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THE SENSATIONAL STORY OF WEST LYNNE: THE PROBLEM WITH PROFESSIONALISM

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ABSTRACT
Ellen Wood’s bestselling East Lynne (1861) achieved its phenomenal popularity as the sensational tale of a fallen woman, but it is also an exposé of a fallen man. Archibald Carlyle allows Wood to critique the emerging figure of the male professional, who challenges affective norms by dividing his attention, loyalty and love between his home and his work. The geographic patterns of East Lynne, consistently drawing the reader’s attention to the distance between home and work, insist on the crucial space of Carlyle’s commute and show the trauma felt by the women in his life according to their places at West Lynne, East Lynne or on the public byways in between. Isabel, Barbara and Cornelia are all differently victimized by the new professionalism. In Carlyle’s primary orientation towards his office, we see Wood tracing the scandalous story of a man who has found a place he prefers to his home, and who inadvertently destroys that home as a result.

Ellen Wood’s sensation-fiction bestseller, East Lynne (1861), was among the most widely read works of the nineteenth century, going into 24 editions in its first 10 years. By the turn of the century, the novel had sold more than a million copies. “In the oft-repeated assessment of the day, Wood ‘woke up and found herself famous’”. In modern feminist scholarship, East Lynne has become famous for its sympathetic depiction of a fallen woman. By encouraging readers to identify with, even to love, the erring Lady Isabel, critics have argued that Wood creates space for female sexuality and allows for a critique of conventional feminine roles. Yet East Lynne’s fallen man gets less critical attention. In this article, I want to suggest that the novel’s radicalism extends to both genders: if Wood makes a sexually desiring woman sympathetic in Lady Isabel, Wood also makes a male professional problematic in Archibald Carlyle. I argue, in other words, that Carlyle offers just as profound an interrogation of mid-Victorian gender ideals as Isabel does.
Carlyle’s professionalism has attracted some critical attention. John Kucich and Patricia McKee concur that male professionalism is central to this novel, although they differ on its value. Kucich argues that Carlyle’s personal failings express Wood’s anxiety that professionalism was displacing domestic female traits. Cataloguing “Carlyle’s increasingly pathological deceit”, Kucich argues that Carlyle’s “habitual refusal to confide in Isabel leads directly to her ruin”. Yet this deceptiveness undergirds his professionalism. As the male professional gains power, Kucich argues, amateur domestic women falter in their capacity to manage social strife. The professional’s competence “appropriates, in the process, the psychological and emotional authority of the feminized private sphere”. Similarly, McKee reads Carlyle’s male professionalism as a force separating him from the realm the female characters inhabit, although McKee regards this division as fortunate. The women of East Lynne, she argues, remain overemotional, confused, atavistic subjects, while men’s access to orderly public venues permits a proper regulation of their interests. In McKee’s reading, Carlyle’s capacity to move into professional space means that he can retain “integrity” and “superiority”.

McKee and Kucich both tend to read male professionalism as a kind of competent managerial prowess that reforms the women’s sphere, much to the women’s resentment, and while this is true, East Lynne is actually far more radically skeptical about male professional life. McKee argues that when Carlyle opens a separate office, this “opportunity to add spatial dimensions to his daily life” gives him “the opportunity to add dimension to his character”, but the novel does not present this new “spatial dimension” as necessarily desirable. Kucich’s insight is critical here: Carlyle’s deceptiveness and reticence are faults that derive precisely from his professionalism. “Ellen Wood wrote in uneasy opposition to the professional class”, Kucich argues, concerned with “the threat professionals posed to the moral power of women”. Yet Wood’s own career testifies that she could capitalize, professionally, on “the moral power of women”. In my view, Wood’s profoundly skeptical view of professionalism was based not so much on its incursion into the female home, as its absence from that home. In other words, where Kucich sees East Lynne as charting a male takeover of domestic space, I see East Lynne as diagnosing male withdrawal from that same space.

Wood herself was a superlative female professional and an exemplary case of how to combine professional work and domestic presence. Forcing herself to write regularly, regardless of her health, Wood’s productivity and self-discipline enabled her to support four children, herself, and her husband by writing over 30 novels and, for 20 years after her husband’s death, single-handedly editing (and writing much of) the journal Argosy. “Her son’s biography reveals that she never abandoned her middle-class values”, writes Andrew Mangham.
Going to her writing like a salaried clerk, she held firmly to the belief that authorship could form the bedrock of a successful bourgeois home and [...] she wrote many a passage in her novels with the aim of supporting that class’s advocacy of hard work, thrift, and perseverance.  

This attitude may have been sharpened by dissatisfaction with her husband’s reckless over-confidence; his business collapsed in 1856, forcing her to start writing for money.  

Identifying herself with the cadre of hard-working professionals, Wood tends to depict household management as boring drudgery—the opposite of a successful career. Instead of idealizing domestic tranquility, during the time she wrote East Lynne, Wood was consumed with issues of ownership, profit, professionalism, financial success and class mobility.

Although Wood herself worked at home, fitting her writing “around her duties to her family”, she was working at a time when professional men were beginning to establish offices outside the home. I argue that this apparently minor spatial shift is, in fact, one of the major issues East Lynne interrogates. In a period of uncertain, transitional expectations about workspace, Archibald Carlyle represents a new breed of professional men who conceptualize work away from the home. Such men left home to pursue activities in which they were deeply emotionally involved, in conjunction with partners with whom they formed close ties and spent a great deal of time. Their workplace could all too easily become a rival to their home.

East Lynne also shows how the development of an office can retroactively redefine the home. As its title implies, the novel explores what happens when the home becomes merely a location in relation to other locations, a cardinal direction in which one might happen to be traveling. Its name relates it to another space, West Lynne: the home versus the site of business. This opposition sets up a dynamic of traversing distances on a daily basis; it is about what can occur in the liminal space of that commute: whom one might run into, what one might see, how one might act. What might a daily practice of suburban commuting do to men’s ability to notice, let alone participate in, domestic dynamics? How might professionalism threaten spousal harmony and patriarchal authority? What happens when the qualities assigned to each realm get conflated? When the most sacred of domestic relations—the illness or death of a family member—occur in a work environment, or when the solution to a legal problem can be found in a house guest, or when one finds a better helpmeet in an office manager than in a wife? East Lynne shows how the attempt to separate work from home both facilitates a dangerous liminal zone between the two and encourages confusion between them.

Notably, Wood emphasizes the transitional spaces in this novel rather than its endpoints. West Lynne is an unremarkable town, “neither a manufacturing town nor a cathedral town, nor even the chief town of the county”. Similarly, East Lynne is “not a very large house”, but simply a generic “beautiful estate”
Instead, it is the journey between the two that captures the narrator’s attention:

Passing out at the town, toward the east, you came upon several detached gentlemen’s houses, in the vicinity of which stood the church of St Jude [... ] for about a mile these houses were scattered, the church being situated at their commencement [... ] and about a mile further on, you came upon the beautiful estate which was called East Lynne. As you drove along the road you might admire its green, undulating park; not as you walked, for an envious wall, mounting itself unconscionably high, obstructed your view. Large, beautiful trees, affording a shelter alike for human beings and for the deer, on a day of summer’s heat, rose in that park, and a great gate between two lodges on the right-hand side the road, gave you entrance to it, and conducted you to the house. It was not a very large house, compared with some country seats, but it was built in the villa style, was white and remarkably cheerful, altogether a desirable place to look upon. (20)

The narrator insists on putting the reader in motion and guiding our imagined reactions to the scenery we pass. It is the park, road and gate to which we should attend. What the narrator describes in detail is neither the estate nor the town, but, rather, the solitary “mile of road” with a brick house at its midpoint (20).

Justice Hare’s house both allegorically and literally provides a stopping point between East Lynne and West Lynne. It is the epitome of the mixed or transitional realm between work and home, and, not surprisingly, it itself mingles private and public in disturbing ways. Justice Hare offers a different form of legal business than Carlyle’s, a rural, crude, jovial magistracy in which no specialized training is ever dreamed of, and presiding at the bench seems reliant on pipes of tobacco and drinks. He is no professional, but a version of an eighteenth-century squire, and his rulings are ludicrous, getting him into a “mess” that may provoke a governmental reprimand (45). As the narrator remarks: “in that primitive place—primitive in what related to the justice-room and the justices—things were not conducted with the regularity of the law. The law there was often a dead letter” (537).17

This archaic form of legal ruling finds its analogue in an archaic form of family, a home with an aggressive and indifferent patriarch instead of a domestically involved father, and a space where lines of privacy and hierarchy are not adequately marked. Justice Hare’s house represents the “working household”—the shared work/home space that had been the norm as recently as the late eighteenth century—as a dangerous muddle.18 In the eighteenth century, “the bourgeois house often presented the appearance of a thoroughfare”, comments John Tosh, since business acquaintances and visitors mingled indiscriminately.19 The Justice’s magistracy interferes with his familial affections and forces his family to hide information from him. It poisons the home with boorish masculine behavior, it reduces his wife to helpless
illness, and it wrecks his son’s life. Every time Carlyle goes to and from work, the sight of the messy Hare household might well confirm his determination to organize his life according to more modern compartmentalization.

Meanwhile, the only geographic detail we know about West Lynne is that the Carlyle office sits, symbolically, at its heart: “In the centre of West Lynne stood two houses adjoining each other, one large, the other much smaller. The large one was the Carlyle residence, and the small one was devoted to the Carlyle offices” (37). The persons are contiguous too. Archibald’s tall, commanding elder sister, Cornelia, runs the home (the large building), while the smaller building (the office) is organized by the short, obedient office manager, Mr. Dill. Dill gets a narrow room that allows him to keep the clerks under surveillance and to issue private orders (40). When the novel opens, Carlyle lives with Cornelia in this locale, enacting the traditional model of the couple living over the shop, with the woman as active helpmeet.

However, when Carlyle purchases East Lynne, he initiates a new organization, in which his office becomes a masculinized homosocial professional space. He promotes Mr. Dill and deposes Cornelia. We learn that the office consists of a series of graduated, separated spaces: Carlyle’s private room, with double doors and a lock; a waiting room for visitors; a private passage for Dill; a chamber for the clerks; and an internal chamber, in which Richard Hare is concealed at one point. West Lynne is the opposite of the porous world of Justice Hare’s house. It is impregnable, a series of closed and enclosed spaces whose windows and locks are carefully monitored. McKee admires the fact that “in this masculine distribution of desire, multiple spaces are available for multiple objects. There is little overlap, little conflict of interest; indeed, new interests seem to come with new places”.20 However, for the women stuck at home, Carlyle’s multiplication of new interests becomes threatening. His numerous spatial investments only distract him from what ought to be his primary site of attachment.

The novel opens with Carlyle bifurcating himself in both class and spatial terms. By buying East Lynne and marrying a woman of leisure, he acquires a home life that is geographically and conceptually separate from his work life. Tosh writes:

Under the same roof for much of the day and jointly engaged in the household enterprise, husband and wife at least shared a body of common concerns, whatever their differences of temperament and taste. But by the early nineteenth century this situation could no longer be taken for granted. The daily experiences of husband and wife were more likely to diverge sharply, as he labored in an unfamiliar and unseen working environment for six days a week, while her life was given over to activities which often seemed to him to be either trivial or “feminine” (or both).21

In a parodic version of separate spheres, East Lynne becomes a static, secluded, private, female realm, while West Lynne is the bustling public
realm of male work. Not surprisingly, their representatives become pathologi-
cal extremes of their spheres, with Isabel becoming exclusively ornamental
and Carlyle becoming overwhelmingly absorbed in his profession. When Isabel
strolls towards the park gates, instead of stepping onto the road, she falls
asleep under a tree (150). Like an enchanted maiden in a fairy tale, she falls
into a protective slumber when she nears the perimeter, kept safely within
the private sphere. She is so much associated with her home that, when
Carlyle proposes, he asks her not to be his husband, but “to return to East
Lynne as its mistress” (119).

When Isabel runs away later in the novel, she has to go all the way to
France to break the spell, but remains abroad in a kind of unchanging,
static, vacant trance. As a fallen woman, Lady Isabel “sat in one position,
her countenance the picture of stony despair. So had she sat, so looked,
since she began to get better” (289). When we rejoin her in March, “Lady
Isabel was sitting where you saw her the previous December, in the precise
spot, courting the warmth of the fire” (300). On returning to East Lynne as
the governess Madame Vine, Isabel still tends towards indoor stagnation,
and is agitated whenever she is forced to go out into the grounds or visit
West Lynne. She is stuck at home, bound by its enchanted gates, the
psychic “mistress” of East Lynne, even when she has been exiled.

But what is a barrier for Isabel is a passageway for Carlyle. For him, the
park’s function is to separate and mediate the home from the public road.
Gail Cunningham’s description of suburban villas has some resonance for
the estate as well. Cunningham explains:

For both returning commuters and male visitors, the front garden represented a
transitional territory between the open, masculine space of the street, with its
direct linkages to the worlds of city and work, and the constrained, internal
and woman-dominated interior spaces of the home. Entering a front garden,
the male makes a public commitment to a private domestic space into which
he is not yet incorporated; visible from both street and house, he is momentarily
captured in liminal space with conflicting possibilities still available of flight or
admittance, confrontation or conformity.22

In the case of East Lynne, a large estate with enclosed parkland, the liminal
space is even more powerful. The front garden is larger and therefore
permits more intermediate forms of activity; it creates a more substantive
transition between the public world of the road and the private realm of
the home.

Isabel’s rival and eventual successor, Barbara Hare, has a very different
relation to space. Significantly, Wood gives Barbara a parallel scene to
Isabel’s, in which Barbara also gets stuck at the gate to her garden while await-
ing Carlyle. However, instead of falling into a passive daze like Isabel, Barbara
peers, hides, and steps forward again; as McKee comments, “her senses are
active, as are her deep feelings.” Her constant mobility significantly differentiates her from Isabel.

Indeed, Barbara experiences her emotional life on the road. The route between East Lynne and West Lynne, which takes in The Grove (the Hares’ house), is in fact the site of Barbara and Carlyle’s relationship. Levison spots Carlyle and Barbara walking arm in arm in the moonlight along this thoroughfare while they are discussing Richard’s case. He uses the information to inflame Lady Isabel (270–71). But the alternative shortcut, through the field, is the site of more intimate passions. It is on this path that Barbara falls into a fit of uncontrollable, frustrated sobbing as she reveals her passion to Carlyle—a memory that she subsequently finds excruciatingly embarrassing (163–66). Barbara’s confession is overheard by an unsympathetic servant who will later tell others the story. For the road and the path are both public spaces in which privacy is impossible.

The only place where Barbara can express intense feeling is in the dangerously visible space of transit from one endpoint to the other. In one scene, Barbara pursues Carlyle unsuccessfully into both his office in West Lynne and his home at East Lynne. She finds him only on the avenue between the two, as if it is the only place where they can meet (255). And this puts her in a terribly vulnerable situation. Missteps by residents of East Lynne or The Grove are the currency of West Lynne, which “could not have got on without [gossip], and without interfering in everybody’s business but its own” (311). Barbara’s most private feeling—her passion for Carlyle—becomes the stuff of public knowledge, discussed by everyone in town (164).

The two women’s different spatial relations to Carlyle become representative; throughout the entire novel, Isabel is stuck in seclusion, while Barbara cannot stop moving. As a young wife, Isabel seems to spend much of her time gazing drearily out of a window, watching her husband and Barbara stride away together through the park. By contrast, Barbara is a busy, mobile spirit. Before marrying Carlyle, Barbara is constantly walking outside, either with Carlyle or with her brother, Richard. After marriage, she is always visiting with friends, going to her parents’ home, or planning trips to the seaside. She is also always under hostile surveillance (though she does not know it) from Isabel. At the end of the novel, she is discussing whether she can move to London with Carlyle for his parliamentary terms. Interestingly, we rarely see her settled in any of these places; we only hear of her in transit, planning a trip or traveling. Even in scenes set in East Lynne itself, Barbara is usually preparing to leave or sweeping in from outside.

Isabel’s stasis is not precisely that of the Angel in the House. The daughter of the Earl of Mount Severn, Isabel has been trained to employ leisure time gracefully and to show off her body in spectacular attire (as when she wears diamonds to a local charity event). Once she marries Carlyle, however, she enters into a middle-class ménage, with neither the social events nor the
company that an aristocratic lifestyle assumes. She has nothing to do other than “trying the new piano, and looking at my watch, wishing the time would go quicker, that you might come home”, as she tells Archibald (150). As Cornelia points out tartly, Isabel should be hemming napkins and ordering dinners; she is ignorant of the middle-class work she is supposed to do, but she has nothing with which to replace it.

However, Carlyle also causes her to be bored because he is violating Victorian conventions for male domestic behavior. Conduct literature for men at mid-century warns against getting too involved in one’s profession. The clergyman William Landels worried that overwork destroyed men’s health, benevolence, piety and intellect. Businessmen became people who could only “deal with men on commercial principles; not otherwise”. Perhaps more pragmatically, the author of Routledge’s Manual of Etiquette urged men to have their wives participate in their work, so that the couple could have a shared interest. Indeed, “for two generations—from the 1830s to the 1870s—didactic writers in Victorian England were almost at one in declaring that bourgeois men not only had time for a domestic life, but a deep and compelling need of it”. At the same time, however, men increasingly had to negotiate what Tosh calls “a central experience of daily life—the separation of home from work”. Another mid-century novel, Charlotte Riddell’s Too Much Alone (1860), focuses on a woman whose husband is so consumed with his chemistry business that he neglects his domestic life. In both Riddell’s and Wood’s novels, the man’s desertion causes the women to experience boredom, loneliness and a great temptation towards adultery. It is clear that the man’s overinvestment in professional life was worrying both conduct writers and novelists in the period.

It is perhaps not a coincidence that East Lynne’s main male character shares his name with the Victorian sage who popularized the Gospel of Work. Archibald Carlyle would certainly have endorsed Thomas Carlyle’s oft-cited claim in Past and Present (1843):

For there is a perennial nobleness, and even sacredness, in Work. Were he never so benighted, forgetful of his high calling, there is always hope in a man that actually and earnestly works: in Idleness alone is there perpetual despair. [ … ] The latest Gospel in this world is, Know thy work and do it.

Victorian culture idealized work (at least for men; work for women was another, and far more controversial, issue). Samuel Smiles, whose Self-Help (1859) became the most famous inspirational guide to male work, resembled Carlyle inasmuch as he idealized professionally oriented male behavior: productivity, integrity, punctuality, hard work and self-reliance. His precepts governed Woods’s own career.

Among the types of work available to Victorians, professionalization had a special status. It showcased trained expertise, specialization, intellectual skills
and a higher commitment to one’s work. Because professional skills did not require muscular strength, these fields were also relatively accessible to women. They were able to enter the arts or literature, as Wood did, when most other occupations were closed to them. By the 1860s, male professionals formed some of the most powerful forces in Victorian society, as judges, managers, civil servants, authors, politicians and clergymen.

Not all of these professionals, however, established separate workspaces right away. The 1851 census shows that the home/office split was uneven. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall point out that manufacturers would live apart from their factories, medical men might cluster in the town center, while lawyers generally lived above or next to their offices. Many professionals preferred working in domestic spaces. Clergymen, men of letters and lawyers generally worked from a study in the home. Valerie Sanders claims that, in such professions, there was a “cultural acceptance of permeable boundaries between gender-specific work and home-based activity”, as men like Darwin, Gladstone, Kingsley, Dickens and Arnold all wrote at home with their children nearby. For lawyers, even professional legal spaces resembled homes, since they lived in chambers in the Inns of Court and qualified by eating dinners, although few probably went as far as Dickens’s Tommy Traddles, who moved in his wife and sisters-in-law. Tommy concedes that “our domestic arrangements are, to say the truth, quite unprofessional altogether, my dear Copperfield. Even Sophy’s being here, is unprofessional.” Tommy continues the older pattern we saw in the Hare household, where home and work intermingle—a pattern that must have continued to feel familiar and pleasurable for many mid-Victorians. In this context, Archibald Carlyle’s decision to separate work from home is unusual. We can understand why it would have so dismayed his wife and sister.

Carlyle’s acquisition of workspace, however, is part of a larger class shift. As Kucich insightfully points out: “Carlyle’s self-imposed alienation from his middle-class roots and the way it disorders his relationships with women are the primary causes of the novel’s traumatic events.” Carlyle’s purchase of property and his ascent to Parliament represent the historical rise of a professional class. “Lawyers in market towns were in a position to acquire land for themselves”, explain Davidoff and Hall. “These wealthy lawyers and property owners were a power in the local community, helping to bind together the commercial, trading, manufacturing and farming interests and many were active in local politics.” Archibald Carlyle quite precisely embodies such an upwardly mobile legal class.

Yet Cornelia’s distress reveals how startling and dangerous such a class rise might have seemed at the time. Cornelia cannot comprehend that Carlyle’s new life requires public spending and the display of high-status commodities, not the thrifty older values in which she has been trained. She has learned to
retain outmoded items and concoct home-made substitutions for bought objects. However, Cornelia’s ancient outfits and personal interventions in cookery and brewing embarrass an upwardly mobile brother who does not wish to be seen to care about saving money. Cornelia insists on retaining this role, in spite of its increasingly comic inappropriateness and its devastating emotional impact on the residents of Archibald’s house.

Yet when Archibald Carlyle lived in West Lynne, Cornelia was vital to both the business and the home. Cornelia’s “sound judgment in legal matters, and quick penetration” made her an ideal partner (48). Her status in the firm also comes from her family descent, being simultaneously the niece of one partner and the daughter of the other (while Archibald, with a different mother, has no blood relation to the partners) (37). Mid-Victorian family businesses were typically connected by consanguinity, as Adam Kuper has shown. Family status and natural ability converge to place Cornelia in the center of the family firm, regardless of her gender. Such female adjuncts to male businesses do show up in Victorian fiction, although they are often caricatured as monstrous: the female bankers Mrs. Clennam and Catherine Vernon; the female lawyers Sally Brass and Judy Smallweed; the female philanthropists Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle; and the “female bishop” Mrs. Proudie. Wood, Dickens and Trollope present women as being centrally involved in Victorian professional life, but they depict them as unnatural Amazons.

Cornelia seems natural enough in the firm, but she becomes monstrous when forcibly reassigned to the private household. There, she can only exercise her managerial skills by scolding the servants and criticizing Isabel. Bored and frustrated, Cornelia is even denied knowledge of the business she once helped run, unless she forces the information from her reluctant brother. The door is literally barred to her (44). Cornelia moves from being centrally important to being wholly extraneous, and the features that once indicated good qualities—her strength, energy, thrifty and creative reuse of clothing, and detailed oversight of servants—have now become markers of grotesquerie.

By contrast, Mr. Dill “was very fond of his present master, Mr. Archibald”—so much so that he wants to serve Carlyle rather than set up in business for himself (39). In his meekness, subservience, fondness, lifelong loyalty and lack of personal ambition, Dill makes a far more conventional “helpmeet”, a better Victorian wife, than Cornelia (or, for that matter, than either Isabel or Barbara). Carlyle experiences his wives as burdens, demanding repeated reassurances and interventions. But Dill works on Carlyle’s behalf, organizing his responsibilities and substituting for him when necessary. Dill violates masculine norms as much as Cornelia does; if she is loud, mannish and bossy, he is humble, shy, and decorative (she berates him for wearing an embroidered shirt front). Yet he is not presented as monstrous. In this
novel, at least, professionalism can accommodate the effete male but not the strong female.

If Dill and Cornelia represent gender variance, Archibald exemplifies the masculine ideal, as characters are never tired of exclaiming. Dorice Williams Elliott’s description of *Middlemarch’s* Will Ladislaw would serve for him, too:

[... ] a perfect representative of the new professional, a classless man who finds a place through merit rather than birth, a place that specifically involves him in attaining political power for himself and for other “classless” men, meaning, of course, men not of the landed class.45

His sense of a calling for his work matches Elliott’s sketch of what “vocation” meant: “work pursued not simply for money but rather from some inner sense of mission”.46 Carlyle uses this kind of language when he decides to keep working even when he enters Parliament:

[... ] not that he had the least intention of giving up his business; it was honourable (as he conducted it) and lucrative; and he really liked it: he would not have been condemned to lead an idle life for the world. (436)

In this language, we see work redefined as a voluntary pleasure.

However, if work life was associated with enjoyment, honor and loyalty, it could compete with home life, which was supposed to be the site of such emotional experiences. Monica Cohen has argued that professionalism and domesticity used comparable rationales: special skills and a selfless wish to serve others. And, in fact, Carlyle’s professional life looks more like domestic life than work as Victorians often understood it. Men’s work was supposed to be rough, ruthlessly competitive and unpleasant, as in Ruskin’s famous claim that “men, by their nature, are prone to fight; they will fight for any cause, or for none”.47 But Carlyle’s unpleasant fighting occurs at home, where he has to adjudicate between a hectoring sister and a sickly wife. By contrast, he goes daily to a pleasant work environment, where he sits in a private room with a loyal and admiring helpmeet.

Ironically, this prospect of a humane and satisfying work environment created a new kind of strain. The idea that a man could find personal fulfillment in his job imported softer emotions more normally associated with the private realm into the world of public work. It is this uneasy transfer of affect that many mid-Victorian novels interrogate, from Wemmick’s bifurcation between his “Walworth sentiments” at the Castle and his self-contained attitude at the office, to Plantagenet Palliser’s and David Copperfield’s anxiety lest their wives feel neglected as they devote themselves to work.48

However, Archibald Carlyle is a problematic version of these masculine counterparts, and the issue is partially one of geography. Plantagenet and David work from the home, and want their wives to assist them. Sophy Traddles actually trains herself to be her husband’s legal clerk. In these cases, the
couples behave the way M. Jeanne Peterson has described, as partners in a shared enterprise.49 “The most important prerequisite [for a happy marriage] was that husband and wife would routinely be in each other’s company a good deal”, Tosh explains. “The key issue was how much time the husband spent at home”.50 Unfortunately, unlike David, Tommy or Plantagenet, Carlyle has an office that is separate from the home, to which Isabel never gets near enough to hold the pens, let alone use them in copying documents. The tragedies of Carlyle’s private life derive, to a large extent, from his overattention to a business that is inaccessible to his wife. In Mangham’s summation: “although this schizophrenic arrangement appears to work for Wemmick, East Lynne questions the effectiveness of such a division”.51

Carlyle is so profoundly preoccupied with work that he becomes oblivious to the emotional dynamics of his most intimate relationships and domestic spaces. Withholding information, concealing emotion, and ignoring others’ social and emotional cues, Carlyle never becomes aware of his culpability for the emotional havoc of the novel. Isabel is miserable, but Mr. Carlyle suspected it not. At home but morning and evening, and then generally alone with his wife, and becoming gradually more absorbed with the cares of his business, which increased upon him, he saw not that anything was wrong. (167)

Indeed, Carlyle’s professional deceptiveness blunts his capacity to comprehend any communication. He simply does not attend to events occurring outside the office, which he has defined as the only space that requires his attention. His “ability to separate business from feeling leads to a complete and destructive lack of understanding between him and Isabel”.

The parliamentary election makes Carlyle’s loyalty clear. He realizes that “he would rather represent West Lynne than any other spot on the face of the earth, no matter what might be that other’s importance” (436). Having “the interest of West Lynne at heart” means leaving East Lynne (and his family) for London during much of the year—a prospect that they find devastating. Nonetheless, “before Mr. Carlyle had reached East Lynne, he had decided that it should be” (436). The important decision is taken on his daily commute. The road between the two becomes a symbol of his identity and, importantly, he does not consult the women at each end—the sister at his town or the wife at his home—each of whom might be thought to have some say in the decision. Both are aware that he has decided without their input; Barbara admits that “he had made up his mind before he spoke to me” and weeps, while Cornelia asks: “why did you not come in when you left the office?” — “and there is no doubt that, in his not having done so, lay one of the sore points” (446).

Carlyle’s reticence destroys his first marriage, because he refuses to tell Isabel why he is holding covert meetings with Barbara. Since Carlyle has
assigned these meetings to the category of work, it never occurs to him that anyone else might imagine they belong to the category of home. Meanwhile, Carlyle had become “unobservant to what was passing at home” (306). As the Earl of Mount Severn remarks subsequently to Isabel: “and so, you construed business interviews into assignations!” (307). But Isabel was right to do so, not because Carlyle was actually having an affair, but because the emotions she might have expected in marriage—loyalty, honesty, self-sacrifice, affection, attention and assistance—are emotions Carlyle diverts towards “business interviews”, instead of reserving them for his family. Brian McCuskey notes that “Carlyle’s fiercely private habits, by discouraging the exchange of confidences and prohibiting open discussion, constitute nothing less than an obstruction of justice”.53 Endorsing the professional as a good man, the novel nonetheless shows how very hard he might be to live with. As Mangham points out, it was precisely Wood’s own allegiance to this class that put her in the position to critique it. Wood “was also in a good position to spot the same class’s weak points, as well as the main problems with its well-trumpeted values”.54

In one particularly problematic instance, Carlyle invites his client, Sir Francis Levison, to East Lynne, and forgets to mention it to Isabel: “Mr. Carlyle, like many another man whose brain has its share of work, was sometimes forgetful of trifles, and it entirely slipped his memory to mention the expected arrival at home” (223). Because work is coded as important, domestic relations are treated as “trifles”. The home becomes dangerously porous because Carlyle neither allows the women to monitor guests nor bothers to attend to the job properly himself. By inviting Levison and overruling Isabel’s subsequent objections, Carlyle overrides the careful social-status scrutiny women were supposed to exercise over who was allowed to enter private space.55 Introducing a notoriously immoral man into the sacred precinct of home creates a dangerous situation indeed.

Levison’s invitation reveals that it is, in fact, impossible to separate home from work, since the legal case on which Carlyle is employed involves his own family, and the perpetrator is his own house guest. Only able to recognize someone as a suspect when he is actually seated in Carlyle’s legal office, Carlyle entirely misses the identifying details that would have allowed him to name Levison as the criminal, because they occur in domestic spaces where he does not expect to see evidence. Even he is astounded afterwards when he realizes what he has missed (484).

At the same time, although work is the place where Carlyle is attentive, work is also the place that precludes emotional expressions. Thus, when life-changing events occur at work, Carlyle can recognize their significance but has no capacity to respond, since he needs to maintain the self-discipline that is the marker of gentlemanly professionalism. Most egregiously, when Carlyle reads the newspaper report that Isabel has died, he can only express
his mourning by pausing in his work for an hour or two. When his clerk comes in to check on him, “Carlyle stared at him for a moment, as if his wits had been in the next world. Then he swept the newspaper from before him, and was the calm, collected man of business again” (326). Similarly, Carlyle learns that his son William is dying when he speaks to the doctor at his office/Cornelia’s house. “What Mr. Carlyle felt was not suffered to appear; his feelings were entirely under his own control” (518). He pauses for a few minutes and then resumes conversation. When William actually is on his deathbed, Carlyle stays home initially but then goes to court, since “he always had much business there at assize time” (581). Thus, the most tragic events of Carlyle’s life—the deaths of wife and son—can only be represented by temporary breaks in his work schedule, a silence or a pause, with his professional merit shown by his flawless recovery thereafter. He was, after all, “as little given to show emotion as man can well be” (613). In this reticence, he forms a major contrast to Lady Isabel, who speaks in a language of wild emotional excess; to Barbara, notable for her hysterical outburst; and to Cornelia, who hurls invective at those of whom she disapproves.

Isabel’s emotional excess makes her likeable as a woman and becomes the agency of her reformation; her despair and repentance are just as extravagant as her earlier feelings, carrying the reader along with her. Archibald Carlyle’s emotional discipline makes him admirable as a consummate professional man, but that is the problem from which he can never recover. Deborah Wynne and Andrew Mangham have both noted that the novel appears to reward the middle-class self-control of Carlyle and Barbara, while destroying the wayward, emotional aristocrats Levison and Isabel. But, in fact, it is Carlyle’s inability to reform himself that is the most chilling aspect of East Lynne. One cannot reform if one’s behavior is already perfect. Isabel herself recognizes this problem: she cannot complain to the man “who must be almost without reproach in the sight of heaven” (615). Unfortunately, the qualities demanded for a good professional man—attentiveness, concentration, focus—end up, Wood shows, impoverishing the home. East Lynne reveals the pathological extremes of a private world of love and a public world of work, and what happens to the presumably perfect votaries of each sphere. It is a fear that must have haunted a novelist aiming to unite them in her own life.

In this respect, East Lynne is not alone. While sensation fiction is deeply involved in challenging feminine norms to make space for passions like rage and desire, it also pursues a parallel project for men. If Aurora Floyd, Lady Audley, and Lady Isabel are too emotionally uncontrolled, then Talbot Bulstrode, Mr. Talboys (Senior) and Archibald Carlyle are too attached to professionalism, dangerously overinvested in reticence, self-discipline and control of information. Many sensation novels, after all, could have used
Riddell’s title, *Too Much Alone*, to describe neglected women who get into sexual trouble because their husbands or fathers are elsewhere. Sensation fiction is interested in interrogating male vocational expectations as well as female sexual regulations, suggesting that perhaps they felt comparably constraining.

It is not surprising, since sensation fiction was perceived as a genre of wildly entertaining excesses, that a major sensation novel should critique unattractively cool rationality. Mangham sums up: “Wood’s books appear to join in the worship of moderation, perseverance, and self-help, yet they also expose how the middle-class lifestyle generated the very hazards and inconsistencies it was most eager to overcome.”58 By attacking the very virtues associated with professionalism, sensation fiction can make a case for an alternative set of values—a warmly spontaneous, personal, intensely affective mode.59 Readers loved the extravagantly emotional Lady Isabel, not her chillingly perfect husband—just as they chose melodramatic sensation fiction like *East Lynne* over rational, “improving” books. Kucich writes: “most important, the novel critically rewrites the meaning of professional authority, formulating in the process a wish for some as yet unimagined roles for both men and women”.60 In her 1861 bestseller, Wood warns us that, if being a good Victorian woman leaves no room for the passions, being a good Victorian man leaves no time for daily attentiveness. All one can do is trudge on the high road, measuring the space between those two unsatisfactory endpoints, the home that is too stifling and the office that is too attractive—the path, perhaps, taken by sensation fiction.

**Notes**

1. I use the Oxford University Press edition of *East Lynne* (1861) because of its wider availability, but it is based on the first edition. Most editions of *East Lynne*, including Andrew Maunder’s excellent Broadview edition, use the 1862 one-volume version. Minor points and specific quotes may therefore differ; for instance, in the 1862 edition Isabel goes to Trouville, but in the 1861 version she goes to Boulogne.


3. Tromp, 257.

6. Kucich, 166.
8. McKee, 178.
9. Kucich, 158.
15. In the early and mid-Victorian period, suburbia was often decried as an area of tasteless, commercial, mass-produced, badly built houses, debased copies of aristocratic estates, explains Bilston. Sarah Bilston, “Your vile suburbs can offer nothing but the deadness of the grave’: The Stereotyping of Early Victorian Suburbia”, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 41.4 (2013): 621–42. *East Lynne* interestingly complicates this dynamic by placing its upwardly mobile middle-class professional in a repurposed aristocratic mansion.
19. Tosh, 23.
23. McKee, 153.
25. Landels, 156.
27. Tosh, 6.


38. Tosh, 17.

39. Sanders, 196.


41. Kucich, 163.

42. Davidoff and Hall, 261–62.


44. By contrast, Oliphant’s depiction of the female banker Catherine Vernon in Hester is sensitive and sympathetic.


46. Elliott, Angel, 200.


50. Tosh, 59.


52. Mangham, Violent, 134.

55. Tosh, 23–24, 124.
59. Cvetkovich argues that the affective extravagance of sensation fiction, particularly its emphasis on female suffering, allowed women to effectively express distress about their roles.
60. Kucich, 195.

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