Title of Paper: **Separate Spheres: A Closer Look at Ideological Gender Roles in Victorian England through the Sensation Novel**

Author: Sarah Fitzpatrick  
Affiliation: University of New Hampshire  
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Abstract:

This paper explores how sensation novels like Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White* and Ellen Wood’s *East Lynne* complicate traditionally understood gender roles through the lens of the separate spheres ideology, which Amanda Vickery asserts “has come to constitute one of the fundamental organizing categories, if not the organizing category of modern British women's history” (389). Despite the fervent advocacy of this ideology by proponents like moralists John Ruskin and Sarah Stickney Ellis, Mary Poovey points out that “what may look coherent and complete in retrospect was actually fissured by competing emphases and interests… [T]he middle class ideology we most often associate with the Victorian period was both contested and always under construction” (3). In the novels I discuss, certain behaviors and fates, as well as critical reception, of male and female protagonists demonstrate both the upholding and subversion of the separate spheres construction to reveal those fissures. Through analyses of these fissures as represented in sensation fiction, the article purports a more complete and textured image of Victorian society.

Keywords: Gender; Sensation Fiction; Collins; Wood; The Woman in White; East Lynne; Separate Spheres Ideology; Morality; Angel in the House

Author Bio:

Sarah Fitzpatrick earned a Bachelor’s of Arts degree in English from the University of Rhode Island in 2013. She enrolled in the University of New Hampshire's graduate program in 2014 and will be receiving her Masters of Arts in Literature in December 2015. Sarah is interested in identity politics in primarily British and American literature, especially subversive readings of oppressed identities. She will be pursuing these interests more closely as she works on her thesis in the fall.

Author email: sjf2003@wildcats.unh.edu
General conceptions of the Victorians today tend to be based on the time period’s strict social regulations of “the normal” and include very little about those who transgressed these boundaries of normalcy. Despite contemporaneous criticism of the genre as somewhat coarse, criticism of the sensation novel now is able to fill in some of those gaps, giving the 21st century reader unique insight into an overly simplified culture. The position of genders in that society is one of the issues where our understanding needs particular adjustment. Sensation novels like Wilkie Collins’ The Woman in White and Ellen Wood’s East Lynne can assist us in that endeavor by complicating traditionally understood gender roles of the period to reveal a more complex vision of Victorian culture.

John Ruskin wrote in 1865, “A man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender... But the woman's power is... for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision” (Ruskin 59). In this statement, Ruskin suggests an innate, possibly even biological, imperative that pushes men out into the world and keeps women in the home, arguing that these arenas are where their respective natural talents lie. He writes of women that “wherever a true wife comes, [the] home is always round her... This, then, I believe to be...the woman's true place and power” (Ruskin 60). Sarah Stickney Ellis, in 1839, wrote of this “true wife”'s male counterparts, “the man of enlightened understanding,” that when he neglects his [business], for the sake of hours of leisure, [he] must be content to spend them in the debtor's department of a jail” (Ellis 443). These contemporaneous writings illuminate the concept of separate spheres: the public sphere and the private, or domestic, sphere. Ruskin and Ellis address both the efficiency and necessity of maintaining these spheres. They suggest that women are the most capable of administrating domestic affairs, and that men condemn themselves and their families to poverty if they spend more time in the domestic sphere than the public sphere, where business was conducted and money earned.

Recent research and criticism also acknowledges the traditional separate spheres framework as the prevailing notion in Victorian study, even as it has begun to put such simplistic categories in doubt. In Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall address the gender ideals that Victorian society strove to propagate, writing, “A masculine penumbra surrounded that which was defined as public while women were increasingly engulfed by the private realm, bounded by physical, social, and psychic partitions” (319). In her article in The Historical Journal, “Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History,” Amanda Vickery writes:

Buttressed... by three types of evidence - didactic literature, contemporary feminist debate and post-Victorian denunciations - the separate spheres framework has come to constitute one of the fundamental organizing categories, if not the organizing category of modern British women's history. Moreover, through the medium of
women's studies, the orthodoxy has been communicated to adjacent disciplines, where 'public and private', 'separate spheres', and 'domesticity' are rapidly becoming unquestioned key words. (389)

This separate spheres construction is both plainly visible and at issue in Wilkie Collins' 1859 novel *The Woman in White* and in Ellen Wood's 1861 novel *East Lynne*. In these novels, certain behaviors and fates, as well as critical reception, of the main protagonists demonstrate both the upholding and subversion of the separate spheres ideology.

In *The Woman in White*, Walter Hartright, the novel’s hero, is the champion of middle-class values that include the separate spheres framework. Walter’s graduation to full-fledged masculinity is synonymous with his movement from the domestic sphere to the public sphere. At the outset of the novel, he is a drawing master who teaches upper class young ladies within their homes. He is permitted to move among them freely and considered a non-threatening, emasculate entity. Walter says of himself:

I have long since learnt to understand, composedly and as a matter of course, that my situation in life was considered a guarantee against any of my female pupils feeling more than the most ordinary interest in me, and that I was admitted among the most beautiful and captivating women, much as a harmless domestic animal is admitted among them. (Collins 103)

Walter’s use of the word “domestic” here is deliberate. It is his status as a fixture of the household that renders him unmanly—it is the fact that his occupation necessitates confinement to the domestic sphere that emasculates him. The fact that it is a money-making venture cannot alter this fact, because jobs within the home were largely the domain of women at the time, who could hire themselves out as governesses as an appropriate, feminine means of earning income.

However, Walter leaves the domestic sphere to venture out into the public sphere and become the novel’s hero. He sails for Central America, where he endures plague and war, before returning a changed man and an appropriately masculine hero for the story. From then on, he is the champion of damsels in distress, mediating the public sphere for Laura and Marian while they are confined in hiding. He also takes down the villain, Count Fosco, through investigation and inquiry that necessarily takes place outside of the home, spending much of the latter part of the novel traveling in search of clues to a sordid mystery. Even his livelihood moves from the domestic sphere into the public, as he moves from a solitary country house to a bustling metropolis and sells his crafts in the city rather than teaching within the home. In the end, Walter is rewarded with a happily-ever-after that includes a loving wife, a newborn son, and an expansive property, all as a result of his fulfillment of the expected male gender role.

While Walter’s ending is a happy one that rewards him for his adherence to expectations of his gender, Lady Isabel of *East Lynne* conversely is punished for her failure to conform to codified femininity. Isabel, after a misunderstanding...
with her husband and the constant deceitful temptation of another man, leaves her husband and children to elope with her lover, away from domestic life. This is the act that is at the core of the scandal of East Lynne and a large part of what renders the text a sensation novel. In spite of this unsavory component, however, Ellen Wood had actually written what was widely considered to be a “moral” book because of the fate that befalls Isabel. An unsigned review in The Examiner in 1861 declared, “There is no maudlin enjoyment offered in a study of ill-regulated passions. The crime brings its own bitter punishment... [T]he tone of the book is healthy, and its strong hold on the attentions is as wholesome as it can be in a story with a wife’s fall for its central incident” (728).

Isabel fails to maintain a happy, healthy domestic sphere, as her gender role prescribes she must, and for the rest of the novel she is consumed by guilt and masochistic impulses, punished both inwardly and outwardly. She returns to her former home disguised as a governess and must watch her husband shower his new wife with affection and witness her children growing up with a new mother. She even is forced to experience the death of a child she cannot claim, and she must do so quietly, unable to acknowledge her hidden devastation. Over and over again in the novel, Isabel is punished for her failure to be a dutiful wife and mother until she eventually wastes away and dies. She is allowed a single moment of acknowledgement and forgiveness by her husband on her deathbed, but nothing more. The novel implicitly proclaims to a largely female audience that such is the fate that will befall them if they do not abide by prescribed gender norms.

Even Barbara Hare, the new wife, is subject to scrutiny when it comes to adherence to appropriate gender roles. In popular reviews of the novel at the time, Barbara is widely declared less likable than Isabel. One anonymous review in The Literary Gazette says, “We confess that of the two wives, our sympathies rather go with the first... [W]e feel that we have left a rarer, sweeter, deeper nature for one that is comparatively vulgar and uninteresting” (370). Margaret Oliphant’s article “Sensation Novels” reads similarly: “From first to last, it is [Isabel] alone in whom the reader feels any interest. Her virtuous rival we should like to bundle to the door and be rid of anyhow” (567).

This seems unaccountable under moral considerations, as Barbara is a faithful and steadfast wife and Isabel a fallen woman: there is deeper gender politics at work here. In spite of Isabel’s fall from grace, she is faithfully characterized throughout as being sweet, naïve, fragile, helpless, and altogether very feminine. Barbara, on the other hand, is assertive, strong, sensible, and active. She not only boldly professes her love for Carlyle while he is married to another woman, but she refuses to marry after he rejects her, a heavy blow to the Victorian ideal of the woman as wife and mother. She has brusque manners, is somewhat rude to her governess, and seems lacking in maternal nature, particularly toward her stepchildren. In other words, she does not adhere to the feminine virtues of quiet passivity and motherliness that are meant to come along with reign of the domestic sphere, which perhaps is why the Gazette review calls her vulgar and several other contemporaneous reviews suggest...
distaste for her. In Barbara, being virtuous as a wife is not enough to make her likable when she is lacking all other qualities of the traditional feminine gender role.

However, while these gender roles and separate spheres were the officially designated “normal” of the period, further research suggests that it was not always the case, nor was it even necessarily always the ideological imperative. Amanda Vickery writes:

In fact, where historians have researched the activities of particular individuals and groups, rather than the contemporary social theories which allegedly hobbled them, Victorian women emerge as no less spirited, capable, and, most importantly, diverse a crew as in any other century... Martin Pugh, for example, in an analysis of four elite-Victorian marriages, duke and duchess of Marlborough, Lord and Lady Londonderry, the earl and countess of Jersey, and Lord and Lady Knightley, observes: 'each of these husband and wife teams included a partner who tended to be home-loving, unambitious and easily exhausted by the stress of public life; in every case it was the male.' (Vickery 390)

Mary Poovey also declares the deeper complications of the construction, writing, “What may look coherent and complete in retrospect was actually fissured by competing emphases and interests... [T]he middle class ideology we most often associate with the Victorian period was both contested and always under construction” (3). She explains further how these prescribed gender roles were for some individuals “so accurate as to be true” (3) while for others, it may have felt more like a “goal or a judgment—a description of what the individual should and has failed to be” (3). In fact, in direct contrast to the prescribed norms of the period, the 1851 Census estimated that 42% of women between the ages of twenty and forty were unmarried, and two million out of Britain's six million women were self-supporting (Poovey 4).

_The Woman in White_ features prominently one of Britain's aforementioned unmarried, self-supporting women. Marian Halcombe, one of the novel's major protagonists and the narrator of a large portion of the text, is utterly un-feminine as the feminine was defined at the time. Upon first meeting her, Walter Hartright narrates that Marian has a decidedly masculine face that at first puts him off, and from that point on she is characterized as being possessed of a manliness that is in keeping with her facial features. Beyond her physical masculinity, Marian intrudes on the male domain through her aggression, initiative, and intelligence. She also mediates between the domestic and public spheres on behalf of her sister Laura, often writing letters and venturing to travel where Laura is too timid. She also is responsible for moving the two fugitives from place to place in London, taking charge of the public domain. Moreover, her narration of such a large portion of the novel puts her literally in conversation with the public sphere as she painstakingly chronicles the events of the novel for the audience.
However, unlike Barbara Hare in *East Lynne*, who was widely deemed unlikable, Marian is lauded as a heroine. She is the salvation of her helpless sister and a valuable friend and confidante to Walter, positions she simply could not occupy were she not the audacious and unapologetic character that she is. Furthermore, she is not only portrayed sympathetically by Collins, but she was well-received by the general public in spite of her lack of femininity and unwillingness to be confined to domestic space. Collins reveals in an interview that he “received a number of letters from single gentlemen, stating their positions and means, and their wish to marry the original of Marian Halcombe at once” (Yates 152). This fact provides strong evidence that the Victorians were not as restrictive in their gender ideology as previously suggested. Marian is simultaneously attractive and resistant to the separate spheres framework, moving relatively freely between the public and private spheres after her departure from Limmeridge, although Walter takes on more of the public sphere responsibilities later on.

Marian stands in direct opposition to one of the most popular ideological images of women in the Victorian era: the “Angel in the House,” a figure derived from Coventry Patmore’s iconic 1854 poem of the same name. Poovey explains, “‘Naturally’ self-sacrificing and self-regulating, this domestic deity radiated morality because her ‘substance’ was love, not self-interest or ambition” (8). (The “Angel in the House” model is also a cornerstone of Ruskin and Ellis’ works.) However, both *The Woman in White* and *East Lynne* present some problems with this model, as the characters find themselves in difficult situations resulting from strict adherence to limited gender roles.

In *The Woman in White*, Laura Fairlie is the perfect embodiment of the “Angel in the House” archetype. She is sweet, submissive, domestic, and moral, setting aside her own romantic desire and marrying the man to whom her father promised her on his deathbed. She does not complain, but acts the part of the dutiful wife at all times. Having set aside her own passions, she is a virtuous Madonna, and the angelic image is complete by a halo of golden blonde hair. However, it is her character as the Angel in the House that makes Laura susceptible to manipulation and mistreatment. The timorous submissiveness so central to the Angel model makes her an easy target to be taken advantage of by the villainy of her cruel husband and his duplicitous comrade. She becomes the unfortunate victim of a scandalous plot that deprives her of both her money and her identity as she is imprisoned in an asylum under false pretenses. She is helpless against the conspiracy of the two men because she is timid and innocent as the officially endorsed image of femininity suggested she should be. She has no idea how to operate outside of the domestic sphere, and must rely on the savvy of her sister Marian and, later, her hero Walter in order to recover her identity and position.

The quandaries that ensue from being the Angel in the House also beset Isabel of *East Lynne*. Her ostensibly wealthy father dotes on her and spoils her until his death, leaving her with no practical skills but only the feminine grace he has encouraged her to cultivate. She is sweet, humble, and naive, relying on the...
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The Victorian marriage, and seems more willing to intervene in the domestic sphere in his her relationship with Carlyle has been strengthened by their partnership in the respective spheres. Barbara is not afraid to be involved in the public sphere and ultimately succeeds. In this relationship, both parties are less restricted to their respective spheres. Barbara is not afraid to be involved in the public sphere and her relationship with Carlyle has been strengthened by their partnership in the unraveling of the murder plot in the public domain. Furthermore, Carlyle has learned his lesson about not being involved at home after the failure of his first marriage, and seems more willing to intervene in the domestic sphere in his

The lack of communication between Carlyle and Isabel is at the center of the entire sordid affair. Not only is Isabel not privy to the public sphere of Carlyle's business and thus compelled to misinterpretation, Carlyle is so involved in his business in the public sphere that he is neglectful of the problems occurring in the domestic one. His sister, Miss Corny, subjects his wife to constant verbal abuse. Isabel is desperately jealous of the time he spends with Barbara Hare, and Francis Levison feeds her lies to exacerbate the situation. However, Carlyle remains painfully unaware of these events, and is shocked at what appears to be the abrupt desertion of his wife. When he discovers Isabel's farewell letter, Carlyle wonders, “How had he outraged her? in what manner had he goaded her to it?... No, he could not understand it: he had no clue to the mystery” (332).

Isabel and Carlyle's confinement to their separate spheres causes the central conflict of the novel, and the text is thus, perhaps inadvertently or ironically, critical of the separate spheres construction. While Ellen Wood may have intended to create characters that were appropriately masculine or feminine, or at least punished for their failure to be so, she has also reflected some of the inherent issues at stake in a Victorian society that follows these constructions too closely. With men and women leading completely separate lives, their relationships are at risk. There must be some sort of union of the domestic and public spheres in order to ensure healthy communication between the individuals and to promote a healthy marriage. Perhaps the strongest evidence of this in East Lynne is that it is Carlyle's marriage to Barbara that ultimately succeeds. In this relationship, both parties are less restricted to their respective spheres. Barbara is not afraid to be involved in the public sphere and her relationship with Carlyle has been strengthened by their partnership in the unraveling of the murder plot in the public domain. Furthermore, Carlyle has learned his lesson about not being involved at home after the failure of his first marriage, and seems more willing to intervene in the domestic sphere in his
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marriage to Barbara, as is evidenced by his sending his sister away from the house.

In summary, sensation novels like Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White* and Ellen Wood’s *East Lynne* complicate traditionally understood gender roles of the Victorian period by both affirming and subverting them to create a more complete and textured image of the society. The critical reception of the novels bears out this observation. In reviews from the period, the authors are frequently praised for their realistic portrayal of human behavior and the life-like nature of the characters, suggesting that these novels in fact offer believable, if melodramatic, representations of their society. The sensation novel also happens to be particularly useful as a vehicle for the complication of gender ideology because the histrionic exaggeration of the scandal plots enables the scandal of gender role subversion and criticism to go relatively unnoticed. While sensation fiction may have been considered vulgar in its own time, it proves an invaluable tool for readers centuries later to gain insight into a culture just as complex as our own.

Works Cited


