

Chapter I:

Investigating Representations of
Women in Women's Novels

. . . it is most certain, that in these days, where society is becoming every day more artificial and more complex, and marriage, as the gentlemen assure us, more and more expensive, hazardous, and inexpedient, women must find means to fill up the void in existence. Men, our natural protectors, our law-givers, our masters, throw us upon our own resources: the qualities which they pretend to admire in us—the overflowing, the clinging affections of a warm heart,—the household devotion,—the submissive wish to please, that feels ‘every vanity in fondness lost,’—the tender, shrinking sensitiveness which Adam . . . thought so charming in his Eve,—to cultivate these, to make them, by artificial means, the staple of the womanly character, is it not to cultivate a taste for sunshine and roses, in those we send to pass their lives in the arctic zone? (Margaret Mylne, “Woman, and Her Social Position” 19)

In a private note written in 1851, Florence Nightingale articulated her own personal anguish concerning her function within mid-Victorian society:

The thoughts & feelings that I have now I can remember since I was 6 years old. It was not I that made them. Oh God, how did they come?
A profession, a trade, a necessary occupation, something to fill & employ all my faculties, I have always felt essential to me, I have always longed for, consciously or not. . . . Why, oh my God, cannot I be satisfied with the life which satisfies so many people? (Selected Letters 47)

In her 1852 essay “Cassandra,” often cited as a feminist challenge to idle domesticity, Nightingale argues for more opportunities for women to serve. She challenges the cultural notion that women are naturally passionless, that they lack the intelligence or the mental capacity to learn traditionally masculine subjects such as math, science or law. She goes so far as to suggest that “the next Christ will perhaps be a female Christ” (53). Yet despite the challenges she makes to the domestic angel ideal, Elizabeth Langland and Anne Summers argue that Nightingale represents the ultimate fulfillment of the angel role.¹

According to Langland, Nightingale’s accomplishments in sanitary reform and nursing advanced the womanly paradigm of household management and the model of the domestic angel. Langland contends that Nightingale “had a viable managerial model to import to nursing: the bourgeois homemaker” (49). Mary Poovey, on the other hand, argues that though Nightingale seems to conform to the domestic angel ideal by repudiating the feminist movement of her day, in reality Nightingale’s writings “capitalized on the contradiction inherent in the domestic ideal in order to make even more radical claims for women than contemporary feminists did” (166).² Elaine Showalter also classes Nightingale among those women who broke “new ground and creat[ed] new possibilities” for Victorian women (Literature 19).

In fact, Florence Nightingale embodies the snarled difficulty in understanding how women functioned in Victorian society. She represents both the feminine ideal of the nurturing angel and the strong, independent woman who transgresses boundaries and undermines the governing hegemonic structure. In both capacities she serves as a signifier of empire and as an imperial agent. As such, she is an authorized representative

of the hegemonic structure, and is thus required to conform to her prescribed role. Like any other authorized representative of a governing social structure, she must “conduct [herself] in accordance with the social essence which is thereby assigned to [her]” in order to retain her position within the power structure (Bourdieu 106). She is inscribed by an imbricated collection of often contradictory ideals which culminate in the Victorian period in a single image of the Angel in the House. This image positions women as the bedrock of the nation by “legitimize[ing] both England’s sense of moral superiority and the imperial ambitions this superiority underwrote” (Poovey 9). Thus the Victorian woman as signifier of empire is implicated and promoted in the angelic ideal.

The Victorian woman is both Angel and Monster, Madonna and Eve, capable house manager and delicate child. Thus what might be characterized as subversive could also be commandeered for the purposes of patriarchy and for hegemonic objectives; what seems to be an advocacy of the domestic ideal could be turned to the feminist goals of transgression and subversion.

Langland’s study of the role of the domestic angel in Victorian Britain explores the function of women in the rise of the middle-class. She examines the way in which middle-class women, as domestic angels, solidified class barriers and imposed upon their culture middle-class values. According to Langland, during the mid-Victorian period there is a shift “from class defined in economic terms to class defined through cultural representations” where “women controlled representations of the middle class” (6). She posits that women, though subject to individual discourses and ideologies, held substantial power through their abilities to patrol and enforce discursive borders, giving them an “institutional” level of power (7).

Though Langland makes important and astute arguments, she fails to account for the imperial nature of the Victorian hegemony. She perceives the domestic angel as a product of the middle-class alone, rather than as, I will argue, a product of a variety of discourses. By the Victorian period, the angel ideal becomes essential to the British concept of themselves as a nation and as an empire. The proper woman becomes an authorized representative of the controlling hegemony, which I will argue is fundamentally imperialist and patriarchal in nature. As an authorized representative, she has been delegated power. So long as she performs her allotted duties, she will retain that power, perhaps climbing higher in the sovereign power pyramid. A failure would result in a slide down the pyramid and a loss of prestige, authority, and status; consequently her ability to maintain herself would diminish. This power structure coincides with the imperial power pyramid which Albert Memmi argues is “the basis of all colonial societies” (xiv) and the structure that I would argue dominated British culture during the mid-Victorian period.

The purpose of this study then, is to examine representations of women within five women’s novels. My focus shall be on women’s novels, not only because novels were perceived as a woman’s genre and forum, but because they were also perceived as having a dangerously potent influence on female minds and imaginations—an influence most often believed to be inevitably adverse. Through novels, women writers could challenge or reinforce ideological norms and thus undermine or affirm the cultural hegemony and the position of women within that hegemony. I wish to map the way in which these novels encouraged hegemonically complicit behavior through imperialistically coded language and motifs; how women participated in community

surveillance, the patrolling and maintenance of borders, and the suppression of turbulence; and I will finally seek to locate those places where ideological contradictions and discursive collisions created rupture and therefore opportunities to create change.

Imperial Hegemony

A discourse is an organized set of governing rules and strategies structuring signifying practices within any given community. Articulated through institutional formations such as law or education, accredited disciplines of knowledge such as history or medicine, and accepted social norms of behavior, the discourse regulates who can speak or act, and what it is that can be said or done. Through the manufacture and dispersion of authorized epistemological structures throughout its various levels, the discourse defines what is knowledge and how it can be constituted and classified. Through reinforcing ideologies which define truth as such, and which code discursive practices with the normalizing patina of 'natural' or 'common sensical' discourse justifies itself as intrinsic to "the established order of things" (Foucault, *Archaeology* 216). The Victorians might have said "God-given." Thus discourse is necessary to life, and therefore it is indisputable. A discourse then, is a regulatory system which preempts challenges and contradictions by establishing itself as an inherent and elemental production of the natural world.

Every culture is comprised of multiple discourses, each of which is ruled by its own set of ideologies. Some discourses are nested within one another, sharing compatible ideologies; others merely overlap, their ideologies colliding and exposing contradictions. Those places of contradiction constitute ruptures or gaps where there is

room for modification and transformation, and where discursive suppression and containment of turbulence becomes necessary if the discourse cell is to protect itself from disintegration.

The multiple discourses which comprised Victorian Britain gave rise to an ideological superstructure—a hegemony. Antonio Gramsci argues that hegemony materializes spontaneously, arising out of the needs and desires of the “dominant fundamental group” (12). Furthermore, “the great masses of the population” consent to its rule because of “the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production” (12). Hegemony functions to bind multiple discourse cells together, promoting the dominant ideologies which are generated through trans-discursive coalition, and suppressing or defusing the natural frictions which arise when the competing ideologies of the individual discursive structures collide. Thus the larger discourse cells of Britain, through shared ideologies, needs and goals—which I discuss in more detail below—generated Victorian hegemony.³

In the case of Victorian Britain, hegemony coalesced beneath a single ascendant ideology of nationhood, one that centered on a sense of moral and cultural superiority and a consequent obligation to form a dominion under which to guide and protect the lesser peoples of the world. According to Maurice Quinlan, Victorian British “nationalism [was] based upon a belief in the moral superiority of the English over the lesser breed of men The conviction that the English were a chosen people, elected to enjoy the fruits of virtue at home and to rule over palm and pine abroad, was peculiar to the Victorians” (253). The successful building of empire confirmed this conception of a paternalistic and privileged nationhood. For instance, Shamsul Islam uses the Sepoy

Mutiny (1857) as an example of Britain's self-justification as an imperial power, saying "the suppression of the Mutiny had proved the triumph of the Christian God against the evil pagan deities; of Western culture over the Indian" (3).⁴ The Mutiny itself corroborated the English perception of Indians as barbaric. The subsequent defeat of the Sepoys reinforced British cultural superiority.⁵ Seamus Deane argues that a nationalist conception of England arose as a result of its imperial advancement. Deane writes that any given imperial nation "imagines itself to be the ideal model to which all others should conform They universalize themselves . . . regard[ing] any insurgency against them as necessarily provincial" (8-9). Indeed the British conceived themselves as the model and shepherd of global civilization, superior to not only their colonial subjects, but also their European competitors. Edward Said contends that the British commitment to imperialism took on an "almost metaphysical obligation" which resulted in "very little domestic resistance to these empires, although they were frequently established and maintained under adverse and even disadvantageous conditions" (10). Such scanty resistance indicates the influence of Britain's imperial hegemony. So deeply internalized was this national identity which believed itself to be divinely obligated to succor and govern other inferior peoples of the world, that the British people consented to support the process of empire in spite of domestic hardships.

This sense of national spirit was deployed through systems of "economics, religion, politics, biology, and literature, [all of which] served to spread the imperial gospel" (Shamshul 3). In her study of the British Empire and its systems of deployment, Anne McClintock says that "as domestic commodities were mass marketed through their appeal to imperial jingoism, commodity jingoism itself helped reinvent and maintain

British national unity,” portraying Britain as a humanizing force with moral obligations to bring civilization to its colonies (209). Each of the categories which Shamsul points to, as well as the popular culture advertising which McClintock explores, was domestically focused and essential to the production of an imperial-based national spirit within the domestic borders of Britain.

It is my contention that Victorian hegemony was fundamentally imperialist in nature, modeling the pyramid structure of colonization and utilizing the same discursive strategies which Britain implemented in the second stage of its empire, when it shifted from the violence of colonial rape, to the less overt violence of imperial indoctrination. Though as Patrick Brantlinger points out in his Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914, some critics argue that “early and mid-Victorians were perhaps . . . oblivious to India and [Britain’s imperial holdings],” it is more accurate to say that “colonial politics influenced all domestic issues and reform movements throughout the century” (4). Brantlinger goes on to say that “for the white imperialists from the [British] metropolis . . . that phase [Victorian empire building] was the chief glory and merit of modern history, the ever rising pinnacle of progress and civilization” (16). British national identity coalesced around a sense of superiority and the moral obligation of what Kipling infamously termed “the white man’s burden” in his poem of the same title. This self-concept deeply influenced the needs, desires and goals which gave rise to imperial hegemony in Victorian Britain. As Paul Knaplund explains in his history of the British empire, “the British empire came to represent not so much a political system as a way of life” or a hegemony (xvii).

I will also argue that the feminine ideal of the angel in the house came to serve as the signifier for England and her moral superiority, her sphere of influence as a caretaker and keeper of peace and harmony, and as a mother figure to her colonies. Evangelical morality had elevated women to the position of the domestic preserver of morality, but that subject role shifted so as to function as a foundation for nationhood and empire. Women as domestic angels became fundamental to the continuance and success of the imperial project through their influence on morality, male relatives, and domestic service. Novels became important to the construction and maintenance of hegemonic codes of femininity, and at the same time provided a means of protest and limited resistance.

The Power of the Novel

It is important to note here that hegemonic transformation or modification becomes possible when there are power shifts between or within discourse cells, when ideologies are revised, or when the needs and goals of the discourse communities are altered. Thus hegemony suppresses and diffuses turbulence from above, but is subject to alteration from below. This distinction becomes important when evaluating the impact of novels within the culture.

Throughout the early and mid-nineteenth century in Britain, most of the readership of novels came from the dominant majority—since only they could afford to purchase novels or memberships in circulating libraries. Novels consequently crossed the boundaries of the dominant discourse cells. In doing so, they were perceived as potentially subversive because they could not promote all the ideologies and codes of every discourse they transversed. Thus they exposed their readers to a range of

ideological possibilities. Even in Hannah More's intensely didactic novel Coelubs in Search of a Wife (1808), she acknowledges in her preface that "the religious [reader] may throw it aside as frivolous" (viii). In writing the novel, she intended to promote Evangelical morality, and "to show how religion may be brought to mix with the concerns of ordinary life" (x). However, she recognizes that she cannot please everyone, that in appealing to a wide audience, she must in the end challenge some competing discursive codes:

I must be content with the humble hope that no part of these volumes will be found injurious to the important interests which it was rather in my wish than in my ability to advance; that where I failed in effecting good, little evil has been done; that if my book has answered no valuable purpose, it has, at least, not added to the number of those publications which, by impairing the virtue, have diminished the happiness of mankind (x)

Novels had the power to reach across discursive boundaries and create turbulence by exposing ideological contradictions and challenging discursive codes, which could prompt discursive and hegemonic modification. At the same time, many novels overtly served the dominant hegemony. Novels then served as instruments of maintenance as well as rupture, often both contained within a single text. Even the most well intentioned and rigidly written novel, such as More's Coelubs, could not escape from criticisms of subversion or, to use More's term, "contamination" (x).

Early Evangelical movements had identified novels as harmful to their readers, a conception which permeated British culture through the first half of the nineteenth century. These middle-class Evangelicals feared that

novels would become an instrument of ideological penetration by what was seen as decadent aristocratic or gentry culture, depicted as either glamorous libertinism or its transmuted form of sensibility or sentimentalism, into the lives and consciousness of those lower down the social scale. Such penetration, it was thought, would help to ensure the continued ideological and social hegemony of the upper classes. (Engel and King 7)

This fear grew more powerful during the Regency period and on through George IV's reign. During this time, the "nobility abandoned themselves to hedonism," their dissipation reflected in the "shallow romanticism of the fashionable novel" (Engel and King 13). This change in perception is heralded by the changing critical tone within popular magazines. In one short diatribe in a 1790 Lady's Magazine, a writer claims that because of novel reading:

the moderate enjoyments of life are despised, and its duties neglected; the imagination, suffered to stray beyond the utmost verge of probability . . . soon shuts out reason, and the dormant faculties languish for want of cultivation The mischief does not stop here; the heart is depraved, when it is supposed to be only refined . . . and vague fabricated feelings supply the place of principles. ("Novels" 363)

The boundaries of the middle class discursive structure were marked by moderation, reason, duty and principle—the antithesis of the decadence perceived in the aristocracy, and the very values which popular novels were suddenly perceived as attacking. At the same time, the moral corruption of the aristocracy took on a more malignant aura viewed against the violent depredations of the French Revolution. Now the novels began to be perceived as spreading cultural pestilence which could result in a similar revolution, causing the complete collapse of the nation from moral decay. As John Taylor notes, “expressions of opinion about the dangers of novel reading pervade the ephemeral literature of the day . . . so repetitious and persistent did these comments become” (v). Coleridge, in addressing the subject of novel reading, said:

I will run the risk of asserting, that where the reading of novels prevails as a habit, it occasions in time the entire destruction of the powers of the mind It conveys no trustworthy information as to facts; it produces no improvement of the intellect, but fills the mind with mawkish and morbid sensibility, which is directly hostile to the cultivation, invigoration, and enlargement of the nobler powers of the understanding. (3)

While conservative groups had challenged the immorality of novels throughout the eighteenth century, their impact on the ruling hegemony had been slight, as the bulk of the population was not yet receptive to their admonitions and exhortations. It was not until the turn of the nineteenth century that their protests met with support during the rise of Evangelicalism and its enormous pool of middle class supporters. Thus their strict standards concerning novels—and leisure activities in general—permeated through many of the discourse cells comprising Britain at that time, leading to a modification of the

dominant hegemony and thus creating an ideological perception of novels as potentially dangerous, though having an equal and opposite potential of disseminating ideologically correct values and beliefs. However, by the middle of the century, the novel's popularity had grown enormously, while the Evangelical movements had subsided.

During the Victorian period, the novel came to be identified as a particularly middle-class form of literature. It served as a middle class representational replacement for the classical canon of literature, requiring no background in the traditional upper class education and written in a widely accessible style and language. Thus, despite the strong anti-novel sentiment of the earlier powerful middle-class Evangelical movements, the novel's popularity grew by leaps and bounds. At the same time, Evangelical groups sought to take advantage of the genre's popularity to promote their moral ideals.

The Novel as an Instrument of Discursive Reinforcement

The Evangelical push to establish Sunday schools for children, followed later by adult schools, led to an enormous expansion of the reading public. These schools were most particularly aimed at the poor. At the same time, the growth of the middle class led to the establishment of boarding schools for girls while there was an increased enrollment at boys' schools. Thus according to Frederick Karl, "by the end of the eighteenth century there were perhaps 100,000 habitual readers upon whom the booksellers and circulating libraries could count. In the nineteenth century itself, literacy outdistanced population growth by more than five to one" (14). For the first half of the century, the circulating libraries relied mostly on the patronage of the middle class, as the cost of membership was still too high for most of the working classes. The discovery of

new papers and publishing techniques made novels cheaper by the middle of the century, and thus more available to the working classes, but the middle class continued to provide the backbone to the book publishing market.

The Evangelical motive for teaching the poor to read was to promote their morality, reinforcing such virtues as cleanliness, obedience, and contentment with their station in life, and thus preserving the class system and alleviating the fear of revolt.⁶

The use of literature to inculcate the poor was effective. Terry Eagleton writes that literature “was in several ways a suitable candidate” for pacifying the masses (45).

Literature “could provide a potent antidote to political bigotry and ideological extremism” (Eagleton 45). In a deeply ironic tone, Eagleton comments that literature

could serve to place in cosmic perspective the petty demands of working people for decent living conditions or greater control over their own lives, and might even with luck come to render them oblivious of such issues in their high-minded contemplation of eternal truths and beauties. . . .

Literature would rehearse the masses in the habits of pluralistic thought and feeling, persuading them to acknowledge that more than one viewpoint than theirs existed—namely, that of their masters. It would communicate to them the moral riches of bourgeois civilization, impress upon them a reverence for middle-class achievements, and, since reading is an essentially solitary, contemplative activity, curb in them any disruptive tendency to collective political action” (45-6).

The Evangelical use of literature as a tool for ideological deployment is reminiscent of the development of English studies in India. According to Guari

Viswanathan, “British colonial administrators, provoked by missionaries on the one hand and fears of native insubordination on the other, discovered an ally in English literature to support them in maintaining control of the natives under the guise of a liberal education” (“Beginnings” 17). Teaching English literature to natives was to be particularly successful as a colonial control strategy because it converted the natives to a new ontological world order because, as Said notes, “even where colonies are not insistently or even perceptibly in evidence, the narrative sanctions a spatial moral order” where the colonizer is always superior to the colonized (79). In the case of English education in India, Viswanathan argues that this literature helped to codify an ontological conception of native Indians as inferior to the British, not only in need of instruction and discipline from their moral masters, but desirous of receiving them. In universalizing this concept and forcing the generation of a hegemonic structure based upon this moral order, English literature solved the largest problem facing the colonizers.

This problem was, as Viswanathan succinctly puts it, “how were Indian subjects to be imbued with a sense of public responsibility and honour,” where that honor and responsibility were defined under the heading of service to the British empire (“Beginnings” 10). It was vital to make the natives participate in their domination, for only a handful of British personnel were actually on site to maintain British dominion within the colony. The solution was to introduce the study of English literature to India. In this way, the natives could be indoctrinated with British ideologies—particularly those which reinforced British superiority—internalizing them and as a result, conforming to them, and disseminating and enforcing them as well.⁷ This was possible, because, as Elizabeth Langland argues, texts “formulate, transmit, and reproduce the ideologies of a

culture through the production of subjects. This is the process through which particular and local beliefs of a group become naturalized as truth” (3).

In the case of Evangelical groups, the discursive goal was to reinforce the subservient subject role for the lower class and to generate within them a sense of the divinely designated nature of that role. With the French Revolution and the consequent realization that the poor classes had not only the power to disrupt the economy but also to destroy the nation, came the Evangelical revelation that there needed to be a systematic program for solving the ‘problem of the poor.’ Maurice Quinlan contends that “seeing in France what they believed to be a collapse of civilization, they were impressed by the idea that the stability of a nation depended not only upon the maintenance of law and order, but upon the character of its manners” (69). Evangelicals focused particularly on the threat of the lower classes. Because these lower classes were characterized as degenerate and lazy, it was thought that only the infusion of middle class morality through education, surveillance and reward would defuse their threat. Economic inequity and hardship were believed to be only symptomatic of lack of morality amongst the poor, rather than as a cause for their discontent. Thus began systematic education centered on Evangelical treatises and tracts as means of inculcating the lower classes with hegemonically approved ideologies.

John Wesley, an early pioneer in Evangelicalism, did a great deal to further the effort of educating the poor, furthering the mission of indoctrination. His dictionary, created for the poor reader and aimed at assisting him in practical applications, served to widen the reading horizon for the vast numbers of the uneducated.⁸ Wesley also sought to provide suitable literature for the new reading public. Toward that end, he began to

edit classical works for both content and language.⁹ Though, unlike later Evangelicals, he did not condemn the novel as corrupting, he did not consider novels to be suitable reading material for readers of limited education because they did not provide a straightforward moral message. For instance, neither *Tom Jones* nor *Moll Flanders* are ever really punished for their sins which indicates the possibility of reward for immorality. Because most novels provided a variety of characters and often ameliorating circumstances for sinful behavior, readers might be confused into imitating that behavior.

This conception of the dangers of novels was taken up by Evangelicals and secular critics alike. Hannah More argues that novels “are continually shifting their ground, and enlarging their sphere, and are daily becoming vehicles of wider mischief” (27). Thomas Gisborne claims that they “are devoured with indiscriminate and indefatigable avidity. Hence the mind is secretly corrupted” (159). In 1840, while applauding two novels by the Reverend William Gresley, George Eliot still cautions that:

It appears to me that there is unfairness in arbitrarily selecting a train of circumstances, a set of characters as a development of a class of opinions. In this way we might make atheism appear wonderfully calculated to promote social happiness. I remember, as I dare say you do, a very amiable atheist depicted by Bulwer in *Devereax* and for some time after the perusal of that book, which I read 7 or 8 years ago, I was considerably shaken by the impressions that religion was not a requisite to moral excellence. (Letters 45)

However, despite fears that even the best intended novels would corrupt the minds of their readers, the genre’s continued popularity made them impossible for Evangelicals to

ignore. The proliferation of unsuitable novels, novels that were “under the semblance of instruction, conveying the subtlest poison,” filled circulating libraries and juvenile libraries (“Evils” 783).

For some, the solution was to provide fiction which would be morally uplifting as an alternative to the poison available. Hannah More started the Cheap Repository, Sarah Trimmer began the Family Magazine, both of which published didactic fiction promoting proper behavior in both men and women. The novels of Mary Sherwood, Maria Edgeworth and Jane Austen received positive critical attention for their reinforcement of morality, duty, and class hierarchies, and their portrayals of traditionally feminine role models. As the century progressed, more and more novelists made contributions which would, in Horace’s classical terms, both teach and delight. Grace Aguilar, Elizabeth Sewall, Charlotte Yonge, Emily Eden, Margaret Oliphant and Dinah Mulock Craik are but a few names on the list of authors who sought to impose a moral message on their reader through their novels. As George Eliot states, the prevailing feeling had become that “we cannot . . . help being modified by the ideas that pass through our minds” in the course of reading, particularly novel reading (Letters 23). William Greg makes the same assertion in his “False Morality of Lady Novelists” (1859), saying “this literature is effective by reason of its very lightness: it spreads, penetrates, and permeates, where weightier matter would lie merely on the outside of the mind” (144). Thus Evangelicals, unable to stop the publication and sale of novels through censorship or public sentiment, began a campaign to develop novels and short fiction which would promote and support their ideologies.

Edward Said's relates the novel to imperialism. His discussion helps make sense of how Evangelicals sought to use the genre as means of inculcation. He says that the novel was "immensely important in the formation of imperial attitudes, references, and experiences" in Britain (xii). He argues that the British novel, designed for consumption by British subjects, reinforced the nationalist conception of Britain as superior to all other countries, divinely obligated to bring civilization to the lesser beings of the world. According to Said, "if we study the impulses giving rise to it [the novel], we shall see the far from accidental convergence between the patterns of narrative authority constitutive of the novel on the one hand, and, on the other, a complex ideological configuration underlying the tendency to imperialism" (69-70). Novels, by reinforcing and reproducing hegemony throughout British culture, act to refresh the needs, desires and goals which originated the imperial hegemony and which now assure its continued endurance. They also help to establish and confirm discursive and hegemonic subject roles which then serve to promote hegemony. According to Said, "British power was durable and continually reinforced . . . [and] that power was elaborated and articulated in the novel" (73).

The Domestic Angel and the Novel

To the "good woman" in mid-Victorian England falls the awesome responsibility for the perpetuation of the British civilization. According to the myth of the Angel in the House, she has "under her jurisdiction the [development of the] most basic qualities of human identity" (Armstrong 3). Her realm of influence is the home and hearth, and through her responsibilities there, she has as much a duty to her country as any man

serving in the military or government. A woman must engender moral and ethical values in her children, which include a moral sense of duty to the nation and consequently the imperial project. Rowbotham writes of the need for women to:

accept cheerfully the burden of sacrifice entailed by involvement in Empire. . . . However hard, the true woman was expected to accept and make the best of such events without adding to the sorrow of others by useless complaint or by inability to cope. More than that, it was necessary for women to take the lead in teaching men how to cope with their stresses. It has been seen that women were expected to teach men, from boyhood, the qualities necessary for moral and spiritual development: one aspect of this learning was the development of an imperial patriotism, ideally first imbued at a mother's knee. (190-1)

Thus from childhood women were inculcated in an ideology of femininity devoted to the development and perpetuation of empire through the maintenance of the domestic sphere.

Sarah Stickney Ellis makes the imperial duty of women plain when she writes in 1839 that women serve as “a kind of second conscience, for mental reference, and spiritual counsel . . . [making each of their husbands, sons and brothers] a wiser and better man” (1639). According to Ellis, women are fundamental to the maintenance and success of not only the imperial enterprise, but also English culture. The men who take up their duty to England in the colonies are only able to do so because “they have borne along with them a generosity, a disinterestedness, and a moral courage, derived in no small measure from the female influence of their native country” (1639). Should women default on their proper duties, English civilization and culture should fail at every level,

political and domestic.¹⁰ Consequently, women must be vigilantly selfless, moral, generous and sacrificing.

Containing women within the domestic angel role was accomplished through techniques of power which had already proved effective with the indigenous peoples of the colonies. The systematic imperial-styled power methodologies which these novels reflect include: panoptical surveillance, and containment and rehabilitation through modeling, self-discipline, punishment and reward. These techniques worked to motivate women to embrace the traditional role of the angel.

Just as English studies in India could be used to indoctrinate the natives into participating in the colonization process, and just as the Evangelicals used their didactic tracts and treatises to imbue the British lower classes with a sense of nationalism and duty which would make them conform to their assigned subject roles, so could novels, which had become so popular with women, be used to maintain control of them. Literature works “at the unconscious level, where it leads to the naturalizing of constructed values” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 3). Kate Flint argues that those who attempted to limit reading practices, were doing so as a “means of gaining control over subjectivity,” and to restrict the flow of knowledge available to women, and “through this, to [control] different social expectations and standards” (11). Further, according to Nancy Armstrong in her study of the development of the novel as a genre, novels would “have the desirable effect of inducing a specific form of political unconscious” (18). Armstrong claims that “fiction could accomplish much the same purpose as the various forms of recreation promoted by Sunday Schools,” which was to “occup[y] many of the idle hours when people gathered in their customary fashion and when political plans

might otherwise have been hatched” (17). The novel becomes a means of inculcating the population with hegemonic codes of propriety and self containment through its power to reach into a relaxed and unguarded setting, subtly re-aligning loyalties and belief systems.

Thus British white women and the indigenous people of the colonies were located in similar epistemological categories. Both were necessary to the wealth and stability of empire, while at the same time, both needed, for their own preservation and salvation, to be monitored and disciplined against the dangers of their inherent deficiencies. The novels then serve to disseminate hegemonic codes of behavior, mark taboos and transgressive behavior, model ideal role models, and to foster the deployment of the system of surveillance, discipline and punishment which formed the hegemonic auto-maintenance network.

Women's Novels as Instruments of Hegemonic Subversion

Despite the Victorian novel's potential as a tool of hegemony, it held, at the same time, the dangerous seeds of subversion. Let us return for a moment to George Eliot's assertion that novels had the power to create powerful impressions on readers, even to the point of undermining their religious integrity: “it appears to me that there is unfairness in arbitrarily selecting a train of circumstances, and a set of characters as a development of a class of opinions. In this way we might make atheism appear wonderfully calculated to promote social happiness” (Letters 45). In Eliot's words then, novels provide a means to influence readers' minds, and through them, I would suggest, discourse cells and eventually hegemony. For as Greg remarks:

there are peculiarities . . . in works of fiction which must always secure them a vast influence on all classes of societies and all sorts of minds. They are read without effort, and remembered without trouble. We have to chain down our attention to read other books with profit; these enchain our attention of themselves Other books are effective only when digested and assimilated; novels either need not digestion, or rather present their matter to us in an already digested form Novels are like soup or jelly; they may be drunk off at a draught or swallowed whole, certain of being easily and rapidly absorbed into the system. (146)

Novels have the ability to engage with the imagination without first passing through the hegemonically produced filters of reason and truth. Thus any parts of a narrative which undermine or challenge the currently hegemonically ratified ideologies are instantly advanced into the imagination where they at least come under consideration, if they are not assimilated. In this way, contradictions between the idealized norm of hegemonic subject roles and the actuality of women's lives created ruptures within the internalized systems of ideological truths which structured women's minds and guaranteed their cooperation within hegemony and discourse both. Discipline, imposed through reason and an awareness of the 'natural' order of culture based on internalized ideological conceptions, cannot defend against the threat of novels because it is completely bypassed in the course of reading.

On the side of hegemony, novels function, in the words of Chandra Talpade Mohanty, to produce "ethnocentric universalism" (199).¹¹ She argues that this kind of "discourse . . . sets up its own authorial subjects as the implicit referent, i.e. the yardstick

by which to encode and represent cultural Others. It is in this move that power is exercised in discourse” (199). Because, as Simone de Beauvoir notes, the masculine is assumed to be the universal basis of epistemology, women are defined as Other, unable to function in the world without the benefit of the “masculine mediator” (755). In the mid-Victorian period, we can postulate the angel ideal as the “masculine mediator” to which Beauvoir refers. Produced as a means of making women compliant to hegemonic needs, the domestic angel ideology becomes the normative referent against which all women must be measured. Novels served hegemony by helping to institutionalize the angel ideal subject role for women.

Women’s novels often challenge the concept of an androcentric world by setting their novels within the feminine realm. Much as post-colonial writers seek “the right to represent” themselves as “part of a grander effort to discover the bases of an integral identity different from the formerly dependent, derivative one” (Said 212-3), women novel writers produced works which focused on the female domestic sphere, including marriage, motherhood, housekeeping, shopping, and moral caretaking. They not only portrayed the day to day life of women, but they celebrated feminine traits and traditions, those things which had come under derision by the larger culture. Visiting and gossip were shown to be communal opportunities for establishing and deepening relationships. Pregnancy was no longer taboo, but given a place of importance in the narrative. In emphasizing what had previously been perceived as feminine triviality, women writers asserted a separate identity from men, one that was whole and complete of its own, refuting the basic Victorian cultural mythologies that these trivialities signified women’s status as “weaker vessels” and “flawed men.”

In writing their own experiences, women claimed the right to relate their own histories—histories that hitherto had been ignored as insignificant and therefore unworthy of being recorded. Said emphasizes the primary importance of novels in the imperialist project. In particular, he examines how novels which take up the subject of imperialism, represent and codify the Other (the native) according to the needs and desires of the colonizer. However, when postcolonial writers coopt this method of power, redefining themselves through the imperialist mode, they create ruptures in imperialist ideologies, forcing the colonizer to recognize the contradictions and paradoxes within his concept of the world. In this way, the writers seek to reclaim their nation from the homogenizing forces of the colonizer. Similarly women, in writing their own experiences, seek to forge a separate identity from the universalizing androcentric hegemony which constitutes women within the angel ideal subject role, not because women are inherently angelic, but because to do so serves hegemony.

At the same time, because of the scope of a novel, women could skirt overt transgression by conforming to the letter of hegemonic codes while at the same time circumventing them through narrative skill. For instance, in some novels, transgressors, though subject to eventual punishment according to hegemonic dictates, may be portrayed in a sympathetic light for the bulk of the novel which cannot be dispelled by a token last page death or imprisonment. For instance, the Baroness Sampson, in Emily Eden's The Semi-detached House, is forced to flee from polite society when her husband's business dealings are revealed to be less than legitimate. Yet she retains her 'gentlewoman' status, her husband continues to accrue their fortune, she does not lose the family that she loves, and there is every chance that she will be able to return to polite

society eventually. At the same time, those female characters who are portrayed in a hegemonically correct fashion according to proper feminine subject roles, might come to the end of a novel in less than satisfactory circumstances. They might be unmarried, unhappy, or poor, and thus provide little incentive for their readers to imitate them. An example of such a woman would be Elizabeth Bennet's best friend Charlotte who marries the obsequious Mr. Collins in Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice. She accepts Mr. Collins because she has no other marital options and to refuse him would be to renege on her duties to her family and to her community. As a domestic angel, she must participate in any 'good' marriage which becomes available to her. Though Charlotte seems resigned and even content with her new life, her story does little to encourage marriage; readers are more inclined to sympathize with Elizabeth who adamantly refuses his proposal.¹²

Women writers also portrayed women who pretend to conform to proper subject roles, mimicking or passing as domestic angels in order to achieve their own ends. Lady Audley serves as an example of this. She pretends conformity to the angel ideal and then undercuts it by committing murder and arson, all the while appearing to be the epitome of innocent, moral womanhood. Similarly, Isabel Vane, though initially a perfect example of the feminine ideal, ends up seduced, pretending to model the proper role of wife and mother, while hiding her indiscretion. The readers are aware that these women are manipulating their appearances to mimic or impersonate the angel ideal. Through this awareness, readers begin to realize the constructed nature of feminine subject roles—that these roles may be circumvented. Controlling ideologies are thus exposed to inquisition and criticism, opening up opportunities for hegemonic modification.

Novels in Victorian England became a tool both of hegemony and of resistance, particularly regarding women. Much of the discussion concerning novels centered on their impact on the women who made up the bulk of the subscribers to Mudie's and other circulating libraries.¹³ Margaret Oliphant's scathing attack on the sensationalist novel focused particularly on the genre's corruption of women authors and women readers: "it is a shame to women so to write; and it is a shame to the women who read and accept as a true representation of themselves and their ways the equivocal talk and fleshly inclinations herein attributed to them" (275). Women's novels which focused on the domestic sphere—whether in the sensational or domestic realist style—simultaneously deployed and challenged the hegemonically codified ideologies surrounding the domestic angel ideal and the domestic sphere. The dynamic between the text and the reader's experience allowed for a complex interplay that could spark resistance or hegemonic compliance. Kate Flint addresses this point, saying "the same texts . . . may elicit complicity or resistance; the same reading subject, for that matter, cannot be relied upon to be a stable identity, responding in a predetermined way to each text that she encounters" (40). Any feminist exploration of woman-authored Victorian novels must therefore address both conformity and resistance, examining both the deployment of hegemonic codes of 'true womanhood' and the ways in which these writers challenged and undermined those ideological structures.

The 1860s: When the Future Palled

Ah, love, let us be true
 To one another! For the world, which seems
 To lie before us like a land of dreams,
 So various, so beautiful, so new,
 Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
 Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
 And we are here as on a darkling plain
 Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
 Where ignorant armies clash by night
 “*Dover Beach*” by Matthew Arnold

Arnold’s vision of the world in his 1867 “Dover Beach” was symptomatic of the unsettled Victorian mood. James Thomson echoes the cynical and despairing perception of the world in his “City of Dreadful Night” which stems from his experiences walking through London. His imagery is full of apocalyptic visions, ending with a stream of hopeless conclusions:

The sense that every struggle brings defeat
 Because Fate holds no prize to crown success;
 That all the oracles are dumb or cheat
 Because they have no secret to express;
 That none can pierce the vast black veil uncertain
 Because there is no light beyond the curtain;
 That is vanity and nothingness. (599)

For Thomson and Arnold, and for many other Victorians, by the 1860s, the world had become a dark place, with little hope for an afterlife of paradise. The 1859 publication of Darwin’s Origins of Species coincided with a strong upsurge in dissent from the

Anglican church, unsettling the faith of many. Questions about the nature of God abounded as people sought to account for not only the bloody losses of the Sepoy Rebellion (1857) and the Crimean War (1853-56), as well as those from the continuing skirmishes in China, but also the horrors of their own city streets, the wavering morals of the nation, and more than anything, the frightening chaotic changes attributed to progress. This was an unsettled, uncertain time, its glittering gilded surface hiding a rotten core.

During the decade of the 1850s, Britain glittered with success. It was a decade of great scientific and economic advancement. The 1851 Crystal Palace exhibition in Hyde Park showcased Britain's self-avowed superiority. It remained open for just six months and in that time there were over six million visitors to the exhibition. The iron and glass building, a miracle of architecture in and of itself, spread over more than twenty-one acres of the park. It housed a massed display of Britanalia: the best of its national products gathered together in a national narcissistic shrine celebrating industry and commerce.¹⁴ Robert Adams describes the exhibition, saying that "overstuffed furniture and gimcrack decoration, patent medicines, religious tracts, and Indian curries were jumbled in with ladies' corsets, brassbound steam engines, celluloid collars, and cast-iron whatnots for the genteel parlor" (386). A facsimile of the exhibition catalog shows that the wealth of displays ranged from tableware to furniture, guns to carriages, lampposts to statuary, jewelry to door knobs and hinges. Adams points out, however, that the aesthetics of the display were hardly important: "what the exhibition celebrated was the triumph of industry and commerce. And though the taste was uncertain or worse, there was something to celebrate in the sheer quantity of artifacts assembled" (386). And yet, according to James Adams in his book The British Empire 1784-1939, "the Exhibition,

indeed, although it seemed to those who visited it as the doorway to the future, was in reality the “Finis” to an age which was rapidly passing” (155). In fact, Adams writes that though the Victorian period “was to last for nearly a half century more, . . . it was entering on a new phase, in which the dreams of pacifism, of a world made peaceful and happy by free trade and inventive industry [sic] were to be rudely shattered” (154-5). Elisabeth Jay, in a literary biography of Margaret Oliphant, comments that “the New Exhibition of 1862 prompted comparison with the political climate in which its illustrious predecessor of 1851 had taken place. Peace had given way to war and the royal instigator of the nations’ euphoric self-congratulation, the Prince Consort, was dead” (192). This New Exhibition heralded a far more somber decade than its predecessor.

Along with the progress of industry and science, during the mid-Victorian period England vacillated between pinnacle achievements and abysmal lows. There were improvements in prisons and penal codes, transportation to Australia was abolished, the plight of workhouse children began to be addressed, new medicines were discovered, gas lamps lit the streets, and restrictions disallowing Jews to serve in Parliament were removed. At the same time, the Irish continued to suffer under cruel oppression. According to James Adams, “in spite of the wonders in the Crystal Palace and of many reforms, [conditions were] almost incredibly crude and cruel” (155). There was an enormous rise in prostitution and sexually transmitted diseases. The financial prosperity of the upper and middle classes did not translate into prosperity for the enormous lower classes, producing a situation of conspicuous consumption amongst the wealthy elite which contrasted sharply with the grim subsistence living or outright poverty of the lower classes. The later novels of Charles Dickens, novels such as Bleak House (1852-53),

Hard Times (1854) and Little Dorrit (1855-57), reflect a darker vision of Britain more akin to Arnold's and Thomson's than his earlier, more socially optimistic works such as The Pickwick Papers (1836-37) or Martin Chuzzlewit (1843-44).¹⁵

According to G. M. Young in Portrait of an Age: Victorian England, “all through the [eighteen] fifties we are aware of the increasing tension” (89).¹⁶ Much of this had to do with the demands of empire and with domestic political developments concerning women and sexuality. England was not only concerned with the preservation of its current empire, but with its further exploitation as well—both of which carried high financial and human costs.

Even as England invested more of its resources in India and China, it became necessary to turn more of its attention to Africa. The discovery of financial opportunities in a previously unvalued Africa led to even greater domestic demands. McClintock writes that “until the 1860s, Britain had scant interest in its unpromising colony at the southern tip of Africa. Only upon the discovery of diamonds (1867) and gold (1886) were the Union Jack and the redcoats shipped out with any real sense of imperial mission” (368). During the 1850s, England also consolidated its control over the Australian continent and its resources of gold and wool. In India, after the Sepoy Rebellion, Britain revamped its governing structure, expending even more of its resources in retaining control over this lucrative colony.

Angels and Redundant Women

The social role for women that encompassed all other social roles and was fundamental to the progress of empire came to be known as the Angel in the House, or

the domestic angel. This role was characterized by selflessness, purity, high morality, self-effacement, and a strong sense of duty. Yet even while women as domestic angels had become central to Victorian hegemony, a new threat in the form of the so-called ‘redundant’ women loomed. The problem of redundant women was caused by the enormous exodus of men to the colonies—both in military service to the crown—to make their fortunes. Most did not return to England. Women were left behind in disproportionate numbers to remaining available men. At the same time, many middle class men claimed that the cost of marriage, of establishing and maintaining a household, was prohibitive. Joanna Trollope writes in Britannia’s Daughter’s: Women of the British Empire:

the Empire was only partly to blame for that [the exodus of eligible men from England]; certainly it demanded a huge manpower to forge new links around the world, and subsequently to maintain them, but men . . . were abandoning it [England] too for escape. What they sought to escape was marriage, not for any reasons of misogyny, but because of the demands made upon a married couple by middle-class Victorian society To get married it was necessary to set up an establishment and the rules for that were so exacting and expensive that ducking the issue altogether was understandably common. (23)

Joan Perkin argues that despite “the social ideal . . . that all women would marry and be kept by a husband . . . the 1851 Census showed there were half a million more women than men in Britain. It also revealed that a million women remained unmarried” (153).

Perkin goes on to say that this polarity of numbers resulted in a conception that “there had been a breakdown in the social system” (152), centering largely on how women fit into this rapidly changing culture. These extra, unmarried women were labeled redundant.

In 1862, William Greg writes in his well known article “Why Are Women Redundant?”:

there is an enormous and increasing number of single women in the nation, a number quite disproportionate and quite abnormal; a number which, positively and relatively, is indicative of an unwholesome social state, and is both productive and prognostic of much wretchedness and wrong. There are hundreds of thousands of women—not to speak more largely still—scattered through all ranks, but proportionally most numerous in the middle and upper classes,—who have to earn their own living, instead of spending and husbanding the earnings of men; who, not having the natural duties and labours of wives and mothers, have to carve out artificial and painfully-sought occupations for themselves; who, in place of completing, sweetening, and embellishing the existence of others, are compelled to lead an independent and incomplete existence of their own. (436)

This summation of the dangers of redundancy implies the debate surrounding the so-called ‘woman question’ which had become a great preoccupation for Victorian society. Indeed Greg states “the ‘condition of women,’ in one form or another—their wants, their woes, their difficulties—have taken possession of our thoughts, and seem

likely to occupy us busily and painfully enough for time to come” (436). In the article, however, Greg argues that women should maintain their traditional roles as wives and mothers, that unless women are encouraged to remain or return to the home and the domestic sphere, society will collapse. He terms the lives of single women, particularly those of the upper and middle classes, “unfulfilled destinies,” describing them as “wretched and deteriorating” because “they have nothing to do, and none to love, cherish, and obey” (437). According to Greg, the problem of redundant women, and by implication the woman question, is a problem that “society must solve or die” (437).¹⁷

A decade later, Josephine Butler’s introduction to Woman’s Work and Woman’s Culture: A Series of Essays articulates the continuing difficulties facing women, made worse by an economy about to dive into a severe depression¹⁸:

there remain both men and women who continue solemnly to inform the women who are striving for some work or calling which will save them from starvation, and who have no human being but themselves to depend on, that their proper sphere is *home*,—that their proper function is to be wives and mothers, and their happiness is to be dependent on men! Like Pharaoh, who commanded the Israelites to make bricks without the material to make them of, these moralizers command this multitude of inquiring women back to homes which are not, and which they have not the material to create. (xxviii-xxix)

The fortification of the traditional values surrounding women to which Butler refers came about largely in response to the feminist movements of the mid-Victorian period, particularly the agitation for women’s legal rights. The most obvious indicators

of the power of the feminist movement came in the form of the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, and the Married Woman's Property Bill of 1857 and its eventual enactment in 1870, both of which enabled women to have more control over their bodies and their finances.¹⁹ Yet even as women were put in a better position to free themselves from bad marriages, hegemonically they were subjected to the increasingly compelling ideology of the domestic angel. In 1869, Frances Power Cobbe writes that "the domestic life and the passionate love of home are preached to a girl, even *ad nauseam*, as her special sphere and particular virtue" ("Final" 11).

This growing pressure to conform to the standards of the domestic angel coincided with a new understanding of middle-class girls as generally loose or promiscuous. This perception of girls had begun to circulate throughout Victorian society during the 1850s and increased dramatically during the 1860s, giving the impression of a kind of contagion within the heart of the family, reinforcing the need for hegemonic correction. Joan Perkin claims that "by the 1860s middle-class girls were becoming more flirtatious and sexually assertive. The journalist Eliza Lynn Lynton writing anonymously in the Saturday Review of 14 March 1868, trenchantly accused young women of behaving like courtesans" (55). While Michael Mason argues convincingly in his book The Making of Victorian Sexuality that this sort of perception of an escalation in feminine 'looseness' or 'forwardness' "can be traced back at least to the 1780s . . . and that it would be hard to make out a case for unmistakable change in frequency or character of reports of young women's behaviour over the successive decades of the nineteenth century," he goes on to remark on a single exception: the 1860s (119). Mason says that

the impression of girls' freedom and sexual adventurousness becomes so emphatic that the episode deserves isolating and considering on its own The evidence for 1860s emancipation comes from an encouragingly wide range of texts, including complaints of a new decline in standards, reminiscences about the period that are nostalgic for the good times it offered, and non-polemical writings (among them some fiction) which incidentally depict emancipated habits. (119-20)

This increasingly negative perception of girls stemmed largely from a sense of a decline in traditional morality and standards among women, a decline directly proportional to the growing feminist movement. A telling bit of legislation reveals an attempt early in the 1860s to recapture control over female bodies and feminine sexuality after the small liberties gained for women by the 1857 Matrimonial Causes (Divorce) Act. According to Perkin "an Act of 1803 made it illegal for anyone to assist a woman to procure an abortion, but the law was not broken if the woman sought her own miscarriage. The law was tightened in 1828 and again in 1837, and by an Act of 1861 self-abortion became an offence" (71).

The surge of agitation and turmoil surrounding women's roles which accompanied both the feminist push for independence from the domestic sphere and the impossibility for many women to attain the ideal for lack of marital opportunity, forms the context of this study. During the decade of the 1860s, women became the subject of intensifying hegemonic attention. Women best served hegemony as domestic angels, both at home and abroad; at the same time, many women were finding the traditional roles constrictive, if not all together impossible. The novels reveal evidence of the

struggle to define women, and on the basis of that definition, position them within particular roles within society.

My research is particularly concerned with the way in which women's novels functioned to foster the containment of women within hegemonically structured subject roles, and how the novels functioned to make them complicit with such control. At the same time, I wish to examine how women, through the medium of novels, were able to subvert those containment strategies.

The 'Woman's Novel': Domestic Realism and Sensationalism

Susan David Bernstein writes in her essay "Dirty Reading: Sensation Fiction, Women, and Primitivism," "the flood of sensation fiction on the Victorian literary marketplace of the 1860s posed a social catastrophe that threatened to erode literary standards and to undermine domestic tranquillity" (213). Keeping in mind that domestic tranquillity was none too tranquil, as we have seen above, what in fact the sensation fiction of this time focused on and interrogated were the traditional accepted roles for women in Victorian society. Bernstein argues that the sensation novel "transgress[es] conventional representations of middle-class gender roles, the sensation heroine is the bourgeois housewife turned villain: on the surface, the quintessential Victorian angel-in-the-house, but underneath an appealing demon of domestic crimes for which she is never convincingly punished" (216).

In her 1867 essay "Novels," Margaret Oliphant attacks the sensation novel for its portrayal of women. She writes that the sensation novel is "held up to us as the story of the feminine soul as it really exists underneath its conventional coverings" and yet this

hidden soul has “a very fleshly and unlovely record” (259). The heroines of these novels are portrayed in complete opposition to the socially valued characteristics of the domestic angel, while any representative domestic angel is dull by comparison: “the wickedness of the woman, her heartlessness and her self-indulgence, and utter blindness to everybody’s feelings but her own, render her profoundly interesting; and . . . good women are very dull shadows by her side” (271). Because novels are the “favourite reading of the young . . . one of the chief amusements of all secluded and most suffering people . . . [and] women and unoccupied persons,” which is to say, the most mentally vulnerable people of society, Oliphant argues that novels ought to uplift the reader and “to a great degree be pure from all noxious topics” (257). She decries the popular sensation novel for “unseemly references and exhibitions of forbidden knowledge . . . [and] stories of bigamy and seduction, those . . . revelations of things that lie below the surface of life” (258). Most particularly Oliphant complains of the representations of “young women, moved either by the will, foolhardiness of inexperience, or ignorance of everything that is natural and becoming to their condition” (258). She writes that sensation novels have no redeeming message, no underlying morality or reason for existence other than to excite the readers’ passions. Another reviewer shares a similar view in an 1865 review, complaining that in sensation novels, “on the whole, the wicked people have the happier fate” (Rae 198).

H.L. Mansel, writing in 1862, condemns sensation novels on much the same grounds. Like Oliphant, Mansel is concerned about the immense and vulnerable readership of these novels, and thus about their power to corrupt society as a whole. His suggestion that the sensation novel had appropriated the duties of religion reflects the

severity of the threat which sensation novels were believed to pose toward Victorian society:

A class of literature has grown up around us, usurping in many respects, intentionally or unintentionally, a portion of the preacher's office, playing no inconsiderable part in moulding the minds and forming the habits and tastes of its generation; and doing so principally, we had almost said exclusively, by 'preaching to the nerves'. . . . [These novels are] indications of a wide-spread corruption, of which they are in part both the effect and the cause; called into existence to supply the cravings of a diseased appetite, and contributing themselves to foster the disease, and to stimulate the want which they supply. (482-3)

For Mansel, novels appropriate the preacher's task of molding and forming young female minds, engendering in them a diseased appetite for excitement, sensation, and vulgar knowledge. Mansel's criticism stems, like Oliphant's, from the way the authors offer characters which illustrate "repulsive virtue and attractive vice" (499). These illustrations are often attached to real contemporary events, lending them credibility and a veneer of the commonplace which Mansel argues creates a "morbid" interest in current events, where people become "thrilled with horror . . . by the thought that such things may be going on around us and among us" (489). It is the aura of truthfulness or reality which these novels engender which critics of the period feared created havoc amongst the reading public. In an often quoted sermon by the Archbishop of York concerning sensation novels, he says that

sensation stories were tales which aimed at this effect simply—of exciting in the mind some deep feeling of overwrought interest by the means of some terrible passion or crime. They want to persuade people that in almost every one of the well-ordered houses of their neighbours there was a skeleton shut up in some cupboard; that their comfortable and easy-looking neighbour had in his breast a secret story which he was always going about trying to conceal. (qtd. in Rae 203).²⁰

The effect of the novels then is to excite the readers into such a state that they cannot tell truth from fiction and begin to believe that everyone about them hides a desperate secret. This suspicion challenged the notions of middle class respectability and morality, the foundations of Victorian society.²¹ According to Thomas Boyle, “if the Victorian age in England represented the high point of modern civilization, its basic underpinning was the cosy [sic], bourgeois, God-fearing family life (93). Yet, as Elaine Showalter argues, in sensation novels, “we find a fantasy which runs counter to the official mythology of the Albert Memorial. In these novels, the death of a husband or wife comes as a welcome release, and spouses who lack the friendly agency of typhoid find desperate remedies in flight, divorce, and, ultimately, murder” (“Desperate Remedies” 1). Sensation novels challenge the ideologies of family and the domestic sphere, and most particularly, of the domestic angel. Boyle says “the benevolent dictator of a father was the head of the household [sic], but the centerpiece of the tableau was the demure, passionless wife and mother, ‘The Angel in the House’ as Coventry Patmore had it. The Sensation novel . . . implied that scratching one of these virtuous matrons might reveal a tigress” or a monster (93). Patrick Brantlinger expands, saying “The plots of sensation novels lead to the

unmasking of extreme evil behind fair appearances. In doing so, they threatened their first readers' cherished assumptions about women, marriage, and the fair appearances of the Victorian scene" ("Sensational" 11).

This credibility or sense of realism in the novels stemmed from two separate but equally authoritative sources. First, they were set in ordinary domestic situations. East Lynne (1861) takes place in an ordinary town involving ordinary households. Lady Audley's Secret (1861-2) is made real through prosaic details which would anchor the novel in the daily lives of its middle class readers. The details are mundane, about railways and food, clothing and weather, bad roads and dirty houses. This positioning of the sensation novel within a familiar domestic situation lends verisimilitude to characters who are generally middle class and with whom the largely middle class readers would find it easy to identify. Robert Audley in Lady Audley's Secret is described as an ordinary barrister with a penchant for stray dogs and a lazy manner. He reflects often on his housekeeper's mutton chops which though filling, are not particularly tasty, comparing them to the various meals he receives throughout his search for the missing George Talboys. Robert Audley's most significant characteristic lies in the negative—that he is not portrayed as particularly out of the ordinary; instead Braddon goes to great lengths to make him something of an everyman, or at least, a fairly typical middle-class man. As Peter Edwards asserts, "In the typical sensation novel . . . no matter how bizarre and complicated the stories, how deep-dyed the villainies, how doom-laden the atmosphere, the settings are always ordinary English households, [and] the characters are mostly harmless, unremarkable people" (7). It is just this lack of an extraordinary setting or uncommon characters which lends veracity and a sense of reality to the novels, and

which disturbed critics who said “into uncontaminated minds they will instill false views of human conduct A novel is a picture of life, and as such ought to be faithful. The fault of these [sensation] novels is that they contain pictures of daily life, wherein there are scenes so grossly untrue to nature” that they must be denounced (Rae 203).

Yet were these scenes of murder, bigamy, arson and mistaken identities really ‘grossly untrue’? The answer is no. Newspapers legitimized the fiction, making it more believable. Regular news accounts of murder and bigamy lent credibility to the sensation novels, combining with the aura of mundanity to further confirm these stories as truthful or real. Richard Altick argues in his account of various Victorian murder cases, “fiction . . . however sensationalized, could be regarded as a faithful transcript of contemporary life: there were the newspapers to prove it” (79).

Thomas Boyle discusses the relationship between newspaper headlines and sensation novels:

sensation novels appeared in the years immediately following the rise of the modern popular newspaper in Britain. News was cheaper, more immediate, more intrusive of privacy, and more plentiful. Much of this change took place most dramatically in the police reports and columns emerging from the newly-formed Divorce Court. (93-4)

Headlines about murder, bigamy and divorce could be read daily. Among them were the 1861 Yelverton bigamy-divorce trial, Madeleine Smith who poisoned her lover by putting poison in his cocoa in 1857, and sixteen year old Constance Kent who was accused of stabbing her four-year-old brother in 1860.²² Lyn Pykett claims that “the details of all these cases of bigamy, divorce and murder were communicated to the

ever-widening readership of a rapidly expanding newspaper press by the sensational reporting then enjoying a vogue” (Sensation Novel 2). And for the first time, these stories were not concealed from the delicate and vulnerable women at home, but “were carried across the domestic threshold to violate the sanctuary of home” (Pykett, Sensation Novel 2). In doing so, they became a source of corruption of the home, the family, and most particularly, of women.

Yet if such extravagant and often criminally-based plot devices as murder, bigamy, forgery, violence and disguised identity form the basis of sensation novels, what differentiates such novels as Charles Dickens’ Oliver Twist (1837-38), Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre (1847), Elizabeth Gaskell’s Ruth (1853), and George Eliot’s Felix Holt (1866), all of which utilize such devices, from sensation novels?

Let us begin with Mansel’s 1862 definition of the sensation novel which remains valuable in separating the sensation novel from other types of novels of the period.

According to Mansel,

a sensation novel, as a matter of course, abounds in incident. Indeed, as a general rule, it consists of nothing else. Deep knowledge of human nature, graphic delineations of individual character, vivid representations of the aspects of Nature or the workings of the soul—all the higher features of the creative art—would be a hindrance rather than a help to a work of this kind ‘Action, action, action!’ . . . is the first thing needful, and the second, and the third. The human actors in the piece are, for the most part, but so many lay-figures on which to exhibit a drapery of incident.

Allowing for the necessary division of all characters of a tale into male

and female, old and young, virtuous and vicious, there is hardly anything said or done by any one specimen of a class which might not with equal fitness be said or done by any other specimen of the same class. (486)

Mansel's contemporaries reiterate this definition. Oliphant contends that "their [sensation novels] construction shows, in some cases, a certain rude skill, in some a certain clever faculty of theft; but in none any real inventive genius; and as for good taste, or elegance, or perception of character, these are things that do not tell The events are the necessary things to consider, not the men" ("Novels" 261).

Lyn Pycket's definition echoes and expands Mansel's. From her twentieth-century perspective, she argues that sensation novels:

were mainly distinguished by their devious, dangerous and, in some cases, deranged heroes and (more especially) heroines. The sensation plot usually consisted of varying proportions and combinations of duplicity, deception, disguise, the persecution and/or seduction of a young woman, intrigue, jealousy, and adultery. The sensation novel drew on a range of crimes, from illegal incarceration (usually of a young woman), fraud, forgery (often of a will), blackmail and bigamy, to murder or attempted murder. . . . The sensation narrative is more than usually reliant on surprising events and extraordinary coincidences for its effects, and character is quite often subordinated to incident and plot. Mystery . . . is the dominant element. (Sensation 4)

While certainly many novels utilize such devices, from Richardson's Clarissa to Thackeray's Vanity Fair to Jane Eyre, Felix Holt, and Hardy's Tess of the D'Urbervilles,

their main focus is on character development, on exploring their society, or on discovering a transcendental understanding of the world and the human relationship to it. Not so sensation novels. Sensation novels sought to entertain through emotional manipulation. Character development was scant, if present at all, while deeper exploration of anything else was negligible at best. Braddon proudly professed this conception of her own writing in her preface to Run to Earth (1868):

The author who provides his readers with a rapid narrative of stirring events will be more popular with the millions than the more profound writer whose greater depth of thought enables him to anatomize character and to depict the subtle emotions of mind. The author of Run to Earth believes in this dictum; and that, in short, novels are read, when read at all, for the amusement they afford, and not for the philosophical truths which they may contain. (qtd. in Edwards 21)

While there were those critics who felt that entertainment for the sake of entertainment was not particularly harmful to anyone, most agreed that these novels engaged in a “moral evasiveness” which, according to P.D. Edwards, gave the impression of advocating immorality and criminality (28). Perhaps this then, above all else, is what divided the sensation novel from other novels of the period. Edwards argues that “the failure to represent the motives for evil acts with anything approaching the realism, the particularity, and the emotional intensity that mark the dramatization of the acts themselves” was in direct contrast to the deeper explorations and purposes with which other novelists engaged these same plot devices (28). Brantlinger makes a similar point when he says that “most serious novels . . . involve a search for the self, the attempt of at

least one character to stake out a career or an identity in the social wilderness. In sensation and mystery novels, however, just as the intractable problem of evil is reduced to a neatly soluble puzzle on a personal level, so the search for self is short-circuited” (“Sensation” 22). Once the mystery is solved in a sensation novel, personal and social dilemmas are neatly wrapped up with little concern for deeper exploration of causes, larger implications, or moral messages. Brantlinger says “whereas serious literature imitates life partly by reducing and simplifying its scale and complexity, the mystery [sensation] novel imitates serious literature by carrying its reductive and simplifying tendencies to extremes” (“Sensation” 24). Such reductionism conceals the lack of realism in the world of the novel, a lack which suggests that the consequences for transgressive behavior will have little or no impact on the perpetrator’s family, community, or by implication, hegemony. This directly contradicts the ideology which insists that transgression will lead to disaster for the family, community and hegemony.

In the five novels I shall explore in the following pages, two are sensational novels. Braddon’s Lady Audley’s Secret (1861-2) and Ellen Wood’s East Lynne (1861) were two of the most popular sensation novels of the 1860s, and are often credited with having originated the genre.²³ Of the two, East Lynne is more moral, more supportive of traditional values of class, gender, and manners. Indeed the novel straddles the line between sensational and domestic realism, according to Margaret Oliphant’s understanding of domestic realism: “Their [the authors of domestic realism] stories were all family stories, their troubles domestic, their women womanly to the last degree” (“Novels” 265). Like sensation novels, domestic realist novels were set in small communities with ordinary middle-class characters. They were also generally written by

women for women, focusing on female characters, manners, local society, and the domestic situation. In each of the three domestic realist novels I have chosen, there are plot devices which would easily fit a sensation novel. The difference is that in none of these novels are these devices sensationalized. They are used to explore deeper issues of character, society, and particularly, the 'woman question.' Emily Eden's The Semi-attached Couple (1860) contains marital misunderstanding, misrepresented identity, and dramatic illness. Charlotte Yonge's The Clever Woman of the Family (1865) contains forgery, disguise, fraud, embezzlement, dramatic illness and several deaths, including a child and a woman in childbirth. Margaret Oliphant's Miss Marjoribanks (1866) contains disguised identity, fraud, a love triangle, and financial ruin. Yet in spite of all these sensational devices, these three authors studiously avoid the sensationalizing of these topics. Rather they are presented matter of factly as a means of conveying moral messages, particularly concerning the roles of women.

I have chosen these novels for their popularity—all went through numerous printings and were in high demand in the circulating libraries, and were therefore read by many women. Thus the possibility of their influence was great. I have also chosen them because they are representative of their particular genres, though each offering richly varied perspectives on the 'woman question.' They are all written by women for women. Though men may have read them, critics couched their reviews in terms of their feminine creators and their expected feminine audience.

In contrast to sensation novels, domestic realist novels were perceived to present a more traditional view of woman and her sphere, reinforcing the domestic angel ideology, while the sensational novels challenged that ideology on many levels. Yet the

presentation of women and their roles in all of these novels is far more complex than the categories of domestic realism and sensationalism allow. Significantly, the novels are not published on a continuum—on a diachronic progression from traditional to radical—but instead overlap one another, offering both competing and complementary views of women and their roles within society and the domestic sphere. The proliferation of novels in the 1860s which are both written by women and which focus on women, of which these five are a tiny representative portion, indicates the pervasive cultural concern with the ‘woman question’ and the hegemonic struggles to suppress and defuse the growing turbulence and to recontain women within safe boundaries.

In the following pages, I will explore the various ideologies concerning women which these novels disseminated and reinforced, as well as the kinds of turbulence within hegemony which they generated by exposing the inconsistencies, contradictions, impossibilities and misconceptions of the domestic angel and the woman’s sphere.

Notes

- ¹ See Florence Nightingale: Saint, Reformer or Rebel? Ed. Raymond G. Hebert, Malabar, Florida: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Company, 1981. This collection offers a variety of essays on the subject of Nightingale's impact on women's roles.
- ² Interestingly, Poovey does not couch her argument in terms of Nightingale's "Cassandra" but instead she looks at Nightingale's nursing career and the narratives which surround it.
- ³ I would argue that the larger discourse cells which generated hegemony were comprised of the following populations: the aristocracy, middle class tradesmen, middle class industrialists, evangelicals, and the military. The working class had no representation, and little opportunity or power to affect hegemony. Though Gramsci argues that lower classes may create their own competing hegemony in resistance to the dominant hegemony, I believe that to be virtually impossible. The dominant hegemony will protect itself by suppressing turbulence. In England, the poor were rehabilitated and reeducated through Sunday school programs and visitations by their community superiors. Those who refused to conform to standards of behavior and dress were punished, while those who cooperated were rewarded. For the Victorian lower classes, conformity meant survival: jobs, food, housing. Given Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which postulates that a person whose basic needs are not fulfilled will be incapable of seeking beyond those needs, the mid-Victorian lower classes would be locked into a cycle of basic need fulfillment. Transgression would mean starvation and death. Thus it would be nearly impossible for the members of the mid-Victorian lower classes to organize and formulate a resistant hegemony, despite their numbers.

- ⁴ Resistance and revolt was not new to the British Empire. This rebellion, however, was reported in such bloody terms and involved the mass rape of women as well as the killing of children, that it shook the British people like nothing else had. For more on the Sepoy Rebellion, see chapter 4.
- ⁵ It should be noted that the British retaliation was equally, if not more, bloody and disturbing as the massacre by the Sepoys. See note 52 in chapter 4.
- ⁶ The French Revolution fostered increasing fears of a similar revolt amongst the English poor and lower classes. The increase in industrial technology put many people out of work, and Napoleon's Europe-wide ban on British goods worsened the crisis. Charlotte Bronte's Shirley (1849), set amongst the Luddite Riots of 1811-12, focuses on the rising discontent of the working class.
- ⁷ It is important to note that at this time, novels did not come under the designation of literature. Instead their defects were equated with those attributed to native literature which "lull[ed] the individual into a passive acceptance of the most fabulous incidents as actual occurrences; more alarming, the acceptance of mythological events as factual description stymied the mind's capacity to extrapolate a range of meanings for analysis and verification in the real world" (Viswanathan 20). Yet because of these very qualities, they were useful tools of inculcation.
- ⁸ Wesley's dictionary made no attempt to be comprehensive, but rather sought to provide a wide enough base of vocabulary to the poor so that they might read their Bibles, as well as the classical literature which he endeavored to edit and gloss for their use.

⁹ As Quinlan notes, Wesley's emendations focused on simplifying the texts for these basic readers, and removing those things which contradicted his teachings (31).

However, the Victorian anxiety over delicacy and refinement did not occur until the Evangelical movement hit its stride. Thus the works which Wesley edited do not reflect the prudishness for which the Victorian period would become known.

¹⁰ McClintock demonstrates that the trope of domesticity is fundamental to colonialism.

By equating the natural relationship of woman and child to colonizer and colonized, the moral imperative of civilizing the barbaric spaces becomes inextricably linked with the metaphor of England as mother to a recalcitrant family (30-45).

¹¹ Mohanty's argument is aimed at the ways in which western feminist discourse

conflates all third-world women's experiences, making presuppositions based on the experiences of western women. However, as she points out, her argument is valuable in the discussion of any implementation of discursive power structured in this fashion:

"my argument holds for any discourse that sets up its own authorial subjects as the implicit referent, e.g. the yardstick by which to encode and represent cultural Others. It is in this move that power is exercised in discourse" (199).

¹² Mr. Collins is portrayed as obsequious and foolish and Elizabeth shuns marriage with him, though she may be left an old maid. Charlotte, on the other hand, agrees to marry him knowing his faults and accepting them because

without thinking highly either of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of

giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want. This preservative she had now obtained; and at the age of twenty-seven, without having ever been handsome, she felt all the good luck of it. (111)

¹³ In a letter to Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Mary Elizabeth Braddon comments that she must not deviate too much from her popular sensationalist formula as “I have always to remember the interests of the Circulating Library, and the young lady readers who are its chief supporters” (Wolff 132).

¹⁴ This exhibition was predicated on the British nation as imperialist, the exhibition focusing on its colonial enterprises and economic strength in the world of trade.

¹⁵ While certainly Dickens is concerned with social issues in his earlier works, particularly Oliver Twist, his novels of the 1850s are far more focused on social problems and are, on the whole, far more grim.

¹⁶ Young discusses religious and political movements, as well as the impact of science and progress on mid-Victorian culture. Further, Young notes that economic speculation led to disaster in the form of panics in 1857 and 1866, and soon there was to be an economic depression. In 1857 the Neanderthal Man was discovered in Germany, further shaking institutional religion in Britain. At the same time, as will be discussed in Chapter 2, feminists were arguing loudly for women’s rights, threatening Britain’s most basic and fundamental institution: the family.

¹⁷ Susan Hamilton’s collection of Victorian women writers: ‘Criminals, Idiots, and Minors’: Victorian Writing by Women on Women, Broadview P, 1996, provides a more extensive contemporary discussion of women within Victorian culture.

- ¹⁸ England's economy had faced financial crises in 1857 and 1866. A panic occurred, caused by 'the cotton famine': the nearly complete deprivation of raw cotton imports from the United States as a result of the Civil War. According to James Adams, "in the winter of 1861-62 it is said that 500,000 people were being supported by public and private charity, and by 1863 it was necessary to start public works, the government making a loan of £1,500,000 and private subscribers helping to the extent of about £2,000,000" (184).
- ¹⁹ The 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act, also known as the Divorce Act, facilitated divorce by taking it out of the ecclesiastical courts and putting it instead in the civil courts. An amendment to the act in 1859 allowed the courts to review custody arrangements for the children and to place them with whichever parent was deemed best for the children, regardless of the original fault in the divorce suit. These changes in the law enabled women to not only escape bad marriages, but also to do so with their children. The Matrimonial Causes Act was further amended in 1878 to protect wives from the physical abuse of husbands. According to Mary Lyndon Shanley, "the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1878 helped lay to rest the notion that a husband's authority over his wife's body gave him the right to chastise her physically" (169).
- ²⁰ The sermon was reported in the Times on November 2, 1864.
- ²¹ Yet, as I argue in chapter 3, suspicion was an important element in the function of the panoptical power pyramid. The difference here is that reader suspicion is not hegemonically channeled safely and usefully.

²² Richard Altick's Victorian Studies in Scarlet (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1970) explores the Victorian fascination with murder and crime. His study presents a variety of cases sensationalized in the newspapers.

²³ While Wilkie Collins' The Woman in White often makes a triumvirate of these foundational sensation novels, it has also often been separated out as more serious and realistic and has been categorized amongst the better realist novels of the period.