Scenes of Sympathy

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Isabel's Spectacles: Seeing Value in East Lynne

"The world goes round and round by rules of contrariety. We despise what we have, and covet that which we cannot get."
— Ellen Wood, East Lynne

To ward the end of Ellen Wood's East Lynne (1863), Barbara Carlyle recounts to her family's governess, Madame Vine, the story of Isabel Vane's elopement—not knowing that the governess actually is Isabel. Carlyle's first wife, transformed by the combined effects of a disfiguring railway accident and a disguise, Barbara includes the one detail of which Isabel is unaware: that Francis Levison, the man for whom Isabel left her husband, is now known to be a murderer. Isabel responds to that detail, and to the cumulative effect of hearing the entire story, immediately and physically: "In spite of her caution, of her striving for self-command, the whiteness and the low shrill cry of horror and despair burst from her lips.... I beg your pardon, Mrs. Carlyle," she sobbed: "I am apt to picture things too vividly. It is so very horrible.""

Isabel might be regarded here as a model for sensation fiction's ideal reader: one for whom the genre's non-ideal pictures provide an occasion for the experience and release of powerful affect. Indeed, spending considerab-ly more time detailing Isabel's response to representations of her experience than on describing that experience itself, the novel suggests the superiority of representation and emotional narrative over the experience represented to produce affect and sensation. Positioning Isabel as audience to her own story—asking her, in effect, to sympathize with herself as a fictional character—Wood reproduces both the reader's relation to Isabel and the divided narrative of Isabel's own experience in the novel's latter half, which finds her situated as spectator to the familial life of Mr. and Mrs. Carlyle: to the life she might have led, that is, had she not run away with Levison. In doing so, the novel renders Isabel's sympathy for a fictional character inseparable from her identity as that character (his is the same literal-ization of identification found in "A Christmas Carol," in which the shock of recognition stems from the fact that the character in the story is you), and it implicates the reader in her identification: sympathy with Isabel is aligned with reflection on, and horror at, the story she now recognizes as her own. In this way, as, later, in Isabel's active reconstruction of her body and identity, the novel defines her, has her define herself, and implicitly defines its readers as effects of sympathetic identification. To sympathize with Isabel, in Wood's novel, is manifestly to sympathize with representation.

Recent criticism of sensation fiction finds in the genre's reliance on what might be called bodily sympathy (as in the communication of nervousness from character to reader) an erosion of representation, an evoca-
tion of the real and the natural in somatic responses that seem to efface the boundary between reader and text.2 But Barbara's narrative and Isabel's spectatorship stage this ostensible erasure as a response to representation, affirming less the immediacy of sensation's effect on the body than the role of cultural representations—such as East Lynne's own sensational narra-
tive—as mediators of sensation and its meanings. Isabel's response to

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Barbara's narrative, like the agony of suffering she endures in her position as spectator, aligns her enunciation of middle-class values with the mediation of her experience by representation—in the novel's terms, "reflection." Rather than grounding affect directly in the body, first in East Lynne highlights the cultural construction of ideological effects—a highlighting for which she endorses Isabel's role as part of her disguise (which both frame the scenes she witnesses and make a spectacle of Isabel herself) will serve as my metaphor. Despite the novel's reliance on the idea of inchoate bodily response (as in Isabel's sexual response to Leviston), then, I wish to argue that experience in East Lynne counts most heavily and leaves a more lasting impression when filtered through Isabel's spectacular lenses. In particular, framing its representations of domesticity through and as Isabel's spectacles, the novel reveals them to be precisely vivid pictures.

Meeting Frances Leviston in Boulogne, where Carlyle has sent her for her health, Isabel "shrank from self-examination" (175). No sooner has she left East Lynne with Leviston, abandoning husband and home, than she develops a capacity for "reflection," simultaneously recognizing the "true" nature of her actions: "The very hour of her departure she awoke to what she had done: the guilt... assumed at once its true, frightful colour" (237). "The terrible position in which she found herself had brought to Isabel reflection. Not the reflection, so called, that may come to us who yet live in and for the world, but that which must, almost of necessity, attend one whose part in the world is over" (249). Much of the remainder of the novel is taken up with this process of reflection, in which Isabel imagines—"in true and vivid colors"—what she has witnessed or experienced (the best example is the scene of Carlyle and Barbara walking in the moonlight, a scene to which she returns repeatedly and which, appearing to confirm Isabel's suspicions of her husband's infidelity, prompts her departure). Indeed, the entire second part of the novel, which finds Isabel installed as governess to her own children in the Carlyle home, in essence constitutes such a reflection, as Isabel, wearing the tinted spectacles some Victorian actresses used to indicate the entire none-too-flattering disguise, entertains vivid pictures of what would have been her life had she remained.

3 On the glasses, see Sally Mitchell, introduction to East Lynne, xi.
...she imagines before returning: "How could she bear to see Mr. Carlyle the husband of another?—to live in the same house with them, to witness his attentions, possibly his caresses?" (333). "The old scenes passed through her mind, like the changing pictures in a phantasmagoria" (493). In this process of reflection, things had initially deceived through an ostensibly distorted lens are said to assume their true colors, as in the following account of the transformation of her consciousness: "As her eyes opened to her folly and to the true character of Francis Levison, so in proportion did they close to the fault by which her husband had offended her. She saw it in fainter colors; she began to suspect—nay, she knew—that her own excited feelings had magnified it in length, and breadth, and height... She remembered her [Carlyle's] noble qualities; doubly noble did they appear to her, now that her interest in them must cease... her esteem, her admiration, her affection for him, had returned to her fourfold. We never know the full value of a thing until we lose it" (249). Her eyes opening and closing at once—opening to an inward scene as they close to the external world—laid weight her losses and magnifies her vision. Reconstituting changes in moral value at shifts in visual value, this passage illustrates both the bourgeois nature of perception in the novel (its relentless attempt to measure, to value everything) and the embourgeoisement of Isabel's consciousness: as the passage slides effortlessly from "appear" to "know," swelling Carlyle's retrospective value, Isabel's body and state move (as they throughout the novel) laterally (as instruments for the recalibration of social value). Defining the acquisition of knowledge as a readjustment of vision—giving Isabel colored glasses through which to view things in their "true" colors—the novel both suggests that the need corrects lenses and offers a metaphor for its own ideological coloring, for projecting what the new person as "magnified" halls simultaneously expresses her discovery of worth in equally exaggerated terms: "she remembered his noble qualities; doubly noble did they appear to her... her affection for him had returned fourfold." But if, indeed, "her own excited feelings had magnified" Carlyle's faults "in length, and breadth, and height" (as if measuring for a carpet, or piece of furniture), who is to say that her current feelings are...

4 On the calibrations or transpositions of the middle-class household, see Anne McClintock, Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Context (New York: Routledge, 1995), 168.
any less the result of magnification, or, as the passage has it, multiplication? Making visible what it quickly moves to repress—the difficulty of separating value from the "color" with which one sees it (or of separating "knowledge" from "experience," with the suggestion that the former is nothing but the millennium of the latter)—she began to suspect—any one who knew?—the passage calls attention to the instability of its ideological calculus: in the terms that "doubly" and "fourfold" still say so, "full.

Grounding truth in the need for Isabel's re-see and revalue the events of her life, Wood aligns Isabel's "discovery" of the truth of bourgeois verities with representation in several forms. Mental "reflection" conjures up "pictures" and "phantasmagorias," all of which aligned with the characteristic visual intensity of sensation fiction and melodrama, suggest the representational function of the novel itself. And in East Lynne's second half, the projection of domestic spectacles through Isabel's eyeglasses in effect renders them indistinguishable from productions of her own consciousness and, by implication, the consciousness of readers who "see" through her eyes. In a process that mirrors the self-determination and desire projected on the novel's readers, then, Isabel's newfound awareness and the intervention of her readers are represented as effects of the ability to project the self into representations. "Reflecting," Isabel comes to know her true self seeing "correctly," the attains to her possession of proper values. Isabel's inferiority is cultural representation: experience filtered through the categories of bourgeois ideology.

5 This despite Margaret Oliphant's assertion that sympathy for Isabel would lead to "moral confusion." East Lynne disturbed Oliphant because—like Gaskell's Ruth—it seemed to her to direct feeling to the wrong place; encouraging readers to empathize with Isabel, Oliphant writes, Wood makes "the worse... the better cause." ("Novels," Blackwood's 94 [1863]: 170). But to sympathize with Isabel at this point in the novel is to identify with her desire to occupy Barbara's place: Readers who identify with Isabel imaginatively invest themselves in a consciousness emptied of everything but a gaze; the spectacles through which they look are filled with the domestic scene that has become the novel's world of value.

6 Susan Stewart describes a similar effect as characteristic of nostalgia: "The inability of the sign to 'capture' its signified, of narrative to be at one with its object, and of the genre of mimetic representation to approximate the time of face-to-face communication leads to a generalized desire for origin, for nature, and for a unmediated experience that is in evidence in nostalgic longing." On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 23-24.
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sympathize with Isabel is to sympathize with representation in several forms. Unable to partake in middle-class life by virtue of her aristocratic identity, figured as her oversensitive body, Isabel in the latter half of the novel "assents" (Wood's term) with the intensity of her spectatorship and suffering to the value of that life. Eliciting readerly sympathy for Isabel largely through the mechanism of spectatorship—requiring readers, as a condition of sympathy for her, to gaze both at and through the eyeglasses that mark her as spectator and spectacle—Wood ties readerly sympathy to a condition of spectatorship. Sympathy for Isabel is identified with a reflexive spectatorship that mirrors Isabel's own; it depends upon identification with the representations for which she yearns, and with her yearning for them. Indeed, in several ways Isabel's story registers her social fall as a fall into representation: as an increasing involvement with spectacle, reflection, projection, dissimulation, and disguise. To identify with Isabel is to identify with Isabel's spectacles: those she sees, those she wears, and those in which she pursues; it is also to sympathize with an identity in which, as in the fiction called the middle-class, images of various class identities jostle against one another. As a fallen aristocrat, and in particular a woman in decline, Isabel in disguise emerges as a paradigmatic figure for a fractured middle-class identity, an image that captures the tensions between high and low, "nature" and artifice, out of which this identity is constituted.

Rendring sympathy a spectator's melodrama, East Lynne makes spectatorship a condition of sympathy and, in doing so, disclose the role played by sympathy and spectatorship in the construction of middle-class identity.

Wood's reliance on a dynamic of scenes and spectators has, it has often been noted, obvious affinities with stage melodrama. But that connection does not so much explain away her reliance on spectatorship as suggest the way both the popular novel and stage melodrama reflect and reproduce the increasingly spectatorial nature of experience in the 1860s. To describe the scenes Isabel imagines as a phantasmagoria, as Wood does, is to imagine a spectator as a subject to include spectatorship in subjectivity's definition. As E. Ann Kaplan notes, East Lynne demonstrates the way the scenes

footnote: As Sally Mitchell notes of stage adaptations of East Lynne, "The essential scenes were in Wood's novel." (Mitchell, introduction to East Lynne, xvi.)
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popular novel is “affected by the culture of the spectacle,” revealing in turn the way that culture “transform[s] the subject’s ways of perceiving and desiring.”

Here is in “A Christmas Carol,” however, spectacular forms of cultural representation do not overt but rather reinforce cultural values already in place. East Lynne’s visuality amplifies the spectacular function of middle-class Victorian women, for whom visible details indicated status and value; the novel functions in large part as a feminine phantasmagoria, a portrait gallery in which women hone their ability to distinguish good feminine spectacles from bad ones and evaluate the portraits other women make. For Isabel embodies the contradictory tensions of a Victorian middle-class feminine identity that was, increasingly and preeminently in the mid-nineteenth century, a matter of keeping up appearances: of displaying the visible evidence of middle-class status.

Sympathy, for instance, accurately describes Barbara’s activity as she observes and imitates Isabel’s manipulation of social codes (despite Isabel’s ostensible function as a negative role model, she is, as Jeanne B. Elliot points out, very much a...

8 E. Ann Kaplan, Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama (London: Routledge, 1992), 62. Richard Altick dates the first London phantasmagoria as occurring in 1801 or 1802. But he also points out that the term “phantasmagoria” quickly “was absorbed into the common vocabulary.” The Shows of London (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 1978), 219. “By the 1860’s,” he writes, “they were well on their way to becoming one of the most widely attended of all forms of Victorian entertainment” (220). No specific form of representation need be at stake here; “phantasmagoria” signifies the general way in which “dull” subjects are “glamorized” by means of technological presentation (221). But the actual structure of the phantasmagoria (in which the size of images projected from a magic lantern behind a screen could be increased or decreased to simulate movement toward or away from the audience) was also for a time only in the phantasmagoria could extra-wide still be circumvented (217). The point was to focus the audience’s attention on the lighted figures: as Altick further remarks, “The ghostly figures were painted on glass ‘sliders,’ the extraneous portions of which were blacked out so as to concentrate the light... on the fantastic images” (217).

9 On middle-class feminine display, see Elizabeth Langland, Nobility of the Middle Class: Houses and Homes in Early Victorian London (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991), 87–94.
In several crucial scenes at the novel's beginning—especially that of Isabel's first appearance in West Lynne's church, which finds Barbara apposite in pink parasol, bonnet, and feather, and Isabel elegantly understated in white muslin—I feel as if Isabel, an adjustment of values can lead to nothing but, as the novel puts it, "an long scene of repentance," for Barbara and potentially for Wood's readers as well. As openness to the colors of class value translates into a new identity, a new social self—Isabel, by the end of the novel, Barbara—represented in the novel's first half for her love of money and for the failure of control that results in her emotional outburst to Carlyle—has, by watching Isabel, learned balance, and the ability to manipulate her own self-representation to achieve it. Her accession to her position as Carlyle's wife and mistress of East Lynne serves as a model for a fluid, socially mobile subjectivity able to perceive the hues and shades, codes and controls, fluid movement from one class to another.

Seeming to value the identifications that lead to social advancement, however, the novel also tends to dismiss the instability that identification suggests, while it values in Barbara the fluidity that leads to middle-class identity. It values that fluidity in its juxtaposition of Isabel, condemning her awareness of the codes of self-representation by associating that awareness both with aristocratic indulgence and with disguise. In Isabel's first public appearance at West Lynne's church, for instance, out-dressing the local women by not dressing up at all, she avoids the "unnecessary profusion of splendour" Carlyle perceives that same day at the Earl's dining table (53-54). But subsequent events suggest that within her apparent modesty lies an undesirable canniness about self-presentation. Later,  

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for instance, the deliriously conditioned for a social by Kane, the music means, in order to show that I think the poor man’s concert worth going to, and worth dressing for” (51). It is in C. W ood’s estimation Isabel can- not fill the role of the liberal subject because she is unable to detach her- self from her own spectacular class identity she cannot, as she will soon have to, “see” herself. Exhibiting sympathy, Isabel also displays her ability to manipulate self-display and her awareness of its consequences: “I feared it might be thought I had put them on to look fine,” she says elsewhere of some diamonds she has chosen not to wear (12).

Thus despite Wood’s evident valuing of Isabel’s feeling for Kane, the novel—as if rehearsing a characteristically middle-class response to this aristocratic gesture—expresses ambivalence about her mode of expressing it. And that ambivalence is reinforced when, summoned in all her finery from the concierge to her father’s sickbed, she refuses to pay attention to that same dress. However, from her father’s death, her dress is no longer found to be inappropriate, oriented for the occasion. The episode suggests the difficulty for the aristocratic Isabel, of wearing the version she is conditioned to love, but so that may try she can never strike the correct balance between inner value and external display. For the correct can be brought to display through her impulse in each instance to a sympathy of which Wood evidently approves, but unavoidable visibility suggests (and the novel continues to demonstrate) that the aristocratic heroine must reenact sympathy because she cannot help but make a spec- tacle of herself she cannot necessarily read, nor can she be properly absorbed into, the scenarios in which she finds herself. And, indeed, the episode of degradation Isabel embarks on in Madame Vine reproduces Isabel Vane’s subjection to the erbene middle-class gaze—a gaze literally reproduced when, toward the end of the century, the novel was transformed into the- ater.) Only middle-class identity, the novel’s ideology suggests, with its val- orization of innermost and intuition of the proper balance between feel- ing and its manifestations, is sufficiently mobile, sufficiently flexible, and—as its metaphorical figuration in the theater audience suggests, sufficiently invisible—for the proper exercise of sympathy.

This episode also marks gender differences in sympathy's mode of operations. The novel criticizes Isabel's attempts to assist Kane, designates the personal gesture as feminine and self-indulgent, well intentioned but insufficiently considered. This leaves room for the dispassionate, "professional" sympathy displayed in Carlyle's behind-the-scenes assistance to Barbara's brother James—and, presumably, in his later political life. When Isabel "mistakes" meetings between Barbara and Carlyle for love scenes, she is of course hardly mistaken; in these scenes, Carlyle's cool, rational business mode—ostensibly just a convenient cover for discussing how to help James—develops as the novel's alternative to Isabel's sentimental and unpredictable emotion. In this way, as in its late evocation of mass sympathy in the theater, East Lynne distinguishes a practical, masculine sympathy from an ostentatious and impractical—if also admirable—feminine one.

The novel valorizes Barbara's self-presentation over Isabel's. But it does so in a manner that merely replaces the latter with the former as the novel's glamorous center. And in this replacement, an anachronistic "ethos of visibility" is adapted to and seemingly merged with the visual modality of the Victorian marketplace, the Victorian bourgeois home positioned, in Andrew Miller's succinct characterization of the effects of Victorian commodity culture, "behind glass." Barbara's spectacular home embodies what Thomas Ribrand has called "capitalist representation," and what, for Jürgen Habermas, marks a hollowing out of the private sphere, an "illusion of bourgeois privacy" in which the former in effect becomes an advertisement for a form of intimacy in the process of being displaced by popular culture. The value of West Lynne's domesticity, then, is located in Isabel's newly abused perceptions, and in ideological perception in general as it projects value onto everyday life.

East Lynne allegorizes a social shift: the replacement of Isabel and her father by Carlyle and Barbara signals the replacement of the aristocracy by...
the professional middle class, and the novel's representation of bourgeois life is inseparable from its project of engendering desire for that life. And replacing the aristocracy with the middle class seems, for Wood, substituting the one for the other at the object of the reader's desires. Thus while in the novel's first half the middle class enjoys the aristocracy, in its second the aristocracy is put in the position of envying the middle class, the former's characteristic heightened sensibility and emotional susceptibility given over to the increment of middle-class desire. The novel's idealization of the middle class is thus resolved as a function of Isabel's gaze: if we begin by gazing at Isabel, we end by gazing—through and with Isabel—at Barbara. And as that gaze shifts from one woman to another and one class to another, the bourgeois scene los its capacity to replace the aristocracy than to become it. (Once she has become an expert at the bourgeois economics of feeling and its expression, Barbara exemplifies what Nancy Armstrong calls—referring to an ambiguously coded combination of character regulation and external display—"middle-class sickness.") In East Lynne, spectacle, both naturalized and psychological through Isabel's gaze, is identified with both aristocratic excess and an idealized middle-class domesticity. Even when the scenes Isabel witnesses seem to speak of nothing but surface, these of the shallowness, for instance, of Barbara's managerial mothering—the intensity with which they are visualized figures the intensity of Isabel's longing and invites mutely longing as well. Indeed, the novel's pictures of East Lynne's domesticity exist chiefly as mirrors for Isabel's desire. And that desire, in turn, suggests the inescapably representational status of Victorian middle-class domesticity: the way its successful achievement is always in question. (And always in process: the necessity for active household maintenance—which goes largely unseen—reflects the perpetual identity-maintenance of middle-class consciousness, as it moves toward a never-to-be-attained ideal.)

"We never know the full value of a thing until we lose it," says Wood's narrator, the "until" implying the inevitability of loss. As the novel moves from our observation at the bourgeois virtues of modesty and prudence." Hyperbole, 266.

14 In connection with Austen's novels, Armstrong describes the "middle-class aristocracy" as a formation that links middle-class moral and economic codes with aristocratic "nuances of emotion and ethical refinements." Armstrong, Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 160.
When early in the novel Isabel's perceptions are isolated, defined as excessive and overwrought, after her fall readers share her vision, witnessing Barbara's life through lenses that locate desire for bourgeois life in an overly sensitive aristocratic body—the body offered to readers for their sympathy and identification. Thus is Isabel being taken through East Lynne for the first time:

On she followed, her heart palpitating; past the rooms that used to be hers, along the corridor, towards the second staircase. The doors of her old bed and dressing-rooms stood open, and she glanced in with a yearning look. No, never more, never more could they be hers; she had put them from her by her own free act and deed. Not less comfortable did they look now, than in former days, but they had passed into another's occupancy. The fire threw its blaze on the furniture: there were the little ornaments on the large dressing-tables, as they used to be in her lifetime, and the cut glass of the crystal essence bottles was glittering in the fire-light. On the sofa lay a shawl, and a book, and on the bed a silk dress, as if thrown there after being taken off. (336)

Desire produces a description already framed, by both Isabel's spectacles and the doorway through which she glances; it produces a path of glittering objects for the eye to trace, and ultimately a place—the discarded dress—with which both Isabel and the novel's female readers are invited to identify, and into which they may imaginatively insert themselves. As Mrs. Carlyle, Barbara becomes visible in the wood draped hidden glimpses. And throughout the novel's latter half, the lives of Barbara and Carlyle—

15 John Keats argues that East Lynne's success was connected with middle-class aspirations above the rising political and economic titans, and that Keats' heroines had fragmented to serve moral writing. The Power of Lies: Transgression in Victorian Fiction (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 161-62. For Keats, the figure of the professional resolves tensions between middle-class and aristocratic roles. To my eyes, Isabel's unstable identity and the precarious but generous degree of distance she maintains undergoes subtle but significant (stable-middle-class) simulations, counterbalance distance at both middle moral truths and female identity boundaries.
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especially that of Barbara, whose desires, amply described earlier, seem now to have been fulfilled—similarly appear as image and spectacle. Isabel's vision overlaps what she sees with painful intensity, perhaps, we are told, distorting it. This "inexpressibly more beautiful looked Barbara than Lady Isabel had ever seen her—ver she the Scandal" (332). But where the "or else" might suggest a perception weakened or at least called into question by an acknowledgment of feeling's effect on perception, here it also seems to define a mode of seeing that, drenched in longing, expresses a more profound truth that any objective account could. Collapsing Isabel's consciousness into its own representational strategies, the novel generalizes her perception, as if to acknowledge that the expression of ideological truths requires a certain distortion.

East Lynne gives middle-class life both specular and spectacular form by framing it through the eyes of an observer whose life has become, Wood puts it, "as one long scene of moral agony" (316). Like "A Christmas Carol," the novel repeatedly— and relentlessly— positions readers, along with Isabel, outside the home, staging window-scenes that set a brilliantly lit East Lynne against a dark background: "In one of the comfortable sitting-rooms of East Lynne sat Mr. Carlyle and his sister one inauspicious January night. The warm, blazing fire, the handsome carpet on which it flickered, the exquisitely comfortable arrangement of the furniture of the room altogether, and the light of the chandelier which fell on all presented a picture of home peace, though it may not have deserved the name of luxury" (323). Scenes showing Barbara and Carlyle are usually framed through Isabel's eyes: "Lights were moving in the windows, it looked gay and cheerful, a contrast to her" (335). The novel's readers, positioned along with Isabel as targets of these representations, are invited to perceive themselves as similarly dispossessed, and Isabel's distance from her "own" experience is thus inscribed as a division within bourgeois life itself as the unresolvable but inevitable distance between the middle-class wife and the "scenes" in which she lives.

These pictures of idealized domesticity capture the tension between permanence and transience that marks the professional middle class's "substitute" of aristocratic property, its attempted appropriation of aristocratic signifiers. For despite the sale of the house, despite the changes of master and mistress, everything—from the fire to the "little ornaments on the dressing-table"—"seems to baed" as they used to be in "ladies". One might think that a new mistress would have chosen new ornaments, or that the
“crystal essence bottles...glimmering in the fire-light” might now be different ones. But how every detail, including and perhaps especially the dress laying on the bed, tells readers that what is susceptible to change is not the house but its occupants, particularly its mistress. Describing what, in her view, constituted the novel's magnitude of sympathy for Isabel, Margaret Oliphant wrote that “when [Isabel] returns to her home under the guise of the poor governess, there is not a reader who does not feel disposed to turn her virtuous successor to the door, and to reinstate the suffering heroine in her glorious confusion of all morality.”

For Oliphant, sympathy for Isabel takes the form of a reader's wish for her reinstatement, into the house, the ornaments, the dress, what is rejected is not the place and not even the husband but the other woman, who becomes—as any reader might imagine herself—just another temporary occupant. Indeed, given the permanence accorded to domestic objects, even to the fire that, it seems, is always burning, this picture gives female readers a rather tenuous hold on their bourgeois paradises. Sympathizing with Isabel means sympathizing with the place in which she wants to insert herself, and with her desire to do so. (Wood stresses everywhere the identification between the two women; Barbara is what Isabel might have been, Isabel “almost regarded Mr. Carlyle as her husband” [507].)

Barbara and Isabel's gazes intermingle class desire and feminine envy; both define middle-class feminine consciousness as a condition of being inhabited;...
and by and dependent on the class-inflected images of others. Seeing Isabel's and Carlyle's marriage from the inside, readers learn of the effects of "time and custom" on Carlyle, whose "demonstrative affection, shown so greatly for her in the first twelve months or so of their married life, had subsided into calmness" (164). But such indifference never manifests itself in the marriage of Barbara and Carlyle. For while readers are invited to participate in the dissatisfactions of various female characters at various points, for instance—to see through Barbara's "covetous eyes," or to hear about Isabel's jealousy of Barbara and uncertainty about her own marriage—the woman who has achieved the novel's ideal position seems to have no interiority once she achieves it. This marriage is an idealized and nostalgic construction whose value Barbara perceives only because, living both literally and figuratively with Isabel's shadow hovering at her side, she does not fully possess it in the novel's terms; it can be perceived as valuable only because (and this is in keeping with many critical assessments of Barbara's character) no one really inhabits it.

And yet Wood also suggests that what appears as distortion or magnification in East Lynne's domesticity is not only the product of the novel's representations or of Isabel's gaze: the staged quality of the domestic life Isabel observes in the Carlyle home is, we learn, inextricable from that home's successful functioning. Barbara offers her governess and East Lynne's readers the following lesson in child rearing:

"Now, what I trust I shall never give up to another, will be the training of my children," pursued Barbara. "Let the offices, properly belonging to a nurse, be performed by the nurse—let her have the trouble of the children, their noise, their romping—but I hope I shall never fail to gather my children round me daily, at stated periods, for higher purposes: to instil into them Christian and moral duties; to strive to teach them how best to fulfill the obligations of life. This is a mother's task—a child should never hear aught from its mother's lips but persuasive gentleness; and this is impossible, if she is very much with her children." (Lady Isabel silently assented. Mrs. Carlyle's views were correct.)

East Lynne is best known for its affirmation of maternal feeling for Isabel's longing for her children, and (in the theatrical versions) the
Fear of Falling deathbed melodrama of recognition. But what Isabel approves here is not nature, but rather a theatricality fully ingrained in ordinary life, and made possible by a distance between the mother's emotional and the governess's physical labor—motherhood in this account is the effect of an image making orchestrated by the mother herself. This explanation of the melodrama whereby middle-class domesticity produces itself as ideology—what John Kucich calls "professional motherhood," and what constitutes the underlying condition for Joseph Litvak's description of the home as a stage set (see below)—might, like the representational excesses of the passage discussed earlier, be said to underscore the novel's melodramatizations. Whether or not Wood herself agrees with Barbara's words, that is, Isabel herself unequivocally endorses a life defined as representation and a motherhood that consists of knowing how to play the part. 18 Indeed, in a formulation that resolves the confusing tension between what appears to be Wood's simultaneous approval and disapproval of Barbara's methods, Isabel may be said to assent not necessarily to Barbara's exact methods but rather to her demonstration of the role of representation to an ideal of ideological representation itself, as antitext or as genre, can only churlishly manage. In other words, the novel signals here a present admission for the emptiness of its domestic images, for the exposure of the bourgeois home as theater—and for the way in which, to a desiring if ambivalent spectator (and these images project no other kind) the scenes of Barbara's marriage celebrate the impossible cancellation of the distance between self and image so meticulously inscribed in Isabel's experience.

Litvak describes the representational excess of East Lynne's domesticity as the novel's transformation of domestic space into "one big stage set" (138). Of Wood's theatricalization of the home, he writes "If the narrative can reinforce 'home control' only by casting the home itself in an enthrallingly theatrical light, the opposite— that is, the collapse of the distance between self and image—may be compromising in more ways than one. To refuse the home as a desirable site, glittering with crystal and silk, is to make it all the more intelligible as a site of desire" (141). Wood's novel--which the Victorian home's own fall into representation--fall that renders, by virtue of the home's reaffirming, the

18 Kucich argues that Wood endorses neither version of motherhood on display here (Power of Lies, 193).
weakens the "control" imagined therein. Similarly, suggesting that the
correct practice of motherhood is indistinguishable from the mother's
private image, and reconfiguring that image in her own novel's specular
closure, Wood not just exposes spectacle's workings and exploits its power
as a mechanism for the transmission of bourgeois ideology.

And indeed, Isabel's spectacles give readers and audiences of East Lynne something to look through; they also give readers and audiences something to look at: seeing what Isabel sees, readers (and of course spectators) also find their attention relentlessly directed toward the figure cut by Isabel herself. On the one hand, East Lynne inscribes middle-class values on a body whose aristocratic complexion gives that inscription its ideological force; Isabel's assimilation to Barbara's idea of motherhood is mediated by the pain inflicted on her sensitive aristocratic body that on the other, her middle-class acci-
dents, like her clothing and herar with which she enhances her disguise, transform her body's class markers; Isabel's coming to bourgeois con-
sicuousness—more precisely, the violent infliction of middle-class con-
sciousness upon her—is signaled by a confusion of the signs of class iden-
tify, an exposure of that consciousness' s own vexed identifications.

The novel frequently points toward Isabel's essential self: without her
eyeglasses, we are told, she is dangerously identifiable (Madam e V in re-
sembles her, Miss Corny remarks at one point, "especially in the eye", [392]). Shielding her identity, the spectacles point toward its irreducibility.

But the gaps the glasses also demarcate—between Isabel and her sur-
roundings, between her vision before and after her fall, and between the
persona behind them and the picture she presents to those who view her—
focus attention on the reconstruction of her body and her experience.

Indeed, Isabel's disguise, like her native skill at manipulating her appear-
ance (for which her deformation serves as an appropriate punishment), high-
lights her identity as a creature of representations, and opens up the sueh
cultural space for identifying with representation that the novel itself does.
Capturing the tension between claims to nature, on the one hand, and the
construction of social identity, on the other, that characterized the
Victorian middle class, disguise in East Lynne registers the same tension as
disguise in Ruth; it points toward natural identity at the same time that it
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signifies a distance from it, a fall into a bourgeois world of representation.19 With her numerous and ambiguous class signifiers, and her allegiances to ostensibly natural feeling as well as to a world of artifice and disguise, Isabel embodies the contradictions of Victorian middle-class identity.

And she also illustrates, in exemplary fashion, the construction of the sympathetic object. For in taking on the governess’s disguise, Isabel willingly becomes a metaphor for a self seen primarily as spectacle (and the voluntary nature of her self-abnegation is important). Entering into her husband’s household service, she not only accepts but actively assumes in the construction of her own image as the dominant ideology would construct it. In doing so, she reveals the indistinguishability of the object of degradation from the object of sympathy. As Isabel reconstructs her body, enhancing the deformation wrought by her railway injury—and as she becomes the agent of her own suffering, willingly entering into service in the Carlyle household—she emerges as a paradigmatic sympathetic spectacle, not only accepting her actively enhancing the punishment for actions would suggest to her Victorian readers. And the overdetermined nature of her spectacularity renders her as an object of sympathy par excellence as well, since spectacle itself—in the context of Victorian sensation fiction and drama—is a signifier of degradation, enhancement of other “cheap” entertainments in which the visual predominates. Constructing herself as a middle-class fantasy of degradation and decline, Isabel is, again in exemplary manner, a figure about whom it feels good—indeed, virtuous—to feel bad. Readerly sympathy in East Lynne is thus inseparable from the taking of some pleasure in her punishment. Fashioning Isabel’s character as a series of images that foreground identity’s social and cultural configuration, the novel reveals the object of sympathy to be a projection of the dominant culture’s gaze, and sympathy for Isabel to be inseparable from sympathy against her.

By the end of the novel, outcast, wearing victim’s clothing, deprived of her children, and physically as well as emotionally scarred, Isabel in all her discomfort fits comfortably into the category of sympathetic object.

Isabel’s spectacles

...sympathetic because no one sees or recognizes her, she is so garishly appointed as victim—she is the acceptable object of everyone’s gaze. Classically, slipping her eyeglasses, a device that in its most banal form calls attention to the eyes it conceals, Isabel works at distorting the illusion of her false identity as unassumingly as any stage actress wishing to leave a distinct mark on the role. And the awkwardness—what might be called the stagecraft—of her disguise functions in the same way her spectacles do: pointing toward the “true” self, it simultaneously suggest the painful self-consciousness of a self-constructed identity. Underneath the disguise, say the glasses, lie true identity and true worth—not incidentally, in aristocratic form—if only someone will recognize them. Indeed Isabel’s painful self-consciousness exposes a yearning for recognition that (certainly according to Jane Eyre) underlies the governess’s stereotypically self-effacing facade. In its final, spectacular moment, East Lynne affirms a bourgeois publicization of supposedly private values, as if true feeling can only be true when ratified by the public gaze.

...est Lynne leads to, but also displaces, a class saga in which the aristocratic Isabel, confident in her ability to control the terms of her self-representation, is refashioned as Madame Vine, a figure self-alienated but somehow simultaneously at one with herself. The governess disguise thus effects a kind of solution to the claims made by East Lynne, and by Victorian middle-class culture, to both stable moral values and fluid identity boundaries: Isabel is both a victim of disguise (deformed by the accident) as well as the manipulator of her own image. Signifying the kind of fate that awaits those who violate bourgeois morality, the disguise marks her as having paid, and continuing to pay, for her behavior; if Isabel appears to become aware of her tragic mistake, simply by virtue of the power that thinking has over evil, she is also made to feel and to represent—in her bodily injuries, the loss of her child, and the parallel self-consciousness she experiences as governess—how inexorably she has left happiness behind. Indeed, with the accident (as with the hard labor to which the novel gleefully sentences Levison) Isabel is made to bear the burden of middle-class resentment; her aristocratic sensibility has bourgeois virtues violently impressed upon it. In Isabel, a figure of aristocratic ease experiences her class’s decline in physical and emotional terms as her own personal narrative.
But the novel's sacralization of Isabel as mother distracts from and ultimately overshadows the class drama her various identities enact, class confusion gives way to phantasmatic unanimity in the novel's insistent claims for maternal feeling. Emphasis on the priority and passion of that feeling conceals the more socially complex division of labor the novel also exposes: the way the role of mother is assuaged by two actors, one acknowledged and the other not. As Barbara's lesson in motherhood suggests, Madame Vine is the repressed "other" of this maternal scene—the figure who, desiring children (and readers') anger, makes ideals of the mother possible. The unrecognized mother, Wood's plot suggests, is not just Isabel Vine but rather the Victorian governess. But if for the Victorian middle classes motherhood required more than one player, sympathy with Isabel's maternal feeling swamps aside that class reality. Behind Isabel's disguise readers are meant to perceive true maternal feeling—feeling belonging to a mother significantly not allowed to live, as if the intensity of her feeling rendered her unsuited to the world of representations that, if she did live, she would have to inhabit. And the placement of Isabel's feeling—the novel's refusal to install the true mother in her true home—contributes to its peculiar power. For in the social context in which the novel was translated into theater, Isabel's homelessness corresponds to the displacement of the bourgeois home itself: the removal of domestic feeling to the public sphere.

Sympathy generally entails an attenuation of self in a spectator's disturbing identification with the marginal. In the shift from Vine to Vane, one marginal self becomes another in a transformation that, characteristically, claims the middle. Isabel Vane, the aristocrat is favored, elite, but in decline; Madame Vine, the governess would, in another novel and by other means, be the preferable result of that decline. Sympathy here envelops the creation of a self positioned on the margin, yet occupying a place at the center of the consciousness of the middle classes who, policing the borders of their cultural economy, find themselves preoccupied with—and imaging the spaces they construct invaded by—the very characters they would exclude. (Though Isabel wears her governess disguise on the outside, sympathy with her appeals to the governesses' wisdom.) Wood's break renders the ever present middle-class anxiety about degradation and decline. The novels I have discussed sometimes literalize the invasion: Isabel,
Isabel's Spectacles

like Ruth, penetrates the sanctified boundaries of the bourgeois home, while in Madame Vane the body of the middle class wishes to see as foreign to that home is rewritten as, thereby, a foreign body. And in a scenario that captures the way imaginative space legitimizes, and displaces, in increas-
ingly segregated physical space, theater audiences watching stage adapta-
tions of East Lynne during the latter decades of the nineteenth century—by feeling for a character previously excluded from middle-class sympathy—have expanded their emotional horizons as they occupied an increasingly exclusive space: one more and more hostile to any but the respectable middle classes.

East Lynne's home-as-stage-set sets the scene for the novel's actual transforma-
tion into a work of theater at the precise historical moment when the theater was being reconfigured in the image of the middle-class home. The novel's suitability for stage adaptation has already been noted: apart from scenes and dialogue modeled on stage melodrama, its voyeuristic structure duplicates the relation between theater audience and stage. And presenting home as image and Isabel as envious looker-on, the novel foregrounds the late-nineteenth-century theater's theories of exclusion ("East Lynne's central emotion," writes Sally Mitchell, "is the pain of ex-
clusion").

The period saw the transformation of the English theater's class associations: theaters were restructured to make both attendance and enjoyment more difficult for members of the lower working classes, and their surrounding areas were similarly (in Russell Jackson's term) "cleansed." By the 1880s, Jackson writes, theater "had established itself as a rational entertainment for the middle and upper classes." Thus the po-
terior expansion of audience sympathy signaled by a willingness (indeed an eagerness, suggestive of a cohesiveness founded as much on class re-
sentment as on sympathy) to sympathize with Isabel Vane was accompa-
nied by the increasing exclusiveness of the theater's attendees.
nied by a contraction of the place in which that sympathy was to be felt, as the newly认识和可流通的剧院增长到值得的家

16 East Lynne's important scene of sympathy, then, occurs not in the novel or on the stage but rather in readers and audiences, for whom Isabel serves less as an object than as an occasion for (to adapt Raymond Williams's phrase) a middle-class structuring of feeling.

Sally Shuttleworth argues that sympathy for Isabel undercuts East Lynne's ideological prescriptions: readerly sympathy for Isabel's passion, she

23 "Numerous individuals come literally, together—solidary—in the space the theater furnishes in order to confront one and the same representation. It is as if the lines of sight that connect them to a common object also unite them in a common identification." David Lloyd and Paul Thomas, *Culture and the State* (London: Routledge, 1998), 56. Jackson points out that working-class audiences were more likely than others to insist on the strict observance of conventional morality and decorous behavior in plays (*Victorian Theatre*, 13). I cannot say here—if it is possible to say at all—to what extent this insistence derives from the influence of middle-class ideology and to what extent it belongs to working-class culture, if indeed cultures are so easily distinguishable from one another.

claims, subverts the novel’s moral condemnation. But the injured, disfigured Isabel is an image of the body Victorian sympathy produced for its own consumption. Sympathy for Isabel requires the monstrosity and deformity it seems to lament, rather than subverting the novel’s condemnation of Isabel, sympathy is consensual with it. The narrative of Isabel’s punishment and decline constitutes the cultural narrative of sympathy for her: it is the narrative that invites readers to imagine themselves in her place. In a manner that recalls René Girard’s account of sacrifice, Isabel seems to fall victim to her own sensibility and susceptibility, the violence inflicted upon her, ostensibly caused by no one but herself, purges her from the community which then enables its innocence by producing around her death a spectacle of communal unanimity and class cohesion (a performance of cohesion brought to life, I have suggested, by the novel’s translation into theater), sympathy constructs an imagined class solidarity in which a phantasmatic bourgeois interior makes a home for an equally phantasmatic bourgeois interiority. “The leisure activities of the culture-consuming public,” writes Habermas, “determine the place within a social climate, and they do not require any further discussion.”

Assenting to her appropriate role and its generic consequences within the drama of bourgeois representation, Isabel does not die so much as fade; in keeping with the novel’s photographicism of vision and value, she dissolves in color and strength as a direct result of the “incessant irritation on the mind” (472) to which she has subjected herself, literalizing in her body the distance from value that becomes the defining feature of her experience. While Barbara, after her initial outburst of affection for Mr. Carlyle, learned to keep her feelings to herself, Isabel chafes against that restriction; as her response to Barbara’s narrative shows, she is always on the verge of giving herself away. And her “rebellion” against her situation, in the novel’s economic terms, “costs her her life.” (In fact, the entire second half of the novel is described as a kind of death: the effect of the accident


26 Habermas, “Structural Transformations,” 19.
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is "little less than death itself" [48]; her experience since her return to East Lynne is "as one long scene of mortal agony." As in "A Christmas Carol," where the idea of Scrooge's death threatens him with irremediable absence from the scenes of culturally sanctioned delight he witnesses, Isabel's death is identified with a spectatorial position that marks her as hopelessly identified with, yet forever excluded from, the scenes. Wood identifies not just with health but with life.