve to strengthen the author’s claims and words of advice. For example, upon discussing the importance of a young lady’s knowledge of domestic and culinary affairs, T.S. Arthur provides his readers with the following anecdote:

A friend of ours, remarkable for his strong good sense, married a very accomplished and fashionable young lady, attracted more by her beauty and accomplishments than any thing else. In this, it must be owned that his strong good sense did not seem very apparent. [...] One day, some few months after his marriage, our friend, on coming home to dinner, saw no appearance of his usual meal, but found his wife in great trouble instead. “What’s the matter?” he asked. “Nancy went off at ten o’clock this morning,” replied the wife, “and the chamber-maid knows no more about cooking a dinner than the man in the moon.” “Couldn’t she have done it under your directions?” inquired the husband, very coolly. “Under my direction? Goodness! I should like to see a dinner cooked under my direction.” [...] replied his wife. (44-45)

A remarkable characteristic of the exemplary anecdotes is that they frequently provide a bad example. Such anecdotes, thus, enabled the authors of advice manuals to underline the usefulness of their purpose to educate women about the domestic ideology; but, simultaneously, they also acknowledged that many people in society failed to live up to such a demanding ideology.

Interestingly, the occasionally defensive, or at least justifying, tone of advice manuals also reflects the fact that some women must have considered the Victorian domestic ideology to be too demanding and limiting. Nearly all advice manuals seem to engage in justifying and strengthening woman’s confinement to the home by presenting her domestic duties as equally important to the well-being of society as any other male or public vocation. In her first chapter, Mrs. Parkes, for instance, informs her readers that “every woman by marriage is placed at the head of a family, and in some degree or other acquires importance in society” (12) (my emphasis). Ellis, in her typically grave and moralising tone, also reminds her female readers of their social importance: “You have deep responsibilities; you have urgent claims; a nation’s moral wealth is in your keeping”
T.S. Arthur even explicitly compares women’s domestic duties to men’s public professions when he claims that “a woman should govern in her household, as fully as a man governs in his office, counting-room, manufactory, or work-shop” (47). In short, the authors of advice manuals repeatedly stressed that the devoted housewife (or rather “household manager”) who dutifully discharged all her tasks not only promoted the happiness and welfare of her own family, but also added to the welfare of the entire society.

4.3. Defining the Feminine Ideal

In portraying the beau-idéal of a married woman, I should describe one not absorbed in any single part, but attentive to the whole of life’s obligations; one who neglects nothing, – who regulates and superintends her household concerns; attends to, watches over and guides her children, and yet is ever ready to consider, in moderation, the demands upon her time, which the numerous and various claims of society may make. Such appears to me to be a right sketch of the character of the married woman. (Parkes 16)

This quote from Mrs. Parkes’s Domestic Duties indicates that the Victorian feminine ideal was quite demanding because women were expected to juggle all kinds of responsibilities in order to make themselves desirable. According to Mrs. Parkes the ideal woman’s essential feature was “propriety,” which she considered to be “the union of every desirable quality in woman” (333) and the feature that enabled a woman to become the epitome of moderation, someone who could properly balance out every single one of her duties. Several critics have observed, however, that the Victorian feminine/domestic ideology consisted of many contradictory demands which both created and complicated the delicate balancing act women were expected to engage in.89

88 T. S. Arthur, not insignificantly one of the few male authors of advice literature for women, also devotes an entire chapter to the defence of the domestic ideology against “a class of intellectual ladies, who boldly contend for the absolute equality of the sexes” (107).

89 In the first chapter of The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal, Deborah Gorham (7) addresses some of “the contradictions that existed at the centre of the idealised vision of true womanhood” posing questions such as: “How convincing could an idealisation be that combined both childlike simplicity with the complex duties of wifehood and motherhood?” and “The ideal of feminine purity is implicitly asexual: how, then, could it be reconciled with the active sexuality that would inevitably be included in the duties of wife and mother?” Upon discussing nineteenth-century advice on household management, Emma Liggins (59) has observed that “[t]he responsibilities of the mistress of the house, which could become ‘very substantial’ as wives became ‘indispensable’ in running men’s homes, ran from managing servants and ordering meat to
One of the most important tasks of the Victorian middle-class woman was the proper management of her household because, as Deborah Gorham indicates, “[t]hrough the creation of an appropriate domestic environment […] women at all levels of the middle class were responsible for assuring that the private sphere acted as an effective indicator of [their family’s] status in the public sphere.” Consequently, the ideal woman was, as Nancy Armstrong also observes, neither idle nor labouring. She was expected to be sufficiently involved in her own household and to possess enough knowledge of domestic affairs, but she was not to “toil through the duties [her] servants ought to perform” if “[her] station and affluence enable[d] [her] to command the service of others” (Parkes 15). Advice manuals repeatedly stressed that a woman, as the manager of a household, should be active and frugal, but not overly industrious nor parsimonious.

To fulfil her mainly supervisory task as “household manager” a woman had to be able “to lead, to regulate, and to command” (Parkes 10); thus, she had to possess such qualities as regularity, fortitude, composure, and balance. Paradoxically, women were, at the same time, also expected to be endowed with those inherently female qualities such as sensitivity, sympathy, modesty, and benevolence. In The Women of England, Sarah Stickney Ellis, for instance, continually refers to women’s “disinterested kindness,” an apparently inherent kindness that sprung from women’s generous hearts and that enabled them to confer happiness to those around them (18). Gorham even contends that the ideal woman had to possess some sort of “majestic childishness,” basically a certain level of ignorance and dependence, which was “a sign of the extent to which she was removed from the vicissitudes of the public sphere.”

Another very important task of the Victorian middle-class woman was the upbringing of her children. As mothers, women were again presumed to take up a certain amount of responsibility and strength because “[a mother] is the person in whose hands [her children’s] mental and spiritual welfare is placed” (Ellis, The Mothers of England 67).

meeting the sexual and emotional needs of husbands, placing women under tremendous pressure in their fulfilment of the role of household manager.” In her essay “Demonic mothers: Ideologies of bourgeois motherhood in the mid-Victorian era,” Sally Shuttleworth (31) addresses several of the “irreconcilable ideological contradictions” related to the Victorian understanding of motherhood. Finally, in The ‘Improper’ Feminine, Lyn Pykett (16) also acknowledges that “[w]oman was […] inscribed in a contradictory discourse, which was organised around the concept of the ‘proper’ or respectable feminine,” and the aim of her book is to show how the women’s sensation novel of the 1860s and the new woman writing of the 1890s dealt with the contradictions of the nineteenth-century’s domestic ideology.

90 Deborah Gorham: 8.
91 Armstrong: 114.
Lyn Pykett, thus, correctly observes that, in her role of mother, “woman was charged with the responsibility of acting as the [...] guardian of the spiritual and moral purity of the [entire] race.” 93 Consequently, motherhood was another duty which demanded balance and moderation. A mother was not supposed to be too controlling nor too easy-going. The ideal mother according to Ellis, is the one who applies “sound principle, and common sense, with [...] a due proportion of warmheartedness” (*The Mothers of England* 106).

In addition to perfecting their children’s upbringing, women also had to be concerned with achieving a proper balance between their duties as mothers, on the one hand, and their duties as wives, on the other hand. Sally Shuttleworth indicates that “[Victorian] theorists were exercised by the problem of whether a woman’s first concern should lie with the comfort of her husband or the upbringing of her children.” 94 As Shuttleworth also observes, in *The Mothers of England*, Ellis seems to “[pay] lip service to the primary importance of the male” 95 (even though huge moral and social importance was attributed to children’s upbringing): “There is such a thing as forgetting, that however interesting children may be, they ought never to occupy the attention of their mother, to the exclusion of their father, or his affairs” (252). Mrs. Parkes, somewhat differently, also alludes to the centrality of the husband within the domestic ideology:

> Of all [a wife’s] social, domestic, and personal obligations, her husband is the centre: when they are properly discharged, his welfare and happiness are certainly promoted; and his esteem, affection, and confidence established on a permanent basis. In neglecting them, he is neglected, his respectability diminished, and his domestic peace and comfort destroyed. (14)

All the foregoing, often contradictory, demands related to womanhood implied that women had to be extremely self-regulatory if they wanted to abide by the prevalent feminine ideal. Most advice manuals stress that all the separate obligations of women ultimately related to and contributed to the one principal (extremely virtuous) duty of their sex: “the great end of promoting the happiness of those around them” (*Ellis, The Women of England* 23). The fact that this great duty required from women extreme self-regulation, the restraint of virtually all their personal inclinations and emotions, is explicitly stated in Ellis’s *The Women of England*:

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93 Lyn Pykett: 12.
94 Sally Shuttleworth: 32-33.
95 Shuttleworth: 33.
[T]o be *individually*, what she is praised for being *in general*, it is necessary for [woman] to lay aside all her natural caprice, her love of self-indulgence, her vanity, her indolence – in short, her very *self* – and assuming a new nature, which nothing less than watchfulness and prayer can enable her constantly to maintain, to spend her mental and moral capabilities in devising means for promoting the happiness of others, while her own derives a remote and secondary existence from theirs. (40)

I have endeavoured in this sub-chapter to sketch the demanding and contradictory nature of the feminine ideal as it was comprised in nineteenth-century conduct literature, because (as will be demonstrated in the second part of this dissertation) in her novel *East Lynne*, Mrs. Henry Wood (either consciously or unconsciously) uncovered some of the contradictory and highly self-regulatory demands of the Victorian feminine/domestic ideology.  

96 As the second part of this dissertation will show, many feminist critics, such as Elaine Showalter, Lyn Pykett, Emma Liggins, Ann Cvetkovich, Audrey Jaffe, E. Ann Kaplan, Sally Shuttleworth, and Gail Walker, have also detected and discussed this fact.
II. ANALYSIS: CONSTRUCTING FEMININITIES

One might argue that nineteenth-century advice literature tended to obscure female diversity as a result of its aim to prescribe a rather rigid and narrow feminine ideal. Mrs. Henry Wood’s novel *East Lynne* (1860-1861)\(^{97}\), on the other hand, contains a multitude of very diverse female characters, and consequently also allows for diverse versions of femininity to be considered. As Lyn Pykett has convincingly claimed:

*East Lynne* is not only a feminine narrative, it is also a narrative of femininity. Most of the central characters are women, and each of them is represented at some point as a feminine stereotype to be compared and contrasted with other such stereotypes.\(^ {98}\)

In this second part of my dissertation, I intend to investigate the novel’s treatment of femininity and the feminine ideal by means of contrasting Wood’s depiction of her different female characters (or “feminine stereotypes”) to the feminine ideal as it was portrayed in the nineteenth century’s advice literature.

5. Domesticity

5.1. Idealizing Middle-Class Domesticity

Many critics have observed that Mrs. Henry Wood’s *East Lynne* is an extremely class-conscious novel.\(^ {99}\) Indeed, through all the different implications of its elaborate plot, *East Lynne* delivers the story of the material and, especially, moral victory of the bourgeoisie over the aristocracy. As I pointed out in the previous chapter, advice literature, with its main focus on constructing and representing the (non-aristocratic) feminine ideal, helped to

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\(^{97}\) The appendices contain a plot summary of Mrs. Henry Wood’s *East Lynne*. This plot summary might facilitate the reading of the second part of this dissertation (especially for those readers who are unfamiliar with the novel).

\(^{98}\) Lyn Pykett: 119.

\(^{99}\) Lyn Pykett (117) argues that “Wood’s most successful novel, *East Lynne* […] reproduces the domestic melodrama’s preoccupation with the transfer of power from the aristocracy to the bourgeoisie.” Similarly, in *The Sensation Novel and the Victorian Family Magazine*, Deborah Wynne (66) observes that in *East Lynne* “[t]he middle-class ideal is represented […] through the figures of Archibald Carlyle and Barbara Hare, who quietly ascend the social ladder without appearing ambitious for power.” In “‘Stepchildren of Nature’: *East Lynne* and the Spectre of Female Degeneracy, 1860-1861,” Andrew Maunder (64) observes (also with regard to Wood’s novel *East Lynne*) that “[t]he aristocracy is for Wood a species in decline, which can only save itself by a Darwinian process of adaptation to the new economic and moral climate, namely through a process of bourgeoisification.”
underpin the social rise and the power of the middle class. Interestingly, in *East Lynne* class tensions are also embedded in a feminine discourse since the conflicting interests and values of the upper and middle classes are reflected, to a large extent, through the characterizations and depictions of the novel’s female characters.

As Lyn Pykett has observed, in the course of the story, the heroine Isabel Vane is contrasted in her various feminine roles (of young lady, wife, and mother) with the other female characters that appear in the novel. Regarding her domestic skills and wifely duties, Isabel is especially compared with her maiden sister-in-law Cornelia and with the family friend Barbara Hare. Throughout the first two parts of the novel, which mainly deal with the marriage of Archibald Carlyle and Lady Isabel Vane, Wood gradually exposes her heroine’s domestic incompetence by placing her alongside the thrifty and active household manager Cornelia Carlyle. As a young woman Cornelia became responsible for the management of her father’s (a country lawyer’s) middle-class household and for the upbringing of her baby half-brother Archibald. Consequently, Cornelia remained single, dedicating her life to the management of her brother’s (now also a country lawyer’s) household and income. Cornelia is clearly portrayed as a woman who very strictly applies the type of domestic advice that was included in advice manuals. She almost religiously abides by such domestic values as industriousness, regularity, and frugality.

As Mrs. Beeton’s *The Book of Household Management* indicates, frugality and economy were indeed considered “home virtues, without which no household [could] prosper” (2). Nevertheless, Beeton also warns that “[e]conomy and frugality must never [...] be allowed to degenerate into parsimony and meanness” (2). Cornelia, who is described as having “[a] love for money [that] amounted almost to a passion” (*EL* 46), however, appears to be not simply frugal but rather a tad mean. Consequently, she is very much concerned about her brother’s marriage to a member of the aristocracy, a class which was stereotypically linked to vices such as vanity, idleness, and dissipation. Upon learning about her brother’s marriage to Lady Isabel, Cornelia quickly decides to accompany her brother and his young wife to their estate, East Lynne, convincing her brother that:

> There will be enough expense, without our keeping on two houses: and most people, in your place, would jump at the prospect of my living here. Your wife

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100 Pykett: 119.
101 Throughout this dissertation all bibliographic references to Ellen Wood’s *East Lynne* are included in the text.
will be mistress: I do not intend to take her honours from her; but I shall save her a world of trouble in management, and be as useful to her as a housekeeper. She will be glad of that, inexperienced as she is: I dare say she never gave a domestic order in her life. (*EL* 144)

In *Domestic Duties; or, Instructions to Young Married Ladies*, Mrs. Parkes states that “[i]t happens not unfrequently, that a husband [...] has had his domestic affairs managed by a maiden sister; and circumstances may exist to render her continuance in the family requisite” (40). Thereupon, Mrs. Parkes advises her young female readers to nevertheless immediately assume the entire management of the household, whilst, at first, gently yielding to “the guidance of its former ruler” (40). Such advice, however, seems to have been lost upon the formerly aristocratic Lady Isabel who, realizing that she knows nothing about housekeeping, allows herself to become “little more than an automaton” (*EL* 167) while her sister-in-law boldly takes over the household.

Andrew Maunder has correctly observed that “Isabel’s failings as a middle-class wife stem from her immersion in a completely different mode of behaviour, having been raised as an aristocrat” for whom the acquisition of domestic knowledge was deemed unnecessary.102 The (biased) belief that aristocratic ladies were generally idle and inexperienced also surfaced in the advice literature of the period. In *The Women of England*, for instance, Sarah Stickney Ellis claims that “few women whose hands have been idle all their lives, can feel themselves compelled to do the necessary labour of a household, without a feeling of indescribable hardship” (22). In *East Lynne*, such an opinion seems to be confirmed by the fact that the heroine, Isabel, fails to exchange her life of leisure and pleasure for “a life of active usefulness” (Arthur 16). Pressured by a sense of incompetence and by Cornelia’s sneering remarks about her (presumed) extravagance, Isabel soon becomes “listless and dispirited” (*EL* 169):

‘I wish evening was come!’
‘Why do you wish that?’
‘Because Archibald would be at home.’
Miss Carlyle gave an unsatisfactory grunt. ‘You seem tired, Lady Isabel.’
‘I am very tired.’

‘I don’t wonder at it. I should be tired to death if I sat doing nothing all day. Indeed, I think I should soon drop into my grave.’
‘There’s nothing to do,’ returned Lady Isabel.
‘There’s always something to do when people like to look for it.’ (EL 169)\textsuperscript{103}

Apart from illustrating the stark contrast between Isabel and Cornelia, this passage also indicates how, as a wife, Isabel has become one of those young ladies whose behaviour many advice manuals deplored: a young lady “distinguished by a morbid listlessness of mind and body” who displays “a constant pining for excitement” (Ellis, \textit{The Women of England} 15). Indeed, as several critics have noticed, during her marriage, Isabel is characterized as a rather childlike wife who is entirely dependent upon her husband for any form of excitement or diversion.\textsuperscript{104} Finally, as Maunder also observes, the frivolous, dependent, and inactive Isabel becomes entirely immersed in her own emotions, rendering herself susceptible to gossip, jealousy, and deceit; in short, to all the forces which conjointly bring about her fall from grace.\textsuperscript{105}

In the third part of the novel, Isabel returns to East Lynne as the governess of her own children, and both she and the reader become witnesses of the marital bliss of Mr. Carlyle and his new wife Barbara Hare. As opposed to Isabel (as Carlyle’s wife in the first half of the novel), Barbara is depicted as a healthy, contented, and competent middle-class wife. Cornelia is no longer living at East Lynne, and Barbara clearly seems to have no need for her advice or assistance. Upon Isabel’s arrival as the governess Madame Vine, East Lynne is depicted as a home governed by prosperity and peace: “The hall doors of East Lynne were thrown open, and a flood of golden light streamed out upon the steps” (EL 400).

As mentioned above, Isabel’s failure as a middle-class wife has been mostly considered the consequence of her aristocratic upbringing. Both her major flaws, her domestic incompetence and her excessive and instable emotionality, are perceived as

\textsuperscript{103} In \textit{East Lynne} the character of Cornelia Carlyle is referred to by means of several surnames: Cornelia (Carlyle), Miss Cornelia, Miss Carlyle, or Miss Corny.

\textsuperscript{104} According to Lyn Pykett (119) the first role which Isabel assumes in the novel is that of “the aristocratic, childish, dependent wife.” Ann Cvetkovich (108) writes that “Isabel is constantly figured as the child who doesn’t want to grow up” because “she spends her time waiting for Mr. Carlyle to come home” rather than “adopting the duties of household manager that Miss Corny attends to.” Similarly, E. Ann Kaplan (79) observes that “[w]hen marrying, Isabel regresses to dependency and childishness, wanting only to be by Carlyle.”

\textsuperscript{105} Maunder, “‘Stepchildren of Nature’: \textit{East Lynne} and the Spectre of Female Degeneracy, 1860-1861” (\textit{Victorian Crime, Madness and Sensation}): 64.
related to the fact that Isabel is “[a] gentle-spirited, high-born lady” (EL 280) who has been raised “secluded from the great world” (EL 13). When Isabel, in chapter twelve, is considering Mr. Carlyle’s marriage proposal, the narrator already seems to predict some difficulty related to Isabel’s descent:

Isabel was little more than a child, and as a child she reasoned, looking neither far nor deep: the shallow, palpable aspect of affairs alone presenting itself to her view. [...] She forgot that her position at East Lynne as Mr Carlyle’s wife, would not be what it had been as Lord Mount Severn’s daughter; she forgot that she would be tied to a quiet home, shut out from the great world, from the pomps and vanities to which she was born. (EL 120-121).

Remarkably, Wood presents Mr. Carlyle’s engagement to Barbara Hare a lot more positively, allowing Mr. Dill (Mr. Carlyle’s clerk) to proclaim: “She [Barbara] [will] be a good and loving wife to him; I know she will; it is in her nature: she won’t serve him as – as – that other poor unfortunate did” (EL 381) (my emphasis). This statement conveys the opinion that Barbara, in all probability through her middle-class upbringing, is naturally endowed with the qualities of a good wife. In addition to having profited from a middle-class upbringing, Barbara, as a young adult living with an invalid mother, presumably has also been able to gain the necessary experience in domestic matters. This final fact seems not entirely insignificant, when we take into account T.S. Arthur’s remark that “knowledge of domestic duties] can only be gained by practical experience” (17).

Aside from the difference in social class, there is another significant difference between Isabel and Barbara which might account for the discrepancy between their respective marriages to the ever-courteous Archibald Carlyle. As E. Ann Kaplan observes, Isabel’s marriage to Carlyle is “admittedly one of convenience.”106 Isabel’s main motive for marrying Carlyle is her desire to escape from her tyrannical and malicious aunt, Lady Mount Severn, into whose care she has been released since the death of her father. Therefore, the domestic uneasiness and the childlike dependency upon her husband which Isabel experiences after marriage might indicate that (the still young) Lady Isabel was not ready for the kind of commitment and responsibility a marriage entailed. As opposed to Isabel, Barbara has since long loved Carlyle; and, by the time she marries him, her initially youthful infatuation has clearly turned into, what T.S. Arthur calls, “the strong, deep,

106 E. Ann Kaplan: 79.
intelligent affection of a true woman” (140). In other words, Barbara has reached a level of emotional maturity that, together with her middle-class upbringing, has provided her with a strong sense of the duties of a wife, and which also seems to ensure the successfulness of her marriage.

Deborah Wynne, thus, rightfully contends that Wood ultimately “[promotes] the ‘superior’ qualities of the middle-class Barbara Hare” over the reprobate emotionality of the aristocratic Isabel Vane.107 Wynne also observes that Wood’s fiction is often “extremely critical of the drive on the part of middle-class men to marry aristocratic women.”108 Indeed, in East Lynne, it turns out that Mr. Carlyle actually made a mistake when he overlooked the loving and caring Barbara Hare, and instead elected the aristocratic Lady Isabel as his wife. As I have indicated already, advice literature also obviously posited the middle-class woman as the ideal spouse, contrasting her with the inexperienced and often helpless aristocratic lady. Ellis, nevertheless, admits to the fact that Victorian men preferred, and often desired, women who presented a certain amount of innocence, weakness, and helplessness: “there is a peculiarity in men – I would fain call it benevolence – which inclines them to offer the benefit of their protection to the most helpless and dependent of the female sex” (The Women of England 41). East Lynne’s hero, Mr. Carlyle, is not devoid of this peculiarity. Even though he claims to love Isabel “passionately and sincerely” (EL 139), the original motive behind his proposal is this “benevolence” which Ellis describes: “It [Isabel’s maltreatment at the hands of Lady Mount Severn] aroused all my feelings of indignation: it excited in me an irresistible desire to emancipate her from this cruel life, and take her where she would find affection and – I hope – happiness” (EL 139). Thus, at a certain level, Wood’s novel seems to have served an instructive function both for women and men. As Pykett correctly observes, East Lynne both “warns middle-class men against the growing practice of taking aristocratic wives, and middle-class women against embracing the excessive refinement and susceptibility to feeling of the upper-class woman.”109

5.2. Opposing Middle-Class Domesticity

As I mentioned in chapter three, Elaine Showalter was one of the first critics who analysed the sensation genre as a genre that contained subversive, feminist critiques. In A Literature
of Their Own, Showalter considers the sensation novel as a form of feminine protest. She contends that “[t]he sensationalists made crime and violence domestic, modern, and suburban; but their secrets were not simply solutions to mysteries and crimes; they were the secrets of women’s dislike of their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers.”110 Indeed, in Wood’s East Lynne, the most central and most shocking secret is not the fact that Francis Levison is the real murderer of George Hallijohn, but rather the fact that Lady Isabel inwardly experiences great feelings of dissatisfaction and unease concerning her marriage, which eventually tempt her to abandon her husband and children for the corrupt Levison. According to Showalter, such a secretly subversive content provided the (women) sensationalists and their women readers with a sort of “independence from the tedium and injustice of the feminine role in marriage and the family.”111

Lyn Pykett, working in the wake of Showalter, researches East Lynne as a novel that is “full of scenes of domestic entrapment, which represent female characters observing the events of their household and feeling powerless to influence them.”112 Indeed, the first half of the novel represents several female characters as subjects that are entrapped within their domestic spheres. Firstly, there are (the extremely docile) Mrs. Hare and (the somewhat stubborn) Barbara Hare who form part of “the tyrannical patriarchal family of Justice Hare.”113 Secondly, there is Isabel who, as I have already pointed out above (in 5.1.), clearly feels entrapped within the domestic sphere because she is unable to settle in her role of middle-class wife. Nevertheless, the novel not only points to Isabel’s personal shortcomings as the cause for her sense of entrapment, rather it exposes Cornelia’s dominance in the Carlyle household as a major disturbing factor in the development of Isabel’s marital happiness:

Isabel would have been altogether happy but for Miss Carlyle: that lady still inflicted her presence upon East Lynne, and made the bane of its household. She deferred outwardly to Lady Isabel as the mistress; but the real mistress was herself, Isabel little more than an automaton. Her impulses were checked, her wishes frustrated, her actions tacitly condemned by the imperiously-willed Miss Carlyle: poor Isabel, with her refined manners and her timid and sensitive

110 Elaine Showalter: 158.
111 Showalter: 161.
112 Pykett: 125.
113 Pykett: 123.
temperament, had no chance against the strong-minded woman, and she was in a state of galling subjection in her own house. (*EL* 167)

As Pykett correctly observes, in this “narratorial gloss” the narrator clearly sympathizes with Isabel’s state of “confusion and impotent suffering,” brought about by the dominance and shrewdness of her sister-in-law.114

The struggle for domestic competence between Isabel and Cornelia might be perceived as part of what Pykett calls the novel’s “intra-female rivalry,” which, according to Pykett, is produced by the fact that “women’s [subordinate] power is usually exercised only in relation to children and other women.”115 In other words, Pykett contends that through its implication of this “intra-female rivalry” the novel underlines the fact that only masculinity was infused with real power, while femininity implied a power limited to the home, and that women consequently had to look for other ways to exert influence.116 Indeed, *East Lynne* presents two obvious examples of women who abuse the limited amount of power they are allotted. Both Lady Mount Severn and Cornelia Carlyle use their domestic superiority to subject the still young and sensitive Lady Isabel to their will. Pykett also insightfully observes that Lady Mount Severn and Cornelia Carlyle “both derive their power and authority from their failure to conform to [the sensitive] versions of the feminine,” in other words, from their slightly masculinized nature.117

Ann Cvetkovich also approaches Wood’s *East Lynne* from a feminist angle. She reads Isabel’s excessive emotionality as a consequence of the limitations that the ideology of the separate spheres imposed on women: “Isabel is depicted as a woman who can only respond emotionally to the conditions of her life because she is prevented from overt action.”118 According to Cvetkovich, “Isabel’s powerlessness [essentially] stems from her economic dependence first on her father and then on her husband,” but “[t]he novel […] represents this economic problem as an emotional one, focusing on her inability to express herself, rather than on her inability to support herself.”119 Indeed, in the passage that Cvetkovich cites, the narrator alludes to Isabel’s economic dependence only to stress her restrained emotionality (her fear to express her emotions):

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114 Pykett: 125.
115 Pykett: 125.
116 Pykett: 126.
117 Pykett: 126.
The penniless state in which [Isabel] was left at her father’s death; the want of a home, save that accorded her at Castle Marling, even the hundred pound-note left in her hand by Mr Carlyle, all had imbued her with a deep consciousness of humiliation; and, far from rebelling at or despising the small establishment (comparatively speaking) provided for her by Mr Carlyle, she felt thankful to him for it. But to be told continually that this was more than he could afford, that she was in fact a blight upon his prospects, was enough to turn her heart to bitterness. Oh, that she had had the courage to speak out openly to her husband! that he might, by a single word of earnest love and assurance, have taken the weight from her heart, and rejoiced it with the truth [...]. But Isabel never did: when Miss Corny lapsed into her grumbling mood, she would hear in silence, or gently bend her aching forehead in her hands, never retorting. (EL 168-169)

Central in this passage, according to Cvetkovich, is the narrator’s suggestion that “Isabel need only have the ‘courage to speak out’ in order for her problems to be corrected,” because such a narratorial comment “makes it possible for the [female] reader to imagine that women could alleviate their oppression by articulating their feelings.” Cvetkovich thus argues that the novel’s focus on emotionality or “affect” is central to its feminist politics. She introduces the interesting insight that the novel raises the issue of the patriarchal oppression of women by making it equivalent to the repression of affect. As I have pointed out in chapter four, the repression of women’s personal emotions and inclinations, or female self-regulation, was a female feature that was essentially procured by Victorian society and their (feminine) ideologies.

Emma Liggins, who has investigated nineteenth-century advice literature in relation to Wood’s early fiction, contends that, in many of her early works, Wood deconstructed “the ideal of domestic woman” by means of exploring “women’s feelings of sexual rejection and frustration,” and by emphasizing “the problem of men’s ‘absent presence’ from the home.” This is also the case in East Lynne. As I have indicated already, Isabel, due to her emotional dependence, obviously suffers when her husband is absent from the home. In addition to this, a few years into marriage, Isabel also struggles to understand

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120 Cvetkovich: 102.
121 Cvetkovich: 105.
122 Emma Liggins: 66.
“the even manner, the quiet calmness into which her husband’s once passionate love had subsided” (*EL* 198). Liggins claims that Isabel has become sexually frustrated, depressed by “the decline of [her husband’s] sexual interest in her.” At times Isabel’s listless longing for affection certainly seems sexual: “She looked for the little tender episodes of daily life: she would fain have had him hang over her chair as she sang, and draw her face to his, and feel his kisses on her lips, as when she first came, a wife, to East Lynne” (*EL* 198-199). Nevertheless, I would also attribute Isabel’s failure to comprehend her husband’s stagnated display of affection to her immaturity and dependency. The author’s urge to provide her readers with an advisory comment (that sounds almost like the advice of the author of an advice manual) at exactly this point in the novel arguably reinforces the sense that Isabel’s incoherence stems from immaturity, from a lack of knowledge of real life:

> Young lady, when he, who is soon to be your lord and master, protests to you that he shall always be as ardent a lover as he is now, believe him if you like, but don’t reproach him when the disappointment comes. He does not wilfully deceive you; he only forgets that it is in the constitution of man to change, the very essence of his nature. The time will arrive when his manner must settle down into a calmness, which to you, if you be of an exacting temperament, may look like indifference, or coldness; but you will do well to put up with it, for it will never now be otherwise. (*EL* 198)

This scene also drew Showalter’s attention. She perceives that even though “Wood adopts a moral and prudential tone [especially at the end], [...] she [also] clearly sympathizes with the feelings of the wife who is neither deceived nor mistreated, but sexually frustrated and simply bored to death.”

It is remarkable that many feminist critics situate the possibly subversive undertone of *East Lynne* especially in the first half of the novel, in the part where the trials of Isabel’s married life are amply explored. In addition, they often observe that the novel is eventually still largely engaged in the process of endorsing the Victorian domestic ideology. Pykett, for instance, argues that “[i]n the final volume, where Isabel is repeatedly portrayed as a spectator of scenes of domestic intimacy between Carlyle and Barbara, the family becomes

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123 Liggins: 60.
124 Showalter: 172.
for Isabel (and by extension for the reader) the object of desire rather than the cause and focus of discontent.”  

Furthermore, Pykett states that “[t]his process works to defuse women’s discontent and to reposition them as domestic creatures.”  

Liggins observes, about Wood’s early fiction in general, that “[e]ven as [Wood’s] novels seek to present a more balanced view of household tensions than advice literature, [...] women are [repeatedly] blamed for their failure to live up to prescriptive images of ideal wives.”  

She also argues that in Wood’s fiction “[m]arital estrangement is linked to female emotional states, obscuring the details of men’s neglect and expenditure.”  

This last fact is obvious in *East Lynne* already in the above-mentioned quote, from the second volume of the novel, in which the author informs her readers about the changing nature of men’s amorous manners. Even though (as Showalter argued) the narrator clearly sympathizes with the neglected wife, she also stresses that men are not to be blamed for such behaviour because it is in “the very essence of [their] nature” (*EL* 198), and that women consequently “will do well to put up with it” (*EL* 198). Such conflicting conclusions indicate that Wood’s novel clearly conforms to the general pattern of the sensation novel that Showalter discerned:

Typically, the first volume of a woman’s sensation novel is a gripping and sardonic analysis of a woman in conflict with male authority. By the second volume guilt has set in. In the third volume we see the heroine punished, repantant, and drained of all energy.  

Showalter’s statement that “[t]he sensationalists were still feminine novelists, thwarted in a full exploration of their imaginative worlds by Victorian convention and stereotypes,” thus clearly applies to Mrs. Henry Wood whose hugely successful sensation novel *East Lynne* continually vacillates between conventionality and unconventionality, between conservatism and liberalism.
6. Maternity

6.1. Debating Ideal Motherhood

During the Victorian age, the truly feminine woman was defined not only in terms of her domestic and wifely abilities, but also in terms of her maternal abilities. Lyn Pykett indicates that Mrs. Henry Wood’s *East Lynne* offers a range of different and competing versions of motherhood,\(^{131}\) which means that, as a mother, the heroine Isabel Vane is again contrasted with various of the novel’s female characters.

E. Ann Kaplan indicates that the novel contains two examples of “the ‘bad’ mother paradigm” in Cornelia Carlyle and Lady Mount Severn.\(^{132}\) Indeed, Cornelia Carlyle, as Archibald Carlyle’s (her younger brother’s) surrogate mother, is portrayed as somewhat “tyrannical, possessive, controlling and not above deceit.”\(^{133}\) Even though she is undoubtedly a stern and controlling presence in her brother’s life, Cornelia’s intentions are not entirely bad: “Mamma Corny had done her duty by him [Archibald], that was undoubted; but Mamma Corny had never relaxed her rule; with an iron hand she liked to rule him now, in great things as in small, just as she had done in the days of his babyhood” (*EL* 37). Cornelia’s “bad” mothering seems to be the consequence especially of her thriftiness and of an overabundant adherence to the Victorian age’s maternal advice, which stressed the importance of discipline, of “a steady and consistent method begun in early infancy” (Ellis, *The Mothers of England* 31), with regard to both the physical and moral upbringing of children. Lady Mount Severn, on the other hand, is a truly bad mother mainly because she is a rather vicious person. She is described by the narrator as “the very essence of envy, of selfishness” (*EL* 112), and is constantly portrayed as behaving in a horribly deceitful and tyrannical way, even towards her own son: “Lady Mount Severn finished up the scene [of jealous outrage against Isabel] by boxing William [her son] for his noise, jerked him out of the room, and told him he was a monkey” (*EL* 115).

To a certain extent, Isabel can also be considered a “bad” mother, not because she is extremely strict or mean (on the contrary, she is actually a very gentle and loving mother), but because she abandons her children, leaving them to be raised by someone else. Victorian society, in all probability, would have considered such behaviour as sinful.

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\(^{131}\) Lyn Pykett: 127 & 128.
\(^{132}\) E. Ann Kaplan: 78.
\(^{133}\) Kaplan: 81.
because huge moral and social importance was attributed to the role of the mother. Even though nurses and governesses played a central role in the upbringing of Victorian middle-class children, the (biological) mother was considered “the person whose influence over them is the most powerful” and “the person in whose hands their mental and spiritual welfare is placed” (Ellis, The Mothers of England 67). After having left her children, Isabel begins to suffer from “heart-sickness” (EL 390) as she becomes aware of the moral importance that is attributed to motherhood, and realizes that she has forsaken her maternal duties:

She [Lady Isabel] had passionately loved her children; she had been anxious for their welfare in all ways: and, not the least that she had to endure now, was the thought that she had abandoned them to be trained by strangers. Would they be trained to goodness, to morality, to religion? Careless as she herself had once been upon these points, she had learnt better now. (EL 390)

Many critics indicate that the novel mostly problematizes Isabel’s maternity because of its surplus of maternal affect, and not because of its lack of maternal responsibility, since Isabel is mainly portrayed as an excessively emotional and over-invested mother. Indeed, Isabel struggles to control her maternal feelings, especially after she returns to her children as their governess. She feels a constant urge to be near her children, to hug them, to kiss them, and to buy presents for them, even though she threatens to reveal her true identity by means of such behaviour. Several scholars (Pykett, Cvetkovich, and Kaplan) also interpret Isabel’s excessive mothering as a form of emotional compensation because motherhood was “the only socially sanctioned outlet for female desire.” As I mentioned in chapter four, during the nineteenth century, women were expected to be extremely self-regulatory and to suppress most of their feelings and desires. Consequently, as the above-mentioned scholars all suggest, many women experienced motherhood as the only social domain within which (at least a little) explicit and unconstrained emotion could be expressed.

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134 Lyn Pykett (130) states that “Isabel is […] constructed as an over-invested mother, another version of the improper feminine which must be expelled from the text and replaced by the normative controlled and containing proper femininity of Barbara Hare.” Somewhat similarly, Sally Shuttleworth (48) states that “Isabel’s passion for her children, which she is never able to suppress or restrain, is contrasted sharply with the bourgeois, wifely restraint of Barbara.” Finally, also E. Ann Kaplan (79) indicates that Isabel had a desire to merge with her children, and that such a desire was considered excessive by the Victorian social system.

135 Pykett: 129. Similarly, Ann Cvetkovich (115) states that “[m]otherhood allows women to express intense affect that is socially sanctioned.” E. Ann Kaplan (80) writes: “[L]ove for the children provides a kind of defense against the passion for Levinson because […] the former love is to a degree socially sanctioned.”
Especially Kaplan suggests that an over-invested mother like Isabel is a woman who “strives to gain unmet gratifications by establishing a fusional relationship with her child.”\textsuperscript{136} To prove this theory, Kaplan refers to a particular scene from \textit{East Lynne}, the scene where Isabel expresses her desperate wish to take her children with her on her trip to France (which she is advised to take in order to improve her health): “Oh! I could not leave them behind me!’ she added, looking imploringly at Miss Carlyle. ‘I should get no better if you send me there alone; I should ever be yearning for the children’” (\textit{EL} 200). According to Kaplan, during this scene, Isabel “[exposes] her emotional need for [her children] and her fear of separation, individuation and emotional autonomy.”\textsuperscript{137} In all probability, during the first half of the novel, the sensitive aristocratic Lady Isabel orients all her emotions towards her children in an attempt to compensate for her unease and unhappiness in marriage. Consequently, as Kaplan also indicates, once forced by doctors, husband and sister-in-law to leave for France without her children, Isabel has to forego the limited satisfaction that motherhood offers and becomes vulnerable to a less-socially-sanctioned form of desire: amorous and/or erotic desire for another man, Francis Levison.\textsuperscript{138}

Even though \textit{East Lynne} presents Isabel’s (excessive) maternal feeling as “a ‘safe’ location of female desire” in contrast with amorous or erotic desire, the novel’s conception of ideal motherhood still differs from Isabel’s over-invested mothering.\textsuperscript{139} With regard to their views on motherhood, the novel again opposes the overtly emotional aristocratic Lady Isabel and the sensible middle-class Barbara Hare. During the first meeting with the new governess Madame Vine (actually Lady Isabel), Barbara elaborately explains her views on motherhood, which fully correspond to the views propagated by the authors of Victorian advice manuals. Barbara begins her explanation exactly with a denouncement of the emotionally, and especially physically, over-invested mother:

\begin{quote}
I hold an opinion, Madame Vine, that too many mothers pursue a mistaken system in the management of their family. There are some, we know, who, lost in the pleasures of the world, in frivolity, wholly neglect them: of those I do not speak; nothing can be more thoughtless, more reprehensible; but there are
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{136} Kaplan: 77.  
\textsuperscript{137} Kaplan: 80.  
\textsuperscript{138} Kaplan (80) similarly suggests that “Isabel is vulnerable to erotic desire if separated from her children” and that “love for the children provides a kind of defense against the passion for Levison because […] the former love is to a degree socially sanctioned.”  
\textsuperscript{139} Kaplan: 79.
others who err on the opposite side. They are never happy but when with their children: they must be in the nursery; or, the children in the drawing-room. They wash them, dress them, feed them; rendering themselves slaves, and the nurse’s office a sinecure. The children are noisy, troublesome, cross; all children will be so; and the mother’s temper gets soured, and she gives slaps where, when they were babies, she gave kisses. She has no leisure, no spirits for any higher training: and as they grow old she loses her authority. [...] The discipline of that house soon becomes broken. The children run wild; the husband is sick of it, and seeks peace and solace elsewhere. (EL 406-407)

In Domestic Duties; or, Instructions to Young Married Ladies, Mrs. Parkes similarly condemns both mothers who indulge in “the immoderate love and pursuit of pleasure” to the point where they neglect their domestic and maternal duties (337) and mothers who entirely devote themselves “to household concerns, and to the over-solicitous care of [their] children” to the point where they neglect “the duties connected with social life and good neighbourhood” (344).

In The Mothers of England, Sarah Stickney Ellis also prefers the sensible, balanced mother over the sensitive, over-invested mother which she describes as “[an] ungoverned [spring] of tenderness and love, which burst[s] forth and exhaust[s] [herself], without calculation or restraint” (106). Ellis, like Barbara in the above-mentioned passage, also observes that the (physically) over-invested mother, who allows “[t]he occupation of the hand […] to demand her whole attention,” tends to make the mistake of setting aside the task which essentially belongs to a mother: the moral and spiritual training of her children (The Mothers of England 17). Barbara continues her explanation with a demonstration of her thorough awareness of a middle-class mother’s true task:

Now, what I trust I shall never give up to another, will be the training of my children[.] […] Let the offices, properly pertaining to a nurse, be performed by the nurse […]. Let her have the trouble of the children, their noise, their romping; […]. But I hope I shall never fail to gather my children round me daily, at stated and convenient periods, for higher purposes: to instil into them
Christian and moral duties; to strive to teach them how best to fulfil the obligations of life. This is a mother’s task […]. (EL 407)

At this point, the novel clearly shows that servants (nurses but also governesses) played an important role in the upbringing of Victorian middle-class children, but that the most important educational task, “the cultivation of the [children’s] moral character” (Parkes 351), was reserved for the mother.

Both Pykett and Kaplan correctly contend that Barbara’s above-cited discussion about motherhood exposes the contradictory demands that were placed upon the mother in Victorian patriarchal society. Pykett insightfully points out that Barbara’s discussion reveals how a mother had to split up herself because her social function as moral guardian conflicted with her natural inclination to function as her children’s primary caregiver. Barbara’s discussion about motherhood, thus, suggests that to successfully assume her primary maternal role as a moral guardian, a mother had to sensibly restrain her natural emotional attachment to her children. It is significant that, even though Isabel agrees with such a view on motherhood, she herself fails to maintain an appropriate emotional distance from her children because she seems to need their presence and affection in order to fill a certain emotional void.

Kaplan observes that, in her discussion (when she claims that the husband “seeks peace and solace elsewhere” (EL 407) if the mother fails to enforce discipline in her house), Barbara also alludes to the possibly conflicting nature of women’s roles as mothers, on the one hand, and as wives, on the other hand. As I have already indicated (in section 4.3.), Sally Shuttleworth has stated that Victorian theorists and writers of advice manuals actually “were exercised by the problem of whether a woman’s first concern should lie with the comfort of her husband or the upbringing of her children.”

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140 It might be interesting to indicate here the similarity between Barbara’s statement and the following piece of advice provided by Mrs. Parkes: “It can scarcely be impossible for [a mother] to collect her young ones around her each day, to hear them repeat their little prayers, and to give them some suitable portion of religious instruction. At such moments, too, admonitions against falsehood, disobedience, and ill-humour, may be impressively given” (387-388).

141 Pykett: 129 & Kaplan: 85.

142 Pykett: 129.

143 Kaplan: 85.

144 Sally Shuttleworth: 32-33.
Shuttleworth confirms, in *The Mothers of England*, Ellis explicitly stresses the importance of the wifely duties:

>[W]e must not forget, that while wholly given up to [the feeling of maternal love], so sacred in itself, there is such a thing as neglecting, for the sake of the luxury it affords, the duty of a wife. […] There is such a thing as forgetting, that however interesting children may be, they ought never to occupy the attention of their mother, to the exclusion of their father, or his affairs. (252)

This is another opinion which Barbara seems to share with nineteenth-century authors of advice literature, since the following passage clearly indicates that Barbara considers herself as a wife first and a mother second:

‘I may as well have him [the baby] here for once, as Mr Carlyle is out. Sometimes I am out myself, and then he has to be fed.’
‘You do not stay in-doors for the baby, then?’
‘Certainly not. If I and Mr Carlyle have to be out in the evening, baby gives way. I should never give up my husband for my baby; never, dearly as I love him [my husband].’ (*EL* 409)

Remarkably, rather than to agree with this view, the excessively maternal Lady Isabel is surprised by it. Shuttleworth argues that Isabel’s surprise, and subsequent silence, at this point in the discussion suggests that “the text is not willing to endorse this assertion of wifely duty over the physical claims of maternity.”

Shuttleworth’s interpretation of Isabel’s silence at the end of the discussion about motherhood might be correct, since the novel actually treats the subject of maternity rather ambiguously. As Dan Bivona insightfully observes, while Wood may be implicitly endorsing Barbara’s middle-class views on motherhood by having Isabel agree to (most of) them, the novel also sanctifies Isabel’s (unrestricted) maternal love by constructing it as natural. Bivona especially bases his assertion on the following passage from the novel, in which the narrator attempts to justify Isabel’s unseemly decision to return to her former home disguised as a governess:

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145 Shuttleworth: 33.
146 Shuttleworth: 48.
147 Dan Bivona: 115.
But now, about her [Isabel’s] state of mind? I do not know how to describe the vain yearning, the inward fever, the restless longing for what might not be. Longing for what? For her children. Let a mother, be she a duchess, or be she an apple-woman at a standing, be separated for a while from her little children: let her answer how she yearns for them. She may be away on a tour of pleasure: for a few weeks, the longing to see their little faces again, to hear their prattling tongues, to feel their soft kisses, is kept under; [...] but, as the weeks lengthen out, the desire to see them again becomes almost irrepressible. What must it have been, then, for Lady Isabel, who had endured this longing for years? (EL 389-390)

In this passage the narrator urges the reader to sympathize with the erring heroine who has been separated from her children, indeed, by naturalizing and universalizing maternal affect. I would argue that the novel also stresses the naturalness of maternal love by including a character whose maternal feelings and situation closely resemble those of Isabel. Mrs. Hare, like Lady Isabel, is a soft and loving mother, who silently suffers from the loss of a child, and who, thus, provokes the reader’s sympathetic feelings. Pykett, who has also noted the similarity between these two female characters and their respective situations, accurately contends that both in Mrs. Hare and Lady Isabel “[the] readers are asked to recognise the maternal bond as the strongest of all bonds, and maternal feelings as a hidden and private space from which women may resist their domestic oppression.”

6.2. Demonstrating the Importance of Motherhood

As was established in the preceding sub-chapter, both Lady Isabel and Barbara Hare agree with the nineteenth-century opinion that a mother’s primary task is to serve as a moral (and religious) guide and example for her children. Considering this (at the time) general opinion, it could be argued that Isabel, who lost her mother at the age of thirteen, has been put at a disadvantage as a young woman because she grew up largely without maternal guidance. At the beginning of the novel, Isabel is described as a generous, benevolent, timid, and sensitive young woman who has been decently educated by a governess:

Lady Isabel was wondrously gifted by nature, not only in mind and person, but in heart. She was as little like a fashionable young lady as it was well possible to be, partly because she had hitherto been secluded from the great world,

Pykett: 127-128.
partly from the care bestowed upon her training. [...] since her mother’s death, she had remained entirely at Mount Severn, under the charge of a judicious governess [...].” (EL 12-13)

Nevertheless, the narrator soon alludes to the unfortunate fate that is to befall this good-natured and innocent girl: “Do not cavil at her [Lady Isabel] being thus praised: admire and love her whilst you may, she is worthy of it now, in her innocent girlhood: the time will come when such praise would be misplaced” (EL 13). Indeed, the novel goes on to portray Lady Isabel’s moral downfall, her decision to leave her husband and children for the deceitful aristocrat Francis Levison. Consequently, via its main plot that centres around the heroine’s act of adultery, the novel, among other things, stresses the importance of motherhood and maternal guidance.

In other words, the novel’s portrayal of the downfall of a highborn, but motherless, heroine seems to suggest that the care of a nurse or governess does not suffice as regards the moral cultivation of a child. Addressing the middle class, a social class which relied hugely on the services of domestic servants, authors of advice manuals (for mothers) also stressed that the (biological) mother, because of her natural maternal feeling and instinct, was best suited to fulfil such an important task as the moral cultivation of her child. As I mentioned before (in section 6.1.), only after she has left her children, does Isabel become fully aware of the importance of her maternal role:

She [Lady Isabel] had passionately loved her children; she had been anxious for their welfare in all ways: and, not the least that she had to endure now, was the thought that she had abandoned them to be trained by strangers. Would they be trained to goodness, to morality, to religion? Careless as she herself had once been upon these points, she had learnt better now. Would Isabel [her daughter] grow up to indifference, to – perhaps do as she had done? (EL 390) (my emphasis)

Interestingly, the final two sentences of this passage seem to suggest that, at this point, Lady Isabel also realizes that her moral instability and her sinful deed might have been the consequence of her own lack of maternal guidance.

Nineteenth-century advice literature also contains proof of the fact that a mother’s guidance remained important to her children even after childhood. In The Women of
England, for instance, Ellis refers to the peculiar form of companionship that seems to exist between mother and child:

If the stigma of worldly degradation falls upon us, we fly to a mother’s love, for that mantle of charity which is denied elsewhere. [...] the bitter tears of experience are wept upon a mother’s bosom. [...] we tell to a mother’s ear the tale of our distress, and the history of our wrongs. For all that belongs to the weakness and the wants of humanity, a mother’s affection is sorely taxed [...].

(195-196)

In *Advice to Young Ladies*, T.S. Arthur denotes the mother’s special function as her children’s confidante and careful adviser: “Many a young girl, who has fully confided every thing to her mother, has been saved from blindly loving one who had been able to mislead her as to his true character, but could not deceive the mother” (154). Such an observation triggers an interesting comparison with Lady Isabel’s situation. Especially throughout the first half of the novel, some maternal guidance would have proved very useful to Isabel. For one thing, Isabel’s mother would (probably) gladly have served as her daughter’s companion and confidante, and would presumably have warned her daughter against the deceitful nature of Francis Levison. Furthermore, Isabel’s mother would have been able to provide her daughter with some useful domestic and marital advice, thus helping her daughter to deal with her marital problems and insecurities. Consequently, one might assume that, if Isabel’s mother had still been alive, Isabel’s fate could have been entirely different since her mother might have helped to alleviate her sufferings and, thus, maybe even to prevent her downfall.

When reading about Isabel’s suffering throughout the first half of the novel, it becomes very clear that Isabel, as a young woman and wife, lacks guidance and companionship. Unfortunately, both female characters that are positioned to function as some sort of surrogate mothers for Isabel (Lady Mount Severn and Cornelia Carlyle) fail to do so because they are governed by their jealousy. Lady Mount Severn fails to welcome Isabel into her home after the death of Isabel’s father because, as a woman who constantly craves attention, she envies Isabel’s youthful and unusual beauty. Consequently, Lady Mount Severn constantly subjects Isabel to humiliating remarks and cruel behaviour during her stay at Castle Marling. Cornelia Carlyle also fails to welcome Lady Isabel into her family. Instead of employing her domestic skill and expertise to guide and assist her young
sister-in-law, Cornelia decides to continue to manage her brother’s household herself because she wants to remain in control of his habits and expenses. Due to her distrust of the domestic and economic capabilities of a member of the aristocracy, Cornelia also continually burdens her sister-in-law with sneering remarks about the added expense which she (presumably) brings to Mr. Carlyle’s household. Such unkind behaviour as Lady Mount Severn’s and Cornelia Carlyle’s is, according to Victorian standards, very unfeminine. In *The Women of England*, for instance, Ellis stresses that “[no practice] demands our condemnation more than that of the women who are [...] false and cruel to each other – who, because they know exactly where to wound, apply the instrument of torture to the mind, unsparingly, and with the worst effect” (177). According to Ellis such unkind behaviour among women is particularly reprehensible because women are aware of the fact that their sex suffers from “innumerable sources of disquietude [...] in which no man can partake” and, thus, has need of sympathies which only other women can offer (*The Women of England* 175-176).

E. Ann Kaplan has also noticed that *East Lynne*’s heroine, Isabel, lacks a protective (surrogate) mother-figure and that her moral vulnerability is directly related to this lack of maternal protection:

> The saintly nature of Isabel’s dead mother is indicated, first, in the young woman’s devoted memories, and second, in the mother’s link to holiness through Isabel’s cherished cross-adorned necklace. It is this necklace that Levison ominously breaks on his first meeting with Isabel. Isabel’s distress comes from the fact that her mother gave her the cross as she was dying, telling the child to let it be a talisman to guide her when in need of counsel [...]. Its breaking signals Isabel’s aloneness and vulnerability to the “snake” Levison ready to step into the gap left by her mother’s death.\(^{149}\)

Thus, according to Kaplan, Isabel clearly suffers from having lost her mother and, consequently, “seeks in both the children and the men in her life [...] the satisfaction of a passionate, merged feeling” in order to attempt to fulfil “the impossible desire for unity with the Mother left over from childhood.”\(^{150}\) In addition, Kaplan suggests that Barbara Hare’s story “[provides] another example of a young woman’s vulnerabilities and

\(^{149}\) Kaplan: 78-79.

\(^{150}\) Kaplan: 80.
emotional dependencies through lack of a strong mother-figure.”  

According to Kaplan, even though Barbara’s mother, Mrs. Hare, is present, she is “so sickly and confined [that she is] unable to help her daughter.” I, however, rather disagree with the opinion that, like Isabel, Barbara (emotionally) suffers from the lack of a mother-figure. Even though the relationship between Barbara and the invalid Mrs. Hare might seem a little bit difficult and detached at first, as the novel progresses both women increasingly appear to bond because of their shared concern for the strayed brother/son. Moreover, in *The Mothers of England*, Ellis explicitly claims that “a mother’s influence, if once established, is often known to operate beneficially, even when she herself is confined to a couch of sickness” (67). This observation seems applicable to Mrs. Hare’s maternal influence, since it is very likely that Barbara, as Mr. Carlyle’s successful, efficient and devoted wife, follows the example set by her mother, who has always been devoted and obedient (even) to her tyrannical husband.

7. Morality

Victorian society attributed much importance to morality. Nineteenth-century advice manuals continually stressed the importance of adopting correct, moral, and virtuous behaviour in all domains of life. To refer to this comprehensive kind of proper behaviour, authors of Victorian conduct literature frequently used the term “propriety”. The *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* defines “propriety” as “correctness concerning standards of behaviour or morals,” which proves that this term usually has a double connotation: it tends to refer to a combination of both proper (social) behaviour and proper morals. As suggested before, in Victorian society, especially women were allotted an important moral task; as wives and mothers, mainly they were considered responsible for the propagation and preservation of correct behaviour and correct morals. In other words, women were expected to set an example by means of acting with perfect propriety at all times. Morality is an important topic in Mrs. Henry Wood’s nineteenth-century sensation novel *East Lynne* as well. The moral message of the novel is especially related to the heroine’s sinful fall from grace, but also extends to other levels of the novel’s elaborate plot. The following

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151 Kaplan: 81.
152 Kaplan: 81.
discussion will especially show that, as with the topics of domesticity and maternity, the novel’s treatment of morality is very class-conscious and ambiguous.

7.1. The Importance of Propriety

7.1.1. Propriety of Dress

Most nineteenth-century advice manuals and (of course) etiquette books paid quite some attention to the topic of dress. Dress was considered an important issue because, as the following quotes suggest, it was (and probably still is) considered an indicator not only of people’s class, but also of people’s (more specifically women’s) general and moral character:

Dress, it is true, may be considered as the criterion of a woman’s taste. [...] If [a spectator] perceive that fashion has not been servilely or implicitly followed; that peculiarity has been avoided, and simplicity preferred to splendour, the opinion he forms must be in favour of her taste; and the supposition follows, of course, that the good sense which directs her choice of attire, will have its influence over every thing of which she has the direction and control. (Parkes 94-95) (my emphasis)

[T]he want of propriety of dress, whether shown in the neglect of the person, or by a too studied and extravagant pursuit of fashion, makes a more unfavourable impression on an observing mind, than mere absence of taste would produce. In the one case indolence, self-indulgence, and many other symptoms of an ill-regulated mind, are betrayed; and in the other the suspicion cannot fail to arise, that the mind is frivolous and vain, which has evidently bestowed so much precious time on exterior decoration. (Parkes 95) (my emphasis)

Good taste is therefore most essential to the regulation of her dress and general appearance; and wherever any striking violation of this principle appears, the beholder is immediately impressed with the idea that a very important rule of her life and conduct is wanting. (Ellis, The Women of England 81-82) (my emphasis)
Always endeavour to dress well and neatly, but be not too eager in your pursuit after fashion, lest people suppose that you mean to rely entirely on outward adornments to recommend you. (The Hand-Book of Etiquette 8) (my emphasis)

In *East Lynne*, Wood provides much detail with regard to her characters’ attire, and often her detailed descriptions of dress actually seem to serve as indications of the personality and moral worth of her characters.\(^{154}\)

As I have pointed out in the previous two chapters, Cornelia Carlyle tends to adhere quite strictly (often a little too strictly) to the advice that was provided in nineteenth-century conduct literature. With regard to advice about dress and style, Cornelia again tends to go to extremes. She is described by the narrator as someone who appears in (often ridiculously) old-fashioned costumes because she “despise[s] new fashions” (*EL* 61). Authors of Victorian conduct literature usually also distrusted fashion because of its changeable and precarious nature.\(^{155}\) Consequently, they recommended a modest, but nevertheless still contemporary, dress style for women. Interestingly, Cornelia’s huge sensitivity about fashionable dress stresses and/or reveals some of her more negative character traits. Firstly, her extreme disdain for fashion is more than likely related to her meanness, to her “love for money” (*EL* 46). Secondly, her sensitivity about other people’s appearance reveals her judgmental and somewhat crude nature. A good example of this latter fact is provided at the beginning of chapter thirty-eight, where Cornelia rather cruelly criticizes and ridicules Mr. Dill’s new clothes (which he bought for the wedding of Mr. Carlyle and Barbara Hare):

‘People like to dress a little out of common at a wedding, Miss Cornelia: it’s only respectful, when they are invited guests.’

‘I don’t say people should go to a wedding in a hop sack. But there’s a medium. Pray do you know your age?’

‘I am turned sixty, Miss Corny.’

‘You just are. And do you consider it decent for an old man, turned sixty, to be decorated off as you are now? I don’t; and so I tell you my mind. Why, you’ll

\(^{154}\) In “See What a Big Wide Bed it is!: Mrs Henry Wood and the Philistine Imagination,” Deborah Wynne (90) informs that Wood’s fiction typically contained a lot of domestic and societal detail, and that her “detailism” often “rendered her work ludicrous and distasteful to intellectual contemporaries, yet satisfied a large audience of ‘philistine’ readers.”

\(^{155}\) Mrs. Parkes (105), for instance, writes: “Fashion carries us, as it were, in a perpetual stream from which we make no attempt to rescue ourselves, but are borne along through all its windings, and are drawn into all the shallows into which folly can pilot us.”
be the laughing-stock of the parish! Take care the boys don’t tie a tin kettle to you!’ (EL 379-380)

As I mentioned in chapter five, Lyn Pykett characterizes Cornelia Carlyle as a masculinized (rather than truly feminine) female character. Indeed, passages like the above-mentioned one reveal that, despite her thorough knowledge of domestic affairs, Cornelia lacks some important feminine qualities such as tact, kindness, and regard for others.

Another character from the novel in whose case the (multiple) descriptions of her appearance and dress obviously serve to indicate her character flaws and her lack of correct moral principle is Afy Hallijohn. Throughout the novel, Afy Hallijohn, a working-class lady’s-maid, is portrayed as a young woman “whose egregious vanity was her besetting sin, who possessed enough of it for any ten pretty women going” (EL 541). Nearly every appearance of Afy in the novel is accompanied by an elaborate description of her utterly fashionable attire and (subsequently) by a narratorial remark about her vain and selfish personality:

In a gay summer’s dress, fine and sparkling, with a coquettish little bonnet, trimmed with pink, shaded by one of those nondescript articles at present called veils, which article was made of white spotted net, with a pink ruche round it, sailed Afy Hallijohn, conceited and foolish and good-looking as ever. (EL 381) (my emphasis)

Shortly after this passage, Cornelia Carlyle also comments on Afy’s appearance: “What creditable servant would flaunt about in such a dress and bonnet as that? – with that flimsy gauze thing over her face! It’s as disreputable as your [Mr. Dill’s] shirt-front’ (EL 381). Cornelia’s remark corresponds to Mrs. Parkes’s claim that “attempting to vie in dress with those whom superior station and fortune entitle to exterior distinction” was a common error among (lower-class) women (95). Such an opinion is interesting because it associates vain behaviour with class status; and, this association also applies to the character of Afy

\[156\] Lyn Pykett: 120 & 126.
\[157\] It might be interesting to point out here that the novel also contains a male character whose appearance is stressed in relation to his morally degraded nature. Francis Levison is portrayed as a handsome, but deceitful, man who, by means of his appearance (his fancy clothes, his white hands adorned with diamond rings, etc.), emphasizes his aristocratic descent in order to render himself more attractive to young women.
Hallijohn because Afy’s vain and foolish behaviour ultimately relates to her strong desire to promote her social status.

The beginning of the novel also contains several passages which pay specific attention to Lady Isabel’s appearance and style of dress. Interestingly, the first chapter of the novel continually stresses Lady Isabel’s kindness and modesty or, in other words, her lack of traits such as vanity and frivolity, which were stereotypically attributed to members of the aristocracy. It is, for instance, explicitly stated that Isabel “has been reared as an English girl should be, not to frivolity and foppery” (EL 10) and that “[s]he [is] as little like a fashionable young lady as it was well possible to be” (EL 12). A bit further into the novel, Wood even emphasizes Isabel’s modesty by contrasting her simple and modest attire with Barbara Hare’s highly decorative and fashionable attire. In chapter seven, Barbara appears at church decked out in “a pink bonnet and feather [...], a grey brocaded dress, and white gloves” (EL 64). Once seated, Barbara is described observing all people present because she is eager to catch a glimpse of the aristocratic Lord Mount Severn and his daughter Lady Isabel. Barbara, however, fails to recognize the expected high-born visitors because Isabel appears at church plainly dressed in “[a] clear muslin dress with small lilac sprigs upon it, and a straw bonnet” (EL 65).

At the beginning of the novel, Isabel’s modest style and conduct seem to be emphasized in order to portray her as a promising young girl who possesses several important feminine qualities such as modesty, kindness, and benevolence. Nevertheless, as I explained in chapter five, during her marriage Isabel’s femininity is undermined as her aristocratic flaws become increasingly apparent. Throughout the chapters that describe her marriage, it becomes obvious that Isabel’s aristocratic descent and education, although sound and sensible, have rendered her not only modest and kind, but also extremely emotional and rather unworldly. Interestingly, the novel’s very first chapters (which describe Isabel’s and Carlyle’s lives before their marriage) already contain an indication of Isabel’s largest shortcomings: her excessive emotionality and her unworldliness. In chapter eight, Isabel meets the working class organist Mr. Kane who, together with his wife and seven children, is about to be “turned out of his home, and his furniture sold for the two years’ rent he [owns]” (EL 69). Isabel is so surprised and so touched by Mr. Kane’s story that she convinces her father, and many other residents of West Lynne, to attend this man’s village concert. In addition, on the night of the concert, the usually modestly dressed Lady Isabel decides to put on her richest dress and diamonds (despite the objections of her maid
and father) in order to “show those West Lynne people that [she] think[s] the poor man’s concert worth going to, and worth dressing for” (EL 76). Even though this situation initially emphasizes Isabel’s kind and benevolent nature, it also discloses her unworldliness and her extreme sensitivity. As I have already stated, throughout the novel, Isabel’s excessive emotionality is repeatedly brought forward as problematic because women were expected to keep their emotions in check. The importance of constraining one’s emotions is the topic that will be discussed in the following subsection of this chapter.

7.1.2. Propriety of Affect

As I have argued at the end of chapter four, women had to be extremely self-regulatory if they wanted to abide by the prevalent feminine ideal. In The Women of England, Sarah Stickney Ellis explicitly claims that, as the propagators of correct morals, good virtues and happiness, women had to constrain their personal emotions and desires:

[T]o be individually, what she is praised for being in general, it is necessary for [woman] to lay aside all her natural caprice, her love of self-indulgence, her vanity, her indolence – in short, her very self – and assuming a new nature, which nothing less than watchfulness and prayer can enable her constantly to maintain, to spend her mental and moral capabilities in devising means for promoting the happiness of others, while her own derives a remote and secondary existence from theirs. (40)

Of course, this type of self-regulation was not supposed to result in a complete lack of emotionality because, in order to promote the happiness of others, women still had to be sufficiently affectionate. In other words, as Ann Cvetkovich also indicates, women simultaneously had to produce and regulate affect. The regulation of affect was deemed necessary especially for women because, as the following quote by Mrs. Parkes shows, women were considered the weaker sex, which was (supposedly) more liable to the irrational and capricious vigour of emotions and desires: “We [women] must, in candour, allow, that, if we have usually more disinterestedness and generosity than men, we are more liable to be governed by sudden emotions, and to act upon impressions of anger and of caprice” (380). This belief about women’s liability to excessive emotionality is also present in East Lynne, since most of Wood’s female characters, at some point or another in the novel, are driven to irrational behaviour by their emotions.

158 Ann Cvetkovich: 111.
To begin with, Lady Isabel’s sin (the abandonment of her husband and children, and her subsequent relationship with Francis Levison) is obviously connected with the issue of desire and emotionality. Many critics primarily analyse Isabel’s sin in relation to erotic desire or sexual passion. It is true that, even until the moment of her engagement with Archibald Carlyle, Isabel feels (physically) attracted to Francis Levison: “It is not only that I do not love Mr Carlyle, but I fear I do love, or very nearly love, Francis Levison. I wish he would ask me to be his wife!” (EL 121). Nevertheless, I would not consider Isabel’s physical attraction towards Levison as the primary motive or cause of her sin. In fact, from the very moment she resumes contact with Levison (during her trip to France), Isabel’s “[strong] voice of conscience” (EL 214) and her respect for her husband urge her to fight this attraction constantly rather than to give in to it. For instance, as soon as she starts to fear “that further companionship, especially lonely companionship, with Francis Levison might augment the sentiments she entertained for him to a height” (EL 212), Isabel asks her husband to accompany her during the remaining time of her trip.

In my opinion, Isabel’s sin should be understood in relation to her sensitivity and her emotional dependence on her husband. As I explained in chapter five, marriage (and all the responsibilities it entails) pretty soon proves to be too hard for the sensitive, aristocratic Lady Isabel. Subsequently, as Cvetkovich also observes, rather than communicating her concerns to her husband, Isabel represses her domestic unhappiness and desperately tries to hold on to her husband’s love and attention, and, eventually, also to her children’s affection. Consequently, when her doctors and her husband send her on a trip to France by herself, Isabel becomes even more emotionally vulnerable; and, this is exactly the point at which she meets Francis Levison again:

What was it that caused every nerve in her frame to vibrate, every pulse to quicken? Whose form was it that was thus advancing, and changing the

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159 Elaine Showalter (172), for instance, states: “Motivated by sexual passion that seems perverse because Mrs. Wood is so reticent in explaining it, Lady Isabel deserts her husband and children and runs away with a base seducer.” Similarly, Sally Shuttleworth (47) contends that “[t]he forces of sexual desire (painted initially in very graphic terms, but subsequently masked under the morally more acceptable explanation of marital jealousy) cause [Lady Isabel] to violate the sacred code of motherhood and abandon her bourgeois home, husband, and children for the aristocratic rake, Francis Levison.” Lyn Pykett (122) argues that “[t]his narrative is a parable of the dangers of sexual passion and (female) marital indiscretion, in which the erring wife (Isabel) is fiercely punished.” Ann Cvetkovich (119) writes that “Isabel Vane seems perfectly capable of leaving her children or overlooking her maternal affects in order to pursue other desires, in this case her sexual desire for Sir Francis Levison.” Finally, also Gail Walker (27) contends that “[Isabel] experiences an attachment, clearly based on sexual attraction, to Captain Francis Levison.”

160 Cvetkovich: 102.
monotony of her mind into a tumult? It was that of one whom she was soon to find had never been entirely forgotten. (EL 205) (original emphasis; my emphasis)

Even though this passage initially describes the revival of Isabel’s earlier physical attraction towards Francis Levison, it simultaneously also undermines the importance of the element of erotic desire. The passage recognizes Isabel’s unhappiness and boredom with married life as another important factor with regard to her sin, since it suggests that the presence of Francis Levison excites her because it disrupts “the monotony of her mind” (EL 205).

Another, particular emotion which constitutes the final (and decisive) factor in Lady Isabel’s gradual fall from grace is jealousy. Throughout the first half of the novel, Isabel becomes jealous of Barbara Hare (a close family friend of her husband’s). Isabel’s jealous feelings are secured by an unfortunate combination of events. First, her jealousy is aroused by the gossip of a servant; second, it is intensified by the frequent secretive meetings that take place between her husband and Barbara Hare (who are actually conferring about the fate of Barbara’s brother); third, her jealousy is brought to its peak by the lies and tricks of Francis Levison. Gail Walker claims that Isabel “[deliberately] falls into the delusion that Archibald is in love with another woman and regrets having married her, so that the way is open for a chance meeting with Francis Levison to re-arouse the earlier passions which she ought never to have experienced.”  

I disagree with Walker that Isabel purposely constructs delusional ideas about her husband’s fidelity in order to clear the way for her own infidel relationship. I would argue that Isabel’s strong emotionality and her childlike dependence on her husband (basically her lack and fear of autonomy) are what render her liable to jealous emotions. Even though Isabel thinks herself “securely conscious of [her] own rectitude of principle and conduct” (EL 212), as a consequence of her sensitive and dependent nature, she ultimately gives way to the pressure of marital expectations and insecurities and becomes liable to gossip and deceit.

The foregoing discussion clearly shows that Isabel sins mainly because she is unable to regulate her emotions properly. Even though she is actually a victim of her own emotions (and of Francis Levison’s deceit as well), Isabel is severely punished for her immoral actions. As Walker states:

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161 Gail Walker: 27.
Not only does she lose status and name [...], home, security, and reputation after her fall from virtue, but she is also led by her creator to return in disguise to the home of her wronged husband as governess to her own children, forced to become a witness of his marital happiness with his second wife, and placed at the deathbed of her [eldest] son [...].

In addition, as Elaine Showalter also observes, after Francis Levison abandons her, Isabel loses her illegitimate child and becomes disfigured (consequently losing much of her former beauty) during a railway accident. By means of subjecting the erring heroine to severe punishment, Wood endorses the Victorian age’s strict moral views. According to Victorian moral values, Isabel sins against the most essential virtue of the female sex: selflessness. The moment she gives in to her personal emotions of discontent and jealousy (and forsakes her wifely and maternal duties), Isabel fails “to spend her mental and moral capabilities in devising means for promoting the happiness of others” (Ellis, *The Women of England 40*) and, thus, basically acts selfishly. As the following quotes suggest, selfishness (in women) was considered sinful by Victorian society:

> To sin, is to act in opposition to [the] laws of God. In every instance, therefore, in which we neglect the good of another, in seeking some selfish gratification, we commit sin; for the law of God, in common society, is, for each to regard the good of the whole. (Arthur 12)

> A selfish woman may not improperly be regarded as a monster, especially in that sphere of life, where there is a constant demand made upon her services. (Ellis, *The Women of England 61*) *(my emphasis)*

Notwithstanding the occasionally sympathetic treatment of the heroine, such strict moral beliefs are reinforced in the novel by the severe punishment Wood provides for her erring protagonist. Consequently, Walker rightly contends that *East Lynne* (partly) is some sort of cautionary tale that “[reflects the nineteenth-century audience’s] belief in the centrality of woman’s position in the social fabric and the seriousness of the consequences for society and the individual of a failure to fulfill *[sic]* the demands which culture placed on women as guardians of the public morality.”

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162 Walker: 24.
163 Elaine Showalter: 172.
164 Walker: 23.
In the novel, Isabel is not the only female character who struggles to keep her emotions under control. As Cvetkovich correctly states, “[t]hroughout East Lynne, femininity is consistently aligned with or defined in terms of susceptibility to feeling[;] [and,] [n]ot just Isabel, but many of the other women in the novel experience affective states that are […] difficult to restrain.” 165 As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, Cornelia Carlyle lacks some important feminine qualities such as tact, kindness, and compassion. Consequently, at certain points in the novel, she behaves rather inappropriately for a woman. In particular, Cornelia’s (earlier-described) opinionated, crude, and somewhat conceited behaviour towards Lady Isabel and Mr. Dill is lacking in propriety. 166 As opposed to Lady Isabel, Cornelia Carlyle is not punished or condemned for her unfeminine behaviour. This fact might have something to do with Cornelia’s somewhat special status as a spinster. Even though she assumes the roles of surrogate mother and household manager to her younger brother Archibald Carlyle, her spinsterhood technically withdraws her from the actual domestic feminine vocation, and therefore maybe also from the kind of punishment and humiliation Isabel is subjected to after having failed to fulfil this vocation.

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter (in section 7.1.1.), the working-class lady’s-maid Afy Hallijohn also displays some character flaws and a lack of correct moral principle. Afy’s main vice is her vanity, which is related to her strong desire to promote her social status. This vain desire tends to dominate Afy’s, often selfish and foolish, behaviour. For instance, like Lady Isabel, Afy allows herself to be seduced and deceived by the aristocratic womanizer Francis Levison. As Lyn Pykett also observes, East Lynne carefully juxtaposes the similar situations of the upstart servant Afy Hallijohn and the aristocratic Lady Isabel; but, there are also several dissimilarities between the two women’s situations. 167 Firstly, Afy’s attraction towards Francis Levison (who is actually known to her as Captain Thorn) is mainly stimulated by a strong desire to ascend to a higher social class, rather than by any marital and/or emotional insecurities. Secondly, Pykett observes that “Afy is not required to undergo the punitive moral, emotional and physical suffering

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165 Cvetkovich: 106.
166 Interestingly, Cornelia’s occasionally immodest behaviour is generally related to a typifying character trait of hers, which is described by the narrator in very affective terms: “[h]er love for money [which] amount[s] almost to a passion” (EL 46) (my emphasis).
167 Pykett: 123.
which is constructed for Isabel.”\textsuperscript{168} According to Pykett, this discrepancy between both women’s punishments is related to their different class origins:

Afy is required to suffer less than Isabel because of the presumption […] that she is less emotionally and morally refined than her social superior. Afy’s fall is presented by the narrator as a mixture of folly and wilfulness; if the character reflects upon her situation at all it is to see it as a career move. However, Isabel’s is a fall from grace, which is accompanied by exquisite agonies of moral scrupulousness and emotional self-torture, both of which are presented in class terms.\textsuperscript{169}

Even though I agree with Pykett that Isabel’s higher refinement renders her actions all the more serious and sinful, I would primarily stress another difference between Afy’s and Isabel’s respective situations in order to explain their different punishments. Unlike Lady Isabel, Afy Hallijohn is single, she is not a wife and mother, which means that she does not bear the same amount of moral and social responsibility as Isabel does when she yields to Levison’s advances.

At the beginning of the novel even the balanced and sensible middle-class Barbara Hare struggles to control her emotions. In the third chapter of the novel, Barbara Hare is introduced as a pretty and strong-willed young woman who is desperately in love with her close friend Archibald Carlyle. This infatuation is so strong that it takes complete control of Barbara’s thoughts and desires. Consequently, when Cornelia Carlyle informs her about Archibald’s marriage to Lady Isabel, Barbara hastily runs up to her bedroom and breaks out into tears:

She swiftly passed up-stairs to her own room, and flung herself down on its floor in utter anguish. […] She saw now that while she had cherished false and delusive hopes, in her almost idolatrous passion for Archibald Carlyle, she had never been cared for by him. […] With a sharp wail of despair, Barbara flung her arms up and closed her aching eyes: she knew that from that hour her life’s sunshine had departed. (\textit{EL} 134)

\textsuperscript{168} Pykett: 123.
\textsuperscript{169} Pykett: 123-124.
Cvetkovich indicates that the impulsiveness of Barbara’s reaction “could be attributed to the pressures of a social propriety that demands that a woman disguise unrequited desire.”\textsuperscript{170} Indeed, after this (brief) moment of despair, Barbara pulls herself together again because she is well aware of “the necessity of outwardly surmounting the distress at the present moment” (\textit{EL} 134). Nevertheless, an even more inappropriate outburst of emotion is still to follow. After actually witnessing Archibald Carlyle and Lady Isabel together, Barbara’s reason is overpowered by a strong amorous jealousy which prompts her to confess her deeply-aggrieved feelings of love to Mr. Carlyle, a married man:

There are moments in a woman’s life when she is betrayed into forgetting the ordinary rules of conduct and propriety; when she is betrayed into making a scene. […] Barbara Hare’s temper was not under strict control. Her love, her jealousy, the never-dying pain always preying on her heart-strings since the marriage took place, her keen sense of the humiliation which had come home to her, were all rising fiercely, bubbling up with fiery heat. […] A little self-control and Barbara would not have uttered \textit{sic} words that must remain on her mind hereafter like an incubus, dyeing her cheeks red whenever she recalled them. (\textit{EL} 163)

Audrey Jaffe correctly states that “after [this unrestrained] outburst of affection for Mr. Carlyle, [Barbara has] learned to keep her feelings to herself.”\textsuperscript{171} Even though the humiliation initially renders her rather bitter, the novel explicitly stresses that Barbara learns from her mistake: “Barbara had grown more gentle and tender of late years, the bitterness of her pain had passed away leaving all that had been good in her love to mellow and fertilize her nature. Her character had been greatly improved by sorrow” (\textit{EL} 230). Furthermore, Jaffe observes that, soon after having left East Lynne with Francis Levison, Isabel also “develops a capacity for ‘reflection’” and realizes the error of her ways:\textsuperscript{172}

Her recent and depressing illness, the conviction of Sir Francis Levison’s complete worthlessness, the terrible position in which she found herself, had brought to Lady Isabel \textit{reflection}. […] A conviction of her sin ever oppressed her: not only of the one act of it, patent to the scandal-mongers, but of the long,

\textsuperscript{170} Cvetkovich: 106.
\textsuperscript{171} Audrey Jaffe: 117.
\textsuperscript{172} Jaffe: 97.
sinful life she had led from childhood; sinful, insomuch as that it had been carelessly indifferent. (EL 298)

Consequently, Jaffe claims that, after having committed an error (admittedly larger than the one committed by Barbara), a certain “embourgeoisement of Isabel’s consciousness” takes place.  

Nevertheless, as I have shown in the chapter about maternity for instance, the aristocratic Lady Isabel, unlike the middle-class Barbara Hare, never actually manages to repress her excessive emotions effectively. Thus, as E. Ann Kaplan states, “[t]he novel shows that the only class capable of the correct balance between desire and its release is the middle class.” Deborah Wynne also insightfully observes that, later in the novel, Barbara even gets the opportunity “to assert her moral superiority over Isabel,” when, disguised as Madame Vine, Isabel asks why Mr. Carlyle ever invited the debauched Francis Levison to stay at East Lynne:

Why did he [Mr. Carlyle] give the invitation! Did I hear you aright, Madame Vine? Did Mr Carlyle know he was a reprobate? And, if he had known it, was not Lady Isabel his wife? Could he dream of danger for her? If it pleased Mr Carlyle to fill East Lynne with bad men to-morrow, what would that be to me? – to my safety; to my well-being; to my love and allegiance to my husband? What were you thinking of madame? (EL 491-492)

Finally, I would like to discuss an emotion and a vice which the novel seems to define as particularly common among women: jealousy.

There never was a passion in this world, there never will be one, so fantastic, so delusive, so powerful as jealousy. Mr Carlyle dismissed the episode [of Isabel’s jealousy of Barbara Hare] from his thoughts; he believed his wife’s emotion to have arisen simply from a feverish dream, and never supposed but that, with the dream, its recollection would pass away from her. Not so. [...] Shakspeare [sic] calls jealousy yellow and green. I think it may be called black and white; for it most assuredly views white as black, and black as white. The most fanciful surmises wear the aspect of

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173 Jaffe: 98.
174 E. Ann Kaplan: 89.
truth, the greatest improbabilities appear as consistent realities. Isabel said not another word to her husband; and the feeling [...] only caused her to grow more attached to him, to be more eager for his love. But certain it is, that Barbara Hare dwelt on her heart like an incubus. (*EL* 182-183)

This passage confirms that, as I suggested earlier in this sub-chapter, jealousy is a factor which hugely contributes to Isabel’s sinful decision to abandon her husband and children. In addition, Cvetkovich observes that this passage from the novel implicitly suggests that “women are more susceptible to the fears of exclusion and isolation that foster jealousy” because they are “[d]ependent on the protection and support of men.”\(^{176}\) Somewhat similarly, Pykett has stated that “central to the novel’s emotional dynamics” is a form of “intra-female rivalry” which is produced by women’s lack of actual power.\(^{177}\) According to Pykett, “women’s [subordinate] power is usually exercised only in relation to children and other women.”\(^{178}\) Indeed, as I pointed out in chapter five as well, Lady Mount Severn and Cornelia Carlyle are two (masculinized) female characters who abuse their limited power, their domestic superiority, to subject the still young and inexperienced Lady Isabel to their will.

In my opinion, *East Lynne* presents jealousy as a typically female emotion especially because, not only Isabel, but nearly all of the novel’s female characters are subjected to and struggle with this emotion. Afy Hallijohn’s desire to promote her social status, for instance, might be considered as a form of (social) jealousy. As suggested above, also Lady Mount Severn and Cornelia Carlyle suffer from jealous feelings; both women, each for their own personal reasons, are envious of Lady Isabel.\(^{179}\) Finally, even the mature and sensible Barbara Hare is found to suffer from jealousy. As I mentioned earlier in this sub-chapter, in the first part of the novel, Barbara suffers an outburst of emotion as a result of her amorous jealousy of Lady Isabel. This outburst, however, teaches her the importance of self-restraint and allows her to become a wife who is perfectly capable of procuring domestic peace and happiness. For instance, the novel’s

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\(^{176}\) Cvetkovich: 110.

\(^{177}\) Pykett: 125.

\(^{178}\) Pykett: 125.

\(^{179}\) Lady Mount Severn envies Isabel because of her extraordinary beauty and the consequent attention she gets from men. Cornelia Carlyle envies Lady Isabel because, as Archibald’s wife, she is destined to take over the management of the Carlyle household.
very final scene clearly demonstrates that Barbara Hare has developed a strong sense of morality and self-control:

‘Anything you will. My earnest wish is to please you; to be worthy of your esteem and love. Archibald,’ she [Barbara] timidly added, her eyelids drooping, as she made the confession, while the colour rose in her fair face, ‘there has been a feeling in my heart against your children, a sort of jealous feeling, can you understand, because they were hers; because she had once been your wife. I knew how wrong it was, and I have tried earnestly to subdue it. I have indeed, and I think it is nearly gone. I’ – her voice sunk lower – ‘constantly pray to be helped to do it; to love them and care for them as if they were my own. It will come in time.’ (EL 624) *(my emphasis)*

This passage clearly suggests that, although Barbara, as a woman, is still prone to emotions such as jealousy, her strong sense of duty and propriety (in short, her perfect and contained femininity) enables her to restrain, and eventually maybe even overcome, such (excessive, negative) emotions. Interestingly, Barbara’s husband, Mr. Carlyle, does not reproach his wife for feeling envious towards his and Isabel’s children. Instead, he emphatically confirms the importance and benefit of self-regulation and selfless behaviour as it was described in nineteenth-century conduct literature as well: “‘Every good thing will come with time that we earnestly seek,’ said Mr Carlyle. ‘Oh, Barbara, never forget – never forget that the only way to ensure peace in the end, is, to strive always to be doing right, unselfishly, under God’” *(EL 624) *(my emphasis)*.

7.2. The Ambiguity of the Narration

Mrs. Henry Wood’s *East Lynne* obviously delivers the story of the material and moral victory of the bourgeoisie over the aristocracy. As Lyn Pyckett suggests, by the end of the novel, Lady Isabel has indeed “[been] replaced by the controlled, competent and controlling Barbara [Hare].”*180* Nevertheless, Pyckett also rightfully states that Isabel “also functions as the repository of the text’s and the reader’s emotional ambivalence and resistance.”*181* It is true that, due to its ambiguous treatment of the erring heroine, the novel’s moral position is highly ambiguous as well. Consequently, the reader is not

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*180* Pyckett: 131.  
*181* Pyckett: 131.
entirely sure which moral position he or she is expected to take, and the Carlyles’
bourgeois success story is also partly undermined.

Andrew Maunder writes, “Wood’s narrative of female failing, discipline and
punishment [...] presents Lady Isabel Vane as an object lesson [of immoral behaviour and
its consequences].”\(^{182}\) Indeed, as I suggested earlier in this chapter, by means of the
depiction of Lady Isabel’s sinful actions which are followed by a severe and prolonged
punishment (and self-castigation), the novel clearly endorses the Victorian age’s strict
moral values. In addition, the novel is told by “an intrusive, moralising and gossipy
feminine narrator”\(^{183}\) who, at times, explicitly condemns Isabel’s actions:

The very hour of her departure she [Isabel] awoke to what she had done: the
guilt, whose aspect had been shunned in the prospective, assumed at once its
true, frightful colour, the blackness of darkness; and a lively remorse, a never
dying anguish, took possession of her soul for ever. Oh, reader, believe me!
Lady – wife – mother! should you ever be tempted to abandon your home, so
will you awake. Whatever trials may be the lot of your married life, though
they may magnify themselves to your crushed spirit as beyond the endurance
of woman to bear, \textit{resolve} to bear them; fall down upon your knees and pray to
be enabled to bear them: pray for patience; pray for strength to resist the demon
that would urge you so to escape; bear unto death, rather than forfeit your fair
name and your good conscience; for be assured that the alternative, if you rush
on to it, will be found far worse than death. (\textit{EL} 283)

In this passage the narrator obviously warns the novel’s female readers of the
consequences of such sinful actions as Lady Isabel’s. In addition, the narrator also
explicitly stresses that to strive for endurance is the correct kind of behaviour for women
who suffer from marital hardships. Simultaneously, as Elaine Showalter observes, this
passage also acknowledges the often hard and trying nature of married life.\(^{184}\) Showalter
especially remarks that “[t]he urgency of Mrs. Wood’s message suggests that she felt
herself to be speaking to a large and desperate audience” because, during the Victorian age,

\(^{182}\) Andrew Maunder, “‘Stepchildren of Nature’: \textit{East Lynne} and the Spectre of Female Degeneracy, 1860-
1861” (\textit{Victorian Crime, Madness and Sensation}): 69.
\(^{183}\) Pykett: 115.
\(^{184}\) Showalter: 172-173.
“[w]hen women found it nearly impossible to obtain a divorce and had no means of support outside marriage, fantasies of pure escape had a great deal of appeal.”\textsuperscript{185}

Even though the novel often subscribes to Victorian morality, Pykett contends that “[t]he reader’s emotional investment in Isabel creates a space for resistance of the text’s ‘official’ morality [which presents] maternal suffering and death [as] inevitable and just consequences of female adultery.”\textsuperscript{186} Indeed, as Pykett suggests, throughout the novel Isabel’s suffering is so vividly described by the narrator that the reader is automatically made to sympathize with the erring heroine and her suffering.\textsuperscript{187} At several points in the novel, the narrator even explicitly addresses the reader whilst trying to defend Isabel’s intentions and actions in order to stimulate the reader’s sympathy: “Oh, reader! never doubt the principles of poor Lady Isabel, her rectitude of mind, her wish and endeavour to do right, her abhorrence of wrong; her spirit was earnest and true, her intentions were pure” (EL 218). Even though Lady Isabel’s decision to abandon her husband and children remains hard to justify, towards the end of the novel, the narrator does attempt to justify Lady Isabel’s second improper decision to return to her former home whilst secretively harbouring loving feelings for her former husband:

\begin{quote}
I shall get blame for it, I fear, if I attempt to defend her. But it was not exactly the same thing, as though she had suffered herself to fall in love with somebody else’s husband. Nobody would defend \textit{that}. [...] Had Lady Isabel fallen in love with – say – Mr Crosby, she would have deserved a little judicious chastisement at Mr Crosby’s hands. [...] But this was a peculiar case. She, poor thing, almost regarded Mr Carlyle as \textit{her} husband. The bent of her thoughts was only too much inclined to this. (That evil human heart again!) Many and many a time did she wake up from a reverie, and strive to drive this mistaken view of things away from her, taking shame to herself. [...] Mr Carlyle’s love was not hers now; it was Barbara’s: Mr Carlyle did not belong to her; he belonged to his wife. (EL 590-591)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{185} Showalter: 173.
\textsuperscript{186} Pykett: 132.
\textsuperscript{187} Lyn Pykett (130) writes: “Throughout the novel, but particularly in its final volume, the reader is repeatedly invited to identify with Isabel through the text’s staging of the spectacle of her maternal suffering. The reader is simultaneously made into a spectator of Isabel’s sufferings and drawn into an emotional investment in them through the narrator’s rhetorical excess.”
In this passage the narrator attempts to stimulate the reader’s sympathetic feelings for Lady Isabel by stressing the exceptionality of her situation and the persistence of her innate goodness, of her strong sense of right and wrong. Nevertheless, towards the end of the novel, the female narrator’s main strategy in her appeal to the reader’s sympathy is her emphasis on the exceptional power of human emotions:

Let people talk as they will, it is impossible to drive out human passions from the human heart. You may suppress them, deaden them, keep them in subjection, but you cannot root them out. (EL 590)

I agree with you [reader] that she [Isabel] ought never to have come back; that it was an act little short of madness: but are you quite sure that you would not have done the same, under the facility and the temptation? And now you can abuse me for saying it, if it will afford you any satisfaction. (EL 591)

Thus, even though the novel in many ways stresses the importance of the proper regulation of emotions, in both these passages, the narrator explicitly naturalizes, universalizes, and consequently also justifies, human affect and its strength.\(^\text{188}\)

Pykett remarks that via such sympathetic narratorial interventions the novel engages in some sort of dialogic “manipulation of point of view” because these interventions urge the readers to condemn and, at the same time, sympathize with the heroine:

The middle-class reader (especially the female reader) must ultimately reject Isabel, with whom she has become increasingly involved as the text progresses, in favour of Barbara, a character […] who is represented as progressively less sympathetic. These shifts of sympathy and identification depend partly on the way in which the text positions the reader vis-à-vis the characters. […] [T]he reader is most closely involved in Barbara’s emotional life in those scenes in which she transgresses those norms of the proper feminine which she is later used to exemplify. […] However, once Barbara has effectively changed positions with Isabel, she is viewed from a more distanced perspective and becomes of less emotional interest. [At the same time,] the reader’s emotional

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\(^{188}\) As I mentioned in chapter six, at a certain point in the novel the narrator also makes an effort to defend Isabel’s actions by naturalizing a particular type of affect: maternal affect.
involvement with Isabel intensifies as she, in turn, becomes the spectator in the triangle [and the transgressor of proper norms].

Thus, like E. Ann Kaplan, Lyn Pykett observes that “[Isabel’s, the imperfect and erring woman’s,] intense emotionality captures our interest, while Barbara [the perfect woman] ceases to have much appeal once happily married.” Consequently, Pykett insightfully concludes that “[a]lthough the novel ultimately rejects the transgressive, improper femininity of Isabel in favour of Barbara’s proper femininity, it has in the process [via its manipulation of point of view], to some extent, destabilised the reader’s identification with, and commitment to, the normative category of bourgeois femininity.”

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189 Pykett: 132-133.
190 Kaplan: 83.
191 Pykett: 133.
8. Conclusion

One element that nineteenth-century advice literature and Mrs. Henry Wood’s mid-nineteenth-century novel *East Lynne* clearly have in common is their focus on the female/feminine, the (Victorian middle-class) home and the (Victorian middle-class) family. As I mentioned in chapter four, nineteenth-century advice literature was a non-fictional literary genre, written especially by and for women, that aimed to diffuse and uphold the Victorian “cult of domesticity” (which firmly situated women within the domestic and familial sphere) by means of providing the middle-class wife with a domestic education as complete as possible. The 1860s sensation novel *East Lynne* was written by a woman and, as Lyn Pykett remarks, also hugely appealed to a female readership because it “[largely] deals with women’s experience of the family from a woman’s point of view.”\(^{192}\)

As a novel which describes the lives and family situations of several female characters and which is told by a (presumably) female omniscient narrator, *East Lynne* indeed presents a particularly feminine focus. Furthermore, this utterly feminine novel is, to a large extent, engaged in endorsing the Victorian domestic ideology and/or the Victorian feminine ideal that was expounded, for instance, in advice manuals.

Andrew Maunder rightly contends that *East Lynne* displays (like many advice manuals as well) “a highly topical concern with the need to distinguish good and bad women, along with a related attempt to re-invest middle-class women with a sense of their duties as mothers of the race.”\(^ {193}\) Indeed, as the preceding analysis has demonstrated, in *East Lynne* most female characters are defined in relation to their understanding of and adherence to the norms and values that were related to the three most important domains of ideal Victorian femininity: domesticity, maternity, and morality.\(^ {194}\) In addition, the novel appears to seek to determine each female character’s level of femininity by means of comparing and contrasting several female characters with one another on all three of the feminine domains. The most important feminine comparison contained in the novel is the comparison between the heroine, the aristocratic Lady Isabel Vane, and her middle-class counterpart, Barbara Hare. While Barbara is (increasingly) depicted as the embodiment of ideal femininity, Isabel’s femininity is gradually undermined throughout the novel. The

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\(^{192}\) Lyn Pykett: 124.

\(^{193}\) Andrew Maunder, “‘Stepchildren of Nature’: *East Lynne* and the Spectre of Female Degeneracy, 1860-1861” (*Victorian Crime, Madness and Sensation*): 69.

\(^{194}\) It is probably useful to remind the reader of the fact that the discussion of woman’s status as a wife or spouse (which, of course, was one of the essential feminine roles or tasks) was included and discussed as part of the first feminine domain: domesticity.
novel represents Isabel as a woman who is hampered in her understanding of true womanhood by her, typically aristocratic, emotional frailty and dependency. Barbara, on the other hand, is presented (especially throughout the second half of the novel) as a young woman who displays a thorough understanding of women’s domestic, maternal and moral duties.

The main plot of Mrs. Henry Wood’s *East Lynne* thus largely centres around the replacement of the imperfect woman, Lady Isabel, with the perfect woman, Barbara. Whilst describing this process of replacement, the novel, very much like nineteenth-century advice literature, explains and maintains “the cult of domesticity and true womanhood” by contrasting examples of good, perfect femininity with examples of bad, imperfect femininity. Interestingly, many of Wood’s characters (serving either as good or bad examples) often display striking similarities to the good and/or bad character sketches included in Victorian advice manuals. Consequently, it can be argued that both nineteenth-century advice literature and Mrs. Henry Wood’s *East Lynne* have recorded the Victorian age’s often stereotypical outlook on female character. An important feature that is stereotypically linked to ideal femininity in both nineteenth-century advice literature and the nineteenth-century novel *East Lynne* is class status. As I mentioned in chapter four, the Victorian domestic ideology, which enforced the separation of the public and private spheres, was central to the creation and preservation of middle-class power. By explaining and encouraging the domestic feminine ideal, nineteenth-century advice literature thus functioned as a type of social device that aimed to maintain the power of the middle class within society. To a certain extent, Mrs. Henry Wood’s novel *East Lynne* also seems to contribute to the social end of preserving middle-class power. Ultimately, the novel not only includes an explanation and appreciation of the “cult of domesticity,” but (especially by allowing the middle-class Barbara Hare to triumph over the aristocratic Lady Isabel Vane) it also delivers the story of the material and moral victory of the bourgeoisie over the aristocracy.195

Because the novel is (partly) engaged in the endorsement of middle-class power and the middle class’s “cult of domesticity,” Mrs. Henry Wood’s *East Lynne* was, in the twentieth century, frequently dismissed as a conventional and conservative women’s novel.

195 Audrey Jaffe (104–105) observes: “*East Lynne* allegorizes a social shift: the replacement of Isabel and her father by Carlyle and Barbara signals the replacement of the aristocracy by the professional middle class, and the novel’s representation of bourgeois life is inseparable from its project of engendering desire for that life.”
Nevertheless, the analysis contained in this dissertation, admittedly together with many other contemporary (feminist) literary critics’ analyses of the novel,\(^{196}\) has repeatedly demonstrated that *East Lynne* is a highly ambiguous novel which takes up a rather complex ideological and moral position. While the preceding analysis of the novel has revealed many resemblances between the Victorian domestic ideology’s conception of ideal femininity and *East Lynne*’s conception of femininity, it has also demonstrated that *East Lynne* in several ways (partly) subverts, or at least undermines, that same ideology. Throughout its various chapters and in its treatment of various feminine topics (especially domesticity, maternity and morality), the novel carefully uncovers various difficulties and constraints that were enforced upon women by Victorian society.

Firstly, by focusing on Isabel’s marital problems in the first half of the novel and her maternal problems in the second half of the novel, Mrs. Henry Wood not only evidences Isabel’s feminine imperfections, but also carefully discloses the extremely demanding, and often also contradictory, nature of wifehood and motherhood. The first half of the novel especially focuses on (what Pykett has called) Isabel’s “domestic entrapment,”\(^{197}\) which has been shown to be procured both by Isabel’s domestic incompetence and Cornelia’s (Isabel’s sister-in-law’s) dominance. As Lyn Pykett very insightfully observes, by depicting a wife who is entrapped and tyrannised within her own home, *East Lynne* “exposes the severe limitations of [the Victorian domestic] ideology” which attempted to justify “women’s lack of public political power [...] by the argument that within their own domestic sphere, as wives and mothers, [women] held complete sway.”\(^{198}\) Throughout the second half of the novel, much attention is paid to the topic of motherhood; and this topic also elicits ambiguous opinions expressed by the novel’s narrator and/or creator. Even though *East Lynne*’s narrative voice seems to favour Barbara’s sensibly detached form of maternity over Isabel’s excessively emotional form of

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\(^{196}\) Most of the feminist literary critics whose work is included in this dissertation have noticed and discussed the novel’s ambiguous ideological position. For instance, Lyn Pykett (133) has concluded that “[a]lthough the novel ultimately rejects the transgressive, improper femininity of Isabel in favour of Barbara’s proper femininity, it has in the process, to some extent, destabilised the reader’s identification with, and commitment to, the normative category of bourgeois femininity.” Somewhat similarly, Emma Liggins (61) observes that “although the text may ultimately work to reposition women as domestic creatures, the signalling of women’s discontent remains high on the agenda.” E. Ann Kaplan (86), for example, argues that “[a]lthough Isabel suffers for her transgressions (the novel in that sense supports the patriarchal law), the very articulation of the difficulties of women’s lives, of the constraints that hemmed them in, of the lack of any place in the system for female desire, of the contradictory demands made upon women, surely gave some satisfaction to female readers.”

\(^{197}\) Pykett: 125.

\(^{198}\) Pykett: 126.
maternity, the narrator of the novel also explicitly presents (excessive) maternal feeling as a phenomenon that is natural to all women. In this manner, the novel exposes the contradictory demands made upon the mother, who was especially expected to attend to her children’s moral upbringing, but also naturally inclined to be involved in their physical and emotional upbringing.

Secondly, by paying particular attention to the subject of female jealousy or (what Pykett calls) “intra-female rivalry,” Mrs. Henry Wood also carefully illuminates women’s lack of actual, public power. As I mentioned in chapter seven, nearly all of *East Lynne*’s female characters enter into jealous rivalry with one another at a certain point in the story. Both Ann Cvetkovich and Lyn Pykett indicate that such rivalry between women is related to women’s lack of power. Cvetkovich argues that the novel’s emphasis on the pervasive strength of female jealousy exposes the fact that women’s “[dependence] on the protection and support of men” rendered them “more susceptible to [...] fears of exclusion and isolation [and, consequently, also to] jealousy.” Pykett correctly states that, by including this “intra-female rivalry” as an important subtext, Wood’s novel exposes that the domestic ideology endowed women with a merely subordinate form of power which was “usually exercised [only within the private, domestic sphere and] only in relation to children and other women.”

Thirdly, whilst stressing that it is important for women to restrain their emotions and desires, *East Lynne* also presents the requirement of self-restraint or self-control as a source of huge suffering for women. Ann Cvetkovich has insightfully argued that, since the novel continually “[represents] female identity in terms of being emotional,” *East Lynne* “makes the oppression of women equivalent to the repression of affect.” As I mentioned in chapter seven, the novel’s final scene celebrates Barbara’s vigorous emotional self-control and, subsequently, explicitly stresses the importance and benefit of (emotional) self-regulation. Nevertheless, throughout the entire novel, most female characters are portrayed as, either momentarily or continually, burdened by the need to “hide [their] feelings, stay silent, and put up with their lot in life.” Especially the novel’s heroine, Lady Isabel, is portrayed as a woman who constantly suffers from the need to

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199 Pykett: 125.
200 Ann Cvetkovich: 110.
201 Pykett: 125.
202 Cvetkovich: 105.
203 Cvetkovich: 105.
suppress her feelings. Throughout the first half of the novel, Isabel suffers from marital insecurities and from a difficult relationship with her sister-in-law; and, throughout the second half of the novel, Isabel suffers from guilt and from being unable to reveal her true identity to her children and former husband. Interestingly, the narrator explicitly stresses that in both cases (thus both before and after her sin) Isabel continues to suffer in silence because society considered it inappropriate for women to express their emotions. As Cvetkovich has argued, this emphasis on Isabel’s fear to speak up is central to the novel’s early-feminist tendency since it implicitly exposes Victorian society’s oppression of women and “makes it possible for the [female] reader to imagine that women could alleviate their oppression by articulating their feelings.”

Fourthly, it has been demonstrated that *East Lynne*’s ambiguity and its consequent subversiveness are especially related to a specific element of the text: the incitement of sympathy for Lady Isabel Vane, the erring heroine. Even though Isabel’s lack of perfect femininity and her sinful decisions are ultimately condemned in the novel via the strong moralizing voice of her narrator, the implied author also continually invites the (female) reader to sympathize and identify with Lady Isabel. Throughout the entire novel, the narrator employs several strategies to ensure the reader’s emotional involvement in Isabel’s feelings and sufferings. For instance, from beginning to end, the narrator occasionally reminds the reader of Isabel’s good feminine qualities, especially her kind and benevolent nature. In addition, the narrator does not fail to expose the failures and mistakes of the novel’s other female characters, consequently also exposing some of those female characters as maybe even more imperfect and unfeminine than Lady Isabel. Finally, as Lyn Pykett has observed as well, the (presumably) female narrator most emphatically secures the reader’s sympathy by means of her vivid and sympathetic descriptions of Lady Isabel’s marital and maternal (and actually also moral) sufferings. Interestingly, several critics have also observed that while the reader’s emotional involvement with Lady Isabel Vane and her sufferings only increases as the novel progresses, Barbara Hare (Isabel’s perfectly feminine counterpart) ultimately becomes less sympathetic and less emotionally interesting.

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204 Cvetkovich: 102.
205 Pykett: 131.
To sum up, Pykett correctly concludes that “[a]lthough the novel ultimately rejects the transgressive, improper femininity of Isabel in favour of Barbara’s proper femininity, it has in the process, to some extent, destabilised the reader’s identification with, and commitment to, the normative category of bourgeois femininity.”

Taking into consideration all of the preceding subversive elements, Mrs. Henry Wood’s *East Lynne* is best defined as a novel that continually vacillates between conventionality and unconventionality, between conservatism and liberalism. Consequently, besides the above-mentioned analogies with several of the typical features of advice literature, *East Lynne* also displays several important divergences from the contents, techniques and goals of this instructional non-fictional genre. For instance, it is remarkable that both the examined advice manuals and Mrs. Henry Wood’s novel are written in a very moralizing and rather patronizing (although often female) voice. Nevertheless, only in *East Lynne* is this voice (the female narrator’s voice) used to support the Victorian domestic ideology as well as to undercut it by subtly exposing its inconsistencies and pressure points and by encouraging sympathetic feelings for erring women. In addition, as mentioned before, both nineteenth-century advice manuals and the nineteenth-century novel *East Lynne* utilize the contrast between examples of good feminine behaviour and examples of bad feminine behaviour in order to educate and emphasize the importance of the domestic ideology and/or the feminine ideal. Nevertheless, since the novel, unlike the advice manuals, not only condemns but also sympathizes with the plight of some of its imperfect women or bad examples (especially with that of the sinful heroine Lady Isabel), *East Lynne* also undermines the domestic ideology and the accompanying feminine ideal.

Finally, nineteenth-century advice literature specifically sought to prescribe one rather rigid feminine ideal, and, in the process, somewhat obscured female (character) diversity. It is true that, from a twentieth-century (feminist) point of view, contradictory advice and information concerning ideal femininity or true womanhood might be discerned in advice manuals. For instance, in chapter four, I mentioned that the use of negative

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206 Lyn Pykett (132) states that “[t]he middle-class reader (especially the female reader) must ultimately reject Isabel, with whom she has become increasingly involved as the text progresses, in favour of Barbara, a character [...] who is represented as progressively less sympathetic.” Similarly, E. Ann Kaplan (83) observes that “[Isabel’s] intense emotionality captures our interest, while Barbara ceases to have much appeal once happily married.”

207 Pykett: 133.
exemplary anecdotes in advice manuals, on the one hand, underlines the usefulness of educating women about the domestic ideology, but, on the other hand, also reveals that many people in society failed to live up to this rather demanding ideology. Nevertheless, because advice literature’s essential goal was to teach and preserve the domestic ideology, the official concept of womanhood, authors of advice manuals generally ignored and obscured the ideology’s contradictions in their works. By contrast, Mrs. Henry Wood’s novel *East Lynne* has shown to include and also respect diverse (albeit often stereotypical) patterns of femininity, which the (female) reader might alternately reject or identify with at different points in the novel.  

Consequently, it might be argued that by including a multitude of diverse and often slightly imperfect female characters, *East Lynne* exposes the rigid and nearly unattainable nature of the Victorian concept of ideal femininity.

To tie this all together, in my opinion, the preceding arguments have demonstrated that around the mid-nineteenth century the domestic ideology and the accompanying feminine ideal still strongly prevailed, but were nevertheless valued somewhat differently in fictional and non-fictional literary productions. While non-fictional productions, such as advice manuals and etiquette books, continued to propagate a strict and uniform version of true womanhood, a mid-nineteenth-century fictional production like Mrs. Henry Wood’s sensation novel *East Lynne* (admittedly still rather carefully and also rather intricately) dared to question society’s rigid version of true womanhood by addressing the difficulties and ambiguities it produced for the female sex.

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Emma Liggins (65) observes something similar with regard to Mrs. Henry Wood’s novel *East Lynne* when she states that “[East Lynne’s diverse characters] offered readers contradictory models of femininity, suggesting that Wood’s punishment of her heroine was meant to activate a variety of interpretations of the domestic woman, rather than simply making an example of a bad manager.”

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Mrs. Henry Wood’s novel *East Lynne* (1860-1861) primarily tells the story of Lady Isabel Vane, the aristocratic daughter of the extravagant, wasteful Earl of Mount Severn. The novel is (mainly) set at the country estate East Lynne, which is located in the fictional British town West Lynne. At the outset of the story, the Earl of Mount Severn sells his summer residence, East Lynne, to Mr. Archibald Carlyle (a local town lawyer) in an attempt to solve his money problems. Several months later, the Earl of Mount Severn dies from gout, and his eighteen-year-old daughter Lady Isabel Vane is left parentless and moneyless. Consequently, Lady Isabel is forced to move to the estate of her uncle and aunt (the new Lord and Lady Mount Severn) at Castle Marling (another fictional British town). At the estate of her relatives, Isabel is extremely unhappy because she is subjected to the vicious and jealous treatment of her aunt Lady Mount Severn. After a few months, however, Isabel is “saved” from this awful situation by Mr. Carlyle when he proposes to her. The couple soon marries, and Lady Isabel returns to East Lynne as Mr. Carlyle’s wife.

In the years that follow, Mr. Carlyle and Lady Isabel have three children: Isabel Lucy, William, and Archibald. Their marriage, however, is not altogether happy. Isabel silently suffers from boredom and loneliness, and also from being subjected to the will of her dominant sister-in-law Cornelia Carlyle. In addition, after overhearing some servants’ gossip, Isabel begins to suspect that her husband is having an affair with a family friend, Barbara Hare. Indeed, Archibald Carlyle and Barbara Hare get together regularly. Their meetings are, however, related to a matter entirely different from romance. Aside from the main plot about Lady Isabel Vane, Mrs. Henry Wood’s novel *East Lynne* also contains a subplot about the Hare family, more specifically about Richard Hare, Barbara’s older brother, who has left West Lynne after being (wrongfully) accused of the murder of George Hallijohn. Barbara starts to confer regularly with friend and lawyer Archibald Carlyle after having received a surprise visit from her brother who claims to be innocent. Together, Barbara and Mr. Carlyle attempt to exonerate Barbara’s brother by trying to locate a man named Captain Thorn, who is, according to Richard, the real murderer of George Hallijohn.

After the birth of her third child, Isabel is sent to France by her doctors and her husband in an attempt to improve her failing health. During this compulsory trip to France,
Isabel runs into a former suitor of hers, Francis Levison, towards whom she used to entertain romantic feelings. Feeling revived and excited by Francis Levison’s companionship, Isabel’s health soon improves. Shortly after Isabel’s return to East Lynne, Mr. Carlyle (who is unaware of his wife’s friend’s vicious nature) offers Francis Levison legal aid and invites him to stay at East Lynne for a while. During his stay at East Lynne, Francis Levison takes advantage of Mr. Carlyle’s and Isabel’s trust. He gradually resuscitates Isabel’s amorous jealousy of Barbara Hare by means of subjecting Isabel to his lies and deceptions. Eventually, Isabel becomes so consumed by her feelings of incompetence, insecurity and jealousy that she rashly decides to run off with her former suitor Francis Levison, thus abandoning her husband and children.

Lady Isabel soon begins to regret her irrational decision to leave her family. She also realizes that Francis Levison is a vicious man; but, as a fallen woman, she has no other option than to remain with him. After a few years, Francis Levison unexpectedly comes into a fortune and abruptly abandons Isabel and their illegitimate son. Thereupon Isabel decides to leave her home at Grenoble and to start looking for a job as a governess. She embarks upon a train journey together with her child and a maid. During this journey, however, a railway accident occurs. The maid and the baby are instantly killed, and Lady Isabel is severely injured. Since she is expected to die from her severe injuries, Isabel decides to send a farewell letter, in which she asks for forgiveness, to her uncle. Ultimately, Isabel survives the railway accident; but, due to the severe injuries she sustained, she is left disfigured nearly beyond recognition. Thereupon, Isabel decides to change her name (to Madame Vine) and play dead to her friends and relatives.

Nearly a year after the presumed death of his former wife, Mr. Carlyle marries Isabel’s former rival, Barbara Hare. In the mean time, Isabel (posing as Madame Vine) has been working as a governess for the Crosby family in Germany. After a few years of occupying this position, Isabel loses her job because her pupil is about to get married. One morning, a friend of the Crosbys informs Isabel (or Madame Vine) that the Carlyles (Archibald and Barbara) are looking for a new governess for Mr. Carlyle’s eldest children. A bit later, the now (nearly) unrecognizable Lady Isabel decides to return to East Lynne as the governess of her own children. At East Lynne, Isabel’s emotions are seriously taxed. She primarily suffers from not being able to reveal her true identity to her children, but also from having to witness the marital bliss of her former husband and his new wife. In
addition, Isabel is made to witness the slowly approaching death of her eldest son, William, who suffers from consumption.

Thus, with Lady Isabel’s agonizing secretive presence at East Lynne, both the novel’s main plot and subplot are unravelled. In the third and final part of the novel, Mr. Carlyle puts himself forward for the position of West Lynne’s new Member of Parliament. Francis Levison also returns to West Lynne at this point in the novel because he is Mr. Carlyle’s opponent in the elections. During one of his public appearances at West Lynne, Francis Levison is recognized as the man who used to pose as Captain Thorn many years ago during his visits to George Hallijohn’s daughter Afy. Finally, the real murderer of George Hallijohn is known. The falsely accused Richard Hare (Barbara’s brother) is called to West Lynne to institute legal proceedings against Francis Levison (or Captain Thorn), and, a few months later, Levison is sentenced to life imprisonment for the murder of George Hallijohn. Shortly after Francis Levison’s trial, William Carlyle (Mr. Carlyle’s and Lady Isabel’s eldest son) dies from consumption at East Lynne. After her son’s death, Isabel’s health takes a turn for the worst as well. On her deathbed, Isabel/Madame Vine reveals her true identity to her former husband, Archibald Carlyle, and he is able to forgive her for her rash actions. After Lady Isabel Vane’s death, the novel ends with one final representation of Archibald Carlyle and Barbara Hare as a strong and successful middle-class couple.
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