

The Ungovernable Governess:
The Figure of the Governess in the Victorian Sensation Novel of the 1860s

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Dissertation submitted for the 60-credit, level & module
'Dissertation for the degree of MA in English.'

2011

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Abstract

This dissertation will examine the figure of the governess in the Victorian Sensation Novels of the 1860s in order to determine if sensation fiction in this period was inevitably concerned with portraying the ungovernable side of femininity. The primary focus will be on the female protagonist in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, Wilkie Collins *Armadale*, Louisa May Alcott's 'Behind a Mask,' and Ellen Wood's *East Lynne*.¹ The effects of the moral and social climate of the nineteenth century and the influence the historical governess had on these works will be examined. The hypothesis that Braddon, Collins, Alcott, and Wood use the governess to depict various forms of female non-conformity in order to comment on the limitations and injustices of the woman's position in a male dominated society will be considered, particularly in relation to the depiction of Victorian matrimony and the sexual double standard. Under discussion will be the liminal position of the governess and the way in which these villainous and deviant women use masquerade and their position in ways that tend towards deception. The motivation behind the actions of these transgressive females will also be discussed, particularly the significance of poverty and social position on their ungovernable behaviour, and the extent to which these texts and the governess figure can be seen as feminist will be explored.

¹ Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, ed. by David Skilton (Oxford: OUP, 1997); Wilkie Collins, *Armadale*, ed. by Catherine Peters (Oxford: OUP, 1989); A. M. Barnard [Louisa May Alcott], 'Behind a Mask; Or a Woman's Power' in *Behind a Mask: The Unknown Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott* ed. by Madeline Stern (New York: Quill, 1984), pp. 1-152; Ellen Wood, *East Lynne*, ed. by Andrew Maunder (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2000).

Abbreviations

A - Collins, Wilkie, *Armada* (1866)

BaM - Barnard, A. M. [Alcott, Louisa May] (1866), 'Behind a Mask', in *The Unknown Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott*, ed. by Madeline Stern (1975)

EL - Wood, Ellen, *East Lynne* (1861)

LAS - Braddon, Mary Elizabeth, *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862)

Introduction

In 1855, writer and critic, Margaret Oliphant wrote of Jane Eyre:

She stole upon the scene a little fierce incendiary [...] something of a genius, something of a vixen – a dangerous little person inimical to the peace of society [...] Such was the impetuous little spirit which dashed into our well-ordered world, broke its boundaries, and defied its principles – and the most alarming revolution of modern times has followed.¹

With the advent of the sensation novel in the 1860s, Oliphant's assumption that a 'most alarming revolution' in the portrayal of the governess had occurred was indeed correct. In Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, Collins' *Armadale*, Alcott's 'Behind a Mask' and Wood's *East Lynne*,² the governess is no longer the embodiment of Victorian femininity but the 'vixen' of Oliphant's argument, an 'impetuous little spirit' who is quite prepared to use whatever means necessary to achieve her subversive ambitions. Sensation fiction played on the fear that lurking beneath the respectable feminine veneer women hid an abject nature, which was waiting to rebel against patriarchy. Numerous critics condemned the depiction of female characters such as Braddon's Lucy Audley (*Lady Audley's Secret*) and Collins' Lydia Gwilt (*Armadale*), protesting that sensation novels were 'debasing to everyone concerned' and a 'morbid phenomenon of literature – indications of a widespread corruption, of which they are in part both the effect and the cause.' Nevertheless, the subversion of the traditional heroine of mainstream literature in many ways represented the appeal of sensation fiction; the idea that deviant women were not merely the invention of writers but actually lurked on the bourgeois doorstep, waiting to infiltrate the respectable home fascinated Victorian readers.³

Indeed, Pykett notes the centrality of the female protagonist meant that sensation fiction was generally read by women, associated with women, frequently about women, and with women's writing (as in the works of Braddon and Wood), consequently the genre has received much feminist critical attention. For Pykett, the sensation novel was a reaction to

¹ Margaret Oliphant, 'Modern Novelists – Great and Small', *Blackwood's Magazine* 77 (May 1855), pp. 554-68 (p. 557).

² Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, ed. by David Skilton (Oxford: OUP, 1997); Wilkie Collins, *Armadale*, ed. by Catherine Peters (Oxford: OUP, 1989); A. M. Barnard [Louisa May Alcott], 'Behind a Mask; Or a Woman's Power' in *Behind a Mask: The Unknown Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott*, ed. by Madeline Stern (New York: Quill, 1984), pp. 1-152.; Ellen Wood, *East Lynne*, ed. by Andrew Maunder (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2000).

³ Oliphant and Henry Mansel cited in Lyn Pykett, *The Improper Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 48, 51. Oral communication with Jessica Cox 11th January- 14th March 2008.

anxieties regarding the changing nature of the family and marriage, uncertainties about gender roles and the shifting role of women. Throughout her seminal text *The Improper Feminine* (1992), Pykett offers a comprehensive study on the issue of gender and sexuality, further suggesting in *The Sensation Novel* (1994) that the centrality of the sensation heroine represents ‘hostility in action’ against patriarchal oppression. Mitchell’s *Fallen Angel* concurs, and adds that sensation fiction suggested that the deviant woman was a threat to the stability of the middle-class home. Pykett and Mitchell’s arguments have parallels with Poovey’s critically acclaimed essay, ‘The Anathematized Race: The Governess and *Jane Eyre*,’ which opened critical debate on the governess in mainstream Victorian fiction in 1989. Poovey’s text also recognises the ambiguous position of the governess as a potential source of disruption that threatens the stability of the middle-class family.⁴

More recently, Lecaros’s work *The Victorian Governess Novel* (2001) and in Nash’s earlier work “‘Wanting a Situation’: Governesses and Victorian Novels,’ (1980),⁵ offer comprehensive studies of the literary governess. Both texts consider Braddon’s Lucy Audley and Wood’s Isabel Vane but the main focus is on the governess in the canonical novels of the Bröntes, and Thackeray, and the novels, that they both suggest, mark the advent of the Victorian governess genre such as Blessington’s *The Governess* (1839).⁶

Prior to the sensation genre, the governess novel had been a popular subgenre of Victorian fiction during the 1830s and 40s. Many of these novels followed the narrative pattern of Blessington’s novel, portraying the governess as orphaned, isolated and oppressed within both the public and domestic spheres, her stoicism against the oppressive regime of governing usually rewarded by marriage and motherhood, as portrayed in such novels as Anne Brönte’s *Agnes Grey* (1847) and Charlotte Brönte’s *Jane Eyre* (1847). However Lecaros and Nash’s work, with Peterson’s ‘The Victorian Governess’, Thomson’s, *The Victorian Heroine* (1956), all note that the governess novel had a didactic purpose in that it

⁴ Lyn Pykett, *The Sensation Novel from the Woman in White to The Moonstone* (Plymouth: Northcote, 1994), pp. 10. Pykett, *The Improper Feminine: The Women’s Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992); Sally Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel: Chastity, Class and Women’s Reading 1835-1880* (Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1981), p. 73-97; Mary Poovey, ‘The Anathematized Race: The Governess and *Jane Eyre*’ in *The Nineteenth-Century Novel: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Stephen Regan (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 194- 212.

⁵ Cecilia Wadsö, Lecaros, *The Victorian Governess Novel*, (Lund: Lund University Press, 2001). Lecaros examines the position of the Victorian governess, and argues that the governess novel should be considered as a specific genre in its own right. Susan Nash, “‘Wanting a Situation’: Governesses and Victorian Novels’ (unpublished doctoral dissertation thesis, State University of New Jersey, 1980).

⁶ Marguerite, Lady Blessington, *The Governess* (London: Longman, 1839).

responded to anxieties regarding the growing number of ‘redundant women’ and was used to raise awareness of the working governess’s liminal position.⁷

The governess in the nineteenth century generally is now a topic that has received attention critically not only from literary critics, but also from cultural historians, such as Ruth Brandon’s *Other People’s Daughters: The Life and Times of the Governess* (2008), and Kathryn Hughes, *The Victorian Governess* (1993). Brandon and Hughes also place particular significance on the governess’s liminal domestic position between family and servants, and their ambiguous position within the class system.⁸ Primarily, the governess is a working woman but is not of the working classes. Secondly, within the respectable middle-class home she is regarded as a surrogate mother but is a single woman who by society’s mores should have no knowledge of motherhood. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, she is in a position of trust but as a sexually available woman, she is also a figure of suspicion and mistrust. It is the governess as a figure of suspicion and mistrust this dissertation argues is used by Braddon, Collins, Alcott, and Wood to portray the ungovernable side of femininity, and the negative effect that Victorian commentators, such as Oliphant and Mansel, saw this as having on the tenets of patriarchal ideology that the governess was meant to uphold.⁹

Thus as mystery was one of the fundamental conventions of the sensation genre, the ambiguity that surrounded the governess meant that the role of governess is a well documented one in the genre, adopted by Lucy Audley, Lydia Gwilt, Isabel Vane and many others. However, with the exception of Alcott’s governess figure, Jean Muir, little has been written on the governess specifically in the sensation novel. Most critical works do not consider the importance of the subversion of the traditional role of the governess, or how, or why, the transgressive female uses governessing to aid her subversive agenda. Conversely, there is extensive criticism on the fallen woman figure, the themes of gender and sexuality,

⁷ See Anne Brontë, *Agnes Grey* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988); Charlotte Brontë *Jane Eyre*, ed. by Richard J. Dunn, 3rd edn (London: Norton, 2001); Lecaros, *The Victorian Governess Novel*; Nash, “‘Wanting a Situation’: Governesses and Victorian Novels;” M. Jeanne Peterson, ‘The Victorian Governess: Status Incongruence’, in *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, ed. by Martha Vicinus (London: Indiana University Press, 1973); Patricia Thomson, *The Victorian Heroine: A Changing Ideal, 1837-1873* (Oxford: OUP, 1956), pp37-56.

⁸ Ruth Brandon, *Other People’s Daughters: The Life and Times of the Governess* (London: Weidenfeld Nicolson, 2008); Kathryn Hughes, *The Victorian Governess* (London: Hambleton, 2001). All future references from these editions.

⁹ Oliphant, Margret, ‘Sensation Novels’, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* (1862), (repr. in Stephen Regan, ed., *The Nineteenth-Century Novel* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp.39-44). Henry Mansel, ‘Sensation Novels’, *Quarterly Review* (1863), (repr. in Stephen Regan, ed., *The Nineteenth-Century Novel* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp.44-47).

female identity, and matrimony and motherhood as in Foster's *Victorian Women's Fiction: Marriage, Freedom and the Individual*.¹⁰

This discussion aims to redress the deficit by examining the figure of the governess in Alcott, Braddon, Collins and Wood's sensation novels of the 1860s in order to determine if sensation fiction in this period was inevitably concerned with portraying the threat that ungovernable femininity posed to society and the bourgeois home. Adopting a broadly feminist perspective, whilst drawing on cultural historicism, this discussion will examine how these writers characterise the governess in relation to the prevailing ideology of the Angel mythology, and how these ungovernable women defy such stereotypes. As Victorian women's legal and social standing was expected to be one of passive presence as opposed to one of active participation, all three chapters will examine how these protagonists use their position of governess to put their 'hostility [into] action' against patriarchy. The first chapter will discuss the emergence of the new figure in the villainous governess by discussing Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* and Collins *Armadale*. By committing both moral and social crimes the actions of these villainous 'heroines' typify the genre, and embody Victorian anxieties regarding female non-conformity; paradoxically their governessing experiences reflect those of the historical governess. The second chapter will discuss Alcott's Jean Muir, and how Alcott employs the theme of masquerade to offer an implicit critique of class boundaries and snobbery which demonised the middle-class working woman. The final chapter will progress to the conclusion with an examination of one of the most famous fallen women of the genre - Lady Isabel Vane (*East Lynne*). This chapter examines how her role of governess differs from that of her more ungovernable counterparts, and considers whether Wood uses the transgressive female to uphold or to question morality. Although the sensationalists were not feminist writers, their work reflects an age when the Woman Question had begun to raise awareness to the artificiality of the Cult of True Womanhood, therefore the extent to which these protagonists can be read as examples of proto-feminists will also be considered.

¹⁰ Shirley Foster, *Victorian Women's Fiction: Marriage, Freedom and the Individual* (Kent: Croom Helm, 1985).

Chapter One: The Victorian Villain Goes A-Governessing

‘O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!’¹

The machinations of countless literary villains are often strangely fascinating and alluring. Indeed, throughout literature, the image of the villain often proves to be the far more interesting character than the text’s hero, or the victim of their villainy. Until the 1860s, the villain had been traditionally associated with the man. This is because the good and evil issue was related to the human condition and this was seen as inherently masculine. The advent of the sensation novel during the 1860s however heralded a new generation of villains, a generation that sent both shockwaves and thrills through the literary world and its readership.

Initially, in what is considered the inaugurating novel of the sensation genre, *The Woman in White* (1860), villainy continues to be a masculine province as seen in previous literary genres, with the characterisation of the enigmatic Count Fosco, who with his ‘rod of iron’ is arguably one of the most infamous villains of the genre.² However, although the rakes, rogues and robbers of previous genres still appear in sensation fiction, the sensation novel ostensibly equates the villain not with the working-class male as epitomised by Dickens, the Newgate Novel, Penny Dreadfuls³ or the Gothic aristocrat, but with a new archetype of villainy – the villainess.

The advent of the villainess reflects cultural anxieties regarding the changing mores of the woman’s role and position in society. As Pykett observes:

In the 1860s woman, womanhood and womanliness all became contested terms, as did the institutions of marriage and the family around which these terms were constructed. The period of the sensation novel’s dominance was the decade which immediately followed the agitation leading up to the Divorce Act of 1857, the press campaign on the ‘social evil’ of prostitution, and the ‘surplus women’ controversy and its associated campaigns for educational and employment opportunities for women.⁴

¹ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. by Harold Jenkins (1603; London: Arden Shakespeare, 1997), I. v. 106.

² Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*, ed. by John Sutherland (Oxford: OUP, 1996; repr. 1999). In *The Woman in White* Fosco controls the three female protagonists with a mixture of flattery and charm. However, there is a far more sinister side to the Count, one which includes controlling women by violence and drugs.

³ Newgate Novel- a term applied to certain popular English novels of the 1830s that are based on legends of 18th century highwaymen and other notorious criminals as recorded in the *Newgate Calendar* (c. 1773); Penny Dreadful- cheaply produced literature containing bloodthirsty narratives of crime, sometimes merely plagiarisms from Gothic novels, mass produced for the lower-classes. Definitions from Chris Baldick, ed., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: OUP, 2001), pp. 231, 251.

⁴ Lyn Pykett, *The Sensation Novel from the Woman in White to The Moonstone* (Plymouth: Northcote, 1994), p. 44.

This meant that women were seen as a source of political agitation and were acting in a manner contradictory to the prevailing ideology of the feminine role.

During the nineteenth century Ellis's conduct books, Patmore's poem *The Angel in the House* (1854), and the works of Ruskin were among the many publications that fostered an image of an idealised middle-class domestic life. These narratives were fundamental in the construction of the powerful image of the Victorian female as the metaphoric domestic Angel.⁵ As the Angel, women were expected to be obedient, submissive, chaste, and dutiful. Protected from the temptation and danger of the public sphere by male guardianship, the Angel was enshrined in an aura of purity within the domestic sphere where she selflessly devoted herself to the physical, emotional and moral well-being of the family. As Mavor observes:

In the age of religious doubt, we find that the bride of the bourgeois Victorian male, the angel in the house, replaces Mary as a source of worship. This new secular yet angelic bride, crowned the bourgeois home and family as the new temple of purity. It is she who maintained sacredness within an age of modernist doubt. But as a result of the heightened fear of sexual difference that had exploded in the Victorian era, she too, like the Virgin Mary, had to maintain her "motherhood" as sexually indifferent. This angel in the house, like so many women of her time, found that her wings were merely decorative – rendering her powerless.⁶

The re-gendering of villainy meant that 'The heroine is, according to the *Westminster Review*, "no longer the Angel, but the Devil in the House."⁷ Gone is the eighteenth-century portrayal of the innately virtuous heroine, such as Richardson's Pamela or Clarissa, who emphasise the incorruptibility of the heroine as she battles to protect her purity and reputation. Gone is the early nineteenth-century's depiction of the reformed coquette who ultimately conforms as epitomised by Austen's Emma Woodhouse. Gone too is the Christian humility and dauntless endurance of the governess that Lecaros notes is seen in religious and

⁵During the 1800s Sarah Stickney Ellis wrote several books on the correct etiquette and conduct for the ideal feminine, such as *The Wives of England Their Relative Duties, Domestic Influence, and Social Obligations* (1843), *Women of England* (1844) and *The Daughters of England Their Society, Character, and Responsibilities* (1845) see Kathryn Hughes, *The Victorian Governess* (London: Hambledon, 2001), pp. 12-13, 35, 210n. See Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House* (1854); John Ruskin, 'Of Queen's Gardens', *Sesame and Lilies* (1865), (both repr. in Ellen Wood, *East Lynne*, ed. by Andrew Maunder (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2000), pp. 735-738; pp. 738-9); M. Jeanne Peterson, 'No Angels in the House: The Victorian Myth and the Paget Women' in *The American Historical Review*, 89, 3 (1984), pp. 677-708.

⁶ Carol Mavor, *Pleasures Taken* (London: Tauris, 1996), p.52. See also Peterson, pp. 677-708; Joan Perkin, *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Routledge, 1989; repr. 2002), pp. 233-256.

⁷ *Westminster Review* cited in Elizabeth Langland, *Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 233.

secular governess novels.⁸ In their place stands the adulterous, bigamous, often murderous, Angel turned demon in the guise of the respectable wife, mother or governess.

Although the governess was a familiar figure in Victorian literature, from Thackeray, the Bröntes, Gaskell *et al*, Braddon was far more radical than her predecessors were in her depiction of the female protagonist when she introduced in *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862)⁹ the figure of the villainous woman masquerading as the feminine ideal. Braddon offers in her characterisation of Lady Lucy Audley a unique creation: a creation, who as the demonised Angel became one of the key features of the genre and an incredibly controversial female figure.

One of Braddon's most vehement critics, Oliphant, campaigned against this subversion of the traditional image of the Angel, claiming that 'it is a shame to women so to write; and it is a shame to the women who read and accept as a true representation of themselves and their ways the equivocal talk and fleshly inclinations herein attributed to them.'¹⁰ Nevertheless, the concept that a villainous woman could find her way into the very heart of the bourgeois home undetected enthralled and fascinated every class of reader, and saw Braddon crowned as the 'Queen of the Circulating Library.'¹¹ Thus, the popularity and notoriety of *Lady Audley's Secret* engendered a perverse fascination with Braddon's transgressive female, a fascination that established Lady Lucy Audley as the prototype for the sensation novel's 'heroine.'

Winifred Hughes notes that, 'In the sensation novel of the Lady Audley tradition, the heroine's rightful place is usurped altogether by the villainess, the golden-haired impostor who masquerades as a conventional wife while plotting murder on the side.'¹² This new

⁸ Jane Austen, *Emma*, ed. by Fiona Stafford (1815: London: Penguin, 1996); Samuel Richardson, *Pamela: Or, Virtue Rewarded*, ed. by Margaret Doody (1740; London: Penguin, 1980); *Clarissa, or The History of a Young Lady*, ed. by Angus Ross (1747; London: Penguin, 1985; repr. 2004). For a discussion on the religious and secular governess novel see Cecilia Wadsö Lecaros, *The Victorian Governess Novel*, Lund Studies in English, 100, ed. by Marianne Thormählen and Beatrice Warren (Sweden: Lund University Press, 2001). For further information on the heroine see Jane Spencer, *The Rise of The Woman Novelists From Aphra Behn to Jane Austen* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986; repr. 1987, 1989), pp. 107-212.

⁹ Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, ed. by David Skilton (Oxford: OUP, 1997). All future references from this edition and will be given in parenthesis within the body of this chapter, and hereafter referred to as *LAS*.

¹⁰ Margaret Oliphant cited in Pykett, *The Sensation Novel from the Woman in White to The Moonstone*, p. 41.

¹¹ Guinevere L. Griest, *Mudie Circulating Library and the Victorian Novel* (London: Indiana University Press, 1970), p. 27.

¹² Winifred Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of 1860s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 45.

breed of female protagonists Showalter argues, ‘conveys the threat of new fantasies, new expectations, and even female insurrection’, insurrection, which Kalikoff suggests, was associated with ‘a fear of unrestrained sexuality, especially women’s, a fear of being attacked by members of the family or social circle, and a growing belief in the decay of morality.’¹³

Pykett concurs and argues:

Throughout the 1860s, in increasingly strident tones, the newspaper and periodical press made a spectacle of ‘Woman’, put women or ‘Woman’ on display, and devoted increasing amounts of space to the ‘New Woman’, the ‘fast woman’, [...] the ‘Girl of the Period’[...]Femininity itself was put under the spotlight as an inherently problematic state which involves duplicity, and a potentially uncontrollable feeling.¹⁴

Consequently, the sensation novelists’ portrayal of femininity, in addition to newspaper reports of crimes which ‘were ...grossly inappropriate for the gentler sex,’¹⁵ legitimised the fear that deviant women were not merely the invention of fiction writers but were at close proximity to ‘respectable’ society. As Altick argues ‘fiction [...] however sensationalised, could be regarded as a faithful transcript of contemporary life: there were the newspapers to prove it.’¹⁶

The moral panic engendered by newspapers and sensation fiction has parallels with periodicals of the 1840s and 50s that focused on ‘the plight’ of the governess, and her status incongruence within the bourgeois household.¹⁷ As a woman who cannot be categorised by

¹³ Elaine Showalter cited in *Victorian Sensation Fiction: A Reader’s Guide to Essential Criticism*, ed. by Andrew Radford (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 106. Beth Kalikoff, *Murder and Moral Decay in Victorian Popular Literature* (Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1986), p.2.

¹⁴ Pykett, *The Sensation Novel from the Woman in White to The Moonstone*, pp.44-5.

¹⁵ Kalikoff, p. 59. For example, Madeline Smith poisoned her lover but was acquitted because the jury could not believe an attractive woman could commit such a crime (1857). A sixteen-year-old Constance Kent murdered her half-brother but was also acquitted, as the jury could not believe a middle-class female could commit such an horrendous crime (1860). See Mary S. Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses* (London: Robson Books, 1985), pp. 85-129.

¹⁶ Richard Altick, *Victorian Studies in Scarlet* (London: Norton, 1970), p. 79. In this text Altick discusses the Victorian fascination with sensationalised newspaper reports of murder and criminal cases.

¹⁷ Thomson notes, ‘In 1841, a Governesses’ Benevolent Institution was formed to give annuities and to “afford assistance privately and delicately to ladies in temporary distress.” The Institution was inundated with appeals from destitute governesses--appeals, so heart-breaking and numerous, that the Christian Socialists, under F. D. Maurice, turned their thoughts towards improving the governess’ position by more radical methods, by raising the standard of their education so that they would be in a position to command higher salaries.” Patricia Thomson, *The Victorian Heroine: A Changing Ideal, 1837-1873* (Oxford: OUP, 1956), pp37-56. (p.38). For further information on the governess see: Ruth Brandon, *Other People’s Daughters: The Life and Times of the Governess* (London: Weidenfeld Nicolson, 2008); Kathryn Hughes, *The Victorian Governess* (London: Hambledon, 2001); Lecaros, *The Victorian Governess Novel*; M. Jeanne Peterson, ‘The Victorian Governess: Status Incongruence’, in *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, ed. by Martha Vicinus (London: Indiana University Press, 1973), pp.3-19; Mary Poovey, ‘The Anathematised Race: The Governess and *Jane Eyre*’, in *The Nineteenth-Century Novel*, ed. by Stephen Regan (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 194-212; Dara Rossman Regaignon, ‘Instructive Sufficiency: Re-Reading the Governess Through *Agnes Grey*’, *Victorian*

the usual norms, the governess foreshadows the tensions and anxieties examined in the genre's characterisation of its female protagonists, in that they also embody concerns regarding social respectability, sexual morality and the financial position of middle-class women. These fears and the governess's liminal position meant that she could easily be portrayed as a woman of mystery and intrigue. Hence, the governess became a familiar figure in the sensation novel, a figure far removed from previous governess figures such as the Brontës' wholesome Agnes Grey and Jane Eyre, a figure who 'no longer runs away from the would-be bigamist; [but] is more likely to dabble in a little bigamy of her own.'¹⁸

Kathryn Hughes observes that 'From 1830 to 1865 there appeared in fiction every type of governess imaginable. For the reader, the governess became a daring alter-ego who could wander the world in a manner quite unthinkable for a young woman in more comfortable circumstances.'¹⁹ Therefore, in many novels, the governess's story is a reworking of the hero's experiences. However character traits often used by novelists to enhance and advance the status of the hero, such as ambition, self-assertion and the desire for power and freedom of choice, in a female protagonist these are regarded as antagonistic, unfeminine qualities, qualities which label her an aberration of her sex. Thus, often expected gender norms are re-established and the heroine's dependency on men reaffirmed by marriage. Interestingly, much Victorian literature stereotyped the governess as plain or austere. When Lucy Audley was employed as a governess, however, she is not the 'plain Jane' governess of previous genres, such as Jane Eyre in the *Buildingsroman*, but is a demure siren, whose 'fair face shone like a sunbeam' (*LAS*, p.7), a challenge to the stability of the social order who must be contained at all costs.

Perhaps it is far more difficult for modern readers to realise the implications of the opening descriptions of Braddon's most famous female protagonist, as today's readers might expect that appearances are not necessarily what they seem. For Victorian readers, Lucy is introduced as the typical Victorian heroine, with 'soft blue eyes', 'flaxen curls' that created 'a pale halo round her head,' administering 'joy and brightness' (*LAS*, pp. 6, 9) as she conducts

Literature and Culture, (2001), 85-108. Peterson draws on sociological theory to posit that 'Sociologists call . . . conflict in the assessment of a person's social characteristics "status incongruence."' Peterson argues, these conflicts centred on whether the governess was or was not a lady. She had to be a model of ladyhood for her pupils; she could not be a lady, however, because she worked outside her own family's home and was paid for that work, pp. 11-14.

¹⁸ Winifred Hughes, p. 9. Anne Brönte, *Agnes Grey*, ed. by Robert Inglesfield and Hilda Marsden (Oxford: OUP, 1998); Charlotte Brönte, *Jane Eyre*, ed. by Richard J. Dunn, 3rd edn (London: Norton, 2001).

¹⁹ Kathryn Hughes, p p. xiii, 4.

her philanthropic deeds. Lucy appears to be another example of the infantilised child-woman, the ‘blue-eyed wax-doll’ (*LAS*, p. 264) found throughout Victorian literature, such as Dora in Dickens’s *David Copperfield*, or Collins’s Laura Fairlie.²⁰ Braddon however subverts Victorian ideas of femininity, which dictated that women should be passive, angelic and dependent, and Lavater’s concept of physiognomy as an indication of character throughout her work.²¹ Indeed, appearance proved an essential component for the female protagonist of the sensation novel, representing not only the visual transformation from demon to angel, but as Fahnestock argues as a ‘way of suggesting without proclaiming, of imputing intelligence, caprice, and even sexuality to heroines without indecorous explicitness.’²²

In a discussion on physiognomy and the work of Collins, Cox suggests, ‘Physiognomical descriptions are used to for both the indicating and concealing of character – to suggest to the reader the character of, and, at a times confound expectations of the heroine.’²³ This is particularly true of Braddon’s most famous female protagonist. In Lucy’s description, there is no ‘red hair and a scrofulous complexion’ (*A*, pp. 373-4) which, despite Lydia Gwilt’s beauty in Collins’s *Armadale* (1866)²⁴, serve as a warning against her villainy. Indeed, Lydia displays many of the traits that the criminologist Lombroso claims are inherent in the female criminal, whereas in Lucy’s case there is no indication of her villainous character, which Lavater suggests would ‘preserve him who can see from the dangerous charms of their shameful bosoms.’²⁵

²⁰ Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, introduction by Jeremy Tambling (London: Penguin, 1996); See Collins, *The Woman in White*.

²¹ During the Victorian era ‘John Casper Lavater’s *Essays on Physiognomy* (1772) was hugely popular... and the idea that a person’s character could be read in his/her countenance gripped the public’s imagination,’ Jessica Cox, ‘Reading Faces: Physiognomy and the Depiction of the Heroine, in the Fiction of Wilkie Collins’ in *Wilkie Collins Interdisciplinary Essays*, ed. by Andrew Mangham (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), p.107. For a further discussion on physiognomy, see pp. 107-121. Also, Piya Pal-Lapinski, ‘Chemical Seductions: Exoticism, Toxicology and the Female Poisoner in *Armadale* and *The Legacy of Cain*’ in *Reality’s Dark Light: The Sensational Wilkie Collins*, ed. by Maria K. Bachman & Don Richard Cox (Knoxville: Tennessee University Press, 2003), pp. 94-130; Jeanne Fahnestock, ‘The Heroine of Irregular Features: Physiognomy and the Conventions of Heroine Description’, *Victorian Studies*, 24, (1981), 325-50.

²² Fahnestock, p. 326.

²³ Cox, p. 107.

²⁴ Wilkie Collins, *Armadale*, ed. by Catherine Peters (Oxford: OUP, 1989). All future references from this edition and will be given in parenthesis within the body of this chapter, and hereafter referred to as *A*.

²⁵ In 1895, Cesare Lombroso published his psychological and physiological research findings on female criminality in *The Female Offender*, which claimed, for example, that female criminals are cruel, vengeful, display no maternal instincts, have superior cranial capacities, acute minds, and have the capacity to write extremely well. See Pal-Lapinski, pp.111- 113. Lavater cited in Cox, p. 109.

Conversely, in Braddon's next bigamy novel, the eponymous Aurora Floyd has 'black eyes and blue-black hair,'²⁶ and as Pykett notes, 'Aurora's appearance is a sign that she belongs to the category of the dangerous, improper feminine.'²⁷ Although Braddon uses physiognomy as an indicator of Aurora's transgressive nature, in *Lady Audley's Secret* the dark-haired female, Alicia Audley, is not the stereotypical subversive feminine. By all outward appearances 'there was nothing whatever in her [Lucy's] manner of the shallow artifice employed by a woman who wishes to captivate a rich man' (*LAS*, p. 8). Lucy nevertheless epitomises the adventuress of earlier genres whose aim it is to marry her way out of poverty, and, as Mitchell observes, 'the adventuress marries without love and therefore submits to sex without love. Even though the submission takes place within marriage, the adventuress is often shown to be evil because of her sexual willingness.'²⁸

Lucy's characterisation is reminiscent of Thackeray's governessing adventuress Becky Sharp²⁹ in that they both use governessing to give them the respectability they need in order to launch their ambitions, but Lucy succeeds where Becky fails in that she not only succeeds in her ambition for wealth and status, also 'Everyone loved, admired, and praised her' (*LAS* p.6). Lucy's crimes, however, prove her to be a ruthless villainess who will employ any means necessary to retain her position. As Showalter argues:

The brilliance of *Lady Audley's Secret* is that the would-be murderess is the fragile blond angel of Victorian sentiment. Braddon means to show that the dangerous woman is not the rebel or the intellectual, but the pretty little girl whose indoctrination in the feminine role has taught her deceitfulness almost as a secondary sex characteristic³⁰

Showalter, and arguably Braddon, suggest that deceitfulness is a vital component of the patriarchal construct of femininity. Indeed, as with Lydia Gwilt and subsequent 'heroines' of the genre, Lucy's deft ability to hide and disguise her abject nature means that the villainess 'is at once the heroine and the monstrosity of the novel.'³¹

²⁶ M. E. Braddon, *Aurora Floyd*, ed. by P. D. Edwards (Oxford: OUP, 1999), p.25.

²⁷ Lyn Pykett, *The 'Improper Feminine'; The Women's Sensation Novel and New Women Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992), p.88.

²⁸ Sally Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel: Chastity, Class and Women's Reading 1835-1880* (Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1981), p. 76.

²⁹ William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, ed. by John Sutherland (Oxford: OUP, 1998).

³⁰ Elaine Showalter, 'Desperate Remedies: Sensation Novels of the 1860s', *The Victorian Newsletter*, 49 (1976), 1-5 (p.3).

³¹ W. F. Rae cited in Skilton, 'Introduction' to *Lady Audley's Secret*, p.xviii.

As the novel's 'heroine and monstrosity', for the Victorian reader Lucy's evil lies not solely in her criminal acts of bigamy, arson, murder and her rejection of the maternal role but also in her masquerade of respectable normality. As Oliphant suggests, 'Her [Braddon] odious females are all remarkable for conformity to the respectable type.' Although Lucy appears to be the 'respectable type', and adopts the masquerade of servitude expected of Victorian womanhood, 'Lady Audley's story shows that women are most evil when they conform to social expectations.' As Lucy climbs the social ladder, she repeatedly reinvents her identity in order to conform thereby emphasising the fluidity of female identity. This substantiates Pykett's argument that the novel 'explores and exploits fears that the respectable ideal, or proper feminine, may simply be a form of acting a role among other possible roles.'³²

Whilst the sensation novelists are not overtly feminist, Braddon's novels reveal the limitations and contradictions of the female role within Victorian patriarchy. Hence the figure of the actress is common in the sensation genre, whether the central female protagonist actually works as an actress as does Collins's Magdalen Vanstone in *No Name*, or plays a role in order to achieve their purpose, as in the case of Lucy, Lydia Gwilt, Isabel Vane in *East Lynne*, and Jean Muir in 'Behind a Mask.'³³ Each is 'forced to be a complete actress by the awful necessity of her life' (*LAS*, p.298).

Pedlar argues that 'Braddon uses role-playing to draw attention to the theatricality of domestic life.' This theatricality is apparent in Braddon's own unconventional lifestyle where she played the role of dutiful wife and mother, whilst remaining unmarried and in full employment.³⁴ Arguably, this implies a feminist leaning in her own life which enabled her to empathise with her transgressive 'heroines.' Showalter proposes that by declaring Lucy mad Braddon avoids 'having to execute an attractive heroine with whom she identifies in many

³² Margaret Oliphant cited in Winifred Hughes, p.128. Pamela K. Gilbert, 'M. E. Braddon: Sensational Realism' in *Disease, Desire and the Body in Victorian Women's Popular Novels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 92-112 (p.96). Pykett, *Improper Feminine*, p. 90.

³³ Wilkie Collins, *No Name*, ed. by Virginia Blain (Oxford: OUP, 1986); Ellen Wood, *East Lynne*, ed. by Elisabeth Jay (Oxford: OUP, 2005); Louisa May Alcott, 'Behind a Mask' in *Behind a Mask: The Unknown Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott*, ed. by Madeline Stern (New York: Quill, 1984).

³⁴ Valerie Pedlar, 'Behind the Scenes, Before the Gaze: Mary Braddon's Theatrical World' in *Popular Victorian Women Writers*, ed. by Kay Boardman and Shirley Jones (Manchester: MUP, 2004), pp. 108-207 (191). Prior to a career as a writer Braddon worked as an actress to support herself and her mother, lived and had five illegitimate children with John Maxwell, who could not marry Braddon until the death of his wife who was in an asylum. For an in depth study of Braddon's controversial life and literary career see Jennifer Carnell, *The Literary Lives of M. E. Braddon* (Hastings: The Sensation Press, 2000), Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (London: Virago, 1977), pp. 163-4.

ways and spares the woman reader the guilt of identifying with a cold-blooded killer.’ However Dr Mosgrave’s diagnosis that ‘there is no evidence of madness in anything [Lucy] has done’ (*LAS*, p.377) suggests Braddon adopts a radically feminist stance by implying that Lady Audley’s ‘real secret is that she is sane, and moreover representative,’³⁵ driven mad by circumstance rather than puerperal mania.

Braddon, then, does not fully demonise her villainess by providing some motivation for Lucy’s sins by portraying the social and economic limitations of her life as the daughter of a wastrel, and a destitute, abandoned wife and mother:

I resented it by hating the man who had left me with no protector but a weak, tipsy father, and with a child to support. I had to work hard for my living, and in every hour of labour--and what labour is more wearisome than the dull slavery of a governess?--I recognised a separate wrong done me by George Talboys. His father was rich; his sister was living in luxury and respectability; and I, his wife, and the mother of his son, was a slave allied forever to beggary and obscurity (*LAS*, p.353).

Although Lucy can be seen as a victim of the failure of patriarchal constructs, which thrust numerous middle-class women into the alien world of work, as the actress, bigamist, governess, would-be murderess, and possibly the madwoman, to the Victorian reader Lucy represents ungovernable female sexuality and the threat it poses to the respectable home.

With no redress within the law,³⁶ Lucy has to use her only possession – her sexuality in order to escape from the ‘dull slavery of a governess.’ Lucy utilises the power of feminine allure to ensure that she achieves her aim and is always in control, ‘I can twist him [her husband, Sir Michael] which way I like. I can put black before him, and if I say it is white, he will believe me.’ The invocation of ‘fever’, ‘longing’, ‘restlessness’ in both Sir Michael and his nephew Robert Audley, as they become ‘bewitched by [Lucy’s] beauty and bewildered by her charms’ (*LAS*, pp. 282, 352), resonates of Martineau’s suggestion that male employers and their male relatives are sexually vulnerable to the ‘charms’ of the governess. Brandon concurs and argues that the sexual threat was obvious given that the governess lived in close proximity to the family.³⁷ Poovey, nevertheless, argues that, ‘theoretically, the governess’s

³⁵ Showalter, *Desperate Remedies*, p. 4. Oral communication with Jessica Cox 25th January 2008.

³⁶ Even after 1857, the year in which the Matrimonial Causes Act was passed through parliament, the sexual double standard prevailed. While a man could obtain a divorce on the grounds of adultery, a woman could only obtain one on the grounds of adultery aggravated by incest, bigamy or cruelty. Furthermore, when passing the act through parliament, the House of Lords concluded that rape, desertion, sodomy, penal servitude and transportation were not sufficient reasons for a woman to apply for a divorce. See Mary Lyndon Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage and the Law in Victorian England* (Princeton: PUP, 1989), pp. 22-48.

³⁷ See Harriet Martineau cited in Kathryn Hughes, p. 120; Brandon, pp.10-11.

position neutralised whatever, temptation she, as a young woman herself, might have presented to her male associates; to gentlemen she was a “tabooed woman,” and to male servants she was as unapproachable as any other middle-class lady.’³⁸ Considered together Martineau, Brandon and Poovey’s opposing arguments emphasise the inherent contradictions of the governess’s position.

Showalter however argues that Braddon was ‘less preoccupied with sexuality than with self-assertion and independence from the tedium and injustice of the feminine role in marriage and the family’ as seen in *Aurora Floyd* (1863). Showalter also suggests that ‘Braddon’s novels had so little overt sexuality in them that they were permitted in the Victorian schoolroom when *Ruth* and *The Mill on the Floss* were not.’³⁹ Nevertheless, moralists of the time, such as Rae, compared Lucy to ‘Lady Macbeth who is half unsexed [...] such a portrayal of womankind makes this novel one of the most noxious books of modern times.’⁴⁰ Interestingly, within three months of publication this ‘noxious’ book reached its eighth edition and was made into no less than three stage productions.⁴¹

Throughout her literary career, Oliphant vilifies Braddon for the ‘fleshly inclinations’ of her female protagonists,⁴² however, Lucy’s wickedness is surpassed by the actions of Collins’s Lydia Gwilt. Fraudster, blackmailer, adulteress, thief, laudanum addict, convicted murderess and *femme fatale*, Lydia was regarded by contemporary reviewers as ‘a woman fouler than the refuse on the streets.’ As ‘one of the most hardened female villains whose devices and desires have ever blackened fiction [...] a horrible creature,’ Braddon herself argued that the novel and its ‘heroine’ was ‘too openly and inartistically sensational.’⁴³ Lydia is presented as a composite of the sensationalised crimes that scandalised Victorian Britain with Cox *et al* arguing that she is based on the husband-poisoner Madeline Smith.⁴⁴

³⁸ Poovey, p. 196.

³⁹ Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.161.

⁴⁰ W. F. Rae cited in 186-7

⁴¹ See Carnell, p. 381fn.

⁴² Oliphant claimed that, ‘It is a shame to women so to write; and it is a shame to the women who read and accept as a true representation of themselves and their ways the equivocal talk and fleshly inclinations herein attributed to them.’ Oliphant cited in Pykett, *The Sensation Novel from the Woman in White to The Moonstone*, p. 41.

⁴³ *Spectator*, (1866), pp. 638-40 repr in Page, pp. 149-50; H. F. Chorley, *Athenaeum* (1866), pp. 732-3 repr in Norman Page, *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1974), pp. 146-8. M. E. Braddon cited in Robert Lee Wolff, *Sensational Victorian: The Life and Fiction of Mary Elizabeth Braddon* (New York: Garland, 1979), p. 168.

⁴⁴ See Cox, p. 117.

Furthermore, Lydia's association with 'a house filled with wicked secrets' (*A*, p. 415), the 'quack-doctor' and backstreet abortionist, Dr Downward, and the procuress Mrs Oldershaw, suggest the seedy world of Victorian prostitution. Poovey, Peterson and Kathryn Hughes argue that as a working-woman, the governess was explicitly aligned by her critics with the prostitute. This offers an interesting argument on the position of the governess as both are working-women propelled into the workplace by economic necessity, and both are paid and defined by their labours and, as Hughes and Poovey argue, are essential for the stability of the middle-class home.⁴⁵ However, masculine denial of their culpability for the prostitute's situation overtly associated the prostitute's voracious sexual appetites with ungovernable sexuality rather than poverty, whereas the governess's asexual position is overtly associated with poverty and the failure of masculine responsibility. The governess's repression of her sexuality poses a greater threat to the feminine ideals she was expected to promote, as the sexually ungovernable female cannot be distinguished from the asexual Angel, as the author of *Governess Life* (1849) proposes:

Frightful instances have been discovered in which she, to whom the care of the young has been entrusted, instead of guarding their minds in innocence and purity has become their corrupter – she has been the first to lead and to initiate into sin, to suggest and carry on intrigues, and finally to be the instrument of destroying the peace of families.⁴⁶

The governess of the sensation genre, however, cares little for the education of her charges but considers governessing as a necessary encumbrance that must be endured whilst she executes her plan. In *Armada*, the young Neelie Milroy is Lydia's sexual rival and as such, Lydia does not intend 'to lead and to initiate [her] into sin.' Lydia writes. 'I propose inflaming Mr. Armadale and extinguishing Miss Milroy', quashing her charge's 'sudden disturbance about the bosom [...] and sudden flash of tenderness in her dark grey eyes' (*A*, pp.197, 298) whenever she is in Armadale's company.

'The peace of families' is further threatened by the anxiety that the governess was not intrinsically a gentlewoman but a woman of the lower classes, educated above her station, who uses her pedagogical position to make an advantageous marriage.⁴⁷ Lydia, far more than

⁴⁵ . For further discussion on the association between the governess and prostitutes see Kathryn Hughes, pp. 119-121. Poovey, pp. 197-201. For a discussion on prostitution and *Lady Audley's Secret*, see Susan David Bernstein, *Confessional Subjects: Revelations of Gender and Power in Victorian Literature and Culture* (NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), pp. 73-103.

⁴⁶ Mary Atkinson Maurice, *Governess Life* qtd in Peterson, p. 14.

⁴⁷ See Regaignon, p. 87.

Lucy Audley, belongs to the lower criminal classes, the implication being that she has traits associated with the lower classes; hence Lydia begins her criminal career and sexual transgressions at the age of twelve, and throughout the novel is primarily defined by her depravity.

Lydia's past reveals that she is 'a miserable fallen woman' well-versed in the art of seduction, but as with Lucy and Jean Muir in the next chapter, she uses her 'devilish beauty and devilish cleverness' to conceal her 'wicked secrets' (*A*, pp. 415, 437, 415). Lydia's 'wicked secrets' however are not fuelled by the possible hereditary taint of madness, or the economic circumstances that motivate Lucy: Lydia's actions are reprehensible. Unlike Lucy, Lydia's transgressions are always premeditated, and fuelled by a desire for revenge, as exemplified in her aim to marry Armadale with the sole purpose of murdering him, thus enabling her to inherit his vast fortune.

Therefore, Collins implicit inclusion of prostitution and class ambiguity in his portrayal of the governess engages with anxieties regarding the governess's role as a working-woman, but his depiction of the villainess differs from Braddon's in that he does not extend sympathy to his villainess or offer any mitigating circumstances for her actions. Whereas Braddon skilfully constructs Lucy in order to provoke a certain amount of sympathy in the reader, contemporary critics condemned Collins for sacrificing characterisation for the sake of an overly convoluted narrative, arguing that Collins suggests that 'all women are idiots (a reference to Neelie)..., intriguers and murderesses (Lydia) ... and hags (Mrs Oldershaw).'⁴⁸

Even though Collins does not justify his villainess's transgressions, he does attempt to justify the depravity in the novel by asserting in the preface that the text would be thought immoral given 'the clap-trap morality of the present day' but in fact the novel 'spoke the truth' (*A*, p. 4). Nevertheless, Collins is unequivocal in his protagonist's villainy, by stating that there is 'No creature more innately deceitful and more innately pitiless ever walked this earth' (*A*, p. 39) he presents Lydia to the Victorian reader with no apparent redeeming qualities.

However, Collins lack of sympathy towards Lydia is uncharacteristic and offers an interesting departure for Collins compared with his depiction of female protagonists in many

⁴⁸ See *The Spectator* (1866), and *Saturday Review* (1866) in Page, p. 149.

of his works.⁴⁹ For instance, one of Collins's later 'mission' novels, *The Evil Genius* (1886)⁵⁰, treats the governess with great sympathy. The governess Sydney Westerfield is naive and childlike; thereby emphasising her innocence and initially establishing her as the stereotypical Victorian heroine. Sydney's waif-like existence in the Linley household means that her employer, Herbert Linley, initially adopts a paternal role to the young governess, but, as Martineau warns, Sydney arouses sexual interest in the men she meets during the course of the narrative; hence, Linley falls in love with Sydney and later seduces her. Although, Linley divorces his wife Catherine, and cohabits with Sydney, the sexual double standard prevails as he later rejects Sydney as a fallen woman and remarries his former wife. Nevertheless, as in *No Name*, Collins subverts Victorian morality: the deviant female is saved, goes unpunished and Sydney is rewarded with marriage to Captain Bennydeck, a long-lost friend of her father.

Sydney Westerfield, however, did not incense critics in the same way Lydia Gwilt, or for that matter Lucy Audley, with one reviewer in the *Athenaeum* (1886) suggesting that readers will find it difficult to judge this latest female deviant too harshly.⁵¹ For modern readers, however, the text has an uncomfortable paedophilic undercurrent as throughout the narrative all the paternal figures become obsessed with the infantilised governess. Although the infantilisation of women is a common trope in Victorian literature, Sydney's relationship with the various paternal figures symbolises the sexualised danger of the governess and the threat she poses to the bourgeois home. *The Evil Genius* is relatively unknown today; nevertheless, it is an important novel of the genre not only for its sympathetic portrayal of the mistress and wronged wife, but also for its discussion on divorce, the child-custody laws, and the importance of fatherhood from the position of the child.

Kitty Linley's relationship with her governess also offers an interesting perspective on the governess role, as it develops into a friendship based on equality and mutual respect, a relationship that becomes paramount for her physical and emotional wellbeing. This is a very different relationship to that of Neelie Milroy and Lydia Gwilt, which is based on mutual loathing and sexual jealousy. These relationships highlight the opposing perceptions of the

⁴⁹ Collins often used his work as a form of purpose fiction to put across a social message. For instance, one of the issues critiqued in *The Woman in White* is the lunacy laws; *No Name* offers a fierce argument against illegitimacy laws and against society's prevailing attitudes towards the illegitimate child, particularly the position of the illegitimate daughter. Perhaps one of his most radical novels is *Man and Wife* (1870) in which Collins depicts marital rape in order to campaign against the abuse of women and the injustice of property rights.

⁵⁰ Wilkie Collins, *The Evil Genius*, ed. by Graham Law (Ontario: Broadview Press, 1994).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 354.

governess as faithful retainer destined for spinsterhood or a grateful marriage, or as a sexual predator. It is interesting then that Collins portrays both the seduced Sydney and the seductress Lydia as sexual beings capable of destroying the sanctity of the home. In his own life, Collins had a liberal attitude to monogamy, yet he upholds the sexual double standard and belief that the governess's behaviour must be regulated in order to safeguard the family and society.⁵²

Conversely, throughout his fiction Collins seems to be campaigning against prevailing attitudes towards the fallen woman, this is exemplified in *The Fallen Leaves* (1879), where the hero, Goldenheart, rescues a young prostitute, rehabilitates her, and then shocks polite society by marrying her.⁵³ As with *Armadale*, *The Fallen Leaves*'s immorality incensed contemporary critics but it is Lydia Gwilt the ungovernable governess, and not Simple Sally the reformed prostitute, who is renowned for her deviancy; hence, upholding theories that the sexualised Angel is far more abhorrent to society than what was perceived as the voracious sexual appetites of the prostitute.

Robinson notes that, 'Five years or so later, when the hubbub had died down, an article in *Vanity Fair* described *Armadale* as "perhaps his finest work,"' and that T. S. Eliot wrote, 'a specimen of the melodramatic fiction of the epoch, is *Armadale* [...] If Miss Gwilt did not have to bear such a large part of the burden of revealing her own villainy, the construction would be almost perfect.'⁵⁴ Lydia does indeed reveal her own villainy in her diary and at one point there seems to be a brief moment when Lydia is repentant:

I had some innocent moments--and then I loved you dearly. Forget me, my darling, in the love of a better woman than I am. I might, perhaps, have been that better woman myself, if I had not lived a miserable life before you met with me. It matters little now. The one atonement I can make for all the wrong I have done you is the atonement of my death. It is not hard for me to die, now I know you will live. Even my wickedness has one merit--it has not prospered. I have never been a happy woman (A, p. 806).

⁵² It might be argued that Collins implies that the male libido is compromised and renders monogamy an impossibility when faced with the threat of the sexualised woman. Perhaps this is an unsurprising position from a man who maintained two families concurrently. See Kenneth Robinson, *Wilkie Collins: A Biography* (London: Macmillan, 1952). Pykett also argues that 'Collins repeatedly examines the social construction of femininity and masculinity and dramatised cultural anxieties regarding gender roles. Nevertheless, his fiction often worked with and within the very assumptions about gender difference-particularly femininity- which they purported to explore and question.' Lyn Pykett, *Authors in Context: Wilkie Collins* (Oxford: OUP, 2005), pp. 123-4.

⁵³ Wilkie Collins, *Man and Wife*, ed. by Norman Page (Oxford: OUP, 1998; repr 2008); *The Fallen Leaves* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1994).

⁵⁴ Robinson, p. 195.

Collins portrays a woman who is well aware of her sins, and despite her villainy is capable of love. Indeed, John argues that, 'Lydia Gwilt underestimates her own capacity for humane and generous feeling, finally making the ultimate self-sacrifice by laying down her own life. Her suicide is not simply prompted by love; however, it is also the result of intense misery and self-loathing.'⁵⁵ John does make a valid point in that Lydia saves the life of the man she loves but despite Lydia's emotional outbursts and seeming self-loathing and repentance, she is always in control of her actions. Lydia consciously chooses death, thus, her death can be seen as the ultimate self-sacrifice but Lydia is well aware that she will not evade the hangman's noose this time. Her suicide then is the ultimate form of control and defiance as she evades punishment for her scandalous deeds, and dies as she lived – in sin.

Interestingly, if one discounts Lydia's depravity, her narrative offers an interesting paradox in that some of Lydia's 'legitimate' experiences reflect those of the historical governess as discussed in critical studies such as Kathryn Hughes's, *The Victorian Governess*. For example, Lydia's pupil Neelie's 'education stands woefully in want of a finishing touch' (*A*, p.196), 'finishing touches' such as an ability to speak French, play the piano, and a proficiency in needlework, the ornamental accomplishments considered necessary to attract a suitable husband.⁵⁶ Lydia's position reflects the inherent anomalies of the governess's role as if she teaches the skills to attract then the implication is the governess is, as Martineau suggests, a possible threat to male members of the household as she can use her talents to capture a man herself. Ironically, Lydia's role of governess is to teach her respectable pupil to do the same thing. She is therefore scapegoated as an anomaly to enable her detractors to avoid their culpability in sexualising the Angel.

From the outset, Lydia is treated with suspicion and mistrust, a 'red-haired hussy' (*A*, p. 373) who has designs on the master of the house. Granted this is warranted given her hidden agenda, but as the governess, Lydia's behaviour is exemplary. However, it is in her role as a sexual predator, who is 'perfectly modest in her manner, possessed to perfection of the graceful restraints and refinements of a lady' (*A*, p. 462) in which she excels.

⁵⁵ Juliet John, *Dickens's Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture* (Oxford: OUP, 2001), p. 207.

⁵⁶ See Kathryn Hughes, pp. 17-18; Brandon, pp. 1-24; Peterson, p.5. In addition in 1865, John Ruskin agreed that women should be educated but 'only so far as may enable her to sympathise in her husband's pleasures, and in those of his best friends.' Ruskin cited in Merryn Williams, *Women in the English Novel 1800-1900* (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 17.

Dallas and Sergeant consider the villainess in sensation fiction as a reaction to the ‘inane and impossible goodness’ of passive, angelic, or insipid heroines of previous literary genres.⁵⁷ However, these heroines are still evident in the sensation novel, usually in the character of the innocent woman whom the male protagonist marries at the end of the novel. For example, Clara Talboys in *Lady Audley’s Secret* marries Robert Audley; Neelie Milroy accomplishes Lydia Gwilt’s ambition and becomes Mrs Allan Armadale. Nevertheless, the reader often admires the deviant woman’s sense of purpose or victimised status, and their sympathies are drawn not to the traditional heroine, but to the villainous female who has subverted traditional notions of Victorian femininity throughout the novel in order to fulfil her sinful desires.

Although these villainous and ungovernable women often fulfil the role of hero in the narrative, the morality of the time dictated that deviant females had to be punished for their transgressions. Hence, madness, incarceration or death became common forms of punishment in the novels. Ironically, these punishments are analogous to the fate of many retired or redundant governesses. Just as Lucy Audley ends her days in the *Maison de Sante*, a psychiatric institute for gentlewomen, so Kathryn Hughes observes that the 1861 census records 136 governesses in asylums.⁵⁸ Whilst Lucy Audley and Lydia Gwilt are haunted by the spectre of their past, so the threat of the workhouse and the fear of destitution caused undue mental distress on the unemployed governess. Victorian columnist, Lady Eastlake, suggests that, ‘the lunatic asylums of this country are supplied with a larger proportion of their inmates from the ranks of young governesses than from any other class of life.’⁵⁹ Lydia Gwilt takes refuge in cheap boarding houses, correspondingly, many governesses applied for residency in similar lodgings or in an institute for distressed gentlewomen, as superintended by Florence Nightingale in 1853.⁶⁰

Despite working in the male sphere of work, economics continues to marginalise the governess and indeed the Victorian female. This is poignantly represented in a brief episode in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, when the minor character, Miss Morley’s experiences are juxtaposed

⁵⁷ Adeline Sergeant cited in Sally Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel: Chastity, Class and Women’s Reading 1835-1880* (Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1981), p. 74; See also E. S. Dallas cited in David Skilton, ed., ‘Introduction’ to *Lady Audley’s Secret*, p. xvii.

⁵⁸ Kathryn Hughes, pp. 164.

⁵⁹ Lady Eastlake cited in Kathryn Hughes, p. 163.

⁶⁰ Kathryn Hughes, pp. 161-176; Asylums and the Institute for the Care of Sick Gentlewomen in Distressed Circumstances offered ‘cheap lodgings’ for impoverished governesses. See Brandon, pp. 227-231.

with those of George Talboys. Miss Morley has worked as a governess for fifteen years in Australia for a pittance to enable her to marry, whilst George, who has abandoned his wife and child, makes a fortune in the goldfields. Miss Morley's experiences are identifiable with those of hundreds of surplus Victorian females who found work in the colonies in a desperate attempt to support themselves financially.⁶¹

In conclusion, the governess's liminal position enables sensation novelists, such as Braddon and Collins, to subvert the image of the proper Victorian female by portraying the domestic ideal as an abhorrent inversion of the idealised feminine. Lucy Audley typifies the sensation villainess, but she also emerges as the most feminist of the sensation protagonists, representing the oppression of women in the nineteenth century by subverting Victorian notions of femininity, sexuality and madness. Lydia Gwilt may be an extreme version of the villainess, but as a representation of a beautiful and educated woman who is prepared to use her sexuality as a weapon against patriarchy, she embodies everything that the middle-classes feared of the governess. Both Lucy Audley and Lydia Gwilt represent important figures not only in the sensation genre, but also in Victorian literature as a whole, not simply because of their subversion of the traditional image of the heroine, but also, ironically, because of the reaction they provoked as the villainous female masquerading as the epitome of femininity.

⁶¹ See Brandon, pp.17-18; Kathryn Hughes, p. xv; Peterson, p. 6.

Chapter Two: Behind Her Mask

‘And Thus I Clothe My Naked Villainy’¹

With the governess firmly established as an agent of villainy, the figure is no longer on the peripherals of the narrative, but is central to the text’s plot and themes, particularly issues of female identity and masquerade. Indeed, with the angelic wives and daughters of previous genres replaced by the ungovernable female masquerading as the ideal of femininity, the metaphor of the mask and the theme of masquerade became key elements of sensation fiction. For the deviant female, the masquerade of respectability enables infiltration into the bourgeois home and the mask of ideal femininity becomes a strategy to avoid detection. The mask functions to obscure the ungovernable female’s identity and her deviant purpose, but it also acts as a defence mechanism against patriarchal strictures that would demonise her, not only for her sins, but also for her status of working woman.

In many ways, the governess parallels the position of the woman writer as both are driven by economic necessity to subvert Victorian ideals of femininity and to adopt a mask of conformity in order to achieve their ambitions. Just as the governess held an ambiguous position in the household, so the woman writer’s position in the literary world also collapsed the tenuous boundary between the domestic and public spheres. Williams argues that writing and governessing was regarded as a suitable role for Victorian women, however the middle classes saw such work as ignominious, but Williams further argues for women writers ‘literature was one of the few professions which granted equality to women.’²

Nevertheless, women writers were considered to be infringing on male territory and in order for their work to be taken seriously many adopted a male pseudonym. One such writer was Louisa May Alcott. Although Alcott was not normally associated with sensation fiction until the recent investigations of Madeleine Stern and Leona Rostenberg³, Alcott like so many sensation ‘heroines’ also wore a mask of female conformity but her motives were very different to those of the deviant female or the masquerading governess.

¹ William Shakespeare, *King Richard III*, ed. by Janis Lull (1597; Cambridge: CUP, 1999), I. iii. 336.

² Merryn Williams, *Women in the English Novel 1800-1900* (London: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 9, 13-14. For an in depth discussion on women writers throughout the Victorian age see Palmer, Beth, *Women’s Authorship and Editorship in Victorian Culture: Sensational Strategies* (Oxford: OUP, 2011).

³ Madeleine B. Stern, *Louisa May Alcott* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1950). Over the past fifty years, Stern and Rostenberg have discovered Alcott’s pseudonymously published sensation fiction. Oral communication with Jessica Cox 22nd February 2008.

In 1868 Alcott's novel, *Little Women*⁴ marked the beginning of the heart-warming saga of the March family's trials and tribulations as they search for happiness and fulfilment. Having captured the imagination and hearts of the American public, the novel presents a positive image of a matriarchal household and the unbreakable bonds of sisterhood whilst advocating Christian morality, the sanctity of marriage and the embracing of the domestic feminine ideal.

Little Women however has a subversive feminist message, one that encourages women towards autonomy and independence but in a socially acceptable way. Marmee and her daughters become a vehicle for Alcott's examination of the constraints of gender and social expectations, and the conflict between familial duty and the quest for female independence. Indeed, since the discovery of Alcott's sensation fiction in the 1970s, critics such as Stern, Smith, and Joyce Warren have commented on the feminist aspects of Alcott's work claiming that her sensation stories, and particularly 'Behind a Mask' (1866)⁵, are undeniably feminist, representing an important triumph over patriarchal authority for the oppressed Victorian female.⁶

Nonetheless, Alcott adheres to convention and by the end of the *Little Women* the sisters all conform to social and literary expectations. For instance, Beth is portrayed as a self-sacrificing, fragile example of femininity who dies in an idealised way befitting her quasi-angelic status,⁷ both Meg and Amy become dutiful wives, and the fiery, rebellious Jo ends the saga no longer as the independent woman writer of sensation stories but as the domesticated mother figure and writer of children's moral homilies.

Stern, Smith, and Warren all note that Jo's characterisation reveals that there is an autobiographical element to the novel. Certainly, Jo shares many similarities with Alcott,

⁴ Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*, ed. by Valerie Alderson (Oxford: OUP, 1994).

⁵ A. M. Barnard [Louisa May Alcott], 'Behind a Mask; Or a Woman's Power' in *Behind a Mask: The Unknown Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott* ed. by Madeline Stern (New York: Quill, 1984), pp. 1-152. All future references from this edition and will be given in parenthesis within the body of this chapter, and hereafter referred to by BaM.

⁶ See Madeline Stern, 'Introduction' to *Behind a Mask: The Unknown Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott* (New York: Quill, 1986), pp.vii-xxxiii; Gail K. Smith, 'Who Was That Masked Woman? Gender and Form in Louisa May Alcott's Confidence Fiction' in *American Women Short Story Writers: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Julie Brown (New York: Garland, 2000), pp. 45-59; Joyce W. Warren, 'Fracturing Gender: Women's Economic Independence' in *Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Karen L. Kilcup (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 146-163.

⁷ For a discussion on the iconography of female death in Victorian literature see Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd edn (New Haven and London: YUP, 2000), pp.3-44.

most notably her passion for writing and the publication of sensation stories in weekly periodicals to support her family financially, as did Alcott before she found fame with *Little Women*. Although Jo and Alcott both become ‘The Children’s Friend’, Alcott does not eventually embrace matrimony and motherhood as it was her belief that marriage cost women their ‘loss of liberty, happiness and self-respect.’⁸ As with Braddon, Collins, and Wood, Alcott’s sensation fiction implicitly questions the institution of marriage and suggests a woman’s subservient position within patriarchy could be improved through a life of masquerade as the archetypal Angel. This questions and contradicts the Christian morality of *Little Women* but as Alcott’s sensation fiction was serialised either pseudonymously or anonymously, the mask of anonymity gives her some form of feminist freedom to express her views whilst protecting the integrity of her domestic fiction.

Interestingly, although Alcott’s sensation fiction thematically encompasses traditional tropes, for example false identities, misdirected letters, train crashes, falsified documents etc., and there are obvious parallels between her sensation fiction and that of her British counterparts, (for instance the bigamy plot and deviant women), her work is considered far more overtly feminist and radical than that of Collins, Braddon or Wood. As discussed earlier, the deviant females of these novelists who defy masculine authority must be punished in order to have their work published and, of course, to appease Victorian morality; Alcott’s story however suggest that the ungovernable female can be victorious in her manipulative schemes and machinations and can go unpunished. As Warren suggests, ‘the thriller stories which were published anonymously focus almost wholly on the theme of female power.’⁹

In ‘Behind a Mask’ Alcott presents one of the few examples of sensation fiction which substantiates Warren’s comments, and supports Stern and other feminist critics’ views that Alcott’s work is ‘obliquely feminist,’ and that her sensation fiction is in fact an indication of her real self. Alcott’s ‘real self’ was associated with the Woman Suffrage Association, and she was an outspoken supporter of women’s rights, including the right to work and independence,¹⁰ views which are reflected in her literary works. Alcott, however, was astute

⁸ Jo March published her ‘necessity stories’ in *The Volcano* and *The Blarneystone Banner*, whilst Alcott serialised many of her sensation stories in *The Flag of Our Union*, XXI: 41, 42, 43, 44 (Oct. 13, 20, 27, Nov. 3, 1866). See Stern, p. xxxi, n. 26. Louisa May Alcott, ‘Happy Women’, *New York Ledger*, XXIV:7, April 1868 quoted in Warren, p. 157.

⁹ Warren, p. 156.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xxviii. See Smith, pp. 45-59; Warren, pp. 156-8. Also, Ann Douglas, ‘Mysteries of Louisa May Alcott’ in *Critical Essays on Louisa May Alcott*, ed. by Madeline B. Stern (Boston: Hall, 1984), pp. 231-40;

enough to realise that despite her feminist beliefs she must wear the mask of conformity herself in order to be accepted as a respectable writer:

I think my natural ambition is for the lurid style. I indulge in gorgeous fancies and wish that I dared inscribe them upon my pages . . . How should I dare interfere with the proper greyness of old Concord? ... what would my good father think of me if I set folks to doing the things that I have a longing to see my people do? No, my dear, I shall always be a wretched victim to the respectable traditions of Concord.¹¹

Thus, wearing the mask of anonymity, in ‘Behind a Mask’ Alcott presents a complex female protagonist, one who ‘had been lovely once, happy, innocent, and tender’ (BaM, p.11), but as ‘the divorced wife of a disreputable actor’ she ‘[broods] over some wrong, or loss, or disappointment which had darkened all her life’ (BaM, pp.101, 12). Rage and bitterness empowers Jean to dare to wear, and to remove the mask of femininity in order to exact revenge on those who have scorned, rejected and exploited her. Jean masquerades as a girl of nineteen, the idealised ‘little woman’ (BaM, pp. 11, 19, 39) in order to gain employment and a wealthy, titled husband – and above all else, revenge on a society whose class distinctions and inherent prejudices have pauperised her yet does not pity poverty.

As the governess, Jean wears a mask of humility, servitude, and ‘meek obedience’, a mask that she removes every night. Behind the cosmetic façade of pink rouge, ‘abundant braids... [and] pearly teeth’ (BaM, pp.7, 12) is the figure of the actress, someone whose profession is regarded as one tenuous step away from prostitution by ‘respectable’ society and literature of the time. Jean is a social outcast by birth, gender, class, and profession but as an actress Jean is well-versed in the art of masquerade; thus, she follows in the footsteps of Lucy Graham, and Lydia Gwilt, successfully infiltrating the patriarchal home by simultaneously playing the role of puritanical governess and sexual temptress.

Indeed, McDermott analyses ‘Behind a Mask’ as having many allusions to *Jane Eyre* and argues that Alcott’s text is a retelling of the ‘Beauty and the Beast’ fable in which Jean

Judith Fetterley, ‘Impersonating *Little Women*: The Radicalism of Alcott’s *Behind a Mask*’, *Women’s Studies*, 32 (1983), 1-14. Elizabeth Lennox Keyser, “‘The Second Sex’: Behind a Mask; Or a Woman’s Power’ in *Whispers in the Dark: The Fiction of Louisa May Alcott* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995), pp.46-58. Charles Strickland, *Victorian Domesticity: Families in the Life and Art of Louisa May Alcott* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1985), p.77. Alcott was the first woman to vote in Concord, Massachusetts 1879 election. See Smith, p. 47. For an in depth biography of Alcott’s life see Madeleine B. Stern, *Louisa May Alcott* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1950).

¹¹ Alcott in conversation with LaSalle Corbell Picket (1911) qtd in ‘Introduction’, *Little Women*, ed. by Valerie Anderson, pp. xviii-xix.

plays the dual role of both Beauty and Beast.¹² From behind the mask, Jean's personality oscillates from the symbolic beast in the form of a 'Scotch witch' weaving an 'indescribable spell of womanhood' (BaM, pp.28, 53) to the Jane Eyre archetype, the symbolic Beauty of McDermott's argument, who is an impoverished, orphaned gentlewoman forced by economic necessity to invert her class and gender role by working as a governess. Stern, Fetterley and Keyser have also noted that 'Behind a Mask' addresses many of the issues raised in Brontë's text, primarily that of a woman's social position. Doyle concurs and adds, 'Jean Muir echoes Jane Eyre's physiology and habit in order to ingratiate herself to her employers until she eventually wins the heart of Sir John Coventry ... the master of the manor, securing herself a fortune and the title Lady Coventry.'¹³

Jean does indeed ingratiate herself with the Coventry family, but as with Alcott's semi-autobiographical novel *Work: A Story of Experience* (1873)¹⁴, the figure of the governess is used to criticise the Jane Eyre stereotype. Although not a sensation novel, *Work's* governess figure, Christie Devon, makes explicit Alcott's critique of governing, and Brontë's heroine, 'I like Jane but can never forgive her for marrying that man, as I haven't much faith in the saints such sinners make.'¹⁵ In Alcott's fiction, marriage to a repentant Byronic hero is unrealistic, and instead she uses her work to convey a feminist message, one that suggests that the Victorian Cult of True Womanhood¹⁶ forces women to wear the mask of passivity and submissiveness in order to survive in a world where women have limited options. Alcott concludes that in reality women are not saved from poverty by finding long-lost relatives or inheriting a vast amount of money, women have to resort to other methods to survive such as governing, or those employed by Jean and her fellow 'sensation sisters.'

From the outset, the narrative's title makes explicit the significance of the mask metaphor, one is in no doubt that Alcott's protagonist wears a mask of beauty and that

¹² Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. by Richard J. Dunn, 3rd edn (1847; London: Norton, 2001); Christine Butterworth-McDermott, 'Behind a Mask of Beauty: Alcott's Beast in Disguise', *AQT*, 18 (2004), 25-48.

¹³ Christine Doyle cited in Christine Butterworth-McDermott, 'Behind a Mask of Beauty: Alcott's Beast in Disguise', *AQT*, 18 (2004), 25-48 (p. 26).

¹⁴ Louisa May Alcott, *Work: A Story of Experience*, ed. by Joy S. Kasson (London: Penguin, 1994).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.81.

¹⁶ 'Carroll Smith-Rosenberg identifies the formulators of 'The Cult of True Womanhood' as male society of the early mid-nineteenth-century; true womanhood denoted a female role bounded by the kitchen and nursery, overlain with piety and purity, and crowned with subservience.' Carroll Smith-Rosenberg cited in Mary Elliott, 'Outperforming Femininity: Public Conduct and Private Enterprise in Louisa May Alcott's *Behind a Mask*', *AQT*, 8 (1994), 299-310 (p.301). For a discussion on Alcott and the Victorian Cult of True Womanhood see Keyser pp.48-49.

something ‘other’ must lie beneath. The subtitle also alludes to the paradox which underlines the narrative – behind this mask is a woman with power, a ‘beast’ who has vowed, ‘I’ll not fail again if there is power in a woman’s wit and will!’ (BaM, p.11). In a society where power is associated with men, the ‘beast’ is no longer the animalistic Bertha of *Jane Eyre* fame but is hidden under the ‘plain black dress’ (BaM, p.6) and ladylike demeanour of the governess as espoused by conduct books. Although Bertha initially appears ‘tall, dark and majestic’ before ‘her vices sprang up fast and rank’ Jean is arguably a far more dangerous female than the savage, half-crazed Bertha in that she masquerades as the epitome of femininity before and after her exposure. Alcott’s text emphasises that patriarchy cannot identify the ungovernable female from the feminine ideal until the ‘beast’ is laid bare and beauty subsumed by ‘hideous and degrading agonies.’¹⁷

Although the ‘Beauty and the Beast’ analogy offers a thought provoking argument, Gaul argues that Jean uses mesmerism to ensnare the Coventry men, and that Gerald’s intense reaction to Jean, his loss of inhibition and concentration on her to the exclusion of all others certainly parallels the mesmerised subject.¹⁸ This argument undoubtedly offers a plausible explanation as for Jean’s enchantment of the Coventry family and throughout the narrative there is evidence to support such an argument with the repetition of words such as ‘electrifying’, ‘captivate’, ‘bewitch’, and numerous references to the fire and look in Jean’s eyes. These phrases could conceivably also be coded references to female sexuality, a female power a respectable woman should not possess. As with Lydia Gwilt and Lucy Audley, Jean ‘was blessed with that magic power of fascination by which a woman can charm with a word or intoxicate by a smile’¹⁹ a ‘magic power’ which confounds normative gender roles as all three Coventry men become submissive and compliant to her will.

Indeed, Smith argues that, ‘It is in her [Alcott’s] “blood and thunder tales” that her women cross gender boundaries, acting in traditional masculine ways and forcing men into “feminised” roles of subservience, ignorance passivity and powerlessness.’²⁰ Jean is constantly aware of her power over the Coventry men and that she is subject to the male gaze, and as such she must maintain ‘a charming picture of all that is most womanly and winning’

¹⁷ Brontë, pp.260, 261.

¹⁸ Theresa Strouth Gaul, ‘Trance –Formations: Mesmerism and “A Woman’s Power” in Louisa May Alcott’s *Behind a Mask*, *Women’s Studies*, 32 (2003), 835-851.

¹⁹ Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley’s Secret*, ed. by David Skilton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 6.

²⁰ Smith, p. 50.

(BaM, p.71) to achieve her aim. Whilst Edward, Gerald and Sir John are enraptured by her very presence, they fail to realise that she is acting in what Fetterley claims is ‘the culture’s ultimate monster: a man herself, she has treated men like women.’²¹ Given prevailing attitudes to women at the time, Fetterley does make a valid point, as Jean’s behaviour would have been considered unfeminine by the Victorian readership, and her exploitation of the power dynamic of master/servant, man/woman decidedly masculine.

Elliot nevertheless disagrees with such arguments and claims that it is Jean’s ability to use the mask as ‘a weapon of domestic empowerment’ which enables her to succeed in her goal.²² Although the narrative does imply that masculine traits empower Jean, her power ultimately lies in her ability to employ the mask at will as Elliott suggests. Throughout the narrative Alcott implies that the mask is a crucial element in the female’s masquerade of ‘true’ femininity, and the mask is used to disguise any behaviour that would have been deemed ungovernable in order to appeal to masculine notions of how a proper ‘little woman’ should behave. To Edward she is the enigmatic sexual fantasy, to Gerald the epitome of passive femininity who bolsters his libido by referring to him as her ‘master’, and to Sir John she offers the fulfilment of a rescue fantasy. In a similar manner to numerous sensation villainesses and heroines before her, Jean’s ‘maiden shame and timid love’ un.masks ‘what fools men are’ (BaM, pp.74, 101) and exposes her ‘masculine’ power over them, and the power a female can attain when wearing the mask of ideal femininity. Nevertheless, these protagonists are driven by a very human motive – the serious need for social and economic survival.

Jean does however warn that appearances can be deceptive and that the ungovernable female lies beneath the mask of femininity, ‘I *am* a witch, and one day my disguise will drop away and you will see me as I am, old, ugly, bad and lost. Beware of me in time. I’ve warned you. Now love me at your peril’ (BaM, p.86). However, all members of the Coventry family are charmed by Jean’s words and are intoxicated by her smiles. Alcott suggests that it is not just the male of the species that is susceptible to the ‘modest domestic graces’ (BaM, p.8) of the governess; inherent, preconceived notions of proper feminine behaviour affects all members of the family and society. Ultimately, it is the Coventry family’s own class and assumptions of femininity and desire for the ideal governess blinds them to the role that Jean

²¹ Fetterley, p. 11.

²² See Elliott, p. 301.

is playing in order to be accepted into the household, thereby enabling her to marry her way out of poverty and social exclusion. A further irony is that the revelation of who she really is reinforces assumptions that governesses are ‘such a mischief-making race’ (BaM, p.26) who, if not kept in their ‘place’, can successfully infiltrate the patriarchal home and destabilise class stratifications.

Perhaps far more than *Lady Audley’s Secret*, Alcott subverts the conventions of the sensation genre, and the Victorian fairytale as seen in *Jane Eyre*. Victorian readers are no longer secure in the knowledge that the story will be the usual happy ending of marriage and motherhood, or where patriarchal structures are threatened or infiltrated, justice will be done and the ungovernable female contained. Granted Jean does not harbour the murderous intent of Lydia Gwilt or Lucy Audley, and behind her mask Jean does not appear in any way sinister but is ‘a haggard, worn, moody woman of thirty at least...worn out with weariness and mental pain’ (BaM, p.12). Conversely, a glimpse behind Lucy’s mask reveals ‘the hard and almost wicked look... [of] a beautiful fiend.’²³ Lucy Audley however does not allow her mask to slip; it is her nephew-in-law’s relentless pursuit of her true identity which finally un.masks her as a murdering bigamist. It is in Alcott’s subversive ending, nonetheless, that genre and cultural differences are made explicit. Alcott has to appease her American publishers but does not have to adhere to the rigid strictures of British literature; hence, Jean goes unpunished once unmasked, whereas Lucy Audley is left powerless, her fate in the hands of patriarchal authority. Jean, on the other hand, still embodies the notion of female power in that she has the security of patriarchal protection and a possible future of wealthy widowhood. With this in mind the burning of her letters is Jean’s symbolic rejection and destruction of her past life as she embarks on her new life as Lady Coventry, but this act also symbolises victory, and further empowerment of the deviant woman figure.

Fetterley argues that Alcott’s passion was for the composition of ‘lurid tales’ and that by masquerading as a children’s writer she betrays her feminist beliefs.²⁴ Fetterley writes from a feminist perspective, one which suggests that Alcott’s subversive ending is undermined when Jean promises to be dutiful wife and declares, ‘I solemnly promise to devote my life to his happiness’ (BaM, p.104). Nevertheless, further analyses of the Alcott’s work in general reveals that she felt the injustice of female subordination and the limitations

²³ Braddon, pp. 70-1.

²⁴ Fetterley, pp.1-14.

and constraints of the role that women were demanded to play in a patriarchal society. Alcott may have questioned female conformity but she was astute enough to realise that she must also wear the mask of conformity herself. As a consequence, her fiction implicitly questions female conformity and social position, and explores the possibilities of a radical female voice but finally concludes that empowerment for women comes from conforming to masculine images of femininity. Throughout Alcott's fiction the domestic sphere can be seen as a metaphoric stage, one on which the female is expected to conform and perform to patriarchy's expectations; hence despite Jean's promise of devoted spousal duty she discards the mask and makes it explicit that she is playing the role of 'little woman' with the quip. 'Is not the last scene better than the first?' (BaM, p.104).

Thus, 'Behind a Mask' depicts a governess who is a quasi-feminist figure who will no longer suffer the indignities of her position but Jean's partaking of 'a fiery draught...of some ardent cordial' (BaM, p.12) foreshadows her possible fate. Kathryn Hughes notes that, 'There was a feeling amongst contemporaries that governesses had a tendency towards alcoholism, as well as an addiction to propriety medicines, both conditions which led to a state of melancholia.'²⁵ Jean's possible alcoholism is compounded by the fact that she must forever wear the mask of conformity and become no more than a walking *tableaux vivant*, 'frozen in a masked smiling depression... adrift in a sea of darkness.'²⁶ Regardless of her initial victory over patriarchy, as a melancholic, Victorian wife the new Lady Coventry could face the same fate as Lucy Audley (and many governesses), ending her days in a psychiatric institution for gentlewomen: a victim rather than a victor of patriarchal authority.

In conclusion, Alcott's personal experiences undoubtedly manifest themselves in her writing and the delineation of her female protagonists proves that she had an astute understanding of social and domestic expectations of her gender, and what is expected of

²⁵ Kathryn Hughes, *The Victorian Governess* (London: Hambledon, 2001), p. 164.

²⁶ McDermott draws on the theories of psychiatrist and Jungian analyst David H. Rosen to posit that 'Jean may suffer emotionally as Lady Coventry just as much as she has as Miss Muir. Rosen explains that when a woman lives in 'a false self' which is 'a manifestation of one's parents [and/or] society's wishes' (represented by the Coventrys-rather than her 'true self' she may become "severely depressed ... adrift in a sea of darkness. preoccupied with death and not uncommonly suicide" (223-25). Rosen goes on to suggest this self-destructive behaviour could become extreme. "The ultra feminine woman or lady will ... be frozen in a masked smiling depression (a state of despair) until she comes to know and love her inner masculine"' (225).' David H. Rosen, 'Archetypes of Transformation: Healing the Self/Other Split Through the Creative Imagination' in *The Fantastic Other; An Interface of Perspectives*, ed. by Brett Cooke, George E. Slusser & Jaume Marti-Olivella (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), pp. 221-42 cited in McDermott, p. 45.

women within the public and domestic sphere. Alcott and Jean's economic positions and the choices they are forced to make suggests that feminist beliefs must be laid aside and the mask of femininity must become a strategy for survival in a male dominated world where the 'little woman' is expected to quash any ungovernable behaviour and conform to notions of 'true womanhood.' Thus, one might conclude that Jean's ungovernable behaviour is not used to portray the threat the deviant female poses to patriarchy but to reveal that femininity is in itself a masquerade and the mask of femininity is an essential component of that masquerade.

The very fact that Alcott and Jean are aware of their actions as stratagems for survival undermines those critics who claim that Alcott betrays her feminist beliefs. Alcott uses the governess to suggest that some women may prove to be a reflection of other people's expectations as opposed to revealing their true selves, but by challenging the social and patriarchal structures that confine them demonstrates that femininity is not the one-dimensional construct of patriarchy. 'Behind a Mask' suggests that femininity cannot be dichotomised by beauty/beast, angel/whore analogies, and the very strictures that try to control women means that one never gets an accurate insight into the woman behind the mask.

Chapter Three: The Ungovernable Governess?

‘Thou Villain, Thou Art Full of Piety’¹

The concept of the dutiful wife as no more than a walking *tableaux vivant* is also evident in Ellen [Mrs Henry] Wood’s *East Lynne* (1861).² The novel’s ungovernable female, Lady Isabel Vane is metaphorically frozen in a state of idealised femininity, firstly as the daughter of Lord Mount Severn, then as wife to up-and-coming lawyer, Archibald Carlyle, and finally as a governess to her own children. Isabel, however, does not remain in this ‘frozen’ state: she allows jealousy and matrimonial discontent to sway her emotions, is seduced by Levison, (one of the genre’s most notorious cads), embraces passion, endures social and familial ostracism, is psychologically tormented by remorse, and seeks atonement before she pays the ultimate price for her sins - death.

As in the case of Lucy Audley, Isabel Vane has come to define the ‘heroines’ of the sensation genre. Isabel is portrayed in a similar manner to Lucy in that she is also ‘like an angel...surpassing beauty, beauty that is rarely seen save from the imagination from a painter [...] as good as she is beautiful’ (*EL*, pp.49-50). However, Isabel differs from Lucy, as during the opening chapters of *East Lynne*, her angelic qualities are not artifice on Isabel’s part. Isabel also differs from Lydia Gwilt and Jean Muir, and in fact many of the typical deviant female protagonists that are associated with the genre, as she is not the bigamous, murderess villainess or indeed the accomplished manipulator of the male ego whose subversive agenda depends on the success of their masquerade as the epitome of femininity.

Nevertheless, as in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, *Armada* and ‘Behind a Mask,’³ the theme of masquerade is crucial to Wood’s narrative. Indeed, Isabel’s masquerade of respectable governess caused as much controversy as that of her contemporaries, but Isabel is not motivated by a villainous purpose or for wealth or status but by an overwhelming desire to reconcile herself with her children, her former husband and by extension society. However,

¹ William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*, ed. by Claire McEachern (c.1598; London: Arden Shakespeare, 2006), IV. ii. 71-2.

² Ellen Wood, *East Lynne*, ed. by Andrew Maunder (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2000). All future references from this edition and will be given in parenthesis within the body of this chapter, and hereafter referred to as *EL*.

³ Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley’s Secret*, ed. by David Skilton (Oxford: OUP, 1997); Wilkie Collins, *Armada*, ed. by Catherine Peters (Oxford: OUP, 1989); A. M. Barnard [Louisa May Alcott], ‘Behind a Mask; Or a Woman’s Power’ in *Behind a Mask: The Unknown Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott* ed. by Madeline Stern (New York: Quill, 1984), pp. 1-152.

Walker observes that ‘Showalter includes *East Lynne* amongst her list of subversive novels.’⁴ Showalter makes a valid point, as to consider Isabel’s role of governess as merely an instrument of reconciliation, and the novel as merely didacticism and a diatribe on the perils of adultery is arguably too simplistic as this interpretation ignores the subversive possibility of the text.

The implicit subversiveness of Wood’s novels is evident in one of her later texts, *St. Martin’s Eve* (1866), which is one of the few Victorian novels that includes infanticide in its narrative. Despite sensation novelists drawing on factual events and *cause celebres* (such as the Constance Kent murder trial), *St. Martin’s Eve* features a rare occurrence in sensation fiction - the murder of a middle-class child. Both *St. Martin’s Eve* and *East Lynne* depict differing forms of what Cvetkovich terms ‘maternal melodrama’⁵, but it is not the mentally unhinged and murderous Charlotte Norris that is Wood’s most famous and critically examined female protagonist. Charlotte gleefully watches as her stepson burns to death and therefore represents aberrant femininity in the form of maternal malevolence, but as in previous chapters, it is the subversive angel and governess in disguise that is one of the most renowned female protagonists in sensation fiction.

As with all ungovernable females of the genre, Isabel symbolises the fear that deviant femininity could be living in the respectable home undetected, corrupting the family and particularly womanhood. Although Lucy Audley, Lydia Gwilt and Jean Muir all use their sexuality for mercenary reasons, for the Victorian reader, Isabel’s adultery more overtly raised the uncomfortable question of female sexuality. This supports Mitchell’s argument that, ‘Really interesting women — women worth writing a whole book about — had sexual experience.’⁶ Similar to Lucy Audley, Lydia Gwilt and Jean Muir, Isabel ‘had sexual experience’ and committed acts of deviancy prior to governessing, which must be explored in order to understand Isabel’s motive for going a-governessing and to assess the moral complexity of *East Lynne*.

⁴ Elaine Showalter cited in Gail Walker, ‘The “Sin” of Isabel Vane: *East Lynne* and Victorian Sexuality’, in *Heroines of Popular Culture*, ed. by Pat Browne (Wisconsin: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987), pp. 23-31, (p. 23).

⁵ Ellen Wood, *St. Martin’s Eve* (South Carolina: Nabu Press, 2010); See Ann Cvetkovich, ‘Crying for Power: *East Lynne* and Maternal Melodrama’ in *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992), pp.97-127.

⁶ Sally Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel: Chastity, Class and Women’s Reading 1835-1880* (Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1981), p. 74.

Primarily, the trajectory of Isabel's status from Lady to middle-class wife to outcast to working-woman is dramatised in a hybrid of domestic realism, murder mystery, melodrama and sensationalism as she descends the social ladder rather than ascends it, as does the typical deviant female in sensation fiction. In terms of Victorian values, Isabel's transgressions are as abhorrent as that of the murdering bigamists, Lucy Audley and Lydia Gwilt, not only because she commits a crime against morality, but also because she does not belong to criminal classes and has already been 'rewarded' with marriage and motherhood.

Gender and class attitudes to Isabel's fallen status means that she is ostracised from family and society; therefore her status of respectable governess means that she regains a place in society, albeit one that met with controversy and scorn. Even if Isabel were not a deviant female, her position as governess would not have been met with approval, as Williams argues, 'the middle classes saw women's work as a "misfortune and disgrace."' ⁷ Objection to Isabel's decision to teach is made explicit when Isabel's uncle, the new Lord Mount Severn, exclaims, 'Absurd, Isabel! [...] Earn your living indeed! [...] I am acting as for your father. Do you suppose he would have abandoned you, to starve or to work?' (*EL*, p.361). Isabel's uncle fails to realise that her marriage to Carlyle and her adultery are consequences of the failure of patriarchal protection. Her profligate father leaves her penniless hence her speedy marriage, and Carlyle neglects her in favour of his own self-advancement, holds clandestine meetings with another woman, and fails to protect her from a known cad. Patriarchal provision in the form of a monetary allowance does not provide all the sustenance that she will need now that she is 'Alone for evermore' (*EL*, p. 363): governessing will give her the means to re-enter society, however limited, as a figure of proper femininity.

Elliott suggests that, 'Much of the power of *East Lynne* as a novel lies in its dramatisation of the whole ideal of the Lady [...] Lady Isabel Vane confronts a not uncommon Victorian dilemma: she is caught between the demands of her own nature and the rigid standards imposed upon her sex and class.'⁸ Throughout *East Lynne* Wood emphasises that she 'speak[s] of women in the higher positions of life. [That] Lady Isabel was endowed with sensitively refined delicacy, with an innate, lively consciousness of right and wrong'

⁷ Merryn Williams, *Women in the English Novel 1800-1900* (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 9.

⁸ Jeanne B. Elliott, 'A Lady to the End: The Case of Isabel Vane', *Victorian Studies*, 19 (1976), 329- 344, (pp. 330-1).

(*EL*, p. 335). As the epitome of ‘Ladyhood’, Isabel is regarded as a paradigm of virtuous femininity to the lower-class female who was considered inherently immoral.⁹

The significance of class to sexual attitudes is highlighted with the juxtaposition of Isabel’s transgressions with the working-class Afy Hallijohn, who has also embarked on a sexual relationship with Levison, but she is expected to be sexually aware, and have ‘many admirers’ (*EL*, p 205). Afy however is guilty of sexual promiscuity not adultery, and as a lower-class single woman without children and the obligation of the marriage vows, her ‘crime’ against patriarchy Pykett notes ‘is presented by the narrator as a mixture of folly and wilfulness.’¹⁰ As she is not a ‘true lady’, Afy does not suffer the punitive treatment undergone by Isabel, as her transgressions do not threaten the stability of the bourgeois home. As Elliott notes, ‘The image of the Lady exerted a profound influence in creating the self-image of the Victorian woman... On her rests the responsibility for preserving two Victorian ideals, the Family and Private Property, for she represents both.’¹¹ If Isabel had not eloped with Levison but still embarked on an undetected sexual affair, their child would have been accepted into the Carlyle family, circumventing the progenitorial line. Thus, Isabel’s fall from grace constitutes a threat not only to class distinctions and notions of ‘True femininity [which] depends on the subject’s active suppression of desire,’¹² but also to the family and the status quo.

Given the potential destructiveness of female sexuality, and ‘the Victorian interest in the “social evil” of “deviant” female sexuality was at its height in the 1850s and 1860s,’ for the Victorian reader ‘Murder acquires a certain legitimacy, even wholesomeness, in comparison with the vaguer, weaker, less legally punishable sins of the flesh.’¹³ By committing the socially unacceptable sin of adultery, Victorian morality decreed that as the adulterous mother to an illegitimate child, Isabel is as guilty of her sins against patriarchy as

⁹ Henry Mayhew’s (1812-87) social research into the London poor (published as *London Labour and the London Poor*, 1851) concluded that the working classes had different moral and social scruples to the middle/upper classes. See chapter entitled ‘The Great Social Evil’, in Françoise Basch, *Relative Creatures: Victorian Women in Society and the Novel 1837-67*, trans. by Anthony Rudolf (London: Allen Lane, 1974), pp. 195-209.

¹⁰ Lyn Pykett., *The ‘Improper’ Feminine: The Women’s Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 122.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 331.

¹² Nancy Armstrong, ‘Gender in the Victorian Novel,’ in *The Cambridge Companion to The Victorian Novel*, ed. by Deidre David (Cambridge: CUP, 2001), pp. 97-124 (p. 111).

¹³ Maunder, ‘Introduction’ to *East Lynne*, p. 26; Winifred Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of 1860s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 32.

the bigamist, the murderess and the *femme fatale*. Hence, Isabel joins her villainous counterparts, Lucy Audley and Lydia Gwilt, to become a figure of abject femininity, a figure who must be severely punished in order to protect and to restore the patriarchal structures that she has tried to destroy.

For many feminist critics, such as Cvetkovich, Davies, Elliott, Pykett, and Showalter, Isabel's sins do not warrant the harsh and unrelenting punishment that is meted out to her. Isabel is indeed 'plunged into an abyss of horror, from which there was never more any escape' (*EL*, p. 334) seemingly with, what Davies considers to be, 'a heathen lack of compassion'¹⁴ on Wood's part. Although the unrelenting agony of Isabel's remorse and the alacrity of the retribution she experiences reinforce the novel's overt moralising, much feminist critical opinion also focuses on Wood's sympathetic portrayal of the fallen woman. For Cvetkovich, '*East Lynne* transforms a narrative of female transgression into a lavish story about female suffering, a suffering that seems to exceed any moral or didactic requirement that the heroine be punished for her sins.'¹⁵

Ostensibly, Wood seems to be acting as the Victorian moralist who is unequivocal in her condemnation of her 'heroine's' wickedness, but the narrator's exclamatory narrative intrusions, such as 'Poor Thing! Poor Lady Isabel!' (*EL*, p.335), creates an underlying sympathy for the fallen woman thereby subverting the strictures of Victorian morality that condemned the fallen woman as little more than a prostitute. Showalter argues that Wood clearly 'sympathises with the feelings of the wife who is neither deceived nor mistreated, but sexually frustrated and simply bored to death.'¹⁶ It was such sympathies and the ambiguity between feminine and unfeminine behaviour, which highlighted the danger to morality that the deviant women of the genre posed. As with Braddon, Collins and Alcott, Wood blurs the boundaries between the notions of good and evil in her depiction of the deviant woman, creating an ambiguity that provoked outrage towards Isabel and her plight.

Whereas the *Literary Review*, *The Times* and the *Saturday Review* all express sympathy for Isabel some contemporary reviews reflect a conservative attitude to the novel's continual sympathy for the fallen woman, implying that they found it far more controversial than

¹⁴ Stevie Davies, 'Mrs Henry Wood's *East Lynne*: Introduction' (1984) <<http://www.steviedavies.com/henrywood.html>> [accessed 3rd October 2011] (para.8 of 32).

¹⁵ Cvetkovich, p. 99. For an in depth discussion on Wood's sympathetic portrayal of the fallen woman and motherhood see pp. 97-127.

¹⁶ Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (London: Virago, 1977), p. 172.

Isabel's original sin. For example, an unsigned article in the *Christian Remembrancer* argued, 'None but a thoroughly bad woman would have done what Lady Isabel did.'¹⁷ Oliphant concurs and asserts:

It is [Lady Isabel] alone in whom the reader feels any interest. Her virtuous rival we should like to bundle to the door and be rid of anyhow. The Magdalen herself, who is only moderately interesting while she is good, becomes, as soon as she is a Magdalen, doubly a heroine. It is evident that nohow, except by her wickedness and sufferings, could she have gained so strong a hold on our sympathies. This is dangerous and foolish work, as well as false, to both Art And Nature.¹⁸

The writing of a 'dangerous and foolish work' and the subverting of conventional morality seems incongruent with a writer who throughout her literary career assured her respectability and moral standing by publishing under the name Mrs Henry Wood, rather than adopting a gender ambiguous name or male pseudonym as Alcott, the Bröntes and Eliot did for instance. By defining herself as a respectable married lady, Wood is seen to be producing sensationalism that is more conservative, and her work is not considered by modern critics, such as Phegley and Hart, as controversial or as subversive as other female-authored sensation fiction, for example Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*. Hart notes that:

The unrestrained passion of a Lady Isabel was no match to the threat of a Lady Audley. For it was the woman who killed, and especially the woman who murdered to further her social interests and *not* in response to sexual passion, who most profoundly challenged the order of heterosexual patriarchy.¹⁹

Furthermore, whereas Braddon's controversial lifestyle meant that her work generated more controversy, as in a sense Braddon was living a sensational life as well as portraying it in her fiction, Tromp argues, 'Wood managed to walk a careful line between respectability and sensation.' Edwards concurs and notes that 'reviewers in religious journals seem [...] to have felt that Mrs. Wood was the safest and least unwholesome of the sensationalists.'²⁰

¹⁷ *Literary Gazette* (1861), pp. 370-1; *The Times* (1862), p. 6; *Saturday Review* (1862), pp. 186-7; "Our Female Sensation Novelists", *Christian Remembrancer* (1864), pp. 209-36; (all repr. in Ellen Wood, *East Lynne*, ed., by Andrew Maunder (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2000), pp.705-19), p. 719.

¹⁸ Margaret Oliphant, 'Sensation Novels', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (1862), pp.(repr. in Stephen Regan, ed., *The Nineteenth-Century Novel* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp.39-44), p. 43.

¹⁹ Lynda Hart, *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 30.

²⁰ Jennifer Phlegley cited in Marlene Tromp, 'Mrs Henry Wood, *East Lynne*', in *A Companion to Sensation Fiction*, ed. by Pamela K. Gilbert (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011), pp. 257- 268 (p.261); Tromp, p.258; P. D. Edwards, *Some Mid-Victorian Thrillers: The Sensation Novel, Its Friends and its Foes* (Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1971), p.15.

Wood's 'wholesomeness' is substantiated throughout *East Lynne*, and as Hughes suggests 'the narrator's sympathy [...] is contingent upon the heroine's remorse, upon her total acceptance of the law that she has transgressed.'²¹ In an age when the patriarchal family was regarded by many as the foundation of a civilised society, Isabel's psychological torment reveals that she is aware that she has subverted her proper role of dutiful wife, mother and:²²

The very hour of her departure she woke to what she had done: the guilt, whose aspect had been shunned in the prospective, assumed at once its true, frightful colour, the blackness of darkness; and a lively remorse, a never-dying anguish, took possession of her soul forever (EL, p.334).

Isabel's abandonment of her children is described in animalistic terms, 'a brute animal deaf and dumb clings to its offspring: but *she* abandoned hers' (EL, p.453), thereby reinforcing the image of the bad mother, a key indicator of the villainess in Victorian fiction. Hence, Wood upholds Victorian attitudes to matrimony and moralises that the Victorian wife should follow the dictates of the conduct books that state that a 'good' wife should ignore any marital discontent and 'suffer and be still.'²³

Oh reader, believe me! Lady – wife – mother! Should you ever be tempted to abandon your home, so will you waken! Whatever trials may be the lot of your married life, though they may magnify themselves to your crushed spirit as beyond the endurance of woman to bear, resolve to bear them; fall down upon your knees and pray to be enabled to bear them: pray for patience; pray for strength to resist the demon that would urge you to escape; bear until death, rather than forfeit your fair name and your good conscience; for be assured that the alternative, if you rush on to it, will be found far worse than death! (EL, p. 334).

This passage and the narrator's direct addresses to the reader supports Hughes' argument that Wood intends to convey an 'object lesson' to female readers, one that advocates the importance of matrimony and family values above all else. Indeed, the novel reinforces the 'object lesson' that for Isabel, as the fallen woman, 'From the moment of her elopement with the villain, she has put herself beyond the pale [...] For the adulteress [...] there is only one permissible cure, morally as well as dramatically: an early and contrite death.' Wood upholds literary convention that demanded that the deviant female must be punished, and conventional attitudes towards female sexuality

²¹ Hughes, p. 112.

²² For a further discussion on the Victorian family, Empire and hegemony see Joan Perkin, *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Routledge, 1989; repr. 2002), p.74.

²³ Sarah Ellis advised discounted wives 'her highest duty is to suffer and be still.' See Sarah Ellis, *Daughters of England* (1845), p. 73 cited in *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, ed. by Martha Vicinus (London: Indiana University Press, 1973), pp. x, 207, n.2.

by portraying Isabel's moral and physical 'early and contrite death', thereby reinforcing the message that for the sexually promiscuous woman 'the wages of sin is death.'²⁴

Although Wood can be seen to be upholding morality, Hughes further argues that the narrator's overt moralising is an 'ingenious solution to the problem of Victorian censorship.'²⁵ Davies also notes the contradictions in the novel, 'Mrs Henry Wood's novel makes a classic statement of the Victorian sexual code for women' but in doing so, '*East Lynne* in fact defies the stern code of morality which it claims to preach. By making such a pandemonium about the wickedness of her character, Mrs Henry Wood covers her tracks adroitly.'²⁶

Isabel's 'wickedness' highlights the hypocrisies of the sexual double standard that enables Levison to conduct sexual and adulterous relationships across class boundaries without societal condemnation or the 'cursed stain' on his character. As Pykett argues, 'According to the double standard of sexual morality, such a secret in a man's life may be of little interest'²⁷, as Levison's marriage to a wealthy, 'unsullied' Lady Alice corroborates. It is not until Levison is revealed to be a murderer does he face punishment. The punishment, however, does not fit the crime. Following a ducking in the village-pond, Levison is tried, avoids the death penalty, and is sentenced to penal servitude; hardly just punishment for someone who murdered a lover's father and by implication caused the death of Isabel and their illegitimate child.

The juxtaposition of Isabel and Levison's punishments enhances the novel's moral purpose to warn against female transgression, and to reinforce prevailing attitudes that the errant female must be severely punished in order to restore patriarchal values. Wood seemingly upholds the gendered aspect of Victorian morality, which led moralists such as Oliphant to comment that 'There can be no possible doubt that the wickedness of man is less ruinous, less disastrous to the world in general, than the wickedness of woman. That is the climax of all misfortunes of the race.'²⁸

²⁴ Hughes, p. 112-3.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

²⁶ Stevie Davies, (para. 5, 8); Elaine Showalter, 'Desperate Remedies: Sensation Novels of the 1860s', *Victorian Newsletter*, 49, 1-5.

²⁷ Pykett, p.86.

²⁸ Margaret Oliphant cited in Hughes, p. 135.

Nonetheless, the novel does comment on patriarchal double standards, but ironically, this is vocalised not by an upholder of patriarchal values such as Carlyle, but by Levison's wife, 'How dare these bad men marry! [...] He has done me deep, irremediable wrong, and he has entailed upon his son an inheritance of shame' (*EL*, p. 625). Wood, however, does indeed 'cover her tracks adroitly,' as Lady Levison refers to her husband's act of murder not his sexual misdemeanours, which she considers a 'hindrance' rather than a crime against society and the family. Nevertheless this further emphasises the sexual double standard, as Isabel remains a cautionary figure against female transgression whose 'disgrace is reflected on [her] children, and always will be [...] at, the girl especially' (*EL*, p.463).

Just as Lady Audley claims that, she has inherited the taint of madness from her mother, so the taint of female sexual transgression is also viewed as a form of contagion, particularly for daughters, which must be avoided to ensure the well-being of the future generation.²⁹ Given the surplus number of single women at this time, it is imperative that the young Miss Carlyle is not stigmatised by her mother's transgression and her own reputation remains unsullied. It is ironic then, that as the governess it is Isabel's duty to protect her daughter 'from a like fate' (*EL*, p. 463). For the Victorian reader this adds to the sensational aspect of the text, as the 'proper' education of her female charges was a given norm in the governess's role. The notion that a seemingly respectable woman could corrupt the next generation of domestic angels reinforces the danger of female degeneracy that was seen to be threatening patriarchy.

Wood, however, again 'covers her tracks adroitly' by identifying her ungovernable female with criminal activity. Isabel is described as 'an interloper, a criminal woman who had thrust herself into the house; her act, in doing so, not justifiable, her position a most false one' (*EL*, p. 490). Isabel however does not join Lucy Audley or Lydia Gwilt in their illegal activities in that she has not violated any statutory law, but that by returning to her former home, Isabel's actions are subversive as they threaten to destabilise the morality of the bourgeois home.

²⁹ Lord Chancellor Cranworth's statement to the House of Lords in 1857 reinforces the sexual double standard, 'A wife might, without any loss of caste, and possibly with reference to the interests of her children, or even of her husband, condone an act of adultery on the part of the husband but a husband could not condone a similar act on the part of a wife. No one would venture to suggest that a husband could possibly do so, and for this, among other reasons . . . that the adultery of the wife might be the means of palming spurious offspring upon the husband, while the adultery of the husband could have no such effect with regard to the wife.' Cranworth qtd. in Perkin, p.24.

The subversive possibility of the governess's actions is exemplified in the novel's bigamy theme. Although bigamy is not a major theme of the novel, on discovery that the governess is his former wife, Carlyle fears 'that he must be a man of two wives' (*EL*, p.680). This has led Pykett to argue that Wood attempts to dramatise 'a new moral experience created by the reformed divorce laws: a tension between marriage merely as social legal arrangement, and moral and religious conceptions of marriage.'³⁰ Despite the legalities of divorce, Carlyle still believes in his marriage vow 'til death us do part,' the revelation that the governess is his 'dead' wife results in a moral and religious dilemma for Carlyle, as he perceives himself as a bigamist. Therefore if Isabel had not died her presence would have spread contagion to Carlyle's new family, as his second wife, Barbara, and their child would be in an unstable position within in the family unit.

Isabel's facial and physical disfigurements however emphasises that she is not the figure of the temptress, but as Lecaros suggests Isabel is the embodiment of the governess as seen in *Punch* illustrations, which caricaturised the governess as monstrously ugly and physically deformed.³¹ Isabel's disfigurements are the physical manifestation of her sin; sin that is masked by a thick black veil and justified by naivety and maternal instinct, not as a subversive desire to undermine the stability of the home.

Isabel in the guise of the governess, Madame Vine, 'is a thorough gentlewoman, an efficient linguist and musician, and competent to perform her duties in all ways [...] a treasure' (*EL*, pp.455-6), adores and is adored by the Carlyle children -all the prerequisites for the ideal governess it would appear. In sensation fiction, however, appearance is very seldom reality. Isabel's overwhelming desire to be near her children has no obvious malicious intent but she epitomises the voyeur, and as a symbol of contagion, Isabel's covert surveillance of the Carlyles means that the home is no longer a safe haven from the ungovernable female.

Maunder comments that 'Hughes argues that *East Lynne* exploited the nineteenth-century taste for voyeurism, titillating readers with the spectacle of men and women of

³⁰ Lyn Pykett, *The Sensation Novel from the Woman in White to The Moonstone* (Plymouth: Northcote, 1994), p. 47.

³¹ See Cecilia Wadsö Lecaros, *The Victorian Governess Novel*, Lund Studies in English, 100, ed. by Marianne Thormählen and Beatrice Warren (Sweden: Lund University Press, 2001), p. 214.

refined delicacy thrust by circumstances into extremely delicate situations.’³² Isabel’s maternal instincts place her in the ‘delicate position’ of governess, a position foreshadowed by her father’s profligacy, but unlike numerous middle and upper class young women who were foisted into governessing by their paternal protector’s bankruptcy³³, the governess’s intermediate position suits her purpose as it enables Isabel to survey and participate in a world that was once hers.

Although Isabel’s voyeurism is subversive, as the voyeur, Kaplan argues that ‘[Isabel] is able to look and grieve, but unable to have the gaze of recognition blaze back at her.’³⁴ Isabel’s masquerade ensures she is unrecognised, but Kaplan’s argument also implies that employers see the governess as simply that – the governess, they do not see the ‘real’ person, just a necessary requirement to the efficient running of the bourgeois household. For the governess of the sensation novel, the employer’s failure to recognise the deviant woman is advantageous to their subversive agendas, but for Isabel, the role of governess adds to her unrelenting agony. Langbauer suggests that the Carlyle’s failure to recognise Isabel ‘makes explicit the way a mother is a *servant* in her family [and] the exquisite agony of Isabel’s servility.’³⁵ As the governess, Isabel must bear witness to her usurper’s place in her husband and children’s affection, and on her and Carlyle’s son’s death must appear to be emotionally unattached. This is emphasised in the stage adaption of *East Lynne*, when Isabel laments, ‘Oh never to hear him say “Isabel my wife!” Never again to hear *their* infant tongues murmur the holy name of “mother!”’ (*EL*, p.766). The position of governess enables Isabel to reassure her son on his deathbed that his mother loved him, reassurance that would have been impossible if she was still ostracised from her family. This supports Isabel’s claims that her motives are maternal rather than malevolent.

Foster argues, ‘because so much importance was attached to the roles of wifhood and motherhood, marriage was deemed the apotheosis of womanly fulfilment, alternatives to which were regarded as pitiable or unnatural [...] even the most thorough-going feminists felt

³² Maunder, pp. 13-4.

³³ See Ruth Brandon, *Other People’s Daughters: The Life and Times of the Governess* (London: Weidenfeld Nicolson, 2008), pp.1-24; Kathryn Hughes, *The Victorian Governess* (London: Hambledon, 2001), pp. 11-25.

³⁴ E. Ann Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 83.

³⁵ Laurie Langbauer, ‘Women in White, Men in Feminism’, *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 2 (1989), 219-243 (p. 228).

that wifehood and motherhood were the most important aspect of female experience.³⁶ Therefore, the notions of Victorian womanhood decreed that as the governess Isabel is 'pitiable or unnatural' because she has not fulfilled her designated role. Isabel is doubly damned: as the deviant female she is an abomination of femininity therefore she deserves her suffering.

However, Isabel's role of governess emphasises not only her suffering but also the precarious boundary between the angel and demonised woman, and the governess and the mother. Armstrong argues that, 'Victorian heroines tend to come in pairs, the protagonist within each couple carries on within herself a struggle between the extremes of femininity and femaleness that set her in opposition to her fallen sister or mother.'³⁷ This is certainly true in the case of Barbara and Isabel as both protagonists 'struggle' to maintain their status of domestic angel, and both are portrayed as an inversion of the feminine ideal in some way or another. Isabel is not the demonised angel of Lucy Audley or Lydia Gwilt fame, but by failing to suppress her anger and her attraction for Levison she fails in her duty to 'True Womanhood'; nevertheless, the narrator emphasises the lack of intention on Isabel's part, 'Oh, reader! Never doubt the principles of poor Lady Isabel, her rectitude of mind, her wish and endeavour to do right, her abhorrence of wrong; her spirit was earnest and true, her intentions were pure' (*EL*, pp. 335, 268). Unlike Lucy Audley, Lydia Gwilt and Jean Muir, Isabel is driven by a psychological battle between her conflicting emotions and status of passive and asexual angel, mother and governess.

Lecaros notes that governessing entailed tasks similar to that of the middle-class mother, but as a surrogate mother, the governess supplanted the natural role of the mother.³⁸ Isabel's role emphasises this paradox, and highlights the possible subversiveness of the governess's position. This is an interesting perspective on a novel that foregrounds the importance and value of the middle-class home and marriage, and a woman's place within the domestic sphere. Perkin suggests that 'by the 1850s the middle-class housewife was acknowledged mistress of her own sphere; that sphere was subordinate to that of her

³⁶ Shirley Foster, *Victorian Women's Fiction: Marriage, Freedom and the Individual* (Kent: Croom Helm, 1985), pp. 6, 11.

³⁷ Nancy Armstrong, 'Gender and the Victorian Novel', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. by Deidre David (Cambridge: CUP, 2001), pp.97-124 (p.110).

³⁸ Lecaros, p.193.

husband's, but it had become "her kingdom where she exercises entire control."³⁹ As there is a certain element of vengeance, fuelled by sexual jealousy in Isabel's motive for going a-governessing, she circumvents Barbara's control of the domestic sphere by refusing to acknowledge Barbara as stepmother to her children, declaring that 'nature was asserting her own hidden claims' (*EL*, pp.497, 499). Furthermore, by confiding in Carlyle, rather than his wife, regarding the children's welfare, the governess undermines the new Mrs Carlyle's position in 'her kingdom.' Although Isabel's actions are subversive, the very nature of governessing subverts the Angel mythology that decreed that motherhood was the true vocation for women as observed by Foster, and Peterson *et al.*⁴⁰

Despite the fact that the governess challenges Barbara's role, Barbara remains representative of the Angel mythology. On marriage, 'Barbara had grown more gentle and tender' and there is no longer any evidence of the 'nervous excitement [...] temper, tongue, and imagination [that she would let] fly off at a mad tangent' (*EL*, pp. 280, 212). Gone is the forthright woman who engages Carlyle to save her brother from the gallows, and confesses her love for Carlyle on his marriage to Isabel! Initially Barbara's overwrought passion suggests she is not the ideal of femininity; however when she supplants Isabel in Carlyle's affections, she also become a reincarnation of 'Isabel,' the walking *tableaux vivant* of the passive and dutiful wife. Pykett argues that:

Barbara as the 'successful' heroine, in many respects represents the type of the modern mother. She is presented as suitably adoring, but also as a woman whose maternal feelings are constrained and contained by her sense of what is due to her husband. She has thoroughly modern ideas on children's place in the domestic economy.⁴¹

Wood does indeed portray Barbara as an example of middle-class motherhood. In her exchanges with the governess, Barbara echoes the sentiments of the conduct books in that her husband is her first concern and it is her duty 'to instil in [her children] Christian and moral duties; to strive to teach them how to fulfil life's obligations', and to leave 'the *trouble* of the children' to the governess (*EL*, p. 464-5). The change in Barbara's personality indicates the demands for conformity in Victorian marriage, but her declaration that there is 'a sort of

³⁹ Perkin, p. 248.

⁴⁰ Foster, pp.5-6; M. Jeanne Peterson, 'No Angels in the House: The Victorian Myth and the Paget Women' in *The American Historical Review*, 89, 3 (1984), 677-708 (pp. 677-8).

⁴¹ Pykett, p. 128. See also Sarah Ellis, *The Mother's of England: Their Influence and Responsibility* (London: Fisher, 1843), pp. 252-4 (repr. in Ellen Wood, *East Lynne*, ed., by Andrew Maunder (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2000), pp.730-1).

jealousy' against Isabel's children suggests that the image of the all-loving, self-sacrificing mother is inherently flawed (*EL*, pp. 464-5, 690). Although Barbara's rejection of her stepchildren inverts the notions of the Victorian Angel, she does not join the deviant or villainess females of the genre, as her inversion is only a temporary lapse in duty. In a similar manner to Jean Muir, Barbara promises Carlyle, 'My earnest wish is to please you; to be worthy of your esteem and love' (*EL*, pp.690-1). Her promise to do her duty by God and her husband and to suppress any 'unwomanly' feelings reaffirms her role as custodian of patriarchal values.⁴²

As the novel enters its denouement, the roles of the mother and governess are firmly established: Barbara embodies the patriarchal vision of the domestic Angel enshrined in the bosom of the family, whilst the subversive female, who rejected marriage and motherhood, lies near to death, isolated in her attic room. As Madame Vine, Langbauer argues that:

Isabel's abjection directly preserves the social order; her humble return attests to the rightness of society's constructions of maternity, of the naturalness of maternal sacrifice [...] Isabel returns to her children precisely to resume their training, feeling more than ever through its transgression of its rightness of the social order that punishes her.⁴³

Langbauer's argument implies that far from being subversive, Wood uses the figure of the governess to restore and reaffirm morality; yet the readers' sympathies remain with the errant female. Oliphant acknowledges the immense popularity of *East Lynne* but asserts that, 'Nothing can be more wrong and fatal than to represent the flames of vice as purifying, fiery ordeal, through which the penitent is to come elevated and sublimed.'⁴⁴

The portrayal of the ungovernable female succeeding in infiltrating the bourgeois home and continuing to pose as the ideal feminine was subversive in itself, but as Isabel's suffering reaches epic proportions, she is indeed 'elevated and sublime' in a deathbed scene infused with religious allusions and sexual tension. Isabel dies for her sins and casts off the 'cross' she's had to bear with Carlyle's breath 'nearly mingled with hers' (*EL*, p.683), but she ends the novel not as an abomination of femininity but as a penitent Magdalene figure,

⁴² The parallel roles of Isabel and Barbara are interesting from a governessing perspective as, if Barbara had remained a single woman, on her father's death, governessing may have been her only option. If Barbara had gone a-governessing it is doubtful that Barbara would have the subversive agenda of the sensation governesses, the fact that 'her character had been greatly improved by sorrow' (*EL*, p.280) aligns her more with the Jane Eyre figure of the domestic novel genre.

⁴³ Langbauer, p. 227.

⁴⁴ Margaret Oliphant cited in Maunder, p. 715.

forgiven by the man she has transgressed, a victim of the patriarchal ideology that was meant to protect womanhood. For the moralising reader justice has been done and the subversive threat this governess figure posed eradicated. Or has it?

Isabel admits that she was ‘Wickedly wrong’ but maintains her motives were pure (*EL*, pp.682), revealing that as the governess Isabel has learnt to manipulate the precarious boundary between the asexual angel and passionate women. Her statement that they will be reunited in heaven implements a subversive agenda that leads Carlyle to vow ‘Until eternity’ (*EL*, p.674), thereby enabling the fallen woman to reclaim the man she loves. In a similar manner to Lucy Audley, Lydia Gwilt and Jean Muir, Isabel uses her position of governess and sexuality to exert control over patriarchy. Tromp, however, argues that ‘Wood intimately understands the constraints on women’s behaviour;’⁴⁵ hence she presents a female protagonist who is more mortal than divine, with whom the reader can identify and consider, ‘are you quite sure you would not have done the same, under the facility and the temptation?’ (*EL*, p.657).

In conclusion, this chapter has posited that the ‘wickedness’ of Wood’s character is made explicit by her adultery, but as this discussion has shown this simplifies the moral complexity of the text and Isabel’s role within it. Although Wood does not offer a variation on the fallen woman plot of sin, suffer, die, and *East Lynne* suggests that the maternal role is redemptive and the proper resolution for women, this role proves problematic for the novel’s maternal figures; thus, implying that patriarchy makes untenable demands on wifedom and motherhood. From the outset, Isabel’s role is circumscribed to be daughter, wife, mother; her failure to fulfil these roles serves as a cautionary model against female transgression. Nevertheless, Isabel begins the novel as the infantilised heroine and ends it, not as the ungovernable feminine, but as the Tragic heroine who is arguably ‘more sinned against than sinning.’⁴⁶ This transformation is made possible by Isabel’s unrelenting suffering, her remorse and her role of governess. Wood does not have an overt feminist agenda but the fact that Isabel’s fate can be read as tragic emphasises the injustice of her situation, and therefore the injustice of Victorian women’s economic dependence, their lack of autonomy within marriage, and the sexual double standard.⁴⁷ Therefore, this ‘dangerous and foolish work[’s]’

⁴⁵ Tromp, p. 261.

⁴⁶ William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. by R. A. Foakes (London: Arden, 1997; repr.2001, 2002), III, ii, 57-60.

⁴⁷ In the case of Wood’s heroine, had her husband been conducting an affair with Barbara, it would have been impossible for Isabel to obtain a divorce, as there were no other grounds such as adultery aggravated by incest,

depiction of the fallen woman's suffering and the sympathy it evokes for the ungovernable female, acknowledges and empathises with the reality of women's powerlessness, frustrations and desires within Victorian matrimony, within the governess role and indeed within a patriarchal society. Thus, by undermining the cultural norms of femininity Wood subverts the morality *East Lynne* seemingly advocates.⁴⁸

bigamy or cruelty. Isabel had no other option than eloping with another man and thus providing her husband with adequate reason to obtain a divorce, at the cost of her own dignity, reputation and social position. It was not until the Infants Custody Act (1839) were women allowed custody of children under seven and visitation rights to over sevens. In 1873 women were given custody of children under sixteen but this was not an automatic right. For a discussion on the divorce laws see Mary Lyndon Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage and the Law in Victorian England* (Princeton: PUP, 1989), pp. 22-48.

⁴⁸For a further discussion on *East Lynne* see Stevie Davies; for the fallen woman and social class see Elliott's discussion, pp. 329- 344; Lyn Pykett, *The 'Improper Feminine; The Women's Sensation Novel and New Women Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992), p.117-134 for a discussion on the fallen woman and the theme of female containment, Elaine Showalter, 'Desperate Remedies: Sensation Novels of the 1860s', *Victorian Newsletter*, 49, 1-5.

Conclusion

‘Lady angels go wrong sometimes, you see; they are not universally immaculate.’
(*East Lynne*, p.387)

In Victorian sensation fiction of the 1860s, the heroine is no longer the dutiful, docile, biddable and subservient Angel of the House but is a source of corruption, aberrant to masculinity, femininity, God and society, often masquerading as the governess. In an era when women were beginning to assert their right to education, financial independence and autonomy, acts of bigamy, adultery, murder etc., committed by seemingly respectable women, reinforced the fear that female deviancy was ubiquitous in Victorian society, and that women were becoming too powerful, and their containment paramount for the well-being of patriarchy. Hence, the harsh treatment meted out to Lucy Audley, Lydia Gwilt, Isabel Vane, and their counterparts.

As the governess’s ambiguous position collapses the precarious boundary between the public and domestic spheres, the distinctions of the class system, and subverts the Angel mythology, the genre’s centrality of the governess’s liminal position embodies the fear that female deviancy can indeed infiltrate the bastion of patriarchal values – the bourgeois family. Thus, the governess’s position becomes a site of conflict that does indeed portray ungovernable femininity as a threat to Victorian domesticity and by extension Britain and its Empire in which patriarchy reigns supreme.

Lady Audley’s Secret, *Armada* and *East Lynne* are in many ways representative of the genre as a whole, and given that each is open to a feminist interpretation by the modern reader, including, to a certain extent, the male-authored text, these novels hint at an underlying feminist philosophy. From this perspective, the governess’s liminal position functions to reveal the artificiality of the Cult of True Womanhood and the contradictions and limitations that the Angel mythology imposed on the female role. The genre’s depiction of the physical, emotional and legal subjugation of women within marriage, the biased Divorce Laws, and the effects of sexual transgression upon a woman’s character emphasise the hypocrisies and prejudicial nature of patriarchal strictures and the sexual double standard that categorised women as angel or demon. Furthermore, the inherent contradictions of the Angel role advocated matrimony and motherhood and yet expected childcare to be relinquished to others whilst the Angel remained physically and emotionally fragile. The governess exposes and criticises these limitations and injustices, whilst her transgressions implicitly suggest that

masquerading as the feminine ideal is the only recourse for women who are excluded from patriarchal protection. More radically, as so much moral weight was invested in the Angel, many novels suggest that even women sheltered within the bosom of patriarchy must masquerade as the Victorian stereotype of femininity to meet its tenets; thereby implying that femininity is in itself a masquerade.

Although the sensation writers did not share the same feminist agenda as the New Woman writers of the 1890s, such as Sarah Grand, who were often overtly political in their writing, Braddon, Collins, and Wood are reticent about being overtly feminist in their work. Hence, in the conclusion to the novels, the ungovernable female is punished for her deviancy accordingly, and the domestic sphere becomes a sanctuary for patriarchal values and morality once more. Therefore, the most feminist of the ungovernable governesses appears to be Alcott's Jean Muir who epitomises the disruptive agency of the governess. Nevertheless, the conclusion of 'Behind a Mask' is as ambiguous as the governess's position, suggesting Jean is successful in transgressing the code of Victorian morality and in her agenda to become a respectable married woman, while simultaneously implying that this position in itself represents punishment for her deviancy, as she must never allow her mask of ideal femininity to slip.

Ultimately, the sensation genre does use the figure of the governess to portray the ungovernable side of femininity in order to 'thrill the nerves' of the Victorian reader whilst implicitly questioning the values of a society in which the rights of women were constantly suppressed. For a society in a constant state of social, cultural and economic flux, literary representations of the governess also act as a blatant reminder of financial instability, the fear of spinsterhood, and the economic vulnerability of hundreds of women, who without patriarchal protection were left with limited choices such as marriage or governessing. Perhaps the appeal of the governess in sensation fiction is that she inverts male definitions of femininity by refusing to be categorised by the angel/demon, Madonna/whore dichotomies but is quite willing to exploit such stereotypes for personal gain. Her rebellion against patriarchy suggests that she is in many ways a proto-feminist figure, but it also reveals that she is a woman first, governess second: A full-bodied 'heroine' who refuses to be 'confined in the doll's house of bourgeois femininity.'¹

¹ Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady; Women, Madness and the English Culture, 1830-1980* (New York: Virago, 2001), p.5. Oracle communication with Jessica Cox, January 11th – March 14th 2008.

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