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Gendered Suffering: Mrs Henry Wood's *East Lynne* as a Melodrama of the Nineteenth Century

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Abstract:

Following the spectacular success of the famous sensation novel, *East Lynne* (1861) written by Mrs Henry Wood, there have been numerous adaptations to the stage to attract a vast number of spectators to theatres. Through the adjustment of the story to drama performance, the play, *East Lynne* embodies the characteristics of melodrama and specifically, domestic melodrama, both of which expose the tragedies embedded within everyday life with the latter focusing on the domestic matters and women's condition in troublesome incidents. Significantly, the play reflects the woman problem of the time quite influentially through the depiction of Lady Isabel Vane's helplessness and suffering. As a married woman leaving her husband, Archibald and two children behind and running away with another man due to a tragic misunderstanding, she is stigmatised by the patriarchal values of the Victorian society. In this respect, the suffering in the play is gendered for it is only Isabel, who dies in pain, shame and remorse after her faulty actions as a fallen woman whereas the men around her move on with their lives. In the same way, her husband's second wife, Barbara suffers in silence due to Archibald's strict rules while Archibald's sister, Cornelia forces Isabel and Barbara to conform to the ideal woman image in terms of patriarchal values. Herewith, this study aims to discuss the gender bias and women's suffering in the play, *East Lynne*, as aptly depicted through the qualities of melodrama and domestic melodrama.

Keywords: Victorian melodrama, domestic melodrama, Mrs Henry Wood, gendered suffering.

The focus of this study is to demonstrate mid-Victorian gender issues as demonstrated by Mrs Henry (Ellen) Wood in *East Lynne*, the play. Recounting Isabel Vane's tragic story, her suffering, perseverance and eventual death, the play points out the gendered quality of suffering in Victorian society. Through the characters of Isabel and Barbara, one from the aristocracy, the other from the middle class, who suffer in the patriarchal system all the same,

the play is highly realistic. Presenting a tangible panorama of the Victorian society through women characters ranging from aristocracy to the working class, the play, as an adaptation of the novel, appeals well to the taste of the middle-class audience who yearn for real stories and characters (Mangione 77). Isabel's tragedy unfolds when she elopes with Captain Francis Levison, her aristocratic suitor, trusting in his promises to protect her honour and to cherish her. After her sister-in-law misleads her, Cornelia that her husband, Archibald Carlyle is cheating on her with Barbara, his acquaintance, Levison is the only person, whom she believes, can take care of her. However, she is let down by Levison to her fate with a son out of wedlock. Following the death of her son and Levison's horrible arrogance towards her, she decides to reunite with her children. Nevertheless, on the way back home, she has a tragic train accident which leaves her profoundly disfigured. Thus, she assumes the role of a governess, Madame Vine to get into East Lynne in her new physical condition since nobody can recognise her. All the same, her suffering persists as she sees her husband and children with Barbara, the new wife and mother figure. In the end, she dies in pain having lost his elder son. She has never been a true mother to any of her children or thoroughly carried out her wifely duties because of the unfortunate circumstances that seemed to cross in her path incessantly.

Mrs Henry Wood was a best-selling woman writer in the second half of the nineteenth century with her famous three-volume sensation novel, *East Lynne* (1861), which took the interest of the Victorian audience with an exposé of the freedom of divorce, extramarital affairs and female sexuality as a work of "maternal drama" (Radford 114) along with similar novels "such as *Mrs Halliburton's Troubles* (1862), *St. Martin's Eve* (1866), and *A Life's Secret* (1867)" (Lampens 6). Although Wood was criticised for defective plots, she managed to preserve her texts from more severe criticism due to her conservative personality and upright posture as a married woman. After her husband died in 1866, she bought "the Argosy magazine and became its celebrity author-editor, regularly contributing up to half of its contents," with which she took a big step into her literary career (Holland 5). In the beginning, Wood established connections with other significant figures in the industry like successful history writer William Harrison Ainsworth, who got her *East Lynne* published in one of his journals, *The New Monthly Magazine* in the form of series (Lampens 5). She later emerged as a hobbyist and presented herself to the public as an ideal wife and mother, and got her works published under the name, Mrs Henry Wood, even after she lost her husband. Even though she emphasised her feminine qualities and continuously reminded her contemporaries of her

inexperience in the field, she had already begun working up her professional identity “behind the scenes” by winning a novel contest in 1860 (Phegley 181). She had a new stance among other woman writers of the time for she had a respectable reputation as “Mrs Henry Wood”, the widowed writer, displaying her writing activities as a hobby. In contrast, she brought in controversial issues such as gender inequality in her works “by consistently treating authorship as a ‘performative activity’ and forging her literary reputation and identities” that consequently forged her way as a popular writer of the nineteenth century (Holland 10).

As result of adapting a highly popular sensation novel which was a part of Mudie’s circulating library, the play, *East Lynne* was introduced to the stage with New York audience in 1862, and it turned out to be one of the most popular melodramatic plays of the nineteenth century in the United States and Britain, and it has been performed several times up to the twentieth century (Bolton 395). It started to be staged for theatre audience in England especially after its first London presentation “at the Effingham Saloon, Whitechapel in 1864 under the title of *The Marriage Bells; or The Cottage on the Cliff*” (Maunder 176; qtd. in Kaplan 94). The stage adaptations fuelled the success of one another in an ever-continuing interaction. Initially, Wood realised that stage adaptations increased the sales of her novel so much so that the total sales of the book was about “five hundred thousand by 1900” (Maunder 174). However, the inadequacy of the contemporary Copyright Laws put Wood in a problematic situation in which she neither succeeded to stop the theatrical versions nor got the royalty for the plays. In 1866, four years after the American performance and five years after the publication of Wood’s best-seller novel narrating the story of the adulterous wife, the play was also produced at New Surrey Theatre in London. Later, it was staged East End, which “introduced Wood to a new audience”, and also in West End the following year, and then it reached to Australia (Maunder 173-174). The play grew to be so popular with each production in these countries that eventually the phrase “Next week—East Lynne!” became a cliché of the theatres promising their audience a good play (Steere 56). A most recent version of *East Lynne* was in 1987, the centenary of Wood's death. It was presented in “seven hour-long episodes broadcast on BBC Radio 4” and reflected a most successful adaptation that was “ever made of one of Wood's novels” (“Dramatisations” par. 4). Hence, the stage version of *East Lynne* proved to be accomplished just like the sensation novel itself and acquainted Ellen Wood with the theatre audience.

As a sensation novel which was later turned into a melodramatic work, *East Lynne* “was sprinkled with murder, bigamy, adultery [...] endless complications, and painful predicaments” (Garrison 86). With this in mind, it is no wonder that the drama version similarly displays tragic incidents leading to the female protagonist's suffering and death, all appealing to the sentiments of the audience. The play is endowed with the characteristics of melodrama and domestic melodrama representing the gendered suffering of women in the nineteenth century. Melodrama, in general, focuses on “the discovery of lost domestic bonds, [and] the reunification of families” (Cox 593). Likewise, in *East Lynne*, Isabel, disguised as Madame Vine, tries to get close with her long-lost husband and children. At the end of the play, there is the display of a partial family reunion upon the death of William, Isabel's son, after telling the boy that she is his mother. Cornelia recognises Isabel as she lays in her deathbed and calls Archibald to see her before she dies. Archibald holds her “in his arms” when Isabel passes away (V. ii. 52).

One function of melodrama is to restore the moral order impacted gender inequality in social life, along with politics. To put in another way, “[...] melodrama aims at redistributing the visibility of suffering in a community; however, to achieve this end, melodrama displays suffering as an effect of moral and social ideas” (Zarzosa 2). Displaying the patriarchal system and inequality between men and women especially in the Victorian society through the tragic story and fall of the female protagonist, Isabel, the play, as a work of melodrama effectively restores the order through her suffering in exile and eventual death. Isabel transgresses the gender boundaries of her time by running away with another man leaving her husband as well as two children behind. On the other hand, her husband Archibald remarries and preserves his respectable social status after the unfortunate incident with his first wife.

Besides, through the use of intense emotions which purify concerns of ethics, the play as melodrama succeeds in receiving the spectators' sympathy in specific ways. Thus, “[s]chematic morality and emotional intensity are the two defining, interrelated characteristics of Peter Brooks's melodrama”ⁱ (Rosenman 22). In the play, Archibald, Levison and Lord Mount Severn are the male representatives of the patriarch with their political stance and economic power. They display the power oppression on women, both on Isabel and later on Barbara along with other female characters who are comparably weaker and socially as well as economically dependent on men to survive in the Victorian society. They seem to be highly judgmental and critical on women's behaviours. For instance, after Isabel elopes with

Levison, her father, Lord Mount Severn calls her to reason and tries to help her economically. Nevertheless, he judges her for her wrongdoings and having a child out of wedlock (which differs from the original novel in which Lord Mount Severn is dead and Isabel is only pregnant) (II. ii. 36).

Likewise, character development is explained as irrelevant to melodrama, and the real focus and expectation of the audience are directed upon plot and action. In a melodrama play, the male or female protagonist “confronts a variety of evil forces threatening to destroy the family” (Vicinus 134-135). Furthermore, the villain is almost always the central character and crime is a favoured theme which complicates the matters in the play. In the same way, *East Lynne* conveys the feelings through the plot and the mishap the female protagonist, Isabel experiences. In contrast, Levison is the villainous character who persuades and seduces Isabel to elope with him and to fall into a tragic position in her society. Nevertheless, not complying to the characteristics of melodrama, there is character development observed in Isabel, who realises that she loves her husband and children a lot after she lives with Levison for a while, which explains her return home in disguise. She feels remorse for acting on the impulse to elope with Levison and not talking to her husband, Archibald about the situation on the first opportunity.

Finally, a significant quality of melodrama is the depiction of suffering and intense, excessive emotions. However, melodramatic suffering can likewise reflect the agency of characters, which is mostly identified with women. In the melodramatic stories, “pain is gendered,” and it reflects the general ideology concerning men and women (Rosenman 22). In Isabel’s case as an outcast and the fallen woman in her society, she is also left alone by her lover, villainous Levison, who seduced her in the first place. She loses her two sons, one from Levison, the other from Archibald. Unable to continue her life as a grieving mother and to witness her husband’s happiness with his second wife Barbara, Isabel dies as a lonely person at the end of the play. Nevertheless, the reader feels for Isabel as she suffers although she has made an enormous mistake by eloping with Francis Levison. In the same manner, melodrama focuses on the powerless and the weak ones in the family, which is entirely parallel to women and the working class, who are the “two groups facing great dangers without economic power or social recognition” in nineteenth-century England (Vicinus 131). This situation, in Erdem Ayyıldız’s words, urged women to “act out their domestic roles in the society by keeping them away from the public sphere” (58). It can be observed in Isabel’s situation when she marries Archibald. She is devoid of any economic or political power after her father’s economic failure. She is

obliged to accept Archibald's marriage proposal to live in the same standards that she has been accustomed to. Moreover, as Lady Cornelia incessantly ridicules the representatives of the working class, the servants in *East Lynne*, Joyce and Wilson, Archibald's sister. Then again, the constant clash of good and evil in melodrama is a means "for exploring social and political issues in personal terms" (Vicinus 128). This said the concerns about class and gender provide melodrama with emotions picturing the political matters reflected upon the personal sphere.

As for domestic melodrama qualities that *East Lynne* displays, the tensions and tragedies in the Victorian middle-class households, rather than the conflicts between working-class servants and aristocratic women are more underscored. In this respect, domestic melodrama can be explained as follows:

[i]n the 1860s--a time of gender stress marked by controversies over divorce, female redundancy, and prostitution--these novels provided settings in which conflicting possibilities could be released and explored, though not necessarily resolved in any definitive or satisfying way. (Rosenman 23)

With this perspective, in *East Lynne*, Isabel Vane is a stigmatised woman of the Victorian society who becomes Levison's mistress and the divorced wife of Archibald. So, domestic melodrama is about the efforts and troubles of women who suffer in the domestic sphere. The fears and concerns women endure in their everyday life originating from the patriarchal domination in their society form the basis of this subgenre. Likewise, home is not a source of happiness and peace but it turns into a setting for powerful emotions, suffering, sympathy, passion and remorse (Vicinus 128-129). This is reflected in the dominant setting of the play, *East Lynne* in rural England, where Isabel doubts about her husband's loyalty and decides to leave him behind. It is again this household that she searches for redemption after the train accident that scars her face and makes her unrecognisable. As for the London setting, it is like an interruption to the primary setting as Isabel lives there after she elopes with Levison. Yet, it is also a site of suffering and remorse for Isabel for she realises the truth about Levison's character once she gets to live there. Lastly, in domestic melodrama, an innocent and smart child figure becomes the key to the protagonist's redemption and the child is more influential if sacrificed in the plot. In parallel with this statement, William, Isabel's son is the medium for her eventual deliverance through his death (IV. iii. 46), reunion with her family and the end of her punishment, death (Cross 91).

A well-known fact about Victorian England is that gender boundary is strictly enforced in the social rules. Accordingly, when a woman departs from the ideal image or type, she is marginalised and stigmatised both by men and ideal women. They are labelled as immoral, fallen and a menace for the virtuous and angelic women of the time. As a natural outcome of the conditions of the time, once women are segregated for their transgressive actions, they lose the right to their already weakened rights in the social, economic and political spheres of life. At this point, in Judith Butler's words, "[...] it becomes impossible to separate "gender" from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained" (6). In other words, through gendered politics, patriarchal rules pervade in all fields of life and push women into periphery and passivity. Nonetheless, the fallen and dissenter women held the interest and fascination of the Victorian people for embodying the mysterious and morally-defying qualities that many women abstain from (Barnhill 2). In the same line, Wood's *East Lynne* reveals a marginal woman, wife and mother, the character of Isabel in the play, who is prompted by her sister in law, Lady Cornelia, an ideal woman of Victorian England. When they first meet after Isabel marries to Archibald Carlyle, Isabel puts forth her interesting ideas and baffles Cornelia with her improper behaviours:

ISABEL.[...] and I shall try to be a good wife to him, and render him as happy as possible; and so, you know, I've been thinking how I can be of service to him, and I mean to try and persuade him to let me ride to town with him every morning, and assist him in his business affairs, and be his confidential clerk. Don't you think he will let me?

MISS C. He'd be a fool if he would.

ISABEL. And then we'd be so happy together; and you'll let me love you too—won't you, Miss Corney? Oh! do let me love you a little! (Goes up and put her arm around CORNELIA and kisses her.)

MISS C. (Pushes her off.) She's really a most ordinary girl. (I. i. 7)

Thus, Cornelia criticises Isabel from the first moment on even though Isabel strives to be a good wife for Archibald and a good sister-in-law for Cornelia. In that respect, the polemical dramatic text of *East Lynne* sides with women who give utmost importance to "their duties as mothers of the race" by aligning the others "who criticise matrimonial responsibilities with the fallen Isabel" (Maunder 184).

Furthermore, the suffering rests on Lady Isabel's shoulders as the faulty woman not only by male characters but also by the female characters like Cornelia and Barbara decriing her for being an adulterous wife without ever questioning the cause behind her elopement with Levison. They are typical middle-class women condemning aristocratic Isabel, who fails with her wifely and motherly duties. Lady Isabel is unable to conform to the wide-spread gender norms in which it "is a psychological concept which refers to *culturally* acquired sexual identity, and [...] the culturally learned 'female' characteristics (like passivity) as 'natural'" (Selden et al. 123). Women like Cornelia and Barbara Hare perpetuate these attitudes and act out in their gender roles whereas Isabel bends the norms of oppression and subordination with her unexpected behaviours upon Archibald Carlyle's strange convergence with Barbara. However, another female character, Isabel's maid, Joyce, who is faithful to Isabel, boldly accuses Cornelia of Isabel's elopement with Levison when "she's been crossed and put upon" by Cornelia (II. ii. 29). She always takes Isabel's side and she is the one who first recognises her after she returns home disguised as Madame Vine.

Similarly, Lady Isabel is victimised through several characters in the play: Lord Mount Severn, Miss Cornelia Carlyle, Archibald Carlyle and Francis Levison. At the beginning of the play, her father, Lord Mount Severn, leaves her in a weak and dependent economic situation. He somehow forces her to marry Archibald even though she does not love him at the time (I. iii. 12). On the other hand, Cornelia does not appreciate Isabel's efforts as she tries to learn more about her domestic responsibilities: "ISABEL. [...] I don't think I know much about housekeeping. / MISS C. I don't think you do. Poor Archibald! So much for marrying against my will" (I. iii. 12). Moreover, Cornelia places the doubts about Archibald's loyalty into Isabel's head as she talks about his past relationship with Barbara to discard the lady that her brother married without her consent from this marriage. After Isabel overhears that Wilson gives Joyce, Isabel's maid the latest gossips about the nature of Archibald and Barbara Hare's relationship telling how she saw Carlyle steal a kiss from Barbara once, Cornelia furthermore comments on the truthfulness of the couple's relationship. Therefore, Isabel gets terrified of the thought of her husband loving another woman, Barbara Hare and elopes with Levison (II. i. 20). Then again, Archibald Carlyle adds to the tragedy of Isabel as he first buys their house from his father, leaves Isabel no other choice but to marry him and places her into powerlessness and passivity in their marriage. He subjects her to Cornelia's cynical and bad-intentioned attitude (Barnhill 25-6). Then, he keeps his business matters discreet and pushes Isabel into doubt and uncertainty about his connection to Barbara. He treats her like the typical

‘angel in the house’ and pays no heed to her fears and concerns about Barbara. Lastly, Levison as a villain, takes advantage of Isabel’s sad situation to seduce her and proves her Archibald’s unfaithfulness:

LEVISON. That’s right; be avenged on the false bound. He was never worthy of your love. Leave your home of misery, and come to one of happiness. Come, let me prove this perfidy to you.

ISABEL. Only prove this and I will quit this house forever.

LEVISON. With me, Isabel?

ISABEL. Aye, with you. I care not who shall be the instrument of my vengeance. (II. i. 25-26)

Once consenting to his offer, Isabel lives with Levison as his mistress and loses her family, honour and virtue with her hasty decision. She has a baby son out of wedlock as Levison has not married her despite his initial promise about it. Comprehending her grave mistake, Isabel is extremely rueful at that point: “[...] Oh! I have sacrificed husband, home, children, friends, and all that make the life of value to woman—and for what? To be forever an outcast from society, to never know again a moment’s peace. Oh! that I could die and end my suffering and my misery” (III. ii. 33).

Another major point is the punishment of transgressive women in Victorian fiction and drama through death as a result of their mistake, also as a demonstration of “the ritualistic construction of honour” (Barnhill 30). However, the audience feels pity for Isabel towards the end of the play for her pain and loss when her son, William, dies in her arms just after she tells him that she is his mother. He calls her, “Mother” faintly and fades away after which Isabel cries: “O William! Wake and call me mother once again! My child is dead!—my child is dead” (IV. iii. 46). Hence, the undefinable suffering she endures calls the sympathy of the spectators (Vicinus 141). Likewise, the closure of the play provides not only Isabel but also Barbara with a release from their previous mistakes and final relief. Isabel is now free from her disguised identity whereas Barbara Hare is released from Archibald’s oppression (Gruner 316-317). Barbara, who takes over Isabel’s place quickly after she leaves Archibald gets entangled with Isabel’s tragedy when her brother, Richard is accused of murder due to his relationship to a woman, Afy. Likewise, Afy simultaneously has an affair with Thorn; in other words, Levison (II. ii. 27). Thus, Barbara, though not as intensely as in Isabel’s case, suffers from Archibald’s tyranny for helping out Richard and she is in danger of losing her honour in the Victorian society until the real murderer, Levison, is seized by the

authorities. From then on, to an extent, Barbara is free from her set responsibility of acting like a passive and fully obedient wife and a lovely stepmother.

Likewise, Lady Isabel Vane acquires more freedom than she had as a wife and mother after she is disguised as a governess. She looks quite ill after the train accident, and nobody recognises her at East Lynne. In this respect, the train accident “allows the hero[ine] - previously unjustly accused- to prove his[her] true nature by displaying his[her] noble-hearted and unselfish courage. Likewise, a mechanical catastrophe may lead to the moral recognition of the protagonist” (Saggini 391). Thus, she has a second chance to prove her inner goodness and get intimate with her family. She can act more freely and fulfil her domestic roles more willingly as Madame Vine. She becomes a better wife for Carlyle and a more compassionate mother for her children after the accident (Steere 53-54). She returns home as a servant where she was once an aristocratic lady. However, she has more intense feelings for her husband as she observes his relationship with Barbara from proximity. With her return in disguise, she tries to compensate for her previously lacking “model for middle-class motherhood” (Rosenman 29).

In short, the dramatised version of Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* pictures the ideal type of woman and heeds warning about what not to do at the time through the wrong example and misdeeds of Lady Isabel Vane. It also discreetly recounts the suffering of women, primarily through Isabel, as a result of gender bias in the Victorian society that forces women into either submission or marginalisation. As seen in the play, the burden of the family and domestic affairs are mostly placed on women for they are the ones who try to sort out their problems either actively or passively. As a work of melodrama in the nineteenth century, the play draws the sympathy and pathos of the audience for the suffering of Isabel. It enacts her final redemption and reunion with her family in the face of rigid Victorian values.

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NOTES

¹Peter Brooks is an American writer, critic and professor emeritus from Yale University Comparative Literature Department famous for his theories and works on melodrama (see Zarzosa 1-3).