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Sensational Women:
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Introduction

“Sensation novels,” a kind of novel characterized by scandal and mystery, emerged in the 1860s to entertain and shock Victorian audiences. In many cases, the novels contain incidents of murder or theft that must be solved and dealt with throughout the novel, and in other cases, the shocking acts are more concerned with actions or behaviors of certain main characters, including deception and adultery. While these crimes and transgressions are often found in a sensation novel, the question of what defines the term “sensation novel” itself remains only vaguely answered. It is unclear when the term “sensation novel” was first applied, as sources differ in this, but it seems that the genre existed mostly between 1860-1880.¹ Ellen Wood was one of the best-known novelists in this genre in her day, but she was by no means the only writer of sensation novels. Others, including Wilkie Collins (*The Woman in White*, 1859), Mary Elizabeth Braddon (*Lady Audley's Secret*, 1862), Charles Reade (*Griffith Gaunt*, 1866), also wrote primarily in this genre, and other well-known writers from the nineteenth century, like Dickens, dabbled in what came to be known as sensation fiction, especially in the unfinished *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* [1870]. In the early 1860s, critics generally dismissed and condemned them, though by 1864, the term appears to have been widely used and understood by critics and audiences alike.² Neglected after the 1880s, “sensation novels” have been gradually recovered by literary and cultural critics over the past 30 years.

¹ Philip V. Allingham, “The Victorian Sensation Novel 1860-1880”, *Victorian Web*, <<http://www.victorianweb.org/genre/sensation.html>>.

² Ellen Miller Casey, “‘Highly Flavoured Dishes’ and ‘Highly Seasoned Garbage’: Sensation in the *Athenaeum*,” in *Victorian Sensations: Essays on a Scandalous Genre*, ed. Kimberly Harrison and Richard Fantina (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2006) : 3-14.

Often such critics disagree about whether sensation novels merely reflected Victorian middle-class morality, or in subtle ways challenged nineteenth-century moral and gender definitions. The verdict on such questions remains unsettled even today. In this essay, I intend to examine the ways in which two of the most widely read sensation novelists, Ellen Wood and Willkie Collins, portray what I call “domestic morality” and violations of it. Through the analysis of Wood’s *East Lynne* (1860) and Collins’s *The Woman in White* (1859), I will argue that the Victorian sensation novel at different times could both subvert and confirm domestic ideology as it relates to gender and morality, sometimes in unexpected ways. I will first try to indicate the wider scope of Victorian domestic ideology and conduct literature in which I believe sensation fiction intervened in important ways. I then develop a working definition of the genre as it emerged in the 1860s, especially since many of the leading sensation novels are now coming back into print. Mary Elizabeth Braddon, for instance, was one of the most well-known Victorian sensation novelists, and *Lady Audley’s Secret* remains popular today in print as well as in a recently-released film based on this novel, securing its place as an important work both in the nineteenth century and now.³ My readings of *East Lynn* and *The Woman in White* in the second half of this paper will argue that the genre of sensation fiction cannot be read unilaterally as either entirely supporting or actively undermining Victorian domestic ideology, but rather as interrogating that framework of values in sometimes startling ways.

³ *Lady Audley’s Secret*, TV, Directed by Betsan Morris Evans (BFS Entertainment: 2000).

I. Gender and Domestic Morality in Victorian England

Throughout the nineteenth century, the portrayal of a woman as a wife and/or mother dominated female characters in many popular works as well as serious works of literature. Even sensation novels, with their flawed women characters, depict the ideal woman as a wife, mother, and loyal companion to her spouse. It is when women deviate from these established norms that they are depicted as villainous and often punished by either other characters or by fate.

To understand the social character of Victorian morality, it is important to note first that expectations differed by social class for both men and women. The domestic morality discussed here applies to middle and upper class women, who were expected to remain at home and fill the roles of wife and mother, and not to women in the working and lower classes. This was a change from the eighteenth century, when women were often seen outside of the home in the community, performing acts of philanthropy for the less fortunate people around them. By the beginning of the Victorian age, women were expected to remain in the home and spend time with their children. They were also encouraged, however, to hire governesses to care for their children and teach them.⁴ Such conduct indicated a newer, more modern view of children since, prior to the nineteenth century, mother-child relationships were not encouraged, as infant mortality rates were high and children often died at young ages, even if they made it to childhood.⁵

Within the household, women were expected to display kindness and charity, often in ways that conformed to Christian ideals. [As Judith](#) Flanders writes, "The home was a

⁴ John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (Bury St Edmunds: St. Edmundsbury Press Ltd., 1999) : 20.

⁵ Judith Flanders, *Inside the Victorian Home: A Portrait of Domestic Life in Victorian England* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003) : 6.

microcosm of the ideal society, with love and charity replacing the commerce and capitalism of the outside world” (Flanders 2003, 6). Sarah Stickney Ellis, an influential Victorian conduct literature writer, confirms the importance of kindness in women: “then ask, for what [woman] is most valued, admired, and beloved ... In answer to this, I have little hesitation in saying — for her disinterested kindness.”⁶ Ellis wrote several conduct manuals, most of which focused on a particular woman’s role, such as daughter or mother, rather than [broader](#) rules for women in general. Nancy Armstrong indicates in her book *Desire and Domestic Fiction* that the nineteenth-century ideal woman came to be defined by conduct literature, rather than conduct literature merely reflecting the state of women in society.⁷ [In her](#) article “Nobody’s Angels: Domestic Ideology and Middle-Class Women in the Victorian Novel,” [Elizabeth Langland](#) builds on Armstrong’s findings, [focusing](#) on the idea of the angel in the house, the decline of conduct literature, and [the](#) emergence of [new](#) social rituals and discursive practices.⁸

The importance of women in the household transcended simple kindness, however, and extended to every aspect of domestic life. John Ruskin, the period’s most important moral philosopher, wrote that women were either all good or all bad, and if they were bad, then the household would have no peace.⁹ Women, then, had heavy burdens within the home. They were responsible for the children and the running of household affairs,

⁶ Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits* (New York: D. Appleton & Co, 1843) : 42.

⁷ Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 1990).

⁸ Elizabeth Langland, “Nobody’s Angels: Domestic Ideology and Middle-Class Women in the Victorian Novel”, *PMLA* 107.2 (1992): 291.

⁹ John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies* [1864] (Chicago: Scott, Foresman, and Company, 1920) : 120-121.

including budgets, spending thriftily, and hiring servants, but even beyond that, women were held responsible for the temperament of the house and the peace there.

The relationships between men and women are also important when discussing the role of women in society and in the household. Women were responsible for affairs within the home. It was a wife's job to run the household efficiently and frugally (Langland 2002, 291). Wives were not supposed to have leisure time, [but rather](#) to keep busy with the children, the running of the household, and their matrimonial duties to their husbands. Men, on the other hand, were the visible part of the family and were expected to represent the family in public. A husband's duty lay outside of the home, for the most part, and he was the breadwinner for the household (Tosh 1999, 18). Women were supposed to be obedient and respectful to their husbands as subordinates, not equals (Langland 1992, 294). These important domestic relationships and guidelines help to define what is here called "domestic morality" as [it stood when](#) the new subgenre of Victorian fiction, the "sensation novel," emerged in the 1860s.

II. Victorian Sensation Novels as a Genre

Critics often have difficulty agreeing upon a single definition for the sensation novel genre. Much of the debate centers around what it was that sensation novels [were](#) meant to portray and examine. Were they essentially novels portraying "sensational" behaviors involving gender, class, or morality? Even within these categories, there is often disagreement today, and some of these questions are rooted in the first Victorian [critical](#) responses [to this genre](#). Critics writing in the Tory periodicals *Quarterly Review* and *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* suspected the genre not only of pandering to popular

appetites, but [of intimating](#) a dark underside to contemporary English life. In his 1863 essay “Sensation Novels” for the *Quarterly Review*, Henry Mansel condemns sensation novels as a genre whose attractions he attributes to appetites for thrills stimulated by the machinery of popular Victorian reading: “periodicals, circulating libraries, and railway bookstalls.” But [for Mansel](#) the new genre has a special feature that singles it out from other Victorian fiction like historical novels: “The sensation novel, be it mere trash or something worse, is usually a tale of our own times. Proximity is, indeed, one great element of sensation.”¹⁰ By “proximity” Mansel means that the sensation novel was sensational primarily because it represents English society in the reader’s own present time:

We are thrilled with horrors, even in fiction, by the thought that such things [as secret poisonings] may be going on around us and among us. . . . The man who shook our hand with a hearty English grasp half an hour ago—the woman whose beauty and grace were the charm of last night, and whose gentle words sent us home better pleased with the world and ourselves—how exciting to think that under these pleasing outsides may be concealed some demon in human shape, a Count Fosco or a Lady Audley! (47)

[It is](#) ominous for critics like Mansel that “sensation novels” are suggesting all is not well in the contemporary English life, [as if](#) its placid, prosperous surface [were](#) concealing dark motives and secret passions lurking with.

In her 1862 *Blackwood’s Magazine* essay “Sensation Novels,” Margaret Oliphant placed the genre at a higher level, comparing it to such precursors as Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* or exciting romances like Edward Bulwer Lytton’s *Zanoni*

¹⁰ Henry Mansel, “Sensation Novels” [1863] in *The Nineteenth-Century Novel: A Critical Reader*, ed. Stephen Regan (New York: Routledge, 2001) : 47

and other fiction featuring “magic and supernaturalism.”¹¹ What made Willkie Collins’s *A Woman in White* “entirely original” among such novels, however, was that he dispensed with the supernatural altogether and “boldly takes in hand the common mechanisms of life.” Her admiration for Collins’ originality doesn’t, however, lessen the disturbing fact that he has thus “given a new impulse to a kind of literature which must, more or less, find its inspiration in crime, and, more or less, make the criminal its hero.”(44) Tory critics like Oliphant and Mansell may have differed in how accomplished the sensation novel could become, but both saw the new subgenre of English fiction making morally subversive identifications between avid readers and anti-social protagonists.

Since the 1970s, [revived](#) critical interest in sensation fiction is far less one-sided in defining and interpreting the genre, but it renews the controversy over whether [or not](#) sensation novels upstaged traditional moral identifications between readers and characters. [Some](#) critics think sensation novels [reinforce](#) accepted gender roles, and others think they subvert [such roles](#). In *Wilkie Collins and Other Sensation Novelists*, Nicholas Rance outlines this argument and then observes that there were both conservative and radical or reformist sensation novels.¹² Rance’s views seem to be supported by the readings I will present below of two sensation novels. It is impossible to declare that all sensation novels will always lean in one direction or the other, especially since the authors have such varying backgrounds and ideas. In the case of gender, it is very important to note which characters are portrayed as being villainous — is it the characters who violate or the ones who [sustain](#) domestic morality and its gender roles?

¹¹ Margaret Oliphant, “Sensation Novels” (1862) in Regan, ed., *The Nineteenth-Century Novel: A Critical Reader* : 41.

¹² Nicholas Rance, *Wilkie Collins and Other Sensation Novelists* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1991) : 5.

In defining the genre, current critics tend to focus on two main [questions](#): the importance of the domestic sphere in sensation novels, and the fusion of the new genre from other genres. In her introduction to *Victorian Sensations*, Kimberly Harrison [argues](#) that “sensation novels take as their subject the domestic sphere,” something Nancy Armstrong also [suggests](#) when she briefly discusses sensation novels in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*.¹³ The moral standards by which characters are judged here tend to reflect standards set by writers of conduct literature like Sarah Ellis. Much of the sensation novel’s plot takes place within the house and between husbands and wives, bringing the sensation novel even further into the domestic sphere.

The hybrid nature of sensation novels is also commonly discussed, and critics often cite both gothic novels and domestic realist [novels such as Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*](#) as sources for the genre—thus suggesting a significant tension between earlier Victorian realism and the outlandish plots and character-portrayals in the sensation novel. [In his article “What Is Sensational About the ‘Sensation Novel’?” Patrick Brantlinger classifies the sensation novel largely as a form of domestic realism with elements of mystery, but he also writes that the sensation novel is psychological in nature. Brantlinger further argues that the new popular genre was strongly influenced by the emergence of sensational journalism and detailed reporting of criminal trials in newspaper.](#)¹⁴ Richard Nemesvari explores this idea by noting that much of the tension was caused by the assumption that sensation novels (as Mansel had maintained in *Quarterly Review*) were not a legitimate art form, but

¹³ Kimberly Harrison, “Introduction,” *Victorian Sensations* : xv.

¹⁴ [Patrick Brantlinger, “What is Sensational About the ‘Sensation Novel’?” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 37.1 \(June 1982\): 2-3.](#)

rather a less acceptable form of writing.¹⁵ In addition, some critics have suggested that sensation novels were in fact a new response to the dominance of realist novels before them.

With these useful distinctions, we can obtain a clearer picture of what the sensation novel is, and how we should examine it. In what follows, I will examine the portrayals of women, particularly the portrayals of women as villains throughout these novels. Both their actions and the responses of others to their actions will be significant in this analysis, and for the purpose of this paper, sensational acts will be those that evoke a surprised or horrified response from the other characters as well as presumably from readers.

III. Ellen Wood and *East Lynn*

Ellen Wood (1814-1887) wrote over 30 novels and over 100 short stories, and edited the magazine *Argosy*. Her work largely falls into the category of sensation novels, as they included elements of mystery, crime, and deceit. She was one of the most popular novelists of the [nineteenth](#) century, especially of the 1860s, and her 1861 novel *East Lynne* was among the best-selling novels of the [age](#).¹⁶

Wood's own novels contained many elements from existing genres, such as gothic novels and domestic fiction, as well as topics that interested society at the time that she was writing; for example, subjects like bigamy and women testifying at trials were being

¹⁵ Richard Nemesvari, "Judged by a Purely Literary Standard: Sensation Fiction, Horizons of Expectation, and the Generic Construction of Victorian Realism" in Harrison, ed., *Victorian Sensations* : 16.

¹⁶ Michael Flowers, "The Ellen Wood (Mrs. Henry Wood) Website" <<http://mrshenrywood.co.uk>>.

talked about at the time, and Wood included them in her novels.¹⁷ Her audience was largely middle class and female, as was the case with most sensation novels.¹⁸ When she began writing in 1851, she did not immediately start with novels, but rather with stories containing religious themes. Her first novel, *Danesbury House*, was written in 1860 for a writing contest, which she won, and is a strongly moralistic pro-temperance novel about an alcoholic nurse, Mrs. Glisson, who kills the baby she cares for by overlooking its medicine carelessly and instead feeding it laudanum. Since it was written for a temperance-message contest, the novel in itself may not necessarily suggest that Wood's own views agreed with the novel. The main evidence for Wood's moral viewpoint is her son's claim that she was strongly conservative and intended for her novels to encourage morality by portraying vivid acts of immorality.¹⁹

At first, Wood had trouble trying to publish *East Lynne*. Harrison Ainsworth, the editor of *New Monthly Magazine* who had published her short stories, refused to allow her to write a novel for him, which he later told her was [paradoxically](#) because he liked her short stories too much to accept a novel.²⁰ He did eventually allow the serialization of the novel, but when Wood attempted to publish it in book form, she encountered more trouble. The first publisher to which she took the novel rejected it on the basis of negative feedback from their reader, but according to Wood's son, Charles, she was sure that the book would be a success. The second likewise declined to publish it, but the third publisher, Richard

¹⁷ Kay Boardman and Shirley Jones, *Popular Victorian Women Writers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990): 167.

¹⁸ Andrew Radford, *Victorian Sensation Fiction (Readers' Guides to Essential Criticism)* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009): 10.

¹⁹ Charles Wood, quoted in *Wilkie Collins and Other Sensation Novelists*, Nicholas Rance (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1991) : 5.

²⁰ Charles William Wood, *Memorials of Mrs. Henry Wood* (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1894): 206.

Bentley and Son, accepted the book for publication. Looking back with what we know now, we can conclude that Wood's intuition was correct, or that her hope was well-founded, as *East Lynne* sold extremely well at the time and has been republished today.²¹ Over 4 million copies of Wood's novels were printed by 1905 according to publication data found in that year's edition of the second series of *Johnny Ludlow*.²² The same data states that *East Lynne* had sold 800,000 copies; *The Channings* (1862) sold 300,000 copies; and even her shorter *Johnny Ludlow* stories had between 20,000 and 45,000 copies published, varying by series. Richard Bentley and Son, which was based in London, published the majority of her novels (and also published those of Willkie Collins).

Her success with *East Lynne* led to her taking over the editorship for *Argosy* by 1867, a family magazine that had recently been exposed to scandal as a result of the publication of Charles Reade's racy novel *Griffith Gaunt*. In *Argosy* she serialized many of her works and contributed short stories anonymously. Wood wrote and published at least one novel each year between 1861 and 1873, with 1874 being the first year in well over a decade that she did not have any works published.²³ Like most other novelists in this period, her works tended to appear in serialized form in magazines, varying with each story, but including *Argosy*, *New Monthly Magazine*, and *Bentley's Miscellany*, then in a three- volume print edition for the book market. .

Wood's ability to produce a vast number of works was in part due to the fact that, after the popularity of *East Lynne*, readers demanded more novels and she agreed to write

²¹ Aside from selling well, Wood's *East Lynne* was also converted into two plays, which were performed on stage during her lifetime.

²² Publication data, *Johnny Ludlow, Second Series* by Ellen Wood (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1905): 464.

²³ Michael Flowers, "The Ellen Wood Website", <<http://mrshenrywood.co.uk>>.

them. According to her son, she did not realize how much work she was agreeing to at the time, and she worked for nine hours each day to complete the novels, as she would not go back on her promise to write the novels (Wood 1894, 231). Later, after she had finished the initial orders for books, she chose her engagements more carefully and wrote only what she knew she could write without having too much stress or being overworked.

During her career, Wood's works often received high praise from critics, and *East Lynne* was especially lauded. One critic praised her attention to reality when writing court scenes, including all the appropriate parts of a trial (Wood 1894, 241). Others praised her characters as were realistic and likeable. One reviewer, Hamilton Hume, commended her on being able to maintain suspense and plot in *East Lynne*, and to have "served the interests of morality in holding up to society a mirror in which it may see itself exactly reflected" (quoted in Wood 1894, 243-244). Despite the fact that her novels contained highly immoral acts, critics seemed to universally view it as conveying support of Victorian domestic morality. By showing society the immoral things that it does, they thought, she could encourage more moral behavior among her readership. As her first sensation novel and, indeed, probably the first novel that she wrote with only her own goals and beliefs in mind, *East Lynne* is an important work in her *oeuvre*.

East Lynne features two female characters who both play a significant role in the plot and evoke shock and surprise in the reader: Lady Isabel Vane and Barbara Hare. On the surface, these two characters are vastly different. Isabel shocks the novel's other characters by leaving her husband for another man, while Barbara seems to be a respectable young woman. First appearances can be misleading, though, and by looking closely, we can see that Barbara has committed her fair share of wrongdoings throughout

the novel. Isabel and Barbara are different in more ways than one, and some of their differences stems from their different backgrounds. Isabel was born into an aristocratic family while Barbara is the daughter of a respectable middle-class judge. This class difference seems to point to Isabel as the character who will commit wrongs, but, again, judging the characters too early would be a mistake.

In *East Lynne*, the two main storylines are focused distinguishably on Isabel and Barbara. Through the three parts of the novel, Isabel emerges as a focal point and, as a villainous character, she drives parts of the story forward. At the beginning, she is orphaned and left with nothing, forced to live with her aunt and uncle. Her aunt mistreats her and she is quickly married to Mr. Archibald Carlyle, a respected lawyer in West Lynne. Their marriage is relatively happy and they have several children, but Isabel is unhealthy. While she is away to recover, she happens to meet Francis Levison, a man she had known before her marriage. Later, he comes to visit West Lynne and, after telling Isabel that her husband was meeting secretly with Barbara Hare, she runs away with him, abandoning her family. She becomes pregnant with Levison's child, but shortly after her divorce is made final, he leaves her to assume his newly-inherited title. She has the baby outside of marriage, but in a train accident, the baby is killed and she is left horribly disfigured, unrecognizable by those around her—one of the novel's most "sensational" moments. She is pronounced dead, and Carlyle marries Barbara. Meanwhile, Isabel assumes the name "Madame Vine" and goes to work as a governess for her own children. After her eldest son dies, she becomes ill and dies of heartbreak, but not before informing Carlyle of her true identity.

Meanwhile, a second and more mysterious plot involving Barbara provides a different kind of shock and surprise. Barbara's brother, Richard, is accused of killing a man in the past, but he claims he is innocent. He meets secretly with Barbara from time to time, and eventually they get Carlyle involved. They work together to solve the mystery of who killed the man, trying to find a man called "Thorn" whom Richard remembers. Eventually, they find Thorn — but Thorn turns out to be Francis Levison. Coincidences like this one were typical of sensation novels and lent them part of their melodramatic quality. In the end, justice is served and Richard's name is cleared of the murder charge.

Both halves of the story serve an important purpose. First, because they are both contained within the same novel, they tend to support Brantlinger's definition of a sensation novel as one that contains both domestic realism and features of crime fiction.²⁴ Second, the villain Levison is a narrative villain in both realms—he causes the fall of Isabel and is the murderer of the father of the woman he was secretly having an affair with. Each new revelation in the murder case is a surprise to the reader, taking twists and turns along the way, even going so far as introducing another character by the name of Thorn. Isabel's violation of domestic morality creates in her a lesser villain, but one who is repeatedly scorned and criticized throughout the novel.

There is some debate over what Wood's portrayal of Isabel means. Deborah Wynne argues that Isabel is villainous because the novel itself attempts to "champion the middle class."²⁵ Isabel's shocking behavior successfully inspires positive ideas toward middle-class domestic morality. Andrew Mangham's argument that the novel shows the "shortfalls

²⁴ Patrick Brantlinger, "What Is Sensational About the 'Sensation Novel'?", *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 37 (1982): 2-3.

²⁵ [Deborah Wynne, quoted in Andrew Mangham](#), *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007): 132.

inherent in bourgeois masculinity” is an interesting one, but it does not [explain the male characters’ actions very clearly](#) (Mangham 2007, 132-136). While Archibald Carlyle does keep secrets from his wife and fail to reassure her often enough that he is devoted to her, his actions are not something to be blamed for the actions of his wife. Her own paranoia and lack of proper bourgeois domesticity seem to cause her fall, and Carlyle is shown to be a victim of her actions, not a man lacking in propriety himself.

Isabel’s character is really the most shocking of any character in the book. She is shocking not only because of her actions— leaving her husband for another man, bearing illegitimate children, and disguising herself to work undetected in her home as a governess — but also because of her class origin. Isabel was, at the beginning, a socially respected woman and a faithful, loyal wife, indeed the “perfect” lady with perfect expectations at the beginning of her marriage. She did not marry for love, but rather expected that love would come over time, as she got to know her husband better.²⁶ After their marriage, Isabel becomes possessive and often jealous of Barbara, with whom Carlyle spent a great deal of time because of her brother’s legal peril. At one point, Isabel accuses him of loving Barbara and not her: “You never loved Barbara Hare?” He responded, “Loved *her*! What is your head running on, Isabel? I never loved but one woman: and that one I made my wife” (Wood 1860, 140). Isabel’s jealousy proved to cause her problems later, as well, but besides her jealousy, she lacked the skills and talents necessary to be a housewife, having been accustomed to a life of luxury rather than one of practicality. When Miss Carlyle asks her to help make table napkins, Isabel exclaims that she cannot because she doesn’t “understand

²⁶ Ellen Wood, *East Lynne* [1860] (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1984): 114.

that sort of work" (142). Miss Carlyle, and likely the novel's reader, believes Isabel's idleness to be sinful.

This idea that idleness in the household is a sin is worth exploring further. Women in Victorian England were expected to run their households, and Isabel's inability to do this positions her already as a violator of Victorian domestic tradition and normalcy. Later, after Isabel goes to work as a governess in her home, Barbara confides in her what she thinks a mother's duty is:

Now, what I trust I shall never give up to another, will be the *training* of my children. Let the offices, properly pertaining to a nurse, be performed by the nurse — of course taking care that she is thoroughly to be depended on. Let her have the *trouble* of the children, their noise, their romping; in short, let the nursery be her place and the children's place. — But I hope I shall never fail to gather my children round me daily, at stated and convenient periods, for higher purposes: to instill into them Christian and moral duties; to strive to teach them how best to fulfil the obligations of life. *This* is a mother's task — as I understand the question; let her do this work well, and the nurse can attend to the rest. A child should never hear aught from its mother's lips but persuasive gentleness; and this becomes impossible, if she is very much with her children (341).

Barbara's explanation of a mother's duties refers pointedly to Isabel's conduct. While Isabel has not been available to teach her children these things, perhaps even more important is her own inability throughout the novel to fulfill her domestic obligations. She is unable to care for her household or her family and eventually abandons the idea of domestic devotion altogether, instead running off with another man. Her eventual transformation

into a teacher and caregiver (as a governess) redeems her only somewhat, since she had so clearly failed at her duties as a wife and mother before eloping with Levison.

Isabel's jealousy finally gets the best of her when Levison confirms her suspicions, or so she thinks, of her husband's love for Barbara. He claims to have witnessed a private meeting in the street and suggests that Carlyle is unfaithful to Isabel (226-27). She agrees to run off with him, devastated by her husband's lack of loyalty. Levison tricks her, knowing that she did not really want to leave her husband, by claiming to present proof of Carlyle's infidelity: "Be avenged on that false hound, Isabel. He was never worthy of you. Leave your life of misery, and come to happiness" (227). This deception seals Isabel's fate and she agrees to leave the home to be with Levison, never knowing the truth about the meeting between her husband and Barbara.

Although Isabel leaves her husband for another man, she initially looks like a victim, leaving a disloyal husband for a man who loves her and wants only the best for her. Soon, though, we learn, through her own admission, that Isabel is not only a victim. In a fight with Levison, he tells her he is not the only one at fault for her downfall, and she says, "Don't I know it? Have I not said so?" (248) Because she admits her guilt, she becomes an agent rather than a victim and is therefore, to the novel's readership, more villainous in her violations of domestic moral codes. While Isabel does not break any laws, she does violate the norms of the society in which she lives by leaving her husband and having an adulterous affair, which resulted in an illegitimate child. Isabel's actions are also worse because she knows they are wrong. She is concerned about the illegitimacy of her child and has every intention of marrying Levison, making the situation more honorable, but he instead runs back to England, leaving her alone to have her child. Once he returns, she

regains her senses and sends him away (241, 248). She finally recognizes that her actions were wrong and regrets them. After sending Levison away, she begins thinking: “[S]he had repented of the false step for her husband’s sake, and longed — though it could never be — to be back again, his wife.” (249)

Even though Isabel must necessarily be shown to be the villain here, she does inspire pity from readers. She admits that she was responsible for her actions, but because she has lost so much and because she was tricked into leaving her husband, we are left feeling as though we should sympathize with her, even though her actions were reprehensible according to domestic moral standards. As Lyn Pykett argues, the novel encourages us both to pity and to condemn Isabel.²⁷ This does not, however, mean that the novel in any way subverts middle-class domestic morality. Rather, it is a warning not to be like Isabel. One pities her because she has made these choices and has gone down the wrong path, but it is not a pity that inspires a dismissal of the morality she violates. It is rather one that inspires one to conform to the rules to avoid her situation. In addition, part of the reason that Isabel can be pitied is that she repents and understands that what she does is wrong. By repenting, even the immoral villain is able to confirm that the domestic moral standards are legitimate and should be upheld.

Isabel is judged throughout the book by nearly every other character she comes into contact with, including both strangers and her own family. When her uncle, Lord Mount Severn, comes to see her following the departure of Levison, he criticizes her decision to leave her husband. “[I]f ever man loved his wife, he loved you. *How* could you so requite him?” he asks (254). Later, after the train accident, Isabel is working as a governess for a

²⁷ Lyn Pykett, [quoted](#) in Mangham, *Violent Women in Sensation Fiction* : 129.

family when Afy Hallijohn, the sister of her old maid and the daughter of the man Richard Hare is accused of killing, shows up to visit. Isabel asks her about her former life, pretending to have known the Carlyles in passing, and when asked whether she has ever met Lady Isabel, Afy replies, "Not I. I should have thought it demeaning. One does not care to be brought into contact with that sort of misdoing lot, you know" (329). Afy also tells her that her daughter was no longer called "Isabel," but instead was called by her middle name, "Lucy." (239) The name change occurs because Carlyle has found his wife's name so painful and distasteful after what she had done that he could not bear to have his daughter called "Isabel." Only rarely does anyone speak well of her after she leaves, but even then they speak of how much they loved her when she was there, not condoning her actions in any way, even though some people found them understandable at times. Joyce, one of the maids at East Lynne, says, "She has gone and taken the life that was not hers to take, and I say she has been driven to it." (234).

Isabel lives her life in disgrace after violating the rules of domestic morality and running off with Francis Levison. While nothing that she does is quite illegal, she suffers because of her actions until she dies. She is horribly disfigured in a train accident, but worse for her is watching her husband love someone else, and watching her son die without being able to tell him that she is his mother. Nothing good comes to Isabel after leaving her husband; she is left poor, alone, and disfigured, symbols of her wrongdoings. Other characters who can be seen as violators of these moral codes do not suffer in the same ways that she does, but their actions are violations of domestic morality just the same.

Barbara Hare, for example, appears to be the perfect daughter. She takes care of her mother and shields her father from news that would be too shocking for him. She is polite and kind and, to most people, she does not seem to violate any significant rules. The first signs that Barbara is doing something wrong are the moments she spends with her brother, who has been outlawed from West Lynne and who, if caught, will be hanged for committing murder. She helps him hide when he visits and keeps the secret from her father, knowing he would disapprove. While it is possible to see her actions as noble, risking her own safety to help a man she believes to be innocent, the secrecy shows that she knew she was doing something that was not quite right. She disobeyed her father in meeting with her brother, and moreover, by harboring a fugitive, she broke the law. This, however, is not the key element of Barbara's violation of domestic morality. That comes in a chapter titled "Barbara's Misdoings," which already suggests that there is something wrong with Barbara's behavior.

In this chapter, we learn that Barbara has refused to marry every man who has asked her. This has angered her father, who is upset that the people of West Lynne gossip about her. This chapter also puts her in contrast with Isabel. Barbara says to her father, "I like him as an acquaintance, papa. Not as a husband" (252). Where at the beginning of the book, Isabel appears as a perfect member of Victorian society, recognizing that her duty to marry came before her love for her husband, Barbara always has her mind set on marrying for love. Her father is angered by this idea, and he tells her that she does not need to like a man as a husband until he is her husband (261). This scene between Barbara and her father shows us that the idea of marriage is an important one, and marrying for love is not always possible or desirable. Isabel married Carlyle, knowing that she did not love him yet,

but Barbara refused to marry anyone until Carlyle asked her, having decided that he was the best choice for her in advance. By failing to marry and continually refusing proposals of marriage, Barbara also violates the rules of domestic morality. While she is not shunned or barred from local society, she is frequently gossiped about in town. According to her father, everyone has been saying that she could not be married because of what her brother had done, and this has brought shame to the family, though not in quite the same way that Isabel brought shame to hers.

These two women may have vastly different personalities and social backgrounds, but both of them violate the rules of domestic morality. In allowing both of these women to be seen as violators of domestic morality, Wood is able to emphasize the importance of adhering to the rules. Isabel may violate those terms more overtly by committing adultery and abandoning her children, by having an illegitimate child, and by disguising herself so that she could work as a governess in her own household. In addition, Isabel violates the rules set forth by Victorian conduct literature for women, ignoring the rules for her gender. Because Isabel is the subject of gossip and is cast out from society, Wood confirms that the rules should be followed through her characterization. Barbara's violations come in the form of secrecy and disobedience, and more importantly, in denying marriage proposals repeatedly for no practical reason. Both women bring disappointment and shame to their families, even if not to equal degrees, and both women know that they are doing something wrong. Here, Wood's portrayal of Barbara emphasizes a different aspect of morality and societal expectations. Where Isabel's actions are wrong in a more unmistakable way, the novel's clear implication that Barbara's actions are also tends to reveal, I think, Wood's adherence to the tenets of Victorian domestic morality. Women should behave according

to all of the rules of society, including the seemingly less important ones, like obeying one's father or only rejecting marriage proposals for good cause. Isabel's extreme violations are most wrong, but Barbara's indiscretions and nonconformity to the rules of her society are portrayed negatively, as well.-The wrongdoings committed by these women can be seen as violations of both contemporary domestic morality and as violations of Victorian gender roles. Isabel goes off on her own, leaving her husband behind, and Barbara defies the orders of the men around her, making decisions for herself. Both of these categories of indiscretion decidedly put these women into the ranks of sensational women characters.

IV. Wilkie Collins and *The Woman in White*

During his lifetime, Wilkie Collins (1824-1889) published 23 novels in addition to various collections of short stories and articles.²⁸ Despite his prolific output, he is now known primarily for two works: *The Woman in White* [1859] and *The Moonstone* [1868],²⁹ and for the latter he has been credited with the invention of the modern detective novel.³⁰ Most of Collins' works were sensation novels, but he also wrote biographies as well. He published his first book, a biography of his father, in 1848 and continued writing until his death in 1889. *The Woman in White*, published serially in 1859-1860 in *All the Year Round* and in three volumes by Sampson Low, Son, & Co., was by most critical accounts the first sensation novel—although Margaret Oliphant thought he had significant precursors for the genre in Hawthorne, Bulwer-Lytton, and even Dickens. While Oliphant generally disliked sensation novels, she regarded Collins was the writer who defined the sensation novel in

²⁸ Paul Lewis, "Wilkie Collins Bibliography", <<http://www.web40571.clarahost.co.uk/wilkie/bibliog/books.htm>>.

²⁹ Norman Page, *Wilkie Collins* (New York: Routledge, 1974): vi.

³⁰ Ronald R. Thomas, "Detection in the Victorian Novel", ed. Deirdre David, *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001): 179.

the way that continued through the 1860s until the 1880s. She writes that Collins' fiction is superior to these other sensation novels because he does not rely on the supernatural in order to achieve a sensational effect, but rather uses shocking actions that could be committed by anyone.³¹

In *The Woman in White*, Wilkie Collins portrays women as villainous characters as well as virtuous ones, as Ellen Wood does, but his techniques and his characters are vastly different from those in *East Lynne*. While the female characters in *East Lynne* are suspect because they violate social norms and ignore domestic morality, the portrayals of women in *The Woman in White* are much subtler. The audience is unlikely to see most of Collins's women as villainous, and it is only in the eyes of some of the male characters that they can be grasped as villains at all. Nonetheless, the book can be read as an anti-woman novel, since comments about the negative qualities of its women are scattered throughout the book. On closer inspection, however, Collins's strong female leads seem to suggest otherwise. In fact, throughout the novel, the women who are viewed most negatively are not those who have violated any sense of morality, but rather those who have obtained some sort of power over men.

The story of *The Woman in White* centers around the mystery of a woman clothed entirely in white and around a household that is affected by that woman. Walter Hartright, a drawing teacher, happens upon this mysterious woman on his way to Cumberland, where he has obtained a position as the drawing master for two young ladies, Laura Fairlie and Marian Halcombe, half-sisters under the care of their invalid uncle, Mr. Fairlie. Walter falls secretly in love with Laura, and she with him, but after learning of her engagement and the

³¹ Margaret Oliphant, "Sensation Novels," 39-44.

impending arrival of Laura's fiancé, Sir Percival Glyde, Walter plans to leave the position and try to forget her. As Walter is preparing to leave, Laura receives an anonymous letter warning her against marrying Glyde, which we later learn comes from the woman in white, Anne Catherick. Anne herself is an escapee from an asylum who had known Mrs. Fairlie when she was alive, and the allegations in her letter — which, while it mentions no names, is quite clearly identifying Glyde — have to be investigated. The allegation that Glyde had locked Anne away in an asylum must be investigated before his marriage to Laura, and Walter does his best to help solve the problem. Walter and Marian speak with the family attorney, Mr. Gilmore, as well as Glyde's attorney and Glyde himself, who suggests that they write to Mrs. Catherick, Anne's mother, for confirmation that she had asked him to lock her daughter away. After receiving this confirmation, Laura agrees to marry Glyde, but only reluctantly. As someone who is inclined to keep to her promises and always tell the truth, she tries to have Glyde break the proposal by telling him that she is already in love, but he refuses to release her, and they are married.

This is a turning point in the story. Until this point, Laura has merely been a side character, with most observations and most conversations taking place between Walter and Marian. After her marriage, though, she becomes stronger, to a certain degree, though still not as strong as Marian. After their honeymoon, the couple returns to Glyde's estate, where Marian is eagerly waiting for her sister. They return with guests, Count and Countess Fosco, Laura's aunt and uncle who lived in Italy. Shortly after their return, Glyde tries to force Laura to sign a document, which would give him the money he needs to clear his debts, but Laura refuses since he will not tell her what the document says or give her time to read it on her own. This is the first time she is portrayed as a strong woman, but her

persistence in denying her husband continues through the rest of her interactions with him — until the one time that it really matters. After he discovers that Laura has been secretly meeting with Anne Catherick, who knows a mysterious secret about him, Glyde devises a plan with Count Fosco, who has been nefariously helping him spy on Laura and Marian since their return home. Anne and Laura do bear a striking resemblance, and Fosco decides to kill Anne, pretend it was Laura, and effectively give her inheritance to Glyde and to himself. Fosco's villainy is so pronounced that it would become a frequent reference point for critics of sensation fiction like Henry Mansel in 1863 (see p. 25).

Fosco's foul plan is set in motion when Glyde convinces Laura that Marian, who has been sick and confined to bed, has left for London with Fosco, and that she is waiting for her at a house along the way. Because of her love for Marian, Laura is convinced and she leaves, only to be thrown into an asylum while Walter and Marian are left to sort out the problems, but she is eventually saved and given her happy ending.

The role of women in this plot is extensive, and while much of the story is told by Walter (the narrator changes throughout the book), this is essentially a plot focused on women. Many of the women in the novel appear to be victims rather than villains and the men take advantage of them and manipulate them, as they will do in *East Lynne*. The women in the novel are quite different from the *East Lynne* group, though, and the novel's men tend to portray women as having something shockingly wrong with them — except in the case of Countess Fosco and, occasionally, Mrs. Catherick. The roles of all of the major women — Laura, Anne, Marian, Mrs. Catherick, and the Countess — are important in establishing the power dynamic between men and women in the novel. Understanding this

power dynamic will help establish a sense of female villainy in those cases where women do not readily submit to the power of a husband.

Perhaps the most extraordinary female in the novel is Marian Halcombe, a woman described as being very masculine in her features.³² She herself declares a dislike for women and puts herself squarely in a non-feminine category. She is not treated like the other women in the book, but rather as more of an equal to men in many cases. Even Fosco, who manipulates women and sees them as being weak, admires Marian. When she becomes ill, he reads her journal to obtain information, and he leaves a note in the back. He declares that she is a “sublime creature” and “magnificent” (330). He even compares her to himself in various instances in the entry (330-31). Marian’s consistent refusal to give in to the men around her marks her as unusual. She is also an unmarried adult woman with no money. She depends upon her sister, but not upon any man. A large portion of the story is told through her journal entries, and her adventurous plans show her unusual nature in a very clear way. She risks a great deal for Laura’s safety and happiness. Besides her own feats, Marian is respected by men. Her sister’s uncle, Mr. Fairlie, despises all company because of his nerves, but he does not resist Marian in most things. When he receives a letter from her, he says in his narration, “The moment I heard Miss Halcombe’s name, I gave up. It is a habit of mine always to give up to Miss Halcombe. I find, by experience, that it saves noise.”(334) Marian has power over men, but since she is portrayed as being masculine, she is not pointed out as a villain. Still, the power situation here makes even Fosco uncomfortable, and he admires Marian rather than despising her (538-39).

³² Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* [1859] (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 2005): 35.

Laura and Countess Fosco are best examined together, as they are situated at different places in the marriage power spectrum. Laura, once she is married, defies her husband, while the Countess is a pawn of her husband. Laura's behaviors make her appear to be a stronger woman than the Countess, and she is often portrayed as being the victim. The Countess, here, is a much more interesting character in terms of villainy. While she seems to simply agree with her husband in many respects, the Countess inspires a strong feeling of dislike. The characters in the novel dislike her, and so does the reader. She is, in many ways, a pawn of her husband and has no agency, and therefore cannot be considered a full character. She has no power of her own after her marriage, though before marriage she was a liberal-minded woman (229). Here, the difference between the Countess and Laura is even more pronounced, as Laura is, after her marriage, at least, an agent rather than a pawn. These two characters show very little in terms of the power dynamic with men throughout most of the novel, but they do provide an insight into the relation of women to their husbands, with Laura being criticized by the men for her outspokenness and the Countess being praised for her obedience. This pair provides a contrast for the reader. Neither woman has power over men, but Laura is not completely powerless in her own life, which makes her a more compelling character than the Countess, who simply goes along with her husband's schemes.

Anne Catherick and her mother truly challenge the male-dominated realm of power. They both provide a threat to Glyde, but through agreements with Mrs. Catherick, Glyde has come to believe her to be safe. Anne, on the other hand, still holds a secret of Glyde's, one that could be used against him at any time. Because Anne has this power, Glyde feels that he must take action. He is constantly in search of her throughout the novel, seeking her

desperately in order to put her back into the asylum, where she poses no risk to him. By taking away her agency and discrediting her, Glyde seeks to protect himself from the secret she knows. It is this secret that gives both Anne and Mrs. Catherick power — and also gives Laura the appearance of having power to Glyde. When a woman finds out his secret, Glyde does his best to have her discredited or silenced through whatever means possible. His cruelty stems from a perceived threat, which comes from women having the power to control him. Anne Catherick acknowledges this in her conversation with Laura. She says,

If you know his Secret, he will be afraid of you ... He must treat you mercifully for his own sake. ... You are helpless with your wicked husband. Yes. And I must do what I have come to do here — I must make it up to you for having been afraid to speak out at a better time. ... I once threatened him with the Secret, and frightened him. You shall threaten him with the Secret, and frighten him, too. (275-76)

Anne urges Laura to see that, by knowing “the Secret,” Laura will gain power within her marriage. This secret, this power over Glyde, frightens him enough to lock Anne away, and eventually to kill her and lock Laura up instead. Mrs. Catherick knew the secret first and had power over him, but through a mutual agreement, she became safe from his fearful wrath. Her power in the community and her actions drove her husband to leave her and to live somewhere else, away from her, leaving Mrs. Catherick essentially single and powerful in her own right.

These women all provide insight into the disturbance of the household structure. They have very few indiscretions and violate very few rules of the domestic moral code, but they are still essentially in violation of the code, with the exception of the Countess. The man of the house should be obeyed, as the Countess tells us countless times throughout the

novel, and she is the only woman in the novel to obey a man. Marian is free of anyone's control and Laura disobeys her husband; both Anne and Mrs. Catherick have power over Glyde and answer to no man. These women are important to the discussion of a violation of domestic morality because they do have some power over men, or at least over themselves, and they do not follow normal household procedure regarding men. Only two of the women, Laura and the Countess, are truly married and living with their husbands, and of those, only the Countess obeys her husband and is powerless. The majority of the women in the novel disobey and disrespect the men in the novel that try to control them, adding them to the list of domestically-immoral female characters in sensation novels.

V. Conclusion

In both *East Lynne* and *The Woman in White*, women are represented in ways that seem to violate Victorian domestic morality, whether through a shedding of proper conduct or through the reversal of gender roles. In both novels, women defy the ideal, leaving behind the idea of being good wives and mothers and instead invoking alternate lifestyles. While the ways in which the various women characters do this differ, the common result is that they are viewed as almost villainous, the sort of women that men despise and other women gossip about behind closed doors. It is these women, and not their positively portrayed counterparts, that this project seeks to shed light on.

Both novels studied here contain women who violate these standards, but also women who conform to them. In each book, the tone behind these women is different. For example, in *East Lynne*, Barbara Hare appears to be the ideal wife and mother, going so far as to tell Isabel her philosophies on being a wife and mother, mirroring exactly the

definitions of Victorian domestic morality defined earlier in this paper and by numerous critical sources. In *The Woman in White*, however, the Countess, who is seemingly the most loyal and well-behaved wife in these novels, is portrayed as being a vile and villainous creature who betrays other women. While the novels portray women equally in violation of the domestic moral code, the tones of their narration are quite different, lending different meanings to each novel and telling us something different about how women were perceived, at least by these two authors. As Nicholas Rance pointed out, there are both conservative and radical sensation novels, and here, I think, we have an example of each.

In *East Lynne*, both the reader and the other characters within the novel could identify the domestic and moral failings of Isabel Vane. She ran off with another man, leaving her husband and children behind, and tried to make up for her failures by returning, disguised, as a governess for her children. The characters and audience understand that what Isabel has done is wrong, and while she does redeem herself slightly by showing that she understands that she has done wrong, she never fully returns to the accepted female position in Victorian society. Lyn Pykett's reading of the novel, which puts Isabel in a position of a villain we should condemn while asking us to pity her, is closely aligned with this one. While we cannot approve of Isabel's behavior, we do feel that her situation is something to be pitied. Barbara, however, strikes us as the ideal wife, following all conventions and spouting them off to anyone who will listen. She obeys her husband, remains within the home, and does not spend money lightly. She has children of her own in addition to caring for Isabel's children. Barbara is Ellen Wood's portrait of the ideal woman and wife. No one within the novel says anything bad about her, with the exception of her father, who thinks that she is too stubborn and should not refuse so many offers of

marriage. The contrast of these two women provides a picture of both the good and bad sides of Victorian femininity, identifying both the ideal and the worst sort of woman.

The portraits in *The Woman in White*, however, are almost entirely opposite. It is the women who defy the norms of Victorian society who are admired and who suffer because of the “ideal” sort of woman, which is found in the Countess. Marian, who defies all of the domestic moral standards of the time, is the heroine of the novel and remains strong throughout, even when confronted with male hostility. She is a single woman under the control of no man. She has no children or attachments to any men and she refuses to be controlled. She roams the town of her own free will and treats men as equals rather than superiors. In this novel, she is idealized as the best sort of woman. Laura is shown as being strong only when under the influence of her sister, especially after her marriage. Countess Fosco is perhaps the most strongly criticized by Collins. She is obedient to her husband and discarded her views about women’s rights once married. She is, however, portrayed in the least favorable way of all of the women. Because the characters who are shown to be villains in this novel are aristocratic rather than middle-class, it can be said, like *East Lynne*, to support middle-class morality, as Deborah Wynne argues in the case of Wood’s novel. This is especially true of the male characters, as the middle-class man in the novel (Walter) is successful and helps the women escape the clutches of Glyde and Fosco, the villainous aristocratic men. The women are not aristocratic, but the fact that they are not seen as villains despite their violations of conventional domestic morality is important in determining Collins’ views.

The portraits of women within these novels perhaps suggest the authors’ own views of women within Victorian society. Collins idealizes the strong, independent woman,

tossing aside the view that being a good wife and mother is the only important factor in determining a woman's worth. His characters interact with each other in ways that also clearly show the power dynamics between a husband and wife, but also between men and women in general in the case of Anne Catherick and Percival Glyde. Men here perceive powerful women as a threat, but these men do not prosper by having the women taken out of the picture. Rather, Glyde ends up dying because of his fear of women's power over him when he tries to stop anyone else from learning his secret. It is the man who respects women and treats them as equals that prevails and finally marries the woman he loves. By putting Laura and Walter together in the end, Collins may also be suggesting that marrying for love rather than money or convenience is better. Laura's marriage to Glyde did not end well and was based upon a promise she made to her father. After his death, though, she was able to marry Walter, giving her a happy ending. Overall, Collins' portraits of women are favorable and discourage the one-dimensional traditionalism of the conduct literature's domestic morality.

Wood's views, on the other hand, seem to suggest a belief in the conventional sort of domestic morality even when she herself, in a career as writer and editor, did not conform to these standards. In *East Lynne*, Isabel suffers because of her deviations from the accepted norms, while Barbara, who conforms to them perfectly, prospers. It is Isabel who is disfigured, who loses her children, who dies of heartbreak. Barbara lives a happy life within her home, observing all proprieties. Wood creates a female domestic villain in Isabel and, while the reader can sympathize with her somewhat, it is difficult to avoid agreeing with the criticisms that abound throughout the novel regarding her character and her actions. This portrayal of women is very different than Collins's, placing the non-liberated

woman in the position of being good and the woman who defies convention as being bad. If these are, in fact, Wood's views of women, she herself as an author would not fall within the Victorian's domestically acceptable category, but rather a more negative one. As a woman who owned a magazine and wrote novels, she did not remain in the home, but followed her own instincts and behaved more like Marian in *The Woman in White*, doing as she pleased and working to be successful in the public world.

While the books arrive at different conclusions, it is important to note the ways in which they address the issue of women in Victorian England. Each novelist seems to argue that a different kind of woman is the right kind of woman, but both use similar standards to judge these women. The domestic morality contained or violated within these novels is similar and comes from the same place. While different aspects of it are showcased within each work, the same ideas show up in both novels. The issues of female independence, proper marital relations, and a woman's place in both the household and society are challenged by the women in these novels, leaving both the reader and the characters to judge the women for their actions. While there was a vast quantity of information on morality and women's behavior published during the nineteenth century, there are relatively few works fully exploring gender representations and domestic morality in sensation novels. With more scholarship in this area, more revelations can be made about women and the ways in which they were viewed within their society through the eyes of the heroines and villains of these novels.

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