

RE-DEFINING THE VICTORIAN IDEAL

RE-DEFINING THE VICTORIAN IDEAL: THE PRODUCTIVE
TRANSNORMATIVE FAMILY IN SENSATION FICTION

By

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ABSTRACT

This study examines two of the most popular sensation novels of the 1860s, *Lady Audley's Secret* by Mary Elizabeth Braddon and *East Lynne* by Ellen Wood, and their respective treatments of the Victorian family. Building on the work of critics who question and challenge the cohesiveness of the domestic ideal and the complete family within Victorian ideology, this project explores the representation of family units in both novels that are somehow beyond the ideological normative family of husband, wife and biological children. I examine several different figures, including the stepmother, the governess, the orphaned child, the single parent, and the unmarried aunt in order to trouble the distinction between the normative family and the transnormative family and thereby suggest that the contradictions and tensions that exist within a family grouping can function as enabling rather than debilitating. Through such an examination, I redefine the domestic ideal as ultimately flexible and adaptable rather than fleeting, frail or unachievable.

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Chapter 1:

INTRODUCING THE FAMILY: VICTORIAN DOMESTICITY,
NORMATIVITY AND DEVIANCE

Elizabeth Langland writes that “whereas domestic novels governed by the conventions of realism often obscure...resulting tensions, the very sensationalism of sensation fiction allowed it to expose not only the conflicting passions of middle-class women but the dark side of domesticity itself” (*Tales* 64). A genre that is notorious for its revelations and unmaskings, sensation literature, according to Langland, is specifically concerned with tensions and conflicts within the private sphere. Certainly, these tensions could be considered a dark side, given the tendency of sensation fiction to locate crime and conflict in the home; indeed, the passions of sensation heroines frequently result in crime. Yet the focus on tensions and conflicts need not be a way of expressing dark secrets and revealing troubling truths related to the home, the family, and the Victorian middle-class woman. Ellen Wood’s *East Lynne* (1861) and Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862), two of the most popular sensation novels of the mid-century, employ tension and conflict within the home in order to challenge and productively re-define central understandings of the Victorian family.

I. Domestic Ideology

The image of a Victorian middle-class family—husband, wife, and children—lovingly gathered in front of the household hearth has come to

epitomize domestic happiness and the centrality of home in Western culture. The Victorian household served as both the centre and foundation of English national identity; the Empire and the nation survived and prospered because of the purported purity of the English home.¹ For the Victorians, the true home was

a place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division. In so far as it is not this, it is not home; so far as the anxieties of the outer life penetrate into it, and the inconsistently-minded, unknown, unloved, or hostile society of the outer world is allowed by either husband or wife to cross the threshold, it ceases to be home; it is then only a part of that outer world which you have roofed over, and lighted fire in. But so far as it is a sacred place, a vestal temple, a temple of the hearth watched over by Household Gods, before whose faces none may come but those whom they can receive with love... (Ruskin 102).

The importance of the domestic realm, then, is that it functions as a space of relief and recuperation where the men of the marketplace, in particular, could escape the taint of the marketplace and the outside world and where women could raise their children away from that taint. John Ruskin goes on to elaborate the role of the wife in creating and maintaining the home, explicitly stating that “where a true wife comes, this home is always around her”, that “home is yet wherever she is” (Ruskin 138). Thus a wife’s primary purpose is to create this sacred space for the benefit of her husband and children, with the suggestion that a home is never properly a home unless the Angel of the House is present.

Ruskin’s list of things that should be excluded from the home, or that render any house a failed home, is also very telling. Terror, doubt, division, the

¹ See, for example, *The Young Ladies’ Reader* (1893) by Sarah Stickney Ellis, or Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall’s *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (1987).

unknown, the unloved and the hostility should remain outside the space of the home, which should be restful, sacred, peaceful and sheltering for both body and mind, as least as far as it was conceived of within domestic ideology. Of particular relevance to my study is Ruskin's choice to emphasize that "division" undermines the concept of the idyllic home. His use of the word relates back to the opening image of husband, wife and children around a hearth, to the necessary presence of a normative femininity to create a home, and to the understanding of family as laid out by the Census of 1851. The census employs an understanding of the family as "a small kin-group occupying a single house," specifically that group which includes two parents and their biological children (Waters 14). The Census of 1871, taken nearly ten years after the publishing of *Lady Audley's Secret* and *East Lynne*, adopts a similar understanding of the family as "founded by marriage" and consisting "in its *complete* state" of a husband, wife, and their children (qtd. in Thiel 8, emphasis mine). A home needed to be whole. Thus, these details of domestic ideology suggest that the concept of the home was profoundly intertwined with the presence and absence of certain family members. The predominant understanding of the true home (which translates to the domestic ideal) cannot exist without a "true wife". And as the wife's role is to reproduce and raise her children, it would appear that a home must include children. Finally, a home must also include a husband, as it exists primarily for his benefit while paradoxically being supported through his economic labours. These three elements of the family exist in harmony with one another; Ruskin's use of the

term “division” implies that any disruption of this harmony or any fragmenting of the whole would prove disastrous for the sanctity of the home. Each family member contributes something crucial to the home which seemingly cannot be contributed by any substitute. Thus, the home cannot exist without all its required members.

The contradictions and tensions that exist within this construction have been thoroughly explored and illustrated to great effect by critics such as Catherine Hall and Leonore Davidoff, Elizabeth Langland, and Karen Chase and Michael Levenson. Their studies, and the field of Victorian domestic criticism more broadly, have demonstrated that Victorian domestic ideology was filled with contradiction and paradox. These contradictions and paradoxes are visible in Victorian fiction which was frequently concerned with the ways in which the family was troubled, broken, or burdened by loss and conflict.² However, when I refer to the normative family, I am drawing upon the predominant Victorian understanding of the ideal as it was “advertised” by writers like Sarah Stickney Ellis, John Ruskin, Isabella Beeton, and even Queen Victoria, in which hallowed walls shelter a father, mother, and their biological children from the evils of the marketplace.³

² Charles Dickens, Elisabeth Gaskell, and the Brontë sisters, in particular, focus on the ways in which the middle-class family could be troubled or unhappy, or on broken families. See Lisa Surridge’s *Bleak Houses* (2001), Catherine Waters’ *Dickens and the Politics of Family* (1997), and Carolyn Dever’s *Death and the Mother from Dickens to Freud* (1998).

³ See Ellis’ *The Women of England* (1839), Isabella Beeton’s *Book of Household Management* (1863), and *Queen Victoria in Her Letters and Journals*, ed. Christopher Hibbert (1985).

I wish to take as my topic the complete family that is so central to Victorian understandings of the family. The emphasis on the importance of completeness in the ideal family suggests that those family groups which are not complete can never achieve the ideal, thus establishing an opposition between the complete, ideal, and normative family and the “incomplete” or transnormative family. The fact that a non-complete family can never achieve the ideal and yet remains surrounded by the pressure to work towards it, suggests that much of the power of the domestic ideal in Victorian ideology stems from hope. That is, because the ideal is only available to certain family groupings, the only connection between the “incomplete” family and the ideal is the hope of somehow achieving it in the future. This hope would be futile but, as Elizabeth Thiel has pointed out, non-ideal literary Victorian families are constantly trying to live up to the image of the domestic idyll that circulated within society. Thus, the ideal functions as a familial and domestic norm to which all middle-class families are pressured to conform.

I will illustrate the unsustainability of the binary between ideal and non-ideal family groupings by arguing that the Victorians operated under a much more flexible understanding of the domestic ideal. My readings of *Lady Audley's Secret* and *East Lynne* suggest that the ideal must incorporate elements of the transnormative, but also that the transnormative family is simultaneously structured by the ideal or by the persistent hope of attaining it. For example, while the family may appear to collapse following Isabel's elopement in *East*

Lynne, the collapse is not necessarily permanent because the family continues to function based on the hope that the ideal is never wholly unrecoverable.

II. Complicating the Home: the Domestic and the Marketplace

My approach draws heavily on the New Historicism by combining the study of literature with the study of culture and history and by operating under a general suspicion of any unified view of the depiction of history and culture. The Victorian domestic ideal is frequently either deconstructed or dismissed as merely fictional.⁴ To be sure, these are both useful perspectives, but these approaches do not necessarily do justice to the importance of the ideal to Victorian society and to our own. The notion of the true home holds enormous sway and occupies an interestingly complex place within Victorian society. In *Dickens and the Politics of Family*, Catherine Waters identifies nineteenth-century fiction as crucial in creating and upholding Victorian definitions of normality and deviance within the family. Her exploration of select Dickens novels reveals that even in literature, the ideal “is almost everywhere implied as the standard against which the families...are evaluated” (27). Hence Dickens’ famous preoccupation with broken homes is read by Waters as a way of representing deviance or abnormality

⁴ Lisa Surridge’s *Bleak Houses: Marital Violence in Victorian Fiction* (2005) explores family violence and its implications for the understanding of the ideal. Catherine Waters in *Dickens and the Politics of Family* (1997) traces the shift towards the ideal of domesticity through novels more concerned with domestic failures. Karen Chase and Michael Levenson’s *The Spectacle of Intimacy* (2000) deconstructs the Victorian notions of public and private. Elizabeth Langland (*Nobody’s Angels*, 1995), Catherine Hall (*White, Male, and Middle-Class*, 1992), Leonore Davidoff and Hall (*Family Fortunes* 1987), and Monica Cohen (*Professional Domesticity in the Victorian Novel*, 1998) explore the labour that existed behind the image of the sanctified home. Mary Poovey’s *Uneven Developments* (1988) is also a foundational text in the deconstruction of gender that links directly to understandings of the domestic ideal.

in order to reinforce the ideal and to signify the norm that can provide resolution. By pointing to what constitutes deviance, Dickens defines the normative. Thus, Waters' study is closely linked to my own in its recognition of the dialogical relationship between the normative and the deviant and its blurring of the distinction between the two. The complete family or the true home was advertised as the norm, eminently achievable for all families, and yet impossible to achieve for most; even families that qualified as complete could fall short of achieving such an idealistic norm. We credit the Victorians with too little self-knowledge in assuming that their ideal is ultimately one-dimensional or that they were not aware of its self-contradictions. The fact that Victorians returned persistently and hopefully to the intimate family structure—in spite of manifest failures—suggests that the ideal was much more nuanced than an all-or-nothing state of the home. That is, could a family not achieve some elements of the norm, while failing to conform to others? More significantly, the normative family is able to exist (ideologically or actually) only through an intimately dialogical relationship with the transnormative that results in the incorporation of elements of the transnormative or non-ideal into the ideal.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault's discussion of the norm reveals its dependence on the abnormal in order to define itself. According to Foucault, discipline, and therefore power, are exercised through normalization and by a normalizing gaze. The discipline enacted by institutions or apparatuses of society hierarchizes "good" and "bad" subjects—those who are normal and abnormal,

respectively—with the intention of making the shameful, abnormal class of subjects disappear (Foucault 181-82). In order to discipline, society exerts pressure on its subjects to conform to the same models of behaviour, the reward for which is autonomy within the specific system. Certainly the family as a unit within society is not exempt from these disciplinary pressures to conform; as Jacques Donzelot has observed, the state has the capacity to interfere in those families that do not adhere to the norm by means of social legislation concerning child labour, compulsory education, and housing. Indeed, the family is also the “locus for the emergence for the disciplinary question of the normal and abnormal” (Foucault 217). Thus, questions of normality are particularly important in regards to family behaviours and composition. In many ways, the ideal functions as the norm to which families are expected to conform in order to create a stronger foundation for the nation.

I wish to examine more closely this concept of the family and its complex relationship with the norm, analyzing the connection between ideal and non-ideal in light of Foucault’s work on the normal and abnormal. Karen Chase and Michael Levenson have done foundational and groundbreaking work in *The Spectacle of Intimacy: A Public Life for the Victorian Family* (2000) by taking up the Foucauldian “normalizing gaze” (184) and applying it to the task of illustrating the unsustainability of the binary between the Victorian domestic sphere and the outside marketplace. Chase and Levenson explore the duality of the Victorian domestic as both public and private, suggesting that “domestic life

itself was impelled towards acts of exposure and display” (7). Specifically, they argue that the members of a Victorian household lived with the awareness that their lives could become public and sensationalized at any time, that “appetites” within a family could drive what was private into visibility and humiliation. Paradoxically, however, it was this constant threat of exposure that kept the domestic private: “the only way to save privacy is to publish its secrets...because the throbbing act of disclosure purifies the private world” (Chase and Levenson 98). This “publication of a privacy” was not an invasion (7), suggest Chase and Levenson, but a way of regulating the private sphere from without and thus a way of disciplining it to adhere to the social norm.

Furthermore, the publishing of the private amounted to the manufacturing of an ideal, as images of the proper home circulated alongside stories of the antihome (Chase and Levenson 7). The home and the antihome, then, are in constant dialogue with one another. The home cannot be sanctified or maintained without acknowledgement of the possibility of disintegration in the antihome. By drawing attention to the imbrication of home and marketplace, Chase and Levenson trouble the Victorian middle-class notions of home and of private and public life. *The Spectacle of Intimacy* blurs the boundary between the “normative” conception of home and the transnormative or abnormal home by suggesting that even the ideal home cannot exist entirely in isolation from the marketplace. Not only is the home policed by the marketplace, but, as both Elizabeth Langland in *Nobody’s Angels* and Monica Cohen have pointed out, the

home cannot function as a home if the wife is unable to manage the household (3-13, 92). The duties of management included, among other things, knowledge of and participation in economic transactions such as purchasing food or paying domestic servants. The complicated conclusion, then, is that the ideal *must* be structured by the marketplace and must be touched by economics or the home cannot run properly and disintegrates.

Chase and Levenson, however, are less interested in the implications for the family itself than they are in how their conclusions impact the home as a larger concept. Their study provides an important foundation for my project because their conclusions ultimately complicate the ideal by revealing that contradictions can exist within it that do not necessarily deconstruct it. My own conclusions, however, are connected to how these contradictions impact the family structure.

III. The Shifting Family Structure: Re-marriage and Death

The second important strand of Victorian criticism that is foundational to my project is the study of the Victorian family itself. Much criticism on the Victorian family in literature is concerned with how its internal bonds are constructed and how they are affected by events such as death, re-marriage, or even domestic violence. The ostensibly sheltering walls of the middle-class home were of little use against the conflicts and tensions of familial relationships, and they certainly could not keep at bay the fragmentation caused by loss of a family

member. In many cases, the conflict within the family could be motivated by a desire to achieve the norm; in others, the conflict could be created by external forces that developed it and were themselves developed by the home in a mutual interaction. Lisa Surridge's *Bleak Houses: Marital Violence in Victorian Fiction* (2005) explores the effect of domestic violence on the home, uncovering references towards domestic violence in well-known texts that "undermine [Victorian middle-class culture's] central tenets of domesticity, marriage, and protective masculinity" (13). The idea that violence can exist within the shelter of the home renders the ideological norm suspect, as many of the fictional families that she examines are neither fragmented nor broken but technically whole and complete. As with Chase and Levenson's discussion of the publicity of privacy, Surridge's study too complicates both the domestic ideal and middle-class ideals. Surridge suggests that domestic violence can even be enacted in the name of the ideal in the sense that it might be a means of correcting a marriage that is not ideal. For example, from a patriarchal perspective, if a wife refuses to acknowledge patriarchal authority, then patriarchy must take action to adjust her behaviour so that the home can function properly. Domestic violence demonstrates that the ugliness of humanity is not unique to the world outside the home and that even the complete family fails to stand as a bulwark against it when home and the outside world develop dialectically. Ultimately, domestic violence in fiction forces the construction of a new home out of the remaining parts of the old. It is this observation that I feel bears more scrutiny, as the connection

between the ideal and the transnormative in *East Lynne* and *Lady Audley's Secret* is revealed primarily through the constant need to re-create or re-structure according to circumstance.

Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* were both immensely popular sensational novels when they were first published in 1861 and 1862, respectively. At the centre of each novel is a grand home and the family that is connected to it; both narratives are intensely focused on the shifting dynamics between figures that share the domestic space.. In *East Lynne*, the estate has passed from a profligate aristocrat into the hands of middle-class lawyer, Archibald Carlyle, leaving the daughter of the estate, Lady Isabel Vane, homeless and dependant upon her relatives. Desperately in love, Carlyle offers Isabel protection and a stable home in return for her consent to be his wife and so she marries him out of necessity rather than love. The marriage produces three children and runs relatively smoothly (in spite of the abrasive presence of Carlyle's sister, Cornelia) until Isabel becomes jealous of Barbara Hare, who is in love with Carlyle and working with him to defend her brother against a false accusation of murder. Isabel's jealousy grows, flamed by the taunts of Francis Levison, until she is driven to elope with Levison, abandoning her husband and children. Levison quickly abandons Isabel and their illegitimate child, who is eventually killed in a railway accident that leaves Isabel badly disfigured. Overcome with longing for her children, Isabel returns to East Lynne in disguise to take up the post of governess and is thereby forced to witness the blissful daily

interactions of Carlyle and Barbara, who is now his wife, and the death of her eldest son. The novel concludes with Isabel's dramatic confession and death.

Lady Audley's Secret also employs a second marriage as its central issue. Elderly Sir Michael Audley falls in love with and marries a middle-class governess named Lucy Graham, who appears to embody the Victorian feminine ideal. Lovely, childish, and charming, Lucy becomes mistress of Audley Court and stepmother to Alicia Audley. Robert Audley, nephew to Sir Michael, quickly becomes interested in the secrets of Lucy's past, especially following the disappearance of his friend, George Talboys, somewhere on the Audley estate. Eventually, it is revealed that Lucy has committed the crime of bigamy in marrying Sir Michael, having already been married to George, abandoned their son to be raised by his grandfather, adopted a false identity, and attempted to commit murder to maintain her new life of wealth. Her many crimes are attributed to her "latent insanity" and she is safely shut away on the Continent, allowing the rest of the characters to reconstruct new families out of the ruins of the old (385). Again, the narrative centers on the domestic and the circumstances that force the family to change and to re-structure itself, especially in relation to class status.

The effects of re-marriage on the family are particularly significant to both Braddon and Wood's novels; the impact of death is also worth looking at, as Carlyle's re-marriage is only facilitated by news of Isabel's death and the reconstruction of the Audley family occurs because Lady Audley has been

permanently removed to the asylum where she supposedly dies. Indeed, Lucy's opportunity to create a new life for herself is accomplished through faking her own death. Many critics have examined the issues of re-marriage in Victorian society, especially as it relates to Marriage Act of 1835 and its prohibition against a husband marrying his deceased wife's sister. The debate over re-marriage to a sister-in-law has provided fertile ground for critics interested in exploring the construction of the nuclear family.

The Deceased Wife's Sister debate centered on the "constructed nature of the relationship" between a man and his-sister-in-law (Gruner "Born" 425), constructed because it carried all the implications of a blood relation yet was created by legal rather than natural bonds. When the husband is married to his wife, her unmarried sister becomes his by law. Once he is a widower, however, she is suddenly a potential bride already closely connected to the family. The paradox is that the very blood relationship to her nieces and nephews that makes her an ideal second wife is the relationship labeled incestuous by supporters of the Marriage Act of 1835. The scenario in which a husband was forbidden by law to marry his deceased wife's sister for fear of committing incest illustrates how the internal bonds of the family can shift. The sister-in-law occupies the center of a complicated "web of relationships mediated by nature and culture, biology and law" (Gruner "Born" 425) that challenges the ideological norm of the natural, nuclear family based on biological relationships. Leila Silvana May observes that the "overdetermined metaphorization of familial nomenclature" has the potential

to “prove destructive to the ideal of the family” (25). The idea that achieved or conjugal familial bonds could be sufficient substitutes for consanguineal bonds suggested that a happy domestic life could be found in situations other than the prescribed norm. This concept links directly to Archibald Carlyle’s second marriage in *East Lynne*, which successfully reproduces and even improves upon the first despite its status as transnormative. Furthermore, anxieties around re-marriage and the ways in which re-marrying changes the internal bonds of the family are explored extensively in both novels with regards to both children and adults. Gruner suggests that a family is both “born and made” because marriage results in the construction not only of conjugal bonds (423) but also of ties between families that extend and re-shape the original family group (Corbett 2). If brotherhood and sisterhood can be constructed by marriage or law, it is logical to suggest that other biological relationships can be “built” as well. *East Lynne* is interested in the construction of familial bonds—especially between mother and child—following re-marriage, while *Lady Audley’s Secret* explores the ways in which absent parents allow for the construction of alternate familial bonds. Both novels carefully engage with the ways in which blood relationships mingle with those based on affection or legality.

Mary Jean Corbett, like May, suggests that the family that exists in an altered state may be functional and happy, despite failing to meet the qualifications of the normalized ideal (3). The fact that this is possible calls for a new understanding of the ideal as a state of the family that is able to include

elements both normative and transnormative. Where Corbett is concerned with the “installation of a norm that emphasized the exclusive (and exclusionary) bond of the conjugal, reproductive couple” (3) and the way it modifies and replaces alternative family groups, my own work will explore how these alternative family groups modify our understanding of the exclusionary, ideal bond of the conjugal couple. What remains to be done is to examine the relationship between the normative and the transnormative, defined as something less than deviance but deviant enough not to adhere to the norm. Furthermore, my study will examine the implications that such a relationship has for the definition of the normative or ideal.

IV. Affective Connections and the Transnormative Family

Elizabeth Thiel’s *The Fantasy of Family: Nineteenth-Century Children’s Literature and the Myth of the Domestic Ideal* (2008) is the work to which I am indebted for the term “transnormative” in relation to a family that is not completely deviant from the norm. Her theory of the transnormative family will provide an important framework for my project. Her book directly addresses the issue of whether or not a family that does not conform to the concept of the normative family is considered broken by creating a third category to encompass the in between units. “Transnormative family” is the term she coins in order to identify family units that deviate from the established order in some sense (8). As is implied by the construction of the term, the transnormative family is both

beyond the norm and yet not far enough beyond that it constitutes dysfunction.

Thiel has clearly defined the ways in which the transnormative exists in

opposition to the normative; what remains to be said is how it exists side by side.

A detailed explanation and exploration of the theory of the transnormative family is necessary before I can begin discussion of *Lady Audley's Secret* and *East Lynne*. As the transnormative family is characterized by its deviation from or modification of the established order, Thiel first defines what she means by the "established order," specifying her understanding of the ideological norm. To do this, she draws upon the Census of 1871 to which I referred above (Thiel 8). The census' idealization of a "complete state" of the family necessarily references its purported opposite; these are the units that Thiel labels "transnormative." The transnormative family is defined by the absence of biological parents, which means that the transnormative family unit may be headed by a single parent, step-parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, siblings, or surrogate parents unrelated by blood (Thiel 8). These units, unlike explicitly deviant families, resemble the normative family and attempt to replicate both its formal and affective structures.

The scenario examined by Chase and Levenson, Corbett, and Gruner, in which a deceased wife's sister assumes a prominent place in the household of her brother-in-law, for example, would fall under the category of transnormative because the void left by the loss of one biological parent is filled by a more distant relative who becomes both step-mother and aunt. In an era when death before middle-age was widespread, households missing one or more parents were not

uncommon (Nelson 145). Indeed, such units were pervasive enough that they threatened the “verisimilitude of the ideal” (Thiel 8). The prevalence of transnormative families in society translates to frequent appearances in the literature of the period, where authors attempt to impose an idyllic façade onto alternative groups in a clear “collaboration with prescribed ideology” (Thiel 10). Even when such authors present transnormative groupings as commonplace or akin to the normative family model, Thiel suggests that stepfamilies, foster homes, and orphanhood in literature rarely convincingly replicate or imitate the “natural” and “complete” family.

Thiel’s entire approach is relevant to my own work but her close analysis of the stepmother figure in children’s literature is where it most closely intersects. Her chapter on the stepmother also very clearly exemplifies her overarching concern with the tension existing between ideology and reality which functions as the basic foundation of her method. In her discussion, Thiel draws on a rich field of scholarship interested in the stepmother who appears frequently in nineteenth-century children’s literature. Critics have found the stepmother to be a problematic figure wherever she appears because, whether or not she plays the role of the evil, tyrannical interloper, she is never fully able to escape association with the monstrous stepmother of fairy tales.⁵ The linking of the stepmother in naturalistic fiction with her notorious literary predecessors may simply be a

⁵ See Jacqueline Schectman, *The Stepmother in Fairy Tales: Bereavement and the Feminine Shadow* (1993); Christina Hughes, *Stepparents: Wicked or Wonderful? An Indepth Study of Stepparenthood* (1991); and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *Madwoman in the Attic* (1979).

child's perspective in a particular text, or it may be linked to the stepmother's failure to assume that tyrannical persona in order to maintain order in her adopted household. In every case, however, Thiel points out that even these attempts at distancing stepmother from monster "ultimately serve to re-affirm the existence of a close association" because the stepmother of fiction is always compared to the dreaded wicked figure of fairy tales (Thiel 74).

This inescapable association results from the fact that the stepmother figure is consistently characterized as "other" in relation to her adopted family; the stepmother's otherness is also the reason for her bad literary reputation. Thiel suggests that she must enter the family's life from outside and attempt to re-create a second perfect home as best she can, with the understanding that she is ultimately doomed to fail. No matter how kind or well-intentioned the stepmother may be, Thiel maintains that she must always stand in opposition to the "frequently sanctified perfection of the deceased maternal image" (99). The traditional conceptualization of the stepmother is founded on the assumption that her very presence is a reminder of the absence of the original maternal presence and her role therefore rises out of pain, grief, and death. The stepmother consequently becomes a symbol of the destruction of a previously complete, ideal home (Thiel 100). Thiel draws on *The Mother's Practical Guide*, dated 1843, in her assertion that a stepmother's otherness frequently results in disrespect, coldness, or suspicion from the members of her new family, to which her response might be defensive, retaliatory and tyrannical. I would argue, however, that the

comparison between the stepmother and her predecessor does not necessarily have to have negative consequences for the stepmother's ability to create a home. Her otherness to the complete family can work to her advantage by allowing her to define herself as a better option than either a failed first mother or the single-parent family prior to her entry.

Thiel's reading of several children's novels, including *Birdie: A Tale of Child-Life* by Harriet Childe-Pemberton and Charlotte Yonge's *The Young Stepmother or A Catalogue of Mistakes*, reveals that the stepmother can "achieve a *semblance* of the domestic ideal through manipulation" if she is able to resist any authoritarian impulses (99, emphasis mine). Even these attempts, however, require the establishment of a relationship with the children that is built upon the "ashes" of the fractured family and which is forever haunted by the ghost of the sanctified absent mother (Thiel 99). Where my own argument diverges from Thiel is in respect to her suggestion that even the best-intentioned manipulation suggests a duplicity about any stepmother character that connotes her fairy tale counterpart and consequently means that she will always be a threat to the loving and tranquil home that is the Victorian domestic ideal. What I am most interested in, especially in relation to the stepmother and the ideal, is the ways in which she *can* reconstruct the ideal *because* she is a signifier of the transnormative.

The incorporation of the stepmother into the family group is just one of many possible transnormative groupings that appear in period literature. Another possible transnormative family, and one that I will examine more closely in the

final chapter of this study, is the family created to rescue and rehabilitate the orphaned child. The stepmother's consistent failure to convincingly recreate the domestic ideal in children's texts is the result of authors who, according to Thiel, "largely vaunt[ed] the 'natural' family as the superior form" and perpetuated the myth of the domestic ideal (157). As often as these authors seemed to emphasize the possibility of recreating the idyll within a transnormative unit, Thiel notes that these tales often close with the suggestion of compromise (25). In *The Fantasy of Family*, then, the family that includes a stepmother can never become the natural, complete unit that it aspires to because a stepmother can never be a mother by dint of the fact that she is a stepmother. Likewise, while the orphan may find his transnormative family a vast improvement on poverty or neglect, he will never fully experience the norm. Correspondingly, the transnormative family will never succeed in being anything but transnormative, either in fiction or in reality.

Again, this is where I part from Thiel. Her claim that a transnormative family cannot replicate the ideal because it does not qualify as "complete" is predicated on the assumption that a complete family must be the ideal family. However, this is not always the case. The stepmother is criticized for not reproducing the home that centered on her husband's deceased wife but the belief that the complete family prior to the mother's death was a happier situation is never questioned. In fact, the conflation of the terms "ideal" and "complete" is problematic because the family that includes husband, wife, and offspring does not automatically qualify as ideal simply because it retains its original members.

As I have pointed out, the cohesive nuclear family has been questioned and critiqued by Chase and Levenson, Lisa Surridge, Catherine Waters, Laura Peters, Leonore Davidoff, Leila Silvana May, and numerous others. *East Lynne* demonstrates that a step-parent or surrogate parent can create something more akin to the ideal by embracing the tensions of the transnormative. Subsequently, *Lady Audley's Secret* illustrates an example of the interactions and relations of the ideal that might exist outside its recognized class domain.

Thiel's analysis is focused mainly on how the transnormative "realities" of Victorian families exist in relation to the predominant domestic ideology. Her book is concerned with the discrepancy between prescribed norm and reality (which she defines as somewhere between literary representations and what existed statistically in society), and the ways in which the transnormative is *not* the ideal. Thiel's literary transnormative families are constantly trying and failing to live up to the idyllic home. Such a transformation is unsurprisingly impossible because, while Thiel first defines transnormative units as occupying a middle ground, her study ultimately focuses on the ways in which the transnormative fails to provide a substitute for the complete and natural family. Such a sharp division suggests that the ideal in all forms is a myth and that the transnormative in all forms leaves something to be desired. There is no doubt that *The Fantasy of Family* continues the work of Chase and Levenson, Gruner, Corbett, and May in examining the cross-over of normative and transnormative by bringing closer

together ideal and other through its focus on transnormative families that attempt to replicate the ideal.

However, my project will suggest that the ideal is predicated on and in dialogue with the transnormative to the extent that any distinction between the two must break down. Thiel suggests that the domestic ideal is a fragile concept continually threatened with disintegration; I would argue that the ideal is flexible, adaptable, and enduring. This does not necessarily suggest that the ideological norm delineated by John Ruskin or Sarah Stickney Ellis cannot exist at all—that it is a myth in every sense—but rather the ideology of the norm requires an adjustment to the understanding of the ideal that allows for the similarities between the normative and transnormative. Even an incomplete family structures itself on the ideal by attempting to compensate for vacant roles and by operating based on the hope of reconstruction provided by remaining elements of the complete family. In *East Lynne* and *Lady Audley's Secret* the remaining elements are usually a single parent and at least one of their biological offspring. In both novels, the combination of ideal and transnormative characteristics within any family grouping disallows its categorization as either normative or transnormative, effectively troubling both.

Not only are both categories troubled by the consistent amalgamation of their various characteristics with regards to a single family, but they are also constantly in dialogue between families. Their dialectical connection results in the complete family giving birth to the transnormative, as in *East Lynne*, or the

complete family growing out of a transnormative family, as Robert and Clara's complete family is made possible by Sir Michael and Lucy's transnormative family. Again, however, the status of each newly created unit is complicated by characteristics of its purported opposite. For example, the transnormative family of Barbara and Carlyle evolves into something more akin to the ideal by their love for one another and by their relationship with their biological children, while Robert and Clara's nuclear structure is augmented by the presence of George and his son, Georgey.

The analysis of Braddon and Wood's respective novels in the following chapters will suggest that neither the ideal nor the transnormative can exist independently of one another. Instead, the relation between the two is much more complex as each category is continuously troubled, complicated, and structured by elements of the other. The end result is a broadened definition of the domestic ideal as a state of the home and family that not only incorporates characteristics hitherto categorized as belonging to deviant, broken, or incomplete families but *requires* those same characteristics to function. The Victorian understanding of the domestic ideal is ultimately more flexible than John Ruskin's definition would lead us to believe.

Chapter 2:

PARENTS, STEP-PARENTS, AND THE FAMILY STRUCTURE: THE
DIALOGUE OF TRANSNORMATIVE AND NORMATIVITY IN *EAST*
LYNNE

East Lynne is both effective and explicit in its challenging of what constitutes normative and transnormative with regards to the middle-class Victorian family. The novel features a number of different versions of the Carlyle family, none of which can be neatly classified as normative or otherwise. *East Lynne* itself is the constant in the two halves of the novel, while the family that resides within it is constantly shifting and changing. Not only does the family change from the aristocratic household of the Earl of Mount Severn to that of middle-class professional Archibald Carlyle, but Carlyle's family itself takes numerous forms as the plot unfolds. Each half of the novel features a different woman as Carlyle's wife and mistress of *East Lynne*. Part One and the first half of Part Two are concerned with the Lady Isabel and the complete nuclear family that springs up as a result of her marriage to Carlyle, while the latter half of Part Two and Part Three center on the marriage of Barbara and Carlyle, and the children of both marriages under their care. In addition, Carlyle's household is organized by his sister, Cornelia prior to his first marriage, and, following Isabel's flight, Carlyle governs the domestic as a single parent with the assistance of Cornelia and a governess.

According to Elizabeth Thiel's theory of family structure, the Carlyle family qualifies as transnormative at every point in the narrative except during Carlyle's marriage to Isabel. The entire second half of the novel is shaped by Isabel's absence, defining the Carlyle family by "the temporary or permanent absence of a natural parent" and therefore as somehow outside the norm (8). However, as discussed in the previous chapter, and as an analysis of *East Lynne* will demonstrate, both the normative and the transnormative family are troubled categories. The different manifestations of the Carlyle family combine both elements of the ideological domestic idyll and of the transnormative, signifying that the ideal can incorporate contradiction and that the transnormative, or incomplete, family is structured by the hope of achieving the ideal. These contradictions and complications are especially visible upon closer examination of Isabel's behaviour and position as wife and mother, Cornelia's ever-shifting position in the family, Carlyle's choices as a single parent, Barbara's complex place as simultaneously mother and stepmother, and, finally, Isabel's status as a paid governess within the family at the end of the novel.

Many of the figures or roles that I will be examining are either mothers or mother substitutes. My concern, however, is less with the intricacies of the woman's role within the family and more with the broader implications for the family structure and the way in which it may be troubled by male as well as female figures. The exploration of the presence and absence of mothers in Victorian literature has already been undertaken to the extent that I feel there is

very little left to be done in this area.⁶ Indeed, the figure of the Victorian mother—usually of the middle classes—continues to provide scholars with material because of her centrality to family, to home, and to nation. If England's pride was in its patriotic sons, then its solid, silent foundation was the domestic and virtuous English housewife (Davidoff and Hall 19). Without the moral upbringing and sheltering hearth provided by English womanhood, the sons of England would lack the strength to battle the forces of the public sphere or to navigate the darker currents of the Empire.⁷ The Victorian woman was positioned at the very centre of English middle-class domesticity in her dual roles of wife and mother.

The roles of wife and mother were the two most important that a woman would fill in her lifetime. Wifedom and motherhood were connected by their shared emphasis on love, especially a self-effacing love.⁸ Good wifery was demonstrated through devoted maternity and the good mother was assumed to be a devoted wife. If a wife could succeed in creating a peaceful and comfortable home for her husband, then she could create the same for her children. Wifely or familial devotion and domestic management skills were lauded in conduct books

⁶ For criticism on the presence and absence of mothers see: Carolyn Dever's *Death and the Mother From Dickens to Freud* (1998); Barbara Thaden's *The Maternal Voice in Victorian Fiction: Rewriting the Patriarchal Family* (1997); Natalie McKnight's *Suffering Mothers in Mid-Victorian Novels*; Mary Poovey's *Uneven Developments: the Ideological Work of Gender* (1988); Nancy Armstrong's *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1987); or Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall's *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850*.

⁷ See Laura Peters *Orphan Texts* (2000) and Davidoff and Hall 28.

⁸ In one of her famous conduct books, *The Daughters of England*, Sarah Stickney Ellis writes that love was the very centre of a woman's being, that "to love was woman's duty; to be beloved her reward" (qtd. in Davidoff and Hall 183). Her entire life was in the family and her own sense of satisfaction would come through the selflessness demonstrated in her devotion to the needs of husband and children.

as guaranteed by the nature of the female sex (Liggins, Gruner), while it was “expected that all women, whether biological mothers or not, had a maternal instinct” (Davidoff and Hall 335).⁹ Consequently, a woman’s role was built around the family and the family itself was dependant upon the roles that she might play within it.

Nonetheless, in spite of the shared physical space of wifehood and motherhood, the two roles existed separately from one another in many ways. A woman’s primary duty was to ensure that her husband could find emotional support in the home and she ostensibly accomplished this by turning his mind away from anxiety and marketplace concerns and into “an exalted love free from the taint of sexuality or passion” (Hall *White, Male and Middle-Class* 61). Practically, her duty involved efficient domestic management, which required knowledge of the household duties required to create a comfortable home, and fulfilling her husband’s sexual and emotional needs. The raising of children, however, was slightly subordinate to these wifely duties and required different skills and different emotions. In “Plotting the Mother,” Elizabeth Rose Gruner observes that some literary heroines attempt to play multiple female roles at once, “refusing to cast off one for another,” but that they can find no model for their complex positions as simultaneously “mothers and desiring women, wives and daughters” (305). Gruner remarks on the ways in which maternal desire and

⁹ For a discussion on how conduct books themselves undercut the notion of “natural” and untaught domestic management or maternity, see Elizabeth Rose Gruner, “Plotting the Mother”(307), and Emma Liggins “Good Housekeeping? Domestic Economy and Suffering Wives in Mrs Henry Wood’s Early Fiction” (56).

conjugal desire are put into play against one another in *East Lynne*. While speaking to the disguised Isabel, Barbara Hare suggests that over-attentiveness to maternity at the expense of matrimony might result in the husband leaving the home to seek “peace and solace elsewhere” (Wood 407),¹⁰ meaning that the home has failed to fulfill the primary function of its existence. Yet, as Lynn Pykett explains in *The Improper Feminine*, maternity was the “only sanctioned outlet for female desire” apart from married love (129). Thus, once Isabel’s marriage starts to trouble her, her only distraction is to focus exclusively on her children; following her abandonment by Levison, her whole identity “is defined by her motherhood” (Pykett 130). Unlike Barbara, Isabel struggles throughout the novel with the various roles that she is expected to play and the roles that she desires to play. When these roles come into conflict, when sexual desire clashes with maternal and matrimonial, she is unable to protect herself. Both Isabel’s downfall and Barbara’s reward suggest that the roles of wife and mother need to be compartmentalized even within the home. Barbara’s ability to manage herself and the household emotionally *and* practically ensures her success, while Isabel serves as the illustration of failure to manage the emotional tensions of middle-class domesticity. A woman must keep her roles straight, and not only so that she avoids abandoning her domestic roles for more transgressive roles, but also, as Barbara points out, so that she can successfully use her own discretion to

¹⁰ All references are to the Oxford edition of *East Lynne* (2005). Ed. Elizabeth Jay.

determine which role must come first in certain situations and thereby protect both herself and her family.

The criticism of Gruner and Pykett points towards an alternate way of looking at the structure of the family, particularly in relation to women. In suggesting that maternal and conjugal desire may come into conflict with one another, they divide the role of the domestic woman into two: wifedom and motherhood, where wifedom constitutes the creation of a comfortable home and motherhood constitutes the bearing and raising of children. According to Victorian domestic ideology, in order for the family to qualify as normative, both these roles must be filled and they must be filled by a single individual. Yet the fact that the two roles are not necessarily the same suggests a complexity about the structural place of a woman within the family. If her place has more than one purpose, then it opens up the correlative possibility that the place can be filled by more than one figure. As Antonia Losano has pointed out, there are other women besides his wife that a man might "choose as his domestic partner" (105). If, for example, the mother cannot complete the duties of the wife, as we see in *East Lynne*, to what extent does the family still qualify as normative? The Lady Isabel, of course, makes a convincing and devoted mother, but fails in many respects to be the perfect wife, even without taking her adultery into consideration. A closer analysis of her role in Carlyle's household, however, will suggest that in spite of Isabel's shortcomings, the Carlyle family manages to conform to a revised ideal that incorporates contradiction. Isabel's domestic failures are cancelled out by the

presence of the capable Cornelia, who simultaneously allows the Carlyle family to function as normative and adds a jarring element of the transnormative.

I. Sharing the Domestic: Cornelia and Lady Isabel

The Isabel - Carlyle family is considered complete and normative according to Victorian domestic ideology simply because it incorporates the three essential elements: father, mother, and their biological children. Indeed, it operates as the normative family should and serves the proper functions. As the male head of the household, Carlyle spends his days labouring as middle-class lawyer in order to support the family, rewarded by Isabel's intense desire that "the time...go quicker, that [Carlyle] might come home" (150). It is Isabel's presence itself, not her domestic skills, that creates a haven at East Lynne; because Carlyle loves her, his reunion with her is enough to help him recuperate at the end of each work day.

For her part, Isabel, while self-admittedly not in love with Carlyle, is at least devoted to him and a genuinely affectionate mother to his children. Until Isabel reunites with Francis Levison, it is almost possible to forget that Isabel gave her heart away before her marriage because she is so "dull" without her husband around (159). Whether or not Isabel's devotion to her husband is the result of gratitude or of affection (likely a little of both), she contrives to "*put up* with Cornelia" in order to make him happy and to avoid troubling him with domestic tension in the space that is meant to be relaxing and rejuvenating (168).

Isabel strives to put her husband's emotional well-being above her own, conforming to the expectations of a Victorian wife. Isabel's devotion to her husband and the affection between them is easily mistaken for an idyllic love by Barbara Hare when she intrudes on one of their singing sessions. The very image of Carlyle standing behind his wife as she serenades him and accompanies herself on the piano, followed by a rewarding embrace, suggests the domestic happiness that was purportedly natural to a complete family, yet it is also an image that will be reprised within the transnormative family by Barbara and Carlyle later in the novel.

The functioning of the normative family is also dependant on the relationship between the mother and her children. Not only must the family include biological children, but their mother must cheerfully participate in their upbringing. Isabel's role as mother in *East Lynne* becomes particularly important as it is the only role of several that she seems to embrace naturally and wholeheartedly, rather than out of gratitude, necessity, or jealousy. As a mother, Isabel is immediately attached to her children simply because they are hers; she finds satisfaction in loving and being loved by them according to the doctrine of Sarah Stickney Ellis.¹¹ During the few scenes in which the novel depicts Isabel interacting with her children, her attachment to them is made quite explicit, especially when she is ordered to the French coast for her health. Even in her weakened state, one of Isabel's most common activities is to "sit for

¹¹ See note 2 on page 3.

hours...watching her children at play” and she is upset to learn that she cannot take them with her to France, unconcerned about the detrimental effect their energy might have on her recovery (167). In the tradition of the devoted mother, Isabel believes she would be unhappy away from her children for too long, that she would “ever be yearning” for them, and she would “get well all the sooner for having them” with her (200, 201). In this light, Isabel’s desire to have the children with her no matter the cost to her own health would seem to support Ellis’ claim that women find satisfaction and happiness in love. While not a particularly competent mother, at this point in her married life, Isabel seems to fill completely the role upon which the normative family so depends. Again, from the outside, the Carlyle family appears to strictly adhere to the norm of a loving husband who eagerly anticipates the evenings spent with his family and a devoted wife and mother who adores her children.

The complete family of the Carlyles, however, is troubled by transnormative elements. That is, it encompasses elements that lessen its normativity but do not necessarily render it incomplete. The first of these has already been touched on, which is the fact that Isabel’s marriage to Carlyle is a marriage of convenience that rescues her from an unhappy living arrangement in the house of the new Earl of Mount Severn, thereby allowing Carlyle to act as Isabel’s protector. Carlyle’s attitude towards Isabel is a love founded on an intense desire to shield her fragility and beauty from the damage of the world: he describes her to Cornelia as “a gentle, tender plant; one that I have taken to my

bosom and vowed before my Maker to love and to cherish" (152). Isabel's devotion her husband is a desire for his care and attentions as well as his protection and so their complete family is not necessarily based on love but on economics and security. This element, however, is not debilitating for the family. In contrast, the second of these elements is much more difficult to overcome. Isabel's ignorance concerning matters of the domestic poses a challenge for the entire household and has the potential to result in discontent and suffering (Liggins 61).

While Isabel respects her husband and attempts to avoid troubling him, she is unable to fulfill the most important duty of a middle-class wife: the creation of a comfortable home. Her presence itself provides some element of the haven for her husband, but, as an aristocratic daughter trained in the aesthetic rather than the practical, she lacks the required domestic management skills to keep her home operating smoothly. As Pykett writes, "[f]rom the outset Isabel is a failure as the wife of a middle-class lawyer...[s]he is physically, emotionally and (it would appear) morally frail" (117). Her failure to transfer from aristocratic to middle-class status "explode[s]" the middle-class dream of allying the money of the bourgeoisie with aristocratic status through marriage (Pykett 117), pushing her to occupy an ambiguous class status between the two.

Pykett observes that *East Lynne* focuses on the "ways in which gender is differently constructed in different classes" (118). Thus, Isabel is a proper model of a certain type of femininity particular to her aristocratic background; she is

sensitive to her aristocratic duties, especially her role as patroness, but her skills do not necessarily translate to the expectations of a different class. According to Elizabeth Langland, many novels directed at the middle-class “have the luxury of ignoring or obscuring” the fact that middle-class life was dependant on successful management of a servant class (*Nobody’s Angels* 60). One of the results of such obfuscation is the failure to acknowledge the importance of the bourgeois household manager (Langland *Angels* 60). In contrast, *East Lynne* speaks directly to the importance of household management and, by introducing Isabel as “childish” in behaviour and “girlish” in appearance (150, 11), repeatedly calls attention to her exclusive training in the decorative rather than in the practical arts. The most vivid moment is when the butcher makes his visit to East Lynne and Isabel is utterly clueless as to what to order for the household, never having been required to give such a command in her father’s home: “[t]otally ignorant was she of the requirements of a household; and did not know whether to suggest a few pounds of meat, or a whole cow” (147). The vague order that Isabel gives to be carried to the butcher angers Cornelia with its incompetence and the latter immediately takes over. Isabel admits that she must learn about “housekeeping,” but simply because she is the daughter of a peer, and not middle-class, Isabel is neither permitted nor able to take control of her own home (147). Langland observes that “[t]he central regulatory task of the Victorian angel—management of her servants—is signified in Victorian novels by housekeeping keys” (*Angels* 53). On one of the first nights following her marriage, however, Isabel does not

know where her keys are, anticipating her unsuitability for the position of middle-class manager (150).

Juxtaposed with her more successful performance as mother, Isabel's inability to run a middle-class household means that she is not successfully compartmentalizing her duties and, consequently, that she is not adhering to the normative vision of the middle-class family which expects the two roles to be filled by the same person. According to both novels and advice manuals, "men spen[d] their leisure hours elsewhere in order to escape a badly-run home" (Liggins 55) and Isabel's domestic incompetence could result in the disaster that Barbara later describes, in which the husband seeks "peace and solace" outside the home (407). Perhaps it is fortunate, then, that Isabel's ignorance of household management necessitates the jarring but capable presence of Cornelia.

As Isabel lies dying in the home of her husband and his second wife, heartbroken after the death of her son, she is visited by Cornelia. Astounded that Isabel is both alive and living at East Lynne in disguise, Cornelia is further struck by Isabel's declaration of Cornelia's virtue and morality. Unable to remain silent, Cornelia becomes only the second character in the novel to directly inquire as to the reasons for Isabel's abandonment of her husband and children:

'Child,' said she, drawing near to and leaning over Lady Isabel, 'had I anything to do with sending you from East Lynne?'

Lady Isabel shook her head and cast down her gaze, as she whispered: 'You did not send me: you did not help to send me. I was not very happy with you, but that was not the cause of—of my going away. Forgive me, Cornelia, forgive me!'

'Thank God!' inwardly breathed Miss Corny. 'Forgive *me*,' she said, aloud and in agitation, touching her hand. 'I could have made your home

happier, and I wish I had done it. I have wished it ever since you left it.’
(612)

This is perhaps the single moment in the text when Cornelia, the sister, and Isabel, the former wife, directly refer to their sharing of domestic space. Their conversation presents two ways of interpreting the structure of the Carlyle household during Archibald’s marriage to Isabel. As if the reader were not already aware of the conflict between the two women, this exchange emphasizes Isabel’s unhappiness that she had been unable to fill completely the role of wife but also her acceptance that Cornelia could provide for Carlyle what Isabel’s aristocratic background prevented her from knowing. Isabel remarks that she was “not very happy” with the situation but that it was not enough to drive her away. At the same time, Cornelia’s contribution to the maintenance of the household, while acknowledged as necessary, is also treated with irony by the narrator, who appears as shocked as Cornelia at Isabel’s reference to her sister-in-law as “good”. The narrator exclaims over Isabel’s humility, declaring her compliment delivered “as though Miss Corny were a sort of upper angel” simultaneously undermining Isabel’s statement by recalling all the moments in the narrative where Cornelia’s contribution to the infantilization of Isabel is made explicit and acknowledging Cornelia’s household management skills. Consequently, Cornelia’s presence at East Lynne is presented as a source of discord that nevertheless enables the continued functioning of the household and the complete family.

Unfortunately, there is very little extensive criticism on Cornelia. With the exception of offering one or two brief remarks, most critics are content to read

her as the traditional literary spinster who functions as “the most subversive of family members in terms of nineteenth-century domestic ideology” (Thiel 106). Cornelia is thus neatly categorized as threatening the domestic ideal rather than supporting it because she plays the role of spinster sister.¹² But what happens when we look more closely at a figure that we claim to understand? The presence of the spinster aunt in the conjugal home qualifies the Carlyle family as transnormative, according to Elizabeth Thiel, because it expands the family beyond the “natural” and normative unit of husband, wife, and children. Categorizing the Carlyle family as transnormative, however, is problematic because they also obviously conform to the norm that requires husband, wife, and biological children. As both an abrasive presence and crucial to the functioning of Isabel and Carlyle’s complete, normative family, Cornelia is a strangely dual figure.

Isabel’s failure to fill the role of wife leaves an unusual vacancy in the family into which Cornelia willingly steps and the result is two women filling the roles meant for one and thus occupying similar structural places in the family. In explaining to her brother why she should be allowed to remain his domestic partner, Cornelia herself points out that she can occupy the role that Isabel cannot: “Your wife will be mistress: I do not intend to take her honours from her; but I shall save her a world of trouble in management, and be useful to her as a

¹² Ann Cvetkovich refers to Cornelia in passing as the “domineering” and “overbearing” sister who “usurps” Isabel’s position as the head of the household (101, 99). Lyn Pykett describes her alternately as “competent, combative and masculinised” and as the phallic mother (120), while Emma Liggins accuses her of exacerbating Isabel’s ignorance by belittling “Isabel’s lack of domestic skills” (60).

housekeeper" (144). Yet Cornelia is more than just a domestic helper. Her strange possessiveness of her position of housekeeper and caregiver in her brother's life is more suitable to a wife than an older sister and much of her antagonism towards Isabel appears rooted in jealousy. She admits to Barbara that she is somewhat envious that Carlyle has discarded her "with contemptuous indifference" in his "taking a young wife to his bosom, to be more to him" than the sister who brought him up and "loved nothing else in the world, far or near" (135). The fact that Carlyle has taken a wife, however, apparently gives Cornelia no motivation to abandon him. Instead, she refuses to leave the household even after it is gently suggested that she return to her own home. Cornelia pays lip service to Isabel's place as mistress of East Lynne, sometimes withdrawing an order that contradicts Isabel's, yet determinedly performs all the duties of the mistress herself and leaves Isabel "little more than an automaton" (167). The necessity of her presence demonstrates that even the complete family must borrow elements from outside (that is, outside the conjugal couple and their children) in order to function.

In spite of Cornelia's status as spinster aunt in her brother's household, she invalidates in part Thiel's claim that aunts have "little or no skill in establishing a domestic idyll" because she is so industrious and authoritative (102). Neither does Cornelia consider herself depressed and lonely in the way that Victorian society perceived spinsters, who would be "left standing" "surrounded on all sides by vibrant, glowing, and younger creatures" (Thiel 104). Rather, her entire life

has been structured in relation to her brother's happiness and well-being in the same manner that her life would have been structured around children and husband had she chosen to have them. In refusing to relinquish care of Carlyle to Isabel, Cornelia appears to be appropriating Isabel's role as wife. The rivalry between Isabel and Cornelia for the practical duties of the wife is made explicit in the narrative when Carlyle reassures Isabel that she has "as much cause to be jealous of Cornelia, as...of Barbara Hare" (181). In competing for Isabel's role as wife, Cornelia creates a purpose for herself in a society that would otherwise have shut her out, denying her power and prestige. In contrast to the archetypal figure of the spinster aunt discussed by Thiel, Cornelia is able to have duties and responsibilities of her own because Isabel cannot take them over as Carlyle's wife.

If, as Foucault suggests, the abnormal or transnormative defines the norm and if the home could only be maintained through constant awareness of its antithesis (Chase and Levenson 7), then not only does Cornelia play an important role in supporting Isabel and Carlyle's marriage but she also contributes to the success of Carlyle's marriage to Barbara. By the time Carlyle is ready to marry for a second time, he has presumably learned from the conflict between Isabel and Cornelia that his new wife must be able to perform the duties of both wife and mother and that Cornelia should not have a place in his new family. Thus, the discord that Cornelia represents in the first marriage results in her quick banishment from the second. Once the servant Joyce has revealed to Carlyle the

depth of Isabel's unhappiness with her domestic companion, Cornelia's occasional presence at East Lynne serves as a reminder of discord and thereby assists Barbara and Carlyle in strengthening their own version of the ideal. Thus, the transnormative presence of Cornelia is necessary to the success of both Isabel's ideal and Barbara's ideal, suggesting that the ideal is not only able to incorporate contradiction but requires the reminder of the transnormative to successfully exist as ideal.

II. Surrogate Mothers in the Motherless Family: Stepmothers and Servants

Transnormative elements in *East Lynne* ensure the continued existence of the complete family, resulting in an ideal that includes conflict. In this way, the ideal depends upon the transnormative, since "the norm need[s] and cultivate[s] the disturbance" (Chase and Levenson 12). It stands to reason, then, that the ideal and the transnormative have a dialogical relationship and that the transnormative also depends upon the ideal to some extent. Nowhere is this more clearly illustrated than in Carlyle's brief period as single parent and Barbara's reign as stepmother.

When Isabel abandons her husband and children, she leaves a void in the family where the figure of the mother should be, resulting in a transnormative grouping. Carlyle is left to raise the three children as a single, divorced father and then as a widower. With one parent missing from the complete unit, William, Isabel Lucy, and Archibald are considered orphans, as Victorians often applied

the term to children who were “deprived of only one parent” (Peters 1). Yet “fragmented” or “broken” is perhaps too simplistic a label for the Carlyle family. “Broken” connotes a finality that is not altogether appropriate for Carlyle’s family unit; in fact, his family retains enough aspects of the norm for there to be hope of reconstruction. For example, while the children have lost their mother, their biological father remains with them. Cornelia, mistress of East Lynne to all intents and purposes, also remains and presumably continues to run the household efficiently. Her appropriation of the practical duties of the wife means that there is someone remaining with the knowledge to keep the domestic operating smoothly. Consequently, while Isabel’s place in the family is vacant, the rest of the structure remains intact. Transnormative families, unlike deviant or broken families, resemble the norm closely enough that they can attempt to replicate both its formal and affective structures. In *East Lynne*, the triad of substitute mothers—one of whom is the biological mother in disguise—constitutes an attempt by the Carlyle family to fill the void and thereby come a little closer to resembling the norm.

One of the most important of Isabel’s duties as mother would have been training her children according to her chosen moral code; other aspects of motherhood included affectionate emotional support and caring for the children. The combined functions of Joyce, Wilson, Cornelia, and Miss Manning the governess are intended to fill the rupture in the family. By virtue of her centrality to the Carlyle household, Cornelia seems the most obvious candidate to step into

the void created by Isabel's absence; combined with her close consanguineal relationship to the biological father, her role as "wife" would make it simple for her to take over the care, discipline, and instruction of the children. She continues to manage East Lynne but, in spite of her "phallic" mothering of Carlyle (Pykett 127), never are we encouraged to see her in a maternal light. Cornelia spends the majority of the novel chastising her brother, scolding Isabel, directing the servants, and generally lurking in the background of domestic life as a disapproving and judgmental presence. And while her severity is never directed at the children, neither does the reader ever watch her interact with the children. Her role at East Lynne is restricted to housekeeper and privileged sister, but in distancing her character from the children and, therefore, from the prescribed feminine ideal, Wood ensures that she cannot perform maternity when required.

In contrast, the servant Joyce comes across as a particularly maternal figure, even before Isabel is seduced by Levison. When Isabel is required to travel to France without her children for her the sake of her health, she asks that Joyce remain with her children if she does not return, since "the next best thing will be to leave them with [Joyce]" (202). She instructs Joyce to "be kind to them, and love them, and shield them from...any unkindness that may be put upon them", which are among the things that a mother would be expected to do for her children (202). On the night of her departure, Isabel again asks Joyce to promise to stay at East Lynne with her children should anything happen to her (276). This repeated request suggests that Isabel attempts to appoint her successor

and that Isabel trusts Joyce's loyalty, kindness, and maternal instincts above those of her sister-in-law or those of the rest of the household servants. Indeed, Joyce's relationship with the children is often closer than that of their father or stepmother. It is Joyce who fractures her ankle chasing Lucy out into the rain, and it is Joyce who attempts to comfort the child the night of Isabel's flight. Yet for all Joyce's affection towards Isabel's offspring, she is simply a servant in the household and not in a maternal position. Likewise, Miss Manning the governess cannot take the place of a mother, despite being "like the middle-class mother in the work she performed" (Poovey 127). A governess, as Mary Poovey points out, earns a wage performing the instructional and disciplinary aspects of motherhood and therefore functions explicitly as a figure of both the domestic and public spheres (Poovey 127). In contrast, the mother's managerial duties, which functioned as the efficient counterpart of her husband's work in the marketplace, were performed without wage and so were supposedly restricted to the domestic (Langland *Angels* 46-48). Thus, the governess is also unable to transform her role into that of mother.

Clearly, there is no single figure remaining at East Lynne who can step into the vacant role. Joyce, Miss Manning, and presumably Wilson share some of the duties of motherhood among them but the combination is not equivalent to a single woman who can devote her main existence to the well-being and raising of her children, however idealistic such a figure may be: in many ways, as McCuskey has convincingly demonstrated, the very status of the middle-class

family depended on their ability to hire domestic servants (360). Still, both fictional and historical accounts are often reluctant to promote the servant to the position of acceptable parent substitute. Though *East Lynne* tacitly endorses a number of transnormative family configurations, it suggests that the motherless family can merely *structure* itself on the ideal rather than replicate it. Indeed, it is clear from the moment of Isabel's departure that none of these figures can take her place. Isabel's daughter, Lucy, is aroused by the commotion once the disappearances have been discovered and demands her mother. Joyce makes a number of attempts to placate the child and orders her to bed, but Lucy refuses to be comforted by anyone other than Isabel, anticipating the absence that defines single parenthood (282). Nonetheless, if the transnormative is to come as close as possible to replicating the norm then an attempt must be made to fill the vacancy even with the knowledge that it must ultimately fail. At the very least, such an attempt allows for the continued existence of hope of the ideal which structures the transnormative family grouping. In this way, then, the transnormative also incorporates contradiction because it must somehow strive to resemble the ideal.

The incorporation of substitute mothers into the transnormative family begs the question of whether or not maternity is performable and who is capable of performing it. Those figures in the household who are touched by the concerns of the marketplace, such as servants, cannot become replacement mothers. The question of performativity plays into what Elizabeth Rose Gruner refers to as the "double bind" of Victorian maternity: it is either natural to the female sex, and

therefore naturally moral, or it is performable by others ("Mother" 316). Fallen and adulterous mothers such as Isabel appear to disprove the theory that motherhood is naturally moral, yet the belief that there was no substitute for a mother's care was predominant, as demonstrated by Caroline Norton and the debates over the 1839 Infant Custody Act.¹³ In *East Lynne*, further proof of the potential disjunction among morality, maternity, and femininity comes in Cornelia's inability to be mother to William, Isabel, and Archibald,¹⁴ *East Lynne's* maternal failures, however, also function in hopeful ways. If maternity is not necessarily dependant on a biological relationship, then the space left by Isabel might yet be filled.

This line of reasoning brings me back to the notion that a successful surrogate mother must be one person who combines all the required elements of maternity that the household attempts to provide for Isabel's children. The presence of such a figure within the transnormative family is a crucial step towards its reclamation of the norm. However, if the transnormative family wishes to replicate the norm, rather than merely draw upon it, the surrogate mother will also be capable of stepping into the role of wife. As Carlyle himself points out to his sister in a moment of surprising—and long overdue—understanding, "two mistresses in a house do not answer, Cornelia: they never

¹³ For further discussion on Caroline Norton and the Infant Custody Act, see Chase and Levenson's *The Spectacle of Intimacy* (21-45); Poovey's *Uneven Developments* (51-88); or Gruner's "Plotting the Mother".

¹⁴ Support for marriage to the deceased wife's sister in the debate over the bill of the same name was premised on the notion that a second wife of blood relation to the orphaned children would make the best stepmother (Gruner, "Born and Made" 434).

did, and they never will” (373). What Carlyle implies here is that the prescripts of the norm require that the roles of wifehood and motherhood be played by the same person in order to avoid the type of conflict and confusion that existed at East Lynne between Isabel and Cornelia. The figure that could most convincingly perform maternity for the children would be a figure that could perform the other crucial female role in the family. The new wife and mother simultaneously completes the family structure and adds elements of the transnormative, thereby creating a revised version of the ideal.

The stepmother is a complicated figure in Victorian literature and ideology.¹⁵ I explored in the previous chapter Elizabeth Thiel’s perception of the stepmother in Victorian children’s literature as consistently “other” to her adopted family (74). In myth and fairy tale, “[l]oss and grief are [the stepmother’s] milieu, her *raison d’etre*” (Schechtman xv) but in reality, stepmothers suffer the stigma of wickedness “even when they are good and loving surrogate mothers” (C. Hughes 54). Whether the stepmother’s status as intruder preceded and contributed to the monstrous figure at the heart of many fairy tales, or whether the image of the traditional wicked stepmother lurked in the Victorian unconscious and thereby resulted in the second wife’s alienation, Thiel asserts that the stepmother was ultimately unable to avoid association with her wicked counterpart (Thiel 74). In *East Lynne*, Isabel’s anxieties over Carlyle’s re-marriage if she should die are

¹⁵ See Christina Hughes, *Stepparents: Wicked or Wonderful? An In-depth Study of Stepparenthood* (1991); Jacqueline Schechtman, *The Stepmother in Fairy Tales: Bereavement and the Feminine Shadow* (1993); and Thiel’s *The Fantasy of Family*. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar also touch briefly on the stepmother in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (269-270, 343).

based primarily on the myth of the stepmother; she articulates her fear that a stepmother would “ill-treat” her child and “draw [Carlyle’s] love from it, and from my memory” (181). Consequently, the stepmother is trapped by her otherness to the family as a kind of doppelgänger to the original mother (Losano 106). If she adopts a somewhat tyrannical persona to impose order on the presumed chaos of the single parent family, she risks allying herself with the wicked fairy tale stepmother; if she does not, then she is unable to organize the chaos in her quest to re-create the ideal (Thiel 100). The stepmother, then, is another dual figure, an intersection of transnormative and ideal as well as a site of conflict within the ideal.

The common reading of her—that she can never create what the family has lost—is founded on a single, flawed assumption. Certainly the stepmother cannot help but be compared to her predecessor, but it does not necessarily follow that this has negative repercussions for her ability to re-build the family. For example, what is the result when her predecessor was less than saintly, as in *East Lynne*? In Wood’s novel, Barbara’s “normative controlled and controlling femininity” succeeds in creating a family more akin to the norm than any other in the novel (Pykett 130), in spite of the fact that she is a stepmother. Her success is due in part to Isabel’s transgressions, which pave the way for Barbara’s re-creation by providing her with something against which to define herself, not unlike Chase and Levenson’s construction of the home as defined by its opposition to the anti-home (7). The result of the tensions within the Isabel-

Carlyle ideal allow for the creation of a second ideal by Barbara and Carlyle that is simultaneously more akin to the norm and more troubled by transnormative elements.

If Isabel is the most critically examined figure in Wood's novel, then Barbara is a close second place. Most often, the two characters are examined side by side as Barbara briskly succeeds in accomplishing those things at which Isabel fails miserably; indeed, Antonia Losano goes so far as to analyze Barbara as one of Isabel's many doubles because she has literally stepped into Isabel's role as Carlyle's wife (106). Pykett describes her as the "'successful' heroine" (128) and her success has been attributed variously to her domestic management skills and to her ability to contain her feelings.¹⁶ Barbara's success, however, is not the domestic idyllic "true home" described by John Ruskin (102). Emma Liggins describes it as "illusory, given the patterns of illness, discontent and sexual frustration mapped out by Wood as symptomatic of the bourgeois marriage" (61). Nonetheless, while Barbara's ideal is just as fraught with conflict as Isabel's, her middle-class upbringing (which accounts for her domestic skills and practicality) ensure that hers is ultimately more productive than Isabel's.

The term "normative family" as I have been employing it refers specifically to a middle-class conception of the family. It is appropriate to suggest, then, that in order to most successfully create both the norm and the ideal

¹⁶ Emma Liggins describes Barbara as "an excellent household manager" (61). Both Pykett and Gruner refer to Barbara's ability to "compartmentalise" her desires, and her ability to constrain and contain her maternal feelings by her sense of conjugal duty (128; "Mother" 316).

the mistress of the home should come from a middle-class background. Barbara's background and family—unlike Isabel's—are perfectly suited to the roles of efficient, middle-class wife and mother. That Barbara is a more suitable choice of partner for Carlyle in terms of social status is implied when Cornelia first breaks the news of her brother's engagement to Barbara. She remarks that Isabel's elegant and be-jeweled concert apparel was "all very well for her, for what she is, but not for us" (133). This is an interesting comment in the context of a conversation with Barbara; Cornelia's use of "us" is a slightly ambiguous because it might refer to herself and her brother, to herself and Barbara, to all three figures, or to their larger acquaintance. Nevertheless, it is clear that Cornelia sets Isabel and her "high-born beauty" apart from herself and Barbara (135). Cornelia's objection to Isabel as Carlyle's wife on the grounds of class difference and her possible inclusion of Barbara in the "us" anticipates Archibald's second marriage. And while Cornelia chafes at Carlyle's marriage to Barbara as she did with his marriage to Isabel, her objection to Barbara appears much less well-founded and more likely motivated by resentment, rather than genuine disapproval. She calls Barbara "conceited" and "vain", but cannot deny that the match is socially suitable (373).

Barbara demonstrates her skill to take over as mistress of East Lynne even before Carlyle has decided to propose. In stark contrast to Isabel's timid instructions to household servants, Barbara has no qualms about authoritatively ordering Wilson to ensure that little Archibald remains quiet and out of sight

while Cornelia is unwell: “‘You must be so kind as to keep him strictly in, for to-day,’ continued Barbara, authoritatively. ‘Cornelia is not well, and cannot be subjected to the annoyance of his running into her room’” (364). Although she is not yet Carlyle’s wife, or even wife-to-be, Barbara’s middle-class training motivates her to calmly organize when she is witness to a moment of chaos in the household. In spite of Mrs. Hare’s poor example, Barbara has been brought up in awareness that she will one day have “the whole of the internal administration [of the home] in her hands”, including “the management of children and servants” (*Guide to English Etiquette* qtd. in Langland, *Angels* 46). Cornelia’s absence from this particular scene allows Barbara to take full charge and the servants respond without the resentment frequently articulated in response to Cornelia. *Cassell’s Book of the Household* declares that “capable servants are produced by capable mistresses, who understand how work should be done, and insist upon it being properly done” (qtd. in Langland *Angels* 47). Later in the narrative, Barbara’s instructions to Madam Vine are delivered in a “courteous but most decided tone” intended to show that she is the “unmistakable mistress of the house and children, and meant to be” (418). Indeed, Barbara’s ability to recognize the importance of delegating “certain duties to servants and ‘professionals’” appears to be what makes her arguably more successful in her roles as middle-class wife and mother (Gruner, “Mother” 314). She understands the importance of separating her roles and of the significance of the maternal division of labour:

‘I hold an opinion, Madame Vine, that too many mothers pursue a mistaken system in the management of their family. There are some, we

know, who, lost in the pleasures of the world, in frivolity, wholly neglect them: of those I do not speak; nothing can be more thoughtless, more reprehensible; but there are others who err on the opposite side. They are never happy but when with their children: they must be in the nursery; or, the children in the drawing-room. They wash them, dress them, feed them; rendering themselves slaves, and the nurse's office a sinecure. The children are noisy, troublesome, cross; all children will be so; and the mother's temper gets soured, and she gives slaps where, when they were babies, she gave kisses. She has no leisure, no spirits for any higher training...The discipline of that house soon becomes broken. The children run wild; the husband is sick of it, and seeks peace and solace elsewhere...Now, what I trust I shall never give up to another, will be the *training* of my children,' pursued Barbara. 'Let the offices, properly pertaining to a nurse, be performed by the nurse—of course taking care that she is thoroughly to be depended on. Let her have the *trouble* of the children...But I hope I shall never fail to gather my children around me daily, at stated and convenient periods, for higher purposes: to instill into them Christian and moral duties; to strive to teach them how best to fulfil the obligations of life. *This* is a mother's task...' [sic] (406-407)

Barbara's philosophy on child-rearing in *East Lynne* is a particularly interesting approach to maternity, especially because it is endorsed by both the narrator and Isabel. Barbara seems to suggest that successful motherhood stems from an awareness of all aspects of her role as mistress of a household. Her role as mother manifests itself in her function "as moral guardian and guide" (Pykett 129), while her awareness that the servants of her household have duties that they must be allowed to perform facilitates her role as wife, ensuring that it receives the proper amount of attention. Barbara makes this much more explicit when she explains to Isabel that she would "never give up my husband for my baby" (409). Unlike Isabel, Barbara "is able to keep her roles straight...as wife she puts her husband first; as mother she is a respectable and respected moral teacher" (Gruner 316). Her disdain for mothers who "must be in the nursery" or have their children with

them “in the drawing-room” is a disdain for women like Isabel who cannot compartmentalize their maternal and conjugal desires.

Barbara’s expertise within the domestic sphere and her long-standing love for Carlyle establish her as the ideal “active middle-class wife and modern mother” (Pykett 119). The skills and qualities that accompany Barbara’s middle-class status are the skills and qualities that allow her to succeed where Isabel fails; the tensions that trouble Isabel’s complete family do not trouble Barbara’s. Her knowledge of housekeeping and management excise Cornelia from the nuclear family, and her love for her husband establishes a more idyllic conjugal bond than the financial necessity that motivated Isabel’s marriage to Carlyle. Thus, Barbara and Carlyle are able to enact “*precisely* the same marital scenes as did Isabel and Mr. Carlyle ten years previously” in spite of their status as transnormative family (Losano 106). That a transnormative family can echo accurately the scenes of the norm challenges the ideological assumption that a stepmother, and, by extension, the transnormative family, can never regain what was lost with the departure of the first wife. The family under Barbara and Carlyle includes transnormative elements in the forms of Isabel’s children, yet it also includes a complete and recognizably normative family *within* the larger transnormative as Barbara and Carlyle produce children of their own. The presence of the smaller, complete family within the larger suggests a desire on the part of Barbara and Carlyle to model their family on the norm in the same way that the previous sequence of substitute mothers constitute a desire to structure the family according to the

precepts of domestic ideology. Because Barbara proves more competent at the roles of wife and mother than Isabel herself (the lost, original mother) the resulting transnormative family is perhaps more akin to the ideal than the normative family which preceded it. Unlike the mythical stepmother, Barbara does not need to resort to tyrannical behaviour to establish a place in her new home; her skills as a middle-class woman enable her to find other means to create a space for herself. Unfortunately, her ability to create the ideal out of the transnormative gives rise to its own set of problems.

Barbara's version of the ideal is not without its own tensions and contradictions. While she successfully compartmentalizes her roles as wife and mother and demonstrates her ability to fulfill the duties of a married middle-class woman, Barbara never quite succeeds at being a convincing mother substitute for Isabel's children. One of the first things that Barbara explains to Isabel (in disguise as Madam Vine) is that the children of the household who are to be placed under the governess's care are not her own but "the children of Mr. Carlyle's first wife" (405). Her comment immediately establishes a division between Isabel's children and her own baby, whom she mentions just before (405). It is made very clear that Barbara does not consider the children her own or even close to her own at this point in her marriage; rather, they are her responsibility and a somewhat burdensome responsibility at that. Barbara does not appear to hold William, Lucy, and Archibald responsible for their mother's crimes, but she does point out that their mother's disgrace "is reflected on the

children, and always will be" (406). Furthermore, the fact that she is deliberately more focused on the children's connection to Isabel ("they are the children of Mr Carlyle's first wife"), rather than their connection to Carlyle (405), suggests that she is not willing to re-define their familial connections and replace their mother, in spite of the fact that Lucy was instructed that Barbara "was come to be our mamma in place of Lady Isabel" (418). Indeed, the assumption concerning the stepmother who has taken over care of the children of her disgraced predecessor in the novel is that the new mother completely takes the place of the old. Consequently, Mrs. Latimer informs Isabel that she is certain that the Carlyle children "are taught to forget [Isabel], to regard Mrs Carlyle as their only mother" (399). The fact remains, however, that William, Lucy, and Archibald are consistently described as "motherless." Mrs. Latimer refers to them as "unhappy" and Hannah refers to the dying William as "poor" in her remark that his unnoticed bad health is almost certainly due to the fact that he does not have a mother to take proper care of him (439). The emphasis on the abandoned state of Isabel's children effectively sets up an hierarchy between them and their step-siblings, Anna and Arthur Archibald. If they are defined as Isabel's children first, and Carlyle's second, they are essentially figured as outcasts from the complete family created by Barbara, Carlyle, and their children; where we might expect Barbara the stepmother to be the intruder on the remnants of the complete unit of the children and Carlyle, her ability to re-create the norm builds a barrier between her offspring and those of her predecessor. Nowhere is this more clearly

demonstrated than in the different ways that Carlyle responds to his children. The affection he displays for Barbara's child is surprisingly maternal, as he "smother[s] his face with kisses, as Barbara had done" (413). In contrast, Lucy tells Madam Vine that her daily breakfasts with her father stopped after Barbara became a part of the family, immediately giving both the reader and Isabel the impression of a division within the home and of some degree of careless neglect (416). Barbara herself admits in the closing pages of the novel that she is not a satisfactory replacement mother: "there has been a feeling in my heart against [Carlyle's] children, a sort of jealous feeling...because they were hers; because she had once been your wife" (624; pt. 3, 61). The disparity between the two groups of children constitutes a tension that troubles Barbara and Carlyle's ideal.

The hierarchy within the family, however, does not necessarily negate its status as ideal. It is made very clear that the neglect of William and his siblings does not stem from any malicious intent. In her thoughts, Isabel frequently accuses Barbara of not caring enough about William's obvious sickness because "she is not his mother" (521), yet biological maternity does not preclude blindness to a child's suffering, as Isabel herself is unaware of the seriousness of William's condition until Hannah remarks on it (439). The night of the false fire alarm, it is Barbara who realizes that the sick William is shivering in the cold air of the corridor and takes him to her bed to warm him up. Likewise, Barbara demonstrates capability in dealing with little Archibald even before she becomes his stepmother, and Lucy's admission to Madam Vine that she does not love

Barbara as she loves her “very very own mamma” does not preclude the fact that she *does* love Barbara as a mother to some degree (418). More importantly, Barbara’s admission of failure at the end of the novel is paired with a recognition of the wrongfulness of her behaviour and an explicit desire to improve:

‘I knew how wrong it was, and I have tried earnestly to subdue it. I have indeed, and I think it is nearly gone. I’—her voice sunk lower—
‘constantly pray to be helped to do it; to love them and care for them as if they were my own. It will come with time.’ (624)

That these are among the last sentences of the novel means that the closing tone of *East Lynne* is one of hope; the reader is left with the knowledge that Barbara will try her hardest to strengthen the sympathetic, affective bonds among family members that Victorians viewed as the very foundation of desirable family life. That the Carlyle family can continue to function in spite of the hierarchies within it suggests that the ideal is no less ideal for its incorporation of tension.

When one woman replaces another within the structure of the family, it is inevitable that first wife and second wife, mother and stepmother, will be compared to one another. *East Lynne*, however, is structured so that the comparison of Isabel and Barbara is embedded within the narrative. In many respects, Wood’s use of comparison between the two spouses of one character draws upon the bigamy plot so popular amongst sensation novelists. Carlyle’s reluctance to re-marry while Isabel is alive is motivated by his belief that to do so constitutes bigamy. Once news of her death reaches East Lynne, Carlyle has no qualms about asking Barbara to be his wife. As in many bigamy novels, however,

the news of the original spouse's death is false and "the former husband or wife becomes, in effect, a ghost haunting the second marriage—a living ghost, rather than a memory of, say, a dead first spouse" (Losano 105). In *East Lynne*, Isabel's ghost is both living and dead; to the residents of East Lynne and West Lynne, her ghost exists in memories, but to the reader and to the narrator, she is the living ghost that Losano describes. Thus, we are easily able to compare the two women who have essentially swapped roles and replaced one another in relation to Carlyle.

In her discussion of the "living ghost" of the bigamy plot, Losano explores the doubling of Barbara and Isabel (105). Barbara has literally "stepped into Isabel's shoes to become the second Mrs. Carlyle" because she and Carlyle enact the same scenes that he and Isabel took such pleasure in during their own marriage (106). The narrator and Isabel comment freely on the replication, making certain that the reader understands the significance. Upon seeing her former rooms occupied by Barbara, Isabel thinks to herself that "never more, never more could they be hers...they had passed into another's occupancy" (401). Likewise, as Isabel persistently intrudes on or is forced to witness scenes of intimacy between Barbara and Carlyle, she masochistically dwells on her lost role. When Carlyle leaves East Lynne in the morning, she watches Barbara walk him to the front gates: "[s]o had *she* fondly hung, so had *she* accompanied him, in the days gone forever" (418). Isabel watches the strange moment in which Barbara serenades Carlyle with the same song that "he had so loved when *she*

[Isabel] sang it to him” (431 emphasis mine); the narrator underscores the resemblance, noting that “so, once had stolen, so, once had peeped the unhappy Barbara, to hear this self-same song. *She* [Isabel] had been his wife then; she had received his kisses when it was over. Their positions were reversed” (431). The strange repetition of marital scenes encourages a direct comparison of Barbara and Isabel by suggesting that Carlyle’s “rather rigid sense of what marital relationships consist of—the same in every case” renders “the woman who stands in the position called *wife*...essentially replaceable” (Losano 106). The doubling of Barbara and Isabel, then, draws the two characters so close together that it becomes impossible for Barbara to escape the living ghost of Isabel.

Fortunately for Barbara, however, the comparison is ultimately what allows her to create a particular version of the ideal family. Her success is due in large part to the fact that as a stepmother, she herself is an element of the transnormative and will consistently be compared to her predecessor. Barbara’s position as stepmother is unusual because rather than being “cursed by the spectral presence of maternal perfection and lost domestic bliss” (Thiel 74), Barbara can define herself and the family she has created against Isabel and her failures. Without the direct comparison, Barbara runs the risk of being reduced to her role as the stepmother who tries and fails to replicate the norm. Her status as the replacement of a fallen first, however, ensures that no matter the tensions existing within Barbara’s ideal, it must always be an improvement on the state that existed before her arrival, which is itself a direct result of Isabel’s

transgressions. Isabel's fall, as Mrs. Hare observes, clears the way for Barbara to build her own ideal (429). The family of Barbara and Carlyle is the only grouping in the novel that completely embodies the dialogical relationship between the normative and the transnormative. By embracing her status as transnormative element and adapting the norm to her family, Barbara exemplifies a re-definition of the Victorian domestic ideal as a flexible concept that is strengthened by its tensions and ultimately productive.

III. The Fallen Woman and the Functioning Family: Isabel as Governess

The dialogue between transnormative and normative becomes more complicated by Isabel's return to her former home as governess. The governess herself is a complicated and troubling figure for Victorians, both in literature and in reality, even without the complications existing when she is actually a mother in disguise. Her purpose was to be an instructor of middle-class values to the household children and her presence intended as a "barrier between the wife/mother figure and the erosion of all that this figure represented" (Losano 107). In her much-cited chapter in *Uneven Developments*, Mary Poovey delineates the inherently unstable position of the governess as a figure who is intended to instill and embody middle-class morality while simultaneously challenging those values through her position as hired woman; "[t]he very figure who theoretically should have defended the naturalness of the separate spheres threatened to collapse the difference between them" because she brought the

concerns of the marketplace into the hallowed walls of the home (Poovey 127). The governess was expected to “preside over the contradiction written into the domestic ideal” by both policing and embodying middle-class morality, especially in her repression of sexual desire both in herself and in her charges (Poovey 128). Yet, as Poovey points out, the governess was frequently linked with the lunatic and the fallen woman, which was a reflection of a Victorian anxiety over the governess’s position as a young, unmarried woman in spite of her theoretically neutral sexuality (128-29). Her embodiment of middle-class morality, therefore, was part of an elaborate performance that included the roles of servant and mother as well as chaste young woman (Litvak 138). The governess facilitates the functioning of the complete family by performing duties similar to that of the mother, yet, as I have already pointed out, she could not occupy the same structural place as the mother because she earned a wage for her work. Subsequently, the governess is a dual figure who both enables and troubles the norm. In this way, the governess is closely intertwined with the dialogue between transnormative and normative, especially in *East Lynne* when she is actually the biological mother of the children in her charge, children whom she abandoned in her adulterous (and disastrous) elopement with a man from her own class.

The ultimate theatrical performance by a governess is Isabel’s disguise as Madam Vine, which has received a generous amount of critical attention.¹⁷ In her

¹⁷ Criticism on Isabel and Madam Vine focuses specifically on the concept of the doppelgänger. See Losano’s article and Winnifred Hughes’s *the Maniac in the Cellar* (21). For an exploration of Madam Vine and performance, see Litvak 138-141.

2004 article, Losano uses the concept of the doppelgänger to suggest that Wood is appropriately adapting the convention of the double to female characters in a novel written for women. The female doppelgänger, especially in *East Lynne*, is threatening to the original self because “the second self is given an equal shot at being the ‘real self’” and, in the case of Isabel, the doubling reflects a “fantasy of self-erasure, of becoming one’s own ghost” (Losano 104, 106). The persona of Madam Vine, then, is intended to become the real self but remains haunted by the original persona of Lady Isabel. Consequently, while Isabel’s disguise as Madam Vine is intended to be the dominant self, the fact that Madam Vine is haunted by Isabel ensures that the ghost of Carlyle’s first marriage haunts his second as per the tradition of the bigamy novel (Losano 105). Indeed, Isabel’s presence in the household as the disguised former wife adds a distinct tension to the family, albeit one of which only she, the narrator, and the reader are aware. She is not quite a part of the normative family at East Lynne, yet neither does she completely exist within the realm of “hired help”; she is related by blood to some of the children of the household but forced to play down her maternal feelings to avoid discovery. Isabel/Madam Vine constitutes a transnormative element in the Carlyle household because she expands the family even further beyond the complete unit than the presence of either a stepmother or stepchildren. In contrast to the way in which Cornelia is figured as intrusive on the complete family of Isabel and Carlyle—as an unwelcome but familial presence—Isabel is never directly acknowledged as either an intruder on the family or a source of tension to it. Her haunting of the

marriage, however, is made physical by her disguise¹⁸ and the tension is underscored by the number of scenes in which Isabel intrudes on or is forced to witness private moments between Barbara and Carlyle. Isabel seems to develop remarkable skill at timing her entrances just as Barbara and Carlyle are expressing their love for one another or playing out particularly intimate scenes. Frequently, as when Isabel voluntarily peeks through the doors of the drawing-room to watch Barbara singing to Carlyle or enters a room silently at the moment when Carlyle is “taking plenty of kisses” from his wife, her intrusion goes unnoticed (437). At other points during the narrative, her intrusion becomes an interruption and Barbara reacts by springing away from her husband (438). Isabel’s persistent and varied disruption of so many conjugal displays of affection has the effect of denying the reader the opportunity to watch Barbara and Carlyle together without being reminded of Isabel and all that her presence connotes, ultimately troubling the newly-created ideal at East Lynne.

Given the ambiguous presentation of Barbara’s ability to mother Isabel’s children, it is intriguing that Wood allows the return of the biological mother to care for her children, effectively presenting the second side of the maternal “double bind” outlined by Gruner; that is, the complications inherent in performable maternity. Isabel’s abandonment of her children suggests a failure of the “natural and naturally moral” maternity, yet her return to East Lynne to care

¹⁸ Even Isabel’s new French identity contributes to her status as intruder. As an Englishwoman who supposedly married a Frenchman, Madam Vine would still be considered very French and thus ‘alien’ to the Carlyle household, as demonstrated by Justice Hare’s reaction to her in Chapter 41.

for them seems to re-confirm the maternal instinct if not its natural morality (Gruner 316). The web becomes increasingly tangled because, as governess, Isabel is expected to be a surrogate mother and therefore must repress her maternal “longing” in order to play the role properly (418). As Gruner remarks in “Plotting the Mother,” “[w]ho or what is a wife, a mother, especially if her husband and children do not recognize her?” (315). *East Lynne* would appear to suggest that a mother is still the best caregiver for her children, whether or not they recognize her. Indeed, the narrator suggests at one point that natural affection between a mother and her biological children exists regardless of mutual recognition: “She [Isabel] and the children were upon the best terms: she had greatly endeared herself to them, and they loved her: perhaps *nature was asserting her own hidden claims*” (438, emphasis mine). Moreover, it is Isabel who carefully and diligently attends to William as he gets progressively sicker and who speaks to Dr. Wainwright about his condition each time he comes (442). That we are intended to attribute her devotion to maternal love rather than proper performance of her duties as governess is made clear by the narrator’s tendency to dwell on Isabel’s grief at having to watch her son sicken and die. Her reaction to William’s eventual death shocks even Joyce, as Isabel throws herself on her son, clasps him to her while “crying, sobbing, calling” (587). Interestingly, the only acceptable answer is to admit that William reminds Madam Vine of her own son, further underscoring the importance of natural maternity to Isabel’s return to East Lynne in disguise.

The ideal as I have been re-defining it not only incorporates contradiction, it also *requires* contradiction or tension in order to exist at all. Accordingly, Isabel's presence at East Lynne is a necessary evil. The tension created by the shadow of Carlyle's first marriage is balanced by the importance of Isabel's governess duties in ensuring a functioning household. In many ways, Isabel comes to occupy the place previously filled by Cornelia as an intruder on the family idyll who is nevertheless necessary to the endurance of that idyll. In spite of the fact that a governess is not considered a part of the family, Isabel's role as governess is integral to Barbara's vision of the middle-class home and family: "Let the offices, properly pertaining to a nurse, be performed by the nurse...Let her have the *trouble* of the children, their noise, their romping" (407). Barbara's desire to function as a moral guide to her children only works if her household includes the aforementioned nurse or (presumably) governess; without the governess to endure the trouble of the children, Barbara will be forced to become the type of mother that she so disdains—the mother who is "wearied, tired out with her children" (407). Her discourse of maternity is "fractured and contradictory" because it "reveals the division of labour, and the dependence on servants in the domestic hierarchy which sustains this version of mothering" and because her emphasis on management clearly links the role of middle-class wife to the role that her husband would have outside the home (Pykett 129). The role of the governess becomes even more important at East Lynne during Barbara's reign because the specific children in need of a governess are stepchildren. In

seeking to establish a “maternal division of labour” for herself (Gruner 314), Barbara simultaneously collapses it by placing Isabel in a position in which she will endure from her own children that which, according to Wood, is not the province of the middle-class mother. This has the ultimate effect, however, of having Isabel care for her own children, while Barbara cares for hers, ostensibly ensuring (while Isabel lives) that each group of children receives the best possible care according to the belief in natural maternity. The incorporation of the biological mother in disguise, however, is also the incorporation of the adulterous woman. Not only does the middle-class family depend on an ostensibly external figure in *East Lynne* to function, but it depends on a sexually compromised or fallen woman and it is this revelation that motivates Barbara’s confession and the hopeful closing of the novel. Thus, Isabel as Madam Vine combines natural maternity with the “unnatural” sexual deviance of the fallen woman in order to assist in the creation of a conflicted family ideal.

East Lynne depicts several versions of the Carlyle family, all of which are troubled by conflict or structural tension. In defiance of Victorian domestic ideology, however, none of these manifestations qualify as broken despite existing outside the limitations of the norm; even Carlyle’s experience as single-parent is never depicted as a failed family. The adjunct presence of Cornelia and Barbara’s position as stepmother and second wife, as well as Isabel’s importance to the family as governess, are causes of tension within the family that do not compromise its functionality. Instead, Isabel benefits from Cornelia’s skills and

Barbara is able to use her position of outsider to build her own family; thus, the transnormative characteristics that reside in both Isabel's and Barbara's families are ultimately productive. *East Lynne* illustrates the way the transnormative family incorporates the same interactions and affective connections that define the norm, thereby complicating the categories of normative and transnormative. Ultimately, the novel suggests that the norm is a limited vision of the domestic ideal, which is far more flexible, complex, and inclusionary. The very relationships and tensions that threaten to destroy the norm are what define the ideal.

Chapter 3:

(DE)CONSTRUCTING THE MIDDLE-CLASS NORM: RE-WRITING THE ORPHAN NARRATIVE IN *LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET*

In the previous chapter, I challenged the predominant understanding of the Victorian domestic ideal and proposed that *East Lynne* employs an ideal that is capable of incorporating contradiction. In particular, I examined the relationship of the stepmother to her adopted children who qualify as orphans, according to Laura Peters, because they are deprived of at least one parent, whether or not the absent parent is actually dead or merely departed (1). In exploring Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, I will also take up the issue of the orphan child, who "has always held strong imaginative potential for novelists" (Waters 29) because such a figure can be linked variously to many of the things with which Victorians concerned themselves: family, morality, empire, class, and the past.¹⁹

Victorian literature and society recognized three broad yet varying categories of orphans: privileged orphan, the street waif, and the middle-class foundling. Each variation of the orphan figure was linked to a particular class, which ultimately determined how they were treated by wider society. The privileged orphan would have "middle-class or wealthy custodians arranged prior to the parents' demise or departure" and was therefore considered neither very threatening nor in need of rescue. The middle-class foundling is a child of the

¹⁹ For further discussion of these topics in relation to the orphan, see Waters 28-38, Thiel 43-71, and Peters.

upper or middle classes who, by a combination of bereavement and bad luck, ends up living amongst the poor; eventually, however, his inherently superior intelligence, his attractiveness of feature, and his purity (all of which are physical manifestations of his original class status) result in his rescue and reunion with lost family members.

The street waif, on the other hand, is a more ambiguous figure. Born into poverty and “rescued” by the state from his degenerate, neglectful parents or from the streets, the street waif needed to be educated as a contributing member of society and thereby prevent the otherwise inexorable slide of the poor child into immorality (Thiel 44; Peters 8). At the same time, however, Peters observes that poor orphans who had actually lost both parents were “neglected, malnourished and, at best poorly educated” while being farmed out “with local families in order to provide cheaper outdoor relief” (14). The poor orphan was potentially a criminal or potentially an example of the triumph of Victorian middle-class morality. As a child without a family and without “ties to the community,” the street waif was figured as a foreigner and a threat to the complete, middle-class family (Peters 2). Emily Brontë’s Heathcliff is a prominent example of a street waif who is rescued in the hopes of rehabilitation but whose destructive potential threatens the Earnshaw and Linton families almost to the point of destruction. Yet the street waif was not completely outside the narrative of domesticity; as a constant reminder of disruption, the bereaved child strengthened and further defined the normative, middle-class conception of the family (Thiel 44). Thus,

Heathcliff's aggression and bitterness become the catalysts for the creation of a new family in the closing chapters of *Wuthering Heights*. The complete family needed to guard against the degeneracy that might accompany the orphan, yet only through the domestic norm could the orphan be rehabilitated. Thus, the figure of the orphan and of the street waif, in particular, occupies a complex place in relation to the Victorian family. If sensation fiction generally questions, disturbs, or reveals contradictions in Victorian ideologies and norms,²⁰ then it is appropriate that such a figure be employed and adapted by Braddon in her interaction with predominant family ideologies.

While the term "orphan" is applied exclusively to children, *Lady Audley's Secret* features a number of adult characters who were missing at least one parent as children. Helen Talboys, Robert Audley, Alicia Audley, Clara Talboys, and George Talboys are all raised by single parents of different classes. Helen's orphanhood has been remarked upon as typical of the sensation heroine whose motherlessness renders her "both more vulnerable and more assertive than was the norm for the properly socialized woman" (Pykett 87). Indeed, the stigma of the poor orphan marks Helen's actions as an adult as she is both an intruder on and a part of "the conventional middle-class values of domesticity and respectability" (W. Hughes 127). In contrast, the orphanhoods of Alicia and Robert are shown to be relatively productive, resulting in the close relationship of

²⁰ For example, Schroeder and Schroeder suggest that *Lady Audley's Secret* exposes "flaws in the social apparatus of patriarchy" (31). Cvetkovich writes that sensationalism renders "concrete or visible what would otherwise be hidden" (50) and Pykett explores the way in which women's sensation novels "rework and negotiate, as well as simply reproduce" the contradictions of the historical conditions of women's oppression (50).

Alicia and her father and in Robert's status as "a great favourite with his uncle" in what is clearly a surrogate father-son relationship (Braddon 72).²¹ Just as treatment of various child orphan figures both socially and in literature are inextricably intertwined with class, so the effects of orphanhood on adults are shown to be dependant on social status.²²

This chapter will focus primarily on the child orphan figure of Georgey Talboys, drawing on the figures of the street waif and foundling, in order to expand my analysis of the family beyond parents and the adults in the family structure and in an effort to compensate for the minimal amount of scholarship on Georgey. While Georgey is relatively marginal in the text and generally interpreted as an extension of issues explored through the characters of Robert and George,²³ his story is worth further study because he occupies a complex place in relation to the family structure of the Talboys. By the time Georgey is born to Helen and George Talboys, the family is well on its way toward poverty because George has failed to either appeal to his father for money or to find

²¹ All page numbers refer to the 2003 Broadview edition of *Lady Audley's Secret*, ed. Natalie Houston.

²² Alicia, Robert, Clara, and George all qualify as privileged orphans in that their orphanhood does not result in a change of social status; instead, they are cared for by surrogate guardians or single parents of their own class and would therefore have been considered less threatening to the family or society and less in need of protection. This chapter is predominantly interested in the way in which Georgey's ambiguous class status affects the Victorian ideological understanding of the family. Examining these four adult characters and the impacts of their orphanhood on their lives and on the novel would be an interesting and rewarding approach to *Lady Audley's Secret* but one that I was unable to engage with to the extent I would have liked due to the scope of this project.

²³ For example, in the closing sentence of her article "Educating Boys to be Queer: Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*" (2002), Jennifer Kushnier refers to Georgey's declining of *musa* at Eton as a representation of the novel's critique of the "practice of tolerating homoeroticism during school days and later enforcing heterosexism" (69-70).

employment (361). George soon abandons both Helen and Georgey to seek his fortune in Australia, and Helen herself abandons Georgey shortly thereafter, leaving him in the care of his grandfather, Captain Maldon. When George returns from Australia, he is shattered by the reported death of his wife and takes very little interest in his son. Instead, he assigns Robert legal guardianship and Maldon practical guardianship of Georgey. As Robert delves deeper and deeper into Lady Audley's secrets, however, he becomes convinced that the drunken and impoverished Maldon is not a suitable guardian for his friend's child and promptly removes him to school. At the end of the novel, Georgey is one of the residents of the blissful and peaceful, middle-class "fairy cottage" along with his father, his aunt, and his legal guardian (444).

Georgey's progression from poverty to education and the middle-class domestic idyll parallels in many ways the traditional tale of the foundling child that provides the foundation of such novels as *Oliver Twist*. Like Oliver, Georgey is orphaned and living in poverty only to be plucked from the poor working classes and restored to his proper place amongst by the middle classes. Yet Georgey's position is not simply that of middle-class foundling; he is also very much like the street waif in that he is rescued from the care of an impoverished family member in order to be educated and prepared for entrance into respectable society. Georgey occupies an ambiguous class position throughout the novel as inherently middle-class yet ostensibly subject to the same dangers of corruption from a poor family as the street waif. In a discussion of Robert Audley,

Cvetkovich observes that because his detective work exists between “the legal, professional world and the family” it keeps the boundary between the two fluid (57); I would like to suggest that Georgey’s ambiguity of class similarly connects two different versions of the family from two versions of the orphan narrative: the middle-class norm and its ideological antithesis in the lower-class, impoverished family.

Waters describes the journey of the middle-class foundling as a progress “from poverty and anonymity to the revelation of...pedigree and the recovery of...inheritance” and, therefore, as a narrative of the retrieval of “lost” family (29). The retrieved family may be based on surrogate familial relationships as easily as blood-relationships, but it is the transition from poverty to middle-class respectability that is ostensibly carried out for the child’s “own moral and spiritual benefit”, whether the child is street waif or foundling (Thiel 44). Only the middle classes could create the proper nurturing idyll and, thus, the foundling can only be happy among his own classes and, in the case of the street waif, any middle-class family is “invariably depicted as superior to the child’s ‘natural’ family” (18). The orphan narrative, then, serves primarily to emphasize the inherent superiority of the middle-class norm. Braddon, however, re-writes this narrative in order to question the very ideology upon which it is founded. An orphan figure who occupies an ambiguous class status and who is consequently able to connect different versions of the family reveals the similarities between the norm and the transnormative or non-normative. In a narrative that is intended to vaunt the

superiority and exclusiveness of the middle-class norm, however, any suggestion that the ideal is accessible for other classes ultimately serves to undermine it. Not only does the norm of George and Helen prove unable to endure under the stresses of reality, but the first “retrieval” of Georgey’s family, in which George returns to England with the means to support his wife and son once again, does not result in the recreation of the middle-class family but in its rejection. Furthermore, Maldon, the most ostensibly unsuitable guardian of the novel, is the guardian to whom Georgey is most attached, while Robert, the middle-class professional, is the guardian who appears least able to care practically for his charge. Finally, the blissful middle-class idyll into which Georgey is incorporated is fraught with conflict and compromised by the heavily ironic tone of the narrator in the closing chapter of the novel. By weaving the well-known orphan narrative through the sensation plot of *Lady Audley’s Secret*, Braddon challenges Victorian preconceptions concerning the ways in which a family is constructed and defined. *East Lynne* illustrates the ideal as a version of the family not incompatible with conflict; *Lady Audley’s Secret* further demonstrates the flexibility of the ideal by suggesting that it can exist outside the limitations of class established by domestic ideology.

I. George and Helen: Flaws in the Norm

The implications of disruptions or voids in the complete family structure are often explored through the figure of the orphan child. The middle-class

orphan and the impoverished orphan both begin their narratives in poverty and both are characterized by a need to be rescued from that poverty, if not also from the care of an incompetent, impoverished guardian. Thus, the orphan child would lack the moral guidance and selfless, loving care of a mother and the protective presence of the father, whether because both parents are absent or because “poor parents” were generally depicted as “frail, and incapable, or as corrupt and uncaring” (Thiel 51). Because the impoverished family in literature is often represented as “the very antithesis of the ideological middle-class family,” according to Victorian ideology, the orphan will never experience a secure domestic environment unless he is transplanted into a family that embraces the middle-class norm (Thiel 51).

In *Lady Audley's Secret*, Georgey is abandoned by both his biological parents in their quests for wealth or personal gain: George leaves to seek his fortune in gold, and Helen leaves to find a better life for herself, away from the “slavery” of her father’s household (362). As such, they appear to conform to Thiel’s claim of the inferiority of impoverished parents who have little thought for the children who suffer neglect. Yet, before the break-up of the Talboys family, they live “in splendid style” on the Continent and George is explicit about the fact that he was “the highest bidder” for Helen’s hand because of his father’s wealth (59). Until their money starts to dwindle, the Talboys appear, to all intents and purposes, to conform to the ideological understanding of the middle-class family. George recognizes his duty to provide for his family by braving the public sphere

(however half-heartedly) in his search for a profession to “drop” into (59).

Helen’s golden-haired beauty and childish mannerisms allow George to project onto her the image of the archetypal middle-class angel who ostensibly forms the foundation of the middle-class domestic norm and whom it is his duty to protect. With the addition of Georgey, the Talboys complete their family structure and should be living a secure and peaceful domestic life, according to the prescripts of the norm.

The only way for George and Helen to replicate the norm—or attempt to—is to live far beyond their means with little thought for their future, which in itself speaks to the problems inherent in the norm. The idealized norm is “largely defined by the domestic woman at its centre” (Waters 36) and, thus, George believes he has achieved this norm because he believes that his wife embodies domestic virtue. Helen’s ability to perform and appear to conform to an idealized femininity has been remarked on extensively by Victorian critics, especially in her marriage to Sir Michael, and George Talboys is no less guilty than Sir Michael in his willingness to believe in her perfection.²⁴ He believes so intensely, in fact, that he abandons her and appears to expect that those idealized qualities will sustain her in the absence of his monetary support. He paints an idealized and highly romanticized vision of his departure, having left Helen “sleeping peacefully with the baby on her breast” and apparently believing that she will be

²⁴ See, for example, Pykett; Schroeder and Schroeder 29-67; Chase and Levenson 200-208; Winnifred Hughes (124-128); Cvetkovich 46-50; or Lynn Voskuil “Acts of Madness: Lady Audley and the Meanings of Victorian Femininity.” *Feminist Studies* 27 (2001): 611-639.

“safe under her father’s roof” despite his earlier criticisms of Captain Maldon’s drunkenness and irresponsibility with money (60-61). His insistence on remembering the image of his wife and child asleep together, combined with his insistence to Miss Morley that nothing could have happened “in such a short time” as three and a half years, indicates a strong belief in the endurance of the norm and in the bond between mother and child, in particular (58). He expects that he can leave a significant void in the family structure and simply return to fill it after three years. Unsurprisingly, the idealized bonds of normativity are not enough to sustain a family and so Helen, too, abandons it. Natalie and Ronald Schroeder suggest that marriages in the novel “are relationships under stress, in fact, under pressure to the very breaking point” because “the ideological basis of Victorian marriages makes such a consequence inevitable” and those most likely to suffer from the breaking of marriages were women (63). Likewise, Georgey’s position as the middle-class child also renders him vulnerable to the impact of a flawed norm.

While the middle-class Talboys family is unconcerned with social reform and the rescuing of orphans, it nevertheless conforms to the appearance of the vaunted superior norm that would rehabilitate destitute orphans and welcome home the foundling. Yet such an inflexible vision of the family proves vulnerable and unsustainable, “a mockery of the stable household” (Chase and Levenson 207), and Georgey is left an orphan all the same. His mother does not give birth to him and die, nor does his father abuse and then abandon him as in more

traditional orphan narratives. Instead, Braddon adapts the abandonment in order to challenge the superiority of the middle-class norm by suggesting that Georgey's orphanhood is result of flaw built into the middle-class norm. George's journey to Australia becomes an extended foray into the marketplace to support the norm, yet also constitutes a legal abandonment of his son without financial support for three years (Schroeder and Schroeder 38), and Helen's journey to Essex and the Audleys is undertaken with the middle-class idyll as the ultimate goal. Consequently, Georgey sinks from the middle-class home into an impoverished orphanhood.

II. Captain Maldon's Guardianship: Rejecting the Norm

The disappearances of both George and Helen leave two ruptures in Georgey's family structure. Just as George seems willing to leave Georgey to his grandfather's supervision (84), Helen apparently has no qualms about leaving her child to the care of her father and, indeed, Captain Maldon steps willingly into the void left by Georgey's parents. The family unit of Captain Maldon and Georgey is based on natural or blood relationships in the tradition of the orphan narrative, yet it also qualifies as transnormative because it is headed by a grandparent rather than an actual parent. Because Captain Maldon is a single surrogate parent, he must be both father and mother to Georgey. The absence of a parent or parents creates an opportunity "for the formation of a variety of atypical family relationships" (Waters 29). The relationship between Georgey and Captain

Maldon is complex and fascinating, although it is tempting to dismiss it as the brainwashing of an innocent child by an unscrupulous old man. The frequent descriptions of Captain Maldon's "dusty, shabbily furnished, and disorderly" cottage prepare the reader for the worst in relation to Georgey's living conditions (79), but it is immediately clear that Georgey loves and trusts his grandfather. Captain Maldon is very much a father-figure and paternal presence to Georgey, offering the protection required from a father. When Georgey is frightened by the appearance of Robert and George, he runs to his grandfather and clings "about the tails of his coat" (83). Later, he "peeps" out of the parlour when Captain Maldon opens the door, suggesting a reluctance to venture past a known safe place from behind a trusted "protector" (125, 200). And, while the narrator explains that Captain Maldon spoiled Georgey "by letting him have his own way in everything" (201), Georgey explains that he is not permitted to go to school for fear of his catching the measles again, forbidden from playing with the rough neighbourhood boys, and that he was scolded for using the term "blackguard" (189). As a result, it appears that Captain Maldon protects Georgey and makes some attempt to discipline him according to the duties of a father.

Even more surprisingly, Captain Maldon occupies a maternal role in relation to Georgey as well and thereby creates a transnormative family that is unintentionally structured on the ideal. If discipline and protection are the province of the father figure, then nurturing, loving and selfless care belong to the mother figure. And while Captain Maldon is by no means a substitute for the

idealized domestic angel, he provides Georgey with his own version of the expected maternal behaviours. Georgey and Captain Maldon himself are explicit about the mutual affection between the grandfather and his grandson, and even George and Robert recognize the bond between them to some degree. Georgey declares that he loves his “grandpa” (83) and demonstrates his love through his trust and happiness, by giving Captain Maldon his jeweled watch and by smoothing his “wet and wrinkled face with a pudgy hand” when he is distressed (198). Captain Maldon reciprocates through his behaviour towards Georgey; he smooths Georgey’s hair or takes him in his arms, gestures that are commonly associated with the tenderness of a mother. George is loath to remove Georgey from the care of Captain Maldon, realizing that it would break Georgey’s heart (87), and when the moment of separation finally arises, it is more reminiscent of the separation of mother and child than child and careless guardian. Indeed, Captain Maldon displays an almost maternal selflessness in his willingness to give up his “blessed angel” for a good education in spite of his grief at being left alone (198). Even the narrator grudgingly admits that Captain Maldon “displayed a maudlin affection” for his grandson and that Georgey was “happy enough” with his grandfather (201). The impoverished cottage and shabby environment are offset by the fact that Georgey is always playing happily under supervision when he appears in the narrative. He is introduced as a charming and happy child, unharmed by his lack of domestic idyll, who has succeeded in creating around him a transnormative family based on bonds of love and of blood.

In spite of Captain Maldon's functional adoption of the roles of mother and father, his defining characteristics in the novel are his drunkenness and his poverty, which seems to support Elizabeth Thiel's claim that the transnormative must always oppose the ideal. While Captain Maldon is an affectionate grandfather who clearly desires the best for his charge, he is also irresponsible, dishonest, and weak. In her final confession, Helen/Lucy Audley admits that she was easily able to manipulate her father into helping her because "poverty had perhaps blunted his sense of honour and principle" (363). Indeed, Captain Maldon is instrumental in concealing Lucy's true identity and Georgey's disappearance from Robert: he is privy to the deathbed façade involving Matilda Plowson and willingly lies to Robert about George's having stopped in Southampton. Captain Maldon's unsuitability to care for Georgey is built into his living conditions and his very physiognomy. His eyes are repeatedly described as "watery" or "feeble" and his frequent bursts of crying and "irresolute-looking mouth" are indicative of the weakness that Helen is able to exploit (82-83). Captain Maldon's weakness and poverty result in his exploitation of Georgey's jeweled watch, which he admittedly pawns frequently albeit extremely reluctantly. His cottage is figured as a failed domestic idyll, where the window curtains smell of "stale tobacco" rather than fresh air, and its poverty is emphasized more explicitly every time George or Robert visit (79). At first, the narration refers to Lansdowne Cottage by its name, but this dignity gives way to such descriptors as one of a "poor little terrace of houses" and an extensive

account of that shabbiness which was mentioned only in passing earlier in the narrative:

Robert strode into the little parlour. The furniture was shabby and dingy, and the place reeked with the smell of stale tobacco and brandy-and-water. The boy's broken playthings and the old man's broken clay pipes, and torn, brandy-and-water stained newspapers, were scattered upon the dirty carpet. (125)

The cottage has the correct ingredients for a domestic idyll—a parlour, the carpet, a child's toys—but the alcohol is clearly intended to be the defining feature of the room. It is not difficult to understand why Robert eventually refers to the cottage as a “wretched hovel” in a “poverty-stricken” neighbourhood as he discovers the depths of Captain Maldon's weakness (188); the narrator is particularly critical in her evaluation of the cottage as the location of Captain Maldon's “slovenly household gods in one of those dreary thoroughfares which speculative builders love to raise upon some miserable fragment of waste ground” (187). Certainly, Lansdowne Cottage is figured as the degenerate environment from which the orphan must ostensibly be rescued and Captain Maldon the parody of paternalism and maternalism.

Patrick O'Malley has suggested that in *Lady Audley's Secret* “domesticity itself can be a deceptive façade” and other critics frequently remark on the chilling contrast between Helen/Lucy's banal surface of “mid-Victorian respectability” and the wickedness that lurks beneath (106; Chase and Levenson 204; Cvetkovich 46). A prominent theme of the novel, then, appears to be the impossibility of recognizing reality based on appearance. Georgey's position in

the narrative, however, suggests that this concept might work both ways in the narrative; that is, that while the middle-class family idyll may be an illusion, the appearance of the impoverished, dysfunctional household might also be misleading. The over-emphasis on Captain Maldon's drunkenness and shabby home, in combination with the obvious love between grandfather and grandson, belies the apparent transparency of the character of Captain Maldon that does not correspond with the other relatively complex figures in *Lady Audley's Secret*. Such repeated emphasis on a tendency to drink that does not appear to be harmful is suggestive of an irony in Braddon's portrayal of an archetypal figure that enables the reader to question why Captain Maldon cannot be a suitable guardian for his grandson in spite of his failings simply because he cares for him. Captain Maldon's dishonesty and drunkenness do not appear to have damaged Georgey or to have hindered the development of a genuinely affectionate relationship between the two. The transnormative family bond and surrogate relationship between Captain Maldon and Georgey significantly improves on biological parent-child relationships, particularly those between Harcourt Talboys and his children. Harcourt's love for "his only son" does not prevent him from coldly disassociating himself from George for years; in the end, it is only the fear of his son's death that re-establishes the bond between them (220). Furthermore, Georgey's closeness with his guardian echoes the intimacy of the bond between Robert and Sir Michael, which is also based more on affect than on blood. Not only does the loving relationship between Georgey and Captain Maldon

demonstrate that ideal bonds of love can exist outside the ideological norm in the transnormative and in the midst of poverty, but it also suggests that the middle-class norm is not inherently superior for the orphan child who is loved, especially when Georgey's biological father reappears and is rejected.

Catherine Waters describes the foundling orphan narrative as "a narrative about the recovery of origins" and, specifically, the recovery of a family lineage (Waters 31). Once the disreputability of the impoverished guardian—whose poverty generally cancels out any blood ties—has been established, the child must be rescued either by a long-lost family member or a surrogate family member and allowed to find a place in the middle-class domestic norm or, at least, a place in a transnormative family structured on the domestic norm. Thus, George Talboys's reappearance in his son's life tallies accurately with the timeline of the orphan story, reminding the reader of Georgey's middle-class origins. The narrator informs us that "although each feature of the child resembled the same feature in George Talboys, the boy was not actually like him" early in the novel; but during Robert's final visit to Lansdowne Cottage, he declares that Georgey is growing "more like [his] father every day" (189). Indeed, Georgey is described as having his father's hair and eyes no less than three separate times in the text, and it is made very clear that he is a remarkably handsome child (125). Both his attractiveness of feature and his resemblance of George underscore his pedigree as a middle-class child, which are figured as naturally embodied and which "can never be entirely covered over by the narratives of his social experience" (Waters

31). The expectation of the reader, then, and certainly George's expectation, is that Georgey will immediately recognize and love his father and that the two of them can work towards the creation of another middle-class norm founded on George's new wealth.

In Braddon's version, however, the recovery of lost family and the "revelation" of pedigree are not the catalysts of an immediate transformation. George's interest in his son is unconvincing and half-hearted: he signs Georgey over to Robert's legal guardianship immediately, telling Robert to "see that [Georgey] is well used by his grandfather", yet apparently feeling no desire to protect his son personally (85). The narrator assumes that George is "destined to be himself the guardian of his own son" when he misses his boat back to Australia, yet Georgey remains with his grandfather, remains legally guarded by Robert, and George's attempts to re-establish a bond with his son are superficially based on toys and sweetmeats (85, 87). Furthermore, Georgey rejects his "natural" class position. He pushes his father away, does not recognize him, and stubbornly refuses to "become very familiar with his papa" because the role of father-figure is already filled by Captain Maldon (87). Indeed, the boy proves more open to an affectionate relationship with Robert than with his own father (126). Georgey's unwillingness to be bribed into loving his father suggests that material possessions cannot replace or substitute for the love of Captain Maldon and his rejection of his father functions as a rejection of the middle-class norm in favour of a transnormative family ostensibly blighted by poverty. Georgey's

willful refusal of his “birthright” challenges the assumption that an orphan child is always better off away from his impoverished family; the lack of connection between Georgey and George illustrates the power of familial bonds outside the norm and thereby challenges the ideological assumption that the ability to create such bonds lies “primarily with the middle classes” (Thiel 44).

III. Robert’s Guardianship and the “Fairy Cottage”: Re-testing the Norm

For a Victorian readership, Captain Maldon is the very image of the frail, irresponsible, and corrupt impoverished guardian and the degree of affection between Georgey and Captain Maldon counts for very little once Robert has decided that Captain Maldon is unsuitable to guard “the legacy of [his] lost friend” (188). His journey to Southampton to “place the boy in better hands” (185) is premised on the assumption that “the destitute family [is] clearly no family at all” (Thiel 44). The children of the lower classes would wither and perish or be led astray by parents and guardians who were “inevitably afflicted by physical or mental weakness or bestial tendencies” and could, therefore, be expected to either fail at raising their children properly or to abandon their offspring (Thiel 44). Yet, if the parents were beyond all redemption, their children could be saved as long as they still retained their innocence and had not already fallen into a life of crime as a result of their neglect. Indeed, they were clean slates on which Victorian society could “inscribe morality, duty and a sense of place” (Peters 9). Robert’s concern for Georgey’s safety and future is

completely reasonable within this ideological context and so is his decision to uproot Georgey and send him to school to be educated for entry into the middle-classes. As I have demonstrated, the relationship that has already been established between Captain Maldon and Georgey precludes the possibility of neglect of the child, challenging the belief that Georgey would have been far better off away from Captain Maldon and living in a middle-class home for the first five years of his life.

While Robert is able to provide Georgey with education and, presumably, a professional future, his own inability to care for Georgey further challenges Victorian assumptions about the innate abilities of middle-class guardians to provide for destitute children.

When Robert discovers that Helen Talboys and Lucy Audley are the same person, and that the death of Helen Talboys was an elaborate plot, his first thought is to remove Georgey from the Maldon cottage because he suspects Captain Maldon's role in the deception (185). Robert's sudden interest in Georgey halfway through the novel begins the orphan narrative anew by providing Georgey with a second chance to recover his birthright. Robert provides the opportunity for the middle-class education which is necessary for Georgey's successful relocation to an environment that is ostensibly more conducive to the nurturing of a child. And while Captain Maldon is broken-hearted by the separation from his grandson, he also recognizes that Robert has every right to send Georgey away because he is Georgey's legal guardian (200). In the more

traditional orphan narrative, the already-established legal bond between Robert and Georgey would likely lead to the creation of an affective bond between them and, in turn, to the creation of a transnormative family that could replicate at least some aspects of the norm. *Lady Audley's Secret*, however, “has a far from utopian view of the family, revealing it as a site of relations of power that involve both gender and class” (Cvetkovich 53). Again, Braddon does not allow the triumph of middle-class superiority and continues to question whether a family can be created by legal and class-based relationships.

In spite of his credentials as a wealthy, middle-class professional and as the acting party for George Talboys in relation to his son, Robert proves an incompetent and neglectful guardian. Georgey is at first reluctant to leave Captain Maldon, setting up “a terrible howl, and declar[ing] that he would never leave him”, but his fears are calmed when Robert appears amenable to Georgey’s suggestion that he come back to visit his grandfather and Mrs. Plowson very soon (200). Nonetheless, it is very clear that Robert does not want Georgey to maintain the bond with Captain Maldon when he forbids unaccredited visitors to the school and when Captain Maldon makes no further appearance in the novel (202). Robert’s callousness is not the act of removing the boy and sending him to be educated, but his refusal to trust that education can combat any negative influences to which Georgey might be exposed through a continuing relationship with his “old protector” (200). Robert’s decision to sever that bond constitutes an attempt to place Georgey firmly in the middle-class family rather than allowing

him to maintain his ambiguous place and therefore constitutes a refusal to acknowledge the possibility that the ideal can exist outside the middle-classes. Furthermore, if he is not able to recognize the strength of the atypical familial bond between Georgey and Captain Maldon, it is difficult to trust that he will be capable of creating such a relationship with his charge.

The narrator is very clear that Robert “had about as much notion of the requirements of a child as he had of those of a white elephant” and the scene in the restaurant testifies strongly to his ignorance (202). Not only does Robert have very little sense of the proper daily routine for a five year-old boy, but assumes that Georgey will be amenable to bread and milk and boiled mutton in spite of the fact that Robert himself hated it as a child. In the span of a few paragraphs, Robert asks himself two rhetorical and slightly hysterical questions about caring for a child. The meal of “[e]els, Julianne, cutlets, bird, [and] pudding” recalls Georgey’s fondness for “hot suppers of the most indigestible nature” that he inherited from Captain, implying that Robert’s care is not an improvement on Captain Maldon’s (203, 201). Robert’s guardianship is further linked to Maldon’s by his decision to let the waiter care for Georgey all afternoon. His delegation of supervision appears far more neglectful than Captain Maldon’s delegation to Mrs. Plowson because his relationship to Georgey is not based on love and because we witness Captain Maldon personally supervising Georgey directly at least twice. Robert “purposely” avoids “the society of the child” which prevents the establishment of any affectionate bond between them, in spite of Georgey’s trust

in the man who allows him to attend school (204). Finally, Robert's decision to request "that no visitors should be admitted to see [Georgey], unless accredited by a letter from himself" strangely foreshadows the "living grave" imprisonment of Georgey's mother at the end of the novel and thereby undercuts Georgey's proper pleasure at the prospect of education and the triumph of achieving a middle-class education for an impoverished orphan (202; 396).

Certainly, Georgey will not succumb to the fate of the neglected street waif by falling into a life of crime because he receives a proper education, yet a middle-class guardian who provides him with such an education is not inherently suitable to nurture and raise him. The conclusion of the chapter is constructed to enable further questioning of whether Georgey is indeed far better off and better cared for amongst the middle classes in a legally constructed family than with his grandfather in a family based on affective connections.

The final step in the reclamation of the middle-class orphan is his incorporation into a family that replicates the middle-class norm. Consequently, Georgey becomes one of the characters of the "fairy cottage" at the end of the novel, his education presumably having made his incorporation possible (444). Not only does he seem to be reunited with his father, but he discovers his lost aunt in Clara Talboys and a new uncle in Robert. Georgey is able to reclaim his middle-class inheritance and be re-united with long-lost family members, according to the orphan narrative of *Oliver Twist*, as well as able to establish a transnormative middle-class family that is allegedly better than a poverty-stricken

family with his blood kin according to the popular street-arab tales of children's fiction. On the surface, then, Georgey's prolonged struggle to find his rightful place in society is over.

Critics have generally refused to take the final chapter of *Lady Audley's Secret* at face value and agreed instead that it is either compromised or ironic.²⁵ The middle-class norm that is established in the fairy cottage is built on deception, bigamy, and attempted murder. The revelation of these things has made the creation of the new family possible and necessary in order to protect the Audley family from the scandal of a public trial for Lucy, which would ensure that their failings as a family would be exposed for mass consumption. Just as the family of Sir Michael and Lucy hides threatening secrets, so does the family of Robert and Clara discreetly cover up the failings of the Audley family and their alliance with dangerous femininity. O'Malley's suggestion that "domesticity itself [is] a deceptive façade" from the very opening pages of the novel renders the closing domestic idyll suspect by association (106). The presence of a secret is the presence of vulnerability:

"Who could say, even in the midst of domestic ease, that a family would withstand the release of an old secret shattering its privacy, exposing it to the public eye, and leaving it another casualty of...the machinery of narrative?" (Chase and Leenson 220).

The presence of attempted murder and illicit sexuality (inherently linked with bigamy) in the middle-class or aristocratic family destroys the distinction between

²⁵ For example, Richard Nemesvari describes it as "so overdetermined that it can only be read as an ironic statement on what the novel has 'revealed'" (526), while Cvetkovich refers to it as a "happy ending" that is "less convincing" because it is so "suddenly healed" (53).

those classes and the working classes that was based on the premise that the poor were somehow less moral than their social betters. The figure of the orphan in *Lady Audley's Secret* further demonstrates the fluidity of this boundary because Georgey is able to exist as contentedly as he does in Captain Maldon's run-down cottage as he appears to live in the fairy cottage. His ambiguous class status allows him to find a home in both classes, with separate versions of the family, each with its own transnormative elements and elements of the ideal. Thus, the domestic idyll is revealed to be ultimately no better than a working class family; the norm is compromised and so is the orphan's salvation through it.

The orphan child's final refuge does not necessarily need to be a completely normative family (Thiel 18). In fact, it is very rare that either the foundling or the street waif ends up reunited with both biological parents in a middle-class household. More often, the orphan ends up a member of a "transnormative family infused with middle-class mores" (Thiel 18). The reclamation of Georgey's middle-class roots, however, is compromised by the flaws of the Audley and by the already-established dynamic between George and his son. In Braddon's revised story of the impoverished orphan, the recovery of the long-lost child is not the catalyst for the re-creation of the family, nor is he the beloved centre of the new family. Instead, he spends his time "fishing for tadpoles...beyond the ivied walls of his academy" and "comes very often to the fairy cottage," but does not actually live there (445). Thus, he sits on the margins of a family based primarily on the relationships between Clara, George, and

Robert. The norm of Victorian domestic ideology must be founded on the conjugal bond between a man and a woman; the fact that the heterosexual relationship appears mainly as a device to “cement the homosocial bond” of Robert and George, as well as to “camouflage its potentially homosexual nature,” compromises the family’s normative status (Nemesvari 524).²⁶ His middle-class refuge is further compromised by the lack of interest in Georgey displayed by George much earlier in the novel. When Georgey refused “to become very familiar with his papa”, George gave up and eventually left the country, apparently having forgotten his desire to be loved by his son (87). Like the engagement of Alicia to Sir Harry Towers, George’s sudden return of interest in his son is inexplicable. He has twice abandoned his offspring—once to Australia, once to America—which anticipates the possible opening of a second orphan narrative for Georgey if his father should neglect him again. If the middle-class norm has already failed George and Georgey once before, it is not beyond the realm of possibility that it could fail a third time, especially when it has been built on such a fragile and fraught foundation. The final chapter is meant to leave the reader questioning whether Georgey was perhaps better off in the opening.

The narrator closes the novel by asking forgiveness for leaving “the good people all happy and at peace” and quoting a Psalm that amounts to a declaration that the bad will always come to bad ends (446). The content of the final

²⁶ For further reading on the Clara/George/Robert triangle see the following: Jennifer Kushnier, “Educating Boys to be Queer: Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret*” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 30 (2002): 61-75; Richard Nemesvari, “Robert Audley’s Secret: Male Homosocial Desire in *Lady Audley’s Secret*” *Studies in the Novel* 27 (1995) 515-28; Cvektovich 56-64.

paragraph is rendered heavily ironic in the context of a narrative that punishes a single woman for the failings of an entire family and suggests that the peace and happiness of those good characters are built on blindness. By undermining the idyll of the fairy cottage, Braddon casts doubt on the middle-class family as the only possible true home for the impoverished orphan child. The novel does not imply that the middle-class family cannot be a happy family but that it is by no means superior to any other family simply because it *is* middle-class. As both street waif and middle-class foundling, Georgey straddles the arbitrary divide between the lower classes and the middle classes and consequently brings them closer together, illuminating the flaws of the norm and, most importantly, revealing the ways in which the transnormative, impoverished family functions as the ideal. The middle-class status of George and Helen and Robert does not ensure the survival of their norms, nor does it endow them with any innate ability to nurture a child. The genuine affection between Captain Maldon and Georgey testifies to the existence of the ideal in revised forms outside the middle-class. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, the orphan narrative is adapted to challenge the assumed monopoly of the middle-class norm on domestic happiness as Georgey appears to find a place in a transnormative family with an impoverished and morally frail old man.

Thus, *Lady Audley's Secret* challenges and destabilizes Victorian domestic ideals. In the process, however, it also contributes to a re-definition of those ideals, building on and further demonstrating the claims I have made concerning

East Lynne's depiction of the family ideal. The middle-class ideological norm is a limited and rigid concept of the family but a distinction must be made between norm and ideal. The characteristics that lie at the heart of Victorian family ideal are affection, protection, and trust between members and especially between children and their guardians, all of which may thrive outside a complete middle-class family. The characteristics that primarily define the norm, however, are social status and legal bonds which are not proven to create an ideal by default in *Lady Audley's Secret*. Braddon's treatment of Georgey as the impoverished orphan, then, challenges the ideological understanding of the ways in which a family is constructed and defined. Like Ellen Wood, Braddon points to the ideal Victorian family as flexible and capable of existing in the most unlikely circumstances. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, impoverishment and conflict do not cancel out the ideal; rather, the presence of love and trust amidst poverty, weakness, and alcohol force an adjustment of the understanding of the ideal.

Epilogue

THE ENDURANCE OF THE IDEAL

In *The Family Story*, Leonore Davidoff writes that as critics “[w]e must continue...to question the dominance which the nuclear family retains over our imagination and our ideas about family life” (269). The Western concept of the nuclear family is based, like so many other Western values, on Victorian understandings of the family. In this project I have tried to demonstrate that the process of questioning the Victorian normative family began with the Victorians themselves, and especially with sensation fiction writers, who continuously sought to unmask what was hidden and to “make the abstract seem concrete” (Cvetkovich 4). The complexities of the family groupings in two of the most popular sensation novels of the 1860s seem to suggest that the Victorians had perhaps a greater understanding of why the family retained such power over their society and can perhaps point us to why it continues to have such power over our ideas of family life.

In the opening chapter of this study, I indicated that I would build on the work of critics who have challenged the normative, cohesive family by troubling the distinction between ideal and non-ideal, normative and transnormative in an effort to re-define the Victorian domestic ideal. What I discovered in the process was that the ideal was ultimately and vastly more flexible than I had anticipated and evaded my every attempt to conclusively nail it down. *East Lynne* provided the foundation for a discussion of the dialogue between the transnormative and

the ideal, not only comparing them but illustrating that, in a middle-class context, the ideal exists within the transnormative and the transnormative troubles the ideal in productive ways. The troubling presence of Cornelia, for example, supports Isabel's ideal and strengthens Barbara's through a reminder of discord. For Barbara and Carlyle the transnormative elements of their family that could weaken it—that is, the persistent comparison of Barbara to her predecessor and the dependence of the family on a disguised Isabel—are what allow it to function and endure. The contradiction of ideal and transnormative—which have been defined as mutually exclusive until now—existing simultaneously in one family grouping challenges the enduring belief in the ideal's resistance to change and the acceptance that it is still a rigid standard against which all Western families are evaluated. In examining *Lady Audley's Secret*, however, I became fully aware of the extent to which the ideal permeates every complete or transnormative family, exploding out of the containment of the middle-class to impact other classes, not in as an unattainable vision seen through a glass ceiling but in real and believable ways. The transnormative family of Captain Maldon and Georgey constitutes a fragment of the ideal existing far beyond its ideologically-established boundaries where it theoretically should not be able to survive. The domestic ideal is not a singular idea, but one that exists, like the family that it effects, in different-sized pieces and at every level of society. The Victorian ideal is strong, not frail; rather than being cancelled out by a hint of conflict, the flexible ideal adapts and incorporates in order to endure.

The ideal is not a myth, and perhaps this accounts for its incredible power of endurance and the hold it continues to maintain on Western society. Thiel writes that “the concept of the domestic ideal remained the template by which all was gauged and it has proved resistant to change, regardless of the new paradigms of family life that are now intrinsic to the Western world” (157). I have argued, however, that it is not that it was advertised as achievable for all yet impossible to achieve for any. Rather, its flexibility ensured that even single-parent families or families existing in poverty could establish their own version of it or cultivate a hopeful link to an image of domestic contentment unique to their family grouping. Such a re-visioning of the ideal ensures that a specific family can continue to hold onto what informs their identity as that family and integrate it with a broader Victorian sense of what constitutes family, thereby establishing a place for themselves within nineteenth-century society. At the end of this study, I remain plagued by uncertainty as to the precise definition of the domestic ideal beyond the fact that it is flexible. Might it be that the only way to define the family ideal is by the inclusion of the bonds of trust, love, protection, and support between members? The flexibility and complexity of these bonds would account for the fluidity of the ideal and also for its lasting influence on the Western psyche.

If, as Stephen Greenblatt observes, “a culture’s narratives, like its kinship arrangements, are crucial indices of the prevailing codes governing human mobility and constraint” (15), then the treatment of kinship within narrative is a concentrated reflection of Victorian culture and society. Yet, in a return to

Davidoff's statement concerning the continuing domination of the nuclear family, that concentrated reflection of Victorian culture and society is also a reflection of our own. The question we must ask following an exploration of the family through sensation fiction is to what extent is that exploration an expression of our own anxieties concerning the family? Does a deeper understanding of the Victorian domestic ideal lead us to a deeper understanding of ourselves? Thiel has suggested that we remain late Victorians and I agree, but not because of any nostalgic longing for a golden age of humanity (157). We remain late Victorians as we struggle to pin down our ideas of the family and the home; and we remain late Victorians in our attempts to come to terms with an ideal that easily adapts to those varying ideas; finally, we remain late Victorians in our persistent and consistent desire for the stability of those bonds at the core of the family ideal: love, trust, and support.

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