

Jim Neilson
The 19th Century Novel Podcast
Episode 4

Ellen Wood, *East Lynne*

Part One

Chapters 1-14

By 1860, the novel had become perhaps the most popular form of entertainment in England. What explains its popularity? New technologies enabled texts to be published more quickly and cheaply. The growing rail system ensured wider and faster distribution. Rail travel provided a perfect place to read, well-lit and without the bumpiness of carriage travel, leading to the establishment of train station bookstalls. The first Railway Library, begun by the publishing house Routledge, was established in 1849, publishing cheap texts (sometimes called yellowbacks or mustard-plaster novels) for rail passengers. By its demise in 1898, the Railway Library had published 1277 titles (Barrett). These included novels by Jane Austen and Fenimore Cooper (Wagner), as well as many now long-forgotten popular novels of sensation and adventure with titles like *The Last of the Mortimers* and *A Passion in Tatters* and *An Eye for an Eye* (“Yellowbacks”). In addition to the Railway Library, the growing availability of subscription libraries, in which patrons paid an annual fee, provided cheap access to books, usually divided into three separate volumes. Free public libraries began to appear in 1850 (Altick, *Victorian* 65). A change in postage rates reduced the cost of novels. And serial publication of novels issued in monthly or weekly parts offered even cheaper texts. As historian Robert Darnton asserts, “The wagon, the canal barge, the merchant vessel, the post office, and the railroad may have influenced the history of literature more than one would expect” (qtd. in Patten 484).

Of course, none of this would matter without a large reading public. Education was not compulsory in England until 1880. But literacy rates grew steadily through the century. Literacy became an increasingly necessary skill. As Rice University professor Robert L. Patten puts it: “The British Empire ran on print” (481). W.B. Stephens, History Research Fellow at University College London, identifies some of the factors which promoted literacy in Britain: “The expansion of trade, business, industry, and agriculture . . . created a market for technical literature; growing wealth and the consequent expansion of leisure led to a demand for histories, travel accounts, biographies, [and] novels. . . . Aimed at the lower orders was a thriving production of robust, earthy literature, much of it sensational, scurrilous, and pornographic” (547). By the end of the Victorian period, Britain had almost universal literacy (Patten 503).

Perhaps the greatest boost to readership of novels was the development of a literate middle class with money enough to buy books and leisure enough to read them. Victorian England, with its expanding industry and empire, saw its economy boom, especially during the 1850s and 60s. But however much some prospered, the nation was strictly divided by class. It was the small landed propertied elite who ruled. And it was the vast army of the poor and working class, in factories and fields, who propped up this system.

The middle class, comprising at most 20 percent of the population (Hoppen 33), strove to climb up the social ladder, to live comfortably in homes of their own with servants to do the difficult and dirty work. People in the middle class desired to read about people like themselves, people struggling to uphold the bourgeois values of hearth and home while navigating the complexities of the class system and the ruthlessness of a capitalist economy. As Rutgers professor George Levine explains: “The novel and the burgeoning middle class were, in Victorian England, deeply identified with each other, to the extent that many modern critics have viewed the Victorian novel as a kind of instruction book for the middle class” (12). This desire to read about themselves and learn how people like themselves might struggle or succeed was not mere narcissism but was an expression of middle-class anxiety, an awareness of their tenuous position in a world undergoing disconcertingly rapid change. “It is a crucial fact of nineteenth-century middle-class life, feeding their anxieties and shaping their consciences,” writes historian Peter Gay, “that [the] bourgeois were always, everywhere, even in commercial cities, a minority” (24), threatened by the powerful few above and the desperate many below.

In addition to the impact of new technologies, increased literacy, and a rising middle class, the popularity of novels grew, simply, because of the remarkable flourishing of novelists in the first half of the 19th Century. People wanted to read these books. By 1860, all of Jane Austen’s, the Bronte sisters’ and William Thackeray’s novels had been published. Charles Dickens would write only three novels after this date. Elizabeth Gaskell would publish her last novel at mid-decade. And a new generation of writers—George Eliot, Anthony Trollope, and Wilkie Collins—had begun their literary careers. But these familiar names only hint at the abundance of novels published in England during this time. One scholar, John Sutherland, emeritus professor of English at University College London, has estimated that at least 50,000 novels were published in England during the reign of Queen Victoria (Gettleman 114). In his *Guide to Victorian Fiction*, Sutherland lists 878 novelists, a third of them women (Maunder, Introduction 9). Writing in 1862, the poet and novelist Robert Buchanan suggested that women made up an even greater percentage: “At least two-thirds of all the novels published nowadays,” he asserted, “are by feminine hands.” Among these hands, Buchanan identifies “Mrs. Oliphant, Miss Jewsbury, Mrs. Henry Wood, Mrs. Marsh, Mrs. Trollope, Mrs. Gore, Mrs. Gaskell, Miss Muloch, Mrs. Stowe, Miss Sinclair, Miss Young, and a host of others,” while novelist Charles Reade complained that libraries would “only take in ladies’ novels—Mrs. Henry Wood, Ouida, Miss Braddon—these are their gods” (qtd. in Maunder, Introduction 10). As the novelist Margaret Oliphant proudly declared, “the 19th century, “which is the age of so many things—of engineers, of science, of progress—is quite as distinctly the age of female novelists” (555).

One of the most popular of these was Mrs. Henry Wood, born Ellen Price in 1814 to Elizabeth Evans and Thomas Price. Her mother, according to Elisabeth Jay, English professor at Oxford Brookes University, was “a restless, self-dramatizing, fault-finding woman who laid claims to clairvoyance” (xvii). Her father was a successful glove manufacturer in the city of Worcester, a center for glove-manufacturing, with, at its height, 30,000 people employed in the trade (“History”). (Worcester is also the home of a noted Victorian creation, Worcestershire Sauce, developed by the chemists John Wheeley Lea and William Henry Perrins in the 1830s. This most English of culinary favorites, allegedly, was based on a sauce discovered by an English Lord while serving in India [“Worcestershire”]).

Until the age of seven, Ellen lived in comfort as an only child with her grandparents and was often cared for by their servants. According to Andrew Maunder, Reader in Victorian Studies at the University of Hertfordshire, these servants “delighted her with tales of ghosts and supernatural happenings and left her with a life-long interest in local history which she would later draw on” for much of her fiction (Introduction 10). She developed a deep and precocious love of reading. “At seven years old,” writes her son Charles in his biography of his mother, “she had gone through the studies of girls twice her age” (11). After her grandfather’s death, Ellen returned to her parents’ home and developed a close relationship with her father who Ellen’s son Charles describes as indifferent to the world of business but “remarkable for intellect and refinement, a gentleman and a scholar.” At age 13, Ellen developed a serious and debilitating curvature of the spine (Wood 33), which, writes her son, forced her to spend “her days . . . on a reclining board or couch, from which she seldom moved” (34). Charles Wood goes on to record that “most of her life [for the next four years was] spent upon the reclining couch” (36). One benefit of this confinement was that she was removed from the shallow education middle- and upper-class girls received as preparation for their entry into society. She was not socialized into the ways of the debutante and coquette. Instead, she perused her father’s many volumes and benefited from his close tutoring.

Ultimately, she would recover but remain fragile. Under five feet tall (Maunder, Introduction 10), “She could never raise the most ordinary weight,” her son Charles remembers, “or carry anything heavier than a small book or parasol” (37). At age 22, Ellen Price married Henry Wood, agent for a family banking and shipping firm. She would live the next twenty years in France, giving birth to five children (four of whom would survive), then returning to England after the failure of her husband’s business. In the meantime, she had begun her remarkably prolific literary career, publishing, in a nine-year period in the 1850s, approximately 150 stories and essays in two popular monthly magazines (Jay xviii). In the first four weeks of 1860, she wrote a novel about the evils of drink and the necessity of Christian faith, *Dansebury House*, which won the Scottish Temperance League’s competition for “the best Temperance Tale, illustrative of the injurious effects of Intoxicating Drinks, the advantages of Personal Abstinence, and the demoralizing operations of the Liquor Traffic” (Maunder, Introduction 11). But it would be her next novel, *East Lynne*, that would establish her literary reputation.

As *East Lynne* was being serialized in *The New Monthly Magazine*, beginning in 1860, Wood sent the complete manuscript to the publishing house Chapman and Hall, hoping to have it published as a three-decker (i.e., three-volume) novel. However, the firm’s reader, the well-known poet and novelist George Meredith, was not impressed, describing it as “in the worst style of the present state.” Wood resubmitted her manuscript only to have it again rejected, a different reader finding “Its tone . . . not good for the general public” (qtd. in Maunder, Introduction 18). Her third attempt to publish saw the manuscript returned unread from the publishing house of Smith, Elder, and Company. For her fourth attempt, Wood submitted the manuscript to Bentley and Son, where novelist Geraldine Jewsbury effused, “The story contains a great skill in construction & invention” and declared herself “anxious to read the conclusion for my own amusement!” (698). But she cautioned Bentley and Son not to let Wood edit her own manuscript. “You must by all means,” she wrote, “let the grammar and the composition be *thoroughly* revised by some competent person. The author is not qualified for the task” (698). Thus it was that in 1861 the 47-year-old Ellen Wood, under the penname Mrs. Henry Wood, published her most famous novel, *East Lynne*.

The novel features two main narratives: a marriage and a murder. The bride-to-be is the 18-year-old Isabel Vane, the only child of William Vane, Earl of Mount Severn. We learn immediately that William, faced with debts, is selling his estate, East Lynne, to the lawyer Archibald Carlyle. The 49-year-old Earl had, as a teen, eloped, thereby losing access to his wife's fortune and causing the death of her father, whose weak heart could not cope with the stress and excitement and disappointment brought on by this elopement. And the Earl's wife, guilty over her father's death, slowly "wast[ed] insensibly away" (9), dying when her daughter Isabel was 12. Deprived of a dowry because of the elopement and spending recklessly, the Earl placed his fiscal hopes on another's marriage, his daughter Isabel's. He explains: "she will marry well . . . for she possesses beauty in a rare degree, and has been reared as an English girl should be, not to frivolity and foppery. . . . [but] all goodness and refinement" (10). Isabel has not been educated to be a coquette, to flirt and tease and charm. Instead, Wood writes, "She was as little like a fashionable lady as it was well possible to be, partly because she had hitherto been secluded from the great world, partly from the care bestowed upon her training" (12-13). Concluding his purchase of East Lynne, the lawyer Carlyle, sees Isabel for the first time as she is about to leave for tea with her young aunt Emma and Emma's grandmother, Mrs. Levison. Mr. Carlyle is overwhelmed by her beauty, "not quite sure whether it was a human being: he almost thought it more like an angel." She has "a face of surpassing beauty, beauty that is rarely seen, save from the imagination of a painter, dark shining curls falling on her neck and shoulders smooth as a child's." She looks like "one from a fairer world than this" (11).

At her tea at Mrs. Levison's, Isabel meets Captain Francis Levison, her sister-in-law Emma's first cousin. Wood spells out his dangerous allure: "Few men were so fascinating in manners, . . . in face and in form, few men won so completely upon their hearers' ears, and few were so heartless in their hearts of hearts" (15). The inexperienced Isabel flushes crimson at his admiring looks. Her aunt Emma, on the other hand, criticizes Isabel's appearance—specifically, that she is wearing only a golden necklace (a cross and seven emeralds) and a pair of pearl bracelets. Why not put on your diamonds? she asks. When Isabel says she did not wish to look too fine, Emma sneeringly replies, "you mean to set up in that class of people who pretend to despise ornaments." And she accuses Isabel of "the refinement of affectation" (16), that is, of pretending to be simple and modest, when she should, like Emma and all upper-class women, make a prominent show of her wealth. Failure to do so, failure to visibly assert one's class position, is disingenuous. It shows a lack of respect for the proper role of the aristocracy. And it invites suspicion about one's wealth. Emma responds aggressively to Isabel's modesty not just because her sense of class propriety has been offended but because she's jealous of the 18-year-old Isabel, with "the rich damask of her delicate cheek . . . the luxuriant falling hair . . . the soft dark eyes. . . . [and] the roses on the cheeks" (11). By contrast, Emma "was a little woman of six-and-twenty, very plain face, but elegant in figure" (13). Emma is aware that her handsome cousin, Captain Levison, is taken by Isabel's beauty. Emma sees "the evident admiration Captain Levison evinced for her fresh, young beauty. It quite absorbed him, and rendered him neglectful even of Mrs. Vane" (16). She is jealous as well because Isabel, daughter of the eldest Vane son, is Lady Isabel, whereas she, wife of a younger son, is just Mrs. Vane.

After this interlude, Isabel and her father travel to East Lynne. Mr. Carlyle has agreed to the Earl's request to keep the sale private and to allow him and his daughter a final week's stay at their former estate. Wood maps the class hierarchy here, with homes growing wealthier and more privileged as one moves eastward, from the common folk who live in West Lynne, to the "several

detached gentleman's houses," to the Grove, the home of Mr. Justice Hare, his wife, and their 19-year-old daughter Barbara, and finally to East Lynne itself.

West Lynne is where the working and middle classes live; East Lynne and its surroundings are where the wealthy reside. Wood titles her novel *East Lynne* because it is a synecdoche for—in other words, is an embodiment of Victorian verities—home, family, marriage, and the upper class. While some working-class characters appear in the novel—mostly as domestic servants—Wood does not attempt to show the broad range of English society. She does not, as Charles Dickens does, show the tangled and often cruel intersections of class. Wood makes no attempt to represent the class system from top to bottom. It's more like from top to near the top. In William Vane, Richard Hare, and Archibald Carlyle, Wood presents a cross-section of the upper class. William, Earl of Mount Severn, represents the landed aristocracy, Hare the wealthy gentry, and Carlyle the rising professional class. While the numbers of the first two groups—aristocracy and gentry—were relatively small, their holdings were huge, with approximately 4200 families owning four-fifths of the land in England. The size of their estates was equally large, ranging from 10,000 to more than 30,000 acres (Cannadine 9), with the wealthiest individuals owning multiple estates and, of course, a grand house in a fashionable section of London. We know that the Earl had a house in London, an estate at East Lynne, another in Wales, and perhaps others.

Although the aristocracy would begin its inexorable decline in the last decades of the 19th century, accelerating in the first decades of the 20th, in the late 1840s, when this part of the narrative is taking place, the members of this class were prospering both from their agricultural holdings and their industrial investments (Cannadine 11). The Earl's financial collapse, therefore, is an outlier, is unrepresentative of the financial status of the aristocracy at the time. Wood does not explain what caused the Earl to lose his wealth. Was he an upper-class scoundrel indulging in grand expenses and gambling his money away? Was he the victim of ruthless schemes and bad investments? Did the Earl lose his fortune in a speculative bubble such as the notorious railway mania of the 1840s? Wood doesn't say.

Richard Hare is not the equal of the Earl in rank or wealth. He is not an aristocrat but a squire, a member of the gentry. As such, he serves as magistrate and thus wields considerable local power, which, according to Victorian scholar Richard Altick, allows him to "set the tone of rural and small-town society, sometimes to its benefits and sometimes to its detriment" (*Victorian* 26). The gentry tended to own only one estate on as few as a thousand acres (Cannadine 9). Wood clearly shows the class difference between aristocracy and gentry in her depiction of Carlyle's and Hare's homes. East Lynne is a "beautiful estate [with] . . . a green, undulating park. . . . Large, beautiful trees, affording shelter alike for human beings and for the deer. . . . it was built in the villa style, was white and remarkably cheerful, altogether a desirable place to look upon" (20). By contrast, Richard Hare's home, the Grove is "a square, ugly, red brick house with a weathercock on the top, standing some little distance from the road. A flat lawn extended before it, and close to the palings, which divided it from the road, was a grove of trees, some yards in depth" (20). With nothing regal or classical or even aesthetically pleasing about it, the Hare home reflects its owner's class position, rich but not wealthy, upper class but not noble.

Of these three men, Archibald Carlyle had, initially, the least claim to wealth and power. He is the son of a country lawyer living in middle-class comfort in West Lynne. It's tempting to assume that Carlyle's success reflects the rise of the professional class, given that the latter half of the 19th

century saw substantial growth in professional occupations to meet the needs of a burgeoning capitalist economy and the transformation of England from an agrarian and rural nation to an industrial and urban one (Gourvish 13). However, while a tiny number of top-tier lawyers became wealthy through their legal practices, most did not. In fact, K. Theodore Hoppen, emeritus professor of history at the University of Hull, points out that “books of advice to parents on their son’s choice of career talked dolefully of how the law was a ‘sinking profession,’ of how only 500 of the 4,035 barristers in the 1850s were prospering” (43). Thus, whereas poet Alfred Tennyson’s grandfather, a provincial lawyer, gained wealth enough to purchase a landed estate (Altick, *Victorian* 28), the novelist Anthony Trollope’s mother, Frances, began her career as a novelist because “her husband, an unsuccessful lawyer with a disagreeable personality and unstable mind, would never earn the family bread” (Altick, *Victorian* 51). The purchase of East Lynne by Carlyle, this son of a country lawyer, has little to do with his diligence and skill or his having received “the training of a gentleman, [having] been educated at Rugby, and [having] taken his degree at Oxford” (7), but to inheriting wealth from his father and his father’s childless law partner.

Although 19th century England saw a remarkable rise of the English middle class, substantial movement up the social scale was uncommon, given the rigidity of the class system and the sustained power of the upper classes. In his indispensable *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy*, from which I’ve drawn much of my understanding of the British class system, the historian David Cannadine summarizes the position of the British upper classes at mid-century: “Until the 1870s, power, prestige, and property were . . . exceptionally highly correlated in the patrician elite of the British Isles. . . . In terms of territory, it seems likely that the notables owned a greater proportion of the British Isles than almost any other elite owned of almost any other country” (18-19). Given this highly stratified and unequal class system, those who did rise above their class position often did so thanks to the successes of parents and relatives. In fact, Wood’s father had inherited his glove manufacturing business from his father (“Wood 355), just as Carlyle, besides gaining a large inheritance, has the advantage of taking over his father’s successful law practice.

The dazzling wealth and power of the aristocracy generated a sense of glamour, which is apparent in how excited the people of West Lynne are about the arrival of the Earl and his daughter. Like the rest of the town, which “seems bent on out-dressing the Lady Isabel” (64), the squire’s daughter Barbara Hare is preoccupied with the arrival of this new rival. In her transcendent beauty, divine innocence, and noble bearing, Isabel represents the ideal of Victorian womanhood. It’s no wonder that the townspeople turn out in large numbers at church to gawk at the two nobles. Prominent among these gawkers, Barbara Hare, in anticipation of Isabel’s splendor, has decked herself out in her finest: a pink parasol, a pink bonnet with feather, a “gray brocaded dress and white gloves” (64). But she is undone by the simplicity of Isabel’s dress, a simplicity that enhances her beauty. “She has no silks, and no feathers, and no anything!” cries an aggrieved Barbara, “She’s plainer than anybody in the church!” Barbara can’t help noticing “those brown eyes, so full of sweetness and melancholy” and declaring, “I wish I had not had this streaming pink feather. What fine jackdaws she must deem us all!” (65). Her self-reproach and vanity are not merely a response to Isabel’s beauty but to her own frustrated attempts to attract Mr. Carlyle, the 27-year-old lawyer and secret new owner of East Lynne. His “was a countenance that both men and women liked to look upon,” writes Wood, “the index of an honorable, sincere nature—not that it would have been called a handsome face, so much as a pleasing and a distinguished one” (7).

* * *

Another obstacle to gaining Carlyle's affections is his older half-sister, Cornelia, or Corny, who raised him after the death of his mother. She possesses what to a modern audience are admirable traits: a stubborn independence, a disdain for the demure role expected of women, and a contempt for fashionable class-and-gender-appropriate dress. She has not married and has no intention of doing so. Whereas women like Lady Lowborough (in Anne Bronte's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*) take great pleasure in toying with men's emotions and expectations, Corny dismisses her suitors out of hand. Or as Wood puts it: "All who had approached her with the lovelorn tale, she sent quickly to the right-about." Whereas Mathilda Murray (in Anne Bronte's *Agnes Grey*) enjoys her long teasing relationship with a curate futilely seeking to marry her, Corny puts an immediate end to a curate's similar attempt: "She screamed out that he ought to be ashamed of himself . . . and she flung . . . a basin [filled with treacle pudding] over his spotless shirt-front" (39). But for Wood, Corny's disregard for Victorian conventions renders her grotesque. Those qualities which separate her from the conventions of Victorian womanhood are also those which mark her as villainous: she is controlling, deceitful, cruel, intolerant, abusive, even violent.

Corny, in her role as surrogate mother, is unremitting in her criticism of her brother, Archibald Carlyle. "With an iron hand she liked to rule him now," Wood writes, "just as she had done in the days of his babyhood. And Archibald generally submitted, for the force of habit is strong. . . . the ruling passions of her life were love of Archibald and love of saving money" (37). Though he often bends to her will, Carlyle is much more open-hearted than his sister. Thanks to his generosity, Isabel and her father are allowed to stay in their former home for several months as the Earl suffers from what will turn out to be a fatal case of gout, that disease of indulgence and dissipation associated with the upper class. Upon his death, an army of creditors descends on East Lynne, revealing to Isabel the abject destitution she must now face. She is able briefly to keep these creditors at bay through her noble sincerity and purity: "All anger, at least external anger, was hushed at her sight. She looked so young, so innocent, so childlike in her pretty morning dress of peach-colored muslin, her fair face shaded by its falling curls, so little fit to combat with, or understand *their* business, that instead of pouring forth complaints, they hushed them into silence" (91).

But she is unable to disarm the two men who have laid claim to her father's corpse as collateral. What separates these two men from the others? Why are they immune to her charms? Because they are Jews. These men, "each with a remarkably hooked nose, stole away from the hubbub of the clamourers and peered cunningly about" (89). Here Wood relies on the familiar anti-Semitic stereotype. Hook-nosed and cunning, these Jews, presumably money-lenders, do not show reverence for the dead, as Christians would, but instead see the Earl's body as a tool to enrich themselves. In depicting this laying claim to a body, Wood is drawing on local history. The funeral of Robert Carr, Bishop of Worcester and a friend of her father, "was interrupted by creditors who seized his coffin in lieu of debts" (Jay qtd. in Wood, 625n95). Seizing a body as payment for debt occurs in at least two other 19th century novels, Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* and Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. (Altick, *Presence*, 665n). But without the hook-nosed creditors. This scene is not the only appearance of antisemitism in *East Lynne*. Later in the novel, following the anti-Semitic stereotype of Jews as physically weak and inactive, Wood renders a Jewish lawyer as short and grossly over-weight, "about five times the breadth [of two normal-sized men] rolled into one." "The lawyer's name," Wood writes, "was Rubiny, ill-naturedly supposed to be a corruption of Reuben" (475). This character appears nowhere else in the novel and thus serves as a gratuitous bit of racist

humor. About this scene, Elisabeth Jay comments, “Wood manages to cast an anti-Semitic slur while apparently disavowing it” (639n475).

The most famous instance of anti-Semitism in Victorian literature, of course, is the character Fagin in Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* (published 24 years before *East Lynne*). Although the hooked-nose appearance of Fagin owes more to George Cruikshank’s illustrations than to Dickens’s descriptions, Dickens nonetheless depicts “the Jew” (as he frequently calls Fagin) as an evil homunculus: “It seemed just the night when it befitted such a being as the Jew to be abroad. As he glided stealthily along, creeping beneath the shelter of the walls and doorways, the hideous old man seemed like some loathsome reptile, engendered in the slime and darkness through which he moved: crawling forth, by night, in search of some rich offal for a meal. gleefully gazing at his purloined treasures” (153). And of course the Jew is obsessed with riches: “His eyes glistened,” Dickens writes, “as he raised the lid [of a small box hidden in a trap in the floor] and looked in. . . . and took from it a magnificent gold watch, sparkling with jewels. . . . ‘Aha!’ said the Jew, shrugging his shoulders and distorting every feature with a hideous grin” (67).

However, at the time of the writing of *East Lynne*, Britain had taken significant steps toward inclusion, toward recognizing the common humanity of Jews. As Frank Felsenstein, Emeritus Professor of English at Ball State University, explains in his book on anti-Semitic stereotypes in English popular culture: “many of the old assumptions that cast Jews as fiendish assassins and infernal bogeymen came to be viewed by the [1830s] with an increasing skepticism coupled with what appears to be an unfeigned remorse at their vile treatment in former times” (220). In 1848, the House of Commons approved the Jews Relief Act, which would allow Jews to enter Parliament without having to swear an oath on “the true Faith of a Christian.” Ten years later, in 1858, the bill was approved by the House of Lords. David Salomons, the first Jewish mayor of London, was elected in 1855. The Jewish born Anglican convert Benjamin Disraeli would become Prime Minister seven years after the publication of *East Lynne*. And in 1871, Parliament passed the Universities Test Act, which opened Oxford, Cambridge, and Durham universities to Catholics, non-conformists, Jews, and other non-Christians.

But stereotypes aren’t erased by legislation. They persisted in the culture, as reflected in Wood’s depiction of the carrion-like Jews hovering over the corpse of the Earl. Writing in 1847, the novelist and Jewish historian Grace Aguilar noted that Jews “are yet regarded as aliens and strangers; and still, unhappily but too often, as objects of rooted prejudice and dislike” (qtd. in Ragussis 302). Thirty years later, in 1877, in a review of George Eliot’s novel *Daniel Deronda*, Joseph Jacobs voiced a similar complaint: “There yet remains a deep unconscious undercurrent of prejudice against the Jew which conscientious Englishmen have often to fight against” (107). Yet the once-prevailing anti-Semitism did wane due to Enlightenment views about equality, to a sense, especially as England’s self-regard grew to match its growing wealth and power, that this religious prejudice could not be reconciled with a belief in “England’s green and pleasant land,” and to the recognition that a capitalist economy needed to respect and support successful capitalists, their religious beliefs notwithstanding. A bit of this more progressive view is apparent in the novel. When a businessman, Mr. Warburton, alleges that half of the Earl’s creditors must be Jews who, therefore, will find losing a little money “an agreeable novelty,” the new Earl angrily responds, “Jews have as much right to their own as we have” (102-3).

This defense of the rights of capital does nothing to help Isabel. Left penniless and homeless, she has no choice but to move in with her uncle Raymond Vane and his wife Emma, the new Lord and Lady Mount Severn. We met Emma earlier when she criticized Isabel for not wearing her finest jewels and being in “that class of people who pretend to despise ornaments” (16). The 26-year-old Emma sees herself as far more sophisticated and worldly than the 18-year-old Isabel who she had “complimented . . . for being little better than an imbecile” (18). And she remains jealous of the seeming perfection of Isabel who even her husband declares is “as gentle and sweet-tempered a girl as I ever saw” (112). Needless to say, Isabel is not eager to live with Emma. She tells herself she would rather die than live with Aunt Emma. But, as Wood notes, it would be impossible for a woman of Isabel’s class background to survive on her own: “Young demoiselles are somewhat prone to indulge in these flights of fancy; but they are in most cases impracticable and foolish. . . . Work for their living? It may appear very feasible in theory; but. . . . The plain fact was, that Isabel had no alternative whatever, save that of accepting a home with Lady Mount Severn” (105).

Emma, Lady Mount Severn, is equally opposed to Isabel’s living with her and gives in only because her husband demands it. Married to “a tall stout man” with cold manners and “countenance severe,” a man 19 years her senior, Emma relishes flirting with the young, dashing Captain Levison, but Isabel’s beauty entices him away from her. While Lord Mount Severn is in Paris, Isabel is abused verbally, psychologically, and even physically by Emma. Their antagonism climaxes when the jealous Emma accuses the innocent Isabel “in a torrent of reproach and abuse, most degrading and unjustifiable” (114) of flirting with Captain Levison. Isabel takes umbrage that her inferior has the gall to accuse her, that “an earl’s daughter, so much better born than Emma Mount Severn, [should] be thus insultingly accused in the other’s mad jealousy” (114). Interestingly, Isabel is consistently described as being modest and not caring about her class position. That Wood has her recognize her class superiority here suggests that when pushed (by Emma’s mistreatment and Isabel’s own recent impoverishment) even the most open-hearted aristocrat will fall back upon belief in their privilege and superiority. Isabel vigorously denies Emma’s accusation, indignantly responding, “There is but one inmate of this house who flirts, so far as I have seen since I have lived in it: it is you, not I” (114). At which Emma turns white with rage, strikes Isabel twice in the face and, when her young son enters the room, “box[es] [him] for his noise, [jerks] him out of the room, and [tells] him he[is] a monkey” (115). Clearly, Emma Vane is no Angel in the House.

Soon thereafter the lawyer Archibald Carlyle arrives (he’s been nearby on other matters). Emma encourages Carlyle’s pursuit of Isabel, eager to send her away. Although she has begun to think she may love Captain Levison, Isabel is eager to leave the awful atmosphere of the Severn home. Isabel, like other middle and upper-class women who lose their income, has few other options. Seemingly without the inclination or the education to work as a governess or the skill to become a writer, her only option is to rely upon someone else, either to live with relatives or to marry. The former having failed miserably, Isabel agrees with some reluctance to marry Carlyle and to live with him in East Lynne. He understands she does not love him but hopes in time her heart will open to him.

Chapters 15-19

Before they have a chance to move into their home as husband and wife, the angry and jealous Corny, Mr. Carlyle's sister, lets her house for rent, replaces her brother's servants with her own, and moves into East Lynne. She is there when the newlyweds arrive. Corny manipulates both her brother and his new wife into accepting her as mistress of the house. She takes on the duties of managing the household, and her brother continues his work as lawyer, depriving Isabel of what should be, by Victorian principles, her proper role as household manager and leaving her with little to do on the isolated estate.

For a novel that looks at the various ways women's lives are constrained and contorted by patriarchal rule, there's little direct criticism of the patriarchal system which has determined their fates. On the contrary, Wood suggests that women themselves are largely responsible for such woes. Isabel suffers because of the abuse she receives from a trio of women: Barbara, Corny, and Emma. Their mistreatment of her derives from an identical cause: jealousy. From the time she first sees Isabel, Barbara is jealous of her beauty and self-possession. This jealousy becomes rancorous once Isabel marries Mr. Carlyle. Corny has contempt for what she sees as Isabel's frivolous nature and she, too, develops a deep jealousy once Isabel marries her brother. Emma likewise is jealous of Isabel's ability to attract a man, in this case, Captain Levison. There's a mean-girls quality to all of this. Isabel does little to attract Carlyle or Levison other than be her beautiful innocent self. It's precisely these qualities—her beauty and class and character—that infuriate the three women. Hence, they poke at her appearance, Corny seeing the fine clothes she wears to a rustic concert as inappropriate and vain, Emma seeing her lack of display as disingenuous. It's striking that someone who seems to embody the essential traits of Victorian womanhood is criticized by other women. Isabel is too angelic, too perfect, and so the three women must pick at her, must find her flaws. It's as if Wood is saying that this standard of womanhood, perfectly pure and innocently charming, can't exist in the real world of self-interest and individual desire. These women, of course, are products of their culture. To understand why they respond so egregiously to the blameless Isabel, then, we need to consider their own histories.

We know little of Emma's upbringing, other than that her mother is dead. Unlike Isabel, she has no title. But she has pretensions of being a lady. "She had," Wood writes, "the greatest horror of soiling her hands or her gloves [and] had a particular antipathy to doing anything useful" (14). She has married a considerably older man, the presumptive heir to an earldom, presumably to luxuriate in his wealth while hoping for a title. She wishes she were not encumbered by this marriage and could be free to enjoy a life of pleasure with Captain Levison. The animus she feels for Isabel, therefore, is an expression of her own frustration. She cannot attack the real source of her anger, the male-defined class system that has kept her from pursuing her genuine desires, and so she attacks a convenient foil, the young and pretty Isabel.

Although strongly anti-Victorian in her repudiation of marriage, Corny is in other ways a model Victorian. She has devoted her life to caring for a surrogate son. He has even called her Mummy. She is prudent and self-sacrificing and religious. And she possesses many domestic skills. Her intemperance toward her suitors and her angry response to her brother's marriage, though, suggest a different reading of her character. To respond so disproportionately to these offenses suggests that at some level she is aware of all that she has sacrificed to be the dutiful brother-protecting

surrogate mom. She has denied herself true companionship, let alone romance. She seems to have little if any interior life. And for all the work she put into raising her brother, she was not rewarded financially. The family inheritance went overwhelmingly to Archibald. No surprise, then, that she enjoys announcing her brother's marriage to the heartsick Barbara. At least she can experience the pleasure of watching another suffer. And by physically injecting herself into the newlyweds' home and managing its many domestic demands, Corny supplants Isabel as mistress of the home, forcing her to turn inward for solace. Although more devil than angel in the house, Corny nonetheless is of the house and is thus adhering, however perversely, to the Victorian gender code.

Barbara Hare has grown up in a secure, upper-middle class family with a domineering father. Her mother was cripplingly passive: "she had never dared express a will" and "scarcely, on her own responsibility, to give an order." In fact, "her life had been one long yielding of her will to his . . . she had no will; his, was all in all." Barbara alone among the three Hare children "had inherited this will" (21). Because she does not have the tempering feminine influence of a mother, Barbara, like her father, seeks to impose her will, especially to fulfill her one desire: to marry Mr. Carlyle. But this desire is impossibly frustrated by Isabel's appearance in *East Lynne*. And her appearance in general: Isabel "looked inexpressibly beautiful," writes Wood, "and Barbara turned from her with a feeling of sickening jealousy; from her beauty, from her attire, even from the fine, soft handkerchief, which displayed the badge of her rank" (158-9). Barbara has, it seems, an aggressive, male temperament that Victorian conventions have made her repress. But her anger and frustration boil over one night when she is alone with Carlyle. Wood sets the scene: "There are moments in a woman's life when she is betrayed into forgetting the ordinary rules of conduct and propriety. . . . Barbara'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" (163). And so, at last, her love for him long assumed, never expressed, and now rendered impossible, Barbara confronts the oblivious Carlyle: "What is my misery to you?" she asks, "I would rather be in my grave, Archibald Carlyle, than endure the life I lead. My pain is greater than I know how to bear. . . . All West Lynne had coupled us together in their prying gossip, and they have only pity to cast to me now. I would far rather you had killed me" (164).

The persistent jealousy of these characters might be read as a comment on women, that it is in their nature to be possessive of the men they love and to be jealous of anyone who threatens this relationship. On this reading, Wood is merely reinforcing familiar stereotypes about overly emotional women fighting other women for the men they love. In other words, they are standing by their man. However, when placed within its Victorian context, this behavior takes on a different cast. Denied independence, pressured to marry, taught to surrender their own interests, many Victorian women defined themselves by their ties to their husband. The idea that their lover or brother or husband was emotionally committed to another inspired strong jealousy because these women's sense of self was threatened. To put it another way, because they identified with their husband, his being attracted to another was perceived as an assault on their own identity.

Jealousy occurs when a person wants something she can't have. Women in Victorian culture were deprived of much. Consequently, jealousy—of what men could do or own or control or say—was an understandable response to an unfair system, and it was a habit of mind that could easily shift into jealousy of other women. Isabel's and the other women's jealousy was not an innately female emotion but was a feeling generated by a culture of denial. For Wood, "There never was a passion

in this world, there never will be one, so fantastic, so delusive, so powerful as jealousy” (182). In Isabel, we see this passion at its most destructive. With little to do but live in her imagination, Isabel becomes more and more convinced that her husband loves—and seeks to be with—the neighboring Barbara Hare. Isabel is also pregnant, and thus further confined to the house. “Weak, feverish, and in a state of partial delirium” (180), she overhears a servant say she has seen Barbara and Carlyle meet at night, evidence, she presumes, of their romantic involvement. And so Isabel “took up the idea that Archibald Carlyle had never loved her, that he had admired her and made her his wife in his ambition, but that his heart had been given to Barbara Hare” (180). Isabel is projecting her own feelings and situation onto her husband. She is married because of convenience and is attracted to another, so must he be. She feels she is incapable of attracting a man as noble and decent as Archibald Carlyle because of her poverty, her pregnancy, and her lack of domestic skills. Thus, jealousy overwhelms Isabel’s reason until “Barbara Hare dwelt on her heart like an incubus” (183). As he strolls the grounds of East Lynne with Barbara, deep in conversation, Carlyle “is quite unconscious that Lady Isabel’s jealous eyes were watching them from her dressing-room window” (190).

What do Barbara and Carlyle talk about as they stroll these grounds or meet furtively elsewhere? They talk about murder.

Four years earlier, Barbara’s brother Richard was accused of shooting and killing the father of Aphrodite Hallijohn (known as “Afy”), a working-class woman he had been pursuing romantically. Ever since, he has been on the run, working part of the time as a stable-hand in London, a low-class profession that appalls his sister. Carlyle arranges for Richard to surreptitiously meet his mother and sister Barbara (but not his father the magistrate who, believing in his son’s guilt, would turn him in). Richard seeks money to help him in his difficult life as a fugitive. When Carlyle meets him, Richard gives his side of the story: he had been turned away by Afy, had given his gun to her before leaving, and had believed she was seeing a mysterious man named “Thorn.” Twenty minutes later, he had heard a gunshot, ran to Afy’s home, found Thorn running away, went into the house and stumbled over Afy’s father’s body, ran out of the cottage with gun in hand but tossed it back into the cottage when seen. When he later meets Afy, she accuses him of murdering her father. He goes into hiding until learning that a coroner’s inquest declared him the murderer. Since then he has been on the run.

As Isabel watches her husband and Barbara from her window, imagining they are sharing intimacies, Barbara is telling Carlyle that she passed a man on the street who was called Thorn and who matched her brother’s description of him. Soon after they part, Carlyle encounters the same man. Confronted, this man admits to being Captain Thorn but says he has never been in this area before and soon thereafter departs. Carlyle tells Barbara she must accept that for now the mystery of George Hallijohn’s murder will remain unsolved; they must simply wait. Of course, that’s all Barbara has been doing, waiting for him to love her. She “presse[s] her forehead down on the cold iron of the gate as his footsteps [die] away,” telling herself she must “wait on in dreary pain; [must] wait on, perhaps for years, perhaps for ever!” (195). Meanwhile, an unhappy Isabel, recovered from childbirth, continues her wifely duties and watches “a few years pass . . . smoothly on, no particular event occurring to note them” (195). Barbara longs for Carlyle; Isabel longs for something different; and Carlyle, oblivious to both women’s feelings, contentedly proceeds with his life as friend of one, husband of the other, and master of East Lynne.

Thus concludes Volume One.

Part Two

Chapters 20-38

“A few years had passed on” is how Wood begins Volume Two. This bland, vague opening suggests the emptiness of Isabel’s life. Time has passed; nothing has happened. Well, something has happened: Isabel now has three children, the youngest 12 months old. And she seems to be suffering from what we would call “clinical depression” or what her doctor, noting no “chronic or confirmed disorder,” calls “protracted weakness” (196). His prescription: a change of air and scene. And so it’s decided that she will retreat to Boulogne-sur-Mer, a French coastal town near Calais, in part because an acquaintance, Mrs. Ducie, and her daughters will be staying there and will keep her entertained. When she arrives, though, she learns they have gone to take the baths in Germany. (Boo-loan) Boulogne-sur-Mer was a popular destination for the English, being in 1861 only five hours from London and having 2000 permanent English residents” (*Handbook* 10), though Isabel spends her time alone with her thoughts and avoids contact with the English.

Except for one person. She sees “a tall, handsome, gentlemanly man” who “cause[s] every nerve in her frame to vibrate, every pulse to quicken” (205). It’s Captain Levison, who has traveled to the Continent to avoid his creditors. He quickly recognizes Isabel and plots to seduce her, for Levison is that villain of 18th and 19th century fiction, the upper-class rogue, a man who lives to seduce and abandon. Or as Wood describes him, “this dangerous foe, that was creeping on in guise so insidious” (110). He frequently meets her on the beach or takes her to the pier at dusk or escorts her home in the evening. His presence revivifies her. “All the fresh emotions of her youth had come again,” Wood tells us. The blue sky, the green fields, the waving trees, and the flowers’ perfume take on a new sweetness and brightness when Levison is nearby. Isabel understands that this change, “the sensation of ecstasy, was in her own heart” (209). She is surprised by the depth of her feelings for a man she had met only briefly several years before. In fact, she is transformed: her cheeks wear a rosy flush and pleasure shines again in her eyes. When her husband visits, he’s astonished at the change that two weeks has wrought, declaring it “little short of a miracle” (209).

Like many a Victorian heroine, Isabel is torn between duty and desire: “She was aware that a sensation all too warm . . . was working within her; not a voluntary one; she could no more repress it than she could repress her own sense of being; and, mixed with it, was the stern voice of conscience, overwhelming her with the most lively terror” (211-12). When Archibald returns to England, Isabel tries to avoid Levison by taking unfamiliar routes and going out at odd hours. To no avail. Levison is too experienced a stalker to be so easily thrown off the scent. But he miscalculates, frightening his prey by telling her, “I knew not how passionately I loved you, until you became the wife of another” (215). Isabel knows the danger she is in: “The symptoms of sinful happiness throbbing at her heart while Francis Levison told her of his love, spoke plainly to [her] of the expediency of withdrawing entirely from his society and his dangerous sophistries” (216-17). When Archibald returns to France, she convinces him to take her back to East Lynne, without explaining why. Archibald tells her that this desire to return must be evidence that at last she has come to love him. Upon hearing him say that she must be in love, “her face flushed nearly to tears . . . a bright, glowing, all too conscious flush” (218).

Such vivid changes in facial coloring are a device commonly used by Victorian novelists to show a character’s true feelings. Wood’s extensive use of this convention, though, verges on self-parody, as

in this sampling of passages: “Isabel’s cheeks flushed crimson” (237); Isabel’s “pale face flushed scarlet” (437); Isabel “turned of a deadly whiteness” (496); Barbara “flush[es] suddenly and vividly, and then becomes deadly pale” (253); “Barbara’s face turned white and her lips dry” (261); Barbara’s face shone with “the sudden light of joy; the scarlet flush of emotion and happiness. Then it all faded down to paleness and to sadness” (366); “A scarlet flush dyed the brow of Mr. Carlyle” (457); Richard Hare “turned as white as a cloth” (342); “Mrs. Hare’s face turned white as death” (315); a “frightfully livid hue . . . disfigured the features of Francis Levison” (526); Afy’s face was “turning from white to red, from red to white” (529).

This device was used, in part, to adhere to the realist convention of authorial objectivity. The novelist is presenting facts. In other words, it’s a shorthand way to show emotion without having to delve into the consciousness of a character. We can see a character’s feelings in her very appearance. While Victorian culture emphasized the importance of maintaining appearances, Victorian novelists often showed the hypocrisy in this culture, revealing the immoral behavior hidden behind a curtain of propriety. Characters’ flushing and blushing and growing pale suggests that deeply felt emotions—shame, guilt, desire, anger, jealousy—can’t be completely hidden by social mores. Propriety might dictate that uncomfortable truths be repressed (especially by women). But physical signs of these truths will emerge and be visible to anyone sensitive enough to interpret them. It’s also important to note that in Victorian society the body was often a taboo subject. These physical manifestations of emotion enabled writers to suggest the body’s responses, the passions and emotions that otherwise would be hidden behind high collars and hoop skirts.

Before she had left for France, in her depressed state, Isabel had renewed her suspicions about her husband and Barbara Hare, suspicions exacerbated by his diminished passion after several years of marriage. Explains Wood, “Lady Isabel did not understand the even manner, the quiet calmness into which her husband’s once passionate love had subsided, and in her fanciful jealousy she attributed it to the influence Barbara held upon his memory” (198). Although she admires her husband and thinks even “a princess might have deemed it an honour to be the chosen of such a man” (199), Isabel has never truly loved him. Upon her return, her jealousy—and her depression—resume, worsened by her separation from Levison. His form “was ever present to her, not a minute of the day but it gave the colouring to her thoughts, and at night it made the subject of her dreams” (220).

Unbeknownst to Isabel, Carlyle, grateful for Levison’s having occupied his wife’s time in France (Isabel kept the details of and her discomfort with their relationship secret), has agreed to allow him to stay at East Lynne while his financial entanglements are disentangled. Hearing this news, Isabel “grew dizzy . . . her senses seemed momentarily to desert her. Her first sensation was as if the dull earth had opened and shown her a way into Paradise; her second, a lively consciousness that Francis Levison ought not to be suffered to come again into companionship with her” (223). She tells her husband she does not want Levison to stay with them. But he dismisses her wish since Levison’s already on the way and since she gives no specific reason other than that she doesn’t like him.

When Levison arrives at East Lynne, he is met by Isabel’s young daughter who tells her mother, “I don’t like him, mamma. He laid hold of me and held me tight, and there was an ugly look in his eyes” (227). She continues: “I don’t like him to hold me. . . . I am afraid of him. Don’t let him take me again” (228). Later, Barbara and Carlyle see Levison astride a rock “intent upon a child’s whip,

winding leather round its handle” (238). These episodes seem to hint at Levison’s dark side. Sadomasochism? Flagellation? Pedophilia? But these concerns are never mentioned or even alluded to again by Wood. Perhaps my seeing these details as disturbingly suggestive is just a 21st century reader imposing his sensibility onto a 19th century novel. Or perhaps these details are meant to show Levison’s need to control. Likewise, his inability to hold a child without hurting it may merely suggest his flawed character, not his depravity. Or perhaps just briefly an inkling of genuine depravity gets past Wood’s self-censorship. Finally, we should note that a young child, uncontaminated by social expectations, sees who Levison really is. Again, Wood suggests, as she does with her characters’ frequent flushing and blushing, a person’s true nature can’t be completely hidden. Whether Levison’s eyes or Isabel’s cheeks, what’s in one’s heart and soul will be revealed.

Simultaneous with Levison’s arrival at East Lynne, the alleged murderer Captain Thorn returns to the area, as does Barbara’s brother Richard. Carlyle and Barbara arrange to have Richard observe Thorn. He tells them the man he is observing is not the murderer, not the Thorn he witnessed flee from the scene of the crime. During this time, Barbara and Carlyle meet frequently to share information, to plot strategies, to arrange Richard’s temporary return, to speculate about the identity of the murderer. Intent on seducing Isabel, Levison sees how suspicious Isabel is of the relationship between Barbara and her husband and does all he can to exploit her fears and increase her jealousy, a jealousy, writes Wood, “kept up . . . by Barbara’s frequent meetings with Mr. Carlyle, and by Captain Levison’s exaggerated whispers of them. Discontented, ill at ease with herself and with everybody about her, Isabel was living now in a state of excitement, a dangerous resentment against her husband beginning to rise up in her heart” (252). At one point, Carlyle’s sister Corny, referring obliquely to the murder, asks him if that “old affair” is being renewed. Isabel, knowing nothing of the murder inquiries, assumes “that any ‘old affair’ could but have reference to the bygone lives of her husband and Barbara” (257). Ultimately, Levison arranges to be in a carriage with Isabel as it passes where he knows Barbara and her husband are meeting. Wood describes the scene: “There, in the bright moonlight, all too bright and clear, slowly paced, arm in arm, and drawn close to each other, her husband and Barbara.” Isabel chokes back a sob, while Levison, “that bold bad man, dared to put his arm round her; to draw her to his side; to whisper that *his* love was left to her, if another’s was withdrawn” (271). Lonely, angry, jealous, deceived, Isabel commits the worst possible sin: she, a married woman, leaves her husband and children for another man.

At this point, a reader might expect a hasty carriage ride, a night train to London, a passenger ship across the Channel, Isabel and Levison, pretending to be man and wife, in passionate embrace. But not so. Instead, Wood jumps ahead a year. And the scene shifts to Grenoble. Whatever passion brought the couple together has vanished utterly. Levison now spends much of his time away from Isabel, pursuing new pleasures in Paris. And a pregnant Isabel eagerly awaits news of her divorce so she and Levison can marry and her child will not be born a bastard. Wood gives little indication that there was a moment’s pleasure between them. She suggests passion *might* have motivated Isabel, only to immediately discount this idea: “She had taken a blind leap in a moment of wild passion, when, instead of the garden of roses it had been her persuader’s pleasure to promise her she would fall into, but which, in truth, she had barely glanced at, for that had not been her moving motive” Rather than passion, Isabel responds instantly with guilt and remorse: “The very hour of her departure [Isabel] awoke to what she had done: the guilt . . . took possession of her soul for ever” (283). Wood pointedly addresses her female readers: “Whatever trials may be the lot of your married life . . . resolve to bear them . . . 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” (283).

* * *

Victorian fiction was notably shy about depicting sexual intimacy—often making such scenes depend on the interpretation of subtle signs and codes that are easily missed by modern readers. What, for instance, does it mean that Emma Vane is repeatedly accused of and enjoys to the point of jealousy *flirting* with Captain Levison? Is she sleeping with him? Hoping to sleep with him? Does she take pleasure in mere flirting, in being chased (and chaste) but never caught? To be sure, we don’t read *East Lynne*—or other Victorian novels—for arousing descriptions of sexual couplings. But there’s a difference between reticence and omission. Wood could give us a peak—however blinkered—into the boudoir. Yet we see no finely turned ankle, no hand brush a stray lock from the nape of a woman’s neck. Part of the reason for this omission is that Wood, writing her first commercial novel, did not want to upset conventional middle-class moral sentiment. Publishers, too, were aware of the need to censor the untoward and unrefined. As Altick notes, “Editorial squeamishness . . . seems to have reached its peak in the sixties and seventies” (*Victorian* 195). And, of course, a Victorian herself, Wood might quite naturally agree with this reticence.

By comparison, it’s instructive to look at a 19th century novel published nearly a decade earlier, Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*. Although Emma Bovary is married to a much less interesting and attractive man and lives in much more constrained and isolated circumstances, she, like Isabel, married young for financial security and falls for an arch gentleman seducer, Rodolphe Boulanger. Flaubert’s description of their first intimate encounter, though hardly the stuff of erotic fiction, is worth quoting at length:

They dismounted. Rodolphe fastened up the horses. She walked on in front on the moss between the paths. But her long habit got in her way, although she held it up by the skirt; and Rodolphe, walking behind her, saw between the black cloth and the black shoe the fineness of her white stocking, that seemed to him as if it were a part of her nakedness.

She stopped. “I am tired,” she said.

“Come, try again,” he went on. “Courage!”

Then some hundred paces farther on she again stopped, and through her veil, that fell sideways from her man’s hat over her hips, her face appeared in a bluish transparency as if she were floating under azure waves.

“But where are we going?”

He did not answer. She was breathing irregularly. Rodolphe looked round him biting his moustache. They came to a larger space where the coppice had been cut. They sat down on the trunk of a fallen tree, and Rodolphe began speaking to her of his love. He did not begin by frightening her with compliments. He was calm, serious, melancholy.

Emma listened to him with bowed head, and stirred the bits of wood on the ground with the tip of her foot. But at the words, “Are not our destinies now one?”

“Oh, no!” she replied. “You know that well. It is impossible!” She rose to go. He seized her by the wrist. She stopped. Then, having gazed at him for a few moments with an amorous and humid look, she said hurriedly—

“Ah! do not speak of it again! Where are the horses? Let us go back.”

He made a gesture of anger and annoyance. She repeated:

“Where are the horses? Where are the horses?”

Then smiling a strange smile, his pupil fixed, his teeth set, he advanced with outstretched arms. She recoiled trembling. She stammered:

“Oh, you frighten me! You hurt me! Let me go!”

“If it must be,” he went on, his face changing; and he again became respectful, caressing, timid. She gave him her arm. They went back. He said—

“What was the matter with you? Why? I do not understand. You were mistaken, no doubt. In my soul you are as a Madonna on a pedestal, in a place lofty, secure, immaculate. But I need you to live! I must have your eyes, your voice, your thought! Be my friend, my sister, my angel!”

And he put out his arm round her waist. She feebly tried to disengage herself. He supported her thus as they walked along.

But they heard the two horses browsing on the leaves.

“Oh! one moment!” said Rodolphe. “Do not let us go! Stay!”

He drew her farther on to a small pool where duckweeds made a greenness on the water. Faded water lilies lay motionless between the reeds. At the noise of their steps in the grass, frogs jumped away to hide themselves.

“I am wrong! I am wrong!” she said. “I am mad to listen to you!”

“Why? Emma! Emma!”

“Oh, Rodolphe!” said the young woman slowly, leaning on his shoulder.

The cloth of her habit caught against the velvet of his coat. She threw back her white neck, swelling with a sigh, and faltering, in tears, with a long shudder and hiding her face, she gave herself up to him— (129-30).

For Isabel Vane, there are no long or short—or medium length—shudders. Unlike Wood, Flaubert not only describes the passionate encounter between these lovers but vividly describes Emma’s excited reaction to this affair:

when she saw herself in the glass she wondered at her face. Never had her eyes been so large, so black, of so profound a depth. Something subtle about her being transfigured her. She repeated, “I have a lover! a lover!” delighting at the idea as if a second puberty had come to her. So at last she was to know those joys of love, that fever of happiness of which she had despaired! She was entering upon marvels where all would be passion, ecstasy, delirium. (130)

Why doesn’t Wood give us something comparable? Admittedly, standards were looser in Second Empire France than in Victorian England. (It would be twenty years before an English language version of *Madame Bovary* appeared, translated by Karl Marx’s daughter Eleanor Marx Aveling. Ironically, after discovering that her long-time partner and fellow member of the Socialist League, Edward Aveling, had secretly married another woman, Marx committed suicide by poison, just as Emma Bovary did.) That *Madame Bovary* had been published two decades earlier, shouldn’t be read as a sign of its widespread acceptance in France. For even there, Flaubert’s novel created a scandal. Flaubert faced criminal charges of obscenity. Still, Wood could give us more. She suggests Isabel’s desire beforehand—she had “a sensation all too warm,” a “sensation of ecstasy,” a “sinful happiness”—but does not suggest this desire was ever satisfied, does not describe Isabel’s pleasure—however short-lived it might have been—because it would in a small way justify her actions. Better to jump immediately to guilt and suffering. Whatever ephemeral pleasure she might have enjoyed

is so overwhelmed by the sin of adultery, of violating the sacred bonds of matrimony and her wifely duties that it's not even worth mentioning.

Another reason for this omission is that, as some scholars have suggested, Victorian culture denied the very existence of female sexual desire. The prominent Victorian physician William Acton, for instance, in his *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in Childhood, Youth, Adult Age, and Advanced Life: Considered in Their Physiological, Social, and Moral Relations*, argues that “the majority of women . . . are not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind. . . . As a general rule, a modest woman seldom desires any sexual gratification for herself. She submits to her husband, but only to please him; and, but for the desire of maternity, would far rather be relieved from his attentions” (qtd. in Marcus 31). This view of female sexuality was associated especially with women of the upper classes. A Lady like Isabel Vane, according to Jeanne Elliott, a Professor in Victorian literature at San Jose State University, “was supposed to be sexually neuter: not only ignorant of physiology (at least before marriage) but also largely devoid of sexual drives. She was expected to love her chosen husband, but it must be assumed that it was a selfless and disinterested love capable of persuading her to overlook, for his sake, the distasteful nature of the act of procreation (333). On the other hand, recent scholars have argued that such views are unrepresentative and that Victorian sexual prudishness is a 20th century conceit which distorts actual sexual practices in 19th century England

We will explore this debate and try to better understand Victorian sexuality in future episodes. For now, we can say that Ellen Wood hints at Isabel's sexual desire in the run-up to her affair but gives no indication that this desire was ever satisfied. When explaining why Isabel left East Lynne to be with Levison, Wood almost completely ignores her sexual longing, attributing her departure instead to jealousy and to the emotional distress caused by her husband's rejection of her and his betrayal of their marriage. Wood does not want to complicate this simple morality tale with notions of sexual desire and fulfillment. To show that Isabel had real desire and experienced genuine passion—and that these caused her to leave her husband and children—would make her seem a monster to a Victorian audience, a heroine who could not be redeemed, who could be no heroine at all.

Contrary to Wood's portrayal of Isabel, one of the charges laid against Flaubert in his obscenity trial was that his portrayal of Emma Bovary focused too much on her desire, not enough on her other traits. The prosecution asked, “did [Monsieur Flaubert] try to emphasize her intelligence? Never. Her heart? Even less so. Her spirit? No. Her physical beauty? Not even. . . . the painting is first and foremost lascivious, the poses are voluptuous, and the beauty of [Madame] Bovary is the beauty of provocation” (Pinard 323). Flaubert's painting of Emma is flawed, in other words, because it emphasizes her sensuality and does not consider those other, more important female virtues: intelligence, heart, spirit, and beauty. The prosecution also found obscene the notion that a woman could have an affair and not feel, as does Isabel Vane, instant remorse. When “she returned to her home and hearth,” the prosecution asks, “after having shaken off the tiring effects of sensual pleasure, to that home where she would find a husband that adored her; . . . after that first adultery . . . does she experience remorse . . . at the sight of that cheated husband that adored her? No! She returns her head held high while she glorifies adultery” (Pinard 323). Flaubert's sin was not to acknowledge Emma's sin, both the sin of adultery and the sin of not seeing this sin as sinful.

Flaubert shows a woman experiencing sexual pleasure without remorse. Wood depicts a woman experiencing remorse without sexual pleasure. Wood is remorseless in depicting Isabel's remorse, describing "its adder stings" and "dark course of gnawing retribution." And she offers platitudinous encomiums to bourgeois values, explaining that Isabel "had sacrificed husband, children, reputation, home, all that makes life of value to woman. She had forfeited her duty to God, had deliberately broken his commandments, for the one poor miserable mistake of flying with Francis Levison" (283). At this point, Isabel's desire is not to enjoy life with the dashing Levison but to marry him and thereby save her child from the infamy of an illegitimate birth. Thus, she awaits word of her divorce. She doesn't know that the divorce has been granted and that Levison has kept this notice from her to avoid revealing that he has no intention of marrying her and that her child will be illegitimate.

That a married couple like Carlyle and Isabel could even get divorced was a recent development. As the philosopher and Oxford fellow Sybil Wolfram writes, "Before 1700 there was effectively no divorce in England. . . . Between 1700 and 1857 there was a system of divorce by private Act of Parliament" (155). This system required applicants to receive a grant of divorce, first, from the ecclesiastical courts, second, from the criminal courts, and third, from the House of Lords. Although a divorce could be granted within a year, the cost and difficulty of, and the social opprobrium regarding it, made divorces rare. From 1700 to 1857, 324 divorces were granted in England, 320 to men, only 4 to women (Wolfram 157, 162). This process was simplified with the Marital Causes Act of 1857, which made divorce a judicial procedure, a change that increased the number of divorces per year from 3 to 500 by the end of the century (Wolfram 158), a significant increase, but still only a small percentage of the population.

While simplifying the process, the Marital Causes Act did not make divorce more equitable. No changes were made to the only grounds accepted for divorce—adultery. And these grounds continued to apply differently to men and women. Husbands could receive a divorce on grounds of adultery, wives only if adultery were accompanied with another moral offense, as made clear in the legislative language: the wife must prove that "her husband has been guilty of incestuous adultery, or bigamy with adultery, or of rape, or of sodomy or bestiality or of adultery coupled with . . . cruelty . . . or of adultery coupled with desertion . . . of two years and upwards" (qtd. in Harrison). Adultery alone wouldn't become grounds for divorce for women in England until 1923; grounds other than adultery wouldn't be accepted until 1937 (Wolfram 156).

Because he has money, the ability to travel to London, and a wife who committed adultery, Archibald Carlyle was granted a divorce.

Isabel's fears that a divorce will not be granted quickly enough to keep her child from being born illegitimate are understandable given the precarious position of such children in Victorian society, a fear Isabel makes clear in her impassioned plea to Levison to marry her: "For the child's sake! for the child's sake. A whole long life before it; never to hold up its head, or right; the reproach everlastingly upon it that it was born in sin! Francis! Francis! If you have no pity for me, have pity on it!" (288). The plight of illegitimate children—and their mothers—was a major concern in mid-century England. As reported in *Magdalen's Friends*, a magazine created by reformists who sought to reclaim fallen women, "there are only two courses before the unfortunate mother, either to kill her child or support it by sin" (qtd. in Higginbotham 322). Numbers seemed to bear this out. According to Ann Higginbotham, Professor Emeritus, Eastern Connecticut University, "In the

mid-1860s, over 80 percent of all coroners' reports of murder in England and Wales involved infants, many of whom were assumed to be illegitimate. . . . [One London coroner] claimed that two hundred child murders in London escaped detection each year[, while] John Curgenvin, a physician and member of the Infant Life Protection Society, argued that even the alarming figures from coroners' inquests represented only a fraction of actual infant murders" (321).

Nonetheless, concerns for the plight of his child do not sway Levison. He has tired of Isabel's nagging and pleading and wishes to continue his rakish ways with other women. Ultimately, he breaks off their relationship when he comes into an inheritance and a title. No longer Captain Levison, he is Earl Levison. And so he ignores Isabel's pleas and the fate that might befall his child, unashamedly proclaiming, "Isabel—you must be aware that it is an awful sacrifice for a man in my position to marry a divorced woman. . . . I am the representative of an ancient and respected baronetcy . . . to make you my wife would so offend all my family" (292).

He does offer her modest financial support, though, saying he will not allow her to starve. When she rejects this offer, he surreptitiously provides money for two servants and a year's rent. This charity may seem out of character for the often debt-ridden and guilt-free Levison. But Wood explains this behavior as a necessary step for Levison to escape this relationship. He "thank[s] his lucky star," Wood writes, "that he had so easily got rid of a vexatious annoyance" (296). Isabel's uncle, the new Lord Vane, also offers assistance. She reluctantly agrees to take a small sum while planning to support her son by working as a governess—just about the only occupation open to an educated but impoverished upper-class gentlewoman

She begins her job search by leaving Grenoble with her maid and newborn son. But as their train approaches a small-town station, calamity strikes. The train crashes, instantly killing her maid and son and seriously injuring Isabel who winds up in a hospital where she stays in serious condition, in and out of a coma, for three months. From what she thinks is her deathbed, Isabel writes to Lord Vane, letting him know that her son is no more—and that she is about to join him. Given the confusion of the train wreck, Isabel is mistakenly pronounced dead. And so a nurse appends a death notice to Isabel's letter. Isabel doesn't correct this mistake, feeling this outcome true—Lady Isabel of East Lynne is dead. Recognizing that this fate will grant her anonymity, she changes her name from Vane to Vine. Her transformation is effected as well by the change in her appearance. After the accident, she has aged, her face disfigured by a large scar. She further hides her identity by wearing colored spectacles, a veil, and ill-fitting, unfashionable clothing—a far cry from the sparkling young beauty who had dazzled West Lynne.

Wood recognizes how contrived the sudden demise of Isabel's infant son is and so tries to explain it away, telling her readers that "Railway accidents are less frequent in France than they are with us; but when they do occur they are wholesale catastrophes" (320). Wood could have taken her narrative in a different direction by showing how an unwed mother and her illegitimate child would struggle to survive against social prejudice. This would have been a grim tale, a subject perhaps better suited to a Hardy or a Zola. Instead, Wood releases Isabel from her financial concerns and social stigma, committing a kind of authorial infanticide, one that frees her from the narrative constraints that would arise from having an unmarried mother as heroine. This train wreck both punishes Isabel for her sin by killing the offspring of her adulterous affair and rewards her by removing the burden of an illegitimate child, an outcome that parallels the broadly held but false belief, at the time Wood was composing *East Lynne*, that England, especially London, faced an

epidemic of infanticide caused by unmarried mothers' recognition of how hard their own and their children's lives would be.

While the notion of a plague of infanticide was overstated, fears that scores of infants were being murdered by their unwed mothers suggests a broad recognition that the hardships imposed on mothers and children in these circumstances were grossly excessive. As a committee on infanticide reported in 1867, "the life of the bastard is infinitely less protected than that of the legitimate" (qtd. in Higginbotham 320). Wood refers to this belief directly at one point, having Barbara point to newspaper accounts of "so many children 'suffocated in bed.' . . . they were smothered on purpose" (595). This belief in an epidemic of infanticide may have been due to doctors' inability to diagnose, let alone treat, illness in infants. For the medical profession, it was better to blame mothers than to acknowledge their own shortcomings. And this belief in mass infanticide may simply have been a way to avoid acknowledging the true causes of infant mortality, shifting blame away from a socio-economic system that killed children through poor nutrition and squalid and diseased living and work conditions. Against this background and aware of the sad life her son would have faced, Isabel, as she sees her dead child, feels "a deep thankfulness that it had been so soon taken away from the evil to come" (321). It's unlikely that the solitary Isabel with her bastard son could have gained employment as a governess and taught young girls proper moral behavior along with singing and piano-playing and French. To do so, Isabel had imagined that she would have had to "put the child out to nurse" (297). But she is saved from this unlikely childcare option and unrealistic career plan by Wood's *deus ex locomotive*.

Chapters 39-62

When the third volume begins, two years have passed and Isabel is governess for an American family in Germany who believes her the English widow of a Frenchman. Presumably, this family was impressed by Isabel's social habitus, deeming her speech and manners and affect sufficient credentials. But after their daughter becomes engaged to a German count, the family has no further need for a governess. Conveniently, Afy Hallijohn, daughter of the man Richard Hare allegedly murdered and lover of the mysterious Thorn, is working as a domestic for a wealthy English family that has come to take the waters; she tells Isabel, whose true identity she does not recognize, that there's an opening for governess at East Lynne.

It's here that the novel takes its most infamous turn: Isabel will return to East Lynne, in disguise, as governess. She will live under the same roof as her former husband, his new wife, Barbara Hare, her newborn daughter, and Isabel's three children. Her motive for doing so is to be close to her children. She also sees this as an act of penitence, a belief that by subjecting herself to the daily pain of living in a world that she destroyed she will be redeemed.

When she arrives, after being away for four years, the house is no longer the semi-prison she felt it before. Instead, "The hall doors of East Lynne were thrown open, and a flood of golden light streamed out" (400). Whereas before Barbara couldn't match Isabel's beauty, now it's no contest. The 30-year-old Isabel "limps as she walks, and slightly stoops. . . . A scar extends from her chin above her mouth, completely changing the character of the lower part of her face; some of her teeth are missing, so that she speaks with a lisp, and the sober bands of her gray hair—it is nearly silver—are confined by a large and close cap" (388). She is, writes Wood, "a grey, broken-down

woman with disfiguring marks” (389) who wears a disfiguring dress topped off by an ugly bonnet and veil. Barbara, by contrast, is “Inexpressibly more beautiful. . . . Her evening dress was of pale sky-blue—no other color suited Barbara so well . . . and on her fair neck there was a gold chain, and on her arms were gold bracelets. Her pretty features were attractive as ever; her cheeks were flushed; her blue eyes sparkled, and her light hair was rich and abundant” (404). Of the other two women Isabel had warred with, Corny has moved out of East Lynne at her brother’s insistence, after insulting his fiancé Barbara—a belated recognition by Carlyle of his sister’s noxious treatment of Isabel, while Emma Mount Severn almost completely disappears from the narrative. But her animus remains. Upon receipt of the letter announcing Isabel’s death, Lady Mount Severn seems to show sympathy for what would have been Isabel’s desperate life as a fallen woman: “poor creature what could her future life had been? . . . she had brought misery upon herself, and disgrace upon all connected with her. No one could ever have taken notice of her again.” But ultimately, Lady Mount Severn is pleased that Isabel is no more, telling her son, “I shall send the notice of her death to the papers; and I am glad to do it; it is a blight removed from the family” (324).

Removed from the family of Lord and Lady Mount Severn, this blight lives on with the Carlyles of East Lynne. When confronted with displays of affection between her former husband Archibald and his new wife Barbara, Isabel is overcome with jealousy and regret. In one such scene, Archibald “fondly kissed his wife. Isabel’s eyes were turned upon them. She saw Barbara’s passionate lingering kiss in return, she heard her fervent, whispered greeting, ‘My darling!’ . . . Isabel flung her hands over her face. Had she bargained for this? It was part of the cross she had undertaken to carry” (401). In another scene, Isabel witnesses Barbara flying “off to her idolized husband, leaving her, who had once been the idolized, to her loneliness. She sank down on the sofa; she threw her arms up in her heart-sickness; she thought she should faint; she prayed to die” (497).

As jealous as she may be, Isabel the governess must maintain amiable and respectful relations with her mistress. Barbara speaks to Isabel on somewhat equal terms because, although she doesn’t recognize Isabel, she does recognize her social class. “Barbara could not fail to perceive,” writes Wood, “that [Isabel] was a thoroughly refined gentlewoman, far superior to the generality of governesses” (594). This hyper-awareness of a person’s class is common to Victorian novels. Or as George Levine puts it, “Narrators and characters within [Victorian] novels have an almost neurasthenic sensitivity to markers of class and to what sort of behavior is appropriate to each class” (21). Thus, not only is Isabel forced to watch her husband embrace another woman, but she is repeatedly told by that other gentlewoman, Barbara, what a good man he is and what a fool his wife had been. Barbara tells her that her husband “is the most noble man! revered, respected by every one. . . . The only one who could not appreciate him was his wife. How ever she could leave him . . . will always be a marvel to those who know him” (410). Hearing this, Isabel chokes back a bitter groan.

Isabel obviously is glad to be close to her children, none of whom recognize her. But she suffers knowing how she has hurt them, how her sinful behavior will impact their lives. As Barbara explains, “the disgrace is reflected on the children, and always will be; the shame of having a divorced mother. . . . She is dead. . . . But they will not be the less pointed at, the girl especially” (406). Although here Barbara seems to show some concern for these children, her real focus is on Isabel’s selfish immorality. For in truth, Barbara, with a child of her own, shows little affection for,

or even interest in, her three step-children, even ignoring her step-son William's steadily worsening health. In criticizing the novel as immoral, reviewers often noted that the immoral Isabel is a more sympathetic character—more fully developed, more sensitive, and a better mother—than the moral Barbara, who is selfish and shallow. One might have expected, given Victorians' adoration of motherhood, that Barbara's motherly neglect would be condemned by Wood. But not so. This neglect is presented as normal and entirely understandable given that the children are not Barbara's own. One of Barbara's servants makes this clear: "Of course, Mrs. Carlyle can't expect to have the feelings of [a mother] for him" (439). At another point, when Isabel tries to explain the seriousness of William's illness, a hurried Barbara brushes her off, causing Isabel to say to herself: "Why should she care? . . . He is not her child" (481). Although there are numerous instances in Victorian novels of men and women lovingly raising distantly related or orphaned children (as in Mr. Brownlow's adopting Oliver Twist), it seems, if Wood's novel is any indication, that for Victorians it was the biological bond that truly connected mother to child. Therefore, what seems a general lack of interest in the welfare of her step-children and a callous disregard for the health of her step-son is acceptable behavior.

Wood dwells on the steady decline of this step-son William, a sick child getting sicker and discussing his fate and his faith with a governess he does not know is his mother. These scenes are filled with what to a modern audience, is mawkish sentiment. The approximately 8-year-old William is preternaturally wise and accepting of his illness thanks to his Christian faith, a belief almost comically shallow and clichéd. But for one moment when he says he doesn't want to die, William shows a placid acceptance of and even eagerness for his demise. "The boy," Wood writes, "in his innermost heart, knew as well that death was coming for him, as that death itself did" (1486). He accepts this imminent death because, as he tells Isabel, "It's nothing to die when God loves us" (486). These sentiments are reinforced by his mother who tells him "when God takes a little child to [heaven] it is because He loves him" (488), and when his father tells him "we are in the hands of God . . . and whatever God wills is always for the best" (521). William imagines heaven as a beautiful city adorned with precious stones and streets of gold, with a clear river and fruit bearing trees and harp music and singing (577). And he imagines that his mother will be waiting for him there, telling Isabel, "she is looking out for me now. Perhaps she's standing on the banks of the river, watching the boats" (585).

William is dying of consumption, the same ailment that killed Isabel's mother, an ailment Wood alleges—in accord with contemporary medical belief—is inherited. The bacterial origin of consumption (i.e., tuberculosis) wouldn't be discovered for another twenty years. Without knowledge of the conditions that created and spread the disease, Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries experienced an epidemic of consumption. According to an article in the *Journal of Preventive Medicine and Hygiene*, "In 1838-39, up to a third of English tradesmen and employees died of TB" (Barberis, et al.). The disease ravaged the Bronte family in the 1830s and 40s, Charlotte's brother and four sisters all dying from consumption. From 1851 to 1910, thirteen percent of all deaths in Britain were due to consumption (Jay 640 n. 518). This disease, with its slow development and gradual wasting away, appealed to the Romantics who associated it with those poor souls with too tender a sensibility for this world, especially artists like the poet John Keats. As Furman University History Professor Carolyn Day explains, for the Romantics, "Consumption was the ally of the genius, who was consumed by his excessive emotional and intellectual activity" (47). Because of its sufferers' fragility, thinness, and pallor (consumption was referred to as "The White Plague"), Victorians often associated it with the feminine. Wood has the

child William die from consumption because it was, first, an ailment that commonly afflicted children; second, its long, slow development enabled the melodrama between dying son and disguised mother; and third, its relatively painless progress would not intrude upon this sentimental narrative. In truth, though, tubercular patients suffered from frequent coughing. And in its end stages, these patients often coughed up blood and mucus, symptoms not apparent in young William who dies peacefully in his sleep, Isabel by his side. Writes Wood, “the pale young face lay calm in its utter stillness; the busy little heart had ceased to beat. Jesus Christ had indeed come, and taken the fleeting spirit” (587). The death by railway misadventure of her infant son produced a similarly peaceful corpse: “a poor little child quite dead, but not much disfigured. . . . a little angel . . . beholding the face of its Father in Heaven” (321).

Death scenes such as William’s, especially the death scene of a child, were common in 19th century fiction, as, for instance, the deaths of Little Nell in Dickens’s *The Old Curiosity Shop* and Little Eva in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Nineteenth century novelists strove to depict the world as it really was. But this realism had its limits. Frank depictions of sexual activity, of course, were taboo. It seems that the deaths of children also could not be depicted graphically and realistically—though more because of literary convention than social prohibition. Readers expected the death of a child to be depicted through the gauze of sentiment. What was the purpose of this convention? Why this lingering—and to contemporary readers perversely obsessive—preoccupation with the slow deaths of children? Partly, this was due to the Romantic notion that children were born innocent therefore closer to God. Or in William Wordsworth’s famous lines, “trailing clouds of glory do we come from God who is our home.” Also, this convention was due to the evangelical belief in redemption, something seemingly guaranteed to innocent children. Thus, William asks Isabel, “will Jesus come for me . . . or will He send an angel?” To which she replies, “Jesus has *promised* to come for His own redeemed” (577). Another explanation for this peculiar convention is that it derives from the high infant mortality rate in the 19th century. The death of a child—that most horrifying and psychologically scarring of events—was a perpetual and very real threat. Nowadays, parents may imagine a child’s death; in the 19th century they had to prepare themselves for it. If they had not experienced this horror themselves, they would have known parents who had. One historical study of child and infant mortality found that in the 19th century about one in four children died before the age of five—and many more died before reaching adolescence. To put it another way, “The average woman in 1800 had between 5 to 7 children. Parents probably lost 2 or 3 of their children in the first few years of life” (Roser, et al.). Ellen Wood herself lost one of her five children to scarlet fever, after which she suffered a nervous breakdown (Jay xvii).

Faced with the grim reality of infant and child mortality, novelists sought to give readers solace rather than renew their trauma. Rather a fantasy of painless death and heavenly reward than the truth. This denial of reality may seem the foolish habit of a distant age. But how far removed are we from it? We offer similar condolences to the grieving: “at least he didn’t suffer,” “she’s in heaven now,” etc. And as realistic as we may imagine ourselves to be, our popular entertainment, when confronted with a child’s death, if not as sentimental, is similarly unrealistic. No movie or TV show would devote such a large portion of its narrative to watching a child slowly waste away. It could be argued, therefore, that Victorian fiction’s dwelling on such scenes is truer—is more realistic—than contemporary entertainment’s unease with sentiment and its avoidance of whatever is slow and depressing. We might ask which is the more foolish, sentimentalizing a child’s death to give readers hope or overlooking such scenes to maintain narrative momentum?

While William is dying and Isabel grieving, Barbara and Archibald continue their sleuthing, ultimately discovering what Barbara had long suspected: Thorn, the lover of Afy and murderer of Afy's father, is in reality Captain Levison, now Lord Levison. Having left Isabel behind to assume his title and inheritance, Levison further demonstrates his immorality by discarding a woman he had had a long relationship with, Blanche, to marry her younger sister Alice. "He had never, at any period, cared for Lady Isabel," Wood writes, "as he had cared for Blanche" (449). But "Blanche was beginning to show symptoms of her nearly thirty years: not the years, but the long-continued disappointment, the heart-burnings were telling upon her. Her hair was thin, her face was pinched, her form had lost its roundness" (449). The 20-year-old Alice is much more desirable. Made thus aware of how corrupt and duplicitous Levison is, Blanche must warn her sister away from marrying Levison, realizing "that only misery could result from the union" (450). Unfortunately, Alice, primed by Levison, discounts her sister's charges as jealous fabrications and marries him. Three years into the marriage, Levison has squandered his entire inheritance on "pretty little pastimes [such as] horse-racing . . . gambling. . . and cock-fighting" (447). And Alice, now Lady Levison, with no money and a two-year-old son, has seen "her love for Sir Francis [turn] into contempt and hate" (452). "Night and morning, one prayer goes up from me," she tells her husband, "that I may find a way of being legally separated from you" (456). Desperate for money, Levison finds employment through family connections as secretary to a prominent minister in the House of Lords, under the condition that should the need arise, he will himself run for Parliament. When the need does arise, the seat he must run for is West Lynne. Although reluctant to pursue this seat, given his reputation there, Levison goes forward because he knows that members of Parliament cannot be arrested for debt or other charges while Parliament is in session. He therefore must go to West Lynne and compete for votes against his opponent: Archibald Carlyle.

Unfortunately for Levison, West Lynne knows of his seduction and abandonment of the beloved Isabel and his betrayal of the admired Carlyle. Therefore, he is forced to "sneak about the town with [his] tail burnt . . . entirely alive to the odour in which [he is] held" (463). When he is eventually found out by the mob, someone yells, "what do he, the scum, turn himself up at West Lynne for, bearding Mr. Carlyle?" (465). To avenge this outrage, the crowd dunks Levison in a fetid pond, "its green poison, not to mention its adders and toads and frogs, going down his throat by the bucketful" (466). It's at this time that allegations of his having murdered Hallijohn become public. He is tried, found guilty, and sentenced to be hanged but this sentence is commuted to penal servitude for life—a sentence that dismays his wife, whose "one little grain of comfort" had been "anticipation of the time when she and her ill-fated child should be alone, and could hide themselves in some hidden nook of the wide world; he and his crime and his end gone, forgotten" (607). Instead, with Levison not sent to the gallows, "she and the boy must be tied to him still: and she was lost in horror and rebellion" (607). Since a wife could be granted a divorce only if her husband had committed adultery and another serious offense against her, Alice does not have sufficient grounds—nor does she have sufficient money—for a divorce. Impoverished and raising the son of a notorious murderer, she will be forever tied to the loathsome Levison. The man falsely accused of murder, Barbara's brother, Richard, returns to his home in West Lynne. His father the judge, though, who was completely certain of his son's guilt, suffers a series of strokes.

And at East Lynne, Isabel, close to death, reveals her true identity to Carlyle. In her last moments, they share an intimacy, a physical and emotional closeness, that in its challenge to Victorian propriety, Wood's readers must have found titillating: "Lower and lower bent his head, until his breath nearly mingled with hers. But, suddenly, his face grew red with a scarlet flush, and he lifted

it again. Did the form of one, then in a felon's cell . . . thrust itself before him? Or that of his absent and unconscious wife?" (617-7). Momentarily, propriety triumphs. But after Isabel tells him "there will be no marrying or giving marriage in heaven. . . . we shall be together with our children for ever and for ever. Keep a little corner in your heart for your poor lost Isabel" (617), Carlyle removes his hand from hers to "wipe . . . the death-dew from her forehead" (617). "Farewell, farewell, my once dear husband!" Isabel sighs. After these final words, she raises "her head from the pillow, excitement giving her strength; she [clings] to his arm; she lift[s] her face in its sad yearning. Mr. Carlyle laid her tenderly down again, and suffered his lips to rest upon hers" (617). This scene is more sensual than any encounter between lovers in the novel. Isabel in her bed experiences excitement; she clings and yearns, is laid tenderly down and kissed on the lips. It's as if this bedside death-scene frees Wood from Victorian constraint. Now, when there's no chance that this yearning can be fulfilled, we can observe a couple's intimacy, can see the closeness that once existed between Isabel and Archibald.

For some 19th century readers, this breaking—or rather bending—of taboos suggested that Wood's piety was pretense, allowing her to entertain her readers with the voyeuristic, masochistic and emotionally over-wrought experiences of an adulterous ex-wife living with her former husband. The novelist Charlotte Riddell, for example, complained that Wood "is simply a brute; she throws in bits of religion to slip her fodder down the public throat" (qtd. in Jay xxiv). That Wood sought to entertain her readers is undoubtedly true. But this bit of titillation hardly undoes the novel's Christian sentiment and moralizing. *East Lynne* is a novel of strict and conventional morality, as its closing line reinforces: "never forget that the only way to ensure peace in the end, is, to strive always to be doing right, unselfishly, under God" (624).

In this novel, with some exceptions, the immoral suffer and the morally virtuous triumph. Levison is mocked, abused, imprisoned, and sentenced to forced labor, a fate he sees as worse than death: "The gay Sir Francis Levison working in chains with his gang! . . . Oh why did they not hang him" (607-8). The faithless father Justice Hare suffers paralyzing strokes upon seeing the harm he's done to his son, while his son "regained the favour of West Lynne. . . . A happy, happy home from henceforth" (607). And Lady Isabel, having abandoned her husband and children is tortured by what she has left behind and punished with the deaths of two of her four children. Afy Hallijohn is an exception to this conventional moralizing. She had had an affair with Levison, had lived with him in London, had denied his role in the murder of her father, and had continued her flirting ways. Yet she winds up manipulating a successful grocer into marrying her. Why does Afy avoid all punishment for an immoral lifestyle while Isabel suffers so greatly for a single offense? She knows no better. Or as Elisabeth Jay asserts, "the capacity for moral scruple . . . is class based. . . . [she] is immune to the workings of conscience" (xxiii). In other words, the Victorian code of proper sexual behavior applied to the upper and middle, not to the poor and working classes. In fact, according to Sally Mitchell in her book *The Fallen Angel*, "Lower-class women were known to be sexually active. . . . the testimony of rural clergymen revealed [that] many . . . were already pregnant when they got to the altar" (xiii). *East Lynne*, then, is an instruction book for the middle class, showing the horrors that will befall those who violate marriage and family and gender conventions. This safe and comforting world is ruptured by human passion, by lust and greed and pride. But in the end, threats to bourgeois stability are overcome; order is restored. That's what Wood intends and what, I assume, most of her readers understood.

But there's something off about this conventional morality tale. For one misdeed, a short-lived affair, Lady Isabel suffers Job-like punishment, page after page of psychological torment—what Mary A. Armstrong, Chair of Women's and Gender Studies at Lafayette College, describes as a “potent mix of misery, masochistic charm, sadistic relish, and sympathy” (745) that culminates in the death of her son, followed by her own demise. Since Isabel is the only character whose interior life is made known to us, we experience her thoughts and feelings and thus sympathize with her plight. Rather than reinforce conventional morality, therefore, the excessive punishment doled out to Isabel suggests that this moral code is flawed. We respond to her punishment by asking why this one error by a still young and inexperienced woman deserves such brutal treatment. Isabel, forced to marry by a culture that denied her other options and forced to take on the role of wife and mother, fled in a moment of desperation. For this one moment, she is exiled from respectable society and her bastard son, had he lived, would likewise have become a social pariah.

In this irrational and excessive punishment we see a culture struggling to deny its cruel treatment of women. Or as Sally Mitchel puts it, “The very force of Isabel's punishment and Wood's rhetoric suggest the enormous strength [required to repress]” knowledge that threatens status quo belief (Introduction, xv). Perhaps at some level Wood—and Victorian culture itself—know that their view of women is wrong. But the novel's response to this knowledge, as is common when one's core beliefs are threatened, is not to critically examine these beliefs but to kill the messenger (and two of her children). The mistreatment of Isabel raises another question: why in Victorian culture was a woman's adultery such an unpardonable sin? The conventional answer is that a class-system based on male primogeniture could not exist without controlling female sexual desire. Upper-class husbands needed to be certain that those who would inherit their wealth and title were truly their offspring, or as a Lord Cranworth opined before Parliament in 1854, female adultery “might be the means of palming spurious offspring upon the husband” (qtd. in Shanley 364). Adultery also raised the possibility that women were sexual beings. And this perception threatened the Angel in the House mythology upon which bourgeois English values and practices were based. Hence the novel ends with a conventional tableau, a weak emotional woman supported by a strong confident man: Barbara “leaning on [Archibald's] breast, sobbing gently, her repentant face turned towards him. He held her there in his strong protection, his enduring tenderness” (623). Just as Isabel had once enjoyed the same paternalistic embrace, “a strong arm of shelter round her, a powerful pillar of protection, him upon whom she leaned” (225), so now the once aggressive Barbara has—as a wife—surrendered her will and identity to her husband.

The question of whether Wood reinforces or subverts Victorian moral codes comes down to weighing the importance of the novel's conventional moralizing conclusion against our sympathies with Isabel. In other words, by showing the unjust and excessive suffering of Isabel and her intelligence and humanity does Wood undermine the novel's reinforcement of bourgeois morality? This question has divided critics since the book's publication. Some criticized Wood for creating too sympathetic a portrayal of the immoral Isabel (and too unsympathetic a portrayal of the moral Barbara). For Margaret Oliphant, writing in *Blackwood's Magazine*, “It is evident that nohow, except by her wickedness and sufferings, could [Isabel] have gained so strong a hold upon our sympathies. This is a dangerous and foolish work. . . . Nothing can be more wrong and fatal than to represent the flames of vice as a purifying, fiery ordeal” (“Appendix” 715). Similarly, an anonymous reviewer in the *Christian Remembrancer* proclaimed, “the moral fault of the book is, that the heroine has reputed to her a delicacy and purity of mind in utter variance with her whole course. None but a thoroughly bad woman would have done what Lady Isabel did” (“Appendix”

718-19). On the other hand, some thought Isabel's suffering reinforced the book's moral lesson. For instance, Samuel Lucas, writing in *The Times*, argued that Wood was "a moralist" and that "there is a moral purpose in her portraits" ("Appendix" 712). Marlene Tromp, president of Boise State University, calls the 19th century reception of the novel, "a schizophrenic response . . . the novel was moral and tactful/the novel was wholly amoral and tactless."

This debate has continued in recent years, except that now instead of condemning Wood's depiction of the immoral Isabel, many critics see Wood's sympathy for her as an implicit critique of Victorian gender norms and bourgeois values. According to University of Cincinnati professor Tamar Heller, the plight of Isabel Vane "subverts [the novel's] apparent condemnation of the fallen woman" (qtd. in Tromp). On the other side of this debate, Andrew Maunder sees *East Lynne* as a "tale of identify for the newly affluent middle classes [which] . . . reinforce[s] . . . bourgeois (moral) hegemony" (qtd. in Tromp). Or as Jeanne Elliott asserts, "Mrs. Wood wrote for the wives and daughters of the newly prosperous and upwardly mobile mercantile classes. In every way she shared the ethical assumptions and moral convictions of her readers, and she always directed her sensational plots to the ends of traditional morality" (330).

In support of the latter position, some point to Wood's conventional lifestyle and her decision to publish under the name Mrs. Henry Wood. She was, according to the 1900 edition of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, "a strong orthodox churchwoman and a strong conservative" ("Wood," 363). Despite her popularity, Wood didn't participate in literary society or otherwise become a public figure. Instead, according to Maunder, "Wood remained an elusive figure, confined at home by two needs: her health and the need to guarantee her own and her family's middle-class standard of living" (Introduction 15), habits that reinforced the perception of Wood as preserver of the status quo. Even her appearance supported this view. She never posed for a photograph and the one picture we have of her, used as a frontispiece in later editions of her work, "shows the novelist dressed in sober black, wearing a lace cap" (Maunder, "Ellen"). According to Maunder, in the popular imagination Wood was "an impassive but respectable Victorian matron, projecting an aura as asexual as that of Queen Victoria" ("Ellen").

Others suggest that however conventional her appearance or her behavior, as a writer and editor, and as the sole provider for her family, Wood lived outside Victorian norms. In addition, this perception of Wood as a proper matron was likely constructed by her son Charles. "It has been said of many literary people that they are not domesticated. It was not so with Mrs. Henry Wood," Charles writes, "No one ever looked more earnestly to the ways of her household' . . . Her house was most carefully ruled . . . the domestic atmosphere was never disturbed. . . . No home duty was ever neglected or put aside for literary labours" (227-28). Deborah Wynne, Professor of Nineteenth Century Literature at the University of Chester, believes that a close reading of Charles Wood's memoir suggests the opposite, that a truer depiction of Ellen Wood can be discerned within this conventional portrait: "another picture struggles to emerge," Wynne writes, "of a self-promoting, hard-working writer and editor, and [her son's] systematic idealization of his mother stalls when he refers to her career" (227). Wynne goes on to suggest that Wood herself felt the need to create a "housewifely façade" to disguise her inappropriate "ambition to succeed and . . . [her]business acumen." In other words, according to Wynne, Wood recognized the importance of assuming a frail lady-like persona as a way of disguising her 'unfeminine' traits of literary ambition and business management skills" (66). On this view, Wood ironizes herself, presenting a public face that's far different from her private one.

Of course, this modern perception of Wood could be false and her son's depiction true. But that would have little bearing on a reading of her novel since a literary text can't be reduced to a mere reflection of its author's life and politics. Therefore, even if Wood consciously intended to reinforce conventional morality, her portrayal of Isabel, according to many recent critics, undermines it—reflecting, perhaps, her own mixed and unacknowledged feelings about Victorian gender codes: the sexual double standard, the inequity of divorce laws and rules of inheritance, the requirement that a woman remain in the domestic sphere, the limitations placed on a woman's education and career, etc. On this view, the novel's moralizing should be read ironically.

I agree that we can't determine Wood's intent, can't find definitive proof one way or the other. But for me this moralizing is so strenuously emphasized by Wood that it outweighs whatever intentional or unintentional subversion may be read into the novel. To titillate then to moralize has long been a feature of popular entertainment, a way to transgress conventional morality without offending bourgeois sensibilities. Wood wrote a novel filled with sensation that attracted much attention and many readers. But she also closed the novel conventionally, a wise move if her intent was to sell books to the Victorian—and substantially middle-class—reading public and to become, as she did, a commercially successful writer.

Because it reinforced conventional Victorian morality while at the same time exploiting this morality for dramatic effect, *East Lynne* was phenomenally successful, going through multiple editions, ultimately selling more than a million copies, and initiating Wood's literary career. She followed up its success with many more novels. "In the seven years after *East Lynne*," Sally Mitchell records, "she wrote fifteen novels often working on two at a time and producing installments for both month by month under the pressures of serialization" (Introduction ix). She would go on to write more than 40 novels and edit and write for the popular magazine *Argosy*, which serialized many of her novels. In 1916, dedicating a plaque to her enduring fame and literary genius at Worcester Cathedral, Lord Justice Avory declared, "her works were more widely read than those of any other author of the Victorian era. Her present publishers announced that they had sold over 5,750,000 copies of her novels" (qtd. in Mangham). But her most popular book would remain *East Lynne*.

Its popularity as a novel was, if anything, outdone by its popularity as a stage play. The first American version of *East Lynne* was performed in 1861, the first British version in 1864. From then on, the play, in at least 20 different versions, would be ubiquitous on the American and British stages (Maunder, Introduction 741). According to the British Library, "it was said that a performance of *East Lynne* could be seen somewhere in the English-speaking world any Saturday night over a period of 40 years" (*East*). The phrase "Next week—*East Lynne*!" became a clichéd promise to audiences after a poorly received play. And a line from this play, which doesn't appear in the novel—"Dead, dead, and never called me mother"—became a catchphrase for melodramatic Victorian tragedy ("Melodrama"). One production of *East Lynne* by a Toronto theater company featured the nine-year-old Gladys Smith as the consumptive William. Eight years later Gladys would begin her film career under the auspices of D.W. Griffith and under the name Mary Pickford (Whitfield 34).

East Lynne was made into three silent films, notably one starring Theda Bara (one of the few of her films that has survived) and a sound film that was nominated for a best picture Academy Award in 1931 (it lost to the Western *Cimarron*, which was based on another novel written by a

woman, Edna Ferber). Because *East Lynne* was so popular, it generated a number of spoofs and farces, including a play titled *East of Lynn, Mass.*, which featured a character named not Lady Isabel Vane but Madame Tomato Vine (Armstrong 753); a silent film called *East Lynne with Variations*, written by Mack Sennett of Keystone Cops fame and starring the cross-eyed silent comic Ben Turpin and the star-crossed actress Marie Prevost (“East Lynne with”); and a 1931 sound film titled *East Lynne on the Western Front*, whose plot the British Film Institute summarizes as “A group of [British soldiers] at rest in France, entertain their comrades with a burlesque of *East Lynne*” (“East Lynne on the”).

After the long-standing popularity of the play and this flurry of movies, though, *East Lynne* fell out of favor and disappeared from public consciousness (although in the 1950s, an Indian Tamil-language film version was released). By mid-century, the novel seems almost to have fallen out of print (Jay xxxviii). Initiated by feminist critics, interest in *East Lynne* was renewed in the 1970s. A BBC-TV movie of *East Lynne* appeared in 1982. The first scholarly edition of the novel was published by Rutgers University Press in 1984, with at least two other scholarly editions published in the early 2000s. Thus, thanks to the expansion of the literary canon, to feminist critics’ interest in marginalized texts by women, and to a general reappraisal of Victorian culture, *East Lynne* began to receive the attention of scholars and to be taught in college English classes. Yet what Andrew Maunder wrote in 2000 probably still holds true: “*East Lynne* may now be one of the most famous unread works in the English language . . . but as . . . critics have begun to acknowledge, it is an important cultural document, as well as being one of the most gripping of nineteenth-century novels” (Introduction 17).

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