Sanctimonious or Sensational?
Ellen Wood, the "Good" Woman, and Maternity in *East Lynne*

Christine Choi

Abstract

This article considers Mrs Henry (Ellen) Wood's public persona as a morally conservative author to be a calculated strategy designed to align with Victorian ideals of virtue and respectability, thereby ensuring the commercial success of her works. This is demonstrated through an analysis of *East Lynne*, where Wood's narrative strategy of blending sanctimony with sensationalism both conforms to and subtly critiques the era's moral expectations, particularly those related to gender roles and maternal ideals. Through this lens, *East Lynne* emerges not merely as a moral tale but as an exploration of how the idealised feminine and maternal roles contribute to the emotional, physical, and psychological burdens placed on women. By focusing on the victimisation of women under the weight of these expectations, Wood invites readers to critically engage with and question the rigid and often oppressive ideologies of womanhood and maternity that defined female identity and motherhood, including childbirth and childrearing, during the period.

Keywords

Mrs Henry (Ellen) Wood; *East Lynne*; sensation fiction; womanhood; maternity; childrearing

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Sanctimonious or Sensational? Ellen Wood, the "Good" Woman, and Maternity in *East Lynne*

Christine Choi

Ellen Wood cultivated an image of respectability, projecting a "suffer and be still" persona right out of Sarah Stickney Ellis' conduct books.[1] To her reading public, she exuded a moral authority and marital devotion reinforced by her publishing name, Mrs Henry Wood. Evidence suggests, however, that this was less an accurate depiction of the author (despite what the only existing biography of Wood would have us believe)[2] and more a strategic move by a shrewd businesswoman to appeal to her audience and increase readership.[3] In her introduction to Wood's bestselling sensation novel *East Lynne,* Stevie Davies astutely pinpoints the marketing genius behind Wood's publishing name:

> To declare oneself as "Mrs Wood" is to say to the reading world that one is a safe, harmless, respectable, God-fearing, middle-class Englishwoman, probably endowed with children. It is to advertise one's novel as safe moral reading for the family circle, and as a sound acquisition for the circulating libraries. To add one's husband's Christian name for good measure, as "Mrs Henry Wood" . . . did, is to emphasize the point doubly.
>
> (1984: par. 1)

This image of conservatism served a dual purpose in Wood's commercial success. On the one hand, it resonated with the prevailing moral sentiments of Victorian society, making Wood's novels more palatable to a broad readership. On the other hand, the conservative moral framework allowed Wood to depict sensational subject matter under the guise of cautionary tales, reinforcing the idea that deviating from traditional values led to negative outcomes. The

[1] In *The Daughters of England*, Ellis emphasises women's moral and domestic responsibilities, citing their "highest duty is so often to suffer, and be still" (1842: 94).

[2] *Memorials of Mrs. Henry Wood* (1894) written by Wood's son, Charles, presents a eulogistic account of his mother's life devoid of any details that could be construed as negative. Prior to this, Charles had published a shorter biography, *Mrs. Henry Wood: In Memoriam* (1887), which appeared in installments in *Argosy* magazine.

[3] See Riley (2004) for an account of Wood's business acumen in recognising and adapting to shifting literary trends.

conservative façade of Wood's publishing persona and her novels was thus a deliberate strategy to adhere to her audience's expectations while subtly challenging those very norms.

That Wood's rigid conventionality was merely a veil becomes evident in *East Lynne*.[4] I will demonstrate how the novel's apparent moralism, conveyed through pious sermonising, conceals a deeper critique of the restrictive societal norms governing womanhood and motherhood in Victorian England, challenging rather than endorsing those ideals.[5] Published in 1861, *East Lynne* was one of the earliest novels to set the archetype for the sensation genre, characteristic for its dramatic plot twists, moral conflicts, and exploration of taboo subjects within domestic settings.[6] The genre's popularity, from its peak in the 1860s through the end of the century, coincided with the increased circulation of mother-oriented publications, which were often didactic in nature and promoted idealised notions of motherhood and domestic responsibility.[7] Sensation authors, including Wood, therefore naturally incorporated and responded to the prevailing cultural emphasis on maternal themes and experiences.[8] The genre's inherent daringness to eschew Victorian notions of propriety provides a rich framework for examining how Wood engages with the prevailing discourses on motherhood and childrearing, particularly as these discourses marginalised and oppressed women of the period. Contrary to the idea that sensation fiction relies on reproaching the absent mother figure, whether physically absent or absent of the ideal maternal qualities,[9] I instead trace how Wood consistently highlights the victimisation of Victorian women at the hands of the ever-present maternal ideal.[10] In this sense, I argue that *East Lynne* does not naturalise contemporary Victorian conceptions of womanhood and maternity but rather serves as an optic through which

[4] I focus on *East Lynne* because, as the bestselling novel of nineteenth-century England, it reached a wide audience and became a significant cultural touchstone. Its popularity makes it an ideal lens through which to explore how Wood's portrayal of women and maternal expectations resonated with the public, reflecting and shaping broader societal attitudes at the time.

[5] In contrast to Armstrong, who reads *East Lynne* as a "protracted vacillation between condemnation and empathy" for Isabel (2015: 745), I argue that Wood rather strategically commingles the two to interrogate the oppressive maternal ideals and societal expectations that entrap women.

[6] Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (1860) and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) were the other two most prominent examples of sensation fiction.

[7] In addition to Ellis' conduct books, some titles include: Mrs. Beeton's *Book of Household Management (1861);* Andrew Halliday's "Mothers" (1865); and *Cassell's Household Guide* (1869–1871). These publications reminded women of their supreme duty to live only for their children.

[8] Other notable sensation novelists who incorporated maternal themes in their works include Braddon, whose *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) explores the consequences of maternal abandonment, particularly through the depiction of Lady Audley's assumed death and her desertion of her child in pursuit of personal security and social advancement. Collins, in *No Name* (1862), focuses on how social and legal structures deny maternal rights and leave women powerless to protect their children. His earlier novel, *The Woman in White* (1860), also engages with themes of maternal suffering, as seen in the tragic fate of Anne Catherick's mother, whose warnings about her daughter's mistreatment are dismissed due to her lower-class status. Broughton's *Cometh Up as a Flower* (1867) examines maternal expectations and their oppressive nature, particularly in relation to female agency, as the protagonist's life is shaped by the weight of familial and societal obligations.

[9] Cook notes how various scholars have analysed maternal absence, both literal and moral, highlighting the ways in which mothers' failures to embody ideal motherhood or perform domestic duties serve as central plot points in Victorian literature (2021: 3).

[10] My analysis of maternity in *East Lynne* draws on works by Sally Shuttleworth (1992) and Tamara Wagner (2020), both of whom make compelling arguments about Wood's complex engagement with contemporary ideologies of motherhood and childrearing.

to investigate how the "overpresence" of female and maternal ideologies oppresses, paralyses, and anesthetises its female subjects.[11]

East Lynne relates the unfortunate story of Isabel Vane, left impoverished after her father's death and with no options but to enter a practical, yet loveless, marriage with Archibald Carlyle, a man who is respectable and morally upstanding, but of lower rank. After a series of coincidences (as is characteristic of the sensation genre), Isabel succumbs to the advances of a rake, Francis Levison, and impulsively runs off with him. At this point, the heavy moralistic tone sets in, and Wood apparently sends her heroine down a spiralling path of retribution:

> The very instant – the very night of her departure, she awoke to what she had done. The guilt, whose aspect had been shunned in the prospective, assumed at once its true frightful color, the blackness of darkness; and a lively remorse, a never-dying anguish, took possession of her soul forever. Oh, reader, believe me! Lady – wife – mother! Should you ever be tempted to abandon your home, so will you awake.
>
> (Wood [1861] 2012: 239)

Along with the crippling guilt and shame of her sins, Isabel is impregnated by Levison, who then refuses to marry her. Isabel is further punished for her transgressions when her illegitimate son with Levison dies in a freak train accident that also leaves her grossly disfigured and unrecognisable. She seizes this opportunity to assume a new identity as Madame Vine, so she can return home to the children she abandoned and misses. However, she must play governess to them and hide that she is their birth mother, even when her youngest son, William, is on his deathbed.[12] She must also endure watching her former husband with his new wife, Barbara Hare, of whom she is jealous (and partly why she ran off). She eventually dies of a broken heart and is buried in a nameless grave.

On the surface, this seems irrefutable evidence that Wood is more sanctimonious than sensational. In subjecting her transgressive heroine to a merciless fate, she condemns her reckless female passion and abandonment of maternal duties, thus reinforcing Victorian idealisations of womanhood and motherhood.[13] This is certainly one layer of *East Lynne*, but it is complicated by moral ambiguities, as the female characters must grapple with a reductive hegemonic image of womanhood that constricts their autonomy and exposes them to legal and economic vulnerabilities. I will highlight these layers beneath the surface of moralistic preaching, where Wood allows her reader to glimpse at the debilitating and oppressive nature of the Victorian feminine ideology.

Judgment vs. Empathy: The Redemption of Lady Isabel

While the narrative does not miss an opportunity to harangue Isabel for her transgressions, Wood also invites readers to empathise with the complexities of Isabel's character, delving beyond the surface of moral judgment to explore the underlying motivations, societal pressures, and personal struggles that contribute to her ill-fated decisions. The dichotomy between the overt moral judgment of Isabel in the narrative and the reader's ability to empathise was

[11] In her book-length study on Ellen Wood, Mariaconcetta Costantini also discusses Wood's use of "camouflage strategies" to veil subversive ideas beneath an overtly moralistic framework (2020: 9).

[12] I will argue later that this is more a liberating act of autonomy than a symbol of atonement.

[13] Notably, Wood does not punish the social-climbing Afy Hallijohn in the same way, even though her pretensions are more dangerous. They are a threat to the social hierarchy à la Lucy Graham of Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*. At the very least, this suggests Wood's sermonising is disingenuous.

recognised by Wood's contemporaries, as is highlighted in this 1864 review of the novel published in the *London Quarterly Review*:

> *East Lynne* is one of the most powerful but one also of the most mischievous books of the day . . . our sympathies are excited on behalf of one who has betrayed the most sacred trust man can repose in woman. All that the union of beauty, rank, talent and misfortune can do to create a prejudice in favour of the criminal is done, while the sense of the enormity of her crime is greatly enfeebled by the unamiable light in which her husband is presented.
>
> ("Thackeray and Modern Fiction": 406)

Despite the heavy moralistic tone against Isabel, readers still find themselves drawn to her character, grappling with a nuanced empathy that transcends the condemnation. Before the transgression, Isabel is, after all, established as a victim of her profligate father, whose reckless spending depletes her inheritance, leaving her penniless when he dies. Moreover, she is unable to properly mourn her father because the house is quickly overrun with debtors, and she is confronted with the harsh reality of her financial woes:

> Instead of being a young lady of high position, of wealth and rank, she appeared to herself more in the light of an unfortunate pauper and interloper in the house she was inhabiting . . . she could not shut her eyes to her own future . . . the words of that plain-speaking creditor kept ringing in her ears: "You won't have a roof to put your head under, or a guinea to call your own."
>
> (Wood [1861] 2012: 83-4)

Wood illustrates the vulnerability of women like Isabel, who, due to no fault of their own, find themselves burdened with the consequences of male financial recklessness. In a social context where women often had limited financial agency and were dependent on male relatives, Isabel's predicament highlights the broader challenges faced by women when familial financial stability is compromised. Isabel has no other recourse but to marry, and she weds the respectable Carlyle, whose money and social standing override an absence of love.

Wood demonstrates the psychological toll on Isabel from such an uneven arrangement. Carlyle's spinster sister, Cornelia, impresses on Isabel that she is a financial leech in her marriage, and her guardian confirms she "ought to feel grateful to [Carlyle] for his generosity" (141). This constant reminder of her dependence creates a profound sense of insecurity and inferiority in Isabel, contributing to the emotional strain she experiences within the confines of her marriage. Isabel takes on a passive role in her relationship with Carlyle because she perceives him as her financial saviour, and this entitles him to liberties and a position of authority in their marriage.[14] The unequal power dynamics and financial dependence become significant sources of psychological distress for Isabel, making her vulnerable to "madness" (or suspicions that her husband is cheating on her, and a fantasy of escape from the oppressive constraints of her marriage).[15] Her decision to run off with Levison, despite knowing him to be false and heartless, underscores the desperation of her actions and highlights the psychological impact of navigating a homosocial world that limits women's agency. Rather than just condemned as morally inept, Isabel's choices then serve as a lens through which Wood sheds light on the challenges faced by young, destitute but marriageable women striving for autonomy in a restrictive cultural environment. In other words, readers not only sympathise

[14] After Isabel reticently accepts Carlyle's proposal, he "took from her lips his first kiss," while Isabel, who does not yet have romantic feelings, remains "passive," supposing "he had gained the right to do so" (Wood [1861] 2012: 107).

[15] As I will discuss later, these irrational thoughts are also exacerbated by her postpartum condition.

with Isabel and the complex motivations that drive her to transgress established norms, but also lament the patriarchal structures that enable such injustices against her.

While Isabel's return to East Lynne as governess Madame Vine can be considered a fall from her aristocratic pedestal, the crowning retribution for her perceived moral transgressions, I read it more positively as the heroine's first act of autonomy in the novel. In assuming the disguise of Madame Vine, she makes a concerted decision to break free of the stifling "Victorian Lady" archetype and achieves financial independence for the first time in her life. Furthermore, as Madame Vine, Isabel has a freedom of mobility in the domestic sphere that she was denied as a Lady and is less the subject of surveillance (Steere 2013: 117). As we recall, in her early days of marriage to Carlyle, Isabel was but a pawn to her sister-in-law, Cornelia, who upstaged her position to the point that Isabel was "in a state of galling subjection in her own house" (Wood [1861] 2012: 141), and "less free than either of her servants" (234). Ironically, Isabel also spent less time with her children as their mother than she does as their governess. As a paid servant, she is notably allowed to remain with her son, William, on his deathbed until his very last breath. This was not the case when her father was dying; she was barred from the room, as it was deemed improper for a Lady to witness death. In recognising her newfound freedoms and autonomy as Madame Vine,[16] we can better grasp the psychological turmoil she experienced as Lady Isabel Vane. Through this incisive portrayal of Isabel's sufferings at the hands of Victorian class and gender constructs, Wood manages to evoke readers' sympathies for the adulterous heroine.

The "Good" Woman in Crisis

Meanwhile, contemporary critics found it difficult to admire Barbara Hare, despite her roles as the doting wife to Isabel's ex-husband and the heroine-detective working to clear her brother's name of a murder charge. In an 1863 review of *East Lynne*, Margaret Oliphant notably remarks that "there is not a reader who does not feel disposed to turn [Isabel's] virtuous successor [Barbara] to the door, and reinstate the suffering heroine" (170). Barbara's seemingly admirable qualities are juxtaposed with an underlying sense of disapproval, suggesting that her adherence to societal norms and roles may not necessarily make her a universally likeable or morally unambiguous character. Wood complicates the figure of the "good" woman by portraying Barbara with a tension between societal virtues and reader aversion.

The simplistic dichotomy of "good" and "bad" women is further unmoored by Wood's portrayal of Alice Challoner, the eventual wife of Francis Levison. Dazzled by the status and privileges that come with being Lady Levison, Alice marries Francis, despite knowing full well that he manipulated and led on her sister, Blanche. Three years into the marriage, we learn that Alice comes to reap what she has sown. She is miserable. There is no money because Francis has squandered it, and she feels such "contempt and hate" (Wood [1861] 2012: 385) for him that she wishes their two-year-old son had a different father. At this point of the novel, Alice's pursuit of social status and her betrayal of her sister are unequivocally condemned and shown to warrant her current wretchedness; she had brought the wrong upon herself.

Much later in the novel, however, when Francis is revealed to be a murderer, Alice's fate no longer seems justified. Alice visits the Carlyles to see if there might be any means to

[16] See Jeanne Peterson (1973) and Kathryn Hughes (1993) for their studies on the figure of the governess, whose liminal position in the Victorian household – neither fully a servant nor a lady – afforded her some personal autonomy, yet within the constraints of a highly regulated, class-based system.

divorce Francis and save her son from the ignominy of his father's crime. There is none.[17] The hopelessness of the situation drives Alice into an emotional tirade about women being taken advantage of by cruel men:

> "My husband!" broke forth Lady Levison, in agitation, seemingly. "Yes! there's the wrong. Why did he, knowing what he was, delude me into becoming his wife? You ought to feel for me, Mrs. Carlyle; and you do feel for me, for you are a wife and mother. How dare these base men marry – take to themselves an innocent, inexperienced girl, vowing, before God, to love and honor and cherish her? Were not his other sins impediment enough but he must have crime, also, and woo me! He has done me deep and irredeemable wrong, and has entailed upon his child an inheritance of shame. What had he or I done to deserve it, I ask?"
>
> (491)

Alice expresses a sense of powerlessness and victimhood as she reflects on her husband's deceit. Her words underscore the imbalance of power between men and women in the Victorian era, particularly women's vulnerability within the institution of marriage. While men had the agency to choose their wives, women (and their children) were often at the mercy of the men they married, bystanders forced to bear the lasting consequences of ill-fated decisions made by uncaring men. Alice has no legal recourse to redress the wrongs of her husband, as divorce is not an option for her under the restrictive Victorian divorce laws. Her life and that of her son will forever be stained by the association with Francis, a murderer. That this is not a just end is highlighted in the text by Barbara's pitiless response, reminding Alice, "Still he is your husband" (491). Barbara's words speak to the lot women must bear for their husbands, the undying loyalty they are held to, even in the face of such egregiousness. The use of "still" implies a recognition of the difficulties and challenges Alice faces, yet it more importantly underscores the prevailing notion that marital ties are enduring, that women must suffer marital hardships and uphold their marital commitments, regardless of the actions or character of their husbands. Wood once again reveals the heavy crosses women must bear in a society that doles out high expectations with little room to manoeuvre.

Through her psychologically incisive portrayals of Isabel and Alice, and her depiction of the conventional yet still insufferable Barbara, Wood prompts readers to question societal expectations of womanly virtue and the limitations imposed on female characters within the narrative. In doing so, Wood adds layers of ambiguity to the representation of women in the novel, encouraging a more critical examination of traditional feminine ideals. The staggering commercial success of *East Lynne* – with hundreds of thousands of copies sold and numerous stage adaptations – serves as a testament to how deeply such critiques of feminine ideals resonated with Victorian audiences across class lines. Readers were not only drawn to the novel's melodramatic plot but also engaged with the anxieties it expressed about female gender roles, morality, and social expectations. Wood's ability to popularise such topics, prompting both conservative and progressive interpretations, underscores the power she wielded through sensation fiction in shaping cultural discourse on womanhood.[18]

[17] Divorce for a Victorian woman was notoriously hard to obtain. Under the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, while husbands could divorce their wives on grounds of adultery, wives had to prove additional elements such as cruelty or desertion along with adultery. Moreover, the Victorian view of marriage as a permanent, sacred union often meant that women were expected to endure their husbands' faults and transgressions, making divorce not just legally difficult but socially unacceptable.

[18] Like Wood, her sensational contemporaries challenged idealised femininity by exposing the contradictions within Victorian gender norms. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) critiques the feminine ideal through a heroine whose charm masks ambition and violence, revealing how femininity can become a dangerous performance under systemic pressure. Collins exposes its dangers within a

The Impotence of Maternal Love in *East Lynne*

Having established that Wood does not strictly adhere to Victorian conventionalities of womanhood, I will examine the complexities surrounding her depiction of mothers. Motherhood was perceived generally as the Victorian woman's highest achievement, as evidenced by the numerous mother-oriented publications that circulated at the time. Periodicals, novels, guidebooks, and magazines all reminded women of their supreme duty to live only for their children, to be "gentle, mild, long-suffering, devoted, and voiceless . . . akin to the Virgin Mary" (McKnight 1997: 14). The period's ideology of the mother who happily sacrifices for her children created a tension between women's private feelings about motherhood and what they could express in public. Notably, George Eliot depicted a quintessentially virtuous and fulfilled mother[19] in her widely read *Middlemarch* (1871). In her private letters, however, she shared a bleaker portrayal, describing the mother's body merely as a "vehicle" for childbirth that after delivery amounted to "a poor husk" (Eliot qtd. in Davis 2017: 271). Even the fecund Queen Victoria,[20] whose maternal image set the standard for her female subjects, had privately griped about pregnancy and childbirth being heavy crosses for women to bear.[21] Such contradictions between public and private sentiments about motherhood ultimately reveal how disillusioned Victorian women were at the oppressive constraints imposed on them by nineteenth-century formulations of the ideal woman, an attitude that transcended class lines. While Victorian women would undoubtedly have been relieved to know their queen held ugly sentiments about maternity, the mother to the Empire could not be the one to challenge the sanctity of the maternal experience by publicising her albeit universal frustrations. This was rather the function of popular novels like *East Lynne*, which could more openly explore the complexities and discontents of motherhood without threatening the social order.

In addition to Isabel, Barbara, and Alice, there are two other noteworthy portrayals of motherhood in the novel. The first is of Isabel's own mother, the Countess of Mount Severn, who died when her daughter was only thirteen. The mention of her is brief and occurs posthumously when the earl worries that his runaway marriage with the countess (combined with his reckless spending) will leave their daughter unsettled and without provision. This elopement was the countess' one sin. Otherwise, the earl informs us she had been "an affectionate wife to him, had borne with his follies and his neglect" (Wood [1861] 2012: 2) and was a faultless mother to Isabel, having "reared her as an English girl should be, not to frivolity and foppery" (6).

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patriarchal legal framework. In *The Woman in White* (1860), Laura Fairlie's identity is legally erased through marriage, while *No Name* (1862) highlights how illegitimacy strips Magdalen Vanstone of her inheritance. Rhoda Broughton offers a more emotionally interior exploration in *Cometh Up as a Flower* (1867), portraying young women whose intense desires and conflicted loyalties put them at odds with conventional expectations, often inviting more readerly sympathy than censure. Her subtler approach aligns her most closely with Wood. For more on sensation fiction as a vehicle for feminist critiques, see Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979), Winifred Hughes (1980), and Lyn Pykett (1992).

[19] Susan Garth is the epitome of a selfless and devoted wife and mother. She is so self-sacrificing that her character fades into the background, overshadowed by her mismanaging husband and ungrateful children.

[20] Queen Victoria bore nine children over 17 years.

[21] Both Natalie McKnight (1997) and Yvonne Ward (1999) discuss negative sentiments about maternity that Queen Victoria communicated to family in private letters, which were at odds with her public image of a devoted mother.

Unfortunately, good English values do not ensure a roof over one's head or that there is money to pay the servants. While the countess may have upheld traditional English virtues in her motherly role, these values alone do not guarantee practical necessities for her daughter's survival, such as housing or financial stability. It underscores the idea that societal expectations and moral virtues, while significant, may not necessarily translate into tangible, material well-being or address the practical challenges of life, including financial responsibilities, thus trivialising the role of the mother's moral guidance. The earl's refusal to control his spending cannot be fixed by motherly virtue. This is perhaps why Wood minimises the portrayal of the countess, since her moral guidance would not have alleviated Isabel's financial situation had she lived. A mother's love in *East Lynne* simply cannot counter a father's neglect.

We see a similar scenario play out in the Hare household. Like the countess, Mrs Hare has little influence over Justice Hare's impudence and neglect:

> Since her husband had first brought her home to [their] house, four and twenty-years ago, she had never dared to express a will in it . . . her life had been one long yielding of her will to his; in fact, she had no will; his will was all in all.
>
> (18)

Following their marriage, Mrs Hare has refrained from asserting her own desires or opinions. The narrative describes her life as a continuous surrender of her will to her husband's, highlighting his dominance in their relationship. The repercussions of these power dynamics come to light when their son, Richard, becomes entangled in a murder investigation. Justice Hare, prioritising legal over paternal duties, renounces Richard for his suspected crimes and vows he will turn his son over to the law should he ever return home. Meanwhile, Mrs Hare's maternal instincts lead her to empathise with her son's predicament and support him despite the evidence pointing to his guilt. However, her maternal love and compassion towards Richard are ultimately impotent in shielding him from his father's iron will to disown him or in clearing his name against false murder accusations. Once again, motherly love cannot alleviate material realities. Richard, branded as a fugitive, is compelled to elude authorities for most of the novel, emphasising the limitations of maternal influence in the face of societal and legal injustices.

It is interesting to note, however, that when the real murderer is brought to justice and Richard is cleared, Justice Hare suffers paralysis from a stroke. This is a stroke of narrative justice, as we are told, "People cannot act with unnatural harshness toward a child, and then discover they have been in the wrong, with impunity" (489). Richard returns home to live blissfully with his mother and as the new master, "for the justice would never be in a state to hold sway again" (538). Mrs Hare is reunited with her son and released from the tyranny of her husband. This is perhaps Wood's feeble attempt to restore the force of motherhood in the novel. However, it does not efface Isabel's and Richard's earlier trials, thus showing contemporary readers that maternal love is not as formidable as the Victorian guidebooks would have them think.

Mothering as a Source of Sensation

With the rise of parenting advice literature in the Victorian era, childrearing and the mother's responsibility became a source of contention. Conflicting advice from different sources not only resulted in confusion and disagreements about the best practices for childrearing, but it also provoked fears in parents about making the wrong choices and harming their children. Not only was the mother expected to oversee the complete physical, mental, and spiritual health of

her child, but she was to do so singlehandedly[22] and in the face of the often confusing and contradictory advice of prominent pseudo-experts who left readers more baffled than enlightened on "good" mothering.[23] Furthermore, if the child failed in any way, only the mother was to blame. This made it the perfect source for sensational melodrama. Wood participates in the childrearing discourse via her novels, packaging her advice within dramatic tales of domestic disasters that emphasise the potential consequences of deviating from her recommended approach.[24] But where she stands in these topical childrearing debates is not always clear, as portrayed in the pointed conversation in *East Lynne* between Isabel (disguised birth mother) and Barbara (stepmother), concerning the mother's role. Isabel (posing as Madame Vine) asks Barbara if she spends much time with the children and the latter replies:

> No. I never was fond of being troubled with children . . . Let the offices properly pertaining to a nurse be performed by the nurse . . . Let her have the *trouble* of the children, their noise, their romping; in short, let the nursery be her place, and the children's. But . . . 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 . . . and the nurse can attend to the rest. A child should never hear aught from his mother's lips but persuasive gentleness; and this becomes impossible if she is very much with her children.
>
> (349)

Barbara's perspective emphasises a clear division of roles between a mother and a nurse. The nurse should handle the practical and physical aspects of childcare, such as dealing with the noise and energetic behaviour of children within the nursery.[25] The mother, on the other hand, should focus on the higher moral and Christian education of the children. This division of responsibilities aligns with the notion that a mother's primary duty is to instil the children with moral values and spiritual guidance.

Barbara also touches on breastfeeding, telling Isabel how she prioritises her husband over her baby being breastfed, proclaiming "If I and Mr. Carlyle have to be out in the evening, baby gives way. I should never give up my husband for my baby; never, never, dearly as I love him" (350).[26] Later in the novel, the two women are at odds over how Lucy, Isabel's

[22] The role of the father is considered minimal in Victorian childrearing. In her conduct book *The Mothers of England, Their Influence and Responsibility* (1843), Ellis sets up the mother as the sole person responsible for the moral and spiritual development of her children.

[23] In *Suffering Mothers*, McKnight includes a discussion of such contradictions that were perpetuated by Victorian conduct books (1997: 3-11). Notably, Ellis told women they should selflessly devote every waking moment to the happiness of their family, yet somehow not turn into a "household drudge" in the process. Sarah Lewis also called for a mother's selfless devotion to others, while also remaining intellectually stimulating for her sons.

[24] The same gimmick was used in the parenting advice literature. See Wagner for a detailed discussion on how Wood uses mothering as a theme and a source of sensation (2020: 218-35).

[25] Notably, earlier in the novel, when a destitute Isabel must live with her uncle, the new Lord Mount Severn, and his wife, Emma, she grows close to her six-year-old nephew, William. Isabel is quick to send the loose-tongued boy to the nursery when he reveals to a visiting Carlyle that his mother, viewing Isabel as a petulant leech and a rival for Francis Levison's attention, has unceremoniously slapped her twice. This scene reveals that Isabel is unable to quiet the boy herself and that, before she is a mother herself, she accepts the servant's role in disciplining misbehaving children (Wood [1861] 2012: 101).

[26] The conflict between wifehood and motherhood is also brought up earlier in the novel during Isabel's row with her sister-in-law, Cornelia, over spending money on new dresses. Isabel asserts, "I am a competent judge of what is necessary for my children" (Wood [1861] 2012: 214). While she is certain little Isabel needs a new dress, however, she cannot ignore Cornelia's point about the financial burden

daughter with Carlyle, should be punished for her bad behaviour. Barbara is of the stern view that "when [Lucy] commits faults, they must be corrected" (482). But Isabel (as Madame Vine) begs for Lucy's forgiveness, so she may attend the evening's dinner party, and Barbara remarks that the governess is "too lenient" (482). Though Isabel silently assents, and the narrator emphatically proclaims, "Mrs. Carlyle's views were correct ones" (349), the conversation raises several key issues, including: the mother's involvement in the daily childcare routine; the division of responsibilities between mothers and hired help; the competing obligations of the wife to her husband and the mother to her children;[27] and the disciplining of children.

As I have already shown, the text generates sympathy for Isabel, the mother overcome with an "irrepressible" (333) longing for the children she abandoned, even as it endorses her suffering as a form of moral consequence. Meanwhile, Barbara notably acknowledges that she "never was fond of being troubled with children," a dismissive attitude of motherhood that is in sharp contrast to Isabel's. The text's sympathetic portrayal of Isabel, despite its earlier endorsement of Barbara's views, adds depth to Wood's stance within the childrearing debates. It suggests that in the face of conflicting societal norms on what constitutes "good" mothering, the emotional toll on mothers who conform to or deviate from these norms cannot be ignored. For instance, the description of "the heartsickness" (333) for her children that plagues Isabel conveys the emotional and moral dimensions of her maternal failings and complicates the straightforward endorsement of Barbara's views.[28] Wood explores and critiques social expectations of "proper" mothering in *East Lynne* by emphasising the challenges and burdens faced by women like Isabel and Barbara, who strive to uphold varying expectations of motherhood. In expressing the inconsistencies within maternal advice manuals, and highlighting the confusion and fear that result, Wood reinforces the impossible ideal of the "good" mother, who remains a figure of contestation.

The Traumas of Mothering

Beyond unsettling the ideal of the Victorian mother as a paragon of strength and moral authority, Wood underscores that the very act of becoming a mother, specifically pregnancy and childbirth, is fraught with danger and trauma. By highlighting the physical and emotional perils inherent in the maternal experience, the novel deepens its critique of the precarious and burdensome position of mothers in a society that demands their unwavering sacrifice. In Isabel's case, these maternal struggles manifest in life-threatening forms, forcing readers to confront the real and tangible risks of motherhood that extend beyond the emotional and moral challenges that have thus far been explored.

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that buying one would place on Carlyle. Isabel must decide whether to prioritise her daughter or her husband, and she (like Barbara) chooses the latter.

[27] See Shuttleworth for a detailed discussion on how Victorian theorists navigated the conflicting demands of wifehood and motherhood. Ultimately, they advised women to prioritise their husbands over their children for their own self-preservation. Shuttleworth aptly concludes: "Although a woman's central concern is with her children, self-interest dictates an outward subservience to the controller of the purse-strings" (1992: 33).

[28] Pykett makes an interesting point about how Wood constructs maternal feeling in *East Lynne*. Isabel's longing for her children is depicted as an innate response, one that transcends class boundaries and invites universal identification. Yet, there is a striking irony in the way this "unbearable maternal deprivation . . . [is] actively sought by the mothers who are escaping from their own maternal and domestic commitments in reading the novel" (1992: 131). In other words, though framed as tragic and morally instructive, Isabel's suffering is also a consumable spectacle through which Wood's predominantly female readers could temporarily detach from their own domestic constraints.

A year into Isabel and Carlyle's marriage, Isabel is stricken with a formidable "illness" that is likened to "death" (Wood [1861] 2012: 142). Outside the sickroom, her maid, Joyce, and her meddling sister-in-law, Cornelia, lament her deteriorating state, repeatedly voicing their fear of "danger" to her life. Joyce, especially troubled by the sight of her mistress' pain, remarks that "it's hard to witness, and it must be awful to bear" (142). From the way they speak, one might assume Isabel suffers from consumption. But in truth, she is pregnant! Pregnancy in *East Lynne*, particularly the ensuing childbirth and postpartum conditions, are dramatised as profound physical and mental trauma. After the harrowing birth of little Isabel, we are told the mother "did not get strong very quickly. Fever and weakness had a struggle with each other and with her" (146). Notably, it is in this postpartum "state of partial delirium" that the servants' gossip about Barbara and Carlyle's affair infiltrates Isabel's mind, "playing pranks with her brain" (151) and sowing seeds of doubt about her husband's loyalty. Thus, alongside her deteriorating physical health, Isabel also suffers from growing paranoia, illustrating the dual assault of childbirth on a mother's body and mind.[29]

The narrative skips ahead some years, but Isabel's health remains fragile. We are told that in addition to the girlchild Carlyle named after her, Isabel has borne two more children, William and Archibald. This time Isabel's postpartum state, in addition to being described as an "illness" or "disorder," is marked by such a "protracted" and "alarming state of weakness" that the doctor deems her an "invalid," indicating her condition is severe enough to warrant "a change of air and scene" (164). Moreover, Isabel's anxiety that Barbara might usurp her as Carlyle's wife has grown so irrational that she asks the maid to care for the children should she not return from her prescribed sojourn in Boulogne (165). Once again, Wood portrays the postpartum experience as a profound ordeal, manifesting as both physical frailty and emotional torment. Isabel's "alarming state of weakness" reflects the severe physical toll childbirth has taken on her body, rendering her fragile and dependent on external care. At the same time, her obsession with Barbara highlights the psychological strain of her postpartum condition, as feelings of jealousy and inadequacy amplify her emotional distress.

By her fourth pregnancy, this time with Levison's child, readers are well-acquainted with the accompanying physical and mental tolls on Isabel: "She had an invalid cap on, and a thick woolen invalid shawl, and she shook and shivered perpetually . . . her countenance the picture of stony despair" (244). Although the moralistic preaching of the narrative attempts to frame her condition as stemming solely from the guilt of her adultery, if history is any indicator, we know it is rather exacerbated by it. In fact, Isabel's declining health following childbirth underscores the extent to which motherhood is portrayed as an inherently dangerous and life-altering experience, one that depletes both the body and the mind, inviting readers to reflect on the risks and sacrifices of childbearing for women in this period.

For Isabel's spinster sister-in-law, these costs are deemed too high. Reflecting on the onus of childbirth, Cornelia tells Joyce, "It is our common curse…You and I may congratulate ourselves that we have not chosen to encounter it" (142). Through Cornelia's perspective that giving birth is something to be avoided, Wood alludes to the shared and widespread experiences of Victorian women beyond the novel. Cornelia's characterisation of childbirth as "our common curse" resonates profoundly within the context of the high rates of maternal mortality[30] and the prevalence of puerperal insanity (the Victorian term for what we now recognise as postpartum

[29] Twenty years after the publication of *East Lynne,* Frances Power Cobbe noted the same "*immense* … physical claims on [a mother's] bodily and brain vigour" in *The Duties of Women* (1881: 190).

[30] See Emma Griffin (2020) for an account of the vast number of Victorian families afflicted by maternal death.

depression)[31] that coincided with the publication of *East Lynne*. Hilary Marland posits that these physical and mental effects of childbirth were not anomalies, even though Victorian society often sought to portray them as deviations or failures, the antithesis of idealised womanhood. Instead, Marland argues that these hardships were intrinsic to the lived experiences of many Victorian mothers, citing medical and judicial authorities[32] who typically regarded such traumas as almost inevitable side effects of childbirth (2004: 198). Marland's insights highlight the paradoxical reality of Victorian childbearing that I argue Wood illustrates with Isabel's experiences of childbirth and postpartum recovery: celebrated in theory but fraught with serious dangers and suffering in practice. Cornelia's aversion to childbirth reflects an acute awareness of the heavy physical and mental tolls that this form of mothering exacted during the period. Thus, instead of bearing children herself, Cornelia "mothers" through moral supervision and control, meddling in the life of her brother, to whom she was "Mamma Corny" (Wood [1861] 2012: 35) after his own mother passed giving birth to him, and schooling her sister-in-law on the management of the household and family affairs (140-1). Her choice to remain childless allows her to distance herself from the physical risks of motherhood while still fulfilling a maternal role through childrearing and handling domestic responsibilities. Wood raises a particularly interesting point with Cornelia's approach to motherhood, namely that the job of mothering often requires the contributions of multiple women. In other words, there is a social dimension to mothering, where caregiving responsibilities are not always carried out by the biological mother but rather passed on to family members or hired servants. This highlights the communal nature of caregiving and the practical realities of mothering in the absence of the biological mother, challenging the monolithic view of the Victorian mother as solely responsible for all aspects of caregiving. That the Victorian mother was expected to do it all was a burden that Wood suggests "none can know, save those who have gone through it" (145). The expectation for mothers to manage every aspect of mothering (childbirth, childrearing, domestic duties, and more), often without support or recognition, becomes the defining trauma of motherhood in this context, highlighting the overwhelming and isolating nature of the role. Ultimately, Wood's portrayal of multiple women contributing to the tasks of mothering in *East Lynne* pushes back against the idealised image of the solitary, self-sacrificial Victorian mother, offering a more nuanced understanding of the shared, and oftentimes burdensome, nature of the mother's multifaceted roles.

Conclusion

Wood's *East Lynne* critiques the feminine ideals that Victorian society held sacred while skillfully exploiting the sensational to drive the critique home. Rather than simply condemning her female characters' transgressions, she offers insight into the complex motivations behind their ill-fated decisions, revealing how societal constraints, emotional vulnerabilities, and systemic injustices converge to shape their actions. She portrays her characters not as inherently flawed or immoral but as individuals navigating a rigid patriarchal system that often forces them into untenable situations, thereby dismantling the binary of "good" and "bad" women.

[31] See Hilary Marland (2004) for her study of the relationship between mental disorder and childbirth.

[32] Judicial authorities became involved in discussions of puerperal insanity due to its connection with cases of infanticide, which were tragically common during this period. The mid-1860s saw a peak in infanticide cases, often attributed to the mental instability linked to postpartum conditions. Women suffering from puerperal insanity were sometimes deemed legally unfit to be held fully responsible for their actions, reflecting the intersection of medical and legal perspectives on this condition. (Marland 2004: 167-200)

Wood's treatment of motherhood further challenges Victorian ideals, exposing the impossibility of meeting the conflicting and often impossible expectations of the "proper" mother constructed in advice books. Wood also does not shy away from depicting the trauma of childbirth and postpartum experiences, revealing the physical and psychological suffering often glossed over in contemporary discourse.[33] By illustrating these heavy burdens, Wood urges a broader understanding of maternal roles beyond the narrow, glorified image of the self-sacrificing mother. She deconstructs the assumption that mothering is a solitary endeavor, showing that the tasks of raising children, particularly in the absence of the biological mother, are often shared by servants and relatives.

Ultimately, *East Lynne* is a unique blend of the didactic and subversive. In combining moralistic elements with provocative storytelling, Mrs Henry (Ellen) Wood was able to provoke while maintaining the appearance of conventional morality, ensuring her novel was both commercially viable and intellectually subversive. Wood understood well the balancing act that female authors had to maintain between adhering to societal norms and challenging them, and *East Lynne* is a testament to her business acumen. The novel went on to become the bestselling novel of nineteenth-century England, and its immense popularity underscores the cultural resonance of Wood's portrayal of the limits of idealised womanhood. In this sense, *East Lynne* did not merely secure Wood's literary and financial success, but it also catalysed a broader societal reflection on femininity and maternal expectations, bringing these complex issues into the heart of popular discourse. Thus, rather than framing Wood as either sanctimonious or sensational, the more fitting question is how she skillfully managed to be both.

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[33] Widely circulated Victorian medical treatises, such as Thomas Bull's *Hints to Mothers* (1842) and Fleetwood Churchill's *On the Diseases of Women, Including Those of Pregnancy and Childbed* (1857), often minimised the trauma of childbirth and postpartum experiences. While they acknowledged puerperal insanity and other postpartum disorders, they frequently attributed them to inherent female weakness, moral failings, or a predisposition to hysteria rather than the physical and psychological toll of childbirth itself.

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