

Best-Seller or “Entire Mistake”? :
The Effect of Form on the Receptions of Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of*
Wildfell Hall and Mrs. Henry Wood’s *East Lynne*

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Introduction

If an English major were asked to name the best-selling novel of the nineteenth-century, chances are she would answer with a title by Dickens, Eliot, Thackeray, or even Trollope. Surprisingly, however, the answer to the question is *East Lynne* by Mrs. Henry Wood, a book which had sold half a million copies by 1900 (Maunder “Introduction” 9), and which is not widely known today. It is, however, making a comeback in popularity, as evidenced in part by a heightened interest in sensation fiction generally and in part by the many editions of the book that have recently been printed.¹ Nonetheless, the attention it received when it came out, the impressive number of dramatizations of the story, and the sheer number of copies sold suggest that this novel should be paramount to every study of nineteenth century literature, when in fact, it has not survived in the canon.

Thirteen years prior to *East Lynne*’s first publication in 1861, however, another novel composed of themes and elements strikingly similar to those of *East Lynne* made a small splash on the literary scene. While it was never destined to come close to the popularity of *East Lynne*, the first edition sold out quickly, and within two months, a second edition was being printed (Alexander and Smith 496). However, compared to *East Lynne*, the novel remained relatively obscure, and while it is not commonly read today, it has seemingly fared better than *East Lynne*, for many will at least recognize the title and assuredly know the author’s name: *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* by Anne Brontë.

East Lynne and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* share enough similarities that reason would dictate they ought to have been treated similarly, if not characterized as belonging to the same

¹ Recent editions include Broadview Press (2000), University of North Carolina’s electronic edition (2001), Oxford University Press (2005), Echo Library (2006), and a stage adaptation by Lisa Evans (2005)

class of literature altogether. However, as we see in the reception of the two books, they were viewed in different ways when they were first released, and are still treated in different ways today. How, then, can this difference be explained? The answer is not a simple one; factors as disparate and complicated as publishing practices, sex (both gender and sexuality), genre, motherhood, and point of view all impact and shape the fate of these two books. Yet before we continue exploring these novels, it is important to first understand the moment in which they were originally published and the basic plot of each book.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall

“Sick of mankind and their disgusting ways”

—Anne Brontë, a note scribbled in the back of her prayer book

The youngest of the Brontë sisters, Anne published only two novels before her death at age 28 in 1849: *Agnes Grey* in 1847 and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* in 1848.² Since she published under the pseudonym Acton Bell, and Emily and Charlotte published as Ellis and Currer Bell, respectively, there was considerable speculation as to whether the Bell novels were written by the same hand, and whether that hand was male or female. Thus, from the beginning, there was an urge to group Anne’s writing with her sisters’ work.³ In fact, *The Tenant*’s early sales may have been boosted because of *Jane Eyre*’s success; Anne’s publisher, T.C. Newby,

² Winifred Gérin presents the critical opinion that Anne’s writing matured greatly between *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant*. Gérin accounts for this growth by explaining that although the novels were published only two years apart, Anne began writing the books four years apart (235).

³ Although it is customary to refer to an author by his/her last name, I have chosen to refer to Anne Brontë as simply “Anne” throughout my thesis. In studying her life, work, and critical reception, I have become increasingly convinced that she is not sufficiently recognized for her literary achievements; instead, her accomplishments have been overshadowed by her sisters’ works, both in the past and in the present. Furthermore, the name “Brontë” more readily brings to most people’s minds Emily or Charlotte, rather than Anne. Thus, to emphasize her importance as an individual and author in her own right, I have decided to refer to her as Anne.

tried to profit from *Jane Eyre*'s status as a best-seller by advertising *The Tenant* as being written by the same author (Alexander and Smith 496).

Since *The Tenant*'s sales may have been increased by the public's interest in novels by the Bells, it might be logical to assume that Anne, the traditionally lesser-known Brontë, merely rode the coattails of her sisters' success. Even from the earliest reviews of *The Tenant*, such as those published in the *Spectator* and *Athenaeum* during the same month that the book came out, there is clearly an urge among critics to look at the Brontës' work in comparison to one another. The *Spectator*, for example, notes the "generic resemblance" among the Bell novels, while *Athenaeum* maintains that *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant* "ring in a chime so harmonious as to prove that they have issued from the same mold" (249, 251). This tendency to group the Brontës together carried into the end of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth as critics debated over who the true genius was: Emily or Charlotte. Examples of studying Brontë works together continue in current criticism, as evidenced by Elizabeth Langland's treatment of *Jane Eyre* and *The Tenant* in her 2002 article and Garrett Stewart's use of *Wuthering Heights* in his discussion of *The Tenant* in 2001, to name just a couple of many such studies. However, until only very recently, Brontë mania focused on Emily and Charlotte, relegating Anne to "dismissive passages in Brontë biographies" (Alexander and Smith 146). It seems plausible, then, that Anne was pulled along for the ride of literary success only by her sisters' reputation. However, there are two convincing pieces of evidence to suggest otherwise.

In the first place, most, if not all, of the attention that Anne gained in relation to her sisters tended to efface Anne's accomplishments in favor of her sisters'. For example, the reviewer in *Athenaeum* wrote that "*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* must not hope to gain the popularity of her elder sister *Jane Eyre*" (251). The same type of disparaging comparison

continued into the twentieth century, as exemplified by Naomi Lewis's 1946 review of *The Tenant* that states, "[Anne] did not have the passionate temperament that could make her conceive a Heathcliff or a Rochester," after already implying that *The Tenant* is not as memorable as *Wuthering Heights* (462). Comments like these clearly do not encourage the survival of Anne's literature, an idea that T.K. Meier, writing in 1973, picks up on: "Though she is the least of the Brontës, Anne suffers more greatly in comparison with them than with the generality of fine authors, with whom she should more often be compared; although her family relationship alone is not enough to make her admired, it should not be the cause of her being despised" (62). Meier implies that Anne has survived *in spite of* her familial name, not because of it, a claim that is accurate given Emily and Charlotte's reputations as geniuses while Anne lurks somewhere in the shadows of obscurity.

Furthermore, Charlotte, Emily, and Anne were not the only Brontë siblings that wrote and published; their brother Branwell published work as well, devoting much of his energy towards becoming a man of letters. Not only did he publish poems in magazines and newspapers, but he even sent a poem to Wordsworth, asking for his opinion of it, an inquiry that went unanswered (Alexander and Smith 73-77). Branwell's literary work, however, has never received even a fraction of the attention given to his sisters' writing. Instead, he is chiefly known as the brother who drank and wasted his potential, the very potential his sisters had sacrificed much in order to cultivate. Thus, the name of Brontë was not enough to make his writing be much remembered or gain critical attention over decades of time; therefore, it seems that merely being a Brontë is not a sufficient explanation for the survival of Anne's work.

In the context of original reviews, Anne's relation to the Brontës, then, both potentially hurt and helped her critical reception. While Anne's familial connection is clearly not the reason

that her work has survived, it did help to spark original interest; on the other hand, the critics' comparisons of the Brontë novels often left *The Tenant* as the black sheep in the Brontë canon. Whether or not one believes *Jane Eyre* or *Wuthering Heights* is superior to *The Tenant*, it is clear that while *The Tenant* shares marked similarities with the work of the other "Bells," it has a story and structure all its own.

The Tenant begins as a letter written by Gilbert Markham, a gentleman farmer, as he looks back on a period of his life that he recounts to his brother-in-law-Halford, the recipient of the letter. Gilbert begins with the mysterious arrival of Helen Graham, an austere young widow who, with her son Arthur, begins to inhabit Wildfell Hall, a deserted manor in Gilbert's neighborhood. Gilbert soon finds himself attracted to her, and as his ardent feelings for her grow, he is increasingly bothered by the foibles of the country people around him, including his once-sweetheart, Eliza. The neighborhood spreads rumors about Mrs. Graham, thinking that she must be a woman of ill-repute, but Gilbert is strong in his defense of her despite the fact that she usually repels his affectionate attention. Finally, Gilbert too begins to think ill of Mrs. Graham when he sees her with Mr. Lawrence, the landlord of Wildfell Hall, and overhears what he thinks is an amorous meeting between the two. Gilbert then spurns Mrs. Graham, but she gives him her diary to read so he might know the truth about her past.

The diary begins some seven years earlier, when Helen has just come out in society and is looking for a marriage partner. Compared to the boring, older men who pursue her, Arthur Huntingdon, a charming young gentleman, stands out above the others and is the only one Helen is genuinely attracted to. Despite the admonitions of her aunt, Helen marries him with some awareness of his tendency towards dissipation, believing that her influence might reform him. Once married, she finds that Arthur is not what she had hoped, that he is fond of her as an object

to please him, rather than interested in her moral influence. He eventually goes to London and stays months longer than he had told Helen, returning in a sickly state as a result of the life of drinking and carousing with friends that he led in London. What follows is a heart-wrenching account of Arthur's descent into a life of alcoholism and a growing dislike for his wife, who tries desperately to reform him. Arthur often brings his drinking companions into his own home, a crew of the thoughtless and vicious Hattersley, Grimsby, Hargrave (who sometimes comes to Helen's defense, driven by his own designs on her) and Lowborough, who, though once a profligate himself, reforms and abstains from drinking. Although Helen has friends in Millicent, Hattersley's wife, and Esther, Hargrave's sister, she is forced to witness the haughty and cruel Annabella Lowborough carry on an affair with Arthur under her own roof. Eventually, Arthur seeks to exert his vicious influence on little Arthur, the son of Helen and Arthur, and Helen flees with little Arthur to the refuge of Wildfell Hall under an assumed name to save herself and her son from her husband whom she now despises.

The diary leaves off, and Gilbert's letter resumes, revealing that Mr. Lawrence is in fact Helen's brother and that Helen has returned home to care for Arthur, who is gravely ill. Gilbert periodically receives letters from Helen through Lawrence, which detail Arthur's waning life and unwillingness to repent, even under Helen's tender care. He eventually dies, but Gilbert does not immediately pursue Helen. Instead, it takes news of Helen's pending marriage to another to goad him to action, and when he arrives at the church, he is relieved to find it is not Helen, but her protégé Esther who is marrying Lawrence. The book concludes with Helen and Gilbert reunited and happily looking forward to their marriage, a marriage which has apparently brought happiness to both, as Gilbert's letter to Halford is written years after their marriage.

East Lynne

“*East Lynne* will always be read and remembered as a curiosity of literature, as a book which sold in hundreds of thousands for two generations, which found a place, in a much-handled, ex-library volume, in early twentieth-century households which boasted only a single book-shelf, and which represents the popular taste of an historical epoch.”

– Malcolm Elwin, *Victorian Wallflowers*, 1934

Published in monthly installments in the *New Monthly Magazine*, beginning in January of 1860 and ending in April of 1861 (Maunder “Introduction” 702), *East Lynne* was the second of three novels key to the sensation fiction genre. Sensation fiction was a phenomenon of the 1860s, beginning with Wilkie Collins’s “archetype of the sensation genre,” *The Woman in White*, published in 1860 (Pykett “Sensation Novel” 138). Next came Wood’s *East Lynne*, and in 1862, Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret*. Unlike other literary movements that become clearly defined only in retrospect of the era in which they existed, the Victorians were very conscious of this new fad—and wary of it as well. One magazine described sensation novels as “devoted to Harrowing the Mind, making the Flesh Creep...Giving Shocks to the Nervous System, Destroying Conventional Moralities, and generally Unfitting the Public for the Prosaic Avocations of Life” (qtd. in Pykett “Sensation Novel” 3).⁴ Margaret Oliphant, a novelist herself, was at the forefront of warning against the evils of sensation fiction, describing the Sensation School as being the most dangerous in fiction (44); Henry Mansel, writing in 1862, complained that the sensation novel was “usurping...a portion of the preacher’s office” and that it achieved this usurpation by preaching to the nerves; furthermore, he saw the novels as “indications of a wide-spread corruption of which they are in part both the effect and the cause” (45).

⁴ The magazine quoted here, *Punch*, was “a parodic prospectus for an invented journal called *The Sensation Times*” (Pykett 3).

But what, exactly, is sensation fiction? Both Winifred Hughes and Lyn Pykett, modern critics of sensation fiction, note that sensation novels are composed of elements from several genres, including Gothic romance, the Newgate novel, domestic novels, crime novels, and journalism (Hughes “Sensation” 261; Pykett “Sensation Novel” 2-6). A sensation novel is usually a “novel of incident” rather than a “novel of character” (Hughes “Sensation” 265); in other words, sensation novels privilege plot more than the other elements of fiction, an aspect fostered by the way in which sensation fiction was typically published in serial installments.⁵ These plots typically include crime (or multiple crimes)—such as murder, bigamy, or adultery—and secrets, such as disguised identity or family secrets like madness. Since the inspiration for the criminal threads of sensational plots often came from real life court cases or murders detailed in newspapers, sensation fiction gives a sense of Victorian pop culture. Henry Mansel’s 1862 essay from the *Quarterly Review* identifies this aspect of sensation fiction:

The sensation novel, be it mere trash or something worse, is usually a tale of our own times.

Proximity is, indeed, one great element of sensation. It is necessary to be near a mine to be blown up by its explosion; and a tale which aims at electrifying the nerves of the reader is never thoroughly effective unless the scene be laid in our own days and among the people we are in the habit of meeting. (47)

But beyond being a product of Victorian pop culture, Hughes characterizes sensation fiction as “a product of Victorian mass culture” (“Sensation” 267). This emphasis on the masses picks up on an important part of sensation fiction: unlike previous fiction that was specifically written for middle or upper class audiences, sensation fiction “blurred the boundaries between classes” and made “the literature of the kitchen the favourite of the Drawing room” (Pykett “Sensation Novel”

⁵ Victorian critic Henry Mansel expressed particular anxiety over the effect serialization had on novels, noting that such “ephemeral” demands for fiction—such as fiction that could be bought in train stations for long train rides—led novelists to write sensational books in order to grab the readers’ interest (46).

9). This mass appeal was made possible by changing publishing practices. Whereas a book like *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was published in volume form, and was thus somewhat costly to the consumer, novels were increasingly published serially in family magazines. Deborah Wynne explores the connection between publishing and the rise of sensation fiction, explaining that “the sensation novel became legitimate reading for the middle classes largely *because of* its magazine context, where readers were addressed as educated and domestic family members, rather than sensation seekers after cheap thrills” (1).

East Lynne was published at the beginning of the sensation fiction era, before critics like Oliphant and Mansel had aired their scathing reviews of the genre. As we will see in chapter II, although some original reviews questioned Wood’s choice of subject matter, they were typically more positive and less frantic to dismantle sensation fiction than later reviews of the genre. Even today, however, Wood is considered as the mildest sensation novelist of the three big names (Maunder “Introduction” 15). Nevertheless, the sensational leanings of *East Lynne* are clear even in a brief summary of the plot.

The story begins with the Earl of Mount Severn, the aristocratic owner of an estate called East Lynne, who is so deeply in debt that he sells the estate to his trusted solicitor, Archibald Carlyle. The Earl of Mount Severn dies shortly thereafter, leaving behind his daughter, Lady Isabel, a young woman of dazzling beauty and extreme innocence. Mr. Carlyle, noting her unhappy situation and already an admirer of her beauty, proposes to her, and she marries him despite her attraction to Sir Francis Levison, thus becoming the mistress of East Lynne. Meanwhile, another plot unfolds in which Barbara Hare, a young woman who has hopes that Mr. Carlyle will marry her, seeks Mr. Carlyle’s assistance in helping her clear her brother’s name

from a charge of murder. Her brother, Richard Hare, is innocent, yet everyone in the town of West Lynne believes him to be guilty, so he is forced to live in hiding.

At first, Lady Isabel and Mr. Carlyle's marriage is a happy one, marred only at times by Mr. Carlyle's sister Cornelia, who lives with the couple and usurps Lady Isabel's position as lady of the house. Several years pass, Isabel and Carlyle have three children together, and Isabel is then ordered by her doctor to go abroad to strengthen her naturally weak health. While abroad, Isabel runs into Levison and struggles to suppress the renewed attraction she feels for him. Wishing to escape his presence, Isabel begs Carlyle to send her home earlier than planned. Carlyle, who thinks Levison has helped his wife recovered, offers to help him clear up some money problems and invites him to stay at East Lynne. Isabel is horrified when she finds out, but it is too late to send him away, and she does not tell her husband the truth of why she wishes Levison gone. Meanwhile, Richard Hare's case is becoming more complicated, as he feels sure he has recently seen the real murderer. This causes Carlyle to carry on secret nighttime meetings with Barbara and/or Richard, meetings which Isabel interprets as romantic rendezvous with the woman with whom she has always felt a slight rivalry. Levison sees Isabel's jealousy and convinces her that Barbara and Carlyle are having an affair. Thus, he gets her to elope with him, a step she regrets as soon as she has irrevocably taken it.

Levison and Isabel go to France together, and after a brief period, he increasingly leaves her alone, refusing to marry her even though she has a child by him. Meanwhile, Carlyle obtains an official divorce,⁶ and Isabel breaks ties with Levison so that she is now alone and miserable in the world. Shortly thereafter, she is in a train accident in which her bastard baby is killed and she is—as she and the nuns attending her think—mortally wounded. Thinking that she is

⁶ The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 made it possible to obtain a divorce without an act of parliament; this created the infamous divorce courts (Mitchell "Chronology" xiv).

breathing her last, Isabel dictates a letter to a nun, telling Carlyle of her death. The letter is sent, but Isabel miraculously survives, although she is horribly disfigured, gray-haired from unhappiness and repentance, and lacking teeth so that she lisps when she talks.

Back at East Lynne, after Carlyle receives word of Isabel's death, he eventually proposes to Barbara Hare, who accepts and takes Isabel's place as wife and mistress of East Lynne. The Carlyles hire a governess, a French widow named Madame Vine, who—as the reader knows—is Lady Isabel. With the help of large clothing and a pair of blue spectacles, Isabel manages to disguise herself enough that she can once again be with her children. Although several characters have moments of suspecting her true identity, it is only her faithful servant, Joyce, who realizes Madame Vine is Isabel. Isabel longs for her former position as wife and mother, and daily “takes up her cross” of repentance as she witnesses Barbara and Mr. Carlyle's happy marriage.

Barbara and Mr. Carlyle eventually clear her brother Richard of murder when it is proven that Francis Levison was, in fact, the man who committed the crime. The book concludes, then, with the vice character being punished, and Lady Isabel's situation is resolved by her declining health and, ultimately, her death. The final pages detail her death-bed scene in which she reveals herself to Carlyle, who forgives her and kisses her once before she dies and he returns to his prosperous, middle class life with Barbara.

Changing Critical Fortunes

“I am told by those who have the means of knowing that no such work of fiction has for a long while made a greater sensation than *East Lynne*.”

—Mrs. Henry Wood, 1862

In an 1863 article published in *Fraser's Magazine*, the reviewer relates his impression of how books are generally received. "The book" of which he speaks is not any particular book, but a sort of Everybook:

In the course of a few weeks the book has been read by everybody who intends to read it; the surplus copies are sold off at a reduced price; and the book and the author pass simultaneously into oblivion—unless, by some great good luck, or a more than usually striking scene, the story happens to be dramatised, acted by rival players at several different theatres, and advertised in letters half a yard long on every temporary paling and old wall in or about London. Even then, the author must keep his name well before the public by some marvelously prolific process, under which he produces three or four startling and thrilling romances at a time, for several successive years.

After this period it not infrequently happens that the books cease to sell, and the name no longer commands any very lucrative sum. In fact, the goose has been killed that lays the golden eggs; and the public ungratefully turns to some fresh quarter; and some new purveyor of light literature rises from obscurity and secures the monopoly of the novel market. Like other ephemeral creatures, '...They, idly fluttering, live their little hour.' (263)

This reviewer paints a depressing picture of the conveyor-belt quality of being easily replaced that is the fate of most works of fiction. In so doing, he unwittingly captures in miniature the fate of *East Lynne* through about 1930, but more importantly, he notes how for any book, both early reception and luck play a role in determining its fate. However, although both *The Tenant* and *East Lynne* had their moments of being almost forgotten, both have made something of a comeback, yet their recent attention stems from opposite reasons. As I will argue, the form of the novel was a crucial factor in *The Tenant*'s lack of popularity and in *East Lynne*'s run as a best-seller. Although the books took different courses between their original reception and contemporary criticism, they have reached a point where *The Tenant* is better-known than *East*

Lynne, though certainly neither text is wholly forgotten. One of the main reasons for this difference in modern attitude is once again the form of the novels, for form is now considered one of the great attractions of *The Tenant* and one of the biggest weaknesses of *East Lynne*.

In Anne Brontë's preface to the second edition of *The Tenant*, she summarizes the early critical reception of her novel, saying that while she is pleased with the success and measure of praise her book has drawn, she "must also admit that from some other quarters it has been censured with an asperity which I was as little prepared to expect, and which my judgment, as well as my feelings assures me is more bitter than just" (3). Although *The Tenant* sold well—the publisher began getting a second edition ready within a month of the original publication—its sales figures, as we have already seen, were perhaps boosted by the fact that it was written by a "Bell." Nevertheless, two things appear for sure from *The Tenant*'s early days: the reviews were generally negative towards it, yet it sold relatively well—the best-selling Brontë novel at the time besides *Jane Eyre* (Gérin 260).

The Tenant, however, quickly dropped into obscurity, for after Anne's death, Charlotte was largely in control of shaping Anne's posthumous image. Charlotte "opposed in no uncertain terms reprint of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*" (Goreau 13), and even a cursory reading of Charlotte's "Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell" shows her preference for Emily and her work over Anne, whom she clearly has a tenderness for, yet whom she compares to Emily as "milder and more subdued; she wanted the power, the fire, the originality of her sister" (57). While interest in Charlotte and Emily's lives continued, "Anne's work was virtually neglected between 1860 and 1940" (Alexander and Smith 146). Although she has continued to trail her sisters in popularity and critical attention even to the present, the mid-twentieth century brought an important measure of attention to Anne. Perhaps most influential to the study of Anne was

Winifred Gérin's biography of Anne published in 1959, a momentous step because it treated Anne in her own right. Gérin, however, notes "the present eclipse into which [*The Tenant*] has fallen" (260). Working to reverse this eclipse, in July of 1966, *The Quarterly Review* published A. Craig Bell's "Anne Brontë: A Re-Appraisal," an article that argues enthusiastically in favor of shifting attention to *The Tenant*. Craig makes a bold statement: "And since later and deeper study of [*The Tenant*] has more than ever convinced me of its intrinsic greatness, there is only one thing I can do, namely, declare publicly that I am right and everyone else is wrong [for their derogatory attitudes]!" (464).

Despite increased attention, Anne's work still received less than that of her sisters, even when the feminist movement in the 1970s stirred interest in all three Brontës. However, "Anne's work—especially *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*—has attracted increasingly sophisticated and appreciative treatment since the early 1980s" (Alexander and Smith 147). In addition to recent essays like Elizabeth Langland's 2002 "Dialogue and Narrative Transgressions in Anne Brontë's *Tenant of Wildfell Hall*," an essay that pays particular attention to the form of the novel, there has been at least one book entirely devoted to critical analyses of Anne's work: *New Approaches to the Literary Art of Anne Brontë*, a collection of twelve essays published in 2001.

Interestingly, much of recent criticism has reversed the earlier condemnation of the novel's construction (Alexander and Smith 137), and in fact, many articles in the past twenty years have specifically examined the nuanced form of *The Tenant*, articles such as Langland's aforementioned "Dialogue and Narrative Transgressions," Lori Page's "Helen's Diary Freshly Considered," and Garrett Stewart's "Narrative Economies in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*." Thus, after a rough critical reception that denounced the form of the novel, *The Tenant* slipped into

neglect until the mid to late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have brought increased attention that particularly praises Anne's form and her "literary art."

East Lynne's reception appears to be the opposite of *The Tenant's*. Although current criticism draws attention to Victorian reviewers like Oliphant and Mansel who denounced sensation fiction, the original reviews of *East Lynne* are for the most part laudatory. In general, the scathing reviews came at least two years after *East Lynne*'s publication and are typically reviews of sensation fiction as a genre that include *East Lynne* as a case study.⁷ Therefore, my view of *East Lynne*'s original reception is one of mostly positive criticism, positive especially in comparison to *The Tenant's* reviews. In fact, a mostly-positive review of *East Lynne* that appeared in *The Times* is thought to have been partially responsible for the book's wave of immense popularity.⁸ Maunder claims that even the negative reviews of *East Lynne* might have contributed to the book's popularity, as they aroused the public's interest. In any case, by 1900, 500,000 copies had been sold (Maunder "Introduction" 9), making it the "single top-selling novel of the entire nineteenth century" (Hughes 260).

Another boon to *East Lynne*'s popularity was the number of stage versions produced. The first was an 1862 performance in New York City, just nine months after the last installment of the novel had been published. As the chart below demonstrates, *East Lynne* was hugely successful on the stage (chart reproduced from Bolton 394):

⁷ Studies vary as to how thoroughly they treat *East Lynne*. In her book *The Improper Feminine*, Lyn Pykett focuses one out of 20 chapters on *East Lynne*. Winifred Hughes's *The Maniac in the Cellar* devotes one of six chapters to Braddon and Wood together. In fact, it is not uncommon for Braddon and Wood to be treated in close proximity, thus taking some attention from each author in seeking to address both.

⁸ Again demonstrating Victorians' consciousness of the sensation fiction genre, a review as early as 1864 cited *The Times* review as being responsible for bringing the novel "into notice—and, indeed, extensive notoriety." Likewise, modern critics like Andrew Maunder point to the influence of that same review from *The Times*.

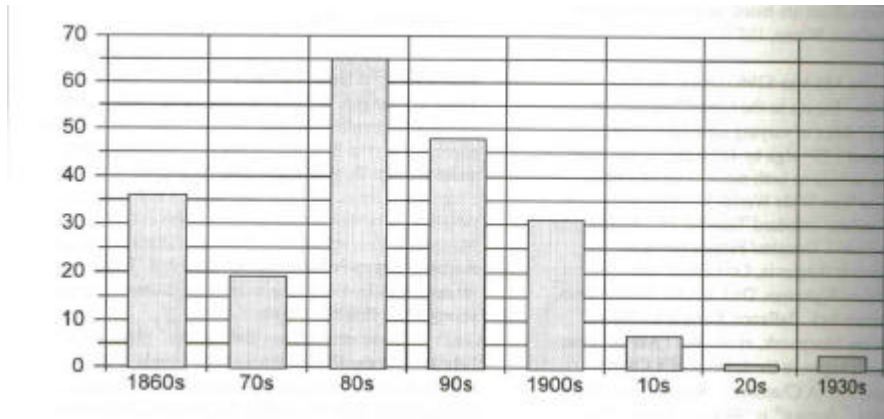


Figure 1: Productions of dramatizations of *East Lynne* per decade

With the advent of motion pictures, *East Lynne* spread into the realm of film, the first film adaptation dating from 1916, with others in 1925 (Wynne 60) and 1931 (Bolton 416). Thus, *East Lynne* remained a popular story into the early twentieth century.

As Wynne notes, however, “by the mid-twentieth century *East Lynne* had declined into a joke, a tired Victorian melodrama which was no longer capable of generating emotion” (61). In all my research, this is the best explanation I have found for *East Lynne*’s sudden decline in popularity. Other factors surely influenced its decline, especially since its drop in popularity coincides with World War I and the beginning of the modernist era. As in the generic reception history from *Fraser*’s, “the goose ha[d] been killed that la[id] the golden egg.” It wasn’t until feminism brought an increased interest in *East Lynne*’s “powerful representation of the maternal melodrama and its articulation of the constraints of proper Victorian femininity” (Wynne 61) that the book began to receive significant attention once again. However, *East Lynne* is no longer given the individual attention it once received; instead, its study is generally part of a larger work about sensation fiction. One of the first works to revive interest in sensation fiction was Winifred Hughes’s *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860s*, published in 1980.

Critics Ann Cvetkovich, Elaine Showalter, and Lyn Pykett all published books on sensation fiction in the 1990s as part of a movement that approached sensation fiction “from the perspective of theory and gender studies” (Hughes 275). Sensation fiction continues to receive critical attention from scholars like Andrew Maunder and Deborah Wynne, who have both published significant sensation fiction scholarship in the twenty-first century. However, it is important to note that critics do not focus on praising Wood’s style or characterization in the way the early critics did; instead, sensation novels (including *East Lynne*) are treated not as “suppressed masterpieces of English literature” but as fiction that holds “an important place in the cultural history of the nineteenth century, and played an important part in the development of fiction” (Pykett “Improper” ix). In other words, *East Lynne* is not studied today for its “literary art,” but rather as an interesting part of Victorian pop culture. Thus, where it was once praised for its form, it is now praised in spite of its form—the exact opposite of attitudes toward *The Tenant*. Today, then, *The Tenant* is studied as serious literature, finally getting a piece of the attention it seemingly deserves, while *East Lynne* remains relatively obscure outside the field of nineteenth-century women studies.

Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and Mrs. Henry Wood’s *East Lynne* share great thematic and sensational similarities, and yet they have never been commonly studied together. In fact, their critical fortunes bear a chiastic relationship to one another: while *East Lynne* began with general praise from the critics and has today become noticed only for its cultural rather than literary value, *The Tenant* met with overall disapproval from the original critics, yet is currently gaining positive attention as a work of literary merit. Since the difference

in how these two books were viewed began when each book was first published, the best place to start untangling the myriad threads that knot together into either books' fate is the original reviews. In examining these reviews, particularly reviews from magazines that critiqued both books in their first year or two of publication, it becomes clear that there is something beyond subject matter that causes the critics to receive *The Tenant* with disapprobation and *East Lynne* with enthusiasm. As I will argue, the underlying anxiety towards *The Tenant* is caused by the form of the novel, particularly point of view and structure. Furthermore, I will show that *The Tenant*'s form is threatening to Victorian society because it seeks to tell the truth first-hand in a society that privileged maintaining a tranquil surface appearance by turning a blind eye towards immoral behavior. For Victorians, nothing could be more subversive than a text that forces the reader to hear, see, and feel social abuses as though they were happening before the reader's very eyes—precisely the effect of Anne's narrative technique—for such widespread witnessing could potentially dismantle the disguise of propriety that Victorians sought to maintain. Conversely, Wood's form allows her to disguise and therefore lessen the extent of vice in *East Lynne* by maintaining proper silences in a story that reads as fiction, rather than as a witness to the truth.

Chapter I: Establishing Common Ground

Considering that the two books were written more than a decade apart, and—more importantly—that *East Lynne* belongs to the genre of sensation fiction while *The Tenant* has never been viewed in that light, is it even fair to study these novels side by side? While we must be ever mindful that the two are, of course, different in some ways, it is clear that they are

overwhelmingly similar, both in the sensational elements they contain and in common themes found throughout both books.

Sensational Similarities

“We have even heard it hinted, nay positively maintained, that the decline of female (and consequently also of male) virtue, in the present generation, has been a fact too remarkable to escape even the least careful observer, and that it has been chiefly due to no less a cause than *crinoline*.”

—Henry Mansel, “Sensation Novels,” 1863

As we have already seen, *East Lynne* is a sensation novel; likewise, *The Tenant*, though not specifically studied as a sensation novel, has multiple sensational elements.⁹ It is difficult to articulate precisely what makes sensation fiction “sensation fiction,” for clearly the basis cannot be as simple as a morally questionable situation or else books like *Anna Karenina*, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, and *Vanity Fair* would all be considered sensation fiction. Interestingly, many of the authors that fill the syllabi of typical Victorian literature courses actually were linked with sensation fiction, most notably Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, Anthony Trollope, and even George Eliot.¹⁰ The distinction between these authors and others such as Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Mrs. Henry Wood, and Wilkie Collins, however, is that the works of the former group are rarely read with an emphasis on the sensation context. In the case of *The Tenant*, however, not even a loose link is considered between it and sensation fiction. This is perhaps not surprising considering that *The Tenant*’s publication in 1848 precedes the birth of the formally

⁹ Critic Deborah Wynne recognizes the connection between the Brontës and sensation fiction, but does not explore it further than saying, “Sensation novelists were obviously indebted to former popular writers: Dickens was clearly a major influence for many of them, along with the works of Edward Bulwer-Lytton, William Harrison Ainsworth, **the Brontës**, Sir Walter Scott, as well as the eighteenth-century Gothic novelists” (my emphasis 19).

¹⁰ There is a good amount of information on the connection between these authors and the sensation genre. See especially Chapter 4 of Lyn Pykett’s *The Sensation Novel*.

labeled sensation fiction genre in the 1860s. Still, *The Tenant* exhibits so many elements common to sensation fiction that it seems fair to consider it closely related to the sensation fiction tradition.

Thomas Hardy pinpointed four aspects of sensation fiction that he believed were foundational to the genre: “mystery, entanglement, surprise, and moral ubiquity” (qtd. in Pykett “Sensation Novel” 4). *The Tenant* exhibits all four of these characteristics: mystery in Helen Graham’s enigmatic arrival in the neighborhood and unrevealed history; entanglement in Gilbert’s confused relationship with Lawrence, as well as in the complex relationships among Hargrave, Helen, Millicent, Hattersley, Lowborough, and Annabella; surprise in the discovery of Helen’s real past as well as in Gilbert’s discovery that she has returned to her husband to nurse him; and moral ubiquity in the constant confrontation with viciousness—in drunkenness, swearing, and adultery—and in Helen’s opposing example of virtue. Critic Winifred Hughes offers contemporary ideas of the elements that determine sensation fiction, one of which is a blending of genres with particular use of Gothic romance (“Sensation” 261). While *The Tenant* does not include any supernatural elements, it retains the Gothic’s sense of mystery—as noted above—with horror mixed in. The “horror” here is a sort of domestic horror; the scenes of drunkenness and adultery that Helen is forced to witness in her own home move horror from the realm of the supernatural into the world of everyday life, giving this horror a vividness and concreteness, much the way Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* brings horror to the respectable English drawing room. The setting of Wildfell Hall furthers the connection to the Gothic tradition, for the house is described as:

a superannuated mansion of the Elizabethan era, built of dark grey stone,—venerable and picturesque to look at, but, doubtless, cold and gloomy enough to inhabit, with its thick

stone mullions and little latticed panes, its time-eaten air-holes, and its too lonely, too unsheltered situation,—only shielded from the war of wind and weather by a group of Scotch firs, themselves half blighted with storms, and looking as stern and gloomy as the Hall itself. (19)

To be sure, there are some elements Hughes identifies that do not resonate with *The Tenant*. She observes that sensation novels are typically a “novel of incident” rather than a “novel of character” (that is, more plot-driven than based on characters and their psyches). While there are certainly episodes that advance the plot in *The Tenant*, the current of the plot does not sweep the reader along as it does in novels like *East Lynne* or *Lady Audley’s Secret*. Instead, the form of *The Tenant* alone—a diary and a letter—suggests that Brontë is more interested in providing the reader with a psychological understanding of the characters as they develop over time than with a suspenseful page-turner. Furthermore, *The Tenant* lacks the pop culture feel of sensation fiction that Hughes labels as “a product of Victorian mass culture” (“Sensation” 267). Although there are many ways in which *The Tenant* either fits or breaks with the sensation genre, the examples outlined above show that while *The Tenant* does not exhibit every aspect of sensation fiction, it does contain enough of the fundamental elements that it is reasonable to view *The Tenant* and *East Lynne* on the same plain.

Although *East Lynne* itself does not exhibit every element of sensation fiction, two of its many sensational aspects strike a chord with *The Tenant*, the first of which is the portrayal of a woman who abandons her still-living husband. In *East Lynne*, the reader sympathizes with Lady Isabel, who, believing her husband is having an affair with Barbara Hare, elopes with Sir Francis Levison, leaving behind her husband and three children. In *The Tenant*, Helen leaves her husband after he has tortured her for years with drunkenness, openly having an affair with

Annabella Lowborough, and finally carrying on with the governess. Helen leaves as a last resort to save little Arthur from his father's influence; as she writes to her aunt, "in duty to my son, I must submit [to my husband] no longer." Thus, Helen's flight is mostly motivated by concern for her son's well-being, and unlike Isabel, she does not leave with another man beyond her son. Despite the differences in the heroines' flights, their desertions are nearly equally subversive to nineteenth-century convention. Aside from the obvious sensation caused by Isabel's elopement with Levison, Gail Walker notes that for Isabel to feel any attraction to Levison is a sin in the eyes of Victorians. Walker draws upon medical opinions of female sexuality—particularly Dr. Acton's statement, written in the 1850s, that women "are not much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind" (25)—to explore just how sinful Isabel's actions are. She claims that in the nineteenth-century, "A young woman who possesses such impulses and passions, *whether she acts on them or not*, has sinned already, without need of overt action" (26). Thus, Isabel's elopement is doubly sensational—first in the act of adultery itself¹¹ and secondly in the mere fact that Isabel has sexual desire for a male who is not her husband. But the sensation doesn't stop there; Isabel's elopement is also an abandonment of her children, a shocking detail in a time when, according to Dr. Acton, "love of home, children, and domestic duties, are the only passions [women] feel" (qtd. in Walker 25).

Helen's desertion of Arthur Huntingdon likewise takes on more sensational dimensions when considered against the cultural milieu of its time. Although Arthur's maltreatment of Helen and her protection of her son seem like good reasons for her to leave, her flight is illegal. As *The Oxford Companion to the Brontës* notes, "In 1848, a wife had no legal rights to her children or to her property" (502). Thus, Helen "steals" little Arthur from her husband; even the

¹¹ For further information on adultery in the Victorian era, see Barbara Leckie's *Culture and Adultery: The Novel, the Newspaper, and the Law, 1857-1914*.

wages she earns from her painting once she has left Grassdale are not legally hers since the First Married Women's Property Act wouldn't be passed until 1870.¹²

Helen's illegal flight necessitates her use of a disguise, and thus Brontë introduces another element common to many sensation novels. Most, if not all, sensation novels include concealment or disguise—if not the physical disguise of a character like Lady Audley pretending to be the angel of the house when she is actually a fiend, then the concealment of a secret. Helen's disguise takes the form of an assumed identity; Helen Huntingdon becomes Helen Graham, a widow who has recently moved into Wildfell Hall. Elisabeth Rose Gruner characterizes Helen's time at the Hall as “a masquerade from start to finish” (310). Gruner observes that “she must conceal her identity in order to maintain her maternity,” and indeed, as noted previously, Helen is chiefly motivated by the desire to protect her son from following his father's footsteps. While this may seem like a well-intentioned disguise, the disguise nevertheless opens Helen to a morally questionable situation, for presuming that she is a widow, Gilbert Markham makes courtship advances towards Helen. Although she keeps him at a distance, she falls in love with him while still married to Arthur. Helen, then, is guilty of the same sin as Isabel: feeling sexual attraction for a man who is not her husband, a situation brought about by the concealment of her marital status.

Isabel likewise resorts to disguise to maintain her maternity and finds herself in a morally questionable situation. Disfigured by both a train accident and a guilty conscience, Isabel is so changed in appearance that, with the help of blue-lensed spectacles, she is able to disguise herself as a French governess named Madame Vine. As Madame Vine, she is invited to be the

¹² An interesting parallel between Helen's flight from Huntingdon and Isabel's flight from Carlyle is that both are spurred by their husbands' adulterous, or seemingly adulterous, behavior. Although Helen's reason for leaving is chiefly her son, it is not until Huntingdon crosses a line by having an affair with the governess that Helen leaves. Likewise, Isabel leaves because she believes her husband is having an affair with Barbara Hare.

governess for the Carlyle family, and in this way she returns to her children after she realizes the horrible mistake she made in leaving them. In addition to providing the opportunity for scenes filled with dramatic irony, Isabel's disguise opens the door for bigamy. Although Mr. Carlyle obtained an official divorce with Isabel before she "died" in the railroad accident, most Victorians would have believed that Carlyle is still morally Isabel's husband and therefore could not be the husband of Barbara as well.¹³ Read in this way, the latter portion of *East Lynne* becomes sensational immorality thrust before the reader time and again as Isabel talks face to face with Barbara, watches Barbara and Mr. Carlyle exchange caresses, and consults with Mr. Carlyle about William's¹⁴ deteriorating health. By enabling her to return to the house of her former husband, Isabel's disguise threatens the security of Victorian propriety. Not only has she made Carlyle into a bigamist, but she also comes to desire Carlyle and his love, hungering to feel his kiss even on her deathbed. The disguise thus enables a new level of sexual desire to enter a story already filled with Isabel's inappropriate desire for Levison and Barbara's earlier yearning for Carlyle while still a single woman.

Thematic Similarities

"People with nothing to do, and with sufficient money to live in luxury, have always had, and from the nature of the human mind must always have, a strong desire for 'sensation'."

– "Sensation Novels," *Medical Critic and Psychological Journal*, 1863

¹³ As Pykett writes, "Carlyle's reaction dramatizes a new moral experience created by the reformed divorce laws: a tension between marriage merely as a socio-legal arrangement, and moral and religious conceptions of marriage" ("Sensation" 47). In other words, although divorce was legally recognized in some cases, Victorians considered a person morally married to the partner with whom they first consummated a marriage vow. This is exemplified in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* in that Tess is considered already married because the man to whom she originally lost her virginity and became pregnant by (Alec) is still living when she marries Angel Claire.

¹⁴ William is Carlyle and Isabel's son.

As we have seen, both *East Lynne* and *The Tenant* exhibit sensational elements, some of which mirror one another as in Helen and Isabel's love for a man outside of marriage. The similarities between these two books are not, however, limited to sensation; the novels also share common themes. In my research, I found only one article that treats *East Lynne* and *The Tenant* side by side: Elisabeth Rose Gruner's "Plotting the Mother: Caroline Norton, Helen Huntingdon, and Isabel Vane." As the title suggests, Gruner focuses on maternity and Victorian attitudes towards the role of the mother. In so doing, she highlights one of the most important themes in each book—motherhood and the proper rearing of children.

In *East Lynne*, motherhood takes center stage after Isabel leaves East Lynne with Levison. Isabel changes from a woman who impulsively follows her sexual desires by eloping with Levison to a woman unconcerned with sexuality and focused solely on motherhood. As Lyn Pykett notes, "When this novel dwells on the sensations of its heroine, it dwells less on her sensual longings for male muscles, and more on her frustrated maternal feelings" (60). From the point at which Isabel adopts her governess disguise to the end of the book, Pykett's description holds true. When Isabel debates whether to accept the governess position, Wood notes Isabel's "longing for her children," describing this longing at one point as "desperate" and at another as "intense" (455). In fact, her decision to return to East Lynne has nothing to do with Mr. Carlyle but is instead based wholly on her love for her children. In a typically dramatic passage, Wood details Isabel's thoughts of her children before returning to East Lynne: "Oh! to be with them! to see them once again! To purchase that boon, she would willingly forfeit all the rest of her existence" (453). While Isabel's love for her children is all-consuming, Wood offers another approach to maternity in Barbara Hare. Rational and passionless, Barbara's maternity is based

on her belief that a mother must not become consumed with the concerns of her children. In a much-quoted passage, Barbara expounds her views to Isabel (Madame Vine):

I never was fond of being troubled with children. When my own grow up into childhood, I shall deem the nursery and the schoolroom the best places for them. . . . [Some mothers] are never happy but when with their children. They wash them, dress them, feed them; rendering themselves slaves. . . . Let the offices, properly belonging to a nurse, be performed by the nurse... But I hope I shall never fail to gather my children round me daily, at stated periods, for higher purposes: to instil into them Christian and moral duties; to strive to teach them how best to fulfil life's obligations. *This is a mother's task.*" (464-5)

While Barbara's brand of parenting seems to be more successful than Isabel's (as evidenced by the balance she achieves between maintaining a strong relationship with Mr. Carlyle *and* being in control of her children), Wood nonetheless makes her readers somehow prefer Isabel's passionate mothering. It is Isabel who is present and attentive to William during his illness; while she watches anxiously at his bedside, Barbara is a distant presence, her concern for William seeming cold compared to Isabel's. Part of the difference between the two mothers in William's case is the fact that Isabel is the boy's biological mother whereas Barbara is his step-mother. However, nobody—including William—knows that Isabel is the "real" mother, and thus Barbara has full authority in the role of mother.

While Wood presents two opposing examples of motherhood, Brontë blends these types of maternity in Helen. Like Barbara, Helen concerns herself primarily with the moral instruction of her son, Arthur. Fearing that he will follow in the footsteps of his father, Helen calculates how best to rid Arthur of any inclination towards wine and executes her plan so successfully that Arthur "shrank from the ruby nectar as if in terror and disgust, and was ready to cry when urged to take it" (27). The example of teaching abhorrence of drink is only one part of Helen's attitude

toward parenting. Her views are most clearly expressed early in the book when Gilbert and guests from the neighborhood are gathered in the Markham's drawing room. When Helen admits that she has done her best to make Arthur hate wine, the guests laugh and comment that "the poor child will be the veriest milksop that ever was sopped!" (28). This launches a debate in which the neighborhood expresses the opinion that boys should be exposed to vice so that they can become truly virtuous by resisting temptation. Helen, on the other hand, argues that "fifty—or five hundred men" who witness vice succumb to it rather than resist it, and she therefore says, "I will lead [my son] by the hand, Mr. Markham, till he has strength to go alone; and I will clear as many stones from his path as I can, and teach him to avoid the *rest*—or walk firmly over them" (28). As the book progresses and we read of her husband's vicious decline, it becomes clear why Helen holds fast to such a method of parenting. The people of the neighborhood, however, are ignorant of Helen's past, and therefore warn her against "taking that boy's education upon [her]self," saying that she "will treat him like a girl—[she]'ll spoil his spirit, and make a mere Miss Nancy of him" (29).¹⁵ Beneath the details of this debate, it is clear that Brontë has picked up on a question of central concern to both books and to Victorians generally: to what extent should a mother be involved with her child and how should she go about educating that child?

At the same time that Helen answers this question by taking an active, calculated role in educating Arthur, she also shows signs of a motherly passion similar to that of Isabel's. Like Isabel, Helen makes her "sensational" decision to leave her husband and assume a disguise on the basis of her love for her child. As mentioned previously, it is not because of her own sufferings at her husband's hands that Helen leaves, but because she fears Arthur's influence on

¹⁵ According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first appearance of the phrase "tied to the apron strings" was in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*: "Even at *his* age, he ought not to be always tied to his mother's apron string." (www.wordorigins.org)

their son. Additionally, Gruner notes that *The Tenant* includes several views of motherhood through its presentation of Gilbert's "over-protective" mother and of Mrs. Hargrave (309). Considering this, Gruner states, "*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is centrally concerned with what it means to be a mother" (309). Likewise, *East Lynne* also presents several examples of mother figures—Mrs. Hare and Miss Corny in addition to Isabel and Barbara—thus making maternity a central theme with multiple characters furthering that theme, just as in *The Tenant*.

Isabel and Helen do not simply share motherhood as a common thread; they are also both embodiments of the theme that purity and goodness degenerate over time when exposed to vice or the effects of vice. Winifred Gérin, in her influential biography of Anne Brontë notes this theme in her discussion of Anne's most successful novel, stating that "from the first appalled query within [Helen], 'Surely that man will make me dislike him at last?' to the dreadful cry, 'I hate him for having brought me to this!' there is the slow, corrosive action of years" (250).¹⁶ This slow, corrosive action also takes place in Isabel's life as well, both outwardly, as she goes from looking "like an angel" (49) to being disfigured and haggard in appearance, and inwardly, as she changes from an innocent girl to being aged before her time from living a life of daily repentance. Gérin continues, "The time-factor in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is indeed of the first importance because, without the passage of years, the effect after which the author is reaching throughout could not be achieved: that effect is nothing less than to show the deterioration of the good by contact with the wicked" (250). Although Gérin writes only of *The Tenant*, she once again articulates a theme crucial to both books studied here. "The good" in Gérin's quote clearly refers to Helen, while "the wicked" is Arthur and his companions. She argues that beyond the sad fact that Helen has married a bad husband is an even sadder thought

¹⁶ It is not just Anne's biographer who notes this theme; contemporary critic Arlene Jackson likewise notes that the diary portion of the novel "traces the gradual hardening of Helen's personality" (477).

that “he makes her bad, or, at least, sufficiently fallen in her own esteem to break her spirit” (250). The same could be said of Isabel, “the good,” in relation to Levison, “the wicked.”¹⁷ Like Helen, Isabel is keenly aware of the effect “the wicked” has on her. When she comes across Levison in Boulogne, she realizes her old feeling of love for him resurfaces, and she therefore “clasp[s] her husband’s arm the closer, and inwardly pray[s] for strength and power to thrust away from her this dangerous foe, that was creeping on in guise so insidious” (259). Again, she tries to resist the negative influence of Levison when he is a guest at East Lynne, for she importunes Mr. Carlyle to keep Levison from staying in their house. Nevertheless, the more she is in contact with Levison, the closer she comes to committing an immoral act, which she ultimately does under his influence. As time passes, Isabel continues her decline because of her contact with Levison, as the two live a miserable life abroad until she leaves him. Her contact with “the wicked” then becomes her daily renewal of suffering from the effects of her affair with Levison until she finally dies.

In both books, then, time brings about a degeneration of the heroine, who begins as a pure, innocent, beautiful girl. Andrew Maunder’s analysis of *East Lynne* identifies another type of degeneration: that of the aristocracy. Maunder explains that in the wake of Darwin’s theory on evolution, British society feared the opposite of evolution might also be possible and human beings might regress rather than continue to evolve (59). In particular, Maunder notes how Isabel—whose physical degeneration is linked to her moral decline—seems to have inherited a weakness from her ancestors, who belonged to the aristocracy. He writes that Wood portrays the

¹⁷ Levison is clearly the vice figure in *East Lynne*. Not only is his behavior despicable from beginning to end, but he follows the traditional pattern of vice characters outlined by Alan Dessen in his book *Shakespeare and the Late Moral Plays*. In sixteenth-century English drama, the vice typically follows a “two-phase” action, as Dessen terms it: the character is first active and stirs up trouble, often with an assumed identity, and then he is unmasked and punished/brought under control. Levison follows this traditional pattern perfectly, especially since he adopts the identity of Thorn in order to get away with his vicious activities. When his true identity is finally revealed, he is punished and brought under control.

aristocracy as a species in decline that can only be saved by adapting to bourgeois ways (which Isabel does not do). Maunder's argument indirectly leads us to another thematic similarity between *East Lynne* and *The Tenant*: changes in traditional class hierarchy. As Maunder notes, *East Lynne* champions the middle class, as the hard-working, almost too-good-to-be-true Mr. Carlyle supplants the deeply-in-debt, aristocratic Mount Severn family as proprietor of East Lynne. *The Tenant* likewise includes a shuffling of classes; Helen comes from an upper-class family compared to Gilbert, who comes from a farming community. Their union at the end offers a compromise between the two classes, balancing out to make them almost like a respectable middle class couple. In contrast, Arthur, like Isabel and Levison, offers a glimpse of the degeneracy of an upper class plagued with idleness and dissipation. Not only is this theme common to both novels, but it is also a theme that has a subversive undercurrent. After all, the dismantling of the upper class and championing of the middle class disrupts the status quo of a clear class hierarchy. Interestingly, sensation fiction itself represents the class changes that occurred in Victorian England with the rise of the middle classes, for it brought the reading of the kitchen into the drawing room; in other words, both lower and upper classes read—and enjoyed—sensation novels.

East Lynne and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* are not just sensational and potentially subversive, but they are also progressive in their suggestion that marriage must be a partnership in order to function at all. No matter how good, smart, or moral Helen and Isabel are at the beginning of their marriages, they cannot preserve a stable home if their husbands fail to fulfill their roles. Contemporary critic Arlene Jackson, writing about *The Tenant*, acknowledges how progressive such a message is: “Anne Brontë also answers a question that other novels of her time do not ask: what happens to a marriage and to the innocent partner when one partner

(specifically, the male) leads a solipsistic life” (476). Helen and Arthur offer the more obvious example of a dysfunctional marriage, as Arthur clearly fails to treat his wife and son with any sort of respect, love, or kindness, thus driving Helen to break free from their household at Grassdale. *East Lynne* offers a less obvious example of a failed partnership, for it seems that Mr. Carlyle is the perfect husband—hard-working, up-standing, and loving. However, I would argue that it is ultimately Mr. Carlyle who drives Isabel to elope by treating their marriage as a dictatorship, rather than a partnership.

There are two clear ways in which Mr. Carlyle contributes to Isabel’s act of adultery. While it is true that Isabel clearly has feelings for Levison, she never acts on those feelings, even though she has ample opportunity, *until* Carlyle pushes her to her limit by making her think he and Barbara are romantically involved. To be sure, he never purposely builds the illusion of an affair, but he is guilty in that he does not trust his wife enough to confide in her. Even the fateful night of Isabel’s elopement, Carlyle is not honest with her when he breaks their dinner engagement, evasively claiming that “some business has arisen” (315). A fault of men throughout Victorian literature is their assumption that by not speaking to a woman about a certain subject, she will have no knowledge of the subject; here, Carlyle’s assumption that Isabel knows nothing of his meetings with Barbara leads to disaster, for she has indeed noted the meetings and incorrectly interpreted their purpose. If Carlyle had treated Isabel as an equal partner in marriage, he would have confided in Isabel about the business with Richard Hare. However, even when Isabel asks point-blank “Must the business be kept from me?” (309), Carlyle does indeed keep the business from her.

In addition to Carlyle hiding his involvement with Richard Hare’s case from Isabel, Carlyle contributes to Isabel’s fall by not honoring or seriously considering her wishes. For

example, when Isabel is abroad and finds Levison is in the same place, she begs Carlyle to stay with her until her return to England, and when he says he cannot, she asks to return to England with him, a request to which Carlyle smiles and answers no. Thus, Isabel is left under the influence of Levison for a longer period of time. Again, Levison's presence is forced on Isabel when Carlyle offers to let him stay at East Lynne. When Isabel finds out that Levison is to visit, she plainly tells Carlyle, "I do not wish Francis Levison to stay at East Lynne" (274). Although Carlyle says he wouldn't have invited Levison had he known, the damage is already done for Carlyle failed to consult Isabel in the first place. Time and again, then, we see Carlyle make decisions for Isabel without consulting her, and when she does express her desire, he often brushes it aside. In order for her to get her way, as she eventually does with returning to England promptly from being abroad, it is only after "she urged it at length with tears" that Carlyle gives in (268).

Clearly, then, Isabel and Carlyle's marriage is not a partnership, just as Helen and Arthur's is not a partnership. However, both novels end with a marriage that holds true promise and, not coincidentally, is a partnership. At *The Tenant's* conclusion, Helen and Gilbert unite, Gilbert having learned from Helen to obey propriety and cool his temper, and Helen having learned from Gilbert to be loving and trustful once again. Helen and Gilbert's love for little Arthur also suggests a future partnership; according to Gruner, "shared parenthood has, we are reassured, brought the couple peace and happiness" (312). *East Lynne* likewise ends with shared parenthood as part of a larger partnership, for Barbara's final lines reveal her feeling that Carlyle's children are becoming her own. The final chapter demonstrates how Barbara and Carlyle's marriage is closer to a partnership—and thus more successful—than was his first marriage with Isabel. It concludes with Carlyle preventing a second marriage crisis by telling

Barbara honestly that the now-dead governess was none other than his first wife. Barbara is then inspired to confess her jealous feelings towards Mr. Carlyle, thus ridding herself of them, rather than letting them fester. The first, failed marriage, then, has taught husband and wife not to conceal things from one another, thus setting Barbara up for a more successful turn as Carlyle's wife because she is his partner rather than his ward.

We have seen, then, that *East Lynne* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* share important similarities, both in sensational elements—adultery, disguise, abandonment of a living spouse—and in common themes—maternity motivating heroines to extreme action, the degeneration of a good person over time, changes in class organization, and the view of marriage as a partnership. With all these similarities, why is it that the two novels did not share a common fate? In order to answer this question, we must start at the source of the stream—that is, the original reviews of both books—in order to understand what caused the divergent currents of thought regarding these books.

Chapter II: Original Reception

“Too often do reviewers remind us of the mob of Astrologers, Chaldeans, and Soothsayers gathered before the ‘writing on the wall’, and unable to read the characters or make known the interpretation.”

—Charlotte Brontë, Preface to the 1850 edition of *Agnes Grey*

When studying *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *East Lynne*, it quickly becomes clear that the original reception of both books set the stage for their divergent level of popularity in the years following their publication. While I do not contend that early reviews are directly

responsible for the books' original popularity (or lack thereof), the early reviews are useful in showing that Victorian critical attitudes towards *The Tenant* largely differed from attitudes towards *East Lynne*. A brief comparison of nine early reviews of *The Tenant* with eight of *East Lynne* shows numerically the difference in how these books were treated.¹⁸ Of the nine for *The Tenant*, none are wholly positive reviews while five—including one by Charlotte Brontë—are strongly negative. *East Lynne*, on the other hand, has three strongly positive reviews and five reviews that are praise mixed with acknowledgments of negative qualities of the text. Of course, there is room for debate as to how one might categorize these reviews as positive, negative, or both. For example, Miriam Allott's introduction to *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, cites only two that refuse to see any good in Anne's novel. Speaking in broad terms without quibbling over classification helps, however, in highlighting the unequivocal difference between the original critical receptions of the two novels, especially in that it shows the absence of any overwhelmingly positive reviews for *The Tenant*. Furthermore, it shows a negativity towards *The Tenant* that is considerably less prevalent in *East Lynne*'s reviews. However, generalizations are dangerous because they do not allow us to fully understand the nuanced differences in opinion concerning these novels. Therefore, in this chapter, I will turn to three magazines that reviewed both *The Tenant* when it was first published and *East Lynne* immediately after its publication—the *Spectator*, *Athenaeum*, and *Fraser's*—to show that it is the form of the novels that caused their differing receptions and created anxiety among *The Tenant*'s reviewers, an anxiety that is absent in *East Lynne*'s reviews.

¹⁸ The reviews I am using are as follows. For *East Lynne*: *Spectator* (September 28, 1861), *Daily News* (October 7, 1861), *Athenaeum* (October 12, 1861), *John Bull* (weekly review column from 1860-61), *Literary Gazette* (October 19, 1861), *Examiner* (November 10, 1861), *The Times* (January 25, 1862), *Saturday Review* (February 15, 1862). For *The Tenant*: *Spectator* (July 8, 1848), *Athenaeum* (July 8, 1848), *Examiner* (July 29, 1848), *Literary World* (August 12, 1848), *North American Review* (October 1848), *Sharpe's London Magazine* (August 1848), *Rambler* (September 1848), *Fraser's Magazine* (April 1849), Charlotte Brontë's "Biographical Notice" (September 1850).

It may seem that a difference in reception is logical given that one belonged to the genre of sensation fiction while the other did not. However, the differing attitude has nothing to do with genre since *East Lynne* was treated as its own book until mid-1862, rather than being conceptualized as part of the sensation genre. Too often, modern critics assume that the dawn of sensation fiction caused an immediate outcry among defenders of traditional morality and the domestic novel, defenders like Margaret Oliphant. However, it wasn't until May of 1862, a full year after *East Lynne*'s publication, that Oliphant published the article "Sensation Novels" in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, an article which denounced the sensation genre. The trend of denunciatory reviews continued with essays such as Henry Mansel's 1862 "Sensation Novels" in the *Quarterly Review*, *Fraser's* 1863 "The Popular Novels of the Year," and the *Christian Remembrancer's* 1864 "Our Female Sensation Novelists." *Fraser's* "The Popular Novels of the Year" offers a particularly clear view of a trend that emerges when looking at the bigger picture of how *East Lynne* reviews relate to one another: while *East Lynne* fares well in its own reviews, reviews on sensation fiction that include *East Lynne* tend to be more scathing. To explore this point, I will examine *Fraser's* review of *East Lynne* before turning to the *Spectator*, *Athenaeum*, and ultimately *Fraser's* review of *The Tenant*.

The review begins with high praise for *East Lynne*: "The success of *East Lynne* was great, and deservedly so. It is precisely the kind of story to attract all classes of readers. There is no lack of plot or imagination, the characters are pleasing and life-like, the conversations are lively and spirited,—three essential qualifications in a good novel" (253). Note particularly that it attracts "all classes of readers," a detail that, as we saw in chapter I of this paper, adds to the sensationalism of *East Lynne*. Here, this is counted as a positive aspect, among the other, more textual-oriented praises of plot, character, and written dialogue. The reviewer does not, however,

enumerate negative aspects the way he does the positive; instead, he glosses over them, saying, “Whatever its faults may be, it will probably always remain a popular book” (255).

The negative critique comes as the review stops focusing on *East Lynne* as its own entity and begins opening up to include several of Wood’s key books such as *The Channings*, which the reviewer describes as “wanting in force, in plot, in love-making, in almost everything which goes to make up a novel,” and *Mrs. Halliburton’s Troubles*, which it pegs as “a repetition of *The Channings*” (255). The review continues to become more generally about sensation fiction as it includes some of Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s works like *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *Aurora Floyd*. The reviewer proves to be conscious of both the merits of sensation fiction and its problems, such as when he writes, “the style of writing is one of their great charm; for a good story told in bad English loses half its merit. These novels may be full of mistakes and inconsistencies throughout, so far as the story is concerned, but the language is always correct, easy, fluent, and agreeable” (257). Interestingly, in the next paragraph, he singles out Wood as being “apt to make use of words and expressions which grate on the ear of a strict grammarian.” This is one of the few places in which a review leans towards treating *East Lynne* negatively, but even so, it is far from harsh criticism, for it conveys the sense that it is only a small part of the text—certain words and phrases—that cause the problem. Still, the review becomes increasingly scathing towards sensation novels until he characterizes them as having “perverted and vitiated taste” and happily predicts that sensation fiction “is dying a natural death” (263). This review, then, replicates in miniature the overall trend in *East Lynne*’s reception: when considered on its own, as in early reviews, the novel receives praise, yet when later grouped with sensation fiction, it draws censure. The implication of such a trend is that *East Lynne* itself was not the most sensational sensation novel, and was therefore slightly less controversial when considered on its

own terms. However, the moment it is placed in a sensation fiction context, the mere suggestion of it belonging to this controversial genre makes it more threatening, and thus more likely to draw a negative review.

My definition of “original reviews” for both *East Lynne* and *The Tenant* are reviews that were written within a year of each book’s first publication. Therefore, the difference in critical attitude is not caused by genre because the original reviews of *East Lynne* considered the book on its own terms. Furthermore, since *The Tenant* and *East Lynne* both include similar sensational and subversive topics, the difference in original reception cannot be attributed to content. Although the reviewers are wary of subject matter in both, there is an underlying negativity and uneasiness about *The Tenant* that is absent in reviewers’ attitudes towards *East Lynne*. By examining reviews from the same magazines for both books, a pattern emerges that suggests the form of the novels is responsible for the difference, for the underlying anxiety towards *The Tenant*.

External Factors in the Early Reception

“The violent stimulant of serial publication—of *weekly* publication, with its necessity for frequent and rapid recurrence of piquant situation and startling incidence—is the thing of all others most likely to develop the germ, and bring it to fuller and darker bearing.”

– Margaret Oliphant, “Sensation Novels,” 1862

To make sure that it is indeed the form that accounts for the difference in critical opinion, let us first consider external factors—that is, factors that have to do with something other than the texts themselves—that may have had an effect on the books’ receptions. For example, a significant difference between *The Tenant* and *East Lynne*’s original reception—a difference that is perhaps partially responsible for the fate of the books—is that a single review of *East Lynne*

from *The Times* in January, 1862, managed to spark such interest in the book that this one review alone is “generally believed to have been responsible for turning the novel into a cult book” (Maunder “Introduction” 712); *The Tenant* never had a review that came close to having a similar effect. Interestingly, *The Times*¹⁹ does not give *East Lynne* a perfect review; instead, it first lists the negative aspects of the book, noting that too much of the plot relies on unbelievable coincidences, that the villain is “commonplace” and does not live up to his part, that Lady Isabel is “unsatisfactory,” and that the trial scene is an inaccurate representation of how English courts operate. It does, however, call *East Lynne* “the best novel of the season” (note the echo of the *Athenaeum*’s recommendation from nearly a year earlier) and praises it for being “highly entertaining,” for its plot and characterization, and for Wood’s ability to successfully capture male characters. The reviewer concludes, “With all its artistic defects this is a first-rate story,” a statement that succinctly captures how many reviewers felt towards the book. It is significant, though, that not one of the artistic defects detailed have anything to do with form. Instead, the defects relate to plot, character, and accuracy, *not* style, structure, or narrative technique.

It didn’t help *The Tenant* that it never received a review that sparked interest as *The Times* did for *East Lynne*; even more damaging than the absence of a positively influential review, however, was a strongly negative review of the book, written by Anne’s own sister Charlotte in her 1850 “Biographical Notice” that was published in the second edition of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*. Among Charlotte’s more scathing remarks is her contention that “the choice of subject was an entire mistake” (55). She describes Anne’s motivation for writing the book as “pure” but “slightly morbid,” explaining that her dedication to truly represent her characters “brought on her misconstruction and some abuse.” Charlotte paints a happy

¹⁹ The review is printed on one page in *The Times*; thus, all quotes come from page 6 of the January 25, 1862 review.

picture of neither *The Tenant* nor Anne herself; it is no wonder, then, that “Charlotte’s rating of her sisters’ respective merits” is to blame “for the diminishing interest in Anne’s writing in the 1850s and beyond” (Alexander and Smith 138). In fact, from 1850 until the mid-twentieth century, Anne’s work did not draw critical attention, while Charlotte and Emily’s did.

Ultimately, however, the review in *The Times* and Charlotte’s “Biographical Notice” do not account for the underlying negativity that comes through in the *Spectator*, *Athenaeum*, and *Fraser’s*. With the exception of a review in the *Saturday Review*, *The Times* was the last review published in the period I have defined as “original reviews.” Likewise, Charlotte’s “Biographical Notice” was published after all of *The Tenant*’s reviews examined above. Thus, while these two reviews impacted the novels’ overall reception history, they are not responsible for the *original* difference in treatment since they were published late in the “original” reception period.

One of the biggest changes in the literary world between 1848 and 1861 was publishing practices, and thus it seems that this may be a viable explanation for the difference in the books’ reception. Although serial fiction in magazines was first produced on a large commercial scale in the 1830s (Wynne 11), *The Tenant* was not serialized, and thus only a small quantity of first editions were printed by Anne’s publisher, T.C. Newby. On the opposite end of the spectrum, *East Lynne* was published in serial installments in a family magazine, a fact that impacted the way it was written. Sensation fiction generally had a symbiotic relationship with the publishing world; while sensation novels boosted the popularity of the magazines in which they were serialized, serialization encouraged the novels to be filled with interest-arousing cliffhangers between installments and allowed those novels to reach a broader audience (Oliphant 44). The equivalent to the “watching of television serials in the twentieth century,” serialized novels gave

common reading material to the entire family, as magazines were geared toward the whole family unit (Wynne 12). Clearly, then, *East Lynne* had a greater chance of reaching many people than did *The Tenant*, whose original volumes would have been affordable only by the middle class and above.

However, this perceived difference fails to take into account how Gérin characterizes the sale of *The Tenant* as “an immediate and sensational success” (260). Indeed, *The Tenant* sold out quickly and a second edition was soon prepared. Thus, although *The Tenant*’s number of sales compared to *East Lynne*’s is extremely modest, it caused a small stir on the literary scene when considered proportionally to *East Lynne*. More importantly, although the price and number of copies available may have affected the reading population, the original critics judged the work for its merit and not relative to its success, although they certainly acknowledged and made predictions as to the books’ future. Their primary concerns were subject matter, characterization, style, and moralizing moments, *not* how many copies had sold that week or month. Although publishing practices certainly had an effect on number of copies sold, as well as the audience reached, they cannot be held accountable for the difference in the books’ original reception.

As we have just seen, then, the factors that may have had an effect on the books’ receptions actually influenced the number of copies sold and audience reached instead of the critical opinions. In other words, the external factors affected aspects of the books’ original sales, leaving the critics to form their opinions based on the text itself.

Spectator

“It is one of the great misfortunes of the present manufacture of novels that the supply of incidents is becoming used up. The combinations of ordinary life are, we may fairly presume, inexhaustible,

but to interesting combinations there must be some attainable limit, and many of our novel writers seem to think it has been reached.”

—Review of *East Lynne*, *Spectator*, 1861

Chronologically, the *Spectator* was the first of the three exemplary magazines currently in question to comment on both novels, but what makes it an even more fitting starting point in a comparison of reviews is that its critique of subject matter is remarkably similar for both books. For *The Tenant*, the reviewer notes that “there seems in the writer a morbid love for the coarse, not to say the brutal; so that his subjects are not very attractive, and the more forcible are displeasing and repulsive, from their gross, physical, or profligate substratum” (249). He continues, saying that bad people and situations should not be chosen for writing topics simply because they exist, but rather that the topic’s “general or typical character is a point to consider” when selecting subject matter. The *Spectator*’s reviewer of *East Lynne* might well have given the same advice in topic selection to Wood, for he claims that “if she is ever to assume a place among novelists she must search for incidents more in accordance with the facts of life, and less open to the suspicion of passion, the limits at which keen interest becomes a morbid curiosity” (706). Note how each reviewer refers to the “morbid” interest of these two books, revealing an underlying fear of these books to inspire a “morbid curiosity” or “morbid love” not just in the author, but—more threateningly—in the reader. In short, both reviewers disapprove of the subject matter in their respective novels, a disapproval which stems from the same fear of gruesome fascination with “coarse” subjects.

The common ground does not end here; both reviews also contain an evaluation of each novel’s execution as well, but in this evaluation, the books are viewed in divergent ways. *The Tenant*’s review in regards to execution is decidedly negative as the reviewer first criticizes the

structure of the novel. He expresses his dislike of the opening frame story, identifying Helen's diary as the "main story" and describing Gilbert's part of the narrative as "scarcely enough to sustain the reader for a volume" (249). He proceeds to criticize the style of the novel, saying, "It is not only the subject of this novel, however, that is objectionable, but the manner of treating it. There is a coarseness of tone throughout the writing of all these Bells" (250). To a modern reader, this assessment of the Brontës' writing (in this case, particularly Anne's) may seem surprising, especially in comparison to what the *Spectator* has to say of *East Lynne*: "Mrs. Wood can write a good novel. The second plot of "East Lynne", as we have said, is excellently worked out; the authoress really understands country life . . . and she can sketch odd or strong characters unusually well" (706). Based on the modern view of sensation fiction versus a Brontë, the remarks from these reviewers seem as though they should be exchanged. Like the rest of its sensation novel family, *East Lynne* receives attention today for its cultural value rather than its literary value; critics view it as a piece of Victorian pop culture, rather than a well-wrought urn. Yet here, the *Spectator* extols the positive aspects of the way *East Lynne* is written, while twelve years earlier, it had characterized Anne Brontë's style as coarse. This difference is surprising but significant, for it is specifically the form—structure and style—that causes the critics in the *Spectator* to praise *East Lynne* and disapprove of *The Tenant*.

Athenaeum

"Written to meet an ephemeral demand, aspiring only to an ephemeral existence..."

—Henry Mansel on sensation novels, 1863

With a circulation of 2,100 subscribers per issue (Thompson 122), the *Athenaeum* was "one of the most prestigious of the weekly literary journals" (Maunder "Introduction" 707). It

typically reviewed works promptly after they came out, and is regarded today as having been particularly fair in its remarks (Thompson 120).²⁰ In one respect, the *Athenaeum*, like the *Spectator*, reviewed both *The Tenant* and *East Lynne* in a similar way—it recommends both books as interesting. Of Anne Brontë’s novel, the *Athenaeum* offers its “honest recommendation of *Wildfell Hall* as the most interesting novel which we have read for a month past” (251), a statement which is closely echoed for *East Lynne* in 1861: “This is one of the best novels published for a season” (707). Notice how the recommendation for both books, though enthusiastic, is qualified by a small time period, a month or a season. Perhaps this can be attributed to the large number of reviews the *Athenaeum* produced as a weekly journal committed to reviewing novels shortly after they were published. Still, the recommendation qualified by a small time period gives each review an almost prophetic feel, as after each novel had drained its original popularity, they slipped into obscurity for a number of years until recently, when scholarship on Anne has been making a comeback and the feminist movement has revived interest in sensation fiction.

Having given both *The Tenant* and *East Lynne* a strong recommendation, the *Athenaeum*, like the *Spectator*, includes more detailed comments on specific aspects of each text, and again like the *Spectator*, the *Athenaeum* is somewhat harsh towards *The Tenant*, but very laudatory of *East Lynne*. *The Tenant*’s review begins with the observation that the works of the Bells bear striking resemblances to one another, so much so that the reviewer believes “they have issued from the same mould” (251), by which he means that they have come from the same family, not from the same person as many people of the time period wrongly believed. The reviewer declines to detail the similarities he sees in their work, but he finds one aspect so troubling that

²⁰ For further detailing of popular periodicals of the day such as *Cornhill* and the *Quarterly Review*, see Nicola Diane Thompson’s *Reviewing Sex: Gender and the Reception of Victorian Novels*, particularly the Appendix beginning on page 120.

he “cannot remain silent: —the Bells must be warned against their fancy for dwelling upon what is disagreeable” (251). He then moves the critique from the Bells generally to Anne specifically in his next sentence, saying, “The brutified estate of Mr. Huntingdon might have been displayed within a smaller compass in place of being elaborated with the fond minuteness of Jan Steen” (251).²¹ If we examine this quote in direct relation to the novel, it is clear that this is a comment on the form of *The Tenant*, for it is specifically Helen’s diary that gives Anne the opportunity to portray vice (Huntingdon’s “Brutified Estate”) in great detail. The reviewer is indirectly suggesting that the diary be replaced or contained “within a smaller compass,” rather than the 28-chapter account that Anne made it to be. Thus, it is not the vice itself that the reviewer specifically critiques in *The Tenant*; instead, it is the “dwelling upon,” the minute detailing of vice that incurs his disapproval, disapproval that is really more related to Anne’s form—how she handles her subject matter—than the subject matter itself.

The reviewer is, however, somewhat appreciative of Anne, for—continuing his pun on the name “Bell”—he says, “Were the metal from this Bell foundry of baser quality than it is it would be lost time to point out flaws and take exceptions. As matters stand, our hints may not be without their use to future ‘castings’” (251). In other words, Anne’s work is of a caliber that is worth notice and worth making an effort to improve, yet improvement is needed nonetheless. The “flaw” that he has specifically pointed out in Anne’s work is the form, as his Jan Steen remark—along with a brief critique of an inconsistency in Helen’s character—is the only comment that pertains directly to Anne’s work, rather than the Brontës’ generally.

Yet while Anne receives a measure of censure in her *Athenaeum* review, Wood receives high praise: “The plot is interesting, intricate and well carried out; the characters are life-like,

²¹ Jan Steen was a Dutch artist famous for his genre paintings, paintings which depicted in detail scenes from ordinary life (Microsoft Encarta 2002). For examples of his paintings, please see the appendix.

and the writing simple and natural. There is nothing forced, nothing disjointed or unfinished about it; no discrepancies in the story” (707). Notice how in just two sentences, the reviewer has praised nearly every aspect of the text—plot, characterization, style, and pacing. This is clearly far more outspoken than the veiled “were the metal of a baser quality” compliment bestowed upon Anne. The reviewer of *East Lynne* does, however, mention a negative aspect or two, saying, “There may be a little too much repetition of the trial scenes—a little fine-drawing and attempt at melo-drama in the third volume; but the book is a good book, and will be, no doubt, a successful one” (707). Although this sentence leans more towards criticism than praise, it is very much softened, both by the reviewer’s tentativeness in saying “there *may* be a *little* too much” and by the concluding statement of the book’s overall greatness. As in the *Spectator*, it is once again *East Lynne* that is praised for its style and characterization while *The Tenant* receives an indirect critique of its form. Perhaps evidence of the *Athenaeum*’s fairness, the *Athenaeum* does at least give *The Tenant* its “honest recommendation,” an improvement over the *Spectator*.

Fraser’s Magazine

“Let the novelist, in default of any better teacher, tell the people, in his clumsy way, that God did not mean them to be mere drudge-breeding animals, but men and women, with passions and affections as graceful and enthusiastic, as chivalrous and divine, as those of ancient knight-errant or poet of modern days.”

—*Fraser’s*, “Recent Novels,” 1849

If the reviews in the *Spectator* are somewhat disapproving and the reviews in the *Athenaeum* are on the whole more approving, *Fraser’s Magazine* falls somewhere between the two as it takes an ambivalent stance towards both books. Interestingly, like the other two magazines, *Fraser’s* also praises *East Lynne*’s style, but criticizes *The Tenant*’s, once again

implying without specifically stating that, to a Victorian reader, there is something disagreeable about *The Tenant*'s form. Since we have already explored *Fraser's* treatment of *East Lynne*—first positively when considered on its own terms, then negatively when speaking in terms of genre—the detailed reading of the *Fraser's* review for *East Lynne* will not be repeated here.

Fraser's discussion of *The Tenant* is part of its April 1849 article entitled, “Recent Novels,” a discussion which begins by stating that *The Tenant* “is, taken altogether, a powerful and an interesting book” (423). Despite the blunt statement, “The fault of the book is coarseness,” early on, the first part of the review appreciates Anne’s work in a way that others do not. It praises her for her ability to represent the dark side of life without shying away or flinching. The reviewer acknowledges that most people will fault the book for its choice of topic, but points out in a perceptive analogy, “Shall we despise the surgeon because he does not faint in the dissecting-room?” (424). In other words, the reviewer appreciates Anne’s ability to depict the brutality of human nature without compromising, a statement which seems to appreciate the form of her novel, for it is the first-person narration that allows Anne a close examination of human nature. However, as the review continues, we increasingly see an anxiety towards form that the reviewer does not explicitly state. Nevertheless, this anxiety manifests itself in its accusations of “coarseness” and an almost willful misreading of the text.

After an initial reflection on Anne’s ability to unflinchingly face the truth, the reviewer expounds the book’s faults: the satire is coarse and inferior to Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*; the text feels like a caricature of people the novelist knows and is ranting against; the form is faulty because the diary is unrealistic and unpleasant. The first point to notice in this negativity is the way in which this review joins the chorus of reviewers who described *The Tenant* as coarse : “there seems to be in the writer a morbid love for the **coarse**” (*Spectator*); “The mind that

conceived [*The Tenant and Jane Eyre*] is one of great strength and fervor, but **coarse** almost to brutality” (*Literary World*); “so **coarse** and disgusting the language put into the mouths of some of the characters, that the reviewer to whom we entrusted it returned it to us, saying it was unfit to be noticed in the pages of *Sharpe*” (*Sharpe’s London Magazine*); “no man would have made his sex appear at once **coarse**, brutal, and contemptibly weak, at once disgusting and ridiculous” (*Sharpe’s*); “all unnecessary **coarseness** is a defect—a defect which injures the real usefulness and real worth of the book” (*Fraser’s*).²² A detailed look at these quotes shows that their accusations of “coarse”ness apply to different aspects of the novel and even to Anne herself; the *Spectator* and *Literary World* go so far as to call the writer coarse, *Sharpe’s* highlights the coarse language and characters, and *Fraser’s* calls the book itself coarse. But what exactly do these reviewers mean when they use the word “coarse”? The first definition for “coarse” in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is “Ordinary, common, mean (in the depreciatory sense of these epithets); base; of inferior quality or value; of little account,” which is helpful to keep in mind, but perhaps the more important definition—especially in relation to Anne as coarse and the text itself as coarse—is, “Rough, harsh, or rude, to the taste, perception, or æsthetic sense.” A final sense of “coarse” relevant to *Sharpe’s* use of the word is, “Of personal behaviour, manners, language, etc.: Unrefined; rough, rude, uncivil, vulgar.”

This “coarse” repetition is significant because it encapsulates the attitude of many reviewers towards both the book—including its scenes and characters—and the author. In many cases, even if the reviewer does not use the word “coarse” itself, he still critiques the novel for what amounts to the more or less the same thing, as in the *Rambler’s* description of scenes in the diary as being “of the most disgusting and revolting species” (267). Yet while this attention to coarseness makes the reviews sound negative, as indeed many of them were meant to be, from a

²² My emphasis in all quotes

modern standpoint it is easier to see that an accusation of coarse characters and coarse scenes may not necessarily be a bad critique. After all, it was Anne's goal to portray the true nature of vice; in her own words, "When we have to do with vice and vicious characters, I maintain it is better to depict them as they really are than as they would wish to appear" (253). That so many reviewers detect "coarseness" is a sign that *The Tenant* was actually a successful novel, successful by Anne's standards. However, for Victorians generally, this chorus of "coarseness" is a vague way of expressing disapproval of some facet of the book, and thus an indication of a general anxiety aroused by this book. Although the reviewers themselves do not explicitly acknowledge this anxiety, let alone indicate that the form lies at the root of all this quiet anxiety, the existence of such a strikingly similar critique across a range of reviewers suggests that there is a common feeling towards *The Tenant* that lurks, an unseen and unheard presence, behind Victorian critics' articulated opinions of the book.

While the "coarse" chorus reverberates throughout early opinions of *The Tenant*, it is notably absent from *East Lynne* reviews. This absence can be attributed to the way in which the actual acts of immorality in *East Lynne*—the murder and adultery—occur offstage so that the reader does not actually witness viciousness in the way that he does in *The Tenant*. It is ironic, though, that the style of *East Lynne* should escape such critique, for in the sense of "rough, harsh...to the aesthetic sense," there are many spots in *East Lynne* that grate on the artistic nerve. An example that can be found throughout is Wood's tendency to be overly dramatic, as in the following lines: "And Lady Isabel remained in her chamber, alone. Alone: alone! *Alone* for evermore" (363). While lines like these may be a source of comic relief for a modern reader, they certainly do not contribute to any sense of subtle artistic craft. Other lapses in aesthetic value include Wood's tendency to give repetitious representations of her characters to ensure the

reader grasps the type of person she's trying to portray. The reviewer in the *Athenaeum* hints at Wood's tendency to be repetitive when he notes, "There may be a little too much repetition of the trial scenes" (707). While *East Lynne* is viewed by feminists today as worth studying, few if any modern critics note *East Lynne* as an aesthetic achievement. In fact, Lyn Pykett, in her introduction to her book *The 'Improper' Feminine*, summarizes this attitude well: "In re-examining these texts it is not my intention to insist that they should be recognised as neglected, forgotten, or suppressed masterpieces of English literature" (ix). As we saw earlier, modern critics such as Pykett highlight sensation fiction's *cultural* value, rather than any artistic value that the idea of a masterpiece may connote. In other words, today's tendency is to view sensation novels as being more "coarse" (that is, harsh to the aesthetic sensibility) than a Brontë novel—precisely the opposite of what the original reviewers saw, as *Fraser's* demonstrates.

Fraser's also shows, albeit inadvertently, an uneasiness towards *The Tenant* in that the review seems an almost willful misreading of the book. On one hand, *Fraser's* claims that "our worst complaint against fiction-mongers is, that they are so tame, so common-place, so shamefully afraid of wonders, of ninety-nine hundredths of what a man may see every day of the week by putting his head out of his own window. You old whited sepulchre of a world! there are dead men's bones enough inside you, of which you could give but an ugly account!" (425). On the other, *Fraser's* ridicules *The Tenant* because in it, "the dark side of every body and every thing is dilated on; we had said, revelled in" (426). These two statements seem completely contradictory, for rather than praising *The Tenant* as precisely that Victorian rarity which gives an "ugly account" of the commonplace, the reviewer scathingly remarks on its portrayal of "the dark side." The willful misreading comes in when the reviewer compares the book to *Vanity Fair*:

The author [of *The Tenant*] has not the tact which enabled Mr. Thackeray, in *Vanity Fair*, to construct a pleasing whole out of most unpleasing materials, by a harmonious unity of parts, and, above all, by a tone of tender grace and solemn ironic indignation, in the midst of all his humour, spreading over and softening down the whole;--that true poetic instinct, which gives to even the coarsest of Fielding's novels and Shakespeare's comedies, considered as wholes, a really pure and lofty beauty. (426)

By trying to read *The Tenant* in the context of a book that seeks to point out human viciousness through “a tone of tender grace” and “humour,” *Fraser*'s misses the point of Anne's work entirely and sets it up for failure. There is little humor in *The Tenant*, and Anne—by her own statement in the preface to the second edition that “I wished to tell the truth”—does not try to create a “pleasing whole.” The misreading seems purposeful, for in the reviewer's earlier statement about wishing that fiction were less “tame,” the reviewer acknowledges his capacity to appreciate realistic portrayals of everyday life, even if those portrayals result in an “ugly account.” However, when confronted with a book that “tell[s] the truth,” all he can do is try to make it fit within a satiric, *Vanity Fair* context, rather than appreciating it for what it is. In other words, there is something about *The Tenant*'s honesty that is so threatening to his Victorian sensibilities that he seeks to lessen its threat by comparing it to *Vanity Fair* or Shakespearean comedies.

Further evidence of the purposeful misreading is that while he first prophesies that “[the world] will revile Acton Bell for telling us, with painful circumstantiality, what the house of a profligate, uneducated country squire is like,” he later likens Anne's characters to “caricatures from the life” (424). The *Oxford English Dictionary* uses the word “ludicrous” in each definition of “caricature,” thus confirming that the reviewer's usage of such a word implies a form of “jesting” or “laughter” (“ludicrous,” *OED*). Once again, the reviewer seems unable to face the

reality of Anne's narrative, preferring instead to avoid what is in front of him by trying to read it in a light, humorous sense.

Fraser's review also includes a more explicit negative reaction to *The Tenant's* form, specifically the way in which a portion is told through Helen's diary. The reviewer writes:

The author introduces, for instance, a long diary, kept by the noble and unhappy wife of a profligate squire; and would that every man in England might read and lay to heart that horrible record. But what greater mistake, to use the mildest term, can there be than to fill such a diary with written oaths and curses, with details of drunken scenes which no wife, such as poor Helen is represented, would have the heart, not to say the common decency, to write down as they occurred? Dramatic probability and good feeling are equally outraged by such a method. (424)

This quote is particularly interesting because it starts with an acknowledgement that Anne's method of telling the tale through a diary is an effective one. The desire that every man should read it and take it to heart suggests that the diary is a powerful way of conveying a character, of making known that character's innermost thoughts as well as her daily interactions. However, the reviewer ultimately does not approve of Brontë's use of the diary because he does not find it convincing; in other words, he does not accept the diary as true to life, and therefore his final analysis of adopting such a form is negative. Even the wording of his critique becomes significant, for he specifically notes that it is not just flawed from an aesthetic point of view ("dramatic probability"), but from a personal standpoint as the reader ("good feeling"). Later, he again makes a direct, negative statement on the form, saying that "many other scenes seem as vulgar and improbable in conception, as they are weak and disgusting in execution" (426). Execution is essentially equal to form—that is, the way the story is told, in both structural and

stylistic terms. Thus, the reviewer both consciously—as here—and unconsciously—as in the *Vanity Fair* example—objects to the form of *The Tenant*.

The original reviews show an imbalance in critical opinion, one that favors *East Lynne* and disapproves of *The Tenant*. By closely examining each review, it is clear that there is an uneasiness towards *The Tenant*'s form that, though not explicitly addressed in the reviews, permeates Victorian critical opinions of this book. *East Lynne*, on the other hand, at times receives a slap on the wrist for sensational subject matter, but more frequently receives praise for its plot, style, and characterization. In the next chapter, I will explore just what makes the form of *The Tenant* so dangerous and *East Lynne*'s so benign.

Chapter III: Breaking the Victorian Silence—The Effect of Form

As we have just seen, both books contain sensational subject matter, and thus it is not content that is responsible for the original difference in reception; rather, it is the form that causes anxiety in *The Tenant*'s reception and opens the door for praise of Wood's storytelling abilities in *East Lynne*. To understand this difference, it is important to first examine Victorian attitudes towards vice, for it is Anne's detailed depiction of immoral behavior that engenders harsh reviews. *The Tenant* is presented as a truthful representation of reality through its first-person point of view and its structure consisting of a letter and a diary (both very intimate and truthful documents). Conversely, *East Lynne* is told as a story, complete with a third-person perspective and an intrusive narrator that distances the reader and the author from the events that

unfold as though they were happening in a play rather than in real life. As we will see, then, *The Tenant* breaks the conventional silence of the Victorian era, whereas *East Lynne* maintains a proper Victorian distance from vice.

Cultural Anxiety: The Victorian Era and its Mask of Propriety

“The ‘sensation novel’ of our time, however extravagant and unnatural, yet is a sign of the times—evidence of a certain turn of thought and section, of an impatience of old restraints, and craving for some fundamental changes in the working of society.”

– “Our Female Sensation Novelists,” *Christian Remembrancer*, 1864

Andrew Maunder characterizes the Victorian era as a time when “the nation’s superficial success was, it would seem, a veneer that hid both ‘mental alienation’ and immorality” (“Stepchildren” 59). Indeed, England made many advances during this time period as the industrial revolution brought new technology and the empire continued to prosper. However, these advances often came at the expense of exploited colonial areas and over-worked lower class citizens (including children), while problems like pollution also became prominent. Thus, Victorians used prosperity as a mask to hide a wide range of decay, a habit that they applied to more than just the economic realm.

In her preface to the second edition of *The Tenant*, Anne writes, “O Reader! if there were less of this delicate concealment of facts—this whispering ‘Peace, peace’ when there is no peace, there would be less of sin and misery to the young of both sexes who are left to wring their bitter knowledge from experience” (4). Anne’s lament that there needed to be less whispering of “peace” and less concealment points to Victorians’ deepest seated fear—that of facing the “‘mental alienation’ and immorality” beneath the surface of an appropriately tranquil surface. It

is as if Helen Graham's ideas on mothering little Arthur applied to Victorians generally. Just as she sought to prevent Arthur from all contact with vice, rather than letting him become virtuous by being exposed to vice and refusing it, so too was the Victorian era marked by a carefully contrived ignorance of vice. In exploring this theme of immorality lurking beneath a respectable surface appearance, it is clear that gender is the chief determinant in dictating proper behavior. While women were supposed to be innocent, charming angels of the house, men were expected to be worldly gentlemen. However, like Britain's "superficial success," these idealized gender roles often fell into the same trap of being a disguise to cover up immorality.

By labeling woman as the "angel of the house" and emphasizing her important role as the moral force of the family, Victorians masked the reality that marriage defined women as property rather than as people. Critic Sally Mitchell details this grim reality:

A woman who married disappeared as a legal entity. Her husband owned all she possessed and everything she might earn. He could restrain and chastise her—lock her up, keep her from seeing her children, beat her at will—so long as he did not endanger her life. She couldn't sue him or charge him with battery because, in the eyes of the courts, she had no separate existence; any legal action she entered had to be taken jointly with her husband, and under his name. Rape was, of course, impossible within marriage: by signing the register a woman issued a blanket consent, good at any time and under any circumstances. (xi)

Furthermore, women did not have a right to their own children, not even after the passage of the Custody of Infants Act in 1839. Although a small victory for women, the act allowed for nothing more than "the right for a married woman separated from her husband to petition chancery for an order to see her child 'at such times and subject to such regulations as it shall deem convenient'" (Mitchell 24). Beyond custody, it wasn't until 1870—well after both *The Tenant* and *East Lynne* were published—that the First Married Women's Property Act was

passed, an act which gave women the “right to their own wages earned after marriage, certain investments, and legacies under 200 pounds” (Mitchell “Chronology” xvii).²³

And yet, for all that women stood to lose in marriage, it was their only respectable choice beyond a life as a governess. In order to preserve the integrity of marriage, an extremely high value was placed on women’s pre-marital chastity, for, as William Gayer Starbuck wrote, “When a woman falls from her purity there is no return for her—as well may one attempt to wash the stain from the sullied snow” (qtd. in Mitchell x). In order to eradicate the possibility of sex outside of wedlock, Victorians “kept girls pure by concealing the basic facts of human existence. . . . A doctor’s advice about what to tell girls approaching matrimony is reported by C. Willett Cunningham: ‘Tell her nothing, my dear madam, for if they knew they would not marry’” (qtd. in Mitchell xii). This is one example of how women were kept in check by a concealment of information; however, there are many other examples of similar concealment, directed particularly at women.

Since nineteenth-century women were typically educated in the accomplishments, they were already at a disadvantage for knowledge over their male counterparts. However, women were also typically deprived of knowledge from sources like newspapers that men read primarily in their clubs or offices rather than in the home (Mitchell 22). Women, then, were left to read fiction, for novels and periodicals that published serialized novels were considered reading for the whole family to enjoy (Wynne 16). This is in part what made sensation fiction so sensational, for it brought the sometimes gruesome stories of the newspaper into the realm of fiction, thus allowing women to read of events that were formally known by men.

Victorian men, it seems, often exploited female innocence so that they could both appear respectable but behave viciously. Time and again in Victorian literature, male characters engage

²³ Unless specified as “Chronology,” all Mitchell citations are from her book *The Fallen Angel*.

in immoral behavior and expect their wives or fiancées to either know nothing of this behavior or pretend that they know nothing about it. As *East Lynne* demonstrates, men like Mr. Carlyle rarely, if ever, discussed business details with their wives, and therefore could get away with any number of behaviors while supposedly attending to “business.” In the case of Mr. Carlyle, his secret business is indeed virtuous as he works with Barbara Hare to clear her brother’s name, but Arthur Huntingdon offers a perfect example of using business as a disguise for undesirable behavior when he sends Helen home from London without him, explaining that he “had business that required his presence” (206). As we suspect, and with Helen eventually learn, Arthur’s “business” is carousing with his friends and living a life of dissipation that leaves him “flushed and feverish, listless and languid” (213).

In addition to the “business” excuse, men often hid gambling and drinking under the respectable guise of going to a club. Although it was socially acceptable for men to belong to clubs where they might read the newspaper, dine, and socialize, books like Anthony Trollope’s *The Way We Live Now* reveal the reality of those clubs as places where men engaged in vicious activities. Likewise, William Makepeace Thackeray highlights in *Vanity Fair* how a post in the military made a gentleman admired and respected, and yet some men used their posts as excuses to spend time with their fellow military men, drinking and gambling. Furthermore, men’s behavior was often excused simply because of the differing gender expectations. While a male could keep secret his pre-marital sexual behaviors and still present himself as a gentlemen, women who were sexually experienced before marriage were considered ruined (Mitchell x). This double standard surfaces frequently in Victorian literature in characters like Mr. Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, Angel Claire in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, and Arthur Donnithorne in *Adam Bede*,

all of whom have sexual experience previous to marriage, yet fall in love with a particular woman because of her purity (whether actual or perceived).

These excuses—business, clubs, and male nature—exemplify a few of the ways in which men commonly disguised or hid immoral behavior under a gentlemanly disguise, a disguise facilitated by society's expectations that men inhabited the public sphere. Women, on the other hand, often presented their own mask of respectability in relation to the private sphere. This disguise is perhaps best exemplified in *Lady Audley's Secret*, Braddon's sensation novel published within a year of *East Lynne*. Blonde-haired, blue-eyed, innocent, and child-like, Lady Audley is the epitome of the Victorian angel of the house, and thus a very desirable marriage partner. However, in her case, playing the role of a sweet housewife covers up the fact that she is a cold, calculating, bigamist and would-be murderess. Although Lady Audley is an extreme case, women in Victorian literature frequently use their prettiness and charm to cover up the reality of their boredom or unhappiness. In *East Lynne*, the beginning of Lady Isabel's marriage finds her idle and alone all day until Mr. Carlyle returns home, yet she never admits this to him. Amelia in *Vanity Fair* is a charming, happy lover when in the presence of her beloved George, and yet the truth of her existence is one of unhappily pining away after George, who gambles and drinks with his military men, but who appears to Amelia as an untouchably good young gentleman.

Interestingly, Mrs. Henry Wood herself offers a real life example of Victorian disguise. According to Deborah Wynne, "Ellen Wood's housewifely façade concealed a determined ambition to succeed and a business acumen which resembled that of her father. . . . Wood recognized the importance of assuming a frail, lady-like persona as a way of disguising her 'unfeminine' traits of literary ambition and business management skills" (66). Indeed, Wood's

disguise seemingly worked, for her own son, also her biographer, believes her to be “conservative, passive, nervous, and domestic” (Wynne 65). In examining excerpts from her letters, however, a different picture emerges as we see her not only negotiate terms of publication with her publisher but also advise him on how best to advertise *East Lynne*, with clear, rational reasons behind her choices (Maunder “Introduction” 12). A shrewd businesswoman, Wood wrote in an 1861 letter to her publisher, George Bentley, “On the title page of [*East Lynne*] I must request you to put ‘By Mrs. Henry Wood, Author of ‘Danesbury House.’ Be particular that the Christian name (Henry) is inserted” (694). This latter statement confirms that the adoption of Mrs. Henry Wood for a sort of pen name was carefully calculated. It is as though Wood hopes to put a face of respectability on a book otherwise full of sensation, a tactic she uses in her ending that reaffirms morality by punishing the sinner and championing the up-standing characters. Her moralizing intrusive narrator and punishment of the vice character are further evidence of an attempt to maintain an overarching sense of respectability in a novel full of immorality.

Taking all these brief examples into account, the Victorian era begins to appear as a time that valued maintaining an appearance of respectability over all else. In examining this intricate web of appearances, it is clear that it is principally maintained by intentional silences and, like Thackeray’s *Amelia*, turning a blind eye. It isn’t that the Victorians thought vice didn’t exist in society (although women especially may not have been aware of the full extent of vice); instead, Victorians avoided fully examining the cause and effect of vice because it was not an appropriate subject to linger on, and therefore something better left unspoken in order to preserve the appearance of respectability. Because it is not the *existence* of immorality that Victorian society denies but rather the *experience* that Victorians refuse to give voice to, *The Tenant* is clearly the more dangerous of the two novels because of its witness to the truth in place of upholding a

disguise of respectability. Although *East Lynne* does contain morally questionable elements, its third person, storytelling narration—complete with an intrusive authorial voice—allows for appropriate silences and an appearance of respectability. In order to fully grasp the difference in the form of the novels, we must first explore the two divergent views of nineteenth-century art represented in *The Tenant* and *East Lynne*.

Realism and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

“Unless I can have the courage to use the language of Truth in preference to the jargon of Conventionality, I ought to be silent.”

– Charlotte Brontë, speaking for both Anne and herself in a letter, 1848

In Anne’s preface to the second edition of *The Tenant*, she makes clear her purpose in writing the novel, and in so doing, her opinion of art as well. She writes, “My object in writing the following pages, was not simply to amuse the Reader, neither was it to gratify my own taste, nor yet to ingratiate myself with the Press and the Public: I wished to tell the truth, for the truth always conveys its own moral to those who are able to receive it” (3). To Anne, depicting uncompromised truth makes a book “good,” an opinion which aligns her with realism. George Lewes, in an 1858 essay published in the *Westminster Review*, offers a concise statement of the basic tenet of realism when he writes, “Art always aims at the representation of Reality, i.e. of Truth; and no departure from truth is permissible, except such as inevitably lies in the nature of the medium itself. Realism is thus the basis of all Art” (37). By this definition, Lewes would have theoretically read *The Tenant* with strong approbation, even the scenes that detail Huntingdon’s drunkenness and depravity. However, realism was not simply an excuse for reveling in ugly depictions of real life; instead, Realists believe that by seeing something as it

truly exists, they will gain a moral lesson and thereby be uplifted and improved by art. This is clear in Duranty's "Principles of Realism" as published in 1856, in which one principle is, "That Realism thereby attributes to the artist a philosophical, practical, useful aim, and not that of amusement, and consequently raises him up" (31). Anne's statement that "I wished to tell the truth, for the truth always conveys its own moral to those who are able to receive it" is essentially an early statement of Duranty's principle, for it emphasizes not only the importance of truth in art, but also the way in which the moral conveyed by truth elevates those who read it.

Anne's preface continues with strong statements of her adherence to realism, even though she does not use that label to describe her art. She modestly writes, "Let it not be imagined, however, that I consider myself competent to reform the errors and abuses of society, but only that I would fain contribute my humble quota towards so good an aim, and if I can gain the public ear at all, I would rather whisper a few wholesome truths therein than much soft nonsense" (3). Here again, Anne foreshadows Duranty's principle, for just as he discounts amusement in art, so too does Anne dispense with the entertainment of "soft nonsense." As in this quote, George Eliot, who championed realism throughout her career, makes an accurate depiction seem almost the author's duty as she writes, "The mirror is doubtless defective; the outlines will sometimes be disturbed, the reflection faint or confused; but I feel as much bound to tell you as precisely as I can what that reflection is, as if I were in the witness-box narrating my experience on oath" (36). Although Eliot wrote her realism manifesto in her novel *Adam Bede*²⁴ eleven years after *The Tenant*'s publication, it is clear that Anne abides by this same idea of witnessing in *The Tenant*, for she chooses to write the novel in the form of a letter and a diary.

²⁴ This manifesto can be found in the chapter, "In Which the Story Pauses a Little." One of Eliot's statements is that she admires Dutch painters because of their minute attention to realistic detail. Interestingly, Anne is compared to Jan Steen in the *Athenaeum* (which should be taken as a compliment), while Wood is likewise compared to Vandyke in *The Times* review.

Modern critic Deborah Denenholz Morse notes the importance of the form's connection to witnessing when she writes, "Within the written narrative frames of the novel, Helen and others witness to the truth of what they actually see, rather than subscribing to the social codings of manners and mores" (107). Thus, Anne's commitment to telling the truth is evident in how she tells the story, using a letter and a diary as documents that, in George Eliot's terms, "witness" to the truth.

Although Anne states that her purpose is to portray the truth, her preface reveals a second agenda behind *The Tenant*: that of educating her audience. This, too, is consistent with the dogma of realism, for the urge to educate is an urge to improve, or (as Duranty says) "raise up" the reader. The concern for women's education increased as the nineteenth century progressed, as exemplified by the many people who called for education beyond the accomplishments, one of whom was Sarah Lewis, who, in 1839, published *Woman's Mission*. In it, she critiques female education, saying that it consists more of instruction on how to "adorn society" than on how "to vivify and enlighten a home" (728). She writes, "From the fear of too much agitating the heart, we hide from women all that is worthy of love, all the depth and dignity that passion when felt for a worthy object; their eye is captivated, the exterior pleases, its heart and mind are not known, and after six months union they are surprised to find the *beau ideal* metamorphosed into a fool or a coxcomb" (729). Anne seemingly noted the same problem and wrote *The Tenant* in reaction, for in her preface, as we have previously noted, she writes, "O Reader! if there were less of this delicate concealment of facts—this whispering 'Peace, peace' when there is no peace, there would be less of sin and misery to the young of both sexes who are left to wring their bitter knowledge from experience" (4). Although she is more mindful of both sexes than Lewis, she narrows her focus to targeting young women specifically: "I know that such characters [as

Huntingdon and his companions] do exist, and if I have warned one rash youth from following in their steps, or prevented one thoughtless girl from falling into the very natural error of my heroine, the book has not been written in vain” (4).

Interestingly, Anne’s vision of *The Tenant* as an educational tool is picked up in at least two of her original reviews. The reviewer in *Sharpe’s* writes that *The Tenant*, “the moral of which is unimpeachable and most powerfully wrought out,” is sadly “unfit for the perusal of the very class of persons to whom it would be most useful, (namely, imaginative girls likely to risk their happiness on the forlorn hope of marrying and reforming a captivating rake), owing to the profane expressions, inconceivable coarse language, and revolting scenes and descriptions by which its pages are disfigured” (265). This reviewer’s opinion seems almost paradoxical; on one hand, he recognizes the need to educate women from making a mistake, while on the other hand, he wishes to hide from them the full effect of the lesson. In other words, he fails to see how representing Arthur and his companions as they truly are correlates to impressing the moral lesson on young women. In short, he is one who, as Anne put it, might whisper “Peace, peace” when there is no peace. Equally blind to how a true picture of Huntingdon’s depravity would work to teach young ladies a lesson, the reviewer in *Fraser’s* “Recent Novels” says that “coarseness...makes [*The Tenant*] utterly unfit to be put into the hands of girls” (424).

Anne’s preface, then, raises two important issues: truth and its ability to educate. By moving her emphasis from representing the truth to making that truth work to educate others, Anne shows that her vision of art is one in which amusement and entertainment has little, if any, place. Instead, like George Eliot and other nineteenth century realists, she sees art’s potential for morally benefiting her audience, if only that audience would recognize that behind her representation of truth, there is a lesson to be learned.

The Entertainment Value of *East Lynne*

“...murders and mutton, suicides and rice pudding, stolen cheques and thick bread-and-butter; and, as she never fails to say an emphatic grace over each heavy meal, she satisfies alike the appetite, the taste, and the conscience of her readers.”

— an 1874 reviewer describing Wood’s novels

Fraser’s review of *East Lynne* in the 1863 article, “The Popular Novels of the Year,” begins with a quote from Sydney Smith, who says:

The main question...as to a novel is, did it amuse?—were you surprised at dinner coming so soon?—did you mistake eleven for ten, and twelve for eleven?—were you too late to dress —and did you sit up beyond the usual hour? If a novel produces these effects, it is good; if it does not—story, language, love, scandal itself cannot save it. It is only meant to please, and it must do that, or it does nothing! (253)

Smith’s quote captures an alternative from realism in defining the purpose of art—to amuse or please the reader. Although Wood herself rarely commented on her work, we know from her son’s biography of her that she wrote for her own pleasure and amusement, a habit which began when her curvature of the spine confined her to her sofa for a number of years. Charles Wood writes, “With Mrs. Wood the frailty of the body was so great that every word of *East Lynne*, and of many of her novels, was written in a reclining chair, her manuscript upon her knees” (42).

Unlike other sensation novelists such as Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Wood did not rely upon her writing for money. In fact, the small and inadequate amount she earned from Ainsworth for her short stories and serialized novels in *New Monthly Magazine* is enough to confirm that she could not have depended upon her income from writing to sustain her (Wynne 35). Even critics in the 1930s shared this view of Wood’s motivation for writing as nothing more than that it was her

hobby, claiming, “She had no literary ambition; she merely loved writing stories for their own sake” (Elwin 244). Although Wood left no statement on her work as in-depth as that of Anne’s preface, she did reveal her own opinion that the chief purpose of fiction is to hold “interest,” saying “From the first page to the last my works are full of it, they are never dull, and that is what the generality of readers like and what I think ought to be first and foremost in a work of fiction” (qtd. in Maunder “Introduction” 13). Clearly, then, Wood’s ideas of fiction align with Smith’s, a stark contrast to Anne’s moralizing realism.

Despite Wood’s own statement, however, she at times adopts a moralizing tone. This occurs perhaps most notably just after Lady Isabel’s elopement when Wood uses an intrusive narrator to comment:

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 unto death, rather than forfeit your fair name and your good conscience; for be assured that the alternative, if you rush on it, will be found far worse than death! (334-5)

Like taking special care to publish under the name Mrs. Henry Wood, this is perhaps another attempt to lessen the sensation of her plot by covering it with a dose of strong moral conservatism. We see this guise of propriety throughout—in the way that Isabel daily pays for her error and in an ending which punishes the sinner and champions the up-standing, middle class citizens. Then again, perhaps it is not so much a guise as Wood’s own middle class values coming out in her work, for, as noted earlier, her only biography portrays her as an unassuming, devoutly religious, respectable middle class woman. However, given Wood’s statement that the

priority of fiction ought to be “interest,” it seems that any moralizing statements are of secondary importance to the overall sensational plot.

East Lynne’s early reviews reflect this mix of sensationalism and moralism. While the *Spectator* suggests that she ought to choose a less morbid subject, it admits that “there is nothing, either in writing or in principle, for the strictest moralist to condemn” (705). Likewise, *The Times* review characterizes *East Lynne* as a book “found by all of its readers to be highly entertaining,” but goes on to say that “the authoress is really what the novelist prefers to call herself—a moralist, and there is moral purpose in her portraits as well as vivacity” (6). Based on reviews like these, it seems that Wood has succeeded in blending entertainment with a realist adherence to achieving a moral purpose. But while the *Spectator* and *The Times* buy into Wood’s surface morality, the reviewer in the *Literary Gazette* takes a more critical—and more accurate—view of Wood’s morality. The review begins with an acknowledgment of the widespread love of realism: “Generally speaking, our fair countrywomen perpetrate the novel with the idea of inculcating some great moral lesson” (709). When it comes to Wood, however, the reviewer says that “Mrs. Wood does not fail to parade her moral. But it is easy to see that her proper vocation is that of a genuine storyteller” (709). The reviewer further explores how Wood is less moralist than storyteller:

...a subtle analysis of motive and character is scarcely attempted, and the work suggests subjects of ethical interest on which an adequate attention is scarcely bestowed. . . . What is the fault in training, or in society, that is to account for the fall and spreading blot of immorality? Mrs. Wood is quite untroubled by such speculations. She is not morbidly earnest to inculcate a purpose. (709-10)

Here, the reviewer has picked up on a key difference between Anne and Wood; while Anne views her story as merely a medium through which to portray the truth (and thus a moral lesson),

Wood gives foremost importance to the story and its entertainment value, rather than transmitting a moral lesson.

Form: Point of View

“What an irony that the only British novelists of the nineteenth century who could give us any sense of normal, warm-blooded sexuality between men and women should be three isolated, inexperienced, shy, retiring spinsters!”

– A. Craig Bell, referring to the Brontë sisters, 1966

As we have just seen, Wood is best characterized as a storyteller, a descriptor that is congruent with the third person point of view she uses in *East Lynne*. Indeed, an obvious difference between the two books is the point of view; while *East Lynne* is written in third person, *The Tenant* is told entirely in first person. It may seem that this difference is not worth much notice—after all, neither third person nor first person is an uncommon view to adopt. Yet in looking at these two texts specifically, it is clear that the point of view is one aspect of the differing form of each of these novels and therefore one of the main factors that influenced the original treatment of *East Lynne* and *The Tenant*.

Wood’s use of third person creates a distance between the author and the characters, and thus a distance between the reader and the characters as well. In other words, third person invites both the reader and the author to view the events as a story, rather than aligning the author/reader directly with an “I” speaker. Take, for example, one of the early scenes involving Lady Isabel, who is about to attend a concert, unaware that her father’s health is rapidly declining. Wood writes, “Later in the day, the earl grew alarmingly worse: his paroxysms of pain were awful. Isabel, who was kept from the room, knew nothing of the danger, and the earl’s

groans did not penetrate to her ears. She dressed in a happy mood, full of laughing willfulness” (119). Note the way in which third person allows Wood to detail what is occurring with more than one character at a time; in gaining this freedom, though, she loses the ability to fully put us in Isabel’s place or make us feel the earl’s pain. Instead of feeling, Wood relies on telling, thus creating a closeness with the reader (that is, the person whom she is telling her story to), but a distance with the characters that relegates the characters and events into the realm of a story.

A clearer example of the distance between author/reader and story comes in our first encounter with Lady Isabel after her train accident. Wood writes, “Look at the governess, reader, and see whether you know her. You will say no. But you do, for it is Lady Isabel Vane. But how strangely she is altered! Yes; the railway accident did that for her” (445). First, note the way in which the third person narrator gives the sense we are outside the characters looking in. The phrase “Look at the governess, reader” makes it seem almost as if the author and reader are standing together, looking at a character on a stage, rather than experiencing the story with Lady Isabel. Also note that Wood creates a dialogue between author and reader, leaving Lady Isabel in a world of her own. This dialogue comes not simply from Wood’s direct address of the reader, but also from the response that the reader seemingly gives. The line, “But you do, for it is Lady Isabel Vane”—clearly the author’s voice addressed to the reader—is followed immediately with the reader’s rebuttal, “But how strangely she is altered!” The author answers once again with her acknowledgement of the reader’s validity: “Yes; the railway accident did that for her.” The intrusive narrator is fairly common in nineteenth-century fiction; in this case, however, both the intrusive narrator and the intrusive reader cutting into the narrative remind us that this is a story being told, rather than a first-hand account of an event. While the intrusive reader does not frequently recur in *East Lynne*, there are many other examples of an authorial

voice stepping in; the effect is that the reader is continually conscious of the distance between himself and the story.

The review in *The Times* picks up on another reason altogether for the distance between the author/reader and text. In critiquing Wood's characterization, the reviewer claims that Lady Isabel's character is "unsatisfactory" because she often acts without a clear enough motive. The reviewer specifically references Lady Isabel's elopement with Levison, saying, "Thus, again, we have an effect without adequate cause, and the reader is reminded by an artistic error that the story is an unreality" (6).²⁵ Whether or not this reviewer is justified in his critique does not matter nearly as much as the fact that he, as a nineteenth-century reader, experiences the feeling of being pulled out of the story and reminded that it is "an unreality."

But while Wood's use of third person and an intrusive narrator makes *East Lynne* seem an unreality, Anne's first-person perspective has the opposite effect. *The Tenant* begins from Gilbert's point of view as he composes a letter to his brother-in-law, Halford; it continues in the first person when it switches to Helen's diary—with Helen as the "I" speaker rather than Gilbert—before ultimately switching back to Gilbert as "I." Unlike third person, first person narratives leave no distance between the reader and the character or events in the novel, while the author is seemingly effaced. *The Tenant* is no exception. We spend the first part of the novel identifying with Gilbert, feeling his happiness when he gains ground with the mysterious Mrs. Graham and experiencing his frustration whenever she repels his advances. Then, when the diary comes, we are plunged into Helen's point of view and experience her life as though we

²⁵ As an interesting point of comparison, contemporary critic Arlene Jackson argues that in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Anne builds the effect that Helen's marriage has had on her so that by the time we read Helen's diary, the reader is "ready to discover the psychological causation of her cold, scornful demeanor and her mysterious life-style as well, surely, to discover the 'facts' of her story" (476). Thus, *The Tenant* includes an effect without a cause, but this is purposefully and skillfully set up so that the reader's interest—and Gilbert's interest—climaxes just when Anne reveals the cause of a previously mysterious effect.

were her, not some distant by-stander. *This* is where *The Tenant* becomes controversial and threatening to a nineteenth-century audience, for being in Helen's shoes allows us to be present in scenes of drunken debauchery, the most infamous of which is Hattersley and Huntingdon's drunken attempt to get Lord Lowborough to drink with them. In it, Hattersley tries to physically drag Lowborough into a room to get him "blind drunk" (265), as he and Huntingdon already are. Desperate, Lowborough bids his wife to fetch a candle; when she refuses, Helen, who has been forced to witness the scene, takes an active stance: "But I snatched up a candle and brought it to him. He took it and held the flame to Hattersley's hands till, roaring like a wild beast, the latter unclasped them and let him go" (266). By using a first person narrator, Anne not only allows us to see ("he madly clung [to the door-post] with all the energy of desperation") and hear ("roaring like a wild beast") scenes of viciousness first-hand, but she also makes us take an active role through our identification with the "I" speaker.

Perhaps an even clearer example of the extreme closeness between the first person narrator and the reader can be found in Helen's progression of emotions. Whereas Wood can only report on Lady Isabel's feelings from the outside, third-person perspective, Anne's use of first-person allows her—and consequently the reader—an intimacy with Helen that reveals her innermost feelings. Contemporary critic Arlene Jackson notes that "the reader shares Helen's growing pain and the hardening of her heart towards Arthur" (478). Beyond Jackson's support of the idea that *The Tenant* invites reader identification, Jackson's overall argument further helps to highlight the difference that form makes, noting that Helen's diary affords Anne the opportunity to develop her characters' psychology (470). Both Jackson's argument and my own contention that first-person invites closeness with the reader is clearly illustrated in the text. When Helen is engaged to Arthur, for example, she writes, "My cup of sweets is not unmingled:

it is dashed with a bitterness that I cannot hide from myself, disguise it as I will” (175). Because there is no distance between the reader and Helen, we are privy to feelings that she does not admit to anyone, and only very hesitantly admits to herself. This closeness is again highlighted in an entry after she is first married when she writes, “And do I regret the step I have taken?—No—though I must confess, in my secret heart, that Arthur is not what I thought him at first, and if I had known him in the beginning as thoroughly as I do now, I probably never should have loved him” (191). Here again, the reader is brought so close to Helen that we know her “secret heart” and hear a confession that is too dark and heart-wrenching for any other character in the story to know—it is a private matter shared only with the reader, since a first-person narrator forces the reader to take on Helen’s point of view.

It is not simply that there is no distance between the reader and the text of *The Tenant*; there is an extreme closeness between the *author* and the text as well. As Winifred Gérin writes, “Less than any other of the Brontë novels can *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* be separated from the circumstances in which it was composed” (236). Indeed, a favorite theme in much criticism on *The Tenant* is tracing a biographical connection between Branwell Brontë and Arthur Huntingdon, or, as Gérin contends, a more accurate connection between Branwell and Lord Lowborough’s character (246). The connection to Lowborough seems the more plausible argument, for, as Gérin points out, Branwell had some artistic sensibility—he strove to be a man of letters as well as an artist—like Lowborough, whereas Arthur does not have any. The book, however, becomes slightly more disturbing when we consider Gérin’s claim that Anne’s motive in writing *The Tenant* was “quite as much to impose a penance on herself for her presumption and for her failure in saving her bother” (240). Read in this way, the tortuous scenes of Helen’s suffering at her husband’s hands take on a deeper meaning as we see Anne aligned with Helen.

Gérin connects the scenes of debauchery at Grassdale Manor with Thorp Green Hall, the estate where Anne served as a governess, going so far as to pronounce that Grassdale “is essentially the social milieu of Thorp Green Hall” (244).

In addition to the biographical elements which link Anne to her novel, the early reviews of *The Tenant* suggest this closeness between author and book, even if though the original reviewer may not have been fully conscious of the extent to which he linked author and text. For example, one of the quotes that contributes to the “coarse” chorus is also one that aligns Anne with her text. The reviewer for *Literary World* writes, “The mind that conceived [*The Tenant* and *Jane Eyre*] is one of great strength and fervor, but coarse almost to brutality” (257).²⁶ Notice that the reviewer comments here on neither characters nor language, nor any other aspect of the text, but on Anne’s mind, thus subtly turning a review of literature into a comment on the author. This seems surprising, especially since the identity of Acton Bell—and all three Bells, for that matter—was unknown when the review was written. The reviewer, however, transitions seamlessly from a comment on the novels to a comment on the author, therefore tacitly suggesting an intimacy between *The Tenant* and its creator.

A similar move occurs in the *North American Review*’s critique: “Everywhere is seen the tendency of the author to degrade passion into appetite, and to give prominence to the selfish and malignant elements of human nature; but while he succeeds in making profligacy disgusting, he fails in making virtue pleasing. His depravity is total depravity” (262).²⁷ Although this critique is harsher than the *Literary World*’s, the reviewer is once again extrapolating the author’s

²⁶ Although this quote sounds like the beginning of a very negative review, the reviewer continues to say that he does not want to come across as “offensively severe on this trait.” Instead, he expresses his hope that “American readers will recognize it while doing just homage to [the author’s] genius” (257). Thus, the reviewer softens his critique and turns it in a positive direction.

²⁷ Again, remember that the reviewer is using the pronoun “he” to reference Anne Brontë because the identity of Acton Bell was still unknown at the point when this was written.

characteristics based on the text. Again in the *Spectator*, a reviewer links Anne with her novel, observing that “there seems in the writer a morbid love for the coarse” (249). This type of commentary on Anne is unparalleled in the *East Lynne* reviews, as Mrs. Henry Wood is rarely mentioned. When she is, it is typically to foretell of future success as a novelist, or to comment—either negatively or positively—on her role as a moralist. Never is it a comment directly about her mind or her morals as it is for Brontë. This, then, is another clue to the way a first person narrative eliminates any distance between author and text or reader and text, for as these reviews unwittingly show, first person invites the reader and the author to assume a personal identification with the protagonists.

Form: Style and Structure

“Is it better to reveal the snares and pitfalls of life to the young and thoughtless traveler, or to cover them with branches and flowers?”

– Anne Brontë, Preface to second edition, 1848

As previously noted, the style of *East Lynne* is not something a modern reader would highlight as a major attraction of the work, nor is it a reason for its resurgence of recognition among contemporary Victorian scholars. However, original reviews were much more approving of Wood’s style than of Brontë’s, as exemplified by comparing the following statements. Of *East Lynne*: Wood has a “style clear, sharp and crisp; like a quick footstep on a frosty day” (*John Bull* 708); the novel has a “good plot carefully worked out, with clear, clever sketches of ordinary people, and in a pleasant natural style” (*Saturday Review* 714). Of *The Tenant*: “We are reminded occasionally of the minute gossip in which Miss Austin [sic] occasionally indulged, but with less of that particular quality which her dialogues invariably possessed, of illustrating

the characters of the speakers” (*Examiner* 256); “It is not only the subject of this novel, however, that is objectionable, but the manner of treating it. There is a coarseness of tone” (*Spectator* 249). As these quotes show, there is a distinct difference in the reviewers’ attitudes towards how the books are written.

Closely related to matters of style is the overall structure of the book, as exemplified by the way in which *The Tenant*’s review in the *Spectator* relates the two in its comment, “The composition—not mere diction, but the arrangement of the incidents and persons, as well as the style of the things themselves—was extreme and wild; seeking to base effects on the startling, without much regard either to probability or good taste” (249). This quote is representative of a theme found in several reviews: that the structure of the book is unpleasing or unbelievable. In terms of structure, approximately the first section of *The Tenant* is Gilbert’s letter to Halford, the middle third is Helen’s diary, and the final section is Gilbert’s letter with letters from Helen included at times. The reviewer in the above quote clearly does not care for this letter/diary format as evidenced by his dislike of the “arrangement.” The *Examiner* likewise points to the structure as a major flaw; although it at first says *The Tenant* is “inartificially constructed,” a few paragraphs later it states that:

there is no very intense excitement in any part of the book. Just at the time when we begin to feel some interest about Markham and the lady, we are thrown back upon her previous history, which occupies a full half of the three volumes before us. This is a fatal error: for, after so long and minute a history, we cannot go back and recover the enthusiasm which we have been obliged to dismiss a volume and a half before. (255)

Other reviews similarly focus on the diary as a major fault of the book, such as *Sharpe*’s, which likes the book until the diary and its vicious scenes (264). *Fraser*’s likewise finds fault with the diary, claiming that “poor Helen” would not have had the heart to record the drunken scenes as

she does, and especially would not have reported the foul language of Huntingdon and his compatriots (271). On the other hand, the reviewer in the *Spectator* draws attention to the problem with the beginning frame to the “real” story, saying that Gilbert’s letter is “scarcely enough to sustain the reader for a volume” (249). Whether or not it is the diary, the frame, or the handling of the story generally, it is clear that none of the reviewers found anything to be praised in the structure of the book.

However, in a current analysis of *The Tenant*, telling a story through a letter and a diary proves to have several advantages. Since Anne was concerned with telling the truth, no form would better suit her purpose than two such personal, truthful documents. This is an idea that several contemporary critics pick up on in their analyses of *The Tenant*’s form. Lori Paige, for example, contends that the format of Helen’s diary lends credibility to the accuracy of its content “because Helen has set down each detail of her married life at the very time of the incident,” thus excluding the possibility of “exaggeration in retrospect” (226). Jackson likewise explores how the diary is set up as a credible source, citing among other evidence Gilbert’s own acceptance of the diary as truth. Jackson ends her exploration of credibility, and the essay itself, by concluding, “Though the journal and letter devices are not very subtle means of storytelling, Anne Brontë’s handling of her narrative does increase the credibility of both the male and female characters. A potential Victorian melodrama thus becomes a perceptive and realistic reading of men, women, and marriage” (479). Indeed, Anne herself seems conscious of the truthful form she adopts, as evidenced by Helen’s frequent reference to her diary entries in terms of a confession. At first, the idea of confession surfaces only matter-of-factly, as in Helen’s entry when she is newly married in which she says, “I must confess, in my secret heart, that Arthur is not what I thought him at first” (191). Her awareness of the diary as a space for confession

continues to grow, however, so that six chapters later, she writes, “I have need of consolation in my son, for (to this silent paper I may confess it) I have but little in my husband” (232). Unlike the loose way in which she has used confession, Helen’s parenthetical note here is a conscious affirmation that the diary, or “silent paper,” contains a truth so true that it is rendered unmentionable to anyone beyond herself and her diary. The idea of confession becomes even more emphatic when Helen writes, “Bitter, bitter confession!” (234). Anne’s increasing emphasis of Helen’s confessions in the diary can be seen as a continual assertion that the diary is a truthful document.

A letter and a diary also further the effect of a first person narrator, for just as an “I” speaker lends a more personal feel to the text, so too are letters and diaries highly personal forms. In fact, the personal perspective adopted in both segments makes the story feel less like fiction and more like an eyewitness account. Morse, a contemporary critic, bases an entire article on her observation of the witnessing that takes place in *The Tenant*; it is worth noting that she, too, believes that the narrative frame draws attention to the act of witnessing (107). While Morse notes multiple layers of witnessing, I would argue that the diary becomes the most important witness, for it has the ability to transmit what Helen sees to the reader as though the reader is seeing it for herself. For example, when Helen witnesses Arthur and Annabella’s rendezvous in the garden, it is not just Helen who overhears the adultery-fraught conversation, but the reader as well, thanks to the diary:

‘But tell me, don’t you love her still—a *little*?’ said she placing her hand on his arm and looking earnestly in his face—for I could see them plainly, the moon shining full upon them from between the branches of the tree that sheltered me.

‘Not *one bit*, by all that’s sacred!’ he replied, kissing her glowing cheek. . . . There he stood before me; but I had not the strength to confront him now; my tongue cleaved to the roof of

my mouth, I was well nigh sinking to the earth, and I almost wondered he did not hear the beating of my heart above the low sighing of the wind, and the fitful rustle of the falling leaves. (291-2)

In this passage, we witness adultery first-hand, every aspect of it—we hear Huntingdon’s verbal adultery, we see his physical act of kissing Annabella, and we feel the emotions of the betrayed wife. Compare this to the passage of Lady Isabel’s adultery in *East Lynne*,²⁸ which begins with Levison speaking to Lady Isabel:

‘Be avenged on that false hound, Isabel. He was never worthy of you. Leave your life of misery, and come to happiness.’

In her bitter distress and wrath, she broke into a storm of sobs. Were they caused by passion against her husband, or by these bold and shameless words! Alas! alas! Francis Levison applied himself to soothe her with all the sweet and dangerous sophistry of his crafty nature. (322)

Even a cursory reading of these two passages underscores a distinct difference in approach, both in tone and in the differing ability to make the reader feel what the protagonist feels, rather than being told. We don’t feel Isabel’s “bitter distress and wrath” as we do Helen’s despair in “sinking to the earth,” for there is a third person distance between the reader and Lady Isabel, whereas Helen’s first person makes us feel her tongue on the roof of her mouth and her heart beating wildly. Notice also the way in which a third person narrator makes Lady Isabel’s motive for crying unclear, and thus we again experience a distance from Isabel that is not present in Helen, for we—in the diary—are taken into the confidence of the confessions of her heart.

These passages illustrate why the form played a fundamental role in determining the early critical reception, for they show how Anne plunges everybody—character, reader, and

²⁸ The “elopement scene” will be further detailed in the next section.

author—into the midst of vice (in the case of this example, adultery, but in others, bad language and drunkenness) while Wood keeps a safe distance from viciousness and makes it take place offstage. Indeed, we never actually *see* any of Levison's adulterous kisses; the narrative of Isabel's life skips from her elopement to a new chapter which starts "Nearly a year went by" (334), thus distancing the sinful act even further. Although Wood details the repercussions of sin (adultery and murder), the sins themselves are absent from the narrative. *Fraser's* question in relation to *The Tenant*—"Shall we despise the surgeon because he does not faint in the dissecting-room?" (424)—offers an apt metaphor: if Anne is a surgeon who doesn't faint in the dissecting room, then Wood is the surgeon's administrative assistant who knows precisely what is going on in the dissecting room, but respectfully keeps the door closed.

The Tenant vs. East Lynne: A Comparative Study of the Texts

"Creative power is so rare and so valuable that we should accept even its caprices with gratitude."

– Review of *The Tenant*, *Examiner*, 1850

To fully appreciate the effect of these choices in form—choices in point of view, structure, and overall purpose—there is no better place to turn than the texts. Beyond the adultery scenes and scene of drunkenness previously detailed, there are many other examples that, when considered in comparison to one another, fully illustrate the effect of form. The following section, then, will exemplify in further detail the formal choices that we have just discussed in each novel.

As we have seen, a first-person point of view brings the reader into greater intimacy with the characters while a third-person narrator creates a distance. One clear illustration of this difference can be seen in Anne's portrayal of progressing emotions as opposed to Wood's mere

hinting at characters' innermost emotions. As we have already seen, Helen's diary offers an up-close account of her progressive disillusionment towards Arthur. Likewise, we see a similar detailing of Gilbert's emotions in the frame surrounding the diary, particularly as he changes from admiring/courting Eliza Millward to loving Helen and despising Eliza for her gossipy ways. The first encounter that we witness between Eliza and Gilbert concludes with Gilbert saying, "My fair friend [Eliza] was evidently unwilling to bid me adieu. I tenderly squeezed her little hand at parting; and she repaid me with one of her softest smiles and most bewitching glances. I went home very happy, with a heart brimful of complacency for myself, and overflowing with love for Eliza" (24). Two days later, in one of the first encounters with Helen, Gilbert reflects on Helen: "'Just as I thought,' said I to myself: 'the lady's temper is none of the mildest, notwithstanding her sweet, pale face and lofty brow, where thought and suffering seem equally to have stamped their impress'" (26). Here, the first-person narrator makes us privy not only to Gilbert's contrasting feelings towards the two women, but also shows us these characters through Gilbert's eyes, thereby making the reader see what Gilbert sees.

At first, we see Eliza as "charming beyond description, coquettish without affectation," (35) since this is how Gilbert presents her to us. But our enthusiasm for her begins to wane, just as Gilbert's does, when we come to see her inferiority in comparison to Helen. After several chapters, when Gilbert is on an excursion to the sea with a group that includes both Eliza and Helen, Gilbert reports, "to confess the truth, I was too happy in the company of Mrs. Graham"²⁹, to regret the absence of Eliza Millward" (60). Not long after, he begins a chapter by saying, "Though my affections might now be said to be fairly weaned from Eliza Millward, I did not yet entirely relinquish my visits to the vicarage because I wanted, as it were, to let her down easy; without raising much sorrow, or incurring much resentment" (71). In just this one sentence,

²⁹ Recall that Helen is, at this point, disguised as Mrs. Graham.

Gilbert discloses both his feelings and his motivation behind his actions, even though they are not the kindest—after all, he has led Eliza to believe he had serious interest in her, but now wishes to cast her away. Anne does not leave the reader to take Gilbert’s word at face value; instead, she allows the reader to witness his lack of feeling toward Eliza in the scene that follows, wherein Eliza tries to turn him against Helen by spreading malignant rumors about her to Gilbert. Thus, because we as readers are not distanced from the first-person narrator, Anne manages to “wean” us—along with Gilbert—from a favorable opinion of Eliza.

On the other hand, *East Lynne*’s third-person distance from the main characters keeps silent their building emotions and inner motivations. While we witness Gilbert’s progressively strong feelings towards Helen, Wood does not provide us with comparable inner-workings of Mr. Carlyle. Up until the moment that Carlyle proposes marriage to Isabel, he has been merely a helpful presence in Isabel’s life, a character that comes and goes as his business with Earl of Mount Severn dictates. We know little of his thoughts beyond that he finds Isabel beautiful and is sympathetic to her plight, and so it is a startling change when Carlyle proposes. However, even in the proposal scene, Wood keeps us at a distance: “What was Mr. Carlyle about to say? What emotion was it that agitated his countenance, impeded his breath, and dyed his face blood-red? His better genius was surely not watching over him, or those words had never been spoken” (164). Notice Wood’s emphasis on outward, physical details so that all we as readers see is a focus on surface appearance, rather than the passion motivating it. Furthermore, Wood’s less-than-subtle foreshadowing of a disastrous marriage in the last sentence reminds the reader that this is a story with an author in conscious control of the plot and where it will lead.

To be sure, one might account for the distance from Carlyle by arguing that Wood’s third-person narrator is more focused on Isabel, especially in the early sections of the novel, and

so the surprise of Carlyle's proposal is an effect that unites us with Isabel, who is equally stunned. However, even with Isabel, Wood evades providing her innermost secrets as well. Wood consistently relies on telling rather than showing. While Anne never once needs to state that Helen is an exceptionally good person, Wood relies on direct statements to her readers to convey Isabel's goodness: "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" (268-9). We must trust Wood's statement, for otherwise Isabel's inner motivations are hidden from the reader. For example, shortly before the lines quoted above, Isabel and Carlyle are discussing the possibility of Isabel returning home from abroad early; Isabel is in favor of it because she wishes to escape Levison's presence while Carlyle fails to perceive her motivation. Isabel comes close to breaking her silence:

A sudden impulse flashed over her that she *would* tell him the truth. Not tell him that she loved Francis Levison, or that he had spoken to her as he did: she valued her husband too greatly to draw him into any unpleasantness of which the end could not be seen; but own to him that she had once felt a passing fancy for Francis Levison, and preferred not to be subjected to his companionship now. Oh, that she had done so! her kinds, her noble, her judicious husband! Why did she keep silence? (267)

Here, Wood does acknowledge Isabel's silence, but rather than detail Isabel's feelings towards Levison, she prudently pulls away to exclaim Mr. Carlyle's virtues and question Isabel's motive for keeping silent. Thus, she becomes Isabel's accomplice in hiding the undercurrent of viciousness beneath non-descriptive complacency.

The outside view of characters—particularly Mr. Carlyle—continues to the end of the novel. Even in the final scene when Mr. Carlyle discovers that Madame Vine is Isabel, Wood keeps the passion carefully distanced from the reader. In fact, it is particularly significant that

she does so in this scene, for here the reader, characters, and author are all faced with an immoral situation; after all, Mr. Carlyle is married to Barbara, and yet we—with Isabel—long for him to make a declaration of his love for Isabel and passionately kiss her. Instead, Wood maintains distance from the scene by keeping an outsider's perspective. When Carlyle first realizes the woman before him is Isabel, rather than her disguised persona of Madame Vine, Wood writes, "The words faltered on his tongue. Did he think, as Joyce had once done, that it was a ghost he saw? Certain it is, that his face and lips turned the hue of death, and he backed a few steps from the bed: though he was as little given to show emotion as man can well be" (680). Again, Wood avoids detailing Carlyle's feelings, excusing this silence by explaining that he is not one to show emotion—a near acknowledgement on Wood's part of the silence left in her story. The closest she comes to breaking this silence is when Isabel begs his forgiveness and Wood writes, "His mind was in a whirl, his wits were scared away. The first clear thought that came thumping through his brain was, that he must be a man of two wives" (680).³⁰

In addition to skimming over the emotions of the characters, Wood deflects the immorality of the scene by merely flirting with it. Mr. Carlyle feels clearly feels the temptation to express lingering love for Isabel: "Lower and lower bent [Carlyle] his head, until his breath nearly mingled with hers. But suddenly his face grew red with a scarlet flush, and he lifted it again. Did the form of [Levison], then in a felon's cell at Lynneborough, thrust itself before him? or that of his absent and unconscious wife?" (683). When he finally does kiss her, Wood writes that he "suffered his lips to rest upon hers" and does not linger on it further, detailing neither his emotions nor Isabel's.

³⁰ This shows the Victorian view of marriage; even though he legally obtained a divorce from Isabel, he still thinks himself as a man of two wives in a moral sense, rather than a legal sense. As Pykett writes, "Carlyle's reaction dramatizes a new moral experience created by the reformed divorce laws: a tension between marriage merely as a socio-legal arrangement, and moral and religious conceptions of marriage" ("Sensation" 47).

Conversely, Anne does not hide the inner workings of her characters, as unpleasant as they may be. Part way through Helen's diary, when her marriage is beginning to seriously unravel, we see an example of the type of inner conversation Anne frequently allows us to witness in her characters. Helen recounts that Arthur has left for London without her; he was supposed to have taken her with him, but instead he leaves while she is out, "pretending that some sudden emergency had demanded his immediate presence in London, and rendered it impossible to await [her] return" (255). Helen writes, "Was it really so?—or was the whole a contrivance to ensure his going forth upon his pleasure-seeking excursion without my presence to restrain him? It is painful to doubt the sincerity of those we love, but after so many proofs of falsity and utter disregard to principle how can I believe so improbable a story?" (255). We thus know exactly what Helen is thinking, even though her thoughts are extremely dangerous to a society built on surface appearance. As noted earlier, women were expected to turn a blind eye to their husbands' behavior, allowing them to participate in it as part of their role within a public sphere. But Helen has the audacity to not only doubt her husband's behavior, but to put it on paper, thus giving voice to her thoughts which threaten to dismantle Arthur's disguise of attending to urgent business. Helen does, however, try to believe the best about her husband; she continues, "I have this one source of consolation left:--he told me some time previously, that if he ever went to London or Paris again, he should observe more moderation in his indulgences than before, lest he should destroy his capacity for enjoyment altogether" (256). Ultimately, though, she admits that while "such considerations will doubtless have more weight with him than any that I could urge," "no better hope remains" (256). The reader thus becomes the auditor of Helen's inner-debate; after first questioning Arthur's behavior, she then clings to the hope that

he will comport himself better, but then eventually admits a bleak outlook that she no longer holds any sway with her husband.

In her next entry, Helen shows an acknowledgment of how subversive her thoughts are. Arthur has returned from London, and she accuses him of leaving home purposely without her. However, Helen admits to her diary, “Before the words were well out of my mouth, I regretted having uttered them. It seemed so heavy a charge; if false, too gross an insult; if true, too humiliating a fact to be thus openly cast in his teeth” (257). Interestingly, this quote seems to contradict the theme of speaking the truth in *The Tenant*, but it is, in fact, not contradictory. We must remember that Helen is a participant in a society based on purposeful silences and disguise; thus, she accordingly feels that speaking the truth is “too humiliating” and should not be done. Therefore, there *are* silences and disguises in *The Tenant*, but Anne does not maintain these silences with the reader. In other words, because of its form, *The Tenant* as a whole breaks the silence of carefully built propriety, even though the characters within it may play into the theme of disguise towards one another. We are reminded again at the end of the same diary entry that Helen contributes to keeping a tranquil, Victorian surface when she writes of her husband, “Surely that man will make me dislike him at last! ‘Sine as ye brew, my maiden fair, Keep mind that ye maun drink the yill.’ Yes; and I *will* drink it to the very dregs : and none but myself shall know how bitter I find it” (257).

Contemporary critic Elizabeth Langland argues that “the very indecorousness of [*The Tenant*’s] subject seems immediately undermined by the propriety of the form this narrative takes: The woman’s story is enclosed within and authorized by a respectable man’s narrative” (33). Langland thus implies that Anne (like Wood) uses the form of her story to lessen the focus on subversive material. However, Langland’s argument misses the mark, for she fails to

consider the way in which the form of an unedited diary like Helen's gives voice to honest, unrestrained thoughts and feelings. While Helen's diary is circumscribed in Gilbert's letter, the diary is included in its entirety and is thus left unmediated. Clearly, the inner debates detailed above and the simultaneous breaking of silence to the reader while maintaining it in the plot are indeed facilitated by *The Tenant's* first-person, letter/diary form.

Yet while Anne uses her form to speak the truth, several features of Wood's third-person form allow her to evade the truth. One of these features is the way in which Wood can jump from following one character to another, often at crucial points that allow her to avoid detailing the vice that is going on in another thread of the plot. Perhaps the clearest example of this comes in the scene in which Isabel decides to elope with Levison. Levison and Isabel are in the carriage and have just driven past Carlyle and Barbara Hare together in the dark, seemingly confirming Isabel's suspicions. Levison urges Isabel to "leave [her] life of misery, and come to happiness," and Wood ends the chapter with Isabel crying and Levison "appl[ying] himself to soothe her with all the sweet and dangerous sophistry of his crafty nature" (322). At this crucial moment, without even confirming that Isabel plans to elope, Wood concludes the chapter and begins the next with Carlyle and Barbara's part of the story that has been simultaneously unfolding. After following Carlyle into the house where he bids Isabel goodnight, Wood shifts to follow Joyce's part in the story. Isabel comes to Joyce to bid her goodbye (although Joyce does not know why), and continues the story with Carlyle and Joyce waking to find Isabel gone. Wood never details Isabel's elopement, and further avoids doing so by beginning the next chapter with, "Nearly a year went by" (334). Wood, then, appropriately distances her reader from the elopement, both by making it take place off-stage and by treating it as an event that

took place a year earlier, thereby ignoring the immediate details, thoughts, and feelings that surround such an incident.

While Wood uses point of view and time lapse as formal techniques for avoiding a full revelation of vice, Anne does not, even though she includes both changes in point of view and the passage of time. The difference is that Anne uses a change in narrator and lapses in time to help her arrive at the scenes of viciousness first-hand. Consider Anne's alternative to including Helen's diary: Helen could easily have delivered her past history to Gilbert orally—that is, merely recounted her past life in a scene of dialogue still inscribed in Gilbert's point of view. However, Anne *does* include the diary in order to minutely detail the deterioration of Helen's marriage and the full depth of both Helen's character and that of her profligate husband. Anne could have easily left out the first-hand accounts of witnessing drunkenness and foul language, but to do so would have been to follow convention by keeping a mask of propriety over a reality of immorality. In Anne's own words, "When we have to do with vice and vicious characters, I maintain it is better to depict them as they really are than as they would wish to appear" (253). Recall, too, Paige's argument that the diary is a credible source because it is written at the time of the incidents, thus denying the possibility of exaggeration—or conversely (although Paige does not argue this), of pairing down or softening the vicious scenes. Anne thus uses timing—both lapses between entries and the immediacy in which the diary is written—to further help her depict vice as it really is. Helen's diary entries are frequently dated days, months, and, in one case, even a year later than the previous entry; however, Anne skips time that is uneventful in order to get to the scenes that most reveal the sad truth of Helen's marriage and Arthur's deterioration. In other words, Anne does not use time elapse to avoid vice, but to specifically confront it—the exact opposite of Wood's technique.

In all these ways, the authors keep or destroy an appropriate distance and maintain or break the conventional silence. While Wood gives an outer view of her characters to keep distance from them, Anne provides an intimate, inner view of her characters. And while both authors use similar devices like changes in perspective and lapses in time, they use these to different ends; Anne utilizes them to immerse her narrative in scenes of vice, and Wood takes advantage of the way in which these changes can help her avoid treating vice first-hand.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall and *East Lynne* are rarely studied together, but as we have seen, an examination of the two builds in a way that allows a glimpse into many aspects of Victorian literature and culture. Noting the sensational and thematic similarities between the books affords the opportunity to see themes relevant to the Victorian era such as attitudes towards motherhood and anxieties about class divisions. An examination of the original reviews opens the door to explore Victorian publishing practices as well as ideas on what a “good” book should do—either entertain or morally enlighten. Furthermore, the anxiety towards *The Tenant* allows us to see that the Victorian era sought to uphold an appearance of “peace” by distancing themselves from the effects of vice; therefore, a book that detailed the experience of vicious living was more threatening to Victorian propriety than was a book that merely acknowledged the existence of vice without exploring it further.

Perhaps most importantly, a study of *The Tenant* and *East Lynne* shows the importance of authorial choices, reaffirming that formal aspects of a text truly matter. It is not plot alone that affects a book’s reception; the presentation also counts. Still, as this study highlights, the process by which a book either survives or fades away is mysterious and influenced by a plethora of

factors—popularity among readers, number of copies sold, stage adaptations, critical response, the author’s posthumous reputation, genre, and, ultimately, the formal aspects of a text. A comparison of *The Tenant* and *East Lynne* offers an example of how Victorian attitudes specifically impacted the reception of a book, favoring *East Lynne* because of its presentation as an entertaining story mixed with the appearance of providing a moral lesson, and fearing *The Tenant* because of its honesty in witnessing vice first-hand. And perhaps, by understanding Victorian attitudes towards these books and comparing them to our own contemporary ideas, we might gain insight into what makes a book “good” to a modern reader.

Appendix: Examples of paintings by Jan Steen



The Dancing Couple, 1663



Drawing Lesson, 1665

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