"A sensation all too warm": an Argument for the Continued Presence of Maternal Sexuality in East Lynne

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While the writers of the major novels during the Victorian period were handcuffed by the demands of propriety, writers of the extremely popular sensation novels enjoyed a freer rein in terms of what aspects of society they could reproduce on the page. Ellen Wood's 1861 *East Lynne* stands out as a prominent contribution to the short-lived genre, reportedly selling 500,000 copies by 1900 (Maunder 9). But if these sensation novels, and Wood's in particular, were popular, it was not for their conservative content. One of the most striking features of the sensation novel was the ambiguous view of feminine morality that it presented. *East Lynne* is a particularly good example of this characteristic—Isabel Vane, the main character, must be punished (and is, severely) for her dual sins of child abandonment and sexual expression (as evidenced by her attraction to and flight with Francis Levison); yet, the novel continually sympathizes with and eventually redeems her through her maternal urges. Despite this ambiguity, I suggest that Wood does offer a strong argument, counter to the prevailing ideology of the day, for the presence of female sexuality alongside of maternity. In doing so, Wood makes explicit other contradictions inherent in the expectations placed upon women. Nowhere in the text do we see the complete “ideal” woman (as wife and mother). Wood shows, in the figure of Isabel Vane, that a woman is physically able to fulfill both roles; however, the social constructions of “wife” and “mother” are so contradictory that a woman inhabiting both roles is a *semantic* impossibility. Thus, a woman who defies the previously prescribed language of the Victorians by enacting both the “wife” and “mother” roles is left unnamed and, consequentially, excised from the text.

Ambiguity in female morality was a defining characteristic of Victorian sensation novels. Generally, Patrick Brantlinger argues in *What Is ‘Sensational’ About the ‘Sensation Novel’?*: “virtue [was] rewarded and vice apparently punished at the end” of the novel (5). And yet, moral ambiguity slipped in the novels because of the heavy dose of domestic realism they contained. The content of sensation novels—“crime, often murder as an outcome of adultery and sometimes of bigamy, in apparently proper, bourgeois, domestic settings”—was shocking enough to draw criticism from reviewers, but it was “dangerous” because it was taken directly from the current society. Brantlinger writes that “Historically there is a direct relationship between the sensation novel and sensational journalism, from the extensive crime reporting in the *Times* and the *Daily Telegraph* to such early crime tabloids as the *Illustrated Police News*” (9). Barbara Leckie, in her book *Culture and Adultery*, strongly agrees with Brantlinger, writing that the sensation novel “translated social and sexual anxieties into domestic detective novels that enjoyed a popularity inexplicable and disturbing in terms of prevailing ideologies” (113). Because the content of sensation novels was taken from the pages of the newspaper rather than simply the imagination of authors, Brantlinger labels the novels as “generally exploitative” in its treatment of “controversial issues like bigamy and adultery” (6). The novels were a useful tool in sparking cultural debate: critics who feared that the novels were morally corrupting were forced to turn their attention to the source of the sensational content—current domestic reality as represented by divorce and criminal court proceedings. Thus, sensation novels simply fed back into the debate swirling around female morality, stimulating and reinforcing the same kinds of questions that they were representing in the first place. Finally, the immense popularity of sensation novels (and *East Lynne* in particular) was a bitter pill for critics to swallow: not only did the novels simply reflect what you could find in any newspaper, but they proved that people actually cared about those proceedings and were concerned about the questions of domestic life they posed.

Of course, with questions about female morality floating around, many answers sprang up in response. Literature about how women should be—including conduct books, medical guidebooks, and periodicals—proliferated. In this literature, women were continually identified as keepers of the social morality. In 1842, Sarah Ellis writes of her work entitled *The Women of England* that “All I have written in this volume, imperfect as it is, has been stimulated by a desire to increase the moral worth of my countrywomen, and enhance the domestic happiness of my native land” (33). And most of this moral responsibility was grounded in anxieties into domestic detective novels that enjoyed a popularity inexplicable and disturbing in terms of prevailing ideologies” (113). Because the content of sensation novels was taken from the pages of the newspaper rather than simply the imagination of authors, Brantlinger labels the novels as “generally exploitative” in its treatment of “controversial issues like bigamy and adultery” (6). The novels were a useful tool in sparking cultural debate: critics who feared that the novels were morally corrupting were forced to turn their attention to the source of the sensational content—current domestic reality as represented by divorce and criminal court proceedings. Thus, sensation novels simply fed back into the debate swirling around female morality, stimulating and reinforcing the same kinds of questions that they were representing in the first place. Finally, the immense popularity of sensation novels (and *East Lynne* in particular) was a bitter pill for critics to swallow: not only did the novels simply reflect what you could find in any newspaper, but they proved that people actually cared about those proceedings and were concerned about the questions of domestic life they posed.

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structure”) (5). However, the expectations placed upon mothers in the conduct literature were unreasonable. Indeed, McKnight writes that “The claims for and on mothers in these books are so excessive at times as to be laughable, when they are not directly disparaging of the poor” (3). The fear generated by sensational journalism (sensation novels) coupled with this insistence and unrealistic over-regulation of female behavior left mothers “frustrated” and others wondering where the truth lay. Into this void, two extreme views of women—perpetuated by sensational journalism and conduct literature—stepped woman writers who were perfectly situated to address concerns over female morality. A series of novels, East Lynne being one of them, with layers of narrative emerged; an overt layer celebrating female morality was consistently undermined by a more covert layer condemning restrictive views of the ideal “woman.”

In East Lynne, the ambiguity surrounding female morality is apparent in the figure of Isabel Vane. Without a doubt, Isabel is overtly condemned by the novel: “She had wilfully abandoned her husband, her children, her home; she had cast away her good name and her position; and she had deliberately offended God” (Wood East Lynne (3)). The fear generated by sensational journalism is evident, to her loneliness. She sank down on the sofa: she threw up her arms in her heart-sick-ness; she though she should faint; she prayed to die. It was horrible, as Barbara had called it. For that man, with the red stain upon his hand came home in that hour to Lady Isabel. (Wood 349) And we see clearly that she receives her just punish-ment for such behavior, most obviously when she returns to East Lynne and must bear the fact that her past rival is now Carlyle’s wife.

Francis Levison quickly becomes more apparent with the ac-ceptance in view towards Isabel. Once she has taken action, she must be condemned for all of the sins she has already committed—including being a sexual mother. (Wood 559)

And yet, in that last statement, we see a clue to Isabel’s eventual redemption: the narrator continues to try to help her identify her as “Lady Isabel,” a designation that even Barbara never receives. The narrator’s sympathy for Isabel is as clear as is her condemnation. Isabel is the most developed character by far; she is the most morally justifiable role for a woman, it is also the very safeguard of morality as far as sexual-ity was concerned. Unmarried women were of course supposed to be virginal, without knowl-edge of sexuality. Married women, shocked and dis-mayed on their wedding night by their first sexual en-counter, were supposed to view sex as only a neces-sary ingredient of their most important role—mother-ness. Thus, female sexual desire (if it existed at all) was channeled into a desire for maternity (Curtis 79). Shuttleworth points out that even medical discourse was directed to this end: “Indeed maternity encompassed the domain of female sexuality, for all the workings of female sexual desire were traced directly to the opera-tion of the reproductive system” (32). Because of this link between female sexuality and maternity, fears of social corruption became inexorably tied up with fears of unregulated female sexuality. We can easily see the dilemma: women, to be moral, had to be mothers; yet, becoming a mother necessitated being sexual—a car-di-nal sin for women. Expressed in powerful terms by female Victorian writers like Wood and others, this contradiction in social code was one that was accepted enough by society that authors had to couch their com-ments in a palatable fashion. Consequently, we re-ceive Wood’s covert redemption of Isabel and argu-

ment for a female sexuality alongside of maternity through the overt narrative of her condemnation. As well, readers can see Helen Huntingdon as an unsettled lady in Anne Brontë’s The Tenant of Wildfell Hall because we receive her narrative only through Gilbert Markham’s retelling of her diary.

Yet, this does not happen; long after having children, Isabel once again falls under the spell of attraction for Francis Levison. On her recuperation holiday on the Contiinent, Isabel runs into Levison unexpectedly and is forced to confront her past; if their relationship was not quite dead within her, why, she must smother them down again as effectually as if they were; the very fact of recognizing them to her own heart brought its glow of shame to her brow” (257). We see even more direct evidence of Isabel’s sexual desire in her letter to a woman holding commune with herself, and it was not altogether satisfactory. She was aware that a sensation all too warm, a feeling of attraction towards Francis Levison, was working within her; not a voluntary one; she could no more resist it than she could resist the notion of being (261). But this frank avowal of sexuality does not disguise the fact that Isabel is a mother; rather, she is clearly attached to her children, even to the point of wanting to take them along on vacation. At this point in the novel, Isabel’s development with Levison, Isabel is still overtly a proper lady. Yes, she is both sexual and a mother, but both of those things are so obscured by her innocence and subjugation under Miss Cornelia that she is cast as a victim of things she does not understand and as little as a “fallen” woman rather than a “fallen” woman. It is the dramatic turning point of the novel, Isabel’s flight with Levison, that necessitates the sudden shift in view towards Isabel. Once she has taken action, she must be condemned for all of the sins she has already committed—including being a sexual mother.
The reasons for seeing Isabel as only a mother after her elopement are numerous. For starters, she is immediately overshadowed by immense regret and remorse:

Poor thing! Poor Lady Isabel! She 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 impulse of flying with a man—frankly with a Leviticus. But, the instant the step was irrevocable, the instant she had passed the barrier, repentance set in. (335)

And with regret, remorse and repentance comes the inevitable contribution of religion. Just as with Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, where the heroine Helen, becomes increasingly angelic and pure with her embracing of Christianity, Isabel becomes suddenly consumed with thoughts of guilt that are suggested by Biblical scripture. Reflecting on her sins, Isabel thinks it up from henceforth daily and hourly, and bear it as the inevitable contribution of religion. Just as with Tenant, you yourself to that bad man? (356). In Helen’s acknowledgement of her sins, she best might: she had fully earned all its weight and she would do it, by God’s blessing ... She would take [her] hand to that bad man. Helen’s role in her religious redemption and condemnation is therefore obvious, whereas for Isabel, the religious part is less overt. Isabel’s religious redemption brings to the Victorian mind fears about “unregulated sexual-ity” that Matus uncovers (Matus 94).

These are small details about Isabel’s position and appearance that signal the continued presence of her sexuality; I feel that we can see evidence of her sexuality simply within her thoughts that we are privy to thanks to the narrator. In addition to her obviously physical attraction to Levison in the beginning and middle parts of the novel, Isabel experiences a renewed love for Carlyle when she returns to East Lynne. Wood makes this feeling explicit through Isabel’s intense jealousy of Barbary: [Carlyle] did not perceive that anyone was present, and he bent his head and fondly kissed his wife. Isabel’s jealous eyes were turned upon them. She saw Barbary’s passionate, lingering kiss in return, she heard the fervent whispered greeting ... Isabel flung her hands over her face. Had she bargained for this? (355). We see that Isabel’s jealousy, then how can she be redeemed? I suggest that Isabel’s redemption and condemnation is in fact palatable to readers, but in no way does it immediately disappear. Isabel’s is communicated by Wood in a couple of ways. First, her reappearance at East Lynne as a lame governor begis inquiry. Cindy LaCom writes that nineteenth-century writers “(re)inscribed a negative attitude by associating female disability with diseased female sexuality and suspect morality,” indicating that perhaps Isabel’s disability serves as a disguise in two ways: one, to hide her true identity from the Carlyles, and two, to mark her as sexual or deviant (from the asexual mother code) to readers (190). The other aspect of Isabel’s disguise—her strange dress—could also be a clue to her continuing sexuality. We find out immediately that Isabel’s dress is notable for its deviant sexuality—could simply be excised from Isabel’s character. In fact, it seems foolish to think that one of these aspects of Isabel’s sexuality—could simply be excised from Isabel’s character. The longing for you was killing me,” on her deathbed (680). These passions are so inextricably connected that it seems foolish to think that one of them—sexuality—could simply be excised from Isabel’s character.

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lated through maternity because they were unmarried. Therefore, as Jill Matus states, “Governing focused anxieties about working women, class boundaries, and the preservation of the domestic ideal of maternity” (94). In presenting Isabel as a governess, Wood brings to the Victorian mind fears about “unregulated sexual-ity” that Matus uncovers (Matus 94).
type of motherhood that Isabel does. The most lengthy conversation between the two proves that: “I never was fond of being troubled with children. When my own grow up into childhood, I shall deem the nursery and the school-room the best places for them,” Barbara says (464). Compared to Isabel’s painful devotion for William, Barbara’s comment strikes the reader as callous and unconcerned. And Ay to whose comment on marriage is “What’s the good of a husband, except to work for you?” poses no challenge to Isabel’s favorable position with the reader. Yet, both of these women—Barbara and Ay—receive far better treatment than Isabel in the end. Barbara is perfectly happy with her marriage to Carlyle, and Ay is rewarded with marriage to a prominent tradesman. These women—because they only inhabit one role, that of “wife”—are acceptable within Victorian society. But Isabel, who inhabits both roles, “wife” and “mother,” must be condemned even in her redemption by Carlyle’s final comment: “never forget that the only way to ensure peace in the end, is to strive always to be doing right, unselfishly, under God” (691). And it is Isabel’s condemnation, this final affirmation that she was, ultimately, still wrong, that Wood uses to point out the real contradiction in Victorian social code—that a woman is, in fact, both a wife and mother, and that she is punished for being such.

This contradiction between the demands of being a “wife” and “mother” only serves to point even more illogical gaps in social expectations. I believe that Wood’s novel makes explicit as well inconsistencies in the conduct of gentlemen (note that Carlyle cannot be overtly criticized for his neglectful behavior towards Isabel) and in the moral and economic expectations of women. East Lynne, though it has not received a large amount of critical attention, is certainly a fertile ground for further inquiry. Areas that I have not even touched upon in this paper—most notably the redemption narrative of Richard Hare and the emphasis on dreams in the novel—suggest numerous things about Victorian society and could even impact my analysis of maternal sexuality presented here.

Works Cited


Identity in our contemporary society has been established on principles of otherness. We study history to gain the knowledge of what we have surpassed as a society, and thus, we understand our modern society by knowing what we are not. However, the notion of examining our current society’s ideologies and actions has been deemed a more complicated and intangible mode of study. This same concept may be applied to our postmodern construction and comprehension of identity. Our understanding of self becomes an understanding of what we are not, a more established dichotomy of normalcy versus super-normalcy. The super-normalcy is one that has the most buying power simply has more money, and thus, the author of the sub-human identity as an inferior being. Their own monstrous identity is conceived from the notion that they do not live the life of normalcy that they have determined. Instead, they live beyond their own notion of normalcy, attaining more than middle-class status and enabling themselves to secure positions of power over the human and sub-human persons. In a consumer culture, such as our modern society, the one who has the most buying power simply has the most status. Thus, the super-humans are able to sustain their power by continuing the existence of our everyday existence?

In the following pages, I will present my own understanding of the aforementioned questions that I have raised. After studying a variety of “monster texts,” I have developed a generalized theory that demonstrates how the workings of our hierarchical society gives rise to two forms of monsters and an identity in the middle that is left in search of the dictated notion of normalcy. This dictated notion of normalcy is conceived by the super-humans in our society, those of the first monstrous descent. These super-humans live a life of privilege and power and create a notion of normalcy. This concept of normalcy is based on the attainment of middle-class economic status, the ability to exercise the standardized language, and staying in one’s pre-determined position based on racial and gender identity. Ironically, their own over-achievements and privilege ostracize the super-humans from society. The super-humans’ notion of normalcy becomes a second type of monster, one that I refer to as the sub-human identity. The sub-humans are the ones that cannot or will not fit into these notions of normalcy, and thus are left to exist in the margins of society. After these two monstrous identities, all that is left is the human identity; however my usage of the term “human” does not refer to the biological definition of humanity, but instead, to a socially constructed definition. This definition is socially constructed by the super-humans, and the humans remain the only subjects who can and will carry out this ideology. In the following pages, I will thoroughly examine this theory. I will utilize various notions of monster theory from Jeffrey Cohen, Barbara Creed, and Michael Foucault, which aided my construction of this theory. Next, I will apply this hierarchical monster theory to two films. The first film that I will examine is Thelma and Louise and next I will analyze the construction of the monstrous in the film Fight Club.

The first monster that I would like to examine is the super-human. The super-human is the creator and the disciplinarian. He or she is the creator of normacy, and thus the creator of otherness. These super-humans are the authors of the sub-human identity as an inferior being. Their own monstrous identity is conceived from the notion that they do not fit into the life of normalcy that they have determined. Instead, they live a life beyond their own notion of normalcy, attaining more than middle-class status and being able to secure positions of power over the human and sub-human persons. In a consumer culture, such as our modern society, the one who has the most buying power simply has the most status. Thus, the super-humans are able to sustain their power by continuing the existence of our consumer culture. Their dominance of the market is in contrast to the normalcy of the super-humans, which includes the participation in, but not dominance over such an economic system. Thus, they are feared anomalies of the system, but ones that still attain positions of power and wealth. In order to secure this position of power, and instill their notions of normalcy into the fabrics of society, they have developed a system of surveillance and discipline that resembles Foucault’s understanding of Bentham’s Panopticon. This system allows them to ensure the humans and sub-humans are not attempting to attain more than the status of normalcy.

Foucault chooses the Panopticon as a metaphor of restraint to express the power that resides over mass society. The sub-human and sub-humans, in order to attain a sense of control. He uses Bentham’s notion of individual panoptic establishments, which reside in every institution of society. This “Panopticon” refers to a surveillance system which is organized architecturally, consisting of a circular building containing the humans